

STAR DRIVE™
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Threats from Beyond



A™
Science Fiction
Roleplaying Game



Bill Slavicsek

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Threats from Beyond

by Bill Slavicsek



Science Fiction
Roleplaying Game

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CONTENTS

4
INTRODUCTION

16
TENDRIL

14
IGNATIUS

18
CORRIVALE

27
LUCULLUS

34
COULOMB

36
THE LIGHTHOUSE

45
THE CONCORD

50
AEGIS

58
RINSTOKE

60
OBERON

72
TYCHUS

74
ALGEMRON

89
HAMMER'S STAR

95
CONCLUSION



INTRODUCTION

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/November 30, 2500**

by Avatar

I'm not sure how long I'll be able to file reports over the Grid, but I'll keep going until the GNA cuts my bandwidth or some Administrator catches up with me. They're searching even now, as you scan this, and I have no illusions that I'll be able to avoid them forever. They've almost had me a few times since I first began my investigation, and I've got a feeling that they're closing in on me even as I jack these reports over the Grid. Let's call it "reporter's instinct," which has kept me alive in more than one war zone.

Where was I going with all that? Oh yeah, the truth. I'm not sure if I can believe the truth—or at least what passes for the truth as I've uncovered it. I'm even less sure how my readers will handle it, but I'm compelled to file these reports no matter the consequences. I have to do it. Someone else has to know.

Do I really have such lofty ideals? Or do I simply want to make a name for myself? After all, I'm sitting on the biggest story to hit the bandwidth since we re-established contact with the Verge. But I can't even tell you my name. I can't plug in my actual byline or those who wish such information withheld from the rest of us will find me. So, until I find some courage or I figure I don't care if I die, call me Avatar. That's as good a name as any for a shadow ... for a journalist reduced to logging outdated text reports over the usually interactive Grid. You would have loved to see me file these in person, though. I know. I've got the ratings from another lifetime to prove it.

Where should I begin? Should I explain how my reporter's instincts tingled when the first anonymous tips appeared in my Gridbox? Or should I reveal the moment the full breadth of my investigation crystallized when I uncovered secret Concord military documents? Or maybe you want to hear about the day unidentified agents broke into my living quarters and tried to silence me the old fashioned way?

I think I'll start with the age-old questions that all reporters strive to answer. The tried and true who, what, when, where, and why.

Who? You name it. Concord officials, stellar nation diplomats and nobles, corporate executives, military leaders of every nation, Arrivers, Vergers, and even those who come from beyond the borders of space as we know it. Especially those last ones. Especially the Externals. But I'm getting ahead of myself. You can read all about it shortly.

What? It is my opinion that the people of the Verge, and by extension, the people of Old Space, face a foe more im-

placable than anything we've ever experienced. But our governments are focused on one another; they pay little attention to anything but their game of one-upmanship. So they want to keep the threat secret. They want you to think you're safe and secure in this newfound freedom they've established since the Second Galactic War ended. The Concord will protect us; that's what the Gridbursts say. We are told our fortress ships and other weapons of war are now turned to protecting trade and commerce. They're lying! There's a war coming, but it won't be human against human this time. This time, it's going to be an invasion from beyond the boundaries of known space!

When? Much of the information I have uncovered is relatively recent in origin. Some of it, however, predates the return of the so-called "Arrivers" to the Verge after the calamity of the Second Galactic War. We didn't even know about Silver Bell's destruction until seven years after it occurred. The people of the Verge have survived despite being cut off from any support from "home," and this has bred in them both a toughness and a reluctance to put much trust in those of us from Old Space. Drawing information from the Vergers is much like drawing blood from a ... well, you get the idea.

Where? Here, in the Verge, at least to start. But much of this information has implications for all of us. As you read these reports, you will begin to see a picture of something that threatens all of humanity and the other intelligent species, including those of us who believe ourselves safe back on the worlds of the Stellar Ring. The Verge has become a microcosm of Old Space, where stupid rivalries within threaten to divide us before what may be an implacable enemy. Whoever destroyed Silver Bell is still out there, and they possess technology that can destroy an entire city with but a single rock. What world is safe from such a threat?

Why? Well, that's a great big unknown, even for an in-the-know, conspiracy-uncovering Grid reporter like me. But I'm working on it, and with any luck I'll put together a theory or two for you to consider before you scan the last of these documents. Once, a long time ago, isolationists claimed that the t'sa were evil and nasty and they wanted our women. I can tell you from personal experience that most t'sa can't even tell a human male from a female, let alone have any desires for them. But maybe it's as simple as that with these new invaders. Or maybe not. I think I've been jacked in too long! I'm starting to sound a little crazy. And you know what? Maybe I am. Maybe. Keep scanning. Then decide. What have you got to lose?

CORPORAL PLESKI

It began in February. I was sent to cover the opening of a new Concord military facility in the Verge when reports of battle put the base on alert. I won't reveal the exact location of these events, as that could compromise my own safety as well as the safety of the soldiers assigned there. Suffice it to say it was in the Verge, the base was brand new, and the battle was completely unexpected. Base personnel hesitated only a moment, then went into action as though they had been working together for years—quite in contrast to the fresh paint and new-ship smell that permeated the facility.

I tried to stay out of the way, but I kept my eyes and ears open. I saw the marines leave, full of bravado and decked out with the best armor and weapons the Concord could buy. I heard them joke and brag and wager on who would rescue the most colonists. I also heard the undercurrent of fear in their young voices, that slight hint of terror that accompanies any foray against the unknown.

Later, in the silence that followed their departure, the tension in the base was thick enough to cut. I wandered the corridors, looking into the worried faces of the support staff, nodding quietly to the soldiers who had remained behind. These latter individuals wore mixed expressions: part anger over having been ordered to stay at the base, part relief that they weren't out there fighting clicks or n'sss or—worse yet—some new alien terror.

Time passed. It had to have been at least six hours since the troop transports departed for the colony, full of marines eager to fight and die in defense of human space. Now the first of those transports was returning, full of wounded and dying soldiers who couldn't care less about the Dream and the Code and the Honor. All they wanted was to live or die—whichever would result in an end to the pain and suffering they were experiencing. I was near the docking bay when the med techs carried away the first wave of wounded men and women. There were aliens among the injured; mechalus, weren, t'sa, and even a fraal. Humanity's partners in space. I walked among them, offering smiles and nonsense words of encouragement even though my gut wanted to rebel and expel what was left of the meal I ate before this terrible spectacle had begun. That's when I met Corporal Pleski.

I thought he was dead, there was that much blood covering his mangled body. I started to turn away when a surprisingly strong hand snapped around my wrist.

"Listen," he whispered, forcing me to bend close to hear what he had to say. "The kroath . . ." he managed to spit out, and I could see that it was hurting him to talk. I tried to convince him to lie still, to hold on. Help was on the way, I assured him. He ignored me.

"You have to listen . . . understand . . ." the wounded marine told me. I could see that the effort was using up whatever strength still remained in his body, but the look in his eyes said he had something important to pass on before he died.

Using This Book

This book is intended primarily as a resource for the *STAR*DRIVE Campaign Setting*. Designed to expand the nature of that setting, it uses the *ALTERNITY Science Fiction Roleplaying Game* rules as its basis. Rumors, reports, and adventure hooks of all kinds can be found throughout these pages. Use the adventure hooks to introduce the items that intrigue you the most, then watch which direction your campaign takes. There are also elements of news that expand upon previously published material. This is designed to detail further some of the future history of humanity and its allies that we have provided a glimpse of in the *STAR*DRIVE Campaign Setting*.

The entries are divided among the seven major star systems of the Verge, the *Lighthouse* space station, and some of the lesser-known Verge systems. If you are not using the *STAR*DRIVE Campaign Setting*, you can certainly drop the stories contained in these reports into your own campaign. In most cases, such alterations require only a minimum of effort on your part.

It is up to the Gamemaster what in this book is fact and what is fiction. Avatar reports things that are too incredible for most of the people of Old Space and of the Verge to believe. To paraphrase Winston Churchill: "The truth is best served when surrounded by a body-guard of lies." Is there a kernel of truth that lies at the center of each of these reports? Or has Avatar taken leave of his senses, "reporting" stories that would be better suited for the tabloids than a major news agency?

Players be warned! Don't believe everything you read.

I wish now that I had never met that damned marine.

He told me what he saw on that colony world. He told me something about the kroath—one of the external species currently causing trouble in the Verge—something that was so terrible I didn't want to believe him. But in the end, I had to believe. And soon, so will you. That's the problem with the truth. It refuses to stay hidden, and once you discover it you can't help passing it on. Or die trying.

Corporal Pleski passed on a truth. He died for his efforts. Who knows, maybe I will, too.

But you know what? I never wanted to live forever. Call me Avatar, and listen to the truth I have to tell you. It might kill both of us, but maybe, just maybe, it will save the Verge, Old Space, and all of the places in between.

CHAPTER I: TENDRIL

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/December 21, 2500**

by Avatar

The Tendril star system has been called a gateway. Where it opens to depends upon which way you're traveling. For the Arrivers, those brave and adventurous souls seeking to tame a new frontier, Tendril is seen as the Gateway to the Verge. "The future's edge starts here," according to the propaganda produced by the Galactic Concord and two dozen other organizations. These groups need people ready and willing to travel 100 or more light-years to defend, explore, catalog, build, and otherwise work toward turning the Verge into a proper extension of Old Space and the Stellar Ring.

If you're a Verger, born to life in this wild frontier region, then Tendril is also the first stop on the long road back to Old Space. For some, that road brings hope and stability. The wealth and security of the Stellar Nations have been absent for a long time, and many of these Vergers welcome a return to the ties of old. For others, it's a link to a past they no longer want to go back to. What did the Stellar Nations ever give to the Verge except war, suffering, poverty, and mass destruction? Where were they through all the years of the Long Silence? Why should we give up the freedom we have carved out for ourselves just because the road is once again open?

Regardless of your feelings on the matter, the Arrivers have come to Tendril. And from Tendril, they are spreading far and wide throughout the Verge. If the threat to the Verge has a starting point, it has to be here, because everything in the Verge starts in Tendril.

NOVA STATION

Ever since the Kendai relay station came back on line in 2496, there has been an increased level of security in the systems that serve as the relay links between the Verge and Old Space. Not the least among these relays is the drivespace communications station aboard Nova Station, the terminus of the link to the Stellar Ring. As the nearest link to the governments of the Stellar Ring, the relay has drawn considerable attention from those who wish to remain independent of the governments who abandoned them over a century ago. Most of these are little more than small groups of peaceful protesters, while some have more sinister ends.

TaskCor maintains strict control over access to the drivespace relay in Nova Station. They have installed numerous security precautions to minimize the risk to the relay link. In addition to a power supply separate from the station's mains, a detachment of veteran security troops guards the place at all times. These are backed up by Concord Investigative Bureau operatives on board the station.

CONCORD FREE NOW

Earlier this year, members of the radical political group known as Concord Free Now attempted to destroy the Nova Station relay. They did not succeed. However, the lengths to which these terrorists will go demonstrates the danger they pose not only to the Concord but to all citizens and visitors to the Verge.

This incident was as ingenious as it was insane. Four CFNers boarded a transport at Corrivale bound for Tendril. Instead of the

usual luggage that such visitors abroad pack for a long trip across the galaxy, this group carried explosives. They were homemade, juryrigged devices that were as dangerous to build as they were to use.

The four CFNers, led by Clarise Deltane, believed that every problem facing the Verge could be traced back to the restoration of the link to Old Space. When the transport stopped in Tendril, the quartet disembarked. A small in-system tug was waiting for them, provided by an anonymous benefactor with ties to the region. They boarded the tug, set a course from the spacedocks toward Nova Station, then made the preparations for the terrorist actions they had come to engage in.

It was Deltane's intention to follow in the bloody footsteps of the radicals who had sabotaged a StarMech cruiser in the system in 2499. However, each subsequent CFN activity has shown a growing desperation—as though they realize their cause is futile but stubbornly continue to support it, even at the cost of their own lives.

The tug departed the spacedocks and started the slow crawl toward the station. The trip, even at maximum power, would take the tug almost 20 hours to complete. At 1 hour and 23 minutes into the journey, the tug exploded. Everyone on board, including the CFN radicals, was killed. Nova Station suffered no damage.

Later, a statement issued by CFN declared that the quartet were heroes.

"Deltane and her teammates died," the statement proclaimed, "fighting against the antiquated traditions and backward-looking initiatives of the current day in an effort to keep the past from consuming the present." It went on to say that "Concord Free Now is fighting time itself. The Galactic Concord and other dupes of the powers of the Stellar Ring seek to return the Verge to the state that existed before the Long Silence. They wish us to bow down before the stellar nation, to give up the freedom they bestowed upon us through abandonment. This we shall not do! We shall die to keep the past at bay!"

Rumors abound as to what actually occurred that day. Some believe that the juryrigged explosives detonated prematurely, saving Nova Station as a byproduct of the accident. Others have postulated that the Concord was able to get a team of operatives aboard the tug while it was enroute to the station. This team, which one report insists was led by a Concord Administrator, supposedly subdued the terrorists, rigged their explosives, and made their escape well before the tug got anywhere near the station. While the final details of what happened that day may never come to light, the CFNers were obviously ready to die to promote their cause.

ALAUNDRIL

Compared to the habitable worlds of the Stellar Ring, Alaundril is a hellhole of heat and rock. But compared to much of the Verge, it's a paradise. Like paradise, however, it has its serpent. Earlier this year, despite the best efforts of the Galactic Concord, Celestial Entertainment Limited opened a headquarters on the oasis moon. Located in the heart of Babel, Alaundril's metropolis, the Celestial Entertainment Complex features a corporate compound, a holofilm production facility, and a theme park open to the public (for a modest fee, of course).

CELESTIAL ENTERTAINMENT LIMITED

Why do I compare CEL to the serpent of old? For the same reason that the Concord worked so hard to keep the entertainment giant

out of the Verge. Celestial Entertainment has long been tied to the Coreeno crime syndicate, though nothing has ever been proven in a court of law. The Coreeno family and its associates have a lock

7

CHAPTER I: TENDRIL

ADVENTURE HOOK: TERROR AT THE ORION LEAGUE CONSULATE

As the Concord Free Now grows more and more desperate, the acts of terrorism the group's members engage in become more and more dramatic. In this incident, a group of combat-trained terrorists claiming to represent the CFN assaults the Orion League consulate in the capital city of Babel, on Alaundril. Armed to the teeth, the militants commandeer a section of the embassy. The terrorists demand the immediate surrender of Nova Station and the Kendai relay to CFN loyalists, and the withdrawal of stellar nationals and the Galactic Concord from the Verge within one galactic month. They promise to kill one hostage every hour until they receive confirmation of the surrender of the space stations from their compatriots. A short time later, hostages begin to die ...

BACKGROUND

The heroes are already in the consulate when this adventure begins, possibly negotiating for some sort of freelance courier or transport contract.

This attack is actually a decoy. The CFN leadership has sent a team to attack the consulate in order to draw off local security forces. Meanwhile, another team is robbing a nearby gem exchange of several hundred million dollars worth of merchandise. Still other teams are sowing further chaos throughout the city of Babel.

The consulate strike team knows that they are a decoy, but they were also told they would be pulled out before security forces could storm the place. The rescue they expect never comes. About two hours into the siege, the terrorists realize that they have been betrayed. This realization causes the team to fragment. Some want to make a deal with the local security element, exchanging information for freedom. Others also want to deal, but only with the Concord. Finally, three of them refuse to negotiate, preferring to die for the cause rather than give in to the enemy. They believe that CFN will pull them out. Unfortunately, not only does CFN have no intention of risking themselves for this team, but they have already taken steps to ensure that no harm comes to the organization. CFN operatives have killed every one of the team's few contacts within the organization.

The terrorists are at their most vulnerable at this point. The stress they are already under mounts further until one of the fanatic loyalists snaps, taking matters into her own hands. If the heroes have not been able to overcome the terrorists before this, they might have a chance to do so during the confusion caused by the unexpected attack. If they make a move, a few of the consulate guards will try to help.

SUPPORTING CAST

There are a total of 12 terrorists in this CFN commando unit. Most of them are combat specs, but the team includes two tech ops, two free agents, and a diplomat. If you want to make it harder for the heroes, one of the terrorists can also be a psionic talent. At least four of the terrorists should be created with the same care and attention offered to hero characters. Of these, one is clearly a leader type and one is a lieutenant. Arm the terrorists for battle, and make sure they have some level of armor (battle jackets or CF softsuits should suffice).

Local security forces seal off the building, including communications out of the area immediately surrounding the consulate. This process is complete within 45 minutes of the takeover. They make several attempts at negotiation, only to be rebuffed by the terrorists.

Also, this scenario demands hostages. Create people for the CFNers to threaten, hurt, and even kill as the story unfolds. If you want to increase the stakes, one of the hostages could be a high-ranking Orion League diplomat—maybe even the ambassador herself!

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this read-aloud to start the action, or adapt it to the adventure you've constructed:

A powerful explosion rocks the embassy. In the distance, you can hear the screams of the wounded, and the panicked, confused voices of those who have been shocked and frightened but don't understand what's happening. The familiar sound of charge weapons fills the air, and any thoughts of an accident quickly fade away. The embassy is under attack! A moment later, this is confirmed when the embassy's internal communications system comes on line.

"Invaders and interlopers," a voice booms from the comm units throughout the facility. "We shall not suffer another day under the thrall of the slave-holders of Old Space. Concord Free Now has taken control of the building. We have made our demands known. If your governments cooperate, none of you will die. If any of you resist, it will go hard on you. We will kill two hostages for every person who refuses to cooperate. You have sixty seconds to comply."

You can hear several people forcibly removing hostages from the room next to yours to another location. It's just a matter of minutes before they should reach the room you're in.

What do you do?



on a huge percentage of illegal activities throughout the Stellar Ring, especially in the Solar Union, and to a lesser extent the Orion League, Austrin-Ontis, and the Rigunmor Star Consortium. Celestial Entertainment has an even wider reach, providing holofilms, theme parks, and five-star casinos and restaurants throughout seven of the stellar nation territories. Its chief executive officer and principle stock holder, Tero Coreeno, is the second son of reputed crime syndicate boss Fereni Coreeno. If the rumors are to be believed, Tero Coreeno is even more vicious, calculating, and explosive than his infamous mother. While his entertainment conglomerate expands and enjoys unparalleled success, Coreeno has set his sights beyond Old Space. He wants to conquer the Verge.

Of course, Tero Coreeno won't use troops and weapons to conquer the Verge (though it is rumored he has a private army at his beck and call). Instead, he plans to woo the Verge with the treasures produced by his entertainment machine ... and, when the opportunity presents itself, with an illegal transaction or two to sweeten the deal. Tero Coreeno has been linked to slave trading, arms dealing, Gridstims, and other contraband—though he has been exceedingly careful about covering his tracks. None of these illegal activities can ever be traced directly back to him or to CEL.

Why did Coreeno come out to the Verge? One report suggests that stellar authorities were getting too close, so he decided to move his headquarters to a safer, less legally hostile region of space. Even so, the Concord has been briefed on Coreeno's history and will be watching him. Hopefully, a Concord Administrator or two will be on hand when Coreeno loses his temper, kills a competitor who displeases him, or otherwise makes a mistake. But it will need to be a big mistake, as his money and influence have been able to buy his freedom in the past.

In the meantime, Vergers and Arrivers alike will be able to enjoy the fruits of the CEL tree—legal and otherwise. I have to admit, the entertainment giant knows what people like, and it gives it to them on an epic scale. I've even been tempted by the luxury Grid suites and hyper-gambling halls of the Celestial Casinos. Not to mention that four of the top ten highest-grossing holofilms of all time have come out of the CEL stable.

What does Tero Coreeno want in the Verge? First, my sources indicate that he has come to Alaundril to avoid prosecution and persecution (his word) back in the Stellar Ring. Second, he wants to expand his legitimate business holdings and generate new profits within the Verge. He sees the region as virgin territory hungry for the leisure nutrition that Celestial Entertainment provides. Third, he is tired of being a lesser player in the Coreeno crime syndicate. As long as his older siblings (brother Kwar and sister Alie) live, he will never rise to the heights he believes he is destined to reach. But the Coreeno family has no holdings or interests in the Verge. This makes the region particularly inviting to the younger Tero. He plans to be the most powerful crime lord in the region, and he's prepared to go to war with any other criminal organizations that refuse to acquiesce to his desires.

Finally, there is one other treasure that Coreeno wants to add to his coffers. That treasure is Jack Everstar. Like others of his generation, Coreeno was captivated by the cult classic, *Children of Mars*. The holofilm, which featured Everstar, is listed as the Tero Coreeno's favorite movie of all time. The fact that it was produced and distributed by the rival Mask & Bauble Studios only makes him want Everstar that much more. For by signing Everstar to an ex-

clusive contract, he not only gets to own his favorite holofilm star, he gets to seriously hurt one of his most successful competitors.

Everstar could not be reached for comment.

THE STRANGE CASE OF PRELATE MEMORN

Another recent arrival to Alaundril is Prelate Memorn. This high-ranking Orlamu official claims to be touring the Verge on a fact-finding and goodwill mission. He arrived in system aboard the Concord fortress ship *Kordava*, one of the two that travel between Tendril and the Stellar Ring twice each year. With a small entourage of acolytes and advisers beside him, Memorn has taken up residence in the Traveler's Sanctuary hotel while waiting for the *Lighthouse* mobile space station to reach the system. Memorn is expected to continue his tour of the Verge aboard the great station that once belonged to the Orlamu government and now serves as a Concord facility. The Orlamu temple on *Lighthouse*, still active and functioning with the Concord's blessing, has reportedly been especially prepared for the Prelate's visit.

Memorn, however, isn't on a mission of mercy. I have received tips from a source within the Prelate's camp that suggest that there is something very wrong with the man who many consider to be one step removed from the First Prophet himself. The First Prophet is the spiritual and political head of the Orlamu stellar nation.

One acolyte, who refused to be identified, claims that Memorn seeks to rise to the very top of the Orlamu Theocracy.

"Prelate Memorn believes he is destined to become the next First Prophet," the acolyte explained. Galindus, the current First Prophet, has served in this position since 2474 and shows no signs of retiring any time soon. When asked to expand on Memorn's claims of destiny, the acolyte had this to say. "The Prelate claims to receive visions of the future. He says these signs and portents come from the Divine Unconscious, but I have begun to doubt this. I think he may have lost his sense of connection to the Divine."

An interview with Prelate Memorn was mostly uneventful. I saw no indication of an ambitious man suffering from religious delusions. At least not at first. After a pleasant discussion about welcoming the Verge back into the folds of civilization, Memorn was about to conclude the interview when I pressed to ask one more question. "Why, Prelate Memorn, has someone of your position left the relative comfort and luxury of Prophethome for the frontier of human space? Shouldn't the next First Prophet be closer to the Orlamu capital when his ordination could occur at any moment?" I asked.

"Do not venture into matters that do not concern you," the Prelate said through clenched teeth. "The key to my ascension lies with one of the Starborn, but he has fled Prophethome and seeks to deny his part in my destiny. I shall find the youth, even if I have to search every forsaken rock in this forgotten region of space."

I had more questions, of course, but my audience with the Prelate ended there. A priest dressed in black, his face hidden beneath the shadows of a thick hooded robe, quietly emerged unbidden from an adjoining chamber and motioned for me to leave. Just before the door closed behind me, I heard the man whisper a single word, "Kalin," and saw Memorn's eyes light up, and both men hurried into the adjoining room.

Research has revealed the following details after the fact. The black-robed priests of the Orlamist church are accorded special re-

spect, as they are all among the Starborn. "Starborn" is the term used to identify a child born in drivespace. Some of these individuals have religious significance to the Orlamu faithful. Rarely do they ascend to any leadership rank within the Orlamist church, but their even the greatest of the Orlamist hierarchy heed their counsel on scientific and spiritual matters. I am uncertain of the significance of the word the Starborn priest spoke to the Prelate, but "Kalin" is a common name among the Orlamu. Perhaps he is the Starborn that the Prelate seeks in the Verge.

ORLAMU PRELATE MEETS WITH WILLIAMSON

In addition to his personal search for the Starborn who is the key to his destiny, Prelate Memorn has also conducted business while out in the Verge. Whether this business is also his own or representative of his government's interests is unclear.

While in the Tendril system, the Prelate met with Scott Williamson, the CEO of Ion Productions. Earlier this year, Williamson closed a deal with the Orlamu corporation Boman-Sendir Drive Systems to purchase Orlamu stardrives for the Alaundril shipyards. Orlamu stardrives are considered by most naval architects and technical experts to be the finest, most reliable stardrives available. These stardrives are destined to provide FTL power to a new generation of vessels for the Concord now rolling off the assembly lines. These vessels, combining StarMech ship design with Orlamu stardrives, represent Williamson's desire to make Ion Production's shipyards the dominant shipyards of the Verge.

The details of the meeting are uncertain, but Williamson seemed displeased with the results. He has been asking for months that Boman-Sendir step up delivery of the drives to Alaundril, for he has invested heavily in expanding the facilities of his shipyards, opening up two new drydocks just this year. The Orlamu corporations have been stretched to the limit to meet their production schedules.

StarMech representatives are said to oppose Ion Production's acquisition of these state-of-the-art stardrives.

"We feel that the purchase agreement with the Orlamu drive production facilities is an unnecessary waste of effort," said Francesca Buono, spokesperson for Chelsea Krest. "It is far more beneficial to negotiate such arrangements through StarMech trade representatives, for we can provide cost benefits through simple economies-of-scale purchase procedures."

Williamson discounts such objections, stating that the sale of Orlamu drives to StarMech in the past has hardly been of sufficient number to warrant any bulk purchase benefits. The Orlamu Theocracy and StarMech were members of opposing alliances during the Second Galactic War, and trade between the two since the war has not yet achieved its pre-war volume.

THE WORDS OF THE SEERS

The Seers of Torai occupy a lonely temple complex 800 kilometers or so west of Alaundril's Providence outpost. This Hatire stronghold has become famous for the predictions of the future proclaimed periodically by the temple mystics. The Seers have recently shared a new vision, but not with the general public. The Seers held a private audience with Concord Undersecretary Michael Thayne and reportedly provided the popular politician with a glimpse of tomorrows to come.

"I was with Thayne, I heard the Seers' words," said one high-ranking official. "It was eerie, but the omen had a ring of truth, if you believe in that stuff. They said it in words that are a lot more flowery than mine, but the gist of the message was that Thayne would achieve his goals."

Thayne would not comment on the exact nature of those goals.

The unnamed official had more to say on the matter. "Not everything was happy and bright. The Seers also spoke of a deadly threat to the Verge and to Old Space itself. What kind of threat? I'm not sure. That's where the voice of prophecy gets a little cloudy, if you know what I mean. It has something to do with the days before these days, and the days that will come after, but I couldn't make heads or tails of it. Neither could Michael, but I could see it upset him. I guess I'd be upset, too, if I believed this stuff."

In a related item, sources close to Prelate Memorn of Orlamu contend that he has been visiting with the Seers of Torai on a regular basis.

"He hopes that the mystics can help him locate the lost one," a source informed me. "He believes they can find the Starborn, for he trusts the power of the mind and the spirit."

ALAUNDRIL SHIPYARDS

Ion Productions, the largest corporate entity on Alaundril, has poured a vast amount of resources into getting its shipyards up to full production. The facility, the finest of its kind anywhere in the Verge, is dedicated to not only keeping starships in good repair, but to turning out new ships to meet the growing demand. Concord vessels receive higher priority than other ships coming to the shipyards, but everyone who decides to make use of the facility can expect excellent service and workmanship.

This vital economic strongpoint has suffered a few setbacks of late. Accidents and broken machinery have led to slowdowns in production. Scott Williamson, CEO of Ion Productions, has downplayed the seriousness of recent events, but sources inside Alaundril's largest corporate entity paint a different picture.

"If I didn't know any better," said one factory foreman, "I'd say someone was out to get us. The accident in Production Bay 17 killed 26 highly skilled workers and set back the completion of the Academy-class fleet for the Concord by almost a year. Add to that other little delays and a rash of minor breakdowns and it feels a little like sabotage to me."

Could one of the stellar nations or some radical splinter group like Concord Free Now want to derail the build-up of Concord naval power in the Verge? There are certainly more than a few factions that harbor no love of the Galactic Concord. However, other information leads me to believe that the problems are not of human origin. Witness the following account from Kever Dwane, an engineer for Ion Productions.

"I was working the deep shift, which still has a skeleton crew despite all the work coming our way," Dwane explained. "I was making the rounds, checking to see how the earlier shifts had done and what was on tap for the evening's festivities. Everything looked fine until I got to Production Bay 12. That's where the Orlamu stardrives are prepared before being placed inside the vessel hulls. Anyway, I entered the bay and immediately found a problem."

Engineer Dwane discovered that the two stardrives being worked on in the bay had been damaged. "Torn apart" were the words Dwane used.

"It was terrible," he said, "like someone took an industrial chainsword to the casing and ripped out the guts. A bunch of the lights had been smashed, too. I wondered if there had been some sort of explosion."

The engineer, shocked and confused by his discovery, tried to take stock of the damage when he heard a noise somewhere else in the bay. Still not connecting the busted stardrives to any real danger, Dwane investigated the sound. What he saw haunts him to this day.

"It was a monster," he said. "It was tall and more or less humanoid in appearance, but it looked more like a killing machine—all tendons and muscles. Plus, it had all kinds of cybernetic implants—reinforced joints, armor plates, battleclaws, and other weapons I can't even begin to identify. I've never seen anything like it. Maybe it's a holdover from the war."

Dwane was certain the creature was going to kill him, tear into him with its metal claws just as it had torn into the stardrive components.

"It turned toward me," Dwane explained, "advancing a few steps in its jerky, mechanical walk. It made a sound that frightened me to my core. It was an eerie warble, unlike anything I had ever heard before. I dropped my tool belt, that's how scared I was. With most of the lights gone, the bay was mostly dark. Just as I thought it was going to attack me, it disappeared. I mean, right before my eyes. The shadows swallowed it whole."

While it's possible that what Dwane saw in the darkened bay was some sort of StarMech cyborg that had gone rogue, I have reason to believe that what he really saw is something no one will admit to. If my hunch is correct, then what he probably encountered was a creature known as a magus. I do not know if these creatures are native to the Verge, whether or not they are intelligent, or what their purpose is. I have tried to get information about these creatures from those who should know, but all I received was stony silence or outright derision. If I were able to talk to them in person, maybe I could use my instincts to get some answers. Over the Grid, I can't seem to get anything.

If this is a magus, what is it doing on Alaundril? Is the magus—or whatever this is—responsible for the problems beginning to plague Ion Productions? Possibly. At least some of the problems can be traced back to possible sabotage. In the end, as long as such delays create problems for the Concord's efforts in the Verge, then the source of those delays—human, cyborg, or alien—must be considered a threat to the Verge's security.

THE MAGUS: A NEW STUDY

Some of my readers will no doubt think I am just bucking for some sort of ratings sweep with these sensational reports. I cannot convince you to believe me on my own credibility, for if I were in your position, I would view these reports with some skepticism as well. I cannot directly corroborate my findings, but I can offer other evidence which may help convince you that at least I am not just some lunatic fringe element who has hacked into the GNA's Grid systems. This information is something the governments of the stellar nations do not want you to have. I respect their desire to prevent a panic, but I also have to wonder how many more people must die before these governments decide to inform us—especially those among us who might be able to help—of the danger we may face.

I cannot—I will not—identify the source of the following report. I can only say that he has come to possess some information concerning the incident involving a magus that occurred on Nova Station last year.

What I saw were security recordings taken at the scene of a bloody massacre. They showed a creature two meters tall, with a humanoid form. Its body had the appearance of being freshly skinned, contained several cybernetic implants, and had a mechanical gait that has led many to speculate that the alien is in fact an automaton of some kind. But it is not an automaton. My contact told me that the creature was positively identified as a magus. As I watched the recording a second time, I saw that its ungainly gait disappeared when it entered a sort of killing frenzy.

In the course of seven minutes of holorecord, the magus entered the scene, killed eight people, including four professional bodyguards and three stellar nation ambassadors, and escaped from view. Two of the ambassadors were in a secure area, but the third was not. The evisceration the magus visited upon that victim was similar enough to that performed on the other two that there can be no doubt that it was their killer. My contact also informed me that the magus did not make its escape, as was previously assumed. In a furious battle some moments later with station security personnel, the magus managed to wound several of the guards before they could bring it down with overwhelming firepower. StarMech military personnel immediately took custody of the magus, which my contact believed may still have been alive. StarMech has yet to issue a statement to explain the events that occurred on Nova Station.

Information on the magus probably exists, but it is hidden behind the veil of secrecy. One exception to this is Dr. Jena Vaxom and her colleagues at the newly formed Center for Xenological Studies on Bluefall. I met Dr. Vaxom through the friend who helped with the identification of the magus that attacked Nova Station. The scientists of the Center have embarked on an extensive fact-finding mission to catalog the magus and other species of the Verge once and for all. Dr. Vaxom and her team of scientists are gathering all of the reports that can be attributed to the magus to date, as well as any physical evidence the creature has left behind (though there has been precious little of that). Vaxom hopes to determine a psychological and physical work up, as well as possible weaknesses and recommended responses should the magus appear again.

The researchers have recently received an information windfall concerning the magus. Dr. Vaxom claims that an evrem, whom the researchers have dubbed, "Raphael," has been meeting with Vaxom and her colleagues. "Raphael claims that the magus have threatened his species in the past," the scientist said, "and he has offered to do whatever he can to help us understand it."

As "Raphael" explained it, "the magus resides within the battleform you have encountered. The battleform protects the magus. It is not a robot, but it is mechanical in nature and responds to the commands the magus provides it with. The battleform is fashioned in such a way as to evoke a sort of numb horror. It is almost as if it is formed from the nightmares of its prey. When it came to us, it appeared much differently from the creature that plagued the Tendril star system. While some magus revel in causing pain and suffering, that is not their primary purpose. Everything a magus does is to prepare the way for the next generation of magus."

So what is inside the magus battleform?



"Nematodes. Worms that have developed a group intelligence that serves them as well as or better than the solitary minds of other species."

An individual magus, then, is a huge tangle of worms nestled

inside the battleform.

"Each magus battleform houses some 10,000 worms. An individual worm possesses no intelligence. It's only in tangles that sentience presents itself."

ADVENTURE HOOK: INCIDENT AT OUTPOST T-38

The Cyra Asteroid Belt provides much of the resources that fuel the Tendril economy. Scattered throughout the belt are mining outposts, repair stations, and labor camps all focused on extracting the raw materials necessary for keeping the industrial machines of Alaundril operating. One such outpost labeled T-38, only 0.4 AU from the Darkhold space station, provides the backdrop for a kidnapping.

Maria Williamson, 28 year old daughter of the CEO of Ion Productions, has been secretly using outpost T-38 as a meeting place with contacts from the Stellar Ring, especially those from the Nariac Domain. While keeping a low profile on Alaundril's politics, the younger Williamson has attempted to forge a political base of her own. Currently she's been pushing Nariac interests in acquiring rights to the gas giant Pox and its moons, hoping to dilute the influence of StarMech, and prepare her own path to power after her father's retirement.

Since StarMech has proven so difficult in negotiations of late, Williamson has resorted to extreme measures. She's hatched a plot that involves Nariac operatives holding her hostage until her father can pressure StarMech into meeting their demands on the planet Pox. The incident was planned to remain as quiet as possible, and only a few people should ever know it was the Nariacs behind it (or else, say the operatives!). Later, Williamson will never be suspected of dealing with the same people who held her against her will.

BACKGROUND

Unfortunately, the enthusiastic but secretive daughter has neglected to inform Scott Williamson of her plot, and his first instinct isn't to cave in to the Nariac's demands. He hasn't founded this empire in Tendril by surrendering before the show has really begun, and so he has hired the heroes to go in and free his kidnapped daughter. Masquerading as the negotiation team from the Alaundril government, the heroes have been instructed to save Williamson's heir at any cost. The government has already issued legal pardon for any violent acts that the heroes may take against the aggressors aboard outpost T-38.

The prelude opens with their recruitment by officers of Ion Productions, and a meeting with Scott Williamson himself. Ultimately, though, the adventure begins as the heroes come aboard outpost T-38 and face to face with the Nariacs. At first, the Nariacs try to appear like the screaming terrorists the media has surely characterized them as. As the preliminary discussions continue, how-

ever, the Nariacs demonstrate a desire to discuss terms for a peaceful resolution.

In the next scene, allow the heroes to inspect the hostage and verify her safety and good health. She's resting comfortably, under guard, in one of the outpost's quarters. Of course, at this point Williamson may realize something has gone wrong. She knows most of her father's trusted personnel and the government's crisis negotiation teams. So who are these heroes? She'll take the time to ask and find out. Behind the scenes (unless a cunning hero has thought to leave a recording device around) after the heroes are allowed to consult privately with one another, she'll warn her captors that something is wrong and tell them to connect her with her father so she can find out what's up. Suspecting betrayal now, the Nariacs change their minds about the situation. Locking Williamson back in her cell, the false kidnapping has become actual. And the Nariacs strongly suspect the heroes aren't who say they are.

SUPPORTING CAST

This scenario calls for a variety of individuals. As villains, the Nariac operatives on board the station should be up to the skills that the heroes can present; they're clever, manipulative, and they have the upper hand. Then there's Maria Williamson, the hostage, and any scattered workers who may have been aboard when Williamson was "captured." Finally, the heroes may have interactions with Scott Williamson himself and several of his corporate officers.

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this opening or adapt it to best serve the adventure you have planned:

Across the Tendril Grid today, a single news bulletin has blared time and time again. Maria Williamson, reclusive daughter of Scott Williamson, CEO of Ion Productions and leader of the Alaundril government, has been kidnapped by unidentified foreign nationals in the Cyra asteroid belt. Apparently, the story broke only hours ago when a Trans-Verge News society columnist was informed of the reasons why his interview with Maria was cancelled.

While you muse over potential fate of the woman and who her abductors may be, your reliable communication gear buzzes to demand your attention. In a moment, the holoprojected image of a Ion Productions corporate officer appears before you. "The Alaundril government needs your help," he says. "There has been an incident ... well, I'm sure you've seen the news. Would you be willing to meet with us to discuss a lucrative short-term employment contract?"

What do you do?

Much of this data must be independently confirmed, though the evrem presents a rather convincing picture. The last thing the evrem told the researchers made the picture that much more frightening.

"Intelligent beings serve as incubators for magus young. Eggs are deposited in such beings, eventually hatching. Such a host provides both nourishment and training for the growing tangle of nematodes. Its body serves as food, its mind teaches the tangle to reason and helps it develop a sense of self."

This explanation is one I cannot completely accept, since it does not explain the reason for the attack that occurred on Nova Station. I also keep thinking back to what Engineer Dwane said, about it being a holdover from the war. The thing that disturbs me about the Nova Station murders is that the magus attacked only the three ambassadors. The bodyguards died because they got in the way. The magus was an assassin, which means that someone had to send it. The meticulous precision with which it struck, the horrifyingly casual nature of its violence, and the transformation from awkward automaton to efficient killer makes me wonder if it is not the result of some twisted military experiment gone horribly awry. Such technology is within our grasp. The question is, who would create and use such a creature?

I am not claiming that "Raphael" is wrong. The creature he knows as the magus may be different from what struck on Nova Station. I would like more evidence before deciding the truth of these things. Unfortunately, those who have that information deny having it.

THE GHOST SHIP *TWELVE CLUTCH*

The t'sa science vessel *Twelve Clutch* came to Nova Station in February of this year. It arrived without fanfare to take part in a StarMech experiment. The vessel underwent modifications that were designed to modify its stardrive and its crew was briefed on the experiment to come. Six weeks later, on March 24, 2500, the preparations were completed and the experiment began.

This event was top secret, and no Grid releases were issued to alert either the media or the scientific community. Nonetheless, a skeleton crew of stardrive engineers, pilots, astrogators, and scientists boarded the *Twelve Clutch* and moved the ship a few hundred kilometers from Nova Station, well outside Atlas' gravity well. The official report is exceedingly brief:

"At 12:02 p.m. Galactic Standard Time, the driveship *Twelve Clutch* activated its stardrive and starfell out of normal space. It never reached its destination and is presumed lost in drivespace."

No destination has ever been given. Nor have Nova Station authorities ever explained what modifications were made to the vessel before it took its ill-fated trip. For that, I had to dig into secure records and rely on sources willing to open up topics that others would prefer remained sealed. My Grid expertise came in very handy for this report.

Research indicates that the *Twelve Clutch* was involved in an experiment to discover the physical makeup of the extra-dimensional plane we call drivespace, the latest of our efforts to understand the gravity plane. The experiment was developed by StarMech researchers, with funding from a t'sa scientific foundation. I further discovered that the captain of the t'sa vessel, who was also on the foundation's board of directors, had his own experiment to run. While StarMech was seeking knowledge that

would help it advance the capabilities of travel through drive-space, the t'sa was trying to determine whether or not any intelligent beings actually live in drivespace, and if so, to attempt contact with them. As far as anyone can tell, neither experiment succeeded.

What moves this from simply a tragic story to an enigma is what has happened since. On three separate, documented occasions, the *Twelve Clutch* has reappeared briefly in the vicinity of Nova Station, each time in a different location. The first incident occurred on April 15. The vessel remained in normal space for approximately 11 seconds, then once again made starfall. Sensors aboard Nova Station recorded the event, though there was an abnormal signature to the sensor data. The nature of this signature has yet to be determined. The ship appeared two more times since then, on May 21 and June 26. During the most recent occurrence, a brief message was sent to Nova Station. The unidentified voice said one word: "T'krl." The meaning of this word is uncertain; no such word exists in either Standard or t'sa. Linguistics experts and acoustic engineers have attempted to determine if the mystery word was simply the result of a garbled transmission.

Twelve Clutch has not been seen since, and no plan for rescuing the ship or its crew has yet been formulated.

THE SOURCE IN TENDRIL

Vegor Tagg is an impressive man. But then, most Concord Administrators are. He comes from the old school of lawmen, acting more as a wandering judge and jury than as a desk-bound bureaucrat. He has a passion for justice, the law, and the truth, and that passion eventually led him to me. It was early this year, when I first began to harbor suspicions about what was going on in the Verge. I was aboard Nova Station at the time, investigating a few leads concerning the magus and some other events that I'll reveal later in this report. My questions must have reached someone important, for the next thing I knew I was being visited by Vegor Tagg.

He wore the robes of his station and carried the traditional symbol of the Administrators—the legendary tri-staff. I knew him for what he was the moment he stepped into my quarters, but I also knew that not everyone who wears the title also carries the nobility and morality that has been popularly identified with these defenders of the Concord. I have reports that paint some Administrators as either sadistic, egotistical madmen or ineffective paper-pushers who prefer their desk-mounted gridcasters over their tri-staves. It only took a few moments for me to determine that Tagg was neither of these types.

"You've been making certain inquiries," he said after introducing himself to me. "Perhaps we can be of assistance to each other as your investigation continues." He handed a 3D crystal to me.

"Examine the contents of this crystal," Tagg said. "If you still want to continue on this course, I'll find you at Corrivale."

What was on the 3D? Well, the hour grows late on my side of the gridlines and it's time to disconnect for a while. When next we get together, I'll tell you about the kroath and what Vegor Tagg decided to share with me.

I'll let you decide if I should thank him or curse the day the galaxy created the infernal man.

CHAPTER 2: IGNATIUS

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/February 6, 2501**
by Avatar

Located as it is relatively near the Tendril system, Ignatius sees a fair amount of traffic. However, that proximity is a double-edged sword, as it means few are interested in doing much business (not to mention actually living) on Antigua—the system's only somewhat friendly planet—when the bustling cosmopolitan system of Tendril is only a starfall away.

ANTIGUA

Despite being the second Class I world in the Verge, this massive and hot planet remains largely undeveloped. Certainly the marginal conditions and metal-poor crust contribute to this state, but Antigua's colonists are quick to point out the problems caused by the planet's natives: the ke'kekt. These amphibious creatures are strongly xenophobic, and not only to alien species: Neighboring villages of the six-armed beings frequently battle over territory.

That's where the Concord comes in. As on many other worlds, they're working to foster friendly relations between the natives and settlers. So far, they've been relatively successful in maintaining peace between the humans and the land-dwelling ke'kekt, but the sea-dwelling ke'kekt have resisted such overtures.

KE'KEKTS AND CAPE MARIS

In fact, tensions between the two species have grown so strong that the governor of the main human colony, located at Cape Maris, has posted a standing bounty on sea-dwelling ke'kekt. Governor Wallace Alomar stated that this action was "based on public demand and a need to protect the citizens of the region."

One of my sources claims that it's all due to a few militant (and paranoid) individuals who blame the ke'kekt somehow for the recent seaquakes that shook the fault lines near the Iskandera island chain, and that the governor feared appearing unresponsive to the needs of local citizens. I've got a hunch that one or more Alaundrin merchant families may be behind the bounty, since they'd love to see the Concord's authority on the planet weakened so they could move in. Whatever the reason, ke'kekt carcasses are now worth \$1000 apiece in Cape Maris.

It's a sad commentary on humanity that we seem to default to such behavior when encountering new species. Sure, the ke'kekt aren't particularly advanced, and it's not like they're the most peaceful beings in the Verge anyway, but I'd like to see more examples of successful, peaceful interspecies "planet-sharing." But then, I'm a romantic at heart.

THE ANTIGUA CUP

Though sailing is seen on many worlds as a playboy's hobby, settlers on Antigua have turned it into an endurance sport. Thanks to the oppressive gravity and thick atmosphere, being active outside air-conditioned buildings for any stretch of time is difficult enough. Add the treacherous currents of Antigua's enormous (but surprisingly shallow) oceans, hidden reefs, and dangerous native ke'kekt, and you can see why the Antigua Cup has become one of the Verge's premier "Iron Man" competitions.

This year's event, scheduled to begin May 3, should prove no different. Last year's champion, Bluefall's Guiseppe Hauck, piloted his one-man sailcraft to a new record time. He'll no doubt be challenged this year—I hear an entire team of Thuldan sailors are entering, not to mention Lenda Michir, the fraal who won back-to-back Antigua Cups in 2498 and '99. It's a shame I won't be there to cover the event.

METAL SHORTAGE PROMPTS CUTBACKS

Never a metal-rich planet to begin with, recent failed mining attempts have left some Antiguan in a bit of a pinch. Shortages of iron and aluminum have prompted cutbacks in proposed construction projects in Ecola Point, a small island community of about 300 settlers. This leaves about a dozen families living in temporary shelters.

This wouldn't be a problem, except that the stormy season is only a few months away. These settlers face the potential of riding out the winter storms behind walls of molded plastic—fine for the relatively calm summer months, but another story entirely when the winds start picking up.

Trouble is, none of the big merchant companies are interested in such small potatoes. It'll probably take a savvy independent trader to capitalize on this market shortage.

HATIRE COLONISTS ARRIVE ON ANTIGUA

In a surprising move, a group of several dozen Hatires landed on Antigua last month. Though they claim to be merely seeking room to settle, some locals fear it marks the beginning of a colonization effort by the highly religious Hatires.

But why Antigua? The answer's as obvious as the six fingers on that pair of half-price gloves I bought last year: the ke'kekt. As a technologically primitive species, they have no innate hatred of the anti-technological Hatires. Thus, they provide excellent potential converts to the words of the Cosimir. The Hatire colonists no doubt believe that if they can teach the ke'kekt the ways of their faith, they can unite the entire species under the banner of the Cosimir and expel both the original Taurean settlers and the Concord in one fell swoop.

ADVENTURE HOOK: KE'KEKT FEVER

In this adventure, the heroes get caught up in "ke'kekt fever," as some are calling it. However, while the heroes may relish the possibility of (relatively) easy money, they find that there's more to the situation than simple xenophobia.

BACKGROUND

The truth is, local opinion is being whipped into a fury by the actions of a lone gardhyi who has gained the confidence of the governor. As with most of his kind, the gardhyi's motives are unclear. Perhaps someone fears a potential alliance between the humans and the ke'kekt. Maybe there's something hidden in the oceans of Antigua that someone doesn't want the settlers to find, and continued strife between the planet's inhabitants will ensure the "something's" safety.

Whatever the reason, over three dozen ke'kekt have met their doom in the past two weeks as a result of this bounty. What's worse, some hunters are ignoring the restriction and "bagging" land-dwelling ke'kekt instead—after all, they're easier to track down. Despite the Concord's efforts to calm the situation, the planet's status as an independent colony prevents the Concord from overtly interfering.

Of course, the ke'kekt aren't sitting still during all this. While a few of the more peaceful communities are working with the Concord to get through this difficult time, most of the natives aren't so understanding. In fact, many see this as an excellent excuse to make a decisive strike against the human "invaders" of their planet.

