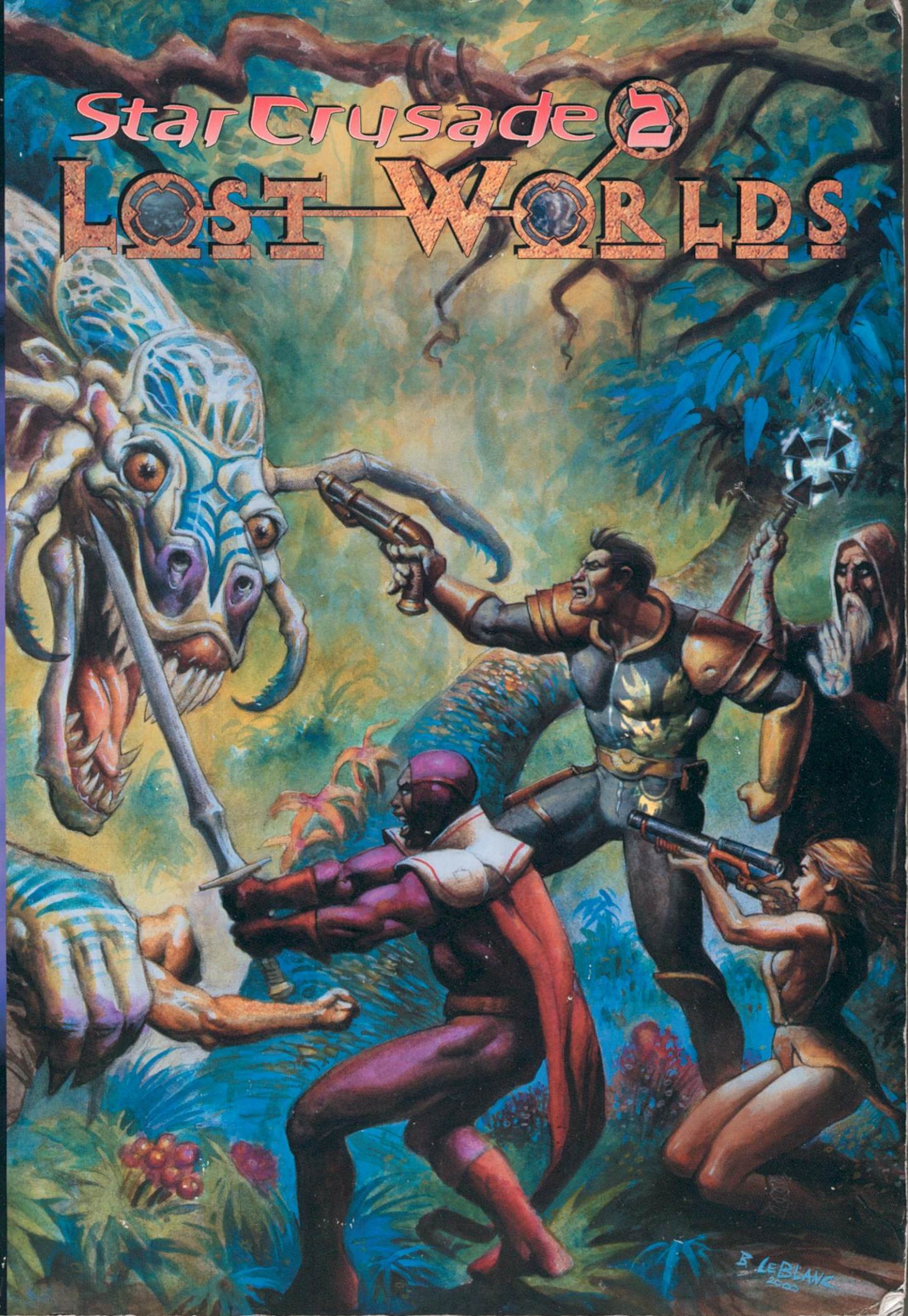
Star Crusade 2

LOST WORLDS



FADING SUNS™

Jumpweb of Barbarian Space

Star Crusade 2
LOST WORLDS

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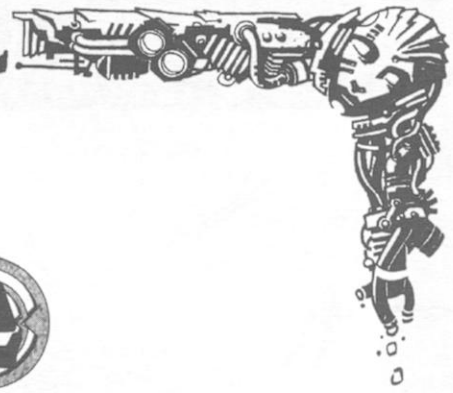
And though you travel in darkness, light is unseen all around you, cast from that celestial lantern which hangs above us all day and night, shining grace into the cold void without and within. Let your souls be as mirrors, casting forth this radiance to those who do not know it, whose ears have yet to hear the word of the Prophet, which casts the veil from our mind's eye. Deliver to them that which reflects from above, not what lurks below.

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Lost Worlds

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Alustro's Journal: Strange Communion

Madness. Utter madness.

The inhabitants of Sky Tear are afflicted with a brain rot from which none seem to escape — even we feel its effects. Only Haldon Boldeye's assurances that time and distance away from the orb heals all its ills gives me the calm patience to write this now.

Curse this lawless space! Never before have I lost a journal book, but my most recent accounts of our time in barbarian space was reduced to ash by the hot plasma of a raider's blaster. It seems our guide has enemies here, as well as the friends for whom we hired him. I shall have to recreate our journey through Hargard, Khotan, Frost, Wolf's Lament, Fingisvold and Epiphany at some later time, when the stress of escape is no longer upon us. We only stayed any length at Wolf's Lament, anyway, passing through the space of those other worlds but not touching upon them. We were in too great a hurry to come here, to this stark world with its patches of eternal night.

Eight jumps from Byzantium Secundus through unknown, hostile territory. Many here do not like Questing Knights, even though the majority have never met one — rumor alone precedes us, most of it lies. However, there are enough people here who welcome us, curious about our customs. Indeed, some even look upon us with a sort of reverence, relics from their legendary past come to walk among them.

Our mission is certainly a vexing one. The data ring that Erian wears only divulges necessary information on a "task required" basis — we must trust it to reveal important facts before we make fatal errors in our search for the secret relic its memory guards. Once upon Sky Tear, in the frigid dome of Cydax Station, it finally awoke to give guidance, informing us that we would have to leave the Vuldrok settlement and travel to another continent. It only spoke in latitudes and longitudes, but Julia was able to translate these onto the continent of Gervais.

Our guide's local friends here chuckle and shake their heads. A "fool's errand," they say, for Gervais is a vast jungle, unexplored except by savages — and this was a barbarian speaking. What sort of degenerate must one be to earn the title "savage" from such a thug? Here Haldon failed us, claiming that he was hired to simply take us here, not to go thrashing through a jungle waiting for the Muazi to chew on his brain.

Cardanzo demanded to know what the hell he was talking about, and so the Vuldrok of Cydax Station gathered to tell us the campside horror stories about Sky Tear. Terrible accounts of men driven mad simply by breathing the air on the world, or worse, of the bizarre sentient fungal aliens that whisper into a man's sleeping consciousness, driving him to insane acts. Ong was getting nervous, as was Sanjuk, and even I began to fear, but Cardanzo smiled as each story got wilder and wilder. I began to understand that they were intentionally trying to scare us.

Nearby, watching but not taking part, was a man in animal-skin robes, painted sloppily with odd markings, similar to those we had seen on Wolf's Lament — the alleged Anunnaki script called runes. I am skeptical about their mythical powers, but recognize that the Vuldrok revere the runecasters and speak carefully near them. I assumed this quiet watcher was a runecaster, or perhaps apprenticed to one.

"Excuse me, good sir," I asked him. He simply stared back, meeting my eyes in acknowledgement but refusing any further sign. "And what can you tell us of this world? Is there any way to survive such perils as your comrades tell?"

The Vuldrok storytellers grew silent and sullen, but the robed man smirked. He came forward and sat in a chair

immediately vacated for him by the lead storyteller. He stared at each of us, but Erian in particular, and Ong also.

"It is as they say, but not always so. They tell the worst, for they thrive on danger and feel that no trip is worth taking without a sense of adventure. But you are different. I can tell. You have purpose, and no time for drama. What do you seek?"

"I tell you truthfully that I do not know," said Erian. "But I have sworn an oath to retrieve it."

"Ha! Searching for the unknown with threat of dishonor. A brave quest if ever there was one. How will you know this thing when you see it?"

"A voice will tell me," Erian replied. "A voice from the past."

The man stared at her for a while, then nodded. "I can believe this... spirits are strong upon you. A rune dances on your forehead, but one I have never before seen. It is faint, otherwise I would have these warriors bind you while I studied it."

Ong growled at this, and earned a look of approval from the runecaster. "Yes, mighty beast, I would risk even your ire to gain such lore. But it is clear that it is not meant to be. Not yet... the rune evades me purposefully, and even I am no fool to raise the anger of such a thing."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but everything I had so far surmised concerning Vuldrok religion seemed true here. That they were animists, believing that even stones and trees have intelligence of sorts, or at least indwelling spirits. It seemed this one believed that ideas or thoughts had a similar life.

He said little after that, only commanding the nearby warriors to aid us on our quest, telling any who accompanied us that a chance for destiny was at hand. This carried much weight, for we soon had five volunteers to help us navigate the wilds, one of whom owned a flitter, taken, he proudly informed us, from the "milkfed Kurgans on Ananoxia."

There is little worth reporting about the following day's provisioning activity, or even the flitter trip across continents, except that our pilot avoided the "night regions," flying us five hours around one. These places, where clouds of crystal loom in the skies, often see no light for years, except for the stabs of lightning shot down from the heavens like spears thrown by an angry god. Ah, too much time among pagans afflicts even my imagination with their imagery.

As we approached the reported site, the ring once again awoke and chimed forth information, this time a detailed description of an old Second Republic archaeology bunker abandoned in the jungles below, besides the ruins of an old alien civilization. When Erian asked about these aliens, it droned forth a truly ancient report about them, in a long-dead voice from the Second Republic. It told us little, though, except that they resembled insects and were apparently not Anunnaki. They were a mystery shown only in ruins even to the first human explorers to this world.

We landed in a clearing six kilometers from the site — the closest we could get through the dense foliage — and trekked forth, leaving behind the flitter pilot and one other to guard our only escape from this place.

As we traveled, Cardanzo became quite surly, even snapping at Erian — something she had never experienced before, as evidenced by her shock and hurt. I begged him to tell me what was wrong, but he refused to even speak to me. Sanjuk also was not herself, shivering and staring at the jungle, obviously afraid. While I had seen her fearful before, never like this — she was a mouse expecting a cat to stalk her at any moment.

One of the Vuldrok warriors, seeing my reaction to my friends' behaviors, came and whispered to me, "The madness begins, my friend. No one escapes it for long." I shuddered, and hurried on, hoping we would be done before nightfall and away from this world before another week had passed.

The bunker itself was completely unimpressive. It was a block of maxicrete unceremoniously dumped on its existing spot by its unimaginative makers long ago. Since then, the jungle had swallowed its exterior, lending some degree of vibrancy to its long abandonment. The doors were sealed with a sophisticated lock, but the ring spoke again, demanding to be placed before the lock's "eye," where it could silently transmit codes. A rumbling within was heard and the door slid open a crack before a loud explosion came from somewhere deep within.

The ring chimed out: "Error. Internal power plant failure. The door must be forced."

At least it had opened far enough for us to squeeze a tree branch in, and use it for leverage. I say "we," but it was Ong and the Vuldrok who did the labor. No locking mechanism worked against us now, only the weight of the doors. The branch broke after the doors had been moved enough for Sanjuk to squeeze in, but we thought it best to try again before she risked going alone. A second branch did better, and this time the doors were fully opened.

No lights could be seen within, so we each lit lanterns or activated fusion torches. Corridors within led to old offices empty of anything — whoever had worked here took their think machines and files with them upon leaving. The ring guided us to a set of stairs and bid us travel to the bottommost level three stories down. At various places along the walls, cracks had allowed wet earth to seep in; I assumed we were near to some underground river or stream. Molds and oddly-colored mushrooms sprang up on some of these spots, emitting an ugly stench.

We finally arrived in what I assumed to be an old archive

chamber. Crates were scattered about the room, sealed sometime during the Second Republic and unexposed to air since. It was apparently one of these which we searched for. The ring asked Erian to hold the shipping manifests before it, and it somehow saw their contents, comparing them to its own records.

I looked about the room with Ong, who sniffed and wrinkled his nose at the stench, greater now in this room than the stairwell. The Vuldrok looked nervous, so I went to the one who had confided in me before and whispered a query at him: "Why so edgy?"

"The fungus," he said, trying not to look at it as he said so. "It isn't normal. It is Muazi. Hsst! Do nothing to acknowledge it. Get your thing so we can begone from here."

I went to warn Cardanzo, but the angry look in his face stopped me short. I felt a burst of betrayal and a sense of shame that he would act like this, but then I noticed the sweat on his brow, sure sign of the great effort of will working within to hold back an even greater tide of rage. We had to leave now, relic be damned!

I grasped Erian's ring hand: "We should go, my lady. This very minute."

"We have not come all this way not to search every crate, Alustro," she said, her look acknowledging my fear and worry but telling me it was unimportant next to the goal of the quest.

"Damn your quest!" I yelled. "Are we but pawns for the Eye?! We'll meet our deaths here!"

Julia moved to pull me away from Erian before Cardanzo could fully draw his sword, but we were all startled to hear the ring speak: "100% confirmation. Open this crate."

Erian snapped the hinges on the crate before her, and the slow hiss of air seeped out. After a minute, it was safe to open it, so she carefully reached for the lid. She was gently pushed aside by a silent Cardanzo, who reached instead to open it first, still performing his duties even when gripped by a madness none of us could explain.

I cannot convey enough our extreme initial disappointment in what we found. A stone carving rested on a pillowed shelf, displaying the odd carvings of the aliens who had once built cities here. A grasshopper shaped entity could be seen, but the other markings made no sense. We had traveled all this way for a piece of stone.

I cried out in rage. Reader, realize that I was not myself at this point. I moved forward and grabbed it from Cardanzo's startled hands, smashing it to the floor in frustration. The stone shattered, scattering across the perfectly smooth maxicrete. Cardanzo's fist impacted by jaw and the next I knew I was lying among the broken carvings. A glowing crystal was near my hand, something I had not seen before. Small chunks of stone revealed that it had been inside the carving, at its core.

Before anything else could transpire, I heard a Vuldrok yell: "Get out of my head!"

And then I remember little but heaving floors, quaking stairs, spiraling molds on the walls, and the melting yet continually reforming face of Ong as he carried me. And this one, curious thing above all: a feeling of confusion not my own, changed to relief and then regret, all mingled with intense memories of my vision of the Gargoyle of Nowhere.

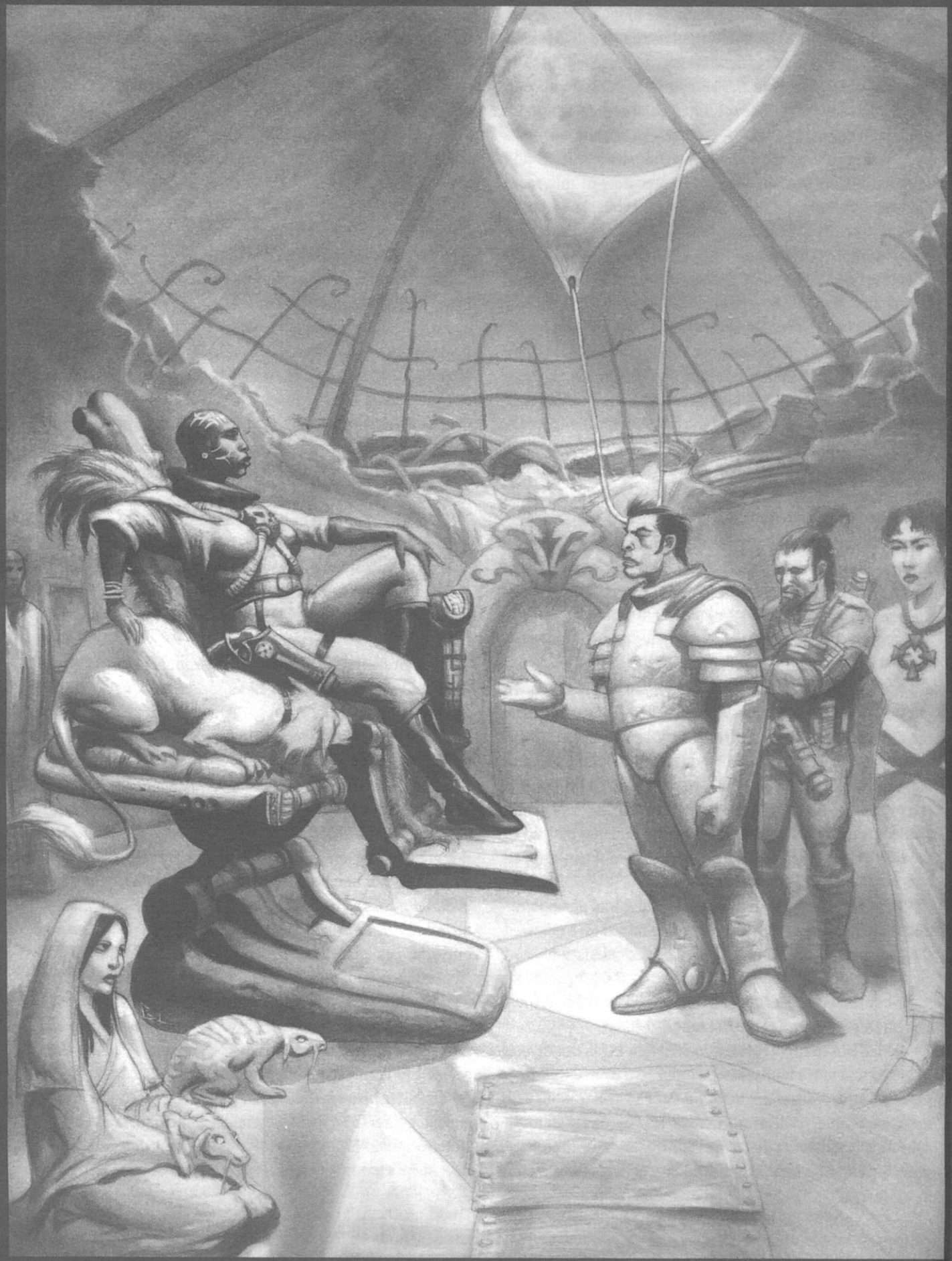
When my sense finally cleared from what I now know to be the fungal-induced hallucination, we were all once more aboard the flitter on our way back to Cydax Station. Erian held the glowing crystal in her hand, soaked in blood — not hers, but that of the Vuldrok who tried to take it from her, a renegade even his comrades did not mourn. Only she and Ong had remained unaffected, Ong because of his Vorox constitution, and she due to an antidote injected by the ring — which had apparently been prepared for all that had happened.

Our relic appears to be a soul shard, one of the famed makings of the Anunnaki. Each has unique properties of its own, and I would dearly love to investigate this one's, but Erian's ring reminds us that it is the property of he whom we serve in this quest, and that is enough to quell my curiosity.

We are once more in space, almost to Sky Tear's jumpgate. Captain Gordon Samothrace tells us to expect trouble on the other side: Kurgans riled by our previous jaunt through the system when we ignored their calls to communicate with them.

I don't know when I'll get another chance to write again, or to replace the lost journals, but I hope to have many things to say by then. Poor Cardanzo flinches every time he sees the great bruise on my jaw, but I smile to tell him it is no pain (a lie, but one he needs to hear). More than that, however, he needs to hear my council, and I hope he will soon accept my offer of it. His confidence is wounded, for he is one who prides himself on iron control. We both suffered from contact with Sky Tear, and perhaps an alien mind.

I realize now that my mind had been touched by the Muazi intelligence present in the room, one which had feared us until it encountered the memory of my vision, which seemed to accord us some respect. When I told this to the others, after hearing their tales and piecing my own conclusions together from them, I earned a name from the Vuldrok: Alustro Muazi Friend. I'm not sure I like it, but it does reflect somewhat my strange communion.



Introduction: Here There Be Dragons...

Lost Worlds is a companion volume to **Star Crusade**, the first sourcebook released by Holistic Design detailing the worlds of barbarian space, specifically the Kurga Caliphate and Vuldrok Star-Nation. This book deals with the various independent worlds sharing the jumpweb with Vuldroks and Kurgans — and, now, with Known Worlds adventurers.

Most of these planets have been closed to jumptravel for years, or have yet to become major players in interstellar events. Many of them are worlds of adventure, exploration and discovery — the stuff of good ol' pulp sci-fi adventure yarns. Here a single person can perhaps carve an empire of her own, far from the powerbases of the Royal Houses, Patriarch or League.

Recommend reading for inspiration includes the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs (his Martian and Venusian tales), Jack Vance (his Planet of Adventure series), and just about any science fiction involving exploration or first contact. Generally, older works, from the '30s through '50s, deal more with adventure than does recent science fiction, which tends to be concerned with greater versimilitude (scientific, psychological or anthropological) rather than raw edge-of-your seat suspense or the unalloyed wonder of bizarre ideas. This is certainly no indictment of modern works — of which there are many brilliant examples — just a note that this sourcebook attempts to capture more the feeling of what Gardner Dozois calls "The Good Old Stuff" (in an anthology of the same title).

Gamemasters should feel free to use these planets — as yet largely untrodden by Known Worlds explorers — to play up the strangeness and individuality of place and culture. These are new and unknown worlds with many points of similarity, but also many points of departure. Instill a sense of wonder, a dash of danger, and the thrilling feeling that nobody knows what's going to happen next — the future cannot be predicted here. Anything can happen, regardless of the best-hatched plots of nobles, priests or guildsmembers. A stunning upset for any number of schemes waits in the wings.

Dramas can involve intrigue, great escapes, cliffhanging adventure, new allies and new enemies. They can be populated with creatures, predators and prey, beauty on the wing or the hoof, and alien plants swaying in strange-scented breezes, their fronds shading travelers from the dying suns.

Realize, however, that those who travel these places leave their mark. The watcher changes the watched; one cannot interfere without ramification. While what was lost now is found, it can still be lost again — but will never be the same.

Repercussions

There are a variety of repercussions these lost worlds can have on the Known Worlds status quo, best categorized by the following threats:

Tech Proliferation: While few high-tech resources remain on these lost worlds, there are a number that host hidden caches, the discovery of which could vault their owners into prominence and even sway the outcome of certain battles. They are not numerous enough, however, to shake the pillars of the Church's stance against high technology.

Pandora may be an exception; its cybertech could potentially flood Known Worlds markets. The Church will surely attempt to control jumpgate travel to and from this world, but it will have a very hard time regulating activity on the world itself. Instead, it may use the sinful planet as proof that high tech leads only to fallen morals.

Political Upheavals: Few democratic institutions exist on these worlds, so the shadow of Republicanism is still just that, a shadow cast into the past. Only Iver is a significant exception, but one that may be controlled, either through continued interdiction, healthy engagement or tyrannical oppression, depending on which faction gains control of it.

Some of these worlds are important to more than one faction (for instance, Sky Tear hosts a drug vital to Kurgan religion and popular among certain Vuldrok pagans) and can thus cause great conflict or provide excuses for greater accord, depending on how things play out. Known Worlds representatives can greatly color the outcome of these events.

Rival Empires: Perhaps one of the main concerns is to which starfaring empire these independent worlds will eventually fall — Vuldrok, Kurgan or the Phoenix Throne of the Known Worlds. Every faction will fight for them, to use them either as territorial buffers or as a resource in a campaign. Of course, these worlds' own reactions to outside influence will greatly determine the political fate of the region. Only the Known Worlds are actively expansionistic here. The Kurgans can only extend slowly, and only over Kurganized populaces. The Vuldrok rarely expand as a single entity, but work through individual colonization instead. As conflicts increase in the Star-Nation itself, more and more renegades may flee to other worlds with their families, setting up new kingdoms that may one day draw the rest of the nations.

Occult Threats: Unregulated psychics (Kun Lun), pagans (Sky Tear) and heretics (Heaven's Ridge) are always a problem for the Church, and can become weapons in the hands of various factions. Hence, planets exhibiting such occult powers are destined to be the most policed of worlds. Even should Kun Lun become known to some factions, everybody has an interest in keeping it secret from rivals or from the masses. Thus, it could become a "night world" fought over by intelligence agencies and Inquisitors before the common folk ever hear of its existence.

The Unknown: What Ur secrets await discovery here? What sentient races? These are factors hard to count in any prophecy or plan, for they are unknown and thus unpredictable. Also, what of the rumors of other worlds still hidden? Where do the Nizdharim come from? What of the old Rweng conquerors? What happens when their gates also open? These and other questions should be engaged by gamemasters only when they are ready to shake up their universes a bit.

Who's Who

The players in this pageant of opportunity are many and varied.

Known Worlders

Questing Knights: The Known Worlds' main representatives are the Questing Knights and their Cohorts, scouting the region for Emperor Alexius. While they all follow the Emperor's charter to represent him with honor, each knight has his own ideas on what constitutes honorable behavior. Already, rivalries between Questing Knights are arising over first-discovery claims on new worlds, and disreputable deeds are not unknown, from the sabotaging of fellow knights' starship engines (preventing them from getting to a new world first) to the spoiling of rivals' reputations with a world's inhabitants.

Missionaries: Priests, monks and Brother Battle soldiers all vie to bring the Word of Zebulon to these forsaken regions, each with their own ideas of just how to instill it in others — through persuasion or by the sword. The Inquisition is not well represented here yet, but that's only a matter of time; as increased word of heresy and worse reaches the Known Worlds, Inquisitors are sure to travel forth.

Merchants: Of course, the guilds are here. Indeed, they were among the first, for their merchants know little fear when great profits are at stake. Scravers, Muster (especially Chainers) and Charioteers are the best represented so far, but as alliances are struck, the Reeves are sure to follow, and as wars are waged, more Muster will come. The League has the least intent to engineer new ideologies here — they just want to buy low and sell high — and thus may become the most trusted party once the inhabitants of the lost worlds come to know the ulterior motives of nobles and priests.

Spies: Where armies cannot tread due to expense, distance or politics, there walk the spies. No faction worth its weight in power is without its own intelligence agency, and barbarian space is now the new darling of advance espionage efforts. The Imperial Eye has the lead here so far (no telling how many Questing Knights are actually working for Eye interests, whether or not they know it), but only a scant edge at best on the Decados. The other factions are gearing up, but may be rare. For now, independent adventurers have the field mostly to themselves. Nonetheless, spies exist in any of the guises mentioned above, and their agencies can even co-opt the natives (see below).

Dervishes: At the beck and call of their masters (noble or Church), these psychic warriors have been covertly dispatched on missions into barbarian space, but as yet don't constitute a major force in the region. Still, most people prefer to send them on risky missions to unknown worlds than rather risk them getting restless at home.

Lost Worlders

If a drama or epic involves Lost Worlder player characters, the gamemaster should probably first stick to a single world for a while, introducing the characters to their native environs before thrusting them into the strangeness of space travel and off-world affairs. Each world is different and produces its own character types.

There is at least one nascent interstellar alliance here that may grow over the coming months:

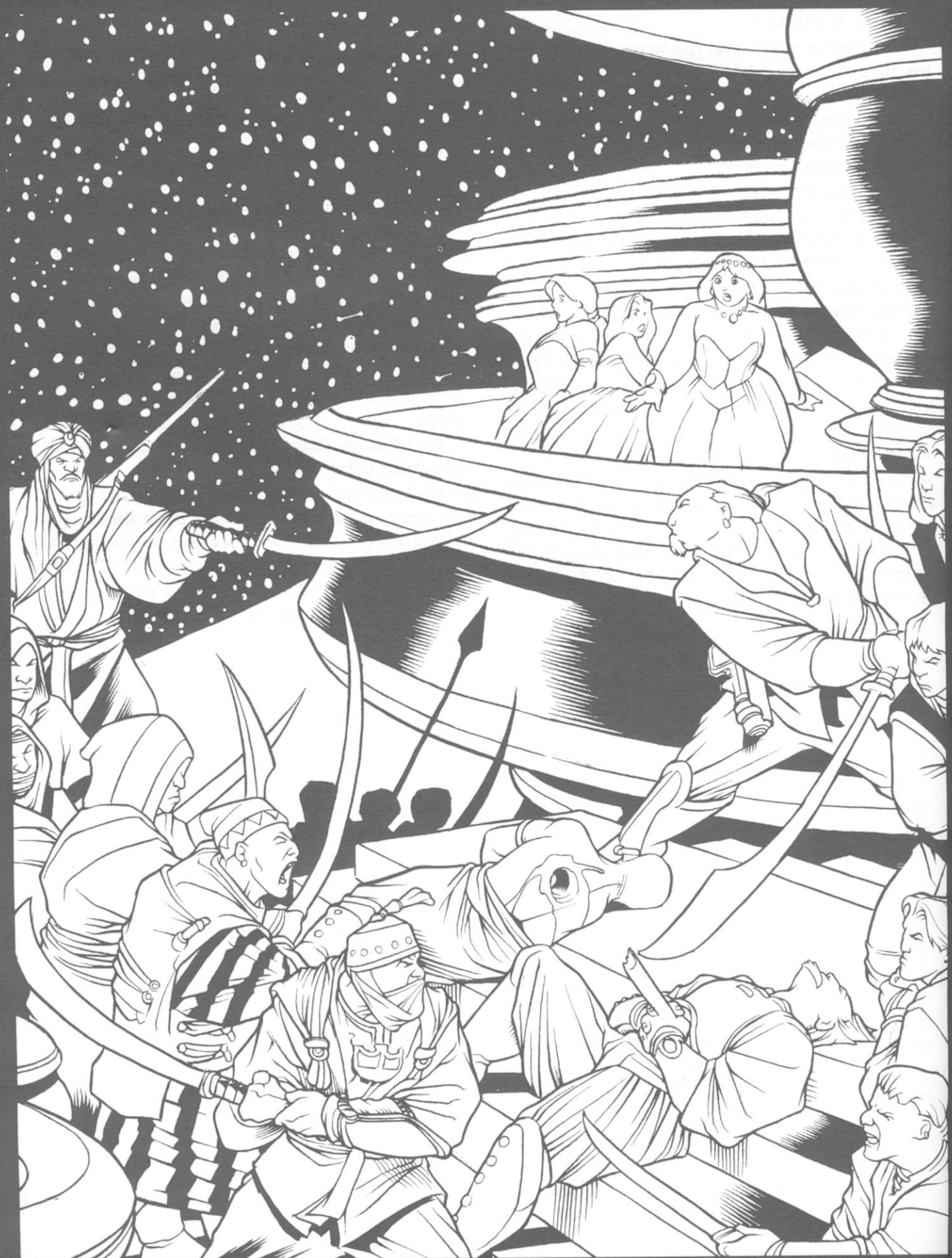
The Autonomous Union: Not all the Qabirim on Antioch are members of the Diplomatic Corps, and not all of them appreciate their own ruler, let alone the threat of starfaring empires. Hence, a new idea is being born, hatched by a number of these super-intellects (see *Aliens*) and ferried through independent messengers to all the independent worlds that have recently been rediscovered: The Autonomous Union, an alliance of mutual support for worlds wishing to remain independent. Of course, no power here has the military capability to resist a concerted thrust by the Vuldrok, Kurgans or Known Worlds, but the Union can sow the seeds of rebellion and distrust of these foreign empires. As yet, the movement lacks passion, for it is only an idea. Its leaders hope to find a martyr for the cause soon, one whose name they can appropriate and whose deeds they can manufacture into legend.

Story Ideas

The Grand Tour: The characters hire a Vuldrok (or other spacefaring local) to give them a tour of this exciting new jumpweb, stopping off at each world they pass, scouting, making alliances and righting wrongs (or burning sinners). They probably need to collect new keys along the way; these usually exist as artifacts on most lost worlds or as data gleanable from now-open jumpgates.

Mission to X: The characters' faction(s) sends them on a mission to a specific lost world. They may first have to travel to some other places to get there, but the particulars of that world and its situation are the leading themes of the story. They may have to collect something and take it back, fighting resistance all the way, or deliver a gift or data important to a new alliance. How important the final goal is (or is believed to be) will greatly affect the characters' motivations.

Dark Envoys: Characters are involved in the nascent Autonomous Union, and are performing some shuttle diplomacy in attempts to gain adherents. This doesn't just involve meets and greets — the characters are also charged with the task of initiating terrorist events that can be fully blamed on any of the star empires, forcing local leaders into the union. Do the characters do this out of genuine ideological fervor or from fear of their Qabirim masters?



Lost Worlds

Out there, in the vastness of space, humanity exists in fragmented societies, mere shadows of the former reach and unity of the star-spanning Second Republic. When the Republic fell, so crumbled human unity. Division and conflict wracked society once more. As the few seized power over the many, old feuds, ethnic hatreds and cultural separatism flared. Thought long engineered out of human psychology, these old ways proved to have only been slumbering, lulled to quiescence by the technological marvels and ease of living delivered by Republic life. Now, they awoke with a vengeance and conquered consciousness once more, squashing ideals of peace, tranquility and equality.

But not all succumbed to such pressures. Rather than risk disruption and oppression from anarchy, many worlds shut their jumpgates and sealed off their solar systems from star travel — a more effective quarantine than any territorial border guard in human history. These worlds were now on their own, cut off from the remnants of their government and their fellow human beings — friends and family on distant worlds would never see one another again, and as the years passed, successive generations forgot they even had relatives elsewhere. Tales of star travel and brothers on far planets became legends impossible to prove or deny. It was as if the Republic never existed.

An age of colonization of unknown peoples with strange ways begins anew, different from humankind's previous first thrust into space. In the Diaspora, humans planted themselves on worlds they had never seen. Now, they encounter other humans, but with ways unlike their own. This kind of culture shock hasn't occurred since an earlier Age of Exploration in old Urth's 15th and 16th centuries. While it is sure to bring with it misunderstanding, conflict, hatred, imperialism, colonialism and all of ignorance's ilk, it may also nurture new understanding, friendship, enlightenment and wonder. Which of these causes an explorer chooses to serve may determine his place in history — as hero or tyrant.

Discovery Timeline

Some of these worlds have just recently been discovered by the Known Worlds, others are on the cusp of such discovery, and still others have yet to be visited. Each description provides some idea of how these worlds will be (or were) found, and the likely result of such rediscovery. However, each gamemaster must decide on her own the actual sequence of events here. Any "official" timeline revealed in Holistic Design sourcebooks or website info should be considered as a suggestion only — we try to keep the details open for any chosen style of play, keeping to broad effects (i.e., how the Church views a world rather than which particular bishop visited it and said what particular thing). Even if we do provide such a timeline, feel free to throw it out if it differs, or warp it however desired.

New Worlds

Just because a lost world doesn't appear on the jumpweb in this book doesn't mean a gamemaster can't slip it in — there are still many worlds yet lost. While Holistic Design has eventual plans for most lost worlds mentioned in previous supplements (such as Yathrib, off Aylon), feel free to use them here anyway, or better yet, create your own. There can be an unlimited number of "night worlds," those planets discovered by only a few and kept secret for their own uses.

Antioch

I know not how to describe the place that the Paladindrax enjoys in Antioch's society. He stands militant yet remote, holding all knightly virtues, like a sacred mythical king. The people believe that a touch from his hand will cure any disease or misfortune.

The Paladindrax is the supreme military leader of Antioch, and the head of the inhabitants' diplomatic corps. Under him, representatives in the Sanada vote on internal affairs, and he is kept informed of all that passes outside his mountain citadel. The Dons, remembering their ancient power, resent and fear him, for they say he sends the birds and beasts of the field to spy on them. All religious leaders pray for his health, and his image is enshrined in the poorest hovels and the richest estates. It is as if they know not the Maker of Stars, or think the Paladindrax is himself the All-maker.

To mock him is to die; those who do not bow when he is mentioned are horribly suspect. In short, he is believed to be the incarnation of the just spirit of the ancients, come to protect Antioch from the barbarians who lurk outside its jumpgates.

And why not? He lives 200 years, and his soul incarnates in his successor when he drinks from the Grail of Zebulon (whom we call Zaibolu). Or so it is generally believed....

— Mehmet Ugalu, Kurgan Caliphate ambassador

Antioch is famous for its diplomats, skilled politicians who have kept the ancient planet free and independent since the Fall of the Second Republic, although its inhabitants pay tribute to the Kurgan Caliph. "I would rather trust a starving Beliah jackal than expect to get the better of Antioch's negotiators," replied an exasperated Temg Urline to the Caliph in the 47th century, when the Caliph could have easily taken the world. Time and again, negotiations came before the expected attacks, and each time the Caliphate agreed to what seemed like advantageous terms. But the frustrating world remained stubbornly independent, its people giving the Caliphs tribute, but not their souls or lands. The Antiochites are considered to be part of the Ordu Kafiri, or honorable unbelievers.

The diplomats dealt differently with each Caliph. After Antioch was rediscovered by the Caliphate, the first two Caliphs to reign during this time were presented with ancient Second Republic weapons, and the third Caliph received pleasure slaves, wines and addictive spices. Later Caliphs were presented with ancient artifacts of their faith, and each successive Caliph meet his desire from the Antioch diplomatic corps. The Caliph's advisors swore that the Corps' diplomats had a preternatural ability to read their envoys, and yet seemed to exhibit no psychic or theurgic advantage. Unknown to them at the time, the genetically altered Qabirim controlled Antioch's diplomatic corps, and were answerable only to the supreme ruler of Antioch, the mysterious knight known only as the Paladindrax.

Antioch Traits

Ruler: Paladindrax Pater Diogenses

Cathedral: Various religions; Antioch Orthodox is the main one (derivation of Omega Gospels and Caliphate beliefs)

Agora: Pratifix's Way (Pandropoli)

Garrison: 7

Capital: Nicaea

Jumps: 4

Adjacent Worlds: Twilight (dayside), Irem (nightside)

Solar System: Rum (0.378 AU), Edessa (0.967 AU), Antioch (1.22 AU, Riga), Corinth (2.66 AU), Atlas (16.010 AU, Odysseus, Achilles, Acheas), Trebezond (24.35 AU), Sulla (40.33 AU, rings), Aura (52.23 AU, Silenus) Jumpgate (64.37 AU)

Tech: 6

Human Population: 163 million (estimated)

Alien Population: 3,000 (Obun, mostly centered near their own university)

Resources: Consumer, luxury, contraband

Exports: Wines, crafted furniture, captured weapons, manufactured weapons, off-world slaves, religious items

Landscape: Antioch is a dry world; many inland deserts and farms have Mediterranean-style climates. The planet's landmass is greater than Urth's, with four major continents.

History

Settled in the Diaspora era, Antioch's early history is largely legendary, for many of its records were destroyed in the First Antioch Civil War, during the sacking of M'Nott. However, enough records survive to show that Antioch was controlled by six aristocratic families, called the "Seismilias" by the populace. They ran the large agricultural territories and were represented in a sort of parliament called the Sanada. Most of the people were farmers, fishermen or small-time tradespeople, owing allegiances to the wealthy rulers of Antioch.

Zebulon came here, as is mentioned in the Omega Gospels, and local legends have given his stay numerous interpretations. Zebulon is supposed to have left the *Golden Metaphors*, a book he presented to the desert hermit Renato, leading to a unique evolution of his teaching on the world.

The First Antioch Civil War (2917-2926) occurred when the emerging Galan clan, enriched off mineral veins found beneath the southern pole, attempted to wrest control from the old aristocracy. After a fierce war in which the jealousies among the Seismilias initially worked against the family, Gadastro Galan eventually emerged victorious, and the new Sanada represented Galan interests, along with the trade unions who supported the family.

Gadastro Galan was appointed Guardian of Antioch. He rewarded the rising middle class by founding universities and technical schools across the planet, a process accelerated by his son, Gregory. When Gregory died, the Revolt of the Classes (3062) saw a shift in power to the First Speaker of the Sanada. The Galan clan, along with the older Seismilias, found themselves represented in the Honorary Chamber, where debates concerning titles and culture occurred among old aristocrats while real power was debated in the Sanada's Great Chamber.

During the Second Republic, Antioch's technical and educational reputation grew, and the planet competed with Shaprut, Byzantium Secundus and other worlds as a center of universal learning. Antioch's citizens were known for an aloof air of superior learning and culture. They made higher education available even to the poorest, and across the Republic Antioch's sons and daughters were renowned as engineers, scientists, teachers and cultural trendsetters. Pleasantly remote, the planet received many students yearly from other worlds, some of whom settled there. Its agricultural scientists transformed the world into a productive garden, able to feed many worlds. When the Second Republic began to topple, the scientists and economists of Antioch were able to keep the planet running smoothly while the rest of the Republican worlds fell into strife and darkness.

Unlike her neighbors, Antioch did not welcome the Fall of the Second Republic. She staved off economic collapse thanks to the *noblesse oblige* of her great families, but the military situation worsened. Raiders from renegade worlds appeared, and the Second Republic forces withdrew to defend Byzantium Secundus. When Twilight shut its gate, Antioch's access to the Republic was cut off. Legally, the Sanada still considered itself a part of the Republic, although it was now an island in a sea of barbarism. Cultured families and institutions from Rogue Worlds fled to Antioch, trying to escape the rising tide of lawlessness encompassing their worlds.

Finally, in 4080, the situation became intolerable. A great wave of barbarians landed on Antioch by way of Arimaspia.



The Sanada gave emergency powers to Count Geoffrey Galan, a descendent of the old family and commander of the Defense Forces. Granted the title of Paladindrax (Paladin of Supreme Command), Galan mustered his strength, leading his armies into a bitter four-year war to free the planet from outside influence. This he did, developing a loyal guard about him, the Granquee Knights.

Henceforth, the Paladindrax was granted supreme military rule over Antioch. A quasi-mystical tradition built around him, now considered to be the Pancreator's Anointed, the Savior of Antioch. The Paladindrax held supreme command over all military and diplomatic orders, but the domestic affairs were still, by tradition, voted on in the Sanada. Among the Paladindrax's many titles were Guardian of the Republic, Savior of Antioch, God's Anointed, and Supreme Leader of the Armies and Fleets.

Upon the death of Geoffrey Galan, his son received the title, beginning a long dynasty. The successive Paladindraxes have traditionally supported the universities, the Qabirim population and the lower classes, from whom they derived technical, diplomatic and manpower support. Their rulings often hurt the interests of the Dons of the old families.

The Paladindraxes ruled from the fortress city of Nicaea. Geoffrey was the first to drink the Elixir of Life, a longevity potion developed by his scientists, extending his rule for a century. Each successive Paladindrax has regularly imbibed this secret and rare concoction, and thus only nine Paladindraxes have held the title since Geoffrey. The first three followed a lineage from father to son, but the Paladindrax must choose a successor skilled in the art of military command, and so the title has not always been hereditary.

Geoffrey ruled until 4217, and was the first to recruit the mysterious Qabirim into his service. They needed protection from the rising fear and superstition gripping many worlds, fanned by the remnants of the Church and the suspicious Wersa. Genetically altered humans were an abomination in the Church's eyes, and the Qabirim needed a secure refuge. The Paladindrax provided one. Geoffrey's son Ramirez next took the title.

In 4312, the Drenjar-Wersa raiders from Arimaspia fell in fury upon Antioch, and Ramirez met them in battle, losing his life. The Wersa soon controlled large sections of the Heldrin Continent, and raided wherever else they could, finally leaving in 4314. Centralized authority was shattered, and the Dons rebelled.

Paladindrax Ramirez II secured the city of Mestfa, but his authority was challenged elsewhere. The Wersa returned in 4319, and this time the new Paladindrax, in order to secure his position against the Dons, gave North Heldrin to the invaders, signing an alliance with their captain, Thorfinn. Vendrethlan became a fortified province, and the Wersa added their armies to the Paladindrax, subduing his foes. Surprisingly, within three generations, the Drenjar of Vendrethlan became Antiochized, and created a buffer against their warring kinsmen from other worlds, securing the planet's peace against the later Vuldrok. Holding the most organized and militant sector of the planet, the dukes of Vendrethlan ruled as autonomous kings for centuries. When Paladindrax Juo fell before a Vuldrok fleet, Duke Morgar wed Juo's daughter, Pau, and became Paladindrax in 4487. It was in his time that the Vuldrok threat receded, only to be replaced by the looming shadow of the new Caliphate.

Morgar raised a huge army and held the planet against the united Vuldrok under King Froljir the Ill-Fated, allying with the Caliphate to hold the world at heavy cost. Froljir conquered Sapur, but it was reconquered after his death by a united Caliphate-Antioch army, named the Glorious Horde. When the Caliphate later threatened an invasion, Morgar realized he had not the power to resist them. In a desperate hour, he sent his greatest diplomats to the Caliph. Surprisingly, the planet was spared in return for tribute paid for the Caliph's generous protection; independence was maintained. This was no small feat, and the diplomats were handsomely rewarded.

Antioch diplomacy ever since played the Caliphate and Vuldrok off against each other. When the Vuldrok were strong, diplomacy leaned toward the Caliphate; when the Caliphate entered a conquering phase under a military-minded Caliph, Antioch sought alliances with various Vuldrok thanes. When both powers were strong, the diplomatic core played them against each other for their own advantage.

In 4791, the jumpgate to Arimaspia and the Vuldrok heartworlds was shut. Antioch still dealt with occasional Vuldrok raids by way of Irem, but without the threat of thanes from Frost, the world now had to deal mainly with the threat of an unopposed Caliphate.

Luckily, the Caliphate experienced a long non-expansionist phase, ended only recently with the attempt to claim Hira. Antioch still pays tribute to the Caliphate in order to maintain its independence, but its diplomats fear what will come should the Caliph win the Hiran conflict and seek more worlds. While the Known Worlds and the mysterious Hazat are still largely a myth to Antioch, this will change any day now once Known Worlders come by way of Twilight.

The current Paladindrax, Pater Diogenses, has begun reforms in reaction to the extreme wealth enjoyed by his predecessor. Pater seeks to revive the warrior code and purity of his office, re-creating the mystical aura that once surrounded the title.

Geography

The northern continent of Heldrin holds the only conifer forests, along with the greatest grazing and farmlands. Descendants of Wersa-Drenjar raiders populate the northern region, called Vendrethlan, but they have assimilated peacefully with their neighbors. Southern Heldrin produces superior wines and is largely rural, its people living and working small, self-owned farms or the farms of various Dons. Directly south of Heldrin is the continent of Corinth, where great irrigation projects bring water to the deserts. Political power lies with the Dons, minor nobles who hold vast estates and the free city of Turaspo.

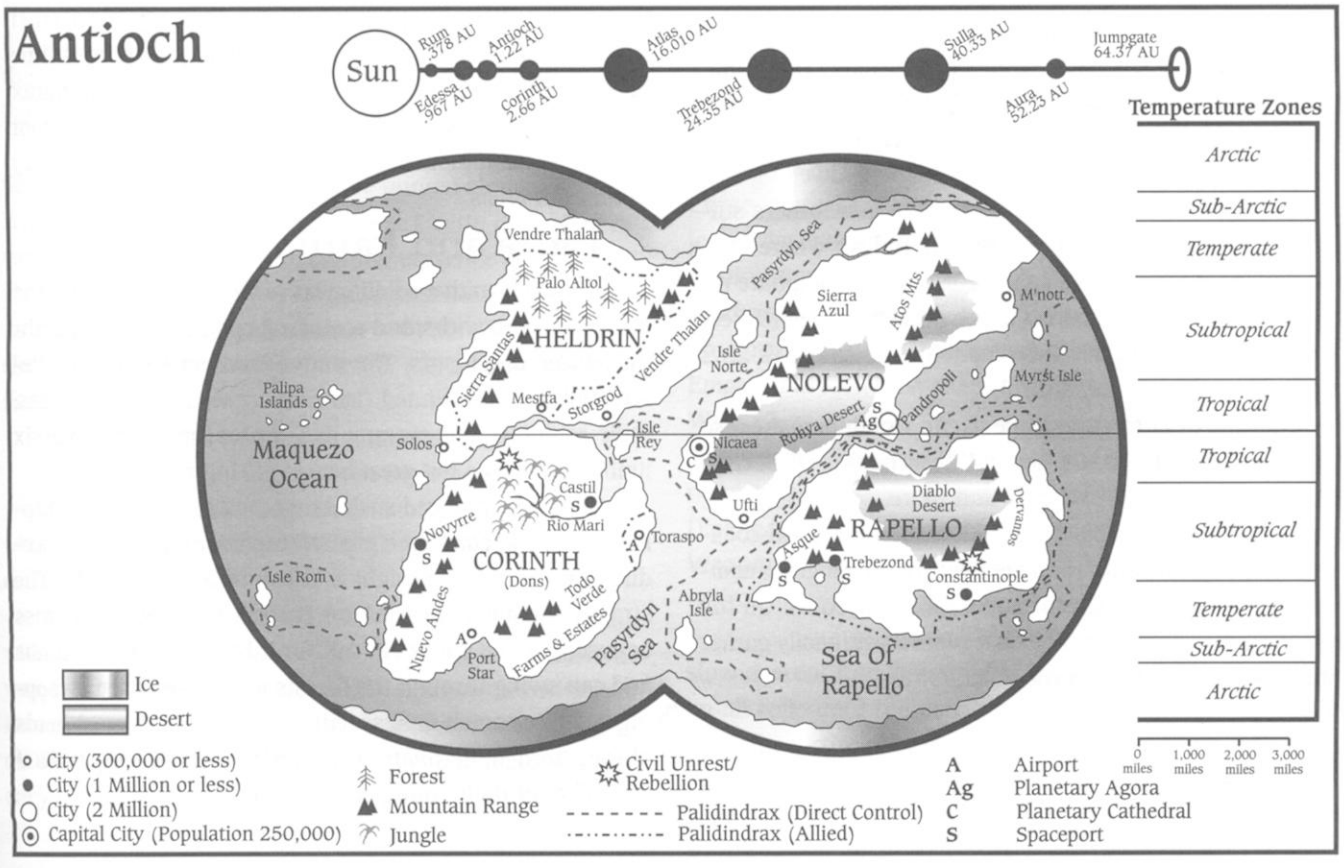
The Paladindrax rules from the fortress city of Nicaea on the opposite eastern continent of Nolevo. The land is both arid and mountainous, dotted with small farms and towns, and is home to the great universities. Many of these still produce great scientists, logicians and thinkers; Antioch's tech level has remained relatively high.

The southern continent of Rapello is abundant with wildlife and forests, having both tropical and temperate zones. The cities are largely calm, with many tech factories producing weapons. The highest standard of living on Antioch is found here.

Current Conditions

The space defenses of Antioch are strong and its armies well equipped, but not large enough to survive a war against an empire such as the Caliphate. Fearing the possible unity of jumpgate neighbor Twilight, Antioch's policy has long been to keep the planet divided, so no one powerful faction can rise to become a threat to Antioch's independence. The Paladindrax favors the Citadel in Twilight's three-faction war, believing that its philosophy is closest to his own. Indeed, the belief in a single semi-divine leader and the people's support for the leader's party dimly reflects the Paladindrax's own political condition. However, no Paladindrax has ever used racial cleansing, and all have allowed for freedom of religion. An alliance allowed for the Citadel to receive aid from Antioch, but when the royalist faction became aware of possible outside Hawkwood help, the Paladindrax became worried, and considered arming all foes of the returning aristocrats.

On Antioch, only two factions raise the banner of discontent against the Paladindrax. The Dons and their political allies in the Sanada offer nothing more than reinstating the ancient rule of the rural aristocratic families. Their plots and programs are not popular outside the rural nobility, and the Qabirim spy network keeps the Dons divided; all they whisper is soon known to the Paladindrax.



The second opposition group is the mysterious and cryptic order known as the Mountain River Poets. A loose-knit alliance of poets, hermits and individualist thinkers, its opposition comes from a philosophical point of view stressing the unnaturalness and unhealthiness of worshiping any one man as a semi-divine being. Instead, this elusive group emphasizes contemplation and naturalness — the "Way of Nature" rather than the "Play of Man."

Attempting to free their fellow citizens from the religious and political propaganda surrounding the Paladindrax, the poets have produced anonymous poems, such as the heretical *Rivers and Sands*, wherein "every blade of grass, every single autumn leaf, every creeping insect and every lizard basking in the sun is a Paladindrax."

Using the poetry of resistance, the Mountain River Poets cause the reader to question basic cultural assumptions about belief and hierarchy. Their books are distributed anonymously, and their writings point to a more idealized society in which small communities make informed decisions. It is a fairly recent phenomenon, and the Paladindrax's intelligence services have not been able to penetrate the anonymous groups, but they did arrest the poet Raul Montana. Frustrated with their inability to wrest information from him, the agents killed him. Montana, if not actually a Mountain River Poet, was in sympathy with some of their goals.

Some claim that the Mountain River Poets received their wisdom from ancient hermits dwelling in the mountains, called Viejos by the natives. Viejos are held to have mysterious powers over the weather and are great healers. The Mountain River Poets receive support from small rural communities and some dissatisfied intelligentsia in the cities.

Religious freedom is guaranteed under the Paladindrax. This has resulted in a patchwork of religions dwelling side by side in relative peace, some relatively new, others surviving from ancient times and now found no where else. The dominant religion is a splinter-sect of the Caliphate religion (the Antioch Orthodox Church of Zaibolu), which recognizes the Paladindrax as the upholder of Zaibolu's laws and the guardian of the faithful.

Children of Zuran and some pagan worshipers are also found on Antioch, as are several descendants of Second Republic philosophical schools and prereflective religions. The Paladindrax and his diplomats enforce peaceful coexistence among the faiths, and members of the religious communities often hold peaceful philosophical debates. On the summer solstice, all the religious leaders traditionally gather and pray for the health of the Paladindrax.

Politically, the current Paladindrax (Pater Diogenses) is moderate, rarely using his influence outside of defensive matters. Already old in years, he is grooming one of his best knights, Julian Patraxus, to succeed him. Hearing from afar of the sudden Known Worlds interest in the Vuldrok, Caliphate and neighboring worlds, he is troubled, and has sent his diplomats to confer with the Caliph about the matter.

People

Antioch's people are hard-working and serious — except at festival times, when they parade wildly in the streets. Respect for another's vocation is ingrained; even rural farmers are granted protection by the laws. Teaching is the profession carrying the greatest honor, and the academic traditions of the various Antioch schools run deep. The majority of people belong to the Antioch Orthodox Church of Zaibolu, but minor religions are tolerated (they suffer a slightly higher faith tax). While the citizens are deeply religious, they do not often argue over belief. Strict tolerance is enforced by the Paladindrax (this also extends to academic freedoms, though no professors would preach rebellion or other forms of government, for fear of the intelligence networks).

A limited democracy allows people to vote for members of the Sanada. Political races are often reduced to members of two old and respected aristocratic families, each differing little from the other in politics. Nonetheless, the people often label the candidates as "Blue" or "Green," Blue having connotations of aristocratic stability and rule, Green with the rural workers and poorer sections of society. Since strict rules regulate voting and election campaigns, there is little open viciousness, but twice in recent history the Paladindrax has had to put down riots over election outcomes in major cities. The Paladindrax can dispose of the Sanada authority in times of crisis.

Flora and Fauna

Antioch's native wildlife was resilient enough — for the most part — to withstand ecological competition with Urth-introduced organisms. The native land vertebrates are descended from six-finned fish that crawled out of the seas; their reptilian and mammalian representatives have six limbs, rather like the great beasts of Ungavorox.

This has produced such dangerous animals as the rapidly moving *verdiablos*, a gigantic reptile resembling a crocodile that can stand upright and run at terrific speeds. The strange, mammalian predator *cartelgos* resembles a cross between an ape and great cat, for it has opposable thumbs and can swing through the forests with ease, often swooping down to snatch unsuspecting prey. Even the great herds of four-horned, herbivorous *cuatellons* can be dangerous if the safety of their young is threatened.

The most mysterious lifeform is the *marellen*, a simian-like creature that returned to the sea. Marellen are toolbearers, and some believe them to be sentient; others say the elusive and oddly human-looking species resembles clever apes. Hairless except for their heads, the *marellen* produce songs of haunting beauty in the isolated coves and on the beaches of Antioch.

Personality

Tomora Keldemin

Antioch's Diplomatic Corps has kept the world free from conquest for centuries. Its highly trained operatives are among the best intelligence agents and cultural envoys human space can produce. Envoy Tomora Keldemin is among that number. The chosen disciple of Mentor Gavas Lapulo, one of the most effective diplomats, Tomora is in charge of handling Known Worlds visitors. While she has yet to travel to the Known Worlds, rumors of the Empire and reports from the few mavericks who have come to Antioch intrigue her. She, like others in the Corps, realizes that this Emperor Alexius may offer a greater obstacle to Antioch's liberty than the Caliphs have. She thus tries to meet every Known Worlds visitor she can.

While most of the Corps is fiercely loyal to the Paladindrax (its agents don't rise without suffering intense interrogation on this matter), Tomora was trained by Lapulo, whose genius allowed him to hide his affiliation with the Mountain River Poets. Tomora shares his secret political hope that an alternative to the Paladindrax can be found, although this new savior must protect the Qabirim as well as the Paladindraxes have.

Her Achilles Heel is her devotion to Lapulo. If his true ties were discovered, she would be purged along with him. What's worse is the magnetic pull he exerts over her personality. Without some sense of his presence or guidance, she finds it hard to concentrate and center herself. She wears an heirloom he gifted her, a locket with his portrait; should she lose it, she would suffer from her Mental Instability Affliction.

Race: Qabirim (Tweaked Changed human)

Rank/Class: Minister, Antioch Diplomatic Corps

Quote: "The universe is large enough for us all to get what we want, as long as we recognize one another's sovereignty."

Description: Tomora is a tall woman of medium build, with long dark hair tied into an elaborate braid that she wraps around her neck and shoulders. She wears whatever is in fashion for the wealthy aristocrat of Antioch, but without the individual baubles that set the rich apart or cause envy in others.



Entourage: She is often accompanied by a group of young diplomats-in-training, most of them human but with at least one Qabirim protégé. On dangerous diplomatic missions, she also has undercover guards.

Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Endurance 3

Mind: Wits 11 (base 4, max 12), Perception 8, Tech 4

Spirit: Extrovert 8, Introvert 1, Passion 3, Calm 3, Faith 1, Ego 3

Natural skills: Charm 7, Dodge 4, Observe 9, Shoot 4

Learned skills: Academia 7, Art (sculpture) 3, Bureaucracy 7, Empathy 8, Etiquette 9, Focus 6, Inquiry 6, Knavery 3, Lore (Kurgan Caliphate, Vuldrok Star-Nation) 5, Read Urthish, Remedy 2, Science (Anthropology) 3, Social (Debate) 9, Social (Oratory) 6, Speak Kurgan, Speak Vuldrok, Stoic Mind 4, Think Machine 2, Warfare (Military Tactics) 1

Curse: Mental Instability — Dependant (-2 Calm when object of dependence is inaccessible)

Affliction: Ostracized (mild, 1 pt)

Changed: Meta 4

Powers: Enhanced Intelligence, Unsaid Discourse (Per + Empathy to read unspoken meanings)

Wyrd: 3

Equipment: Personal think machine (the size of a small notebook), whisper pin radio (usually transmits to nearby Diplomatic Corps team members)

Weapons: Stiletto (2d, concealed in thigh sheath and coated with a narcotic: anyone who takes damage must make a contested End + Vigor roll vs. 9 successes; failure means a slow descent into sleep, suffering a cumulative –1 penalty on all rolls until the penalty exceeds Endurance, at which point the victim collapses for three hours)

Armor: Dueling Shield (5/10, 15 hits, concealed in necklace)

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0

Aspiration

The Second Republic was a time of unparalleled scientific achievement for the human race, spurred partially by the technological superiority humans encountered at Apshai. The Vau and their advanced energy tech bloodied humanity's nose and set a precedent for alien superiority. The Diasporan governments settled into an uneasy truce with the mysterious Vau Hegemony, warily watching and worrying about its capabilities and goals, all the while gleaning what secrets they could from stolen Vautech.

The political and military leaders of the later Second Republic were not content to just watch and wait for the alien menace to invade their space. What the Republic really needed, in these experts' opinions, were weapons and technology to render the Vau powerless. Covert operations to prepare and develop weaponry — by reverse-engineering the Vau's own technology — were initiated. Unfortunately, the Vau's own espionage capabilities were unknown; the discovery of such programs could spark outright warfare. Maintaining secrecy posed resource and supply problems; too many curious activities on a populated world would surely come under the notice of intelligence operatives. To successfully hide this research, the outposts had to disappear. Thus, Aspiration was removed from the jumpweb.

The large blue planet hung suspended in a hellish zone of stellar radiation. Astrophysicists of the time theorized that the system hosted the remains of a supernova that destroyed its primary and, in the resultant release of energy, ignited fusion in the large gas giant that orbited it. Leftover stellar gasses and the vaporous remains of other planets formed what is now a sphere of glowing particles. For reasons never fully understood, one of the gas giant's moons survived the devastation. This became the planet known as Aspiration.

Ages passed as the azure planet slowly developed. Bathed in the glow of hard rays from the nebula, the world was always on the brink of ripping itself apart. After a long period of unrest, a strange change came over it. An unknown event brought heavy ferrous metals to the surface and generated a magnetic field strong enough to block most of the harsh rays. This, coupled with heavy cloud cover, brought stability to the planet. Life began and spread across the surface. Oxygen, released from simple plantlike organisms, bonded with hydrogen trapped in the atmosphere, creating water and spurring further organic growth.

At some point in this history of evolution from catastrophe, the Anunnaki placed a jumpgate, leaving no other trace of their coming or going behind. Aspiration awaited discovery by younger sentients....

Aspiration Traits

Ruler: None

Cathedral: None

Agora: None

Garrison: 9 (base defense only)

Capital: Susurrus

Jumps: 7

Adjacent Worlds: Beliah (dayside)

Solar System: Nebula (extends throughout system, except for occasional pockets), Aspiration (2.5 AU), Jumpgate (86.10 AU)

Tech: 8

Human Population: None

Alien Population: None

Resources: High-tech cache (weapons, Second Republic data, Vautech)

Exports: None

Landscape: The planet's surface is devoid of all the amenities that make life bearable. Although the world was fully explored during the Second Republic, records have been lost. Mostly comprised of bluish sand drifts and rocks, the surface is windswept and hostile. Water is restricted to the Susurrus canyon and underground streams. There is no precipitation or weather fluctuation, except for fierce sandstorms. Any available natural resources are currently unknown, although the eerie coloration of the surface suggests high cobalt content.

Map: No map for Aspiration is provided, as the Great Trench and Susurrus as its only remarkable features.

History

Discovery of Aspiration by humankind finally occurred during the Second Republic's move to stop Bjorn Egon's domination of what would become the Kurgan Caliphate. A "dead" jump was discovered from Beliah, leading to a system that at first seemed to contain no planets, just a young hot star surrounded by a nebula of gases and dust. This dust cloud obscured most sensors and served to hide the planet for many years. Only after a Republican fleet ship pursued Kurgan partisans deep into the system was a habitable planet revealed. After capturing his prey, the fleet captain stayed long enough to take a cursory survey.

A small fleet of science vessels, accompanied by a military escort, soon returned to the system. An orbital search revealed a metropolis near the only surface water on the entire planet, constructed in a deep canyon and protected from the inhospitable weather. As the science team's shuttles

landed and the escort's squads of marines disembarked, they were met by a throng of grateful citizens surging from the city.

The city had been built in secret by key figures in Egon's corporation as a hideout from Republican troops should the day come when the Kurgan jumpweb was discovered — as it inevitably did. Key executives, along with corporate workers and their families, fled to the planet as soon as word of the Second Republic's entry into the Hira system reached Beliah, joining the small population already sent there to maintain the city.

Unfortunately for the deserters, the plan to become self-sufficient evaporated when a second fleet of supply ships failed to follow the initial exodus — the chaos created by the arrival of Republican ships saw many mutinies and capture of starships. Somehow, word of the supply ships' destination was forgotten, along with the deserters.

Abandoned and slowly running out of food, the deserters in their new city were on the verge of collapse. Every human on the surface would have died months before the science team landed if an ironic salvation had not come from the native lifeforms. One day during their wait, the heavy winds that howled through the canyon increased to gale force. Riding them were small crablike creatures, each less than an inch in diameter. Like the plagues of locusts from Urth's history, the small eating machines mercilessly descended upon the populace. A couple dozen of the monstrosities could strip a human to bones in mere minutes. Thousands of people died within hours. When the wind picked back up, the alien creatures spread chutelike wings and were whisked away, leaving stripped skeletons behind. They also left new hope for the horrified survivors, for now the food stores would last the greatly reduced populace for a few months, rather the weeks they faced before the assault.

The refugees greeted the Republican scientists with joyous surrender, thankful to the forces from which they had once fled. The science team had barely taken stock of the situation when a fleet of stealth ships arrived in orbit around the planet. A covert operations task force, the Central Scrutinizers, interdicted the system and set about confiscating the few jumpkeys that existed. The Kurgan refugees were not allowed to leave the world, and the scientists were all reassigned to aid the security operations that became the planet's new priority.

Over the next 15 years, a sprawling military complex was built up around and below the metropolis, now renamed Susurrus. As far as anyone high-ranking enough to know about Aspiration was told, its facility trained and indoctrinated high-level espionage agents. While the planet's existence was not exactly a secret, its actual location and real purpose became somewhat of a legend among conspiracy buffs. Aspiration's maximum-security clearance — bolstered by a constantly alert military fleet in space and expert surveillance systems on ground — hid Susurrus's real purpose from the prying eyes of any snooping watchdog groups or media that managed to smuggle spies in. As far as anyone who did witness the site knew, cybernetic special forces and espionage agents trained in combat simulations against sophisticated golems, putting every skill to the test. Meanwhile, unseen and unknown to most personnel, an autonomous underground facility went about the real work.

The facility was built with a technology level unimaginable before the last days of the Republic. The complex blended human tech with the cutting edge of stolen Vautech. The resources for this forbidden tech came from a derelict Vau colony ship found in space (the system where it was found was never disclosed even to Aspiration's intelligence operatives). The unmanned ship was never meant to carry crew, but instead possessed an automated construction technology that prepared habitats for Vau colonies on newly discovered worlds.

The human scientists released the Colonizer into a series of underground caverns beneath Susurrus. The mysterious device immediately set to work; within a few months, a strange edifice had filled the cavern. It spread like a fungus across the entire cave complex, giving humans a never-before-seen glimpse of Vau nanotech at its most advanced (or so they assumed). When the initial flurry began to slow and the activity came to a halt, scientists crept in and began studying the strange but beautiful formations. Before the inspection was complete, the Central Scrutinizers ordered human tech construction to begin.

The people assigned to work and live in the complex found the environment alien and disturbing in many ways, but most marveled at the edifice around them. The task of the researchers was to look for an exploitable weakness or edge against the Vau.

The Vau Colonizer facility was kept as secret as possible. It is a testament to the vast political and anti-espionage powers of the Central Scrutinizers that the Republic senate never became aware of it. Everyone knew that many of the technological wonders created near the end of the Second Republic were reverse-engineered from the Vau, but both false and real facilities on countless planets claimed responsibility for such tech. The Central Scrutinizers created many shell companies to reap the benefits of Aspiration's discoveries, patenting their tech breakthroughs and selling them back to the military in exclusive, expensive contracts that furthered Aspiration's work, all under the noses of Second Republic bureaucrats.

During the last days of the Second Republic, the locust-crabs revisited the town of Susurrus. This was not uncommon every few years, but this visit coincided with a more devastating problem. Per standard procedure during such

seasonal swarms, the populace of the city and base sealed themselves away from the devouring beasts in their airtight bunkers. Unfortunately, the Vau Colonizer finished its work and began its final phase before transmitting a signal to the Vau, presumably to summon them. The last step was the sterilization of the new facilities.

This clean-up removed pests — all living creatures — that had taken up residence in the new colony during its construction. Accordingly, every single man, woman and child of Susurrus was "cleansed." The exact nature of the cleansing is still unknown. One lander managed a dangerous takeoff during the height of the crab storm; its crew reported seeing the sealed doors and windows of Susurrus open all over the city, its people screaming and scrabbling to escape, as if whatever rose from within was worse than the flesh-devouring alien insects.

Before any response or rescue mission could be launched, Byzantium Secundus fell to the Ten Royal Houses. In the chaos of the overthrow, the Central Scrutinizers went into deep cover, destroying all record of Aspiration and its forbidden facility. The closure of the jumpgate from Vera Cruz to Hira and the chaos of the burgeoning Kurgan Caliphate effectively shut off Aspiration from the rest of human space.

Recent History

Two years ago, a tribe of Tengri-Igren discovered a jumpkey to Aspiration among the asteroids of Beliah. In true nomad fashion, they gathered at the jumpgate and moved *en masse* to a system unvisited by humans in a millennium. Chaos erupted as soon as the first ship arrived. The violent star's static discharge played havoc with their sensors and ship systems. A few ships collided with one another. Those ships whose sensors were able to pierce the nebula's chaos organized a retreat from the system. Surely Erlik Khan himself had cursed this place, and his afrits haunted its stellar regions.

After the disastrous jump, the key was passed off to another tribe to pay a past debt, with a warning that many ships would be unable to navigate such a system. The tribe leader immediately had it copied, in secrecy and at great expense, unsure whether to alert the current Caliph or not; he awaited a sign that the Caliph could regain his crumbling empire, that he was indeed worthy of his title. Little use has since been made of the jumpkeys, as few Tengri-Igren have the courage to risk their souls against the evil spirits guarding the system.

The Imperial Eye recently liberated one of these jumpkeys from the barbaric nomads during a trade talk on the tribe's ship. A bold Eye agent disguised as a League merchant stole the key from the belt of the tribe leader. Upon discovering the theft, and fearful that heathens now had an advantage over the faithful, the leader decided to give the other jumpkey to the Caliph. The Eye agent did not investigate the new jump, but instead returned to the Known Worlds. A double agent working for the League, he copied the key before turning it over to his Eye superiors. The League has since made a number of copies, and covertly seeks just the right band of explorers to test the dangerous jump deep in barbarian space. All the while, the Eye and the Caliph seek the same....

The Nebula

Navigating Aspiration's system is a difficult feat, thanks to the energy fluctuations transmitted by the nebula. All starship piloting and sensor rolls suffer a –8 penalty upon first exiting the jumpgate. If a course toward the sun is plotted correctly, a pocket in the nebula can be found, clearing the sensor jam and revealing Aspiration. Landing on the planet poses no special difficulties.

Note that pilots will have to make rolls (suffering the nebula penalty) just to find the jumpgate again. The trip through the nebula gets easier the more often a pilot and navigator perform it; lower the penalty by two per journey, until it becomes only –2 (it doesn't get better than this).

Places of Interest

The Susurrus canyon represents all that Aspiration has to offer humanity at this time. This 1300-kilometer slash on the face of the planet can be seen from orbit, running along the equator like a jagged smile. It ranges from three to 40 kilometers wide and reaches six kilometers deep in some places. Rushing along the bottom of the canyon is a shallow river that runs cool and clear.

Near the center of the trench is the deserted city of Susurrus. An odd mix of Second Republic utilitarian architecture and Kurgan aesthetics (the older parts of the city), the city, though small. can house and support almost a million people. Automated functions keep everything in working order, providing a glimpse back in time to the Republican era.

Advanced technology can be found in both the city and adjacent military base, seemingly for the taking. No one knows the story of the ill-fated colony and what caused all traces of the colonists to disappear. It's as if no one ever lived here at all, except for the ample evidence of habitation — personal belongings are scattered about where they were left by the panicking colonists, including such incongruous things as children's toys.

The changes wrought by the Vau Colonizer altered the scope and complexity of the city. Spreading virulently throughout, it transformed entire blocks into strange building networks of unknown function. Some areas have become completely inaccessible, protected by force fields.

Strange tremors have started to affect the city of late, a side effect of the Colonizer's disruptions in the deep crust. Whether due to a processor or sensor error, or simple inability to forecast the consequences, the Colonizer has weakened the canyon face surrounding Susurrus. If a large tremor were to occur, the two-kilometer-high cliff face might tumble and bury the city.

Located on the outskirts of the town of Susurrus is the forgotten military base. Batron Military Training Facility taught and improved on conventional intelligence techniques. Only the best and the brightest made it to the B.M.T.F., and only the highest-tech devices were used. For all these reasons and more, the facility was also one of the most heavily secured in the Second Republic. A perimeter breach was nigh impossible. On the inside, golems and security systems defended access to restrictive areas. Holo-chambers and obstacle courses designed to train and stress the best intelligence agents were placed throughout the complex, some of them unmarked; should an unauthorized person get deep into the base, he might inadvertently wander into a false reality. Other areas served as personality programming centers for deep-cover agents. Somewhere deep inside the heaviest security area, the entrance to the Vautech research center still exists.

The Center for Vau Research and Discovery covers an area underneath the military base and much of the city. After the cleansing of the colonists, automated construction and nanotech assemblers continued to run an incomprehensible program that has expanded since its launch by the center scientists. Xenoengineers theorized that the actual process would continue unaided until the Colonizer received a signal from its Vau builders. Miles of tunnels and chambers, including completely self-sufficient biodomes and strange rooms with no obvious application, spread out underneath the surface. Left unchecked, the construction routine has even spread into the city itself, guided by some unknown logic. Only the Vau may know where and when the device will stop — if ever.

The scientists who used this facility ate, drank and lived Vau lore. More information on the Vau survives in the data stored here than anywhere else in the Known Worlds since the Fall. Psychological and biological profiles detail all the knowledge gleaned from human/Vau interaction from the time of first contact at Apshai to the quiet subterfuge of Republican spies, some of whom were trained in the facility above. All available examples of stolen or black-market Vautech are archived: personal shields, artificial gravity repulsor pads, blasters, and more. Electromagnetic field specialists worked on finding and exploiting any weakness in Vau shields and armor, and biological weapons were experimented with, hoping for a virus tailored explicitly against the Vau.



This information, however, was highly classified in an era where encryption and security had to be the best. It would be quite a feat to access any but the most superficial bits of such lore. Anyone who can glean even a bit of this data could surely retire rich in any star empire's territory. Incautious access, however, might trigger the golem security system.

The vast amount of lost tech just sitting around awaiting discovery on Aspiration could seriously affect the balance of power between the Caliphate and the Known Worlds, depending on who finds it first. Add the military-grade and Vautech equipment also available and you have a resource over which many a noble house would readily war. Moreover, if the Vau ever became aware of the planet and the secrets it contains (assuming they are not already aware), they could make a claim for themselves. No one would be in a position to stop them if their desire was strong enough. A Vau planet so close to Irem would not make the Caliph comfortable.

Flora and Fauna

But while rich rewards wait on the planet, terrible dangers also exist. The biosphere of Aspiration is more like the bottom of an irradiated ocean than dry land. Life on Aspiration never developed forms of great complexity, and all known specimens are similar in structure to Urth's oceanic invertebrates. Swarms of microscopic algae fill the air, and coral-like growths are the most prevalent plant lifeforms. Most complex animals are akin to radial symmetric crustaceans. Some are born aloft in the strong wind currents, maneuvering with flipperlike appendages, gas-filled pods, or ballooning sails. Others scurry across the wind-swept plains, searching for food.

Certain times of the year, as the inhabitants of the city learned, are especially dangerous. Huge swarms of small crablike terrors sweep across the plains and through the canyon. These creatures can strip flesh from bones and bore through even the thick shells of other crustaceans. The city of Susurrus has become a haven for creatures seeking shelter from the harsh life on the plains above. Hundreds of years of living in the more controlled and static existence of the city has enabled change in an otherwise stagnant biosphere. Native growths cover normal and Vau-modified structures alike.

In addition to the unknown active defenses, the Colonizer has assimilated and used native lifeforms as building materials. While the strong coral-like growths make exemplary building blocks, the resonant energy fields that flow through the building have weakened and killed sections of living walls and floors. It is only a matter of time before the entire structure degenerates and collapses, bringing the city and military base down with it. All in all, the precarious forces that hold the place together are at odds, and the slightest shift in the balance can bring the whole cache of lost tech crashing into ruin.

Aspiration is an enigmatic world. No human has set foot on it in over a millennium. Given the unknown defenses, the first to do so may never leave to tell the tale. It is hard to quantify the effect on the Known Worlds when and if the technology present finds its way across the jumpweb. More likely, the first visitors will set off a chain reaction that will destroy the city and seal off its information forever. It's just a matter of how much they can get off-world before that happens....

Story Ideas

Aspiration is a perfect setting for exploration, tempered with great risks but promising rich rewards. Rumor about this lost world on a "night road" of the Kurgan jumpweb is now filtering through the Known Worlds. The Imperial Eye and Merchant League are each seeking foolhardy adventurers to try to claim the planet, unaware of just what it holds. But once awarded with a jumpkey, the adventurers have to get through Kurgan space, and then find the planet behind its nebula screen of sensor distortion.

Once on the surface, the city and military base security systems must be breached or circumvented. The holoreal environments in the military base will be triggered once sensors detect anyone in the vicinity, providing harrowing scenarios that give little clue to their virtual nature.

Finally, the Vau facility itself provides many perils, from the bizarre behavior of the automatic routines of the Colonizer (which might seem sentient to anyone first experiencing it) to the threat of the roof's collapse.

Characters exploring the site might have to vie with explorers from another faction — whether Known Worlds or Kurgan. Whether the two (or more) sides team together to survive Susurrus or let it destroy them one by one is a question determined chiefly by the player characters' actions. And if the characters can't win the Vau secrets for themselves, perhaps their orders are to destroy it before someone else can....

Personality

Ninor Pax

Ninor Pax is the only fully sentient golem left in the Batron Military Training Facility. The purge of all life in the caverns underneath and the city itself has left its mark on this state-of-the-art machine. Ninor erased memories of the event from his memory core to prevent going mad. He was almost successful. The strain of maintaining the facility by himself over the years pushed him over the edge. Ninor Pax is now completely insane.

Originally designed to add depth to the holotraining courses, Ninor spends much of his time fully immersed in

the personality of General Sterling Grey, the former base commander who now waits somewhat impatiently for more students to arrive. Any explorers who successfully struggle through the security gates and other defenses will encounter Ninor at the entrance to the B.M.T.F.

Quiet and self-assured, Ninor responds only to stimuli that he wishes to acknowledge. His near-invulnerability allows him to ignore any attacks and insults that don't penetrate his armor. Any attack which actually succeeds in damaging him, no matter to what degree will drive him into a berserk rage wherein he will attempt to kill all living things in his immediate vicinity.

If listened to and obeyed, he will be a good host to the "students," giving them a tour of the facility. Clever characters may even convince Ninor that they are not students but inspectors meant to examine the base and its operations, in which case he will fully cooperate — as long as they maintain a convincing charade as espionage agents. Much can be learned from him, but there are a few things he will not reveal. He does not wish to recall the cleansing of the complex that wiped out all humans, and will become quite agitated and confused if pressed on the matter. Whether or not he even knows about what lies beneath the facility is up to the gamemaster. (Ninor exists to add an element of interaction to Aspiration, either helpful or harmful, to the characters.)

Race: Golem (TL8)

Quote: "Good to see you. I am here to greet you and make your stay here at BaMTiF as enriching as possible. I will start with a short tour. As you can see, no expense has been spared in making this a suitable home for you during your tour. After experiencing more of it, I'm sure you will never want to leave. Good. Now before we begin, are there any questions?"

Description: Standing 5'10" when assuming the old general's personality, Ninor can resemble whatever human personality he is mimicking (up to 6'3" tall). His head is actually a holofield designed to be solid to the touch (he can generate facsimiles of over 500 different base personnel). Underneath a Second Republic military uniform (complete with gloves), his carapace is made of gleaming ceramsteel.

Roleplaying: Ninor's own personality has been suppressed and doesn't want to come out. Programmed to act the part of any type of individual needed in the holotrainers and able to create his own holofield, he will act however he deems necessary. He will switch roles to a personality that allows him to act however he would best benefit from a situation. Unless stressed and under pressure (perhaps badgered about the fate of the city's residents), he will switch personalities only when out of sight of anyone.

His mimicking is imperfect. Those who specifically state that they are observing his behavior may make Perception + Empathy or Science (Psychology) rolls to detect that something is wrong; five or more victory points will reveal that he is an artificial intelligence. Alternatively, occult perception powers (Subtle Sight, Rending the Veil of Unreason) will reveal his golem nature. Cybernetic visual enhancements (infrared) might reveal an abnormal heat signature.



Entourage: He is most often alone, but may occasionally have a few lesser golems in attendance (TL7 but with weak AI programs).

Body: Strength 14, Dexterity 8, Endurance 15

Mind: Wits 6, Perception 10, Tech 7

Spirit: Extrovert 5, Introvert 3, Passion 1, Calm 4, Faith 1, Ego 7

Natural skills: Depending on the personality he mimics, he can run skill programs up to level 8.

Learned skills: As with natural skills.

Equipment: Ninor possesses a holofield projector that can emulate any human form (visual and tactile).

Cybernetic features: Automaintenance, Battery Powered, Cybersenses (Telescope, Infrared, Radio), Data Interface (all Republican languages)

Weapons: Stun beam of varying intensity (up to 8d). If necessary, he can also unleash a blaster carbine (8d).

Armor: Battle shield (5/20, unlimited hits), ceramsteel carapace (14d)

Vitality: -9/-6/-3/-2/-1/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Egg

Egg's vast primeval jungle growth is interspersed with broad plains. Lava oozes from fissures, fracturing the surface in crazy-quilt patterns. The world is almost devoid of mountains despite its volcanic state. Its seas are small, though there are untapped reservoirs of water and long stretches of rivers to irrigate the rich soil. Egg, like Holy Terra, is blessed by being the optimum distance from its sun to produce congenial lands and riotous growth. Unlike Holy Terra, Egg still seems to be in its formative stages, with luxurious growth arising from the ashes of continuous volcanic activity.

History

Though Egg was one of the last settled planets in this area of space (after the Kurgan worlds had been discovered), evidence of its earliest settlements remains buried in ongoing eruptions or jungle covering. Recently rediscovered by Caliphate explorers, it has been newly colonized by settlers, who have begun pushing aside the few natives already living here — the "Primaries," as they are called.

These natives seem strange to the new colonists, and they don't reveal their history to outsiders. So far as the newcomers are concerned, Egg's real history begins little more than 40 years ago. Most of Egg's populace believe Primary history to be of little interest, and scoff at the rumors of a hidden sentient race on Egg, little realizing that the Akraeii, the true natives of Egg, once interbred with select Primary families; their legacy lives on in near-human genes.

The Akraeii

Long before humans reached the stars, the Akraeii thrived on the planet now known as Egg. Their creation stories speak of "Great Ones" who fostered their development for a time, then withdrew. According to Akraeii teachings, their benefactors encouraged them to advance and told them there would come a time of testing to judge their fitness as caretakers of their world. The Akraeii overused and decimated the land, leaving it broken and infertile. Fighting over the last good land, they unleashed weapons powered by the planet's core energy, flattening mountains, drying up seas and cracking the land apart, splitting it into a wretched world wracked by faults and fissures. Worse, their experiments with chemical and biological weapons produced a genetic plague that greatly decreased their entire race's fertility, causing a slow death of the surviving population over the next generations.

These cursed descendants call this time the Great Destruction. The Akraeii failed the Great Ones' test. The result of their failure was a ruined world and (so they believe) the coming of humans to inhabit and inherit the planet.

The Inheritors

Near the end of the Second Republic, after the discovery of the hidden Kurgan worlds, the jumproute to Egg from Rukh was discovered. A group of terraformers and colonists arrived on the new world. The Akraeii, suffering a long dark age after the fall of their civilization and now small in numbers, watched them from afar. Rather than fight the newcomers or try to drive them out, they tried to learn the humans' language. They saw the efforts made by the humans to change the face of the world, to remake it better for their own lives. The Akraeii remembered their once-great hopes and dreams, and felt a kinship of sorts with the struggling colonists trying to build a life upon a ruined world. Seeing the humans' determination to rescue the planet, the surviving natives approached a chosen few and revealed themselves.

Egg's Traits

Ruler: Khaghan Dushan Sameyed (Kurgan settlements), Goltag Akranto (Primary settlements)
Cathedral: Zyk Tower (Al-Kanar, Kurgans); Klaad Acre (deep jungle, Primaries)
Agora: Al-Kanar spaceport
Garrison: 2
Capital: Al-Kanar
Jumps: 2 (Irem)/ 7 (Byz II)
Adjacent Worlds: Rukh (dayside)
Solar System: Emerida (0.6 AU), Egg (1 AU; Kazar, Manawe, Limothe), Sulke (32.4 AU; 12 moons), Dolk (44 AU), Jumpgate (62.45 AU)
Tech: 4
Human Population: 600,000 Kurgans, 1,000,000 Primaries
Alien Population: None (10 or so Akraeii are rumored to exist among the Primaries)
Resources: White ash, vakavine wood, minerals, metals, food
Exports: Vakavine wood, white ash fertilizer, metals, food
Landscape: From space, Egg appears as a light green orb with dark green cracks across its surface, some of them glowing red with lava. On the surface, impenetrable jungles rise from lava-rivered plains. Ash from old eruptions produced acres of now-productive farmland in many regions, forming the basis of current human population centers.

The colonists welcomed the Akraeii's knowledge of the land and the survival skills they had learned in the aftermath of war. The Akraeii told the humans of their disastrous overuse of the land, the war and its damage. Made more cautious by these tales and the fragility of the land, humanity continued reclamation efforts, using terraforming only where necessary.

Thrilled at the discovery of new sentients — and now more enlightened in their reaction to them — the humans awaited their resupply ship's arrival so that news of the Akraeii could reach the Republic. They waited in vain. Unknown to them, the chaos of the Fall had engulfed the worlds beyond.

Lacking a jump-capable ship, the colony could only wait and hope for more ships to come. They assumed the gate had been shut, although in truth it still worked, but the coordinates for Egg were lost in the great data purges of the Fall. Several of the colonists postulated a war or plague, something terrible enough for those who sponsored the colony to seal them away from it. So far as they knew, they might be the last humans left.

Over time fuel and spare parts for their shuttles gave out. They were abandoned, then forgotten. Those who had once been scientists and engineers passed on their knowledge as folk wisdom. The people lived simply, although they did maintain what tools they could. Today, Second Republic machinery still exists hidden in certain communities of their descendants.

The main problem they faced was adaptation to the local ecosystem. They discovered that local bacteria and viruses caused great harm, and many could not develop proper antibodies against infection. The Akraeii, few in number and aware that their race was dying, devised a means to extend their genetic legacy and aid the humans at the same time.

With what high technology they still had, they genetically adapted their bodies and that of a select few human volunteers to be able to interbreed with one another. The result was a human with certain Akraeii characteristics. The original Akraeii did not last much longer; their pure offspring rarely made it to full-term anymore, and their maturation cycle was twice that of a humans. The half-Akraeii continued to breed with humans, thinning the Akraeii blood still further, but producing offspring that resembled humans even more.

The Second Wave

In 4958, a Kurgan scout vessel landed on Egg by way of Rukh, using a newly discovered jumpkey pirated from a League ship in the Hira system. The key's previous Charioteer owner had found the key in a Scraver's cache, but never knew where it led. The Kurgan surveyors found humans already settled on the jungle planet, though somewhat



sparsely. The scouts hoped to claim Egg for the Caliphate, but the hostility of the natives and the destruction of the resource samples they had gathered to take back convinced them that the Primaries could wage a lengthy and costly guerilla war to maintain their independence. On the other hand, they seemed reasonable enough when talk of conversion was dropped in favor of independent alliance.

Diplomatic envoys forged an agreement between the Caliphate and the Primaries. In return for the Primaries allowing the settling of colonists on the planet, and for their nominal loyalty to the Caliph as members of the Ordu Kafiri (they recognized the Caliph's secular sovereignty over Kurgan regions but not his spiritual authority), the Primary settlements were allowed to remain independent. Thus, while the Kurgans controlled certain regions, the majority of the world remained in the hands of its natives.

In the years since then, Egg has prospered. Kurgan colonies have blossomed into cities, with the capital city Al-Kanar boasting a sizeable spaceport. Most settlements revolve around agricultural pursuits. Thus far, the agreement has held, though as more citizens of the Caliphate relocate to Egg, the balance is shifting. The Caliph knows that the planet will eventually become part of the Caliphate through sheer numbers. Those primitive natives who remain cannot long withstand Kurgan troops or stage a revolt with any degree of success. However, complete control will require troops; Egg will have to wait until Hira is liberated for full entry into the Caliphate.

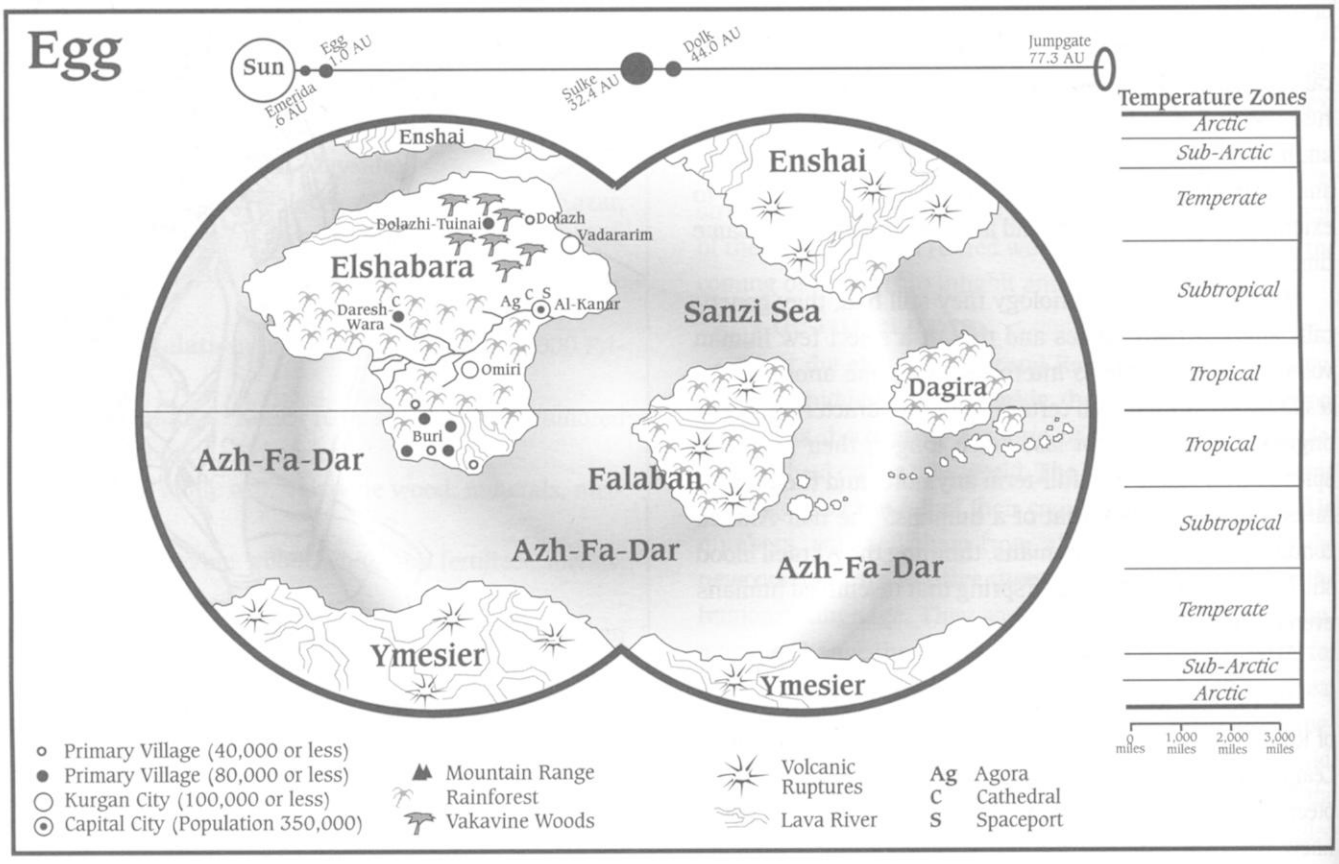
Culture and People

Two distinct populations reside on Egg. Though the later colonists believe the earlier inhabitants to be fully human, they are not, harboring vestiges of the alien species with which they once bred.

Kurgan Colonists

Visitors and most residents of Egg see only the cities and agricultural communities established by the colonists of the second wave. Those who live in those places think of themselves as Egg's true citizens, who perform the important work and run the planet. Few have ever visited a Primary enclave; none know of the vast settlements located far from prying eyes in jungle interiors and deep caves beneath the fractured plains. Farmers, traders, miners, merchants, ship personnel and a few technicians and bureaucrats make up the majority of Egg's known populace. All hail from the Kurga Caliphate or were born on Egg to Caliphate families. They follow the ordus, religion, dress styles and beliefs of the Caliphate. Their lives are similar to those of most subjects of the Caliph except that the remoteness of Egg means they sometimes wait longer for new products or desired entertainment.

As yet, Egg has no sultan, although a khaghan admin-



isters the colony, and a noyan represents its interests to the Caliph on Irem. Spurred on by the Caliphate's need for more food and metals, the colony works to increase the numbers of immigrants and build more agricultural stations and mines.

The Primaries

Egg's other inhabitants are viewed as primitive, disorganized and incapable of work more demanding than shoveling white ash or gathering wood and fruit from the jungles. Most city dwellers see them as harmless and a little simple. Many believe the "primitives" to be defective due to inbreeding, but most think their deformities the result of Second Republic genetic engineering, a stigma which is more readily accepted in the Caliphate than the Known Worlds.

Taller than average, but more slender, with less muscle mass, Primaries often exhibit six supple fingers and toes, and a variety of light gray or brown markings — stripes or freckled spots — on their backs and outer limbs. Most have fine, spiky dark hair and almond-shaped, pale blue eyes. Their clothing features long, flowing hooded robes or short tunics and loin coverings. Only a few have ever been seen carrying weapons greater than a knife.

Quiet, even a little shy or aloof, the Primaries attend market days in the towns. Those who try to bully them, however, find themselves facing an entire pack rather than an individual. Though Primaries try to appear humble before others, behind their backs they walk as though they rule the planet rather than like those who perform menial labor. Despite the Primaries' apparently peaceful nature, those who cause them trouble often mysteriously disappear or emigrate quickly. Delicate frames host quite resilient bodies and their simple-mindedness is feigned.

Among themselves, most Primaries believe that they *might* once have interbred with aliens, but that such beings have long since died out. They are now the true rulers of Egg. Growing from the roots of the Second Republic colonists and the Akraeii, they have attained a population of a little over one million spread across the planet. Their obvious settlements are small, with only a hundred or so individuals. Their true homes, hidden from the newer colonists and the Caliph's agents, boast thousands. Because they are the laborers who harvest the wood and gather the white ash, they control how much of each is taken to the cities and sold or distributed to the agricultural stations. When others have tried to take over such pursuits, sabotage prevents them from being profitable.

They have little interest in the newcomers' cities. Their only real agenda is to remake the planet into the paradise they know it can be while preventing the sort of technological advances that caused the Great Destruction. Some even believe that if they can restore Egg to its original state and show others how to do the same to their planets, the Great Ones might return.

Each community sends a chosen leader to council with other leaders to decide policy for all the regions. Women hold as many high positions as men. Primary children are raised by their parents and all the adults of their settlement who care to take a hand, and are schooled in some fairly sophisticated studies of land reclamation and planetary ecology. Primary agents covertly trade for technological items the enclaves require; others infiltrate the cities and learn the plans of government officials and traders.

They are independent people determined to remain so, for they fear what the Caliph would do if given free reign on Egg. They believe that should they lose their independence, the Caliph would immediately place thousands, if not millions, into agricultural or mining settlements on Egg. This explosion of people would denude the carefully restored resources of the planet, once again turning it into a hell. Rather than let that happen, the Primaries would go to war with the Caliphate. Unbeknownst to the Kurgans, many elder Primaries know the secrets of the ancients and might use the knowledge to call forth energy from inside the planet itself, deliberately destroying it rather than allowing its ruin from ignorance and greed again.

Places

Egg orbits a yellow star at a distance of 1AU. At 12,782 kilometers in diameter, Egg closely approximates the size and axial tilt of Holy Terra. Egg's oceans are small. Three moons — Kazar, Manawe and Limothe — orbit Egg. The first two cross east to west and the third describes an opposite orbit. Once every six months, all three are visible in the sky at the same time for three standard hours. None is capable of supporting life.

Egg is the second planet in its system. The first, Emerida, is too hot for habitation. Sulke is a great gas giant, and the final planet, Dolk, is a barren rock.

Egg consists of vast jungles and enormous rivers juxtaposed by shattered and broken plains riddled with cracks and fissures. Lava, hot steam and boiling geysers issue from some of the fissures, oozing across the land and leaving deposits of white ash in their wake. Where the land has achieved greater stability, ash deposited by prior eruptions produces extremely fertile land, yielding amazingly abundant crops of grains, tubers and vegetables or regions covered by verdant jungle. Agricultural areas surround Egg's few cities, organized into vast combines providing food crops for export.

Irrigation canals feed off the rivers and provide needed water to the crops. Deep wells dot Egg's few cities. Little is known of Egg's oceans. Though small, they contain sea life from algae to fish and provide much of the water in the atmosphere. Under the waters exist volcanoes and even

undiscovered mountain ranges. There are almost no mountains elsewhere on Egg, although the land does have many gradual slopes, rises and depressions.

Constant eruptions, odd wind patterns and vast rainforests subject Egg to severe storms. Most wrack the jungles during three months of the year, although tornadoes in the plains and croplands are not unknown. The seas can be stormy as well; currents and tidal patterns respond chaotically to the pull of the planet's three moons.

Egg is currently in a recovery phase from near destruction. It has regained great fertility, though many areas remain in flux.

Egg has five major land masses and several smaller ones, including two island archipelagoes. The main continent of Elshabara is the only one with known settlements. Though mostly covered by vast tropical jungles, it also contains the only cultivated land on Egg. The great Toliz River, the most significant waterway on the continent, winds from the northeast to the southwest through Omiri Agricultural Station and the Dareshi-Toliz, the largest rainforest on the planet. It empties into the Azh-fa-Dar, Egg's largest and warmest ocean.

The other continents — Enshai, Dagira, Falaban and Ymesier — all evince lava-rivers winding across plains, but remain locked within impenetrable jungle covering. Reportedly, nobody lives there. A few Primaries tell tales of ancient Akraeii who still reside in these unexplored vastnesses, but their existence is considered more myth than fact, even among the Primaries. Falaban, which might be considered the central area of the planet, seems almost desolate, with enormous blackened craters pitting its fractured, though fertile, landscape.

Cities

Al-Kanar

The largest city and the only spaceport on Egg, Al-Kanar was built by the arrivals from Rukh. Formerly a backwater, Al-Kanar has found itself important to trade and now rushes to catch up to its own importance. Kurgan traders run the marketplace, where traders in ash, spices, fruits and other foods and some manufactured goods share space with woodcarvers, smiths and the occasional entertainer.

Vadararim

The second-largest city on Egg lies 50 miles northeast of Al-Kanar. Situated near to the Bida-Mar, a jungle noted for its fine vakavine wood and succulent firifruit, it does a brisk trade in those commodities. Surrounded by fertile farmland, Vadararim also serves as a source for about one-third of the grain and cereal crops harvested on the planet. Less sophisticated than Al-Kanar, Vadararim nevertheless has pretentions of becoming the most important trade center.

Omiri Agricultural Station

Not really a city, but a conglomeration of huge farms linked by smaller several associated towns, Omiri provides over half the grains and cereals and three-fourths of the vegetable crops grown on Egg. Though Omiri is the most remote settlement, it's the most technologically advanced, with modern farming equipment and swift transport vehicles to send its all-important products to market as quickly as possible.

Primary Enclaves

The Buri

This huge enclave hosts the greatest number of Primaries on Egg. Hidden within enormous underground caverns linked by subterranean seas and waterways, the Buri is the heartland of the Primary people. During their lifetime, all Primaries spend at least one year living there, dedicating themselves to restoring the planet to health. The Omradu — literally "land mystics" — perform solemn rituals within the grand temple of the Buri. These chosen few serve as priests and keep alive the old tales and ancient knowledge of the Akraeii. A small segment of the population trains as spies to infiltrate the cities of the latecomers and discover the Caliph's plans for Egg.

Daresh-wara

This stronghold of the Primaries consists of a number of small villages spread throughout the Dareshi-Toliz, hidden within the deepest parts of the jungle. Several are arboreal, constructed among the mid-level canopy of the towering trees. Harvested fruits, flowers and honey are sent via caravan to Al-Kanar.

Dolazh

This Primary settlement is an open one, nestled on the outskirts of the Bida-Mar. The inhabitants trade vakavine wood and firifruit to merchants from Vadararim in exchange for colorful cloth and manufactured tools and goods. Dolazhi-Tuinai, a greater enclave, lies further within the jungle, hidden from outsiders.

Flora and Fauna

Most of the flora and fauna of Egg have yet to be catalogued. Whisper grass and *sahaila* flowers predominate in plains areas, while jungles teem with trees, vines, lianas, grasses, bushes, ferns and flowers too numerous to name. Small mammals, such as rodents of various sorts, inhabit the green areas, causing some problems in protecting crops. Insects proliferate, and a type of gazelle, called *fikuli*, grazes the plains and provides meat to the populace. Predators stalk the jungles, though only the Primaries have ever seen most of them. Among these, the most notable are the *indriak*, small, catlike beings who can hunt on all fours, climb trees and even stand erect for long periods. Though they seem quite intelligent, they aren't sentient.

Primary Traits

Cost: 4 pts

Learned skills: All Primaries gain Speak Egg Dialect for free; this is a local version of the Urthish spoken by the Second Republic colonists, changed over the years and mixed with some Akraeii vocabulary.

Racial Traits:

Blessings: Elongated Fingers (1 pt: +2 Dexterity with fine manipulation), Flexible Joints (2 pts: +4 to escape grapples, bonds, etc.), Night Vision (2 pts: +4 Perception to offset the –6 darkness penalty)

Affliction: Ostracized (1 pt., only among Known Worlders)



Personality

Daresk

Born a Primary of the Buri, Daresk was chosen as a young woman to learn the ways of the Omradu. Though many among the Omradu have psychic powers, many do not. Daresk is one of those without such talent. Taught the old Akraeii stories of war and destruction, she grew into a serious-minded young woman dedicated to maintaining the planet's health. She now serves as one of the chosen who walk the land, measuring its seismic activity, mapping areas for plantings and harvesting needed food for her people. When not performing these duties, Daresk sometimes accompanies her cousin on expeditions to Al-Kanar, where they pose as native traders selling rare spices. From their observations in the market, they pick up rumors and news that might concern their people.

Race: Primary human

Rank/Class: Omradu. Although considered to be mystics and priests by their own people, the Omradu are more like Engineers in their understanding of the ancient Akraeii and Second Republic technology still used by their people.

Quote: "What my greatmother's mother's mother once threw away, I shall find. What was destroyed shall be reborn."

Description: Daresk is above average height at 5'10" and weighs 140 pounds. Her dark hair is held in a long tail wound with strips of cloth and covered by a veil. Her face seems too small and thin to hold her generous mouth and large, almond-shaped pale blue eyes. She wears flowing robes over more practical leggings and boots.

Body: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Endurance 6

Mind: Wits 3, Perception 3, Tech 5

Spirit: Extrovert 3, Introvert 7, Passion 5, Calm 5, Faith 8, Ego 2

Natural Skills: Fight 4, Observe 6, Sneak 4, Vigor 5

Learned Skills: Focus 5, Inquiry 4, Lore (Akraeii) 7, Lore (Regional) 5, Physick 4, Remedy 3, Science (Ecology) 6, Speak Kurgan 5, Survival 6, Tech Redemption (High Tech) 4

Blessing: Righteous (-2 Calm when judgment questioned)

Curse: Secretive (-2 Extrovert around strangers)

Benefice: Family Ties

Affliction: Obligation (recover the planet)

Racial Traits: Elongated Fingers (1 pt: +2 Dexterity with fine manipulation), Flexible Joints (2 pts: +4 to escape grapples, bonds, etc.), Night Vision (2 pts: +4 Perception to offset the –6 darkness penalty)

Equipment: Robes, seed bag, measuring tools, mapping materials

Weapons: Knife (2d)

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0

Wyrd: 4

Epiphany

At some point, we must cease transforming worlds to suit us and begin the process of transforming ourselves to suit our worlds.

— Camilla Asavara, Founder

The history of the water world known as Epiphany stretches as far back as the Second Republic, when human technological achievements impelled widespread colonization and terraforming. The resulting dependency on technology and the growing tangle of social and political upheavals that marked the Second Republic, however, created a desire in some groups of spacefarers to found new homes in the stars, away from the conflicts and confusions of known space. In 3843, the starship *Epiphany*, bearing a contingent of self-appointed exiles from the Second Republic's bureaucratic monolith, set out for unexplored regions of space in search of its passengers' utopian vision. Led by a biogenetic engineer named Camilla Asavara, these colonists eventually discovered an isolated planetary system that suited their separatist purposes.

The fourth planet from the system's sun proved the most hospitable, despite the fact that fully 85% of the world consisted of ocean. Two small continents and a plethora of islands and archipelagos provided ample space for the colonists. The settlers engaged in small-scale terraforming, making minor atmospheric adjustments and introducing a handful of new plant and animal species in order to ensure a constant food supply while they conducted detailed explorations of their new home.



The decision to restrict technological development to a level that would not tax the world's limited fuel resources or compromise Epiphany's desire to remain as self-sufficient as possible forced the colonists to make the most of what they had — water and air. Within those self-imposed restrictions, the inhabitants of Epiphany maintained a relatively sophisticated, though apparently simple, way of life.

Then came the Fall. News filtered through to Epiphany not from its Rogue World neighbors but from the Second Republic courier ships that irregularly cruised the Fringe. When the Rogue Worlds made their move against Byzantium Secundus, these couriers were among the most harassed ships. One of them, the *Scyla*, pursued by pirates, fled to Epiphany. It ferried a valuable passenger, a member of the Republican Intelligence services. He closed the gate behind the *Scyla*, blocking the pirates and anyone else who wanted to come through for the next five centuries. While he had the secret military codes to close the gate, he had no clue how to open it again.

Left to their own devices, and with islands separated from one another by vast distances of water, the inhabitants of Epiphany settled upon a coalition government made up of representatives of each major geographic region. This alliance of more or less independent nations developed thriving trade patterns that made use of harvestible resources. Armed disputes between island groups rarely arose, since low populations made the fielding of significant armies difficult, while the distances between nations discouraged invasions.

The discovery of Epiphany by Kurgan ships from Sky Tear in the early 46th century reestablished connections between the inhabitants of Epiphany and a human spacefaring civilization. At first, busy with Caliph Khabir's Jihad against Vera Cruz, the Caliphate sought only to establish cordial relations with the natives in order to assess their potential value. The Epiphanians agreed to establish trade relations with them, offering locally made products in return for luxury items, metals and other hard-to-find goods. The Kurgans seemed content to confine their dealings to the mercantile arena, since the planet offered little else in terms of population or land. They established a small outpost near the planet's single spaceport, on Stablestone, one of only two landmasses large enough to be called a continent. This arrangement continued for a time, although Khabir toyed

with making the world an official part of the Caliphate.

The emergence of a Vuldrok pirate fleet through the Fingisvold jumpgate in 4521 brought matters to a head. Intercepted by Kurgan ships before they could make landfall on Epiphany, the Vuldrok retreated to Wisdom, the larger of Epiphany's two moons. The Kurgans pursued them there and drove them out of the system — for a time. As a precautionary measure, the Kurgans established an outpost on Wisdom, "to ensure the safety of the planet."

In 4528, a larger fleet of Vuldrok ships arrived. Made up of Fingisvold refugees from the Battle of the Fourteen Thanes, these ex-thanes and their households traveled to the surface of Epiphany, where the planet's population met them with the same courtesy they offered the Caliphate. Setting up an outpost on Harmony, Epiphany's smaller moon, as well, the Vuldrok newcomers negotiated with Epiphany's ruling council and acquired a small island (part of the Shard Atolls) on the surface of the planet as well as an ambassadorial presence on Stablestone. In return for a new home, the Vuldrok agreed to help defend Epiphany from outside influences — including other Vuldrok raiders. In response to the increased Vuldrok presence, Kurgans petitioned to establish their own colony on one of the islands of the Remotes. Thus, an uneasy three-way détente has evolved from the presence of both Kurgan and Vuldrok colonists.

Although both colonists have warred in Epiphany's waters and in space in the intervening years, for the most part Epiphany has managed to maintain its autonomy while treading a difficult course between two often hostile neighbors. Since its chief value as a world lies in its strategic location between Vuldrok and Kurgan space rather than for any intrinsic assets, the planet has remained relatively free of direct influence from either group. Both the Caliphate and the Vuldrok have established an ambassadorial presence on Stablestone, which they believe to be the seat of power for the planet. The leaders of Epiphany encourage this deception, for it allows them to keep their real centers of culture and civilization away from the prying eyes of outsiders — and surface dwellers.

The people of Epiphany realize, however, that this state of affairs cannot last. As the Vuldrok and Kurgans grow more antagonistic toward one another and more desirous of expanding their influence throughout the universe, the chances increase that one or the other of the two empires will decide to make a move to claim Epiphany.

Epiphany Traits

Ruler: Jian Asavara (Ephanian), Khan Dolema Eruban (Kurgan), Thane M'stili (Vuldrok)

Cathedral: Istin Atoll (near Stablestone)

Agora: Portside (Stablestone)

Garrison: 4 (Kurgan and Vuldrok)

Capital: Asavara (Stablestone)

Jumps: 3 (Irem)/7 Byz II

Adjacent worlds: Fingisvold (dayside), Sky Tear (nightside)

Solar System: Prima (0.3 AU), Vision (0.5 AU), Solace (1.1 AU), Epiphany (2.3 AU), Rim (25 AU), Jumpgate (48.9 AU)

Tech: 3 (7 in secret dome cities)

Human Population: 1,300,000

Alien Population: 400 Nizdharim

Resources: Coral, exotic foods and spices, rare woods, water, ocean products

Exports: Rough and carved coral, exotic foods and spices, rare woods and crafted wooden items

Landscape: A few distinctive land masses dot the seascape of Epiphany. In the northern and southern polar regions, archipelagos composed of ice and frozen tundra serve as homes for a few thousand hardy folk. Two continents (Stablestone and Brim) and the Shard Atolls archipelago hold the bulk of the world's population, while numerous other small island chains dot both hemispheres. Both volcanic islands and coral formations exist on Epiphany, giving rise to a wide variety of living conditions.

The climate ranges from tropical near the equator to subarctic at the poles. Several oceanic regions serve as breeding grounds for tropical storms and hurricanes for much of the planet's year; thus, rainfall is plentiful over most of the planet. In the polar regions, heavy snows and icestorms mark the winter season.

Cultures

Ephanians

On the surface, the culture of Epiphany seems relatively primitive, with few overt manifestations of technology. With the exception of the capital city of Asavara and the trading center of Portside (both on the continental mass known as Stablestone), cities appear to be little more than primitive permanent settlements with none of the accoutrements associated with the Second Republic era's tech level. Handmade goods, low-technology energy sources and labor-intensive cultivation of arable lands imply that the inhabitants of the planet do not possess advanced capabilities in science or technology.

In reality, the standard of living and level of scientific expertise possessed by the populace of Epiphany exceeds appearances. The original colonists possessed a wide variety of skills and knowledges, including specialties in biological and chemical sciences, terraforming, genetic engineering and other scientific disciplines. Subsequent genera-

tions of colonists not only preserved the knowledge of the first colonizers, but also added to it through their own research and experimentation.

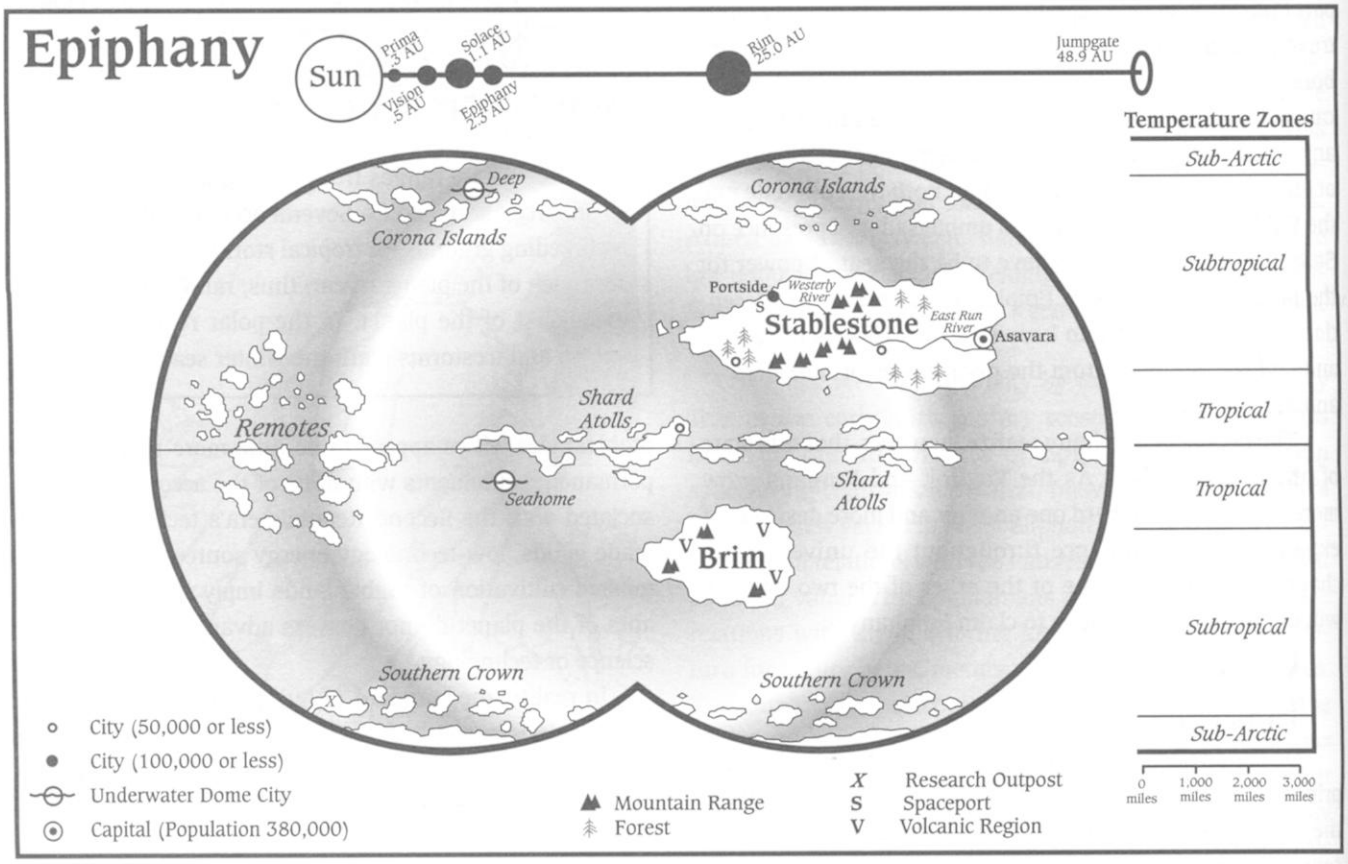
Because of the limitations engendered by their environment, however, the early settlers of Epiphany decided to impose restrictions on the outward manifestations of their knowledge. In addition, their desire to remain as self-sufficient as possible led them to cultivate a low-tech approach to their daily lives. At the same time, Epiphany's scientific community has, over the centuries, conducted intensive research and development using the planet's available resources.

The abundance of water makes hydroelectric energy a major source of power, while the many resources present in the vast oceans of Epiphany provide the planet's inhabitants with food, medicine, clothing, fuel and many other useful products. Marine biologists and biochemists have discovered how to use the numerous types of algae, seaweed and other ocean flora and fauna to synthesize everything from liquid fuel to medicines.

The native population of Epiphany consists primarily of the descendants of the original human colonists. However, these humans display a few subtle differences from standard human stock, the product of delicate — and, to the Known Worlds, proscribed — genetic enhancements. Most notable of the changes are an increased lung capacity, enabling the natives to hold their breath underwater for longer periods of time, transparent nictitating membranes (third eyelids) designed for underwater vision, and a more streamlined physique, allowing for faster and more efficient movement in the water. Needless to say, the natives of Epiphany excel at swimming and diving.

