

## The Malta Group

### 3.1 History

The 1960's were a turning point for the twentieth century in ways that historians today are only beginning to understand. Of course there were the well-known advances in liberalism, civil rights, and political awareness, but it was also the decade that saw the birth of the modern super powered hero. The gaudy costumes, devil-may-care attitudes, and wildly powerful heroes of the 1960's reinvented how the modern world thought about its heroes. No longer did they work in the shadows, secretly fighting crime. Nor were they necessarily soldiers fighting for the military. They were each individual personalities, with their own foibles, desires, agendas, and powers, and a lot of them could level whole city blocks with their powers. It was the 1960's that cemented this concept of the hero as Other. They lived amazing lives and fought bizarre enemies that the rest of us could only cower in fear before. The public at large looked up to the heroes – but more as rock stars and pop culture icons than true heroes – chiefly because their battles seemed so far removed from the common experience. It was almost as if they weren't part of the “real” world.

This public perception of heroes was, in truth, the outgrowth of another revolutionary change that came into its own during the 1960's – a secretive shadow government that operated entirely outside the public eye. While the Cold War became hot in places like Korea and Vietnam, most of it was still being fought behind closed doors and in dark allies. The NATO and Warsaw Pact had a very uneasy public detente, but in secret they were tearing at each other's throats through espionage and covert operations. So the government let the people have their flashy, costume clad, pop heroes, while they secretly used super powered individuals of their own to fight their shadow war with the enemy.

In 1956, the United States had passed an abusive law known as the Might for Right Act. It allowed the government to secretly draft anyone possessing super powers into military service, which included working for the CIA and FBI. Other NATO countries followed suit, particularly Great Britain, which had had an equally invasive law on the books since World War II. These draftees didn't receive fancy costumes or inspiring code names. They were anonymous soldiers sacrificed as pawns in the great chess game of the cold war. They served as spies, assassins, and even rabble rousers, using their powers according to instructions from their handlers. Those who refused to cooperate were subjected to torture, hypnosis, and mother mind control techniques to ensure their loyalty. Minorities were particularly hard hit by the Might for Right Act, with hundreds of black heroes being pulled from their homes and forced to serve at the CIA's behest.

Most of these draftees worked under the aegis of the Titan Project, CIA's code name for its division of para-human operatives. The Titan Project's director and creator, Roger Vrabel, was an old-school intelligence community mandarin who had been around since World War II. He was one of the main architects of the Might for Right Act, although no one but a few key senators he had in his pocket new this to be the case. During the War he had worked closely with a number of super powered soldiers, and he saw immediately how useful they could be if they had proper direction and control. He also saw that World War II was only the beginning, and felt that the Soviet threat loomed as large as Hitler ever had. Vrabel was thus horrified when, after the war, all of the heroes were released from military service and sent home to lead their own lives. What a terrible waste of trained operatives!

Vrabel spent the next decade trying his best to recruit super powered individuals into the intelligence community, but he had very little luck. Being a hero meant public adoration and

fighting crime on your own terms. Few people wanted to act out of the spotlight, and those that did weren't very interested in taking orders from the CIA or Army Intelligence. It was only through sheer force of personality and the efforts of a few dedicated super spies that Vrabel managed to maintain a respectable level of super powered intelligence assets. But with each passing year, recruiting became more and more difficult, and Vrabel grew more and more frustrated. Finally, he resolved that more drastic measures were needed. Thus, he used his influence (and the powers of some of his psychic agents) to ensure the passage of the Might for Right Act.

The next decade, from 1956 to 1967, was a golden time for Vrabel. He founded the Titan Project as an umbrella organization for drafting, training, and using super powered assets. The Project had jurisdiction over all super powered assets in the United States government, including those in the Justice Department, the Secret Service, and even the military. Any agency or branch of the military that wanted to use a super powered individual in its operations had to go through the Titan Project and, ultimately, Vrabel. The Project's scouts combed the country looking for possible draftees. They avoided high profile heroes, instead choosing to find subjects before they'd had a chance to make a name for themselves. Vrabel had several psychics on staff who could detect dormant super powers as well as a trained sorcerer who was terrific at sniffing out magical potential.

Likewise, the scouts tended to avoid anyone from middle-class or upper-class families – basically anyone who could afford to hire a lawyer. The Might for Right Act did have provisions for avoiding the draft, and any decent attorney could navigate said provisions to find an out for his or her client. Vrabel wanted to avoid anything resembling a public fight in the courts over his supers draft, so his scouts steered clear of troublesome targets. As a result, most of those recruited in the Titan Project were poor minorities who had no way of standing up to the process. The nation never knew about or missed most of the “heroes” that ended up getting drafted into service and Vrabel got his own private army.

The Titan Project's activities and operations focused almost entirely upon combating the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, along with, to a lesser degree, China. Like most cold warriors, Vrabel was obsessed with defeating the Soviet Union (not without cause). He used his super spies with care and finesse, because even with the Might for Right act's powers, the Communists still had more super powered resources to put into the field (since there were no private super powered heroes behind the iron curtain). Inevitably, the casualties were high, but so was Vrabel's success rate vs. the KGB. At the time, the CIA and the Titan Project only had a passing interest in domestic villains and out of control heroes. They pretty much left those kinds of problems to the “private sector” heroes as Vrabel called them.

That changed in 1966, just as Vrabel was increasing the size and scope of the draft to include even more heroes for the war in Vietnam. Among those drafted were three black heroes who had been operating in Paragon City as a team for over a year. Vrabel's scouts mistakenly assumed that no one would miss these three enough to put up a fuss if they were drafted. What they didn't count on was that the three would put up quite a fuss themselves. Already, elements in society were beginning to turn against the war and the impending draft. The mood of the nation was changing and black empowerment was on the rise. And so it was a tremendous surprise to Vrabel when Roger Washington, Georgia Reynolds, and Hakeem Muhammad not only refused to report as required under the Might for Right Act, but actually brought suit against the CIA.

The three heroes immediately jumped into the forefront of national media attention. They claimed, with some justification that the CIA was targeting blacks and minority heroes for recruitment. They challenged the legality of the Might for Right Act and began to publicly draw attention to some of the abuses Project Titan had been perpetrating in the last decade. Vrabel made the mistake of trying to strong-arm the three heroes by sending a team of his operatives to seize them and bring them into custody. The retrieval team found itself facing not only the three super powered heroes, but several dozen sympathetic heroes and a whole army of reporters. Luminaries from the Statesman to Martin Luther King spoke out on their behalf and brought pressure to bear on President Johnson. The case ended up being fast tracked through the courts and, in 1967, the Supreme Court declared the Might for Right act unconstitutional and ordered all those drafted under its auspices freed from service.

With that wave of the judicial wand, Vrabel's whole organization came crashing down around him. Within a few months he was down to one fifth the manpower he had possessed in 1966, even as the war in Vietnam escalated. Seeing their enemy weakened and vulnerable, the KGB took this moment to launch its own massive espionage offensive, rolling up CIA spy rings throughout Western Europe and assassinating hundreds of agency intelligence assets. Three "friendly" dictatorships in Africa went over to the Soviets and the CIA lost ground in two dozen other countries. Their West Berlin station house was literally gutted, with no survivors.

#### Meeting in Malta

Retreating on every front, Vrabel was not alone in his anger at what had happened. His counterpart in England at MI6 was also suffering similar setbacks and, without American support, was losing agents and operatives almost as quickly as the CIA was. The same was true for West German Intelligence and the Israeli Mossad. Vrabel called for an emergency meeting of the most influential and experienced men in the Western Intelligence agencies. This was not to be a meeting of the agency heads – appointed politicians who would come and go. No, this was a secret, off the books meeting amongst the career intelligence officers who had real expertise and real knowledge. They were all men like Vrabel, people who put the mission and the good of the service before all else.

