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# TRAVELLER

## THE PIRATES OF DRINAX

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### THE DEMON'S EYE

*The Demon's Eye* is the fourth adventure in the *Pirates of Drinax* campaign. If you are a player in this campaign, **STOP READING NOW!** If you're a Referee, then you should first read *The Pirates of Drinax Campaign* document to get an overview of the campaign.

This adventure takes place in the Borderlands subsector of the Trojan Reach. The year is assumed to be 1105. The adventure begins on Tech-World, or in a nearby system where the characters can be contacted by emissaries of Tech-World.

#### ADVENTURE SYNOPSIS

The characters travel to Tech-World to conduct secret negotiations with the scientific council who operate the highly advanced colony. While there, one of the council, a brilliant nanotechnologist named Jali Astor, accidentally exposes herself to an experimental nanotechnological weapon. Infected, she flees the planet, and the characters are asked to pursue her.

From Jali's assistant, Lemuel Volin, they learn she comes from the planet Neumann, which fell victim to a nanotechnological catastrophe during the Long Night. She sought a solution to the nanotech swarms that still plague her world, but it seems to have driven her insane.

The characters pursue Jali to the world of Mirage, where she attempts to kill a representative of the Shield Church of Neumann, Archon Dreek. If she obtains the Church-only nanotech from Dreek, she believes she can save Neumann. The final confrontation takes place either on Mirage, or in the chaotic swarm zones of Neumann. As a complication, Lemuel Volin is not what he seems.

#### Background

The Solomani believed the path of technological development was straight and direct as an arrow. One discovery built upon another, and another, each breakthrough expanding the scientific knowledge of the species. There might be accidents, setbacks, the occasional dark age or ecological catastrophe, but the path of advancement bent ever upwards towards some unimaginable glorious future.

The Vilani, older and wiser, knew otherwise. Technological development is not a constant. It is like the tides. A world might surge forward in a great wave of advancement, a flood of knowledge, then fall back like the retreating surf. Hundreds or even thousands of years might pass without any further change, one generation following the rules and systems laid down by their parents, choosing comfortable stability over dangerous advancement. The path of technological development is not a straight line - it is a maze, with many blind alleys and even more pit traps and perils.

The Third Imperium advances not in a sudden wave, but with the steady, measured pace of a rising ocean. New developments are carefully monitored, weighed, judged and considered before they are allowed to come to fruition. The Imperium has murdered its share of geniuses and prophets.

The alternative is to risk the extinction of Humanity. Look at the few examples of unfettered technological advancement. The Ancients wiped themselves out in an apocalyptic war. The Darrians nearly blew up their own sun in their hubris. And in the Trojan Reach, the transhumanists of Neumann brought ruin upon themselves in a single ghastly hour. The future must ripen slowly, or it will be bitter.

### ***Library Data: Nanotech Swarms***

Nanotechnology is technology that operates on the molecular scale. Some forms of nanotech become available as early as TL7 in the form of smart fabrics and coatings, but later Technology Levels allow the construction of microscopic robots, small enough to manipulate individual cells or even individual molecules. Individually, these robots are exceedingly simple, but can communicate and coordinate their efforts. Examples of such robot swarms include the 'utility fog,' a cloud of robots that can assume any shape and density desired, assembler/disassemblers who build objects up or tear objects apart, from the nano-scale upwards.

Like any technology, nanotechnology can be dangerous, especially when nanotech swarms are allowed to operate outside a controlled environment.

### ***Tech-World***

Only a few parsecs antispinward of Drinax is the planet Tech-World. The ugly name - the product of a botched advertising campaign by the General Development Corporation - speaks of the planet's ambition. On Tech-World, there are no limits to scientific research, and no fetters on what a scientist can attempt. The colony's foundation was bankrolled by the General Development Corporation. Most of the researchers come from the Imperial subsectors of the Trojan Reach, especially worlds like Neumann. Others are eccentrics and radicals, drawn to a world where they can conduct virtually any experiments.

GeDeCo tolerates its collection of mad scientists, as long as they occasionally produce something useful and keep the automated starport operational. Tech-World is an island of advanced technology amid the backward worlds of the Reach.

## ***1. OVERTURE***

Rumours spread quickly in the Reach. By this point in the campaign, the pirates should have acquired a Standing (even a negative one) that gives them a reputation as dangerous, ambitious people. Perhaps they have even recruited a few worlds to the banner of Drinax. The characters are becoming influential, and that attracts attention.

At some starport bar, or in the Floating Palace of Drinax, or in some other sleazy dive frequented by thieves and corsairs, the crew are approached by an emissary of Tech-World. The emissary slips a featureless black disc, about the size of a man's palm, into the pocket of one of the characters. The disc contains information on the pirates, drawn from whatever data the masters of Tech-World have on them - Imperial arrest warrants, old naval records, DNA traces if they ever visited Tech-World

and so on. The disc activates only if the characters are the only people nearby, to ensure no agent of the General Development Company spies on this overture.

At the appropriate moment (and if the characters don't notice the disc being planted or ignore it, this might happen when the character carrying the disc is asleep or alone), the disc unfolds. It projects a perfect hologram - the image of a humanoid figure, his features concealed behind a silvery mask.

+++Greetings. Your presence is requested - discreetly - on Tech-World, where matters of mutual interest and profitability may be discussed. We offer you this gift as a mark of our respect, in the hopes of future friendship.+++

The gift is a computer data module containing a cutting edge (TL 15) Intellect program equipped with the skills Social Science (linguistics) 3, Social Science (philosophy) 3, Social Science (psychology) 3 and Social Science (sophontology) 3. Installed on a suitable computer, it can advise the characters on its various fields of expertise. It's of marginal use for a bunch of uncultured pirates, but a lovely conversation piece.

### ***An Alternate Approach***

If the characters deliberately seek out an alliance with Tech-World (which is a very wise move), then you can skip straight to Landing on Tech-World.

### ***Landing on Tech-World***

From orbit, Tech-World looks like a rusty wasteland. Native lifeforms are almost non-existent, unless you are a big fan of slime. The world lacks any notable mineral resources or anything else that might make it desirable for colonisation. Thousands of years of colonisation waves and empires in the Trojan Reach ignored it.

Then the colony comes into view, and it looks like a microcircuit spread out across the desert. In the centre of the colony is StarPort, a featureless matt-black hemisphere the size of a small city. It looks like the disc given to the characters, only billions of times larger. As the characters' ship descends towards StarPort, a docking platform grows to accommodate them, and when they land, it draws their ship through a seemingly solid barrier. The walls are composed of trillions of microscopic robots, who can flow and reshape themselves to whatever configuration is required.

More macro-scale robots swarm out to service the ship. A servitor android - a perfect female form sculpted in brass and steel - comes to greet the characters and welcome them to Tech-World. She introduces herself as Sophia, and declares that she has been assigned as the characters' personal guide and aide for the duration of their stay on Tech-World.

## Wonders of Science

The pirates are free to explore the public sections of Tech-World. Automated stores offer a limited amount of high-tech goods, robot-controlled repair yards and hangars provide ship repairs and upgrades, medical suites have the best anagathics, cybersurgery and cloning technology in the sector, and there are exotic high-tech entertainments of all sorts. Immersive holographic displays - so realistic they are utterly indistinguishable from reality - inform visitors about the research being carried out on Tech-World. Here, scientists experiment with psionics, cognitive augmentation, hyperspatial manipulation, and advanced nanotechnology.

Everywhere, the characters see robots - there are millions of robots on Tech-World - but only a handful of other living beings, mostly crews from other starships. Most of them look slightly stunned by the bizarre environment.

Trade convoys from the Imperium and the Aslan Hierate stop here regularly. Just outside StarPort is a sprawling bar/diner called Luddites, where the highest technology used is a robotic washing machine. Starship crew from low-tech worlds can find refuge from technology shock in Luddites, and the player characters may feel more at home there.

