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REPORT TO FIELD OPERATIVES

ÆON TRINITY TRANSMISSION [NEPTUNE DIVISION]

Central Office, Senior Operative Hector Ramirez

Fellow Æon Members —

You are to be congratulated in your endeavors of late. Your efforts on behalf of the Æon Trinity and humanity as a whole are commendable. Things have been understandably busy for all of us in these trying times, what with the rampant rumors of psi-order corruption, and the dangers of Aberrant and alien invasion. Each and every one of us has had his abilities and convictions challenged to the utmost, but few have responded with the degree of talent and courage that you have shown.

I know quite well how tiring such sustained efforts can be. In recognition of your recent ventures, Æon would like to offer you a rather simpler and, we hope, more pleasant mission: escorting a group of Qin diplomats to the ballet. The Russian port city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is hosting a special performance by its Koryak Tribal Dance Troupe in honor of a contingent of the visiting aliens. Thanks to our small but notable presence since the time of first contact, an Æon escort typically chaperones events of this sort.

Despite the simple nature of this assignment, please remember to keep your eyes and ears open. Not only is there the potential of danger to the Qin (due to accident or criminal elements), but Æon, as always, is interested in anything new that we might learn about our alien allies. Despite the 14 years since first contact, the Qin are a far bigger mystery to humanity than we are to them.

While we would not ask you to spy on them — they are our allies, after all — Æon is eager for any new data that you can provide. Though the Qin aren't prone to careless slips of the tongue, they have developed an increasing loquacity in recent months. We are not certain if this is due to a change in policy among their diplomats, or if it's due to simple familiarity.

Indeed, this very nebulous quality is indicative of our ongoing relations with the Qin. The humanoid contraptions they use to interact with us can lull even the most perceptive person into treating the Qin as human. We must always remember, though, that the Qin are alien in every sense of the word.

Use your judgment and caution accordingly, but don't forget to enjoy the show!

Ramirez

Central Office, 14:24:02 7.26.2121

Hope Sacrifice Unity

ÆON TRINITY FACTBOOK: EARTH: ASIA: RUSSIA: KAMCHATKA

OVERVIEW

Location: Northeast Asia, bordering Bering Sea, Sea of Okhotsk, Pacific Ocean

Area: 503,000 km²

Land Area: 472,000 km²

Coastline: 4159 km

Climate: Relatively mild for latitude, due to maritime influence. Average February temperature -10° C, average July temperature 15° C. Heavy snow in winter.

Terrain: Volcanic mountains; many lakes and rivers.

Natural Resources: Abundant; minerals, coal, oil, timber, fish.

Land Use: Arable land 5%, permanent crops 5%, forest and woodland 75%, other 15%

Irrigated Land: 1400 km²

Environmental Issues: Some legacy problems from Soviet era. Reforestation projects generally successful. Some limited areas moderately toxic due to mining.

Natural Hazards: Volcanic activity, earthquakes, landslides, wildlife.

Population: 2,993,000 7.1.2120 census

Age Demographic:

0-15 yrs: 18% 407,340

16-29 yrs: 35% 792,050

30-64 yrs: 28% 633,640

65+ yrs: 19% 429,970

Population Growth: 3.09%

Net Migration Rate: 20.89 migrants/1k population

Ethnic Divisions:	Russian 45%	Koryak 10%	Kamchadals 3%
	Non-Russian Caucasian 10%	Other Indigenous 2%	Hispanic 9%
	African 7%	Nihonjin 7%	Other 7%

Languages: Russian, English, Nihonjin, Chinese, Koryak

Literacy: 99.9% (source: 2118 survey)

Labor Force: 1.50 million (110,000 foreign workers, 193,000 resident workers of no fixed nationality)

By Occupation: Services 54%, light industry 16%, heavy industry 12%, crafts and arts 3%, agriculture 9%, government 4%, other 2%

ÆON TRINITY FACTBOOK: EARTH: ASIA: RUSSIA: KAMCHATKA: PETROPAVLOVSK-KAMCHATSKIY

THE CITY OF TWO SAINTS

Residents are proud to declare Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy the greatest city in the world, if not in settled space. And, though the weather is often startlingly chill, the citizens' smiles generate an inviting warmth. Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is indeed a shining example of human achievement in this tumultuous era.

Visit any of the nearby volcanoes, and admire nature at its most fierce. Let the underground slideways carry you on a shopping tour. Travel to the top of One Fang Plaza, and see the Pacific unfolded before you. Stop in one of the world-famous spas, and let geothermal energy melt your cares away. The city aims to please, whatever your needs.

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy's strength comes from its shining meld of cultures. The indigenous tribes are hardy and cultured people joined centuries ago by ethnic Russians, who add their own customs into the mix. Two generations ago, they were joined by expatriates from every society bordering the great Pacific, including thousands of Americans, Nihonjin, Chinese, and a medley of others. Today they all work together to make the City of Two Saints a unique amalgam of sensibilities and talents unlike any other on Earth, or off it.



TOURIST SEASON IS YEAR-ROUND

Though Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy lies only a few degrees further north than London, it lacks the warm influence of the Gulf Stream. This makes for a fine skiing season, and temperate summers. If short-sleeve strolling is your pleasure, you'd best visit during the pleasantly warm months of June and July — though keep a jacket handy, as the evenings can be brisk. Winters are marked by heavy snowfall. While the city hosts a wide range of outdoor winter sports, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is also designed to keep the elements at bay, with large enclosed shopping bazaars and underground transportation.

ACCESS IS EASY

Located near the tip of the Kamchatka peninsula, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is most easily reached by the many flights from all over near space. Thrice-daily flights are available at reasonable prices from Tokyo (¥200), Beijing (¥400), Los Angeles (¥600) and Olympus (¥1300). The city is also a regular port-of-call for the Circum-Pacific cruise line. Special travel packages are available.

By ground, travel options are more limited. Kamchatka's only land border is with the Sino-Russian Co-Development Zone. Minor military activities in the CoDeZo prevent reliable ground transit. There is daily train service on the Trans-Russian railroad, but service is erratic.

MONEY IS NO OBJECT

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy has no sales tax, and its strong economy keeps prices low.

A WALKING CITY

Sprawled over the hillsides surrounding Avachinskaya Bay, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is surprisingly compact for the variety it offers. A brisk half-hour's walk can carry you from the bustling business district to the thriving harbor to the cozy suburbs. If a more leisurely pace is your style, you can take your time strolling through the many small streets and byways. Plus, the underground slideways are always available to carry you across the city in warmth and comfort. Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy also boasts clean and polite taxis, a strong bus service, and point-to-point HVTR air service.

NO MEDICAL WORRIES

In the unfortunate event of a medical concern, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy's hospitals are well funded, competently staffed, and free to both citizens and guests. Donations of time, materiel, or money are always welcome.

FURTHER INFO

The Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy Tourist Center is located at 500 Mikhail Avenue, one block north of City Hall. It is open 24 hours a day to provide assistance or to satisfy your curiosities. It also provides free access to PITA, the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy Interactive Tourist Archive, via comm channel 5757.

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Welcome to the Petropavlovsk- Kamchatskiy Koryak Tribal Dance Troupe's • Performance of **Hunter/Love**

28 July, 2121 — Founder's Day Performance

To celebrate our 381st Founder's Day, The Koryak Troupe is proud to present this acclaimed balletic opera, "Hunter/Love," a classic tale of life, betrayal, nature, deception,

and romance. Our performers tonight are:

Hunter. J. C. Kahree

Lover. Suzan Beldougal

Brother. Stefan Jud

Mother. Mary Hansen

Walker. Laszlo Kasnot

Leader. Joan Ciomma

Father. Ju Ito

Bear. Julia Meszoly

Seal. * Alan Meszoly

Water. Willa Williams

Chorus. Gary Van Nimwegen

* Rand * Litse

* Jonathan Westberg

* Mikhail Yakov

* Zsuzsa Coyne

* Joy Zeltsijn

The story begins in 10th-century Kamchatka, as Hunter and his betrothed, Lover, meet in the woods as they do every morning. They discuss, with delight, the minor details of their lives. Hunter leaves to track down the Bear that has been disturbing the tribe's fish traps. Unknown to them, Hunter's Brother has been eavesdropping. He agonizes over how he loves both Lover and Walker, but the fact that Lover is unobtainable makes her more desirable. He curses the gods, who in the form of Seal and Bear, come to him with what they claim is a plan to win both of his obsessions. They are, in actuality, angered by his blasphemy, and wish to destroy him. Bear gives Brother magical honey that will sweeten his words, and Seal gifts Brother with a coat that will make him slippery, impossible to hold or catch.

Brother first goes to Lover's Mother and offers himself as a new suitor for Lover. The magic convinces her, and she states that Brother and Hunter must compete for Lover's hand. He then goes to Walker, promising that if he loses, Brother will marry him instead. Lastly, he goes to Lover, and his honeyed words convince her he truly loves her, though she tells him she loves Hunter before any other.

On the day of the contest, Brother first goes and secretly replaces Hunter's coat with the gift from Seal. When they fight, Brother cannot hold on to the slippery Hunter, and loses. He then protests that Hunter used magic. When the coat is discovered to be enchanted, Hunter is condemned for his cheating. Brother then reveals to the audience that he will not be required to break his word to Walker, since he did lose, but that Lover will now want to marry him more than Hunter, and this way he will be able to marry them both.

Leader is about to execute Hunter when Seal arrives and asks the tribe for his coat. Leader tells him it is going to be destroyed, along with Hunter, who used it unfairly. Seal insists on the return of his coat, and the execution is delayed long enough for Bear to arrive, who goes directly up to Brother and asks for his honey. Brother protests his innocence, but Leader declares both Hunter and Brother's lives should be forfeit. He does not want to deprive Lover of both her suitors, and asks her to choose. Lover kisses Brother. She now can speak with the power of the honey, and convinces the Water to wash through the village, and strip away all artifice and lies.

Brother, Seal, and Bear are all seen for their deceptions, and are driven from the camp. Lover and Hunter are married, and Walker becomes the new Hunter.

Dedication

This performance is respectfully dedicated to our Qin allies, representatives of whom are attending tonight's performance with our compliments. We hope our opera leads to a greater understanding between our two peoples.

QIN ANALYSIS

Filename: Data on Qin and Qinshui

Filetype: Polytype data, volatile

Filesubtype: Precis

Division: Triton, Xenoscience Department

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This file is a summary of the information presented from previous reports regarding the Qin and the planet Qinshui. Its contents are largely assembled from the datapod returned by the Leviathan *Ananda* during Project: Recontact, from the late Maria Diaz' journal entries, and from Bruce Lysik's summary of the Qinshui Expedition in May of last year.

Of the different elements composing Project: Recontact, the Qinshui mission was one of the most inspirational. After five years of isolation, our embassy staff was by in large healthy and thriving, though obviously ready to return home. Only five of our personnel were lost: one to a heart attack, one to drowning, and three (apparently) to the equivalent of an industrial accident while outside approved areas in the city of Meetpoint.

In hindsight, the enforced isolation was probably to the benefit of human-Qin relations, as our diplomats were forced to assume that Qinshui was where they were going to spend the rest of their lives. As a human population literally in the middle of an alien city, life itself depended on improving relations and cementing friendships. The Qin, in turn, could have eliminated the embassy at any time, but instead nobly pursued understanding.

QIN ANATOMY

Excerpt: Maria Diaz journal entry, 12.9.2119

Slugs. Would you believe it? They're a meter or so long, colored mostly in grays

and tans and other earth tones, with stripes of brighter colors here and there. They have segmented bodies and what look like little treads that propel them across the ground. I could make out tentacles below what might have been a mouth.

Diaz's brief glimpse is in accord with the rare views that Aeon personnel have been able to obtain of the Qin stationed in our Solar System. The total number of sightings is under a half-dozen, and the Diaz report is the only one not obtained by psi powers or hidden camera. This information would normally be classified higher, but the fact that the Qin are slug-like leaked years ago to the mass media by means unknown.

QIN CULTURE

Excerpt: Alicia Prasong datapod textfile, 2.26.2120

Actually, it's interesting how — Asian — Qin culture seemsto be. The aliens are courteous and orderly, but also focused and reclusive.

Excerpt: Bruce Lysik expedition summary, 5.17.2120

[The Qin] have a distinct tendency to divulge as little as possible. It seems to be part of their lifestyle.

...[A] paranoid race.

Our knowledge of Qin culture is embarrassingly sparse. While we are aware of how they deal with humans — politely, but divulging little — this is not necessarily an indicator of how they relate to each other. As to other aspects of their



"ALIEN DIGNITY" 2109 >>> MOMA COLLECTION

culture, the only example of Q'in art we have seen is their biotech, which is uniformly designed to an esthetic that is recognizably coherent, but nevertheless quite alien.

Excerpt: Jeff Rapmund journal entry, 9.19.2119

Since I got to this drizzly planet, I don't think I've seen a single piece of sculpture, art, book, photo, holo, or movie that we didn't bring with us. On the other hand, their architecture is stunning... if you like ovoids and spines.

Our xenoculture team has concluded that the Q'in do not recognize the act of creating art as being distinct from the act of creating, for example, a table. The aliens only create practical things, but they always make them beautiful and aesthetically harmonious with the environment in which the tools are to be used. The Q'in do appear to have rich body of myth, but its transmission seems primarily oral and telepathic.

QIN BIOSUITS

Q'in biosuits are designed to resemble idealized humans. Their first attempts were considered unconvincing at the time, but recent reviews of file footage indicate that the original biosuits were near-perfect in shape, but presented entirely the wrong color, being crystalline and shimmering. The current hypothesis is that the Q'in originally had no idea what colors would best serve them in establishing cordial relations with humans, and were forced to experiment, only settling on the current mix of blues and greens after some time. They also eventually chose to present a less physically precise form; modern Q'in suits are somewhat stylized, but in ways that humans find easy to accept. (This is similar to the way cartoon characters can have radically altered proportions, but still appear human and — more to the point — be easy to identify with.)

QIN LANGUAGE

— Marcia Garné, *Biology & Diplomacy* © 2119 Graytones Publishing

The Qin language is composed mainly of soft susurrations divided by distinct “pops.” Common consonants are *F, J, L, M, R, S, W, SH, TH, WR*. *A* and *U* are the most often-used vowels. Vowels are usually short — like in “cat,” “bed” or “run” rather than “arm,” “see” or “too.” There are two different inter-syllable pop sounds, written as *!* and *j*, respectively. Each can be simulated by humans by clacking the tongue against the roof of the mouth; the *j* sound is lower-pitched. Either pop, or neither, may be present between syllables. For ease of pronunciation, Qin is written with a hyphen if neither pop is used.

Example Qin words: *ges!bru, roub, meij!eun, wrauv-moug*.

QIN INTERNAL POLITICS

Excerpt: Alicia Prasong datapod textfile, 2.26.2120.

[Ambassador Delgado has] identified five major Qin nations — factions, really, divided more by philosophy and social function than by geography or biology. She says there may also be more.... It seems that one of these Qin “houses” is anti-human.... Other Qin seem to be trying to keep them away from us.

Excerpt: Maria Diaz journal entry, 12.16.2119

Since it’s a spacefaring society, [the houses are] all basically working toward the same goal, but there are exceptions.

Apparently all the Qin who’ve had extended contact with us are from [Lle-ji, the House of Roads]. They’re the ones who traditionally take an exploratory role, which is why they met us first, and they’ve kept a tight lid on us ever since.

...Humans are a completely new factor, so the political scales are tipping heavily. Apparently that makes us disruptive.

Excerpt: Bruce Lysik expedition summary, 5.17.2120

The [houses] interlock as smoothly as the ecology.... There aren’t any totally useless [houses] as far as I could tell. I’d be very interested to find out what happens to [one] whose role in society becomes obsolete.

For the present, official Æon Trinity nomenclature uses the term “houses” for the divisions of Qin society, and the phonetic transcriptions of the individual names. The original Chinese names are to be phased out. The use of the “House of X” form is permitted where it illuminates the point.

There are six major houses and an indeterminate number of smaller ones (at least three, possibly several dozen). The descriptions of the houses’ functions are tentative at best. The major houses are:

Name	Designation	Function	(Former Label)
Lle-brib	House of Speech	diplomacy	(Hsiao Kuo)
Lle-llau	House of Walls	defense?	(Kuei)
Lle-ji	House of Roads	exploration	(Tung Jen)
Lle-sosh	House of Wheat	food?	
Lle-av	House of Beasts	domesticated animals?	
Lle-tha	House of Servants	labor relations?	

Further detail is extremely sparse. Most human contact has been with Lle-ji. Its relationship with humanity is arguably friendly, but it is clear at this point that the house uses this relationship to strengthen its position among the other houses. This has, thus far, rebounded to humanity’s benefit, but we cannot be certain how long this pattern will continue.

Contact with Lle-brib has been minimal, but our xenoculture team believes that the house serves as the instrument of truth in Qin society (similar to journalists in ours), and is extending its mandate to include humanity. From the Lle-brib, we have learned that Lle-llau is hostile toward humans. Recent inquiries indicate that this may be a *cause celebre*, that Lle-llau is simply upset that the Lle-ji is be-

coming more powerful
due to human interaction.

The attitude of the other houses toward
humanity is unknown at this point.

MEETPOINT

**Excerpt: Alicia Prasong datapod
textfile, 2.26.2120**

The city where the human compound is located has been dubbed Meetpoint. It's quite large, covering several hundred square kilometers.... It's always wet; you think it's raining, and then you realize you're mistaken, because it *really* starts to rain. The landscape and buildings meld into each other. Everything is a confusing blend of muted, pastel colors mixed with a few garish blues, greens, and purples.... The hardest thing to get used to is the complete absence of angles or flat surfaces; everything is curved and organic.

**Excerpt: Jeff Rapmund journal entry,
8.13.2119**

Walking around the city feels much like walking around a reasonably quiet city on Earth. There are people going about their errands on foot or in small vehicles, and so on. Of course, everyone you see is a Qin in a biosuit, so you have to think the whole thing is staged. Unless all the Qin in Meetpoint wear biosuits all the time, which doesn't seem too likely. They're trying to make us feel at home, but it's just eerie, like walking onto a stage while the play is going on.

The city of Meetpoint is named Thouhji in Qin, the final syllable suggesting that it is an important city for the Lle-ji house. It is difficult to provide a map of the area, as Qin buildings are impermanent, being built and deconstructed according to exigencies as yet unexplained. The human embassy itself remains a constant, as do the major terrain features. The city is bounded by a swamp to the east, beyond which lies one of the planet's many oceans. To the west, there is a quarantine zone encompassing much of the city that humans are not allowed to enter. Beyond the city is a low range of hills that curve around to the north.

BIOTECH, CREATION THEREOF

**Excerpt: Alicia Prasong datapod
textfile, 2.26.2120.**

When we finally received [permission] to land, our transports were directed to the human embassy itself instead of to a proper landing facility.... According to embassy staff, the Qin hastily *grew* the landing complex after we made contact, by using their amazing control over the planet's environment.

The Qin can create a vast variety of biotech objects on demand, apparently through the use of so-called "factory beasts." These large, sessile creatures are the linchpin in the Qin ability to build new equipment rapidly. They serve much the same purpose as an assembly line combined with a powerful CAD/CAM computer agent. A Qin specifies a device (usually working from a vast "library" of designs), and telepathically submits the specification to the factory-beast. According to our best understanding, the beast then constructs a large molecule with the spec encoded on it (similar to, but definitely not identical to, DNA), and inserts this spec-molecule into a standardized broth of bio-assemblers and raw biological material. The assemblers, working from the spec, grow the device — much as an embryo grows, but considerably faster. The living device is then extruded from the beast, usually within hours. Other, more mobile beasts are used for projects such as buildings, which need to be progressively grown *in situ*. Construction time is proportional to both the size of the device and its complexity. According to embassy personnel, the "biotarmac" landing site mentioned in the excerpt above was grown in six hours. A multi-person vehicle may take 12 hours to a day to develop, though.

Note that these beasts are merely a means of production. The Qin themselves perform the actual design of new biotech devices. The factory beasts are just their current, highly efficient means of realizing these designs. Presumably the Qin used techniques closer to the human biotech matrices prior to the creation of their production beasts.

BIOTECH, MEDICAL

**Excerpt: Alicia Prasong datapod
textfile, 2.26.2120**

Word has it that one of the embassy staff fell and broke her leg a while back. A Qin supposedly rubbed a substance on it and Coulon's leg set shortly afterward. The Qin described the substance as a semi-living sealant that could migrate through human tissue to the site of a break and affect repairs.

During the years of isolation, the Qin gained a much greater understanding of human physiology, as our embassy staff became virtual "guinea pigs." Originally the embassy medical staff prohibited medical treatment by Qin. However, there were several recurring illnesses brought on by the alien environment, and Qin "doctors" were eventually consulted. Their advice was sound and useful, and medical security was relaxed. By the third year of isolation, the occasional injuries and illnesses suffered by the humans trapped on Qinshui

were routinely treated by alien medical specialists, and invariably led to rapid cures. As a result, the embassy's mortality rate was remarkably (even astoundingly) low. The single non-accidental death was a heart attack that occurred in the middle of the night; Arthur Klein's body was not discovered until morning. Seventy-five percent of the staff received medical treatment from the Qin at one point or another, and remain uniformly healthy. Today, many of the techniques discovered during that period are being sold to human biotech concerns by the Qin (at high but reasonable prices).

THE DEATHS OF DIAZ, ROBERTS, SANDOZ

**Excerpt: Maria Diaz journal entry,
12.9.2119**

A few of us — Roberts, Sandoz and I — [sneaked] out of the official embassy area. Not



very risky... I figured I could keep us out of sight.

Excerpt: Ambassador Flores memo, 2.27.2120

...were tragically killed while venturing *outside* the official ambassadorial sector. I have personally inspected the accident scene and ordered autopsies of the bodies. Our Qin allies apologize profusely for the accident, and offer their condolences.

Maria Diaz, Laura Roberts, and Jerome Sandoz made between three and six excursions into off-limits sections of Meetpoint. While these infractions gained some valuable information, the value of that data in no way compensates for the possibility of disastrous diplomatic repercussions. Nor was it worth their lives.

A Qin worker entering a building described as a "secondary food processing facility" found the three bodies on February 22, 2120. The embassy security chief, Wernay Thomas, was notified by his Qin liaison, one Lillyob. Thomas noted immediately upon her arrival at the scene that the bodies had clearly been disturbed, though not moved. Lillyob explained that the worker had attempted to assist the apparently injured humans before calling for assistance.

Thomas' inspection (later confirmed by autopsy) determined that the three victims had been violently crushed and/or squeezed in some sort of organic tentacle. The autopsy was unable to provide further details. According to Lillyob, the food processing facility had several devices that might cause such injuries, including the protein extractor the bodies were found next to. The Qin later reported to Thomas that the extractor, along with several other biotech constructs in restricted areas, reacted unpredictably to human pheromones. Qin biotech experts believe this to be inherent to the original design, and not the result of sabotage. The Qin are currently changing such devices to improve safety, but still require humans to not venture into quarantined zones.

TRITON ARCHIVE

TRANSLATING QIN

The Qin language is exceptionally difficult to translate into English. In its written form, Qin resembles delicately looped lines and swirls. When I questioned my Qin colleague, Mai Raus-eth, he commented:

When you walk, you leave footsteps, and your words are as these footsteps. Discreet, individual, integral unto themselves. We see speech as a path, a trail, melding from one concept to the next, without break or line. Your way has much wisdom to it, but I yet prefer ours.

Much of Qin writing, especially poetry and epic verse, is based on a line that crosses itself repeatedly. For example:



Fig1

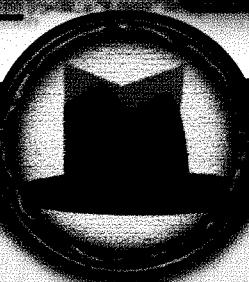


Fig2

Follow the lines, starting at the arrows. In figure 1, we see a typical ABBA form. In figure 2, the form is ABCABC. Many more complicated forms exist.

In most traditional English forms, these patterns would denote punctuated emphasis or rhyme schemes. In Qin, however, they indicate variances in the *part of speech*. For example, in the ABBA form, the key words might be "hammer," "claw," "hammered," "will claw." Each word is used once as a noun, and once as a verb. In longer forms, the words may be also be used as adjectives, adverbs, *et cetera*.

This variance is much easier to understand in Qin than in most Earth tongues, as the distinction between "verb" and "noun" (for example) arose rather late in the development of the aliens' language. Primitive Qin saw little distinction between what something *was*, and what it *did*. This philosophy still colors a great deal of their culture, actually.



Twenty Questions with Rrulu-lein

— Cori Heisler, *The Painful Truth* © 2120 MMI

Rrulu-lein is a Qin diplomatic attaché to their embassy on Earth. As a representative of humanity's noble allies, he provides us with an invaluable outside perspective on ourselves.

PT: Good afternoon, Rrulu-lein, and thank you for agreeing to this interview.

R: Your gratitude is appreciated. May this conversation be of benefit to both of us, and to our peoples.

PT: Indeed. Before we begin, allow me to compliment you on your excellent grasp of English.

R: My thanks. My people enjoy puzzles; your languages are most entertaining puzzles.

PT: We try. [laughs] I've never interviewed a Qin before; your race rarely grants interviews. What led you to agree to this one?

R: The timing was auspicious. New eras in Qin-human relations are unfolding.

PT: And what do you see in our mutual future?

R: Much of benefit. Exchanges of knowledge, and of wisdom. Working together.

PT: [pause] Could you be more specific?

R: If an engineer is not specific, the building may fall. If a diplomat is not specific, the building may stand.

PT: [pause, laughs] I see. Let's try this, then: What are your personal plans for the future?

R: I long to see my homeworld again. With your wondrous Leviathans, that time may be soon.

PT: What is your home, Qinshui, like?

R: It is a jewel, it is a misty green orb set in the sea of space. I sometimes suspect God encoded the appearance of one's homeworld in one's genes as the exemplar of perfect beauty. As Earth is wondrous to you, Qinshui is to me.

PT: You believe in God?

R: Your God? Your religions believe in your gods, so surely they must exist. I believe in a first one, a creator. [laughs] It has no beard, however.

PT: On a different note, may I ask about your biosuit?

R: Questions are always permitted; it is answers that may not be allowed.

PT: Don't I know it. Your suit is really quite remarkable, and more refined than the ones your people used in the past. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were a human with pale-green skin. How is it made?

R: I know of biotech only the basics. It is designed in our minds, and told to our makers, and then it is grown.

PT: Your "makers"?

R: Devices. Tools. As one drives nails with a hammer, one builds suits with a device fitting the task.

PT: Will you be giving this biotechnology to us?

R: You personally? Your employers? Humanity? Orgotek? We may give it to someone, or perhaps we already have. I believe you call this a "trade secret?"

PT: Ah, well, yes. Now for a truly personal question. Please don't be offended. What do you really look like?

R: [pause] Your tabloids, your scientists have their suspicions. I am not permitted to confirm their guesses. For today, it is truth to say I look as you see me. It is not the whole truth, but it must serve.

PT: Thank you. Now, I understand there have been recent Aberrant attacks on the Qinshui sys-

tem. Has this altered the Qin stance on humanity?

R: If a single sheep in a herd is black, do you cull the whole herd? Aberrants are responsible for their own actions, and their inner selves are no longer like your own. Taint is upon them.

PT: "Inner selves?"

R: That which is in one's genes, as a reflection or inflection of what is in one's soul.

PT: Ah, so you believe in nature over nurture?

R: Nurture is easier to control, but nature has greater effects.

PT: What do you see as humanity's nature?

R: You are such many and varied beings! The days it would take to say, I do not have.

PT: If you could change our nature with your biotech, what would you do?

R: My field is of words, not genes. [pause] You are a very tall species, however.

PT: In another field, what have you seen of human culture?

R: In the flesh? Very little, alas. But our embassy has quite a complete holo feed. So much of it, I truly find mysterious, yet beauty lies in that we do not understand. Even in football.

PT: And human history?

R: That is much more comprehensible than your entertainment. Our two worlds share much in this area.

PT: Wars, conflict, slavery?

R: Hardships, ended by alliance, followed by triumph.

PT: Do you have any last thoughts for us?

R: No, not yet.



Methods and Concepts in Biotech

— Excerpt: *Principles of Biotechnology*, Third Edition © 2120 Parsing Publishing

Biotech commerce is a driving force in the modern science of biology. The creation of newer, better aids to contemporary life is the primary focus of much current research, making biotechnology a billion-yuan a year industry throughout settled space. This text provides an introduction to the principles behind the creation of biotech.

On Fundamental Principles

All known biological life is made of cells, ranging from single-celled organisms like bacteria to multi-trillion-celled entities like whales. A cell is built of three primary components: the *plasma membrane*, which serves as boundary and container; the *nucleus*, a compartment containing DNA and DNA-controlling molecules; and the *cytoplasm*, a stew of fluid and particles between the plasma membrane and the nucleus.

Life on Earth can be divided into three categories: *prokaryotic* organisms (bacteria), *archaea* organisms (a variant type of bacteria), and the much more complicated *eukaryotic* organisms (plants, animals). Eukaryotic entities are distinguished from the other types by, among other differences, having *introns* in the DNA, and *organelles*. Organelles are parts of the cell, contained in the cytoplasm and distinct from the nucleus, which serve various organ-like purposes. Organelles were originally separate organisms, but they were subsumed into the ancestors of eukaryotic life billions of years ago, and permitted the evolution of multi-cellular life. As all human-scale biotech is eukaryotic in nature, we will confine this discussion to that type of cell.

The most important parts of a nucleus are the chromosomes. These thin threads contain the specifications and plans needed for the growth of an organism. Chromosomes are built of *deoxyribonucleic acid*, or DNA. This familiar ladder-helix molecule is formed of from deoxyribose sugar and phosphates molecules as the "verticals," and the four molecules adenine, guanine, cytosine, and thymine as the "horizontal." The variances in the AGCT molecules determine what information is encoded in the chromosomes and, thus, control the shape and life of the organism.

The basic techniques of genetic engineering were developed 150 years ago, when methods were found to cut and paste DNA molecules between creatures of the same species, and then between species. Today, virtually all domestic animals are descended from genetically modified ancestors, and are thus longer-lived, healthier, and better-tempered than their ancestors. Food animals and agricultural plants are also near-universally modified, providing crop yields and breeding rates that are many times greater than in previous centuries.

As distinct from genetically engineered animals and plants, however, biotechnology rarely bears any resemblance to traditional forms of life. At its core, biotech is similar to all other forms of life. It is built of cells that contain chromosomes that determine function. However, the DNA in biotech devices has typically been built from the ground up, and only comparatively short sequences are taken directly from extant organisms. For example, many biotech weapons have a skeletal structure, and the genes that control the chemical makeup and fundamental structure of each bone are indeed similar or identical to those found in animals. Yet the skeleton's actual shape is completely unlike anything produced by nature.



Is Biotech Alive?

The following list contains some of the common characteristics of life.

A Structure More Complex than a Non-Living Thing: Biotech devices are indeed complex.

Depends Directly or Indirectly on Other Organisms for Materials and Energy: This is also true of biotech devices, as they are created by humans, and often powered by humans.

Metabolic Activity: Biotech does, in fact, consume energy in order to serve its functions.

Homeostatic Response to Environmental Changes: Not all biotech is designed to protect itself against changes in its surroundings, though most is. For example, most biotech weapons contain cooling systems that become more active in elevated temperatures.

The Capacity for Growth, Development, and Reproduction: While biotech devices do grow and develop to meet their design specifications, few are capable of reproduction.

DNA is the Molecule of Inheritance: All known forms of human biotech use DNA.

Adaptive Potential: As biotech does not breed, any adaptive changes must be made by the creator.

Variations in Form Accumulate as a Result of Evolution: Biotech devices are designed to be as identical as possible among a given device. All bioweave armor of a given model from the same manufacturer will (in theory) be genetically identical.

Thus it is clear that, although biotechnology is dynamic, it does not exhibit all the traditional characteristics of life. Among biologists there is a certain amount of debate as to whether the definitions should be changed to encompass biotech, and currently there is no clear consensus. The question "What is life?" is a question that will remain a controversial for some time.



REPORT: THE QIN EMBASSY ON LUNA

>>> **Warning:** Other headers suppressed. This is an unsecured document. To protect his identity, the contributing associate's identity has been concealed and referential pronouns conformed to male. <<<

I'm sorry to say that this report is not going to be as thorough as I would like, or as we thought. There are several psi jammers built into the Qin embassy structure, so approximately 45% of the embassy was impossible for me to scan.

The front dome, or "reception center," contains few surprises. It was clearly designed from the ground up as a place for Qin and humans to meet and interact. My scans confirmed a grand ballroom, a dining hall, a great many private meeting rooms, a kitchen, some private suites for humans spending the night, bathrooms, a fairly typical computer core of human manufacture, and a number of offices — all things we've seen before. The only new discovery was the number of cameras the Qin had installed in the walls. Not a centimeter of the reception center is out of sight of one camera or another. The feed from the cameras passes into the embassy proper.

In my scans of the rest of the embassy, I was most surprised to discover how much time our sluggish friends spend inside their biosuits. I only caught brief glimpses of Qin outside their suits, and in every instance they were in the process of sealing up their biosuit "chests" after returning from a visit to one of the areas covered by the jammers.

The interior portions of the embassy devoted exclusively to the Qin are difficult to describe. Much of it seems to be exactly what one would expect; offices, meeting rooms,

biotech computers, life-support systems. There are also three large "media rooms" in which a few Qin are always present, watching as many different broadcast holo channels as they can. Similarly, there is an extensive library of human literature, and a small collection of other art forms.

Among the more surprising discoveries, however, are the living quarters. There were rooms for a dozen people... and I do mean *people*. These chambers were typical human living quarters in every respect. I can only assume that the aliens use these for "practice" in being human. I did not find sufficient living space for the several hundred other Qin we know live here, so I have to conclude that either I don't know what they look like, or they're inside the jammed zones.

Other things I specifically didn't see in these interior areas include kitchens, communication centers, armories, or factory beasts. I was also unable to trace where the feeds from the cameras in the reception center end up.

On a more general note, the style of the embassy's interior is quite distinct from the reception center. The "human" zone is clean, moderately humid, and designed in a smooth fashion generally reminiscent of seashells. The Qin-only parts, however, are much more similar to the descriptions I've heard of Qinshui — misty, organic, soft-edged, and generally less appealing to humans.

>>> see attached image files <<<

FOR STORYTELLER EYES ONLY!

This section covers Storytelling information for running this installment of the **Alien Encounter** series for **Trinity**. Players should stop reading now and content themselves with examining the full-color setting section.

What Is This?

Symbiosis is the first adventure in **Deception**, the second and final book in the **Alien Encounter** series. This episode can serve either as a continuation of the series begun in **Invasion** or as a stand-alone story that can be your players' entry into the Trinity Universe.

The **Alien Encounter** series, composed of **Invasion** and **Deception**, is intended to place the characters at the forefront of the changing relations between humanity and the known alien races. While the characters' actions have immense political and cultural ramifications, the events of *Symbiosis* are meant to be personal and immediate. Though the characters are often at the mercy of forces they can't control, remember that, in the end, it is their choices that shape the story.

Each episode in this book is split into two sections: full-color setting and black-and-white rules information. The former is "color text" in more ways than one — it consists of interesting background material pertinent to the story. Players should either read the setting material before the episode or at points during the story that you, the Storyteller, feel are suitable.

The black-and-white rules sections — such as the material you are reading now — consists of Storyteller-specific material. From here on you get a plot synopsis, specific (and reusable) source material, suggested ways to advance the plot, and Storyteller character write-ups. This is the meat of the adventure, the part that really tells you what's going on.

Good luck and good roleplaying. You'll never look at the Q in the same way again.

The Plot

This synopsis describes the events of *Symbiosis* in brief. Later sections go into full detail; this simply provides the basic lowdown. **Once again: If you're not the Storyteller, don't read this!**

What Has Gone Before

The previous adventure series, **Darkness Revealed**, featured the characters exposing the Huang-Marr conspiracy, a group engaged in bizarre and unethical research and led by corrupt psions. This conspiracy shattered the faith many people had of psions as champions of humanity. The public began to question the freedom with which the Gifted were allowed to operate, and many people wondered if psions weren't destined to fall in the same manner that the Aberrants had.

The **Æon Trinity** and the psi orders worked overtime to track down any and all rogue psions and show that the Gifted could still be relied upon to aid humanity. The events of **Invasion**, the previous volume of the **Alien Encounter** series, helped to bolster these efforts.

Invasion covered a massive, coordinated assault by humanity of Chrome-Prime, the home planet of the hostile Chromatics. The invasion had two primary goals: stopping the aliens' own attacks on Earth and her colonies, and rescuing the Upeo wa Macho teleporters the Chromatics held captive. (The **Æon Trinity** also hoped the effort would show that the rogues of Huang-Marr were not representative of psions as a whole.) The characters had the specific mission of scouting a hospital on Chrome-Prime and rescuing any humans suspected of being held there. They were aided in this by intelligence extracted from a Chromatic prisoner known as Vermilion.

The hospital turned out to be a trap. The characters teleported with Vermilion directly into an ambush, and barely escaped alive. During their flight across the surface of Chrome-Prime, however, the characters learned the truth about the Chromatics' hostility toward humans. Members of a mysterious psi-using alien race known as the Doyen had manipulated the Chromatics into attacking Earth, blaming all humanity for the

acts of a few malevolent Aberrants. In a climactic showdown, Vermilion confronted a Doyen about this manipulation. The Doyen was driven away, and its race's hold over the Chromatics was broken. Humanity negotiated a cease-fire with some of the leading Chromatic tribes, and the Upeo returned to Earth.

Currently, the Chromatics are locked in civil war. Some dynasties remain loyal to the Doyen, while other tribes view humanity *and* Doyen as enemies. The United Nations, with *Æon* Trinity assistance, is developing diplomatic relations with some of the Chromatic dynasties. Though true peace is still some way off, efforts so far look promising.

The assault also did what *Æon* hoped it would: improve the general opinion of psions. Some cultures, most notably the FSA and Nippon, still claim that the Gifted are a danger that must be monitored closely. However, there's no denying that psion and neutral successfully worked side-by-side during the Chrome-Prime assault, and that psions were directly responsible for some of the most telling advances made in the campaign.

Assuming the characters were involved in the events of *Invasion*, they're now minor celebrities. Even though a significant portion of humanity remains hostile toward the Chromatics' past acts, and there's a residual nervousness — even distrust — of psions that may never be overcome, the characters are lauded for helping stop an interstellar war. *Æon* has decided to use this status as war heroes to improve public relations, by giving the characters high-profile, low-violence assignments.

Overview

Symbiosis begins in mid-2121, a couple months after the events in *Invasion*. This is designed to give Storytellers who ran *Invasion* time to wrap things up on Chrome-Prime and give the characters a bit of a rest upon their return to Earth. In the end, feel free to vary the exact timing to suit any subplots you may have boiling in the background.

As noted in the color section, the characters are contacted by *Æon* and assigned to escort duty. There should be few complaints; the mission is a refreshing change, simple and fun. The characters are sent to Eastern Russia and meet their wards, a group of Qin, at the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy spaceport. The aliens' party is comprised of two diplomats and three bodyguards. The Qin prove to be personable, friendly, a touch evasive, and very dignified — in all ways typically Qin. The

group spends the afternoon sight-seeing (including a brief encounter with a group of alien-woolshipping Qindo). That night they attend a ballet/opera being presented in the Qins' honor.

The opera goes off without a hitch, and the Qin are volubly impressed. As the party leaves the theatre, however, it is attacked by what appears to be a small cadre representing the terrorist group Pamyat. Strangely, both the diplomats and the bodyguards have trouble moving during the attack; their biosuits' control systems are being jammed. One of the bodyguards, Tha Tha!fa, still manages to grab one of the terrorists while the characters take care of the rest. As Tha Tha!fa and the terrorist grapple, the radical *explodes*, throwing the combatants apart. Tha Tha!fa's biosuit remains intact, but the "terrorist" proves to be a *human-looking biosuit* — and inside is something that looks like an octopus, rather than the slug-like Qin the characters might expect!

The remaining attackers flee. Before the characters can examine the occupant of the ruptured biosuit, the Qin bodyguards take possession of the suit and its contents. The Qin then commandeered a limo and proceed to the spaceport alone, taking off in their vessel immediately, without waiting for clearance. The characters are left with many questions and precious few answers.

As the characters investigate, it's obvious that none of the attackers were human, but rather "humaniform" biosuits controlled by Qin — or by some heretofore unknown Qin species, considering the strange octopus-like creature seen in the ruptured suit. All efforts to gain information from the Qin are met with stubborn silence, though, until the alien dignitaries suddenly request an emergency transport to Qinshui.

Since humanity controls faster-than-light travel, *Æon* now has leverage to find out what's going on. Negotiations ensue, and the Qin ambassador, Soub-jur, agrees to allow the characters entrance to the Lunar embassy. The hope for answers degenerates into further frustration, though, as the characters get the runaround for hours before finally being given only the barest facts: The attackers were Qin criminals whom the ambassadorial staff has captured and plans to return to Qinshui for trial. Thanks to the continued scarcity of facts, *Æon* uses its leverage to "invite" the characters on the trip.

Travel to Qinshui is routine, as far as interstellar jaunts go. Once there, the human embassy staff briefs the characters as to local conditions.

At that point, the team tries once again to glean some worthwhile answers from the cryptic aliens. Many of the Qin are unwilling to speak at all, and others clearly have their own agendas. Eventually, a picture of Qin houses in turmoil emerges.

Lle-ji, the House of Roads, is monopolizing humanity, with detrimental effects for all. Lle-llau, the House of Walls, is desperate to regain its lost status and is attempting to sabotage human-Qin relations through plans like the opera attack. Lle-llau has more attacks in the works, including a planned assault on the human embassy on Qinshui!

The characters' investigation also reveals the identity of the octopus-like being. Apparently, the Qin had designed a race of biotech robots! The *ewr-be*, as they are known, are not sentient, though they are surprisingly intelligent and serve many roles in Qin society.

Armed with these startling discoveries, the characters end up trying to stop a full-fledged fight between angry Qin and outraged humans. When the dust settles, both the House of Roads and the House of Walls have been shamed for their machinations, and cooler heads in the Qin government respect humanity for defusing a potentially disastrous situation.

Theme

The theme in *Symbiosis* is seeing beyond appearances, of looking beneath the surface. The Qin are, to all appearances, human. Mankind reinforces this perception by attributing the Qin with human traits, especially Asian ones. Yet on the inside, both physically and mentally, the Qin are quite alien. Characters who assume the Qin operate with human philosophies and justifications are bound to be surprised again and again.

This is given an interesting twist in the situation on Qinshui. The obvious is the admittedly bizarre city of Meetpoint, a place where the Qins' alien origins are quite visible. But beneath the sometimes jarringly alien society, political currents run that are all the more disturbing for their astonishing familiarity.

In the end, the characters must question what they see and know. Truly figuring out what makes the Qin tick takes a great deal of time and effort, and success is not guaranteed.

Mood

In a word: paranoia. The Qin are a paranoid race. Aeon is paranoid about the Qin. While both humanity and the Qin recognize that an alliance is beneficial to both, neither can wholly trust the other. The Qin worry about a race that can produce the Aberrants and, therefore, reveal little to us. Humanity fears a race about which so little is known. This death-loop of mistrust is only intensified by the events of *Symbiosis*. In the end, the characters' actions determine the tone of future human-Qin relations. If they show trust and a willingness to lay their cards on the table, the Qin will notice and, perhaps, respond in kind. Otherwise, the characters may unwittingly contribute to the apprehension flooding the cosmos.

This paranoia can be felt on the periphery as well as in direct interaction with Qin. After all, much of humanity remains paranoid of psions and their abilities. Earth is paranoid about the Chromatics and their erstwhile allies, the Doyen. The universe is full of dangers unknown just a few short decades ago. Now it appears that nothing is as it seems. You have the opportunity in almost every scene to make the characters question the motivations of others — and of themselves! May you live in interesting times, indeed.

Timeline

Date	Event
3.23.2107	Humanity hears the Qin's first radio message.
4.11.2107	First contact. Chinese explorers meet with the Qin at 47 Tucanae.
2108	Embassies established on Luna and at Meetpoint on Qinshui.
8.17.2114	The Upeo wa Macho vanish, cutting off the embassies.
2114-2120	The isolation.
2.25.2120	AnandaLeviathan teleports to Qinshui. Contact reestablished.
Early to mid-2120	The events of Darkness Revealed .
Mid-2121	The events of Alien Encounter: Invasion .
7.26.2121	Beginning of <i>Symbiosis</i> .

The Setting

Symbiosis begins in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy on the Russian Pacific Coast. Events then take the characters to the Qin embassy on Luna, and from there to Qinshui. Most of the story occurs in alien environs; the relative familiarity of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy should be emphasized, so that the later transition fuels the characters' sense of being out of their depth.

The busy city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is the capital of the Russian region of Kamchatka, located between the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Okhotsk. While most of Siberia is leased to China, Kamchatka remains a proud Russian state. In 2121, the City of Two Saints is a center for both science and culture, and a stew of mixed peoples.

Geography

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is on the eastern coast of the Kamchatka peninsula, a few hundred kilometers from its southern tip. It surrounds Avachinskaya Bay, a well-protected harbor. The most distinctive geographic features of the area, however, are the two great volcanic ranges that surround the region, including Mt. Koryakskaya, which looms over the city. Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is built in the volcanic region known as the Pacific Ring of Fire, and the area is quite tectonically active. The volcanic ash, however, insures healthy soil and a strong fishing industry. The volcanoes themselves are largely tamed, though occasional earthquakes affect the city. Typically, there is a quake strong enough to rattle dishes once a week. Major tremors are significantly less frequent.

History

The city was founded in 1740 by Vitus Bering, the explorer. He named it for St. Peter and St. Paul, and sailed away from the young village to explore Alaska. While technically a part of Russia from this point on, the area was largely ignored by the tsars, who allowed the region almost complete self-autonomy for nearly two centuries. In fact, from 1870 to 1880 Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy's mayor, Edmund Sandalin, was an American.

During the brief Soviet era, Kamchatka became a fortress-state of the Cold War. Originally populated largely by indigenous tribes, the city was flooded both by ethnic Russians seeking better jobs, and by those fleeing Stalin's purges back west. The tribes were ruthlessly homogenized into Russian culture, and forced to abandon their homes

and live in the cities. The area was isolated from the outside world, and slowly stagnated.

With the collapse of Communism, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy (also referred to as Petropavlovsk or simply P-K) recovered at a blinding rate. American currency flooded into the city, along with American tourists and researchers. The city's primary industries of fishing and logging were joined by an increase in high-tech companies and shipbuilding. The area escaped the worst of the Aberrant depredations, and remained prosperous throughout the first half of the 21st century.

In the mid-2050s, the Federated States of America came into being. The new totalitarian government in America had its hands full, and spared little thought at first for Alaska and North-west Canada. During this time, tens of thousands of former Americans and Canadians fled for the other side of the Bering Sea, and many came to Petropavlovsk. The FSA demanded that their escaped populace be extradited, but Russia rattled its sabers, and declined. Kamchatka had built upon its naval might from the previous century, and a developing alliance with China gave Russia a strong backer in the event of conflict. The North American refugees were joined by a much smaller exodus from quarantined Nippon, and similarly displaced people from around the world.

In 2061, the Crash came. Russia was hit as hard as any other nation, mainly due to the lack of appropriate systems to exploit its vast resources. The government in Russia desperately decided to lease Siberia and its vast resources to China, forming a Co-Development Zone (colloquially known as the "CoDeZo") designed to benefit both nations.