Under the auspices of Vrabel's counterpart at MI6, Neal Macintosh, the meeting was held at a secret location in Malta. Each of the seventeen men who attended arrived in total secret and there were no records kept or recording made. Outside of those seventeen original Malta Group members, no one can say for sure what was discussed or, for that matter, who exactly was there. The men debated, plotted, and planned for 53 straight hours, during which time they managed to change the face of covert operations forever and launch a criminal conspiracy that still endures today, perhaps stronger than ever.

The Malta Group all agreed that super powered beings presented an enormous challenge to not only the intelligence community, but to the entire world. With the Warsaw Pact and China "nationalizing" their super powered assets in the most repressive way possible, the West had to come up with a solution to the so-called "hero-gap" problem. But the trend for hero involvement in government activities was moving the wrong way. Super powered beings wanted to be independent, to do their won thing and fight crime in their own way. Or, just as likely, they simply wanted to be criminals themselves. Either way, they weren't lining up to join the ranks of MI6 or the CIA.

The Group realized that they needed to find a way, no matter what the cost, to ensure a steady supply of super powered operatives if they wanted to have any hope of turning back the Communist menace. They also realized that, in the West, publicly employing heroes, even

under the auspices of a top-secret government organization, was no longer feasible. The events of 1967 had shown that the courts would side with individual liberties and civil rights over security needs and the war on Communism. The Malta Group needed super powered assets that could not possibly go crying to the Supreme Court when they stubbed their toes. They needed assets like the Soviets had – totally under their own control.

The only way for the Group to get what it wanted was to step beyond the laws that governed their respective lands. None of the seventeen men had any super powers of their own, but they were all extremely good at what they did. They knew that their best asset was their ability to out think and out spy anyone else in the world, at least when it came to espionage. Certainly they could out think and manipulate a bunch of tight-wearing, overconfident super beings. While famous for many different things, few heroes were known for their incredible intelligence. It was just a matter of applying the right levers at the appropriate times.

The Group thus decided on a complex course of manipulation, blackmail, fraud, intimidation, and mind-control. They would use every tool in the spy's toolbox, and they would do so without any moral compunction. In their fear and frenzy over losing their most powerful assets, the Group members had managed to convince themselves that the super beings weren't really people. They were assets. Their powers were, by all rights, the property of their respective governments. Anyone who refused to help was unpatriotic and, at heart, a communist. And since any good patriot would agree to help if asked, there was no reason to ask for volunteers anymore. The "bad" heroes would be forced to comply in any event and telling the "good" heroes about the Group's existence would needlessly compromise security. Thus everyone would receive the same treatment, and everyone would play along or face the consequences.

But first things first. Being experts in the field, the Group knew that the first thing they had to do was set up a whole new network of agents to carry out their plan. The genius of their scheme was that it put reliable, normal humans at the heart of its operation. The Group members knew how to recruit and retain normal agents, and by making them the fulcrums of power, they could ensure stability and reliability. No longer would the Group's members have to rely on mercurial and egotistical super beings to behave like professional spies. The Group now just assumed that the super powered assets would be as uncooperative as possible but, thanks to the field operatives' expertise, they would have no choice but to do as they were told. Thus, upon leaving Malta, the Group's various members set about funding and creating its new network of spies.

Funding the Malta Group was the easy part. Each of the members had access to secret bank accounts, covert ops budgets, and a host of other secret money sources. The Group stretched its fundraising abilities to the limits and raked in millions of dollars within just a few months – more than enough money in 1968 for what they had planned. Recruiting reliable agents was more problematic, but nothing the Group's founders couldn't handle. For his part, Vrabel cherry picked his most trusted operatives in the CIA, detaching them from their current duties and encouraging each of them to "retire" from official government work. He then transferred them to "secret source" status, which allowed him to pay them out of the CIA's budget without anyone asking for detailed information on who they actually were. They were in turn told that they had become black ops contract workers tasked with finding disloyal and criminal super powered beings within the United States and the rest of the world.

Only a few hundred agents actually made it into the "inner circle" of the Malta Group. That is to say, only these most trusted operatives realized they were working for a new covert agency that was operating outside the boundaries of any specific government agency or, for that matter, any specific government. These were the analysts, operations planners, and other upper level personnel who helped manage the daily flow of information and who carried out the

more delicate operations. Most of the day to day work was to be done in piecemeal by contract agents and operatives still working for the various intelligence agencies. Since all 17 Malta founders still held positions of power within their respective agencies, it was relatively simple for them to occasionally divert operations and resources in a manner beneficial to the Group's various schemes.

### Modus Operandi

The basic strategy for the Malta Group was – and is – very simple. They use their tremendously effective ability to gather information on anyone, anywhere to gather intelligence on various super powered beings, whether they be “heroes” or “villains.” They then comb through that data looking for any way they can leverage that hero into doing their bidding. For some beings, it's as simple as finding their price and then offering to pay it for them. Others will work in exchange for information or expertise that the Group can give them. But there are also plenty who won't do the work unless they're threatened in some way. The Group has no compunctions at all about making threats. By far the most common threat was revealing a hero's secret identity. Very few beings wanted to live life in the public eye 24/7. Public disclosure meant the hero's enemies and fans would not only know where he or she lived, but where their families and loved ones could be found as well. Few heroes were willing to take the risk, especially if what they were being asked by the Group didn't seem too egregious or wrong. Those he needed more convincing fell prey to more serious forms of blackmail and extortion, including false legal charges, physical threats against loved ones, and worse.

The Group's first targets were those super powered beings they knew the most about – the former members of the Titan Project and other veterans of the cold war super spy game. Vrabel and the other members had no problem getting copies of their already extensive files on these subjects. Once their field agents were in place, providing more up to date data, it was a simple matter to apply the screws and get these former soldiers back on the “team” again. By late 1969, The Malta Group was up and running with a whole new cadre of effective – if unwilling – super powered assets.

### Winning the Cold War

The next twenty years saw the Malta Group leading the charge against communism around the world, although very few people knew it at the time. The CIA and MI6 continued to use their own agents and handful of super powered assets, but they had very limited success compared to the Malta Group – largely because the Group was busy stealing away their best agents, their resources, and their opportunities. With all forms of restrictive oversight and bureaucracy removed from the covert operations process, the Malta Group could move fast and strike hard. They showed no compunction about killing their enemies, including people they thought just might be their enemies.

The new Malta offensive took the KGB by complete surprise. They had no idea where these new operatives were coming from or even what their goal was (aside from killing off their own agents). The Kremlin's super spies had thoroughly penetrated the established Western Intelligence services, and even their moles within the CIA and MI6 had no idea that the Malta Group even existed. Thus, it was almost impossible for the KGB to strike back. Moreover, this mysterious new enemy's tactics were far different from those formerly employed by Western intelligence. They seemed much more interested in killing off communists than in gathering intelligence.

Indeed, this was exactly the Malta Group's new strategy. They no longer worked for any particular government and so were no longer particularly interested in gathering traditional

intelligence about things like troop movements, nuclear secrets, and political maneuverings. The Malta Group had become entirely absorbed in the goal of winning the super powered spy game. Nothing else mattered to them, and since they had no other concerns, they became extremely good at.

Group controlled assassins picked off anyone and everyone they could find in the Warsaw Pact that possessed super powers. They were largely unable to directly attack established powerhouse groups like the Defenders of the Motherland, but they cut great swathes of death through the lesser heroes – particularly those involved in espionage. The Group employed many of the same techniques they used at home to “recruit” super powered agents. They used their spies on the ground to identify super beings and their weaknesses. Then, they would either use that information to force the subject to help them or, if the subject wasn’t useful or couldn’t be turned, they would kill him.

In several cases the Malta Group was able to wrap up entire networks and even military units comprised of super powered assets. Once the Group got its fingers into one individual, they could torture/blackmail/manipulate him or her into revealing information about every other super powered being they knew. Even in the closed society of the Soviet Union, super powered beings tended to congregate or at least keep tabs on each other. They then shared this information with the Group’s agents – a fate much preferable to the other option. Usually, all the Group had to do was threaten to leak a false lead to the KGB claiming the person was a spy for the west in order to ensure cooperation.