To this end, several ke'kekt villages have set aside their typical hostilities in order to work together against the humans of Cape Maris. Spurred on by the inspirational words of a Hatire colonist, a full-scale assault—consisting of about forty ke'kekt armed with spears and similar primitive weapons—will occur sometime within the next few days. These ke'kekt won't take prisoners, and they're unlikely to care whether the humans they attack are men, women, or children; after all, the bounty hunters haven't cared about that either.

The town should be able to bring several dozen armed defenders to bear, though it may take an hour or more to get organized. The ke'kekt are counting on this lag to accomplish their goal: assassinating Governor Alomar.

A good climactic scene could have a group of ke'kekt, pursued by the heroes and some townsfolk, bursting into the governor's office, where the gardhyi hides with Alomar.

SUPPORTING CAST

For most individuals encountered during this adventure, the Gamemaster can use the Supporting Character Templates on pages 96–99 of the *Gamemaster Guide*. Most will be of Marginal quality. A typical group of bounty hunters will be made up of Ordinary-quality Brawlers or Spacehands with a Good-quality leader. Most of these individuals are just interested in making a buck; they

won't have time for discussions of the ethics of killing innocent sentients, especially not with "offworlders" like the heroes.

Governor Alomar is a Good-quality Administrator. He's likely to have little or no time for any of the heroes' questions, instead foisting them off on his low-level bureaucrats. Alomar is usually guarded by several Ordinary Law Enforcers who know nothing of their boss' "advisor."

The gardhyi has no name, or at least not one he's given the governor to use. The Gamemaster should use typical gardhyi statistics from the *Alien Compendium*. The gardhyi will prefer to remain in the shadows, and if cornered will claim to be a "deep cover" agent of the Concord Investigative Bureau (CIB). If his true nature is discovered, he will attempt to flee via his star web (see page 120 in the *Alien Compendium* for information on this device).

The heroes may encounter one or more Concord officials; use Ordinary Administrator statistics except for Lieutenant Barry Jordan, the Star Force attaché to Antigua, who's a Good-quality Military Officer.

Use the statistics found on page 36 in the *Alien Compendium* for any ke'kekt encountered. The heroes shouldn't encounter any of the Hatires during this adventure. They've long since left for their island settlement.

TRIGGER SCENE

The particular reason for the heroes visiting Antigua isn't important—they may be delivering supplies, refueling, or just waiting for their stardrive to recharge on their way to or from Tendril. In any event, use this read-aloud to start the action, or adapt it to the adventure you've constructed:

Before arriving on Antigua, you knew the Ignatius system as little more than a dot on the starmap. After a few hours in Cape Maris, you think you'd prefer it that way. Hot, humid, and high-gravity: not exactly a winning combination, and unlikely to jump-start the local tourist trade.

What's more, the environment seems to be affecting the locals, too. Almost everyone you've met seems tense, if not downright surly. Perhaps a flyer you saw earlier explains it—"Protect Your Family! Defend Our Homes! Stop the Ke'kekt Menace! Contact the Office of the Governor to Collect Your \$1000 Reward"—though you're not sure what the "ke'kekt menace" is, exactly. The \$1000 reward sounds good, though.

As you discover more information about the flyer and the "ke'kekt menace," you discover that Governor Alomar has authorized a bounty on dead ke'kekt. The people of Antigua blame the primitive indigenous ke'kekt for any of a number of woes, from attacks on outlying settlements to recent seaquakes that have caused fault lines to shift, bringing about thousands of dollars of damage to buildings in affected areas—right before the storm season.

What do you do?

CHAPTER 3: CORRIVALE

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/March 19, 2501**

by Avatar

Corrivale remains a sparsely settled frontier despite the efforts of the Concord and a few of the stellar nations to develop the system. Even the Vergers have had a hard time making this star system more prosperous. Instead, it remains underutilized and a storehouse of untapped profit.

Perhaps that's why VoidCorp has such a keen and obsessive interest in the area.

GRITH

The political and population center of the Corrivale star system, the jungle moon Grith orbits the uninhabitable world of Hydrocus. Two diverse groups occupy Grith. Colonists from the Hatire Community have legal claims to the world, while free sesheyans—whose numbers more than double that of the colonists—fill the jungles around the primary city of Diamond Point. The two groups get along surprisingly well—at least on the surface. Anyone familiar with Grith politics, however, knows that factions on both sides would prefer it if the other side were simply to disappear and leave Grith to them.

To alleviate this growing tension, the Concord has been working extremely hard to get the Hatire and the sesheyans to cooperate on various improvement projects. Some of these are yielding particularly exciting results. Brethren and sesheyans loyal to the Aanghel empire have joined forces with a Concord scientific expedition to catalog and explore the ruins of Quenaalt. One rumor insists that the sesheyans have gone along to make sure that any evidence concerning their origin on Grith remains buried, but my contacts insist that Aanghel's people support the expedition fully and are among the team's hardest workers.

I have a few specific incidents to report that might help bring the situation on Grith into clearer focus. One concerns the Aanghel crime empire and a possible connection with Celestial Entertainment. Another suggests a tie between the Devli'yan traditionalists and a particularly dangerous band of cykoteks known to be operating in the Verge. Finally, evidence has come to light that indicates a possible alliance between the Colonial Diocese and the local VoidCorp corporate raiding fleet—a fleet of warships whose numbers increase on an alarmingly frequent basis.

AANGHEL'S TROUBLES

Most agree that the owner of Aanghel Enterprises and leader of a sizeable portion of Grith's sesheyan community also runs a powerful crime syndicate that operates throughout the Corrivale system. Aanghel Osui'ike believes that her people must accept and use technology if they are to survive and prosper in the modern era. She is a dynamic

and popular entrepreneur who usually sticks to the holding company's more legitimate endeavors. This makes the news that Diocesan Kola Entele of the Brethren issued an indictment against Aanghel on charges of conspiracy, racketeering, and moral turpitude especially surprising.

Most people familiar with the Corrivale system understand Aanghel's position, though few openly discuss her role in the community. For every criminal activity that can be traced back to Aanghel Enterprises, two or three projects that improve the community are openly promoted by the holding company. Still, neither the Hatire colonists nor the followers of shaman Devlei'ir consider Aanghel Osui'ike to be anything but a common criminal who uses lies and money to hold sway over the star system. Both groups would be happy to see her fall.

Which leads to the events of January 16, 2501. The first event was as shocking as it was mysterious. One of two former Aanghel employees was found dead within the master bedroom of the safehouse where he was being held in protective custody.

The male sesheyan, Jekut Lo'kot, was one of two witnesses preparing to offer testimony against Aanghel Osui'ike. The indictment hearing, set for later in the year but still unscheduled, supposedly hinges on the statements to be made by Lo'kot and an as-yet-unidentified female. The case against Aanghel appears extremely tenuous following the news of Lo'kot's death.

Details are still sketchy, but the Hatire authorities have not yet ruled out foul play in the death of Lo'kot. The sesheyan was discovered early in the morning, when one of the Brethren guards was making his rounds. Lo'kot was found in bed, the sheets in disarray, with no visible signs of injury to the body. Medical examination results are still pending.

The whereabouts of the second witness remain confidential, though Diocese officials have issued assurances that she is alive and well in protective custody. The Diocese statement goes on to say that she will remain in seclusion until after the indictment hearing is concluded.

The second bit of news from July 16 was the leak of information concerning a possible merger between Aanghel Enterprises and Celestial Entertainment Limited. While it isn't clear what the holding company and the entertainment juggernaut could gain from a merging of their legal endeavors, when one considers the illegal activities to which the leaders of both companies have been linked, the partnership becomes more comprehensible. Indeed, Tero Coreeno has much to gain by aligning his crime syndicate with the local power held by Aanghel Osui'ike. Of course, knowing Tero, the partnership will only last as long as it provides a healthy return to the Coreeno coffers—or until Tero has taken complete control of Aanghel's criminal activities and absorbed its infrastructure into his own organization.

ADVENTURE HOOK: SAVING CASUER KA'LEE

In this adventure, the heroes are hired to protect a sesheyan informant named Casuer Ka'lee so that she may testify at the trial against Aanghel Osui'ike. Of course, Aanghel and her supporters are not interested in attending this particular trial. Even now, a deadly and nearly invisible assassin is converging on the secret safehouse with only one course of action on his mind—to silence Casuer Ka'lee before the start of the indictment hearing. Time grows short and there's a tension in the air around Diamond Point ...

BACKGROUND

There's one witness left in the case against Aanghel Osui'ike. Aanghel's covered her connections to the syndicate's more sordid endeavors exceptionally well over the years, and even with a couple of witnesses, Diocesan Kola Entele's case was mostly circumstantial in nature. Still, tensions between the humans and sesheyans of Grith are high, and rival sesheyan crime bosses are looking for ways to take advantage of Aanghel's troubles.

No matter what you decide was the ultimate fate of Jekut Lo'kot, there is someone out to silence the remaining witness, Casuer Ka'lee. The assassin, decked out in a CF stealth suit and armed with a variety of deadly weapons, reports to one of the following factions (which one is left entirely to Gamemaster discretion). The factions include Pe Terei, Aanghel's lieutenant, who has decided to eliminate the trouble bothering his boss; Tero Coreeno, who's seeking to prove his good intentions to the sesheyans; a VoidCorp executive who believes it's in the corporate interest to allow Aanghel to remain in power; or even one of Entele's rivals, who doesn't want the Diocesan to earn such a high-profile victory.

The surprising thing about the assassin is his nature. He's a sesheyan trained in the killing arts by VoidCorp and now willing to sell his services to the highest bidder. However, his hunter's pride and honor won't allow him to be bought out once he has committed to a particular client.

For this case, the assassin has decided that everyone at the safehouse must die. With protectors of hero caliber defending Ka'lee, he doesn't expect to be able to glide in and make the kill without meeting at least a little resistance. With this in mind, the assassin has decided to take out Ka'lee's body guards one at a time. Divided, he plans on making sure each of them falls before silencing the witness and escaping into the night.

The heroes have been hired by the Brethren to keep the witness safe and deliver her to the courthouse after the weekend. Conversely, if the heroes are Concord agents, then the Diocesan requests their aid from the local Concord authorities. Either way, they have to make sure Ka'lee survives three days at a secluded safehouse and then get her to the courthouse first thing Monday morning. In the meantime, the assassin prepares to move in for the kill ...

SUPPORTING CAST

The safehouse, hidden somewhere in the jungles outside of Diamond Point, is run by two Brethren. This married couple maintains the property, cooks and cleans for the guests, and provides the first level of defense (one of them is a low-level combat spec, now retired).

In addition, Casuer Ka'lee is a low-level free agent whose talents for acquiring secrets are almost legendary among the Aanghel crime syndicate. This makes her testimony that much more dangerous as far as Aanghel Osui'ike is concerned.

Finally, the sesheyan assassin needs to be powerful enough to handle the heroes—at least for a little while. If played intelligently and with a degree of ruthlessness, he should dispatch the married Brethren easily and perhaps wound or even kill a hero character or two before they take him down. Of course, he might just succeed at silencing Ka'lee, if the heroes aren't prudent and extremely careful. Peg the assassin about two levels higher than the average of the hero party. Once he has killed Ka'lee, he will direct no further attacks against the heroes.

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this read-aloud to start the action, or adapt it to the adventure you've constructed:

The first evening in the safehouse has passed quietly enough. The Brethren definitely know how to make their guests feel welcome. Even the sesheyan has been little trouble. In fact, she can be downright charming when she wants to be, and she has a biting sense of humor that the Brethren don't quite understand.

Midnight comes and goes, and the house remains as peaceful as it was since you arrived. Maybe Lo'Kot did die of natural causes. Maybe there is no assassin watching the house from the deep jungle outside. Maybe ...

Wait a minute. Did you hear something? For a second, you thought you heard a strangled cry, but if so, it was cut off in mid-scream. It could have been some jungle animal. Or maybe that imaginary assassin has located this safehouse and its prize witness.

What do you do?



One official in the Diocese believes that Coreeno had a hand in Lo'kot's death.

"It would not surprise me at all if one crime lord decided to help another," the official said. "Cooperation such as theirs never lasts, but it can prove troublesome to the legal authorities while it does. I fear we will never get the second witness to the hearing."

THE BONE HUNTERS AND THE SHAMAN

Could there really be a connection between the old sesheyan shaman Devlei'ir and the sadistic leader of the Bone Hunters cykoteck clan, Silver Ghost? While most on Grith would find such an alliance unlikely at best, my sources tell me that perhaps the impossible has occurred.

I have discovered that the cybernetic sesheyan known among the systems of the Verge as Silver Ghost is actually a rogue VoidCorp agent named Salimugost Nar'el. After succumbing to the mental illness referred to as cykosis, Salimugost worked his way toward the Verge. Along the way he gathered a small band of followers and formed the Bone Hunters clan. While a few murders and wanton acts of violence are attributed to the Bone Hunters back in Old Space, the first documented appearance of these cykotecks in the Verge was on April 11, 2499. A small trader was found floating just outside the Algemron space lanes. The inside of the vessel was a like a slaughterhouse—everyone on board, including eight crewmen and four passengers, were ritualistically murdered in what appeared to be a slow and agonizing ordeal. Cult symbols and other markings aboard the craft identified the murders as the work of the Bone Hunters clan. Each bloody death was dedicated to their leader, the mysterious Silver Ghost.

It wasn't until the events surrounding the Bone Hunter sacrificial murders of 2500 that the shocking nature of Silver Ghost came to light. The incident, which drew extensive media coverage throughout the fall of 2500, started at the Orvon Research Outpost in Algemron and turned into a massive manhunt for the elusive band of cykotecks and their souped-up cutter. Survivors at the outpost, who reported that the only reason they're still alive is because the cykotecks got bored and left, gave the first eyewitness account of the Bone Hunter's leader, Silver Ghost.

"He was a sesheyan," Dr. Mara Cole, planetologist for the Orvon Institute, said. "He was covered in cybernetic implants, and it was obvious that he was completely insane."

"His followers worshipped him," she added. "I'm sure they'd do anything he asked of them. And I'll never forget being forced to watch one of his commands get carried out. Poor Richard ..." she said, referring to murdered colleague Dr. Richard Stark.

After leading Concord and other authorities on a wild chase through the Verge, the Bone Hunters disappeared

completely after November of 2500, when they killed 17 children and three teachers on an outing to Bluefall's Regency Mountains. The field trip participants were discovered more than 72 hours after the last victim was killed, giving the Bone Hunters more than enough time to make their escape. Regency police have organized a multi-jurisdiction manhunt to track down these killers and bring them to justice. The Regency has also posted a \$100,000 reward for information that leads to capture and conviction of "Silver Ghost" and his followers.

Information that has come to light in recent days suggests that the Bone Hunters have found refuge with the Devli'yan. The followers of the sesheyan shaman Devlei'ir believe that his people must adhere to the old ways and ancient traditions of Sheya. Anything less, Devlei'ir contends, is nothing more than a shallow existence.

"My people pretend to be something they are not," the shaman has been known to say. "Look at Aanghel. She tries so hard to be human, but all she manages to do is fail to be sesheyan."

Why would the shaman, who obviously considers technology to be a human folly and a crime against the traditions of the sesheyan people, help a sesheyan who has embraced cybernetics to a dangerous and maddening degree?

"Because the shaman never turns away anyone who needs help," a young Devli'yan explained. "Human, misguided mechalus, ancient fraal, it doesn't matter. Any who ask the shaman for aid receive it. That Salimugost is also sesheyan makes the shaman's act even easier to understand. He could not turn away Salimugost any more than a father could turn away his wayward son."

Information provided by this young sesheyan and other sources on Grith confirm that Silver Ghost and his followers have found sanctuary deep in the jungles surrounding Diamond Point. They have settled down with a small tribe of Devli'yan sesheyans, waiting for the extensive manhunt to slow down before once again venturing into space. Several bounty hunters and two VoidCorp combat teams have ventured into the jungle to seek out Silver Ghost. None of these people have returned yet. VoidCorp has listed their team members as "presumed dead."

Both the Regency and the Concord have said they will send police officials to Grith to assist in the search for Silver Ghost, once the details of cooperation have been worked out with the Diocesan government. The issue of which jurisdiction will prosecute him is not yet settled.

When Silver Ghost and his Bone Hunters are finally ready to leave Grith, what token of devotion will they leave behind to mark their passage? What bloody sacrifice will they make in the name of their leader? And how many Devli'yans or Brethren will have to die because of Devlei'ir's compassion and generosity?

DIOCESAN DEALS WITH VOIDCORP?

Has the Diocesan of the Hatire colonists actually made a deal with VoidCorp to gain control of Grith? That's the word on the Grid these days, especially on Insight Gridsites and among the many info-delvers looking to sell data. Most Concord officials consider this rumor to be ludicrous, especially since VoidCorp has a habit of claiming half of something and then taking all of it when everyone turns away. VoidCorp has already reclaimed the Iphus mining facilities and everyone knows they have their sights set on the sesheyans of Grith. But would VoidCorp be willing to leave the rest of the Green Gem in the Hatire's hands? Most independent observers doubt it.

Still, the rumors of a corporate deal persist. Cooperation between the Hatire and VoidCorp dates back to the earliest days of the Second Galactic War. The two stellar nations were part of the Expansion Pentad alliance during the conflict, and even today the two nations remain friendly. If such an local alliance were made to deal with Grith, I have to wonder what concessions the corporate nation has offered. Or, probably more accurately, what terms the Brethren were comfortable accepting.

Kola Entele refuses to acknowledge that any such deal has been made. He points out that "the growing number of VoidCorp warships in Corrivale cannot be good for any party. It is in the best interests of Grith if we can work out our differences without outside interference."

The increasing size of the VoidCorp fleet in the system also concerns officers of the Galactic Concord's Star Force. Although VoidCorp has not violated the Concord-imposed limit on the number of capital-class warships in the system, it has added numerous smaller ships, which it classifies under the category "exploratory vessels." These ships are said to be the backbone of VoidCorp's Exploration and Economic Development initiative in the Verge. Unfortunately, they are also quite capable in other roles as well.

OMEGA STATION

The lonely outpost catalogued as Omega Station orbits one of Lectorion's moons. Not yet complete, the space station nonetheless serves as Concord headquarters in the Corrivale system. Currently, about 20% of the facility is operational. The rest is scheduled to be completed at a rate of 10% every year until all systems and services are on line. Until then, the Concord Star Force maintains Patrol Squadron 131 at Omega Station.

Three recent events at Omega Station must be included in this Corrivale report. The first concerns the Lordan Conference. The second deals with an attempt to sabotage the unfinished station. Finally, details have come to light about a restricted section of the space station that might just shed some light on one of the Verge's most mysterious threats.

THE FIRST LORDAN CONFERENCE

In late February, Concord officials attempted to ease the tensions surrounding the planet Lordan. Like Sol's Mars two centuries ago, Lordan is a prime candidate for terraforming. More than a few consortiums compete for the rights to perform the technological miracle. The problem is, the planet doesn't have a clear-cut owner, and therein lies the crux of the tensions.

Commodore Shari Talivvin of Omega Station invited all interested parties to the first Lordan Conference on February 7. Under the watchful eye of heightened security, representatives of all claimants and ambassadors of the Galactic Concord came together to try to untangle the complicated legal issues surrounding the claims on Lordan. Among those seeking the title deed for the planet were members of Grith's Fhe'irre Consortium, as well as officials from VoidCorp, StarMech, and the Hatire Community. The conference lasted three days.

During the negotiations, Concord mediators tried to establish the legal history of the world. The high-tech space industries consortium with strong ties to Grith's sesheyan population argued passionately that Lordan belongs to them. StarMech, the original owner, insists that all records dating back to before the Long Silence have been destroyed. As such, and because of the great wealth that a successful terraforming process can generate, StarMech insists that the world revert back to the stellar nation. VoidCorp, of course, produced documentation of planet ownership, but the Concord determined that all the documents proved was that VoidCorp had staked a claim on Lordan—not whether or not the claim predates any other claims. The Hatire, who stress that their colony within the system included rights to Lordan, say that the planet should simply be turned over to the Brethren for spiritual and economic development.

While the Concord was quick to issue a statement that the conference was a success, no decision was reached concerning the eventual fate of Lordan. After three days of arguing, debate, and plowing through legal documentation, the Concord mediators called for a recess. The conference, they insist, will continue at some future date. However, no date has yet been set and all sides seem more inclined than ever to maintain their claims.

Commodore Talivvin appeared tired but optimistic after the conference concluded.

"We will get to the bottom of this legal entanglement and determine who has a legitimate claim to Lordan," she stated. "The promise of another inhabitable world is just too important for the system for the Concord to allow this dispute to go on indefinitely. We will find a solution, and we'll find it sooner rather than later."

In the meantime, tensions remain high and many fear that if the Concord can't settle the issue then the claimants will take matters into their own hands.

"There are already more warships in the system than the Concord can handle," one observer noted. "If the various

sides decide to fight over Lordan, then who's really going to stop them?"

Commodore Talivvin concluded, "There won't be a war in Corrivale on my watch. The Concord will respond to violence or threats of violence in kind. I hope I've made that clear enough for everyone to understand."

Conference participants had no comment concerning the likelihood of going to war over ownership of Lordan.

KLICKS IN CORRIVALE

During the Lordan Conference, a drama played out that did not make it to the evening news reports. I learned of the near-disaster while looking into missing security logs from Omega Station that coincided with the Conference's second day. Hidden within the logs, which were withdrawn from public scrutiny immediately after the incident, was the following incredible report.

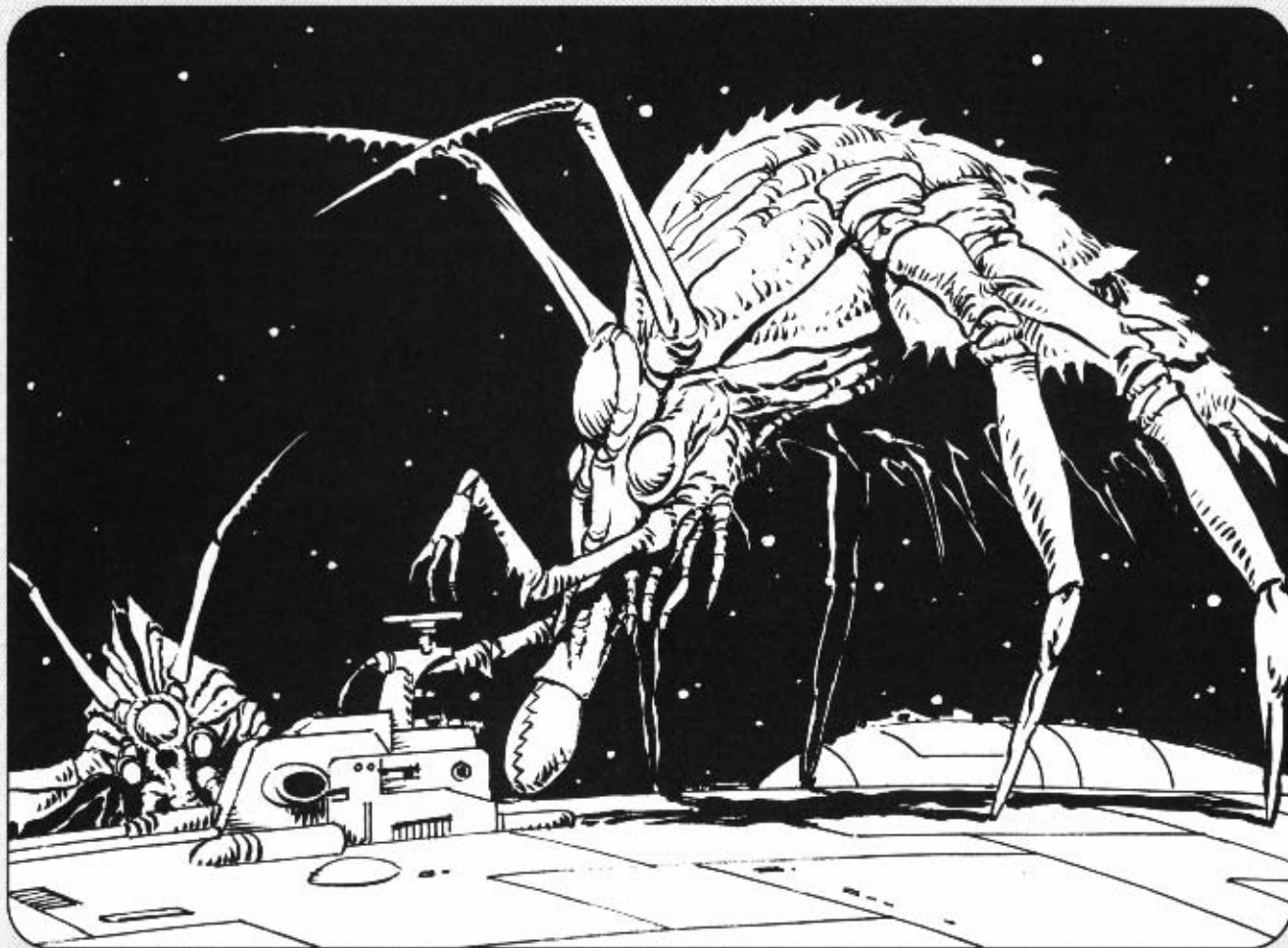
"Omega Station Security Log, February 25, 2501, 10:47 p.m. Galactic Standard Time: While making its rounds just prior to overnight lockdown, Corporal Gail Derow's security team decided to run a patrol of the incomplete portions of the station. This isn't a requirement, but it isn't all that unusual, either. Especially with all of the dignitaries aboard, it pays to make sure there are no potential hazards in the unfinished superstructure. During the preliminary sensor scan, the patrol registered a discrepancy out along Frame 167B, but the computer was unable to provide any details concerning the anomaly.

"This made Corporal Derow uncomfortable. She ordered her squad to prepare for a walk outside and 20 minutes later they were traveling along the skeletal exterior of Omega Station. As they approached the area identified in the scan, they noticed two clicks were working to attach a device of unknown origin and purpose to the station's superstructure."

The report went on to detail a short but fierce battle in which three members of the patrol squad were killed and two others wounded. However, Corporal Derow and her team were able to dispatch the clicks and remove the device. It was later identified as a plasma bomb of some kind. The bomb was put together from a collection of parts manufactured by human arms manufacturers. There was no evidence of design similarities to known devices used by any stellar nation. Concord authorities are investigating various underworld sources to determine if the bomb was supplied by any criminal organization operating in the Verge.

Enough of one of the clicks remained for scientific study, I later learned, but no sign of any vessel was ever discovered. It should be noted that these clicks were sealed within a form-fitting envelope of a jelly-like substance. While Concord researchers continue to study the chemical composition of the material, it has been speculated that this served as an environment suits for the clicks.

None of the conference attendees were injured in the incident.



This is the first confirmation of clicks operating outside the Hammer's Star system. So far, the clicks have limited themselves to attacks against shipping and installations in that system's asteroid belts and on Spes. Have they decided to take their attacks against the Concord to other systems? Are these two clicks operating on their own or on the behalf of one of the disputants in the Lordan affair? Either of these possibilities is cause for great concern. If the clicks are attacking the Concord outside of the Hammer's Star system, then it seems they know much more about the human presence in the Verge than we do about theirs. Perhaps more unnerving, if they were at Nike Station on behalf of one of the stellar nations, then how far off are the opening shots of the Third Galactic War? Or have they already been fired?

SECTION 21-C

Omega Station is officially listed as a research and repair facility. Some reports have hinted at a more militaristic purpose, and a few cynics believe that the Concord isn't being completely forthright about the true nature of the station. It is true that the Concord has placed military personnel on the station, including members of Star Force. That seems to be standard practice for them here in the Verge.

Those who seek a more ominous purpose for Omega Station may want to read on. Thanks to data that has come

into my possession, I have learned that the station is being utilized as a laboratory for a top-secret Concord initiative code-named "Project White Glare." White Glare occupies a high-security section of the space station designated as Section 21-C. This location is off-limits to all but those people with the highest security clearances in the Concord hierarchy. Rumor has it that even Commodore Talivyn is barred from Section 21-C, but I doubt this is truly the case. From what I know of the Commodore, she goes wherever she damn well pleases. Plus, the findings of Project White Glare require all of the top military officers to be completely informed of the project's status on a regular basis.

What takes place behind the sealed portals of Section 21-C? My sources tell me that this is but one of a dozen such locations scattered throughout the Verge. These locations serve as storehouses and research sites where data concerning possible threats to the security of the Verge is collected and studied. It has further come to my attention that only threats of an alien nature are handled by White Glare. This means that the internal struggles of the various stellar nations don't concern the project chiefs. Nor do they collect data concerning pirates, mutant raiders, cykotek marauders, or any other mundane threat facing the Verge. Instead, White Glare concentrates on threats that are external in nature—threats from beyond the bounds of known space.

ADVENTURE HOOK: INCIDENT ABOVE NIKE

This scenario is one in which the heroes' ability to dish out violence is less important than their ability to avoid it. It is set against the backdrop of the political maneuvering that occurs after the First Lordan Conference. In essence, the heroes will be hired to plant evidence that will discredit one of the participants of any future conference. Not every hero needs to be a sneaky superspy, but a subtle approach will be necessary to complete the requirements of the job without running into a buzzsaw of opposition. Diplomats might acquire info like passcodes or allay the suspicions of nosy security sorts, Combat Specs might be responsible for mission planning and security, Tech Ops could handle technical support (communications, computer monitoring, etc.), and Free Agents might perform the actual breaking and entering work.

BACKGROUND

The First Lordan Conference failed to resolve any of the legal issues surrounding sovereignty over Lordan. Following the conference, the participants have begun to maneuver, each in their own way, into a more secure political and legal position. The Fhei'irre Consortium has managed to acquire information that will undermine VoidCorp's claim to Lordan, but they believe that VoidCorp is watching most of their agents. The Consortium has managed to move the data packet, using several cutouts, to an independent talent agent who discreetly secures the assistance of professional "troubleshooters."

The agent, Alexandra Kelly, will contact the heroes to get them to perform a little breaking and entering into Fhei'irre's offices on Omega Station and place the data packet in the safe. As Ms. Kelly has probably not worked with the heroes before, she will state that her employer would prefer that nothing is stolen from the office, in order to keep Fhei'irre from involving Concord law enforcement.

Most of the Fhei'irre officials working on Omega Station are unaware that the head offices on Grith have chosen to deliver any data packet to them, so if they encounter the heroes, they will likely attempt to call Concord security and have the heroes arrested. Only Fhei'irre's security chief knows of the upcoming "delivery." Unable to relax any of his security measures, he will be "working late" for the next couple of weeks, just in case. There is a 2 in 6 chance that he will be there when the heroes break in. If so, he will be able to override some of the security for a few moments. He will avoid actually interacting with any of the heroes, assuming it is better for everyone if they are unaware of each other.

SUPPORTING CAST

The Gamemaster should create whatever security personnel the heroes may encounter. This should especially include Concord security on Omega Station. At the Gamemaster's option, she may add a VoidCorp assassin or black ops team who know the information has been stolen and who are following the trail to the heroes even as they plan their mission into Fhei'irre offices on Omega Station.

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this read-aloud to start the action, or adapt it to the adventure you've constructed:

You have agreed to meet with a contact that promises a lucrative short-term work contract. You are gathered in a conference room in a fairly barren office building. It looks almost as if the place isn't used for much other than meetings like this one. At the table with you is a young woman named Alexandra Kelly. She is dressed in a conservative but well-tailored business suit, and she has a portable computer system with her. After she exchanges a few pleasantries with the heroes, she gets down to business.

"I have been retained by a party I will not, for professional reasons, identify to acquire a team of discreet professionals to perform a mission of some delicacy. The mission itself will almost certainly necessitate breaking a few minor laws, but in the event you are apprehended by authorities, my employer will be able to render legal assistance—through several intermediaries, of course—to you within 48 hours. This will occur whether or not you have successfully performed the mission. At this point, I must know from you whether or not such activity is something you are willing to consider."

If the heroes are not averse to engaging in illegal work, Ms. Kelly will continue.

"As you may know, The First Lordan Conference failed to resolve anything concerning the legal claim to the planet Lordan. Now comes the maneuvering phase by all of the participants. What my employer wishes for you to do is to place a sealed data packet into the safe of the offices of the Fhei'irre Consortium on Omega Station. The contents of the packet are irrelevant to your mission, as is the reason for placing it there. Although we cannot prevent you from removing anything from the safe, I should point out that if you are caught with any material from there by security forces on Omega, it will become more difficult to extricate you from any potential legal difficulties. My employer is generous, but only within limits. What we seek is a discreet, professional operation, preferably accomplished within ten days. Are you still interested?"

What do you do?

Which brings us to our current discussion. What lies beyond the seals of Section 21-C? I'm not sure of everything that's cataloged therein, but I have learned that a Concord special operations unit went to great pains and endured considerable risk to capture a live kroath soldier. The kroath, as has been reported elsewhere, wear protective armored suits that contain a highly corrosive gel. When a kroath suffers more damage than the suit can repair, the gel becomes active and destroys the armor and the body within. This has made it extremely difficult to ascertain anything useful about the mysterious species.

Thanks to the efforts of a hand-picked Concord Marine "raider" unit, such data is now in the hands of the Concord through Project White Glare.

The living kroath was brought to Omega Station under tight security. It was placed within a stasis gel tube to keep it unconscious, as the team feared that the kroath might be able to activate the destructive properties of its armored suit even if the suit wasn't severely damaged. Once inside Section 21-C, it fell to the team of scientists to devise a method for getting the most information in the short time they were sure to have once the stasis gel was removed. Indeed, according to the transcripts of the incident, the kroath was available for study for just under two minutes after the procedure began. Luckily, computer sensors and diagnostic equipment were in place during the allotted time period.

The Gridshot included with this report comes from the files of Project White Glare. It shows the scientists working quickly to study the kroath before all evidence was destroyed. It might be a little hard to see in this particular Gridshot, but what the scientists found makes the mystery of the kroath even more disturbing.

Inside the kroath armor, the scientists found a human being. I don't know what they were expecting, but I was expecting to read in their report that they had classified a new alien species. To learn that the deadly, unforgiving kroath are actually humans makes the atrocities they have thus far committed all the more disturbing. The scientists are still running tests to determine if the human comes from standard Earth stock or from some other strain (though that seems unlikely). Moreover, the Concord has expressed concerns that this revelation could mean that one of the stellar nations has discovered a new form of technology—possibly alien in nature—as none of the kroath weaponry or defenses matches anything in the known human arsenals.

As more information concerning the kroath or Project White Glare comes to light during my continuing investigations, I will endeavor to share that data with you.

THE OUTER BELT

There are two items of interest concerning Corrivale's Outer Asteroid Belt. One deals with a colony of mutants who have been living in relative seclusion and isolation since before



the Long Silence and appear to want to be left alone. The second discusses events that have been occurring at the Qaliban Research Station, and it could hint at yet another problem facing the people of the Verge.

THE MUTANTS OF RED ROCK

In the turmoil that followed the Mutant Uprising of Tau Ceti, the event of 2346 that has been credited with starting the Second Galactic War, mutants suffered terrible persecution at the hands of frightened and vengeful mundane humans. At the same time, mutants continued to be exploited for their unique abilities and physical enhancements. One band of mutants volunteered for a mission to the Verge in order to escape the growing hatred back home. The Solar Union organized the mission, sending the small strike force to wreak havoc on enemy installations throughout the Verge.

The mutant strike force, numbering about 100 individuals and outfitted with a small warship, battled its way to the frontier. It had a handful of impressive victories along the way, but also suffered its share of casualties. By the time the warship reached the Corrivale system, the strike force commander decided that they were being left to die by a society that feared them. Although some of the crew wanted to seek asylum among the Thuldans, where they felt they would at least be accepted by the mainstream society, most of them were uncomfortable with the idea of committing outright treason against their nation. Among these were also those whose mutations made them likely never to be accepted by mainstream Thuldan society. So they decided to find a place for themselves out in the vastness of the Verge.

One version of the story postulates that the warship carrying the mutant crew had suffered significant damage in a skirmish with VoidCorp forces near Hydrocus. This version indicates that the ship was barely able to limp into the outer asteroid belt and hide before enemy vessels could hunt it down. Whatever the truth of that story, the warship reached a large asteroid and settled there. It never moved again.

The asteroid, called Red Rock due to its crimson coloration, featured a huge network of caverns and tunnels that may have been created long ago by one of the Precursor cultures. The crew discovered machinery and devices, the purposes of which they could only imagine. The crew built its colony in some of the caverns of the asteroid, careful to avoid those areas where they discovered the machinery. Using the remains of their warship, they created a small but viable colony at the edge of the Corrivale system. Two smaller craft, including one with a stardrive, serve as a means of acquiring any needed supplies from elsewhere in the Verge, but both of these craft are barely functional. Now, over a century later, the population of Red Rock has stabilized at around 300. The increase in population has begun to strain the resources of the colony, and its leaders are considering expanding into some of the caverns that contain evidence of the earlier culture.

The citizens of Red Rock claim to be an independent colony. They don't consider themselves to be part of any

stellar nation. These mutants are fiercely self-sufficient, but they can't survive without trade with the outside. Often they trade for a number of essentials with prospectors and mining companies working within the Outer Belt. The hatreds of the past are acutely present in modern Red Rock society. Every child is taught about being a mutant and how normal humans hate them—an accurate if somewhat jaded opinion based on what the original settlers suffered in the days following the Mutant Uprising. While they won't attack humans on sight, they will present themselves as cold and indifferent to nonmutant visitors.

Recently, when the first hint of the settlement's existence became public knowledge, the Union of Sol demanded the return of its warship and citizens. The people of Red Rock refused, claiming they had broken away from the nation long ago. In contrast, the Thuldans have offered the mutants sanctuary. This offer has also been refused. It has fallen to the overworked and understaffed Concord to intervene on the settlement's behalf. This, too, has been rejected, but Concord representatives continue to negotiate with the mutant society in hopes of keeping it from being exploited or destroyed by those around it.

Some factions in the Corrivale system, now learning about the existence of this band of free mutants, fear a repeat of the Mutant Uprising. "They'll kill us in our beds while we sleep," suggested Bin Savor of the United Mining Corporation, a small ore processing company operating in the Outer Belt. The Concord has rejected these fears, but a growing uneasiness continues to surround Red Rock and its inhabitants.

QALIBAN RESEARCH STATION

On January 29, 2501, the Galactic Concord seized control of a small research station in the outer belt of the Corrivale system. The station, which belongs to a chemical company called the Qaliban Corporation, was reportedly involved in research intended to develop a powerful mutagen which would significantly enhance the fighting capabilities of combat soldiers.

Preliminary reports suggest that the station was researching a mutagen called "hce7," or "Strain Seven." The Concord strike team recovered little data concerning Strain Seven, as much of that information was dumped from core memory by the researchers on the Qaliban station. But data on an older Strain Six, suggests that the mutagen accelerated and enhanced the production of adrenaline and pain inhibitors. Neurological research evidence also indicates that the effect may be triggered and shut down with specific simple phrases. Strain Six was considered nearly a complete failure because the switching mechanism failed to work in most cases and led to uncontrollable aggressiveness in many of the test subjects.

Early genetic examination of the test participants in the station show that they all share a very similar genetic code, suggesting that they are clones or have been engineered to maximize the effect of the mutagen.

ADVENTURE HOOK: MISSION— CAPTURE A KROATH!

The Concord's first capture of a live kroath did not yield very much information. This time, why leave it to an unnamed Special Forces unit to capture a living kroath specimen? That's what perfectly good heroes are for! In this scenario, the heroes are dropped into a fierce battle against the kroath with one goal in mind—locate, subdue, and secure a live kroath. Just another day at work for the heroes ...

BACKGROUND

The Concord has been seeking to acquire better data concerning one of the new enemies it has found here in the Verge. As part of the top-secret White Glare project, a group of special operatives (the heroes) are assigned a particularly delicate and dangerous mission. During the next engagement with hostile kroath forces, the team will be dropped at the edge of the battlefield. They must locate a solitary kroath, subdue him quickly and without too much damage (so as not to activate the self-destruction mechanism built into kroath armor), and transport him back to one of White Glare's secret research facilities.

Local Hatire have had brushes with kroath in the past, but these have occurred only on Grith, as the kroath conduct a raid against an outlying settlement. The Concord has recently discovered what appears to be a kroath staging base. This base, ironically, is on Lordan, the site of the brewing ownership dispute. The Concord Star Force and Marines have been assigned to attack and destroy the base while the heroes work to capture one alive. In the event that the heroes get in over their heads, the Gamemaster may choose to allow a few marines to bail them out, but the two missions should occur more or less independently.

The heroes know nothing about White Glare or the specifics of the project. They only know that the Concord needs them to capture a kroath soldier for study. Only then can the military come up with sound strategies to help Concord forces eventually defeat this mysterious foe.

SUPPORTING CAST

Kroath, of course, figure prominently in this scenario. You'll need a number of these aliens to throw at the heroes. The *STAR'DRIVE Alien Compendium™* accessory has full details concerning the kroath, but here are the short-form statistics.

You might want a few Concord Marines to throw into the mix as well, as the heroes could get caught between the two combating forces before they complete their mission (or, just as likely, may need backup when the kroath object to being captured!).

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this read-aloud to start the action, or adapt it to the adventure you've constructed:

The transport dives low and deposits you on a relatively quiet section of the battlefield. All around, you can hear the sound of combat as Concord Marines duke it out with hostile kroath soldiers. You check your position, take a quick head count of the rest of the team, then pick a direction. You have to locate and subdue a kroath before the window of opportunity runs out and the transport returns to this spot to pick you up. You have been told that no one has ever succeeded in capturing a kroath alive. You plan to be the first.

Ahead of you, you see one of the outlying buildings of the kroath base. It is mostly built into the ground, and dirt has been piled on top of it, presumably to reduce its sensor signature. As you are observing the building, four kroath in armor and carrying infantry weapons of some kind come around the corner, as if about to enter the building. They spot you as you spot them.

What do you do?

KROATH GAME DATA

STR	10	INT	10
DEX	11	WIL	8
CON	12	PER	8

Durability: 12/12/6/6

Move: sprint 20, run 12, walk 4

Action Check: 11+/10/5/2

Actions: 2 Reaction Score: Ordinary/2

Last Resorts: 1

Attacks

Claws 12/6/3 d4w/d4+2w/d6+3w LI/D

Rifle 13/6/3 see description

Trigun 11/5/2 see description

Filament chain 11/5/2 see description

Enraged: Provides a -2 bonus to all attacks and action checks for d6+1 rounds; can be activated once per scene.

Defenses

no resistance modifier vs. melee attacks

+1 resistance modifier vs. ranged attacks

no INT resistance modifier vs. encounter skills

no WIL resistance modifier vs. encounter skills

Armor: d8+2 (LI), d6+2 (HI), d8+2 (En)

Biotech Gel: Heals 1 stun and 1 wound point per phase; if kroath is rendered unconscious or if any mortal points have been lost, the gel becomes a powerful acid and destroys both the kroath and the armor.

Special Administrator Robert Monteith, senior Concord Administrator in charge of the case against the Qaliban Corporation, believes the extent of the research may be considerably greater than they had previously thought.

"Once we manage to pierce the veil of lies that surround this investigation," Monteith said in a statement to the press, "I think we will see that this installation has been involved in research that almost any civilized nation would categorize as illegal."

The seizure of the station was nearly bloodless. A joint operation of the Concord Investigative Bureau and the Concord Star Force and Marine special operations units, the station was in Concord hands eleven minutes after marines breached the first door. Only one marine was injured in the assault, and his injuries were treated on the station by Star Force medical personnel.

Apparently there was a delay in getting through one of the bulkhead doors leading into the research section itself, which led to the loss of much important data, but Administrator Monteith is confident that he and his investigators will be able to put together a clear picture of the nature of the research within a few weeks. Investigators are searching the traffic logs for the station to determine possible distribution of the mutagen.

At the corporate offices in the city of Resa Bhar on Galvin, a spokesperson for the Qaliban Corporation has called the investigation an example of bullying tactics typical of the Concord's style. "The charges the Concord lays at our doorstep are utterly ridiculous," said Alytra Tamon. "This station and the Qaliban Corporation do not engage in dangerous experimentation. Everything we do falls within the Stellar Nation Guidelines set forth by the Galactic Concord and the Council of Independent Scientists. We continually research new medical applications; it's one of our principal products. But to suggest that we may be attempting to evolve some sort of monster is ludicrous. I expected better from the Concord."

The CEO of Qaliban, James Duman, has reportedly launched an independent investigation into what occurred on Qaliban Station. As yet, the corporation has not reported their findings. Administrator Monteith believes that the findings will be little more than a smokescreen.

"Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that Mr. Duman discovers that one of his divisions has undertaken research he was unaware of. Even so, his company will only suffer if this were to be proven. So I don't expect much here."

VEGOR TAGG AGAIN

I was aboard Omega Station when the Administrator visited me again.

"Did you examine the 3D?" he asked without preamble or fanfare.

When I said that I had, he nodded and motioned for me to follow him. He wasn't wearing his robes this time, just a simple black tunic and slacks, but he carried the telescoping tri-staff strapped across his back. He led me through the station's corridors, eventually taking me to a section of the station that I had never seen.

"Welcome to Section 21-C," Tagg said, producing a small device that easily opened the heavy bulkhead door. He ignored all of the other wonders that were lying around on tables and work benches. Instead, he moved directly to a storage unit and keyed one of the flatbed pods to slide open.

"We don't have a lot of time," he urged, "but I wanted you to see this."

The drawer slid open. He pulled away the covering sheet and revealed the remains of a kroath environmental suit. It was obvious that the corrosive agent had done a great deal of damage, but the scientists were able to save a portion of the suit here in the controlled laboratory. There was even a section of human skeleton still residing within the ruined armor.

"Does this really prove anything?" I asked. "The Concord could have set this up solely for my benefit."

"Perhaps," Tagg replied, sliding the drawer closed. "That's for you to decide."

We left Section 21-C behind and walked for a long time. He led me in many directions, succeeding in making it almost impossible for me to find my way back to that location even if I wanted to. Finally, he stopped before a portal that looked out on Nike.

"Do you wish to continue?" he asked. He never looked directly at me, preferring to gaze out at the moon spinning below us.

After a long pause, I answered him. "Yes."

Tagg nodded. "One of my agents will contact you in Lucullus." With that, the Administrator turned and started to leave.

"You know, I've been wondering just who you are, so I did a bit of checking."

Tagg paused and turned.

"You don't exist. There is no Administrator Vegor Tagg working for the Concord. Nor could I find any trace of you in any other agency. So just who the hell are you, and who do you work for?"

"Perhaps you should confine your queries to the matter at hand, Avatar. Probing into my background will likely prove fruitless—and quite possibly dangerous for us both. It would be best to consider our relationship one of mutual benefit and leave it at that."

He turned and walked out the room, leaving me to my own thoughts.

CHAPTER 4: LUCULLUS

27

CHAPTER 4: LUCULLUS

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/May 28, 2501**
by Avatar

If crime has a home in the Verge, it's probably in Lucullus. What started as a Solar Union penal colony went through a long period of brutal anarchy before settling on a better societal model. Eventually, economic interests won out, and free trade became the basis of a barbarous, corrupt society. Survival of the fittest remains one of the primary laws of the region, edging out bribery, scandal, and haggling as the best way to get ahead.

Dangerous yet opportunistic, the Lucullus system resembles a shell game; three stars dance together, hiding a treasure that can never be found. It's a scam, a con game, a masquerade—but it's also a place where dreams begin and opportunities are made.

THE RADIANT PIRATES

Recent pirate activity in the vicinity of Lucullus' Arch suggests that one corsair captain is determined to make a name for himself. This reporter has learned that Ker Dharkid, leader of the self-styled Radiant Pirates, has begun organizing many of the smaller raiders under his group's banner. The league of marauders now claims to have as many as a dozen military-class vessels stalking the space lanes in and around the Arch, with another two dozen commercial ships in their fleet.

"Out here," ore processor Jessok Morn said, speaking of the Arch, "the Lucullan League isn't worth a drop of water on Bluefall. That means there's no one to protect us when the pirates strike. Certainly not the Solars, who slide through the system pretending they can't hear the cries for help or the pleas for assistance, the bastards. And the pirates will strike. Dharkid is building a fleet, and you don't build a fleet unless you plan on using it."

The Radiant Pirates have demonstrated a boldness of late that has grown as more and more smaller bands have merged with the larger fleet. In addition to hijacking an ore transport and destroying an independent trader whose crew refused to surrender, the pirates even made a strike against a Solar Union vessel that wandered too close to the Arch. After a short but fierce battle, the Solar vessel was able to break away. It escaped with minor damage.

"Rumors of a build-up of pirate forces in the Arch is sheer fabrication," a spokesperson for the Union of Arch Miners stressed. "In a place like the Arch, with its riches and sensor-inhibiting radiation, it's natural for some raiding to occur. But that is not meant to imply that the UAM believes these stories of the so-called Radiant Fleet. They're wild spacer tales, nothing more."

