War In The Heavens: Hegemony



FADING SUNS™

War In The Heavens: Hegemony



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War in the Heavens

by
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Enjoy, dear friends... and may the Pancreator's light shines on you.

Pilgrims:

And Hombor said unto Maya: "There be chains shackled to your wrists and feet, and so you bemoan your servitude and rage against the bars of your cage. But in such bindings I see opportunity, for do not chains invoke pity? Pity in turn invokes charity."

"Fool!" Maya replied. "What good is charity without the freedom to use it?"

"Ah, but you do not understand," Hombor replied, rubbing his sores. "It is not the charity of Humanity I seek, but that of the Pancreator. What chains can hold against His grace? In this darkened universe, liberty is not a right but a gift."

— *Omega Gospels* (Hombor 13:7)



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Alustro's Journal: Approbations

Never did I conceive such wonders as I have seen of late. Amidst the violent cruelties of barbarian space I witnessed strange beings and saw that, even far removed from the core worlds, humanity survives and thrives in manners all its own. Though my ribs still hurt when I draw breath and my leg shall ever walk with a limp from the wounds I sustained there, these maimings have been more than paid for by our patron's gratitude. Our mission — whose aim and ends must still remain secret — held importance for this nameless lord.

And yet wonders still present themselves, one greater than any that occurred on that long star sojourn into barbarian space from which my companions and I only just returned. On Byzantium Secundus we finally came to rest, three days ago, delivering the prize we had sought, found, and fought hard to retain on the perilous journey back to the Known Worlds. My wounds are still too fresh, even weeks after their delivery, to write overmuch of their getting — or the woundings I delivered in return. My soul still bleeds with sorrow from the deeds I committed in that far place, the dark void of space where bandits prowl heedless of all threat.

As I write, my Lady and her bodyguard meet with our quest liege, and surely great shall be the honor gained in his eyes, although she must wear it cloaked and silent. Julia, Sanjuk and Ong traveled to the Port Authority, hoping to immerse themselves in its cosmopolitan goings-on, so long denied them in those places from which we lately came. Lt. Gosado sought old friends at the Li Halan garrison, where she can reveal her newly won scars and tell the tales of our glory among Vuldrok pirates.

But I sought only solace and healing, and so wandered to the Holy City to rest in its chapels and meditate in the incense scents of sandalwood and jasmine. Walking unsteadily from circle to circle, borne on the cane I still find unfamiliar and damnable, I stopped at whatever shrine or cathedral took my fancy, and there prayed again and again, hoping in such wise to purge my guilt.

Finally I came to the Pelunia Gardens, in Corona Secundus, over which looms St. Maya's Cathedral, on its perch on the upper and final circle of the city. I sat by a willow tree on a stone bench placed by Patriarch Halvor during his service as Regent of the Known Worlds. A simple carving, now forgotten by most priests, it brought me solace with the memory that here, in times of trouble, Chia Wen, the Patriarch's sister, would come and watch the gentle spring that runs past, delivering the fallen blossoms from the far end of the garden to a pond around the bend, hidden by trees. Here I sat for a number of hours, working over and over in my mind how I might have performed my actions differently, and thus saved men their lives. A useless exercise.

So deep in thought I was that I failed to notice the complete stillness that fell over the gardens, for no passersby had come for some time, as if barred from the place. When I noticed the strangeness of its complete silence, I stood and looked about, wondering the cause.

Then I saw the Mandarin. On the broad lawn from the front entrance the Vau came toward me, his (her?) robes flowing about him as the wind gently swept through the trees, causing them to shiver and stir. We were alone but for his guards — Vau Soldiers bearing short staves — which I could now see at the gateway, keeping all others from entry.

He came near and stopped, nodding slightly, a faint smile on his face. I was too stunned to act at first, but then remembered my manners, and so bowed to him. His smile grew larger, and he watched me as one would a friend long sundered.

For many a long moment we stood thus, simply watching each other. I noted the intricate carvings of his headdress, which extended over his shoulders and part of his chest, decorated with strange, indecipherable glyphs. Colored a dark brown, it looked more like a piece of wondrously shaped driftwood than the result of a technology beyond human ken.

Finally, he spoke: "I had hoped to deliver my invitation solely to you and your company, but your wounds do not permit your going at this time. A pity, for your insight would have served your kind well. May the glyphs turn and allow for such a moment to again occur. Then perhaps you shall meet with us in gardens of our own sculpting."

He bowed fully to me and turned to leave.

I barely knew what to do, awed at the attention this being had given me. How could this be? What supernatural means did the Vau employ whereby they would know me, from among so many others of my race?

"Please wait," I said, perhaps too hurried. "How is that you know me?"

He turned his head, his smile still there. "I have read your journals. It is wise that you chose to publish them."

He walked back whence he came as I stood dumbfounded and feeling somewhat the idiot. My journals are anything but supernatural and available to many who can read. I am nonetheless amazed that they have come to the attention of such as the Vau.

I watched the Mandarin leave the gardens, his escort behind him, and stood once more alone in the stillness. I tried to follow, but collapsed to the ground as my cane gave way beneath me. The exhaustion of my day-long walk had been too much for my weakened state, and the shock of my encounter perhaps too much for my turmoil-wracked mind. I passed into unconsciousness as a fever warmed my brow.

I awoke not on grass but in a bed, a large cushioned one fit for a lord or rich merchant, judging by its size and the gilt on its four-poster hangings. Looking about the room, I saw a fire crackling in a small chimney, before which was an empty reading chair, positioned to catch light from a closed, ornate window. From beyond a door, now slightly ajar, I could hear the coming and going of people, servants by the sound of them.

I slid from the bed and noticed my cane leaning near. Clutching it, I stood and tried to quietly move to the chair, but could not do so without emitting a pained grunt — my broken rib complained overloud. A boy stuck his head through the door, saw I was up, and rushed to help me sit.

"Where am I?" I asked him.

"Worry not, provost," he replied. "You are within the quarters of Bishop Yost. Rest now, and I shall fetch him who ordered you brought here." He slipped from the room before I could say ought else, and so I sat, staring at the fire and trying to remember if I knew the name he had given. I did not.

It was not the mysterious Bishop Yost who came quietly through the door, but my uncle, the Archbishop Palamon, the highest spiritual authority on this world.

I bowed my head to him but was too startled to give the proper address.

He placed his hand upon my head and tilted it upward, so that he could see my face. I wondered at the look upon his, for it was so like that given me by the Mandarin — the expression of one who has long missed looking upon a friend. Tears welled in my eyes, for I so deeply missed looking likewise upon my uncle, who was once as a father to me. He bent down and embraced me with genuine ardor, but also, I suspect, to relieve me of the shame of my tears. I quickly wiped my eyes and gently pulled from his hug.

He called out to a servant: "Bring me a chair." In moment, the boy came again, this time carrying a light chair, certainly not one fit for an archbishop. But my uncle took it without complaint and set it across from me, tilted slightly toward the fire. He waved the boy away, who quickly left the room, closing the door behind him.

We sat in silence for a few moments, listening to the pop and crackle of the flames, each wondering where to begin. I, of course, waited for him to speak first.

"When I received your last letter," he said, "telling me of your journey beyond the Known Worlds, I feared you would soon be dead. I believed it to be foolhardy in the extreme, and knew not what madness could have driven your liege to lead you there.

"And today, my priests followed a contingent of Vau emissaries to the Garden of Respite and found you, lying fevered on its lawns, within sight of my very bedroom window. I could scarcely believe the news, and came myself to see. There you were, unconscious and pained by a wound-fever no priest should ever know. I had you brought here, to the home of Bishop Yost, a retired yet revered local. Your coming is unknown by any but those loyal to me, and so you need not worry about your secrecy. Oh, yes, I heeded well your comments in your letter about rivals and enemies. What noble does not reap such from their sowings?"

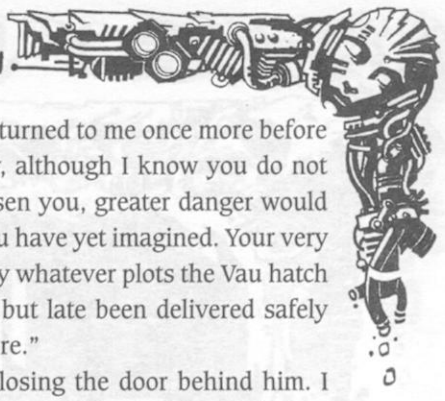
"Thank you," was all I could say.

He turned from the fire and looked upon me again.

"Fear not my ire, nephew. It was extinguished by the cold that gripped my heart when I imagined you dead on some world far from the Church, but is now replaced by the warmth of seeing you again, weakened but still whole. I forgive you your transgressions against an old man's fear, for I ever resisted your following a questing path, the most regretful of the Prophet's admonitions to one whose duty it is to raise boys into adulthood, only to see them travel far from their hearths.

"Your letter laid upon me finally the burden of acceptance. I accept your duty, and your quest. And by my intelligence, I know that it has now led to perilously high acclaim."

My eyes widened, but then closed. Of course, I realized, if any on this world know of our recent patron, it would be my uncle, whose eyes and ears hear and see much that the



Faithful do here. "Then you know. I beg you not to speak of it."

"I?" he said in surprise. "To whom would I tell? Is there any whose alliance I need court? Not I. Although he who was your liege in this holds goals different from those I foresee for the Church, he is yet true to the Faith and acts in accord with it. I can gainsay him nothing in this, nor you for your role in his mission."

"I know you, uncle," I said. "And your word I trust. But I also know that you would not have me leave this room without revealing something to you of my encounter with the Vau, and so I shall tell it—"

"No, tell me none of it," he said. "Although I have ever demanded to know all of your doings, even one as old as I can still learn, and I perceive that what this being told you was for you alone. Let it stay that way for now, until you meditate further on the wisdom of revealing it."

"You amaze me," I said. "I almost fear you are not real, but a fantasy of my fever, which I thought was abated."

He laughed at that, and stood up from his chair.

"You are surely wide awake, nephew, but must not remain so for long. Rest you need, and here you shall have it, safe from all intrusion. Your friends will come, for I have already dispatched messages. However, I ask this: Do not mention my role in your rescue to them, at least not yet. They would fear the hand of politics come down upon them, and I would not burden them so."

"I am tired," I said, but rose from the chair. "Yet I cannot allow myself to sleep. I have too many questions concerning my visitor earlier."

"Ah," he said. "Few answers will be forthcoming, but I can tell you this: The being traveled to the second circle and there waylaid an unsuspecting noble and her entourage. He gave to her an invitation, an emissary mission to Vril-Ya, and then departed to a starship outside the Holy City. The noblewoman, whose name I shall not reveal — for she deserves privacy as much as you and your Lady — is already the talk of the high court. No clue can be found as to why she was chosen for this honor; it is seemingly a random choice.

"One more thing will I tell you, a thing most people do not know as yet and may never come to know: This noblewoman and her entourage were not the first so chosen for ambassadorial duty to the Vau. Others throughout the Known Worlds have been so gifted of late, and their choosing is seemingly just as arbitrary, unless they all withhold intelligence of deeper doings. And so a strange sampling of humans go to meet the Vau, and none dare prevent it for fear of losing insight into those aliens' inscrutable ways, regardless of the consequences of allowing them to pick and choose from our kind."

He went to the door and turned to me once more before he opened it. "You are lucky, although I know you do not think so. If the Vau had chosen you, greater danger would have threatened you than you have yet imagined. Your very soul would have been tried by whatever plots the Vau hatch with this scheme. You have but late been delivered safely from evil; pray seek it no more."

And with that he left, closing the door behind him. I went to the bed and lay down, thinking on the transformation of my uncle's attitude toward me, but came to few conclusions before I fell once more into deep slumber.

I dreamed. There I stood in a hall unknown to me, for its make was strange and inhuman, the markings on the walls and floor forming patterns that made little sense. The Mandarin from the garden appeared in a doorway that did not exist before, although whether this was but the logic of dream or some vision of actual Vau architecture, I know not. He smiled at me, and made an odd noise, his mouth forming a trumpet shape. He extended his hand and offered me an item that looked to be a portable think machine.

I gazed at it and saw, swimming in streams on its screen — flat, but yet seemingly with infinite depth — many glyphs, changing into different glyphs as I watched. Then they gathered together in a spiral and formed one large, complex shape that I could not look upon. As it formed, my mind reeled, and I surely knew what it was like for a dreamer to hit the ground after a long fall — something oneirists claim shocks us awake before impact. And yet still I dreamed, and was now in a cage formed from the glyph, so tightly that I could no longer see it whole, and was thus spared further pain. I was desperate and grabbed the bars of my cell, shaking them with all my strength, but they did not yield. I saw past them other cages wherein stood my companions, talking through the bars to one another as if unaware of the enmeshing glyphs.

I cried out but they heard me not. In despair, I uttered a prayer to the Empyrean asking for deliverance, and a light appeared, so strong as to shine through the bars, revealing them to be insubstantial and unreal, a mere illusion. They melted away and I stepped forward into the light, where I saw a shadowy silhouette of a robed man awaiting my approach.

I then awoke to the sun-filled bedroom as a chiurgeon bent low over me, testing my brow for signs of fever. There were none. Awake now, I requested paper and pen, and so recorded this account. I know not whether my dream was fever-induced or visionary, but I must admit that it matters not to me at this time. I have returned to the hearth of my uncle's regard, from which I traveled far, and have been welcomed home. Even though my feet shall wander again, my heart shall ever have a place here.



Introduction: Prophecy Unfolds

It is said that the Oracle never lies. Falsehood is introduced through interpretation, performed by embodied sentients blind to the Weft's far horizons. It has been a matter of faith for many ouil'tlor *that the Progenitors are gone but that their Works remain. And yet now comes new Prophecy, heralding the return of their war. If they are not here to fight it, who will then be its soldiers? I fear this fate will be ours to bear — ours and every sentient being's who has also touched the secret stars.*

— Val'huyima Vozin Slee'ur Uma'plau, *Subil'yo Hua'tilor* ("Waiting in Fullness"; trans. by Yonn Gwin Ko'anti)

What is War in the Heavens?

Many ancient cultures have mythical legends about a cosmic war fought by the gods in times past: numerous Urth cultures have stories of such battles, as do the Obun and Ukari, the Oro'ym, and the Vau. Most of these even prophesy a future war where the gods' struggles with their rivals will finally be resolved and the universe will come to an end.

During Urth's First Republic and early Diaspora periods, humans looked back on their myths and labeled them mere metaphors for psychological ideas and conflicts. However, as more and more legends of similar god wars from alien cultures were uncovered, some xenoarchaeologists began to take the whole thing quite seriously, as a literal fact of the past. Since there was clear and undeniable evidence that the Anunnaki had visited all the races who had hosted such legends, it was concluded that some great and terrifying war, fought with the high technology of the Ur, had occurred, resulting in the destruction of the Anunnaki. Accounts of this conflict reverberated through the stories of all the young races, growing in the telling so that the advanced Anunnaki became gods in these tales.

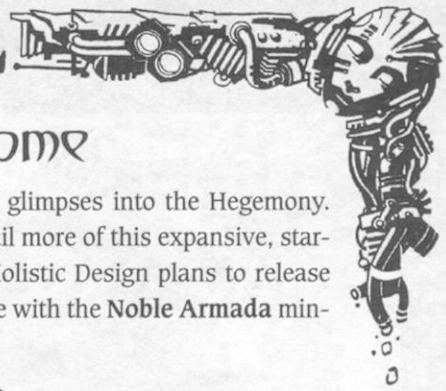
With some exception, a rational scientific view of history prevailed in human thought until the New Dark Ages, when a more superstitious, apocalyptic and literal legend took over. The war was now considered to have been fought by two races, one good (aided by Empyrean powers) and one bad (aided by demonic powers). Although the good race won the conflict, it died waging it, leaving no mentor alive to aid the ignorant, sinful younger races, now struggling to reach Empyrean grace without the aid of teachers.

It seems that the Vau believe the fabled cosmic war of the past was a reality. What's more, they say that it never really ended and continues even now, although in some immaterial fashion uncomprehendable to humans. Furthermore, they prophesy that the conflict will return to plague the universe in a manner that involves all living beings, a prophecy similar to that found in Obun and Ukari legends.

Just who the players in this war were and will be is a matter of conflicting accounts: To take the Obun and Ukari version of things, the supposed good and evil of the gods depends on one's point of view. What hints the Vau have given tell that all races will be involved, although the parts each will play are unclear — or the Vau have chosen not to reveal them. Obun theorize that certain current races will take the parts of the Anunnaki and, by trying to become gods, will doom the universe.

The Trilogy

Each volume in the trilogy examines a major new faction of the **Fading Suns** universe. Most of these have only been glimpsed or hinted at before. Each book provides new details and is divided into two separate sections: a



sourcebook, providing history, culture and rule information; and a drama wherein the player characters meet the new faction and perhaps change the way the Known Worlds views or deals with them.

In addition, prophecies concerning the imminence of the War in the Heavens become more frequent — and more clear — as the series progresses. The epic drama told through the trilogy allows characters to involve themselves in history-changing events, key moments that change the continuity of the **Fading Suns** universe.

Past **Fading Suns** books have concentrated on human space, both civilized and barbaric. Each book in this series offers differing views on overall cosmology: the more organic, metamorphic Symbiots; the enigmatic and advanced Vau; and the secrets of the Anunnaki. The complete "War in the Heavens" series includes:

- Volume one: "Lifeweb," detailing the Symbiots,
- Volume two: "Hegemony," detailing the Vau, and
- Volume three: "Pantheon," examining the mysteries of the Anunnaki.

While each book's drama follows its predecessor chronologically, each can also stand alone; previous volumes are helpful but not required to use any book in the series.

This Book

"Hegemony" provides the gamemaster with background on Vau history and culture, with a glimpse at their high technology, and gives a drama to introduce the player characters to the Vau. Details in this book should allow gamemasters to devise future encounters with Vau along the human border, but the mysteries of the core Hegemony worlds necessarily remain vague.

More to Come

This is only the first of glimpses into the Hegemony. Future sourcebooks will detail more of this expansive, star-spanning civilization, and Holistic Design plans to release Vau starship rules compatible with the **Noble Armada** miniatures game.

An Open, Discriminating Mind

Book One: Inception is a subjective account of the Hegemony by one of its citizens. As such, it provides only as much lore as its own author possesses. It even includes mistakes and misunderstandings — or deliberate propaganda. Gamemasters should read it with an open and discriminating mind, supplementing it with truths revealed in **Book Two: Elabi**.

Mandarins are intensely private and secretive sentients. They rarely ever reveal the whole of their lores, plots or plans to others. What's more, even these wise and learned beings might — like any human — have only a piece of the overall puzzle of the universe. High achievement in science and technology is no guarantee of an unbiased understanding of the universe. Like any culture, the Vau's own history and traditions color their perspectives. As their achievements in technology increase, so does their control over the physical universe — and their attempts to impose their values upon it.

When dealing with the Vau, one is wise to follow one of the Prophet's adages: "Not all uttered truths are true, and not all lies are false."





Book One: Inception

The River of Time flows ever on, with us adrift upon its silken surface, or submerged beneath, but dragged ever forwards, save for the occasional eddy and vortex, whose spiral force nonetheless finally yields to the onrushing torrent. We may return to the place of our beginning if the river of our time encircles that space, but we may never return the same, or to the same place. Time and space are entwined — to move in one is to move in the other. Never is there stillness — of body or mind, for the mind is ever afroth, and the Body our bodies inhabit ever moves, planets like wood adrift in cosmic waters.

—Shu'ud Shavit Lo'van, *Lana* ("The Excellences"; trans. by Yonn Gwin Ko'anti)

Time has many streams, rivulets and underground courses. No single river follows the same path, but all empty into the Ocean of Time...

— Ffo'vil Guani Sed, *Kesh Pla'emsh* ("Time As It Is" ; trans. by Yonn Gwin Ko'anti)

The River of Time: History

I beg patience and forgiveness of you, whomever you be, before the reading of this, my humble work, my attempt to communicate to my distant brethren, cousins amidst the stars. I write of the great works of my hosts, Wisest among sentients, most gracious of Presences, the Vau.

Words are inadequate to convey the Essence, for they lack Presence, substituting abstracts for phenomena. I nonetheless endeavor, for, divided as we are by stellar voids and cultural gulfs, they are the one commonality we share, thanks to the training of my diplomatic inceptors. Known Worlds Urthish is not my native language, although my kind do speak a form of it. Thoughts often stall before coming to expression. Again, forgiveness and patience.

Introductions, then — so best experienced with shared Presence, but even in absence our thoughts may greet and images form. No matter how faulty they be, perhaps a conveyance of truth may yet persist.

I am called Yonn Gwin Ko'anti, and I am, like you, *Gwindo*, or "human" as your Urthish states such matters of species. My body is like yours, and our minds share similar formative patterns, but our ways and understandings are unlike. Perhaps a description of my image is required: Upon standing, I reach to three *woon'l* and three *jo'ir*, what you measure as five feet and six inches tall. (Is not one *woon* equivalent to a foot and a half? And a *jo'i* equal to a third of a foot?) My hair grows long below the shoulders, dark black and straight. My skin is brown, like the *flunt'hanot*, and my eyes blue as the skies of Quadi, my homeworld — said to be in shape and form similar to the cradle of humanity, Urth. My robes are for the time of moonrise — auspiced for writing — and are thus colored orange for Slee'Il, the moon of Hoom, with threads of silver and jasmine woven in for Shaduveen's moons, Flur'Id and Opan'Jed ("Harmonious Rest" and "Inspired Vision," respectively).

I add now a note that occurs upon rereading. (I shall also warn that much of this manuscript will suffer unannounced interjection as it occurs to me upon later reflection.) You surely wonder why a human so addresses you from the borders of the Hegemony. This is explained later in the reading, but it is best summarized here, lest confusion reign for long. Humans — *Gwindor*, to us — exist within the Hegemony and have for many centuries, since the time of your fabled Prophet. Humankind spread across many star systems in the time called Diaspora, and many of these colonists were forgotten when they failed to send word back of their finds. My ancestors were such as these. They colonized Quadi only to discover that it was already claimed by the Vau. Gracious as they are, the Vau allowed my kind to stay, and they raised our children as *xa'lo* (citizens) ever since.

I was raised from an early age to perform the role of *xa'duomi*, or ambassador to the Known Worlds. My hosts hoped that one day the time would come when the Vau could reveal to the Known Worlders the citizens of the Hegemony, but such a time must wait for the proper auspice, which has yet to appear, although hints promise an opening soon. Until that time, the Gwindor must not risk taint from untoward Presences, and so I have yet to meet my cousins to whom I address this manuscript. I grow old; my river will soon run dry, my time soon be undone. I fear that the knowledge and training of my hosts will have gone to waste, and so I write this now, to address to my unknown friends what I shall likely never share in Presence.

I was trained in the arts and sciences and made privy to the lore of archives. Such knowledge serves me well now, and I hope to explain our ways through it. I am told a great loss of learning is now suffered by my Known Worlds cousins. Thus, I am advised that much of what I write may be incomprehensible to them. Perhaps this is so. Perhaps not. I nonetheless write to the best of my ability, and let the *Sho'lan Suilmor* guide readers to proper understanding.

I write in the *Khweg'yurip*, the Foreign Tongue, that language reserved for communication between species and cultures. As is the custom, I adopt the writing form created by Sab Verden, who first transcribed the speech into Urthish letters. The Quadirin script is more accurate, but unknown to you, my reader. The Verdenin has been in use for many cycles now, and has long served our diplomats, and shall likewise serve here.

And so you know of me and the purpose behind this manuscript. I hope that it undoes the fear and misunderstanding between our peoples and demonstrates adequately the greatness possessed and destined to my hosts, the Vau. The great and secret workings of the *Uo*, the Cosm are well beyond my simple ken, but are grasped and borne daily by the Mandarins for the good of all beings. This is their legacy,

bequeathed to them not in their present role as rulers but their former place as servants, firm in loyalty to the *Querl'ba Jym-fadi*, the Architects of long ago.

Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph, my mentor, has given his leave for me to write this, and he has generously allowed me complete sovereignty in its composition, fearing nothing and trusting fully in my earnest desire to state things as they are, not as some wish them to be. He has further promised that, once the time is proper, it shall be delivered unchanged to you, my destined reader among the lost brethren of my ancestors' people.

And so I leave behind the subject of my identity and proceed to the Essence. Wish me well, Hoa'Tal Gaamzi, and allow the Pattern to emerge with clarity. Your Presence still informs the *Uo*, and will do so ever on, for it is the very force that tugs forward the waves on the *Kesh'Amal*, the Ocean of Time, and receives the tributaries of the years gone and yet to come.

Beginnings

It begins with water, rushing and still, a womb wherein the Vau were nurtured, protected, and grown to sentience. The rivers and streams of Hoom were home to herds of *Muanhor*, ornithropod hadrosaurs that eventually evolved into the Vau. (I hope that my terminology is correct; I refer to Stout's *Megafauna of Old Earth*, the standard reference in the 22nd century. Has this changed? Is there a more updated study?)

Roaming the banks and shores in twilight and under the moon, seeking succulent, moist grasses and reeds to chew, these herbivores worked in close-knit kin groups, developing over time genetic caste-differences based on survival roles. The majority roamed and gathered food, storing it in their mouths to take back to the rarest among them, the more intelligent *gualpha* (herdmasters), who decided where to take the herds over the seasons and when to move them.

All were guarded by broadly built warriors, ever aware of danger from the plains or forests. At first sign of trouble, these soldiers would howl and hoot, warning the others to seek the shelter of the river, as they gather themselves into a protective cordon. Each alone was not enough to withstand the mighty predators of Hoom, but together they distracted them from the herd, ensuring at the least a costly dinner.

Out in the midst of the rivers, which rushed too fast or deep for the predators to reach, the *gualpha* sat on islands of stamped mud and thatched reeds, calling their kind to them, away from the embattled banks and into the sloshing, protective waters.

Over many eras, life stayed the same, changing little. But with each new clutch of eggs, with each new generation



of *gualpha*, the *Muanhor* grew more cunning. The necessities of dam-building spurred innovative uses for scavenged materials, and eventually the intentional engineering of better materials — the creation of tools. Under the guidance of the *gualpha*, all of the *gualshor* (herdmembers) learned new ways.

During this evolutionary era, physiology changed, creating many offshoots and breeds, who migrated down the rivers and streams to new lands. In Gur'laphta, among the So'lat, was born Hoa'Ma Xantso, the First Mandarin, and from his egg clutches came the Vau, known as the Wisest, for among all the herds, they were the most intelligent and adept with tools.

From them, civilization arose. Details are lost in myth, but the Vau fervently believe that Hoa'Ma Xantso was fertilized not by a mortal father, but by the sacred star, Hashat, which shines in the skies of Gur'laphta, within the southern hemisphere of Hoom. His intelligence was of a magnitude greater than all who came before, and so he is still known as the Celestial Wisdom Seed, the sower of greatness among his kind.

The So'lat were primitive Vau, close in form to the present-day Vau but with cruder features. Many still walked somewhat humped over, like their Muanhor ancestors, although most walked upright. Their fingers were more sinuous than similar breeds, and these would grow even more so over the coming generations. The basic physical differences between present-day castes could even then be found among the So'lat.

Ancient, steamy Hoom hosted many megafauna species, mostly saurian, amphibian, piscean, and avian. Unlike on ancient Urth, no antediluvian disaster or ecological shift occurred to drive them into extinction. Few mammals awoke on Hoom, although small rodents and marsupials thrived underfoot of the larger beings.

For the most part, the planet was ruled by the mighty predators until more cunning and intelligent species — the scavenger Id'lakh and the herbivore Muanhor — experienced population explosions due to their successful methods. These two species would eventually hunt most of Hoom's megafauna to extinction.

At first, the Id'lakh and the Muanhor did not compete, for they sought different resources. But within a few generations of Hoa'Ma Xantso — once the Vau has become distinct from their Muanhor ancestors — the two nascent civilizations met and clashed.

The First Empires

The barbarous Id'lakh built a nomadic kingdom based on seizing the works and territories of weaker Id'lakh tribes and many Muanhor river fisheries. They were a scaled race of quadrapeds whose mighty tails could knock down a host of soldiers in a single, horned sweep. Their four legs allowed them to move with great speed over all forms of terrain, while their swimming ability allowed them to ford rivers most others predators dared not traverse. This mobility eventually brought them against the Vau.

When their initial forays into Vau territory resulted in the deaths of many Soldiers and Workers, the Vau Mandarins banded together under the leadership of Fluogh Sin'zlo, clutch-descendant of Hoa'Ma Xantso. While the Vau were more peaceful than the often passionate Id'lakh, their Mandarins were more intelligent. Already, their tools and initial fortifications far surpassed anything the Id'lakh could devise. The weakness was in the Soldier and Worker castes, whose reasoning ability was inferior even to the Id'lakh. They acted mainly from trained instinct — acceptable against lumbering predators, nearly useless against an intelligent foe using tactics.

The Mandarins responded by formalizing new training routines for the lesser castes and began initiating a breeding program whereby lesser castes could perhaps inherit some Mandarin features — hopefully, advanced reasoning capacity. Even in these ancient, primitive times, the Mandarins acted with startling logic and forethought.

Over time, new generations of Soldiers and Workers gained increased sentience. Their reasoning capacity began to match, even to exceed, that of the Id'lakh, and their success in turning back raids increased accordingly. Under Mandarin guidance, workers devised new weapons using the various crystalline rocks, the *zan'hod*, abundant on Hoom. Methods of using sonic resonance to work these crystals into hard, defined shapes, such as swords and armor, yielded superior weaponry. The sonic resonance was itself discovered through experimentation with tapping such rock crystals together, one of the many amazing innovations of the curious Workers, honed by the Mandarins and made possible by Hoom's abundance of these strange, resonant materials, unknown elsewhere in the universe.

The Id'lakh never greatly developed these sciences, but they did create an array of musical instruments and light-producing devices later adopted by the Vau. Their cultural legacy can still be found in some Vau songs and stories, but beyond entertainment, they left no lasting material.

The Id'lakh were eventually conquered by the nascent Vau empire, a unit of amazing solidarity thanks to inbred caste instincts. While the Id'lakh, still mighty warriors, lived on in certain regions, they never fully adapted to the new world created by the Vau, and they disappear from the historical record entirely after the *Xed'Fornaal*, the Progenitor's Leavetaking. Most scholars believe that they were made extinct in the first War in the Heavens, perhaps suffering as pawns of a losing side.

Carefully study, however, reveals that they do indeed



still exist, although barely sentient, as if reason had been stricken from them. They are a primitive people still living on Hoom, carefully watched and tended. (The Vau find abhorrent the idea of forcibly moving a race to a reservation on a planet foreign to its development.)

This seeming history of inexorable technological and material development, of the spread of empire, masks a teeming chaos of political rivalries among the Mandarins. Different nests built empires, each with ideas of its own. Rather than cause suffering among the lesser castes through war, however, the Mandarins warred among themselves, in complicated games of political one-upmanship or outright duels of physical prowess.

The lesser castes remained largely ignorant of these struggles, although whispers did reach them, and the effects of — if not the reasons behind — such battles were certainly apparent. Only very rarely did a member of the lesser castes rise up to challenge Mandarin power, and then usually only to temporary gain. One long-lasting rebellion is recorded, in which a clever Worker led a revolt that seized a city, then held it for nearly a *thalus'tlo* (27 Urth years) without Mandarin rulership. Once this charismatic leader died, however, his government quickly fell to Mandarin machinations, and his people returned to the fold once more.

At some point after the pacification of the Id'lakh, once the Vau had gained true rulership over the planet and were spreading to all regions, a star fell from the sky and brought with it the covenant of a new civilization — that of willing servitude to higher powers. The Progenitors had arrived.

Heralds of the Architects

It seems that the Vau's learned superiority over the Id'lakh appealed to the *Querl'ba Jym-fadi*, the Architects, who sought evidence of such tests in their servants. The clash of one species against another in a rise to sentience must have been something experienced in the Architects' own development, for they applauded it in the Vau.

Beyond surmise, little is now known of this time, except to those among the Jaykata U'moti, who guard such lore against misuse by others. Some wonder how much they actually know, and how much they merely pretend to know. The overall ignorance of this time, however, is not solely their design. It is the legacy of the *Ban'kesh So'kaata*, the Progenitors, who left little in their wake to inform those who came after them. They deliberately kept their secrets and ciphers and took the keys to such lore with them. Even the Vau suffered a dark age of ignorance after their Leavetaking, and only later crawled upward from it by the genius of Hoa'Tal Gaamzi, the architect of post-Progenitor civilization.

That the Vau were specially favored by those Progenitors known as the Architects is undeniable, for their access to ancient secrets is supreme among all the species and cultures within the *el'zweldar*, the jumpweb. Much of their history from this time — what few details there are — is surely accurate.

And so it can be said that the Vau rose high in material and intellectual status, serving in some manner as favored minions of the Architects. Some believe they were ambassadors, heralds to other species concerning Progenitor law. Others say they served as attendants, seeing to the personal needs of their masters.

As such, they spread across many star systems, governing new worlds or seeing that the will of the Progenitors was heeded. Many of these worlds still exist within the Hegemony, now carefully maintained lest their original masters return.

Eventually, like every other being in the universe, they were drawn into the fabled conflict between two factions of Progenitors: the previously mentioned Architects and the *Quarl'nan Kwot*, the Abrogators. They became soldiers (or pawns) in the *Arkh'intor Uo*, the War in the Heavens.

Cosmic War

What was this struggle? Why was it fought? None can say with surety, although many believe they know. The whims and wills of the Progenitors were beyond the ken of even the Vau, and like children, they were kept from full knowledge of what took place or why. The Progenitors answered their queries with simple explanations that revealed nothing, but did serve to halt further queries for a time.

The Vau took the side of the Architects, the masters who favored them most. These beings sought to mold the physical universe to their will, and they achieved mighty works — the *ird'kalka*, the jumpgates, are among the most treasured of their handicrafts, although the sculpt and hue of many a planet also bears their mark.

But their work extended not simply to physical rulership. They had learned to harness the mind, and through it, the ideals that influenced the universe unseen. They bent the very Pattern of reality to their will.

And here the Abrogators revolted. Angry that they could not wield complete control themselves — or fearful of the control the Architects attained — they turned against their brethren and shook the battlements of heaven with their physical and mental conflict. Fierce weaponry unimaginable to lesser species sundered many a world from its moorings. Alien concepts crashed into manifestation, corrupting the carefully wrought mindscape of the Architects.

But even still the Abrogators lost ground, for the Archi-



tects were unmoved by passion or short-term whim, and implacably marched upon the celestial citadels of the rebels. Then did the Abrogators reveal their true benefactors: the *Va'klo*, the Ungoverned, beings of awesome might and unimaginable wrath, whose every atom screamed for vengeance against an ancient wrong done them.

Recall how the Architects had respected in the Vau their defeat of the Id'lakh, neighbors turned to enemies in the rise to sentience? Did the Progenitors now encounter those they had once defeated in their own rise to power? Some believe so....

Regardless, the Architects had set many wards against the Ungoverned, only to discover them broken and torn by the treachery of the Abrogators. Without their well-planned defenses, they fell back, and world upon world suffered war. Many servitor species throughout the universe, forced to choose sides, suffered the wrath of whomever they betrayed. Countless species were purged to the last individual, while others thrived in the madness.

Amidst this treachery and deceit, the Architects asked of the Vau a great sacrifice, but one necessary to ensure their loyalty. The Mandarins met and argued and fought, finally casting out from their ranks those who refused the request. Those that remained made the decision for their species and accepted their masters' terms. The Vau were riven of their *Va'emsh*, the Essence, the birthright of all sentients who develop *Kyari*, the Will.

From thence forwards, the Vau lacked the Essence to experience the *Uo'tswa*, the Weft. They thus could not use its weapons against their masters, but were likewise denied its consolations. To account for the loss, the Architects awarded the Vau with lore unheard of among lesser sentients, and gave to them the Everwatchful Eye of Auspicious Gleaning, known today as the *Valukesh Ha'eni*, the window into the Weft.

How long did the war last? In what mode of time is such a thing best counted? The answer is a brief material time as *Gwindor* lives are measured, but a mental eternity.

Winners and losers cannot be declared with surety, although it seems as if the Architects managed to protect their territories against complete loss and hide from lesser sentients the pathways to Abrogator worlds.

Regardless, all Progenitors withdrew from their thrones and ceased contact with all species. Whether this abdication was from fatigue or a slow dying, none can say. If any lived much past that conflict, evidence of them is unknown. If any still live, they allow no hint of such an unimaginable feat.

The universe was left to its own, with no ruler but chaos.

A New Order

The Vau were scattered across the stars with no means to travel them, and the *Xix Ha'glo*, the Curse of Unknowing, was laid upon them, causing many to forget, and some to misremember, what they had known of the Progenitors. Only the most disciplined few retained the true lore, keeping it safe from unguarded minds.

Many *twent'tlo* (2.5 Urth years) passed thus, and Vau on many worlds grew apart from one another, but never to the degree known among other species, for the castes were ever rigidly maintained, and the Ways of old religiously adhered to. Among the myths and lies now told about their former starfaring times, many truths were nonetheless maintained. No Vau dared to forget that they, above all other species, had the task of maintaining proper rites for the ordered working of the universe, according to the *Jymin Tswa'tilvo*, the Pattern devised by the Architects.

Even though many had forgotten the substance of the rites and even their reasons for being, they continued on with them, and thus ensured the protection of their universe from the *Fel Dwantha*, the Outside Unknown.

On one world an island of enlightenment still thrived, under the leadership of Hoa'Tal Gaamzi, reckoned Greatest among the Vau who have ever dwelt in the streams of time, greater even than Hoa'Man Xantso, the First. She it was who kept all the Ways intact, for she did not suffer the *Xix Ha'glo*. Alone among all sentient beings, she remembered. With a wisdom now unknown in these diminished times, she planned the means to raise the Vau once more to their status as gatekeepers and stewards of the Cosm.

No Vau, no matter how great, is ever truly alone. Although even Hoa'Tal Gaamzi's clutchmates did not share her mind, they worked together toward her purpose, and gathered to them meritorious Mandarins from the other nests of Zyuil'Thala, the world upon which they then dwelled. So joined, they formed the *Im Dau'lansar*, the First Council, and began the *Va'sheel Tholo*, the Reconstruction of the Architects' Way.

Working long and hard, they once more tapped the *Fo'swir*, the Eddy, drawing upon the roiling, primal energy to raise *uo'dwel*, starships, into the *Uo'Amal*, the Dark Cosmic Ocean, and again journey to the gates. One by one, old worlds were rediscovered and drawn into the council's fold.

This endeavor grew from Zyuil'Thala, outward along the jumpweb, world by world. Soon, emissaries arrived at Hoom, the homeworld. Their coming was unwelcome at first, for Mandarins there had regressed to older ways, from before the teachings of the Progenitors. The First Council's scouts were appalled at this primitivism, and sought Hoa'Tal Gaamzi's advice. Recognizing the reclamation of Hoom as

an important symbol, she traveled herself to the world and there gathered a meeting of the spiteful local Mandarins. She unfolded her vision to them, speaking in tones stunning and inspiring to hear. She summoned forth vast phantasmeries (holo-projections) with waves of her hands, orchestrating a great tale of loss and recovery, of brethren sundered and reunited.

The Hoom Mandarins stared in awe, ocean dew glistening down their cheeks, and the *Xix Ha'glo* lost all power on them, and ancestral memory awakened. Not in full, but enough. Enough to stir them to forthright action once more, and they surged forward, surrounding Hoa'Tal Gaamzi and nuzzling her with their shoulders, honoring her as if they were Workers and she their sole Mandarin.

And so did Hoom return once more to the Righteous Stream of Correct Auspice. Where Hoom led, others quickly followed, for deep was the love for its rivers and plains, its Presence forever imprinted on the Essences of the Vau. Hoa'Tal Gaamzi removed the seat of her new government to Hoom, and never left it again, overseeing the interstellar empire from Sko'sla, a small island in the midst of the Fau'yarm River on the continent of Gurlaphta. Although great matters are still decided there today, later Mandarins once more moved the capital to Zyuil'Thala, to the Amethyst Palace of Curious Resolve, for it was there that they had access to Architect engines useful in governance.

Expansion

Hoa'Tal Gaamzi called her new government *Hua'imlor*, the "All Influence," for her method of gaining converts was persuasion, not coercion. But as new councilors succeeded her, they found that alien species resisted this persuasion. At first, they were inclined to leave them be, to decide their own destinies. There were few resources these worlds owned that could not be synthesized elsewhere.

However, this changed as prophecy foretold bad tidings if these worlds were not pacified and brought in accord with auspice. The *Hua'imlor* became the *Hua'ladar*, the "All Empire" — the Hegemony.

Few conflicts hindered this rejoining with Vau worlds, for the Vau, although not in agreement on all things, eventually conceded what was best for their kind — a hallmark of the Architects' touch. Other alien species, less governed by Will, often fall to useless infighting in times of greatest need. Rarely so the Vau.

There was, however, a terrible, tragic circumstance on Sab'wa. Here, Soldiers had taken over and ruled the Mandarins, who were forced to use their intellects for martial means, as rival Soldiers warred upon one another, ignoring all laws against caste-killings. This barbaric example horrified the Hegemonic scouts and leaders, and they quickly moved in to emancipate the Mandarins and Workers from



the ill-evolved Soldiers. They cleansed every one of the evil breed, and introduced properly bred and nurtured Soldiers from off-world in their place. Things eventually returned to harmonious accord, and much of the history of those barbaric times has been thankfully forgotten.

The Hegemony continued to grow, the greatest, most ambitious project the universe has witnessed since the original works of the Architects. Never has a single government brought such wisdom and prosperity to so many. Although many species resisted the Vau's leadership upon first contact, their descendants have thanked the Vau many times over, recognizing their ancestors' initial folly — and after witnessing similar waywardness among the "barbarian" humans of the Known Worlds and beyond.

New technologies were uncovered, based on remnants of the old relics abundant on Hegemonic worlds. Great leaps were made in *tswar*, force field technology, and these led to the invention of *yurim'zhor*, the nanotech machines that are now ubiquitous on Hegemony worlds. The very desk upon which I write — and the pen! — are made of this amazing substance, as is the building in which I reside, rising high into the air on paper-thin butresses. I will convey more on this later.

Slowly, over many *twent'lor*, the Hegemony expanded, reclaiming worlds once joined in the Progenitors' net. Many have remarked on the eerie wisdom and forethought of the Mandarins, and wonder at their success. This was the work of Hoa'Tal Gaamzi, who unlocked the mysteries of the Sealed Gift, the only legacy left to the Vau by their former masters — the Valukesh Ha'eni, the Glyphs of Prophecy.

The glyphs allowed the Council, with its superior wisdom, to determine the likely course any given action might follow in the River of Time. With infinite patience, the Council spent many *thalus'tlor* plotting and planning their reclamation of the lost universe. Rarely would any action be taken without long consultation and meditation on the glyphs. The results were not hasty or quick, but almost always unfolded as planned.

Or did so long as they were heeded. Even the Vau know frustration when their desires are unmet, and newly encountered alien species put even their legendary patience to the test.

Aliens

The Hegemony soon encompassed worlds barely touched by the Progenitors, places whose native species had appeared and grown without the wisdom of the Elder Kind. Some were barbaric, others mysterious, but the Vau tended them with patience and implacable intent, winning over all planets to their way in time.

The first encountered were the Velek Zzum, large crustaceans, beings who had risen to a degree of technical civilization on their own, with no sign of Progenitor aid. Communication posed the greatest problem at first, for the Velek could not naturally form proper sounds for Vau words. However, after spending long *twent'tlor* working with the Velek through images, Workers created devices that could translate their sub-vocal clicks into prerecorded words.

The Velek Zzum homeworld, Bastago'Lo, was rife with seafood delicacies, and the Vau found it favorable as a retreat for relaxation. The Velek showed them how to harvest from the sea without depleting lifeform breeding cycles, and the Vau taught the Velek their Ways and raised them high in technology.

The Vau's First Contact was successful and harmonious.

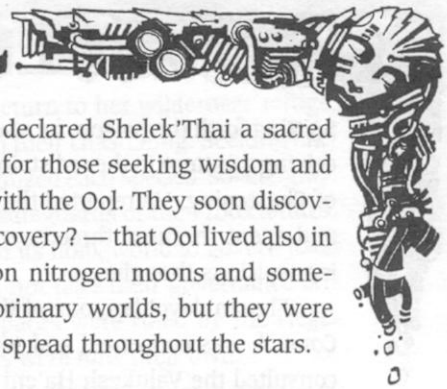
Their next was not.

The Manshogo are a warrior race, forged by bizarre instincts, which the Vau found unaccountable to their natural environment — they could imagine no way that such a sentient could naturally develop the strange trance states the Manshogo displayed. Only closer inspection of their diet revealed the subtle trace toxins on the homeworld, seemingly introduced from an offworld environment some time in the past, perhaps during the War in the Heavens. A long diet rich in these alien minerals had altered the Manshogo's natural chemistry and exalted their sentience — unhinging their balance at the same time.

The Manshogo are ruled by their passions and only rarely master them with Will. Nonetheless, they are deemed sentient by the Vau, for their many emotional states are still remarkable by most standards. However, these very states also prevented the Manshogo from recognizing Vau authority or respecting proper auspice. Spread over many worlds — for they had achieved star travel — they began a vicious resistance.

They delivered a long fight on many worlds, for their Essences were unique, and sometimes foiled the Valukesh Ha'eni — or so it seemed at first. But with subtlety and insight, even their ways were foreseen by the Vau. Scholarly Mandarins uncovered lore concerning the Manshogo, for they had indeed fought in the War, but accounts were imperfect, based upon tales told by the Architects, concealed by the Fog of Unknowing. It was unclear upon whose side the Manshogo fought, or if they were willingly involved at all, for they, like much of the Vau, suffered from the *Xix Ha'glo*, and remembered nothing of this past cataclysm except in myth.

This forced the Vau to examine their policy towards recalcitrant sentients. They had for so long acted only as the Progenitors provided — as taught in the lore of Hoa'Tal Gaamzi. The Vau of old, servants of the Architects, traveled



from world to world, pacifying sentients and harmonizing them to the Progenitors' Ways. It was clear that the Manshogo must likewise be pacified.

And so began a long, dark time of conflict and hatred, for the Manshogo greatly resented their imprisonment on their own worlds. Now that they witnessed the Vau's greater starship capacities, they bristled at being denied them. Many sought to overthrow the Vau warders and steal their ships, and a few actually succeeded, only to lose control of the complex starships and finally plead surrender to rescue crews.

Other sentients also suffered from the Manshogo's resistance, for the Vau now suspected all newly encountered beings of harboring the same resentment and thus treated them brusquely. The Fah Selani were the next encountered, and they hid themselves for many *thalus'tlor*, rarely willing to parley. Likewise the plantform Sobolzitzin, who were kept distant not only because of ill auspice, but ill manners.

These new sentients' homeworlds became *Skur'skula*, Watchworlds, interdicted planets whose citizens were not allowed offworld. The Vau would only rarely partake of these worlds' resources, leaving them untouched for the most part.

The Vau's opinion of other sentients — as beings who must be tightly controlled and allowed no self-sovereignty — changed when they finally encountered the Ool Shrr'mu. The Vau came to the planet Shelek'Thai, and were haunted by a sense of familiarity. The world was a contrast of high, rocky mountains separated by deep, broad oceans, below which lay hundreds of ruins left by the Progenitors. As scouts swam the waters, they were immersed in an intelligence — a telepathic mind of immense power. Curious at first, and then overjoyed, the mind greeted the "children of Hoom," and sang a music in their minds, a wonderful composition that awakened images and memories owned by their ancestors.

They lived for a time within a tale of past times, when the Vau served the Architects and came to Shelek'Thai for wisdom, to consult the great elder sentients who lived in its timeless seas, the ancient and revered Ool Shrr'mu, old when even the Progenitors were young.

Then did the newcomer Vau, chastened by the lessons of the Ool, learn that an iron hand was not the best way to rule. Contact was only brief and fleeting, and much that was experienced was incomprehensible even to Mandarin minds, for the Ool were extremely alien, amoeboid entities. Mandarins speculated that their evolution was so entirely different from anything yet encountered that it was a wonder they could communicate at all. Only the immense age of the Ool's civilization allowed them to learn how to reach out to other sentients.

The Vau withdrew and declared Shelek'Thai a sacred world, a place of pilgrimage for those seeking wisdom and the hope of a brief contact with the Ool. They soon discovered — or were led to the discovery? — that Ool lived also in other systems, sometimes on nitrogen moons and sometimes in methane seas on primary worlds, but they were never told how the race had spread throughout the stars.

Sacred Archaeology

As the march for worlds continued, so did the Vau's search for clues to greater Progenitor lore. Some of these worlds seemed new — no memory was kindled concerning them — but all bore the mark of the Progenitors, in their *ird'kalka*, their jumpgates, if not in other relics scattered across their solar systems.

The *Dau'kedalir*, the Procurement Council, gathered relics and artifacts from each Hegemonic world, or made intense studies of the places that could not be removed to a laboratory. With the aid of the *Oma'tlama*, the Readers who interpreted Progenitor leavings, they greatly heightened the knowledge and technology base of the expanding Hegemony.

I will not bore you here with calendars, for the Vau method of tracking time is much different than that of Urth. I explain some of this in the next chapter, wherein a study of caste, clutch, and culture is entertained. However, I will hazard a guess here as to the years, according to the Known Worlds calendar, in which the Hegemony expanded. I believe that the first starship left Zyuil'Thala sometime between 1802 and 1813. The Hegemony expanded unchecked until the early 24th century, when prophecy failed and Hashat, the most sacred star, disappeared from the sky for an entire *suala* (moon phase). This is now known as the *Im Zlar'vaugh* — the First Dimming.

It was accompanied by many inauspicious events, unraveling the work of past councils and threatening the harmony of the Pervasive Robe of Stars.

The Rectification

The Great Dancer of the Manshogo was struck by a trance and never came out, but his body yet lived. No doctor could awaken him, and no Solacer could stir his soul.

A comet pierced the atmosphere of Zau'Let, irraditating the planet and its people, forcing a quarantine for nearly an entire *yomas'tlo*. Its coming was unforeseen by prophecy or telescope. It seemingly came from nowhere.

On Zyuil'Thala, a low-level Mandarin, advisor to the Aesthetic Council, raised his cup of tea and drank blood.



Spitting forth the poison, he stared in horror at the cup, perceiving a pattern in the red stain: *Zwam'ze'baal* — the Glyph of Chastening. He reported the incident to the First Council and spent the next three *twent'tlor* in a Refuge, purging inauspicious thoughts.

Fluuan'devo'dau, one of the high worthies of the First Council, was concerned and worried over these omens. he consulted the Valukesh Ha'eni oriel placed on Zyuil'Thala, the most revered and ancient of such books. He received the glyphs for "strife," "earth," and "heaven." He then compiled a massive concordance of constellations, gathered from observations made in the central palaces on all Hegemonic worlds. Curiously, Feti Tul'imo, the Star of Warnings, was ascendant over Vajslo Uo'an (which you call Manitou). He waited for one *twent'tlo*, then, on the exact anniversary of his first consultation, once more requested converse with the Valukesh Ha'eni. His former glyphs had transformed into those for "elder time," "now," and "yet to come."

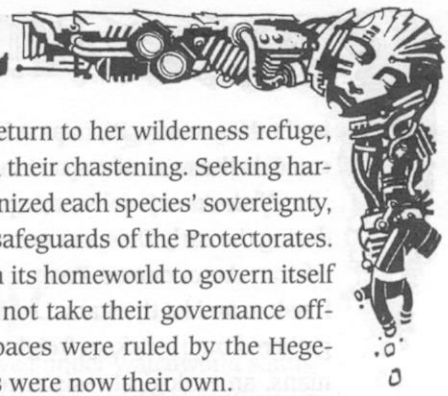
He left the oriel perplexed, with no clear answer to the problems at hand. He went to the poppy, and visited a coma for one *suala* during the waxing crescent phase. There, he had a terrible vision, full of images drawn from the deep past, of places he himself had never seen and beings he had never known, but now remembered. Resonant with a past moment, he foresaw the coming times, and his eyes glowed. When he departed the bed, he solemnly gathered the First Council and announced his findings: The Arkh'intor Uo would return. The War in the Heavens was to begin once more.

Hoots and cries followed his speech, and panic broke out among the Mandarins, eased only by the solace of the Soldiers, come running to aid their disturbed masters. When all had calmed again, Fluuan'devo'dau explained that he had not witnessed a particular tributary or stream of time, but had seen the *Uo'Amal*, the Ocean of Time. Its broad surface was stormy and uncalm, and it was impossible to predict the true moment when the war would return. It could only be known that the future would deliver it, perhaps soon or many *yomas'tlor* from then. Fluuan'devo'dau suspected the latter and strove to prove to the others that they could work to ease the war's coming, thereby controlling the high ground before the conflict was upon them.

All they had to do was strengthen the auspices, to pay strict attention to prophecy, and always work for it, never against, even if ethics or emotions called otherwise. The dictates of the Valukesh Ha'eni, the words of fate, were to become the true law of the Hegemony. As a legacy of the Progenitors, only it could protect their servants from the brunt of further interstellar armageddon.

And so began the Rectification, the project of aligning the Hegemony with proper auspice. Where before the Vau were swift and liberal in their governance, now they became





slow and conservative. No major undertaking was begun without years of scrutiny, study and contemplation to measure its potential affect on the Weft.

Expansion nearly ceased, and new worlds were sought only rarely, and those that were found were only admitted to the Hegemony after long study and prophecy counseling. The traditions were strengthened, and new ideas drew suspicion. Society was reordered in the image of the past, ever-seeking harmonious accord with those times.

Between the time of Fluuan'devo'dau's omen and the first contact with humans, the Hegemony seemingly changed little, although unseen unrest simmered to the surface now and then.

Not all agreed with what some believed to be an excessive reliance on Valukesh Ha'eni prophecy, which must still be interpreted by observers, for it does not give up its secrets easily. Some Mandarins expressed doubts, causing councils to spend more time arguing than agreeing, and governance crept only slowly forward. Movements by Workers to resist the increasing rule of auspice, which worked against their creative ingenuity, were suppressed.

The alien species proved the most difficult, for they did not agree with the concept of prophecy, and many refused to be governed by its seemingly vague dictates. Conflict broke out on many worlds as Manshogo, Fah Selani and Sobolzitzin rebelled against what they believed to be harsh laws. Many died, alien and Vau alike, in these wars over sovereignty.

Finally, a solution came from the Dwee'il, the Hermits of Hoom, a mysterious brotherhood of Mandarins who had removed themselves from society to live in the high peaks and low valleys of Hoom's wildernesses. Largely ignored by the government and other Vau, the Dwee'il were practically forgotten, and they seemed absent from the doings of prophecy. Some whispered that they were descendants of those who had refused to be shorn of their Essences during the first War in the Heavens, and that they still retained powers unknown now to other Vau. Others say that such beliefs only nourish their myth, the true source of any Dwee'il power. Nonetheless, when a Dwee speaks, Mandarins listen, lending further creedence to the myth.

Amidst the interstellar conflict with alien species, one hermit came forth. Only when she entered the council chamber unannounced did the *Val'huyima* (High Councilor) realize the meaning of the vexing glyphs delivered the previous *suala*. The meaning of the Glyphs of Harmony and Legacy became clear when the hermit spoke, and all quieted to listen. She admonished the council for forgetting their wisdom and mistaking all creatures for Vau. Did they not see that other species were different from them, and had, in the past, received different gifts from the Progenitors? The glyphs must be interpreted for them in a different light than for the Vau. Let them follow their ways, and fate will follow a right path.