The 1970’s were a decade of tremendous success for the Malta Group. They rolled back Soviet bloc advances and liquidated or turned hundred of super powered beings. As a result, the Soviet Union’s super powered arsenal was all but crippled, with the exception of a few high profile teams. Of course, the Malta Group’s losses were also quite high. Few of their coerced operatives survived more than three missions, but such high casualty rates had always been part of the Group’s plan. The important thing was that their intelligence gathering network remained largely unscathed, and so they were able to continuously replace lost assets through their strong-arm techniques. By the end of the decade, the super spy war had been all but won.

The 1980’s began with the Cold War still a firm fixture in the world political scene, but for the Malta Group it was the beginning of some significant changes. Most significant of all was the death of Roger Vrabel in 1982, followed less than six months later by the passing of his counterpart Neal Macintosh at MI6. These two old cold warriors had been the driving force behind the Group’s success and had been the de facto leaders since its inception. While both deaths were of natural causes, they still caused a firestorm of controversy and suspicion within the Group’s ranks. There was no formal system for running operations – everyone had always just done whatever Vrabel and Macintosh told them to do. Now the different department heads and field officers began scrambling for influence and control within the Group, and cliques began to form almost over night.

The two main factions were those who believed that the Group should continue in its present course of fighting Communist super spies and those who argued for an expansion of the Group’s brief to include other targets and operations. Even within the secretive and small bureaucracy of the Malta Group, inertia and momentum count for something, and the second, more radical faction was outvoted. A council of five Directors was established to run things and they in turn chose a Chief of Operations to oversee all operations. Although this new arrangement was more than sufficient to keep the Malta Group as a working organization, the group did lose much of its momentum. The number of new recruits and new operations steadily

decreased over the decade, a process that was only hastened by the warming of relations between East and West.

#### New World Order

Even as their group atrophied around them, the so-called radicals within the Malta Group were busy secretly plotting a new future for the organization. When the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union fell, the old guard within the Group was at a loss as to what to do. They had geared their entire existence towards fighting an Armageddon-like battle with the Soviet Union, only to see it collapse from within in a relatively peaceful manner. They had no idea what to do next. There was even talk of disbanding the Group now that the war had been won. Not surprisingly, the radicals had other plans.

For the previous five years this secret group within a secret group had been diverting operational resources to its own pet projects. They'd gotten involved in everything from smuggling arms and drugs to freelance assassination and mercenary work. They hadn't quite lost all moral grounding – they still fought for causes they thought were right – but they had begun to go very far a field from the traditional war on communism. Indeed, most of these ultra-secret operations were aimed at helping “promote capitalism,” or, in other words, aiding Western based multinational corporations in their efforts to expand business interests in the third world.

One of the biggest early clients for the radicals were European owned diamond dealers who controlled the African mines. The company had relied on mercenaries to defend its mines against local rebels, but when several dozen super powered beings started fighting for the rebel cause, they were forced to abandon their mines. No established hero team would go into the country to confront the native heroes, mostly because the heroes tended to agree with the rebels. The cabal within the Malta Group saw an opportunity here and offered to help the diamond dealers out. They used Group controlled heroes to attack and eventually kill all of the troublesome rebels, and within a few months control of the mines was restored to the diamond merchants. The Malta Group had just served its first private interests and picked up a healthy paycheck in the process. Of course the radicals kept the payment for themselves, and continued to perform other such jobs on the side, all the while being careful to avoid tipping off their more conservative fellow Group members.

Thus, when the Soviet Union collapsed and the Group's leaders had their crisis of faith, the radicals were well prepared to step in and seize the reins of command. The conservatives scarcely put up a fight. They didn't want to give up all the power they'd accumulated as being part of the Group, but they simply didn't have the vision to see where to go next. The radicals' revealed their recent activities and showed that the Group could still be an effective, powerful force in the world. After they got over their outrage at being duped, the conservatives were forced to agree, and they eventually adopted the radical plan. After all, they were only human and deep down the profits, power, and success that the radicals had accumulated in secret was tremendously appealing.

For only the second time in its history, the entire group met once again in Malta. They there restructured the entire organization from the ground up, moving resources from Europe and Russia to other nations, both in the third world and the first. America had always been a primary recruiting ground for the Group, so the organization in the States remained relatively the same, even increasing in power slightly. With the death of world-wide communism as a political force, the group agreed upon the need to focus their efforts towards a loftier goal – something that they felt would make the world a better place and secure their position in it. They came up with

a list of priorities and goals, most of them centered around working closely with the military industrial complex and multinational corporations to ensure a world economic climate that was ideal for corporate capitalism's growth and prosperity. This goal would include protecting and serving those governments that were friendly to this ideological goal and destruction of those groups and governments who opposed it.

With their new goal firmly set, the Malta Group didn't need to change its methods very much. Although the enemy might be different (And more diverse) now, the key to victory was still the same – the judicious and forceful application of super powered individuals. Heroes were themselves starting to become global forces. The rise of the corporate Hero Corps proved a perfect example – it was possible to organize and utilize super powered beings for any purpose. The Malta Group selected itself as the secret police force of this new era of globalism, and controlling heroes who stepped out of line was their new beat.

Even as they continued to blackmail and recruit heroes from their traditional stomping grounds, they saw a whole new realm of options open up to them. With the opening up of the Eastern Bloc, the Malta Group was at the forefront of exploiting the new open markets. Not only did they want to encourage capitalism in the fledgling democracies, they wanted to snatch up as many of the unaligned super powered beings as possible. While two decades of covert assassinations had taken a serious chunk out of the Soviet super reserves, there were still plenty of low power or previously untouchable candidates for recruitment. Even better, many were willing to work for money or other favors, negating the necessity of the strong arm tactics the Group usually resorted to in the Western world. Of course the Group's operatives got all the information they needed to use such tactics anyway, just in case.

Hundreds of new recruits flowed into the Group's operational teams, although few of them knew who or what they were actually working for. Indeed, most were led to believe that they were working for a variety of different groups, many of which allegedly hated one another – just one more way to deflect suspicion away from the Malta Group's true nature. Among the many new recruits was a scientist who, while not super powered herself, had been part of the Soviet super soldier program. In exchange for a few hundred thousand dollars, she gave the group access to something almost priceless: the keys to a secret Soviet research facility that was virtually unknown outside of those who had worked there.

The group carefully and quietly moved in on the remote Siberian installation. Even with all their intelligence gathering about Soviet super being projects, they had never heard of this facility – not even a hint. What they found was effectively a cyborg factory, a fully functional assembly line with hundreds of complete and partially complete cyborgs all sitting in stasis waiting to be activated. This program had been the Soviet response to the series of setbacks they had experienced at the hands of the Malta Group (although they didn't know who was responsible at the time). Developed in absolute secrecy, the cyborgs were meant to turn the tide in the war of assassins that was being waged in the super spy community. But the program took much longer than expected to produce results and now, with the new government, funding had dried up. And so the Malta Group just bought its own private cyborg army.

Of course the units were not ready to be put into the field – they still needed extensive work and resources. Some within the Group thought they should be destroyed. The Malta Group's strength had always been that it had no permanent super soldiers or bases – there was no way for their enemies to strike back. Taking on these cyborgs would require a lot of time, money, expertise, and facilities that they didn't have right now. While these were all valid points, ultimately the leaders simply could not pass up the opportunity. They spent millions moving the

entire facility and all the cyborgs out of Siberia and into a more secure location in Germany, where it remains to this day. It took another five years and tens of millions of dollars to get the cyborgs working again, but by the mid 1990's, the cyborgs, called Titans within the Group, were online and carrying out operations.