The following transcript, taken from the communication logs of the Solar Union vessel *Little Rock* after its battle near the Arch, suggests a different picture: "This is Captain Dharkid of the *Black Radiance*. You are ordered to shut down your engines and prepare to be boarded. If you refuse, we will slice open your hull and collect your cargo and any remaining salvage while leaving your crew to freeze in the absolute cold of space. You have three minutes to comply." As stated earlier, the Solar Union crew refused and was able to escape relatively intact.

A later transmission intercepted by the *Little Rock* during the ensuing battle contained this additional bit of data: "I want the fleet assembled now! The Arrivers must not escape! I want that ship! If you dogs don't get more ships out here in the next 10 minutes, I'll feed you to my warbeast. You'll watch while it nibbles on your intestines and laps up the gore pooling around your sorry bodies! Do I make myself clear?" The voice has been identified as belonging to the same person who identified himself as Captain Dharkid.

To add further evidence to the threat of a pirate fleet build-up, this sensor sweep report comes from the logs of *Peacekeeper*, a Concord dreadnought that recently completed a patrol run through the Lucullus system: "The radiation emanating from the asteroid field designated as Lucullus' Arch makes it almost impossible to collect reliable sensor data from the area. There are moments of clarity in any interference pattern, however, and we had a window for a few brief seconds. In those seconds, the sensors recorded patterns and energy signatures that, upon analysis, suggest a sizable fleet of spaceships hiding among the asteroids and debris of the Arch. None of the supposed ships were broadcasting any kind of detectable identification signals, suggesting that they wished to remain anonymous or that the radiation was blocking such signals from reaching us." *Peacekeeper* logged its report and proceeded with its patrol of the system. It encountered no hostile vessels at all, but that isn't unusual. Pirates and raiders have rarely attacked anything as powerful as a Concord warship.

Has Dharkid's ambitions attracted the attention of any of the other powerful corsairs in the system? Obviously, but so far none of these have moved against the Pirate of the Arch. A few of the lesser corsair lords have actually joined Dharkid's growing fleet. One corsair lord who is rumored to be very disturbed by Dharkid's power-play is Devriele Shanassin. The fraal, who has his own dreams of dominating the Lucullus system, reportedly offered Dharkid and his fleet a place of honor and authority in Shanassin's burgeoning organization. Dharkid has apparently refused to consider such an arrangement, and the word in the system is that Shanassin isn't pleased. War seems inevitable between the two groups.

ADVENTURE HOOK: PIRATE ATTACK!

As the heroes travel through the Arch, one of the warships in the Radiant Fleet decides to target their vessel. It's time for an old-fashioned pirate adventure! Just don't walk the plank without an e-suit ...

BACKGROUND

The heroes enter Lucullus' Arch for any number of reasons. They could simply be passing through the asteroid field while on their way to another location within the system, or they could emerge from drivespace in the vicinity of the Arch. Maybe they're delivering supplies to a mining station, or picking up cargo to sell at a far-away port. Whatever the background, the heroes attract the attention of the Radiant Pirates and must defend themselves and their ship from a raiding party.

The adventure can either focus on a ship-to-ship battle and chase scene, a boarding action after the pirates invade the heroes' ship, or a longer adventure that combines elements of both scenes in a logical order. In the end, the pirates want the heroes' vessel, their cargo, and maybe even the heroes themselves to sell in the more deranged regions of the Verge.

SUPPORTING CAST

This plot features a pretty straightforward cast of characters. The pirates and their attack ships must be generated—two ships and a handful of pirates with decent combat skills will be needed to challenge the heroes.

You might also want to provide passengers to place in

danger aboard the heroes' ship, or prisoners within the holds of the pirate ships that the heroes can rescue. Maybe one of these prisoners is a favorite son or daughter of one of the Lucullan barons, or a trusted follower of Devrielle Shanassin. Returning such a prisoner to a person of power elsewhere in the system is a good way to earn money, curry favor, and gain a worthy contact in this rough-and-tumble region.

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this read-aloud to start the action, or adapt it to the adventure you've constructed:

Energy crackles around your vessel, making it almost impossible to use the ship's sensors and comm gear. That's supposed to be normal around the Arch, but it doesn't make it any easier to move through the area safely. Something would have to be right on top of you for you to notice it.

Suddenly the close-proximity alarm blares. Radiation levels outside fluctuate, and for a moment you can clearly examine the sensor readings scrolling across your monitor. There's a ship out there, and it's extremely close! Then a voice crackles over the comm unit.

"You're surrounded and outgunned," the voice proclaims. "Surrender your ship and prepare to be boarded! We are the Radiant Pirates, and your cargo, crew, and vessel now belong to us. Shut down your engine and disengage your weapons or we will destroy you. The choice is yours. You have two minutes to comply!" What do you do?

THE MINDWALKER REPRESSION ACTS

Because of the tactics and policies utilized by the Supervisors, a faction made up of powerful mindwalkers who control the mining region of Caracas, the rest of the Lucullan League has issued new laws designed to curb unauthorized psionic activity. Known as the Mindwalker Repression Acts, the laws state that no individual or group may employ psionic abilities in their territories. The laws are quite similar to one another, as they were drawn up by five of the six members of the Lucullan League. League rules state that for a law to affect all of Penates, there must be unanimous agreement among the six factions. The Supervisors refused even to consider the measure.

The laws hold that any individuals or groups caught employing psionic abilities are subject to fines, imprisonment, and even more stringent penalties, depending on the type of psionic ability being used and for what purpose. ESP and telepathy skills receive the harshest penalties.

To help enforce these new laws, psi detectors are being installed in all spaceports, at key locations all across Penates,

and in select areas throughout Lucullus. A special Psionic Repression Unit (PRU) has been established. Although small in number, the PRU has received funds from all members of the Lucullan League (except the Supervisors) in order to provide training, equipment, and anti-psionic devices for use against violators of the new act.

"The Supervisors have always had an unfair advantage due to their psionic talents," said Basil Turcheyev of the Jamaican Syndicate. "We're tired of being scanned and manipulated by mindwalkers. When they teamed up with the Mob, the rest of the League knew it had to take action."

Much of the prejudice aimed at mindwalkers dates back to when Lucullus was a penal colony. The Supervisors, remnants of the secret police who once controlled the prison state, continue to employ psionic abilities to control and manipulate those around them. The informal taboos against mindwalkers have now become official sanctions aimed at all unauthorized psionic use. The Supervisors have expressed displeasure with the new law but have not yet demonstrated any means by which they plan to protest its implementation.

"This is typical of the sort of fear engendered by the former prison administration," said Toshi Hayakawa, Min-

ister for External Affairs. "It has been over a generation since we were associated with that administration. Sure, our roots are there, but we hardly want to reunite with our old masters. Like everyone else on Penates, we're making our lives out here now. And until other people here overcome their fears, we will remain exiles on a world forsaken even by God."

A NEW PLAYER IN LUCULLUS

With the return of the Solar Union to the Lucullus system, a few of the idiosyncracies of the stellar nation have begun to pop up in the Verge. Specifically, as criminals of all types are drawn to Lucullus like moths to a flame, a new criminal group that styles itself "the Mob" has set up shop in the system. Many Solar citizens, in an effort to preserve the rich history of Earth, immerse themselves in a lifestyle that memorializes a specific Earth culture, tradition, or historical era. The Mob's leader, Selena Lucino, models herself after Al Capone, the infamous boss of an early twentieth century criminal racket that operated primarily out of the city of Chicago on the North American continent.

In many cases, this might be amusing. But there is nothing funny about Lucino. Early reports suggest that she has a psychopathic streak that would make even the most hardened criminals on Lucullus uncomfortable. Taking

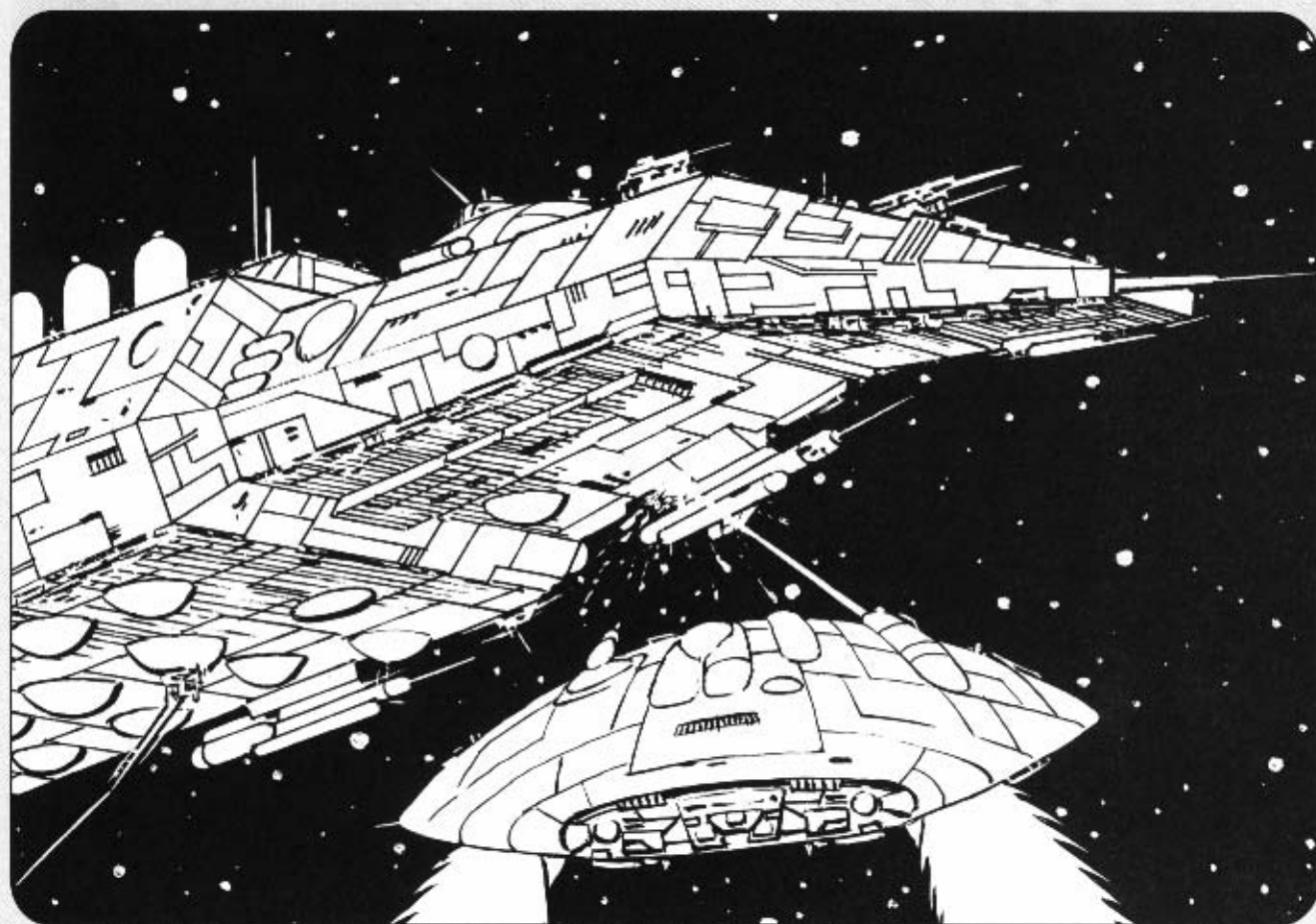
Capone's style as a means of conducting her business made her a terror of Old Space.

Lucino never managed to get a foothold onto Terra itself, so she has expanded into smaller Solar colonies, where her ruthlessness paralyzed local police officials. Clearly, she has seen the reopening of the Verge as an opportunity to expand her influence into a new frontier.

"The Mob" has made an unholy alliance with the Supervisors of Caracas, on Penates. This alliance may tip the scales in the delicate balance of power that exists between the factions of the Lucullan League. Many of the Supervisors are hampered by the increase in anti-psionic surveillance that other League members have adopted in the last year. Lucino's organization gives them the ability to operate in other areas with less risk of loss. For Lucino, the answer as to why she allied herself with the Supervisors may lie in her very nature.

"This is one woman you don't want to cross," said a former member of her organization. "We all used to dread the fourteenth of February. She liked to send her own special holiday greeting to her rivals, and she didn't care how many of us died to deliver it."

He was referring to the St. Valentine's Day Massacre perpetrated by Capone against one of his rivals in the early twentieth century. "A lot of tough guys out there would laugh at the Boss, thinking her thing with the history of that guy Capone made her some kind of joke. When she



showed up at their funerals wearing paisley and escorted by a couple dozen soldiers and a guy with a bottle of chilled champagne, nobody was laughing anymore."

The Mob, whose members are sometimes called "Capones," arrived en masse in the system at the end of last year. "They've taken up residence in Caracas," a source in the Lucullan League said, "building on connections that date back to the days of the Solar Colonial Administration. But basically, it's just a way for the Supervisors to acquire more muscle, if you ask me."

"We're businessmen," said Telor Penne, a representative for the Mob. "We've come to Lucullus to build a new and better life for ourselves and our families, and to bring a touch of Earth's history to the Verge."

The trouble is, it's a violent part of Earth's history that this gang of Solars has decided to share with Lucullus. "They're gangsters of the worst kind," commented Luro Munji of the Tobago Transport Company. "Extortion, weapons running, smuggling, hijacking, protection rackets—you name it, the Mob offers it, whether you want to participate or not!"

What does the Mob really want in Lucullus? "Power and wealth," a source in the Lucullan League believes. "The Mob, and its allies among the Supervisors, wants to carve out a base of power in the system. I wouldn't be surprised if they were working with the Solars, too. They're constantly expanding their business interests, and I think the Mob Boss has her eye on a Baron seat within the League. If I were one of the Barons, I'd be watching my back."

Selena Lucino dismisses such notions as ridiculous. From her office aboard *The Untouchable*, a frigate-sized freighter equipped with military armor and weaponry that serves as the Mob's mobile headquarters, Lucino had this to say: "Why would I want to be a Baron? The Lucullan League, although a fine idea, does not work on a practical level. Its members can never agree on anything, so it has no real power. If I were interested in power, I certainly would not become a Baron. My associates have chosen to follow my lead. That's enough for me."

Lucino claims that the Mob participates in legitimate business endeavors, and any intimations of illegal activity are completely false. "We have established a trade consortium in Caracas, thanks to the cooperation and generosity of Supervisor MacEwan," Lucino claims. "We serve as an alternate venue for getting goods and services to the various markets throughout Lucullus and other locations in the Verge, and we do so at a competitive cost."

Others are skeptical. They see the Mob as a front for criminal pursuits. "There's a gang war on the horizon," the Lucullan League source warned. "If something isn't done soon, the factions will resort to physical confrontation to determine who controls the largest piece of the action. The smaller businesses in the system are already suffering due to these tensions. I fear there's more hardship ahead—and it's all because of the Arrivers who call themselves the Mob."

The recent destruction of the trader *Zekip's Hope* has been linked to the Mob. The fully loaded cargo ship, packed with trade goods and bound for the markets of Aegis, departed from Penates as scheduled on March 22. It made starfall and disappeared from Lucullus as planned. Five days later, it emerged in the Aegis system and immediately exploded. Cargo and crew were all lost in the powerful explosion. What happened to *Zekip's Hope*? "Alotar Zekip refused to provide the Mob with a share of his profits," a spacehand at Wheeler Dome said. "I guess when they offer shipping insurance, you'd better take it."

Telor Penne dismissed the notion that the Mob sabotaged the trader. "We make legitimate business offers," the representative said. "If someone decides to refuse one of our offers, it isn't the end of the world. I'd say someone is watching too many old holovids."

Maybe, but the word in Lucullus is that there's a new faction in town—and the Mob doesn't take kindly to those who refuse to do business with them.

WEREN KRUSGURRG SEEKS PICTS' KING STEEL

The Penates faction known as the Picts is a violent collection of criminals, pirates, and raiders that control a sizable portion of the planet. Led by the weren brawler, King Steel IX, the Picts' tyranny is legendary in the Lucullus system.

Recently, word reached the system that a weren of considerable power and prestige was on his way to the Pict city of Santiago, located in the southern hemisphere of Penates. This weren, a member of the legendary *krusgurr*, plans to challenge Steel and end his reign of terror. "King Steel has abandoned his honor," Burgu of Clan Blue Tusk explained in an exclusive interview. "The code of word and claw cannot be broken. Steel has broken the code. I shall break Steel."

The *krusgurr* have a rich and noble tradition among the clans of Kurg, the weren homeworld. Like the musketeers of old Earth or the knights of Camelot, these warriors of honor defend and uphold the highest ideals of the weren people. Considered to be defenders of the faith, the *krusgurr* have spread beyond the bounds of Kurg to follow the weren into galactic society. However, this sect is rare even on Kurg, which makes them almost impossible to find outside Orlamu space. Unless, of course, an important crusade demands the attention of a *krusgurr*.

"No weren will fight a lesser opponent unless given no choice. That is one of our most basic laws," Burgu said. "Steel is a tyrant, preying on the weak and frightened. He has lost his honor. Soon, I will take away his life."

Burgu plans to challenge Steel in the tradition of the weren war-debates of old. If Steel refuses the challenge, he further demonstrates his disregard for the code. If Steel disregards the code, then so can Burgu. "Steel has dishonored the weren people," the *krusgurr* said. "Steel will die."

King Steel is expected to mobilize his forces and put

ADVENTURE HOOK: MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Here's a new take on a tried-and-true classic adventure. Of course, your group of heroes needs to contain at least one weren. When the group shows up in Lucullus, the Picts take notice. This hook is designed to be used in conjunction with Avatar's report about a weren coming to make trouble for King Steel, leader of the Pict faction. Whether your weren hero really is the *krusgurr* in question or this is just a case of mistaken identity, it's going to be tough for the weren hero and his companions to get out of Lucullus alive ...

BACKGROUND

The heroes travel the space lanes of Lucullus for any number of reasons, depending on the recent events in your campaign. Unfortunately, now isn't the best time for a group with a weren to be visiting the system. A recent news report has a local faction leader up in arms. It seems that a Grid news article has put King Steel of the Picts on notice. A weren honor warrior from Kurg is supposedly on the way to Penates to punish Steel for breaking the weren code of word and claw. Steel, who left his culture and traditions behind a long time ago, has no intention of meeting this weren warrior in fair combat.

So the Picts and their allies throughout the system have been ordered to watch for any suspicious weren traveling toward Penates. They are to capture such weren if possible, kill them if necessary, but in any event make sure they don't reach the Pict leader.

This adventure can take the form of a single encounter or a gauntlet of encounters as every stop the heroes make within the system leads to a battle with Pict enforcers.

SUPPORTING CAST

The number of supporting cast members required for this adventure depends upon the scope of activity you want to build into the plot. You should definitely have a collection of Pict gang members, ranging from sneaky observers sent to watch out for and track the weren hero to brutal and ruthless warriors with orders to capture the weren hero—dead or alive. If the Gamemaster is feeling particularly sadistic, she might have King Steel

send his favorite champion, Sherhan Dargeesi (see page 140 of the *STAR DRIVE Campaign Setting*). Others associated with the Picts could also come in handy. Corsairs, smugglers, and even lesser thugs looking to make a name for themselves (and some money as well) by carrying out King Steel's orders.

Finally, if you want to really expand the scope of this plot, add characters who are loyal to other Lucullan factions. The Supervisors and the Technospiders might want to help the weren get to Santiago, as they would gain much from the demise of the Pict's chieftain. The Jamaican Syndicate, on the other hand, might decide to take the weren captive and see what kind of money they can make by selling him to the highest bidder. Union Penates and the Free Trade Guild might see this as an opportunity to gain more power. He could be worth votes in the League, providing either or both of these factions the influence to finally get an issue of importance to them pushed through.

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this read-aloud to start the action, or adapt it to the adventure you've constructed:

The spaceport reminds you of any number of similar locations scattered throughout the Verge. It's dimly lit, crowded, and permeated by a slightly offensive odor. But there's also an excitement in the air, a condition common to spaceports everywhere.

Still, something doesn't seem to be quite right at this spaceport either. You know that Lucullus has a reputation for being a corrupt and brutal place, but there's an underlying current that has you slightly on edge. Maybe it's the stares. Everyone seems to stop what they're doing and look at your group as you pass. Actually, they're not looking at all of you. Just the weren. Besides the obvious gawkers, you also have the sense that you're being watched from the deep shadows that stretch out from the walls and branching corridors.

Suddenly, a gang of brutish thugs steps into your path. The largest of these large individuals levels his render rifle in your direction. "You. Weren," he shouts, "King Steel wants to see you. Do you yield or do you die?"

What do you do?

them on alert for the weren's arrival. It's doubtful that Burgo will ever reach Steel, let alone be allowed to issue his challenge and actually engage the Pict's leader in combat. However, a Concord Administrator who would not reveal his true name cautioned me not to underestimate the *krusgurr*. "They are powerful warriors with hearts of fire," the Administrator said. "I've fought beside one of these honor warriors, and I know what they are capable of. If I were King Steel, I'd be moving to Hammer's Star right about now."

King Steel could not be reached for comment, and no

representative of the Picts was willing to speak on-record concerning the validity of this situation.

ORLAMU FUGITIVE SOUGHT

Several groups on Penates are seeking an off-worlder who is purported to have psionic talents. A young man who calls himself Kalin Ankra has been working for the Free Trade Guild for the past several months.

"We had no idea he was he was a mindwalker," said Fernando Villalobos, captain of the *Zapata*, a margin-running



free trader. "He was quiet and hard-working ... did what was asked of him quickly and efficiently. The only thing odd about him was his fascination with what ships were in system. I caught him one night on the bridge going through the computer link to Highport. I was pretty mad about it, but after a while, I realized he wasn't really snooping or anything, so I let him have access every once in a while. After a month, that guy could name every ship and her captain who regularly came to Highport. Now I realize he must have been looking for someone."

Rumor has it that even one of the Verge's more dangerous bounty hunters was involved in the pursuit for a while. Pyotr Sokolov was thought to be closing in on Ankra but abruptly ceased his search. As usual with the taciturn man-hunter, he refused to divulge any information about who hired him to find the young man. I caught up with him in Port Royal and asked him why he ceased pursuit.

"Simple," he answered, "the employer pulled the plug. I don't get any kicks chasing down people and seeing who'll pay the best price for him. It's not my style. As far as I'm concerned, I'm just a spectator in this affair now. Hell, I'm even rooting for the kid a little. He was a wily adversary."

I have not yet been able to discover who seeks the young man or why. But I have noticed something odd about this whole thing. On a world that has earned a righteous hatred of mindwalkers and their powers, I can't help noticing how many people, like Sokolov, seem to be pulling for the young man.

"Me? I hope he gets away," said Villalobos. "He's never done anything wrong to me or my crew, and he was a good guy to have around. If he's reading this, well ... Good luck to you, kid. I hope you find what you're looking for."

THE SOURCE IN LUCULLUS

When I first stepped into the dark alleyways of Port Royal, I was not certain that I would ever come back out. Not exactly the most pleasant place I've ever been. But it's where I was told to meet my contact.

My guides met me at the entrance of an abandoned warehouse. They were each wearing jackets that bore identical logos: a questing beast from a mythical age. I tried striking up a conversation with them several times—even asking about their colors—but all I got in return from them were looks of contempt that the young reserve for only the most dim-witted of adults. I kept silent after that.

As if I hadn't already lost any sense of where I was, they actually blindfolded me for a while as they led me through what I assume were several buildings. My attempts to convince them that I was already well and truly lost they ignored.

When they took the blindfold off, I was in a chamber lit only by the luminescence of virtual screens and data displays. Someone sat at the center of these continually changing screens, his back to me. I could not make out any of his features, and to say the truth, I am not even sure what species he was. Two data cables snaked down his neck, disappearing into machinery.

"You have travelled far, reporter-man called Avatar," he said, without turning around. "What is it you seek, out here among the dead?"

"What makes you think I seek anything? I'm just bucking for another award, sort of crystallizing my job security."

The rumble of laughter echoed through the room. "No security for you out here, Avatar-man. As you begin the quest for your beast, so, too, do you become the beast for others."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Everybody searches for something, but some never realize it. And for those who do, it is a curse."

"And what is it you seek?"

"There behind you, on the table, is the first part of your journey," he replied. "Once you pick up the disk, you are forever committed to this path. And like the Saracens of long ago, your path will be fraught with peril. Go, Avatar-man, teach the Arrivers the truths of our heritage, the truths of what we live with."

"Look, who the hell are you? What's all this babble about

quests and Saracens and all that other crap? I came here because your people identified themselves as my contact here. I'm willing to pay a fair price for information, but I'm sure as hell not going to listen to all this garbage!"

"The data we have is yours, newsman. All you have to do is pick up the disk. If you seek answers, then you must first know what questions to ask, and of whom. We shall assist you where we can, but never in the open. If you wish to continue on your journey, you may find enlightenment aboard our protector's wandering home. Choose."

With that, all the lights but the one illuminating the table behind me winked out. I walked to the table and reached for the disk—and then hesitated.

I am a reporter, I told myself. My job is to discover and report the truth as best as I can determine it. This talk of quests was just so much stage play. Right?

Then I thought of the Concord Marine who got me started on this whole inquiry.

I snatched up the disk and walked out.

FIRST CONTACT WITH NEW SPECIES LEADS TO BATTLE

Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/June 11, 2502
by Avatar

While out here in the Hammer's Star system, I came across this report of an alien warship skulking about the edges of the Lucullus system. I felt it important enough a discovery to append to my Lucullus file.

Warships in the service of the Solar Union and several Lucullan factions encountered vessels of a technologically advanced spacefaring species in the vicinity of Lucullus. The alien ships apparently attacked human forces in the area, destroying or capturing at least two human driveships. Verge and Concord authorities are pressing forward with an urgent investigation of these events.

At 0730 hours on June 2, 2502, the Solar Star Navy auxiliary scout vessel *Sirocco* made starrise in the Lucullus system with a first contact report of a most alarming nature. During pursuit of the corsair lord Devriele Shanassin, the *Sirocco* encountered an unidentified ship in the vicinity of a mysterious derelict drifting through interstellar space approximately 2.5 light-years from Lucullus. The Solar Union government has classified the details of the encounter, but sources who asked not to be identified claimed that ships representing the Jamaican Syndicate and HelixTech (a megacorporation based in Lucullus) were also present when alien vessels attacked without provocation.

Early reports indicate that the Syndicate and Helix-

Tech ships may have been captured or destroyed during the ensuing combat, while Shanassin's ship, the *Blackguard*, disappeared shortly thereafter. The Syndicate's public relations firm issued no statement regarding any such encounter, but HelixTech confirmed that *HTCV 117*, the *Adroit*, is now overdue and presumed lost. The *Adroit* is a heavily armed *Daring*-class corvette; a search of flight plan records with local authorities revealed that the ship departed HelixTech corporate headquarters outside Santiago on May 22, 2502, under the personal command of Karcen Borun, the Vice President of Corporate Security and Special Operations.

To compound the mystery, an anonymous source transmitted an extensive data packet containing detailed records of the initial exploration of the alien derelict to TVN's subsidiary office in Port Royal. While TVN has been unable to confirm the truth of this data, it would seem to indicate that some fifth faction or party was involved in the encounter, a small number of human explorers or freelancers who surveyed the derelict before anyone else became involved. Details are still unclear.

Based on the information TVN received, the alien race appears to be, to human eyes, reptilian in nature, with a long, serpentine body and six limbs. In an upright posture, the aliens stand well over two meters tall, with an overall length of close to five meters. Clearly, they've evolved from large, powerful carnivores of some kind. Their technology seems to include some kind of advanced metallurgy, virtual matter creation, and most tantalizing of all, a quantum-fluctuation power system—the legendary zero-point energy. However, TVN must reiterate that this report cannot be substantiated at this time.

CHAPTER 5: COULOMB

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/July 23, 2501**
by Avatar

Coulomb is a lonely system located on the very edge of the Verge. Like its neighbor Mantebtron, it is an old star, and like High Mojave, its lone planet Ohmel holds ruins of the so-called "Glassmaker" civilization of Precursors. These days, control of Coulomb is divided between the Concord and the local corrupt Ngongwe government, with the Austrins looking to pick up some scraps.

LADY KFIRA NGONGWE AND THE AUSTRINS

As the head of the Ngongwe aristocracy, Lady Kfira does her best to rule the planet with an iron grip. Unfortunately for her, the locals are getting tired of putting up with her, and the Galactic Concord appears to offer a much better alternative.

Interestingly, Austrin-Ontis has recently taken up the cause of Coulombian independence. That's independence from the Concord, mind you, not independence of the natives to choose their own government. To that end, the Austrins have started dispatching mercenary forces to Ohmel under the Ngongwe family's control. These are little more than hired goons, as the dozen or more reports of violence against peaceful civil gatherings would attest. Ironically, the heavy-handed Austrins may be accelerating the very revolutionary behavior they're hoping to quash!

Opinions vary as to why the Austrins are so involved in Coulombian politics, but a recent trade negotiation brokered by the Austrins between Ngongwe's mercantile enterprise and the Thuldans suggest that something's up. Are the Austrins using Coulomb—and the powerful Ngongwe merchant force—as a bargaining chip in the war between Alitar and Galvin? Hey, if you're going to be a successful journalist, sometimes you have to read between the lines to find the story.

RIOT IN TUNGUSTA

Two days ago, the tensions on Ohmel resulted in a full-blown riot in the farming town of Tungusta (population 1200). The fighting between local hydroponic farmers and Austrin "peacekeeping" forces left four Coulombians dead and several injured.

Apparently, what began as a peaceful demonstration against the Ngongwe government turned violent soon after a half-dozen heavily armed Austrins arrived to disperse the crowd. Many of the locals felt the whole thing could have been avoided, if not for the mercenaries' brutality.

"It was like they didn't even really care about quieting down the crowd," said one witness, who wished to remain anonymous, of the Austrins. "All they wanted to do was wave their guns and act big."

Said another observer, "The Tungusta police were doing just fine until those thugs showed up. It just goes to show you, local problems should be solved locally."

Some wondered why the Concord wasn't there to keep the peace. "The Concord says the Coulomb system belongs to them. Well, where were they while we were getting shot down in the street by those Austrin goons? If they're really in charge, they should prove it by kicking the Ngongwes off the planet."

Though no further altercations have been reported in the last 36 hours, it's clear that tempers haven't completely cooled down. It's only a matter of time before a similar situation occurs again, whether here or in any of the other small towns on Ohmel. That is, if it doesn't get to the capital city of Charlotte first.

GLASSMAKER SITES

Like High Mojave, Ohmel holds a number of Precursor ruins. To date, six sites have been verified as having once belonged to the Glassmaker civilization. Unfortunately for xenoarchaeologists interested in learning from such sites, these ruins have aged poorly. Apparently the constant thawing and refreezing of the ice, not to mention the slow but steady movement of Ohmel's glaciers, have wreaked havoc on most of these locations.

However, a group of independent scientists recently received authorization from the Ohmel government to set up a research laboratory not far from the south pole of the planet. Though the application didn't specifically state what the researchers would be studying, it's a good bet that they've found a seventh site of Glassmaker ruins. Perhaps the site's proximity to the south pole—where thawing and refreezing would be at a minimum—might have allowed the ruins to survive in better condition than the others here. Sadly, I was unable to obtain an interview with any of the researchers, so I can't confirm any of this.

INFLATION IN CHARLOTTE

Over a third of Ohmel's 40,000 citizens reside in the capital city of Charlotte. Thus, its economy tends to drive that of the entire planet. Thus, the announcement by Charlotte merchants of a 15% increase in the price of textiles seems certain to have an impact on every person on the planet.

Visitors to Charlotte often complain about the high prices and apparent lack of competition between merchants. What many outsiders don't realize is that the Ngongwe family owns every business in the city, transforming Charlotte into one big company store. This monopoly allows the Ngongwe government to control the supply and pricing of over 90% of the goods entering the Ohmel economy.

Since the citizens of Ohmel have limited access to other suppliers, they have little choice but to purchase their goods from Ngongwe merchants. Despite the Concord's desire to

ADVENTURE HOOK: You Say You Want A Revolution

Tensions on Ohmel have been growing steadily over the past few months. With the recent trouble in Tungusta, young radicals in Charlotte have decided that there's no time like the present for a revolution. The heroes are probably just caught in the middle—perhaps restocking supplies or just enjoying shore leave while their stardrive recharges—though the Gamemaster is free to work them into the plot more thoroughly.

If the heroes have been involved in anti-government activity in the past, Jonas Martin might even try to solicit their help in the upcoming revolution. In that case, the Gamemaster should adapt the trigger scene and flesh out the roles of the heroes in the activities to come.

BACKGROUND

Jonas Martin is a 28 year old native Coulombian. All his life he's been frustrated by the corruption around him. His father couldn't get a good job because he "didn't know the right people." His mother was blacklisted after she dared to organize a boycott of local merchants for their price gouging. It was perhaps inevitable that Jonas would fall in with those who shared his opinion that the Ngongwes must go.

By the time he was 22, Jonas knew most of the other radicals in Charlotte. At 25, he was the second-in-command of Blue Frost, the biggest anti-government group on Ohmel. Today, he leads the organization, which numbers nearly 120 worldwide, including 75 in Charlotte alone.

Inspired by the powerful words of Michael Thayne, Jonas has taken the Galactic Consulate Minister as a personal hero. Though he doesn't quite have Thayne's leadership skills, Jonas has gone as far as to style his appearance and mannerisms along those of the minister, even wearing his hair in the same manner.

Until now, Blue Frost has been content to stay in the shadows, making small strikes against the Ngongwes. The riot in Tungusta, however, convinced Jonas that things were getting worse, not better, and that revolution was the only answer. He's hoping that this action will if nothing else, draw the attention of the Concord to the plight of the Coulombians. If along the way a few Ngongwe goons get killed, that'll be just fine as well.

SUPPORTING CAST

Jonas is exceptionally skillful for such a young man—the result of years of personal training. Use the Good-quality Spy statistics from page 99 in the *Gamemaster Guide* (adding some leadership skill). He is extremely driven and won't hesitate to use deadly force to accomplish his goals. However, he isn't bloodthirsty; he truly believes that what he's doing is the right thing.

The rest of the revolutionaries are less talented, use Marginal- or Ordinary-quality statistics from any Supporting Character Template. Remember that most of these people have normal jobs. Though devoted to their cause, most aren't completely sold on the idea of violence and could be talked out of anything more than vandalism or rabble-rousing.

Most Austrin mercenaries are Ordinary-quality Brawlers or Soldiers, though a few are of Good-quality. These goons are here to do one thing: Keep the locals in line. To that end, they've been instructed to give no more than a single warning before the use of violence. With the riot in Tungusta fresh in their minds, some may even "forget" the first warning, instead opening fire on anyone who looks like a trouble-maker.

TRIGGER SCENE

As the heroes relax between missions, read aloud or paraphrase the following text:

You're sitting in a small café, enjoying tasty (though overpriced) drinks. Though you know the frigid winds howl outside the protective domes of Charlotte, inside the temperature is a comfortable—if cool—14 or 15 degrees.

You've just finished your drink when the background noise of the street outside starts to increase. At first you think it might be some sort of public gathering, but then you hear the sound of glass breaking and people shouting. When a pair of heavily-armed men dressed in combat gear bearing the logo of the local government jog past, you sit up and take notice.

Suddenly, a young man pokes his head into the café and shouts, "Revolution! The revolution has begun! Join the fight against the Ngongwe oppressors! Revolution!"

What do you do?

clean up the corruption in local government, they've had a hard time making any inroads into the local economy. They simply don't have the resources to provide an alternative supply channel for many of the materials needed.

What's worse, the Ngongwes have successfully kept most competing merchants out of their back yard. It's believed they control approximately 95% of all trade between

Coulomb and the systems of Algemron, Aegis, and Lucullus, the three nearest trade centers of the Verge. Though reports of unfair competition—read: violence toward competitors—abound, there's no doubt that the Ngongwes worked hard during the Long Silence to cement their power over this system.

CHAPTER 6: THE LIGHTHOUSE

Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/September 17, 2501
by Avatar

The *Lighthouse* shines in the darkness, a beacon to civilization urging the wayward children of the Verge to come home. Once it was all but forgotten, a relic of the Second Galactic War rusting in a distant port. Then the Galactic Concord was formed, and the Orlamu offered the *Lighthouse* to the new organization as a symbol of their commitment to the ideals of the Concord. Refitted and upgraded, the *Lighthouse* was turned into a mobile embassy. It was charged with carrying the standard of the Concord throughout the Verge, as well as providing a safe place to settle differences, make deals, engage in trade, and rest in relative comfort even in the most primitive systems.

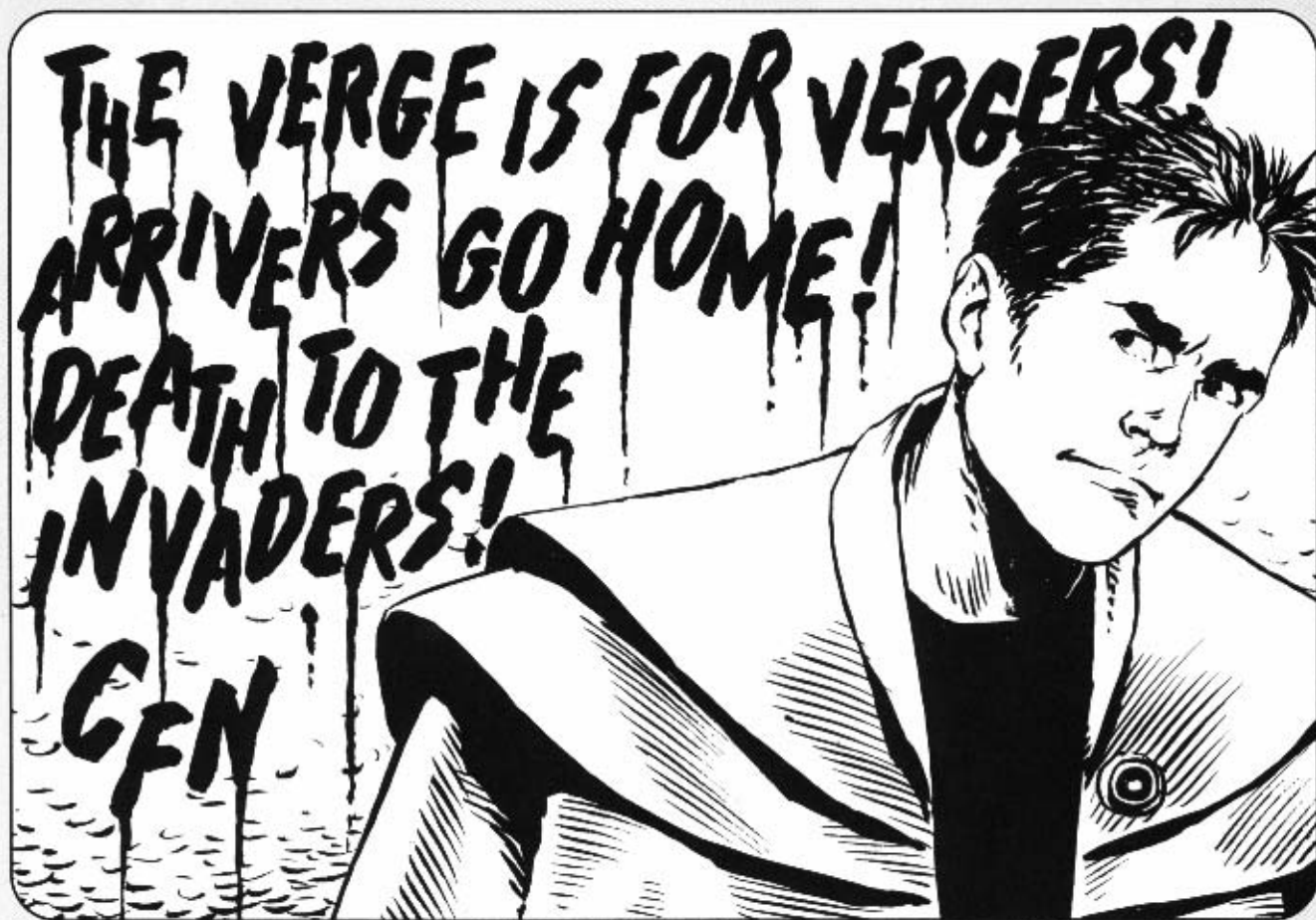
I caught up with the *Lighthouse* in the Aegis star system. It made a spectacular starrise on schedule (I was watching the event from the great portal lounges aboard the Nectaris Orbital Station), then settled into orbit around Bluefall for a week of intensive diplomatic and trade negotiations. I visited the mobile space station during this layover and discovered that not everything aboard this great symbol of the Galactic Concord is peaceful.

CFN HITS LIGHTHOUSE; No Place Is Safe

Concord Free Now has invaded the *Lighthouse*. From random acts of vandalism to more serious threats of destruction and sabotage, CFN has turned the Concord's premiere embassy into a place of terror. "Of course I'm afraid," said Umra Hurm, proprietor of one of the station's many shops and restaurants. "CFN is a dangerous group, and they have certainly seemed willing to attack innocents to promote their agenda. They've made their intentions known, and I'm not sure the Concord can really guarantee our protection."

In addition to claiming responsibility for the bombing that destroyed Jilly's Den and killed almost a dozen off-duty Concord Marines last September, CFN has been associated with random attacks on Old Space ambassadors and their staff personnel, untold technical difficulties that could be the result of sabotage and work slow-downs, and anonymous threats to a variety of station inhabitants who regularly do business with or offer aid to the Concord and other Arrivers.

Most CFN supporters do little more than defacing corridor walls to get their message across. Primarily the work of local teenagers, nevertheless it illustrates the increasing



Gridline—TransVerge Network/ The Lighthouse/September 19, 2501

by Theron Lignos,
senior correspondent on the *Lighthouse*.

The reports coming from the anonymous Avatar and carried over the Galactic News Agency's bandwidths appear to be just another example of how badly misinformed the people of Old Space really are about the Verge. Avatar demonstrates an appalling lack of knowledge concerning the situations unfolding throughout the region. He or she knows just enough to present credible arguments, but not enough to realize he (or she) is missing the underlying truth of each account.

If the GNA really wanted to present an accurate picture of the Verge to the people back in Old Space, the organization would have been better off obtaining the

services of a journalist who has learned the ins and outs of the region and had earned the respect and trust of the inhabitants of that region. Instead, the GNA has allowed Avatar to rant on about conspiracies and hidden threats. I can only conclude that GNA's interests here are to sensationalize otherwise routine events and titillate Gridreaders throughout the stellar nations.

In the report concerning Concord Free Now, for example, Avatar would have you believe that everyone aboard the *Lighthouse* was constantly in fear for their lives. Nothing is farther from the truth. This space station is one of the safest, friendliest, most luxurious places within the Verge. Yes, the radical group sometimes gets a bit carried away with its protests, but rarely do the CFNers resort to violence aimed at civilians. To imply otherwise is a criminal act of negligence on the part of Avatar and his (or her) editors.

popularity of the group among the younger generation of the Verge. I can only hope that these kids never actually have to see first-hand the work of their "idols."

Concord officials have tried to open a dialogue with the radical group, but to date these efforts have not been successful. "There's room for everyone in the Verge," said Concord Undersecretary Michael Thayne. "I welcome diverse opinions and would love to talk directly with the CFN's leadership. I'm sure we could come to a mutually beneficial understanding." So far, no one claiming to represent CFN leadership has come forward to take Thayne up on his offer.

On the contrary, I have learned that Concord Free Now is planning to disrupt the upcoming economic summit (see the article later in this data packet). Concord officials have received a threat that they are taking very seriously, even though they have not yet made the threat public. "I have no such knowledge of a threat to the economic summit," said *Lighthouse* Administrator Kyle Wakefield, denying the existence of a CFN threat. "We will, however, do everything possible to ensure the safety of any and all guests and diplomats aboard the *Lighthouse*."

Concord Free Now has declared that the station corridors will "run red with the blood of Arrivers," according to one source close to station security. What form this violence will take has only been vaguely hinted at. Station officials claim that explosives stolen from a Marine armory have been recovered and admit that security was insufficient at the armory. Station Administrator Wakefield has assured the inhabitants of the *Lighthouse* that he and his staff have taken steps to prevent a repeat of such a breach in security. The episode nevertheless demonstrates that CFN is willing to go to great lengths to further their dangerous agenda.

"They're crazy," commented a member of station security. "I've had to lock up a few of them—just local rabble-rousers, mind you—in my time on the *Lighthouse*, and

believe me when I tell you that these CFNers are one mass reactor short of a stardrive."

To add fuel to the fire, an unnerving attack aimed at striking fear into the hearts of *Lighthouse* visitors occurred while I was aboard the space station. Three evrem, an alien species new to the Verge, came aboard to procure trade goods to take back to their huge market ship that was also orbiting Bluefall at the time. While one of the evrem was negotiating with a merchant, his partners were involved in an ugly altercation. Shouts of "Invaders go home!" accompanied a hail of gunfire aimed at the evrem. People throughout the marketplace dropped to the floor and screams of panic and terror filled the area. When the noise died down, the evrem were shaken up but unharmed. The gunfire had hurled stain-pellets at the aliens, not lethal charge slugs. The evrem quickly left the station without completing their business transaction.

THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF WARTHEN HALE

Whatever happened to the great ambassador of peace, Warthen Hale? As one of the founding fathers of the Treaty of Concord, the agreement that ended the Second Galactic War and created the Galactic Concord, Hale is remembered as one of the saviors of humanity. A great statesman, Orion League President Hale was at the top of his form, respected and powerful, when he suddenly vanished from the political and galactic scene. In fact, the senior member of the Hale family hasn't been seen for almost 30 years.

So what happened to Hale? Speculation was hot and heavy in those days following his resignation from political office and his subsequent disappearance. Everything from murder to suicide was offered as a reason for his disappearance, but in the end no body was ever found. It was as though he simply stepped out of known space. This theory

supports the claims of the Warthenists, a religious cult that venerates Warthen Hale as humanity's messiah. According to the Warthenists, Hale was sent to humanity to lead us through the dangers of the Second Galactic War. He was sent to intervene before humanity could destroy itself or its civilization. Today, the small but vocal cult views the Concord as the last great work of Warthen, and venerates his offspring as near-unto-godlike beings. Members of the cult can be found in the Verge, specifically on Bluefall and aboard the *Lighthouse*.

A recent celebration aboard the space station indicated that the Warthenists believe that Warthen Hale will soon be returning to aid humanity once again. They claim that the senior Hale will appear aboard the *Lighthouse* at 12 midnight on December 29, 2502. They refer to this date as "the Return of the Peacemaker." On that day, the Warthenists believe, Hale will appear and lead the Concord to even more power and glory.

Other theories suggest that Hale departed for one of the frontiers in order to start over. The Orion Frontier, which still hasn't made contact with Old Space, often tops the list for possible places where Hale is hiding. It's not the only one, however. Some have speculated that Hale, distraught over not having been able to end the war before it had affected his children, headed for the Verge in those early days after the war to find his son Christopher. This theory holds that Hale's ship was lost somewhere between Orion space and the Verge. Depending on whose opinion you accept, Hale's

**Gridline—Trans Verge Network/
The Lighthouse/September 20, 2501**

by Theron Lignos,
senior correspondent on the *Lighthouse*.

Of all of the stories Avatar has thus far presented, none border on irresponsible as much as this one does. To drag out unsubstantiated scandals concerning one of the most revered leaders of the last century and present them as fact is an offense against journalistic integrity. Moreso, to suggest that Hale's own son, the renowned Christopher Hale, could possibly be connected to his father's disappearance is patently absurd. Christopher Hale is one of the most respected leaders of the Verge, and the inhabitants of Bluefall love him.

For Avatar to suggest that he has evidence that actually proves young Hale's guilt and not share that evidence with the public is criminal. If Avatar has some new fact to present, he should present it and not just hint that it may or may not exist. I don't know where Warthen Hale disappeared to, but I'm more inclined to believe he's coming back next year with a grand plan for saving known space than to even consider that he was murdered by his son. Shame on you, Avatar. Shame.

ship was lost to pirates, the victim of those who were still fighting the war, or crashed on an uncharted world where the former President still lives in primitive isolation.

Another group suggests that Hale, still alive and active in the political arena, controls the Galactic Concord from behind the scenes. This theory says that Hale went into seclusion after the Second Galactic War ended, but did not completely cut himself off from society. Instead, he occupies a hidden suite, perhaps aboard this very space station, and manipulates and orchestrates events in Old Space and the Verge. Only the upper echelon of the Concord knows who they take their orders from, and they follow those orders without question due to their allegiance and respect for the Great Peacemaker.

One last theory deserves mentioning due to the implications it suggests if it proves to be true. This theory indicates that Warthen Hale did set out for the Verge and he did arrive safely. However, his son Christopher wasn't happy to see his father. The two had had a falling out in past years, which is why the younger Hale wound up in the Verge. Under this scenario, Christopher Hale murdered his father and wiped out all evidence that Warthen had ever reached Bluefall.

