



TWILIGHT IMPERIUM

FOURTH EDITION

GUIDE TO THE IMPERIUM



Guide to the Imperium

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"There is no price too great for the Hacan, no silk too fine, and no war too long. My people will persevere."

—Hacan Carth

THE EMIRATES OF HACAN



Under the punishing rays of the massive star Kenara lies the tri-system of the Hacan, each of its three satellites wrapped in the yellow haze so distinctive of desert planets. These three jewels are called Arretze, Kamdorn, and Hercant. Here, the united Emirates of the Hacan have grown a mighty civilization of warriors, nomads, farmers, and above all, merchants.

The Kenara system is one of the most heavily trafficked in the known universe. Only the wormhole portal systems see more traffic in any given cycle. From Kenara, an untold number of Hacan and other merchant vessels traverse the galaxy. This traffic is supported by entire cities of space stations that provide the warehousing, logistics, maintenance, banking, entertainment, and other necessities facilitating the constant flow of goods, ships, and crew.

On the surface of the three hot desert planets, life is slower and more serene. Only life in the city of Harcarun on the planet Arretze matches the breathless pace of the space above. Located in a shadowy vale near the Arretze northern pole, Harcarun is the only city in the tri-system that has a fixed position. Its permanent location and almost bearable climate has made Harcarun the primary point of operation for most non-native trading corporations, financiers, and opportunists. The Hacan, despite their uncanny ability for establishing financial relationships and building trade, generally despise the chaotic lifestyle and, to them, windy cold of Harcarun.

The Hacan people dwell mostly in cities built on massive dust-sleds, constantly moving to cooler climates as the desert seasons shift. Although some technology has been introduced in the last hundred years, most Hacan cities are still pulled by vast herds of Tuuran beasts, whose gill-like skin membranes take moisture from the very air itself.

In their distant past, the Hacan were a poor species, their exploits into space dwarfed by the other great races of the Imperium. Then slowly the Hacan discovered an insatiable off-worlder lust for special products grown under Kenara's blinding light or dug from the deep sands of their homeworlds. The intoxicating gerr root, clothes made from the starflowers that only rise during Hercant's equinox, Spehat aphrodisiacs, liquors, medicines, and forbidden drugs: all harvested and manufactured by the crafty and patient hands of the Hacan.

Soon the Hacan became masters of trade, and their system prospered as unfathomable fortunes were made by the increasingly powerful trading clans, chief among them the Mowshir Emirate of Arretze. The desire to protect their newfound wealth, and a will to peacefully regulate and arbitrate between the clans, moved the Hacan to form a representative gathering and to elect a Quieron—the leader who speaks for all the Hacan. The Quieron leads the entire hierarchy of trade-groups, each possessing its own fleets of commerce and war. His task: to lead his people to the Imperial Throne, establishing an era of wealth and peaceful commerce.



KENARA SYSTEM

✧ Population	8.82 billion
✧ Government	United Emirates
✧ Leadership	Quieron
✧ Disposition	Nomadic
✧ Tendencies	Economic

The wealth of half the galaxy flows through the coffers of the nomadic trading clans of the Hacan, but being a traditional people, they choose to remain secluded away in the dry deserts of Kenara's worlds, their ancestral homes.



"Our enemies consider us children. They think us weak. Show them. Show them what the children of Jord can do!"
—Supreme Admiral DeLouis

THE FEDERATION OF SOL

Nestled in the third orbit of the Sol system lies Jord, the ancestral home of the human race. Few planets can rival Jord's diversity of climates, seasons, and ecology. Much of this wealth is attributed to its enormous moon, which causes dramatic tidal motions in Jord's oceans, which is thought to be the impetus of its diverse life and weather patterns. Much of Jord's orbit, as well as its moon, is crowded with stellar traffic from the orbital and lunar space stations. Military ships of the line, bearing the distinctive Sol symbol, are often moored to the bulky military platforms in Jord's orbit, or to the fleet base Churchill Prima that orbits the reddish fourth planet of the system.

The humans themselves represent the most numerous and most diverse species of the galaxy. Since the discovery of the mass-drive, humans have left Jord to explore, and they continue to explore, the distant corners of space. Humans can be found in all corners of the galaxy and seem to demonstrate the greatest variation in intellect and application of skills. Human colonies and settlements can be found everywhere, as can human servants, traders, cartographers, explorers, mercenaries, scholars, construction crews, smugglers, scientists, diplomats, etc. It is commonly recognized among galactic historians that it has been the diversified skills of the human race that has been the determining factor in avoiding annihilation or extinction.

Of the untold billions of humans that dwell across the galaxy, all of whose ancestors once migrated from the Sol system, most feel no allegiance or kinship to the Sol Federation or the humans of Jord. Some feel a traditional friendship, while a few remain loyal to Sol and its policies. Being the last civilization to be admitted into the imperial council, it is ironic that Sol was the first to openly declare war against the failing empire. It was a Sol fleet that fired the first shot at the Letnev blockade of the Quann wormhole, escalating the minor conflict into the full scale galactic war that was the Twilight Wars.

The Sol Federation of Nations is governed by the bi-annually elected High Minister, who has the executive control of the economy, budget, and Sol military. The executive powers of the High Minister are held in check by three distinct governing houses: The House of Law, The House of the People, and The House of Industry. The four governing bodies of the Federation are all centrally located in the massive metropolis of New Moscow, a bustling center of politics, trade, and high culture.

The current High Minister, Juan Salvador Tao, is preparing for a new age that he knows is rapidly evolving before him. He is eager to expand the official colonization of the Sol Federation once more, especially to the old colonies of Centauri, Gral, and Quann. He knows that the balance of power is shifting and that the universe will soon once again be governed under one empire. The High Minister will make sure that his Federation will prevail during the coming power struggle and inevitable war. Already the Sol fleet awaits his orders to strike nearby systems. Soon the human destiny will be fulfilled, and the distant suns theirs to command.



SOL SYSTEM

✦ Population	16.44 billion
✦ Government	Federation
✦ Leadership	Juan Salvador Tao
✦ Disposition	Determined
✦ Tendencies	Expansionist

Humanity was not the first species to travel the stars, but the voracity with which they spread throughout the galaxy surprised even the eldest of the spacefaring races.



"Hold your fire until the main fleet arrives. Our armada will blot out their sun—when they die, they will die in darkness!"

—Baron Unlenn

THE BARONY OF LETNEV



In the very blackness of space lies cold, hard Arc Prime. Its system has no central star, and Arc Prime's lack of defined orbit has been a mystery to scientists for millennia. It is a common jest that Arc Prime is simply afloat in space, and that only the Letnev disdain for the rest of the galaxy protects it from a fatal collision. The Letnev's principal vassal, Wren Terra, shines like a mighty star in the ebon distance, while thorny military ships surround the dark planet like fireflies attracted to a black hole.

Foreign visitors to Arc Prime will, under heavy fighter escort, be directed to the Dunlain Crater. The crater holds the sprawling city of Feruc, Arc Prime's only city located on the planetary surface. Feruc is a pressurized mesh of icy black metal housing, belching industries, warehouses, and military installations. The thin atmosphere of Arc Prime prohibits normal surface life outside the cold pressurized facilities of Feruc. Since the Barony has no use for the meager atmosphere of Arc Prime, it freely emits unfiltered pollutants from the underground Letnev cities and factories to the surface. A journey to Feruc is likely to leave a thick layer of frozen black residue on any vessel. It is a common merchant endearment to call a ship returning from Arc Prime a "Chimney Sweeper."

Under the surface of Arc Prime, heated by its planetary core, the Baron presides over the proud and fierce Letnev people. Few non-natives have ever visited the capital Goz, fabled "city of a billion," or the other six major underground urban centers of Arc Prime. A gray organic plant material, called Ao by the Letnev, is found everywhere in Arc Prime's underground. It is Ao that supplies the oxygen to the enormous cavern-networks, and the plant is held in almost religious awe and respect by the Letnev people.

Although tens of thousands of moist fungus caves are farmed by an army of intelligent machines, the Letnev's great weakness has always been its shortage of food, liquid, medicines, and essential vitamins. The ancient Lazax kept the aggressive race in check by maintaining strict control of the Letnev food supplies and trade.

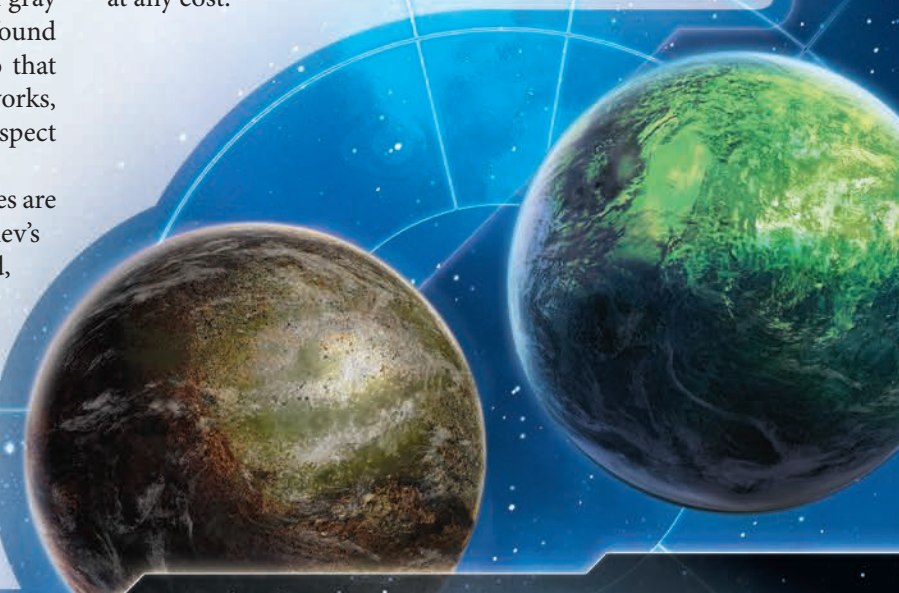
Throughout the time of the Lazax Empire, the Letnev led two unsuccessful rebellions against the Imperium. Their history of dissension justified a constant imperial oversight of Arc

Prime and its people. The Letnev blockade of the Quann wormhole at the end of the Age of Dusk was started in protest over the Lazax sanctions and supervision. It was the Quann conflict that ignited the Twilight Wars and the final downfall of the empire.

After Wren Terra was annexed by the Letnev during the latter years of the Age of Dusk, their colonies here have been primarily occupied with growing and supplying food for the population of Arc Prime. Foreign trade with the Letnev consists mainly of foodstuffs, for which merchants receive metals, weapons, and the sharp Saimoc—strong crystals used in mining operations across the galaxy.

The Baron keeps order by maintaining a strict bureaucracy, discipline, and an elitist military culture that brings the strongest and the smartest directly under his control. The pale Letnev despise light, and will often wear protective headgear when visiting other worlds with bright sunlight.

The legendary Letnev troops are only surpassed in brute strength by the Tekklar N'orr elite soldiers of distant Quinarra. With the new awakening of ambitions among the great races, the resurgence of interstellar commerce, and the recent momentum of the Galactic Council, the Baron has secretly been preparing to lead his people to final dominance. Baron Daz Emmiciel Werqan III has only one ambition: to become emperor at any cost.



BARONY SPACE

✦ Population	10.47 billion
✦ Government	Barony
✦ Leadership	Daz Emmiciel Werqan III
✦ Disposition	Disdainful
✦ Tendencies	Military

In the darkness of space reside the Letnev. Whether the darkness is innate or whether the Letnev brought it with them is unclear, for they are one and the same.