The Titans were not the only new addition to the Group's arsenal. The more they worked on the behalf of large corporations, the more access the Group received to high technology weapons and devices. For all their influence and espionage capability, the Malta Group had never been a particularly high-tech organization. Except for buying the latest and greatest surveillance gear every year, the Group didn't need much in the way of fancy weapons or powered armor. They worked their "recruits" using traditional, proven spy craft techniques. Vrabel himself had never been a proponent of high technology, preferring instead to rely on highly trained humans to make the right decisions and see the mission through to completion. But times were changing and the Group was growing. It was time to gear up.

The Group began to augment their Titans with more high tech weapons and supplement their offensive power with permanent teams of highly trained and well armed commandos. Although they still used coerced heroes and mercenary super beings for most of their ops, the Group found that more, and more, it needed its own standing army to ensure security and retain maximum flexibility. They also began constructing a series of more permanent bases across the globe, although they never created any central command center that could serve as a juicy target for their many enemies. The Group remained almost as amorphous and ghostly as ever, except that they maintained a few islands of permanency.

In the years leading up to the Rikti Invasion, the Malta Group continued on its dual path of fostering corporate capitalism and keeping radical and rogue super beings in check. To be fair, most of what they did was for the greater good, because most of the people they fought were not only a threat to their corporate interests, but to the general welfare of humanity as well. Terrorist groups, mad scientists, and secret cabals bent on world domination all fell prey to the Group's ruthless attacks. But "most" is not "all" and the Group certainly played a part in supporting numerous corrupt regimes and exploitative multinational corporations as well. They also took on more than a few radical or activist heroes who had done nothing wrong (besides getting in the Group's way). Within the super powered community, the Group began to earn a fearsome reputation, particularly for the bloodthirsty Titan cyborgs, which remained the only readily identifiable sign of the Group's involvement in a particular incident (and they seldom left many witnesses).

When the Rikti Invasion came, the Malta Group was as surprised and alarmed as anyone else. Unfortunately, there was little they could do about it. Eighty percent of the Group's offensive capability was in the form of coerced super beings who did their bidding out of fear or for money. With the whole world besieged by aliens, almost all of these individuals put aside personal concerns in order to fight the invaders. The Malta Group had no leverage when their operatives believed the whole world was coming to an end. Likewise, the Group's intelligence networks were of little value against an enemy that could teleport and didn't use any known form of communication. Nevertheless, the Group did what it could, using its Titans and special forces units to help fight off the Rikti as best they could.

By the war's end, the Group had suffered heavy casualties, just like everyone else. But, their disparate structure and traditional reliance on a disparate command and supply chain made them more resilient than most. Once the war was over they were able to pick up the pieces and start again where they had left off. For the first year or so after the war, the Group concentrated

on rebuilding. Most of their former operatives had died during the war, so they needed to surveil and blackmail a whole new generation of heroes. They also needed to recruit more normals for their commando teams and Titan units. All of this took time and money, but eventually they returned to something approaching their former level of effectiveness. But it is only recently that the Group has begun setting new, post-invasion goals and preparing for a new century of operations.

### **3.2 Goals**

For the first few decades of its existence, the Group wanted nothing more and nothing less than the complete and utter destruction of communism and the Soviet Union. Since that war was won, they have gravitated towards a more general posture of being pro-corporate capitalism and anti-radical and rogue super being. The leaders of the Malta Group imagine themselves as the protectors and heralds of “democracy” and “freedom.” In reality, their ideals are at best autocratic and at worst despotic. Even worse, nearly all the Group’s ideology is tinged with a Christian air; their “new world order” mysteriously omits the other religions.

Their part in the fall of the Soviet Union has infused the Group with a new enthusiasm: they can win. But, the Malta Group also knows that they alone cannot win the fight against “rogue” states, and they are more than willing to instigate the world’s powers into action. As a result, the Malta Group does its best to force Western nations into action and even into full out wars with countries that the Malta Group has targeted.

#### **Setting Priorities**

Beyond this overarching goal of total domination, the Malta Group has a number of less obvious, but still vitally important ambitions that it hopes to realize in the next few years. Ever the pragmatists, the Malta Group fully realizes that there is no way they can ever truly control all the world’s heroes (barring some bizarre and unexpected event). Therefore, they have broken super powered beings down into a number of different Priority Groups or, as they say around the office, simply Priorities. The Priorities are as follows:

Priority One (Red Threats): These are the super powered beings who present a clear and present danger to the United States and/or humanity as a whole. These are beings that the Malta Group has decided it cannot safely try to manipulate or deal with in any way. The only viable option is to destroy them. The vast majority of Priority One targets are readily recognized villains – people like Nemesis or Requiem that no one would disagree were menaces to society. Like the hero organizations of old, the Malta Group uses its influence and intelligence to try to eliminate these foes as quickly and with as much finality as possible. Of course, not all the Priority One targets are as powerful as Nemesis. Most are much lesser lights who are nevertheless deemed utterly irredeemable – psychopaths, some aliens, monsters, demons and other supernatural entities, and basically anything else the Group can’t fully comprehend or deal with get thrown into Priority One. It is not unheard of for some non-villains or even heroes to get thrown into this Priority as well, especially if they’re seen as a threat to the Group in some way.

Unlike the Hero Organizations of old, the Group deals with these so-called Red Threats with maximum force. They do take prisoners and they do not hold trials. As far as the Group is concerned, being put in Priority One is a death sentence. How adamantly the Group pursues executing that sentence depends on the vulnerability and imminent threat of the target. For example, Nemesis is perceived as a very dangerous threat, but he is also incredibly powerful. It would take all of the Group’s resources to try and take Nemesis down, and even then they probably wouldn’t be successful. Thus, the Group continues to gather intelligence and harass Nemesis when they can without exposing themselves too much. On the other hand, a lone

super powered psychopath or some poor child possessed by a murderous demon are relatively easy targets to take out. In these cases, Malta Group hit teams will be on the way in moments to take out the Priority One target as quickly and quietly as possible.

Priority Two (Usurpers): Priority Two Targets, also known as Usurpers, are an interesting group. They are, for the most part, individuals who would not uniformly be classified as villains by an objective judge. They are, instead, radicals and activists who have utterly devoted themselves to a cause that the Malta Group doesn't agree with. This means that, more often than not, the Group would like to see them dead or disabled. However, it also means that they are not beyond intimidation, manipulation, and even "recruitment" to the Malta Group's uses. In short, they're not insane or unreachable.

Many of these Usurpers are in fact part of revolutionary or counter-revolutionary groups scattered around the world. Many are, in fact, known super-powered terrorists, making them legitimate targets for any kind of abuse the Group wants to heap on them (at least, that's the Group's assessment). However, The Group has been known to work with terrorist and revolutionary groups on many occasions, especially when doing so can help advance some greater cause. The terrorist's propensity for violence and radical devotion to a cause makes him or her relatively easy to manipulate. The Group loves to sick terrorists on one another or have them attack some other target that the Group wants eliminated. It seldom takes more than a few whispered lies and some false intelligence to set the super powered patsies into violent motion. As long as a Priority Two target remains useful to the Group, it will let them live. As soon as they can't control it any more or find no further use for it, they eliminate the target and move on to the next one.

Unfortunately, a large number of Priority Two targets are not terrorists at all. They are simply super powered activists of one type or another who use their powers and position to fight against causes that they believe are unjust. Environmentalists, anti-globalization activists, human rights workers, and others have all been thrown into Priority Two simply because they oppose one of the corporate or governmental interests that the Group represents. As far as the Malta Group is concerned, there is no difference between real terrorists and these activists. Both should be manipulated as long as it is practicable and useful and then they should be eliminated. Indeed, it has become a favorite tactic to pit true terrorists and activists against one another, ensuring a mutual destruction of both groups and deflecting any suspicion from the Group itself.

