

## GAUNT CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE

In general, gaunts adhere to the same cultural tropes as normals. They read the same newspapers, listen to the same music, and engage in the same fads and social movements that normals do. The jobs they hold are similar, if not identical, and the measure of success and failure is no different for a gaunt than it is for anyone else. But that being said, their physical isolation — pressed into slums with little chance of integrating with the normal majority — coupled with the realities of their condition brings a unique quality to their life. Being a gaunt is hard, but it's not altogether unmanageable, and like any culture, it has its share of joys.

### RULES FOR GETTING AHEAD

Though there are no fast, clean rules for law-abiding gaunts to make it in the world, a rough code of sorts has evolved to help them do it. Most gaunts — at least those trying to play by the rules and make what they can of their opportunities — adhere to this code in some form or another.

- 1) **Mind your own business.** Gaunts make a habit out of not prying into others' affairs. Normals don't want their help and tend to view interference as an affront. Many of them will find some way to pin blame on any convenient gaunts — especially one offering to help fix things. Gaunts believe that it's best to just tend to their own affairs and let the rest of the world take care of itself. It keeps them safe and besides, they don't see anyone offering to help with *their* problems, now do they?
- 2) **Watch what you say.** Normals who can't remember their own address can often recall insults and implied insults from a gaunt with crystal clarity. The less one says, then the less one reveals and the less chance of saying something to offend. With so many people looking for a reason to knock them down, there's no cause to compound the problem by mouthing off. Similarly, knowledge is power, and the less other people know about a gaunt's private affairs, the better.
- 3) **Be loyal to other gaunts.** As a community, gaunts can be very fractious, with various gangs and groups struggling against each other for dominance. But they close ranks like Roman legions at external threats. Getting a gaunt to inform on his fellows is harder than it seems. Better to say nothing, in their opinion, than to make trouble for one of their own — even if it's someone they'd kill in other circumstances.
- 4) **Be smart; don't let your passions get the better of you.** The media has a fixation on gaunt anger and the spectacle of leatherback emotions running amok. This is a dangerous fallacy; gaunts are no more or less temperamental than

any other humans. Their outbursts are simply more spectacular, and the pressures they're under mean they lose their temper more often. With yet another strike against them, gaunts admonish each other not to pop their corks. Keep cool, stay calm, and never raise your voice.

- 5) **Be tough.** No one said life as a gaunt was easy, and the world is not interested in hearing about your problems. Gaunts should always be prepared for the worst, and have the ability to shrug it off without a second glance. The more they can resist adversity, the better they can take advantages of those precious few opportunities that life throws at them.
- 6) **Be honorable.** Pay your debts, show up to work on time, and always be true to your word. Stand by what you say and take responsibility for your problems. In short, don't give the rest of the world any reasons to blame you; they can do that plenty well already without you handing them ammunition.

Of course, many of these rules are observed more in the breaking than in the adherence. Gaunts are as varied as any other social groups, and some of them don't care a whit how the rest of the world perceives them. And gaunt criminals are an entirely different breed of cat, creating their own rules rather than adhering to any preconceived notions of "being good." Those who keep to these tenets hope that they can guide their people to a better future... or at least keep things manageable today. The rest take note of them, but — like anyone else — use or discard them as convenience dictates.

### FIGHTING THE ROT

The most demanding aspect of gaunt life is simply keeping their surroundings from falling apart around them. Their corrupting aura means that they are constantly plagued with maintenance problems of all varieties. Plumbing sprouts leaks, electrical wiring shorts out, and cars break down on a regular basis. It combines to make the cost of living inordinately high for gaunts — ironic, since they rarely have the money to make proper repairs. Instead, they engage in a constant process of patching and jury-rigging, fixing what they can as expediently as possible. Many gaunts are adept scroungers and tinkers; if they weren't, then their dilapidated slums might be in even worse shape than they are. A gaunt who can't produce a piece of pipe he needs or scrounge up a spare part for his car is not highly regarded among his peers.

Gaunt servicemen do exist, and indeed many of them do fairly well for themselves. The demand for plumbers and electricians is high on the construction projects where many gaunts work, and because gaunt tradesmen aren't union, they will work at a cheaper rate than their normal counterparts. Many of them take a section of their pay in spare parts, allowing them to offer some version of their services to their fellow gaunts. The results more or less keep the lights on in gaunt districts and ensure that the constant corrosion they live with can be kept at bay.