The old woman left to return to her wilderness refuge, and the council meditated on their chastening. Seeking harmony, the First Council recognized each species' sovereignty, and established further the safeguards of the Protectorates. The rights of each species on its homeworld to govern itself were sanctified. They could not take their governance off-world, for the interstellar spaces were ruled by the Hegemony, but their own matters were now their own.

The homeworlds of most sentient species were now *Aum'lor*, Protectorates, rather than Watchworlds. (A few species, such as the Manshogo and Ool, claim more than just their native planets, but this is rare). Only those races who refused to cooperate were not granted Protectorates, and live now under the careful watch of Mandarins. Such are the Lun'grar, who rebelled during the War in the Heavens, serving the Abrogators, and refused during the Reclamation to change their ways. Few are seen abroad now, for they are trapped in cages of their own manufacture, still denying Vau supremacy.

This opening of the ways and granting of self-sovereignty was at first greeted with suspicion by many species, but as new generations were born into freedom, they embraced the Vau and their gifts, spurning the paranoia of their parents. Fighting ceased, and peace was declared. The treaties binding the alien worlds more closely with the Hegemony were strengthened, while the aliens' rights to self-governance were assured, as long as proper respect was paid to the Vau interstellar authority and the auspices were still maintained.

I believe Known Worlders have misunderstood the reasons for the Vau's granting of self-sovereignty to alien species. It is not, as some have written, a matter purely of "face" or respect paid — the Vau would be a vain nation indeed to fall for such tricks! It is instead a matter of necessity, for prophecy can flow unimpeded only in undammed waters. Of course, a species must first prove that it can govern itself and keep within the broad dictates of auspice, as set forth by the Vau.

The G'nesh understood the concept of auspice early on, perhaps because they themselves were a very disciplined society, patient as trees. It was their demonstration of auspice knowledge and respect for it that granted them Protectorate status, rather than the more restrictive Watchworld status — like Quadi suffered for many years until its Gwindor inhabitants finally proved their understanding and acceptance of the necessity of prophecy.

Humankind

And so I finally arrive at the subject of my own kind, the Gwindor. I cannot say with surety whether our history is true and verifiable, for so many records are lost to us here,



in the Hegemony. Perhaps a scholar in the Known Worlds could do the work of researching records to affirm or deny it?

Of the many colonists spreading across the jumpweb during the early Diaspora were my ancestors, the folk of the African Autonomous Zone, ex-corporate workers seeking freedom amidst the stars. Led by Alcaz Jeremiah Jones, they gathered onto a rickety freighter in alliance with the Oregonians, an ecological resistance culture. Also aboard was a group of Secular Monks, a society of scholars convinced that civilization was at a terminal end; they believed they could one day provide the seeds for its reemergence by hoarding knowledge in massive data crystal libraries.

This motley group took passage to a world that had been dubbed Beelzebub by the First Claim Corporation scouting team that found it and that now sold shares of land to desperate colonists. This was a black-market operation, skirting the zaibatsu authorities, and so had no protections or even records of its journey.

Once the colonists had landed, they were practically abandoned by their starship, left in the hands of the petty corporate tyrants who had already arrived and controlled the foodstores. It would take years to build successful, self-sustaining communities, and so the colonists had to bow to the tyrants' pressure — or so it seemed at first. But Alcaz was used to dealing with local dictators and military bosses, and he had vowed never to do so again. On their first night, as most of the colonists took to their scarce blankets in the hot, open air, Alcaz lead a team of resistors against the tyrants.

The unsuspecting thugs, most of them drunk and absorbed in games of chance, fell quickly before the vindictive colonists. By morning, their loose rule was but a memory of the night before, and Alcaz — after distributing the foodstores — led the colonists away from the central landing zone and into the wilderness to claim it for their own.

When more First Claim crews arrived, they found the colonists already far-removed from their zones of control and ready to resist any attempt to govern them. Reinforcements were sent for, but they never arrived. Instead, a messenger vessel from the core worlds came to evacuate the FCC, a planet deep in what was newly revealed to be Vau space. Tales of the Apshai tragedy came with them, and every single FCC employee packed and left. Runners were sent to warn the colonists, but their words went unheeded, thought to be lies.

The last representatives with interstellar capability fled the world, just as the Vau arrived to enforce their claim upon it. The fleeing ships were allowed to leave, but only after a glimpse of the ominous fleet gathered to expel them.

No further contact between the colonists and their brethren beyond the borders of the Hegemony has since occurred.

The Vau performed a cursory inspection of the planet, focusing on the FCC's zone. Finding it abandoned, they assumed the rest of the world was likewise free of infestation and so took their fleet elsewhere.

It was nearly a *thalus'tlo* — almost an entire generation for the human colonists — before the Vau once more sent fleets to the world, this time to populate it. The Prophet had already died, and the only contact between Vau and humans took place in extremely controlled circumstances on the border worlds. Imagine the Vau's surprise when they found humans living on their world!

More perplexed than angered, the Worker scouts — who had yet to hear much about humans from the tight lips of the Mandarins — introduced themselves to the nervous humans, who lived a life of simple but highly educated subsistence. (They had retained the Secular Monks' computers and data crystals and educated their children in all the known lores of humankind). By the time the Mandarin leader arrived, the two species had become fast friends.

The Mandarin, annoyed that someone had misinterpreted prophecy, withdrew contact and awaited proper advice from his superiors. They arrived and studied the situation from afar, observing the humans by remote orbital eyes. There was, of course, much consulting of the Valukesh Ha'eni. In the end, it seemed that the best course was to adopt the humans as a new Watchworld, and treat them as they would any new species, hoping that they would one day pass the tests to become a Protectorate in their own right.

There was a caveat. The Vau feared the wild and amoral ways of the other humans they had encountered, and they decreed that these humans could not be allowed to contact their brethren, lest they suffer the taint of unruliness so rampant among them. All word of events in the Known Worlds was hidden from them — as it was to most Hegemonic citizens — and they were not allowed to leave their world (called Quadi by the Vau) except on approved diplomatic missions.

The Word

"Prophecy is what men demonstrate to the children of their children," said the Prophet. "Only when you stand in the light now can you cast your shadow into the future."

The Vau wrinkled his brow and consulted his think machine. The glyphs had fluxed: "void," "incomplete" and "unknown" had become: "light," "hand" (intent) and "yet to come." The Mandarin gasped, and looked to the Prophet, but the bearded man had already begun his journey to the starport.

— Joseph Armala, *The Word Read Through Veils*

And yet, even through this cordon, the word of the Prophet came to Quadi. My ancestors believe this to be a miracle, but others have since proven that even in this time of intense security, humans from outside the Hegemony

broke through into Vau space and visited Quadi (among other worlds), bringing not only those preaching war upon the Vau, but missionaries spreading the message of the Omega Gospels.

The Vau did not react well. They saw this as a blatant attempt to taint the Gwindor against them. Against their own wisdom and even the most telling glyphs ("harmony" and "heaven"), the Vau attempted to stamp out all word of the Prophet. Why did the Mandarins do this? They had clearly become intrigued by the Prophet, and seemingly respected him above all other humans they had encountered. The answer is still unknown, for the Mandarins do not reveal their plans, but the importance of the Gwindor's purity was revealed.

The Vau increased security on the world, ensuring that no human who came to Quadi ever left. For this reason, word of the planet never returned to the Known Worlds. The Mandarins began an invasive regime wherein all human lore was examined for its efficacy toward auspice, and removed questionable lore from existing data crystals and other storage devices. It is said that some rebels hid certain information, handing it down orally to a select few, so that even the Mandarins cannot root it out again.

Among the underground cultures that arose on Quadi was the a band of Prophet worshippers. They had heard of the Prophet's final visit to the Vau and believed him to have been killed attempting to bring the Word to the Gwindor. His sacrifice was looked upon as a divine transmutation, from flesh to spiritual ether. They believe that his subtle body still exists, occasionally appearing to those who follow him. In this depiction can be found a twisted version of Vau metaphysics, for the Prophet is conceived of as an energy field, encompassing all of space and time. All one need do to contact the Prophet is to become resonant with this field, by contemplation of his mysteries and his divine death.

I know little else of this creed. What I do know comes from people who have known or met these cultists. I feel sorry for them, for they obviously have wounds the Vau cannot cure, to so recklessly disobey the Mandarins' wisdom.

Do not think that knowledge of the Prophet is still denied us. This was only kept from us for a time, until we proved our ability to rule ourselves with Will rather than happenstance. Once we so graduated, the Prophet's teachings and life were made available, as were works of other great human philosophers over time. We know that the Prophet is not a god, but a man. His wisdom is worthy of teaching, but not beyond critique. Like many philosophers, he spoke beyond his own time, but in this era in which I write, we have advanced beyond his vision.

The Mandarins see farther, for they have the Valukesh Ha'eni. As wise as was the Prophet, he had no such legacy from the Progenitors. Indeed, his teachings revere the Progenitors, but place an even more mysterious and bodiless spiritual power above them, one for which there is no proof or evidence.

Citizenship

For quite some time we lived under Watchworld status, carefully nurtured to one day join the society of sentients in the Hegemony. Finally, that time came in what you deem the 42nd century. After generation upon generation, we earned the right to become a Protectorate — too late to change the course of history in the Known Worlds. Our wish was to intervene, invite our lost cousins to submit to Vau authority, and thus save themselves from the chaos following the Fall of the Second Republic. But the Mandarins denied it. They claimed that it was not yet time for sundered kin to meet.

I see now the wisdom in this. It took many long *twent'tlor* for humans to again rule their own stars, while we were protected from such madness. The Vau foresaw that we would one day be needed to deliver our wisdom to our cousins, but only when they were capable of receiving it. I hope that that time now approaches.

My *yoma* tells me that I assume too much of you, intended reader, that you have not the learning to understand of what I speak, and so he allows me to continue, believing I can have little effect. I fear his wisdom is correct, but hope against it. Is there not one scholarly man or woman who can interpret this manuscript?

Yoma Zal Vor'rumph did say this curious thing to me when I pressed him upon it, but he would not explain it. I repeat it here: "You have traveled far downstream and eaten well of knowledge, but you have yet to become Wise. Your kind is kept in keeping for a time yet to come, when your ignorant racemates can receive you without fear. Perhaps that time is soon. Know that this is not for your benefit, but for theirs. They have a treasure which all the Cosm needs, but one which can only be wielded with the ages-old wisdom of the Vau."

I can but wonder at the meaning of this utterance.

The Gwindor became full citizens and could now move offworld. Many chose to emigrate to other worlds where the Vau had invited them. While the Vau believe it is right and proper to maintain a species' presence on its own homeworld, it is harmonious to have a good sampling of diversity throughout the Hegemony. For this reason, species who are willing may take up residence in other places across the stars, living among the Vau or other species.

I am told that this is rarely so in the Known Worlds — that aliens are kept apart, or looked down upon when they are near. I cannot fathom such rumors. Perhaps the lack of

Vau authority and its protective influence causes fear. Without their safeguards, maybe the strangeness of others is cause for terror rather than curiosity. But would this not also be so with human communities? One fearing the other? I refuse to believe this is so, for it is so obviously an archaism of the Diasporan past. No species that experienced such a wonder as the Second Republic could so easily forget, unless the Curse of Unknowing were laid upon them, surely.

Darkening Skies

Before we had received Protectorate status, a new danger threatened the Cosm, one known also to you: the dwindling stars.

For long, the Mandarins kept this secret, but eventually, the evidence revealed by the stars themselves could not be hidden. However, there was little cause for alarm, for an excuse was furnished: For too long had the auspices gone unheeded; now, all sentients must respect and maintain them. In this way, would the stars cease to dim.

No better method had yet been devised to coax all the species of the Hegemony to come together in unity. Rebellious aliens rethought their strategies; although some doubted the Vau's explanation, enough of them believed it so that most worlds began to respect the auspices again, and soon it was not only the Vau who followed them.

But this message has begun to fray of late, for attention to auspice has never been so intent as within the last *yomas'tlo*, and yet the stars show no signs of healing. Whispers are heard that it is beyond the Mandarin's power to control, for it is an unknown, ungoverned force that drains the stars of their energies.

The appearance of the *Glo'maasa*, the Misshapen, only fed such panic.

Trouble on the Borders

I know too little of the next incident which I report, but write it here because I believe it to be important, as does my yoma (although he will say little of it to me but for what is told to all citizens).

Less than a mere five *thalus'tlor* ago, a new species was encountered at S'rib, coming from a world unknown to the Mandarins, although one that has since been identified as part of human space. They spoke a broken version of Urthish, and had once clearly been human. Curious, the Mandarins sought closer scrutiny, assuming them to be descendants of the many experiments humans made on their own *tswa'tilvor*, their Patterns.

The Vau believe these tamperings to be in error unless done slowly and with the full accord of those being tampered with. They are horrified at the human urge to warp others' bodies and minds unwillingly, and then to shun them afterwards.

Thinking to perform some courtesy to these poor victims, a Mandarin and his escort traveled to their ship, discovering it to be an advanced form of biotechnology that rivaled anything the Vau or G'nesh had conceived. Now truly amazed and curious, the Mandarin sought to perceive what these newcomers' role in prophecy would prove to be. Drawing glyphs and observing their flux, he was astonished to see that these beings were invisible to prophecy — the glyphs did not acknowledge them.

Instead of fear, the Mandarin, one Yoma Zlaus Fovali'klaur, was filled with wonder. That quickly changed when one of his Worker escorts screamed for help. His *tswa'tilvo* had been invasively warped in but an instant by some strange technology the newcomers possessed. Examining the poor Worker with glyphs, Yoma Zlaus was horrified to see them all flux into one: *Waugh'shlauvikh*, the Glyph of Broken Accord, also called the Ungoverned Sigil, sure sign of the *Fel Dwantha*, the Outside Unknown.

After mercifully slaying the Worker, he quickly left the ill-omened ship, relieved only in that the newcomers' captain seemed as confused by the event as he was. Once safely away, the yoma bade the newcomers leave Hegemony space and never return. They heeded his demand and left. Workers descended on the gate and manually closed it from future egress along the route the newcomers had come. Today, a great fleet still waits amassed there, in case the beings return.

The Vau dubbed them *Glo'maasa*, the Misshapen. It is now known to me — because of my position — that they are also known to Known Worlders and are called "Symbiots." The Mandarins are greatly concerned, more so than I have ever seen on any other matter. They have sought whatever intelligence the Known Worlds has about these beings — I know, for I have translated much of it, and sorry I am to know what they have done to many a poor soul on the planet of Stigmata.

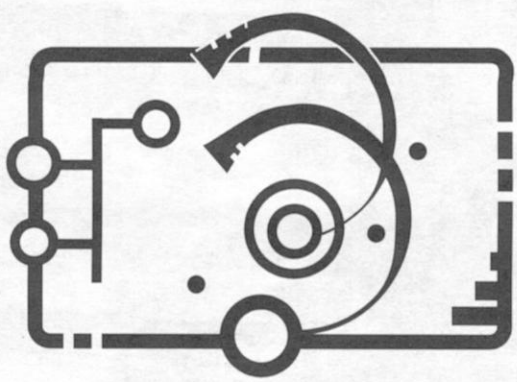
I know not what it means that these beings cannot be seen by the Everwatchful Eye of Auspicious Gleaning. That great oracle was wrought by the Progenitors and is a window into the Weft — the artifact that orders the universe. That *Glo'maasa* are unseen by it must surely mean that they are Ungoverned, and they thus pose a danger to the ordered workings of the Cosm itself.

Yet, I am allowed to write this manuscript now because of their threat. If it has done no other good, it has accomplished this, for the Vau have witnessed the manner in which humans resist these things, and they have reconsidered their plans for them. It was recent intelligence — intercepted from Imperial sources — that informed them of a parley with the *Glo'maasa* between a small group of human explorers and an elder of that species. The Mandarins of all councils, but especially the *Dau'rum'phal Scobit-sa'un*, the Council of Worthies, seem for the first time in all my service to have become impatient.

Thus it is that Yoma Zal Vord'rumph's own plans have finally come to fruition. No other Vau has taken such an interest in humanity for so long, and none has studied them as deeply. He has been given authority to bring Known Worlders into Hegemonic space for the first time in many *twent'tlor*, and here to treat with them and learn how our kinds might better ally against the *Glo'maasa* menace.

Or so my yoma tells me. I suspect the reason is even greater. I have ears and eyes and glean much from visiting Mandarins as they speak to my yoma. They heed me not, for I am unimportant in their councils, and so I can listen unremarked. They speak not simply of *Glo'maasa* and human destiny, but the fate of the Cosm itself. Now, it seems, more than in any era before, the glyphs flux to form the shapes of fear: The War in the Heavens is finally upon us.

What part we shall play, you and I, mere humans, I dare not say, but I know that the Mandarins think much of it.





Inner Sphere: The Vau

To understand the Vau — if this can ever truly be accomplished — one must first study three concepts, taught to all children of Hegemonic protectorates: *Tsor*, *Gwala* and *Ha'Valur* (castes, clutches and the fundamentals).

Castes

As all know, the Vau are born into one of three different castes, marked by strong genetic differences: *Zuil'tso* (Worker), *Sham'tso* (Soldier) and *Xan'tso* (Mandarin). I will consider each one in kind below, but I feel it necessary first to speak of common physical traits.

Vau skin is leathery and strong, but supple and soft to the touch. It is very efficient at repelling liquid and insulating the Vau from temperature fluctuations. While Vau prefer humid, steamy tropical environments, they exist equally well in a wide variety of climes and biomes, especially when aided by *hanstha* (sheaths).

To look into a Vau's eyes is to perceive wisdom, even in the Worker and Soldier castes. The pupils are large, with no whites to disturb their pool-like essence. Some are black, others are blue, and others still are green or even crimson. When the mood is light, the eyes darken, as a deep pond in cool stillness. But as concerns arise, so lightens the eyes, sparkling with intent. Whether light or dark, however, the Vau see well in airy or liquid realms, for a membrane covers their eyes when submerged. Eyesight is at least as strong as a human's, and Vau can perceive spectrums invisible to the human eye, as attested also by the Manshogo.

Vau fingers are long and supple, but strong and bony. A Worker can bend his wrists and fingers in many directions, a skill denied humans and even the Soldiers and Mandarins. It is said that this was not a trait original to that caste, but one planted into their blood by the Mandarins.

Hair quantity, color and length varies among the Vau, said to be a trait that differed based on their ancestors' original climes on Hoom. All retain some degree of hair on the head, usually short stubble, but long manes are possible among certain clutches. Hair on the body is quite rare, although some soldiers develop thick stubble on the lower arms and legs. Its color is most often black, but browns and blues are known.

Vau have two sexes, *fo'va* (male) and *rem'na* (female). Females outnumber males, and in the past a single male would fertilize the eggs of many females, although it is now often the custom on some worlds for a male and a female to form a sole mating bond and not share mating duties with others.

Because of the ancient need to attract *fo'va* based on appearance alone, *rem'na* sport many beautiful features, such as colorful head feathers, body markings or enhanced organs. While these old mating lures still exist, they are now often hidden under garments, reserved for times of mating. Indeed, it is considered embarrassing for one's feathers to be seen by any but an intended mating partner, similar to the aversion humans have to be witnessed naked. The males rarely possess any marked physical traits, beyond endurance.

Of course, the Vau do not eat meat. Their ancestors were herbivores and they still cannot digest flesh, cooked or no. Indeed, they view the practice as an unfortunate barbarism, akin to the practice of the primitive carnivores of Hoom. It used to be a matter of faith that no being who ate the flesh of an animal could be fully sentient. Vau no longer believe this, faced with numerous proofs otherwise, but still believe that true spiritual attainment requires the abandonment of meat in the diet.

There is surely more to say, but enough has been covered. Details specific to each caste shall be mentioned below. I begin with the Mandarins, those born to lead.

Mandarins

The tallest and thinnest of the Vau, Mandarins stand over six *woon'l* tall (about 10 feet). They are among the universe's wisest and most intelligent beings in this present *lan'tlo*, exceeding Workers and Soldiers in sentience. Of known species, only the Ool Shrr'mu are wiser, and they now rarely involve themselves in affairs of this Cosm.

Mandarins are also the longest-lived of the Vau, reckoned in *duilo* years (by *quelo* reckoning, they are equal to the other castes; see my notes on time, below). The average Mandarin lives for nearly a *yomas'tlo* (about 230 Urth years).

They are the least populous caste, for never is more than one Mandarin born to a single clutch, and even then only about one clutch in seven or eight hatches a Mandarin.

While they are born rulers — the other castes have a genetic disposition to look to a Mandarin for guidance — they are rarely arrogant about their higher status. This is indeed a great difference between the Vau and other species — including humans. We suffer much from those seeking power over others. Would it not be easier for all concerned if these issues were decided at birth, so that everyone could get on with the work of living?

While the other castes recognize the Vau as leaders (only the insane among them believe otherwise), the Mandarins look upon the other castes with affection and admiration. What is a leader without a flock? All the castes are necessary for a functioning civilization; each holds an honored place.

Mandarins are deeply attached to members of the others castes, and become nervous and anxious without their proximity. Remember, it was the Soldiers of old who defended the herd leaders from danger, while Workers huddled near to them. In times of distress, Mandarins still seek the comfort of Worker and Soldier Presences. It is rare to see a Mandarin walk for long without at least one representative of the other castes among his entourage.

Role

The Mandarins' role in society is more than mere rulership — they guide the very course of culture and civilization. It is typical human myopia to declare that society serves only the Mandarins, for the opposite is true — the Mandarins exist to foster society.

Everything a Mandarin does is preordained in some fashion; he is simply a gardener or shepherd who ensures the task is completed with maximum efficiency and aesthetics. The *Valukesh Ha'eni* is the core text for rulership. Indeed, in these chaotic times it is now considered almost criminal to undertake an affair without consulting its wisdom. Although its answers are often cryptic, they can guide even the most perplexed Vau toward a safe path of pursuit.

This desperate need to know the will of the Weft in all things is most propitious. I will explain it better later, in the section devoted to the auspices — without which no study of the Vau could be complete.

Suffice it to know for now that the Mandarins turn their considerable intelligence and wisdom toward the unlocking of puzzles posed by prophecy — how best to perform actions toward the achievement of desired goals. Keep in mind that these goals may not always best serve the Vau, but may instead work for the universe at large, even to the detriment of the Vau. Nonetheless, the selfless Mandarins perform the desired tasks, their sacred duty from the time of the Progenitors.

Hence, few things in the Hegemony are done in haste. Certainly, the Vau can act quickly when necessary — with astonishing speed and efficiency, in fact — but most matters await careful weighing over many *twent'tlor*.

For this reason, many Protectorate citizens have learned to govern themselves without resort to Vau law, and yet do so in accordance with Vau principles (if not, the Vau will involve themselves). Those whose grievance is too great must call upon the Vau; their resolution may take time, but it will be the most correct possible given the tenor of the Cosm.

To facilitate governance, Mandarins form *dau'rum'phala*, or councils, descendants of Hoa'Tal Gaamzi's First Council. Unlike more individualistic species, such as humans and Manshogo, the Vau rarely rely on the wisdom of one individual alone, but seek consensus from a group of the wise. The Lun'grar criminal species — rarely seen out of their interdicted Protectorate — curse the Vau as herdbeasts. That species' own predicament, however, tells much about the value of cooperation over conflict.

The topic of the councils is a weighty one and is best described in the context of the Hegemony and its governance systems. I undertake this task in the following chapter. More will be said hereafter about the Mandarins and their roles in various thoughts and deeds.

Rank

Not all Mandarins are equal; some are far wiser than others, judged usually by age and merit, but range of experience is also considered. There are a number of ranks by which they are stationed, in addition to various titles based on duty.

Balfum'eni — "Dew on the Flower." The beginning level of social attainment as a Mandarin, usually representing one who leads his own clutch.

Zep'apat — "Noted." A *balfum'eni* who is recognized by superiors for a noteworthy deed or unique talent.

Dwelphut — "Vessel on the Stream." One who performs duties for a council. *Dwelphut* are sent far and wide, and often serve as messengers of sensitive information.

Kwal'pholo — "Worthy." An advisor to a council.

Hualth'ama — "Attended." A member of a council.

Slee'wau — "Island of Refuge." An aide to a yoma.

Yoma — "Supreme Attainment." Represents a leader of a council, of which there can be nine per council.

Val'huyima — "Crest of the Waves." The highest active rank, held only by a handful of councilors from the core worlds. There are only nine of them in any *thalus'tlo*.

Va'halnumu — "Silent Radiant Presence." The most revered of all ranks, representing the wisest of the wise, one who no longer partakes of active council duty but whose every word is heeded as a wisdom jewel. Although this honor is most often awarded posthumously, there are nonetheless a few rare individuals who achieve this merit in life.

Dress and Equipment

The most noble fashions in the Hegemony are those worn by the Mandarins — robes of resplendent fabric and many uses. Unlike civilian clothing, whose make, fabric and color are chosen for practical or aesthetic reasons, Mandarins robes of office are carefully wrought to complement the task in which their wearer engages. For instance, the light vermilion robes of the Foreign Ambassadors convey a pleasing Presence, yet one charged with elder wisdom and natural power. The crimson robes of the *Oma'tlama*, the Readers, reflects the deeply charged lore in which they delve, as well as the color of the moon as it rises on Unshalla, homeworld of this council.

The correspondences of color, fabric, weave and sheath are complex and understood fully only by trained Mandarins. But not one Mandarin dares spurn these guidelines, for they were set long ago, in accordance with *Valukesh Ha'eni* glyphs, and can only auspiciously change at that great book's behest. To break these rules, even in error, may affect the course of the River of Time, and produce different results than those intended or hoped for.

Does this seem superstitious? Indeed, the idea that colors and clothing could affect the outcome of events in which one is engaged seems preposterous given the materialistic beliefs that haunt human history and understanding. But we lesser sentients do not yet ken the etheric waves given off by every Presence, nor the effect of Essence upon the Weft. These matters are high indeed, for they concern the complex, ever-flowing interaction of ideas in the Weft, which in turn affect the course of material things. Only the Mandarins are so wise and learned as to navigate these seas. For us, it is enough to dip our feet in the river and stay far from the ocean.

One need seek no further proof than the efficacy of Vau energy technology, a wonder and marvel to behold but a conundrum to contemplate in a scientific manner. The Vau's mastery of energetic reality is truly awesome, from the impervious *sham'tswa hanstha* (which you call energy shields), the etheric sheaths that cloak bodies, to the world-shaking power of their starship plasma guns.

This mastery did not come through the mere study of colliding atoms, but through a more cautious study of subtle cause and effect. Of course, the *Valukesh Ha'eni* greatly aided the work, as did the remnants of Architect technology. The result is an amazingly comprehensive metaphysical science.

But discussion of this topic — the auspices and their correspondences — remains for later; now, we discuss dress. Vau robes are made of one of three different materials: *holimo* thread, grown from the *hwama* plant on Hoom (valued much as your silk is); *sibcha* fur, collected from the beasts native to Sab'Wa; and *klirzz*, a synthetic fabric of complex weave. Each of these can be dyed or manufactured in nearly any color and cut to any design. Their choice depends entirely on the nature of a task. For instance, *holimo* is best for relaxing times and meditations, while *klirzz* is used when meeting strangers and *sibcha* for cementing alliances.

Underneath the robe, a tight *holimo* bodysuit is worn, unless the temperature is too high (in which case, nothing else is worn), or too low (in which case, a thick bodysuit of *chorl* fur is donned).

Adorning the robes is a sheath, the kind depending again on need and auspicious omen. In inert mode, most Mandarins' sheaths appear as ornate, bony headresses and shoulder pads with vambraces. When active, a sheath can take many forms, usually one signifying its role. For instance, a protective sheath will provide armor for the entire body, unless such an appearance is inappropriate, in which case, an invisible etheric sheath will still protect.

The sheaths are, of course, wrought from *yurim'zho*. This material is explained in length later, but know that the Mandarins possess the most complex and versatile of sheaths, capable of a number of tasks or labors, among them the *nu'fleed*, or Smart Robes as they are called by Known Worlders (Verden's dreadfully literal translation of *numunanth ofleed'hansth* is unused in the Foreign Tongue). These sheaths provide not only protection and weaponry, but equipment for various tasks, depending on the Mandarin's station, need and the sheath's data training.

A Mandarin needs little else besides, for his retinue of Soldiers and Workers carry tools useful in other tasks. Each Mandarin, however, does carry at least a small Valukesh Ha'eni oriel, or reader, by which he can measure the auspices. Those of higher station carry interactive readers, capable of posing a number of questions and receiving complex outcomes.

With that, I now leave the topic of the Mandarins, but shall return to it many times over before the end of this study. For now, it is proper to give the other castes their due.

Soldiers

As the Mandarins are unexcelled in intellect, so the Soldiers have little match in martial skill. Born to defend others from vicious enemies, they are superb fighters with an innate group instinct — a tactical advantage over other species, who most often must rely on training and indoctrination to form ordered ranks of troops. In times of stress among most sentients, low morale can destroy years of training. With a Soldier, stress serves to enhance favored traits.

Certainly, as with the Workers, not all of these instincts were delivered by nature; some were conceived by Mandarins and nurtured in Soldiers through proper breeding programs or direct plantings in the blood. (Generational breeding is preferred to invasive Pattern modification, for the slow, natural formation of organic and mental Patterning fields is much more in accord with *Valukesh Ha'eni* principles. For similar reasons, terraforming is undesirable. See later for further explication on this matter.)

While a lone Soldier might or might not provide a match against a lone Manshogo or Velek Zzum warrior, two or more together easily outmatch similarly numbered foes. It is in group fighting that Soldiers excel.

The average Soldiers stands over five *woon'l* tall (about eight feet) and is of broader girth than a Mandarin or Worker, with a powerfully built torso, well-muscled limbs and bright teeth (meant in ancient times to threaten rather than actually wound). Some of them host horns or bony ridges on their skulls and shoulders, an atavistic feature mostly absent now from Mandarins and Workers but encouraged in Soldiers.

Reckoned in *duillo* time, Soldiers are the shortest-lived of the Vau (average lifespan of three *thalus'tlor* — 80 or so Urthish years), but they are the most physically adept of the castes, possessing a well-honed, inborn agility and stamina. About one quarter of every clutch produces a Soldier (two out of the average seven hatchlings are Soldiers).

They tend to follow orders more readily than even Workers, and rely on Mandarins for high-level tactical or strategic orders.

It is extremely rare for a Soldier to rebel against a Mandarin's command; those that do are considered emotionally unstable, even insane. The first remedy is enforced group activity with loyal clutchmates. If the offender still acts against his own best instincts, Mandarin scrutiny and interview roots out the cause. If it cannot be easily cured, the Soldier is retired away from other Soldiers and removed from any weapons. If he still persists in rebellion, he is euthanized as a physical and mental danger to the community, for his Presence risks tainting others' Essences.

Role

A Soldier's chief duty is to defend his Mandarin and associated Workers, giving his life if necessary. Secondarily, he performs martial tasks commanded of him by his Mandarin, such as to attack enemies before he is attacked himself. Rarely does a Soldier or unit undertake an assault without a direct order from a Mandarin — it is not their nature, which is mainly defensive. However, their defense can be vicious, ensuring that attackers do not survive their folly no matter the cost to the Soldiers themselves. For this reason, few contemplate harming a Vau, for the punishment is severe and almost always fatal. Indeed, once engaged, Soldiers require clear (and often strenuously delivered) orders from a Mandarin to prevent killing an enemy.

Luckily, Soldiers are not easily riled. They can well perceive the difference between a mock assault and a real one, and between jest or play and serious harm. But once the line has been crossed, there is rarely any reprieve. (Witness the horrors of the Known Worlders' first encounter with Soldiers on Apshai. Their defense of the planet was thorough and complete; humans survived only because Mandarins so ordered it.)

The exception to this bloodlust is if the enemy is a Vau — Soldiers will not knowingly kill Workers unless ordered to do so by their Mandarins, and then only after repeatedly reinforced orders. They will under no circumstances knowingly and willingly kill a Mandarin (although they can be convinced to harm one); those who have been forced by coercive means to do so almost always commit suicide thereafter, and their fellow unit members may become wild and uncontrollable, suffering a temporary insanity. (It is a deadly game to press such loyalties, as Fleeur'Yuan Choola discovered in the dark times after the Leavetaking. This infamous Mandarin used a loyal Soldier to slaughter a rival Mandarin; after the deed, the Soldiers' entire unit became ungoverned and turned loose their bloodlust wantonly — killing Fleeur himself.)

However, they can be turned against other Soldiers with little compunction, unless the opponent is a personal friend or ally. Hence, unscrupulous Mandarins from the dark times waged war against one another's Soldiers. Thankfully, such times are long in the past, and no Vau has been turned against another in many *thalus'tlor*.

But let me not initiate fear here — Soldiers are among the most disciplined of beings, and even their bloodlust is delivered coldly and with dispassion. However, short of a deadly assault upon their wards, they offer no danger and even provide protection to those favored by the Mandarins. Having a Vau Soldier hold watch over you in dangerous places is a relief equal to none.

Rank

There are seven ranks of attainment for Soldiers, representing skill in arms or a history of noteworthy achievements, in addition to stations based on region or Mandarin affiliation. The ranks from lowest to highest are: *tlaavu* ("armed"), *kwama* ("prepared"), *suam'shal* ("defender"), *khelee* ("enemy bane"), *soqluq* ("without retreat"), *lyo'dwed* ("rapid fortress"), *zeput'nu* ("impervious cascade").

Dress and Equipment

A Soldier's garb is practical, although Soldiers serving Mandarins of high station often adorn their gear in an aesthetic manner, all in accordance with whatever is best to heighten the Mandarin's auspices. The standard, however, is more drab: a simple, one-color jumpsuit (often dark green, but other colors are used in different services) and a battle sheath that provides armor, an etheric field, and energy stores for weaponry and tools.

The chief weapon is the *forv'rulkh*, or energy stave, a short (two *woon'l*) pole capable of projecting plasma bolts. It also hosts a retractable sharp, metal blade, like an axe, but it can be used instead like a stick or club to subdue rather than wound. Well feared are these staves by criminals and rebels! Like many military-grade *yurim'zhor* devices, a stave is proprietary — its activation is keyed to a user or group of users, and cannot be used by strangers.

If necessary, a stave can be triggered to explode, but this is meant as a last resort and is almost never used.

A Soldier's sheath provides a number of features: medical care (an emergency wound medic), portable environment (air filtration and self-breathing functions), nutritional support (intravenous short-term rations), temperature adjustment (except for extremes), broadband radio, a magnification and broad-spectrum imager, and a passive tracking signal. Of course, it also provides physical and etheric armor capable of withstanding a high degree of punishment. (Usually, only the etheric armor is necessary, but the use of illegal shield dampers by rebels requires the physical armor backup.)

Each Soldier also bears a crest identifying his unit, which consists of his Mandarin's sign and a series of glyph designations for unit, his place within that unit and his personal rank. For instance, a Soldier serving Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph will bear the yoma's sign (the *fest'rau* leaf) and glyphs representing his unit (perhaps the Third), number within that unit (23 perhaps) and rank.



Workers

Continuing our study of the Vau, we come to the Workers. They make up the majority of Vau, for five of seven hatchlings will be Workers (four, if the clutch is lucky enough to host a Mandarin). As the Mandarins possess amazing intellect and the Soldiers steadfast duty, so the Workers have their own area of expertise: ingenuity. Most technological innovations come from the Workers, under guidance from the Mandarins. The awe-inspiring architecture and art of Vau cities is chiefly due to Workers.

The name given them in Urthish does little to convey their creative skills, for they not only work in practical endeavors, but also create works of art in song, story and phantasmery (holo-artifice). If the Mandarins serve as the head of the Vau people and the Soldiers their strong limbs, Workers are the heart. A shame it is that Known Worlders know next to nothing of their achievements, of the subtle and yet grand art, architecture and poetry of the Vau, wrought by Workers. No culture in this present *lan'tlo* is so refined as the Vau's; if only every being had their example, then would the universe know harmony.

Workers are the smallest Vau in height and girth (four *woon'l*, or six feet tall), but are nonetheless hardy in health. They perform tasks without complaint and take pride in the results (and process) of their work. The average Worker lives for nearly 130 Urthish years.

They tend to settle into a particular place or region, rarely traveling except on occasional vacations, except for those individuals whose waypaths are built around stories or exotica gathered only by wandering. Like many Hegemonic citizens, they are usually placed in a region by Mandarins, one where their talents are needed, and live out their days becoming part of its harmony.

Role

A Worker's role is to provide for the Mandarins and Soldiers, just as those castes guide and protect the Workers. As such, they provide not only sustenance in the form of food (for some Workers are chefs excelled by none) but also emotional and spiritual, for their companionship and song lighten the hearts of Mandarin and Soldier alike and reaffirms their own purposes.

Workers are less easy to classify than members of the other castes, for their chosen duties are so broad and varied, from bakers and builders to dancers and storytellers. Any endeavor that has value is practiced by some Workers, and the Vau often see value where others do not. For instance, the Fah Selani have little use for the arts, but the Vau recognize that art is very often a necessary condition for spiritual advancement, without which civilizations cannot rise in understanding of the Cosm.

Each Worker, upon reaching the age of stability, chooses an *an'vona*, a "waypath" or profession, the chief focus of his endeavors for the remainder of his life. (Sometimes, Workers change waypaths in midlife, but this is considered a form of defeat and is rarely done.) Life is then spent perfecting that path, discovering its rites and rituals and perhaps, with luck and talent, creating new ideas — the most sacred endeavor capable of a sentient being.

Because of the dangers involved in creation of new ideas — for novelty often eludes even the *Valukesh Ha'eni* — the works of Workers have come under increasing scrutiny by the Mandarin councils, who grow ever more wary of wayward endeavors that might lead to chaos rather than Understanding. This has left Workers feeling less and less valuable, for ingenuity is their gift to Vau society, and with its constrainment, they feel lacking in worth. It is a problem haunting the Hegemony, one that will surely soon be resolved toward a more harmonious effect.

And so there has been little advancement in the arts or even sciences for many *twent'tlor*, as all await the wisdom of the *Jaykata U'moti* on when to move forward. Instead, Workers concentrate on the rites that maintain their waypaths, the methods by which the Patterns are preserved whole and untainted. It can truly be said that never before has the understanding of preexisting art, architecture and technology been so deep or so rich.

Rank

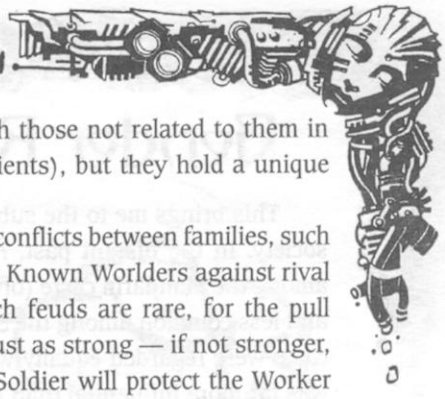
As demanded by old, long-ignored traditions, Workers are again ordered by rankings, awarded to an individual either by fellow Workers of at least *afor'olpak* rank or by Mandarins. The ranks, reflecting recognized skill, talent or achievement, are: *swiban* ("endowed"), *xel'var* ("qualified"), *hu'narsh* ("adroit"), *afor'olpak* ("master"), *ramthu'yil* ("perfect attainment").

Dress and Equipment

The fashion of a Worker's garb varies with his waypath, and is as functional (or not) as duties demand. Generally, Workers wear the least amount of clothing, adorning themselves most often with comfortable, loose tunics and sandals, except in climes that require heavier clothing, in which case they rely as much as possible on slim, lightweight sheaths to protect them from elements.

A Worker's sheath is likely to be less versatile than those of the other castes, tailored specifically for his waypath and clime. An engineer's sheath may provide him with custom tools on demand, while a storyteller's may project phantasms and music complementary to a tale.

In these time of strict adherence to auspice, Workers often bear a visible glyph signifying their waypath so that others will know them upon sight and treat them properly according to tradition. For instance, it is customary to offer



hospitality to wandering musicians, or meals and drink to technicians in return for service, while gardeners can expect the occasional gift of a seed from faraway lands.

Clutches

Many forces bring the distinct castes together and ensure that they work closely with one another in harmony. Of these, the councils are the most formal, developed mainly to facilitate interstellar unity. The most instinctual force, however, is the clutch bond, that emotional tie between all the hatchlings from a single clutch.

Vau experience what humans have traditionally called an "imprinting" process. This process occurs immediately following hatching, whereby the new hatchlings, whistling and struggling from the shards of their shell, bond with one another in the same nest. This is not simply due to visual stimuli, for touch and sound also have a function in this initial social event. The Vau claim it also includes subtle senses we humans rarely recognize, for bonds have been formed between clutchmates even when eggs have been separated from a nest, proving an intangible connection between them.

This bond remains with a Vau for his or her entire life. She will rarely become as close with other beings as with her clutchmates — even if differences of opinion fracture intellectual consensus among them, an emotional bond always remains.

Soldiers bond with their clutchmate Workers, defending them above all other beings, no matter where duty calls them in life. If a Mandarin is part of the clutch, it too shares the Soldiers' protection. Likewise, Workers bond with Soldiers and Mandarins, serving their needs before others. Only the Mandarins gain the intellectual training that allows them to distance themselves — if necessary — from emotional ties, so that they may make decisions even at the cost of their clutchmates' best interests. But they will also share in the fruits or ill effects of such decisions, for never but in death is a Mandarin separated from his clutch. They serve as his advisors and guardians through all trials.

One of the greatest sadnesses of a Mandarin's long lifespan is that she outlives her clutchmates. This is common, but considered a tragedy among Worker poets. When bereft of their mates, elder Mandarins tend to grow cold, seemingly heartless, and often manipulative, and for this reason are the eldest council members thought to govern from intellect unbalanced by feeling.

Vau also retain a close tie to hatchlings from other clutches laid by their direct parents. While the bond is by no means so deep, they feel an affection even if these hatchlings are strangers separated by distance and age. Of course, Vau may also form deep ties with those not related to them in any way (as may most sentients), but they hold a unique favor for family relations.

One might imagine vast conflicts between families, such as the bloodlusts directed by Known Worlders against rival noble houses. However, such feuds are rare, for the pull exerted by caste instinct is just as strong — if not stronger, at times. In other words, a Soldier will protect the Worker and Mandarin hatchlings of a stranger's clutch, without being bid to do so, and all caste members will obey the mandates of a Mandarin who outranks their own Mandarin clutchmate, even though it causes them mental anguish.

Clutches are so cohesive that, if one member gains great honor or notoriety, the rest of his clutch receives some of the same. Thus, Mandarins raised to high station raise also their Worker and Soldier clutchmates, but likewise, a Mandarin brought low brings down his mates with him. There are, of course, exceptions based on common sense.

In this discussion of instinctual drives, one must always remember that Vau are not beasts — they are the most civilized sentients in the known universe. They have retained their strong instincts because they are useful — indeed, they are partly what makes a Vau so superior. While other beings squabble and argue with one another where they should come to consensus, the Vau are beyond such petty conflicts. It is true that some of my fellow *Gwindor* believe that, in gaining a surcease to social conflict, the Vau have sacrificed individual freedom. I argue, however, that our excessive valuation of "freedom" needs to be reexamined in light of what the Vau offer. Are they less happy or content, or less capable of achieving their goals?

Hegemonic rebels call the Vau a servant race, and it is a true claim — but one which is deserving of honor, not shame, for the Vau serve all sentients today as they did the Progenitors in times past, working for the good of all.

I digress from the topic of discussion. Let me return to the subject of the clutches, and explain Vau biology somewhat.

A *rem'na* can lay, on average, one clutch every nine *tha'sualar* (lunar months). Today, many choose to lay only two or three throughout their lifetimes, and this has served to keep the Vau population in check. On ancient Hoom, predators or accidents caused many clutches to be lost or diminished, making regular egg laying a necessity. Technological innovations in birth control long ago assured that *rem'nar* would have to lay fertilized eggs only when they chose to. (As with many sentient species, somewhere in early evolution, Vau became fertile in all seasons, allowing them to breed when they desired rather than wait for the whim of natural cycles. I wonder if anyone has done a study on the link between perennial sex-drive and sentience?)



Gender Roles

This brings me to the subject of gender and its role in society. In the distant past, *rem'nar* were more common among the Mandarin caste (often outnumbering the *fo'var*) and less common among the Soldiers. Those born of either caste were regarded equally with *fo'var*, for caste heritage was far more influential than gender.

Worker *rem'nar* were far more restricted in their freedoms, as is common in many sub-technical societies. However, even in the early Hegemony, they gained status equal to that of *fo'var* Workers and performed the same functions in society interchangeably. The one major exception was the initial raising of hatchlings, in which *rem'nar* have proven to be more effective, for their nurturing instincts exceed those of the *fo'var*.

One result of planned breeding programs is that today there is a relatively equal distribution of sexes among the castes, although females still outnumber males somewhat. The Vau seek such harmony in all endeavors, but not always to the best. They once attempted to tamper with the Manshogo's breeding cycle, but abandoned the project once it became clear that the lack of parity between males and females (favoring males over the rarer females) was a necessary part of their societal structure.

Age

I have already mentioned that all Vau live to the same age, as judged by *quelos* reckoning, but to different years by *duilos*. I should mention here that each caste experiences three distinct phases of growth: *foo'la* (childhood), *twim'la* (youth), and *kyar'zi* (adulthood). A child requires the care of its adult and clutchmates to survive, for it is immature and incapable of fending for itself. A youth is old enough to fend for itself or its clutchmates, but still ruled mainly by hormone surges — he has not yet come to the Will and so is not fully sentient. Achieving adulthood is often called "coming to stability," for the Vau is — in theory — less ruled by passionate instincts and more capable of harnessing the Will.

Mandarins and Workers reach youth after three *twent'tlor* and adulthood after seven. Soldiers reach youth after two *twent'tlor* and adulthood after four.

Fundamentals

I shall now address lore that is the fairly common curriculum of Hegemonic citizens. However, I am perhaps biased, for my inceptors have been Mandarins, and mayhap I confuse my advanced lore with that taught to common pupils. Nonetheless, it is useful to know.

Language

There are three language classifications among the Vau: *Hil'quar* (High Speech), *Mau'quar* (Middle Speech) and *Ud'quar* (Low Speech). The High is spoken only by mandarins, while the Middle is known to all Vau castes — it serves as a common tongue among Vau. The Low Speech consists of three different dialects: *Zuil'quar* (Worker caste), *Sham'quar* (Soldier caste) and the *Khweg'yurip* (Foreign Tongue). Additionally, the native languages of Hegemonic species are considered forms of Low Speech. The caste forms are spoken only among fellow caste members, although many Mandarins know these dialects and monitor conversations spoken in them.

The Foreign Tongue was developed as a common tongue for the alien species within the Hegemony. It is also used to communicate with Known Worlders. While it is a distinct dialect, it shares much with the Middle Speech and High Speech, for it was developed by Mandarins. However, while the High and Middle Speeches contain sounds pronounceable only by the Vau, the Foreign Speech contains few complex sounds and its fundamentals can be mastered by most species. It is this dialect that Benjamin Verden learned and formalized into an alphabet for translation into Republican Urthish.

Verden was not a professional linguist, although the study of languages was a hobby of his. He made many mistakes, some of which were corrected by later diplomats, but on the whole, his system is a relatively faithful representation of the Foreign Tongue. Indeed, it has been adopted by the Vau as the standard form for written communications with Known Worlders, as practiced mainly by *Gwindor* scribes such as I. My own native language — a Diasporan dialect of Urthish — also uses similar characters.

As with most time-tested languages used by technological civilizations, the Foreign Tongue is complex — it has had to deal with cultural concepts alien to the Vau themselves, such as the trance-thoughts of the Manshogo or the twin-mind of the Fah Selani. Hence, it adopts much alien vocabulary, and not always in a form or declension proper to its original usage. While it may be an etymological wonder to study, it is a confusing language to understand on a formal level. One cannot always deduce the proper plural form of a singular noun, or the passive and active forms of certain verbs, from what governing structure exists (unlike the High Speech, which is suprisingly concise and formal). It is best learned by speaking it and through the acquisition of vocabulary.

Nonetheless, there are some rules to Verden's system that are fairly consistent throughout. For instance, pronunciation of certain letters is usually the same, even if it differs



from a word's native vocabulary. These rules are given below.

Pronunciation and Grammar

Consonants:

G = Always hard, as in "govern," not "gymnasium."

GH = A gutteral "choking" sound in the back of the throat; no Urthish equivalent.

H = Represents a voiceless, breathy sound before a consonant (as in *hlo'vo* — "wing"; no real equivalent in Urthish), and a voiced expellation of breath before a vowel (as in *hod* — "stone," or Urthish "ho!").

J = Slightly trilled, as in old Urthish French "j."

K = When followed by an "h," it is an aspirate (as in *khun* — "tooth," or the "ch" in Urthish *loch*).

PH = A softer version of "f," as in "fall" rather than "for."

TS = The "t" and the "s" are both pronounced.

X = Forms a sort of short, sharp *kh-z* sound, moving quickly from the back of the throat to the front.

Vowels: In almost all cases, vowels are short unless doubled ("aa"), in which case they are long.

A = Short = "cat"; long ("aa") = "father."

E = Short = "get." A doubled "e" is an especially long "i" sound.

I = Almost always long, as the e- in "evil." A short sound (as in "sit") represents a word of non-Vau origin.

O = Short = "oh" or "on."

U = Always long = "brute."

Dipthongs: Each letter is pronounced separately, unless it is a long vowel (repeating characters) or one of the two dipthongs listed here:

AU = "ow," as in "proud," but with a pronounced nasal sound.

IE = as in "tie."

Stress: Generally, stress is determined solely by vocabulary — a word's stress is learned with that word and cannot usually be deduced by grammatical rules. However, words of Vau derivation (as opposed to those borrowed by other alien species in the Hegemony) almost always stress on the first syllable and every other or third syllable thereafter, giving the sequence a rythmic quality.

Apostrophes: An apostrophe mark within a word represents two distinct syllables if it follows a vowel, but a long consonant otherwise. For example, in *hlo'vo*, the mark shows that the word is pronounced as two syllables, *hlo* and *vo*, with no pause in between. However, in *ban'kesh*, it shows that the "n" sound in *ban* is long.

Hyphen: As with Urthish, a hyphen represents a compound word that is uncommon enough not to have trans-

formed into a single word or an apostrophed conjunction.

Plural: Plural nouns are often formed by adding an *–r* to a word ending in a vowel, or an *–a* to a consonant. Thus, *Muanho* (hadrosaur) becomes *Muanhor* (hadrosaurs), and *hod* (stone) becomes *hoda* (stones). However, there are many words, especially alien ones, that follow different rules. Some words, such as *Vau*, are the same for both singular and plural.

Vocabulary

Amal = Ocean, great expanse

An'vona (an'vonar) = (lit. "Swimming with the current") Waypath, career

Arkh'intor Uo = War in the Heavens

Aum'lor = Protectorate

Bafu = Dance, movement

Ban = Before (usually a prefix)

Ban'kesh So'kaata = Progenitors

Dahum = Antipodes, polarized opposites

Dau'kedali (Dau'kedalir) = Procurer, a member of the Procurement Council

Dau'rum'phal (dau'rum'phala) = Council

Dau'rum'phal Scobit-sa'un = Council of Worthies, judges of human involvement in Progenitor affairs

Dloan-shi = The 24th century (by Urthish reckoning)

Dwel (dwela) = Vessel, ship (see also *uo'dwel*)

Duilos = Objective time, the material reckoning

Eev = Sealed (usually a modifying prefix)

El'zweldar = (lit. "Net of stars") The jumpweb

Eni (enir) = Book, icon, glyph

Fel Dwantha = The Outside Unknown

Feti Tul'imo = A particular star seen from the planet Manitou

Fo'va (fo'var) = Male

Foo'la = Childhood

For = Flow, movement, the passage of time

Fo'swir (fo'swira) = The Eddy, plasma energy

Forv'rulkh (forv'rulkha) = Energy stave, the chief weapon of a Soldier.

Forvu (forvur) = River

Glo'maas (glo'maasa) = (lit. "Misshapen") Symbiot

Gualph (gualpha) = Herdmaster

Gualsho (gualshor) = Herdmember

Gur'laphta = A province in the southern hemisphere of Hoom

Gwal (gwala) = Clutch

Gwindo (Gwindor) = Human

Ha = Illuminating, revealing, obvious (often used as a prefix)

Ha'phagh = (lit. "Unlidded Eye") The etheric sense organ, equated with the mystical third eye

Ha'valu (ha'valur) = (lit. "insightful truth") A truism. Plural form often refers to the "fundamentals," the basic education of a Hegemonic citizen, comprising religious, scientific and social lore.

Halsh = Silence

Hansth (hanstha) = Sheath, cocoon

Hashat = The most sacred star, associated with the Architects' homeworld (now inaccessible by jumpgate), seen in the night sky of Hoom's southern hemisphere

Hil'quar = High Speech

Hlo'vo (hlo'vor) = Wing

Hoa = First

Hod (hoda) = Stone

Holimo (holimor) = A fabric woven from the *hwama* plant (native to Hoom); it is similar in many ways to silk.

Hoom = Homeworld of the Vau

Hua'ladar = (lit. "All Empire") The Hegemony

Huwan = After (often used as a prefix)

Im Dau'lansar = The First Council

Im Zlar'vaugh = First Darkening; when Hashat disappeared from the night sky for a full *suala* in the early 24th century

Ird'kalk (ird'kalka) = (lit. "Door warden") Jumpgate

Jaykata U'moti = (lit. "Those who unfold history according to precepts") Keepers of the Valukesh Ha'eni

Jo'i (jo'ir) = Four inches

Jymin Tswa'tilvo = The Plan of the Architects

Kazta'va (kazta'var) = Quantum sphere

Kesh = Time

Kesh'Amal = Ocean of Time, destiny

Khun (khuna) = Tooth

Klirzz = A high-tech synthetic fabric, similar to synthsilk. The Vau know how to weave it with bright colors.

Khweg'yurip = The Foreign Tongue

Kur'pla (kur'plar) = Metacrystal

Kyari (kyarir) = (lit. "Wind over water") Will

Kyar'zi = (lit. "Possessed of Will") Adulthood

Lan = Grand, important, central, axis

Lan'tlo (lan'tlor) = (lit. "great reckoning") An "age" or "era," the largest unit of time measurement, equivalent to 19,683 Urthish years

Man'quar = Middle Speech

Muanho (muanhor) = Hadrosaur, evolutionary predecessor of the Vau

Nunt'a (nunt'ar)= Glory, noble duty

Numu (numur) = Radiant

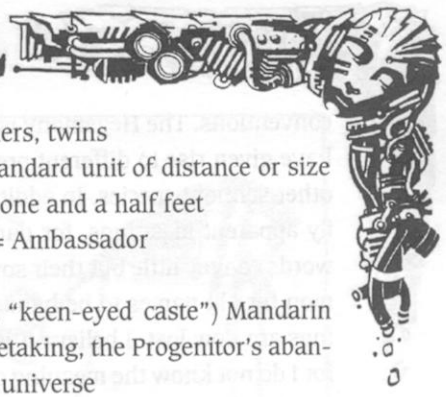
Ofleed (ofleeda) = Purpose, practicality

Oma'tlam (oma'tlama) = (lit. "scrutinizer") A Reader, member of the Study Council, one who delves into lore to aid the interpretation of prophecy

Phu (phur) = Stream, fast-moving current

Qua (quar) = Language, manner of speech

Quarl'nan Kwot = Abrogators (Progenitors)



Quelos = The organic reckoning of time

Querl'ba Jym-fadi = Architects (Progenitors)

Rem'na (rem'nar) = Female

Ri (Rir) = Water (in its liquid form)

Rumu (rumur) = Chorus, unified group

Rumuld = Deep sleep, hibernation

Sab = Honored one (title usually given to foreigners who impress the Vau, such as Benjamin Verden)

Samos = The spiritual reckoning of time

Sham'quar = Soldier Speech

Sham'tso (sham'tsor) = (lit. "protective caste") Soldier

Sham'tswa hanth (sham'tswa hantha) = (lit. "Sheath of protective force") An energy shield

Sho'lan Suilmo (Sho'lan Suilmor) = Mythical etheric entity of the Weft

Sibcha (sibchar) = A badgerlike rodent native to Sab'Wa whose fur is valued for its supple hardiness and complex hue

Skur'skul (skur'skula) = Watchworld

So'lat = "Cro-magnon" Vau

Su'ud (su'uda)= Nourishing food, sustenance

Thalus'tlo (thalus'tlor) = A Vau "decade," equivalent to 27 Urthish years

Tla (tlar) = Light

Tlair'voama = Enforcement Council, the chief military power on the borders of the Hegemony

Tlo (tlor) = A count or reckoning of time. Used mainly as a suffix for words measuring time (*twent'tlo*, *thalus'tlo*, etc.).