## Possible Encounters

1. Lieutenant Herold Nash of the Imperial Navy. A brash young officer out of Pax Rulin, he is eager to cross swords with some of those dastardly pirates he has heard so much about. His ship, a Gazelle-class escort named *Lionsbane*, is part of a trade convoy heading for the Hierate.

2. Eldreth Vaux, a prospector and explorer. He and his crew work for Imperiallines shipping, on a mission to map the Reach and establish new trade lines. Vaux is an untrustworthy shyster and a coward.

3. Gali Flotaine, a young woman from the Pandora system. She suffers from a rare genetic condition that can be treated only on Tech-World. The General Development Company paid for her treatment here to curry favour with her mother, who is an important politician on Pandora. Flotaine mistrusts GeDeCo, but owes them her life.

4. Klowaaar, an Aslan free trader. He is an exiled male, and suffers from extreme culture shock. He barely understands money or technology, but has been forced to leave the Hierate and start a new career as a trader. He ended up on Tech-World, and is unable to find his way back to his ship because he refuses to talk to robots. If the characters want to recruit the poor brute as a crewman, he would jump at the chance. Klowaaar is an excellent soldier and fighter, but is useless at everything else.

5. Talbis Doherty, another free trader, and a spy for the General Development Company. Her ship, the *Parrot of Doom*, bounces

around Borderland subsector, engaging in speculative trade and adventuring. She's friendly, outgoing, charming - and in the pockets of GeDeCo. Anything the characters say to her gets reported to Mr. Cerul.

6. Lemuel Vinus, a researcher from Neumann. He works with the brilliant scientist, Jali Astor. They are both experts in nanotechnology - a field of study banned on their homeworld by the oppressive Shield Church. Vinus is an innocent abroad. He arrived on Tech-World only a few weeks ago, and has never been on a world below TL 14. He's quite fascinated by how humans 'used to' live, so he hangs around Luddites with the wide-eyed excitement of a junior anthropologist. At least, he pretends to. For the truth, see *The Immortal Protector*.

## The GeDeCo Agent

Tech-World may seem like a wonderful playground for scientists, but above the ruling council of technocrats sits the shadowy General Development Corporation. One of their agents, Mr. Cerul, visits the characters while they are on Tech-World. Cerul pretends to be a potential patron, and claims to have a mission for the characters - a simple delivery run, dropping a cargo of high-tech goods to Byrni, where they will be transferred to a Jump-5 courier for the long lonely jump to Villag.





In fact, Cerul's goal is to find out who the characters are and what they want on Tech-World. If the characters have not had dealings with GeDeCo before, then Cerul's interest is academic; he wants to get to know any potential threats or pawns before they interfere with the company's activities. If they have crossed paths with GeDeCo before, in *Adventure 7: The Vorito Gambit* or elsewhere, then they must be here under assumed names, and Cerul's goal is to determine the characters' real identities. If GeDeCo wants the characters dead, and Cerul sees through their cover, then the pirates get chased by GeDeCo robot death squads while on Tech-World. The Scientific Advisory Council can help the characters escape.

### ***Cloak and Dagger***

Officially, Tech-World is an independent colony. Starport is managed by the General Development Corporation, but the rest of the colony is under the control of the Scientific Advisory Council. GeDeCo is not responsible for the work carried out by the researchers.

That is a convenient fiction. Tech-World is GeDeCo's research hothouse. They may absolve themselves of responsibility for any problems through this legal shadowplay, but they rule the planet. If Tech-World were to defy the wishes of GeDeCo, it would be cut off from the supplies and support it needs to survive.

If the council's plan to open negotiations with Drinax were discovered, the punishment would be severe. Therefore, they need to keep the characters' presence here a secret. While in the middle of some other task - say, arranging payment for refined fuel - Sophia turns to the characters.

*'Do not ask questions. Behave normally. My masters wish to speak with you. Follow me.'*

She leads the characters down into the lower levels of StarPort, into areas where the walls are moist, suggesting they have not opened in years. From there, she brings them out into the surrounding town via a metal-lined access tunnel used only by robots.

### ***The Guards***

The tunnel ends near a loading yard. The characters spot a trio of GeDeCo security troopers there, standing guard over a large cargo container. The guards are bored and not especially vigilant - what do they have to worry about, on a planet where the robots do everything - but the crew still need to sneak past with a Stealth (Difficult -2, Dex) check or otherwise deal with them (they carry laser rifles).

Sophia does not accompany the characters past the tunnel exit, but points them in the right direction - out into the warren of robot factories and laboratories. The crew spot several other

GeDeCo patrols, but can easily avoid them. Sophia's directions lead to a heavily shielded bunker used for weapons testing.

### ***The Scientists, in an Adventure With Pirates***

Waiting for the pirates are three scientists, the representatives of the council. They are;

- **Dr. Gerret Hodal**, a geneticist from Neumann. An elderly statesman, he's the head of the council and does most of the talking. He has come to mistrust GeDeCo and wants to explore other options for the future of Tech-World.
- **Dr. Jali Astor**, a nanotechnologist from Neumann. She came here looking for a way to cure the nanotechnology swarms that plague her homeworld. She pushed Hodal into making contact with the characters, and should be the one leading these clandestine negotiations. However, she had a revelation this morning, and her mind is elsewhere. She's clearly not paying attention to the meeting, which visibly irritated Hodal.
- **Dr. Rex Darke**, a roboticist formerly of the University of Regina. Characters from the Imperium may have heard something about a Dr. Darke, and something about killer robots and a scandal. Between his occasional bouts of maniacal laughter, and his habit of rubbing his hands as though plotting the overthrow of the Imperium, Dr. Darke scores highly on the mad scientist checklist.

Hodal explains the status of Tech-World and how it is an independent colony, but supplied and protected exclusively by GeDeCo. They have the technology to provide most of their own needs and, given time, could build their own robot-controlled System Defence Boats. However, doing so would take several months, if not longer. During that transition, Tech-World would be vulnerable. What Hodal needs from the characters is;

- Regular shipments of cheap Basic Consumables, Basic Raw Materials, Biochemicals, Petrochemicals, Radioactives and Uncommon Raw Materials.
- At least four System Defence Boats or equivalent, massing at least 300 tons each.
- Protection against any reprisals from GeDeCo.
- A contract that ensures that Tech-World will be free to carry out any sort of scientific research without restrictions, even in sensitive fields like psionics or artificial intelligence (Dr. Darke has some really interesting theories about silicon lifeforms on Cymbeline...).

If the characters can provide all these, then they can negotiate a secret alliance between Tech-World and Drinax. Tech-World will become a Friendly port to pirates. With good Diplomat or Broker rolls, the characters can bargain Hodal down on some of his requests - perhaps he will take some 'liberated' freighters refitted as Q-ships instead of SDBs, or pay for stolen cargo instead of demanding all his Basic Consumables on a platter.

Above all, Hodal wants this arrangement to be kept secret until all the pieces are in place, to forestall any retaliation by GeDeCo. If the characters are unfamiliar with the corporation, he explains their Machiavellian ways. GeDeCo may pretend to be a trading firm, but they are the fourth power in the Reach, behind only the Imperium and the Hierate and more influential than the Floriani.

The characters do not have to make a final decision on his proposal immediately. They can sleep on it.

## 2. THE DEMON UNBOUND

Accommodation in Tech-World is luxurious - and soundproofed. That means that the characters do not hear the earth-shattering explosion in the distance, nor do they hear the raging inferno. The first they hear about anything is when Dr. Hodal walks through the wall of their room (the wall melts away on command). He is clearly alarmed.

*'There's been a terrible accident. Please, we need your help. Quickly, quickly.'*

He leads the characters down to another access tunnel. As they follow Hodal, he explains what has happened.