Without any evidence, this last scenario remains purely speculation. However, evidence has come into my possession that hints at this very event happening 25 years ago or so. The data, provided by a source close to Christopher Hale, is being analyzed and, if I am still able, I will report on it again once all of the facts become clear.

KALHT INITIATIVE

Perhaps the biggest news to come out of the *Lighthouse*'s sojourn in Aegis was the announcement of the Kalht Initiative. Named for famed stellar explorer Mero Kalht, whose treks during the earliest days of stardrive development inspired a generation, this initiative is designed to foster exploration and help the Verge grow.

"We plan to award charters and grants to 100 scouting and scientific exploration ventures over the next five years," explained Dikon Wrage of the Concord Survey Service. "After the results of the first wave of the Kalht Initiative are analyzed, we plan to award colonization and industry charters to the most promising discoveries throughout the Verge and the surrounding star systems. This is the beginning of an exciting and challenging time for the Verge and a great investment opportunity for individuals and organizations back in Old Space."

Already, independent scouts, traders, and scientists have come forward to compete for the 100 charters and accompanying grants. "This is a wonderful opportunity for anyone with a driveship, a dream, and the courage to go off in a new direction," said Kistul Or Talic, a fraal who has lived in the Verge since the earliest settlements were established. He plans to win one of the 100 charters for his company, Legends Scouting and Rescue Services. "So much of the Verge remains unknown and underutilized. The Kalht Initia-

tive should help change that over course of the next five decades."

Not everyone believes that the Concord will be so free with the charters. "This is obviously a scam," complained Breve Zolms, a self-proclaimed leader in the Concord Free Now movement. "The Concord pretends that everyone will have an equal chance at the charters and grants. But that's not what's really going to happen. They're going to give a few of the charters to the biggest companies and established settlements for show, but the majority of them will be awarded to those who are loyal to the stellar nations. Before we know it, the rest of the Verge will be divided up and claimed by the various stellar nations and the Vergers will find themselves a subjugated people. We'll be slaves of Old Space all over again."

The Concord Survey Service started the Initiative by immediately granting five charters. "Since the Concord arrived in the Verge and was given political control of the area, many different interests have sought permission to restart the explorative and colonization efforts that were in effect before the Galactic Wars," said Wrage. "We've chosen the best of these to help kick off the Kalht Initiative."

The five charters went to the Fhei'irre Consortium of Grith, the Hoff Academy of Scientific Studies, Esterum's Salvage Company, Serun Orr (an independent explorer who is credited with three important discoveries during the Long Silence), and the Collective (a group of Ancientist scientists seeking permission to search for previously undiscovered Precursor sites beyond Hammer's Star).

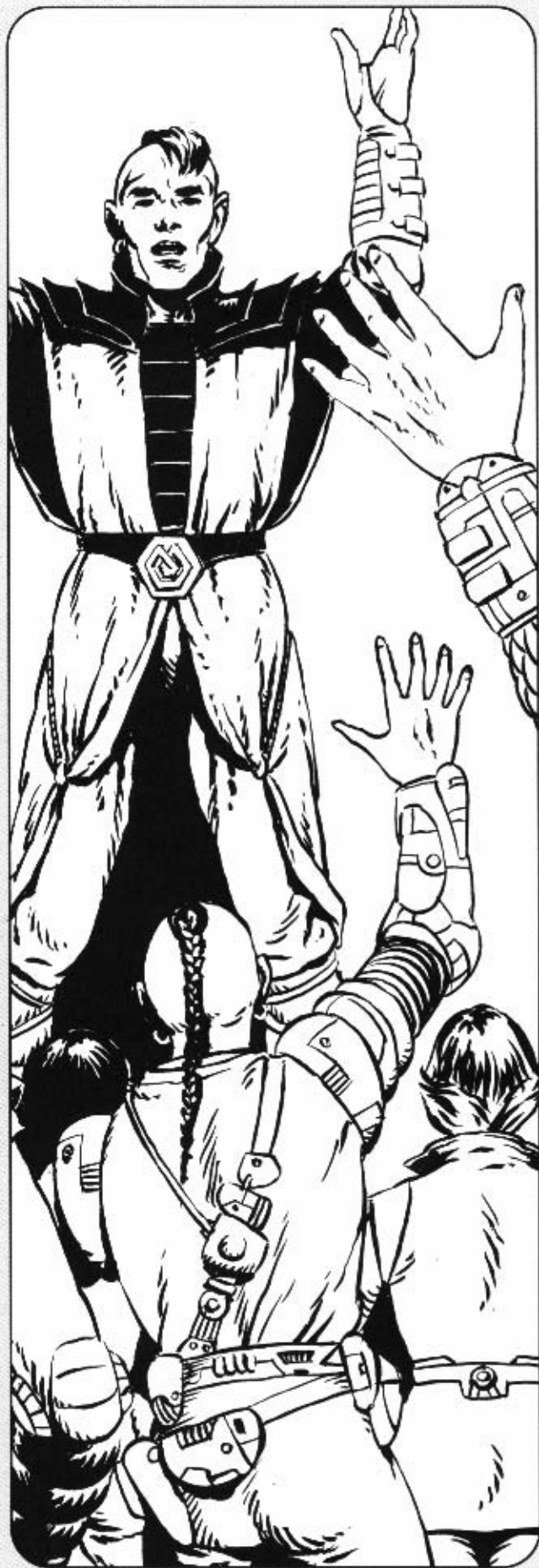
THAYNE SPEAKS OUT AGAINST ISOLATIONISM

In a rousing speech before the Verge Assembly that was broadcast throughout the *Lighthouse*, Undersecretary Michael Thayne rejected the notion that the Verge was better off during the Long Silence. His commanding tone and charisma won over the crowd. If the Verge was to become a full-fledged stellar nation tomorrow, it's easy to believe that Thayne would unanimously be appointed its president.

"There is no benefit to standing alone in the galaxy," Thayne admonished the crowd. "Alone, we have only ourselves to depend on. As part of the great expanse of human space, we are one among many. Brotherhood, companionship, assistance; these are the benefits of once again re-establishing our ties to Old Space."

Thayne went on to propose that standing with the stellar nations did not mean bending to the will of Old Space. "We must step back onto the stage of galactic politics as full equals with the stellar nations. We must reach out to Old Space as partners, not worry that we will become slaves."

Thayne spoke up in response to a proposal by Arani Huhn, Corrivale's representative to the Verge Assembly. Huhn set forth that "the people of the Verge got along fine during the Long Silence. Perhaps it is time to let the Silence



ADVENTURE HOOK: IT'S A BIG STATION

The *Lighthouse* is a big place, full of a variety of different humans and aliens from all over the galaxy. Sometimes, a few of these different-minded individuals get together and trouble occurs. Take, for example, the situation presented below. While your heroes are exploring the wonders of the *Lighthouse*, they stumble upon a transaction that's suddenly taken a turn for the worse. It's just one of a hundred similar events occurring all the time aboard the station. Sometimes people turn away and ignore such events. Other times, someone, like our heroes, just has to get involved ...

BACKGROUND

A t'sa explorer arrived on the *Lighthouse* about the same time as the heroes. He has brought with him a number of supposedly ancient relics from a previously undiscovered world. Among these items, one piece stands out above the others. It may not be an alien artifact, but it sure looks like one. For the t'sa's purposes, that's all that matters. He plans to unload it for a significant amount of Concord dollars, then depart as quickly as he can.

Unfortunately, the t'sa has decided to do business with a less-than-reputable scoundrel from a less-than-reputable section of the station. This scoundrel and his thugs have decided that the alien artifact isn't worth paying for. Oh, they mean to take possession of it, all right, but they don't plan on paying the t'sa anything.

That's where the heroes come in ...

SUPPORTING CAST

This plot demands a few specific characters, and these characters need enough traits to make them memorable. When the adventure ends, you may want to have them survive to cross paths with the heroes again at some future time. Anyway, the story starts with the t'sa explorer. He's an adventurous sort who loves to find new things, uncover old things, and look for ways to make money while doing so. His heart's in the right place, even if he sometimes lets his greed get the better of him. He really has found a previously uncharted alien site, which could lead to other adventures if you're so inclined. But has he found a genuine alien artifact? That's up to you.

You also need to create the other half of this unfortunate situation. A tough and self-important minor crime boss works well for this role, or a dishonest merchant, or a smuggler, or any other type who wouldn't think twice about cheating and doublecross-

ing a customer. Such an individual requires a number of thugs to back him up and offer a challenge to the heroes. Depending on the relative strength of the heroes, you'll want anywhere from as many thugs as it takes to equal the number of heroes to as many as double the number of heroes. Remember, these thugs prefer to throw down with fists or melee weapons, as opposed to firearms. The law on the station goes easier on them when they're arrested if no guns were used in the altercation.

Finally, the Gamemaster has to decide whether or not the alien artifact is a genuine alien artifact—at least as far as the ALTERNITY game rules are concerned. Does it have any special powers and abilities? If you haven't introduced an artifact into your campaign yet, this could be the perfect time to do so. See the *ALTERNITY Gamemaster Guide* for details on creating alien artifacts.

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this read-aloud to start the action, or adapt it to the adventure you've constructed:

The hustle and bustle of the Lighthouse is a stark contrast to most of the places you've visited in the Verge. It's a busy, crowded, cosmopolitan city in space, full of people from all walks of galactic life. Some wander around gaping at the sights. Others stroll purposefully, getting on with whatever business brought them here. There are those who look like locals, who seem completely comfortable and unaffected by the energy swirling all around them, just like people who live in big cities.

You can't help but look around, trying to make sense of all of the activity. That couple over there is exchanging holocards. The kid in the corner thinks no one is watching and is writing something on the wall. The woman in the business suit is obviously waiting for someone, and by the way she keeps checking her watch, that someone must be late. And the t'sa with the metal case is arguing with a merchant.

Wait a minute! The merchant has grabbed the case away from the t'sa. The t'sa protests, moving to reclaim his possession. But the merchant's associates step into the t'sa's path. One of the associates pulls a stun baton out of the pocket of his long coat. He just smashed the t'sa in the back of the head! The t'sa falls to the ground as the merchant and his companions laugh. Something isn't quite right here.

What do you do?

ADVENTURE HOOK: A MESSAGE FOR MICHAEL

While aboard the *Lighthouse*, the heroes receive a special mission from Undersecretary Michael Thayne himself. All they have to do is deliver a message to Chand Vorin, a representative from Algemron currently sitting on the Verge Assembly. No problem! Just like taking candy from a weren baby ...

BACKGROUND

A visit to the *Lighthouse* is never dull. While taking in the sights aboard the largest mobile space station in the Verge, the heroes receive an invitation to meet with the famous Michael Thayne himself. In his office, the charismatic Thayne offers the heroes a job. If the heroes already have ties to the Concord, such an offer should be considered unusual but not out of the realm of possibility. If not, then the heroes' reputation has brought them before Thayne.

Either way, the job appears to be simple. "Carry this 3D to Chad Vorin and await a reply," Thayne tells them. He informs them that the information contained on the crystal is too sensitive to trust to even secure-line communications or the encrypted Grid-stream. "This needs to be delivered by someone capable of handling any unexpected problems and who isn't directly tied to my office," Thayne explains.

From here on, it's up to the heroes to protect the 3D and place it directly in the hands of Representative Vorin. What's on the crystal? That's up to you. It could contain information vital to the Verge, details on Thayne's unification plans, intelligence concerning the escalating hostilities in the Algemron system, or any other plot device important to your campaign. Whatever rests

within the matrix of the crystal, many people don't want it to reach its intended recipient. And they'll stop at nothing—bribery, threats, theft, violence, even murder—to make sure Chand Vorin never receives it.

SUPPORTING CAST

The supporting cast for this adventure can be as small or as large as you want it to be. It all depends on how difficult and convoluted you want the plot to be. Start with assassins loyal to Vorin's opposition in Algemron. Add thieves from VoidCorp, Insight, Rignunmor, or Austrin-Ontis. Don't forget thugs from Concord Free Now or any number of crime syndicates working in the Verge. There should also be representatives from those individuals and groups who oppose Thayne, as well as Concord Intelligence agents who want to find out what the crystal contains.

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this read-aloud to start the action, or adapt it to the adventure you've constructed:

With the 3D crystal safely hidden, you start off for the offices of Chand Vorin, somewhere deep within the city-section of the Lighthouse. Thayne warned you to stay alert and be on your guard, but so far nothing out of the ordinary has occurred.

Suddenly, a handful of rough-looking thugs step out of a side corridor to block your way. "We know that Michael Thayne has given you a package," one of the toughs growls, leveling a charge pistol in your direction. "We hope you refuse to hand it over so that we can hurt you. Please." The others also draw their weapons.

What do you do?

descend again, for the noise of Old Space has gotten exceedingly loud." The representative went on to suggest that the problems of the stellar nations were not the problems of the Verge. "Why must we be dragged back into the conflicts and arguments of Old Space?" Huhn asked rhetorically of the assemblage. "We have our own problems to deal with, our own resources to utilize as we see fit. There is no room in the Verge for Old Space, no place on our worlds for the stellar nations."

"How short-sighted and small-minded," countered Thayne. "We must stop focusing on the possible pitfalls and concentrate instead on making the best of the opportunities that present themselves. How much greater can the Verge be as part of the larger whole, than as a single island lost amid a sea of stars. It is time to stop looking for the dark clouds and start taking advantage of the silver lining."

While most of the assemblage cheered Thayne's words, not everyone was happy. Christopher Hale, attending the meeting while conducting other business aboard the station,

stood up and challenged Thayne's claims. "I don't necessarily disagree with your words, Undersecretary," Hale said, "I just take exception to your tone. You speak as though you are one of us, a Verger, when in fact you are as much an Arriver as any other opportunistic stellar national from Old Space." Hale failed to mention that he isn't a native Verger either, but he has been a prominent resident for over 35 years.

"Learn the rules of the Verge before you decide to make new ones," Hale said. "And before you form a new stellar nation, at least have the decency to consult with your subjects before forging ahead."

Michael Thayne ignored Hale's final jab in favor of leaving the crowd with a memorable sound byte of his own. "The Long Silence was not golden, no matter what the old adage says," Thayne declared. "We must not submit to fear and distrust, but instead proudly take the systems of the Verge to the next level. We must join the stellar nations and demand to be recognized as full and equal partners in the

galactic community. Isolation leaves us detached; the time has come to reconnect with the rest of humanity."

ECONOMIC SUMMIT OF 2501

Scheduled to begin in just over a month, the upcoming *Lighthouse* economic summit promises to be exciting and a little dangerous. The summit, sponsored by the Galactic Concord, gets underway on October 9 when the *Lighthouse* once again visits the Aegis star system. Many representatives boarded the space station in their own star systems and have been traveling with it as it makes its way back to Aegis. At the same time, station security has been reinforced to make sure that those attending the summit receive maximum protection.

"There are always threats associated with this kind of event," said one member of station security. "We take every threat seriously and make sure we've implemented every possible precaution." The terrorist group known as Concord Free Now has already threatened to disrupt the summit, and other hostile organizations are being watched carefully.

The purpose of the summit is to establish overall economic strategies and goals for all of the Verge. "We must think and act as one if we are to compete successfully in the galactic marketplace," said Undersecretary Michael Thayne. "There are trade agreements to finalize, currency issues to debate, exchange rates to establish, and other business that can only be handled within the framework of a summit."

Representatives from nearly every political and economic power in the Verge, as well as select participants from Old Space and the Concord, will meet and hammer out agreements over the course of the two-week-long summit. At least that's the plan. If opponents such as Concord Free Now have their way, the summit will be disrupted before any significant progress can be made. "A united Verge is a Verge that's one step closer to falling sway to the stellar nations," said Breve Zolms, spokesperson for CFN. "We will not see the Verge united. We shall do everything within our power to keep that from happening."

Summit organizers hope that the event can also be used to address some of the more volatile problems plaguing the Verge. "Perhaps we can find a few moments to get the representatives from Algemron to discuss their differences," said the Concord's Economic Attache, Jingion Wellington. "It would also be a tremendous breakthrough if we could help Grith and VoidCorp reach an understanding. These continuing conflicts add to the economic turmoil of the region, and we want to find ways to calm the waters, as it were." She also explained that their wasn't a lot of time and the summit had a lot of topics on the agenda. "If we are successful, this will just be the first of many meetings to forge the future of the Verge. I have every hope that the summit will be well received by all participants."

IF *Lighthouse* security can keep the proceedings peaceful, and IF centuries-old disagreements don't derail the discussions before they even begin.

SECRET VIRUS THREATENS VERGE

Sources in the Concord have indicated that the *Lighthouse* has established a secure medical facility to combat a genetically engineered virus that threatens all life in the Verge. The virus, designated Apocalypse, is believed to be the remnant of a biological weapon produced during the Second Galactic War. "Time is short," said Dr. Dron Yuelit of the University of Bluefall. "The biological agent, dormant all these years, has recently been activated. Now we must find a cure or watch everyone in the Verge die—Arriver and Verger alike."

The fraal scientist went on to recommend an immediate and wide-ranging quarantine of the entire region. "If one contaminated individual takes this virus back to Old Space, all human life as we know it will eventually be wiped out. It's only a matter of time."

The origins of the virus have still not been determined, but likely candidates include the Thuldans, Hattre, or Orion League nations. Representatives of each of these governments denied the existence of an Apocalypse virus. Kul Valance of the Orion League's Center for Biological Control stressed, "While we explored the possibilities of such an agent during the darkest days of the war, we never acted upon this research. The Orion League never developed, stored, or utilized a biological agent such as the so-called Apocalypse virus." The other nations were equally positive it didn't come from them.

Apocalypse supposedly targets the human nervous system. While the virus' incubation period is relatively long and victims can suffer symptoms for as long as six to nine months, the final stages of the disease pass extremely quickly. "When the incubation period end, the virus rages through its victim's nervous system, shorting out the brain within a matter of six to twelve hours," explained Dr. Yuelit. "Death is exceedingly painful but mercifully quick."

The first cases of Apocalypse were documented in the Terivine system. Symptoms of the engineered disease include uncontrolled body movements, progressively higher temperatures, and a sensitivity to psionic energy. "Ironically, while the neural pathways are dissolving, the mind is also becoming more aware of the psionic energy all around it," said Dr. Yuelit. "Some victims even gain psionic abilities right before their neural networks collapse."

For the time being, the Concord has decided to remain silent about this new threat. "Don't be ridiculous," said Administrator Wakefield in a recent interview aboard the *Lighthouse*. Instead of warning the public, the Concord works in secret to find a vaccine and a cure for this deadly biological weapon.

Anyone experiencing any of the symptoms described above are urged to see their local health providers immediately.

PRICE INDEX

Compiled by the Hadman-Smith Trading Corporation, September 2501

Commodity	Ae	Al	Ar	Cor	Cou	En	HS	Ig	Ka	Lu	Ma	Ob	Pi	Ri	Ten	Tor	Ty	Vi
Animals, Common ¹	4.3k	5.1k	3.5k	3.8k	3.2k	3.4k	2.7k	3.4k	3.7k	3.2k	3.1k	2.9k	2.7k	2.6k	3.4k	3.6k	4.4k	3.6k
Animals, Exotic ¹	28k	28.5k	25k	24.5k	27k	30k	28k	27.5k	26k	28k	29.5k	29.5k	30.5k	29k	27k	28k	26.5k	28k
Animals, Livestock ¹	6k	5.7k	7.5k	6.2k	7.2k	9.5k	7k	7.5k	6.7k	8k	10.1k	8.3k	9.2k	7.5k	8.1k	8.2k	9.2k	8.6k
Art	32k	35.5k	35k	39k	35.7k	39k	41k	41.5k	35.5k	39.5k	41k	40k	42k	34k	34.5k	35k	44k	42k
Beef/animal prods	73k	8.8k	9k	7.5k	8.8k	8.9k	9.1k	8.4k	8.3k	8.6k	7.7k	8.9k	9.2k	7.5k	9.1k	8.7k	8.5k	7.8k
Building Supplies	11k	11k	12.5k	11k	11.7k	11.3k	11k	12.4k	12k	11.5k	12k	8k	12k	10.5k	9.5k	11k	10k	10.5k
Chemicals	21.5k	20k	22k	19k	23k	19.7k	24k	19.5k	22k	22k	24k	18k	22.5k	22.2k	17k	22.1k	19.5k	19.8k
Computers	240k	234k	236k	238k	241k	250k	234k	240k	227k	247k	239k	248k	236k	240k	226k	239k	244k	235k
Contraband ²	121k	138k	134k	115k	120.7k	130k	147k	121.3k	122k	117k	123.6k	137k	129.4k	133.7k	126.2k	120k	145k	142.7k
Electronics	203k	193k	174.2k	191.7k	193.4k	192.9k	193.6k	194.1k	193k	192.1k	191.9k	189.6k	191.4k	190.3k	163.6k	191.6k	192k	193.2k
Entertainment	22.1k	23.6k	22.8k	24.1k	23.6k	23.7k	24.9k	24.7k	23.5k	24.2k	23.9k	23.9k	25.1k	23.4k	25.3k	23.4k	25.1k	24.6k
Fruits/vegetables	3.5k	3.8k	3.9k	3.6k	4.3k	4.4k	3.8k	4.0k	3.9k	4.6k	4.1k	4.4k	4.1k	4.0k	4.3k	3.9k	3.9k	3.8k
Gas (H, He) ¹	650	530	600	400	650	780	370	620	730	855	945	720	850	610	685	610	910	620
Grain (wheat, rice)	195	200	305	290	295	300	315	310	290	300	215	290	275	205	275	285	290	215
Machinery, Heavy	77k	75k	77.6k	77.4k	79.8k	84k	77.7k	76.8k	82.7k	82.4k	86k	78.1k	77k	76.4k	73k	80.3k	86.5k	80.1
Machinery, Light	23.4k	20.5k	23.4k	24.8k	23.9k	22.8k	23.6k	25k	23.6k	24.4k	23.7k	21k	25.5k	22.2k	26.1k	23.6k	22.8k	22.9k
Medical Supplies	117k	115k	135.3k	136.8k	137.1k	135.8k	136k	136.4k	137.1k	138.7k	138.5k	136.6k	137.3	135.8k	136.9k	137.3k	140k	138.6k
Munitions	401.6k	350k	404k	411.3k	407.6k	403.1k	406.6k	404.4k	405.1k	407.8k	411.8k	406.7k	353k	402.6	410.4k	407.6k	414.5k	419.7k
Ore, Common	1400	1375	1610	1505	1450	1490	1470	1450	1410	1200	1475	1250	1455	1465	1525	1400	1500	1440
Ore, Rare	92k	90.6k	92.2k	90.6k	93.6k	91.1k	80k	91.1k	92.8k	93.1k	94.2k	82k	91.3k	90.6k	80.7k	72.8k	93.3k	91.1k
Plastics	18k	21.1k	21.4k	21.6k	21.7k	22.4k	23.1k	22k	21.2k	21.8k	22.6k	20.2k	21.7k	20.6k	22.9k	21k	22.8k	21k
Radioactives ¹	79.6k	81.9k	81.8k	79.9k	80.6k	80k	83.1k	78.8k	80.7k	80.1k	83.6k	70.7k	81.1k	81.7k	71.4k	81.6k	80.7k	80.1k
Refined Metal, Common	13.7k	11k	13.5k	13.5k	12.9k	13k	13.7k	13.2k	13k	13.1k	13.3k	13.4k	13.5k	13.6k	13.5k	12.8k	13.2k	13.6k
Refined Metal, Rare	51.5k	57.4k	56.9k	59.1k	57k	59.1k	61.1k	56.8k	56.7k	57.4k	58.4k	58.6k	59.4k	57.1k	61.7k	57.2k	61.2k	59.1k
Spices	13.1k	12.0k	14.9k	11.2k	12.4k	10.2k	10.8k	10.9k	14.8k	16.4k	15.5k	14.3k	13.5k	9.4k	11.7k	13.8k	12.7k	16.4k
Textiles	2.4k	2.2k	2.4k	2.5k	2.5k	2.4k	2.3k	2.1k	2.3k	2.1k	2.6k	2.5k	2.4k	2.2k	2.4k	2.1k	2.5k	2.2k
Vehicle, Air ¹	78.4k	77k	87.8k	87.4k	88.1k	86.8k	85.7k	86.1k	87k	88.6k	89.4k	82.4k	90.4k	81.8k	90.1k	81.9k	90.6k	83.4k
Vehicle, Ground ¹	25.2k	25k	27.4k	28.2k	27.8k	30.1k	28.8k	28.2k	28.6k	28.8k	29k	28.2k	28.8k	27.1k	29.9k	27.4k	29.4k	27.6k
Vehicles, Military ^{1,2}	1.3M	1.2M	1.2M	1.3M	1.3M	1.3M	1.3M	1.4M	1.3M	1.4M	1.5M	1.3M	1.4M	1.3M	1.4M	1.32M	1.35M	1.28M
Water	4.6k	4.1k	4.9k	5.1k	4.8k	5.1k	4.3k	4.7k	5.0k	4.8k	4.4k	5.4k	5.1k	5.0k	5.6k	5.1k	4.9k	4.6k
Weapons ²	2.7M	3.1M	2.9M	2.7M	2.7M	3.1M	3.0M	2.9M	2.8M	2.7M	2.8M	2.9M	3.2M	2.6M	2.8M	2.7M	2.8M	2.8M

¹ requires a special bay or hangar.

² regulated or illegal item that may be difficult to procure or sell.

The listed costs apply to a standard ship's cargo unit, typically about 10 cubic meters of cargo space.

**Gridline—Trans Verge Network/
The Lighthouse/September 23, 2501**

by Theron Lignos,
senior correspondent on the *Lighthouse*.

Rumors of a catastrophic biological weapon set loose upon the people of the Verge have no basis in reality, according to Undersecretary Michael Thayne. "There is no secret Concord medical facility aboard the *Lighthouse*, and no one has died due to an unknown virus," Thayne said in a statement released shortly after Avatar's report hit the Grid. "Furthermore, Avatar's source, while a distinguished scientist in her own right, is commenting upon topics far outside her own area of expertise." Thayne was describing Dr. Dron Yuel of the University of Bluefall. Dr. Yuel's degree is in archeology and historical studies, not the hard sciences, and especially not medicine or biology.

"There is no need to panic, no cause for concern," explained Thayne. "The only evidence of a weapon relating to the Second Galactic War revolved around the recent appearance of a warhulk, and that menace is being dealt with. The Concord will continue to monitor the situation, but at this point there is no validity to Avatar's claims."

Anyone who does experience the symptoms suggested by Avatar are urged to report them to a qualified medical technician. "We don't believe there is any truth to the rumors, but we always want to err on the side of caution," said Thayne.

THE SOURCE ABOARD THE LIGHTHOUSE

After my last meeting with one of "Vegor Tagg's" go-betweens, I was sure I was entering the land of make-believe, with all the bizarre references he—if it even was a he—was making. I have several forged identities, carefully collected from a variety of sources, that allow me to move freely around the Verge, picking up passage on whatever ship is going my way. These identities are pretty well done—especially considering what I paid for them. Despite my confidence in them, I was not excited about testing them against the *Lighthouse's* MINA, the AI that resides aboard "our protector's wandering home." So it was with some trepidation that I shuffled through the security and customs checkpoints of the "Arrivals" area and downright dismay when I was pulled at random from the line for a more thorough inspection. It went better than I hoped, and I was putting my gear back together alone in the inspection area when a woman's soft voice came through the speakers. I was greatly alarmed when she quietly spoke my real name and told me that I would be expected up in the Temple. When I asked who she was and how she knew my name, she simply said, "A friend, one who shares your lonely road." Then she was gone.

I made my way to the top of the *Lighthouse*.

Have you ever stood within the Hall of Worship in the Temple of the Divine Unconscious? This spot high atop the station feels exactly like what it is supposed to be—the closest spot to God in this reality. In the massive chamber, beneath the transparent dome that separates a small pocket of warmth and air from the cold void of space, the atmosphere is decidedly holy. Maybe it's the solemn acolytes who minister within the temple. Or perhaps the zealous religious fervor of the visiting weren is contagious. Whatever the source, the place feels divine. It might be an illusion, but it made this skeptic believe—if only for a little while.

A weren stood in the very center of the hall, his massive head tilted back so that he could stare straight up at the stars. I watched him for a short time, fascinated by his discipline and devotion. I didn't even notice the young woman walk up to stand beside me.

"He has had a revelation," the woman said. I glanced at her, noticing the short, hooded robe that marked her as a practicing Orlamist. A strange tattoo adorned her left cheek, its swirling pattern almost hypnotic in the flickering light of the torches that filled the hall. "He saw something in drive-space and now awaits the next starfall so that he can clarify the message the Divine Unconscious has graced him with."

I nodded, unsure of exactly what the young woman was talking about. Then something else occurred to me. "Starfall isn't for a few more days yet," I said quietly, "won't he starve or die of thirst?"

She smiled, and I was immediately captivated by her. "It is said that the Divine Unconscious provides for the faithful, giving them everything their spiritual nature needs. Everything else is provided by the acolytes. When hunger or thirst become more insistent than his spiritual quest, he will ask for sustenance. And the acolytes will provide it."

I nodded again. "And what else do the acolytes provide?" I asked, my words barely a whisper in this holy place.

"Questions," the acolyte said, slipping a 3D crystal out of the folds of her robes. "And, perhaps, answers ... if one is worthy." She placed the crystal in my hand. "May the Divine Unconscious speak to your dreams and guide you on the True Path through the galaxy."

At that moment, the weren roared. "My spirit still quests, but my body hungers!" he bellowed, shattering the silence without hesitation or regret. "Bring me food and drink so that I may be ready when the mind of God opens again!"

Robed figures emerged from the shadows, carrying platters of meats and cakes or pitchers of water and wine. They appeared so quickly, they must have been ready and waiting for this request for hours or even days. I turned to ask the young woman about, but she was gone. If not for the crystal that I held firmly in my hand, I would have believed I had imagined her. She had disappeared, and now it was time for me to do likewise.

My next report concerns the Concord itself. Hopefully, I'll be able to file it ...

CHAPTER 7: THE CONCORD

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/October 21, 2501**
by Avatar

The Galactic Concord is supposed to be our hope for the future. Created after the Second Galactic War, the Concord incorporates members from all twelve stellar nations. It exists to keep the nations in line by mediating and neutralizing disputes before they gestate into wars. We entrust this organization to maintain the peace, watch over the neutral borders, and protect the Verge and the Stellar Ring against threats from within and beyond. The Concord serves as a symbol of what humans can accomplish when they're not destroying themselves.

Conceived out of desperation and humanity's instinct for self-preservation, the Concord has come to represent law in a galaxy of lawlessness, especially out here in the Verge where Arrivers are often loathed. But if the nations that gave birth to the Concord are inherently corrupt and self-serving, how can the Concord expect to exceed the sum of its parts?

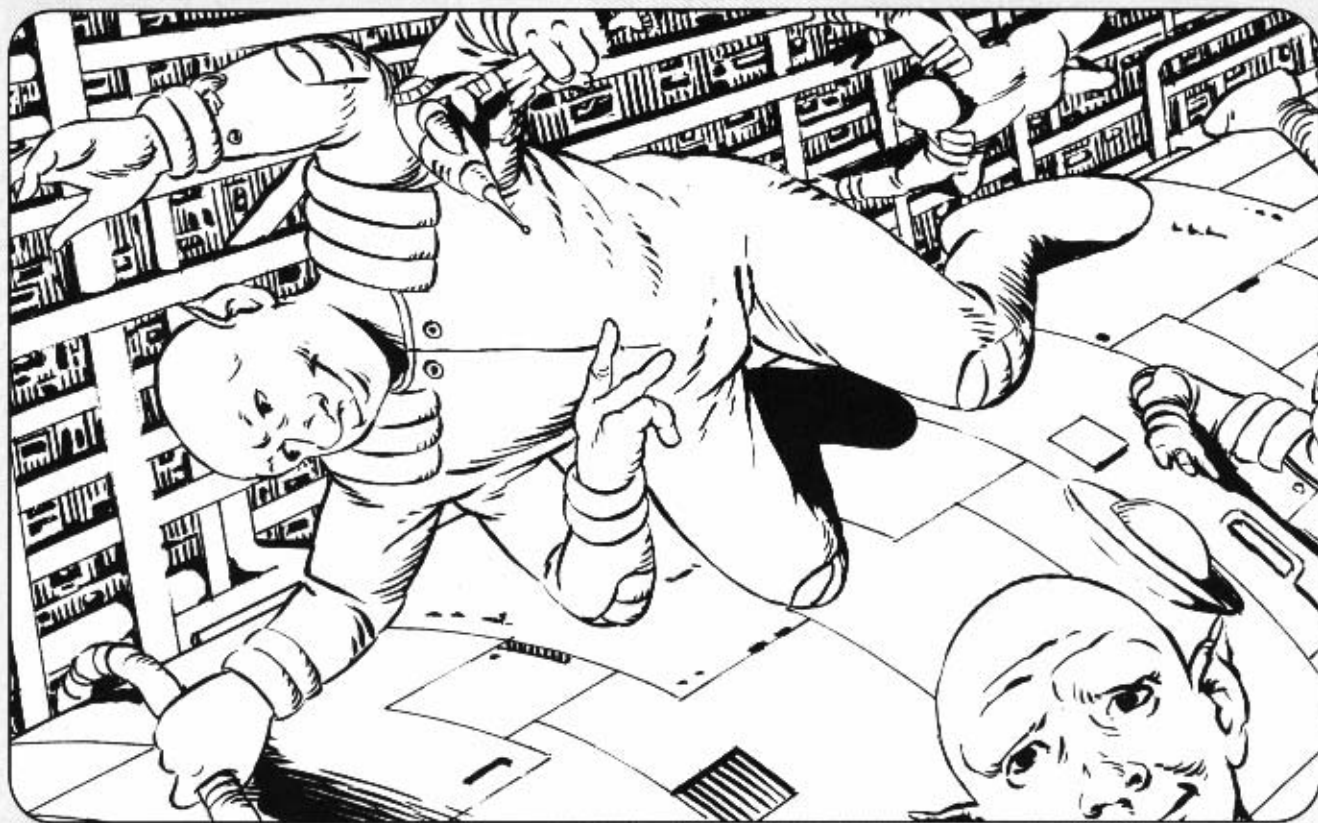
The organization that was created by the Treaty of Concord is only now beginning to emerge as a powerful, autonomous nation with a much darker agenda than was conceived by its progenitors. Perhaps the Concord knows, through its contact with species dispassionately referred to as the Externals, that the future cannot be protected—that we

are all, in fact, doomed. If this is true—if we are destined to fall before some insidious and indomitable alien threat—one must speculate that the vaunted Galactic Concord, that epitome of human endeavor, has chosen that regardless of the cost, it must survive. That which came out of humanity's desperation now seeks to ensure its own survival in the face of a threat too great to ignore, let alone overcome.

Were the Concord's true agenda made known, its role as defender of the Verge and enforcer of peace within the Stellar Ring would fade like so many ancient, endangered stars. Could we ever trust the Concord with our universal welfare? Relations between the stellar nations would dissolve into chaos, and the instinct to survive would leave us again torn by war. In this condition, neither the Verge nor the Stellar Ring could stand united against any threat from outside our own space. We'd be playing into the clutches of whatever species were waiting in the darkness.

THE SUNSPOTS OF KARPPOLLA

Sinister forces have tried to silence and discredit me, their gridshadows dogging my every move, shutting down my gridlines wherever they can in a futile effort to contain the truth. I've consigned myself to the belief that time is rapidly running out, and I feel a terrible fear wash over me every time I turn a corner or close my eyes.



A terrible sense of urgency befell me as I returned to the *Lighthouse* to meet with another of Vegor Tagg's messengers. A delayed lift rendered me a few minutes late for my rendezvous with yet another contact. When I got there, I saw three men in Concord Administrator uniforms who were unknown to me. In a galaxy filled with trillions of people, it's folly not to trust *anyone*, but I couldn't shake the feeling that those three men looked like cold-blooded assassins in Concord uniforms. I decided it was in my best interest to get the hell out of there. I was about to board the first transport off the *Lighthouse* when a man approached me with confirmation of his connection to Vegor Tagg. After I calmed my frazzled nerves, he introduced himself as Sagittarius, and he turned my attention to an often overlooked white dwarf star system 20 light years from Oberon.

Although I cannot divulge the identity of my new source, in fairness and deference to my readers I should mention that Sagittarius confirmed that he holds a Star Force rank and has access to classified information. When I asked him about the three men waiting for me at our appointed meeting place, he said "There are elements within the Concord who believe Tagg overstepped his authority—that he never should have exposed the media to the ongoing research being conducted at Omega Station in the Corrivale system."

Sagittarius assured me that he was merely imparting information Tagg wanted me to know, at which time he

handed me a dataslate detailing the most recent developments in the Karppolla system.

Sagittarius informed me that the Concord had taken a "keen interest in the Karppolla system." Glancing at the system specs, one might doubt that claim. Karppolla is a Class A star—hotter than hell—with six orbiting worlds, none of them suitable for permanent habitation or terraforming. However, if the dataslate information can be trusted, there is a fortified Concord surveillance outpost orbiting one of the planets as well as a shielded Concord marine base on the planet's surface, three kilometers underground. According to Sagittarius, "Karppolla was first surveyed by the *Monitor* in 2497, during one of several starfalls as the vessel traveled from Oberon to Tychus. Our first concern was that any system within striking distance of Oberon needed some form of military presence—an early-warning system. Our second concern was the amount of radiation in the system and how that might disrupt sensor readings and communications."

In the two years it took for the Concord to authorize and mount the construction of a surveillance outpost in Karppolla, various stellar nations availed themselves of the opportunity to scour the system for precious resources and habitable worlds. According to Sagittarius, "These corporate opportunists found nothing to their liking and moved on. But when the Concord vessel *Amsterdam* arrived to begin construction of a surveillance platform orbiting Karppolla's third planet, a sensor scan of the Karppolla star yielded some-



thing surprising—something that none of the previous survey missions had detected, perhaps due to disruptive radiation throughout the system.”

The dataslate reveals photographic images of the Karppolla star. Surrounding Karppolla is a necklace of large objects which, from a distance of several million kilometers, look like infinitesimal black spots on the star’s vast surface. However, analysis by Concord scientists has revealed that these dark, vaguely elliptical objects, each measuring several hundred kilometers in diameter, are composed of unidentifiable metals and are fixed to a position a mere 60,000 kilometers from the star’s active corona. At that distance, not only would the heat burn metal and stone like butter, but the gravity would crush anything smaller than a planet into powder.

“No shielding technology known to human science can protect a ship for longer than a split-second that close to a Class A star,” according to Sagittarius. “The *Amsterdam* sent two heavily shielded sensor probes toward the objects. The probes became locked in the intense gravitational pull of the star and incinerated 500,000 km from the corona. No accurate sensor readings of the objects were obtained. Radiation emanating from the star has limited analysis of the objects to crude telescopic visuals of their impenetrable hulls.

“On March 3, the Concord asked an Orlamu science team to assist the *Amsterdam* in assessing the possible threat posed by these objects. The scientists had spent nine months studying monoliths near the Orlamu colony on Yellow Sky in the Tychus system. One of the scientists—a xenoarchaeologist named Dr. Emilu Laarus—speculated that the objects circling Karppolla might have been left by the same Precursor culture, a race the Orlamus have dubbed the Stoneburners. Dr. Laarus identified patterns and indentations on the surface of the objects orbiting Karppolla as reminiscent of shapes carved into the ruins found on Yellow Sky. Unfortunately, not all of the Orlamu scientists concurred with her hypothesis. The images of the objects circling Karppolla are unclear. The patterns might have been formed by heat or intense gravitational forces. Concord representatives overseeing the scientists’ investigation believe Dr. Laarus has allowed her research of the monoliths on Yellow Star to overshadow her scientific objectivity.

“The Concord surveillance station, having gleaned all it could from the objects surrounding the star, has since turned its sensors outward. Ships approaching the Karppolla system are detected and warned away under threat of Concord retaliation. The *Amsterdam* has been ordered to patrol the Karppolla system and chase away intruding vessels until reinforcements arrive.

“On June 9, a VoidCorp scout ship leaving the Oberon system was fired upon by the *Amsterdam* after it made starfall too close to the Karppolla system and refused to withdraw. The VoidCorp ship sustained light damage but suffered no crew casualties. To my knowledge, this incident has never been reported, although I have proof that the encounter was documented.

“Before leaving the Oberon system, I received a 3D crystal from a dubious source whom I believed was a VoidCorp employee sent to disseminate lies concerning the stellar nation’s failed attempt to seize control of rhodium trade on Lison. The information on the 3D crystal indicated that a VoidCorp vessel equipped with state-of-the-art sensor apparatus was sent to determine what, if anything, the Concord was hiding in the Karppolla system. According to the information stored on the 3D, ‘Six hours after the VCM *Endgame* entered the Karppolla system, the vessel was attacked by a Concord frigate identifying itself as the *Amsterdam*. The frigate did not attempt to fire a warning shot but instead targeted the *Endgame*’s sensor pod, crippling the ship’s sensors with its particle beams. Unable to complete his mission, the *Endgame* commander, Employee NV329 86NWA, ordered a full withdrawal from the system. No crew injuries were sustained. It can be concluded from this encounter that the Galactic Concord has initiated a covert quarantine of the Karppolla system for reasons that remain to be ascertained.’

“A secret meeting of the Concord’s Administrator Generals was convened on June 20 to decide how best to contain the situation at Karppolla. There is some speculation that the Concord might use the situation in Karppolla to test an experimental shield technology capable of withstanding the incinerating levels of heat and the intense gravitational pull of the Karppolla star. My sources have often referred to this new technology as ‘the Blacklight Project,’ although there is some disagreement about whether the technology was purchased from the evrem or acquired from a more dubious source. Concord officials and gridseers fervently deny withholding technology from the other stellar nations. Maybe people should know what the Concord found there.”

With that, Sagittarius got up and walked away. Absently, I took a sip of my coffee—now cold—and wondered just what was there.

THE CONCORD INVESTIGATIVE BUREAU

The greatest weapon of any ruling power is information. The Galactic Concord’s Investigative Bureau, sometimes called “the Silent Bureau,” is responsible for intelligence gathering within Old Space, the Stellar Ring, and various Concord neutralities including those located within the Verge. The CIB rose from the ashes of what was once the Taurean Star Republic’s Strategic Information Agency, taking over many of the SIA’s networks and agents throughout the remaining stellar nations.

The CIB is nominally supervised by the Concord Executive Council comprised of the Chancellor, the Vice Chancellor, and various Executive Directors representing each of the stellar nations. However, there is mounting concern among certain members of the Concord Assembly that the CIB has become too autonomous—that the agency has been allowed to expand its network at an exponential rate and create independent offices throughout Old Space and the Stellar

ADVENTURE HOOK: THE NEXT PHASE

The heroes are soldiers and scientists of the Galactic Concord. They must solve the mystery of the unidentified objects orbiting Karppolla. There is speculation that these objects are gigantic vessels left by some Precursor alien species. The vessels orbit the star at a range of only 60,000 kilometers—too close for a ship to reach without being crushed or incinerated. The Concord needs to determine whether these vessels are a threat, and whether their technology can be salvaged.

To facilitate closer exploration of the objects orbiting Karppolla, the Concord has developed a new shield technology that can theoretically protect a ship from the intense heat and gravitational pull of the star. The Concord plans to place a team aboard a test ship equipped with this experimental shield technology, hopefully enabling them to conduct close reconnaissance of the objects orbiting Karppolla. The heroes are selected for this team. They are joined by three Orlamu scientists who have been working with the Concord military for several months. The scientists' names are Emilu Laarus, Ejan Basindi, and Meryl Dezray.

BACKGROUND

The Blacklight Project is a name used when referring to classified technology secretly developed by Concord scientists from science and technology gleaned from the artifacts of the Precursor races. With the help of xenoarchaeologists and other specialists who study this alien technology, Concord scientists have recently developed a experimental shield that warps space, enabling a small vessel to withstand incredible forces like those presented by the Karppolla star. The experimental "interspatial shield" is the equivalent of PL 8 technology and is too costly and unreliable for prevalent use in a PL 7 setting.

Concord scientists in the Karppolla system have equipped a small scout ship with an experimental warp shield prototype so that a team of Concord investigators can determine the true nature and threat posed by the mysterious objects encircling the Karppolla star.

These objects are gargantuan incubator ships created and abandoned by a Precursor species known as the Stoneburners, an enigmatic race detailed somewhat in the *Alien Compendium* (page 110). There are 200 ships in all, each one conforming to an elliptical shape and measuring 300–500 kilometers in diameter. Each ship is composed of worked stone and unknown metal alloys that deflect the harmful radiation of the sun, protecting the creatures encased within. The vessels use dimensional shifting to maintain their orbit above Karppolla by

displacing themselves just enough to negate the effects of the star's gravitational field. A crystalline lattice incorporated throughout the hull of each ship collects heat energy from the nearby star—enough to power the millions of stasis chambers located throughout the ship's interior. Each stasis chamber resembles a 2-meter-wide, 9-meter-long crystal cylinder, and confined to each chamber is a fledgling dimensional horror—an immature form of the adult horror fully detailed in the *Alien Compendium* (pages 110–111). In its immature form, a dimensional horror resembles a large, translucent worm with a spiderlike mass growing inside it. When fully matured, the horror erupts from its wormlike casing and devours the translucent membrane for sustenance before moving on to more succulent food sources.

Immature dimensional horrors are sluggish and lack the ability to shift into alternate dimensions. Mature dimensional horrors, however, are destructive biological lifeforms capable of shifting into alternate dimensions and crossing space. The species known as the Stoneburners planned to unleash billions of dimensional horrors upon their enemies, but the Stoneburners were annihilated before the horrors could be released.

At one time, these enormous vessels were capable of traveling from star to star, although they haven't translocated in over six thousand years. Entering a ship is simple. An orifice on the "dark side" of each ship appears more "out of phase" than the rest of the ship, enabling vessels to pass through unscathed. As the hero move deeper and deeper inside the alien ship, it begins to solidify. The core of the ship is completely solid; heroes may leave their ship to explore the core sections without harm, as long as they provide their own oxygen. There is neither oxygen nor gravity inside the Precursor vessels.

Once inside the ship, the heroes must locate the "nexus"—a large central compartment devoid of stasis chambers but filled with strange instruments and control panels. Tampering with the controls triggers a fail-safe designed to keep the technology from falling into enemy hands. The violation of even one ship causes the entire necklace of 200 vessels to phase back into "normal" space, whereupon Karppolla's heat and gravitational forces cause them to disintegrate, destroying all of the dimensional horrors aboard. The heroes should have just enough time to escape the vessel they're on before it collapses into the star.

To complicate matters, three of the stasis chambers aboard the Precursor vessel visited by the heroes deactivate shortly after the heroes arrive, causing its occupants to mature at an alarming rate. As a result, three adult dimensional horrors emerge from their stasis chambers as the ship is ripped apart. Before they are destroyed, the dimensional horrors shift into an alter-

nate dimension and follow the heroes back to the nearby Concord space station. The heroes must destroy these surviving monstrosities to save themselves from annihilation.

SUPPORTING CAST

You will need vital statistics for the three Orlamu scientists who accompany the heroes to the Precursor vessel. Statistics for the three mature dimensional horrors can be found in the *Alien Compendium*. For the Concord personnel aboard the space station, use the pregenerated templates for supporting cast given in Chapter 6 of the *Gamemaster Guide*.

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this read-aloud section to start the action, or adapt it to the adventure you've constructed:

Circling the Karppolla star at a distance of 60,000 kilometers are several hundred unidentified objects which the Concord believes are gargantuan starships of some ancient, Precursor civilization. According to sensor data, each ship has a diameter of roughly 500 kilometers.

Unfortunately, due to the unique hull composition of the ships and their proximity to the star, no additional data can be gathered at long range. Probes sent within a million kilometers of the star have been either pulverized by the star's gravity or incinerated by the intense heat.

Your primary mission is to determine what those objects are, whether they pose a threat to humanity, and what technology, if any, can be salvaged from them. Concord scientists have been working on an experimental shield technology designed to protect a small, scout-class ship against the heat and gravitational forces of the Karppolla star. We don't know how long the experimental shields will hold, but we estimate an hour, perhaps two.

You have been selected to command and pilot this shielded recon vessel. Nothing like this has ever been attempted before, so this is your chance to make history. In addition to your team, you'll be accompanied by three Orlamu xenoarchaeologists familiar with Precursor cultures. Their insight could be useful on this reconnaissance mission. Your secondary mission is to protect the scientists and ensure their safe return.

You've heard the mission specs. What do you do?

