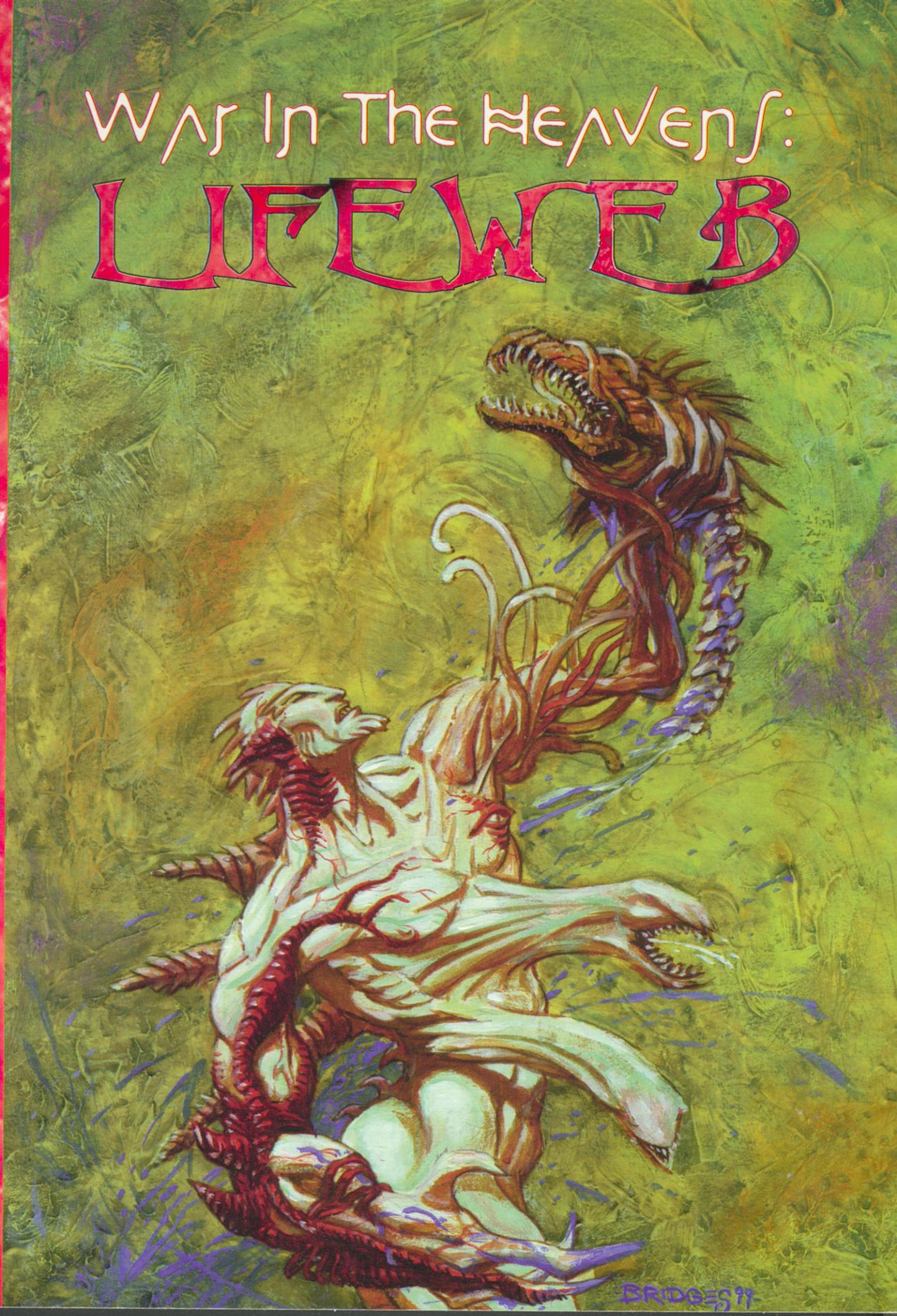
War In The Heavens: LIFEWEB



FADING SUNS™

War In The Heavens: LIFEWEB



Vau glyph:
War in the Heavens

by
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FADING SUNS

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Alustro's Journal: Tangled Web

I pray that I never again experience a Night of Fire. The Inquisition's flameguns burn not only wood and straw, they boil the blood and singe the soul.

The town of Ravican, in the barony of al-Bazan on Criticorum, was last night's target for Inquisitorial fervor. The rumors had spread throughout the marketplace earlier that day: a Symbiot had been seen by Yeoman Dar in his apple orchard, creeping about in the trees. There is no telling just what his initial description of the thing had been, for by the time word spread in town, various descriptions were given, with the creature growing larger and more malevolent as the shadows from the sun grew longer.

We ignored the rumors at first, for we are all well used to such superstitious panics among commoners. This was meant to be our rest time, a month far from the bustle and politics of the big cities. We deserved this time away from responsibility. As our liege, Erian Li Halan, pondered out next step in the quest, we relaxed and roamed the idyllic hills and meandering streams of this pastoral region.

Our peace ended just after nightfall when the Inquisition ship landed in the fields near the shire reeve's home. Cloaked and hooded priests — mainly Avestites, but some Orthodox priests among them — stamped from the ship and into the town, immediately demanding that no one leave. They summoned the local lord, a retired knight, and demanded that everyone in the town subject themselves to Inquisitorial questioning. Unable to deny them lest he be suspected himself, the old knight acquiesced and gave them free reign to find the Symbiot they had heard was hiding in Ravican.

The priestly team split up and marched down the streets, lining up the citizenry, eyeing them for any signs of inhuman behavior.

Erian, her bodyguard Cardanzo, and I were in a small pub on the far side of town. A farmer ran in to cry the news about the Inquisition, and the other drinkers and diners immediately abandoned their meals to flee from the town to their hovels in the surrounding hills. This was no sign of guilt — no one willingly subjects himself to Inquisitorial scrutiny. Even I, a priest myself, know that the accusing monks are wrong more often than right.

We decided to slip away ourselves. Our starship was in a field not too far from here. Julia, Sanjuk and Onggangarak were there now. By the time we passed two streets, the smell of smoke was already in the air. Somewhere a hapless fool said the wrong thing or tried to run when he should have halted, and flameguns had roared as a result. The sky was lit with the flames, started in one building perhaps but now obviously spread to more of them. The whole town would probably be cinders by the morning. I almost hoped the rumors of Symbiots were true, to at least justify the cost.

As we neared the pig sty near the small path that would lead us to our ship, we heard voices approaching: "I saw movement here, brothers!"

We leapt into the dark doorway of the hovel and tried to still our breathing as a group of the robed fanatics rushed past and down another street. Our quiet allowed me to hear the sobbings in the room behind us.

I peered into the gloom and saw a man slumped to the floor, his head in his hands, his body wracked with sobs. I moved to him and bent down, my hand over his head. "Don't fear; I am a priest, but not like those outside."

The poor fellow looked up at me, his eyes pleading. "They killed my children, father. They burned them. My poor, poor children." Tears streamed down his face. I didn't



know what to say. How do you console a man who has just lost his beloved children to the flames of priests?

I moved my hand to his shoulder but recoiled in sudden fear and disgust, unable to control my instinctual reaction. From out of his shirtless torso grew four thin, segmented spider legs. He didn't seem to notice at first until he heard the intake of my breath. He looked at me and then at himself in surprise. He then leaped to his feet with amazing speed and scuttled up the wall to the rafters above, his new legs clinging to the ceiling.

"By the Pancreator!" I heard Erian yell. Cardanzo drew his blaster and aimed it at the rafters, trying to discern the creature in the darkness.

The thing spoke: "Please, father, I beg you. I mean no harm. I was a priest once, like you."

Cardanzo, seeing the creature, pointed his gun and prepared to fire. I leapt forward, knocking down his hand, yelling: "No! Wait!"

Both Erian and Cardanzo looked at me like I was mad. I explained: "Let me hear him. I... I don't know why, but please. Let me hear him."

They didn't move, and the thing bent down further into the dim light coming from the doorway. "I was an Illuminatus grade monk on Stigmata. I fought Symbiots, and believed them to be evil and demonic. But then I was changed, converted by a stray spore they had spread months before. They came for me and taught me who they really were. They aren't like we think. They are a good people, living closer with nature than you can know."

As he spoke, he slowly came down from his perch, crawling down the wall and looking at me earnestly. "I remembered more of my human memories than most converts. I still know the litanies and exegeses drilled into me at the Naos. I still rever the Pancreator and Zebulon, but I see that their message is broader than even Pallamedes knew. The Holy Flame is not restricted to humans. All beings share its spark. Each world has this fire, which empowers all living things."

He stood up straight on two human legs when he reached the floor, moving closer, his arms gesturing as he made his case. "Because I still knew human ways, I was sent back to the Known Worlds to learn about the new Emperor and his plans against the Symbiots. I changed my form to look like anyone I wanted to, and spent time in the main capitals of many worlds, pretending to be many people I was not. But I tired of it, and longed for the peace and tranquility of my old home, the town where I had grown up.



"I returned to Ravican and started a family. My wife, who knew of my secret, loved me the more for it. She died last year of the Vantokos Sickness. But our children lived. They are human, like you. I cannot and would not convert them even if they asked. I love my Symbiot brothers, but prefer my human family. Do you understand?"

I stared at him, not knowing how to respond. He spoke so passionately, his tale came from the heart. His grief over his lost children seemed so genuine.

"I... I'm so sorry," I stammered.

"We do not need to be enemies. We share the same dangers. The light of the suns fade for us all. There is a saying among the Phazûl: Weaving webs around the sun."

"What?" I said, surprised.

"It means to support the Lifeweb, to renew the light."

He paused for a moment, as if trying to figure out how to say something difficult, something hard to translate from one tongue to another, when a sword thrust out from his chest. He stared down at it in shock, and Erian, standing behind him, withdrew her rapier and quickly slashed it across the air. His head rolled forward and thumped to the floor. His body's spider legs twitched momentarily before the body collapsed.

I stared in shock.

Cardanzo stepped forward and emptied his blaster into the body, turning the carcass into an ashy husk. Summoned by the blaster fire, Inquisition troops bolted down the street and through the door. As soon as they saw the scene and the sizzling body on the floor, remnants of its spider legs still apparent, they nodded quietly.

Erian wiped her blade on a nearby sack, and the Inquisition leader stepped over to her. "Well done, my lady. May I know your name?"

"Erian Li Halan," she replied coldly, as if speaking to her social inferior. "And this is my entourage. Cardanzo, my bodyguard, and Alustro, my confessor."

Her attitude worked well, for the Inquisitor, cowed somewhat by a noble and her brave deed, bowed slightly. "I thank you for catching the Symbiot menace and sending it to Gehenne. We will clean up the remains."

Erian, without any delay, walked out the doorway. Cardanzo followed, but I was still too stunned to realize that this was our cue to exit. I stood looking down at the body, my thoughts in turmoil.

One of the priests placed his hand on my shoulder. "It's evil is done with. It cannot harm you now."

I must have looked at him like he was mad; he completely misunderstood the cause of my confusion. But the startled look on his face brought me back to my senses. I bowed my head. "Yes. Yes, you are right. I was... unprepared."

He nodded with sympathy and I walked through the door. Erian and Cardanzo had not waited for me, but walked slowly so that I could catch him. As soon as I came to them, they increased their pace, and Cardanzo whispered, "Hurry before they think to search us for taint."

As we moved through the woods past the sty and toward our ship, my consternation was clear. Erian looked at me with worry. "It's all right, my priest. You see the best in men, and not their lies."

"But... the web. The web in the sun. It was in my vision. What does this mean?"

"I cannot say. Are not lies seen as a tangled web? Perhaps your vision warned you against his deception."

I nodded, but I knew that was not the answer. There was a deeper meaning here, and I feel our prejudice and fear silenced the answer before I could ask the question.



Introduction: Myth Becomes History

In the third twent'tlo (period equivalent to three Urth years) of Dloan-shi (24th century?), the Valukesh Ha'eni (a divination book) presented three glyphs to the Revered and Enlightened Mandarin Fluuan'devo'dau: 'strife,' 'earth' and 'heaven'. Observing the governing constellations, he recognized that Feti Tul'imo (a star?) was ascendant on Vajslo Uo'an (Manitou). Once time had transformed itself sufficiently, he allowed the glyph to flux, witnessing now 'ancient,' 'present' and 'future.' Perplexed, he visited his dreams, and there received renowned wisdom: the Progenitor's War in the Heavens was doomed to once again emanate into the tributaries of time.

— Vau prophecy of a past and future cosmic war, translated by Benjamin Verden.

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 prophecy 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 they 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, they 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.

However, the Vau, arguably the most advanced race known, have always viewed this event as a war between godly powers. No attempt was ever made by their scientists to rationalize history solely as a causal, material series of events. Indeed, their mysterious understanding of time seems not to recognize linear causality as humans understand it — according to certain Vau mandarins, the arrow of time moves in all directions.

While humans know little about Vau opinions and lore on such matters, 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. However, they do proph-

ecy 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.

Regardless of vague Vau hints and clues or the traces of myth from other races, what is clear to some humans is that, as time draws closer to the sixth millennium, prophecy is no longer the province of past doomsayers: the increasing number of those who claim visions and glimpses of the future can be seen on nearly every city street corner in the Known Worlds.

Of course, the majority of this is utter nonsense. However, some of it does seem to strike a chord now and then. The gamemaster can sprinkle many of these prophecies into his drama, as a means to convey the momentous nature of the events revealed in the "War in the Heavens" trilogy:

· A hesychast monk called Vigo the Scarred on Criticorum is gaining quite a following after telling a prophecy supposedly delivered to him personally by Saint Pallamedes. He claims the rock of the Church is threatened by forces outside the Known Worlds. As proof, he declared that the Vuldrok would raid Criticorum that spring. When a small fleet of raiders did indeed come through from Gwynneth to sack a small village and retreat, people began flocking to Vigo and begging for more divinations. He then delivered the "Symbiot Warnings," claiming that the Symbiots would soon declare their true intentions to humanity, although he is very vague when answering questions about what these intentions are. Nonetheless, word of his prophecy has spread to other worlds.

· Sir Vlarden, a former Decados count who is now a knight on Manitou, sent a messenger to the Emperor's court telling of a Vau prophecy delivered to him: One afternoon while the knight was walking through a field of poppies, a Vau worker harvesting the poppies broke from his work to approach him. He then, furtively looking about for anyone watching, slipped a think machine data crystal into the knight's hand and then returned to work, ignoring any word from the perplexed knight. Upon acquiring a think machine capable of playing the crystal, the knight was astonished to witness a holovid of a Vau mandarin addressing a crowd, apparently recorded surreptitiously. As the mandarin speaks, a hoarse voice whispers Urthish translations. The Vau tells everyone to prepare for the return of an ancient conflict once fought by the Progenitors. Word from the court is that most believe the holovid to be a fake or a poorly conceived Vau joke.

· A Prospector guilder working in Rampart's asteroid belt claims to have discovered an Ur magic lantern device. When he accidentally bumped it, the device activated a light beam that displayed images of gargoyle-like leviathans crashing into each other like tanks on a battlefield. Smaller, humanoid creatures swarmed on the ground firing energy weapons of awesome power. One of these beings had a tail similar to an Oro'ym's. However, a pirate raid on the Prospector base caused most of the base's stores — including the device — to blow out into space. Subsequent searches have not turned up the alleged device, but numerous Scraver bosses are supposedly offering rich rewards to anyone who finds it.

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 legendary War in the Heavens alleged to soon erupt again across the galaxy will 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. However, these stories are told in broad strokes, leaving the details up to the gamemaster.

Past **Fading Suns** books have concentrated on the Known Worlds and the beliefs of its people, especially influenced by the Church. 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; Volume three: "Pantheon," looking at the Anunnaki.

This Book

"Lifeweb" provides the gamemaster with background on Symbiot history, culture and powers, and gives a drama to introduce the metamorphs to the player characters. Details in this book are comprehensive enough for the gamemaster to create his own dramas and epics involving adventures with or against the Symbiots.

Holistic Design plans to produce future supplements further detailing the Xildûr (as the Symbiots call themselves), such as a forthcoming **Noble Armada** miniatures kit, with Symbiot and al-Malik starship miniatures and rules.



Book One: Metamorphosis

Silence fell over the Great Chamber. Galzai Hivers young and old stared at Mik'ur. The eyes of the higher rank members, the Garsazi and Korzi, drilled contempt into him, while those of his younger fellows, the Garzi and Galkinzi, looked with worry and confusion.

Folzeer stood and approached the impetuous young soldier. "I accept your challenge, whelp."

Mik'ur smiled; he knew his former mentor would. It would be unseemly for him to refuse the insult of a pupil. People might begin to think he was soft, unable to beat someone he himself had trained.

"Now," Mik'ur said. "No reason to wait."

Folzeer shrugged. "Now it is, then."

The Xokor raised his hand, and all Galzai in the cavern moved to the walls, leaving the central circle to the two challengers. Once everyone was settled, he lowed his arm. For a moment, neither of the two combatants moved, each locked in a staredown.

Then, orifices opened in Mik'ur's forearms and small, white slugs — like boney knuckles — shot out at Folzeer. The older Xildûr tried to sidestep them, but one impacted his shoulder, exploding and driving a cluster of sharp fragments into his flesh.

Folzeer reeled but did not cry out. He sucked in his breath and faced Mik'ur squarely. He released his breath with a great gust, calling on the elements to enhance it. Before anyone could blink, a wall of wind hammered into Mik'ur, knocking him over and bruising his chitinous hide.

Mik'ur slowly got to his feet, looking groggy. Folzeer cautiously approached. But Mik'ur ceased feigning and leapt at his mentor, flying 10 meters in a bound. He landed just behind Folzeer and raked his claws across his teacher's back, opening deep wounds. Green pus bled forth.

Folzeer did not even turn; fibrous tendrils of plant matter snaked from his torso, wrapping Mik'ur in a tight bond. The young Gar struggled to free himself with his claws. Folzeer turned and coughed a gout of flame into the youngster's face.

Mik'ur screamed in pain, his head and shoulders aflame, and Folzeer released his tendrils before the creeping fire could engulf them. Collapsing to the floor, Mik'ur tried to douse the flames by rolling on them, but the flammable sap Folzeer had spit kept burning.

"Mercy," Mik'ur whispered, his teeth gritted against the pain.

Folzeer stepped away, not even looking at Mik'ur, and turned to leave the chamber. The Xokor stood and followed Folzeer from the cavern, followed in turn by the older soldiers. Even some of the young followed them. The others whispered among themselves, unsure whether or not to approach their humiliated comrade.

The fire slowly sizzled out, its smoke still wreathing the now-weakened Mik'ur, who lay upon the ground in shame.

Biogenesis: History

A Growing Conflict

Every society has its malcontents, those unhappy with the status quo. The Second Republic had many such splinter groups, but few were considered dangerous; most were content to complain on soap boxes or vid screens, or even to abandon mainstream society and build communities that supported their particular value systems, far removed from crowded worlds. Breakaway colonies rarely succeeded in actual political secession, but cultural isolation was possible on backwater worlds. Dropout culture even became hip for a time among Second Republic youth.

Some groups, however, did more than simply complain or withdraw. Some fought back.

The UWW, or United Wildworlders, was a group greatly concerned about the effects of industrial terraforming on planets during the latter days of the Second Republic. While the corporations responsible for altering worlds to become more Earthlike touted high success rates and little to no adverse side effects, the UWW said otherwise. Their main mission was to leak the truth behind terraforming disasters to the public. Stories about communities ravaged by terraforming engine failure, radiation-based diseases such as cancer, or the loss of natural ecosystems and lifeforms were routinely introduced into holovidcasts by UWW representatives.

As more and more people became outraged by these stories, the government began to slowly turn its investigatory agencies onto the terraforming industry. Seeking to head off government regulation, E.G.O., the Eco Green Organization, the largest terraforming consortium, sued UWW representatives for slander and slapped a gag order on them, halting their media leaks.

EGO then turned its publicity engine toward improving its public image. This often involved outright lies and cover-ups of unfortunate incidents on many worlds, but they got the message across: terraforming was a clean technology, one that was good for people. Images of happy families playing in parks and gardens were superimposed with images of harried colonists fleeing Voroxian Grackle Foxes in trackless jungles, as if to imply that the latter image was humanity's fate without terraforming.

UWW members, under harsh legal limits, could no longer even speak about terraforming lest they harm their case and suffer financial ruin. After years of rising legal fees, the lead representatives of UWW settled out of court, gaining absolution from personal financial ruin in return for dissolving their activist organization.

But not everyone gave up. Some of the most fanatic members went underground and initiated a dirty tricks and monkeywrenching campaign against EGO, under the banner of the banned UWW. Graffiti written in the sky using stolen weather machines revealed EGO's crimes to many colonists.

Although the government had, by this time, passed greater regulatory measures against EGO and other terraformers, the corporations were still allowed to alter ecosystems at will. Although they had to pay higher fines for past harm done to people, nothing was done about their violation of environments. This was because such rape was most often initiated at the behest of the Second Republic or any number of planetary governments, seeking more normalized environments for their citizens.

This greatly angered conservationists who saw the destruction of alien ecosystems as not only arrogant, but dangerous to human life. Countless future discoveries, such as medicines, waited on untouched worlds, discoveries quickly lost forever under the onslaught of huge world engines. Indeed, even the notes of the greatest terraformer of all, Doramos, warned of the dangers of indiscriminate terraforming.

But there was little sympathy or ear for this message. Progress was all that mattered. Since the sky had not fallen after centuries of technological development on many worlds, nobody expected it to fall any time soon — or in the future.

The loss of native lifeforms did bother some people, especially when those lifeforms were cute and cuddly, but industrial fortunes would not easily step aside for a few strange species that nobody really understood anyway. Great bioreserve systems were devised on certain worlds, where displaced animals and plants could live out their lives wild and with little hindrance to human progress. But not all these creatures thrived; inevitably, some vital element was inadvertently left out of a creature's new home, something necessary to its previous existence that human ecologists had overlooked, forcing its eventual extinction.

The UWW decided to make a very public final stand, and chose the world of Chernobog for its grand message. Chernobog's initial explorers had almost named the planet Vorox II, for no other world so lush and varied had yet been found except the dangerous and extremely wild homeworld of the Vorox. It's Russo-Slav émigrés, upon first suffering its harsh wildernesses, called it Chernobog after the "black god" of Slavic myth.

Chernobog's jungles hosted numerous new discoveries in lifeform adaptation. Early colonists faced hurdles in adapting to life amid the steamy jungles or crowded forests. and many succumbed to the tree-leaping predators called *hiisi*. Much of these dangers, however, were mitigated when EGO began its terraforming project. Since it was the

newest world to undergo terraforming, and its original ecosystem was still largely intact, Chernobog became the focus of UWW's cause.

A small cabal of eco-guerrillas quietly arrived and went to ground in the deep wilderness, building a base from where they could monkeywrench EGO's operations planetwide.

The UWW Eco-Team

This small cabal was led by young Galt De Vatha, heir to the famed jumpkey manufacturing family, one of the richest families in the Known Worlds. Galt grew up to hate the affluence of his family and, by extension, the affluence of Known Worlders in general. Such riches seemed to be built on the bodies of other lifeforms. The only thing that gave Galt peace was his long time spent in wilderness, escaping his family and its expectations of him. His father's shadow hung over everything he did — except out there, in the wilds, where the industrialist deigned not to go. It is little wonder that UWW seemed the perfect home to him, and the perfect weapon with which to strike at his parents and their whole social class.

His aggression was somewhat tempered by a long-standing UWW member, Solomon Frem. Frem came from wretched poverty on Kun Lun, a world now somewhere in Vuldrok space but which was then one of the Second Republic's many backworlds. His family suffered from toxins routinely dumped into its water supply by the world's terraforming generator. The problem was eventually discovered and fixed, and full medical benefits were extended to those harmed by the corporation, but the damage had been done: Frem's mother died when he was eight, and he ever since equated her death with the death of Nature. He became a devout Gjarti priest, ever seeking to cleanse toxins from natural systems, and these sensibilities lead him to the UWW cause.

While Galt and Solomon had differences of opinion on methods and means, they were staunch friends allied on a single goal: to ruin EGO's operation on Chernobog.

Other members of their team included Chi Hashimi, a human follower of the Ven Lohji sect of the Universal Church and a genetically-engineered hermaphrodite; Ann Basque, a former terraforming architect who turned against the science when she realized its dangers; Riva Alecto, a noblewoman who, like Galt, despised her family and heritage but who was fascinated with nature; Leena Riggs, a wilderness survival expert with experience leading colonies; and Aldo Rimes, a poet and novelist who hoped to turn the Chernobog "adventure" into a best-selling story.

The team settled in for an extended stay and began its terrorism against EGO equipment and devices, ever careful to avoid harming people, only objects. EGO developers initially believed the unseen saboteurs to be locals, some backwoods dropouts trying to scare the corporation away, but when more extensive damage was discovered to their core engines, they realized that these saboteurs were experts. Soon after that, Galt began signing his work with the UWW symbol, leaving it at worksites or scrawled across the chief surveyor's office walls.

EGO did not hesitate to reign in these criminals and immediately hired a mercenary force to hunt down the UWW renegades. The hiring of merc forces was a highly controversial affair, mired in legal grays leftover from more colonial days when governors often had to hire freelance military aid in matters of defense. However, misuse of such mercs was widely known, since they had little regard for civil rights or due process. EGO hoped that their new hire would go unnoticed by the local Second Republic authorities until their mission had been accomplished and the saboteurs where either in restraints or "missing."

In their first major instance of ill luck, Galt's team broke into an equatorial alignment facility at night, when the employees were absent, and wired it with explosives. Alarms instantly alerted EGO headquarters almost at the same moment the merc forced arrived on planet. They were immediately dispatched to halt the UWW incursion.

As the team left the facility, they were met with gunfire. Riva and Aldo were wounded before they could find cover. Using himself as a decoy, Galt distracted the mercs with a surrender ploy, allowing his team to slip away into the nearby jungle. When he was sure they were away, he triggered the explosives and escaped himself in the ensuing chaos.

Three mercs were dead and their leader, Colonel Basteau, a veteran of many colony conflicts, now declared a personal vendetta. After sending the wounded back to HQ, he and a small band set out into the jungle in pursuit of the eco-guerrillas.

Riva was badly wounded. Like all the teammembers, she wore an energy shield, but the barrage of bullets had burned it out, and a slug entered her brain. Although she was still conscious, the swelling and hemorrhaging meant she would soon die if immediate medical aid wasn't applied. While Elixir injections helped repair some of the damage, it seemed only to delay the inevitable.

Aldo and Solomon carried her through the jungle, following Galt's lead. They had carefully planned escape paths during the previous weeks as they waited for the best time to break into the facility. But with the mercs hot on their trail, Galt decided to go deeper into the jungle than they had before in the hopes of throwing off their pursuit.

The mercs were expert trackers and jungle survivalists, but next to Galt's experienced crew, this meant little. The UWW team outdistanced the mercs but found themselves in completely untouched territory, places where no human had ever set foot.

This led to their second major instance of ill luck...



The Xoloti Awaken

When Galt realized that his team was ready to collapse, he called a halt to their march. Frem discovered a small grove nearby, hidden by thick vines and creepers. Parting the green curtains, the crew found a small clearing beneath a massive tree trunk. Nearby, a stream gurgled from a calm pond. The peace was almost spiritual.

They also immediately fell into arguing, in heated whispers. Some wanted to surrender, so they could get Riva help, but Galt argued that the mercs would not stop their hunt to medivac her out of the jungle. They all realized that this was no longer merely a political protest — it had become deadly serious.

The pressure was too much for Galt; the last thing he felt he needed now was to defend his decisions to the others. He did something he abhorred doing in normal circumstances: he used his psychic influence to silence Frem's heated arguments.

Galt kept his psychic powers hidden from everyone, fearing the increased expectations his father would then heap upon him, and the intrusion of government forces that tried to keep track of such people. While there was rarely any outright coercion involved, the government tried to persuade psychics to join research programs. In addition, if the word got out that someone was psychic, people flocked to him with all sorts of requests for aid and cures. Privacy was nonexistent for known psychics.

Galt's powers were slight, confined to sensing another's emotions and indirectly influencing those emotions. He activated these powers now, and tried to project images of authority into Frem's mind, to slowly convince him that Galt's will should be heeded.

But Frem was not so easily fooled. He practiced the rituals of his Gjarti religion, and had achieved effects similar to magic. Theurgy, or religious magic, was known to the people Second Republic, but was largely believed (by skeptics) to be mere hallucination on the part of witnesses, or a form of psychic power (by open-minded scientists). Even most priests believed it to be a hoax, for it was said that the age of miracles had passed with the death of the Prophet.

Frem recognized occult intrusion when he felt feelings normally alien to him. He immediately realized that Galt was behind the occult influence. Shocked not only that their leader was a psychic but that he would dare use those powers against his own team — his own friends — Frem responded with a power of his own. He closed his eyes and prayed for assistance in resisting Galt's projections.

This mystical war went unnoticed by the others, who continued to argue among themselves, occasionally demanding that Galt or Frem answer them. It did not, however, go unnoticed by the other denizens of the grove.

The occult energy released by Galt and Frem's mental war spread as a wave through the area. So subtle even a highly-attuned psychic would have trouble sensing it, the

creatures of the grove nonetheless stirred and twitched from their long sleep. Their hunger for such power awoke them. Like a shark smelling blood, they followed their instincts to the source.

The teams' arguing was cut short by Riva's horrendous scream. They had left her by the stream where she couldn't hear the arguments, so they had not noticed when a creature crawled from the water onto her chest. The slimy, boney *thing* burrowed into her chest as she gurgled and shrieked, unable to move.

Before anyone could act, more creatures dropped from the overhanging branches and assaulted the team. The things pierced skin with multiple pincers, making it impossible to tear them off with brute force. They then began chewing their way into their victim's chests.

Oddly, however, the pain halted before the creatures' job was done. Indeed, their feeding — if that's what it was — created a euphoric sensation, and all the team fell to the ground, lost in ecstasy. All, that is, but Galt and Frem. They, too, felt the anesthesia, but were not overcome by it; something about their occult powers protected them. Unable to tear their attackers from them, they watched in horror as their comrade's very forms began to melt, to metamorphose into bizarre combinations of life: skin became fish scales, which then became fur, and then smooth, amphibious flesh. As the creatures "ate," their victim's very morphology shifted in chaotic madness.

Galt felt his own flesh begin to change, but quickly realized that he could will it to change in ways he desired. He immediately willed the thing to drop from him, which it did, dying instantly. Galt moved to help the others, but before he could even begin his task, his mind was flooded with new sensations. He now felt that his psychic powers were immense, and the world itself was different. He saw how everything in his field of vision was connected, as if by strands of lights. He felt the pulsing magnetic push and pull of those strands, a constant beat by which the universe marked time.

He looked down at his body and knew that he was no longer human. His hands had become claws, his hide a series of armored plates. His chest wound was healed, but the flesh was now a flexible carapace.

Frem also experienced a similar sensation, but his was accompanied by a religious epiphany. As his senses opened to the web of light, he felt a presence behind it all, a being who orchestrated the pulsing ebb and flow of life. The strands connecting everything in sight were this being's vessels, and the light was its blood flowing through them.

He looked down to see the creature fall from his chest, dead, but knew that it was meant to be, for its spirit now enlivened Frem, giving its power to him. His skin grew a thin fur, and he felt his ears enlarge.

Galt and Frem looked at each other and knew they were different than the rest, that they had become something new, while the others slowly died, their life forces devoured by the creatures from the trees. They each went to their friends and willed the creatures to leave them, which they did. But the things did not die like the others; they scuttled into the water or up the trunk of the great tree to return to their hibernation.

One by one, Galt and Frem revived their friends through willpower. In doing so, they could feel energy leave them and enter the others, changing the others as they had been changed. Their forms slowly coalesced into definitive shapes, but shapes no longer fully human, shapes which now shared morphological features with lower animals and even plants.

It was not a wonderful and mind-expanding experience for all of them. Leena Rig's opened her eyes and screamed in terror. She leapt to her feet to run but fell dead after two steps, vomiting blood and fluids. The strain on her metabolism and mind had been too much.

Aldo Rimes jumped to all fours — his arms and legs resembling a great cat's — and growled like a beast. He broke and ran from the others, beating a path through the jungle Galt could not follow. His mind was gone, erased along with his human anatomy.

Chi Hashimi, aided by Frem, arose with wings sprouting from his back, smiling with the new sensations and visions. Ann Basque, aided by Galt, slowly stood, her long tail waving awkwardly, her hands rubbing her scaled hide. Riva Alecto awoke after Frem removed her creature, and stood up, staring strangely at her friends. A sinister smile warped her face, and spikes grew from her brows. Fur grew down her back and claws sprouted from her fingertips. The wound in her head sealed, but a scar remained.

Solomon Frem, looking in wonder at them all, said: "We are made anew by Gjarti."

But Galt said, "No. We made ourselves. We are now only what we choose to be."

Riva then spoke, saying: "We are but a transition to something more primal, something that waits at the end of time."

Frem furrowed his hairy brow: "What do you mean by that?" Riva would not explain, but smiled a private smile.

They spent the rest of the evening and the following day marveling at their new bodies and minds. By will alone, they could warp their bodies into any shape they desired. Some were better at this than others, or excelled with certain forms but not others. Ann Basque found that she could more easily reshape living things around her — tree branches, toads — than she could her own anatomy, while the others found it hard to change anything but themselves.

They soon realized that they could not metamorphose indefinitely. Each new shape or form left them drained, for it required an expenditure of energy, as if they were now batteries with limited charges. Frem felt that it was not his energy that he used, however, but that he and the others only channeled a force from nature. There was a limit to how much they could channel, for their frames

were too weak to pass so much power. Riva suggested cryptically that they used up the energy of the region around them; the more they took from it, the less was left for other lifeforms to use. This appealed to their ecological guilt, and they agreed to slow down until they more fully understood what had happened to them.

Experimentation

The small team stayed in the grove for the next week, making small trips out for food. They found their hunting abilities to be phenomenal, for they could assume any animal form or feature they desired, whether it be cat eyes or claws. Chi Hashimi theorized that they could form anything they wanted, but had so far been limited to known models. He set out to form shapes and functions unknown to nature.

His first experiments didn't work very well, for he found it hard to form something he could barely imagine. It was much easier to work with shapes he had seen before or which already existed in nature. Ann began to believe that they had in some way unleashed deep genetic structures, codes which existed in human DNA since early evolution; she posited that, if a shape did not already exist in their DNA, they could not form it.

Galt argued that the DNA of the creatures that had converted them obviously had some contribution, and perhaps provided codes from any number of unknown alien animals they had devoured before. Frem stood by his belief that they were now connected to Gjarti and could assume any shape She had already envisioned, but warned that to envision things not already in nature was to invite hubris and to become antithetical to nature.

Chi Hashimi laughed at these ideas and proceeded to play with his metamorphic abilities. He indeed assumed shapes and textures unknown to any animal, and created senses which he claimed provided him information bizarre and never before known. But, as Frem warned, he went too far.

In forming an organ designed to draw nutrients out of the air, so that he would no longer have to eat, Chi went somewhat mad. His bout lasted only for a little while, but was a stern warning to the others: their minds were now closely tied to their forms, and to alter one was to alter the other. To do so indiscriminately was to risk uncontrolled results. Chi became convinced that the others were out to eat him, a paranoia which caused him to flee into the jungle until he regained his mental stability. It took him even more time to find his way back.

Ever after that incident, Chi was more careful, but still more carefree than the rest. His madness, however, grew steadily worse over time, and he found that he would suffer uncontrollable metamorphoses at times and under certain conditions. Frem accused him of arrogance and said that his powers were no longer in sympathy with Gjarti; he called Chi's affliction "antipathy," borrowing from his Gjartin theology. He declared that their own powers were symbiotic, working in synergy with other life and its energies.

It was during this period that Frem first began using the term Lifeweb, the best description he knew for the vision of the interconnected strands of life he experienced.

Riva suggested that, since they were no longer human, they should no longer speak as humans. She would from that time forth speak only the eco-cabal's code tongue, a fictitious language adopted by them to prevent their conversations from being understood by others.

This language, called Xoglazi, was not invented by them, but came from a discredited linguist from the Diaspora-era. It was an attempt to translate the glyphs found among Anunnaki ruins, to piece together the varied ideograms and pictograms into a phonetic language. Its inventor, Professor Simon Vedik, claimed to have discovered the "Rosetta Stone" of the Ur language, a stele displaying the code used to build their pictograms. His resultant reconstruction was hailed by xenoarchaeologists as a brilliant recreation of a dead tongue.

It was only after his death that his "Rosetta Stone" was proved a fake. It was actually a false artifact made by an Ukari taudwon who had convinced Vedik of its authenticity. Nonetheless, Vedik must have suspected its origins himself, for he lied about the location where he found it, and never mentioned the taudwon to anyone. His earliest critics were Ur-Obun scholars, who, although impressed with much of Vedik's work, claimed that the code he used to build his language was corrupted by too many Ukari-seeming glyphs. Their criticisms were originally dismissed by Vedik's supporters as part of their long-held racism against their cousins.

After the truth was discovered, Xoglazi became a joke and an example of hubris in the field of Anunnaki archaeology. It was soon forgotten by scientists, remembered only by those interested in quirky Ur cults and famous hoaxes. By the latter days of the Second Republic, it was quite obscure, but had received somewhat of a revival in fabulist circles, among artists whose work involved the Ur races. Aldo Rimes was one of these, a fiction writer whose fantasy tales involved time travel back into an imagined past where the aliens encountered spoke Xoglazi. It was Rimes who had originally suggested Xoglazi for a secret tongue, a language the cabal could use when speaking in code. It was not a hard tongue to learn, and they quickly picked it up, although Leena and Galt had a harder time with it than the others.

Riva claimed that Xoglazi was not the hoax everyone believed. She hinted that, during her conversion, entities spoke with her, whispering words in Xoglazi, some of which she did not know, implying a greater language of which she only knew a part.

Most of the others did not believe her, but Galt greatly liked the idea of a new language for them, for he increasingly held that they were now a race apart and superior to

any that had come before. What better language than that supposedly spoken by the greatest race to walk the stars? He called their new race the Xildûr, literally "shape-changer" in Xoglazi.

Frem complained that it was silly, and preferred the Urthish term "symbiot." He said Xoglazi would only make them the laughing stock of humans once it was realized they spoke a hoax tongue, but Galt icily said that nobody would ever laugh at them again.

The Hunt Resumes

All the while, the mercenary outfit combed the jungle for the eco-terrorists. Although it had lost the original trail, its persistence paid off. Two days after the UWW's conversion into their new forms, Aldo Rimes ran howling into the merc camp. Starving and completely mindless, he leapt at the first moving target, the company's Master Sergeant. Before the poor man could react, this super-fast and vicious beast tore his guts out with its hind-claws and began to devour him as the other mercs ran in terror for their guns.

Colonel Basteau ordered his men to open fire on what they all believed to be a native predator. Bullets flew at full auto, tearing the thing to shreds. As Basteau raised his hand for everyone to halt their fire, Aldo Rimes twitched and his body metamorphosed back into his original human shape, his flesh reknitting.

The mercenary company stared in shock at the display, as Rimes, a glimmer of his former intelligence in his eyes, moaned at Basteau to kill him. But the hardened merc had no idea what the wretch was trying to say. He realized, however, that this groaning thing, flopping in its own blood, was one of the eco-terrorists. Whatever had happened to him — an alien plague or some artifact weapon — could endanger them all.

He ordered Rimes' capture, and the unit immediately set about caging him. Rimes, weak and barely able to heal himself, could not shift his form or maintain his sentience for long. He lapsed back into his bestial state and soon collapsed from exhaustion.

The unit called for emergency evacuation and two EGO hoppers soon arrived, with biocontamination equipment and scientists. The unfortunate Rimes was carted back to EGO headquarters and forced to undergo a battery of invasive tests while locked in a containment chamber. Using waldoes and lasers, EGO scientists ruthlessly cut open his living body and watched as it regrew, replacing injured organs with entirely new types of organs. What was once a human or even a panther organ regenerated as something else entirely, some recognizable (canine, rhinoceros), others unique in all of Known World's zoology.

They exposed him to other animals, some of which he ate immediately, others he would fondle but then ignore. Upon retrieving a kitten he had idly petted but did not play with, the scientists were startled to find it growing, its flesh metamorphosing into a beetle-like monster. It killed three men before being scorched by the security officers' lasers. After that incident, Rimes was allowed no further contact with living things.

Those who had been exposed to the warped kitten were put into quarantine, as was anyone who had been exposed to Rimes — except the mercenaries, who had been sent back out into the jungles in search of the other UWW members. The burning question: Was Rime's metamorphic state a communicable disease, or did he infect the kitten on purpose, as a bid for escape?

A New Army

Unware of Rime's fate, the UWW survivors decided they would no longer allow themselves to be stalked like animals, but would assault the mercenaries themselves, confident in their new abilities. They crept upon the camp at night, using their new abilities to pad silently through the long grass of the clearing. The watchmen occasionally heard sounds, but concluded they were just animals. One by one, the guards fell to the Symbiots' silent attacks.

Chi Hashimi disregarded Galt's order to merely render his guard unconscious and instead decided to try a new experiment on a living, sentient being. He wondered: could he create another being like himself? If Frem had done so with him, why not he with this guard?

He slithered on the ground as a snake and came behind his prey, rising up in near-human form to grab the guard, covering his mouth so he couldn't cry. Holding the struggling mercenary to the grass, he willed him to lose his form, to surrender to the chaotic energies of symbiosis. The mercenary's shape melted and reformed, but the light of consciousness went out of his eyes. Chi released him and looked upon his work: a humanoid amalgam of animal forms, part canine, part amphibian. And he realized a new thing: he could manipulate the former mercenary's emotions and scant mental processes however he so desired.

He had created the first drone (second, considering Aldo Rime's kitten). The cost was a human being's sentience.

He quickly met the others to tell them of his new discovery, commanding his amphibian mutt to follow behind, which it loyally did. The revelation shocked the others and caused Galt to delay the attack. Even though they had already incapacitated three guards themselves, they slipped back into the jungle to review Chi's actions.

Galt was furious but also fascinated. Although the mutt refused to follow anyone's commands but Chi's, Galt imagined a legion of such warriors. The irony thrilled him. Unlike Frem and the others, Galt hated the mercenaries. He felt they deserved their coming deaths, for they willingly attempted to kill the UWW. He also knew that the more time he allowed for thought and debate, the more the others might argue against his chosen course: to create a loyal legion of eco-warriors from the bodies of the mercenaries.

He ordered the attack to continue, but this time told the others to repeat Chi's conversion feat. Reluctantly, they agreed. Even Frem did not anticipate Galt's plan, and went along with it unknowingly; he would not otherwise have accepted it. Indeed, his later stance on using only willing converts was strengthened by Galt's deceit in this affair.

They all found little problem with their own conversion efforts, although with mixed results: Frem's convert did not fully lose his intelligence, and could even speak haltingly. However, his capacity for reason seemed greatly diminished. While his loyalty was unquestionably now to Frem rather than Colonel Basteau, he waited on Frem's guidance to take any action. This was the first servitor.

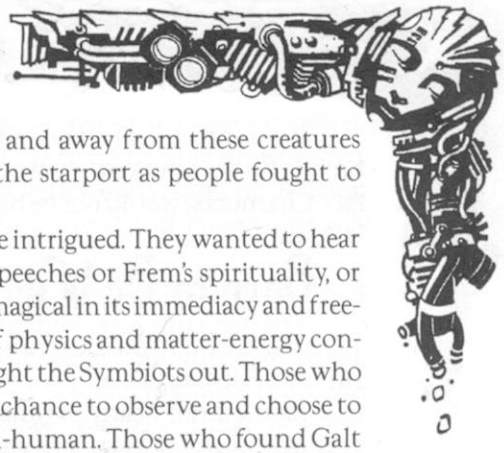
Galt told Frem to have the servitor shift its new, bestial motherform back into a human shape, to hide its deformities, and send the servitor into the camp to distract the colonel, who had called out to his guards but received no response. Before he could order an alert, the servitor entered the camp and told him that all was clear. Once the camp relaxed, the UWW attacked. They sent the drones in first. When the mercenaries recognized their former comrades, now turned into freakish beasts, they broke ranks. Some fled, others let loose fire on them. The chaotic fight ended with casualties on both sides, with drones and mercenaries dead, but it had the desired effect for Galt: he cornered the colonel and forcibly converted him to the new race.

His rage and fervor caused a different outcome than before; Basteau became neither a drone nor a servitor — he was a fully sentient metamorph like the others. But he was confused and seemed to have no memory of his identity. Galt provided a new one. Grasping his convert's head, he stared into his eyes and told Basteau that he was now Galt's warrior, his chosen soldier in a war against civilization. Galt's imprinting worked: although still disoriented, Basteau nodded and asked what his orders were. After that, it was only a matter of time until the entire camp was captured and the mercenaries lined up for forced conversion.

The others' lack of compassion sickened Frem, but his curiosity and need got the best of him. Each mercenary in turn was a guinea pig for conversion training: How much intent to use when converting? How much energy? What made the difference between drone, servitor and Symbiot? As the original UWW crew walked up the line, they each in turn grasped a screaming man and willed him to become other than human.

Some died as did Leena Rigs, unable to withstand the metabolic chaos. Others seemed to die through refusal — their resolve to resist the process was so firm that they chose death over conversion. Most, however, became mindless drones or semi-sentient servitors. Of the entire unit — nine living mercenaries — only one became a full Symbiot. All of them required some degree of imprinting, but the sole Symbiot most of all needed it to orient his shattered self; he also needed more reinforcement later, to keep him thinking as Galt wanted him to.





War Against Civilization

Events moved quickly after that, faster than the planet's authorities were prepared for. The Symbiots entered a small town on the edge of the jungle, a corporate village where employees of EGO lived between shifts at various worksites across the world. The entire population was converted or killed over the period of a day and night. All communications had been cut before the attack, so no message ever reached EGO or the Second Republic governor.

Frem greatly protested this move, but he was ignored by the others. They were a new race now, and like all races, they had to breed. Frem could work to instill principles in them later, Galt claimed; for now, he needed soldiers for the cause. Only Frem's original passion for removing EGO from Chernobog allowed him to acquiesce and join the others in forcibly converting the human population.

As more and more Symbiots joined the ranks, Galt discovered that their fresh identities depended greatly on their initial imprinting and the further imprinting over the following days. After that period, they became fully loyal, intelligent soldiers for his cause.

They made further assaults on EGG and Second Republic bases and facilities. Whenever the group converted an outpost, they retreated into the jungles to imprint their captives; Galt wanted no chance of cross-imprinting by EGO or Second Republic civilians.

At first, EGO tried to contain the problem by lying to the governor about the disaster at their corporate village. But once other outposts lost lives and people, the governor became aware just how deadly this strange plague was. He called for immediate evacuation of all citizens — nearly 500,000 workers and colonists. Ships capable of handling the evac were summoned from other systems, and the military might of the Second Republic was called upon to cleanse the planet.

Before the ships arrived, Galt took over the airwaves. Finally returning to the UWW's original propaganda machine, he began sermonizing to all who could receive holovid transmissions about his "new way." Broadcasting with stolen cameras and the aid of converted technicians, his image reached thousands. He claimed that EGO and the governor were lying to the people about a plague and alien menace, that the Symbiots were representatives of a new form of life, one granted by the planet itself. If colonists intended to live here, they would have to transcend their previous forms and assume metamorphic forms.

Frem also broadcast his own messages, although initially against Galt's orders. Frem's were religious sermons, describing the Lifeweb and its wonders. He orated about symbiosis and its powers, even demonstrating his shapeshifting on holovid.

Most people panicked. These monsters who had once been humans scared people to their marrow, and they wanted to get off-world and away from these creatures *now*. Riots broke out at the starport as people fought to seize the few ships there.

But some people were intrigued. They wanted to hear more. Dazzled by Galt's speeches or Frem's spirituality, or his display of raw power, magical in its immediacy and freedom from normal laws of physics and matter-energy conversion, these people sought the Symbiots out. Those who found Frem were given a chance to observe and choose to be human or better-than-human. Those who found Galt or the others had no choice: convert or die.

Military confrontations increased, as Galt led his soldiers against terraforming installations and supply depots. The governor drew back his limited forces to protect the largest city, location of the sole spaceport. Horror stories came in every day of troops forced to fight against their own comrades or kin, who had been converted and now chanted the praises of symbiosis — or worse, who howled like beasts or shambled mindlessly on before hails of bullets.

Relief arrived just as the Symbiots made their march into the city. Second Republic assault landers dropped from orbit and loaded as many people as they could fit before fleeing back into space. But there were not enough. When it became clear that not everyone could be saved, the governor abandoned the planet in his own ship, ordering the spaceport bombed to keep the Symbiots from getting off-world. When the announcement was made, the remaining colonists, now aware that they had no way off-planet and would be incinerated if they huddled at the port, ran for the hills. A mass exodus of refugees streamed from the city in all directions and into the jungles. Some of them met Symbiot forces and faced conversion; others escaped into the wilderness and hid.

The flagship of the rescue fleet, the cruiser *Koyukon*, fired its broadside of heavy blasters at the spaceport from space, devastating it. What ships were still there — a small fleet of freighters and corporate escorts awaiting repair parts — were buried under blasted maxicrete.

Chernobog's governor, now hysterical, ordered the system abandoned and the jumpgate sealed. Although such an order required ratification by the Second Republic Council, the military commander of the relief fleet, shaken to his soul by his brief encounter with the Symbiots, supported the order. As the last ship left the system, it engaged the top secret sequence used to seal the gate. Such information was of the highest confidentiality and was inaccessible to ship captains in most circumstances; in emergencies, however, the command crew could all agree for the computer to release it. Such a code was unique to each gate, and often took years for technicians to glean from the gate's workings. What's more, the same code never sealed a gate twice: it only worked once. But that one time could seal a gate for centuries — there was no controlling the gate's own timer.



The commander had no idea how much time he was buying his government — a week? A year? Maybe ten? In fact, Chernobog would not be heard from again for nearly 800 years...

Born to Be Wild

The Second Republic forces fled the world before realizing what Galt did not want them to know: that his new race was not nearly so unified as he led them to believe. Although it seemed to the human forces fighting their former comrades that their friends were now either mindless slaves or hive-minded puppets, this was the case for only some of the converted troops.

The fact was that Galt and his crew had increasing trouble controlling their converts, especially the "drones," as they dubbed the non-sentient former humans or animals who made up the bulk of their army. These things were wild creatures, and although they could be imprinted during conversion to follow their maker's lead, the strength of this new bond faded as more primal instincts took over. The farther removed they were from their maker, the wilder they became.

The True Symbiots displayed varying degrees of loyalty. Some retained their full memories and sense of identity from before their conversion, but most remembered little of their lives before symbiosis changed them. The loss of knowledge and skills both aided and hurt Galt's cause: with little sense of self, the new Symbiots were easily imprinted, and followed their new ways as if that was all they had known; but their lack of memories meant that the remains of their civilization was alien to them, and now seen as hostile. Towns were abandoned and left to ruin.

For some Symbiots, the imprinting or their reaction to it was so powerful that they developed hive-minds. Groups of these like-minded Symbiots could feel the emotions and sometimes thoughts of their fellows, and acted together as one. Whether this was from some form of telepathy or advanced chemical signaling was hard to discern; the farther apart these linked Symbiots were from one another, however, the more individualistic they became. Some did not react well to this separation, and seemed to lack any mental capacity for individual thought. Without their hive, they floundered, falling back on instinct or developing psychoses.

Worse news was that each successive True Symbiot created seemed to be less metamorphic than the original founders — its powers of change and transformation seemed more limited, and they tired sooner. Not all new Symbiots could convert other lifeforms; some seemed to lack the ability entirely. This created a division between "breeders," those who could convert others, and non-breeders, those who could not. In addition, the younger Symbiots were far more prone to the Antipathic problems originally displayed by Chi Hashimi — the more they were pushed to expand their powers before fully grasping their new state of existence, the more unbalanced they became both mentally and physically.

Foreseeing generations of Symbiots with lesser degrees of power, Galt and the other original team returned to the grove to find the creatures that made them. As they climbed the great tree and searched its branches, Ann, looking down upon the grove, realized with a shock that the area was not a primal, natural grove, but an overgrown ruin. Only from above did the features beneath the pool become obvious: Anunnaki carvings.

Metamorphosing fishlike forms, they investigated, finding underwater tunnels beneath the pool which led to deep chasms filled with crumbling Ur carvings. And hibernating among these megalithic pictographs and statues were the creatures. This time, they did not stir when life came near, for they had already gained their fill of Lifeforce to last them many years into the future.