Kamchatka was spared the worst of the Crash, and P-K in particular survived fairly well. Its economy depended neither on vast farmlands nor on the OpNet, and the locals had a heritage of enduring tough conditions. The citizens of the region protested its government's decision, the expatriate population most loudly of all. They had not fled a totalitarian government only to become subject to the central planners in Beijing, after all. Some strained negotiations later, Moscow quietly removed Kamchatka from the Zone, with China's reluctant agreement.

This decision proved to be distinctly in Russia's favor. The show of loyalty by the Russian government to the displaced Americans was returned in force, and the mix of ethnic Russians, Americans, and tribal cultures turned Kamchatka into an eco-

conomic powerhouse, determined to show that Chinese interference is neither necessary nor wanted.

Today, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is arguably one of the most exciting cities on the Pacific Rim. In addition to being a center for numerous industries, it is undergoing a cultural renaissance, mixing tribal culture with traditional Russian forms. It is also a "free city" for the rebel forces in the CoDeZo who often make P-K their base for attempts to harry Chinese in Siberia. Beijing considers the local resistance nothing more than a nuisance at this point. China chooses to make examples of the rebel forces it finds in Siberia itself, rather than risking its lucrative agreement by forcing its will on Kamchatka.

Politics and Government

While technically and emotionally still part of Russia, Kamchatka is very nearly an independent state. With the collapse of Europe and increasingly strained relations with China, Moscow has not had the time to direct its eastern holdings closely. Kamchatka's prosperity does trickle west, but this is mostly due to loyalty on the part of the government in Petropavlovsk, which has sent many large aid packages to "the old country."

A democratically elected council governs Kamchatka. Council members represent their geographic regions for six-year terms, and appoint a First Councilor from their ranks. This individual presides over council meetings and serves ceremonial duties. The current First Councilor is Irina Viter III. While capitalism is a strong force in Kamchatka, the economy is also partly socialized. Medical care is freely available to anyone (citizen or not), and doctors are well paid and competent. Similar systems are in place for education, unemployment, and law enforcement.

An elected mayor and cabinet run the city of Petropavlovsk. The members of the cabinet (called "secretaries") are elected by area of expertise, not region. For example, teachers and students may vote for the Secretary of Education. The current mayor is Mikhail Smitsk, of mixed Russian-American heritage.

The City

At the end of the Soviet era, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy's architecture tended to be concrete blocks with little adornment. Much has changed over the past century. Repeated waves of immigrants have brought their styles with them, and modern P-K is an eclectic mix of Neo-Beaux Arts skyscrapers, clean-lined Greek Revival govern-

ment buildings, and Early American Colonial homes. The long, white winters have also led to it being an immensely colorful city, with murals on every corner, teal-blue office blocks, and the unique bright-orange spire of One Fang Plaza (the local office of FangTech), visible from most parts of the city. The only constant in the buildings is the need for sturdiness in the face of frequent earthquakes.

While the streets of Petropavlovsk are usually busy, much of the bustle is underground. As with several Canadian cities before it, P-K has large underground shopping facilities and office structures, connected by a clean and prompt transit system. Like the city above, it is powered and heated by geothermal taps on the nearby volcanoes, which also serve to regulate the volcanic pressure and prevent eruptions.

Culture

The culture of Petropavlovsk has been thoroughly mixed over the past centuries, and its mood today is one of vigor. Life is regarded as something to be enjoyed, in equal parts work, play, and rest. The city is industrially diverse, but a good percentage of the population is still involved in sea-related industries. FangTech has a large plant there and fishing is still a major industry; Kamchatka even developed a market for the large crabs common to the peninsula. For recreation, skiing and dance are popular. The Russian tradition of the steam bath, combined with the plentiful hot springs, means that almost the entire population takes a steam more than once a week, and some particularly harried businessmen indulge every day. A surprising percentage of the business dealings in P-K are conducted with the participants mostly naked.

The dominant art forms are song and dance. The Muzzein bang movement is active, and the city is home to the so-called "Ban-Chan Singers," who mix Bang with ancient sea chanteys. (It's uncertain if they're being satirical.) Jump! and central rhythm also enjoy strong followings. In dance, the Koryak Tribal Dance Troupe is the pride of the city. Their tribal balletic opera, "Hunter/Love," has been acclaimed systemwide.

Religion in Petropavlovsk is varied, with the largest denominations being Russian Orthodox and Episcopalian. There are a surprising number of followers of Morning Westerly Exuberance (the alleged cetacean religion), and a small but vocal Qindo sect (worship of the Qin). See **Hidden Agendas** for more information on MWE and Qindo.

Demographics

Kamchatka has a regional population of almost three million, and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy's population is 942,000. Page four contains a breakdown of the ethnic percentages. Those figures are really just a measure of the gene pool, though. Few citizens are ethnically pure, nor would they want to be. Biracial relationships are actually encouraged, and breeding within one's own ethnicity is regarded as slightly silly and pointless. On the whole, P-K is a refreshingly progressive city.

Crime

The criminal elements in Petropavlovsk tend to be organized and non-violent. "Consensual" crimes such as prostitution and drugs are thoroughly run by the several local mobs, who are far more likely to settle disputes with cash rather than bullets. Street crime is minimal. The black market is unsubtle and large, and regarded as benign. Socially, attention to the letter of the law is seen as bureaucratic nit-picking, with personal systems of ethics being far more respected.

Armiya Osvobozhdeniya Sibiri (AOS)

When the CoDeZo was established, several quasi-terrorist groups sprang up to resist the Chinese presence in Siberia. Several have a presence in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, but the Army of Liberation for Siberia (AOS) is the most notable. Historically, guerrillas are venerated in Russia due to their contributions during the Second World War, and are locally regarded as slightly dangerous heroes. While the entire city would like to see the Chinese out of Russian lands, the locals are sometimes nervous about attracting Beijing's wrath. Most of the AOS's activities are morally justifiable (e.g., blowing up bridges), but some incidents border on actual terrorism, including targeting Chinese civilians and Russian "collaborators." The AOS attributes these darker acts to other groups, including Partizany Ermaka (Ermak's Guerillas) and Pamyat (Memory); the truth is uncertain.

A portion of *Symbiosis* involves a splinter faction of the AOS, Pamyat. This group is detailed further in "Dramatis Personae" on p. 58.

The Qin Embassy on Luna

The official embassy to the Qin is located on the Moon, south of Moretus Crater at 77° S, 0° E. The location was presumably chosen for its remarkable view of Earth and reasonable proximity to Olympus. Virtually every centimeter of the

structure was created with Qin biotech. Only a few human advancements like gravcrystal grids and human-specific components such as airlock fittings were designed using hardtech. The main dome was built over the course of a month in 2108 as raw Lunar materials were transformed into the soaring domes and towers that stand today.

The embassy is powered primarily by solar energy. During the two-week Lunar day, large black sails unfold from the roof to gather energy. The walls of the building itself dim noticeably during this time, the better to absorb light. Unknown to humans, there is also a deep selenothermal tap penetrating tens of kilometers into Luna, providing a secondary source of heat and energy. A fusion engine is set up in the reception center to serve as an emergency backup.

Most of the raw material necessary for the embassy's day-to-day functioning is derived from extensive mining operations beneath the structure. Biotech harvesters dig up the Moon's raw materials to be processed into food, water, air, and components for the factory beasts. The Qin import materials that are scarce in Luna's crust, but are otherwise remarkably self-sufficient.

The walls of the embassy are extremely thick, and ablative to laser weapons. The embassy has concealed anti-ship weapons, and an (inactive) anti-personnel minefield.

The Reception Center

The front dome, referred to as the reception center, is all most humans ever see. It consists of a large circular hall surrounded by smaller rooms serving a variety of functions. The hall's roof is transparent, and the view of the Lunar sky is striking. The floor is colored in a swirl of grays and oranges that blend neatly into the walls and pillars surrounding the hall. The colors darken toward the top of the walls, where they seem to blend into the black sky overhead. The effect is a tad dizzying, but beautiful. On average, the Qin hold one reception (or similar public event) in the reception center each month. The type of event varies widely and includes everything from Qin cultural celebrations to elaborate African dances to Polynesian feasts.

Most of the surrounding rooms serve relatively mundane functions. The top diplomatic staff has offices that closely resemble typical human offices for high-ranking politicians. The décor is usually soft pastels, but there are often Qin wood desks, human-manufactured computers, and framed artwork and *faux* vistas of Earth landscapes. The offices are

clearly designed to put people at ease after the relative strangeness of the main hall.

The reception center also contains temporary quarters for up to 16 humans (at two to a room). These closely resemble moderately luxurious hotel rooms, but the complete absence of brand names (other than on obviously hardtech devices) indicates that the construction is entirely Qin. Each room has a private bath, top-of-the-line holo-vision, view of the Lunar landscape, and is self-cleaning. A beverage spilled on the floor, for example, is absorbed within half an hour. Food is available from the kitchen, which is staffed by a competent and enthusiastic Qin chef and her assistants. (She does not affect a French accent.) The food provided is completely artificial, but tasty and nutritious. The chef happily attempts any dish requested.

Between the reception center and the rest of the embassy is a substantial buffer zone. This area is given over to security systems, white-noise generators, anti-CBG (Chemical-Biological-Genetic) gear, and simple armor. The Qin take their privacy seriously. Oddly, the psi-jamming devices noted on p. 16 do not cover all of the embassy's private portion. This is not an oversight; the Qin decided to let

humans have an occasional look, in the effort to promote harmony. (The jammed zones themselves are impenetrable to any psionic scans, though.)

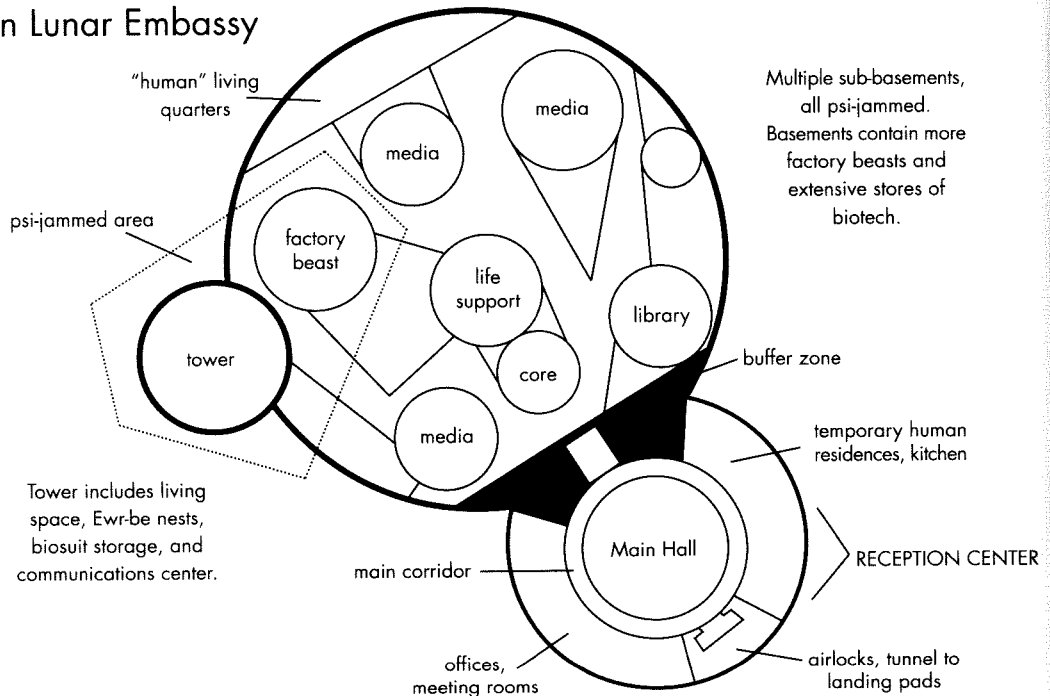
The Qin know when someone is spying on them, though they usually choose to do nothing about it. There are small noetic scanners placed throughout the embassy that register manipulation of subquantum energy (the equivalent of a Psi 6 Attunement roll).

Getting through the buffer zone physically requires a challenging **Intrusion** roll at +4 difficulty. Once inside, an intruder needs to make frequent **Stealth** rolls (at +2 difficulty at least) to avoid being discovered by Qin security devices and patrols.

The Interior Embassy

The section not blocked by psi-jammers is called the interior embassy. Only Qin are allowed in this area, though the aliens routinely wear their biosuits there anyway. It's seen as good practice. To further learn human customs and behaviors, a portion of the embassy is a mock-up of human offices, homes, and a small schoolroom. When in this area, Qin are expected to always act like humans. This attention to detail is simply an effort to better understand humanity, but some Qin (particu-

Qin Lunar Embassy



larly the House of Walls) have also placed agents on Earth in "humaniform" (i.e., convincingly human-looking) biosuits.

The dominant feature of the private area is the trio of circular media rooms. In each, at least a dozen different holofeeds are active at a time. Between three and 50 Qin are in each room, watching several channels at once. To a human, the rooms are cacophonous and disturbing. To a Qin, this immersive technique allows the aliens to gain a gestalt picture of humans very quickly, and also keeps them on top of developments throughout settled space. The library is far quieter. It contains many megablocs of data stored on disk, as well as a remarkable paper collection of human fiction and newspapers.

Also in the private area is the Qin biocomputer core (maintained separately from the hardtech computer systems), and life support. Both are extremely advanced alien biotech, and few humans are qualified to understand their workings.

The Jammed Zones

The areas blocked by psi-jamming include the largest of the embassy towers and a portion of the main dome, as well as the basement and sub-basements. The jamming is passive in nature, creating ripples of subquantum energy that disrupt clairsentient attempts to pierce the zone. Theoretically, the jamming would not stop Aberrant powers, but there have been no known attempts as of yet.

The tower has several dozen levels, with the lower two-thirds being living space. Qin live in communal "nests" comparable to large water beds. When unused, biosuits are stored in niches throughout this area. At any given time, several score Qin are asleep in the tower and another dozen are active. There are food dispensers on every level, connecting to a factory beast in the basement that produces only foodstuffs.

The upper third of the tower is mostly communications gear, but this is also where the ewr-be nests are located. Each nest is a five-meter radius bowl flooded to a few centimeters with briny water. Compared to Qinshui, Qin on Luna get by with remarkably few of the squidlike ewr-be, and no more than half-a-dozen are asleep here at a time. The remainder, numbering about 20, operate equipment in the basements. See p. 57 for more information on the ewr-be.

The basements are separated from the upper embassy by a two-meter layer of compressed Lunar crust. The only access is from under the

tower, inside the jammed zones. Currently, Aeon is certain that the embassy has basement levels, but has been unable to confirm what they hold. These sublunar rooms are dimly lit tunnels and caverns with biotech-grown walls. The Qin keep some mundane equipment here, such as backup life support, factory beasts and raw-materials storage. There are also a dozen humaniform biosuits, including one that looks like Alex Cassel. None of the others are of specific individuals. These particular suits have never seen use, though they are undeniably sinister in import. There is also an armory containing a variety of biotech weapons (some human, some Qin). Most are designed to be used by the "arms" of the Qin biosuits, but a few can be wielded by the aliens themselves.

Ancillary Buildings

The embassy spaceport is located a kilometer away, and is connected by slideway-equipped tunnels to the reception center. The spaceport and the tunnels are of human construction. The design is unremarkable, but clean and efficient. Attached to the port is a small set of living modules for humans who are more-or-less permanently attached to the embassy. Most of them would rather be living in the reception center, but the Qin permit no permanent residents.

The Staff

Over 80% of the Qin currently stationed at the embassy are of the House of Roads, Lle-ji. Another 11% are from the House of Walls, and 5% are from the House of Speech. The remaining percentages are a mix of the remaining houses. Lle-ji originally tried to maintain absolute control over the embassy, but the Convocation of Houses on Qinshui agreed that there was a compelling need for representation by the militant Lle-llau and "neutral" Lle-brib.

The Lle-llau (House of Walls) stationed here are about evenly divided between those who genuinely pursue the best interests of all Qin, and those who want to bring down the House of Roads. This latter group is responsible for the attack at the opera. Its intentions and plans are detailed further on p. 29.

Qinshui

As planets go, Qinshui is a near-clone of Earth. It is nearly the same mass, fractionally warmer, and 89% of it is covered in liquid water. The atmosphere is nitrogen-oxygen, with slightly more methane and neon, but less argon than Earth.

The day is 21.13 hours, and the Earth embassy adopted a 21 hour clock with a built-in 7 minute 48 second pause at midnight to conveniently bleed off the extra time each night. To compensate for the shorter day, "noon" is 1030 hours and "working hours" are from 0800 to 1400, with most people sleeping from 1900 to 0600. The axial tilt is low, so the sun (Qinri) rises at 0530 and sets at 1550 year-round.

The seasonal variation in weather is minor, and few humans keep track of the local date. (Journals and records are marked with the current Earth date in the Nordamerican fashion that Æon encourages.) Daytime is misty and overcast, with a strong pearl-green tint to the clouds. Shortly after sunset the drop in temperature generally causes heavy rain showers, and by 1630 the sky becomes clear enough to see the impressive starscape. The Qinjunan System is part of a dense globular cluster, and the night sky is awe-inspiring.

Qinshui geography consists of many archipelagos; no land mass is larger than 1.5 million square kilometers. The second-largest island, Llae, contains the city of Meetpoint. Most of the landscape is rolling hills; the constant rainfall erodes sharp edges rapidly. Most of the islands are covered with what, on Earth, would be jungles and swamps. The extreme north and south have drier, forest-like regions and even a few grasslands. The polar ice caps are very small.

Meetpoint

The Qin city called Meetpoint is currently the only part of the Qinshui surface that humans have explored. Before first contact, it was devoted to research and space exploration, and was largely inhabited by the House of Roads. It was chosen as the site for the Earth embassy when the first human expedition arrived, because the few Qin who knew anything about humans were located there. The capital city of the Convocation of Houses is a few kilometers away, in the city of Lle!whon. A few humans have been permitted to visit Lle!whon briefly, but the actual Convocation building is simply too small for them to enter.

Over the 13 years since the establishment of the human embassy, Meetpoint has been gradually regrown into a "model" city, suitable for human tourists. This process has been delayed both by political pressures from the anti-human factions and by the isolation. Regardless, just over half of the city is now usable only by Qin in biosuits, and humans can roam freely in that area. Build-

ings are constantly being torn down and rebuilt in different shapes or places. This is partly a result of the improving Qin understanding of humans and what they expect from a city, but it also intended to keep the humans slightly disoriented.

The Human Embassy on Qinshui

The embassy is a city in its own right, housing 20,000 people (and growing) under a single dome. It is strongly reminiscent of the domed cities of Mars, despite the damp green world outside its doors.

History

Humans first set foot on Qinshui in late 2107, a few months after First Contact. In preparation for their arrival, Lle-ji set aside a few square kilometers on what was then the outskirts of the city Thouhji. The area was essentially bare; all extant construction was leveled, and the Qin set up a small shelter for the humans and their equipment. The small Æon-UN team of specialists quickly made themselves at home. The Qin-built shelter was replaced by prefab buildings more suited to humans, including luxuries such as toilets, doors that shut, and roofs that kept out the rain. Many puzzled Qin helped in setting up the original makeshift embassy. Their communal efforts, working side-by-side, are credited by many for the initial rapid successes in human-Qin relations.

The jury-rigged structures quickly became inadequate, and plans were drawn up for a larger and more permanent structure. For security reasons, the new buildings were to be built by humans using imported materials where possible. Still, it proved diplomatically untenable to exclude the Qin completely from the process. In the end, the Qin built the dome that encloses the embassy, and the humans did the rest.

Physical Plant

The dome is very large by biotech standards, a kilometer across and supported only at the edges. It is considered one of the most remarkable feats of bioengineering known to humanity. (The Qin have created structures more extraordinary, but haven't felt the need to advertise them.) It strongly resembles a geodesic tree with intricate hexagonal networks of branches supporting a near-transparent green membrane. Living under the dome has been described as "being inside a giant leaf." As a biotech construction, the dome is alive and self-repairing. It also acts to adjust the interior

environment to better suit humans, keeping the interior humidity relatively low, and the temperature even. Unfortunately, the constant greenness of the light has minor negative psychological consequences. To make up for this, lighting inside the buildings is Sol-yellow or orange, and much of the interior décor is red. The dome has one main entrance and three secondary entrances, all located on the northwest side.

The architecture of the embassy treads a line between the organic style of the surrounding city and more traditional human motifs. The graceful, curving walls and artistically scattered windows are not an unqualified success. (The lack of straight lines in the plans makes it difficult to find one's way around.) On the whole, however, the embassy is considered a pleasant place to live. Since the embassy, like the ambassadors, represents humanity for many Qin, no expense has been spared, and the result is overall a well-thought-out environment.

The land inside the dome is heavily landscaped with shrubs, flowers, tree groves, and lawns that look larger than they are. None of the flora is from Earth; the Qin have understandable concerns about eco-clash. Instead, the "grass" and "trees" are the result of Qin bioengineering. The results are very convincing and low-maintenance. (To a culture as advanced in biotech as the Qin, mimicking Terran grass is trivial.)

The central structure under the dome, usually called the Core, is the embassy proper. At 15 stories high, it is also the tallest building. It houses the offices of the ambassadors and their aides, the central computer core, and the main fusion plant. It also has sufficient living space, kitchens and life support that could serve as a self-contained shelter in case the rest of the dome is compromised.

The buildings immediately around the core tend to be public spaces. There is a 15,000-seat theatre, used for live or holo performances and occasional "town meetings." There is also a school for the staff's children, catering to ages four to 18. Advanced studies are handled on an individual basis. The embassy's shopping arcade and library are closest to the Core.

The largest facility aside from the Core itself belongs to Qinshui One, the embassy's holo news and entertainment channel. Newcomers can find it very hard to adjust to being cut off from the 57,000 holochannels that are suddenly 17,000 light-years away. Qinshui One (or "Q1") isn't quite a substitute, but its staff manages to fill the broad-

cast day with news, diplomatic dramas, prerecorded material from Earth, and "Growing Up Qin," a cartoon show based on popular theories about Qin home life.

Located further from the Core is the small science complex, which is mostly devoted to xenostudies. Despite rampant curiosity, the science department is rather small. It's generally rude to conduct experiments on one's hosts, and the fields of botany and zoology are hindered by the fuzzy line between "wild" animals and plants, and those that are someone's property. The sociological department is fairly large (though forced to work indirectly), and the astronomy section regularly churns out valuable new data on the globular cluster surrounding Qinshui. (All of the data garnered comes from three orbital telescopes.) Also in this second ring of structures are athletic facilities, several restaurants and clubs with varying themes, and the medical center. The latter is well staffed, but sees little use. The embassy population is remarkably healthy.

The outermost buildings are mostly residential, and vary from a dozen or so single-family dwellings (for high-ranking officials) to small apartment blocks. Style varies widely, to allow for individuality. On the side opposite the entrances to the dome are a few small manufacturing plants, for the creation of those minor goods that are not economical to ship from Earth. (The larger factories used during the isolation are being dismantled or mothballed.) The outer ring also has a small cultural museum (containing mostly human artifacts), two churches (generic Christian and Hindu), and more athletic facilities, including a soccer field and a swimming pool.

Though security is much less tight in the human embassy on Qinshui than in the Qin embassy on Luna, the Core is designed to be defensible. No direct lines of approach exist, and there is a great deal of concealed weaponry. The windows are all relatively small and reinforced. The landscaping around the dome's perimeter is engineered to favor defending snipers over attackers, with excellent hiding places if one is facing out, and none if one is coming in.

Infostructure

The embassy, like all the colonies, is cut off from the vast OpNet of Earth. The local Embassy Network (or EmNet) is many orders of magnitude smaller than the OpNet; it's about the size of an isolated private corporate network. Leviathans and

Upeo bring a steady stream of information to Qinshui physically, and the original construction included vast libraries both paper and digital. Even so, there are still whole areas of knowledge barely touched upon. Characters who have not done much traveling outside the Solar System may be surprised when the information they took for granted isn't there. Further, access within EmNet is not completely unrestricted. Aside from security procedures and defense plans (obviously classified), information on the darker aspects of humanity is not trivially accessible. This restriction is in place to prevent Qin from gaining easy access to information over which humanity would like to keep some control. Characters requesting info on (for example) the Spanish Inquisition, encounter brief delays while security verifies their identity.

Culture

The humans who make up the original embassy staff were selected to be the best possible representatives of humanity. In addition to being the best in their professions, they were carefully vetted by Æsculapians to be free of major illness or genetic disorder. The first wave was mostly single professionals, but later influxes had a significant number of families. Many who were children when they came to Qinshui are now adults, and few have returned to Earth since the end of the isolation. The oldest child born on Qinshui is 12.

There are two key forces shaping human culture under the dome. First, every human on Qinshui is, in small or in large, an ambassador, representing humanity. In theory, one should be on one's best behavior even when at home alone. It's never certain what will come to the Qin's attention. As both races grow closer, people have become more relaxed, but there are still strong social imperatives toward carefully watching what one says.

The second major force was, and is, the isolation. For six years, Qinshui was cut off from Earth completely, with no guarantee of recontact. (Select individuals were secretly in touch with Upeo teleporters, but that fact was never shared with the rest of the staff. See **Stellar Frontier** for more information). Economic and cultural self-sufficiency was very important. The Qin were still an unknown factor originally, and dependency on them, while inevitable, was avoided wherever possible.

On an individual level, your typical citizen under the dome seems methodical and, well, *diplomatic*. He (or she) pauses before speaking to be sure of the proper word choice, and always con-

siders the consequences of their actions. There's also a general reluctance to put one's self in a position of unnecessary dependency. Emotional attachments tend to be long in developing, but solid once formed.

Running Symbiosis

This episode assumes that the characters participated to some degree in the events of **Alien Encounter: Invasion**. This need not be the actual rescue mission outlined in that book; all the personnel coming home from the Chromatic planetary system are being hailed as heroes. Those soldiers who performed noteworthy (or at least highly publicized) acts during the raid are in great demand back on Earth. Their countries of origin coordinate celebrations in their honor; news and entertainment programs request interviews; metacorporations contact them for endorsements — everyone wants a piece of the returning champions.

The Æon Trinity is no different. While Æon is content to allow its operatives and associates the opportunity to indulge these other requests, the Trinity won't wait forever. The characters are a great public-relations tool — not only to present psions in a positive light but to help promote Æon's goal of Unity. After all, the UN/Æon coordinated invasion was the greatest example of international cooperation ever performed. The Trinity plans to run with that for all it's worth. The escort duty is therefore a PR move and a reward to the worthy characters.

Bypassing Previous Episodes

It's not difficult to involve the characters if they didn't take part in the assault on Chrome-Prime. The same goes if you didn't take them through the **Darkness Revealed** series. The series you're already running can be the impetus to provide the team with a reward. Unless the characters are deep-cover agents who would be exposed by a public outing with Qin dignitaries, virtually any recent mission can give you the appropriate justification for this "milk run."

New Characters

If you're dealing with newly created characters, you may want to encourage the players to include some form of diplomatic or public relations background in their characters' histories. Otherwise, you could run a couple introductory sessions to help establish the characters' credentials. Assume that Hector Ramirez learned of their expertise and figured they'd be perfect for the mission.

Characters as Independent Operatives

It's a bit tricky, but still possible, to involve characters not currently associated with the Æon Trinity. Every nation is interested in bolstering its knowledge of the Qin. If the characters have government ties, you could replace Æon's role in this episode with that sponsor; simply assume the respective government worked out an arrangement with the Qin. Perhaps the performance in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is just one stop of many on a cultural tour.

This angle may well involve a subplot dealing with the Russian government, since it's bound to have some say in having foreign representatives traipsing through its territory. There's nothing wrong with that; such added angles bring greater richness to the story as a whole.

You can follow a similar game plan if the characters represent a private concern. Perhaps they work for Fang Tech or Alchemy, and are courting the Qin in an attempt to garner a biotech deal. This makes later involvement in the trip to Qinshui more difficult, but that can also be dealt with through a little planning. Assume that Æon learns of the attack in Petropavlovsk and contacts the characters' metacorp. The Trinity agrees to help use its influence to keep the corporation (and the characters) in the loop, in return for whatever insights are discovered about the Qin. This can provide later plot hooks as Æon and the corporation develop a closer relationship.

Behind the Scenes

As of the beginning of *Symbiosis*, humanity as a whole is hopeful on the alien front. The Chromatics are no longer the threat they were; the Coalition is still far away, and the Qin have been allies for a decade and a half. Also, the general opinion toward psions has grown more positive in the aftermath of the Chrome-Prime invasion. On the whole, humanity is cautiously optimistic.

The Æon Trinity

Æon shares this attitude. The Chromatic invasion was a success, Aberrant activities have waned slightly, and many corrupt psions have been captured and are being dealt with satisfactorily (both in public and in private). This mission is, in its way, quite typical of Æon's public-relations efforts at the moment. A great number of Trinity members are using this opportunity to take vacations, visit the family, or go on "fact-finding" missions to equatorial beaches.

Once the story gets under way, however, Æon recognizes a gold-plated opportunity. New information on the Qin is a high priority, and the characters are encouraged, even ordered, to take advantage of the openings offered.

The Qin

The majority of Qin society belongs to Jiu! Luan-Ile, or the Convocation of Houses. These groups are divided by the roles they play in society, with influence corresponding to each house's perceived importance to the whole of Qin culture. Only a gathering of southern cultures known as the Outcast States remain separate from the Convocation. More information on Qin history is listed under "A Qin Socio-Political Primer," p. 44.

The race is intensely political, so propaganda and political espionage are second nature. The Qin approached humanity in a similarly paranoid fashion, though they're still developing a final opinion of mankind. Those Qin currently assigned to Earth generally enjoy themselves, and regard Earth as an exciting place full of friendly, if naïve, people. The secret political games back on Qinshui are taken seriously, but by their very nature, have little to do with interacting with humans on a day-to-day basis. Current Qin policy in general can be expressed as follows:

- Don't make any serious commitments. There is, as yet, no official treaty between humanity and any aspect of the Qin political structure, and no house is willing to change that as yet.
- Reveal as little as possible. The Qin accept that humans know that they are slug-like in appearance, and that there are multiple, vying houses on Qinshui. Still, the aliens don't usually give outright confirmations to questions that humans ask. Entirely apart from security issues, Qin as a race enjoy speaking elliptically.
- Keep the artificial constructs, the ewr-be, a secret. The Qin are not idiots. They are familiar with the human concept of "slavery," and have read much human fiction on androids, robots, clones, and similar "constructed people." They know that a lot of humans would regard the ewr-be as enslaved people. The Qin have not yet determined how to broach the subject, knowing that they can't keep the secret forever if human-Qin relations are to continue. In the Qins' opinion, though, the ewr-be are definitely just advanced machines, not people.

Lle-ji (House of Roads)

Previously labeled by humans as "Tung Jen," this house has, since antiquity, been involved in both physical and scientific exploration. In pre-Convocation days, it developed on an island chain far removed from other Qin cultures. This isolation gave the early Lle-ji culture impetus to become strong explorers, and to create swift ships to cross the vast Qinshui oceans. In its modern form, Lle-ji is also responsible for science and travel, and shares with Lle-brib the responsibility for physical communications infrastructure.

The House of Roads was roughly the fourth most powerful house at the time of first contact with humanity. Since then it has surged upward rapidly. From 2108 to 2114 Lle-ji was easily the most influential house in the Convocation. Most of its best and brightest were assigned to the embassy on Luna, and the influx of new ideas and technologies created a virtual Renaissance for both the house and for Qinshui as a whole.

The isolation that occurred when the teleporters vanished changed that, however. As far as those on Qinshui knew, Lle-ji's most important members were gone, possibly forever. Beyond that, the lack of a clear reason for the isolation tumbled humanity from its status as exciting new allies to that of ominous enigmas. The mystery and concern this generated invalidated much of the House of Road's pro-human stance. The Aberrant attacks that occurred during the isolation only made the situation worse.

By 2120, Lle-ji was without allies, and rapidly sinking. The rival Lle-llau was well on its way to cementing its position as first among the houses. Then the Leviathan appeared in the Qinjunan System, re-establishing contact between Earth and Qinshui. Although the Lle-ji's fortunes are climbing again, it has not reached its former levels. In particular, opposing houses Lle-sosh and Lle-tha (see below) say that the House of Roads should no longer be allowed to monopolize relations with humanity. Lle-ji has had to make several concessions to the opposition as a result of its weakened status.

The decision makers of Lle-ji know that their current position is precarious, and have begun several projects to improve their situation. First, the returning Lle-ji brought back immense quantities of hardtech and much of the concepts behind its construction. Additionally, since these Qin were involved in the jump-ships' design, the house's brightest minds are working feverishly to create

Tessers that operate off of the Qins' weak noetic signatures. If Lle-ji can develop interstellar travel that does not require humans, the house's dominance in the Convocation is assured.

Neither of these projects has much to do with *Symbiosis*. Instead, Lle-ji's efforts to stop rival Lle-llau's maneuvers impact most strongly on this episode's events.

Lle-llau (House of Walls)

Humans first gave this house the Chinese appellation "Kuei," before moving to the Qins' own language. Lle-llau was originally a powerful, militant clan, one of the largest of its time. Today the house serves as the military for the entire Convocation, and is House Lle-ji's greatest rival. Historically, Lle-llau was involved in several successful conquests, and subsumed the defeated forces into itself at each step. Lle-llau troops became valued mercenaries, and even fought on both sides of several battles. When the Convocation was formalized, the house was given *de facto* control over all the extant militaries, barring only the southern Outcast States.

Immediately prior to first contact with humanity, Lle-llau was in decline. The Convocation's accord with the Outcast States eliminated the need for armed forces except for trivial police work. The discovery of alien races revitalized the house. The logic among the Lle-llau leaders is that the more enemies the Qin have, the more the house will be needed. Thus, they urge that not only are Aberrants a threat, but all of humanity pose potential danger. This claim is entirely politically motivated to promote Lle-llau's social dominance. Even so, some of the few Lle-llau in Earth's Solar System actively subvert human-Qin relations, and are responsible for the attack at the opera (see "Terrorists!" p. 34).

Some factions within the clan believe that Aberrants and other hostile forces are more than adequate threats, and that Qin society as a whole, and Lle-llau in particular, needs humanity as allies. This in-house disagreement has, thus far, been kept hidden from the public.

Lle-brib (House of Speech)

Formerly referred to by humans as "Hsiao Kuo," this house's members originally served as performers and bards, creating the oral/empathic sagas that are the history of the Qin. They were frequently wanderers. Those communities that welcomed them prospered from the information they brought, ranging from new medical techniques

to agricultural advice. Eventually, Lle-brib became an *ad hoc* diplomatic group, acting as go-between for communities in competition or conflict. Its policy of strict neutrality developed during this period, which only made the house more in demand as speakers of the truth.

Today, Lle-brib is one of the most respected houses. Since it refuses to make alliances, however, its practical influence is relatively slight. Its members' areas of responsibility include journalism, history, literature, and diplomacy. They are resolutely truthful in all regards, and do not take sides in debates. This does not stop the house from having opinions and agendas of its own, but the few it has put forth in recent decades are uniformly related to the promotion of truth and the propagation of knowledge. This occasionally places the House of Speech on the same side as the House of Roads in a debate, which has led to some mild questioning of Lle-brib's true neutrality. The logic behind its position, however, is usually clear enough.

Currently, the Lle-brib leaders have no set opinion on whether humanity should be allied with, ignored or considered enemies. They have determined that giving information to humans falls under their mandate of spreading truth, though. House of Speech members are gradually introducing new data to humans and seeing how mankind reacts. They won't be completely forthcoming, though, until they reach a final determination whether humans are safe and worthy allies.

Over the course of *Symbiosis*, Lle-brib members give measured doses of information to the characters, and watch them carefully. These Qin are extremely useful in guiding events, but you should be careful not to hand the characters all the answers on an olaminium platter. Lle-brib is arguably the house most interested in actually judging the value of humans, and careful roleplaying on the players' part should be encouraged to avoid souring Lle-brib on humanity as a whole.

Lle-av (House of Beasts)

This powerful house is the creator of most biotech, particularly mobile technology. Strictly speaking, every house creates biotech related to its area of responsibility, but devices that are universally useful (e.g., cargo vehicles) are the mandate of Lle-av.

One of Lle-av's most prominent roles is as military-materiel supplier to the Lle-llau. As a result, the two houses are tentative allies in the debates regarding humanity.

Lle-sosh (House of Grain)

This house is responsible for the production and distribution of food. It originated as a clan known for its production of fermented beverages, but has today expanded its mandate to include all questions of nutrition. Politically, Lle-sosh has always been a house of moderate power; the need for food is a relative constant. In the current debates, it is a firm ally of Lle-ji. The two houses have historic ties reaching back to sea-trading days.

Lle-tha (House of Servants)

Last and currently least of the major houses, the Lle-tha are mainly responsible for the breeding and control of the Qins' biotech robots, known as ewr-be. While the creations are utterly crucial to Qin civilization, the decision to keep them a secret from humanity has led to a perceived drop in their importance. In the Convocation, perception is nearly as important as reality. Further, the human notion of "slavery" has found some adherents among the Qin (though still a rather dramatic minority at the moment). The scattered demagogues who have begun denouncing the "enslavement" of the ewr-be are rare (only two have achieved any prominence), but the controversy is disturbing enough to lower Lle-tha's political stock another few points. Thanks to this recent plunge in influence, Lle-tha is currently allied with Lle-llau's anti-human faction.

Minor Houses

There are over a dozen minor houses, but only three have any notable political strength. Lle-naug (House of Towers) has the responsibility of creating buildings. This seemingly important role is not what it appears, as most Qin structures are semi-mobile biotech to one extent or another and, thus, Lle-av has assumed much of the power and duties. Lle-naug is pro-human, because of both antipathy toward the Lle-av, and from an interest in humanity's permanent architecture. Lle-aes (House of Thorns) is in charge of entertainment duties not covered by Lle-brib. It is anti-human since the recent influx of Earth entertainment — regulated by Lle-ji, or course — has put a serious crimp in its influence. Lle-waush (House of Others) is responsible for dealing with the Outcast States (unless outright conflict is called for). This house is pro-human, but strongly believes that it should be interacting with humanity instead of Lle-ji.

Ewr-be

The ewr-be are one of the most important creations of Qin biotech. Simply put, they're autonomous robots. Since they were designed based on the Qins' biotech science, ewr-be are unlike robots as humans understand them. The engineered creatures are born, mature, reproduce, age, and eventually die. They are proto-sentient, capable of following complex orders, exercising a degree of judgment, and occasionally displaying initiative.

Whether ewr-be are "people" or "property" is a difficult question to answer. They are definitely artificial creations with low intelligence. Whether that intelligence could be considered equivalent to a chimpanzee or to a human child is debatable (and helps highlight how tricky the whole issue of sentience can be).

It's easy to overestimate an ewr-be's intellect, too. The part of the ewr-be brain that handles language is relatively huge. With a solid week's study, one of them can acquire a fluency in English comparable to an SI computer agent. They are similar to SIs in other ways, including good deductive ability, relatively poor intuition, and legal status as property. The Qin have no doubts about this last. The aliens' civilization would require massive restructuring if the status of ewr-be changed.

As far as **Trinity** is concerned, the ewr-be are not sapient and the Qin are not slave owners. The ewr-be brain can be reached by Telepathy — but so can that of a dolphin, a chimpanzee or even a dog. Ewr-be lack the potential for the true self-awareness and self-direction that distinguishes people from robots or animals. This truth, however, is not something that can be determined easily (if at all) by the Qin or by humanity. When mankind learns of the ewr-bes' existence, the resulting philosophic and legal debates will go on interminably.

Pamyat

This group is a splinter of the greater Armiya Osvobozhdeniya Sibiri (AOS), the guerrillas harassing Chinese in the Co-Development Zone. Andru Hope, a sociopath of immense charisma, leads Pamyat. His frequent policy disputes with the AOS leadership led him to break away, taking a number of malcontents and easily swayed members with him. His agenda follows that of the original Pamyat group from the 20th century: "purifying" Russia of all non-Russians, including Chinese, Nihonjin, Americans, and aliens. He sees the Qin as the enemy, and will give his life if he can take

Names

It can be difficult to come up with authentic-sounding names, especially when dealing with foreign Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy or alien Qinshui. The lists below provide a selection of ready-to-wear names that you can use as the occasion warrants.

Qin names

Male

Vehlirb
Mai-seum
Bry-nurb
Saj! Lluy
Lei-feng
Brum! Mei
Srui! Tha

Female

Rej!ill
Wae-llai!
Rauj!lleu
Llaf-wi
Shas-aes!au
Thai-fein
Lajwraum

Petropavlovsk Names

Male

Mikhail Dimitrievich
Henry ibn-Ajurrum
Anatole Rodov

Female

Petra Arne
Katherine Tworivers
Gidea Mansur

one with him. The rest of Pamyat (numbering about 25) follow him devotedly.

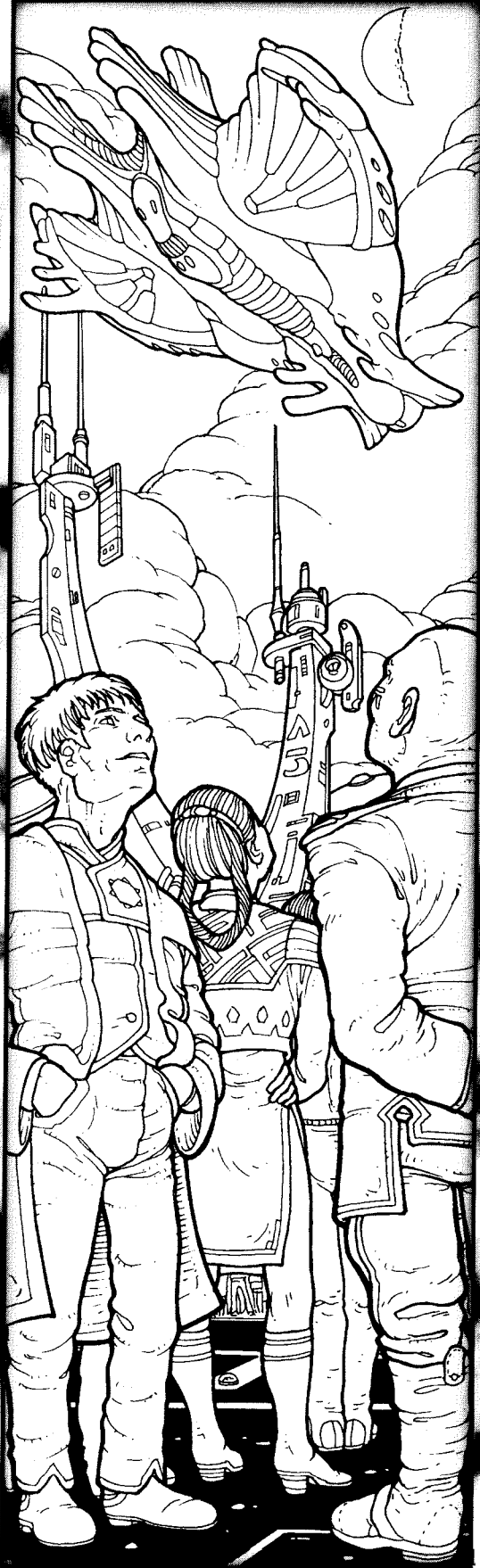
Hope and Pamyat may or may not enter directly into the plot; elements of the Qin House of Walls use Pamyat to advance their own agenda, so the characters' own investigations may lead them inadvertently to the group. Hope and his group are detailed further in "Dramatis Personae," p. 58.

The Aberrants

Earth's Solar System and Qijnunan are experiencing Aberrant attacks, but they do not bear directly on *Symbiosis*' plot. Even so, if an Aberrant hears about the friction in human-Qin relations, it will attempt to exploit it. You may want to toss an encounter into the mix just to spice things up. If the players are immersed in the Qin intrigues, though, you might reserve that for another time.

Meeting the Ambassadors

The transmission from Hector Ramirez (see p. 2) provides an outline of the characters' roles. He also sends confirmation of travel arrangements from each character's current location to Petropavlovsk, planning their arrivals on the evening of July 27. Rooms at the Chadin Hotel are



reserved for that night. Nothing of note is planned for that evening, so you may move ahead to the next day unless there's something specific you want to cover with the characters.

The team is to be at Bay A3 of the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy Spaceport by noon the next day, July 28. The characters must escort the Qin through a detailed but flexible schedule for the afternoon, including visits to two Petropavlovsk museums (Natural History and Tribal), and a driving tour of the distinctive city architecture. The ballet is scheduled for that evening. (There are passes at the door for each character and the Qin dignitaries.) The day after is devoted to visiting the bay and nearby volcanic ranges. The Qin plan to leave by the evening of the 29th, but the characters have an additional day in Petropavlovsk to relax.

For the initial meeting, the characters are advised to dress formally but comfortably. (It gets chilly at night, even in July, so coats are recommended.) No comment is made on weapons. A character who makes an **Etiquette** or **Savvy** roll (standard if the character has been to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, +2 difficulty, otherwise) knows that the City of Two Saints has a relaxed attitude toward personal weapons, but he must be discreet for the ballet. Only weapons with concealment ratings of Pocket or Jacket are allowed inside the theatre.

Two Reed Rosen limousines (see "Technology," p. 60) await the characters at their hotel in the morning, spiriting them to the spaceport in comfort. A police escort and a large media presence are already on hand by the time they get there. Though interested in any of the popular characters, the assemblage is more excited about the impending arrival of the Qin.

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy Spaceport is small but fully equipped, similar to travel terminals throughout the ages. The characters are shown to Bay A3, and must wait only a few minutes. The Qin shuttle arrives promptly at noon. The craft looks strange though quite beautiful, closely resembling a large spiny seashell or fish, with a fascinating corrugated texture. It appears to glow pink and blue as it sinks to the pad in a rush of wind.

The hatch unfolds, and five Qin emerge. Two wear the streamlined biosuits that indicate their status as diplomats (one "female," one "male"). The remaining three have the powerful-looking

Qin Gender

Like humans, the Qin have male and female genders. The males are somewhat larger and tend to have more brightly colored patterns, but that's only noticeable when the Qin are seen outside of their biosuits.

To help avoid confusion, the Qin modified their suits to follow a human paradigm. Both designs are still fairly androgynous in appearance. The "male" suits are styled more broadly, while the "female" suits hint at breasts. The bodyguard biosuits are all uniformly designed as "male."

None of this matters fundamentally, since the suit's appearance and its occupant's gender don't necessarily coincide. In general, though, Qin gender references are based on the individual biosuit's design.

bodyguard suits. The female diplomat introduces the other as Ambassador Soub-jur, the ranking dignitary to Earth, and identifies herself as his aide, Llou-aub. She then introduces the bodyguards: Vrol-hum!lla, Renjath, and Tha Tha'fa. See pp. 55-56 for more information on Soub-jur and Llou-aub; the bodyguard templates in *Trinity* (p. 305) serve the other three well enough.

The diplomats do most of the talking for their group, though all five are extremely polite and rather charming. If the characters have had any prior media attention, Soub-jur and Llou-aub are familiar with their exploits, and congratulate them on recent successes. As the party walks through the spaceport to the waiting limousines, the Qin maintain conversation on whatever topic arises. The police keep the crowd back, but there are many bright lights and shouted questions. The Qin respond politely to the waiting mass of media, though they never slacken their pace. The aliens have nothing against good press, but regard such a media circus as undignified.

Soub-jur gets into the front limo, along with Renjath and Vrol-hum!lla. Llou-aub and the other bodyguard take the rear limo. The characters may

distribute themselves as they see fit, but no more than four humans can fit into the remaining seats in each vehicle, and a standard *Etiquette* roll indicates that it would be rude for all the humans to ride in one car. As the characters enter the limos, they note that the bodyguards' biosuits appear to have actually compressed slightly to make more room inside the vehicles.

The Day Tour

From a roleplaying standpoint, most of the day's events are quite boring. Unless you want to explore any subplots during this time, you may gloss over much of it with simple declarations like: "You tour the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy Museum of Natural History. The Qin make splendid conversation, but answer personal questions with polite evasions. Two hours pass pleasantly."