Ring. By 2505, it is expected that the number of agents, informants, and special operatives employed by CIB will surpass the the number of enlisted Concord soldiers. Furthermore, it is believed that fully one-quarter of those indoctrinated into the CIB will have received some psionic training.

"The CIB is always looking for a few good mindwalkers," said Gavin Emblar, an outspoken critic of the Concord Assembly. "Makes you glad you're not a fraal, doesn't it?"

While the Assembly does not share Emblar's contempt for the CIB, there is growing concern among Concord representatives that the true power in the CIB lies not with the Executive Council, but with some force operating from deep within the CIB itself. This group is dedicated to increasing the influence of the CIB throughout the Stellar Ring and the Verge and ensuring that no other force attempts to undermine the authority that the Galactic Concord has amassed since its inception after GW2.

A Concord gridpilot provided an alarming account. On January 14, 2501, a known CIB gridshadow delivered an encrypted message to a high-ranking member of the Concord Executive Council, informing him that the star witness slated to testify against sesheyan crime lord Aanghel Osui'ike had been assassinated by order of Aanghel's lieutenant, Pe Terei. The disturbing thing about this information is that it was delivered two days before the actual assassination occurred. Since the assassination didn't occur until the 16th, and since Pe Terei was never officially implicated in the murder, one must either assume that the CIB has

taken to embracing premonitions, or the CIB knew about the assassination before it occurred.

Meanwhile, Concord accountants continue to puzzle over the CIB's allocation of funds. The CIB's budget in 2500 was significantly smaller than the budgets of bureaus half its size, which begs the question of how CIB is funded. Some sources have suggested that the CIB obtains the bulk of its funding from stellar nations and independent corporations with whom the CIB shares its intelligence.

A Hatire observer on Grith noted that "Operatives within the Aanghel Empire believe that Aanghel Osui'ike relies on the CIB to provide her with up-to-date information concerning politics in the Stellar Ring. There is even a joke whispered among the sesheyans that Aanghel owns one of the two private drivesat relays the CIB uses to relay covert communications to and from Corrivale and other nearby Verge systems."

Among others believed to have connections throughout the CIB is holoevangelist Martin Gaylord, owner of Visions of Divinity Incorporated (VDI, based in Aegis), a subsidiary of Celestial Entertainment Limited. This would suggest a connection between the Concord Intelligence Bureau and the Coreeno crime syndicate, although no one I spoke to within the Concord could confirm or deny any affiliation with the Coreeno family or the CEL juggernaut.

CHAPTER 8: AEGIS

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/November 23, 2501**

by Avatar

I had never been to Bluefall before, but like most of us, I had heard stories describing it as the "jewel of the Verge." Those stories are true. I find it ironic that of all the obstacles I have encountered while researching the information I have presented in these pages, the greatest of them was leaving Bluefall behind. My future uncertain, it took a will I didn't know I had to leave.

The Regency of Bluefall is one of the youngest governments in the Verge—and one of the healthiest. Under forty years old, the Regency reflects the attitudes and energy of its leader, Christopher Hale. A dynamic, down-to-earth man, I am led to understand, Hale has transformed a mysteriously vanished colony into a thriving regional power. Many Vergers look to the Regency as a symbol of hope, of what can be done when people set mind and spirit to the task of building a future.

But even here, on this island of calm in the sea of interstellar chaos that surrounds it, are troubled waters. True, the Regency government has established a place of refuge, but such an idyllic setting has its own burdens. Some covet it, wishing to add such a strategic entrepôt to their own holdings. Others use it as a place to conduct their dirty business of political and economic espionage. And still others, eking barely a subsistence living from far less desirable worlds, are envious of it, and wonder why a group of Arrivers who landed barely thirty-five years ago should have a right to the best real estate in the Verge.

VOIDCORP AND CONCORD NEARING AGREEMENT ON DRIVESAT INSTALLATIONS

Last weekend, representatives of VoidCorp and the Galactic Concord met at the Concord embassy on Hughes Island to discuss the final arrangements for emplacing three drive-space relay stations in the Verge. VoidCorp, a major player in the lucrative interstellar communications market, has offered three new drivesats to the Concord. These relays will likely go into the Oberon, Algemron, and Corrivale systems. As part of its commitment to providing assistance to the Concord required by treaty obligations, VoidCorp has offered to donate these satellites to the Concord in order to speed up the timetable for establishing a secure communication link between the Verge and the Stellar Ring.

Indeed, the primary sticking point in the negotiations thus far seems to be the communication relay going into the Corrivale system. VoidCorp has made no secret of their opposition to the Concord's Mahdra ruling that declares the sesheyans of Grith an independent colony. Concord officials

view with some suspicion VoidCorp's desire to place a drivesat in a system where rapid communication greatly serves their interests. VoidCorp insists that these suspicions are unfounded.

"We recognize that the Concord will view with suspicion any activity in which we engage in the Corrivale system," said Carl Rosen (NT 209 38JAT), a spokesperson for VoidCorp's Verge Development Division. "We have well-established interests in this system. Our mining concern on Iphus I continues to expand. The raw materials that we mine from that site significantly adds to the industrial development of the Verge."

So far, the Concord has withheld its final decision on VoidCorp's offer to speed up Verge infrastructure development. Undersecretary Michael Thayne is said to favor the move, but several other members of the Committee on Verge Integration are cool on the proposal.

Thayne argues that this offer advances by nearly a year the timetable for establishing reliable interstellar communication with the systems of the Verge. "Have we forgotten the desperate cries for help of the dead colony of Silver Bell? We have made contact with a seemingly implacable foe. To defend against that foe, to protect the lives of our families, our children, we need an integrated defense plan. Without redundant communication systems, no defense we muster will be adequate to the needs of the people of the Verge. VoidCorp is offering to meet its treaty obligations by providing a key element of our defensive measures. Come on, people, let's work together and get this thing going!"

Despite the opposition to the measure by several of the members of the Committee on Verge Integration, it seems likely that the Concord will accept the offer. If that is the case, the relays could be operational in as few as six months.

There are rumors that VoidCorp is offering these stations only because it is upgrading its own internal communications system with newer models recently developed by their manufacturing centers. If this is true, do the Vergers really want to depend on outdated systems to handle their strategic communications needs? Might it not be better to see to it that VoidCorp honors not only the letter of its obligations, but the spirit as well?

SABOTAGE ON JACK EVERSTAR'S NEW FILM

At the undisclosed location of Jack Everstar's current holofilm project *Chimes*, the tale of the tragedy of Silver Bell, an explosion ripped apart one of the studio sets where the young actor was to spend the day in shooting one of the key scenes. Miraculously, no one was injured in the blast, but the property damage was substantial. Mask & Bauble studios believes it will set back the film's production schedule at least six weeks.

Everstar had taken ill at the last moment as a result of a overly long day shooting some other scenes in the rain the day before, so the director made the decision to cancel the day's shoot at the studio and move to a different set to film a scene in which the Everstar does not appear.

Mask & Bauble Studios' security team has not yet discovered the exact cause of the explosion, although reports indicate that they have detained one of the pyrotechnics crew. Apparently, several of the crew's supply caches were found empty, leading the security staff to entertain the possibility of foul play.

This was but the latest in a series of incidents that have reportedly plagued the production of this film. It is almost as if the ghosts of Silver Bell want to remain at rest. Earlier in the production schedule, a frayed rope nearly cost the life of a stunt expert who was performing a daredevil maneuver on the side of a 300 meter high cliff. In the production company's move to the filming site, several million dollars worth of equipment were lost in a freak accident when an equipment truck was buried under a landslide; fortunately, no one was hurt in that incident, either. Sarah Caldwell, Everstar's original co-star, walked off the set after she was trapped in a burning building when her exit door would not open. She was replaced by Anne Marie Valois, the ravishing actress who appeared in Everstar's first film, *Children of Mars*. Reportedly, Everstar was none too happy about the decision to hire Valois, as

the two of them enjoyed what coworkers described as a "stormy" relationship.

It was not the first time that Everstar has been at risk, either. Claims of his personal adventures aside, the young man has taken excessive risks in previous work and has managed to walk away with hardly a scratch every time. In an attempt to channel Everstar's remarkable luck into continued box office rewards, studio executives have ordered the director and Everstar to use a stunt double for the more dangerous scenes of *Chimes*.

Despite these setbacks, Mask & Bauble Studios expects that *Chimes* will release on schedule. "We anticipate these sorts of difficulties when we set our schedules," said Hanna Zorel, *Chimes'* associate producer. "We certainly don't like to see so many occurring in a single film, but we are confident that the worst of it is behind us. In a case like this, we simply shoot around the scenes scheduled for that set while our support crew builds a new one."

COMMANDER KALDEN MARRIES

Commander Kalden, the weren commander of Regency Island and one of Regent Christopher Hale's most trusted friends, recently married a foreign national. Yesterday, in a private ceremony attended only by close friends, Kalden married Raiaza Krayjal, a Commander in the Orlamu military.



For the past year, the Regency has established closer ties with the Orlamu. Regency shipyards have sought to purchase Orlamu stardrives for the ships they construct, a move which will increase the efficiency of Regency vessels and lower their operating costs. The Regency's shipbuilding industry is the fastest-growing one in the Verge, although to date, they are capable only of producing ships up to the size of a frigate or a small bulk transport. For larger ships they rely on the great shipyards of Alaundril. A purchase agreement with the Orlamu could pose a serious challenge to Alaundril's dominance in the shipbuilding market, as Regency vessels are said to be remarkably well-designed.

Some critics have suggested that the marriage between the two warriors is, in fact, politically motivated. When asked to respond to such a charge, Commander Raiaza simply growled. The reporter who asked the question realized that he had another appointment elsewhere.

The reception afterward was a raucous affair, to put it mildly. But during the festivities, members of the Regency government took the opportunity to reestablish ties with their Orlamu counterparts. William Nkoma, the Regency's Secretary for Industrial Development and Jane Tolson, Secretary of the Regency Stellar Navy were seen in close consultation with both Prelate Tassina of the Orlamist Temple on the *Lighthouse*, who at the request of Commander Raiaza actually performed the wedding ceremony, and Consul-General Dane Hardeson, the official responsible for Orlamu trade matters in the Verge. The topic of their conversation is not certain, but they seemed to reach some sort of agreement before drifting off to rejoin the festivities. Perhaps they reached some tentative agreement on the sale of Orlamu stardrives that the Regency wants to acquire.

DISASTER RELIEF AID REACHES THULDAN SHORES

Regent Christopher Hale has added seven capital class surface transports and four submarine transports to the international effort to provide disaster relief to the storm-swept citizens of Filtrane Island. The southeastern shores of the Thuldan-held Filtrane Island were devastated last week by ETS-2184, dubbed "Margo" by local meteorologists. Two-hundred twenty one people were killed and hundreds other injured in the storm, one of the most devastating to hit Bluefall since the ships of the Flight from Ericis arrived nearly forty years ago.

Regent Hale bluntly downplayed any political motivation for the Regency's assistance.

"Certainly the Regency and the Empire have our differences, but those differences are between the governments, not people. I would expect the same sort of response from Ambassador Stott if the situation were reversed and it were Hughes Island that had suffered Margo's ravages. Quite simply, there are at least 10,000 people without adequate shelter and food on Filtrane. Help from the Empire is far

away, and we're all on our own out here, by circumstance or by design. There's no reason to be worried about diplomatic appearances right now. We can return to our war of words later."

Ambassador Stott could not be reached for comment, but a Thuldan embassy spokesperson gave Regent Hale and the representatives high praise for their generous assistance in disaster relief.

"Our differences are not so great that we must turn a blind eye to each other when help is needed. This generosity on the part of the multinational relief effort we will remember and repay in kind if the situation ever demands it. With your assistance, we will recover from this disaster, bury our dead, and move on."

(See related story, "Is 'Margo' Natural?", following.)

IS "MARGO" NATURAL?

The terrible tropical storm known as "Margo," which last week devastated the southeastern shore of Filtrane Island, may not have been entirely natural. Meteorologists claim that the storm resulted from the clash of two powerful fronts. One of these weather cells had formed a week ago in a more or less stationary location two hundred miles off the southern coast of Filtrane, which is very unusual for this time of year.

"It was almost as if it were just sitting there waiting for one of the usual storm fronts to blow across the water and run headlong into it," said Wallace Dent, staff meteorologist for the Aegis News Agency. "The resultant stormfront was easily the largest I've ever seen. When that sucker hit land, nothing would have stopped it. Lucky for the folks over on Filtrane that they got only the edge of it, or it may have been even worse for them."

The storm continued northeastward toward the polar regions. It was expected to hit Berilar Island as well, but it broke up before making landfall.

Add another oddity to the series of strange occurrences that preceded Margo. Seismologists researching deep core magma disturbances received signals three weeks ago that were likely the result of human activity in the area of the sea midway between Filtrane and Berilar Islands.

Stephen Talbot, a Research Fellow at the Holman Sound Oceanographic Institute on Saber Island, was the scientist who interpreted the sounds as something likely originating from human machinery.

"It's difficult to tell for sure, but my guess is that these disturbances represent a series of explosions, much like underwater mining teams use to break up large mineral nodules lying on the sea floor. The strange thing in this case is that these signals were more or less periodic for a while, then occurred in rapid succession, followed by a single more powerful signal. We got virtually no sonar reports, which probably means they were deep, below at least one inversion layer. If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say something went wrong on an underwater mining platform; that

final signal may represent a hull breach and the subsequent implosion. Poor bastards."

A reliable source, who wishes to remain anonymous, in the Regency Sea Navy states that he can place a Thuldan submarine in the vicinity of the bizarre seismic signals at the time they were made.

"We have no immediate confirmation of our data, but we lost track of the Thuldan Navy's submarine *Agamemnon* several hours before the people at Holman Sound picked up the seismic signals. The buildup of Margo prevented any of our surface ships from investigating, and the subs we dispatched to the area have not yet reported back."

The Thuldan Maritime Navy has been involved for the last year in an aggressive exploration of the sea floor in the area surrounding Filtrane Island. Most military experts believe that the Thuldans have been emplacing early warning sonar systems, creating a net through which they can track the movements both of submarines and surface ships.

Some, however, believe their purpose is more sinister. In an interview with TVN several months ago, Silva Byaros, senior military analyst for the Sanger-Osselman Foundation, an institute that studies trends in politics and economics, believes the Thuldans are attempting to make contact with the so-called Deepfallen, the aliens that inhabit the uncharted depths of the oceans of Bluefall.

"The Thuldans have been quite insistent in their demands for information concerning the Deepfallen. It remains a central tenet of their governmental policy to study alien species to determine the level of threat they may pose to humanity. Their local program of gathering information on the Deepfallen is really just an extension of that policy. Unfortunately, their means are often heavy-handed, which puts the Regency's efforts to establish peaceful relations with the Deepfallen at risk."

Could the Thuldans have encountered the Deepfallen? Did that first contact turn violent? And more importantly, was the devastation wreaked against the coast of Filtrane Island the Deepfallen response?

REGENCY ASSISTS NEW ORGANIZATION FOR VERGE TRADE

Michal Billings, Regency Secretary for Commerce, announced today the government's sponsorship of the Merchant League, an organization dedicated to maintaining open trade between the systems of the Verge. Designed principally as an umbrella organization dedicated to protect the business ventures of small businesses and independent merchants, the organization opened its head office on Nectaris Orbital Station a week ago. The official opening ceremonies occurred this afternoon.

It seems clear that this venture has the interests of the highest reaches of the Regency government, as Regent Hale himself was standing in the wings when Secretary Billings made the announcement. In the informal reception that fol-

lowed the ceremony, Regent Hale made clear that the initiative for this organization rested squarely on the shoulders of his young Commerce Secretary and the merchant representatives who worked with him to create it.

"This is most certainly Michal's doing," Hale stated. "I was initially opposed to the idea of involving the Regency government in anything so ambitious, but the plan he and the traders came up with is an exceptional one. Our government supports the creation of the League as a measure that keeps the lines of interstellar trade and peace open."

According to Secretary Billings, the League will negotiate with other systems to open offices on other worlds within the Verge. Currently there are no plans to expand the League's mandate toward the Stellar Ring.

"The League is an ambitious project, to say the least, but we have no intention of attempting to compete in the backyards of the stellar powers back in the Ring," said Garron Terhune, captain/owner of the independent trade ship *Watson's Folly* and one of the principal architects of the organizational constitution that formed the League. "Our goal is to provide for the small business owner, the margin-runner, an organization that can assist in moving goods and services across the Verge without paying such staggering overhead costs. This helps improve our reliability, which in turn means that businesses across the Verge will be able to turn to us for shipping and distribution."

The organizational structure of the Merchant League is a relatively simple one. Every member business owner must agree to provide for the common good. This involves principally an annual payment of \$350 to help defer the necessary organizational costs, particularly onsite station staff and legal defense requirements. In addition, however, the League plans to negotiate with the Concord the right to arm their ships against commerce raiders and other threats that plague independent traders across the Verge. As of yet, no such agreement has been reached with the Concord, and there are signs that opponents of the proposal are already lining up.

Principal among these is the Redman-Smith Trading Corp. Redman-Smith has been aggressive in their attempts to torpedo the creation of the fledgling League. According to one report, they even threatened the Regency with a moratorium on shipments containing goods from Bluefall.

"That simply is not true," said Secretary Billings. "Certainly Redman-Smith has asserted that they see no need for the creation of a second Verge trading group. They see it as inherently destabilizing. What I think they fail to understand, however, is that the cost of doing business under the Redman-Smith umbrella is so prohibitively expensive that it effectively excludes a significant portion of the shipping capacity of the Verge. Without an organization that allows for the inclusion of more cargo hulls, we may be setting ourselves up for failure if ever we must repeat the trying years of the Long Silence. It seems to me that the very thing that Redman-Smith formed to circumvent years ago is the very thing we are trying to ward against here. I believe the



business owners of the League would welcome a cooperative arrangement with Redman-Smith."

Industry analysts believe that the Corp, which has grown from just such an organization as has been created here today to a major mercantile power in the Verge, will continue to view the Merchant League as a fledgling rival that must be encouraged to die on the vine.

The spirit of hope which infused the proceedings today aside, it looks as if a trade war is on the horizon.

REGENCY FIELDS NEW PSIONIC COMMANDO UNIT

Regent Christopher Hale signed the order last week that officially and publicly created the 118th Psychological Operations Battalion, a unit that will include a significant number of so-called mindwalkers. The move, a controversial one even on fairly liberal Bluefall, is one that has been quietly in the making for the past two years. An extensive but discreet recruitment drive began in the waning months of 2499 at the request of Regent Hale himself. Members of the Regency military were screened by professional psionics, psychologists, and medical personnel. Those who showed promise were quietly asked if they would be interested in joining a new unit that made use of some of their talents. Many agreed to accept the challenge.

These young men and women were trained not only in psionic talents, but in standard light infantry, reconnai-

sance, intelligence-gathering, and commando skills as well. The rigorous training, which had nearly a 70% attrition rate, took nearly two years to complete. At their graduation, held at their training facility located somewhere out of the Aegis system, Regent Hale showed up and met with some of them. According to a source that accompanied him on the trip, Hale told them he promised to sign the order that gave them official existence when he arrived back on Bluefall, but he wanted to know if they had chosen their motto yet. Their commander is said to have responded, "Securité!" I wonder if he was referring to their mission to defend the Regency, or if he meant it as a recognition that the Regency was providing a home for those with talents often considered extraordinary or even dangerous.

For now, the unit is not even at company strength. But Hale hopes that the unit members that currently exist will eventually serve as a cadre for new volunteers. Eventually, the unit will reach its full personnel allotment of 423. Military experts concede this may take years, if it can be achieved at all.

The public responsibility of this unit is to undertake missions against foreign enemies threaten the people and interests of the Regency. Despite this claim, many Regency citizens here on Bluefall fear that they will be used in internal affairs as well. Regency military officials claim that the unit was designed principally to offer the Regency a weapon with which to combat those species that have been found to

possess psionic talents themselves and who might offer a threat to the Regency.

"We are not a police state," said Military Secretary Nadine Cox in an interview televised on *This Week*, a local weekly news program, "nor do we intend to become one. The 118th Psychological Operations Battalion was formed to provide us a credible response to incidents that threaten our security abroad. The mandate of the unit does not include any provision to act on Bluefall except as directly authorized by the Regent, and then only in emergencies that require their special talents. They are not a secret police."

Cox went on to say that she believes the unit will serve as little more than an umbrella organization for a number of teams that will operate more or less independently. "That was the way they were trained, to form teams and operate on their own. Such units serve best when they have no set structure. The teams have specialists who fulfill required functions. As I understand it, psionic talents require a great deal of energy, so they cannot replace technology or simple human intuition and experience."

Responding to concerns that the members of the unit, when no longer on active service, may pose a problem for law enforcement, Cox responded that the selection criteria included rigorous tests of character designed to weed out individuals who would put their training to improper use. "Certainly we cannot prevent every possible scenario, but we worked long and hard to select only those who possessed a strong moral character. They knew they would face invasive and exhaustive security and psychological examinations. Some, frankly, chose not to endure these tests, and others were released from the program and returned to their units without any stigma attached. It is why we have less than a company of these soldiers, rather than an entire battalion of them. As we considered the possible deployment of such a unit, foremost on our minds was what these soldiers would do with their training once they left service. Every precaution was taken to ensure they would pose no threat to people after their service."

When asked who commanded the new unit, Cox explained that, for security reasons, the identities of the soldiers of the 118th were classified. Their jobs require anonymity, as they will be asked to operate without direct support. The Regent feels we should take whatever measures possible to protect the soldiers and their families from reprisals by others."

CHURGALT REBEL MURDERED ON HUGHES ISLAND

The murder of Winston Dumas yesterday morning may have been the result of a desperate attempt by the Federal State of Galvin to prevent sensitive intelligence information concerning the locations of key government officials from falling into the hands of their enemies. Independent information brokers have determined that Mr. Dumas was

seen meeting with Ruben Jarovich, a Third Secretary of the Thuldan embassy here on Bluefall, and likely an agent of the Thuldan Office for Strategic Information. Messrs. Dumas and Jarovich were seen in a private dining room at Pirandello's, a restaurant catering to business people who desire privacy for their "power lunches." The two of them were apparently there for some time, and seemed to have reached some sort of accord, although about what is uncertain.

Another source overheard Dumas discussing with his bodyguards that the negotiations were drawing to a close. "Soon," he was reported to have said, "the war will be over and the assassins who run our government dead in their sleep. Maybe then we can put our world back together."

Mr. Dumas, a representative of Galvin's Churgalt rebel faction, was found dead yesterday morning in his hotel room on Hughes Island. Police found two other victims, who were identified as Mr. Dumas' security detachment, in the adjoining suite. The medical inspector has yet to determine the official cause of death, but local police have reported that the murder was particularly brutal.

The two bodyguards were each shot twice in the head at close range. Powder burns and ballistics suggest that the weapon was a small caliber slugthrower and was probably silenced as well. The victim, Mr. Dumas, was not so lucky. Police found a small dart imbedded in Mr. Dumas' neck. It likely contained a paralytic poison, for nothing else could explain the violence perpetrated upon the body. Mr. Dumas was literally eviscerated. The killer removed Mr. Dumas' hands and feet, a signature of sorts. The Federal State of Galvin's Directorate for Internal Security is said to remove the hands and feet of captured Churgalt rebels during "interrogations." Usually their tongues are cut out as well. They often release these unfortunates as a warning to those who would oppose the Federal State government.

As of yet, the police do not have a suspect in the savage slaying. No one saw anyone entering or leaving the suite where Mr. Dumas and his security team were staying. The room appeared to have been carefully searched, but police do not yet know if anything is missing.

"This is the sort of case in which our hands are tied before we collect the first piece of evidence," said a senior police official, who wishes to remain anonymous. "While we are well-equipped to handle most crimes perpetrated by one citizen upon another, the sorts of international crimes like we saw last night in the Westham (Hotel) often go into the 'Unsolved' drawer. The victim was here on Bluefall for only two days, we have no idea of where he might have gone or whom he might have met while on world. The perpetrator? Likely not a local. He was probably someone who tracked the victim here, waited for an appropriate time to make his move, then struck. Whoever it was, he knew what he was doing because we haven't found a damn thing in that hotel room that doesn't tie to the victim. My guess is that he is long gone by now. God, I hate these cases."

REPUBLICANS ORGANIZE MARCH

Opponents to Regent Christopher Hale's unchallenged rule of Bluefall marched last week on Hughes Island. The march, which was cleared by police last week, took 14,000 people down Landsedge Boulevard past Regency Row and Consular Row. A peaceful demonstration, police nevertheless observed the protest with care, as agents of the Thuldan and other governments have recently been agitating the populace to call for a change in government.

Claire Barnes, chairer of the Committee for Reform, the principal organization calling for a change in the form of government, said that their protest is not against Hale's leadership; rather, they seek for the population of Bluefall to become enfranchised in the political process.

"Regent Hale has been and will likely remain a man of vision and integrity. Forty years ago, when we arrived here, we were but a small ragtag group of exhausted travelers, who needed direction in order to build our society. Hale provided that guidance, he provided that leadership, and he gave us our vision. But times have changed, and the needs of our society have changed. It is not that we do not any longer want Christopher Hale to lead us. What we want is a chance to participate in our own futures, to take stewardship of our own lives. A peaceful change to a more democratic form of government will serve to ensure a dynamic Bluefall tomorrow as well as today. Let's elect Christopher Hale our President."

Hale responded that while he is not opposed to calls for a republic, he feels that now is not the time to consider significant internal changes when the situation in the Verge is so volatile. He responded to reporters' questions after the news conference that detailed the Regency's assistance for Filtrane Island.

"I know, I know. I've heard the question that usually follows this statement dozens of times: When won't the Verge be unstable? But I truly believe that until we have established a state that can endure on its own, without help from the Stellar Ring, we need a single focus guiding our efforts. I am not saying that I'm without fault or that I don't make mistakes. What I am saying that we've managed to get a hell of a lot more done without worrying about pandering to the interests of individual groups. Let's get to the point where we can enjoy the decadence of a government run by lobbyists rather than run pell-mell down that hill right now."

CONCORD-REGENCY FLEET EXERCISE UNDERWAY

When I arrived insystem early in August, a significant naval force was already present. The Aegis system is one of the best defended systems in the Verge, and its Stellar Navy patrols aggressively to prevent a repeat of the tragedy that destroyed the Silver Bell colony of Hammer's Star over a decade ago. "Not here!" is the unofficial motto of the Regency navy.

In an effort to integrate better with the elements of other Verge fleets, the Regency has approached the Concord and suggested the idea of a joint naval exercise. The Concord, in its efforts to promote system defense measures, readily agreed.

The exercise involves mostly ships of frigate class and below, although the Concord has brought a cruiser, a few destroyers, and a bulk freighter that will act as a dreadnought in the mock battles that will comprise the exercise.

The purpose of the exercise, which has been going on for three days already, is twofold. First, it tests the response time of Regency patrol craft to raider attacks. These exercises have been very successful in bringing home to commanders the idea that the best weapon against such attacks is a skilled sensor operator and a decent tactical display. In the first part of the exercise, Concord raider ships "bombed" Hughes Island into oblivion. They snuck in using Aegis' radiation to mask their own and loosed a spread of missiles that turned Hughes Island into Hughes Parking Lot. Most of the missiles were destroyed by Regency anti-missile defenses, but there were too many to eliminate completely. At the exercise command post where observers watched the unfolding of the exercise, Regency Admiral Edmund Chapman was said to have peeled the paint off the walls with his angry invective. Somewhat sheepishly, he apologized later to the other observers, saying that he expected at least one of his picket ships to have responded to the peculiar sensor displays that they would have seen when the Concord ships entered their range. The Regency did especially well, though, later, when six attack ships came out of nowhere and "crippled" a Concord cruiser while other attack ships drew off her escorts. Admiral Chapman was in a noticeably better humor after that particular victory.

The second part of the exercise will deal with escort tactics. The likely role of the Regency Stellar Navy in the event of another attack on Hammer's Star is to serve as escorts for bulk freighters resupplying the Concord squadrons. The Regency has some experience with this, and naval spokespersons believe that this phase of the exercise will actually be as instructive to the Concord as it will to the Regency.

Admiral Chapman has been pleased with the results of the exercise thus far, despite the "loss" of Hughes Island. "We haven't had much of an opportunity to work against Concord ships before. What they have learned in Hammer's Star may one day affect all of us. Fighting a mock battle against these veterans may help us prevent a repeat of the tragedy of Silver Bell here in Aegis."

ABANDON TERIVINE, REPORT SAYS

The Council for Conscientious Scientists has issued a report urging the Regency government to withdraw all colonists from Terivine. The report, which also calls upon the government of Alaundril to do the same, claims that the delicate

ecological balance which exists on Rivendale is being adversely affected by the presence of human settlements.

The report further calls for the Concord to establish Terivine as an interdicted system, preventing any government from endangering the flora and fauna that grow in abundance on Rivendale. The scientists argue that if the settlements are not removed within a decade and new colonization efforts not prohibited, the wildlife of Rivendale will be in danger of extinction within a century.

"The ecology of Rivendale is remarkably delicate," says biologist Dr. Mira Olsen. "It is almost as if the ecosystem were deliberately designed to reflect a perfect harmony. The slightest disturbance, the smallest change has repercussions up and down the ecological chain. Human pollutants have already left a visible mark on Rivendale. Even as small a colony as Sunbreak, 9000 meters above sea level, produces enough pollutants to leave part of the rain forest below dying. Our efforts to reverse the destruction of the forest have been fraught with disappointments, as we have not yet developed a sufficiently complete database to determine what measures might be appropriate to halt the deforestation."

Dr. Olsen believes the riglia, the sentient creatures that soar the winds of Rivendale, see themselves as caretakers of Rivendale's ecosystem. The attacks on humans disturbing the environment certainly supports this theory. But Dr. Olsen goes further in her analysis of the riglia.

"Basically, the riglia possess utterly alien mental processes. Our survey team included two skilled psionic research specialists, myself and Dr. Algar Vinn, a professor of philosophy at the University of New Cairo on Hale. Both of us made contact with the riglia in an attempt to discern more about these graceful creatures. Our conclusions were very different, but we both agree that the riglia see human presence on Rivendale as a greatly alarming development.

"Dr. Vinn believes that the riglia are simply xenophobic telepaths who wish to be free to roam the skies of Rivendale without outside interference. I found something else in my dealings with them, but I cannot absolutely confirm with scientific evidence my conclusions. I am of the opinion that the riglia are not a species indigenous to Rivendale. I believe that the riglia may have been placed on Rivendale as wardens of some sort. By whom, when, how—these are questions I cannot answer. But I am convinced that they are carrying out some sort of order to protect Rivendale's flora and fauna."

THE SOURCE IN AEGIS

As you may have noticed, my report on Aegis hardly touched upon any grand scheme the likes of which threatens the inhabitants of the Hammer's Star system. But that is the nature of the place. Aegis' problems stem from age-old human flaws: Greed and ambition are the sorts of difficulties with which the Regent and people of Bluefall must contend. The naked desire of the Thuldan Empire to establish its

foothold in the Verge by dominating its most important system colors the attitudes of Bluefall's people as much as does their memory of the terror that ran through them when they first learned of the destruction of Silver Bell. Other stellar nations make no secret of wanting a foothold on Bluefall, either. Through these rocky shoals, Regent Christopher Hale guides the ship of state, a sure hand on the helm.

It is, perhaps, the most telling description of the place that my contact refused to speak of anything that would be considered "dirt" on Hale or his government, which is just as well, I guess, since I really didn't feel like asking, for some reason. This time, I never actually met the new messenger. She spoke to me, but in a way I have never before experienced. I don't know if you have ever been contacted by a mindwalker, but it is simultaneously the most unnerving and wonderful event I have ever experienced. To think that she was somewhere else on Hughes Island—hell even on some other island on Bluefall—and that, amid all the minds on Hughes, she could just reach out and touch mine was unsettling at best. But I grew to look forward to her daily contacts, and I became more amazed, and admittedly, a little envious, that such a thing was possible.

We "talked" this way several times, each conversation unfortunately too brief to satisfy my curiosity about this strange way of communicating, but eventually we came around to the topic of the next step in my investigation.

The actual contents of my message from Tagg, whoever he was, were actually quite brief. In effect, the information he possessed led me to set out on the long journey for Oberon, one of the greatest sources of rhodium in known space.

CHAPTER 9: RINSTOKE

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/January 11, 2502**

by Avatar

This lonely system sees relatively little traffic. Located far above the galactic plane, few travelers see any need to pass through, since it's not really "on the way" to anything else in the Verge. Not surprisingly, this means that Rinstoke hasn't even been claimed by any of the stellar nations, unlike many other Verge systems.

And why should it? With no habitable planets, and few strategic minerals or metals, Rinstoke doesn't represent a potential jewel in any nation's crown. The only major trade route that passes near it is the Corrivale-Hammer's Star route, and even then, many vessels choose instead to detour through Aegis or Oberon for the superior facilities found in those systems.

THE ICY MOON OF HUDSON

This frigid world, orbiting the gas giant Caina, is home to the only official settlement in the Rinstoke system. This settlement, composed of an independent observatory, trading post, and emergency repair station, is called Baffin Island and was built by Bluefall nearly a hundred years ago.

Though of limited value today, this forward thinking may prove invaluable as the population of Bluefall continues to grow. Scientists employed by the Regency are busy investigating the possibility of terraforming the icy moon. When I spoke with one of the researchers, he agreed that Hudson is still far from attractive. However, as we've seen so many times in the past, when living space is in demand, beggars often can't be choosers.

Also, without any stellar nation claims on this system, the problems of conflicting interests that have plagued so many other systems—see the ongoing struggles in Algernon for a good example—don't pose a problem here. It's likely that Bluefall will continue to keep quiet about their business here for the foreseeable future.

THE BEDESTRIN

These giant natives of Hudson wander from one warm spot to another, eking out an existence in search of prey. Though they appear at first glance to be nothing more than beasts, these creatures are actually sentient, if still very primitive. However, they have mastered the use of fire, utilize tools and basic weapons, and have even domesticated some animals.

Dr. Aliasz Veras of the University of Ceres stated in a report that Hudson should be declared a special preserve in order to allow the bedestrins a chance to reach true sentience. The Regency of Bluefall has so far resisted such efforts, claiming that their need for terraforming research outweighs such matters.

CARLSON'S DOCKYARD

Of course, wherever the stellar nations aren't, those who seek to avoid the attentions of such governments likely are. Rinstoke is no different, as the many moons of Caina provide excellent hiding places and boltholes for any sort of extralegal—or just plain secret—activities. Caina's strong magnetic field, which interferes with sensors and other electromagnetic equipment, just serves to improve the security of such installations. Rumors abound of everything from hidden shipyards to secret mindwalker colonies to pirate havens.

Thanks to persistent research and a couple hunches paying off, I managed to track down one of these rumored locations: Carlson's Dockyard. Run by former pirate captain Quarrie Carlson, this small spaceport is carved out of the tiny moon of Apone. Despite its limited capacity—nothing larger than a corvette has any hope of fitting into the subterranean shipyard—Carlson has outfitted her establishment with top-notch crew and repair facilities.

I was fortunate enough to set up an interview with the owner to discuss her operations in Rinstoke. While she admitted that her limited clientele sometimes makes for lean months, Carlson's plush living quarters suggested that the business was lucrative indeed.

"Thankfully, the Regency doesn't seem too worried about my setup here. I figure that's primarily due to my standing rule for anyone whose ship we fix up: 'Don't mess with the locals.' Sure, the Concord came by here once a few years back on the trail of some ship that had hijacked some rhodium shipments coming out of the Oberon system, but we just shut down and stayed quiet 'til they had what they wanted and left."

Of course, at Carlson's prices, it's unlikely the Concord would be interested in even stopping for a cup of coffee (which goes for \$3, by the way). But for those interested in quick, quiet repairs—as well as the occasional restricted or military ship component—Carlson's Dockyard provides an excellent resource.

MISSING RESEARCHERS FEARED LOST

When Baffin Island Head Administrator Jonathan Dunne revealed yesterday that a rescue operation had been unable to locate the missing scientists of South Station 6, most gave up any hope of finding the lost researchers. Due to the intense cold of Hudson, few humans can hope to survive more than a single night outside of shelter.

What's particularly baffling about the situation is that no trace whatsoever was found of the researchers—dead or alive. It appears as if the entire group just moved on, leaving the prefab dome and virtually all equipment behind. The last report filed by South Station 6 indicated that all was well, and that they were scheduled to check out some local volcanic hotspots in the next few days.

The rescue operation was assembled after the research outpost missed two consecutive weekly reports. While it was hoped that the culprit would be a faulty transmitter, many Baffin Islanders feared the worst. No one on Hudson has forgotten the fate of East Station 3, which had the misfortune of building its protective dome directly above a dormant geothermal vent. When tidal forces flexed the moon during its orbit around Caina, the vent opened and exposed the researchers to blasts of superheated steam and carbon dioxide. All twelve scientists were killed instantly.

ADVENTURE HOOK: A TRIP TO THE DOCTOR

Among the many secret installations hiding in the Rinstoke system is a medical facility that caters to those who make their living outside the law. Run by Dr. Andreas Tocher, the "Clinic" (as it's called by some) represents a "whatever-you-want, no-questions-asked, cash-in-advance" resource for those with medical needs.

The particular reason for the heroes' visit to the clinic is up to the Gamemaster and her campaign. Perhaps the one or more of the heroes is severely injured but doesn't trust "legit" doctors. Or maybe the heroes are looking for cybernetic surgery or other unusual medical assistance. Whatever the reason, their contacts have pointed them to Dr. Andreas Tocher's clinic.

BACKGROUND

Dr. Tocher, once an esteemed geneticist and biosurgeon on Bluefall, was expelled from the medical community for his work on hybridization of human and alien DNA. Though his experiments were perhaps no more unusual than some, the mechalus' casual disregard for the proper methods of obtaining test subjects led to his eventual fate.

Now he continues his studies at his hidden clinic, while obtaining funding from anyone who needs medical assistance and who wishes to avoid the attention of others (especially the Concord). Tocher will perform just about any operation, from simple cosmetic surgery to gene therapy, from cybernetic implants to cloning. The benefit to the patient is that no record of the procedure exists, and the clinic provides a neutral territory for recuperation. Of course, those who visit the clinic pay dearly for these services: Dr. Tocher charges at least triple normal fees, and has been known to charge up to ten times the typical costs. All in cash, of course, and all up front.

When not working with a paying customer, Tocher spends his time tinkering with the DNA of any sentient species he can get his hands on. He's already just about memorized the genomes of the common species—humans, fraal, weren, t'sa, mechalus, and sesheyans—and is eager to get his hands on new material. He

Opinions vary as to the fate of the South Station 6 researchers. Some claim that the scientists moved to another location; others, that local predators (such as the aboriginal bedestrin) are to blame. Personally, I know foul play when I see it. It's obvious that the researchers stumbled across something that somebody else—whether it be pirates, a stellar nation, or something more sinister—didn't want discovered. Hudson's big enough that just about anything could be hiding out there, somewhere.

recently came into the possession of two samples of teln, and he hopes to obtain other samples from the so-called "external" species soon.

To spice things up, the Gamemaster might decide that one of the heroes' old adversaries is also at the clinic. Perhaps after their last encounter, the enemy has decided to upgrade his arsenal with a bit of cyberware, or maybe he's just looking to escape the heroes' attention with some cosmetic surgery. The heroes may have a difficult time adhering to Dr. Tocher's "neutral territory" policy when one of their most hated foes recuperates only a few doors away!

SUPPORTING CAST

Dr. Tocher is an extremely talented medical scientist, and should have several ranks in most Medical Science specialty skills. Instead of hiring human guards and assistants, he instead utilizes robots for most tasks, and is skilled in the construction and repair of such.

The ALTERNITY accessory *Dataware* details rules for robots, including sample statistics for medical and body-guard robots. Gamemasters without access to those rules can simply rule that the robots are equivalent to human characters with the appropriate skills, but without any freedom of will.

TRIGGER SCENE

Read or paraphrase the following text to the heroes when they arrive at the clinic:

When you told your friend that you needed some medical help but wanted to avoid attention, you figured he'd just send you to some back-alley doc. Little did you expect you'd be headed out to the remote Rinstoke system in search of some top-secret clinic.

As you exit the airlock of your ship and step onto the landing pad, you're greeted by an exceptionally tall man in armor. However, upon second glance you realize that the two-meter tall man before you is no man after all, but a powerful-looking robot!

"Welcome to the Clinic, my friends," says a voice in your radio. "Please follow me. I hope your stay here is pleasant and comfortable."

What have you gotten yourselves into here?

CHAPTER 10: OBERON

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/February 27, 2502**

by Avatar

Oberon was once seen as a paradise, but that was from a great distance and through the rose-colored lenses of propaganda and advertising. The Rignumors did a very good job of recruiting workers for the Lison mines, and shortly after the planet's discovery, upwards of one million fortune-seekers found themselves as wage-slaves on a hostile world. Now, some 150 years later, one wonders exactly what has changed.

True, the current government claims to be a technodemocracy. It uses the latest technological advances to allow every citizen a voice in the government. All of the evidence I have examined suggests that the technology has occasionally been compromised by a variety of parties, making suspect every decision the Lisons reach.

What makes Lison, with its hostile environment and terrible living conditions, so interesting to the stellar nations? Simple. Rhodium. The ore, found in abundance beneath the surface of Lison, translates into great amounts of wealth for whoever controls the recovery, processing, and transport of this valuable material. On Lison, in the Oberon system, it could honestly be said that rhodium is the root of all evil.

But, oh, what a seductive evil it is ...

THE RIGNUMOR INVASION OF LISON

In 2323, the Rignumor Star Consortium laid claim to the Oberon system. By 2329, the Consortium had completed the first operable rhodium mine on Lison. Thanks to an unprecedented advertising campaign depicting Lison as a 'planet of opportunity,' the Rignumors lured thousands of workers to Lison with promises of a secure financial future. By 2364, it was clear that these workers had been betrayed—fooled by Rignumor propaganda and wooed into a life of slavery. In 2373, the Lison miners revolted against Rignumor tyranny and established the United Lison State. Today, after 127 years of independence, Lison stands at the threshold of change as various stellar nations compete to win the Lison people's trust and annex the rhodium-rich world. It's become clear that whoever controls Lison controls not only the rhodium trade, but also travel through drivespace. And the nation that controls travel through drivespace controls the Verge.

The loss of Lison was a punch to the proverbial nose of the Rignumor Star Consortium, and for the last 127 years, the Rignumors have strived to reclaim Lison and its precious rhodium. Two months ago, coincident with the attempted assassination of Lison President Michael Kevik, the Rignumor dreadnought *Eclipse* invaded the Oberon

system, blockaded the planet, and destroyed the twilight colony of Lister. Not since the Silver Bell incident in Hammer's Star has one Verge system commanded so much attention.

The attack on Lison has been condemned throughout the Verge and the Stellar Ring and has prompted the Galactic Concord and other stellar nations to send ships to protect Lison's interests. The Rignumor government claims, quite adamantly, that the invasion was unauthorized—that the dreadnought's commander, Admiral Clarence Sarn, a thrice-decorated veteran of GW2, acted on his own accord. Although the dreadnought was destroyed by a combined task force of United Lison and pirate vessels, Rignumor guilders have promised that no retaliatory action will be taken. On January 11th, the Rignumor government resolved to make amends to the Lison people by funneling billions of Concord dollars into the Lison economy for facility upgrades, social security, and special programs for miners. Guilder Tambrin, speaking on the Rignumor homeworld of Bazaar, said, "The Lison people have good reason to despise us now ... and we must strive to change that." Guilder Veers, visiting Lison to survey the destruction at Lister colony, said "We are not evil. The destruction of Lister colony is the most savage demonstration of power I have ever seen, and it has irreparably damaged our future relations. We can ask only forgiveness."

In the wake of the Lister tragedy and the botched assassination of President Kevik, several questions remain unanswered.

First, did Admiral Sarn have his government's consent to invade the Oberon system? The Guilders have publicly declared that Sarn planned the invasion himself and acted alone. However, not only did Sarn have the full support of his command staff, but no attempt was made by the Rignumor government to warn the Lison people of the impending invasion. The Guilders are shrewd, but instead of perceiving their thrice-decorated military leader as a potential threat to Rignumor security, they awarded him full command of the Rignumor Third Fleet, assigned him to patrol the borders of Rignumor space, and gave him a back door through which he could strike out into the Verge without sanction.

Every stellar nation prepares some form of military contingency in case diplomacy and political rhetoric fails. The evidence could suggest that Sarn attacked Lison because the Executive Guilder lacked the stomach to implement the military option. However, I believe the Rignumor Guilders not only authorized the invasion but also arranged President Kevik and Vice-president Taylor's assassinations to destabilize the Lison government and facilitate the transfer of power.

Lison media reports that Nariac Domain terrorists have been blamed for the bombing that killed Vice-president Taylor and injured President Kevik. The Nariac Domain has

denied responsibility for the attack, citing that three of their ambassadors were also killed in the bombing. Nariac Commissar Igaamo explained that President Kevik had agreed to meet with the Nariac ambassadors to discuss "future Lison-Nariac relations." Humor is that Kevik scheduled the meeting to discuss Lison's annexation by the Nariac Domain. Although Lison Senator Krella Dosit and several other outspoken representatives of the United Lison State have denied the move toward annexation, Lison Mining Commissioner Paul Nextler was quoted as saying that "Lison could learn a lot from the Nariac Domain. The Nariacs could help pave the road to prosperity and eliminate the avarice that is gradually consuming us."

Both Igaamo and Nextler believe that the bomb was planted by VoidCorp terrorists to prevent the Nariacs from gaining a foothold in the Oberon system. "VoidCorp continues to believe that it can dictate Nariac foreign policy and keep us from expanding into the Verge," said Igaamo. "VoidCorp wants the Oberon system for itself—one need look no further than Hux to see its ambition. The Nariac Domain empathizes with the plight of the Lison workers. We do not want to see them enslaved by the Rigunmors, VoidCorp, or anyone else."

Although I find Commissar Igaamo's rhetoric compelling, the timing of the assassination attempt with the Rigunmor invasion cannot be ignored. When the Nariacs approached Kevik with their plan for annexation, they must have realized that they could never protect Lison from VoidCorp, which had already rooted itself throughout the Oberon system. On June 12th, a group of Nariac military advisors visited the Rigunmor homeworld for reasons that seem clear given what transpired six months later on Lison. Admiral Sarn—the man who would determine the fate of the Oberon system—returned to Bazaar on June 11th to teach a class on Advanced Tactical Command at Striker Naval Academy on Bazaar, at the behest of his academy friend, Admiral Enkaru. Did Sarn meet secretly with the Nariac military advisors to discuss his plan for retaking Lison?

My search for the truth led me to a reporter with the United Lison Network (ULN) who had conducted a thorough investigation the assassination scheme against President Kevik. This reporter provided me with a message recovered from a damaged 3D found at the bomb site. I can neither confirm the authenticity of the message nor confirm the identity of its sender, but the message corroborates my theory that "a team of Nariac military advisors was sent to confer with a Rigunmor admiral named Sarn. There is speculation that we might help the Rigunmors assimilate Lison in exchange for their assistance defending our borders against further VoidCorp intrusion and the promise of a steady rhodium supply. There are many Nariacs who would happily give the Rigunmors what they want if it means freeing themselves from VoidCorp's tyranny."

I know my detractors have accused me of hurling unsubstantiated accusations without providing evidence to justify my incriminations. Granted, there have been no recent

indications of a formal alliance between the Nariacs and the Rigunmors. However, I believe that these stellar nations are merely pawns in a much larger game—a game owned and operated by Celestial Entertainment Limited.

The Coreeno crime syndicate partakes in countless illegal ventures throughout the Stellar Ring, and crimelord Tero Coreeno has clearly set his sights on conquering the Verge. What better way to accomplish this goal than to control the rhodium mines of Lison? After all, the one who controls the rhodium controls travel across the Verge.

It is a known fact that the Coreenos rely on the Rigunmors to help manage their financial empire—after all, the Coreeno family can afford the best, and few are better at managing business finances than the Rigunmors. Tero Coreeno has contacts in the highest echelons of the Consortium—people like Guilder Tambrin, who owns 1% of the stock in Celestial Entertainment Limited and sits on the organization's Executive Board. How many other Rigunmor Guilders besides Tambrin own stock in Coreeno-owned subsidiaries?

Anyone who believes for one minute that the Coreeno family can't manipulate Consortium politics is blind to the truth. I have firm grounds to suspect that Tero Coreeno requested the Rigunmor attack on Lison and that the Rigunmors picked the perfect man to lead the attack and take the fall when the time came. I suspect that Coreeno learned of the Nariac Domain's attempt to annex Lison and instructed the Rigunmors to make a counter-proposal. One could theorize that Coreeno used the Nariac penchant for subterfuge to get at President Kevik in exchange for the promise of rhodium and a commitment from the Rigunmors to help the Nariacs free themselves from VoidCorp tyranny.