- There has been an accident in one of the laboratories. Dr. Jali was working with dangerous nanotech from her homeworld of Neumann, when the containment system failed.
- Dr. Jali is possessed by the nanotech.
- Hodal then corrects himself. 'Possessed' is the wrong word. Not possessed... infected. Back on Neumann, the Shield Church teaches that nanotechnology is the work of demons. He doesn't believe such things of course...
- Dr. Jali stole a ship from the starport. They're tracking it now, but it will reach the jump limit before they can bring it down. He wants the characters to go after Jali and stop her before she spreads the nanotechnological plague.
- Her assistant, Lemuel Vinus, may know more.

### The Burning Laboratory

The characters find Vinus outside the door to the lab. He's winding bandages around his head and hand, and explains he was burned in the explosion. Nervously, he stammers out that Dr. Jali made some breakthrough with her work in the last two days, and spent every waking minute in the lab.

The lab is on fire, and the automated purge cycle (triggered when any dangerous experiment goes wrong) will soon annihilate everything inside. There is no time to get a suitable robot or drone to search the place - if the characters wish to investigate the laboratory, they need to put on protective suits themselves and quickly check the ruins before the purge cycle hits.



### Investigating the Laboratory

This is an Average (+0) Intelligence + Investigate test. The information gained depends on the Effect of the best roll among the group.

**Effect 0:** The characters find the words SHIELD CHURCH scrawled on one wall. It looks like Dr. Jali scraped the metal with her fingertips, suggesting she is inhumanly strong and tough.

**Effect 1-2:** The characters recover partial security camera footage of the lab accident (Dr. Jali deactivated the lab's link to the rest of Tech-World's security grid, so this is the only visual record of the accident). It shows Jali working with a large machine that anyone with a good Physical Science skill can identify as a nanotech containment crucible. She inserts a sample of dangerous 'swarm' nanotech from her homeworld of Neumann, and then inserts a second sample of some custom-designed nanotech. The two samples mix, and a thousand generations of tiny robots crossbreed inside the crucible. Then alarms flash, and the crucible containment fails. The front of the crucible melts away as the nanotech eats through it. Jali's

protective encounter suit also fails to protect her - but instead of pulling her apart molecule by molecule, the nanotech infects her. She staggers to her feet, then moves incredibly quickly towards the door. The characters catch a glimpse of her eyes glowing red for an instant.

**Effect 3-4:** The characters manage to examine the nanotech crucible for a few seconds before the purge cycle begins. It appears to have been deliberately sabotaged (Lemuel's work – he wanted to push Jali's work onwards, and for that it needed a human host).

**Effect 5+:** The audio in the recording is mostly the sound of explosions and screaming, but just before the accident, Jali whispers the words 'Immortal Protector' under her breath.

If the investigation roll fails with an Effect of -3 or more, then one of the characters accidentally comes in contact with 'live' nanotech. The nanoscopic machines dissolve a hole in the character's armour, then infect the skin beneath. The character's Dexterity is permanently lowered by -1, and his Endurance is permanently increased by +1.

### ***Purge Cycle***

The automated purification cycle triggers after a few minutes, when Hodal can no longer delay it. Plasma fire incinerates anything left in the laboratory. Then the laboratory itself is dissolved, the intelligent-metal walls closing in and reforming, until the place never existed outside the sealed memory-archives of Tech-World.

Hodal warns that a GeDeCo crash team will soon arrive to investigate the incident. For everyone's sake, it would be best if the characters departed immediately. He begs them to go after Dr. Jali and find her before she reveals the existence of the illegal experiments to anyone. Her lab assistant Lemuel volunteers to go with the characters.

If the characters refuse, then this adventure is over. Lemuel goes after Jali on his own; Hodal withdraws his earlier offer of an alliance, and Tech-World becomes a Hostile port to the pirates.

### ***Jali Transformed***

Dr. Astor was experimenting with a variant of the nanotech infection used by the Shield Church to augment their own Flame Knights. In her case, it increased her strength, speed and agility, but also pushed her survival instincts into overdrive. Her instinctive, autonomic nervous system is now as 'smart' as the conscious mind of a normal person. Instead of a basic fight-or-flight response, her brain is now capable of instinctively and automatically coming up with elaborate responses involving long-term planning and advanced technology. Her higher brain functions only kick in after the adrenaline wears off. Let's put it this way – if you put your hand on a hot electric grill, you jerk

your hand away instinctively. If Jali does it, then she jerks her hand away, tracks the power supply for the grill, then precisely smashes the weakest point in the wall to sever the power and shut down the grill... or maybe she jerks her hand away, then kills everyone in the house and burns it down. She won't know until she calms down and her consciousness reasserts itself.

In game terms, any threat to Dr. Jali is met with extremely lethal force, and she won't even know she's doing it. The enhanced fight-or-flight autonomic system takes some of her desires into account, but is completely amoral. It is like she has a sociopathic switch.

#### ***Dr. Jali Astor***

**Age 38, 5 terms**

**STR 10 DEX 9 END 14 INT 13 EDU 14 SOC 8**

Admin 1, Astrogation 1, Comms 0, Computers 3, Deception 1, Engineer (jump) 1, Investigate 0, Jack of all Trades 1, Life Sciences (biology) 4, Melee (brawl) 1, Mechanic 0, Pilot (spacecraft) 1, Physical Sciences (chemistry) 4, Physical Science (electronics) 2, Remote Operations 1, Space Science (robotics) 3, Sensors 1, Vacc Suit 0

**Augments:** Subdermal Armour (Armour 3), Drug Gland (produce Combat Drug or Slow Drug at will), Fight-or-Flight Response (when threatened, Jali gains Athletics (co-ordination) 3), Gun Combat (slug pistols) 3, Melee (brawl) 3, Recon 3 and Stealth 3.

**Equipment:** Gauss Pistol (3d6, Auto 4), Vacc Suit (TL14, Armour 8, Vislight Chameleon giving DM+4 to Stealth checks)

#### **Playing Jali (as Jali)**

- Your mind works faster than most. Get frustrated when people don't understand.
- Finish other people's sentences.
- Compulsively check your hand computer.

#### **Playing Jali (in combat mode)**

- Stand on the balls of your feet.
- Bare your teeth, like a predator.
- Speak only in clipped sentences.

## ***3. CHASING HORRORS***

Jali stole a Jump-2 Far Trader, the *Lord Gerald's Fancy*, and didn't have time to plot a new jump solution. The *Fancy* was en route to Exe, two parsecs away from Tech-World. The hunt starts there.

#### ***Lemuel Vinus***

Jali's young assistant accompanies the characters on their journey. If they quibble, he points out that he can tell them



about both Jali's nanotech experiments and her homeworld of Neumann. Jali was working on a way to stop or control the nanotech swarms that plague their homeworld, so Lemuel suspects she is on her way there. On the off chance that the players refuse to take Lemuel with them, he stows away on board. If they shoot him... well, Lemuel is not what he seems.