Tso (tsor) = Caste

Tswa (tswar) = Force field

Tswa'tilvo (tswa'tilvor) = (lit. "formative field") Pattern, morphogenetic form

Twent'tlo (twent'tlor) = A Vau "year," equivalent to two and a half Urth years.

Twim'la = Youth

Ud'quar = Low Speech

Uo = Cosm, Macrocosm, Heavens

Uo'Amal = Outer space, the void of space

Uo'dwel (uo'dwela) = Starship

Uo'tswa = The Weft

Va'emsh (va'emsha) = Essence

Vajslo Uo'an = The planet known to Known Worlders as Manitou

Va'klo = The Ungoverned

Valu (valur) = Truth

Va'osh (va'osha) = Presence

Va'sheel Tholo = The Reconstruction

Vau = People of Wisdom, the Wisest

Val'umato (val'umator) = (lit. "Veil of authenticity") Auspice

Xed'Fornaal = The Leavetaking

Vupan (vupana) = Partners, twins

Woon (woon'l) = The standard unit of distance or size measurement, equivalent to one and a half feet

Xa'duomi (xa'duomir) = Ambassador

Xa'lo (xa'lor) = Citizen

Xan'tso (xan'tsor) = (lit. "keen-eyed caste") Mandarin

Xed'Fornaal = The Leavetaking, the Progenitor's abandonment of the present-day universe

Xix Ha'glo = The Curse of Unknowing

Yoma (yomar) = Title of Mandarin rank

Yomas'tlo (yomas'tlor) = A Vau "century," equivalent to 243 Urth years

Yurim'zho (yurim'zhor) = (lit. "Many shapes") Nanotech material

Zan'hod (zan'hoda) = Vibrating rocks found naturally only on Hoom, but are now synthesized by Vautech.

Zuil'quar = Worker Speech

Zuil'tso (zuil'tsor) = (lit. "industrious caste") Worker

Names

Vau are traditionally recognized by two names, a clutch name (listed first) and a personal name (listed last). Sometimes, the two are so closely identified that they become one word, separated by an apostrophe at best. Often a Vau's notable deeds or traits are recognized by others with an honoric name, usually listed before the clutch name. Some truly noteworthy Vau may have multiple honorifics. Rank and title is always listed before any other names, identifying to others the Vau's right to speak and lending weight to his words.

For example, my mentor is called by most Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph. His full name is actually Yoma Folar Tsan'tsin Zahl Vord'rumph. However, this is considered too long for casual converse, and is thus often shortened. His rank is listed first (*Yoma*), followed by the honorifics "twilight blossom" (*Folar* — a plant native to Zun'zar that blossoms at twilight, a time associated with new activity) and "formidable counsel" (*Tsan'tsin* — referring to his unrivaled debating ability). Then comes his clutch name, *Zahl*, and his personal name, *Vord'rumph*, "thankful reprieve" (he was his mother's only Mandarin hatchling, born to the last of five clutches).

My true human name is Mutambo Olani, but this is used only by fellows from my homeworld of Quadi. Since I have served the Vau for most of my life, I have answered to the name I was given by my first Mandarin inceptors, Yonn Gwin Ko'anti. *Yonn* is my station; it is the name of a non-Vau ambassador. *Gwin* represents the Protectorate from which I come, that of the Gwindor on Quadi. *Ko'anti* is my personal name, which means "promised treasure" (the meaning of which has never been explained to me).

There are, of course, many exceptions to these naming



conventions. The Hegemony is broad, and different regions have given rise to different predilections, some inspired by other sentient species. In addition, not all names have easily apparent meanings, for names based on old or unused words convey little but their sounds; nonetheless, it is common for old names to be handed down even if their meanings are now lost. I believe it is the same with us *Gwindor*, for I do not know the meaning of my birth name; it is lost on an Urth distant in space and time.

Sounds

Certain sounds uttered by the Vau have little to do with formal words, although their shapes and forms are fairly consistent. These are used for emotional comfort or affirmation. For instance, a friendly greeting is signified by an "oooh" sound. The Vau form this favored noise by turning their flexible lips into "o" shapes. Likewise, assent or agreement involves an "oooh" utterance, usually in conjunction with a sideways head shake.

Anyone hoping to endear themselves to the Vau had best practice as many variations on "oooh" as he can imagine, for the range and subtlety of this all-purpose sound is important to any polite converse. Of course, not all Hegemonic species are equally conversant with it (the Velek cannot make the noise, having no lips, and the Fah Selani hiss it), and it has little affected their fortunes. The Vau certainly understand that not all beings can match their ways. Nonetheless, those that do can gain special favor.

Writing

There are two different forms of script, each with its own set of pictographic glyphs. The *Ban'eni* is the older, more primitive form used by all Vau languages but the High Speech. It is the most pictographic, and its images still convey images of the people, places and things they refer to, even if metaphorically. For instance, the character for *an'vona* (waypath) is a boat on a stream. The meanings of many *Ban'eni* glyphs can thus be deciphered by those familiar with ancient Vau art forms and metaphors, even if they don't recognize the glyphs themselves.

The *Val'eni* is used to render High Speech. It is a post-Rectification script, and is the more complex of the two scripts. It derives from a formal attempt to standardize the many *Ban'eni* variants into a single, easily recognized interstellar set; it has grown in complexity over the years since its invention. Its glyphs are rarely drawn by hand and are best rendered by machine, either with phantasmery pens or oriels.

There is also a third script, but it is never used for writing. It is the *Ha'eni*, composed of the glyph forms delivered by the *Valukesh Ha'eni*. There are thousands of such glyphs, and only the wisest Mandarins can remember them all; reading devices are usually required for interpretation. These glyphs are rarely depicted, and are usually only seen by Mandarins as they are revealed by the Valukesh Ha'eni.

Customs

It is important that I address Vau culture and customs here, for they are elaborate and can be confusing for those untrained in their ways. Many an unlettered *xa'lo* from the far Protectorates has ruined his cause through ignorance of proper forms of address. I would not wish that to be the case with us, when and if we should meet. I hope that what I can tell here will prevent potential errors that would only further the distance between Known Worlders and Vau.

Perhaps the most important concept to understand is that of the *val'umator*, the auspices — the meaning any given item or event has for prophecy. Ever since the Rectification, the study and careful control of auspice has been an obsession with certain Mandarins, especially the *Jaykata U'moti* council. Few major tasks are allowed without careful attention as to how behavior and environment (not simply place, but speech and clothing besides) may affect the tenor of the Cosm.

Many *yomas'tlor* have been spent carefully determining the auspices proper to most common occasions, with the result that these events have become highly ritualized, rich and resonant with the past. Certainly, absolute adherence is unnecessary, and small allowances are made for particular time and place, but overall, the integrity of the ritual must be maintained, lest the *Valukesh Ha'eni's* predictions be for naught. The careful work of generations of Mandarins observing auspice has laid the groundwork for the stability and continuance of the Hegemony. None can fully know the plans of the councils except for those who serve on them, and so it is important to heed their wisdom unquestioningly, trusting that their every thought and deed has long-term purpose toward the fulfillment of prophecy.

For every season of the day there is an associated correspondence, advising which activities are most propitious and which are ill-omened when undertaken in that time. Matters of importance, such as affairs of state or the laying of foundations for new buildings, will commence only during the proper hour, even if it means delaying decisions for a day or more.

I list here as an aside some customs and their auspices, so that Vau culture is better understood. The actual tome of correspondences, the *Luor'eni*, is massive; in print, it is far too thick and heavy to lift, and is updated every *twent'tlo*. However, dataform editions are commonly available in portable oriels (which you call "think machines," I believe), and are consulted often.

I provide here only a short, abbreviated list, including items often known by Protectorate citizens. I leave out, how-

Table of Correspondences

Number	Time of Day	Moon Phase	Element	Color	Sense	Gross Anatomy	Subtle Anatomy
1	Twilight	Glimmer	Air	Green	Sight	Blood	*Ŋalab'yen**
2	Evening	Shimmer	Mud	Blue	Hearing	Bones	Inner sphere
3	Moonrise	Shine	Ether	Orange	Thought	Brain (Crown)	Will
4	Moonshine	Loom	Water	Red	Feeling	Nerves	Instinct
5	Moonset	Sheen	Mist	*Sho'in***	Dreaming	Brain (Root)	*Sh'khar****
6	Night	Sliver	Ice	Black	Touch	Heart	Cultivated seed
7	Penumbra	Fade	Hollow****	Purple	Smell	Lungs	Crucible
8	Dawn	Shadow	Dew	Yellow	Taste	Sex organs	Root seed
9	Day	Lost	Fire	White	Void	Limbs	Outer sphere

* "Custodial dragon."

** "Moon radiance," a color invisible to human eyes and most intruments. It is so named because it was first recognized as a reflection off of Slee'll, Hoom's moon, during the equinoxes.

*** A concept familiar to human psychological sciences, perhaps best described as the idiosyncratic, autonomous part of consciousness that is not identified with one's self. However, the Vau believe this to a real entity, not a mere mental process.

**** Outer space, or "vacuum."

Number	Material	Activity	Art	Quality	Yoga	Protectorate	Starship*
1	*Holimo* (silk)	Travel	Visual arts	Enlightening	Contemplation	Gaz'bula**	Ambassador
2	Wood	Greeting	Music	Equilibrium	Endurance	G'nesh	Invader
3	*Zan'hod*	Council	Writing	Essence	Mastery	Ool Shrr'mu	Gatewarder
4	Plant	Waypathery	Performing	Unity	Compassion	Sobolzitzin	Moonwarder
5	*Yurim'zhor*	Study	Poetry	Chaos	Imagination	Gwindor	Guardian
6	Pearl	Exercise	Sculpture	Presence	Refinement	Mau Ku***	Caravan
7	Glass	Relaxation	Symmetry****	Justice/Truth	Transformation	Fah Selani	Jumpwarder
8	Flesh	Coupling	Cooking	Ecstasy	Liberation	Manshogo	Sentinal
9	Metal	Sleep	Diplomacy	Falsehood	Alertness	Velek Zzum	Bane

* I believe the Known Worlds designations are as follows: explorer, assault lander, dreadnought, cruiser, escort, freighter, jumptug, frigate and destroyer.

** A species from the Hidden Worlds that I know nothing about.

*** Yet another Hidden Worlds species of which I can report nothing.

**** The art of arrangement and emplacement for maximum benefit; includes architecture.

ever, whole others areas of knowledge, such as plants, stones, animals, weapons, martial stances, stars, planets, etc. — all these things would require descriptions of native flora, fauna and starmaps that are unavailable to Known Worlders at present. Perhaps if I am given leave to write another volume in this study, I can devote space to such an endeavor.

Time

To humans, time is perceived as an objective dimension, part of a shared continuum with space. The Vau hold a different conception of time than do humans. To them, time is not a single, linear dimension, measured universally from any point. There are three different dimensions, continuums or ways in which to reckon time: *duilos* (material), *quelos* (organic) and *samos* (spiritual).

Duilos

Material time is that most recognized by humans and other species, for it is measured by the passage or decay of nonorganic entities, such as the ordered turn of a clock or the steady dissolution of nuclear particles. In other words, the *movement* of things. Even if space is perceived as still and motionless, nonetheless all material beings move. Movement through time *is* movement through space, and *vice versa*, so long as the continuum is unbreached. *Duilos* corresponds with flow and movement forward.

For all material beings sharing the same continuum, time is seemingly the same, as most things move at slow speeds, very rarely radically exceeding that of others. And so there is the sense of an objective clock governing all things, even though most civilizations know otherwise. Could we but devise faster-than-light vessels, we would know this truth more readily, so far as it concerns our material continuum.

There are a number of units by which Vau measure or reckon *duilos*:

Twent'tlo— The standard measurement is the *twent'tlo*, a period equivalent to a little more than two and a half Urthish years. This is not based, as some have assumed, on the orbit of Hoom around its star, but instead comes from an older Progenitor reckoning. If the Mandarins know its origin, they do not explain it.

Tha'suala — A *twent'tlo* is often divided into 27 lunar months, based on the orbit of Slee'Il around Hoom. Each such month is equivalent to 36 days, the time it takes Slee'Il to complete a waxing and waning cycle.

Suala — Slee'Il has nine phases, each called a *suala* (see also the *Table of Correspondences*). A *suala* is equal to two "days" (making for 18 nights per waxing or waning cycle).

Fal'qu'il — *Sualar* are divided into two *fal'qu'ila*, "days" or "light-dark cycles," each of which equal 27 *zeq* (25.3 Urthish hours). These "days" are likewise divided into three, the hours of which are now standardized on all Hegemonic worlds: *khemi* (moonlight, nine hours), *sobo-fal* (transition, dusk and dawn, four and a half hours each) and *fal* (sunlight, nine hours).

Zeq — An hour. Divided into 81 *zu'il* (minutes), each made up of 45 *zuk* (seconds).

Thalus'tlo — On the longer scale, nine *twent'tlor* count for the equivalent of a Vau "decade" (actually, 27 Urthish years).

Yomas'tlo — Nine *thalus'tlor* equal a "century" (243 Urthish years).

Ouil'tlo — Nine *yomas'tlor* make up a "millenium" (2187 Urthish years).

Lan'tlo — Nine *ouil'tlor* make up an "age" (19,683 Urthish years).

Quelos

There is also organic time, that measured differently by each cell in each living thing. If *duilos* is movement forward, *quelos* is rhythm or oscillation. This is a concept hard to describe, but an illustration might help: The Vau believe that all among them, every Vau of every caste, lives to exactly the same age — each body clock is set exactly the same. However, each *experiences* this time differently. Thus do some die earlier or later than others, providing an illusion of randomness to allotted lifespans.

Each creature experiences its clock differently, and so each slides slowly or rapidly down the River of Time, as it is so ordained. So do *chou'khwon* beasts age slowly, living thirty *twent'tlor*, while *jrub'war* worms pass their time in but one or two *sualar*.

This is seemingly a strange and impractical way to measure time, according to our culture, inherited from Old Urth. Why not simply measure such things by *duilos* and admit that each creature does not share the same allotted span? Here we must recognize our limited perspective. It was not humans who stood at the feet of the Progenitors and learned from them their ways. Who are we to believe one thing, when the Forgers of the Cosm believed another? No, we must accept as true the idea that, at some level of reality, beings are uniform, and that only in our limited continuum are they experienced as otherwise.

However, it need not concern us much, for the concept of *quelos* is little used for practical purposes even by the Vau themselves, although it is known in their poetry and spiritual philosophy.

Samos

And what of the final continuum, the spiritual? It is the most complex, and even Mandarins argue over its subtle measurements, for it is subjective in the extreme to our

senses. (Ah, the senses — another conundrum. Please read below for an explanation of mental faculties as forms of sensory awareness.) If *duilos* is movement, and *quelos* resonance, then *samos* is a spiral whirlpool that combines both concepts — movement and return.

I believe that even we humans, among the most crude of intellects, have some perception that time — when seen through a lens of emotion — is measured differently depending on the emotion experienced. Indeed, some events seem to last an eternity, while others are all too brief. Do not journeys away from home make the days seem longer and more full than even the most productive time by one's own hearth? So it is with *samos*, measured by the Vau with different means than *duilos*.

A special form of *samos* is recognized by the Vau, and is called *sa'tlo*, or "the eternal ecstatic moment." It is ambiguous, both instantaneous and infinite, and dangerous to weak minds, for it can shatter egos and identities, submerging them in deep waters and whirlpools. Some Mandarins believe it represents a peek outside of all time, or perhaps the perfect ocean stillness that ever eludes the rushing stream. For this reason, it is equated with matters of the spirit, with dreams and visions, and with admittance through the Wards.

Ecstatic time is not to be trusted, and yet it is the truest of all times, the one continuum that all share. Here we glimpse Eternity, but only for a fleeting moment. Here the briefest of touches lingers forever. Contrasts, opposites, polarities — all are revealed as but one phenomenon existing only now and yet forever and ever. This is the *Uo'Amal*, the Ocean of Time — vast, deep, broad and with endless horizon, receiving all tributaries and offering its misty jewels upwards into the heavens.

There are a number of methods by which sentient beings can directly experience *sa'tlo* time — ways in which one's *ha'phagh*, the Unlidded Eye, may be opened. The safest is through the many alchemical poppies devised by the Vau, administered only with permission but guaranteed not to destroy one's mind. With these concoctions, all forms of time may be known. Indeed, it is said that the poppy gave the Mandarins their time awareness and allowed them perception into a mystery that vexes all others.

Religion and the Sciences

There is little division between the concepts of religion and science for the Vau. They learned their first scientific truths from the lips of gods, beings so mighty and wise that we can but tremble when imagining what they were like to actually walk with and talk to.

After the Leavetaking, the Vau forgot much of what they had learned, but they retained inklings. These vague recollections and yearnings spurred many religious philosophies, honed over the many *yomas'tlor* since that time. These philosophies, based largely around reclamation of the Ancients' gifts, encouraged scientific inquiry not only into realms material, but the more subtle realms of invisible energy. The Vau's mastery of energy technology is awe-inspiring, for energy is ever mysterious to those who cannot readily perceive it or understand its invisible workings.

To even the greatest human scientists of the fallen Republic, the ultimate mysteries of energy remained an enigma. Surely they could manipulate various fields and effects, but they rarely understood energy enough to match the great technology used by the Vau. Indeed, what they did know was invariably gleaned by studying Vau technology. If only they had studied from the lips of the masters themselves!

Energy envelops the lives of the Vau and all the citizens of the Protectorates. It is the very Essence of life, and its web orders the grosser patterns of matter and the more subtle patterns of mind. The Vau envision a plethora of fields that surround us at all times, of which we are but parts. These fields determine the Patterns of our bodies and the inclinations of our minds. Each field has its own unique resonance by which it comes into harmony or conflict with others, or effects them not at all, as if it were of another dimension or continuum entirely. This is what the Vau usually mean when discussing dimensions — the different oscillations of the many fields that make up the Cosm. Things suspended in fields at variance with others might not even realize these other fields exist, so little do they impinge upon one another. Or the resonance might be so subtle as to go unnoticed by those entities blind to such fine sensation.

Everything in the universe, from tiny atoms to sentient beings to infinite galaxies, is joined together by these fields, no matter how far apart they appear in space or time. Thus, the Vau deeply concern themselves with holism — the study of the wholes of which particular parts are members. Human science — even Republican science — was, at its foundation, concerned with parts, especially fundamental or elementary parts. However, no matter how deeply scientists looked into gross matter, they always found deeper levels — smaller and smaller particles.

The Vau instead focus chiefly on wholes, seeking to discover the principles that unite and join things, not what differentiates them. And here is where the study of energy and vast fields seems to us more like religion, for they are concerned not only with material bindings, but mental besides. To best understand this, it is propitious to introduce the Vau's concept of the senses.

The Nine Senses

Humans recognize five senses, each associated with bodily organs: sight (eyes), sound (ears), smell (nose), touch (skin) and taste (tongue). It is this reductionist tendency to associate a sense function with an organ that prevents humans from recognizing that there are three additional, more subtle, or mental, senses — emotion, intellect and dream — and a final sense: void, or the lack of all senses (to the Vau, absence is as real as Presence).

Humans believe the mental senses are actually governed by the *kyari*, the Will, mistaking any thought process for enlightened mentality. The Vau believe that only through the Will (honed through the various yogas) do emotions and thoughts become free or active; otherwise, they are passive, received like all other phenomena.

There are indeed organs associated with these mental senses, but they are broader and more complex: the nervous system for the emotions, the crown (or fore) brain for the intellect and the root (or stem) brain for dreams. The Will and its attendant functions have no bodily organ, being purely tied to the subtle organs and etheric veins.

Unless wholly volitional (activated by Will), mental faculties are not separate from the senses but are mere passive receivers of subtle phenomena. Only the enlightened are truly mental; all others are as animals, acting on instinct from sensory input.

It can be stated thusly: Certain feelings and thoughts come not from willful (or simply unconscious) intent, instead arising on their own not in the mind, but from outside phenomena — from the Patterns of the ether. They are thus more rightly sensed or perceived than felt or thought.

You see, to the Vau, the majority of beings are animals, even those we term sentient. To be fully sentient, however, requires an awakened Will. Even the Soldiers and Workers cannot claim this at all times. Only the Mandarins have succeeded in being fully aware at all times and in all times. (Other species may produce exceptional beings, of course, and these are most curious to the Vau — proof of a species' possibilities and potential value. I believe that the human Prophet was such a figure to the Vau, a being considered even by the Mandarins to be fully aware in all continuums.)

And where, you surely ask, do these emotions and thoughts reside "out there," as phenomena waiting to be perceived? In the subtle realm, that continuum invisible to any senses but those touched by the Will, unless it be through a device engineered with Will to allow measurement and use thereof — and only the Vau, but for the Progenitors, have achieved such technology and understanding of not only the invisible material currents but the subtle ones besides.

Those who cannot work through Will are slaves to the *Uo'tswa*, the Weft.

Pattern

Energy is never neutral, for it is suffused with information or data — in a similar way, perhaps, to which a DNA molecule is said to hold information. An entity in resonance with an energy field partakes of its data. The Vau recognize many types of fields, each differentiated by varying resonance scales. Among them are the formative fields, those that hold Patterns. An entity oscillating with such a field is patterned by it. It is this field that determines his material and even mental shape; DNA simply acts as a material transmitter for this field data. (Matter itself is simply sluggish energy, oscillating on a lower scale than pure energy.) An entity's Pattern is thus defined as the expression of data from the many fields with which it resonates. This can be expressed in matter as shape and form, and in mind as character and instinct.

In such a way is the universe still alive with history, for all the events of the past float invisibly all around us. Nothing — no idea or action — is ever truly gone from the Cosm, for it is stored forever in the data of immortal fields. If no entity comes into resonance with such a field, its information only seems lost.

The Vau are engaged in the reclamation of the Progenitors' past through increasing resonance with it. This is a long and arduous task, for the *Xix Ha'glo* was not merely a wiping of the minds of all beings who had seen them — it was a concealing of the fields that held the very memory of their work and existence. Hence, it almost seemed that they had never been. But the Mandarins have clues, and slowly but with success, they are uncovering the secrets.

Thus also is proven the importance of ritual — to reenact the past is to resonate with it. As the enactment becomes more perfect, so too is the resonance deepened. The glyphs of the *Valukesh Ha'eni* are symbols for these lost fields, and the auspices are the key to proper enaction, so that the present universe may be in accord with the past universe — the River of Time flows backward.

But the auspices are not only keys to reclamation, they are wards against disaster. Without the wise hand of the Architects, the Cosm becomes increasingly ungoverned, and

chaos grows. The constant enactment of auspicious deeds and thoughts reinforces the universal Pattern, strengthening their Truths. Likewise, inauspicious deeds and thoughts empower evil and chaos and introduces ungoverned novelty, which threatens to subvert the prophecies of the *Valukesh Ha'eni* into unpredictable outcomes.

The Weft, the greatest work of the Progenitors, was etheric machinery by which the Pattern of the Cosm could be governed. It is now without governance. For many an *ouil'tlor*, it continued to order the universe according to ancient plan. But its mechanism now runs down, for it has been too long unattended — as evidenced by the waning phases of the stars. And so the work of the Vau and the desperation of their endeavor is revealed: Only by adherence to Prophecy can they maintain tenuous Order in the universe. Should they fail, everyone will suffer the entry of chaos into the Cosm.

Here we perceive the heart of Vau morality: All things may be judged in the context of being auspicious or inauspicious toward the order of the universe. This is not merely a simple rendering of good and evil, for some things that appear evil may be good for the universe at large, just as the death of a beast in the woods provides sustenance for other forms of life.

Presence, Essense and Will

Each entity has a *va'osh*, a Presence, the sum quality of its material and spiritual being. Some beings' Presences are more dull or refined than others. Those with highly refined Presences are of more note than others; these beings are hard to ignore, for their power exudes from them. Presence is projected outward toward others; it is the wordless qualities we respond to in others. The Vau are adept in judging the character of others by their Presence alone, whereas we often require actions or behavior by which to judge.

Not all entities have *va'emsh*, or Essence, a part of their spiritual beings that oscillates with the most subtle fields of the Cosm. We might call this the "soul." Some creatures have refined or pure Essence, while others' is debased or twisted – harmful to the Cosm.

The Will is that part of a being which is independant of the Weft, ungoverned by its whims. Few sentients ever attain it, although it is said that every being has its potential. Many *twent'tlor* of cultivation in the yogas is required to fully harness one's Will.

Superior Entities

The Vau, for all their power and sovereignty, are a humble species. They recognize that they are not the most refined beings in the Cosm. Indeed, they believe that other, more subtle and immaterial beings lay claim to that honor. Some aver that the Essences of certain Progenitors still remain in this Cosm, guiding lesser sentients to understanding — or doom.

Even the Vau pray. When they do so, which is rare, they direct their meditations to the *Sho'lan Suilmor*, bodiless beings of immense wisdom and far-reaching power over the operations of the Cosm. However, to pray to such a being is to bring its eye upon you. These entities have goals and works of their own, and woe be it to any sentient who becomes their tool. Although the universe may benefit in the end, the individual surely shall not, for great are the trials demanded by them. The *Sho'lan Suilmor* do not manifest in the Cosm — the favor or wrath of these entities never declares itself except through good or ill luck alone.

There are those among the councils who believe that the *Sho'lan Suilmor* are no more, that they abandoned the universe during the Leavetaking, and that their continued recognition is but an atavistic memory of ancient Hoom mythology, when Vau worshipped the moon goddess and her many silver and green rivers. They counsel that the Vau should waste no further thought on them, but should instead choose how they themselves will best assume their tasks. These godless ones now hold the most power, but it is nonetheless a matter of debate and contention.

Conclusions

I could say so much more. Tomes, in fact. The Vau are a never-ending study. What I have said here is but the barest of lore, and I had to do much injustice to certain matters to make them understandable. To state things of a spiritual nature so bluntly is to rob them of the mysterious depth they so rightly claim. Mere words like Essence and Will do nothing to convey the deep meaning of these concepts as it concerns every aspect of Vau philosophy and culture. And it is impossible to answer the question as to how much of this philosophy is the Vau's, and how much is the legacy of their masters, the Architects.

I move on. It is now time to address the matter of the Hegemony, its Protectorates and their species, and also the topic of technology — the means by which the Vau maintain the Hegemony against the tide of history.



Outer Sphere: The Hegemony

The harmonious accord of all beings is required for the proper application of Prophecy. Yet there is paradox in this, for the flux of glyphs depends on conditions that are free enough to flow, but the governance of good auspice requires control of conditions. Only one truly wise may navigate this foaming course and achieve balance.

— Va'halnumu Swo'duma Hilmsur Symin'zar, *Oltab'ymin'zur* ("The Yogas of Governance"; trans. by Yonn Gwin Ko'anti

The Hegemony

Here I shall attempt to explain the working of the Hegemony, but must do so in only the coarsest manner — how else to convey the whole of a government that spans over 60 stars? The task is enormous, and I can attempt it only by consoling myself that only the barest sketch can seep through my muddied words.

The Hegemony consists of 60 inhabited star systems, most of which hold planets colonized by the Vau but which now often include alien inhabitants from the Protectorates. The Protectorates are star territories, each consisting of a solar system (or more, in some cases) ruled by an alien species in accordance with Vau interstellar law. Besides Protectorates, there are a number of Watchworlds, planets populated chiefly by an alien species that has not earned Protectorate status as yet (such as Glaan, homeworld of the Lun'grar). More worlds are known, but have yet to be fully cataloged and colonised, awaiting proper auspice.

Planets

I would like to present a map here, but my yoma forbids it. He says that Known Worlders must come to know the Hegemony by its Presence, not an abstract depiction of the *el'zweldar* (jumpweb). I believe he considers it a military secret, and so of course I must honor his request. I can, at least, explain something of the major worlds, and do so below.

Terraforming is extremely rare, performed only when auspice allows (which takes many long *twent'tlor* to determine). Even then, it is performed as lightly as possible, to retain as much of the world's natural state as can be. While Vau technology is supreme over that of the Known Worlds in many areas, even Yoma Zahl is quick to pay compliment to humanity for its amazing works of world sculpting. He does believe that many of your worlds were made in haste with no consideration for auspice, but is greatly impressed with the technology that allowed it, which exceeds the Vau's own devisings. He speaks of one Doramos with deep respect, but tells me that this master's methods are lost to the Known Worlds. A true shame, for perhaps here humans would have something to provide the Vau that they do not already have.

Vau living on worlds unfavorable to their anatomy use sheaths to protect them and allow them to breathe, erecting sealed environments in which to live. It is most always better to adapt to a planet's environment than to adapt it for your own uses. If it were meant to be sculpted, then the Architects would already have done so. We dare not interfere with the plan.

As for other features, it is the case that the greatest cities are still built in the midst of rivers or lakes (and rarely, oceans), sprouting vast networks of roads across the land from river city to river city. Workers and Soldiers can be found on inland towns and villages, but Mandarins almost never live away from rivers. (A few hermits are known to live in mountains, but they are either mad or wise beyond anyone's ken.)

Hoom: The homeworld of the Vau, few planets are so stunning as Hoom. I am favored to have visited it once with my yoma, as he returned to the birthplace of his clutch parents. With the aid of a sheath, I witnessed the *sho'in* myself, the moon radiance that resides on a spectrum invisible to human vision. There are truly marvels in the universe denied us by our senses, but we can earn glimpses of them through the ingenuity of science or the yogas of the subtle ethers.

Hoom is a steamy world, so wet that it seems one is ever walking in mist, and yet it is comfortable, not muggy as on other humid worlds. The Vau say this is due to the *clo'maax*, the gentle coolness exuded by the thousands of rivers and streams. Indeed, everywhere one gazes there is water, in glistening threads across the marshy plains or the calm seas between landmasses. The land is dry only in the few highland areas, near to the mountain chains. Otherwise, it is muddy, a vast swamp leading to the riverbanks.

A few old fortresses and villages still stand from the days before the Progenitors, but they are unused and remain only as historical monuments. The other buildings are mainly *yurim'zho* collapsible edifices, capable of changing shape and size — and location — to their owners' specifications (all within rule of auspice, of course).

The flora and fauna is magnificently varied. While the megafauna of old is no more, smaller creatures still climb and crawl throughout the tree roots and mud holes. Ferns in a hundred varieties can be found even in small regions, huddling under towering *zo'laaks*, wide and ancient trees similar to the yews of Old Urth, but gargantuan.

The smells are strange and unfamiliar, except for the mildly scented mists and the rot of underbrush. But these sensations are overpowered by the blossoming nectars of the many vines and water lotuses. Their perfumes are used throughout the Hegemony by Vau for a variety of social occasions.

Hoom is the cultural capital of the Vau, mainly in the form of traditional ways. Other worlds sport younger fashions, but the ways of Hoom remain and are copied by all Vau to some degree on all other worlds of the Hegemony.

Zyuil'Thala: The political capital of the Hegemony, where resides the First Council. Here also are the greatest institutes of study, and advanced technological breakthroughs are birthed here more than on any other world. No sentient can witness the amazing architectural marvels of Zamin'shree, the chief city, without some expression of awe. Slender buildings soar into the heavens — some nearly reaching orbit — connected to one another by vast webs of crossways and paths, each supported by force fields to strengthen them and prevent walkers from plunging. Floating carriages swing to and fro on the breeze, making their leisurely way toward destinations — no one hurries on Zyuil'Thala, for rare is the emergency requiring haste.

At night, windborn lights travel over thoroughfares, lighting the public paths but keeping other ways dark, so as not to blot out the stars and moon. It is in these shadowed places, still within sight of light, that Zamin'shree earns its forbidden name: "City of Passions," for many a tryst is accomplished in the gardens, fountains or streams of the numerous parks.

Everything of supreme interest and merit in the Hegemony is witnessed or known by council members on Zyuil'Thala. It is both Home to Hospitality and the Source of Secrets.

Unshalla: A quiet world, Unshalla is home to the primary *Oma'tlama*, the Readers who study ancient lore, including Progenitor relics. For this reason, residency here or even visits are restricted by the Mandarins. It is one of the few Hegemony worlds with such travel restrictions, except for the Watchworlds and Protectorates. Rumors say that many items of great power are gathered here, waiting their use in the coming War in the Heavens.

Shaduveen: This world is simply called "Vau" by Known Worlders, and it is my home. Here is where Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph directs all contact with denizens of human space on the frontier worlds and oversees the protection of the borders. It is a beautiful world, not unlike Hoom in some respects, although more mild. Nonetheless, the flora exudes a peculiar odor that has ill effects on humans, and so we must wear sheaths to cleanse our breathing. The smell can be withstood for a while, but will eventually cause drowsiness that can lead to a coma, although rarely death.

Vril-Ya: The main diplomatic world, where Vau ambassadors who serve under Yoma Zahl maintain tentative contact with human representatives. Only Vau are allowed to travel here, for even *Gwindor* are not allowed to be seen by Known Worlders yet.

Vajslo Uo'an: Known as Manitou to Known Worlders, this is a strange world. It is not under the direct control of Yoma Zahl — a fact that displeases him — but is instead governed by a chapter of the *Jaykata U'moti*. The planet's mix of outlaw humanity is a means by which the Mandarins can get close access to Known Worlders, and study them with a number of methods. I believe the residents here are pawns, victims of the council's experiments with humans to witness their effects on prophecy. Yoma Zahl has petitioned for more access to their secrets, but has been denied repeatedly.

Apshai: The homeworld of the G'nesh is practically considered a part of the Known Worlds. I say more about it below, where I speak of the G'nesh Protectorate.

Governance

The capital world, where the First Council meets in times of weighty decision, is Zyuil'Thala, the planet from which Hoa'Tal Gaamzi began the Hegemony. Also important as a cultural capital is Hoom, homeworld of the Vau.

Each planet is governed by a *daun*, or planetary council, each of which answers to the First Council on Zyuil'Thala. However, there are a number of other councils that have authority on certain matters specific to their purview, and these have interstellar authority to intervene locally when necessary. For example, in matters concerning the discovery or unearthing of Progenitor relics, the Dau'kedalir have sway. There are also any number of local councils with governance over local matters.

Everything of importance is decided by a council, especially since the Rectification, for all councils consider auspice as it concerns their subjects. Hence, a council may convene to judge the guilt or innocence of an accused criminal, or the worthiness of one Vau's claim over another's in argument. Councils decide when new buildings are to be erected, and what sort of materials and designs are allowed (although Workers are still given much leeway). Only Mandarins may serve on a council, although Soldiers and Workers may perform roles as advisor to a councilor.

Councils have nine leaders, called *yomar*. Unlike with humans or Manshogo, Vau are rarely led by single individuals. Only great moments in history call for such sole leadership. Instead, a consensus must be reached by nine leaders for any decision to be enacted.

The *yomar* rarely choose the subject matter of a council meeting, instead hearing the thoughts of the *hualth'ama*, the council members. Their number depends on the size of the council, which itself depends on its importance and interstellar reach — local councils rarely have more than 27 members, including *yomar*, but interstellar councils can have as many as 81.

Councilors rarely work alone, for each is often aided by a *kwal'pholo*, a younger or less-achieved Mandarin who might one day earn status as a full member. The *kwal'pholor* research matters for the councilors and play debating games with them to hone their ability to sway the *yomar*.

Still, the *kwal'pholor* rarely provide the footwork necessary for investigations; they instead call upon the *dwelphut*, Mandarins who serve as messengers and inspectors, ready to travel where necessary. They in turn often call upon Mandarins who serve upon no council (usually the young or retired) for aid in the field.

The edict of a council is law. It must be obeyed by all Vau in its purview (locals need follow local council laws, but not edicts from other localities). Interstellar council law also applies to citizens of the Protectorates. This is enforced by martial councils, those with the specific task of monitoring compliance with laws or auspice.

Occasionally, a council will come together to abolish an old edict, if it is believed no longer necessary or is harmful to current auspice. However, this is rarely done. There are many thousands of edicts in effect on many worlds, and this has caused the creation of a new waypath for Workers: the lawkeeper, whose task is to chronicle all existing edicts so that citizens can know them.

There are a number of punishments for those who transgress against a council edict, depending on the edict and the

Councils

I list here some influential councils, although I can certainly not include all of them.

Dau'kedalir (Procurement Council): This council has sway over the recovery of Progenitor relics and alien technology, whether Lun'grar nerve-screamers or human terraforming nodes.

Dau'rum'phal Scobit-sa'un (Council of Worthies): The chief judge of human affairs on Quadi or in the Known Worlds. As such, they host a large number of highly trained diplomats and ambassadors and work closely with the Jaykata U'moti. My own yoma is a member of this council, and a very influential one indeed.

Im Dau'lansar (First Council): The highest council in all the Hegemony, the Im Dau'lansar decide the fate of many worlds. Only it can award Protectorate status to a world or admit a new world into the Hegemony as a Watchworld or Vau colony. Their edicts have sway over all other councils, even the Jaykata U'moti.

Jaykata U'moti (Prophecy Council): Currently the most influential council — for the First Council rarely contravenes its edicts — its members are among the wisest and most cunning of all Mandarins, for they peruse the glyphs, and render verdicts on their fluctuations. They are the chief authority on auspice, and rulings from this council can launch wars or seal treaties — or hide new discoveries.

Oma'tlama (Study Council): A council of scholars, the Readers study Progenitor relics seeking deeper knowledge of their makers and their intent. They work closely with the Procurers, who bring them their subjects, and the Jaykata U'moti, who interpret glyphs in light of what the Readers surmise.

Tla'ir Voama (Enforcement Council): A martial council that has specific purview over foreign threats — namely, the Known Worlds and the Glo'maasa. They maintain the borders, and also guard the more dangerous Watchworlds, such as Glaan.

severity of its transgression. Those crimes that risk lives or dire prophecy are the worst, sometimes meriting death. Otherwise, imprisonment or enforced work is the standard rule. Even here, though, criminals who prove themselves repentant and newly observant of auspice may receive a shortened sentence.

I should mention here an important concept: Hegemony law applies to all beings, regardless of actual membership in the Hegemony. In other words, Known Worlders are also bound by these edicts when they enter Hegemony space. If the Vau were so inclined, they could legally (by their standards) enforce the edicts on Known Worlds planets, but choose not to do so.

I realize that this may seem presumptuous, but understand this: The auspices are true throughout the Cosm; they recognize no boundaries of people or place. For the Vau to maintain an ordered universe against chaos, they must beware violations on all worlds. That they have yet to do so in human space either speaks well for the Vau's respect for freedom or reflects humanity's inability to do great harm. Of course, there is another option: the Vau believe that enforcement in human space will only further harm auspice, and so they abide their time for now.

Citizenship and Economy

The greatest honor a non-Vau can achieve within the Hegemony is citizenship. Luckily, the Vau are generous with it and withhold it only from those who cannot prove their worth. Most of the denizens of the Protectorates are also considered citizens, and it is a birthright given to all the Vau, although it can be revoked for misbehavior.

Citizens have free travel throughout the Hegemony, except to the Protectorates and Watchworlds, which they must gain permission to visit. They may also request one free meal per day at any public food-service establishment, but must pay for any other meals or goods with earned money. Comfortable survival is always ensured, and each citizen is granted a basic sheath to protect them from temperature extremes and monitor their vital functions.

If a citizen cannot procure his own domicile, one is provided him in any of the public pavilions. While the room may be small, it is private, although group rooms are shared with other visitors.

If he is willing to work, a citizen is provided a job utilizing one of his skills, for which he is paid a decent wage. Those with desirable skills may choose their jobs. Otherwise, an applicant may be forced to relocate to another world where his skills are needed. As much as possible, the Vau try to keep citizens on their homeworlds, unless they request otherwise.

I certainly cannot list all the manner of labor engaged in here, but there is much to do, for the Vau do not favor mechanical factories, preferring their crafts and goods be made by hand whenever possible, although advanced tools are certainly used for tasks.

Money is paid in the form of *kul'aka*, a universal credit system. The Lybanzi'dau, the Values Council, determines the value at which certain goods and services are to be credited, although local Values Councils can change the value somewhat based on local supply and demand. The ideal, however, is to maintain a single pricing structure for the entire Hegemony.

A *kul'ak* is available in three formats: a scroll (painted paper, very hard to counterfeit), a block (a premanufactured carving representing a set amount, made with *yurim'zho* techniques available only to the Values Councils), and a dataform (a think machine code used for distant exchanges).

In some places, barter for handmade crafts or arts takes place, but this is unfavorable to the Mandarins, for it skirts possible auspice needs. On those worlds bordering the Known Worlds, brisk barter takes place with humans, although trading anything of military value carries the risk of Mandarin punishment (nonetheless, it happens).

The Protectorates

Vau-populated worlds are the most prosperous and redolent in high-technology luxuries. Outside of them, there are the Protectorates, worlds ruled with a degree of sovereignty by their original alien natives. However, each Protectorate must still recognize interstellar Hegemony law and bow to any Vau edict governed by it. In addition, the locals must maintain a certain respect for auspice (although it is looser than on Vau worlds), and answer to a local Jaykata U'moti contingent. Failure to heed them may result in sanctions from the First Council, or even the revocation of Protectorate status. This, however, has never happened, although the Manshogo and Sobolzitzin have pressed the issue many times.

Gwindor

I have already said much about the history of humankind within the Hegemony, and cannot properly address more here, for the topic is long and detailed. I note little physical difference between the Gwindor and Known Worlds humans. Not enough time has passed between our sundering to greatly differentiate our Patterns. As for ancestry, I have told of the chief emigrants to Qaudi and whence they arose on Old Urth. Some have commented that, were our world to have stayed in human space, many of its people would have claimed royal legacy, for even my own ancestors were from a line of kings in the Africa of long ago. But we had no need for such

titles under the Vau.

I will simply add here that we are quite learned, gaining much from not only the Vau but our own archives, brought to us by Secular Monks on the very first colony ship. Thus, my lore of Old Urth is quite good, supplemented by my special access as *xa'duomi* to the Known Worlds lore of the Second Republic.

I would say more, but a whole volume is really required. Besides, Yoma Zahl questions my desire to tell all I can here, feeling that it might engender mistrust and jealousy rather than understanding. He gives no reason for this belief, but I must trust him, and so move on to other topics, with but the barest mention of my homeworld.

Planet

Quadi: A most beautiful place, it is said to be much like Old Urth in its make and orbit, requiring no terraforming to make it so. I am told that a chief difference is the hue of its moon, Twani, which is green rather than silver. Much of our animal life is also different, for there was little time to import natives from Urth, but what we have are said to be comparable analogs, and so we use the same Urthish words for many of them. Some day, one of you who reads this will come to Quadi and be glad for its familiarity in a star empire otherwise strange and unusual.

G'nesh

A quiet race of gardeners, the insectlike G'nesh seek little more in life than aesthetic harmony. Indeed, the Vau's keen sense of how the aesthetics of balance and harmony are applied to auspice were sharpened by contact with the G'nesh.

Physiology

The G'nesh have many races, each of which has its own distinct appearance and traits. Some may resemble large spiders, while others appear related to beetles or ants. However, all have certain commonalities: The eyes are always the same (there are four of them, and they are always black), and they each bear the distinctive "safety crest," a mark on their backs that resembles to the Vau the Glyph of Reprieve. Beyond these two notable similarities, the G'nesh could almost be considered many species rather than one.

All varieties possess remarkable fine manipulation abilities with their hands, although these may be shaped quite differently from race to race. Renowned as gardeners, they use not only tools (shears, scythes, ropes, etc.) to handle plants, but teeth besides, for their art of plant shaping is also their culinary delight.

Other traits vary with race: the spider kind (*Shl'urb Fola*) can spin webs, weaving from them garments desired by Mandarins across the Hegemony (which is why they are rarely found in the Known Worlds); the beetle kind (*Wyb'mova*)



can fly, creating elaborate sculptures in the upper reaches of trees; and the ant kind (*Ula'gaba*) are seemingly tireless.

History & Culture

Not all G'nesh consider themselves gardeners by profession, although they all practice the art when eating. They had risen from a somewhat violent past to recognize the similarities in their kinds and had united into a planetwide union by the time the Vau arrived. Their technology had progressed quite well, matching those of my ancestors when they arrived on Quadi, save for space travel, which they yet lacked.

The complex cultures of these diverse races mixed well; instead of argument and conflict, a vast new art movement was created, as each appreciated what concepts and ideas could be gleaned from others. It seemed that each G'nesh jumped headily into new discoveries in visual art and music, expressing their hopes and fears in artworks rather than bloodshed. (I suppose, properly speaking, it would be "ichorshed" in the G'nesh's case, for they have no blood as such in their veins, only a nourishing lubricant.)

However, they did still possessed their powerful weapons (odd biotechnology devices, such as guns that fire wasps) and used them to the full against the Vau, until their leaders recognized that the Mandarins sought a harmonious accord with them. Whichever G'nesh it was who cannily understood the concept of auspice is now unknown, his name lost to history, but his reward was the Vau's recognition of the G'nesh's ability to govern themselves.

As the Vau's presence grew more common, the G'nesh eagerly sought word of Vau culture, so that they could incorporate its concepts into their art. Robbed of any need to protect themselves militarily (for the Vau assumed that task), they threw all their energies further into their artworks.

The coming of humans to their world energized them yet again, although I do not believe Known Worlders realize this as yet, for they are kept apart from the G'nesh by order of the Vau. But the G'nesh artisans now adopt Known Worlds images, sounds and themes into their works. Perhaps soon they will be allowed to give them to those who orginally sparked such creativity.

Planet

Apshai: The G'nesh live mainly on one large continent in the southern hemisphere, while other landmasses are allowed to human settlers from the Known Worlds. Other G'nesh live underwater, but I am unfamiliar with their kind, and so do not mention them here. The plantlife on Apshai is rich and abundant but rarely deadly. Beautiful shrubs are most prominent — the chief vehicle of garden art — but a startling variety of fruit trees also grow here, providing tastes unique in all the worlds.

Ool Shrr'mu

Considered to be the oldest and most profound entities in existence, the Ool Shrr'mu are revered by the Vau. They are rarely encountered, for their worlds are off-limits to most travelers, but contact with one invariably leaves a sentient feeling awed and extremely young — we all are but children next to the Ool.

Physiology

An Ool's body consists of a circular, amoebic mass varying in size based on age, from a three-*woon'l* radius on average to 10 *woon'l* for the oldest encountered. Ool live in liquids or gases, possessing limited mobility on land, where they risk drying out and perishing. They have been known to live and even thrive in water, methane, nitrogen and *per'sliven* (I am unsure how to translate this form of gas, for I can find no equivalent in our Urthish records and I cannot here describe our methods of chemical analysis).

They have no eyes, ears or mouth, and yet they can see, hear and speak through the power of their minds. It is rumored by malcontents that one reason the Vau removed themselves from common contact is not out of reverence, but from fear — fear that their every plot and plan could be read by the Ool. I scoff at such paranoia.

No one has yet conducted a study of their bodies, and it is not known how they ingest nutrients or procreate, although they seem to birth new Ool only once in a very long while.

History & Culture

Almost nothing is known of the Ool's history except what little they have divulged to the Vau. They are truly ancient, achieving sentience before the Progenitors wrought an empire among the stars, and were held sacred by the later members of those high races. They have hinted that their immense intelligence and wisdom comes not from themselves, however, but was imprinted on them by contact with the Progenitor races — their natural, non-sentient telepathy was transformed by contact with those high intelligences. Later Progenitors, seeking the wisdom of their ancestors, could find it alive in the Ool.

They claim to know little of the War in Heaven, however, for their kind does not travel the stars on its own, instead relying only upon contact with other sentients. They could read deep into the minds of the Vau, however, and glean from them ancestral images hidden by the *Xix Ha'glo*, and thus restored forgotten lore to the Mandarins.

Their intelligence is confusing, though, and conversation comes in images and sounds, rarely in words. Only over time can meaning develop, but few can rarely devote long time to contact with the Ool, who often refuse long discourse with unworthy supplicants.

Mandarins seeking Ool interpretation of *Valukesh Ha'eni* lore often come away with detailed answers, or with even more confusing questions. It is said that to involve the Ool in prophecy is to ask the timeless to interpret what they cannot discern, for past, present and future flow as one for the Ool, and one is likely to get insight on a problem from long ago or one that has not yet occurred instead of current matters.

Planets

Shelek'Thai: The world upon which they were first discovered and on which they seem the most populous (nearly 300 known individuals, and more suspected), the Ool have hinted that this was not their homeworld, that that place is now lost to known jumproutes. Still, the place seems quite suited for them, for its seas are deep and dark, and are said to hold Progenitor mysteries which the Ool guard against trespass (leading interlopers away through unconscious telepathic suggestion).

The mountains and craggy rocks that thrust up from the seas are home to an array of birds and a few Vau Mandarins allowed to live like hermits along the shores, hoping for contact with the Ool.

Slaarn: A gas giant sharing its system with a thinly atmosphered world (Flu'El, hosting a Vau colony), Slaarn hides an unknown number of Ool. The oldest known individual (believed to be over three *yomas'tlor* old) resides here, but never in the same place, and so can be found only by those he chooses to contact. Needless to say, perhaps, the atmosphere is unbearable for most air dwellers, and sheaths must be used.

Oh'ba: A small moon orbiting a lush jungle world inhabited by Vau colonists (U'lukh), its noxious liquids are unbreathable even by the Velek. Only two dozen Ool are known to live here, and all of them seem young.

Velek Zzum

The Velek Zzum are a species of crustaceans who achieved a goodly technology before their encounter with Vau emissaries. They now perform roles as deep-space belters and hazardous environment workers on many worlds.

Physiology

Velek are covered in thick carapaces. Their bodies are wide and circular and they stand about five *woon'l* tall on eight legs (four to either side). Two clawed arms allow them to manipulate their environment quite well; besides two mighty pincers that can behead a human with a casual clack, two subpincers (placed radially around the large pincers) allow for fine manipulation. For an image, imagine a four-petaled flower with unevenly sized petals.

Their heads are barely mobile, buried in their neck carapaces, but their eyes are stalked and can extend or withdraw into and from their fleshy heads. Their mouths are below the head, mere apertures used to suck in sea debris. Their digestive systems filter an amazing amount of junk, dumping waste from a rather large aperture in the rear (which opens only as needed).

There is only one gender, but it requires breeding partners to produce a viable egg. Interestingly, the sex organ is in the face. With no sense of smell, a Velek's nose is a fleshy stalks that explores and feels out a partner's stalk, exchanging egg material through an orifice on the end. Any Velek can produce an egg, but it requires material from a partner to do so.

Velek have no speech ability, but instead communicate by clacking their claws or drumming their legs onto another's shell. Vau devices can translate the subvocal clicking of their vestigial throats (surgically enhanced in those who act as emissaries to the Vau), and can likewise translate a number of languages into thrumming vibrations for the Velek.

History & Culture

Velek culture is, considering their sexual nature, unsurprisingly homogenous. A community is formed not through similarity or like attraction, but simply by the boundary of one Velek territory with non-Velek territory. In other words, all Velek in a region are a community. All Velek in another region (defined as an area separated by places with no Velek) constitute another community.

Few conflicts arise between Velek communities, which are quite self-sufficient. If one community extends its territory into a non-Velek region (searching perhaps for new food sources), successive Velek do not fight over the area — whomever claims a place first is the clear winner.

Velek have a religion of sorts, a hazy belief in fate manifested as tidal movements, along with a concept of good luck and bad and many rituals designed to control them, similar to the more refined and scientific Vau auspices. They don't practice it much today, however, substituting instead a more Vauish outlook on the universe.

The main conflict that turned Velek into hardy warriors was with a non-sentient, sharklike species that considered Velek a delicacy. The Skavul, as they are called by the Vau, could pierce Velek carapaces with double rows of gnashing teeth. They were eventually vanquished by the Velek's weapon and armor technology, but still exist in the wilderness seas.

Velek technology and science is extremely practical, holding few theoretical ideas that cannot be directly applied to a particular problem. They came to understand much about the local life around them and biology in general, but also developed amazing underwater earthworks and caves that controlled the onrushing of water and funneled it into energy for perpetual light. Cities grew up and around these complex caves, and efficient methods of food production and

storage were devised to address the problems of supply for large populations.

Eventually, Velek crawled from the seas and investigated the land, using breathing devices and waterpacks (although they can breathe air for short periods). They created ducts and pumps to maintain sealed aquatic environments above water, and used the new materials they found there to good effect. One of the most clever innovations was the manipulation of fire — discovered through lightning strikes on land — and the creation of a flash powder that in turn led to the spearguns they used to conquer the Skavul.

They are considered industrious allies by the Vau, and some are awarded the honorary position of Worker — an adoption into that Vau caste. These few individuals have the full freedoms of a Worker caste citizen.

Planet

Bastago'Lo: An oceanic world with two large continents and many islands, this planet is considered a paradise of sorts to many Vau, who come here to relax and partake of the excellent seafood prepared by the Velek. The breeze brings many wonderful (and sometimes rank) scents to an air dweller, which cannot be smelled by the Velek.

Manshogo

The Manshogo were a warrior culture that spanned the stars before encountering the Vau. They resisted the Mandarins' authority for years before finally accepting a limited servitude as a Protectorate. (Many are still unaware, however, of the mass suicides this accession to defeat caused among their best and brightest.)

Physiology

Manshogo are bipedal mammals descended from marsupial predators. They somewhat resemble the general shape and form of humans, but possess thicker skin and horny protuberances on their shoulders and backs, covered by thick manes on their heads, necks and shoulders. They have varying degrees of racial differences, broken into five distinct groups marked by skin coloration and markings: *Supi* (dark black with white stripes), *Sani* (brown with yellow stripes), *Lakh* (red with blue stripes), *Hium* (blue with orange stripes) and *Pasa* (green with purple stripes). These seem to have no origin in regional differences, and their cause and evolutionary purposes are unknown — one of the many reasons Vau suspect Progenitor-wrought mutations in the species.

Manshogo tend to stand taller than Workers but shorter than Soldiers (four *woon'l* and three *jo'ir*, or about seven feet), but produce a number of sizes, depending on ancestry (as small as three *woon'l*).

Males tend to be larger than females, but not by much. The differences between sexes are similar to those between human males and females, although Manshogo females have a small, vestigial pouch on their lower abdomens in which they carry their tiny newborns for three months, after which they are tended like human babies for the rest of their growth cycle (10 years until puberty, and then five until adulthood). Females also have four nipples, but their breasts are not as pronounced as a human's tend to be. Otherwise, body hair is similar for both males and females — large, shaggy manes (except among certain warriors, who shave them), but few other patches.

The genders are considered equal in capability, although females are preferred as Solacers (see below).