Priority Three (Unknowns): Unlike the first two Priorities, Unknowns being classified an Unknown is not necessarily a death sentence. Instead, it means that the subject merits increased observation and investigation to determine his or her actual status. Most of these Unknowns are super powered beings that either operate in areas of the world where the Group doesn't have many resource or those that have recently emerged onto the scene. As soon as the Group identifies an Unknown, it does everything it can to gather enough data to reprioritize the target. Sometimes a target can languish in Priority Three for months or even years, something that the Group Analysts find infinitely frustrating.

In order to fully reprioritize a target, the Group must have proof of the person's powers and intentions, as well as some firm grasp on his or her background. More often than not this information comes from passive surveillance and some behind the scenes investigation. The Group never has to actively interfere in the individuals life. However, for those particularly tough nuts to crack, the Malta Group does have procedures for what they euphemistically call a Litmus Test. They create a series of situations for the target and observe how he or she reacts. These

can include attacks, attempted bribes, false information, and threats to the target's friends and families. The Litmus Test firmly identifies which priority the target belongs in, assuming it doesn't kill the person in the process (which is not as uncommon as one might hope).

Priority Four (Potentials): The Malta Group defines any super powered being that they can possibly control with safety and security as a Priority Four Target or, Potential. The vast majority of the world's heroes and villains (and non-aligned super beings) fall into Priority Four. Potentials do not present any immediate threat to the Group or to those institutions and individuals that the Group feels are important. Every Potential has a file in the Group's databases that records all the known information about his or her origins, powers, background, family, and friends. The Group accumulates this data over time, usually through carefully culling newspaper and media articles, police reports, and other public and confidential databases. The Group is tied into every information source on the globe and has hundreds of analysts working to sift through the data for informational gems on super beings. The Malta Group monitors every electronic transaction, every telephone call, every newspaper report or mention on a Web log that has anything to do with a Potential. Often their computers know more about the subject's life than their own family and friends.

Actual agents are seldom dispatched to surveil Potentials unless they show particular promise. After all, there are thousands upon thousands of these beings out there, and even the Group has limited resources. When a very promising Potential is identified, then the surveillance teams spring into action and start looking for some lever with which to manipulate and/or recruit the target. Or, if the Potential is showing signs of becoming dangerous, the surveillance teams come up with enough information to reclassify the target as Priority Two or One.

It should be noted that there are a great number of "petty" criminals that the Group leaves within the Potential prioritization. The Malta Group does not concern itself with local crimes unless they directly impact its interests. For them, there is little difference between a master thief and a vigilante hero. Both are potential assets until they prove themselves either useless or a direct threat. The never ending struggles between costume clad heroes and their masked nemeses do not concern the Group – unless of course they can be used to control and deceive an asset.

Priority Five (Assets): Assets are those individuals who have, by one means or another, been compromised and recruited into the Group. Some are paid mercenaries, others are unknowing dupes, but most of them are working under threat of blackmail or exposure of some secret. Priority Five targets live under constant surveillance by the Malta Group through both electronic and human intelligence gathering resources. The Group does not want any of its recruits to be able to make a single move without them knowing about it. After all, their intimidation and control techniques rely upon their ability to force others to cooperate and prevent them from seeking help out of fear for the consequences. As soon as the asset feels he or she has any freedom to act without consequence, they will rebel against the Group.

The Malta Group classifies an Asset as Operational when he or she is engaged in some mission or errand on the Group's behalf. The Group usually has several hundred active assets operational at any one time. While operational, a team of up to a dozen agents and analysts keep an eye on the operative and make sure he or she plays along. These handlers (as they are known) are fully empowered to terminate the Asset if necessary, although this is always an option of last resort. If additional threats/bribes/promises don't ensure cooperation, then deleting the Asset is the only option. The Group seldom takes prisoners, wanting to limit its direct exposure to targets as much as possible.

The majority of Assets remain in Reserve status until the Group needs their special talents for a specific operation. Reserve Assets are still subject to constant monitoring, usually by electronic means. These reserve Assets only have three or four handlers working them at a time. Each of these smaller handler teams is usually responsible for monitoring multiple assets (typically between five and ten). The Group never makes its presence felt when monitoring an Asset in reserve unless absolutely necessary. Many targets begin to think that their ordeal is order – that perhaps the Group has forgotten about them or decided to let them off the hook. They are always wrong in this assumption. The Group never forgets, and never lets anyone off the hook.

Priority Six (Untouchables): The final Priority Class are the Untouchables. These are super powered beings that the Group recognizes as being both not harmful to their goals and too powerful to directly manipulate or turn into assets. The prime example is, of course, Statesman. Before he disappeared he was the archetypical Untouchable. No one in the Ground wanted to get his attention or, worse yet, draw down his wrath. They steered clear of him and let him do his things. If he had ever learned of the Group (which he didn't) and decided to come after it, he would have been reprioritized as a Priority One Threat and the Group would have done what it could to neutralize him. These days there are very few Untouchables left. Most of the surviving seven great heroes fall into this category, as do some other powerful individuals scattered around the world. Likewise some villains fall into this category, like the Archonate. Others have alliances with the Malta Group or some influence within its ruling elite, like the Countess Crey.

The Group hates the fact that there are people that are beyond their power to corrupt or influence. As a result, they have decided to make it a goal not to allow anyone else to become so popular, powerful, and untouchable that they must be categorized as Priority Six. Any hero, no matter how noble her actions or how much good they've done for the is subject to what is known as Priority Six Sanction. Under these circumstances the group takes the necessary steps to halt the hero's (or villain's) rise to untouchable status. This is seldom something as crass and obvious as an assassination. More likely, they start a smear campaign against the hero's reputation, followed up by a staged incident where it's impossible for the hero to do the right thing. Sometimes all it takes is a tarnishing of the hero's image to stop his or her rise. The target continues to work as a hero, but doesn't have the influence and status they once possessed. Most commonly though, the hero is forced into retirement in disgrace, having been shown to be undesirable or reprehensible in some way. This often works especially well for the Group, since the hero now becomes a Potential or an Asset with relative ease.

#### Politics by Any Means

While the manipulation and control of super powered beings is the Malta Group's primary brief, they also have extensive expertise in the field of political maneuvering. After all, the Group's power stems not from any super abilities or special technology, but rather from their expertise as spies and politicians. For decades they have secretly siphoned off billions of dollars from Western governments, all the while ensuring that they had all the legal cover and political support necessary for their operations. It should come as no surprise then that the Group is as adept at working the halls of government as it is at making super beings do what they want. The only difference is, with politics, the Group tends to be a little subtler.

The United States and Western Europe remain the strongholds of Malta Group power, although the organization has extended its influence to every continent. While in Asia, South America, and Africa the Group often engages in bribery, chicanery, and even bullying to get what it wants from local governments, it does not have the deep seated political roots that it maintains in the NATO nations. The United States and Britain in particular hold special places in the Group's heart, and in these countries they have almost unrestricted access to the ruling elites.

Fortunately for the Malta Group, unlike heroes and villains, politicians are inherently for sale to the highest bidder. The Group does not need to resort to mind control techniques or even black mail to get its way as long as it has legal (or at least semi-legal) ways in which to influence key members of government. Through a number of shell corporations, think tanks, and political action committees, the Malta Group gives tens of millions of dollars to candidates during every election cycle in both the United States and the UK. Most of these go to a few particularly powerful and influential committee chairs or legislative leaders. In return, they almost always lend a friendly ear to whatever suggestion the Malta Group has to make.

Thus while the governments no longer directly fund the Malta Group out of their various military and intelligence budgets, the Group is usually able to make all of its money back and more by winning special funding or government contracts for its shell corporations. The Group also makes even more money by selling its influence to others who don't have such access, such as client corporations or even other governments. But money is just a side benefit for the Group. The real purpose of buying political interest is their desire for political and legal cover for their activities.

First and foremost, the Malta Group has managed to secure for itself blanket immunity from investigation or prosecution by the Justice Department in the United States. There hasn't been an Attorney General in the past decade who wasn't either directly paid off by the Malta Group or part of an administration that the Group had bought and paid for. The FBI and other groups simply don't investigate the Malta Group, and all it takes is a few phone calls to wave them off a particular subject. The Group can even (and has) get away with murder, since the local cops are as likely to succumb to pressure from their political bosses as the FBI is.