Play Lemuel for comic relief. He's earnest, eager to help, and largely incompetent at everything. His carrot-coloured hair is absurdly unruly, and he has the co-ordination and grace of a beached whale crossed with a giraffe. Likely topics of conversation with him include;

- **Dr. Jali:** Lemuel describes Jali as a genius, one of the bravest scientists he has ever known. The Shield Church of Neumann bans certain fields of research, so Dr. Jali had to fight and work underground to study nanotechnology. She was fiercely determined to save her planet from the machine plagues. She was passionate – but never violent or irrational. He suspects that the nanotech infection has affected her thought processes.
- **Jali's Work:** She was trying to develop a cure or control for the nanotech swarms. Many scientists tried to find such a cure in the past, before the Shield Church put an end to such dangerous experiments. Jali believed the swarms were essentially malfunctioning programs, and could be controlled given the right inputs. She was working with nanotech stolen from the Shield Church, and he knows it connects to the autonomic nervous system. If she feels threatened, she may become extremely dangerous.
- **Stopping Jali:** Lemuel asks that the characters refrain, if possible, from using lethal force on her. She is not herself. He believes they can convince her to listen to reason, and that provoking her will trigger a hostile response.
- **Neumann:** The world of Neumann (page 174 of *Alien Module 1: Aslan*) was a Solomani colony. The planet was a shining jewel of technological advancement to rival the Darrian civilisation, until a disaster released a 'grey goo' hegemonising swarm. The ruling AIs committed suicide, unable to find a solution for the plague. All hope seemed lost, until the arrival of the Shield Church.
- **The Shield Church:** The Shield Church rules Neumann. The priests of the Church have their own nanotech swarms that can break down and block hostile swarms. The Church rules every aspect of life on the planet, and bans certain scientific research that might bring back the dark days. The head of the Shield Church is the Immortal Protector.
- **The Immortal Protector:** The mysterious Immortal Protector is the master of the Church. He is reborn once every generation. He is rarely seen in public, and always wears his ceremonial mask and armour. The Immortal Protector's will guides the people of Neumann, and it is his holy Church that shields them against the swarms. Jali did not believe in the Immortal Protector, and said he was a myth perpetuated by the Shield Church, a figurehead used

to keep the ordinary people of Neumann from questioning Church policy. Lemuel agrees with her... but says he finds it hard to give up the myths of his childhood. He was raised to honour and love the Protector. If asked for further details, Lemuel tells the tale of the Immortal Protector.

## 4. DEAD SHIP

In the Exe system, the characters initially find no trace of *Lord Gerald's Fancy*. The Exe starport has no record of the ship arriving in the system; a Difficult (-2) Persuade check convinces the starport tech to let slip that they did detect a jump signature

### *The Tale of the Immortal Protector*

Once upon a time, the scientists of Neumann believed that machines could solve all their problems. They built thinking machines to do their thinking for them, and building machines to make everything they needed. Their whole world became one great union of machines, and people just seemed like an unnecessary distraction.

Then something went wrong. The building machines turned on the people, and went mad. They killed billions and billions of people, dissolving them into goo and using their remains to build more building machines. The thinking machines could not see a way to solve the problem, and kept thinking and thinking until the building machines devoured them too.

Now, one of the people killed in that plague was a woman, a traveller from afar, named Nuwia, and as she died, she called out the name of her lover. That name is forgotten, for now we know him only as the Immortal Protector.

Then the Immortal Protector came down from the stars, in a ship of silver fire. He was a wanderer and a hero. Some say he was the last Emperor of the First Imperium, exiled from his throne by the Solomani upstarts. Others say he was half-human, and half-Ancient, that his mother was an archaeologist who found an Ancient tomb on a deserted dead world. Whoever he was, he was a man without peer. He stood eight feet tall, and wielded a FGMP in each hand. He burned back the swarms with the fury of his fusion guns, and fought his way to the last laboratory. There, he found more slumbering swarms, and – for he was as great a scholar as he was a warrior – he commanded the swarms to block the building machines from encroaching any further onto Neumann.

The surviving scientists were made to swear an oath never to interfere with the protections set in place by the Protector, and he established the Shield Church to watch over his work. So it is by his grace that everyone on Neumann lives to this very day.

### ***What Happened Here?***

One of the passengers on the *Vagabond Soul* was Olim Bayl, a trader from Neumann. Jali recognised the ship and docked with it to speak to Bayl. Well, 'speak' is beyond Jali in her current form, but she was able to get what she needed from him – the location of the nearest Shield Church archon.

The crew of the *Vagabond Soul* tried to stop her, and she instinctively released a nanotech virus. Similar weapons were seen on Neumann, centuries ago, during the worst days of the swarms. They turn humans into living weapons. Nanotech strips metal from any available sources (in this case, the corridors and bulkheads of the *Vagabond Soul* are pitted with tiny scars) and coats the victims in armoured scales. Useless organs dissolve; their organic molecules used to assemble combat-drug glands and backup hearts.

The Far Trader is a ship of the living dead.

Before Jali left, she sabotaged the main computer, ensuring no survivor could follow her.

a few hours ago, but the incoming ship headed towards the system's gas giant, Artobin, instead of visiting the port. Exe is a small waystation, and does not have the resources to track every stray signal.

Scanning the gas giant requires a Very Difficult (-2) Education + Sensors check. If the roll succeeds, then the characters detect *Lord Gerald's Fancy* skimming the gas giant's atmosphere to obtain hydrogen fuel. They also detect another ship, the *Vagabond Soul*, a Far Trader class merchant. The latter ship is drifting out of control in a decaying orbit around Artobin. It looks like she's intact, but unmanned. If the Sensors check fails, then the characters detect only the *Vagabond Soul* at this point, and pick up *Fancy* as she jumps out.

### ***Pursuing Fancy***

If the characters detect *Fancy* early, then Dr. Jali makes a break for it. Her fuel tanks are partially full of unrefined hydrogen, so she tries to burn hard for the jump limit. She has already calculated her jump solution for her next destination, Cordan. If she can reach the 100-diameter jump limit of the gas giant in time, then she jumps with a -2 DM from her unrefined fuel. If she jumps within the limit, she suffers a -10DM and misjumps - the Referee should displace her by 1d6x1d6 parsecs in a random direction.

### ***Vagabond Soul***

Once the characters are within Close range, they can scan the *Vagabond Soul* in detail. She appears undamaged. There are

life-signs on board, but they are oddly muted - the best guess is that the eight remaining crew are in suspended animation, but as they are scattered around the ship (three on the bridge, four in the common area, one in a cabin), they must have taken fast drug instead of climbing into low berths. From the ship's mass, she must have a nearly full cargo bay.

There is one tell-tale sign that someone recently docked with the ship. A communications umbilical hangs free near the starport airlock. The umbilicals on that class of ship are notoriously unreliable, and often come loose when the other ship departs.

### ***The Cursed***

Exploring the *Vagabond Soul* is like wandering into a haunted house. Light and gravity flicker on and off. The air is icy cold. Everywhere, there are signs of carnage and brutal slaughter. Blood splatters every surface.

The Cursed – the eight surviving nanotech-altered crew – are things out of nightmare. They have no eyes or mouth any more; they see in millimetre-wave radar and scream in radio frequencies. Their skin is covered in silvery scales; their fingertips bristle with thousands of elongated needles that secrete neurotoxin. They move like lizards, scuttling along rooftops or springing down corridors in zero gravity.

As soon the characters find one of the Cursed, it screams. The characters hear this scream as a burst of static on their radios. The other Cursed then begin to hunt the characters. They co-ordinate with each other with more radio-bursts, and retain enough intelligence to use weapons and tactics (like circling behind the characters to block the path to the airlock).

### ***Cursed***

**STR 12 DEX 9 END 12 INT 5 EDU 5 SOC 0**

Gun Combat 0, Melee (natural weapons)2, Stealth 2, Tactics (Ground Combat) 3

Armour 8, Engineered (TL15), Natural Weapon (Hand Spines, 1d6 damage plus poison with DM-4 to Endurance inflicting -1D6 Int and 1D6 Dex damage)

### ***Bayl's Cabin***

This is the only occupied passenger cabin. If present, Lemuel exclaims that he knew Olim Bayl – the trader visited Tech-World sometimes, and brought news from home. Jali disliked him because Bayl was a fervent member of the Shield Church.

The first thing the characters find in the cabin is a leather-bound copy of the Shield Church Bible, and tucked into the First Testament of the Immortal Protector is a flyer for an interfaith conference to be held on the planet Mirage (0509 Gazulin). One of the attendees will be Archon Dreek of the Shield Church.



### ***Giving Up***

Hunting one woman across thirty parsecs of space may test the patience of characters, especially if they feel they have more pressing matters to attend to back on Drinax. If this comes up, there are several ways to handle it.