Although the Rigunmor invasion of Lison ended in what was perceived as a failure, I know that Celestial Entertainment Limited continues to establish a foothold on Lison through the wholesale and black market distribution of holofilms, holovid programming, and illegal "pleasure cyberware." The dimly lit tunnels of Tribon are rife with people seeking to trade, sell, or procure new forms of entertainment distributed by CEL and its ever-expanding chain of subsidiaries.

MINDARA'S HAUNTED HOUSE

The long-abandoned space station and refueling base that orbits the barren world of Mindara has remained empty ever since the days of GW2. Over the years, pirates and vagrants alike have tried to utilize the facility. Inevitably, all have eventually departed the base and left it to the ghosts that inhabit it. Apparently, not all of Mindara Station's ghosts are just memories and unexplained noises.

"Something strange walks the halls of Mindara Station," one "free trader" from the Oberon system claimed. "I was there once, and I swear I'll never set foot in that hellish place again."

The station, established and managed originally by the Rignunmor nation, once collected solar energy and hydrogen. When the stellar nation was cut off from Oberon during the Second Galactic War, the station was abandoned. It remained empty for nearly 50 years before various parties attempted to take control of it. According to available records, not one group occupied the Mindara Station for more than two weeks. Most abandoned the facility in less than a week.

What drove people away from the station and keeps them away to this day? "It's the ghosts," explained Luri Valcon, a pilot in the Lison Air Guard. "When the Rignunmors left the system and the locals revolted, many of them were killed. One of the worst massacres occurred on Mindara Station. It's said that if you even fly too close to the base you'll hear the screams and cries of pain of the Rignunmors who died there."

An incredible tale to be sure, but it illustrates the underlying fear that people in the Oberon system have of the station. The margin runner who claimed to have recently visited the station expanded upon his tale with an eerie description of unseen watchers and a feeling of rising dread. "I barely stepped out of the docking ring when I

sensed the evil presence within that place," he said. "There was something on that dark, deserted station. It watched us from the shadows and we couldn't see it, but I knew it was there just the same. Maybe I'm a talent and I just don't know it, but I felt that ... thing ... and I knew it wanted me dead." Needless to say, the trader departed the station at the first opportunity. He never actually encountered the source of his unease.

Reports of strange ships in the vicinity of Mindara have also been piling up with Lison and Concord authorities. The captains and crews of freighters, passenger liners, and other ships have logged accounts of "ghost ships" that appear and disappear at will throughout the Spenner-Mindara corridor. While none of these accounts have been firmly linked to the deserted station, more than a few of the reports recorded sightings well within range of the station. Whether or not the strange occurrences are connected, the words of Tekon Xorrne of the Lison Space Authority must be taken into account: "Ghosts don't need spaceships."

Recently, a Concord survey team was sent to explore the station to determine if the base was salvagable. The team had barely begun to make its examination when disaster struck. A hull rupture sent three members of the team

Gridline—TransVerge Network/ Oberon/March 2, 2502

by Sendar Grant, Lison correspondent

I hope that among Avatar's many professed awards, there isn't one for journalistic integrity. I will certainly concur that there are many tales surrounding the history of Mindara Station. But ghosts? What next? Monsters under the bed? Please! We're supposed to be reporters. These stories are little more than fanciful tales spun over time to address our insecurities with the vastness of space. The people of Lison and the rest of the Verge have been cut off for a century from any contact with the rest of our species. The sorts of tales that arise concerning Mindara Station and other places abandoned during the Long Silence are mostly told to scare children and to pass the time in spacer bars throughout the Verge. To give them credence as anything other than a human interest story undercuts everything else Avatar would have us believe.

I can speak only for myself, but I, too, have uncovered oddities out here in the Verge, and I've lived here all my life. Something destroyed the Silver Bell colony out in Hammer's Star, and the Concord's recent run-ins with the alien clicks certainly points to them. This is newsworthy, an enemy that threatens all of us out here, Vergers and Arrivers alike.

What I find particularly disheartening is that Avatar did not research his allegations concerning Mindara Sta-

tion. While there were bloody battles to win Lison's independence, most of these took place on Lison itself. Indeed, there is no record of any massacre occurring aboard Mindara Station. According to records on Lison and backed up by Rignunmor records of the era, the Rignunmors simply abandoned the place when they fled the system to return home to Consortium Space.

Are unexplained events taking place aboard Mindara Station? I doubt it. It seems to me that the reason no one has reopened the station in all these years is because it would be expensive to do so with little hope of recouping such costs. Insystem traffic does not pass the station anymore. As for the Concord survey team, they succumbed to a terrible accident, but probably nothing more, not unexpected on a station that hasn't been maintained or repaired in over a hundred years. Why create something out of nothing, a story where there is only silence?

To add to Avatar's inaccuracies, the Concord has set a date for a return to Mindara Station. On December 4 a second survey team will step aboard the base and finish the evaluation. At that time, barring any more accidents, most Lisons believe that the Concord will reach the same conclusion the ULS reached long ago—there's just no profit in Mindara.

Avatar, whoever you are, if you have truly found something that affects the lives of all of us out here in the Verge, share it with us. Leave the ghost stories to the children and spacers in need of amusement.

hurtling into space. Two of those died in the vacuum, the third is still hospitalized on Lison. Due to the accident, the team had to abandon its survey mission. Locals, of course, blame the station's ghosts. A new mission to the station has yet to be authorized.

FRAAL COLONY SHIP FOUND?

A new mystery has surfaced in the great gulf between Oberon and its sister star, Titania. Initial sensor sweeps and visual investigation have suggested that the derelict vessel recently discovered about 250 AUs from Oberon may be a fraal colony ship. "If it is a fraal ship, it's incredibly ancient," said Gevon Datim of the Concord Bureau of Science and History. "It could be the first real clue to the fraal's forgotten home world in more than 10,000 years." Initial sensor scans and eyewitness accounts describe a vessel that shares much with known fraal technology.

Neither Concord nor Lison authorities have yet determined if the ship has only recently appeared in the area or if it has been drifting in the desolate reaches between the stars for thousands of years. "Not a lot of activity takes place in that region, especially the closer you get to Titania," explained Colonel Turin Zisef of the Lison Air Guard. "The pull of Titania and the powerful stellar winds that swirl around the blue supergiant make it a hazardous area. That derelict could have been there since the time of the original fraal migration. We're just lucky someone spotted it this time or it would still be floating out there all alone."

A joint Mechalus-Rigunmor experiment to design better protection against stellar wind for starships led to the discovery of the mysterious derelict. Aleerin Space Technology, Inc. and General Industries, a Star Consortium company, reported the discovery and jointly filed for salvage rights. The Galactic Concord stepped in and has put everything on hold until a survey expedition can be launched. "Everyone's being real careful with unregistered vessels since that warhulk showed up a few months back," said one local merchant.

The Concord, desperate to keep this from turning into a diplomatic incident, have asked all interested parties to meet with them to determine the best course of action. "The fraal must be represented in this endeavor, as the findings could have consequential bearings on their history and place in the galaxy," said Datim. "Both the Wanderers and the Builders have been notified. We're just waiting for their representatives to arrive before we make any final decisions."

In fact, one source close to the Concord has indicated that the Wanderers have claimed all rights to the vessel. Secretive and living in self-isolation, the Wanderers have come out of their seclusion to take possession of this supposedly ancient fraal colony ship. The Concord may have its hands full keeping this incident from escalating into a small war.

"Time is of the essence, and we have logged a formal protest with the Concord," explained Disevru of Aleerin

Gridline—TransVerge Network/ Oberon/March 2, 2502

by Sendar Grant, Lison correspondent

Is the ship discovered near Titania a fraal colony ship? One prominent fraal scholar finds this conclusion highly unlikely and is speaking out against such unsubstantiated claims.

"The odds that this so-called derelict is actually a fraal colony ship are astronomical," commented Dr. Dron Yuel of the University of Bluefall. "No evidence of any ancient fraal ships or technology have been discovered anywhere in human space, with the exception of the Sol star system. My people long ago came to the realization that we had come from an exceedingly great distance to reach the shores of Earth. For all we know, we are the last of our kind. To claim otherwise now seems rash and extremely unscientific."

The fraal scientist and scholar disputed the claims made by various parties in the Oberon system. "I would urge caution to any who seek to salvage the vessel," he said. "It could be a remnant of the Great War, waiting to explode the moment someone sets foot within its hull. Or, if we are extremely lucky, it could be a Precursor vessel, although none of those have ever been found either."

Dr. Yuel indicated that he is heading to Oberon to take part in the Concord salvage rights hearings. "I shall represent the Builders in this matter, or at least add my voice to others who have made a home among the stellar nations," Dr. Yuel said. "I do not believe this vessel belongs to the fraal, but I must admit I am curious as to its origin and purpose."

Space Technology, Inc. "The derelict is firmly caught within the currents of the solar winds. While it is in no danger of immediately being pulled into the blue star, it will soon be dragged close enough to make any salvage efforts extremely dangerous. Plus, what if there are living fraal aboard that ship? They could be stored in suspended animation, and every day we delay is one day longer they have to risk death in the belly of that desolate vessel."

Not to mention the various pirates, illegal salvage hunters, and others who are preparing to go after the vessel—Concord quarantine or no. "Possession is nine-tenths of the law," stressed Thomas Kind, one of the most influential pirate leaders in the system. "I plan on possessing all tenths of that ship well before the bureaucrats finish with all their damn talking."

In any case, this unidentified derelict could represent one of the greatest scientific discoveries of the century. Who knows what secrets an intact fraal colony ship might contain? Maybe some scrap of fraal history lies inside the great ship. But is such a prize worth battling over?

ADVENTURE HOOK: GHOSTS IN ORBIT

The Concord wants to re-open the Mindara space station. A survey team went in to survey the damage and evaluate the costs and repairs needed to make it habitable not too long ago, but a hull rupture and a couple of injuries forced them to abandon the mission. Now it's time to try again. This time, the heroes draw the mission and must head out toward Mindara ...

BACKGROUND

Someone has finally figured out how to turn a profit with the Mindara space station. Beerg Tuslow, a Star Force lieutenant, has been using his access to the Concord Intelligence Grid to make a hefty sum of money on the side. He's been visiting the Mindara station every few months to trade fleet movement and location data for diamonds and other precious stones. Who is Tuslow trading with? The current occupants of the station—and they aren't ghosts!

A small band of clicks are using the abandoned station as a base for spy activity in the Oberon system. These clicks monitor communications, make visual assessments in their scout ships, and utilize other sensory equipment to gather information. Tuslow encountered these clicks while engaging in his primary hobby; he loves to explore and race the space lanes in his personal star skimmer. On one of his treks, he decided to visit the Mindara station and see if the ghost stories were true. The station was haunted all right, but not by the spirits of the dead. The clicks overwhelmed Tuslow. Thinking quickly, he offered them a 3D from his previous shift, full of Concord ship tracking data. The clicks examined the crystal, then completed the barter by handing Tuslow a small sack containing a handful of diamonds. Thus began a profitable partnership, one that could put the Concord and the Verge out of business!

Tuslow warned the clicks about the previous survey mission. It was the clicks who rigged the hull to blow and forced the survey team to leave before they could discover anything. Now the Concord is sending another team to Mindara. Tuslow and his alien partners will do whatever they have to to keep the secret of the space station intact.

SUPPORTING CAST

There are six clicks aboard the Mindara space station, a pilot, two warriors, and three technicians. They try to frighten humans away before confronting them and

resorting to violence. It is their belief that a face-to-face battle will result in the ruination of their operation, even if they kill these humans, more will follow. To maintain this intelligence operation, the clicks will employ as much subtlety as they are able to in the face of the human threat.

You'll also need to develop Lt. Beerg Tuslow. He learns about the newest mission and decides to provide his partners with whatever help he can. In fact, Tuslow coaches the clicks as to what frightens humans. With his help, the clicks turn the station into a virtual haunted house. Moreover, Tuslow has a new 3D that has the plans for an resupply operation that Star Force is about to establish to support Hammer's Star. He plans to hand this over to the clicks after the new survey team has been scared off—and after he negotiates a larger price for this important data.

In the end, the heroes should be able to discover the secret of Mindara space station, learn the identity of a Star Force traitor, and stop military data from falling into the enemy's hands (or claws, or whatever).

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this read-aloud to start the action, or adapt it to the adventure you've constructed:

Mindara space station drifts above the barren planet, as dark and lifeless as the sphere beneath it. Your mission is to determine whether or not the station can be utilized as a Concord base here in the Oberon system, and analyze what repairs the place needs to make it habitable again.

Your ship docks with the station, landing within the empty hangar bay. The bay has no viable atmosphere; the life support generators in this section of the station must be offline or broken. As you prepare your environment suits and get ready to start your survey, a strange noise floods your vessel. It emanates from the ship's comm units, a static-filled crackle that threatens to damage your ears. Just as it gets so loud you want to scream, the noise suddenly stops. A hum replaces the static, and for a moment you thought you heard words as though whispered from a great distance. Then you hear them again, clearer this time despite the constant hum.

"Get out," the distant voice urges. "Get out while you still ... 'crackle'crackle'click!" The noise, hum, static, and all, abruptly cuts out.

What do you do?



WHAT DESTROYED THE TOPSIDE SETTLEMENT OF DUSK?

While most of the people of Lison live within cities built far beneath the planet's surface, a handful of scattered settlements eke out a living in the terminator between the world's perpetual day- and night-sides. One such settlement is Dusk, a mining and supply station at the foot of the Sunburnt Mountains. Rather, it was one such settlement. Dusk was destroyed not by a force of nature, but by something far more insidious, despite official reports that claim everything is fine on Oberon's fourth planet.

If Lison officials handled information as tightly as they handled rhodium, the incident at Dusk might never have come to my attention. Juxtaposed against VoidCorp's recent insurgence into the system, it paints a disturbing picture of the Oberon system's future.

Before my readers embrace VoidCorp as Oberon's great defender, I caution them to remember that VoidCorp, like any corrupt stellar power, acts in accordance with its own interests. The stellar nation has made a stand against the Hux Defense League (see story on page 68) because the pirates pose an ongoing threat to VoidCorp operations in Oberon. The stellar nation knows that the pirates have no allies. If VoidCorp wants the pirates eradicated, who's going to stand in their way, and who will cry bitter tears when the

pirates are gone? You see my point.

The people of Lison don't trust the stellar nations, and rightfully so. Since Lison declared its separation from the Rignormors in 2373 and established its own government, the stellar nations have tried every trick under the sun to annex the rhodium-rich planet. Rhodium is, after all, the stuff that makes it possible to travel via starfalling, and it exists nowhere in great abundance save on Lison.

In addition to defending what it perceives as its jurisdiction, VoidCorp has dedicated itself to reestablishing its image and improving diplomatic ties with the inhabitants on Lison. I have since come to possess facts that suggest VoidCorp's war against the pirates of the Oberon system is not merely intended to protect VoidCorp's mining interests on Hux or protect the lives of the innocent, although VoidCorp executives would have us believe otherwise. I believe the nation's unprecedented benevolence is an attempt to overshadow the horror of what happened to the Dusk settlement on Lison.

Dusk, a settlement of 135 people located in relative isolation within the narrow terminator band that circles the planet, is situated some 2,500 kilometers from its closest neighbor. On May 3 of last year, the anniversary of the destruction of Silver Bell colony in Hammer's Star, the settlement was obliterated. "People die on Lison," Michael Kevik, President of United Lison said in a recent interview. "Ours is a harsh, dangerous world, but it is our home just

the same. My heart goes out to everyone who lost someone in Dusk, but this is not the same as what happened in Hammer's Star. This wasn't clicks or asteroids or alien invaders."

Theories ranging from a pirate attack, to a click invasion, to a new virus that caused the residents to destroy one another have been put forth as a reason for Dusk's obliteration. A t'sa miner who claimed to be a survivor of the Dusk disaster painted a different picture. "The demon n'sss were responsible," the t'sa, who asked to remain nameless, explained. "They have returned to curse the t'sa for some past sin that my people don't even remember. They came to Dusk because of me, but my hell is that they let me survive to remember the horror."

Many of my detractors have accused me of perpetrating fiction to sway my readers, but I can concoct no fiction that comes remotely close to the fiction spun by this so-called "survivor." The t'sa miner described n'sss battle pods in fascinating detail, matching reports logged in the Verge over 60 years ago as well as more recent sightings of these hostile aliens. "They floated above the domiciles like metal clouds, tendrils hanging just over the domes, weapons extended. We tried to communicate with them, but they

refused to answer, at least with any words we could understand. Instead, they attacked, opening fire upon shielded domes and descending to better utilize the blades and saws jutting from their metal pods."

The t'sa survivor refused to explain how he was able to escape, although he did offer one chilling observation. "The n'sss don't kill all of their victims—at least not right away. I saw them wrap their ghastly tentacles around a few of the settlers and lift them up into their metal pods. Some one has to find them! T'sa legends speak about the n'sss rituals, and believe me, no one—not t'sa nor human nor mechalus—deserves to be subjected to their foul experiments."

T'sa legends speak of many things that go bump in the night. Fortunately, on Lison, the n'sss are not one of them. When questioned about the likelihood of a n'sss attack on Lison, President Kevik replied, "Nonsense! The n'sss have never been observed on Lison before." In fact, there have been no recorded sightings of n'sss anywhere in the system.

So the question remains: What destroyed Dusk? The answer, to which I've already alluded, is VoidCorp. The real question is whether the attack was deliberate or accidental.

Classified information is only as secure as the Grid system protecting it, and Lison's Grid isn't exactly state-of-the-art. My investigation began shortly after my arrival in Tribon. What I learned during my visit might not shock you, but it will certainly open your eyes.

On May 3, an emergency transmission was sent from Dusk and intercepted by a team of oxygen runners on the planet's surface. The message was badly garbled and virtually incomprehensible. The poor reception was blamed on planetary radiation. Although I was unable to obtain the actual recording, one of the oxygen runners who heard the message said that he clearly heard the phrase "silver cloud" and the word "bugs" repeated again and again by whoever sent the distress signal.

The Lison Air Guard deployed a search-and-recovery team to Dusk to investigate. The team concluded that the settlement had been thoroughly bombarded. An analysis of the explosion suggests a missile attack. It is clear, however, that the explosive devices had not been detonated from within the settlement, but rather dropped from above, possibly from low orbit. In addition to the organic and inorganic remains found at the bomb site, the team was able to recover several fragments of something that could not be classified as indigenous or part of an explosive device: tiny fragments of metal resembling, curiously enough, insect shells or carapaces.

I later occasioned to fly over the site and saw from an orbital shuttle what looked like a series of ever-deepening craters. Unfortunately, I was unable to examine the site more closely. Suffice to say, no one could have survived such terrible devastation, which brings me to our so-called t'sa "survivor."

Evidently my investigation of the Dusk incident had not gone unnoticed. An unidentified contact in Tribon—some-



ORGANISM OMEGA

STR 2 (d4+0) INT 2 (d4+0)
 DEX 11 (d6+8) WIL 2 (d4+0)
 CON 12 (d4+10) PER 1 (d4-1)
 Durability: -/2/1 Action check: 8+/7/3/1
 Move: wa 4, fl 24, gl 18 # Actions: 1
 Reaction score: Ord/1 Last resorts: 0

Attacks

Mandibles* 8/4/2 d4w per phase LI/O

Defenses

+1 resistance modifier vs. ranged attacks
 Immune to radiation
 Impervious to stun damage
 Armor: d4 [LI], d4+1 [HI], d4-1 [En]

Skills

Acrobatics [10]–*flight* [12]; Stamina [12]–*endurance* [15]; Survival [12]; Awareness [2]–*perception* [5].

* The razor-sharp mandibles of Organism Omega have monofilament edges that enable the insects to cut through most materials, including light starship armor. The insects cannot penetrate moderate or heavy starship armor.

Organism Omega is a collective of artificial, invasive life-forms developed by VoidCorp. These swarms resemble flying cockroaches except that they employ the same integrated biocircuitry as the mechalus. Each drone measures 5 centimeters in length.

Organism Omega employs a collective mind that enables various swarms to link as one, and their physiology enables them to exist in an otherwise desolate and uninhabitable environment, by allowing the drones to feed on one another while the “queens” lay countless eggs to ensure future generations of organisms.

VoidCorp recently attempted to populate the surface of Lison with swarms of these organisms. VoidCorp’s prelude to invasion was initially conducted under a veil of secrecy. Cargo containers packed with hundreds of “sleeping” Omega nests were brought to Lison. These resilient containers were jettisoned from orbit by rhodium transports and other visiting ships. After colliding

with the world below, the compartments broke apart, and a simple radio signal activated the swarms within. VoidCorp’s intention was to eradicate all life on Lison’s surface and cutting off the subterranean colonies’ oxygen supply. Without oxygen, the population would die, allowing VoidCorp to lay claim the rhodium-rich world.

The VoidCorp scientists created a “kill switch” to deactivate Organism Omega once the organism had successfully eradicated the planet’s inhabitants. This radio signal triggered an overload in the organisms’ circuitry, effectively destroying them. Fortunately for the people of Lison, the threat of Organism Omega was discovered and thwarted. The kill switch was triggered prematurely. However, for reasons no one can yet explain, one swarm was not deactivated. The rogue swarm attacked the settlement of Dusk, and while some believe that VoidCorp bombed the settlement to conceal all evidence of Omega’s attack, VoidCorp actually alerted the Lison government to the rogue swarm. The bombing of Dusk was actually executed by the Lison Air Guard under the authority of President Kevik, who, knowing that the settlement could not be saved, wanted to ensure the organism’s destruction.

VoidCorp has provided Lison with financial restitution for the damage caused by Organism Omega, which it claims to have unleashed accidentally. Although the stellar nation seems particularly eager to rebuild its relationship with Lison, it continues to test Organism Omega on various other unsettled worlds throughout the Verge.

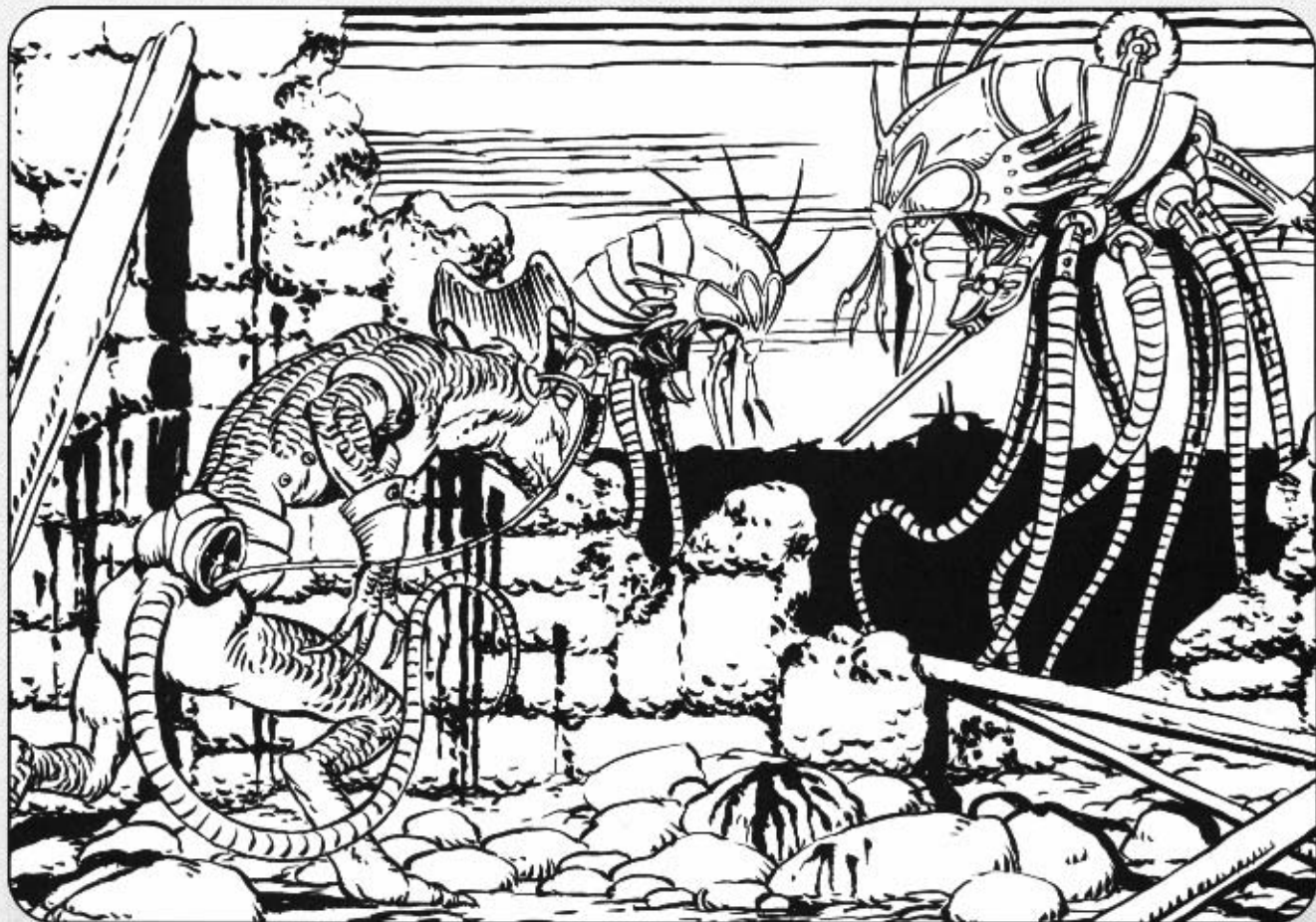
Each swarm is faintly luminescent, as each insect emits a radiant bioelectric field. Collectively, they generate a massive energy field that disrupts all communications within one kilometer. Swarms vary in size, from several hundred meters to several kilometers in diameter.

Once a swarm has descended upon its intended target, it generates a massive static discharge, shorting out electrical equipment and inflicting d6+6s to anyone within 200 meters of the swarm. The discharge is strong enough to disrupt even shipboard power systems.

The swarm can unleash an electrical discharge once every 10 rounds. It uses this attack to cripple or stun its prey before moving in for the kill. The insects can chew through fibrous e-suits in one round, devouring the individual within by inflicting an automatic d4w each phase (up to 4d4w in a single four-phase round).

one whom I believe suffered a personal loss at Dusk but who wanted to remain anonymous—provided me with some of the answers I sought: classified files verifying that the t’sa survivor was, in fact, VoidCorp Employee KN453 329UD. In the list of personnel stationed at Dusk, Employee KN453 329UD was identified as a structural engineer named Kemilik. Given the nature of Lison’s antiquated grid

system, I wouldn’t be at all surprised to learn that VoidCorp gridshadows had successfully infiltrated Kemilik into Dusk’s personnel registry after the attack, adding to the fiction that he had lived at the settlement for the past year. Why would VoidCorp go through the trouble, you ask? For the express reason of ensuring a “living witness” to the carnage.



My suspicions are further substantiated by the t'sa's own deposition, which I've discovered is nothing more than a clever amalgam of two depositions taken from survivors of a n'sss attack near Zin Point in 2436. KN453 329UD quoted passages of these earlier depositions verbatim. At least we can say that VoidCorp employees are well briefed. Based on this evidence, I am compelled to postulate that VoidCorp conjured the story of the n'sss attack to hide its own grievous misdemeanors, using KN453 329UD as their parrot.

Though President Kevik has placed no stock in the n'sss threat, he has quietly issued an order to tighten security. Other surface settlements have been placed on constant guard, and the airlocks to the subterranean colonies have been reinforced with extra security personnel. "Maybe Kevik is giving more credence to these stories than he claims," said one Tribon citizen. "These preparations alone should tell you it wasn't no pirates who scragged Dusk."

Pirates, of course, aren't the problem. VoidCorp has just about seen to that. One might suspect that President Kevik is concerned about VoidCorp's claim to the planet Hux and the growing VoidCorp presence in Oberon. One might also suspect that he knows the truth about Dusk but does not wish to fight VoidCorp on the diplomatic battlefield—that it's easier to make amends and quietly discuss recompense rather than reveal the truth and risk provoking further antipathy

among the Lison populace toward the stellar nations. It is known that President Kevik has been meeting with various stellar nations, looking for allies to help protect Lison's rhodium supply and guarantee Lison's future once the rhodium runs dry. With the foothold VoidCorp has established and the efficient manner in which it runs its business interests, I find it within the realm of possibility that the stellar nation might someday annex Lison, providing the security it needs in the face of more hostile threats from beyond.

So the question remains: Why did VoidCorp destroy Dusk? Unfortunately, I have no concrete answer. Perhaps there was more to Dusk than met the eye—something that VoidCorp perceived as a threat. Perhaps its destruction was part of a test. The answer, I think, lies in the conspicuous metal insect remains found amid the debris. While I have not seen the remains and cannot verify their existence, a former oxygen runner confided that he'll never set foot on Lison's surface again, not after seeing what he saw: "Our team had just secured a supply of oxygen. We circled around a valley, and I remember the ground was covered with glittering pieces of metal. I reached down and picked up a piece. I swear, it looked like a metal bug casing. They all did. Just these small, empty shells scattered as far as the eye could see. It really creeped me out."

Veteran shuttle pilot Cassandra Martin describes seeing on numerous occasions "great silver clouds of dust" as she was making her descent to the planet's surface. "Each time

I got too close to a damn cloud, the instruments in the shuttle would go wild, and I'd have to veer away. Those silver clouds screw up everything—guidance systems, sensors, communications, everything."

Lison's surface is harsh and deadly in the best of circumstances. Radioactive, baked dry by the ceaseless bombardment of Oberon's rays on one side, frozen in perpetual darkness on the other, Lison is otherwise lifeless. It's the perfect training ground for a new organism designed to survive even the most hostile climates. Where better to test such a weapon than on a planet where most of the indigenous lifeforms live underground?

I'm sure the facts I've uncovered here are enough to incur VoidCorp's eternal wrath, but I've already made more than a few enemies, so what's a few more? The truth is, to survive underground, the people of Lison depend on oxygen extracted from the planet's surface. Any threat that keeps the runners from reaching their precious oxygen could spell doom for the entire world, leaving a planet rich with rhodium ripe for the taking in a system already half-conquered by VoidCorp.

N'sss indeed.

VOIDCORP SAVES THE DAY NEAR HUX

VoidCorp, in cooperation with United Lison and the Galactic Concord, has begun a massive mining project on the planet Hux. Perhaps faster and more efficiently than either party expected, VoidCorp has placed 24 satellites in orbit above Hux. Each satellite is armed with a state-of-the-art drilling laser capable of blasting the planet's surface in the unending quest for rhodium. Two orbital stations have also been erected. These stations serve as the primary headquarters for VoidCorp's Oberon ventures. Miners and mining vessels constantly travel between Hux's surface and the orbital stations, pausing only long enough for the drilling lasers to scour the planet.

In addition to the orbital stations and satellite system, VoidCorp has placed one frigate and two corvettes at Hux to deter pirates and help protect the nation's interests. While some members of United Lison have expressed concern over the sheer number of workers and equipment—as well as the speed in which they were placed—that VoidCorp has sent to Hux, it must be said that not everything this corporate nation does is just out of its own interest. Indeed, its citizenry consists of the same mix of good and bad as most other nations; no more, no less. Already, the Oberon system has benefitted from VoidCorp's presence in many measurable ways.

New computer equipment and upgrades for environmental systems have already been provided to Lison, and more is on the way. The corporate nation has even agreed to share its latest mining technology developments with Lison, which promises to make life on the rhodium-rich planet just a little easier in the years ahead. Now, United Lison must pay for these improved technologies, but VoidCorp is offer-

ing vast discounts and goods that would not have been available had the two sides not reached an agreement concerning Hux.

The added muscle that VoidCorp has brought to the system has also paid high dividends of late. Two separate incidents involving pirates have turned out well due to the timely and much-appreciated intervention on the part of VoidCorp combat vessels.

The first occurred December 12, 2501, when the ULS freighter *Strong Wind* was attacked by unidentified pirate ships while traveling in the region between the orbits of Lison and Hux. The pirates hit fast and hard, damaging the *Strong Wind's* insystem propulsion system. Before the pirates could move in closer and board the disabled freighter, the VoidCorp corvettes *Positive Revenue* and *Fiscal Responsibility* swooped in from the dark side of Hux. Striking as fast as and with even greater accuracy than the pirates, the VoidCorp vessels used surprise to best advantage. One pirate ship was destroyed outright, while two others took heavy amounts of damage in that initial attack run. As the corvettes turned to make a second run, the remaining pirates broke off. The corvettes allowed them to flee, deciding instead to offer much-needed aid to the damaged freighter.

The second incident occurred January 17. On this date, a privately chartered luxury tour vessel was working its way through the Oberon system and had passed the orbit of Hux on its way to view the outer planets. It has become an increasingly common practice for rich, bored stellar nobles and other people of wealth from Old Space to charter luxury liners so they can explore the fringes of human space in the comfort to which they are accustomed. These liners usually travel to the Verge with a fortress ship, then break away to see the sights under their own power. Eventually, they hook up again with a fortress ship for the return trip to the Stellar Ring. In between, the vessels starfall from system to system, visiting exotic spots along the way. The Concord frowns upon these tours, as the liners have only the most basic armaments with which to defend themselves, but so far such enterprises remain legal. The Concord has only declared two of the Verge's main star systems off limits to tour ships: Algernon and Hammer's Star. That doesn't mean an adventurous captain and crew with a high-paying customer won't dare to disregard these restrictions, but it doesn't happen often.

The incident in question centered around the Borealin charter *Philosopher's Stone*. The vessel was scheduled to visit the system's two gas giants, Kreshaw and Werth, before making starfall for Aegis and a rendezvous with the Concord fortress ship *Kordava*. Before the *Philosopher's Stone* could reach Kershaw, pirate ships claiming to be part of the Hux Defense League surrounded the luxury liner and demanded it prepare to be boarded. While pirates often board such vessels for the purposes of relieving the passengers of some of their cash and personal possessions, the Hux pirates have a reputation for engaging in more violent

and depraved pastimes. For this reason, the crew of the *Philosopher's Stone* decided to make a run for it. Though they made the most of the effort, the civilian craft was no match for the faster, more maneuverable pirate ships. The crew did manage to get a distress call out through the jamming measures the pirates were employing, alerting the VoidCorp frigate *Executive Forecast* of the situation. While the arrival of the VoidCorp ships (the frigate brought one of the corvettes along for company) caused an initial swell of panic in the pirates, they quickly regrouped and decided to take on the warships. The so-called Hux Defense League had earlier declared war upon VoidCorp interests in the system and these pirate captains figured a war needed to have its battles. This one went to VoidCorp.

The heavily armed *Executive Forecast* easily dispatched three of the smaller pirate ships in the first exchange of weapons fire. *Positive Revenue* inflicted heavy damage upon a fourth ship, and the remaining pirates turned to flee. The frigate remained in the area to wrap up the loose ends; it took prisoners from the two relatively intact pirate ships that survived the battle, then destroyed the empty hulls so the vessels could not be salvaged. Meanwhile, *Positive Revenue* escorted the *Philosopher's Stone* to a safe position from which it could make starfall. While the passengers never got to see Oberon's gas giants, they did get to witness the superior firepower VoidCorp has brought to the system.

In related news, VoidCorp representatives in system have issued this statement concerning the Hux Defense League: "According to both Concord and United Lison officials, there is no recognized organization or authority called the Independent Union of Hux, and there is no recognized Hux Defense League. Hux has been given over to VoidCorp legally and through due process for the express purposes of developing the world and making its resources available to the galaxy at large. We see Magnor Pendrill as a pirate, criminal, and terrorist. We do not recognize his declaration of war. We have, however, issued a warrant for Pendrill's arrest. VoidCorp will not tolerate the actions of pirates within or around its space, and any such actions will be dealt with swiftly and with extreme force. There will be no additional warnings."

Magnor Pendrill, self-proclaimed Admiral of the Hux Defense League, could not be reached for comment.

SECRET ORLAMU DOCUMENT POINTS TO PRECURSOR SITE ON WERTH

Much speculation has surrounded the Orlamu Theocracy's petition to secure the rights to develop and administer Werth and its moons. The Galactic Concord has already given its go-ahead, clearing away one obstacle. President Michael Kevik of United Lison has not yet made a decision, despite repeated requests by Orlamu diplomats and the Orlamu Prelate in Tribon. It all comes down to, what makes the gas giant and its moons so interesting to the Orlamus?

Gridline—TransVerge Network/ Oberon/March 3, 2502

by Sendir Grant, Lison correspondent.

Once again the sensationalist Avatar has presented only one side of a story in order to build his conspiracy case. In an effort to provide readers with a clearer picture of the facts, this reporter spoke to Prelate Derez, the spiritual and political leader of the Orlamu people in the Oberon system.

"We see an opportunity in the Oberon system and we have decided to pursue it," explained Prelate Derez from his office in the Orlamist temple in Tribon. "For us, it is just good business," he said, dismissing the notion that the Orlamu people are following some obscure prophecy in their quest to win the development rights to Werth and its moons.

"The First Prophet produced a number of documents that have survived to the current day, but I know of no secret writings such as these so-called Prophet Scrolls," the Prelate went on to say. "If there are ruins found on any of the moons, we will certainly share our research with the scientific community. However, we would not be willing to pay security fees simply to acquire more ancient artifacts. We have plenty to study in other parts of the Verge and, indeed, throughout Orlamu territory."

"It's simple," said Paul Nextler, United Lison Mining Commissioner, "revenge. The Orlamu want to strike back at their old enemies back in the Rignunmor Star Consortium. There's a lot of bad blood between the two, and it doesn't all date back to the Great War. Some of it goes back even further, and some of it is more recent. Anyway, what would hurt the Rignunmors more than letting a hated rival get a foothold in their old stomping grounds. Add the VoidCorp settlements at Hux and I'm certain the Executive Guilders is about ready to leap out the window of a tall building."

A secret data file document suggests another answer, however. The document, part of the Prophet Scrolls of the Orlamu faith, presents a prophecy concerning Werth and its moons. "The Prophet Scrolls are among the most holy texts of the faith," explained theology expert Marel Kelway of the University of Bluefall. "They contain all kinds of hidden knowledge, revelations, and prophecies as put forth by the original First Prophet and his mystics."

Very few people outside the Orlamist hierarchy have seen the Prophet Scrolls, let alone suspect that such documents exist. They were supposedly written by Jeff Sendir, founder and First Prophet of the Orlamu nation. The document is said to contain Sendir's visions, predominantly those he experienced during his first trip into drivespace and a few select omens he experienced later in life. Between the years of 2211 and 2216, Sendir worked feverishly to

record his drivespace visions and to compile the divinations of his inner circle of mystics. Though it is said that Sendir wanted to share these glimpses of the Divine Unconscious with the galaxy, First Prophet Walen, who succeeded Sendir, decided that the holy words were too dangerous for the uninitiated. He locked them away and they have stayed that way until the present day.

A portion of the Prophet Scrolls were released to me by an unidentified source. I have had the text checked by experts on Sendir and the early days of the Orlamu nation, and have been reasonably convinced of their authenticity. On Werth and its moons, locations that weren't named or even discovered at the time of Sendir's reign, the Scrolls had this to say (spellings are uncorrected, from the original text):

"I saw a ball of bright green gas hanging in the sky; there was a hooded figure beside me, alien, its voice speaking directly into my mind; Worth, it said, and emerald lightning flashed; then I was standing on the highest mountaintop, within the gates of the Divine City; and the alien said 'Holy, Holy, Holy is this place, for it basks in the Hymn of the Divine Unconscious.'"

Certain high-ranking Orlamists believe that this verse is just the beginning of an important prophecy concerning the Verge and the current era. They believe that the cryptic words point to a holy site on the moon Hymn, which orbits the gas-giant Werth. To date, no accurate data concerning the moon has been collected due to the thick cloud cover that shrouds it.

"The Divine City waits for us atop the highest mountain on Hymn," proclaimed one devout Orlamist. "The First Prophet knew this and his writings tell us that we must inhabit the City before the Dark Cloud descends upon the Verge."

The full prophecy was unavailable for review, and the Orlamist refused to speculate on what the "Dark Cloud" was. Needless to say, this could be why the Orlamu are so determined to win the rights to Werth and its moons. The secret of the Divine Unconscious may be waiting for them beneath the thick clouds of nitrogen and neon that blanket the moon called Hymn.

THE SOURCE IN OBERON

I was followed to my preappointed rendezvous in Tribon. Someone shadowed me through the narrow corridors and confined spaces of the city buried beneath tons of irradiated Lison dirt and rock. Whoever it was always maintained a discreet distance, but never totally disappeared from view as I made my way toward the ever-crowded UnderMarket. When I entered the quiet, dimly lit section of tunnel, I was sure my shadow was going to strike. The truth was still eluding me and the mystery remained, but part of me almost welcomed the coming blade strike or charge pistol blast. I tensed but continued walking, and a moment later I emerged into the UnderMarket.

No attack came. When I turned back to the tunnel, I noticed that my shadow was gone. Perhaps they want me to know they're still watching. Maybe they hoped simply to frighten me to death. Either way, I shrugged off the strange encounter and started looking for my meeting place.

Near a small shop called DownBelow Beth's, my source made contact. I recognized him immediately but was surprised nonetheless. "Welcome, journalist," the t'sa said, obviously struggling to maintain as calm an exterior as possible. Of course, that only made him look more suspicious. I hoped no one was watching, but I knew someone was. A figure garbed in black, tall and gaunt and pale. My shadow.

"The demon n'sss have found my people," the t'sa said, "and the time has come to look again to the practices of the past. We need to perform a clutch ritual, a cleansing to drive the demons away."

His words were nonsense. I told him what I already knew: he was a VoidCorp employee trying to bury the truth about Dusk under the lie of a n'sss attack, the n'sss were no threat to the Oberon system, and he was using me to propagate the lies of a brutal, Machiavellian stellar nation.

He produced a 3D crystal and examined it for a moment. It looked blood red under the artificial light of the UnderMarket. "Perhaps a blood sacrifice would be prudent." He slipped the 3D into my hand. The t'sa started to walk away, but he paused. "I am not all that you think I am. Know this: When a newborn begins to emerge from its shell, a pattern of fine cracks appears across the surface of the egg. You can learn a lot from those patterns." He looked at the crystal as I dropped it into a pocket. "Find the pattern, journalist. Find it before the shell cracks open."

I contemplated his words as I watched him walk away. Only then did it occur to me that the t'sa might be telling the truth, or something close to it. I can't tell you specifically what I was thinking at that moment, but later, as I traveled to Hammer's Star, I puzzled over the file of Employee KN453 329UD.

Ninety-five percent of VoidCorp employees are low-ranking drones. Employee KN453 329UD was different. His KN designation suggested someone more important and far less expendable. I began to question how his file had come into my possession so easily. Perhaps I wasn't given the file to expose the conspiracy surrounding Dusk or the sinister threats to Lison. As I have said before, there exists a greater threat to the Verge beyond anything posed by one stellar nation. That danger is still out there, lurking in the darkness. Perhaps this is the truth VoidCorp wants me to see. I don't know.

As I left Oberon, I could see the shell beginning to crack. Lines were forming across the surface of the egg, but it was too early to see the pattern. The truth had not yet emerged. When I was half way to Algemron, I realized that a pattern could only form once I'd unraveled the greatest mystery of the Verge: the truth about Silver Bell in the Hammer's Star system. I guess it was inevitable that my road would take me there.

CHAPTER 11: TYCHUS

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/April 9, 2502**
by Avatar

As perhaps the most isolated system in the Verge, Tychus has been forced to fend for itself since the middle of the Second Galactic War. However, as a logical forefront for any push toward the Perseus Arm, Tychus represents a valuable system for any forward-thinking power.

Certainly the Orlamu knew that when they settled the colony of Mount Illumination on the planet Yellow Sky in the 24th century. Unfortunately, the Long Silence served to reduce the colonists to a state of technology resembling Earth's Renaissance period. Still, they persevered, and since the arrival of the *Monitor*, the Orlamu Theocracy has poured substantial funds into the rebuilding of Yellow Sky's economy.

ORLAMU SHIPPING PROBLEMS

With the colony in dire need of supplies, it's no surprise that the loss of two of the four major shipments on their way to Tychus has had a dramatic impact on the inhabitants. It's estimated that these two shipments had a cash value of over \$150 million, and the Orlamu aren't happy about the losses.

It's generally believed that pirates—perhaps operating out of one of the fringe worlds orbiting Tychus—are to blame, though others have pointed their fingers at rival stellar nations such as VoidCorp or the Thuldans. After all, the Orlamu aren't the only ones who recognize a strategic system when they see it. There's also the possibility that these losses represent an increase in the reach of the clicks—perhaps these alien beings see Tychus as an easier target than Hammer's Star?

Though the Orlamu have dispatched additional ships to ensure the safety of future cargo transports, they've also begun openly advertising for "independent" assistance. Anybody who's interested should contact colony officials on Yellow Sky for more information.

SABOTAGE SLOWS CONSTRUCTION

Colony administrators reported a few days ago that the problems plaguing the new Hopewell Spaceport (named for the home planet of most of the original Tychus colonists) have now been officially designated as sabotage. Over the past six months, delays have resulted from events such as missing equipment, broken machinery, work slowdowns, and stolen supplies.

It was the most recent problem—a mistimed explosive charge that cost three workers' lives—that moved the occurrences from "coincidence" to "sabotage" in the minds of

colony officials. All told, these delays have cost tens of thousands of dollars and weeks of lost time, in addition to numerous injuries and the three recent deaths.

With dozens of construction projects underway, it was only a matter of time before something like this happened. Whether these problems are connected in any way with the two lost Orlamu shipments is unknown. Personally, I wouldn't put it past the Nariacs to be involved in an attempt to subvert the legal authority of the Orlamu. The two work slowdowns that have occurred recently stink of their "Workers of the galaxy, unite" dogma. Also, though the Nariac Domain has virtually no holdings in the Verge, Tychus might represent a juicy possibility to "get a jump" on the rest of Old Space in the direction of the Perseus Arm. If the Nariacs can get there first, they might be able to practice their beliefs on some new species.

Whoever's responsible, the Orlamu have taken steps to protect their interests, hiring a number of additional security personnel. Over half these new guards come from the local weren population. The weren see a great deal of honor in protecting the workers from the cowardly saboteurs.

THE STONEBURNERS

Down in the valleys and swamps of Yellow Sky, far below the lowest safe altitude for human habitation, can be found the ruins of another Precursor civilization. Dubbed the "Stoneburners," these creatures walked the planet hundreds of millions of years ago.

Because of the poisonous and corrosive atmosphere at these low altitudes, exploration of the ruins has been limited. Still, scientists have learned much from their short expeditions, and dozens of major sites have been discovered. In addition, the remains of several large complexes have been located in higher regions, though these are in far worse repair than the lower sites.

From their research, it appears that the Stoneburners were large cephalopods—multi-tentacled creatures that moved easily through the swampy lowlands of Yellow Sky—and that they enjoyed technological breakthroughs that baffle our best scientists. Without the benefit of fire or metallurgy—combustion is impossible in the atmosphere of the lowlands, and metal-bearing ores couldn't survive the chlorinated air—the Stoneburners instead developed unknown methods of shaping stone to form their buildings, as well as genetic manipulation, dimensional travel, and matter transmission. It's a good thing they're gone, as we'd have a hard time competing with such an advanced species for territory.

But are they truly gone? Still-active defenses have been noted at some Stoneburner sites, suggesting that these Precursors might have been expecting to return. After all, why bother turning on the alarm if you're not coming back to your house?

With the recent influx of resources, the number of expeditions into the lowlands has increased noticeably. Xenoarchaeologists from far and wide have come to Yellow Sky with the hopes of making the discovery of a lifetime. Of course, the inherent dangers of such a trek—including the poisonous atmosphere, the deadly sirens and speargrass, and the truly horrific dimensional horrors—means that mer-

cenary guards are as common a sight as scientists. Most expeditions bring at least a few well-armed individuals along, and the better-funded groups hire a dozen or more at prices of \$1000 a day or more! It's become known around the Verge that in Tychus, "If you've got a gun, you've got a job." Of course, a fair number of these hired guns don't survive to spend their salary ...

ADVENTURE HOOK: THREE'S A CROWD

The heroes are part of an expedition into the lowlands. It's up to you to decide whether the heroes are the scientists, the hired guns, or both.

BACKGROUND

The lowlands of Yellow Sky offer the potential of immense riches in the form of Stoneburner ruins. No world in the Verge holds so many intact Precursor sites, and the heroes are looking to cash in. They may be explorers or scientists, searching the swamps for knowledge. Or they may be mercenaries, hired by an archaeological expedition to provide protection from the native hazards.

Whatever the reason for the heroes' presence, they're not the only ones investigating this particular region. A team of VoidCorp scientists looking for alien artifacts have beaten them to the site. As if that weren't enough, a n'sss science group is rapidly moving in.

