**Interacting with Settlements**

The heroes of the Gamma Age all have one thing in common: they live in a world of wonders and terrors, surrounded by the bizarre fauna, flora, and machines of a reality gone mad. Some may retreat from the dangers of the world, staying within the confines of one community and the comprehensible lives of their own kind. Heroes rarely have that option. Destiny is not a homebody, and an adventurer’s fate will almost always draw him into new and unexplored territory, and demand he fight, negotiate, and ally himself and herself with the other species of the world.

Few, if any, ever journey beyond the village or the Valley due simply to curiousity or wanderlust. That being said, you are a new, up and coming group of Heroes. And while there may be a few elders in your village that, back in their day, had been bona fide adventurers, you are the new generation – all having grown up together and knowing about each other’s’ strengths and weaknesses, personalities and quirks.

This document contains some skill checks related to determining key information about a settlement and shopping/barter related activities.

**ARRIVING, MINGLING, DEPARTING**

This document discusses what happens when characters leave the wilderness and enter something passing for civilization. Most communities in the Gamma Age are insular at best; many are downright hostile to outsiders. Even “cosmopolitan” communities usually deal only with those from a relatively small surrounding a area, a few days’ travel at most. Cultural centers on the scale of Rome, places where travelers from dozens of far-flung nations meet, simply do not exist on most of the planet. Thus, arrivals from any place distant — which might as little as a few miles — may be greeted with anything from curiosity to hostility, but almost never with apathy.

Communities which are located along trade routes, or which serve as marketplaces for a local cluster of towns, are generally the most welcoming. Visitors are quickly appraised for their threat potential by observers who may have a great deal of experience making such assessments. Characters who are not overtly hostile earn tentative acceptance. In most places, merely carrying weapons is not considered inherently hostile. Indeed, a totally unarmed individual wandering in from the lethal wilderness is likely to attract more attention than one carrying a well-worn gun or blade. Individuals who look too weak to defend themselves effectively may be pegged as easy targets. This can lead to problems, including higher prices for common goods and out-and-out fraud (such as selling bottles of alleged medicine containing nothing but colored water). In extreme cases, it leads to assault and theft.

The less common contact is with strangers, the more hostile and suspicious the community tends to be — while its customs are more likely to contain difficult-to-interpret idiosyncrasies. Just as strange life-forms evolve more frequently in relative isolation, developing hyper-specialized survival mechanisms, so too do isolated communities develop strange rituals, since they do not receive new memes from other societies on a regular basis. This section discusses the three stages of dealing with a community: arriving, mingling and departing. None of these is as straightforward as it might seem.

**ARRIVING**

First impressions count. If the first encounter with a community goes poorly, the characters might never get a chance to make a second; they will be dead or chased off. Most characters know this and are on their best behavior (even if they plan to loot, pillage and burn once they figure out where all the goodies are stored). But there is one other thing to be aware of: The first encounter with a community might come long before the characters are even aware the community is there.

Assuming the characters make it to the boundaries of the community unmolested, a range of other potential problems waits to confront them. Among the problems are:

**• Where do we enter?**

Is there a common gate all pass through, or an open road? Do visitors need to pass through a special gate, entrance or checkpoint? Are there separate entrances by species or other discriminative factor? Is there a special ritual which must be performed upon entering, such as bowing, offering a small coin to the spirits, or reciting a particular prayer? If there is, how annoyed are the locals going to be if we leave something out or make a mistake? Will they politely say “We are sorry, good visitors, but all who enter here must recite the Litany of Good Passage,” or will they open fire without warning?

**• What’s legal to bring into the town?**

Are any of our weapons illegal? Do the laws vary based on our species, gender or social status? Are we carrying forbidden books, tools, food or animals? Will we be inspected and warned? If we are inspected and “contraband” is found, will it be confiscated or destroyed? Will we be attacked outright? Will we be given a chance to store it outside of town and then return? Or are we expected to know the rules — and, if we are found carrying contraband inside the town, be accused of smuggling?

**• When can we come?**

Are there special times for entering? Is it forbidden to enter at night, during mealtimes, on certain days, or when a red flag is flying from the third tower of the town hall? And, again, what happens if we violate these conventions? Is it a polite warning or a laser bolt to the head? All of these issues, of course, come into play before the characters have truly entered the town. Once they are in — and presumably, there legally and currently in compliance with all local laws, regulations, rituals, traditions, codes and so on — the real fun can begin.

**ENTRY TASKS**

The following are some of the tasks characters can attempt before entering a community. The DCs of these tasks can be modified by the distance of the community from the PCs’ home base. Add the difficulty modifier to the success DC, and one-half the difficulty modifier to the critical error DC.

**Locate the proper entrance for visitors** (Knowledge (behavioral sciences))

DC to accomplish: 12+

Critical Error DC: 5–

Success: The character understands where he needs to go, including such possible complications as different entrances for different social classes, genders, species, and so on.

Error: The character blunders into the wrong entrance. The severity of this mistake depends on the local culture. At best, the character will reveal himself as a total outsider; at worst, he will have committed a blunder which can lead to combat.

**Discern Critical Social Division** (Knowledge (behavioral sciences))

DC to accomplish: 15+

Critical Error DC: 8–

Success: The character identifies one or more major distinctions among people in the community — divisions which call for separate rules, rituals, privileges and so on. Such divisions can include male/female, old/young, mutant/nonmutant, mammal/reptile/bird, psionic/non-psionic, and so on. This can give a circumstance bonus of +1 to +4 on figuring out any social rules which differentiate along these divisions.