Epiphany's residents speak, read and write a unique dialect of Urthish descended from the Second Republic Urthish spoken by its original colonists. A few new terms — consisting primarily of words used to describe the manifold varieties of water characteristics, algae, and other planet-specific phenomena — have crept into their vocabulary. In addition, the languages of the Kurgans and the Vuldrok have gained widespread use as secondary tongues.

Although many of the original colonists possessed no particular religious belief (a few of them were Universal Church followers), their descendants developed their own religion, called Aquaea after its primary deity, a female embodiment of the ocean. Aquaeans also recognize Aer as the god of the air and Epiphanea, goddess of the land. Rituals and sacraments involve simple ceremonies such as sharing water, planting seeds and exchanging the "breath of life" in a ritual kiss. Priests and priestesses of the faith act as exemplars of "attuned behavior," using their lives as examples of the best way to coexist in harmony with the planet. Some exemplars of faith have exhibited theurgic abilities



similar to Gjartin folk rites.

Aquaeans view science and technology as good if their effects contribute to the survival of the planet and evil if they impinge on the world in a destructive fashion. Most of the planet's population nominally accepts this faith instead of trying to maintain any connections to the Urth-based Church of the Celestial Sun. The religion's liberal views toward scientific achievements and technological advances make it compatible for the numerous scientists who make up a significant proportion of the planet's population.

Kurgans

While the Kurgan settlements host many long-time natives, all considered to be citizens of the Caliphate and members of particular ordus, many are also offworld military service personnel who serve terms here, keeping an eye on the Vuldrok. The most prevalent ordus are the Bagatur, Kibituk, Fellahin and the Ikhwan-i-Sihr. The vast majority of natives are Khirghiz, but some water-nomads are considered Khaizak.

Vuldrok

Most of the Vuldrok are descendants of Zetol who fled here after Froljir's victory on Fingisvold. They have mixed and interbred with some Epiphanians, and make bold sailors. Those few who have discovered the secrets of Deep and Seaholm usually willingly join those cities rather than spread the tale to others. Nonetheless, offworld members of the unified Star-Nation are attempting to gain a greater hold on the planet. The native Vuldrok don't always agree with them.

Solar System

Epiphany orbits a yellow G2 star. The fading suns phenomenon has only marginally affected this sun, called Heart by the Epiphanians.

Prima: Nearest to the system's sun, Prima consists of three craggy, volcanic continents afloat on a sea of molten matter, making it inhospitable to human life.

Vision: A dense cloud-cover conceals Vision from sight, but scans of the planet from space during the original exploration of the system indicated that the surface holds vast resources of organic materials.

Solace: Epiphany's nearest neighbor, Solace, consists of equal proportions of land and water, though its dense gravity and high atmospheric pressure make habitation impossible without large-scale terraforming.

Epiphany: The only truly habitable planet in the system, Epiphany consists primarily of water, with only a few prominent land configurations visible from space. Its Urth-like gravity and mass, along with a breathable atmosphere, have provided optimal — if somewhat limited — conditions for settlement.

Twin moons, Harmony (roughly 1/12 the size of Epiphany) and Wisdom (1/10 Epiphany's size) orbit the planet. Wisdom appears first on the horizon in the early evening, followed by Harmony a few hours later. Wisdom contains a Kurgan outpost, while the Vuldrok have established their own base on Harmony.

Rim: This gigantic outer planet consists of large chunks of icy matter bound together by a powerful magnetic field. Second Republic planetologists suspected that the planet once exploded from within, but still maintains a tentative integrity due to its high gravity.

Places

Although most of Epiphany's surface consists of ocean, numerous land masses provide ample solid ground for the planet's inhabitants. Each major region has its own unique characteristics, depending on climate, location and geological history.

Corona: This series of archipelagos forms a crownlike rim along the northern polar area, surrounding a largely uninhabitable polar ice cap. Created from volcanic upthrusts in the planet's formative era, the rocky islands of Corona have long since frozen over. In places where the volcanic rock lies exposed to the harsh climate, the natural terraforming agents of wind and water have created a few habitable places with rich soil, warmed by underground springs heated from lava flows far beneath the surface.

Shard Atolls: A large grouping of coral atolls, the Shard Atolls consist of more than 50 small islands spread out in a seemingly random pattern across the planet's equatorial zone. In reality, underwater "bridges" of coral formations link many of the islands. Early terraforming of the surface of most of these islands by the original colonists has enabled small-scale farming and herding. Vuldrok colonists have claimed one of the Shard Atolls as their own.

Stablestone: The largest land mass on Epiphany sits slightly north of the equator in the planet's eastern hemisphere. The most heavily terraformed of the planet's surface areas, Stablestone contains rich soil, making it ideal for a variety of farms. A few forests seeded with trees — imported along with the colonists and genetically altered to thrive on Epiphany — provide for the colonists' lumber needs and also serve as topsoil anchors. Stablestone contains a ridge of low mountains (below 600 meters) running through the center of the continent. Two major rivers (each with several tributaries) cascade from the mountains toward each coastal plateau. The city of Asavara sits in a natural harbor at the mouth of the East Run River on Stablestone's eastern coast, while the trading center of Portside, which contains the planet's only spaceport, occupies a similar position at the mouth of the Westerly River on the continent's western coast.

Brim: The other continental landmass on Epiphany is largely barren. It was never terraformed by the early colonists, and considered too hard to remake by the post-Fall

era inhabitants. It does host a few surface volcanoes, although none seem currently active since one of them, Grimsky, erupted just before the first Kurgans arrived.

Southern Crown: Forming a ring around Epiphany's southern pole similar to the northern region of Corona, Southern Crown consists of massive ice floes that bear little sign of habitation outside of a few migratory avians and colonies of seal-like creatures indigenous to the planet. A single colony of humans exists within the largest of the Southern Crown floes and forms a floating research outpost; here experiments in cryogenics and bioengineering take place under conditions of extreme secrecy.

The Remotes: Numerous single islands, collectively known as the Remotes, dot Epiphany's western hemisphere both north and south of the equator. Though most of these islands are volcanic in origin, a few coral atolls are also interspersed among the Remotes. No more than 1000 colonists inhabits any of these islands, with some Remotes containing as few as 50 permanent residents. Fishing and algae farming make up the primary enterprises on the remotes. A colony of Kurgans inhabits one of the Remotes.

Deep and Seahome

The twin hearts of Epiphany lie far beneath the planets' waters in the two cities of Deep and Seahome, built during the Second Republic and maintained since that time with a tech level equivalent to 7. Seahome, the larger of the two underwater settlements, consists of a large domed structure beneath the largest of the Shard Atolls. Deep, also a domed city, lies beneath the icy waters near Corona. Both cities contain research and experimentation facilities for a group of scientists and technicians involved in genetic engineering and biotechnology.

The permanent inhabitants of both Deep and Seahome bear significant signs of bioengineering and nanotech enhancements, possessing the capacity to sustain themselves in the high-pressure environment of the deep ocean as well as metabolic alterations that enable them to thrive in the colder water temperatures. Low-light vision, gills and webbing on hands and feet enable the residents of these cities to adapt to a near-total aquatic existence. Although most of the individuals who reside in Deep and Seahome spend short periods of time on the surface, a few hard core scientists have so drastically altered their bodies and metabolisms that they cannot survive for long outside of the water. Calling themselves "aquatics," these visionaries believe that the real future of Epiphany lies not on the surface, but beneath the ocean.

The existence of both these colonies is a secret zealously kept from outsiders such as the Kurgans and the Vuldrok.

Flora and Fauna

Animal and plant life exists in abundance on Epiphany, despite the paucity of land formations. Indigenous species exist side by side with creatures and vegetation introduced by the original settlers, after genetic enhancements enabled the inserted species to adapt to conditions in their new environment.

Though no large land-based mammals exist on Epiphany, due to the lack of sufficient space for either herd animals or predators, a number of small mammals — both indigenous and introduced — populate many of the regions. Some Stablestone farmers maintain herds of miniature sheep and goats for wool and dairy products, as well as several varieties of fowl raised for eggs, feathers and, occasionally, meat. The largest known mammals on Epiphany are cetacean-like creatures. The planet's specialists in marine zoology have cataloged several hundred types of aquatic mammals resembling whales and dolphins.

Epiphany contains several thousand species of indigenous fish, shellfish and crustaceans, which provide the primary source of food for Epiphany's population. In addition, fishers and fish-farmers extract oil from many species. Fish roe (including several varieties of caviar), sea cucumbers and other delicacies add variety to the diet of the locals. Pearls, shells and coral also serve as domestic as well as off-planet trade goods.

The plantlife of Epiphany is as varied as its animal life. In the tropical regions around the planet's equator, jungle-like growths of vines, lianas, palm trees and flowering bushes abound. Many of these species are native to the planet, but introduced species also thrive in the fertile conditions of the tropical regions. Even in the more rigorous environments of Corona and Southern Crown, some hardy plants exist. The inhabitants of Epiphany have also had great success in introducing some strains of wheat and other grains for limited production, primarily on Stablestone. Hydroponic farming enables a wide variety of food plants, though not in huge quantities.

The most remarkable and varied forms are the algae and seaweeds that populate the oceans and shorelines of the planet. The inhabitants of Epiphany have learned over the years how to use seaweed in its many forms for food, clothing, useful items such as baskets or mats, and building material. Through biological research and experimentation, scientists have discovered how to create fuel from certain types of methane-producing algae and poisons and medicines from other varieties. Algae also provides a staple food source, while some varieties can be fermented to produce alcohol.

Epiphanians

Many Epiphanians (not all) are Changed.

Cost: 2 pts

Changed Powers:

Benefices: Increased Lung Capacity (1 pt; +4 Vigor roll for holding one's breath. Meta 0), Nictitating Membranes (1 pt; no penalty for seeing underwater or in other liquid mediums. Meta 1), Streamlined Physique (1 pt; +1 meter per victory point on Vigor swimming rolls, +1 Dexterity to slip from grapple holds. Meta 1)

Affliction: Mutation (+1 pt)

Aquatics

Cost: 11 pts

Changed Powers:

Benefices: Gills (1 pt; Meta 1), High-Pressure Tolerance (4 pts; can withstand underwater depths. Meta 1), Low-light Vision (4 pts; same as Cat Eyes. Meta 1), Nictitating Membranes (1 pt; no penalty for seeing underwater or in other liquid mediums. Meta 1), Streamlined Physique (1 pt; +1 meter per victory point on Vigor swimming rolls, +1 Dexterity to slip from grapple holds. Meta 1), Webbed Hands (1 pt; +2 meters per victory point on Vigor swimming rolls. Meta 1)

Affliction: Mutation (+1 pt)

Personality

Jian Asavara

Descended from the charismatic visionary and biogeneticist Camilla Asavara, leader of the original Epiphany colony, Jian has assumed the role of spokesperson for the planet. Though both Vuldrok and Kurgan ambassadors consider her Epiphany's ruler, Jian holds no official position in the planet's loose government. Instead, she serves as a figurehead First Counselor who maintains the fiction that the inhabitants of Epiphany are a relatively simple population of low-tech farmers and fishers.

Though she assumes the persona of a wisewoman whose careful speech and dignified bearing suggest someone who spends much time in thought and meditation, Jian actually possesses an astute knowledge of political behavior and social interaction.

Race: Human

Quote: "Greetings, strangers. We are a peaceful people with simple desires. Our poor world has but a few things to offer you, but our hospitality is boundless."



Description: Jian is a tall, slim woman in her mid-40s. Her weathered complexion and gray-streaked dark brown hair give her the appearance of an earth-mother, though her ice-blue eyes hold evidence of a canny intelligence that belies her outward simplicity. Clad in homespun clothing and coral jewelry, Jian carries no obvious weapons, though she does secrete a blowgun and darts in a pouch worn under her tunic.

Body: Strength 5, Dexterity 7, Endurance 7

Mind: Wits 6, Perception 7, Tech 6

Spirit: Extrovert 4, Introvert 2, Passion 1, Calm 4, Faith 3, Ego 1

Natural skills: Charm 5, Observe 5, Vigor 6

Learned skills: Blowgun 6, Bureaucracy 4, Drive (Watercraft) 4, Empathy 6, Focus 4, Lore (Regional) 7, Read Urthish, Read Kurgan, Remedy 2, Science (Biology) 5, Science (Genetics) 6, Social (Leadership) 7, Speak Urthish, Speak Kurgan, Speak Vuldrok, Tech Redemption (Craft) 3

Blessings: Gracious (+2 Extrovert to guests)

Occult: Theurgy 1

Powers: Purification, Aquaea's Blessing (like Gjarti's Blessing)

Wyrd: 4

Equipment: Personal watercraft, medallion of office (coral necklace)

Weapons: Small blowgun and darts (3d, 10/20 RNG, Rate 2, Size S)

Armor: None

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Eridol

Eridol was an unusual world even before its discovery by human explorers. It displayed a perfectly circular orbit, stable climate, and strangely homogenous flora and fauna. Even a blind person could recognize the taint of terraforming in its makeup. There was elemental evidence that several large gas giants had once orbited the outer rim of the system, although none now existed. The Anunnaki are, of course, the suspected architects of the present system, and xenologists theorized that the ancients used the gas giants to power immense gravity engines, tugging Eridol into its perfect orbit. No one could say anything for sure about its origins, but most people in the Diaspora knew it was a wonderful vacation spot.

Its agreeable climate attracted Urth-Mediterranean colonists, led by the wealthy Thana family. They in turn attracted other elite families, diplomats and corporate tycoons, transforming Eridol into a private retreat. An economy geared to serve the luxuriant demands of the rich grew up around them, with laborers shipped in to perform all manner of menial but necessary tasks. In addition, the gentle, indigenous *aluuni* made excellent construction workers for the Thana's crystalline cities.

The wealthy also brought with them their causes and obsessions, the latest fashionable distractions for the season. One of these was a haven for persecuted psychics (many of them Sathraists) fleeing the bigotry of the non-Gifted masses. The world also attracted xenoarchaeologists seeking evidence of the Anunnaki. Although the solar system hinted at the progenitors' previous presence here, no Gargoyles, soul shards or other ruins could be found. Eventually, the xenologists gave up active research, although many prominent scientists retired to the peaceful world on the pretext of continuing their work.

Soon after the Prophet's death, one of his minor followers made a big splash — literally and figuratively — when his starship crashed into the great southern ocean. Fished from the deep by *aluuni*, Balu lived among them for years before returning to human civilization old and frail. He claimed that the gentle beings had led him to a great underground cavern complex where the Anunnaki hid their treasures. Refusing to reveal its location lest heathens despoil it, he prophesied that one day one of Zebulon's true faithful would once again unlock its mighty gates and wield the Empyrean weapons that waited within. After his death, many exploiters attempted to befriend the *aluuni* in the hopes of discovering the treasure, but the semi-sentient being seemed to have no knowledge of Saint Balu's cavern.

As time passed, Eridol seemed like a planet trapped in unchanging amber; as worlds around it saw progressive reforms (often violently enacted), Eridol's Thana masters refused to give any quarter to the lower classes. The increased trade that occurred in Human Space brought news of these reforms from other worlds. Given glimpses of a better way of life, Eridol's servant class — far outnumbering its wealthy masters — grew more and more disaffected.

That was when the jumpgate shut down. Whether it was a result of sabotage on the part of some rebel, willing purpose on the part of the Thana, or a result of unknown Anunnaki science, the gate shut and travel between the stars ended. With no more news reports to inform the populace, the Thana could control the media — which they did with relish.

Over the years, prominent members of the family had begun mixing with the psychic refugees, giving them favored place in high society. Eventually, intermarriage occurred, and Thana children were raised psychically aware. They set themselves to the study of how such powers could be used to maintain rule over the rabble. Now, such study saw fruit, as the Thana's increased understanding of the human mind and its behavior — although a rather Machiavellian view — allowed them to manipulate the masses with ease, creating fear, desire or loyalty when and where they wanted.

Eridol Traits

Ruler: Empress Calista (Elysia), Morik of Aerie (Windward Crescent), Mowlowee (Aluuni)

Cathedral: The Shrine of Aerie

Agora: Windward Crescent

Garrison: 0

Capital: Aerie

Jumps: 4

Adjacent Worlds: Sargasso (dayside), Wolf's Lament (nightside)

Solar System: Sharab (0.5 AU), Alahym (0.56 AU), Eridol (1.02 AU), Caraphym (5.405 AU; Talon, Beak), Malikam (5.406 AU; Sword, Shield), Karal (41.23 AU; Eleisos), Jumpgate (55.3 AU)

Tech: 1

Human Population: 500,000

Alien Population: 1,000,000 *aluuni*

Resources: Drugs, food

Exports: Contraband (art), slaves

Landscape: Eridol is mostly covered in water, with a few atolls along the equator and in the northern hemisphere. Its only mountains are at its poles.

Unfortunately, the jumpgate did not stay closed. Its opening centuries later brought scout ships from the advanced and egalitarian Second Republic. When these ships landed outside the cities, where the populace became the first to greet the envoys, it became impossible for the Thana to then censor news of the visitors and their message.

Agents of discontent ever hounded the Thana's goal of complete rule, always spurring minor revolts here and there throughout the archipelagos. Now, with word of a democratic, high-tech society at hand, cries for revolt fell on ready ears. This alone was not enough to overcome the Thana's rule, for most of the populace believed their handy propaganda. But the *alunni* knew better.

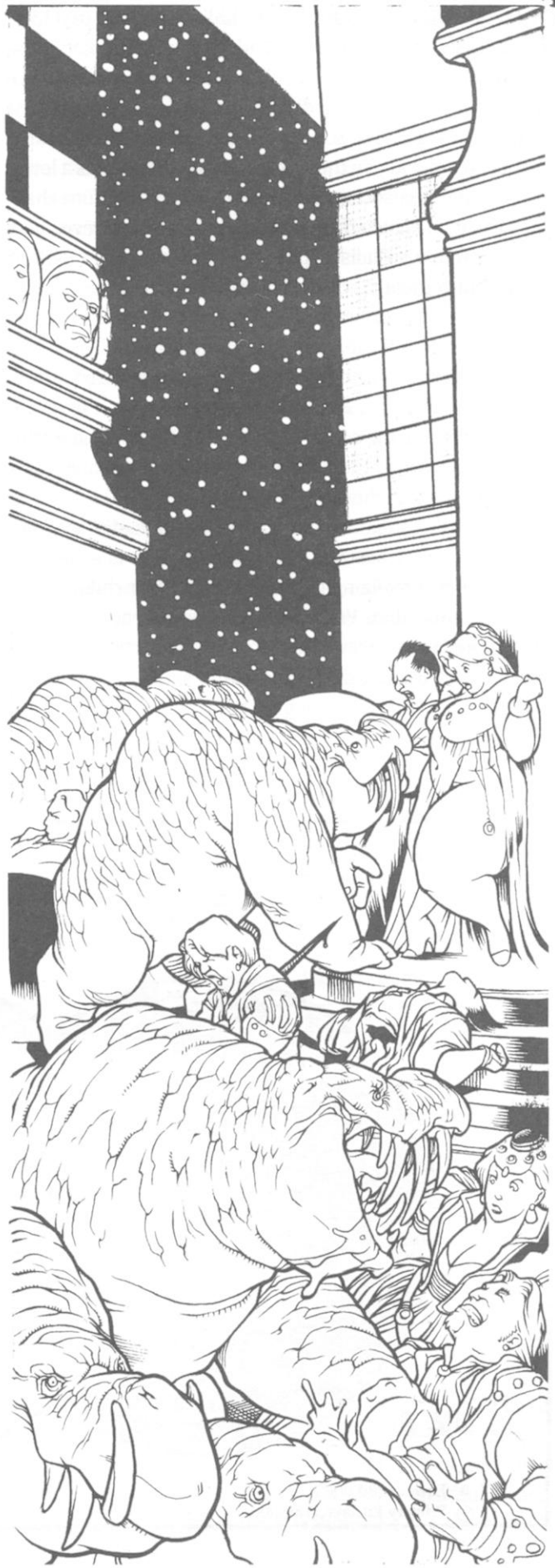
Once the Thana's lies about their evolutionary superiority were laid bare by the existence the Second Republic envoys (who showed true superiority in all fields, technical and moral), resentment over years of cruel enslavement to alien masters coincided with the mating season. The *aluuni's* surging hormones and fury were directed not against mating rivals, but at the Thana. The *alunni* amassed at the Thana palace in Aerie, followed cautiously by bands of human revolters hoping to take advantage of the chaos. Amaglio deCappulo, the Thana's head of police, witnessing the surging crowds below, responded by personally firing a rifle at the lead *aluuni*.

Normally, the sudden death of a leader would disperse the then-confused *aluuni*. But their mating season frenzy only drove them into a murderous rage. They battered their way into the palace and flooded its halls, beating to death any Thana family member or official who crossed their path. Behind them, human rebels followed, finishing the job for any who had survived the *aluuni* wave.

In the towers above, the core of the family gathered by flitter and begged the aid of the Republican representatives who had "caused all the trouble." The nervous survey team agreed to evacuate the nobles in their scout ships and shuttles, and summoned them from orbit, loading the relieved nobles aboard.

Once back in the Republic, hearing only the Thana's story of the event, the senate ordered a peacekeeping force to reclaim the world for the disenfranchised family. But when they attempted to jump to the world, Eridol's gate denied access. It had shut down once more. The Thana, crestfallen at the loss and now trapped in a democratic society, immediately set about making the best of it, playing the martyr card for all it was worth, gaining the pity — and charity —of fellow gentry.

Back on Eridol, the days of the remaining Thana were numbered. Not all members of the vast family had escaped, for not all had responded to the summons to greet the Republican survey team, assuming that if these Republicans were important enough, they would eventually come to them.



Without their core leadership, including the best psychics, these lesser family members had no hope of maintaining control in the face of a global revolt. Some of them were killed, many injured and disenfranchised, still other exiled to remote islands, but some managed to throw off the curse of their genes and join the rebels, earning themselves a lowly place in the new society.

The immediate effect of the Thana's fall, however, was not union in a socialist republic, as many rebels sought to build, but a great migration of workers across the world, away from their former homes ("cages") and onto small islands where they could carve a life for themselves. The Windward Crescent of islands along the equator was nearly abandoned, and Elysia, a beautiful tropical island to the north, took its place as the center of human activity on the world.

The *alunni* went back to their ancestral waters and avoided humans whenever they could.

Tired of maintaining the machines of industry, workers reveled in a more pastoral existence as fishers or small-plot farmers, never realizing that they robbed their children of a technical education. With each successive generation, scientific lore became scarcer and scarcer, its practitioners confined mainly to the old Thana cities.

Recent History

In 4985, the Vuldrok arrived. They looted what technology they could (not much) and set up a number of bases they could use as staging areas for raids deeper into space (into Sargasso and beyond).

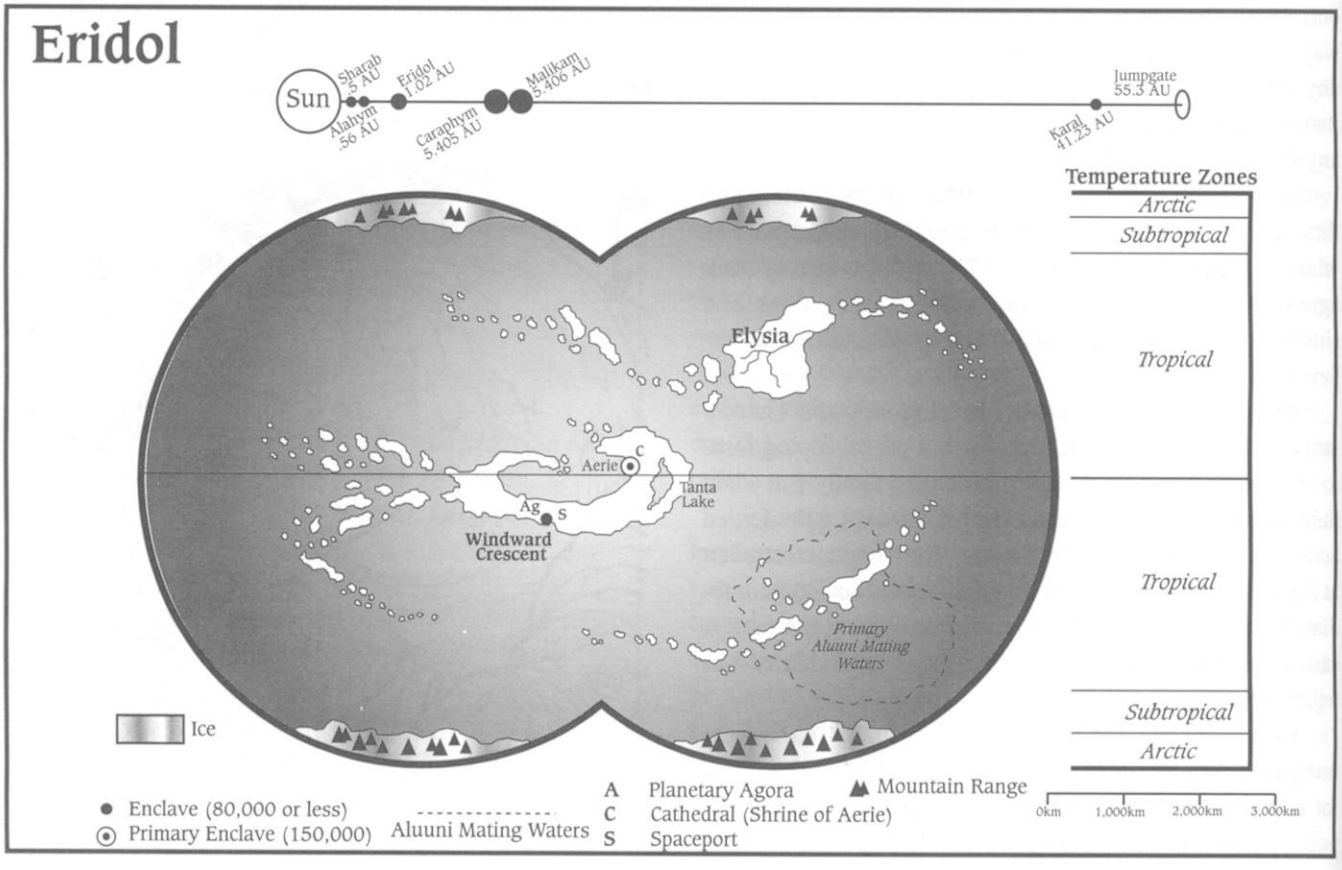
As yet, no Vuldrok to visit Eridol has heard of the Thana still existing. It is only a matter of time — days perhaps — until a Known Worlds' explorer lands on Eridol. And once House Thana hears that its ancient planet has been rediscovered, it will exert all its influence to reclaim it.

Three Cultures

Eridol is now home to three separate and distinct cultures, two human and one native alien.

Elysians

Paleosocialists thriving on an abundance of food and freshwater reservoirs on Elysia, this principal human culture on Eridol honors art and hedonism. Their technology is fairly limited (TL 2), and they have little architecture, building only temporary shelters during the rain season. Since Elysia is far from the equator, there is little difficulty with mach storms, but monsoons and hurricanes can occasionally wreak havoc. The Elysians respond to these catastrophes with celebrations of wild abandon, both before and after such disasters.



Most of Elysian culture involves art and creative expression, but in forms which would shock priests of the Known Worlds Church, for sexual subjects are common and depicted with a joyful lust. One possible cause for this obsession with art — especially the visual and tactile — is the heightened state of sensory awareness Elysians' gain from decades of ingesting the natural psychoactive substance found in the "sacred" water that bubbles up from ancient natural springs.

The dark side of Elysian society, however, reveals itself in the treatment of *aluuni* natives, who are considered mere animals regardless of their semi-sentience. Some Elysians are even known to eat *alunni*. As a result, *alunni* pods rarely travel near Elysia, and Elysian outriggers have to range far afield to collect them.

Most of the lone human settlements scattered across the archipelagos are from Elysian society. Most don't drink Elysia's water, and thus do not gain the sensory awareness of Elysians themselves, although jugs from the sacred springs are often bartered for.

The current ruler of Elysia is perhaps the most insane human on Eridol. Her name is Calista, but her subjects have dubbed her "Empress." Most call her this mockingly, some seriously, but others accept her whims as part of a game of sorts (similar to that played with old Urth's Emperor Norton of San Francisco). She is carried on a transom by oiled-down strong men, and rarely wears clothing. She is frequently under the influence of various intoxicants. Her justice is swift and practical, her temper legendary, and she rules only by pandering to the base lusts of the perverse society she commands. Some who have witnessed her in action claim that she has some kind of psychic ability to command; others merely say it is her beauty in action.

Windward Crescent

Elsewhere on the world, among the remains of Aerie, the Thana's capital city, a different human civilization exists, utilizing ancient Thanic technology that still works to this day. The Windward Crescent, home to the old Thana palace, is protected from the powerful mach storms that occasionally pound the equator by a still-functioning portable terraformer that bends the weather around it. Because the mach storms are hard to predict, the Windward Crescent is the only equatorial area where starships can safely land with any regularity. The Vuldrok land here most often, and an agora of sorts has sprouted, attracting people from all over Eridol wishing to trade with the star travelers. Crafts and goods from all three planetary cultures — including the *aluuni* — can be found here. Among the popular artifacts the Vuldrok trade for are the ancient Thana kinetropic tapestries (holograms that also appeal to tactile senses) depicting intricately detailed orgies.

The Windward People are custodians of the ancient Thana legacy, and pray to their long-departed, angelic patrons for deliverance from the planet's (and the Vuldrok's) barbarism. While actual descendants of the Thana can still be found on Eridol, they are rarely recognized as such, and even then are not considered to be true Thana. Those lofty lords spurned the world in olden times, waiting for the people to prove themselves worthy once more for their enlightened rule. Once they return to judge Eridol, only those who maintained the proper ways will serve them; the rest will be submerged in a global monsoon.

The people of the Windward Crescent understand little of the technology they maintain, for too few devices from the Thana Retreat have remained in working order. Vuldrok raiders carried off everything of real value, leaving behind only the portable terraformer (the Maghtaw were afraid to unhook its old and rusty parts lest it break and ruin their potential raiding base) and a large hydroponics farm of which they remain unaware.

While religion is largely unimportant to the sybaritic Elysians, the Windward people retain some remnant of the Prophet's Church the Thana once maintained to keep the people in line. Like anything created by the Eridol Thana, this Church is tainted with legends of the Thana's descent from Empyrean angels and their divine mandate to rule. These myths play a large part in molding the current view of the Thana as departed demigods. Also important, however, is Saint Balu, Patron of the Waves. He is also worshipped as a pagan underworld deity among some remote Elysians, the lord of an undersea kingdom where worthy souls go upon death to live among the works of the ancient gods.

The people of the Windward Crescent are ruled by Morik of Aerie. This ancient man is said to have some Thanic genes, for he is the oldest man on Eridol and is still thriving. He was once custodian of the old lore, tending and maintaining as much of the Thana's ancient technology as possible. A cunning and savvy leader with a practical manner, Morik is exceedingly suspicious of all foreigners, especially off-worlders. He detests the Elysians and would conquer them if he had the means. He carries with him a jeweled box that is said to control all of Aerie's defense shields and automatic weaponry; he can supposedly use it to kill anyone on the spot.

The *Aluuni*

The *aluuni* are a race of semi-sentient amphibious cetaceans. Their thick gray skins and layers of adipose deposits protect incredibly supple and strong muscles, built for swimming long distances and in deep water. Their low metabolisms allow them to stay underwater for long periods of time, although they are warm-blooded, air-breathing mammals. They can walk on land, looking like slouching, shuf-

fling walrus-bipeds. While their voices sound congested when outside of water, they can learn and speak pidgin Urthish.

Their hearing is superb; their sound-sensitive membranes amplify signals when cushioned by water. Their eyesight and sense of smell, however, are poor. Hollows in their skulls allow them to gauge barometric pressure, and they possess special organs for sensing ambient temperature, allowing them to forecast local weather conditions. However, they are not all equally adept at such foreknowledge; some training and experience is required.

Mating season — the first two to three weeks of spring — is the only time of conflict between *aluuni*, and there have been many terrible battles between pods for mating rights over females in heat. The gentle *aluuni* become aggressive warriors during this time, bloodthirsty and unstoppable, their muscular bodies transformed into organic bludgeons.

Alunni reproduce bisexually, with live births occurring in open sea. The father nudges the recently birthed offspring to the surface for its first breath. Due to their slow metabolism, gestation time is 12 Urth standard months, although embryos develop in a strangely human fashion.

The *aluuni* are fairly peaceful creatures, being sea-filters rather than predators, ingesting krill-like microorganisms for their food and helping to fertilize the vast green fernlike undersea forests with their wastes. They have no natural predators other than humans, who like to enslave and sometimes eat them.

The *aluuni* are a simple people, with mostly instinctual rituals and a simple culture. They enjoy a relatively safe, simplistic life, except for the occasional problems with humans. Few skills are required to live on such an easy and gentle planet.

Barter is their primary means of exchange with humans, though a complex system of pod obligations and trading pacts exists between *aluuni* pods. They do have an art of sorts: long, repetitive song epics they sing in a droning scale of extremely limited notes that can be understood by humans who bother to learn *aluuni* language (although humans cannot speak it). These epics revolve mainly around the Fair Ones, those who once gave them purpose in life and protected them, and who may one day return. More secretive songs, rarely heard by humans, tell of the Ancient Ones, those who came before the Fair Ones and who still dwell in the uttermost depths of Eridol.

The *aluuni* are led by Mowlowee. His name means "the most fertile bull in all the pods," and his stature is truly immense. He is too heavy too move well on land, but many young and fleet-of-fin *aluuni* communicate his decisions to pods throughout the world. The slavery suffered by some *aluuni* pods troubles him, but he hesitates to take action against the slavers, knowing that his people are hard to goad into combat outside of mating season. He worries that several young bulls may challenge his place next season.

Solar System

Looking at the celestial makeup of Eridol's star system, one would be hard pressed to understand how the planets got their orbits and why they are so eccentrically placed — until one realizes that the gravitic pull of all the other planets helps determine Eridol's perfect orbit (which helps create its year-round calm weather and gentle turn of seasons), as if some celestial engineer placed them there.

Eridol's star, Kabir, is obviously suffering the fading suns phenomenon. Its surface regularly erupts with solar flares that can hinder the sensors of any starship traveling closer than Eridol. Sharab and Alahym are Mercury-like planets whose orbits seemed aligned such that they protect Eridol from the worst of the sun's explosions. Caraphym and Malikam are giant, lifeless balls of dead rock that seem to have at one time been lush green worlds. Karal is a far-off Plutonian planet of ice, dead and cold.

Geography

Eridol is swathed in water, bulging at its equator with the salty brine that makes up most of its skin. Atolls and island chains peek above the ocean's surface. Only at the poles is it cold enough for ice and snow, and then for only part of the year. The tallest mountains on Eridol are at its poles. The weather is mostly perfect, although solar activity precipitates occasional wild storms, monsoons, hurricanes and vast, reverberating sound-explosions called sonic or mach storms. These tremendous releases of sound energy are the result of the fading star's release of solar flares that rake across the atmosphere, causing it to thrum like a struck drum.

The Windward Crescent is a giant, natural atoll near the equator that forms a beautifully protected bay. An inland freshwater lake is the largest such body of water on the planet, although the Elysian river (on an island to the north) rivals it in length and depth.

Flora and Fauna

Aside from the *aluuni*, there are only a very limited variety of other indigenous species. Eridol is surprisingly devoid of biodiversity for an aquatic world.

Krill thrive on sunlight and waste products from fish, *aluuni*, and an amphibian species called the *wyllk* (possibly the evolutionary ancestors of the *aluuni*). The fish eat krill and other fish. The *wyllk* eat mostly fish and other *wyllk*. Small, warm-blooded, land-going tusked omnivores called *mosks* eat the *wyllk*, who sun themselves and lay eggs on the beaches. The *wyllk* also eat plant undergrowth and the occasional *shrask* (a large omnivore) which they can pull down. The gentle, lightly furred, long-necked, bucolic *shrasks*

eat the taller plants and the small omnivores they happen across, either alive or dead, plus a few fish for variety (they are extremely fast with their long necks and piercing cuspids).

Humans eat everything on the planet except the krill, paying special attention to the very easy-to-get fruits of the taller trees, the easy-to-kill *shrasks*, and the easy-to-catch fish. The only concern a human hunter in the underbrush has is a particularly hungry *wyllk*, but these beasts are so single-minded, they can be distracted from attacking by simply killing a *shrask*; its blood attracts the *wyllk*.

Personality

Lazar

Born in a remote, semi-Elysian island, Lazar was raised with many superstitious beliefs, among them the worship of Saint Balu as a water and underworld deity. When a child, his parents' raft capsized, drowning the both of them and leaving little Lazar adrift on the waves, clinging to a wooden spar. After days of endless floating and dehydration, he was found by an *aluuni* pod, who nudged him along toward an islander fishing raft. Once his own kind saw the boy, the *aluuni* disappeared under the waves.

While tending the fatigued lad, the fishers heard him mutter many things under his breath, among them a conversation with someone named Balu, who told the boy that he would live so that he might one day perform a great service. From then on, Lazar was treated as a special child and taught everything the Elysians knew about Saint Balu.

Now in his 30s, Lazar travels the archipelago spreading the teachings of Balu and his apocalyptic message (at least, the way pagan Elysians remember them). Although he is revered by the simple islanders among whom he was raised, the more sophisticated and sybaritic Elysians scoff at the ranter. People of the Windward Crescent think him a deluded fool, to raise a historic saint to deity status — especially one who was never of the Thana bloodline.

If any priest of the Universal Church were to encounter him, his beliefs would surely be deemed heterodox, but at least the poor man follows one of Zebulon's own, rather than a psychic noble.



Race: Human
Culture: Elysian

Quote: "I know that Saint Balu will rescue me from the Ocean of Sorrows once I die, and then I shall behold the Vault of the Makers and know the ultimate outcome of Their Works, which is yet to come."

Description: Well-proportioned and tanned, Lazar is in very good shape from years of boating and fishing the high seas. His garments, like most Elysians, are sparse: a grass skirt and coral necklace.

Entourage: Lazar travels alone. Although he does try to attract others on his travels, they invariably tire of his morose attitude and jump ship at the first port.

Body: Strength 3, Dexterity 6, Endurance 7
Mind: Wits 5, Perception 5, Tech 2
Spirit: Extrovert 5, Introvert 2, Passion 7, Calm 1, Faith 8, Ego 1
Natural skills: Charm 5, Observe 4, Vigor 6
Learned skills: Art (woodcarving) 5, Empathy 5, Focus 4, Inquiry 4, Lore (Saint Balu's legends) 8, Remedy 3, Social (Oratory) 5, Stoic Mind 4
Wyrd: 3
Equipment: House raft with provisions for one month, ample rope and palm leaves for restoring storm damage
Weapons: Shrask-tooth knife (2d)
Armor: None
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

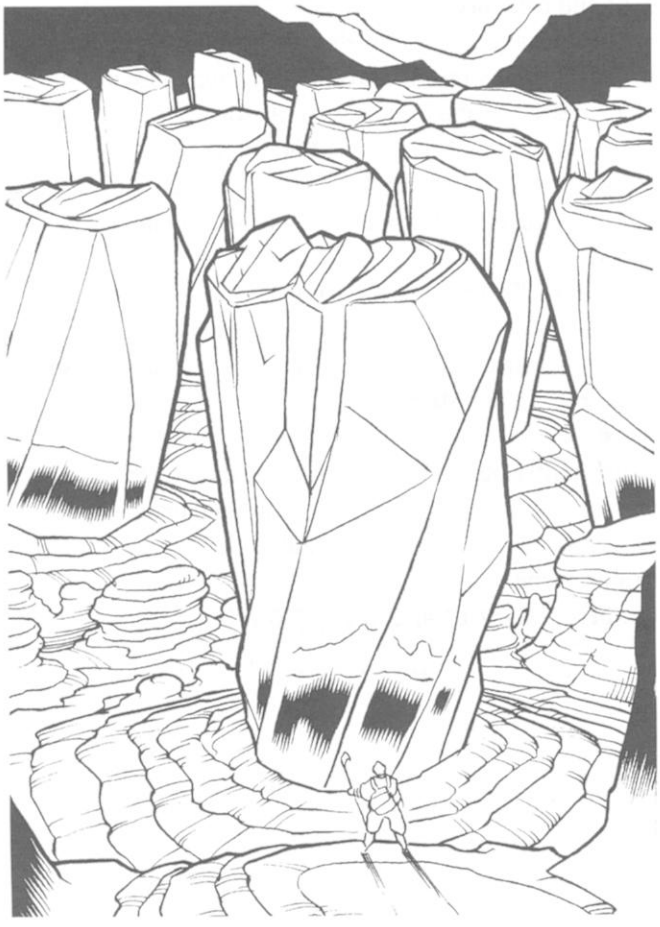
Gizeh

Along paths uncharted, or lost in the madness of the Second Republic's fall, lie planets both strange and wondrous. Gizeh, once thought a small, insignificant world, lies on one of these nightroads, waiting for someone to discover its secrets and treasures.

An undiminished yellow sun bakes red mountains, plateaus and oceans of windswept sand. From orbit, the planet appears divided along the equator by a horizontal belt of desert. Broad bands of vegetation cling to life on the shores of Gizeh's three seas. Cities and towns of low, white-washed buildings and rusted, abandoned factories paint Gizeh as a sleepy, backward place compared to the Known Worlds.

History

Gizeh's recorded history begins with the opening of the system's jumpgate, although no one remembers for sure when the first settlers arrived. It was the height of the Diaspora, a time when people fled the tyranny of the First Republic. A group of like-minded individuals sought to found a society based on socialist doctrines, led by Robert McKenzie, a one-time stock financier who had become disillusioned with capitalism's inability to cure social ills. McKenzie purchased the exclusive rights to Gizeh's jump coordinates and launched a fleet of colony ships. After the fleet passed through the jumpgate, McKenzie immediately shut down the gate to ensure the experiment's seclusion, cutting off any chance of returning home.



McKenzie's rag-tag fleet of transports set down near what has come to be called the Great Inland Sea, and set about establishing their colony. They constructed pre-fabricated buildings, using their ship's fusion drives for power. In the first few years, they tried planting the grains, fruits and vegetables they brought with them, though only a few thrived (notably olives, figs, wheat and rice). Their cattle did not last long on such sparse fare, although goats did well, becoming a staple for the colonists. Meanwhile, botanists researched the local plant life and discovered several edible varieties of "water fruit," emerald grass and prickly grapes among them. The colonists discovered the *pakunie*, a species of short-furred ungulates, and used it for meat, milk and drayage. The sea teemed with local species of fish.

Throughout this period, the jumpgate remained closed and the colony existed in a state of blissful isolation. It remained ignorant of the Prophet and his Church, the wars with the Shantor and Ukar, and first contact with the Vau. It avoided the social pressures that led to the formation of noble houses on other worlds. McKenzie and his inner circle founded a Council and established a system of cradle-to-grave government support. Everyone had their assigned task, and each person contributed to the colony's overall prosperity. Money and bartering were unnecessary, as everyone provided what they could and received just what they needed. Even after McKenzie's death, the Council retained control. Bolstered by the inhabitants' homogeneity, and their isolation, the social experiment worked.

As that first colony thrived, the Gizehns spread out to explore more and more of their planet. They soon discovered the presence of titanic crystalline monoliths. A survey party, led by a planetologist named Doctor Emil Briggs, discovered a gigantic crystal outcropping rising from the desert floor during a trip to the Fartop Mountains. The unnatural deposit perplexed the scientists. The cool, smooth surface vibrated slightly, as though charged with electricity. It thrummed when the hot desert winds blew. At night, it glowed with residual heat and light from the day.

Most shocking, on the third night of his examination, Dr. Briggs had a vision he would describe only as "mathematically perfect." But the monolith's origins and purpose eluded the group. The expedition discovered three more of these monoliths during their travels, and later expeditions discovered additional ones — shockingly, in places where

none had been before. The Gizehns apparently were not alone.

Decades later, the Ming walked out of the Deep Desert and into Gizehn awareness. One of these seven-foot-tall, rock-based beings lumbered into Dr. Briggs' camp during one of his expeditions. Bridging the language barrier with hand-signals, Briggs convinced the Ming to return with him to Memphis, the site of the original colony, now a bustling town. The Ming's appearance startled the human population when it shambled from Brigg's shuttle. The colony's scientists tried to communicate with it using several languages, and eventually discovered it spoke an ancient Earth dialect — Aramaic.

Haltingly, they established the basics: The Ming lived in the mountains of the Deep Desert, where they were content to stay. They didn't mind human colonists on their soil, but they wanted them to leave the "Temples to the Stars" — the monoliths — undisturbed. The colonists were just as content to stay where they were; they couldn't survive for long far from the Great Inland Sea, anyway. Its message delivered, the Ming ambassador returned to the desert.

But this was not the end of contact with the Ming. More and more, Gizehns spotted Ming on the move. Exactly how and when the two species forged a relationship remains unknown. The Gizehns welcomed the occasional Ming into their settlements; the Ming had a wealth of knowledge about their planet and beyond, such that they gained reputations not unlike those of medieval sages.

After several decades of increasing contact, Thomas Jerymyn and a team of scientists set out to find a Ming settlement. When they did not return, most Gizehns assumed they either died in the Deep Desert or — more darkly sinister — had trespassed on Ming lands and were killed for their trouble.

Ten years after the Jerymyn expedition disappeared, stories of nomadic humans living in the Deep Desert began to circulate. They are called Durgwhallah by the Gizehns, for their skill at domesticating Gizeh's native camel-like species, the *durgra*. One such band, led by Jerymyn, returned to Memphis and announced that he and the others planned to stay in the Deep Desert. After assembling some supplies, they returned to the sands, where their descendants have lived ever since.

As time passed, Gizeh's human inhabitants continued to prosper and expand. Additional cities were founded on the shores of the Great Inland Sea and settlements sprouted along the shores of the Hapi and Khnemu seas. Little of importance took place, as it is with sleepy places.

This changed after the arrival of a Second Republic scout ship in the year 3799, employing a long-unused jumpkey with Gizeh's coordinates. It was the Ming who revealed the ship's arrival to the human settlers, when they casually asked if this meant more colonists would be arriving.

A landing craft touched down outside Memphis, and as Captain Adnan Isadore stepped from the hatch, thousands of Gizehns turned out to welcome him. Isadore remained on Gizeh for seven months, during which time he learned what he could of the planet and told Gizehns much of what had transpired in human space over the last centuries. Emissaries from Gizeh returned to Byzantium Secundus with Isadore,

Gizeh Traits

Ruler: The Memphis Council
Cathedral: None
Agora: Khephreaux
Garrison: 3
Capital: Memphis
Jumps: 3
Adjacent worlds: Delphi (dayside)
Solar System: Gizeh (0.6 AU; Karé), Kai-ro (5.32 AU), Budge (27.8 AU), Drovetti (61.7 AU), Jumpgate (74.5 AU), Sept (91.34 AU)

Gizeh orbits a fairly bright, yellow subdwarf star slightly smaller than Earth's sun; Second Republic astronomers rated the star's mass as 0.8. Gizeh's sun appears wholly unaffected by the fading suns phenomenon. Superstitious Gizans credit the Ming's crystal monuments.

Tech: 5
Human Population: 2,025,000
Alien Population: Unknown (Ming)
Resources: Untapped mineral wealth (gemstones, fossil fuels, and heavy, industrial and light metals), early Second Republic tech
Exports: Chemicals (predominantly pharmaceuticals; Gizeh once exported petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, and industrial chemicals throughout the Second Republic)
Landscape: Gizeh has an unusual environment, barely suitable for humanoid life, but remains untouched by terraforming. At the equator, along a band known as the Deep Desert, the blistering heat and dry, thin atmosphere prevent life as humans know it from enduring. In the upper and lower latitudes the temperature is cooler, and the air breathable, thanks to Gizeh's three deep-green seas (Ament in the northern latitude, Khnemu and Hapi in the southern) and the vegetation growing along their shores. Numerous oases, most appearing seasonally, dot these habitable latitudes. Desert blankets the rest of the planet, from hard-packed dirt to rippling waves of reddish sand, broken only by rocky plateaus, jagged canyons, and eroded mountains.

and Gizeh officially joined the Second Republic in 3802.

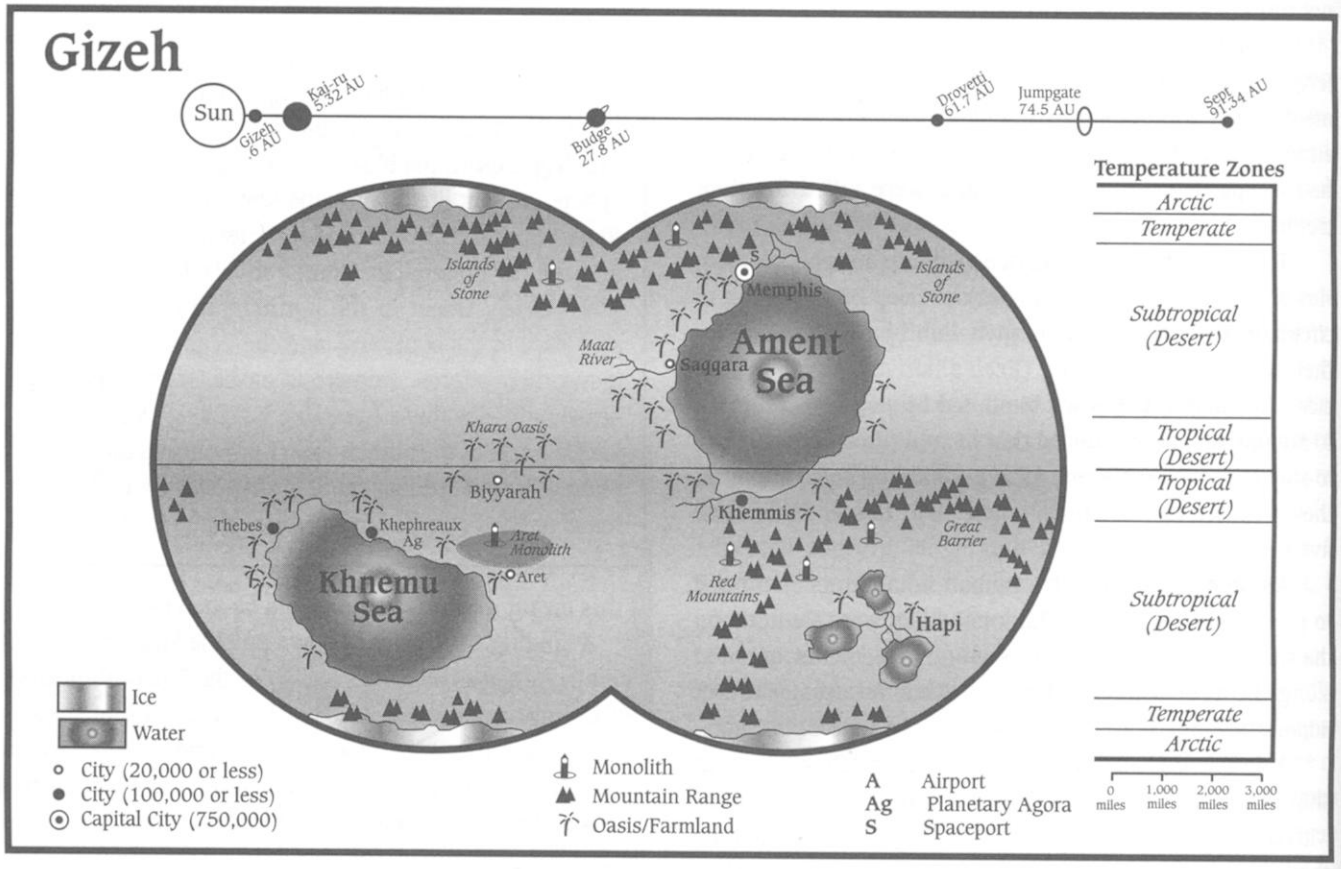
Mining companies arrived to extract Gizeh's abundant mineral wealth, while chemical factories sprung up along the southern shore of the Great Inland Sea. But membership in the Second Republic brought with it certain problems. The influx of people, coupled with pollution created by increased manufacturing, taxed the ecosystem; the air thinned, and skin cancer cases swelled. Several mining operations ran afoul of the Ming when encroaching on their hallowed lands. Scientists flocked to study the crystal monoliths, chipping samples for analysis. Durgwhallah tribes attacked both groups, sacking three remote camps. The Second Republic hunted the tribes, and some even advocated herding the Ming into reservations (though nothing came of this). Both peoples, no match for Second Republic troopers, retreated further into the interior.

As the Second Republic tottered under its crushing bureaucracy and increasingly violent riots, Gizeh's Senator Shore recognized the handwriting on the wall. He secretly encouraged select scientists and corporate allies to come to Gizeh as a haven. As the last of them arrived, the jumpgate shut behind them. Everyone assumed that this action was undertaken by Shore, and it was certainly the senator's intention to shut the gate, but he had yet to act on it himself. Regardless of the reason, Gizeh was again isolated from the rest of human space.

Gizeh recovered from the wounds inflicted by the Second Republic. The factories producing the most pollution were shut down. A strict birth control policy ensured negative population growth, which in turn decreased the population pressures on the atmosphere. With the jumpgate's closure, Ming appeared once more in the Deep Desert, and eventually in Gizeh's cities. The Durgwhallah remained isolated, however, their caravans returning to ply the routes between the oases.

No noble house claimed the planet, and Zebulon's faith, never popular on Gizeh, soon died out. No anti-technology pogrom came to Gizeh. While star-nations coalesced into the Kurgan Caliphate and Vuldrok, and plundered the Known Worlds, Gizeh remained unknown and untouched. Gizehns remained ignorant of the Symbiot Wars and Emperor Wars. This state of blissful isolation continues to this day.

The jumpgate has recently reopened, a fact revealed by the mysterious Ming. After centuries without spaceflight, however, the Gizehns cannot take advantage of the opportunity. The ancient spaceships sit rusting in abandoned starports. Using plans stored on still-working think machines, the locals have begun construction on new spaceships. The lack of heavy industry, however, has hampered mass production of spaceworthy craft. The locals have started to build a few handcrafted ships, based on Second Republic designs. Thankfully, no one from the Known Worlds has yet



discovered Gizeh's accessibility. But this could change at any time....

Cultures

Gizehns

Gizehn culture is typically outgoing and friendly. Gizehns practice a variety of ancient Urth faiths, and look down on dogmatists and zealots. Hospitality is important to them, and visitors find themselves eagerly welcomed into homes for a meal. This openness and freedom manifests itself in an eagerness to argue. Gizehns love to debate, discuss, and pontificate on favorite subjects. This is especially true at mealtimes and the midafternoon coffee hour (a time when Gizehns everywhere stop what they're doing, gather for a cup of strong coffee, and chat). They speak an old dialect of Urthish; although there are many confusing words, conversation between a Gizehn and a Known Worlder can occur.

The colony on Gizeh began as a cultural experiment in socialism. Thanks to the colony's originally small size and homogeneity, the experiment was a success, and today Gizehns enjoy a wide range of social supports. Even the least fortunate receive food, housing, and medical care. Everyone is expected to contribute to the society's well-being, according to the government's plan. Farmers farm to produce food, factory workers work to provide products, and doctors practice medicine in government-run clinics. For the most part, everyone practices their chosen profession because they want to, not because of money. Indeed, the government ensures everyone contributes to the greater good through a system of taxation and subsidies.

Finally, the people of Gizeh are comfortable with technology, although they don't possess it to the same degree as their ancestors. While many homes have working think machines, they are quite basic and can't undertake complex tasks. After the excesses of the Second Republic, Gizeh's populace chose to forego too much reliance on industry, instead honoring honest labor and personal craftsmanship.

Technology in the cities still exists in certain facilities at a tech level of 5, but most Gizehns live at TL 3. Gizeh's own tech advances are not mechanical or electrical; chemicals are the basis of new technologies on Gizeh. In particular, Gizehns depend on pharmaceuticals extensively in their everyday lives. Glow lamps powered by chemical reaction provide light, advanced polymers are used in the construction of buildings and devices, and drugs expand memory capacity, increase oxygen absorption, and extend life expectancy.

Durgwhallah

The descendants of Thomas Jerymyn's expedition to the desert, the people known as Durgwhallah still wander the Deep Desert. Traveling in small camps, these nomads move between the oases of the northern and southern hemispheres, and are thought to routinely enter Ming lands. Indeed, Gizehns presume the Ming are close to the Durgwhallah; they are often seen in each other's company, and the Durgwhallah appear to know a lot about them. The Durgwhallah consider it taboo to bring an outsider into Ming territory, and to suggest such a thing is a grave blunder.

In order to survive in the thin atmosphere and high temperatures away from the polar regions, the Durgwhallah depend on sophisticated technologies. The most unique of these is the gel-suit. These form-fitting jumpsuits are furnished with dozens of gel-filled pouches along the torso, legs and arms. With the turn of a knob, the wearer can inject a chemical into the pouches to heat up, keeping the wearer warm during Gizeh's frigid nights. During the day, the wearer reverses the process, injecting a chemical to turn the gel cool. Rebreathers, heat-reflective ponchos, and thick goggles complete a Durgwhallah's desert rig.

Durgwhallah congregate whenever they meet another band of Durgwhallah. Both pitch their camps close together, and share food and drink around portable heaters. Like other Gizehns, the Durgwhallah pride themselves on their hospitality. A visitor to a Durgwhallah camp will not be turned away, so long as they conduct themselves properly. Durgwhallah practice foot washing, a sign of extravagance as they waste precious water on a guest's feet.

The Ming

For more information on the Ming, see the *Aliens* chapter.

Solar System

Gizeh (Karé): Gizeh is the system's first major satellite, and the only habitable planet. It is a terrestrial world with a hot desert climate. Gizeh has very few seasonal effects (due to its six-degree axial tilt), just enough to melt the snows in the nearby mountains in summer. Karé, Gizeh's sole satellite, is an irregularly shaped asteroid of a rock-iron composition captured by the planet's gravity well.

Kai-ro: The second planet in the system, Kai-ro is a hydrogen-helium gas giant measuring 50,000 miles in diameter. It has seven moons (none habitable) and five captured moonlets. An ancient Second Republic gas mining station was abandoned with the Fall, and presumably fell out of orbit.

Budge: Budge is a small, greenish Jovian planet with a faint ring and 10 moons.

Drovetti: A small icy ball of rock with no atmosphere. Second Republic mining operations exploited the planet's mineral wealth of yominium, gold, and lithium, shipping it to processing plants on Tethys.