The team left the slumbering makers and came back to the air. Galt declared that the grove was sacred, and that none but they and their immediate chosen — their most loyal Symbiots — would be allowed near. The Makers must be protected at all costs, for they held the key to future lineages. Riva then named them Xolotl, "Sacred Elder Beast."

Frem was disturbed at this, but said nothing. He knew now that Galt intended to build a dynasty based on his ideals of power and will — ideals opposed to Frem's own Gjartin ways.

Consolidation

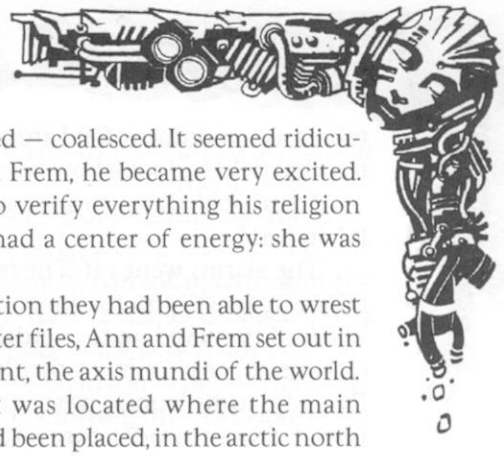
Galt set about consolidating his new kingdom. More and more humans — civilian colonists and EGO employees who had fled into the wilderness — were converted and imprinted with Galt's new way.

What humans remained free in the jungles were soon reduced to archaic survival conditions. The Symbiots guarded the city and the few colony villages scattered over the planet, and no one dared come near them seeking supplies for fear of conversion. Galt declared a moratorium on conversion for the time, and allowed these holdout communities to exist freely, in case his new race would one day need new breeding pools.

Although Symbiots held the cities, they did not use them. Galt sought a return to humanity's primal past, and now that his new race shared physical features with its environment, there was nothing standing in the way of a perfect, ecologically-balanced society. The cities were guarded but empty of inhabitants.

Galt did fear the return of a new fleet, however, and was curious about the communication silence from space. He had his loyal soldiers gather the few remaining working starcraft on Chernobog — a handful of explorers and a small freighter — and, with the assistance of those Symbiots who still retained their piloting skills, flew to the jumpgate.

He found it ominous that they encountered no ships along the way. Once at the gate, where no fleet waited to



prevent his leaving the system, he nervously commanded his crew to jump the ship to Daishan. Nothing happened. The gate had been shut. They were trapped.

After a plethora of curses, Galt realized that this actually aided his cause, for no help for the humans would arrive soon. Although he had no idea when the gate would reopen, and would have to remain constantly vigilant for high-tech rescue forces, he knew now that he had more time to cement his power.

The World Egg

Frem and Ann investigated the now-deserted EGO headquarters, uncovering numerous data about the planet's terraforming. They also found the dead body of Aldo Rimes, who had starved to death in a cage; no one had been there to feed him.

After burying his body in the sacred grove, they set to work deciphering the banks of technical data, trying to understand just what had been done to the world and how far progressed the operation was. Although Ann had studied terraforming science, she was never a world architect herself; she knew that arcane trade secrets were withheld from most who worked on the world engines, but until she read EGO's files, she had no idea just how arcane it could be.

Terraforming tech took a giant leap forward following the work of Doramos, the most brilliant terraformer. His elite school of students followed his lead to remodel the imperfectly formed worlds of the Second Republic. After Doramos, it seemed that no environmental effect was impossible to achieve. However, his students kept their secrets well, and the corporations, owning a piece of this high-tech knowledge, kept it highly classified. Thus, few people understood what a crank Doramos really was.

His own notes, and that of his faithful students, sound more like magical grimoires than scientific treatises. While they are more than competent in the reigning sciences of the day, they also speak of "idea fields," fields related to thoughts, emotions, celestial events and spiritual energies. It was this kind of talk that the corporations hid from the public, fearing a backlash not only from the practical-minded government. but also from religious groups, who might be angered to discover they were living on worlds designed in accord with mystical ideas not their own.

Yet, it was these ideas, cloaked in a code of metaphor known only to the world architects themselves, that held the key to their power. Not even the Master Engineers of the corporations really understood just how the architects achieved the effects they did; they just knew that, if they followed the directions given them exactly, things would work. Indeed, every section of a terraforming crew knew only their piece of the puzzle. Only the architects knew the whole.

After reading the Chernobog architect's files, Ann began to suspect the existence of a center of energy on the world, a single point where all the world's fields — electromagnetic or idea-based — coalesced. It seemed ridiculous, but when she told Frem, he became very excited. Such theories seemed to verify everything his religion taught, for each world had a center of energy: she was called Gjarti.

Using what information they had been able to wrest from the encrypted master files, Ann and Frem set out in search of this central point, the axis mundi of the world.

Not surprisingly, it was located where the main terraforming engines had been placed, in the arctic north pole of the planet. The facility had been unmanned even before the Symbiots' assault on EGO. Ann and Frem spent days trying to find their way into the sealed facility — usually one of the most well-protected on a planet. The security code snippets Ann had retrieved from the EGO mainframes failed to work until their final attempt, when the door unsealed. This time, the code had been entered just as the internal timer was awaiting a monthly maintenance visit. Ann and Frem slipped into the cold, ceramsteel building.

Inside, a massive tunnel had been cored into the earth, leading down countless miles, where tendrils of thick cable spread even deeper into the mantle. The steady hum of machinery and energy surrounded them. Ann, looking about the place, didn't understand most of what she saw. But both she and Frem, through their Symbiot senses, felt something in the air.

While Ann investigated the machinery, Frem sat beside the chasm and meditated, trying to return to that primal state he had experienced upon first conversion, when he had seen the Lifeweb itself. He had tried similar exercises over the past weeks, some successful, most not. Now, it proved easier than ever before, for the air was pregnant with Lifeweb energy. Frem instantly slipped into the reverie of vision.

The web appeared about him, its strands thicker and more clustered than he'd seen before, shooting out from the earth and spreading out far beyond the horizon. Looking down into the hole, a great light pulsed there, a massive knot of webbing. It seemed like a cocoon, wrapped around something primal and full of raw energy.

Frem blinked and the thing changed. It seemed now more like an egg, a brittle shell encasing something embryonic and struggling to get out. Without thinking to alert Ann, he metamorphosed wings and flew to it, lost in his mystical reverie. He reached his hand forward and touched it, its warmth spreading through him like an orgasm. Beneath his touch, splinter lines appeared and multiplied out, cracking the egg. Light burst out and Frem was thrown back as energy streamed forth like a monsoon, escaping the chasm and exploding into the upper atmosphere of the world.

Frem weakly landed on the floor by Ann, who had not seen a thing. She did notice that the dials and readouts went haywire, and desperately tried to understand what they were saying. It was clear that the core had main-



tained a containment field around some form of energy, but that field had somehow been breached.

Frem babbled about an egg, and muttered: "It hatched. It hatched."

The alarms went off. The feedback regulators, containing magnetic fluctuations over the world, overloaded. The facility revved up to overdrive, trying to regain control over an environment that had exploded into chaos. Outside, tumultuous weather patterns wracked the planet, from thunderstorms to monsoons, and earthquakes rumbled across formerly stable plates.

Ann and Frem ran from the station, afraid it would explode, but the fail-safe mechanisms engaged, shutting the engines down. The weather calmed, but haunted the world in strange patterns for days. The terraforming of Chernobog was now over. Until a crew came from off world to restart the engine, the world was on its own. The station even sent an automatic report to all EGO stations and to the communications relay by the jumpgate, ready to be read by the first incoming ship. A warning: "Chernobog terraforming engine off-line due to core containment failure. Immediate evacuation of citizens recommended. Emergency environmental protocols recommended. Planet now classified T12: highly toxic."

Rewilding

This event and its following effects would become one of the major myths of the new race: the Hatching of the World Egg. Raw symbiosis energy streamed over the world and changed everything.

Many of the newer Symbiots, toying with their powers, inadvertently created True Symbiots from plants and animals — for the first time, non-sentient creatures were transformed into sentient Symbiots. These new beings were hard to imprint; while they followed their maker's commands at first, they soon learned that they could ignore them. What's more, their sentience was of a different order than that of the humans who had been converted; their thought processes were strange and inexplicable to human Symbiots, and their actions unpredictable.

Galt, fearing loss of control, demanded that all such "wildlings" be brought before him, to be subjected to his personal imprinting. While this seemed to work at first, the wildlings eventually threw off even his yoke. Rebelling against the human-influenced society, they often retreated to the wilds and oceans, and formed their own society of sorts, although a community wracked by dissension and factionalism. Only a few of them, lead by plant Symbiots, formed a cohesive group, but one which kept its counsel secret from the humans.

Chi's Offspring

Chi Hashimi, by now extremely mentally unstable, reveled in the new power that coursed throughout nature. He set about to create his grand masterpiece of metamorphing power: to merge himself bodily and mentally with the planet. Using new metamorphing techniques he had discovered with his unique senses, he merged his flesh with the surrounding landscape — yet miraculously kept his consciousness (what little there was left of it) intact even though his body was spread, like a giant fungus, over a large region.

To those who didn't know what he had done, it seemed that the very land had come to life and achieved sentience. It communicated to them through gesture: a swaying grove of trees, a shifting bed of rocks. And sometimes the land even grew a mouth and spoke in Xoglazi and Urthish, but nobody understood these statements.

Frem finally came to investigate the legends of the living land and heard the whisper of a million mouths formed from the trees and rocks, and he understood what had happened. He summoned the others, and they came to try and convince Chi to rise from the muck he had become, to reform his motherform and return to some semblance of identity. But he refused, and eventually, communicated with them no more.

Over the following weeks, the land slowly lost it unique consciousness and seemed to return to normal. After all trace of Chi had vanished, Frem had others dig up the earth, searching for some remnant of his original body so that he could be buried, like Aldo Rimes, in the sacred grove. What they found was something unique: an amorphous blob of flesh which reacted upon contact with others, shifting its shape seemingly at random, a mindless gel of metamorphic matter.

Frem found that he and the others could coax nearly any shape and function from the mass. It could even act like a battery of Lifeforce, absorbing and storing what was transferred into it. What's more, when one of the younger Symbiots tried to convert it, to see what would happen, it split like a cell into two different blobs. Frem marveled at the amazing thing Chi's body had become after his death.

Or was it death? His consciousness had spread so far that perhaps it simply dissipated, or became unlinked with any particular flesh. Frem speculated that perhaps Chi still existed, disembodied and potentially inherent in any living thing. There was no way to answer that question unless Chi communicated further, and there was as yet no sign of that.

His body and its duplicable copies proved most fascinating to Ann, and she dubbed the substance *zigchi*, "Chi's offspring," or simply "biomass" in the Urthish she still spoke. Zigchi was the perfect biotech substance.

A Dark Vision

As the released energy rained upon the planet, Riva Alecto passed into a deep trance, and the others feared her dead. Although her heart still beat, she did not respond to any word or physical prod. After a week of this coma, she awoke, and shivered in a sweat-soaked delirium, moaning in Xoglazi, but most of the words were unknown.

Finally, she came out of her fever and looked about

her, at the young Symbiots set to watch her. When they noticed that she was now awake, she smiled and beckoned them closer, trying to speak. As they bent ear to her, she whispered a secret to them, a truth gleaned from her nightmare. They moaned in horror and fell to the floor, tearing their skin in despair. But then she spoke again, and they calmed, and looked to her for guidance. She had re-imprinted them as if they were newly-converted.

She left the chamber and motioned for them to follow. She came into Galt's throne room, the cavern chamber he had set up as his headquarters, from where he ruled his new society and race.

He smiled in relief to see her healthy, but frowned when he saw the expression on her face. "I have seen you smile like that before, but you would not say why then. Say so now."

"I have had a vision, from the Anunnaki we have thought long dead. You and Frem preach a new life, a new connection with nature. It is a lie. The ultimate truth lies only in death, in the cold void that was our birthplace and will be our grave. I have come to preach this new truth, and to guide our children to it. Their bodies are the signs of a coming chaos, harbingers of transformation."

Galt sneered. "You still suffer from a fever, Riva. Go back to rest and leave the leadership of our race to me."

"I go and only some will follow, but more will be born to me in the future than to you." She turned to leave, beckoning her guards to follow, and they did.

"Stop!" Galt yelled. "You don't leave until I say so! I am the leader here!" He motioned to his other guards, who surrounded Riva, wrapping their tentacles about her.

She laughed and her eyes grew dark. The room became cold and time seemed to slow. When she moved again, the guards cried in despair as their tentacles dropped to the ground, dead and gangrenous limbs, poison slowly spreading to their bodies. Galt stared in fear as he saw the creeping death grow over them, snuffing their lives like an instant plague.

He let Riva go, and she went forth into the world, disappearing into the jungles. No one saw her again, but her children would one day return in numbers, crowing her dark creed.

Biotechnology

Ann Basque doubted the wisdom of the Symbiot's descent into barbarism, led by Galt's fanatical anti-technology creed. She knew that the new race could not long survive against high-tech enemies without technologies of their own. But without an industrial base, it would be impossible to maintain the learning and infrastructure necessary to upkeep Chernobog's technology. The Symbiots needed something new.

Ever since her conversion, Ann's mind worked away at the possibilities of living technology. All her experiments in shaping plants and animal life were geared toward the utilitarian uses to which such life could be put.



Biotech was not unknown to the Second Republic. While the science had suffered setbacks at times due to moral and ethical violations, it proceeded slowly but steadily, until by Ann's time, bioengineered medical cures were common. Indeed, the wonder regeneration drug, Elixir, was invented with bioengineered, regenerative microbes discovered in the boiling waters of the Tulani Trench, on the oceanbed of Madoc.

The question of genetically-engineered humans was a divisive issue between those who willingly changed their genetic structures and those who felt such a meddling with nature was an abomination, but it rarely slowed down science. The "changing" of animals for various uses was hotly protested by many — including most UWW members — but the results were interesting enough to keep such research well-funded even by government interests.

Now Ann had the chance to vault that science well beyond anything conceived of by humans. She gathered a group of former EGO technicians around her and set about trying to warp living shapes into mechanical objects. Fearing Galt's anger, she kept these experiments secret from him — a wise thing, for the mistakes they made created mewling horrors best left unseen by any compassionate person.

Nonetheless, their limited successes kept them trying greater and greater feats. Using sea creature and insect morphology (mollusks, jellyfish, wasps, etc.) as models, most of her tech was a combination of warped, spiked shells and moist, wriggling flesh. While living creatures were sometimes used for these experiments, most of them were done using zigchi, the non-sentient, metamorphic biomass.

With the raw energy now cascading over the world, wreaking havoc with weather patterns, Ann saw a chance to harness weather control on a personal level. Once the province of mighty terraforming machines, she sought to build a hand-held device to capture such power. The result was the first Symbiot Element Gun, a weapon she and her fellows would soon put to use in revolt.

Factionalism

As Galt's hand of rulership fell more and more heavily upon the Symbiots, it was inevitable that the differences between he, Frem, and Ann would create rifts. With Riva, originally Galt's strongest supporter, gone into the wilderness, Frem and Ann increasingly questioned his decrees. Afraid that his children would see his inability to silence them as weakness, he became even more autocratic toward them, often giving them commands from spite.

When his spies reported to him about Ann's biotech experiments, he exploded in rage and demanded that she come to him for punishment. Knowing that the final split had come, Ann and her crew met Galt's guards with their element guns, killing many of them and forcing the surrender of the others. She sent them back to Galt with a message: No more would she or her fellows follow his leadership. They were their own nation now: the Zûldor, the "Shapers." If he chose to press the issue, there would be a war among the new race.

Galt welcomed a war. Now he would prove whose will was strongest and allow his children to weed out the weak. Frem protested but was unheeded. Dejected and wishing no part in such madness, he retreated from the company of Galt and Ann, taking a small group with him, those who had listened most heartily to his spiritual sermons and philosophizing on the nature of symbiosis.

Galt called for all Symbiots to join around him, to muster an army that would assault Ann's fortress: the EGO headquarters, now augmented with biotech weapons. As he gathered the army, a herald arrived from the deep jungles, a representative of the wildlings. She declared that the Symbiots who had been born wild would never follow a human-tainted leader. Galt was advised never to command them lest they move against him. As long as he kept his distance and let them be, they would keep theirs and not interfere with him.

Grating his teeth, Galt grudgingly accepted, knowing he could not fight against two enemies at once. He fully believed that he could come against the wildlings later, and force them to follow his lead.

Assault

Galt's army laid siege to the EGO facility, but their claws could barely penetrate the bizarre carapace that now grew over the building, regenerating whenever breached. Galt realized that Ann's biotech outmatched his own metamorphic weaponry. He lead a team into a small breech himself, knowing it would close behind him.

Fighting his way past the drones in the corridors, his team eventually made it to Ann's control room, although of the original 12 in the team, only four remained behind Galt.

"Leave now, Galt," Ann said, leveling a strange gun at him, "and do not return."

"You cannot turn away from me," Galt said. "We agreed long ago that I would lead."

"We were different people then," she replied. "Our differences are now magnified."

Galt leaped at her, his claws bristling, and she fired at him. A stream of acid shot forth, scouring his carapace and burning his flesh. He screamed, in greater pain than he had ever known, but reached her before she could further react. He grabbed her head and crushed her skull with his augmented muscles, collapsing himself as soon as she was dead. The acid burned through his chest and ribs, and melted his heart. He gasped and thrashed on the ground, trying to will his flesh to regenerate. But Ann's weapon had been designed to prevent that: specialized enzymes in the acid short-circuited his Symbiot body's healing. Galt finally stopped moving and his eyes went blank, but his

followers swear he muttered a final phrase before he died: "We will live..."

This final statement has since been interpreted many ways, from a promise of his eventual rebirth to a proclamation of his new race's future. But it could not unite that new race. Galt's army fell into fighting as soon as his death was known, as many young Symbiots sought his throne.

The Hives Gather

The next few years were chaotic as Symbiot fought Symbiot. Factions split into factions, which split further into cabals and sub-groups. The old unity was shattered.

This was the beginning of the Hives, the social groups which would come to dominate Symbiot society. The most powerful was the Galzai, the "Mighty Horde," the Hive which remained true to Galt's creed. It was lead by a series of warlords who fought over rulership of the unit, and who fought other Hives in attempts to extend their power base. They even attempted biotech experiments of their own, some successful, most not.

The Zûldor "Shapers" had less members than the Galzai but remained a potent force, for they maintained the most mastery of biotech. For the most part, they cared little for the greater fate of the Symbiot race, obsessed as they were with their experiments and new discoveries in their science of the flesh and its uses.

The Xanxi, "Flux Dancers," forming around Chi Hashimi's original followers, carried on Chi's tradition of continually seeking the outer limits of their new existence. They believed that Chi's spirit was everywhere, and that he aided those who honored him. Few could deny that the Xanxi were less susceptible to Antipathy than others who dared their chaotic, metamorphosing feats, as if the disembodied Chi did indeed protect them from harm.

The Ornzai, the "Wildlings" (a name used by most Symbiots to describe the breakaway wildlings), held to the deep wilderness areas, and attacked any Symbiot force which tried to command them. Led at times by a number of animal or plant messiahs, they were strange to other Symbiots, who preferred to leave them alone.

Amid these struggles, Symbiots bred sexually among themselves or with other lifeforms: captured humans (still living free in some regions, reduced to barbarism) or animals. They discovered that their offspring shared none of their Symbiot traits, but were normal members of one of their parent's original race. Whenever crossbreeding occurred between a human Symbiot and an animal, offspring produced shared only one of the parents' morphologies — in this way, an animal might birth a human child, or a human an animal.

New generations of children were born, awaiting puberty, when they would be converted to join their parent's race. The first children had been converted upon birth, but immediately experienced extreme signs of Antipathy, their shapes refusing to stay steady and their behavior completely unpredictable. These unfortunate children usually died of Antipathic wasting or insanity before reaching puberty. It was decreed that all offspring must reach puberty or adulthood, when their own growth steadied, before they would be subjected to conversion.

During these times, another thing was discovered: symbiosis was slowing down. Powers were less and less powerful, and their effects took longer to blossom. Metamorphing was haphazard, and shifting from one shape into another could not always be fully completed. Symbiots reverted to their motherforms more often than ever before. One social side effect of this was that it was now easier to form identities around a single shape.

Antipathy was more common now than before. Many Symbiots suffered mental breakdowns or lapses after too much metamorphing, and some could no longer fully control their shapeshifting. An unfortunate few wasted away, as if their own bodies devoured them. It also seemed that where one Symbiot suffered Antipathy, others would soon also suffer it, as if it were a disease carried on the Lifeweb. Strong taboos were placed on those suffering such Antipathy, and many faced euthanasia rather than risk tainting others. Doomsayers began to lament the slow death of the new race, prophesizing that their time had come and gone, that nothing so chaotic as the Symbiots could long survive without entropic decay catching up.

A great pall of despair descended on them, as Symbiots feared they would return to their parents' former, mundane shapes and be powerless against enemies — including the Second Republic forces, ever rumored to return one day.

From the mountains, a new Hive appeared. Leading them was an ancient prophet returned: Solomon Frem, last of the original founders, now old but lit with an inner power and conviction envied by all who saw him.

His followers, called the Phazûl, the "Mystery Weavers," preached the answer to the depleted powers: the energy of the world was not limitless. The hatched World Egg needed time to rest and regrow. Each and every Symbiot must ration his powers, and use them wisely, lest they dry up the wellspring of the world and bring death to all life there.

As Symbiots gathered around Frem to listen, they sensed the truth in his words. He spoke of sacrifice, but offered hope: if all were careful to conserve the Lifeforce, it would be available for the next generations.

Taking Frem's sermons to heart, the current warlord of the Galzai, Barak, led his army to the top of the world and seized the terraforming facility there: the center of the World Egg, according to Frem. He declared that he would guard access to the heart of the planet, and all who wished to partake of it must do so with his accord.

Angry Hives rushed to knock him from his hill, but Barak discovered that Frem spoke truer than even he himself had realized: the warlord could access more energy from the terraforming chasm than his enemies. His forces'



metamorphic powers proved greater and he held his place, forcing surrender from every Hive who had come against him, including the Zûldor and the Xanxi.

Barak declared himself the emperor of the Symbiots, and called himself Xokor Tlan, "Supreme Warlord."

Frem, disgusted with this perversion of his message of cooperation, retreated again to his mountain, but left most of his followers behind, convinced that only the wisdom of the Phazûl could guide the race out of its worst passions.

Various stories are told about Frem's passing: Some claim he died peacefully and quietly in his mountain home, attended by his chosen wives. Others say he crept back to the sacred grove and disappeared into the waters there. Still others say he went to the grove to kill the Xolotl, turning against the new race and attempting to prevent its further genesis; only the vigilant guard placed there by the Xokor Tlan stopped him, killing him.

Growth

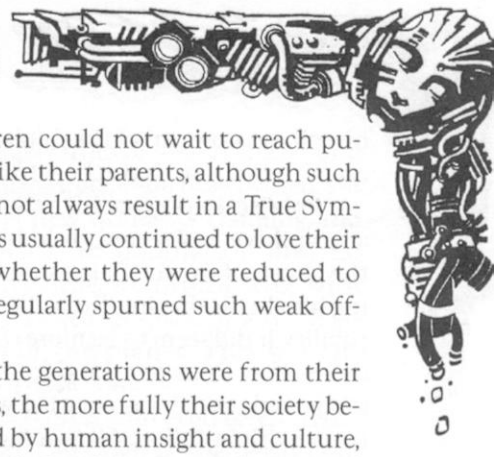
Under the rulership of the Xokor Tlan, the Symbiots again worked toward unified goals. With the cooperation of the Zûldor, the Xokor Tlan ordered "industrial" scale biotech experiments. He envisioned an empire with all the benefits the Second Republic claimed, but this would be a living empire, built on life, not dead minerals dug from the earth.

Without Ann to lead them, the Zûldor weren't as successful in their new endeavors. The leaders who succeeded her, terraforming technicians themselves, foresaw that future generations of Zûldor would not have the benefit of the high-technology sciences they had been inculcated with themselves. They thus returned to the city and its computers, and began to use human tech as a model for the new biotech. With physical, working models, it would be easier for the younger converts to take up where their more educated masters left off.

In addition, they sought out what tech-savvy humans remained on the world, and promised them immunity from conversion in return for their knowledge. Some cooperated, others resisted; the recalcitrant ones were converted against their will and imprinted to follow the Zûldor's lead. But conversion often erased previous memories and skills, and wiped out more learning than it saved.

The irony of the affair was that the terraforming technology once hated so much by the UWW now became the greatest boon to the Symbiots. The architects' secrets of energy flow from the planet's electromagnetic field helped to tentatively explain some of Frem's message about the World Egg and its limitations. This in turn aided the powering of biotech devices, from guns to flying cars.

Biomass proved to be the key to most high-technologies, as it was discovered that the substance could be used to hold and memorize data, although it could not act it-



self on such data unless linked to a Symbiot or servitor. However, while this allowed the data more fluidity and quicker transfer rates from one zigchi computer to another, it also meant that interfering energy frequencies could more easily wipe that data. Biomass computers had to be protected under layers of hard shell or flesh designed to shield against electromagnetic radiation. This shell in turn often developed degenerative diseases from such exposure, and would have to be routinely replaced.

Communications technology proved tougher. It was hard to develop devices with the finesse needed to transmit radio waves, encoded light or neutrinos. Until that hurdle could be overcome, long-range communication relied on biomass message pods with encoded data.

As the Zûldor dug through the city and EGO facilities for clues to their diminishing science lore, they discovered caches of jumpkeys. Their biomass computers were eventually able to decode them, but could never encode the sheer amount of information: the Symbiots, like Known Worlders, had to rely on jumpkeys to carry the data for startravel.

Using the broken ships in the starport as models and biomass as substance, the Zûldor attempted to build starships of their own. The first such ship was sent out with a volunteer crew, aided by drones and servitors. Its maiden voyage was disastrous, as numerous leaks developed, and whole areas of hull flesh died upon exposure to vacuum. The ship painfully burnt up when returning through the upper atmosphere, and the screams of its living hull reverberated in the nightmares of its makers for years after.

Nonetheless, the biotechnicians learned valuable clues through failure, and they made further attempts until secure methods were finally achieved. Soon, multiple explorers reexamined the solar system, fueled by metamorphic biomass, capable of being routed toward many different functions. The interior environment of these early ships was rather uncomfortable: they were either too cold or too hot, and it sometimes proved unfeasible to maintain an oxygen environment. Crews on these ships had to be able to metamorphose alternate breathing apparati. It took time for good environment simulation to become sufficient, but Zûldor biotechs would eventually advance this technology beyond that of Second Republic.

A facility on Borzoi, the outer moon of the final planet in the system, unlocked more data for the Symbiots. While the facility had been abandoned before the forced retreat from the system, it still held valuable records. A small team of Symbiots moved in to reclaim the base, setting up plant-like oxygen generators to make their stay more comfortable.

Centuries passed with little conflict or challenge to the status quo. A succession of Xokor Tlans ruled over the expansion of the Symbiot empire. New generations of children were converted, and a stable society developed. Mundane human children could not wait to reach puberty and be converted like their parents, although such conversions, as ever, did not always result in a True Symbiot. Nonetheless, parents usually continued to love their children regardless of whether they were reduced to drones; only the Galzai regularly spurned such weak offspring.

The more removed the generations were from their Second Republic parents, the more fully their society became its own, less colored by human insight and culture, and more marked by purely Symbiot nature, the ways of a metamorphic society, where one's body and very identity could change radically from day to day. The original founders, raised as humans, would barely recognize their descendants.

The drones and servitors were ever present, far outnumbering the actual Symbiots, but firmly tied to their imprinting (for the most part). The Ornzai would occasionally appear from their territories and attempt to lead the wildlings, drones and servitors into revolts against what they deemed a perverse, human-tainted culture, but these uprisings were short and often backfired against the Ornzai prophets, as their own drones, inspired by the wildness their masters inflamed in others, began to run free.

Eventually, however, this self-enclosed world opened up once again to touch the greater universe: the jumpgate activated once more.

New Worlds

Among the technologies that the Zûldor found hard to replicate through biosynthetic means was the jumpdrive. The creation and containment of a singularity and the complicated flux cache that maintained it was made more intricate with the addition of a Sathra Damper. Initially, the biotechs built their ships around the few existing human tech ones they had, using the already-built jumpdrives.

It took years to figure out how to harness Lifeforce and regulate its regenerative capacity enough to steadily power a normal stardrive — not as efficient as fusion engines, but it did the job. The trick was to get it to generate a quantum singularity — physics which proved well beyond the Zûldor's capacity. Then Phla'jeer, a brilliant young Zûldor studying the jumpgates, had a dream.

Aboard a ship floating near the jumpgate, Phla'jeer dreamed of a complex spiral of energy, a coil which, when Lifeforce was pulsed through it, gathered power at every twist until reaching an epiphany point, whereby the spiral and everything in contact with it — Phla'jeer himself in the dream — blinked out of existence in a moment of supreme ecstasy. Phla'jeer awoke with the image of the spiral seared into his memory, and quickly set to work shaping it from the ship engine's biomass before it could fade. He didn't rest again for 56 hours, during which time he was manic and muttering. Afterwards he collapsed, but



his coil was now part of the ship's drive. Excitedly, the ship's captain tried to activate the gate, but received no response.

Phla'jeer swore that his new engine would perform as a jumpdrive, and secretly told his closest confidants that the ghosts of Symbiot ancestors had spoken to him, aiding him in his shaping. Regardless of his design's jump capability, it did seem to be more efficient than the current drives. New ships were bred from that ship, and its biomass "genetic code" was guarded well, for it was the key to future shipbuilding. All Symbiot jumpships descend as organisms from that first successful ship.

The one thing that was not duplicated was the part the engineers felt to be useless — the Sathra Damper. Since it was not an original part of a ship's engine design, only a secondary feature that served to funnel jumpgate energy into the engine so it did not cascade over the ship, they left such dampers off their ships.

They repeatedly sent their new jumpships out to test them but the jumpgate failed to respond to their codes. A regular testing schedule was set up, whereby ships would routinely travel to the gate and attempt to open it. As the years passed, the trips became less frequent, and the duty was seen by crewmembers as a useless effort — until the gate finally opened for one astonished crew.

Seizing the moment, the captain, a Galzai Hiver named Glar, ordered the ship forward. It shot through the gate and exited into the Absolution system. Luckily, there were no human ships nearby, for the Symbiot crew would not have been able to deal with them effectively anyway: they were paralyzed by ecstasy. The captain whispered under his breath: "Sathra..."

Fearing to travel too far into a human controlled system, and yearning already to experience the Sathra ecstasy again, the captain ordered the ship to turn about and jump back to Chernobog. Again, the gate responded and the ecstasy descended on the crew as they returned to their home system. But when they set course back to Chernobog, the ship responded slowly, and maneuvering it became difficult. The engines resisted orders for more thrust.

Perplexed, the chief engineer, a Zûldor Hiver, shaped reserve biomass, and finally forced the ship to respond. The glitch disappeared and it flew normally for the rest of the trip home.

Message pods (containing encoded biomass) had been sent before the ship had jumped and after its return, so Chernobog was ready to receive its heroic crew. The Xokor Tlan personally interviewed them and rewarded them for opening up his empire to the stars. He then ordered the creation of a new fleet of scouts, so that they could slip into human space and return with intelligence about the vaunted Second Republic forces that awaited them.

Although the captain and crew were fiercely loyal to their emperor, they oddly chose to omit the truth about their Sathra experience. They told of the effect, but explained it away as a minor distraction quickly forgotten, hiding their true feelings and deep yearning to again experience the ecstasy. In this way, the first Sathraist cabal began; others Symbiots would soon join.

As ships were dispatched to Daishan and Absolution, the strange glitch in the first ship's performance was repeated. All the returning ships experienced the same problem, and some required the aid of other ships and engineers before they could get their ships to cooperate. It was only after the flagship of the fleet, a semi-sentient servitor built to automatically man most ship systems in case of emergency, affected the same behavior that the truth was understood: the living ships had also experienced the Sathra ecstasy and had become addicted to it; they resisted orders to move away from the jumpgates, and sought instead to return for multiple jumps. The flagship took over all ship functions and flew itself back through the jumpgate two more times before the gate's own functions froze, closing the gate for the next few hours. This was enough time for the engineers to impress control over the servitor ship once more, and order it back home.

The Xokor Tlan immediately grounded the entire fleet. The Zûldor set to work on simulating a Sathra Damper, but their first test proved only that the damper itself, made like the rest of the ship from biomass, was just as susceptible to the Sathra Effect. It was decided that the dampers would be made the traditional way, from forged metal. Incorporating it into the biomass proved little problem, and from then on the ships no longer experienced the Effect — or if they did, it did not affect their functioning.

Nonetheless, the small cabal of secret Sathraists soon learned how to disable the dampers without leaving traces, but everytime they did so, they risked losing control of their ships.

Expansion

The first worlds chosen for expansion were a number of planets known to have held only small colonies at the time Chernobog became a lost world. Thus, the first spacefaring humans the Symbiots encountered were Vuldrok raiders. The encounter did not go well for either side.

A Symbiot frigate-sized ship encountered a Vuldrok galliot and attempted to communicate with it by launching a message pod. This was interpreted as a hostile rocket; the Vuldrok shot it down and then tried to board the strange vessel. The Symbiot captain allowed the battlesuited warriors with blaster axes to hack through his living hull, eager to see what had become of humans during the long separation of their two races.

The Vuldrok were unnerved by the bizarre vessel, which seemed to bleed when they breached it. Furthermore, their stray blaster shots caused the very walls to convulse as if in pain. Its odd crewmembers seemed to move on instinct alone, until the carapace-armored soldiers arrived to fend off the raiders. These soldiers were definitely

intelligent and dangerous — they changed their very shapes during battle to grow claws or piercing tails, whatever natural weapon they desired.

Nonetheless, it seemed that the raiders were winning — until a Symbiot soldier grasped one of the wounded Vuldrok boarders whose suit had been torn, and clawed into his flesh. The hapless man writhed and his body revolted against him: thorny spikes thrust from his back, further tearing his suit, and venomous acid dribbled from his slack jaw. There was murder in his eyes when he looked at his fellows, and he joined the Symbiots in their assault.

Spooked beyond even their courageous capacities, and afraid to even touch whatever booty might lie on such a ship, the raiders retreated into their own ship and dropped the grapple cables, thrusting away as fast as possible. The Symbiot ship, damaged and weakened, did not pursue.

The Vuldrok warriors carried stories back with them of biological monstrosities that turned their fellow crewmembers into bestial mockeries of life. These legends grew as Symbiots landed on Vuldrok worlds to investigate the human communities there. As word got back to the Xokor Tlan, he was surprised to discover that humanity had descended into barbarism on a galactic scale. It was clear that the Republic had fallen, and each planet now was a government unto itself, with no strong alliance to rescue it from assault.

The colonization of these human worlds began, sparking a war with the Vuldrok warlords, who united in an unprecedented alliance to resist this new threat to humankind. But they had no infrastructure with which to completely draw their worlds together, no central myth of unity. More often than not, warlords ignored the advice of their fellows and fought their own strategies, alone rather than in groups. The result was that the world of Abydos fell to the Symbiots, and its inhabitants fought a long protracted war against forced conversion.

Rather than continue to spread his forces thin (for they could not possibly convert as many Symbiots as there were humans), the Xokor Tlan halted the expansion at Abydos, and withdrew his forces from the other worlds. He knew the humans would use this time to build a greater alliance, but was confident that they could not resist his empire when it again chose to expand into their territory.

The hatching of Abydos's World Egg became the priority, although it took some time to find it; unlike the recently-terraformed Chernobog, Abydos's terraforming engines were well hidden, concealed as natural parts of the landscape. The nexus was eventually discovered, however, and its released energy participated in the rewilding of the planet, and the new push for mass production of biotech ships, weapons and devices.

Inner and Outer Threats

Once a new fleet had been built, with new converts to man it, the Xokor Tlan turned his eye toward a region of space that had been largely unexplored by the Second Republic, but whose jumpgate codes he now owned. His scouts set forth to discover new worlds for claiming, and found a lush planet with no population and no terraforming: a natural paradise. Returning later with colonists, their way was blocked in space by a small armada, the true owners of the planet. This was the Symbiot's first meeting with the Vau.

The armada offered no threat, and even received the Symbiot's message pods well. Enough of the newly converted Vuldrok citizens retained their Urthish language skills to haltingly communicate with the Vau. A parley team was agreed upon and sent in a shuttle to the Vau's flagship, where it was greeted with pomp and ceremony.

The Vau seemed genuinely astonished to see the Symbiots, realizing immediately that they had once been human. Their curiosity at this new race was unbridled, and displayed a side of the Vau humans had never before seen. When the initial meeting went well, the Vau were invited to the Symbiot mothership, and they gladly accepted.

As the mandarin and his cohorts walked through the breathing corridors of the mothership, they gazed in awe, and often reached out to touch the walls in wonder. The ambassadorial team split up, and the Vau engineers were allowed to examine the engine room and the raw biomass.

This is when the temptation to experiment became too much for Rizeel to contain any longer. A Xanxi engineer aboard the ship, she secretly belonged to a Hive as yet unknown to the rest of the Symbiots. She distracted one of the Vau workers and led him aside. Once out of sight of the others, she extended piercing tendrils into his skull and began the process of conversion.

It was fascinating to watch a Vau's flesh reshape itself. Its new motherform developed bizarre alien features, perhaps adopted from the primitive traces in its DNA similar to animal life on its homeworld. However, unlike human or animal converts, the Vau could not be imprinted. As soon as it broke from Rizeel's grasp, it ran to its comrades, screaming for help.

They immediately alerted the mandarin over their communicators, and he demanded the injured worker be brought to him. The Symbiot captain, horrified at Rizeel's actions, ordered her brought also, in chains. He hoped to convince the mandarin that Rizeel was mad.

As soon as the Vau leader saw the deformed flesh of his worker, he pulled out a blaster and shot it dead. The other Vau seemed relieved. The mandarin then turned to examine Rizeel, and drew glowing glyphs into the air around her with a luminous pen. Something in the arcane display shocked him, and he stepped back, his guards drawing defensively around him.

The Symbiot captain asked what was wrong, and the Vau glared at him, saying only in his broken Urthish: "Dark taint."

He rushed from the Symbiot ship and returned to his flagship. Soon after, the Symbiots were ordered to leave the system and never return. When the captain tried to argue, a scintillating bolt of plasma shot forth from the Vau flagship and tore through the decks of the Symbiot colony vessel. It was a warning shot.

The Symbiots turned and jumped from the system. Later attempts to return proved useless; the Vau had somehow blocked or shut the gate.

The question of Rizeel was personally attended to by the Xokor Tlan. He presided over her interrogation and torture, trying to find out why she had done such a foolish act and what the Vau meant by "dark taint." After days of excruciating pain, she pantingly revealed her true allegiance. She was Urgunzai, the "Spawn of the Dark Womb," a descendant of Riva Alecto and follower of her mysterious creed. Furthermore, she revealed that Urgunzai members had infiltrated all levels of Symbiot society. Their goal was to deliver life to the void, to aid the fading of the suns and snuff the light from creation.

The Xokor Tlan killed her himself. He then called all his ministers and tortured every one of them until he was sure they were not Urgunzai. He then salved their wounds, granted them greater titles, and revealed to them Rizeel's secrets. He sought their counsel: how could he root out this menace and snuff it? There was only one answer: he would have to wait for the Urgunzai to show themselves once more.

Return to the Known Worlds

Unable to expand into Vau space, the Xokor Tlan turned his eyes back to Absolution and Daishan. His empire needed new bodies to convert and new World Eggs to hatch for the raw energy required to build ships at the speed he needed them. Expecting these systems to be run by their own warlords, he sent scout teams to infiltrate the planets and plant seeds of conversion.

However, this increased contact with humans and the new converts gained from Abydos were beginning to cause problems. These new Symbiots, although imprinted with the ways of their Hives, doubted the anti-human rhetoric expounded by the Xokor Tlan. Many who retained their memories believed that humans as a whole were no threat; they could be potential allies, not enemies. There was no reason worlds could not be shared by both races in cooperation. Such sentiments were fueled by the Phazûl, who tired of the relentless expansion which only resulted in war.

In response, the Xokor Tlan produced his own mystics, those who swore they had evidence that it was humanity that caused the suns to fade. It was their hubris toward nature, their disconnection with the Lifeweb, that drained the heart of the stars.

Most Symbiots responded well to this propaganda, for even Symbiots still feared the fading suns phenomenon, and had discovered no firm explanation or solution of their own to this cosmic threat. The Xokor Tlan's accusation made sense within the Symbiot worldview, for all Symbiots knew that unseen connections at a distance were a fact, not just a rumored psychic phenomenon. Why not extend this thinking to the very stars that gave light and life to the solar systems? Consciousness and will affected the physical bodies of Symbiots and even the raw biomass of the World Egg; it made sense that the wrongful consciousness of humans affected the raw energy of the sun.

The Xokor Tlan used this sense of renewed purpose against humans to launch a campaign to take Absolution and Diashan from their human masters.

The Symbiot Wars

Rather than begin with an all-out assault, the Xokor Tlan first ordered a deep and silent infiltration of Diashan. Agents slipped onto the world and began converting lifeforms and planting *gorazi*, plantlike seeds of biomass that could convert lifeforms when they sprouted.

Although the Supreme Warlord had quelled most of the dissent, he still felt he had to show his followers that he had some compassion. The Phazûl, ever against forced conversion, threatened to withdraw from the war effort. The Xokor Tlan broached a compromise. He would stage an initial assault on Absolution, giving the humans warning and allow them to withdraw from the world. Any that stayed were subject to conversion whether they liked it or not. The Phazûl grudgingly agreed.

The assault consisted of one ship, the Symbiot equivalent of an assault lander, bearing troops to the planet. Their attack was swift and surprising: Known Worlders had never seen anything like the Symbiots who poured from the bizarre ship and began shooting the place up with harnessed lightning. Panic ensued, and the assault team escaped before the planetary defense force knew what hit them. The main industrial facility in the capital city was demolished.

This did indeed set off a wave of refugees, as people fled from Absolution, fearing the arrival of demons from space. But long-term natives refused to give up their home because of one surprise attack. For all anyone knew, the assault team was all there were to the Symbiots. The noble rulers of the world felt otherwise; if the Symbiots had a spaceship, they had industrial capacity, and thus a substantial population. The nobles called on the Regent to defend them, and a regency fleet cobbled together from all the noble houses was sent to guard Absolution. It took too long, however, to hammer out the conscription details, and the fleet was late in coming. By the time it arrived, Absolution had already fallen to the full assault force of the Xokor Tlan.

The Symbiots had returned with a fleet, and as with Abydos, they laid siege to the world, dropping ground troops who dug into wilderness areas and set about converting lifeforms. Unschooled against this threat and out-

numbered, the noble's defense fleet had little chance.

Simultaneously, the deep cover forces on Daishan revealed themselves, rising up against the human rulers with the full force of nearly every wild animal and ecosystem on the planet. The regency fleet dispatched to Absolution rerouted to Daishan instead, and effected an evacuation of most of the prominent citizens (there was little room for serfs aboard the military ships). Troops set fire to whole jungles only to discover them regrowing overnight, now twisted and alien, seemingly immune to flame as if they evolved defenses against past hurts. Fearing a spread of the biological taint throughout the Known Worlds, the cruisers and dreadnought bombarded the planet from orbit, firebombing most of its surface, and wiping out all life below.

They retreated to Stigmata, the choke point system the Symbiots would have to come through to take the rest of the Known Worlds, and set up military bases to defend the cities on the planet. Citizens fled their rural homes to squeeze into the cities, whose walls were now being fortified against outside assault.

The winning of Absolution claimed the lives of few Symbiot troops, and the Xokor Tlan believed the humans were weak and unable to stand before his power. But the utter destruction of Diashan brought him to his knees in shock, and sent a physical ripple throughout all the Symbiot worlds: the scorching of Daishan's World Egg spread its fire throughout the Lifeweb, and all who were deeply connected to its strands were affected. Some Symbiots spontaneously ignited, their bodies burning to ash in seconds. Others reeled, crying that their brains were on fire. They desperately shifted forms to evade the torturous feeling, but nothing halted it. Others simply fell into deep despair, mourning the loss of family they never really knew but whose lose left a vacuum in their hearts.

The Phazûl demanded that the war end now, for Daishan was clearly evidence that nothing the Symbiots did was contained to one region — their influence spread across the Lifeweb, affecting them no matter how distant they were in space and time from an event.

The Xokor Tlan disagreed, for rather than despair, he felt a great anger. The death of all on Daishan must be avenged. He ordered all his troops to Stigmata to annihilate the humans there. The lust for revenge overcame most Symbiots, and all tried to join the war effort. The Phazûl, however, withdrew from the Xokor Tlan's counsels and retreated to their mountain temples to mourn the war which preached life but delivered only death.

In the Trenches

Thus began the long, protracted war for Stigmata. Once started, it proved impossible to withdraw. The Galzai Hive reveled in such conflict and fanned the Xokor Tlan's hate until anyone who counseled peace was dismissed from his sight or executed for treason.

The pain which had spread through the Lifeweb at



the death of Daishan infected the race. Where before many might seek conciliation and cooperation — for conflict was not necessarily any more natural for Symbiots than for humans — now most only knew unreasoning hate, a madness they handed down to their descendants, a decree to never rest until Stigmata was rescued from human control.

Fearing another firebombing, the siege of Stigmata proceeded more slowly. The Xokor Tlan knew that if he took too much territory too soon, the humans would retreat and scorch the world. But if he orchestrated gains slowly, piece by piece, the planet and the World Egg would be in Symbiot hands before the humans ever thought to retreat. These humans proved to be far more unified in their defense, however, than those of Abydos and the Vuldrok worlds. It seemed that, although the Republic had fallen, its remnants still retained some strength.

The plan went well at first, for the humans still had little defense against Symbiot weaponry, and the conversion of wounded soldiers greatly harmed human morale. To be a human soldier on Stigmata was equated with a death sentence not only for the body, but for the soul.

The first setback came when the Zûldor reported that the World Egg rested in territory firmly held by humans. If they followed the original plan of slow assault, it would take years to finally achieve the Lifeweb nexus. This threatened their energy supply. While they could draw on the planet's energy to some degree, to gain the power necessary for their campaign, they had to hatch the Egg. Until that time, they would have to rely on shipping supplies of biomass from Absolution.

Before the Xokor Tlan could change plans, a greater setback occurred. A group of human psychics and theurges proved to wield powers the Symbiot soldiers had no defense against. Drones, servitors and even True Symbiots proved astonishingly open to psychic and mystical assault. Once the humans realized this, they conscripted many psychics and theurges, and set them loose with military patrols.

The telepathic psychics found it quite easy to read the minds of Symbiot commanders, finally revealing the truth about Symbiot culture, powers and battle tactics. In addition, the powerful commands of the theurges were unresistable: they abjured the Symbiot forces to turn on themselves, and they did, puppets to a greater power.

Before too many secrets could be revealed or troops turned against their masters, the Galzai commanders ordered all True Symbiots to withdraw from the field. Unknown to the human forces, the troops they encountered from this time forth consisted only of drones and servitors. Their incomplete understanding of the Symbiots was made even more murky in that the few they encountered were either non-intelligent, or hive-minded. This, coupled with the mindless examples of non-imprinted converts, convinced most humans that Symbiots were a largely mindless, instinct-driven menace, unable to reason a compromise or surrender.

This retreat of the True Symbiots exaggerated the victory of the psychics and theurges beyond their actual role. Nonetheless, the Galzai feared allowing themselves near mindreaders or priests who could command with mere words.

Unable to devise a defense against such tactics, the Xokor Tlan was forced to halt the assault and order a defensive entrenchment to hold the territory they had already claimed. The following years saw sporadic fighting, but they were unable to gain much new territory with armies of drones and servitors alone.

The Phazûl reappeared in the Xokor Tlan's court, and this time they had allies: the Ornzai. Both Hives theorized that perhaps not all worlds were meant to be opened to the Symbiots. They urged the emperor to withdraw from Stigmata and leave it to the humans. They already had enough work to do on Absolution, where the holdout communities of humans proved tougher and more tenacious than those of Chernobog or Abydos. In addition, they hinted that the Vau might secretly be involved in aiding the humans.

This last thought chilled the Xokor Tlan, although there was no proof, only speculation. Nonetheless, it gave him pause. He ordered the Stigmata Symbiots to maintain their territory, but to refrain from expanding. He instead focused on infiltrating the Known Worlds with undercover agents, to bring back intelligence on the humans and their possible alliance with the Vau.

Infiltration

Over the next few decades, Symbiot agents perfected their metamorphing abilities so that they could easily reshape their former human features; some could even mimic the features of another person. Thus hidden in plain sight, they slipped into the Known Worlds.

Inevitably, not all of these infiltrations went undetected. Often, the drop-off or pick-up ships were intercepted by Known Worlds forces, and they would either be destroyed or badly wounded before fleeing back through a jumpgate.

Known Worlders believed that Stigmata was the only point through which Symbiots could reach the empire, and this was somewhat true. Stigmata was the quickest route, but Symbiots could also navigate a jumproute through Vuldrok space and enter the Bannockburn, Shaprut or Leminkainen systems from there. However, this required a number of jumps through hostile Vuldrok territory, and not every ship made the journey intact. Since they also had to return by that route, few willingly chose it. Although Stigmata's jumpgate was heavily guarded, the fleet could be distracted by a greater Symbiot force jumping in and attacking while a small scout made the jump.

The Symbiot force could then either jump away themselves or continue on to provide aid to their territories on the planet. A number of vessels usually roamed the Stigmata system, waiting either to jump home, fly to the Known Worlds, or land on Stigmata.

The al-Malik worlds, first jump in from Stigmata, fitted their fleets with missile racks to avoid getting too close to the Symbiot enemy. It was feared that a Symbiot boarding action would infect a crew regardless of whether the Symbiots fought through to the ship's bridge. Any ship suspected of suffering such close contact was deemed tainted by the Church; such a crew had two choices: join the Stigmata Garrison or die.

It wasn't only the ships that were discovered, though. A careless spy could blow his cover any number of ways, from simple cultural ignorance, reverting to his motherform in front of witnesses, or accidentally encountering a mind-reading psychic, against whom he had no defense. But these spies also built a network of allies, humans enamored of the power promised to them by symbiosis. Most served these secret Symbiots in the hope that they would be converted one day, to share in the metamorphic power.

The infiltrators not only watched and gathered information, they planted seeds and sowed chaos and fear. These seeds often sprouted and converted the unwary, turning them into maddened monsters. With no Symbiot to oversee their imprinting, the majority of them lost their former identities and had nothing to replace them with but rage or paranoia. These creatures ran amok and enforced the most typical stereotype of Symbiots among Known Worlders: the instinctual, unreasoning beast.

Symbiot spies were ultimately few in number, however. With the difficulties of getting them in and out of enemy territory, and their risk of discovery, few made it back to Symbiot space to tell their tales. Some did, though, and they reported on a growing conflict, one soon to explode into war.

The Emperor Wars

When the Xokor Tlan realized that the Known Worlds were at war, fighting over the rulership of the empire, he ordered his Stigmata generals to wait for a moment of weakness and then make a huge advance on the humans. That moment came when the Decados withdrew fleets and troops from the Stigmata Garrison to bolster their own forces in a petty bid against a rival.

The Symbiot armies flooded across the no-man's land and fell against the walls of the capital city. Outnumbered, the human troops quickly lost morale. Some willingly flung themselves at the Symbiots, begging for conversion rather than death. Others rallied around the central starport, building a defensive line the invaders found hard to breach. Then, before the full array of forces could be brought against the line, assault landers dropped from the sky. New troops streamed from the ships and cut a bloody swath through the Symbiots to reach the beleaguered human defenders. Their leader, young Alexius Hawkwood, became the hero of every man there, and the loyalty he forged on that battlefield aided him in his later bid for the throne.

The Symbiots pulled back, confused and angry that such expert help had arrived to thwart their gains. The Xokor Tlan was prepared to issue new orders, a final charge to decide the fate of the world no matter how many lives it would cost, when the Phazûl and the Ornzai came to him with new evidence against the war. Their own agents, returned from Stigmata, brought injured troopers with them and revealed a story the Xokor Tlan's generals had not reported: the Lifeweb of Stigmata was being destroyed by the war.

The Symbiot's own advances had sucked dry the wellspring of energy and the effects showed in the hinterlands of the world: whole regions of forest died, as if taken down by a plague, and native lifeforms disappeared as if extinct. While some of this damage could be attributed to humans and their tactical bombing of key terraforming nodes, most of the blame rested with the reckless tactics of the Xokor Tlan's own generals.