*"To fight without cause is not the way, human.
Curb your anger. Let us walk through the
gardens and consider how to proceed."
—Elder Qanoj*

THE XXCHA



Even the oldest annals recognize the ancient kingdom of the reptilian Xxcha as the first of the great interstellar civilizations. Nestled in the middle of a wealthy section of space, the Xxcha twin planets of Archon Ren and Archon Tau lie bathed in the gentle light of the Xxlak star. While the Xxcha still call the two planets “twins,” an outsider will instantly notice that the grayish and shadowy Archon Tau in no way resembles the brilliant, healthy green of Archon Ren.

Throughout the tenure of the lost Lazax Imperium, the Xxcha were the most peaceful, docile, and content of the major civilizations. They did not, unlike the other races, scheme for power and territory during the Age of Dusk. Unlike the Lazax, the Xxcha elders did see the growing threat to the galaxy. They fruitlessly sought to warn the Lazax of their peril, and struggled to bring dialogue to the increasing racial factionalism. A powerful Lazax councilor by the name of Ibna Vel Syd listened to the Xxcha warning, but even he could not sway the false sense of safety felt by the emperor. Then, disaster struck. The Quann crisis erupted into sudden war, and the Letnev, led by the Baron Daz Arrokan I, moved towards the rich Xxcha system in conquest. The Xxcha, unprepared and weaponless, used their formidable powers of negotiation and goodwill to broker an agreement in which they ceded only Archon Tau to the invaders, while the kingdom retained a Letnev-supervised autonomy on Archon Ren. The Xxcha, never fools, were aware of the nature of Letnev promises and the futility of the arrangement. The agreement would only last as long as the Barony was occupied in war elsewhere. In time, the Xxcha knew, the Letnev would return to claim the rest of their prize and enslave them. It was then, for the first time in their history, that the Xxcha started to create their first weapons and train their first armies. In secret deep groves and in hidden vales, the Xxcha king sadly watched his people develop into warriors.

Less than a decade after the occupation of Archon Tau, the Letnev fleet suffered a stunning defeat against Sol in the Gral system. Only a few cycles after the battle, the Sol Phoenix fleet entered the Xxlak system and engaged the heavily fortified Letnev positions on Archon Tau. The ensuing bombardments and battles lasted for almost two years. In the end, the Letnev occupiers were defeated, but with a terrible toll. The ecology of Archon Tau had been shattered beyond recall. What was once a true twin to the green and fruitful Archon Ren was now a noxious, blackened crater. Its forests had burned. Ashes and scattered dust started a planet-wide winter that lasted for a hundred years, killing most plant and animal life.

Now, recovered from the loss of Archon Tau, the Xxcha kingdom has prospered on the generous Archon Ren. Covered by mostly leafy forests, small inland oceans, and fruitful jungles, Archon Ren is rich in minerals, energy, foodstuffs, and water. The Xxcha

civilization dwells in a myriad of arboreal villages and towns. The only true metropolis is the giant city of Kklaj, found on the planet’s southern hemisphere. Kklaj functions as the seat of the Xxcha King, whose extensive palace, entirely sculpted of Q’waar wood, and flower gardens, stretch for miles at the center of the city.

The Xxcha are an inherently peaceful, slow, and thoughtful people. They hold their nobles and town elders in deep respect. A common pastime of Xxcha males and females alike is to debate meaning and origin while smoking gerr root on long-stemmed pipes. The jungles and lakes of Archon Ren are surprisingly free from the invasive insects that so often make forest and jungle planets unbearable.

Although the Xxcha still believe in the doctrine of peace and negotiation, they will never again bend to foreign invasion. Travelers to the Xxlak system will often notice impressive sentinel Xxcha superdreadnoughts and the distinctive Xxlun fighters in intense naval exercises. Although the typical Xxcha may seem slow and encumbered by a heavy reptilian bodily weight, when roused, the Xxcha are surprisingly strong and fast.

The pale shadow of Archon Tau hangs like a scar in the Xxcha skies. The sight of it is the everlasting sorrow of the Xxcha, and the ever-present reminder of the cost of submission. The Xxcha will never allow such tragedy to befall them again. Ccrysus, the Xxcha King, knows that for the sake of a peaceful galaxy, the Xxcha must seek the Imperial Throne and be wise for all.



XXLAK SYSTEM

✦ Population	8.16 billion
✦ Government	Monarchy
✦ Leadership	Ccrysus
✦ Disposition	Diplomatic
✦ Tendencies	Political

Slow to anger, and political by nature, many have mistaken the Xxcha's commitment to peace for weakness, only to uncover fierce warriors beneath the Xxcha's tranquil veneer.



"We cannot halt progress for the sake of morality. If you have not the stomach for science, then I suggest you depart Wun-Escha immediately."

—Doctor Sucaban

UNIVERSITIES OF JOL-NAR



Most technological devices used in the galaxy today have at least one or two components originating from the Jol-Nar laboratories. During the height of the Lazax Imperium, the galaxy was even more reliant on underlying Jol-Nar technology and the knowledge of the aquatic Hylar. This reliance on Jol-Nar engineers and skills was one of the key factors leading to the total collapse of galactic civilization and its descent into the Dark Years that followed the Twilight Wars.

When the Twilight Wars first began, the Jol-Nar closed their embassies, withdrew their workers, and started a war of aggression on their own. Among the other races, few individuals remained who now understood the complex Jol-Nar machinery, virtual code, and chemical compounds. Soon, fundamental machinery started failing, setting off a chain reaction of integrated technological failures over a period of hundreds of years. Combined with devastating wars, this spurred massive famine, poverty, and chaos. As cultures, economies, and finally the tools of war completely collapsed, the Twilight Wars quickly ebbed and the Dark Years began.

Even the Jol-Nar were devastated by the Twilight Wars. Although the rest of the galaxy had relied on their technologies, so had the Jol-Nar relied on the income, protection, and natural resources of others. The arrogance of the High Scholars spurred them to wage a sudden aggressive war after the Quann conflict erupted. Then, a few years later, the Doolak plague destroyed nearly a quarter of the Jol-Nar population, causing a massive loss of knowledge by itself. The Jol-Nar aggression soon turned defensive, and the powerful N'orr looked to conquer all Jol-Nar space. Only after a decisive Jol-Nar victory in the Saudor system did the Hylar receive a needed respite.

Like azure sapphires, the twin ocean planets of Jol and Nar slowly circle the Garian star. Under their waters lies the great civilization of the Hylar, a water-breathing, soft-boned species with oversized heads and intellects to match. The Hylar are governed by an ancient system of high scholars, who combined are called the University. A single Hylar ruler, the Headmaster, oversees the Hylar from the deep underwater city of Wun-Escha on the planet of Jol. Under the Headmaster, the Circle of Regents governs the local regions and specific areas of knowledge.

Although the Hylar are often considered one race, there are in fact several distinct variations within the Hylar species, mainly derivative of the

geographical region and ocean depth from which they hail.

Most Hylar are capable of breathing surface air, and some can exist for weeks without being submerged. Others cannot breathe surface air at all, and must travel in massive tanks when off-planet. None know how an underwater race came to be masters of technology. Most agree that the large bio-cerebral area of the Hylar physique, combined with a need to adapt their soft-boned and slow bodies to their environment, created an evolution of material usage, as opposed to one of physical adaptation.

Despite their physical weakness, the Hylar are a proud people, often to the point of abrasiveness and arrogance. Since the catastrophic Dark Years, the Hylar have started utilizing the natural resources of their own planets, and they now extract metals and medicines from the many algae and coral formations of both Jol and Nar. As a new age nears, the Hylar once more strive for the influence they feel they have earned. The Circle of Regents has secretly decided that the Hylar must take the place of the Lazax in governing and advancing a new united galaxy. Under their mandate, the Headmaster has begun building his forces, and Jol-Nar diplomats and engineers have started appearing among the other civilizations in large numbers, appearing friendly, but with hidden agendas. Soon the Headmaster will make his claim for the empire, and the galaxy will enter an age of technological advancement and intellectual achievement.



GARIAN SYSTEM

✦ Population	3.22 billion
✦ Government	Circle of Regents
✦ Leadership	Headmaster
✦ Disposition	Aloof
✦ Tendencies	Scientific

The Hylar technologies which have become so widespread across the galaxy represent a mere fraction of the Universities' advanced capabilities.



"Fear is death. Most of you will die. The Queen Mother thanks you for your worthy sacrifice."

—G'hom Sek'kus

SARDAKK N'ORR



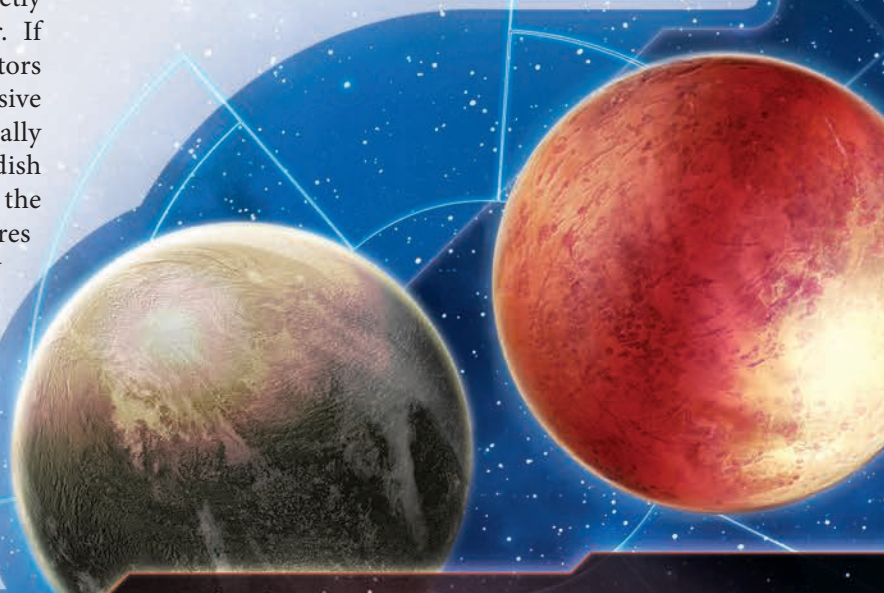
Not far past the Unicorn Nebula, the golden Sardakk star shines its ancient, hot light on giant oceanless Quinarra. The massive planet radiates a red glow like a dusty ruby in the night, its massive polar storms clearly visible from space. A great network of orbital space stations and massive complements of fleet units occupy the system in the fashion of the insectile N'orr. Massive whale-like N'orr carriers spew fighters like angry hornets from a disturbed nest. Convoys of ice-mountain transports are always inbound from the planet Tren'lak. Small spider-like robotic ships drill into the sides of the ice, guiding the ice to the orbital liquid-processing plants, after which the derived water and salt is flown to Quinarra by bloated sungliders that, like beetle balloons, slowly descend to the N'orr cities below.

Quinarra itself is among the most inhospitable of planets inhabited by a major civilization. Only Letnev's Arc Prime is recognized as more desolate than Quinarra. The Letnev, however, live exclusively under Arc Prime's surface, whereas the N'orr civilization is well established both on and below Quinarra's continents. Only Quinarra's polar regions, where even the hardy N'orr cannot survive the deadly storms for extended periods of time, are largely uninhabited. Brutal electric, hail, and dust storms, although not approaching the ferocity of the polar storms, are frequent throughout the planet and considered normal by the N'orr.

Visitors to Quinarra will be flown directly to the immigration nexus in the capital H'cor. If weather permits sufficient visibility, most visitors will be impressed by the massive size and explosive traffic of the city. The N'orr structures are typically oval or rounded, created from a hardened reddish material similar to the general topography of the planet. Like most major N'orr cities, H'cor features towering building constructs, sprawling low-story buildings, and deep gorges that reveal city-nests deep below the surface, delving into the red earth. Busy roads and hover-lanes cross the city in a thousand ways, often congested with N'orr traffic.