One event of note occurs as they leave the Tribal Museum. A group of humans dressed as Qin — including translucent robes and face paint — are arrayed on the front steps. They are members of a Qindo sect, whose leaders learned that the Qin were in the city. The group begins a melodic chant as the Qin approach. The aliens barely hesitate as they proceed down the steps, but face the worshippers when they reach the curb. The chant finishes, and the crowd looks expectant. Soub-jur says in Russian, "By seeking the similarities between us and yourselves, you seek the path of our alliance. We are most pleased. Go, and return to your tasks." He then leads the rest of his retinue in turning civilly from the assemblage and entering the limousines.

The cars proceed to the next destination, a restaurant serving native Russian cuisine. Along the way, the characters may ask their charges their thoughts about Qindo. The bodyguards don't have much of an opinion on the subject, though Soub-jur replies, "The interaction between our species is a vast ocean of possibilities. The ones who call themselves Qindo have chosen one path out of many. It may be a good path." His faceplate then crinkles in the Qin version of a smile. "It certainly helps our egos."

Dinner is an odd experience. The bodyguards stand by the walls of the private dining room, with only the ambassador and his aide actually eating. The two Qin dine much like humans do, showing impeccable table manners. The mouth slits open slightly, taking in each bite, and there's a perceptible swallowing action. However, there is no actual chewing involved. A character with back-

ground in Qin xenology knows that the food is being relayed to the actual Qin occupant, who ingests it himself (or herself, in the case of Llo-aub). The Qin aren't the slightest bit offended by any questions about the process, although they decline requests to open their suits for those who wish to inspect the process in action. See "Technology," p. 60, for more details on biosuit functions.

The Opera

The opera is scheduled for 8 p.m. Serious about punctuality, the Qin ask to arrive at the theatre by 7:45. The entourage approaches through a maze of picturesque streets, finally stopping in front of a large structure at a corner: the Saints Theatre. Exiting the limos, the group is subjected to the same media blitz as at the spaceport, only this time there are a significant number of both opera attendees and civilians hoping to glimpse the aliens. The entire crowd totals over 500 people, but police are on hand to help keep everyone back. The officers take the opportunity to ask any character who is obviously armed to leave the weapon in the limousine. This is not negotiable, and the authorities are very firm. Any character unwilling to part with a weapon is denied entrance into the theatre and may spend the evening in the limo (or jail, if he gets violent). The Qin, presumably followed by the characters, proceed into the theatre.

Their names are checked efficiently against the guest list, and an usher escorts them to luxurious upper boxes. Everything is complementary, including drinks and food (though eating during the performance is rude). The Qin decline any further sustenance, though they encourage the characters to try whatever they like.

The mayor of Petropavlovsk, Mikhail Smitsk, steps on stage about 15 minutes later. An older, pleasant-looking man with a hoarse but surprisingly strong voice, he makes a short speech welcoming all the guests on the occasion of the city's anniversary. He then thanks the Qin and the visiting war heroes for their attendance as well. (A spotlight shines on the box, prompting waves and bows from Soub-jur and Llo-aub and any characters who feel like it.) The orchestra, having warmed up prior to Smitsk's speech, starts a gentle melody, the mayor exits the stage, and the curtain rises.

The performance lasts three hours with a single intermission, and is accurately summarized on p. 5. It is an opera, entirely sung, with frequent dancing. The show is a synthesis of tribal and modern styles, and is breathtaking to all but those who

lack even a hint of artistic appreciation. The Qin are obviously entranced throughout.

During the intermission and immediately after the performance ends, some of the other attendees politely attempt to meet the ambassador. You can use this opportunity to advance any subplots or to set up new ones as you wish. The group can meet local politicians who may want to hire the characters later, pro- and anti-AOS lobbyists, visiting Ministry snoops, or even potential romantic entanglements. The opera is a big enough event that major public figures may be there, like Kostbaar or possibly even a proxy.

After the show, the theatre's manager, Sveta Anotovna, requests that the Qin and the characters meet the performers. The ambassador declines apologetically, stating that Qin custom is not to meet actors, as it detracts from the verisimilitude of the performance. Anotovna hopes that the characters will accept at least, but she understands if they decide to remain with the Qin. (Considering that the characters were sent here to act as the aliens' chaperones, the proper thing to do is decline as well.) With a final farewell to the manager, the Qin head immediately out of the theatre.

Terrorists!

About 100 people mill about outside the theatre — opera attendees lingering after the show, a few media types doing follow-ups on the event, and civilians with nothing better to do but ogle the beautiful people. There are also three Qin (Vhu-ah and Sous!vol and the team leader, Youm_j) and six ewr-be lurking on the fringes. The Qin came to Earth a few months ago as clerical replacements in the Qin embassy, and the ewr-be were assigned to help in embassy maintenance. In truth, the entire group belongs to House Lle-llau, the Qin faction opposed to human-Qin relations. The three aliens and their robot assistants perform specialized missions for the House of Walls — such as the attack they're about to make on Soub-jur and his entourage.

All are inside humaniform biosuits; however, they've further disguised themselves under loose-fitting clothing and caps that pull down into full masks. Statistics are listed in "Dramatis Personae," p. 60.

Youm_j's team is split into two groups — Youm_j himself commands three ewr-be to the left of the entrance, while Vhu-ah and Sous!vol stand with the other three to the right. Youm_j's plan is to activate a biostatic generator (see p. 59), inflict some minor damage, then flee. During the skir-



mish, the “terrorists” will “accidentally” drop clues (backpacks, weapons) that point to the AOS as perpetrators. The Lle-llau agents’ primary goal is to stir xenophobia in both humans and Qin. They do not intend to kill anyone, but don’t particularly care if it should happen by accident.

Besides the Lle-llau team, the diplomatic retinue and the characters, the only combatants on the scene are four Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy police. **Trinity’s** Police Officer template (with the “normal” gear package), p. 306, suits the cops well enough.

The theatre entrance is set back about 10 meters from the curb. The Qin move at a leisurely pace toward the street, where the limousines await. When the entourage is halfway to the curb, Youmj’s team springs into action. It is possible that alert characters notice the attackers first. A successful **Awareness** roll at +2 difficulty registers one of two small groups clustered to either side of the entrance, lurking just beyond the glow of the theatre’s awning lights. You may also roll for a character who has **Danger Sense** up to sense impending violence. If it seems they’re spotted prematurely, Youmj orders his crew to attack immediately.

Their first action is to activate the biostatic generator. The device fires off a short disruptive burst, temporarily shorting out all bioware in the immediate area — except that which the attackers use, since they wisely position themselves outside the generator’s area of effect. All five Qin in the diplomatic entourage stop dead, and quiver slightly (assume the device works against all the Qin for the sake of drama, but roll for any bioware the characters have). Before they can begin to recover, the hostile Lle-llau agents start shooting.

Though armed and adequately skilled, the six ewr-be were ordered to simply cause confusion. They push bystanders around and fire over people’s heads or at the building. The ewr-be only shoot at someone if that person attacks one of the “terrorists” directly.

While the ewr-be provide cover fire and distractions, Youmj and Vhu-ah attack the bodyguards, aiming mostly for the legs. They believe the bodyguards are the biggest threat, and want to incapacitate them. Sous!vol throws gas grenades at the police officers to get them out of the picture.

The characters may attack the “terrorists,” try to help the immobilized Qin, get non-combatants to

safety, or even run for cover themselves. Play up the situation's sense of chaos and confusion as much as possible. People are screaming, smoke clouds billow about, laser beams and projectiles fill the air — it's a mess all around. Do whatever you can to play this up (thereby keeping the characters from engaging the attackers immediately); throw panicky theatre-goers in their faces, suggest that their first duty is to assist the Qin. Move events quickly, forcing the characters to respond in kind. Any hesitation results in a lost action.

The Qin dignitaries partly recover from the biostatic charge after a couple turns of combat. The diplomats drop to the ground at first opportunity. Vrol-hum!lla clumsily grabs one in each arm and stumbles toward the nearest limo, or helps any character already doing so. The other two bodyguards lurch after the hostiles; Renjath heads for Vhu-ah, and Tha Tha!fa goes for the nearest ewr-be.

Renjath doesn't make it; one leg of his suit is sheared off almost immediately, tumbling him to the ground. Tha Tha!fa does get his hands on one of the ewr-be. At the same time, Vrol-hum!lla makes sure the diplomats are safe inside the limo. Llou-aub's suit was shot in the leg, and leaks a clear biolubricant, but Soub-jur is unharmed. Vrol-hum!lla leans on the limo for support; his suit is a mess, having been hit a number of times.

Escape

At this point, it's not apparent that the attackers are actually Qin. The biostatic generator was a shock, but humans could also create such technology. The hostile Qin are a bit surprised, since they didn't expect such interference from the characters. Youmj calls for retreat (in Russian, to maintain the ruse), and the attackers fall back rapidly, using more smoke and gas grenades to cover their retreat.

If one of the "terrorists" is being held, he uses his suit's prodigious strength to break free. If he's still unable to get loose, the Qin (or ewr-be) triggers an incendiary charge built into the suit, immolating himself (and anyone in the immediate area). Unless there's a quick-thinking Cryokinesis specialist on hand to flash-freeze the "terrorist," the victim is rapidly reduced to a pile of carbon ash, making later identification difficult.

If at all possible, though, try to have all the "terrorists" successfully flee the scene (except for the one still engaged with Tha Tha!fa). Some of the characters may pursue them. The Petropavlovsk surface streets at this time of night

(after 11 p.m.) are dark and nearly empty. In the summer at Petropavlovsk's latitude, it stays light until very late. It should be just after dark during the chase, and the streetlights, while functional, are widely spaced. Most citizens use the subsurface transport at night. There are many dark shadows and alleys to duck into, and the lack of people can be very spooky to characters used to traditional crowded cities. The air is slightly chilly.

The attackers have their escape route well planned. They have many pre-planned obstacles set up, including fences that can only be climbed in one place (and collapse on the climber in others), and doors that require great strength to open or shut. They also don't hesitate to drop live grenades in their path. After a few minutes of surface travel, the "terrorists" open a service hatch and go underground. They have a Concurso T-10 truck waiting in a service tunnel with a direct route to the waterfront. This trip takes only five minutes at high speed through the little-used tunnel. At the shore, they abandon the Concurso and switch to a submersible BioSystems Belem (see **Hidden Agendas**) to escape under the waves. Youmj takes his team across the bay to where a battered old Bakuhatsu Trey awaits. Still posing as human terrorists, the Qin lift off (headed for Luna). The shift from foot travel to truck to submarine to hybrid transport should be enough to shake any pursuers.

Players can be surprisingly resourceful, though, and the use of psi powers such as Dowsing can make pursuit easier for them. If the characters manage to keep up with the escaping Qin as far as the waterfront, set aside an additional experience point or two for them. Then declare that, despite the characters' superior efforts, the "terrorists" frustratingly give them the slip. Even obtuse players should get the idea at that point.

A Nasty Surprise

As the other "terrorists" run off, Tha Tha!fa grapples with one of the ewr-be, preventing it from getting away. You may well have a character or two lend a hand, although they'll soon be in for a rough time of it. Unable to escape, the ewr-be triggers the charge in its suit. Thanks to a flaw in the suit design, the blast fires mostly upward and out, tearing off and igniting much of both biosuits' tops (see p. 60 for specifics on the biosuit's blast effect). The two combatants are thrown in opposite directions — Tha Tha!fa into the theatre wall and the ewr-be against the side of the rear limo. The Qin bodyguard is unconscious but otherwise

unhurt. Although his suit's head, shoulders and arms are mostly shredded, the abdominal cavity in which Tha Tha!fa sits is not ruptured.

The same cannot be said for the "terrorist's" suit. The force of the explosion tears the biosuit open, clearly exposing the seemingly human body as biotech. A successful **Engineering** roll (standard if the character has the Bioapps specialty, +1 difficulty otherwise) confirms that the exposed portions are consistent with Qin biosuit construction. A tentacle twitches painfully in the hole in the abdominal cavity. Only someone familiar with Qin physiology (standard **Science** roll with the Xenobiology specialty) registers that the tentacle looks much larger than the fine manipulative digits Qin are supposed to possess. Tearing away bits of the suit exposes what is obviously *not* one of the slug-like Qin. Instead, the characters see what looks like a small, bleeding and burned octopus.

No more than a glimpse is possible, however, as Vrol-hum!lla lunges forward, grabbing the humaniform biosuit and its occupant. At the same time, Renjath crawls for one of the limos with Tha Tha!fa's suit in tow. Soub-jur emerges from the vehicle long enough to help, while Llou-aub or-

ders the driver out of the car. She gets in and peels away in the limousine as soon as her fellow Qin (and the ewr-be) are inside.

It is important that the Qin leave quickly and without answering questions. Hopefully, some of the characters took off after the fleeing "terrorists," thereby reducing the effectiveness of those who remain at the theatre. Beyond splitting the team's numbers, there are plenty of ways to keep the characters from interfering. Using force on a diplomat or his entourage is extremely unwise, even under the unusual circumstances. There also may be injured bystanders (or the characters themselves), smoke-blinded armed police, panicky crowds and excessively pushy media, all of whom are tools of hindrance.

Still, some characters can be stubborn. Attempts to restrain the aliens are met with defensive force. A character who steps in the way is bypassed or pushed aside. If a character grabs a suit's arm and doesn't let go, the Qin inside simply detaches it and continues on. If a character pulls a weapon or declares he'll use force, Soub-jur states (with all the weight of his significant presence), "You do not have the authority to bring violence



against a representative of the Qin. Any protests may be directed to our embassy.”

He’s right, of course. Further, it’s obvious that the Qin bodyguards will unleash the full amount of their formidable armaments if the need arises.

Fallout and Investigations

Six skimmer-riding police and an ambulance arrive just as the Reed Rosen pulls away from the curb. Two of the cops continue after the limousine, while the other four corral everyone in the area, questioning witnesses or directing them to receive medical attention as appropriate. The police do not allow the characters to chase after the Qin, even in the face of some form of law enforcement credentials. The cops already have men after the car a who will call for backup if need be. The authorities’ priority is finding out what just happened, and the characters look like they can provide answers.

Several waves of Petropavlovsk police and rescue workers arrive shortly thereafter. The cops are all angry, nervous and armed. They disarm the characters (this time credentials are effective, allowing appropriately licensed characters to retain their weapons) and anyone else obviously armed, and keep all witnesses on hand to answer lengthy questions. Anyone who suffered a serious injury (Injured or worse) is taken to the hospital first; the police come by later to take their statements.

It’s possible, though tricky, to slip away during the chaos of first few minutes (**Stealth** at +1 difficulty). Once the second wave of police arrives, though, there are too many authorities on hand to dash off unnoticed. The police cordon off the scene, and do not permit evidence gathering. Obvious forensic use of psi powers is similarly stopped. This is an extremely tense situation; war heroes or no, characters trying to throw their weight around are only going to piss off the cops further.

Help soon arrives in the form of Æon associate Kiera Birand (see “Dramatis Personae,” p. 56). The official liaison to psion affairs in the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy police, Birand takes responsibility for the characters. Characters may want to help with the investigation or chase after the “terrorists” or the Qin. Frankly, those aren’t options at the moment.

If the characters cooperate, Birand promises that she’ll do what she can to get them involved in matters, but they must first provide a full account-

Diplomatic Action

The Qin go directly to the spaceport, ignoring requests to stop that come from the sizable contingent of authorities the aliens gather behind them. Unfortunately, the police have no jurisdiction over the Qin diplomats and can only watch helplessly as the aliens, with the “terrorist’s” biosuit and occupant, climb into the shuttle and take off.

Ambassador Soub-jur is worried and furious. The ewr-be died before reaching the spaceport, but he has direct evidence that someone tried to kill him — and that someone is almost certainly a group of Qin. Although multiple houses have a presence on Earth, Lle-ji is officially in charge of matters here. That means there is at least one traitor in his embassy.

The members of Lle-llau present the most likely suspects. Upon his return to the embassy, Soub-jur orders an immediate update on the location of every Qin in the Solar System, and orders them all back to the embassy at their first available opportunity. He instructs his communication staff to politely turn away all human inquiries until further notice.

By the time Youm-j’s team slips back to the Moon the next day, Soub-jur has learned of its involvement. The three Qin are immediately locked up in cells inside the jammed zones, while the five remaining ewr-be are memory-wiped, reprogrammed and returned to the work pool. Soub-jur then begins steps to make a play of his own against House Lle-llau.

Thanks to the media at the theatre, news of the attack went out nearly live. Every major power in near space attempts to contact the embassy within hours, if not minutes. The Qin refuse to respond to anyone for the time being.

ing of events. She takes over the theatre's front office and records each character's statement separately. You may gloss over this part, asking only if the characters are planning to withhold or provide false information. Birand then speaks to the senior officer in charge of the scene, Lieutenant Arlo Deitrich. At Birand's urging, Deitrich allows the characters to assist in the investigation.

Characters who persist in being argumentative or obnoxious end up getting chauffeured back to their hotel with clear directives not to involve themselves further in the matter.

The Crime Scene

While the characters are being debriefed, the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy police begin a serious investigation of the scene. Lodovico Johnson, the senior forensic analyst on hand, directs the use of an advanced Steinhardt PX-13 forensics computer ("Technology," p. 59), and police analysts go over every centimeter of the ground. Characters with investigative skills who treat the police with respect can lend a hand as well (standard **Investigation** or **Clairsentience** rolls as you feel the need).

The PX-13 projects an image of the first few seconds of the attack. Sketchy holograms representing the Qin diplomats walk across the sidewalk, stop, shudder, and fall to the ground. Others indicating the "terrorists" and characters themselves display their respective actions as well. The images then vanish and the hologram loops back to the beginning. If the team waits long enough, several different parts of the battle are recreated. This looks rather eerie to anyone except a clairsentient — figures reacting over and over, with technical readouts, projectile trajectories and other analytical data overlaying the ghostly images.

The media footage also provides adequate pictures of the hostile forces (they did not pull their masks down before the fight started), showing the faces of the "terrorists." The images are also of great assistance in reconstructing the battle through the Steinhardt. Only a brief glimpse of the "octopus" was recorded (just a tentacle-tip), so the characters are the only witnesses to that unusual detail.

An hour or so of research reveals the following: many biosuit fragments, including small pieces of Llou-aub's diplomatic suit, larger fragments of Renjath and Vrol-hum!lla's bodyguard suits, and scraps of the humaniform suit the ewr-be wore. If there was any doubt before, further checking proves that the latter are clearly Qin biotech made to look human. However, it's the red herrings left

by Youm; — the weapons and pack that the Qin stole from a Pamyat hideout a week ago — that provide promising clues.

The weapons have human fingerprints on them, which belong to known members of the AOS (the members in question are actually now part of Pamyat), and the backpack has a disk in it with AOS propaganda on it, along with a few grenades and some clothing. The clothing has DNA traces that don't match anything on file, but belong to a member of Pamyat. Clairsentient investigation reveals that all of this equipment was kept in a locker for some time, with the only recent use being the attack that just occurred.

Tracking Down Pamyat

When the "connection" to the AOS is discovered, the police insist on handling it themselves. The city's relationship with the regional quasi-terrorist organizations is a delicate one. The police, over the course of the next day, visit a few of their trustworthy AOS contacts and politely ask about the people whose fingerprints were on the weapons. They learn those people are now in Pamyat.

During this time, the characters should contact the Aeon Trinity and any other relevant connections they have. The overwhelming response is that the characters should do whatever they can to find out what really happened. Roleplay this as much as you like, but the upshot is that Aeon assures the characters that it will work things out with the local authorities.

Just a few hours later, Birand arrives at the hotel in which the characters are staying. She explains the discovery concerning Pamyat, and that the authorities (and the city in general) are not as friendly toward the splinter group as they are toward the AOS. The police plan on moving in force on the terrorists' hideout, a leased warehouse in the commercial district. Birand formally invites the characters along as observers (unless at least one of the characters has serious Status or Influence, in which case they can actually participate).

The link to the splinter group is kept out of the press, and the police arrange the apprehension for just before sunset. The warehouse is bulky, and painted a bright shade of red (not unusual for Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy). The police quietly surround the area one block out, and blockade the streets. They then call Pamyat on the commline, and ask that it surrenders for questioning. While Pamyat may be fanatics, they are not stupid. A resolute show of force by the po-

lice encourages the group's leader, Andru Hope, to order his people to surrender.

The Pamyat members are quickly taken to police headquarters for interrogation. Again, the characters are allowed along. The various members don't know much, but Hope is loud, confident and surprisingly forthcoming. His group has been skating along the line of acceptable behavior for some time, but he feels confident that it hasn't pushed things too far yet. Dissemination of racist propaganda is not illegal, and Pamyat's activities in the CoDeZo are tacitly okay when the "proper" AOS does it, so he isn't worried about his group's actions.

Hope has no knowledge of who was behind the previous night's attack. He says that there was a break-in at the warehouse a week ago, and some minor equipment was stolen. He rattles off a list that includes the material found at the scene of the battle. If shown pictures of the Lle-llau strike team, he recognizes Youmj's biosuit. Hope states that a stranger approached him in a local tavern, apparently after snooping around the edges of Pamyat's activities. This individual asked to join the group. Figuring he was being made a fool of (since Youmj's biosuit appeared African), Hope struck the stranger. Looking confused, the stranger simply got up and left. Hope admits that the man looked a little odd and acted extremely peculiar, including bizarre, twitchy body language.

Unknown to Hope, Youmj had hoped to prompt Pamyat into attacking the dignitaries, thereby reducing the chance of showing any Qin involvement. Youmj had no real understanding of what Pamyat's mission was, though, only that they were political extremists. Thus, the Qin genuinely didn't understand his *faux pas* in using a dark-skinned biosuit.

To the Moon

At least a full day has passed since the attack, and Aeon has been trying non-stop to get a call though to the Qin ambassador, Soub-jur. When he calls *them*, requesting a Leviathan trip to Qinshui ahead of the normal schedule, the Trinity puts its institutional foot down — no jump ship until the situation clarifies. Aeon made sure that it retained control of all Leviathan use back when the jump-ship project was established. It's not afraid to use political blackmail at this point to get some answers.

Far above the characters' heads, negotiations ensue. Eventually, Soub-jur agrees to admit an Aeon contingent to the embassy — none other



Psi Use in Polite Company

The characters may be tempted to use psi — most notably Clair-sentience or Telepathy — during their investigation (whether to peer into a secured area or to sense what a suspect is thinking). Remember that, though not as powerful as psions, the Qin are natural telepaths. The aliens' natural Attunement will pick up the characters' psi use. Even though they won't necessarily sense what effects the characters employ, the Qin will be offended by such surreptitious activity and the characters will find themselves summarily kicked out.

What's the big deal? Although not officially illegal, using psi in such an intrusive manner without asking permission is considered inappropriate; it is much like walking into someone's house unannounced or swiping someone's wallet and digging through it. Considering the characters are dealing with an alien race in a tense situation, such a transgression goes beyond a mistake of etiquette and could easily swell into a diplomatic incident.

But as long as no one knows, what's the harm, right? True enough, but all psi users can sense subquantum ripples when psi energy is channeled nearby (see Attunement in *Trinity*, p. 191). If the characters plan to apply their psi abilities, they had better ask first or make sure no one is around who can sense the attempt.

than the characters. This is not as contrived as it sounds. The characters are the most significant witnesses to the battle in Petropavlovsk, and are the only humans to ever see an ewr-be.

In return, Aeon agrees to provide a Leviathan once it receives an adequate report from the team. The Trinity negotiators know perfectly well that they are sending the characters into a politically volatile (not to mention potentially violent) situation. It's Aeon's hope that control of the jump ships provides a strong enough persuasion to ensure cooperation.

For the Qin's part, the ambassador isn't sure what to do about the intrusion. He contemplates a number of options, including simply killing them to keep a lid on everything. Soub-jur is not a monster, but he is Machiavellian in the extreme.

Once arrangements are confirmed, Hector Ramirez contacts the characters and informs them of the *fait accompli*. Their instructions are to get answers, be safe, and *not start a war*. A Banji Raven II is already on its way to the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy spaceport to ferry the team to the embassy. The craft was sent in a hurry, but has a fair range of equipment in its lockers. The characters can equip themselves as they see fit, except for weapons. Bringing guns and other imple-

ments of destruction into a foreign embassy is impossible under the circumstances.

Entering the Embassy

The trip to Luna is routine, as is the arrival at the Qin embassy's private spaceport. When they enter the main hall of the embassy, a Qin in an unfamiliar biosuit meets them. It's actually Ambassador Soub-jur in a new suit. He introduces himself as Shoj, one of many Qin aides to the ambassador. He pretends to not speak Earth languages well, and haltingly explains that he is to escort them to their rooms, where they are to stay until called. If pressured, the only other information he gives is that the ambassador will see them shortly. For his part, "Shoj" phrases his responses to draw out the characters (such as by asking what specific questions they have).

The characters can examine much of the public areas freely. The offices are locked, but can be broken into with an **Intrusion** test at +2 difficulty. There's nothing of import inside, however. Such wandering (certainly breaking and entering) is noticed soon enough, resulting in a "random" encounter with "Shoj" and a trio of Qin guards. The "aide" is polite but obviously irritated that the characters have abused the Qins' hospitality. (This becomes obvious anger if the characters are found in mid-burgle.) The only other Qin in the public area is the chef. She is eager to cook for them, but reveals nothing about the current situation. She is willing to talk about Qin and Qinshui, providing effusive but vague generalities.

In the end, Soub-jur makes the team wait for over five hours. It's mid-afternoon Lunar time (just after midnight Petropavlovsk time) when he finally calls on them. This is calculated to ensure that the characters are at a low ebb in energy and enthusiasm. "Shoj" escorts them to the ambassador's office in the reception center, then sits behind the ambassador's desk. He explains who he is and apologizes for posing as an aide. He truthfully states that he wanted an opportunity to observe and interact with them before this interview. After asking the characters to make themselves comfortable, the ambassador ends up providing the following information:

- He hopes that the recent attack won't strain human-Qin relations. While he doesn't precisely apologize for the abrupt and unilateral way he handled the situation, he expresses regret if it caused stress. (True, Soub-jur is entirely sincere about promoting relations between the two races.)



- Qin criminals who infiltrated the embassy staff with the intention of damaging human-Qin relations were behind the attack (true, except that they were not criminals *per se*, but political rivals).

- He is uncertain of their motives. He believes that forces whose interests are threatened by a human-Qin alliance back the attackers. (True enough, although he's certain that the backer is House Lle-llau.)

- The "octopus" is just Qin biotech. He is as surprised as the characters by its resemblance to an Earth creature. (True.)

- The humaniform biosuits were also a shock to him. He knew of such advances, but had heard of no authorization for their production. (True, but sneaky. Soub-jur was shocked to see the suits since they were supposed to be kept secret. Also, while he knows they're being made, he never heard the actual order authorizing their manufacture.)

- He also claims that there are no humaniform suits in use at the embassy. He ordered the ones found with the criminals disassembled. (Again, a true statement but not accurate. There are more humaniform suits, but in storage. And the "terrorist" suits were taken apart, but could be rebuilt if need be.)

- He wishes to personally take the criminals back to Qinshui to face punishment for their crimes. (True enough. There will be no trial, though. The Lle-llau agents are fodder to shame Lle-ji's rival and gain greater political influence in the Convocation.)

- He is unwilling to let the team interrogate the prisoners. The "terrorists" are locked up in the interior embassy, and there are no cells in the reception center. Further, Qin diplomatic mandates don't allow the aliens to be seen by humans outside biosuits, but prisoners aren't allowed access to bioware of any type. This a matter of policy set above his level of authority. (All true.)

The Next Step

Just then, as if choreographed, a small shell-like object on the ambassador's desk chirps once. Soub-jur excuses himself and answers the intercom by simply placing one of the biosuit's hands over the device. It's impossible to hear the ensuing conversation through normal means, since the transmission is actually being relayed through the suit to Soub-jur himself. Some psi abilities could be used to eavesdrop, but doing so triggers the

ambassador's ire and ends with the characters on the next tram to Olympus. (See "Psi Use in Polite Company," above.) The call is entirely in Qin anyway, making understanding difficult even if a character could hear it.

After a moment, Soub-jur breaks the connection and stands. He apologizes, but he is late for an important meeting. Requests to know what the meeting is about or claims that the current meeting is more important make no impact on the ambassador. If need be, Soub-jur points out that who he meets with is none of the characters' business, and that he has talked with them out of courtesy in the first place. He opens the office door and motions to another aide in a biosuit similar to the one Soub-jur currently wears. The ambassador introduces the other Qin as Fousj, and asks the characters to please follow him to transport back to Olympus.

Courteous but firm, Soub-jur allows nothing to keep him from walking away to the interior embassy. He's even polite if the characters threaten violence (although a silent call brings a squad of Qin bodyguards equal in number to the characters).

This "give a little" maneuvering is standard in Qin politics, and Soub-jur believes he knows enough about human interactions that it should suffice for the characters as well. It's bound to frustrate the players, though. Their characters are certainly within their rights to feel like they're getting the runaround. Intelligent characters (standard **Bureaucracy** or **Subterfuge** rolls) realize that the best plan is to try to finesse the Qin in the same fashion.

The Aeon Trinity already applied influence to the Qin in getting the characters an audience with Soub-jur. It makes the most sense to return to Aeon with what they've learned so far and request that Soub-jur and the "terrorists" be kept on Luna long enough to answer more questions. Lacking that, the characters may be able to hitch a ride to Qinshui to continue the investigation there.

Returning to Olympus, the characters meet with an expectant Hector Ramirez. He listens intently and asks for their opinion on the ambassador's sincerity. There can be as much discussion as you care to roleplay, but in the end, Aeon agrees that this matter won't be swept under the rug. Ramirez promises he'll do what he can, but suggests the characters get some rest in the meantime. Considering they spent the day

dealing with True SFA extremists, flying to the Moon and sitting on their asses for far too long before finally getting stymied by a Qin diplomat, they're bound to be mentally fatigued if not physically worn out.

By the next morning, Ramirez has good news and bad news. The good news is that Neptune Division pressed the issue and finally got the Qin to agree to further talks. The bad news is that Soub-jur acquiesced only if he may first return to Qinshui. Since the ambassador may decide to never come back, Aeon figures the best plan is to send

Why Them?

Honestly, field operatives wouldn't normally be sent to negotiate with high-ranking alien officials. Still, it's no fun if the characters get pulled from the assignment just when it's getting interesting.

If the characters ask, they're being sent along because they're most familiar with the events involved. Aeon feels that having the characters continue with the mission is the best use of resources. Plus, the characters are likely to be frustrated at the moment and looking to find some kind of resolution. Going to Qinshui gives them the opportunity to finally get some answers out of the cryptic aliens.

someone along to the Qin homeworld. Ramirez states that it's a good bet Soub-jur hopes to apply a home court advantage in these matters, but urges the characters not to be intimidated. They'll have the backing of Aeon and the assistance of the human embassy on Qinshui to draw upon.

The jump-ship *Ananda* has already moved up its standard transport time to Qinshui, and should be ready within 12 hours. The characters have time to address any last minute details, get inoculated (just in case), and pack their bags for a trip out-system.

The Jump

The characters arrive on *Ananda* three hours before departure. They are shown to small compartments on the jump ship, and are barely settled in before they get a visitor. Llou-aub (the ambassador's aide) comes to see the team. Although not a chatterbox before, Llou-aub is noticeably subdued as she greets the characters. Llou-aub is a member of House Lle-brib, and is devoted to truth. Llou-aub feels strongly that current circumstances may well determine the Qins' destiny. Any choices her people make require as much information as possible. She has decided that her calling and her race are best served by giving some data about recent events to the humans in hopes of learning more about humanity and its intentions.

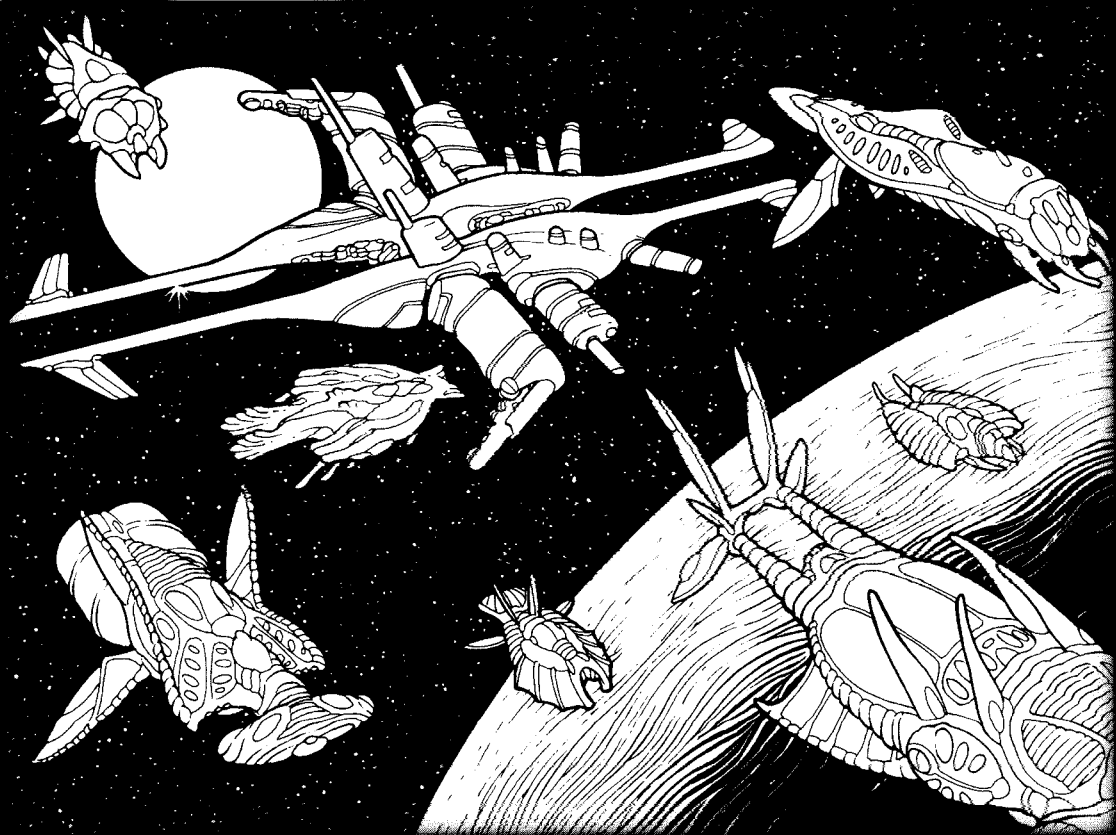
Llou-aub keeps her full motivations to herself. She explains that the Qin contingent arrived shortly before the characters did, and she would like to take the time *Ananda* needs to reach safe jump distance to perform her duties as a disseminator of information. She will provide them with some background on her people so that the characters are better able to interact with the Qin on the aliens' homeworld.

Soub-jur knows that Llou-aub went to speak with the humans. (The official embassy biosuits have tracking transponders that Soub-jur monitors within his own suit.) The ambassador never brings up this knowledge to his aide or to the characters, however. Llou-aub's act is simply another maneuver in the on-going machinations common to Qin politics.

A Qin Socio-Political Primer

This provides you with the opportunity to convey the important details below to the players in a roleplaying context (as well as give them something to do as the Leviathan heads away from Earth prior to its jump). The inner workings of Qin politics are the focus of the latter part of this episode, after all. This is only a pocket history, but should be sufficient to convey a sense of the race's interactions and sources of conflict among the houses.

The Jiu! Luan-lle, or Convocation of Houses, has been the dominant political power on Qinshui for centuries. For most of recorded history, the Qin were divided into socio-political groups, each controlling a geographic region varying from the size of a city to a small country. They found their identity through respective fields of expertise, which were originally linked to natural resources.



A group whose territory included plentiful woods became known for its builders. A group with prime grazing land was famous for its herd beasts.

Since a balanced society requires a mix of talents, each clan established outposts in other groups' territories. These outposts acted as embassies and trading posts. They provided an interface for the skills of the owning culture. As communication and travel speeds improved, there became less reason for each group to develop skills other than its area of expertise, as there was always easy access to those who already knew how to perform some other task. Eventually, groups began trading portions of their territory to those clans best suited to exploit them. For example, a group that only knew how to farm had no interest in its coal deposits, and happily sold those resources to the clan that could use them.

Eventually, each group's actual "geographic" territories became patchwork maps of varying interests. Simultaneously, a process of horizontal integration and monopolization caused the strong clans to assimilate the smaller ones in their field. Today the houses (as they became labeled) no longer even pretend to control specific geographic territory. They are firmly divided by function.

The first full Convocation of Houses occurred approximately 300 years ago, after a brief war among two societies that still believed physical boundaries to be relevant. Those clans were dissolved and assimilated by other groups, who met to develop a new comprehensive cultural base. Roughly 60% of the Qin population was represented in the first convocation, and increased to 75% by the modern day. Two large and half-a-dozen smaller nations in the southern hemisphere remain independent of the Jiu! Luan-Ile. These groups are known collectively as the Llanrei-saj (Outcast States). Each year, a delegation ventures southward to invite them into the convocation. Only infrequently does one of the smaller nations accept; the rest resist the idea of being subsumed into a foreign culture.

The Llanrei-saj are far behind the rest of the Qin in terms of technology, and do not have space capability. They have not been officially informed about humanity's existence, though most of the governments have found out through spies. There is occasional talk in the Jiu! Luan-Ile, and within individual houses, that the north should simply absorb the hold-out nations by force. There are useful resources in the south, but none of immediate necessity. Plus, cur-

rently there are more important matters to deal with concerning humanity and Aberrants.

The Convocation is constantly in session in the great city of Lle!whon. Three representatives from each house meet daily in the Convocation's Grand Hall. The houses typically rotate representatives every 25 days. Both major and minor houses are represented, but speaking privileges depend on the house's current standing. This standing fluctuates with the ebb and flow of Qin politics, although there's a stark division between the six largest houses and the numerous smaller ones. So although two major houses may shift in supremacy respective to one another, it is extremely rare for a minor house to gain influence close to that of a major one.

To the human eye, the houses' most obvious function is as the primary units of Qin government. This simplification overlooks an important distinction, though: The houses are also literal "castes," with a house's status determining its members' position in the Qin class-based society. As noted above, Qin houses are dynamic, unlike most human caste systems (e.g., the hereditary classes of Hindu society). The constantly changing status between houses is reflected on an individual level. Ranking members of different houses may lose or gain influence as the houses fluctuate in power. More bizarrely, though, individuals within the same house can experience a similar change! This can have extensive impact on a day-to-day level, including where and what one is allowed to eat, what biotech one has access to, and the Qin equivalent of where one sits on the bus.

The Qin believe that humanity works in fundamentally the same way, just on a finer and ill-defined scale. The Qin consider the various Earth nations to be humanity's "houses," with the United Nations serving as humanity's version of the Convocation. The differences between Qin and human culture are convoluted enough that neither race has yet puzzled out the many distinctions that exist.

The characters may redirect this conversation to cover recent events. Llou-aub is acutely aware of the tension between the pro-human Lle-ji and anti-human Lle-llau, but she does not know the details behind the attack in Petropavlovsk. At most, she'll confirm that Soub-jur is holding back some information (though she doesn't know what; it is simply an assumption since the ambassador is Qin, and Qin are never completely forthcoming if they can help it). Also, Llou-aub can say that the

"terrorists" aren't just solitary criminals, and are associated with a rival house to Lle-ji. She won't confirm that it's House Lle-llau, since the House of Roads has a number of rivals. That's the general extent of what she'll relate, other than confirming information the characters have already.

If they become too pushy, or if you feel uncomfortable with the direction the conversation is headed (or when you feel you've covered all the relevant details), announce that *Ananda* has reached safe distance. Llou-aub returns to the Qin shuttle (attached to one of the jump-ship's external docking clamps). The characters strap themselves in, and the Leviathan translates itself across light years.

Interstellar Travel

An interstellar Leviathan jump is never routine. The moment of transfer is a seemingly eternal moment of sensory and psionic overload. You should emphasize the mystery and grandeur of the experience.

The jump can also be a useful storytelling tool. For a character, the second of disassociation can be filled by a flashback to a key memory, a strange insight into a puzzle, a moment of perfect precognition, or a vision of events elsewhere in the galaxy. Don't be afraid to kick your players in the head with the Mysteries of the Noetic Totality.

Strangers on a Strange World

Ananda spends three days in subquantum transit (though it feels like only 20 minutes to the characters). The Leviathan reaches Qinshui orbit seven hours after it appears in the Qinjunan System. The characters are then shuttled down to the human embassy landing site, arriving just after dawn local time. The ambassador's group remains inside its shuttle during this time and does not allow visitors. The craft heads for a different destination, the capital city of Llelwhon.

The embassy's somewhat surprised staff wasn't expecting a jump ship for at least two weeks, but welcomes the characters without hesitation. The characters encounter D. Herbert Unger, chief aide to Ambassador Martina Flores. Once the characters explain the basics of their mission, Unger says that they should speak directly to the ambassador about the matter. Flores must first take care of some details that have just come through from Earth, so a meeting is arranged for early that afternoon. Unger directs the characters to their rooms in the meantime. They have a few hours to rest, eat and otherwise get acclimated to their new environment.

Unger gathers the characters at 2 p.m. and escorts them to Ambassador Flores' office. It's a rather large suite, done in an American Southwestern style of gentle earth tones punctuated with rich reds, blues and greens. Flores is in her late 50s, of medium height and thin build. She has dark hair, pale skin, and green eyes. She greets the team warmly and asks about recent goings-on elsewhere in the universe, showing special interest in the recent Chrome-Prime invasion. The conversation then segues into the characters' current mission.

Human Embassy Staff

The embassy is technically a small colony, numbering over 20,000 people at present. Aside from Flores and Unger, there are many humans with whom the characters can interact during this episode. A few other individuals the characters may encounter are listed here. Feel free to create names and personas for any other necessary Storyteller characters.

- Dr. David Zaslavsky, head xenologist
- Dr. Laura Hindlian, xenobiologist
- Dr. Dara Petrucci, xenosociologist
- Jack Grace, embassy security
- William von Hoffman, ambassadorial aide
- Kraig Strahinch, landing site maintenance and scheduling
- Yumiko Traverso, housing director
- Kim Wong, chief groundskeeper
- Terri Wessling, records clerk (and Proteus Division operative)

Flores listens with few interruptions, asking for clarification when necessary. She then sits back and thinks for a minute, appearing mildly puzzled.

Finally, Flores explains what she knows of events on Qin. She has no first-hand evidence that there is an actual "criminal element" on Qinshui. In recent years, her Lle-ji contacts have attributed notably unusual incidents to alleged criminal activity. However, the embassy has discovered that the majority of these instances could be traced directly to inter-house conflict — the equivalent of political espionage, if you will.



Flores strongly suspects that Qin criminals of some sort exist — it seems sociologically necessary, if nothing else — but they are very likely rare and radically different from human criminals. Thus, it seems apparent that the “terrorists” in Petropavlovsk weren’t merely associated with a rival house, but were likely sent orders explicitly from someone within the house. Considering current politics, the most likely culprit would be House Lle-av, House Lle-tha or House Lle-llau. Flores would guess the last one, even though in that she’s uncertain. She explains that she has never heard of a house being so bold or so violent. Either Flores doesn’t understand the way the houses interact as well as she’d hoped, or Lle-llau is more desperate than she suspected. Either way, there’s certainly more to be learned.

Flores doesn’t have any useful information on the topic of octopus-like bioware or on humaniform biosuits. She is quite eager to learn whatever the characters can tell her about either. The ambassador then directs the characters to research the entire incident further. They have the embassy’s full cooperation, and as much of her own time as she can make available. Flores then assigns Unger to be their liaison.

The ambassador relays the details of the attack in Petropavlovsk to her immediate staff, and tells the xenologists of the existence of humaniform biosuits. Dr. David Zaslavsky, the embassy’s head xenologist, directs his staff to work on some way to detect the biosuits. The job shouldn’t be terribly difficult; it’s a simple matter of scanning for the Qin genetic coding common to the aliens’ bioware. The only reason humaniform suits weren’t detected before is because no one thought to look for them. Zaslavsky thinks they should have a functioning scanner within the week.

Investigation

At this point, the characters have the freedom to pursue the investigation as they see fit. Following are some of the most likely avenues to pursue:

Asking Around the Embassy

Some of the humans at the embassy have been living in the heart of a Qin city for years. Unfortunately, that doesn’t make them experts on the aliens. If the characters spend time consulting with the human citizens of Qinsui, most of what they hear is simply a rehash of the material previously presented in this episode. Even so, there is a wealth

of unfounded speculation in which the locals indulge (be creative). The few nuggets among such dross include the following:

- The Qin take inter-house conflict a lot more seriously than Ambassador Flores thinks. From what the humans have learned, some Qin seem to have grown more violent in recent years. It's unclear if this is due to human influence or if they were always that way, and it's only now becoming apparent.

- The houses seem to be polarizing into pro- and anti-human factions. Lle-ji is pretty much the leading promoter of human-Qin relations, with Lle-llau its greatest detractor. No one is sure where Lle-brib falls.

- Diaz, Roberts, and Sandoz's deaths weren't accidents. (This is actually disinformation spread by Lle-ji. The House of Roads hopes to eventually pin the blame for those deaths on Lle-llau. Lle-ji figures that if their rivals are caught killing humans outright, the Convocation will turn against Lle-llau. Unfortunately, Lle-ji miscalculated. The humans on Qinshui have heard the rumor from too many sources to consider it simple hearsay, and aren't restricting their suspicion and anger to any one Qin house. In turn, the increasing negative sentiment is bolstering Lle-llau's case that the humans are dangerous.)

Contacting House Lle-ji

Soub-jur and his compatriots are considering their options. Normally, the Lle-llau prisoners would simply be swapped for Lle-ji prisoners. This is still a possibility, and the humans might even be informed once the decision is made. It would involve admitting that they weren't "criminals" in the human sense of the word, but there are half-a-dozen excuses for that sort of misunderstanding. (A mistake in translation is always a good option.) Alternately, the humans could be told that the criminals were tried and executed, or in a similar vein, a mock trial could be staged. Until the top Lle-ji make up their mind, the characters are told that the ambassador is unavailable, and that complex "pre-trial proceedings" are underway. The dead end should be apparent to even the most obtuse character, but there's currently no way around it. The characters are best served checking other avenues.

Contacting House Lle-brib

The House of Speech has received a report from Llou-aub. The Lle-brib officials are interested in answering more of the humans' questions, as well as in seeing how long it takes the humans to contact them. Contacting Lle-brib quickly counts

in the characters' favor, as the House of Speech considers curiosity a positive trait.

The characters don't meet with Llou-aub. (She doesn't rank high enough for matters of this import.) Instead, the characters are given an audience with Au-j-vro, one of the house's so-called "judges." He offers some history on the Lle-llau/Lle-ji conflict. He relates anything the characters didn't already know from the above information on Qin socio-political arrangements. Au-j-vro reiterates that, until recently, all human contact was with the Lle-ji. That house profited greatly from this relationship; the potential in human hardtech alone was enough to catapult Lle-ji above institutions that had existed for centuries. When Lle-ji became more powerful than Lle-llau, the House of Walls reacted. In the convocation meetings, the House of Walls played up the potential threat the humans represented, and tried to blur the distinction between Aberrant and psion. This was both an attack on the Lle-ji's source of power, and of direct benefit to Lle-llau's standing. A bigger threat meant increased status, after all. Although Au-j-vro is willing to clarify a few points, he does not reveal any other details. This is all that the house is willing to tell humans at this time.