The two Hives warned the Supreme Warlord: if he persisted in his war of revenge, they would have no choice but to turn against him and reveal the evidence. Faced with the death of a World Egg, the Xokor Tlan could not withstand the religious fury even his own Hive would turn upon him. Nothing was more sacred to the Symbiots than the Lifeweb and its World Eggs. To destroy one out of revenge was the ultimate act of Antipathy.

Disbelieving but afraid to ignore such evidence, the Xokor Tlan had no choice but to curtail new advances. He ordered the troops to maintain territory but to ration energy, and to avoid unnecessary metamorphic activity. As Alexius accepted the crown of the empire, the Xokor Tlan's own throne was threatened. The anti-war forces had gained a victory, one they fully intended to follow through on.

For the first time since their genesis, Symbiots began to talk of reconciliation with their human progenitors. Whether such talk would see fruition would depend largely on how well humanity responded to the Symbiots' first, tentative overtures of peace...



Shifting Identities: Symbiot Culture

Gabalzin placed his hands lovingly on the heads of the caninelike beasts swarming about his legs, each desperate for his attention. "Now my Xilkuzi, calm yourselves. It is time for the joining..."

He closed his eyes and reached his mind out through his hands, touching not only fur and hide but the instinctual essence of the drones. He imagined a web of light weaving around those minds, leading from his to theirs, a Lifeweb nexus of empathy.

His drones now sat obediently, waiting with bated breaths for his orders. "Go forth, and seek out the owner of this scent." He slipped a piece of skin from his sash and held it out for each drone to sniff in turn. As soon as they captured the scent, they were off, bounding through the jungle in search of the same smell.

Gabalzin smiled and placed the skin back into his sash. He followed behind the pack at a distance, taking his time to enjoy the scenery. The quality of light this day was marvelous, a treasure to witness. He stopped momentarily when he sensed one of the drones, far off in the jungle, picking up the scent. The other drones, linked in the empathic accord of the hive-mind, also sensed his discovery and ran to meet it. "Only a matter of time now."

Over the next hour, he idly walked on the trail beaten by his hounds, sensing now and then high points in their search. It seemed that their prey had tried to hide his scent by bathing in blood. That might have worked against other drones, but Gabalzin had made sure his hounds were hyper-sensitive to smells. Very little could stay them from their hunt.

"There!" he said aloud as the lead hound caught sight of the human running desperately through the trees. He quickened his pace, sending an image to the hounds to calm themselves, and stalk the human slowly. He did not want them tearing it apart before he got there.

Another span brought him to the tree where they had cornered it. Looking up, he saw the shivering lad clutching the branches, praying for the hounds to leave. "Come down, Phazona. It is time for you to become an adult. Your foolish fear of the Lifeweb is tiresome."

"I don't want to be a Xildûr!" the boy cried. "I don't want to be like my father!"

"Your father had lived too long among the Known Worlders. He didn't have the advantage of a Xildûr upbringing like you. Now get down here and we'll take you to the Breeder, and I shall oversee your imprinting myself. Nothing can possibly grow wrong."

"I'll go mad, like my father!"

Gabalzin sighed. There was always that chance. But how do you tell a convert that his present personality is worthless anyway? Only his metamorphic sentience had any importance. Of course the boy would lose his memories, but they were useless. "Get down here or I'll flay another piece of hide off your back! Now!"

Sensing his anger, the hounds whined, drooling with the hope of sinking teeth into human flesh...

Symbiot society is full of inequality. Regardless of what the Phazûl preach about a society mirroring a non-hierarchical web, there is a definite social hierarchy based mainly on four factors: caste, species, Hive and status.

Castes

Caste is the most defining feature of identity in Symbiot society. A member of society is either a True Symbiot (Xildûr), a servitor (Xilkim) or a drone (Xilkuz). Any other being is not a direct participant in society but is only an adjunct at best (such as mundane family members who have not yet been converted by symbiosis). Most drones are not even considered members — it depends on their relations with others, especially True Symbiots. Indeed, the True Symbiot, as the fully-sentient center of Symbiot culture, is the ruler in all social interactions. Complications arise only in inter-Xildûr relations; behavioral rules between a Xildûr and a servitor or drone are clear: the Xildûr takes precedence.

True Symbiot (Xildûr)

Of all the castes, only Xildûr are considered to be fully sentient. Only they have the sufficient individuality, self-awareness and willpower to claim a degree of self-determination. A Xildûr is a weaver of the Lifeweb, a being com-

pletely in resonance with the Lifeweb and thus able to metamorphose at will (depending on skill and Lifeforce). In other words, only a Xildûr can freely use Lifeweb powers.

Xildûr cannot pass their Symbiot status to their progeny; any offspring they create are mundane (untouched by Symbiosis), usually a member of either one of the parent's native species. Some Xildûr can create other Xildûr, servitors or drones by converting living beings; these Xildûr are called Breeders.

Servitors (Xilkim)

A servitor is a semi-sentient being created by a limited form of symbiosis. Servitors may possess certain metamorphic powers, but they lack the full resonance with the Lifeweb with which to learn new powers. Indeed, they cannot create/breed other Symbiots, servitors or drones, although they may still procreate using the old-fashioned method, but their progeny will be mundane.

Unlike drones, servitors may, over time and with experience, grow into or earn a greater degree of self-determinacy within Symbiot society.

Drones (Xilkûz)

Little more than mundanes, drones are considered non-sentient. The symbiosis which created them grants them little or no change in their mental capacities, but often warps their shape and form to exhibit limited metamorphic powers. A sentient being whose mind is destroyed by conversion becomes a drone. Drones, like most non-Symbiot lifeforms (humans included), are ignorant of the Lifeweb; this makes them slaves with no self-determination.

Drones are considered a part of society only because of religious beliefs in the interconnectedness of the Lifeweb — since they have been touched by symbiosis, they must be granted some form of recognition, even if the practice of such notice varies from Symbiot to Symbiot.

Drones can only produce mundane offspring through procreation.

Species

A Symbiot's native species may change during the symbiosis conversion. Conversion imposes traces of a particular "motherform" onto the convert; the resultant Symbiot will be a blend of its native species and its motherform species (which may be an amalgam of various animal and/or plant traits), with varying degrees of prominence for either species' traits. A Symbiot's motherform is now her natural form, the shape she assumes when her metamorphing powers are inactive.

A Symbiot's identity is usually formed around the motherform, for it is the shape which others will most easily recognize. However, since metamorphosing different forms and features is a common occurrence among Xildûr, many Symbiots do not attach any particular psychological significance to someone's appearance, for it is the most unstable part of that Symbiot.

With some exceptions, Symbiot culture is not inherited through conversion. The new Symbiot must learn about his culture through personal transmission, although the process is usually speeded up with the aid of imprinting.

Only animals (including humans) or plants can become True Symbiots — molds and microbes can only produce drones when exposed to symbiosis. Many Symbiots are amalgams; they shares traits of more than one kingdom.

A species' native instincts make up the substantial difference between Symbiots of differing kingdoms, for they provide marked difference in values and even consciousness. For instance, animal Symbiots have so far proved to be more willing to engage in conflict than plant Symbiots, whose chosen forms of conflict are far more subtle and long-standing. Plant rivals are rarely recognized as such directly; instead, rival plant Symbiots plot long-term campaigns against their enemies in secret — an extremely passive-aggressive behavior. Perhaps this evolves out of their former rooted necessity to live side-by-side with competitors for years, each attempting to outgrow the other to reach the best sources of light. See *Of Three Minds*, below, for more on this topic.

Animal (Lozai)

The Symbiot is a being of flesh. He is either a vertebrate (including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish), invertebrate (jellyfish), or arthropod (crustacean, spider or insect) — or some combination of these traits. For instance, if a Symbiot whose original form was human undergoes conversion by a Symbiot with an insectoid motherform, his resulting motherform may include traits from either species, such as the bipedal stance and binocular vision of a human but with the carapace and venomous stinger of an insect.

Motherform traits: Most animals are assumed to be oxygen breathers (certain alien species may breath other substances), although they may take it in chiefly through lungs, skin or gills. They also gain their sustenance through eating other lifeforms (vegetables and/or meat) and drinking water. Animals are naturally mobile, although some may be more sluggish than others.

Plant (Imzai)

The Symbiot is a being of vegetable fiber, with lineage of flower, tree, weed or even fungus. Most plant Symbiots are not mobile, but instead root or grow in a particular place or region. Usually, only those whose motherforms share animal traits — such as legs — regularly roam. While even plant Xildûr can metamorphose legs, wings or other transport features, they rarely choose to leave their homes.

Note that in modern biology, fungi are considered a separate kingdom from plants; however, from the Sym-

biot metamorphing perspective, there is little difference.

Motherform traits: Most plants gain sustenance through photosynthesis, carbon dioxide and water, although more fungal Symbiots may eat through absorption. Plants are usually rooted; plantform Symbiots will not necessarily possess a method of transportation as part of their motherforms. Even those that do may prefer to root between changing locations.

Molds (Gimzai)

Only drones can be made from protist lifeforms, although a Symbiot can use amalgams of protist traits. Protists include algae, protozoa and slime molds. Some alien lifeforms combine features of protist and fungi, such as the mobile *galisp* of Kordeth, used by the native Ukari to form their homes and cities. Gimzai are mainly used by Symbiots in a utilitarian function, as some aid to biotech. They may be grown in a controlled fashion to form a plush carpet for a Symbiot ruler, or provide lubrication for biotech devices.

Microbes (Gozai)

Monera — bacteria, blue-green algae — can only become drones through symbiosis, although Symbiots can use monera traits, especially in biotech. The creation of drone viruses is a dangerous but important Zûldor engineering project — dangerous because Symbiot immune systems cannot always produce antibodies to combat symbiosis-produced drone viruses. Such experiments are tightly-controlled by the Xokor Tlan — anyone breaching the protocols he sets is executed.

Hives (Zim)

The most important distinction in Symbiot society is the Hive — membership in a Hive determines a Symbiot's behavior, metamorphic powers and philosophy. Loyalty to a Hive is usually quite strong, more so than human loyalty to a house or sect, for the Hive's philosophies and goals are the chief content of imprinting after conversion. A Symbiot's initial imprinting forms the core of that Symbiot's very sense of self, his new being. It is extremely rare for a Symbiot to break away from these core values, or to deprogram them. However, such a shifting of values is possible, especially if the shift is from one core Symbiot philosophy to another — from Hive to Hive. While Hives are rigid caste systems, there is some degree of mobility — a Symbiot may leave a Hive at any time; however, she leaves any rank and station behind. A new Hive may or may not accept her, and even if one does, she may have to rebuild her standing.

Hive imprinting does not mean a hive-mind: that is the result of a metamorphic power (see the *Symbiosis* chapter). Although members of a Hive may share the same creed, they are individuals and may differ radically over the best way to execute that creed.



There are now five major Hives in Symbiot space, and a number of minor ones. Most of the five are directly descended in philosophy (and in some cases, biology) from one of the original Symbiots.

Galzai ("Mighty Horde")

The most powerful Hive — both politically and martially — is the Galzai. It traces it lineage to Galt DeVatha, the psychic who became the very first Symbiot and who was the leader of the eco-terrorist cell that encountered the hibernating Xolotl.

Galt's militant revolutionary ideology was only heightened by his new metamorphosis, and his beliefs had an indelible impact on Symbiot culture. The pervasive martial and competitive attitude of Symbiot society is due to Galt and his followers.

The Xokor Tlan, the Symbiot "emperor," has traditionally been a member of the Galzai Hive. The Hive thus leads the war effort against human worlds; their conflict oriented-ideology thrives best in wartime.

Creeds: The universe is defined by a great, hierarchical chain of being. Certain lifeforms are thus higher (better) than others — some beings are meant to be masters over others. Symbiots, as the most adaptable of beings, stand at the top of this hierarchy, and some Symbiots stand over others.

Galzai members differ in their views on what exactly defines higher or lower. The more religious-minded believe that spiritual beings are the highest and thus should rule over the mass of lesser lifeforms, while the martial-minded (most of the Galzai Hive) believe that might rules best. All Galzai believers, however, are undemocratic. They may not be strictly totalitarian, but they do believe that certain beings are naturally better than others. To some, groups of such beings are believed best fit to rule (oligarchists); to others, a single perfected being best rules (imperialists). The latter form is the reigning philosophy in Symbiot politics, as the Xokor Tlan is treated as a holy king.

Critics of the Galzai (the Phazûl especially) claim that this is simply a predator's philosophy — the beliefs of lonely stalkers writ large. Few can deny, however, that certain beings possess certain gifts or skills which do make them better suited at some tasks than other beings. In other words, even most Phazûl recognize that equality is more a possibility than an actuality.

Ranks: Hivers rise in rank based mainly on their abilities and achievements. Among the Galzai, such achievements usually include overthrowing someone of a higher rank and assuming his place; if none object (or can do anything to stop the upstart), the new rank is recognized.

The chain of command is as follows: Convert (Zimkai), Trooper (Galkin), Soldier (Gar), Veteran (Garsa), Ruler (Kor), Warlord (Xokor)

Powers: Armor, Breeding, Command, Enhanced Characteristics, Limbs, Movement, Projectile Attack, Size, Toxins, Weaponry

Phazûl ("Mystery Weavers")

Perhaps the second most powerful Hive — at least in terms of numbers — is the Phazûl. Its members are considered the most religious, for they trace their ancestry back to Solomon Frem, the second Symbiot, a spiritually-minded follower of Gjarti and a theurge. Solomon and Galt De Vatha soon began to argue over the direction their new race of beings would take, and their children have continued the argument ever since. Solomon saw symbiosis as a gift from Gjarti, the interstellar earth-goddess. Symbiots were meant to deliver their mystical awareness of the Lifeweb to other lifeforms. Galt believed that wherever these powers came from, they must be used to purge technological civilization from the stars.

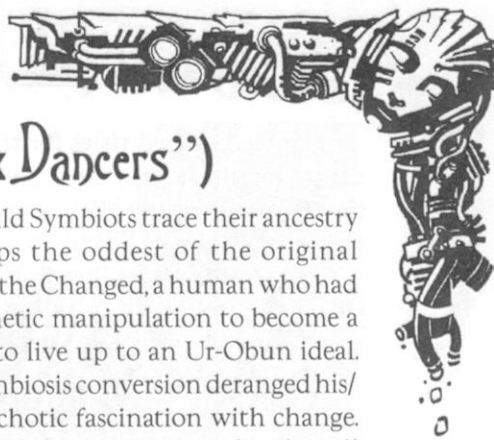
The Phazûl resist the war effort against the humans — warfare is no way to communicate a mystical message. The Phazûl prefer cooperation over conflict, and believe that, over time and with good example, Symbiots can bring all beings into the fold — willingly, not forcefully. Unfortunately, the Phazûl are largely ignorant of the front lines of the war and the human response to Symbiots; they are not fully aware of just how much humans have been made to hate and fear the metamorphs.

Creeds: The Phazûl's central thesis is that the Lifeweb connects all things, living and seemingly unliving, in a web of diversity in unity. In this multi-dimensional web, no being is higher or lower than any other — all are simply part of a vast network. Individuals and societies are envisioned as regions or hubs rather than centralized units. Indeed, no individual lifeform exists without a vast web of interconnections — sentience itself depends on these interconnections and their diversity.

This creates a recognition that all lifeforms are extensions of the world and the world is an extension of all lifeforms. It is impossible to ultimately discern the point at which an individual is separate from its environment, since discernment itself is a quality of sentience, which depends on ever-shifting contexts between the lifeform and its world. Conflict is thus a form of self-harm. Cooperation is the highest form of conduct.

Critics of this creed (the Galzai especially) claim it is an herbivore's philosophy — a desperate attempt to make the herd instinct into a cosmic principle. While other Hives recognize some Phazûl tenets — such as the interconnectivity of the Lifeweb — they draw different ethical and spiritual conclusions about them.

Rank: The best measure of a Phazûl Hiver is his spiritual wisdom and experience. While political movers and shakers certainly rise up the ranks also, most Phazûl are truly versed in Lifeweb theology. However, in keeping with their non-hierarchical philosophy, rank is usually only a means of involvement in major issues, such as the anti-war effort. Since these issues are usually politicized and more engaged in societal affairs than mystical insights, it is no shame to remain a humble Quenkin one's entire life.



The offices of rank usually follow this progression: Convert (Zimkai), Initiate (Quenkin), Pilgrim (Saamkin), Monk (Phakin), Mystic (Tlakin), Priest (Tlakor)

Powers: Breeding, Command, Elemental Call, Energy Attack, Extrasensory Powers, Hive-Mind, Pheromones, Phosphorescence, Special Senses

Zûldor ("Shapers")

While the Zûldor are not large in numbers (compared to other Hives), they are powerful in influence. The Zûldor are the chief biotech engineers of the Symbiot war effort, and as such are closely allied with the ruling Galzai Hive.

Members trace their ancestry to Ann Basque, the terraforming engineer who had joined the eco-cabal to help sabotage the technology she now believed was harmful. However, after her conversion into a Symbiot, she began to realize that human science and Lifeweb awareness could complement each other. Indeed, it appeared that the grand work of terraforming masters such as Doramos was built on an awareness of world energy similar to that recognized by Symbiots. She and a band of dedicated followers — most of them corporate scientists who retained their knowledge after conversion — began building a new science: biotechnology through symbiosis. The Zûldor Hive continues her work today.

Creed: Life is a continual growth, an expansion toward a distant goal. All healthy lifeforms are compelled by this seeking outwards, this continual transcendence of the present toward the future. Evolution of body, mind and spirit is the catchword of Zûldor followers, whose main goal is to overcome all forms — physical, social and mental. Never fully satisfied with a shape or an idea, they seek continual improvement, some toward greater efficiency and utility, some toward greater aesthetics.

Unlike Xanxi Hivers (see below), the Zûldor place a greater emphasis on the past and future than the present: they learn from the past to improve the future. The present is always an imperfect moment, an incomplete grasping toward perfection. This is not to say that Zûldor are always dissatisfied. Indeed, they are usually quite optimistic, although always seeking to change the state of things no matter how satisfactory that state may be to others.

Rank: A Zûldor's influence within the Hive is entirely dependent upon his craftsmanship, his genius or his achievements in biotechnology. A Zûldor who builds a better bio-mousetrap is rewarded with more prestige, which brings privileges of access to confidential data, invitations to work on important projects, and other such benefits.

Titles are usually recognized in the following order, from lowest prestige to highest: Convert (Zimkai), Worker (Zog), Implementor (Zogsa), Technician (Zogkor), Shaper (Zûldag), Master Shaper (Dûrkor)

Powers: Armor, Breathing, Command, Hive-Mind, Immunity, Projectile Attack, Shaping, Sustenance, Weaponry, Webbing

Xanxi ("Flux Dancers")

These sensual and wild Symbiots trace their ancestry to Chi Hashimi, perhaps the oddest of the original Symbiots. Chi was one of the Changed, a human who had willingly undergone genetic manipulation to become a hermaphrodite, hoping to live up to an Ur-Obun ideal. Many believe that the symbiosis conversion deranged his/her mind, creating a psychotic fascination with change. Xanxi members believe this fascination was already well in-place before symbiosis.

Xanxi Hivers relish the new world opened up to their metamorphic bodies and minds, and often seek an overload of the senses. More than any other Hive, they experiment freely with their shapechanging abilities and abhor staying in one form for too long. It is disconcerting even for other Symbiots, who barely recognize their Xanxi friends from one week to the next.

The Hive as a whole can be considered neutral towards the war with human space; some like it, others don't. Their individual opinions differ greatly.

Creed: The universe is a chaotic flux: everything comes and goes, rises and falls. No hierarchy is forever, but neither does a state of harmony remain for long. In light of this flux, the present moment becomes more important than the past or future. Xanxi believers live fully in the now.

Diversity across space and through time is the important theme, for nothing is stable — it is a lifeform's various changes which enliven it.

Two sub-philosophies of Xanxi have developed: *xix*, or "discord," and *xin*, or "spirit beyond form." Followers of xix are tricksters, complete iconoclasts who see no enduring authority; to them, life is a joke. Followers of xin believe in an immaterial soul or spirit that inheres in the variety of shapes and forms of life; this soul celebrates beauty and diversity, keeping the universe in motion and preventing stagnation.

Xin believers hold that the spirit of their founder, Chi Hashimi, still lives, spread through all the material world. His final act of melding his flesh with the very landscape was actually an act of merging with the Lifeweb itself. His beneficent will still protects his followers and shields them from the Antipathic effects of metamorphic chaos. (Xanxi Hivers may purchase the Benefice: Founder's Blessing; see the *Symbiosis* chapter.)

In response to the vociferous debates about food-based philosophies (i.e., that Phazûl are herbivores and Galzai predators), Xanxi followers jokingly claim that their philosophy is omnivorous, characterized by the clever intelligence of the omnivore.

Rank: Xanxi recognize their fellows purely through their achievements: Did they create something truly new or do something no one has done before? Produce thoughts never before manifested? How well a Xanxi lives up to the creed of her Hive is the measure of her rank.



The recognized titles for those who have achieved novelty are (in order or prestige): Convert (Zimkai), Enthusiast (Wazpa), Dreamer (Wazkaipa), Creator (Ikto), Visionary (Ikkai), Chimera (Ikko)

Powers: Breathing, Breeding, Concealment, Enhanced Characteristics, Flight, Immunity, Limbs, Mimicry, Movement, Ooze, Pheromones, Size, Special Senses

Ornzai ("Wildlings")

Not all Hives hearken back to a human progenitor. The Ornzai look instead to the more natural-born Symbiots for identity: the wildlings. That creatures which were once non-sentient would think and behave quite differently than native sentients is no surprise. Just how different they are is actually more unfathomable than most sentient Symbiots know.

There are very few humans or sentients of other origin among the Ornzai. The Hive is made up almost completely of wildlings — animal- or plant-born Symbiots. They thus have few among them who were born with sentience; the practice of rational thinking is not a priority for them. Their name was given to them by the other Hives, as they have little use for names.

The Galzai accuse the Ornzai of plotting insurrection against the hard-won stability of current Symbiot society. That they often speak with one another only in *Khiglazi* (the instinctual language of the Lifeweb) only fuels these suspicions. Indeed, their powers display a knowledge of natural and elemental forms unknown to even the Zûldor. That they are reluctant to share these powers with the other Hives only increases suspicion against them.

Creed: Sentience is not all it's made out to be. The true essence of reality lies in instinct. The Lifeweb is the source of instinct; it is where these native impulses are encoded. All beings are in resonance with the Lifeweb through their natural impulses, their instincts. It is only those who have gained egos and rational thought that have forgotten this; their reason blinds them to something their bodies know intimately. But rational thought itself is part of the web: ideas belong not to their thinkers but to the web which is the source all things.

Symbiosis is a merging of all Lifeweb possibilities into consciousness. Non-sentient beings become sentient because they are now in resonance with those strands of the web which represent rational thought. The true calling is not to spurn sentience but to use it as a tool to better understand instinct, much as an old Urth Zen master might use paradox to awaken another to truth beyond reason.

Self-awareness of Nature's natural impulses is the Lifeweb examining itself, like a mirror reflecting back images many times in infinite regress. A sentient Symbiot who fully gives into his instincts yet is aware of them is the Lifeweb's instrument of self-awareness. This does not mean that an Ornzai Symbiot must act like a wild animal or aloof tree, for animal and plant instincts can prove too static and unchanging — nature flows, changing form and feature with time and season; so, too, should the Ornzai. The Symbiot must transcend race-based reactions and attune himself to the universal flow of nature.

The true role of an Ornzai Hiver is as an instrument of the Lifeweb, not as an individual with self-made goals. Instinct provides the goals; the Ornzai simply observes and follows.

Rank: Since this Hive is not nearly so unified as the others, rank is a more complicated issue. Animal and plant wildlings have entirely different ways of determining worth: animals tend to equate rank with prowess, while plants are more likely to equate rank with age.

Nonetheless, they both recognize that the more a member exemplifies nature's greater rhythms, the more valuable he is. Thus, their rank scale can be listed as follows: Convert (Zimkai), Yearling (Lotra), Indigene (Zothsa), Wildling (Xanra), Primal (Yarsa), Elemental (Yarkor)

Powers: Breeding, Concealment, Elemental Call, Enhanced Characteristics, Flight, Hive-Mind, Limbs, Movement, Special Senses, Toxins, Weaponry

Urgunzai ("Spawn of the Dark Womb")

An outlawed Hive, Urgunzai followers are considered tainted by Nullity. It is believed that they seek a return to the cold, lifeless void. They speak of it as the dark womb, a homecoming to painless bliss, an escape from the endless morphogenesis of the lifecycle. Urgunzai followers are thought to be Symbiots whose conversion either made them insane or who cannot cope with Lifeweb resonance — or who were re-imprinted by an Urgunzai Hiver. Certain Urgunzai followers have exhibited powers blasphemous to Symbiots — powers which seem at first to be fully resonant with the Lifeweb but which later prove to taint the web with creeping death.

Urgunzai Hivers rarely reveal themselves directly; they instead infiltrate the other Hives and work out their goals using those Hive's resources. It is known that certain leaders of this secret Hive can imprint other Symbiots as if they had just been converted; they impress their new creed upon them but leave the old Hive creed intact, so that the new spawn can easily return to society incognito.

A Symbiot even suspected of Urgunzai taint is usually subjected to painful tortures until he reveals his taint or his innocence. If tainted, he is killed; if innocent, he is freed, but may suffer physical or mental scars from the ordeal.

Creed: Not much is known about their creed, for few have been willing to explain it to their torturers. It is known that they believe life and flesh to be a sin, a cosmic mistake. Their role as Symbiots is not to exalt life but to use its own powers against it: they are harbingers of chaos, not understanding. They believe that sentience outlives the death of the living body, and that its true origin and

home is in a place beyond all flesh and materiality, beyond all light and warmth. Whether they literally believe the dark void between the stars is this home or simply use this image as a metaphor to speak of an other-worldly place or condition is unknown.

Rank: There is surely a rank structure among the Urgunzai, but it is unknown to outsiders. It is probably based either on one's ability to manifest Null powers, or on degree of influence.

Powers: They have in the past exhibited metamorphic powers horrifying to most Symbiots, including an entropic touch and a Null field, canceling metamorphic powers in a region around them.

Xokor Tlan ("Supreme Warlord")

The emperor of the Symbiots is considered sacred: his decrees are to be obeyed without question. In actual practice, the Xokor Tlan often suffers insurrections, whether it be uppity Galzai warlords or secessionist Ornzai.

After Barak, the first Xokor Tlan, others in his lineage were often overthrown by other warlords, who then assumed the title. Kantlak, the tenth Xokor Tlan and a direct descendant of Galt De Vatha, devised a way to maintain the lineage: she personally chose one of her offspring and then subjected it to conversion by a Xolotl, awakened from hibernation for the important event. Such a Symbiot proved to be more powerful than most, with metamorphic abilities nearly as fluid as those of the founders. Since that time, the sheer power of successive Xokor Tlans has proved hard to overthrow, especially coupled to the sacred aura surrounding the Xolotl. Every Xokor Tlan guards the sacred grove from trespass, executing without trial anyone caught attempting to infiltrate it. Only those who petition the Xokor Tlan properly are granted entrance, and even then, their audience with a Xolotl is limited to viewing, never conversion — only future Xokor Tlan are allowed that privilege.

Every Xokor Tlan has come from the Galzai Hive, with the exception of the eighth, a Zûldor who could not long maintain the throne. The current reigning Xokor Tlan of Alexius's time is Lotzeer, the 23rd in that line.

Status

Other arbiters of standing in Symbiot society have little to do with physical features or ability, but are instead based on age, origin (native to Symbiot society or a foreign convert) and acknowledged ability (reputation).

Age

The stages of growth for a Symbiot, like a human, color others' perceptions of that Symbiot.

Newborn: A newborn child is always mundane, but is also a promise to the future. Instinctual mothering and



parenting of newborn offspring are important values in Symbiot society, and protection of babies is a strong issue.

Child: The rearing of an infant is important, for many values can be inculcated at this time, perhaps strengthening the imprinting process when (and if) the child is converted. However, this is not a universal concern for all Hives. Since imprinting is powerful enough as it is, and since many memories of former life are lost during the process, a child is often considered a separate person from the Symbiot she may become. Thus, many Symbiots ignore child-rearing, leaving the task entirely to a mundane family. Communities of mundane humans and animals exist for just this purpose. Some are treated well while others are mere slaves, meant only to keep children healthy until puberty.

Puberty: Upon puberty, a child can be converted into a Symbiot. For animals, puberty may come within one to two years (for animals such as canines) or longer. It usually occurs in a human's twelfth to fourteenth year. Sometimes the teen may have to wait longer, as a form of punishment (for those raised with the desperate expectation of becoming Symbiots), or because he has proved unworthy. Some teens are chosen instead to retain their mundane status and become nannies or providers for future generations of children.

Young adult: Once a teen has been converted, he is considered to be a young adult Symbiot, and must join his Hive and work towards it goals. Rising in the ranks of a Hive to eventual leadership positions is a popular goal, but some Symbiots are content to stay at a particular task and rank for life.

Adult: Once a young adult has proven himself as a worthy Symbiot, he is considered an adult and capable of taking care of himself or even others. Only adults can attain leadership positions in a Hive.

Elder: An old adult is considered to have wisdom, gained through years of activity and metamorphosing. Elders usually have leadership positions, but not necessarily. Those who chose to perform no great deed or risked nothing during their adult lives rarely achieve the status of elder.

Origin

A Symbiot comes from one of two backgrounds: she is either a native, someone who grew up around Symbiots (the children listed above) or is a foreign convert, such as a human from Stigmata who was converted on the frontlines.

Native: Natives receive the most trust and openness, for they are well known by those who grew up with them or who observed them as they grew. No foreign ideas arose to taint their imprinting. The bulk of Symbiot society is made up of natives. Occasionally, such as after the winning of the planet Abydos, an influx of foreign converts appears, destabilizing traditional Hive structures, but natives usually get the benefit of the doubt more often than foreign converts.

Foreign convert: Symbiosis conversion does not always wipe out a convert's memories; some retain vestiges of their former lives. Although imprinting is usually strong enough to overrule previous allegiances, the occasional convert has been known to retain stronger ties to their past, such as the few priestly converts who continued to exalt the human Church of the Celestial Sun over the Lifeweb, or the nobles who swore more strongly by their former houses than their current Hives. For this reason, all foreign converts are usually looked upon with some degree of suspicion: nobody is really sure where their true loyalties lie.

The best way such a convert has to overcome this prejudice is through loyal actions in the name of his new Hive. A reputation forged in battle for the Symbiot cause, or gained through the conversion of new Symbiots, is usually enough to allay suspicions and allow the convert to rise through the ranks like any native. Once proven, doubt is rarely again cast upon him.

Reputation

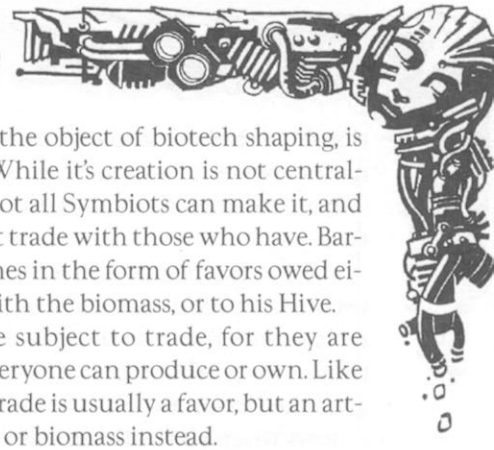
A Symbiot's self-made reputation is the one factor that can outweigh all others: lack of good breeding, age or origin can be overcome by remarkable deeds and behavior. Since actions, more than any other sign, are considered the hallmarks of one's true identity in Symbiot society, well-considered actions can help raise an unknown, low-ranking Symbiot to fame and influence.

See the sections above listing the ranks for each Hive; a Symbiot's rank is usually a good representative of her reputation. Of course, the converse is true: a low rank usually means little reputation or worse, a bad rep. Repeated transgressions against societal taboos (see *Taboos*, below) can result in expulsion from a Hive and even exile from Symbiot space.

Names

A Symbiot's name is his most obvious identifier, although many Symbiots may share the same name, just as "John" is a common name among humans. In the time of the founders, names were awarded based on deeds, and thus had a meaning in Xoglazi. Over the years, words contracted or combined until most given names no longer have a definite meaning, except to Symbiots interested in etymology.

Normally, a Symbiot only has one name, usually no more than two or three syllables long. Often, however, a deed signifier is appended to the name, telling of that Symbiot's most defining achievement. For instance, Lozag Urgset, or "Lozag Enemy Slayer." The progeny of a famous Symbiot might attach that Symbiot's name to his own, as in the case of Rumaal zig Lotzeer, "Rumaal son of Lotzeer." Or someone from a particular region might adopt that place's name to add to his own, as with Kazhal mok Daban, "Kazhal of Daban" (a jungle region on Chernobog's southern continent).



Some Urthish names survive, but they are often combined with Xoglazi prefixes or suffixes. For instance, Zebat still pops up, a condensed version of Zebulon with the suffix "-at" (adult). In the same way, certain Vuldrok dialect names also survive and may even be recognized by other humans.

Lifestyle

Symbiot daily life is taken up with chores and tasks undertaken for one's Hive. These vary greatly from Hive to Hive. A Galzai soldier may spend his time training in combat, or guarding an important site — or fighting the human menace on Stigmata. A Phazûl mystic might meditate or debate the meaning of some unexplained event or celestial portent, or go forth among his kind preaching the best ways to honor the Lifeweb. A Zûldor biotechnician might invent a new form of biotech, or aid another in shaping parts. A Xanxi artist might create a new form of sculpture using crystal formations, or travel with Galzai scouts to distant worlds seeking new experiences. An Ornzai Hiver tries to attune herself with the flow of nature, perhaps by spending her time in animal activities or rooted as an oak soaking up sunlight.

Eat and Be Eaten

Like all lifeforms, Symbiots must eat. They are far less squeamish about this simple fact than many civilized humans, who prefer not to know where their food comes from. Symbiots see little paradox in the fact that they must eat fellow lifeforms — all are part of the Lifeweb, regardless of whether they meet in someone's stomach or outside it. What is unconscionable and taboo is cannibalism (eating one's own species, whether it be human or dog or otherwise), or the eating of a servitor or Symbiot (note that sentient humans or aliens, as long as they are not Symbiots or members of one's own species, are considered fair game, although bad tasting).

Symbiots who develop a certain aversion to eating familiar animals usually metamorphose alternate nutritional functions, such as photosynthesis, to make up for the need to devour their fellows.

Economy and Barter

The Symbiot economy deals not in rare minerals or centrally-issued scrip, but in goals and intents. All Symbiots work for their Hives, and the product of their labors goes to benefit those Hives. Since most Hives are sworn to the Xokor Tlan, part of what they reap also goes to him. Material deprivation is largely unknown, for most Symbiots can metamorphose forms to protect themselves from the elements. Their worlds are purposely kept rich in natural bounty, so food is plentiful and impossible to hoard from others.

There is a system of barter, however, built up around the trade of objects that are unique or scarce. Zigchi, or biomass, which can store Lifeforce energy vital for metamorphosing, or become the object of biotech shaping, is the most prized object. While it's creation is not centralized by any one group, not all Symbiots can make it, and thus those without must trade with those who have. Barter for zigchi usually comes in the form of favors owed either to the individual with the biomass, or to his Hive.

Also, art objects are subject to trade, for they are unique items that not everyone can produce or own. Like zigchi, the condition of trade is usually a favor, but an artist may trade for renown or biomass instead.

Another means of trade is preceptorship: the teaching of a metamorphic power to another. Since the self-learning of new powers involves greater risk of Antipathy, those who already possess a tried-and-true metamorphic ability are often sought out to teach it to others. Most often, this ability is only taught within one's Hive, but some powers may be taught to outsiders.

Art and Adornment

Art is popular among most Symbiots, who seem to have an innate appreciation of artistic intent. However, they find beauty in forms usually disgusting to humans: oozing fluids, squishy flesh, mottled and spiny shells and carapaces. Just as Zûldor biotechnicians mold zigchi into devices, Xanxi artists use biomass to make fascinating sculptures, some designed to metamorphose on their own into new and amazing shapes when viewed or touched. One such small sculpture became the object of the most fascination by the first Vau mandarin to encounter Symbiots; it seems that the Vau's own crystal molding and object shaping technology follows a similar aesthetic.

However, many Symbiots view art as frivolous; while they appreciate it, they find that other things could best occupy one's time, such as training or manufacturing. For this reason, perhaps, a wide-spread Symbiot arts culture has yet to develop outside the Xanxi Hive.

Symbiots do not usually wear much clothing, unless their motherforms require protection or comfort against the elements. Robes, sashes and other loose clothes — those designed not to tear when new forms are metamorphosed — are the most popular, and are usually adorned with pleasing patterns or identifiers of one's Hive and rank.

Of Three Minds

Just as the sentience of a Shantor or Etyri differs from that of a human, so a Symbiot differs from other sentient lifeforms. The body and its senses greatly inform the mind; an Etyri's superior vision and treetop culture give him a different way of thinking than a human. Language is one sign of this difference, witnessed by the greater number of visual and vertical height and depth metaphors in Etyri language than in Urthish. At least in its initial developmental stages, a race's possibilities seem bound to their bodies. Only once an abstract tool like writing enters into culture, codifying a spoken tongue into a universal, immaterial form, does a race makes it way toward disassocia-



tion from the body and association with unfettered imagination. Nonetheless, the body is always there, anchoring culture to a material reality, one following the laws of nature.

What happens when a race's member's very bodies become as freeform as their imaginations? When the natural laws which govern those bodies seemingly differ from those ruling other races? If the limitations of sentience are linked in some way to the limitations of the body, what follows when all bodily limitations are removed?

The Second Republic got an inkling of just what happens when they began radically altering bodies when they created the Changed. Conservative elements of society revolted against such meddling with natural law, evidenced by the Church's strong and continued condemnation against the genetically-altered. It seems that, with the exception of some progressive individuals, humanity's sense of self was not yet ready for such an extreme leap.

The Symbiot sense of self and reality is vastly different from that of humanity. While many things remain the same — Symbiots did, indeed, begin as humans — the more distant they become from their human beginnings, the more alien they seem. Although the leaders of Symbiot culture are mainly converted humans who inevitably bring human concepts with them (as did the founders), some eventually develop ideas of their own unique to their metamorphic bodies and minds.

Symbiot philosophers who think about such things say that the Xildûr are *jinkha mok*, "of three minds": sentient, instinctual and universal, also thought of as human, animal and plant. A Symbiot's sentient (or human) inheritance is seen as a form of self-reflective, abstract reason, characterized by differentiation, wherein everything in one's sensory environment is divided into discrete objects: a rock, a toad, a priest. This is the rational mind: self-awareness and an ability to analyze and thus utilize one's environment.

The wilder, instinctual (or animal) consciousness (from which human consciousness sprang) is considered more phenomenological, more deeply involved with immediate sense data and its participation with perceived objects. Instincts are considered unmediated responses to the raw impulses of the world. Even here, however, there is a sense of discreteness, but with less differentiation than in the rational mind. Things are taken more for what they are rather than what they should be.

The universal (or plant) mind is equated with a hivemind, the most primitive (or transcendent) form of mentality, where the sensor merges with the sensed so completely that no sense of individuality exists. Instead, the sensor is felt to be part of an undifferentiated continuum of events, not objects. Not all plants are believed to have this extreme form of consciousness, but they display it to a greater degree than animals or sentients. Insects, animals closely tied to plants and their ecology, also share this mind.

It is perhaps inevitable that these mental inheritances clash in the arena of Symbiot society, for wildlings born of wild beasts or flowering trees differ radically in their very thought processes than those born of humans or other sentient aliens. When many Ornzai Hivers cannot even understand the concept of individuality, enforcing the concept of personal responsibility and culpability for wrongful actions taken against others is not easy.

Those Symbiots considered most wise are those who try in some way to experience and understand all of the Three Minds (*Jinkha*). Very few achieve this goal, however, for straying from one's own mental processes has always been a difficult feat for mystics of all sentient races. Indeed, expanding one's consciousness and being able to teach insights gained in such a way to others is usually the province of religious prophets, a rare breed anywhere in the galaxy.

Languages

The official language of Symbiot society is Xoglazi, the fictive language invented in the Diaspora by an archaeologist attempting to decipher Anunnaki glyphs, and adopted by Galt's eco-cabal for its secret code tongue. After their conversion, the founders continued to use Xoglazi, mixing it at times with Urthish words and phrases. After conversion, many converts who had lost their original language abilities learned Xoglazi quicker than their native Urthish.

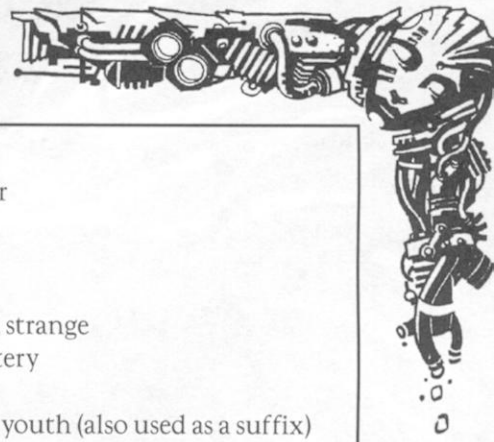
Modern-day Xoglazi is somewhat different from the textbook language originally invented by Professor Simon Vedik. As is usual with most languages, words suffered contractions and slang terms over the years, and a reader of textbook Xoglazi might have a hard time understanding spoken Symbiot Xoglazi.

In addition to Xoglazi, many Symbiots still speak Urthish in a number of dialects, from mainstream Known Worlds to the regional dialects of Absolution and Abydos, the latter heavily influenced by the polyglot of Vuldrok languages, most of which are dialects of Urthish or an old Urth language (Swedish, Lakota, Spanish, etc.).

Khiglazi

There is another language known only to certain Symbiots, for it is a form of universal communication tied to the Lifeweb. While complex thoughts and abstract concepts cannot easily be communicated with Khiglazi (literally "instinct words"), basic needs, desires and emotions can be stated. It is not merely a spoken tongue, but includes gestures and non-verbals of a broad nature, ones which can usually be formed no matter what the Symbiot's morphology, such as upright posture, baring teeth, or blinking.

Khiglazi is used to issue commands to drones and servitors. While some servitors may learn to understand and speak Xoglazi or Urthish in a limited way, drones can usually only communicate in Khiglazi.



Xoglazi Word Roots

Most Symbiot words and phrases involve combining word roots to form nouns. For instance, the word for Lifeweb is Quensaam ("life" + "web"). Or Xoglazi, a combination of "ancient" + "language" + the plural suffix. There is no universal rule determining the proper order of combination; usually, whichever subject gets the most emphasis comes first. The same meaning can be presented different ways in the same conversation simply by changing root order: *kaira*, a "new convert," can also be stated *rakai*, to emphasize just how recent the conversion took place.

Pronunciation: The letter "x" is properly pronounced *kz* — a velar "k" sound becoming an alveolar "z." However, certain dialects — and most newly-converted Urthish speakers — pronounce it as an alveopalatal, as in the middle consonant sound in "treasure." The letter "z" is always an alveolar, as in "zipper."

at = the present, adult (also used as a suffix)
dag = skill, experience
dûr (dor) = shape, form
gal = might, strength
gim = small, diffuse
gla = voice, word, language
go = tiny, invisible
im = plant
kai = convert
kha = sentience, mind
khi = instinct
kin = servant
kor = leader, ruler
kuz = slave
lo = animal
mok = of
orn = wild, other, strange
pha = Wyrd, mystery
quen = life
ra = the future, youth (also used as a suffix)
sa = the past, old (also used as a suffix)
saam = web, non-hierarchical system, unity
set = slay, kill
tl(a) = holy
urg = dark, evil, Null
xan = chaos
xil = change, symbiosis
xo = elder, primordial, ancient
vral = Vau
zai = many, horde, species
zarn = epic, event
zig = offspring, progeny
zim = Hive
zog = worker
zoth = place
zûl = weaver (of the Lifeweb)

Numbers: 1 = jor, 2 = jan, 3 = jin, 4 = jak, 5 = jai

Suffixes:

-ti = mundane
-to = servitor
-tu = drone
-zi = plural

Writing

Symbiot culture is largely oral; information is transmitted mainly through personal speech. Even biomass-based message pods are designed to deliver their messages through metamorphically-formed vocal apparati. Writing is reserved for technical, ritual and sometimes artistic purposes, and is written in the Xoglazi used by Aldo Rimes in his own writing, using the Urthish alphabet and characters. However, these characters are usually highly stylized and more organic-seeming than most Urthish scripts.

Taboos

There are few society-wide strictures placed on Symbiots. Although members of each Hive must behave in accordance with their Hive's own rules and regulations, these apply only to members. A Galzai Garsa does not have to heed the behavioral advice of a Phazûl Tlakin. However, if he breaks his own Hive's taboos to such a degree that he is expelled, other Hives will consider his transgressions before allowing him membership.

There is one subject that is taboo to all Hives: Antipathy. This metamorphic malfunction is viewed as a communicable disease, one that may spread from one Symbiot to another. At its weakest effects, the afflicted Symbiot is expected to try to undo whatever caused him to become out-of-sync with the Lifeweb. Various actions may be called for, from meditations, removal from society for a time, curtailment of metamorphosis, and even self-sacrifice in the form of physical deprivation or mutilation. Different Hives have different "cures" for Antipathy.

Antipathic effects which spread are reacted to with extreme prejudice: like a Known Worlds Inquisition, Symbiot authorities crack down quickly on the offending parties, either incarcerating them and forcing harsh treatment (not always effective) or executing them outright. A dead Symbiot rarely spreads the contagion, but even the dead are known to retain their Antipathic aura; such bodies are burnt and the ashes shot into space.

More details on Antipathy and its effects can be found in the *Symbiosis* chapter.





Symbiosis: Metamorphic Powers

Sobanzeer sweated in the heat but did not rest from his toil. He hurriedly moved his hands across the sculpture, turning hardness into softness, smiling now and then as the thing undulated in pleasure, or wincing when it started in pain. Finally, after a day of work, it was complete. He was exhausted in more than body. Too much Lifeforce had gone into the Shaping, but it was worth it. Or so Sobanzeer hoped.

He stepped back from the piece, dropping to his knees, unable to stand any longer. He bowed his head and sent a silent prayer to Chi Hashimi, asking his blessing on this endeavor.

He felt a slick touch on his head, and moisture dripped down into his face. He blinked the salty water from his eyes and looked up. The sculpture swayed before him, stretching and bending in many directions as if moved by the breeze into a dance. He choked back a cry of glee, tears running down his face. "Did I do well?"

The sculpture of living water, an amorphous mass of liquid given semi-solid form slowly moved toward him, responding to his emotions. Its wet arms wrapped about him, caressing him. He melted into the embrace, holding his breath as his head slipped into the watery torso.

He drew himself back out, looking at it, trying to find some face, some nexus of emotion.

A funnel formed amid the torso, and it spoke to him soothingly in an echoing voice: "Well done, my love. My new body is wonderful. Never in creation has there been such a thing as I. My old flesh is gone, and everything is new."

Sobanzeer laughed with joy. "Oh, my lover! You were unique even before my shaping. But now you are truly one-of-a-kind. And I love you even more, for not only do I see you in your liquid flesh, I see me as well."

The Lifeweb (Quensaam)

The glue that holds the Symbiots together as a culture and society is a vision of the Lifeweb, the universal network of energy connecting all life. While only the occasional mystic and prophet claims to have seen this web, belief in its existence is imprinted into most Symbiots upon conversion. The belief is strong, for the Lifeweb's properties and behavior, as taught by mystics, does indeed seem to explain how and why Symbiot's can metamorphose a chaotic array of forms and shapes.

Descriptions of the web given by those few who have actually seen it vary. The most prevalent version is that of Solomon Frem and his followers in the Phazûl Hive: luminous threads of light wrapped around all life. These threads lead from each lifeform to every other, and from there outwards into the vast universe, like a cosmic spiderweb, or like Indra's Net in old Urth Buddhist belief. Others, however, describe not a web of strands but an energy field enveloping everything, generated by life — each lifeform generates energy for the vast pool, and in turn draws from that pool. Yet another version builds on this field theory but speaks of resonance, whereby lifeforms vibrate, breath or rhythmically move in sync with a single, pure frequency or a number of sub-frequencies; some lifeforms are more fully in sync than others.

Symbiot philosophers point out that perhaps all visions of the web approach the same truth, but from different senses: Frem's Lifeweb is a visual metaphor, while the field theory is tactile and the frequency theory chiefly auditory. They aver that the Lifeweb itself is a reality beyond direct comprehension, but not direct sensory apprehension, as witnessed by the experiences of Frem and other mystics; their spiritual encounters were interpreted by each of them through their primary senses, as a way for the mind to comprehend a reality that encompasses all things.

Lifeforce (Quenpha)

Lifeforce energy (Quenpha) exists freely across the universe, diffuse and spread out. The points where Lifeweb strands converge attract this free energy, drawing it in. Where much energy collects, it begins to create ener-

getic reactions, generating more energy. A planet or moon is a knot of Lifeweb strands, and thus is full of Quenpha. As the Lifeforce pulses back and forth through the strands, when it spirals about such a coil, its movement generates a new energetic field. This creates life (or creates the conditions for the generation/ manifestation of life) and the landscape where this life exists — solar systems and planets. In other words, material things like elements, minerals, and organic matter collect around these points and generate more such matter.

A star is the ultimate knot or coil of Lifeforce — without a star, the meager Lifeforce generated by planetary knots could not sustain life. However, Symbiot's have not studied this energy of the stars as deeply as they have those of the planets they live on, and thus they don't understand it as well. Careless study has been known to lead to Antipathy, and thus few have yet to greatly advance research in this area.

While no place in the universe is untouched by a strand of the Lifeweb, certain places have less Lifeforce, either because there is no knot of Lifeweb strands to draw and generate it or the free Lifeforce has been drawn elsewhere. In a sense, stars and planets steal Lifeforce from these barren regions to empower their localities. Those areas of least Lifeforce are called Nullities, for they manifest little to no life whatsoever. The deepest, darkest, emptiest regions of space are considered to be such Nullities (see *Dead Spaces: Nullities*, below).

World Egg (Quenzoth)

If the Lifeweb is the whole, lifeforms are the pieces. Some of the largest pieces of the web, however, are not lifeforms per se, but nexi of Lifeforce called World Eggs. A World Egg is the embryonic heart of a planet, the place where the major lines of power in the universe coil and converge before spreading forth to further worlds. While the universe, like the Lifeweb, has no center, planets do.

A planet's knot or core is called a World Egg, or Quenzoth. Often, the Lifeforce it attracts gets caught during its travel through the spiraling strands of the knot, and can thus become stagnant. However, beings in resonance with the Lifeweb can free this energy to complete its natural circuit — they can "hatch the egg" to free the life within.

Terraforming technologies are believed to tap into this same energy core. The act of terraforming can either taint a world (as in the case of Pandemonium) or improve it (as with Pentateuch).

The character and nature of each planet's World Egg is unique. Solomon Frem referred to the World Egg as a Gjarti, a manifestation of the Universal Mother of Nature. Gjartin religion teaches that each world has a unique goddess, a manifestation of the greater Gjarti. Some Symbiot's have followed his lead in anthropomorphizing World Eggs and their energies, speaking of spirits and goddesses, while others take a more naturalistic view.

Weblore (Saamdur)

The Symbiots' view of their metamorphic powers is tied deeply to their theories about the Lifeweb and its religious ramifications. While certain less-spiritually inclined Symbiots, such as the biotechnicians of the Zûldor, are interested mainly in the scientific, utilitarian uses of Lifeweb theory, the spiritual side is prevalent throughout Symbiot culture.

The Zûldor, following human models of scientific method, seek to codify the behavior of Lifeforce into natural laws, as humans have done with electricity or magnetism . They are interested in dissecting its material nature and are unconcerned about its spiritual nature — some even disbelieve any immaterial elements entirely, but they are a minority.

One of the main elements of Symbiot Lifeweb science, heavily colored by the Lifeweb field theory (rather than strand or thread theory), is its connection to memory and pattern. Information is immaterial. It does not exist substantially in material objects, but only organizes or patterns those objects. The Lifeweb is the universe's ultimate store of information, holding the patterns of countless material forms (and thoughts, some say). The Lifeweb is memory. Material objects and living bodies hold their patterns only through resonance with this immaterial data. DNA is a receiver of such data, just as a radio receives radio waves and patterns them in ways the sentient ear can understand. Hence, damage to DNA, by injury or mutation, only changes the pattern received, not the data itself, which exists in the all-encompassing field called the Lifeweb, although at differing frequencies.

What makes a Symbiot different from other lifeforms is the conscious ability to alter his data reception — to change his pattern. The true locus of "truth" or "soul" is in the Lifeweb, not in matter or its various combinations, which are ephemeral and — for a Symbiot at least — can change radically from moment to moment.