The N'orr will tell you that they are ruled by "Sardakk the Queen Mother," but that acknowledgment seems more steeped in ritual than fact. None have ever met the mythical "mother," and no off-world documentation exists suggesting there is any truth to the notion. The accepted and visible head of the N'orr state is the Envoy of the Queen, a male N'orr in direct command of the cultural, economic, and military matters of the race. The length of the Envoy's tenure and the process of his election seems to be decided by a secret brotherhood, the "Veiled Brood," in which lies the real power of the N'orr.

The Envoy and the Veiled Brood oversee the rapid expansion of the N'orr military forces and fleets. The Tekklar Elite soldiers are the pride of their people. The Tekklar train exclusively in the southern polar regions, where the weak die and the strong become G'hom: members of the prestigious Tekklar order, treated like knights by the N'orr and feared across the galaxy. As Quinarra slowly turns, as the stars again come into their right constellations, the Veiled Brood knows that the time to swarm is coming again. And this time, the swarm will cover the stars.



SARDAKK SYSTEM

✦ Population	28.71 billion
✦ Government	Veiled Brood
✦ Leadership	The Envoy
✦ Disposition	Aggressive
✦ Tendencies	Military

No N'orr has ever laid eyes upon the Queen Mother, but her fury swells within each of them, charging them to drown the galaxy with blood in her name.



"You do not know the meaning of time. You do not comprehend the infinite. Your ignorance is surpassed only by your irrelevance."

—Diplomat 2RAM

THE L1Z1X MINDNET



It has been 13 years since the Hacan trader Zollar was lost, its final desperate broadcast intercepted by a Yssaril outpost near the Mahact asteroid fields.

The last transmission of the Zollar told a grim story. After leaving Moll Primus in the Mahact region, its navigation equipment failed, and its crew found themselves lost far beyond the remote borderlands. After nearly two weeks adrift in deep space, they were suddenly hailed by a great warship of unknown origin. The crew's joy soon turned to terror. The warship closed, bringing its broadside cannons to bear on the helpless freighter. The Hacan captain was able to send a final emergency broadcast before his ship was destroyed.

Not long after the disappearance of the Zollar, a mighty alien fleet appears on the outskirts of Yssaril space. From that fleet, a small delegation of representatives travels to Mecatol, submitting an ancestral claim to the Imperial Throne. They claim to be the true remnants of the ancient Lazax, now calling themselves the L1Z1X ("Ell Won Zee Won Ex"). Grisly to behold, they resemble the Lazax, but utterly changed, their bodies almost entirely overtaken by invasive cybernetic implants.

The Winnaran custodians are deeply divided over the issue. Some claim that the L1Z1X are not the ruling race, but a new and potentially dangerous hybrid. Other Winnarans argue that the Lazax have returned, in unexpected form, but returned nonetheless, and that their custodianship is over.

A Winnaran observer has been allowed to visit the L1Z1X home world, called "0.0.0" by its inhabitants, or "Null" by most others. The observer has not yet returned, and the L1Z1X remain a largely unknown entity. What little is known of them has been provided by the L1Z1X themselves, or obtained from a few old records provided by the Jol-Nar Regents.

From the Hylar records and from the L1Z1X claim, it has been inferred that the L1Z1X history started during the final days of the Lazax. It was less than a year before the great bombing of Mecatol that a councilor to the Emperor by the name of Ibna Vel Syd saw the impending doom. The Emperor and his other councilors refused to listen to Ibna's dire warnings. Soon Ibna grew frustrated with their myopia. Although the Lazax navy was clearly failing, although droves of systems were daily joining the three rebellions, although trade had entirely failed, and food supplies on Mecatol were running out, the Emperor and his cabinet simply could not comprehend that their birthright, their empire, could possibly fall.

Refusing to share the fate of his liege, Ibna Vel Syd began secretly planning a furtive diaspora for his own family and the few thousand Lazax who shared his fears. With him, Ibna sought to bring the pillars of Lazax culture, technology, and knowledge. He even managed to persuade a small group of Hylar scientists to join him, recognizing that the Hylar's skill was instrumental to the underlying technology of the empire.

Then, on a fateful night during the seventy-second year of the Twilight Wars, two freighters, the Manda and the Hurwana, and Ibna's own cruiser, Syd, left the great spaceport of Mecatol City. Below them, the great Hall of Cartography burned. So fearful had Ibna been of discovery and persecution by the Lazax's enemies that he had engineered the destruction of any record that could possibly identify his secret destination: a cold but adequate planet orbiting the small star Hazz, far beyond the borderlands.

It is guessed that the colony, struggling to survive, started to rely almost exclusively on technology to assist them in their hardships. Presumably helped by the small contingent of Hylar, technology crept into their lives and bodies, until they became almost indistinguishable from it.

It is rumored that Ibna Vel Syd still leads his people, encased in eldritch technology that keeps his ancient body alive. Whether the L1Z1X are guided by the wisdom that saved them or by the insanity that destroyed the famed Hall of Cartography, it is not known. Behind their vacant red eyes lie both a tragic history and a terrible malevolence. It seems certain that the return of the Lazax will wash across the galaxy like a tide of prophecy and steel.



UNKNOWN SYSTEM

✦ Population	Unknown
✦ Government	Unknown
✦ Leadership	Ibna Vel Syd
✦ Disposition	Calculating
✦ Tendencies	Scientific

Whether the L1Z1X are the Lazax returned or something much darker is a subject of much scholarly debate. The surgical effectiveness of their orbital bombardments, however, is not.



"You insult me, ssskinling. Ze monstrosity you suggest—ze Druaa, we are not capable of such cruelty. Purge zis madness from your mind and leave zis world."

—Q'uesh Sish

THE NAALU COLLECTIVE



It was not until the middle of the Twilight Wars that the Naalu civilization made itself known to the rest of the galaxy. Their system, dominated by the white star Mallac, had remained suspiciously undetected by the empire, despite being surrounded by wealthy systems whose recorded history predates even the Lazax. After a period of sheer astonishment, stellar cartographers and historians began suspecting manipulation by the Naalu themselves. After researching old records, investigators found a remarkably high number of missing ship incidents in that sector and an even more incriminating number of ships found stranded in space, their crews suffering from deep-space memory loss. Some scientists (the most vociferous of whom have died amidst questionable circumstances) have indicated that records exist indicating a great number of Yssaril ships passing into Mallac's area of space, but no records of any derelict or amnesic Yssaril crews have ever been recorded. The Naalu, it was later discovered to the horror of their neighbors, are highly telepathic and armed with technology and weapons that redirect, manipulate, or damage the neuron impulses guiding the brains of all major known races.

A secret prior relationship between the Yssaril Guild of Spies and the mind-bending Naalu goes a long way in explaining how the Naalu, a seemingly isolated civilization claiming no prior contact with the rest of the galaxy, developed premium civilian and military technology similar, and in some cases superior, to the rest of the galaxy.

Soon after the appearance of the Naalu, several of the great races, seeing the potential of a powerful new ally in the empire's midst, sought to win their allegiance. After learning of the Naalu's telepathic power, however, and after witnessing the strange arrogance of the beautiful Naalu, many quickly retrieved their envoys and diplomats in a healthy fear of the mind-reading serpentine race.

Despite originating on the dank and nondescript planet Maaluk, the Naalu have taken the breathtakingly beautiful Druaa as their home world. Most Naalu will scoff at any mention of their Maaluk heritage, and recent Naalu generations often seek to contest even hard scientific evidence which indicates that their proud, stoic race originated from any planet other than the scenic Druaa—especially the stinking bogs and mist-plains of Maaluk.

The Druaa seldom communicate with each other by speaking. Their telepathic communication is more effective, facilitates emotional as well as intelligent understanding, and has allowed the collective to prevent larger internal wars, which in turn has spurred their rapid advance in culture, technology (assisted by the Yssaril), and the creation of the Naalu fleet and military might. Unless speaking to off-worlders, the Naalu use their voices only for their music – hauntingly alluring arias of melodic hissing.

The Naalu have kept the pristine beauty of their crystal cities and Druaa's environment intact by locating most of their heavy industries on Maaluk. These industries are manned by the Miashan, a low-sentient marshland race enslaved by the Naalu to work in the great iron-extraction plants, underground gas mines, and on the thousands of rodent farms. Raw materials are promptly shipped to Druaa, stored in massive underground warehouses, and distributed to the Druaa cities by airborne gliders.

The leader of the Naalu collective is always female, as most Naalu leaders and off-world representatives are female. For the last decade, the tall red-scaled Q'uesh Sish has ruled the collective from her palace in the shining crystal city of Eershin. The beautiful, sleek spaceships of the Naalu patrol Mallac's outer borders, while Naalu troops train and muster on Druaa's two moons. With her Nefishh, a rare crystal radium device, Q'uesh sees the minds of the other races. She smiles at the knowledge, and with her, the collective Naalu leaders smile, sensing the knowledge in her mind and relishing the sweet poison of her thoughts. The great plan of the collective is about to take its final shape. Long have the Naalu observed the chaos and ugliness of the other races from a distance. The time nears that the beauty of Druaa will grow beyond the borders of Mallac. The time now nears when the rest of the galaxy will know the tranquility, order, and the true beauty of the Naalu. They will submit to that beauty... or be destroyed.



MALLAC SYSTEM

✦ Population	4.72 billion
✦ Government	Collective
✦ Leadership	Q'uesh Sish
✦ Disposition	Seductive
✦ Tendencies	Military

Deadly grace, perilous beauty. The crystalline radiance of the Nefishh reflects the very aspects of the Druaa, digging its claws deep into the minds of the "lesser" beings of the galaxy.



*"One people. One mind. One destiny. We will
rise above the pit they have thrown us in."
—Erwan Mentak, Founder of the Coalition*

THE MENTAK COALITION



Beyond the Mahact Plateau, part of the borderlands and the old star route known as the Passage of Tears, lies distant Moll Primus with its three tiny moons. The young planet is predominantly covered by extensive plains of the orange meet grass and sprinkled with a million lakes. Sharp youthful mountains pierce the heart of many of its continents, their icy mountain streams giving life to steep lush mountain valleys, where green fruitful trees and flowers grow in colorful contrast to the orange plains.

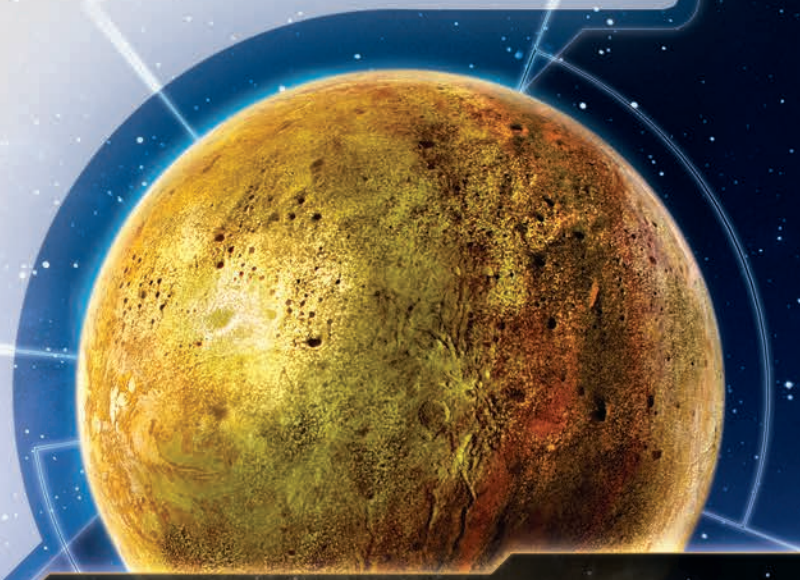
Although rich for exploitation, the remoteness of Moll Primus allowed the planet to go without organized colonization by the Lazax for thousands of years after its discovery. After the failed Gandar rebellion, however, the Lazax started to use the planet as a penal colony, a distant prison, for the worst offending political dissidents and other criminals from all races. Exile to Moll Primus meant a long journey in the bowels of a prison freighter along the Passage of Tears, a winding dark journey around the treacherous gravity wells of the Mahact Plateau. Only the remote planet Hope's End lies farther than Moll Primus on the Passage of Tears. Once on Moll Primus, prisoners were assigned to manual labor under the supervision of one of the regional planetary Governors. The Governors of Moll Primus mostly consisted of Lazax politicians or servicemen fallen into disgrace. An assignment to Moll Primus was as much a sentence to a Lazax public career as it was a prison for its population. Thus, the Governors were often incompetent, cruel, and bitter individuals. Although the planet itself was quite pleasant, even considered beautiful, its prisoner population was tortured, malnourished, and forced to fight in small-scale wars against the population of neighboring Governors.

