Criminal exploits make exciting fodder for Iron Kingdoms gaming as characters work to foil nefarious plots or enact some of their own. However, running a gang or other criminal outfit takes more work for a group of characters than simply choosing to be members of an outlaw adventuring company (see Iron Kingdoms Full Metal Fantasy Roleplaying Game: Core Rules, p. 152). In this week’s offering for Full Metal Fridays we take a look at some of the most common criminal pursuits in the Iron Kingdoms to inform players and Game Masters alike about roleplaying in the seedy underbelly of western Immoren.

Many criminals and gangs specialize in one or more areas of crime, but it is a rare gangster indeed who turns his nose up at a lucrative opportunity for larceny outside his preferred arena. Career criminals are invariably well connected in their local underground networks and might work in the short term with specialists to conduct a tempting heist. The most successful criminals treat crime like a business—and that business rewards fast thinking and the ability to act on a rare opportunity.

CONFIDENCE TRICKS

Clever criminals regularly employ confidence tricks and scams. Even at the simplest levels, confidence tricks usually rely on trust. Street urchins might convince a stranger to lend them an item of some small worth, such as a watch, and then simply vanish into a crowd. If a young criminal can master the art of appearing trustworthy, he can in time begin to develop the ruthless social skills to engage in more complex cons.
Professional con men almost always operate in groups to orchestrate their complicated schemes. A gang attempting to divest a Cygnaran noblewoman of her heirloom jewels might make considerable efforts to impersonate an exiled member of the Llaelese aristocracy and his household, perhaps going so far as to forge false documents to verify their crafted identities. One notorious incident in this vein involved a group of confidence artists who not only pretended to be exiled Llaelese refugees to gain the trust of a noble family in Bainsmarket but also had some of their number impersonate Khadoran assassins in pursuit of the faux exiles. Alarmed to see their new friends under attack in the street, the Cygnaran nobles invited the confidence men into their home for safety. Several days after their guests had moved on to their next target, the nobles discovered that their finest jewels had been pilfered.

Since confidence games hinge on gaining the trust of the victim, characters who are potentially sympathetic enjoy the greatest success. Humans have the easiest time gaining the confidence of most citizens of the Iron Kingdoms, more so if they are (or can appear to be) of the same ethnic group or social strata. Gobbers also make excellent conmen, given their diminutive size and apparent harmlessness.

**LABOR RACKETS**

Criminal gangs and other organizations naturally attract violent individuals to their ranks and employ their talents for various minor crimes.

Successful criminal organizations become well versed in the arts of extortion and coercion, using the looming presences of their most dangerous members to gain the assent of their victims and rivals. Although these talents commonly come into play between competing criminals, such skills do not go unnoticed by more legitimate institutions. In some cities, notably Steelwater Flats, companies have been known to hire criminal thugs to intimidate and coerce business rivals. Gangs are often eager for such jobs, which involve the opportunity to infiltrate legitimate businesses. Once a few gang members have secured places within a business, they go out of their way to bring in more members, turning the business into a lucrative source of income.

As organized labor has gained momentum across the Iron Kingdoms, it has become increasingly common for unscrupulous companies to hire thugs as strikebreakers, or sometimes to temporarily replace unskilled laborers. Of course, this sword cuts both ways, and unprincipled local unions are not above hiring their own violent louts to protect picket lines or combat city watchmen and strikebreakers. The lines between gang warfare and labor protests have grown increasingly unclear in some cities.

**MONEYLENDING**

Gangs can earn a respectable profit through moneylending. By loaning out money with steep interest rates, gangs can parlay illicitly gained coin into massive returns. A borrower is typically given a short period of time to repay the debt, with compounded interest added weekly or even daily. Borrowers who prove either unwilling or unable to pay face threats of violence made against them, their property, and their families by the enforcers of the gang. This kind of exploitative lending provides a steady trickle of funds into a gang’s coffers.

Moneylending also includes opportunities for massive scores. A gang might seek out a borrower with access to an especially appealing business or facility, particularly those without a head for numbers or those who find themselves in desperate situations, and offer them a large loan. An individual in dire straits can scarcely afford to decline, even though the debt may be nearly impossible to repay. Once a borrower is caught in an untenable position, the gang offers to forgive part or all of the debt in exchange for a favor, such as leaving the gates of a storehouse unlocked or diverting shipments of valuable goods to waiting members of the gang.