Tension Mounts

At an appropriate place in the investigations (perhaps a day after the team arrived), the characters are approached by Jack Grace, an off-duty member of the embassy security detail. The news about the battle in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, and how it was apparently an inter-Qin battle, leaked to the whole embassy. Grace was friends with the dead Diaz and Sandoz, and was already well on his way to believing that they were murdered when he heard of the recent "terrorist" attack.

Without preamble, Jack Grace asks if the rumors are true, but barely seems to hear the answer. He's furious at the Qin for constantly getting the runaround and pulling who knows what kinds of subterfuge. Talking to Grace and looking around the embassy thereafter, it's obvious that he's not alone in his fear and anger. Things were already tense before, but the revelation that the Qin are apparently holding their petty battles on human soil without regard to innocent human bystanders is pushing things steadily over the edge.

Contact House Lle-llau

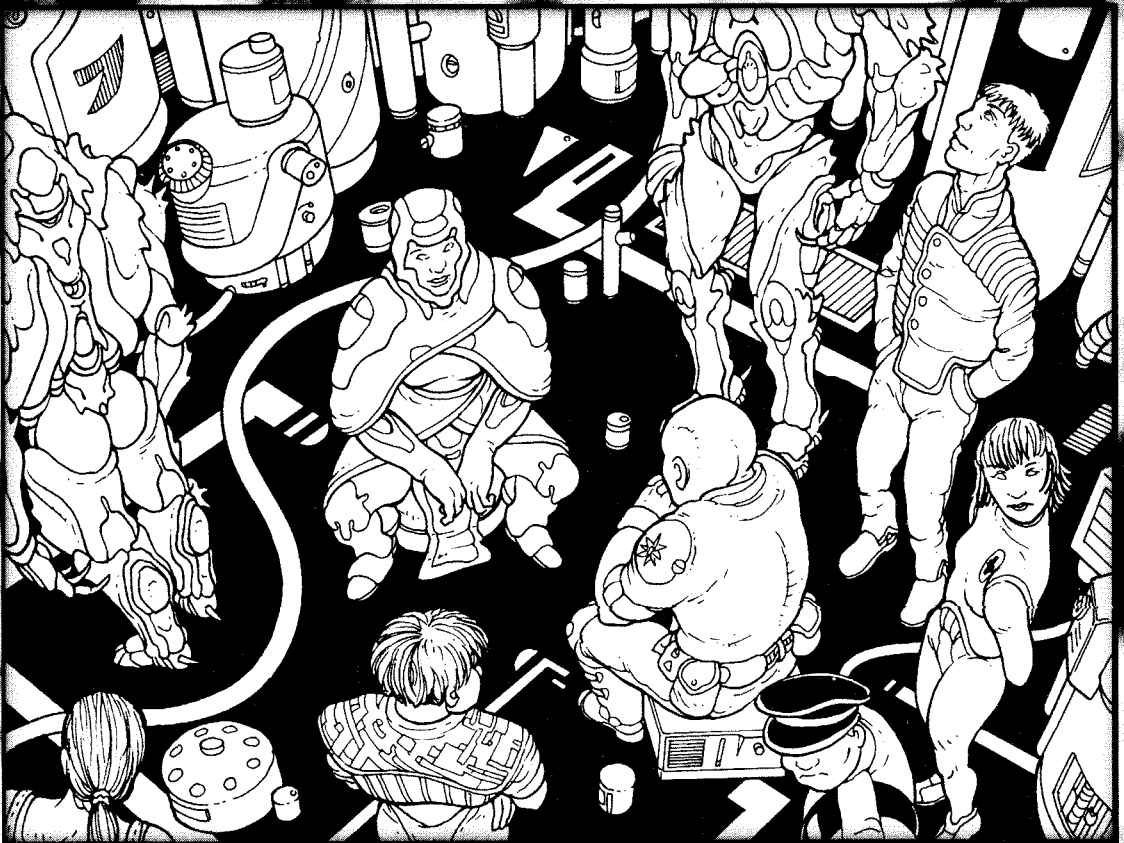
Convincing a Lle-llau representative to talk to the characters requires several successful rolls versus **Etiquette**, **Rapport** or **Subterfuge** (and hours, if not days, of messages being passed between intermediaries). It is possible, however; the House of Walls understands the philosophy of "know thy enemy." A Lle-llau representative, Oum!-rruy, finally agrees to meet the characters at an office just outside the embassy proper.

Oum!-rruy presents herself as a mid-level functionary, but is actually a high-ranking member of the house's psychological warfare division. She arrives with four menacing warriors (each controlled by an ewr-be, in fact.) Oum!-rruy does an excellent job of directing the conversations, answering few questions while asking many of her own. What information she does provide is never complete, but neither is it an outright lie. The whole meeting is nothing more than a tactical exercise. Oum!-rruy wants to see if the humans can out-maneuver her verbally. She finally admits to the conflict between Lle-llau and Lle-ji, denies any involvement in the deaths of Diaz, *et al*, and tries to avoid confirming

that Lle-llau was behind the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy attack. Even though she does a masterful job of the last, it's clear that Oum!-rruy is familiar with the details of the attack.

Oum!-rruy is only likely to give useful information if the subject of the ewr-be comes up. She appears surprised when the subject is broached, then (in English, or whatever human tongue everyone is using) orders one of her guards, Shurr-bru, to open up. The massive suit's front cracks open smoothly like expanding flower petals. The octopus-like ewr-be inside is exposed in short order. Oum!-rruy does not permit the characters to examine Shurr-bru too closely. (The suit and the ewr-be are valuable resources.) She explains that the ewr-be are biotech robots, used by all the houses for simple tasks. The resemblance to Earth octopuses is just an unsettling coincidence. Oum!-rruy then rhetorically inquires, in a nasty tone, why no Lle-ji Qin has ever told the humans about the ewr-be.

Having fulfilled her tactical goals, Oum!-rruy then brusquely declares the meeting at an end and departs with the ewr-be in tow.



Things Get Worse

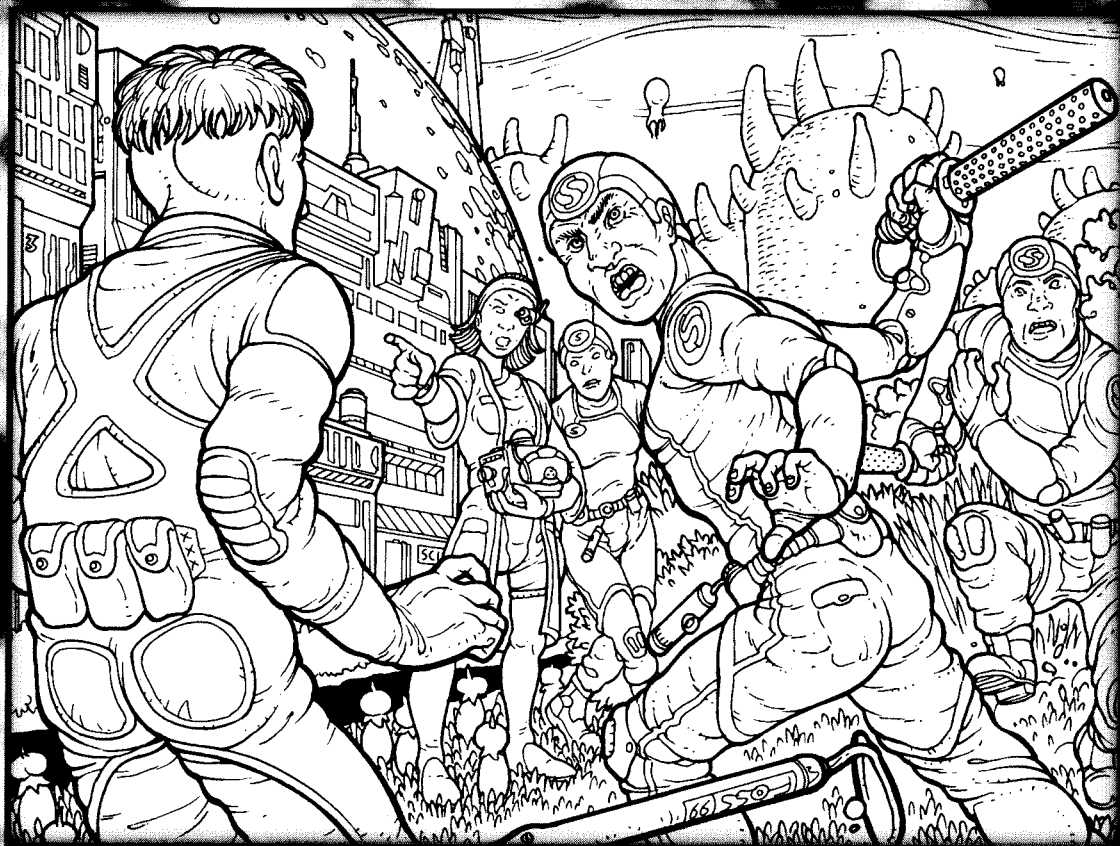
Unknown to the characters, Lle-llau has an agent inside the embassy in a humaniform suit. His name is Ov-llor, though he's known to his fellow workers as "Oliver." The Qin spy is posing as a new member of the groundskeeping staff, which is large enough that no one suspects him yet. He sends constant reports to his superiors on the mood in the embassy. The most recent surge in anti-Qin sentiment (thanks to news of the attack in Petropavlovsk) leads House Lle-llau to station additional troops in warrior biosuits in the quarantined areas of Meetpoint (see "Technology," p. 60). Though hidden from all but concerted clairsentient scans, these battle suits could be in the dome within minutes.

Meanwhile, House Lle-ji has made up its mind. As even a carefully scripted mock trial provides the possibility of humans learning more than they should, that option is discarded. The prisoner swap will go through instead. Lle-llau's attack on Earth will be exposed to the Convocation, embarrassing the House of Walls and causing it to lose status. Lle-ji will get back valuable personnel, and the

humans will be told an appropriately sanitized semblance of the truth.

Soub-jur and Vhu!-ab, the chief Qin diplomat attached to the human embassy, come to see Ambassador Flores (each with a pair of bodyguards). In turn, she politely insists that the characters be present. After everyone arrives at Flores' office, Vhu!-ab explains the situation, including the fact that the prisoners are Lle-llau. If Soub-jur is questioned about being less than forthcoming in the past, he simply apologizes for not having been clearer before. Any character making a standard **Rapport** roll knows the Qin regrets nothing. The ambassador is beginning to think of the characters as blustering, tactless pests he must mollify.

Outside, chaos is about to break loose. One of the xenologists, Dr. Laura Hindlian, takes the prototype biosuit scanner for a field test, and it goes off almost the moment she steps outside the lab. (As luck would have it, the Lle-llau agent, Ov-llor, is working in one of the nearby parks.) Hindlian calls security while she tracks down the source of the signal. She quickly approaches the startled Ov-llor, who handily recovers his composure and does not run. He is trying to bluff it out when Jack Grace and



two other security personnel arrive. Months of anger and tension find their focus on the Qin spy. Grace swings his baton at "Oliver's" head; the force of the blow cracks the suit's skull. (The security officer later claims the Qin was resisting coming in for questioning — true enough, but Ov-llor had only verbally declined once before Grace attacked.)

Ov-llor himself is unharmed and tries to flee immediately, calling for aid on his suit radio. Grace and the other two security men tackle the spy while Hindlian screams for help into her own transmitter. Lle-llau troops are already mobilizing toward the dome when a tense call from embassy security chirps on Ambassador Flores' intercom. There's the makings of a full-scale riot growing in the embassy compound, with multiple hostiles converging on the dome.

Riot

The actions of Grace and his cohorts spread panic like wildfire. The handful of people who witness the capture of a Qin spy throng forward in the beginnings of a mob. As word spreads, a few embassy staffers even confront the new arrivals from *Ananda*, fearing that they're also Qin spies in fake bodies. Heated words are exchanged throughout the embassy, and tension crackles in the air.

There are only a few other Qin actually under the dome at this time. Most are Lle-ji technicians and minor functionaries who surrender instantly to the embassy staff. There are also three Lle-brib xenoculture specialists conducting research in the embassy's library. Their leader, Lla-jni, is of fairly high standing in his house. He offers no resistance, and requests a meeting with Ambassador Flores to help negotiate.

The Lle-llau troops outside the embassy are led by Rum!-esh. He is a very good general, insightful and dispassionate. The Qin plans to give the humans one opportunity to release all the Qin inside the embassy. If Rum!-esh's order is not obeyed, he'll direct his warriors to seize the embassy.

Things are no less tense in the ambassador's office. Vhu!-ab and Soub-jur's biosuits conveniently conceal the shock they feel at the security announcement. At this point, they're not sure how much the humans know — was this meeting and the intercom call a ruse to draw out the Qin? It's the type of tactic the aliens would use themselves. It's just as possible that there really is growing conflict outside, a discouraging thought. Both diplomats are familiar enough with humans to know that the embassy won't hesitate to respond to force

in kind, which will only strengthen House Lle-llau's position. Not only that, the two dignitaries may be in physical danger. There's great potential of being caught in a crossfire between hostile humans and rival House of Walls troops. With so many subtleties to consider, Vhu!-ab and Soub-jur decide the best course of action is to keep quiet and see what move the humans make.

Flores is also taken back. As a trained diplomat, she is by no means naïve. It's quite possible that some Qin faction — or, perhaps, the entire race — set up this situation to gain the upper hand with humanity. But it also occurs to her that the characters might be manipulating events for some reason, and could have engineered the riot deliberately. Flores is far from trusting either of the two parties in her office at the moment, but knows it would be foolish to act merely out of suspicion. The situation outside must be brought under control first — and involving the Qin and the characters in trying to defuse the situation can go a long way to determining any complicity on the part of either group.

The characters are bound to have suspicions of their own, but they should all recognize that the important thing at the moment is to deal with the riot.

What To Do?

How events conclude depends on the characters' ingenuity. There are any number of things the characters could do, including assuming (inaccurately) that the Qin race in general is hostile toward humans. The best possible solution is for the characters to convince Rum!-esh to not storm the embassy, calm the embassy staff, and keep any Qin hostages alive.

The best place to start is with the Lle-brib. That house showed previously (in the meeting with Llou-aub on *Ananda*) that its members are interested only in promoting the truth. A character with insight into Qin politics (a **Bureaucracy** or **Rapport** roll at +1 difficulty, standard if the character has a Qin specialty) feels confident that other Qin are normally willing to listen to a Lle-brib member. If the characters can find one within the embassy, they might be able to enlist its help in talking with Rum!-esh and the Lle-llau warriors.

Calling around via intercom is the quickest way to discover who has Qin in custody and to direct them all to a central location. This also increases the likelihood that the aliens remain relatively safe, since they can be separated from the nervous

embassy staffers. As noted above, a high-ranking Lle-brib is one of the current hostages. Llajni is quite willing to help, due to an idealistic love of truth and from the practical possibility of his being stuck in a small war.

Before he commits himself, though, Llajni demands to know the full situation from both the human and Qin points of view. The more persuasive the characters are in presenting their side of things, the better. If Llajni gets even the faintest suspicion that they're holding anything back, he'll focus more on helping the Qin than the humans. (The Lle-brib may be a mediator, but he's still Qin; he's not *entirely* impartial.) Characters who are obviously open with him quickly gain Llajni's respect. He knows that the truth is sometimes difficult to face, and considers those admitting to fears or prejudice in this matter the more evolved for it.

If you're not sure the players will provide the proper nuances, have Vhu!-ab and Soub-jur go first. They know how useful Llajni can be here, and feel that the Lle-llau will end up losing more status than the Lle-ji will. The two Qins' surprisingly open description of their house's recent involvement should provide the characters with ample guidance — not to mention filling in any details the characters hadn't yet discovered themselves.

Learning the source of the recent panic, many on the embassy staff are embarrassed at their behavior. A few (including Grace) remain angry and afraid. With cooler heads around, however, they don't do anything rash. The humans wait expectantly to see the outcome of the Qin talks.

Once Llajni is in communication with the Lle-llau outside, the situation defuses rapidly. Convocation custom requires that hostilities stop if a Lle-brib negotiator is on the job. Llajni explains to Rum!-esh that a humaniform biosuit was discovered within embassy grounds, triggering a security response from the embassy staff. Rum!-esh understands such a reaction. He directs his troops to stand down, but still expects that the Qin inside the embassy be put in his custody.

Convinced now that they're in no immediate danger from the humans, the Lle-ji members refuse to be handed over to the Lle-llau. They've just seen that humanity is interested in progress, not violence (plus, leaving the embassy at the moment puts them in Lle-llau custody, giving the House of Walls more bargaining chips in the future).

The Lle-brib also stay to continue negotiations. Even though disaster is averted, it's clear that the

present human-Qin relationship suffers many problems, and the House of Speech members consider it their duty to guide such discussions.

The only Qin inside the embassy who still wants to leave is Ov-llor. Flores is just as interested in seeing the alien go, but she demands that the suit stay. The ambassador wants her people to study it to determine if it constitutes a continued threat to human safety. This directive makes things tense once again, giving the characters one more opportunity to apply their diplomatic talents. Ambassador Flores' demand is actually reasonable, no matter how much the Lle-llau protest. Once the characters get Llajni to agree, he directs Ov-llor to exit the suit. There's a pause, then "Oliver" takes off his work coveralls, revealing a hairline scar down his abdomen. This splits open, exposing the Qin.

The alien does indeed look much like a large slug, though with a series of short, strong tentacles radiating out from his tread. Ov-llor directs the suit to set him on the ground — the whole thing looks quite bizarre, as the otherwise human-looking machine with a caved-in head pulls an alien from its guts. Ov-llor's eyestalks dart around nervously, looking at Grace and the characters. The Qin then scoots surprisingly quickly toward the embassy's main exit, where Rum!-esh waits with a squad of warriors.

What, No Big Fight?

The stakes are too high for anyone to completely indulge in their fear. A physical conflict between humans and Qin now would cause serious damage to diplomatic relations. Frankly, no one in the embassy is that stupid. The Lle-llau are the only ones who want such a thing, and their whole plan hinges on getting humanity to attack first. It really becomes a standoff, with each side hoping the other flinches first.

This can be discouraging to players who are used to an explosion-filled climax rather than having a tense psychological finale. If you know your players just won't be satisfied without smacking somebody around, have Grace finally snap. Demanding satisfaction for the death of his friends Diaz and Sandoz, the guard fires his weapon at the departing Ov-llor. The Qin, bereft of any defenses, is sliced gruesomely in half by the laser beam.

Lle-llau warriors react immediately, prompting a response in the embassy personnel as well. Qin weapons fire, primarily upon Grace, and the humans defend themselves. The characters should realize that they must defuse the situa-



tion before it becomes full-scale war. If they don't get that hint, have both Lla'jni and Ambassador Flores cry out something to that effect. This allows for a skirmish, but hopefully with the characters trying to subdue both humans and Qin. If they just lay into the aliens with lethal force, they'll have to face the consequences of contributing to a major interstellar incident.

Conclusions

As things cool down, the Lle-llau retreat and Grace is taken into custody (or, more likely, to the morgue). Later, Soub-jur comes to see the characters. Though his biosuit appears as composed as ever, the Qin's voice is noticeably shaken. He is no longer certain that his house knows how best to nurture relations between the two races, and admits that he will resign as ambassador to Earth. He and Vhu'-ab will recommend to House Lle-ji and to the Convocation that the Lle-brib be given the primary role in dealing with humanity. Now is the time for truth. Though it will take time, this sentiment grows among the Qin.

The Convocation considers House Lle-llau's actions brazen, and reprimands the group for its overzealousness. Even so, much remains unknown about humanity, so some caution is necessary.

After further discussion, the Qin agree that their race is best served by creating a diplomatic force not restricted to any one house. Within two months, Qinsui's relations with humanity are handled by a triumvirate of Lle-ji, Lle-llau, and Lle-brib. The truth-speaking Lle-brib take the lead role.

Although these changes are significant, the Qin request that the details not be made public due to their controversial nature. Ambassador Flores agrees, but includes the full events in her report to the United Nations.

The characters may stay on Qinsui to contribute or to simply watch history in the making. Otherwise, they can return to Earth in a week or so and file a report with Æon. Flores sends back a significant portion of the embassy staff as well (notably those individuals who succumbed to panic and paranoia in the recent crisis), and requests fresh personnel.

Ramirez welcomes the characters enthusiastically, then hauls them in for a full medical review and an excruciatingly long debriefing (not that Æon doesn't trust the characters; it just wants to make

Character Development

A player may spend experience points on his character to signify permanent benefits from these events. Any Attributes, Abilities or Aptitude Modes that were used are obvious choices for development.

The Allies, Contacts, Influence and Status Backgrounds may also be purchased or increased to indicate the results of high-profile interaction with the Aeon Trinity and the Qin race. It's recommended that you raise each character's Status rating with Aeon by one dot (to a maximum of four), conveying the appreciation the Trinity has for the team's efforts.

Subsequent episodes may result in the characters being approached for endorsements or other lucrative endeavors, and Aeon may well provide them with a monetary bonus for a job well done. This can enable a player to increase his character's Resources Background as well.

sure it doesn't miss anything). The debriefing lasts 10 long hours each day for a week, covering much of the same information over and over again. The characters are kept in the Trinity's Chicago headquarters for the duration (comfortable, if isolated, quarters; see **Ascent into Light** for more details on the HQ). If the characters wish to conceal something, standard **Subterfuge** and **Endurance** rolls are required to avoid letting it slip. At the end of the debriefing, a copy of the report is forwarded to the United Nations and the characters are released.

Other Endings

You needn't conclude events here. There are a number of directions you can go with things from this point. Below are a few suggestions.

- **Interstellar conflict:** As noted above, the siege of the embassy could easily turn violent. This could result in anything from a series of skirmishes to full-scale war. Though not a direction future Trinity supplements plan to follow, this can create an exciting scenario where the characters become guerrilla fighters on Qinshui, leading a band of humans battling the enemy on its own turf.

- **Diplomatic endeavors:** The team could request a return to Qinshui to assist in further diplomatic efforts. They could become highly placed officials in the embassy, with the role of diplomatic trouble-shooters. This option enables the characters to continue exploring the Qins' fascinating alien culture.

- **Pursuing Pamyat:** Though Andru Hope and his followers proved to be blameless in the events of *Symbiosis*, they are still clearly dangerous. The Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy police may approach the characters (or vice versa) to ask for their help in de-clawing the group. The AOS proper is willing to help, but can the team trust vigilantes? Further, the mood of the whole city is turning against all the "freedom fighters," and the characters may find themselves in the middle of anti-AOS riots if they aren't careful.

- **The mystery of the ewr-be:** The characters may decide that there is more to the strange Qin robots than they were told. Perhaps they believe the ewr-be are actually an enslaved sentient race. In the official Trinity Universe, this is a doomed battle; the Qin will never "free" the ewr-be since the latter aren't sapient. In your series, however, this can become a battle to rescue a downtrodden people from servitude.

Dramatis Personae

The Qin with complete write-ups are listed with their natural Attribute ratings. See the Biosuit description, p. 60, to determine any changes to the aliens' Traits.



Senior Operative Hector Ramirez

Ramirez is a Hispanic man who would be stocky if he were a bit shorter. He has an energetic, friendly personality with a firm undercurrent of confident authority. He carries himself in a military manner when on duty, with precise movements. During his appearance in the **Deception** episodes, he wears a stylish but understated suit with an *Aeon Trinity* lapel pin.

See **Descent into Darkness**, p. 39, for complete statistics on Ramirez. (He's been through a bit since then, though, so feel free to boost some of his Traits.)

Ambassadorial Aide Llou-aub

Llou-aub came to Earth after the isolation. She is a respected member of Lle-brib, the House of Speech. The Convocation requested the Lle-ji accept a non-Lle-ji to act as an observer and guide, to ensure that the Qin were being fairly represented. An avowedly neutral Lle-brib was the logical choice. Llou-aub is quiet and observant. She is generally in agreement with Soub-jur's decisions, and shares his vision of the future. Her biosuit is pink-skinned. The Qin Diplomat Template in **Trin-**

Qin Physiology

Qin are meter-long slug-like creatures. They're durable enough for their race, but not as hardy as an average human. For the purposes of this episode, assume that an average Qin outside his biosuit has Strength 1 and Stamina 2. Also, consider the exposed Qin to be an "extra" as far as health levels are concerned (see **Trinity**, p. 251).

Qin are natural psi users; they're just not terribly good at it. The Prometheus Effect wouldn't be able to boost them further, since they're already near the peak of noetic evolution. Besides, the Prometheus chambers were designed for humans. A Qin dunked in one would pop like a cat in a microwave.

The aliens developed only one expression of noetic talent: Telepathy. Almost 97% of the current Qin population is telepathic. The majority (say 80%) have the equivalent of Empathy 1. About 10% of the remaining Qin can develop the first dot in each of the three Telepathy Modes, with another 5% able to manifest up to two dots in two of the three Modes. The remaining 2% can develop up to three dots in two Telepathy Modes and two dots in the third. *Perhaps one-quarter* of this top percentage can manifest a single auxiliary Mode in Biokinesis, Clairsentience or Vitakinesis.

No Qin can ever develop more than three dots in any Telepathy Mode, and Psi tops out at seven. (To determine Psi for a Qin character, take the average of Stamina, Wits and Charisma and divide by 2, rounding down.)

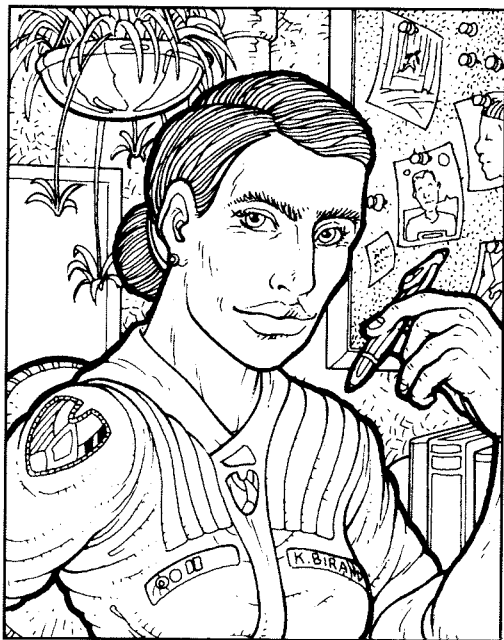
In Qin society, Sense Emotion is a part of everyday life. The aliens read each others' emotions in much the same way that humans interpret body language. Therefore, a proper Qin keeps his emotions in check (passion and sincerity are respected, though). Such social training makes Qin well suited to resist Telepathy effects; Telepathy used against Qin suffers an additional +1 difficulty to the roll.

In pre-Convocation days, a few clans tried to monopolize psi powers, but these groups were broken up and incorporated into the more powerful houses. Powers are seen as gifts to be shared, not as resources restricted to those best suited to exploit them. Now, the rare Qin with more advanced powers are regarded much as psions are in human society.

ity, p. 305, fits Llou-aub overall, though she is also fluent in Arabic, Chinese, English, Nihonjin, Portuguese and Russian.

Kiera Birand, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy Police Liaison

Ms. Birand is a police officer who (among other duties) has the job of dealing with representatives of Æon or the orders. She's normally rather vivacious with a keen sense of humor. The violent events after the opera leave her grim and businesslike, however. Birand is of mixed Turkish-Slavic descent, with dark skin, eyes, and hair. She is very tall, but with a slight slouch from too much desk duty.



Ambassador Soub-jur

Soub-jur, a member of House Lle-ji, is the ranking Qin ambassador to Earth. He has held the post since 2113, before the isolation. Before first contact Soub-jur was a senior member of the house, and a frequent delegate to the Convocation. He requested assignment to Earth soon after encountering the alien race, and first came to our Solar System in late 2108. At first a top aide to the previous ambassador, he took over the position after five years of diligent service. During the isolation, Soub-jur served as *de facto* governor of the several hundred Qin in the Solar System, and still regards himself as much a leader as an ambassador. He is the most powerful Qin in human space, and highly respected and influential back on Qinshui.



Image: Soub-jur's biosuit is one of the most advanced ever created. The suit itself was intentionally designed to look artificial, with teal skin, no hair and an almost stylized Asian cast to the features. In truth, it is capable of anything a human would be, and the ambassador knows how to use it to its fullest effect. He wears human clothes over the suit, preferring colorful, loosely draped styles. Soub-jur's voice is a rich tenor, and his linguistic skill is such that he betrays no recognizable accent no matter what language he speaks in.

Roleplaying Hints: You know who you are, and your place in the universe. Your self-confidence is immense. Humans are a resource to be exploited, although you do count some as your friends. You believe in grace, poise, and political expediency. You have a vision for the universe, and the Qin have the prime role in it.

Nature: Leader

Allegiance: The Qin

Physical Attributes

Strength 1

Dexterity 3

Stamina 3

Mental Attributes

Perception (Alert) 4

Investigation 2

Intelligence (Contemplative) 5

Abilities

Athletics 1, Drive 1,
Martial Arts 1, Pilot 2
Endurance 2

Abilities

Awareness 3,

Academics 2,
Bureaucracy 4,
Engineering 3,
Linguistics (English,

Wits (Insightful) 4	Chinese, French, Russian) 4, Medicine 1, Science 2 Arts (painting) 2, Meditation 2, Rapport 3	English), Medicine 1, Survival 2 Meditation 1, Rapport 1
Social Attributes	Abilities	Abilities
Appearance (Pleasant) 4	Intimidation 4, Style 4	Intimidation 3
Manipulation (Cunning) 5	Command 3, Interrogation 2, Subterfuge 4	Subterfuge 3
Charisma (Suave) 5	Etiquette 4, Perform 2, Savvy 1	Savvy 1
Aptitude: [Telepathy] Empathy 2, Mindshare 1, Psychbending 1		Aptitude: [Telepathy] Empathy 1
Willpower: 7		Willpower: 7
Psi: 3		Psi: 2
Backgrounds: Allies 5, Contacts 5, Cipher (on Earth) 2, Devices (biosuit) 5, Followers 5, Influence (Earth) 5, Influence (Qinshui) 3, Status (Lle-ji) 5		Backgrounds: Cipher (to humans) 3, Cipher (to Qin) 2, Contacts 1, Devices (biosuit) 4, Mentor 3
Gear: Biosuit (the Attributes listed above are Soubjur's natural Attributes; see below, as well as [1/3, 0] armor)		Equipment: Fighting knife, Voss 63K laser carbine or Banji Thunder, three smoke grenades, two gas grenades, two incendiary grenades, reinforced clothing, Wazukana DX70, binoculars, computer detector, Qin medkit, humaniform biosuit. See "Technology," p. 60, where appropriate.
The Qin "Terrorists"		Ewr-be
Youmj, Vhu-ah and Sous!vol are agents of the Lle-llau, and lead the team that attacks the Qin diplomats at the opera. These Qin are quite loyal to the House of Walls. They are enjoying their time in the Earth system, finding humans to be colorful, if dangerous. Their guises as clerks at the embassy are dull but survivable.		While technically biotech (and, thus, "equipment") it is simpler to treat ewr-be as characters. The traits below describe a typical ewr-be worker, without biosuit. The Manipulation attribute is zero; most ewr-be are incapable of even conceiving the idea that they might influence others. The "Mentor" background refers to their Qin masters; ewr-be are valuable property, and are protected by their owners. On Earth, ewr-be have Cipher 5; at the beginning of <i>Symbiosis</i> , no human knows they exist.
Image: In their humaniform biosuits, Youmj and Sous!vol are male and Vhu-ah is female. Youmj and Vhu-ah look African, Sous!vol appears Asian. They have not yet completely mastered their biosuits, and seem slightly awkward and emotionless. They speak English and Russian with no accent.		Image: Physically, ewr-be strongly resemble small Earth octopuses. A casual inspection quickly reveals differences, though. Ewr-be have nine limbs, and their internal arrangement is markedly different. General body structure, however, including tentacles, eyes, and beak, are all quite similar. Ewr-be are amphibious, comfortable in salt water, fresh water, or reasonably humid air. Ewr-be can survive well in temperatures from 10° to 50° C, but are severely affected by cold. In particular, sub-zero temperatures are quickly lethal. Ewr-be reproduce asexually; the pronoun "it" is typically used for convenience. In order to reproduce, they require a specific chemical trigger. The Qin control the knowledge of and access to this trigger.
Roleplaying Hints: Go in, get the job done, get out. Don't be captured, and if you are, don't talk. Cause trouble for the good of the House of Walls.		Nature: Follower
Nature: Conniver		Allegiance: The Qin
Allegiance: Lle-llau, the Qin (in that order)		Physical Attributes
Physical Attributes	Abilities	Abilities
Strength 3	Brawl 2, Might 2	Might 2
Dexterity (agile) 4	Athletics 3, Firearms 3, Melee 3, Stealth 3	Drive 2, Pilot 2
Stamina (hardy) 4	Endurance 3, Resistance 2	Endurance 4, Resistance 3
Mental Attributes	Abilities	
Perception 3	Awareness 3	
Intelligence 2	Engineering 2, Intrusion 2, Linguistics 2 (Russian,	

Mental Attributes

Perception 3
Intelligence 1

Wits 2

Social Attributes

Appearance 1
Manipulation 0
Charisma 1

Willpower: 2

Psi: 1

Background: Cipher (with humans) 5, Mentor 2

Ewr-be "Terrorists"

The ewr-be who participate in the opera battle are not exceptional, though they are the first of their kind to wear humaniform biosuits. At the time of the attack, those six are loyal to House Lle-llau. (Ewr-be are often used in inter-house conflicts, and have no innate problem with harming other Qin. Their precise loyalties are chemically controlled.) Assume that their Traits are as above, but with the addition of Firearms 2. Also be sure to modify the appropriate Traits when they are in biosuits as you would with a Qin. The ewr-be have the same equipment as Youmj, Vhu-ah and Sous!vol do.

**Andru Hope and Pamyat**

Hope's history is a mystery, even to himself. Bearded, mumbling, and clad in rags, he walked into the northern Kamchatka city of Ust'Penzhino in 2111. After a two-year stay in the local mental health facility, he emerged coherent, clean, and

Abilities

Awareness 2
Academics 1, Engineering 1,
Linguistics 3
Meditation 1

Abilities

Etiquette 3, Perform 1



angry. Hope sympathized strongly with the AOS's goal of returning the CoDeZo to the Russians, and joined the group within the month. He rose in the ranks of the AOS erratically, his opinions on "corrupting influences" in Russia became more pronounced over the next five years. Hope finally grew actively hostile toward people of non-Russian descent, even those within the AOS.

After being kicked out of the organization, Hope gathered several other ultra-Russian fanatics together and formed Pamyat. Their activities so far have been violently anti-Chinese in focus, with efforts against other races at present being restricted mainly to propaganda and leaflets.

Image: Hope is a big bear of a man, with wild dark hair, piercing eyes and broad shoulders. He has a fierce presence, and can be mesmerizing when orating. He typically dresses either in paramilitary camouflage or Russian working clothes such as heavy boots and bulky, multi-pocketed jackets.

Roleplaying Hints: You believe in Russia. You are Russia, and Russia is you. Russia must be pure. Russians made the nation great, and can do so again. Foreigners and aliens are hostile invaders, regardless of what they may claim.

Nature: Leader

Allegiance: Pamyat

Physical Attributes

Strength 2
Dexterity 3

Stamina 3

Abilities

Brawl 2
Drive 2, Firearms 3,
Melee 2, Stealth 2
Endurance 4, Resistance 3

Mental Attributes

Perception 2
Intelligence 4

Wits 3

Social Attributes

Appearance 2
Manipulation 4

Charisma 2

Willpower: 6

Psi: 1

Backgrounds: Cipher 1, Contacts 3, Followers 3, Influence 1, Resources 2

Equipment: Varies; he is always the best-equipped of his team at any given moment.

Pamyat

Hope's followers are uniformly Russian and fanatical. They tend to be former middle-class laborers; a number are ex-dock workers. They are devoted to Hope, and most would take a bullet for him.

Technology

Hardtech

• **Steinhardt PX-13 Forensics Computer:**

The state-of-the-art in crime scene investigation, the core unit is a computer and advanced holoprojector, measuring 100 cm tall by 25 cm in diameter. The package also includes three hand-held sensor remotes that incorporate magnifying IR/UV cameras, microphones, and special locators. The computer agent is custom-designed for the hardware, and appears as a gruff female police officer (head only).

In use, the core unit is set up at the center of a crime scene. It does a visual scan of the surroundings, and immediately begins reconstruction of the crime based on available forensic evidence. It also records all input from the sensor remotes, accurately adding the detailed views they provide to its reconstruction. It also accepts input from the police on the scene including witness descriptions, and requests specific information it deems important. ("Point a sensor at that bullet hole in the ceiling. No, to your left.") The IR scanners can often detect residual heat from footprints and handprints.

After collating the data, the PX-13 can use its holographic generator to recreate the entire crime by displaying images of the partici-

Abilities

Awareness 2
Engineering 1, Intrusion 3,
Medicine 1, Survival 4
Rapport 1

Abilities

Intimidation 3
Command 5, Interrogation 3, Subterfuge 3
Savvy 3

pants, including physical movements, weapon trajectories and the like. The images are rather basic and color-coded to distinguish each participant, as well as provide analytical displays where appropriate. While not capable of doing chemical analysis on its own, the PX-13 understands such data and can draw conclusions from it within its area of expertise. (Qin biotech definitely falls outside that area.) The PX-13 is rather advanced, but still falls within normal SI restrictions (no real intuition, unable to think "outside the box"). 5 Fail-safe.

Tech: Ω, Cost: ••••• (restricted)

Performance: 4

Applications: Analysis 4, Biology 2, Chemistry 3, Concealed Objects 5, Deduction 2, Energy Sources 1, Intent 2, Law 5, Mathematics 4, Physics 3, Procedure 3, Quick Search 2, Research 1

Biotech

• **Biostatic Generator:** This device is a crude biotech jammer. It is trivial for any moderately trained Qin with access to a factory beast and a little free time to construct one. (The beasts typically won't build such a device, but there are loopholes in the security mandates that allow the key elements to be made.) Far more sophisticated biostatic devices are employed by inter-house espionage agencies on Qinshui, but Lle-llau was unable to smuggle one to Earth. This particular device projects in a cone that reaches up to 50 meters.

The generator has a dice pool of 6 to determine jamming effectiveness against any biotech device. Roll the dice pool against each piece of bioware within the area of effect (standard against Qin biotech, +1 difficulty against human bioware, +2 difficulty against Qin military hardware such as warrior suits). Each success rolled equals a turn in which the bioapp is "frozen," unable to function. Ewr-be, though technically biotech, are advanced enough to counteract jamming attempts, and only feel a mild tingling.

Tech: Ψ, Mass: 1, Tolerance: n/a, Cost: Not available commercially

• **Biosuits:** The Qin have manufactured a variety of biosuits at this point, but the characters interact with only three models in this adventure: the diplomat, the bodyguard, and the new humaniform design. They are marvels

of biotech design, beyond the cutting edge for humans and close to the best Qin science can achieve. The models provided here are slight upgrades over the suits worn by the Qin template characters in **Trinity** (p. 305).

Each suit provides full life support for up to a week under Earth-normal conditions. If the Qin has access to a regular supply of food (or other organic materials) the suit can be worn indefinitely. Food is consumed through the suit's mouth, and converted into Qin food if need be. The suit is equipped with internal sensors that identify anything potentially harmful to Qin physiology. Any food registering as such is shunted to a receptacle for later analysis. While not designed as a vacuum suit, a biosuit can support a Qin in vacuum for up to a full hour.

Biosuits also function as armor. Assume that a Qin in his biosuit has the normal seven health levels. Further, the suit may augment some of his Traits, as noted in the chart below. (The Appearance Trait replaces the Qin's own score when interacting with humans.)

The warrior suit is available only to Llellau troops. It looks like an even bulkier version of the bodyguard biosuit, with four arms and a mere bulge where the head should be. Aside from the Trait modifiers below, it also has boosters that provide two additional dice to any jumping test. Integral weapons include the equivalent of an Orgotek Minipulse-L in the upper left arm and an Alchemy Bulldog F-40 Bioflechette in the upper right arm. The secondary arms are designed for close combat.

A humaniform suit looks human, but is designed internally much like a diplomat suit. The key difference is that a humaniform suit contains an incendiary charge. This is designed to destroy the suit, its occupant and anyone within two meters (inflicting 4d10 L damage for three consecutive turns). Thanks to the potency of the plasma-like effect, any victims caught in the area have their armor reduced by one third, rounding down (so 3/3 armor and 4/4 armor become 2/2). This reduction also

affects the calculation for *destroying* armor (**Trinity**, p. 267).

Suit Type	Str.	Sta.	App.	Armor
Diplomat	+1	+1	4	[1/3, 0]
Bodyguard	+3	+2	2	[2/4, 0]
Warrior	+4	+3	1	[4/4, 0]
Humaniform	+4	+2	2	[2/3, 0]

Tech: Ψ

Mass: 80 kg (diplomat, humaniform), 130 kg (bodyguard, warrior)

Tolerance: n/a

Cost: Unavailable to humans

Transportation

• **Reed Rosen Brougham LX (Luxury, Extended):** The limousine version of the Reed Rosen Brougham, the LX model is redesigned with a comfortable passenger compartment, including wet bar and holovision. It can seat two in the driver's compartment and eight as passengers. It is available only in the armored version.

VT: Hover

Tech: Ω

CS: 110 km/h

TS: 200 km/h

Handling: +1

Mass: 2

Cost: ●●●●●●●●

Armor: 3 [7]

• **Qin Diplomatic Shuttle:** The standard Qin shuttle is a showpiece of their biotechnology, being versatile, quiet, fast, and beautiful. Its upper performance limits are a secret, but it is faster than Æon knows. From the outside, it looks like a streamlined seashell with asymmetrical fins. It is not rigid; inside an atmosphere, some of the control fins are always in motion, even when on the ground. The interior includes a cockpit for two (restricted to Qin only), a luxurious passenger compartment for 12 and a small cargo space aft (100 cubic meters). The passenger seats are almost absurdly comfortable, and there are media terminals and small food dispensers throughout the compartment. The windows are small, and can be opaqued from the cockpit. The door from the passenger compartment to the cockpit is as tough as the outer hull, though this is not obvious.

Qin Biosuit
Ambassador Model

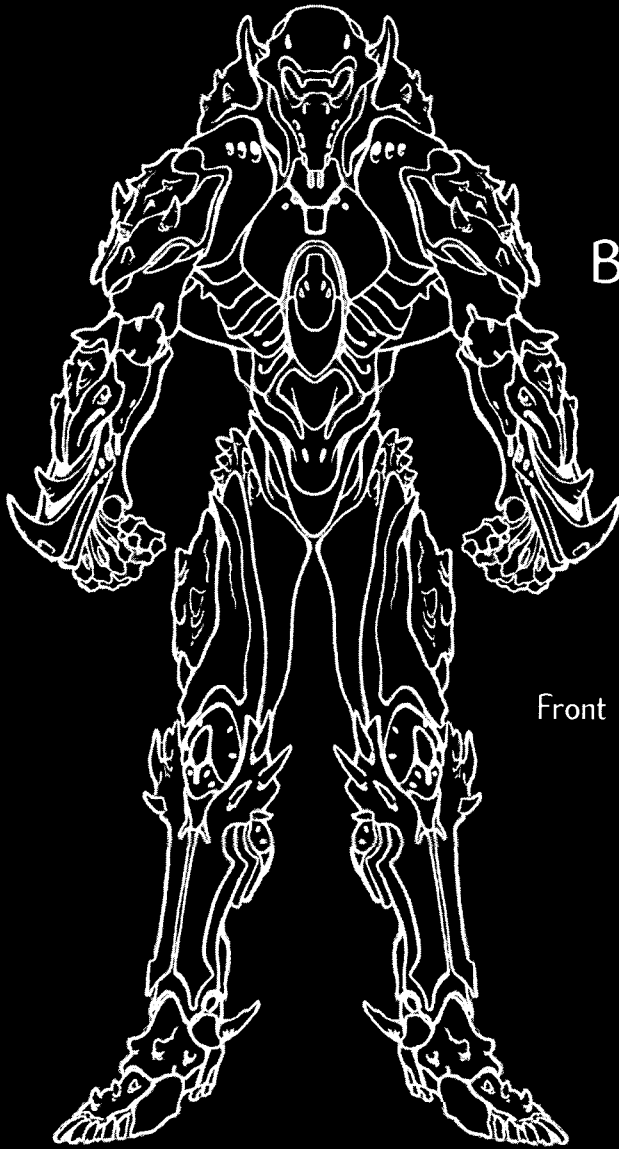


Front

Profile

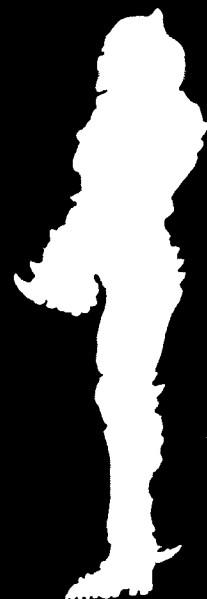


Qin Biosuit Bodyguard Model



Front

Profile



Qin Biosuit
Warrior Model

Front

Profile





VT: Hybrid

Tech: Ψ

CS: Mach 0.9

TS: Mach 3

VS: 5

Handling: +3

Mass: 25

Cost: Not available to humans

Armor: 4 [10]

Weapons: Single medium laser cannon (Accuracy: +2, Damage: 6d10 [5] L)

Special: Qin shuttles are self-repairing. If no engineer is present, repair roles are made automatically using the equivalent of Engineer 3, and repair times move up one level on the Repair chart (*Trinity*, p. 279), to a minimum of 20 minutes. If an actual engineer is supervising, the ship's self-repair roll adds to any successes the engineer has, and repair times move up two levels, to a minimum of 10 minutes.

REPORT TO FIELD OPERATIVES

ÆON TRINITY TRANSMISSION [NEPTUNE DIVISION]

Extraterrestrial Office, Deputy Office Director Giorgios Alekandros Gamemenos
Fellow Æon Members —

We never held any illusions that first contact with a new race would be easy. If we were willing to accept the fact that humanity was not alone in the universe, we also had to accept the fact that we didn't have all the answers. An action or belief was not right or wrong simply because we said it was so. Other races meant other perspectives, other values. We could not judge aliens simply because they were different from us.

All the same, what happened to our people at the hands of the Coalition was *wrong*.

When the clairsentients first detected the aliens' mammoth ark, light-years distant, but drawing inexorably nearer to Earth, there was every reason to fear that we had discovered an Aberrant or Chromatic invasion force. While Earth's best minds worked feverishly to complete final tests on the first Leviathan jump ships, a group of volunteers was assembled to rendezvous with the approaching ship and confirm or deny our fears. When the ark responded to the contact team's hails, everything changed. Gone were the fears of Aberrants and invasions — the contact team had found a new alien race.

Yi's crew met the Coalition with open arms and a message of peace. In return, the very essence of the crewmembers — you could say their very souls — was stolen from them, ripped away. They were simply left to die, without even an acknowledgment of their ordeal. The aliens raped our people, many to death... and walked away. The bridge recorders on the jump ship recorded three-and-a-half hours of human screams, but not a single alien voice.

Thanks to the efforts of a single crewmember we got Yi back. As we buried our dead, we tried to remember our beliefs in diversity of thought and belief. Could it have been a mistake, a terrible misunderstanding? Could we let a sentient species pass us by without making certain of their hostility, despite the risks?

With Æon's help, the United Nations decided to send another delegation. This time we sent *two* ships, *Kohl* and *Pandora*, with a mix of ambassadors and soldiers. The combination of diplomats and warriors showed that, while we wanted dialogue, we would not be mistreated again.

Our people expected anything — anything except an Earth-like welcome from an English-speaking ambassador. The Coalition envoys were charming and urbane and did everything they could to put our people at ease. Our ambassador started to believe the Yi incident was a tragic misunderstanding... except that there were certain questions that the envoy would not address, and the delegation's psions began detecting taint from deep within the alien ship.