However, the "nature" of nature is a hotly contested topic. The Phazûl believe that the natural occurrences of Lifeweb patterns in matter are important, for they represent the design of a sentient creator, whether it be Gjarti or some greater spirit. The tampering with those natural patterns can be destructive, for no single being can comprehend the balance planned by this central creator.

Zûldor, for the most part, don't recognize a central architect of the universe, but instead see things as either randomly created, forms from the chaos of free-floating data, or as self-willed, individuals who create themselves. The Galzai are especially fond of this latter philosophy. Nonetheless, it behooves a Symbiot to understand the greater patterns — the natural laws — if for no other reason than to aid in altering them through biotechnology.

Weaving the Web

The Phazûl and Ornzai prefer to alter the natural order within limits of reason or following spiritual guide-

lines believed to have been given by the Lifeweb itself through prophets and prophecy. They stand for the primal organic. The Zûldor and Galzai, and most Xanxi, feel they can alter things through metamorphosis at will; they prefer the synthetic organic.

All Symbiots recognize that their metamorphic powers extend only over life; they cannot affect non-living objects. Indeed, combining non-living things, like cybernetics, with metamorphic biomass is not easy. It is as if the non-living or synthetic nature of these things interferes with metamorphosis, or perhaps it generates an opposite charge to Lifeforce.

Nonetheless, merging flesh and machine can be accomplished; it simply requires more ingenuity and work on the part of the biotechnician. (See *Biotech*, later this chapter.)

Unraveling the Web

There are a number of things a Symbiot dreads, but among the worst is becoming unresonant with the Lifeweb. When one loses contact with the Lifeweb, one can no longer metamorphose. Essentially, such a person is no longer a Symbiot.

While it is extremely rare, some few Symbiots have lost their privileged status and became mundane. They lost their metamorphic connection either through Antipathy or exposure to Nullity or a Nullhaven. The Antipathic ones lost their synergetic ability but continued to suffer their Antipathic diseases; only one of them was known to regain his connection, and this after a grueling trial and ordeal overseen by a Phazûl priest.

For those exposed to Nullity, their connection was severed and their motherforms returned to their original, pre-conversion forms. It was as if they had never been Symbiots at all. Those native to Symbiot society never mentally recovered from the loss, while the foreign converts soon adapted.

Dead Spaces: Nullities (Urgzoth)

There are places where life does not flourish, where the strands of the Lifeweb are weak and Lifeforce pulses only slowly or not at all. Such places are greatly feared by Symbiots, for they can drain Lifeforce and metamorphic powers — they can snuff out a Symbiot's soul.

It is extremely rare for a Nullity to occur on a living, populated world, although a few have been known to exist (Ikarzurg on Abydos; Balzûg on Rusalka, the third planet in the Chernobog system; and Shajahn on Raven, a Vuldrok world). In addition, the lairs of those who openly worship Nullity, such as the Urgunzai Hive, are called Nullhavens, for some Null effects usually exist around them.

Most Nullities exist in the depths of space, encountered occasionally by exploring starships. It is believed that deep space, the supposedly empty region between solar systems, is where the most dangerous Nullities exist. Some



Symbiots believe that these are the cause of the fading of the stars, as they drain solar Lifeforce into oblivion. Some even claim that entities exist in these Nullities, beings of pure thought with no bodies or material nature, and that they destroy the light of the stars because it is harmful to them. Humans are sometimes accused of beings agents for these unseen forces.

Urgunzai Hivers have been known to exhibit Null powers, such as the spread of metamorphic diseases (against which Symbiotic powers have no defense), accelerated entropic decay, and even causing inexplicable, suicidal depression.

Because of its dangers, Nullities and their effects have been little studied by Symbiots. Powerful taboos against exposure prevent investigation. Like Antinomy and demonism among Church-going Known Worlders, Nullity and its servants are considered pure evil.

Motherform (Khidar)

All True Symbiots are metamorphs to some degree, but each possesses a "motherform" — its natural shape. This shape may exhibit certain powers which were not available to that person before symbiosis conversion — indeed, the Symbiot may no longer even resemble its original species. A Symbiot's motherform is bought with normal traits (characteristics, blessings/ curses, etc.) and powers. The cost for powers incorporated into a motherform equals its Synergy level (see below).

A Symbiot's species provides some motherform features (see *Species* in the *Shifting Identities: Symbiot Society* chapter).

A newly converted Symbiot made from a pre-existing character may spend 15 Extra Points to build its motherform from characteristics, blessings/ curses, Lifeforce and powers. (The conversion process may provide more points; see *Conversion*, below.) No points may be spent in skills or benefices. Synergy costs 3 points per level, while powers cost 1 per level. Lifeforce is 2 per level.

During his imprinting, he then gains another 15 points with which to purchase metamorphic or synergetic powers, chosen from his Hive's list of powers. He may also use the points for Synergy or Lifeforce. (Again, the conversion process may provide more points).

Example: Jonas, a human soldier on Stigmata, has been converted by a Breeder Symbiot. Assuming the Breeder gained no victory points on its roll (and thus provides no additional points), Jonas can spend 15 Extras on his motherform. He spends 6 of them to gain three levels of Armor (3d); 3 points fireproofs his armor (+2d against fire damage); 2 points gives him Claws (see the *Weaponry* listing); and his final 4 points are spent to get four levels of the Metamorphosis skill.

He is then imprinted by a Galzai Hiver. He spends his 15 power points (restricting himself to powers listed for the Galzai Hive): 9 points gives him a Synergy rating of 3, and 3 points gives him levels 1 and 2 of the Synergy powers (Lifesense and Discern Lifeforce). The remaining two points are spent on Lifeforce.

NOTE: Character creation details are provided to give the gamemaster a depth of characterization for NPCs and a sense of how Symbiots balance against humans or other aliens. These details are not intended for player characters. Creating player characters from scratch would require more points to be spent on characteristics and skills, and a list of Benefices, allowing for such things as strong breeding (to represent the Breeder's victory points during the conversion) and Hive rank.

Reversion

A Symbiot's whose motherform is non-human has to metamorphose into human shape to pass among humans as normal. (See *Mimicry*, below.) Things don't always go well when passing incognito among humans, for there are a number of ways a Symbiot can be forced to revert to her motherform — to cancel all her currently active metamorphic powers (but not Synergy powers) and assume her natural shape. Some of these are:

- She can be Commanded to do so (using the Command power, or a psychic or theurgic power), or coaxed to do so with any empathic power (Organic Empathy).

- If she spends or loses all her Lifeforce points, she will revert.

- The Shaping power (see *Biotech*, later in this chapter) can force her to revert. This is a sustained contested action: the Shaper's activation roll versus the target's Faith or Ego + Metamorphosis; the number of victory points the Shaper needs is equal to the target's Synergy characteristic. The Shaper may roll once per turn, and can perform no other action than Shaping (and maintaining a grapple hold); he must spend one Lifeforce point per roll. Should the Shaper lose contact with the target, all victory points are lost and he must start over.

- Certain Antipathic effects can cause reversion (see *Antipathy*).

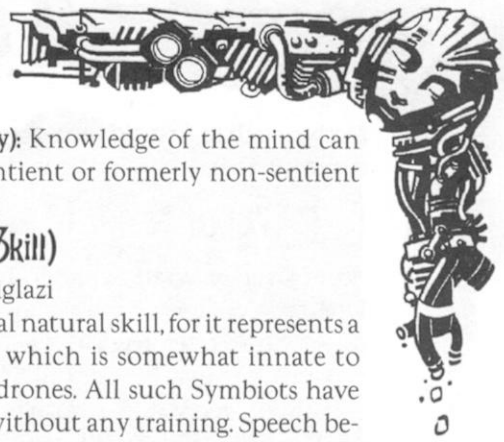
- If she is knocked into a coma or other deeply unconscious state (such as sleep), her body will revert to its motherform.

Certain of these effects (such as losing all Lifeforce points) mean that she may not activate any metamorphic powers for a time (until she gets some points back).

Characteristics

Symbiots share most of the same characteristics as humans, with the following exceptions:

· Instead of the "Tech" characteristic, Symbiots have "Biotech." This characteristic operates much the same, except that it concerns biotechnological science and devices rather than standard technology. Note that it is possible for a Symbiot to also have a Tech characteristic, but it is uncommon. Likewise, it is possible for a human to learn and grasp the principles of biotech, but without long ex-



posure to it (such as living among Symbiots), it is unlikely.

· The Human/Alien pair of opposed traits is replaced by a new pair: Symbiosis/Mundane. Symbiosis is a measure of how fully changed a character is by symbiosis, not only on the cellular level, but also psychic. Mundane represents the opposite, measuring how normal or unsymbiotic a character is. Otherwise, these characteristics operate in similar ways to Human and/or Alien. Symbiosis is sometimes used in rolls to activate certain metamorphic powers. Mundane aids a Symbiot attempting to assume a human or alien shape, or otherwise pass as normal to non-Symbiots; she will be more successful with a higher Mundane trait. (See *Mimicry*, below.)

· In place of Psi or Theurgy, a Symbiot learns Synergy. All Symbiots (even drones and servitors) have at least one level of Synergy after conversion. Psychics or theurges who are converted lose their occult powers, but convert their relevant traits into Synergy at the same levels (whichever is higher) — making for powerful Symbiots. However, from that point on, Psi and Theurgy are considered opposed traits: if a Symbiot were to gain either one of them (from exposure to the Sathra Effect, perhaps), the levels of Synergy which he could gain would be limited.

For more details, see *Synergy*, below.

Skills

Symbiots share the same natural skills as humans, with the addition of Khiglazi. They also can learn two new learned skills: Imprint and Metamorphosis; like all learned skills, their beginning levels must be learned with practice or training, and are not innate. However, a Symbiot without the Metamorphosis skill will find it very hard to use his powers. Symbiots may also potentially acquire any learned skill available to humans and other aliens.

Imprinting (Learned Skill)

Roll: Extrovert + Imprinting

This is the skill required to imprint a new Symbiot convert in the ways of his Hive, his race and his new self. Without proper imprinting, Symbiots tend to get psychotic — as evidenced by the number of rampaging Symbiots in the Known Worlds, usually the victims of conversion seeds who had no Symbiot to imprint them. A good imprinter is a prized member of his Hive; even if she can't breed Symbiots herself, she is often assigned to aid Breeders. See *Conversion*, below, for details on imprinting Symbiots during conversion.

Complementary Skills

· **Charm:** The more likable the imprinter can make herself, the better the message will get through.

· **Impress:** Being nice isn't necessarily the best way to impress a new convert; talking tough can strengthen the power of the message.

· **Leadership:** A Symbiot with a commanding manner can get others to follow her lead even without imprinting them.

· **Science (Psychology):** Knowledge of the mind can help when coaxing a sentient or formerly non-sentient convert into his new life.

Khiglazi (Natural Skill)

Roll: Extrovert + Khiglazi

This is a most unusual natural skill, for it represents a language, Khiglazi, one which is somewhat innate to Symbiots, servitors and drones. All such Symbiots have three levels in this skill without any training. Speech between Symbiots and non-sentient drones must usually be performed with Khiglazi, although certain empathic powers can allow other forms of communication.

Metamorphosis (Learned Skill)

Roll: Wits + Metamorphosis

This is the skill required to metamorphose most powers; without some training or practice in this area, a Symbiot may not have much luck activating powers.

Complementary Skills

· **Physick:** Experience with advanced medicine may help when metamorphosing certain powers, such as Immunity.

· **Science (Biology):** Knowledge of organic anatomy helps when altering anatomy through will.

· **Science (Xenobiology):** Likewise, knowledge of alien anatomy helps when metamorphosing alien traits.

Blessing

Stance

A Symbiot's motherform is not necessarily bipedal — the Symbiot may walk on four or six legs instead. Costs are as follows: bipedal (walks on two legs, 0 pts), quadrupedal (walks on four legs, 1 pt), six-legged (walks on six legs, 2 pts). In addition, while the Symbiot may be a quadruped, he may also be able to walk on two legs, like a bear; additional stances (bipedal in this example) cost +1 point.

Quadrupeds may add six meters to their running speed when using all fours, while six-legged Symbiots may add twelve when using all sixes.

Benefices/Afflictions

Founder's Blessing

This Blessing is only available to members of the Xanxi Hive. It helps protect against Antipathy: the Symbiot gains a +2 bonus on any rolls to prevent activating Antipathy or to cancel it. The cost for this Benefice is 4 points.

Achilles Heel

The Symbiot is particularly susceptible to some specific mode of attack, such as fire, electricity, elemental attacks, etc. He cannot use any of his powers to regenerate or heal damage from this source, and the healing powers of others (synergetic healing, theurgic healing) will not work either. However, normal medical means will be ef-



fective, such as first aid, surgery and even the Elixir wonder drug. This Affliction provides 2 points.

Lifeforce

Instead of Wyrd, Symbiots have Lifeforce (Quenpha). Upon conversion, a Symbiot's former Wyrd is converted directly into Lifeforce. This energy acts just like Wyrd in most cases; it may be spent like Wyrd for similar circumstances, and it is what fuels a Symbiot's metamorphic powers. Like Wyrd, Lifeforce is regained through meditation, sleep, religious events or astrological happenings. It can also be gained through unusual energetic occurrences, such as the hatching of a World Egg or exposure to free Lifeforce. Certain levels of Synergy powers (see below) allow for the drawing of Lifeforce from other sources, such as biomass or other lifeforms.

Synergy (Xilsaam)

Lifeweb Powers are bought very much like Psi or Theurgy powers and rites. Each Symbiot has a level (ranging from 1-10) in a characteristic called Synergy. Some Symbiots also have levels in its opposing trait, Antipathy — like Urge or Hubris, this trait is undesirable and gained through mishap.

Each power is rated by level (again, ranging from 1 to 10). A Symbiot must first have the required level of Synergy before learning that power. A power's cost in Extras Points is equal to its level; the experience point cost is twice its rating (two points for Level One powers). Some powers allow extra levels to be learned; the cost is only one point per rating.

Symbiots have no defense against Psi or Theurgy, and they may not learn either of those powers (except Sathraists, who must then limit metamorphic powers — Synergy is "opposed" to Psi and Theurgy just as the Passion characteristic is opposed to Calm).

Synergetic Powers

In addition to the metamorphic powers listed later, Symbiots may also gain Synergy powers with each level of Synergy they attain. The powers must be learned sequentially, in order of level. The cost in Extras points is equal to the power's level; the experience point cost is 2x the power's rating (although the Level One power costs 2 points).

Lifesense

(Level 1, Perception + Observe, sensory, temporary, 1LF)

The Symbiot can detect Lifeforce — or its absence — within his immediate region (usually about 10 meters radius). It is not perceived through any sense organ but is instead read through a sixth sense of sorts. While Lifeforce occurs in all living beings, it may be stronger or fainter in some than others, due perhaps to injury, disease, age, hibernation, etc. This allows a Symbiot to detect the presence of lifeforms around him; active beings (animals) show stronger Lifeforces than passive ones (plants).

Discern Lifeforce

(Level 2, Symbiosis + Search, sight, temporary, 1LF)

The Symbiot's ability to sense Lifeforce is more discerning. Each being has a particular Lifeforce signature; the Symbiot can read this and tell if the person is a Symbiot, and if so, what metamorphic powers he is currently using. He can also recognize a lifeform's race — human, Ukari, brute, hull rat — if he is familiar with that species' general signature.

Three or more victory points scored on the activation roll allows the Symbiot to perceive an individual's particular Lifeforce signature, his unique stamp. Once he knows this signature, he can potentially recognize a disguised or altered person (four or more victory points).

Organic Empathy

(Level 3, varies, sight, temporary, 1LF)

With a roll of Perception + Empathy, the Symbiot may perceive a lifeform's feelings and basic thoughts — its wants, needs and feelings about the Symbiot. This ability works on any lifeform, including sentient ones, such as humans, and plants (although a non-sentient plant does not communicate much more than a desire for nutrients).

By rolling Extrovert + Empathy, the Symbiot can project emotions and desires, influencing a lifeform. The target will not necessarily be aware that he is receiving someone else's emotions, but he also does not have to act on them — he may interpret them as the voice of conscience, but choose to ignore it anyway. Instinct-driven animals will usually act upon emotions they receive. If the Symbiot is not sending his own genuine emotions, but is faking them, he needs to make an Extrovert + Knavery roll; otherwise, the target will sense something odd about the emotions and may even conclude that they are psychic in nature.

Regeneration

(Level 4, Endurance + Vigor, self, instant, 1LF)

The Symbiot may regenerate injury to his Vitality. He must perform no other action that turn; each victory point gained on the activation roll equals one restored Vitality point. Damage caused by occult powers or artifacts (psi, theurgy or Ur tech) cannot be regenerated, but may heal normally.

Healing

(Level 5, Extrovert + Remedy, touch, instant, 1LF)

The Symbiot may regenerate injury to another lifeform's Vitality. He must perform no other action that turn except touching the target; each victory point gained on the activation roll equals one restored Vitality point. Damage caused by occult powers or artifacts (psi, theurgy or Ur tech) cannot be regenerated with this power, but may heal normally.

Regrowth

(Level 6, Symbiosis + Vigor, self, instant, 3LF)

The Symbiot may regrow severed or severely-damaged limbs or organs. Although the power activates instantly and does not have to be re-activated, it takes one week to a regrow a limb or organ, and only one limb/ organ can be replaced with each activation. If the organ is a vital organ, it can be regrown faster by sacrificing a point of Endurance, at which point the organ is replaced immediately, but the Symbiot will be weak for the following week (-2 on all physical actions). The lost point of Endurance can be regained through experience points or, temporarily, through a metamorphic power.

Note that a Symbiot may not regrow a brain — if his head is severed, he is dead. (Even a plant Symbiot has a nexus of neuronic fibers that acts as a brain, although it is sometimes located in the torso.)

An optional Level 7 version of this power exists allowing a Symbiot to regrow another lifeform's limb or organ (roll Extrovert + Physick).

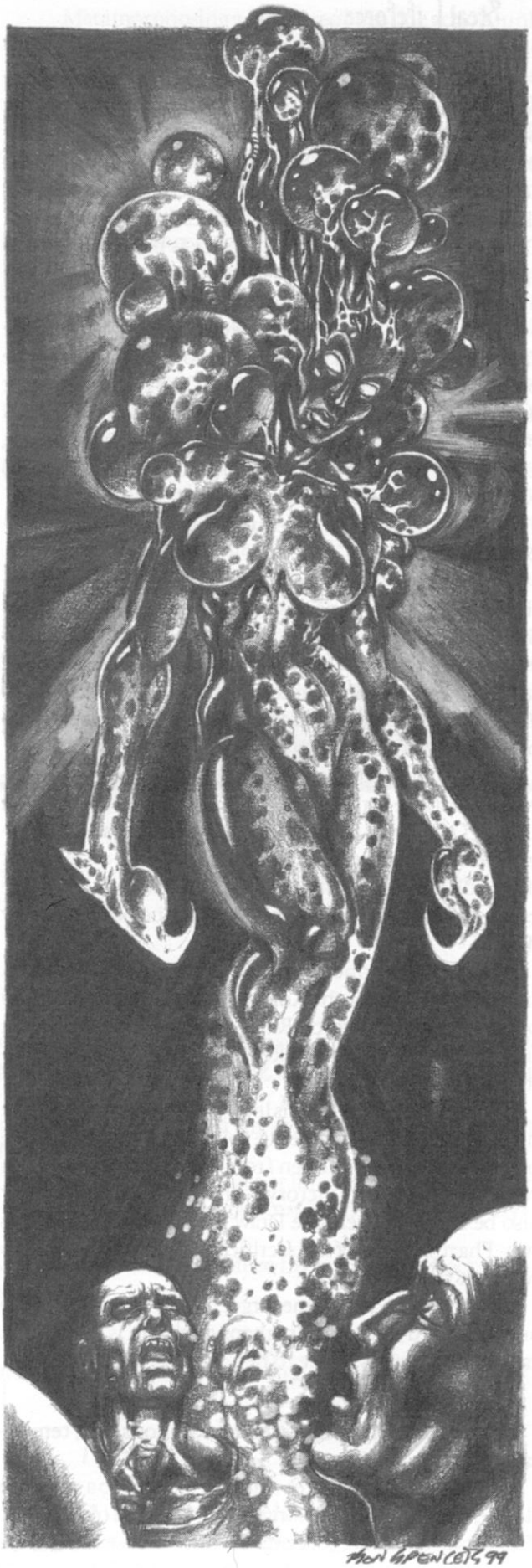
Draw Lifeforce

(Level 7, Symbiosis + Focus, touch, prolonged, 0LF)

The Symbiot may draw Lifeforce from a region's natural energy to add to his own (for one span) or replenish his depleted Lifeforce (permanent until spent). This power may only be attempted once per span, and the same region (about a one kilometer radius area) cannot be drawn from more than once per day by any Symbiot. While the Symbiot draws energy — which takes 10 turns — she can take no other action; if she is interrupted, she must start again.

Certain areas have features which are stronger in Lifeforce, or conduct the region's Lifeforce best. This may be an oddly-shaped rock, a bend in the stream, a deep cave, or a mountain peak. Such areas have a sense of the sacred to Symbiots, who often paint images or words in Xoglazi on or near them, to mark their nature for others to note. Unless such a focus is used, the Symbiot suffers a -2 penalty on his activation roll. Some foci are better than others, and the gamemaster should feel free to award bonuses for high-energy foci. However, on Symbiot worlds, such foci are usually already claimed by an individual or Hive, who will often charge for the privilege of tapping Lifeforce on their land.

During war, the Symbiot need for Lifeforce to power their war machines and metamorphic powers usually leaves a region depleted of Lifeforce: crops may not grow there for a season or more, and animals may naturally shun or avoid the place. While it is not dead, it is not truly alive. Strict taboos are placed on the drawing of Lifeforce during war, lest a region be drained too much or an individual take too much for himself.



Steal Lifeforce

(Level 8, Symbiosis + Impress, touch, prolonged, 0LF)

The Symbiot may draw Lifeforce from an animal or sentient being to feed his own need. Obviously, the target often resists, requiring the Symbiot to first make a combat roll to touch him. The victory points gained on the activation roll equal the amount of Lifeforce drained from the target and added to the Symbiot's own pool. As with Draw Lifeforce, replenished Lifeforce is permanent until spent, while additional Lifeforce points (more than the Symbiot's rating) disappear after one span.

If the target is reduced to zero Lifeforce (Wyrd in the case of most sentients), he is unconscious until at least one point is replenished through sleep. If the target is further drained (pure maliciousness, since no Lifeforce is gained by this), he is in a coma and cannot naturally replenish Lifeforce. If no one infuses Lifeforce into him (see below) within the hour, he is dead.

The stealing of Lifeforce suffers strong taboos in Symbiot society:

- Drawing Lifeforce from a non-sentient source is considered acceptable if necessary. Otherwise, it is an act of desecration and the Symbiot's reputation may suffer for it. Draining an animal to the death is considered a crime unless it was absolutely necessary (the animal was a menace to others or the Symbiot needed the Lifeforce to save others); it is punishable by incarceration or slavery.

- Drawing Lifeforce from a sentient source is considered acceptable only in dire need or if the sentient is an enemy. Otherwise, it is an act of desecration and is punishable by incarceration or slavery (depending on who was drained). Draining a sentient to the death is a terrible crime, unless it was an enemy; this may be punishable by death.

Nonetheless, one of the punishments inflicted on transgressors against the Xokor Tlan's laws is the draining of that person's Lifeforce. Rarely is the criminal drained until death, but he is often kept depleted beyond his ability to metamorph.

Giving Lifeforce: At this level, a Symbiot may also give his Lifeforce to another being: roll Extrovert + Empathy; one Lifeforce point is taken from the Symbiot and given to the target for every victory point rolled. The target may also be the land itself (see Draw Lifeforce, above); in this way, Phazûl priests often sacrifice their own Lifeforce to return it to the land.

If a Symbiot drains one target to give that Lifeforce to another, needy Symbiot (perhaps one who is dying), the taboos are more favorable to her.

Elemental Body

(Level 9, Faith or Ego + Metamorphosis, self, temporary, 1LF)

The Symbiot resonates with the Lifeweb to a supreme degree, temporarily becoming a manifestation of its power. The character undergoes one of four (choose one before activation) of the following transformations:

· **Fire Body:** The Symbiot's body is made of flame. He is completely immune to fire or heat damage, and is unaffected by physical or energy attacks. However, water will dissolve him, creating steam: inflict one point of damage per gallon (or die of damage for a water-based attack). Fire extinguishers will dampen flame but not put it out, and exposure to vacuum will quench it. (If all Vitality is lost, the Symbiot will reform his own body at its previous state at the end of the power's duration.) He has the power Energy Attack: Flame, with both touch and ranged versions, but he adds 4 dice to damage. In addition, flammable objects his flame touches may ignite (roll 1d20: a result over 13 ignites the object). In addition, any natural diseases or pathogens his bodied suffered are purged.

· **Air Body:** The Symbiot's body is made of roiling winds, a humanoid tornado. He is completely immune to wind attacks, and is unaffected by energy attacks. Physical attacks suffer a -4 goal and inflict only half damage. He has the powers Elemental Attack: Wind and Flight: Wings, both at 9 levels.

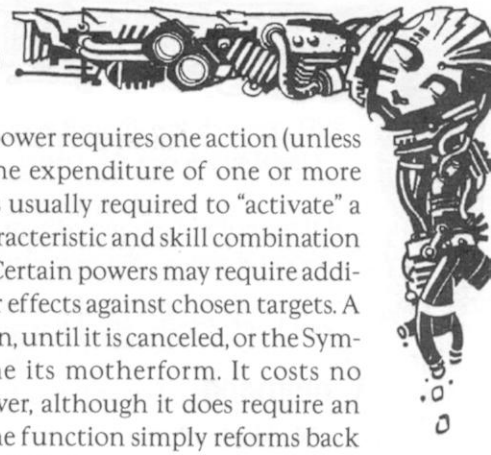
· **Water Body:** The Symbiot's body is made of water, a humanoid whirlpool. He is completely immune to water attacks, and is unaffected by physical attacks. However, electrical shocks do +2d damage, and fire dissolves him, creating steam: inflict three points of damage per turn the flame contacts him. (If all Vitality is lost, the Symbiot will reform his own body at its previous state at the end of the power's duration.) He can dissolve his shape willingly, and ooze through cracks or spread into an existing pool or stream. He has the powers Slippery Ooze and Skin, both at 9 levels.

· **Earth Body:** The Symbiot's body is made of soil and metal. He is completely immune to physical attacks; energy attacks suffer a -4 goal and inflict only half damage. His Strength, Endurance and Vitality are doubled, and all his punches and kicks inflict +4d damage. He has the powers Burrowing, Ooze: Tar Slick and Ooze: Sticky Hands, at 9 levels.

Metamorphic Powers (Phadurzi)

Each Hive has groups of powers it specializes in, listed in the description of that Hive in the *Shifting Identities: Symbiot Culture* chapter. Newly converted Symbiots can learn only their Hive's specialty powers. Later on, they may petition other Hivers to teach them their powers, or experiment on their own to learn them — however, self-experimentation brings the risk of Antipathy (see *Metamorphosing New Powers*, below).

A Symbiot must have learned the proper power before he can metamorphose the desired effect. Powers are described by function, not substance; the new shape can be made of whatever substance the Symbiot declares



when he first learns the power. For example, a Symbiot metamorphoses spines along its back: these could be made of bone or perhaps cactus-like needles. Once the Symbiot has chosen the substance and form upon initially learning to metamorphose it, it cannot later change these without some experimentation (see *Learning New Powers*, later in this chapter).

The powers listed below are grouped by general subject for ease of reference, such as Size for the Grow and Shrink powers.

Each power is listed with its Synergy level and Lifeforce cost. To metamorphose a power, the Symbiot must first learn it (purchase it with Extras or experience points), roll to activate it and spend the listed Lifeforce amount. Powers are also listed with a duration, the time they are active until they are canceled.

The cost to incorporate a power into the Symbiot's motherform is one point per Synergy level of the power. (Levels must be bought consecutively: it costs 1 point for a Level 1 power, and 2 points for a Level 2. Thus, the total is 3 points to purchase the Level 2 power, because the first level also has to be bought). Note that the Symbiot does not have to learn or purchase the power to make it part of his motherform, nor does he need to spend Lifeforce to use it (it is part of his natural shape). However, if he does not learn it, he cannot also metamorphose it separately or cancel it from his motherform.

Metamorphosing a power requires one action (unless noted otherwise) and the expenditure of one or more Lifeforce points. A roll is usually required to "activate" a power; the pertinent characteristic and skill combination is listed with the power. Certain powers may require additional rolls to direct their effects against chosen targets. A power lasts for its duration, until it is canceled, or the Symbiot is forced to resume its motherform. It costs no Lifeforce to cancel a power, although it does require an action. Once canceled, the function simply reforms back into the Symbiot's morphic flesh.

Certain powers may be bought multiple times; this is usually signified by a "+" sign following the Synergy level. When the Synergy level is listed with multiple numbers separated by slashes, each successive number represents the level of Synergy the Symbiot needs to use an extra level of that power. For example, a number listed as 1/3/5 means that the first level requires a Synergy trait of 1, while the second needs Synergy 3, and the third needs Synergy 5. Note: Once a Symbiot has learned the first level of a power, successive levels are cheaper; it only costs one experience point per Synergy rating.

Some powers have different effects at different levels. For instance, the Energy Attack: Fire power has a 4th level which requires touch, and a 5th which can be performed at range. Unless an exception is noted, the lower level must be learned before the higher level can be bought.

Armor

The Symbiot can sheath his body with a layer of hard or absorbent material to prevent injury. Note: Extra levels do not affect the Lifeforce cost of these powers. See also *Ooze*, below.

Roll: Strength + Metamorphosis
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Self

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
1/2/3+	1	**Armor:** The Symbiot has skin or features on his skin that deflect damage, such as scales, thick hide, chitin carapace, etc., or that absorb damage, such as blubber, webbing, etc. Armor value: 1d; + 1d per extra level.
1/2/3+	1	**Fireproof:** The Symbiot's outer skin is sheathed with or secretes a fireproof substance. Armor value (against flame attacks only): 1d; +1d per additional level.
1/2/3+	1	**Reflective:** The Symbiot's outer skin is sheathed with a reflective surface or liquid that effectively blocks the coherent light of lasers and the plasma of blasters. Armor value (against lasers and blasters only): 1d; +1d per additional level.
2/4/6/9	1	**Exoskeleton:** The Symbiot has an outer skeleton which helps stabilize his form and deflect damage. Add +1 to resist grapples. Armor value: 1 per level.

Breathing

The Symbiot can metamorphose alternate breathing functions, from gills to self-contained respiration.

Roll: Symbiosis + Metamorphosis
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Self

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
2	1	**Gills:** The Symbiot can glean oxygen from water, and thus breath underwater.
4	1	**Alternative Respiration:** Methane, chlorine, carbon dioxide, etc. Each atmosphere must be bought separately. Note: Plant Symbiots breathe carbon dioxide and emit oxygen naturally; to breathe oxygen, one



must purchase Alternate Respiration: Oxygen. (Few environments disallow both forms to operate at the same time, although certain recycled environments, such as starships, may filter out too much carbon dioxide.)

7	1	**Internal Respiration:** The Symbiot no longer has to breath and gases that must be inhaled to take effect have no impact. If this is part of the Symbiot's motherform, he must eat almost twice what other people do. Also, the Symbiot has to remember to fake breathing or else his difference will be apparent in many situations.

Command

No Motherform

The Symbiot may issue orders to drones, servitors, non-symbiotic sentient beings and even Symbiots. Her forceful personality ensures that they will follow her commands.

The target must be able to understand the commands; the Khiglazi language is best used with non-sentient beings. The command must be in the form of a declarative word or sentence: "Kill the intruders!" "Surrender!" "Jump off that cliff!" The target may resist the command; if so, the Symbiot's activation roll is contested versus the target's Wits + Stoic Mind.

This power is considered essential for those Symbiots who lead drones or servitors, such as Stigmata troop commanders and the captains of servitor starships. Projecting emotions and feelings is best done with Organic Empathy (see *Synergy Powers*, above).

Roll: Extrovert + Impress (or Leadership)
Duration: Temporary
Range: Sensory

Synergy	*LF*	*Target*
4	1	Drone
5	1	Servitor
6	1	Sentient being (human, Obun, Vorox, etc.)
7	1	Symbiot

Concealment

There are a number of means Symbiots can use to hide themselves from others.

Roll: Wits + Stealth
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Self

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
3	1	**Scentless:** The Symbiot gives off no scent, making him impossible to track by olfactory senses.
4	1	**Cloud:** The Symbiot emits a cloud of fog, ink or some other substance which conceals his exact location from visual senses. Heavy substances like ink only work well in water or vacuum, while light substances (mist) may disperse too quickly in water or outside an atmosphere. An area three meters radius around the Symbiot is covered.
5	1	**Chameleon:** The Symbiot's skin changes color and pattern to mimic his immediate environment. If he enters a different environment, another Lifeforce point must be spent to match its patterns.

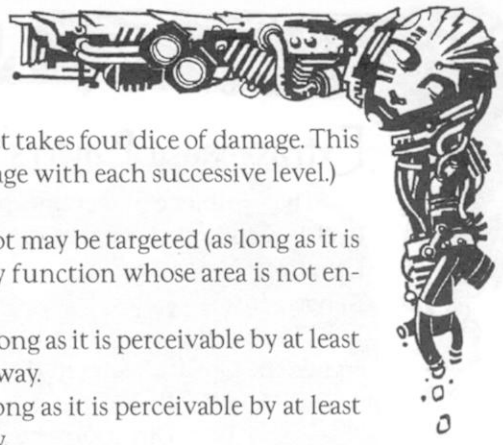
Elemental Attack

No Motherform

The Symbiot can connect with the level of the Lifeweb that orchestrates the weather, and change the weather within a certain area of effect.

Roll: Symbiosis + Shoot.
Duration: Instant
Range: Varies (see *Area of Effect*, below)

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
2/4/6/8	1	**Wind:** Direct a Str 2 attack at a target (+1 goal); if successful, target is knocked down and thrown back one meter. Target suffers one die of damage per meter thrown unless a Dex + Vigor roll is made. If the target grips a stable object, perform a contested action with the wind's Str vs. the target's Str. (Str and distance are doubled with each successive level.)
3/5/7/9	1	**Hail:** Direct a stream of hard ice at a target; if successful, target takes three dice of damage. (Add +3 damage with each successive level.)



5/7/9 1 **Lightning:** Direct a bolt of electricity at a target; if successful, the target takes four dice of damage. This damage bleeds through energy shields on rolls of 1 or 2. (Add +4 damage with each successive level.)

Area of Effect

Immediate: Only one target within a range of 10 meters of the Symbiot may be targeted (as long as it is perceivable by at least one sense). This is the base area of effect for any function whose area is not enhanced.

+1 **Near:** The function affects either one target up to 30 meters away (as long as it is perceivable by at least one sense), or all targets within a three meter radius up to 10 meters away.

+2 **Far:** The function affects either one target up to 60 meters away (as long as it is perceivable by at least one sense), or all targets within a 10 meter radius up to 30 meters away.

Energy Attack

The Symbiot generates flashes of electricity or produces fire from his body.

Roll: Dexterity + Fight or Shoot

Duration: Instant

Range: Varies (see below)

Synergy *LF* *Power*

Shock: The Symbiot emits electricity from his body. The damage inflicted is three dice plus one point of damage per victory point (3d + 1 per v.p.). Targets wearing metal armor suffer -1 protection from this shock.

3 1 Touch: The Symbiot must touch a target to shock him. Roll Dexterity + Fight. The Symbiot can attempt to release his charge after he has touched the target, thus evading energy shields. His attack suffers a -2 penalty to initiative and victory dice damage is withheld; however, the minimum damage for the attack is still rolled (fist, claw, etc.) — if it exceeds the energy shield's minimum threshold, the shield activates.

4 1 Range: The Symbiot may send an arc of electricity at a target up to 10 meters away (+10 meters per extra Lifeforce point spent). He may add an extra, adjacent target for every extra Lifeforce point he spends.

Fire: The Symbiot emits fire from his body. The damage inflicted is three dice plus one point of damage per victory point (3d + 1 per v.p.). Heat damage bleeds through energy shields on a roll of 1 or 2.

4 1 Touch: The Symbiot must touch a target to burn him. Roll Dexterity + Fight. The Symbiot can attempt to ignite his flame after he has touched the target, thus evading energy shields. His attack suffers a -2 penalty to initiative and victory dice damage is withheld; however, the minimum damage for the attack is still rolled (fist, claw, etc.) — if it exceeds the energy shield's minimum threshold, the shield activates.

5 1 Range: The Symbiot may send a gout of flame at a target up to 10 meters away (+10 meters per extra Lifeforce point spent). He may spread this damage to adjacent targets (-2 Init, -1 goal per meter spread, +1d damage); no extra Lifeforce expenditure is required.

Enhanced Characteristics

A Symbiot's physical characteristics may be altered with his metamorphic powers: enhancing muscle power (Strength), improving hand-eye coordination (Dexterity), or bolstering his immune system (Endurance), or any other method by which these characteristics can be raised.

Roll: Symbiosis + Vigor

Duration: Prolonged

Range: Self

Synergy *LF* *Trait*

1/2/3+ 1 Strength

1/2/3+ 1 Dexterity

1/2/3+ 1 Endurance: Raising Endurance does not affect Vitality.

1/2/3+ 1 Vitality: Each level provides one point of Vitality. When the metamorphosis wears off, any damage delivered to metamorphic Vitality disappears.



Extrasensory Powers

The Symbiot can metamorphose special sensory abilities unavailable to most creatures.

Roll: Perception + Focus
Duration: Temporary
Range: Sensory

The duration and range of these powers can be extended by spending Lifeforce points as if they were psychic powers (see the *Occult* chapter in the **Fading Suns** rulebook).

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
3	1	**Direction sense:** The Symbiot rarely gets lost, for he can internally orient himself with the planet's magnetic field. Needless to say, this power does not work in space.
4	1	**Danger sense:** The Symbiot has a sixth sense when something threatens him: his hackles rise or he gets a sudden impulse to flee. The Symbiot may perform one quick, defensive action (such as a dodge or leap to cover) before an unseen or surprise attack occurs. If three or more success were rolled, the Symbiot knows the direction and nature of the attack before it occurs. Five successes allows the Symbiot an entire turn of action before the attack (normal actions or multiple actions may be taken).

Flight

There are a number ways Symbiots can take to the air.

Roll: Symbiosis + Metamorphosis to activate; Dexterity + Vigor to maneuver
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Self

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
4/5/6+	1	**Wings:** The Symbiot has wings which may or may not lift him into the air: his Strength rating must be two more than normal for his species (Str 5 for humans). To lift another person of the same weight, he must have a Strength two more again than the minimum required to lift himself (Str 7 for humans). He moves two meters per turn plus one per victory point scored on the activation roll. Additional levels double this speed (two levels allow movement of four meters plus two per victory point, and so on). Note: Learning special airborne maneuvers requires the Fly skill (the same possessed by Etyri).
3/5/7/9	1	**Glider:** The Symbiot has flaps of skin or some other substance which allows him to glide upon the winds. Note that there must be some wind or thermal present to catch, or else the Symbiot will fall. In addition, his Strength rating must be one more than normal for his species (Str 4 for humans). To lift another person of the same weight, he must have a Strength two more again than the minimum required to lift himself (Str 6 for humans). He moves two meters per turn plus one per victory point scored on the activation roll. Additional levels add one plus one meter to this speed (two levels allow movement of three meters plus two per victory point, and so on). Maneuver is not as precise as it is with wings; the Symbiot may need to make multiple Dexterity + Vigor (or Fly) rolls to aim himself properly.
2/4/6/8	1	**Puffer:** The Symbiot produces an internal, lighter-than-air gas, ballooning himself out as he lifts into the air. If the Symbiot is surprised suddenly, or loses more than half his Vitality in a single blow, he must roll Wits + Vigor to maintain his gas; if the roll rails, he expel the gas and falls. Otherwise, this power acts exactly like gliding.

Hive-Mind

The Symbiot can create a hive-mind of sorts among a chosen group, where they will share emotions and basic thoughts. This works the same as Organic Empathy (see *Synergy Powers*) except that anyone in the group is included. The group must be declared before the activation roll is made; others may later be included in the group, but a new activation roll must be made for them (failure does not cancel the existing group's hive-mind).

The list below shows the Synergy level required for a particular lifeform to join the group, and the Lifeforce cost for one of those lifeform's to join. Extra Lifeforce can be spent to increase the power's range (see *Psi* in the **Fading Suns** rulebook), but the group must all be present (within sensory range) when it is formed.

The leader of the hive exerts some pull over the members: add two to the goal roll for any attempts to fast talk, seduce, orate or use the Command power on members. This power is considered essential for Symbiots commanding troops of drones or servitors on Stigmata.

Roll: Wits + Empathy
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Sensory to activate, distance (1 km) to maintain



Synergy	*LF*	*Member*
4	1	Drone: Two drones may be added to the group for every Lifeforce point spent (it still costs 1 LF to admit one drone).
5	1	Servitor
6	1	Symbiot
7	1	Non-symbiotic sentient being (human, Obun, Vorox, etc.)

Immunity

The Symbiot is immune to a type of condition, such a below-freezing temperatures or Vorox poison. Each immunity must be bought separately; the required Synergy level depends on the immunity desired.

Roll: Endurance + Vigor

Duration: Prolonged

Range: Self

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
		Environmental:
3	1	Cold (does not allow immunity from freezing attacks, such as hail from an Element Gun, although the Symbiot gains +1d armor against such attacks)
4	1	Heat (does not allow immunity from scorching attacks, such as flameguns, although the Symbiot gains +1d armor against such attacks)
6	1	Low Pressure
8	1	High Pressure
		Hazards:
1	1	Alcohol
3	1	Plague (choose one particular strain)
4	1	Vorox poison
7	1	Xaos gas
9	1	Radiation

Limbs

It is not unusual for Symbiots to metamorphose extra limbs to aid them in certain tasks. Some Symbiots even have these additional appendages as part of their motherform. Each extra level a Symbiot uses represents another limb. For instance, as listed below, it requires Synergy 4 to metamorphose two extra limbs.

Roll: Symbiosis + Metamorphosis
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Self

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
2	1	**Elongated fingers:** +6 Dex with fine manipulation.
2/4/6/8	1	**Additional existing limb (arm/hand or leg/foot):** Each additional leg adds +3 meters to the character's base running distance.
3/5/7/9	1	**Prehensile limb (tail, tentacle, tongue, etc.):** No fine manipulation, +2 goal on grabs.
3	1	**Strong tail:** 3 DMG attack, provides counterbalance (+1 Acrobatics skill when balance is an issue) OR +1 meter/victory point when swimming.

Mimicry

The Symbiot's metamorphic ability allows him to mimic one or more functions, from sounds to shapes.

Roll: Wits + Metamorphosis (Mundane + Metamorphosis when mimicking humans)
Duration: See Power description
Range: Self

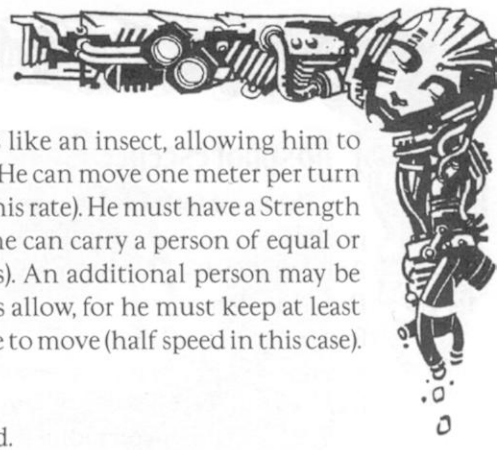
Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
2	1	**Sounds:** The Symbiot may imitate a sound, such as a bird call or gun shot. Reproducing a sound once has heard before may be easier and may allow a bonus to the roll (gamemaster's discretion). Duration is temporary.
3	1	**Voice:** The Symbiot may imitate another's voice. The Symbiot may suffer penalties if he does not know the person being imitated, and may suffer severe penalties if he is trying to mimic voices by memory alone. Duration is temporary unless an extra Lifeforce point is spent to prolong it.
5	1	**Shapes:** The Symbiot may assume a shape and form that resembles another individual. The number of successes approximate how well the image is duplicated. The Symbiot may suffer penalties if he does not know the person being imitated, and may suffer severe penalties if he is trying to mimic shapes by memory alone. The Disguise skill is complementary to this power, especially when the Symbiot must assume to demeanor and manner of the person he is mimicking. Duration is temporary unless an extra Lifeforce point is spent to prolong.

Movement

There are a number of ways Symbiots get around, some of them boosted well beyond their former, pre-conversion capacities. One Lifeforce point can be spent to extend the duration to a span. See also *Flight*.

Roll: See below
Duration: Temporary
Range: Self

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
1	1	**Balance:** The Symbiot has a superior sense of balance; add +4 to any goal rolls involving balance. Roll Dexterity + Vigor to activate this power.
2/4/6/8	1	**Running:** Double the Symbiot's normal running distance with each level purchased. Roll Dexterity + Vigor to activate this power.
2/4/6/8	1	**Swimming:** Double the Symbiot's normal swimming distance with each level purchased. Roll Dexterity + Vigor to activate this power.
3/5/7/9	1	**Leap:** Double the Symbiot's normal leaping distance with each level purchased. Roll Strength + Vigor to activate this power.
4/6/8	1	**Burrowing:** The Symbiot may burrow into the ground and create a small tunnel behind himself. Roll Strength + Vigor to activate this power. Note that, unless the Symbiot has some means to dissolve or rend stone or steel, he may not burrow through rock or metal walls, only dirt. Move one meter per turn plus one per victory point scored on the activation roll (move base four meters with two levels, and base eight meters with three levels). The circumference of the tunnel is equal to that of the Symbiot: the larger the burrower, the larger the tunnel.



5/7/9	1	**Sticky:** The Symbiot's hands and feet are sticky or extremely porous like an insect, allowing him to climb up sheer surfaces. Roll Dexterity + Vigor to activate this power. He can move one meter per turn plus one per victory point on the activation roll (extra levels double this rate). He must have a Strength one higher than his species norm to climb walls (Str 4 for humans); he can carry a person of equal or less weight with two levels of Strength above this (Str 6 for humans). An additional person may be carried with two levels above that (Str 8 for humans), as long as limbs allow, for he must keep at least two limbs attached to the wall when staying in place, and at least three to move (half speed in this case).

Ooze

The Symbiot exudes a chemical or fluid through whatever orifice or organ desired.

Roll: Endurance + Metamorphosis
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Touch

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
1/2/3+	1	**Tar slick:** The Symbiot can spread a pool of sticky tar on an area, object or person (1 meter radius, +1 meter per extra Lifeforce spent). The pool has a Strength equal to its Synergy level plus one per victory point gained on the activation roll. Anyone contacting the tar must roll Strength + Vigor versus the tar's Strength to avoid getting stuck; once stuck, the character cannot move any stuck limbs until he breaks free (repeat the contested roll). However, breaking free does not remove the tar; further contact results in further stickiness.
1/2/3+	1	**Slippery ooze:** As the tar slick above, but this one is like frictionless gel. The radius is the same as the tar. Anyone contacting it must roll Dexterity + Vigor (or Acrobatics) to avoid slipping; subtract one from the roll for every level of the power. If its on the ground, the slipper falls. If on an object or person, it cannot be grasped (or slips from one's grip). On the plus side, anyone covered in slippery ooze gets +3d armor (except against energy attacks).
2/4/6/8	1	**Sticky hands:** The Symbiot exudes sticky tar from his hands (or other limb, such as a tongue), and may grasp or wrest objects from others easily (+2 Str per level). He must simply touch the object (or person); this may require an attack roll if the object is in a resistor's hands or is resisting itself. Add +2 to grappling, wrestling and disarm attacks per level of the power.
3/4/5+	1	**Slippery skin:** The Symbiot exudes slippery ooze from his outer skin (or carapace, etc.). This makes him very hard to grasp or injure. Add +1 goal per level when resisting grappling and wrestling attacks, and +1d armor per level (except against energy attacks).

Pheromones

The Symbiot uses chemical emission to attract others or change their behavior. The victim must be able to smell the pheromones (although those without a discriminatory sense of smell will remain unconscious of them), and be within arms reach. The range can be increased to 10 meters by spending one Lifeforce point.

Roll: Extrovert + Charm or Impress
Duration: Temporary
Range: Arm's reach

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
3	1	**Sexual:** +6 Charm against a specific gender when aroused. One extra Lifeforce point may be spent to increase the duration of the effect to prolonged.
4	1	**Trust:** +6 Impress when trying to gain someone's trust. One extra Lifeforce point may be spent to increase the duration of the effect to prolonged.
5	1	**Fear:** Other characters must succeed in an Ego + Fight roll to engage the Symbiot in hand-to-hand combat, melee combat, or to stay near him when he feels that he is in danger.
7	1	**Fight:** Aggression in others may be triggered and channeled toward a source (another person, an object, a dwelling). Other characters must succeed in a Calm + Focus roll to avoid attempting to harm or destroy that source.



Phosphorescence

The Symbiot's inner light shines out for all to see. Note: Extra levels do not affect the Lifeforce cost to activate this power.

Roll: Symbiosis + Metamorphosis
Duration: Temporary
Range: Varies (see below)

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
1/2/3+	1	**Glowflesh:** The Symbiot's outer skin glows, emitting enough light to brighten a small room. A three meter radius area is lit with each level, and the light brightens and is more intense with each level. The duration is 10 turns; an additional Lifeforce point can be spent to keep the effect going for an entire span.
2/3/4+	1	**Flesh lamp:** A Symbiot limb (finger, hand) or organ (eyes, tongue) glows, projecting light in a more directed but less diffuse fashion than Glowflesh. The light projects 10 meters forward in a one meter arc, plus 10 meters distance and 1 meter arc per level. The duration is 10 turns; an additional Lifeforce point can be spent to keep the effect going to an entire span.
3/4/5+	1	**Flash:** The Symbiot can produce a flash of bright light to temporarily blind his enemies. Anyone who is looking at the Symbiot is affected; they are blinded for three turns plus one per extra level. They may contest with Perception + Vigor rolls to close their eyes in time; each victory point subtracts one turn from the duration of blindness. Blinded targets suffer a -6 penalty to all actions involving sight.

Projectile Attack

The Symbiot can shoot physical objects from his body at a foe.

Roll: Dexterity + Shoot
Duration: Instant
Range: Varies

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
1/2/3+	1	**Slugs:** The character shoots blunt objects from his body. These do 1d damage per level of the power. The slugs may be coated with acid or explode on impact (see below). The range is 5/10 for the first level, and increases by 5/5 for each level thereafter. Note: Extra levels do not affect the Lifeforce cost to activate this power.
1/2/3+	1	**Needles:** The character shoots sharp objects from his body. These do 1d damage per level of the power, but may be boosted with venom or coated with acid. The range is 5/10 for the first level, and increases by 5/5 for each level thereafter. Note: Extra levels do not affect the Lifeforce cost to activate this power. Venom: The needle carries venom. If at least one point of damage was inflicted on a target (i.e. passed through armor), the venom takes effect. The Symbiot must first use the Toxin power to make the venom; see *Toxins*, below. **Acid:** The slug or needle is coated with acid, which burns through armor and flesh. The Symbiot must first use the Toxin power to make the acid; see *Toxins*, below. Explode: The slug explodes on impact. Choose one type of effect (these do not need to be learned consecutively; a Symbiot may know how to make burning slugs without knowing how to make fragmenting ones):
3	1	**Fragment:** The projectile shatters into sharp shards, doing +3d damage.
5	1	**Burn:** The hot Lifeforce plasma encased in the projectile does +5d damage and bleeds through energy shields on a roll of 1, 2 or 3.
7		**Advance ammunition:** The Symbiot's projectiles are considered to be self-replicating — he produces them as he fires. However, some Symbiots learn to produce their ammunition in advance. Roll Symbiosis + Vigor; one projectile may be made plus one per victory point. It takes 10 turns and costs 1 Lifeforce point per projectile (+1 pt for exploding rounds). If venom or acid are added, the Toxins power must be used (see *Toxins*, below). The Symbiot does not need to pay the listed Lifeforce cost to later fire the projectiles.



Size

The Symbiot can change her size. Up to three levels of either power can be metamorphosed at a time. Size also changes mass: cube the Symbiot's new height to get it's new mass (height^3).