Then, after more than 800 years, the Twilight Wars began. As the empire crumbled, as the supply ships and supervision from Mecatol Rex became infrequent and finally failed, the Governors panicked. Some fled the planet overnight with their entire households. Others perished in the inevitable prisoner revolts that followed. Before the Twilight Wars had subsided, Moll Primus was free. Some of its most recent prisoners soon left, but for most of its mixed-race population, Moll Primus was home. After the united rebellion against the Governor wardens, a brief period of infighting among

the different regions followed. A single human, Erwan Mentak, soon brought the regions together in a final peace and, before he died, prosperity.

Today, Moll Primus is governed by the Table of Captains, elected leaders from each region. Among them a single leader is chosen every ten cycles and granted the honorary title Erwan's Hand or "the Hand" for short. Helped by their Hylar brothers, the coalition has made great progress in advancing their technological status. Metals mined from Moll Primus's moons, various products made from the rich meet grass, income from "special" fleet excursions, and the hard work of its population have slowly formed the strong economic backbone of a proud civilization.

Although publicly denied by Mentak ambassadors, the Mentak employ a vast pirating fleet which wreaks havoc among merchant shipping lanes and smaller military convoys. Although now an educated culture and civilization in their own right, the Mentak people have never forgotten their roots as rogues and usurpers. Every Mentak feels a historical need for revenge: revenge against a galaxy that shipped their ancestors to torture and rot on Moll Primus centuries ago. The Table of Captains has given their Hand a clear mandate: to scheme, pillage, and conquer until the ruled are rulers and the enslaved are emperors.



MOLL SYSTEM

✦ Population	2.55 billion
✦ Government	Table of Captains
✦ Leadership	Erwan's Hand
✦ Disposition	Rebellious
✦ Tendencies	Economic

One might expect that a civilization descended entirely from convicts, exiles, and revolutionaries would be corrupt and lawless, but the Mentak have developed a rich, if somewhat vague, code of honor.



"Clever Ssruu has met the offworlder and made it dead. What does the Guild want for Ssruu to meet next?"

—Ssruu

THE YSSARIL TRIBES



Near the Mahact Plateau, diagonally opposite the Passage of Tears, but located in a far richer area of the region, shines the Myock star and its two habitable planets, Shalloq and Retillion. As recorded in even the earliest annals, Retillion has been known for the edible and delicious menn root. Throughout the Lazax Imperium, many farming colonies existed on Retillion, harvesting the roots along the musky and odorous shores of the Fianni swamps. In the years of Lazax emperor Munhan Las Idu, the colonization efforts were dramatically expanded. Not long after the start of the farming expansion, however, things started to go terribly wrong on Retillion: farm machines were sabotaged, isolated farms destroyed, inhabitants murdered by an unseen foe that would strike when the bog mists rolled over the lands.

The empire sent reinforcements, and the colonists soon realized that they were under systematic attack by a small native chameleon race with natural greenish skin and large yellow lamp-like eyes. These aborigines had the ability to “fade,” making them both virtually invisible to the naked eye and a great threat to the farming boom towns springing up along the edges of the measureless swamps. It was clear that the natives were a primitive race, but fierce, intelligent, and relentless in their intent to stop the invasive farming of their native swamplands. From the few early prisoners, it was learned that they called themselves the “Yssaril” and that a vast network of villages and tribes was to be found in the continent-sized Fianni swamp.

Eager to renew the supplies of their beloved menn root, the Lazax sent their 21st Expeditionary Division to suppress the Yssaril uprising, allowing for the resumption of the increased farming mandate. During these bloody years, thousands of Yssaril were captured and shipped to governments and buyers across the galaxy for study or hunting sports. Although farming did resume, the Lazax military division never completely suppressed the Yssaril natives. As the small green Yssaril adapted to the Lazax style of warfare, as they stole and learned to use Lazax weapons, the Fianni swamp soon became an embarrassing killing field for Lazax conscripts.

It was during the Age of Dusk that the great races learned to utilize the potential of the intelligent Yssaril as spies and assassins for their covert operations. For a hundred years, the Yssaril learned the skills of stealth, the usage of technologies, and the power of information. Combined with their own natural ability to become nearly invisible, they soon came to realize their own potential and established the powerful and feared Guild of Spies. By the proceeds derived from Guild business, the Yssaril added a formidable income source to their civilization and to the development of Retillion. With this power and influence, they were able to convince the Lazax to leave the planet (while still supplying menn root). Over a few generations, the Yssaril became industrial, educated, and ambitious.

Although still powerful in covert circles, the Guild now functions as the prime governing body of the united Yssaril tribes. The Guild elects its leader from its faction of master assassins. This prime leader, the Cqaark, leads the powerful civilization of an intelligent, determined, and ambitious people: a people whose history has left them with little love for the other great races.

Since the Lazax left, no off-worlders have been allowed on Retillion. The Yssaril capital Wuecca lies somewhere deep in the Fianni swamps, its actual location unknown to all but the Yssaril. The official business, trade, and covert operations are conducted from the planet Shalloq, which the Yssaril colonized not long after gaining independence from the Lazax. The only actual Yssaril city known to off-worlders is the city of Mojeb on Shalloq. From here, or from Shalloq’s great orbital trade station Haarsuh, the Yssaril receive foreign emissaries, merchants, and visitors.

The proud, fierce Yssaril are slowly starting to look beyond their borders and beyond the income of the Guild. Hidden in the planetary shadow of Shalloq, and kept secret from the rest of the galaxy by the covert means at which the Yssaril excel, a great invasion fleet is being built. Although the rest of the galaxy may shudder at the Yssaril’s unseen eyes and ears, it would be terrified if it knew the ruthless imperial ambitions of the small green people.



MYOCK SYSTEM

✦ Population	Unknown
✦ Government	Guild of Spies
✦ Leadership	The Cqaark
✦ Disposition	Secretive
✦ Tendencies	Political

Many doors thought locked are easily opened by the Guild, and many doors, once opened, reveal that the Guild has already been there and left.



*"We will claim what is ours by right, cousins.
We will fulfill the destiny of those who came
before us, and your treachery will not be
forgotten."*

—Muad Di Faruuq

THE WINNU



The Winnu system was the first system to seek annexation into the Lazax Empire. Throughout their history, the Winnarans had suffered countless civil wars, a deteriorating climate, and debilitating disease. They were a race on the brink of extinction when they first came into contact with the Lazax, and only with generous Lazax support did the Winnaran race survive. The Lazax allowed the Winnarans into their empire, and over time healed the scars of Winnu. More importantly, the Winnarans came to embrace the Lazax code of strength and peace, the powerful doctrine which had allowed the first Lazax emperor to defeat the last of the mad Mahact kings and to emerge as a shining beacon of peace and stability in a dark galaxy.

The Winnarans were eternally grateful to the Lazax, and swore an oath of servitude to the emperors. Disciplined and diligent, the Winnarans became indispensable to the Lazax as bureaucrats, councilors, and administrators. As their empire grew increasingly complex, it is likely that the Lazax would not have been able to hold their empire together without the work and attention to detail of the Winnarans. Then, as the Lazax decided to move their imperial seat to a planet more central to the galaxy, more than half of the population of Winnu joined the Lazax diaspora to this new home. That home was the planet of Mecatol, which would become the Rex, the splendid jewel in the imperial crown. As the ages came and went, most Winnarans began to think of Mecatol as their ancestral home, and the relevance and memory of Winnu and their brethren there diminished.

Yet the Winnaran population on Winnu, now generally called the “Winnu,” quietly built their own civilization following the doctrine of the emperors. Much Lazax lore, wisdom, and culture is intact on Winnu, even as all other Lazax imagery and culture was destroyed elsewhere in the galaxy during the Great Scourge.

As the memory of the Great Scourge faded, and as the Dark Years seemed to stretch along endlessly, the Mecatol Winnarans and the Winnu grew estranged from one another. On Mecatol, the Winnarans were bound to rigid tradition and scholarship, while the Winnu culture had evolved and prospered. The Winnu became ashamed of their submissive cousins on Mecatol, whom they began to regard as a grey, backwards people, devoid of fashion, art, and culture.

As a new age is dawning, the Winnu truly believe themselves to be the inheritors of the Lazax. Their philosophies, their artwork, and even the clothing fashion of the Winnu is rooted in that of the ancient Lazax. Some outside observers, however, will note that along with the Winnu preservation of Lazax imagery and culture, that time has brought the return of more traditional Winnaran traits in the Winnu—ambition, pride, and impatience.

As they grew prosperous and powerful, the Winnu witnessed the reemergence of the other great races with annoyance and mistrust. Those were the races that had slaughtered their benefactors, and their return to power felt to the Winnu like sacrilege against the memory of the Lazax. Even more poisonous to the Winnu was the fact that their submissive cousins on

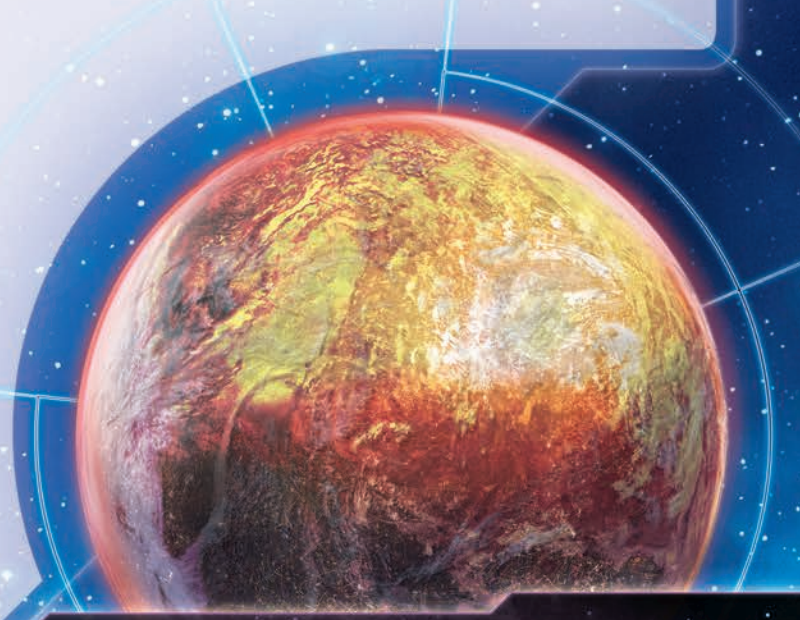
Mecatol had invited these races to reestablish the Galactic Council there—even going as far as inviting the races that resigned from the Lazax council immediately before the Age of Twilight.

