Mandate Archive

Stellar Heroes

FOR USE WITH *Stars Without Number*

STELLAR HEROES

RUNNING *STARS WITHOUT NUMBER* ADVENTURES WITH A SINGLE CHARACTER

One of the most difficult parts of modern tabletop gaming is finding a group with a suitable match of schedules and availabilities. Sometimes even the best will in the world can't gather more than one or two players, or some unfortunate complication trims down the available players for a particular night's entertainment.

This brief supplement includes a number of tools and mechanical tweaks for *Stars Without Number* that will allow a GM to run their adventures for just one or two interstellar adventurers without reworking the challenges or changing their character sheets. With the tools here, your heroes will be able to survive tests that would otherwise require a full party to have any reasonable chance of survival and success.

These rules can also be used for a full-on campaign for a single space-faring hero, a daring explorer of the void with the mettle to survive challenges that would kill any lesser freebooter. You can use the rules here to provide a fresh gaming experience for a spouse, a kid, or a friend who's curious about the game and could use a one-on-one introduction to it. With more durability than the usual *Stars Without Number* hero, they're less likely to find the swift death that might otherwise accompany someone new to the finer points of interstellar adventure.

RUNNING A SOLO ADVENTURE

Before you look to the rules adjustments, there are a few things to keep in mind about running an adventure for a lone player. Most of the usual tricks and tools of a GM are as applicable to one player as they are to four or five, but there are still some factors that might trip up a session.

First, **solo adventures move quickly**. With a conventional group, most major decisions require at least the tacit consent of all the PCs. The process of talking over choices and coming to a decision can take a while- sometimes too long a while for some groups' tastes. A GM usually has a little downtime while the players talk it over, and can use this time catch up with the players' plots and plan out a little of what's to come.

Solo adventures don't have this leisure. With only one player to make decisions, decisions get made quickly. There's no pause for debate or negotiation with other members of the group, there is only an observation, a consideration, and a choice, all made with a head-spinning rapidity. Even in combat, a single hero can make choices and respond to enemies much more quickly, as they're never forced to wait their turn among a group of four or five more-or-less decisive combatants.

Because of this, a GM has to be ready to think on his feet. Don't hesitate to call a brief pause in the action to get ahead of the player or figure out the ramifications of their latest decision. The time

you'd normally take during party discussions has to be found elsewhere, and you need to be willing to take that time if it isn't given to you in a more convenient package.

Second, **solo adventures change direction rapidly**. Just as before, a player isn't constrained by the tacit expectation of the group. Where usually a major change in the party's focus would require at least moderate buy-in by four or five people, a solo adventurer can simply decide to change direction with a moment's consideration. There's none of the implicit social contract to play along with the rest of the group, because there isn't any rest of the group.

As a consequence, you should be prepared to let the game's direction turn on a dime. Don't invest too heavily in a specific adventure or subplot unless you and your player have agreed to see it through. In the same vein, if you don't have a specific situation in mind, you should make sure the player understands that it really is fine for them to shift in radically different directions and explore those aspects of the game that interest them the most. With only a single PC, a GM has the focus to really pay attention to the kind of game that player wants to have.

Lastly, **solo games are much more vivid expressions of an individual player's tastes than a standard group game**. With a single player, there's no buffering mediation from the rest of the group; that PC is going to like the people they like, dislike the people they dislike, and act in their own personal interests. Petty dislikes and passing affections that might rate nothing more than an NPC footnote in a group can motivate a single PC into elaborate schemes of vengeance or aid. An NPC doesn't have to charm a majority of the players in a party to become a useful hook for a GM- they only need to snare a single player.

With these facts in mind you should be able to run a game for a single player with minimal difficulty. Single-player gaming demands a lot of both the player and the GM. There's no one else to take up the slack if one of them is having an off night, so it's important that both of them be ready to bring their best available engagement, attention, and focus to the game. If that can be provided, however, the experience can have a kind of immediacy and fluency that's very difficult to find in a more traditional group.

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Like the idea of a lone hero facing the perils of a hostile world? Try my new game *Scarlet Heroes*, an old-school RPG built both as a stand-alone game and a seamless overlay for your own favorite system. Use it to play existing OSR material or classic adventure modules with a single player and GM. *Right now it's being Kickstarted until March 2, 2014*, and you can pick up the full playable low-art beta for a trifling pledge.