Error: The character misreads the actions of those she is observing, and selects the wrong trait as key. For example, she may see a male being treated differently than a female when both tripped over a stone, and conclude that gender is the primary distinctive trait; in fact, the female happens to be a priestess and the man a lay-person, and the key factor is religious power rather than gender.

**Determine Legality of an Item** (Knowledge (behavioral sciences))

DC to accomplish: 18+

Critical Error DC: 10–

Success: The character is aware that a given item is, or is not, legal, and of the various strictures which might accompany it (e.g., it’s legal to own a laser weapon provided it is holstered and properly registered, but grenade-type weapons are always illegal and must be checked with a guard before entering the city).

Error: The character wrongly interprets the legal status of something. This may lead to him abandoning a perfectly legal item before entering the town — or even worse, openly flaunting an illegal item after entering.

**MINGLING**

For purposes of this section, “mingling” includes all activity occurring inside the community other than entering it or leaving it. Shopping, talking to locals, eating at the local tavern (if there is one) and getting involved in the lives and problems of the residents all fall into the category of “mingling.”

One significant issue is how long the characters plan to stay (which is not always how long they do stay). If their only interest is to unload some items they found, to buy new supplies, or to pass along a message to a contact, the “mingling” portion of a town stay may occupy only a small part of a single session (if there are no complications). Assuming that the community is welcoming to visitors, and that there are no unexpected barriers of language or custom, simply purchasing supplies or selling (legal) goods is not likely to pose significant problems.

Of course, there are always complications. Supplies could be sold out. A contact might be out of town when the characters arrive, and they will need to wait a few days. A buyer may be hard to find for some goods, or he may need to scrounge together a fair payment. This can turn a few hours’ stay into a few days, or more — which can pose problems if the characters have other places to be.

On the other hand, the characters may plan an extended stay. Information-gathering expeditions often need a few days, at least, to get the general “lay of the land.” Winter may be closing the passage through the mountains, and this is the only place to hole up for a month or two. If the characters have many goods to sell, it could take a while to get through them all. The characters may wish to hire NPCs or even raise a small mercenary army; it can take time to draw prospective hires. Characters who are being pursued may choose to hole up in a town until the heat dies down.

Extended stays, planned or otherwise, offer a lot of opportunity for interaction. The characters may get to know the locals on a deeper level than “the four-armed bartender” or “that turtle-guy with the medi-bot.” The characters’ status as outsiders places them in an unusual position; while they have limited access to the conventional methods of social control, the fact they “don’t have to live here” allows them to take actions the locals never would. They have a lot of concern for the immediate consequences of their actions, but much less for the long-term; this allows them some freedom of action.

If a town is a true center of trade, there may be a small “visitors’ quarter” which is home to a regular population of transients, with many inns and hotels — as well as businesses which provide the services long-term travelers need. Such communities should be very rare in the Gamma Age, and any that do exist are going to be the centers of new nations rising from the ruins.

A community may have rules about certain types of visitors. Some communities may allow, say, mutants or synthetics to trade within the town, but not to sleep there. Sleeping areas may be segregated by species or gender.

**SHOPPING-RELATED TASKS**

**Determine Market Etiquette** (Gather Information)

DC to accomplish: 12+

Critical Error DC: 6–

Success: The character has learned the proper way to approach a merchant, when haggling is and is not appropriate, and how to politely raise a dispute over the quality of goods. This grants a +1 bonus on all Wealth checks while dealing with merchants in the community.

Error: The character has misinterpreted or otherwise failed to identify proper social procedures for buying and selling; merchants think of the character as rude, a poor customer, or otherwise not someone they wish to deal with. This inflicts a –1 penalty on all Wealth checks while dealing with merchants in the community.

**Bully Price Down** (Intimidate)

DC to accomplish: 18+

Critical Error DC: 10–

Success: The character has reduced the purchase DC of the item by –1 for every 3 points by which he beat the DC of the check, via subtle or not-so-subtle threats of harm, either to the merchant or her merchandise.

Error: The character’s bluff (if it was one) is called… and so are the guards. At worst, the character is attacked and killed; at best, the character suffers a +3 increase of all purchase DCs with that merchant for the duration of his stay.

**Sweet-Talk Price Down** (Diplomacy)

DC to accomplish: 18+

Critical Error DC: 10–

Success: Via flattery, charm, and charisma, the character has lowered the Purchase DC of an item by –1 for every 4 points by which she beat the DC of the check.

Error: The character has insulted the merchant grievously. All Purchase DCs with that merchant are increased by +2 for the duration of the character’s stay.

**LEAVING**

Generally speaking, departing is often easier than arriving. Other than prisons or slave labor camps, few communities make an exceptional effort to make sure visitors don’t go. There can be some exceptions to this, however. If the visitors have been exceptionally useful — for instance, serving as guards, healers or sources of knowledge — then the community may not wish to see them leave, and may take steps to insure they stay. These measures can range from begging and pleading, to blackmail, to imprisonment. It is also possible that a community, especially a hostile one which eventually learned to welcome or accept the characters, might not want word of its existence to get out. Many might feel that letting visitors go and spread tales could bring back unwanted attention. Even if the characters comported themselves honorably, they could spread tales to others who would not.

From the characters’ perspectives, the most important thing about leaving is not to make new enemies. This means making sure all loose ends are tied up, especially if there’s little chance of returning. On the most basic level, this means making sure any trading has concluded to mutual satisfaction and that no one is still waiting for you to fulfill your end of the bargain. On a more complex level, though, there can be trouble, especially if characters have had more than merely business dealings with NPCs…