Roll: Symbiosis + Vigor
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Self

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
2/4/6	1	**Grow:** x1.5 height, +1 Vitality, +2 meters run per level. When growing, a Symbiot must have a Strength at least one higher than his species norm per level (Str 3 for humans) or suffer a -2 goal penalty on all athletic actions per Str level she is deficient. For instance, a Symbiot with Str 4 metamorphoses two growth levels but does not increase his Str; he now suffers a -2 goal penalty when he fights, climbs or jumps. If he increased his Str to 5 with the Enhanced Characteristic power, he would suffer no penalty.
3/5/7	1	**Shrink:** -50% height, -1 Vitality, -2 meters run per level.

Sonic Screech

Like a Screecher gun, the Symbiot can emit a sonic wail. Damage is one die per level, but characters who have ear protection or hold their hands over their ears can contest this with an Endurance + Vigor roll. The range is 5/10 meters, +5/5 per level. Note: Extra levels do not affect the Lifeforce cost to activate this power.

Roll: Extrovert + Vigor
Duration: Instant
Range: Varies

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
1/2/3+	1	Sonic screech

Special Senses

The Symbiot can metamorphose unique sensory functions, from sonar to superior scent discrimination.
Roll: Perception + Metamorphosis to activate; Perception + Observe to use
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Sight or sensory

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
1	1	**Multifaceted eyes:** The character has eyes like a fly and can see all around him. The bonus for attacking her from behind is halved.
2	1	**Night eyes:** The character can see normally in anything less than absolute darkness.
2	1	Scent: The Symbiot has little problem detecting various smells around him and can easily tell others apart by their smell alone.
3	1	**Dog ears:** The Symbiot can hears sounds higher than those other people can.
4	1	**Sonar:** The Symbiot has bat-like sonar and can detect things in the dark by firing out high-pitched bursts of sound.
5	1	**Infrared vision:** The character can detect heat sources and their intensity.

Stealth

The Symbiot has special means which aid him to move silently and avoid detection by auditory senses.
Roll: Wits + Metamorphosis to activate
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Self

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
2	1	**Foot/paw pads:** The Symbiot has a layer of cushioning on his feet or paws that allows him to move extremely quietly. He gains +4 to the goal number of any movement-related Sneak rolls he makes while barefoot.

Sustenance

A number of nutritional options are available to Symbiots. If this power is not part of the Symbiot's motherform, the Lifeforce cost listed is for the Symbiot to survive on that form of sustenance for 24 hours.
Duration: 24 hours
Range: Self

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
3	1	**Photosynthesis:** The Symbiot gains her sustenance from solar energy. She must bask in sunlight once a day for at least four hours (not necessarily consecutively). Planet species Symbiots usually have this power as part of their motherforms.
5	1	**Air Eater:** The Symbiot can gain her essential nutrients from the air around her: the act of breathing is enough. However, dirty, smog-ridden air may not taste well and may even be poisonous.
7	1	**Omnidigestion:** The Symbiot can gain nourishment from almost any source she can wrestle down her gullet. Her body will also neutralize most toxins those foods might carry (except synthetic poisons and metamorphic toxins). She can even live on a diet of rocks and water.
9	1	**No diet:** The Symbiot requires no outside sustenance; her body recycles it fluids and flesh in an amazing chemical synthesis.

Toxins

The Symbiot may produce toxins deadly to others. Note: Extra levels do not affect the Lifeforce cost to activate these powers.
Roll: Endurance + Metamorphosis
Duration: Varies
Range: Varies

Venom/poison: The Symbiot produces a venom or poison which is transmitted to a target through any piercing attack (claws, bite, needle projectiles, etc.). The venom only affects a target who suffers at least one point of damage from such an attack. There are a number of effects possible (each is considered a separate power, not an additional level of a single Venom power, although each does allow for extra levels):

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
1/2/3+	1	Killing: The venom inflicts one die of damage per level. This may be contested by the target with an Endurance + Vigor roll; each victory point subtracts one point of damage.
3/4/5+	1	Paralytic: The venom paralyzes the target for one turn per level. This may be contested by the target with an Endurance + Vigor (or Stoic Body) roll; each victory point subtracts one turn of effect.
5/6/7+	1	Sleep: The venom causes the target to fall unconscious for 10 turns per level. This may be contested by the target with an Endurance + Vigor (or Stoic Body) roll; each victory point subtracts 10 turns of effect.
1/2/3+	1	**Acid:** The Symbiot produces a corrosive acid which is transmitted to a target by touch. One die of damage is done per level of the power; this damage is delivered for one turn per level of the power or until washed off. For example, a level three acid will deliver three dice of damage for three turns.
+1	+1	**Spit:** The Symbiot may spit his venom or acid at a target within 10 meters (+10 meters per Lifeforce point spent).
		Gas/smoke: The Symbiot emits a cloud of gas or smoke. Anyone breathing it (except the Symbiot emitter) suffers its effects. The cloud lasts for one turn per level of the power. There are a number of effects possible (each is considered a separate power, not an additional level of a single Gas power, although each does allow for extra levels):
3/4/5+		Killing: The gas/smoke is deadly to breath: one die of damage per level for each turn it is breathed. This may be contested by the target with an Endurance + Vigor roll; each victory point subtracts one point of damage. Those who cover their mouths with cloth or similar substance gain +2 on the roll.
3/4/5+		Nausea: The gas/smoke is noxious to smell or breath. Anyone breathing it become nauseous and suffers a -1 penalty per level to any action. A critical failure on any action results in the character collapsing to his knees to vomit for three turns. The gas may be contested with an Endurance + Stoic Body roll; each victory point subtracts one penalty modifier.
2/3/4+		Delirium: Like laughing gas or the smoke of certain plants, the gas causes an altered state of consciousness. Anyone breathing it will suffer hallucinations or experience reality and time somewhat differently. The gamemaster is encouraged to get creative. This can be resisted with an Ego + Stoic Mind roll.

Weaponry

Those Symbiots who do not have any natural weaponry incorporated into their motherforms usually learn this power, so they can metamorphose weapons as needed on the battlefield.

Roll: Endurance + Metamorphosis
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Self

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
1	1	**Hardened blow:** The Symbiot's hand or foot is hardened by thick skin, carapace, bone, etc., such that it delivers +2d extra damage with a punch or kick.
2	1	**Bite, fangs, beak:** The Symbiot has sharp teeth or a beak with which to bite/peck at foes. Damage is three dice.
2	1	**Claws, talons:** The Symbiot has sharp nails or claws on his fingers and/or toes. Damage is three dice.
3	1	**Spikes, quills:** The Symbiot has sharp or hard spikes/quills/thorns with which to pierce a foe's hide. The Symbiot performs a normal attack with whatever limb bears the spikes (fist for hands, tail for tail, charge for spinal row); add +4d damage. In addition, anyone wrestling or grappling the Symbiot's spiked limb will suffer 3d of damage. Some Symbiots can shoot spikes from their body to targets at a distance; see the Projectile Attack power.
4	1	**Sword arm:** The Symbiot's forearms or legs are sharpened like swords, and can be slashed around like swords. Damage is six dice. He can learn fencing actions to use with his fleshy swords.
4	1	**Whip:** A tentacle, elongated finger or other limb is flexible and long enough to be used as a slashing whip. The Symbiot can learn melee actions to use with his organic whip. +1 initiative, -1 goal. Damage is three dice, but this variation can inflict more:
5	1	Piercing tip: The tip of the whip is sharp and causes +1d of damage; venom may be delivered from the tip.

Webbing

The Symbiot can spin webbing from an orifice or limb (finger, mouth, etc.). Similar to spider webbing but on a grand scale. The webbing's Strength is equal to its Synergy level plus one per victory point gained on the activation roll. Anyone touching it must roll Strength + Vigor versus the web's Strength to avoid getting stuck; once stuck, the character cannot move any stuck limbs until he breaks free (repeat the roll). However, breaking free does not remove the web; further contact results in further stickiness.

The webbing may be attacked, but weapons will also stick to it. The Vitality of the webbing is equal to its power level. However, it is susceptible to fire, and takes double damage from flame attacks directed against it.

Once the duration of the webbing has run out, it loses its tackiness and disintegrates.

Note: Extra levels do not affect the Lifeforce cost to activate this power.

Roll: Endurance + Metamorphosis
Duration: Prolonged
Range: Varies

Synergy	*LF*	*Power*
1/2/3+	1	**Snare:** A snare of sticky webbing can be woven into a three meter radius region (+1 meter per level); it must connect to a structure in at least two directions (top, side or bottom).
1/2/3+	1	**Rope:** A rope of webbing can be spun downwards from a height; it must have a porous surface it can hang from. A length of five meters per level plus one per victory point can be spun. The Symbiot may climb up and down the rope with ease (+3 on climbing rolls), but others will get stuck.

Conversion (Xankai)

The only way to create/breed new Symbiots is through the process called conversion, whereby another lifeform is changed through symbiosis into a drone, servitor or Symbiot. This is the process which has made Symbiots synonymous with demons in the Known Worlds, for it is one of the most invasive alterations imaginable, changing a being's body and mind.

Non-sentient creatures that undergo conversion gain not only metamorphic powers but sentience — symbiosis brings with it the mysterious element of consciousness. Sentient beings who undergo conversion most often remain sentient, but their consciousness is now of a different order, and much of their past memories and identity may be erased.

In the period immediately following conversion, the new Symbiot is ripe for imprinting — indeed, it needs some form of imprinting or its metamorphic mind will not cope well with the changes. This is when Hives brainwash their values onto their converts, so that the new Symbiot follows their lead willingly. Imprinting can change with time and experience, but that initial value-system is rarely overwritten or replaced again.

The stages used for conversion are given below; different processes are used to create drones and servitors than that used to create Symbiots.

Most known lifeforms may become Symbiots, including most known sentients: human, Etyri, Vorox, Ascorbite, etc. (Gannok, however, are immune for reasons as yet unknown to Symbiots or Known Worlders.)

There is no known cure for Symbiosis, although exposure to a Nullity may "cure" it. However, other adverse affects may follow such an encounter.

Stages of Symbiot Conversion

1. Activate Breeding

Whether it's through a seed or immediate intrusion, the first step is to activate the Breeding power (see below) against a target. If the target is willing, the Breeding activation roll is made normally; if the target is unwilling, the roll is a contested action. The resisting target rolls his Faith (or Ego, whichever is higher) + Stoic Mind. Only one victory point is required to convert the target. However, if the breeding roll fails, no conversion takes place and the Breeder responsible may never again attempt to convert that target, unless it is a willing convert. (Another Breeder Symbiot may try, though.) A critical failure means that the target may not be converted by anyone for at least a month, and the Breeder must roll to activate Antipathy.

Keep track of the victory points gained on the Breeding roll (after subtracting the contested roll's successes), since they affect the convert's motherform (stage 3).

2. Final Resistance

If the target has successfully been converted, he still has a chance to refuse it. Actually, it is not the target which refuses at this stage, but his body and unconscious mind — the target's ego has nothing to do with it. Roll the target's Human (or Alien if it's an alien) + Stoic Mind or Stoic Body (whichever is higher). If the roll is successful, the target dies — his body/mind refused the symbiosis or was incompatible with it. If the roll fails, the target is now a Symbiot;

proceed with the following stages of conversion. A fumble means that the target is a Symbiot especially susceptible to imprinting: add one success to the breeder's imprinting roll (see below). A critical success reverses the breeding process: the target is alive and immune to that particular Breeder's power.

3. Creating the Motherform

The new convert's body goes through a metamorphosis; his normal features warp and change as if they were liquid, sometimes exhibiting a number of different forms and traits before finally settling into one overall combination. The process takes about three turns, and it is completely wild — none can control it.

The amount of points which may be spent to purchase the convert's new motherform traits is explained in *Motherform* (earlier in this chapter). For every victory point gained on the Breeding roll (stage 1, above), the convert gains three Extras Points to add to his motherform.

4. Retaining Identity

Before imprinting occurs, the fledgling Symbiot struggles to retain its memories and former sense of self; this is rarely completely successful. The fledgling rolls his Ego + Stoic Mind.

V.P.	Effect
None	No memories are retained from the new Symbiot's former life: all learned skills are lost. Beginning Mundane characteristic is 0.
1–2	Scant traces remain: The Symbiot remembers his name and closest family/friends, but nothing else (Who is the Prophet? What guild did I belong to?). Roll each learned skill on a d20 (do not add a characteristic): those that succeed remain but are now rated at 1; those that fail are lost (although see the note on language in the Imprinting stage, below). Beginning Mundane characteristic is 1. The Tech characteristic is 0.
3	Some memories are intact: Name, friends and family, and social status (house, sect or guild membership) remain. Roll each learned skill on a d20, adding Wits to the goal: those that succeed remain but are now rated at 3 (or their former rating, whichever is lower); those that fail are lost. Beginning Mundane characteristic is 2. The Tech characteristic is 1.
4	Substantial memories: Identity, religion, social standing, and rank are remembered. Roll each learned skill on a d20, adding Wits to the goal: those that succeed remain at their former ratings; those that fail are lost. Beginning Mundane characteristic is 3. The Tech characteristic is 3.
5	Most memories: As with three successes (above), but former values (loves/hates) remain. Note that these old values may conflict with newly imprinted values, causing moral dilemmas. In addi-



tion, those learned skills which fail their rolls are not lost but are instead reduced by half. Beginning Mundane characteristic is 4. The Tech characteristic is unchanged.

6 Memories and identity remain completely intact. Beginning Mundane characteristic is 5.

5. Imprinting

This is the stage where a Symbiot (not necessarily the Breeder) imposes his will on the confused fledgling, communicating ideas and values which will be readily accepted (as if he were brainwashed) and rarely questioned; they will form the core of the new Symbiot's identity. The window of imprinting — the time in which the convert can be imprinted — lasts only about 24 hours. Thus, the imprinter must act fast and choose his words wisely. For this reason, the most skilled imprinters are valued highly and often accompany breeders.

The imprinter must be able to communicate with the convert in an understandable language, and usually helps the convert to retain that language until he learns Xoglazi. Only a single success on the roll is required to maintain language relations.

The intent in this stage is not to impart details (there is little time for that), but to impress a sense of overall goals, spirituality and identity on the convert. In other words, a Hive's basic philosophy is imparted ("You are Galzai, which means you must be strong, for others will try to control you. Only those above you may command you; spurn or rule those below. Be mighty and skillful, and one day you will rise..."), the Symbiot's sense of the Lifeweb is told, and the converts rank is given (almost always that of "convert").

The imprinting Symbiot rolls Extrovert + Imprint. If the roll fails, successive attempts may be made with penalties (see *Second Tries* in the Rules chapter of the **Fading Suns** rulebook). Besides the effects listed below, each victory point allows the convert three Extras Points (in addition to the base 15 points; see *Motherform*, earlier in this chapter) with which to purchase his Hive's metamorphic powers (these may also be spent on Synergy, synergetic powers, or Lifeforce).

V.P. Effect

Fumble The Symbiot's mind is broken and its sentience gone; it is now a drone.

None Regardless of how well the convert retained its former identity, its mind cannot calm itself. Unless successfully imprinted within a day of conversion, madness and Antipathy ensue: choose a psychosis from the Antipathic psychoses (see *Antipathy*, below), and an event which will cause the convert to metamorphose uncontrollably.

1 – 2 Basic imprinting: Convert retains one language (whichever the imprinter speaks), understands his Hive identity and values, and knows what is expected of him, but may choose to think and feel otherwise.

3 – 4 Standard imprinting: Convert fully identifies with his new place in the Hive and its goals (he is a mild patriot). However, he can still question orders, especially those that conflict with normal Hive procedures.

5 Strong imprinting: Convert is fiercely loyal and rarely questions authority. He will willingly die for the Symbiot cause.

6 Extreme imprinting: Convert is a fanatic and dogmatically follows his Hive's values, even to the point of turning on his imprinter if he displays actions counter to the convert's imprinting. He will often force himself into foolhardy or dangerous positions for the Symbiot cause.

Stages of Drone/Servitor Conversion

Follow stages 1 – 3, with the following differences: resisting animals roll Wits + Vigor; plants do not resist.

Turning a sentient being into a drone or servitor requires the same stages as Symbiot creation; if successful through the process, the final result is a mindless drone or semi-sentient servitor. For drones, erase all memories, learned skills and Spirit Characteristics, and halve Wits, which is now considered mere animal cunning, not reason. For servitors, erase all learned skills, and halve Wits and all Spirit Characteristics. It is possible for a formerly-sentient being who has become a servitor to regain his former capacities (not memories) through experience.

Perhaps the most horrifying thing to Known Worlders about Symbiots is their ability to convert people into mindless drones.

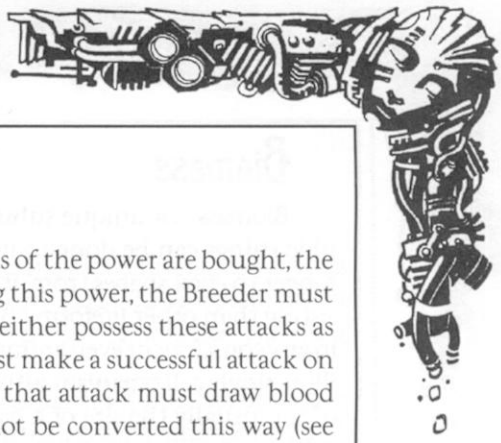
Biotechnology (Quendar)

Instead of manufacturing devices and tools from synthetic means like most technology known in the universe, Symbiots create theirs from organic, living — sometimes sentient — materials. This manufacturing process is very different from traditional means, for it requires the direct participation of a Symbiot who possesses the metamorphic power of Shaping. While the Symbiot may be aided by others with that same power, he is the chief crafter of the final object.

Principles

Like any type of technology, someone has to invent a thing before it can be made. This process of invention may be very deliberate, with someone spending hours or even years devising the workings of an object, or it may be a form of idle play, as a Symbiot shapes organic matter into whatever shape occurs, until one finally works for him.

Most Symbiot biotech was originally built from human tech models: the examples of human tech provided ready-made solutions to common engineering problems. Of course, not all examples were equally valid: the stress points of metal are very different than flesh. Nonetheless,



Breeding

No Motherform

The power required to convert Symbiots, drones or servitors. Unless higher levels of the power are bought, the breeder must infect her target through its bloodstream, like a poison. Upon learning this power, the Breeder must declare which form of attack she uses: claws, bite, thorns, etc. (She must, of course, either possess these attacks as part of her motherform, or be able to metamorphose them before Breeding.) She must make a successful attack on the target before the Breeding process (the stages listed above) can commence, and that attack must draw blood (inflict at least one point of damage). Note that lifeforms that have no blood cannot be converted this way (see Infect Lifeforce, below).

Not every Symbiot has this power, and individuals possess it to varying degrees: some cannot convert Symbiots, only drones or servitors. Those who can convert Symbiots are highly valued. In a sense, the majority of Symbiots were converted by a handful of the same Breeders.

Roll: Symbiosis + Metamorphosis

Duration: Prolonged

Range: Varies (see below)

Synergy	*LF*	*Function*
2	1	Create biomass (see the *Biomass* sidebar, later in this chapter)
3	3	Create drone from non-sentient lifeform
5	5	Create servitor from non-sentient lifeform
+2	+2	Create drone or servitor from sentient lifeform
7	7	Create Symbiot from any lifeform
+2	+2	**Infect Lifeforce:** The Symbiot breeds by altering the target's Lifeforce. All living things possess a Lifeforce, a connection to the Lifeweb which helps determine their morphology. This method of Breeding infects this source. The Symbiot must touch the target before the Breeding process commences; if the target resists, this may require a combat attack (although no damage needs to be inflicted).
+2	+2	**Seed/spore (gorazi):** The Symbiot may produce seeds or spores pregnant with Breeding energy. These can be placed in an area and "programmed" to hatch or release their energies under certain conditions, such as when a lifeform passes nearby or steps upon it. Each seed affects a single target's Lifeforce. The seed's viability — the amount of time it can lay dormant and still breed — varies; the time is chosen during the production of the seed. However, certain environments (extreme cold, radiation) may destroy a seed's breeding potential.
		Conditions:
	0	Crushed by lifeform
5	+1	Touched by lifeform
6	+3	Lifeform passes near (1 meter range, +1 Lifeforce point per extra meter radius — five meters maximum)
7	+1	Prearranged time (anytime within the viability of the seed)
8	0	Specific person only (requires that person's Lifeforce signature — see Discern Lifeforce, in *Synergy Powers*, above)
		Viability:
	0	1 week
6	+1	1 month
7	+2	3 months
8	+3	1 year
9	+4	10 years



Biomass

Biomass is a unique substance. Many metamorphic things can be done to it at will. While it takes longer to coax shapes from, it is less unstable and resisting than other lifeforms. Biomass is alive, but not in any conscious or even animal way. Instead, it is more like a single cell organism, although the smallest blob of it is usually the size of a baseball. It appears like a gelatinous mass, somewhat smooth to the touch, but slightly warm.

Biomass can not only be shaped into specific forms, objects and substances, it can also store data. In data storage mode, it must be left relatively shapeless, in its naturally occurring bloblike form, although it can be cased or housed in a protective shell made from biomass. (Indeed, the thicker the shell, the more protected the data is from interfering energy sources.) Standard Symbiot data has been stored in vocal format and paired with a mouth device allowing it to be spoken back at whomever requests a retrieval. Likewise, data is usually stored by literally reading it through the device into the biomass.

Recently, a Zûldor genius discovered a way to get biomass to display its data on a sand-painting-like viewscreen (BTL7), although the data had to be input as images by drawing them on a device paired with the biomass.

Biomass can also store Lifeforce when in its natural state, acting as a battery for it. Any Symbiot can draw Lifeforce from biomass (unless it has been enclosed in a device allowing access only to particular persons or groups): roll Symbiosis + Metamorphosis; each victory point draws one Lifeforce point.

Biomass is created from biomass through a process similar to cell division. A Symbiot must use the Breeding power, although biomass does not resist conversion. If successful, one blob of biomass creates another blob of biomass. Each Lifeforce point spent on the conversion doubles the size of the new biomass — it may be bigger than its "parent."

Symbiots call biomass *zigchi*, or Chi's Offspring, since it is believed to have been created from Chi Hashimi's inert body after he melded himself with the landscape (or so the story goes...).

early Symbiot biotech resembled fleshier version of familiar technology. Over the centuries, however, biotech has come into its own, as generations of masters and geniuses solved vital problems and advanced the science.

Substances

Biotech is made from either biomass (zigchi) or a lifeform, such as an animal or plant — or even a human being. The Symbiot Shaper uses his power to reform the substance's shape and even substance, perhaps changing skin into scales or blubber into chitin.

Biomass is by far the desired substance; although it takes longer to coax shapes from, it is ultimately more malleable, doesn't fight back (as wild animals and humans tend to do when forcibly altered), and carries no risk of Antipathy for faulty shaping. Hence, biomass has become the main substance of wealth in Symbiot society.

Shaping lifeforms is considered an alternative best done only in emergencies, when no biomass is available. This is because the lifeform can resist the shaping, making it a harder task, taking more time and Lifeforce energy. What's worse, a single failure or setback in this process raises the specter of Antipathy, threatening the Shaper. Thus, lifeforms are rarely used, except by the desperate or mad.

Energy

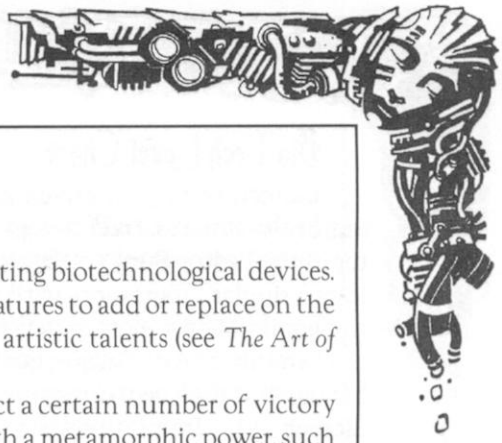
Simple tools like axes or staffs require only substance and form, but higher tech items like lightning guns or starships require an energy source to power them. While humans use fusion energy, Symbiots rely on Lifeforce.

The advantage of Lifeforce is that it is self-renewing; it replenishes its expended stores over time. The disadvantage is that, unlike fusion power, is harder to generate in quantity. For the most part, it is "found" energy. It is collected where it naturally generates, but biotechnicians have yet to unlock the key to generating it themselves wherever and whenever they want. The closest they have come is the controlled reactions of stardrives, but even those are created by the faster replenishment of biomass Lifeforce, not the generation of new sources.

Thus, the main problem with Symbiot tech on a mass scale is that of energy. One key to unlocking massive Lifeforce is a planet's World Egg — it was the hatching of Chernobog's and Abydos's World Eggs which allowed the Symbiot forces such a speedy victory. One of the reasons the Stigmata assault has taken so long is that the World Egg of that planet has yet to be hatched; thus, assault forces must conserve energy, and new energy (harvested from Absolution or Chernobog) must often be smuggled in by relief forces.

A new, as yet not fully tested technology, allows for the harvesting of Lifeforce from the stars, but this is not fully efficient yet and not all technologies can use it. However, if this potential is ever realized, the Symbiot's need for energy will be greatly assuaged — that is, until the suns fade completely. Indeed, already Phazûl priests crow about the dangers of such tech.

The ethics of Lifeforce use is a powerful question among Symbiot Hives. The Phazûl and the Ornzai finally convinced the Xokor Tlan that the careless tapping of Lifeforce in the war effort was actually harming the Lifeweb, by drawing energy faster than the Lifeweb could replenish it. It is said that barren planets such as Nowhere were "killed" by such loss of Lifeforce. This revelation has delayed the war effort even more, and has granted credibility to those against further conquest of human space.



Shaping

No Motherform

The act of reshaping a living thing or person. This is the major power used in creating biotechnological devices. The Symbiot shaper must first have a design in mind, some sense of what forms or features to add or replace on the target flesh. How well designed or aesthetic the shaping is depends on the shaper's artistic talents (see *The Art of Shaping*, below).

Shaping flesh itself is a sustained action; each task requires that the shaper collect a certain number of victory points before the desired effect is achieved. Most shaping involves investing flesh with a metamorphic power, such as a new limb or weapon. Details on how to achieve such effects are listed below.

Some shaping, however, simply involves the rearrangement or alteration of an existing structure, texture or substance, such as turning a Stigmata Garrison soldier's face into a warped, scarred mess. The gamemaster must determine how many victory points are required for such actions. In addition, living beings can resist such invasive torture; see the guidelines below.

In general, the amount of time between sustained shaping rolls is 10 turns, although it is one hour when shaping biomass. The shaper must spend the required Lifeforce cost with each roll, until the requisite number of victory points is achieved. Obviously, it helps for unwilling targets to be restrained during this time.

Roll: Biotech + Metamorphosis

Duration: Perpetual

Range: Touch

Synergy	*LF*	*Function*
1	1	**Shape inert lifeforms (biomass):** Biomass does not fight back, so no contested actions are required, and there is no danger of Antipathy.
4	1	**Shape non-sentient lifeforms (animals, plants, etc.):** Unless the target has been mentally controlled in some fashion, it always resists shaping, and thus causes a contested action: the shaper's activation roll versus the target's Wits + Vigor. If the shaper fails, he must roll to avoid activating Antipathy; if he fumbles, Antipathy automatically becomes active. Failure also means that shaping may not be tried again on the creature for at least a month. Note that even unconscious creatures may contest an unwanted shaping.
8	1	**Shape sentient lifeforms (humans, etc.):** Unwilling targets cause a contested action: the shaper's Symbiosis + Metamorphosis versus the target's Faith or Ego + Stoic Mind or Body (whichever is higher). The target can spend Lifeforce points to boost his successes; each point equals one victory point (three successes). If the shaper fails, he must roll to avoid activating Antipathy; if he fumbles, Antipathy automatically becomes active. Failure also means that shaping may not be tried again on the person for at least a month. Note that even unconscious people may contest an unwanted shaping.
1	1	**Invest powers:** Incorporating powers into a shaping is a sustained action; as when metamorphosing a new power, the victory points required equal the power's Synergy level x3. If the Shaper already knows the power, then the victory points are equal to its Synergy level x2.
4	1	**Invest data:** Biomass can be written over with information. However, unlike human computers, this information is usually input or delivered from a speaking orifice. Such biomass caches are sometimes melded with a servitor that can organize and calculate the data in simple routines (primitive programs or artificial intelligence functions). The amount of data determines the amount of victory points for the shaping (programming). In modern-day human computer terms, every megabyte of information takes 1 v.p. However, Shapers with a Biotech rating of 7 can invest one gigabyte for every 1 v.p.
5	varies	**Invest Lifeforce (self-powered):** The shaper may invest a shaped device of biomass (not a creature or person) with a pool of Lifeforce from which any Symbiot may draw to use powers. This pool replenishes itself over time just as does a Symbiot's Lifeforce. The Lifeforce pool is equal to the number of Lifeforce points spent into it. Only the Shaper and those on the shaping team (those making complementary rolls) may invest their Lifeforce into the biomass.
8	3	**Self-replicating:** The shaping becomes a deep part of the target's Lifeweb pattern, such that any offspring that target produces share the target's powers. So far, no shaper can apply this power to a Symbiot, although it works on biomass, drones and servitors, allowing these shaped lifeforms to breed symbiotic offspring. However, their progeny suffer greater risks of Antipathy.



BioTech Level Chart

Biotech coding, interfacing and quality follow the same rules as normal technology (see the Technology chapter in the **Fading Suns** rulebook). The tech level also follows a similar progression, with some differences: "era" is not applicable, for biotech development began at a high level, thanks to Ann Basque, but then dropped following her death; it took centuries to rise again.

Biotech Lvl	Item/Substance
0	Simple, non-powered items: bone daggers, swords
1	Items with moving parts (wagons)
2	Buildings; chemical production (venom, acid)
3	Personal Lifeforce-powered items; biomass batteries
4	World Egg Lifeforce harvesting; Lifeforce-powered propulsion (aircraft)
5	Terraforming; biomass data storage
6	Spaceships; sentient devices (servitors)
7	Jumpdrive; organic radio transmission/reception
8	Self-replicating biotech; solar Lifeforce harvesting
9	Lesser Urtech (Soul Shard)
10	Urtech (Jumpgate)

The Art of Shaping

There are a number of stages one must pass through to create a biotech device. These are summarized as follows:

1. Design/Invent the Device

The actual process of invention can be simulated with a sustained action. The inventor rolls Introvert + relevant skill (Artisan, Art, Biomech Redemption, Science, Lore, etc.) and totals his victory points. The total victory points required depends on the goal: the more unique, new or unusual the device, the higher the total. There may be three levels of victory: a barely functional prototype might only require 7 victory points, a fully functional model might be 11 v.p., while an expert model might be 17 v.p. Beginning the process with a known model may allow the inventor a bonus on his goal rolls. Likewise, inventing a device using powers the inventor does not know may cause penalties.

The amount of time between rolls varies; it may be days for the first three rolls, then weeks between the next three, and perhaps even years between all successive rolls — invention does not always come easy or immediately.

The inventor does not have to be the lead Shaper, although if he is not, he must communicate his invention to the Shaper. If he can't do this well, the final device may not work to expectations.

Note: When a Symbiot attempts to shape a device of a higher tech function than his Biotech rating allows, he will suffer a penalty the same as a normal technician working beyond his level would. Likewise, he may not invent tech level functions beyond his level of understanding. See the Biotech Level Chart.

There are a number of questions to ask during this process:

a. What does it do and how does it work?

b. How is it powered? (Limited load or self-replicating energy)

c. What does it look like (its shape) and what is it made of (its substance)?

d. What features does it have? (See Features sidebar.)

e. What powers is it invested with? Add one victory point to the total for every power invested, and one victory point for every level of Synergy (only use the highest Synergy in the case of multiple powers).

f. Total the victory points required.

g. Figure the Wyrd cost per roll: 1 per roll, 1 per power invested, and a varying number for features (see sidebar).

2. Choose the Shaping Team

a. Choose the lead Shaper, the Symbiot who will perform the rolls and spend the Lifeforce. The lead Shaper's Synergy rating must at least equal the level of the highest power involved.

b. Choose the Shaper aides (if any). Other shapers can aid the process by making complementary rolls, helping to collect victory points. However, too many cooks spoil the soup; only one extra person per Synergy level of the shaping can help (a shaping requiring Synergy 9 allows for 9 extra hands).

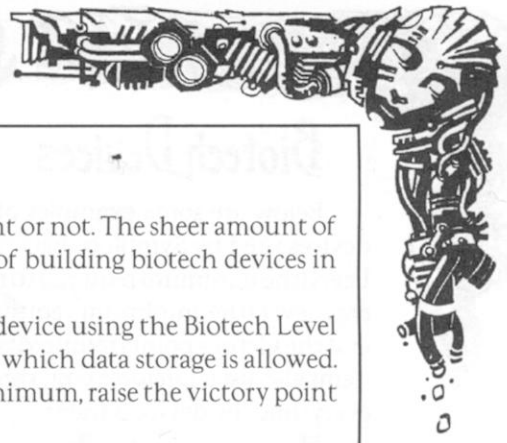
3. Shape the Device

a. Shaper aides make complementary rolls; determine the bonus (if any) to the lead Shaper's goal. Note: These rolls cannot activate Antipathy; a critical failure simply means that the failing aide can make no further rolls.

b. The lead Shaper spends the requisite Lifeforce (he may use points stored in zigchi or drawn from other sources) and makes his roll. If the target is an unwilling lifeform, contest the roll.

c. Figure the total victory points gained; if it's not enough, repeat the process. The time lapsed between rolls is 10 minutes for creatures and one hour for biomass.

d. Once the victory points have been gained, invest Lifeforce (if any). The device is now complete.



Features

The following traits apply only to devices, regardless of whether they are sentient or not. The sheer amount of biotech diversity precludes a complete description here; only the bare framework of building biotech devices in game terms is provided.

Biotech Level: The gamemaster must determine the basic Biotech Level of the device using the Biotech Level Chart. For instance, a biotech think machine is minimum BTL6, the lowest level at which data storage is allowed. More advanced ones require higher tech levels. For each Biotech Level above the minimum, raise the victory point total by one.

Damage: If the device is designed as a weapon, then its lethality must be designed in. Common sense should be a guide here; use the Weapons Chart from the **Fading Suns** rulebook for weapon comparisons. The device's damage should not be too extreme for its function: a small knife is only going to deliver 3-4 dice of damage regardless of what substance it's made of. Add one to the victory points required per die of damage.

Goal bonus/penalty: The device is either easier to use than usual or harder. A bonus often represents a wide-area of affect for the device (a gust of wind). Add one to the victory points required per bonus, and subtract one per penalty.

Incorporated Tech: The shaper may incorporate elements of normal technology into a biomass device. For instance, the shaper could devise a biomass gun that is powered by fusion cells — part of its design incorporates a human-made fusion cell cylinder (where to hold the cell) and crucible (the energy interface). The shaper must have the required level of the Tech characteristic or suffer the usual penalties to work with misunderstood technology. In addition, most technology interferes with Lifeforce, and thus imposes a -3 penalty on Shaping rolls.

Limitation: Introducing some glitch or limitation to a device's operation may lower the required victory point total, as does removing a feature already existent (such as a creature's legs). An example of a glitch might be that a gun overheats and shuts down for three turns after only three shots. This might be -3 v.p. Again, the gamemaster must rule here on amounts.

Metamorphic: The device is actually two (or more devices) in one: it can change shape and function in a predesigned fashion. In other words, a screwdriver can shapeshift into a hammer and maybe a fork besides, or a think machine can metamorphose into a needle gun. Simply design each device's function and powers as usual, total the victory points, and then add +3 for each different device. In addition, the device must have a Lifeforce pool to power its metamorphosing (cost: 1 Lifeforce point per device shift).

Multiple actions (rate): Add one victory point per extra action allowed per turn, and one per extra attack/shot allowed in the same action (such as with autofire).

Ordinary features: Some features cannot be easily simulated with metamorphic powers, such as those ordinarily possessed by common lifeforms but not biomass, such as the ability to walk or react to stimuli. Each such feature incorporated into a device adds to its victory point total. The gamemaster must decide how many points to charge for the feature. For example, the ability to deliver, by speaking, a prerecorded message in a single language may cost one victory point. Such a feature is found on Symbiot message pods, which are also capable of being "written over" with new data and used again (+2 v.p.).

Personal Use: The device may only be used by a specific person or group (such as a Hive). To dedicate a device to a single person, raise the victory point total by two; to dedicate it to a group, raise it by three.

Range: The device can be used at range. Add five victory points if it returns (such as a boomerang).

5/10 = +1 victory point
10/20 = +2 victory points
20/30 = +3 victory points
30/40 = +4 victory points
40/60 = +5 victory points
every +20/+20 thereafter = +1 victory point

Size: XS (+1 v.p.), S (0 v.p), M (+1 v.p.), L (+2 v.p.), XL (+3 v.p.). Add another +1 for every category thereafter: H (huge, the size of a crate); G (gigantic, the size of a brute); I (immense, the size of a tank); GA (gargantuan, the size of a building); M (monumental, the size of a large building or starship)



Biotech Devices

Below are some examples of the variety of biotech devices used by Symbiots. Each is listed with its Biotech Level (the minimum required to make the device), it's Synergy level (the minimum required to Shape the device), and the victory points required to Shape the device. Some items also list a Lifeforce cost; this amount must be spent everytime the device is used.

Miscellaneous Items

Symby (Best Friend) Dolls

Biotech Level: 5
Synergy Level: 5
Victory Points: 15

A Symbiot child's life is extremely primitive, with few material possessions to soften things. While their converted minders provide for all their needs, the children have little to do but run around killing wild pigs, breaking glasses and lording it over flies. In order to relieve the monotony of the children's lives (and to help make the conversion process easier), some shapers specialize in making objects for them. The Symby is a perfect example of that. Shapers imbue these soft and cuddly dolls with the ability to mimic the Symbiots they vaguely resemble — eyes open and close, mouths move and, most importantly, they talk. Boy, do they talk. Shapers invest all kinds of data about Symbiot society into these adorable children's companion, and the Symbies pass it on. They even talk while the child is asleep, passing on more complex lessons to prepare the child for the coming conversion.

Shaset (Fire Extinguisher)

Biotech Level: 3
Synergy Level: 4
Victory Points: 8

While some Symbiots can call down water from the heavens to douse blazes, this does little good inside a building. Thus, the shapers came up with these simple amoeba masses which grow immense upon contact with intense heat. In fact, they grow so rapidly that they smother even the worst blazes in less than an hour. Unfortunately, once they have grown, they take days to die away from lack of food. Indeed, early attempts at fire extinguishers survived on photosynthesis and grew to truly gargantuan proportions before the Symbiots destroyed them or abandoned the site where they were used. Additionally, they stink worse than Grackle Fox excrement, causing anyone around them to suffer a -1 on all their rolls.

Flitter

Wymfurg (Fuming Flyer)

Biotech Level: 4
Synergy Level: 4
Victory Points: 21

Lacking the anti-gravity technology of humans or Vau, Symbiots have come up with a number of clever ways to launch vehicles into the air. One such is the Fuming Flyer, so called because it uses lighter-than-air gas fumes to attain eleveation, and short, explosive bursts of another, more volatile gas to propel it forward, sideways or backwards. The gas is generated in large sacs and emitted from a stalk along the Flyer's dorsal spine. A Symbiot pilot sits in a small control room, looking out through a membranous windshield. A small cargo space is usually hollowed out in the center of the ship, with an orifice on its keel through which cargo can be loaded. Weapons can be grown or mounted onto the Flyer's sides.

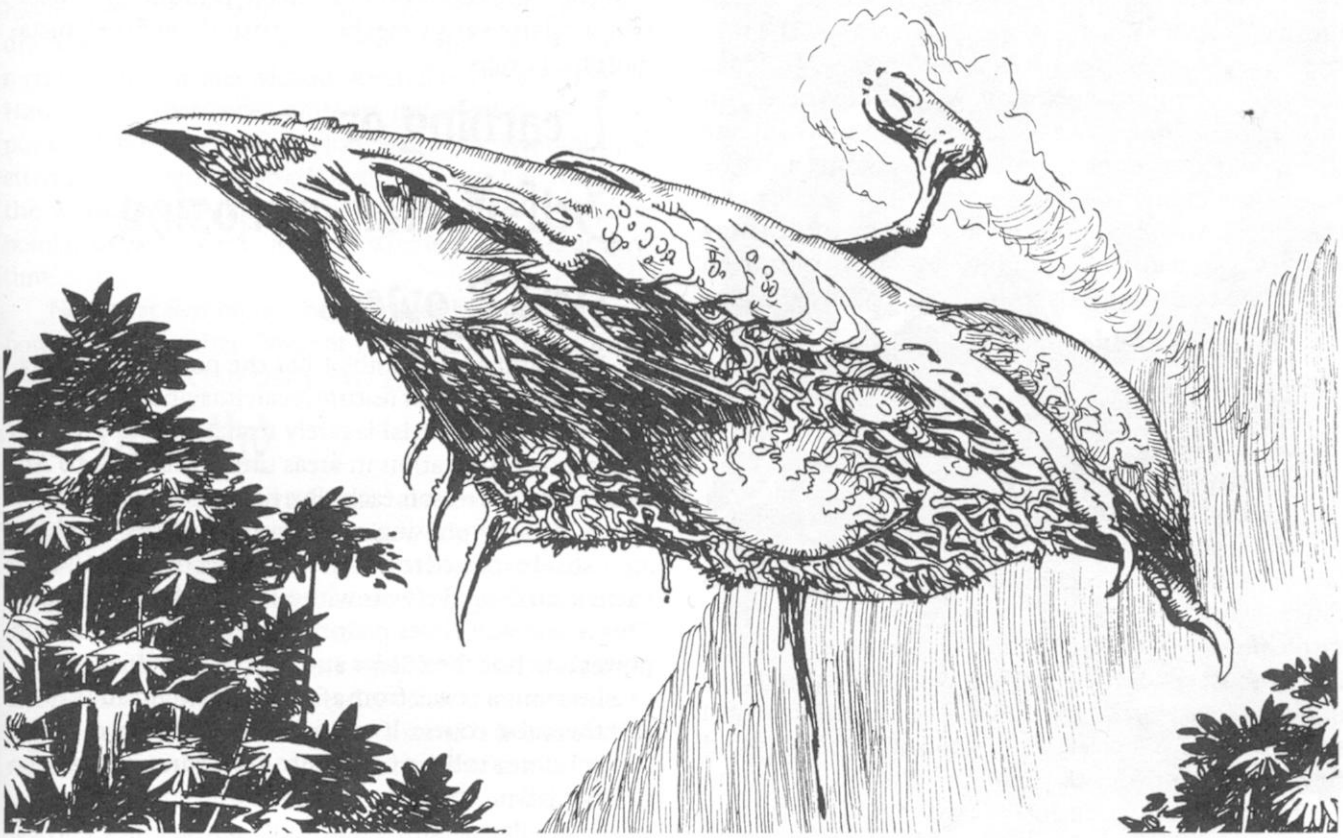
Speed	Armor	Fuel	Rng	Cargo	People
500 km/hr	7+7d	Feed	650 km	1 ton	1/5

Weapons

Xangla (Screamer)

Biotech Level: 3
Synergy Level: 2
Victory Points: 16
Lifeforce: 1

Symbiot society has not had long to develop music and arts, but their dedication to these subjects has lead to some breakthroughs. Screamers are one such breakthrough, designed to play their notes based on the musicians' movements. Since Symbiots often hear both higher and lower ranges than do humans, musicians have sought out ways to reach and effect as much of their audience as possible. Screamers play all across these ranges, hitting high notes and resonating deeply at the same time. Symbiot musicians have used these to bring great joy to their friends — and great pain to their enemies. Expert musicians have been known to cause ecstasy and fear, love and loathing, joyous abandon and horrified catatonia, and even full-blown insanity, in both Symbiots and humans. Thus, Symbiot bands have accompanied warriors into battle, moving wildly to create the most extreme sounds. Successful Dexterity + Performance rolls allow them to change their listener's emotions, though this can be resisted by Calm + Stoic Mind rolls. Basic success may allow them to increase an existing emotion, two victory points might allow them to lessen one, while three or more victory points would allow the musician to create entirely new emotions in the listener. Five or more success are needed for the more extreme effects (catatonia or other temporary insanity), and the musician would have to accumulate a large number of successes (15+) in order to make such an effect last more than a turn.



Gimzord (Jelly Sand)

Biotech Level: 2
Synergy Level: 2
Victory Points: 9

The Symbiots have never managed to effectively duplicate human technology, so they have instead devoted their efforts to messing it up. Dirt Bombs are one example of this. Dirt bombs contain biomass designed to seek out oils and other lubricants, thus clogging the operations of mechanisms of all kinds, including vehicles, weapons and cybernetic devices. Contained in gelatinous packs, they explode whenever they impact with anything hard, such as a man in armor. This explosion sends the pack's gritty gel everywhere, covering a human-sized target from head to feet and impacting a substantial part of a vehicle. Anyone using a mechanical devices it touches suffer a -6 on all rolls involving that device. Shields offer no protection from this. While the pack may explode against a shield, the gel immediately slips on through.

Galset (Pounder)

Biotech Level: 3
Synergy Level: 7
Victory Points: 18
Lifeforce: 1
Range: 10/20

While Jelly Sand works well against powered armor, Symbiots also need ways to deal with regular armor and energy shields. Pounders have proved their worth at this job, and the Symbiots usually include a number of these with their attack groups. They fire pounders from large launchers, and the writhing amoeba-like pounders latch onto their targets. Then they begin the pounding process, their midsections rearing back and slamming forward repeatedly. They attack three times a turn at point-blank range, needing 15 or less to hit and doing 8 dice of damage each time. This often drives through armor and quickly wears out a shield's charges. These do not last for long, however, falling off after 15 seconds (5 turns). Characters can also pull them off, making a contested Strength + Vigor. The Pounder's goal number is 14.

Setkha (Lobotomy Gun)

Biotech Level: 3
Synergy Level: 6
Victory Points: 13
Lifeforce: 1
Range: 5/10

Originally designed to deal with mad Symbiots, Lobotomy Guns have also proven extremely valuable against psychics and theurgists. These small pen-like devices fire larva which burrow into their target's head, seeking extremely active brain areas. They then hatch into tiny worms, destroying chunks of the brain in the process. They then go dormant and die.

If the user succeeds on a Dexterity + Shoot roll and achieves at least three victory points, then the larva has hit the head. Anything less counts as a failure. The tiny larva then burrows in to hatch. It automatically hatches, costing its victim two points of Wits unless the victim succeeds in an Endurance + Stoic Body roll, in which case it only destroys one point. Symbiots usually only use these against the insane or dangerous foes (like psychics and theurgists). Any other use can cause Antipathy. Theurgy can heal this damage, as can physicks using NanoTech Medpaks. Note that shields do not protect against this gun.

Medical Devices

Sobodor (Scanform)

Biotech Level: 2
Synergy Level: 4
Victory Points: 13

In some ways Symbiot medicine is both far ahead and far behind human physicking. On the one hand, Symbiots can make extremely accurate diagnoses and amazing new medicines. On the other hand, they still use leeches. This is because of the advent of scanforms, a biotech liquid they inject into sick and injured compatriots. They then attach specially devised bloodsuckers to remove some of the fluid from the patient's blood. The suckers then turn a number of colors before going inert, and trained Symbiots can tell by these colors just what is wrong (or right) with their subject. This requires Perception + Physick rolls (or Xeno-Empathy if the patient is not a Symbiot).

Urgkor (Antipathy Regulators)

Biotech Level: 3
Synergy Level: 2
Victory Points: 14

Better known to the uninitiated as torture devices, these vicious-looking implements are designed to bring corrupted Symbiots back into full cognizance of their place in the Lifeweb — their lowly, tormented niche. These sharp and sadistic slivers seek out their target's most sensitive pain receptors and go right after them, sending their subjects into shrieking fits of agony. Successful use of these on a Wits + Torture roll does not do physical damage to the target but does create minuses to any die rolls at a rate of one per victory point. Antipathy regulators are only supposed to be used on tainted Symbiots and captives with critical information. Other uses may result in the user gaining Antipathy.

Xilmog (Stabilizers)

Biotech Level: 3
Synergy Level: 5
Victory Points: 18

There are times when Symbiots lose control of their metamorphoses, creating a danger for both themselves and Symbiot society. Consequently, shapers have turned tiny sea organisms into metamorphic inhibitors, preventing changes and the use of existing powers. They inject these into their subjects who must make Endurance + Metamorphosis rolls any time they try to use one of their metamorphic powers.

Learning or Self-Metamorphosing New Powers

Each and every Symbiot has the potential to metamorphose any form or feature it can imagine. However, in practice, such potential is rarely realized to the full. Too much experimentation in areas unknown leads to Antipathy. For this reason, each Hive has strictures against too much metamorphosing of unlearned powers. Symbiots are instead expected to petition a teacher to carefully help them form desired effects without the risk of Antipathy. This is one way Hives maintain monopolies on certain powers, such as the Zûldor and Xanxi with Shaping.

Learning a power from a Symbiot who already knows it is the safest course. It takes one week per level of the power before a roll can be made to determine whether the student learned his lesson or not: after the requisite time, roll Wits + Focus; failure means the power is not learned. The Social (Teaching) skill is useful here. The downside to such training is that the teacher will charge for it, either in the form of biomass or a favor. Once a Symbiot has learned the rudimentary level of a power, he can raise its levels with self-practice (experience) with no danger of Antipathy.

Symbiots — especially those removed from mainstream culture, such as on deep space missions — often get impatient with this system and try to figure out new forms on their own. A risky undertaking, but rewarding if successful.

A Symbiot may only attempt to metamorphose a power equal to or lower in level than his Synergy rating. Is requires a sustained action of varying difficulty: the amount of victory points required is equal to 3x the power's Synergy level. The amount of time between rolls is usually 10 turns.

Roll Wits + Metamorphosis and spend one Lifeforce point per roll. A single failure during any roll means the Symbiot must roll to activate Antipathy (see below); if he fails (does not activate it), he may continue rolling to gather victory points. If he succeeds, he loses all victory points, may not try again for another week, and must contend with Antipathy. A fumble at any point activates Antipathy, cancels any collected victory points and prevents future attempts for at least a week.

If the Symbiot is interrupted or seeks a prolonged rest, his victory points can be saved for 12 hours before he needs to roll again, after which point they are lost.

Once a power has been metamorphosed, the Symbiot has learned that power for the duration of the present drama (or one month, whichever is shortest), and can metamorphose it later without rolling (as with any power). However, if experience points are not spent to learn the power within that time, it is lost again. The Symbiot may attempt to metamorphose it again, but must go through the whole process all over (with a bonus of 3 victory points); or he may buy it with experience points at any time.

Note that Symbiots who have not learned a desired power from another Symbiot or metamorphosed it on their own cannot buy that power with experience points.

Antipathy

Symbiots share a symbiotic relationship with the Lifeweb to such a degree that they can manipulate its functions through their wills. However, things can go wrong — the Symbiot can fall out of sympathy with nature and even become Antipathic to it.

Antipathy is not just a personal affliction: it is a cancerous disease which may spread to other Symbiots, infecting them as well. Since a Symbiot's mind is just as tied to nature as his body, symptoms may manifest as mental derangements and, ultimately, metamorphic malfunctions.

Like the psychic Urge, Antipathy is activated for a span, after which its effects become dormant, waiting for further activation. The levels are cumulative, so when a Symbiot with an Antipathy rating of 3 activates his Antipathy, his Level 1 Derangement, his Level 2 Phobia and Level 3 Faulty Memory are all active.

These effects often cause the Symbiot to undertake actions horrifying to him; he may spend a Lifeforce point to cancel any one action demanded of him by Antipathy (i.e. his Phobia requires that he flee from humans, the source of his fear). If this keeps up, the gamemaster may rule that the Symbiot is at war with his body, and require a contested roll of the Symbiot's Wits + Stoic Mind versus his own Symbiosis + Vigor. If the Symbiot wins, Antipathy is dormant for the rest of the span; if Antipathy wins, the Symbiot may not resist actions for the rest of the span.

Harsh punishments are delivered onto those who become Antipathic (see *Taboos*, in the *Shifting Identities: Symbiot Society* chapter).

Derangement

(Level One)

The first signs of Antipathic contagion begin with a mild derangement: the Symbiot becomes extremely obsessive about something (his work, his love, his vendetta), or he develops an extreme aversion to something he previously loved (his lover, his friends, his work). Alternatively, he can lapse into bizarre behavior, such a glossalallia, where he can only speak nonsense while Antipathy is active, or he can't stop laughing or giggling. He may instead develop unhealthy desires (cannibalism, necrophilia) or engage in



compulsive rituals (washing hands after touching anything, walking only in circles or straight lines). It is up to the gamemaster to ensure the Symbiot behaves in a deranged manner.