Modified Rules for Solo Adventuring

Now that you've been warned of some of the structural differences in one-on-one gaming, the following rules should provide you with the tools you need to make a daring space odyssey the kind of experience that a lone hero has a reasonable chance of surviving.

Combat

Combat in a solo game works exactly as it does in the standard game, save for two very large changes in initiative and damage.

First, in a solo game, the hero always wins initiative. If ambushed or surprised they lose a round as usual, but act first during the first normal round of combat. It is crucial that the hero have the chance to flee from an unwinnable situation, and a hero who loses initiative to a mob of thugs with combat rifles may not last long enough to absent themselves from the line of fire.

Second, damage in a solo game is counted in a completely different fashion than in a standard game. Instead of totalling the damage dice together, each die is counted separately. A die that rolls a 1 does no damage, 2-5 is one point, 6-9 is two points, and 10+ is four points. If the damage has a bonus to the roll, that bonus is applied to a single die of the attacker's choice- thus a 2d8+2 mag rifle that rolled a 5 and a 3 could have the bonus applied to the first die, doing a total of 3 points of damage- two points for a modified roll of 7, and one point for a roll of 3.

This damage is then subtracted from the hit points of a hero, or from the *hit dice* of anyone else. Against a 1 hit die target, for example, a pistol shot that does one point of damage would kill them instantly. Against a hero, that same round would do only one hit point of damage. The hit points of NPCs become irrelevant; the only thing that counts is their hit dice.

If damage is sufficient to kill a target, the overflow can be shared with any other valid target within range, provided the attack or effect could have hurt them as well. Thus, if a hero fires a shotgun at a bug-eyed alien and kills it with 2 points of damage left over, he could spread the rest of the injury to another xenomorph, provided his attack roll was good enough to hit that other target. In this way a hero with a powerful weapon and good attack and damage rolls can mow down a small legion of weak enemies in a single round.

Ammunition expended is only counted once per attack, no matter how many victims are slain. A rain of bullets might have scythed through the onrushing hordes, but a proper interstellar hero is not excessively concerned with rationing their ammunition.

When powers or circumstances cause an attack to do half damage, that modifier is applied to the final damage total. Heroes round down, and everyone else rounds up.

The damage rules given here apply to all sources of damage, both in and out of combat. Thus, a pit trap that inflicts 3d6 damage on a hero would end up doing from 0 to 6 hit points of damage to them, or the same amount in lost hit dice to an unwary NPC.

The Fray Die

Heroes have a knack for taking out minor opponents and lesser foes with relative ease. This is represented by their ***Fray die***. Warriors have a Fray die of 1d8, Experts have a 1d6 die, and Psychics have a 1d4 die. If using the optional multiclass rules, a hero can choose which of their class' Fray dice to use. Fray dice are never modified, either by attributes or equipment. They are always a simple, single die.

Each round, at any time during their turn, the hero may use their Fray die to hurt an enemy of equal or fewer hit dice than they have levels. This represents casual blows, snap shots, opportunity attacks, psychic assaults, or other passing strikes they might be performing amid their other actions. A Fray die's damage can be leveled at any target within range of the character's weapons, or up to 20 meters away if using a Psychic's Fray die. Fray die damage can overflow to other valid targets just as any other damage source. Heroes can use their Fray die even if they aren't attacking that round or are using their action to do something else.

A Fray die that reflects a firearm's use never expends ammunition, assuming the gun is loaded and usable in the first place. The shots snapped off to execute a minion or two aren't worth tracking.

Psychic Fray dice are special. Their uncanny powers and unique, vicious tricks of mental violence can harm even powerful foes, and so their Fray die can affect even targets with more hit dice than the Psychic has levels. The specific ways in which their powers are use to harm or incapacitate others are up to the player to define, though the GM can veto those particular expressions that are too far out of line with the psychic's abilities.

Healing, First Aid, and Death

Characters heal hit points at a normal rate from resting. When using psychic healing powers or pretech healing drugs, the dice are rolled as "reversed" damage dice; thus, a nanostim that cures 1d6+1 points of damage would heal 1 to 2 points of damage for a hero. NPCs heal hit dice at a rate of one per day, when it matters.