Sept: A nondescript ball of ice lacking an atmosphere, Sept has never been fully explored because it lies beyond the system's jumpgate.

Geography

The Monoliths

The Ming began gathering on the Hauron Plains outside Biyyarah at dawn. By nightfall, I counted one hundred Ming, gathered together in a circle. When the first star appeared in the sky, the chanting began, a piping ululation I will never forget. After a time — I'm not sure how long — the air became dry and charged. Then, the ground began to shake. A cry went up among the thousands who came out to witness the event. People pointed. Some ran. I kept my eyes on the Ming congregation. Suddenly, a finger of crystal began to grow from the desert floor. In minutes, it stood there, completed. It was broad and smooth, and appeared to glow. Then, the Ming's song stopped. They began to disperse almost immediately.

— Kolat Dale, 3832, First Gizehn Xenological Expedition

The monoliths remain Gizeh's greatest mystery. No one knows why the Ming "summon" them, nor how they decide when and where to do so. The nature of their construction likewise remains a mystery. When asked about the construction and purpose for the monoliths, the Ming respond with characteristic obscurity. They claim the monoliths have always existed at their present locations, or that they summon them from the Empyrean. Were an Eskatonic to study the monoliths, he would be shocked to discover they stand at the nexus point of intersecting ley lines. An Engineer would be fascinated by the crystal's fractal nature — it self-organizes along complex, predictable routes. A Vau Mandarin, however, would not be surprised, knowing that Ming monoliths share much in common with Vau nanocrystal morphology.

Ament, the Great Inland Sea

The largest body of water on Gizeh, Ament keeps the planet barely habitable. In the spring, snow from the nearby mountain peaks melts, creating raging rivers that feed the sea. Without this body of water, there could be no plant life, and thus no oxygen. Because it is located in the northern latitudes, the temperature remains tolerable. A band of greenery surrounds the sea; irrigation extends this narrow band in areas, fertilizing the fields of grain, waterfruit, and dates, contributing to atmosphere production. Ament also provides a majority of the meat consumed on the planet, in the form of fish.

During the Second Republic, pollution controls were relaxed and chemical companies dumped tons of waste products into the water. Ament's southern shore became a toxic morass. With the collapse of the Second Republic, the local government reasserted its control and shut down polluting factories. A stringent clean-up program restored Ament to its original pristine state. Strict pollution controls have allowed some of the chemical plants to reopen, while the worst offenders remain shut down to this day.

Along the sea's northern shore rises the planet's capital and largest city, Memphis. With its low skyline of white washed, flat-roofed buildings, it appears as a sleepy place from the outside, but the city streets are packed with people, and the city's many small bazaars are filled with shoppers. A large starport stands disused on the southern side of the city. Saqqara, along the western shore, exists solely as a center of agriculture and fishing. The fields of thousands of small farms ring the city and extend along the banks of the river Ma'at, while fishing boats bring in their catches here. Finally, at the sea's southern tip rises the ugly, gray maxicrete towers and factories of Kemmis; many of the largest chemical factories remain closed and abandoned.

Khnemu, the Salt Sea

In the southern latitude, Khnemu is a land-locked body of water whose the salt content is much higher than Ament's. Nothing lives in the water, and originally nothing grew on its shores. The first arrivals to Gizeh built desalination plants, which allowed for extensive irrigation. Today, Khnemu is surrounded by farms.

On the flat granite plateau of Khnemu's eastern shore rises the soaring minarets and graceful domes of Khephreaux, Gizeh's economic center. To the northwest lies the region's next-largest city, Tebes. Largely a resort area, the low buildings are made of a distinctive white stone. Finally, several miles inland from Khnemu rises the Aret Monolith. This impressive outcropping of crystal rises from the desert floor, and is today surrounded by a town of the same name. A respectful distance is maintained (and indeed, people attempting to construct buildings closer find they have problems sleeping, their dreams plagued by extraordinary visions).

The Deep Desert

Most of the remaining areas on Gizeh are known collectively as "the Deep Desert." This is the home of the Ming and the Durgwhallah. The extreme temperatures keep this region largely uninhabited and unexplored. The desert ranges from hard-packed ground to flat stone plateaus and undulating oceans of sand. Several oases, fed by deep underground aquifers, dot the landscape between the Ament and Khnemu seas.

The Khara Oasis, located on the edge of the latitude that marks the beginning of the Deep Desert, is the largest oasis on the planet, and a center of Durgwhallah activity. The Biyyarah Oasis serves as a rest stop on the trade route between Ament and Khnemu. The town of Biyyarah exists solely to cater to travelers, and is the hub of a network of towns along this trade route.

Mountain ranges push their way above the desert floor to break the desert's flat monotony. The Red Mountains, far

to the south of Ament, are widely believed to be the home of the Ming. Early reports by Gizeh's first settlers described an arid, scorching environment, with minimal atmosphere. In the northern latitudes, to the west of Ament, rise the granite Islands of Stone. In the winter, snow falls on the mountain peaks, which melts in the summer to form Ament. In the southern hemisphere, the Great Barrier keeps the desert sands from overwhelming the Flatlands, a region with a high concentration of Ming monoliths and home to Hapi, the planet's third and final standing body of water, a network of giant lakes.

Flora and Fauna

Gizeh's flora includes human-introduced figs and grains, but the indigenous varieties of water fruit form the most popular staples. Grown from short, stunted bushes that produce a fruit the size of olives but with the texture of grapes, water fruit shoots a stream of water when squeezed into the mouth, restoring moisture to parched travelers. Crushed and fermented, it produces a light wine.

As for fauna, the native *pakunie* are somewhat like a combination of Urth mules and cows, while the *durgra* resemble humpless camels, although they are smaller and faster on the sands.

Gintra are mammalian scavengers that roam in packs near — and often into — the Deep Desert. They are known to night travelers by their ululating howls, which sound like the moans of an injured man.

Personality

Shula Senn

Most of the Durgwhallah spurn attempts to enlist them as guides for the great deserts and Ming monoliths. Some, however, prey on "tourists," stripping them of every coin they can in return for helping them survive the harsh environment — sometimes even deliberately leading them into windstorms to prove their worth to the harried traveler. Shula Senn is one such predator.

She does, however, deliver on the goods — eventually. After a few days of "trackless" wandering, she will bring her charges to a Ming monolith — most often one long abandoned by the Ming — and let them "ooh" and "aah" all they want for a hefty fee. Her immoral behavior, however, is all in service to a higher cause — the protection of the Ming.

Shula saw her first Ming when she was only five, running from the safety of her clans' caravan and into the wastes. A windstorm separated her from her parents' cries, and she was soon lost. Her own cries summoned a shambling rock from across the plains, one that slowly but steadfastly pursued her over two days, until she was too tired to run any longer. It arrived and gently cradled her in its massive arms, and set off to rejoin her clan caravan, delivering her into her awestruck parents' arms.



Since that day, she was groomed by a secret society within the Durgwhallah clans, one that protects the Ming from outsiders. While most of them do not understand the Ming any more than other Gizehns, a few have been gifted with private audiences where deep secrets were revealed, secrets these privileged few refuse to divulge even to their fellow protectors.

Shula prays that she will one day be gifted with a Ming secret.

Race: Human

Culture: Durgwhallah

Quote: "Yes, yes, my friend! The monolith is just ahead. No, we cannot go that way. There lies quicksand. We must go this way, although it is longer...."

Description: Shula fits the stereotype of the Gizeh desert nomad: Wrapped in dark cloth robes, turbans and veils, only her eyes are commonly seen by others. Seen without her turban, her hair is black and her skin dark brown; her eyes are blue.

Entourage: She travels with her trusty *durgra*, and occasionally meets with other Ming protectors for missions.

Body: Strength 6, Dexterity 6, Endurance 8

Mind: Wits 5, Perception 5, Tech 3

Spirit: Extrovert 5, Introvert 3, Passion 4, Calm 3, Faith 6, Ego 2

Natural skills: Charm 4, Dodge 4, Fight 4, Melee 5, Observe 6, Shoot 7, Vigor 6

Learned skills: Focus 2, Inquiry 4, Lore (Ming) 5, Remedy 5, Stoic Body 5, Survival 9

Wyrd: 3

Equipment: Water bags, food stores, camping gear (tent, cook set, etc.)

Weapons: Dirk, Sniper Rifle

Armor: Leather

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Heaven's Ridge

They forced me to drink pulque — its taste like a smoky resin left in my mouth. My head swam with the force of it, strange visions pressing in upon me. They then took me to their place of worship — one of the hidden ones, not the pretty places set up for visitors. There was a marble table, well-crusted with a brackish black liquid. As I watched, they led a tan-skinned woman up to the table. Her eyes were glazed — drunk on pulque, I thought, like myself. Even as the priest drew the knife, my guide grabbed me by the hair. "Not her," he said, forcing my head up. "Watch the sun." I heard a scream... of passion? Pain? I thought I could hear the flood of life juices spurting onto slick stone...

And I saw the sun, glowing there in the sky. Was it brighter now, if only for a moment?

I understood then. I understood it well.

They were feeding the sun.

And I smiled.

— from the diary of Jason Pell, captain of the *Ransom's Republic*

In the early years of the Second Republic, certain rare planets lacked exploitable resources yet still attracted the eye of the scientific community. Such a planet was Cortez, a sphere dominated by sharp-peaked mountains, frequent electrical storms and endless rivers of biological sludge churning out the primal building blocks of life.

When the Divestiture came, few mourned the loss of the outpost on Cortez or noted the absence of an extremist religious cult from the Known Worlds. In the chaos that became the New Dark Ages, no one cared about reports of strange new life forms and bizarre diseases that filled the panicked communiques from Cortez before it disappeared from the jumpweb.

And when a world named Heaven's Ridge reappeared on the jumproutes off of Hira in the year 4932, no one recognized its startling similarity to the world once known as Cortez.

History

Hernando Cortez, the first explorer to set foot on the planet, found an inhospitable world remarkably similar to Holy Terra's prehistoric beginnings. To truly understand the history of Heaven's Ridge, one must go back farther in time to pre-Diaspora Urth. During the latter years of the 25th century, a scientist working for the Keneichi-Sobu zaibatsu became fascinated with the idea of a cosmic war between the Anunnaki races. This scientist, Dr. Simon Dey, hypothesized that remnants of such a conflict should be evident on Urth, as they were in other star systems.

With this in mind, Dey focused on events that would indicate such an extreme occurrence; he found one approximately 65 million years ago. At that time, a massive meteor hit Earth close to the equator, causing a worldwide ecological disaster. Dey was convinced that, instead of a meteor, this was a direct strike from an Anunnaki weapon. Inspired, he poured considerable resources into unearthing the artifacts he was certain he would find. In addition to this, Dey studied the civilizations near the strike area, on the chance that "psychic residue" from the weapon would permeate the area, influencing the cultural development of people living there.

Though Dey never found any physical proof of the Anunnaki, he did uncover some compelling evidence that they had influenced the indigenous tribes. Specifically, he became fascinated by the locals' advanced astrology and mathematics, as well as their extensive collection of prophesies. Before his death in the early 26th century, Dey compiled a thorough study of those cultures and developed an extrapolation of what he felt Anunnaki society would look like.

Dey's "Extinction Hypothesis" was popular until about a century later, when the dating of Anunnaki ruins placed their earliest appearance at 40,000 B.C. As for Dey's discovery of cultural interference, his detractors pointed out that such cultural changes could occur naturally. Dey's papers were promptly filed away and forgotten. And they would have remained so had it not been for events in the 39th century that would bring them back to notice.

In 3724, Second Republic scientists discovered jump coordinates for a new planet. Once opened, explorers were puzzled to find a system almost identical to Earth. It had a robust yellow sun, nine planets, an asteroid belt, and the rotation and orbit of its third planet were identical to Earth. But there the similarities ended. The third planet, while it did sustain life, had a lower gravity than that of Earth. This resulted in a world of exceedingly high mountains and extremely low valleys. Numerous volcanic vents, leaking gases out of deep cracks and crevices, lent a distinctive sulfurous taste to the otherwise oxygen-rich atmosphere. The flora and fauna were still in an extremely primitive stage, few life forms evolving past a primordial stew that floated like a thick scum upon any large source of water. The survey teams tagged it for research, and an exobiology facility was established in 3850.

Around the same time, numerous mystics, misfits and charlatans were combing the records of the past to uncover bits of "wisdom" they could foist on a gullible public. One of these seekers, an Orthodox priest named Father Bernardo Sahagun, found Dr. Dey's notes. Fascinated by Dey's con-

Heaven's Ridge Traits

Ruler: Priest-King of the Vox Igni

Cathedral: Order of the Vox (Celestial Church variant)

Agora: Agorros port

Garrison: 6

Capital: Tollan

Jumps: 4

Adjacent Worlds: Hira

Solar System: Nuntius (0.42 AU), Amare (0.75 AU), Caelestis (Heaven's Ridge: 1.00 AU), Bellare (1.52 AU), Mors Balteus (Death's Belt, an asteroid field: 3.75 AU), Rex Deus (5.20 AU), Pater Deus (9.54 AU), Validus (19.18 AU), Oceanus (30.06AU), Nex (39.36 AU), Jumpgate (69.75 AU)

Unlike the fourth planet of the Terran system, Bellare is habitable, with a very thin oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere. Currently, a profitable mining colony of around 10,000 Vox live upon it.

Tech: 5

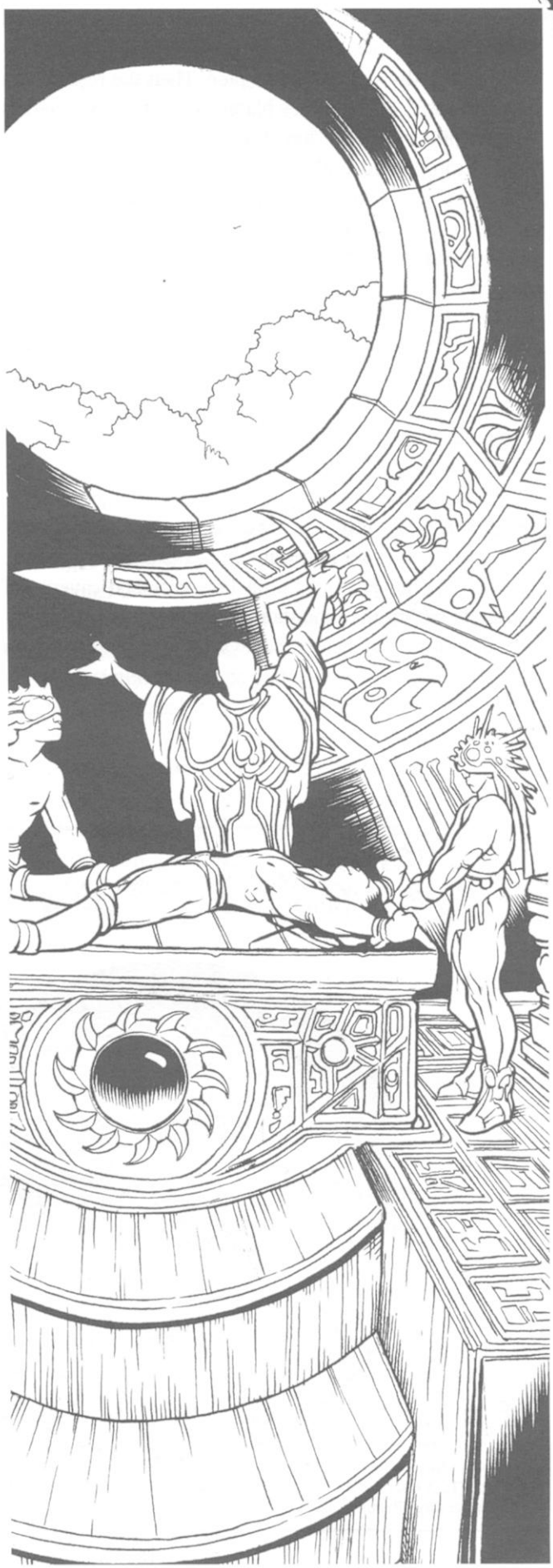
Human Population: 250 million

Alien Population: None

Resources: Metal (gold, iron and faux-ivory), foodstuffs, medicinals, tech

Exports: Medicinals, foodstuffs, consumer goods (metalworking, including jewelry)

Landscape: When seen from space, Heaven's Ridge is a brownish, cratered world with lots of storm systems, similar to Urth during the Devonian period. Tall mountains, sporadic lakes and deep valleys characterize the land. The land becomes moister the deeper one delves into the valleys. There are no oceans, although several seas exist.



clusions (which matched some of his own), Sahagun bound up Dey's observations in a large tome. This book, the *Panoptic Codex*, became the basis for Sahagun's revolutionary ideas for a highly ordered society based on the Anunnaki culture proposed by Dr. Dey.

Sahagun and a handful of followers attempted to create their "perfect world" on Earth, but after several deaths occurred during their "worship," they were driven off planet. Sahagun and his followers were desperate; they could only practice Dey's model for Anunnaki life on Earth or an Earth-like planet. Turning their attention outward, they scanned the maps of the Known Worlds for a planet that would most closely approximate the homeworld. They found Cortez.

By this point, the planet boasted a population of 300,000, mostly researchers and support staff eager to study the origins of life. Sahagun moved his followers, number-

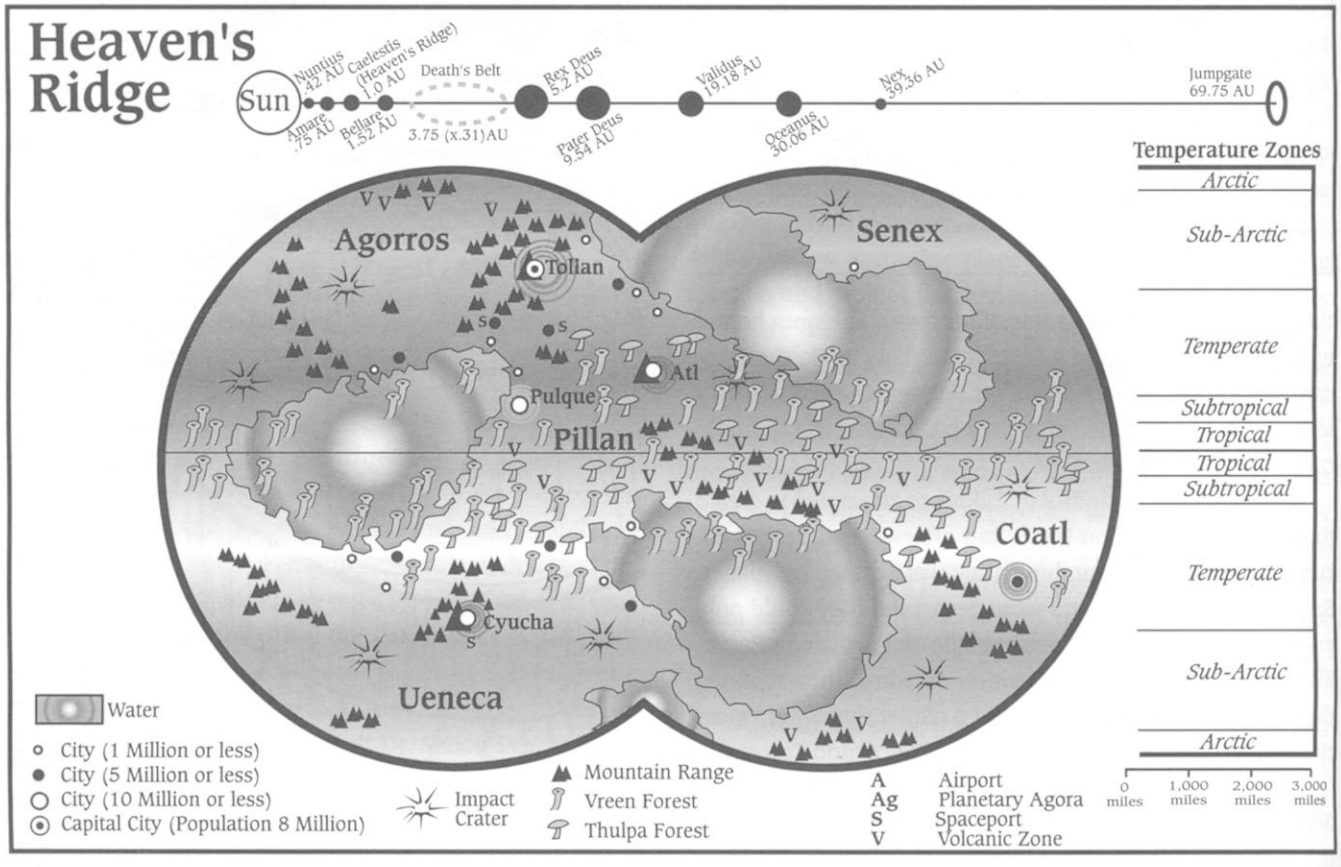
ing nearly a quarter of a million, to the planet and set up camp. Forced to live together, the two cultures uneasily coexisted until the suns began to fade. Then the researchers began to get ill. At first, they blamed the effects on the fading sun phenomenon. They didn't realize that this was a planned campaign of ecological warfare, perpetrated on them by the Vox Igni — the "Voice of Fire," as Sahagun's followers now called themselves. Using Second Republic technology to modify some of the strange flora and fauna, the Vox had forged biological weapons to take control of the planet. Soon, the scientific complexes were firmly in their control, and the researchers no better than slaves. As a final gesture, the Vox shut down the jumpgate. With their takeover complete, they could shape the planet into a perfect society.

A succession of priest-kings took over where Sahagun left off, each one molding society closer and closer to the model proposed in the *Panoptic Codex*. Those highest in status lived closest to the heavens, existing in carefully constructed biodomes set on mountain peaks or wide plateaus. Those of the lower castes built honeycombed caverns of maxicrete within the mountain, their lives intricately connected with the dangerous valleys below. Disappearances among the lower castes became common as things that crept within the darker spaces preyed on encroaching humans.

When the jumpgate reopened, the Vox were ready, a civilized culture awaiting its place among the stars. The Kurgan traders that first came through the gate were warmly greeted — and then brutally slaughtered when they betrayed Vox customs. Kurgan military forays followed, but the Vox were well prepared. They took strength from each victory and were never conquered, and the Kurgan assaults eventually abated in the face of the greater conflict with the Hazat over Hira.

Things changed in 4996 with the arrival of Father Alistair Augustus of the Urth Orthodox Church. Originally a missionary to Hira, he captured the jumpkey to Heaven's Ridge from a fallen Kurgan commander. In a small explorer with a skeleton crew, he came to Heaven's Ridge seeking new converts and was promptly captured by the Vox. When questioned about the holy sigil he bore, so similar to the Vox's own symbol of worship, he revealed a faith similar to that of the Vox. They showed the priest the more pleasant pieces of their superior society without letting him know the intricacies of their Anunnaki worship. They then released the surprised cleric, sending his ship back to the Known Worlds.

Now, a trickle of goods filter through to the system, brought by bold Known Worlds merchants who risk Kurgan assaults at Hira's jumpgate. A cathedral, similar to those Father Augustus described, is being constructed in the Anderak mountains. Some among the lower levels of society fear that such trade will taint their perfect world. The



elders know better. With their god's wisdom and prophecies to guide them, it will be the Known Worlds that changes....

Culture

The society of Heaven's Ridge is built upon two cornerstones. The first is unswerving loyalty to a strict caste system, with extremely specific rules as to the daily duties of each person. In this, the people of Heaven's Ridge have much in common with the Li Halan. The Vox have two calendars which they follow: the Solar Calendar, with traditional 365 days, and the Tonal Calendar, a mystical 260-day calender which acts as a divinatory tool. For the Vox Igni, this calendar is extremely important — without it, they believe the world would soon come to an end.

According to the tenets of the *Panoptic Codex*, the universe is in a very delicate balance, with opposing forces competing for power. This equilibrium is in constant danger of being disrupted by the elemental forces that influence our lives. To prevent this from happening, these forces have been given their own space, their own time, and their own social groups to rule over. Obedience to these forces is not only necessary for social order, it is necessary for the survival of the universe.

The second cornerstone of Vox society is similar to the Eskatonic belief of Universal Heterodoxy. According to the Eskatonics, each person contains a piece of the Divine Flame. Service to the Pancreator enhances that flame until it burns bright. The Vox Igni have taken this a step further, adding that the ultimate service is giving up one's light for the health of the sun. Specifically, they have renewed the ancient practice of human sacrifice, claiming that the "well-fed" sun of Heaven's Ridge is fading slower than others. Of course, any Engineer will tell you that each sun decays at its own rate. The fact that Heaven's Ridge's sun has dimmed slower than others may be simple coincidence.

Flora and Fauna

From the mile-high *thulpas* (immense sponge colonies shaped like mushrooms) to the *waisling* creepers (semi-animate viscous strings of amoebae that devour everything in their path) and the enormous *vreen* forests (made of delicate fern-like tubeworms), Heaven's Ridge plays host to an astonishing variety of life. Most of its species are based off of single-celled organisms — amoebae, bacteria, parasitic life forms. Some sponges and worms have evolved; all other multi-celled creatures that exist are of a liquescevore variety — they feed solely off of digested matter. This means that all animate creatures eat by injecting digestive fluids into their food, dissolving their target from inside. Then the animal feeds on the resulting nutritious soup, usually while the food is still alive.

The people of Heaven's Ridge have adapted well to their unusual surroundings. Though new diseases (mutating from the primal ooze) are common, they have found a number of uses for the local species. From some of the larger predators, the Vox make a pungent soup flavored with intestines. Various algae are dried, ground up, and used for lighting and fuel sources. There is a type of sponge that hardens into a sturdy, ivory-like rock when exposed to air. Another creature, a jet-black gelatinous amoeba, can be grown across an opening to form an airtight door, allowing access to others only when stimulated with a small electric shock. Various animals and plants are also used as weapons, incapacitating opponents with disease-filled pustules or sharp thorns from a *tzerin* walker.

Though they respect their environment, the Vox avoid the deep valleys. Things inimical to man lurk in the valleys, resting in the primal stew that covers many of the lakes. There are rumors of amoebae a mile wide, a "living sea" waiting to swallow unwary travelers. Spider-like "walkers," three times the size of a man, cling to shallow cliff sides, calling hunting cries as they weave thread-like webs composed of their own feces.

Some human sacrifices, hurled down to appease the dark things of the valley, return to the mountains transformed, with blood-fed worms of delicate and rare colors clinging to their faces like oversized tumors. Others report that there are sentiences living in the valley. A visiting Orthodox priest claimed that Arzulgh, lord of the Sixth Qlippoth, lives there. Galen the Mad, the 27th priest-king of the Vox Igni, maintained that he had spoken with the ghosts of the Anunnaki in a complex within one of the larger crevices. A Charioteer, upon hearing Father Augustus' reminiscences about the planet, remarked with a shiver how much it reminded him of the Symbiots.

People and Places

Despite the simplistic life led by most of the people on Heaven's Ridge, the planet maintains a surprisingly resilient technological edge. The priest-kings were meticulous in preserving the secrets of the Second Republic and they nurtured just enough of a technological base to support the security and maintenance of small bases on other planets in the solar system.

Cities in Heaven's Ridge are built around a nine-tiered system. The top three tiers, constructed on mountain peaks or plateaus, are for the nobility, the priests, and the staff that supports them. Often set in biodomes (that maintain more pleasant conditions than the air found outside), the cities are marvels of marble, gold and faux-ivory made from alien sponges. Much of the mineral wealth of Heaven's Ridge

is shipped in from mining colonies on the fourth planet of the system, Bellare, but the degree of craftsmanship found in the construction of the cities is all local.

The next three tiers, built on the side of the mountain or slightly within it, concern themselves with crafts and foods made for the top tier. Stone edifices here are precisely cut, allowing good ventilation for heating and cooling ducts that stretch throughout the complex to mediate the harsher temperatures of outside. The final three tiers, built directly into the mountain, contain vast caverns and honeycombed tunnels that deal with waste reclamation, technological resources and valuable commodities from the valleys below.

Overall, the people of Heaven's Ridge strike visitors as a rugged, passionate folk. They are not very forthcoming or curious (having lived most of their lives under the strict dictates of the Tonal Calendar), but are loyal to those they consider friends. Most citizens, used to the past Kurgan assaults, are well-trained in warfare. They are also deeply invested in their faith, willing to give up their lives to the Pancreator and their sun. However, they also have a tradition of keeping this faith private, not discussing the details with outsiders. Short-term visitors to this world leave with an impression that the Vox Igni follow a debased version of the Omega Gospels, nothing more.

Agorros: Province of Oracles and Wisdom

The Province of Agorros boasts the tallest mountains and deepest valleys on the planet. It also hosts the capital city, Tollan. Its people are stronger than most, and better acclimated to high altitudes. The plateaus are the center of Heaven's Ridge religious life as well, with multiple sacrifices held just out of sight of the main city. Commerce from other worlds, as well as communications across the planet, are centralized in this province. It also hosts the spaceports, heavily protected within several of the lower plateaus.

Tollan: Capital of Heaven's Ridge

Tollan is known as the City of Gold, and its top tiers are enclosed in an atmosphere-tight dome perched on a mountain peak. Tollan is one of the few enclaves to possess a garden of extraordinary splendor, with plants obviously imported from other worlds. The Priest-King can be found here in the Palace of the Sun, as well as the bureaucracy that keeps Heaven's Ridge running smoothly. Crime is virtually nonexistent, and visitors to this area consider it to be a taste of paradise.

Pillan: Province of Thunder

Less than 50% of Heaven's Ridge is freestanding water and much of that is locked in large lakes near this equatorial region. Wracked by strong storms, this province also has the richest diversity of life on the planet. Here, the *tziessen* algae can be seen, flowering oil-slick rainbow blooms from the cliffsides. People are better fed here, but there is also a variety of plagues that frequently sweep through the cities. This is also where numerous species are harvested for medicinal purposes. The equator itself is uninhabitable to humankind, since even the mountaintops are covered in a slick covering of jelly-like bacterial colonies. Clouds of biological sludge, kicked up by underwater volcanic vents, are so thick as to form a sort of "smog" that clings to anything that passes through it.

Pulque: City of Visions

This city harvests the grape-like growth from the pulque kelp, distilling it into a smooth, potent liquor. This drink is a favorite of the Vox nobility, though degraded versions of it filter down to the lower classes. Pulque is known to be a hive of decadence, its excesses recognized as a needed release for the clockwork society.

Atl: City of Lakes

Atl is the sister city to Cuycha in the Uenaca Province and it provides food for surrounding provinces. Primarily an underground city set deep within a mountain, its citizens rarely see the sun, except for the lucky few that deal with the terraced farmlands outside their mountainous habitat. Peasants toil in the sludge fields, growing beetles and other insects imported in the time of the Second Republic. A few brave souls grow indigenous liquescevores to butcher and sell on the open market.

Uenaca: Province of Stones

Uenaca is known for its mineral deposits and still produces a significant amount of wealth in gold and iron. Uenaca is also the center of industrial production, with huge hidden vents scouring the valleys below with toxic fumes. Delivery of Uenacan products is accomplished by cleverly designed airships, which brave the strong winds and frequent storms to ship their products across the world.

Cuycha: City of Rainbows

Cuycha is one of the oldest cities on the planet, built on the researchers' prime outpost. Within Cuycha, aging Second Republic computers hold immense mathematical and astronomical data used to calculate the prophecies of the Vox priests. The people of Cuycha tend to be a suspicious and paranoid lot, as most people plot to gain better positions within the city's overburdened bureaucracy.

Personality

Sir Frederick Dimaldo Avila Orestes (Lost Knight)



Sir Orestes was stranded on Heaven's Ridge after a disastrous raid into barbarian space. Fighting his way up from the sacrifice pits, he became Coatl (one of the People) after defeating seven well-armed Vox warriors with nothing but his bare hands. Though initially horrified by what he saw in their rituals, Frederick grew to embrace their customs and looks forward to the time when he can spread the word of the *Panoptic Codex* throughout the stars.

Rank/Class: Converted Vox follower, Hazat knight

Quote: "Draw your blade across his chest, bathe in his blood as I have — then you will finally know the truth!"

Description: Frederick dresses in the typical garb of the Vox — a burned leather-like shirt (woven from a local plant) and loose-fitting trousers. He sports elaborate, geometric designs painted on his face.

Body: Strength 6, Dexterity 5, Endurance 7

Mind: Wits 6, Perception 3, Tech 3

Spirit: Extrovert 5, Introvert 2, Passion 5, Calm 1, Faith 3, Ego 5

Natural skills: Charm 4, Fight 6, Impress 7, Melee 6, Observe 5, Shoot 8, Vigor 6

Learned skills: Inquiry 6, Leadership 4, Lore (Panoptic Codex Doctrine) 3, Social (Oratory) 3, Read Vox Igni, Speak Vox Igni, Speak Kurgan, Survival 5

Wyrd: 5

Weapon: N'huatl broadsword (forged in Uenaca, blessed in Tollan), club

Armor: Carapace breastplate and arm guards (5d)

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Iver

Iver is often considered the hidden clause in the Vau's "gift" of Pandemonium to humanity. The rediscovery of that world and its spare (but inoperable) jumpgate allowed for the rediscovery of Iver — a mixed blessing, for this world has raised the ire of noble houses and the Patriarch himself. Although not a part of barbarian space, this lost world is perhaps the greatest hotbed of contention and intrigue in courts across the Known Worlds. Iver's political destiny hangs in the balance, to be decided perhaps by whatever events the future brings.

History

Iver intentionally cut itself off from the chaos of the Fall of the Second Republic. It first left the jumpweb in 4005, but its gate opened again between the years 4110 and 4201. During that time, Iver still maintained its Republican government, although it was increasingly threatened by noble house insurrections from within and intrigues from without. Its own corporations conspired with the nascent guilds to take power themselves, but it was the threat of the Universal Church that finally shut its gate for nearly a century.

The fierce independence of Iver's people attracted them to a variety of religions and ways of life, which allowed for one of the most cosmopolitan worlds of the Second Republic, although one best characterized by the phrase "Tolerance through separation." The world was made up of numerous cultural enclaves, each with representation in the local senate. Some of these enclaves were alien cultures, such as the Etyri, Hironem and even Shantor. However, each enclave had little interaction with other enclaves throughout the world. While this meant a certain intellectual and social isolation, it also hindered conflicts between enclaves.



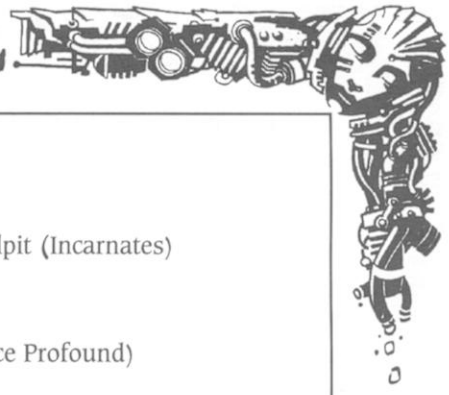
As the Dark Ages fell around them, enclaves became even more separatist, ready to shoot strangers on sight. One of the few groups successful in crossing these territorial boundaries was the Church Incarnate, a splinter movement from the Universal Church begun by Zarek Mezentius on Gwynneth. When Mezentius was killed by the Church, Incarnates everywhere suffered persecution. Those on Iver refused to bow to it, and plotted to shut the jumpgate to keep the now-feudal worlds of Human Space from ruling Iver. In a co-conspiracy with members of the Chauki noble family, they managed to close the gate with a military key stolen from a Republic military base. No more would the Patriarch or the Ten threaten Iver's independence.

While many of the enclaves that had been coopted by outside factions tried unsuccessfully to reopen the gate, most of the world hailed the Incarnates and Chaukis as heroes. Successive generations of these factions managed to parlay the good will they had garnered into political power. As enclaves began warring with one another over dwindling tech resources, House Chauki stepped in to restore harmony and accord. With the blessing of charismatic Incarnate preachers, they took the reins of power from the now-fractious and crumbling senate, and became the peacekeepers of Iver.

Forgotten were the alleged illegitimate beginnings of the so-called noble house. Rumors of their rise to nobility through assassination of true Chauki lineage holders were successfully suppressed by the ascendant rulers, aided by Incarnate propaganda (most of it based on genuine disbelief of these rumors).

The senate was never completely disbanded, but its power was now of a more civic nature. Nontheless, this shadow of representative democracy continues to exist into the present age, and is one of Iver's many institutions that pose an ideological threat to the Known Worlds.

In 4994, Merchant League exploration ships arrived on Iver after gleaning the jumproute from Pandemonium's incomplete secondary jumpgate. They found a populace happy and willing to reunite with its fellow humanity. While Iverites had maintained old technology very well over the centuries,



they had lost the ability to re-create it. Jumpships had been the first casualties in Iver's slow drift down from the heights of Second Republic technology. A few spaceworthy craft existed, but they rarely accomplished more than cursory surveys of the solar system every few years.

The League found some rather intriguing developments on Iver, some guaranteed to shake the foundations of Known Worlds status quo: A Chauki royal lineage, an elected senate, Incarnate-dominated religious institutions and aliens living in equality with humans. Any one of these elements was enough to cause scandal; all of them together added up to a major political fiasco. What was to be done with Iver?

As word spread, the first overt reaction came from the Church. The Patriarch sent elements of his fleet to interdict the world. Inquisition sentry ships orbited Iver's jumpgate to ensure that no ship could pass through uninspected — under no circumstance were the heretics of Iver to be allowed to contaminate the Known Worlds with their Incarnate creed. The noble houses did not object. While they appreciated the Church's fiat — for it would keep the freemen Iverites from traveling the Known Worlds and spreading a creed of individualism — each house had its own particular reasons for claiming exclusive control over Iver.

The Decados foremost. The Mantis Lords claimed the planet by right of spaceway — the only jumproute went through Pandemonium, a Decados planet.

The Hazat, while distantly interested in ruling the world, see little direct claim to it — unless, of course, they can consider as theirs the last remnant of Chauki property not already taken by their house. More than rulership, however, they wish to squash all chance these new Chaukis have to claim legitimate ownership of Hazat lands. In 4995, a botched assassination attempt against Arturo Chauki was widely believed to be arranged and backed by the Hazat. (Some Iverites believe that the plot succeeded, and that a fake Arturo look-alike took the slain leader's place, preventing the Hazat's victory.)

The Li Halan have no claim over the world, but don't want to see the Decados gain another planet — they already encroach too much on Li Halan space. To this end, they lobby the Patriarch to avoid upholding the Decados claim. In addition, they are especially disturbed by the idea of a world of freemen, whose only allegiance is a thinly held serfdom to House Chauki.

Some within House al-Malik are, on the other hand, intrigued by Iverites, seeing them as an experiment on the possibilities of a Republican revival. Perhaps here, more than on any other world, a chance to sprout the seeds of the Third Republic exists. While they have no claim on the world, they support its interdiction for reasons of their own — they don't wish to see it corrupted by the other houses. A grace period wherein agents of the Mutasih secret police can engineer Republican sensibilities is to their liking.

The Hawkwoods also have no direct claim, but like the Li Halan are furiously opposed to the Decados gaining yet another foundling planet, as they did with Pandemonium. They thus support the Emperor's own claims on the world.

Emperor Alexius is sure to be the deciding factor on Iver's fate. This could be a golden opportunity for the Phoenix Throne to gain another annex — or to push its rivals too far, initiating a direct campaign against the new empire. Alexius must be careful here. To this end, Iver has become perhaps the prime concern of the Imperial Eye, whose chief task here is to discover excuses for Alexius to annex the world for himself, denying it to the other houses or the Church. The Eye's agents may finally have found such an excuse in the inadvertant discovery of a Vau lunar outpost near Barsoma, Iver's gas giant. Such a place potentially threatens the Known Worlds and hints at further jumproutes from Iver. In the grand tradition of Stigmata, Iver could per-

Iver Traits

Ruler: Arturo Chauki

Cathedral: Chaido Pulpit (Incarnates)

Agora: Zeppitai

Garrison: 4

Capital: Chaido (Palace Profound)

Jumps: 5

Adjacent Worlds: Pandemonium (dayside)

Solar System: Felix (0.35 AU), Iver (1.1 AU; Dale), Falstaff (4.3 AU; Orson), Dastard (7.7 AU), Barsoma (22 AU; 43 moons), Gallup (38 AU; 22 moons), Zestil (42.2 AU; Glam), Jumpgate (63.5 AU)

Tech: 5

Human Population: 220,000,000

Alien Population: 2,000,000 (mostly Etyri, Hironem and Shantor)

Resources: Metals, gems, Second Republic tech caches

Exports: Wines, crafts, jewelry

Landscape: A temperate world with many naturally occurring Urthlike features, and some terraformed Urthlike features, Iver has four large continents, of which Ivaner is the largest and most populous, and a large island (Bilgo). Geographical features includes mountains in the northern regions, jungles near the equator and deserts in the south, and arctic northern and southern poles. Various seas surround the landmasses, providing a variety of sealife. The main form of trade is seafaring, with Zeppitai, at the tip of Hine Bay on Ivaner, providing the greatest marketplace on the planet, central to most other continents' own coastal cities.



haps now be claimed by the Emperor as a frontier defense against the alien Vau.

Factions

To understand Iver, one must understand its many factions and how they interact or conflict with Known Worlds factions.

Citizens

While everyone on Iver is ostensibly a serf to House Chauki, it is impossible for the Chaukis to enforce such a privilege on most people. Independence runs too strongly in the people's blood. Some regions have capitulated to a peasant level, but they are usually the descendants of poorly managed enclaves that always hovered close to poverty — until the Chaukis turned their fortunes around in return for direct fealty.

Most of the world is still composed of independent towns or city-states, remnants of older cultural enclaves. These places are mostly republics to some degree or another, where the town burghers are elected by the people. The burghers in turn elect a senator, who represents the region in the Iver Senate, which decides on civic issues that concern the planet as a whole and advises the Chaukis on important decisions. Many of the people of Brûn and Bilgo openly ignore their ancestors' fealty ties to the Chaukis.

From a Known Worlds perspective, most Iverites are practically freemen. While bound by fealty to the Chaukis, they behave like independent people of personal means. This independent streak greatly colors — and is colored by — the people's chief religion: Incarnatism.

Incarnates

Like other Incarnates in the Known Worlds (see the **Lords & Priests** sourcebook), the Iver Incarnates preach a gospel of individual merit and good works, condemning authoritarian religious structures. However, unlike their Known Worlds counterparts, the Iver Incarnates have had years of unpersecuted power, which has inevitably led to some concession to authority and organization.

The Incarnate Church is a loose organization of preachers and priests, led by an elected council of bishops, which often acts like the third estate in the power triangle of Chauki, senate and bishopric. However, the true leaders — those who gain the most followers and loyalty — are charismatic preachers whose personal dedication to the faith provides example to others. Most believe that no man should spiritually coerce another through social hierarchy; instead, it is the personal persuasiveness of spiritual men — an earned fealty — that governs interactions between priests and laypeople.

While issues of inherent flame are downplayed and undecided, Incarnates recognize that the Pancreator acts through all beings, not simply patriarchs and archbishops.

The main doctrine on Iver is that of Cyclical Incarnation, the belief in reincarnation based on Zarek Mezentius' works and his cryptic "The Cycle Endless." Degrees of innate morality are assumed by one's birth status — low or poverty-stricken birth environments imply that the soul has to suffer to either work off past life sin or to transcend to a higher level. Toil and suffering are not necessarily bad; they act as prods for the soul's journey to higher realms.

Regardless, the details or imaginings of these higher realms are considered unimportant to this life. The hard work of the body and the soul's stoic acceptance of adversity are more meaningful values than mystical yearnings or imaginings. While the Incarnates may share similar views on the inner flame with Eskatonics, they radically differ on occult matters. Incarnates believe the obsessive study of mysticism to be a distraction on the path of higher morality — and even possibly a sin because of this. Certainly, some Incarnates practice theurgy, but even then, their rites have a practical purpose, usually to help better deliver the message of the gospels.

It is highly doubtful than the majority of Incarnates would ever submit to patriarchal rule, even if it meant acceptance as an official sect of the Universal Church. The compromise — recognition of a hierarchy of bishops and archbishops — is too great for most Incarnates to accept. This may not always be the case, though. The current generation, ignorant of the Known Worlds' history of Church abuses, may come to accept such rule on the condition that it is secular — for the sole purpose of organizing cathedrals and services — not spiritual. It is doubtful that the Patriarch, however, could accept the latter option.

Sons of Iver

A secret society called the Sons of Iver exists on Pandemonium. Its members believe they are the descendants of Iver Republicans and that it is their duty to ensure that the people are not unduly oppressed by feudal powers. For many years during Pandemonium's non-Interstellar Interregnum, most of them believed the existence of Iver was a legend, an ideal left over from Second Republic holovids — but a valuable ideal nonetheless, one worth dying for. They spent these years as a sparse terrorist cell occasionally making statements against House Gilgar through bombings or assassinations. Needless to say, their numbers swelled once House Decados came to rule.

As the Known Worlds stepped in and the cataclysms began, the Sons gave up their role as terrorists to become protectors once more, forming a mutual protection society for beleaguered Pandemonians. Once Iver returned, they were stunned into confusion. Their namesake did indeed exist, and its promised Republic values were roughly intact.

The Sons now have a new mission — to smuggle chosen people to Iver and there create a new Republic, well away

from Known Worlds influence. To this end, they work to gain a universal jumpkey that will allow them to once more close the gate of Iver. The hidden Second Republic military caches on Iver will provide the ammunition for any martial confrontations the Sons need to create — assuming they can find one of them.

Their current leader, the mysterious Graaf, poses as a king of thieves.

The Parmathian Martyrs

While the non-native Sons of Iver carry on an idealistic crusade offworld, a native group of Iverites has gained popularity of late and may soon be able to make its dream a reality — the downfall of House Chauki. Aided by mysterious off-world interests — the true identity of which even their leaders are unaware of — these terrorist militiamen currently wage a guerrilla war against Chauki interests from the mountains surrounding Chaido. Of course, everyone assumes the Hazat are supporting them, but it could be anyone.

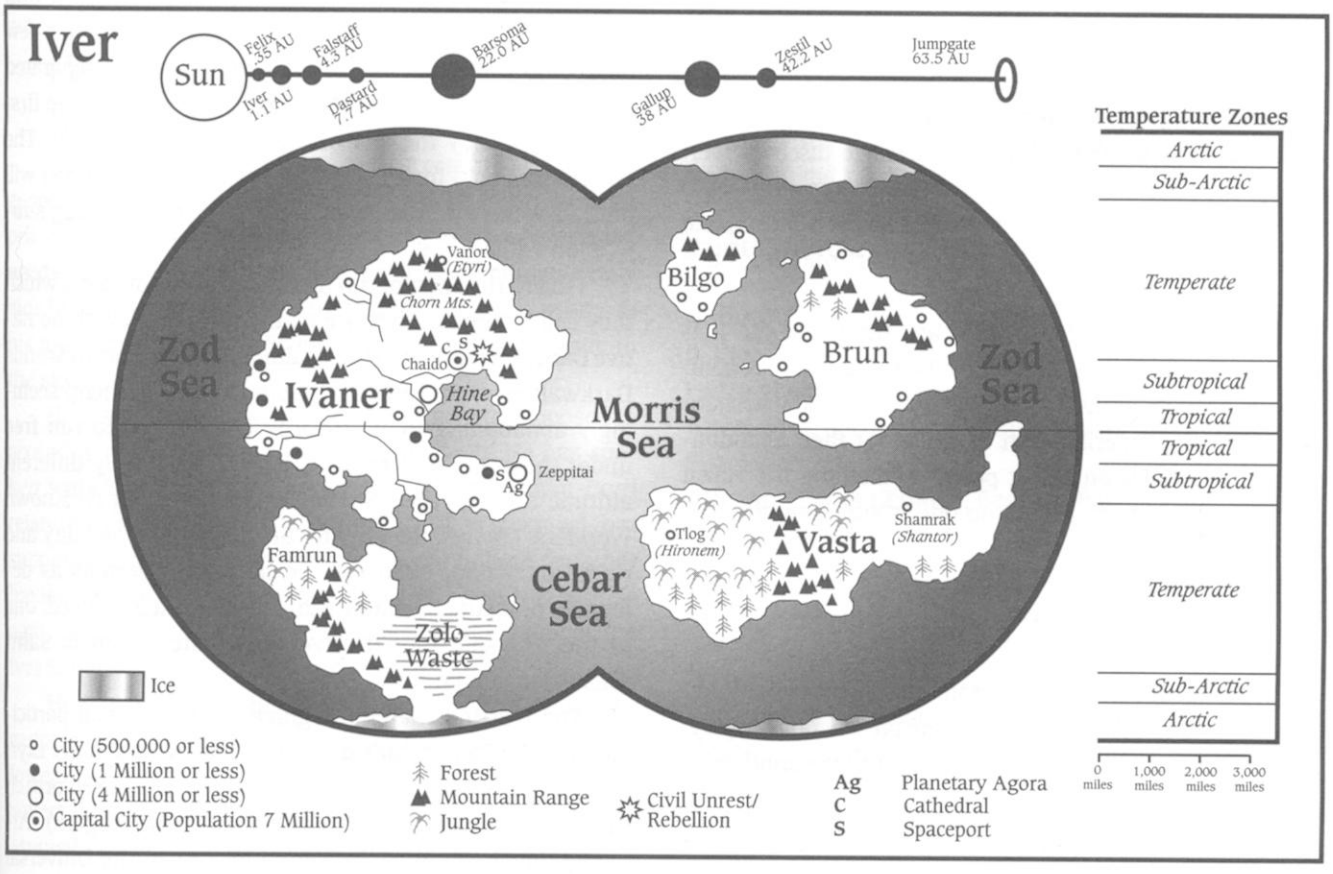
They are named after Parmathia Garsten, a legendary farmer from the 4500s whose family was killed by a decadent Chauki and who quested for revenge before being tortured to death by the noble family. Her cause was taken up in many revolts thereafter, and her image is enshrined in the senate building as a reminder to the Chaukis that the people are not fully under their thumb.

The Merchant League

The League wants sole trading rights to Iver, and as long as the Church interdiction stands, they have it by default. The Church can harass the guilds that attempt to come and go from Iver, but they have little power to prevent these trips entirely, unless they levy patently false charges of heresy against every one of them, which would only erode their credibility and raise the ire of the Leaguemeister. However, the threat of such harassment does prevent most independent freemen and minor guildsmembers from running the Iver gauntlet, leaving trade with the world solely in the hands of the influential Charioteers and Scravers.

While many suspect that the League wants to stoke the fires of Republicanism here, this is far from the truth. While dilettantes among the al-Malik may toy with such ideas, the more practical-minded guilds know better — the best way to maintain their monopolies is to maintain the status quo. They thus engage in all manner of trade deals and even scams with Iver merchants and nobles, but keep a watchful eye out for any espionage or political event that might threaten their hegemony.

The League has made no firm alliances with any Known



Worlds faction concerning Iver, preferring to keep its options open. It does, however, lobby hard for Alexius to grant its guilds exclusive trade rights once the interdiction is over.

The Imperial Eye

Rumors abound that Leandro Chauki, heir to the Iver throne, was secreted to Byzantium Secundus for talks with the Emperor, and that his special intelligence concerning the world is what piqued Alexius's own interest in claiming Iver.

Everyone in the "know" is aware that the Imperial Eye crawls all over Iver, digging for any intelligence and excuse Alexius can use to claim the world without pissing off the other factions too badly. The recent discovery of Sham'lo'veel, a secret Vau outpost on Dimrock, one of Barsoma's 43 moons, may be just the excuse required.

No one knows why the Vau did not reveal themselves earlier, for they are rarely so furtive in their dealings with humanity (closed-off and obstructionist, yes, but not furtive). They have yet to respond to the Emperor's communiqué concerning the base, which does seem to be operated by members of the Vau soldier caste. Alexius has dispatched elements of the Imperial Fleet to safeguard the world, but has not yet annexed it. Perhaps he awaits the Vau response.

Of course, conspiracy theories from other factions are legion. One, supposedly spread by the Decados, posits that Alexius secretly plotted with the Vau, allowing them to build the base so that he could use it as an excuse to bring his military might forth. The Li Halan, however, ever more wary of the Vau due to their proximity to Icon and Midian, fear that this is but the first in a new series of espionage activities perhaps leading to a planned Vau invasion. Some even wonder if the Vau ever intended humans to discover Iver; perhaps the Mandarins assumed that human ingenuity could never glean the jumproute from Pandemonium's incomplete jumpgate. Their own plans to observe Iver from afar have now been botched by the empire's arrival.

Regardless of the base, there are signs that the Emperor is preparing to trade favors for Iver. One rumored compromise has him granting the Iver Chaukis an ambassadorial post to the Imperial Court in return for their abandonment of any claim on Hazat power, something the Hazat would surely support. So far, no one is sure how the Emperor plans to work around the thorny issue of the Incarnates. Some speculate that he is waiting and hoping the current Patriarch will soon pass on to a new post in the Empyrean court of the afterlife.

In the meanwhile, agents from just about every interstellar espionage service imaginable are present on Iver, playing a covert game of one-upsmanship with one another.

Aliens

And then there are the aliens. Before the Fall, reservations were set up on Iver for the Etyri, Hironem and Shantor. While many were initially brought against their will, the current generations know Iver only as home, and speculate in wonder about their distant cousins on other worlds. The most wondrous thing, however, is that they have suffered little persecution on Iver, and are in fact considered assets by the local humans.

FAR, the Frontier for Alien Rights, sees Iver as a perfect case for its call for increased alien rights and sovereignty. Its agents have filtered onto the world and attempt both to inflame Iver's native aliens against the treatment of their own kind elsewhere and to shore up their defenses for the inevitable struggle to come once the Known Worlds government gets its clutches fully on the planet.

So far, they have received little aid from the natives, who simply don't have enough schooling in oppression to realize the dangers. Indeed, if they were to be oppressed by outsiders, the local humans would in all probability come to their aid, seeing the aliens as closer family than the goons of some offworld noble house.

The Etyri live, for the most part, in the Chorn Mountains that blanket northern Ivaner. On a perilously high peak sits Vanor, their city, one of the most technically accomplished Etyri cities anywhere. A few flitters are available for human use, as are a fleet of hot-air balloons.

Tlog is a small city in the jungles of Vasta, ruled by a distantly related descendant of the God-King on Cadiz. He is called Shamash Dozo, the "little god," and rules similarly to the God-King. Now that Iver has been reconnected with the Known Worlds, some local Hironem have made a few pilgrimages to Cadiz to consult with their long-separated God-King. Such journeys are expensive, however; the first was patroned by the Chaukis as an act of good will. The second was paid for by the Decados, as an act of good will both to their new "future subjects" and their existing subjects on Cadiz.

Finally, the Shantor run free on the plains of Vasta, which they call Shamrak. They are all traditionalists, with no native Darkwalkers among them, although a few Known Worlds Darkwalkers have come and assimilated with them, seemingly abandoning their crushing depressions to run free under the sun. Local humans have a completely different attitude towards their Shantor neighbors than do Known Worlders. On Iver, the Shantor are a symbol of nobility and righteous action, often used in Incarnate sermons as defenders of instinctive faith and moral fortitude. Indeed, one of the few saints of the Iver Incarnate canon is Saint Galawaloo, a Shantor.

The Iver Incarnates recognize aliens as equal participants in the Pancreator's grace and bounty, and many Etyri and Shantor consider themselves Incarnates or even preach the gospel (although few Hironem adopt the religion). Already, the Ur-Obun of the Ven Lohji sect of the Universal Church are looking to Iver as an example for the Patriarch

that it is time to declare a bull freeing aliens from spiritual discrimination. Some plead with the Syneculla that the release of such a bull may be the key to convincing the Iver Incarnates to accept Patriarchal rule.

Geography

Of the four continents, Ivaner is the center of most human activity. It hosts both Chaido, the capital and home to the Chauki's Palace Profound, and Zeppitai, the merchant center of the world. In the northern Chorn Mountains, Vanor sits upon a peak reachable only by flight — it is an Eytri city. The continent of Vasta hosts Tlog, a Hironem city amidst the jungles, and Shamrak, a Shantor province in the grasslands. The continent of Brûn and Bilgo island are home to independent farmers and a few coastal mercantile cities that export their produce across the seas on fast clippers. The southernmost continent of Famrun is only sparsely populated, and its inhabitants are believed to have descended into savagery.

Flora and Fauna

While much of Iver's native wildlife comes from Urth or otherworld imports, its own native species still thrive, especially on Famrun and Vasta. Beautiful varieties of birds can be found all over, but especially on these two continents. Plant life varies from lush jungle vines and shrubs on Vasta and Famrun to light green conifers and redwood-like trees (the mammoth *golpurs*) on Ivaner, Brûn and Bilgo, with numerous grass varieties on Vasta and Ivaner.

Personality

Miis'kar Skyspeaker

Proof that not only humans can successfully preach the gospel of the Pancreator, Miis'kar is a popular Incarnate Etyri priest, traveling Ivaner and sermonizing to whomever most needs to hear the word of faith. His striking plumage only aids his cause, drawing folks from all over to see him preach his passion for the Holy Flame and the Empyrean castle in the sky.

He is also among the forefront of Incarnates opposed to accepting any compromise with the Patriarch. He has spoken with Etyri from Grail about the state of human-Etyri relations under the eye of the Church, and is incensed that supposedly spiritual mentors can not only allow such behavior but condone it. Until this changes, he will sermonize against the Universal Church before even the gates of the Iver Senate, at the Chaido Pulpit.

He has also been approached by a number of intelligence agencies, but has rebuffed them all — or so his followers believe. The Li Halan Hidden Martyrs think he is a covert double agent for the Imperial Eye and the al-Malik Mutasih.



Race: Etyri (Chirikiti)
Rank/Class: Incarnate Canon
Quote: "Know that there are some among the distant stars who hate me for my feathers, and believe that I cannot reflect the light of the Pancreator." (Spreads brightly colored plumage like a peacock) "I ask you — are they not luminous?"

Description: Standing only four feet tall, Miis'kar can appear larger when he spreads his bright plumage, including peacock-like tail feathers. His voice is loud and gravelly, giving his speeches weight and authority. He wears only a simple tunic with the symbol of the Church Incarnate.