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Public services, however, are practically nonexistent in gaunt neighborhoods. Streets undergo terrible degradation — especially in northern cities like New Eden, where the winters can be harsh — and city councils lack the inclination and the resources to keep them upgraded. As a result, the streets in gaunt districts are cracked and broken, sporting huge potholes and often lacking proper lanes. In the worst cases, they're nearly impassable, forcing motorists to go around or disembark and walk on foot. Streetlights, sewer lines, and mail service are often in similar condition — intermittent and sometimes completely nonexistent. (Groups of gaunts will often take out a communal mailbox in a nearby post office, rather than trust traditional mail service.) Gaunt communities place a priority on keeping some services up to snuff — fire hydrants, for example, or a working sewer system — and community projects aimed at their maintenance take place on a regular basis. Those services spared such attention go slowly to pot, keeping gaunt districts mired in substandard conditions and ensuring that what little money gaunts make is quickly sucked up just staying ahead of the decay.

## GAUNT POLITICS

Politically, gaunts walk a thin line between being highly valued and nearly forgotten. Officially, of course, there's nothing to prevent them from voting or running for office. But beyond the odd city council member or two, no gaunt holds an elected position in the Unified Commonwealth. Their numbers simply aren't high enough to elect one of their own without help, and few normals are enlightened enough to seriously consider a leatherback as a candidate. Like most poor and disenfranchised communities, the gaunts received few direct benefits from participating in the electoral process, and the idea that one of their leaders could serve in an elected office is just a forlorn glance through a very real glass ceiling.

That doesn't prevent gaunts from registering in large numbers, however, or from turning to alternative means to exercise their clout. As a voting bloc, gaunts can be quite attractive to the right politician, and when they act in concert, their presence can indeed be felt. Pro-union candidates, for example, are routinely shunned, and those campaigning against such candidates may find the gaunt vote counteracting those from the unions. Reform-minded candidates interested in cleaning up the system often receive the enthusiastic support of leatherbacks, as do those who advocate formal laws protecting gaunt rights. Most gaunts recognize the definite (if small and somewhat shaky) handhold which their voting bloc gives them, and stay registered even if they believe that it won't really change anything.

Politicians on the other side, of course, are happy to use gaunts as scapegoats. Demagoguery has a proud tradition in the U.C., and fearful voters need only look to the nearest leatherback district to see the alien Other which embodies all of their anxieties. Union-backed candidates speak of gaunts "stealing" jobs from hard-working citizens, while anti-crime politicians like to paint the gaunt districts as hotbeds of cor-

ruption and violence. The most radical have even suggested deporting all gaunts to the Borderlands, or forming a gaunts-only province where they can exist away from normals. Gaunt activists have decried such prejudice in the harshest possible terms, but it doesn't prevent opportunistic politicians from laying the blame for all of society's problems at the leatherbacks' feet.

There are, however, more surreptitious ways of exercising power, which gaunt communities have swiftly learned to exploit. Gaunt criminals, for example, gain a great deal of political clout by funneling money towards one particular candidate or another. In exchange, they ask for favors and preferred treatment, gaining through guile what their brethren could never accomplish on their own. While gaunt political appointees tend to raise too many eyebrows, the normal minions of a gaunt crime lord often find themselves holding plum public seats, channeling resources back to their underworld masters. Officials elected with a gaunt criminal's funds often turn their eyes away from the syndicate's activities, ignoring them in favor of persecuting gangland rivals. A few crime lords even have altruistic goals, using their leverage to send more public funds into gaunt districts or quietly lobbying for pro-gaunt reforms. None of it would be possible without first mastering the art of the backroom deal, and gaunts have proven extremely fast learners in that department.

Leatherbacks on the right side of the law lack the resources of their criminal brethren, but their leaders can still deliver a big turnout on election day... and they expect those they support to remember that. Candidates who court the gaunt vote only to renege on their promises once in office can expect to pay a price the next time they run. Leatherbacks have long memories when it comes to being slighted — by politicians in particular. Though they must always take care to whom they give their votes, gaunts refuse to be taken for granted, and when their clout is properly applied, they can make slow but steady progress towards whatever goals they set.

## Gaunt Activists

While politics is the art of compromise, activism remains forever idealistic — and gaunt lives are too bleak to live without hope for something better. While criminal bosses seize power through guile, and *realpolitik* gaunt leaders seek only a seat at the table, some gaunts refuse to work within the status quo. They reject the notion that others have the right to subjugate them (regardless of how dangerous their condition may be), and work tirelessly for equal treatment for their kind. For them, political action takes on a far more radical form: a battle for equality by any means necessary. They stage protest rallies, encourage the boycott of "bigoted" business institutions, and lobby for honest treatment in property laws (hoping to break the grip of gaunt slums on the leatherback population).