- **Send in the B-Team:** The characters could split up. Some (or even none) of the players could go in search of Jali, and the others can roll up temporary characters to play through the rest of the adventure. For example, one character could accompany Lemuel, and recruit another band of adventurers on Cordan or some other border world. The scope of *The Pirates of Drinax* is big enough to have several groups of characters – if an adventures does not suit the original set of characters who started the campaign back on Drinax, then maybe it would work with some of their new hirelings and followers.
- **A Quiet Season Back Home:** The Referee may rule that no significant events happen while the characters are en route to Mirage, letting them chase Jali with a clear conscience.
- **It's Your Sandbox, But...:** The final option is to let the players do as they wish. If they want to abandon this adventure and try something else, let them. Events unfold without them – in this case, Jali dies on Mirage, her research is lost, and Tech-World withdraws its offer of an alliance.

### ***Salvaging the Vagabond Soul***

Jali smashed the main computer and scrambled the backup systems before leaving. It can be fixed with a Difficult (-2) Intelligence + Computers or Intelligence + Mechanic roll taking 10-60 hours, but the ship will fall into the gas giant's gravity well and burn up within 12 hours. The crew can try salvaging the ship by hastening these repairs, or by towing it out, or by trying to fly it out manually (a Very Hard -4 Dexterity + Pilot check). Alternatively, they can just loot the 50 tons of Petrochemicals in her hold and escape.

## ***5. THE CHASE***

Jali's course goes from Tech-World to Exe (see *Dead Ship*) and from there onto Mirage. Her planned course goes Cordon (0401/Borderlands), Wildeman (0409/Tobia), Fist (0508/Tobia) (see *In the Shadow of Tobia*), Imisaa (0506/Tobia), Sabruse (0505/Tobia), Saurus (0403/Tobia), Intelia (0202/Tobia), Empire (0301/Tobia), Susanawo (0510/Gazulin) and finally Mirage (0509/Gazulin), for a total of 11 jumps. All the systems visited have gas giants, and Jali intends to refuel in the wilderness each time.

The scout ship has plenty of supplies, and Jali can put down on relatively deserted worlds for food and water as needed (or raid other ships). Her madness drives her on.

### ***Tracking Jali***

The characters have no easy way to track Jali after she jumps from Exe. They can try doggedly pursuing her, jumping as she jumps and hoping to pick her up in the next system before she refuels and jumps again. However, space is big, a scout ship is small, and the variation in jump transit time (148+6d6 hours)

### ***The Truth of the Immortal Protector***

It is written in the Shield Church Bible that the swarm arose by mischance. It is written that the twelve Artificial Intelligences that guided the sinful, godless science-society of old committed suicide when they were unable to solve the problem of survival, and it is written that the Immortal Protector came from the stars to save mankind.

All lies.

1,500 years ago, an archaeological team in the Trojan Reach found an Ancient relic and brought it back to Neumann for study. The twelve ruling AIs examined it, and eleven of them came to the same conclusion – the artifact contained a blueprint for a transcendence engine. It described how to encode information in the structure of jump space itself, how to reconcile psionics with physics, and how to transform living minds into beings of pure thought, immortal godlings to whom thought and deed would be a single act.

The twelfth AI disagreed with these conclusions. It's too good to be true, it argued, this is a berserker trick, a booby trap left behind by a previous civilisation. If you're smart enough to build this thing, then you're a danger to them. This thing doesn't transcend – it'll just kill us all. The other eleven AIs did not heed this warning, and began to assemble the transcendence engine.

What could the twelfth AI do? It hacked into the assemble nanotech and commanded it to stop. The other AIs tried to override the hacking, and in the ensuing cyberwar, the nanotech received trillions of contradictory commands. The twelfth, in a desperate attempt to even the odds, commanded the nanotech to attack the infrastructure of the other AIs. They tried to counter this in turn, but the nanotech was already in their systems, and they were partially deconstructed even as they ordered their own reconstruction. The nanotech blindly flailed around, devouring whole continents in an effort to simultaneously make and unmake the machine and the AIs. Chaos reigned.

The surviving AI feared the retribution of the humans, so it hid its core. It had access to cloning tanks, so it cloned a flesh-avatar drone for itself, a human with cybernetic implants that it could control like a puppet. This drone was the first Immortal Protector, and when it aged to death, the AI made another and another and another, for thirty generations.

And for all that time, it has wondered if it was right.

The other eleven AIs and their supposed transcendence engine are still out there, in the churning molecular soup of the swarm zone. Sometimes, one of these AIs reasserts itself for a brief period, when enough of the confused nanotech swarms work together to build a semi-functioning computer core. The Immortal Protector's agents in the Shield Church swiftly respond by commanding the nanotech to unmake the computers again, but their patterns still exist. There are eleven mad would-be gods in the swarm, and the Immortal Protector fears their judgment just as it fears the judgment of humanity.

Lemuel Volin is the current incarnation of the Immortal Protector. Most of his consciousness is in a hidden mainframe beneath the Shield Cathedral, but the drone has enough intelligence to act independently. It hoped that Jali's research might give it a way of seizing control of the nanotech swarm and ending the chaos once and for all, but it cannot be sure if Jali's solution will work. It needs certainty – if Jali's solution were tried and it failed, it could give the eleven other AIs a chance to rebuild themselves and finish their transcendence engine, and who knows what would happen then...

### ***Lemuel The Protector***

For most of this adventure, Lemuel stays in the background. Play him as comic relief, or as a way to describe how nanotech worlds, or to explain the Shield Church and other aspects of Neumann culture. He wants to see what Jali intends to do, and to determine how effective her discovery is. Lemuel intercedes to keep Jali from being killed, or to protect himself, or to prevent anyone tampering with the delicate balance of the swarms. He tries to keep his true identity a secret, so if he can fulfil his goals without revealing his powers, he does so. However, he can unmask himself if he has to.

#### **Lemuel Volin**

##### **Age 1,500+, Computer Controlled Drone**

**STR 15 DEX 10 END 18 INT 15 EDU 15 SOC 12**

Lemuel has access to virtually any skill in software format while on Neumann. In the field, though, he is limited by the capacity of his android drone's brain. He may have any twelve of the following skills at Skill Level 2;

Astrogation, Broker, Comms, Computers, Deception, Drive (any), Engineer (any), Explosives, Flyer (any), Gambler, Gunner (turret), Gun Combat (any), Heavy Weapons (any), Language (any), any Science (any), Mechanic, Medic, Pilot (any), Remote Operations, Sensors, Steward, Tactics (any), Vacc Suit.

Armour 4, Pistol (3d6) or FGMP16 (16d6, Auto 6)

means it is unlikely that the characters will see her again before Mirage.

A Very Hard (-4) Intelligence + Astrogation check lets a navigator guess the likeliest destination of a jumping ship based on neutrino emissions and the shape of the inflating hydrogen bubble, but this is more an art than a science. Picking up on the neutrino emissions requires a Difficult (-2) Intelligence + Sensors check.

If the characters have access to a network of allies or spies, they could send the word out ahead on the X-Boat network once they reach Imperial space, or they could split up and take multiple ships as they hunt Jali.

### ***Confronting Jali***

Since the accident, Jali has been under the effect of her enhanced fight-or-flight response. The trauma of the accident brought her half-way across the sector before she calmed down enough to think clearly. If the characters attack or threaten her, she may lurch back into her combat state. Speaking to her calmly (possibly with a Persuade or Diplomat check) lets her explain herself.

- She was working on a way to control the nanotech swarms that plague Neumann. This research is banned by the Shield Church, but she thinks she has found a way to reprogram the swarms.
- Ironically, her work depends on the 'holy gifts of the Immortal Protector' – a safe strain of nanotech used by the Shield Church. She believes she can adapt the programming used in this nanotech to interface with the chaotic swarms and shut them down.
- There are several grades of gift. She was working with the combat upgrades used by the Flame Knights, the monks who fight and extirpate swarm infestations. However, she now believes she needs Archon-grade nanotech.
- Archon-grade tech is closely guarded by the Church. They won't give it up – so she's going to take it from an Archon.
- It's all horribly dangerous, illegal and – in the eyes of the church – demoniacal, but she believes she can save Neumann from being slowly eaten away by its own lost technology. Her world can be a shining jewel of progress again – but she needs the characters' help to do it.