Entourage: Sometimes followed by a group of Etyri and humans (who travel by hot-air balloon).
Body: Strength 3, Dexterity 7, Endurance 4
Mind: Wits 3, Perception 6, Tech 3
Spirit: Extrovert 6, Introvert 2, Passion 4, Calm 4, Faith 7, Ego 1
Natural skills: Charm 8, Dodge 6, Fly 5, Observe 9, Shoot 5, Vigor 4
Learned skills: Academia 3, Etiquette 5, Empathy 3, Social (Oratory) 7, Speak Etyri, Speak Urthish, Xeno-Empathy 5
Species traits:
Blessings: Claws (2 DMG), Beak (2 DMG), Flight, Keen Eyes (+3 sight Perception)
Curses: Claustrophobia (-2 Calm in close quarters), Hollow Bones (three vital levels of Vitality), Short (base run = 8 meters)
Wyrd: 4
Equipment: Omega Gospels (Iver edition, including Mezentius' works), reading glasses
Weapons: None
Armor: None
Vitality: -9/-6/-3/0/0/0

Khotan

Khotan is a world dominated by rifts between high and low, where one's place on the social ladder takes literal meaning in one's physical environment — the highfolk live at the top of great plateaus, heirs to the material wonders of the Second Republic, while the lowfolk eke out a harsh existence on the plains and valleys below, ever resenting those above. Beneath them all, hidden in the ancient terraforming shafts and mines, inhuman intelligences conspire to topple the current social order — not to destroy humanity, but to raise the Republic once again.

History

Discovered soon after Hargard in the 2900s, Khotan initially appeared useless. Its mineral wealth was evident, but it was buried deep and would require an expensive industrial operation to exploit it. Before that could happen, the world had to be terraformed enough to create a breathable atmosphere; its natural atmosphere did contain oxygen, but was weak, like Mars in the Urth system. It needed boosting. However, no sponsor rose to the challenge, for the expense was staggering.

Other planets in the system, like Rudolpho and Kilnaucht, were colonized instead. But these small orbs were hardly worth putting on the starmaps, for their resources were quickly plundered, leaving few renewable sources of wealth.

When the Republic rose, one of its first charters was to make Khotan a world worth inhabiting. Its proximity to Byzantium Secundus and the distant fringe worlds made it valuable. Hence, money poured into a terraforming effort. Colonists received high stakes in the world's mineral wealth resources in return for the hard work of initial colonization and mining. However, not as many people stepped forward as was hoped, so the Republic devised a new scheme — nonviolent criminals were offered early parole in return for voluntarily colonizing and working the mines. The rush of applicants more than exceeded the need, and so the Khotan project was begun.

Early on, unique problems presented themselves. Veins of magnetic metals in the soil garbled radio communications on the low plains, although they did not affect the plateaus. The work of mapping and eradicating these veins took longer than expected, but had to be done, since they could erase many data files. Only as the years progressed and Second Republic technology switched to nonmagnetic storage means (lasers and crystals) could surface colonization ensure data safety without expensive protective measures. In addition, tachyon communications were not hampered by the low-level fields. The work of eradicating the veins ceased, although after the Fall, many lowfolk would regret this, when their fallen technology no longer allowed radio communication.

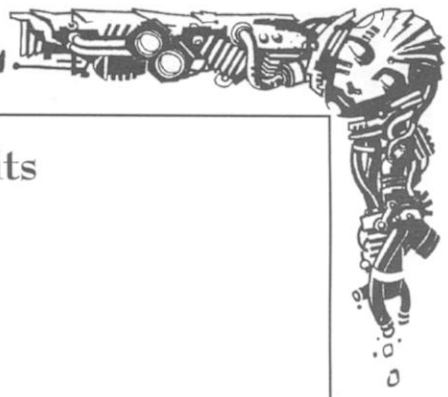
Initially, to circumvent the magnetic problems, the government erected administrative buildings on the high plateaus. Inevitably, the most expensive and best housing rose up around them; the plateau cities became the population capitals, and the chief destinations for miners and workers on weekends and short vacations. Entertainment complexes sprang up to accommodate the wild desires of the workers, giving some of the cities seedy reputations.

By the late Second Republic, Khotan's people reaped rich profits from the precious metals centuries of effort had uncovered. However, work abruptly halted when several inexplicable cave-ins killed workers and cut off huge tracts of mines. Initially suspecting sabotage, investigators uncovered instead unstable fault lines that had seemingly developed after the shafts had been cut deep into the earth. Further terraforming was required before extensive mining could begin again. This time, however, enough wealth had been uncovered to make the wait worthwhile — the rich lined up to invest in Khotan's new terraforming.

Many workers had already grown rich, especially those whose families had been among the first to colonize. Rather then emigrating offworld, most of them stayed, purchasing distant plateaus that had seen little use and turning them into mansions and pleasure-palaces. Entrepreneurs moved in and turned whole plateaus into elite vacation sites or "sin cities," although many of them faltered when the planet failed to become a popular destination for offworlders. These places attracted mainly locals.

Then, yet another setback occurred. Omantus, the world architect called in to fix the planet, announced after lengthy study that Khotan had already been terraformed once before — by the Anunnaki. This grand announcement initiated a new battle for the planet — academic and scientific interests demanded that the mining halt until the nature of this alien terraforming was understood, while those who gained material wealth from the world became even more impatient, lobbying to begin the work once more.

The Republic senate stepped in and decided the issue. Since its own public works loans had originally begun the work on the world, it was a major shareholder in the enterprise (indeed, much of Khotan's wealth helped to erect and maintain the Republican welfare state). The senate decreed that the opportunity to study Anunnaki terraforming was too great to miss, and ordered that all mining cease for a period of 10 years, during which Omantus and his crew would study the world. After that time, a new review would



decide future action.

The results never came. The Fall shut Khotan from the Republic, trapping it in barbaric space traveled only by rebels and criminals. Its outside ties severed, Khotan fell to infighting. The rich seized more and more power, fearful that the masses would envy their lot and attempt to take their wealth, while the workers grew more and more resentful of their leaders. Finally, an attempt to reopen the mines resulted in the death of over a hundred miners. Workers assembled at the capital and angry words became riots, resulting in a French Revolution-style roundup and execution of the rich and the bureaucrats.

In a cruel reversal of lifestyles, the remaining officials and their families were forced from the cities down to the workers' camps below, while the workers took their homes above. However, while there were many technicians among the new masters of the plateaus, most of its residents thought little of the future — or of the scientific and administrative duties necessary to ensure their technological survival in the uncertain times ahead. Instead, great bacchanals and looting caused many cities to descend into anarchy — some of them suffering uncontrollable fires that burned out whole districts.

Only a few major cities avoided this fate, their residents maintaining enough order to prevent too much damage. To prevent the chaos from other cities tainting their own, they increased security and shot down uninvited flitters or other unauthorized attempts to enter. The rise of Khotan's city-states effectively ended the Republic; while many quasi-Republican movements in the coming centuries would see alliances between city-states, few of them lasted more than a generation at best.

The insular and paranoid cities especially spurned attempts by the lowlanders to reenter their gates, with the exception of occasional trade caravans and farm collectives. For the most part, they ignored the lowfolk and left them to rule themselves, largely oblivious to the events on the plains below.

The ex-administrators and upper-class refugees who were "sent down" initially had a hard time of it; few understood basic survival techniques, and most were psychologically unprepared for hardship. Those who did survive the initial bouts of starvation and disease spurned their previous lifestyles — some of them even forging a sense of a spiritual merit from their ability to forget the past and move on.

Administrators eventually did what they know how to do — organize people. Leaders arose, and new communities gathered, taking over the old farm lands and abandoning the work mines. They took up a rural, agrarian existence, but a hard one — reaping sustenance from the hardpacked soil of Khotan required patience and endurance. Through technical know-how and good administration, many communities became self-sustaining, even growing. Future generations would regularly sell produce and handicrafts to the highfolk on the plateaus.

Other societies, however, were not so successful, and instead came to rely on banditry and even slavery. Their leaders continually scheme to reclaim the plateaus, and often raid those they can, or wage long-running terrorist actions against them. In a few places, cadres of military guards aided some to survive, but only after taking charge themselves; they formed new governments based on the promise of one day retaking the highlands.

And so it is with life on post-Republican Khotan. The highfolk reside on the upper plateaus, where the weather is cool and calm. They hold the remnants of Second Republic

Khotan Traits

Ruler: Various
Cathedral: Various
Agora: Various
Garrison: 2
Capital: Various
Jumps: 3
Adjacent Worlds: Hargard (dayside), Frost (nightside)
Solar System: Cebee (0.245 AU), Zim (0.6 AU) Khotan (1.23 AU; Braun, Urza), Rudolpho (2.573 AU; Celnar), Kilnaucht (6.32 AU; Fromm, Sendor), Gelvo (12.6 AU; 12 moons), Samhain (22.57 AU; 7 moons), Kenji (37 AU; Nubix), Sadolo (51.2 AU; Smid), Jumpgate (71.5 AU)
Tech: 2 (lowfolk), 5-6 (highfolk)
Human Population: 13,345,000
Alien Population: 30,000 Ukari
Resources: Untapped minerals and precious metals, Second Republic technology
Exports: Slaves, weapons
Landscape: Khotan is covered in plateaus and valleys, with vast plains of hard-packed dirt stretching between them. While not a desert, it can hardly be called lush. Its atmosphere is breathable only because of the minimal terraforming begun before the Fall. In many ways, it is a half-formed world, part original clay, part human-crafted. It has no oceans, but two large saltwater seas exist in the northern and mid-latitudes. Rain-deposited lakes and streams dot the plateaus and run into the valleys below. Most of Khotan's water, however, rushes through underground streams, and many residents remember legends of a vast, underground sea from early terraforming days.





technology; while not all cities remember how to use and maintain it, some continue to manufacture high-tech goods. Lowfolk live on the plains below, on the harsh earth that takes strength and ingenuity to till. The magnetic veins still exist in various places, prohibiting radio communications between communities, but these do seem to have certain health benefits, lessening the aches and pains of those who live near them. The lowfolk have little high technology, and the selfish highfolk prefer to keep it that way.

Khotan did not have the luxury of extreme isolation, however — their world is a way station between the Vuldrok heartworld of Frost and the colony world of Hargard. Over the centuries, Vuldrok have come and gone, occasionally leaving small colonies but more often moving on, sometimes taking natives with them (as slaves or even converts). Initial raiders ignored the differences between high and low, but some often aided the lowfolk against the high — mainly to get hold of the high tech. A few plateaus switched hands once again, with high brought low and low raised high. However, since the plateaus are very insular, victories rarely extended far.

Rumor of a new starfaring empire from the old heart of the Republic has brought both hope and fear to the residents of Khotan. For some, alliance with this new power promises a break from the stagnant stalemate between high and lowfolk; for others, it endangers long-held hegemonies.

Highfolk

There are thousands of plateaus throughout Khotan, some small (encompassing a diameter of one square mile) and some huge (the size of small states). Some are higher than others, but most are separated from the plains by nearly vertical cliff-faces (although some have at least one area with a more diagonal slope). Many plateaus are capable of producing seasonal crops when well-tended, and they generally get better rainfall than the plains, but some are arid and grow crops only in greenhouse domes.

While some of these plateaus are uninhabited, many of them host city-states or small nations. Travel between these places (and to the plains below) is mainly through flitter (most places have maintained aircraft tech), or by primitive airplanes or balloons in poorer plateaus.

Of the many governments on Khotan, two are the largest and most vibrant:

The Sovereign Sky

Fearful of Vuldrok power and lowfolk resentment, some plateaus banded together to form the Sovereign Sky coalition and reassert their powers. Rather than oppress the lowfolk, however, they cautiously admitted their closest lowland neighbors into their society, but only after a checklist of merits had been accomplished. While this meant that few lowfolk actually joined, enough made the cut to convince others that they, too, might one day make it. Even those that couldn't groomed their children to pass the tests to be raised on high.

Thus, a meritocracy admitted enough lowfolk in to keep them from revolting. The lowfolk even defended the highfolk against other lowfolks' attacks. An inadvertant effect was that new blood emboldened the Sovereign Sky, as scientific genius and charismatic leadership traits arose in lowfolk bred to achieve greatness (the tests); these individuals eventually won places in government, and initiated some egalitarian reforms.

The Sovereign Sky has since spread to admit new plateaus, along with merit-based membership for their lowfolk neighbors. It maintains a space fleet and has begun a recolonization effort of Rudolpho, along with regular patrols to watch for Vuldrok raiders (although they do not interfere with Vuldrok passing through the jumpgate).

While it is a growing power, it has many rivals, and other city-states now threaten to form new leagues of their own to contest the Sovereign Sky's claim on the spaceways.

Gonjeen

Ruled by a despotic government that keeps its privilege through military dictatorship over the nearby lowfolk, the Gonjeen plateau is renowned for its weaponsmiths valued even by the Vuldrok. It has made alliances with various warlords over the years, providing weapons and ship repair in return for occasional aid against other plateau cities or lowfolk communities.

Gonjeen is the chief rival of the Sovereign Sky. Its current ruler, Barak Din, attempts to sway other plateaus to join him against this alleged threat. In addition, he fears what he has heard of Alexius' Empire, for it means new military competition. His small starfleet has orders to destroy any envoy from the Known Worlds — in between skirmishes with Sovereign Sky ships.

Lowfolk

On the plains and in the valleys between the plateaus live the rural lowfolk. While a number or town and villages dot the plains, there are few cities. Most lowfolk are insular and distrust large communities. Lack of radio communication (due to the magnetic veins in the soil in some places), coupled with slave raids by Vuldrok or plateau cities, makes them paranoid of strangers, and all too willing to band together with neighbors to run weirdos out of town.

While most lowfolk are farmers or nomads, a few of them have returned to their ancestors' mines and have successfully removed valuable metals, which they sell to plateaus.

Among all the scattered townships and communities, one place stands out even in the minds of other lowlanders as a utopia of sorts, but one closed off to most:

Freehold

A democratic zone nestled in a large valley surrounded by arid, uninhabited plateaus (except for air defense stations and guns), Freehold is a thriving community of lowfolk of disparate origin held together by bonds of ideology and spirituality. Membership into the valley community must be earned through good works and religious fervor. It is defended by an elite group of soldiers called Sidanzi, each of whom practices a spiritual martial discipline similar to that of the Brother Battle order. Indeed, Freehold's religion, called Lumina, is a remnant of the more liberal sects of the Universal Church of the latter Second Republic.

Freehold has the highest tech level of any lowfolk community, thanks to a cache its founders discovered in the valley's mines when they first arrived (forced from their original homes by Vuldrok raids in the 4600s). They maintain schools for the young and old, and teach science and literacy to every member of the community, along with the basic tenets of Lumina.

So far, Freehold has not attracted the attention of any major plateau, for it has little communication with the highfolk. Its people prefer to keep it that way, maintaining a wall of silence with even local lowfolk. They don't send missionaries, but do trade their high-tech produce for local goods and crafts.

Seafolk

The two seas are open territory, sailed by seafolk, who are considered neither low nor high, but separate from all. A few coastal towns — considered lowfolk settlements — act as ports for the seafaring communities and their fleets, glad to accept the trade from across the seas.

Underfolk

Unknown to anyone above the surface, there is yet another faction of people who have yet to fully show themselves above. Underfolk are subterranean dwellers in the old mines and terraforming passages. The few lowfolk who have seen them tell tales of half-human beasts lurking in the mines. In fact, they are a mix of normal humans, descendants of Changed miners and Ur-Ukar.

The Changed were modified to better work in the tight, dark and dank conditions of mines throughout the Republic. They require less oxygen, can survive exposure to certain noxious gases, perceive in darkness and possess greater endurance than most humans. Their most obvious external features are hulking torsos and a speckled yellow and umber cast to their skin (caused by the chemicals their unique livers secrete).

The Ukari are descendants of those who came to work the mines, for this race's subterranean heritage on Kordeth



made them valued in such operations across space. Unlike Known Worlds Ukari, these know nothing of the bigotry and resentment with which humans traditionally view them. Perhaps for this reason, their psychic Urges do not awaken as often. While some of their ancestors' culture has survived — the *baa'mon* body scars, for instance — many elements have been forgotten. They are looked upon somewhat enviously by their underfolk human comrades, who have adopted the *baa'mon* tradition themselves (no telling what Known Worlds Ukari would think of humans sporting their storytelling scars).

Most of the underfolk are gathered into a cohesive alliance from cave to cave and tunnel to tunnel, centrally run by a council of elders, composed of the oldest and wisest from all the scattered communities. They meet in the ruins of Scaldabad, the deepcore shaft headquarters once used to head Khotan's terraforming effort. The place has sacred significance and is seen as a temple of sorts — one through which the gods still speak.

When facing a vexing problem that they cannot decide for themselves, the council gathers at the lip of the bottommost shaft, which descends into utter darkness untold leagues into the earth. There they speak the problem, hearing their words echo below. After a period of waiting (sometimes involving fasts), a voice is heard from below, delivering advice on the matter, which the council quickly adopts as law.

Sometimes, the voice is heard to call a councilmember to the ledge, in which case he proceeds naked and alone, after purifying himself by bathing in artesian waters and incense. He brings no light with him, and trusts his experience to guide him to the edge of the lip without plunging him over. He then answers the call and waits for further instructions.

The address that then rises from the depths is often lengthy, explaining deep matters of lore or the wisdom of governance, sometimes telling the secrets of Khotan's lost history. The councilmember is then given a mission involving the upper world, usually some mandate to influence its people in some way or another, along with directions on the means for achieving the mission.

The council then summons members of the Foyer, those who live closest to the surface and who sometimes walk among lowfolk disguised as fellow lowfolk. They are given the mission to infiltrate the chosen community and accomplish the given task — which might take years, in the case of those who need to earn leadership roles in an infiltrated community to achieve the goal. The Foyer is thus an elite spy organization, its agents considered to be sacred heroes by the underfolk, performing the work of the gods.

And just who are these gods who speak to their followers in such specifics? Three artificially intelligent golems of tech level 8 manufacture survive in the deepest core of the terraforming shaft. Trapped there in a cave-in long ago, they nonetheless seek to achieve the mandate given them by Omantus, their last master: To never let the Republic fall, and if it should, to raise it again.

They realize that humans would attempt to gain control over them if their existence were known, and thus they parade as deities, guiding humanity back to its roots behind the masks of gods. Built of the highest-quality manufacture, they are effectively immortal — they can link into the terraforming power supply and perform what minor repairs are necessary on one another. They spend this eternity conspiring to return fallen humanity to its place among the stars — starting one village at a time. Their greatest success so far is the lowfolk Freehold, although Foyer agents are now also among the ruling elite of the Sovereign Sky. Besides wise governance, agents are also sent to provide high-tech lore, to keep humanity from losing its greatest heritage.

The terraforming core, built by Omantus, has a powerful think machine that can pick up any transmission across the planet, and many from space. The three golems — Alcibiades, Zeno and Heraclitus — constantly monitor these communications. Along with reports from the Foyer, and spy cameras their agents launch, the golems have the most well-informed conspiracy on the planet.

When Khotan was separated from the Republic, Omantus was trapped on the world. He foretold the coming future of anarchy and chaos, and attempted to plan a way past it. Gathering his terraforming scientists and bodyguards, he sealed them into the core complex, giving them time to organize a Republican core against the rioters. A freak earthquake and cave-in ended that dream. Omantus was trapped in the deepest shaft, amidst the Anunnaki ruins he had found, with no immediate means of outside communication (it would take years for the golems to repair the damaged receivers). Wounded by debris and facing slow starvation, Omantus gathered the five golems who were his constant students and bodyguards, and told them all his terraforming lore and plans for humanity.

Even though they were independent, advanced AIs, he overrode their programming to instill in them the supreme importance of their task to guard the ideals of the Republic. They carry this primary goal to this day. Although two of the golems have since perished (one in an earthquake, the other through pygmallium decay), the remaining three continue on with their conspiracy.

Omantus' followers above despaired that he was dead, and eventually left their confinement to join various plateau cities. The last one out locked the door and destroyed the key, his method of burying his master with honor. Within a generation, existence of the terraforming core was forgotten. Only after a few centuries was it opened again, remotely

by the golems' manipulation of the security computer. Since then, the underfolk have taken up residence and guard their temple jealously.

Flora and Fauna

Plantlife on Khotan is not terribly varied, and comes mainly in the form of grasses on the plains, and trees within the water-rich valleys. Plateaus host a number of introduced species (Urth trees and wildflowers). Underground, a variety of lichens, molds and fungi grow along the underwater passageways, and the salt seas have various kelps.

Animal life is somewhat more abundant. The most ubiquitous animal among the lowfolk is the *grumpa* (plural *grumpas*), a 10-legged beast of burden used to deliver wares to the merchant bazaars of the plateaus. *Grumpas* can climb vertically, doing so in the wild to seek the delicacies of *klee* bird eggs, *glim* worms and plateau gophers. Many plateaus have erected fences on their cliff-faces to keep *grumpas* out. The animals aren't very intelligent and are easily tamed. They are sensitive to the magnetic veins, and can expertly navigate with them during herd migrations, but become disoriented and confused in areas where the veins have been removed, and must be guided by handlers. They can grow as large as 50 meters long — such land leviathans are often used to carry entire nomadic communities.

Lowfolk are sometimes terrorized by *skazlars*, large, predatory, eight-legged lionlike creatures. Evolved to hunt many of Khotan's fleet-footed herd animals, they can attain great speeds themselves, but cannot climb plateaus.

Highfolk must beware the *mazreechi*, large and vicious pterodactyl-like birds of prey. Their natural prey are *grumpas* and other herd beasts, but they also like *skazlar* and highfolk. Like *grumpas* (and many Khotan lifeforms), they are sensitive to magnetic veins, and use them to guide migrations. An occasional few have been trained to defend some highfolk plateaus.

Personality

Alderman Hailen Karle

The Sovereign Sky has assigned certain of its officials as diplomats to deal with offworlders. Until now, this has meant dealing with Vuldrok. But with the influx of Known Worlders, things have gotten more interesting for the aldermen.

As far as his fellows know, Hailen Karle was born among the lowfolk and passed the merit test at age 17. From there, his intelligence and charisma appealed to the aldermen, who apprenticed him in their ranks. Last year, he finally graduated from journeyman status to full alderman. What his fellow do not know is that he was actually born among the underfolk, raised from birth as a Foyer spy and inculcated with the ideals championed by Khotan's secret gods.



He gets fresh communiqués from fellow agents, some among lowfolk merchants and some placed in lower levels of the Sovereign Sky establishment throughout its federated plateaus. His latest mission is to find out everything he can about the Known Worlders and report back every detail to the Foyer, who will in turn deliver the message to the gods.

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Sovereign Sky Alderman (Foyer agent)

Quote: "Tell me more of these distant stars from which you come."

Description: Standing 5'9" tall with black skin, dyed blond hair and green eyes, Hailen Karle wears the simple three-piece suit of office worn by all aldermen, which somewhat resembles that of ancient Republican officials.

Entourage: He is sometimes accompanied by journeymen and apprentice aldermen.

Body: Strength 3, Dexterity 5, Endurance 3

Mind: Wits 8, Perception 6, Tech 6

Spirit: Extrovert 7, Introvert 2, Passion 1, Calm 5, Faith 5, Ego 1

Natural skills: Charm 8, Melee 4, Observe 7, Shoot 4, Sneak 6

Learned skills: Academia 3, Bureaucracy 5, Empathy 7, Etiquette 9, Inquiry 8, Knavery 5, Lore (Vuldrok Star-Nation) 5, Read Urthish, Remedy 3, Social (Oratory) 5, Speak Vuldrok, Stoic Mind 3, Think Machine 4

Wyrd: 3

Equipment: Personal think machine with radio transmitter/receiver

Weapons: Palm laser (3d)

Armor: None

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0

Kun Lun

The foremost parapsychological research organization in the Second Republic, the Phavian Institute drew heavy funding from both government and private patrons. In the latter years of the Republic, it became a popular cause celebré for any number of celebrities, maverick financiers and senate kooks. Money and fame were not the only boons psychic research bestowed on the Phavian Council — psychic powers gifted them an entire planet.

An institute psychic on Leminkainen discovered Kun Lun's jumpcode during an extended study of stellar-range ESP in which the psychic attempted to perceive Leminkainen's jumpgate from an underground room in the city's capitol. All he got for his efforts was a headache and a long string of nonsense numbers and letters, uttered in a trance. However, one of the group's assistants had studied jumpgate tech before, and recognized a characteristic sequence. After working through possible iterations to translate the letters into codes, he came up with an unfamiliar jumpcode.

The Phavian Institute secretly followed where the code led, uncovering an untouched planet one jump beyond. Institute leaders swooned at the idea of a place where psychic studies could go on unhampered by the tides of politics and money that often halted promising research in the Known Worlds. The fear psychic powers engendered in the less-gifted populace too often hindered the study of truly powerful effects. Not so here, where no masses existed to witness such experiments. Gathering a league of private donors, the institute began initial colonization efforts.

Kun Lun seemed to offer a number of advantages. Unlike so many other newly discovered planets, there was no need to terraform the world, and there were no sentient lifeforms to interfere with the establishment of a colony. But no official fleet of colony ships ever arrived to take advantage of the world's natural bounty, for the Central Colony Council never knew about Kun Lun. Powerful benefactors on the senate, influenced by the Phavian Institute's corporate patrons, shuffled data files so that the exact ownership of Kun Lun was hidden under a screen of holding companies and individuals. As far as any outsider knew, Kun Lun was just another new world owned by a corporation that claimed exclusive exploitation rights. By law, corporations who bore the expense of discovering new worlds could withhold public colonization of such worlds for a number of years, usually enough time to recoup their investment and more without worrying about others muscling in. What made Kun Lun special was that it somehow avoided the mandatory Republican observers and military interests.

Kun Lun's first settlement and scientific research facility was barely complete when the omens began. Some of the psychics monitored by the institute complained of bad dreams that continued and grew in intensity. Cataloguing these accounts brought the heads of the institute to a fearful conclusion: The Second Republic was doomed to fall. In the process, it would take the Phavian Institute with it.

As the institute debated what course to take, events overtook it. Psychics became one of the scapegoats for the fading suns phenomenon. The increasingly powerful and influential Church already condemned psychic powers. Then the riots came, followed quickly by the assaults of pirates and Rogue World warships.

The institute council came to a quick consensus concerning their future. If there was to be a future, psychics must retreat to Kun Lun, leaving the rest of the human race behind so that research was kept safe from the tide of anarchy. Only in seclusion could the council begin the next stage of psychic study — the next step in humanity's evolution.

Secretly and in carefully planned stages, key thinkers, scientists, psychics (including some Ur-Obun and Ur-Ukar) and their families were smuggled from their homeworlds and taken to Kun Lun. Along with them came think ma-

Kun Lun Traits

Ruler: The Pentacle

Cathedral: None (Kun Lun is an atheistic society ruled by reason)

Agora: Ouidad Canal

Garrison: 4

Capital: Omentius

Jumps: 2

Adjacent Worlds: Leminkainen (dayside)

Solar System: Kun Lun (Yi Tan, Ma Shen; 1.3 AU), Feng Sha Mao (23.62 AU), Psychus (41.53 AU), Ghost (68.2 AU), Jumpgate (76.7 AU)

Tech: 4

Human Population: 950,000 (of which 60,000 are psychic)

Alien Population: 17,000 (mostly Obun, with some Ukari)

Resources: Think machine technology, psychic research data archives, untapped veins of ore

Exports: None

Landscape: High, arid plateaus and snow-topped mountains wreathed in thick clouds cover most of the world. The oceans cover less area than on most Urthlike worlds, but they are very deep and largely unexplored.

chines with the vast libraries of Phavian research. Also allowed on the journey were favored patrons, mostly holovid stars and a senator or two.

Even as the Second Republic fell, Kun Lun grew and thrived. Research into the nature of psi continued long after the Church had condemned such studies in the smoldering remains of the Republic. While a new Dark Age ruled most of human space, the Kun Lun colonists closed their jumpgate, ready to weather the lonely centuries on their own.

They had prepared well for their long stay, ensuring that the necessary skills needed to keep a colony running were represented to one degree or another. Although they had no desire to explore other worlds (and couldn't once they'd shut their gate), they maintained the starships that had brought them to Kun Lun. Of course, there were some who disagreed with the separation from the Known Worlds, believing their voices of reason could calm the chaos on the other worlds. Fights ensued, but the vast majority of colonists chose to shut the gate and did not allow any dissenters to escape back to the Known Worlds to speak of their existence.

Inevitably, though, some people abused their powers, causing fear among the non-psychics. These despots used their gifts to sway the population to their sides, leading to a number of coups and even a full-scale civil war. On three separate occasions, powerful psychics gained rule over large portions of the populace by means of their powers. The ability to influence the masses in subtle ways made them successful dictators until they either died of natural causes, were poisoned by rivals, or were killed by other psychics who didn't like their methods.

In all cases, however, the Phavian Council eventually regained sway, restoring order among the factions. Such dictators only strengthened the resolve of the Council to equalize all sides, and it began tutoring non-psychics in mental protection techniques and ways to recognize the use of psychic powers.

Prometheus Unleashed

The worst was yet to come. Despite all of their preparations, all of their grandest hopes and schemes, the colonists were more ambitious in their scientific studies than their abilities allowed. Doctor Albert Carlin, normally a very meticulous researcher, lost sight of his usual caution when he discovered what he believed to be the perfect method to increase the psychic potential of all of people on the planet, not just the known psychics. He unleashed what he called the Carlin Retrovirus 32 on the unwitting populace.

That was his name for the disaster; the survivors called it the Promethean Plague.

Almost 300 years after colonization, the vast majority of the population still showed no actual psychic abilities,



despite careful selection of partners for such potential. Human factors — love, lust and the desire to choose one's own mate — got in the way of creating a purely psi-awakened race. Despite the desires of the Phavian Council, no major changes had occurred to substantially alter the species. The Promethean Plague changed that.

The plague had two effects. First, it awakened psychic potential in a full fifth of the population. Second, it killed over half of those who were unaffected, and sterilized a quarter of the survivors. More than two-thirds of the population died, although a vast number of the survivors were now psychic.

What remained of the colony was no longer quite human. Although the Kun Luners were certainly still compatible with the human race, they had changed in ways that could not be ignored. Carlin himself was one of the lucky ones who survived... until the rest of the population discovered what he'd done and killed him for his hubris.

Reconstruction

In the aftermath of the plague, society changed to reflect the majority populace — the psychics. Non-psychics became second-class citizens, but they were still allowed full civil rights and could rise to prominence in the trades or technology fields.

While the technology level of Kun Lun has decreased over the intervening years, it has not dropped as significantly as on most worlds. A healthy respect for science, along with durable Second Republic-era tech, has kept most of the world at a comfortable Tech Level 4, with the research facilities operating at 5 or even 6.

Psychic groups that shared an affinity with one another — usually determined by the path they practiced —formed societies as a means to better train one another in their chosen powers. As time passed, these societies became formalized into a caste system that determined every psychic's place in society, a structure still in place in modern times.

Most often, a child psychic displays an affinity with a particular path, usually exhibiting a low-level manifestation of powers during pubescence; he is then considered a member of that path's caste and trained as such through adolescence. In some communities (those outside the capitol city of Omentius), caste is hereditary; parents train their children in their own paths.

The six most prominent castes are:

Kinetics — Those who follow the FarHand path. They tend to perform manual labor for their community.

Oracles — This small caste includes those who follow the Omen path. They tend to be among the leaders of any community, and are one of the strongest voices for maintaining technical competence in future generations.

Speakers — Composed of Psyche path followers, Speakers are kept somewhat separate from the populace as a whole, their contact regulated. Too many past instances of power misuse have left them as pariahs, but still highly valued, especially among the Jaunters (see below).

Seers — Gifted with the Sixth Sense, Seers are especially valued among the Jaunters, and make up the bulk of Kun Lun's defense forces (along with the Biolords).

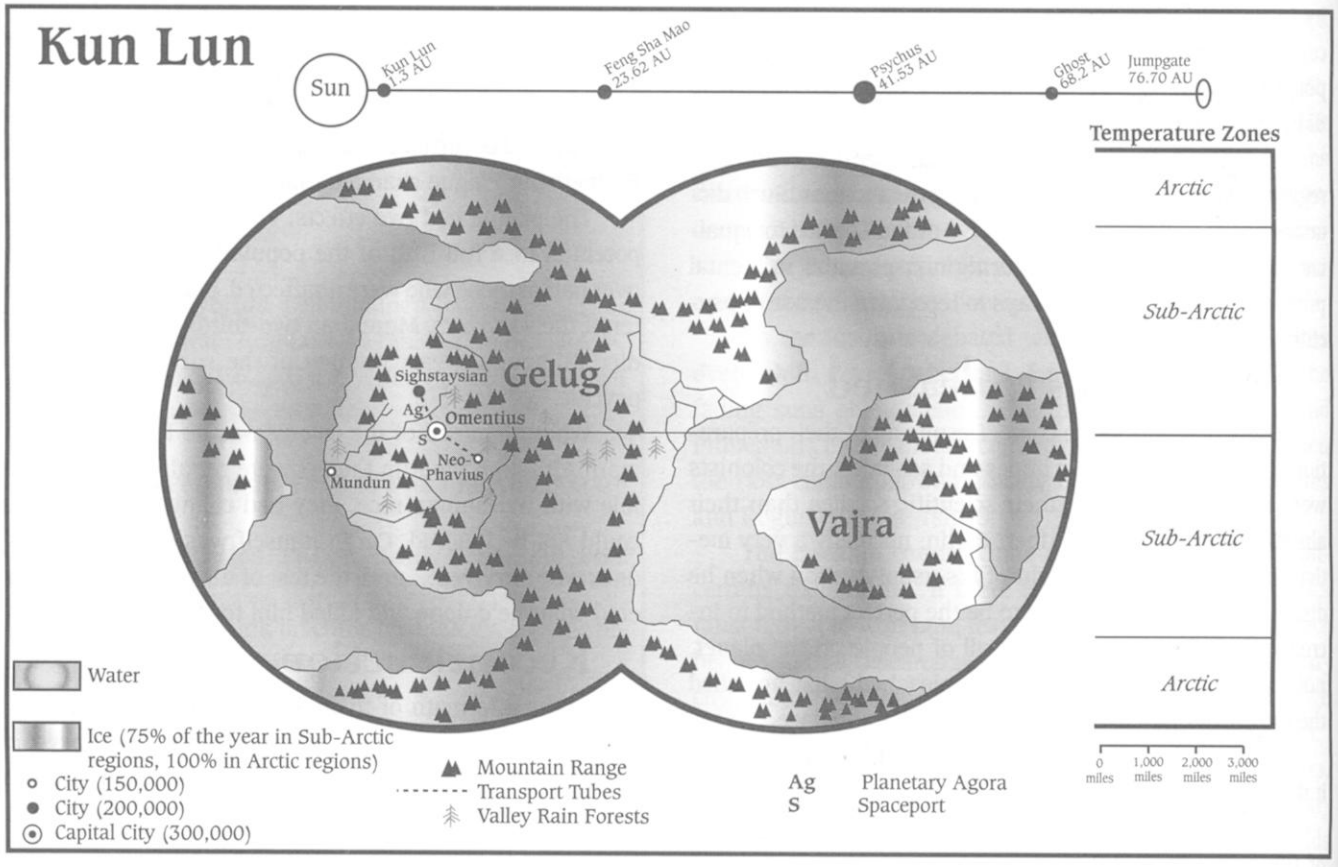
Biolords — The closest thing Kun Lun has to a warrior caste are the followers of the Soma path. Experts in martial arts, their combat skills are a means to better know the mind, not an excuse for brutality.

Casters — The rarest caste, so small in number that it has no official membership in the Pentacle. Its members practice the Vis Craft path. Most join the Jaunters or aid in any of the scientific teams who maintain Kun Lun's technology.

Note that there is no special caste for the Sympathy path, since many Kun Lun psychics develop this discipline regardless of their primary path. It is possible to join multiple castes, as long as one maintains the proper paths at an equal level of expertise. No caste is considered more important than any other one.

The Pentacle

Fearful of the rise of a future dictator, the Phavian Council, run by members of the five leading castes, re-formed itself into the Pentacle, wherein each point on the star was



represented by a leader from one of the five castes. This way all castes had representation, and no one caste could gain sway over another, except insofar as the personal charisma of Pentacle leaders allowed. All Pentacle members, of course, are experts in detecting psychic influence, just in case a fellow member forgets the accords against such activity when in council.

The Overmind

To the people of Kun Lun, the exercise and growth of the mind is life's key goal. Nonetheless, many believe that tasks of the body can help strengthen mental discipline. For this reason, most chores, such as farming and construction, are done manually (or with the FarHand powers). Dangerous or excessively tedious tasks, however, are handled by golems.

There is no definite monetary system on Kun Lun, and no ownership of property aside from the homes that families and individuals occupy. Barter between communities takes place, but for the most part, everyone is provided what they need to survive and given a role in the community. Leadership of communities or castes is attained through mastery of psychic powers and the wisdom to use them properly (this latter tenet keeps talented youths from rising too quickly).

There are no elections per se. The population as a whole, in an unspoken consensus, chooses its leaders. Though it is not consciously considered, the Phavian colonists have, over the course of centuries, established a certain hive mentality. They do what must be done and, rarely giving a matter conscious consideration, they chose who is best suited for each task.

Such a communist utopia is possible because the people of Kun Lun, after the unification following the plague and the coming together of the castes, worked to banish their dark sides. No one on Kun Lun — except for a few aberrant cases — has exhibited a psychic Urge in centuries. The Kun Luners have truly reached the next stage of evolution they so long desired — or so they believe. They are as yet ignorant of the Overmind that rules their lives.

This phenomenon seems to be a byproduct of the Promethean Plague and the Kun Luners' subsequent attempt at psychic social engineering — namely, the conquering of the Urge. Over the centuries, the collective unconscious of the plague survivors has expanded along with their conscious control over psychic powers. Banned from conscious expression by supreme acts of will on the part of the populace, forbidden thoughts and emotions didn't just go away — they lurked ever deeper under the surface, merging into a collective unconscious created from the interplay of thousands of psychic minds. This collective but invisible psychic will developed a crude center or nexus of awareness.

This "Overmind's" existence remains unknown to most Kun Luners. Those few who have consciously noted the remarkable unity of consensus on Kun Lun haven't given credence to any sentience behind it. Those who have briefly considered the thought quickly give it up and move to more constructive contemplations. This is because the Overmind does not *want* them to notice it.

For now it waits, looking for just the right opportunity to erupt into the consciousness of its members — every psychic on Kun Lun. Once so awakened, it may be impossible to control it, for it is the Dark Twin of the entire populace, a global Urge. If it were to become powerful enough to form an actual Doppleganger body, what form would such a being take?

Separation from the Overmind— such as for the Jaunters who leave the system — seems to have no real effect on the person who left. The Overmind isn't so much a part of the individual as the individual is a part of the Overmind. There is no feeling of loss when removed from the influence of the Overmind. Even those who show no actual psychic abilities are apparently part of this greater whole. No one is left untouched by the hivelike influence generated by all Kun Lun's psychics.

Recent Events

Since the plague, the population has increased slowly. Most Kun Luners live in the cities of Omentius, Neo Phavius, Sighstaysian, or their outlying settlements. Some people have set up small towns on distant parts of the planet to take advantage of other resources, such as fish from the sea. One seaside community, Mundun, is formed entirely from non-psychics, those who chose to break away from the Pentacle's rule. Whenever one of their own exhibits psychic powers, he is sent away, exiled to Omentius or the other psychic communities.

The numerical supremacy of psychics has abated over the generations — not even multi-generational psychic families always bear psychic children. By the present time, non-psychics are once more the majority, although they still have no direct representation in government, which is still run by the Pentacle and the castes.

One hundred years ago, the jumpgate reopened. Kun Lun's elite psychics crept into the Known Worlds only to return with sad stories concerning the state of humanity. Most Kun Luners shunned the idea of contacting a barbaric civilization waiting to burn them at the stake for simply evolving. Despite several long years during which the population as a whole considered the pros and cons of revealing their existence to the Known Worlds, the final consensus was that the time was not yet right. Though some voices disagreed, no one dared violate the sanctions openly. There was simply too much at risk.

The end result was the creation of the Jaunters, teams trained to infiltrate the Known Worlds without arousing sus-

picion, to monitor humanity and gather further information. Kun Lun maintains a strict policy of containment — only Jaunters are allowed to occasionally scout the Known Worlds, and then only after each team member undergoes a three-year period of training, learning all he or she can about the Known Worlds.

Eventually, the Jaunters formed spy networks within the Known Worlds, usually among psychic covens, who weren't fully informed as to their new contact's true home. Long-term Jaunters travel with various guilds, serve unobtrusive roles within noble entourages and even gain ordination in the Church. These brave souls are heroes to the Kun Luners, for discovery means death — each Jaunter is provided with a poison tooth with which to kill himself rather than risk interrogation about Kun Lun. Better to die quickly than reveal the homeworld.

While many believe the time has come to reveal themselves to the Known Worlds, none would dare do so before the Overmind agrees. The opening of the jumpgate has revealed new vistas to the Overmind. There are more psychics out there, and once it contacts them and becomes one with them, the connection can be maintained over stellar distances — past jumpgates.

Although the people of Kun Lun are ignorant about the Overmind, they are content in their ignorance. Their society is strong, and the bonds they have with one another overcome any temporary bickering or dispute. Important decisions are made with little conscious effort — everyone simply *knows* what must be done. As a result, while they retain history texts teaching about human foibles and follies, political ambitions and lusts for power, they are incredibly ignorant about how to deal with such emotions and drives should they encounter them in others. No amount of scholarship on Machiavellian intrigue can prepare them for an actual encounter with a deceitful noble. Only experienced Jaunters overcome this flaw.

Kun Luners believe they have left behind such symptoms of savagery with their evolution to a higher level of human development. They tend to have a condescending attitude towards what they view as imperfect human psychology, and are more wont to preach against it than accept such behavior.

This attitude threatens to destroy their society, as highly-developed members of the castes argue that it is time Kun Lun revealed itself to the Known Worlds, believing that they could turn the course of human history once more towards the good. They fail to realize that their ignorance of the dark side of human behavior might lead them like lambs to a slaughter. Their reliance on reason handicaps their understanding of the sheer fanaticism with which elements of the Church would greet their arrival.

But even if they did realize this, it wouldn't stop them, for the source of their zeal comes from deep within, from the Overmind anxious to spread outwards even if it costs the lives of all its original hosts.

The Kun Lun System

Besides Kun Lun, three planets ("the Three Sisters") orbit the system's red sun. All of them are lifeless and uninhabitable. Feng Sha Mao shows evidence of rich ore deposits, but Kun Lun has never needed to take advantage of them. Psychus has an ominous reputation, for it often causes psychics who approach it discomfort; this is believed tied to the odd crystalline sheets that coat the planet, emitting high-frequency sound waves. The final planet, Ghost, shines brightest in the sky due to its unique atmospheric silicates.

The gravity on Kun Lun is slightly less than that of Byzantium Secundus. Two small moons — Yi Tan and Ma Shen — orbit the world. Although neither is inhabited full time, Yi Tan has a fully functional and well-guarded base where most of the ships that brought the Phavians to the world are now housed. Many Jaunters spend three months training here every year before returning planetside.

Geography

Kun Lun earned its name as a result of the massive mountains and plateaus that cover most of the landmasses. Great rivers flow from the frozen tops of mountains that tower far above valleys, sheathed in mist. The air is cold and wet, even in the summer months, and the land is mostly untouched by the colonists. The only animals encountered on the planet are herbivores and insects, with no natural land predators. Carnivores can be found, however, in the deep oceans.

No great wars have scarred or pitted the jungles that fill the planet's valleys, and no seismic activity has yet given people a reason to fear nature.

The winter months are harsh and bitterly cold, with snowfalls reaching as much as 12 to 15 feet on average. Spring grows warmer and brings the Season of Mists, when the valleys below the communities disappear in heavy blanketing fogs. Rains cause massive floods every year. The summer months are warmest; the higher temperature allows people to walk outside without fear of hypothermia. The autumn months are much like spring again, bringing rains before the snows fall once more. A year lasts exactly 10 months, with each month lasting 37 days; the days last for 29 hours.

There are three major cities on Kun Lun: the capitol, Omentius, and two smaller locations, Neo Phavius and Sighstaysian. Many places host automated greenhouses and farms for producing the foods and plants necessary to maintain the populace, allowing the people to concentrate instead on mental studies. The three cities are connected by transport tubes and have been maintained very well by golem

servitors. All are open-air locations, but Neo Phavius and Sighstaysian have vast greenhouses for protecting vegetation during the harshest winter months.

Personality

Abald Greer (Biolord Jaunter)

Greer has been a Jaunter for too long, and he hasn't been home in five years — far longer than most Jaunters stay away. It's beginning to wear on him. This new society has so much misery — class struggle, anti-alien bigotry, poverty — and yet so much wonder besides: an undefeatable spirit, eternally renewed hope in the face of catastrophe, and abiding faith in something bigger. Upon witnessing theurgy for the first time, Greer gave up his atheism and admitted that even Kun Lun doesn't have all the answers.

He has adopted a monk's cassock as his guise on his travels, pretending to be a hesychast from an obscure monastery on Leminkainen (the name changes every time he has to give it). He knows enough basic Church homilies to convince the average layman.

More than most Kun Lun Jaunters, Greer has given up the starry-eyed idealism that once convinced him he was better than humans in the Known Worlds. He's been around the block enough now to know that knowledge alone can't protect him from the dregs of the universe; only instinct and savvy can do that.

What finally made him want to go home, however, was his first encounter with another psychic's Urge. It was a mild encounter — the afflicted Favyana coven member said ugly things and answered to unseen voices — but it scared the crap out of Greer. Kun Lun had conquered its id long ago, and he now feared contamination. He also fears his own weakness, for the Known World psychics he has met seem more powerful than those back home.

The real problem is that he lost contact with his fellow Jaunters months ago and has no idea how to get back to Kun Lun — except to use the jumpkey he carries and keeps safe as if it were crown jewels. For that, however, he'll need a ship with a crew small enough to overpower once back on Kun Lun, so that they can't return to tell of the planet's secret.

Race: Human

Quote: "Yes, I'm looking to charter a ship for an exploration mission. A mission of dire import for my monastery. I cannot pay you now, but upon arrival, vast riches await you."

Description: Standing 5'4" in a grubby monk's robe but with leather combat boots, Abald resembles any number of kooky priests on individual missions of salvation. If necessary, he can change his facial features and pass as a number of people he's witnessed over the years.



Roleplaying Notes: Abald tries to maintain a tranquil façade but finds it increasingly hard. Everyone's refusal to act with any kind of consensus, like back on Kun Lun, or even to act rationally, is finally pushing him to his limits. He might start grumbling about Kun Lun out loud if he doesn't watch it.

Entourage: He used to travel with a small group of fellow Jaunters, but a Chainer raid scattered them. He's afraid the others may be slaves on some cargo ship bound for Stigmata.

Body: Strength 7 (+1 DMG), Dexterity 8, Endurance 6
Mind: Wits 7, Perception 6, Tech 4
Spirit: Extrovert 5, Introvert 5, Passion 2, Calm 5, Faith 1, Ego 3
Natural skills: Charm 5, Dodge 8, Fight 8, Impress 6, Melee 4, Observe 7, Shoot 6, Sneak 6, Vigor 5
Learned skills: Drive Landcraft 2, Empathy 4, Focus 6, Inquiry 7, Knavery 8, Lore (Known Worlds) 5, Read Urthish, Remedy 3, Science (Parapsychology) 3, Stoic Body 5, Stoic Mind 8, Streetwise 2
Martial Arts: Martial Fist, Martial Kick, Block, Disengage, Martial Throw, Sure Fist
Occult: Psi 6
Powers: (Soma) Toughening, Strengthening, Quickening, Hardening, Sizing, Masking
Equipment: Personal think machine (data on the Known Worlds — no evidence of Kun Lun), jumpkey to Kun Lun (hidden in a relic case hanging from his neck, disguised as the fingerbone of some obscure saint)
Weapons: Palm laser (3d), dirk (3d)
Armor: Energy shield (5/10, 10 hits)
Wyrd: 9
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0

Lamorak

The Vuldrok consider Lamorak both one of their worlds and an independent system. Warlords from throughout Vuldrok space have journeyed here to fight its inhabitants, and the planet's own small but growing fleet of ships has sallied forth to attack its neighbors. While Lamorak has no representation at the great Althings, individual heroes have made their impact felt. Lamorak can proudly point to the impassioned speeches of Anna Soresgane, an advocate for greater trade and less piracy, as evidence of its growing influence with the Vuldrok.

Still, even Anna Soresgane would not want to see the clashes between their cultures eliminated. She reached her position of respect by battling and defeating Vuldrok raiders, rescuing kidnapped Lamorak citizens, and raiding Wolf's Lament, Raven and even Hawkwood and Kurgan space. Individual heroes have long been the epitome of the Lamorak ideal, and opportunities for bold heroism abound. Lamorak's inhabitants would want it no other way.

Lamorak Traits

Rulers: Anna Soresgane, Trent Pitt, Aleya "Terror" Boram, Warlord Sundra Tanguilig III

Cathedral: Angel Woods

Agora: New Venice

Capital: Burdena

Jumps: 5

Adjacent Worlds: Frost (dayside)

Solar System: Ceyr (.32 AU), Lamorak (Lance; 1.1 AU), Huckleberry (7.4 AU), Utheron (20.6 AU)

Tech Level: 3

Garrison: 2

Human Population: 95,000,000

Alien Population: 30,000. Most known alien races have small communities on the planet, descended from alien entertainers. Some of these, like the Shantor, have become extremely inbred. There is also a respected and accepted *kwedi* community (Obun-Ukar cross breeds), and some *kwedi* have become world-renowned heroes.

Resources: Old entertainment recordings, agricultural products, grapes, bards

Exports: Holovids and flesh fantasies, food, wine, heroes

Landscape: Lamorak has not seen much seismic upheaval since humans first landed on it, and its mountains tend to be small and its seas shallow. Its oceans are not the deep ones of other worlds, but they cover much of the planet. Hundreds of miles of sea are covered with yellow plankton, giving the world a jaundiced appearance from space.

History

Lamorak, though not as famous as other entertainment centers of the Second Republic, did as much to influence popular culture as any of them. Holovid shows like "Laser P.I." and flesh fantasies like "Captain Simov of the Sextus Rangers" fueled the imaginations of children and adults throughout human space. Lamorak produced educational programming like "Ancient Peoples' Trips to Mars" and "You Are There: Genocide" that taught many people about their glorious (and inglorious) pasts. The attraction of these and many other programs turned Lamorak into a communications center as well, as ships would jump into the system to pick up the best for their own systems. These ships would also relay financial, religious, political and other data.

Certain parts of the planet thrived under these conditions, even while much of the world remained a poor backwater. The city of Angel Woods became a hotspot for entertainers and actors who could not make it on the most famous entertainment worlds. Their shows still attracted a substantial following, however, and the entertainers became some of the planet's leading figures. They saw their wealth blossom as more and more ships visited Lamorak to acquire its recordings.

Thus Lamorak never developed any substantial industry, content instead to trade its diversions for the creations of the Second Republic. It could have become an agrarian wonder, or even developed the industry that could have helped it thrive. However, a combination of passivity and a desire to keep the planet a showplace for its star inhabitants prevented that.

Sophisticated entertainment and information services were some of those hit hardest by the Fall, and the millions of Lamorak citizens who lived off these industries found themselves in dire straits as interstellar trade broke down. Lamorak's leaders at the time of the Fall did little to stop the trend, preferring to bolster the government's sagging revenues by selling public lands and functions to their friends. As imports declined, especially food imports, the populace became more and more restless. Within 10 years, riots became a regular occurrence, and fears of a worldwide drought gave them greater impetus. Lamorak's breakup paralleled that of the Second Republic, with groups claiming territories as their own and resisting any attempts to return their lands to common ownership. The government, already tied up battling daily riots, could do little to stop this disintegration, and within a generation, planetwide government had be-

come a fable from history.

Some of these new territorial rulers had ties to existing noble houses, while others came from industries, religious sects, families and existing communities. The most successful, however, were those led by the most popular entertainers, and rivalries once limited to interactive dramas exploded into real violence. A popular star like Chick Annuncio of "Star Paladin" would find himself attracting followers whether he wanted to or not. As food became scarce, these entertainers began warring over farmland. From their bases on ranches, in wineries and at harbors, they would send out their minions to claim valuable lands, and battles became common. They would also blanket the airwaves, cable feeds and emotive projectors with their own programming, hoping to inspire existing followers and recruit more.

Thus, the planetary government devolved into thousands of competing fiefs, each with its own goals, history and beliefs. They maintained a heavy communications network, however, constantly broadcasting their own entertainment. Even as existing entertainers died and their children or allies took their places, their performances kept showing. As generation after generation came and went, these ancient dramas became more and more a part of the planet's mythology, their actions mixing into stories about the real stars' pasts. Leaders found it beneficial to play down their ancestors' role as performers and promote them as true heroes, though one star might have several different aspects, all related to her roles in the past.

These stars became the objects of worldwide respect and veneration. While the teachings of Santonya Bishop (embodied in her many entertaining holovids) and her other incarnations, Bunny the Devil-Destroyer and Terry Malice of Murphy's Place, held sway over her own community, she also commanded respect in others long after she died. Heroes would pledge themselves to her memory (or the memories of the hundreds of other characters that remained popular) and set off to do to great deeds in their names. This same process occurred with many other entertainers. Within only a few generations, these stars became figures of legend, and Lamorak's heroes did their best to emulate their actions.

They traveled the planet battling bandits, other communities and each other, exploring lost ruins, and engaging in every sort of adventure they could. Some heroes tried to live out their patrons' action personas, while others emulated their more social images. Whatever the case, these heroes became the center of the planet's focus, and defined its culture as close to the views of their patrons as they could. While many heroes accomplished little, the stories they told of their deeds often made up for it. A family will do its best to cover up the tale of a "hero" who dies unheroically, and some Vuldrok believe the natives have a genetic predisposition to lying... and believing lies.



In Lamorak culture, these heroes hold a place of greater reverence than does the Prophet, though almost everyone on the planet worships the Pancreator and Prophet. It is just that Zebulon's teachings do not seem as vibrant to most of the world's inhabitants. Many priests serve both the Pancreator and various ancient stars.

The planet's growing insularity only accelerated this process. While the system's jumpgate never closed, interstellar (and even interplanetary) travel dropped away to almost nothing. The planet had no spaceship building industry and, after the Fall, attempts to create one failed miserably. As ships broke down, engineers had less and less success returning them to service, until practically none of the existing ships left the system anymore.

That's when the Vuldrok raids began. The rise of the Vuldrok Star-Nations had gone unnoticed on Lamorak, and the arrival of the first Vuldrok longships took the planet completely by surprise. Suddenly, as if from an ancient holovid, axe-wielding barbarians fell from the sky, killing, raping and stealing everything in their path. Violently torn from its self-absorbed shell by the raiders' extreme violence, Lamorak responded at once.

While most of the world's technology had declined to tech level 2 or 3, the communications grid still functioned

almost as well as it did during the Second Republic. News of the attacks spread across the planet moments after they happened. Despite the death and destruction, the raids stimulated more excitement than fear. Lamorak's heroes had found their terrestrial foes lacking, and the Vuldrok gave them a whole new dimension in drama. They hauled out anything even vaguely resembling a spaceship, and to the stars they went.

Many of these heroes never left the solar system, and more than a few lost their lives due to inadequate preparations or inferior ships. Those who made it past the jumpgate, however, discovered worlds perfect for their sort of adventure. Their own raids on the Vuldrok, while poorly planned and completely uncoordinated, took the barbarians by surprise. It took several years for the Star-Nations to determine where the attacks came from, and then the battle was on.

Lamorak has never offered much of value to the raiders. Its farms are not the most prosperous, its mines lack depth, and its industries produce almost nothing. What it does have, however, are thousands of willing warriors, anxious to fight in exactly the manner the Vuldrok love — up close and personal. A Vuldrok warlord knows that one of the best ways to prepare her followers for future battles is by attacking Lamorak and its heroes.

She can bring her crew through the jumpgate slowly and carefully, knowing that she will not be engaged in a dogfight as soon as she gets through. A Lamorak shuttle might try to board it during its approach to the planet, but the main fighting almost always takes place on the planet itself. By the time the Vuldrok land, the closest heroes have gathered to meet them, and the fighting begins as soon as all the Vuldrok have gotten off their ship.

While a volley or two of small-arms fire might start the skirmish, the bulk is conducted hand to hand. While the Vuldrok move forward in a mass, the heroes come at them in groups from all sides. The battle quickly degenerates into a swirling, frenzied mass of individual fights. These often last for an entire day, and at the end, both sides usually retire from the field. The Vuldrok return to Frost, and the heroes return to their own communities with tales of valor and daring deeds. Sometimes the Vuldrok drive the heroes from the field and finish their raiding, and on occasion the heroes defeat the barbarians and take their spaceships, but most battles are inconclusive (but fun!).

The Vuldrok have also begun a few colonies on Lamorak, though these have not grown especially large. The biggest, Karttikea, began after Warlord Tanguilig fled Frost after killing a more powerful warlord's son. A member of the minor Uthorak nation, he founded Karttikea on the Gastony coast in 4682, and it has thrived ever since. It began trading with its Lamorak neighbors shortly after its founding. After staying concealed from the Vuldrok for several generations, it revealed itself to the Star-Nation again in 4933, and has maintained contact ever since.

It has come under criticism from its brethren for deviating from the Vuldrok way, however, and falling under the corrupting influence of Lamorak's communication grid. Some of the earliest trades Karttikea made with its neighbors were its fish for their holovid projectors. Priests from Lamorak villages came to Karttikea and showed them how to conduct the necessary rituals to view the holy programming. The programming caught on quickly, especially with Karttikea's children. While Vuldrok myths and religion still play a major role in Karttikea's culture, any observer can spot innumerable Lamorak influences.

Lamorak has also begun exporting these holovids beyond its own shores. Vuldrok raiders took some in their earliest attacks, and they developed a taste for this ancient entertainment. While mechanisms for playing them are rare, the Vuldrok have a few of their own (and stolen a few more). The old disks are prized by raiders and traders alike, and those already in Vuldrok hands get viewed repeatedly. The interactive ones have the highest value, and some of the best-made flesh fantasies command prices approaching a king's ransom.

Anna Soresgane has helped promote the distribution of these recordings, as has her archrival, Trent Pitt. Both of them try to disseminate as many shows about their own lives and their role models as they can. Their own productions often show the other as the villain, much to the Vuldrok's amusement.

Planetary Conditions

Lamorak's technological decline did not affect all aspects of life equally. While such major areas as farming and manufacturing reverted to preindustrial levels, its communications remain stellar. People can contact those on other sides of the planet instantaneously, and ancient think machine programs still run through their routines, ensuring that the finest entertainment gets sent over the airwaves every single day.