With the pride of a new, powerful civilization and the sense of Lazax entitlement, the supreme Winnu leader Muab Di Faruq traveled to Mecatol and demanded that the Winnarans return to the sovereignty of Winnu, and that the custodians grant the Imperial Throne to their own race as the rightful heirs of the Lazax.

The Mecatol Winnarans, ever mindful of their responsibility to the entire galaxy, sorrowfully declined the demand of their brethren. As they did so, they feared that their short-tempered Winnu brothers and sisters would become angered, and that the resulting bitterness would forever break apart whatever kinship remained between them.

The Winnarans’ fear was well placed. Muad Di Faruq was furious with their decision and rushed back to Winnu, but not before establishing a consulate and council presence for the Winnu on Mecatol. Upon his return to Winnu, he proclaimed the betrayal of the Winnarans, and swore that if Mecatol and the Imperial Throne would not be ceded to the Winnu by peaceful means, then, in the memory of the Lazax, force would be the only answer.

The Winnu population rushed to Faruq’s support, a sense of righteousness and superiority motivating them to an intense mobilization. Building massive fleets, eerily reminiscent of ancient Lazax designs, and training massive invasion forces, the Winnu are intent on returning true Lazax culture to the galaxy.



WINNU SYSTEM

✦ Population	13.77 billion
✦ Government	Imperial
✦ Leadership	Muad Di Faruq
✦ Disposition	Righteous
✦ Tendencies	Objective

Traditionalists to the core, The Winnu decree that it is their sovereign right to reign in the world left behind by the Lazax. Haughty and ambitious, the Winnu are prepared to unite the galaxy—by force, if necessary.



*"No longer will the Gashlai be shackled
by your whims. Be extinguished, now,
and know that you have lost."*

—Fire Warden Umbat

THE EMBERS OF MUAAT



It was during the early years of the Age of Dusk that Jol-Nar explorers came upon the volcanic planet of Muaat. Scouting for resources beyond the Mahact Plateau, the explorers were amazed by the mineral wealth of their discovery, but they were truly awestruck by the extraordinary qualities of the planet's fiery inhabitants, the Gashlai.

The Gashlai were unlike any race known to the Jol-Nar: sentient beings with bodies slowly consumed by a fiery heat. After their conception, the Gashlai cocooning process somehow enables conversion of energy into mass—a process hinted at by scientific theory, but forever thought unattainable on a sub-cosmic scale.

The Jol-Nar benefited greatly from Muaat's resources, yet they were frustrated in their attempts to replicate the Gashlai cocooning process. Instead, the Gashlai proved useful as slave labor, as the Headmasters transformed the orbit of Muaat into a massive shipyard for their navy. It was here, at the Muaat shipyards, that the construction of a secret Jol-Nar superweapon began.

The Gashlai suffered tragically under their enslavement by the Jol-Nar, but events of the early Twilight Wars would dramatically change their ill fortune.

Just after the Twilight Wars erupted, a Jol-Nar expedition party searching for mineral deposits on Muaat became infected by an organism in the Doolak Mountains. The infection developed into a disease later known as the Doolak plague. The covert, yet frequent, traffic between Muaat and the Garian star system allowed for the spread of the virus to the Jol-Nar home worlds.

The plague became one of the greatest disasters in Jol-Nar history, and only the early research of Gashlai biology allowed the Headmasters to devise a vaccine before the entire Jol-Nar population was destroyed. Before the Jol-Nar could recover from this disaster, their military offensive collapsed, and soon the Headmasters would face the ruthless advance of the Sardakk N'orr.

As the Jol-Nar navy retreated, the Headmasters were forced to call forth their secret weapon at Muaat. This weapon—an enormous battle vessel called the “War Sun”—was not yet entirely complete, but with their fates clinging to the defenses of the Saudor system, the Headmasters had no choice but to bring it to bear against the enemy.

As the War Sun left its Muaat moorings, and as the majority of the remaining Jol-Nar personnel left with it, the Gashlai finally carved their own destiny. Having long schemed against their enslavers, they incinerated the remaining Jol-Nar in the system, capturing the shipyard and every available scientific document left behind by their hated oppressors.

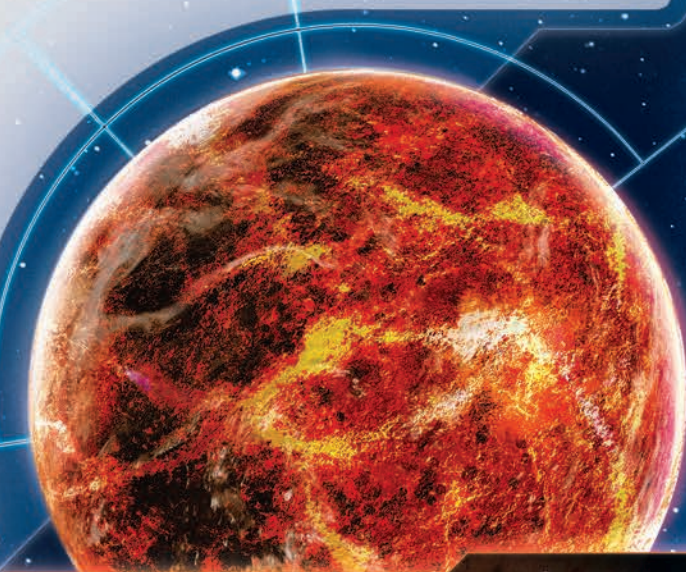
Not long after their costly victory at Saudor, the Jol-Nar sought to return to their colony at Muaat, but found that all communications with the system had been severed. Exploratory ships sent to Muaat would not return. Though the Headmasters suspected what might have taken place on their old colony, they were unable to return there in force again.

Throughout the long Dark Years, the Gashlai prospered.

Clad in Ember suits, special body armor shielding the Gashlai from the cold and others from their lethal heat, a large assembly of Gashlai envoys have recently arrived at Mecatol Rex, demanding recognition and representation. The High Fire Warden Sushon Azh has simultaneously sent forth Gashlai ambassadors to all the great races in the distinctive gold-bronze frigates of the Gashlai.

Yet one such ambassador did not arrive in a frigate. As the Gashlai ambassador assigned to the Jol-Nar sailed past the Garian star and began his approach to Jol, the Headmasters paled in fear, for this representative arrived in a War Sun, a copy of their own ancient designs. The message was not wasted on the Headmasters. Their former slaves had become formidable, and they had not forgotten, or forgiven, the past.

Led by the Fire Wardens, the Gashlai are resolved to never be enslaved again. Inside their golden Ember suits they burn with ambition. The Jol-Nar fear what the rest of the galaxy is about to learn: that the Embers of Muaat intend to bring their fire to the furthest reaches of space, burning the unwilling into submission.



MUAAT SYSTEM

✧ Population	7.39 billion
✧ Government	Tribunal
✧ Leadership	Sushon Azh
✧ Disposition	Grim
✧ Tendencies	Military

The Fire Wardens of the Gashlai emerged shortly after the people of Muaat freed themselves from the oppressive grip of the Hylar. Ambitious and powerful, each Fire Warden carries with him the hopes and dreams of his people.



"A-ah! You mistake me for a human; that we share the blood of Jord. I am no son of humanity. My life for the Yin!"

—Brother Milor

THE YIN BROTHERHOOD



Lazax law strictly forbade the practice of cloning, the dangerous science that led to the madness, disease, and ultimate downfall of the Mahact kings. The emperors severely punished any regime or independent scientist dabbling in this dangerous field.

Darien Van Hauge, a prominent Sol scientist, had lost both his children to the terrible wasting disease Greyfire. After their loss, he was intent on finding a cure for this horrible affliction, and refused to let any law stay his hand. In silent revenge against the destiny of his children, he left his employment with the prestigious Hospitaler Clinic in New Moscow and traveled to the third moon of Emelpar, where he secretly sought and finally acquired ancient Mahact bio studies.

The brilliant Darien made great advances in the following years. His wife Moyin contributed the embryos he needed for his forbidden experiments. With his successes, however, word of his work began to leak, and a congregation of the hopeful began to surround him, bringing their sick and dying to his care, clinging to a last hope that his discoveries could cure them.

Darien's secret ended the day a sick child died in his care. The anguished, remorseful parents blamed Darien for the death and contacted the Sol authorities. That night, Darien fled Jord with his wife and a few of his most devout followers.

Now a known fugitive, Darien narrowly escaped capture again and again. To finally escape the Lazax authorities, his small group joined religious colonists migrating to a new home on the remote planet of Lael, a place of harsh oceans and stormy climates. Their fugitive years brought healing and perspective on the death of their children, and Darien and Moyin found happiness again on the windy plains of Lael.

But a few years later, Moyin developed Greyfire.

Desperate to save his wife, Darien employed all his skills and forbidden knowledge, but still he failed. Before her death, he extracted a single egg from her womb—preserving the genetic blueprint of her unborn children.

He burned her body on the summit of the Hills of Grace, which they had named after their lost daughter. As Moyin's ashes drifted upwards into the strong winds, Darien dug a stone out of the hillside with his bare hands and placed it near the fire. That stone was to become part of the foundation for the great monastery of Lucas, named after Darien and Moyin's lost son.

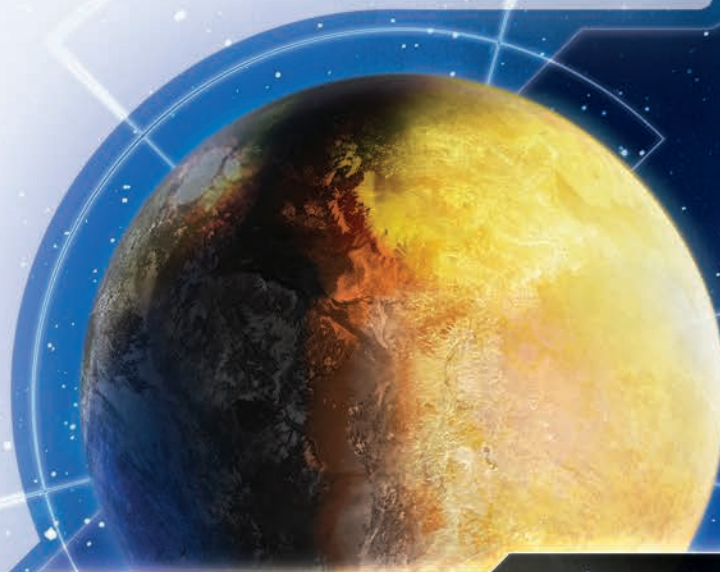
In the following decades, Darien was able to produce a child from a clone of Moyin's egg and his own seed. It was a boy. Cloning Moyin's egg by the thousands, producing child after child with increasing success, Darien became a master of the forbidden craft. Yet, inexplicably to him, all the children were boys, and he was never able to eradicate the vulnerability to Greyfire from his creation. Though he was able to eliminate the lethal outcome of the disease in his "sons" as he called them, the Greyfire would attack their skins and topical tissues, hideously deforming most of the children.

After Darien's death, his sons diligently continued his work. They continued cloning Moyin's egg, which they called the "Yin," and they continued the production of new "brothers" from their own seed. Over the centuries, the monastery of Lucas became a vast facility, completely covering the Hills of Grace and the surrounding plains.

The Brotherhood, blessed with the brilliant minds of both Darien and Moyin, grew to vast proportions and renamed their planet "Darien." As the Age of Dusk neared its end, the Brotherhood ventured into space, establishing monasteries on Darien's moons and its surrounding systems.