Heroes can also take a few minutes after every battle or injury to bind their wounds and catch their breath. This is sufficient to heal 2 points of damage lost in the most recent fray or accident, though such healing can't leave the hero better off than they were before the struggle, nor can it cure damage inflicted by Defying Death or other self-chosen afflictions.

Some campaigns with a lone hero aren't meant to be subject to the same risk of mortality that exists in a more conventional game of *Stars Without Number*. If the GM and player both wish to explore a particular hero's tale until they're done, then being brought to zero hit points merely incapacitates or defeats a PC.

Instead of death, they suffer some great setback. Their goal is made unreachable, an ally perishes on their behalf, some precious relic is lost, or some other negative consequence applies. Ultimately, it's up to both the GM and PC to decide a suitable outcome.

DEFYING DEATH

There are times when a hero finds herself trapped in a no-win situation, or succumbing to a fatal peril, or facing a challenge for which they are totally unsuited. In these situations, a hero may decide to Defy Death.

When a hero Defies Death, they roll a 1d4 damage die for each character level they have, counting the damage as given in the Combat section. Thus, a 5th level hero who Defies Death might suffer from 0 to 5 points of damage. If the damage is sufficient to kill the hero, they survive with 1 hit point, but must face whatever grim circumstance they have encountered or suffer the effect they were trying to avoid.

If the hero survives, they are treated as automatically passing a failed saving throw, evading a certain doom, or somehow by-passing a challenge that would normally require someone else's expertise to resolve. Their salvation may be brief in duration, lasting only minutes, but it gives them time to recoup and perhaps remove themselves from the situation.

After every attempt to Defy Death, the die size of the damage increases. Thus, for the second attempt it is 1d6, then 1d8, then 1d10, up to a maximum of 1d12 per level. The die size only resets after the hero either succeeds in their adventurous purpose or retreats from this particular ill-starred epic.

The GM can determine when a Defy Death check is permitted but it should almost always apply to saving throws, impassable obstacles, and other grim situations for the hero.

HEROIC SKILLS

Heroes tend to be very, very good at their chosen field, whatever it may be. For this reason, skills in a single-player adventure are treated a little differently.

First, solo heroes gain twice as many skill points as standard when gaining a new level of advancement. They are versatile, capable souls who rapidly excel in their fields of interest.

Second, a hero may automatically treat a skill roll as having rolled a natural 12 on the dice. A hero can do this once per game session for every level they have in a skill, with level-0 counting as a level. Thus a hero with level-2 Tech/Postech skills could roll an automatic 12 on the skill three times in a given game session. Warriors and Psychics must choose to use this ability before they roll the skill check, while Experts can choose to use it after they roll.

HEROIC HIT POINTS

Heroes always have maximum hit points for their class and level. Their unflinching resilience in the face of mortal peril keeps them going where other men and women can only perish miserably.

OTHER RULES AND ABILITIES

Aside from the guidelines and changes given above, a single-player game of *Stars Without Number* works exactly the same as a several-player version. Advancement, class abilities, saving throws, psychic powers, and other details are all handled precisely as they are given in the core rule book.

AN EXAMPLE ENGAGEMENT

Trapped in a burning space station by berserk repair drones, the daring interstellar freebooter Matthias Xue struggles to reach the lifeboats before the racing flames bar his path. The 1st level Warrior has 8 hit points, the maximum for his level, and is wearing a vacc suit for a base AC of 7, modified to 6 by his +1 Dexterity modifier. He's managed to hold on to a fully-loaded combat rifle- which is a good thing, since six of the diabolical drones are trying to prevent his escape.

Matthias automatically wins initiative, because he's a hero. The spacer swiftly dodges behind a fallen beam and blazes away at the drones, using the burst fire option of the rifle. He hits, and rolls the rifle's damage, adding +2 for the burst fire and +1 for his attribute modifier. The resulting damage roll is 11- which counts as 4 points of damage using the solo hero rules. The drones are all 1 hit die enemies with the same armor class, so his raking fire shatters four of them. He marks off only three rounds of ammunition, however, for the burst fire.

With four down, he then rolls his 1d8 Fray die, representing collateral violence done during his attack. He rolls a 2, which is still enough to do 1 point of damage- and since the drones have equal or fewer hit dice than he has levels, they're susceptible to the die. One more drone explodes into flames. As it's a Fray die, no additional ammunition is expended.