**MURDER FOR HIRE**

Professional killers are common among western Immoren's criminal class. Most murders are the result of crimes of passion, perpetrated by an individual who feels he has been wronged and committed in the heat of the moment. Hired killers, on the other hand, possess a strong desire for gold and approach their targets with impersonal regard. Such killers are useful to gangs, as they usually do not have any allegiance that would lead investigators back to the gang and their use enables important gang members to protect ironclad alibis. For this reason, most clever gangers prefer to hire out-of-towners for these jobs.

From time to time an individual or organization (legitimate or otherwise) has need of the services of a murderer, and someone willing to undertake the risks stands to make a tidy sum for the bloody work. The murderer-for-hire is typically a feared and well-connected criminal who typically also pursues less lethal criminal activities in the alleys and streets of virtually every city.

Contacting a murderer-for-hire almost always requires good street connections, since few killers take a job from a stranger for fear of being set up by the authorities. Once under contract, most killers require payment up front, with the fee varying by the perceived difficulty of the task. Few murderers accept jobs targeting military personnel or members of the upper class due to the potentially high-risk ramifications of success, let alone the penalties of failure.
ROBBERY

Whether a criminal robs his victim at gun- or knife-point, picks his pockets, or burdgmhis home, robbery is by far the most common crime of the Iron Kingdoms. A wide range of specialized thieves practice their trade in the cities of the Iron Kingdoms, from nimble-fingered pickpockets to catfooed second-story men.

Many—perhaps most—young criminals begin their careers as pickpockets on crowded city streets. Some work as cutpurses, stealthily slashing the pockets and pouches of their victims. Others operate in groups, with one thief distracting the victim by pretending to accidentally jostle him while a compatriot rifles his pockets. Some criminal outfits spend the bulk of their time and derive the majority of their income from pickpocketing operations. Gobbers and children make particularly effective pickpockets due to their small size, unassuming demeanor, and manual dexterity, to say nothing of their ability to disappear into narrow corners of the city should they draw the attention of their victims. An older criminal might become the leader of a gang of child robbers, fencing their stolen goods with unscrupulous merchants.

Some pickpockets graduate to armed robbery, working in small groups to rob their victims through force. Muggings and holdups often involve dragging the victim into an alley or other secluded location to rifle through his belongings in privacy. Some gangs of robbers prefer to target wealthy-looking individuals and others choose the easy pickings of drunks stumbling out of dockside taverns, though the wisest robbers pick their targets with care. Armed robbery is a potentially dangerous line of crime, as any victim might feel the need to fight for his life, and the Iron Kingdoms are home to deadly combatants who might not appear overly threatening to the untrained eye. Outside the cities, highwaymen and brigands operating from secluded wilderness hideouts are a constant threat to travelers on the lonely roads.

Robbers who prefer to avoid direct confrontation may instead pursue breaking and entering. These break-in artists range from those who simply smash down a door or pry open a window to gain access, to the agile urban climbers known as second-story men who easily scale structures to reach upper windows, which typically are less secure than guarded lower entrances.

Whatever their preferred method of robbery, thieves require the services of professional fences to move stolen goods, especially easily recognizable items such as jewelry. Fences profit from these transactions because they are able to purchase goods for a fraction of their value and can use a number of methods to disguise them for sale. A process like covering the monogram engraved on a fine pocket watch is fairly straightforward, while more complex techniques may involve a wide range of different alchemical solutions. The best fences have a network in place to move recognizable items out of a city, duchy, or even nation if needed.

SMUGGLING

Smuggling can be a high-risk, high-profit enterprise for a gang. When the Protectorate of Menoth required smuggled cortexes for its warjacks, loyal Menites living abroad provided the majority of the devices, but several gangs amassed sizeable fortunes by stealing and delivering military-grade cortexes to the nation.

Other smugglers work in the contested territories of Llael. There is profit to be made on both legs of the journey to the embattled territory, since gangs can sell military hardware to the Llaelese Resistance and transport desperate refugees out of military-controlled districts. The Black River is the main channel for these smuggling operations, and larger river gangs employ entire fleets of swift blockade-runners to deliver their merchandise.