Phobia

(Level Two)

The Symbiot now develops an intense and unreasoning fear of something which normally is necessarily not harmful to him. This could be any number of things: herbivores, humans, heights, open-spaces, enclosed-spaces, authority figures, rebelliousness, metamorphosis, technology, biotechnology, members of other Hives, members of other species, etc. The Symbiot cannot interact with this things without becoming fearful and nervous: roll Wits + Stoic Mind to remain in the same room with the object of fear; the more victory points gained on the roll, the easier it is to deal with the thing. If the roll failed, the Symbiot runs away, or if he is prevented from doing so, will breakdown in a fit of screaming hysterics — he can perform no actions except escape while the Antipathy lasts.

Faulty Memory

(Level Three)

The next symptom of contagion is when a Symbiot's memory begins to mislead him. He may remember events differently than they happened or forget who is friends are. In extreme, he may even forget who he is. His learned skills and metamorphic powers are affected at this level: roll 1d20 every time he wants to use one; if the result is over 13, he has forgotten how to use that skill (it's rating is 0).

Metamorphic Chaos (Event Trigger)

(Level Four)

The contagion has reached the cellular level and short-circuits the Symbiot's metamorphic control. Her shapechanging or power activation is triggered against her will by a particular event. This could be: when the moon is full, when she is hungry (has gone four or more hours without eating), when she witnesses a metamorphosis, when she is in the presence of authority, when she is trying to hide her symbiosis (such as when infiltrating humans), etc. The gamemaster should determine randomly which power is activated; each time Antipathy is active, choose a different power.

Metamorphic Chaos (Emotional Trigger)

(Level Five)

Like the previous level's event trigger, but this metamorphosis is triggered by an emotion. This could be: whenever the Symbiot is angry, afraid (the object of his phobia is present), whenever he is surprised, whenever the object of his derangement is thwarted (someone prevents him from walking a straight line, washing his hands, speaking nonsense), when his love is spurned or his hate enflamed, etc. The gamemaster should determine randomly which power is activated; each time Antipathy is active, choose a different power.

Insanity

(Level Six)

The contagion now fully affects the Symbiot's mind. He develops a permanent mental affliction, such as multiple personalities (perhaps different personalities with each shapechange), solipsism, paranoia, recurrent hallucinations, etc. This insanity can only be cured once this level of Antipathy is lost, although it may be made dormant for a span or so through therapy or empathic commands.

Metabolic Breakdown

(Level Seven)

The Symbiot's body begins to revolt or breakdown. While this level of Antipathy is active, one of a number of effects is possible: the Symbiot must always eat, his healing function is slower than normal (he may not Regenerate and its takes twice as long to heal wounds), he bruises easily (suffers one extra damage point from any physical attack) or bleeds easily (takes one damage point each turn for three turns after suffering an open wound), etc.

Wasting Sickness

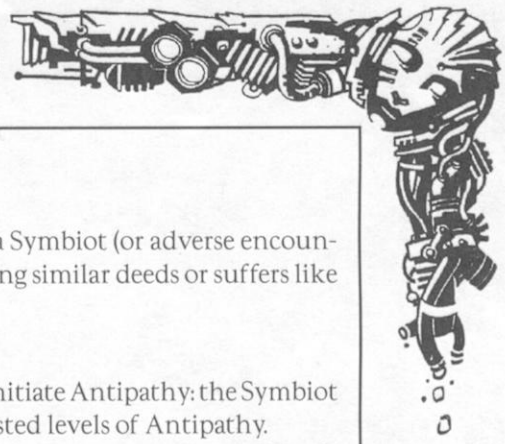
(Level Eight)

The Symbiot's body begins to feed on itself, causing permanent loss of Vitality, Lifeforce or even motherform powers. Each time this level of Antipathy is active, choose one of these categories and erase a point or level from the traits or motherform power. This point/ level is not replenished when the Antipathy goes dormant, but is a permanent loss (unless the Symbiot spends experience points to repurchase the trait/ level).

Contagion

(Level Nine)

At this level, the Antipathic disease is no longer contained by the Symbiot's body and taints the surrounding Lifeweb. Any other drone, servitor or Symbiot contacting the contagious one automatically gains one active level of Antipathy — no roll can prevent this. Contact is defined as physical touch (this can be from the contagious one's powers — his Projectile Attack is contagious) or energy transfer (Lifeforce draw or gain, assault by an Energy Attack), or empathic contact (Organic Empathy, Hive-Mind).This level of Antipathy is perpetual until the level is lost. The only way to prevent the contagious Symbiot from spreading the disease is to burn him to ashes with fire or hot plasma (blaster bolts), or some similar molten doom.



Antipathy

Antipathy is gained through roleplaying. Certain acts or deeds undertaken by a Symbiot (or adverse encounters) may cause Antipathy to occur, and from there slowly grow if she keep performing similar deeds or suffers like encounters.

Gaining Antipathy

Below is a list of taboos which, when a character transgresses against them, may initiate Antipathy: the Symbiot should roll the characteristic and skill given; if she fails this roll, she gains the suggested levels of Antipathy.

Taboo	Roll	Levels
Stealing Lifeforce (from unwilling victim)	Ego + Stoic Mind	1
Completely draining a victim or region of Lifeforce	Ego + Stoic Mind	1-2
Exposure to Antipathy (a Symbiot displaying *active* Antipathic effects)	Symbiosis + Metamorphosis (+4 goal)	1
Exposure to a Nullity or Null Effect (includes Hubris levels 7-9)	Faith + Stoic Mind or Stoic Body	1-3
Exposure to Antinomy	Faith + Stoic Mind	1
Exposure to a psychic's Urge	Faith or Ego + Stoic Mind	1
Failing a Shaping power roll against an unwilling target	Wits + Metamorphosis	1
Rolling a fumble while using the Breeding or Steal Lifeforce powers	Wits + Metamorphosis	1
Providing Hive-Mind therapy (see *Hive-Mind Therapy*, below)	Wits + Focus or Stoic Mind	1
Harming a Xolotl	Ego + Stoic Mind	1
Killing a Xolotl	Ego + Stoic Mind	2
Damaging a World Egg	Ego + Stoic Mind	2-3

Losing Antipathy

Below is a list of deeds which, when undertaken by the Antipathic Symbiot, may restore her symbiosis with the universe and cancel Antipathy (roll the characteristic and skill given; a success means the suggested levels of Antipathy are lost).

Deed	Roll	Levels
Meditation retreat	Introvert + Focus	1
Submit to torture by another Symbiot	Calm + Stoic Mind or Stoic Body	1
Forsaking metamorphic or synergetic powers for three months	Symbiosis + Metamorphosis	1
Exposure to newly-hatched World Egg Lifeforce	Faith + Metamorphosis	1-2
Exposure to Soul Shard	Symbiosis or Mundane + Stoic Mind or Focus	1-2
Exposure to Philosophers Stone	Symbiosis or Mundane + Stoic Mind or Focus	1-2
Group therapy	Wits + Empathy	1
(Communing empathically within a Hive-Mind. If the roll is a critical failure, however, all members of the Hive-Mind must roll to activate Antipathy for themselves; see above)		
Offering to the Lifeweb : (a region; see the Draw Lifeforce synergetic power)		
Sacrifice a metamorphic power (lose that power)	Faith + Vigor	1
Sacrifice a Synergy level	Faith + Metamorphosis	1





Book Two: Living Planet

Preface

The first portion of this supplement provides background details on Symbiots; this portion shows how to use them in a drama. The characters are sent to the planet Daishan, a world seized by Symbiot forces long ago in the initial Symbiot Wars. The regency evacuated the prominent citizens of the planet and firebombed it with nuclear weapons, leaving behind a scorched wasteland devoid of life. The Symbiot reinforcements arriving from space, pained by even orbital proximity to the now-Null world, left the dead place behind.

Since then, no living human has stepped foot on Daishan. Until now...

Using "Living Planet" with a Pre-Existing Epic

The most likely use of this drama is with a pre-existing or ongoing **Fading Suns** epic. Assuming the gamemaster plans to incorporate this drama into his ongoing game, involving his experienced player character troupe, he should spend some time building towards this drama, by dropping clues or foreshadowing hints throughout his players' previous adventures.

Here are some suggestions:

· Characters with connections to high-level gossip of any of the major factions (noble, Church or guild), may hear some of the following rumors:

— More and more news about the Stigmata Front is filtering into Known Worlds gossip. It is said that the Symbiots have withdrawn from some territory and appear to be weakening. Less and less support ships exit the jumpgate from Symbiot space. (This rumor is true.)

— A highly-placed acquaintance heard from a highly-placed friend of his, that that friend's cousin, privy to the goings-on at the Emperor's court, overheard a conversation of Sir Chamon Mazarin, the Emperor's chief intelligence officer, that the Stigmata Garrison Commander has reopened a spacebase in the Daishan system. So far, any inquiries, official and unofficial have been denied by Imperial sources. (This rumor is true.)

— The buzz from the upper echelons of the player characters' various factions is that something major is going on. Alexius has requested individual audiences with prominent members of these factions over the past weeks, and they have returned from Byzantium Secundus to convene high-level meetings with other officials. (This rumor is true and may affect the player characters; see *Putting the Pawns in Place*, in Act One: Stigmata.)

— Alexius himself has appointed an al-Malik noble to personally head a Symbiot interception force, whose duty is to mercilessly question anyone they suspect of Symbiot taint. Supposedly, even torture is sanctioned. This is certainly to be expected from the Inquisition — but from Imperial forces? It's a scandal. (This rumor is untrue, but any number of al-Malik nobles may capitalize on it to threaten or cajole favors from the player characters.)

· Characters connected to the streets and underworld may hear the following reports:

— The word on the streets is that conscriptions for the Stigmata Garrison have increased recently — guildsmembers, priests and even nobles have disappeared from public places at night, only to be heard from weeks later serving on Stigmata. It is not only the Muster carrying out these press-gangs, but Imperial forces are also involved. (This rumor is true and may affect the player characters; see *Putting the Pawns in Place*, in Act One: Stigmata.)

— Some Symbiots broke through the jumpgate blockade and crash-landed on this world. When authorities ar-

rived at their landed ship, it was destroyed and all signs of its passengers were gone. Inquisitors have been seen sniffing about the city streets for signs of the Symbiots, who surely escaped and have infiltrated this very town, disguised as humans. Why, that stranger over there could be one of them! (This rumor could be true or false; regardless, it should serve to build the paranoia level associated with Symbiots.)

— A local underworld boss has acquired some sort of secret superweapon for use against the Symbiots, and has already uncovered and killed a Symbiot who was masquerading as a local guildsman. The body is supposedly hanging on the gates of the mobster's palace for all to see. This mobster is selling protection from Symbiots; the player characters are advised to see him and pay up, or else the Symbiots may get them. (This rumor is true — to a degree. The mobster is running a protection racket, but he has no special weapon, and the guildsman was a Changed mutant, not a Symbiot. If player characters ask to see the body, they are told "It's too late. We just took it down, 'cause it was startin' ta rot.")

Beginning from Scratch

If the gamemaster is not incorporating this drama into an ongoing epic, or is using new player characters, it is recommended that those characters be given 15 experience points to spend after character creation, to toughen them up for this drama. Otherwise, use *Putting the Pawns in Place*, in *Act One: Stigmata*, to introduce the characters into the new game.

Control Issues

This adventure is somewhat freeform in that characters have control over their actions within a set context, but they are often pushed around by others and limited in their options. This may get some players angry, especially those who like to shoot anyone who gets in their way. Gamemastering this frustration into a good roleplaying experience may prove a bit of a challenge.

Tips are provided throughout the drama on how to handle these moments. Key events where the characters' options are limited (usually at dramatic turning points where they are "herded" by authorities in a particular direction) are noted, and recommendations for handling various player reactions are provided. Between these events, however, the characters' actions and choices will determine and change many things — they are not without free will, and their actions have consequences. However, most actions lead to similar events, although the characters' previous decisions help determined the ease or danger those events impose on them.

This cause and effect may not be immediately obvious to the player characters; again, tips are provided on building an atmosphere of importance around them — their choices really do affect things, and will actually greatly determine the future of human-Symbiot relations.

Outline

Once all the player characters have been created (or have spent their experience points from their last drama, in the case of ongoing characters), the drama can begin...

Act One: Stigmata — The player characters are sent or shanghaied to Stigmata and witness the horrors of symbiosis first hand. They are offered the chance to perform a heroic mission for the Emperor (or are threatened to perform it): a cure for symbiosis lies buried on Daishan, and someone must retrieve it. They travel to the newly recovered Daishan spacebase, and from there are sent alone to a world believed dead...

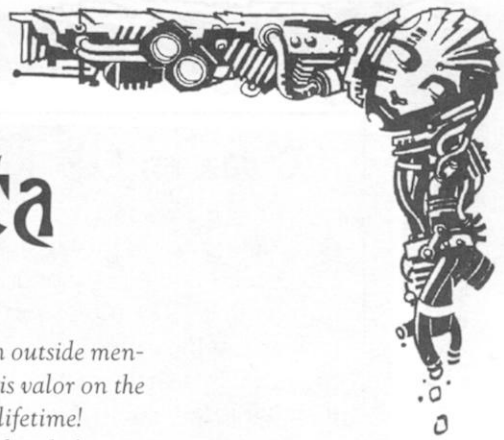
Act Two: Survival — A Symbiot spaceship attacks the characters and forces a crash-landing. The situation on Daishan is not as promised by the garrison authorities: instead of a scorched desert (like Nowhere), it is an arctic wasteland. What's more, their true mission is revealed: contact the local Symbiots, believed to be part of an anti-war faction, and establish a line of communication which the Imperial Eye can later exploit.

Ill-prepared for cold conditions, the group sets out to find a replacement part for their ship. This leads them to encounter the local flora and fauna: more abundant — and dangerous — than previously believed. But animals and flowers aren't all that's here: a rag-tag band of human survivors still eke out a hellish existence.

The survivors deliver the group to their leader, Sister Sergia, a Brother Battle commander. To protect her enclave from the Symbiots, she must offer the newcomers to the metamorphing monsters for conversion. But the lure of escape (using the groups' spaceship) is enough promise for her to risk all their lives: she offers to lead them to the old Bunker, where they can find starship parts — but also the Symbiot leader.

Act Three: The Bunker — Infiltrating the mountain military base, the group encounters drones and Symbiots, who are not as fanatic and hive-minded as all Known Worlders have been lead to believe. Encountering their leader, the characters have a chance to accomplish their mission: to begin new relations with peaceful Symbiots and to retrieve the cure for symbiosis. But Sister Sergia's real dark master, a demon, won't allow it, and the characters' must battle a greater evil than Symbiots before they can return home.

Resolution — Success leads to high Imperial favor, and brings the attention of yet another force onto the characters. The Vau are now curious...



Act One: Stigmata

Honor! Glory! Fame!

Great rewards await those with the courage to defend the Empire from outside menace! The Emperor has promised land and wealth to any hero who proves his valor on the battlefields of Stigmata! See your local Imperial Recruiter for the chance of lifetime!

"Empyrean Grace shines on the valorous soul who faces evil armed with the sword of the Pancreator — his body may suffer mightily, but his soul will rise the higher for it."

— Saint Mantius, Record of the Fallen

— Common Imperial recruiting poster

Putting the Pawns in Place

The first part of this drama sees the characters arrive on Stigmata. They can get there a number of different ways. The gamemaster can devise the best method for his troupe from the options below:

Conscription

The characters are forcibly recruited for the war effort. There are a few different methods the press gangs may use to collect the characters. In all cases, items the conscriptee carries upon his person are confiscated but returned upon arrival on Stigmata — even highly valuable items like flux swords. While the very act of conscription is a foul practice, the Imperial forces don't wish to add thievery to their crimes. Any accusations of theft against recruiters are taken seriously by Imperial authorities (unless the conscriptees are slaves or serfs, of course.)

Press Gangs

The characters are shanghaied by a press gang. Groups of Muster bully-boys and Imperial thugs roam the streets of backwater worlds and slums looking for prime fighting material. Sometimes they approach their prey with offers first: volunteer and get immediate promotion. If refused, they will shadow the characters until the right moment comes (a dark alley, a drunken walk home). Then they club them and drag them off to the assault lander waiting nearby. Once full, the ship takes off for Bannockburn.

Obviously, player characters are likely to put up a fight and not go quietly. The recruiters do not seek to kill or maim their prey (they get paid only for usable troops they deliver); they will thus use stunners, frap sticks and stun nets. These guys are not the cream of the Muster or Imperial crop, however; they don't have much more than these weapons and are not well-armored. If they suffer too much damage themselves, they are likely to cut their losses and run.

It may happen that they get only one or two of the player characters. In this case, the other characters can find out where they were taken (Bannockburn, and then to Stigmata) simply by asking any recruiter they see (who are unashamed of their profession). Any inquiries made of recruiters will elicit offers for the other player characters to join up to meet their comrades on the fields of Stigmata. Voluntary recruits are treated fairly and given an immediate promotion in the Imperial Infantry to the rank of Lieutenant.

Press-Gangers

Race: Human
Rank/Class: Muster bullies or Imperial dregs
Quote: "Quit yer whinin'!"
Description: Usually a big, burly thug or a weedy, quick and cunning rat. The big ones use clubs and fists; the small ones resort to stun guns and frap sticks. The slashes between traits below separate the two types: big guys on the left / rats on the right.
Body: Strength 8/3, Dexterity 5/8, Endurance 8/3
Mind: Wits 3/6, Perception 3, Tech 3
Spirit: Extrovert 3, Introvert 1, Passion 3, Calm 1, Faith 1, Ego 3, Human 3, Alien 1
Natural skills: Dodge 4, Fight 7/3, Impress 6/3, Melee 6/5, Shoot 3/7, Sneak 3/6, Vigor 5/3
Learned skills: Knavery 5, Speak Urthish 3, Streetwise 6
Wyrd: 3
Weapons: One of the following: Stunner, club, frap stick, stun net
Armor: Leather jackets (2d)
Vitality:
Big guys: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0
Rats: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0



You Can't Do This to Me!

What if a character suffering forceful conscription is a member of the Muster, the Imperial forces, or a high-level noble, priest or other big-wig? It actually matters little. Recruiters don't care who you are: as long as you look like an easy sucker, they'll get paid their firebirds. Only once a character arrives on Stigmata will he actually have a chance to protest his treatment (any protest en route will be ignored or disbelieved).

If a character is a Muster member, his guild will do what it can to rectify the mistake, and perhaps even allow him to strip rank from his captors. If the character belongs to any other guild, a Muster guild representative will apologize and offer them bribes, favors and influence in return for their understanding in this matter. If offers of money and power don't convince them to stay and get involved in the war effort, they will be sent home on the next ship but the promises of further recompense will not be followed through upon.

If a character is a major house noble, then Dame Chi Luk Li Halan, the local liaison for the empire to the noble houses, will profusely apologize, then wine and dine the characters, introducing them to so much royalty and high-level personages that their heads will spin. All of these important people are war heroes here, and their tales and demeanor will put whiners to shame. If the character is a minor house noble, she will be treated to some of the same, but with far less intensity. If, after listening to such tales of valor, the noble still wishes to leave and not involve herself heroically in the war, she will be sent home on the next available ship, but her name will be associated with cowardice at intergalactic soirees for some time to come.

If the character is a priest, Bishop Deleus Marcos, leader of the Shriveners, a local group of priests attempting to relieve the pain and misery here, will apologize and offer the priest the comfort of his own quarters. He tries to shame the priest into joining the effort, by showing him bunks of injured soldiers and the monks tending their wounds. If such hardball tactics don't work, the character is allowed to leave on the next available ship, but a letter is sent to his superior explaining Bishop Marcos's distress that so few young priests recognize their true calling these days.

Drugged

The characters are either "slipped a mickey" (knockout drug) in their drinks or are hit with silent stun darts. These more subtle, less combat-oriented methods of conscription are used by contractors, usually professional assassins or bounty hunters, who are paid a high fee for every able body they deliver. In cases such as these, the hapless conscriptee is knocked unconscious and wakes up in a cargo hold bound for Bannockburn.

The Free Cruise

A few extremely clever recruitment contractors put on a big scam rather than risk life and limb struggling with kidnapped conscriptees. These ones usually go for the higher class target, the nobles, priests and guildsmembers who don't walk down dark alleys. To these, they offer a free cruise on a luxury liner or an invitation to a posh soiree on another world. When the invitees show up, they are ushered onto a fine shuttle which promises to take them to their luxury liner or escort. They are actually taken to the contractor's ship, locked in their cabins, and sent to Bannockburn. (Entourages must await a "second shuttle," and will enter the liner through a service entrance — or so the guests are told. There is, in fact, no second shuttle.)

Bannockburn

Most conscriptees are taken first to Bannockburn, the staging area the Muster uses to collect and sort the new bodies. Conscriptees are really just moved from their prison ship into a crowded assault lander or cargo ship, and from there are sent to Stigmata. The weakest ones are weeded out and promised to be sent back home, but it could take months before an outgoing ship heads that way, during which time the failed conscriptee is expected to fend for himself (he must pay for his own food and lodging).

Conscriptees who resist are beaten around by their guards, all under the eye of Imperial Army officers. Treatment is abrupt and cruel until they are on Stigmata, where a more standard military discipline takes over: resistance is dealt with harshly, but those who behave are treated like good soldiers.

Assignment Stigmata

The characters are sent by their immediate superiors (guildchiefs, deacons, counts, etc.) to Stigmata for some mission: check up on Associate Hartwell, provide relief to Father Gambly, deliver this fine silverware to Sir DeLane. Basically, this is just an excuse to get rid of the player characters or to keep them from getting into trouble on more civilized worlds. It's not a permanent solution, but with any luck, their short time on Stigmata will teach them humility or improve their manners — or perhaps ensure they never return at all.

This form of assignment is a punishment, unless some real treasure is associated with it. Perhaps a rumor of Ur artifacts or holy relics is the cause; their superiors can't send anyone important in search of a mere rumor, but if the player characters are so kind as to risk it, great rewards are promised.

Mission for the Empire

The most prestigious manner in which to arrive is to be personally selected by a faction head (guildmaster, bishop, duke) to participate in a mission for Emperor Alexius. The Emperor has asked key house, sect and guild officials to send their best and brightest for a secret mission guaranteed to bring favor on these factions. Even if the chosen ones fail this mission, their factions are promised Imperial favor just for responding.

What if the characters are not the best and brightest their factions have to offer? Perhaps the faction heads think this is just another trick of Alexius' to gain more power over the guilds, sects and houses. They respond — because to do otherwise is not only rude but risks Imperial retribution — but their response is to send a bunch of stooges: the player characters. Why risk the best when a handful of unproven louts can be foisted off on the Stigmata Garrison as accomplished experts?

Regardless of the reasons for their choosing, the player characters are sent to Stigmata with a degree of comfort. If they do not already travel together regularly, or if they come from different worlds, they may arrive separately but all within the same week.

You've Got Mail

Somehow, someway, the characters intercept an Imperial Eye communiqué not meant for them. The Eye finds out about this quick, regardless of whether the player characters told anybody, and seeks them out. The communiqué concerns the search for a symbiosis cure and the existence of a spacebase in the Daishan system. Since they illegally acquired this information, the characters are taken by Imperial Eye forces (using any of the methods listed above) to Stigmata to be interviewed by Salima Sahar, to ensure that they are not spies themselves. Salima offers them the chance to volunteer for the mission (see below). If they actually are spies, they will be ordered to undertake the mission or wind up floating in the moat outside Darmak Station.

Touring the Stigmata Garrison

Whether they arrive in chains or in single staterooms, once on Stigmata, the characters are introduced to the forces there. The only portion of the world they are allowed to see is the main city fortress, Darmak Station. This is the one area on the planet that has not suffered a full Symbiot assault, for its is far from the front lines. Nonetheless, it is heavily defended and entry in an out of its walls is allowed only after long interrogation.

If the characters were sent by their factions or for Alexius' mission, they will be greeted briefly by Baroness



Darmak Station

Built around what used to be the central portion of Darmak City, the capitol of Stigmata, this fortress protects the main command center of the Stigmata Garrison. Its outer walls are 12 meters high and made of ceramsteel. They are surrounded on the outside by the remains of the old city, now just a wasteland of rubble. Nothing in this rubble stands more than a meter high; the watchmen on the wall can see any approaching forces. At various point along the walls are stationed sensory devices which periodically sweep the area, using sonar, radar, infrared scans and sound amplification dishes. Armored flitters constantly patrol the blasted remains of the old city.

Inside the walls are various inner "cities": the large tarmac from which most infantry carriers (hoppers, flitters) come and go; the adjacent infirmary; the troop barracks; the officers quarter; the Brother Battle barracks; the Manifest Light barracks; the Dervish barracks; the Imperial Eye tower; the Garrison Command center; and the starport, which normally holds a few assault landers.

It is only in the barracks or in personal quarters that one can really let down one's hair — any strange or unmilitary behavior displayed elsewhere is cause for instant suspicion by the overly-paranoid troops. Too many Symbiots have tried to infiltrate the base mimicking fallen comrades for troopers to be completely at ease even here.

From Darmak Station, war operations are carried out and coordinated with other bases in human-held territories. Additional support is provided by an orbital platform and a series of fleet ships between the planet and jumpgate.

Lucinda Dulcinea, the raven-haired Garrison Commander from the Hazat household. But she is far too busy with other affairs to spend too much time shaking the hands of minor officials. If the characters were conscripted, they may see her from afar, but not up close.

They are offered a brief tour which is not so much a sight-seeing event as an educational necessity: basic security procedures get explained, and it is clear that bypassing any of these protocols is a sure way to get oneself shot as a Symbiot infiltrator. These include: always identify yourself when entering a new quarter of the fortress, marked by guard posts; always salute a superior officer; volunteer for the Question when an Inquisitor passes by (he may or may not take up the challenge, but volunteering for such invasive interrogation is a good sign that one is not a Symbiot); and always yield the walkways for on-duty troops.

The troops here are less war-weary than those out on the battlefields and fronts, so a true picture of the situation may not be available to the characters. Still, barracks talk gets to them nonetheless: tales of fallen comrades, gross monsters, idiotic superiors, babbling priests, and weird occultism (psychics and theurges) abound.

The Horror! The Horror!

Not too long after the characters arrive, they witness firsthand just what every trooper fears — a forced symbiotic conversion.

A hopper from the frontlines lands in the compound and wounded troopers are immediately carried to the infirmary. As one such trooper is carried across the tarmac in a stretcher, his wound (a long tear down his torso, perhaps from a claw or sword) explodes, spreading greenish spores over the ground and the two medics carrying him.

The poor medics immediately begin to writhe and scream as their skin begins to bubble and bulge like gelatin. Their limbs warp and twist in impossible directions and reform into amalgams of human flesh and scaly armor; insects legs poke from their lower torsos but then snap off and fall to the ground. The medics now resemble lizard men, complete with long tails, rows of fangs and forked tongues. They seem disoriented and confused. One of them, spying the characters nearby, moans something unintelligible and runs at him, its mouth opening wide and its fangs dripping venom.

If the characters engage the monsters in combat, they will soon be aided by guards with submachine guns. Even if the character subdue the lizard drones with the intention of perhaps curing them later, the Stigmata guards finish them off as listed below.

If the characters don't fight them, but run instead (like most everybody else on the tarmac does), some local soldiers will run over from the gates and begin pouring hot lead from submachine guns into them. Once the lizard men drop, the Manifest Light priests arrive with flameguns and burn the bodies to ashes. The smell is horrible, and it lingers over the compound for days afterwards. It seems to linger in clothing, too, and the characters may smell it for some time to come.

Those who stayed to fight are looked upon differently by everybody at the fortress: respect and honor is given with every glance by soldiers, priests and nobles. The characters are heroes.

For those who ran, scorn is heaped upon them with every glance, but those who so accuse them soon look away, guilty themselves of their own cowardice (either during that moment or some past cowardice they once displayed).

Before the characters can cool down and get their bearings, a group of Military Police approaches them and demands in a neutral tone that they accompany them. When asked why, they say: "Orders of Salima Sahar, agent to Emperor Alexius."

Option: If the player characters were not sent by their factions for the Emperor's mission (but were press-ganged), then replacements were sent for them instead. Like the characters, these replacements are in the compound when the spore-bearing soldier arrives. Instead of infecting the medics, however, the spores infect the hapless replacements. When these "elite" chosen are killed, Salima quickly sends the Military Police to grab "that bunch over there" instead (pointing from her tower at the player characters).

Volunteers

The characters are brought to a tower in the rear of the compound and sent, by elevator, to the top. Here, they exit into a circular room with windows on all sides. They are ushered to a table with chairs, and then the guards depart back down the elevator. Two men in black uniforms with the symbol of the Imperial Eye emblazoned on their breasts enter the room from a trap door and simply nod at the characters as they take places on opposite sides of the room, from where they can watch the characters and events in the compound below. Their hands always rest on their sidearms, and their body language displays skill and speed.

Soon, a woman enters, smiling at the characters and asking if they are doing well. This is Salima Sahar (see

Lizard Drones

Race/Caste: Symbiot Drone
Species: Animal
Hive/Rank: None
Quote: "Blaagh! Urggghaaa!"
Description: These hapless humans now look like amalgams of humans and lizards, with scaly skin, long tails, sharp fangs and forked tongues.
Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Endurance 3
Mind: Wits 3, Perception 3, Biotech 0/ Tech 0
Spirit: Symbiosis 3, Mundane 0
Natural skills: Fight 3, Khiglazi 3, Vigor 4
Learned skills: None
Motherform: Armor (scales 2d), Limbs (Strong tail 3d dmg), Weaponry (Bite 3d)
Synergy: 1
Synergy powers: None
Metamorphic powers: None
Lifeforce: 3
Armor: 2d scales
Attacks: Tail (3d), Bite (3d)
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0



Salima Sahar (Imperial Eye Field Agent Daronza Masseri)

Daronza Masseri, granddaughter of Marquis Claudio Masseri, studied at the prestigious Academy for Noble Scions on Ravenna, where she was "adopted" by Jillianna Hawkwood as her best friend and confidante. The young Masseri became disenchanted with the position of her family — under the thumb of the Decados and forced into war with the al-Malik. Further, although she herself doesn't remember her family's homeworld of Daishan (since she was sent to Ravenna at a very young age for schooling), she has long harbored the dream of reclaiming the planet and restoring her family's fortunes.

Rather than returning to her family when her schooling was finished, Daronza parlayed her friendship with Jillianna into a place at the Emperor's court. Quickly picking up on the minutiae of political maneuvering, Daronza pretended disillusionment with the Hawkwoods and a distance she didn't truly feel in order to ferret out the Emperor's enemies. She didn't have long to wait, and was soon drawn into a Decados plot against the Hawkwoods. Her intelligence work enabled Sir Chamon Mazarin, the Emperor's spymaster, to sidestep a trap set for him and earned her an appointment to the Imperial Eye. Since joining the Eye, she has acquired better training in the art of espionage and become one of the Eye's most trusted agents. Daronza specializes in assuming false identities and infiltrating suspect groups.

Her current endeavor sees her working undercover directly for Sir Mazarin to assemble a crew to find the alleged cure for symbiosis — and to contact insurrectionary Symbiots. To protect her house's name from being sullied by her intelligence work, she works under her usual cover identity, that of Salima Sahar, a merchant from the Istakhr market. As far as most Stigmata Garrison officers and troops know, she is an arms merchant ferrying weapons to the front by Imperial hire. There are a number of such contractors, and few pay any attention to them.

Since she is on the Emperor's business, she has broad discretionary powers and resources at her disposal. Should she succeed in this assignment, her future looks very bright.

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Imperial Eye Field Agent

Quote: "Forgive me, noble one, if this humble merchant has displeased you. I seek only your pleasure. Tell me, oh magnificent one, the story of that scar on your cheek, which so distinguishes you. Did you receive it in a duel?"

continued next column

Description: Of average height and just below average weight, Daronza normally has light brown hair and blue eyes. Although her face is pleasant, it is unremarkable. Her collection of wigs and eye lenses and masterful knowledge of makeup allow her to appear however she wishes. She can assume the role of beautiful courtesan or haggard crone given an hour's notice. In even a few moments she can become unrecognizable to most people. Despite her size, Daronza is exceptionally strong and fit thanks to her ceaseless training.

Body: Strength 7, Dexterity 8, Endurance 8

Mind: Wits 7, Perception 8, Tech 5

Spirit: Extrovert 7, Introvert 3, Passion 6, Calm 4, Faith 3, Ego 5, Human 9, Alien 1

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

Learned skills: Academia 3, Bureaucracy 5, Fencing 5, Disguise 8, Drive Landcraft 4, Empathy 6, Etiquette 6, Inquiry 5, Read Urthish 5, Read Urthtech 3, Remedy 5, Search 4, Acting 6, Speak Urthish 5, Speak (various dialects) 4, Stoic Body 4, Stoic Mind 5, Streetwise 5

Wyrd: 6

Weapons: Stunner, Palm Laser, Fencing Sword

Armor: Dueling Shield

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

sidebar). She sits and opens a cabinet behind her, bringing out a decanter of tea and a tray of food and glasses, offering them to the characters.

After sipping tea herself, she then speaks. (The gamemaster should modify her dialogue as appropriate: she will be more polite if speaking to dignitaries than conscripted goons.)

"Let me introduce myself. I am Salima Sahar. And you are...?" (She seeks each character's name, and will also inquire about factions and ranks if they are not obvious or offered by the player characters.)

"As you witnessed in the compound below, the Symbiot menace is a terrible thing. No one is safe from those spores. It's even worse when an actual Symbiot gets hold of you. It changes you — brainwashes you. Destroys your soul.

"But it is not hopeless. You see, there is a cure, an elixir to defend against symbiosis. No, we do not have this wonderful medicine. It is in a far place — a dangerous place. Long ago, Engineers on Daishan devised such a cure. But they, and their medicine, were lost in the final escape from that planet. Although the world has been long dead, their secret lies buried there, waiting for us to rediscover it. Think of how the war would change were such a cure to be returned to us!

"When nuclear weapons scorched Daishan, they sent out a wave of energy, an electro-magnetic pulse in the lan-

guage of the Engineers, which destroyed all functioning energy devices. However, some devices, such as the old think machines of the Second Republic used by the doctors, were protected from such a pulse. Their data is still intact. The means to reconstitute the medicine is in those think machines.

"As you know, we are low on troops here. I can spare no one to undertake such a risky mission as a trip to Daishan. But you — you are newly arrived. I beg you: will you go to Daishan and rescue to the means for our salvation from the Symbiot menace?"

If they do not immediately respond, or they hesitate, or even refuse, she will activate a stud on the table. The center of the table slides away, and a hologram emitter appears. It activates, and the image of Emperor Alexius appears shimmering in the air. Through the magic of holographic technology, he appears to look and speak directly to each of the characters:

"I have asked you here to perform a great service for the Empire. No graver menace threatens the Known Worlds than that of the Symbiots. The war weighs heavily on our forces. But thanks to recent intelligence, a hope has appeared. Agent Salima Sahar has told you about the cure. I am pleased that you have accepted this mission for your leaders. You will be proclaimed as heroes, and tales of your valor will spread far and wide."

(This is a pre-recorded message, meant for those handpicked by the factions. Even if the characters are bunch of conscripted dregs, they get this message.)

If the characters, wowed by Alexius's personal appeal, accept, Salima will smile and say "Thank you. We will leave for Daishan immediately." The characters are rushed from the tower with Salima to the spaceport, where they board a stealth ship and take off for the jumpgate.

If they hesitate and ask too many questions, Salima uses threats: refusal invites not only Imperial disfavor on them, but on their factions besides. If they are conscriptees, she points out that they can always be sent out to the Front with the next hopper. They'll get to see a lot more spores from close up...

If they refuse, she will argue, mentioning the above punishments. If they stand firm, she will say they are free to go. They will not be sent to the Front, but may catch the next ship back to the Known Worlds. However, unknown to them, they will be watched ever after by Imperial Eye forces and some form of vendetta will catch up to them later — Salima does not like to be refused. If they try to tell anyone about the mission, they will be silenced (poison dart, assassin's bullet, etc.).

Troubleshooting: What if one of the characters is psychic and can read minds? Salima has had some training in psychic defense, and is especially watchful for psychic or theurgic activity — there is a lot of this on Stigmata. Her run-ins with Aladotti of the Manifest Light legion have kept her on her toes in case he tries to get one of his penitent psychics to read her mind. Consider her ever ready to contest psychic assault (+2 to any Stoic Mind roll she makes to defend against occult powers).

On to Daishan

The stealth ship that ferries the characters to Daishan is about the size of an escort: the characters are doubled up in cabins, but this is much better than their journey to Stigmata. The ship is an Imperial Eye vessel, and every crewmember aboard is a member of the Eye. Certain cabins, such as the conference room, bridge and engine room, are off-limits to the guests, but they can go anywhere else on board and chat with any crewmember.

The crew doesn't know anything about this mission — they are on a need-to-know basis, and simply do their jobs without question. Many of them were poor freemen before joining the Eye, and they will do nothing to risk their positions in the organization.

The journey takes five days until the ship reaches the jumpgate. During that time, characters are briefed on everything the Eye knows about Daishan. (See *Mission Briefing.*) They are also told to say nothing about their mission whatsoever to anyone who boards the ship. Once at the gate, the ship is boarded by Inquisitors, who cursorily search the ship and crew; they seem annoyed that the vessel is an Imperial Eye ship, and constantly try to question to crew about their mission.

If one of the characters bungles and spills the beans about their mission to one of the Inquisitors, the priest will get intensely interested and demand that their ship be allowed to accompany the vessel to this new spacebase which he was not told about (for which they will need jumpkey coordinates). Salima, fuming at both the Inquisitor and the character who couldn't keep his mouth shut, will refuse to spend the day or so it would take to download jumpcoordinates (and points out that it's against Charioteer protocol anyway).

Unless the characters can find some way to talk the Inquisitor out of examining the spacebase in the Daishan system, Salima will produce a document from the Emperor himself. The characters won't be able to read it themselves, but it's enough to shut the Inquisitor up. He says nothing further and immediately leaves with his crew. Salima delivers a withering gaze onto the loudmouth character and heads to the bridge, yelling at the crew to return to their stations.

The ship enters the jumpgate and exits into the Daishan system. By the next day, they are docked at Spacebase Edo, a floating spacedock only one AU from the nearest planet (the last in the system, called Mado).

Mission Briefing

Objective: To retrieve data or existing samples of a symbiosis cure/inoculation. The last known location of this data (the place where the medicine was synthesized) was a science base on Diashan's southern continental peninsula. Little to nothing is known of this site, so the char-

Spacebase Edo

Grade: Spacebase (floating military platform)
Tech Level: 7
Height: 100 meters
Diameter: 300 meters
Crew: 150 (currently 75)
Passengers: 50 (currently none)
Cargo (Internal): 500 tons
Cargo (External): none
Ship Docks: 2 ships (300m or less) on central platform, 3 ships (100m or less) in internal bays
Supplies: 2 years
Sensors: Neutrino 10
Weaponry: Med Lasers x12 (two per side except top and bottom), Med Blasters x4 (two per turret: one on top, one on bottom), Gatling Lasers x 12 (two per side)
Shields: Standard

Edo was built by Second Republic forces as an outer defense for Daishan. It hardly saw any use until the Symbiot invasion, and then it was evacuated before any space conflict with Symbiots took place. The firebombing of Daishan drove the Symbiots from the entire system, so the base was left untouched from the time of the Symbiot Wars until the Emperor Wars, when first a small al-Malik fleet and then the Stigmata Garrison manned it. It was soon abandoned due to poor resources, but has recently been refitted under orders of the Emperor.

Its crew complement consists entirely of Imperial Navy officers and technicians, and a few Imperial Eye intelligence operatives, whose job it has been to scan the system for Symbiots and to collect as much data on Daishan as possible. The latter task has proved hard due to the drone defenses around that planet; every probe shot has been knocked down before it could radio back any useful information. The base is currently out of probes, as the last one was destroyed just before the characters arrive. They thus have no news of Daishan's surface conditions, only conjecture.

The commander of the base, Tiber Waldon Masseri, volunteered for this dangerous duty in the hopes of reclaiming his noble family's world. It may be years before that can happen, but he aims to be honored highly by his family for his role in their return to Daishan.

An assault lander is always docked on the platform in case the crew needs to make a hasty evacuation. Commander Waldon has sworn that, unlike with Daishan, he shall leave no crewmember behind.

acters must devise their own search strategy once they scout the site.

Recent History of Daishan: During the Emperor Wars, an al-Malik count tried to secretly claim Daishan, and sent a small force into the system to refit a floating spacebase there: Spacebase Edo. They sent a colony team to Daishan, but it was immediately destroyed by Symbiots. Before assault ships could be sent, a rival Hawkwood force entered the system and completely destroyed the small al-Malik fleet. In a diplomatic maneuver, they handed the spacebase over to the Stigmata Garrison. More ships were sent to Daishan, but the Symbiot defenses overwhelmed them, forcing a retreat. The spacebase had to be abandoned again; the forces were better used on Stigmata. Recently, Alexius has ordered it re-opened.

Current Conditions on Daishan: No direct observation of Daishan has been possible of late, due to the Symbiot fighter ships which haunt the planet, shooting down any probes or engaging any ships that come near. These are believed to be auto-pilot entities, operating from old orders, for they display little variance in tactics and will not pursue ships far from the planet.

A recent assault coordinated from Spacebase Edo destroyed all known defender ships. It should now be possible to get a fast ship down to the planet without attracting the attention of any remaining defense forces (if any still exist).

Basing off projections from knowledgeable Engineer scientists, the nuclear firebombing of Daishan has surely left the world devoid of life. The lack of any Symbiot space forces in the system seems to support this supposition; they seem to have abandoned the world. Of course, this means that travel to the planet could be deadly, for the world is surely a radioactive desert.

Equipment: The characters will be given everything they need to complete this mission before they depart, including:

- The characters' own equipment and weaponry is returned to them.
- One pistol and/or rifle of the character's choice per character, with 10 complete magazines/loads of ammunition apiece. (No high tech or powered weapons or shields are provided — the radiation on the world may interfere with fusion cels anyway.)
- Environment suits with radiation protection and full desert survival kit.
- Ample supplies of food and water for long-term survival.
- Personal radio communicators for each member of the party.
- A genetic skeleton key: like a scrambler pad, but better. This TL8 device can bypass gen-locks. (Zelaya Helbron's [see below] DNA is recorded, as is a Masseri family member, in case either of their families' genetic codes were used for locks.)
- A hand-held think machine for scanning, commu-

nicating and data archiving (the medical data on the cure is to be downloaded into this device). Its shell has advanced radiation and electromagnetic protection, to ensure that no data is lost. It can carry up to four extra fusion cels in its shell, in case they need to be protected. Its own cel is guaranteed for one month's use, even if run for 24 hours a day. If no character knows the skill: Think Machine, its basic operation is explained to one character.

SNAFU

Salima and the characters disembark onto a station in turmoil. Engineers and technicians scurry about tearing plates off walls and running wires, splicing wires, reading think machine pads, and banging on things with hammers.

An Imperial Navy ensign greets them with a salute. "I am to take you immediately to Commander Waldon."

If the characters ask what's going on (Salima seems oddly unnerved and unsure if she should say anything), the ensign tells them, as he guides them down the halls, "Emergency repairs, sirs. The life support system is off-line for the moment." If anybody freaks out at the realization that their air supply may be limited, the ensign calmly and coldly looks at him: "It's being taken care of, sir. As you can see." He refuses to answer further questions.

He leads them to an elevator, but instead opens the nearby maintenance shaft entrance. Inside is a cramped shaft with a ladder leading upwards and downwards. He begins to climb, and motions for them to follow. If any of the characters are unable to climb for some reason, they are left behind until the elevator is working again (see *Manifest Light*, below).

After about five minutes of this labor in the increasingly hot shaft, the whole base shakes as if hit by a bomb. The shaft is immediately flooded with cold air, and the ensign, smiling, says: "It's fixed. Told you."

Another 10 minutes of climbing leads them into the bridge. The bridge is filled with much the same activity as the lower decks, but with a less frantic edge; it seems that things are finally getting under control.

The ensign bids the characters to wait while he informs the commander of their arrival. He disappears behind a bulkhead and soon returns following a distinguished-looking noble with an Imperial Navy sash, studded with medals and ribbons.

"Greetings, Agent Sahar," he says to Salima, and then turns to the characters. "I am Commander Tiber Waldon Masseri." He expects them each to introduce themselves. After introductions, he invites them into the bridge proper.

"I apologize for the inconvenience of your climb, but we have only just recently reclaimed this station. It has been dormant for over a century, and not all the systems are fully functional. What's more, many systems don't seem to want to stay on once we activate them. Well, it's finally coming together, though."

Manifest Light

Cut back to any characters waiting for the elevator. As they wait, they are joined by two technicians who seem impatient to get to the bridge, but don't want to climb because they're sure the lift will be here "any minute now." They can explain to the characters what the commander has told the others: station systems are still a little wonky from neglect. Not long after that, the whole station shakes, but the technicians smile. "Life support's on-line again."

As they talk, a group of three ominous people approach and wait with them. They all wear loose gray tunics and cowls (although these are not doffed at the moment) over military fatigues. A fiery symbol is emblazoned on their breasts, and holstered pistols and swords can be seen under their loose tunics. Some in the group may recognize the symbol of the Manifest Light legion of theurges.

The obvious leader of the group, Aladotti (see his featured description and traits at the end of this book), will greet the characters. "You are the new group here, yes? I am Captain Iscarino Aladotti, of the Manifest Light legion."

He motions to the two people by his side, a female with unremarkable features, and a male who is likewise unexceptional in appearance. "This is Deacon Sheila Hamani and Acolyte Gregor Lukan."

He waits for the characters to introduce themselves before continuing. "I know why you are here. The Imperial Eye can hide little from me. I warn you: this mission is dangerous to your very souls. Salima risks not only your lives but the eternal spark of the holy flame that burns in each of you. I have complained to the commander of this station, but he heeds only the Eye. I commend your desire to find a cure, but the very thought of initiating communications with Symbiots chills me."

If a character asks him what he means by that last bit, he will catch himself, realize he has said too much, and simply add: "I think you had best speak to the commander about that." If they don't call him on this slip of the tongue, he will continue, assuming they've been briefed already:

"I agree that there may indeed be some Symbiot puppet masters who display more intelligence than their servants, but we can't rely on such intelligence to sway the war. If there are Symbiots who stand against this war with humanity, why have they not shown themselves?" At this point, Deacon Hamani will cough nervously, and Aladotti will realize that he shouldn't be speaking openly about this topic. He adds: "Well, Salima has explaining to do."

At that point, the elevator arrives, finally working again. Aladotti will lead the characters to the bridge.

Back on the Bridge

Just as the commander finishes explaining the state of the station to his guests, the elevator arrives. Captain Aladotti and his two subordinates in the Manifest Light step onto the bridge (followed, perhaps, by any characters

who did not brave the ladder).

Aladotti will introduce himself and his comrades to the new characters. Anyone with good people skills (Perception + Empathy roll) may notice that both the commander and Salima are nervous around Aladotti; there is obviously some tension between them.

Aladotti then addresses the characters directly: "You have been fully briefed on this mission and undertake it willingly then?" (Remember, they were given detailed briefings on Daishan and their mission during their journey.) If they say yes, Aladotti will stare at Salima and then say. "Then let it commence."

If they say no, or the characters from the elevator question him further about his stray remarks, he simply looks at the commander or Salima for an explanation. Salima will respond: "You have everything you could possibly need to know already. The captain is a thorough man; his long time on the front has made him quite cautious. A commendable trait, and one I've tried to follow on this mission." (She is telling the truth: the think machine she gave the characters does indeed have everything they need to know: it just won't reveal it all until they're on Daishan.)

Aladotti is stone-faced after this; it is hard to tell just what he is thinking of Salima's response. He turns to the characters and pulls a pendant off his neck. He presents this to the person he assumes to be the group leader (whomever did the most decisive talking, or preferably a priest). "This will protect you if you come across Symbiot taint. It belonged to a..." He halts for a moment, obviously holding back grief. "It was important to an officer of mine. His name was Radavan. Illuminatus Radavan. He is dead, but this bears some of his essence and lore. It can be used only once, so use it wisely. All you must do is pray to the Pancreator while holding it, and any taint that is upon you will be expelled. Use it immediately after contact, for the deeper the taint goes, the harder it is to root out."

This is a small relic in the form of an odd, metal glyph. (An occult symbol of some sort; well-traveled merchants or Eskatonic priests may recognize it as a First Day, or birthday, pendant often given to children in a remote region of Pentateuch. The symbol is one of Doramos's many obscure glyphs, but none can say what it means.) It allows the holder to cast a one-use theurgy rite: Disinfect (see Aladotti's traits) with a goal of 13 or less. It is self-powered, but cannot act as a Wyrd Tabernacle for anyone.

Aladotti salutes the commander and leaves the bridge, flanked by his silent priests.

Time to Go

Salima addresses the commander: "I see no reason to waste further time. Commander, is the ship ready?"

"Yes, and fully stocked," Commander Waldon replies.

"Good," Salima says, then addresses the characters. "I'll take you to your ship."

She leads them to the elevator and to the lowest level of the spacebase. The doors open onto a small spacedock, a room that barely holds the al-Malik *Odyssey* class explorer parked there. She gestures to the ship. "This is the *Azhara*. She's been on this base for a longtime, but she's quite spaceworthy still."

If any of the character's groan or make a crack about the rest of the base's condition, she replies: "She has been outfitted by the Imperial Eye. I've tested her myself, on a run to Stigmata and back. She's a sound ship. You have nothing to worry about."

She opens the hatch and leads the characters in, giving them a short tour of the ship. (If you have the **Fading Suns** supplement, *Letters of Marque: Starship Deckplans*, unfold the al-Malik explorer maps and let the characters get a good feel for the layout of the ship.)

"Treat her well," Salima says. "If you succeed in your mission, she's yours." This is an astonishingly expensive gift by any standard, but even the characters may recognize the qualifier she tacked onto the promise: *If* they succeed...

Salima tells them they are heroes, and that the Emperor will personally hear about their valor, and then bids them farewell. She leaves the ship and enters the elevator. Soon after, the technicians on the bridge radio the ship and give clearance to leave. The bay doors slowly slide open and the vast gulf of night and stars awaits.

What if There's No Pilot?

If none of the characters has any piloting or ship repair skills, they will be introduced to a young Imperial Eye agent, Zelaya Helbron. She will perform piloting and/or engineering duties for the characters, and accompany them on their mission. However, she is a young, rather inexperienced field agent, somewhat newly commissioned, and is not in any way in command of the mission.

She knows nothing about the mission except what is written in her character description, below. The characters will not be wrong if they deduce that the only reason she's here is due to her fanaticism to prove a family legend, and because no one else would volunteer for the mission.

Zelaya will report on all the characters action upon her return — she is an obvious spy in the fold.

Zelaya Helbron

The only reason Zelaya wears an Imperial Eye uniform is because she's the one who brought information of the cure to Imperial Eye notice. Her family was from Daishan, and served as householders for the Masseri there. It was her great-grandfather who supposedly developed the cure for symbiosis, but he perished on the world, unable to evacuate in time. The only one of their family to escape the planet was his young daughter, Zelaya's grandmother. She knew of the cure, but no one believed her, or dared to return to Daishan for it. It was only a year ago that Zelaya uncovered evidence of the family legend, found in a cache of think machine data saved by Daishan Masseri nobles but seized by the Decados. Stealing the data, she made her way to a family contact she trusted, who in turn brought her to Salima's attention.

In return for the data, proving that there had indeed been a cure but providing no details about it, Salima commissioned Zelaya, partly as reward, and partly to protect her from the Decados she stole from. (Salima's secret Masseri ties are unknown to Zelaya.)

Zelaya's greatest hope is that a recovered cure will bring favor on her family name and help them to rise to social prominence again, either as householders for a major noble house or as a minor house of their own.

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Imperial Eye Recruit

Quote: "I would do anything to restore my family's place and honor, even if it means risking my life against Symbiots."

Description: She stands five feet tall with long blond curls. She wears a nondescript black jumpsuit with a collar pin showing her Masseri ties (the Masseri star).

Body: Strength 3, Dexterity 6, Endurance 4

Mind: Wits 7, Perception 6, Tech 4

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

Natural skills: Melee 6, Observe 7, Shoot 5, Sneak 4, Vigor 4

Learned skills: Drive Landcraft 3, Drive Spacecraft 3, Inquiry 5, Read Urthish 5, Read Urthtech 3, Redemption (Mech 4, High-Tech 1), Remedy 5, Ride 3, Search 4, Survival 4, Speak Urthish 3, Stoic Body 2, Warfare (Military Tactics) 1

Blessing: Hardy (+1 Vigor to resist fatigue)

Curse: Bitter (-2 Calm when dealing with other noble houses)

Wyrd: 4

Weapons: Rapier, Medium Revolver

Armor: Energy shield

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





Act Two: Survival

Journey to Daishan

The *Azhara* needs six days to complete its journey from Spacebase Edo to Daishan, the fourth planet in the system. During this time the characters should be encouraged (by Zelaya or by a note in their mission kit) to decide their roles: Who is the leader? The survival expert? etc.