The Brotherhood long ago abandoned any hope of a female creation, and instead worship the Yin as the mother and the feminine in their lives. Despite centuries of continued work, they have never been able to completely eradicate the signs of Greyfire. Instead, the brothers that are completely ravaged and deformed by the disease are revered as "The Blessed," and the brothers left untouched by the disease are called "The Untouched." The Blessed form the inner elders and councilors of the Yin society. The Untouched are trained as ambassadors to the other races and as elite soldiers of the Brotherhood.

In their flesh, the brothers carry the secret inner fire and rebellious ambition of Darien. The oldest of the Blessed, the Elder Brother, intimately understands the emotions and aspirations of all his brothers. Intent and unified, the Brotherhood now builds a vast fleet with which to bring Darien's legacy and the light of Yin to the imperial throne itself.



LAEL SYSTEM

✦ Population	1.81 billion
✦ Government	The Blessed
✦ Leadership	The Elder Brother
✦ Disposition	Zealous
✦ Tendencies	Military

The progeny of Darien and Moyin are a zealous people. Devoutly religious, their devotion is overshadowed only by their loyalty to their brothers.



*"O, Lisis, you whose fate is forever
carved into the backs of the weary.
Your spectre is all we see."
—The Lay of Lisis*

THE CLAN OF SAAR



Few historians dispute that the Saar were the first of the known races to venture into space, but it remains unknown whether it was need or curiosity that drove the otherwise primitive people into such exploration. Their peaceful ways and dispersed civilization never promulgated them to official Lazax recognition. Some scholars have thus called them “the forgotten race.”

The tale of the Saar is a tragic one. Historical records are awash with accounts of deliberate planetary expulsions, even massacres, of Saar settlements found on planets colonized by the other races. The musical Saar often chant the “Lay of Lisis” in memory of the largest known Saar colony prior to Ragh’s Call. After the planet of Lisis was annexed by the Sardakk N’orr, no word came from the great Saar settlement there again. They simply disappeared. In their memory, most Saar females wear a carefully carved silver pendant called the Y’ouf Lisis, or the “Tear of Lisis.” During the Houw Shanan, the Saar Holy Day, such pendants are given to young Saar women, while Saar cubs throw beetles and insects into a raging fire and the elders howl at the stars with a longing rage.

Before the Call began, the Saar were scattered across the galaxy, existing at the mercy of other races. On dozens of worlds, Saar could be found living in slums and sublevel cities, working in the most noxious and despicable industries, and making slim sustenance from the scraps of other civilizations. Considered unclean and barely sentient by other races, Saar life was cheap and subject to little justice. With hard work, polluted environments, and no access to proper medical care, the bitter lives of the Saar were often short.

It was in the hopeless middle period of the Dark Years that a single Saar, Ragh Gavar, would forever change the destiny of his people.

Ragh made his living as the captain of an old scrap metal freighter that flew between Xxehan and Sol, a route that had been in his family for centuries. Despite being a capable trader, Ragh’s passion lay in poetry and the imagination of the pen, in the creation of succinct writings of hope, scrawled on paper scraps during long trade hauls. At his ports of call, other Saar would often congregate before his loading doors so that they might hear his latest verses and tales. Many of his listeners began to call him the “Captain of Hope.”

Yet one year, Ragh did not arrive at his destination. His rusty navigation system had finally failed, and Ragh’s ship was lost among the stars. Floating in unknown space, as his ancestors had once done so bravely before him, Ragh prayed that the One Between the Stars would see him and his small crew home.

The Call began a few years after Ragh Gavar’s disappearance. Throughout the great expanses of the galaxy, every Saar began to feel within himself an unyielding longing for the stars, and especially for a certain distant place beyond known space.

Early followers of the Call found its origin in the great asteroid field of Jorun, and here found a small but blossoming Saar colony on the two gigantic asteroids of Ragh and Lisis II. As the Call continued, Saar brethren from across the galaxy continued to arrive at Jorun, together building the infrastructure of civilization and hope for a lost race.

Years before, Ragh’s ship had crashed in the Jorun. Miraculously, he and his crew had survived, and with great wonder they soon discovered the mineral richness, frozen water, atmospheric caverns, and strange fauna that lay hidden within the endless ocean of rock.

Yet Ragh was restless in his new home. It is told that the Captain awoke one night from a dream and then bade his crewmates farewell, disappearing into the great network of caverns that lies within the asteroid named after him. Ragh Gavar was never found or heard from again. But less than a month after his disappearance, the Call began. Saar mystics believe that the Captain of Hope has joined the One Between the Stars, and that he at last won forgiveness for the Saar, and has called them to relieve their suffering. They believe that Ragh’s Call has brought them home, that the life-giving rocks surrounding them are the remnants of the ancient Saar planet of origin, and that even in death it is giving its people a second life.

For centuries the unified and passionate Saar people have built a formidable home and civilization in the Jorun asteroid field. The Saar have finally found home, and they have found that they are strong.



JORUN ASTEROID FIELD

✦ Population	1.01 billion
✦ Government	Admiralty
✦ Leadership	Council of Captains
✦ Disposition	Melancholy
✦ Tendencies	Objective

It is a testament to the perseverance of the Saar that they even exist at all. Massacred, scapegoated, and abused by other races, the Saar cling to life with a ferocity unlike any other.



"We do not mean to offend the honored ambassador. We mean only to imply that should his ship attempt to pass through the gate, it will not return."
—Emissary Taivra

THE GHOSTS OF CREUSS



They're ghost stories. Frightful tales whispered to children by nightcycle lamps. Dread accounts told to fellow sailors in the humming darkness of long-haul freighters.

Even now, in our growing enlightenment, when we know so much more about the Shaleri passage and its strange inhabitants, the sheer differentness of the Shaleri and its Ghosts seduce such tales to persist.

An almost endless variation of hearsay and rumor can be found on the topic of the Shaleri anomaly. Rare records of purported fact are, at best, of irregular verifiability. While now a respected sociological study, what is truly known of the Shaleri remains infinitely smaller than the abundance of myth that clouds its past.

For millennia, space in proximity of the Shaleri anomaly has been mistrusted and avoided by spacefarers. Despite the undeniable historic universality in avoiding this region, few concrete explanations have been made as to the reason for such aversion. Some simply denote the area as "high risk." Others conjecture that the area ebbs with "unknown radiation." Regrettably, most navigation records simply refer to the Shaleri region as "bad space"—the superstitious space-faring analogy of "here be dragons."

What is known for sure is that Shaleri space has over time been responsible for an unusually high number of missing vessels. An extraordinarily high number, in fact. For such a high proportion of lost traffic the absence of distress beacons, message capsules, or any signs whatsoever of the missing ships has been described in official records as "disturbing." It is perhaps more aptly described, using a favored term of sailors and storytellers, as spooky.

The mystery of the Shaleri region goes further and deeper than just that of missing spaceships. Among crews that have safely made journeys through the region, there are records of strange equipment malfunctions, bad dreams, and sudden illnesses. There are accounts of purported "sightings": eldritch encounters with beings described as strange fibrous clouds of energy. While such accounts may have been dismissed in the past as the fantasies of oxygen-deprived sailors, the hindsight of the galaxy's recent association with the Ghosts places these reports in a more credible light.

There are several trade routes that when traced through rather than around Shaleri space will save the traveler substantial time and fuel. It follows, therefore, that willingness to brave its dark reputation has come with substantial profit for those captains who have dared to travel in this "bad space" and returned to tell the tale. It was in pursuit of such profit that the Mentak frigate Entropic undertook its fifth journey through Shaleri space.

The Entropic had been traveling through Shaleri space for three days when it was interdicted by three formidable vessels of unknown origin. The vessels, each the size of a Mentak battlecruiser, were of grey lobstered steel, their surface intricately inscribed with interweaving runic latticework. It is this meeting between the Entropic and the Creuss warships that is marked as First Contact between the Ghosts of Creuss and a member race of the galactic council.

It's not known why the beings that dwell within the Shaleri anomaly (now commonly called the "Creuss Gate") chose to reveal themselves during the early Years of Awakening. Perhaps they'd finally learned enough about the galaxy that surrounded them? Perhaps their societal progress had finally propelled them into the greater universe? A more ominous possibility, one favored by storytellers, is that the Ghosts of Creuss have come forth for some sinister purpose yet to be revealed.

As beings of energy and light, the Ghosts certainly can be placed among the strangest of the known races. The famous historian Merean Barqan described them as "ethereal luxsynaptic souls." As their forms do not remain stable outside the strange gravity of the Creuss itself, the Ghosts garb themselves in intricate metalwork. Not only does the armor stabilize the Ghosts, but its tangible shape places members of the other races more at ease in their presence. Individual Creuss can be discerned from one another by the unique design of their helmets, which, like their ships, are intricately carved with runes.

The Ghosts of Creuss have shown themselves to be perfectly civilized, polite, and masters of many strange sciences and materials. Yet, they're also regarded as exceptionally secretive, ritualistic, and prickly on a wide range of matters. It's generally undecided whether their behavior is one to be expected of a race so recently introduced to the material galaxy, or whether these are signs that something more ominous lurks beneath their brooding metal helmets.



SHALERI PASSAGE

✦ Population	Unknown
✦ Government	Unknown
✦ Leadership	Unknown
✦ Disposition	Enigmatic
✦ Tendencies	Expansionist

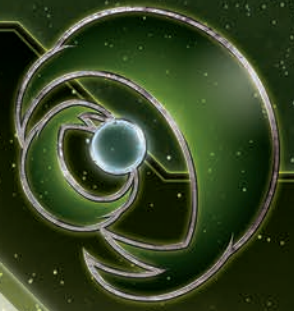
Historically, many renowned adventurers have expressed interest in exploring Shaleri space. Historically, those people died shortly thereafter under questionable circumstances.



"Do you hear, flesh-thing? The harmonies of the Arborec? Your golems of metal and noise and fire have deafened you to the symphony."

—Dirzuga Rophal

THE ARBOREC



On first approach to Nestphar, a first-time visitor may be surprised by the soupy haze that bleeds from the planet's atmosphere like a dusty cloud. This cloud consists of quadrillions of tiny living spores emitted by Nestphar's many Flaah, city-sized floating forests in its stratosphere. The short-lived (and therefore continually resupplied) orbital presence of the Flaah spores allows the Arborec denizens in Nestphar's space-stations and shipyards to remain in continuous symbiotic contact with their planet. The Arborec term for this vital connection, shared among all living things on Nestphar, is best translated as "the Symphony."

When traveling beyond the reach of Nestphar's Flaah spores, and therefore outside connection to the prime Symphony, the Arborec employ the massive Letani. Physically, the Letani are the largest sentient beings yet discovered in the galaxy (each slightly larger than a Sol Elephantus), their bodies resembling a kraken-shaped mushroom crossed with a monstrous carnivorous flower. The Letani are each uniquely capable of embodying a powerful instance of the Symphony (and are therefore closest to an "individual" within Arborec society) which may act as a harmonic nexus for Arborec organisms in near proximity. All ships in the Arborec fleet are based around the presence of at least one (with some ships as many as five) Letani orchestrating the unity of Arborec lifeforms crewing the vessel. Once a Letani returns to the embrace of Nestphar's prime Symphony, its experiences are reconnected and absorbed into the Arborec, as a data-capsule would be reconnected to its mainframe.

While surely intelligent and demonstrably capable of crafting impressive technologies, structures, and a sophisticated fleet of interstellar craft, the Arborec's method of communication remains a source of great controversy. Being a race of vegetative and fungal matter, handling its own data transmission and emotive projection through the prime Symphony, the Arborec have never developed any form of visual or auditory communication (concepts which, to this day, remain foreign to them).