SUPPORTING CAST

Statistics will be necessary for any other members of the group accompanying the heroes (whether scientists or additional hired guns). Use Ordinary-quality Scientist and Soldier statistics from Chapter 6: The Supporting Cast of the *Gamemaster Guide*.

The VoidCorp group numbers four scientists and eight trained soldiers. The group is led by Dr. Yrla Virden, a Tech Op who should be a few levels above the heroes. The three other scientists include a biologist, an archaeologist, and a chemist—none higher than 2nd level. The soldiers should be a formidable challenge; set their level about one or two below the heroes at most. They are armed with chainswords and laser SMGs. Each member of the group wears a hard e-suit and carries plenty of supplies; the scientists also carry laser pistols.

The n'sss are described on pages 126-127 of the *Alien Compendium*. The science group is composed of five n'sss in their survival pods—one science pod, two aerial attack pods, and two light attack pods. Why the n'sss are on Yellow Sky isn't clear, though they obviously have some interest in the Stoneburner ruins. It is up to the Gamemaster to decide whether the science group's interest is more than scholarly.

The VoidCorp team prefers to work in secret. When they encounter the heroes, a fight is likely. However, once the n'sss appear, VoidCorp will call for a truce while they and the heroes battle the alien invaders. In fact, neither VoidCorp nor the heroes are likely to defeat the n'sss without the other's help.

During the fight, Dr. Virden will break away from the combat to enter the ruins. It is up to the Gamemaster to decide what (if anything) she finds. If the combined heroes-VoidCorp alliance is too successful, have her accidentally unleash a dimensional horror. On the other hand, if the humans need some help, she might discover an alien artifact that enables her to crack the armored pods of the n'sss, exposing them to the poisonous atmosphere of the lowlands.

Assuming the n'sss are defeated, the heroes may face a difficult decision. Both they and the VoidCorp team probably suffer from injuries and may be incapable of completing the survey alone. However, can either group truly trust the other? Be sure to play up the tension—at least one of the VoidCorp scientists (assuming any survive) will lobby sincerely for cooperation. If Dr. Virden's already found something, the heroes might rightfully claim that they deserve a share of the find. Whatever happens, it's bound to be interesting.

TRIGGER SCENE

Use this read-aloud to kick-start the action when the heroes reach the ruins:

After days of slogging through the toxic swamps of Yellow Sky, the dim light filtering through the green mists reveal the target of your quest. Dark stone monoliths thrust up from the muck, standing like petrified giants before you. The excitement of your discovery is overwhelmed by the awesome realization that these structures are older than the human race itself. How magnificent indeed must their creators have been to ensure that these would survive for uncounted millions of years?

Your reverie is interrupted by signs of movement across an open "courtyard." Several humanoid figures wearing protective suits like your own seem to be surveying the area. Some carry rifles, while others hold what must be scientific equipment.

What do you do?

CHAPTER 12: ALGEMRON

Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/May 16, 2502

by Avatar

Everyone knows the story of Algemron. Two Earth-like planets in the same star system, claimed by rival powers during the years following the First Galactic War, only to become the bitterest of enemies as their patron states lined up on opposite sides in the Second Galactic War. Back in Old Space, the Second Galactic War has been over for nearly forty years ... but no one ever told the Alitarins and Galvinites. Their fleets and armies are locked in a struggle so fierce and unrelenting that even the Concord can't pull them apart.

From Tendril to Aegis I have followed rumors, tips, speculations, and hunches, seeking the final piece of the puzzle, the hard evidence that I need in order to give my investigation weight and validity. In this day and age, you can dump anything you want to on the Grid—baseless accusations, slander, libel, anything you care to say. It's nothing but bilious vapor without proof. I've long abandoned any pretense toward journalistic integrity in my investigations, hoping that someday I'd find the payoff, the proof I need to justify my year-long inquest.

Algemron is the place I found it.

PARIAH STATION

In the dark, lightless outskirts of the Algemron system Pariah Station orbits Palshizon, a frozen slushball of a planet. The station itself is a cheerless place, an old surveillance post that the Concord purchased from the Thuldans for this job. It was refitted in the shipyards of Kendai, then towed to this remote spot by a Concord deep-space hauler. Hundreds of Concord diplomatic, military, and technical personnel staff the station; at any given time, two to three times that number of itinerant traders and merchants are temporarily quartered in Pariah Station's spartan accommodations, waiting for their opportunity to join a Concord-protected convoy bound for either of the two warring planets.

Pariah Station was the first part of Algemron that I saw, travelling aboard a battered old Alaundrin drivefreighter bound for Alitar. My host was a retired Thuldan Warlion even more battered than her ship, a gruff gray-haired woman named Jasa Durenova. Passage aboard the *Glory of Andrakar* was surprisingly expensive; not many independent captains choose to advertise the fact that they're bound for Alitar, on the off chance that the Galvinite Intelligence Directorate might catch wind of it and arrange for a raiding cruiser to intercept the cargo before it comes under the Concord's protection.

While Captain Durenova could have made starrise a dozen light-hours closer to her destination by plotting an

arrival point somewhere in the inner system, she explained to me that it was extremely dangerous to do so. "The Galvinites control the skies over Alitar," she said. "If we simply popped in a few million kays from Alitar, we might get lucky, and we might not. The Galvinites are in the habit of shooting first and asking questions later."

"But the *Glory of Andrakar* is a non-belligerent ship," I pointed out.

Captain Durenova laughed. "If we're bound for Alitar, the Galvinites take that as hostile intent. No, I'll just wait for a Concord escort before I sail into those waters."

"The Concord Neutrality Patrol intimidates the Galvinites enough to guarantee safe passage?"

"On the contrary, it's deliberately under-gunned. The Galvinites could wipe out the Patrol and torch Pariah Station in a matter of days, if they were so inclined," Durenova said. "But that's just what the Concord would like them to do. A Galvinite attack against Concord ships or installations would free the Concord to roll into Algemron with dozens of major warships and thousands of troops. They'd be free to intervene in the conflict."

I thought about the men and women of the Concord Star Force who manned this lonely station and crewed these inadequate escorts. What did they think about their superiors setting them up as sitting ducks, inviting the belligerent worlds of Galvin and Alitar to lash out at them?

When we docked with Pariah, we learned that the next convoy was leaving in three days. I immediately decided to nose around the station for leads.

THE HUNT FOR THE *RELENTLESS*

Little is left of the proud Alitarin Navy. Over decades of warfare, almost all of their heavy ships have been lost in action. The Galvinites now hold a clear command of the spaceways in the Algemron system, so the Alitarins adopted the classic strategy of the weaker power—they turned their remaining warships to commerce raiding and built fleets of missile boats to contest Galvin's control of the skies.

The largest and most powerful Alitarin warship still at large is the battlecruiser *Relentless*. Late last year the *Relentless* managed to break out of Algemron, scattering the Galvinite forces and escaping into open space. For months now, the cruiser has destroyed Galvinite shipping wherever she found her prey, causing millions of dollars in losses and forcing Galvin's Primary Command to assign dozens of heavy warships to escort duties outside the system. Several task forces were also dispatched to hunt down the *Relentless* and end her daring campaign.

Just last week, an independent freighter—the *Dierden*—made starrise at Pariah Station with a remarkable story to tell. Bound for Algemron from Lucullus, she was laying over at the sparsely settled Crow system when the *Relentless* arrived. The *Dierden's* captain quickly produced docu-

mentation showing that he was carrying goods to Alitar; Captain Loefstedt of the *Relentless* then gave the *Dierden* a number of documents, letters, and communiques to carry for him. More mysteriously, several *Relentless* officers escorted a number of heavy, sealed crates aboard the *Dierden* and remained on board to escort their unknown cargo back to Alitar.

While both ships were still recharging their stardrives at Crow, one of the Galvinite task forces dogging the *Relentless* arrived. The *Tamurlane*, *Nestor*, and *Chiron* moved in to attack. Unable to flee while her stardrive was recharging, the *Relentless* turned to fight. A tremendous battle ensued, in which the Alitarin battlecruiser sustained heavy damage—but the *Relentless* destroyed the *Nestor*, crippled the *Chiron*, and finally drove off the *Tamurlane*.

At the conclusion of the battle, the *Dierden* departed for Alitar, carrying the heavily-guarded cargo from the *Relentless*. The battlecruiser limped away and hasn't been spotted since; presumably the remaining Galvinite cruisers effected repairs and set off in pursuit again.

Before the *Relentless* appeared at the Crow system, her last known position had been Mantebtron. Mantebtron, of course, is a remote system of no commercial importance; certainly there would be no Galvinite merchants there to capture or destroy. But Mantebtron is the location of High Mojave, a planet littered with Glassmaker ruins. Could the commerce raiding of the *Relentless* simply be a cover for some kind of expedition to the precursor sites of High Mojave? And, if so, what was in the bulky cases that Captain Loefstedt tried so hard to smuggle back to Alitar?

The *Dierden* joined a Concord convoy several days ago and made it to Alitar before the Galvinites heard the story of her rendezvous with the *Relentless*. The Galvinite Directorate of State Affairs has lodged an official protest against the Neutrality Patrol's protection of a merchant vessel carrying war materiel or contraband to Alitar. Worse yet, the stellar nation Austrin-Ontis (the old patron of the Federal State of Galvin) may be considering some form of censure against the Concord.

INTERNMENT

The Austrins might sound more sincere in lambasting the Concord for lack of partiality if they hadn't been caught breaking the Monitor Mandate just last month. Alitarin intelligence operatives tipped off the Concord Neutrality Patrol about a covert operation designed to bring heavy Austrin equipment to Galvin under the guise of neutral commerce. Two heavy freighters, the *Therise* and the *Venture Star*, were held over from their scheduled convoy and searched thoroughly by Concord customs officials.

As it turned out, both ships were equipped with secret decks crammed full of heavy military gear—hovertanks, artillery systems, and hundreds of missiles. "It was really quite clever," said Lieutenant Hark Terrence, leader of the inspection team. "The contraband decks didn't appear in the ships' deckplans, and no corridors or lifts led directly to

them. We didn't find the materiel until we conducted a compartment-by-compartment search using magnetic resonance scanners."

Both ships were interned in a nearby orbit close to the airless surface of Palshizon. The Alitarins and their patrons, the Thuldan Empire, demanded some kind of punitive measures against Austrin-Ontis for the flagrant violation of the Monitor Mandate. However, investigation by Concord officials revealed that the direct connection between the two interned freighters and Austrin-Ontis was thin at best. The *Therise* and *Venture Star* are actually owned by a private investment group and have no official ties to the Austrin government.

Complicating matters still further, the *Therise* was destroyed last week in a very suspicious engineering accident. Fortunately, no crewmen were aboard at the time; they were being held on Pariah Station pending the results of the investigation. Security tapes show that the heavy freighter suffered some kind of internal explosion and then de-orbited, crashing into the rock and slush of Palshizon's surface.

Station personnel privately speculated that Austrin saboteurs might have destroyed the ship in order to prevent incriminating evidence from turning up, while others guessed that Alitarin agents might have wrecked the vessel in order to make sure that it would not be released from internment after the confiscation of its cargo. Until someone sifts through the wreckage down on Palshizon, no one will know for sure.

A MESSAGE FROM VEGOR TAGG

Two hours before the *Glory of Andrakar* was scheduled to depart, I received a databurst message from an old friend—Vegor Tagg. Retreating to my quarters aboard the freighter, I downloaded the file and played it on my datapad. As usual, Tagg didn't waste time on pleasantries.

"I know you plan to visit Galvin," his voice rasped, just a little out-of-synch with the grizzled countenance on my display. "I can't help you much if you do; I don't have any assets in place there. Let me know what you find out, but be careful—the Federal State's Intelligence Directorate is a group of people you don't want to fool around with."

"If you get a chance, I'd advise you to consider a detour to Wreath. I think you'll find some interesting stories there. No proof, of course—but it's another piece of the puzzle, and I'm not sure how it fits in—" the message lost tracking for a moment, not unusual for a personal drivesat transmission—and then resumed. "Watch your step, Avatar. I do not know the three men who were waiting for you on the *Lighthouse*, but their appearance there does not bode well for you. Someone out there doesn't want you to find out too much more than you already know."

The message ended; I replayed it, making sure I hadn't missed anything. Then I threw the datapad in my satchel and started to gather up my gear. I wasn't going straight to Alitar after all.

ADVENTURE HOOK: THE ARMS TRADE

Every day, someone tries to smuggle arms by the Concord Neutrality Patrol. After all, a star system is a huge place, and Pariah Station is only one small point on the outskirts of Algemron. For every gunrunner intercepted by the Concord, at least two more make it to the inner system. This adventure thrusts the heroes into the middle of Algemron's risky but profitable arms trade.

BACKGROUND

Austrin-Ontis supports its former colony, the Federal State of Algemron (the Galvinites), in its efforts to win the war against Alitar. As far as the A-Os are concerned, Galvin had the war won when the Concord intervened and imposed an artificial and arbitrary arms embargo while depriving Austrin-Ontis of their only colony in the Verge by means of the Monitor Mandate. No right-thinking Austrin could possibly accept a peace built around the Mandate, not when Galvin was winning the fight before the Concord stepped in.

Consequently, the Austrin position is simple: Help Galvin win the war fast. When Galvin wins, there won't be any Imperial State of Algemron to confuse the issue of which nation owns the system, and Austrin-Ontis will be able to reincorporate Galvin ... along with its conquests. If no Thuldian colony remains in Algemron, the Concord won't have any basis for blocking reunification any longer. Austrin-Ontis will regain its foothold in the Verge, plus Alitar as well. And maybe the Concord will think twice before interfering with A-O colonies again.

Since the Austrins can't openly defy the Monitor Mandate, they've decided to provide all the covert support they can. Austrin's Western Olympic Division (the corporation's covert operations organization) is working through smugglers and independent traders, loading Austrin arms onto any ship willing to take the job and flying them past the Neutrality Patrol. Dozens of A-O operatives under the local command of Colonel Jay Keaton are running a major arms-supply effort to funnel heavy weaponry, money, supplies, and trained 'advisors' to Galvin.

Colonel Keaton's clearing-house for this effort is Hanley Arms Ltd., a company based in Oberon. Hanley Arms is a blind, a dummy company set up by Keaton to insulate Austrin-Ontis from the operation. Under the guise of legitimate business, Keaton buys guns from Austrin-Ontis openly and "sells" them to any of a dozen or so distributors—most legitimate, but others simply A-O agents running smaller blinds. These distributors

in turn sell, consign, or trade arms to hundreds of independent merchants and captains making the arms run.

While everyone in Algemron knows that both the Thuldans and the Austrins are sending as much help as they can slip past the Concord to their respective colonies, no one can prove direct A-O involvement. As far as the typical smuggler knows, he's running guns for Galvinite sympathizers and war profiteers, not the A-O covert ops division.

There are several good triggers hiding in this situation. First, the heroes might be willing to bend the law and take some chances in order to make big money. Taking a load of contraband is one way to do that. Second, heroes with Austrin sympathies might become involved in the operation, either running guns personally or scouting for independents willing to take the job. Finally, heroes with Concord or Thuldian allegiances will want to bust up the ring, stop the shipments, and maybe find a link back to Austrin-Ontis.

SET-UP

When the heroes are in the vicinity of Algemron, let them know that they've heard rumors that there is a lot of money to be made by trying to slip by the Concord embargo. Kiara Montel, a fraal businesswoman, is looking for a captain who's willing to take chances for a big return. Obviously, this adventure hook works best if the heroes have their own ship and can actually get involved in the smuggling. If they don't have a ship, you can involve them by creating a gun-runner who needs to find several new crewmen to man his ship for the next run.

Once the heroes get involved, they'll need to elude local customs officials or Concord agents on the lookout for gunrunners, deal with rival smugglers who don't see why they should share the profitable run, slip past the Neutrality Patrol, and finally evade Alitarin warships or agents trying to intercept the shipment. If the heroes are trying to work their way into Keaton's organization and finger the A-O connection, they'll need to make several successful runs before they get a chance to meet the "distributor" and buy directly from Hanley Arms Ltd. They'll need to show some success in their smuggling efforts in order to win Keaton's trust and get a look around the hidden arms depot Colonel Keaton is running for Western Olympic.

SUPPORTING CAST

Kiara Montel is a mid-level fraal free agent who is simply a successful smuggler with no A-O ties. She has

a small organization (a dozen or so people) and straddles the line between legitimate trade and contraband cargo. Somehow, the heroes are going to have to learn who she buys from in order to strike out on their own—otherwise, they'll be doing her work.

Kiara's supplier is a Lucullan merchant named Dar Kaden. Kaden is a high-level Austrin agent posing as an independent merchant, heading up an organization with warehouses on several worlds and dozens of employees. He funnels arms from Colonel Keaton to the various smugglers and small-time independents who make the run.

Finally, Colonel Jay Keaton is the nominal CEO of Hanley Arms Ltd. His depot in the Oberon system is a bustling complex with dozens of guards, several patrol ships, and hundreds of employees. Ultimately, he's the guy the heroes need to get their hands on if they want to bring the A-O connection to light.

TRIGGER SCENE

This adventure starts when the heroes decide to take Kiara Montel's shipment of arms.

The spacer's bar is a dismal dive a kilometer or so from the spaceport. It's filled with dozens of spacehands, longshoremen, and small-time traders. Some are relaxing hard, spending money on drink and entertainment. Others are talking business in the dark corners, voices lowered as they suspiciously eye anyone who approaches too closely. One in particular—a tiny fraal woman dressed in dark robes—stands out. She's been watching you intently ever since you sat down.

After half an hour or so, the fraal suddenly appears at the side of your table. She studies each of you in turn with a hard, uncompromising look. "I have heard it said that you are not afraid to take a chance," she begins in a whispery voice. "I'm looking for a captain who is ambitious, competent, bold, and not very curious. Are you the one I'm looking for?"

WREATHE

As it turned out, Vegor Tagg's tip came at a good time. The *Glory of Andrakar* never made it to Alitar. The Galvinites stopped the convoy a couple of light-hours from its destination and insisted on searching the freighter for contraband. Outnumbered by the Galvinite force, the Neutrality Patrol could only lodge a protest against this unprecedented level of Federal State interference. Upon searching the *Glory*, the Galvinites discovered a hidden arms shipment and confiscated the vessel. Captain Durenova and her crew were taken into captivity and spirited away. I can only wonder what might have happened had I remained on board.

Instead, I took passage on a Concord cutter running supplies to a Patrol post on Wreathe two days later, using one of my fake press passes to get on board. It took about seven hours for the small courier-ship to make the crossing between Palshizon and Wreathe. The last three were a slow and torturous crawl through the heart of Algemron's asteroid belt; Wreathe sits in the middle of one of the densest parts, a small world surrounded by the rubble of the planet it once belonged to.

Wreathe is called an asteroid due to its irregular orbit and asymmetrical shape, but it's the size of a small planet or large moon, more than two thousand kilometers in diameter. It's one of the few Alitarin possessions that survive in the outer system, defended against Galvinite attack by a formidable battery of planetary defenses and a small missile boat base. Military experts estimate that Galvin could capture or destroy Wreathe in about a month of hard fighting, but there's just no need for the Galvinites to accept the losses as long as they maintain their stranglehold over Alitar itself. Wreathe and the rest of the outer system pos-

sessions are nothing but a sideshow in the war between the planets.

Wreathe was originally settled by the Thuldans of Alitar for its heavy minerals. Like its twin Argolos, it's literally a world of iron and nickel. Before the Second Galactic War, that made Wreathe the most valuable mining territory in the Algemron system. But for decades now the rising power of the Galvinite navy has limited Wreathe's output. Today, thousands of tons of refined ore lie heaped like coal on the asteroid's surface, awaiting transports that will never come.

The mines of Wreathe are virtually idle today; the Alitarins who live in this desolate and lonely place focus their efforts on maintaining their defenses against attack from space, trading as they can, and taming Wreathe's remarkable biosphere. The asteroid is actually large enough to retain a thin blanket of sulfur dioxide, which forms the basis for a thriving ecology of fascinating creatures adapted to live in this cold environment. The most famous of these is, of course, whitespike—source of one of the most insidious drugs known to humankind. Banned in every civilized star system of the Verge, whitespike is so addictive and intense that its users will pay fortunes for a dose measuring grams. The Alitarins, to their credit, have made it a capital crime to harvest or transport whitespike from Wreathe ... but there are only a few hundred Alitarin constables and soldiers stationed on the asteroid, and an entire world to police.

The lure of whitespike has transformed Wreathe into something more than an Alitarin mining colony. The asteroid now serves as a center for neutral commerce, privateers and profiteers, espionage, and criminal activity. The survivors of Thuldan and Austrin deep-space settlements



wrecked by the warring powers have collected here, along with hundreds of expatriates, deserters, and outlaws seeking refuge. Like a storm far out to sea, the war in Algemron doesn't reach Wreathe, but its powerful waves wash all kinds of human debris up on the shores of this lonely rock. There's even an outpost of the Neutrality Patrol stationed out here.

I spent several days on Wreathe, travelling from one cheerless mining-town to another. Cut off from their homeworld, the Alitarins here are grimly determined to hold out as long as they can. It's been two years since anything larger than a light freighter made it through the blockade from Alitar.

WHO RUNS THE WHITESPIKE CARTEL?

Every week, dozens of desperate miners, pirates, and fortune-seekers buy some equipment, quietly stockpile supplies, and then head out into the canyons and craters of the asteroid surface in search of whitespike. It's a dangerous way to make a living—Wreathe is pretty lethal if your equipment doesn't hold up, there are native lifeforms like the terragin or veerkiller that have been known to attack humans, and finally an encounter with the law could spell

disaster for the would-be whitespike harvester. But all of these are incidental dangers—the real threat comes from the Cartel.

It's no secret on Wreathe; the Cartel runs whitespike prospecting and smuggling, and you're taking your life in your hands if you try it on your own. The Alitarin colony administrators and constables have been dominated by the Cartel for years; it's become their job to search out loners and discourage non-Cartel buyers from picking up a load of whitespike. Some of the police are honest, of course. But the crooked ones simply keep the Cartel one step ahead of any lawman that can't be bought, intimidated, or quietly eliminated.

At Midas City, Wreathe's largest settlement, I made contact with a Cartel informant, a disaffected member who was ready to talk. Naturally, he requested that I withhold his name. He told me that the Cartel used a classic cell-like organization, with a special refinement—there was a cell of enforcers who knew the producers but were unknown to anyone except the very top. "They look human, but they're not," he told me. "I occasionally dealt with one who called himself White. He was a gaunt, grayish fellow, with a shark-like grin that never left his face and a voice like wet gravel. He always wore dark lenses over his eyes, even in the dimmest light."

"How do you know he wasn't human?" I asked. "With cosmetic surgery, cybernetic implants, and genetic treatments, anyone can look like anything they want to these days."

"Because I got a look at his eyes once," my informant replied. "White and I were doing business in a 'spike plant a few months back when a police raid busted the place. White got into a fistfight with an Alitarin cop who knocked the shades off his face; his eyes were fish-belly white with no irises or pupils. Humans still need pupils to see, don't they?"

"Contacts," I said uncertainly.

"Maybe. But later White got knocked off a catwalk and fell almost twenty meters, landing flat on his back on hard concrete. He picked himself up and ran off like he'd landed on a feather bed." My informant paused, then added, "Besides, I could just feel that he was all wrong. I talked to some other guys, who dealt with other enforcers besides White. They're all like that. I'm telling you, they aren't human."

My informant excused himself at that point. Unfortunately, no Cartel enforcers turned up in my continuing investigations, leaving me to consider what I'd learned. Aliens running a drug cartel on Wreathe? What possible interest could unknown aliens have in something so sordid as human vice?

THE BLACK SHIPS

Even more disturbing than the rumors of strange gray men overseeing the production and export of whitespike was the story of the Concord patrol vessel CSV 1197, the *Tang*. A

fast and well-armed attack ship with a crew of more than a dozen men and women, the *Tang* was found drifting a couple of AU from Wreathe, a riddled hulk. Based at the Concord outpost near Midas City, the *Tang* had been assigned to interdiction duties, scouring the belts near Wreathe for smuggler activity. Apparently she found more than she could handle.

ADVENTURE HOOK: AGAINST THE CARTEL

Throughout the Verge, thousands of people are killed or crippled by whitespike every year. The social and economic cost is enormous, particularly in the Lucullus and Oberon systems. The incredible prices whitespike commands in these systems drives a terrible cycle of violence, death, and greed, spawning ruthless criminal gangs and sowing hopelessness and despair across a dozen worlds. Ultimately, the only way to put a halt to it is to take on the Cartel.

BACKGROUND

The process is simple. The Cartel sponsors secret whitespike farms and hires independent prospectors to scour Wreathe's surface for the elusive lichen. Raw whitespike is taken to hidden processing plants for refinement into biaxinin, the pure drug. Then the Cartel smuggles the drug off-planet in a fleet composed of swift blockade runners and battered old tradesman masquerading as honest merchants. It's a secret empire, a monopolistic corporation operating production, refinement, security, and distribution under one unified command.

Of course, the Cartel's control isn't absolute. Desperate prospectors strike off on their own all the time, a handful of basement labs handle refinement tasks for independent buyers, and any idiot can try to ship the drug off planet. But sooner or later the Cartel catches up with all of them and either forcibly incorporates the free-wheelers or puts them out of business. In effect, it's a shadow government infecting every aspect of life on Wreathe.

Local facilities—individual farms, labs, distribution centers, and so on—have no connection with each other. Minor bosses run these concerns, reporting only to one superior. The heroes can take down minor bosses and shut down individual facilities all they want—the only way to do the Cartel any serious and long-term harm is to break into the security cells and trace the mysterious enforcers all the way to the top.

SUPPORTING CAST

The first layer of foes the heroes must defeat will be common thugs, prospectors, and technicians operating

Ships are lost all the time in the Algemron system, although it bodes ill that a Concord gunboat was dispatched by supposedly disorganized and lightly armed criminals. Even more disturbing was the fact that not one of the *Tang's* crew was found on board the wreck, and that someone had gone to a lot of trouble to wreck her computer banks and sensor gear. But the story goes that they didn't get it all—

the first low-level operation the heroes successfully locate—probably a farm or refinement lab. The leader of this operation will be a mid-level free agent or combat spec, operating under the cover of legitimate business. This minor boss will have a couple of capable lieutenants and bodyguards, and—most importantly—some local constables on his payroll. Crooked police are unlikely to move directly against heroes operating with some kind of authorization, but freelance heroes could easily be framed and arrested as smugglers themselves! Even if the bad cops can't get at the heroes, they'll pass information to the minor boss and help him deal with the threat.

Above the minor boss will be a major boss in charge of a number of production and export facilities—a mid-level diplomat with several ruthless lieutenants and bodyguards, plus a fortress-like retreat where whitespike is processed or stored. While the heroes tackle this crime lord, they'll have to start watching their backs—the enforcement cells will begin to counter their efforts, striking back at them through intimidation, harassment, and outright assassination. Most enforcers are low-level combat specs or free agents, but some are actually gardhyi agents (see the *Alien Compendium*, page 119) who can give even a tough group of heroes a run for their money.

TRIGGER SCENE

Assuming that the heroes start the adventure by ferreting out a whitespike lab, begin the adventure with a scene like this:

Faint yellow starlight illuminates the rocky desert and towering canyon walls of Wreathe's battered surface. You can feel the deadly cold of the bare stone leaching through your gloves and boots, and the seals of your e-suits can't keep out a whiff of sulfur. Two hundred meters down the steep slope before you, small lights suspended beneath a camouflage canopy illuminate a half-dozen habitat domes clustered together in the middle of a smooth-graded shelf of rock. Glistening like jagged crystals of frost, hundreds of square meters of whitespike growth ring the camp. Your groundcar is parked about two kilometers back—you've come most of the way on foot to avoid detection. What do you do?

Alitarin officials recovered some data files from the wrecked computers that were salvageable and managed to retrieve images of the *Tang's* last battle.

Rumor has it that the Alitarins viewed the records and found that a large warship of unknown origin destroyed the *Tang*, covering the escape of a smuggler the Concord vessel was chasing. But no one in the Alitarin constabulary admits to possession of these tapes. One Concord station officer speculated that the Alitarins had recovered the data, only to have it stolen from their police headquarters by crooked cops on the Cartel's payroll.

I've come to the conclusion that this whole system is falling to pieces. Algemron's insane war has burned so long that all that's left is ash and ruin. No one cares enough to do anything about it anymore.

A NEAR-MISS

My last day at Wreathe was almost my last day ever. After visiting several remote towns, I returned to Midas City only to find a cryptic message waiting for me at my hotel: "Come to Vehicle Lot 3 tomorrow night at 2300 hours, spot 133. I have a message from Tagg." It was unsigned. So far, Tagg's operatives had approached me more openly, but it occurred to me that the informant in question might have been hesitant to leave his name on the record. So, at the appointed hour, I set out for the city's vehicle lot, a deserted spot near the dome's massive vehicle lock.

When I arrived, I found a large, empty underground bay, with groundcars and air transports of all description stowed for the night. It took me some time to locate the designated parking spot; in fact, I got lost and found myself on the wrong level of the structure altogether. This almost certainly saved my life. As I retraced my steps, I passed by an open well that gave me a view to the next level down. I caught sight of spot 133 a few meters below me, currently occupied by a large black groundcar with tinted windows. A gaunt man in a long black coat waited by the car with arms folded, leaning against the wall. He wore a wide-brimmed hat that shadowed his features. I was about to hail him when he shifted his position, rearranging his arms.

Light glinted on a long, heavy blade concealed in his sleeve. The waiting man glanced at a biowatch on the back of one hand and then looked over at another car in the distance. I could dimly make out two more men waiting there, watching the vehicle parked in spot 133. I ducked back into the shadows and waited, studying the scene from above.

Had my secret informant been compromised before the meeting? Or was the man waiting by the car the man who'd left me the message, using Vegor Tagg's name to lure me into an ambush? Of course, everything might have been on the level ... but I wasn't about to bet my life on that. I decided to exit quietly.

The implications of this encounter chilled me. Clearly, my investigations threatened somebody—indeed, threatened them enough to warrant my assassination. That, in and of

itself, was frightening. But the worst part of this was that somebody knew enough about my investigations to use Vegor Tagg's name to lure me into an ambush. I hadn't had any message from the administrator since arriving in Algemron, so that meant that somebody outside this system had forwarded word of my association with Tagg and instructed the would-be killers to use his name as the bait in the trap. In other words, somebody knew who I was, what I was doing, and whom I was working with.

And they wanted me dead.

ALITAR

After the attempt on my life, I deemed it best to leave Wreathe by the most inconspicuous means possible. I made a few discrete inquiries at Midas City's spaceport and soon found a "merchant" who was willing to sell me passage back to Alitar. His name was Reno Stokes, and as best I could determine, he was a native Alitarin who survived through smuggling, piracy, and selling information to both sides of the war. Stokes does nothing for free; I paid more for a transit of two hours than I did for two months of business-class accommodations during my journey from Old Space to the Verge.

Stokes was a man who concealed a cold edge of ruthlessness beneath a layer of insincere good humor. Ostensibly, Stokes had registered his ship, the *Freefall*, under the Regency of Bluefall, a government neutral in the Algemronian war. When I asked him how he planned to avoid the Galvinite warships blockading Alitar, he simply shrugged and said, "Oh, I don't. If I try to sneak down to the surface, I might get away with it, and I might not. It's much better to approach openly and talk your way past."

"Why in the world would a Galvinite commander let you descend to Alitar unmolested?" I asked. "Don't they intercept and destroy any vessels they can?"

Stokes offered a cold smile. "I don't go within ten million kilometers of Alitar unless I've got a good answer to that question. This week it's humanitarian relief. My cargo manifest shows a load of medical supplies, and I've got a special Federal State permit to allow me to cross the lines. Three weeks ago, it was simply an understanding with the commander of a Federal State destroyer assigned to the patrol sector I needed to pass through. Hell, last year I crossed the lines dozens of times with a set of Intelligence Directorate codes, since I was doing some quiet work for the Federal State."

I decided not to press the question any further, since it seemed to me that Stokes could very easily think of reasons why my fare should climb if I let my curiosity get the better of me. We set down in the middle of a deserted part of the Beronin spaceport, and Stokes personally escorted me from the docking pit. I suspected that he was anxious to get on with his real business for the trip, whatever that was. But in the meantime, I was on Alitar.

Alitar is a beautiful planet, much like Earth itself. Beronin, the capital, is located in the planet's tropics. It overlooks the

sea; sparkling blue water and brilliant white sand dazzle the eye. But in the center of Beronin the destruction of the war against Galvin is shockingly evident—the center of the city is nothing but rubble and dust. Almost forty years ago, the Galvinites detonated a massive fusion bomb in the heart of the Alitarin capital, wiping a swath of city almost fifteen kilometers in diameter from existence. The Alitarins never rebuilt the wreckage of the Blast Zone, so Beronin now exists as a doughnut of development and industrialization around the empty center of the old city.

It took me more than six hours to pass through Alitarin spaceport customs. A covert war of terrorism, espionage, and commando operations rages between Alitar and Galvin; both planets take their entry-point security measures very seriously. Fortunately, my press credentials and a quick check against the Concord records at Palshizon proved sufficient for a planetary travel visa.

Naturally, I had to sign a statement signifying that I was aware of the state of war between Alitar and Galvin, that I understood that military operations could occur at any point on the planet's surface with little or no warning, and that I in no way would hold the Imperial State of Algernon responsible for loss or injury suffered as a result of military action. With that formality attended to, I was free to go. I rented a groundcar and set out for the front lines, a thousand kilometers away in the Andeswaar district.

TROUBLE ON THE MISTEN

During my two-day drive out to the front, Alitarin news carried a disturbing story of developments on the other side of the planet. Alitar is home to an indigenous intelligent species, the xe'reen. These creatures live in the northern seas, most notably the Misten Sea—the largest of Alitar's land-locked seas. The Misten is the most remote part of the planet's surface, stretching from the cool mid-latitudes deep into Alitar's permanent glaciation. Surrounded by rugged mountains and dense forests, human activity in the region is limited to a few small towns supporting forestry, mining, and fishing industries.

The xe'reen are generally reclusive and non-technological. No one even realized they were sentient until just a few years ago. But, according to the story breaking when I arrived on Alitar, the xe'reen were on the warpath. Employing modern weapons modified to their form, xe'reen raiding parties had simultaneously struck at a dozen industrial sites, using explosive charges to destroy or disable mines and refineries in the vicinity of the Misten Sea.

Most Alitarins assume that Galvin's notorious Intelligence Directorate was behind this uprising, agitating the xe'reen and arming them for rebellion. If this is the case, it's an uncharacteristic choice of tactics. The Misten Sea is an important area for Alitar's long-term economic development, but it's not crucial to the war effort, and the xe'reen won't be able to operate more than a couple of hundred kilometers from the northern seas; they're aquatic creatures who don't like to spend too much time out of the water. So



ADVENTURE HOOK: THE XE'REEN WAR

Who's arming the xe'reen? How did they convince this non-technological race to adopt human weaponry and tactics and take sides in Algemron's war? Neither the Galvinites nor the Alitarins understand it yet, but the xe'reen situation conceals the potential for generations of tragic struggle. Once the Alitarins start to shoot back, the harassment will escalate into a full-scale race war that can't have any real winners.

BACKGROUND

Believe it or not, General Kell has got things more or less right. About two years ago, an Alitarin company called GeoVenture surveyed a range of mountains along the western shore of the sea and discovered a heavy deposit of valuable heavy metals, the remnant of a massive asteroid strike from Alitar's youth. While this was valuable enough, the really interesting discovery consisted of the first known naturally occurring deposit of super-heavy elements. The heart of the ancient asteroid consisted of a transuranic element roughly three times the molecular weight of lead. Laboratory experiments performed in the 22nd and 23rd centuries pointed toward a series of power and weapon technologies that could be based around the transuranic elements, but since the requisite elements could only be produced in tiny amounts, no one ever developed the technology.

The survey team reported their findings ... but their findings crossed the desk of a Galvinite agent named Milla Jend. She was engaged in an operation to funnel GeoVenture survey information to Galvin's fleet command, and when the strange report came to her, she forwarded it to her superiors on Galvin. The Intelligence Directorate discovered the potential of the deposit and responded; Jend was ordered to make the report and the survey team disappear.

Milla Jend concealed the survey team's findings and provided the Intelligence Directorate with the names of everyone on the survey team. Galvinite agents quietly eliminated each person who had been party to the find. Then Milla was given funds to start her own company, Northern Pride, and begin a clandestine mining operation to recover the transuranic ore. Northern Pride mined high-quality iridium, nickel, and iron, selling it at a tidy profit—but more importantly, the company smuggled tons of the new ore off of Alitar altogether.

The operation proceeded well, but the Galvinite agents missed one of the original survey members—a Dr. Sid Bray. Bray was almost killed in a groundcar accident, and after months of recovering from his injuries, he recalled his discovery in the Misten mountains. Checking with GeoVenture, he realized that no one had ever

seen the survey team's report. Bray went to the authorities, but he couldn't prove anything, and Northern Pride was meeting its war production quotas just fine. He turned to General Kell and asked for help.

Meanwhile, the mining operation produced tons of dangerous pollutants and threatened an archipelago sacred to the xe'reen. They tried to speak with Milla Jend about Northern Pride's dirty operations, but she ignored the xe'reen concerns. Matters turned ugly when a xe'reen emissary was shot and killed while trying to restate the natives' case. Local skirmishes between xe'reen warriors and Northern Pride guards grew into general fighting throughout the Misten as xe'reen began attacking human settlements.

Hearing of the native unrest, a militant alien rights group named Verge Green began to investigate the allegations of environmental damage and interference with the natives. Backed by a millionaire named Carlos Aguirre, Verge Green began smuggling arms to the xe'reen, advising them on how best to fight back.

In order to make peace with the xe'reen, the heroes will have to shut down Northern Pride and bring those responsible for the xe'reen deaths before the tribal elders. Finding a way to get Verge Green to back off will be a lot harder—they're determined to make Alitar into a flashpoint for human abuse of indigenous species, and they're going to aggressively urge the xe'reen to fight back with all they've got. Finally, both the Alitarin security forces and the Galvinite Intelligence Directorate are involved.

SUPPORTING CAST

The local war-leader of the xe'reen is a canny, experienced warrior named Jee'kehl. She's actually traveled off-planet and understands humans and their ways fairly well. However, she's a little gullible; her friends in Verge Green are telling her that the Alitarins are her enemy, and she believes them.

Kitt Ferin is the Verge Green team leader, an eco-guerrilla with years of experience across the Verge. He's committed to helping the xe'reen fight for their independence, and he doesn't care who is at fault. Kitt and the other Verge Green operatives have been staying with the xe'reen, quietly advising them on how to go about the fight.

Milla Jend is the leader of the Northern Pride operation and a Galvinite agent. The xe'reen have caused serious delays in her production schedule, but she doesn't want the Alitarin military stomping around the Misten, looking over her operation. She's been scaling up a private war against Jee'kehl, trying to settle the xe'reen problem before too much attention falls on Northern Pride.

Finally, Colonel Brent Darred is the leader of the 119th Air Cav battalion, a light and fast force of Alitarin soldiers detailed to guard Alitarin civilians and industries in the region. He's only got about a thousand men to cover a region the size of a continent, so he's on the lookout for any concentration of xe'reen to hit hard. Darred fully intends to quell the xe'reen violence with whatever force is necessary.

SET-UP

The ideal sequence of play would be for the heroes to fend off a xe'reen attack, find out why the xe'reen are angry, investigate Northern Pride and discover what they're up against, and then finally send Colonel Darred to the secret Galvinite base. At the same time, they'll need to remove Verge Green from the picture and prevent the Colonel from undertaking wholesale bombing of xe'reen villages. It's a tough job, but that's why the heroes are heroes.

The best way to give the heroes a stake in this adventure is to assign them as Concord observers, a xe'reen contact team on hand to mediate between the Alitarins and their alien neighbors. If that doesn't work, a watchdog group aware of Carlos Aguirre's support of militant eco-action could hire the heroes to track down Verge Green. By searching for Verge Green's hand in the rebellion, the

heroes should be able to piece together the rest of the story.

TRIGGER SCENE

Start the heroes off at the scene of a recent xe'reen attack; regardless of what they're trying to do, investigating the site of a xe'reen raid would be a good first step.

The petrochemical plant is a smoldering wreck. Huge columns of black, greasy smoke tower up into the gray, cloudy sky; residual fires still burn on pools of spilled oil. Workmen in blue coveralls and hardhats are struggling to extinguish the last of the flames. Beyond the wrecked station you can see snow-capped mountains aproned with green, misty forests. The contrast between man-made ruin and natural beauty is stark and jarring.

Beside you, Martin Scherich, the plant supervisor, nods toward the glint of open water in the distance. "The xe'reen came from that direction," he growls. "They hit us without warning, but we gave them one hell of a fight. I know they've got to be carrying wounded with them. We would have pursued, but we had to lock down the power plant or the whole station would have gone up. But you could probably catch 'em in the hovercraft."

why would the Galvinites go to the time and trouble of manufacturing arms for the xe'reen and inciting them to action?

The prevailing wisdom is that the Galvinites are using the xe'reen unrest as a diversionary tactic, hoping to draw Alitarin troops away from the fronts where they're really needed. But I ran across an interesting speculation during my searches of Alitar's admittedly second-rate Grid. General Therald Kell, a retired war hero and outspoken Galvin-hater who frequently criticizes the Imperial State's management of the war while supporting a number of radical schemes for decisive action, posted his own theory about the development.

"Clearly, the Galvinites are using the xe'reen unrest as a smokescreen," General Kell said. "They want to drive our people out of there so that they can run covert industrial operations in the area. My sources indicate that we've found some kind of strategic heavy elements up there, materials that might be useful in a whole new class of weaponry. If we don't defend the Misten, the Galvinites will get to it first. The War Department needs to organize a major expedition to the Misten in order to quell the xe'reen and root out the Galvinite forces operating there."

General Kell is known to be too outspoken for his own good. After all, if the Misten region did possess any secret reserves of strategic minerals that could be used in super-weapons, Kell's speculations certainly wouldn't help to keep

them secret. Most people agree that the old general is sinking further into unfounded paranoia with every passing year, grasping at any straw that might promise a victory over the hated Galvinites.

But ... what if General Kell isn't paranoid? What if he's just the only high-ranking officer who's willing to speak out?

WORK UNDERWAY ON THE WARHULK

Six months ago, the Warhulk *Ares 22* came within minutes of beginning an orbital bombardment that would have killed millions of Alitarins. A robotic cruiser from the Second Galactic War, the Warhulk was a StarMech warship ordered to destroy the Thuldan colony at Alitar. Fortunately, a small band of elite operatives managed to kill the cruiser's AI before it could begin its deadly bombardment, and the warship crashed along the shoreline of Alitar's Southern Ocean.

The Imperial State promptly commenced salvage operations, hoping to recondition the Warhulk for action against the Galvinite fleet. Heavy marine tugs were dispatched to the scene; they sealed the Warhulk's battered hull and then towed it to a hidden shipyard somewhere along the coast for refit and repair. The Galvinites caught wind of the plan and dispatched a strike force of atmospheric fighters to sink the Warhulk in transit, but the Alitarins fought off the attack

and got the robotic cruiser under cover before the Galvinites could launch a second attack.

While the damage to the Warhulk was described as severe, StarMech experts concede that it might not be irreparable. "It depends on how badly the hull was damaged in the crash," said G.E. Thurwait, a StarMech consultant working at Alaundril's Solar X shipyards. "Hull plating can be replaced, but severe damage to the main structural members—the keels and armored decks—would be very difficult to correct. On the other hand, I understand that the main mass reactor and the induction engines are mostly intact. That machinery is so large that you'd have to cut away several decks and bulkheads in order to remove and replace it, and that might be more than a small shipyard can handle."

Any repair project would likely take many months, if not years. In addition, the Imperial State doesn't have the technology to restore the Warhulk's artificial intelligence and robotic control systems. They'd have to rebuild the ship for a human crew, albeit a highly automated one. But Galvin's Primary Command is taking this threat very seriously. The largest Galvinite warships are a pair of battlecruisers a little bit larger than the Warhulk, and military analysts believe that a rebuilt Warhulk might be a match for one of the Galvinite capital ships. The Federal State's Intelligence Directorate has placed the highest priority on locating the secret shipyard where the Warhulk is being repaired, pouring human and electronic assets into the dozen or so cities that might conceal the repair yards. Freelancers and mercenaries of all kinds have been hired to assist in the effort to find the Warhulk through old-fashioned sleuthing.

In response, the Imperial State's Security Bureau has mounted an exhaustive counter-intelligence campaign, using the Warhulk as bait to smoke out Galvinite spy rings and intelligence assets. So far, it's proven to be a masterstroke of deception; the Galvinites aren't even entirely sure that the Warhulk is still on the planet, let alone its exact position.

There are ominous rumbles from the Federal State that extreme measures might be used to prevent the Alitarins from repairing the Warhulk, including orbital strikes with weapons of mass destruction. The political fallout of such a tactic would be significant—few could continue to support Galvin's aggression when they're dropping nukes on civilian targets. But Primary Command doesn't seem to care about public relations.

ACROSS THE LINES

After two days of driving, I reached the eastern edge of the province of Andeswaar—one of two Alitarin states under the occupation of Galvin's army. The Big Slate Mountains mark the front lines. For the last year, they've been under the control of the Alitarin army following General Murrad's famous offensive. Rumor has it that the general is planning another big push for later this year, a concerted attempt to retake all of Andeswaar from the Galvinite army. Stories

about secret weapons or a change in tactics abound, but no one can substantiate any of them—and probably wouldn't if they could.

At a small town called Barrows, I found a Concord Observation Post—a tiny island of neutrality under the guns of both sides. Part refugee camp, part relief station, and part border crossing, the Concord OPs are watched but not harassed by both sides, serving as the only means to pass the lines safely. Each OP consists of two camps, maybe ten to twenty kilometers apart, on each side of the front. Someone who wants to enter the other side's territory reports to their OP, spends days or weeks undergoing rigorous examination and security checks, and then clatters across no-man's land in a battered old groundcar convoy.

The convoy heads directly to the OP on the other side of the line, and everyone who crossed is detained for examination and questioning by the other side. You're taking your life in your hands when you set foot outside the Concord OP; once you've announced your intention to enter enemy territory, the Concord accepts no responsibility for your safety or freedom. I saw a group of four people trying to cross into Andeswaar lined up and shot by the Galvinite garrison after DNA matching identified them as known partisans. The Concord Marine detachment stood by and did nothing. Once the travelers stepped out of the OP and into Galvinite territory, there was nothing they could do.

You might wonder why there's any traffic across the lines at all. After all, why do the Alitarins want to risk the possibility of Galvinite commandos sneaking through their lines this way? And why would the Galvinites let anyone leave the territory they occupy, when there would be no reason for them ever to return? A Concord lieutenant named Collins filled me in. "It's pretty simple," he said. "The ground phase of this war has lasted for more than thirty years. Both sides have exhausted their reserves of military equipment, so it's damn near impossible to move the lines. Galvin's Star Navy doesn't have enough lift capability to supply all the troops currently on Alitar. They've got to confiscate food and materials from the territory they've occupied on Alitar.

"Since the Galvinites are taking what they need from the occupied territories, the people who are going hungry are Alitarins behind enemy lines. So Alitar sends relief to the territories under Galvinite occupation. On the other side, the Galvinites are trying to operate Andeswaar's industries with conscript labor and local materials. They allow some trade so that the economy in the occupied areas doesn't entirely collapse. It's happened a few times, and the Galvinites learned that it costs them a damned fortune to maintain troops and a captive population when there's no economy to speak of. They can afford to take the long view—they're winning the war."

"What about the recent Alitarin offensives? Isn't the tide turning?" I asked.

"The Alitarins may get a kilometer here and a kilometer there, but they can't make any real progress until they find

a way to get the Galvinite Navy out of their skies," Lieutenant Collins said. "This whole situation is going to stay pretty much the same until the Alitarins score a space victory, or the Galvinites manage to lift enough heavy equipment to finish the job once and for all."

"Any chance that's going to happen soon?"

Collins laughed sourly. "Not likely. Sometimes I'd swear that there must be somebody out there who's working hard every day to make sure this whole damned mess stays just the way it is."

I reflected on that thought as the convoy rumbled across the barren hills and scrub of no-man's land. Later I learned that Lieutenant Collins' wry observation was shockingly close to the mark, but in a way that no one would have believed.

GALVIN

I spent almost two weeks on the Galvinite side of the lines, submitting transit requests to travel to the other planet. I'd expected to find nothing but squalor and misery in the occupied regions, but the Alitarins living in the captured territories were faring reasonably well. Of course, with three decades of occupation, most of the initial damage had been repaired, and the displaced population resettled. But everywhere I traveled, I saw the heavy hand of a police state. Road checkpoints, exhaustive ID and work voucher checks, electronic monitoring, random search and seizures ... the Galvinites rarely applied deliberate cruelty or permitted unfair treatment, but they intended to keep what they'd conquered, and they weren't going to let the local population hinder the war effort.