But wait, there's more. Not only do the Justice Department and many local law enforcement agencies (including the Paragon City Police Department) turn a blind eye to the Malta Group's crimes, they also provide assistance when called upon to do so. The Group almost never uses government or police personnel (although they can if they have to in an emergency), but they do have open access to law enforcement's files, databases, and lab facilities. The Group can call upon expert forensic teams to provide them with analyses of a location, or they can simply have the cops cordon off a few city blocks while they carry out some sensitive operation. The law enforcement men and women drafted for such duty never have any idea who they're working for – they just know that someone very high up the chain of command told them to do as they were told.

The Malta Group's interests stretch beyond the immediate need for help on the ground or protection from investigation. The Group really wants to change society and how it works. They want to make the world safe for big business capitalism and they want to bring the world's super beings under iron clad control. Ultimately, doing this requires changing the laws of the land. And there is no law the Malta Group would like to see restored more than the now-defunct Might for Right Act.

Thus the Group is exerting tremendous pressure upon its political assets to slowly but surely revive the Might for Right Act and allow the government to unconditionally draft super beings into service. Although the Group has plenty of assets on its own, it would love to be able to cut out the rigmarole of blackmail and intimidation and just be able to order whoever they want to do whatever they want. Of course public opinion is opposed to the law's revival, and the Supreme Court has declared it utterly unconstitutional. Therefore, the Group has a long road ahead of it before it can revive the hated statute. But they can be patient, and they're experts at playing the

long game. Already they've begun to groom a number of prominent federal judges who would be likely Supreme Court nominees. By their reckoning, they need to secure three more seats on the nation's highest court in order to overturn the *Might for Right* decision. All the pieces are almost in place, and it wouldn't be surprising to see justices start dying off under mysterious circumstances in the not too distant future.

### **3.3 Methodology**

The Malta Group has dozens of different techniques for obtaining and controlling assets, each of which is worth a story or two in and of itself. The Group thinks nothing of shattering a person's life and putting him or her through hell if that means they can accomplish their mission successfully. No particular technique is unique to a particular kind of asset. That is to say, there isn't a one size fits all solution for recruiting heroes into the Group's service. Each individual requires special attention that's appropriate to his or her own weaknesses and pressure points. In general though, there are several broad categories into which all the

Group's methodologies fall:

**Money:** The simplest and least reliable form of control is money. There are thousands of mercenaries out there, many of them with super powers, who claim that they're willing to do anything for money. As it turns out, that's not quite true. They're willing to do anything for money as long as it doesn't sound too dangerous or go against their own personal best interests. Worst of all, more than a few of them are willing to sell out completely to another master if they get offered more money. The Malta Group doesn't like working with assets who they don't have some form of real leverage over. Thus they rarely ever employ mercenaries on anything but low priority operations. Often mercenaries are hired to attack some location or guard some facility purely as a distraction while other assets carry out the real operation elsewhere.

But money can be a great motivator if the asset is desperate enough. More than a few heroes and villains have gotten into serious debt through gambling, drug addictions, or just lousy financial sense. Loan sharks, dealers, and bookies banging at the door can make a man quite desperate, especially if he has a public image to maintain. In these instances the Group is more than happy to help a hero out and pay his debts – once he's performed a small favor of course. Unlike traditional loan sharks who buy a person's loan and continue to demand repayment, the Group likes to simply clear the debt for the asset (after the job is done of course). This makes the asset grateful and ensures that he feels like he got a fair deal. The Group feels that if someone was stupid enough to get in debt over their head once, they'll probably do it again. Especially if the Group uses some of its other agents to help seduce the asset into borrowing more money, thus creating a never ending cycle of debt and repayment through action on the Group's behalf.

**Blackmail:** Everyone has secrets of one sort or another. The real question is, what would you do to keep the world from knowing your secrets. For most people, the answer is not very much. Letting the world know that you secretly read romance novels is not the kind of thing that's going to make a person commit crimes in order to keep the truth hidden from the world. Plus, even if the secret got out, no one would care. But heroes are celebrities in this modern era, and lots and lots of people care about each and every little thing they do. Furthermore, many heroes fall into the "work hard, play hard" mentality. They risk their lives every day and sometimes, when it comes time to blow off some steam, they get carried away. This can lead to some embarrassing behavior.

But of course the biggest secret many heroes have is their true identity. Many heroes prefer to act pseudonymously so that they can maintain a private life outside of their business as heroes.

Secrecy protects their family and friends from reprisals and helps ensure their security during downtime. The secret identity also offers some legal protection, insulating the hero from lawsuits and criminal prosecution on those occasions when he or she accidentally steps over the line. The public exposure of one's secret identity can be a life-changing catastrophe.

The Malta Group is, of course, expert at finding out secret identities, embarrassing details, and much darker, more dangerous secrets as well. But even so, there's only so much a hero will do to avoid revealing his identity or that a villain will undertake just to avoid having his secret base outed to the authorities. Most blackmail victims are called upon to do smaller tasks – things they probably would have done anyway. For example, the Group uses heroes to attack villains or unknown super beings, painting them as utterly evil (even if they're not) in order to assuage and guilt the blackmailed asset feels about doing something just to preserve his identity. Likewise, with villains, the Group has them steal things or attack locations they normally wouldn't mind taking on, and usually allows the asset some profit out of the deal as well.

But when the Malta Group comes up with some really nasty, incriminating information, then they can really put the screws to someone. A super being guilty of murder, treason, drug trafficking, or some other heinous crime is a dream find for the Group. After assembling incontrovertible proof of the asset's guilt, they lay it out nice and simple: do what we say or all this proof goes to the press and the police. Few people have the will to stand up to such a threat, and once they get going they Group never lets go. Invariably the asset is made to commit more and more crimes, making him or her that much more susceptible to blackmail. Sometimes the Group even send the asset on missions that serve no other purpose than to rack up more crimes on his or her conscience. Once an asset has fallen this low, there's no escape. They serve the Group until they die or are caught red handed by the authorities. Those few that try to make a run for it seldom succeed.

Threat: While blackmail is of course a kind of threat, it is not the only one in the Malta Group's arsenal. Sometimes, it is necessary to more directly threaten an asset's well being – or the well being of his or her family and friends. Threatening a subject into doing your bidding is a tricky business, and not everyone responds well to it. The most valiant and brave of heroes will stand up to the threat, making it ultimately useless (although the Group always carries out its threats, without exception). The Group has therefore become quite adept at identifying those assets who are most susceptible to threat and then latching onto them. Individuals with high levels of fear and overblown senses of self preservation make particularly tempting targets. The ideal candidate cares mostly for himself, and will do whatever he needs to do to survive. Eventually, such subjects become used to working under threat of death, and even become reliable in a certain way.

Threatening someone's loved ones is a trickier undertaking. In all threat based assets, there is a strong desire to somehow trick the Group and strike back at them. This desire is dramatically increased when someone feels a strong sense of duty or love for his friends and family. Since the Group is expert at spotting any attempts to strike back at them, they usually foil rebellious assets before they can act, but even so, it can distract from completing the mission objectives. Once the mission is over, the asset invariably does everything he or she can to find out who was behind the threat so that they can protect their loved ones from any future menacing. Therefore, assets brought into operational status via threats usually have some very specific power or access and are rarely used for more than one or two operations. After that, the safest course is usually to eliminate the asset entirely.

One of the more interesting and high-stakes threats that the Malta Group uses is the tried and tested time-release poison or bomb. Agents of the Group inject the asset or a loved one with a poison or explosive device that will cause certain death within a short period of time – usually between ten and twenty-four hours. The asset must follow orders or die. It's as simple as that. The Group has developed some very toxic and hard to cure substances that cannot be counteracted by any means known to modern medicine, including the hospitals in the emergency teleportation network. This technique works fairly well, and can even be used successfully against the same target on multiple occasions. However, like most threats, it is a short-term solution and is used to gain the abilities of an asset for a specific operation.