Those who maintain this technology receive the greatest respect in their communities, revered almost as priests. While few homes have a fully functioning altar (one that allows for receiving ancient broadcasts), every community has at least one that serves as the center of public life. The priests (known as watchers) maintain it, notify everyone of important broadcasts, and even make their own.

Becoming a bard or entertainer is as important a calling as that of hero or watcher, and most heroes and watchers have some bardic training. Most bards follow the ancient ways, traveling from village to village, singing for their meals and performing for their board. Others, either more talented or technologically proficient, make new holovids. These ei-

ther tell the stories of modern heroes or repeat ancient legends.

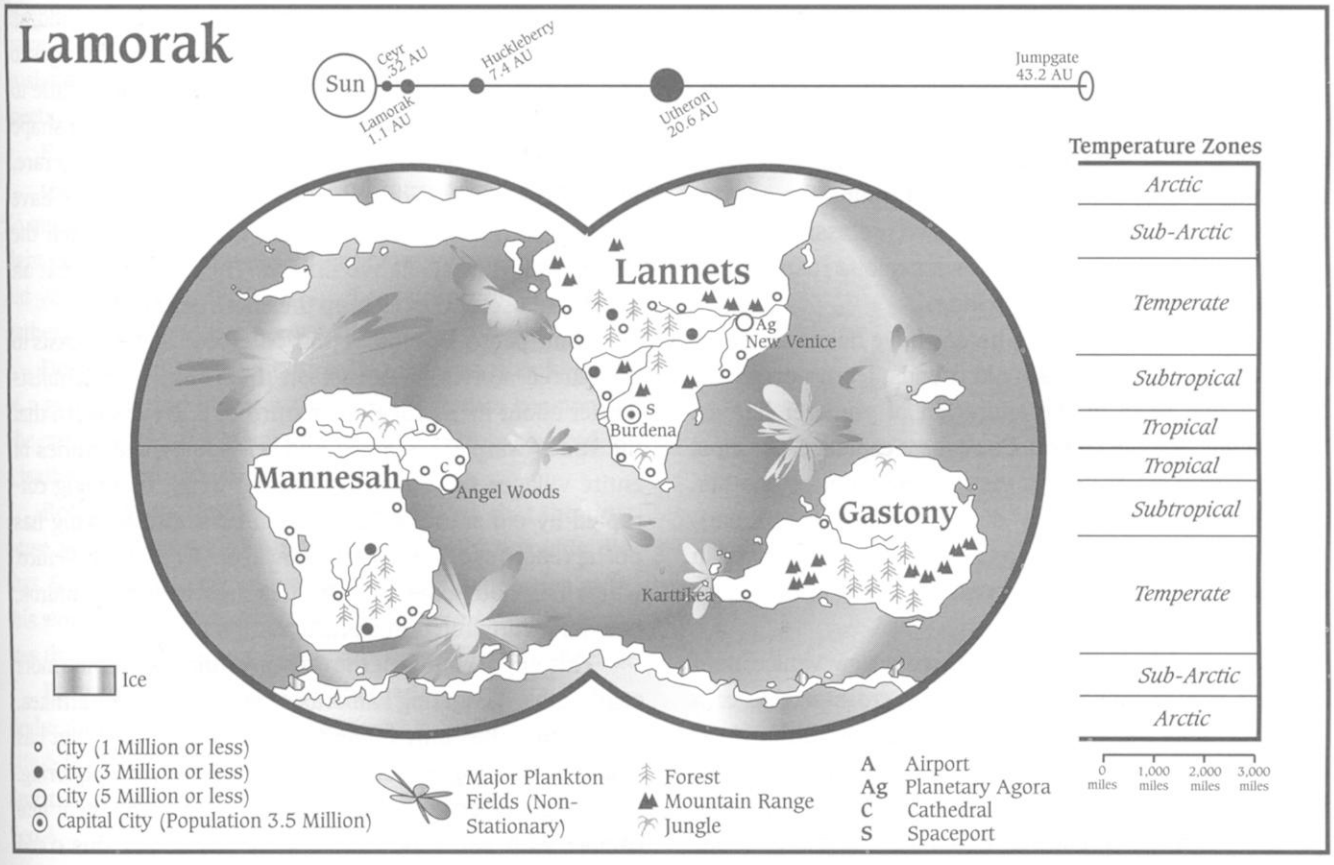
Many consider Angel Woods the cultural soul of this planet. During the Second Republic, this city on the continent of Mannesah served as the center of the entertainment industry. Stars who could not find work on the major entertainment worlds (many either on their way up or on their way back down) ended up here. Production, recording and broadcast facilities sprang up in every nook and cranny in the city, and the performers built large estates outside of Angel Woods.

After the Fall, Angel Woods suffered riots and violence, but these did not prove as apocalyptic as they did in other cities throughout the Second Republic. While Angel Woods suffered many of the problems other urban areas did — food shortages, interrupted utilities, failing infrastructure — the nearby entertainers helped minimize the damage. Most of the stars had based their estates on ancient Terran farming and ranching models. These low-tech operations remained viable even after the Fall, and while many were inefficient, they helped hundreds of thousands of people survive.

As a result, Angel Woods still operates much as it did before. While a shortage of parts and trained technicians caused most of the studios to shut down, a number managed to keep running. As the stars set up their own fiefdoms, Angel Woods became both battleground and holy ground. While all the stars wanted control of the studios, none wanted to risk destroying them (or their existing recordings). Thus, after a number of inconclusive battles put the facilities at risk, the planet's leaders agreed to make the actual city off limits to war. For the most part, they abided by this pledge.

Thus the stars developed their own areas outside of the city, purchased areas within it, and sought to spread their influence more by communications than by weapons. Angel Woods still looks like the epitome of a Second Republic city, with glass spires reaching high into the sky, massive broadcast towers placed everywhere, and a mishmash of architectural styles. During the Second Republic, it was considered gaudy and tacky. Now it inspires awe and respect.

The surrounding areas are primarily farmland, and they lack the technological wonders of Angel Woods. Ranches fill the largest open spaces, and vineyards line the hills. These lands have spawned most of Lamorak's great heroes, perhaps inspired by their proximity to Angel Woods itself. Many of the planet's greatest lords have estates here as well as holdings in the city itself. Despite their power, the city's true strength lies in its horde of watchers, led by Aleya "Terror" Boram. Their ability to control Lamorak's communications prevents most people from moving against them. Not only can they call for help around the world, they can also make up new epics portraying their attackers as the worst kinds of villains. This inspires heroes who might not otherwise



care to come to their aid in hopes of new legends being created about them.

Vuldrok attacks in this area have been stymied for much the same reason. While Angel Woods holds a treasure trove of ancient artifacts and the surrounding area is rich in foods and materials, attacks here draw immediate and vigorous responses. As a result, the raiders tend to avoid this area, preferring the less defended areas on Cannets.

The power of the watchers is ill-defined but very real. By altering what gets broadcast, they can affect the plans of thousands of heroes and their followers. While individual broadcasts have little impact on the day-to-day life of most of Lamorak's inhabitants, heroes respond instantly. In addition, long-term broadcast strategies can dramatically alter the goals and priorities of the entire world. Anna Soresgane has long sought to have more shows broadcast that would inspire an interest in technology, but Aleya Boram has blocked this. While Boram refers to the Pancreator in her defense of current programming, Soresgane's supporters say Boram fears that a technologically efficient populace would challenge the watchers' stranglehold over the communications grid.

The continent of Cannets is more mountainous than Mannesah and holds most of Lamorak's productive mines. It also boasts what passes for Lamorak's capital — Burdena, city of bards. While Angel Woods is the planet's cultural center, Burdena is the main training place for heroes and bards. Most heroes spend at least a month or two within its towering walls.

Here they practice everything from hand-to-hand combat to singing to makeup, all in hopes of becoming the next major hero. Those who decide against becoming heroes often become bards, chronicling and performing the exploits of others. More than a few mix the two professions, regaling audiences with tales of their own exploits (usually embellished and improved in the telling).

Thus most of the planet's heroes have ties to Burdena, and many return there to see old friends, learn new tricks, teach, or just revel in the adoration of younger heroes. Burdena has become Lamorak's *de facto* capital. Since most of the planet's major figures visit at one point or another, meetings here resolve many disputes (and create more). Deals struck in Angel Woods get announced and resolved in Burdena, and its bards help spread the word of important events across the planet.

The second-largest city on Cannets is New Venice, near the main mining areas. Located at the cross-section of a number of major waterways, New Venice is the starting point for many resource shipments. This is not the reason it has become the planet's main trading point, however. The area used to be Lamorak's prime industrial region, and large quantities of Second Republic artifacts litter the region.

While most Lamorak citizens have no idea what to do with these items, Vuldrok traders and shamans have begun visiting the area in search of usable rarities. Vuldrok raiders also attack here more than they do any other area, so trading near New Venice has its risks. The entire region around New Venice also attracts more heroes than does any other aside from Burdena itself. They flock here in hopes of battling Vuldrok raiders, exploring Second Republic ruins, hunting the many wild mountain beasts (including the Scarlet Snapping Serpent), and exploring abandoned mines.

A number of these mines have proven extremely dangerous. Automated during the Second Republic, their golem workers ended up without orders or managers after the Fall. While most deteriorated away to utter uselessness, more than a few remained in working order. Humans trying to reclaim the mines have accidentally reactivated them, creating local hazards as security robots attacked them and mining robots without orders tried to excavate nearby human settlements.

Indeed, most mining problems now get blamed on killer golems, rumored to continue their activities far beneath the earth. More than one hero has made it her mission to protect the miners, and others have gone in search of golem cities deep underground. While no one has found these legendary cities, said to have been built by mining golems under the control of one sinister AI or deranged human, many miners swear they exist.

Gastony, the smallest of Lamorak's three main continents, lacks these rumors. A quiet, isolated land, the Vuldrok settlements like Karttikea marked the first major changes to this continent in centuries. The Vuldrok have done little to change the landscape, but their views have begun to shape those of their neighbors. Runecasting, while still very rare, has gained some followers, and some local watchers have added it to their repertoire. These watchers are often the children of Vuldrok-native unions. They have found it an extremely useful way to keep the altars operating.

Some people say altars thus "blessed" add emphasis to the sacred stories broadcast on them, but traditionalists mutter about its sacrilegious nature. A few even warn that the runes warp the stories, and tell apocryphal stories of entire villages that have lost the old ways, becoming corrupted by old stories told on new altars. Runecasting has not spread beyond Gastony, however. Even New Venice, which has had some peaceful dealings with the Vuldrok, has not incorporated this practice.

This might change if the Gastony Vuldrok become more comfortable navigating Lamorak's expansive seas. Karttikea, for instance, has only limited space and air travel, but has begun developing a fleet for fishing, trading and exploring. Its voyages over the yellow seas have brought them into contact with Lamorak natives only rarely, but this could change.

Gastony itself has a small population. It consists primarily of wide-open plains populated with native wildlife. The creatures here lack the ferocious reputations of the ones near Burdena, but at least a few can hold their own against human hunters. Most of the people here are nomads, following the herds that supply them with food and raw materials.

Personality

Marlena "Golembane" Buffington

Marlena still remembers the shivers that ran down her spine every time "Lelina Huskwrecker" appeared at her hamlet's small temple. The ancient adventures of Joana Stapelton's most famous character thrilled Marlena no end. Lelina Huskwrecker battled ancient evils, protected the weak, and always got the boy in the end. Thus when Marlena came of age, she said good-bye to her family and made her way to Burdena, city of heroes.

Marlena took to her training at once, proving as adept at the bardic aspects of her lessons as she did in the combat drills. Her first travels took her across the continent with several other wanna-be-heroes, and their lack of adventures did not stop her from creating wonderful stories about hunting great beasts and averting bandit raids. Thus she had already begun to make a name for herself when she had her first encounter with an amok mining golem. She ran when her weapons could not hurt it, and only managed to stop it by luring it over a cliff. Her ensuing stories gained her a new title, as well as invitations to join other heroes in their travels. Now she travels the space lanes, sure that the evil husks her idol used to encounter populate every ship she meets.

Race: Human

Quote: "What? No husks? Are you sure? Ah, well then. So much for heroism today. Excuse me? Golems? Uh, yes, I fight golems, but there are surely none here. Oh. How big did you say? Well, then... uh... I suppose I shall have to gather a hearty band of heroes and confront it, yes?"

Description: Trim and lithe, Marlena has the physique of a gymnast, and she practices her acrobatics constantly. She prefers to wear a leotard while adventuring, covered by a leather jacket.

Roleplaying Notes: Life has taught her that the universe is filled with adventure. Well, actually holovids did that. Still, she believes it, and embellishes her stories to fit this worldview. She does not see this as lying, or even realizes that she is doing so. She just believes her own stories.

Entourage: Other Lamorak heroes.

Body: Strength 6 (+1 DMG), Dexterity 8, Endurance 6
Mind: Wits 6, Perception 5, Tech 4
Spirit: Extrovert 7, Introvert 1, Passion 6, Calm 2, Faith 2, Ego 4



Natural skills: Charm 7, Dodge 8, Fight 6, Impress 6, Melee 6, Observe 7, Shoot 6, Sneak 5, Vigor 8
Learned skills: Acrobatics 6, Crossbow, Empathy 3, Gambling 1, Performance (Storytelling) 5, Read Urthish, Remedy 4, Ride 3, Speak Vuldrok, Survival 2, Tracking 1
Blessing: Handsome (+1 Charm)
Curse: Gullible (-2 Wits against fast-talk attempts)
Martial Arts: Martial Kick, Martial Throw, Drop and Kick, Leaping Kick
Equipment: 30' coil of rope, telescoping rod (10' max), fusion torch (with extra fusion cell)
Weapons: Axe (8d), Crossbow (6d)
Armor: Leather Jacket (2d)
Wyrd: 6
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0

Novgorod

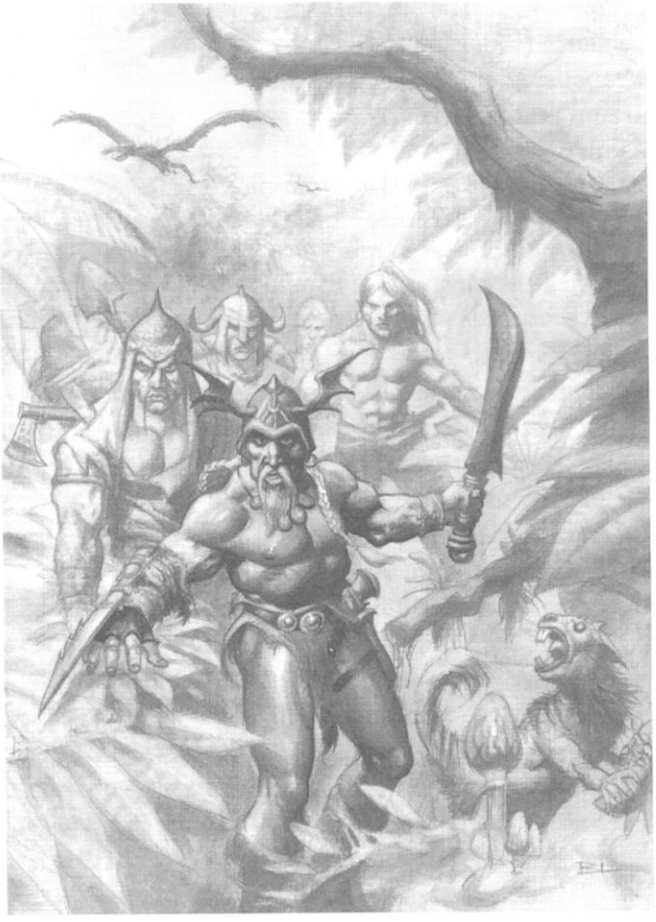
Novgorod is a wet hell. Underneath its canopy of peaceful green, death stalks in many forms. Shade conceals an incredibly fertile ecosphere hosting thousands of yet-to-be-identified species. Even those species who have been placed in some kind of rough taxonomy have rarely been properly studied, especially those weird creatures that exhibit electrical or even psychic powers.

People who live on the planet don't do a lot of studying — they are too busy trying to stay at the top of the food chain. Animals in the vast rain forest of Novgorod are classified as tusked, fanged, taloned, poisonous, acidic, electrical, winged, chameleon or some combination thereof — an animal is known by how it kills.

Within this rainy nightmare, however, are rich goods to be plundered. The network of delicate ecosystems has extruded pearls beyond price, creating magnificent treasures in the form of beautiful animal furs, the unique *hycla* wood and the shimmering Know Stones. Such treasures are the chief draw for explorers and merchants making planetfall.

History

Vuldrok colonists discovered the planet sometime in the 4700s. Since then, many hardy Vuldrok settlers have tried to tame the wilderness. The ecology, however, is severe, and allows little time for farming. In 4903, a successful long-term settlement finally took root, thanks to the desperation of Larag Voltr and the runecasting of Sigful Stormhair.



Voltr, thane of a minor nation called the Tovki, came to Novgorod with his family, fleeing the blood vengeance of his enemies on Fingisvold. Sigful, a runecaster recently scorned by a Fingisvold patron, accompanied him, curious about the largely unexplored world. The two exiled warriors initially sought only a temporary lair where they could rebuild their strength. Novgorod, however, provided little respite, so tough was survival on the planet. But its riches were too valuable to forego. Voltr became trapped on the world, unable to return home lest his enemies demand blood and unable to give up Novgorod lest someone else find a motherlode to power there.

The Tovki settled in for a long stay, building the town of Kornir near the rim of a freshwater lake formed by an old meteor impact crater. Evidence of Kornir's uncanny genesis still scars the ground around the perimeter of the town. Sigful Stormhair used runecasting to cleanse the area of local flora, and made the soil barren so that the prodigious plantlife could not take root again. Nonetheless, stray runner vines occasionally crawl from the surrounding jungle, and must be cut, burned, or drenched in acid to prevent them from growing further. Although the soil may be barren, potted plants found in various windows or gardens still grow.

The lake was stocked with fish from distant lakes, and soon offered steady catches, supplementing hunting and gathering or the small plot-farms within the village (using imported soil).

The Tovki brought no special technology with them to Novgorod, except for their starships. After Kornir's foundation was laid, Voltr directed the people to adapt their nation's forte to this world: the domestication, training, and breeding of wild animals. As their knowledge of the local fauna increased, they worked to develop partnership bonds with certain animals that could protect and guide them in the wilderness. Imported mastiffs and wolf-hybrids did well on the planet, but not so well as local species who developed the same loyalties.

The able-nosed *khryski* and the ever-vigilant *ulehg* were two of the more commonly used animals. Once paired with these creatures, it wasn't hard for the Tovki to track herds of grazing animals and spot solitary predators. The nesting grounds and birthing places of these animals were used for the training and breeding of these beasts.

In addition, several riding creatures were soon trained, and a work animal (the lumbering *gulk*) was employed to

help with heavy tasks.

Across the crater lake from Kornir, a makeshift spaceport was chiseled out of the jungle. Only part of the area is protected by the soil-deadening runecasting; the rest was cleared with toxic fuels, enforced by the fusion burns from launching engines. This spaceport now has few facilities and only a low-powered radio, capable of receiving and transmitting but not detecting ships in orbit. There are now a few rotting hulks of dead ships clustered around the blackened clearing, which could conceivably serve as fodder for parts cannibalizing.

The Tovki are relatively benign to travelers who bring trade or word of events from other worlds. Novgorod has no representation in the Althing and is rarely visited by other Vuldrok. Only a handful of merchants regularly make the trip to trade for unique furs, woods and other items, in return for stocking the Tovki's supplies of tech and selling performances of the latest Vuldrok epics.

A few explorers have hacked their way into the forests and jungles, never to be seen or heard from again — a frequent occurrence even for the Tovki natives. The Tovki have developed a stoic superstition about the spirits of the woods, who are seen as malevolent or neutral at best.

Although the Tovki pretend they are the masters of the world, the truth is that Novgorod has barely been explored. Only the area immediately surrounding Kornir is well-known; the rest is wilderness. Rumors abound, however, of a Lakol colony that secretly landed elsewhere in the world, seeking to know the heart of the planet and its life cycle well away from the prying eyes of other Vuldrok. No evidence of them can be found even from orbit, and many speculate that, if such a colony does exist, they are living as primitively as possible, and thus leaving no trace of their existence to outsiders.

While the Tovki do not like to sell their trained hunting or guide animals, they do hire themselves out to newcomers as guides. Their animals are an invaluable aid for helping them stay alive in the wilderness, and can perceive threats even expert woodsmen would be lucky to detect.

Despite the dangers, some explorers have managed to return with valuable trade goods. Hycla is a rare form of hardwood that can be grown into any desired shape by a properly trained hycla carver. It can live and continue to grow even with no roots as long as it is slicked down now and then with water. The hycla carvers have developed an oil from the fat of local *glaaba* herdbeasts that makes hycla smooth and shiny and can provide its moisture needs with less maintenance.

Many exotic spices can be found in certain regions, and Tovki healers and midwives use amazing curative herbs.

Perhaps Novgorod's most unique and popular luxury item, however, is a Know Stone. These strange, natural rocks, which are found most often in riverbeds, change color in response to body temperature. It is said that a Know Stone will reveal if its bearer lies or is in love. They can be carved into buildings or sculptures.

Novgorod Traits

Ruler: Warlord Gurvis Gormluck (Tovki Nation)

Cathedral: Kornir (dedicated to Gyevya, Mistress of Vines)

Agora: Kornir Square

Garrison: 2

Capital: Kornir

Jumps: 7

Adjacent Worlds: Fingisvold (dayside)

Solar System: Rapuchel (0.4 AU), Minsk (0.799 AU), Novgorod (1.034 AU, Ursus), Kabatchni (4.83 AU), Ilyana (10.36 AU, Kervon, Mitusk), Torosk (32.23 AU) and Cirili (45.6 AU, rings), Jumpgate (62.72 AU)

Tech: 4

Human Population: 225,000

Alien Population: None

Resources: Hardwoods, food

Exports: Luxury items: furs (varied and multi-colored furs, from the extremely silky to armor-thick, desired by Vuldrok on all worlds), wines, crafted furniture

Landscape: The planet's continents are covered in jungles and forests, split by mighty rivers with thousands of tributaries. The high water-vapor content of Novgorod's atmosphere provides a hothouse for the planet's rampant flora, although it does little to filter some of the more dangerous cosmic rays. Perhaps this combination of warm-weather climate and relatively high background radiation has contributed to the bizarre but successful mutations that thrive on the planet. Unlike most worlds, Novgorod's poles are not frozen.

Places

From the wet, oceanic poles to the lush equatorial rain forests that make up the continental masses, Novgorod teems with life and abundant habitats that breed diversity.

Except for the region surrounding Kornir, the planet is virtually unexplored. A few years ago, several young Tovki men took it upon themselves to establish a new village in the hilly region to the east of Kornir. The small camp did fine until the heavy autumn rains came. Judging from the scene later found by a hunting party, the entire encampment was buried underneath a vast mudslide. Several large, armored, segmented worms had bored out of their dens after a long summer's hibernation. This event, surprisingly, has not dimmed the hopes of several Tovki youth who wish

to hold their own land and make their own rules.

A vast lake can be found to the north of Kornir. Swamps form the southern board of the lake, home to hordes of stinging, biting insects of every size, color and shape. Once a year, during the change from fire season to spring, Kornir endures a day of blackened skies filled with insects. Residents wisely stay inside to avoid getting devoured by a thousand small bites and stings; some leave on hunting expeditions away from Kornir just before the insects swarm.

After the insect season comes the long rainy season. Rains fall continuously for days. Floods are an everyday occurrence. Most structures in Kornir are built on stilts; the first structures washed away with the first rains. Everything becomes so damp and waterlogged that strange fungi begin to grow everywhere. Through careful observation of local fauna and some trial and error, Tovki cooks have discovered which fungi are edible and which are poisonous. Still, there are other fungal dangers: Some early settlers were killed by spore infections, their gray-green bodies buried in a mud-pool on the far side of the lake. Since then, precautions are taken during the rainy season: Windows and doors are sealed with sheets, and those who walk abroad wear tight scarves around their faces.

After the long, drenching, torrential rains, Novgorod experiences a long dry season. The jungle buds with beauty and grace. After the spring rains, however, comes the dangerous mating season. Large, rutting fanged creatures are easily riled.

The summer burns on. Many plants begin to dry up. Water becomes scarce, as many rivers and streams dry up, turning standing water putrid. This is fire season, when the tinderbox jungle renews itself on a spark of lightning from the sky. Vast walls of burning vegetation roar through the jungle. The destroyed undergrowth then sludges in the early fall rains to form perfect fertilizer for the new plants that bloom in late fall, before the rainy season returns.

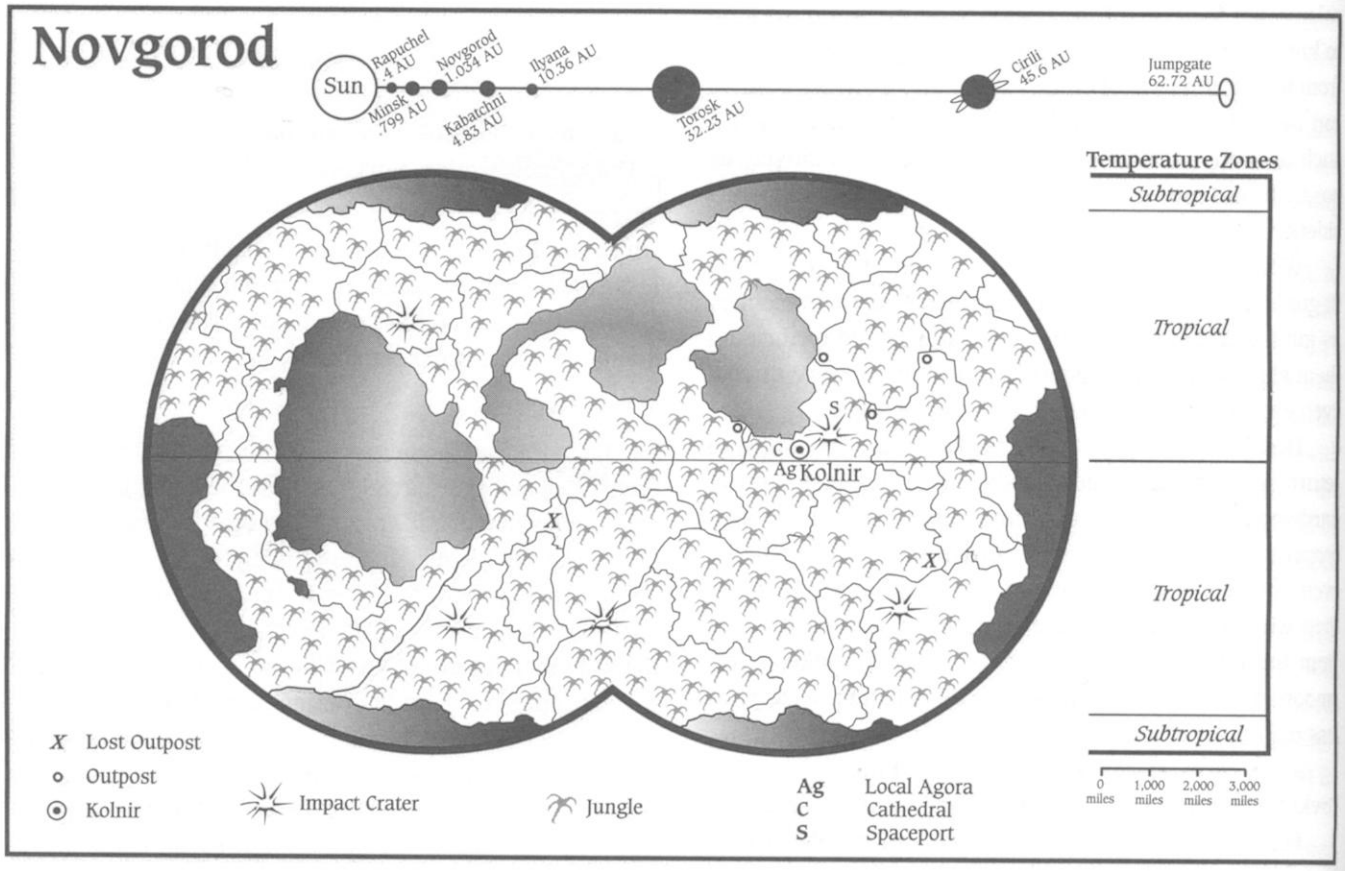
There is no winter on Novgorod, only a cycle of rainy spring, hot and dry summer, and moist fall. Everything plays by the tune of the seasons in Novgorod, and those who ignore the changes in the weather face doom.

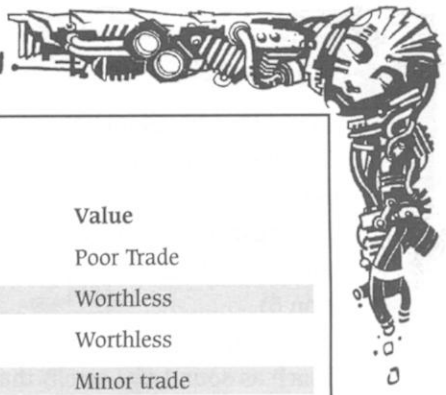
The oceans teem with life, more diverse even than the jungles — and even more unexplored.

Flora and Fauna

There are uncounted millions of species on Novgorod. Such diversity is due to the humid atmosphere of the planet, and its rich soil and advantageous position within its solar system. Biodiversity is Novgorod's greatest asset.

It would require a giant encyclopedia to properly provide an adequate listing of every creature on Novgorod. Instead, the Creature Chart (see sidebar) can simulate the characteristics of most beasts discovered while on a jaunt through





Creature Chart

d20	Size	Speed	Intelligence	Senses	Eco Role	Attack	Defense	Value
1-2	Microscopic	Immobile	None	None	Throwback	None	None	Poor Trade
3-4	Tiny	Immobile	None	Motion	Scavenger	None	None	Worthless
5-6	Small	Very Slow	Instinctual	Motion	Scavenger	Natural	None	Worthless
7-8	Small	Very Slow	Instinctual	Hearing	Pollinator	Natural	Runner	Minor trade
9-10	Medium	Slow	Common	Visual	Herdbeast	Natural	Flight	Minor trade
11-12	Medium	Slow	Common	Visual+	Herdbeast	Poisonous	Armor	Good trade
13-14	Large	Human	Crafty	Visual++	Predator	Acidic	Camouflage	Good trade
15-16	Large	Rapid	Crafty	Starlight	Predator	Projectile	Scentless	Export
17-18	Giant	Speedy	Wily	Infrared	Predator	Constrictor	Shed Skin	Export
19-20	Huge	Blur	Semi-sentient	Electrostatic*	Unique	Electrical **	Fast Healing***	Priceless

* Roll again; on results of 19-20, the creature has a Psychic sense.

** Roll again; on results of 19-20, the creature has a Radiation attack.

*** Roll again; on results of 19-20, the creature has a Psychic Cloak defense.

Novgorod's wilderness. Roll one d20 for each category on the chart.

Please note that these characteristics are just suggestions. Gamemasters are advised to try to create believable creatures, although Novgorod's alien environment can produce many strange adaptations.

Size

Microscopic: This creature is smaller than the naked eye can see.

Tiny: This creature is about the size of an adult human's hand.

Small: About the size of a small dog. (Vitality: -6/-3/-1/+ 1 per Endurance rating)

Medium: Approximately the size of a human being. (Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/+ 1 per Endurance rating)

Large: Big enough for a human to ride. (Vitality: as medium, above, but add two nonvital levels.)

Giant: Larger than a horse, perhaps rhinoceros size. (Vitality: as medium, above, but add four nonvital levels.)

Huge: Megafauna — elephant — or even dinosaur — sized. (Vitality: as medium, above, but add eight nonvital levels.)

Speed

Immobile: Creature does not move unless carried.

Very Slow: Creature creeps along almost imperceptibly. (Dexterity 1)

Slow: Creature moves as slow as a turtle, but fast enough to notice. (Dexterity 3, Vigor 1)

Human: Creature moves as fast as — but not much faster than — a human. (Dexterity 5, Dodge 3, Vigor 3)

Rapid: Creature moves as fast as a horse. (Dexterity 8, Dodge 5, Vigor 5)

Speedy: Creature moves as fast as a cheetah. (Dexterity 10, Dodge 7, Vigor 7)

Blur: Creature is not normally seen because it is extremely fast-moving. (Dexterity 12+, Dodge 9, Vigor 9)

Intelligence

None: No intelligence whatsoever. Creature responds only to outside stimuli, and then in an almost pre-programmed fashion (much like a Venus Flytrap closes its fronds when its trigger is touched). Untrainable.

Instinctual: Creature is intelligent enough to learn migration and breeding patterns and possesses sufficient cunning to track ordinary prey. Simple to train, but very stupid. (Wits 1, Observe 1)

Common: Fairly intelligent for an animal. Can learn a little, slightly better than instinctual. May form packs or cooperate with other members of its species. Fairly simple to train. (Wits 2, Observe 2)

Crafty: Intelligent and able to problem-solve to a certain extent. Nonverbal communication between specimens. Difficult to train. (Wits 3, Observe 3)

Wily: Hard to catch unawares, usually very difficult to train without its cooperation. (Wits 5, Observe 5)

Semi-sentient: Nearly human intelligence, and easy to train once its respect is earned. Some rudimentary language is known. The creature can think creatively and actually make plans for the future. (Wits 7, Observe 7)

Senses

None: Cannot react to outside stimuli. Whether or not it has a nervous system is debatable.

Motion: The creature can sense motion in the area around it. (Perception 1)

Hearing: The creature can sense sounds in the area





around it. (Perception 2)

Visual: The creature can see in the area around it. (Perception 3)

Visual+: The creature can see and has one other sense (such as sound) that applies to the area around it. (Perception 5)

Visual++: The creature can see and has two other senses (such as sound and smell) that apply to the area around it. (Perception 7)

Starlight/Infrared: Same as Visual ++, but can either see thermal patterns or utilize low light levels.

Electrostatic: Same as Visual+, but also includes a sixth sense of electrical patterns.

Psychic: Psychically senses the presence of life and of thinking minds, although this does not necessarily mean it is telepathic.

Ecological Role

Throwback: A very dangerous relic of the planet's evolutionary past. Likely to do anything to survive.

Scavenger: Likes to eat dead things, and frequently doesn't mind helping them get that way. (Dodge +2, Sneak 5)

Pollinator: This species is important to another species' reproduction, and has a symbiotic relationship with that species.

Herdbeast: Usually herbivores, but not always, these creatures band together for strength in numbers. Herdbeasts are frequently the most tamable creatures, but not always. (Vigor +2)

Predator: Solitary or pack-based, these creatures hunt together and are usually carnivorous. (Sneak 7)

Unique: This species is so unique or new it hasn't established itself within a set role yet. It could possibly be a newly sentient race.

Attack

Natural: The creature has fangs, claws, talons, horns or other form of natural attack, such as a charge or tail swipe.

Poisonous: The creature has a poisonous bite, claws, or spittle.

Acidic: The creature has acid for blood, can spit acid, or perhaps can change the acidity of any water in which it swims.

Projectile: The creature can shoot some kind of projectile to inflict damage on its prey.

Constrictor: The creature has a body, tail or other appendage that allows it to grapple prey and perhaps squeeze or suffocate it to death.

Electrical: The creature is able to give its prey a jolt of electricity.

Radiation: This creature stores solar or background radiation, feeds on radioactive elements, or otherwise causes radiation burns or damage.

Defense

Runner: The creature can run very fast to escape prey. If small, it can scamper through forests, relying on cover; if larger than that, it may rely on bursts of speed across open land to outdistance its pursuer.

Flight: The creature can fly to escape ground-based attackers. If the creature is size medium or above, roll again. If a Flight result occurs a second time, assume it can fly.

Armor: Harder to damage than normal skin or fur. The larger the creature, the better the defense rating. This could instead be some form of passive attack, such as quills, thorns or some other defense that harms an attacker rather than providing armor dice.

Camouflage: The creature is harder to see than normal. (Sneak +5)

Scentless: The creature is harder to smell than normal, and cannot be tracked by scent. (Sneak +5 against smell)

Shed Skin: The creature can shed its skin, and can even slip from a grapple by doing so.

Fast Healing: The creature recovers Vitality damage at a quicker pace than most. (Usually one per three hours for nonvital levels, one per day for vital levels, but faster healers are known.)

Psychic cloak: The creature emits a psychic effect that causes other beings to ignore it as if it were not there, as long as it remain unobtrusive (if it attacks, its cloak no longer works).

Value

Poor Trade: This creature is actually so undesirable it makes others disinclined to trade at all. In fact, offering it might be an insult.

Worthless: Everybody can get one of these creatures; it's as common as dirt.

Minor trade: Usually good for food but not clothing or luxury items.

Good trade: Valuable for its fur or feathers, its song, as a pet, or for tasty eating. Worth two minor trades.

Export: Extremely desirable fur, feathers, disposition (makes a good pet or guard) or organs (some extracts of *muko* tiger are aphrodisiacs). Possibly worth firebirds. Worth two good trades, or four minor trades.

Priceless: One-of-a-kind or highly sought-after, possibly for the live animal.

Khryski

Swift, supple predators who hunt alone in the wild or in bonded pairs (usually mates). The Tovki have bred some to act in bonds with a human hunter, or in small packs. While they are somewhat larger than Urth foxes, they occupy a similar niche in that they tend to hunt small prey, either *lursk* mice or *tuvi* voles. The Tovki use them to track prey with their phenomenal noses, but rarely send them out to attack.

They are small, rapid, crafty, have visual++ senses (sight, sound and smell), are predatory (small prey), possess a natural attack (bite), are runners, and are a good trade (trainable as trackers).

Body: Strength 2, Dexterity 9, Endurance 4
Mind: Wits 7, Perception 7
Natural skills: Dodge 7, Fight 3, Observe 7, Vigor 5
Weapons: Bite (2d)
Armor: None
Vitality: -6/-3/-1/0/0/0/0

Ulehg

Similar to an Urthish wolf, the Ulehg are pack animals honed to bring down *glaaba* beasts or other similar large prey. The Tovki train them as hunting animals, used to not only track prey but to bring it down. A skilled human hunter with a trained Ulehg pack can take down a *charga* mammoth (a sort of furred rhinoceros).

They are small, rapid, of slightly more than common intelligence, have visual++ senses (sight, sound and smell), are predatory (large prey), possess a natural attack (bite), are runners, and are a good trade (trainable as hunters).

Body: Strength 6, Dexterity 7, Endurance 7
Mind: Wits 3, Perception 5
Natural skills: Dodge 4, Fight 7, Observe 5, Vigor 7
Weapons: Bite (3d)
Armor: Fur (1d)
Vitality: -6/-3/-1/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Personality

Kevil Orn

Of the many hunters and backwoodsmen and -women of Novgorod, Kevil is renowned as a guide and tracker. He hires himself out to off-worlders who come seeking adventure or treasure in Novogorod's untouched reaches.

Two trained Ulehg hounds, who growl at anyone approaching Kevil with less than a smile, always accompany him; an unsheathed weapon may be enough to initiate a bark or even an attack from them.



Race: Human
Rank/Class: Tovki Armsman

Quote: (grunt) "North, ya say? Yeah, I can go there." (spits) "Damn fool bugs, though. Gonna cost extra, unless you got fancy repellent." (grimaces) "Otherwise, gotta smear stinkweed all over to keep 'em away. That might keep my Ulehg away, too."

Description: A filthy barbarian who hasn't had a bath in weeks, Kevil wears skins and furs from creatures he caught, skinned and tanned himself, somewhat sloppily — he's a good hunter, but not a craftsman. He wears a long beard but keeps his brown hair closely-cropped.

Entourage: He is always accompanied by Kita and Lüs, a pair of Ulehg fiercely loyal to him.

Body: Strength 7 (+1 DMG), Dexterity 6, Endurance 7
Mind: Wits 4, Perception 6, Tech 3
Spirit: Extrovert 1, Introvert 3, Passion 1, Calm 5, Faith 3, Ego 1
Natural skills: Dodge 6, Fight 5, Impress 5, Melee 8, Observe 8, Shoot 5
Learned skills: Archery 7, Beast Lore 8, Gambling 3, Lore (Novgorod wildlife) 7, Remedy 5, Riding 4, Speak Vuldrok, Stoic Body 4, Survival 8, Tracking 8
Wyrd: 3
Equipment: Rope, provisions, bandages, herbs, compass (TL5)
Weapons: Short sword (6d), Spear (6d), Hunting Bow (4d), Knife (3d)
Armor: Leather jerkin (4d)
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Pandora

From space, Pandora appears deceptively serene. It is a simple yellowish world with few large bodies of water and few distinguishing features of terrain. Hidden behind this placid exterior, the planet has thousands of hidden dangers, not from its indigenous flora or fauna, but from the technology covertly used by its human inhabitants. Vast plains of red soil provide abundant crops, plenty of cheap material for housing, and a haven for those who study forbidden tech. Poverty and progress exist side by side. This world is like a Pandoran armed with too much concealed cybertech: Don't misjudge him based on his appearance.

Hidden from dust storms, thieves and inquisitors, the people of Pandora guard carefully maintained caches of technology. Since the time of the Diaspora, the planet has remained isolated from most of the systems around it, creating a backwater that harbors black-market medical clinics, fanatic think machine enthusiasts and a culture that considers technology an integral part of life. Few travelers visit this impoverished world; those who return keep silent about their illegal transactions. The Pandora system has remained closed to most interstellar traffic for centuries; now that it has been "opened up" to the Known Worlds once again, even the Inquisition cannot guess what forces will be released.



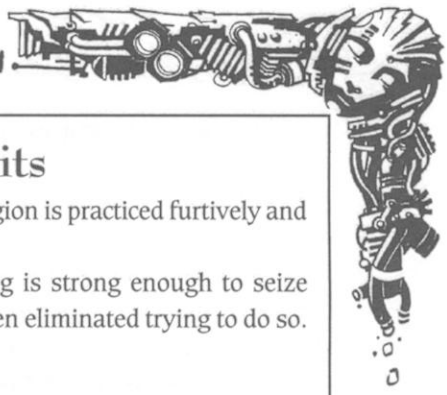
History

In the 24th and 25th centuries, colonizing the stars for humanity required monumental expenses. This was the beginning of the Industrial Combine Age, when the corporate zaibatsu of Urth's First Republic invested heavily in colony ships and exploration. Individuals took great risks to survey the frontiers of space, but corporations took credit for their achievements, claiming entire planets as their exclusive domains. "Company worlds" could breed millions of consumers. The zaibatsu that owned them made sure they had monopolies on the goods and services they required. Enforcing ownership was easy: Without supplies and technical knowledge supplied by parent corporations, planetary colonies could easily degrade into primitive backwaters.

Pandora was among the first of the First Republic systems to risk challenging the zaibatsu of Old Urth. The planet's wealth depended on high-tech sweat shops, hellholes where citizens worked long hours in exchange for a meager existence. Their products were expensive, but building materials, local foodstuffs and labor were all cheaply available. Life was cheap, too — factory workers had few rights, and local laws existed mainly for the sake of protecting company interests and property. When the local labor leaders decided their colony could be self-sufficient without paying taxes and tariffs to their financial masters, Pandora's corporate offices underwent some rather drastic downsizing. A revolution of impoverished Pandorans raided the local corporate headquarters and set them aflame. This changed the planet's history forever.

Life was hard, even more so than enduring financial oppression, but finding new clients, customers and trading partners was easy. Pandorans didn't have to seek out business; travelers and merchants came to them. The result was a booming economy. Unfortunately, with it came a new system of management to run the world. The next generation of economic elite wanted to make sure another revolution wouldn't depose them. A new managerial caste arose, one that safeguarded its tech, keeping it hidden from the masses. History repeated itself: The worker castes were educated just enough to slave away for a lifetime. As offworld overlords were replaced by local technocrats, the rift between those who had wealth and those who didn't grew wider than ever before.

Throughout this period of transition and into the Diaspora, Pandora remained outside the laws of other worlds, and local merchants exploited this freedom for all it was



worth. In those tumultuous days, zealous pilots traveled where they pleased, sometimes breaking through corporate sectors to sell supplies local merchants wouldn't touch. Pandora's economy thrived on smuggling, and its visitors spread its illegal trade throughout the worlds of the Diaspora. Ironically, while the planet's most successful traders amassed credits, the standard of living of the average Pandoran steadily decreased. This created a culture even more vicious and uncaring than the one it had deposed.

A xenophobic attitude festered on Pandora, keeping it removed from the evolution of the rest of Human Space. Because the planet's population had long since rejected the laws of others, it attracted a new breed of criminal, one attracted to easily available tech, cheap living and high profit. Within a few generations, a black market developed, one the planet's economic elite could not suppress or control. The local corporations suddenly had competition, and greedy Pandorans quit their jobs in droves to join the planet's shadow economy. The result was the "golden age" of cybertech.

Once Pandora adapted to this new criminal culture, the only travelers willing to make the journey were those desperate to go unnoticed in their transactions. Pandora thrived on businesses and services other worlds shunned. As long as pilots and smugglers continued to land with clients, profitable business continued. Pandora's population increased steadily, attracting cybertechnician surgeons who didn't keep records, computer communes devoted to cutting-edge codes and programming, and even the occasional fugitive golem slave. If an offworlder wanted black-market tech, he could pay a heavy price to find it on Pandora. Sometimes, that price would be his life; for those who didn't trade in high technology, slitting an offworlder's throat was just as profitable.

Pandora's culture became increasingly violent and anarchistic, a firm rebellion against the legendary exploitation of the economic elite. The final act of rebellion involved sabotage of the system's jumpgate. The last remnants of the managerial caste shut it down in a desperate attempt to evade the increasing control and outside influence of the Second Republic.

Despite the drastic decrease in business, the citizens of Pandora tried to make the best of a desperate situation. The fields still yielded cheap, if bland, crops, and housing was readily available to anyone who could craft adobe bricks from the planet's abundant soil. Black-market clinics and computer communes stopped receiving offworld customers, but caches of forbidden tech remained. Isolated from the rest of the Second Republic, 10 million Pandorans were trapped in a nightmare of their own creation.

After the Fall

The citizens of Pandora never heard of the fall of the Second Republic, nor would they have cared. By then, Pandora had become an isolated dystopia, a high-tech hellhole that had cut off all trade to the rest of Known Space. Wealthy technocrats had desperately attempted to keep order within their bubble economy, but ultimately failed. The economic elite escaped offworld; although they couldn't leave through the local jumpgate, travel to the distant colonies of the Pandora system continued. The masses they left behind were almost starving, but still held an abundance of technology and knowledge. After seizing the means of production, and the weapons used to protect them, the local citizens scavenged what they could find in their high-tech factories and went into business for themselves. They preserved this wealth, then squandered it, and finally hid it from any who would take it away.

Over a millennia later, in 4999, Alexius' Questing Knights reopened the Pandora system to the rest of the Known Worlds. They were horrified to find out what was trapped inside. Pandora had steadily fallen further into squalor, and it is now a world where mistrust and xenophobia are essential to survival. Wealth is still measured by access to relic technology, but few enjoy such luxuries... or display them openly. The massive glass-and-steel structures of the largest cities have been looted and burned, but Pandora has

Pandora Traits

Cathedral: None. Religion is practiced furtively and secretly.

Agora: No single gang is strong enough to seize the agora. Several have been eliminated trying to do so.

Capital: Neo Chiba

Jumps: 2

Adjacent Worlds: Sutek (dayside)

Solar System: Torch (0.3 AU), Sludge (0.6 AU), Pandora (1.0 AU), Metha (4.8 AU), Migon (8 AU), Elysia (15 AU), Jumpgate (30 AU)

Tech: 5 overall; 6+ among the tech cabals

Human Population: 1,200,000,000 impoverished serfs; 100,000 members of the technological elite

Alien Population: None

Resources: Soyu, synthlife, cybernetics, think machine programs, medical expertise and relic tech

Exports: Soyu is the only legally recognized export

Landscape: Most of this planet is one vast land of rolling plains, veldt and savanna. Bodies of water comprise only about 20% of the planet's surface. As such, the inhabitants don't think of geography in terms of continents, but by the names of major plains and cities. A few locations are known by their coordinates of latitude and longitude.





steadily rebuilt a nightmare from the ashes.

Cybertech is much rarer here than it was a thousand years ago, but nearly anyone on the streets of a Pandoran city may be selling it... or using it. In the safest sanctums of their primitive homes, the wealthiest families keep their heirlooms hidden. Think machines and other technological relics aren't just concealed because the dusty plains of this world wreak havoc on electronic components. More importantly, they're kept hidden because there are strong motivations for stealing from neighbors.

Despite short-lived reformations and occasional benevolent attempts at government over the past centuries, over 99 percent of the world's population now consists of peasants living at a sustenance level. Less than one in 10,000 Pandorans actually belong to the planet's technological elite. The highest levels of Pandoran society aren't held by nobles or priests, but by the technologically savvy. Because they prefer to keep their wealth hidden, their fields of sustenance farms and vast dilapidated villages hide some of the most advanced technology in Human Space. Hidden in the midst of over a billion peasants, small cabals of technophiles continue to develop their crafts.

Pandora still has unusually advanced medical technology, for the culture has maintained a sizable caste of healers and surgeons. The local standards of medicine are slightly ahead of what the Engineer's Guild possesses in the Known Worlds. Advanced medicine, complicated with the easy availability of food and housing, has made overpopulation a recurrent problem; thus, human life is far from sacred. Health care exists for profit, and Pandoran doctors are a mercenary lot. One of their most profitable exports is a medical supply called "synthlife," a valuable component in cybernetics designed to perfectly mimic organic life. The city of Fervor makes a healthy profit manufacturing it, albeit in limited quantities. Such readily available medical supplies makes knife-fighting and brawling popular "sports" in that city.

The wealthiest Pandoran surgeons hide illicit practices behind their innocuous personas as healers and doctors. Black-market clinics are not nearly as common as they were during the First Republic, but are still capable of dealing with relic cybertech. Entourages of off-world explorers now seek them out for their expert advice on redeemed medical technology. Traveling to Pandora to have redeemed cybertech installed is a rather epic way to circumvent the records of the Engineer's Guild, but then again, it's an even better way to escape the watchful eyes and readied flameguns of the Inquisition.

Think machine communes are another aspect of Pandora's technological culture: gatherings of citizens who make their living creating and trading code. Communication between communes is limited to the speed of messengers, freelancers who are paid to carry data disks from one settlement to another. Local data messengers never travel offworld, since there isn't much call for their services on other planets. Pandoran think machines are incompatible with those of the Known Worlds, largely because of their vastly different "language" and operating system. The most common shared language is *panlex,* a constantly mutating code that is spread from machine to machine by shareware. Developing panlex is an art form.

Pandora's decadent culture hasn't spread far offworld... yet. Some fear what would happen if it did. The Pandora system has only one jumproute to the Known Worlds, through Sutek, and the Pandoran gate is now protected by elements of the Imperial fleet, who regulate the flow of traffic but can't stop every merchant ship that slips through.

The Imperial authorities have so far kept the nobles of Sutek in the dark, and the Hazat have only just now gained a jumpkey through its spy network. The house does not realize how much forbidden tech has been maintained on Pandora, and still focuses its armies on taking Hira instead. Even were it to evince a great interest in Pandora, its ties with the Church — so necessary for the proposed crusade against the Caliphate — would be harmed, for the Inquisition will surely move to blockade the world once it learns Pandora's secret.

While the dangers posed by the Caliphate have so far kept the flameguns of the Inquisition pointed in other directions, no one knows how long the trend will continue. If the local citizens ever decided to share their technical information with the guilds of the Known Worlds, it could very well spread like a virus throughout the high-tech planets of the empire. Indeed, the guild already has access to the world through its own jumpkeys, and runs missions past the Imperial authorities by skill, guile or bribe.

Both for the sake of their survival and the need to preserve their culture, most of the population of Pandora still distrusts the citizens of the Known Worlds. The few who are ready to do business have remarkable goods to sell.

Solar System

Torch: A molten ball of magma, Torch barely qualifies as a planet at all. The crust and mantle of its surface have worn precariously thin.

Sludge: This massive world is noted for its unending rain and toxic atmosphere. Parents tell their children that it was once inhabited by massive lizard creatures. Of course, they are lying. Sludge is a deathtrap where acid rains eat through metal and flesh with equal rapidity, but Pandoran children prefer to hear nicer bedtime stories.

Metha: A cold world circled with clouds of methane gas, Metha remains shrouded in mystery. Second Republic scientists once knew of vast gaseous "balloon" creatures that wafted on the cloudy currents of Metha's atmosphere like

diaphanous airborne leviathans. Whether this lifeform still exists on the world, or ever did, has not been confirmed.

Migon: Migon is wracked with electrical storms and covered with drifting ice floes. The major icebergs and ice shelves harbor only one form of indigenous life, a crude fungal matter that seems to thrive on electricity. Landing on Migon is possible, but visiting ships are then infected with Migon Fungus, a creeping rot that invades and cripples a ship's electrical systems. Several renegade pirates have tried to harvest this substance as a weapon, but never without meeting disaster afterwards.

Elysia: Centuries ago, the planet's economic elite fled Pandora for the safety of colonies hidden in deep space. Most of these orbited Elysia, a huge gas giant surrounded by a dozen moons and over 20 space stations. Over the last few centuries, the tech supporting these orbiting colonies has steadily deteriorated, and hundreds of thousands of humans have died. While there is plenty of wealth here to be scavenged, there are also a few desperate families of survivors fanatical about protecting it.

People

Pandora's culture is based far more on the greed and corruption of the First Republic than on the religious innovations that followed it. Because the humans on Pandora were sheltered from most of the chaos of the Second Republic's collapse, many of them still equate the advance of technology with progress. They are surprisingly open-minded about learning new tech, or even trading it if the price is right. That price would have to be high, though — Pandorans have always been fiercely mistrustful, almost to a fault. The locals on this world are as isolationist and libertarian as their ancestors were thousands of years ago. Only an exceptional citizens would decide to seek his fortune offworld.

There is no government as such on Pandora, only humans willing to staunchly defend their own rights and property. Because of the lack of any strong legal authority, justice is often enforced over the barrel of a gun or the tip of a blade. Children grow up learning one critical precept: Might makes right. No Pandoran would ever be found without at least one weapon concealed on his person.

Commerce

Local currencies abound in various cities, but each city disfavors other cities' currencies, so the exchange rates aren't very good — one factor keeping most people from roaming too far from home. Merchants rely mainly on bringing rare or needed items from one place and using the profits to purchase a local item that is in high demand elsewhere. They thus tend to move around a lot, although some band together into cabals to monopolize trade on particular items or foods; these gangs usually stick to tried-and-true trade routes and cities.

Offworlders must rely on bartering valued goods usually unavailable on Pandora — mostly Known Worlds luxury items or exotic foodstuffs. Copies of the Omega Gospels are becoming popular in some areas, leading the few missionaries who have discovered the world to believe it is ripe for a conversion. Perhaps centuries of toil and paranoia have left the citizenry desperate for the message of a loving god — or else desperate for a centralized rule wherein peasants have some degree of rights in the Empyrean if not in this world.

Places

The most populous areas of the planet are built over areas of red clay. Housing is made out of a red brick substance similar to adobe. Farmers and harvesters make their living by gathering cheap grains, wheat, and a substance called "soyu" to keep the population above starvation level. Coupled with the astounding abundance of the grasslands of this planet, housing shortages and starvation are remarkably rare. Villages stay together only loosely, based on a need for mutual survival. Living is cheap, but then again, on a world where overpopulation is too easy, life becomes cheap as well.

Because food and housing are plentiful, and the locals are not troubled by predators, the local ecosystem has found a way to keep the human population down: outbreaks of violence. Pandorans do not flinch at the thought of killing to survive. Their culture is a mix of technological supremacy and social barbarism. Those who have tech will kill to keep it; those who do not will kill to take it. This has an unexpected benefit. Any barbarian or explorer who thinks he can take a Pandoran think machine by force has another thing coming. Cheap knives are as plentiful on this planet as soyu. Children learn to throw them and brawl with them as part of growing up. Adults are worse, usually preferring cheap slug guns from Fervor. An armed planet is a polite planet, and few worlds are as "polite" as Pandora.

The largest villages have mutated their ways of life since the collapse of the nearest jumpgate. Now that this barrier is reopening, travelers arriving from Sutek will have a hard time finding technological cabals hidden on Pandora. More importantly, some have a hard time finding the remains of the *last* group of travelers from Sutek. The easiest way to find relic tech is to kill offworlders who bring it with them. Pandorans mistrust people they don't know more than the shiftless, greedy and desperate neighbors they do know.

Neo Chiba

The largest city on Pandora is also home to its largest starport. The Chiban Spaceport is actually little more than a

huge clearing with refueling stations, mechanics, merchants and cantinas nearby. Massive crumbling maxicrete walls keep out dust and wind. Visitors who arrive here often proclaim that they're looking for something illegal, and there are droves of guides ready to fleece and misdirect the unwary. Contrary to the stereotype, the average Neo Chiban is not a cybernetic killing machine with contacts in the medical guild and programming communes. He is, however, quite proficient with the knife he hides behind his back and quite ready to rob barbarian rubes who wander into town with too much wealth. Buyer beware.

Most of the citizens of Neo Chiba are peasants at best, enduring a borderline existence sleeping in mud huts and eating boiled soyu. If there's one other thing they have in common, it's the belief that the last thing they need is a noble house to tax them, command them, rule them and rob them. Instead, gangs roam the streets of the worst neighborhoods, looking for offworlders to rob and fellow citizens to exploit.