After repeated evasions by the Coalition, the delegation tried to get answers for themselves. The cost of truth was dear. They learned that there were Aberrants in the center of the space ark — not one, or a dozen, but *hundreds* of them, being grown in breeding tubes. In addition, the Coalition was using genetic material plundered from Yi's crew to create human-Coalition hybrids!

With their grim plans exposed, the aliens turned on the second delegation, ignoring any pretense of diplomacy or *détente*. The Leviathan *Kohl* was gutted like a fish, and *Pandora* drifted for months before a courageous Upeo finally recovered her.

Why did the Coalition violate our people? Why are they midwifing an entire generation of Aberrants aboard their ship? Why and how are they grafting human genes with their own to create offspring with pheromones that we don't have the power to resist? These questions have haunted us for months.

It's time Earth got some answers.

By unanimous accord of the United Nations Security Council, a state of hostilities now exists between the people of Earth and the alien race or races known as the Coalition. The reports from the Second Contact mission indicate that the aliens have entered into an alliance of some kind with the Aberrants, but precise details are unknown. Likewise, the Coalition's technological capability, sociopolitical infrastructure, and strategic goals remain a mystery that constitutes a dire peril to all humanity.

Therefore, effective immediately, the UN Security Council, with the aid of the Æon Trinity and in cooperation with the Norça, has initiated a classified covert reconnaissance mission. Code-named Blackbird, this effort has the intent of gathering raw intelligence data on the aliens and their relationship with the Aberrants.

As of October 14, 2121, clairsentient monitoring teams detected that the Coalition ark has altered its course and increased its deceleration, entering the Beta Canum Venaticorum system. Blackbird field teams will infiltrate this star system and collect any and all information about the aliens and their activities.

You have been chosen for this crucial task because your field experience and skills are considered vital to the mission's successful completion. If Earth is to stand toe-to-toe with this technologically advanced species, we will need all the time and information we can get. I know you will not let us down.

Good luck, and Godspeed,

Giorgios Alekandros Gamemenos

Extraterrestrial Office, 07:14:32 11.16.2121

FIRST CONTACT

PROTEUS DIVISION MESSAGE ARCHIVE, FILE GROUP 61-1458

Message source: United Nations restricted database, excerpts from bridge log of Leviathan Yi, 09:35:02 11.11.2119 to 13:41:07 11.11.2119

09:35:02: This is Captain Li Hu of the Jump Ship Yi. I wish to record for posterity that at 0935 hours, November 11, 2119, the alien ark responded after seven-and-a-half hours of automated hails, by dispatching a small craft to dock with us. I will monitor the proceedings from here while Dr. Chadwick and the contact team await them at the Docking Collar Three airlock. I am switching the recorder to voice mode to provide observations for the historical record.

09:45:34: The alien craft has docked, and it appears our collar can mate sufficiently with theirs to maintain integrity. The airlock doors are opening. There is an alien in the doorway. It is very large, almost insect-like. It appears to have four arms, two very long and two short. It's entering the ship... hasn't said a word.... There look to be more behind him. Is that a gun—

09:58:02: The large, four-armed aliens appear to be simply bodyguards, and their skills are efficient, if rude. They are escorting another alien, this one much more human-like. It is short and slender, and appears very gentle. Our esteemed telepath, the honorable Chien Shi, attempted communication. The human-like alien was startled by the contact, and became very agitated. Dr. Chadwick assures us that this is from excitement, not anger or fear. It appears likely that that this race does not have telepathic ability. The alien, whom Dr. Chadwick is referring to as "the envoy," appears to be trying to ask questions through Chien Shi, but Chadwick is confused. All she can do is shake her head.

10:04:00: The envoy has returned to its ship and is heading back to the ark, after leaving the warriors behind. Have we misstepped somewhere? Chadwick looks concerned. Our pilot, clairsentient Anne Harolds, requested that she step back inside the MARS unit as a safety precaution. I believe she is being rather hasty, but granted her permission. If she wants to miss out on history, who am I to say?

10:08:11: The small ship is returning! Dr. Chadwick is still trying to puzzle out what the envoy meant before it left. Perhaps it was talking about returning with more of its people? Wait, I may be right.... I can see the envoy through the airlock, and it is not alone. The door is opening. Oh. Oh... my... God...

10:09:55 — 13:41:07: [screams]

>>> transmission ends <<<

Case Number: 69-1237

Date: 12.19.2119

Patient: Dr. Ellen Chadwick

Physician: Dr. Lynn Golden

Comments: Snake imagery continues despite focus work. Dr. Chadwick insists that she loved snakes as a child. Imagery is tied to the traumatic block, but no additional progress on its underlying symbolism yet. We have theories as to its meaning, but final analysis remains inconclusive. I cannot condone medication as a means of wearing away this block. The potential damage is not worth the limited data that we hope to gain.

SESSION TRANSCRIPT

Golden: Ellen, were going back now.... We're floating through the warm, blue light, back to November. It is November, Ellen, and you are on the jump ship. What day is it?

Chadwick: It's the sixth. We left orbit an hour ago—

Golden: Let's go ahead now, Ellen. Ahead to the 11th. We're going to the 11th.

Chadwick: [whimpers]

Golden: What's wrong, Ellen? Nothing can hurt you, remember that—

Chadwick: The envoy is leaving. It's going away. The snakes are coming. [whimpers]

Golden: The snakes can't hurt you, Ellen—

Chadwick: Yes, they can! [groans] Oh God, oh God, the snakes are coming....

Golden: What do the snakes look like, Ellen? Remember, they can't hurt you. Are they arms, maybe?

Chadwick: Oh God, I can see them! I can see them through the airlock viewport! They're curling and writhing against the glass... oh, God, Hu, don't let them in....

Golden: Ellen, calm down, it's just a dream—

Chadwick: *Don't open the hatch! God, no! Get them off me! Get them off me!!*

Golden: Ellen! Ellen! [to attendant] Get me a sedative!

Report: Coalition Engagement

— Captain Mary Palacio, *Leviathan Pandora*

The first indication we had of trouble was when *Kohl* got hit. She was hanging close to the alien ship, looking like a kid's toy next to that behemoth. General Luo put us on alert after Ambassador Irvingson went missing. It was obvious the situation had been deteriorating for days. We hadn't yet learned about the Aberrants being there, though, just that the general was trying to get the diplomatic types onto *Chelsea* and out to link up with us.

Our scopes were lit and the lasers were hot, but we still hoped it wouldn't come down to a tussle there on the ass end of nowhere. All of a sudden this streak of flame tears down the length of the *Kohl* — carving a line like a hot knife through ice. Then we catch a glimpse of this little pissant ship rolling to

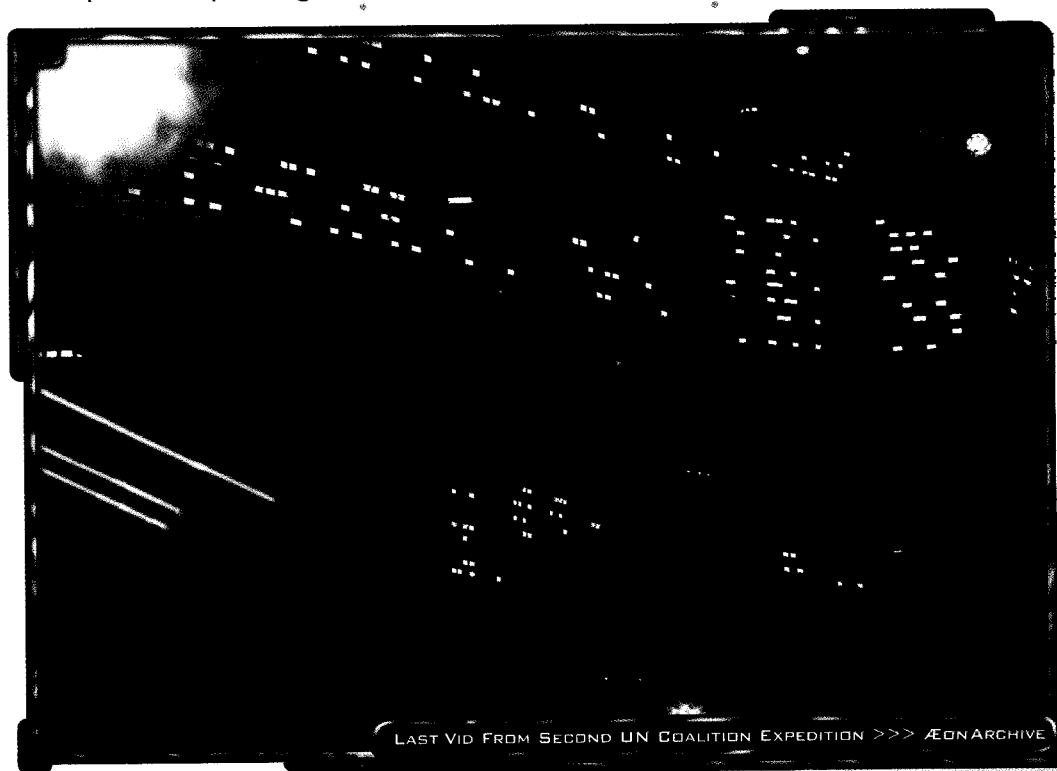
port and boosting away. It was so small; I didn't figure it for a hostile at first, 'til its wingman zapped *Pandora* a half-second later and took out her jump capacity.

Those fighters were so tiny, like the one-man EVA rigs you see in the orbital yards at Luna, only stuck to a huge thruster package. It maneuvered like a missile, and it carried these rapid-fire energy cannons.... If they had been any better shots I wouldn't be talking to you now. Hell, I'm still amazed we made it out alive.

Anyway, the Coalition's idea of fire control is to hose a target down and hope that something sticks. Of course, you play the odds long enough and you get lucky, sooner or later. With those weapons you only have to get lucky once or twice.

Their pilots made a lot of mistakes. That's how we managed to get three of them — they repeated the exact same firing pass, three or four times in a row. That ought to give you an idea how tough those little fighters are. Their flyjockeys can be dumb as a box of rocks and *still* kick our ass, because we have nothing that can touch their tech. People keep crowing about how amazing biotech is, but they forget how devastating good old hard technology can be — and the Coalition has it in spades. I'd guess they're at least 50 years ahead of us, armament-wise. Don't believe me? You try keeping your guns on one.

If the bastards ever decide to pay Earth a visit, we're fucked.



LAST VID FROM SECOND UN COALITION EXPEDITION >>> AEGNARCHIVE

REPORT: COALITION RECONNAISSANCE

PROTEUS DIVISION MESSAGE ARCHIVE, FILE GROUP 97-2660

Message source: Aeon Trinity Extraterrestrial Office [Triton Division], transmission to United Nations Security Council, 10.24.2121

Subject: Clairsentient Reconnaissance Report

From: Fred Lyle, Triton Division

To: Vladimir Dobrynin, UN Security Council

Encryption: DSE

Transmission type: holofile

Date: 23:05:55 10.24.2121

Vladimir:

The latest report from the clears confirms our analysis that the Coalition ark has entered orbit around the third planet of the Beta Canum Venaticorum star system. There is still no evidence to indicate that the ship has FTL capability. From the point that Otha's people first detected the ark until now, the Coalition ship has spent very nearly a year decelerating until it made that slight course change last week and coasted into the system. Who waits a year to reach someplace when they don't have to?

It's clear that their engines have a lot of nice, steady thrust potential, and they take forever to climb up and down the velocity scale. I wouldn't be surprised if the big tub can't do more than 0.6 of light-speed (which is still a compliment if you consider how massive that ship must be). You know, a buddy of mine did some rough calculations, and he estimates that all of Earth's starships combined wouldn't add up to half the mass of that monstrosity.

Even if the Coalition doesn't have FTL, we are still talking about some serious technical ability to build a ship that size. I can't even imagine the power requirements — *hundreds* of hyper-fusion reactors, Vladimir. No joke. The visual evidence alone suggests that their tech is decades ahead of us, at the very least.

What concerns me isn't the size of the space-ark's engines, though. The reports from *Chelsea* talk about vast breeding chambers inside the ark, hundreds of them filled with some kind of Aberrant-Coalition crossbreed. Vlad, take it from one who has been on the bad end of a basic, garden-variety abbie — the only advantages humanity has against them are psi and sheer numbers. It takes five very tough *hombres* to put down the average Aberrant, but I can guarantee that the beast *will* go down. If the Coalition can not only turn out cookie-cutter abbies but find a way to breed Aberrant genes into their own race, we are looking at the very real possibility of human extinction. That kind of idea keeps me awake at night.

From what the clears can tell, the ark settled into orbit around the third planet (they've labeled the place Erebus), and there is a *lot* of orbital traffic between the ark and the surface. The Coalition's up to something, but if the clears know what it is, they aren't telling us.

Speaking of Erebus, the analysts ran the numbers on Operation: Blackbird. Vlad, you will be lucky — *really* lucky — to get more than 25% of your field teams off that rock in one piece after you send them in. Considering the Coalition's advanced armaments and propulsion systems, we've got to assume their sensors are also much, much better than ours.

Sorry for the bad news, Vlad. Don't send anyone to Erebus that you're particularly fond of.

Best,

Fred

REPORT: SECURITY BREACH

PROTEUS DIVISION MESSAGE ARCHIVE, FILE GROUP 97-3004

Message source: United Nations Alien Studies Group, transmission to United Nations Security Council, 10.30.2121

Subject: UN Database Compromised

From: Serena Lange, Director, UN Alien Studies Group

To: Vladimir Dobrynin, UN Security Council

Encryption: DSE

Transmission type: textfile

Date: 09:15:45 10.30.2121

Mr. Dobrynin:

As of 0800 hours this morning we have completed the initial phase of our internal investigation. I must regretfully state that there has definitely been a breach of security involving *all* mission reports, debriefings, and technical analyses collected during both UN expeditions to the Coalition ark (the so-called "first" and "second contact" missions). Security specialists provided by Æon confirm that illegal access was gained during a period between 08.15.2121 and 08.28.2121, bypassing all copy protection safeguards.

It is reasonable to assume that most, if not all, of these classified documents were printed or downloaded at that time. The access log was at least partially modified as well, so we have no way of knowing exactly what information was stolen. We must, of course, assume the worst.

We are beginning our investigation of likely suspects, and have already narrowed the field to 14 individuals who had enough familiarity with our work and the opportunity to access the files. The specialists assure me it is only a matter of time before we apprehend the individual or individuals involved. An investigation of this type is methodical and time consuming, and could take as long as several months. It is highly unlikely we will be concluded before the commencement of Operation: Blackbird. Still, such a search may not even be necessary.

Upon consideration, my senior staff and the specialists from Æon concur that the timing of our security breach and of the Norça proposal for a joint UN-Norça exploratory endeavor are very suspicious. Three weeks after our files were looted, Proxy del Fuego appears with an unprecedented offer of funds and resources to support a possible third contact mission. Of course, the proxy simply expressed a desire to assist the UN with extraterrestrial projects that coincide with the Biokinesis Order's own pursuits in genetic research. No mention of the top-secret Blackbird endeavor, but I don't believe "coincidence" even comes close to explaining the synchronicity.

It is my belief that the Norça either hacked the UN database themselves or hired a third party to do the job. With no hard data as yet, my opinion must remain off the record, officially.

We know that the Norça are extremely interested in genetics, but we don't exactly know why. It's possible they heard enough about the Coalition through our reports to Æon and infiltrated my group to learn more. The biokinetics are uniquely suited for such work, as we all know. They could have gained access to the information, learned about the Coalition's breeding programs, and discovered something they had to get their hands on.

I understand that the decision to move forward with Norça involvement won't be rescinded at this late date. Still, we should be careful not to enter into this operation naively. We know that the Norça need the UN as much as we need them, or they wouldn't have approached us at all. But I don't want to see us used as pawns to further some shadowy order's hidden agenda. Once the teams are *en route* to Erebus, who is to say that the Norça won't forget all about us and do whatever is necessary to get what they want? I recommend that we at least hold the operation until my investigation is complete. Failing that, it is imperative that the Blackbird personnel be made aware of the potential danger in their very midst.

Respectfully,
Selena Lange

EREBUS

System Data

Sun: Beta Canum Venaticorum
(CGSC 4:5111:40:0105-G)
Sun's Spectral Type: G2
Number of Planets in System: 7
Number of Gas Giants: 1
Number of Asteroid Belts: 1 (6.25AU from sun)

Planetary Data

Name: Erebus
Source: psionic survey
Planet Mass (Earth = 1): 0.92
Equatorial Diameter: 9,872
Planetary Gravity (Earth = 1): 0.79
Water Content (Earth = 0.75): 0.76
Atmosphere: nitrogen, oxygen, some sulfites
Rotation Period: 22.23 hours
Indigenous Life: native life, specifics unknown
Population: unknown
Closest Distance to Earth: 29.9 light years
Primary Satellites: two moons

Stellar System Profile

Beta Canum Venaticorum

Notes: This system was initially catalogued during the al-Qatal sweep (2110) and flagged due to its G-type sun and Earth-like planet. A more detailed survey was scheduled, but was delayed when the Upeo wa Macho disappeared in 2114. Initial comments made about Erebus describe a green, temperate world with wide savannahs and the potential for indigenous life. It was given a high rating as a possible site for a new colony.

Addendum (05.15.2121):

Intensive surveys performed in preparation for Operation Blackbird reveal Beta Canum Venaticorum to contain a number of important features of interest to public or commercial colonial ventures. Erebus is home to a number of creatures, including what may be a sentient or proto-sentient race. Preliminary clairsentient studies of this life form place its population at roughly two million, concentrated largely on one of the

world's three major landmasses. This race could provide humanity with a valuable opportunity for scientific study, but any impact on this immature environment must be carefully considered.

Additionally, there are indicators that the system's asteroid field and two of its planets contain a wealth of natural resources essential for commercial/industrial processes. The Ereban asteroid field, very similar to Sol's Ceres field, contains prodigious amounts of ice, base metals (iron, copper, nickel) and possibly rarer metals such as platinum and iridium. Erebus itself appears to be poor in radioactive elements, but possesses abundant amounts of base metals, especially iron. The system's fourth planet harbors a thin atmosphere heavy with nitrogen and sulfites and is volcanically active, with a gravity level notably higher than Earth's, though not prohibitively so. The presence of potentially valuable

crystal deposits brought to the surface by volcanic action might provide sufficient incentive for commercial mining and possibly limited terraforming.

A final item of interest concerns the system's gas giant, located 8AU from the star. Roughly the size of Saturn, its "surface" is a seething mass of emerald green, suggesting a chemical composition of gases currently unknown to human science. The gas giant possesses a thin asteroid ring of its own, and seven moons in differing orbits, lashed at by unpredictable and intense shifts in the gas giant's magnetosphere. Preliminary reports suggest that the gas giant's magnetic field is much more intense and unstable than other planets of similar size and composition, and there have been unconfirmed reports of fluctuations detected in the gas giant's subquantum state. There are no theories at present to explain these phenomena.

THE CLAIRSENTIENT STAR GUIDE CATALOG

As the advent of psionic abilities provided humanity with the ability to travel between the stars, the two orders most directly responsible for facilitating this travel — the clairsentients and the teleporters — quickly realized that the astronomical charts in use at the time were hopelessly inadequate as an aid to stellar navigation.

In the past, stellar positions were marked relative to Earth. This was a useful guide for a terrestrial astronomer, but of little use to a clear trying to locate Epsilon Eridani from the vicinity of Tau Ceti A. Also, there was no uniform naming convention for stellar objects. Each succeeding stellar catalog prior to the Aberrant War kept the naming conventions for previously discovered stars and added new ones of its own, creating a confusing amalgamation of current and outdated descriptors. After careful consideration, the Clairsentience and Teleportation Proxies concluded that the current catalog schemes could not be modified to suit present needs. Instead, a new system must be developed that provided relative positions for every star independent of Earth. The first surveys for the Clairsentient Star Guide Catalog (CSGC) began in January of 2107, under the supervision of ISRA Mashriqi.

From the outset, the catalog was intended to provide psionic surveyors and navigators with data that would allow the location of and focus on a specific stellar object with a minimum of time and energy. The charting system divided the galaxy into nine quadrants, oriented on the galactic core (quadrant five), each approximately 4,300 parsecs across and comprising a volume of 28 million cubic light-years. These quadrants were further subdivided into 5,600 sectors (5,000 cubic light-years per sector), then into 50 sub-sectors of 100 cubic light-years each.

TRITON ARCHIVE

Subject: Smoke and Mirrors!

From: Nigel Heath, Royal Academy of Sciences

To: Sylvia Des Barres, Melbourne University

Encryption: SPE

Transmission type: textfile

Date: 9:27:49 2.12.2107

Syl —

That's it! Three years of undergrad work up in smoke! I can't believe the UN just rolled over and let those damn psyqs tell us how we are going to classify stars from here on!

The dean of our astro department, Professor McMurray, was one of the ones who went to Luna to plead our case. He's the best there is, and they wouldn't even give him the time of day! What are we supposed to do now, hire only clairsentients to staff the observatories? This "star guide catalog" is the scientific equivalent of saying "take a right at Procyon, head north a couple parsecs, and there you are." It's useless for serious astronomy!

You can't just point a telescope into the general area of a star and scan around until you find it. Their smallest set of co-ordinates cover a hundred cubic light-years! It's insane. From now on, if the clears say they've found a new stellar body, we are just going to have to take their word for it.

I never went in for all the paranoia about these blokes, but I have to admit this bothers me. Who knows what those "psions" might find out there, but decide not to tell us about? There is no way to be sure. For hundreds of years science has maintained its integrity through careful and impartial verification of facts. I feel like we've been thrown back into the Dark Ages.

Stars within each sub-sector were then provided with a four-digit ID code that included the star's spectral type for ease of reference. Once these conventions were established, the Mashriqi then assumed the responsibility of going back and allocating numbers for already-charted stars. In most cases, old names were retained (e.g. Altair, Deneb), but a CSGC number was appended to each. It is important to note that the CGSC does not provide precise location and distance data for stellar objects, only relational data. Distance, as far as anyone can determine, is irrelevant for the purposes of teleportation, and clairsentients need only know the general area to look in to settle on their object of interest.

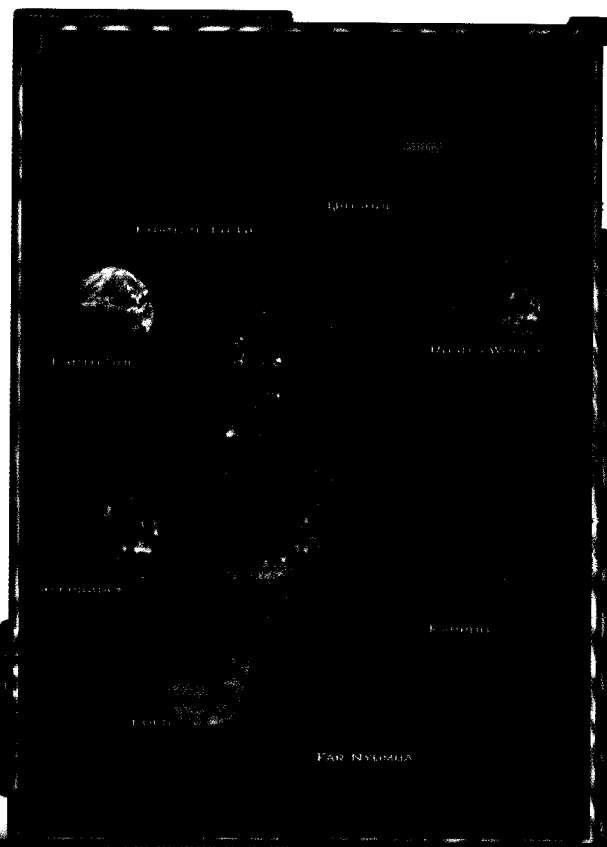
The stellar surveys were carried out in successive waves, with clairsentients using augmentation devices (the precursors of the MARS and ARES systems) to sweep at the limits of their abilities. Once an area was catalogued, a teleporter would carry the clear to the boundary of the surveyed area and push the boundaries further. The reclassification process for already catalogued stars was halfway complete when the Upeo vanished in 2114, and the project lost much of its impetus until the first jump ships became operational in 2119. Though far from complete, the CSGC coordinate system is now the universal stellar charting method in use by astronomers and spacers across human space.

TRITON ARCHIVE

POINTS OF REFERENCE

The following list provides CSGC numbers for Earth, the human colonies, and a number of other well-known star systems:

Earth	(CSGC 4:5111:40:1-G)
Khantze Lu Ge	(CSGC 4:5111:40:20-K/G/M)
Averiguas	(CSGC 4:5111:28:112-G/A)
Far Nyumba	(CSGC 4:3212:15:1050-A)
Karoo (Crab Pulsar)	(CSGC 4:5110:32:0005-N)
Qinshui	(CSGC 4:2056:22:1103-F)
Chrome Prime	(CSGC 4:5112:35:21-G)
Vega	(CSGC 4:5111:40:25-A)
Capella	(CSGC 4:5111:40:78-G)
Rigel	(CSGC 4:3450:22:45-B)
Deneb	(CSGC 4:1512:30:18-A)



REPORT: THE EMERALD FEATHER

Filename: La Pluma Esmaralda
Filetype: Polytype data, volatile
Filesubtype: Analysis
Division: Triton, Anthropology Department
Encryption: DSE
Lastfilemod: 18:56:02 10.22.2120

>>> Warning: This is a volatile document. File may change without notice. Do not modify without locking corecopy. <<<

>>> Warning: Level two clearance required for access. <<<



Report: Xavier Demarco, Æon associate

I have recently completed a five-day trip into the Amazon as a guest of the Norça. I attended a Sudamerican business summit at The Emerald Feather, one of the order's vast nature preserves and research facilities. While we were there, Proxy del Fuego and his staff took us on an extensive tour of the facility. A detailed report follows on what I learned of the site's layout and activities.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

LOCATION

The delegation of which I was part flew into the preserve from São Paulo. Due to the brief flight, I believe that the Emerald Feather is one of the most accessible of the Norça's research facilities, located in the shadow of

the Brazilian highlands, two hundred kilometers from the coast. When I questioned our Norça liaison as to the size of the preserve, she was somewhat vague. Still, over the course of subsequent tours of the facility itself, I gathered that the refuge encompasses at least a hundred square kilometers, following the north-south course of the mountains and their surrounding forest.

Nearly all of the site's buildings lie under this thick forest canopy, arranged as efficiently as possible while causing the least amount of impact on the environment. The one exception is the vast building used by Proxy del Fuego himself. The *Pai's* villa is a palatial walled estate that sits on the mountainside overlooking the preserve's central "village." A short airstrip set precariously close to the villa pro-

vides the primary and generally sole physical access to the site. Later, though, I gained the impression that large equipment often makes its way into the refuge (and to other Norça sites) *via* river traffic run by trusted locals, "cousins" of the Norça.

THE VILLAGE

The Emerald Feather is in every way a closed environment; it is an attempt, so the Norça say, to study the Amazon's complex biosphere with as little outside contamination as possible. Individuals who come to work at the refuge are expected to invest all of their time and effort in this project. I gathered that some members of the order there had not seen the outside world for years.

This is hardly a case of imprisonment or servitude. Del Fuego asks much of his "children," Gifted or neutral, but he takes pains

to build close family bonds between them. For this reason, the concept of a "village" is the central element to all of the order's major facilities. In each case, it is literally a self-contained community, a small, very comfortable enclave that caters to the researchers' needs. It reinforces the image that they are all part of a close-knit family.

The Emerald Feather serves a textbook example. The support facilities are run by local folk whose villages were absorbed by the preserve. Del Fuego treats these people with respect and honor, providing them with jobs and wages far beyond what they could otherwise expect in such a rural environment. In return, the locals provide him with unquestioning devotion. These villagers consider themselves to be Norça as much as the most gifted shifter does. The proxy shrewdly welcomes them, for no one knows the land and its secrets as well as they.





VILLA, EMERALD FEATHER . . . AEGIN SIM RENDERING

THE VILLA

Like a feudal manor house looking out over its sovereign domain, del Fuego's villa is a luxurious retreat for the proxy and an excellent location for meetings between the order and the outside universe. As a career diplomat, I've been exposed to many retreats of this sort, from the unbearable to the sublime. The villa certainly falls in the latter category. The amenities are what one would expect in a top-flight hotel, and the live-in staff were evidently trained by the finest hoteliers in the cosmos. It was clear to me that the villa's tasteful décor was designed to set a tone of dignity, sophistication and discernment.

Del Fuego is certainly aware of how his past (and current) ties to Sudamerica's drug cartels have given his order a stigma of illicit thuggery. The villa is intended to shatter

those preconceptions in a way that leaves guests very respectfully humbled. There is also a more subtle implication, one that I took quickly to heart. Proxy del Fuego and his family have hidden depths no outsider has yet plumbed; it would be wise never to underestimate them.

RESEARCH PURSUITS

BIOSPHERE STUDIES

Fully two-thirds of the preserve's research staff and facilities are devoted to studying the rain forest biosphere in its totality. The Norça say that by understanding how each element of the forest contributes to the greater whole, they can make tremendous strides not only in rehabilitating devastated regions in the Amazon, but improving terraforming technol-

ogy as a whole. Such advances would certainly be useful on Mars and Khantze Lu Ge, but the Norça are not blind to the repairs that should be made to severely tainted areas such as the Middle East and the North American Blight. Much of these research facilities are referred to as "inside-out" labs, where research and analysis are focused on the vibrant life existing outside their walls, rather than extracting samples from the environment for study in abstract.

SPECIES REHABILITATION

A major focus of Norça efforts is the revitalization of endangered species through conservation programs and what they term as "genetic rehabilitation." This latter consists of manipulating animal genes to weed out harmful recessives and reintroduce viable breeding stock. Ultimately, the biokinetics say, they hope to refine their genetic expertise to revive long-extinct species from DNA left behind in blood and tissue samples gathering dust in museums throughout settled space. Again, the order's focus is on returning the Earth to its former glory, but its research also has bearing on colonists who would tailor Earth animals to survive in alien environments.

GENETICS RESEARCH

This research program occupies only two small buildings at the preserve; however, we were not allowed to tour those facilities due to "time constraints." Our liaison explained that genetics research is at the core of the order's studies, as the Norças' own powers have shown that their DNA is far more potent — and mutable — than was ever thought possible for humans. Based on such a grand statement, I asked the liaison if there was any truth to rumors that the order had recently completed the Human Genome Project (a comprehensive map of human DNA lost during the Aberrant War). She neither confirmed nor denied the allegation.

TRITON ARCHIVE

Subject: Dual-Use Technology

From: Benjamin Ngao, Trinity Field Office, São Paulo

To: Malachi Simmons, North American Office

Encryption: DSE

Transmission type: holofile

Date: 13:45:15 11.01.2120

Malachi —

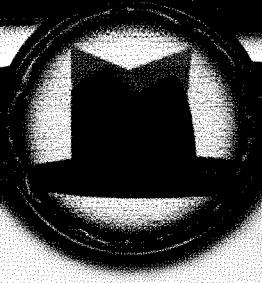
Demarco's report is enlightening on some fronts, though if he'd had a scientific background he could have told us a lot more about what was really going on in those research facilities. Of course, had that been the case, I have a sneaking suspicion they wouldn't have let him anywhere near anything sensitive. And, of course, they would've known every data scrap on Demarco, no matter what his background. I guarantee you, each and every member of the São Paulo delegation was thoroughly checked out before being admitted to the preserve, and del Fuego knew ahead of time where and how much they were allowed to see.

We did learn a few interesting things. Del Fuego has found an ideal way to maintain security over his projects by taking his people and surrounding them with a couple hundred kilometers of untamed rain forest. Operating in the Amazon is perfectly plausible based on the order's publicly stated goals, and just happens to keep his every move concealed under a forest canopy that no satellite can penetrate. Additionally, the research areas Demarco saw are entirely plausible within the context of Earth-friendly science — but they can also be turned to some very nasty applications. It's all dual-use technology; one man's fertilizer is another man's nerve gas. The Norça are going to great efforts to learn about what makes living beings tick, and the impact they have on life around them. The possibilities for such knowledge are limitless — and only del Fuego knows for sure what he intends to do with it.

I sure wish our operatives like Heironymous Dieda could return to the fold. Lord knows del Fuego's never going to let an outsider in on his secrets, but he's even more wary about his erstwhile "children." The guy certainly has loyalty issues.

Call me a paranoid bastard if you will. Spend some time down here in São Paulo. Get a feel for how their influence pervades everything, from politics to street crime, and maybe you will see things a little differently.

Ben



Giuseppe del Fuego

The Man and His Shadow

— Cori Heisler, *The Proxies: A Painful Truth Special* ©2121 MMI

From the very first days of the psi orders, when the galaxy was reeling from the Aberrants' return and justifiably concerned about the appearance of psions in its midst, Giuseppe del Fuego was a man of many secrets and contradictions. A known figure in Sudamerica's legalized drug trade, del Fuego and his underworld ties have long been the subject of speculation and outright paranola. Richard Webel, author of del Fuego's unauthorized biography, Jaguar in a Silk Suit, had this to say about the Biokinesis Proxy's shady past, and how much of it has followed him into the present day.

CH: Mr. Webel, you've spent nearly a decade researching every aspect of del Fuego's life, from the mystery surrounding his early days through his rise to power as proxy of the Norsa. Is he a gangster or savior?

RW: Neither. The man who calls himself Giuseppe del Fuego is an individual of tremendous ambition and great personal power.

CH: I'm sorry, "calls himself?" You comment in your book that "Giuseppe del Fuego" is not his real name. Please explain.

RW: It's painfully obvious to anyone who takes a few moments that del Fuego uses an alias — indeed, that much of what is known about him and his organization was manufactured. The most glaring factor in all this is the mix of Spanish and Portuguese used in relation to the Norça. You should also consider that the order is purportedly headquartered in Colombia, yet exerts most of its political influence on Brazil. I believe that these discrepancies are not accidents, but were calculated by the order's leader to keep his group veiled in as much secrecy as possible.

CH: Why do you say that?

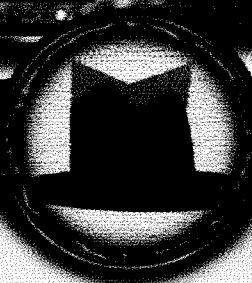
RW: This del Fuego is a shrewd man. By keeping himself in the shadows, he forces those who might act against him to expend much of their energy in first finding him. The key here is information. Knowledge is power, after all. And since few know the truth behind the Norça and their proxy, the group pursues its goals with that much more freedom.

CH: Yet you claim to have pierced this "veil of secrecy."

RW: Truly. It is a testament not only to his talents as a proxy but as a brilliant mind that virtually nothing has been confirmed about del Fuego's past prior to 2106. Still, I am confident that I have unearthed the truth.

Much of the popular myth of del Fuego getting into organized crime as a street thug in Bogota simply isn't accurate, though his involvement in the underworld is true. Even before his awakening as a psion, the *Pai de Norça* was well known as a man of tremendous charisma and a laser-sharp mind, known then as Cristófol Estilos. This is a man with a classical education, someone who dabbled in poetry in his youth. He was not sucked into the underworld like a piece of flotsam — he entered it willingly, calculatingly, because at that time organized crime provided the best opportunities for power and influence in Sudamerica.

CH: Popular public belief holds that del Fuego is still a leader in the criminal community. There have been critics who accuse the biokinetics of being a new breed of thugs that will aid



the proxy in tightening his hold on the underworld on Earth and beyond.

RW: No, not at all. It is true that del Fuego still maintains close ties to the Sudamerican underworld and its corresponding links to the Russian mobs, African cartels, Asian syndicates and European mafia. Still, that's just smart business sense. Again, consider: If the nations of South America have anything like a unifying infrastructure, it is the network of underworld families whose influence is felt in every village and arcology on the continent.

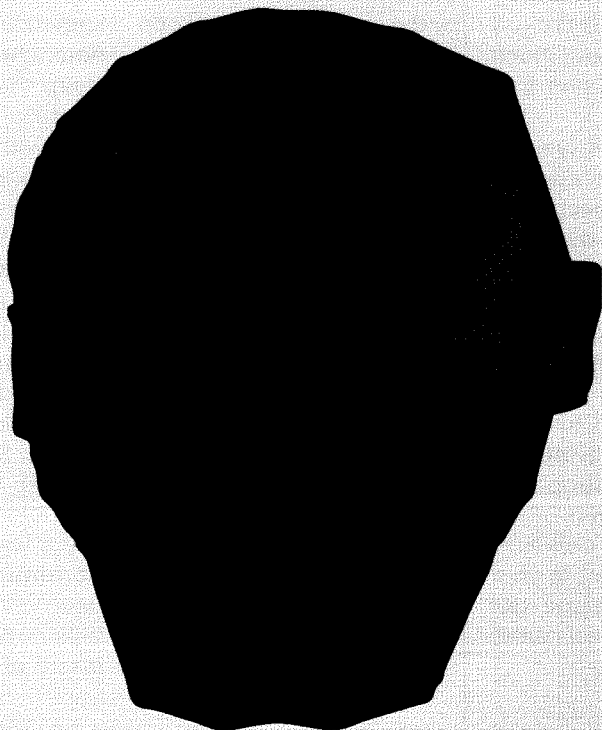
Del Fuego would be a fool not to take advantage of his influence there. He

has access to widespread and reasonably anonymous resources of funds, manpower, and materiel. This comes back to what I said before: It keeps people guessing as to his true capabilities, and *that* was definitely a lesson the drug trade taught him. But the biokinesis order is above all that. I honestly believe that del Fuego has a great vision for Earth and all humanity, and he has handpicked a tightly knit "family" to help him achieve that vision.

CH: And that vision would be...?

RW: [laughs] On that, you would have to ask the *Pai de Norça*. I find that is

one of the most singular things about the *Norça* that sets them apart from the other orders. Look at the recent scandal with the *Æsculapians* — members of Zweidler's order went rogue with their own illicit projects. Beyond that tragedy, one sees frequent news of the endless squabbling and infighting that occurs amongst the psi orders. All, that is, except the *Norça*. The biokinetics are serious about their loyalties. They would not betray the least aspect of del Fuego's agenda, and that has nothing to do with fear or retribution. They are devoted to him.



This is the second episode in **Deception**, the final book of the **Alien Encounter** series. The color pages in the preceding section are to be shared with players when you, the Storyteller, feel are the most appropriate times. The following material, however, is for Storyteller's eyes only.

If you are a player, stop reading now! Some things man was not meant to know.

The Devil's Bargain launches the characters on a dangerous but crucial mission to gather vital information about the Coalition, a rapacious and powerful alien race responsible for atrocities against two previous UN contact teams, and now believed to be in collusion with humanity's greatest enemy, the Aberrants. The characters must travel into the very shadow of the aliens' mammoth space ark to learn the nature of the threat Earth faces. The risk of capture is real and horrific, but is tempered by the knowledge that the characters' efforts are vital to the survival of the human race.

Overview

The Devil's Bargain begins as the *Æon* Trinity quickly and secretly summons the characters to a high-level meeting at a remote villa in central Brazil. There, senior UN and Norça officials explain that the characters have been selected on the basis of their reputations and expertise to perform a covert mission of extreme importance to Earth. Revealing the classified records of the UN's second contact mission to the Coalition ark, the officials explain the grave threat Earth now faces. The Coalition possesses superior technology and a chilling capacity for "genetic piracy," plundering biological material from victims, often through violent rape. The aliens' ark is headed in Earth's general direction. If the Coalition has indeed made an alliance with the Aberrants, as *Pandora's* report indicates, then humanity's homeworld could be targeted for an invasion of nightmarish proportions.

If humanity is to develop a means to counter the Coalition-Aberrant threat, the one thing it needs most of all is information. The aliens' agenda is a mystery, as are most of their capabilities. To counter this serious disadvantage, the *Æon* Trinity proposed to the United Nations this covert reconnais-

sance mission. Conveniently, the Norça offered its resources for alien research to the UN at a similar time.

Clairentient surveillance confirms that the ark decelerated sharply and entered the Beta Canum Venaticorum star system, taking up orbit around the star's third planet. This unexplained stopover provides humanity with an excellent opportunity to observe the Coalition's activities. The Biokinesis Order provides the funds to back the operation, including acquiring *Stormcrow*, a modified Kestrel IV frigate, and six stealth transports. In return, the Norça supplies a contingent of scientists and infiltration specialists. *Æon* contributes ship crews and an equal number of field agents. The United Nations ultimately supports the entire mission. Unfortunately, the UN has long been home to Aberrant spies — one of whom is Dr. Theo Robbins. Dr. Robbins and Ellen Chadwick, mission coordinator of the first Coalition expedition, are both assigned to the characters' team, and play key roles in this episode.

The mission personnel, including the characters, stay at the villa for the night. Their Norça hosts provide a grand dinner in their honor. Just as the festivities begin, the assemblage receives a surprise guest — Giuseppe del Fuego, the *Pai de Norça* himself. Ostensibly at the villa to finalize last-minute arrangements with the UN, the Norça Proxy attends the dinner, and later speaks to the biokinetic mission personnel in private (including any Norça characters).

The actual reason for the proxy's presence is to personally entrust his "children" with the real goal of their mission: to gather any and all information about the Coalition's genetic technology. Most importantly, the biokinetics are to search for evidence of the central power behind the Coalition — the "breeders" mentioned in the logs of the second UN expedition (see **Trinity Field Report: Alien Races** for details on that mission). If these beings do exist, the biokinetics are to do everything in their power to capture one and return it to Earth for interrogation and analysis. At the same time, non-Norça characters are approached by *Æon* officials and warned that they suspect the biokinetics of having their own hidden

agenda. The characters are warned to be careful and not let the Norça take actions that will compromise the mission.

The next day the characters depart for the frigate amid an atmosphere of tension and mutual suspicion. *Stormcrow* departs Earth orbit and, under the power of one of the recently returned Upeo wa Macho, teleports to the edge of Venaticorum System. The Coalition ark hangs in orbit around the third planet. The mammoth ship casts a fearsome shadow over Erebus' surface. As the characters learn over the course of their investigation, the Coalition is effectively raping the planet of all its resources — biological, chemical, and mineral.

The transports slip from *Stormcrow* and carefully sneak through patrolling swarms of Coalition craft to reach the third planet. The characters set up in a mountainous region near one of the smaller Coalition ground bases, an ideal position to observe the aliens' activities. Numerous alien patrols crisscross the area in search of victims, but the team's Norça members appear little concerned with the alien warriors. Instead, they press to take surveillance ever closer to the aliens' base. During these surveillance efforts the characters detect strong sources of taint emanating from the ground base, which only intensifies the Norças' desire for a closer look.

After two days on the ground, and an increasing number of close calls with alien patrols, the characters witness a series of alien shuttle landings at the base. Thanks to the characters' close surveillance they are able to witness a conspiratorial gathering of Aberrants and their allies among the breeders, who have incorporated tainted Aberrant DNA into their own genetic code. The characters learn that the Aberrants have forged an agreement with the Coalition, whereby the Aberrants share their genetic material with the aliens in exchange for using the Coalition's advanced technology to conquer Earth.

There is tension among the Aberrants and the Coalition because the former feels that the aliens are not moving quickly enough to fulfill their part of the bargain. The Aberrants decide to take the matter into their own hands by staging a coup within the Coalition hierarchy. They will attempt to kill as many of the non-tainted "first tier" breeders as possible, elevating their tainted Coalition allies into positions of authority. As the characters are attempting to digest this alarming information, the base suddenly erupts like an angry

hornet's nest. Packs of Aberrants and aliens charge into the surrounding area, some heading directly at the characters.

The source of this sudden activity is Theo Robbins, the Aberrant spy. While the field team was focusing on the events at the base, Robbins was back at the transport, using the opportunity to contact his masters. Finally learning of the human mission, Aberrants take charge of alien groups, and send them to hunt down the field teams. The characters' transport is quickly overrun and the Norça scientists are captured. The characters must use all their wits and experience to avoid being taken themselves. The search lasts for several hours, leaving the team with time to realize that someone within the field team must have betrayed it.

The characters, still within sight of the base, can tell that the Aberrants know that the team is out there, somewhere. The Aberrants' frustrations mount as the characters continue to remain at large. This finally boils over in a fit of psychotic anger that the Aberrants (and tainted breeders) inflict on the hapless members of the sub-races that serve them. When the orgy of slaughter fades and reason returns, the tainted breeders and their allies abruptly depart in their ships, deserting the base and its heaps of bodies.

Not all of the servitors were destroyed, however. The characters find two drones and a sasq who were seriously injured and left for dead, presenting the characters with an invaluable source of potential information. While the characters attempt to stabilize the aliens' injuries, they are surprised to find that the beings bear the humans no malice or distrust at all — they simply are not bred for it. In fact, with almost childlike innocence the aliens explain that their masters left for the ark in order to send an automated sifter to destroy the area. Even as the aliens speak, the characters see one of the large machines settle down and head their way, vaporizing everything beneath it.

The characters race across rugged terrain, slowly losing ground to the floating sifter as it heads toward the grounded transport. The team reaches the ship barely in time, only to find that the Aberrants have irreparably disabled it! The decision to save the aliens pays off, however, as the sasq suggests a means of escape — by climbing aboard a sifter. The characters get on board moments before their own ship is reduced to its component molecules. Then, without warning, the

automated craft streaks into the sky, heading back to the ark. Within an hour, the team members are unwilling stowaways on the Coalition mother ship.

Once the characters gain a picture of how the space ark operates, they can plan a means to escape, probably by stealing one of the ark's many small vessels. The Norça are also determined to find a way to rescue their captured comrades (and, hopefully, find a breeder to capture in the process).

Success in the characters' plans revolves around winning over the captured aliens. The drones can move freely about the ship without notice, and can obtain the location of prisoners (and getaway craft) with a minimum of difficulty. The key to gaining their assistance is deceptively simple — the aliens must be given a choice in what they wish to do. This idea has profound implications, because the lesser of these Coalition sub-races (called "phyles") have been bred to think of themselves as nothing more than tools, extensions of the breeders' will.

In a short amount of time, the characters' alien compatriots locate a suitable transport ship and a sizable number of captured mission personnel, kept in a "sampling chamber." This holding area is deep within the ship, close by many of the Aberrant breeding facilities and patrolled by many aliens. The characters slip into the sampling chamber with some difficulty and overpower the breeders there. While helping free the human prisoners, the Norça insist on taking a breeder with them. The characters must somehow shepherd a large group of traumatized and injured humans and a high-ranking alien prisoner out through the same gauntlet of guards without raising an alarm. Fortunately, a diversion of sorts presents itself — at that moment the Aberrants and their allies attempt the coup they discussed previously on the planet's surface. The broad corridors ring with the sounds of combat as Coalition-Aberrant crossbreeds (called "furries") are unleashed on the untainted breeders and their bodyguards.

A dangerous game of cat-and-mouse ensues as the characters attempt their escape. The team's valiant rescue carries the seeds of its own failure, however, as one of the humans they rescued is none other than Theo Robbins. The Aberrant spy finally reveals himself when he tries to free the captive breeder during an encounter with a group of furries just short of the transport bay. The characters finally defeat Robbins and the aliens, but they have lost precious time. As they reach the transport, a

much larger group of Aberrants and furries appear, too close to escape and too numerous to defeat.

The Norça psions charge the characters on their honor to see the scientists and their prisoner safely to Earth. Then, as one, the shifters charge the onrushing aliens. As the characters climb aboard the ship, one of their newly found Coalition allies remains behind. The drone slips away in the confusion to spread the ideas it has learned to as many of its people as possible.

The characters must quickly master the controls of an advanced alien craft not only to escape, but to survive attacks by several Coalition fighters once they are underway. As they flee from the ark, the characters notice that the Coalition craft completed its plundering of the planet below and recovered its ships and ground bases. The huge ship breaks orbit over the dying planet and heads deeper into the system, toward the sun. As the characters battle the alien fighters that remain, the space ark slingshots around the sun, hurtling out of the system at tremendous speed — then vanishes in a blaze of light. Earth was wrong. The Coalition ark is capable of traveling faster than the speed of light.