**Trickery:** The most effective short term solution for manipulating assets is trickery. While no one likes being blackmailed or threatened, everyone has their own motives that do induce immediate action. The Malta Group has become expert at manipulating such motives to their own advantage. The most common form of trickery is to simply find out what an asset cares about and then manufacture a situation where that particular issue or subject comes into play. Group operatives can easily fake 911 calls, provide false leads to the asset's contacts and associates, manufacture evidence, or even create a false situation that spurs the asset into action. The Group uses such techniques every day, but they do have a drawback. It's becoming increasingly difficult to keep tricking an asset in this way – eventually they grow suspicious and a new tactic must come into play. Unless of course the asset is unusually credulous. In that case, the Group can and will exploit his or her gullibility indefinitely.

A more effective but more time consuming tactic is to develop a false contact for the asset – someone the super being comes to know and trust and for whom he or she works whenever requested. Many freelance heroes rely on contacts of one sort or another to steer them towards crimes that need solving or good that needs doing. Likewise, many villains need tips about valuable loot or potential law enforcement trouble. Either way, if a Group operative can insert himself into that role, then manipulating the asset becomes much easier. An even more effective technique is to develop some sort of personal bond with the hero, usually through seduction. The Malta Group trains a number of its operatives in the finer points of using sex as a weapon. Once an asset falls in love with the operative, manipulation becomes incredibly easy.

A final form of trickery involves what the Group calls False Allegiances. The Group always takes an interest in any paramilitary or revolutionary groups they learn about, no matter where in the world they are operating. Likewise, anywhere with concentrations of political or social dissatisfaction also piques their interest. The Group then sends in its agents to help lead and ultimately redirect these groups' efforts. For example, in the United States there are a number of right-wing paramilitary militias that have formed in reaction to perceived faults in the government. More than a few of these include super powered beings in their ranks. The Group has infiltrated most of them and feeds them a constant stream of misinformation, usually "incriminating" targets that the Group has identified as threats. Thus they succeed on two fronts – they prevent the militias from successfully striking against government resources while at the same time focusing their ire on someone the Group feels deserves it. The Group has similar arrangements all over the world.

**Mind Control:** The ultimate form of asset manipulation, mind control takes a great deal of time, money, and effort to use effectively. It typically takes over a year for the Malta Group's scientists to complete their mind control regimen on a target, during which time the subject must be confined in a cell and subjected to large doses of drugs and a variety of mental stimuli. This time and resource commitment can be quite a risk, especially if the asset has friends who might come looking for him or her. Furthermore, the Malta Group is usually loathe to maintain many

long-term facilities, and has only a few locations around the world suitable for such procedures (including on in Paragon City). Taken together, all these factors mean that mind controlled assets are relatively rare.

But when it does work, the brain washing process produces tremendous results. Subjects retain most of their basic personality and all of their memories and skill set. The Malta Group's scientists do not simply dig around in a subject's brain and cut out the disobedient bits. They carefully sculpt personality and memory, bringing the subject more in line with the Group's beliefs (or whatever beliefs they want the subject to have). By the time the subject is ready for full services, he or she not only obeys orders, they want to obey those orders. However, even after completion the mind control procedure require regular maintenance sessions with the Group scientists – usually at least once a month for a 48-hour period.

All told, the Malta Group has only a few dozen active mind-controlled assets, and it values them a great deal. Almost all of them are currently working as sleeper agents out in the field, pretending to be normal heroes or villains and providing the Group with the kind of insider intelligence that would otherwise be almost impossible to get. The Group has even managed to help two of its controlled assets become superstar heroes, with millions of fans and massive public appeal. For the moment they continue to work for the Group in secret, but they day might some day come when they'll be asked to take a much more public stance on an issue the Malta Group cares deeply about such as Might for Right or in support of an otherwise unsupportable war.

### **3.4 Relations with Others**

The Malta Group firmly believes that it's one of the good guys. It feels that the ends justify the means and is willing to do whatever it takes to win the war against rogue heroes and threats to world capitalism. And while it might manipulate or use groups that are obviously evil, these are always just alliances of convenience. They eventually plan to take out everyone they believe to be evil.

The Rikti are obviously a threat to one and all. For the Group, they are the new Communists and there is no making deals with them. Given any opportunity, they will strike at the Rikti, although now that the war is over, they will not do so if it endangers their current security or operations.

The 5th Column is obviously an evil organization, but it is an occasionally useful one. The Group does what it can to curtail the fascist group's terrorist activities, but it is not above manipulating events so that the 5th Column attacks someone the Group sees as a more immediate threat. However, much more often than not, the Group acts against the 5th Column as best it can.

The Circle of Thorns is more of a mystery to the Malta Group. They have little experience or expertise with magic, although they've recently begun several programs to rectify this deficiency. The Circle is patently dangerous and is packed with super powered threats, so the Group has taken a relatively hard line against it.

The Archonate represents the Malta Group's worst nightmare – an organization of powerful super beings operating outside all the confines of law and morality. Thus far the Archonate is still largely a mystery to the Group, and their various attempts to infiltrate it have proven entirely unsuccessful. They want to gather as much intelligence as possible about this growing threat before making any moves.

Crey Industries on the other hand is not seen as a villain group at all. Indeed, the Malta Group thinks rather highly of Crey, as it represents what they view as an ideal manifestation of the capitalist ethic. While the two don't actively cooperate often, they do have a number of positive interactions.

Nemesis is also a recognized foe, but the Group has taken a surprisingly lax stance against him. The party line within the group is that it's possible to negotiate with Nemesis and perhaps make use of him. In fact, Nemesis is one of the few individuals out there who knows more about the Group than they know about him. In a rare turn of the table, he is playing them, manipulating them for his own purposes.

The Freakshow on the other hand is obviously an enemy of all that is good and decent in the world. The crazed cybernetic anarchists have their uses, but are ultimately a threat and need to be destroyed at some point.

The more monstrous and bizarre groups like the Banished Pantheon and the Devouring Earth are beyond the Malta Group's ken. They are seen as just as bad as the Rikti and in need of destruction at the earliest possible moment. Smaller groups and gangs like the Tsoo and Vahzilok are useful tools for the Group, and both have been sources of assets in the past. The Group doesn't view them as terribly threatening, at least in the short term.

### **3.5 Agents**

Titan Tactical Units (Titans)

- Rank: Boss
- Levels: 41 - 50
- Powers
- AI:

Description: The fall of the Soviet Union was everything the original Malta Group had ever dreamed of. Not only was it the end of the Warsaw Pact, it saw the Russian government replaced with a ruthless oligarchic style of capitalism that was prone to corruption and manipulation at every turn. The Malta Group stole into the disintegrating Evil Empire like bandits and made off with everything they could get their hands on. Aside from a few dozen nuclear warheads, the most dangerous and valuable prize they took had to be the cyborg technology that would become the Titans.

The Soviets never managed to bring the Titan units online, but they had made some startling breakthroughs in technology. Only a totalitarian regime with no moral code would perform the medical atrocities necessary to create these cyborg soldiers, which made them just about perfect for the Malta Groups and its brutal code of "victory by any means." To all intents and purposes, the Titans are really robots, except that they are controlled by a human brain and nervous system. They have certainly long ago lost any sense of humanity they might have once had, and don't even possess memories of their former lives. The Soviets had used dissidents and criminals for their initial experiments, and the current Malta Group does much the same – anyone they don't like who gets in their way has a chance of being turned into a Titan. Since the process is only successful one in three times, the casualty rate in the Titan manufacturing facilities is quite high.

The Titans possess lasers, missiles and machine guns as weapons. The Titans are also multi-part robots – several robots come together to form a larger one. And, when destroyed, the brain case emerges from the wreckage, counts down, and explodes.