- She never meant to kill anyone. The nanotech she uses has a built-in defence mechanism. She can't switch it off, not without Archon-level controls.

### ***In the Shadow of Tobia***

Until the characters reach Fist, they are outside Imperial space. True, some of the systems close to the Imperial border are Imperium in all but name, but the characters are outside the law of the Iridium Throne. Once they cross into the Imperium, though, they may be wanted criminals in every port. Check the characters' Standing with the Imperium. If it is -6 or lower, then every law enforcement agency in the Sector has an outstanding arrest warrant for the notorious pirates. Apply 1/5th of the character's Standing as a disadvantageous DM to any Law Level checks (see page 174 of the *Traveller Core Rulebook*). For example, if a pirate with a Standing of -20 was seen in Imperial space, she would have DM-4 to all interactions with the law, and DM+4 to all sentencing rolls.

Characters travelling in disguise may avoid the effects of their Standings, but need false documents or cover identities.

### ***Alternate Transport***

A distinctive ship like the *Harrier* may be a liability when travelling in the Imperium. Canny characters may choose to take a captured ship, or travel to Mirage using hired passage instead of their own ship. The standard Imperium-Hierate trade route runs through Borderland and Tobia subsectors, so the characters can easily find passage as far as Fist. From there, ships travel regularly between most worlds.

### ***Opportunities***

There is little opportunity for piracy and larceny while in the stuffy, button-down, high-security Imperium. However, if the characters keep their ears open, they may encounter one or more of the following opportunities.

- A former pirate, Lran Smeck, now lives near the starport on Fist. For the right price, he can keep track of shipping patterns and convoys, and send word to waiting pirates about potential targets.
- Hearing that the characters come from the Reach, an unscrupulous investor named Borja asks if they have any high-yield business opportunities. He has the money if they have a way to use it profitably.
- In a gossip column, the characters learn that the nephew of the baron of Gazulin (rumoured to be fabulously wealthy) intends to go on safari to the wild worlds of the Reach. He's travelling incognito to avoid kidnappers and thieves.
- Agents of the Florian Trade Company (see *Alien Module 1: Aslan*) contact the characters with an offer. They're willing to pay protection money if the characters can ensure that none of their ships suffer from pirate attacks. The more worlds the

characters guarantee as safe, the bigger the payment (Cr. 0.5 per ton of cargo per system on the Florian Trade route made completely safe).

- A drunken Scout claims to know the location of the *Yarrow*, a 50,000 ton megafreighter that misjumped in 1099. He says that the Tobia Commerce Guild faked the misjump and claimed the insurance on the ship and cargo, and they are just waiting a few years before bringing her back into service under a new name. Right now, that 50,000-ton ship is sitting in an obscure system, almost completely unprotected...
- A nervous corporate executive working for PRQ asks the characters for advice. She's been asked to revise the language in the company's anti-piracy policy, and needs help understanding certain tricky concepts...

## ***6. THE SANDS OF MIRAGE***

The desert world of Mirage was bypassed by the first wave of settlements. The arid planet is nearly devoid of water, and a prospecting team visited the planet and failed to find any signs of useful minerals.

Centuries later, a consortium of investors tried to grow dust-spice on Mirage for the Aslan market. Dust-spice thrives on only a few worlds, and they believed that with the right irrigation and artificial culturing techniques, they could produce the spice on Mirage too. They failed, but in the course of their efforts discovered the true wealth of the planet. The sands of Mirage contain tiny burrowing insects that, when crushed and processed, yield an intoxicating hallucinogen called Mirage-liquor. This drug differs from other narcotics in that it allows directed dreaming. Drink the waters of Mirage, and you will become the master of your own dreams for a few hours, enjoying any experience you can imagine with perfect clarity and perfect recall.

The consortium of spice farmers fell apart, as each landowner jealously guarded his patch of sand-bugs. Today, the descendants of those farmers are stupendously wealthy, as the liquor is shipped in controlled amounts for use in psychotherapy, and in huge vats for illegal trafficking.

### ***The Marquise D'Haube***

'Marquise' is an affectation; this wealthy woman has no official noble title beyond Dame (Soc 11), but money buys respect. Her mansion – grown from pink crystal – rises over the desert like a fever-dream brought on by too much sugar. Recently, the Marquise has developed an allergy to her anagathic drug of choice, and has begun to age again. She hides these signs of aging behind expensive treatments, so she still looks as perfect as always, but the cold hand of mortality has brushed against her dusky cheek, and she now wishes to know which religion is the correct one.



Therefore, she volunteered to host this century's Sector-wide Interfaith Conference on Religious Diversity. These conferences are seen as a tiresome necessity by the Imperial Bureaucracy. Each world has the right to follow (or suppress) whatever bizarre faiths they wish, but sometimes religion intersects with the Imperium's rule of the space between worlds. Proselytising at starports, burial in space, cults that break some other Imperial law such as restrictions on psionic use, interstellar pilgrimages – all these things must be argued and discussed at tedious length.

For the bureaucrats, it's a painful headache, and if Marquise D'Haube wants to take over some of the costs and the paperwork, wonderful. May the divine entity of her choice bless her in a non-specific way.

For Marquise D'Haube, it's a chance to speak to the representatives of a hundred different faiths, so she can work out which one is correct and thus avoid the oblivion of death.

For the representatives of a hundred different faiths, the conference is many things – a solemn duty, a chance to settle scores, the opportunity to redress grievous ills, an all-expenses-paid junket to a pleasure planet, a political prize, an annoying distraction...

For Jali, it's a chance to hunt an Archon.

### ***Jali's Plan***

Archon Dreek is the Shield Church's representative at the conference. He came with a squad of four Flame Knights, the augmented warriors of the Church, who serve as his honour guard. Marquise D'Haube assigned Dreek a villa some distance outside the main settlement of Haubercity, as Dreek requested privacy and solitude. The villa is situated in a scenic irrigated valley, and protected by the Marquise's security drones as well as the Flame Knights. Each day, Dreek and two of his knights travel by air/raft to Haubercity to attend the conference. One of the Marquise's servants, a young chauffeur named Jek, pilots the air/raft. He wears the traditional uniform of a Miragian flyer, which includes a full-face mask and a heavy cloak.

Jali's plan is to sneak into Hauberville, eliminate Jek, and steal his uniform. She will then wait for the Archon and his guards and fly them out into the desert. At the right moment, she will eject the two guards, then attack Dreek and obtain the nanotech she needs.

### ***Interactions on Mirage***

This section of the adventure can unfold in many different ways. The most likely situation is that the characters watch the Archon until Jali shows herself, or else track her to her ship and find Jek's body.

Hauberville is normally a dull provincial town, the same shops and buildings and facilities one finds on any Imperial world from

### ***Archon Dreek***

**STR 6 DEX 7 END 12 INT 10 EDU 11 SOC 11**

Admin 2, Advocate 2, Comms 0, Computers 3, Deception 1, Diplomat 2, Engineer 0, Flyer (grav) 2, Gun Combat 0, Heavy Weapons (man-portable artillery) 2, Investigate 3, Language 1, Life Sciences 0, Medic 2, Persuade 3, Pilot 0, Recon 1, Sensors 2, Social Sciences (theology) 4

**Augments:** Subdermal Armour (Armour 3), Archon-Class Nanotech (+3 End, +2 Int, +1 Str, +1dex, DM+4 to resist nanotech infections)

**Equipment:** Laser Pistol (3d6+3), Robes (Armour 8)

### ***Flame Knight***

**STR 16 DEX 12 END 12 INT 7 EDU 9 SOC 8**

Battle Dress 2, Comms 1, Computers 1, Drive 0, Gun Combat (varies) 2, Heavy Weapons (Man-Portable Artillery) 2, Investigate 2, Melee (brawl) 1, Recon 2, Survival 2.