Once the alien fighters are destroyed, the characters attempt to contact *Stormcrow*, hoping that the frigate somehow escaped detection by enemy patrols. After several tense hours, they are successful, and the weary heroes are brought onboard to carry their grim tidings back to Earth.

Theme

The dominant themes of *The Devil's Bargain* are deception and betrayal. In many ways, the characters' greatest challenge is who to trust, both within their team and without. Sinister preconceptions about the Coalition (and even the Norça) have the potential to hamstring the team from the start, calling on the characters to separate fact from opinion. There are numerous agendas at work, often at cross-purposes, and the characters must see past their own suspicions and mistrust in order to survive.

Mood

The mood of *The Devil's Bargain* is horror and a sense of invisible menace. The characters should feel from the beginning that they are being drawn into a vortex of schemes and hidden dangers. They should suspect that there is more going on behind the scenes than they are aware of. The characters are being sent to spy on a powerful and terrifying

race, knowing from the start that the odds of discovery and capture are high. The team is considered expendable, and when the characters first arrive at Beta Canum Venaticorum, they should feel naked and alone at the mouth of a lion's den. Even after getting picked up by the frigate in the end, the characters should not feel safe. The discoveries they have made reveal a grim fate for humanity.

Setting

The Devil's Bargain is initially set amid the lush and exotic environment of *La Pluma Esmaralda*, a Norça preserve in central Brazil. The episode then proceeds to the wilds of Erebus, Beta Canum Venaticorum's third planet. Events finally culminate in the labyrinthine corridors of the Coalition's vast space ark.

La Pluma Esmaralda

(The Emerald Feather)

The Norça purchased this vast nature preserve from the Brazilian government in order to continue its wide range of biological and zoological research, including biosphere reclamation and species restoration. The 1200-square-kilometer

sanctuary, set in the Brazilian highlands, teems with rich and vibrant life, closely scrutinized by scientists and discretely surrounded by sophisticated security systems.

Beneath the preserve's dense canopy the Norça have established a self-sufficient community for members of their order, allowing them to immerse themselves in the biosphere that they study and influence. Outsiders with a cynical nature might comment that the isolation is also a useful security measure to keep del Fuego's children from sharing what they know to the rest of the universe. The Norça, however, insist on the need to go out and "work in the dirt," to experience the results of their work viscerally as well as intellectually. "You cannot get a sense of the wilderness by poking at a culture in a petrie dish," goes a famous saying attributed to the Biokinesis Proxy. "You must prowl its paths like a jaguar, let its leaves brush your flanks, and taste of its sweet blood."

There are several dozen laboratory buildings scattered in groups beneath the great trees, designed to present minimal impact to the surrounding environment, plus a centralized "village" that houses and cares for the scientific community. The



name for the preserve allegedly comes from a poem del Fuego wrote in his youth, where he likened the beauty of the rain forests to "Emerald feathers, perfect flashes of jeweled hues in sunlit radiance revealed."

The preserve's villa lies nestled against a verdant mountainside, overlooking the central village and seeming to rest on a sea of swaying green. The large plantation-style home serves as one of Proxy del Fuego's many retreats, as well as an occasional meeting place for senior Norça officials and members of the various Sudamerican governments. Accommodations are luxurious and elegant, and a small army of Norça bodyguards in a variety of forms patrol the walled grounds. The villa can comfortably house as many as 60 guests and has landing facilities for small hybrids and sub-orbital aircraft.

Erebus

Erebus is *Aeon*'s code name for the unexplored third planet of Venaticorum System, currently orbited by the Coalition space ark. The planet is rich in terrestrial minerals (iron, copper, sulfur, etc.) but possesses no radioactive metals in measurable quantities. Though slightly smaller than Earth, Erebus contains a similar water-to-land ratio and supports a thriving biosphere on green, rolling grasslands not unlike the African savannah. These broad plains make up the majority of the planet's land surface, though dense forests cluster against sizable continental mountain ranges, and deserts spread across equatorial regions. Erebus also has two unnamed moons, one visible at night, the other only in early morning hours and in the evenings.

At the time of *The Devil's Bargain*, Erebus is coming off its spring storm season, when huge rainstorms sweep across the plains for weeks on end and swell the subterranean water table for the long summer ahead.

Native Life

The plains are home to huge herds of herbivores and packs of large predators. Erebus is also the birthplace of a primitive race of sentients. These beings are still millennia behind humanity, developmentally speaking. The erebans have only recently learned to domesticate plains animals and are at the early stages of an agrarian society. These beings are semi-quadrupedal, capable of moving easily on two limbs or four. Each of their four "hands" has three long fingers and an opposable thumb. Their bodies are long and lean, covered in a short, velvety greenish-tan pelt. Slim, antler-like

horns sprouting from the erebans' heads are, in fact, sophisticated olfactory organs evolved to sample the ever-present winds that blow across the grasslands. The erebans cluster in rudimentary villages made from grass and animal dung, surrounded by palisades of giant animal ribs.

The Coalition

Initial reports about the Coalition speculated that they were a collection of separate alien races united to fulfill a common set of goals. Subsequent information pointed to the idea that the various "races" were, in fact, tailored offspring of a central "breeder" species. These servitors were thought to be genetically modified for specific functions, but all shared a common set of genetics.

The truth, in fact, is somewhere in between.

Progenitors

The Coalition, at its heart, is a single race of beings with the ability to combine their chromosomes with that of any other living carbon-based organism, regardless of origin. This race comprises the "breeders." It was discovered by the second UN expedition to the ark (see **Trinity Field Report: Alien Races** for details). Each asexual breeder, officially labeled a *progenitor*, can not only mate with any other species, but carries within it the ability to sample alien genetic material, break it apart, and incorporate select pieces into its own matrix. A progenitor can also consciously express or repress specific gene sequences within itself. The full capability of this talent cannot be realized within a progenitor itself. Instead, the race's greatest manipulative strength lies in its ability to conceive offspring tailor-made to individual specifications.

In addition, each progenitor has a means of implanting large amounts of information *in utero* via complex strands of amino acids. These strands encode information on cerebral tissue and effectively "program" an offspring for specific knowledge, instructions and behavior. This kind of programming can also be transmitted through sophisticated pheromones, able to affect mature offspring — and other species as well, within limits. Pheromonal interaction is in fact a central part of the Coalition language. It supplies contextual information and emotional subtext to conversations, and in emergencies, it transmits large amounts of raw data in moments.

In the progenitors' view, the strong are meant to take from the weak; those who do not evolve are meant to die. This cold-blooded ethos holds

Group Dynamics

Organization within the Coalition is very fluid and dynamic. When a breeder has a task that needs doing, it uses its personal authority, via pheromones, to assemble the necessary forces for the job. Once the work is complete, it dismisses them back into the labor pool. In this way, the Coalition resembles something of an ant hive, with work groups formed on an *ad hoc* basis for short-term functions. The number of servitors that a progenitor (or, to a lesser extent, an envoy) can command is dependent on the individual's social status within the progenitor phyle. The type of phyles that can be commanded is also relative — a breeder can naturally assemble members of any phyle, while an individual envoy can only command specific phyles as authorized by its master.

true even within the progenitor phyle. Status and social interaction are based on the relative worth of an individual's genetic matrix, representing potential characteristics that a breeder could provide to the race in times of need. To the breeders, genetic material is the coin of the realm. Alliances are forged, deals are made and social promotions facilitated through the give and take of chromosomes via intercourse. (This is the foundation of sex as a social tool for the Coalition as a whole.)

Despite their many genetic strengths, the breeders are limited in certain key ways. They are physically frail and have short life spans (the equivalent of 20 Terran years). The progenitors' paranoid need to control their environment, coupled with their short life spans led the race to develop plans that are multigenerational in nature.

The Servitors

Over time, the progenitors began breeding specific strains of offspring to address specific tasks and to insulate the "breeders" from physical labor or danger. These tailored groups, or *phyles*, are amalgamations of gene sequences collected from scores of species and assembled in an optimized package. Each phyle is capable of natural reproduc-

tion to propagate itself. As humans classify life, each one can be considered a viable, unique race. The only common denominator between them is a small set of shared genes that link them to their common ancestor, the progenitors. This gene set does little more than establish a means of communication and control for the breeders. Also, servitor races do not share the ability to organically manipulate genetic information. That is the province of the breeders alone.

There are numerous phyles within the Coalition, each one designed for a specific job, but the most commonly encountered ones are envoys, spinals, sasqs, drones, and cattle. The characteristics of any phyle are subject to change, to suit evolving needs or as the progenitors breed in occasional refinements from recently acquired gene sequences. Once a particular generation's characteristics become obsolete, they are eliminated to make room for their improved descendants. For instance, the envoys encountered by the UN during the second contact expedition are being progressively disposed of as phyle members carrying human genes become available.

The progenitors have recently spawned a new phyle incorporating Aberrant genetic material, in hopes of expressing specific Aberrant mutations and powers. The ultimate function of this new phyle, labeled *furies*, remains unclear.

For detailed information and statistics on each phyle, refer to "Dramatis Personae," p. 116.

The Coalition Ark

The Coalition's space ark is a mammoth creation spawned by technology as much as a hundred years more advanced than Earth's. The craft is practically a world unto itself, capable of sustaining a billion inhabitants indefinitely, as long as it has the proper raw materials. The ship's enormous power requirements are supplied from an artificial singularity deep within the core of the ark. This artificially generated black hole "leaks" a near-infinite quantity of high-energy radiation powerful enough to sustain all of Earth and Luna combined.

The vessel's interior layout has a design reminiscent of an onion. Cargo bays, hangar areas, and raw-material processing areas are situated against the outer hull. The next layer comprises vast living areas, organized into huge communal groups like self-contained arcologies. Vital control areas (such as the ruling progenitor phyle's domain), main engineering, and ex-

Pheromone Types

Pheromones serve as a vital tool for communication and function within the Coalition. All phyles can produce these chemicals to varying degrees. Coalition pheromones fall into two categories: *informational* and *relational*. Informational pheromones are neutral chemicals that serve as a vehicle for data-laden amino acid strands. All phyles contain informational pheromone glands for transmitting and receiving information. Relational pheromones are designed to evoke specific behavioral reactions that assist the phyle member in its function. A drone, for instance, carries a sophisticated relational pheromone that gives it a kind of social camouflage — it becomes part of the background and is not noticed unless specifically sought for.

Only the progenitors are capable of creating new pheromones, though updated pheromone sets can be bred into the lower phyles as desired. Likewise, pheromones can be specifically tailored to affect another species' body chemistry once a breeder has been able to absorb a chromosomal sample. The time to produce tailored pheromones (from one hour to several days) depends on the sophistication of its effects.

pansive medical/scientific facilities are located in the center of the ark. Each of the "arcologies" is home to one of the various servitor races, as well as a self-supporting maintenance hierarchy of technicians, workers and guards. The individual phyles routinely and efficiently perform any necessary interactions with other groups, but all are discrete entities. Fundamentally, the servitor phyles are separate races united in support of a single ruling class.

A patina of great age is laid across the ark's cool metal surfaces. The ship and its inhabitants have been traveling for a very, very long time. Bulkheads and inner walls are decorated with flowing script, a complex written language conveying meaning through a combination of form and color, now all but worn away by the passage of hundreds of generations. Within the arcologies are large, abandoned regions that once might have been parks, still decorated with alien sculptures formed by patterns of sound and air. There are hints of art and culture everywhere, suggestions of a refined and sensual culture seemingly long since vanished. Moving through the ship is like walking the echoing halls of a tremendous cathedral, a mixture of ancient power and weathered beauty.

For all the ark's teeming life, there are entire sections near the outer hull that are left abandoned, packed with gear whose use is now forgotten. Dark passageways cut through the vast structure and ancient compartments dot its interior, all left unexplored for hundreds of years. The ark provides the Coalition with a base of operations and a means to transport itself from star to star. Beyond that, its capabilities are largely untapped.

The space-ark's technology is entirely hardtech, and advanced to the degree that much of it is intuitive in operation. The ship's control systems are entirely automated, capable of sustaining critical systems and prompting inhabitants for repairs. Interstellar navigation and travel are likewise automated, allowing the ship's masters to enter and delete courses through a simple set of commands. The ark's controls are virtually artificially intelligent, capable of carrying out complex tasks and adapting to environmental changes according to an extensive set of parameters.

Interaction with the ark's control systems (or any complex piece of Coalition technology) is handled through direct contact with the user's central nervous system. By touching a control surface, the user forms a neural link with the ark itself. The ship can transmit information directly into a subject's brain, manifesting as visual and auditory illusions.

In addition to housing 800 million inhabitants, the Coalition ark also carries a fleet of smaller craft, from single-person fighters to transports to large mineral sifters and survey craft. Large, automated fabrication units situated near the hull replace damaged or worn-out equipment of all types, requiring only that they first receive the necessary raw material from sifters. Robotic handlers and their at-

The Coalition on Erebus

When the Coalition arrives, the ark's sensors analyze the planet and establish regional demarcations based upon native (sentient and animal) population density and raw resources. These population centers are assigned to breeder commanders on the basis of status, with the members of the highest tier selecting the choicest spots.

Each breeder then assembles its progeny, plus attendant spinals and other servitors, and establishes a base camp on the planet. The individual sites form command posts from which to direct the ensuing genetic plunder of Erebus. Areas without significant population are subjected to systematic sweeps by automated sifters to acquire additional resources necessary to maintain the ship and its inhabitants.

By the time the characters reach Erebus, these base camps are fully established, and the native erebans have largely been herded into camps for systematic genetic rape, alongside pens containing potentially desirable animal life. Almost a third of the planet's surface has been sifted. Great clouds of dust hang in the upper atmosphere, the land beneath scoured clean.

tendant servitor phyle ("harvesters") tend large hydroponics areas. Along with the cattle, the food grown in these farms provides the Coalition with all its dietary needs. Each arcology section has automated food-processing units, but these fell into disuse decades ago due to a malfunction that the sasq technicians are unable to repair.

Running *The Devil's Bargain*

The Devil's Bargain is an adventure that challenges you to maintain tension both within the team and without, keeping the characters guessing at every turn where the real danger of their mission lies. Should they be more concerned about the ever-present threat of the Coalition, or the possibility that their teammates might place everyone at risk for the sake of their own secret goals? Even though the characters might have worked together extensively in the past, can they even trust one another?

Getting the Characters Involved

Most likely the characters are part of an established team of Æon agents who have worked



together on numerous field assignments. Even if this isn't the case, you can use the premise of *The Devil's Bargain* to assemble a diverse group of characters with a variety of backgrounds. In fact, the central theme of deception plays best when the members of the team are strangers to one another and must work together for the first time.

If the characters are not members of an established group, you can assemble them through contact by Æon, the UN or the Norça. Those involved with Project: Blackbird need to fill slots in the field team, and the characters fit the bill. A wide variety of professions and skills are in demand for the mission, including:

- **Diplomats:** The two previous attempts to deal diplomatically with the Coalition ended in disaster, but this does not mean that Earth has entirely given up the possibility of establishing some form of negotiations with the aliens. A small number of alien contact specialists could be added to the mission, both to provide analysis from a purely political viewpoint as well as remaining alert for any potential opening to make official contact with a faction of the Coalition or its phyles.

- **Engineers:** Æon and the UN are desperate to learn all they can about the Coalition in the event that the aliens reach Earth. Individuals who possess the capability to investigate and analyze the Coalition's technology are valuable to Project: Blackbird. (And such hotshot techs would likely ignore survival instincts at the opportunity to get their hands on highly advanced technology.)

- **Intelligence Officers:** The Coalition's technological capabilities alone are enough to alarm Æon. This goes for the UN as well, and many world intelligence services would be eager to send along trained agents to analyze alien equipment — and, perhaps, even acquire some examples along the way. You can increase the amount of tension within the team by including a number of established spies who make no secret of the fact that they are loyal to their parent organizations first, and the mission second.

- **Scientists.** The expedition to Erebus is primarily one of scientific discovery. What are the particulars of Coalition biology? How are the aliens capable of intermingling their genes with humans? Why does their society permit such a thing? Æon actually wants to include as many trained scientists as it can, from geneticists to xenobiologists, anthropologists to psychologists. Of course, these academicians face not only the inherent risks of the mission, but the typical rivalries and intrigues that competing researchers typically engender.

- **Soldiers.** Naturally, individuals with military experience are crucial to defending the field teams in the event of discovery, and adding their analysis of Coalition combat capabilities. Æon could tap active or retired military experts on the basis of the individuals' past records and abilities. It's also a way for a given organization to rid itself of mavericks or loose cannons by sending them off on such a risky mission.

Go ahead and play up the team members' different backgrounds and viewpoints, with the goal of challenging the characters when they try to cooperate (with each other and with Storyteller characters) on a plan or action. The actions and comments from Storyteller characters (especially Ellen Chadwick, a woman whom the characters should suspect from the start as concealing her true motives) should provide enough ambiguity to make an already tense situation quite unnerving.

Behind the Scenes

Project: Blackbird is a mission born out of desperation and competing self-interests, drawing the characters into murky waters of deception and double-dealing. Arrayed against them are a number of factions, whose agendas can enrich — or endanger — the characters.

The Æon Trinity

For two centuries, Æon has seen itself as the force guiding humanity through difficult and tragic times. The recent Huang-Marr scandal and the Chromatic War tested the Trinity's personnel and resources to the utmost. Æon must rely more heavily on other groups now, such as the United Nations and the psi orders. The Æon Council is worried about this degree of involvement; the last time it allowed itself such close ties, the organization was caught up in the ultimately doomed fate of the Aberrants.

When the Norça conveniently offered resources to assist in an alien contact mission, Æon and the UN could ill afford to refuse the help. The canny (and cynical) Æon Council suspected the Biokinesis Order's timing and sudden sense of community, though. It was too suspicious for simple coincidence: The Norça knew of Project: Blackbird, and wanted something out of it themselves.

The fact that the masters of subterfuge had penetrated UN records surprised Æon little. The Trinity was most concerned with learning the order's true motives in stepping forward. The

shifters never made any secret of their disdain for Æon's machinations, and in the past, they were downright forbidding when called upon to share information about their research on Earth and in space. But despite constant investigation since the shifters have come on board with the mission, Æon has learned precious little.

The Trinity is attempting to cover all its bases. In doing so, it sets its field operatives with the daunting task of gathering the necessary information on the Coalition and keeping an eye on the Norça. Ultimately the information gathered by Project: Blackbird must find its way back to Earth no matter the cost, and the Norça cannot be allowed to jeopardize this with their own agenda... whatever it may be.

The United Nations

Though often sidetracked through internal intrigue and political maneuvering, the United Nations is committed to acting as a unifying force that can bring Earth's divided nations together for the betterment of all. Only the organization's highest-ranking members are aware of how closely entwined Æon and the UN have become in both philosophy and action. Since the jump ships came on line in 2119, the two groups have worked almost as one — though with the Trinity seeming to call the shots more and more often.

The top UN officials aren't too happy about the relationship, but the ugly fact is that Æon is a necessary partner in the current turbulent times. The Trinity has a better relationship with the psi orders than the UN does, and has, thus far, been vital to interacting with them.

Truth be told, the UN would love to establish some form of control over Æon and the orders. But each group has made influential ties to key member nations, both publicly and covertly, and uses those connections to resist being brought fully under the United Nations' thumb. Not only that, but with the restoration of diplomatic relations to Qinshui and the development of the same on Chrome-Prime, the United Nations' resources are stretched to the limit already.

The Norças' financial backing and scientific expertise on Project: Blackbird were tremendous surprises, but eventually proved vital if the mission was ever to get off the ground. Pressure from both the Æon Trinity and the Norça as the mission developed made the UN fear that it would become an extraneous factor, though.

Whatever individual agendas the members of the United Nations Security Council had, all agreed that such a sensitive project must not slip from its grasp entirely. Æon and Norça investigative expertise was welcome, but their direction was not. Though a bitter pill for the otherwise influential UN to swallow, the Security Council decided to back off on issues of funds allocation and field-personnel allotments to retain control of the mission as a whole. Indeed, the UN privately hopes that this move may finally set in motion its desire to develop stricter control over these shadowy groups.

The Norça

The biokinetics are as notorious for their independence as for their secrecy. The order's members prefer to operate well out of the public eye and only grudgingly share the fruits of their labors. The Norça's proposal to organize and fund a joint mission to the Coalition, therefore, was distinctly out of character. Genetics research is actually one of the order's most important pursuits, though. Since the earliest days, Proxy del Fuego hoped to discover some way to block taint radiation. This would not only shut down most Aberrant powers at the source, but would help protect humans against its harmful side effects.

The shifters learned of the Coalition's technology during a hack in the UN databases in search of genetics data. Del Fuego's cadre of scientists saw the potential immediately. Advanced genetics processes might cut decades or even centuries from their work. The Norça would have preferred to undertake the mission entirely on their own. Despite its tremendous wealth, though, the organization simply doesn't have access to the military-grade space assets and crews that would make an interstellar spy mission possible. Instead, del Fuego decided to insinuate his group in the plans that the United Nations was making already.

As a trade off for providing the necessary funds to acquire ships and personnel, the Norça largely dictated the composition of the field teams and stacked them with loyal Norça. *Pai de Norça* was adamant about keeping the scientific staff almost entirely supplied by his order. This isn't due to simple mistrust or paranoia. He strongly suspects that the United Nations has been infiltrated by Aberrant sympathizers. With a known Aberrant presence on the Coalition ark, the proxy fears that a sole UN expedition would fail like the first two. The Norça have but one chance to get the information they

need, and co-opting the venture in this fashion enables them to control the focus of their studies.

The Norça are as committed to fighting the Aberrant menace as any of the orders. In fact, they are much more dedicated than most. The order's secret research projects in Sudamerica, on Europa, and on Averiguas have resulted in knowledge that it believes the average person is better off not knowing. As a tightly knit organization that prides itself on independence and self-discipline, the Biokinesis Order has a tendency to dismiss others' capabilities until they have proven themselves. Naturally, outsiders see these attitudes as arrogant and presumptuous, but the biokinetics are unapologetic. They know the truth, and that will have to suffice.

The Norça participating in Project: Blackbird are composed of both psion and neutral volunteers. (Indeed, the order has a very high percentage of non-psionic members, most of whom are scientists and researchers.) They are fully aware of the mission's risks, but they are committed to serving the *Pai de Norça*, and through him, the rest of humanity. These Norça plan to accomplish their objectives — assembling a detailed picture of Coalition genetic technology and capturing a progenitor for further study. They will do this with every resource at their disposal... up to and including manipulating other team members. Even so, the Norça are not heartless; they will not callously sacrifice anyone or betray the team, no matter what the other characters may suspect.

The Aberrant-Coalition Alliance

The Coalition's ark has traveled from the center of the galaxy for centuries, following a pre-programmed course that carries it from one habitable world to the next. The aliens took what they wished from these planets and left deserts in their wake. In all that time, not a single species held more than passing value. All that changed with the sudden arrival of the Jump Ship *Yi* and humanity's first attempt at contact. The small delegation of progenitors that eventually replied to *Yi*'s hails was shocked and amazed when members of the human crew demonstrated the use of psionic abilities. Consumed with greed, the breeders overwhelmed the unsuspecting humans, violating most of them fatally to ensure sole possession of this invaluable genetic potential.

The encounter with humanity caused numerous repercussions within the breeders and their social order. Surprisingly, every attempt to breed psionic potential into the Coalition phyles proved

fruitless. The progenitors were by turns frustrated and fascinated. Every living thing in the universe was nothing more than a combination of genetic material. According to everything they understood, a vast, new power was in their grasp, yet it somehow eluded them.

Then, several months later, the Aberrants arrived. Having learned of the Coalition through spies in the UN, the Aberrants made their own attempt at contact. The creatures decided on an unequivocal show of power to convince the aliens that negotiation would be a much wiser course than attempted rape. After seeing a small legion of spinals dissolved before their eyes, the breeders were suitably impressed. The Aberrants, for their part, did a careful job to conceal their own wonder and fear — the Coalition's technological might was even greater than they had suspected.

After reaching a sort of *détente*, the breeders made clear their desire for the Aberrants' genetic potential. The Aberrants, seeing a golden opportunity, offered a mutually beneficial exchange: They would provide chromosomal material in as much quantity as the progenitors wished, if they could use the Coalition's superior technology to conquer Earth. It was a deal that seemed to promise great benefits for both sides.

Of course, the Aberrants had no intention of giving up such power once they had it in their grasp. They gladly supplied their tainted genes, suspecting that they would have much more influence over a tainted progenitor than an untainted one and, thus, would have a means of conquering the race from within. The taint, the Aberrants knew from long experience, had a tendency to shape the wielder rather than the other way around.

As far as the Coalition was concerned, the Aberrants' proposal seemed utterly one-sided. Earth, as the breeders discovered, was to be their next stop after Beta Canum Venaticorum anyway, so they would end up invading the system no matter what. The Coalition was being given rare and potent genes in return for something they would end up doing on their own. Naturally, they agreed. Once they had solved the puzzle of breeding psionic abilities, the Coalition could then turn on the Aberrants and destroy them.

Unfortunately, the Coalition did not understand the difference between psionics and taint, and the Aberrants were not about to enlighten them. Many of the most powerful progenitors assimilated the tainted genes and intensified their

efforts at producing crossbreeds. To the aliens' horror, their first attempts produced mutated creatures whose psychotic impulses made them all but invulnerable to *in utero* programming, and who still could not manifest the awesome power the Aberrants displayed. Subsequent generations fared no better, and all the while the tainted genes were twisting the breeders from within, slowly eroding their sanity. The untainted progenitors viewed their cousins with alarm, caught between the dilemma of terminating their new alliance (and their tainted brethren) immediately, or waiting a little longer to see if their attempts at crossbreeding gave the Coalition access to Aberrant abilities. The lust for power won out, though relations between the majority of the breeders and the Aberrants cooled significantly as a result.

Thanks to careful coaching from the Aberrants, the Coalition envoys were able to welcome the second UN expedition and put it somewhat at ease. The Coalition witnessed further demonstrations of psionic ability, which only served to tantalize them further. Then the progenitor made another discovery that shocked them even further. The human delegation carried equipment *grown from living cells*. The implications of biotechnology stunned the breeders, and once they learned that psionics were a key element to biotech fabrication, the conquest of Earth became paramount in their plans.

The Coalition has every intention of invading and subjugating Earth. It sees the acquisition of psionic potential as vital to the race's continued superiority and the key to accessing biotechnology, which is quickly assuming an almost religious significance to the breeders. As in everything, the Coalition prefers to take the long view, spending several generations to optimize its phyles with new genetic potential and unlock the secrets behind humanity's psi abilities. The Aberrants, however, are increasingly insistent on pressing for an immediate attack, something the breeders consider dangerously hasty. The more the Aberrants insist, the more the Coalition balks, and the wider the rift grows between the tainted and untainted progenitors.

As the tainted breeders degenerate further, and each succeeding generation of crossbreeds shows increasingly alarming mutations, the Aberrants sense that the arrangement with the Coalition is fast unraveling. The untainted progenitors are drawing further and further away from their twisted cousins, and they are showing signs

of resentment at the Aberrants' presence on the ark. The Aberrants feel that time to make use of the aliens' technology is running out, and the sudden stopover at Beta Canum Venaticorum suggests a stalling tactic. The breeders refuse to set a definite timetable for Earth's invasion, which further leads the Aberrants to believe that they are simply being strung along.

While the Coalition ravages Erebus, the Aberrants decide to take action, planning a coup against the untainted breeders. Once the tainted aliens fill the Coalition's first phyle, they can expand the crossbreeding process and spread the taint further through the rest of the progenitors. By the time the ark reaches Earth's solar system, the Aberrants' control of the Coalition should be complete.

Joining Project: Blackbird

The characters' first knowledge of Project: Blackbird comes in the form of a high-priority summons (either from *Æon* or the UN, depending on the characters' affiliation). They are to come to the UN headquarters on the Moon to discuss a matter of extreme urgency. Details will be provided upon arrival. Included with the summons are travel authorizations and credit vouchers to be used in making immediate travel arrangements. The documents are legitimate and are designed to cover the characters' transport costs no matter their current location, confirming that something very big indeed is going on.

A trio of UN officials meets the characters at Olympus Spaceport on Luna and whisks them through customs. (The versatile Hector Ramirez is there as well, representing *Æon*.) Alert characters (**Perception** or **Investigation** at +1 difficulty) note that every effort is being made to avoid lengthy public exposure and eliminate any electronic or paper trails documenting their arrival. If the characters arrive separately, they're escorted to a private waiting room in the spaceport. Once they're all assembled, the officials take them directly to UN headquarters and slip into the complex via a private side entrance. The characters find themselves deposited in the outer office of the UN Security Council, arguably the most powerful political organization of 22nd-century Earth.

After the hectic pace of travel, the characters are left to cool their heels for an hour. Ramirez lingers with them, but provides no useful details other than to explain that the United Nations is in charge of this one; *Æon* (and Ramirez himself) is involved only in an advisory capacity.

Finally, a small squad of security specialists arrives to subject the characters to a routine electronic sweep. The UN security detail, composed of a telepath, two psychokinetics and four neutral technicians, work quickly and professionally, checking the characters for any signs of electronic surveillance or recording systems. Finding none (or if a character is carrying a surveillance or recording device, the specialists will find it and insist that it be temporarily surrendered) the team is escorted to a small, richly appointed conference room within the Security Council's office suite.

Large windows provide a sweeping panorama of the sprawling Olympus colony, and dark skies alight with the passage of dozens of spacecraft. A tall, immaculately dressed diplomat awaits them, setting dpads before each chair placed around an ornate conference table. A small hemispherical bioware device rests in the center of the table, which characters with technical backgrounds recognize as a noetic dampener (**Engineering** at +1 difficulty; see "Technology," p. 123, for details).

The man beckons the characters to enter and with a carefully polished smile introduces himself as Alfred Fields, a senior attaché serving with the Security Council. Once the characters and Ramirez are seated, Fields gestures for security to depart.

Fields begins by apologizing for the abruptness of the summons, and for the use of a psi blocking device (he indicates the dampener on the table), but matters require extreme care and sensitivity. His manner is confident and respectful, but there is a slight edge of tension in his voice. The attaché explains that the characters have been recommended for a highly classified, high-priority mission. The task relates to intelligence gathering and involves extreme risk, but is vital to the security of Earth. Fields promises that the characters will be well compensated for their efforts, but because of the mission's classified nature, no further details are available unless the individuals commit themselves. If the characters do not wish to accept the assignment, they can leave immediately. In either case, they must first sign the electronic form on the dpad (a non-disclosure agreement prohibiting the character from discussing the trip to Luna for a period of 10 years). Fields will not share any further details about the mission until then.

This is not intended to chase off the characters, but to set the episode's tone, and to provide an ominous hint about the gravity of the task set before them. The mission is clearly very serious, and it's a mark of

the characters' skill and reputation that they have been sent to carry it out. (Have Ramirez point this out diplomatically if the characters insist on being paranoid.) On the other hand, it should be clear that once the characters commit themselves, there is no turning back. Fields and Ramirez try to persuade reluctant characters, playing up their unique talents and making them feel that the mission's success depends on their combined abilities. Not only would they be turning their back on Earth, they would be endangering their teammates.

Once the characters have decided, Fields smiles broadly and gathers up the non-disclosure forms, showing any dissenters regretfully to the door. The rest are told that they will be flown to an Earthside briefing site in two hours. Until that time, they have use of a consular apartment and access to any of the facility's lavish five-star restaurants. The unspoken implication is that the characters cannot leave UN headquarters or engage in any outside contact. Mission security is already in effect. Fields is polite but serious throughout, though it's obvious that Ramirez finds these precautions (including this seemingly wasteful side-trip to Luna) slightly ridiculous.

Two hours later, the characters are ushered aboard a UN L-B Comet Orbital Passenger Shuttle at an isolated spaceport terminal. As they're seated in the main cabin with dozens of other passengers, the characters catch a glimpse of Fields and Ramirez in first class. The others on the flight eye the characters with the dispassionate appraisal of experienced field agents. More passengers come aboard, taking up slightly less than half the shuttle's 150-passenger capacity. After liftoff, four Locust-C fighters from the Seventh Legion form up to escort the Comet on its trip to Earth. The characters can spend the journey taking advantage of the Comet's many amenities, or attempting to strike up conversations with any of the other passengers. Conversations can cover whatever topics you like, although everyone aboard has been chosen in the same manner as the characters. No one has any idea what the mission is about.

La Pluma Esmaralda

The three-hour trip to Earth is comfortable and uneventful, and after a smooth reentry the viewports show the wild, green vastness of the South American continent swathed in the darkness of night. The arcologies of Brazil shine like diamonds near the eastern coast, and for a time it

appears as though the Comet is on an approach to São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro. Then the Comet increases its angle of descent, making it clear that the shuttle intends to land deep in the Brazilian highlands, hundreds of kilometers from Sudamerican civilization. Lights suddenly blaze in the darkness, revealing a single, narrow runway on the terraced side of a broad mountain. Touch-down is smooth, and the pilot brings the craft expertly to rest with not a meter of tarmac to spare.

The characters step out of the shuttle into a world as alien as any of humanity's offworld colonies. The rain forest's heat and humidity settle on the characters in a wet embrace, and the vibrant sounds and smells of nocturnal forest life flood their senses. Psions feel the exhilarating abundance of life permeate them like a mountain breeze, so utterly unlike the noetic background of a crowded arcology or forbidding colony world. It is as if the characters have gone back to the cradle of creation. They have arrived in the heart of a Norça preserve.

A small knot of individuals stands a few meters from the shuttle, waiting patiently as the passengers disembark. Their leader, a tall, dark-haired woman of striking beauty wearing a green jumpsuit blazoned with the Norça *figa* emblem, surveys the growing crowd and smiles warmly. She welcomes the entire group in a variety of Earth languages (starting with Portuguese), and introduces herself as Dr. Elisabeth Veron, Director of Research for the Norça biological refuge Emerald Feather. Behind Veron, the characters can see clusters of lights gleaming amid the canopy at the mountain's base.

As the senior Norça member at the facility, the doctor explains that she is proud to open their modest villa to the newcomers, and she offers the sincere hope that everyone will enjoy the order's hospitality to the fullest. There is no way to tell the size of the "biological refuge," but judging by Veron's expansive manner, it likely spreads as far as the eye can see. Veron singles out the few biokinetics among the recent arrivals by name (including any of the characters), offering a special welcome home. The doctor's attendants then take charge of their guests' luggage. Veron beckons for the assemblage to accompany her, leading them along the terrace to a large, walled compound.

The refuge's "modest" two-story villa is nothing less than palatial, designed with open-air gardens and tall windows to let in the region's beauty. Within the compound's stone walls, a cluster of servants waits with food and drink for their guests.

Security guards linger nonchalantly in the shadows, providing a vigilant but non-intrusive presence. Otherwise, the villa is brightly lit and welcoming.

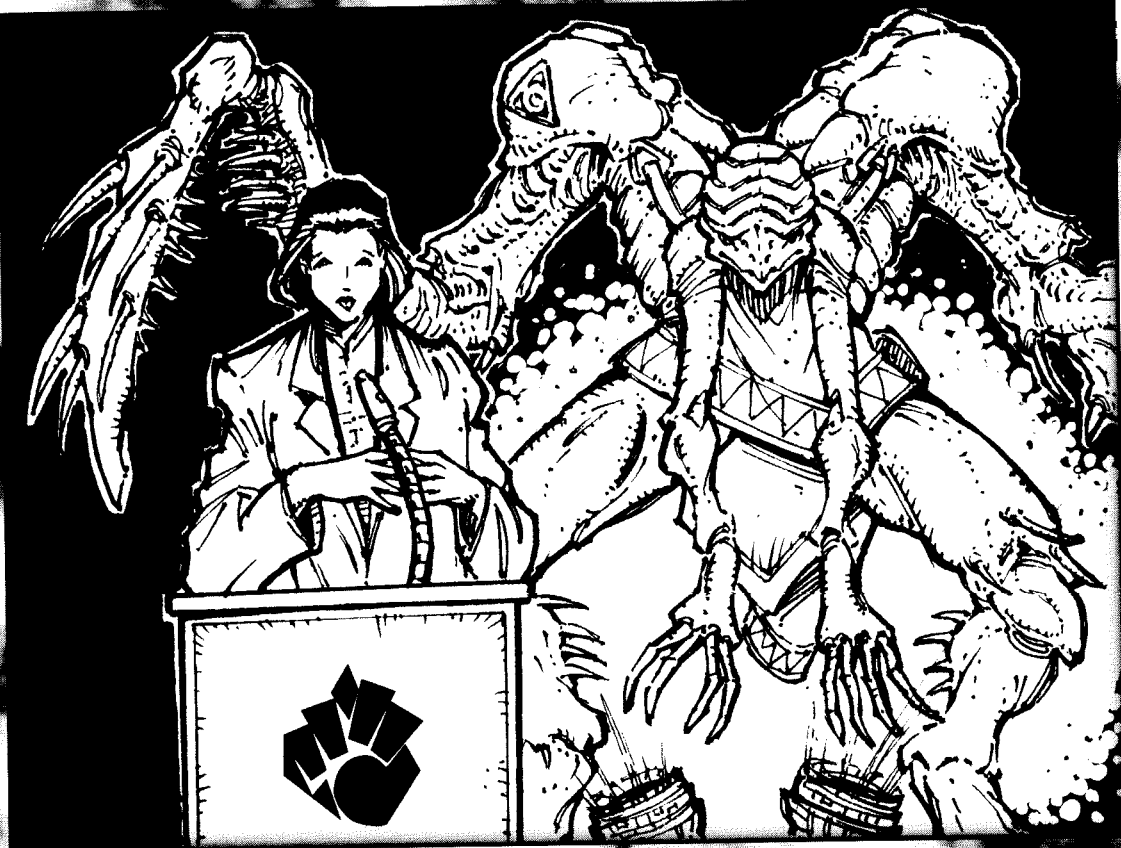
Veron stops at the entrance, and explains that since it is rather late (around midnight local time), her staff will show the arrivals to private suites for the night. She encourages them to rest even if they're not tired, as tomorrow promises to be a long and strenuous day. The servants show the characters to a suite of expensively decorated apartments, and offer to accommodate all reasonable requests. The characters are treated like visiting royalty, and the hospitality is warm and genuine. Depending on the preconceptions the characters may have about the Norça, the refinement and sensitivity of their surroundings might come as a pleasant surprise.

Unless the players wish their characters to pursue plots of their own that evening, fast-forward to the next morning. Servants escort them to a grand dining room awash with early morning sunlight. Subdued anima music plays in the background, and the windows are cracked to invite the plentiful chirps of birdsong. Quite a few of the refuge's research staff are present, strategically seated to provide their guests with conversation and pleasant entertainment. The scientists are pleased and flattered with any interest in their work at the Emerald Feather, and speak with great passion about their work to restore the Amazon to its full, primal glory.

After an expansive breakfast, Veron requests the guests' attendance in a nearby drawing room. The large rectangular chamber has been converted into a briefing room, with a small stage and corporate-grade holo projector at one end. Several low tables along the sides are the focus of a bustle of activity. Servants conduct the characters to a row of seats and offer a selection of coffee, tea and exotic juices to enjoy during the briefing. Otherwise, though, the atmosphere here is brusque and professional, a marked contrast with the general air of congeniality that dominates the rest of the villa. The contrast between Old World gentility and modern impersonality is rather striking.

The Briefing

Alfred Fields takes the stage. He re-introduces himself, this time explaining that he is the Security Council's chief liaison for Project: Blackbird. Blackbird, he states without preamble, is a covert reconnaissance mission to gather information on the alien race known as the Coalition. Fields



then activates the projector and presents the gathered personnel with everything the United Nations has learned about the alien race, including the fate of the two previous expeditions. (Circulate the material presented in the color section at this point, along with any other observations you wish to include.) Given the highly classified nature of this data, it's entirely possible that some or all of the characters might know nothing about the Coalition other than the name. Certainly there are a number of startled outbursts during the course of the proceedings as others see the sensitive data for the first time.

The briefing lasts throughout the day with brief lunch and dinner breaks, and is handled by a mix of UN and Norça experts. Ramirez, the sole Æon representative (other than possibly the characters and roughly one third of the audience), maintains an advisory capacity and contributes nothing of note. The presentation consists of a series of lectures covering speculation on Coalition biology, technology, society and genetics capability, concluding finally with an analysis of repercussions should the Aberrants develop a mass-breeding program. You can present this as a lec-

ture, though short speeches punctuated by question-and-answer sessions encourage more roleplaying opportunities.

One of the presenters stands out in particular — Ellen Chadwick, mission coordinator for the first Coalition expedition. Her presentation covers aspects of Coalition society as she saw it, and an analysis of her own recorded debriefing (made when *Yi* returned to human space). The hollow, haunted look in Chadwick's eyes as she dispassionately discusses the repeated violations she suffered gives the assemblage a taste of the nightmare facing humanity.

You may call for the characters to make standard **Perception** or **Rapport** rolls during the briefing. If successful, the characters sense a definite undercurrent of tension between the UN and Norça officials. Telepaths who use **Sense Emotion** or **Babel Effect** (or vitakinetics making use of **Mentatis**) can sense definite distrust and hostility between the two groups. It's clear that they are working together out of necessity, not friendship.

With the general orientation complete, the characters are briefed on the mission specifics. The assembled staff will be divided into six field

Names

Despite popular belief, not every biokinetic is South American. The majority of the Norças' neutral members do hail from South and Central America, though. It can be difficult to come up with authentic-sounding names for such individuals. The lists below provide a selection of ready-to-wear names that you can use as the occasion warrants.

Male

Bento Rivaldo
Henrique Machado
Adelmar Pascual
Suero de Brugera
Julcir Toriano

Female

Emilia Nunho
Verna Cafu
Yudalis Rocha
Mayela Almagro
Erendira Espejo

teams, each composed of 10 scientists and 10 operations personnel. An Upeo teleporter will bring them to Beta Canum Venaticorum aboard *Stormcrow*, a modified Kestrel IV frigate. Once in-system, each field team will disembark in a hybrid craft and proceed to Erebus. Contact with hostiles is to be avoided at all times.

Upon landing, the ops people will conceal the landing craft while the scientists set up their lab equipment. The field teams have seven days to study alien activity in their sector and gather as much physical evidence as possible without compromising their mission. At the end of the allotted time, the landing craft will head for a rendezvous point with *Stormcrow* for return to Earth. The precise conduct of ground operations is at the discretion of the individual ops and science teams. Enemy activity on the ground and in the area of space around the ark is expected to be heavy. If a field team is discovered, it is to make every effort to get its information to the frigate by broadband radio transmission, then try to escape as best it can without compromising the other teams.

The officials make no illusions about the fate of teams that are discovered. It's fully expected that such groups will be overwhelmed by the enemy's superior numbers and will likely be captured. At that point they will be ravaged for genetic resources until their bodies expire from shock and trauma. Once taken into the ark, there will be no escape.

The mission departs from Earth in two days. At the conclusion of the briefing, Fields steps up again and tells everyone to get a full-night's sleep. The individual field teams will be assembled at 0800 hours the next day, followed by orientation

sessions to familiarize team members with the specialized equipment being taken to Erebus. By the time the characters are dismissed, night once again blankets the lush rain forest.

Secrets, Rumors, and Lies

Sleep seems all too brief before the characters are awakened the next morning. After another elegant breakfast, a servant conducts the characters to a small meeting room on the ground floor. On the way, they catch glimpses of work being performed out in the villa's courtyard — more preserve staffers are decorating the area and setting up tables. The servant explains that there will be a celebration that night to send the field teams on their way.

Since the mission plan calls for 10 field operatives and 10 scientists, the characters will be part of a larger group than they're probably used to working with. (The characters are assumed to be in operations, though you may adjust things for those with obvious science backgrounds.) Norça personnel round out all but two posts on the character's team. The remaining two posts are given to Dr. Theo Robbins, a xenoanthropologist and UN liaison, and Dr. Ellen Chadwick, who will provide advice regarding Coalition behavior. Eight of the team members are actual Gifted, while the remainder are non-psions. Dr. Lauren Kawamura leads the science team, all of whom are experts in their fields. Each one is also a loyal Norça and carries an air of cool distance toward any non-Norça characters. (For more information, see "Dramatis Personae," p. 115.) Appoint the character with the highest combination of Charisma, Command and Influence as head of the ops team.

For the next several hours, UN technicians give the characters basic orientation on the APD-11 Optimized Surveillance Array (of which each team has four), chameleon mesh and pheromone filter/analysis systems (one of each for every team member). In addition, the field operatives are issued field suits, tactical radios, a field survival kit (containing binoculars, compass, field kit, flashlight, survival blanket, emergency medkit, and 10 glup packs), utility knife and an L-K Vindicator 11 laser carbine. See "Technology," p. 121, or *Trinity*, starting on p. 258, for descriptions. Characters are free to supplement their kit with their own equipment, as desired.

After the characters are checked out on their new gear, they are sent into one of the open-air

gardens for a final piece of equipment. A capsule containing an extremely toxic poison is injected to the right earlobe of each Blackbird team member. In the event of capture, a character can, *in extremis*, rupture the capsule and escape her fate. The poison is relatively painless and immediately fatal. (Note: This is a plot device to further set the mood. The players should not feel it is incumbent on them to have their characters kill themselves if captured.) Once this somber task has been seen to, the characters are left to themselves for a few hours until the evening's festivities.

Enter del Fuego

At sunset, the courtyard fills with scientists, technicians and off-duty security officers from the community at the base of the hill. The operatives bound for Erebus are the guests of honor at a celebration lauding their courage and sacrifice. The tables are piled high with a huge feast, and vibrant *selva* music (an energetic Brazilian style incorporating percussion and horns with rhythms found in nature) fills the air. The festival atmosphere is infectious, yet the entire event feels much like the condemned man's last meal, a glorious sendoff for those who will likely never return.

In the midst of this revelry a broad-shouldered, dignified man of middle years quietly enters the courtyard. Despite his subdued arrival, his presence sends a thrill of electricity through the crowd. Cries of *Pai de Norça* fill the night air, and heads turn to see the striking figure of Giuseppe del Fuego smiling fondly upon his cheering supporters.

The Biokinesis Proxy motions the crowd to silence. He easily captures the crowd's attention before even opening his mouth; even the characters find themselves drawn to del Fuego's vitality and magnetism. He speaks softly, but his words carry easily throughout the courtyard. Del Fuego says that he has come to make final arrangements for the mission with the venerable United Nations, and to express his admiration for the brave souls who will risk all for the sake of Earth and its people.

The proxy's utter mastery of form is reflected in his manner of speech, his body language — in every aspect of his physical being. As he addresses the crowd, every person feels as though del Fuego were speaking to them and them alone. Even those who might have cause to suspect or even fear the mysterious proxy find their antagonisms inexorably melting under the brilliance of his charm. *Pai de Norça* urges the celebrations to continue; as the music starts up once again, he circulates through

the crowd, offering kind words and the occasional warm embrace to members of his order.

Up close, Giuseppe del Fuego's charisma is heady and irresistible; women find themselves profoundly attracted to his earthy vibrance, and men unconsciously seek his approval and respect. The characters find the proxy to be very approachable and down-to-earth. If there is a biokinetic among the characters, he greets her by name and gives her a brotherly embrace, his touch electrifying every nerve. It's clear during conversations with *Pai de Norça* that he is honestly passionate about his order's commitment to protect Earth and broaden humanity's awareness of its place in the planet's biosphere.