The Klavi, or Death Dance

Most remarkable is the *Klavi*, the Death Dance. Most Manshogo, to a greater or lesser degree depending on ancestry and training, have the ability to enter a temporary trance state of heightened bodily function and mental focus, wherein they can move and act faster than usual – sometimes with uncanny speed and accuracy. It was the *Klavi* that allowed the Manshogo to resist Vau Soldiers in guerrilla warfare for so long.

The *Klavi* does not last for long, however, and exhausts great amounts of energy, often forcing a deep sleep on the weaker Manshogo and tiring even the strongest. A great hunger comes upon them which, if not eventually assuaged before further trances are attempted, can cause their bodies to devour themselves. So great is their discipline and mastery over instinct, however, that some warriors, far removed from food in the field, withered to slow death without complaint.

Sometimes a Manshogo cannot control the length of his trance and must be brought out of it by another, one who knows the ways this can be done without causing harm. Such are the *Altu*, the Solacers, who use a variety of methods, from verbal commands to physical blows, to awaken a Manshogo from the *Klavi*.

Manshogo religion and art is replete with expressions of the feelings and perceptions gained during the *Klavi*, wherein *Klavar* (dancers) claim to see other entities that operate on their vibrational frequency. These entities are seen as teachers, healers, gods and villains, depending on their actions, and the Manshogo have cataloged many of them. Individuals seek totemic alliances with some, and claim to gain special *Klavi* powers thereby.

In times of extreme religious ardor, some bold *Klavar* perform the *Sati*, multiple trances in sequence, risking their lives to experience a mystical state of supreme ecstasy wherein everything is perceived as a benevolent Oneness. Those who survive are honored as spiritual elders. The majority of such supplicants, however, live only a few days afterward, as their bodies devour themselves regardless of the food or drink consumed.



History & Culture

The facts of Manshogo history are hard to discern, for it is heavily colored by fanciful myths and legends, tinged with the deceptions of the Klavi. Who can say what visions gained in trance are real or hallucinatory? Even the Manshogo debate this, leaving the final word of law to the *Divar*, the Judges of the Dance, who interpret trance-given visions and determine what is real and what is false in them. However, the Vau feel that even the *Divar* are prone to lending credence to falsehood that comes cloaked in images they desire to recognize. And so much of Manshogo history is liberally mixed with fancy — although they do not recognize it as such, claiming it all to be true, if not here then in the *Sarna*, the World at the Edge of Vision.

The Vau, after much study, believe that the Manshogo, in their youth, were claimed as pawns by the Progenitors, although whether by the Architects or Abrogators is not known. They were changed by them, given the trance ability, and used as warriors in some now-mythic conflict. Dim memories of such a war appear in Manshogo myth-history, but the battles of the gods that forged the universe rarely were said to involve Manshogo. They tell that the *Klavi* was given them by Sbim, a trickster deity, who had stolen it as a fruit from the palaces of the gods and delivered it to the Manshogo as a means to liberate them from the curse of mud (material existence).

The Mandarins have granted that the Manshogo are indeed sentient, for they nurture Will and attempt to act from it, rather than from instinct. One sign of this is their technological mastery, such that they attained the stars with no aid from others, and settled four worlds before encountering the expanding Hegemony. One they lost to the Vau, and the other three — including their homeworld of Sar — they retain as Protectorates.

Manshogo technology, however, is imperfect and ugly, lacking aesthetic unity. Their breakthrough discoveries invariably came through the *Klavi*, and the sciences built from such insights were incomplete and full of hasty conclusions, even if occasioned by true brilliance. Their science thus wrought as many disasters as wonders, creating weapons of mass destruction or devastating their homeworld's ecostructure as well as providing astounding medicine and the way to the stars.

Their technology has grown little since the granting of Protectorate status, for there is no longer a need to make mistakes in pursuit of breakthroughs; Vau technology provides everything they need and more. While weaponry is not given to them, everything necessary to maintain life in comfort and ease is.

This has caused somewhat of a problem in their society, as the younger generations spurn the warrior ethic of

the former, preferring a life of luxury to the harsh discipline of war. The young are accused also of misusing the *Klavi*, entering it for puerile pleasure or the relief of boredom rather than as a sacred experience. For these reasons and more do some Manshogo curse the Vau for relieving the burden of struggle from their lives. However, the Mandarins do provide; for those Manshogo seeking challenge, there is service in the Hegemonic Pacification Forces, whereby warriors can serve as wards over troubled worlds or as scouts to distant and unheard-of worlds. Many Manshogo patrol the border of S'rib, awaiting the coming once more of the Glo'maasa. These are honored by the Mandarins for their readiness to sacrifice.

The Manshogo are led by many kings on their different worlds, but their spiritual authority is the *Wunta*, the Great Dancer, of which there is only one living at any time. This is one who has survived the *Sati* and proven himself wise in many circumstances. Before the Protectorates, Mandarins attempted to silence the Great Dancers, who hid from them, but they are now welcomed openly, as long as their religious ideas are confined to the Manshogo Protectorates and communities throughout the Hegemony.

Planets

Sar: The homeworld, a place of rocky cliffs and barren plains, spotted by lush oases and small jungles. Progenitor ruins have been discovered, but they have been decorated and built upon by pre-starfaring Manshogo, and so yield little information to the Readers. The air is thick here and gravity somewhat denser than humans are used to, but it can be survived after a period of acclimation. There are many *yurim'zho* sheaths to aid adaptation.

Much of the local flora and fauna is poisonous to Vau and Gwindor, if eaten in great quantity. Study has revealed a host of strange toxins that surely did not originate naturally, but were introduced by *tswa'tilvo* manipulation in some distant time. The Mandarins believe that these substances helped mutate the Manshogo, perhaps providing the *Klavi*.

Otul: A planet of bizarre coloration: the air is green and the plants red, while the dirt is blacker than black. It is otherwise a fair world, with many different biomes, none more prominent than others, except for the wide oceans. The air smells of a spice, strange to human noses, which is called *vima* by the Manshogo, meaning "rest." Three small moons provide fascinating reflections and shadows on the nights they each ride the sky. The Vau were most reluctant to give up claim to this world, but settled for residences on Goba and Fimzo, two of the moons.

Srega: A place of harsh ice to the north and south but with a fine equatorial zone. Jungles surround a vast river that nearly encircles the globe, providing the major travel lane for citizens in their multiform and colored boats. A group of rebellious Manshogo still live in the jungles and ice wastes, resisting all contact with the Vau. Rumors say that Progenitor ruins hide under the ice, and that the cold mantle is not natural, but a cloak meant to protect these works for some future time.

Fah Selani

The Fah Selani are a reptilian species of snakelike sentients renowned for the inseparable connections they hold between bond-pairs. They are among the most difficult of sentients to communicate with, however, for their emotions are hard to convey to non-Fah Selani; there are few levels on which they can communicate with others, except intellectually. What moves and motivates them is hard to anticipate — they can take umbrage at petty actions but be completely unaffected by the torture of their own children.

Physiology

Fah Selani have no limbs, their bodies being long snakelike torsos, usually wider near the head and tapering thinner near the tail. However, the tips of their tails branch into 10 highly dextrous "fingers," or tentacles, giving them better fine manipulation ability than most humans.

Their sinuous bodies are quite strong, capable not only of sliding them long distances over many hours, but in battering down obstacles they cannot squeeze through. They have poor night-vision, relying instead on a heat-sensing organ in their skulls, but their hearing is good (as good, at least, as a human's), and their sense of smell is excellent.

Fah Selani on the hunt can be very obsessive, ignoring all distractions but their chosen prey. They prefer to eat live meat (usually from small rodent and mammal farms) but can survive on cooked kill.

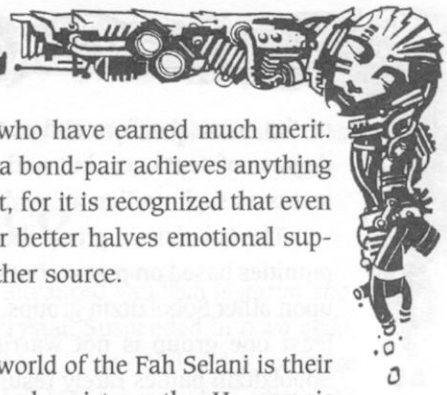
They have retractable fangs of considerable length which bear venom deadly to most known sentients. Manshogo medicine has developed an antivenin for Manshogo, Vau, Velek and Gwindor, but it must be administered within an hour of poisoning.

However, fangs are now a last-ditch weapon, for the Fah Selani learned to rely instead on technological weaponry, such as *schaal*, flechette guns designed to flay a foe from a distance. These multi-barreled, star-shaped devices can be operated only by a Fah Selani, for the triggers require at least three of their 10 tentacles to operate.

There are two sexes, male and female. The male fertilizes the female, who lays a clutch of eggs from the coupling. The average clutch is three eggs. In the primitive past, only one such egg survived the hard years to adulthood; now, they all do.

Him-Saa, the Bond-Pair

Fah Selani tend to bond together into pairs, each of which helps the other with tasks, uniting to become a single effective unit when working in concert. Some Mandarins suspect



that, over time, each member of a bonded pair develops an empathic ability to anticipate the other's needs and instinctively act on them before either is conscious of the need.

Fah Selani folk tales often revolve around tragedies between a bond-pair, such as when one inadvertently venoms the other, or when the warlords of old would capture one of a bond-pair to enforce the servitude of the other.

As great as the bond is between average pairs, however, tales also warn of those who break such bondings. A staple figure of evil cunning is the fiend who kills her bond-mate for profit, only to bond with another and perform the same vile deed. The worst such beings continue on a spree of bonding and killing until they are caught and killed by venom for their crimes. While it is acceptable to form a second bonding if one's first bond-mate perishes, more than two bondings is considered a mark of the insane or cruel.

I should note here that not all bond-pairs consist of opposite sexes, for the *Him-Saa* does not necessarily have anything to do with procreation, but rather with emotional support.

History & Culture

Early Fah Selani were not social at all, except between bond-pairs. Upon reaching adulthood (one and a half *twent'tlor*), a Fah Selani would leave its parent and seek a bond-mate from another clutch. They would then go off together and seek their own hunting territory. As their population increased, inevitable territorial squabbles ensued, with certain strong Fah Selani winning large areas. These twin kings or queens would sometimes allow others to hunt in their domains.

Most often, these leaders came from strains of Fah Selani gifted with larger bodies or elaborately marked hoods. They would hand their domains to their clutch hatchlings, and so began a period of genetic inheritance of the hooded kings.

Eventually, the Fah Selani extended the goodwill of their personal bondings to a greater community. Although the bond as such never extends beyond two individuals, the ideas of goodwill, community and common cause spread to include others of like mind or ancestry, and eventually to a nearly planetwide society.

An oligarchy of pair-bonds overthrew the traditional hooded kings, and ruled by reason rather than might. Domains were given to pair-bonds based on merit, but these new territories were small, so that all Fah Selani could have their own. To make up for the loss of hunting, local farms spread over the planet were devised to breed and provide live prey and easy kills.

The Fah Selani are a naturally curious species, and bond-pairs spend much of their time devising clever things, whether technology, philosophy, stories, puzzles or elaborate and subtle jokes (only Fah Selani typically gain humor from these). They seem to seek out the favor of other bond-pairs, and hold high those who have earned much merit. Even if only one member of a bond-pair achieves anything of note, the other shares in it, for it is recognized that even lazy Fah Selani provide their better halves emotional support unavailable from any other source.

Planet

Han Saarza: The homeworld of the Fah Selani is their only Protectorate, but colonies do exist on other Hegemonic worlds. The various biomes of Han Saarza gave rise to the various races of the Fah Selani, such as the large jungle kin, the sinuous water kin and the better-known desert kin.

Han Saarza is not a pleasant place to visit for most humans or Vau; it can be horribly humid in the jungles — such that tiny fish called *zasha* actually swim the air at times — and freezing during the desert nights. Nonetheless, *yurim'zho* sheaths can provide comfortable environments for visitors.

Sobolzitzin

The Sobolzitzin are mobile plantform sentients. They are among the most recalcitrant members of the Hegemony, and are constantly watched by the Vau, even though they earned a Protectorate through proof of their aversion to space travel.

Physiology

Sobolzitzin possess thick torso stalks and numerous, fully articulated vine appendages. These vines can secrete a paralyzing poison, and tiny, knifelike cilia can puncture flesh. Indeed, they are meat eaters, and rather fierce ones.

Six or more radial stalks act as legs, allowing a Sobolzi bursts of amazing speed. However, periods of extreme energy must often be matched by periods of extreme quiescence, during which the Sobolzi recharges by digesting meat or photosynthesizing light (an imperfect source for them).

Their heads and backs are covered in leaves, which collect and funnel rainfall into their torso pores (they almost always walk bent over during rain, to catch as much water as possible).

History & Culture

The Vau do not believe the Sobolzitzin to be natural. Their world — Larm — once hosted a species of sentient insects who wiped themselves out through some sort of toxic or nuclear overload. The world swarms with their bizarre genetic experiments. It is believed that the Sobolzitzin adapted to meat-eating only after Larm's atmosphere became sheathed in toxic clouds, blocking direct sunlight for weeks on end. They had certainly achieved status as the reigning sentient on the world when the Vau arrived.

Other beings on Larm may or may not be fully sentient; it is a question still studied by the Vau. Hints among certain



of the ocean dwellers and even a species of rodent imply degrees of sentience, but nothing definitive granting them status as such until more evidence is revealed.

The Sobolzitzin group themselves into tight-knit communities based on region, but project a fierce hatred and ire upon other Sobolzitzin groups. There are few times when at least one group is not warring upon another, although Sobolzitzin battles rarely result in death. Maimings are the common result, requiring long periods of healing and a wealth of scars, adding to a warrior's reputation.

A few communities have overcome these emotional and seemingly instinctual hatreds, usually thanks only to isolation due either to impassable mountains or removed islands. These Sobolzitzin have developed fine philosophies of peace, with much wisdom concerning what it means to be a thinking creature. (I have not read any of their works, but am assured it is so by my yoma.)

I can say very little more concerning them, for they rarely leave Larm and few citizens ever go there.

Planet

Larm: Their homeworld is their sole planet, with the exception of a few individuals who have traveled off-world. It is a heavily forested place, with many different types of trees and plants. Eight continents are divided by seas, which are fed by numerous rivers that serve to divide Sobolzitzin tribes from one another. Three continents are uninhabited, except by Vau scientists and a host of mutated creatures. Remnants of the planet's previous ecological holocaust still haunts these regions.

Watchworlds

Outside of the Protectorates, there are the Watchworlds, planets which have not yet been admitted to citizenship, and where access on and off is restricted. When the Hegemony slowed its expansion during the Rectification, many previous Watchworlds were converted into Protectorates. Only two Watchworlds remain at the moment: Glaan, home to the criminal Lun'grar; and S'rib, a colony poised next to dangerous Glo'maasa space.

Lun'grar

I cannot claim to know much about the Lun'grar, for access to them is highly restricted, and no non-Vau citizen is allowed contact with them. The only lore I have concerning them comes from my *yoma*, who has given me the following information and allowed me to copy it here:

During the War in the Heavens, many of the young servitor races were chosen as pawns. Some chose to fight, and of these, some of them fought for the Abrogators. The ursine Lun'grar were such as they. Following twisted Abrogator propaganda, they hunted the Vau. Of course, their side lost, and they are now a carefully monitored species within the Hegemony. They are an example of what happens to those who do not recognize the authority of the Mandarins.

Physiology

Said to resemble somewhat the Ursus of Old Urth, a Lun'grar stands as tall as a Soldier, but it considerably broader, its mass holding muscle and fat, which acts as a protective blubber against cold and combat (Lun'grar are said to wrestle among themselves for rulership rights).

Their eyesight is said to be poor, but was boosted by technological contrivances until these were removed by the Vau. Sense of smell is incredible, allowing a Lun'grar to recognize an individual from many *woon'l* away, and also identify much of his gear (if familiar). Hearing is also strong, as is taste.

Their fingers bear vestigial claws, not long enough to really cut a foe, but enough to break skin when coupled with their mighty blows. Their teeth are fairly sharp, but again not so good as to serve in combat well. Their true power comes from their muscles, which seem deliberately planned to provide maximum leverage and strength. The Vau suspect Pattern manipulation.

They are hairy beings, but their coats are not thick, and some are even born bald in places.

History & Culture

I know nothing of their history or culture besides that mentioned above. They fought for the enemies of the Vau, but still refuse to repent. How it is that the Vau know all this about them, I cannot guess, except perhaps through the wisdom of the *Valukesh Ha'eni*, which was never clouded by a Fog of Unknowing.

The Lun'grar now exist in primitive conditions, for they are denied most forms of technology. However, their culture is naturally oral, and they fell back on old ways and beliefs. They murkily remember their ancient patrons and still call to them, believing that one day they will be emancipated by their hidden masters and returned to their former glory.

Planet

Glaan: A heavily wooded world, its temperature is generally cold, for it orbits farther from its sun than most primary worlds. Long winters and autumns still make way for short spring and summer seasons, however. The planet hosts an array of interesting animal forms unlike those of Urth, but few specimens have been removed for study. I know them only by phantasmic images (which you call holovids). The Vau guard the jumpgate and maintain a base on Plu'Url, the fifth planet from the sun, which travels an orbit similar to Glaan's.

S'rib

This planet has no native sentients of its own, but hosts a militarily fortified land base and starbase, home to a large fleet of Vau ships, prepared at any time to hold back a Glo'maasa assault. It has been many *thalus'tlor* since the Glo'massa last came through the gate, but the Mandarins still demand a keen watch.

Citizens from many Protectorates are called here to serve in the defense forces, as a means to bring honor to their kind — and to allow the more martial-minded of them some means by which to express their violence. Constant training missions take place in the wildernesses of S'rib, and not a few soldiers of many species disappear there, although whether they are killed in training actions or deserting from their forces, I cannot say.

Technology

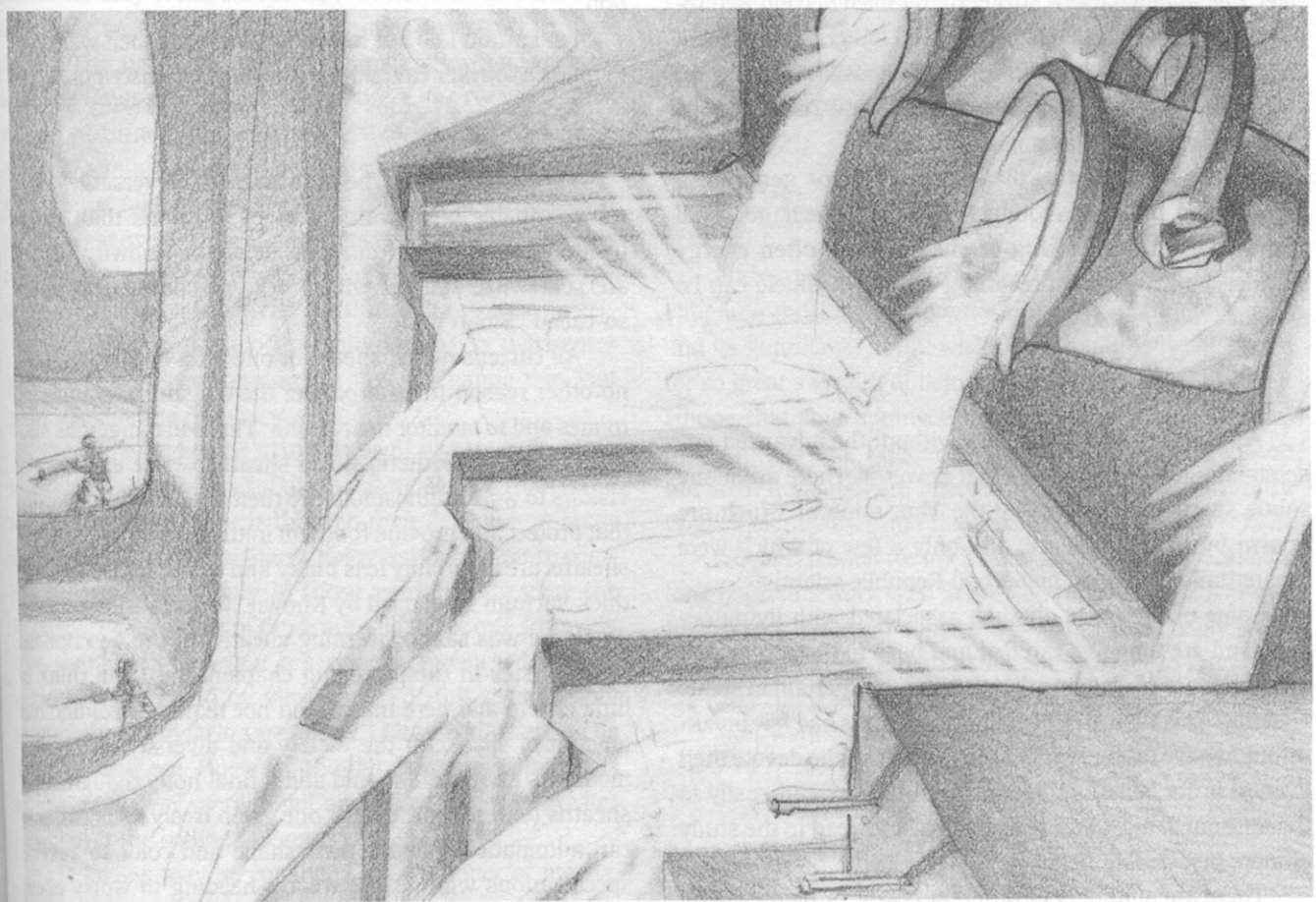
Yoma Zahl tells me that he suspects my readers in the Known Worlds will quickly pass the previous chapters in this study and seek this section first, for he says that Known Worlders hunger for the secrets of Vau technology. He thus bids me to warn you that no secrets will be forthcoming in these words, although perhaps what I can say will provide some satisfaction. As a I said, I am studied in the sciences, and can outline here something of the principles behind most Vau technology.

Substance

The basis of the most advanced Vau tech is *yurim'zho*, the morphing liquid nanocrystal. Suspended in *tswa'qedo*, a psuedo-magnetic field (or so I have dubbed it, because some of its properties resemble magnetics, but others are completely unknown to Urthish technology), it forms into myriad shapes for a variety of functions, according to the programming in its matrix — a decentralized think machine network that trades information constantly with all members of its crystal constituency. Hence, destroying a part of a *yurim'zho* device does not destroy the whole.

The psuedo-field is invisible to human sight, but other technologies manipulate fields that manifest in the visual spectrum. Hence, the scintillating energy emitted from Soldier staves or the green plasma harnessed by starships to power engines, shields and energy weapons. Most of these fields are subtle forces unknown to Urthish technology and were known to Second Republic scientists only through their study of Vau devices.

Vau mastery of energy flow is truly remarkable. Instead of concerning themselves exclusively with substance (like most human science), they studied process, energy and systems. Of course, they were greatly aided by the Architects'



relics, whose secrets were slowly revealed through the *Valukesh Ha'eni*.

But what does it mean to speak of nanocrystals? These are microscopic crystal formations grown from helixes. The speed at which nanocrystal can form new shapes is dependent upon its quality and the genius of its manufacture. These are not simply normal crystals, for they can be manipulated to form a variety of differing functions. Some are strong, some more supple. All have nanobrains seeded throughout their facets, which control energy pulses and chemical reactions, governing the growth or decay of the facets in the helix. In a sense, every tool in Vau society is a think machine with varying degrees of sophistication.

This substance can resemble nearly anything, but its "inert"or "natural" form appears as a bony plastic construct, sometimes creamy or brown, sometimes shot through with various streaks or patterns of color. This will be familiar to those who have seen Mandarin sheaths, with their seemingly elaborately carved head and shoulder guards. In actuality, they are not carved by a workman's hand, but form that way by mental command of the wearer.

The most advanced application of nanocrystal tech is *kur'pla*, an alloy I dub "metacrystal." It is a greenish crystal mixed with metallic particles. Most fortified buildings and armor are wrought from it, as are the hulls of Vau starships. While it is not incredibly resistant to impact (better than steel, but somewhat less strong than fabled Second Republic ceramsteel), it has superb structural integrity, allowing it to form large structures otherwise impossible with lesser alloys. The huge, sky-high pinnacles of Zyuil'Thala's famed pavilions are but one example.

Unlike nanocrystal, metacrystal cannot generate a pseudo-field, but it does conduct one well. While nanocrystal is required for the making of sheaths, and often energy shields, the length and breadth of an energy shield can be extended with metacrystal.

Energy

All nanocrystal is worthless without the advanced understanding of energy fields that power it. There are many subtle spectra recognized by the Vau, none of which are known by Urthish science, and only a few of which were theoretically conceived by Second Republic scientists.

Some of these are organic, associated with living beings, and are the most rarefied and hard to discern, except through years of studying the yogas as they pertain to subtle anatomy. This is an area of endeavor that has had few breakthroughs save for the work of those experts who devote their lives to it. Its benefits thus being hard to extend easily to the untrained, most Vau science turned instead to the study of more perceivable fields.

There are a number of different *tswar*, or fields, useful in engineering, most of which manipulate magnetic or sympathetic forces. The psuedo-field I mentioned above is one such, and it allows *yurim'zho* to be used in many architectural wonders, such as the morphing pavilions and palaces of the Mandarins.

Other forces are used in military devices, although I know little of their manufacture and can provide only a few details about them. Known Worlders are somewhat familiar with the *kazta'var*, the so-called "quantum spheres" of Vau starships, the roiling plasma nodes used to power devastating energy guns. They call upon the Eddy, the universal current that runs through the void.

I can, however, speak of the *sham'tswa hantha*, the energy shields, for this technology has been appropriated somewhat by Known Worlders. These are ingenious devices, more than most scientists perhaps realize, for they manipulate not just *manzar'tswa*, the solid fields, but more subtle organic fields. If the organic fields are disrupted, the solid fields will not manifest, and for this reason it is important to avoid thick garments when employing the cruder devices. In addition, a third force is at work, the *kaz'tswa*, the shunt, a process whereby energy and force delivered against the manifest solid field are nullified. Early models engaged a counterforce to turn back energy — capable of knocking its bearer off his feet but still protecting him from the initial harm — but the *kaz'tswa* allows for harmless transmutation.

I am afraid I do not know the details of such workings. Perhaps a Worker can aid me in future manuscripts.

Sheaths

Yurim'zho allows the manufacture of versatile wardrobes, capable of performing more functions than simple fashion or protection from mild elements. Known Worlders are somewhat familiar with a very practical example, the so-called "Smart Robe."

All citizens own a sheath of one kind or another, if for no other reason than to protect them against weather extremes and to monitor their health. Those in dangerous situations also have etheric shield sheaths, while explorers or visitors to worlds inhospitable to their anatomy bear sheaths that protect and provide for them in that environment. Such sheaths are invariably less bulky and easier to use than the thick vacuum suits used by Known Worlders today.

More was said concerning sheaths in the descriptions of the castes in the preceding chapter, and I can think of little else to add here that would not require a voluminous amount of space, for the variety and diversity of different models is extreme. I should add a final note, though: Most sheaths (except for the basic one given freely to all citizens) can automatically adapt their shape and color to auspice specifications without the wearer needing to worry about

such things. Indeed, the sheer immensity of auspice lore often prevents individuals from learning everything required, and thus sheaths are trained with such knowledge and possess the wisdom with which to adapt to it as necessary.

The Eye of Prophecy

I end this study with perhaps the most telling subject: the ways of prophecy. I know little of them except what my *yoma* has revealed, for only the Mandarins may read the glyphs and properly interpret them.

The *Valukesh Ha'eni* is not so much a device as a method by which a window may be opened into the Weft, where the glyphs that reflect the underpinnings of the universe's Pattern may be perceived. The Weft is the great engine built by the Architects to order the universe to their Will, and the glyphs revealed by the *Valukesh Ha'eni* are clues to its workings, constant, everchanging interpretations of the workings of the universe, reflections of its complexities rendered intelligible.

While the glyphs reveal the truth behind the many confusing appearances put forth by reality, they do not govern reality. However, through wise perception of the glyphs, Mandarins may better understand the tenor of the Cosm and move acts such that reality is changed to accord to their desires. Through small, seemingly insignificant deeds here and sometimes great undertakings there, the course of reality may be turned to represent the Mandarins' governance. As such acts are undertaken, constant monitoring of the glyphs must take place lest the small changes become tidal motions that overwhelm all attempts at governance. For this reason, true and tested means that yield good results are heeded with supreme conviction; thus the auspices.

As events change, so fluctuate the glyphs that represent them. It is in observing the flux or change that Vau glean wisdom and prophecy.

There are said to be many types of glyph, each representative of a deeper level of the *Valukesh Ha'eni*, from those that are known to citizens through their depiction in Mandarin dress and phantasmery (holovids), to the more complex images known only to those who directly view the *Valukesh Ha'eni*. Some of these are said to operate strangely upon the mind, such that a sentient ungoverned by Will would be driven mad by viewing it. For this reason, only accomplished Mandarins are allowed *Valukesh Ha'eni* oriels that produce these. However, though dangerous, these latter images deliver more detail and allow for even greater control over the course of events.

The glyphs may be consulted by a number of means. The most common is the handheld oriel carried by most Mandarins. These are of varying complexity, providing deeper access to those who have proven their ability to handle it. The handheld models rarely reveal more than local perturbations of the Weft, and predict events within a few *sualar* at best. Also known are the styli, the glowpens with which a Mandarin may draw the glyphs he desires and watch them shift, providing insight into a problem. Larger, stationary oriels can deliver more glyphs and allow them to transform faster, but are more difficult to interpret. However, they can deliver prophecy for many *twent'tlor*.

The greatest of oriels is that in the Amethyst Palace of Curious Resolve, for it was the only such book left operating by the Progenitors, and it provided the key for the manufacture of all oriels. It alone can glean glyphs that reflect far futures that are yet many *yomas'tlor* from now.

The glyphs provide not only glimpses of the future or past, they comment on the now, showing a Mandarin some item or person's true Pattern, for few trickeries can obscure the *Valukesh Ha'eni's* vision of the Weft, and fewer powers still are invisible entirely to it. (Alas, the *Glo'maasa* seem to have such powers, as do the Ungoverned and their pawns.)

I can envision your desire to witness such an oriel, to handle it oneself, but such a thing is not possible even for me. Each is made to extremely precise specification under the watchful eye of the *Jaykata U'moti*, and is keyed through *yurim'zho* technology to allow only a specific Mandarin the use of it. Even were you to use it many times, you would not understand it, for many years of instruction on the glyphs are required to read them, let alone protect oneself from their power.

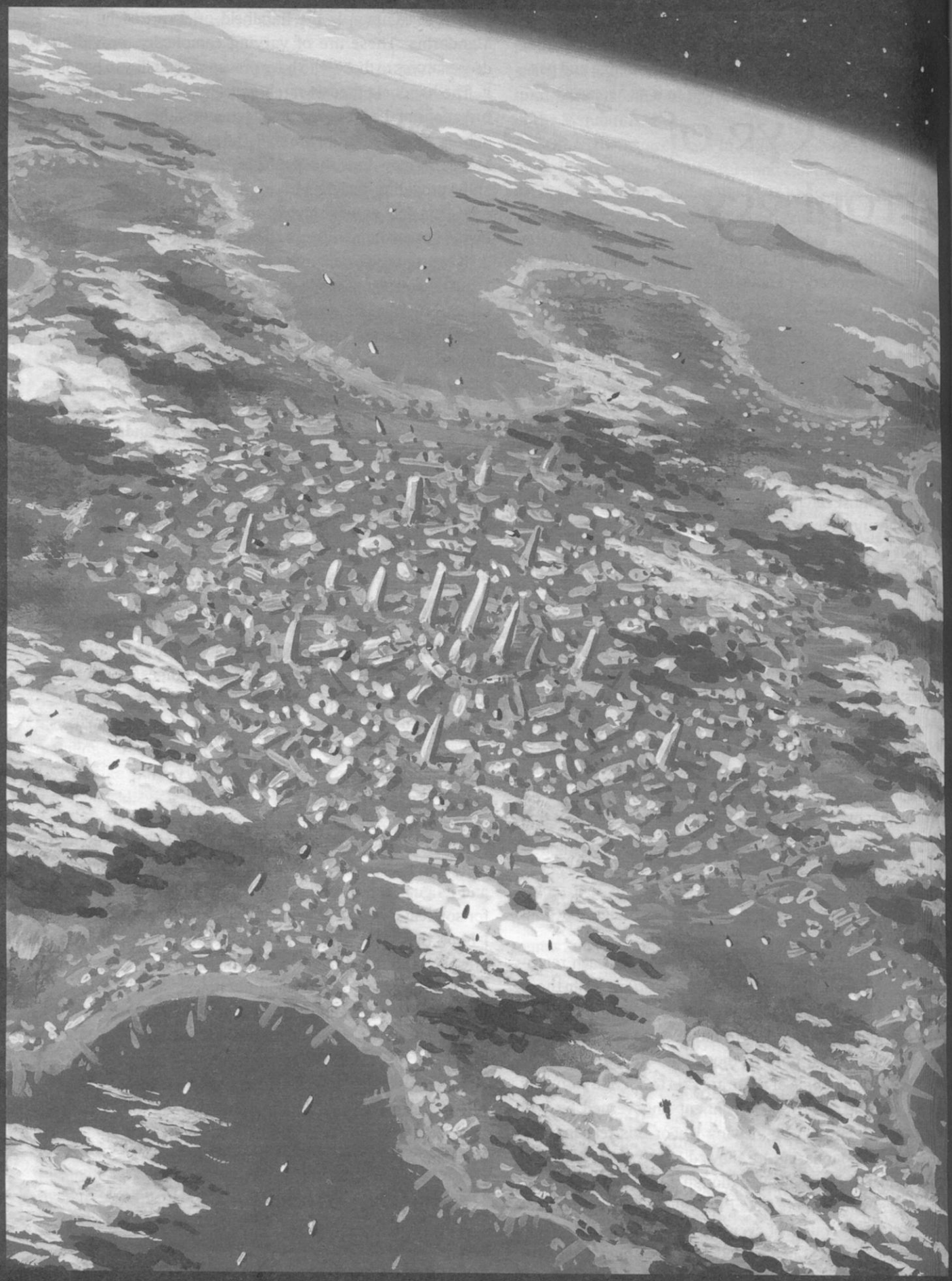
Farewell

And so I end this study of the Vau, especially written to enlighten those who know not the ways of the Hegemony and its guardians. I only wish that I could have said more, for so great a wealth of beings, places and lore is yet to tell. I hope that this manuscript can be delivered within my lifespan, and that I might be commissioned to write more, but such decisions are beyond my power, resting with the Council of Worthies and the wisdom of the *Jaykata U'moti*.

I request a boon for my labors: May the *Sho'lan Suilmor* look upon this work with favor, and turn the glyphs toward its delivery, letting it come finally into hands ready to receive it, eyes keen to read it and minds eager to know it.

May the waters bear you to good ends.

I am Yonn Gwin Ko'anti, a son of Old Urth.



Book Two: Elabi

Preface

This drama gives player characters a greater glimpse into the Hegemony than any outsider has had before. This puts them in the spotlight, not just with their Vau contacts, but with every single faction in the Known Worlds. Never again can they claim anonymity among those who keep watch over interstellar affairs.

This drama is structured into three acts. Ideally, each act will take one to two game sessions to resolve, for a total of six sessions for the drama. Hints and tips for integrating the events into a longer-running epic are provided, especially as it concerns the increased scrutiny the characters experience upon their return to Human Space.

Although Book One provided a sourcebook on the Vau and the other sentient races of the Hegemony, this drama further elaborates on them, providing game details more appropriate to this section than the former. Herein are traits for Vau Mandarins, Soldiers, Workers, and Manshogo warriors, Velek laborers and Fah Selani merchants. Additionally, particular technological devices are detailed as encountered.

With this drama, player characters swing wide the gate to the Hegemony, bringing increased — although cautious — interplay between the Vau and the Known Worlds. Future sourcebooks will further detail aspects of the Hegemony and its denizens.

Using "Hegemony" with "Lifeweb"

Ideally, the player-character cadre will have completed the "Living Planet" drama from **War in the Heavens: Lifeweb**. Those who did might have certain advantages later in this drama. The spur for the envoyship in this present drama comes from the Vau's own intelligence concerning the events in "Living Planet." They know that some humans encountered Symbiots and began high-level talks with their leadership. Curious and concerned about humanity's connection to these terrifying shapeshifters, the Vau now seek to learn more about humans and their connection to the Weft (a concept explained in the *Inner Sphere: The Vau* chapter of Book One).

The Vau invite a cross-section sampling of humanity from all places and backgrounds, so just about anybody — regardless of participation with the Symbiots — can be chosen for reasons known only to the Vau. Even if the cadre did not experience "Living Planet," they can still be drawn into the alien intrigues of "Elabi."

NPC Traits

Traits for specific NPCs encountered in this drama are provided at the end of each relevant chapter. Common traits for alien races and their equipment are provided in *Appendix: Traits*.

Tech Talk

It is perhaps inevitable that technology-oriented characters, such as Engineers, Charioteers or Scravers, will attempt to decipher every bit of Vautech found in this drama. Hints and pointers on how to resolve such requests are given in various places throughout these chapters, noted by the heading "Tech Talk."

During the first such request put forward by a player,

however, it is best to state the ground rules:

"Even the best technicians of the Second Republic could not fully understand Vautech, despite years of research. It is doubtful that stunning insights can be gained in a mere moment of scrutiny or even a week of study aboard a starship. Nonetheless, such studies in one's spare time might eventually yield some clues, as they did to the great scientists of the past. Just don't be annoyed or impatient if you learn nothing."

Act One: Veiled Threats

Duplicity and Falsehood

Almost every major non-player character in this drama is a control freak of one sort or another. Self-sovereignty is not good enough for these people — they must rule over others. After the characters navigate the crowd of machiavellian humans in Act One, the question may arise: Who's the real hegemonist? The irony is that Act One — concerned mainly with human encounters — is more restrictive to the characters' freedom than Act Two or Three among the Vau, where their actions are their own — or they at first seem so.

In this drama, appearances are not what they seem. From the metonym agent in Act One to the metaphysical revelation in Act Three, nothing is what it really seems. The ultimate theme of "Elabi" is the unsure nature of reality itself under so many systems of authority and control. We can't even know our own reality if we don't have the freedom to discover it. How we find answers to such things when the very questions are in the control of others?

"Elabi" owes much to Philip K. Dick's vein of science fiction, not just his ontological questions about the nature of reality, but its context of religious liberation from an oppressive authority that is not merely political (as in Orwell) or mental (as in William S. Burroughs) but cosmological — a truly Gnostic vision of a universe in chains, ruled by shadowy archons. "Elabi" asks: What happens when the archons are gone but their prison remains?

I. Invitation from the Vau

The drama begins with the player characters (the cadre) out and about on the town (city/village/etc.), where they are approached by a Vau Mandarin envoy and his Soldier escort. This curious event happens as follows....

The region is abuzz with rumors about the arrival of a Vau diplomatic ship, escorted by Imperial Fleet ships. Further details, however, are sketchy, filled with obvious falsehoods and legends. For instance, one merchant insists that he heard the Vau were harvesting human babies from a nearby village, part of a quota promised to them by the Emperor to keep them from invading the Known Worlds. He knows some locals who are planning to stake out the village and attack the Vau when they come at night; he'll introduce the cadre to them if they're interested in joining the resistance effort.

Another rumor has it that a disgraced noble, Sir Felix (or Felicia — fill in the name of the most powerful major house here), knows Vau secrets, and the aliens have come to either take the knight into captivity or challenge him to a duel. The rumormonger is selling tickets to the alleged event, held at an exclusive estate that evening. (Anyone who shows up finds only a party given by a low-level guildsmember desperate to hobknob with important people.)

Yet another tale tells that the Vau are seeking an Anunnaki treasure with the aid of Imperial marines, but that only one human knows where it's buried. The problem is, this unknown person does not know he's got the secret — it's been planted in his unconscious by a psychic coven. The Vau intend to wrest the secret from him with a machine that steals souls. As the cadre speaks with this tale's informant, he comes to suspect that the secret-bearer is one of them, and will attempt to sell them out to any local authorities for money. (The authorities don't believe the tale, but will heavily question the cadre anyway.)

Basically, these rumors are distractions that can add some fun to a night's drama, but aren't part of the heart of the matter. That comes the following day, as the cadre is out and about. (Even if they're holed up somewhere, the Vau will find them — the *Valukesh Ha'eni* oracle will see to that.)

What Planet Is This?

This drama is designed to fit into any preexisting epic, and so the cadre can be anywhere in the Known Worlds for this encounter. However, if the characters are in barbarian space, they need to come back to the Known Worlds first — the Vau are not sending envoys to those worlds.

The encounter is best in a cosmopolitan setting, such as a bustling agora or capital city, but it can just as well be a one-brute hamlet in the middle of nowhere. In the latter case, the gamemaster simply needs to adjust the local population to something feasible, and substitute a makeshift landing field for the starport referred to.

A Polite Encounter

The Mandarin in charge of the diplomatic entourage leads a group of Soldiers openly through the streets of the spaceport and local city, observing and watching humans but not taking part in any activity. Of course, people stop what they are doing to gape at the aliens and stare as they move past. The Soldiers brusquely shove aside anyone who attempts to come near them.

In their wake, following out of sight, is a squad of Imperial Marines who will be extremely unkind to anyone who attempts to accost the diplomatic delegation. They are under strict orders to ensure that the Vau are unharmed and that their mission goes off without a hitch. Additionally, they intend to swoop down upon anyone the Vau choose for special favor, taking those persons back with them to the spaceport for an interview with their admiral.

Eventually, the Vau envoy comes upon the cadre, who will undoubtedly first notice the Vau's arrival through the murmur of the crowd and the movement of the hoi polloi as they sidle away from the Vau's path.

The Mandarin holds up a small think machinelike device (his *Valukesh Ha'eni* oriel), observes whatever is written upon its screen, and singles out whomever is the leader of the cadre. To this person he hands a small cube, and then bows. Regardless of the response (stunned silence, evangelical litanies, etc.), he turns and departs with his escorts. He ignores further communication with the cadre; the Soldiers will shove them aside if they attempt to follow. (The entourage returns to their ship at the local port and departs immediately, followed by some Imperial Fleet escorts.)

Although there is no means by which the cadre can discover this information, the Mandarin's name is Dwelphut Hi'ilmo Ko'di Tazvun, one of Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph's many assistants. Yoma Zahl is described later in Act Three, and is mentioned throughout Book One.

Act One Outline

This act is structured into eight parts, each of which can be considered to last for a span (unless player character hijinks shorten or extend the duration of events). The "cadre" is the group of player characters.

1. **Invitation:** The cadre encounters a Vau delegation and is given an invitation for an envoyship.
2. **Mob Revolt:** The locals react poorly to Vau (but only after the aliens have left), dividing into pro and con rioters — with the cadre in the center.
3. **Embarkation:** The cadre is escorted to the spaceport by Imperial Marines, where it is forcibly embarked on the Imperial Eye starship, *Nocturnal*.
4. **Voyage to Vril-Ya:** The cadre gets a briefing from the Imperial Eye and some time to prepare themselves for the coming tests before arriving on Vril-Ya.
5. **A Mirror Darkly:** A member of the cadre gets an unexpected visitor.
6. **Birthday Party:** The cadre goes to a noble meet-and-greet and gets a taste of the fierce politics and rivalries associated with diplomatic duty to the Vau.
7. **Early Morning Muster:** The cadre is rushed to meet the Vau ambassador, who examines and prepares them the journey to Shaduveen. Also, certain identities are revealed (if they were not laid bare at the Birthday Party).
8. **On to Shaduveen:** The cadre boards the *Noctural*, which is then towed by a Vau jumptug to the jumpgate and into the Shaduveen system.

The Cube

This cube is an invitation. It is activated by pressing a stud upon one of its surfaces, whereupon it quickly folds outward, presenting a two-dimensional flat surface that reveals a prerecorded image of another Vau Mandarin (Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph) speaking Urthish:

"Greetings and most auspicious occurrence to you and yours. I am Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph. You are hereby invited to join a delegation of your own kind on the star orb of Vril-Ya. This invitation may be presented to any Imperial official, who is under orders from the Throne to then ferry you immediately to that destination.

"You will there partake in an ambassadorial event conceived for your benefit, all in accordance with the strictest interpretation of auspice, governed by the Council of Worthies for maximum harmony and knowledge. Your presence is necessary for the proper functioning of this event. Your absence will sorely try matters between our kinds.



"I emphasize this: There has been no mistake in your choosing.

"I thank you for your participation in this unprecedented opportunity, unheralded but greatly required. May the river of time deliver you to proper shores."

After the message plays, the flat screen folds back into a cube. (It can be viewed again by pressing the stud, whereupon it repeats the above performance.)

Tech Talk

The cube is a sample of fabled *yurim'zho*, the nanotech crystal used in many Vau devices. Long hours of study might yield some small insight into what *yurim'zho* is (as explained at the end of Book One, in the *Outer Sphere: Hegemony* chapter), but nothing of its actual workings (this requires access to the Vau's advanced think machine tech, to read the nanonodes).

2. Mob Revolt

Of course, the cadre is immediately the object of considerable attention by the locals. But it's the wrong kind of attention.

A hesychast evangelist called Brother Bogs, leading a rag-tag group of followers, comes forth (he has been following the Vau envoys from a distance). He verbally accosts the cadre: "Destroy that thing immediately! It will damn your soul! I beg you, for the sake of your inner lamps, go not where the Vau lead!"

He is interrupted by a gang of anti-alien bigots, a motley group of day-laborers and serfs armed with bottles, knives and clubs, intent on taking out their years of misery and frustration on the cadre: "Get 'em! They're agents of the Vau!" (Their traits are provided at the end of this chapter.)

This group is confronted in turn by yet another — those who believe the Vau are potential saviors of humanity and the universe. It is a group of serfs and merchants, led by a charismatic matron named Mylia Siffron (a local candlemaker). She cries: "Defend the Blessed Ones," and her charges surround the cadre, seeking to defend them from the bigoted thugs.

Before any character can really do anything (orate, draw weapons, etc.), these two groups clash, with the cadre caught in their midst. All the while, Brother Bogs cries out admonishments to everyone in sight.

Thieves

During the conflict, two nimble-fingered thieves will attempt to nick the cube off whichever player character is holding it. They will use the distractions of the crowd to their best advantage, striking when things are at the most

chaotic. They at first seem to be part of Mylia's group, but are only using it as cover. They work together, but are unaligned with any faction. They hope to sell the valuable device to the local Scravers guild in return for money and admittance into the guild. If they do actually gain the cube, they will run off in different directions, heading for the slums, where they will meet again in a seedy bar called the Muddy Prince. (Their traits are provided at the end of this chapter.)

Send in the Marines

Before the cadre can get too bruised or battered, an Imperial marine squad arrives. They were following the Vau entourage with orders to escort any invitees back to the spaceport, but were delayed by a minor debacle in the streets. They now beat back the unruly crowd. The bigots, once they realize that the marines have arrived, will scatter in all directions. Brother Bogs will slink away, making himself scarce and trying not to draw any attention to himself. Mylia's folk will step aside and slowly move away.

The squad (numbering 12) surrounds the cadre and announces to them that they are to be immediately escorted to the spaceport for a meeting with Admiral Sia Wen Ssu Li Halan. If the cadre resists, the squad will repeat their orders. If the cadre violently resists, the squad will attempt to subdue them with frap sticks and hold them in Muster chains.

Once in control of the cadre, the squad marches to the starport and into the temporary offices of Admiral Chou Wen Sia Li Halan. Proceed to "Embarkation," below.

Uncooperative Guests

What if the cadre refuses to cooperate? There are a number of possible outcomes....

If the cadre escapes the marines, a planetwide manhunt will be declared within the hour by order of the admiral. Local police will scour the region, aided by holovid images of each member (sold to the authorities by a Town Criers or Carnivaler guildmember who followed the Vau entourage through town, recording the meeting with the cadre from a nearby rooftop).

A hefty reward for information concerning the characters' whereabouts (10 firebirds!) and a bounty for their capture (100 firebirds) will ensure that nearly everyone in town joins the manhunt, from Muster mercenaries to greedy innkeepers. Of course, the starport is the most watched of places, and checkpoints are set up at each hangar.

Even should the cadre get offworld (on their own ship or another's), they must still get through the jumpgate cordon. Each and every ship in the queue is boarded and checked from stem to stern. This lasts for one month, after which the forces move on, assuming they've lost their prey. However, Imperial Eye agents will continue to hunt the cadre throughout the Known Worlds until it is found.

If the cadre is captured within two days of receiving the Vau's invitation, proceed to the next event, "Embarkation." Any time up to a month after that, they will be hauled to Vril-Ya on a military ship with no amenities, treated like prisoners the entire journey. Once on Vril-Ya, a Reeve will explain that they have been charged with disobeying an Imperial edict from the Emperor himself, and will suffer a trial unless they do as asked by the Imperial Eye. If they agree, continue with the drama as outline below, with Altara Alveda in charge of them. (Pick things up at the end of "Voyage to Vril-Ya," as the cadre arrives at Verden City, but leave out the Imperial Eye dossier from "Voyage to Vril-Ya" — there's no time for that now.)

If they don't agree to work with the Eye, the trial is lengthy and vindictive, with the Empire using all the legal leverage it has; unless the player characters are highly-ranked nobles, priests or guildsmembers with top quality legal counsel, they're bound for a 10-year stint in a work camp. (Mitigating circumstances or powerful allies may help, but such matters are entirely in the hands of individual gamemasters and are not part of this present drama.) The cooperate-or-face-trial option is also extended to the cadre if they arrive on Vril-Ya on their own within a month of the invitation. After that, a trial is inevitable.

There is one other conceivable option for them: They attempt to meet the Vau on another world or to contact Vau representatives on Vril-Ya. This is not easy, but if they can prove that they have an invitation (the cube), the Vau will whisk them away to Shaduveen (proceed to Act Two). However, they will not have the aid of the Imperial Eye, its dossier or its starship, the *Noctural*; they may thus have no means of escape after Act Three. If they do have their own ship, the Vau will tow them in it, just as they do the *Nocturnal* in "On to Shaduveen," below. Even if they can get back afterward, they face an Imperial Eye manhunt and years of interrogation involving invasive psychic techniques.

Basically, if the worst occurs and the cadre avoids interacting with the authorities, they miss out on this drama. Hopefully, even the most libertine cadre will realize that, when getting drawn into such high-level affairs of state and interstellar security, they must accept some degree of authority from others.

3. Embarkation

At the starport, the cadre is quickly ushered into a hastily arranged office. Here, they are stripped of weapons (and scanned for hidden weapons). They are told that all items will be returned shortly.

Admiral Sia Wen Ssu Li Halan enters and greets them. She is a striking woman, her commanding presence giving pause to even the chattiest characters. Long black hair (reach-

ing to her waist) is tied back into an elaborately knotted tail. Her Imperial Fleet officers' uniform is studded with medals and ribbons, some of them representing Li Halan victories from the Emperor Wars.

She is a very old-school military commander, and doesn't like the look of these street urchin player characters (even if they are, by chance, noble or refined), but she knows her duty. She explains that the Vau are traveling throughout the Known Worlds and offering to seemingly random strangers invitations similar to those the cadre received. More details than that she does not know; her orders are to bear any invitees to Vril-Ya with no delay. She offers to have messengers sent to any residences to collect desired belongings for them, but she cannot allow them to leave.

She bids them farewell, lingering just before leaving the room and turning to examine them silently. She then says: "I fought the Vau during the Emperor Wars. Few know of it today, but a handful of their ships invaded the Midian system. My entire fleet of six frigates were barely a match for two starships the size of escorts. Even then, they escaped. I don't know to this day why they did it. To test us for an invasion or to unnerve us, perhaps. Mayhap they sought to draw our forces away to aid Decados treachery."

She sighs, looking away from them. "I tell you this to remind you that they cannot be trusted. Whatever they want you for is surely for their sole benefit, not yours or the emperor's. Remember that." She then leaves, heeding no requests for further conversation.

The cadre is then ushered into a side room where a meal has been prepared. They are given one hour to eat and await the return of any messengers. During this time, they can attempt to chat it up with the ensigns serving them or the marines, but these servicemen and women know little about what's going on. They do know that the Vau ship has already left and is being followed to the jumpgate by a small wing of Imperial escort ships. They don't know where it's bound.

Once the hour is up, the marines march them out onto the tarmac, where an odd vessel awaits them. It is perhaps one of the strangest Known Worlds ships they have seen, for its make is unlike any known. It is sleek and thin, with few rivets or broken surfaces along its completely black hull. It stretches 60 meters in length, 20 in width and 15 in height — about the size of a frigate. One turret (with heat blasters) is planted on its top hull, and other weapons (heat blasters and numerous grapple guns) stud the outer hulls of the gundecks.

A woman stands by the ladder leading up into the ship. "Welcome to the *Nocturnal*, gentle sentients. I'll be your captain for this journey. Altara Alveda's the name."

(See her description and traits at the end of this chapter.)

4. Voyage to Vril-Ya

The characters are shown to small, tight cabins and left to their own devices. (Oversized characters, such as Vorox and Shantor, are bunked in the cargo space.) Their weapons were handed to crewmen by the marines, taken off for storage, although the cadre is not told where. (They are kept in a storage locker in Alveda's quarters; only she has the key.) During takeoff preparations, the ship's crew is tightlipped and shares only basic pleasantries with them.

Up to this point, the cadre has been herded around with little choice to act as they desire. For the course of this voyage, it's now up to them to work their way into the crew's trust and find out valuable information. Nothing more will be told to them unless they seek out the captain or crew for conversation. There are no set rules for determining whether or not player characters successfully gain the information listed below; roleplaying skill should win the day, although social skill rolls (Charm, Debate, etc.) can help now and then.

The following information can be learned:

• The crew are all Imperial Eye operatives, led by Altara Alveda, a field agent. The complete complement is 46 (including the captain), broken down as follows:

- One pilot
- One co-pilot/navigator
- Four bridge operatives (sensors, ship systems observers, etc.)
- Six jet jockeys (maneuver jet operators)
- One chief engineer
- One assistant engineer
- Six auxiliary engineers
- Eight gunners
- Eighteen marines (normally, the ship crews 24 marines, but six have been relieved to make room for six cadre passengers)

• The travel time to the system's jumpgate takes about five days, and the journey from the destination gate to Vril-Ya takes about four and a half days. (This can be shortened or extended, depending on what planet they launch from; AU distances are provided for a number of systems in the **Imperial Survey** series of sourcebooks, and calculations can be made using the chart on p. 241 of the **Fading Suns** Second Edition rulebook.)

Added to this is a quarter day per extra system the ship must traverse before reaching Vril-Ya, as the ship turns around and reenters the gate (ignoring any queues; see below). For intance, if the cadre launched from Byzantium Secundus, they would have to travel through Criticorum,

Cadavus, Severus and Cadiz before reaching Vril-Ya (for an addition of one full day to the travel time). The *Nocturnal* was assigned the necessary jumpkeys by the admiral upon arrival at the cadre's world.

• The odd thing about this journey is that the ship is not stopped once — not to wait for the queue in their origination system or to pass security muster in the Vril-Ya system. It seems as if the ship is invisible. Indeed, it practically is. The *Nocturnal* is an Imperial Eye stealth ship. It avoids all traffic in its travels throughout the system and slips through the jumpgates unheralded. (If need be, it can pretend to be an Imperial messenger escort ship, and has codes for business with all sorts of houses in case noble privateers try to greet it.)

Characters who successfully convince the pilot or captain to let them hang out in the bridge can realize this after a period of scrutinizing the controls.

• The one place characters cannot cajole their way into is the stealth drive section. It is considered top-secret technology, and no prying eyes are allowed. The crew distrusts anyone who attempts to enter this cabin.