One or more of the characters may decide to hack into the ship's think machine for more information, or they may try to crack the hand-held think machine they were given. The *Azhara's* data banks are non-encrypted, except for a single file concerning its recent refitting on Spacebase Edo. It takes only two victory points on a Wits + Think Machine roll to read this file; it is useful information for an engineer, but otherwise it's just tech jargon. It was encrypted to keep the existence of the spacebase secret.

The hand-held think machine is much harder to encrypt. Its security program shuts the device off after almost any attempt to read its encrypted files. It is a sustained action requiring 18 victory points (roll Tech + Think Machine; the character must work on the project for three hours before he can make a roll) to decode the message waiting there for the characters (see *New Orders*, below). A critical failure on any roll shuts down the think machine for 48 hours (this may cause it deliver its message later than usual).

If they do uncover these new orders before they reach Daishan, they have the option of turning back and refusing the mission. They must return to Spacebase Edo (they don't have any jumpkeys), where they will be cajoled to resume the mission with similar threats as those given before. However, Captain Aladotti will intervene and stand by them, offering even to transport them back to the Known Worlds in a Manifest Light escort ship. This will anger Salima and begin a cold war between her and Aladotti, but that is no longer the characters' concern.

One option to prevent such an escape from the drama is to bring in a small fleet of Symbiot pod ships from Daishan. While only one such ship still exists (see *The Last Pod*, below), the gamemaster can fudge and add a few more in the interests of herding them back to the drama. The last human attack on these ships scrambled their instincts, and they have traveled from orbit around Daishan for the first time, seeking human prey. They will chase characters towards Daishan, or block any attempt to return to the spacebase. The *Azhara* is poorly armed and is no match for a small fleet of pods.

The Last Pod

As the characters approach Daishan's atmosphere, a ship suddenly appears to the rear of theirs, popping out of the roiling cloud banks crowding the upper atmosphere. It is a single pod ship, the Symbiot equivalent of a Raider class vessel. This particular one is a servitor, a semi-intelligent ship acting on imprinted programs given to it by the retreating Symbiot forces of a century ago. Since then, it has protected the planet from any space approach.

There used to be a small fleet of these pods, which could join together into units (in twos or fours) to form a larger ship. The new Imperial Navy contingent on Spacebase Edo destroyed most of them with long-range missile barrages. This sole remaining ship was also believed destroyed, but it instead retreated into the upper atmosphere and regenerated most of its damage. It is an injured ship, but it throws all its Lifeforce reserves into destroying the *Azhara*.

The bizarre vessel's turret gun shoots a bolt of energy at the small explorer, enveloping it in a wave of electromagnetic energy. The *Azhara's* electrical systems go haywire and all controls refuse to respond — the ship is heading into a crash-landing. With this last pulse of energy, the Symbiot pod ship dies itself, its husk plummeting to the planet below.

New Orders

Salima addresses the group:

"I want to thank you again for undertaking this mission. I also want to apologize for not telling you the full details of your mission. I couldn't risk you deciding to back out of it — it's too important.

"The Symbiot's war effort is not exactly the mindless enterprise most Known Worlders have been led to believe. Long ago, during the first Symbiot Wars, initial contact of Symbiots by human, Obun and Ukari psychics and theurges revealed many secrets of the Symbiots — secrets they did not wish us to know. Mind-readers determined that there are at least two levels of Symbiot existence: a sentient being as intelligent — perhaps even more so — than humans, and a non-sentient, hive-minded drone.

"The sentient ones rule and are responsible for the war. The drones are their soldiers; these are the monstrous, irrational forces our soldiers have been up against for years. Once the intelligent ones realized that mind-readers had easy access to their minds — the legendary effectiveness of occult powers against Symbiots is no lie — they retreated from the battlefield and left their drones to fight for them. Since that time, we have encountered few sentient Symbiots. This is the true cause for the first retreat of Symbiot forces in the initial Symbiot Wars — they could not risk psychics reading their minds and discovering their strategies.

"This secret was known only to the Stigmata Garrison Commander, the Imperial Eye Chief and the regent. Many attempts were made to infiltrate these sentient Symbiots to discover more about them: their goals, culture and reasons for warring upon us. None were successful, except one fact which a lucky psychic grasped from a sentient Symbiot's surface thoughts: there is a faction of Symbiots in Symbiot space that opposes the war on Stigmata. Why they are against it and why they haven't been able to halt it is unknown. It is believed, however, that the recent withdrawal of some Symbiot troops is due to this faction.

"Upon attaining the throne, Emperor Alexius was fully briefed by the Eye, and has decided to make a bold move to discover more about this rumored faction. Initial teams we sent across Symbiot lines on Stigmata were killed. The planet is a battleground; reasoned contact is impossible. That left Absolution and Daishan. Scouts entering the Absolution system were immediately set upon by Symbiot fleets, forcing them to flee back to Stigmata.

"Daishan, however, has offered little resistance. The Symbiot presence — or what remains of it — is

continued next column

confined to the planet itself, leaving the rest of the system free. For this reason, Daishan was chosen as the focal point for our efforts to parley with the Symbiots.

"By the command of Emperor Alexius, you are to contact representatives of the Symbiot race and determine whether or not an anti-war faction exists. If it does, you are to establish a channel of communication that will enable the Imperial Eye to follow up and gather information on its members and powers. The retrieval of the cure, while still a mission goal, is secondary to this primary objective.

"You have your orders, from the Emperor himself."

The message ends. It may be replayed as many times as the characters wish.

After a few moments of terror, wherein the ship tumbles out of control, the piloting system comes back on-line long enough for the pilot to aim the ship in a general direction and to attempt a smooth landing. However, the engines and most maneuver jets are off-line — the ship can only land, she can't fly again until repaired.

The pilot rolls Wits + Drive Spacecraft to aim the ship at their destination; the number of victory points should be noted, for they will be used below to determine just how far the characters are from their goal (see *Reconnaissance*, below). A final roll is now made to see how well the ship is brought to the ground: success means she hits the ground sliding and comes to a slow halt with no additional damage to the ship; failure means she hits hard and loses her front guns; a critical failure means she crashes badly, losing front guns, all bridge functions, and each character suffers 5d damage.

Recovery

Instead of sand or clay, the Azhara slides into a bank of soft snow. As soon as the white powder drifts from their windshield and window ports, the characters can look out on a winter wonderland as far as the eye can see. Daishan is not the scorched, nuclear desert they were told to expect — it is an arctic wasteland.

The *Azhara* needs an important replacement part. While most systems are functionally intact, the central think machine controls are fused. Until the processing core is replaced, no major ship systems can be activated. The guns can be fired manually, and limited life support (climate control) is available, but the engines and jets require the central processor. They must find a replacement think machine from somewhere.

The hand-held device they were given is not powerful enough to substitute, although the characters can try to hook it up. When they do so (or within one hour of their crash-landing), it activates a program that transmits a recorded voice message from Salima. She gives them new orders (see sidebar).

Radio communications are out on the ship, and the hand-held think machine's own radio cannot seem to penetrate the upper atmosphere of the world. Something strange is going on there energetically; radio communications can't be sent or received. This odd anomaly is one of the reasons the Eye has been unable to scan the world's surface.

Records on the think machine's tracker show that an old military bunker near to the characters' landing site (to the south of them) may have replacement think machines — if the bunker is still intact. It was supposedly a Second Republic ceramsteel installation built into a mountain and designed to survive orbital bombardment, but the nuclear bombs lobbed on Daishan may have proved too much for it. It's exact location is not available, but it is in this region somewhere.

The group's original destination is a continent away — they are in the northern hemisphere of the planet, while the science station is in the southern hemisphere. Unless they get a new think machine, however, it could take years to reach the science lab.

Reconaissance

The only way the characters can possibly get off-world is to disembark and move on foot toward the alleged location of the bunker, their only hope for spare parts.

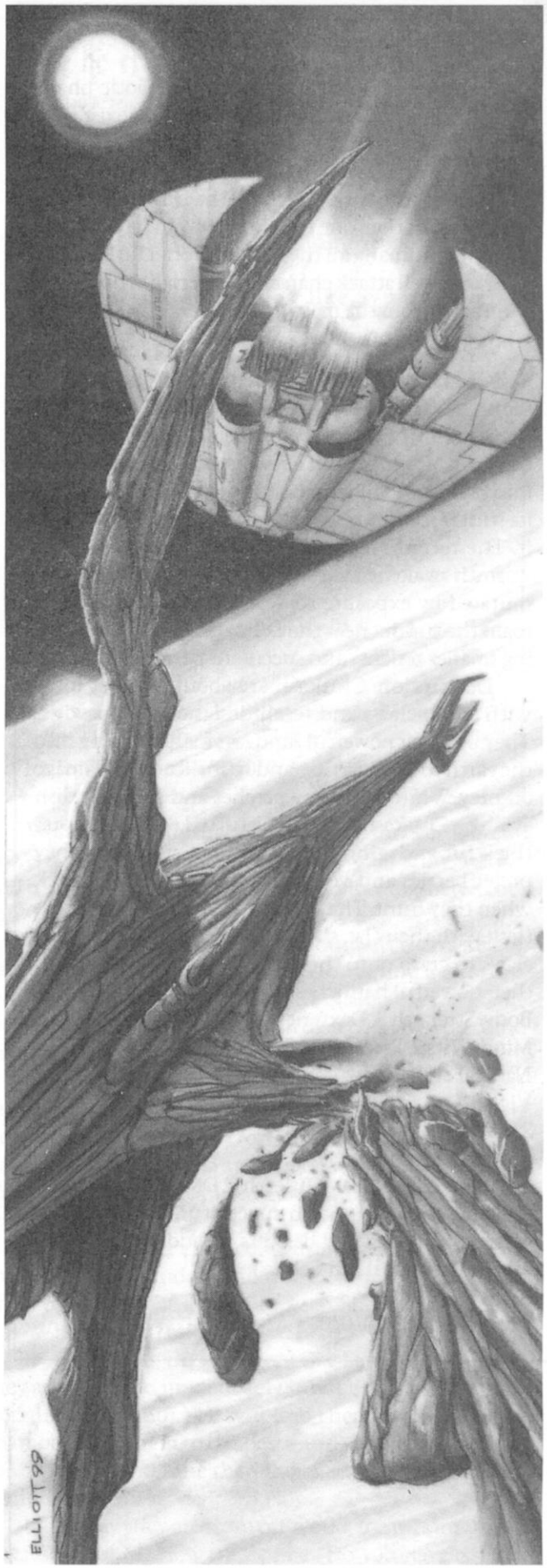
Their kits include desert survival gear: loose, protective tunics, water-reclamation canteens (which can turn urine into drinkable water; up to 10 uses per canteen), military rations (tasteless but nutritional) and an emergency, sealable tent with a 48-hour oxygen supply in case of sand storms.

The clothing is near-useless in the bitter cold atmosphere outside the ship. The tent may help in case of wind storms, but it does not stave off the cold well.

The best gear available is the environment suits provided for them. Designed mainly against radioactive environments (they each include a geiger counter), they will keep the characters relatively warm. Their air circulators can warm the outside air so their lungs don't freeze, and can even provide up to 10 hours of oxygen.

The think machine tracker can compute their general location, based on visual computation of the sun's position, but the magnetic compass is useless thanks to the weather anomaly. Characters knowledgeable about terraforming can make Wits + Science (Terraforming) rolls; success reveals that the odd weather effects are not unlike those that often accompany the initial activation of a newly-installed terraforming grid onto a planet. If it follows common patterns, it should die down within a few months.

Just how far they are from the bunker depends on how well the pilot aimed them at their destination (which was supposed to be farther south): one to two victory points puts them four days march from the mountains; three v.p. puts them three days away, while four or more



Wildlife

The local ecosystem is still in its chaotic phase, struggling for equilibrium. Many lifeforms exist now which may well die out as the Lifeforce energies calm. For now, a strange collection of almost-mythical beasts hunts the tundra around the Dumalla Mountains. Most of them are ever-hungry and have no reason to fear humans, for the Survivors offer little threat. They may well attack characters, especially those traveling away from the main group.

Chukash

Chukash are rodents native to Daishan. Once the scourge of agriculture, the creatures survived the firebombing of the planet buried deep within their burrows. Most died, but a few hardy specimens went into half-frozen hibernation when the world entered its winter state in response to J'azeer's attempt to save it. The recent freeing up of water and returning warmth awakened a few packs of the creatures, now mutated by exposure to World Egg Lifeforce. They roam the tundra near the Dumalla Mountains seeking smaller rodents and succulent berries.

Description: Chukash are about a meter long, with sharp claws and teeth designed for gnawing. They use their powerful hind legs for burrowing into the earth to stay warm — and to inflict extra damage on prey. White with gray patches and small reddish eyes, the Chukash have small, tufted ears, luxurious, thick fur and a long, plumed tail. Omnivores, they prefer berries and vegetation, but attack as a pack when they hunt. They rip chunks out of their prey's flesh with their flat, strong teeth, and use their front claws to grasp onto those they attack, kicking with their powerful haunches.

Body: Strength 2, Dexterity 6, Endurance 4
Mind: Wits 2, Perception 5, Tech 0
Natural skills: Dodge 7, Fight 4, Observe 5, Sneak 3, Vigor 4
Synergy: 1
Powers: Burrowing
Weapons: Claws (2 DMG), Teeth (2 DMG), Backleg Kick (3 DMG; if the Chukash successfully claws, it has grasped its target and delivers an additional attack with its powerful hind claws)
Armor: Id
Vitality: -3/-1/0/0/0/0

Flying Cats

These strange animals are a bizarre mixture of mountain cat and large condor. The flood of symbiosis energy which protected the lifeforms around the Dumalla Mountains melded a number of those creatures, creating new combinations which never would have appeared were nature to go its own course.

A flying cat is about one and a half to two meters long. Its wingspan, however, is one meter on either side (two and a half meters wide total, including body width). Their long, sinuous tails can wrap around prey (usually the canids and rodents roaming the plains) and hold them tight while the cat returns to its eeyrie nest, where it will rend its prey or drop it from a height and retrieve the broken body. Most flying cats cannot carry humans very high or far, so they will drop them from a height of about 10 meters (4d damage). They may attempt repeated grabs and drops until their prey can be killed with claws and devoured on the spot.

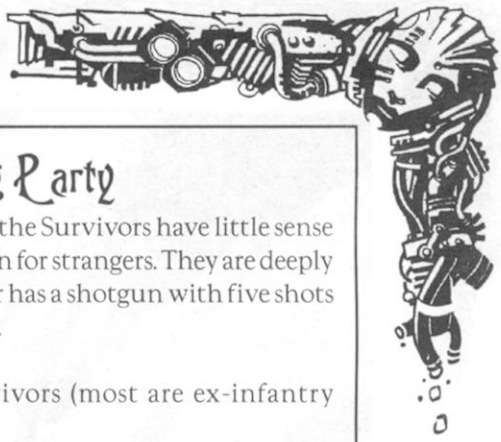
Body: Strength 5, Dexterity 8, Endurance 3
Mind: Wits 2, Perception 8, Tech 0
Natural skills: Dodge 6, Fight 3, Fly 6, Observe 7, Sneak 5, Vigor 3
Synergy: 1
Powers: Special Senses (Night Vision)
Weapons: Claws (2d), Beak (2d), Prehensile Tail (Id; any successful grapple allows it to lift its prey off the ground and carry it to its eyrie)
Vitality: -5/-3/-1/0/0/0

puts them two days away. Once they come within two days of the mountain chain, they can see it on the horizon.

The characters must camp at night, for it is too cold to travel; the tent provides a crowded but reasonable shelter. Everyone should roll Endurance + Survival the following morning: success means the character is no worse for wear; failure means the character feels miserable (fatigue, joint aches). Too many days of this may impose penalties on the characters' actions (-2 for the second failed roll, -3 for the next, and so on).

As they travel closer to the mountains, more and more signs of life become obvious: scraggly trees reach out from snow banks, small streams break up ice and snow in places, and tiny footprints can be seen (the local version of mice or voles, perhaps even rabbits).

Eventually, they will encounter larger examples of the local fauna: Symbiot drones. (See the *Wildlife* sidebar.) Some of these encounters may result in torn environment suits (anytime one or two points of damage is taken, roll a d20: a roll of 13 or less means the suit is still intact — the damage was mainly bruising. If more than three points of damage is taken, or the d20 roll is over 13, the suit is torn. Cold air enters, but is withstandable. However, the suit is



no longer fully intact and is thus susceptible to the spores in the bunker. See Act Three: The Bunker).

Ambush

Once the characters reach the mountains, they find an idyllic glen of grass, flowers and a pool of water under a thundering waterfall. A stream leads from the pool through canyons towards their destination (the bunker).

The air is much warmer here, and in fact seems like a bubble of temperance in an otherwise cold environment. The characters can actually mark the boundaries of this warmth, for the edges are abrupt and represent a 10 degree difference. The center of this bubble is on the field surrounding the pool, where the temperature is 62 degrees.

The characters only have a half-hour or so to investigate and rest before more visitors to the pool come from the tundra. A hunting group of 12 Survivors sneaks up (they noticed the characters' footprints) to ambush them. (See *The Hunting Party* sidebar for their traits.)

The hunters are extremely distrustful about these new humans, and think they may be part of some Symbiot trick. They have argued among themselves long and hard on the tundra before their leader put his foot down and ordered the ambush plan. The aim is for them to capture these strange humans and take them to Sister Sergia, back at their cave encampment. She will surely determine whether they are real or a Symbiot trick.

If the characters try to talk with the attackers and plead for peace, the leader will halt the attack to talk with them — on the condition that they surrender their weapons and accompany the hunters back to their camp.

They don't want to kill the characters, but won't hesitate to harm them if they resist capture. If half their number is wounded badly or killed, the rest will scatter and try to get back to their cave to warn the others. Some may be captured; they will resist saying anything at first, but can be tortured to reveal their encampment's location or coaxed to do so if the characters can convince them that they are not Symbiots but are from the Known Worlds. The hunters at first seem completely unable to believe that rescuers may have come; this is clearly due to their refusal to allow themselves even a shred of hope.

However the characters get to the encampment (tied up by the hunters, marched freely there, or searching for it themselves), their arrival is expected (advance scouts saw them and reported back to the group). Thus, about 15 unseen Survivors hide all around them in crevices and caves, waiting to attack if necessary.

The Survivors

A rough trail leads from behind a boulder near the pond, through a crevice and a short cave, to a clearing near the base of the next mountain. A large cave mouth opens next to it, and here the Survivors huddle, raising their families, making their crafts and cooking food.

The Hunting Party

These members of the Survivors have little sense of humor or compassion for strangers. They are deeply suspicious. Their leader has a shotgun with five shots worth of ammunition.

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Survivors (most are ex-infantry troopers)

Quote: "You don't look like Symbiots, but Symbiots never look like Symbiots!"

Description: Dressed in animal furs with the remnants of their old fatigues (some have boots and flak jackets), these hardy, weather-bitten hunters look like determined survivors.

Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Endurance 6
Mind: Wits 3, Perception 5, Tech 3
Spirit: Extrovert 3, Introvert 1, Passion 3, Calm 1, Faith 3, Ego 1, Human 3, Alien 1
Natural skills: Dodge 5, Fight 6, Melee 7, Observe 5, Shoot 5, Sneak 4, Vigor 6
Learned skills: Archery 5, Remedy 4, Search 4, Speak Urthish 3, Stoic Body 3, Survival 5, Tracking 4
Wyrd: 3
Weapons: Knife, hunting bow, spear
Armor: Heavy clothing (2d)
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0

Women and children can be seen, including newborns suckling mothers' breasts. They wear animal skins and torn remnants of more standard clothing: here a cotton shirt, there military fatigues.

The Survivors stare at the new humans with a mix of suspicion and awe. A child begins to cry, and a girl runs from the cave to the closest of the characters, staring in wonder and asking in an Urthish dialect: "Have you come to rescue us?"

The hunting party leader (or oldest leader present) hushes the girl and leads the group into the cave, lit inside by torches. Coming from the rear of the cave, and flanked by a well-armed and armored group of guards, is Sister Sergia. (See her featured description and traits at the end of this book.)

She stares at the characters suspiciously, scrutinizing their every move and feature, as if looking for something, a flaw or defect in their skin or speech. She addresses them:

"Who are you? Why are you here?"

If they tell her they are from Daishan, she will know they are lying and immediately subdue them (if they are not already bound). She will lead them to the sacrifice chamber, bind them to the posts, and say, "Let you return to your own kind." She then leaves, sealing the chamber behind her. See *The Sacrifice*, below.

If they say they are from off-world, she gets intensely interested, asking how they came. "Do you have a ship?





Does it still work? How many can you fit on it?" Her guards will stare at her in surprise, never having seen such enthusiasm from their leader. When she notices this, she calms immediately, and has the guards cut their bonds and lead them into a side chamber, the best furnished of any here. They sit on fur rugs and sip hot tea while she continues her interrogation.

She questions them about any news they have of the Known Worlds, Spacebase Edo and their ship: "Where is it located? How many days journey from here? What's the malfunction? Can it be repaired?" She is impatient with any delay in answers. She is also hungry for any news about the Known Worlds, and will be annoyed to discover that a Hawkwood sits upon the throne.

If she is led to believe that she may not use the characters' ship for escape, or that they have no intention of helping her to escape this world, she will get cold to them. She will then begin to explain something of the Survivors' situation. If the characters offer their ship for escape, she will warm to them and also explain the situation. The gamemaster should adjust her tone appropriately.

"How did we get here? We were sent by Count Jamal al-Malik to recolonize this system. That was 4971. We refitted Spacebase Edo, and then came to Daishan. Our initial surveys revealed no Symbiots, only this arctic hell. By Count Jamal's orders, we kept this information top secret; we had no contact with anyone outside Daishan.

"We gathered a small colony force into an assault lander and entered Daishan's atmosphere. We were shot down by Symbiot forces. Where they hid during out first survey, I have no idea. We couldn't get a radio signal back to the other ships by the jumpgate — this damn weather. We figured they were destroyed by Symbiots. We've waited for rescue ever since."

If the characters explain what they know (from their initial mission briefing), Sergia will look away, obviously trying to contain a great anger. "Curse the war and its secrecy!" She will then continue:

"We don't live in freedom here. Every day we enthrall our souls to the Symbiot masters of this world. They'll surely want a piece of yours, too! The only reason we are allowed to live is if we provide sacrifices to them when they call for it. Most often they simply want animals, which they warp with their unholy powers into twisted beasts. But sometimes... sometimes they demand human flesh. At these time we have no choice but to offer up one of our own. They take these volunteers and we never see them again."

She gestures to the dark hall behind the cavern chamber. "That way lies the sacrificial chamber. We were forced to adorn it to their demands, to paint it with all manner of foul markings. We tie the sacrifice to a post and then leave the chamber, sealing it behind us. When we return a day later, the creature — or person — is gone. I suppose there is some secret entrance by which they enter. I don't dare look for it. The one time I displeased our masters by

refusing a sacrifice, they came upon our hunting party, and... changed four men. They became mindless monsters who even now haunt these mountains, howling at us from afar." She shudders and stops talking.

If the characters still do not offer escape with their ship, she will clap her hands and the guards will appear, grab the characters, and take them to the sacrificial chamber for sacrifice. (See *The Sacrifice*, below.) "I am sorry," she says. "I must protect my people."

If they do offer their ship, and explain that they need a repair part before it can fly, she will get thoughtful and finally offer: "There is a military bunker near here. It saved our lives. The weather was worse when we got here. We barely escaped our crashed ship and got to the bunker before freezing to death. Some of us were lost, blown away by gusts of wind, buried under avalanches or boiled by sudden steam exploding from the ground. We lived in the bunker for the first few years, until the Symbiots came. They chased us out and took it for themselves. We fled to the caves here, and were safe for a while. They instituted the sacrifices soon after that."

If asked about the cure, she will deny knowing anything about it, and clearly disbelieve it exists. If asked about repair parts, she replies: "There is a lot of old equipment in the bunker, including some starship hulls we could never get working. But there were think machines. One of these might work for your ship. I know the way to the bunker. If you promise you will help us to get off this damned planet, I'll lead you there."

If the characters agree, she bids them rest for the evening, and brings them food and drink. The next morning, just before daylight, she will wake them and begin the journey to the bunker.

If they want to go themselves, refusing to take her along, she will say: "As I thought. You had no intention of ever helping us." She has them taken to the sacrificial chamber.

The Sacrifice

The characters are stripped of their clothes and equipment (which are left on a rock shelf in the corner) and bound with heavy ropes to a series of large posts (three total; some characters may have to double-up, with some facing away from the altar). The posts surround a central altar, adorned with garish glyphs (painted in blood?), guttering animal fat candles and a strange skeleton, somewhat human but with more animal-like features (a Symbiot's bones?).

Once they are tied, Sergia bends to her knees, head down, and says a Brother Battle prayer for their souls. Without looking at them again, she leaves. A rope and pulley contraption outside the door lowers a heavy stone slab, completely sealing the room.

The candles flicker, providing dim lighting, but the flames' movements display not even a stray breeze in the chamber.

The Grimoire

This strange book was written sometime during Vladimir's short reign, and was supposedly used by one of the many cabals accused of causing his death. It has no single title, but is known by many names: "The Book of the Poisoned Clasp," "The Tome of Unspeakable Offering," "Vladimir's Doom," and others. Any character who succeeds on a Wits + Lore (Occult) will recognize it.

It includes no lore for training Antinomy, but instead acts as a dark relic of sorts: proper reading of its pages results in the summoning of a demon; the reader does not even have to know Antinomy. However, many words are unpronounceable without some practice, so the occultist must be diligent and serious about his task and prepare ahead of time.

Sergia used this rite to make a personal pact with Zre'heva, the demon it summons. An obscure demon, he is supposedly of the Seventh Qlippoth. It is possible — although unlikely — that a character can forge a pact with the demon himself, such as getting it to turn against Sister Sergia in return for future service in the Known Worlds. It may even aid them against the Symbiots, but anyone making such a pact may be revealed as Null-tainted to J'azeer. Details of such an extremely insane act as a demon pact are left entirely to the gamemaster and players.

The gamemaster should keep good track of time as the characters attempt to escape (as they surely will). Half an hour after the slab seals the room shut, a small boulder is moved from a tunnel, and Sister Sergia crawls into the room. Until that happens, deal with any escape attempts:

The characters can try to break their bonds. The heavy rope is thick and hard, made from plant fiber, but bundled in strips such that they provide great resistance: one or two strips may tear, but the whole rope is still strong. It is possible to try to slowly work through the rope with one's teeth: make a series of Strength + Vigor rolls with a -4 penalty; nine victory points are required to finally break a rope. One roll can be made per ten minutes of work (three rolls before Sergia returns).

Characters with fangs or talons are bound in chains instead. Especially strong characters, such as Vorox, may be double-bound (two layers of chain). It requires 6 victory points on a single roll to break a single metal chain.

Once free, a Perception + Search roll reveals a sacrificial bone dagger behind the altar; this can free the other bonds within a few turns. Three or more victory points on that roll reveals the grimoire (see sidebar). Another Perception + Search roll reveals a floor-level slab of stone covering a hole (one meter high and wide). It can be shoved forward (into the small tunnel) or pulled back into the room with three victory points on a Strength + Vigor roll.

If the characters can accomplish all this before Sergia crawls into the room, good for them — they are in a good position to deal with her. In fact, upon witnessing that all or most of them are free, she will look relieved and tell them: "Quickly, through here! We have to get to the bunker before the Symbiots know you're here. I'm risking the lives of my people to rescue you. They don't know." The tunnel leads to a ledge outside (on the opposite side of the mountain as the cave). It is dark, but she will lead them toward the bunker.

If only one or two of the characters are free, she will attack to subdue them (she is a formidable Brother Battle fighter). If she wins, she ties them up and continues as told below. If they win, go to *Plea for Help*.

If they are still bound when she enters, she retrieves the dagger and grimoire from behind the altar, and then bends down to pray before the odd skeleton. She intones something in a strange language, and then rises. She goes to each one of the characters and carves a glyph into his flesh (on the cheeks or chest). She then opens the grimoire, and begins an Antinomy rite to summon a demon.

The rite takes about 20 minutes to complete, during which time Sergia is too occupied to prevent them from gnawing at their ropes. She also did not test the ropes before she started, to make sure that gnawing had not already taken place.

If the characters can do nothing to stop this rite, the air will grow heavy and stink of something rotten. One of the characters (the weakest mentally) will be possessed by the demon, which will devour his Wyrd points at the rate of one per turn. Once they are all gone, it will then eat his Vitality. Once the character is dead, he will move on to the next one, and possess and devour him. And so forth until they are all dead.

If this seems overly harsh and cruel, remember that the characters had ample chances to avoid this fate by offering aid to Sergia and even getting her to lead them to the bunker.

Plea for Help

If the characters somehow manage to stop the rite, or defeat her before she even begins it, she will break down in sobs: "Oh, thank the merciful Pancreator for your skills! I am spared from taking more life! Take pity on this wretch and kill me now, before the Symbiots enact their revenge!"

If anyone attempts to oblige her, she will fight back (she didn't mean it!). If they delay killing her, she will continue:

"I was told by the Symbiot leader how to prepare you for sacrifice. They made me perform hideous rites by which they could drain the life from sacrifices without even leaving their lairs. They are still somewhat weak, and afraid to walk openly. The planet taxes their power while it heals the damage done to it. Now is the best time to strike them! I can't do it alone! None among my people is as accomplished as I in the arts of war — but you! With your help, we can defeat them! Go to the bunker with me! Let us slay them and retrieve your think machine!"

If they don't believe her and demand the location of the bunker so they can go themselves, she says: "Yes, I am a lying wretch. Why trust me, who has betrayed my people to the Symbiots? But I did it that my people should live!" She will tell them how to get to the main entrance of the bunker (she does not mention the secret entrance). She points to the tunnel she entered from: "That is the way."

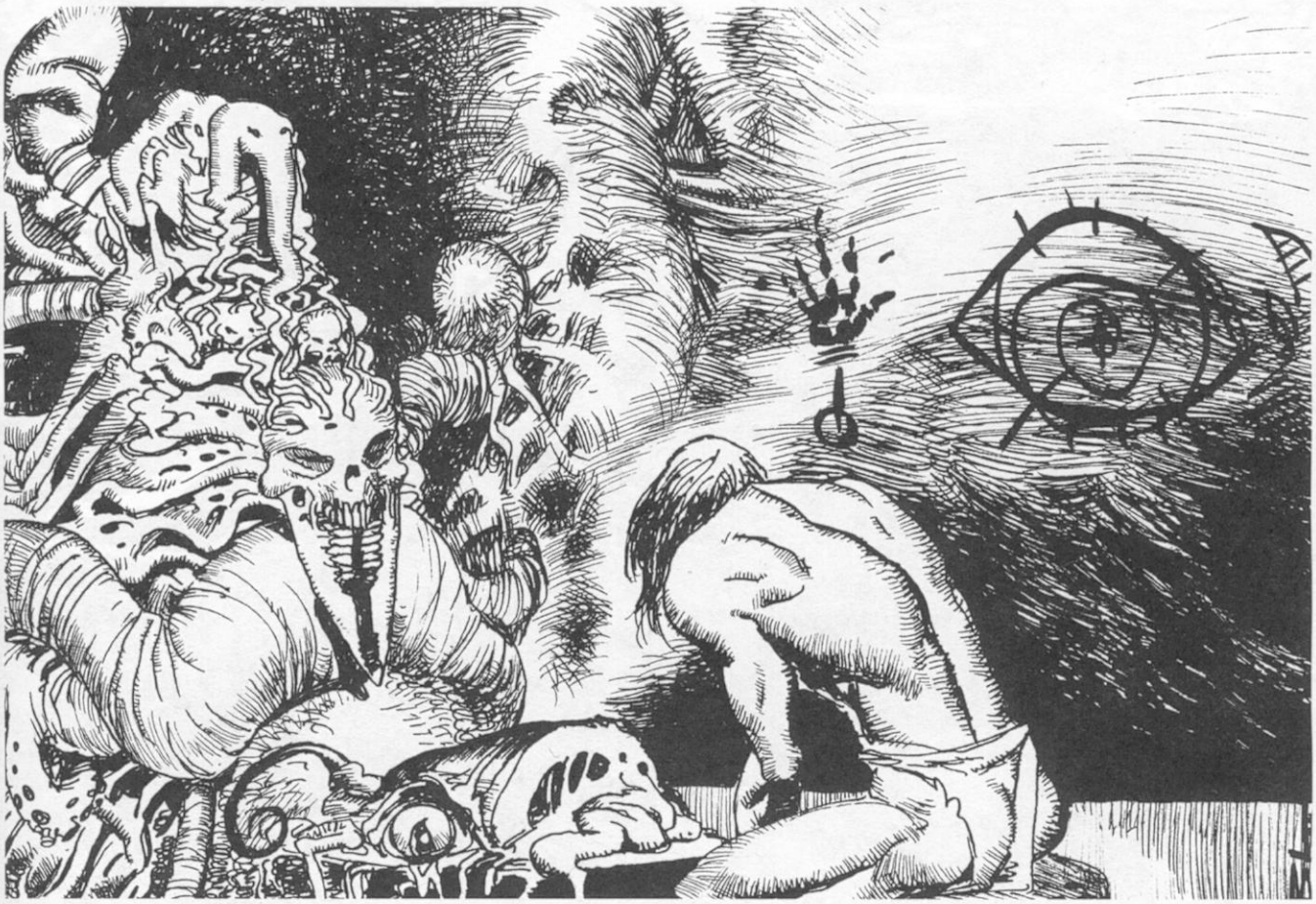
If they let her live but don't take her with them, she will regroup with her people, and tell them a fat lie about the characters working for the Symbiots. (This is also the case if she arrived in the chamber after the characters already escaped out of the tunnel.) She will gather a force to track them down and kill them before they can reveal the Survivors' treachery to their Symbiot masters. Under no circumstances will the Survivors believe the characters' stories over Sister Sergia's. They believe that she is the sole reason they are alive today, and are fanatically loyal to her.

To the Bunker

The bunker is not terribly far, taking only about half a day's walk through mountain passes and caves. If Sergia leads the characters, she will take them to the rear of the bunker mountain, and reveal a secret entrance leading through the air ducts into the base. They must wait until just before evening (or just before dawn), when the duct opens to expel bad air. They can then slip in and crawl their way in.

If she only gave them directions, they may get lost. Roll Wits + Survival to figure out which of the caves and other natural markings they see correspond to her directions. Too many failures will get them lost.

If they simply fled the tunnel before Sergia arrived or seek the bunker themselves without directions, it may take a long time to find it. It requires 12 victory points on sustained Wits + Survival rolls to find the bunker's main entrance, one roll allowed per half-day (23 v.p. to find the secret entrance.)



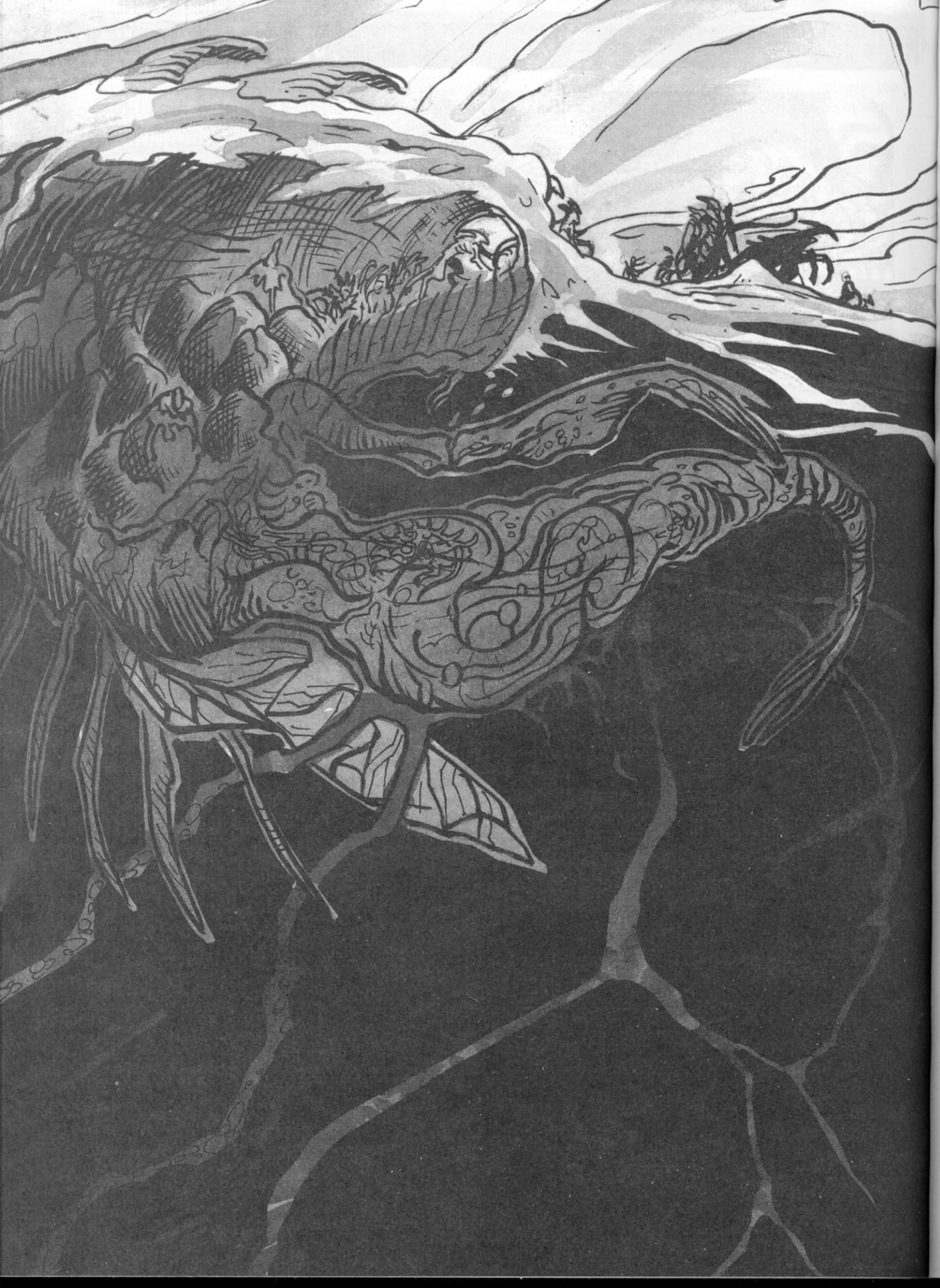
Option: Within a day of the characters escaping the sacrificial chamber, Captain Aladotti and a squad of Manifest Light troops lands near the Survivors' camp. They have ignored orders and come to help the characters. Finding the Survivors first, however, they will be told Sister Sergia's version of events. Indeed, so impressed is Aladotti at Sergia's ability to keep the Survivors alive in face of Symbiot threat, that he follows her lead on a raid on the bunker. She will convince him that the characters have been compromised by Symbiots.

Manifest Light Troopers

An assortment of Eskatonic, Orthodox, Sanctuary Aeon and even Avestite priests who have been taken from the seminary and trained for war.

Race: Human
Rank/Class: Manifest Light
Quote: "Freeze in Gehenne, Symbiot scum!"
Description: They are well-muscled and hardy, dressed in the gray fatigues of the Manifest Light legion. Individuals still bear the signs of their sectarian membership, however, from Eskatonic Order glyphs to Sanctuary Aeon pendants.

Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 5, Endurance 5
Mind: Wits 6, Perception 6, Tech 3
Spirit: Extrovert 1, Introvert 3, Passion 1, Calm 3, Faith 5, Ego 1, Human 3, Alien 1
Natural skills: Dodge 5, Fight 5, Impress 5, Melee 4, Observe 5, Shoot 5, Sneak 4, Vigor 5
Learned skills: Academia 3, Focus 5, Lore (Occult) 3, Physick 2, Read Latin 2, Read Urthish 3, Remedy 5, Speak Urthish 3, Stoic Mind 5
Occult: Theurgy 3
Rites: Prophet's Holy Blessing, Knowing the False Heart, Light, Scent of Evil, Laying on of Hands
Wyrd: 6
Weapons: Knife, Flamegun
Armor: Leather 2+2d
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0



Act Three: The Bunker

The Secret Passage

Sergia leads the characters up the foot of a steeply sloping mountain. They climb boulders and rocks until Sergia calls a halt. She points at the featureless rock wall and says: "Watch that area. Come nightfall, a passage will appear. It's the air ducts. Hold your nose when it happens; the air stinks." (If they arrive at night, they must wait until just before dawn for it to open again.)

As she said, the rock does slide back at the appointed time to reveal a metal-walled tunnel two meters in circumference leading into darkness in the heart of the mountain. With the opening, a distant blower expels hot air and steam. The smell is terrible. Anyone not holding their nose or not in an environment suit must roll Wits + Vigor not to retch. The smell clears within a minute or so.

Sergia tells them to get moving, as the passage does not stay open for long. The doorway will indeed close again in five minutes, expelling air for as long as it is open. After the rock seals again, the tunnel is enveloped in pitch darkness. Fusion torches were included in the characters' kits; if they don't use them, they suffer -6 on any physical action roll involving sight. If they light torches or candles instead (if they thought to collect some from the Survivors), they will agitate the spores even more (see below).

Light reveals that the walls of the tunnel are coated with a reddish-blue mold. Characters who breathe in intact environment suits need not worry about it; however, a character who is not breathing through a sealed suit, or whose suit has been compromised (by battle damage or tears), breathes in invisible spores. Sergia has no suit and thus breathes the spores.

As they move down the tunnel toward its end, which Sergia says opens into the environment plant that maintains the atmosphere in the bunker, they may begin to feel the effects of the drone spores: anyone breathing them must roll Endurance + Vigor for every five minutes of contact. It takes 15 minutes for them to reach the end of the tunnel; that means they must roll three times (add one more roll if torches and candles are used for light). Success means that the spores cause no harm or special effect. Failure causes wild visual hallucinations: the walls seem to undulate and come to life, and appear to be made not of metal but flesh. Touching them causes a ripple, as if the wall is ticklish. Shapes appear to float in the air, as if made of vapor, forming familiar figures from the characters' memories. Will-o-wisps lazily lead and follow behind the characters.

In addition to the visuals, however, there are also some mental effects: the hallucinating characters perceive a vague version of the Synergy power: Lifesense. They can sense the living forms around them and a vague connection to life outside the bunker, connected by subtle strands of pulsing Lifeforce.

A hallucinating character looking at a psychic or theurge sees the occultist's Wyrd glowing as an aura around her. Sergia's aura, however, is dark and gloomy. Anyone viewing her should make a Perception + Observe roll to notice that tendrils of smoke seem to ooze from her aura to pierce the fleshy wall, causing that area to die and become gangrenous. If anyone reacts badly to this or asks Sergia what's going on, she looks confused and her aura immediately disappears. She tells the characters not to pay any attention to the mind games of the Symbiots — they are obviously psychically warping perceptions.

At the end of this trek, the characters reach a grate, beyond which is a large chamber and fan. Right beside the grate is a small door, a service entrance which leads into the environmental plant room. Details on this room and other rooms in the Bunker are provided in *Floorplans*, below.

The Main Entrance

Without Sergia's company, the characters arrive at the main entrance to the bunker instead of the secret entrance. They climb an upgrade which obviously once served as a road for landcraft. Unlike the rear of the mountain, this slope is a long-rising road. It leads to the main doors, which are wide open. The doors themselves are battered and pitted, as if a battering ram repeatedly beat into them and finally broke them open; they haven't been moved since. Snow and ice accumulates within the garage, a chamber large enough to park many vehicles (none are here now).

Resting on perches in the dark gloom of the high ceiling are five flying cats. They swoop down and attack the characters, fighting to the death. They were imprinted by J'azeer to protect this place at all costs.

The characters can try to make a run for the security gate and attempt to gain access, all the while fighting the mutated cat-birds. See *Floorplans*.

Floorplans

The bunker consists of four levels carved out of the interior of Mount Jai. Except for the main level garage and the upper level starport, the bunker consists of a single ceramsteel shed with three levels: living, security, and lab/storage, each detailed below. The floors between these three levels are steel plates laid on metal frames; small air ducts run between each level (too small for a human to squeeze into). Without welding torches, characters cannot break through ceilings or floors to bypass the elevator/stairs.

The power is inactive throughout the bunker. It can be turned on again from the environment plant on the lower level. Unless that happens, the interior of the bunker is in pitch black darkness (-6 penalty on all rolls requiring vision).

Main Level

This consists of the main entrance, through which most land vehicles and visitors enter the bunker. All visitors must pass through the security checkpoint.

Entrance/Garage

This large room was carved out of the mountain rock. See *The Main Entrance*, above.

Security Checkpoint

The walls of the ceramsteel bunker abut tightly against the carved rock of the garage. A meter wide by two meters tall door admits visitors into the bunker's security checkpoint. Like the main garage doors, this door has also been broken, but not battered down; it hangs loosely in its sliding alcove. The gen-lock which once held it is shattered (perhaps by blaster fire?).

Just past the door is a wide room with a metal desk in the center. Banks of monitors allow the guards to view every room in the facility, but the power is now out (unless the characters turn it on in the environment plant, below). Regardless, the cameras placed throughout the bunker are broken, shot by blaster fire. A drawer (normally sealed by a gen-lock, but now de-powered) holds keys to the containment cells at the rear of this level.

Guard Alcoves: To either side of the entrance, small alcoves allow guards to sit unseen by visitors. From here, it is obvious that the walls separating these alcoves from the main room are one-way plastic: people in the alcoves can see out into the main room, but from the main room the walls look like the same metal walls seen throughout the rest of the bunker.

Weapons racks line the walls, all of them now empty (Sergia explains that the Survivors looted them early on).

Personnel Elevator

A personnel elevator allows access to all levels. However, unless the power was restored from the environment plant, it is inoperative.

Stairs

A door opens onto stairs which run alongside the elevator shaft (separated by a ceramsteel wall) to all levels of the complex.

Service Elevator

A service elevator is on the other side of the personnel elevator.

Containment Cells

Three large jail cells line the walls. They are the traditional metal bar type. They each hold two bunks and a toilet, with no privacy. Metal keys from the security desk drawer lock and unlock the cells.

A Perception + Search roll with three or more victory points reveals a wad of paper crumbled up into a ball and squeezed between a bunk and mattress. A message is scrawled in ink; it appears to be a page from a journal or diary: "...Sir Saladin dead. I don't trust her explanation. Can Symbiots really devour a man from the inside out? I suspect something worse than Symbiots at work here, and she is involved somehow. The others don't believe me. I need to —" The page looks like it was hastily torn from its binding and crumpled quickly.

If Sergia is asked about it, she looks pissed and explains: "Roderigo. He was a fool. He went mad and tried to kill Private Daleen. We had to lock him up here. During our evacuation, he got his chance and finished her off. But the Symbiots got him." (She is lying; the note refers to her.)

Lower Level

Located below the main level, this floor hosts the science lab, storage bins and environment/maintenance plant.

Lab

A potted plant with glowing bulbs lights this room with a dim radiance. (It was placed here by B'laz Dal; see below.)

While this is not a full degree science lab, it was hastily stocked during the Symbiot Wars with equipment for studying biotoxins and diseases. Some Symbiot plants and spores were studied here at one time, but most were destroyed by the scientists before they could taint anyone. Some microscopes, petri dishes and other paraphernalia are scattered about the room.

This area also operated as the infirmary; beds and medical supplies are here. However, with the exception of some bandages and disinfectant, the Survivors looted it long ago.

Crafter Blaisdale: This is where the Symbiot B'laz Dal lives. See *Encountering the Scientist*, below. If the characters talk outside the lab (in the stores of stairwell), or make no efforts to move quietly, he hears them and investigates.

Containment room: A sealed containment room for specimens is at the rear of the room. The door is closed and sealed with a mag-lock (it can be opened from the lab once power is restored). Inside, the skeleton of a scientist lies on the floor. Most of his clothing has moldered, but a laser pistol sidearm lies on the floor in the remains of a leather holster. On a shelf in the room is a box of dried soil, from which withered, dry grass grew down to the floor, now obviously dead.

If anyone enters the room, the air and the presence of vital Lifeforce revives the drone grass, which snakes up from the floor and grab the person. It can do no more than that, however, for it is too weak to drain Lifeforce like it once did. It does provide a momentary scare, however. (Note: Characters trying to fry it with flameguns will find it is immune to flame.)

Stores

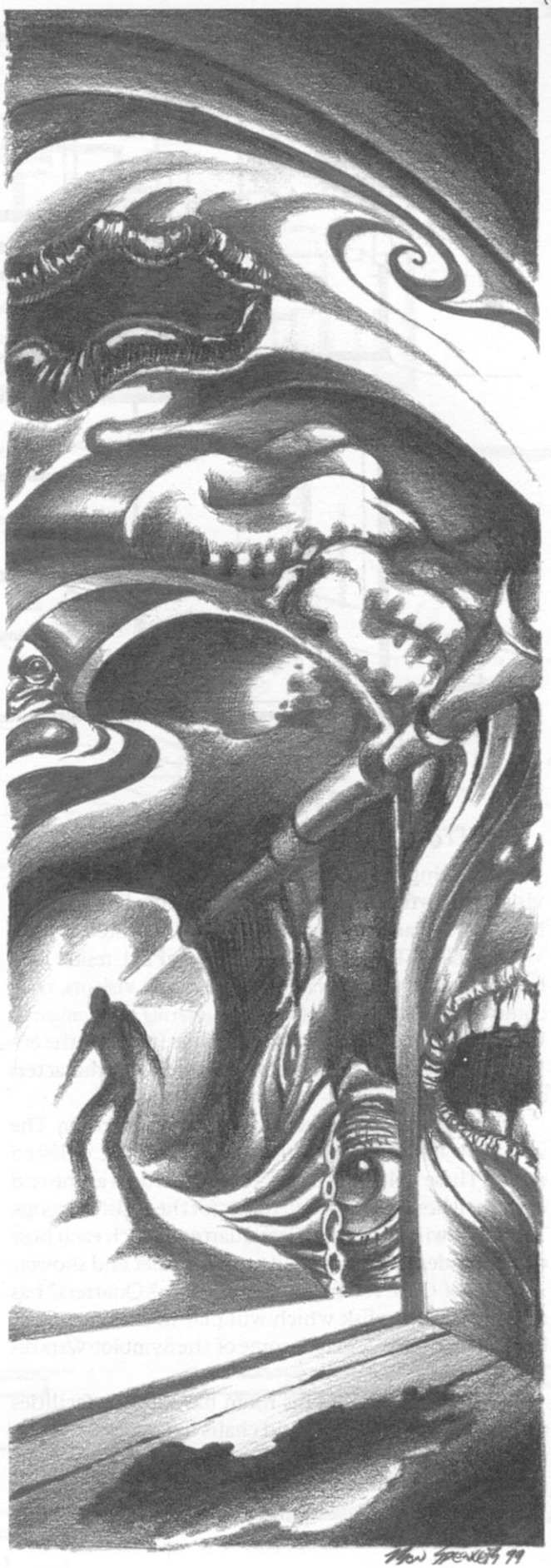
Packed in sealed crates (which can be opened with a nearby crowbar) are various items: some crates hold military fatigues, others have a month's worth of canned and plastic sealed food rations. (Sergia bitterly says the Survivors couldn't get down here to claim this stuff before they were chased out of the complex.)

Another crate holds 10 injections of Elixir and basic medkits.

Environment Plant

The generator that powers the bunker is here, but is currently switched off. It is a simple matter to throw the switches and get it going again (although it takes about 15 minutes to rev up enough to power the electrical system and lights once more). Once the power comes on, all the lights in the bunker's ceilings come on, alerting any Symbiot that someone is here and is probably in the environment plant room.

A shelf holds various mech and volt redemption tools.





Barracks Level

The living quarters for the base's personnel, guests and visitors takes up this entire level. The hall is lit with similar glowing plants to that found in the lab (listed above).

Symbiots: Two Symbiots, Reena and Zal, reside here in the captain's quarters. Once they hear visitors, they come out to investigate. (See *Encountering the Converted*, below.) The other Symbiot, Gazaal, hides in one of the enlisted bunkrooms. He also appears when the characters arrive.

Bunkrooms: There are two types of bunkroom. The wing toward the kitchen/mess features the enlisted rooms. These hold four bunks each. One room at the end of the hall hosts showers and toilets for the enlisted troops. The other wing has the officer quarters, which each host one bed, a desk and chair and separate toilet and shower.