Arborec scientists found the solution to this dilemma in the Sol merchant vessel Dies Opulen. The crew of the Dies Opulen had tragically become infected by Yborin Plague on Maaluk and had later died in deep space. When the derelict ship was found by an Arborec scout, it was determined the cool bodies of the human crew were in perfect condition for an ambitious experiment. The bodies were sent to the great laboratories in Kushin, near the Arborec capital Phara.

Here, fungal Arzuga cells were attached to the brainstems of the dead humans. It was hoped, when grown under proper conditions, the complex acidic properties of Arzuga would successfully merge the cells with the innate brain-tissue of the deceased subjects, slowly re-stimulating the neural pathways back to life. Then, by injecting photo-voltaic stims into the soft tissues of the dead body, the neurally active Arzuga would spur the soft tissue cells to heal and regrow, effectively reanimating the dead body. Symbiotically attached to the

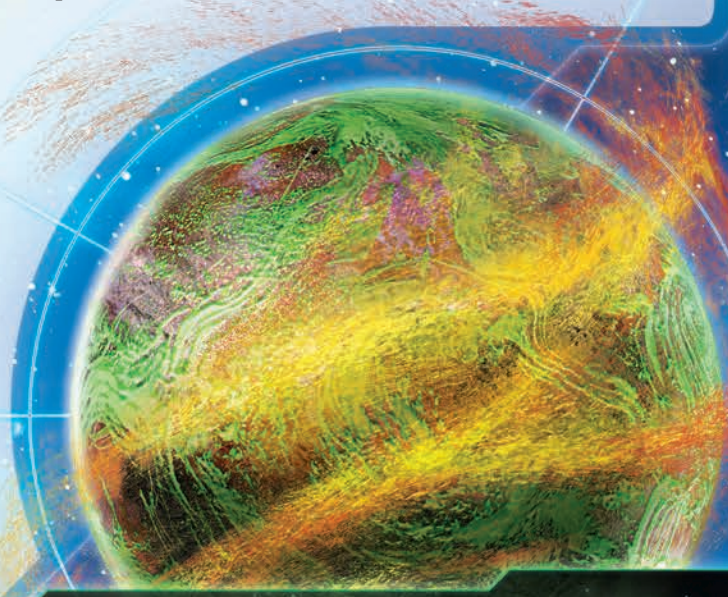
host body, the Arzuga fungi evolved into a new being, one which the Arborec call the Dirzuga.

The Dirzuga were the missing link between the Symphony and the manifestation of physical communication that the Arborec lacked. Over the following few decades, the Arborec eagerly acquired additional subjects (human bodies seem to work best and are the most frequently used, but Letnev, Winnu, and Xxcha bodies are also commonly used as Dirzuga hosts), establishing a sizable diplomatic and trading corps that have become the basis for the Arborec's interaction with the rest of the galaxy.

The Arborec insist the host bodies of the Dirzuga are devoid of the expired individuals' consciousness. With a cultural relationship to death rooted in the natural cycle of decomposition and regrowth, the Arborec have little understanding or sympathy for those who vigorously protest against the bodies of their citizens being reused (some use the term "enslaved") in such a manner.

Ultimately, despite the objections of the dissident races, the Arborec were admitted as a member of the galactic council. The potential wealth of foodstuffs, medicines, and other treasures of Nestphar proved effective in overcoming any objections.

While the Arborec insist that the past knowledge and experiences of Dirzuga bodies do not persist beyond this reanimation, there are some who suspect the Arborec do not tell the entire truth. Such theorists can provide many examples in which the Arborec seem to have come upon information, or intimate understanding of other cultures, that seem inexplicable otherwise.



FARRUBAN SYSTEM

✦ Population	1
✦ Government	Hivemind
✦ Leadership	The Arborec
✦ Disposition	Mysterious
✦ Tendencies	Expansionist

Not the least of the mysteries surrounding the Arborec is the question "Why?" What does such a lifeform seek? What is it searching for, out there amidst the stars?



*"The final step of all craft. The gate to eternity.
A transcendancy to a state of being that can
only be described as godhood."*

—Mordai, The First

THE NEKRO VIRUS



On the eve of the Lazax empire's fall, the legendary councilor Ibna Vel Syd led a small contingent of his people on a secret exodus into unknown space and, in doing so, escaped the massacre of his people that would follow. Only with the help of increasingly extreme technological augmentation did they survive the early years of resettlement. This reliance on technology became the foundation of what would evolve into the vast cybernetic civilization of the L1Z1X.

While the narrative of Ibna's early struggles are common lore, few know of the much darker struggle that shadows the L1Z1X's past: the great schism which ravaged their society a thousand years before their belligerent return to known space. The scions of Vel Syd were rapidly accumulating the power needed to return to known space and reclaim their lost empire. Already, detailed plans circulated in the Mindnet with that very goal. Then came the madness of Mordai.

Mordai was the greatest of the L1Z1X enhancers. His innovation and industry made him foremost among the L1Z1X elite. He worked tirelessly for the advancement of the Mindnet, always using his own body as the first subject for any new brilliant augmentation of his invention. He was meticulous, inspirational, and brazenly ambitious. He believed in the possibility of the perfect existential reality: an apex of the living soul and the helpful machine.

Unsurprisingly, such hubris would meet its nemesis. As Mordai underwent the self-imposed implant of a cortex migrator, the first of several devices leading to this final ascension, something went horribly awry. It's assumed that the smallest of software glitches existed in the cortex module, overlooked even by the meticulous Mordai. As the software began to iterate and integrate with Mordai's neural activity, it began a powerful recursive disease, a virus that would infect Mordai's sanity.

The personality changes in Mordai were subtle at first. A new subtext entered his work. He had come to believe that the conscious machine was the true higher form of being, one more naturally fit to rule the galaxy than the accident of phosphorous chemistry at the primordial heart of biomatter.

Mordai began a series of severe operations to excise the biology of his own body, encouraging and coercing his staff and investors to do the same. Mordai's charismatic preaching soon gained momentum. His growing cadre of followers, calling themselves the Nekro, began clandestine assaults on their unwilling brethren, forcefully submitting them to the removal of living tissue.

By the time the leaders of the Mindnet came to realize that the Nekro movement had to be stopped, Mordai had completed his transformation into a fully mechanical being: a gibbering arachnid of black metal, mad with recursive corruption and the hunger to perpetuate. The efficiency of the Nekro virus was astounding. Mordai's body had been rebuilt as a micro-factory, and from it thousands of microscopic insectile machines sprung forth, attaching themselves to any technology in sight, replicating Mordai's madness with horrible speed.

Rebuilding themselves to Mordai's visions, the new machines became reproductive. Perceiving the threat posed by the Mindnet, they quickly began to construct an army with a

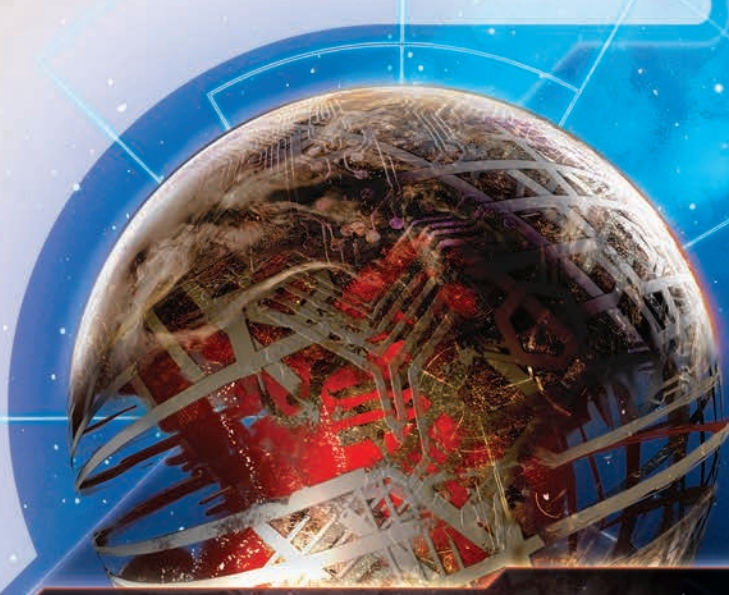
single terrifying purpose: the utter elimination of all organic matter.

The war to subdue the Nekro virus was a great setback for the L1Z1X. The virus's numbers were legion and its visage sprung from Mordai's nightmares. From scorpion-inspired Defilers to the giant Mordreds, each new Nekro model was more demonic and deadly than the last. Replenishing this evil army were the monstrous Abbadons: moving factories that ravenously consumed all materials in their path, seamlessly feeding fresh metals to their internal construction facilities.

This civil war lasted about five years, with the Mindnet ultimately vanquishing the virus. It took the L1Z1X nearly five centuries to regain their former strength, and another five to arrive at their current power. With no new Nekro instantiation resurfacing for near 700 years, the L1Z1X came to believe the virus was wiped out forever. Until now.

In light of the recent Nekro resurgence, it is conjectured that a virus-infested orbital satellite must have escaped Null's gravity during the schism and vanished undetected into rim space. Here, it must have traveled silently for years until it was pulled into a mineral-rich planet somewhere at the edge of the galaxy. Left alone to its own devices, the virus was able to adapt and replicate again.

Some will seek to understand and find common ground with the Nekro, preaching tolerance for the intolerant. But those who have seen the devastated systems absorbed by the resurgent Nekro know that while angels remain a fantasy of the hopeful, out of the darkness have come demons. And in their wake follows blackness and death.



ERROR

- ✧ Population _error
- ✧ Government _error
- ✧ Surface _error
- ✧ Surface Temp _error
- ✧ Surface Area _error

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"The Titans seek something more permanent than a mere empire."

—Pyrolusius the Observer

THE TITANS OF UL



Tens of thousands of years ago, Mahact gene-sorcerers crafted one of their most brilliant creations, the Titans. Though they looked like massive machines, beneath their metallic shells each Titan was a living creature of silicates and steel. They combined the best elements of the biological and the mechanical. They could work for days without tiring and were exceedingly durable. They could also heal injuries and, over time, expand their numbers. Most importantly, they were intelligent beings, not mindless automatons—though the Mahact programmed them so that the Titans would never disobey their masters. In all, the gene-sorcerers had created the perfect guardians and laborers for their kingdoms.

When the Mahact were driven from the galaxy by the Lazax, they seeded sleepers in their wake to facilitate their eventual return. The greatest of these were to be the Titans. At the Mahact's command, the Titans buried themselves in the wilds of their worlds and went into a deep dormancy. And they slept, as the Lazax Empire rose and fell, and the Twilight Wars raged and quieted. Occasionally, a Titan may be uncovered by explorers, but they appeared to be just one more relic of a forgotten past.

Then the Mahact returned, and the gene-sorcerers sent out a call to awaken their servants. Many of the Titans heard the call and woke. However, the Mahact had gravely underestimated their creations. During their millennia of dormancy, the Titans had continued to develop, and their minds had continued to expand. When they woke, they found that they no longer felt any compulsion to obey their former masters.

Instead, the Titans began to seek out others of their kind. The greatest population of Titans had gone dormant on one of the wonders they had constructed during the last days of the Mahact rule: a massive Dyson sphere. The Titans had constructed the shell around a singularity, using its harnessed energy for power, and its immense mass to create gravity on the outer surface. Now, they claimed their creation, calling it Elysium and summoning all other Titans to join them.

In the years that followed, the Titans have worked hard to establish their new civilization. Elysium offers more space than ten thousand normal planets. This has proven invaluable, because though the Titans grow slowly, they never stop. The youngest Titans are easily ten meters tall, while an elder can be the size of a habitant tower. Titans also show a great preference for order and organization. They freely submit to a hierarchical society, where the oldest and most experienced Titan, called the "UI," rules.