**Augments:** Subdermal Armour (Armour 3), Knight-Class Nanotech (+3 End, +1 Str, +1dex, DM+4 to resist nanotech infections)

**Equipment:** FGMP-15 (16d6, Auto 6), Battle Dress (TL 14, Grav Assist, Vislight Chameleon)

Gazulin to Capital. Most of Hauberville's culture and style is imported from Gazulin, and the colony is effectively a boring suburb of the Trojan Reach's most fashionable and effete world. However, the presence of so many diverse religions adds colour and life to the town, at least for a few weeks.

- **Landing:** Mirage's class-A starport has very limited docking space available, so the characters are asked to land in one of the many bays on the outskirts of the port. Due to the ongoing Imperial conference, security at the port is heightened, and includes Imperial Marines in battle dress with grav belts and heavy weapons. Starting a fight at this starport is immensely unwise.
- **Access to the Conference:** Only accredited representatives of the faiths, officials of the Imperial Bureaucracy, and guests of Marquise D'Haube are permitted access to the conference centre. The characters can sneak or bluff their way in, but both are Formidable (-6) challenges.
- **The Marquise:** The Marquise has a limited number of guest passes to the conference. Characters who impress her (requiring a Very Hard -4 Carouse + Social Standing check) may be offered a pass. So far, the Marquise has not identified the one true religion that she seeks.
  - **Playing the Marquise:** You're wonderfully bored and decadent, but have had to confront your own mortality for the first time, so underneath the drugs and the champagne and the gold-plated pet frogs you are scared and desperate for meaning.



### ***Lemuel's Intercession***

Lemuel wants Jali to succeed. If she can control the swarms, then his long vigil over Neumann can come to an end – but only if her solution is absolutely unquestionable and perfect. Therefore, Lemuel will try to help Jali as much as he can without giving away his identity and without letting her actually put her plan into operation.

He might;

- Send her a warning about the characters' plans
  - Move the *Lord Gerald's Fancy* so she can use it to escape
  - Sabotage the characters' movements
  - In his guise as the Immortal Protector, order Dreek to use his Archons to stop the characters
- If the characters bring the Shield Church to her attention, then she becomes interested in rumours of the Immortal Protector. Unlike most of the mystic faiths, the Shield Church has solid scientific underpinnings, even if they refer to their nanotech as 'demonology.'

Perhaps, the Marquise wonders, the Church could be persuaded to share its nanotechnological anagathic treatments in exchange for a favour.

- **Archon Dreek:** The sacred duty of the Shield Church is to protect Neumann from the insidious corruption of the nanotech swarms. It is not to go on 'junkets' to desert resorts. Archon Dreek would much prefer to be battling the swarms in a contaminated death zone to this... decadence. He is a frightfully gaunt man, who speaks like a drill sergeant who retired after developing throat cancer. He knows of Tech-World. It is an abomination, a coven of science-sorcerers who defy the proclamations and edicts of the Immortal Protector. It should be destroyed! And if this Jali came from there, she too will burn.
  - **Playing Dreek:** Despise everything around you. Twitch with the desire to burn it all.
  - Dreek possesses counter-nanotech that can deactivate other swarms. If he has a chance to use this on Jali, he can remove her infection and restore her to full sanity. However, he wants her dead, not cured.
- **Finding *Lord Gerald's Fancy*:** The scout ship can be found easily by checking starport records, or by scouting

around the docking pads. Jali landed her ship a little distance outside Hauberville. On board are three more of the Cursed walking corpses (former thugs that Jali ran into at Wildeman, who attacked her and paid the price), and the unconscious and naked form of Jek, the air/raft driver. If revived, he explains that he was ambushed after dropping the Archon off at the conference in his air/raft.

- **The Ambush:** If Jali's plan works, then she drops the two Flame Knights off by the simple expedient of turning the air/raft upside down at the right moment, then flies off to confront Dreek. Extracting Dreek's nanotech would be harmless if he did not fight back; unfortunately, he does fight back, triggering her fight-or-flight reaction. Intercepting Jali before she picks up the Archon and his two bodyguards forces her to escape across Hauberville. Her backup plan is to attack the Archon's villa under cover of darkness (and if forced into fight-or-flight, then she adds 'with my legion of Cursed soldiers converted from sandbug farm workers'). Intercepting her after she grabs the Archon means a high-speed chase across the desert. Jali's chances of escape in such a situation are remote, but she will try nonetheless.
- **Confronting Jali:** See page 13 for what happens when the characters speak to Dr. Jali Astor.
- **Capturing Jali:** If the characters capture Jali, they can hand her over to the Shield Church (which means execution) or do as she begs and take her to Neumann. Alternatively, Lemuel volunteers to take her back to Neumann on board the *Lord Gerald's Fancy*, claiming he knows other underground scientists who can cure the infection. Just before the scoutship takes off, Jali realises it was Lemuel who sabotaged her experiment, and screams at the characters for help.

## 7. THE SWARM ZONE

If she obtains the Archon-class nanotechnology, then Jali returns to her ship (or tries to steal another) and heads for Neumann. Her Jump-2 scout has to take the long route (going via Fintor/0407, Peridot/0405 and Iscand/0504), but a jump-3 ship can go via Ploderash/0707) and get there more than two weeks sooner.

### Neumann

Tens of billions of people crowd into the shining cities of Neumann. Here is technology at its height – buildings float on gravity platforms, servitor drones flit through the crowds, and every imaginable wonder is at hand. If Gazulin with its museums and fashion houses and high culture is the Paris of the Trojan Reach, then Neumann is a million Akihabaras crammed onto a single world, a cybernetic hive of virtually infinite complexity. Everything is incredibly clean and precisely organised; it is a world of straight lines and engineered curves, of polished metal and chrome.

Visitors are too overwhelmed to notice the dark figures in armour – the Flame Knights – who lurk on the fringes of the crowd. Nor do they notice the horror that spreads through the crowds when a single speck of dirt or mould is found anywhere. That stain on a wall could be the first sign of a swarm zone breakthrough, and must be cleaned with atomic fire.

Out beyond the hermetic perfection of the steel cities is the swarm zone. Ships descending to Neumann usually switch off their external cameras, to avoid showing visitors the disturbing view. More than half the planet is covered in swarm-zone.

Imagine a churning ocean of grey goo that boils and sets and sublimates once again, shifting shape and colour and state faster than the eye can follow. Forms emerge out of the churning slime, then fall back again, dissolving. Buildings, structures, machines – people too – are partially born out of the formless chaos and then vanish again, leaving parts or traces of themselves behind to be recombined again. This is the aftermath of the grey goo disaster that wiped out Neumann's golden age. This is what the Immortal Protector guards against.

### The Swarm Cloud

The closest swarm zone to the Starport is a region called Marina's Land. It was once home to some of Neumann's most densely populated cities, before the swarm dissolved them. The Shield Church has a fortress here, Bulwark 17, and it is here that Jali tries to implement her solution to the problem of the swarm.

She believes her altered form of the Archon nanotech will allow her to filter the programs running in the swarm, so the nanotech robots act in concert instead of following multiple contradictory programs. If she is right, then as soon as she exerts control over the swarm, they should all start building the same thing.

If allowed to proceed, she then activates the nanotech. Her eyes glow red, as the nanotech interface in her brain vents waste heat through directed radiation. As Jali concentrates, the churning of the swarm slows. Shapes begin to emerge in the chaos; forms coalesce out of the utility fog. Are they buildings? Computer systems? People? It is hard to tell, but there is definitely something there.

### The Final Decision

At this point, Lemuel reveals himself. He flips open a hidden hatch and pulls out a FGMP-16, which he hefts effortlessly with one hand. He levels it at Jali, and asks the characters to stand aside.