One of these rooms, labeled "Captain's Quarters," has a think machine disk which will play in the characters' hand-held device. It details some of the Symbiot Wars on Daishan.

Kitchen/Messhall: This room has kitchen facilities along the walls and tables and chairs in the center of the room. Most of the stores have been depleted. Instead, carcasses of dead rodents and other lifeforms line the shelves. These are for the Symbiots' meals.

Starport Level

This level is much larger than the others. It is carved from the mountain rock with a level, ceramsteel floor. It sits on top of the three-level bunker shed. It is a vast room built as a small military starport for fighters, shuttles, explorers and escort vessels. An escort is the largest ship class that can fit through its bay doors.

Glow pod plants grow along the walls and ceilings, providing a good, even light throughout the room.

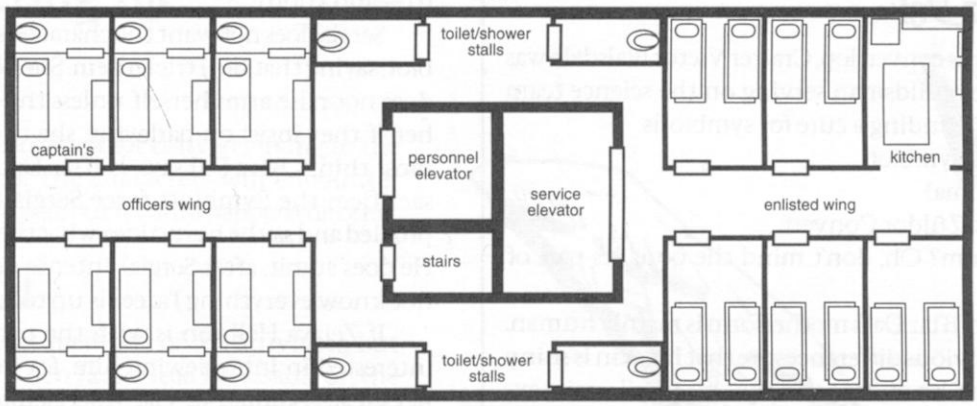
J'azeer: The leader of the Symbiots on Daishan resides here, in the largest indoor space that comfortably holds him. A host of mikaboshi, chukash and flying cats live around him, ready to defend him against assault. See *Encountering J'azeer*, below.

Starship hulls: Three useless starship hulls are parked in the room: two Decados explorers and one Merchant League *Sentry* class escort. Whole plates are missing from most of these hulls, leaving gaping holes in their sides, and all the engines and weaponry have been completely stripped.

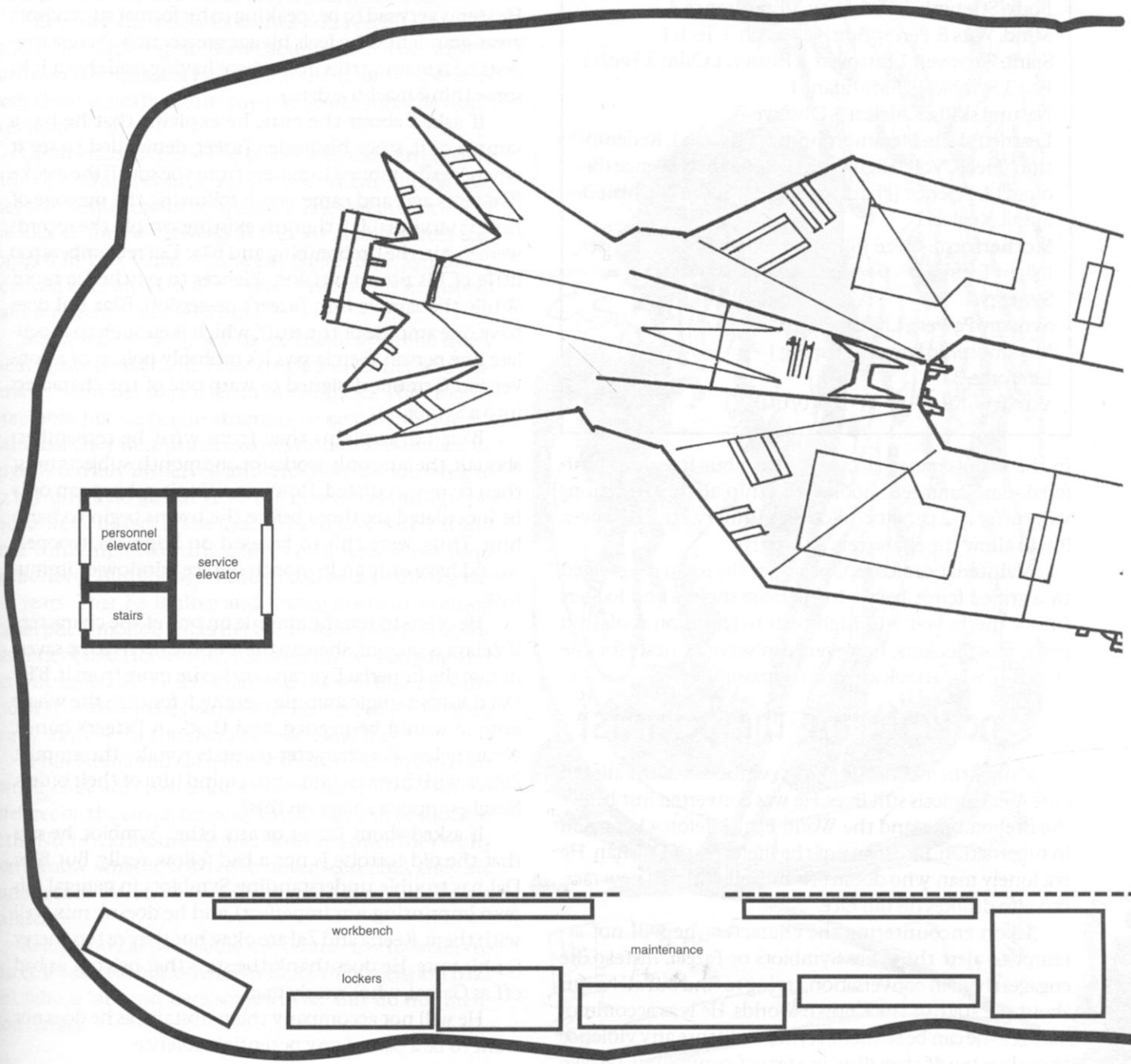
However, one of the Decados explorers still has its think machine matrix, the exact part the characters need to get their ship working. It requires nine victory points on a sustained Tech + Mech Redemption roll to unhook it; one roll is allowed after every 10 minutes of work.

In addition, another such think machine matrix lies

Barracks Level



1 2 3 4
scale in meters



Starport Level

B'laz Dal

Before his conversion, Crafter Victor Blaisdale was an Engineer guildsman serving on the science team dedicated to finding a cure for symbiosis.

Race/Caste: Symbiot
Species: Animal
Hive/Rank: Zûldor Convert
Quote: "Hmm? Oh, don't mind the ooze. It's part of me now."
Description: B'laz Dal's motherform is mainly human. The only obvious differences are that his skin is shiny from a thin film of ooze and that his pupils grow extremely large to take in extra light.
Body: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Endurance 4
Mind: Wits 8, Perception 4, Biotech 3, Tech 1
Spirit: Extrovert 1, Introvert 3, Passion 1, Calm 3, Faith 1, Ego 3, Symbiosis 3, Mundane 1
Natural skills: Khiglazi 3, Observe 7
Learned skills: Metamorphosis 3, Physick 1, Redemption (Mech, Volt, High-Tech) 1, Remedy 1, Science (Biology) 1, Science (Pharmacology) 1, Speak Urthish 3, Speak Xoglazi 1
Motherform: Ooze (Slippery Skin), Special Senses (Night Eyes)
Synergy: 1
Synergy Powers: Lifesense
Metamorphic Powers: Shaping 1
Lifeforce: 3
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0

in the maintenance alcove. It works but has clearly suffered some damage. If hooked to a ship, all ship functions will suffer a -2 penalty (piloting, gunnery, etc.). However, it will allow the characters' ship to fly.

Maintenance alcove: One side of the room is separated by a grilled fence, beyond which are shelves and lockers full of mech, volt and high-tech redemption tools and parts. Most lockers, however, also serve as nests for the chukash, who attack anyone trespassing.

Encountering the Scientist

One of the assistant scientists who created the alleged cure for symbiosis still lives. He was converted just before the firebombing, and the World Egg's Lifeforce kept him in hibernation, like many of the lifeforms of Daishan. He is a lonely man who doesn't fit in well with his new race, but also dislikes his old race.

Upon encountering the characters, he will not attempt to alert the other Symbiots or J'azeer. Instead, he engages them in conversation, trying to find out all he can about the state of the Known Worlds. He is as accommodating as he can be to them, trying to diffuse any violence they threaten. If they display a fear of conversion, he says: "I am not a Breeder. I couldn't convert you even if I wanted to — and I don't."

Sergia does not want the characters to talk to the Symbiot, saying that he'll trick them. She bids them kill it, but does not raise arms herself unless the characters support her. If they insist on parleying, she tries to counterpoint most things B'laz Dal says. If B'laz Dal is asked about the sacrifices the Symbiots force Sergia to make, he looks puzzled and say he has no idea what they are talking about. He does admit, after Sergia's intense denials, that he does not know everything J'azeer is up to.

If Zelaya Helbron is with the party, she is intensely interested in interviewing him, for he very likely knew her great-grandfather, Garrison Helbron. He admits that he did indeed know him, for Helbron was his supervisor. He seems very sad to be speaking to his former supervisor's great-grandchild; he feels his age greatly now. (Sergia suggests he is making this up, perhaps having read about it in some think machine data.)

If asked about the cure, he explains that he has a sample of it, since his leader, J'azeer, demanded to see it when he summoned him here from the south (he awoke five years ago, and came north following the message of J'azeer's servitors). It is the only existing sample; the records were lost in the firebombing and B'laz Dal remembers too little of his pre-conversion sciences to synthesize more. While the sample is in J'azeer's possession, B'laz Dal does have one ampule of the stuff, which is enough to inoculate one person. (Sergia says it's probably poison or a conversion formula, designed to warp one of the characters into a Symbiot.)

B'laz Dal explains that, from what he remembers about it, the cure only works for one month; subjects must then be re-inoculated. However, a single subject can only be inoculated six times before the toxins begin to harm him. Thus, were this to be used on Stigmata, troopers would have only an 18 month service window of immunity.

He offers to use the ampule on one of the characters. If Zelaya is present, she says the ampule needs to be saved, in case the Imperial Eye can synthesize more from it. B'laz Dal doubts a single ampule is enough for that; the whole sample would be needed, and that's in J'azeer's hands. Nonetheless, if a character requests to take the ampule, Zelaya will threaten him, and remind him of their orders. (Sergia supports Zelaya on this.)

If asked about J'azeer or any other Symbiot, he says that the old tortoise is not a bad fellow, really. But B'laz Dal has trouble understanding Symbiots in general (his own imprinting was imperfect), and he doesn't mix well with them. Reena and Zal are okay, but they're too cheery for his taste. He does thank the stars that he's not as bad off as Gazaal, who's nearly mad.

He will not accompany them upstairs, as he does not want to be a part of any potential violence.

Encountering the Converts

There are three more Symbiot converts living in the bunker. It is likely that the characters will encounter Reena and Zal before Gazaal, but it could happen the other way around.

Reena and Zal

These two used to be members of the Survivors, but they could not escape when J'azeer lead his assault on the bunker to flush the humans out. Desiring new Symbiots to keep him company, J'azeer converted them both.

They love their new existence and revel in the new sensations and perceptions available to them. They eagerly learn everything J'azeer has to teach them, and desperately await those times he allows them to go out into the world to explore.

Upon encountering the characters, they greet them with joy and are genuinely glad to see them, hoping that they will volunteer for conversion. They seem shocked at the idea of forced conversion and say that if J'azeer still engaged in that "then why aren't there more Symbiots? He could force all the Survivors to convert, but he instead waits for them to come to him."

Sergia will be horrified to see them, since she knew them before conversion. They are glad to see her, and desperately want her to join them in symbiosis. They fondly remember her desperate attempts to save them but explain that they were unnecessary: symbiosis is wonderful. Sergia is terribly unnerved and unable to decide what to do: she offers no guidance to the characters during this encounter. The fact is, she used to be in love with Zal and once contemplated luring him from Reena; her fond memories of him got her through bad periods during the last years. That he is alive and loving life (and exuding sexual pheromones) forces her to question everything she has done of late. However, the dark influence hanging over her will again assert itself soon, and she will become surly and distrustful of the couple, but hesitate to harm them in any way, even if the characters demand it of her.

While Reena and Zal will not think to do this on their own, if they are coaxed for some reason to use Discern Lifeforce on the characters and Sergia, they will be shocked at the Null-field around Sergia. However, since they really don't know what it is (they've never seen one), they are curious about it, and especially eager to introduce Sergia to J'azeer.

Reena and Zal will gladly introduce the characters to J'azeer. If asked about other Symbiots, they mention B'laz Dal, who is "around here somewhere," but do not mention Gazaal.



Reena

Before conversion, Private Ehrlisa Gannon was a good soldier in the service of House al-Malik. Under the command of Sir Saladin, she came to Daishan to establish a base camp. The crash-landing changed all that, and the meeting with J'azeer changed her very race. Her old life is a bad memory now, except for her long love for Zal.

Race/Caste: Symbiot
Species: Animal
Hive/Rank: Ornzai Convert
Quote: "Do you smell that? No? You breath with human noses. You should change that."

Description: Reena's silky silver fur runs over her naked body, covering everything but her hands, feet and face. Pale white flaps of skin stretch from under her arms and shoulders to her torso, glider wings which allow her to catch winds and float in the air. He nose, while still somewhat human, has pronounced, slanting nostrils.
Body: Strength 3, Dexterity 5, Endurance 3
Mind: Wits 5, Perception 4, Biotech 2
Spirit: Extrovert 5, Introvert 1, Passion 5, Calm 1, Faith 5, Ego 1, Symbiosis 3, Mundane 1
Natural skills: Charm 6, Fight 5, Khiglazi 3, Observe 4
Learned skills: Empathy 4, Metamorphosis 4, Search 2, Speak Urthish 3, Speak Xoglazi 3, Survival 5, Tracking 5
Motherform: Armor (furred hide 2d), Flight (Glider)
Synergy: 3
Synergy Powers: Lifesense, Discern Lifeforce, Organic Empathy
Metamorphic Powers: Immunity (cold), Mimicry (sounds), Special Senses (scent), Weaponry (claws 3d)
Lifeforce: 5
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0

Gazaal the Mad

Poor Gregor was a Survivor who couldn't escape the bunker before J'azeer overcame his aversion to forcing conversion on others. His conversion, however, was a disaster, and he did not take his imprinting well. He is mad, driven between new instincts he despises and fears, and the remnants of a rational mind which can now only scold him for his sins.

Upon encountering the characters, he remembers his former life and screamingly begs them to kill him. He is obviously in anguish and maniacally runs around tugging at them to do him in. If they don't comply, he attacks, hoping they will kill him in self-defense.

Reena and Zal, however, tries to subdue him with their Organic Empathy powers. This calms him and puts him in a slobbering stupor for an hour, during which time he will not respond to any stimuli.

Zal

Lieutenant Devon Parson was the logistics leader of the al-Malik force. He was in charge of securing the bunker for the team. He took it as a personal failure when Sister Sergia demanded an evacuation to flee the invading Symbiots. He stayed behind longer than the others, to provide cover fire. He was surprised to find Ehrlisa appear at his side to stand with him. He is especially glad that she was there to help him through the first confusing says of conversion, and loves her deeply for it.

Race/Caste: Symbiot
Species: Animal
Hive/Rank: Zûldor Convert
Quote: "I was blind, but now I see the light." (activates Glowflesh power for emphasis)

Description: Zal's outward features have changed little from his human days, although his skin is now somewhat translucent, to better allow the phosphorescent chemicals in his blood to shine and the attraction pheromones to exude forth.
Body: Strength 5, Dexterity 4, Endurance 4
Mind: Wits 4, Perception 4, Biotech 2
Spirit: Extrovert 3, Introvert 2, Passion 3, Calm 1, Faith 3, Ego 1, Symbiosis 3, Mundane 1
Natural skills: Charm 4, Fight 6, Khiglazi 4, Observe 4, Vigor 5
Learned skills: Empathy 4, Metamorphosis 4, Search 2, Speak Urthish 3, Speak Xoglazi 3, Survival 5, Tracking 5
Motherform: Pheromones (Sexual), Phosphorescence (Glowflesh 3)
Synergy: 3
Synergy Powers: Lifesense, Discern Lifeforce, Organic Empathy
Metamorphic Powers: Immunity (cold), Phosphorescence (Flash 3), Sonic Screech (3d, 15/20 range), Weaponry (bite 3d)
Lifeforce: 4
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0

Sergia is horrified at his present state, having known him in the past, and will try to kill him if the characters don't.

Encountering J'azeer

The method by which the characters meet J'azeer will determine his initial reaction to them. If they killed any Symbiots (even Gazaal), J'azeer is prepared to attack them and send his drones against them if they do not explain their actions immediately. Parley (see below) is still possible, but only if none of the characters display weapons or threaten violence. Sergia will surely ruin it for the characters.

If the characters come alone, J'azeer is ready to attack if necessary, but allows them to state their case first. Any threats result in a demand that they leave or be attacked.

If they are guided by Reena and Zal, J'azeer greets them warmly; his drones can be seen in the corners and heights, but they keep their distance until ordered otherwise by his hive-mind power. J'azeer invites them to parley. If they agree, see *Parley*, below. If not, see *No Parley*.

In addition to chukash and flying cats, a new type of drone can be found here: the mikaboshi (see sidebar). The gamemaster should stock the room with as many drones as he feels is necessary to defend J'azeer. Suggested numbers: for a player character party of five or less, provide six Chukash, three flying cats, and one mikaboshi. For each extra character in the party, add two chukash, one flying cat and one mikaboshi.

Sergia Calls for Help

Sister Sergia has had enough — she is not about to let the characters speak to this monster and discover that it has no part in the sacrifices she makes to her dark master. She initiates an attack with her pistol. J'azeer will immediately command the flying cats and chukash to attack her.

The characters' reactions to Sergia assault are important: parley with J'azeer is still possible if they attempt to stop her from further attack. If this happens, she will scream: "Traitors!" and sacrifice her own health to instantly summon her demon patron, using her *Call Zre'heva* spell.

The air around her grows dark, regardless of any light shining directly at her. Time seems to slow in the room: characters can only take one action per turn, although Sergia may still act normally. Her traits are now augmented due to demon possession (see her character sheet given in the back of this book). She attacks the characters and J'azeer, fighting to the death. Drones will not approach her, no matter how J'azeer commands them.

If she is killed, the demon leaves her body and attempts to possess one of the characters. The victim may resist with a Faith + Stoic Mind roll; if successful, the demon tries another character instead. If the roll fails, that person is controlled by the gamemaster and fights with somewhat augmented traits (+3 to characteristics and skills). If the attempt to possess a second character fails, the demon screams and disappears, no longer able to remain materialized.

J'azeer is repulsed by the Nullity forming around Sergia and attempts to steal the possessed Sergia's Lifeforce, using his Steal Lifeforce power. If he can drain it all, the demon is forced from her body and disappears. Sergia is unconscious and remains so for a week.

If Reena and Zal tell J'azeer of Sergia's strange aura, J'azeer examines it himself, immediately recognizing Nullity. He immediately attacks Sergia before she can manifest this dread power. Since Sergia may not yet have called her demon, the attack may appear unprovoked to the

Gazaal

Private Gregor Baldani was always a reluctant team member of the Daishan mission. He wanted to stay behind on Spacebase Edo, but a trooper got sick and Gregor was chosen to take his place. His forced conversion by J'azeer destroyed most of his mind and sanity (convincing J'azeer not to force conversion on anyone again), and he has roamed the halls of the bunker since, eating the food Reena and Zal catch and bring for him. He does not approach them, though, and only slips from the darkness to grab the food once they've gone.

Race/Caste: Symbiot
Species: Animal
Hive/Rank: Zûldor Convert
Quote: "Kill me now! In the name of Pallamedes, do it now!"

Description: Except for the thick scales of skin which grow all over his body, Gregor looks little changed — physically, at least. His eyes twitch with a madman's gleam, and he is filthy naked. His Projectile Attack power involves spitting kidney-stone like slugs from his mouth.
Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Endurance 3
Mind: Wits 3, Perception 4, Biotech 2
Spirit: Extrovert 3, Introvert 1, Passion 6, Calm 1, Faith 1, Ego 5, Symbiosis 3, Mundane 1
Natural skills: Fight 4, Khiglazi 3, Vigor 4
Learned skills: Speak Urthish 3, Speak Xoglazi 1
Motherform: Armor (scales 3d)
Synergy: 3
Synergy Powers: Lifesense
Metamorphic Powers: Projectile Attack (slugs 3d, 15/20 range)
Lifeforce: 5
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0

Mikaboshi

This is a mutated version of a once-native Daishan predator, sort of a local wolverine. It is about the same size as a wolverine, but far more fearsome and deadly.
Body: Strength 8, Dexterity 8, Endurance 8
Mind: Wits 2, Perception 5, Tech 0
Natural skills: Dodge 7, Fight 8, Observe 5, Sneak 3, Vigor 8
Synergy: 1
Powers: Leap (2x distance), Pheromones (Fear: characters must roll Ego + Fight before engaging in combat)
Weapons: Claws (4d including Str bonus), Teeth (4d including Str bonus)
Armor: 2d (fur)
Vitality: -5/3/-1/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

characters. J'azeer does not have time to explain until Sergia is dead.

Parleying

Assuming the characters can repair relations with J'azeer after Sergia's attack, they can parley with the ancient Symbiot and learn a number of interesting facts. Good roleplaying is required here by the players; otherwise, the gamemaster can ask for Extrovert + Charm and/or Empathy rolls to see how well they converse with J'azeer. Repeated failures on these rolls cause him to cut off any further conversation (see *Ending the Discussion*, below).

Results

· Some basic success allows answers to the following questions:

Why demand sacrifices from the human survivors? J'azeer has no idea what the characters are talking about. (If Sergia has not already tried to disrupt the parley, she will increase her efforts now.)

Conversion threats: J'azeer has no interest in converting them against their will. Not only does it require more Lifeforce than he prefers to use, but he abhors the practice. Poor Gazaal is an example of what can happen. He does not wishes that fate for anyone.

Anti-war faction: There is an anti-war faction of Symbiots (the Phazûl and Ornzai Hives), but they are not in political power and lack biotech resources. However, they are sure to gain moral ground with evidence that wars harm the Lifeweb. J'azeer has been out of touch with his people for a century, so he is unsure just what is going on right now.

Repair parts: If the characters want to take a think machine matrix, they need to prove themselves. This consists of allowing J'azeer to use his Organic Empathy power to read their intentions. If they intend no harm to the Symbiots, they can take the part; if they do intend harm, they are told to leave.

What's with the weather? The planet's World Egg — center of Lifeforce energy — is attempting to heal the world using images from J'azeer's dreams. The snow and ice will purify the radioactive taint and slowly yield to a more diverse ecoscape.

What are Symbiot really like? J'azeer may or may not explain something about Symbiot history and culture, depending on how attentive or understanding the characters seem to be.

· Very good success at roleplaying (or the dice rolling mentioned above), or allowing J'azeer to empathize with them (use the Organic Empathy power), nets answers to the following questions (if asked):

· **Symbiots on Daishan:** No other Symbiots know that Daishan still lives — they fear it is a Nullity (and some areas are). It is possible that others survived in certain regions of the world, but J'azeer has sent servitors to seek them out and only B'laz Dal came. J'azeer is amenable to allowing limited human recolonization in an attempt to live in cooperation with him and his Symbiots. This coalition may later convince other Symbiots to quit the war.

· **Can we have the cure?** If the characters have given only the best impression to J'azeer, he allows them to have the cure sample, even though it means his race may have great trouble converting humans thenceforth. However, he is against forceful conversion anyway, and believes there will always be enough humans who wish willful conversion.

If they do not pass the basic tests of decency and kindness, he does not let them have it, and demands that they leave. He does leave open the possibility of future parley with other humans (such as the Imperial Eye).

Occult Spying

If one of the characters attempts to use a psychic power or theurgic rite against J'azeer (or any Symbiot here), the Symbiot has no defence against it. He may not even know a power is being used against him. However, if he is aware of it, he will become enraged, and demand that they leave immediately. Nonethless, much of the information in *Parley* may be gleaned without his consent. More victory points may be required to gain Symbiot secrets or de-

tailed answers to questions, or to force J'azeer to give up the cure.

Ending the Discussion

If the parley is unsuccessful, but a good-hearted attempt was made by the characters, J'azeer allows them to leave with the think machine matrix, telling their kind to never return.

If the parley is a disaster or Symbiots were killed or attacked by the characters, all drones in the region will harass characters every step of their way back to their ship. If J'azeer was killed, the drones go nuts and raid the Survivors' caves, killing them all over the next weeks.

If the parley worked and the characters got their spare part, they may leave the bunker with no resistance.

No Parley

If the characters refuse to parley, Sergia helps them kill the vile Symbiot. Once that task is complete, she turns on the characters, subduing them, binding them and then sacrificing them to her demon lord.

Assuming they survive this and the drones (frenzied after J'azeer's death), they can search the room for the cure. Six victory points on a sustained Perception + Search roll finds a sealed hazardous materials flask labeled "Symbiosis Inoculate." It holds enough of the medicine for up to 25 injections. It is also enough to allow Imperial Eye scientists to perhaps synthesize more.

Option: If things go too poorly, the Manifest Light captain and his troops (see Act Two) arrives with troops to help the characters against the Symbiot menace. If Sergia has not yet exhibited her evil side, he is inclined to believe her story over any non-priest characters.

Getting Out

Regardless of how they leave the bunker (as friends of J'azeer, enemies or harried escapees), they must pass through the Survivors' territory to get back to their ship. Sister Sergia is almost surely dead. If by any chance she survived and the characters still don't know about her Antinomy, she plays along with them further and tries to get them to take her to Spacebase Edo with some of the Survivors. If she escapes Daishan this way, she is welcomed as a hero by Captain Aladotti and her Brother Battle order; she can thus spread an Antinomy cult across the Known Worlds under the very guise of the priesthood. When she is eventually unmasked (which could take years), she will name the characters as accomplices in her evil; the Inquisition will turn its attention on them.

If she is dead, the characters will have to explain this to her people. It is doubtful the Survivors will believe any tale of Antinomy on her part, and to even speak of it will rouse their suspicion; they won't attack the characters, but ask them to leave, assuming they've been compromised by Symbiots. A few of them break ranks and beg the characters to take them off-world.

If the characters lie about Sergia, and explain that she died a good, heroic death, the Survivors mourn but look to the characters for leadership. They beg that representatives of their group can return to the Known Worlds and bring help for the rest. Any mention of good or friendly Symbiots will arouse suspicions, as above.

Practically, only 13 or so people can fit into the *Azhara*, and this means some of them have to sleep on the floors and in the cargo hold. This number includes the characters: if there are five characters, only eight Survivors can accompany them back. The Survivors press for this full number, but will accept if they are allowed to send only three people.

Upon reaching their ship, they find it untouched since they left it. It only takes an hour or so to hook up the new think machine matrix and another hour to run a complete systems check: all systems are go.

No more pod ships exist to harass them and their departure is threat-free.

Resolution

Hailing Spacebase Edo

As soon as the *Azhara* leaves Daishan's atmosphere, she picks up a communication from Spacebase Edo: "This is Spacebase Edo hailing the *Azhara*. Please respond *Azhara*." This is delivered in a dull monotone: a communications officer whose orders are to broadcast this message over and over. After a while, he recorded it and now simply repeats the recording. When the characters respond, the message will repeat another two or three times before the shocked officer notices that someone has finally responded.

He replies: "I receive you, *Azhara*. Please state your location and condition."

The commander and Salima are alerted and soon interrogate the characters over radio, asking for complete details of their mission. If anyone bothers to mention that this is not a secure frequency, she will say that there's nobody in the system except the spacebase and them — please proceed.

Tallying the Results

The news of their mission is received as follows:

· **Contacting the Symbiots:** Salima wants to know how far she can trust J'azeer. The characters' answer determines how the Imperial Eye proceeds with future contact: If he is deemed suspicious or dangerous, they will treat him as an enemy, as they do other Symbiots. They may attempt to capture him or kill him to get him out of the way.

The characters' role in establishing contact with the Symbiots (or at least giving it the old college try) is rewarded with promises of future favor from the Empire. They are given some codewords they can use with Imperial forces on a number of worlds by which to contact Salima (such as: Fortean, Albionic, Thornley, Lumma). She will honestly try to aid them or assign an agent to do so. (She actually hopes to use them again for future missions, although she won't tell them this.)

If the characters request it, she will give them commissions as recruits in the Imperial Eye, but she will not offer this herself. This means that the characters must travel to Byzantium Secundus or Tethys to complete a three-month training program in espionage. Once successfully completed, they are given salaries and expected to undertake missions for their immediate superiors. Salima may occasional request them for a mission or two.

Regardless, each character is rewarded with 3000 firebirds and joint ownership (with the other characters) of the *Azhara*. (If they already have their own starship, the gamemaster may boost the firebird award in lieu of the *Azhara*.)

· **The Cure:** They are applauded for rescuing this valuable medicine, and are given an Imperial medal of honor for valorous service on Stigmata (their mission on Daishan is top secret). In addition, each character is given 1000 firebirds.

· **Sister Sergia:** If her Antinomy was revealed, Salima nervously avoids the issue until later — the last thing she needs is nosy Inquisitors sniffing out demonists or rumors of them. However, the transmission is monitored by Captain Aladotti, who will later question the players in detail in person about Sergia.

· **The Survivors:** Stunned and shocked amazement accompanies the announcement that the Emperor Wars unit survived its supposed destruction. Promises to treat them well are given. However, the Manifest Light is extremely curious about them and demands a quarantine period on Stigmata, where they can be watched and interrogated for signs of Symbiot taint. In a few months, they will be cleared and allowed to emigrate to the Known Worlds.

But where do they go? They don't want to split up, since they are a tighter family now than any relations they had before. Nobody wants them: the al-Malik don't want it revealed that they had any involvement with Daishan during the Emperor Wars, and the Imperial forces feel no obligation towards them. If it is made clear to the Hawkwoods that it was their destruction of the al-Malik space fleet that caused the Survivors existence to be forgotten, they will grumble about "It was a war, you know." However, they may allow the Survivors to settle on Leminkainen, if they pledge fealty to the local lord and assist in uprooting any Vuldrok sympathies among the populace.

The Survivors pledge that, wherever they are and in whatever condition, the characters are always welcome among them.

· **Zelaya's report:** If Zelaya Helbron accompanied the characters on the mission (and survived), she will secretly give Salima a complete report on their behavior and actions once she arrived at Spacebase Edo. She has made note of any insurrectionary statements they have made and enemies they mentioned, including rivals or hatreds of particular people or factions. If they are incognito pyschics and displayed their powers before her, she reports that also. Any "holes" in the characters' own report to Salima can be filled in by Zelaya.

Very few thoughts or behavior they display can possibly prejudice Salima against them. Even if they are Third Republicans or anti-Imperialists, she can still find a use for them. She is not an ideologue but a practical espionage engineer.

Experience Points

Use the guidelines from the **Fading Suns** rulebook for awarding experience points, and add in the following bonuses (if the conditions were met):

· Characters accomplished primary mission objective (contacting J'azeer and not parting as enemies): +2 (except any character that actively resisted this outcome)

· Characters learned a lot about Symbiots (they asked questions of J'azeer and the others): +1

· Characters retrieved the cure for symbiosis: +1

· Characters defeated Sister Sergia (putting an end to her vile ways): +2

· Characters rescued the Survivors: +1

Likewise, subtract the following penalties (but do not award less than one experience point to any character):

· Characters aided Sergia in making enemies of the Symbiots and helped her to escape Daishan: -1 (unless the characters are Antinomists themselves)

· Characters selfishly used the cure sample for themselves, leaving none to take back to Salima: -1 (except anyone who actively resisted this)

Put to the Question

Once arrived on Spacebase Edo, the gala welcoming the characters may expect does not take place — instead, Manifest Light troops meet them clothed in environment suits and march them to quarantine barracks. Here, they are interrogated one-by-one by cloaked figures in dark rooms. They are asked the same questions over and over again.

It is obvious that some questions are accompanied by theurgic rites. If any character tries to resist occult intrusion, the questioning goes much worse for her, for the Manifest Light questioners get suspicious: What is the character trying to hide?

Once Aladotti is convinced that they are clean of Symbiot taint, following a Disinfect ritual on each, the characters are finally greeted in person by Aladotti, Salima and Commander Waldon. They profusely apologize for the harsh treatment, but insist that it was necessary.

They are offered a flight back to any world they desire, or they may take the *Azhara*, fully fueled and outfitted.

Further Adventures

Many plot threads can come from this adventure:

· **Where to next?** Once the mission is over, the characters will surely attempt to get the hell out of the Stigmata area as soon as possible, lest they be conscripted for further duty. For the next few months, their fates are their own — until the Vau intervene (see *The Curiosity of the Vau*, below).

· **The Survivors need help:** Now set up in near-poverty on Leminkainen, the Survivors suffer raids from the barbarians in the hills. While they are used to harsh living, and can handle the barbarians, it's the Antinomists that scare them. A warlock is harassing them, perhaps believing them to be demon-tainted like himself. Nobody will help them, so they make a desperate plea to the characters who rescued them from Daishan.

· **The Imperial Eye needs you:** Salima Sahar calls on the characters for another mission, this time to contact Symbiots who have infiltrated the Known Worlds and look like any human.

· **Barbarians Open the Gate:** A Vuldrok world is harassed by Symbiots. The warlord, having heard of the characters and their exploits on Daishan, believes them to be expert Symbiot hunters. He offers them heaps of firebirds to defend his world, or he may try to shanghai them instead.

· **The Symbiots Cometh:** Symbiots have returned to Daishan and heard about the characters from J'azeer. Curious if they can aid in the anti-war effort, perhaps as liaisons with humans, Phazûl and Ornzai Hivers infiltrate the Known Worlds in search of them. Also, Galzai Hivers send bounty hunters after them, seeking to kill anyone who threatens the war effort.

· **Into Symbiot Space:** The characters are hired for a dangerous mission into Symbiot space. The Stigmata Garrison has made contact with an anti-war faction of Symbiots on Absolution and is sending a stealth ship in to meet with them.

The Curiosity of the Vau

Besides all other ramifications of this drama, the characters pique the interest of the Vau. Spy devices and covert Vau allies have spread the word back to the Hegemony of the characters and their actions. Long pondering the "Symbiot question," a Vau Mandarin orders them watched closely, perhaps even sending covert human allies to protect them unseen. He has cast oracles and consulted the Rivers of Time, and recognizes that the characters are a nexus for novelty — they resist the tide of habit and accomplish new things.

A great plan is in motion, and now the characters are unknowingly involved. They may suspect after a while that someone, somewhere seems to be watching out for them. But who? Inquiries with the traditional power factions (nobles, Church, guild) yield nothing. They must wait, as the Vau say, for "time to arrive at the appointed event."

Gamemasters can expand on these hints further with the next supplement in this series, *War in the Heavens: Hegemony*.

Captain Iscarino Aladotti

Iscarino discovered his talent for theurgy and his vocation soon after puberty. Dedicating himself to the Church (rather than his merchant father's enterprises), he quickly rose through the ranks due to his inquiring mind and attention to duty. Graduating to the rank of Philosophus (Priest), Iscarino felt a call to travel and spread the word while also searching for greater knowledge with which to battle the Great Adversary.

On Criticorum, he saw the Symbiot menace first hand when a group of serfs were transformed into mindless maniacs by Symbiot spores before being destroyed by the local militia. Although horrified and fearful at first, Iscarino knew that he finally had his calling. He left the next morning for Stigmata and volunteered for the Manifest Light legion of occult troops.

Under the leadership of the charismatic Father Amelie, the Urth Orthodox captain of his troop, Iscarino fought many skirmishes against feral drones and servitors, and eventually assumed Amelie's rank when the old captain perished on the battlefield.

Suspecting that the Stigmata Garrison Commander and the Emperor knew more about the Symbiots than they revealed, he slowly built a strong intelligence network among the Garrison troops. He has figured out what the Imperial Eye is up to and has strongly objected; he disbelieves any truth to the rumours about anti-war factions among the Symbiots (he has never, in fact, met a True Symbiot). He gathered a small unit and muscled in on the Daishan spacebase. From here, he intends to make sure the Imperial Eye does not destroy a group of innocent souls in pursuit of its wild plans.

He will warn the player characters away from their intended quest. A cure is a noble pursuit — if it exists. But they risk their very souls for an organization (the Eye) which rarely tells anyone the full truth. Failing to sway them, he has no reservations about later slaying them rather than risk infestation from Daishan.

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Manifest Light Captain/Eskatonic Philosophus (Priest)

Quote: "Beware, lest your greed for fame and glory leads you to extinguish the holy flame which burns within your soul!"

Description: Tall and muscular, with brown hair and piercing green eyes, Iscarino has an angular face and thin lips. He wears an Eskatonic sash over his uniform. If ever glimpsed out of uniform, whip marks are obvious on his forearms and across his shoulders; the angle of the marks shows most of them to be self-inflicted. He carries a scourge at his waist.

Entourage: Iscarino travels with a hand-picked team of Manifest Light troopers, a fanatical group of conservative priests.

Manifest Light Theurgy Rites

Captain Aladotti knows two of the Manifest Light's special theurgy rites, developed on Stigmata.

Divine Warning

(Level 4, Perception + Observe, P, temporary, 1W)

This rite acts like the fourth level Sixth Sense psychic power: Premonition.

Disinfect

(Level 7, Faith + Stoic Body, PLG, instant, 1W)

The theurgist can purge Symbiot or Antinomist taint from a target, as long as that taint has not been with the target long (no more than a span). This rite cannot drive out possessing demons or undo conversion or shaping, but it can cancel Antinomy spells cast upon the target or kill Symbiot spores on the target's person. It can also destroy metamorphic powered taints, such as Symbiot toxins, ooze, webbing, etc.

Name: Captain Iscarino Aladotti
Gender: Male
Age: 38
Race: Human
Alliance: Eskatonic Order
Rank: Philosophus

CHARACTERISTICS

Body		Mind	
Strength (3)	6	Wits (3)	8
Dexterity (3)	7	Perception (3)	7
Endurance (3)	8	Tech (3)	4

Spirit		
Extrovert (1)	5/5	(3) Introvert
Passion (1)	4/6	(3) Calm
Faith (3)	7/2	(1) Ego
Human (3)	7/3	(1) Alien

NATURAL SKILLS

Charm (3)	5
Dodge (3)	7
Fight (3)	4
Impress (3)	8
Melee (3)	5
Observe (3)	6
Shoot (3)	5
Sneak (3)	4
Vigor (3)	6

LEARNED SKILLS

	LVL
Speak Urthish (3)	4
Academia	7
Alchemy	4
Focus	5
Lore (Theology)	6
Physick	3
Read Latin	5
Read Urthish	5
Remedy	6
Social (Leadership)	7
Social (Oratory)	6
Stoic Body	4
Stoic Mind	5

OCCULT

Theurgy 7/2 Hubris

Rites	Goal
Prophet's Holy Blessing	12
The Devotional Liturgy	11
Laying on of Hands	12
Prophet's Censure	10
Celestial Alignment	10
Divine Revelation	13
Second Sight	12
All-Seeing Eye	11
Divine Warning	11
Disinfect	11

BLESSINGS/CURSES

+/-	Trait	Situation
+2	Passion	When others hesitate
+2	Per	Symbiot taint suspected

COMMON ACTIONS

Action	Goal
Giving commands	12
Wax theological	11
Resist Occult powers	12

ARMOR Synthsilk 2+2d
Flame retardant +3d
(5/10) Hits:

COMBAT

STR bonus: +1d

Action	Init	Goal	DMG	RNG
Fist		11	3d	
Kick	-1	11	4d	
Grapple	-2	11	3d	
Charge	-3	11	4d	
Heavy revolver		12	6d	30/40
Flamegun		14	5/3	10/20

SHOTS FIRED

Revolver (6 /clip)

Flamegun (10 /clip)

VICTORY CHART

Successes	Pts
1-2	0
3-5	+1
6-8	+2
9-11	+3
12-14	+4
15-17	+5
18	+6

Critical success = x2

VITALITY ●●●●●●●●○○○○○○○○○○
Wound penalties: -10 -8 -6 -4 -2

WYRD ●●●●●●●○○○○○○○○○○○



Sister Sergia

The daughter of a tutor in a noble house, Sergia chafed under too many restrictions. She hated serving the nobles and having to study; she resented the idea that she somehow wasn't good enough. To slake her taste for fighting and to try to advance herself beyond having to bow to aristocratic ninnies, she joined the Brothers Battle. Hoping to make her reputation in warfare, she asked for assignment to front-line duty and was sent to Stigmata. There she encountered a soldier who owned a strange grimoire which he gave to her to be destroyed. The young man was killed before Sergia could discover where he had gotten the book.

When she was trapped on Daishan with the rest of the small al-Malik force, Sergia turned to the grimoire when her faith deserted her. She contacted the demonic patron of the book, and it agreed to protect the majority of the Survivors in return for the occasional sacrifice of a few of them. Sergia instituted the "Symbiot lottery" as a means to choose which among the Survivors would be sacrificed to her patron, Zre'heva. Once sacrificed to feed the demon's blood lust, the person was then butchered and his flesh used to help feed the colony. Sergia hid the truth from the others, though, and told them that it was the Symbiots who demanded this flesh sacrifice.

Sister Sergia became the true leader of the Survivors and her twisted reasoning became the philosophy imparted to all the children born to them. With the coming of the characters, Sister Sergia hopes to escape Daishan, taking some of the more programmed Survivors with her to spread the worship of her dark patron to a wider audience. To that end, she wants the characters' starship for herself.

Race: Human

Rank/Class: Brother Battle Adept

Quote: "The Pancreator has failed us. We survive only by the fickle whim of our new master."

Description: Stockily built with muscular arms and legs that seem a little too short for her frame, Sister Sergia has graying brown hair and piercing brown eyes under fierce brows. Her patrician nose tops a hard, thin-lipped mouth. Sister Sergia still wears her Brother Battle robes, now torn and soiled after years of use and little mending. These are augmented by animal skins and furs.

Call Zre'heva

This spell was gleaned from the grimoire; it allows Sergia to instantly summon and be temporarily possessed her dark master, suffusing her with power. However, it is not without cost: she loses four Wyrd points, three Vitality and one permanent Endurance level. The benefits are: +6 to physical characteristics and natural skills, and an occult shield (acts like a 5/15 energy shield with unlimited hits, but blasters and flame do not bleed through). This rite can only be used once per month, and the possession last for only five minutes.

Details on the other Antinomy rites she knows can be found in the **Fading Suns** supplement *The Dark Between the Stars.*

NPCs

Name: Sister Sergia
Gender: Female
Age: 47

Race: Human
Alliance: Brother Battle
Rank: Adept

CHARACTERISTICS

Body		Mind	
Strength (3)	6	Wits (3)	7
Dexterity (3)	7	Perception (3)	7
Endurance (3)	10	Tech (3)	3

Spirit		
Extrovert (3)	5/5	(1) Introvert
Passion (3)	6/4	(1) Calm
Faith (3)	4/6	(1) Ego
Human (3)	5/5	(1) Alien

NATURAL SKILLS

Charm (3)	3
Dodge (3)	6
Fight (3)	8
Impress (3)	7
Melee (3)	7
Observe (3)	6
Shoot (3)	7
Sneak (3)	4
Vigor (3)	6

LEARNED SKILLS

	LVL
Speak Urthish (3)	5
Archery	3
Focus	6
Inquiry	5
Read Latin	2
Read Urthish	3
Remedy	5
Search	6
Social (Leadership)	6
Stoic Body	8
Stoic Mind	7
Survival	6
Throwing	3
Torture	4

OCCULT

Antinomy 3 / 1 Fealty

Powers/Rites	*Goal*
Curse	11
Evil Eye	11
Cloak of Shadow	9
Call Zre'heva	13

BLESSINGS/CURSES

+/-	*Trait*	*Situation*
+2	Calm	In combat
-2	Per	Social cues
-2	all rolls	When opposing Church

COMMON ACTIONS

Action	*Goal*
Give commands	11
Interrogate someone	12
Resist Occult powers	13

ARMOR Hvy clothing: 2d
(5/10) Hits: 8 + 1 cel

COMBAT

STR bonus: + 1d

Action	*Init*	*Goal*	*DMG*	*RNG*
Fist		15	3d	
Kick	-1	15	4d	
Grapple	-2	15	3d	
Charge	-3	15	4d	
Broadsword		14	7d	
Throwing knife		10	4d	5/10
Hvy autofeed pistol		14	6d	30/40
Hunting bow		10	4d	20/30
Martial Fist		15	4d	
Martial Kick	-1	15	5d	

Action	*Init*	*Goal*	*DMG*	*RNG*
Martial Hold	-1	15	4d	
Block		13		
Martial Throw	-2	15	4d	
Tornado Kick	-1	15	6d	
Sure Fist	-2	17	4d	
Leaping Kick	-2	14	7d	
Choke Hold	-3	14	5d	
Throw Group	-2	15	4d	
Block & Strike		17/15	-/4d	
Off-hand fencing				
Parry/Riposte		17/14	7d	

SHOTS FIRED (8 /clip) Hvy autofeed (12 shots total)

VITALITY ●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●OO
Wound penalties: -10 -8 -6 -4 -2

WYRD ●●●●●●●OOOOOOOOOO

VICTORY CHART

Successes	*Pts*
1-2	0
3-5	+1
6-8	+2
9-11	+3
12-14	+4
15-17	+5
18	+6

Critical success = x2



J'azeer

J'azeer was born on Chernobog and spent 100 years of his life as a *shob'gn* tortoise, a native creature of that planet which somewhat resemble Urth tortoises in appearance and function. Shob'gn shells are quite beautiful, and became a popular trade item among humans before the evacuation of Chernobog. Converted and imprinted by an Ornzai Hiver, J'azeer became fascinated with his sentience. He remembered nothing from his previous life except a love for loafing in muddy waters. Nonetheless, he became one of the more socially involved Ornzai Hivers, and was among those to petition the Xokor Tlan to end his war against the humans.

He went with the initial insurgency teams to Daishan, hoping to arrange a peaceful takeover of the world, for the conflicts of Abydos disturbed him. It was not to be, however, and he was horrified when the nuclear bombs from space began falling. He and a small group had just contacted the planet's World Egg and, before the scorching air could burn his lungs, he freed its energy. But the explosion of Lifeforce could not reverse the firebombing and J'azeer's comrades died writhing in the heat.

J'azeer burrowed deep into the World Egg core, situated near an old terraforming node, and drew upon the Lifeforce to heal his wounds. Without meaning to, he slipped into a deep hibernation, in resonance now with the energies of the World Egg. As he dreamt, his dreams worked with the Lifeweb energy to mend the world. Daishan's scorched surface was enveloped in snow and ice, to cool its mantle. Slowly, as the decades passed, life crept forth again. Plants sprouted in select locations and animals appeared out of Lifeforce hibernations similar to J'azeer's.

Although most of the planet was still enveloped in a global ice age, a small region of temperance and life grew from where J'azeer slumbered, protected from aging by his proximity to the Lifeweb nexus. Finally, J'azeer awoke and returned to the surface, shaking off over a century of sleep. He surveyed the land and set about building a Symbiot culture anew. He converted many of the burgeoning lifeforms before discovering the nearby human bunker.

The humans fled from J'azeer and his drones, but he was able to convert a few of them. These now serve his cause. He has claimed the bunker for his own lair, for it still provides the best protection from the harsh climate, short of burrowing back into the earth.

His drones, servitors and Symbiots see him as a powerful fertility god, the savior of Daishan.

Race/Caste: Symbiot

Species: Animal

Hive/Rank: Ornzai Primal (Yarsa)

Quote: "No good at Urth speak... We not need to fear... Live in Quensaam, yes?"

Description: J'azeer's motherform resembles a melding between a large, fat human and a huge tortoise. He has scaly skin and a hard shell around his torso with hard protuberances which help protect his limbs; his shell has beautiful designs on it, part of his alien heritage. He is 12 feet tall, but spends most of his time on all fours. Regardless of his reptilian body, his eyes are quite human and display much wisdom.

Name: J'azeer
Gender: Male
Age: 133 (physical age)

Caste/Species: Symbiot
Hive: Ornzai
Rank: Primal (Yarsa)

Characteristics

Body		Mind	
Strength (3)	12	Wits (3)	7
Dexterity (3)	5	Perception (3)	8
Endurance (3)	8	Biotech (3)	3
		Tech (0)	0

Spirit			
Extrovert (1)	3/5	(3)	Introvert
Passion (1)	3/7	(3)	Calm
Faith (3)	5/1	(1)	Ego
Symbiosis (3)	8/0	(1)	Mundane

Natural Skills

Charm (3)	5
Dodge (3)	5
Fight (3)	7
Impress (3)	3
Khiglazi (3)	4
Melee (3)	3
Observe (3)	7
Shoot (3)	5
Sneak (3)	6
Vigor (3)	4

Learned Skills

	LVL
Beast Lore	7
Empathy	6
Focus	3
Metamorphosis	8
Remedy	5
Search	5
Speak Urthish	1
Speak Xoglazi	3
Stoic Body	8
Stoic Mind	6
Survival	8
Tracking	4

Metamorphic Powers

Synergy 8/ Antipathy

Powers	Goal
Lifesense	15
Discern Lifeforce	13
Organic Empathy	14/9
Regeneration	12
Healing	8
Regrowth	12
Draw Lifeforce	11
Steal Lifeforce	11
Breeding	16
Elemental Attack (Wind x4, Hail x3, Lightning x2)	13
Hive-Mind	10
Movement (Burrowing: move 8 meters/turn +1 per v.p.)	16

Motherform

Powers	LVL
Armor (shell 8d)	
Size (Grow x2, +4 run)	
Stance (bipedal or quadrupedal)	
Weaponry (Bite)	

Blessings/Curses

+/-	Trait	Situation

Armor Shell: 8d

Combat

STR bonus: +3d

Action	Init	Goal	DMG	RNG	Shots
Fist		11	5d		
Kick	-1	11	6d		
Grapple	-2	11	5d		
Charge	-3	11	6d		
Bite		11	6d		
Elemental Attack					
Wind (Str 16)		14	4d		
Hail		13	9d		
Lightning		13	8d		
Steal Lifeforce		11			

Victory Chart

Successes	Pts
1-2	0
3-5	+1
6-8	+2
9-11	+3
12-14	+4
15-17	+5
18	+6

Critical success = x2

Vitality ●●●●●●●●●●●●●●○○

Wound penalties: -10 -8 -6 -4 -2

Lifeforce ●●●●●●●●●●○○○○○○



Name:
Former Name:
Gender:
Age:

Caste:
Species:
Hive:
Rank:

FADING SUNS

SYMBIOTS

CHARACTERISTICS

BODY		MIND	
Strength (3)		Wits (3)	
Dexterity (3)		Perception (3)	
Endurance (3)		Biotech (1)	
		Tech ( )	

SPIRIT

Extrovert ( ) ____ / ____ ( ) Introvert
Passion ( ) ____ / ____ ( ) Calm
Faith ( ) ____ / ____ ( ) Ego
Symbiosis ( ) ____ / ____ ( ) Mundane

NATURAL SKILLS

Charm (3) ____
Dodge (3) ____
Fight (3) ____
Impress (3) ____
Khiglazi (3) ____
Melee (3) ____
Observe (3) ____
Shoot (3) ____
Sneak (3) ____
Vigor (3) ____

LEARNED SKILLS

	LVL

BLESSINGS/CURSES

+/-	Trait	Situation

BENEFICES/AFFLICTIONS

Type	Pts

MOTHERFORM

Powers	LVL

METAMORPHIC POWERS

Synergy ____ / ____ Antipathy

Powers	LVL	Roll

COMBAT

Action	Roll	Init	Goal	DMG	STR/ RNG	Shots	SIZ
Fist	Dx + Fight			2d			
Kick	Dx + Fight	-1		3d			
Grapple	Dx + Fight	-2		2d			
Charge	Dx + Fight	-3		3d			

VICTORY CHART

Successes	Dice
1-2	0
3-5	+1
6-8	+2
9-11	+3
12-14	+4
15-17	+5
18	+6

Critical success = x2

EQUIPMENT:

ARMOR

VITALITY

O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O

Wound penalties: -10 -8 -6 -4 -2

LIFEFORCE

O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O O
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