Last Minute Matters — Norça

Both the Norça and the UN take advantage of this sendoff to contact members of each field team. Later in the evening, the biokinetics among the field operatives (including any characters) are brought to one of the villa's private libraries for a short meeting with the Norça Proxy. Out of the public eye, del Fuego's affable image evaporates, leaving the stern father of a powerful psionic order. His presence fills the room like a pent-up storm, reaching into each and every one of his children. As one, the biokinetics are held by his dark gaze, their thoughts and feelings swept away in a wave of pride and passion. Though the meeting lasts only a few minutes, it feels like hours, and each moment is etched with crystal clarity in the psions' hearts for many years to come.

Del Fuego again welcomes each Norça in turn, and explains that the real reason for his arrival is to entrust "his children" with a far more vital and dangerous mission than the UN's timid spying attempt. It is vital that the Biokinesis Order learn everything it can about the Coalition's genetic technology; this will only be accomplished by taking the necessary information from the source. Since getting onto the ark is too dangerous, the Norça must dare to capture a live Coalition alien — one of the progenitors, if at all possible — from the planet's surface, and bring it back to Earth. That is not the only danger to be faced. It has long been the proxy's belief that both the United Nations and the Æon Trinity have been compromised by Aberrant spies, so it's quite possible that the Norças' great enemy already knows of this mission. Each Norça can trust only her brothers and sisters in the order; all other mission personnel are suspect, and cannot be

trusted with the Norças' true mission unless it becomes unavoidable. Nor can they be allowed to interfere in its success.

Even so, the proxy is confident of victory. And if successful, these exploits could lead to not only the defeat of the Coalition, but to the eventual eradication of Aberrant Syndrome in the human race.

Last Minute Matters — Æon

At the same time, Hector Ramirez draws aside individual Trinity operatives and warns each of Æon's suspicions concerning the Norça. These characters learn that the biokinetics have their own secret reasons for supporting the mission (what, exactly, Æon doesn't know yet); they could easily betray the mission to achieve their own ends. Ramirez taps a key on his minicomp to display intercepted transmissions warning that the Norça compromised UN data on the Coalition, shortly before the Biokinesis Order conveniently offered assistance in financing a third expedition (as shown in the "Clairsentient Reconnaissance" and "Security Breach" transmissions, p. 70-71).

The operatives are already charged with gathering all available information on the Coalition, including its political structure, strategic goals, technological capabilities, and the nature of its relationship with the Aberrants. Beyond that, the characters are to gather any evidence of the Norças' hidden objectives. At the very least, the characters are to do whatever is necessary to prevent the Norça from compromising Project: Blackbird.

The festivities last all night, but by the end of the evening each character has a lot to think about. One by one, the Blackbird personnel return to their rooms, to catch what sleep they can before the shuttle lifts at dawn.

Beta Canum Venaticorum

The characters awake as a predawn thunderstorm hammers at the mountainside. After enjoying another fine breakfast (or suffering through a hangover, depending on how much partying was involved the night before), the Blackbird mission personnel make their farewells. They board the waiting L-B Comet (which, with the added Norça science teams, is now loaded to capacity). The shuttle roars up into the storm and beyond, rising into a brilliant sunrise.

The Comet meets up with the modified Kestrel-class frigate *Stormcrow* in high Earth orbit, mating to an external airlock long enough to transfer its passengers and cargo. *Stormcrow* then

breaks orbit and sets a general course for Mars. Once beyond standard sensing range, the frigate slips out of established traffic patterns, engages her stealth systems, and heads for safe jump distance. During the intervening hours, each Blackbird team organizes itself and loads its equipment into its respective landing craft.

Once at safe distance, *Stormcrow* sounds red alert, and the teams are ordered to man their ships. The frigate's assigned teleporter then translates the 60,000-ton warship through subquantum space, across 30 light years and within spitting distance of the Coalition.

Arrival In-System

Stormcrow appears inside Venaticorum System, one million kilometers from Erebus. The frigate's engines are silent and its sensor arrays survey the hostile surroundings in passive mode. High-energy signals flood the system as Coalition patrol craft continually search the region for any potential threat to their mother ship. Small, one-person fighters, traveling in groups of four, fill the vacuum with a cacophony of sensor emissions (see "Technology," p. 123, for details on the interceptors). The frigate spends several tense minutes trying to determine if its arrival has been detected. Clairsentients can use this time to employ **Farsensing** or **Sensory Projection** to scan the area for the presence and patrol routes of the Coalition interceptors.

Satisfied that the ship hasn't been detected, *Stormcrow's* captain passes down the order to launch the L-B MEL-S landing craft, each one heading off in 10-minute intervals. Characters with the requisite **Pilot** and **Engineering** skills are chosen to land the MEL-S. The challenge is that the pilot must guide the ship with only passive sensors, as any kind of sensor signal is certain to be detected. A clairsentient pilot can use her powers to augment the sensor information; otherwise, all relevant **Pilot** rolls are at +2 difficulty.

The journey to Erebus is a game of hide-and-seek, and the stakes are deadly indeed (for the characters, anyway; assume that the transports carrying the other Blackbird teams slip safely past the Coalition patrols). A successful **Command** roll does reveal a chink in the Coalition's armor. Though the alien interceptors are clearly being flown with great skill, they appear to fly set, predictable patrol routes. This provides a chance to thread through the interlacing sensor sweeps. The aliens' sensor emissions can be plotted using the ship's

passive sensors (**Pilot** or **Engineering** at +1 difficulty). With that accomplished, the pilot must succeed at four **Pilot** rolls to slip past the patrols. If a roll fails, a patrol ship briefly detects the craft and moves from its course to investigate. The pilot may then make another **Pilot** roll at an additional +1 difficulty to maneuver the MEL-S outside the patrol's sensor sweep (not unlike trying to dodge the cone of a flashlight's beam). If successful, the alien interceptor breaks off and returns to its route. Otherwise, the landing craft is detected. The characters' best hope is to quickly destroy the enemy ship before it can get a report off. (Give the characters the benefit of surprise and a free shot at the fighter before rolling initiative.)

Once past the patrol routes, the trip to Erebus takes less than six hours. As the blue-green world swells in the viewport, the characters see the gigantic alien ark hanging above it like an artificial moon. Small ships hover around the craft like a cloud of gnats, sometimes streaking through the atmosphere like falling stars as they make reentry. Closer still, Erebus' upper atmosphere is thick with formations of interceptors, shuttles and transports. Chadwick crouches next to one of the MEL-S'

viewports during approach, and no one needs to be a telepath to sense the dread she emanates.

Sharp-eyed characters (**Awareness**, +1 difficulty) detect clusters of brownish smears scattered in Erebus' atmosphere. A successful **Science** roll identifies the smears as huge clouds of soil and debris churned up into the atmosphere, creating great blotches tens of kilometers across. After several minutes of observation, the characters can tell that the blotches are slowly expanding, spreading across green and fertile land like a cancer.

Making reentry with so many alien ships in the area is problematic. The heat flare from entering the atmosphere can be minimized, but there is still a chance of detection. A stealthy planetfall requires a **Pilot** roll (+1 difficulty), entering in the shallowest arc possible to minimize the craft's "footprint." To build tension, you can have several formations of Coalition transports fly past the MEL-S at varying intervals, but none seem to take notice of the ship. (The craft is actually noticed, but the Coalition pilots believe that if the MEL-S got past all the patrols, it must belong there.)

Once inside the atmosphere, the characters must locate an observation sector that provides



concealment for the ship, yet affords opportunities to observe the aliens closely. Visual surveys and passive sensors reveal that the continent they're above is dotted with hundreds of small bases, situated for the most part near collections of what appear to be primitive villages. It's clear now that Erebus is inhabited, and the Coalition is ravaging the natives wholesale.

With a successful **Survival** roll, the characters find a region of foothills and sparse woodland at the edge of a great plain that offers moderate concealment and proximity to one of the alien ground bases. As the MEL-S comes in for a twilight landing, the characters can see the horizon aglow with the fires of blazing villages.

The best place to set down the MEL-S is in a small field surrounded by hills some 12 kilometers from the Coalition base (see map, p. 103). As soon as the ship touches down, the scientists get to work unpacking the lab and the characters are sent out to stretch a large chameleon mesh over the ship to prevent detection from the air. The first impression the characters have of Erebus is of dark, smoky skies and a wind that smells of ashes and charred flesh. Psions suffer immediate headaches

and faint nausea at the constant disruptions to the subquantum stratum as Erebus is ravaged. As if to punctuate the Coalition's grim purpose, four Coalition interceptors flash by overhead, followed by a formation of transports.

The characters have arrived at the mouth of hell.

Erebus

Kawamura, the science team leader, takes charge immediately, setting her crew to work establishing their initial research programs. She acts as though the group could be discovered at any time, and intends to make every moment count. The Norça operations staff is also quick to follow its own lead, subtly challenging the authority of the character you've made the ops team leader. From the beginning, that character is sent clear signals that the moment she makes a misstep she will have to step aside.

If the characters do not think of it themselves, the Norça insist on establishing a safe perimeter and determining if there are enemy patrols in the area. A successful **Survival** roll shows that there has been frequent foot traffic through the area in the past, most likely bands of ereban refugees fleeing Coalition raiding parties. Occasional faint sounds can be heard in the direction of the ground base to the east, and there are sporadic flights of alien craft overhead. For the moment, though, their base appears to be secure.

The next step is to map the immediate region for possible places of interest, and to establish surveillance sites for spying on the Coalition ground base. The Norça personnel advocate splitting the field teams into smaller groups and covering the most ground in the least amount of time. They are resistant to exploring the area *en masse*, claiming that a large group stands more chance of discovery. In truth, the Norça want to distance themselves from the Æon and UN operatives in the event the mission has been compromised.

If there is a clairsentient with the field team, a map of the area can be created in a matter of hours, using **Farsensing** or **Sensory Perception**. Physically surveying the region takes roughly 24 hours, with each success on teamwork **Survival** reducing the necessary time by one hour (to a minimum of 10 hours). Spinal patrols comb the region, apparently at random; they patrol for about an hour, then hide and lie in wait for a similar time before changing position again. Spinals on the move can be detected with a standard **Awareness**

Wolf in the Fold

The UN's Coalition Studies Group has long been infiltrated by Aberrant sympathizers who have surreptitiously kept their masters apprised of the Security Council's every decision. The speed with which Project: Blackbird was put together did not give these agents time to warn the Aberrants, but they did manage to get one of their number assigned to the mission. Theo Robbins is instructed to maintain his cover at all costs, but as soon as an opportunity presents itself, he is to gain access to the MEL-S' radio and transmit a warning to the Aberrants on Erebus. Robbins isn't stupid, and knows that acting strangely could get him found out. Therefore, he is helpful and cooperative on the mission, but not fawningly so. He provides honest analysis of the aliens' activities to the best of his ability, but confines his research to the MEL-S' lab instead of going into the field.

The Norça watch Robbins (and all other Æon or UN personnel) with their universal distrust and suspicion, limiting his activities. The arrival of the Aberrant conspirators (see "Erebus," below) finally draws the majority of the Norça scientists outside the ship and gives him the opportunity he needs.

The Rape of a World

The characters, most of whom are psions, have arrived on a world that is being systematically ravaged by the Coalition. The agonies of Erebus' biosphere, including the violation of its native race, send powerful reverberations through the subquantum stratum.

In game terms, a character using **Attunement** while on Erebus suffers from backlash with two dice added to the role (see **Trinity**, p. 192). Even if the character escapes damage from the noetic shock waves, be sure to convey the tremendous feeling of horror and agony that permeates the entire planet. It is the sort of overpowering sensation that, once experienced, is never truly forgotten.

This is made all the more horrific when the characters draw within 75 meters of the Coalition base (see below). The unmistakable disruptive sensation of taint can be felt emanating from inside the Coalition survey ship.

roll in plenty of time to find concealment. The warriors find well-camouflaged positions and remain still as statues when in "ambush mode," though, applying a +2 difficulty to the roll. **Danger Sense** does not suffer a difficulty to register the hidden spinals.

If the characters do stumble into an ambush, limit the spinals number to no more than half as many as the team's, and make the fight short and intense. Although the spinals carry radios (and small triangular patches; see below), their breeding is so specialized that the warriors don't think to call in an alert until after the fight is over. As long as the spinals are defeated and their bodies disposed of (including pheromone traces), the characters can avoid detection from the remaining Coalition forces.

The area survey identifies only one other spot of interest besides the Coalition base: a ruined ereban village four kilometers to the southeast (see map). During the course of the survey, numerous trails are discovered, indicating that there are at least several bands of villagers in hiding somewhere in the nearby forests. This presents several avenues of exploration as well as a number of potential encounters:

The Coalition Base

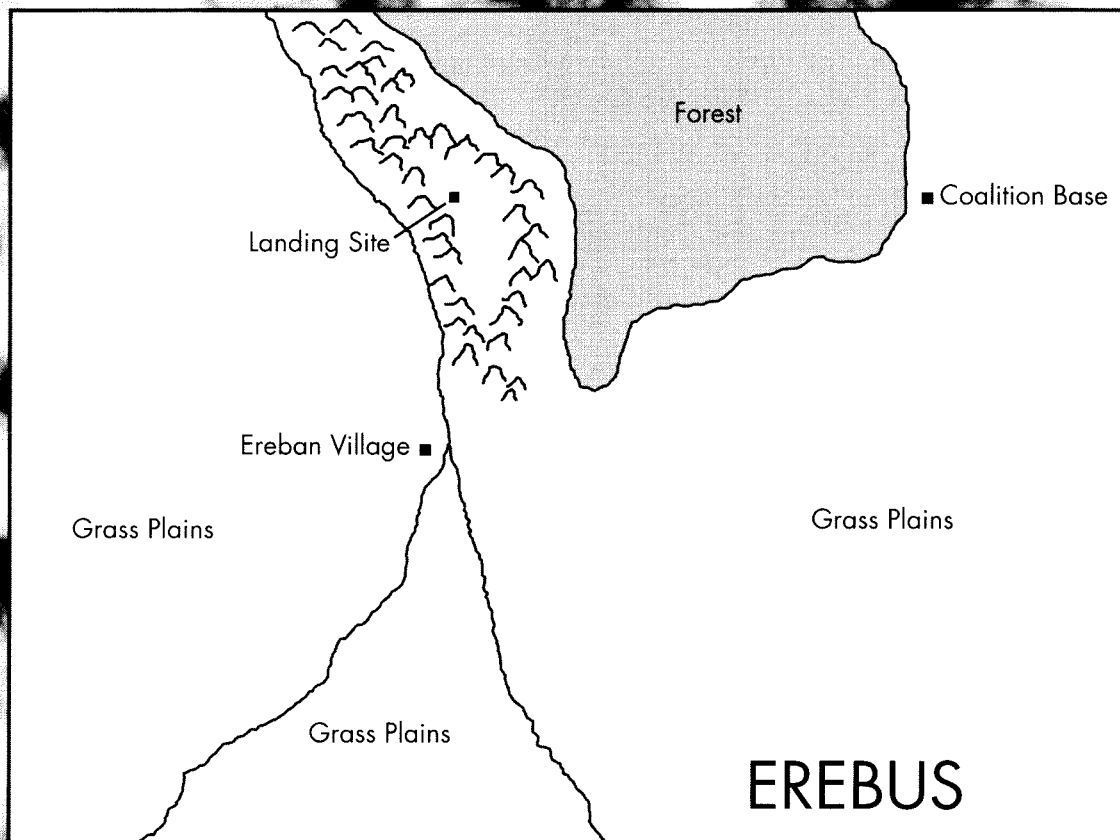
This is the most obvious source of study, but also the most dangerous. The ground base is centered around a single, hexagonal-shaped survey craft that contains automated scientific and medical labs (that are almost never used unless the breeder in possession of the craft is injured) as well as living quarters for the progenitor in charge. This leader's retinue is organized in five camps outside the ship, segregated by phyle (spinal, sasq, envoy, drone, drover) and arranged in a tight circle. Each camp appears to be constructed from modular, prefabricated units not unlike human colony habitats, and provides little more than rudimentary shelter from the elements. (The survey ship provides food, water and power.)

Five holding pens are set up beyond the camp ring, formed by three-meter-tall stakes driven into the ground to form a circle 25 meters across. Close to 100 young erebans are crammed into the pens, stripped of their clothing and segregated by gender (males in two pens and females in the other three). Drovers circle the pens, keeping a careful eye on their charges and, in turn, are watched over by statue-like spinals.

From time to time an envoy (tall and pale, with chillingly human features) approaches the pens from inside the survey ship, drawing the nearby drovers together without seeming to say a word. The drovers move into the pens, triggering terrified shrieks from the erebans. They surround a native and cull him/her from the herd, escorting him/her past the stakes and into the envoy's presence. The native's terror then subsides into something akin to surprise and wonder, and the envoy leads the stuporous ereban into the ship. Then, perhaps an hour later, the ereban's blood-streaked body is tossed outside to be carried away by waiting drones and dumped in a broad pit already half-full of rotting corpses.

Occasionally, an ereban is overcome with terror and tries to flee one of the pens. Most get no farther than the stakes before the stakes flatten them with an electrostatic pulse (8d10 B damage), and get tossed back inside by drovers. The few hardy souls that withstand the pulse and avoid the drovers are quickly surrounded by a pack of spinals. Sometimes these erebans are torn apart and, sometimes, they are viciously raped. Most times it is both.

The amount of detail gathered from the base depends upon how close the characters are willing to get. Naturally, a clairsentient can view the



area from the safety of the MEL-S. However, the science staff (and *Æon*, for that matter) needs details that clairsentient perception can't always provide — chemical analysis, social interaction, technological evaluation and other things that require specialized training to interpret properly. Further, this hard data must be documented for further study, something even a clear with a scrying cannot provide adequately for this mission.

The closest natural cover is a tree line 95 meters west of the base, but the team must make its way closer to use the APD-11 to its fullest capability. Characters with iron nerves can use their chameleon mesh to creep closer across the slightly rolling terrain. This requires a **Stealth** roll (+1 difficulty) for every 15 meters traveled across open ground, whether day or night. If any roll fails, a pack of spinals (equal to half the number of characters) notices the movement and heads over to investigate (make resisted rolls between the characters' **Stealth** and the spinals' **Awareness**). If the warriors fail to notice anything, they return to the camp. Otherwise, the characters' best hope is to eliminate the sentries without raising a general alarm and then escape... an unlikely proposition at best.

At 45 meters out from the ship, the characters find a perimeter delineated by one-half-meter-tall devices that resemble nothing so much as glossy, black tulips (see "Technology," p. 22). Each "tulip" emits a faint hum that can be heard from 10 meters away, but has no obvious controls. A chilling clue to its function can be found in six fresh ereban corpses sprawled five meters from a unit. The natives are not visibly marked, but were obviously slain in mid-stride, possibly when attempting to sneak into the camp. Phyle members move across this demarcation line with impunity, though. Careful observation (**Awareness** at +1 difficulty) reveals one element common to the various phyle members — each wears a small, triangular symbol on his right shoulder.

Still, given the opportunity, video and audio recordings provide a wealth of information about phyle behavior and interaction, as well as evidence of Coalition technological capability. The real payoff comes if the characters can set up surveillance within the APD-11's 60-meter spectral scanning range. Call for a standard **Science** roll for every hour the characters spend within this range. Each successful roll means that the surveillance team manages to analyze and record the spectral sig-

nature of one of the phyle's pheromones. This could be an envoy's use of its interrelational pheromone, or a drone's non-intrusive one — the particular pheromone is up to you. Also, have a roving spinal patrol roll **Awareness** every two hours to see if the surveillance site is detected.

The spectral analysis information can be taken back to the MEL-S and downloaded into the lab computers to determine the pheromone's chemical makeup. With this data, the characters' filters can be reconfigured to neutralize that pheromone's effects and reconfigure the pheromone filters to neutralize its effects — and the biokinetics learn how to manufacture the substances themselves.

The Ereban Village

The ruins of the ereban village are littered with the torn and mangled bodies of the very old and the very young. Thin tendrils of smoke still rise from the husks of burnt-out huts. The village looks as though the Coalition tore it apart with their bare hands, which is essentially what happened. A horde of spinals descended on the enclave, ripping apart the palisade and swarming over its startled defenders. Anyone who fought was killed, and those who did not meet the criteria set by the progenitors were slaughtered. Envoys and drovers came in the spinals' wake, herding together the paralyzed survivors and marching them off to the pens.

Searching the village provides several items of interest to the characters. Not all the Coalition forces escaped unscathed. Two spinal bodies can be found within the village, riddled with crude arrows and spears. The spinals' rifles and radios are gone, but their triangular shoulder badges were overlooked. Each badge is 25 centimeters on a side, and is attached to the creature's bony flesh through molecular adhesion. At first glance, each badge looks like a section of stained glass lifted from one of France's long-lost cathedrals — complex patterns of embedded silicon create beautiful, iridescent configurations that appear to hold a faint electrostatic charge. The devices adhere to clothing or flesh with equal facility, yet can be pulled away with a firm tug.

Elsewhere, the characters find corpses of an envoy and a drone, collapsed beside the body of a young ereban who still clutches a bloody dagger. The human-like envoy was clearly killed by a single stab wound, but the native and the drone do not appear to have a mark on them. A quick examination (standard **Medicine** roll) determines that both

Biokinetics and Pheromones

As a master of his physical form, a Norça shapeshifter may use **Metabolic Efficiency** to resist the effects of Coalition pheromones (with an equivalent Toxin Rating 4). After all, the substance functions in much the same way as a poison. Additionally, the biokinetic can use **Body Sculpt** to produce pheromone glands that duplicate the same pheromone effects, once the psion understands the pheromone's chemical composition. There are two ways to figure that out: either experience the pheromone's effects firsthand, or (more safely), determine its chemical composition by computer analysis.

If a Norça experiences a Coalition pheromone directly, he can reproduce the pheromone himself with a standard **Body Sculpt** roll. Producing it from computer analysis depends on a less visceral understanding, and adds +2 difficulty to the roll. The pheromones produced are functionally identical to the Coalition's, using the same system and effects.

bodies died of severe hemorrhaging, but nothing more can be determined without a detailed autopsy.

The Norça insist on recovering these bodies for further study. It's not a bad idea, that involves transporting corpses over several kilometers in a region crawling with enemy patrols. (The spinals alone weigh almost 250 kg each!) The task is difficult but not impossible, though it may have to be spread over several days. Challenge the characters with devising a means of transporting the corpses, then permit them to succeed with one or two close calls from spinal patrols.

If the characters argue against the idea, the biokinetics become angry and disdainful. Informed of the bodies, Kawamura later threatens to take her staff and drag the corpses back herself. Ultimately, the Norça reiterate that their mission is to gather as much information about the aliens as they can. In light of this, each member of the expedition is expendable. The manner in which Kawamura makes her argument, however, suggests that some people are more expendable than others.

Once at the MEL-S, autopsies reveal a wealth of information about the three aliens, all dutifully recorded for further study back on Earth (including the chemical breakdown for spinal, envoy, and



drone pheromones if the characters have not collected it already). The drone (and the ereban, if the characters bothered to bring it along as well), both died from an intense blast of gamma rays that caused massive, instantaneous cell disruption.

Incidental Encounters

You can include some, none, or all of the following incidental encounters. They are included here if you want to make the characters' struggles on Erebus more interesting.

- **The Ereban:** While on patrol, the characters encounter a group of ereban refugees. These peaceful beings are profoundly traumatized by recent events, and flee if approached. Still, you can allow the characters to attempt contact; gestures of kindness and compassion are the best way to win the erebans' trust. It's quickly apparent that the aliens are primitive to the point of having barely developed a recognizable culture. They're woefully outclassed by the Coalition, and the characters may want to protect these refugees by bringing them to the MEL-S. Unfortunately, any erebans near the ship when Robbins betrays the mission (as noted in "The Betrayal") are slain by marauding Aberrant forces.

- **Spinal Patrol:** A spinal patrol is detected heading in the direction of the MEL-S' hiding spot. The characters can try to distract the aliens somehow (leading them away from the ship, ambushing them). If the characters do decide to get aggressive, be sure to adjust the number of spinals to make for a challenging fight.

- **Stampede:** With all the upheaval the Coalition efforts cause, the local wildlife is in an uproar. Panicked by a low-flying transport, a large herd of vaguely bison-like herbivores stampedes ignorantly toward the alien base. The characters' surveillance site is situated in the stampede's path, calling for some fast thinking while swarms of spinals rush out to stop the beasts.

A Circle of Conspirators

The Norça insist on maintaining round-the-clock surveillance on the Coalition base, using alternating shifts manning the APD-11 array. Four days after the characters arrive on Erebus, late in the evening, the surveillance team on watch detects a sudden increase in activity. Envoys emerge from the survey ship, and convey a combination of verbal and pheromonal instructions to the spinals, and patrol activity triples in intensity. Sasqs

are summoned away from whatever incidental projects they are working on and sent into the ship, as are a sizable number of the drones. It's clear that something big is happening.

Less than an hour later a Coalition shuttle lands, setting down just outside the camp perimeter (but inside the circle of "tulips"). A pack of spinals boils out of the ship's airlock, fanning out in a protective semicircle. Into this protective ring of blades and spines steps a pallid, ghastly figure with huge, black eyes and a set of long tentacles spilling in a writhing tangle from a muscular hump behind its shoulders. All the aliens in the area become subdued, assuming what appear to be postures of deference and submission.

The characters are seeing one of the elusive breeders, a member of the ruling progenitor phyle. Characters using **Attunement** immediately sense taint radiating from the creature, though not as strong as that emanating from the two Aberrants who follow in the breeder's wake. (The characters shouldn't engage these beings, so describe them as horrific and powerful as you like.) The bizarre trio surveys the area. One looks out past the outer perimeter and seems to stare directly at the characters. No words are spoken, but the base's spinals suddenly part to let the breeder past, who moves swiftly, almost furtively, into the survey craft.

This arrival is but the first of many over the next three hours, each transport disgorging another progenitor and one or two Aberrants. The Norça back at the MEL-S are intensely interested in what is happening; after firing a constant stream of questions at the surveillance team, Kawamura urges the field agents to get to the site as quickly as possible and expand their surveillance to get as much data as possible. The Norça members of the operations team agree. Once in position around the Coalition base, they become quiet and focused, intent on every detail of the alien gathering.

In the end, no less than 30 Aberrants are present with at least twice as many breeders and what appears to be close to 200 spinals. The warriors keep their patrols close to the inner perimeter, preferring to stay close to their masters. If the characters don't think of it first, the Norça strongly urge moving the APD-11 arrays closer — at least near enough to get an audio pickup. The team must sneak to the very edge of the tulips' danger zone, requiring successful **Stealth** rolls (+1 difficulty), then successful **Engineering** rolls to properly focus the audio pickups so that they can

hear what is happening inside the survey ship (**Clairsentience** may also be used, of course).

The voices fade in and out amid intermittent bursts of interference, and the words are in Chinese. The Aberrants and the breeders are debating the need to press ahead with their plans. The Aberrants claim that the rest of the progenitors (apparently those not taking part in this conference) are wasting time, and seem to be rethinking their commitment to the alliance. The time to strike Earth is now, while humanity's defenses are stretched thin. Victory would be swift and certain given the technology aboard the ark, and the breeders could glut themselves on humanity's genetic treasures. The progenitors present resist the idea only insofar as it seems too hasty. The invasion will come, but should be a matter for later, stronger generations, after the progenitors have had time to refine their plans. This doesn't sit well with the Aberrants. If the progenitors will not act, they will be made to follow. The Aberrants will make a play for control of the ark; their tainted alien allies may join them or be swept aside.

It should be clear that this news is too vital to wait. The characters will likely want to fall back to the frigate immediately and get word back to Earth. The Norça personnel vehemently disagree, saying that they have much work left to do. As the surveillance team argues over whether to stay or go, the Aberrants inside the survey ship receive a transmission from the traitorous Theo Robbins. (With all the ops personnel away from the MEL-S and the scientists distracted with fear and questions, Robbins finally slips to a secluded spot in the base camp with one of the tactical radios and contacts his Aberrant allies.) It's difficult in the extreme to hear the brief transmission; at best, a clairsentient eavesdropper would find the voice familiar, but wouldn't be able to place it off hand. That's the least of the team's problems at the moment, though.

Scorched Earth

In the space of an instant, short-range Coalition radio transmissions erupt from the survey ship and the spinals explode into action, charging out from the camp in all directions. The characters' proximity to the Coalition base is actually a boon, since the spinals rush past the concealed field teams and begin searching the surrounding countryside in an ever-expanding ring.

Aberrants, envoys and a few progenitors appear outside the survey ship. A dozen Aberrants take to the air (some hopping in one of the trans-

ports, the rest simply flying on their own), and rapidly move out of sight. The rest remain, watching the spinal searchers apprehensively. It is clear that they know *someone* is out there, and are waiting expectantly for word that the interlopers have been found and captured.

Characters foolish enough to act (such as fleeing, or worse, attacking the conspirators) are detected immediately, and a swarm of spinals sweeps over the team like a wave, overwhelming the characters with sheer numbers. They can attempt to creep away under cover of darkness, but **Stealth** rolls are at +2 difficulty with all the spinals around. It's clear that the characters have no chance against such superior numbers; the only sound tactical choice is to remain hidden. At best, the characters can warn the science team back at the MEL-S. After only a few words, though, Kawamura cries out in surprise and the radio goes dead.

As the minutes pass, the characters can only watch helplessly as the Aberrants become increasingly agitated, which in turn unnerves the breeders. Soon, agitation turns to anger as the Aberrants become furious at the spinals' inability to find the hidden team. It all comes to a head when a hapless drone fails to get out of a pacing Aberrant's way and is burnt to ash. Its dying scream opens a floodgate of pent-up frustration within the other Aberrants. The handful of progenitors who'd come outside warble in alarm and quickly retreat into the survey ship as the Aberrants vent their anger violently upon any nearby aliens, including the still-searching spinals. Not even the captive erebans are spared. The mad-dened Aberrants slaughter every creature they can see, simply because they can.

Finally, the massacre complete, control returns to the Aberrants. The progenitors peek outside, then speak briefly to their allies. Mention is made of calling upon "sifters," and then both the Aberrants and the breeders head quickly to the transports they came in. The ships blast into the sky, followed a moment later by the survey ship. Within 10 minutes, all that remains of the Coalition base are piles of mangled flesh.

Survivors

The following sections should take place in rapid sequence. Much of the drama lies in pacing events quickly, giving the characters little time to devolve into arguing about minutia. Don't be afraid to speed things along with a bullheaded Norça who points out the obvious: There's no time to chat.

The characters must now make some desperate decisions. Somehow, the mission has been compromised. The MEL-S' last transmission sounded like it had come under attack, and further attempts to contact it are futile. The science team has probably been killed or captured. Although the Coalition has left the immediate area, there's no guarantee they won't return. The obvious course of action is to try to make it back to the MEL-S and see if it is still intact. Even if the ship has been crippled, the characters might be able to broadcast to *Stormcrow* the crucial data they've learned.

As the characters determine the next step, they hear a low, pathetic mewling from beneath a pile of mutilated drones at the edge of camp. The characters also see the figure of a sasq crawl from under another pile and survey the scene with wide, shell-shocked eyes.

Alien survivors offer a tantalizing opportunity. (As a Norça points out, if the characters are hell-bent on inflicting death.) As if the recent blood bath wasn't obvious in this regard, those who've done their research (a standard **Science** roll) know that drones and sasqs aren't inherently valuable to the Coalition ruling class. However, the creatures could provide the characters with information. Given the situation, they can use all the help they can get (or at least get their hands on some living research subjects).

The first obstacle is getting past the perimeter defense. The shoulder badges (taken from Coalition bodies in the village or from unfortunate spinals slain in the Aberrants' rage beyond the perimeter) allow the characters past the "tulips." Otherwise, the characters can shoot out a couple of the perimeter units (each device shuts down after taking two lethal structural levels).

A quick search reveals three Coalition survivors: two drones and a sasq, all suffering three lethal damage levels. (Enterprising characters can also search the corpses of the spinals in the area and arm themselves with the warriors' gamma rifles, if they wish.) The aliens innocently watch the characters approach and make no effort to resist. The beings do not initiate conversation, but respond haltingly in Chinese or English if the characters speak to them. (If asked, the sasq explains that they were "given" the language by the "Makers" so that they could serve the "new ones" needs when necessary.)

The aliens do not have names, nor do they understand the concept of individual identity. They are open and trusting with the characters for the simple reason that they have no concept of suspicion or deception. Though not stupid by any means, they are servants and do as they are told. If the characters think to ask where the Aberrants and progenitors went, one of the drones explains, rather calmly, that they returned to the ark and are sending down sifters to harvest everything in the area. A sifter, the sasq explains in a rumbling voice, is an automated machine that vaporizes the terrain and sifts it for minerals useful to the ark. If the aliens feel any terror at all that their masters have consigned them to death, they do not show it.

As if on cue, the characters hear a deep, droning sound overhead. Eight huge, hexagonal craft, each a kilometer across, are dropping slowly through the sky to the east of the base. There is nothing left to do but run for dear life, and the only chance of safety lies in the MEL-S, hidden to the west.

The characters may want to check out the MEL-S instead of going after the alien survivors. That's not a problem; just move on to "The Belly of the Beast" and set this scene at the MEL-S. (Assume that the Coalition survivors stumbled after the characters in a deeply ingrained follower mentality.) The Norça try to stop the characters from shooting the drones or the sasq, since the aliens are the only possible way out of their current situation.

The Belly of the Beast

The sifters descend inexorably, close enough together that their flat edges nearly touch. The characters can barely slip from under their shadow when the crafts' sifting fields engage, and the remnants of the base disintegrate in a howling storm of vaporized particles. The wall of destruction advances slightly faster than a human can walk, heading west toward the MEL-S. The characters must reach the ship first if they are to have any hope of escaping the planet. Moving at something between a walk and a trot, the team pulls ahead of the sifters, but the lead is a narrow one.

The MEL-S appears intact at first sight, but the chameleon mesh is thrown aside and there are signs of some kind of struggle. The scientists are nowhere to be seen. The characters have no more than five minutes before the sifters reach the ship, so there's little time to do more than try and liftoff. That's not an option, though; the ship's engineering systems were gutted, effectively grounding the

transport. All power is completely offline, and the laboratories and comm system are destroyed.

Things look exceedingly grim in the face of the approaching sifters. Weapons fire is useless against the huge craft, it's impossible to run ahead of them forever, and there's no time to run laterally past the far edge of the interlocking fields. It's possible the sasq might know a means of stopping the sifters, but he shakes his head regretfully. Suddenly, though, his broad face brightens. They cannot stop the machines, but they can get *inside* one. All the characters need to do is get onto a sifter's upper surface — no mean feat, as the sifters hover 10 meters off the ground.

Rope was part of the gear stowed aboard the MEL-S, and there are enough protrusions on the sifters' upper surfaces that a makeshift grappling hook could find purchase. A successful **Engineering** or **Survival** roll is enough to fashion a workable grapple, and just in time, too. The machines advance, eating through a line of hills less than 250 meters away.

If there's a psychokinetic in the group with the ability to fly, attaching the grapple and shimmying up isn't too tough. Otherwise, hooking the grapple is no easy task, requiring a successful **Athletics** roll (+2 difficulty). Even when the hook locks in an available crevice, someone must hold the line steady while another climbs less than a meter away from a seething force field. Climbing the line requires a standard **Athletics** roll.

The last of the team climbs aboard as the MEL-S disappears beneath the sifter. Even the aliens look shaken at their narrow escape. Wasting no time, the sasq heads for the center of the huge craft. He stops at a small hatch, grasps a knoblike protrusion, and the hatch slides silently open. At that moment, the characters hear the roaring vortex beneath the sifter go silent, and it begins to climb swiftly into the sky. The characters scramble inside, dropping into a surprisingly small maintenance room. As the hatch closes, they hear a soft whirring of compressors as automatic life-support systems come to life. (This does not extend to artificial gravity.)

The sasq explains that their entry into the sifter triggered an automatic return to the ark. He cannot alter the vehicle's course (that is a job for a pilot; he is simply a fixer), and there's not even the hint of guidance controls in the small chamber. One of the drones comments brightly that they should not worry; they will be home soon.

Stranded

The trip to the Coalition ark takes slightly more than an hour, leaving the characters with a little time to plan their next moves. The most pressing issue to some is determining who sold out the team. Off hand, it could be anyone on the mission, including someone from one of the other teams. The trick is figuring out exactly who it was. With little information on hand at the moment, though, finding this answer will have to wait.

The Coalition aliens provide an interesting diversion, at least. They are curious as to the characters' phyles, and the nature of their "Makers." How did they come to be on Erebus? Is it their home? Are the Aberrants a phyle all their own? With the shock of their experiences beginning to wear off, the two drones remember their social obligations, and without preamble, begin to copulate. Characters who fail to conceal their surprise or dismay inspire yet another round of pointed questioning.

All three phyle members prove to be alert and interested in everything the characters say, and are remarkably open-minded (a necessary requisite when all one's life is spent accepting everything one is told). The hardest thing for them to grasp is the concept of individuality. The drones realize that they are different from the sasq, but that is a matter of function, not identity. The idea of individual names fascinates them, and if the characters come up with nicknames for the aliens, the beings ponder them as if they carry mystic significance. To the servitors, the progenitors are like gods, givers of instruction and form. Everyone else serves the Makers, and that is the way it has always been.

If the characters note that they are Makers of their own race, the aliens immediately react with a disturbing degree of reverence and obedience. This is key to the characters' survival aboard the ark, so you might nudge them in that direction (say, with a standard **Rapport** or **Subterfuge** roll) if they miss the opportunity on their own.

Alien social interactions aside, the characters must think of some way out of the fix they are in. If they can get to a real ship, they could try to slip away from the ark and link up with *Stormcrow*. Then there's the matter of the presumably captured Norça scientists. The Norça still with the characters say that honor demands they at least attempt to find and rescue their siblings. Both ops and scientist teams possess invaluable data about

the Coalition, information crucial to the survival of humanity. They must at least try to get everyone out with what they've found.

The aliens are happy to provide any questions about the ark the characters ask (this may be the easiest interrogation the characters have ever experienced), though their areas of knowledge are limited to their specific tasks. The sasq knows where the hangars for transport craft are located, but does not know how to fly ships. The drones know the location of the chambers where the scientists might have been taken. But the aliens become troubled if the characters ask for their help in locating the scientists, rescuing them and stealing a ship. That is open defiance against the Masters, which goes against everything they know to be true about the universe.

Over the course of the trip to the ark and afterward, the characters must use their wits and persuasiveness to enlist the aliens' aid against the breeders. Simply asking the servitors to go along with a rescue attempt is like asking them to breathe vacuum — the very idea of challenging the progenitors' authority is absolutely unthinkable. Encourage roleplay and debate between the aliens and the team as the characters try to win them over. The key is to show the aliens that they have a right to choose their own course of action. They must be allowed a choice in what they do. They cannot be commanded to simply do as they are told, or it will just reinforce the idea of blind obedience. If the characters are shrewd enough to give the aliens the chance to decide for themselves, the beings become contemplative. Over time, the aliens begin to grasp what the characters offer, and the team should feel as though it worked for every moment of it. And so the seeds of social revolution are sown.

Of course, self-involved or suspicious characters may not want to involve the servitors in any of this, in which case they'll have a significantly harder time of it on the ark. If this looks to be the case, have a Norça propose enlisting the aliens' help, perhaps even emphasizing their pliability in the face of obvious leadership.

The Rescue

The sifter docks in a large bay set in the underside of the vast ark. The sasq can assure the characters that no one visits the bay except to answer the occasional maintenance call, making it a safe base of operations while the team tends its wounds and wins

Form and Function

Centuries of selective breeding has left the Coalition members with the ingrained idea that form follows function. When various phyle members encounter the characters, their first reaction is to type each individual by function. Individuals carrying large loads are identified as servants, aggressive persons are seen as warriors, and so on. Even if the aliens are told otherwise, they are still unable to view the characters outside of a particular niche.

Most confusing for the phyles is the sight of a female character performing any sort of labor — or worse, exposing herself to danger. Though the progenitors themselves are asexual, their programming affects the other phyles in such a way that any female, regardless of species, is subject to a certain degree of reverence and respect (except spinals, who don't have the requisite intelligence to make such distinctions). Phyle members who become friendly to the characters unconsciously defer to females in the group, and take it upon themselves to relieve her of any burdens or tasks. Female characters may encourage this for all it is worth, but may quickly find it stifling — especially in combat situations, when sasqs or drones throw themselves onto the women to protect them from danger!

over its new compatriots. When the time is right, the characters can begin their search for the captured members of the Blackbird team.

The team's alien friends say that any prisoners are likely to be held within one of the progenitors' many "sampling chambers." These chambers are located near the ark's center (in the breeding areas). The entrances are guarded by dozens of spinal patrols.

Sneaking undetected into the heart of the Coalition ark will test the team's stealth to the ut-

most. Here the biokinetics come into their own. The Norça can alter their appearance to assume the appearance (and pheromonal signature) of any of the Coalition's phyles. The aliens' utter trust in form and function can be turned against them, allowing disguised biokinetics to move freely throughout the ship — so long as they do not have to directly communicate with a real representative of the phyles! (You should encourage your players with Norça characters to take the lead on this. If none have the appropriate powers, though, you might want to turn it over to a couple of your Storyteller shifters.)

Even non-biokinetic characters have the potential to use the aliens' preconceptions to their advantage. The key is literally right under their noses. The drone phyle's chief relational pheromone is designed to allow its members to fade into the background when not actively needed. The characters can use the same pheromone to slip past the spinal patrols — coating themselves in pheromones the drones (or biokinetics with **Body Sculpt**) give off. The catch is that it's difficult to tell when the pheromone has worn off, so the team should move quickly.

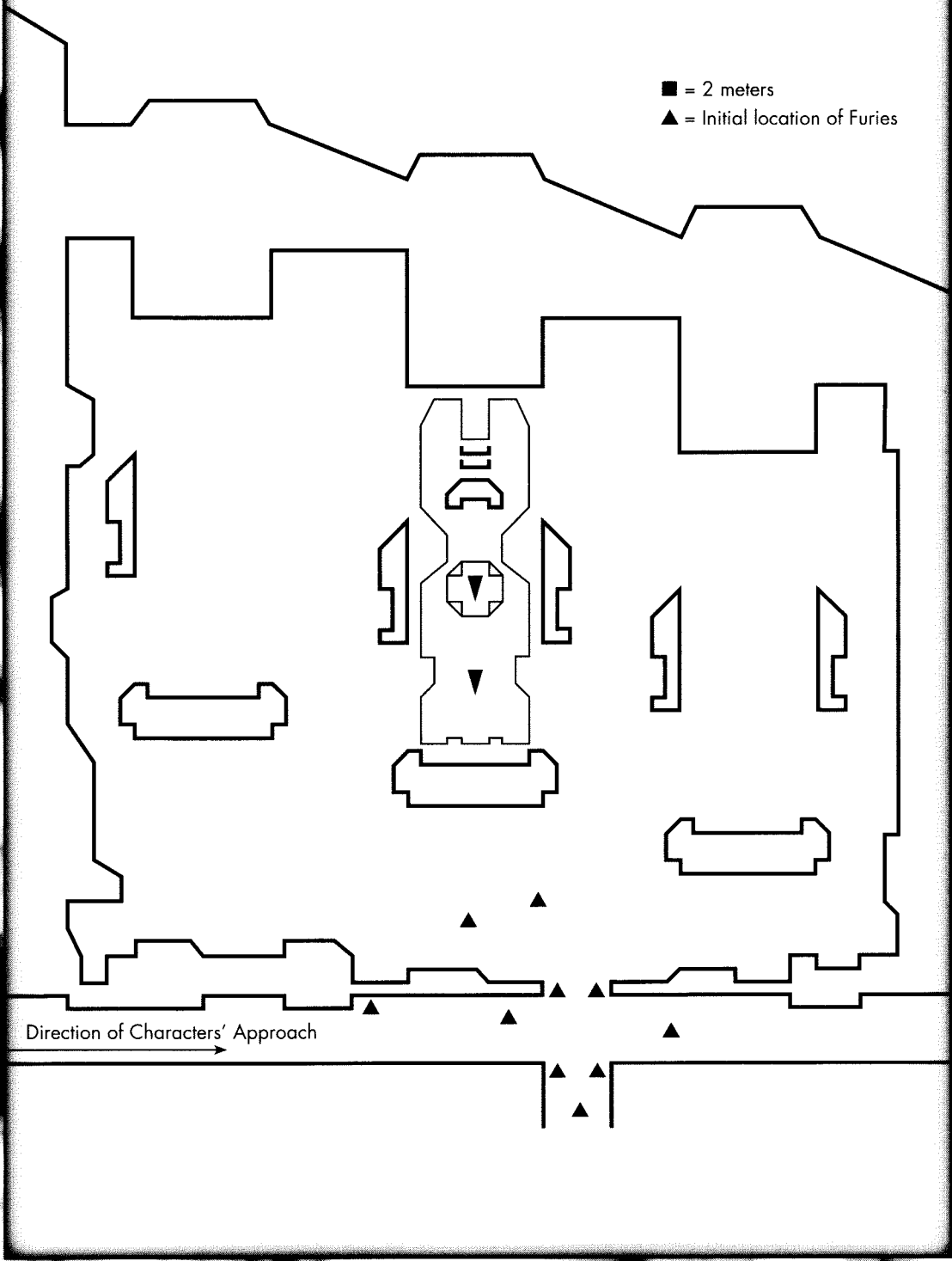
With the drones (or disguised characters) leading the way, the team members don their pheromone filters and slip like ghosts through the labyrinthine halls of the alien ark. Along the way they pass numerous watchful spinals, but each time the warriors' overly narrow programming classifies the characters as just another group of drones and allows them to pass (spinals are observant but rather dim). Encounters with Aberrants are problematic — make such events nail-biting close calls rather than direct confrontations.

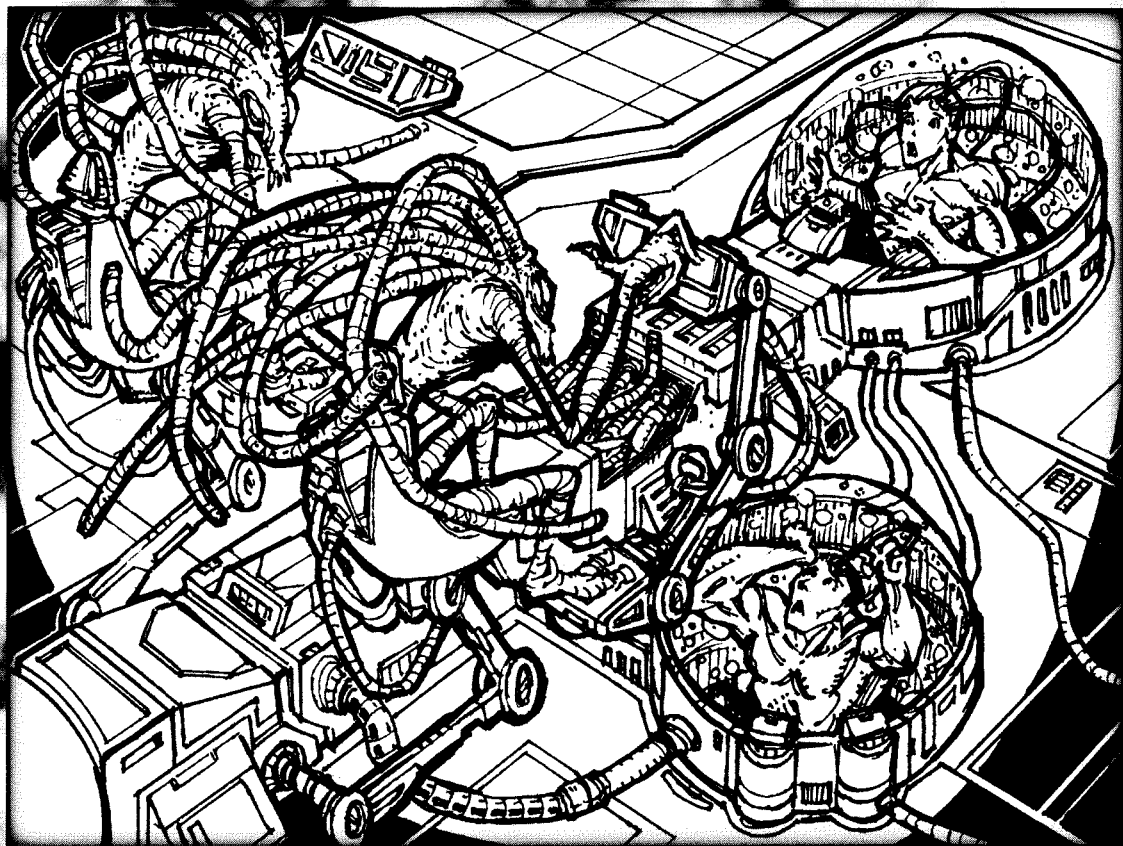
Even after all the hideous scenes the characters have witnessed, nothing really prepares them for the sights of the sampling room. Here, men and women the characters know and worked with stand naked in electrostatic pens, reeling under the effects of the progenitors' coercive pheromones. These prisoners include Chadwick and Kawamura — and the Aberrant spy, Robbins, who is to remain undercover until all the hostages are taken care of, just in case they have useful information to relate. Four breeders are roughly "sampling" members of the science team. Breeders are much brighter than spinals; non-transmogrified characters may scent like drones, but it's obvious that they look very different.