The remaining drone fires back with its integral void carbine and hits, rolling 2d6 for damage and counting each die separately. It rolls a 1 and a 6, for zero and two points of damage respectively. Matthias decides to use his Veteran's Luck ability and negates the hit cleanly. The next round, he again goes first. This time he foregoes his action to move twice his regular movement, but he still gets to use his Fray die. He snaps off a shot at the drone as he charges past, and in rolling a 5, does enough damage to put it down.

Disaster! The lifeboat door has been overridden by the mad AI that seized the station! Luckily, Matthias has the Tech/Astronautics-0 skill and the GM agrees that it applies to getting a lifeboat door open. Unfortunately, he's already used his Heroic Skill use already that session, and so has to roll the dice- and fails. Does this mean the end for our intrepid adventurer?

Never! Matthias elects to Defy Death, overcoming certain doom. He rolls 1d4 damage against himself and gets a 1- luckily, that means zero points of damage. If he has to Defy Death again during the course of this adventure, however, the die size will increase to 1d6. The GM rules that his desperate fiddling with the control panel pops the door open at last.

Yet within waits a bladed thing of steel and warped silicon- a 4 hit die reaper bot the AI planted there as a trap. Can Matthias defeat it? His Fray die is useless against a foe with more hit dice than he has levels, and gunfire inside the lifeboat could be disastrous. There's nothing for it but to club his rifle and charge the steely beast, struggling with the foe even as the flames race closer to the lifeboat's vulnerable hangar....

FIRE ON HIGH

A SIDE ADVENTURE FOR A 1ST LEVEL STELLAR HERO

A temporary stopover has turned into swift-ticking disaster. The Cantreaux Freedom Front has smuggled a team of terrorist commandos aboard Highpoint Station, and they've succeeded in taking a half-dozen hostages from among the local officials. Station security is in chaos and the terrorists have retreated into the station's maintenance corridors. They've already seized control of the station's defensive array and are holding off attempts to retake the orbital. If these lunatics aren't stopped within the hour, they'll be able to crack the last computer core failsafes and turn the station into a merciless steel meteorite to smash the city below. Can the hero stop this madness and rescue the hapless hostages before it's too late for them all?

USING THE ADVENTURE IN YOUR GAME

In place of the Cantreaux Freedom Front you can insert any random group of fanatics in search of any ludicrously impossible concession from the planetary government. While conventional gravitic breaker guns are sufficient to deflect most orbital mass bombardments, the station is too big and too low to be fully braked before it wreaks catastrophe on some population center below. The key for any adaptation is to make sure the PC gets the facts of the situation rapidly and is aware that the clock is ticking.

SETTING UP THE ADVENTURE

It won't take long for the hero to realize the situation, as the CFF uses the station intercoms to announce their demands and warn of the grisly fate of the hostages should they not be appeased. Almost all of the station's security crew were slaughtered during the sudden uprising, and the remaining staff are in a panic.

A badly-wounded security staffer will press her universal passcard into the hero's hands, telling them of an access hatch that will get them into the maintenance spaces where the CFF is holding the station director. It is vital that the director be rescued before they wring the station's command codes from him. They must have gotten something from him already, as the station defensive guns are holding off reinforcements from the starport below.

The nearby hatch will lead down to area 1 on the map, though a particularly foolhardy hero might choose to assault from the conventional stairway down at area 7. The constant thunder of the station's guns will drown out all sounds of combat below.

THE TRUTH OF THE ATTACK

Station Director Yves is actually a deep-cover agent of the CFF, and was directly responsible for enabling the assault. While he was able to activate the station's defensive guns to hold back government reinforcements, the last-ditch security measures on the station's control core are keeping him from being able to turn it into a weapon against the city below. The other hostages taken by the CFF are bewildered civilian workers, though the one locked into the cubicle at 5B spotted Yves giving orders to some of the terrorists and suspects the director's treachery.

1. **Service Access Room**

The eastern corridor is thoroughly blocked by a fall of sheet metal blasted loose in the fighting. The walls of the access room are lined with a half-dozen vacc suits and a number of toolkits sufficient for the use of most Tech skills.