### Kronos Class Titans

- Rank: Giant Monster
- Levels: 41 - 50
- Powers
- AI:

Description: The Kronos Class Titans are a new development for the Malta Group. They're based on plans captured from the Soviet archives, but they are for machines that the Russians never had a chance to build. Like the normal Titans, these are actually cyborgs with human nervous systems as the central control mechanism. However, unlike the normal Titans, these models are very large, standing over thirty feet in height. Thus far the Group has only gotten a few dozen of these titans online, but they expect to produce several hundred over the next five years.

The Kronos class is really just a bigger, better version of the existing line. It looks very similar, but has much more powerful weaponry and is capable of flying faster, longer, and farther. They are capable of supersonic travel at speeds of up to Mach 3 and carry 30mm cannons in each arm and a battery of guided missiles. Thus they're equally capable of intercepting tanks, fighter jets, or troublesome heroes. The Group is keeping these metal beasts under tight raps for now, using them for base security and attacks in remote locations with few witnesses (against terrorist training camps for example).

### Knives of Artemis

- Ranks: Minion, Lieutenant & Boss
- Levels: 41 - 50
- Powers:
- AI:

Description: This all female mercenary group has a reputation as one of the deadliest and most efficient paramilitary groups in the world. It consists of roughly seventy women, two thirds of whom have super powers. The rest are no less deadly, being highly trained warriors with high tech weapons. The Knives are generally ready, willing, and able to take on any contract that comes their way, as long as it doesn't involve anything too obviously evil. They're happy to help defend corporate owned diamond mines from local agitators or take down heroes accused of consorting with terrorists, but they won't attack civilians or engage in ethnic cleansing. The Malta Group likes to use them for security operations and to take down rogue criminals that they don't have the time or resources to deal with themselves. The Knives wear matching uniforms, usually sleeveless black flack vests with purple trim and fatigue pants to match. The Knives also use a ceremonial "knife" that they earn once they join the organization. This large serrated knife is more like a sword than anything else.

### Tactical Ops Teams

- Rank: Minion, Lieutenant
- Levels: 41 - 50
- Powers
- AI:

Description: The Malta Group now has a small standing army of its own, made up of a few thousand trained soldiers recruited from all over the world. Like everything else within the group, this military force is divided into cells or Teams as they're known. Each Tactical Ops Team is always totally unaware of all of the other Teams, insulating the Group from exposure should one or more of them be captured by the enemy. Each Team consists of forty trained soldiers organized into squads of ten. The Group has Teams scattered all over the world, with large

metropolitan areas like Paragon City having multiple Teams scattered around the region. All Team members carry false identity documents identifying them as either police or military officers. The Group arranges a false cover for the Teams that will pass any normal investigation, although an in depth look usually reveals them as false. Such detailed inquiries are rare however, since the Teams usually only need a few minutes or hours of respect that a badge can buy them while they carry out their mission. Most of these missions involve bringing down Priority One targets or supporting other assets in the field. The Group often uses them to secure a city block or building from innocent bystanders while an operation is being carried out. Tactical Ops Teams look very much like a modern soldier. They're armed with sub machineguns, assault rifles, and sniper rifles. They have not special powers, but are all highly trained soldiers. Their weapons usually have armor piercing or high explosive rounds, especially when they're anticipating dealing with tough super powered threats. If the operation calls for it, they can draw heavier weapons from the armory, including missile launchers, heavy machineguns, and even some experimental laser weaponry.

Typically, Tactical Ops Teams surround their position with trip mines, and prefer to shoot at foes and lure them in. This means that at least a few Ops teams stay safely behind the mines. They also use a full panoply of powers from the Device Power Set. There's also an invisible, stealth operative – totally invisible to players – who attacks without warning.

#### Sapper

- Rank: Lieutenant
- Levels: 41 - 50
- Powers:
- AI:

Description: Despite their name, sappers do not dig in the ground or plant explosives. Instead they are trusted Malta Group agents equipped with one of the organizations newest and most potent weapons – The Bio-Energy Feedback Inducer. This weapon was designed specifically for hunting down and neutralizing super powered beings of all sorts. It creates a feedback loop within the target's nervous system that saps away most super powers, effectively weakening or even negating the target's abilities. In game terms, the Sappers drain an enormous amount of player Endurance. The device quickly earned the nickname "Power Sapper" and those agents who use them became known as Sappers.

There are still relatively few Sappers operating within the Malta Group, as the weapons they use are very expensive and difficult to manufacture. The Group only deploys Sappers on high priority missions – either when the threat is great or there's a potential asset they really want to bring in unharmed and neutered. They always works in teams with other agents who are equipped with more traditional – and deadly weaponry such as Gun Slingers or even Titans. It is rare to encounter more than one Sapper at a time unless it is a particularly vital operation.

The Sapper weapon itself is a large rifle attached by a tube to a weighty energy pack that the agent wears on his or her back. All Sappers also wear body armor on their chest, head, and legs to provide both protection from their enemies and shielding from occasional side effects and backlashes from the weapon. The Sapper itself has a wide area of effect and is used not unlike a fire hose. Anyone struck by the weapon suffers immediate ill effects.

#### Gunslingers

- Rank: Lieutenant & Boss
- Levels: 41 - 50

- Powers
- AI:

Description: The Malta Group does on occasion need to employ its own, loyal operatives directly in the field. While the Tactical Ops Teams are good for security or for full frontal assaults, sometimes a few lone, highly trained agents are a much more efficient and less attention grabbing way to deal with a problem. Thus the Malta Group regularly recruits and trains some of the world's most effective killers. Most are brought in young – usually in their late twenties – after having shown some promise in the military or police. The Malta Group then trains them for years, honing their weapons and fighting skills until they're able to single-handedly take on a super powered being – at least under the right circumstances. Those circumstances almost always involve the agent having a gun in his or her hand.

According to official Malta Group nomenclature, these operatives are called Special Qualification Marksmen, but everyone in the group calls them by their nickname: Gunslingers. This name came into common usage not only because the agents use firearms, but because they also tend to have the same kind of cocky attitude and cowboy mentality that one associates with gunslingers in the old west. Each and every gunslinger is trained to believe that they have a very real shot at taking down any kind of super being, as long as they know just where to put the bullet. In most cases, they're absolutely right. Gunslingers are highly effective, cold-blooded killers, and there are few in service today that don't have at least four or five kills to their names.

The key to a Gunslinger's deadly efficacy is not just the training – it's the equipment. All gunslingers use the very latest and most advanced firearms available. Most use high power pistols or small assault weapons – anything that can be hidden on their person and drawn with lightning speed to gun down a target (although for more traditional assassinations, they do use sniper rifles). The real secret though is inside the gun. The Group has developed a whole range of specialized ammunition that it uses against super beings. From armor piercing rounds that can penetrate half an inch of solid steel to poisons, explosives, EMP, incendiary, and even sonic bullets, all designed to overcome some specific kind of super powered defense mechanism. Gunslingers typically carry several different types of ammunition on their person so that they can be ready for any eventuality.

Gunslingers do not have a uniform per se. Instead they wear civilian clothing that helps them blend in on the street. However, because of their cocksure attitudes, both the male and female gunslingers often like to dress to impress. Most favor some kind of jacket, usually leather, underneath which they can hide their weaponry. Sunglasses are de rigueur, as is short hair on both men and women. Beyond that, many go for darker clothing, from blue jeans to black leather pants, depending on the subject's own taste and style. Footwear is usually black boots, often with a holster for a small handgun or knife.

Gunslingers tend to operate alone or in small teams. They occasionally are brought in to provide backup to a special ops team or other Malta Group assets, but they prefer to keep to themselves when they can. They are the Group's assassins of choice, targeting not only troublesome super beings, but other enemies of the Group as well. Although they have no special powers, they're phenomenal training and combat senses make them the equal to some of the toughest heroes and villains in the business.