The Briefing

Once the ship enters the Vril-Ya system, Alveda will gather the cadre into the mess room and provide them with Imperial Eye dossiers on the Vau. If none of the characters can read, she will read the information to them. (In this case, players should take good notes, because they should not be allowed to reference the dossier later.) The dossier, written by an Eye agent codenamed "Spiderweb," is produced at the end of this book, and may be photocopied as handouts for the players.

From this point on, Alveda seems to warm up to the characters (if they haven't broken the ice through their own actions earlier in the voyage). She makes it clear on numerous occasions that they are a "team" and have to work together on such tricky assignments as this one.

If by chance, one or more of the characters are Imperial Eye agents, Alveda will give them the Vau dossier as soon as they launch and the crew will be less secretive around them. However, even if one of them outranks her, she will make it clear that, as far as this mission is concerned, she is in charge. Indeed, she'll be quite happy to have this leverage over the cadre.

Verden City

Five days after passing through the Vril-Ya jumpgate, the *Noctural* lands on a large island hosting Verden City, the diplomatic hub for human-Vau relations. The majority of the planet's surface is covered by a huge ocean, dotted here and there with large islands. Those islands east of Verden City are home to the Vau, and cannot be scrutinized by flyovers or satellite observance, at the risk of angering the Vau (who destroyed the last satellite that attempted this and shunned the diplomat they deemed responsible, forcing him to seek a post off-world).

The cadre is provided lush quarters in the Imperial Wing, with servants, hot jacuzzis, and all sorts of high-tech luxuries at their disposal. However, they are not permitted to leave the premises until word from on high allows.

Altara Alveda excuses herself, explaining that she has to check in alone with her superiors and find out what the next step is. As soon as she is gone, a messenger delivers a letter for them. It is from Duchess Elmira Dolomea Hecuba Hawkwood, the Imperial liaison for Vril-Ya. The cadre is requested to come that evening to her birthday party. The invitation emphasizes how rude it would be to decline. The messenger expects an answer: yes or no, and leaves as soon as he has it. If yes, he explains that a coach will be brought for them that evening.

If no, another messenger will return later, asking once more. If the answer is still no, Altara Alveda reappears still later, apologizing for not being there and demanding that the cadre attend the party. It seems her superiors have requested it, although she does not know why. (If pressed by a character who has won her trust, she reveals that she suspects other Eye agents unknown to her will attempt to question them there or draw information from them surreptitiously, through intermediaries. She also expects that other intelligence agencies will be crawling all over the place.)

5. A Mirror Darkly

The characters have a few hours before the party in which to sleep, lounge in the bath, read in the well-stocked study, or take constitutionals in the wooded park. They have been cooped-up together on a starship for at least two weeks — they should each need elbow room and time away from one another. (Maybe a few Calm + Focus rolls to prevent them snapping at one another as tempers fray will drive the point home.)

Each character — regardless of low social class — has a servant assigned to accompany him wherever he goes, at his beck and call. These servants are not allowed to leave the characters except for short jaunts or tasks.

The gamemaster should take each player aside for a short, private interval, asking them what their character does with his time. Make a few mock rolls to create an atmosphere of possible danger, but nothing really happens here, except maybe some fun roleplaying.

The Substitute

Now comes the hard decision: The gamemaster should choose one player from the group who he believes is best up to the roleplaying challenge described below. It's okay to play favorites here; the better this player can pull the task off, the more fun everyone will have.

That player character's servant turns on him. She is actually a devious intelligence agent named Glams Darvo — a metonym, genetically engineered so that she can change her physical appearance to look like anyone she desires. Her psychic abilities only enhance this effect. (Glams's traits are provided at the end of this chapter.)

Glams first shatters a piece of crystal into the wall or floor next to the character. Immediately, the world goes silent. This is *zanklo'halsh*, Hush Glass, a highly experimental technology gleaned from — what else? — Vau tech. Shattered nanites resonate a field in an area five meters' radius about the area of impact wherein no sounds can be heard and from which no sound can escape. In addition, it acts as a shield damper, shorting out energy shields. The effect lasts for 10 turns, but the glass can be used only once.

Glams then shoots the character with her needler gun, injecting him with a quick-acting sedative. This has been concocted from the powerful but extremely rare (and thus, highly expensive) *sto'kantli* weed on Manitou, grown only in Vau territory. The player may make an Endurance + Stoic Body roll for his character: the victory points equal the number of turns he can stay awake, suffering a cumulative –2 penalty on all his actions per turn. (Remember, none of the character's weapons have been returned as yet.)

During this time of potential struggle, Glams grapples the character to prevent him from leaving the Hush Glass's area of effect. Once the character begins to succumb, Glams begins to assume his form. The character sees, just before losing consciousness, his servant's face shift and metamorph into — his own image!

The unconscious character is actually in a hypnotized state, allowing Glams to interrogate him, learning about his background and relationships with the rest of the cadre, including recent events in their lives.

Now, for the challenge: The player of the subdued character must now play the metonym, pretending to be his character. Give the player Glams's character sheet (provided at the end of this chapter).

Thanks to the hypnotism drug, Glams knows enough to "fake" her way through for a while; perhaps she will explain away her unwillingness to engage in long conversations by pretending to have a cold. Her best tactic is to remain quiet and noncommittal. If she could, she would beg off going to the party, but this is not allowed.

The group should have an interesting time roleplaying the coming events standing shoulder to shoulder with an imposter. At any point along the way, they may figure out the deception and attempt to catch Glams. If this happens, see "The Envoy," below, for her reaction.

The real character is bound, gagged, and hidden in a rarely used closet in an unused guest room. It is extremely unlikely he will be discovered once he awakens, no matter the noise he makes. The plan is that, two days later, once the cadre has left for their meeting with the Vau, Glams's masters will send another servant to carry the character off to a new interrogation, wherein they will attempt to find out why the Vau chose the cadre. However, they won't get the chance; see "The Envoy," below.

Good luck!

(If absolutely no opportunity arises in which a player character can be "replaced," then Altara Alveda is replaced instead. She is not as kindly as before, is more withdrawn and seems to not remember small conversations from the recent journey. Luckily, however, she can bow out of the birthday party....)

6. The Birthday Party

Each character is provided a loan of finery fitting his own tastes, but he is not allowed to bear weapons (or cyber holdouts!). These must be left behind in the Imperial compound. The only exception is for nobles, who are allowed to bear dueling weapons in case a contention of honor arises.

If she has not yet returned, Altara Alveda appears now, unhappy about the forced social engagement, but unable to convince her superiors to use their clout to beg out of it. She herself, however, is not going; she must tend to the *Nocturnal* and make it ready in case it's needed.

A horsedrawn carriage arrives at the entrance, and a servant opens the door for the guests. The carriage can comfortably bear eight people; any oversized character — such as a Vorox — will be asked to ride on top (where the luggage is normally stored on long journeys), while Shantor will be asked to run alongside or behind.

The carriage takes the scenic route through Verden City, and those looking out its windows are gifted with a vista rarely seen in these post-Republican times. The architecture is stunningly aesthetic, built in the far past when technology soared, and has been well maintained all these years. The tall towers and sprawling, many-windowed mansions and offices are made of a variety of beautiful materials: rainstone, Ravennan marble, molded ceramsteel, and colorcrete (astonishingly bright, durable concrete). Windows gleam in multifaceted and colored hues, designed more for

beauty than utility. The builders of Verden City sought to impress the Vau with art rather than utility, and had many of their best works moved from Cadiz, where they had been originally built.

The carriage eventually arrives in the center of the city, at the most luxurious palace yet, the home of the Imperial Ambassador to the Vau, Duchess Elmira Dolomea Hecuba Hawkwood and her consort Duke Matthias Garrius Eldan Hawkwood. The carriage pulls up outside the main entrance — a long pathway lit by floating everlights — and the driver jumps down to open the doors for his guests.

At the door to the hall, the steward greets them and requests their names. He then arranges them in a line in the following order: Freemen first, followed by guildsmembers, priests, and finally nobles, with the lowest-ranking member of each faction first, highest last. He steps into the hall, onto the stairwell balcony, and announces them:

"I present to you the Imperial Envoys to the Vau from (fill in the name of planet they received the invitation upon)." He then proceeds to announce them one by one in the order above, urging each person so-called to enter and proceed down the stairs into the spacious ballroom.

The Ballroom

The room is huge, stretching far to the right and left of the central entrance. Stairways to either side of the entry balcony lead down onto the polished marble floor, now filled with guests. Two rows of pillars festooned with birthday *ribbons* run the length of the hall. At either end, doors open into studies, art viewing rooms or servants' halls, while glass doors on the wall opposite the entry open onto a well-tended garden and patio, hosting a wide lawn and swimming pool. The garden is labyrinthine — perfect for discreet couples to get lost in — while the yard is well lit, a fine place for lawn games.

Guests

The guests range from lavishly dressed nobles, priests and guild representatives, to less stunning but nonetheless well-appointed freemen (merchants and craftsmen mainly), and a few private servants attending entourages.

Throughout the evening, there are a number of people who want to meet the player characters. This is basically the roleplaying-intensive part of this act, and serves both to reveal everyone's desperation to uncover the Vau and to make the characters realize the weight of their responsibility — they truly represent their entire race and civilization in this endeavor. In addition, how well they play off these various movers and shakers determines their allies on their return from the envoyship.

Besides politics, some guests simply want to shoot the breeze, and cadre members curious about local customs on



The Ghost Moon

There is a legend on Vril-Ya about the Ghost Moon, a satellite that once orbited the planet but was flung from its path to plummet into the vast ocean below. There are many alleged causes for this celestial cataclysm, but the most popular one is some dread Vau terraforming device that went awry when that race first claimed the world. (Some say the moon's "death" was intentional.)

Regardless, sailors claim to see the Ghost Moon at times, in the middle of the night, deep below the waters, still following an orbital path. It is always full, however, and seems to have lost its phases. It is considered a terrible omen to see the Ghost Moon, for tidal disasters tend to follow in its wake — the fallen moon still has the power to tug at the waves. According to legend, monsoons and hurricanes are manifestations of its passing.

Such danger is sung in the local sea shanty, "Watery Grave O' the Moon":

Gather your faith, boys
For the tide's streamin' in
The moon's been seen
Swimmin' round with a grin
Circlin' its prey deep down below
Don't know if we'll live or die
Come tomorrow we'll know

The Ghost Moon is one of the chief obstacles preventing free sailing across the ocean into Vau lands, leading some to suspect not some mythical legend but a Vau security device.

Vril-Ya can find out much, if they bother to ask. (For an example, see "The Ghost Moon" sidebar, a story told to any who ask about what it's like overseas in Vau territory.)

It is notable that there are no Vau here at the party; it is strictly a Known Worlds affair.

Nobles

The birthday girl, Duchess Elmira Dolomea Hecuba Hawkwood, sits on a plush seat, behind which stands her bored consort. Her close friend and advisors fetch the newly arrived cadre to her immediately. She is very excited to see them and makes no pretense to hide her obvious examination of them. She looks over every inch of them, obviously seeking some clue or sign as to their importance. But there are too many people to see this evening (everybody who's anybody is here or shortly to arrive), and she soon thanks them for coming to her party and ushers them away so she can greet another new arrival.

If one of the player characters was thoughtful enough to bring her a gift, she will be overjoyed and keep it close to her, suspecting it to hold some secret clue meant only for her about their coming meeting with the Vau.

The duchess is a rather shallow woman, raised in opulence on Ravenna but with little political know-how or ambition. Alexius awarded her this useless but ornamental post as a gift for her father, one of the emperor's generals, who was desperate to be rid of her upkeep. She has meet with the Vau only on two ceremonial occasions, and they seemed to take little interest in her or any human at those times.

Other nobles flit about the room, most of them ambassadors from their own houses or aides to absent ambassadors. Some seem like the Machiavellian type while others seem to be in semi-retirement. Few of them have actually met a Vau.

Trouble awaits any noble character in the form of Baron Voxil Enteus Torenson, an embittered diplomat with a death wish. The player characters might provide the perfect excuse for him to die noble — namely, in a duel. While such a high-profile death — killed by a Vau envoy — will garner fame, it is unlikely any player character has the family connections to threaten a victorious Voxil with vendettas. Thus, they are the perfect marks for his scheme to kill himself, and if he fails (by killing the player character), well, maybe the increased notoriety will bring him a real challenge.

Voxil will attempt to initiate a duel by taking insult at just about anything the characters say to him. He will demand satisfaction. The choice of weapons and terms belongs to the challenged character, although Voxil will try to raise the stakes during the duel itself.

(Baron Voxil Enteus Torenson's traits are provided at the end of this chapter.)

The Church

The most powerful person present, Archbishop Leandra, is quite old and feeble. She spends most of the party asleep on a divan, guarded and aided by a bee's hive of lower-ranking priests. Most of the local clergy either attends the archbishop or could not attend. The other clergymembers in the crowd are from offworld, members of noble entourages or pilgrims and missionaries seeking either to see the Vau or bring their own brand of evangelism to them.

One local exception is Bishop Kanli Stueffensen of the Urth Orthodox, a Church diplomat to the Vau who is very eager to meet the envoys, especially any among them who might be a priest. He explains to this person (or a sympathetic-seeming member of the cadre if none are priests) that the Vau are in peril without contrition for their deadly sin — the murder of the Prophet. He seeks the player characters' aide in soliciting a confession from a Mandarin. If this can be done, he believes, the entire race might at least be saved from whatever horrible fate awaits their souls in the Dark

Between the Stars — where their unreflective spirits will be sucked without the gravity of grace to impel them to the Empyrean.

(Bishop Kanli Stueffensen's traits are provided at the end of this chapter.)

Merchant League

The local guild representatives are rather shallow folk — the League's best and brightest have long given up on gaining any tech breakthroughs or trade contracts here on Vril-Ya. Hence, only the middle management types who prefer bureaucracy to mercantilism come here. Even the Muster rep is a rather dry, cold fish, an ex-labor contractor rather than the more romantic profession of mercenary or even slaver.

Director Hilda Greaves of the Reeves Guild is one of the few who actually has some irons in the fire — she has figured that the Vau are very concerned about the Symbiot menace and hopes to use this as a means to initiate further relations and possible trade talks. As an Imperial representative, Greaves has the authority to offer the transfer of some key secrets concerning military encounters with Symbiots on Stigmata. The problem is that she fears to openly offer this to the local Vau, who she has realized are mere figureheads, incapable of acting without instruction from deeper in the Hegemony. The advent of the envoys is the perfect chance, and she will attempt to recruit a League member to open negotiations for her — all he has to do is mention her offer and let the Vau come to her for more.

(Director Hilda Greaves's traits are provided at the end of this chapter.)

I Spy with My Little Eye

Of course, elements of just about every secret society are here amidst the crowd. Throughout the evening, various agents attempt to wheedle what information they may from the characters. All of them wear various disguises, such that only a fellow field operative even has a chance of figuring out their false identities, and then only if he's on the watch for them.

The breakdown of agencies and their goals is such:

• **Imperial Eye:** Agents of the Eye are here, unknown to the characters (they are not crewmembers of the *Nocturnal*); their mission is to prevent other agencies from finding out too much, by interrupting envoys in mid-speech or spilling drinks on the overly inquisitive.

• **The Hidden Martyrs:** The Li Halan are ever worried about the Vau, for their worlds — along with the Decados — are the closest to the border. They need information about what the envoyship entails and its purpose.

• **Jakovian Agency:** Of course, the Decados are here. However, they are the most restrained of the agencies. They seek information, but are in no desperation to get it. (They're relying instead on Glams Darvo, their "insider.")

• **Killroys:** This Charioteer agency is mainly concerned with intelligence inside the guild — watching for traitors and such, and spying on other guilds. However, they do have some operatives watching over the other factions, mainly ensuring that no jumproutes are illegally exchanged. Their main goal here is to obtain jumproute info into Vau space. One of their "merchants" may pose a deal to one of the player characters if his initial conversation (concerning the marketing of black-market Vau tech) goes well.

• **Others:** Among the other agencies that are not so well represented, but that might have at least one agent in the crowd, are: Church Penitents (psychics spying for the Orthodoxy), Mutasih (al-Malik) and Rooks (Hawkwood spies — most local agents are known to the Eye and so keep a low profile).

No traits for these spies are provided, since — if they do their jobs well — no one will realize they are anything but shallow locals or visiting officials. The moment their guises are threatened, they will withdraw with whatever excuse seems most handy. The gamemaster should play them as colorful distractions, doing little to clue in their true importance.

Aliens

There is a representative of each Known Worlds sentient race here (except for the Ascorbites), each an ambassador to the Vau. They are, for the most part, glad of their privileged status but rather lonely. While they do have servants of their own kinds here, there is little to do beside entertain humans, for the Vau seem to take no interest in them.

Each ambassador will be curious to meet the cadre, but unless others of their own kind are members, the interest will not last long.

Fellow Envoys

The cadre is not the only group of envoys here. The rumors are true — the Vau have offered invitations to various groups throughout the Known Worlds. These rival envoys are:

• A disgruntled team of high-level diplomats handpicked by Alexius but refused by the Vau. They aren't happy about it, and they believe the player character cadre is to blame in some inexplicable way. (These guys might become future political rivals, interfering where they can with the player characters' advancement through the ranks.)

• A noble and her entourage from Byzantium Secundus who arrived before the player character cadre. Dame Fwalta Evair Trusnikron is as surprised about her invitation as the player characters were; she has no clue why she was chosen above any other representative. She's a tall, wiry woman who comes from a rural fief, more at home training urrocs

on her homeworld of Tethys than in ballrooms such as this.

Her companions are just as colorful as she: Sinclair Equaphile, a fat, jovial Reeve; Lewar Sobanyin, an Ur-Obun Charioteer; Simile Marco, a small, petite Zuranist girl who comes off rather witchy; and Omak, a heavily muscled Engineer who once served House Shelit on Hira.

They are just as in demand among the party guests as is the player character cadre, and so they must snatch bits of conversation from the other cadre as time allows. However, upon their first greeting, Dame Fwalta says to the cadre: "Lucky you, going on to Shaduveen. Nobody's been there in ages."

If the cadre inquires as to what she means by that, she'll explain: "Don't you know? I guess you guys arrived after the Vau delegation returned overseas. You're going to Shaduveen. You know, the place everyone called 'Vau.' We're staying here, but going overseas in a day or two to meet the Vau."

She further expresses her envy that they get the gravy — read "dangerous" — assignment, while they get the boring local one. She also informs the cadre that other envoys were chosen to visit Manitou and Apshai, but she doesn't think they're meeting here.

7. Early Morning Muster

Once the duchess tires (around midnight), the party fizzles out and the cadre can leave by the same carriage in which it arrived. The night is uneventful. However, early in the morning, before sunrise — about 4:30 am or so — the cadre is awoken by servants and told that the Vau have suddenly appeared, requesting their presence.

The cadre is quickly ushered to the stores and are allowed to equip themselves with basic needs. The gamemaster should set an egg timer going for five minutes and let the players choose what they can from the list. Once the egg timer goes off, that's it — the characters are ushered out to meet the Vau, and their chosen equipment is all they have for the rest of the drama.

There are no weapons, but their own weapons are returned now.

(NOTE: The plain hooded cloak on the list is not what it appears — it is actually a TL7 Blur Cloak: -6 to others' Per rolls when standing still while wearing it.)

A Traitor Among You

The cadre is taken by skimmer to the spaceport, where a group of Vau awaits them. Nearby is the *Nocturnal*, and beyond it is a small Vau spacecraft, parked on the ground with a lowered stairway leading into its interior.

The Mandarin looks suspiciously like the same one as before, but he is not. Characters who actively try to look for resemblance may make Introvert or Perception + Focus rolls; those who succeed realize he's not the same one. This is Slee'wau Vim Tlephta'al, aide to Yoma Zahl Vord-rumph and in charge of security for this envoy mission. He does not smile, since it is a human custom with which he is largely unfamiliar and does not really understand. If a player character does manage to make him laugh (doubtful), it will come out as a trumpeting "ooh-ooh-ooh" sound.

He is surrounded, of course, by an escort of nine Soldiers, each armed with energy staves and armor.

Slee'wau Vim reveals a handheld think machine from his voluminous sleeves (a Valukesh Ha'eni oriel) and "scans" the cadre: He approaches each character and holds the oriel such that he can view its glyphs and the character with the same gaze. He goes from one to another making no remarks and revealing no emotions — until he gets to the metonym spy. (Unless Glams was already revealed earlier.)

He frowns at the metonym and speaks, looking straight at her: "Remove the veil and restore the whole or departure is denied." (Note: If the metonym took Altara Alveda's identity instead of a player character's, she is not scanned and gets away scot free — until aboard the *Nocturnal*; see "On to Shaduveen," below.)

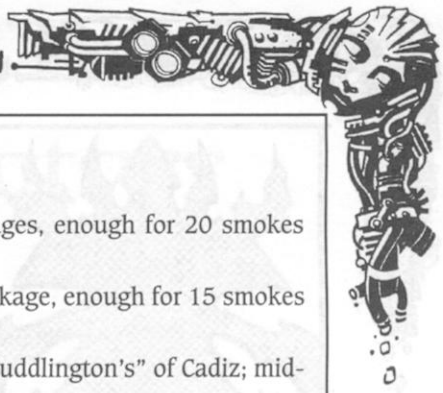
Remember, the metonym is played by a player character, who must now respond to the Vau's strange utterance. If she does not respond within about half a minute, or tries to deny her true identity, Slee'wau Vim nods to a Soldier and says: "Zeed!"

The Soldier aims his energy staff and zaps the metonym. (Don't roll dice — the character is automatically stunned, no matter her defenses.) At this point, it should be clear that the jig is up — Glams's deceit can't really work anymore. The gamemaster should pass the player a note advising Glams to flee the scene, but leaving the decision to the player.

If she keeps "playing innocent," the Vau will motion to the Soldiers and say: "Uban sopito, sadla." They will then surround the metonym and clasp her, and then drag her off to their ship, where she won't be seen or heard from again.

It's of course possible that the rest of the cadre will attempt to interfere with this bizarre behavior directed at their friend. The Mandarin will look upon them with pity, but ignore them, as will the Soldiers. Their armor and energy shields are well capable of ignoring most attacks — but not all. If any character does attack them, they will attack back with their staves, set on stun.

If pressed for an explanation, the Mandarin says: "She is not of you. I request that your missing member be restored." If pressed further, he will seem confused, as if trying to find words, and say: "She is fake. Not true image."



Available Equipment

The cadre can choose items from the following list:

Sack, small (10 available)

Sack, large (4 available)

Backpack, medium (5 available)

Silk shirts (3 available in XL)

Gloves, leather (2 pairs)

Gloves, silk (1 pair)

Leather pants (4 available in L)

Hiking boots (5 available; TL6 adjustable sizes)

Hooded cloak, plain (1 available)

Hooded cloak, fine (1 available; noble fashion)

Spacesuit, standard (10 available; TL6, ARM 3d)

Spacesuit, superb (1 available; TL8, ARM 2d, does not interfere with energy shields)

Candles (20 available)

Matches, standard (500 available)

Flint gun (2 available; TL5 flamemakers — enough to ignite kindling or pipes, cannot be used as weapons)

Lanterns (5 available)

Fusion Torches (6 available; TL7, each fusion cell lasts for one week)

Fusion Cells (10 micro, 20 standard)

Rope (hemp — 100 feet total)

Rope (synthetic fiber — lighter and just as strong as hemp; 50 feet total)

Timepiece (mechanical wristwatch — 1 available)

Timepiece (fusion-powered pocketwatch — lasts for five years on one cell; 1 available)

Compass (1 available)

Travel rations (freeze-dried food, enough for five people for two weeks; 20 lbs.)

Travel rations (nutropudding, Second Republic tasteless military staple that provides good nutrition for five people for one week; 4 lbs.)

Wineskin, leather (5 available)

Wineskin, synthplastic (2 available)

Pipe (2 available)

Tobacco, Cadiz (2 packages, enough for 20 smokes each)

Tobacco, Manitou (1 package, enough for 15 smokes — mild euphoric)

Beer (12 six-packs of "Puddlington's" of Cadiz; mid-quality)

Beer (6 six-packs of "Darktaint," featuring a menacing Ur-Ukar mascot on the label; poor quality)

Ale (1 keg of "Old Urth," brewed in monasteries on Holy Terra; high quality; 20 lbs.)

Med Pacs (5 available, includes 10 injections of Elixir)

Nanotech Med Pac (1 available)

Whisper Pins (3 available)

Scrambler Pad (1 available; TL7)

Spectrum Goggles (1 available; TL7 — can see in the known energy spectrum, but cannot perceive most Vau fields)

Hierarchy Think Machines (2 available; TL7 wristwatches)

Book: "My Travels Among the Madocans, being an account of those Sea-Folk by Baron Horus Godavan Decados"

Book: "Imperial Protocols for the Feast, by Sir Evian Leigh Torenson" (pub. 4833, outdated)

Magic Lantern player (1 available; plays standard holovids)

Holovid: "Capture of the Queen" (A Carnivalers guild swashbuckler set in Vuldrok space; complete fantasy)

Holovid: "Beware the Vau" (anti-Vau propaganda)

Holovid: "True Diplomacy" (live camera captures of diplomatic events — useful only for the aficionado)

Music Player (1 available; wristwatch)

Music: "Lau's *Celestia*, Opus 33 for Ur-Obun Mood Organ"

Music: "Cantos of the Quest: Chorali Chants for Saint Paulus"

Music: "Etyri Songs for the Departed, composed and conducted by Sheik Abada Keddah"

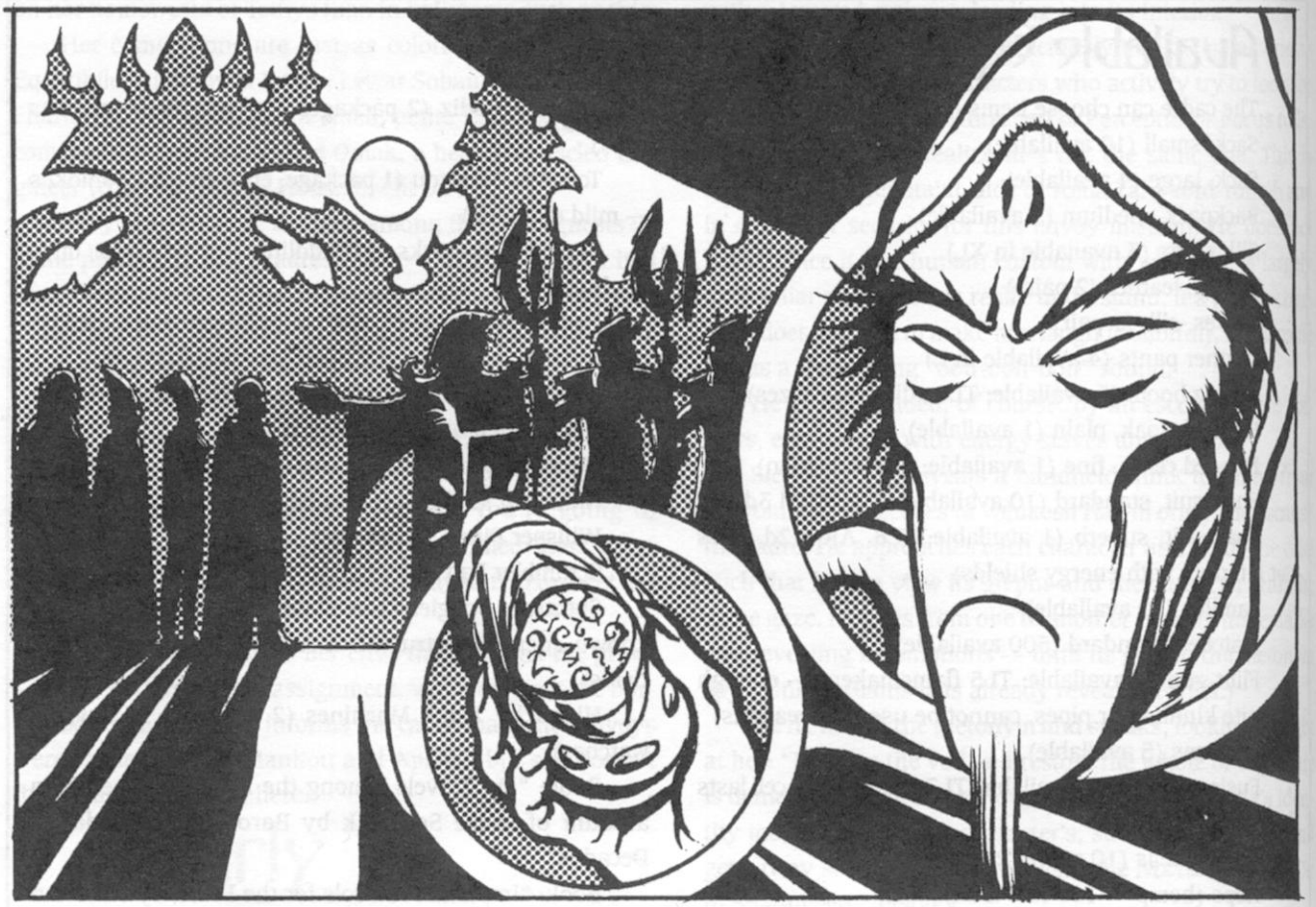
Altara Alveda will appear from the *Nocturnal* and question the Vau in the Foreign Tongue. She seems shocked and turns to the cadre: "He claims that she (pointing at the struggling metonym, now disappearing into the Vau ship) is not your friend, but an imposter. He says we should search our sleep places for your friend."

If the characters still don't get a clue, Alveda will send agents back to search for the missing player character, who will be found bound and gagged, hungry and tired, but otherwise well.

If at anytime, Glams drops her façade and reveals herself (this is entirely up to the player), Alveda will request that the Vau surrender her to Imperial authorities, which he will do. Once the real player character is uncovered, Glams's player can resume his proper role.







8. On to Shaduveen

Slee'wau Vim scans the real player character and is satisfied. (Note: No one who was not a part of the group when the invitation was presented earlier is allowed to travel. Not all members needed to be present at the time; as long as they are considered to be part of the gang, they can go. This is more an emotional bonding the Vau measure than a formal organization.)

The Mandarin gestures to the *Nocturnal* and says: "Please that you board your ship. It will be carried by ours." This may come as a shock to the characters but not to Alveda, who was briefed just before they arrived about the imminent departure.

Once everyone is aboard and ready, the Vau request that they launch and travel outside the planet's gravity well. Once there, a huge Vau ship approaches and engulfs the now tiny-seeming *Nocturnal* in its plasma sphere. Immediately, its thrust and maneuver drives shut down and the ship's movement is completely controlled by the Vau ship. The large Vau vessel rotates on its axis and accelerates to the jumpgate.

There are a number of things which may occur on the journey:

• **Metonym Trouble:** If Glams took Alveda's identity, she will become very scarce, spending most of the time in the captain's cabin. Since the ship is under Vau control, she is not required to give out codes and passwords for engaging the jumpgate, and thus has no reason to raise the crew's suspicion, except for those who comment on her "nervousness of late." They all figure it's the pressure of the assignment.

• **Language Lessons:** The player characters had a chance to hear Alveda talking in the Vau Foreign Tongue (unless she is really Glams Darvo in disguise, in which case there was no need for her to speak to the Mandarin). If any request to learn the language, she will teach what she can on the journey, but there's really not enough time to cover even the basics, only some bare vocabulary at best. However, this may come in handy in future acts.

Otherwise, the cadre is on its own again for nine-and-a-half day journey through the jumpgate and onto Shaduveen.

Non-Player Characters

Below are the traits for every major non-player character to appear in this act. Those NPCs unlikely to become involved in dice-rolling situations are not given traits here; gamemasters should feel free to devise traits for any NPC that needs them.

Bigoted Thugs

Race: Human, all too human
Rank/Class: None
Quote: "Dirty, stinkin', Vau-lovin' traitors!"
Description: The worst of the hoi polloi, these street toughs look intimidating and unwashed, with perpetual sneers and frowns on their unshaven faces.
Entourage: They travel only in gangs, since each alone is too cowardly to face his alleged oppressors.
Body: Strength 7 (+1d DMG), Dexterity 5, Endurance 5
Mind: Wits 3, Perception 3, Tech 3
Spirit: Extrovert 3, Introvert 1, Passion 3, Calm 1, Faith 3, Ego 1
Natural skills: Dodge 4, Fight 5, Impress 5, Melee 5, Vigor 5
Learned skills: A variety of low-level craft or trades skills (Artisan), in addition to Streetwise 5
Wyrd: 3
Weapons: All manner of makeshift weapons — sticks, pipes, sharpened dinner knives, broken bottles, etc. Generally, figure on INIT 5, GOAL 10, DMG 4 or 5d (including STR bonus).
Armor: None
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0

Sneak Thieves — Coddle and Crebs

Race: Human
Rank/Class: None
Quote: "We'll defend you from that rabble, sir, just you see!"
Description: Two small, malnourished young men dressed in rags, their faces covered in grime.
Entourage: They always work together, but with no one else.
Body: Strength 3, Dexterity 6, Endurance 3
Mind: Wits 3, Perception 5, Tech 3
Spirit: Extrovert 3, Introvert 1, Passion 1, Calm 3, Faith 1, Ego 3
Natural skills: Charm 5, Dodge 6, Fight 4, Melee 4, Observe 5, Sneak 7, Vigor 5
Learned skills: Streetwise 6
Wyrd: 3
Weapon: Knife (INIT 4, GOAL 10, DMG 2)
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0

Imperial Marine Squad

Race: Human
Rank/Class: Privates led by a single corporal
Quote: "Halt in the name of the Emperor!"
Description: Snazzy dress uniforms — black leather jumpsuits with gold pinstriping up and down the outer arms and legs — and well-groomed faces set these soldiers off from the common rabble found in any army town.
Entourage: This squad of 12 can break down to handle tasks in fireteams of two or more each.
Body: Strength 5, Dexterity 6, Endurance 5
Mind: Wits 5, Perception 4, Tech 3
Spirit: Extrovert 3, Introvert 1, Passion 1, Calm 3, Faith 3, Ego 1
Natural skills: Dodge 5, Fight 6, Impress 6, Melee 6, Shoot 6, Vigor 6
Learned skills: Gambling 2, Remedy 3, Search 2, Spacesuit, Stoic Body 1
Wyrd: 3
Equipment: Two spare SMG ammo clips, one spare revolver load, Muster chains
Weapons:

WEAPON	INIT	GOAL	DMG	SHOTS
Cutlass	6	12	6	NA
Frap stick	5	12	6/3	NA
Med Revolver	6	12	5	6
Submachinegun	6	12	5	20
3-rounds	6	12	5	
6-rounds	5	11	8	
Empty clip	5	10	10	

Armor: Leather jumpsuit (4d)
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0

Altara Alveda — Imperial Eye Operative

Race: Human
Rank/Class: Field Agent
Quote: "I don't think you have any idea of what you're getting into here. You need me...."
Description: Young and pretty, with blue eyes and black hair, standing 5'7" tall, Altara looks more like a pampered princess in her mid-20s than a hardened field agent. Few realize that she is really in her 50s — a long-time recipient



of longevity serums.

Entourage: The crewmembers of her ship, the *Nocturnal*, are all Eye agents and expert in a variety of fields: surveillance, demolitions, disguise, engineering and weapons.

Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 8, Endurance 7

Mind: Wits 8, Perception 9, Tech 5

Spirit: Extrovert 5, Introvert 5, Passion 5, Calm 5, Faith 5, Ego 5

Natural skills: Charm 9, Dodge 7, Fight 6, Impress 7, Melee 6, Observe 9, Shoot 8, Sneak 9, Vigor 7

Learned skills: Academia 3, Bureaucracy 4, Disguise 5, Drive Aircraft 5, Landcraft 4, Spacecraft 2, Watercraft 3, Etiquette 7, Focus 6, Inquiry 9, Knavery 8, Lockpicking 4, Lore (Known Worlds) 9, Lore (Vau) 9, Physick 2, Read Urthish, Read Vau Foreign Tongue (basic), Remedy 7, Science (Physics) 3, Search 5, Sleight of Hand 5, Social (Acting) 5, Spacesuit, Speak Vau Foreign Tongue (basic), Stoic Body 4, Stoic Mind 6, Streetwise 8, Survival 2, Tech Redemption (Mech, Volt, High Tech) 2, Think Machine 5, Warfare (Demolitions) 2, Xeno-Empathy 5

Wyrd: 5

Equipment: A variety of incognito spy gear: lockpicks, whisper pins, tracking devices, binoculars, extra fusion cells (all sizes), etc. Her favored device, however, is a Shield Damper.

Weapons:

WEAPON	INIT	GOAL	DMG	SHOTS
Dirk	6	14	3	NA
Suresnake Whip	7	13*	3	NA
Palm Laser	8	16	3	7
Assault Laser	8	17	8	20

* GOAL 16 vs targeted foe

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

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

Baron Voxil Enteus Torenson

A decadent disgrace to his formal house ways, Voxil early on had great business success in interhouse diplomacy — but those were the giddy years of the Emperor Wars. Now, in the postwar years, he is a relic nobody wants. Consigned to this useless outpost on Vril-Ya, he daily descends deeper into his personal pit of despair, seeking ever more dangerous pursuits in a bid to quicken his slothening blood and perhaps win fame and a ticket offworld.

He recently led a covert commando insurgency off the island to witness Vau territory. His crew got a few miles inland on another island, witnessing some odd technology and creatures, but they were soon apprehended by Soldier-caste Vau. The mercenaries were killed, but Voxil was deposited back home, more shamed than before.

He is a time bomb waiting to explode, and one of the cadre is the trigger. A duel to the death is what he wants — his own death. He will make a number of unconscious mistakes in a fight, allowing his opponent key openings (for instance, he "forgot" to charge his energy shield, leaving him only 1 or 2 hits before a fight).

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Baron/House Torenson

Quote: "Must you insult me? I see that withering stare you direct at me! I will have satisfaction...."

Description: Despite his unkempt hair and five o'clock shadow, the baron's dress is impeccable. He wears a somewhat out-of-fashion style (it was "in" five years ago), but he wears it well, especially the short leather cape lined with Grackle Fox fur.

Entourage: Most of his steady band of helpmeets from the Emperor Wars have long since abandoned him, leaving



him with an old servant and an annoying Charioteer addicted to Selchakah called Captain Stainman. Despite Stainman's binges, he's the only one these days who will listen to Voxil's bitter, spleen-venting tirades.

Body: Strength 6 (+1d DMG), Dexterity 7, Endurance 5

Mind: Wits 6, Perception 5, Tech 3

Spirit: Extrovert 4, Introvert 1, Passion 5, Calm 2, Faith 1, Ego 5

Natural skills: Dodge 7, Impress 7, Melee 8, Shoot 5, Sneak 4

Learned skills: Arts (Music) 3, Etiquette 5, Gambling 5, Knavery 6, Lore (Commerce) 3, Lore (Vau) 3, Ride 5, Social (Debate) 4, Streetwise 3

Fencing: Voxil uses a rapier.

ACTION	INIT	GOAL	DMG
Parry	8	17	6
Thrust	10	15	6
Slash	6	15	7
Fancy Footwork*			
Compound Attack**	8	15	6
Feint***	6	14	
Parry/Riposte	8	17/14	6
Athletic Strike	5	13	6

* -1 opponent's goal/ v.p.

** Next turn: GOAL 17

*** +3 successes vs. dodge

Wyrd: 4

Equipment: Hankerchief, embroidered glove reserved for slapping an opponent's face (to declare a duel), one extra ammo load for his revolver

Weapons: Rapier, Hvy Revolver (INIT 5, GOAL 12, DMG 6d, SHOTS 6)

Armor: Dueling Shield (5/10, 7 hits remaining in cell — concealed in cape brooch)

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

Bishop Kanli Stueffensen — Urth Orthodox

It is Kanli's personal mission to redeem the Vau of their heinous sin — the murder of the Prophet. To this end, he fought hard for this post, but has since realized how empty it is — he has met with Vau Mandarins once a year at best, with little chance each encounter to engage them in a meaningful exchange. Indeed, their souls seem doomed.

Hence, he will try to impart his mission and zeal to any priest player character — no matter the sect. The Vau need but one thing: To confess their culpability and apologize. Only then will their mirrors once again accept the light.



He promises promotion and a Patriarchal audience if this is done. (He does ask any prospective confessor to bring holovid proof of such a conversion.)

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Urth Orthodox Bishop

Quote: "Ah, I fear greatly for their souls. They must recant! The murder of the Prophet is the most heinous of crimes."

Description: An elderly gentleman standing 5'4" tall with graying hair and liver spots, but piercing black eyes. He wears his robes of office wherever he goes, and a permanent stain has set in on the bottom hem.

Entourage: He is followed by page boys and priests of various rank, all tending to his frail condition.

Body: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Endurance 3

Mind: Wits 8, Perception 6, Tech 3

Spirit: Extrovert 7, Introvert 3, Passion 5, Calm 5, Faith 9, Ego 1

Natural skills: Charm 7, Observe 5

Learned skills: Academia 5, Alchemy 3, Artisan (Pottery) 3, Arts (Sculpture) 2, Bureaucracy 4, Empathy 3, Etiquette 6, Focus 5, Inquiry 5, Lore (Theology) 8, Physick 2, Read Latin, Read Vau (basic), Remedy 6, Social (Oratory) 7, Speak Vau (basic), Stoic Mind 3, Think Machine 2, Xeno-Empathy 3

Wyrd: 5

Equipment: Holy water vials and Elixir injections (3 each, which he will give to any priest who impresses him)

Weapons: Crozier (INIT 4, GOAL 6, DMG 4d)

Armor: Robes (2d)

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



Director Hilda Greaves Reeve

Hilda wants to open up the trade routes with the Vau. She cannily perceives that the Vau are unnerved by Symbiots. She can offer information on the metamorphs (tactical secrets, trained Stigmatan fighters, etc.) in return for access to Vau tech (she'll accept any concession to trade whatsoever at this stage, just to get a foot in the door). She represents the Emperor in this, and seeks to co-opt a League player character to make the initial offer for her — she'll do the follow-up. She promises riches and promotion.

She's actually on to something. Any player character who makes the offer will intrigue Vau Mandarins and initiate future negotiations.

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Reeves Guild Director

Quote: "Did you know they fear Symbiots? Yes, I figured it out myself after watching their reaction every time the subject was raised near them. We can use this to forge a better tomorrow for both our races...."

Description: A tall, well-groomed black woman with short-cropped black hair and blue eyes. She is dressed in an affluent but practical manner: riding pants and boots with an embroidered jacket.

Entourage: A team of paper-pushers and accountants follows her, ready with portable think machines to retrieve whatever data she asks for (usually to support her arguments).

Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Endurance 5

Mind: Wits 8 (CYBER 10), Perception 8, Tech 6

Spirit: Extrovert 8, Introvert 2, Passion 2, Calm 7, Faith 3, Ego 6

Natural skills: Charm 5, Impress 8, Observe 8, Shoot 5

Learned skills: Academia 8, Arts (Literature) 5, Bureaucracy 7, Drive Watercraft 2, Etiquette 8, Focus 3, Inquiry 9, Knavery 5, Lore (Finance) 7, Lore (Vau) 5, Read Urthish, Science (Anthropology) 2, Social (Debate) 8, Speak Vau (basic), Stoic Mind 4, Think Machine 5, Xeno-Empathy 2

Wyrd: 3

Cybernetics: Internal Think Machine (+2 Wits, Known Worlds Lore 7)

Equipment: Whisper pin

Weapons: Palm Laser (INIT 5, GOAL 9, DMG 3d)

Armor: Dueling shield (5/10, 15 hits — concealed in ornate ring)

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

Glams Darvo — Psychic Metonym

Of all the dervishes used by noble houses during the Emperor Wars, few were so effective as Glams Darvo. As a metonym mutant with awakened psychic powers — a master of Soma and Cloaking — there are few intelligence agents in the Known Worlds as deadly as Glams. Although she was birthed and raised in an elite Malignatian laboratory by Jakovian Agents, she saw action only at the very end of the war. Ever since then, her superiors have spent the years perfecting her training and using her against rival house interests.

She is one of the Jakovians' most secret weapons, one they activate only for the most important missions — and few missions are so important as an unprecedented journey into Vau space.

Race: Human (Changed)

Rank/Class: None

Quote: "Huh? Oh, sorry, just feeling tired is all. What was the question?"

Description: Glams' natural form is a woman of medium height and build with pasty skin and greasy hair.

Entourage: She works alone.

Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 5, Endurance 4

Mind: Wits 6, Perception 7, Tech 4

Spirit: Extrovert 4, Introvert 6, Passion 2, Calm 7, Faith 1, Ego 7

Natural skills: Charm 6, Dodge 7, Fight 6, Impress 5, Observe 9, Shoot 8, Sneak 10, Vigor 6

Learned skills: Drive (Landcraft 5, Aircraft 3, Spacecraft 1), Etiquette 3, Focus 7, Knavery 7, Lore (Known Worlds) 3, Lore (Poisons) 7, Performance 8, Ride 3, Stoic Body 3, Stoic Mind 8, Streetwise 6, Survival 2

Changed: Meta 7

Powers: Transformation, Pheromones (Trust: +6 Impress)

Occult: Psi 6

Powers: *Soma path* — Toughening (GOAL 12), Strengthening (GOAL 8), Quickening (GOAL 13), Hardening (GOAL 9), Sizing (GOAL 10), Masking (GOAL 10); *Cloaking path* — ShadowDance (GOAL 14), Stone Wall (GOAL 15), Veiled Face (GOAL 14)

Wyrd: 10

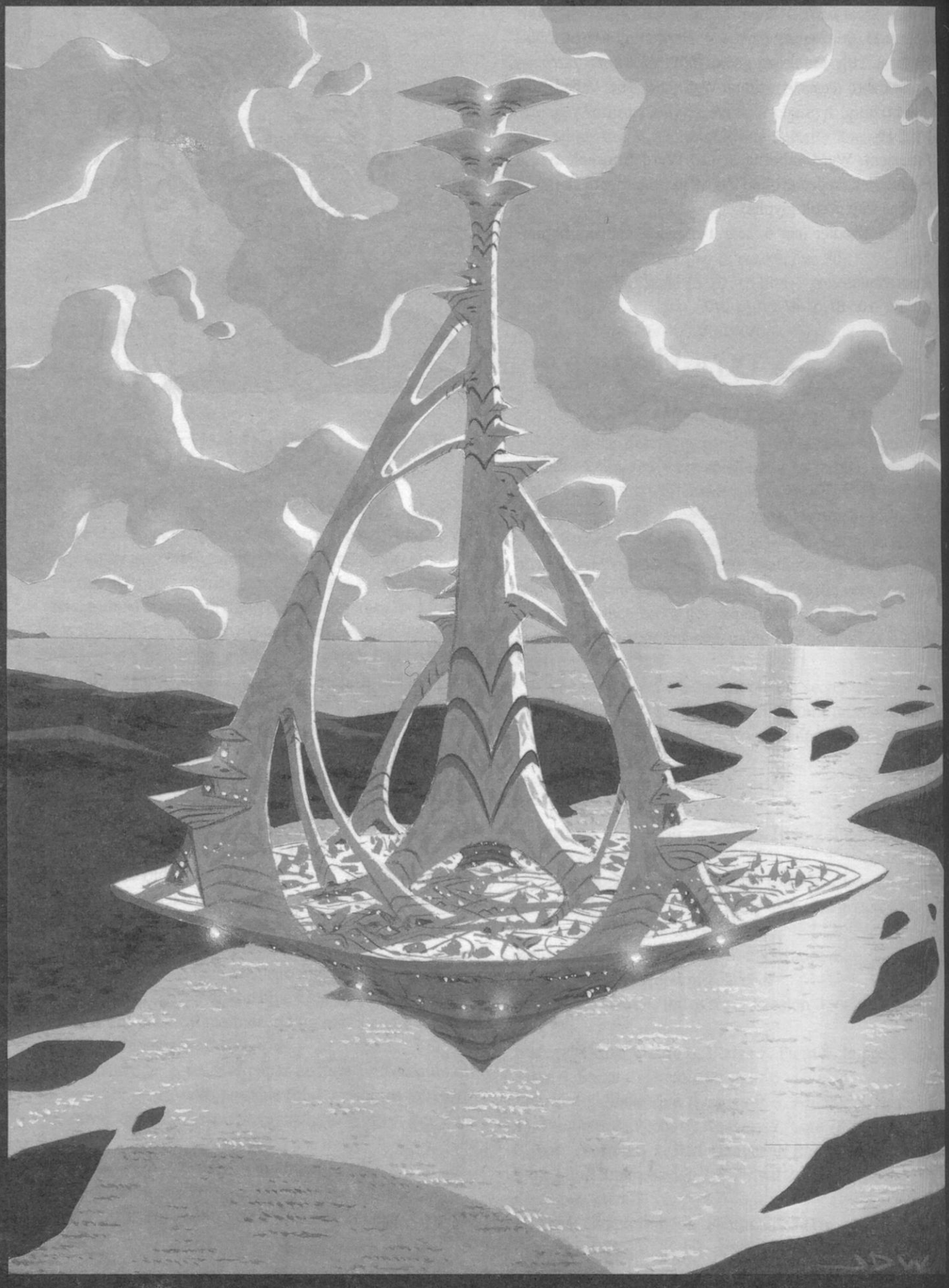
Equipment: Wyrd Tabernacle (20 Wyrd, concealed as a golden sash wrapped around her torso underneath clothing, inscribed with occult glyphs)

Weapons: Needler (INIT 6, GOAL 14, DMG 2, delivers hypnodrug)

Armor: None

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





Act Two: Envoys

Act Two Outline

This act is structured into five parts, each of varying duration depending on the characters' choices.

1. **Smooth Landing:** A surprise guest greets the cadre as they disembark from the *Nocturnal*. They must each don a special sheath so that they may survive Shaduveen's environment.

2. **The Road Goes Ever On**: The cadre is set to wander, allowed to go as it will seeking the *Swam'tal Huanzi*, the Palace of Fortuitous Chance. A number of encounters are possible.

3. **The Sleepy Village:** The cadre comes to a village on the riverfront and finally sees the Vau and how they live. There they find a guide to take them downriver to the palace.

4. **The Palace**: The cadre is greeted by Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph, who gives them a tour of the Palace of Fortuitous Chance and its amazing architecture.

5. **The Cage Is Unlocked:** Disaster ensues, leaving the cadre on its own in a strange, inexplicable place.

1. Smooth Landing

The trip to Shaduveen takes a mere four days — the Vau "jumptug" is faster than its Known Worlds counterpart. Before it reaches Shaduveen's gravity well, it halts and a message is radioed to the *Nocturnal's* bridge, requesting that the crew prepare to resume control of their ship and land on the planet at the coordinates now provided.

Once the captain radios back compliance, the Vau ship drops its energy field and departs. Alveda orders the ship to make a slow thrust towards the planet, using sensors to sweep as much of the system as possible. Some details are learned, listed in the "Shaduveen Traits" sidebar.

The landing coordinates are in the hilly region of the southern hemisphere, the continental isthmus between a western desert and an eastern sea. To the north, vast grasslands spread out, while woodlands and a great river stretch east, south and west.

The landing site is simple: a flat, perfectly level tarmac amidst the hills, in sight of a broad forest. The only structure on or near the fields is a cloth pavilion, outside of which waits a group of nine Vau Soldiers.

The sensors technician declares that an initial analysis of the air content reveals unknown elements. He's unsure if they're poisonous or not, and advises anyone going out to wear breathing equipment, just in case. He announces that the temperature is a comfortable 74 degrees, and the pressure and gravity are Urth normal.

Alveda leads the cadre out, taking a small personal breather for herself and offering spacesuits to the cadre.

As soon as anyone without a breather smells the air, a strange scent hits him. It is somewhat nauseating, and gets worse as the longer he is exposed to it. More than five minutes causes uncontrolled vomiting, after which he will be fine for the next 24 hours, but then suffers a lethargy that causes a –4 penalty on all rolls. After eight more hours of exposure, he falls into a coma and will die if further exposed for more than a week. Those who wear breathers or filters don't smell it and aren't affected.

A figure in robes is seen waiting under a pavilion, past the line of Soldiers. Once the cadre begins to approach, the figure moves forward, gently pushing aside the Soldiers, who yield to him. As he steps into better light, the cadre can see that he is not Vau — he is human.

He is a black man in his mid-fifties (actually late eighties, thanks to longevity drugs), of medium height and build. His hair is completely gray, and a long beard runs down his

Shaduveen Traits

Ruler: *Dau'rum'phal Scobit-sa'un* (Council of Worthies)
Cathedral: Unknown
Agora: Unknown
Garrison: Unknown
Capital: *Swam'tal Huanzi* (Palace of Fortuitous Chance)
Jumps: 5 (from Byz II)
Adjacent Systems: Vril-Ya (nightside), Manitou (dayside)
Solar System: Mercury-analog (.53 AU), Mars-analog (1.1 AU), Shaduveen Lan'Tuomi (1.199 AU; two satellites: one an Urth moon-analog, the other a green moon-analog), Jupiter-analog (8.3 AU), Jupiter-analog 2 (13.67 AU), Uranus-analog (31.4 AU), Pluto-analog (55.7 AU), Jumpgate (61 AU)
Tech: 8 (assumed)
Human Population: 1 (known)
Alien Population: 500 million (estimated)
Resources: *Yurim-zhor* (nanotech crystal), Vau handcrafts and artworks
Exports: None
Landscape: A single continent stretching from pole to pole is broken throughout by five vast seas, four great lakes, and multiple broad and branching rivers. Mountain ranges separated by pine forests dominate the northern hemisphere, while the southern hemisphere consists of a large desert, along with broad grasslands, deciduous forests and a swath of hills. Both poles are covered in ice and snow.

Overall, the world seems deceptively Urthlike. However, much of the plant life emits an unknown gas, high enough in oxygen content to be breathed by humans, but full of toxins that will eventually cause them to succumb to lethargy and then coma. The local fauna is quite adapted to it, but eating any animals introduces traces into the human bloodstream that can build up over time and lead to the same effect as breathing the air.

chest. He is dressed in Vau finery, a robe of light green satin (actually *klirzz*), embroidered with spider-thin metallic tracery reaching all over his body. His only concessions to jewelry are two thin, spidery traces of metal running up his cheeks from below his robes and terminating in both nostrils.

He introduces himself in an oddly accented Urthish as "Yonn Gwin Ko'anti of the Gwindor — the humans of the Hegemony. I am most excited and pleased to meet my long-lost cousins." He does indeed seem overjoyed, scanning the cadre and noting their appearances, manner of dress and generally everything about them. If there are any aliens among them, he will be somewhat awed to meet them.

Regardless of the player characters' reactions, Altara Alveda will be at a loss for words. She is genuinely surprised at this revelation, for she, like so many others, assumed that humans did not live in the Hegemony. If no one else asks, she will: "I don't understand. How is that humans come to live among the Vau?"

"My ancestors on Quadi came to their world over an *ouil'tlo* and many *thalus'tlor* ago," he says, "before humans were driven from Apshai. We were forgotten by our brethren and left to the graces of the Vau, who mentored us until our time of citizenship. We are one of the many Protectorates of the Hegemony."

If any more questions are asked of him, he holds up his hands. "Please, patience. There is so much I would like to say — and so much I would like to hear from you. But you are here to discover this for yourselves. I have been bid by my *yoma* — he who invited you here — to usher you on your way as quickly as possible, so that you may encounter the Hegemony according to your own *kyarir*." (If asked to translate the word, he will say: "I am not allowed to incept you yet. It grieves me, but it must be so.")

He turns to Alveda and says: "I am sorry, but your journey ends here. They are to travel onward, but you must remain with your ship. This is not negotiable."