2. **Temporary Bunking**

The cramped quarters aboard the station have forced six of the maintenance crew to sleep here, on three bunk beds. Three of the crew lie in the far corner, riddled by bullets, while the surviving trio cower under the guns of five CFF terrorists. The terrorists will spend one round trying to kill the hostages before they respond to an attacker. The hostages are all AC 9 with 1 hit die, and know nothing about what's going on.

CFF Terrorists (5): AC 9, HD 1, Attack +1, Dmg 1d8 submachine gun, Morale 10

3. **Secondary Environmental Controls**

The control panels here allow anyone with Tech/Astronautics or Tech/Medical to adjust the station's environmental parameters. A clever hero might think of some way to depressurize sections of the station or change local temperatures, though the panicked civilians above may not respond sensibly to such hazards. Such a feat will probably require a difficulty 10 check, with failure meaning a less controlled response.

4. **Supply Storage**

Large stocks of sheet metal, wiring coils, and other bulky, low-value supplies are kept in this room. If the crates and storage lockers are broken into, there's a 2 in 6 chance that the terrorist at area 5 will hear the noise, alert the group at area 7, and investigate.

5. **Restricted Stores**

A terrorist with stats as per area 2 stands watch here around the corner by cubicle C. The cubicle doors are all sealed, but as with the rest of the maintenance spaces, the security crew's passcard will open them. Each cubicle contains 5,000 credits worth of costly microchips and electronic parts, each 500 credits worth of them counting as one item. In cubicle B is Station Director Yves' terrified secretary Claudette, who saw Yves demanding coffee from two of his terrorist "captors", and being obeyed instantly by them.

6. **Power Plant Coolant Well**

The grating has been lifted over a radioactive pool of coolant, and three terrorists hold a screaming technician over the pool, demanding answers he can't give. If attacked, they'll throw him in, killing him in 2 rounds if he's not rescued. Any hero who falls or jumps in must make a Radiation save each round and for every third round afterwards that they keep wearing coolant-soaked clothing. Every second round's exposure inflicts 1 HP of damage.