Panlex Communal Complexes

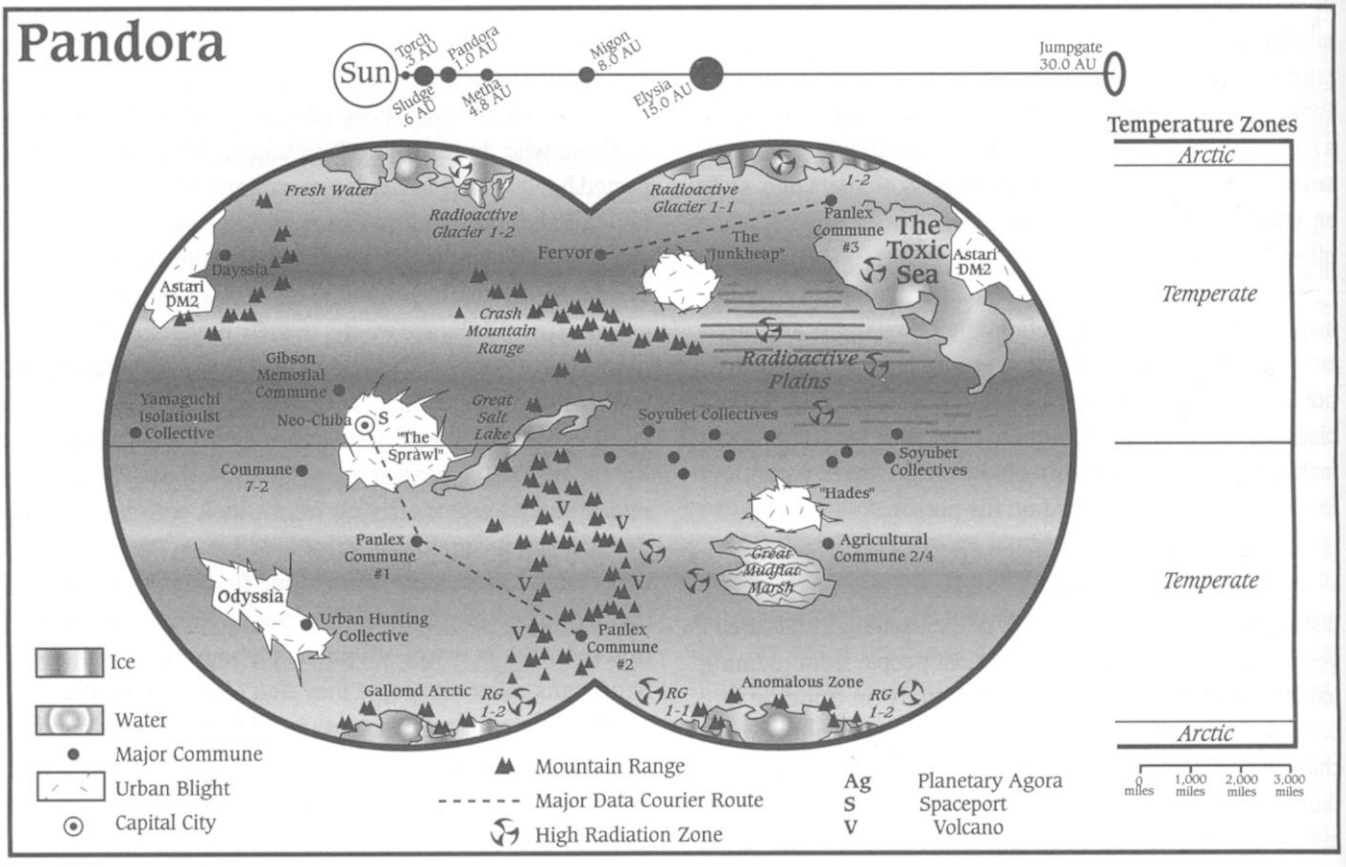
If a traveler from offworld can find a legitimate contact, he may hear tales of distant communes where cults of think machine coders have banded together. Some trade their wares in the agora, offering bizarre programs and codes to offworlders. The rest live solely for amusement and the challenge of advancing Pandoran think machine technology. Communes are typically rows upon rows of crude benches where workers spend more time glaring at screens than talking directly to each other. They are as removed from the rest of Pandoran culture as they are from offworlders, madly pursuing a way of life that was abandoned millennia ago.

Odyssia

This remote village has a high golem population, largely because of the scientists who have assembled here to pursue the cutting edge of their craft. Several Ogre and Companion golems remaining from the Second Republic (as described in **Forbidden Lore: Technology**) are maintained with honored reverence. Sheltered from the dusty winds of Pandora, the local golems exchange the same information over and over, ignoring the changes that have taken place outside their insular circle. Despite their mania for preserving their programming, their memories are steadily failing.

Fervor

Although small, this city is heavily armed, as it is home to some of the most successful weapons dealers. A munitions factory manufactures cheap slug guns for the planet's militia, along with precision parts for relic cybertech. The most profitable product made in Fervor's manufacturing plants is synthlife. Illegally, it's used in most cybertech operations, but legally, the large caste of doctors and healers on this planet have a high demand for it, especially with the Pandorans' love of knife fighting.



In fact, Fervor has a thriving "sports scene" where the locals bet heavily on brawls, knife fights and other gladiatorial contests. Those who win rack in enough credits to purchase a little "edge," as Pandorans call it, giving them weapons to carry back into the arena. It is not uncommon for a robbery victim to be vivisected or dissected, since his most valuable tech is probably kept under his skin. Despite the high murder rate, skilled doctors have also increased Pandora's birth rate. Children's games include toys like throwing knives and zip guns, hopefully to teach them a trade before they get too old and slow to train for the arena. Those who are killed provide another cheap source of protein.

Flora and Fauna

The plains of Pandora are abundant with "soyu," a cheap, genetically engineered protein that is simple to harvest. Processed soyu combines the consistency of tofu with the "flavor" of soybeans. The Pandoran equivalent of a peasant won't starve on soyu, but he won't win any awards for cooking, either. This continued bland and uninteresting diet contributes to the bitter attitude of the local peasants. Meat is far more valuable — if someone uncovers a human body before it's been stripped of flesh, he's got a very valuable commodity.

A few Known Worlds merchants have tried to introduce pets and livestock to Pandora, but such efforts have met with disaster. Neo Chiba is still plagued with roaming packs of feral dogs. On the vast farming plains, Pandoran soyu farmers butcher the few remaining herd animals on sight, largely out of hunger and a need to protect their crops. A Charioteer recently tried to introduce rabbits as food in Forge. After a few of them escaped, a famine hit the area. Local children then started up a thriving business in rabbit pelts. Within a season, the beasties were thoroughly exterminated, never to be seen in the city again.

Personality

Donal Reegest

Donal is part of a burgeoning class of guides, consultants and merchants gathering around the now thriving Pandoran spaceport in Neo Chiba. He left his programming commune six months ago to sell code for offworld think machines; unfortunately, the few he encounters don't run panlex. Now he's got a far more profitable business offering to steer offworlders to a clinic where they can buy a little cybertechnological "edge." Each client he encounters falls into one of two classes: powerful enough to fleece for lots of money or weak enough to rob for even more money. Either way, business is good.



Race: Human

Rank/Class: Pandoran Data Broker and Medical Liaison

Quote: "You want it? I can find it. You need it? I got it. Right this way... in the alleyway, second door on the left....

Description: At just over five feet tall, Donal has mastered the art of appearing innocuous and nondescript. The dull red robes he wears do more than help him blend into a crowd; he sports some deadly hardware under them. His personal wealth is measured in the armaments he's stolen. He doesn't stretch cloth across his face just to keep his lungs free of dust; he prefers that no one remembers his face. If you actually got a good look at his features — after removing his thick glasses and artificial brown hair — you'd see a forgettable face with a broken nose, thin lips and a squint. When undressed, his pale skin looks more suitable for life underground. This suits his profession just fine.

Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 7, Endurance 6

Mind: Perception 6, Wits 6, Tech 8

Spirit: Extrovert 2, Introvert 8, Passion 6, Calm 4, Faith 1, Ego 5

Natural skills: Charm 5, Impress 5, Observe 6, Vigor 7

Learned skills: Think Machine 7, Tech Redemption (High Tech — Golems) 2

Wyrd: 3

Cybernetics: Flesh Cavity, Electroshock Field (anyone grabbing him while the field is active takes 5d damage and suffers a -3 penalty to Vigor rolls for grappling)

Equipment: Whatever he can steal from offworlders.

Weapons: Ceramsteel Knife, Electroshock Field

Armor: Dull, dusty robes (2d)

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0

Sargasso (Collier's Landing)

Sargasso (originally known as Collier's Landing) is a brilliant blue sphere surrounded by breathtakingly beautiful clouds. Beneath them, thousands of tiny islands and small continents are scattered across the planet's surface. William Collier chose the largest continent, Crossroads, when he successfully explored the surface for the first time in the 25th century. Before the installation of terraforming engines, landing through the wild atmospheric winds was difficult even for experienced pilots. Now, millennia later, the islands are inhabited by descendants of the original pilots who shared Collier's reckless enthusiasm — explorers willing to risk their lives for an isolated haven in the stars.

History

In the early days of the First Republic, when corporations funded the exploration of entire worlds, the Dinoba system was a common refueling port for travelers seeking the fringes of space. The fifth planet in the system, Surge, was a massive gas giant surrounded by seven moons; on the largest of these, an extensive space station provided repairs and cheap hydrogen fuel. The third planet of the Dinoba system, originally called Moat by corporate surveyors, was less conspicuous. It was obviously a habitable world, but one where atmospheric landing was nearly impossible.



Surveys revealed that Moat had thousands of tiny islands, incredible turbulence, a thick cloud cover, and atmospheric disturbance that played havoc with scanners and sensors. Only a madman would dare attempt landing there. That man was William Collier, and he achieved the impossible by surviving a crash landing on the largest island in 2442. Many pilots had tried to make a name for themselves by arriving safely; Collier succeeded only because he was willing to risk a near-fatal crash. The name "Collier's Landing" was originally used to refer to the tropical location he discovered, but since travelers had little reason to risk exploring other island chains, the name was soon used in reference to the entire planet, although it fell in disfavor in later years due to scandals concerning Collier's revealed Sathraism. To this day, the phrase is still used to describe any attempt made by a reckless or overly-enthusiastic pilot. The planet is now called Sargasso by most of its inhabitants, representing the large number of craft which have crashed on the world over the centuries.

For centuries, Sargasso served as a gateway between the systems surrounding Earth and the distant, barbarous fringe worlds. Because of the system's proximity to Vera Cruz, it became an ideal refueling station for ships on their way to the frontiers of space. Once William Collier discovered a safe method of touching down spacecraft on the planet's surface, an armada of trade ships followed. Within a few decades, a corporation called EarthCom paved over half of Crossroads' surface and financed the construction of a spaceport, hoping to expand its influence into the many systems beyond.

Although terraforming was beyond the capabilities of these First Republic settlers, electronic beacons and air traffic control made landing on Collier considerably safer. The station at Surge continued its operations, but it simply could not compete with EarthCom's resources and Collier's island paradise. The best pilots in Corporate Space soon learned that Crossroads Station was an excellent jump point for anyone traveling to the unknown, the unexplored or merely marginally profitable worlds of "fringe space." Of course, pilots couldn't touch down without paying for EarthCom's traffic control, but the incredible beaches, idyllic island relaxation and spirit of camaraderie among visiting travelers were sufficient compensation. EarthCom made enough profit to finance a shipyard as well, crafting its buildings from imported concrete and local formations of volcanic pumice.

Unfortunately, the corporations that controlled the local jumproutes steadily began increasing fees, tariffs and taxes to independent pilots. To keep independent business practical, William Collier responded by forming a loosely affili-

ated pilot's guild. Most space traffic to the fringe worlds passed through Vera Cruz and Sargasso (still called Collier's Landing then). Employing occasional sabotage, blockades and rebellion, his alliance made trade routes to the fringe financially practical again. In 2472, pilots at the Crossroads Spaceport stormed the traffic control towers, gaining control over local communications and the electronic beacons that made landing on Collier possible. Within two months, a squadron of merchant ships destroyed the refueling station at Surge, prompting a declaration of war. By 2473, Collier's Landing declared its independence.

Independent Evolution

Administered by a guild of pilots for the next 10 years, Collier's Landing became the gateway to the Fringe. Without the ability to land safely at Collier, ships could not refuel (this was the age before self-recharging fusion drives). Collier's Landing was able to force terms that benefited the pilots who knew the local jumproutes better than the corporations that employed them. Yet the next major crisis the Crossroads Spaceport faced didn't come from Corporate Space; instead, a religious dispute split the ranks of the pilots guild.

Some of the pilots travelling through the Fringe did so as part of the rites of the Sathra religion. Traveling far from established jumproutes allowed them to commune with what they considered the very essence of God. William Collier was one such cultist, and some say his amazing landing was a direct result of his religious fervor. A sizable faction of pilots at Crossroads, however, didn't much care for Sathra cultists — they regarded them as religious fanatics jeopardizing their professional status. As a result, a growing movement among Collier's guild insisted on the installment of Sathra dampers on all ships landing at the station. The result was a bloody series of skirmishes in space between the Sathraist Collerians and the "respectable" pilots and settlers who wanted to colonize the planet further. William Collier was killed in this battle, but the Sathraists won control of the planet.

Their civil war, however, attracted the notice of the First Republic, who sent in a fleet after the Sathraists. While the Sathraists won the initial battle, First Republic reinforcements arrived to find an empty world — the Sathraists had left for unknown worlds, leaving Collier's Landing in the hands of the anti-Sathraist pilot's guild.

Without the charismatic leadership of William Collier and the religious cohesion of the Sathraists, the guild eventually fell apart. The non-Sathraist population that stayed behind was large enough to form a small democratic government that remained independent of the First Republic. The planet's name was changed, for most of the inhabitants no longer wanted to be associated with Collier's Sathraism. Despite the populace's own attempts to choose a new name, the planet's reputation for difficult landings was too strong and the world became known among the interstellar community as Sargasso. The name stuck, and soon the people of Collier's Landing were calling themselves Sargassans.

Since then, the citizens have been fiercely proud of their independence. If Crossroads Spaceport doesn't want to allow a ship to land, an unaided landing is still incredibly perilous. Although the population of this world has never been large, the same hazards that made landing on the more remote islands of Sargasso so difficult ensured that it would never be conquered.

By the time of the Diaspora, when Earth's corporations collapsed, Sargasso dramatically increased its population by attracting independent colonists. Once Crossroads couldn't support any more settlers, the more adventurous ones set out to explore the remote island chains. The planet's geography was perfect for settlers escaping the madness of the First Republic, if only for those brave enough to traverse its terrain. Vastly different cultures swarmed to the world, each

Sargasso's Traits

Ruler: Various independent nations

Cathedral: Sargasso is not dominated by any one religion, although many remnants of ancient Terran religions remain. There is no dominant priesthood, but the elite engineers of Sargasso refer to relic starships as their "temples," watching over them for generations.

Agora: No one faction controls the chief marketplace, save perhaps for the loose alliance that remains between Sargasso's pilots and explorers.

Capital: Crossroads Shipyards

Jumps: 3

Adjacent Worlds: Eridol (nightside), Vera Cruz (dayside)

Solar System: Screamer (0.42 AU), Sargasso (1.06 AU), Myria asteroid belt (1.6 AU to 5.8 AU), Holdfast (9.5 AU, Stay), Surge (11.2 AU), Crone (19.23 AU), Jumpgate (55.3 AU)

Tech: 5

Human Population: 10,000,000 adventurous Islanders

Alien Population: Unknown; Z'go inhabit the vast Myria asteroid belt

Resources: Mining, fishing, electronics factories, shipyards

Exports: Electronics, pilots, and (hopefully soon) a few new starships

Landscape: Thousands of small island chains are scattered across the planet's surface. The three largest continents are Crossroads, Deva and Shiver.

claiming a series of islands as its own.

During the Second Republic, settlers on the various island chains gained access to more efficient transportation, and trade among the islands of Sargasso became common. Sargasso grew into a cultural melting pot; antiquated boundaries of race and nationality meant nothing on a world were diversity was commonplace. Crossroads Spaceport, the site of Collier's original landing, belonged to all the citizens of the world. The original buildings were reinforced with maxicrete, redesigned to last for a millennium. The addition of terraforming engines made landing a routine occurrence. Although now far from the ever-expanding Fringe, Sargasso welcomed spaceships from throughout the Republic, establishing itself as a crucial nexus for interplanetary trade.

First Contact with the Z'go

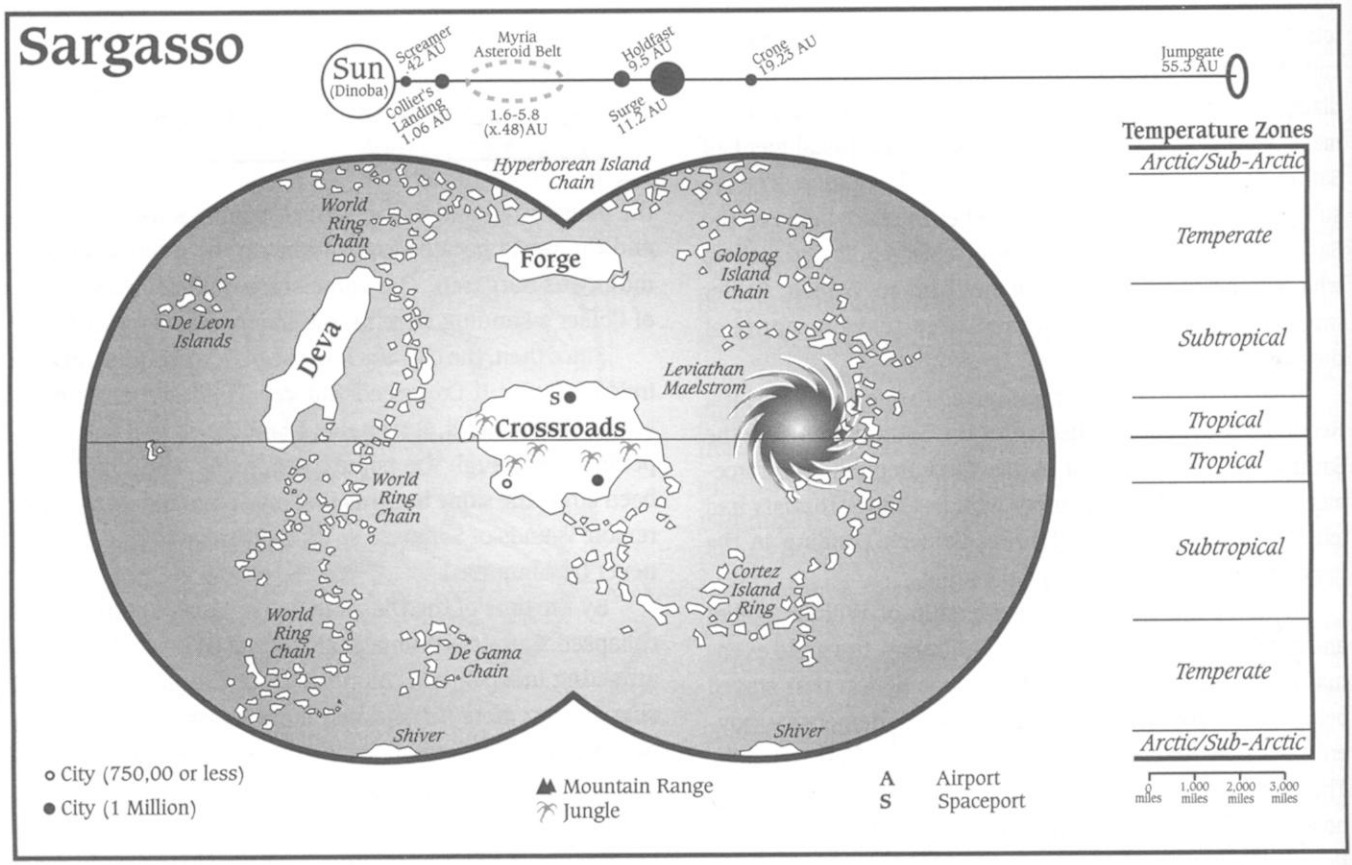
During the Diaspora, some citizens of Sargasso ventured out to the local asteroid belts to make their fortunes. Such trade was never without risk, however. Sargasso's asteroid miners risked their lives against a wide and varied range of curious phenomena: gaseous clouds, electric storms, magnetic interference and the like. The cause of such events remained a mystery until some of the oldest belters began sending out messages to the largest chains of asteroids. The result was first contact with one of the most unusual life forms in the universe: energy beings hiding within the Sargasso system's asteroid belts. The crafting of a common language — from mathematics — took time, but within a few years, programmers developed think machine routines to translate communication between the human race and the alien Z'go, as they were dubbed by the first belters to hear their trademark static over the radios.

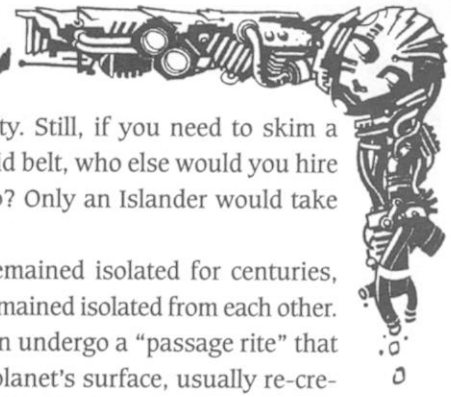
As beings of pure energy, the Z'go (see the *Aliens* chapter) were capable of traveling through asteroid chains at will, giving form to legends of "angels among the stars." Enthusiasm for cultural exchanges soon faded when the Z'go insisted on protecting their breeding grounds; apparently, many of the minerals were vital to their ecosystem. The slow-breeding Z'go needed these places to perpetuate their race.

Originally thought as defenseless, the indigenous lifeforms demonstrated complete mastery of the force of electricity — as some pilots who challenged their territory found out when the electrical systems of their ships were attacked. The Z'go's terms became more severe after some traders attempted to capture a few of the energy creatures in insulated suits. A Second Republic treaty put an end to such practices and established the rights of this unusual and rare alien race.

The Fall

Sargasso became completely isolationist after the collapse of the Second Republic. When the system's jumpgate was shut down, pilots stranded on Sargasso had no choice but to make their planet a secure and comfortable home.





Instead of looking to the stars, they continued to thoroughly explore their own world for generation after generation. Local culture soon incorporated the idea of undertaking epic journeys across the planet's hazardous island chains as a proof of bravery and skill. This cultural practice would survive for centuries, along with the spaceport, the shipyards and the relic remains of merchant ships.

There are several theories as to why the gate shut down, but a lack of proof for any of them. Some residents believe one of Collier's descendants smashed the controls because he was so disgusted at what happened to human civilization. Vuldrok joke that a reckless pilot crashed into it by mistake. Regardless, the residents Sargasso were separated from the rest of humanity for centuries, creating a culture unlike any other in barbarian space.

Solar System

Screamer: The system's innermost planet holds an elliptical orbit precariously close to a fading red sun. For several weeks during a year, Sargassans with optical magnifiers can see the faint image of Screamer rocketing through the heavens as it skims the sun's surface. More than one desert racer has been named after this celestial body.

Holdfast: The Hazat often position a small fleet of ships in orbit around this planet's largest moon, Stay, anticipating attacks on the shipyard at Sargasso from the Vuldrok. Harsh summers, a slightly acidic atmosphere, and vicious sandstorms makes the prospect of actually landing ships on the planet's surface impossible.

Surge: This gas giant glares malevolently in the heavens; its surface is obscured by fierce hydrogen storms. During the First Republic, one of Surge's moons had a space station for repairing and refueling corporate crafts on their way out to the fringe worlds. Since that time, some merchants have tried to make a profit by skimming off the gas from orbit, but such enterprises are barely profitable.

Crone: Sargassan legends include the story of a beautiful young woman who waits a lifetime for her husband to return from his travels. In the end, she becomes cold and withered. Storytellers end the tale by pointing in the direction of this barren, icy rock of a world, using it as a reminder of why life must continue despite tragedy.

People and Places

Colonial life from the era of the First Republic has long since broken down into tribal existence. The residents of Sargasso refer to themselves as "Islanders" or "Sargassans." Islanders are known for being adventurous and open-minded; they are also reckless and consumed by a wanderlust that borders on mania. Like the pilots who first defended the planet, they are often boastful of the origins, achievements and enthusiasm for exploration. Villagers taken offworld have such a lust for travel that Hazat and Vuldrok alike often doubt their sanity. Still, if you need to skim a star or plunge into an asteroid belt, who else would you hire except a pilot from Sargasso? Only an Islander would take such risks.

While the planet has remained isolated for centuries, the various tribes have not remained isolated from each other. Most insist that their children undergo a "passage rite" that involves exploration of the planet's surface, usually re-creating a journey that only the bravest have completed. A few children are content to go out to sea for a week or so and return, but the most ambitious have been known to travel halfway around the world to prove their worth. Recklessness is still considered a virtue, one equated with bravery. In fact, an adult who returns from his passage rite with proof of a particularly dangerous journey — another "Collier's landing" — is assured of gaining respect and status in his tribe.

Citizens of a more technological bent join the elite caste of the planet's engineers, upholding the sacred duty of preserving technology. Ancient knowledge is maintained with religious fervor. While the Vuldrok have integrated religion with technology, Islander "priests" are far more pragmatic and secular, typically studying lore more technical than spiritual. They do more than preserve the many tribes' variants of Old Urth religions — they require apprentices to learn and remember the technical skills they have maintained for over a thousand years. The crashed sites of spacecraft are sometimes referred to as "temples" by the superstitious, but they are more devoted to reason and science than communion with the divine.

Sadly, despite the best efforts of the planet's engineers, Sargasso's terraforming engines are deterioriating, as are some of the electronic beacons created during the Second Republic. In recent years, engineer-priests have redeemed enough of the think machines of "traffic control" to guide the occasional scout craft to a landing, but Sargasso is just beginning to reach out to space again. Traveling from one side of the planet to the other takes bravery and skill, but only the greatest heroes hope to return to the stars and rejoin the rest of Human Space.

Since the recent reopening of its jumpgate to the Known Worlds (4987 to the Vuldrok, 4996 to the Known Worlds), Sargasso has been able to maintain its independence because landing there without the aid of "traffic control" still takes consummate skill. Many Sargassans on the more remote island chains have remained isolated from the rest of barbarian space for generations. While ships still land on Crossroads, it is never without an element of risk. The only safe place for lift-off is now the starport. Reckless Islanders often journey there hoping to make a name for themselves among the stars.

Political struggles in neighboring systems have also contributed to this world's independence. Amassing a fleet



near Sargasso would invite retribution from either the Vuldrok or the Hazat. The most commonly used jumpgate leads to the Hazat-controlled world of Vera Cruz. As a result, the Caliphate is supposedly allying with the Vuldrok to prevent the Hazat from gaining another world — or so some rumors state. Crossroads is once again crowded with Islanders willing to offer their skills to defend their world.

Eridol, near the system's other border, suffers raids by the Vuldrok Star-Nation. The citizens of Sargasso know that they're only a jump away from such raids themselves. Now that their shipyards are open to the stars, they are an obvious target for barbarians wanting to further develop fleets. So far, it seems no warlord is interested in securing Sargasso for himself, but this could change. Even if he did, he'd lose out on the opportunity to hire Collerians to pilot warships against the best the Charioteers guild has to offer.

Sargasso rests at the crossroads of the barbarian fringe once again, just as it did during the Diaspora, but this time, holding its independence will be significantly more difficult. The planet is caught between Vuldrok raiders on Eridol, Hazat from Vera Cruz, and a variety of adventurers and missionaries seeking to exploit these worlds anew. It is uncertain how long the delicate balance of power can continue.

Major Islands

Islanders are surprisingly egalitarian. Their tribes have blended many of the cultures of Old Urth. Hyphenated family names often reflect this ethnic diversity, and are a sure way to recognize a Sargasso Islander traveling off-world. If a barbarian encounters an explorer named Florescu-Gunnarson, Takashi-Svenson, or Collier-McDougal, chances are he's an Islander. Any resident can tell you what island he's from, but usually has far more alarming stories of islands and villages where he's been. Here are a few of the more dramatic ones....

Crossroads

Crossroads is the largest and most populous island on the planet. Stretching along the equator, it was originally composed out of hardened volcanic lava. Most of the surface has since been paved over with maxicrete. Landing seacraft here is difficult, but the local villagers are greeted regularly by distant relatives from other islands: talented engineer-priests looking for work, hotshot teenagers on their passage rites, veteran sailors and explorers insisting they should pilot the planet's first starships, and disturbing Sargassan drifters who come to Crossroads for the chance of traveling offworld.

Historically, the ships originally designed on Sargasso were relatively light, highly maneuverable and fully capable of functioning in a planet's atmosphere. Unfortunately, the metals of their hulls were never as a durable as lumbering warships; while the shields had to be strong enough to endure high speeds, the metals in the hull are typically rather feeble. Ships originally manufactured at the Crossroads Shipyards are capable of amazing bursts of speed over short distances.

While a number of ships have been maintained over the centuries, used by the boldest of Sargassans to fly to other planets in the system, no new ship has been built in some time — until now. With the influx of interstellar travel, the shipyards have been fully redeemed by elite engineers, and Islanders have floated an atmospheric speeder from Deva to serve as Crossroad's first new ship. After years of work by the planet's most esteemed technicians, the *Devan Rocket* is almost ready for its first journey to the stars. The hallways of Crossroads spaceport are filled with Islanders eager to volunteer for the trip.

Deva

This long thin island is surrounded by high mountains that protect vast alkali plains which take days to traverse. Racing across the Devan salt flats is a favored pastime. Sargassans addicted to speed travel here to watch Islanders compete against each other with rocket cars, electric carts and even beast-drawn chariots. Never hire a driver from Deva unless you're in a terrible hurry.

Forge

This rocky northern island is known for its highly profitable mines. Blacksmiths and engineers hammer out precision parts and tinker with electronic gizmos to trade with other Islanders. Many of their finest works of art have been carried halfway around the planet. Their production schedule has been increased now that there are stories of the Crossroads Shipyards being redeemed. Children on Forge learn about electronics from an early age, and many adults remember fondly the gadgets and widgets they made as youngsters.

Golopag

Over a thousand islands make up this chain, which was named after a location on Old Urth that has long since been forgotten. Coral reefs, deceptive currents and jagged mountains of coral make travel in the Golopag Islands extremely perilous. Accordingly, it is home to some of the greatest sailors of Sargasso, along with young travelers who desire extremely perilous passage rites. The two largest tribes are predominantly Polynesian-Scandinavian and Australo-Chinese.

Flora and Fauna

The few Known Worlders who have arrived at Sargasso are rather puzzled by tales of the monsters that supposedly live in the depths of the planet's oceans. The most common involve extremely cunning and massive squids, hundred-tentacled monstrosities that prey on the unwary. Of course, with each tale told, the size and intelligence of these beasts

Playing Islanders

A group of Vuldrok or Hazat might be foolhardy enough to request an Islander pilot or explorer to accompany them on travels. Such brave souls tend to have a few signature traits in common.

Characteristics: Dexterity, Wits, Tech

Skills: Drive, Science (Navigation, Astronomy), Tech Redemption (Mech, Volt)

Blessing: Wanderlust (2 pts: +2 Passion when exploring)

Curse: Reckless (+2 pts: -2 Calm when presented with a challenge)

Islanders pilots have heard plenty of stories about the Charioteer's Guild and don't particularly understand the way it does business. According to the tales, guildsmembers have a reputation for being reliable and cautious, devoting their entire lives to a few well-memorized travel routes, and commonly basing their trade around one ship they wouldn't dare risk with danger. An Islander would be insulted if he had the same reputation.

grows more and more impressive.

Recently, a brave Scraver offworlder actually mounted an expedition to find one. The husk of his bathysphere was found washed up on the shores of Crossroads a few months later, covered with hundreds of gashes from sucking tentacles. The legends of massive Sargassan Squids have since multiplied. As a result, in true Islander fashion, dozens of sailors have come forward to offer leading similar expeditions, no matter how great the risk might be.

Personality

Itaru Ulrich-Yamaguchi

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Pilot

Quote: "Let me get this straight. There's an asteroid field in the way, Vuldrok pirates on patrol, hostile Z'go ready to attack, and you need to get there in under a week. I thought you said this journey was going to be *difficult!* Let's go!"

Description: Itaru comes from a Japanese-Norse village on the northern shores of Deva. He's just over six feet tall, with broad shoulders, long lanky legs, numerous scars and spiky black hair. He is always unbelievably calm. When piloting a ship through incredible danger, his eyelids droop as though he is drifting into sleep — it's actually a trance he uses to maintain a steady hand at the ship's controls. Itaru has three weaknesses: barbarian women, strong grog and insane amounts of speed. The words "slow down" do not exist in his vocabulary.



Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 8, Endurance 6

Mind: Perception 7, Wits 7, Tech 7

Spirit: Extrovert 3, Introvert 6, Passion 2, Calm 8, Faith 1, Ego 4

Natural skills: Charm 4, Observe 6

Learned skills: Drive (Landcraft — Devan Speeder) 8, Drive Starship 8, Science (Navigation) 6, Science (Astronomy) 6, Tech Redemption (Mech) 5, Tech Redemption (Volt) 5

Blessing: Wanderlust (+2 Passion when exploring)

Curse: Reckless (-2 Calm when presented with a challenge)

Wyrd: 3

Equipment: Flight suit, electronic tribal charm, mech tools

Weapons: A relic blaster scavenged from the first barbarian who hired him... who unfortunately didn't know about "seat belts."

Armor: That's what a ship's shields are for, offworlder. Real pilots don't need armor.

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0

Sky Tear

Even when seen from space, tropical Sky Tear teems with life. A magnificent patchwork tapestry of greens and blues, the jungle foliage is occasionally pierced by the fiery orange of huge volcanoes. Perhaps the planet's strangest feature is its covering of swirling gray and rainbow-colored clouds, some of which have hovered in place for centuries. This bizarre phenomenon, caused by vast geysers and localized wind currents, covers regions that have not seen full sunlight in human memory.

History

After the planet's discovery from Rukh in the early 3800s, the corporations moving in to exploit the Kurgan jumpweb initially had high hopes for Sky Tear. Within a year of its discovery, over 12 major conglomerates set about plundering its lush natural resources. Experienced with the dangers involved in exploring new worlds, the early colonists came prepared for any sort of external threat, from ravenous beasts to new diseases. They did not expect to face an enemy within.

Growing animosity and competition among corporate powers turned Sky Tear's colonization into a race to claim as much territory as possible. Huge bonuses and promotions were offered to the managers who could most effectively exploit new territories before the competition. Claim jumping and violent clashes were not uncommon. As far as the corporations were concerned, if the competition for Sky Tear seemed a little more heated than usual, this just spoke well for the entrepreneurial spirit.



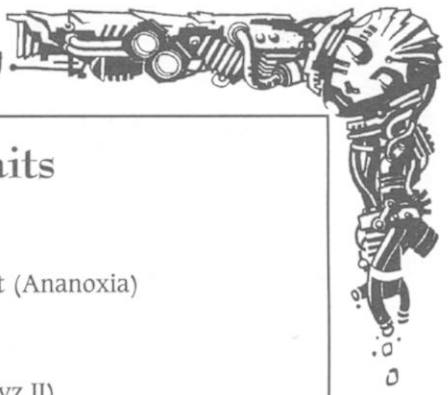
Colony ships landed with hundreds of experts. Seemingly overnight, large urban complexes spread out across the planet. The colonists planned to overcome any problems that beset them by using technology, money and sheer manpower. Unfortunately, none of these things protected them from insanity. In less than a year, the first wave of colonization fell apart in a series of inexplicable and bloody riots. The corporations continued to throw money at the worsening situation, but had little success in stemming the growing bloodbath. Finally admitting defeat, they abandoned their complexes to rot in the jungle sun.

Nonetheless, some settlers chose to stay. More filtered onto the planet over the following centuries, many of them criminals or political dissidents seeking to escape Republican authority on the quarantined planet.

The planet's isolation continued until a disfavored telepath, a member of the mystery cult headed by the Kurgan Sata Natura, traveled to Sky Tear. After a year of fruitless wandering and growing madness, the psychic discovered that humanity was not alone on Sky Tear. The Muazi, a sentient, telepathic fungal alien species, had read the first colonists' minds and did not like what they saw. Fearful for their own existence, the subterranean fungi had used trickery and subtle mental illusions to protect their secrets. With their existence now revealed, however, it was not long before they faced humanity's collective wrath. It seemed unlikely now to humans that the aliens could be benign. Did they not, after all, drive people mad?

Unfortunately for the planet's colonists, what the Muazi were suspected of doing in secret was nothing compared to what they could do when roused. The colonists used the most advanced weapons available, scouring many of the aliens from their hiding places, but the overall effect was not worth the cost. Subtly woven illusions and irresistible mental impulses caused ships to crash into mountainsides and turned colonist against colonist. Additionally, tribes of wild barbarians emerged from the jungles, killing their fellow humans in defense of the aliens. Eventually, humanity had to admit failure; so ended the last major attempt at colonization.

Although humans could not take the planet, they did discover that Muazi flesh, properly "distilled" (through various biotech or alchemical means), produced ecstatic visions



and temporary psychic powers in whoever ingested it. This telepathy drug later became the focus for the Caliph's Satai cult and was long kept a jealously guarded secret. However, Vuldrok runecasters discovered that Muazi flesh, when mixed with another mushroom, could create Tulac, a berserker drug. They made alliance with the Muazi, although a tentative and little-understood affair to outsiders.

Other humans acted on the Muazi's behalf, though whether they did this of their own free will or because of telepathic manipulation is a matter of fierce debate. The Caliphate still maintains a presence at the planet's jumpgate to prevent its rivals (most notably the Vuldrok) from taking advantage of the planet's resources. Nevertheless, Sky Tear has seen little new settlements since its discovery. The planet remains an enigma, visited only by the brave, the desperate and the mad.

Solar System

Sky Tear travels a perfectly circular orbit around an orange star almost twice the size of Urth's sun. Sky Tear has no moon and rotates on an axis with 0° inclination; the planet has no discernible change in seasons and its days and nights are always exactly the same length.

Ever wary of Vuldrok incursions and freebooters from Epiphany, the solar system plays host to a small but potent Kurgan armada. Other explorers may gain permission to pass through this system, but must plead their case to the military administrator on Magellan.

Sirus: Sirus is a small, disintegrating molten world best known for its flickering orange and gold tail. The planet's natives see the comet-like planetoid as either a symbol of good luck or an avatar of doom.

Magellan: A medium-sized world covered primarily by yellow sulfur-like deposits; the planet is crisscrossed by bands of black stone and ice deposits. The planet was colonized during the Second Republic and still hosts a Kurgan spaceport.

Cordax: Cordax is a dead, black planet with caps of white at either pole and veins of frost crossing it in sharp, geometric patterns.

Twil: Hardly a planet at all, Twil is an icy ball around a stone core.

Kree: Constantly at war between extremes of fire and ice, remote Kree's black frozen surface routinely bursts into oceans of lava. The system's jumpgate is in a nearby orbit. The planet itself has proven untenable for any permanent structures, but the Kurgans have placed a way station on its lone moon (Tragos) to resupply ships and support a small fleet.

People

Most of Sky Tear is hot and humid. Jungle biome predominates over most of the planet, with wet, warm forests in upper latitudes. Flooding is a common hazard. Like so many other things about Sky Tear, the planet's geological composition is, in a word, bizarre. The planet's crust consists mostly of oxygen, silicon and copper (as opposed to iron on most planets). Furthermore, the planet's asthenosphere is rich in a crystalline element called *cambysis* (see below). When vented into the upper atmosphere by the planet's massive geysers, these crystals become suspended in the clouds, painting them with vivid and garish hues.

There are few human institutions here — few cities, towns, roads or legal authorities. This situation is not absolute, however. Even the mad can sometimes govern themselves; there are local nobles, councils, cults and bandit parties who claim authority here and there, though none have much power beyond small localities. In fact, there are people on Sky Tear who claim to be patriarchs, caliphs and even the Prophet Zaibolu. The planet's ultimate military defense lies in its very nature — invaders almost inevitably "go native" (i.e., insane) after a few months on the planet.

Sky Tear Traits

Ruler: Various

Cathedral: Various

Agora: Basan starport (Ananoxia)

Garrison: 3

Capital: Oroba

Jumps: 2 (Irem), 7 (Byz II)

Adjacent Worlds: Epiphany, Rukh

Solar System: Sirus (.355 AU), Sky Tear (1.161AU), Magellan (5.25 AU; Cignus), Cordax (9.723 AU; Ukrops, DaChar, Zod), Twil (21.546 AU), Kree (71.456 AU; Tragos), Jumpgate (72.3 AU)

Tech: 1

Human Population: 3,340,000

Alien Population: 10,000 (Muazi colonies, estimated)

Resources: Vast untapped mineral and lumber wealth, *tchua* wood, *cambysis* crystals

Exports: *Tchua* wood, *cambysis* crystals, art, Flesh of Satai/Tulac (Muazi)

Landscape: Sky Tear's surface is a wet jungle, interrupted by occasional desert regions and jagged mountain chains. Its oceans vary from stormy to relatively calm, but this dynamic appearance is deceptive. Due to the planet's clockwork rotation, tidal and weather patterns are more predictable than on most worlds. In some regions, a storm or drought may progress for generations. The planet's volcanic regions spit up multi-hued clouds of steam that hover for years, casting dark palls over the land.



Day and Night

Eternally gathering clouds of steam and *cambysis* crystals perpetually block the sun from some regions; the only light they get is a dark, stormweather gray. These "night regions" tend to be stiflingly hot and extremely wet from the continuous downfall. Multi-hued heat lightning is common and supplies one of the few reliable sources of light. When discussing the cultural differences between day- and nightlanders, one should remember that, on Sky Tear, "culture" is a relative term. Divided by their pathologies, there are few places on the planet that Vuldroks or Kurgans consider to have cohesive cultures of any kind. Educational institutions are virtually nonexistent and literacy here is lower than almost anywhere in the Known Worlds, though many regions have exceedingly rich oral traditions.

The relatively civilized daylanders tend to gather in small tribal groupings, usually based on a shared madness or belief. These beliefs may be harmful or benign, but there is enough good mixed with the bad to allow visitors an occasional good night's sleep. Indeed, some dayside communities may appear quite normal — at least at first. Farming, hunting and communal cooperation are necessary to maintain some standard of living, a concept that many inhabitants understand. Daylanders may even deal with offworlders and have a curiosity about what occurs beyond their planet's borders. (Some of them have even heard fanciful tales of the strange and distant Phoenix Empire.) Kurgan and Vuldrok merchants may trade generators, food, trinkets, "holy relics" and even firearms with daylanders in return for guidance or protection.

The nightrealms, by contrast, tend to attract the maddest of the mad. Murderers, rapists and worse commit unspeakable crimes in the shadows; even the insane who live in other regions of the planet view them with contempt and superstitious dread. Solitary nightlanders often band together in raiding parties to attack each other or to launch nocturnal raids on dayland communities. Long-time denizens of the nocturnal climes are adapted to the dark, displaying either supernaturally acute night vision or other compensating senses (the origins of which remain obscure to outsiders), but most must wear special black-crystal glasses and heavy hoods to enter daylight areas.

Cults

On a world with as little social cohesion as Sky Tear, religious mania and its attendant institutions provide one of the few frameworks for cooperation on the planet. These religions — "cults" to visitors from the Caliphate — are as many and varied as there are brands of insanity on the world. Most have little power beyond a small geographical region. There are two exceptions, however: the various doomsday sects, collectively known as *Mekhenet*, which worship the planet Sirus; and the dark spider cults.

The two religious impulses often come into conflict with each other (most notably in Straethra). The central crux of their animosity is predicated on the star worshippers' apocalyptic desire to purge the world of sin before the universe dies in fire. In contrast, the spider cults foresee a growing darkness enveloping the universe and seek power and sensation in this new demonic order. Unfortunately for outsiders, despite their many differences, neither cult is forgiving of interlopers. With the Children of Sirus, outsiders *might* expect some sort of common ground, however small, if they play their cards right. With the spider worshippers, any entreaties to human sensibilities are simply a waste of time.

Mekhenet: The worshippers of the "dying star" Sirus are a largely apocalyptic sect with adherents in the day regions of Mackel, Straethra and especially the desert continent of Tythus. They see themselves as a chosen people and seek to maintain their purity against outsiders. The cult mixes the nature-worshipping tenets of Gjartins (with whom they share similar but more bloody rites) with a fanaticism reminiscent of the Avestites. While the sect is largely insular and prone to human sacrifice, in some regions — most notably in Oroba — they maintain a more moderate face acceptable to the scant civil authorities and the visiting Kurgans. Despite this, the civilized Mekhenet claim they have little control over the excesses of their followers on other parts of the planet.

Spider Cult: Murderous in heart, mind and deed, Sky Tear's cannibalistic spider cultists venerate many of the same dark entities as those worshipped by Antinomists in the Known Worlds. The grotesque statues the cult raises in its devotions bear a striking semblance to both the *Aura'quar* (thundering eaters of flesh from the Seventh Qlippoth) and the *Vichua* (spidery phantoms known to frequent the Fourth Qlippoth). The priests wield Antinomistic spells consistent with certain rites practiced in the Known Worlds, but seem unfamiliar with Draconic rites. One homegrown ritual practiced by the cult involves a needle and etheric thread with which the priest sews demonic spider webs to blind the eyes and shackle the brain of his victim. This ritual has physical, as well as metaphysical, effects — the victim's skull literally teems with spiders.

Although the spider cults are mainly separate groups, with little apparent communication between sects in other regions (let alone other continents), their rituals remain chillingly similar throughout the planet. This leads some observers to suspect a telepathic, technological or mystical "spider's web" of information. The spider cults are more widespread than the Sirus sects, enjoying a worldwide following, but they favor the nightrealms in Straethra, Ω-6 and Gervais.

Flora and Fauna

There are billions of undocumented species on the planet, many of them dangerous. Among these are segmented sea worms that vary in size from small fish to great sea serpents that can capsize whole ships. Gervais, Ananoxia and Mackel host a race of golden apes. Although shy and retiring, their great speed and strength make them dangerous nonetheless. They are good hunters and show a vengeful streak if threatened that goes far beyond the necessities of self-preservation. Among the jungle plants, the most dangerous is a tentacled, carnivorous "man-trap" that stuns its victims into submission with its drugged thorns and then hangs them from fibrous pods, slowly dissolving their flesh and organs over a period of several weeks before expelling their bones onto the jungle floor. The algae-choked rivers of Ananoxia have bred a species of carnivorous flying fish, called needle-fish. Although primarily aquatic, they sometimes soar through the nearby jungle, attacking their prey *en masse*. Like Urth piranha, they can strip even a large creature down to the bones in a very short time.

The night zones have their own bizarre flora and fauna. White thorny tangle vines, trees with black rubbery foliage and immense, carnivorous, albino amphibians seem perfectly adapted to their nocturnal environment. The night zones also have thousands of varieties of insects, including a horned beetle the size of a Brute and various glowing insects (their tails contain a bioluminescent material used by humans). Both day and night regions are, unfortunately, prime breeding grounds for pack spiders. These loathsome creatures measure as much as a meter in length and hunt in packs that can number in the hundreds of thousands. Depending on the species, they may be venemous or nonvenomous, trapdoor or tree dwellers; there is even an aquatic variety, which spins underwater webs to snare fish and other swimmers.

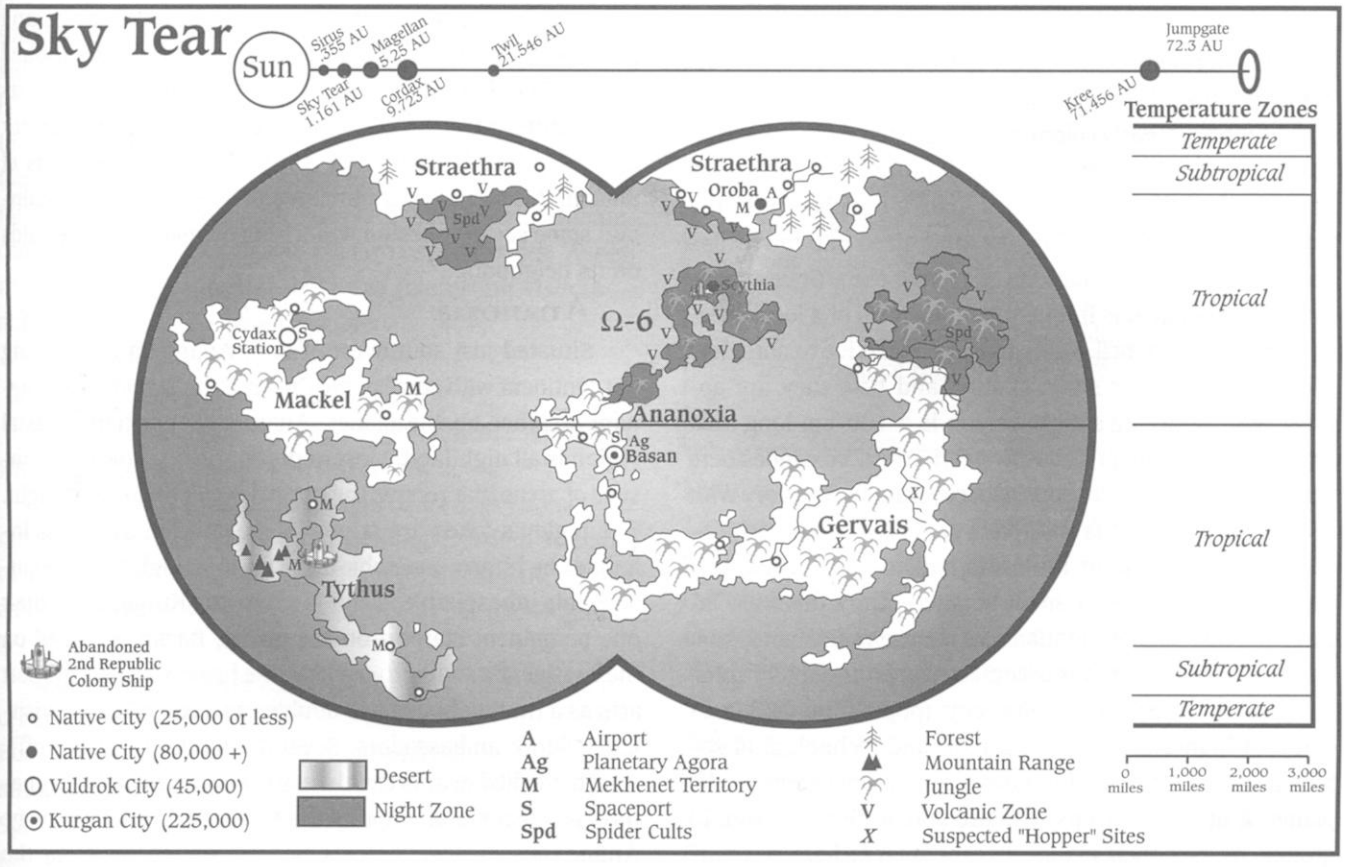
Cambysis

Cambysis is a multihued crystal that changes color when agitated. Due to its tendency to dissolve into fractal rainbow patterns in alcohol (or boiling water), *cambysis* became a novelty drink among the wealthy. Mildly euphoric, the element is less addictive than most mind-altering substances and has few negative effects on the user. Coveted in the Kurgan Caliphate, *cambysis* remains one of the major stated reasons for Caliphate interest in the planet.

Places

Mackel

Jungle foliage and thick underbrush carpet Mackel. The continent hosts a Vuldrok landing site and trading colony. In the alien Muazi, the Vuldrok Gwelkarga priesthood has found something far more valuable than the other meager



goods that flow through its warehouses. They have their own methods of harvesting the Muazi flesh to make Tulac, one that surprisingly does not harm the alien. The tree-speaking shamans have convinced some Muazi to voluntarily render up their vital substances in return for Vuldrok protection. Mackel is the only place on the planet where the Muazi are not hunted. Most of the Vuldrok stationed on the jungle planet are from the ice-world of Fingisvold. In an attempt to approximate their home environment, they keep the colony super-cooled; temperatures inside the Republic dome complex at Cydax Station rarely exceed 40° Fahrenheit. This is not just a concession to comfort; the colonists believe the cold protects them from the planet's madness.

Tythus

Blown by dry, hot winds, Tythus is a land of parched deserts with salt marshes along its coasts. Settled in the hopes that a drier clime might not perpetuate the planet's madness-inducing properties, the early Tythus project ended in spectacular failure. The colony ship launched while suppressing a mutiny and consequently crashed to the ground. It now lies partially submerged in a salty inland sea where it is guarded by a particularly fanatical sect of Mekhenet, who sacrifice intruders to their "Star-God." Nor are the cultists the only threat: Packs of large, poisonous trapdoor spiders hunt in packs by night. The cultists have access to scavenged Second Republic technology from the ship and firearms taken from murdered explorers.

Straethra

This northern polar region is warm, but not nearly as hot as the rest of the planet; deciduous forests cover much of the continent. Early colonists attempted to settle Straethra, but they met the same failure as others. Nevertheless, Straethra has the second-largest native population on the planet, most of them daylanders, organized into townships that rarely exceed populations of 10,000 each. Governance, where it does exist, is frequently in the form of a local secular or religious council. Many here are receptive to outsiders (depending on their state of mind and how they are approached). Straethra's night region is a 100-km long area hugging the continent's southwestern coast. Volcanoes here vent toxic clouds of sulfurous ash, covering the territory with lava flats, basaltic cliffs and rivers of molten rock. Precipitation includes poisonous rains and hailstones of tarlike volcanic tephra the size of small boulders. Only the most insane and degenerate nightlanders choose to live here, so it is little surprise that it has become a nest for the spider cults.

Oroba: Straethra's capital city (population 125,000) enjoys a higher level of civilization and technological sophistication than any other native population center on the planet. It attracts citizens who are able to function well in groups, despite their madness. Government here is a particularly raucous form of participatory democracy where every crank and crackpot can grind his axe in session if he so chooses. Miniature parties based on fractured philosophies, business interests, forms of dementia or important local issues are the norm. The government dissolves every few months or so (the only real constant is a Kurgan representative), but somehow the system manages to work. Violent insurrection occurs occasionally, but is usually a once-in-a-generation affair. A series of local schools and tutors (some Kurgan-sponsored) maintain a decent level of literacy, and Kurgan largesse provides for a certain degree of technological sophistication (electrical lighting, sewage and a sporadically functioning spaceport). Oroba also boasts the planet's only significant native industries. These include various arts, crafts and masonry guilds, as well as a brewers' collective which concocts bizarre hallucinogenic beverages from local flora, including — it is rumored — the Muazi.

Ω-6

Possibly the most dangerous realm, this omega-shaped island surrounds a great lagoon and a series of volcanic islands. Massive geysers vent their clouds over the region, shrouding almost the entire continent in eternal darkness. The island's inner ring is the darkest region on the planet, lit only by volcanic flame and heat lightning reflected in its ink-black sea. Reptilian leviathans ply their way through the darkness, endangering any who dare to sail these waters. The island also hosts the only known nightland city, Scythia, boasting a population of approximately 80,000 and attracting the worst sort of degenerates. Lit by oil lamps and pitch fires, Scythia — built on the ruins of an abandoned Second Republic city — glows green or ruddy orange; its inhabitants travel heavily armed and in small groups for protection. Held together by a brutal ruler, Caliph Apis el Shadai, this society of criminals somehow manages to maintain some social cohesion, launching occasional pirate raids on its neighbors.

Ananoxia

Situated just southwest of Ω-6, Ananoxia is a boiling hot continent with some of the thickest jungle and most stagnant weather on the planet. Ananoxia's northern coastal region is all nightland. Most of the continent, however, consists of areas that receive the normal cycles of day and night. The region's lakes are largely algae-covered swamps, inhabited by bizarre anaerobic fish. Due to its high Muazi populace, this inhospitable island is where the Kurgans put their one permanent starport on the planet, Basan. Situated on the continent's southern dayside, the heavily armed starport acts as a trading house and doubles as a consulate for visiting Vuldrok ambassadors. Several important Kurgan officials have died deaths clearly marked by a telepathic signature, an apparent attempt by the Muazi to drive them away. Ananoxia's dayside natives benefit somewhat from the Kurgan presence, and many practice a strange native ver-

sion of Kurgan culture and religion, even worshipping the distant Caliph as a god, though others regard the Kurgans as invaders.

Gervais

Gervais is the planet's largest continent and the least explored by outsiders, though it hosts the largest human population on the planet. Over 8,000 km from end to end, it contains heavy jungle throughout and its population is spread more or less uniformly in small tribal groupings throughout the continent. The earliest settlers reported finding dangerous alien ruins — less advanced than those left by the Anunnaki, but still promising to archaeologists. Unfortunately, the colony disintegrated into madness before the ruins could be completely uncovered. Perhaps not coincidentally, the planet's madness seems worse here than on any other continent. Very little is known of the aliens who left the technology here, though strange totems suggest a bipedal race with physiological similarities to Urth grasshoppers. It is unknown whether these "hoppers" were native to the planet or visiting aliens; their ultimate fate is also a mystery.

Personality

Asheti

The military governor of starport Basan on Ananoxia, Asheti is a favorite cousin of the Caliph. Over 55 years old, but well preserved due to her use of longevity serums, Asheti is a potent psychic and claims immunity to the planet's insanity causing elements — though those who have met her are not so sure. She is a member of the Satai priesthood and is, among her other duties, responsible for hunting the Muazi to maintain the cult's supply of sacrament. Asheti maintains a life of decadent splendor in her jungle palace carved into the side of a mountain. The place is luxurious, climate-controlled and enjoys all the modern conveniences. Asheti runs a cultured court and welcomes interesting visitors — at least until they become tiresome.

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Atabeg (Ordu Bagatur)

Quote: "You come seeking enlightenment? Here? Are you mad? Ha, ha! But of course you are...."

Description: Dressed in Kurgan court finery somewhat out of place in Sky Tear's hothouse jungle, Asheti attempts to make her situation "just like home." She is dark of skin and hair and looks more like someone in her mid-30s than her 50s.

Entourage: A complement of Bagatur bodyguards accompanies her everywhere.

Body: Strength 5, Dexterity 7, Endurance 6

Mind: Wits 7, Perception 5, Tech 4

Spirit: Extrovert 6, Introvert 3, Passion 4, Calm 3, Faith 5, Ego 3

Natural skills: Charm 5, Melee 6, Shoot 8, Vigor 5

Learned skills: Etiquette 5, Social (Leadership) 7, Speak Kurgan, Speak Vuldrok, Stoic Mind 8, Survival 5

Occult: Psi 7

Powers: Psyche path — Intuit, Emote, MindSight, MindSpeech, MindSearch, Heart's Command, HeadShackle, BrainBlast

Wyrd: 7

Equipment: MedPac with Elixer

Weapons: Blaster Pistol (7 DMG)

Armor: Dueling Shield (5/10, 15 hits)

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0

Madness

In spite of Sky Tear's inhospitable climate and vicious predators, the planet would have been settled long ago but for its detrimental effect on people's minds. Despite massive research, the cause of these effects is still unknown. Theories have been advanced, ranging from the planet's erratic magnetic fields to its extreme heat, plant spores or other pathogens. For a long time the effect was blamed solely on the telepathic Muazi, though modern researchers question whether it is the aliens who cause the madness, or if they are merely a consequence of the true cause.