To her credit, she puts up no argument and turns to the cadre, telling them to beware and watch themselves. She shakes one of their hands and slips a whisper pin surreptitiously into it. "Tell me all about it when you can. We'll be waiting here for you." She then returns to the *Nocturnal*.

Sheaths

Yonn Gwin Ko'anti motions to the pavilion, where the cadre can now see (thanks to the Soldiers moving aside) a set of jumpsuits standing in a row as if mounted on mannequins, but no mannequins can be seen. The same spidery, metallic traces seen on their host's robes can be seen on these jumpsuits.

"These are *fala'hanstha*," he says. "Sheaths that will protect you from Shaduveen's air, which is not meant for humans. They will also provide translation for you of any Vau tongue, except the High Speech known only to Mandarins. Please, put them on. I will demonstrate."

He walks up to one of the suits and places his hand on what looks like a brooch. As soon as he removes it, the entire tracery retracts from the jumpsuits and into the brooch. He motions for a volunteer. If no one steps forward, he will look somewhat crestfallen. "Please, it is required. My *yoma* will not let you walk freely without a sheath. Not even I can survive that."

Once someone accepts this fate and volunteers, Ko'anti will pin the brooch to his chest and press a stud. Immedi-

ately, the spidery traces branch out across the person's body, as if they are vines growing in some speeded-up time lapse film. Tracery laces the body from top to bottom, except for the head, where one thin trace leads to the ear and two traces snake forth and plant themselves in the nostrils. For a moment, it is quite uncomfortable and a brief dizziness strikes. But it passes quickly and the person finds he can now breathe the air just fine.

The characters will not be allowed to leave the pavilion (except to return to their ship in defeat) without each putting on a sheath. After everyone has their sheath, their human host speaks to them in the Vau Foreign Tongue, and they can understand it perfectly through the ear speaker.

"Good," he says. "You will now also understand the speech of the Manshogo, Velek and Fah Selani, as well as the caste tongues. You are now ready."

Tech Talk: Sheaths

The sheaths are, of course, *yurim'zho*, and thus are pretty incomprehensible to cursory examination. A good lab with equipment for examining nanotechnology (TL 7+) would be necessary to get a glimpse of its operating principles, although the actual natural laws governing the crystal helixes could take years of research to divulge. In addition, discovering the means by which the tiny think machines embedded in the helixes are manufactured, programmed and linked to operate in a decentralized matrix is a lifetime's work — unless more data from Vau science logs was obtained.

The cadre's sheaths are among the most simple (at least, they appear so to any Vau; see Act Three for more information). Their operations include air filtration, poison detection (through the pattern matching of images in its Gwindor medical library), language translation and an emergency beacon.

Examples of other sheaths are provided in *Appendix: Traits*.

2. The Road Goes Ever On

Yonn Gwin Ko'anti leads them from the pavilion and gestures south, to the forest that stretches from horizon to horizon east to west.

"This is the *Sloam'sheel Fovali'dar*, the Forest of the Resplendent Seasons. Many things live here that are allowed to exist freely, unheeding of auspice. Beyond is the *Fova Umtuvali*, the River Seen from Above. There rests *Swam'tal Huanzi*, the Palace of Fortuitous Chance, where waits Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph, eager to greet you.

"He bids you to wander as you will here, taking as long



as you wish to reach the river and so come to where its current guides you. In this way, he deems, you will come to know how the Vau keep their worlds. Journeys and their discoveries offer more meaning than mere discourse can convey.

"If you are careful, no harm shall come to you, for there are few dangers in the woods. However, your travels will not be monitored, and so no aid can reach you should you need it. If you do encounter trouble and are unable to manage it yourselves, you may call for help by speaking these words: 'Sham'tso kwid.' Your sheaths will convey this message to the Soldiers here, who will then search for you. Once all is well, you may bid them leave and continue at your own pace once more.

(It will take them 15 minutes to reach the cadre in a flitter similar to that described at the end of Act Three. They follow the tracer signal now emitted by the summoning sheath.)

"Along the river is a village, Zim'phil Zar, the Abode of Craftings. There you may request a boat to take you on the river and to the palace.

"You will need sustenance for the journey, and so I give you these." He draws from his robe a pouch full of small, marble-sized, rubbery balls. "These are *gwam'pha* fruits. They are designed to provide a day's worth of sustenance to a Gwindo. That is, to a human. While they do not satisfy all hunger, they are enough to thrive upon for a number of days. If there is anything in the woods you wish to eat, first hold it before the *dwir'zin* of your sheath — before the eye in the chest. It will glow green if the food can be eaten by a human. Do not eat anything that is not so approved, for there is much that is toxic to us here.

(There is enough here to feed six people for one week.)

"I envy you. You will see a truly alien world for the first time, one never seen by your culture. I wish I could say the same of your worlds. I long to see Old Urth, but fear I shall never get the chance. Perhaps your efforts here can change that.

"Well, I bid you farewell, until you return here once more."

The Journey Begins

He returns to the pavilion, which is surrounded by impassive Soldiers. The area is completely quiet, except for perhaps the slight pops and cracks of expanding metal from the *Nocturnal*, still warm from its atmospheric entry. Characters who strain their ears may perceive some odd noises from far off in the woods; whether they are produced by birds or insects is hard to tell.

The cadre is now free to travel toward the forest in whichever direction they want (except north) and take as long as they want getting there.

A number of possible encounters are listed below. Gamemasters can use as many or as few of them as they wish, in whatever order they desire. As a general rule, only one encounter at the most should be had per half day of travel. If the cadre presses forward at maximum speed, it reaches the banks of the river within two days; a slower pace might take three to five days.

Biome

The forest resembles Urthlike woodland such as that seen in the Pacific Northwest of America. It has the same sense of lushness and biodiversity (hardwoods mix with pines and ferns in various places). However, it is all "off" by just enough to make the place seem peculiar. Some of the characters may be used to some planets with vast amounts of non-Urthish flora (Aylon, Grail, etc.), but the plantlife here is more different than any they know, for absolutely no samples from Urth were terraformed into the landscape here.

The trees look familiar, but their leaves branch in different ways, and with odd bulbous shapes or sharp triangles, rather than the more symmetrical leaves of Urth. The color is still predominately green, but with a bluish tint. Tree bark is almost a purplish brown. It is now summer here, and flowers come in many colors and arrays, some stunningly beautiful. They seem richer in color than Urthish varieties would be in this clime, but they still aren't as extreme as tropical plants.

Flitting from flower to flower now and then, collecting pollen, are some odd insects. Their wings are long and wide like dragonflies (vibrating swiftly in the same manner), but their bodies are more like sea horses, although their size is that of a common bumblebee.

If the cadre moves relatively quietly, they may now and then witness animals just disappearing from view as they come near. There appear to be analogs for a number of Urth mammals, but they are all different in their own ways: Striped foxes running in packs like wolves, nearly bald rabbits hopping onto low branches, a red wombatlike beast snuffling into an underground den (which is quickly closed behind it with dirt), and tracks for something the size of a bear (but which display eight clawed toes in a radial pattern).

Flitting within and above the treetops are a number of birds, mostly greenish and black in color, but some are brighter (blues, purples and yellows). Their feathers tend to be long and shaggy in appearance, and they prefer gliding to actual flying. They watch the cadre with emotionless eyes, letting loose an occasional croak to warn others of their coming.

Those with their eyes to the ground may notice that

mosses are pretty prevalent here, but some look like oil slicks, with a rainbow sheen from oily secretions. Insects seem attracted to these sticky spots, landing in them briefly before flying off again. What ecological purpose this serves is unfathomable without deeper study.

The Night Sky

At night, the temperature drops to around 60 degrees, and the stars come out. Early in twilight, a silvery moon rises in its waxing half moon phase. (This is Flur'Id, "Harmonious Rest.") Soon after full night falls, another moon follows it into the sky, following a similar, though higher, path. (This is Opan'Jed, "Inspired Vision.") This one is greenish, and the mix of white and green light heightens the unreal effect of the woods, turning them into a dreamy fairyland.

Strange constellations can be seen in the sky, and those trained in such things can try to note as many as they can over the coming nights. However, they all seem completely unfamiliar, which is no surprise.

Weather

It is summer on Shaduveen, and rain is uncommon. However, for about half an hour every evening, the skies fill with clouds and darken, and sometimes rain pours down. Anyone trying to drink the water experiences a metallic taste that dissipates the more one drinks. (The sheath filters out the poor taste — or perhaps the sensation of it.)

Otherwise, no startling discoveries can be made about the weather, for it is calm and peaceful.

Encounters

Below are some of the possible encounters the cadre can experience on its journey. Gamemasters should feel free to devise some of their own if the cadre spends a lot of time wandering around aimlessly.

Ruins

In a covered glade by a small stream, hidden under layers of green-and-purple moss, the ruins of an ancient Vau temple can be found. It dates from the period before the Reconstruction, when Vau were stranded in many worlds, abandoned by the Progenitors and stripped of memory.

In this era, many Vau began to worship the lost Progenitors as gods, and some worshipped their own ancestors as gods, for these elders knew much more than the present generations did. This time is something the Vau prefer not to remember, and they do not dwell much upon it. None of the remains from this era were maintained or were ever made into monuments for the curious history buff.

The ruins here were once a temple dedicated to ancestor worship. The rocks, greatly eroded over the millennia, still maintain vague impressions of their carvings: Vau Mandarins with stars for halos. Only someone being very watchful will see them; otherwise, the ruins appear simply to be old, neglected cut stones, now fallen from their original structure (a triangular, one-story building, with a row of pillars along the three walls).

A careful examination reveals that it was a place of worship centered around an altar, upon which is a depression that, unlike the rest of the stone, has not eroded and still maintains its precise cut. It apparently once held an object shaped like a seven-sided star. A jewel perhaps?

Verden's Monument

A path through the woods, overgrown but still discernable, reveals a stretch of old road. Precisely cut stones (now eroded) lead for about a mile through the woods to a clearing that apparently once held some sort of building (judging from the dark spots on the grass), but it was removed long ago. In the middle of the clearing is a rectangular block of smooth marble with a metal plaque fixed to it (it seems to be melded into the molecular structure of the stone). Upon it are words in the Vau Middle Speech. (The sheaths do not translate writing, only sounds.) Beneath them, in smaller type, is a statement in Urthish, carved in imitation of a handwritten script:

"Here in the Abode of Delightful Happenstance, Benjamin Sab Verden met Yoma Stuil'zen Var Xaldo'emi and made peace between their peoples."

The proud words seem ironic in the long deserted and overgrown field.

Birds of an Annoying Feather

The cadre come across a pack of carrion birds, feeding on the rotting carcass of some weeks-dead animal. The birds are about the size of crows, and their heads are completely bald, giving them a skull-like appearance. Their beaks are serrated. Their body feathers are green, with light and dark streaks similar to the grass in this region, providing good camouflage.

They look at the cadre with curiosity but do not fly away as they approach. Indeed, they seem quite friendly — despite their ugly appearance — and may hop over to some of the characters.

For the next day or two, nothing the cadre does can prevent the flock from following them everywhere, loudly cawing and croaking as it goes. The birds fly ahead, to the side and behind at various times, watching these strangers' movements with fascination. Occasionally, as opportunity allows, one or two bold birds may even snatch at a pretty possession, but will eventually return it.

If the cadre tries to kill them, they will only remove themselves to a farther distance, but still shadow them.

These are *urskala*, considered to be harbingers of friendship. To kill, harm or even shoo away one of these birds is a sign of poor character. If any of the characters does act against them in later encounters before sentients (such as the Manshogo, Velek or Vau in the village), they will earn a chilly reception. If they allow them to simply be or even feed them in front of other sentients, their reception will be greater than otherwise given to Known Worlders.

The flock will eventually leave the cadre just outside the village (if they get there within two days of first encountering them).

(Traits for the *urskala* are not provided; one point of damage is enough to get one to flee, while three points will kill it. They do not attack living things, but might try to grab stuff: roll GOAL 15 for them if this is contested.)

Rabid Zlarm

The zlarm is a sort of wild boar analog, but more deadly when enraged. It has huge tusks and a pair of horns on its forehead, in addition to rows of sharp spikes on either side of its torso. It is not native to Shaduveen, but was accidentally released here when some breeding pairs from the palace zoo escaped into the wild (allegedly aided by a disgruntled Sobolzitzin attendant).

That was years ago, though, and they have since been ignored, an unimportant addition to the wilderness as far as the Mandarins are concerned. Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph knows they are in the woods somewhere, but does not expect them to provide any danger to the cadre. Most of them do indeed avoid humanoids stomping through the woods. One of them, however, is *kyantaz* — rabid.

Zlarm are prone to a genetic degeneration that resembles rabies. Those on Shaduveen, removed from their native environment, are even more prone. The stress of foraging on this world, which has fewer edible grubs than they are used to, often causes the *kyantaz* to set in earlier than usual. In their native habitat, only old bulls usually live long enough to be affected, but the cadre here has the misfortune to encounter a healthy, strong female driven to the *kyantaz* by the recent loss of her entire litter.

Its attack will almost assuredly come as a complete surprise to the characters, unless they know woodcraft and are proceeding through the woods cautiously. Otherwise, only Vorox should receive a Perception + Observe roll to notice the zlarm's charge before it breaks from the nearby ferns.

It is mad and completely unreasonable. It will not stop until dead.

(The zlarm's traits can be found at the end of this chapter.)

Manshogo Scouts

The cadre encounters a group of three Manshogo. These aliens are out hunting, for they prefer their food fresh and personally won. They also carry small cages to catch the *fee'lar* (rabbit-analogs) and *klur* (mice-analogs) preferred by the Fah Selani living in the nearby village (whose food is eaten alive).

The aliens will at first believe the cadre to be Gwindor from either Quadi or some other Hegemony world, although they think they are dressed strangely. If the characters can convince them that they are actually Known Worlders, the Manshogo will at first get very cautious around them, the way one would when suddenly confronted with a barbarian or cannibal. But their curiosity gets the best of them and they pester the strangers with questions:

- "What is your homeworld like?"
- "Do you really bathe in the blood of your fallen foes?"
- "What combat styles do you practice?" (Most Manshogo serving away from their homeworlds practice martial arts.)

If any aliens are among the cadre, the Manshogo will immediately realize the characters are Known Worlders, and also ask many questions about the aliens:

- "Is it true you are kept in cages?"
- "Do you not rule your own homeworld?"

They will be cautious in answering questions themselves, unsure of what they are allowed to say to them. They were not told of the Known Worlders' coming, but find it hard to believe that the Mandarins did not allow it. Instead of telling too much about themselves or the region, they offer to lead the cadre to Zim'phil Zar, where they can get answers from the Vau.

They will tell the following things, if asked questions that would broach these topics:

- Manshogo have their own sovereign Protectorate and rule their own homeworlds. These scouts are serving a tour of duty among the frontier worlds, helping to defend them should enemies assault.
- The term "Edgewalker" is unknown to them, but they have heard the Vau speak of their kind as "those who walk the edges of the known." Their skin colors do match some of those described by Verden as "Edgewalkers."
- Shaduveen is the capital of the frontier worlds, where interactions with foreigners are governed. Mainly, the Vau concern themselves with humans, but the *Glo'massa* are also a threat. (They will elaborate on them only by saying: "They are crazy and shapeless.")

(The scouts' traits can be found at the end of this chapter.)



Velek Laborers

Somewhere off in the woods away from the cadre can be heard the sound of trees crashing to the ground. Each crashing "thud" comes within five minutes of a previous crash. Eventually, after about 10 crashing sounds, it stops.

If the cadre investigates, it finds a small clearing that has only just recently been made by the cutting down of thick trees (some sort of oak-analog). Standing in the clearing amidst the dust clouds still lingering from the fall of the mighty timbers are two large crab-men — the Velek Zzum.

They move about to each fallen tree and clear away branches with their pincer claws. After the logs are smoothed, the Velek drag them into the center of the clearing, piling them into a stack two high by five wide. One of them then wraps the ends of the stacks with a loose wire. Once secured, they both step back and the wire-wrapper presses a stud on a small handheld device (which looks like a smooth egg with an eye). The wire snaps taut, pulling the logs tight against one another, and then emits an invisible antigravity field that floats the heavy stack one meter above the ground. The field makes a low, pervasive humming sound that is somewhat annoying.

The Velek then march off down a path, one before the stack, the other after, controlling its travel by physically pushing/pulling it and adjusting its course as they go. The field obviously needs only a few pounds of pressure to move its load. They head to Zim'phil Zar at a slow pace.

If they are interrupted by the cadre at anytime during this activity, they will pause to give terse answers to questions (translated by the characters' sheaths) but get back to work as soon as they can. They, like the Manshogo above, assume the cadre are Gwindor from the Hegemony. If presented with some sort of evidence or insistence otherwise, the two laborers will look at one another and make some barely-audible clicking noises which are not translated by the sheaths. One of them will continue work while the other will stand guard, making sure the characters make no untoward moves. He demands that they accompany them back to the village for questioning by the Soldiers. If they refuse, he will not try to force them, but will report everything about them once back in the village. (If the village's only report about the cadre come from the Velek in this way, the Soldiers will send out a squad of nine to capture them. Their identities will be cleared up by radio transmission from Yonn Gwin Ko'anti later.)

(The laborers' traits can be found at the end of this chapter.)

3. The Sleepy Village

The local Vau village, Zim'phil Zar, is somewhat southeast of the landing pad upon which the *Nocturnal* sits. However, no matter which way the cadre went (bearing southeast or southwest), they will either come to the village themselves or meet up with the Manshogo or Velek (encounters listed above), who can guide them there. Otherwise, they'll hit the river first — all of five miles wide here and rushing along quite fast. In other words, impassable without a boat or flitter, available only in the village.

Of course, characters skilled in woodcraft may attempt to make a raft or carve a dugout canoe from the local trees, but that will take axes and ropes. If for some reason they carry such items with them, then a successful Wits + Survival or Artisan (Boatmaking) roll will accomplish a bare raft capable of holding three people. Three or more victory points can secure enough room for six. It will be extremely hard to paddle upstream; the palace is downstream.

As for the village, it is a series of quaint huts and two-story homes gathered into three rows along the riverside, with a central, circular hub, around which are built centers of industry and commerce.

In the very center of the circle is a slender pinnacle reaching three stories into the sky, atop of which is a large pearl-like object. This is a warning light that can be lit to summon aid to the village in case communications fail. Around the pillar is a lovely pond with odd-looking, rainbow-mailed fish. Glyphs adorn the pillar in decorative rows, but they cannot by read by any who does not know the Middle Speech. (It is a list of the village's founding purpose and values: A *kur'plar* [metacrystal] foundry and peaceful retirement community for those who have served on the frontier yet do not wish to return to the more hectic core worlds.)

Establishments

There are a number of places around the village the cadre can investigate...

The Foundry

The most prominent — and noisy — building on the circle is the *kur'plar* foundry. Here, newly mined metal slag from the mountains, delivered by the river, is refined, melted and formed into rectangular blocks, which are then stacked and wrapped in *gurm'zeer'sar* (gravity wire) and loaded onto boats bound for the palace, or flitters bound for orbit (and cargo vessels).

The metacrystal alloy is not yet complete; it will later be mixed with nanite crystals in factories elsewhere. Here, only the metal itself (mainly iron) is prepared for shipment. Hence, it does not yet have any of the qualities associated with metacrystal.

Unlike human tech factories, this one is a model of cleanliness and aesthetics. The walls appears to be made of white plastic and remain spotless; any dirt or grime that splatters upon them is automatically cleaned by the walls' nanite routines. This building, unlike any other in the village, is formed completely from *yurim'zhor* — the metamorphic nanocrystal that can take any form programmed into its microscopic think machines and maintain high integrity thanks to the fields it emits.

The smelting process consists of slag entering through a wide doorway on the east side of the building, carried on wide antigravity platforms brought up from the river. It is then dumped into a giant smelter and poured into molds, slid into supercooling chambers and finally deposited into stacks tied by gravity wire, or onto more antigravity sleds for shipment on cargo flitters.

The process is mainly automated, but it is monitored by 12 Vau Workers. During any shift, three of them are on break. These fellows hang out by the large westward doors where the refined metal plates are stacked, smoking what appear to be thin plastic pipes with circular bowls that emit no smoke (they are inhalers, filled with a mixture of local and off-world herbs, that promote relaxation without loss of any mental faculties).

(The Workers' traits can be found at the end of this chapter.)

Produce Market

Tables display all kinds of raw vegetation and fruit, much of it completely unrecognizable, but some looks familiar (are those prunes?).

The market is run by a female Vau Worker named Swiban Sleem'zabau. She is rather provincial and knows little about the Known Worlds, and so is unconcerned if the cadre announces themselves as Known Worlders. She will try to impress them with her small stock of Quadi tomatoes, which she grows in her yard.

Yurim'zhor Store

This small shop has many samples of sheaths displayed along its walls, mainly for practical purposes:

- *Bluma'hanstha*: Scuba sheaths, to protect wearers from underwater pressure and provide air.

- *Okhloti'hanstha*: Mining sheaths, to protect against temperature and filter air.

In addition, many multiuse tools can be examined:

- *Flar'zun shor'im*: Foundry trowel, a trowel that "melts" any unfixed metacrystal surface it touches, allowing the user to form it into whatever shapes he desires with the trowel. Unfixed metacrystal has not yet been finalized into a stable

form, such as a starship hull component. (Tech Talk: The simple think machine matrix in the trowel interacts with the metacrystal matrices, reshaping the helix formation as the trowel user desires through his physical gestures. It can also shape fixed metacrystal, but only when used with a smelting process to melt the metal.)

- *Gurm'zeer'sar*: Gravity wire (see *Appendix: Traits*).

- *Mok'tuplani*: A pen-shaped organizer that tracks down any object that has been planted with a *tuplar* nanotransmitter — most Vau household possessions are kept organized with such devices. It operates in two ways: Mau'quar voice ("The key chain is in the living room.") and "dowsing," whereby the pen points to the desired object, tugging in its direction if it is not in the same room. (Tech Talk: This is relatively simple radio communication between nanites tagged and inventoried onto certain objects and the think machine within the pen.)

- *Durg'runtor:* Walking sticks in various sizes, carved from a beautifully grained wood, hollowed out and cored with a slender pole of *gurm'webig* — an antigravity field emitter that aids walking by lightening the weight of those who touch the stick. (Tech Talk: The pole resists the effects of gravity rather like a magnet resists another magnet of reversed polarity. This is a natural feature of the rod, just as magnetism is a natural feature of a magnetized object. How the Vau create such "antigravitism" in objects is a topic requiring a greater glimpse into Vau science.)

- Other lightweight, slender devices that defy expectation by their mere appearances alone.

The proprietor is an elderly male Vau Worker named Hu'narsh Dlug'vim So'vani, far more wrinkled than most Vau the cadre have seen. However, he is in excellent health (thanks partly to his surgically implanted sheath, which monitors and cleanses his organs), and spryly shows off the capabilities of his wares to the curious strangers.

Once he knows they are Known Worlders, he'll get even more excited, showing off Vautech proudly, as an old teacher instructing preschool children. He will pause to consider whether he is allowed to sell to barbarians, but decides he would prefer his wares become known to those who need them most. Since the cadre has no *kul'aka* (money), he is unsure what to charge them. He will accept interesting barter (he prefers cultural items to practical, low-tech human devices), but will accept a handful of intriguing firebirds, made from an alloy he is unfamiliar with.

Eatery

This café-style restaurant serves various vegetarian dishes (no meat). A number of local citizenry — all Vau Workers — hang out here, drinking *hupa* (a mild stimulant that tastes like mud to human taste buds) and playing various games, from simple board games (something called *dwad'dau'vek*, which resembles checkers but on a star-shaped board with pieces of varied shape and hue) to more sophisticated hologames (a high-quality holovid projection of two Vau Soldier armies squaring off against one another, controlled by hand signs transmitted through a sheath-like glove; this is called *Sham'varg*, or "Nest Defense").

As the cadre enters, all eyes turn to them, as the curious and mildly bored residents (many of them retired from active work teams) size up these Gwindor. If word has already reached them (through the Velek or Manshogo) that the characters are Known Worlders, they will watch the strangers cautiously, wondering how to interact with the barbarians without angering them. It all depends on the cadre's behavior. If they are friendly and inquire about the games, the locals will lighten up and excitedly show how they're played.

They know little about goings-on outside the village these days, not because they are kept in the dark but because they care little to hear about such things. This is a quiet community, and nobody here wants to court the kind of interference one gets when Mandarins are out and about enacting prophecy. They'd prefer to be left out of the larger doings of the Cosm, thank you.

They follow traditional auspice rules for when to work and when to rest, when to rise and when to sleep, etc., but are nowhere near as obsessive about such as things as the Mandarins.

Fah Selani Apothecary

Removed somewhat from the rest of the stores, but still within the main hub, is a domed building built from *yurim'zho*, which appears like a creamy, bony shell. Inside are shelves filled with small and large bottles of different liquids and herbal concoctions, each labeled with a Mau'quar glyph. This is the village apothecary.

As the cadre looks around, two large (10 feet total length, 6 feet tall when standing upright) snakelike beings slither into the room from a hole in the floor. They sinuously slide around and over each other as they go, as if they've choreographed the movements many times before. They rise to stand upright, still standing side by side, and speak in Mau'quar:

"Greetings, Gwindor," says one of the snakes. The other says, "How may we serve your health needs?"

This is a *Him-Saa*, a Fah Selani bond-pair. They serve on frontier worlds as apothecaries and are temporarily placed here in this village, awaiting a starship to take them home to Han Saarza. Their names are Sulani-zahl and Fessteer, both of them female.

When they speak, they often finish one anothers sentences or thoughts, like a couple that has been together for a very long time and grown quite comfortable in each others presence.

They are extremely curious about the Known Worlders

and will question them about other sentients living there. They seem especially curious about the Hironem (whom they call *Gaz'bula*), but will say little themselves about the Hegemony, except to reveal that the Vau are fascinating rulers. "They have a plan. We do not know it, but it will prove interesting...."

On a shelf by the door, clearly marked by large glyphs, are five jars with a thick, greenish liquid. These are placed there by law, and are samples of antivenin for Fah Selani poison. They are not allowed to sell herbs and medicines without also making such medicine clearly available. (The Soldiers' sheaths also have emergency supplies of the antivenin, kept for as long as the Fah Selani are in the area.)

(The Fah Selani's traits can be found at the end of this chapter.)

Homes

Outside the circle are rows of Vau Worker homes, about 36 total. They are permanent structures, not built from *yurim'zho*, but made from baked bricks of river mud with ceramic tiles on the roofs and unbreakable glass in the windows. There are no locks on the doors; this has been a safe village for over 20 years now. Hopefully, the cadre will do nothing to change this record.

If the cadre wanders down the rows away from the circle, they will witness Vau children peeking from the windows or from the gardens behind the houses. As with human children, Vau children resembles smaller versions of adults, but with "cuter" features: larger eyes, heads disproportionately large compared to their bodies, big hands and feet.

If the cadre seem nice, one of the children may toss a *bula* at a character. This is an antigravity rubber ball that must be struck within a clearly marked circle as it is thrown or it won't bounce back to its thrower — it will instead playfully pummel the poor target by swooping around him and bouncing back and forth until the target can manage to hit it within the small circle, after which it rockets back at its original thrower, who must himself hit it properly to throw it back once more (although he may choose a new target this time).

Interestingly, the cadre's sheaths will not properly translate everything the children say. The kids actually make up words of their own which are not in the sheaths' databanks.

Riverfront

There is a large, wide dock by the river, along which boats can tie themselves or attach themselves to magnetic field emitters that keep them steadily in place. Only two boats are here now, one of which is being unloaded of seaweed by Vau Workers. This is actually a valuable collection of *wumin* weed from upriver near the mountains, where the mineral content of the streams suffuses it with a taste considered quite delectable by Vau chefs.

Standing guard near the docks are five Vau Soldiers. They are the only people in town who know of the cadre's coming, and are not surprised to see them. While they do not follow them around or anticipate their actions in any way, they are well prepared to intervene quickly if any conflict arises anywhere in the village.

They announce that they were told to aid the characters in reaching the palace, once they arrived here in town. One of them offers to fly them there on a *gurm'forvanli*, a gravity sled. This is a circular platform about two meters in radius with a thin rail around its circumference. In the center is a slender pillar with a smooth, glasslike orb. Once the cadre is gathered into the platform, the Soldier waves his hand over the orb, making elaborate hand formations. A humming noise is heard, and everyone's hair stands slightly on end as the platform rises above the ground (with no wobble whatsoever).

Waving his hand and gesturing over the now-glowing orb, the Soldier directs the platform into the air and over the river, and then follows a course along the river, downstream to the palace. The journey takes about half an hour.

If anyone inquires about the operation of the sled, the Soldier will gladly demonstrate the proper hand signs, even allowing the character to try them for himself. Only about 10 signs are needed (up, down, left, right, forward, back, faster, slower, on, off), and fine piloting is performed with the other hand's palm over the orb, shifting this way and that to nudge the craft either way.

The would-be pilot should make a Dexterity + Drive Aircraft roll to see how well he does. If the result is failure, he makes the Soldier nervous, and he will speak commands to the orb in Mau'quar ("Sled: Palace") to put the craft on autopilot, explaining that it can automatically travel to any destination it knows.

(The Soldiers' traits can be found at the end of this chapter.)

4. The Palace

Characters watching the horizon see the palace as they approach. A huge, slender tower extends high into the sky, below which is a small city of pavilions and gardens, all gathered onto a one-mile-radius circular platform that hovers above the river's center. On the far horizon, the sea is visible where the river empties into its greenish-blue vastness.

Various flags and pennants flap in the breeze, adorned with glyphs, running up and down the tower on stable, sturdy poles that look like thin wires. As the gravity sled approaches, windows can be seen in the tower, covered in glass, but no one is seen watching from them.

The winding, curving streets below are empty. No one

moves there, despite the fact that the city seems like it could host hundreds. If questioned about this, the Soldier guide will simply say, "Everyone has left for the new city."

The sled sets down onto an open area just inside the front gates of the city, which open onto what appear to be boat docks. Standing nearby, waiting for the sled to land, are three Mandarins, each surrounded by three Soldiers (nine Soldiers total).

One Mandarin stands slightly before the others, and characters might recognize him as the Mandarin from their invitation. This is Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph, the Known Worlds foreign policy chief. Beside him stands a lone Worker, extremely elderly, standing only with the aid of a *durg'runtor* gravity staff.

Once the sled sets down and is shut off by the Soldier flying it, Yoma Zahl steps forward and speaks:

"Greetings, friends from afar. I am pleased you honored my invitation. It is time for a reconciliation between our peoples."

He will engage the characters in small talk, asking them about their trip. He seems eager to know their thoughts concerning their encounters. If they have much to say or ask, he will politely hold up his hand and say: "Please walk with me and continue your queries. I shall introduce you to the Palace of Fortuitous Chance."

And so he leads them toward the tower, leaving behind the Soldier from the village.

The other two Mandarins, Slee'wau Vim Tlephta'al (the security chief who ushered them off Vril-Ya) and Slee'wau Pha'Wyrim, say nothing, looking like statues throughout this speech and displaying no emotions. Once Yoma Zahl leads the cadre off, they will fall in behind, walking a respectful three to five meters after them.

(Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph's traits can be found at the end of this chapter.)

The Grand Tour

As they approach the tower, its walls appear seamless. But upon reaching the short steps leading to its base, a doorway appears, as if the wall were melting aside to form the arched entryway. There was no noticeable signal or gesture from Yoma Zahl to trigger this; it seems that their approach alone created the entryway.

Inside is a large, long dining hall, in the center of which is an oak table carved with mythological figures from Urth's ancient past. Yoma Zahl gestures toward it as he motions the characters to sit in the high-backed chairs around it. "This is a relic of your homeworld, in a sense. Its wood comes from that orb, but the craftsmanship is that of the early human colonists of Quadi. An attempt to preserve their past. I find it exotic."

Serving trays glide through the air from windows in the wall, kept aloft by an invisible repulsor field. They cleverly avoid any obstacles (such as characters) that get in their paths to the center of the tables. Once they land there, their lids float upward and return, leaving the streaming hot contents to stir the stomachs of the guests. The menu is unfamiliar, a vegetarian casserole of sorts with delicious sauces, including potatolike tubers, cruciferous greens (somewhat like broccoli) and spinachlike seaweed (very salty).

"Please, break your fast," says Yoma Zahl, sitting down at the head of the table and serving himself. "It is all quite edible by humans. Indeed, it is one of Yonn Gwin Ko'anti's favorite dishes, a recipe of Afor'olpak Sabin'kukla, a late clutchmate of mine. A renowned chef."

The other two Mandarins sit at the foot of the table and take small portions. The Soldiers stand near to them.

The Worker, sitting near the characters, doles out a good portion for himself and chews it slowly, but says nothing to anyone. It may soon become obvious to anyone attempting to talk with him that he is deaf. Yoma Zahl introduces him eventually as Afor'olpak Drinos, and the affection in his eyes as he does so is unmistakable even across species boundaries.

Yoma Zahl will ask them to continue the tale of their journey and answer what questions he can about the people they met along the way. Once it seems that all questions have been asked, he will explain the reason for their trip:

"The Vau have long been fascinated by humanity, as judged by our patronage of the Gwindor on Quadi. However, they are unlike you in that they do not share your history — the rise and fall of the Republic, the rule of the noble houses, the solaces of the Church and the ingenuity of the League guilds. It is an amazing story that your kind unfolds.

"However, not all Mandarins on the Im Dau'lansar, the First Council, are equally enthralled by your deeds. Some label you barbaric and deplore what is perceived to be an anarchistic streak in human nature. They do not wish this quality to taint the Hegemony, which is carefully guided by auspice law.

"Of late, however, your allies have won out, along with the aid of prophecy. Those enlightened Mandarins, such as I and other colleagues on the Dau'rum'phal Scobit-sa'un, the Council of Worthies, have sought increased interaction with your kind, seeing in you not anarchism, but ingenuity and courage, a continued vitality surprising for such a mature race.

"We sought increased council with you, and after so many occasions of denial, finally achieved permission. There were conditions forged for this special council, however: Your representatives must reflect all levels of human society, not simply those handpicked by politicians. I mean no disparagement of your fine emperor! But even he sought to send

only experts, when the First Council wishes to hear report from those less schooled in diplomacy with us.

"To me was given the honor of hosting you here, in my home, as others now host similar envoys in theirs — on Vasjlo Uo'an, which you know as Manitou, and upon Vril-Ya and Apshai. I intend to introduce you to us and our ways. Already, you have seen how the least of us live. Now, I shall show you my most cherished wonder, the Palace of Fortuitous Chance, built ever to surprise even I, its master.

"If you are finished, we shall continue into its interior, and so witness many things that even I cannot predict."

He stands and gestures to a doorway at the far end of the hall, across from the entrance they came through.

Slee'wau Pha'Wyrim stands but does not follow them. He speaks to Yoma Zahl in Hil'quar (which is not translated by the cadre's sheaths), who nods and bows. Slee'wau steps forward and helps Afor'olpak Drinos, the Worker, to stand, and then leads him away, out of the tower, followed by his escort of three Soldiers.

Yoma Zahl has an odd expression on his face as the old man leaves. "He has lived nearly 150 of your years. When he is gone, I shall be alone." If anyone asks how old Zahl is, he responds, "I am as old as Drinos, for we were born of the same clutch. I will not pass away for another hundred years at least, should the auspices so allow."

Escher Stairs

Through the doorway is a set of stairs, but in classic M.C. Escher style, they roam up, down, around, sideways and in all directions. Yoma Zahl leads the way. As he comes to stairs that lead upward at an upside-down angle, he nonetheless walks them normally, his body retaining gravity in relation to the direction of the stairs. The characters find themselves likewise affected.

Repulsor plates in the stairs keep the gravity normal relative to their positions, and so while they might walk upside-down relative to their original position when they entered the room, they seem to be walking normally. Even if they jump up and down, they will fall toward whichever stairs they leapt from. Characters who make truly mighty jumps (six victory points on a Strength + Vigor roll) might rocket up, down or sideways toward another set of stairs only to find themselves landing relative to its "downward" position.

Yoma Zahl will actually chuckle at such attempts. (He has learned such human expressions as laughter.) "I designed this for you recently, when I knew of your coming. Vau have no need of concepts such as stairs, for they are raised knowing the relativity of repulsor plates. I thought it would best drive the point home to you."

There are landings at various places along the stairs, and a door can be seen at each of them, normal-looking wooden doors with turn handles. As they reach the first such landing, Yoma Zahl asks a character to open the door and proceed through.

The Blessed Aviary

The door open onto an aviary. A well-maintained, paved path winds through toward a door on the far side of the room, about 100 meters away. To the side, trees rise, into a limitless sky. Despite being in a tower, there is no sign of it here — simply sky above. The curving wall around the room forms a circle and rises about six meters before leveling off, open to the sky.

Alien birds hide in the foliage, making twittering noises and quick flutters as they fly away from approaching characters. Bright feathers can be seen disappearing into the heights of the tree branches, but little else.

Yoma Zahl smiles when he sees the room. "Ah, the aviary. I have not been here for some time. Most auspicious that you would open a door into such beauty. Come, let us pass through and see what else awaits. Perhaps we shall see a *gleeb*, if we are lucky. They are among the rarest but most beauteous of birds. They approach only those who have attained high virtue."

If any of the characters has performed a virtuous deed of late (sacrificing oneself for others — especially strangers or the needy — or giving greatly to charity or whatnot), they can make Faith + Charm rolls. Any that succeed catch a glimpse of the fabled bird, an iridescent array of colorful feathers unlike any imaginable. It is like seeing a living fractal equation in motion — its depth is unfathomable. Any who gain three or more victory points will experience a "fly by" — the bird flies past their heads. If anyone gets six or more victory points, they get the immense reward of having the *gleeb* land on their shoulder for a moment. Yoma Zahl will stare in awe at the character — his mouth formed into an "o" and his eyes brighter than before. Afterwards, he will treat the character like a sage.

He will ask someone who saw the *gleeb* to open the next door.

The Chapel

A stone courtyard outside of a small chapel. It looks very familiar. It is a perfect replica of Santa Tranquillus, a holy chapel where Zebulon is reputed to have taken his first orders in the main prereflective religion of his times. Its true location is unknown, disputed by the Church (who argue over three different chapels), but most of the faithful are familiar with it through the Second Republic holovid, "The Trials of Wisdom," a rather melodramatic biopic about the life of the Prophet.

Yoma Zahl seems surprised. "Well… Well, indeed. How fitting. I have not come through this door since it was first

built. I had thought it long gone by now. Let us proceed to the chapel."

As they pass through the courtyard, characters can't help but notice graffiti painted on the stone walls in a crude, hasty scrawl: The words "ELABI" over the image of a broken jumpgate — one quarter of the hub is missing. Those who read Latin recognize the meaning of the word as "to escape."

Slee'wau Vim Tlephta'al displays his first emotion, an anger that gets through even his resolve. He marches to the wall and rubs his fingers over the paint, which doesn't come off. He stares at Yoma Zahl, whose face is expressionless. He then speaks to him in Hil'quar, and they have a quick argument. It ends with Slee'wau Vim taking a *Valukesh Ha'eni* oriel from his sleeve and examining it. He then speaks to the Yoma Zahl again, who responds tonelessly.

Slee'wau Vim bows to Yoma Zahl and leaves by the door they entered through, taking his Soldier escort with him. Just before he gets through the door, Yoma Zahl speaks again, and motions his own three Soldiers to follow. Slee'wau Vim says something angrily, but Yoma Zahl repeats his orders at his hesitating Soldiers. They break away and follow Vim, who disappears through the door.

The characters are now alone with Yoma Zahl, who shuts his eyes and seems to shudder for a moment. He then smiles at the cadre and motions to the chapel. "The past cannot harm us, for it has been conquered. Onward."

If he is beset with questions, he will say, "Please, it is an internal affair. Rogues are at work to sabotage your envoyship, but they cannot harm us in any way."

Once in the chapel, Yoma Zahl walks to the altar and seems to meditate to himself.

Before the characters can do much themselves, a doorway from the rectory opens and a figure comes out, dressed in a hooded robe. He looks somewhat familiar. He will walk to the side of the hall and watch the characters from the darkness of his hood, but does not speak.

If approached, he will raise his hood and reveal his face — it is the Prophet himself! At least, it is the popular image of the Prophet shown in most Church iconography: A Caucasian man in late middle age with a black beard but no mustache, balding on top of his head. In fact, he looks like the unknown actor who played the Prophet in "The Trials of Wisdom" holovid.

There are a variety of reactions the characters can have, from amazement to anger at the blasphemy. If the reaction is good, Yoma Zahl will wave a small penlike device and "freeze frame" the Prophet, bragging about Vau interactive phantasmery technology. He will let the characters fool with the pen for a bit, but its operation requires practiced gestures. With it, they can reverse the Prophet's actions or speed them up.





If the reaction is bad, he will wave the pen and erase the Prophet, profusely apologizing. He explains that he did not intend for the characters to see this room, for it was made in his youth to help him understand human concepts better. He used to have conversations with the virtual Prophet to learn about Church doctrine. "It is merely an inceptor tool, holding no reality of its own."

He operates the pen with a complex gesture, and summons forth Benjamin Verden, the original ambassador to the Vau. "You may ask him anything you wish. All his knowledge, based on his writings and diaries, is with him. You may even touch him, for Vau phantasmery involves not just manipulation of light, but force fields besides. He is, as far as experience alone can judge, as real as any other object within our reality."

(Verden will respond affably; he knows more than was given in the dossier but less than is written in Book One of this sourcebook.)

After this incident, Yoma Zahl recommends that they leave, pointing to a door on one of the side walls.

6. The Cage Is Unlocked

The next room is larger than the ones they have visited so far, but the space in which they can walk is only three meters wide, a path curving away to the right to another door, about 20 meters away. On its left are six different biomes, re-created within force field cages. A subtle ripple in the air is the only visual cue to the "walls'" existence, but characters may also hear a slight hum.

Inside the biomes are some truly vicious-looking creatures, all tusk, fang, claw and horn, pacing about frantically within their sealed environments.

Yoma Zahl seems perplexed once again. He now draws from his sleeve a *Valukesh Ha'eni* oriel and consults it. It seems to calm him somewhat. In answer to any queries, he only says: "Prophecy unfolds itself in strange ways on this day. I expected to reach the core of the tower by now, but instead we come to a zoological exhibit. Normally, only Soldiers come here. The palace should have warned me before we entered, but I suppose I was not paying attention."

To this last remark, he will answer queries so: "The palace is a sentient entity, artificially contrived and controlled by the Mandarins who serve here. It is built from the highest-quality *yurim'zho*, and can assume whatever shapes and forms it desires, shuffling contents back and forth to suit the needs of its residents. I had asked it to surprise me for this tour, but it exceeds even my expectations in this."

He points to the beasts and says that the Vau do not

terraform the habitats they encounter, but instead adapt to live among them using their sheaths and other *yurim'zhor* technology. He cannot identify the creatures in the cages. "That is Soldiers' lore."

As he walks the corridor toward the other door, a hole appears in the force field of one of the cages. Its is apparent because the ripple effect within this large hole is gone. The hole itself is shaped like a jumpgate cross (characters must make successful Perception + Observe rolls to notice this).

Immediately following the appearance of the hole, the cages' creature — a *quaz'qual* — leaps out and onto Yoma Zahl's back, tearing into the Mandarin with huge claws and hungrily biting chunks from his flesh. Yoma Zahl goes down stunned and incapable of acting.

It's up to the characters to calm or kill the beast (whose traits are provided at the end of this chapter). It is suffering a feral madness due to near-starvation — the room's automatic feeding devices have been sabotaged. The cadre may also quickly discover that their energy shields are inoperative, even though the charges are normal — there is a shield damper working in the room. (It is hidden just within the now-open cage, underneath the loam.) It prevented Yoma Zahl's sheath from protecting him.

Within moments of falling, Yoma Zahl's sheath immediately forms a lifecocoon about him, completely sealing him within and placing him in a coma while it attempts to heal his wounds. Just before he passes out, however, he manages to speak, his voice sounding distant and far away through the lifecocoon.

"Saboteurs... more clever... than I imagined. They will try to poison your minds.... Leave this room... before they come. I... wanted to judge you before... I gave you this..." A slender key rises from the lifecocoon. "No time for such vanity. It is your legacy, not ours. Other Mandarins... do not agree. Hide it from them."

Whichever character takes it may be shocked to see it melt into his hands, forming a tattoo on his palm before dissolving away completely.

He speaks again: "Do not drink the intoxicants of others... draw from your own wells." He then falls silent as the lifecocoon renders him unconscious. The bony *yurim'zho* device cannot be punctured without damaging Yoma Zahl (ARM 10d, SHIELD 3/18, 20 hits). It cannot be moved, for it emits a field keeping it in place, so that it may be tracked it and retrieve by proper assistants. (Note: Occult healing powers will not work while Yoma Zahl is in the lifecocoon, and there is no way to deactivate it.)

The cadre is now without a guide, trapped in a sentient palace that seems to have been hacked by unknown saboteurs.

Non-Player Characters

Below are the traits for every major non-player character to appear in this act. Those NPCs unlikely to become involved in dice-rolling situations are not given traits here; gamemasters should feel free to devise traits for any NPC that needs them.

Zlarm

Body: Strength 8 (+1 DMG), Dexterity 8, Endurance 8
Mind: Wits 1, Perception 4
Natural skills: Dodge 4, Fight 8, Sneak 6, Vigor 9
Attacks:

weapon	init	goal	dmg
Tusks	8	16	5
Horns*	8	16	4
Side spikes		8	16	3
Charge & Gore**	5/3	16/14	6/8

* A critical hit on a horn strike (or a Gore; see below) means that the victim is impaled. The zlarm may thrash about and deliver 4d DMG each turn, in addition to any other action it takes (suffering no multiple action penalty); this DMG is not blocked by energy shields. It requires one action and a successful Dexterity + Vigor roll to escape the horn.

** +2d DMG/3 meters run; attacker and victim both knocked down. After a successful charge, the zlarm may immediately perform a Gore action with no multiple action penalty; this involves a quick attack with both horns and tusks.

Armor: Bristly fur (3d)
Vitality: -10/-5/-3/-1/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Manshogo Scouts — Duma, Sim and Opa

Race: Manshogo
Rank/Class: Frontier Scouts
Quote: "How strange — a barbaric Gwindo!"

Description: Duma is a male of the *Supi* race (dark black with white stripes), Sim is a male *Sani* Solacer (brown with yellow stripes) and Opa is a female *Pasa* (green with purple stripes). They wear loose tunics with belts and bandoleers, from which hang their equipment (listed below). Otherwise,



they wear no shoes or other adornment.

Entourage: They always travel together, for there are no other Manshogo in the region.

Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 7 (10), Endurance 5

Mind: Wits 5, Perception 6 (7), Tech 3

Spirit: Extrovert 3 (Sim: 7), Introvert 1, Passion 4, Calm 2, Faith 3, Ego 1

Natural skills: Dodge 5, Fight 6, Melee 8, Observe 6, Shoot 5, Sneak 7, Vigor 6

Learned skills: Altu 1 (Sim: 6), Focus 5 (6), Imir, Lore (Hegemony) 4, Read/Speak Ibla, Read/Speak Mau'quar, Remedy 3, Stoic Body 3 (4), Stoic Mind 3 (4), Survival 5, Throwing 5, Tracking 5

Blessings: Disciplined (+2 Calm in combat situations), Tall (+1 Vitality, base run = 12 meters)

Curse: Surly (-2 Extrovert when upset)

Benefice: Klavi

Affliction: Duma is a Trance Addict

Wyrd: 3 (Sim: 6)

Equipment: Lightsplinters (mounted on small metal rods), fishing line and tackle, emergency lifecocoon (inert mode looks like an elaborate scarab brooch)

Weapons:

WEAPON*	INIT	GOAL	DMG	SHOTS	RNG	RATE	SIZ
Laser rifle**	5	14 (17)	8d	30	40/60	2	L
Imir	7	15 (18)	5d	-	-	-	M
Thrown *imir*	5	12 (15)	5d	-	5/15	1	M

* Parentheses = trance-boosted traits

** Vautech: TL7, a thin, ergonomic pole with hookup for a sheath-worn sight (which these Manshogo do not possess).

Armor: Dueling shield (disguised as belt buckles) 5/15, 20 hits

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

Velek Laborers — Quil'par and Kolor'vak

Race: Velek Zzum

Rank/Class: Zim'phil Zar Laborers

Quote: "Leave us be. We have work to do."

Description: Standing about eight feet tall and nearly four feet wide, these eight-legged crustaceans sport two arms with large pincers. It is impossible to determine their genders — or if they even have genders. They each wear large backpacks that look to be made of tin foil, from which thin metallic wires spread over their shells (these are Vautech sheaths).

Entourage: Two more laborers (Bag'lat and Ubi'zin) live at the village, serving work terms in return for greater benefits on the homeworld once they return home.

Body: Strength 10 (+2 DMG), Dexterity 3, Endurance 7

Mind: Wits 3, Perception 3, Tech 3

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

Natural skills: Vigor 5

Learned skills: Artisan (Woodworking) 3, Drive (Underwater craft) 3, Lore (Hegemony) 2, Read/Speak Mau'quar, Science (Environmental Engineering) 5, Speak Gon'lab, Stoic Body 2, Tech Redemption (Craft 3, Mech 6, Volt 2, High Tech 2), Survival (Underwater) 2

Blessings: Giant

Curses: Bad Hearing (-2 Perception hearing only — except very low sounds), Bigoted (-2 Extrovert around non-Velek or non-Vau), Ugly (-2 Charm among non-Velek)

Benefices: Armored Shell (see below), Extra Limbs (total of eight legs, two arms, +4 meters base run), Pincers (see below)

Afflictions: Awkward Size, Speech Impediment, Vestigial



Lungs
Total base run distance: 18 meters per turn
Wyrd: 3
Equipment: *Emzu'hanstha* (survival sheaths), *gurm'zeer'sa* (gravity wire)
Weapons:

WEAPON	INIT	GOAL	DMG
Pincers	3	6	6d

Armor: Armored shell (ARM 7d)
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Vau Workers — Hamlu'waq, Jo'vilo, Skela'him

Race: Vau
Rank/Class: *Xel'var* Workers
Quote: "You say that you are Known Worlds Gwindor? My friend, this joke is not funny. We would have been warned of any such invasion. But we will play along if you wish. Perhaps this is a waypath test, yes?"

Description: They each wear loose tunics, belts and boots, with thick gloves tucked into the belts when off-duty. When on duty, they activate their heat sheaths, which protect them from the high temperatures inside the foundry.

Entourage: The other workers on shift are mainly *hu'narsh* rank, with two *afor'olpak* (masters).
Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 6, Endurance 4
Mind: Wits 3, Perception 3, Tech 4
Spirit: Extrovert 3, Introvert 1, Passion 1, Calm 3, Faith 3, Ego 1
Natural skills: Vigor 4
Learned skills: Artisan (Metalwork) 6 (8), Drive (Landcraft) 3, Lore (Hegemony) 2, Read/Speak Mau'quar, Science (Metallurgy) 2, Speak Zuil'quar, Tech Redemption (Mech) 7, Tech Redemption (High Tech) 3, Think Machine 1
Blessings: Double-jointed (+2 Dexterity to escape bonds or repair awkwardly situated devices), Gifted (+2 with Artisan Metalwork skill)
Curses: Obsessive (-2 Calm when work interrupted), Vassal
Benefices: Contacts (other metalworkers), Occult Shield, Strong Lungs
Affliction: No Occult
Wyrd: 3
Equipment: *Flar'zun shor'im* (foundry trowels; see below), *wimun'hanstha* (Heat sheath: provides complete protection against heat)
Weapons: None
Armor: Heat sheath (3d)
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0

Fah Selani Apothecaries — Sulani-zahl and Fessteer

Race: Fah Selani
Rank/Class: Frontier Servicemember
Quote: "Ah, Gwindor from across the border. Long have we worked near but never seen one another. (Turning to speak to each other) Most auspicious...."

Description: Two large snakes with distinctive markings along their lengths. Their tails end in 10 small tentacles that are highly dexterous.

Entourage: These are the only two Fah Selani on this world.
Body: Strength 3, Dexterity 6, Endurance 5
Mind: Wits 7, Perception 6, Tech 4
Spirit: Extrovert 4, Introvert 3, Passion 1, Calm 4, Faith 1, Ego 3
Natural skills: Charm 2, Dodge 5, Fight 4, Impress 4, Observe 5, Shoot 3, Sneak 4
Learned skills: Academia 3, Alchemy 7, Bureaucracy 2, Etiquette 4, Inquiry 5, Lore (Hegemony) 3, Physick 2, Read/Speak Mau'quar, Remedy 3, Science (Chemistry) 6, Speak Sleesha, Xeno-Empathy 2, Xeno-Physick 4, Xeno-Remedy 5
Blessings: Contortionist (+2 Dexterity to escape bonds or wriggle through tight spaces), Precise (+1 Dexterity for fine manipulation tasks), Sensitive Smell (+1 Perception with smell only)
Curses: Callous (-2 Passion when asked for aid), Unnerving (-2 Extrovert around non-Fah Selani)
Benefices: Bite (see below), Heat Sense Organ, Him-Saa, Venom (see below)
Afflictions: Bereaved Him-Saa, Honor Vow
Wyrd: 3
Equipment: None carried, but there are various alchemical tools (as well as their *schaal* guns) in the den below.
Weapons:

WEAPON	INIT	GOAL	DMG	RNG	RATE	SHOTS	SIZ
Bite	3	10	3d				
Schaal	3	11	6d	20/30	2	32(A)	L
3-rounds	3	11	7d				
6-rounds	2	10	9d				
Empty clip	2	9	11d				
Spread	1	-1/m	10d (up to 5m)				

Armor: None
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0



Vau Soldiers

Race: Vau

Rank/Class: *Kwama* Soldiers

Quote: "We knew of your coming and will do nothing to hinder you — unless you cause harm."

Description: Dressed in light tunics with belts, boots and short cloaks, these Soldiers have no apparent armor. However, their sheaths (seen as spidery metallic tracery across their bodies) will form a carapacelike armor if their energy shields cannot function. Unlike the Workers, these Soldiers have small horns and knobs on their heads and are built large and broad.

Entourage: If necessary, they can radio the Soldiers at the landing site for aid, or even summon a platoon (36 Soldiers) from the palace.

Body: Strength 6 (+1d DMG), Dexterity 7, Endurance 5

Mind: Wits 3, Perception 4, Tech 3

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

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

Learned skills: Drive (Aircraft) 2, Lore (Hegemony) 1, Read/Speak Man'quar, Speak Sham'quar, Think Machine 1

Blessings: Disciplined (+2 Calm in combat situations), Synergy (+2 Fight and Melee when working in concert with other Soldiers)

Curses: Unforgiving (-2 Calm to halt an attack), Vassal

Benefices: Occult Shield, Strong Lungs

Afflictions: Loyalty, No Occult, Vow of Protection

Wyrd: 3

Equipment: *Sham'hanstha*

Weapons: *Forv'rulkh* energy stave

WEAPON	INIT	GOAL	DMG	RNG	RATE	SHOTS	SIZ
Axe	7	14	6d	-	-	-	L
Club	7	14	5d	-	-	-	L
Blaster*	8	15	9d	40/60	2	30	L
3-rounds	8	15	10d				
6-rounds	7	14	12d				
Empty cell**	7	13	14d				
Spread	6	-1/m	13d				
Self-destruct	-	7	15d explosion (5m radius)				

* Bleeds through energy shields on damage rolls of 1 or 2.

** +3 successes against dodge.

Armor: Energy shield (4/16, 20 hits), sheath shell (ARM 5d — this armor only engages if the energy shield is dampened or out of charges)

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

Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph

Race: Mandarin

Rank/Class: Yoma of the Council of Worthies

Quote: "Your arrival is most auspicious for all our peoples."