HIGHPOINT STATION
MAINTENANCE SPACES

1 SQUARE = 3 METERS
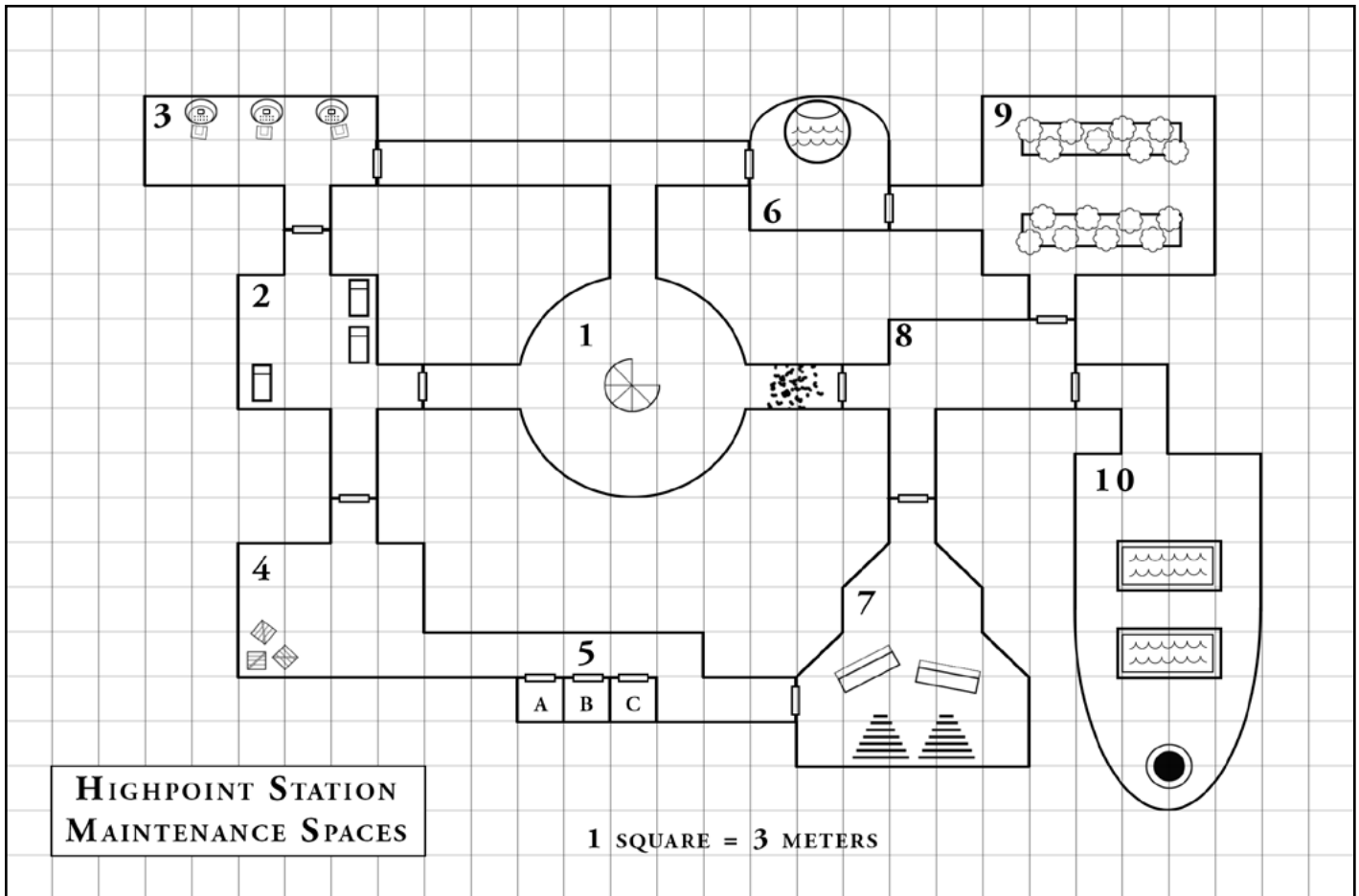
7. Primary Entrance

Eight terrorists have made this stairway a killing zone. They've tipped over metal slabs for cover and are crouched behind them, ready to repel anyone who comes down the stairs. If attacked from behind or the side, however, they will be shocked and lose one round's action to surprise.

8. Massacre Site

A dozen unfortunate technicians and civilians were caught up in the terrorist attacks. The CFF only needed enough hostages to slow down a response, and so shot the excess against the wall here. The stench of death is thick here, and the blood congeals in cold pools on the deck. The pack of ammunition they used for the murders has been left here. It has 60 rounds of projectile ammunition in it and a pair of frag grenades forgotten under the rounds.

9. Backup Hydroponic Bank

Assorted tall, concealing plants are grown here as backups in case of hydroponic failure above. Two hostages are being beaten in desultory fashion by terrorists in the far northeastern corner of the room. A quiet hero could pass between the doorways without being noticed, while a direct attack on the unwary terrorists is very likely to win a round's surprise. Aside from three normal terrorists, the team's lieutenant is supervising the "interrogation".

Lieutenant Bors: AC 7 vacc suit, HD 3, Attack +3, Dmg 1d6+1 pistol, Morale 11

10. Computing Core Access

This room is full of steam from the coolant baths here, and visibility is limited to a three meters. At the far end of the room the main computing core has been opened by Station Director Yves, and the terrorist commander, Froideval, is loudly cursing its uncooperative nature while Yves swears that he knew nothing of the emergency failsafe locks on the station's maneuver jets.

There are three normal terrorists in the room, standing between the two coolant baths. Froideval and Yves are next to the computing core. Anyone pushed into the baths suffers the same radioactive effects as in area 6.

Serious damage to this area will automatically trigger emergency containment protocols that will lock the door (difficulty 10 to hack it open with a technical override) and fill the room with fire-suppressing inert gases. After the first round, everyone not wearing a vacc suit or supplied with oxygen otherwise will suffer 1 point of damage each round. This emergency procedure will automatically trigger on an explosion, and has a 10% chance of triggering on each missed projectile shot. Void carbines will not provoke the emergency system into activating.

Commander Froideval: AC 7 vacc suit, HD 4, Attack +4, Dmg 1d6+1 pistol, Morale 12

Station Director Yves: AC 9, HD 1, Attack +1, Dmg 1d6+1 pistol, Morale 12

SCARLET HEROES

SWORD AND SORCERY ADVENTURES FOR A LONE HERO
BY KEVIN CRAWFORD

BACK IT NOW AT KICKSTARTER