Finally, I received permission to board a heavy transport returning to Galvin. My Concord citizenship and press credentials were the only way to obtain passage to Galvin, and even then I didn't get anywhere until I found a Federal State war correspondent who helped me get through the security checks out of professional courtesy. I had the feeling that she hoped I might be able to write about things she dared not say, but I suspect I ended up disappointing her. My crusade embraced an interstellar conspiracy, not the unfortunate circumstances of an unjust war and a repressive police state.

The trip to Galvin took only six hours, despite the fact that the other planet was on the opposite side of the sun from Alitar. Our transport joined a military convoy guarded by a number of destroyers and escorts, which proved quite fortunate; on our climb out of Alitar's gravity well, we came under attack by a small flotilla of missile boats. I never saw the action; heavy transports aren't designed to keep the occasional passenger informed of developments in the vicinity, and I only learned of the incident after talking with the ship's crew during transit.

We landed at a military spaceport near Fort Drum, the planetary capital. I immediately booked transport to Narrow Point, on the other side of the Wester Sea from Fort Drum. I'd been told that I would find my contact there. However,

while I waited for the hypersonic plane, I was apprehended by agents of the Federal State's Internal Security Directorate. Foreign reporters aren't allowed to travel unaccompanied in Federal State territory. The ISD wanted to know why I was headed for Narrow Point, whom I expected to meet there, how long I'd be staying ... you get the drift.

I'd prepared for this eventuality by coming up with a cover story. I explained to the ISD agents that I was doing a nature story on the veeda bird, a moderately exotic denizen of the jungles and swamps around Narrow Point. I showed them tape after tape I'd prepared during my journey to Algernon, the outline for an imaginary documentary on famous creatures of the Verge. While I didn't have any such stories in my records, I managed to convince the ISD to allow me to do the piece. They assigned me a pair of escorts and sent me on my way.

INTO THE SHADOWS

I spent several days in Narrow Point, making a half-hearted effort to arrange expeditions into the jungle in search of the veeda bird and making a show of talking to local experts on the creature. It was, of course, all a ruse. When I'd lulled my escorts into carelessness, I called the number I'd been given in Aegis. While they reviewed my notes for seditious material, I spoke with a man who called himself Zachram and arranged a meeting. "What should I do with my jailors?" I asked.

"Go ahead and bring them," Zachram told me. "We'll give them the slip when you show up."

Under the pretense of meeting an ornithologist for dinner, I and my ISD guards set out for a small cottage a kilometer or two outside of town. The sunset in Galvin's tropics is quite swift, and by the time we reached the bungalow, the sun was already gone. The air was sweltering, full of the sounds of insects and the small creatures that preyed on them. I wondered how Zachram and his colleagues intended to give my escorts the slip.

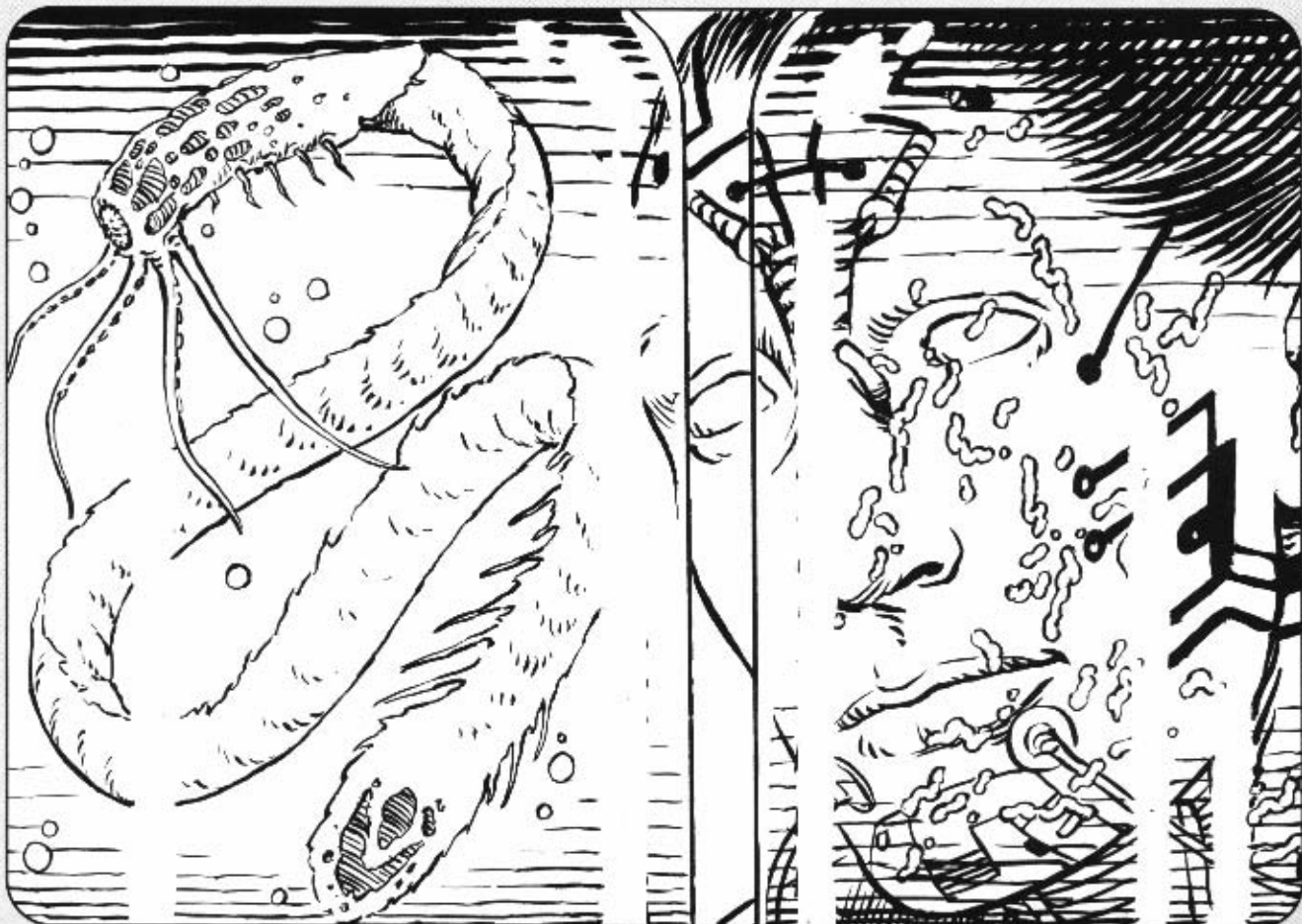
We got out of the car and walked toward the cottage's front door, and then I learned what Zachram had in mind. From the shadows beneath the trees, two stutter guns barked sharply, crumpling my guards to the ground. A short, stocky man dressed in plain worker's garb trotted into sight, holstering a pistol. I stared down at the ISD men in shock. "Are you insane?" I asked. "That's your plan for getting away from them?"

"Can't take them with us, and we can't let them report that you've gone missing," the short man said. "I can't see that we've got other alternatives. How else did you think we were going to get you out of the watchful eye of the Security Directorate?"

"The ISD is going to think I did this! How am I ever going to get off this planet?"

"We'll think of something," the man said. "Besides, you agreed to meet with us. You knew there was going to be some real risk involved. Now, are you in or out?"

I grimaced. "In."



"Good. I would've felt bad if I had had to shoot you, too." The man offered his hand. "I'm Zachram. We're going to take a little ride." He looked out into the darkness and waved to an unseen companion, then caught my sleeve and towed me down toward the rocky beach. He led me to a battered old boathouse on a dark lagoon, inside a sleek, black craft bobbed up and down with the water.

"Where are we going?" I asked. "I was just supposed to talk to someone here."

"Sorry. I've got new instructions," Zachram opened the canopy and gestured. "Climb on in. We need to move fast."

Swallowing my reservations, I stepped into the craft—a small aircar—and strapped myself in. Zachram hopped in beside me, pulling the canopy shut. I tried not to watch as a couple of scruffy-looking men appeared at the side of the lagoon, dragging my two former escorts. Whatever happened next, I was in the hands of Zachram and his superiors. I'd joined the ranks of the criminals.

THE REBEL CAMP

Zachram flew me due west for several hours, staying a few dozen meters over the treetops as he darted along at a truly reckless pace. He didn't respond to my queries, simply saying, "The Colonel will tell you what you need to know." Eventually I gave up and spent the trip staring out into the humid night, wondering if I'd live to see the sun come up.

Near midnight he slowed as we reached a region of sheer karsks, great pillars of limestone crowned with verdant jungle and flanked by misty waterfalls. Zachram consulted some kind of encrypted nav beacon and turned sharply toward one of the hulking monoliths; for one insane moment I feared that he would fly right into the white cliffs, but instead the pilot angled down and flew into a gaping cave mouth. I could make out lights in the darkness, a small camp hidden inside the cavern. Zachram landed the aircar alongside several other similar vehicles and killed the engine. "Here we are," he announced.

"Where's here?" I asked.

"I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you," Zachram replied. "Come on."

We climbed out and walked toward the yellow lights. I guessed that there were several dozen people here, mostly young men and women engrossed in a variety of tasks—cleaning weapons, working on equipment, studying maps, and more than a few who seemed to be busy with cleaning up the camp dinner. Zachram ignored them all and led me to a large tent at the far end. "Colonel? I've got the reporter," he called.

"Send him in," a voice wearily replied. I ducked through the tent flap and entered.

Colonel Bender Davis was a fit man of about forty-five or so, lightly built but tall, with close-cropped hair and thoughtful grey eyes. He was dressed in a camouflage battle dress

uniform, with a simple green cap. He studied me for a long moment, his eyes unreadable. "So you want to tell a story," he said quietly. "I've got one for you. Whatever happens, someone's got to tell people about what's going on here."

"Your revolt?" I asked.

"The democratic movement I'm leading is nothing compared to this," Colonel Davis replied. "The best way to tell you is to show you. Come on." The rebel leader escorted me to another tent, a large structure of white plastic beaded with condensation. Several heavy refrigeration units hummed outside, keeping the interior cool. The door was a small, sealed airlock of soft plastic; Davis paused inside and donned biocontainment gear, then helped me to do the same. Then he led me into the freezer-like interior.

Dozens of black body bags were stacked against one wall, their contents grimly apparent. Three examination tables waited in the middle of the room; two were occupied by pale corpses splayed open in mid-dissection. I noticed Galvinitic military ID marks on the right biceps of each man—these were Federal State soldiers. "Who were they?" I asked slowly.

"This man was a brigadier general, commanding officer of an air-assault regiment assigned to track us down," Colonel Davis said. "The other was the general's aide, a major in military intelligence. We ambushed the regimental headquarters last week and caught these two, but this isn't the first time we've encountered what I'm about to show you. I think this has been going on a long time."

"What's been going on a long time?" I asked, not without some trepidation. I didn't know if I wanted to see what Colonel Davis was about to show me.

The rebel leader didn't reply. Instead, he moved over beside one of the two corpses and picked up a rib spreader from the tray of forensic implements at the end of the table. He pulled back half of the rib cage, and then used a stainless steel probe to push the lung aside. There, in the middle of the torso, a nauseating tangle of fat, white worms lay, wedged in the pleural cavity between the left lung and the heart. The internal organs were literally riddled with the things. I turned away and struggled to control my stomach. Davis moved over to the other body and showed the same parasitic growth in the second man. "Please tell me those things are dead," I managed.

"Oh, they are," he said. "They can't survive without a host for more than a couple of hours, and we've learned containment procedures to make sure any teln tangles we find don't survive the encounter."

"God," I murmured, unable to resist looking at the body again. "What a way to die."

"They died a long time before the worms ate their organs," Davis said harshly. "You see, these things don't just infect the body. They parasitize the mind. They're demons, possessing humans who occupy positions of power and influence. That's what we're up against."

THE TELN

For the next six hours, Colonel Davis led me on a nightmare tour of his laboratory complex, showing me the things he'd found in the Federal State officers. Some of the worms still lived, vile little things kept in sealed jars, no more than one to an enclosure. As individuals, they were mindless. But the more of them in close contact with each other, the more intelligent they were. And, even more frightening, Davis showed me tapes of experiments his technicians had performed with combining worms into tangles. Not only were the tangles intelligent, they were also psionic. I watched one tape over and over, horrified by the sight of a technician inexplicably halting his work to reach out and hold a squirming tangle of teln up to his nose and mouth, eyes glazed as the disgusting creatures invaded his body.

"How could such a dangerous lifeform have gone unnoticed on this planet?" I asked Davis. "Someone somewhere must have autopsied a person killed by these things. There'd be reports in the medical journals, a story of some kind. Humans have been on this planet for more than one hundred and fifty years. We should have seen this by now."

Davis shook his head. "You're assuming that the teln are indigenous to Galvin," he replied. "They're not. We've performed exhaustive genetic testing on these things. They are completely unlike any lifeform native to Galvin, a different DNA structure altogether. The cellular chemistry's not even close, although it's not too far off our own."

"So you're saying these things are extraterrestrial to Galvin? That we brought them in somehow?"

"It's the only logical conclusion," Davis said. "Do you understand what I'm saying? The teln can't survive in Galvinitic lifeforms. The only creatures they can parasitize on this planet are humans, and we've only been here for a century and a half. The teln are here because we're here."

"So we brought them with us," I said. "Somewhere in human space, there's a place where people first got infected with these things. Kind of like smallpox spreading with the Europeans when they explored Old Earth in the 16th and 17th centuries."

"I'm not so sure," Davis said. "Every time we've found a teln tangle, it's been in the body of someone important—a high-ranking officer, an influential industrialist, a war correspondent in one case. This isn't a disease spread through accidental contact. The teln are deliberately invading the bodies of the ruling classes, the most effective leaders they can find. They're taking over at the top." The Colonel held up one small jar with a single white worm inside. "This is what I'm fighting here. I'm not trying to overthrow a tyrannical police state. I'm trying to defend my homeworld from an alien invasion. And if the teln are here, then any human with a brain has got to be wondering, Where else? Who else?"

I thought of the more than forty years of murderous, senseless warfare that had torn this star system in two. I thought of the police state the military ruling caste had cre-

ated on Galvin, and the atrocities they'd committed in their pursuit of victory. Was the Federal State's Supreme Commander aware of what was going on here?

Or was she a mindless shell for something cold and alien, something that viewed humans as prey?

Colonel Davis led me from the laboratory. I stripped off the biosuit with a sense of relief. "This is the story I need you to tell," he said simply. "Someone besides me has to find out about this. Sooner or later, the Federal State troops are going to catch up to me, and that will be the end of the insurgency. But what I've just shown you has to be exposed."

I nodded my agreement. For once, words had deserted me.

ESCAPE?

An hour later, I was back in an aircar, this time speeding toward the city of Resa Bhar and an appointment with a smuggler who was sympathetic to the Churgalt rebels. We flew east, into the rising sun, never rising more than a few dozen meters from the steaming swamps and sweltering grasslands of equatorial Galvin. I hardly noticed the scenery—every time I closed my eyes, I saw a gore-spattered table and an obscene tangle of maggot-like worms.

As we traveled, I turned my mind to the question of my next step as we left the cover of the jungle behind and soared out over the broad savannas of Galvin's southern hemisphere. In my satchel, I carried teln specimens preserved in stasis cubes, a dozen 3Ds summarizing months of research, even a list of which Galvinite officers were known to be infected and which the rebels only suspected. Clearly, no one in the Federal State government could be trusted with the information; even if my initial contacts acted in good faith, I'd have to consider the possibility that their superiors had been compromised by the teln.

My pilot dropped me off at a lonely stop on a railway about fifty kilometers from Resa Bhar's spaceport. Colonel Davis' people had equipped me with fake travel papers and a technical worker's ID, sufficient to see me through any routine security checks. I caught the next maglev train bound for the city, intent on making my arranged liftoff with a merchant sympathetic to the Churgalt rebels.

The Federal State military police were waiting for me when I got off the train.

MAJOR NORRIK

I spent three days in the Resa Bhar Security District Command Center, awaiting trial as an accused spy. At first I intended to say nothing about the fantastic conspiracy unfolding in front of me, hoping that my captors would permit me to contact the Concord consulate before I had to explain myself. My hopes were misplaced. I endured endless hours of exhaustive interrogation, and was eventually coerced into revealing my entire story under the influence of truth serums and more direct methods.

When the questioning was done, they left me locked in an isolated cell, contemplating the cost of my failures. That was when I met Major Garth Norrik. An hour before sunrise on my fourth day of incarceration, he appeared in the door of my cell with a bundle of clothes and ordered me to get dressed. Without a word of introduction, he hustled me out of the station and into the back of a black groundcar. I expected that my next stop would be a lonely field a kilometer or two outside of town, where a bullet in the back of the head would bring my troubles to an end.

But, to my surprise, Major Norrik ordered the driver to take us to the spaceport. As we sped along, he raised the privacy screen and handed me a small case containing a substantial sum in hard currency and a single 3D crystal. "I couldn't recover the material you had on the teln," he said quietly. "But this should get you out of the system. If you want to know more about the teln, follow the directions on the crystal."

"What's going on here?" I asked in a guarded voice. "Aren't you Federal State Intelligence?"

The major nodded. "I'm also a patriot. I work for people who are interested in your investigations. I can't protect you on Galvin, but I can get you off-planet. You'll find a small tradesman named the *Crazy Jane* at docking port 191. There's a man on board who's waiting to take you to Hammer's Star. That's where you'll find all the answers you've been looking for."

Realization dawned on me. "You're working for Tagg? Aren't you risking your life to let me go?"

"Some things are worth dying for," Norrik said with a bleak smile. "Don't try to read the 3D until you're in drive-space, and don't say a word to anyone else on board about what you're doing. The *Crazy Jane* works for the Intelligence Directorate every now and then, and you want them to think that you're another ID man with a mission you can't talk about. Right?"

"Right," I agreed. Maybe the delay in the security center had been worthwhile. I'd find out when I got to Hammer's Star.

CHAPTER 13: HAMMER'S STAR

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/July 13, 2502**
by Avatar

Ah, Hammer's Star. I descend now into territory where angels fear to tread and only Concord military, Borealins, and reckless prophets of dooms such as I feel the need to trespass. We're madmen, all of us, for coming to the front lines at the edge of everything we know. For it's all madness now, a seductive kind of lunacy that finds foundation in truth and revelation but leads into waves of despair. Who can I trust? Who can any of us trust now? The things I've learned, and greater still begun to suspect about the External menace don't make me proud of my accomplishments. They make me afraid. The question now is not whether humanity will notice the threat. It's everywhere. The question I have to wonder at now is where to strike back, whether we can mount a counteroffensive quick enough, and whether we can hope to win at all.

For fighting back, I think I've come to the right place. Norrik's corsair dropped me off on Vallis, the orbiting station that overlooks Spes. Security here is incredible; it's understandably so. A few months ago I might have thought it absurd that the Concord agents on Vallis bother to scan and question all newcomers; after all, it's pretty easy to tell a klik apart from the rest of the sentient species in the systems, human among them. Today, though, the examinations that the Concordans put me and my personal belongs through gave me a little bit of hope. Out here in the war-zone, the Concord's not taking any chances. Either that, or someone high up in the Concord knows more about the dangers in the Verge than he or she is telling.

KLICK ATTACKS CONCEALED

First, an overview. Everyone in the Hammer's Star system knows that the clicks have engaged in more hit-and-run attacks in the last year than any other. The toll of damaged and destroyed civilian vessels, easy to keep track of, has risen every year since the 2497. Word among the Concord Marines is that confrontation with the clicks has grown more frequent, but few of them can say just how common it has become. Secrets now, the ones we keep among ourselves, they're our great weapon and our great weakness. Without secrets, the enemy won't know what we're doing ... but neither do we. The lies we tell threaten not just journalists on the hunt of a story, but everyone. It has to end.

Why is it so hard to determine just how many times our boys in brown and blue clash with the enemy? Both the Star Force's and the Concord Marines' press liaisons in the Hammer's Star system have insisted that individual mission records and battlefield results remain sealed "in the interests of security." But no one questions that, and few civilians

want to see the gory records of battlefields after their first exposure at the Battle of Rakke. Yet the Concord, through Admiral Raastad, has repeatedly denied that the situation has grown beyond their ability to handle.

Evidence I've painstakingly unearthed on Spes and its orbiting station leads me to question the Admiral's optimism. Why can't he just come forward with truth? Truth to set him and all of us free. Can't he see what's he's doing to us and for them?

Not long after the Battle of Vicek 62, the Concord began suppressing the list of casualties and the register of ship losses. Only the next-of-kin (many of them hundreds of light-years away in the Stellar Ring) were notified. Recently, though, it has become difficult to verify even the names of personnel assigned to Hammer's Star system. While it's easy to accept that Raastad doesn't want to reveal the events of recent conflicts as they have bearing on military planning, how long must the lists of dead grow before even newcomers to the system such as myself begin to suspect that we may not be winning this war?

My curiosity about the war's progress was piqued soon after I got off the corsair. Immediately after I arrived on Vallis Station, I found myself surrounded by a multitude of Concord Marines going about their business on the station. It was surprising to see so many soldiers all at once, but a vendor at the station informed me that it's always like this for people coming to Vallis. "Are they always so young?" I asked him, pointing out the fresh young faces, smiling and eager. "Yep, been like this for a while," he answered. Later, other sources told me that the stream of young soldiers coming to Hammer's Star through Vallis represented only a fraction of those newly assigned; since 2500, the Concord has routed much of its traffic directly to Alcazar on Spes, or to the *Vition* or the *Inamorata*.

With the damned Raastad steadfastly refusing to release information on losses, the continuous arrival of reinforcements in the system leaves two possibilities. In the obvious scenario, they're replacements for the thousands of lives which conflict with the clicks has claimed. The other possibility is that Raastad has convinced someone back on Concord that he needs more personnel to mount an offensive against the clicks—presumably here, but possibly even to a system beyond Hammer's Star. While there's no evidence to support either hypothesis, my gut instinct tells me that's it probably both. Raastad needs the reinforcements, but by now he must be tired of being tied to a defensive position; striking back at a few small klik bases in the system won't quench his desire for a counteroffensive.

Admiral Raastad's press liaison, Captain Horus Tiller-man, held a press conference a few hours after the most recent klik attack on Concord assets in the system. During this attack, three klik corvettes were detected in orbit of Charitas. Before the engagement was complete, the Star

Force response group, led by Captain Drel aboard the light cruiser *Corinth*, neutralized two of the targets in open space and the third vessel on Charitas while in low orbit. After his brief statement, Tillerman answered only a few questions before leaving. Surprisingly, none of the local press asked about our losses, or about why the Concord failed to identify the klick vessels until they reached the inner system. Even more curious to me was why the *Corinth* blasted away at the final corvette after downing it on Charitas. Is the Concord no longer interested in investigating the clicks, or have naval officers grown tired of risking their crews lives in missions that produce no results? Have they lost hope as much as I? Desperate men share much in common only with one another.

Within the Hammer's Star system, none of these things seem surprising anymore. The Star Force has been reduced to the role of putting out fires. With the passing of every few days, an incursion of klick vessels is discovered and the fleet rushes out to crush it. No one appears overly alarmed or surprised when the clicks score a minor victory, or even when a company of clicks lands on Spes itself before being confronted. For the soldiers on the front line, getting through another day is enough.

RAASTAD'S COMPETENCY QUESTIONED

Since no one from the Admiral's office has deigned to discuss the greater situation with either civilian or military press in the system, I decided it was time to get in touch with someone else who had reason to be curious about what the military was up to. While I conversed with a few people from the Concord's diplomatic corps, I learned that none other than Michael Thayne, when visiting Hammer's Star last month, rightfully called into question Raastad's competency to command the war against the clicks. The Undersecretary noted Raastad's inability to produce a single significant victory, and the complete ineffectiveness of military intelligence and scouting division to produce sound information on where the clicks are coming from and what their objectives are. And he made these accusations not to Raastad alone, but in front of all of Raastad's senior officers as well. My source, in attendance at Thayne's behest, described it ending thus:

"Admiral Raastad, your long history of service with the Galactic Concord, and prior to that with the Solar Union, does you great credit. So it pains me greatly to deliver such unwelcome criticisms to a man of your stature. Ultimately, however, the needs of the Concord outweigh the importance of any of its servants. That is why, Admiral, I must ask that a board of review be convened to analyze the continued leadership in the system."

Raastad asked Thayne to consider certain impossible, solitary reproductive practices.

Maybe it's all true. Maybe I should give up commenting from the sidelines and have some journalistic integrity and

objectivity. Maybe I think this could be just another damned political game. Playing the fiddle while Rome burns.

While no one could or would confirm the story, it could explain the cold relations between Concord military and civilian authorities in the system. It's not known whether System Administrator Rolin ever attempted to confront Raastad, as would be within her authority. If she did, it produced no effect on the Admiral's command. According to my source, Raastad has become a rogue element since the meeting with Thayne. He as much as told Admiral Lucent, his superior at Kendai, that he'd relinquish command only after the war was over, and not before. Lucent hasn't taken any action, and so now Hammer's Star's dictator has no one to check his authority.

Raastad has been known for a long time to possess a driven, almost obsessive personality. I don't know if I like the bastard. Harsh on civilians in the system, but even more critical of the sentients under his command, Raastad has earned few deep friendships. Yet while the enlisted personnel might gripe and whine as they would about any officer, the naval officers that report directly to Raastad wouldn't even discuss the possibility that Thayne's accusations had any truth to them. It seems that, after only a few years under his service, the naval commanders in Hammer's Star have grown to respect—or fear—their superior officer.

Fear may serve us better than respect in the final hours.

Something will have to give, eventually. As my source in the diplomatic corps says, "Even Raastad can't go against Concord authority forever."

DOOMSAYER ADDRESSES SILVER BELL CROWD

While most of the city slept, a gathering of several hundred Borealins interrupted their late-night revelries last weekend to witness an interesting spectacle on a street corner near Silver Bell's most active nightclubs. Instead of dancing or drinking, they stood and watched a madman prophesying the doom of Hammer's Star, the Verge, and humanity everywhere. All told, the middle-aged man's deprecating philippic lasted some two hours—until, apparently exhausted, he collapsed before his riveted audience.

No reporters were on hand to cover the event, and no precise account of the speaker's words exists. To all appearances, the self-appointed preacher looked as intoxicated as much of his congregation. No one knew who he was. Nevertheless, the Cassandric visions of aliens cleansing the galaxy of humanity have stuck with many of the Borealin youths. "A war in stars," they remember him speaking of, in which "the snake fought and prevailed. The angels lost their place in the heavens and were cast out by the serpent." That night remains a topic of conversation at the Branch College of Justice Ethics and the Branch College of Unism. For most of the students, that night provided a departure from the mundane and a source for countless witticisms; for a few, it may provoke a few thoughts.

I wish I could have met this prophet, or better yet that he would speak out without the power of strong drink to provide his courage.

KLICKS DEMONSTRATE NEW THREAT

After four years of engagements with the clicks, the officers of the Star Force could take some small confidence in understanding the enemy. Unfortunately, with the arrival of the mysterious click cutters onto the battlefield of Hammer's Star, many of those assumptions are now being called into question.

While click scouts, attack ships, and even frigates had the power to harass and even destroy vessels of the Star Force, a few things have always comforted Raastad and those who follow him. Humanity enjoys certain significant advantages over its enemies here. First among these was the lack of large click capital ships. Without these, neither Spes nor its guardian angel the dreadnought *Vition* can really feel threatened. Second, there's never been a confirmed witness of a click vessel starfalling or starrising, and though this does raise the ever-present question of where the clicks are from and how they're getting from place to place, it's still a comfort to the Concord that click activity is largely confined to Hammer's Star.

They wish.

Plus, the technology that we've sifted through in the remnants of click craft doesn't offer many surprises to our engineers, scientists, or ship construction designers. Particle beam weaponry is familiar to us, though expensive and rare in its use; similar induction engines form a standard by which our ships of the day travel; finally, we know well the grav-fusion power cells that the clicks use, but can take refuge in the more powerful and efficient mass reactor. With the exception of the strong click armors used on their vessels, nothing defies understanding in the Star Force's halls of military intelligence.

Until now. The sighting and subsequent disappearance of a small click vessel near Arist baffles human, fraal, and mechalus experts in the system. Only a week ago, Star Force corvette *Poniard* detected a drifting and apparently damaged click vessel near the ice moon. Just after the corvette reached visual range, the click cutter simply disappeared. It could no longer be located on any sensor medium—radar, mass detection, or even the corvette's infrared detectors. At the same time, people watching the cutter saw it simply vanish from their eyes. For hours, the sensor crew aboard the *Poniard* detected intermittent blips of energy in close proximity, but these never reached a threshold of detection, and the crew couldn't be sure where, if anywhere, the cutter had gone. Ultimately, and to the relief of his anxious crew, the *Poniard's* captain ordered his vessel to make an immediate run to Spes and the *Vition* to guarantee a report of the event.

The crew of the *Poniard*—and later, senior officers of the

Star Force, were baffled. There was no residual starfalling signature or burst of energy. To be sure, signal dampeners and stealth shields exist aboard secret Star Force craft, but none of them had the sheer power to disappear of this cutter. Not to the visual spectrum, and not so completely when working against the concerted efforts of a dedicated sensor crew.

The incident raises several questions still. Why did the click leaders, whoever and wherever they are, choose to make evident this amazing technology? Is it confined to small craft alone? Optimists hope that this vessel is unique among the clicks, an expensive prototype that the clicks were testing. Other point to the noted lack of large click capital ships and wonder if the reason they've never been seen is only that they're never been detected as they lie, relaxed and untroubled, before our very eyes. The clicks could be anywhere, everywhere, with the Concord none the wiser.

How can humanity hope to defeat such an enemy? No one whom I spoke to had an answer. I think there isn't one.

VOIDCORP ADMITS PIRACY POLICY

After weeks of silent refusal to address rumors, PF531 42FOY (Gary Le Mel) released a written report that's now available for the public's reading on the Hammer's Star Grid. Until 42FOY's statement, the implications of arrested pirates and reformed raiders, implications which accused VoidCorp executives of a negotiated trade agreement with the pirate communities of the Vicek Belt, could not be corroborated.

But who cares? We all know that the moment we hear something negative about the hell-bound corporation, we believe it. If my quest was to point out the befoulment of VoidCorp's management, it would be an easier one. But it's not VoidCorp's terror, or those any other human, that stirs me out of slumber with sweaty shudders. The death that VoidCorp might offer me for this story could be sweet release.

The basic precepts of the VoidCorp-pirate agreement have been made well-known by now. In exchange for a steady and regular supply of goods to purchase, all of the major pirate clans informed their ship captains that vessels sailing with a VoidCorp registry should be considered be conferred "diplomatic immunity," rendering them exempt from any attack, raid, or other act of piracy. Given how significantly large the pirate communities in the outer parts of the Hammer's Star system have become, the access to a trading partner proved worth the lost opportunity to the pirates.

The question which the VoidCorp report does not address is just when the pirate cultures and the VoidCorp employees came to their friendly agreement. All evidence I can find points to a disgusting exchange by both parties occurring as early as 2498. After the boarding of a VoidCorp passenger liner, an especially vicious pirate crew proceeded to physically abuse, torture, and ultimately kill the 89 passengers and crew before stealing the ship's cargo

and setting it adrift. The VoidCorp response was cheap, efficient, and stentorian. After an agent discovered the location out of which the pirate (and others) operated, a message was sent, wideband, to the outer reaches of the star system. The message contained the location and physical details of the asteroid installation. Anyone, or any species, could interpret the visual data with a simple radio transmitter.

Less than a day later, the pirate outpost and more than a thousand sentients were annihilated. Who roams the dark-nesses of Hammer's Star?

Shortly thereafter, a representative from several pirate bands of Vicek offered a settlement to VoidCorp.

AUSTRINS TO THE RESCUE

The terraformers of Spes, Austrin employees of Boman Corp, grow into fearless legends with each passing day. Over the last few years, the Austrin engineering teams have valiantly stepped up to the defense of Spes more than a dozen times—which tells you something about how many times clicks or pirate criminals have managed to approach a low Spes orbit or even land on the planet's surface. What we need here is a few million more of the crazy bastards to join in this insanity, and maybe even the Externals could learn something about fear. But I digress foolishly; fear is in our vocabulary, not theirs.

Only a week ago, the Austrins earned another mark of valor—and more friends among the Borealin civilians—as they took to the sky to defeat a landing of clicks near Novus Urbe on Usher Island. While the *Vitian* and her fleet engaged an incursion of several click frigates that eventually withdrew, a clever click troop carrier managed to land not far from the city. It's not known what the clicks intended, other than perhaps a general slaughter of innocents, but their intent proved irrelevant with the arrival of eight Austrin "heavy reengineering cars" that dashed in to engage more than three dozen clicks. The Austrins even came out of what can only be properly described as their skytanks in order to combat the clicks with small arms as the spiders retreated into the hills south of the city.

Needless to say, the citizens of Novus Urbe hailed the Austrins as heroes and saviors of the city. A moment of celebration in the midst of destruction, a chance for happiness in the eye of the hurricane. Or, as likely, the calm before the storm.

At the start of the next day, the same heroes were back at work in the terraforming stations of the Hegelian continent.

Apparently, the continued Austrin heroism doesn't sit well with someone in Star Force command. The Concord ordered a biological impact study at the Boman Corp, giving its investigators an excuse to pry into all of the employees' extracurricular and click-hunting affairs. Despite a great deal of diffidence and hostility toward the inspectors, the Austrins opened up rather quickly to the real subject of the Concord inquiry, cheerfully spilling news of their battlefield exploits and how they had achieved their success against the spiders.

The investigation produced a one-hundred page report to the Star Force that largely exonerated the Austrins of

any criminal activity requiring prosecution. It did find a few surprises, however. Reportedly, less than a third of the document dealt with Boman Corp's actual terraforming operations; the rest of it analyzed both the Austrins' motives and the ease by which they respond quickly to click attack near and on Spes. The Austrins, in addition to bringing sophisticated terraforming equipment to Hammer's Star, also brought a number of advanced sensor and communications equipment, much of it now placed in orbit of Spes. A visit to the Boman Corp's corporate office on the planet revealed the purpose of the equipment. It constantly scans the inner system for the intrusion of click vessels, using some of the most powerful mass detectors and most intelligent AI programs available. Meanwhile, the Austrins' communications suites monitor all channels of Concord signal traffic—including numerous coded transmission—listening for news of conflict with the clicks. For every heroic episode that the Spes citizens learn of, ten times as many times the Boman Corp employees go to "full alert," prepared with battle gear and heavy arms, just in case the clicks should intrude. The Austrins sit patiently and hopefully, like some ridiculous but helpful superhero waiting in the wings to save Hammer's Star despite the presence of Marines and Star Force. Several Austrins have advocated the purchase of a frigate, converted to the purpose of troop transport.

The report sent to Admiral Raastad probably won't ever be made public, despite the little bit of comfort it might give to the civilians on Spes. Instead, the Raastad met with heads of Boman Corp at their Alamo headquarters and extended his appreciation of their wartime efforts. After distributing a few medals, he got to the point. Rather than seeking to curtail the Austrins' enthusiasm for intervention, he provided their engineers with frequencies and control codes that should make the job of fighting clicks easier, if anything. Meanwhile, Raastad gained full access for the Star Force to use the orbiting sensor equipment that the Austrins placed in orbit. He also assigned a Star Force lieutenant to act as a go-between the navy proper and these "special heroic deputies." The Austrins were delighted at the acknowledgement, and to a man promised to stand ready to "die fighting the clicks in glorious battle, if necessary." Knowing Raastad, he'll take them at their word.

Additional inquiries into the ownership of the Boman Corp revealed that it's entirely employee-owned, and that with each fiscal year has reported a significant financial loss despite twelve years of operation without complaint from employee or contract sponsor. About the only other thing that's unusual is easily explained: the high mortality rate among corporate employees. Still, the Boman Corp won't be receiving any complaints anytime soon, given the current public opinion of the Austrins on Spes and recent reports that 2501 was the first year in which the average temperature increase on Spes was below 3° C.

The Austrins are to be everything that they seem to me: just another inmate of this carnage. The fact that they choose willingly to be here makes them heroes or maniacs. Or both.

UNINHABITABLE SPES

According to a representative of a Borealin research team on Spes, the low population of the planet may be a good thing when it's necessary to evacuate Silver Bell and other cities in a few years. At present, estimates place just over 330,000 sentient beings claiming Spes as their permanent residence. For a world so close to human norms, it's an incredibly small population, and most of the planet lies fallow and unclaimed, much of it simply untouched by foot.

If the climate on Spes is our biggest concern in a few years, I'll be willing to run marathons in an Arist parka anyway, just to celebrate. But for those of you who don't want to listen to the truth of what's out here, maybe this will convince you to seek shelter somewhere else, preferably in the most distant reaches of the Stellar Ring.

The source for this story spoke only on the condition of anonymity, and though his story could not be confirmed, his identity as a member of a Borealin research team could. "Evacuation," he said, "is now only a matter of time. And the Borealin government of Spes knows that now as much as I do." The Office of the Dean strongly denied the validity of this story, noting that only last week Dean Hanna Palmquist observed that the terraforming efforts are showing signs of success. Representatives from both the Branch College of Justice Ethics and the Branch College of Unism issued similar dismissals.

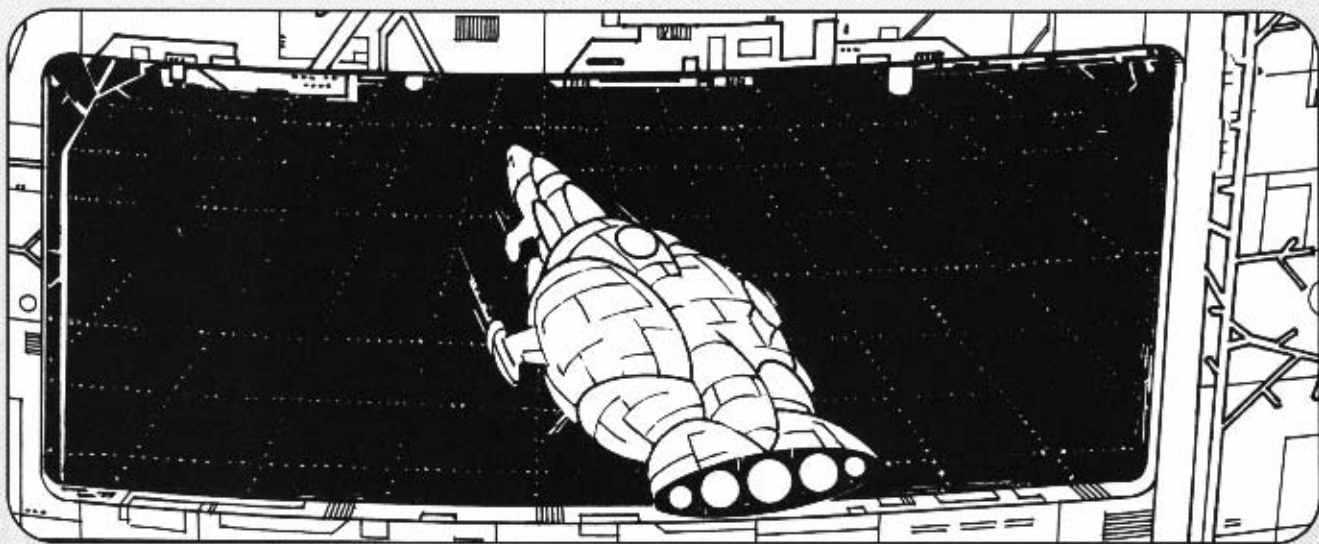
Along with his claim, the scientist delivered a bewildering array of scientific data, reports, and atmospheric analysis. While I've sent it out for independent confirmation, my source summarized its contents for the common citizen: Despite the best efforts and reasonable success of the Austrin terraformers, the temperature rise on Spes over the last decade stands on the "cascade precipice." As the temperature has risen, so everyone has noticed the increase of desertification and increase in greenhouse gases; what they don't know is that as the average temperature reaches 35 degrees Celsius, the spiral on Spes will become inevitable. Barring a massive shift in orbit or the use of extreme methods, Spes has begun its march to become a Venusian world.

BARDO OUTPOST GROWING

At last, the settlement on Bardo has attracted the attention of the Galactic Concord. Generally acknowledged as the safest place that a sentient can go and get in touch with the pirate bands of the outer system, Bardo's newest residents include a Concord Administrator and a company of Concord Marines. Furthermore, the moon has been added to the patrol routes of Star Force. Yet while any other settlement in Hammer's Star would welcome more attention and increased security, the inhabitants of Bardo have accepted the Concord only because they have no choice. Protests and even violent confrontations may follow in the coming months as the inhabitants view the situation akin to a hostile occupation.

Five years ago, the tiny domed settlement on Iniad's tenth moon had a population of fewer than five hundred.





Visited only by the forlorn and lost much like Arist, Bardo had nothing to distinguish it from any of the rocky and lifeless moons in orbit of gas giant. Yet Bardo has grown to support a population of just over three thousand. The economic and population growth of the moon can't be explained by a growing manufacturing or scientific base. While a few independent asteroid miners operate from Bardo, most of the population lacks steady employment. Indeed, the economic function of Bardo largely centered around a place where semi-legitimate merchants and traders could purchase goods—mostly stolen goods—from pirate corsairs. Meanwhile, Bardo serves as a place where many of the pirates can have something approximating a normal life: a home and even a family.

Administrator Rolin quashed any idea of shutting down the settlement on Bardo or evicting its people. While no one doubts that it serves criminals more than law-abiding citizens, Rolin won't endanger or violate the rights of the innocents residing on Bardo. Indeed, housing and employment assistance programs on Bardo seem largely designed to increase the size of the independent little moon.

Marissa Rolin has a tenuous hope to encourage more of Hammer's Star's criminals and pirates to settle down and abandon their former careers. Offers of amnesty from the Galactic Concord, while beyond question for their validity, have drawn surprisingly few pirates out. Given the presence of so many legal and military authorities in the system, the pirate band's obstinance looks almost foolish.

PLATON STATION: CANCELLED?

Construction on the Platon Station, an orbital defensive and refueling station in orbit of the second planet of the system, should have begun in December of 2501. Seven months later, no work has been initiated on the station in space or the construction of its components on any surface in the system, despite the purchase of numerous expensive technical parts and sections. Moreover, the Concord has yet to publish any reason just why Platon Station has gone undeveloped. Mean-

while, several local service providers have begun to be paid by the Galactic Concord, though they have no labor to contribute to an entirely nonexistent construction site. The Concord's bureaucratic elements have some experience with delays and falling behind deadlines, but the situation here in Hammer's Star make the situation more unusual.

Why is Raastad allowing the waste of resources, and why has he let this pet project of his fall behind?

The silence of a normally active rumormill around Concord military bases proves equally alarming, or at least interesting, to the lack of an official pretext. No one in the Concord wants to talk about Platon Station, and those few that do have any curiosity about the subject know as little as I do. Conjecturing about cost overruns or budgetary concerns, the Concord bureaucrats here have no idea why the orders to begin building haven't arrived. But it's no surprise that the military would keep the civilian officials in the dark. It's an old tale, really.

After my second week in the system, someone claiming to be a representative of a Concord bureau—he declined to name which—approached me with the solution to the puzzle. Rather than wasting those precious resources, the Concord has reallocated them. Even as we speak, manufacturing of the space station nears its final stages.

The obvious question is where. The station would have been noticed months ago anywhere in the inner part of the solar system, so that only leaves the crowded Vicek Belt or the dark reaches of the system as possibilities. My source refused to tell me, citing reasons of interstellar security should enemies of the Concord discover the secret location of the base. He pointed his finger significantly, directly away from the yellow sun into dark space as he said that, confirming my guess. He doesn't know either.

At times, I wonder whether the CIB and the Star Force keep its mysteries only out of habit, or out of actual need.

While it proved impossible to verify this information with another source, I took the Concord's unwillingness to discuss or demonstrate the whereabouts of the construction materials to be proof in itself.

**Gridline—Galactic News Agency/
The Verge/July 25, 2502**

by Avatar

I am here, finally, at the end of my road. Within our borders, there's nothing else I can dig up, no one else I can question. Any further answers must come from the passage of time.

As I write this last bit, wrapping up my investigation, I cannot even be sure if I have reached anybody. Out here in the Verge, I think—I hope—that the reports of my investigation have begun to reach people. But then, I have a suspicion that what I have uncovered is not news to these tough, independent folk.

Back in the Stellar Ring—who knows? Maybe I've managed to get these reports through. In some ways, I would be surprised if they did make it back, considering the number of governments and other organizations that are not so happy that I'm snooping around this stuff. To hell with them. I did what I feel is right. Admittedly, I added some fluff pieces just as a cover for my real purpose, reports that do not have any immediate ties to the theme of my overall investigation. But those pieces fulfilled a necessary function as well: They illustrate just how different is the Verge from anything most of us know back in the Stellar Ring.

After all this effort, I find that my questions remain largely unanswered. I have an idea of the basic nature of the threat we face, but I cannot offer concrete evidence to back up that idea. It is my opinion that several External species are working together to undermine human civilization in the Verge. The clicks are at that alliance's center. I believe the n'sss are also involved, despite any evidence of the two species working together directly. The kroath perform an equally important military function. They are, perhaps the most disgusting of all the creatures I have learned of out here. I shudder to think that human beings who have gone missing out here are captured and turned into those ... things. The creatures from the derelict ship in the Lucullus system worry me as well, although I have not been able to uncover any more about them. Are they technologically advanced shock troops? I know little about drivespace tech-

nology, but would our detectors even notice them?

I cannot think of a better "fifth column" species than the gardhyi. These are the "gaunt, pale men" to which I have been referring. It was not until I came to Hammer's Star that I could even put a name to them. They, too, seem to gain easy access to all manners of people. I also place in the category of infiltrator the teln that I learned about on Galvin. How can we defend against something that can override any of our desire to do so with a mere thought? Can you imagine working for the Galvinite government and wondering if an irritable coworker is having a bad day or is under the influence of these teln? What sort of rational behavior can we expect from a government whose leaders may all be infested with these things?

The questions I cannot answer are more troubling. Who are these aliens? What do they want? Which of them serve as the leaders of this dangerous alliance? Or do they work for someone else? Is there another civilization out there, one that is implacable to human interests? The alien ships that the Solars and corporate ships encountered in the Lucullus system—how are they involved in this? Are they the masters who are pulling the strings of all these other races, using them as slaves to further their own aggressive ends? Finally, perhaps most troubling of all, do these creatures work at the behest of one of the stellar nations, who seek any ally to break the deadlocked balance of power? If so, it represents one of the most heinous betrayals of humanity in our long and sordid history.

I do not know how to answer these questions. I cannot be sure that anyone can. I suspect our answers lie out beyond Hammer's Star. I can't shake the feeling that we should do what we can to find out, because I don't think they're going to stop until we're gone. If the clicks did destroy Silver Bell over a decade ago, what will stop them from striking again, elsewhere?

Many of you might justifiably believe that I have no credibility, that my accusations are the result of a mental disorder. If that is the case, I cannot, and will not even try to, change your mind. But I ask you to consider one thing: What if I'm right?

***Minus the faeries, spells, and other crap.**

Interplay

Threats from Beyond

One Grid Net journalist, known to a legion of Grid users as "Avatar," has dug through the rumors and conspiracies to get at the truth of the many perils facing the Verge. Now you can examine the reports and Grid-blurbs and decide for yourself if these threats are real—or just more disinformation spread by the Concord, the Vergers, or the Old Space news agencies hungry to make headlines in the Stellar Ring.

Threats from Beyond, a collection of adventure hooks, news reports, interviews, and other data uncovering a massive galactic conspiracy, is designed for use with the STAR*DRIVE™ setting and other ALTERNITY® game science fiction campaigns. Inside this 96-page book you'll find:

- Updates on the movers, shakers, and key locations of the Verge.
- Evidence of a terrible threat from beyond the boundaries of known space—a threat Avatar calls the Externals!
- The most up-to-date events shaping the Verge—from continuing confrontations between Arrivers and Vergers; to the politics unfolding aboard the *Lighthouse* space station; to reports concerning a variety of independent factions, including pirates, cykoteks, mutants, mindwalkers, and criminal organizations; to details about new alien species, and more!
- Plenty of adventure hooks to help incorporate these reports into any STAR*DRIVE campaign.

The news from the Verge isn't all good, but what news ever is? Jack into the Grid, download Avatar's reports, and decide for yourself if the External threat is real or the deluded imaginings of a burned-out gridpilot. Just don't linger—you never know who might be watching.

Externals: Fact or Fiction?



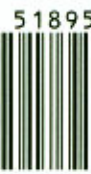
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ISBN 0-7869-1218-9



EAN

U.S. \$18.95

CAN \$27.95