Description: Zahl stands 11 feet tall with a slight goatee, leathery brown skin and dark green robes with bony shoulder guards and headdress (his sheath). His fingers are long and supple, fascinating to watch when he gestures with them.

Entourage: He is most often accompanied by a group of three Soldiers, and is sometimes joined by five artist Workers (one of whom is a clutchmate, now elderly and near his end).

Body: Strength 3, Dexterity 5, Endurance 4

Mind: Wits 10, Perception 6, Tech 8

Spirit: Extrovert 7, Introvert 4, Passion 2, Calm 5, Faith 3, Ego 1

Natural skills: Charm 9, Impress 6, Observe 6



Learned skills: Academia 6, Arts (Music) 3, Bureaucracy 8, Drive Aircraft 3, Empathy 3, Etiquette 7, Focus 5, Inquiry 10, Lore (Prophecy) 8, Lore (Known Worlds) 6, Lore (Hegemony) 5, Read/Speak Hil'quar, Read/Speak Mau'quar, Read/Speak Urthish, Science (Psychology) 4, Social (Leadership) 6, Social (Oratory) 4, Stoic Mind 4, Think Machine 8, Xeno-Empathy 7, Xeno-Psychology 2
Blessings: Compelling (+2 Leadership among Workers and Soldiers), Tall (+1 Vitality, base run = 12 meters)
Curses: Secretive (-2 Extrovert around non-Mandarins)
Benefices: Clutchmates, Gossip Network (4 pts), Occult Shield, Privileged Access, Secrets (5 pts), Strong Lungs
Afflictions: Loner Anxiety, No Occult, Vow of Stewardship
Occult: Augury 3
Powers: True Vision (GOAL 9), Tenor of the Cosm (GOAL 15), Etheric Eye (GOAL 13)
Wyrd: 5
Equipment: *Xan'hanstha*, *Eevru'muld* (lifecocoon), *Valukesh Ha'eni* oriel
Weapons: None
Armor: Energy shield (3/18, 20 hits)
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0

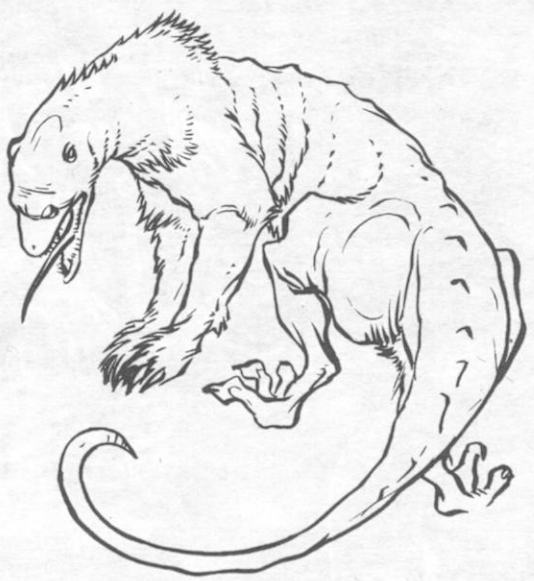
Quaz'qual

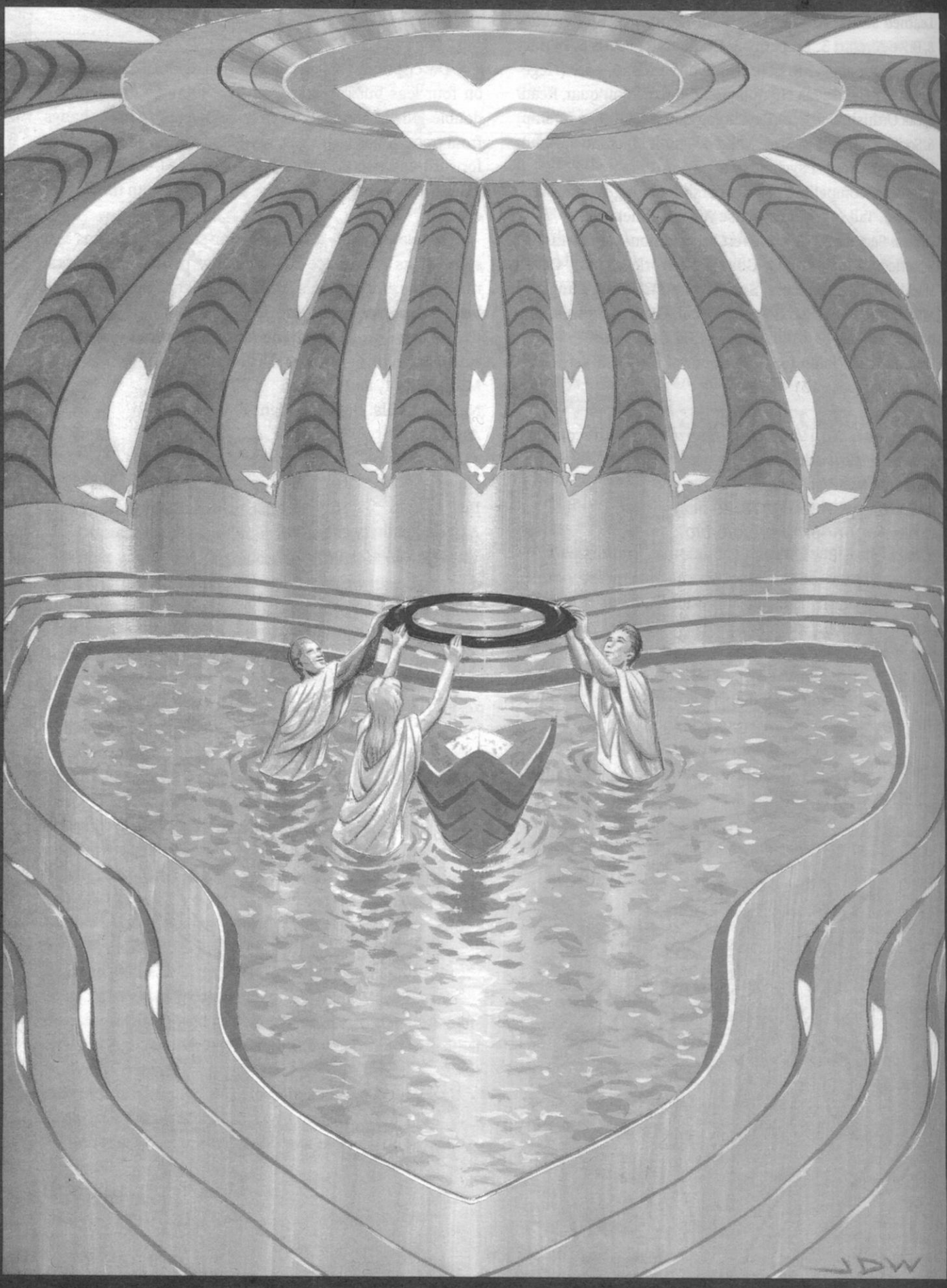
Description: This greenish, furred reptilian creature runs on four legs but can stand on two. Its arms and legs are double-jointed, aiding it when attacking prey while it hangs from trees. It has four eyes, two set above its snout looking forward and two on either side of its head, looking to the sides (it can perceive only color and motion with these side-eyes).

Special: It is in a state of near-starvation (it has lost some of its Endurance-based Vitality points). In the first three turns after it mauls its first prey, it has the traits listed below. However, each turn thereafter, it suffers a cumulative –2 penalty due to fatigue (maximum penalty of –10).
Body: Strength 6 (+1 DMG), Dexterity 9, Endurance 5
Mind: Wits 1, Perception 5
Natural skills: Dodge 5, Fight 7, Vigor 7
Attacks:

WEAPON	INIT	GOAL	DMG
Claws	7	16	5
Bite	6	16	4

Armor: Leathery skin (2d)
Vitality: -8/-4/-1/0/0




JDW

Act Three: Maze of Deception

True Ontology

What's really going on here?

Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph intended to test the Known Worlders by exposing them to an elaborate reality simulation (the palace itself) designed to mimic what the *Jaykata U'moti* believes to be the ever-shifting physical and psychic laws within the central chambers of the Weft. The Weft is a higher-dimensional reality constructed (programmed?) by the Progenitors that projects (emanates?) its laws into the material universe. Although this is a complicated process in Vau metaphysics, it can perhaps be summarized by an analogy to Plato's theory of Forms, the higher ideals that shape their lower expressions in matter.

Or so the Mandarins believe.

The Vau's myth-history states that their race sacrificed its ability to interact directly with the Weft so that the Vau would not pose a danger to their Progenitor masters. However, with the Progenitors missing, there is now no one "at the wheel" — the machinery of the universe lacks guidance. The Vau seek to restore guidance but believe only they have the civilized aptitude to do so. However, they need tools by which to affect the Weft. Humans are just such tools.

The Vau believe that many of the lesser sentient races have the ability to interact with the Weft, especially those who exhibit occult powers, which are in some mysterious way connected to the Weft. Even those who have not awakened such abilities might possess some subtle factor that allows for such interaction, especially after they have been exposed to the workings of the Weft, through contact with Progenitor technology: Philosophers Stones or Soul Shards.

The coming of the Symbiots — whose actions are unfathomable to the *Valukesh Ha'eni* — spurred the *Jaykata U'moti* to shorten its timetable in its grand plan to gain control of the Weft, the machinery of reality. Unable to accomplish this themselves, the councilmembers began a search for servants who could do so under their strict leadership. The Manshogo had already proved too unruly, and the Ur-Ukar seem likewise ungovernable. The Ur-Obun are promising, but their adherence to transcendent religion hints that they, too, would prove rebellious in thought if not deed. In addition, they might already be tainted by their species' previous servitude to Progenitor races. Humans, as varied and virginal to Progenitor manipulation as they seem to be, hold the most promise, especially in light of their successes against the Symbiots.

Nothing, however, is decided quickly when Mandarins are involved. Human destiny is hotly debated by the councils, with most Vau reluctant to have any contact with them. To support their arguments, they point to the Prophet and his religion, stating that any species that follows such a creed would be hard to lead. (Ironically, the Vau hail the Prophet as a sign that humans can "come to *kyari*," or awaken their Will.)

Herein lies the greatest threat to the Vau: Religion. They distrust it. Some believe it to be mere superstition impeding rational thought, while others accept that its tenets touch on a higher reality than that of the Progenitors' making. As such, they fear it competes with the perfect, rational vision for the universe planned by the Architects, and thus impedes auspice.

Experience with aliens such as the Manshogo and Lun'grar led the First Council to conclude that religious belief was troublesome. Its existence allows for an allegiance beyond that of the Hegemony, one that cannot be easily uprooted. Attempts to outlaw belief only strengthen it. Hence, religion must be tolerated, but only so far as it does not endanger proper respect for auspice and Vau authority.

Certainly, not all Vau believe this; most Workers and

Soldiers still hold to ancient Vau religious beliefs (especially concerning the Sho'lan Suilmor), as do a minority of Mandarins. The Mandarins who hold the most power, however, follow an increasingly rationalistic culture built on a mechanistic metaphysics of cause and effect. One primary difference with similar human cultures is that Vau metaphysics admits *ideas* as primary causes. Ideas are as real as any material object, although usually more complex and subtle. They, too, are composed of substance, but exist on an ethereal, energetic level of reality normally invisible to material senses. Only the mind (not necessarily the brain, which is part of gross anatomy) — itself composed of similar mental substance — can properly perceive and manipulate such things as thoughts. Through it, etheric machinery can be devised, tools to engineer the laws of reality. This, the Vau believe, was the greatest achievement of the Progenitors: Ontological technology — reality tech.

In such a context, religious ideas are rogue thoughts. Worse, some Mandarins believe them to be emanations from a reality different from the Weft and, as such, are part of Ungoverned Existence, synonymous to the Vau with the Dark Between the Stars. While they readily admit that most religious cosmologies rarely seem evil, and that their dimensions of origination may be composed of just auspices, they are nonetheless outside of the Weft, and thus must be subsumed by it to ensure the safety of the Hegemony.

And so, the Vau seek Hegemony over not simply the lives of other beings, but the whole of reality itself. In this, they are simply inheriting what was once their masters'.

The Elabi Sect

Mandarin attempts to suppress religion among the Gwindor have been largely successful. Material benefits — long life, freedom from most debilitating diseases — have softened the need for religious answers to life's problems. However, there is one significant exception to their campaign of reason: the Elabi. This sect follows the Prophet, although a mythologized version of him unknown in the Known Worlds.

In their paranoid, underground cosmology, the Elabi see the universe as an elaborate illusion, a cage in which sentient beings have been locked away from the Truth, which nonetheless emanates into the cage-universe in the form of light — the Holy Flame. The forgers of this cosmic dungeon were none other than the Progenitors, who wrought their own will onto an infinite, undivided, nameless cosmos. They tore the One into the Many, and forced upon the cosmos laws of behavior in accord with their own desires, which served chiefly them and their authority at the expense of others' freedom and happiness. They enslaved reality and occluded the spiritual eyes of others so that the light of truth could no longer be seen — darkness and void replaced light and fullness as the background of the universe.

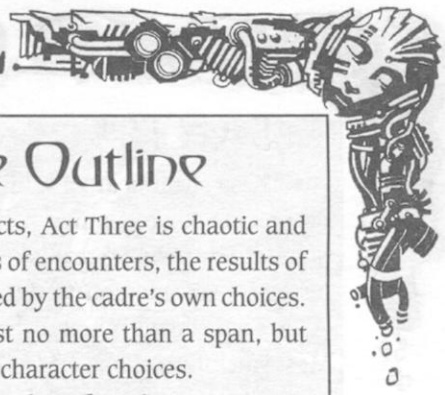
So well did they veil the spiritual eyes of lesser sentients that they were soon mistaken for the benevolent creators of the universe, when they were in fact its jailers. For many ages did the universe suffer until the Progenitors warred on themselves and killed one another. But their prison still existed without them, its inhabitants none the wiser. The Pancreator, chief principle of the true reality, sent into the prison a piece of itself so that Word of the True Light could be heard. This manifested as the Prophet.

The Progenitors' servants, the Vau, seeking to maintain the prison and to lord over it in their masters' stead, killed him. But his example did not die out as the Vau wished. His story was kept alive, hidden in secret among the Faithful, handed down through the generations of Gwindor on Quadi. Eventually, when the Gwindor were allowed to spread to other worlds within the Hegemony, the creed of Zebulon traveled with some of them, and soon the Word came to other alien races. The Manshogo heard it, and some of them heeded, keeping silent around the Vau. The Lun'grar heard also, but none know whether they heed it.

The Elabi's symbol is a broken jumpgate, for jumpgates are the doors leading to and from the prison. They point the way out, the direction of escape, but only once their seals have been shattered. (Note: The Sathra Effect is illegal in the Hegemony unless prophecy allows someone to experience it, for it has proven questionable for harmonious auspice.)

The Elabi is now an illegal sect spread in secret throughout the Hegemony. In truth, its numbers are pitiful, and even a collective uprising would be easily halted by authorities. Nonetheless, its fanatics gather into small cells and attempt to infiltrate the councils, serving as assistants and servants to Vau. Unknown to even Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph, such a cell infiltrated even his palace. With the arrival of the Known Worlders, the cultists have risked everything to enact their plan — to awaken sentients the universe over to the dangers of the Hegemony and its attempts to gain sovereignty over reality itself.

Members of the cell have "hacked" into the artificial sentience that controls the palace and now attempt to alert the Known Worlders to their message. The problem is that, at heart, the Elabi are religious fanatics and have no skill in conveying their message except through dramatic religious metaphors. The palace itself is not a passive victim in this, for it attempts to fight back and regain control over its processes. Thus, the Elabi are kept busy wrestling with the palace's sentience, and only during brief moments of victory can they attempt to communicate their message to the cadre. Even then, the palace may find ways to interfere with it, distorting it and making it even harder for the cadre to understand.



The Palace

The *Swam'tal Huanzi*, the Palace of Fortuitous Chance, is an amazing piece of technology. It is a single construct of advanced *yurim'zho* technology governed at its central core by the *Klur'vela*, the Ring of Figmentation, an Anunnaki Philosophers Stone that even the *Oma'tlama* little understand. The artifact has been known to the Vau for many centuries and is believed to be a key to the Weft. When connected to the unique design of the palace and supplemented by perceptions transmitted through sheaths in resonance with its workings, it can create an environment that is not wholly real. While physical reality is not altered, the perceived environment is. In other words, it's a virtual reality device so advanced that it provides no clues about its existence whatsoever — those inside its simulations have no means of knowing it.

The trick to achieving this effect is through the metamorphic, nanocrystal construction of the palace and the sheaths — those wearing resonant sheaths (the cadre, in this instance) feel and perceive whatever the *Klur'vela* wants them to. The Ring of Figmentation is itself semi-sentient. When connected to the palace's advanced think machine, the palace's reality can be controlled however its Mandarin owner (Yoma Zahl) desires.

The Elabi have broken into the palace's core and have gained control not of the palace itself (which is protected by numerous Mandarin security protocols) but the Philosophers Stone. Using a combination of prayer and meditation, they are able to manipulate the bare sentience within the *Klur'vela*, and thus they can override the palace think machine's commands. This is a game of constant struggle, however, as each tries to gain the upper hand by flanking the other for control of the *Klur'vela*. This conflict can be maintained now only because Yoma Zahl has been neutralized; as soon as he recovers, he will quickly regain control of the palace. Hence, the Elabi run a race against time, attempting to convey their message before the Mandarin's lifecocoon restores him to health.

The Hunters

The cadre must navigate through a confusing, unmappable maze and get to the core of the palace — the only stable reality. However, unknown to them at first, they are also on a timetable. Thanks to the Elabi's initial message — the scrawling of their creed ("to escape") on the monastery wall in Act Two — Slee'wau Vim Tlephta'al is aware of the Elabi's presence and is actively hunting them down. His Soldiers could not reach the core before Yoma Zahl was neutralized, however, and they thus must hunt through the shifting maze of the palace.

Act Three Outline

Unlike the previous acts, Act Three is chaotic and loose, composed of a series of encounters, the results of which are chiefly determined by the cadre's own choices. Each encounter should last no more than a span, but their quantity depends on character choices.

1. **Many Rooms:** A number of random encounters in the chaotic palace.
2. **Axis Mundi:** The cadre reaches the central core of the palace and finally encounters the Elabi face to face.
3. **To Escape:** The cadre must get off planet and back home.
4. **Postscript:** Integrating the cadre back into the Known Worlds.

Slee'wau Vim, unlike Yoma Zahl, is a more conservative member of the Council of Worthies. He has always opposed this envoyship. The fact that the Elabi have now revealed their hand allows him to kill the Known Worlders, for even though they are diplomats, they are considered to be governed by Hegemony law, and knowledge of the Elabi is a capital offense. If Yoma Zahl were conscious, he could overrule Slee'wau Vim's overly technical interpretation of the law. Lacking such a direct order, Vim's Soldiers will shoot to kill.

Slee'wau Vim is no longer in the palace (see *Axis Mundi*, below), but the Soldiers follow his remotely delivered orders.

The Cadre's Sheaths

Each member of the cadre wears a sheath that aids the palace in occluding his true vision and creating false illusions of reality. Even were a character to remove the sheath, the illusions would still persist, for tiny nanites invaded each characters' body as soon as the sheaths were initially donned, planting themselves in the characters' brains and nervous systems. These microscopic invaders are extremely high-tech and will not be detected by any Known Worlds cybertech or other technology. In addition, they will adapt perfectly to their hosts' immune systems, triggering no attacks.

Once the characters exit the palace, the nanites will decay and be sweated or urinated out of their hosts. The *Healing Hand of Saint Amalthea* theurgical ritual is perhaps the only means by which characters can prematurely flush the invaders from their systems, although two such rites per person are required; after the first, a character may begin to see through the false reality around him. See *Axis Mundi*, below, for what this entails.



Tech Talk

These sheaths are not fully sinister, however, for they do provide some genuine benefit to the characters — the atmospheric toxins threat is real, and the sheaths do protect against it, in addition to translating words for the cadre. Also, each sheath can absorb and store phantasmery data. Most Vau information tech is displayed in phantasmery form as semisolid light. Data readers can translate this into information and store it with great efficiency onto tiny crystals. Certain Known Worlds high-tech think machines (those of TL7+) can read these crystals.

However, the sheaths do not announce this capability. Characters must discover it for themselves. Those investigating the sheaths may make Tech + High Tech Redemption rolls; one or more victory points reveals the data crystal, which may be easily removed with one action. (Alternatively, a Tech + Think Machine roll with a –4 penalty will also disclose the crystal.)

This data-absorption ability might come in handy during some of the following encounters.

Many Rooms

The cadre is now alone in a strange Vau palace. A wave of improbability spreads as the programming of the nanocrystal building comes into conflict with the Elabi. Rooms shift randomly, and doors do not always lead to the same place. Space is unreliable.

The dreamlike reality of the palace was meant to test how well Known Worlds humans navigate shifting realities, all under the guidance of Yoma Zahl. They are now trapped here.

During the first part of their tour, everything they encountered could be explained somehow through known Vautech — repulsor pads, holoprojectors, etc. Now, nothing is predictable. No known scientific theory can explain goings-on in some places of the palace (such as the Soul Mirror).

Each room maintains a degree of integrity, but the spaces between rooms constantly shift. As the cadre proceeds from the zoo, doors close automatically behind them (unless they specifically state they attempt to hold them open). Once a door closes, it never leads back to the same place. Only while a door is open are two rooms connected. If it closes while some of the cadre are in one room while others are in another, they are separated and must go their ways apart (until the Elabi get them back together; see "Transmissions," below).

The palace, however, cannot maintain reality over two separate room connections. If the cadre keep three doors open at once, thus keeping three rooms connected, the palace's processing power cannot hold, and the Elabi can break through with a brief message before one of the doors is eventually forcefully shut by the palace. See "Transmissions," below.

Each time the cadre opens a door, the gamemaster should choose from the room encounters listed below, or roll a d20 and compare the result to the room's number; re-roll if the same room is encountered more than twice (it is possible — once only — to open a door onto the same room!).

This goes on until either all rooms have been encountered or the gamemaster feels it's gone on long enough — only then does a door open into the central chamber of the palace, where the Elabi pray over the Philosophers Stone.

1: Mural Corridor

A corridor with old murals on either wall depicting ancient Vau. This is actually a re-creation of old, pre-space Vau civilization on Hoom. In one portion of the mural, large, two-faced, winged beings float in the heavens, bearing books and staves (the Progenitors?).

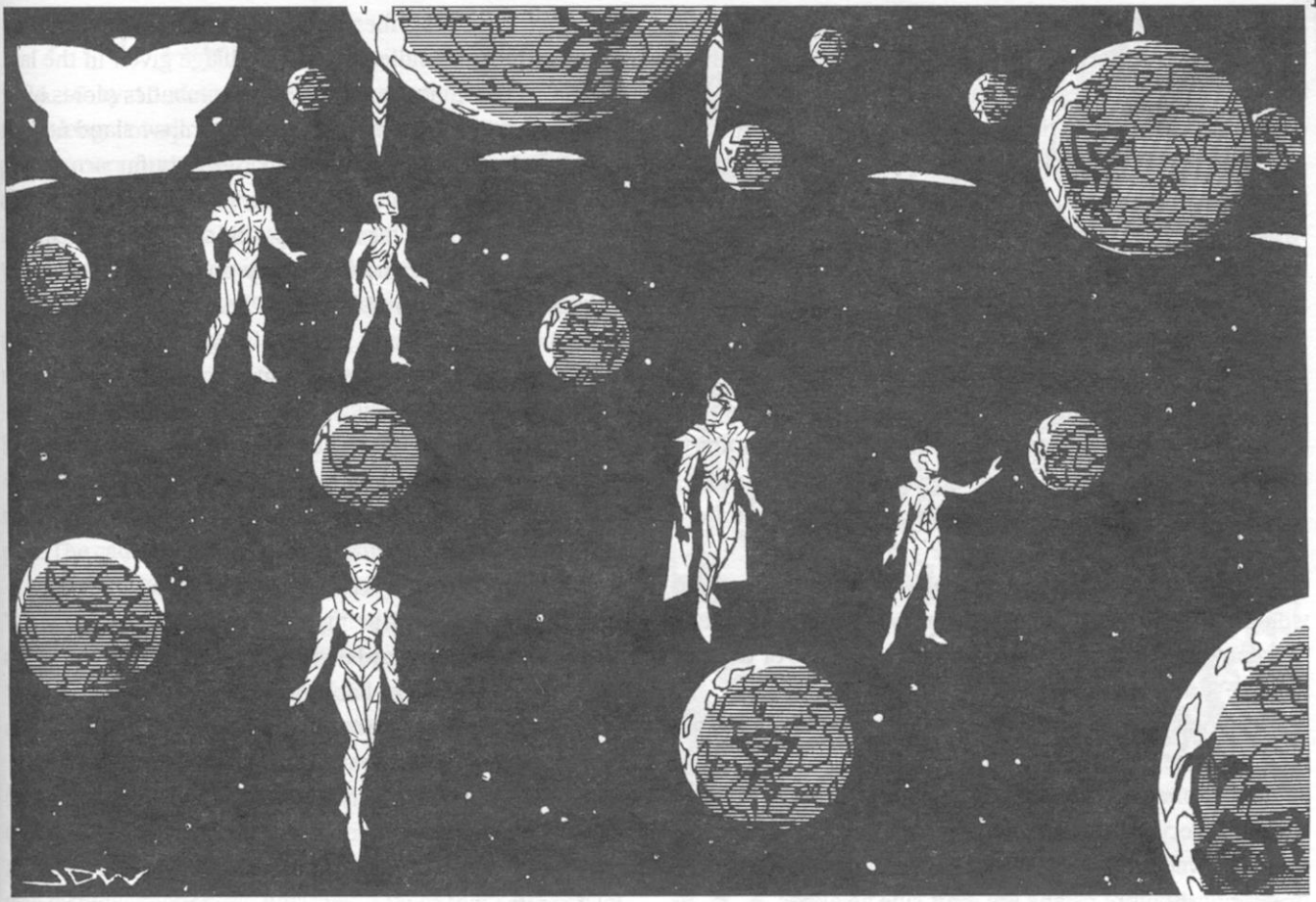
2-3: Map Room

The cadre literally walks amidst the stars — phantasmery projectors display the Known Worlds in three dimensions. The scale is greatly simplified (you can walk from Shaduveen to Cadiz), and each core world is about a half meter in radius, with neighboring planets and satellites shaped relative to it (i.e., gas giants are one to two meters radius).

Everything here is solid and feels to the touch similar to how its larger counterpart should — stars will burn anyone who touches them, ice planets will be cold, etc. As characters get close to each world, they can see extra details appear, such as fleets of ships orbiting the planet or jumpgate. (Characters who know the fleet complements of these systems will notice that these images are not necessarily accurate.)

Every Known Worlds planet is marked with a Vau glyph and an Urthish name. Careful study reveals two extra Symbiot worlds — "Abydos," linked to Hargard, and "Sogthal," linked to Chernobog and a Vau world (S'rib, but this is not marked as such). What's more, some barbarian space worlds are shown, but it is clear that the entire map is not active (there are hazy, ghostly images in some places).

Experimentation will reveal that Hegemony routes can be activated by touching their proper jumpgates. For instance, a character who touches the gate for Shaduveen will activate a small, floating, three-dimensional menu with options to activate the gates to Vril-Ya, Manitou (Vajslo Uo'an) and a world marked with only a Vau glyph (no Urthish name). From this latter world, gates can be opened deeper into the Hegemony. However, the palace will shut down the entire map room if more than three jumps into the Hegemony are investigated (see below).



Each such Hegemony world has its own jumpgates and similar menu options. However, all include an additional image: A two-dimensional display of tiny diamonds marked with glyphs, each connected by lines leading to other diamonds. This is a representation of the Hegemony jumpweb. Below it are three glowing glyphs. These are "buttons" that activate certain features. From left to right, they are:

- Enlarge (doubles the size each time the button is pressed, but will not expand to more than six times its original size)

- Copy (once the button is pressed, the "icon" shrinks and blinks; it can be grasped and placed into the window of any Vau think machine, which will read it and store its data — Known Worlds think machines cannot perform this function, although a character's sheath can — see "The Cadre's Sheaths," above)

- Print (pressing the button will solidify the image into a two-dimensional engraving on a silky, slick paper which can be rolled up into a scroll)

If the cadre chooses the "print" option, give them a copy of the *Hegemony Jumpweb* map reproduced on the inside cover of this book. If they "copy" the image, give them the map once they are able to decode and view the data. Players will have to decode the map on their own, with very little clues. A key for the gamemaster is provided at the end of this chapter.

Jumpdata

Each jumpgate has a number of confusing glyphs on its menu options. One of these displays a glowing series of them. Anyone who can read Mau'quar recognizes these as numbers, although a confusing array of them. They are actually jump coordinates. They can be copied just as the map can (see above). However, if more than three jump coordinates are copied, the palace will shut down the room.

Exit

Once the door closes behind the cadre upon entering, it disappears. There are only two ways to make it reappear: During shutdown (if the cadre investigates too many Hegemony worlds or jump coordinates from any world) or by walking into the planet representing Shaduveen, at which point the planet transforms into an open doorway.

A shutdown simply means that the stars and the dark void of space disappears, replaced by a circular, featureless room with white, smooth walls only six meters in radius. A single door leads in and out of the room.

4-5: The Soul Mirror

A path leads straight through a mirrored hall with a curving ceiling toward a door about 100 meters away. All surfaces except the floor are mirrored, reflecting the cadre's

images in a warped fashion — their inner torments reveal themselves. If a character is wracked with guilt over something, his image appears haunted and sallow, with darkened eyesockets and twitching hands (perhaps even flogging wounds on the back). If she is seething with anger or the need for vengeance, her face is a mask of rage, bristling with fur and fangs, and her hands are talons. And so forth for many repressed or emotional problems the characters might suffer; the gamemaster should get inventive here.

If a psychic character suffers from Urge, his reflection will not be his but that of his doppelganger. Even if it is weak, it will still appear as a separate being who acts on its own, regardless of whatever its counterpart does. Its voice cannot be heard, but anything it does can be seen — and be assured that it will act to embarrass or shame its counterpart.

The same is true of those suffering Hubris — their wounds will be readily apparent in the reflection. Indeed, they may appear hideous and gnarled, a promise of what is to come if they do not repent.

The one boon to this glimpse into the dark side is that each character who sees his own reflection thus may attempt to atone and lower his Urge or Hubris levels. Roll Introvert + Focus; success means the lesson makes a mark and one level is lost. Failure means the lesson failed to sink in. A critical failure means the dark side awakens.

Yoma Zahl devised this hall using the Philosophers Stone as a means of conquering his own doubts and fears concerning his coming betrayal of the council's edicts (by giving the key tattoo to the cadre).

6-7: Repulsor Gym

This room is similar to the Escher stairs in that each wall (including the ceiling and floor) is a repulsor pad. However, each pad works at variable strength, depending on the kinetic energy delivered to it — someone walking across the floor may feel a slight bounce in his step, but someone jumping on it may find himself hurtling into the ceiling — and then bouncing back to the floor with even more force. By jumping at a surface at just the right angle, one can hurtle oneself at a different surface and so bounce back and forth around the room. Those with skill can perform surprise maneuvers on others, who cannot easily predict where the hurtling person will bounce next.

The room was devised as a gymnasium for Soldiers, based on a popular sport played on Hegemony worlds (*Qui'lqff*, or "Bounce Ball").

As soon as the cadre enters, they are attacked by two of Slee'wau Vim'Tlephta'al's Soldiers, who wandered here hunting for the central chamber. They have orders to capture the characters.

The Soldiers are trained in repulsor room gymnastics and prove formidable foes against the green characters. Use the traits for the Soldiers from the village given in the last chapter, except that these ones have Acrobatics scores of 6. Each turn, they can perform leaps and jumps to land next to a character of their choice (no matter how far across the room they are from him); roll Dexterity + Acrobatics to succeed. Characters may also attempt this, but they suffer a –4 penalty due to unfamiliarity. If they do not have the Acrobatics skill, they may substitute Vigor, but the penalty is then –6.

The Soldiers attempt to subdue the characters with martial arts (they each know the Martial Fist, Kick and Hold actions). They do not use energy staves for fear of damaging the repulsors. Any character firing a slug gun or energy weapon will quickly learn that the projectile bounces in unpredictable directions with increasing force.

The projectile will rebound once per die of damage it delivers (ignore victory points). Roll 1d6 to determine which surface it bounces toward next (1 = up, 2 = down, 3 = left, 4 = right, 5 = forward, 6 = backward). Anyone on that surface might get hit (roll GOAL 10); if there is more than one person there, roll randomly to see whom it might hit. Anyone so hit suffers the projectile's damage plus 1d for every bounce it made before reaching the target. Once the projectile hits someone, it stops bouncing.

Exit

The exit lies on the opposite side of the room from the one the characters entered. If the cadre can all get through it without the Soldiers, they can lose pursuit once the door closes behind them, ensuring that the Soldiers cannot follow (they will open the door onto another room).

If the cadre is subdued, they will be tied and bound by Wet Jackets, then dragged from room to room until the Soldiers reach the core. It is possible that an encounter in one of the rooms might lead to the character's freedom.

If the characters are vicious and display that the Soldiers can expect no mercy from them should they be subdued themselves, the Soldiers will draw their staves from the sheaths on their backs and set them to self-destruct, hopefully taking the characters with them. The explosion will, of course, reverberate throughout the room, inflicting double the normal damage.

8: Toothed Gate

A short hall (10 meters) leads to a gate shaped like a large, toothed maw. Entering the maw is the only way out of the hall. Above the mouth, two animal eyes watch the cadre as they move.

This maw is actually harmless. It will only snap tight to devour Lun'grar, and there are no members of that species on the planet at this time.

9-10: Library

A 10-by-10 meter room displays two-dimensional images along it walls. Touching an image activates a short phantasmery projection, an "interactive inceptor" showing elements of Vau history and culture. It is meant mainly for children, but will also prove instructional for Known Worlders. There are three topics available:

- **Word Games:** A "Dick and Jane" sort of children's instructional, showing kids tossing a *bula* gravity ball (which the cadre might have seen in the village). An odd, multi-legged lemur with large, round eyes (a *gwim'zi*), dances in between, trying to catch the ball. The children say basic words in Mau'quar (*bula*, *gwim'zi*, fun, girl, boy, etc.), which are then repeated by a soothing voice from an unseen participant. The cadre's sheaths effortlessly translate these words.
- **Safety in the River:** A historical clip showing how Vau ancestors traditionally sought refuge from predators in the midst of a river, usually on a dam they built where the Mandarins stay. The simulation is so precise it looks like actual footage from the ancient past.
- **Energy Around Us:** A short clip about the energy fields all around us. This one is clearly meant to instruct Gwindor, but it is still somewhat confusing, since it keeps referring to thoughts and emotions as sensory data rather than mental experiences. Basically, a voice that sounds a lot like Yoma Zahl talks about how energy exists all around on subtle levels even Vautech has trouble detecting. Short scenes of Vau starships in action are the highlight here. Each ship hosts a roiling, glowing ball of energy that fires beams and bolts in any direction.

11-12: The Tortured Artist

A Vau Worker, Tra Mo'dal, once favored by Yoma Zahl but now forgotten in this labyrinth, is now insane and spends his time working on insane art.

This room is large, about 100 meters square, but filled with artwork, most of it unfinished, and detritus — rotting plants, animal furs, metal slag, priceless jewels scattered about, etc. A small cushion bed is shoved against the wall in a corner. On a stand nearby is a gurgling fountain.

As the cadre enters, Tra Mo'dal works in the center of the room on his current piece of art, a nonsensical sculpture of some kind. He will ignore them (no matter what trouble they get into with his art — see below) until they approach him directly, and then he will attempt to be a kind host, although it is obvious he wants to get back to work and is annoyed at the interruption.

He is completely ignorant about the latest affairs. He thinks the humans are Gwindor, for the council "would not



be foolish enough to bring real Known Worlders here." Once he realizes they're telling the truth, he gets very fascinated and begs to follow them on their journey through the palace.

It is impossible to pass through the room (to the door on the other side) without passing close to art of one sort or another. In doing so, certain pieces might activate and attempt to interact with the characters:

• **Dancing Statue:** A statue that abstractly resembles a Vau becomes mobile and gracefully leaps in front of the characters, twirling beautifully and with great dexterity. It holds out its hand, obviously requesting a dance. It waits for a few moments for a response. If one of the characters volunteers, it will sweep him up gracefully and begin a dance where it attempts to shackle its new partner — roll Dexterity + Dodge to escape, resisted by the statue's GOAL of 13. If it gets no volunteers, it will choose one of the characters and forcefully initiate a dance. Shattering it is the only way to stop its advances. It has 4d of ARMOR and only VITALITY 5.

• **Smart Rope:** A coil of smooth, green rope that spirals into many beautiful shapes. Its moves are hypnotic — any character must roll Wits + Stoic Mind to resist staring at it helplessly, convinced that its moves form some sort of language; victims become addicted to solving the dilemma of translation. This spell is broken only if the rope stops moving.

Those who are unaffected by the hypnotic swaying may grab the rope and attempt to control it. Roll Dexterity + Vigor to properly grasp it, after which the rope goes limp. With practice, the rope user can train the rope to enact up to five predetermined actions (such as "leap up to grasp a balcony," "flail that serf," or even "untie me.") It requires nine victory points on a sustained Dexterity + Focus roll to train a single action.

• **Soundless Music:** A musical instrument resembling a cross between a tuba and a bagpipe produces sounds in pitches inaudible to humans, but causes sensations nonetheless: Tingling feelings, nausea and giddiness. It may cause a character to succumb to violence, lust or depression, depending on the skill of its player — roll Wits + Arts (*Flarn'zaqua*). Unlike the previous objects, this one does not play itself, but Tra Mo'dal will offer to play for rude guests who don't take his hints to leave (GOAL 13).

13: Shuttle

A shiny, new subway-style shuttle car sits in a tubeway. Once the cadre climbs in, it transports them to a similar station, where a door awaits them. An emergency brake stops the car and opens a panel hosting an energy stave that anyone can use for up to three blasts (after which it becomes inert until reprogrammed for universal use again).

14-15: The Secluded Garden

A wide-open garden spreads across nearly a kilometer of land, a welcome respite from strife. Two G'nesh gardeners tend the place. One is a *Wyb'mova* (beetle kind) named Zlu'bal and the other is a *Shl'urb Fola* (spider kind) named Skliza. They wear sheaths that provide them with gardening tools.

They will not be visible at first, and characters may discover them by inadvertently walking through the spidery one's web (STR 7 to break free of its sticky entanglement). Once alerted to the intruders, the G'nesh will investigate. They are cordial but not very forthcoming, interested only in maintaining the garden, not idle chatter.

Characters who pick flowers may be asked to leave. If they persist, the G'nesh will attack.

Species traits for the G'nesh are provided in *Appendix: Traits*.

16: The Egg Room

A 25-by-25 meter room, in the center of which is a circular table with a nest of seven Vau eggs. A force field keeps them warm and protects them from the characters (not even energy staves can pierce it).

Three Workers sit nearby, observing a screen that looks like it grew from the floor. It shows an X-ray style image of the eggs, where the caste of each egg's inhabitant can be seen. Three of them are Soldiers, three are Workers, and one is a Mandarin, revealed by its slick, protofeathers.

As soon as the cadre enters, the Workers get scared. They have no idea how to deal with this intrusion and beg that the characters leave Yoma Suvala Slee's clutch alone. If questioned, they will reveal that the eggs are here to be modified, to strengthen the Soldiers.

The Workers will die before they let the eggs be touched, and no amount of torture can get them to lower the force field.

A door on the other side of the room is the only exit.

17-19: Vanity Playhouse

A Vau play is in production. The audience sits in a circle about the stage while the players turn and spin, walk and skip around in meandering streams, all while speaking their dialogue. This style is similar to Japanese Noh (revived by certain Li Halan families) — very formal.

No one takes notice of the characters as they enter or if they sit down. If any in the audience are accosted or asked questions, they will simply direct annoyed glances as the characters. The audience consists of about 11 sentients — four Vau Workers, two Soldiers, one Manshogo, two Fah

Selani, and two Gwindor (male and female). The players are two Vau Mandarins. They shock the audience by disrobing and performing a mating dance — with the female's feathered plumage rising.

Before the climax, however, everybody freezes and then disappears. The seats and stage remain, but the players and audience are gone, all but for the Manshogo, who looks around, confused.

A door on the floor of the stage opens and two of Slee'wau Vim's Soldiers appear, aiming energy staves at the cadre. They have no compunctions against using them here, where there are no repulsor pads.

The door through which the cadre enter is still there; a quick escape is recommended.

The Manshogo will run to a corner away from the action but not participate in any way.

The play was a live broadcast from the new palace located elsewhere on the planet. The audience consisted of people from various villages who "tuned in" to watch, becoming part of the interactive phantasmery.

19-20: The Jelly Pond

Except for a small ledge by the door, this room appears to be a cave with a lake of gelatinous liquid stretching about 60 meters in diameter from wall to wall. On the far wall from the ledge, sparking precious gems can be seen embedded in the rocks — diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and some unrecognizable, rainbow-colored stones.

Anyone trying to swim the liquid sinks. After a panicked moment or two, the sheath activates, allowing the character to breathe in the ooze. Strange vibrations thrum from the depths. Three meters below the surface, the lake is inky black — nothing can be seen.

If the characters try to swim to the bejeweled side, they feel something moving below them. A primal jellyfish horror rises from below, threatening to envelop a character.

If a character tries to attack it, the jellyfish convulses and sinks. Immediately, the character is thrown from the liquid and back onto the ledge by the force of the jellyfish's expelled gaseous "breath."

If a character instead does nothing to threaten the Ool Shrr'mu, it will brush up against him for a brief moment. In that time, it effortlessly reads the character's mind regardless of occult defenses he or she might have (except for Anunnaki relics, which do prevent the Ool's mind-reading). The vibrations sensed from before become words within the characters' mind: "You are new to us."

If the character is virtuous, it will say, "Proud we are to greet you." If he is a cad, it will say, "Please to extend your farewell soon."

It will then sink into the darkness below and not return.



Anyone touched by the Ool's mind awakens psychic powers. That character can now spend experience points to gain powers. However, if she does not spend these points within a few months, the awakening atrophies and the opportunity is lost. If a touched character already has psychic powers, it now costs only half as many experience points as usual to gain the next level of Psi (but only the next level!).

However, the downside to this touch is that if a character's Urge or Hubris becomes active in the next three spans, it cannot be put back to sleep by spending Wyrd points.

After the Ool leaves, characters are free to pry jewels from the walls. A small fortune can be gained, as long as the characters have something in which to carry them. (Unfortunately, these jewels may not last long; see "Axis Mundi," below.)

Transmissions

Throughout the cadre's travels, the Elabi attempt to introduce messages, although these are distorted by the palace. There are three conditions under which a message may be transmitted:

• **Three doors open:** If three or more doors are kept open at once, thus connecting three or more rooms, the palace's processor breaks down temporarily (about 10 turns maximum), allowing the Elabi to transmit. Once the palace is back "on line," it will forcefully shut a door regardless of what's impeding it.

• **Three rooms passed:** Every time the cadre traverses three rooms, the Elabi attempt to transmit as they enter the fourth.

• **Occult powers:** The first time any character activates an occult power — psychic, theurgic or otherwise — the Philosophers Stone gains strength, and the Elabi can transmit past the palace's security. This also applies if the first activation is through Urge or Hubris.

Messages

Here are some of the messages the Elabi will attempt to convey, in order of their transmission:

1. Rejoining: If the characters are ever separated, the next transmission the Elabi make will be to rejoin them. Instead of transmitting a message, they wrest control of the palace long enough to deliver one group of characters into the same room as another. The only clue to their interference will be the same graffiti used before: The broken jumpgate image.

2. More Graffiti: Yet another Elabi act of vandalism is discovered, this one more words scrawled upon a wall. The quote is from an obscure poet of Old Urth; characters will need a high Arts (Literature) skill to know the name (William Blake), and will need at least six victory points on a Wits or Introvert + Arts (Literature) to recognize the quote (from *The Book of Urizen*).

They began to weave curtains of darkness
They erected large pillars round the Void
With golden hooks fastend in the pillars
With infinite labour the Eternals
A woof wove, and called it Science

3. Return of the Prophet: The holovid of the Prophet is back, but this time he is animated by the Elabi. The cadre may believe him false and part of a Vau trick, based on their knowledge of his holovid nature.

He speaks only in ancient-sounding proverbs, and tries to communicate the characters' predicament and the way out: "Patience must ye have in times of quest. The end is but the means, and the journey is begun only once the sun sets. Break free! Escape the encircling Mind! Pass through the portal on feet of Faith!"

Soon after he appears, his image becomes hazy and disappears (as the palace blocks the transmission).

4. The Hidden Cathedral: If any character attempts to heed the Prophet's words to "pass through the portal with feet of Faith" by praying before opening a door, he may roll Faith + Focus or Stoic Mind. Success means that the door, when opened, reveals the Hidden Cathedral.

The room looks like a catacomb. Here a group of Elabi are engaged in a group theurgy prayer to blind the palace to their presence. This involves drinking from a communal cup with human blood — representing the blood of the Prophet (a now-heretical practice from the Diaspora). The Gwindor priests are dressed in Diaspora-era clothes, and speak in language best known from the Omega Gospels — a dramatic, rather Biblical manner of speaking.

They are relieved to see the cadre. Their leader, a charismatic woman in her mid-30s, approaches and speaks:

"Quickly, for the Vau will soon arrive! You exist in a false reality, manufactured by the Progenitors. The Prophet knew this and pointed the way out, puncturing the veil and allowing the Empyrean truth to leak through into this dark world. The Vau seek to control the machines that control this reality, to gain hegemony over the universe. They want humans to be their pawns in unlocking the machines. But there is a greater reality even they deny — that of the Pancreator! Escape can be achieved only through faith. Look upon Their Works and know that a greater reality exists!"

She points towards a door in the wall, almost camouflaged against the rocks.

"Go now — we will try to open the portal for you that you may finally come free of this dungeon!"

If the cadre leaves through the door immediately, it will take them into the central chamber. If they delay (perhaps by attempting to question the priestess more) when they finally exit through the door, it will take them to a random

location from the list above. (The Elabi cannot hold the portal for long.)

2. Axis Mundi

The central chamber is unaffected by any of the illusions cast by the Philosophers Stone or palace. The room is circular (about 50 meters diameter) with white walls made from *yurim'zho* (it feels like plastic). In the center of the room is a pond, in the center of which is a one-meter-high pillar. Atop the pillar, floating in an antigravity field, is a hoop of featureless, coppery metal, about one meter in diameter. This is the *Klur'vela*.

Gathered around it, standing in the pond (the water reaching to their waists), with hands touching the *Klur'vela*, are three Elabi cultists dressed in robes. They are in deep meditation and prayer, but stir and cease their mutterings as the cadre approaches. They remove their hands and stare at the cadre.

One of them speaks: "And so you come to the heart of the matter. Here is the ring that encircles our world, binding us to illusion. Dare you grasp it?"

The cultists move aside to allow the cadre access to the ring.

The player of any character touching the ring should roll that character's Faith or Ego + Focus or Stoic Mind. Success means the character experiences a brief communion of consciousness with the semisentient relic and sees through the illusions of the palace. Failure means nothing happens. A critical failure means the character faints, but awakens within 10 turns.

Those who successfully meld with the relic perceive the truth behind the palace, realizing that the rooms and most of the inhabitants within are mere simulacra formed by the palace's artificial think machine sentience, using the powers of the Klur'vela. Almost everything here exists only as raw data and formless *yurim'zhor*, which shapes itself as needed to preprogrammed layouts. They come to understand, for a brief moment, just what's been going on — the struggle of Elabi will against that of the palace, using the the *Klur'vela*.

Only Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph, the Ool Shrr'mu and the Elabi cultists are real — everyone else within the palace is an elaborate similacrum given substance by *yurim'zhor* and appearance by the *Klur'vela*.

The Ool Shrr'mu is real, although it is a somewhat young representative of its race. The *Klur'vela* was discovered on Shelek'Thai and loaned to the Vau by the Ool. This representative accompanies it wherever it is placed.

The two other Mandarins, their Soldiers and Yoma Zahl's Worker clutchmate also actually exist, but all left the palace before trouble ensued. (Slee'wau Vim left as soon as the Elabi revealed themselves.) The remaining Soldiers are palace simulacra, as are the other inhabitants encountered within, including the *Quaz'qual* that attacked Yoma Zahl. Under normal circumstances, these simulacra would have appeared to defend Yoma Zahl, but they were prevented from forming by the Elabi during the *Quaz'qual's* assault.

Yoma Zahl's injury is quite real, for it was engineered by the Elabi's control of the palace's systems — including its shield dampers. Even though much of the palace is unreal, its substance is quite actual. Although the Vau Soldiers that hunt the characters are not living beings, they can still harm the characters, for they are made of *yurim'zhor* designed to exactly simulate reality.

3. To Escape

As soon as the Elabi ceased to concentrate over the *Klur'vela*, the palace regained control and immediately begins to arrange passage for Slee'wau Vim's Soldiers into the core chamber. They will arrive immanently.

Any character who communed with the *Klur'vela* can attempt to banish whatever the palace brings against her. This requires a contested roll against the palace. The player rolls the character's Wits + Stoic Mind against the palace's GOAL of 13. Each victory point gained allows the character to unravel a single target (i.e., a Vau Soldier). Each Wyrd point spent provides one victory point. Unraveled targets become shapeless *yurim'zhor* that seamlessly rejoins adjacent surfaces.

Once the characters commune (or not, depending on their rolls), the Elabi usher them from the pond and begin their vigil once more. Those who succeeded in gaining the vision can now control their travel through the palace and can open doors leading to any place they have already been. The Elabi leader urges them to leave immediately by way of the dining hall. "A gravity sled awaits you by which you may return to your vessel. Hurry!"

If no one communed, the Elabi will take control long enough to open a door for the cadre into the dining hall (from where they may exit by the main doors).

Should the cadre hesitate or attempt to steal the *Klur'vela* (it cannot be removed from its antigravity field), the Soldiers will arrive and they'll have to fight their way out or be captured. There are five Soldiers, each with an energy stave.

From this point on, escape is in the hands of the characters. They can open any door they like (or go through the one opened by the Elabi) and exit the palace. There they will find a gravity sled programmed to take them back to their ship (simply state: "Sled: Starship" or "Sled: Landing Site," etc.).

The *Nocturnal* is still there, as are the Soldiers and Yonn Gwin Ko'anti. They know nothing of what happened at the palace. Yonn greets the cadre happily and asks if they en-

joyed their visit. If they tell him anything of what happened, he grows pale and worried. He tells them to get in their ship and leave immediately while pressing into one of the character's hand a small data crystal. This is a copy of his manuscript concerning the Vau, published in this book as Book One. The character may now read it and disseminate it to the Known Worlds.

The Soldiers do nothing to impede the cadre; they are there to ensure that Yonn Gwin Ko'anti is not harmed. If the characters hang around too long, however, Yoma Zahl will awaken and transmit a message for the Soldiers to prevent the ship from leaving. They do this not by apprehending the cadre, but by activating an energy field that prevents take off. They will maintain this until Yoma Zahl arrives and interviews the cadre (see below).

The Cocoon Hatches

The cadre may decide instead to return to previously visited places within the palace, such as the Map Room or the zoo where Yoma Zahl lies in a lifecocoon. Every moment they spend here increases the chance they will be caught by Soldiers (the palace will generate five new Soldiers to hunt for them).

Yoma Zahl awakens fully healed soon after the characters touch the *Klur'vela*. He instantly takes charge of the palace again by initiating new security protocols. The Elabi are locked out of contact with the *Klur'vela* and the characters can no longer open doors wherever they want. In fact, they can't open doors at all. Only Yoma Zahl has the clearance to do so.

He spends a few moments reviewing the palace's memory concerning the Known Worlders' adventure, and then seeks them out. He bears them no ill whatsoever, and apologizes for the whole incident. He will attempt to counter the Elabi's creed, stating that the religious sect is outlawed for a reason: They are violent terrorists. He admits that their mutterings about "reality machines" are provocative and intrigue him, but such things, if true, concern the Progenitors' works. He assures the cadre that such technology is well beyond the means of even the Vau to decipher, but suggests that perhaps their two peoples could one day work together to uncover the ancient secrets that lie hidden all around them.

It was his original intention to use the palace's reality-warping functions to hypnotize the characters and implant them with posthypnotic suggestions. These would allow him to control them with "catch words" delivered by his agents in the Known Worlds (yes, he has spies there). This plan has now been foiled. He is not overly perturbed, however, for his Prophecy readings hinted that he would not be easily able to control these agents. He thus consigns himself to trust the greater currents of fate concerning the cadre's future enactment of his plans (which will be revealed in next sourcebook of the trilogy: **War in the Heavens: Pantheon**).

He ends with a farewell and a wish that the next meeting between Vau and humans is more peaceful. He adds: "To the key bearer: Keep this gift secret; it is for you and yours alone, for it unlocks your destiny."

He then ushers them back to their ship (or bids the Soldiers release the ship from its confinement field). They may now return to Vril-Ya.

Capture

If at any point the cadre is subdued by the Soldiers, they will be taken to the central chamber and held there until Yoma Zahl awakens. The Soldiers will chase off the Elabi cultists from the chamber. Eventually, Yoma Zahl and Slee'wau Vim (his remotely projected phantasmery) enter the room, arguing in the Vau High Speech (which the sheaths do not translate). Slee'wau Vim clearly wants to lock the characters up or do away with them, but Yoma Zahl denies these requests.

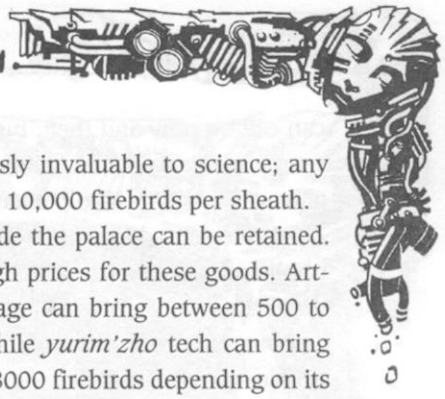
Yoma Zahl has the characters escorted back to their ship and addresses them as above, and then bids them farewell. He does add that their envoyship has caused a momentous political problem for him. He has long defended humanity against its detractors, but fears that he might not have the power to do so any longer. "Only time will tell...."

If anyone tries to attack the Mandarins, they'll find that the Vau's energy shields are working properly now. A single attack will cause the Soldiers to more tightly bind the cadre until they are delivered to the *Nocturnal*.

If the characters acted very badly throughout, showing that they are a danger to the Vau (perhaps they tried to smash the eggs in the hatchery, or killed things wantonly), then even Yoma Zahl will not defend them. They will be shoved into lifecocoons for deep stasis, and wake up when their cocoons hatch a few weeks later on Vril-Ya. Their clothing has been replaced and careful inspection will reveal signs of cranial surgery, but provide no other clue about their lives in the missing months. Altara Alveda explains that they were delivered to the *Nocturnal* in the lifecocoons, and she was told to leave and never come back. Since then, no communication has been forthcoming from the Vau, and all diplomatic ties have been frozen.

Postscript

Once the characters get back to the *Nocturnal*, a debriefing is in order. Altara Alveda wants to know everything that happened and does not allow them time among themselves to concoct a story: She demands an immediate account. This should be roleplayed so that the characters



may be caught in their own lies as they attempt to tell them without first planning an accepted story between themselves.