The process affects the limbic system and the right hemisphere of the brain (both largely responsible for emotions) and the memory functions of the rhinal cortex. Those affected do not generally show any loss of intelligence and can perform most technical skills with little loss of ability (if they concentrate). Short-term effects include anxiety, amnesia, acute schizophrenia, motion blindness (the person sees movement as discreet still images rather than as fluid motion) and auditory, visual and olfactory hallucinations. Long-term effects include schizophrenia, various sexual deviations, absence of emotion or empathy, permanent synesthesia, bipolar disorders, deep phobias, process schizophrenia and various delusional paranoid disorders.

During each week of exposure to Sky Tear, a character rolls Faith or Ego + Stoic Mind. If successful, the madness is staved off (roll again next week). Failure means that one level of his Passion or Calm characteristic (whichever is primary) is lost. Once it is reduced to zero, madness sets in. It cannot be cured while on planet (except temporarily by psychic or theurgic means), and may take weeks of therapy and physical purgings off-world. The Kurgans and Vuldrok have developed drugs to limit the planet's dementia causing effects, bolstering the resistance roll, but these are not always effective.

Twilight

At a respectable distance from a dwindling white sun, Twilight is completely shrouded by a blanket of thick roiling clouds. From space, it does not look at all like a candidate for habitation. Here or there, gaps in the clouds reveal patches of snowy white or frosted black maxicrete, but these only add to the planet's forlorn and devastated appearance. Despite this seemingly desolate aspect, Twilight teems with a vast and restless subterranean population, making it a dangerous sleeping giant. Even in slumber, the wintry sphere exudes an air of shadowy menace. A gloomy, claustrophobic world, Twilight is draped in mystery, fear and paranoia — a planet of dreadful secrets.

History

At the dawn of the 27th century, the space around Ravenna and other neighboring planets erupted into conflict between the governing corporations and a resistance movement of anarchists, Sathraists and other dissident thinkers. Vanquished in battle, the remnants of the rebel starfleet fled through Ravenna space, closely pursued by a corporate armada. The ships desperately jumped through the Ravenna jumpgate in the hope of making it to the Gwynneth free zone. Instead of Gwynneth, the revolutionaries found themselves in a strange system containing a hospitable Urthlike planet orbiting a young, white star. Having eluded their pursuers, the dissidents went about setting up a small colony, and Twilight soon became a magnet for dissidents from a dozen other systems.



Large cities and free farming communities sprang up throughout the planet. With a relatively low population and plentiful resources, the anarchistic model of non-government flourished for over 150 years. By the late 28th century, however, external pressures from noble houses proved too much. It is a compliment to the rebels' military prowess that they were largely able to dictate the terms of their own surrender. The noble houses were more interested in the planet's resources and expanding trade routes than enforcing any given ideology.

Eventually, however, the nobles' power waned and the Republic's rose. Twilight became a center of commerce and learning that soon rivaled Delphi. A prime beneficiary of the Republic's progressive philosophies and monetary largesse, Twilight thrived as a liberal democracy and vigorously resisted the growing encroachment of Church power and noble ascent. During the Fall, the planet openly rejected the Church's edicts on technology and fielded an advanced fleet to preserve its autonomy. Despite a strong Hawkwood presence on the world, the Republican government resisted external threats from the ascendant Ten Houses and, rather than capitulate to what it saw as a prevailing feudalism and religious fanaticism, it closed Twilight's gate — seemingly forever.

As the New Dark Age spread throughout the Known Worlds, Twilight fell prey to its own problems behind its sealed jumpgate. Formerly a major exporter of military and domestic goods, without its customer base the planet slumped into a centuries-long depression. Even worse, Twilight's young, white star was among the earliest of those affected by the fading suns phenomenon. As the star faded, temperatures plummeted worldwide.

Elements sympathetic to the Church and nobility sought to reconnect Twilight with the rest of space. Centered on Delphia, native remnants of House Hawkwood lead the movement, using their armada to break Twilight's cordon around the jumpgate. While they were unable to activate the closed jumpgate, their continued opposition weakened the Republican government over the centuries. Democratic pluralism shattered as the planet broke into a hundred warring factions.

This time of chaos lasted over 700 years as one nation-state devoured another. Long periods of cold war and petty nationalism often broke out into intense regional conflicts.

Despite the limited nature of its early hot wars, the situation worsened in the 48th century as the Northern Hemisphere stabilized along three axes of power: the remnants of the old Republic, which held power on Croven; the Sayshel Collective on Tsaerdik; and the White Tigers, a noble alliance in Delphia that included the Heidgards, noble descendants of the Hawkwoods. Competition for resources and ideological hatreds drove the planet through a centuries-long nuclear arms and shelter race. Vast underground complexes were built as the northern countries prepared for war, their military industries taking complete control of most government functions.

The planet finally had a brief respite during a period called the Reval Renaissance. The southern continents, long observing a neutral status, maintained a higher standard of living than the north. Starting in Reval, a world peace movement reintroduced lost technologies and sought to heal the fractured planet. For a while, it seemed as though the center might hold. In the year 4785, however, a minor skirmish between the Croven Republic and the Tsaerdik Navy escalated into full-blown war. Taking advantage of this conflict, Delphia entered the war on the Tsaerdik side. The Northern Hemisphere erupted into a nuclear conflagration that lasted over a month. Tsaerdik and Delphia became wastelands, while the Croven Republic ceased to exist.

The Present

Over the last two centuries, the shattered world has sought to rebuild. The nuclear exchange tore open the planet's surface along geological fault lines, creating vast belts of tectonic instability. Monstrous volcanic eruptions belch billions of tons of ash into the atmosphere yearly, cloaking the planet in perpetual winter and forcing the majority of the planet's population into vast underground complexes. Further, the cataclysm has shaken the planet from its orbit so that it travels a little farther from the sun with each passing year. The planet soon became so cold that all of its oceans froze almost completely solid, except in regions of extreme volcanic activity. The Southern Hemisphere escaped most direct bombings, though it has suffered from fallout and the planet's environmental upheaval.

Reval blamed the northern countries for the planet's ruin and has become a brutal military dictatorship under the Abwehr Citadel. After attacking its fellow southerners in the Zigo continent, the Abwehr Citadel now eyes the weakened and divided north with fanatical race hatred. Feeding its population's sense of xenophobia, paranoia and inherent superiority, the Abwehr Citadel has become the world's preeminent military power, with well-trained ground and space forces. It has practiced a brutally organized system of ideological and racial cleansing, either murdering its war-prisoners or selling them into slavery on Antioch to raise money to further feed its war machine.

Twilight Traits

Ruler: Northblok (Sayshel Collective), Southblok (Abwehr Citadel), Delphian Alliance

Cathedral: Varies

Agora: Varies

Garrison: 7

Capital: Northblok Central (Sayshel Collective), Kozhikode (Abwehr Citadel), New Andyra (Delphian Alliance)

Jumps: 3

Adjacent Worlds: Antioch (nightside), Ravenna (dayside)

Solar System: Morning (0.152 AU), Axion (0.655 AU), Twilight (1.344 AU; Cyx, Negril, Anvil), Dolorius (21AU; over 40 moons), Night (38 AU, 12 moons), Jumpgate (51.65 AU)

Tech: 6

Human Population: 3,715,000,000

Alien Population: 50,000 (almost all Ur Obun)

Resources: Granite, deuterium, neuronium, politics, slaves

Exports: Slaves (to Antioch and Kurgan markets)

Landscape: Twilight is a bitterly cold arctic planet, virtually devoid of vegetation or a natural atmosphere, although giant atmosphere processors create breathable regions underground and in some above-ground urban areas. An unnatural occurrence, the planet's wintry condition is the result of nuclear winter. Permanent damage is evident on most major landforms, and cracks show in the planet's crust.

Over the past decade, the Citadel increased its hostilities. The weakened but capable White Tigers fleet managed to skirt the Citadel's space blockade to reach the jumpgate in a desperate bid for outside aid. While the gate opened to Antioch, there was no help to be gained from that world. Instead, the nobles tried for Ravenna. Miraculously, the gate activated. Reuniting with their distant cousins there, the Twilight Heidgards appealed for aid. Heavily mired in the Emperor Wars at the time, the Hawkwoods could not fully support them but nonetheless sent what they could, bolstering Delphia's position against the Citadel. They kept the existence of Twilight secret, hoping to use the world as a secret safehouse should they badly lose their bid for power.

Only recently has the secret of Twilight's emergence become widely known. Hawkwood ambassadors and Imperial Questing Knights have dared the Citadel's blockade around Twilight's jumpgate to reestablish contacts with the planet's nobles. The two Known Worlds forces only nominally act together — their goals actually diverge. The

Hawkwoods wish to subsume the Heidgards into their house, while the Emperor holds the promise of granting them ambassadorships in the Imperial Court, thus recognizing their status and claim to their lands.

Meanwhile, missionaries from the Universal Church paint a disturbing picture of a dangerous planet of heretics, and urge the Patriarch to place Twilight under ideological quarantine.

Solar System

Twilight circles a rapidly decaying white star, and its erratic, wobbling orbit increases yearly. The doomed planet is on a long, spiraling orbit away from the fading star.

The various powers each command starfleets, although these are more often aimed at planetary rivals than outside intruders. Nonetheless, travel into the system is dangerous.

Morning: A small, molten world hidden in the sun's white corona, Morning emits regular bursts of radio waves in a pattern of prime numbers, denoting intelligence. Guesses about the signal's origin range from Anunnaki technology to solar entities, such as Gwynneth's salamanders.

Axion: Dusty, windblown and hot, Axion may be the solar system's last hope for survival. During the Second Republic, the planet was colonized by various mining concerns that built massive atmosphere processors (each almost a mile high), drawing oxygen from the soil to create a breathable atmosphere. The project was abandoned after the Fall, but the Abwehr Citadel has recently taken possession of the world and salvaged the ancient devices. Regions within 10 km of the towers now enjoy a thin but breathable atmosphere.

Twilight: Three moons orbit Twilight. Each of the moons has long been colonized; military units belonging to each major faction battle each other for supremacy.

Twilight's planetary defenses include two advanced space stations — Heydrich (Abwehr Citadel) and Caliburn (House Heidgard). Each is heavily armed with lasers, missile racks and meson cannons.

Dolorius: A cacophonic, dangerous planet, this erratically wobbling gas giant hosts electrical storms in a mostly hydrogen atmosphere — an explosive combination.

Night: A darkly beautiful gas giant, Night's icy prismatic atmosphere reflects any light source into muted rainbow shards. All three combatants hold military stations on the surrounding moons to prevent intruders from coming through the jumpgate — traditionally, more to protect the system from Antioch raids than for fear of Known Worlders.

People and Places

Twilight's people vary greatly from country to country, but are frequently sullen and taciturn. Many have both megalomaniac tendencies and feelings of inadequacy, seeing themselves as a superior people that have been somehow robbed of their rightful place in the galaxy. This often manifests itself in paranoia and self-righteous jingoism. Traditionally, these traits have been directed at either other nations on Twilight or against unpopular minorities. Because of its large population and advanced war machines, some see Twilight as a dangerous sleeping giant whose attentions may soon turn outwards toward its galactic neighbors.

Through war, poor environmental practices and sheer bad luck, Twilight's citizens face a planet that is breaking down on almost every level needed to ensure human survival. As the planet spins farther away from the sun and as volcanic clouds fill the sky, the world suffocates in an eternal soot-laden winter. In this toxic, frozen atmosphere, plant life has become virtually extinct on land. Ocean life survives only in those few pockets where volcanic vents produce enough heat without too much radiation, allowing a precariously balanced environment — somewhat resembling the biotic soup found on young planets. Vast subterranean hydroponics farms and atmosphere processors provide for the rest of the breathable air on the planet, though even in areas with a breathable environment, one can detect a certain "grit" in the air. Those who wish to leave civilized areas must carry their own oxygen supply.

Twilight has seven major landmasses: Tsaerdik, Torga, Reval, Zigo, Nir, Croven and Delphia, surrounded by largely frozen oceans. Although the entire planet shares the scars of the recent war, the Northern Hemisphere is far more damaged than the Southern. While it caused a perpetual nuclear winter, the war did deliver at least one dubious mercy — in the rupturing of the planet's asthenosphere, the resultant tectonic instability provides the population with ample geothermal power.

Tsaerdik (Sayshel Collective)

Heavily bombed during the war, vast portions of the continent are totally uninhabitable due to radiation poisoning. This is especially true along the central and southeastern seaboard, which is inhabited only by Changed outlaws, dissidents or surface farmers forced to work the land on some bureaucratic whim. (It is an article of faith that Tsaerdik will "bloom" again, thanks to the wisdom and foresight of the collectivist government.) Tsaerdik's governing body, the Sayshel Collective, is a highly organized plutocracy. Outsiders think of it as a human hive, efficient if somewhat brutal. Additional study, however, reveals numerous flaws.

Ideologically based on the narrow accumulation of wealth by a ruling elite of plutocratic "wise men," money can buy almost anything (food, lodging, luxuries and even a modicum of security), but wealth is hard to accumulate. As a result, Tsaerdik society is riddled with corruption. Orders that emanate from the ruling Politrax Committee often make no sense at all, resulting in whole towns being uprooted and shuffled around like chess pieces. The ultimate

authority within the collective is unknown, but outrageous rumors are rampant: a computer intelligence, the disembodied brain of the collective's founder (industrialist Nikolai Staskova), or a shadow cabinet of the nation's wealthiest men. The visible leaders are merchant princes, military generals and party hacks of various degrees of competence. The Collective is rational to a fault and denies the existence of the Pancreator, a fact that will not endear it to the Universal Church.

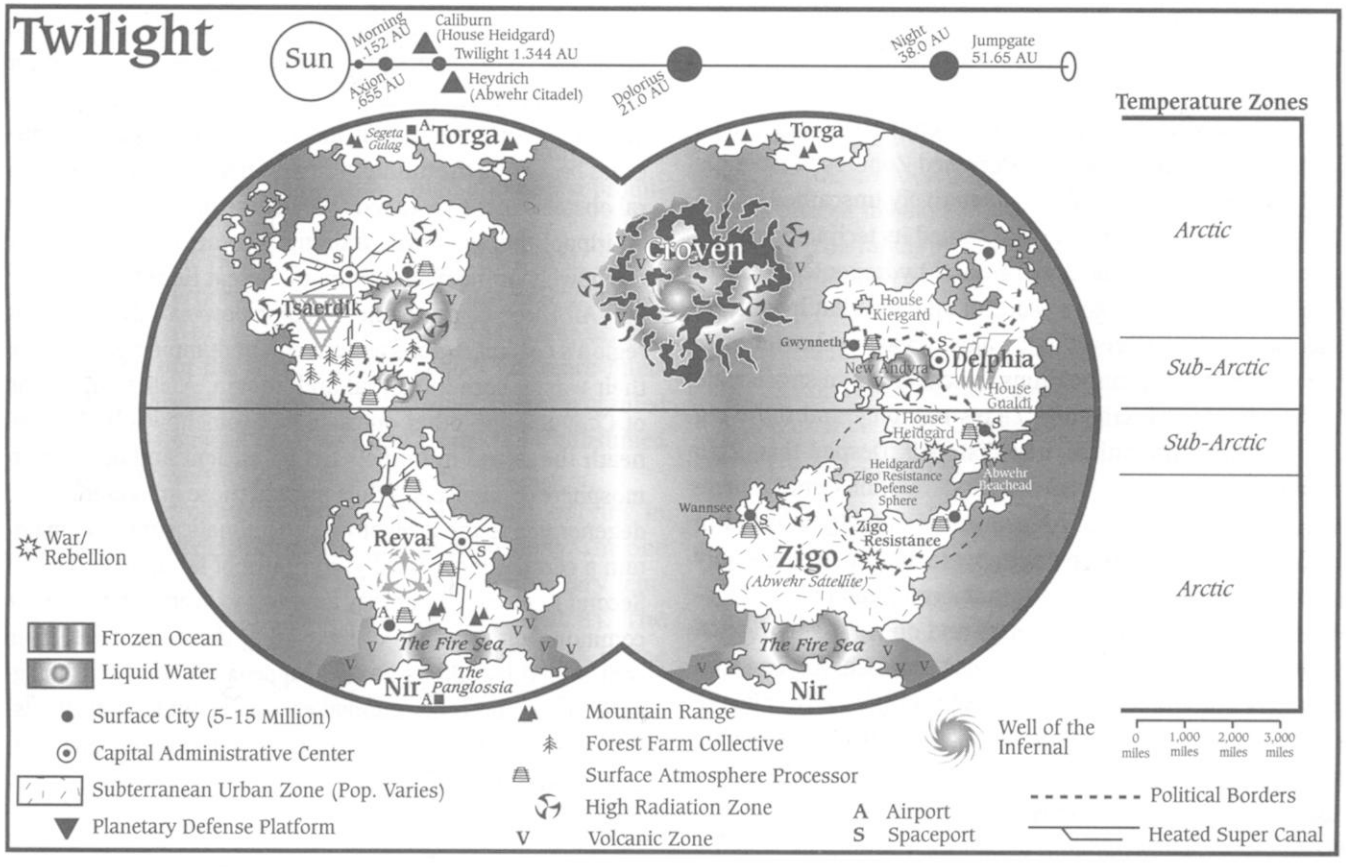
Despite its highly polluted environment, Tsaerdik places most of its hopes in mining, heavy industry and underground collectivized factory farming. Because of the continent's nearly unlivable conditions above ground, most of the population lives in vast maxicrete caverns. Cameras and guards appear in most major urban areas. The daily propaganda promoting the party's political objectives — delivered on the government's ubiquitous communal vidscreens — feed public cynicism, though the populace is too weary and demoralized to rebel. People who question the order of things simply disappear. Even though this high level of technology may seem extravagant to visitors from many parts of the Known Worlds, the general population does not share in the wealth. Few citizens have private access to running water or electrical power, and large portions of every Tsaerdik city are clogged with human waste and are breeding grounds for disease.

Torga

Controlled by the Sayshel Collective for centuries, Torga is a frozen hell at the planet's northern pole. Covered by glaciers over 20 km thick, the continent has little seeming worth or activity beyond a small enclave of prisons and mining facilities. The most brutal of these gulags is a maxicrete fortress known as the Segeta. Most who slave within are either political dissidents or petty criminals. The surrounding region is rich in various strategic minerals, including neuronium (a natural, room-temperature superconductor); the facility has made some members of the Politrax Committee extremely rich. Those who go to the Segeta work the mines until they die of cold, starvation or exhaustion. Defended by electrified razor wire, a laser defense grid and sadistic guards, the fortress seems just as bent on keeping people out as keeping prisoners in. Beyond the region's mining activities, the area secretly hosts a sizable military compound and a major planetary nav-beacon for the Sayshel Collective's second-rate spacefleet.

Reval (Abwehr Citadel)

As the nexus of Citadel power, Reval has elements similar to the centers of noble power in the Known Worlds. The nation avoided the worst effects of the nuclear war. Mostly clean and orderly, a certain degree of technology has permeated the general society. Indeed, in terms of technologically



advanced consumer goods, Reval exceeds most places in the Known Worlds. Despite this, a sense of paranoia prevails among the citizenry. Assured of its holy destiny by its priesthood, Reval sees its complete domination of the planet as the only way of saving the dying world — or so goes the party line. All aspects of daily life — education, family, work, sexuality, science and religion — are subordinated to the service of the state. Those who do not share in this grand vision, or those with an undesirable bloodline or hated ideology (both these definitions change every 30 years or so), are targeted for an orchestrated program of escalating ridicule, harassment, imprisonment and finally genocide.

Reval's society has revolved for centuries around a state party and a series of brutal but charismatic despots known as domitors. The nation's lords of finance control the planet's industrial and financial functions. Militarily, the continent is superior to any other power on Twilight, with a spacefleet technologically comparable to most house armadas, though smaller in size. The state religion is a "blood and soil" faith, seemingly blending pagan reverence for their holy Reval soil — blessed by the blood of its holy martyrs — and bastardized Universal Church elements (complete with an Inquisition). Similar in its trappings to the Universal Church, the Reval faith is administered by a caste of mullahs and has its own pet patriarch (Josepho Allegheri), who blesses the party's political decisions and serves as a focus for the nation's spiritual life and military fervor. Despite the apparent separation of powers, however, all considerations are ultimately secondary to the edicts of the domitor and the ruling party.

Zigo

Anyone who doubts the Abwehr Citadel's brutality need look no farther than the Zigo Occupied Zone. A prosperous and peaceful republic, Zigo was relatively unscathed by the Great War (at least directly) and turned its technological resources to creating vast underground hydroponics farms to feed its populace. Largely peaceful and agrarian by nature, Zigo was quite surprised by its ally, Reval's, behavior after the war. A series of ultimatums, blackmails and small-scale invasions ensued, crippling Zigo's economy and throwing its governing institutions into disrepair. Despite this, Zigo managed to maintain its democratic traditions until a mere 25 years ago, when the Abwehr Citadel finally invaded in force. Now largely ruled by a puppet regime answerable only to Reval, the ZOZ suffers from a brutal campaign of pogroms, purges, ethnic cleansings and outright genocide. A series of work, rape and death camps processes anyone suspected of harboring incorrect thoughts or genes. Despite the Citadel's success in crushing most of the region's inadequate army, active resistance and old democratic sensibilities still exist in some free territories.

Nir

Twilight's southern polar region is not really a continent at all, but a massive ice sheet. Largely ignored because of its total lack of mineral resources, Nir is of interest because of one peculiarity. Because of a strange weather anomaly, it is the one region that is not always covered by clouds. Because of this oddity, it is the one place where one can regularly see the stars at night or patches of blue by day. As a result of this miracle, entrepreneurs of the Abwehr Citadel have built a strange luxury hotel (the Panglossia) aboard a hovering platform in an artificially melted lake. The Panglossia serves not only as a luxury retreat for Abwehr generals, officials and their families, but as a diplomatic meeting place where officials from other governments may negotiate with the Citadel in peace and seclusion.

Croven

The former seat of Republican power, Croven is now a twisted necropolis of fetid radioactive lakes, sunken ruins and blasted stone. In the final decades of Republican rule, the Northern Hemisphere's only remaining democracy played a dangerous game of nuclear brinkmanship. After the missiles flew, what was once a single contiguous continent disintegrated into a series of shattered, stone islands. Background radiation still paints the region an eerie blue at night; only certain Changed misfits or those shielded by protective clothing can survive here long. Ruptured along a tectonic plate, the continent is prone to volcanic instability. Along with several major volcanoes, the region also has thousands of smaller vents that spit columns of flaming gas into the air. Some of these "fire devils" combine with errant cyclones and roar across the islands like destructive demons, sometimes breaching the tunnel system. Another dangerous natural obstacle is the so-called "Well of the Infernal," a gigantic whirlpool that is slowly draining the surrounding sea into the bowels of the planet through a great fiery fissure.

All three of the planet's major powers have used the region's coastal regions as convenient dumping grounds for their waste, both industrial and human. A slim population of Changed and other outcasts has somehow survived beneath the island in tunnels fed by ancient and decrepit atmosphere condensers. While most of these inhabitants have degenerated to the level of wicked animals, some still maintain a certain degree of dignity. Tales of fabulous hordes of Second Republic technology amongst Croven's wreckage are common, but the risks of recovering them are great. Even well-armed battalions have disappeared here. Electromagnetic static and other anomalies make contact with the island troublesome for all but the most advanced communications systems.

Delphia (The White Tigers)

As the sole seat of noble rule, Delphia seems familiar to visitors from the Known Worlds. Its ruling conclave of nobles, the so-called White Tigers, control a number of independent nations on the continent and form a loose-knit confederation. Most prominent of these noble families are the Heidgard Clan (who trace their noble lineage to the Hawkwood family), the Kiergard Clan, and the House of Gualdi. Often competitors, the three noble families must nonetheless make common cause to stem the power of their planetary rivals. Their capital city, New Andyra, hosts a council of nobles who negotiate among the various houses and interact with the Church. Noble power is thus considerable here, but the White Tigers are largely a third-rate planetary power. Things may change now that the jumproute to Ravenna is open once more.

The Heidgards, ascendant during the early years of the planet's closure, maintain a small but tactically deadly noble fleet. They uphold many of their Hawkwood cousins' ideals about duty and honor, and maintain the lion family crest, although the lion is *enfiled* through a jumpgate cross to show their separation from the main family.

The house has recently suffered great pressures. Situated in the continent's freezing southern regions, it has faced growing encroachment by the Abwehr Citadel. Reval has taken a small portion of Heidgard lands along the southernmost coast and has cleansed the region of Heidgard loyalists. Of all the noble families, the Heidgards are the only family openly at war with the Citadel, though they receive tactical support from the Kiergards. The Heidgards also maintain the aid and keen insights of the planet's few remaining Ur-Obun. Slaughtered on almost every other continent, the aliens enjoy an almost holy status here and play a prominent role in the native Church.

The current ruler is Duke Theodore Heidgard, an accomplished warrior and diplomat. Not surprisingly, he has worked hard to bring the Hawkwoods in on his side against the Citadel, but the Kiergards and Gualdi are more interested in playing to the Emperor in the hopes of being granted more power themselves — they don't want to be subsumed by a more powerful House Heidgard.

The other noble families are a mixed bag, varying in strength, temperament and ideological philosophy. The one thing they seem to share in common is their military temperament (they wouldn't be in power without it). The Kiergard Clan are nobles with lineage dating back to the barbarian invasions of the 46th century. Warlike but generally honorable in their dealings, they were originally persistent enemies of the Heidgards but came to an arrangement with them in light of greater threats. The house's most recent ruler is Duke Leander Kiergard, a brash 20-year-old firebrand who seeks to rebuild the nobility's holdings abroad.

Tunnel Warfare

The war fever runs high on Twilight. Like drowning men seeking to inhabit the highest point on a fast-sinking ship, Twilight's martial societies have mastered the arts of subterranean warfare in the belief that it is the only way to ensure their long-term survival. Waging war on Twilight is an expensive and arduous undertaking, given that attackers must beard their enemies in their lairs, breaching elaborately constructed defenses of maxicrete and ceramsteel. Transport ships must not only carry troops, but ensure their survival against the harsh elements.

The most common weaponry employed by attacking armies are fleets of atmospheric flitters for bombing and giant, heavily armed and armored tunnel-boring machines to insert troops. Some combatants also deem acceptable such tactics as poisoning enemy air supplies. Defenders may partially protect themselves against such tactics by employing decentralized environmental, transport and C&C (Command and Control) systems, allowing one area of tunnel to fall without affecting the rest of a complex. The opening of the jumpgate to Ravenna has temporarily enforced a truce upon the world. So far, these warlike skills have been concentrated against each other. Outsiders from nearby planets fear the day when Twilight realizes its ship is lost and strikes out to conquer new worlds.

House Gualdi controls the central portion of the continent and seeks to increase its own power at Heidgard expense. Cruel and deceptive, this technologically adroit house nevertheless displays a sense of panache and bravery in combat. The family matriarch, Duchess Nerina Gualdi, is a cagey, wire-thin silver-haired woman who has ruled the family with a tight fist for over 50 years. The family has recently entered into nonaggression treaties with both Tsaerdik and Reval, overtures that have made the other houses wary of potential betrayal.

Personality

Domitor Vajra

The current domitor of the Abwehr Citadel is a powerful woman of Urth Indian descent named Kerima Vajra. A native of the continent's influential northern region, Vajra started her life in poverty but gained popular support first as a warrior and later as a strong woman in the Zigo Occupied Zone (ZOZ). Climbing the military and party ladder, she eventually eliminated the old party leader through force and guile. There are some in the ruling elite who suspect that — despite her seemingly humble origins — she may be



one of the enigmatic Qabirim from nearby Antioch. Ruthless and efficient, over the past 25 years Vajra has secured her position and greatly increased her popularity by increasing Reval's territory in the ZOZ.

A gifted and fiery orator, Domitor Vajra has her finger on the pulse of the Reval people, glorifying their accomplishments and reinforcing their prejudices. Unlike most of the past domitors, however, she came to power performing an end-run around many of the old guard in the party's power structure. Touting radical reform even as she violently purged many of those who opposed her, Vajra's critics have noted — though not too loudly — that her few real reforms have been aimed solely at solidifying her position as leader. Despite this, she has garnered more genuine goodwill and fanatical loyalty from her people than any domitor in over a century.

Her rule has seen Reval reach its most militant stance in over a century, and the Citadel seems poised to invade much of the rest of the planet. It is only the timely opening of the jumpgate to Ravenna that has stayed Reval's hand against the White Tigers in Delphia. Pragmatic when necessary, Vajra has entered into negotiations with representatives of the Emperor, House Decados, the Universal Church and the Merchant League to bolster her nation's position against the Hawkwood-favored Tiger Lords. To further bolster her offworld aid, Kerima has also cultivated a cynical alliance with the Palidindrax on Antioch.

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Domitor (ruler)

Quote: "And where do you stand? With an increasing noble hegemony — which is what the White Tigers seek — or with Twilight's true hope?"

Description: Sporting spartan military fatigues, Vajra appears like any other military commander. Her advanced firearm (a high-quality laser) hints otherwise, as does her concealed energy shield. She has short dark hair and brown skin with black eyes, and stands 5'10" tall.

Entourage: A complement of military bodyguards ever clings to her.

Body: Strength 8, Dexterity 6, Endurance 7

Mind: Wits 8, Perception 7, Tech 5

Spirit: Extrovert 6, Introvert 2, Passion 3, Calm 7, Faith 1, Ego 6

Natural skills: Dodge 6, Fight 7, Impress 9, Melee 8, Observe 7, Shoot 9, Vigor 6

Learned skills: Etiquette 4, Lore (politics) 5, Knavery 8, Social (Leadership) 9, Stoic Body 6, Stoic Mind 5

Blessing: Astute (+2 Wits against fast-talk attempts)

Curse: Temper (-2 Calm when denied her will)

Wyrd: 3

Equipment: MedPac with various antitoxins for poisons and chemical agents.

Weapons: Laser Pistol (high-quality: +2 goal, 5 DMG)

Armor: Dueling Shield (5/10, 15 hits)

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Aliens

All manner of new lifeforms populate barbarian space. While certain Urth varieties also live there, introduced during the Second Republic or earlier, unique native flora and fauna still flourish. Predators, prey, grazers, scavengers and more inhabit these lost worlds, some unaffected by human presence, others irrevocably changed by it. Humans warped ecosystems, haphazardly introducing off-world species or terraforming incautiously. Geological upheavals affected land and sea and residents in all niches.

But humans didn't just encounter dumb animals — sentient beings also live here, most of them distrustful of humans or so enigmatic in their thought processes as to make communication extremely difficult. Unlike the core worlds of Human Space, many of these fringe worlds did not suffer human population excess or radical removal of their native sentients. Indeed, some sentients were barely discovered before the Fall separated humans and effectively ended their colonization and terraforming of worlds. As a result, the aliens of barbarian space were never assimilated into human culture and are still rather mysterious.

What's more, their phenotypes are less recognizable to Known Worlders than the aliens they live among — no one expects to encounter sentient fungus (Muazi) or intelligent energy (Z'go). Like most sentient life so far encountered, though, hints of the Anunnaki shadow their pasts. What role did the jumpgate makers have in disseminating or even creating sentient life in the galaxy? So far, there are only theories but little evidence for an answer. Perhaps it is different among the Vau....

Humans here live not only among aliens, but with metamorphized members of their own kind — the Changed are found in various places, some of them thriving in the absence of a powerful Inquisition. The most numerous and highly placed are the Qabirim, whose kind are rare and covert in the Known Worlds, for they evoke a fear of inferiority in humans, a fear greater than most of the genetically engineered. Even here, however, they wisely walk incognito, ever wary of the adverse reactions of evolutionary reactionaries.

Qabirim

The Grimsons were genetically engineered for war. Renowned throughout the Known Worlds for their fighting in the Emperor Wars, Grimsons have been allowed to retire in various fiefs, earning some semblance of a life after war. Few today, however, remember their brothers, the Qabirim (sing. = Qabiri), humans engineered for superior intelligence. Feared and hated during the latter days of the Second Republic, Qabirim suffered some of the worst witchhunts of all the Changed. If there are any left in the Known Worlds, they are few, well hidden and by no means a community. Things are different in barbarian space....

Qabirim are Changed humans of cunning intelligence whose mental differences have been well bred into their descendants since the Fall. They are not human think machines, but individuals of ruthless intelligence especially skilled at interpersonal manipulations. They scare others because of their brutal practicality and cruel reasoning — and their fiery tempers or paranoid personalities.

While their ancestors' genetic engineering crafted cunning intelligence, it comes with chemical imbalances which lead to a number of mental afflictions, from depression or manic behavior to murderous insanity.

Nonetheless, in barbarian space, they are considered useful to thanes, Caliphate officials, and especially the Paladindrax of Antioch, the world hosting their greatest free community. Although their population overall is small (they have taken to breeding with non-Changed humans out of necessity, and make distinctions between pure- and half-breeds), they are politically powerful because of their usefulness to any party that desires their intelligence. Most patrons overlook their psychological dysfunctions in return for results.

Qabirim communities are secretive and closed to outsiders. Those among them whose mental afflictions prove to be the least harmful to others are singled out to help raise future generations of Qabirim, and are honored with praise and monetary rewards in return for their virtual enslavement to the needs of the young. However, these mentors are usually fondly remembered by most of their charges, and are treated with great respect.

Qabirim society is a meritocracy. Each Qabiri is expected to earn his place in the community through merit (which includes ruthless cunning), for hereditary titles or positions often prove untrustworthy when an insane son or daughter assumes a well-respected Qabiri's position. Many Qabirim leave the community to serve as freelancers for various political powers throughout barbarian space.

Non-Qabirim are allowed into the community through marriage, and are treated well physically, but are often intellectually disdained by the community as a whole.

Changed Powers

Category: Tweaked

There are four mutations associated with the Qabirim. Only the purest of the original breed possess all these powers. Those that possess none of them are not considered Qabirim, even though they may be blood-related.

Enhanced Intelligence (7 pts)

A Qabiri's base Wits score is equal to 4 (rather than the 3 common to most humans). In addition, her intellectual potential is higher than most. Her maximum Wits score is 12 (rather than 10). Each of these modifiers requires a +1 Meta, for a total of Meta 3.

Photographic Memory (2 pts)

A Qabiri's capacity to remember fine details is prodigious. General remembrance of facts or events usually requires no roll, but a Qabiri can remember things in exacting detail — almost like a holovid playback of the event. To do so, the Qabiri must roll Introvert + Focus. The gamemaster should levy bonuses or penalties depending on the intensity or complexity of the memory. Alternatively, five minutes or so of undistracted contemplation usually recovers an important event without recourse to a roll. Meta +1.

Unsaid Discourse (3 pts)

The Qabirim train themselves to carefully observe the nonverbal communications of others, and can read these as well as most literate people read a book. The unconscious blink of the eye at the right moment or a nervous smile may well reveal what is unsaid. Rolling Perception + Empathy, a Qabiri can perceive these hidden meanings in human discourse. The more victory points gained, the deeper the insight. One victory point might reveal that the person is lying about the duke, but three would clearly show that the person is in love with the duke.

However, good liars can project fake gestures — a person can resist Qabirim scrutiny with a Wits + Knavery roll; the successes are compared against the Qabiri's to determine final success or failure, much like a Dodge roll in combat.

Qabirim with the Xeno-Empathy skill could conceivably learn to read the nonverbal gestures of an alien race. Meta +1.

Ingenuity (2 pts)

When given an intellectual problem to solve, a Qabiri rarely fails to find a solution, given enough time. Devising new ideas or inventions takes leaps of imagination or ingenuity — something the Qabirim are well bred for. The solving of such conundrums usually requires a sustained action wherein the character works to gain a set number of victory points over a series of rolls. The traits used for these rolls vary with the task: perhaps Tech + High Tech Redemption to devise a new fusion drive, or Wits + Science (Economics) to engineer a new trade policy. Whenever undertaking such mentation, a Qabiri has to achieve only two-thirds (round down) as many victory points as a normal human. For instance, when deciphering Vautech, which typically requires 18 victory points, the Qabiri need collect only 12. However, the time between rolls is unchanged. (See **Fading Suns** 2nd edition rulebook, p. 200, for guidelines on inventing technology.) Meta +1.

Curse: Mentally Unstable (+2 pts)

All Qabirim suffer a chemical imbalance of sorts that screws up their emotional stability. Choose one from the list of problems below or create a new one:

Delusional (-2 Perception when confronted with something that disagrees with the character's delusional belief)

Dependant (-2 Calm when object of dependence is inaccessible)

Depressed (-2 Passion when undertaking tasks)

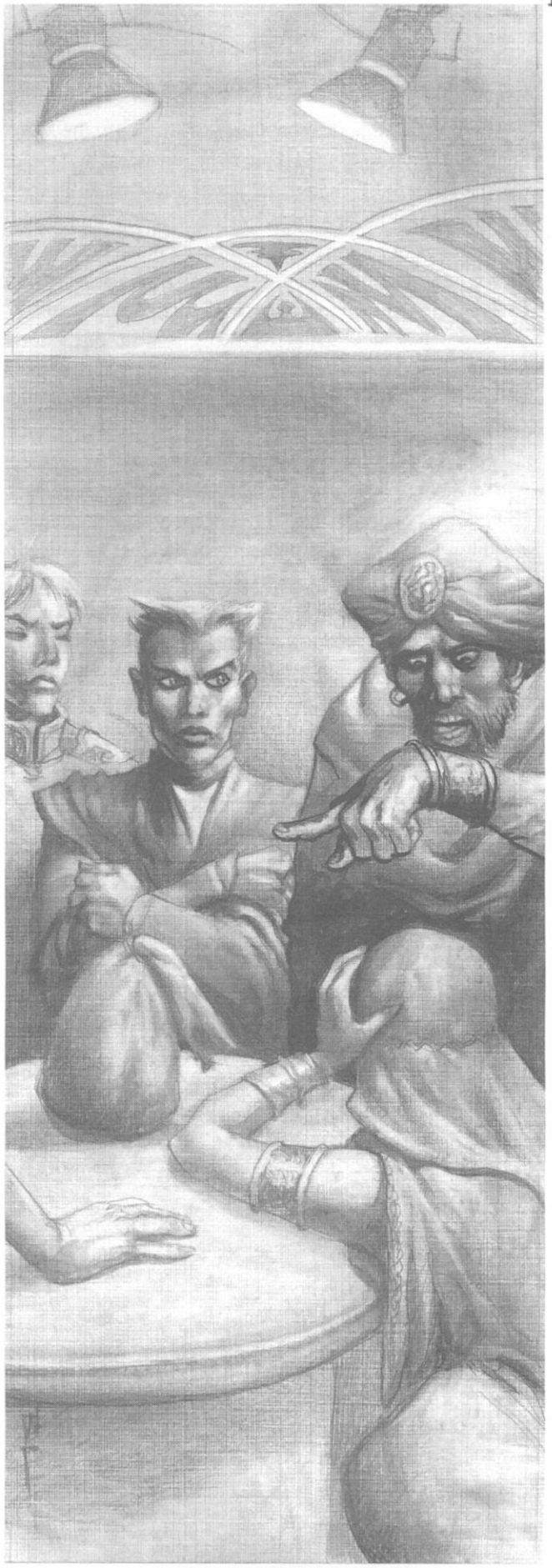
Manic (-2 Calm under emotional stress)

Paranoia (-2 Extrovert around those who have disagreed with you)

Repression (-2 Introvert when trying to remember past events)

Affliction

Ostracized (1 pt): Those who recognize a Qabiri as such usually fear him. Legends of Qabirim infiltrating the governments of the Second Republic on many worlds and engineering their downfalls — not to mention the crash of the welfare computer database — have been told to most children even in the Known Worlds (regardless of their veracity). Hence, they are despised more than most Changed, and suffer extremely hateful retribution from the Inquisition. However, in most of barbarian space they are tolerated, and they even hold positions of power on Antioch.



Ming

The most enigmatic inhabitants of Gizeh are the Ming. Thomas Jerymyn suspected them to be the oldest living race after the Anunnaki, though he never supplied any proof. The Ming appear as large, ponderously moving, humanoid-shaped lumps of rock. They appear to be made of the same rock found in Gizeh's mountains. Small crystals, which act like eyes, ring the circumference of their bulbous heads. Otherwise, they lack distinctive faces, and no one knows how they breathe, eat or talk (they can learn Urthish and emit words in a deep octave, but no one has identified their vocal cords).

More importantly, the Ming possess a unique perspective. To them, everything exists in the ever-present now. The Ming do not understand the concept of time. To a Ming, something that happened millennia ago is just as immediate as today, and all Ming seem to share the same recollections. Somehow, the Ming know a lot about everything. When questioned about repairing a malfunctioning think machine, for example, a Ming can accurately diagnose the problem, describe the repair process, and even design replacement parts. They similarly possess a frightening body of knowledge about other worlds and lifeforms, even though the Ming do not seem to have ever left Gizeh. Curiously, this knowledge does not extend to history; a Ming cannot recall events beyond Gizeh.



This perspective also makes the Ming frustrating to talk to — they tend to confuse the past and future with the present. The Ming try hard to get their tenses right, as a courtesy to their human friends, but they frequently get them wrong. The listener is never sure whether a Ming speaks of the present, some ancient past, or the far future. Asking a Ming the same question twice elicits a different response both times, as though the passage of time affects the Ming's understanding. That the Ming had contact with the Anunnaki is clear from their conversations — they claim they learned to build the crystal monoliths from the Ur races — but questions about them prove particularly frustrating. The locals treat the Ming with a respect bordering on reverence. Whenever a Ming appears to the populace, Gizans flock to ask it for advice.

Little else is known of the Ming, or their culture, for they allow few outsiders into their confidences. No one has seen a Ming settlement, and many locals believe the Ming to be solitary creatures. Indeed, no one knows whether they get together to mate, or if they even die. The only time groups of Ming appear to congregate is when they build one of their crystal monoliths. Otherwise, the Ming appear to have no social taboos, nor any cultural strictures. They simply are.

Crystal Monoliths

These curious structures which the Ming seem to grow from the ground during long rituals are completely baffling to humanity. Their purpose is unknown, causing many to speculate on a number of meanings: They represent a Ming idea of a cathedral to a higher power; they are art forms; they are healing centers, sending out vibratory resonances that either heal or feed the Ming; they are radio transmitters, picking up signals from other worlds, explaining the Ming's odd lores; they are jumpgate keys, controlling the opening and shutting of Gizeh's jumpgate; etc.

Traits

Note: Ming do not make good player characters; they should be reserved for gamemaster use only, to maintain their aura of mystery.

Characteristics: Strength (base 5, maximum 15), Dexterity (base 1, maximum 8), Endurance (base 5, maximum 15), Tech (base 5, maximum unknown)

Learned skills: Lore (general knowledge) 3

Species Traits:

Benefice: Occult Shield (complete immunity from telepathic and empathic psychic powers or theurgic rites)

Muazi

Sentient fungi native to the planet Sky Tear, there are few species more mysterious or fundamentally alien than the Muazi. Found exclusively in moist, hot regions, the Muazi were first believed to be telepathic colony intelligences by the Kurgan who first discovered their existence. In fact, this was not entirely correct. There are pockets of living Muazi fungus throughout the planet that betray no signs of intelligent life.

The sole Second Republic xenologist to study the matter devised a theory that a Muazi "individual" is actually a noncorporeal entity that animates a given colony of the fungus once it reaches a certain age or mass. It is thus an emergent entity that exists irregardless of its physical body, but whose consciousness goes dormant if the body is disrupted, until sufficient mass can again be attained for awareness. Even if a mold is separated, the same intelligence may be reborn into a new colony (with no memories of its dormant period).

Muazi have little to no culture or interaction with one another. However, they do have unique sense perceptions and can provide interesting information to other sentients.

Initiating communications with a Muazi individual (who is physically a collective of molds and spores) requires empathic or telepathic powers, though in certain cases the Muazi may choose to open contact. Truly alien in both their appearance and thought processes, even their most intimate human contacts do not really understand them. To say that their telepathic language is enigmatic is an understatement. The aliens do not use words, but typically communicate through dreams, images and emotions (many of them incomprehensible).

While a meeting of the minds with one of these creatures may prove enlightening or even utilitarian, it can also give the human telepath headaches, strange dreams and even result in lost memories. It is an interesting feature of Sky Tear's madness that its supposed perpetrators, the Muazi, may actually be its greatest victims. There are humans who believe that they were a species of pacifists before humanity found them. These apologists claim that it is humanity that has infected the Muazi with its psychic madness and not the other way around. While Muazi can be extremely dangerous and even vengeful if wronged, they are certainly not inimical to human life like the Symbiots.

Although the Muazi are seen as a major impediment to the settling of the planet, this does not mean they are without worth to the colonial powers. Secret societies within both the Kurgan Caliphate and the Vuldrok Star-Nation (the Satai priesthood and the Sons of Gwelkarga, respectively) seek the sentient fungus for its unique essence, which temporarily transfers some of the Muazi's telepathic abilities to the person who consumes it. For obvious reasons, such knowledge — if widely spread — could prove very destabilizing to these governments, who guard the secret for reasons of planetary and occult security.

The Vuldrok prefer to extract the drug voluntary from the Muazi, lest the entity somehow curse the batch. Shamans seek to commune with the beings and believe they are a living sacrament to the nature gods, a bridge between human consciousness and planetary consciousness.

The Kurgan Satai priesthood uses a mix of advanced biogenetics and alchemy to create its version of the drug, also considered a holy sacrament. However, the Muazi are seen as mere providers at best, servants of the Star-Maker with a single role: to provide the Caliph and his chosen with heavenly visions. They prefer to extract the drug voluntarily, but have little qualm in hunting it down if necessary, lest its scarcity cause upheaval in the court (as it has before).

In addition to these two parties, various local tribes throughout the planet have knowledge of the Muazi drug.



Some of these have profound symbiotic relations with the Muazi, revering them as elder spirits or even gods, and protecting them at all costs. Others consider them demons or merely valuable commodities, and kill them to extract the desired essences.

However, extraction of enough fungal matter to concoct a few doses does not have to harm the Muazi. It feels no pain when its colony is mildly disrupted, but greater disruption (removal of too much mass at once) can cause delirium, mental unstability and ultimately death.

Physiology

Muazi are fungal/cyanobacterial colonies consisting of chitinous, ashen gray mycelium and soft, blue egglike spores. Their sharp, angular mycelium have a brittle, branchlike consistency and are often flecked with specks of green. Although mobile, on most occasions the colony mass remains stationary in shaded regions or moves slowly through the planet's deep soils. Muazi cannot move quickly, even when threatened (about two meters a minute is breakneck speed for a Muazi), though this speed holds whether the creature is above or below ground.

Abrupt disruption of its spores can be a hazard for other creatures (including humans); ingestion (by breathing the spores) can cause temporary but violent hallucinations and emotional upheavals — such as a desire to attack one's companions. However, simple precautions (a veil across the nose and mouth) can prevent this effect.

The Flesh of Satai/Tulac

Information on the Vuldrok and Kurgans' use of these unique drugs is given in **Star Crusade**, but a number of permutations to the basic template are possible. Besides the Vuldrok and Kurgans, various cults, tribes and individual madmen on Sky Tear have concocted numerous drugs from Muazi fungal mass over the centuries.

The types of psychic powers most commonly conveyed by the drug are: Psyche (Intuit, Emote, MindSight and MindSpeech), Sixth Sense (Sensitivity, Darksense and Subtle Sight) and in rarer cases Omen (Shadows Gone By, Shadows to Come and Voice from the Past). Other, even more dangerous, effects from telepathy drugs have been recorded.

About 20-25 doses of a drug can be obtained from a recently dead Muazi, or the alien may voluntarily give up enough of its essence to make two doses every week. The power usually lasts a few hours (average all the user's Spirit characteristics; add one hour per resultant level). Abuse or misuse of the drug may lead to madness, coma or death.

Traits

Body: Strength (maximum 1), Dexterity (maximum 1), Endurance (maximum 12)
Mind: Perception (minimum 2), Tech (minimum 1)
Spirit: Introvert (always primary), Calm (always primary)
Natural skills: Charm (minimum 1), Impress (minimum 1); Muazi cannot learn Fight, Melee, Shoot or Vigor
Learned skills: Stoic Body (minimum 3), Stoic Mind (minimum 3), Survival (minimum 2), Xeno-Empathy (minimum 1, for dealing with humans); other skills may be learned through lengthy telepathic exposure to humans or other sentients.
Species Traits:
Psychic Powers: Muazi may exhibit one or more of the following — Psyche (Intuit, Emote, MindSight, MindSearch, MindSpeech, BrainBlast and Sympaticus), Sixth Sense (Sensitivity, Subtle Sight, Premonition, FarSight, FarSound, Shared Sense and Wyrd Sight) and in rarer cases Omen (Shadows Gone By, Shadows to Come, Voice from the Past and sometimes Oracle).

In addition, Muazi are able to weave harmless but convincing mental illusions (Extrovert + Xeno-Empathy, sensory, prolonged, 1W). The Muazi perceive through a combination of touch and Darksense (which costs them no Wyrd).
Benefice: Soilswimming (Muazi can seep through soil with very little disturbance; Dexterity = meters per minute traveled), Tenacious (+5 increased Vitality)
Armor: Chitinous flesh (4d), Phase Shift (8d vs physical attacks only)
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0 + Endurance

Z'go

The Z'go are sentient beings of energy, with scant material bodies composed of microscopic metallic fibers held in magnetic fields. They appear as luminous, interlacing strings or sheets of color floating in the void of space, sparkling at various points throughout their "bodies." Nobody has any clue as to their origins, although there are many theories, from some ancient Anunnaki energy accident to some willed evolutionary stage on the part of a possible native sentient race of Sargasso (about whom there is no evidence whatsoever).

Z'go live in the asteroid belt of the Sargasso system. They seem to require the magnetic fields generated by the unique combination of ores and metals within the asteroids, and zealously guard these nests from human belters and prospectors. The only humans they have ever befriended are the occasional lone belters, whom they sometimes gift with the location of a particular asteroid motherlode, although one they have already abandoned.

It is known that they cannot survive in their natural state within a planet's atmosphere. Either the proliferation of gases, the magnetic radiations or the sheer gravity destroys the integrity of their fields. Second Republic technicians developed containment suits that Z'go ambassadors could wear when interacting with humans; these humanoid-shaped spacesuits allow a Z'go to move freely within an atmosphere or planetary gravity well, and allow it to communicate through its think machines' vocabulary data (a *dolomei*, similar to those used by the Shantor). These suits haven't been built of late, although many survive among the Z'go, on their asteroid nests.

Z'go culture seems nonexistent except for mating rites on their nests and pseudo-religious ceremonies held far from human scrutiny. They claim to exist for one purpose only: to maintain the sun. Sargasso's star shows signs of the fading suns phenomenon, but the Z'go claim it would have perished in some ancient Ur battle were it not for their "worship." Beyond this, they say nothing, although it is known that they make occasional "pilgrimages" to the system's jumpgate, there hovering about it for days before leaving again.

Physiology

Life as a magnetic field is quite different from that of an organic being. The Z'go's material bodies are mere atoms held together by magnetism, although Second Republic xenologists suspected something more to their integrity fields than simple magnetics. However, lacking the sophisticated field technology of the Vau, they could not fully investigate this phenomenon.

There is a secondary race of Z'go that is rarely encountered, called Prismatics by xenologists. They contain various gases within their integrity fields that make for beautiful and colorful displays. However, there is some speculation that the Prismatics are not another race but instead signify elder Z'go, or perhaps the "energizing" breeders of the race (which would explain why they are rarely seen).

Z'go do appear to have sexes — at least three of them: male, female and "energizer." Little is understood about breeding — the most carefully guarded secret of the Z'go — but it is believed that a male somehow impregnates a female, who carries to term an energy egg. At birth, the egg is inert until an energizer "charges" it (perhaps giving up a portion of its own life force). It is not known how long an egg can remain inert until it is charged.

Z'go find it hard to physically exert themselves upon the world with just their personal fields alone. However, they can interact with other fields at a distance, giving them a seemingly telekinetic ability, and they can warp and distort energy at will, giving them a natural ability similar to the psychic Vis Craft power. A single Z'go in the void can disable a spacecraft; a group of them can threaten a fleet.

Perception is radically different from mammalian vision. Z'go instead sense energy fields and patterns across extended areas — some studied Z'go were known to discriminate between starship classes as many as 30 astronomical units distant in space. To them, humans are conglomerates of organic mush that emit low-level electromagnetic fields; it is the particularities of these fields that allow Z'go to recognize known individuals, and even understand their emotional states to some degree. They can discriminate sound vibrations similar to humans, and learn to understand languages. They have little to no tactile sense, however.

No one knows the natural life span of a Z'go.

Traits

Note: Z'go do not make good player characters; they should be reserved for gamemaster use only. However, a short stint playing a Z'go in a containment suit might be fun.

Characteristics: Strength (base 1, maximum 3), Dexterity (maximum 12), Psi 1

Natural skills: Dodge (base 4), Fly (base 3; move in any direction 10 meters per turn), Melee (base 0), Shoot (base 1)

Learned skills: All Z'go gain Speak Z'goish for free. They cannot speak Urthish without a dolomei.



Species Traits:

Psychic paths (Z'go may learn only these paths and do not gain Urge): Vis Craft, FarHand

Power: Intuit 1 (cannot learn higher levels of Psyche)

Curse: Paranoid (-2 Calm in tense situations)

Benefice: Dolomei (1 pt: Speak basic Urthish; 2 pts: Speak fluent Urthish), Voidborn (Z'go live and thrive in the void of space, near to asteroid fields but far from planetary atmospheres)

Affliction: Planetary Intolerance (cannot exist in a planetary atmosphere/gravity well without a containment suit; see below)

Wyrd: Minimum 7 points

Containment Suit

TL: 5

Cost: 1000

Z'go do not like wearing containment suits anymore than humans like being packed into a spacesuit for long hours at a time. However, those who interact with humans on planets require them. (Z'go can exist within the artificial environments of most spacestations just fine.)

A containment suit always includes a *dolomei* so a Z'go can speak with humans, and it enhances its natural Strength (+3), but hinders the extremely fast movements some Z'go are capable of (Dexterity maximum of 10 while in a suit). In addition, some suits may be equipped with weaponry. A Z'go can handle weapons when in a suit, but must learn to use them. Z'go cannot fly when in containment suits.

Note that not just any vacuum suit can contain a Z'go — special metals and plastic alloys are used to help maintain and protect integrity fields from all sorts of electromagnetic hazards. This requires a power supply. In a tech level 5 suit, a fusion cell will operate for 24 hours. In a tech level 6 or higher suit (+500 firebirds), a single cell will work for a week.

Although it takes a Z'go 10 turns to don a suit, it can escape from it in one turn.

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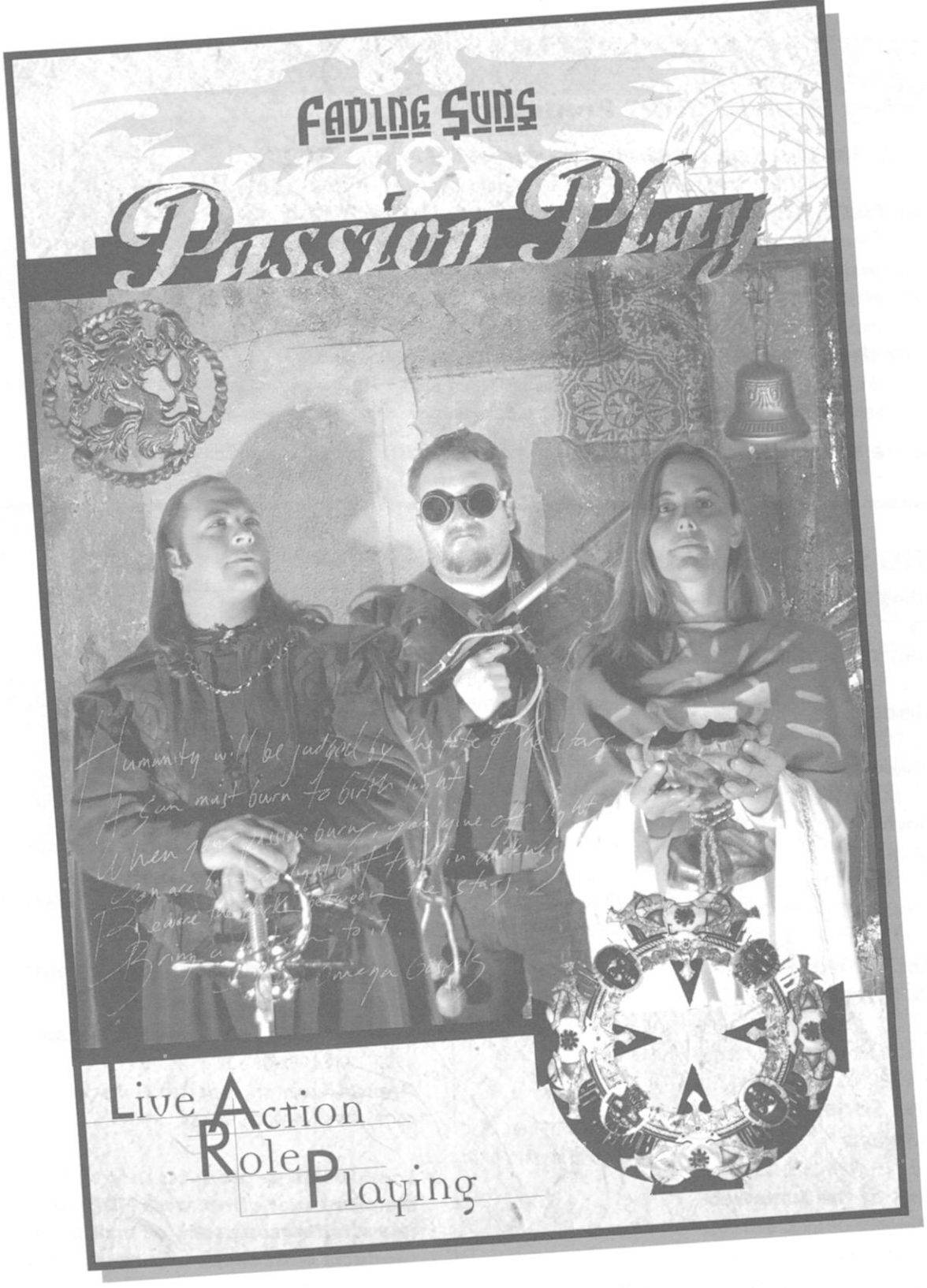
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