Gaunt activists usually come from the ranks of the unemployed; the rest are often well-educated, but forced to work in positions which make no use of their intellect. Rather than channel their frustration into violence, they seek out ways to remedy the situation through relatively peaceful means. They

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meet in bohemian coffee shops and libraries open to their kind, speaking of political philosophy in abstract tones which they seek to transform into pragmatic action. Though some are dismissed as elitist, others are beginning to form a core of leadership around which other gaunts may rally. Their work in blue collar industries gives them a unique contact with the gaunt rank-and-file, meaning that they can connect with the people they wish to help more readily than normal academics. And their burning desire for change is palpable, a potent force in the burgeoning politics of their kind.

Their agenda can be expressed in three words: equality for gaunts. How they arrive at that, however, is a matter of some debate. Their numbers can be roughly divided into two categories, which disagree on how to posit their community in relation to the normals (who vastly outnumber them). Some adopt a "separate but equal" policy, stressing gaunt independence and the ability to create their own institutions. Such gaunts feel that the normal world can no longer aid them, and that gaunts can only depend upon each other. They work for self-reliance: advocating the creation of public services within the gaunt community, pushing to "legitimize" vigilante groups as official policemen, supporting gaunt-owned businesses, and urging their fellow leatherbacks to look away from the normal community when seeking help. The most extreme among their number advocate total separation, seeking to set up gaunts-only communes in the abandoned small towns of the rural Commonwealth. The outer reaches of the Sola Diablo desert have seen the first beginnings of such communities.

Gaunt separatists are also quite active in organizing their own communities against perceived injustices. For example, they have pushed quite hard for the formation of gaunts-only unions, matching the normals in collective bargaining power. They speak out loudly against poor working conditions, and urge their fellow leatherbacks to reject employment if it means putting themselves at increased risk. They are also more likely than their fellows to get involved with gaunt criminals who, corrupt though they may be, are at least self-made men. Finally, they believe quite firmly in renovating the gaunt slums, turning them into livable housing and fighting the corrupting aura of their kind by any means necessary. They disapprove of normals setting foot in gaunt districts and some have even been violent to those normals who violate "their" territory.

Other gaunts take the exact opposite route. Rather than seeking independence through separation, they wish to more firmly integrate with the normal majority. They seek equal treatment in work and cultural relations, organizing boycotts of discriminatory businesses, and lobbying for new legislation specifically guaranteeing gaunt rights. They also seek aid for gaunts who have taken jobs in the normal community, especially policemen and firemen operating among normals. Integrationist gaunts believe firmly in working through the system rather than trying to set up one of their own. They fight to elect pro-gaunt politicians, and often speak at city councils in

defense of their causes. Most believe that if the normal community will only accept more gaunts among their numbers, they'll see that the leatherbacks are nothing to fear and tensions between the two groups will ease.

That doesn't mean that integrationists are weak or believe only in quiet protests, however. Many of them are just as strident as their separatist counterparts, speaking vociferously in defense of their cause and using underhanded tactics with quiet glee. Integrationist boycotts are a sight to see, as the mere presence of several dozen gaunts outside of a store front is enough to keep normal customers away in droves. Integrationists are also masters of the backroom deal, permitting normal politicians to make private concessions rather than risk public stigmata. Any little step, they believe, helps out their cause, and the more they can encourage them, the sooner those steps will grow larger and larger.

Their greatest triumph to date is the integration of the U.C. military, a coup which took several years to fully orchestrate. Gaunts make exceptionally good fighters and while their numbers during the war were limited, their ferocity and aptitude for combat could not be underestimated. The army was quite keen to exploit gaunts' physical abilities, and while they initially considered gaunts-only units, they believed they could mitigate the degradation of supplies and equipment if they spread the leatherbacks' corrupting aura as thinly as they could. Though working with a gaunt was difficult for many normals, the tough guy zeitgeist and gaunts' natural ferocity were able to overcome such prejudice — at least as it related to military affairs. The army is one of the few places where gaunts are accepted with no questions asked, and while they are often assigned to fighting units (with a few partitioned off to research and development), their numbers are slowly appearing in every aspect of military affairs. None of it would have been possible without the efforts of gaunt integrationists lobbying the national government and providing support for those first few gaunt GIs.

Regardless of whether they advocate integration or separation, organization of gaunt activists is largely haphazard. Local groups will focus on their individual communities rather than gaunts as a whole, limiting their gains to a single city or neighborhood. Activist groups are often little more than a few energetic leaders and representatives from their neighborhoods. They lack the numbers to make anything more than a cursory difference. In some cities — Central City in particular — the makings of larger, more coordinated organizations are beginning to take shape. But that may still be years away. In the meantime, gaunt activism makes do with clusters of individual groups: some violent, some peaceful, some well-organized, some little more than mobs of malcontents. The only thing which remains unchanged is their belief that gaunts have been denied a fair shake in this land of opportunity, and that they are no long willing to sit quietly by and take it.