Contact with the *Klur'vela* does provide two interesting effects:

1. The characters' experiences and memories of the events cannot be scryed through occult means. Deep scanning by Imperial Eye psychics or Church penitents will not reveal any memory of the events. This does not prevent the characters from accidentally saying too much, however.

2. Characters who touched the relic may attempt to lower one level of Urge or Hubris by rolling Faith or Ego + Stoic Mind.

Key Tattoo

The key "tattoo" is invisible and cannot be detected by any known Known World technology. It is important in the next volume of the **War in the Heavens** trilogy. If the character bearing the tattoo is killed, the nanites will seep through the skin, form a tiny arrow, and seek out another member of the cadre on the planet (they cannot travel offworld), whom they will then impale and enter, dissolving as they did when Yoma Zahl first delivered it. And so on if that person is also killed....

If the characters reveal the tattoo's existence, the Eye will seek to study its bearer, but even extensive, high-tech scans will not reveal the nanites. Unlike the sheath nanites, these are partially made with Ur tech that is immune to theurgic healing rites, and so will not be flushed from the body of someone subject to such rites.

Keeping the Loot

Characters may retain their sheaths. These devices generate their own energy, enough to perform seemingly perpetual operations. Besides filtering Shaduveen's atmospheric toxins, they can filter hazards in other environments deadly to humans. However, they only cleanse what oxygen is inhaled; they do not provide an independent air supply, although they can aid someone in holding his breath (+3 Vigor).

They can detect poisons and toxins harmful to human anatomy by either holding a specimen before the scanning eye, or will do so automatically if toxins are introduced by air or touch. They will not defend against poisons introduced into the bloodstream, but may aid against those designed to be absorbed through the skin (roll GOAL 10 to neutralize such poisons).

They will continue to translate words spoken in Mau'quar, but their emergency beacons can be received only by Vau, and are thus useful only on Vau worlds. Their datacrystal storage devices work on different standards from most Known Worlds tech, but can be jury-rigged to accept standard data ports (this requires 12 victory points on a sustained Tech + High Tech Redemption roll; Think Machine skill is complementary).

The sheaths are obviously invaluable to science; any major factions will pay up to 10,000 firebirds per sheath.

Any items gained outside the palace can be retained. Various factions will pay high prices for these goods. Artwork or crafts from the village can bring between 500 to 3000 firebirds per piece, while *yurim'zho* tech can bring anywhere between 3000 to 8000 firebirds depending on its function and size.

Any item taken from the palace (including energy staves or shields taken from Soldiers, or any precious gems from the Jelly Pond) reverts to inert *yurim'zho* once outside that strange edifice. The only exceptions are Tra'Modal's artwork or crafts (such as the dancing statue or smart rope).

The bony, creamy-colored inert *yurim'zhor* is still valuable to scientists; major factions will pay 1000 firebirds per sample. Any data absorbed by one of the characters' sheaths is still retained in dataform, and jumpweb printouts from the Map Room retain their images.

Return to the Known Worlds

For the next month or so, the cadre is the center of much questioning by Eye agents and local diplomats (the people they met at the party). At the gamemaster's discretion, these factions will attempt to draw the cadre into further plots, convinced that they are important somehow.

Eventually, however, the furor will die down once people think they've gotten all the information out of the cadre that they are likely to get. Everyone is convinced that, because of the meddlesome Elabi sect, the cadre was denied access to deeper secrets that Yoma Zahl was surely prepared to reveal. The Church, or course, is very curious about the Elabi, and priests are divided as to whether the cult's members are true torches of the faith or followers of some long-forgotten heresy. It will be many years before the arguments die down, especially those concerning the Vau's alleged involvement in killing the Prophet.

As for the other envoys — those on Vril-Ya and those chosen to travel to Manitou and Apshai — no dramatic events are reported. They experienced glorified tea parties and learned something of the local Vau, but did not gain the close exposure that the characters did. Nothing like the palace was seen, and very little Vautech was witnessed. However, any character who tries to dig up deeper information on these other envoys may discover that the group on Manitou was also gifted with a key tattoo similar to the one Yoma Zahl gave the cadre. (This information should not come easily; perhaps an entire cloak-and-dagger drama or series of dramas is required to uncover it.)

The cadre now has allies in the Imperial Eye whom it



can call on now and then, but not without some expected return on the favor. The characters may likewise forge other alliances with Vril-Ya diplomats on their own.

If the cadre brought back Yonn Gwin Ko'anti's manuscript and revealed its existence to the Eye, copies are soon disseminated across the Known Worlds among the leading factions. However, its contents are not spread freely to most people, unless the cadre works to get it published (which the Eye will not interfere with). Its resultant popularity may make the characters into celebrities, providing years of invitations to parties and offers of patronage. Just where all this leads is up to the gamemaster and players.

Future Vau Diplomacy

The Vau do not intend to allow the Known Worlds another intimate glimpse into the Hegemony for some time. If the characters succeed, diplomacy on Vril-Ya, Manitou and Apshai becomes more open (human diplomats are invited into Vau territory more often), though the status quo of silence remains the same.

Any envoy — the player characters or the NPCs who went to the other Vau planets — is welcome in Vau territory, although they may not move freely through it. They may petition for entry, and a local Mandarin (with Soldier escort) will greet them and host them for as long as they wish to stay. They seem to be considered celebrities. While they cannot enter protected or military sites, they can interact with the frontier populace and try to learn their ways better (as long as they didn't sell their sheath translators!). Alien races such as the Manshogo and Fah Selani exist on Manitou, living among the Vau villages far from human settlements. However, no Gwindor live on the worlds along the Known Worlds frontier.

No further contact with Yoma Zahl Vord'rumph or Yonn Gwin Ko'anti is forthcoming. No whisper is heard of the political struggles he undergoes with the rest of the Council of Worthies. His plot has been initiated and he now awaits its future fruition in the hands of the envoys. Its resolution plays out in **War in the Heavens: Pantheon**.

Vau Hegemony Jumpweb Map (Key)



Appendix: Traits

Vau Castes

Mandarin Traits

Cost: 15 Extra points

Characteristics: Wits (base 4, max 12; 7 pts), Tech (max 11; 2 pts), Calm (always primary)

Learned skills: All Mandarins gain Read/Speak Hil'quar (High Speech) and Read/Speak Mau'quar (Middle Speech) for free. All Mandarins raised in the Hegemony learn Lore (Hegemony) 1 for free.

Racial Traits: Every Mandarin character must purchase these racial traits (Blessings and Curses do not count against the total allowed a character).

Blessings: Compelling (2 pts: +2 Extrovert among Workers and Soldiers), Tall (3 pts: +1 Vitality, base run = 12 meters)

Curses: Secretive (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert around non-Mandarins)

Benefices: Longevity (1 pt: Healthy Mandarins in the modern Hegemony live for 230 years), Occult Shield (5 pts: Vau are unaffected by non-physical occult powers), Privileged Access (2 pts: Mandarins have access to lores and technology forbidden to other Hegemony citizens), Strong Lungs (2 pts: Can hold breath for one hour before needing to make Endurance + Vigor rolls)

Afflictions: Loner Anxiety (+2 pts: Mandarins get nervous if there are no Soldiers or Workers nearby; -1 on all rolls), Limited Occult (+2 pts: Can awaken Augery [see sidebar]; cannot awaken Psi or Theurgy), Vow of Stewardship (+3 pts: Must mentor other castes and act within dictates of Prophecy)

Suggested learned skills: Lore (Prophecy), Social (Leadership)

Suggested Benefices: Clutchmates (3 pts of Allies), Gossip Network (4 pts), Secrets (1-5 pts)

Suggested Affliction: Overcautious (+2 pts: It takes twice as long as normal to complete a sustained action due to deliberation over auspice)

Suggested equipment: *Xan'hanstha* (Mandarins' sheath)

Soldier Traits

Cost: 10 Extra points

Characteristics: Strength (base 4; 3 pts), Dexterity (base 4; 3 pts), Endurance (base 4; 3 pts), Perception (base 4; 3 pts), Calm (always primary)

Learned skills: All Soldiers gain Speak Sham'quar (Soldier caste speech) and Read/Speak Mau'quar (Vau Middle Speech) for free. All Soldiers raised in the Hegemony learn Lore (Hegemony) 1 for free.

Racial Traits: Every Soldier character must purchase these racial traits (Blessings and Curses do not count against the total allowed a character).

Blessings: Disciplined (2 pts: +2 Calm in combat situations), Synergy (4 pts: +2 Fight and Melee when working in concert with other Soldiers)

Curses: Unforgiving (+2 pts: -2 Calm to halt an attack), Vassal (+5 pts: Soldiers must obey direct orders from Mandarins or suffer mental anguish; -4 penalty on all rolls associated with disobeying)

Benefices: Occult Shield (5 pts: Vau are unaffected by non-physical occult powers), Strong Lungs (2 pts: Can hold breath for one hour before needing to make Endurance +Vigor rolls)

Afflictions: Loyalty (+1 pt: Soldiers cannot knowingly harm Mandarins), No Occult (+6 pts: Cannot awaken Psi or Theurgy), Vow of Protection (+1 pt)

Suggested Benefice: Clutchmates (3 pts of Allies, 5 pts if a Mandarin is included), *Forv'rulkh* stave (3 pts)

Suggested equipment: *Sham'hanstha* (Soldiers' sheath)

Augery

Mandarins, like other Vau, cannot awaken psychic or theurgic powers. However, due to prolonged and intimate exposure to the *Valukesh Ha'eni* over time, certain individuals can develop a sympathy with that oracle and thus gain a degree of prophetic power of their own, called Augery (*Oma'kesh*). This acts similarly to a psychic power in that there is a path consisting of sequential levels, each of which must be learned before the next level can be gained. Instead of the Psi characteristic, Mandarins learn a new characteristic: Augury, which costs the same Extra and experience point amounts to awaken and train as does Psi. As with psychic powers, Wyrd is spent to activate Augery; extra Wyrd may be spent to extend the range and duration of its effects.

The levels are as follows:

1. True Vision (as the *Knowing the False Heart* Avestite theurgy ritual)

2. Tenor of the Cosm (as the *Divine Revelation* Eskatonic Order theurgy ritual)

3. Etheric Eye (as the *Subtle Sight* Sixth Sense psychic power)

4. Forewarning (as the *Premonition* Sixth Sense psychic power)

5. Unmasked Eye (allows the Mandarins to see through disguises and false appearances, even occult tricks such as Soma powers or the genetically-engineered shapechanging ability of metonyms)

6. What Was (as the *Shadows Gone By* Omen psychic power)

7. What Will Be (as the *Shadows to Come* Omen psychic power)

8. Past Presence (as the *Voice from the Past* Omen psychic power)

9. True Time (as the *Oracle* Omen psychic power)

Mandarins cannot escape the inevitable dark side of such a power; those who fail spectacularly at Augery gain levels of Fallacy. Such a prophet begins to unknowingly project his own hopes and fears into his augeries, and receives prophecies that — while not necessarily false — will surely lead to inauspicious actions that could badly affect the work of the councils in their attempts to steer cosmic fate. (Fallacy is gained similarly to psychic Urge.)

Worker Traits

Cost: 10 Extra points

Characteristics: Endurance (base 4; 3 pts), Tech (base 4; 3 pts), Calm (always primary)

Learned skills: All Workers gain Speak Zuil'quar (Worker caste speech) and Read/Speak Mau'quar (Vau Middle Speech) for free. All Workers raised in the Hegemony learn Lore (Hegemony) 1 for free.

Racial Traits: Every Worker character must purchase these racial traits (Blessings and Curses do not count against the total allowed a character).

Blessings: Adroit (2 pts: +2 with Alchemy, Lore, Science or Tech Redemption skill — choose a topic) OR Gifted (2 pts: +2 with Art, Artisan or Performance skill — choose a topic), Double-jointed (2 pts: +2 Dexterity to escape bonds or repair awkwardly situated devices)

Curses: Obsessive (+2 pts: -2 Calm when work interrupted), Vassal (+3 pts: Workers must obey direct orders from Mandarins or suffer mental anguish; -2 penalty on all rolls associated with disobeying)

Benefices: Contacts (2 pts: Workers who share the same waypath), Occult Shield (5 pts: Vau are unaffected by non-physical occult powers), Strong Lungs (2 pts: Can hold breath for one hour before needing to make Endurance +Vigor rolls)

Affliction: No Occult (+6 pts: Cannot awaken Psi or Theurgy)

Suggested Benefice: Clutchmates (3 pts of Allies, 5 pts if a Mandarin is included)

Suggested equipment: Any sheath associated with one's waypath

Aliens

Fah Selani Traits

Cost: 11 Extra points

Characteristics: Dexterity (base 4, max 11; 5 pts), Calm (always primary), Ego (always primary)

Learned skills: All Fah Selani gain Speak Sleesha (Fah Selani language) and Read/Speak Mau'quar (Vau Middle Speech) for free.

Racial Traits: Every Fah Selani character must purchase these racial traits (Blessings and Curses do not count against the total allowed a character).

Natural skills: Charm (base 2; +1 pt), Sneak (base 4; 1 pt)

Blessings: Contortionist (2 pts: +2 Dexterity to escape bonds or wriggle through tight spaces), Precise (1 pt: +1 Dexterity for fine manipulation tasks), Sensitive Smell (1 pt: +1 Perception with smell only)

Curses: Callous (+2 pts: -2 Passion when asked for aid),

Unnerving (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert around non-Fah Selani)

Benefices: Bite (3 pts: Dex + Fight, -1 INIT, 3d DMG), Heat Sense Organ (2 pts: Fah Selani can detect others through temperature; ignore any Perception penalties for lack of light or sound), Venom (4 pts: A bite that delivers damage injects venom in the wound: 5d DMG nerve toxin, ignore armor and energy shields)

Afflictions: Bereaved Him-Saa (+2 pts: Fah Selani who lose their bond-mates suffer prolonged, debilitating grief; -1 on all rolls for three years), Honor Vow (+1 pt: Fah Selani must swear never to use their venom on Hegemony citizens)

Suggested Blessing: Curious (2 pts: +2 Extrovert when seeing something new),

Suggested Benefice: Him-Saa (2 pts: Bond-pairs can form between two Fah Selani, providing a fiercely loyal ally and constant emotional support; add a +1 bonus to any roll involving confidence whenever one's bond-mate is present)

Suggested weapon: *Schaal* flechette gun (see below)

G'nesh Traits

Cost: 3 Extra points

Characteristics: Calm (always primary)

Learned skills: All G'nesh gain Speak G'yaub (G'nesh language) and Read/Speak Mau'quar (Vau Middle Speech) for free.

Racial Traits: Every G'nesh character must purchase these general racial traits and the traits listed below for their specific racial type (Blessings and Curses do not count against the total allowed a character).

Blessing: Four-eyes (1 pt: +1 Perception, vision only)

Benefices: Bite (2 pts: DMG 2d)

Suggested Blessing: Shrewd (2 pts: +2 Wits against attempts to fast-talk)

Suggested Curse: Secretive (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert around strangers)

Shl'urb Fola — Spider Kind

Cost: +13 Extra points

Characteristics: Dexterity (base 4, max 11; 5 pts)

Curses: Creepy (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert in conversation with non-G'nesh)

Benefices: Extra Limbs (8 pts: total of eight legs, only two of which have hands; +4 meters base run), Webspinning (4 pts: Can produce one meter of strong, silky thread per minute, to a maximum amount in meters per day equal to Endurance. Anything touching the thread sticks to it; resist its Strength, equal to the spinner's Vigor skill, to break free. Thread has ARM 2d and VITALITY 2 + Endurance.)

Afflictions: Addiction (+2 pts: Blood, unnecessary for nutrition but desired nonetheless)

Suggested natural skill: Art (Webweaving)



Wyb'mova — Beetle Kind

Cost: +10 Extra points

Natural skill: Fly (base 3; 3 pts)

Curse: Vain (+1 pt: -1 Perception when being flattered)

Benefices: Carapace (3 pts: ARM 3d), Flight (5 pts)

Ula'gaba — Ant Kind

Cost: +12 Extra points

Characteristics: Endurance (base 4, max 11; 5 pts)

Natural skills: Vigor (base 4; 1 pt)

Curse: Uncouth (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert at society functions)

Benefices: Carapace (4 pts: ARM 4d), Extra Limbs (4 pts: total of six limbs, only two of which have hands; +2 meters base run)

Manshogo Traits

Cost: 10 Extra points

Characteristics: Dexterity (base 4, max 11; 5 pts), Passion (always primary)

Learned skills: All Manshogo gain Read/Speak Ibla (Manshogo language) and Read/Speak Mau'quar (Vau Middle Speech) for free.

Racial Traits: Every Manshogo character must purchase these racial traits (Blessings do not count against the total allowed a character).

Blessings: Tall (3 pts: +1 Vitality, base run = 12 meters)

Benefice: Klavi Trance — 7 pts: It take three turns to enter the trance, during which no other actions can be taken. During trance, a Manshogo's mind and metabolism are supercharged, and she can take two actions per turn without suffering multiple action penalties [a trained combination action, such Parry/Riposte, is considered to be one action]; she may still perform up to two more actions per turn, like anyone else, but with the regular penalties applied to all rolls. In addition, she gains +3 Dexterity, +1 Perception, +2 Focus, +2 Stoic Body and +2 Stoic Mind. The trance lasts for 10 turns plus one per victory point gained on a Faith or Ego + Vigor roll, unless the result is a critical, in which case it is perpetual (see below).

The drawback is that, once the trance is over, the Manshogo is enervated; she suffers a –6 penalty to all rolls for the next hour, unless a full meal is devoured, in which case the effect lasts for only half an hour. However, if another trance is attempted before food is eaten, roll Endurance + Stoic Body; failure means the Manshogo suffers the loss of two Vitality points, as if she were wounded. These points are recovered normally through healing, but cannot be healed by first aid or Elixir injections.

A Manshogo caught in a perpetual trance will devour her own body for energy: Once 20 turns have passed in trance, she must roll to avoid Vitality loss every 10 minutes thereafter (she does not gain the trance's Stoic Body skill bonus for this roll), unless another Manshogo can break the trance. This is done with the Altu (Solace) skill, usually practiced by Solacers expert in calming trance dancers: Roll Extrovert + Altu (bonuses can be gained through the application of certain herbal concoctions, by swift physical blows, songs or other methods). This a contested roll against the trance dancer's Passion + Vigor. Success brings the dancer out of trance; failure allows the Solacer to try again (but with a cumulative –1 penalty for each successive attempt). A Solacer may spend one Wyrd point to gain three successes (one victory point) on this roll.

Affliction: Trance Addict — +5 pts: Each time more than three trances are completed — regardless of the time elapsed between them — roll Calm + Stoic Mind; failure means the Manshogo is addicted to the trance state. She must perform a trance at least once every three days or risk loss of control — roll Faith or Ego + Focus; failure means the character slips into a berserker state wherein she lashes out at friend and foe alike until subdued (after which she is okay for three more days, when she must again perform a trance or once more risk loss of control). Most Manshogo consider a mild addiction to be a sign of spiritual courage, but denigrate those who cannot control their cravings for *klavi*. The addiction can be overcome by successfully avoiding loss of control for three successive occasions, although no trance may be performed during this time or the benefits are lost.

Racial Blessings/Curses: Supi (1 pt: +1 Focus to avoid loss of control due to trance addiction), Sani (1 pt: +1 Stoic Body to resist losing Vitality for attempting successive trances), Lakh (+1 pt: -1 Focus to avoid loss of control due to trance addiction; +1 Fight or Melee during trance instead of Focus), Hium (+1 Dodge during trance instead of Focus bonus), Pasa (+1 Impress during trance instead of Focus bonus)

Suggested Blessing: Disciplined (2 pts: +2 Calm in combat situations), Stubborn (2 pts: +2 Passion to avoid surrender)

Suggested Curse: Surly (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert when upset)

Suggested weapon: *Imir* (see below)

Velek Zzum Traits

Cost: 23 Extra points

Characteristics: Strength (base 5, max 12; 10 pts), Dexterity (base 2, max 8; +7 pts), Endurance (base 5, max 12; 10 pts), Introvert (always primary), Calm (always primary)

Learned skills: All Velek gain Speak Gon'lab (Velek language) and Read/Speak Mau'quar (Vau Middle Speech) for free.

Racial Traits: Every Velek character must purchase these

racial traits (Blessings and Curses do not count against the total allowed a character).

Blessings: Giant (5 pts: +2 Vitality, base run = 14 meters, requires tailored clothing)

Curses: Bad Hearing (+2 pts: -2 Perception hearing only — except very low sounds), Bigoted (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert around non-Velek or non-Vau), Ugly (+2 pts: -2 Charm among non-Velek)

Benefices: Armored Shell (7 pts: ARM 7d), Extra Limbs (4 pts: total of eight legs, two arms, +4 meters base run), Pincers (4 pts: DMG 4)

Afflictions: Awkward Size (+1 pt: Requires special accommodations), Speech Impediment (+1 pt: Cannot speak foreign languages without technical assistance), Vestigial Lungs (+2 pts: Velek normally live in water but can breathe air for three hours, -1 hour for every 10 minutes of intense physical activity)

Total base run distance: 18 meters per turn

Suggested equipment: *Emzu'hansth*: Veleks' sheath — a sheath that provides constant moisture, a 24-hour water supply and voice translator from Gon'lab to Mau'quar and *vice versa*.

Equipment

Below is a variety of equipment carried by Hegemony citizens, although mainly on the frontier, where danger is perceived to be greater than within the core worlds.

Weapons

Fah Selani *Schaal*

A six-barreled, star-shaped gun which requires an energy cell in addition to flechette splinters; the cell lasts for 100 shots. Roll Dexterity + Shoot.

WEAPON	GOAL	DMG	RNG	RATE	SHOTS	SIZ
Schaal	+2	6d	20/30	2	32(A)	L

Manshogo *Imir* Spinning Blade

Five curved blades radiate from a spinning disk attached to a central, stationary hub with a handle. The user grips the bladed disk — which rests perpendicularly above the back of his hand — with a handlebar curving down from the central hub. A trained user can spin the disk — weighted to maintain centrifugal force once put into motion — by moving his wrist, turning the *imir* into a handheld buzzsaw. Manshogo usually bear one in each hand, using them to both parry (ARM 3d) and strike.

The basic Tech Level for the Imir is 5, but advanced models, using magnetic fields and fusion cells to keep the disks spinning, are known, as are versions made with lighter alloys (RNG 10/20).

WEAPON	INIT	GOAL	DMG	STR	SIZ
*Imir**	-1	-	5d	3	M

* Roll Dexterity + Melee. However, users must first train with the weapon, learning a special Imir skill that has no levels but allows the user to then use his Melee skill with the weapon; this costs 2 points (similarly to the Crossbow skill). Those without the skill can still use an *imir*, but with the following traits: GOAL –1, DMG 3d.

An *imir* can also be thrown.

WEAPON	DMG	STR	RNG	RATE	SIZ
*Imir**	5d	3	5/15	1	M

* Roll Dexterity + Throwing. However, a special Throw Imir skill must be learned (cost: 2 pts, no levels), which then allows the character to use the Throwing skill.

Vau *Forv'rulkh* Energy Stave

The Soldier's preferred weapon, the versatile stave can act as an autofire blaster (performing all of the autofire maneuvers, from short bursts to spreads) or as a battle axe in melee combat. It can also be set to self-destruct with a timer set for anytime between instantaneously and 10 minutes, producing a 15d blaster explosion with a ground-zero radius of five meters. Roll Dexterity + Shoot for blaster fire, Dexterity + Melee for axe or club attacks.

WEAPON	DMG	STR	RNG	RATE	SHOTS	SIZ
Blaster*	9d	3	40/60	2(A)	30	L
Axe	5d	3	-	-	-	L
Club	4d	3	-	-	-	L

* Bleeds through energy shields on damage rolls of 1 or 2.

Sheaths

Sheaths are amazing, versatile devices, sort of like tools, protection and cybernetics all rolled into one. Unlike cybernetics, sheaths are removable with one action (simply press the "off" stud to retract it to inert status). All sheaths are minimum Tech Level 8.

Most sheaths are innocuous — the only visible sign is a network of thin, spidery metal wires spreading across the body. Sheaths built to form armor protection look like bony harnesses.

The **Forbidden Lore: Technology** sourcebook provides examples of some advanced sheaths: Lifecocoons and smartrobes. Below are some examples of other sheaths:

Sham'hansth: Soldiers' sheath. Includes: Energy shield (4/16, 20 hits per replaceable cell), energy cell recharger (can fully charge two cells over 24 hours), armor (5d — usually forms only if the energy shield is dampened, but battle models are known that provide 7d ARM while the shield is active), one dose of *yurba* (an Elixirlike liquid) with an autoinjector that engages any time a serious wound is suf-

fered (i.e., once one's last five Vitality levels are threatened), five days' worth of food rations (delivered intravenously), constant air filtration (as needed), three hours of oxygen, radio (planetary range), vision magnifier, spectrum analyzer, and a passive tracking signal that automatically engages if the Soldier is rendered unconscious or is killed.

Xan'hansth: Mandarins' sheath. Includes: Energy shield (3/18, 20 hits per replaceable cell), a decentralized think machine with 10 different Lore and/or Science skills (each rated at 7 levels), an advanced Scrambler Pad device, a fusion lamp, an interstellar radio receiver/transmitter (10 AU range), a Nanotech MedPac equivalent, and a useful tool (dictation device, writing pad, universal screwdriver, etc.)

Zuil'hanstha: Workers' sheath. These come in a wide variety, but usually include: Energy shield (5/10, 15 hits per replaceable cell), energy cell recharger (can fully charge two cells over 24 hours), waypath tool (some device that aids the practice of one's chosen waypath, such as a phantasmery projector to aid storytelling or a painters' brush that can assume any size and shape in addition to self-cleaning functions), backpacklike storage capacity, and gravity wire to help carry other items.

Utilities

Ska'zumir Energy Cells

The Vau use a form of universal energy cell to power much of their technology, except for *yurim'zhor* devices (like sheaths), which are self-powering. This cell is itself a piece of *yurim'zho*, usually about the size of a quarter. It can reduce or enlarge its size as needed to fit into a proper receptacle. Cells hold a goodly amount of energy, but different devices use varying amounts (see the write-up for each device). Most cells are TL7.

A special TL8 cell includes thinking nanites that can adapt the cell to power any energy receptacle — such as the fusion cell slot on a Known Worlds blaster or energy shield.

Gurm'zeer'sa — Gravity Wire

With this TL8 coil of wire (standard 10 meters length), anything weighing up to 15 tons that is wrapped with the wire can be lifted one meter off the ground; each extra wire doubles the weight allowed.

At either end of the wire is a tiny antigravity node, a smooth metal disc, each sharing similar polarity when in an uncharged state. The wire's antigravitism is activated with a remote control unit that resembles a small, oval egg with an eye. The eye emits a signal that switches the polarity of one of the nodes, creating an antigravity field throughout the length of the wire. Different models exist that allow objects wrapped in the wire to rise higher than one meter.

Valukesh Ha'eni Oriels

Most Mandarins carry portable oracle machines with them. With these, they can consult the shifting whims of auspice as it pertains to any given moment or situation. The glyphs witnessed are considered to exist in a continuum different from our own; an oriel is simply a window into that continuum.

Oriels vary greatly in size, from the huge, immovable one in the Palace of Curious Resolve on Zhuil'thala, to small handheld devices. Size and technological sophistication do affect the capabilities of an oriel, restricting how many glyphs can be displayed in a consultation (which greatly determines the detail, and thus accuracy, of any reading) and how quickly and far ahead they can be made to "flux," or change from one glyph into another to reflect changing conditions in the future. The larger the oriel, the farther into the future it can glimpse.

All oriels are connected through resonance with the prime oracle on Zhuil'thala, which is believed to be a Progenitor Philosophers Stone of immense power. By fixing oriels to its etheric frequency, fluctuating glyphs within the Weft may be witnessed through their windows.

Knowledge of the glyphs must be possessed before they can be read. This requires the Read Ha'eni skill. Interpretation requires the Lore (Prophecy) skill.

Handheld Oriel

The standard device used by Mandarins on diplomatic duty, this oriel can display up to three glyphs for any situation examined. It thus requires wisdom and knowledge on the Mandarin's part to interpret them correctly. It can fluctuate these glyphs up to a month into the future, showing how present conditions will turn out. If the result is undesirable, the think machine within the oriel can help suggest different actions that the Mandarin can take to alter the outcome, but this is imprecise work. The best Mandarins don't rely on such strategy but use their gut instincts, perhaps aided by the Augery power.

Most such oriels are TL8, although they rely on energy given off by a distant Philosophers Stone of unknown tech level. Alternate versions are shaped like pens, which can draw glowing glyphs into the air rather than display them on a screen. It takes a certain skill to prevent interfering with the pen's drawing, but those who have it are believed to call the glyphs with more accuracy than a passive window reader.



Recipient: Vril-Ya Envoys
Author: SPIDERWEB
Concerning: Dossier on the Vau

This document has been prepared to brief you on everything known about the Vau. As you can see, it is astonishingly thin. The verified facts concerning the Vau and the Hegemony are few, and much of the data is incomplete. To this end, the opinions and speculations of many experts — some from as long ago as the Diaspora and Second Republic — have been compiled, in an attempt to complete the portrait. Only the most useful of such musings have been included, since any wrong assumptions here could prove deadly to agents who actually manage to infiltrate the Hegemony.

Good luck.

History

In 2845, the Vau first appeared to humanity and delivered a crushing defeat to the colonists of New Monaco (now Apshai). Three years of useless and vain attempts at retribution by various Diasporan governments eventually led to the Vau's acceptance of an official envoy, Benjamin Verden of House Justinian. While the raids into Hegemony space always resulted in the terrible deaths of the raiders, their frequency had become an annoyance to the Vau. They accepted Verden's visit in an attempt to end the raids for good, with the veiled threat that, should this diplomacy fail, the Hegemony would act to disable humanity's ability to conduct the raids.

This threat caused panic and fear on many worlds, as word of it spread through the jumpweb. Many local governments were toppled by uprisings, their governors blamed for the aggression against the Vau, although it was often popular opinion that pressed these governments for victory in the first place. Noble families used the upheavals to move in and stabilize regions, safeguarding them until democratic governments could again be elected, while mercantile conglomorates seized power in other areas. Here and there, acolytes of the new and growing Church spoke out against such seizures of proper power, and urged calm in the face of the Hegemony's threat.

The Prophet himself broke a long fast and meditation to deliver a sermon concerning humanity's problem with the alien empire. Although the actual script of this sermon is lost, most theologians agree that the version handed down to us by Palamedes is correct. The Prophet warned humanity to "guard its own fields," and to worry not about the "wilderness encroaching from without," but instead beware the "untamed wild within." This was one year prior to his own diplomatic mission in 2849, which resulted in his death during jumpgate travel.

Benjamin Verden was ferried by a Vau cruiser to the planet called "Vau" by most humans. (The name Verden gave for it in the Vau tongue — Shaduveen'Lan Tuomani — was hard to pronounce by those un-

trained in the language, and was used only by diplomats.) There he witnessed marvels of technology never yet seen by humans, and — judging from the details given in his reports — unachieved even by the later Second Republic.

Most observers today know about the repulsor plates (bafuvupan dahum), Life Cocoons (eevsu'ud rumuld'hansth), Smart Robes (numunanth ofleed'hansth) and lightsplinters (halsh'rumu tla'a). Everyone also knows that our own energy shields and blaster tech were developed by reverse engineering Vautech. It comes as no surprise to state that the Vau's own shields and blasters are more advanced than ours. Largely forgotten are Verden's accounts of collapsible buildings — somewhat like Smart Robes but on a massive scale — and flitters with remarkable maneuverability.

What few people realize today is that not all of Verden's report was widely published. Much of it was kept secret, shared only with certain officials. Most of these persons survived to become core members of the Second Republic's First Council, whereupon the information was sealed and stored with the Republic's nascent intelligence service. It was considered highly classified, and seen only by certain military personnel and diplomats working the Vau frontier.

During the data purges of the Fall, the files were lost. The consistent failures of the noble houses, patriarch and Merchant League to gain any new advances in Vau diplomacy stem from this lack of key information. Indeed, it must have seemed to the Vau that humans had lost all the secrets of successful diplomacy, as inadvertent faux pas based on ignorance insulted countless Mandarins. Eventually, the Vau withdrew attempts at communication and remained removed from all but scant human contact for centuries, coming forth once more only after Vladimir's ascendancy.

Nonetheless, they were distant and their borders closed even more tightly than before. Previously, uninvited forays into Vau space resulted in the invading ships being towed back to the Known Worlds. Now ships were often fired upon. If they did not immediately heed the warnings, they were destroyed.

During the Emperor Wars, Imperial Eye agents on both Cadiz and Manitou uncovered copies of Verden's original reports, along with successive data on Second Republic intelligence operations against the Vau. The Decados were unaware of the data on Cadiz, hidden in forgotten think machines buried deep under old diplomatic offices. The files on Manitou were obtained in Vau territory at the cost of two agents' lives. Strangely, no retribution or comment from the Vau followed this incident.

While these files have since been kept in the greatest secrecy, for the Emperor and his agents' eyes only, we suspect that some of the other intelligence services have portions of this information, gained through means best not discussed here.

This is information any agent would surely kill to obtain. You are privileged to read it now, by order of the Emperor himself. It is vital that you are as prepared as possible for this first full envoyship to the Hegemony since the Fall of the Second Republic.

The Vau

As you are surely well aware, the Vau have a caste society consisting of at least three castes: Mandarins (leaders), Soldiers and Workers. Hints suggest that there might be sub-classes within these castes, but no evidence of other castes is known.

Before discussing the castes, some general notes on physiology might prove helpful, since it differs somewhat among castes — genetic heritage seems to be the key determinant of a Vau's caste role.

We believe the Vau are related to amphibians or reptiles. Their leathery skin resembles that of the Hironem, although their bone structure is quite different. Their legs suggest descent from a fleet-footed animal, although whether this was a predator, herd beast or scavenger is unknown. Too much time exists between the present Vau and their distant ancestors to draw any conclusions as to their evolution of consciousness and current culture.

Average height varies with caste. Mandarins are the tallest (average 10'), followed by Soldiers (8') and then Workers (6'). Girth or width also seems to vary by caste, with Soldiers the broadest, Workers average and Mandarins slender.

A Vau's eyes consist of large pupils with no whites, similar to the Ur-Obun and Ur-Ukar. However, unlike those cousin races, the coloring of Vau pupils varies. Visitors have witnessed black, blue and red. The shading seems to vary with mood, growing darker or lighter at times, although neither Verden nor other agents knew enough Vau psychology to determine which is more favorable.

Vau hands are surprisingly humanlike, but with longer, more slender fingers, which appear to be double-jointed in at least the Worker caste.

Dress is surprisingly standard among castes — at least, among those living near humans on Vril-Ya, Manitou and Apshai. Variance in minor details abounds, but on the whole, Mandarins tend to look very much alike in their green robes and aesthetically sculpted harnasses, while Soldiers wear the same armored uniforms, differing in badges and glyph symbols. Workers have the widest variation, from leggings to tunics and robes, depending on their labors.

We believe that caste behavior is determined not simply by societal expectations, but might involve actual genetic behavior patterns that control a Vau's reactions to certain circumstances and align his or her goals with the overall purposes of his caste. In other words, a Worker feels a real need to perform constructive labor and gains satisfaction in its performance and completion, while a Soldier has a priori martial assumptions, governed strongly by Mandarin "alphas." Indeed, it is possible that Mandarins are much more intelligent than Soldiers and Workers.

Gender roles are unclear. Physical differences between sexes are not readily apparent, and few unclothed Vau have been witnessed; no examination of sexual organs exists. However, Verden claimed that both males and females fulfill roles within all castes, although he never explained his reasons for believing so. He did reveal an interesting fact: Vau are not birthed live, but hatch from eggs. They are born in clutches, each of which contains a variety of castes, although not all clutches host a Mandarin. A Vau's closest and most precious social ties are to his clutchmates, even mates of other castes. The luckiest Workers and Soldiers are those born in the same clutch as a Mandarin, whom they serve for the rest of their lives as favored advisors.

The Vau language contains many dialects, some varying radically from one another. The High Speech is known only to Mandarins, while Middle Speech is spoken by all castes. Three forms of Low Speech are known: Worker caste, Soldier caste, and the Foreign Tongue, that dialect spoken to non-Vau. It is also the diplomatic language learned and studied by Verden; the phonetic terms he recorded are part of this dialect. Ironically, the Foreign Tongue is closer to the High Speech than other dialects, since it was seemingly invented



Vau Mandarin

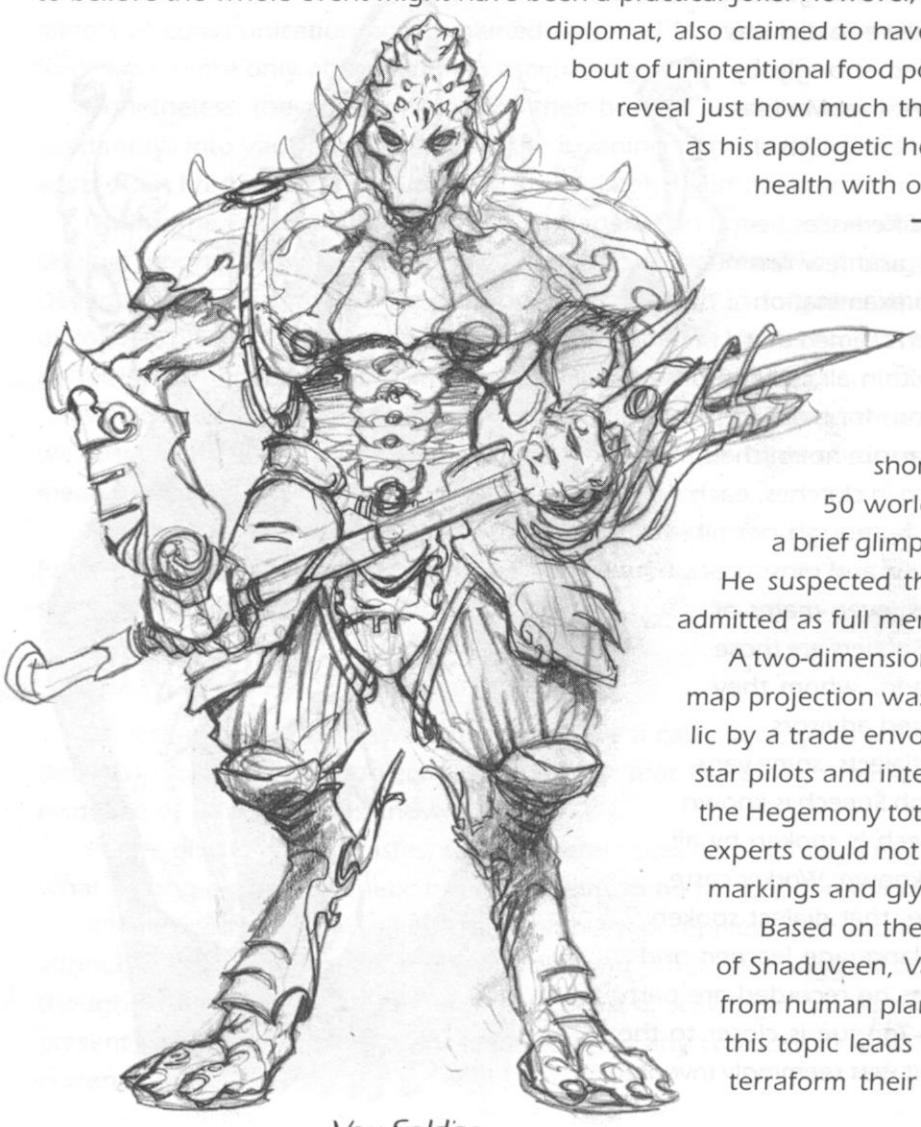
by Mandarins in recent history (i.e., just before or soon after human contact).

As for writing, there are three forms: prophecy glyphs (those used in the Valukesh Ha'eni oracle), Val'eni (High Speech glyphs), and Ban'eni (common glyphs). All of these scripts use pictographic characters, each with voluminous amounts of glyphs readers must memorize.

Verden's phonetic alphabet and vocabulary were based solely on oral transmissions; he did not understand enough glyphs to translate Vau writings. Second Republic diplomats realized that many of Verden's supposed "stems" were wrong — the Foreign Tongue apparently has little consistency in its adaptation of High Speech terms (this is perhaps intentional, to prevent foreigners from easily understanding High Speech).

Learning to speak Vau is a continual process of learning individual vocabulary terms and their numerous exceptions. Some concepts for which the Vau have words are untranslatable to us due to their alien nature. For instance, Verden recorded many words for smells he could not sense through his Smart Robe filter. After drinking what he believed to be a Vau wine, Verden swears to have seen a color that does not exist — at least, within the spectrum of normal human vision. As he stammeringly tried to describe it, a Mandarin, after realizing that it was color the human diplomat was attempting to comprehend, helpfully suggested some words (Verden chose a shortened version, sho'in) and even pointed out the color's location on the electromagnetic spectrum using a crystal prism and chart (it is below red, but above infrared).

The next morning, when the drink's effects wore off, Verden could not find the color again, leading him to believe the whole event might have been a practical joke. However, Jovan Ost, a famed Second Republic diplomat, also claimed to have seen sho'in revealed to him after a bout of unintentional food poisoning on Vril-Ya. (This event helped reveal just how much the Vau know about human anatomy, as his apologetic hosts purged him and returned him to health with only three draughts of a liquid.)



Vau Soldier

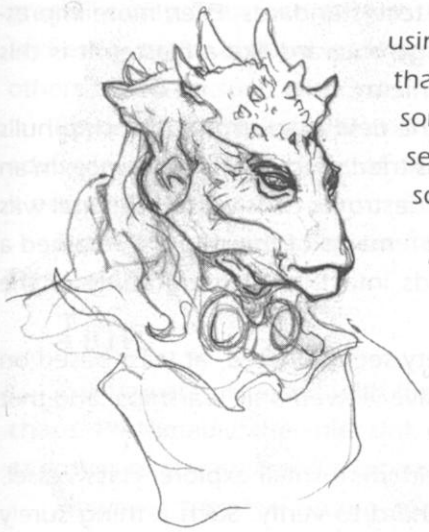
The Hegemony

At the time of Verden's visit to Shaduveen'Lan Tuomani ("Resplendent Fortress of Auspicious Entry," often called simply Shaduveen for short), the Hegemony consisted of at least 50 worlds — or so Verden judged, based on a brief glimpse he had of a holographic star chart. He suspected that there were more worlds not yet admitted as full members of the Hegemony.

A two-dimensional image of such a three-dimensional map projection was captured during the Second Republic by a trade envoy. After study of this faulty image by star pilots and intelligence agents, it was assumed that the Hegemony totaled at least 61 planets. However, the experts could not agree on the interpretation of all the markings and glyphs.

Based on the strange descriptions Verden gave us of Shaduveen, Vau worlds are terraformed differently from human planets. Second Republic intelligence on this topic leads some to believe that the Vau do not terraform their worlds, but instead adapt to them

Soldier (note horns - unique to this caste)



using their advanced Smart Robe and Life Cocoon technology. Verden claims that he was forced to wear a Smart Robe that filtered out atmospheric poisons deadly to humans but pleasant to the Vau. Unable to smell the air himself, he could not translate the word his guides used to describe its unique scent, which the Vau seemed to treat as a treasure.

Aliens

This leads to the obvious topic of sentient alien races: Are there any living within the Hegemony that are as yet unknown to humans?

Verden's descriptions of never-before-seen-by-human eyes alien races was among the information kept secret from the general populace. During his time, troubles with the Ukari and Vau were already bad enough, and officials feared informing their constituents about more potentially hostile races. Later, intelligence agencies and Church officials helped to hide this information from the commonwealth of humanity.

I present some of his descriptions below:

Velek (incomplete name): Verden was filled with a sense of dread upon meeting one of these creatures, apparently a large, sentient crustacean. Its width and overall size — in addition to massive pincer claws — caused him to assume it was a warrior, although successive intelligence reports point to more of a Worker role.

"Naga" (actual name unknown): Verden witnessed large, sentient snakelike aliens that could rise on their sinuous torsos to stand as high as most humans. Their tails ended in a radial array of highly dextrous tentacles by which they manipulated objects and weaponry. He did not learn this race's name, and so dubbed them "Naga" (Nagas plural), after a mythological beast from ancient Urth.

"Edgewalker" (actual name unknown): These tall, broad humanoids could be mistaken for severely Changed humans, so greatly does their basic physiology resemble ours. They are, however, mishapen: broad shoulders, thick necks and slim waists. What's more, the members in the group Verden saw had different, shockingly bright skin colorings and patterns: dark black with thick white stripes, red with blue stripes, and blue with orange stripes. They walked with a regal discipline Verden had before seen only among martial arts experts, leading him to believe that those he saw were warriors. The name comes from the only words Verden's guides used to describe them: "They walk the edges of frontiers."

There may, of course, be many other races as yet unknown. We believe that only some of those listed above have free sovereignty; others may be confined to their homeworlds (such as the G'nesh of Apshai?).

Technology

The most formidable threat the Vau pose is their very mystery. We cannot control what we don't understand. Even once understood, however, the Vau have a vast superiority in technology and resources.

Starships

Vau ship hulls are constructed from an advanced alloy which we have never been able to analyze. Certain Second Republic corporations supposedly made some leeway in studying samples, but the results were considered corporate secrets. From an era where corporate security rivaled that of the central government, none of this research has survived in the intelligence records we inherited, and the guilds have not come forth with such information. Whatever the metal is, it is recognizable by its greenish-coppery tint.

Vau ships have no gun emplacements, but instead harness a massive plasma ball kept suspended be-

tween two, three or four generator struts (the larger the hull, the more struts). The kind of field necessary to contain this roiling ball of energy is immensely strong, far beyond known tech standards. Even more impressive is the ability to selectively open and direct the field, funneling energy outward like a blaster. It is this plasma ball that powers all ship systems, include the prodigious energy shields.

Obviously, it would seem the prime target for any attack. However, the field is so strong that ship hulls have crumbled under fire before the field disintegrated. Of course, this was tried successfully only once, in an engagement with a Li Halan dreadnought against what we assume was a destroyer-class vessel. The hull was shattered enough to harm the struts, whereupon the field collapsed. The remains of the ship still retained a stored charge, enough for the ship to flee the region with slight shields intact, preventing study of the remains by the Engineers Guild.

It is unclear just how many hull types the Vau possess, but their variety seems limited, at least based on the ships that patrol the Hegemony border. It is entirely possible that we have viewed only warships, and that various civilian ships roam within the Hegemony itself.

As for the patrol ships, a few have been classified: a shuttle (well shielded), a small explorer-class vessel, a frigate class, a destroyer and a cruiser. Rumors of a dreadnought are hard to verify. Such a thing surely exists, but has not been seen since the first retribution for trespass against Apshai millennia ago.

Instead of assault landers, Vau seem to rely on smaller, well-armed and shielded shuttles that cluster around a carrier. Again, this was witnessed only at Apshai, and only hearsay tells of it.

Personal Weaponry

Mandarins seem to carry no weapons, but their Valukesh Ha'eni (see below) warn them of dangerous situations or environments. Rarely is a Mandarin without his Soldier escort, usually six per Mandarin. Besides their excellent energy shields and crystalline armor, Soldiers most often bear energy staves, short staffs capable of emitting beams of blaster fire, either single-shot, wide-area spread, or bursts of multiple fire. In addition, a retractable blade allows the weapon to be used in melee to good effect.

Perhaps due to the effectiveness of these Soldiers and their weapons, Verden witnessed no weapons worn by other castes or aliens within the Hegemony. Tools like knives and hatchets were seen, but no other devices designed for martial use. Do not be fooled, however; surely other weapons exist.

Religion and Occult Powers

As yet, we have no idea whether or not the Vau — or any race within the Hegemony — has exhibited psychic or theurgic abilities. We have no idea what sort of religion the Vau follow — if, indeed, they have a religion and not simply a highly ritualized form of Anunnaki-inspired science or culture.

We do know that they have greater knowledge of the Anunnaki than any race yet encountered. Verden translated their word for the Ur races as "Progenitors," for they spoke of them as "great architects of the universe," and "mentors to younger races."



Worker (note single crest)

They revere a device called the "Valukesh Ha'eni," a sort of prophecy think machine allegedly capable of foretelling not only the outcome of individual fates but of whole societies. Every major undertaking witnessed with a Mandarin involved consultation of the Valukesh Ha'eni. Only if the glyphs it revealed were considered auspicious would the Vau take action; otherwise, he would end diplomacy sessions and close off borders.

These glyphs are most curious. Verden viewed a "prophecy invocation" and saw moving images, resembling animated pictograms merging from one into another.

However, these glyphs seem highly interpretive, for Mandarins have often left meet-

ings early to meditate upon the outcome of an invocation, and some have claimed to "seek dreams" to gain greater clarity. Thus, we assume that much of a Mandarin's role involves training in philosophy, art, science and every major cultural endeavor, all to better "read" the prophecy glyphs. Mandarins show deference to others based on such wisdom.

Beyond the Valukesh Ha'eni's prophecy function, it also seems to serve as an all-purpose think machine advisor, warning Mandarins of unexpected conditions and sometimes translating unknown words for them. It perhaps also acts as a sensor device.

There are two metaphysical topics of extreme importance to the Vau, to an almost theological degree: Time and Holism.

Time

The Vau are obsessed with time. To them, the universe is an ongoing process of increasing order amidst chaos. Presumably, the chief task of a Mandarin is to help Order to triumph over Chaos. Metaphors for time as a river or stream are ubiquitous.

However, they feel no urgency in their task. Mandarins often take days to decide a course of action and do not like to be rushed. Once action is decided upon, Soldiers and Workers accomplish tasks with efficiency and timeliness.

Holism

The Vau seem very concerned with the conceptual wholes that encompass parts. In other words, they are concerned with groups over individuals. Every part must have a place within a greater context (a "whole"). Mandarins seem unnerved by pieces they cannot place, and often endeavor to discover what roles people and things serve.

This is one of the most obscure topics on which we can provide little advice. Consultation with expert Oubliette Mind Physicks, Reeves negotiators, Church missionaries and noble diplomats provides little agreement on means by which to exploit this trait.

Customs

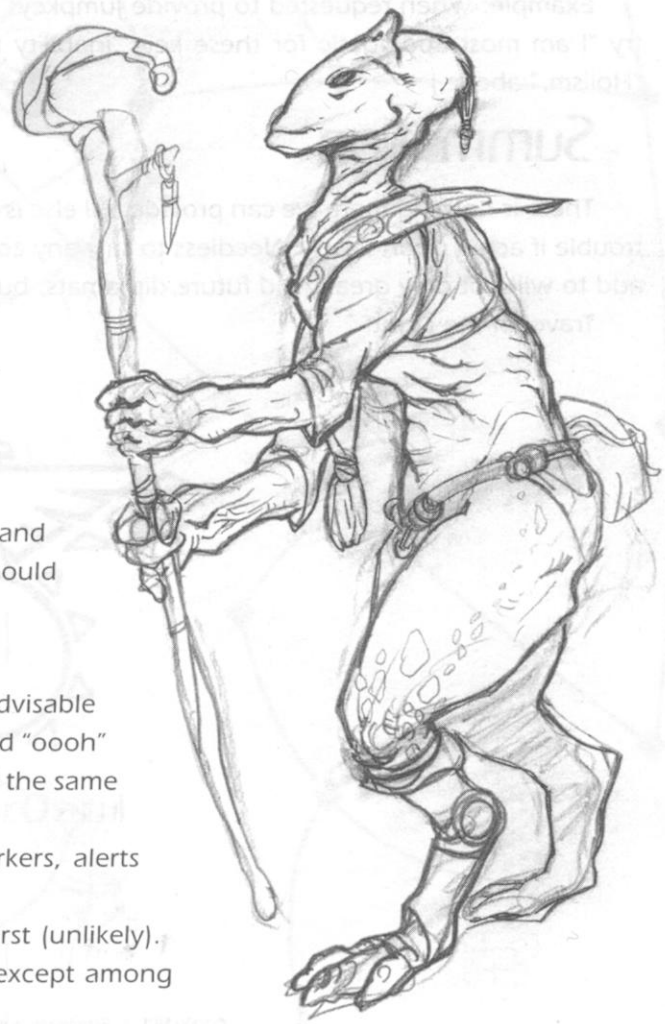
Years of diplomatic encounters — both successful and not — have taught us some behaviors every diplomat should learn and heed when meeting the Vau.

Greetings

Upon meeting a Vau (especially a Mandarin), it is advisable to form an "o" with the mouth and make a deep-throated "oooh" sound. This seems to connote respect and well-being at the same time.

Do not show teeth when smiling. It unnerves Workers, alerts Soldiers and displeases Mandarins.

Do not offer your hand unless the Vau offers his first (unlikely). Vau seem to have a rigid concept of personal space, except among clutchmates.



Vau Worker

Always begin a conversation with pleasantries; coming straight to the point is insulting. If possible, talk around a problem in metaphors. This greatly pleases Mandarins. For this reason, al-Malik and Li Halan nobles have had good success where more plain-spoken Hazat and Hawkwood nobles have failed. (This is no condemnation of those fine houses, simply a statement about Vau relations.)

Presenting Gifts

Vau Mandarins often appreciate gifts, especially magic lantern and holovid entertainments. If they are pleased enough, they sometimes give valuable gifts in return: artificially intelligent artforms or miniature golem servitors are among the most prized.

Farewells

As with a greeting, a farewell is best accomplished with the "oooh" sound. A bow is customary when leaving a Mandarin, but not necessary among Soldiers and Workers.

Is is helpful, but not required, to summarize a discussion with some simple, appreciatory comment, such as "My time has seen great benefit," or "How auspicious the hours have been." Ambassador Sing Chou Li Halan had amazing success with haiku poetry.

Politely Saying "No"

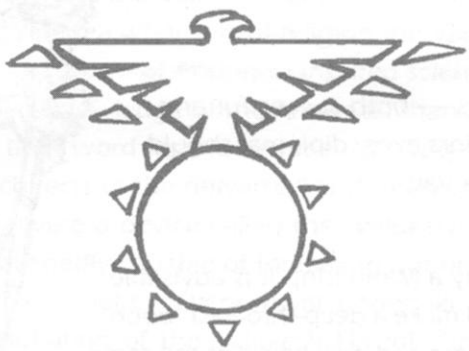
Never say "no." It is extremely rude. Instead, state some circumstantial reason why you cannot respond positively to a request. Try to foist the blame on an object or the weather, instead of upon oneself. (The Vau seem to deny free will, instead attributing actions to fate, which can manifest through objects or people.)

Example: When requested to provide jumpkeys to a Mandarin, instead of denying the request outright, try "I am most apologetic for these keys' inability to leave my ship; they are inclusive of its whole." (See "Holism," above.)

Summation

There is nothing more we can provide. All else is unsubstantiated hearsay, which could get you into great trouble if acted upon falsely. Needless to say, any confirmation of this information which you can provide or add to will not only greatly aid future diplomats, but initiate rich rewards.

Travel in the Light!



ILLIUS OCULUS VIGILANS

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War In The Heavens: Hegemony

The Enigmatic Vau

Ever since the Vau gave humanity its first setback among the stars, their space has been shut to prying eyes. For a brief moment, however, it has opened — long enough for the most daring to catch a glimpse. But the daring need as much wisdom as courage, for encounters with the Vau teach that things are not always what they seem....

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The previous installment in the War in the Heavens trilogy, *Lifeweb*, featured the shapechanging Symbiots. It is not necessary to own *Lifeweb* to use and enjoy *Hegemony*. The final installment will delve into the mystery of the Anunnaki.

HOLISTIC

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