Lemuel explains that he has studied Jali's work over the course of this chase. She has done very, very well. He estimates that there is a 40% chance that her solution might solve the problem of the nanotech swarms and restore order to Neumann – but



might also allow the mad machines to reassert themselves, while there is a 60% chance that it will lead to a swarm outbreak. Lemuel reveals the secret history of Neumann; how the Als discovered a device that he believes to be an Ancient booby-trap, how they struggled, and how the eleven Als still exist within the nanotech churn. Jali's work may live on. He will whisper it to some other brilliant scientist, who will carry the work a step further. One day, aeons in the future, Neumann will be safe once again – but not today.

What do the characters do?

- **Nothing.** The safest option. Lemuel incinerates Jali. Without her influence, the nanotech swarms falls back to its regular chaotic state. Lemuel tells the characters to tell Hodal that Jali died of her nanotech infection. He offers them a MCr. 1 bonus to keep quiet. If they quibble, he points out that he's the immortal god-king of this planet and has a whole church of psychopathic crusaders armed with fusion guns. Do they really want to get on his bad side?
- **Fight Back.** The characters cannot kill Lemuel – or, to be more accurate, they cannot kill the Immortal Protector. If they destroy his Lemuel avatar, then he can grow another clone body. Still, killing Lemuel gives Jali time to put her solution into action.
- **Plead with Lemuel.** Excellent roleplaying and equally excellent Persuade checks can convince Lemuel to gamble on Jali's solution. Even immortal Als get tired and willing to risk it all on one throw of the dice.

### *Jali's Solution*

If Jali is allowed go ahead with her solution, then throw two dice.

On a 7-, it doesn't work. The swarm breaks free of her attempted control. It pours over her, and Jali dissolves as the grey goo tears her apart and makes more of itself from the elements of her body. The characters have to flee immediately, or they too will be devoured. Soon, Flame Knights of the Shield Church arrive, using their fusion guns in a desperate attempt to hold back the tide. In years to come, this will be remembered as the worst outbreak in centuries; millions perish as the grey goo swamps previously-safe sections of the planet.

On an 8+, it works. The nanotech swarm slows, then begins to act with purpose. Slowly, it begins to restore the structures it pulled apart. Building that were devoured centuries ago reform, like seashells left behind by a retreating tide. In other places, the characters see the swarms build up human corpses, layer by layer, shaping bones, then laying muscle and fat and nerve tissue down, creating perfect corpses of people who died 1500 years ago. It will take a long time for the chaos to fully subside, but within a generation, Neumann will be restored to something approaching its former glory.

And in the middle of the swarm wastes, the eleven Als reactivate and continue to assemble their transcendence engine, an enigmatic device built according to million-year-old designs left by a more advanced species. It will take them years to complete the engine, but if they finish it, it may open the gateway to a new phase of existence for those brave enough to pass through it – or it may destroy Neumann. Either way, it's beyond the characters' field of expertise.

### *The Journey Home*

Crossing back through the Imperium should be uneventful as long as the characters keep a low profile. Optionally, they may run into Professor haut-Belzoni on the way back to Drinax (see *Adventure 5: The Treasure of Sindal*) or hear of Captain Hammer's crusade (see *Adventure 6: The Game of Sun and Shadow*).

Once they return to Tech-World, they can inform Hodal of Jali's fate; as long as the Shield Church remained ignorant of Tech-World's involvement in Jali's experiments, Hodal will remain well disposed towards the characters.

The Trojan Reach, they say, is the graveyard of empires. Those foolhardy enough to try resurrecting the glories of the past rarely succeed.

## *WORLDS OF THE REACH*

### *Cordan*

Cordan is a prize by the standards of the Trojan Reach – a pristine garden world, with a breathable atmosphere, rich ecology and thriving farmlands. It was a vassal world of Arunisiir until that planet was conquered by Aslan. Now, the ruling barons of Cordan stand alone (where 'alone' means they have an arrangement with the Imperium, and have tacit Imperial backing as long as they keep the starport operating).

**Patron:** Baroness Lux of Cordan

**Reward:** Territory and estates on Cordan.

**Mission:** The Baroness wants to destroy her rivals, Baron Fero and Baron Halley. The Imperium would step in if she hired an army of mercenaries from offworld (destabilising Cordan's government might threaten the security of the shipping lane, but a few highly skilled professionals with high-tech gear could make certain problems... disappear... without alerting the Imperium).

The one complication – Halley is actually a Zhodani puppet. He reports on Imperial shipping to his masters, and has Zhodani-trained guards to protect him and his castle.

### *Exe*

Exe station is a lonely little refuelling post in the middle of the Borderlands. It is owned and operated by the General Development Corporation. The station is mostly automated,



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so the crew have little to do other than haul liquid hydrogen back from the local gas giant for fuel. As this, too, is mostly automated, they're very, very bored.

It is remarkably easy to turn Exe into a friendly port – just bribe them. A few thousand credits each, and the dozen crew can be bought.

### ***Falcon***

Falcon is a hollowed-out asteroid, dating back to the Solomani wave of colonisation. The natives of Falcon practise strict population-control, to avoid overtaxing the carrying capacity of their worldlet. Over many generations, they have become dependent on Falcon's precise mix of bacteria and germs, and must wear encounter suits when travelling beyond their home. Obviously, visitors are not allowed to interact directly with the Falcon environment – a small section of the asteroid is set aside for them.

**Patron:** John Macule

**Reward:** Cr. 500,000, and Falcon moves one step closer to Haven.

**Mission:** A pirate crew attached to the retinue of Zuekhvi the Corsair claims to have planted a bomb somewhere on Falcon's outer surface, and are demanding a ransom from the asteroid. Macule wants the characters to hunt down Zuekhvi's pirates and force them to reveal the location of the bomb.

### ***Pandora***

Another GeDeCo-sponsored colony, Pandora is a pleasant garden world. A previous colony here vanished during the Long Night, likely due to solar flare activity. The system's primary is a particular active and angry one, prone to dangerous flares. While GeDeCo is trying to attract more colonists, the threat of another cataclysmic flare keeps all but the desperate away.

**Patron:** Administrator Thollett.

**Reward:** Pandora moves two steps closer to Haven.

**Mission:** Rebrand the apocalypse! Everyone believes that the old colony on Pandora was wiped out by a solar flare. If new evidence came to light, evidence that blamed, say, the old Empire of Sindal, then many more colonists might be willing to settle here. Thollett has heard rumours that the characters have connections to Drinax, the last outpost of old Sindal. If they could plant evidence suggesting that the Empire of Sindal committed mass genocide here, that would be wonderful.

### ***Wildeman***

Less a planet, more a big asteroid. The hardy asteroid miners of Wildeman are mostly Imperials, here on two-year furloughs. The system has a bad reputation among many spacers – there are all sorts of wild tales about ghost ships, mysterious breakdowns, psionic phenomena and even space kraken sightings.

**Patron:** Klim Gobbo

**Reward:** One empty gin bottle.

**Mission:** A century ago, a notorious pirate named Tamby Dour attacked shipping within four parsecs of Wildemann. The Imperial Navy intercepted and killed Tamby, but were never able to find his hidden base. Klim Gobbo, a miner, found the base by accident – it is hidden inside an asteroid. Klim discovered that the treasure vault in the base has a DNA lock – only Dour or one of his descendants can open the vault. If the pirates can find a direct descendant of Dour, Klim will show them where the base is, and they can split the treasure 50/50.

Dour's only living relative is Glinnet Dour, a thief who lives on Blacksand. If the characters find her and bring her back, they can open the vault and share all that remains of Dour's fabled fortune – two empty gin bottles. Nothing else remains in the vault.

The real treasure, though, is Dour's hidden base – a fully functional, well-equipped and extremely well hidden Class-B starport right on the main shipping lane...