The startled breeders emit shrill squeals of alarm when the characters reveal themselves. The progenitors are flatly no match for the characters

HANGAR BAY

- = 2 meters
- ▲ = Initial location of Furies





in combat and after so much horror, though, the characters at last have a chance to turn their anger on some of the creatures responsible. The Norça do try to take at least one of the creatures captive. While seeming impetuous to some, this may be the most sensible way to get off the ark with the unarmed Norça scientists. After all, it's unlikely that the servitors will attack the group if it has one of their leaders hostage.

The Norça can quickly knock one of the progenitors unconscious, leaving the characters to kill the rest and release the stunned prisoners. Even so, the spinal guards outside overhear the conflict and rush in as the alarm spreads. (Give the team a free surprise attack and adjust the number of warriors so that the characters have a slight edge.) Just as the last of the warriors falls, the characters hear more screams and the crackling hum of gamma rifles — in the passageways beyond! What may at first sound like human reinforcements soon proves to be the Aberrants' *coup d'état* unfolding.

Escape

Fighting rages in the center sections of the ark as Aberrants and their allies attempt a series

of simultaneous assassinations against non-tainted breeders. The Aberrants even release the young Aberrant-Coalition crossbreeds, the furies, to fight for them. The characters must shepherd two dozen survivors of Project: Blackbird through this chaos and reach an available transport. Considering that previous events were fast-paced, current matters should move at positively breakneck speed. The characters stumble through scenes of confusion and carnage — sometimes shooting their way through two opposing forces! The characters should have ample opportunity to pick up gamma rifles from dead spinals if they haven't already, and as long as they keep moving and use surprise in their favor they can clear a path long enough to move ever closer to salvation.

The fighting appears to taper off as the characters move closer to the outer sections of the ship. Just as they think they are home free, though, they turn a corner and find a large pack of furies guarding the entrance to the hangar bay. The characters have no alternative but to fight their way through or die.

This should be a truly heroic, cinematic fight. Use the fury description from "Dramatis Perso-

nae," p. 121, to determine the crossbreeds' abilities. Set their numbers to give the characters a good balls-to-the-wall, high-stakes battle.

In the midst of the battle, just as the tide is turning against the furies, Robbins shows his true colors. He grabs up a fallen weapon and tries to kill the Norça guarding the breeder in hopes of freeing it and getting them both to safety. The characters must make a successful **Awareness** roll (+1 difficulty) to notice Robbins in time to stop his first shot. If the characters fail this roll, Chadwick bumps the traitor enough to throw off his aim. Robbins has time to strike Chadwick brutally with the butt of the weapon before a character can engage him.

Finally, the last of the furies falls, but precious time has been lost. Assuming the servitor allies are still with the group, the sasq runs into the hangar bay and indicates a large transport nearby. Just as the scientists are scrambling aboard, shouts erupt from behind them. A large force of Aberrants and furies, alerted to the characters' retreat, finally catches up to them in the corridor outside the bay. There are only three Aberrants but at least a dozen furies — too many to defeat, and it's all too likely that more reinforcements are on the way.

Noble Sacrifice

There's no way the transport can leave with the Aberrants thundering down upon the characters. Knowing instantly what must be done, the half-dozen Norça shifters in the group make the characters swear to deliver their scientists and the breeder safely back to Earth. Without allowing time to argue, the biokinetics charge headlong at the enemy. Make it obvious to the characters that if they do not leave now, they will never escape.

While sealing the hatch, a character notices one of the drones they rescued has slipped away in the confusion and is trying to sneak down an alternate passageway. A telepath who takes the time can sense that the creature's thoughts are consumed with the ideas of freedom and individuality it learned from the characters, and sense that it is determined to share those thoughts with as many of its fellows as it can. An instant later, the drone disappears from sight.

Characters in the cockpit are relieved to see that the transport's controls are simple, designed with the same neural interface as the ark's main computer (see p. 87). Once tapped in, it's surprisingly easy to get the craft on line and detach from its moorings. Just as the last of the Norça

rear guard falls, the engines ignite and the transport blasts for the outer hatch. Bizarre alarms sound as the ship nears the exit, but the door doesn't open. Luckily, a sustained burst from one of the gamma cannons can blast the hatch — conveniently depressurizing the hangar bay and giving the remaining Aberrants and furies something else to occupy themselves with in time for the characters to get clear of the ark.

Conclusion

It takes several moments for the characters to get their bearings once the transport launches. Despite the ship's easy handling, it's impossible to make sense of readout displays at the moment. It is clear from looking out viewports that the Coalition ark broke orbit around Erebus. The planet is already thousands of kilometers in the distance; huge blotches of churned earth stain its once-pristine atmosphere, dooming it to a long, unnatural winter that will leave its surface barren of life. Erebus and its people are no more.

Suddenly the pilot feels a warning surge of adrenaline and garbled speech rings insistently throughout the cabin. A telepath with **Babel Effect** or the helpful sasq can translate: four Coalition interceptors have launched from the ark and are engaging the transport. The characters can link up with the gunnery stations in much the same way the pilot did with his controls. The fighters scream in, blasting away indiscriminately with missiles and gamma bursts. Under orders to stop the transport at all costs, the alien pilots (which each have **Pilot 8** and **Firearm 3**) attack until destroyed. Statistics on Coalition transports and interceptors are listed on pp. 123-124.

As the battle rages, any characters not directly involved in combat notice the ark pulling away, picking up speed as it heads toward the sun. The ark soon disappears from normal sight, but reappears as the last interceptor is destroyed. The transport's computer warns (in the same alien speech) of another approaching object, which quickly resolves into the Coalition ark moving at tremendous speed. It blasts past the transport, obviously moving out of the system. There is no chance of catching the ark. Its velocity is incredible after having performed a slingshot maneuver around the nearby sun.

The characters' only option is to watch as the ship quickly reduces to a speck of light. (The sasq can be urged to tweak the transport's sensors to track the retreating vessel more clearly.) Just short

of the edge of the system, the Coalition ark vanishes in a brilliant blaze of light.

With some drawn out questioning of the transport's computer (using the sasq or a telepath as interpreter), it's possible to learn that the ark successfully reached faster than light speed... and that its next destination is Earth.

Aftermath

In the wake of the ark's departure, the characters can try to use the transport's communications system to contact the *Stormcrow*, hoping against hope that the frigate managed to survive the enemy patrols. Once again, the Coalition's advanced technology is a boon. It takes just a few minutes and some help from the sasq to send out an all-frequencies distress call. The response takes more time, though, as the frigate waits some hours before deciding the transmission is not a trap.

The Coalition transport just fits inside *Stormcrow*'s hangar bay, but that simply highlights the fact that none of the expedition craft returned from Erebus. The characters and their teammates are the only ones to survive Project: Blackbird.

The return to Earth seems almost unreal in the aftermath of recent events. The Coalition aliens are placed under watch in the brig; the wounded are treated, and *Stormcrow* moves into position to jump back to Earth. From there, the team is transferred to a shuttle and flown to UN headquarters for a lengthy debriefing (attended by, among others, Fields and Ramirez, and with comm links to at least three of the proxies). The one question that keeps coming up — whether the Aberrant coup was successful — is the one question the characters cannot answer.

If the characters ask about the aliens who returned with *Stormcrow*, no one with whom they speak knows what happened to them. They, and whatever alien equipment the characters recovered, disappear to a classified research facility somewhere in the Solar System, swallowed by the needs of interstellar security.

Still, the characters have earned the gratitude of Æon, the United Nations Security Council and the Norça. This may seem like an inadequate consolation for the trials the characters experienced recently... and for the knowledge of the impending peril facing humanity.

Character Development

A player may spend experience points on his character to signify permanent benefits from recent efforts. Any Attributes, Abilities or Aptitude Modes that were used are obvious choices for development.

The Allies, Contacts and Status Backgrounds may also be purchased or increased to indicate the results of close involvement with the United Nations, Æon Trinity and Norça.

Considering this was a top-secret mission, it would be inappropriate for characters to increase in Influence or other public-related Traits (unless a character decides to spill the mission details to the public, which begins all manner of trouble — and storylines).

Other Endings

There are a number of alternate outcomes that you may choose to expand on the events in *The Devil's Bargain*. Some examples include:

- **Trapped aboard the ark:** Instead of escaping, the Aberrant coup could occur before the characters reach the sampling chamber, and the sudden outbreak of fighting forces them back into the little-used areas near the ark's outer hull. By the time the fighting dies down, the ship engages its FTL drive. The characters are trapped in hyperspace aboard an alien craft. They must avoid capture and try to lead the phyles in a revolt against the breeders and Aberrants.

- **Marooned on Erebus:** The characters' worst fears are realized when they discover that *Stormcrow* was either destroyed or driven from the system. They must land the transport on Erebus and try to survive on the dying world until help arrives. Along the way they can try to help the remaining erebans, providing an opportunity for a challenging first-contact situation.

- **The fallen angels:** The ark is not on course for Earth after all, but instead is headed to a world populated by Aberrant exiles. Was the coup successful, and the Aberrants onboard are now on the way to bequeath their stolen technology to their comrades? Or did the breeders succeed, and are now *en route* to punish the Aberrants for their treachery? The characters could lead a rebellion to free the phyles from Aberrant oppression, or try to escape from the middle of an Aberrant-Coalition war.

Dramatis Personae

The following are general profiles of extras (e.g., servitor phyles, furies) and detailed templates for major characters who appear during the course of *The Devil's Bargain*.

Alfred Fields

Alfred Fields is a member of the powerful Fields family of Britain, a long line of politicians and diplomats reaching back to well before the Aberrant War. Like his brothers, Fields received a classical education and was raised in an environment of statesmanship and intrigue, often accompanying his father Matthew on missions of state during the elder's tenure on the UN Trade Commission. Alfred Fields joined the UN immediately upon graduation from Oxford University, and rose slowly and steadily through the ranks. After 30 years Fields is one of the senior members of the Alien Studies Group, the committee that gathers information and suggests policy to the Security Council regarding alien relations. He is the chief liaison for Project: Blackbird.

Dr. Elisabeth Veron

The director of research for the Emerald Feather is one of many neutrals who are the foundation of the Biokinesis Order, yet are an aspect of the Norça that the public never sees. A scientist of considerable academic fame in the field of genetics, Veron spent several years of post-doctorate work in Africa until her reputation caught the interest of *Pai de Norça*. Del Fuego invited her to visit the Emerald Feather, and Veron never left. She joined the order, accepting a lowly field research post in exchange for the unparalleled challenge of reclaiming the Amazon. Now in her middle 40s, Veron has become one of the rising stars of the order's scientific arm, but as yet shows no interest in events beyond the confines of her research.

Dr. Ellen Chadwick

In the years before the *Yi* expedition, Ellen Chadwick was one of Aeon's most respected xenobiologists, noted for her dissertation on the nature of early Aberrant mutations in the FSA during the Aberrant War, and later for assisting in the first analyses of Chromatic physiology for the Trinity-sponsored Project Abyss. She was well on her way to a brilliant career when she was tapped for the role as mission coordinator for the *Yi* expedition, a first-contact endeavor to the mysterious space ark. At the time, the posting felt like a dream come true.

Chadwick was one of the few survivors of that disastrous first encounter with the Coalition, and the nightmarish experience left scars no amount of therapy could heal. She turned her back on her profession, unable to bear the memories of her ordeal, and entered into an early and unwise retirement. A year later, after the second Coalition expedition ended in disaster, Aeon turned once again to Chadwick for advice in planning Project: Blackbird. Flatly refusing at first, Chadwick soon realized that she could not sit by and let others suffer the same fate without at least trying to show them the dangers they faced.

Dr. Lauren Kawamura

Lauren Kawamura was born to a family of American refugees in São Paulo during the latter days of the Crash. Her father was a prominent geologist, her mother was a leading environmentalist fighting to preserve the still-shrinking Sudamerican rain forests. Lauren was raised to love the Earth and to respect its fragility and beauty. In time, she entered the University of São Paulo, majoring in biochemistry. There she excelled, and would likely have become an ivory-tower academician, but for a fateful meeting one day with the charismatic leader of the New National Force, Giuseppe del Fuego. Del Fuego and his lieutenants were visiting Brazil's arcologies on something of a recruiting drive. Kawamura was not latent, but del Fuego's passionate ideas for the future of his order reached the idealist in her. Upon receiving her doctorate she took her leave of the academic world and was gladly accepted into the Norça.

Since then, Kawamura has worked with the Biokinesis Order on a wide range of environmental projects. She was selected for Project: Blackbird as much for her scientific skill as her unswerving loyalty to del Fuego and the order.

Image: Dr. Kawamura is short and heavysset, in her late 40s, with vivid green eyes partially hidden behind large wire-frame glasses. Her manner is brusque and no-nonsense, reflecting a fiery spirit and a crusader's zeal when it comes to the goals of the Norça.

Roleplaying Hints: You are devoted to the service of the Norça and to del Fuego in particular. Being personally chosen for Project: Blackbird fills you with an indomitable will to succeed. You consider outside involvement to be a necessary evil that must be endured for the sake of the mission. Nothing and no one will get between you and your goals.

Nature: Visionary

Allegiance: Norça

Physical Attributes

Strength 3

Dexterity 2

Stamina 3

Mental Attributes

Perception (Alert) 4

Intelligence (Reasoned) 4

Abilities

Athletics 1, Firearms 1,
Pilot 1, Stealth 1

Endurance 2

Abilities

Awareness 2

Academics 4, Bureau-
cracy 3, Linguistics (Chi-
nese, English, Spanish) 3,
Medicine 2, Science 5

Wits 2

Social Attributes

Appearance 2

Manipulation 2

Charisma 3

Abilities

Intimidation 1

Command 3

Backgrounds: Citizenship (Brazil) 1, Contacts 2,
Resources 3, Status (Norça) 3

Willpower: 8

Psi: 1

Gear: Field suit, Steinhardt Virtu-X minicom, field
survival kit, pheromone filter/analysis mask.

Norça Personnel

The Norça on this mission are loyal to one another first, and everyone else second. If the characters show themselves to be similarly dedicated, they will gain the Norças' trust. Eight of the Norça on the characters' team are actual psion biokinetics. The rest are highly trained scientists. Specific stats aren't necessary for either one. The shifters can use the Proteus Division template in **Trinity**, p. 304, for their general Traits. Assume that each has Psi 4 and four dots to spend in Biokinesis. Kawamura's profile works as a guideline for any other science personnel.

Dr. Theo Robbins

Theo Robbins was never going to amount to anything. His parents made sure he understood that from the beginning. Born to a lower-class family struggling to survive in the poorest sector of the Boston arcology, Theo learned to lie, cheat and steal as a matter of survival. Ethics and morality had nothing to do with life in the lower levels — it was about taking advantage of whoever and whatever was at hand.

Robbins half-slept his way through the FSA's public schooling, bored and bitter that better opportunities were being denied him every moment of every day. He was still an adolescent when he



was first approached by an Aberrant sympathizer. The Aberrants were always on the lookout for "open-minded" individuals, people whose "glorious talents were being squandered in an ignorant and corrupt society." That didn't have to happen to Theo, the agent explained. He could get back at them all. Success was the best revenge, after all, and Theo could go very far indeed, with a little help. Theo replied that he would gladly kill either one of his parents for a chance like that. The agent only smiled.

From that point on, everything seemed to go right for Theo. He graduated at the top of his class, encouraged to develop a love for science and xenobiology. After graduation, Robbins won a full scholarship to an expensive, prestigious private college that catered to the FSA elite, and found himself on the short list for an internship with the United Nations as an alien studies attaché. Once out in the greater universe, he never looked back.

Naturally, once Robbins got the job at the UN, his benefactors were quick to point out that he owed them a certain amount of compensation for the many years of effort they invested on his behalf. Theo was happy to oblige. He understood the nature of the bargain he had entered into and, presently, is very happy with the arrangements. Since joining the UN, he has been an energetic and valuable spy for the Aberrants, passing on

reams of classified information about the alien studies group.

Image: Theo is a seemingly earnest young scholar with a bright interest in xenobiology. He is friendly and cheerful, willing to help on any project. This friendly exterior conceals an arrogant and insecure personality that resents anyone who appears smarter or more successful.

Roleplaying Hints: You aren't a fool. You know perfectly well who you are spying for, and you are happy to do it. If it hadn't been for the Aberrants, you would probably be living in some dark hole in the depths of Boston. At least they appreciate real intelligence when they see it.

Nature: Survivor

Allegiance: Aberrants

Physical Attributes

Strength 2

Dexterity 3

Stamina 3

Mental Attributes

Perception 3

Intelligence 3

Abilities

Brawl 2

Athletics 2, Drive 2, Firearm 1

Resistance 2

Abilities

Awareness 3, Investigation 1

Academics 4, Bureaucracy 2, Intrusion 1, Linguistics (Chinese, French) 2,

Survival 2

Rapport 2

Subterfuge 3

Etiquette 1, Perform 3,

Savvy 1

Wits 1

Social Attributes

Appearance 2

Manipulation (Smooth) 4

Charisma 3

Backgrounds: Contacts 3, Cypher 1, Mentor (Aberrants) 4, Resources 4, Status (UN) 3

Willpower: 5

Psi: 1

Gear: Aris SureSting flechette pistol, field suit, Steinhardt Virtu-X minicomp, field survival kit, pheromone filter/analysis mask.

Progenitors

The aliens known as "progenitors" (also "breeders" and "Makers") are the most powerful and least numerous phyle within the Coalition. They are a nucleus of tyrants who ruthlessly direct the actions of the servitor phyles to serve their far-reaching goals. Within each breeder is the power to create life in a countless variety of forms; thus, it holds no sanctity for them. An individual is nothing more than the sum of its chromosomes, a variation on a theme. Existence is trivial — evolution, however, is sacred. The harvesting of chromosomes is the driving force behind the Coalition,



integrating superior genes into the breeders' genetic sequence from any source they find.

Image: Breeders are chalk-white bipeds, approximately a meter and a half tall, with broad shoulders dominated by a powerful, muscular hump. (This wide upper body implies a physical power that the progenitors do not actually have.) The breeders have two slim, tool-using limbs with slender, five-fingered hands, and six long tentacles that radiate from the back of the hump and reach to the ankles. A progenitor's head is hairless, dominated by two huge, black eyes. The mouth consists of a fleshy sac surrounded by a number of tiny, grasping tentacles.

Progenitors do not possess a skeleton. Their internal frame is supported by cartilage, much like a shark, and their rubbery, moist flesh acts like a muscular exoskeleton. The combination gives breeders fluid, graceful motions at the cost of physical durability.

Roleplaying Hints: Though physically weak, your kind has ruled for generations. It is your right. Your frailty has made you tremendously cautious, but paranoia is a positive for such as you. You do the thinking, and the servitors assume the risks. It is their role.

Nature: Conniver

Allegiance: none

Physical Attributes

Strength 1

Dexterity (Lithe) 5

Stamina 1

Mental Attributes

Perception (Nitpicky) 4

Intelligence (Discerning) 4

Wits (Shrewd) 5

Social Attributes

Appearance 2

Manipulation (Domineering) 5

Charisma 3

Backgrounds: Followers (phyles) 5, Resources (ark) 5**Willpower:** 10**Psi:** 1**Gear:** None; the phyles take care of all the breeders' physical needs.

Special Ability: *Coercion pheromones:* Each target within 20 meters must make a Willpower roll at +3 difficulty. Failure means the subject obeys the breeder's commands without question. Success means the subject has free will, but is at +1 difficulty to all actions that conflict with following the breeder's commands. In either case, the effect lasts while the subject is exposed to the pheromone, plus one full scene after leaving its immediate vicinity. A filter mask reduces the difficulty by one; a sealed environment suit negates the effect.

Envoys

The Coalition's philosophy toward alien contact is simple and direct: If a race is incapable of resistance, it is overwhelmed and pillaged. If a new race is sufficiently advanced to pose a genuine threat, it is destroyed by any means possible. Interaction with another race is nothing more than a prelude to one of these two options. The envoys were bred to gather the most detailed information possible on a newly encountered race — strengths, weaknesses, characteristics of potential value. These comprehensive observations are passed on without bias or analysis to the breeders, who then make an informed decision on which course to take in dealing with the new race.

Envoys have the highest social and intellectual capabilities of any phyle, giving them superior perception and linguistic capabilities along with an eidetic memory. This phyle also possesses tremendous mental flexibility, allowing its members to immerse themselves quickly and easily into

Abilities

Might 1

Athletics 2, Stealth 1

Resistance 4, Endurance 5

Abilities

Awareness 3

Bureaucracy 3, Linguistics (Chinese, English) 2, Survival 2

Rapport 3

Abilities

Intimidation 4

Command 5, Interrogation 2, Subterfuge 4



new and different social situations. Envoys are the consummate social chameleons, bred to take on the mannerisms, behaviors, and physical cues of their subjects, with remarkable speed. Ultimately, however, the envoys are little more than extremely sophisticated information-gatherers. During the long intervals between encountering new races, envoys are used as go-betweens amid members of the breeders, facilitating negotiations across social tiers and acting as something akin to personal secretaries.

Image: Envoys are slim, unassuming individuals. Their forms are specifically designed not to threaten, their slender build and large eyes making them appear rather childlike. Like other Coalition phyles, envoys wear loose, kilt-like outfits and carry only what gear they need at the moment.

Roleplaying Hints: You serve the Makers. You are their eyes, their ears. The Coalition depends on your ability to accurately and completely convey all that you learn.

Nature: Follower**Allegiance:** Progenitors**Physical Attributes**

Strength 2

Dexterity 3

Stamina 3

Abilities

Athletics 1, Legerdemain 4, Stealth 1

Endurance 2

Envoys and Telepathy

Envoys are intended to be little more than semi-passive information gatherers, engaging in dialogue with other races and accumulating facts through skillful conversation and subversive pheromones. They soak up all they hear and see like a sponge, and report it back to the breeders without analysis or opinion. This programming makes them very easy to read using Telepathy. Getting anything useful other than objective data is hard, though, simply because there are no conscious thoughts to perceive, no plans or ambitions to pick up on other than a desire to keep the flow of information going.

Mental Attributes

Perception (Observant) 4
Intelligence (Astute) 4

Abilities

Awareness 5, Investigation 4
Bureaucracy 3, Linguistics
(Chinese, English, French,
Portuguese, Spanish) 5

Wits (Discerning) 5

Rapport 5

Social Attributes

Appearance 3

Abilities

Manipulation (Persuasive) 5
Charisma (Genial) 4

Subterfuge 2
Etiquette 3, Perform 2

Backgrounds: Mentor (Progenitors) 5

Willpower: 3

Psi: 1

Gear: Simple clothing; drones supply any other equipment.

Special ability: *Interrelational pheromones:* Each target within 10 meters must make a Willpower roll at +3 difficulty. Failure makes the subject very trusting and open with the envoy, sharing even sensitive data without a second thought. Success means the subject resists spilling all his secrets, but remains quite friendly toward the envoy. In either case, the effect lasts while the subject is exposed to the pheromone, plus one full scene after leaving its immediate vicinity. A filter mask reduces the difficulty by one; a sealed environment suit negates the effect.

Spinals

The breeders' physical frailty and paranoia are darkly reflected in their breed of warriors and bodyguards, three-meter-tall armored monstrosities bristling with poisoned spines and powerful, scythe-like fighting arms. The spinals are bred for loyalty, obedience, dependability and a berserker-like fury in combat. Spinals lack imagination, cre-

ativity and personal initiative (though they can learn from experience, at least with respect to their duties). Every moment of activity is dictated by a rigid set of programming. While this often leads to trouble when a warrior is confronted by a sudden change of events, the progenitors see this as an acceptable disadvantage. The Coalition might lose hundreds of thousands of spinals in battle, but the breeders can always make more. Not surprisingly, spinals have the shortest life span of any of the phyles, lasting no more than 18 months.

Each spinal is encoded with a set of parameters that identifies "friendlies" (breeders, envoys, other spinals) by the pheromones they commonly exude. If a spinal encounters a life-form outside this set, it first tries to consult with a higher-ranking spinal or other leaders for instructions. If there is no higher authority present, the spinal attacks without hesitation. The spinals have no formal military organization, though they instinctively operate in packs of six to eight, formed around a single "elder" (seniority within the phyle is determined by age). Breeders and selected envoys are the only non-spinals with the proper pheromones to command the warriors.

Image: Huge, insect-like and disturbingly fast, everything about a spinal indicates barely restrained lethal menace. Two gigantic arms equipped with multiple spikes and blades extend



from the creature's upper shoulders, protecting a pair of smaller grasping arms and the head. In battle, a spinal is truly fearsome to behold. The warrior's programming dumps a potent hormonal cocktail into its bloodstream, increasing its ferocity and limiting the effects of pain and fatigue. Displaying its arsenal of natural weapons, the spinal emits a cloud of compound pheromones that fill its enemies with a reflexive panic urge, and alert other spinals in the area and. The spinal then attacks, closing into hand-to-hand combat range to scythe through the enemy with its upper arms. (Spinals do carry rifles to attack at range, but even then the weapon is simply an interim means to attack while the spinal closes with its foe.)

Roleplaying Hints: You are guided by a complex and rigid set of programming that ultimately boils down to a single tenet: If it does not belong, tear it to pieces.

Nature: Follower

Allegiance: Progenitors

Physical Attributes

Strength (Brutish) 4

Dexterity (Fast) 5

Stamina (Unflagging) 5

Mental Attributes

Perception 2

Intelligence 1

Wits 1

Social Attributes

Appearance 0 *

Manipulation 1

Charisma 1

Backgrounds: Mentor (progenitors) 5

Willpower: 2

Psi: 1

Gear: gamma rifle, radio link

Special Abilities: The spinals were bred for rudimentary intelligence, but have the benefit of physical power and the most complicated set of *in utero* programming of any phyle.

Natural Armor: A spinal has a lightweight but tough exoskeleton, providing it with natural [4/4, 0] armor. Further, the creature has rows of poison spines along its arms that inflict 2d10 L damage to any attacker that strikes without rigid armor protection.

Scythe Arms: The creature's tremendous upper arms inflict Strength + 4d10 L damage.

Superior Stamina: A spinal's physiology is designed to allow it to fight until it literally drops

dead. As such, the warrior does not suffer any dice penalty from damage.

Confrontational pheromones: Each target within 10 meters must make a Willpower roll at +3 difficulty. Failure seizes the subject with panic, prohibiting him from taking any actions that turn. Success means the subject can act, but is at +1 difficulty to any attacks made against the spinal. In either case, the effect lasts while the subject is exposed to the pheromone. A filter mask reduces the difficulty by one; a sealed environment suit negates the effect.

Sasqs

The strength of the Coalition lies as much in its hard technology as its genetic abilities. Yet even its advanced hardtech requires maintenance from time to time. This task falls on the "sasqs," (a bastardization of the "sasquatch" label bestowed in the first contact mission). The members of this servitor phyle combine the power of a cargo lifter with the nimble fingers of a surgeon, and brains packed with the compiled technical expertise of generations of their forebears. Their combined knowledge is the foundation upon which the entire Coalition operates, though they only know enough to maintain the *status quo* — sasqs are not designers or creators.

The burly technicians carry their tools wherever they go, and feel compelled to examine and



puzzle out the function of any unfamiliar piece of equipment. Like the envoys, sasqs have highly developed creative and intellectual skills, with a prodigious memory for recalling schematics and specifications. The Coalition techs are the most intercommunicative of any of the phyles; when two sasqs are together they nearly always strike up a conversation, comparing notes on equipment and procedures in their deep, rumbling voices. This constant sharing of information (verbally as well as via pheromones) gives the sasqs access to a vast "brain trust" of experience and technical knowledge. Their technical predilections also make them very neat, orderly creatures, especially when at work.

Image: Sasqs are physically large and very powerful to better manipulate and carry large pieces of equipment, but their hands are quick and sure. They also have a muscular tentacle on each forearm that is used when working on very small equipment or in very cramped spaces. This phyle is one of the longest-lived in the Coalition, with specimens living up to 60 years.

Roleplaying Hints: You are bred with an insatiable curiosity about and desire to tinker with machines — in fact, you are not truly content unless you have something mechanical to putter around with.

Nature: Analyst

Allegiance: Progenitors

Physical Attributes **Abilities**

Strength (Rugged) 5 Might 4

Dexterity (Delicate) 4 Athletics 1, Legerdemain 2

Stamina (Enduring) 5 Endurance 4, Resistance 2

Mental Attributes **Abilities**

Perception (Patient) 4 Awareness 3, Investigation 1

Intelligence 3 Engineering 5, Linguistics (Chinese, English) 2, Science 1

Wits 1

Social Attributes **Abilities**

Appearance 2

Manipulation 1

Charisma 2 Etiquette 2

Backgrounds: Mentor (Progenitors) 5

Willpower: 3

Psi: 1

Gear: simple clothes, toolkit.

Special ability: Mnemonic pheromones: A sasq can "tag" a target with a pheromone encoded with referential information any phyle member can refer to later. ("This tool is the right size for an interceptor's canopy actuator.") A sasq can encode several simple facts onto a single pheromone trace; the effect lasts up to a week.

Drones

The second-largest phyle (next to the cattle) and the oldest, drones began fulfilling the breeders' first needs centuries ago. Drones exist for one purpose: to provide menial labor for their masters at any time. They are bred for dependability, patience and subservience. They are ubiquitous throughout the ark's labyrinthine corridors.

Unlike the later phyles, the drones were created with an average degree of intelligence and the means for creative thinking, on the premise that a certain amount of free thought allowed them to accomplish their tasks without having to bother their masters every other moment for guidance. Over time, the drones memorize enough knowledge about their superiors to provide services intuitively.

Drones can be directed by any other Coalition phyle in order of seniority (breeder, envoy, sasq, and so on), and are obligated to fulfill all tasks to the best of their ability. This can lead to long, hectic working periods as drones must juggle many simultaneous duties. Often, drones communicate with one another and try to distribute their tasks among each other into a more efficient arrangement. Their masters never know the difference — the servants all look alike, even to the progenitors, and once their work is done they are quickly forgotten.

Image: Drones have gray, short-haired pelts and gentle, inquiring features. They are physically resilient but lack agility, moving slowly and deliberately (though equally well on two limbs or four). Their mental faculties are sufficient to allow learning a wide variety of skills and abilities, should the opportunity present itself. Individual life spans last up to 40 years.

Roleplaying Hints: You do not like to stay idle, and draw pleasure from keeping your masters content. Your duty is to serve, and you do so gladly.

Nature: Follower

Allegiance: Progenitors

Physical Attributes **Abilities**

Strength 3 Might 5

Dexterity 2 Athletics 2, Stealth 1

Stamina (Unflagging) 5 Endurance 3

Mental Attributes **Abilities**

Perception 2 Awareness 3

Intelligence 3 Survival 2

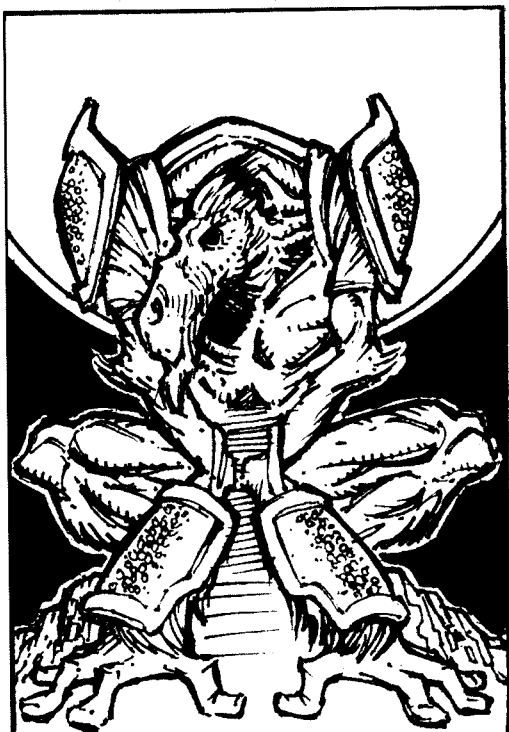
Wits 1

Social Attributes **Abilities**

Appearance 2

Manipulation 1

Charisma 2 Etiquette 2



Backgrounds: Mentor (Progenitors) 5

Willpower: 3

Psi: 1

Gear: simple clothing; whatever is required for the job at hand.

Pheromone type: *Evasionary pheromones:* Each target within 10 meters suffers +3 difficulty to any attempts to detect a drone unless the target is specifically looking for one. The drone is not invisible, just disregarded. A filter mask reduces the difficulty by one; a sealed environment suit negates the effect.

Furies

The Coalition-Aberrant crossbreeds, dubbed furies, are a large-scale experiment by the progenitors to introduce Aberrant abilities into a wide variety of phyles. However, the breeders are still no closer to determining where the control of taint originates in the Aberrant genetic sequence. The result has been select infusions of tainted genetic code into existing phyle templates to determine what effect the new genes create. At the time of *The Devil's Bargain*, the furies are on their fifth generation. This latest batch has demonstrated marked taint-related mutations, but the nature of these alterations are every bit as random as evidenced in the Aberrants themselves. No two furies are alike.

When the Aberrants agreed to share their genetic material with the breeders, they operated on the supposition that the taint within the furies would make them more receptive to their human kin than the Coalition. Certainly, the mutations that twisted the furies' minds have made them very resistant to the breeders' *in utero* behavioral programming, but at the same time the crossbreeds are generally more willful and independent than the Aberrants expected. Like many hybrids, the furies appear to have gained the best qualities of both "parents," and are not particularly beholden to either. Like the Aberrants, the taint has twisted the furies' minds, making them violently psychotic, and their ultimate motives remain unclear.

Furies encountered during *The Devil's Bargain* are twisted creatures drawn from the genetic templates of existing phyles. For individual statistics on a fury, choose one of the phyle templates above (including pheromone abilities), and add one or more of the *physical* mutations presented in the Aberrant template of **Trinity**, p. 303. Furies cannot employ taint-related powers similar to psionics, nor can they warp.

Aberrants

There are no specific Aberrant adversaries in this episode, so go ahead and design whatever Aberrants you like for it. It could be interesting to include an Aberrant whom the characters have encountered in the past, if you're so inclined. Refer to **Trinity** and its supplements for ideas on different kinds of Aberrants to create.

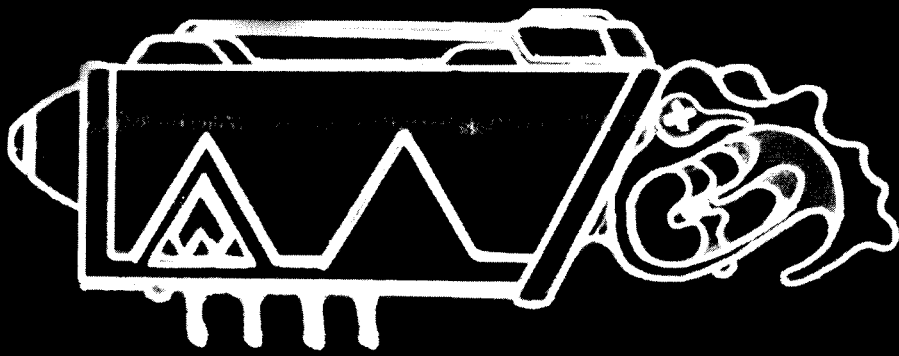
Technology

Hardtech

• **APD-11 Optimized Surveillance Array:** The APD-11 is a special surveillance tool designed by Æon for covert intelligence-gathering operations. The small, tripod-mounted device contains a high-resolution holocam, directional audio receiver and recently added low-power laser for pheromone typing. The APD-11 can record visual images out to 100 meters, audio signals at 75 meters and perform spectral analysis of pheromone traces out to 60 meters.

Tech: Ω, Mass: 4, Cost: not available commercially

• **Coalition Gamma Rifle:** The spinal warriors' standard ranged weapon, this fires a pulse of gamma radiation that can penetrate all but the densest personal armor (anything with a Lethal



Coalition Gamma Rifle

rating lower than four), causing massive tissue damage and cell death. Fortunately for the Coalition's enemies, the spinals are not highly trained in its use, and are conditioned to fire it only in cases where the warrior cannot engage an enemy in close combat. Due to its massive power requirements, the weapon's power cell must be recharged from special plugs on the ark.

Tech: Ω , Accuracy: 0, Damage: 12d10 L, Range: 450, Maneuvers: Ms, ROF: 2, Clip: 30, Conc: 0, Mass: 3, Cost: n/a

- **Coalition Perimeter Defense Pod:** This black, one-half-meter-high tulip-shaped device is solar-powered, and is comprised of a sophisticated motion sensor and gamma pulse emitter. Anything larger than one meter in size and 10 kilos in mass that steps within five meters of the pod triggers a gamma pulse identical in damage to a gamma rifle (see above). A simple "cookie cutter" badge (the triangular patch each Coalition alien has on Erebus) creates a safety zone three meters in diameter that allows the wearer to pass unmolested.

Tech: Ω , Mass: 10, Cost: n/a

- **Pheromone Filter/Analysis Mask:** This system consists of a face mask and integral goggles designed to filter concentrated pheromones and to alert the wearer to their presence. The mask's computer agent contains a library of known Coalition pheromone types, and can catalog most new ones detected. The device automatically engages when it detects catalogued or potentially harmful concentrations, and alerts the wearer to their presence via the goggles' HUD display. When possible, the filter also identifies the type of pheromone and its relative intensity. At present, the system does not provide full immunity from Coalition pheromones, merely reducing by two any pheromone-induced dice pool difficulties.

Tech: Ω , Mass: 1, Cost: ••••

Biotech

- **Chameleon Mesh:** This BioSystems device duplicates a chameleon's unique talent. The poncho-like covering is composed of specially cultured biomaterial whose pigmentation adapts to its surroundings. To operate effectively, the wearer must remain in one location and stay very still for 30 sec-

onds for the camouflage to adapt. Unless the user moves at a very slow crawl, she must pause after every movement to allow the mesh to adapt itself. Once in effect, the bioapp applies +2 difficulty to any visual attempts at detecting the wearer.

Tech: Ψ , Mass: 0.25, Tolerance: n/a, Cost:

••••

- **Noetic Dampener:** This device effectively disrupts psi use within a 10 meter diameter, absorbing any directed noetic energy into itself. The character spends as normal for powers that require Psi point expenditure, but the dampener sucks them up. The effect is dispersed before it can be completed. (Techniques that don't require Psi points function normally.) The device then "bleeds off" the subquantum energy. This doesn't harm the psion, but is effective at restricting psi use.

Tech: Ψ , Mass: 2, Tolerance: n/a, Cost: not available commercially

Transportation

- **L-B MEL-S:** This stealth hybrid uses the MEL chassis as described in *Trinity*, p. 285, but with three key modifications. First, the ship's

power plant was augmented significantly, allowing for greater velocity while reducing detectable engine emissions. Second, most of the cargo bay was converted into a sophisticated field biology lab to facilitate the science team's studies. Third, the remainder of the cargo bay was redesigned to hold a dozen smart missiles.

VT: Hybrid

Tech: Ω

CS: Mach 1.5

TS: Mach 1.9

VS: 4

Handling: 0

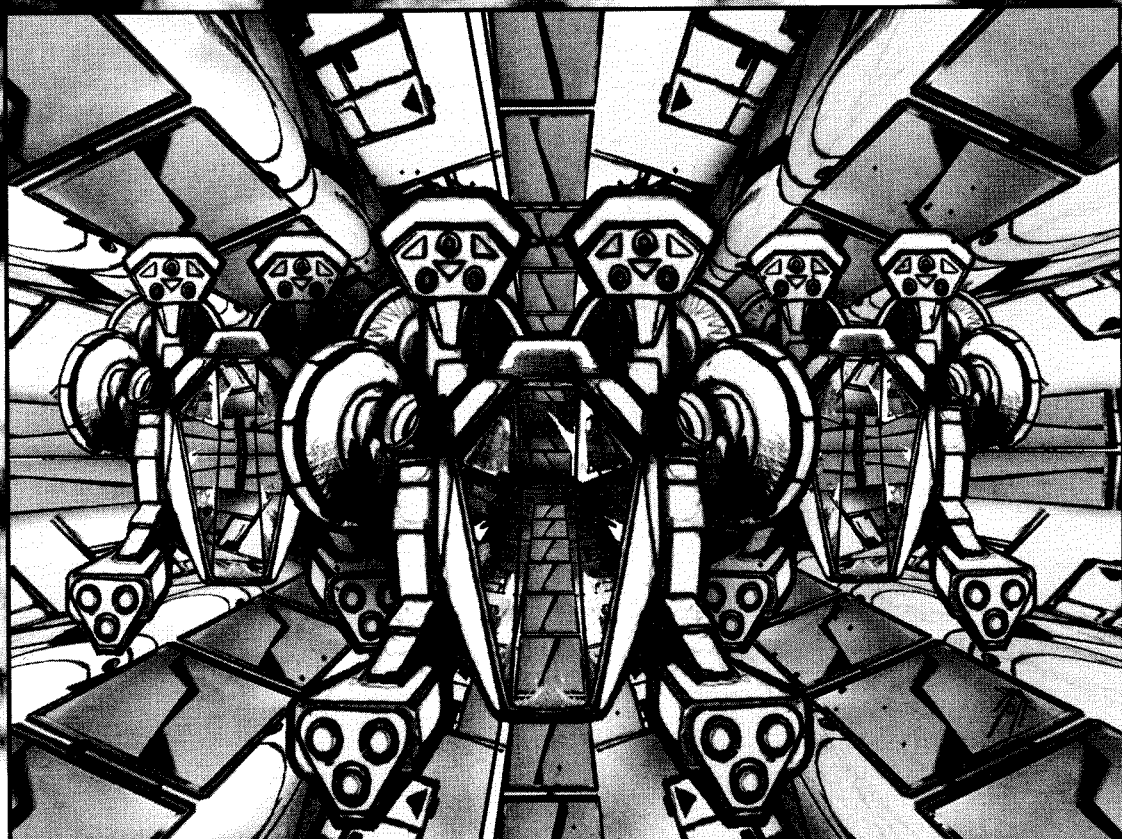
Mass: 250

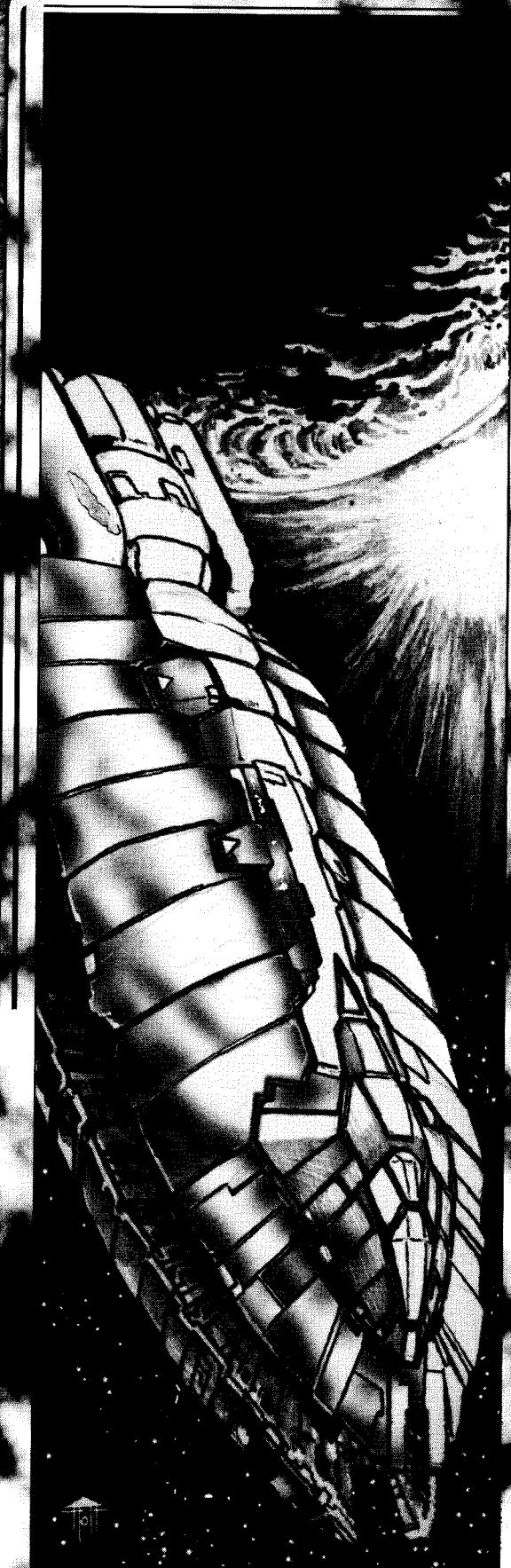
Cost: not available commercially

Armor: 5 [10]

Weapons: Turret-mounted, heavy coilgun (Accuracy: +1, Damage: 8d10 [10] L), 12 smart missiles (Accuracy: +3, Damage: 10d10 [15] L)

- **Coalition Interceptor:** This small, highly maneuverable single-person fighter is the Coalition ark's primary defense craft. The interceptor is heavily armed for its size, mounting two rapid-fire gamma cannons and six pulse missiles. The latter





are small fusion warheads that emit dozens of high-intensity X-ray lasers that strike any target within 10 km of detonation.

VT: Hybrid

Tech: Ω

CS: Mach 4.1

TS: Mach 5

VS: 5

Handling: +4

Mass: 15

Cost: n/a

Armor: I [10]

Weapons: Dual gamma cannons (Accuracy: 0, Damage: 10d10 [15] L), 12 pulse missiles (Accuracy: 0, Damage: 6d10 [10] L in 10 km radius)

• **Coalition Transport:** A standard small transport of Coalition design, this vessel can carry up to 150 passengers and 200 kg of cargo. Seats three in the cockpit (only one pilot is needed), plus a lower deck with three gunnery positions.

VT: Hybrid

Tech: Ω

CS: Mach 1

TS: Mach 1.4

VS: 3

Handling: +2

Mass: 30

Cost: n/a

Armor: 6 [10]

Weapons: Dorsal, ventral and tail turret gamma cannons (Accuracy: 0, Damage: 10d10 [15] L)

ALIEN ENCOUNTER² DECEPTION

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Jonathan Woodward: To my mother, who knows wisdom when she hears it.

Michael Lee: To my father, Hargis Lee (1930-1999). The long night has fallen. Rest, at last, in peace.

Special Thanks

To Alex Sheikman for additional help on things Russian.



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