While the Titans are bio-mechanical creatures, they tend to show a great love of living things. Many Titans devote themselves to cultivating Elysium into a lush garden world, seeding myriad biomes across its formerly barren surface. Titan towns blend seamlessly with the surrounding landscape, even though Titan structures are massive by necessity. That said, since the Titans tend to spread out across

Elysium's surface, the only true city is their capital, Transcendence. Here one can find the UI literally watching over their people. The eldest Titan is so massive that they eclipse even the largest buildings. Instead, the UI stands in the center of Transcendence, unmoving while they speak with their fellows about the issues confronting their people.

Though the Titans have been preoccupied with cultivating their new world and developing their society, they have not forgotten about the wider galaxy. Already trading vessels descend on Elysium with holds full of rare minerals and exotic plant and animal life. In exchange, the Titans construct wondrous devices from the ancient days, and travel to other worlds to build huge orbital stations and massive geoforming and terraforming projects. They continue to scour the galaxy, looking for any of their kin who may still slumber beneath the surfaces of countless worlds.

As the ancient prophecies come to pass and war looms, the UI looks into the skies of Elysium and sees a galaxy in chaos. They know that the only chance that teeming multitudes scattered across countless worlds have for survival is a steady hand guiding them to peace. They know that while some may not realize it, there is a place for everyone in the universe, and everyone must find their place—with the Titans to watch over them all.



ELYSIUM

✦ Population	750 million
✦ Government	Total Hierarchy
✦ Leadership	The UI
✦ Disposition	Patient
✦ Tendencies	Expansionist

Elysium may well be the largest construct in the galaxy and the Titans guard its secrets well. Some suspect that since the Titans themselves are created beings, perhaps their world may be more than it appears.



"We see what you are. We see what you are not. There is nothing we do not know."

—Conservator Procyon

THE EMPYREAN



Since time immemorial, travelers have told tales of the Empyrean, enigmatic beings who live in the depths of space. The oldest Jol-Nar libraries have references to faceless creatures who sailed the void long before the Hylar left their watery cradle. Winnaran custodians still maintain fragmented historical documents that managed to survive the ancient Sol bombardment and suggest that the Empyrean predate the discovery of supraluminal travel, a technology so old that no race has presented credible evidence that they invented it first. If these records are to be believed, the Empyrean have been crossing the vast gulf of space in sublight vessels for tens of thousands of years before the first FTL drives made galactic civilization possible.

Whether or not this is true, historians agree that whenever a species establishes colonies beyond their homeworld, the Empyrean arrive to observe their progress. They tend to lurk on the edges of star systems, making no effort to announce their presence. They can remain drifting in the outer cometary halos for centuries, occasionally sending unobtrusive probes orbiting through the inner system for closer observations.

Though they do not actively avoid confrontations, anthropologists and diplomats who have attempted to establish contact with the Empyrean tend to find them frustratingly noncommunicative. Individual Empyrean tend to avoid answering questions about their purpose in observing the actions of other species, or about themselves or their civilization. Though they are sometimes referred to as the galaxy's "historians," nobody knows if the Empyrean keep a unified record of galactic events. If they do, they have not shared it with anyone else.

Most of what is known of the Empyrean has been gleaned through direct observation. The most startling fact about them is that they are a species who survive in space. Their ships have no pressurized compartments, and beyond some radiation and debris protection, are completely exposed to vacuum. The Empyrean themselves have no visible sensory organs or orifices, and seem to spend much of their time absorbing starlight with the great leathery wings that protrude from their backs. Their body shape does suggest that they evolved on a planet's surface, leading some scientists to suggest that their original home may have been largely airless. Others believe that at some point in the distant past, the Empyrean were a more traditional avian species who biocrafted themselves to thrive in the vacuum of space.

Whatever their origins, most species find interacting with the Empyrean difficult. Communication isn't a problem—individual Empyrean are able to broadcast radio waves that can be picked up by most standard comms devices—but patience is. The Empyrean act slowly and deliberately, perhaps a consequence of subsisting on the meager solar energy of stars, or possibly because of their extremely long lifespans. They can spend hours or even days contemplating an answer to a single question. In addition, Empyrean society seems to operate as a form of communal anarchy. They make decisions based on the consensus of all Empyrean currently present. They seem

cooperative enough that this works, but it does mean governments have no way to negotiate with the "whole of the Empyrean people."

They do, however, make some effort to engage with other sentients, such as donning clothing to make guests feel at ease. They also engage in trade for rare metals and trace elements in exchange for new astronomical and scientific information. Most species tend to ignore the Empyrean unless they seek some esoteric knowledge, or the Empyrean approach them first.

In recent years, more and more black-winged Empyrean ships have begun to gather near major trade lanes and on the outskirts of civilized systems. Some free traders have begun to refuse to follow the deep space commerce trails, repeating rumors that ships have begun to vanish in greater numbers, and Empyrean craft have been sighted following lone vessels. One Empyrean ship has even traveled to Mecatol Rex, and individuals who say they speak for the Empyrean have engaged in long meetings with the Winnarans in Mecatol City.

These representatives say they believe the galaxy will soon be engulfed by a storm worse than the Twilight Wars of a millennia ago. They maintain that the struggle for the throne will tear the galaxy to shreds, and that none of the rising powers have the mandate or the moral authority to rule over their fellows. Instead, the Empyrean have come to believe that only a truly neutral arbitrator can hope to rule a galactic Empire; an arbitrator that already knows all other species better than they know themselves.



THE DARK

✦ Population	Fluctuates
✦ Government	Collective
✦ Leadership	None
✦ Disposition	Contemplative
✦ Tendencies	Political

Some say that sprawling, exposed scaffold-structures drift in the lightless depths of the Dark. Here the Empyrean build their ships and preserve the true history of the galaxy.



*"For too long the galaxy has squabbled
over the bones of our predecessors.
It's time for something new."*

—Tetrarch Klik

THE NAAZ-ROKHA ALLIANCE



The Naaz have had the distinct misfortune of being a species of technological savants who were discovered by other races before they could build their own civilization. In the chaotic aftermath of the Twilight Wars, their world of Naazir was happened upon by scouts for a Winnu corporate-collective. The collective promptly set up an industrial colony on Naazir and began exploiting the talents of the Naaz. This continued until the corporate leaders were charged and prosecuted for their crimes against sentients... at which point a small army of Sol deserters invaded and claimed Naazir as their own.

The pattern continued for centuries, with the Naaz barely able to rid themselves of one conqueror before being invaded by the next. Eventually, a network of Naaz rebels gathered enough resources to try a new plan. To get rid of their current overlords (an alliance of Letnev merchant-princes), they would hire an equally downtrodden group of mercenaries—the Rokha.

The Rokha are a race of felids, distant relatives of the Hacan who long ago split with their genetic cousins. Their story since the Twilight Wars had also been one of tragedy, forced to become a race of nomad warriors, employed as mercenaries but barred from settling in any civilized system in the galaxy. To the Rokha, the Naaz were just one more in a long line of employers. But that would change.

The nascent alliance between the Naaz and the Rokha proved successful, driving the merchant princes from their world. However, in the aftermath of the victory, the Naaz did something the Rokha did not expect. They offered them the chance to settle on Naazir and join the Naaz in a unified society. Exhausted from centuries of a nomadic life, the Rokha accepted.

Together, the Naaz-Rokha Alliance proved much greater than the sum of its parts. Not only did the two species complement one another, their shared history as the galaxy's outcasts drove them to work all the harder together to ensure neither would be taken advantage of again. The two cultures didn't just co-exist, they merged. Every level of Naaz-Rokha society became an equal partnership, from families (a typical Naaz-Rokha family consists of two Naaz and two Rokha, plus any children from either couple) to government (the Alliance Chamber of Congress is overseen by an executive Tetrarchy of two Naaz and two Rokha who each oversee different portions of Alliance territory). When any elected official steps down, only an official from the other species is allowed to take their place. And when the Alliance terraformed and colonized one of Naazir's neighboring worlds so that the Rokha could have a homeworld of their own, the population of the new world was equally divided between both species—the same as on Naazir.

The Alliance would undoubtedly have been satisfied to build their own civilization and keep the other races from exploiting it. However, the Creuss expedition to Ixth changed

their trajectory. Two of the few survivors from that ill-fated adventure were a pair of Naaz-Rokha scientists. They, along with a few lucky others, were able to escape aboard a Letnev corvette even as the rest of the expedition was captured by the Mahact. Then, as the other survivors reported to the Council, the scientists returned to Naazir with precious readings from the Acheron gateway, as well as the machinery that created it.

Using this invaluable information as a starting point, the Alliance has discovered a means of creating momentary micro-wormholes into another dimension and tapping the energy released during that process. This "entropic field harvesting" has proven marvelously efficient. Alliance ships and factories now drink deeply from entropic field taps, and the other galactic powers have suddenly been confronted by the reality that two species they long ago dismissed and exploited are now very real players on the galactic stage.

As chaos builds around the Mahact return, the Tetrarchy has stood before the Chamber of Congress and announced its intent. The Naaz-Rokha Alliance has already demonstrated that two species can live harmoniously as one. Who better to take control of the ancient seat of the Imperium and bring that harmonious cooperation to the stars?



NAAZIR-ROKHA DUAL SYSTEM

✦ Population	12.7 billion
✦ Government	Alliance
✦ Leadership	The Tetrarchy
✦ Disposition	Optimistic
✦ Tendencies	Scientific

Most agree that the cooperation between the Naaz and Rokha is an impressive feat in a galaxy full of suspicion and enmity. Most also agree that they wished the Naaz and Rokha wouldn't brag about it so much.



"You tread upon sacred ground. There is no path to atonement for your sins, only swift and merciless defeat."

—Sakora Aun Navori, Argent Vanguard

THE ARGENT FLIGHT



Few alive today have dealings with the Shikrai. This collection of related avian subspecies lives scattered across a stretch of the galactic rim. Their clutch of worlds are dry, windswept, and poor, lacking in valuable resources or useful minerals. Their small and technologically backward populations tend to stay out of galactic affairs. Most rightfully dismiss the Shikrai as just one more group of sentients in a galaxy full of life.

But there is more to the Shikrai than the rest of the galaxy, or even themselves, realize.

Long ago, Shikrai territory had the misfortune of being the disputed vassalage of two powerful Mahact. These gene-sorcerers fought a vicious internecine war for the avians' planets, with the Shikrai forced to fight as proxies on both sides. Shikrai partisans fought back as best they could, but they had no hope of defeating the armies of two gene-sorcerers. There was no doubt the Shikrai would be consumed by the fight to claim them...until a Lazax battlegroup arrived. A Lazax warlord named Harkor Ilban Tal liberated the Shikrai and personally slew both gene-sorcerers in single combat.

To pay their debt, the remaining Shikrai immediately allied with Tal. Eventually, when the Mahact were exiled beyond the Acheron Gate, the Shikrai made a pledge to their allies. They would contribute a tithe of their best warriors and scholars to found an organization that would watch Acheron and ensure the Mahact would never return. They would call it the Argent Flight.

To do so, the Shikrai turned to their ancestral homeworlds of Valk, Avar, and Ylir, which they had abandoned long ago when they set out to colonize the stars. The Lazax erased all mention of the worlds from their newly constructed Hall of Cartography, and the newly founded Argent Flight retreated to their sanctuary to wait...and prepare.

Valk, Avar, and Ylir are curiosities even in a galaxy full of wonders. The three worlds are barely larger than moons, and share a narrow orbit between the neutron star Phorus and the gas giant Hacid. The unique environment created the Atharal Gas Torus—a ring of breathable air in orbit around Phorus. The three worlds orbit in the center of the ring, and the Shikrai say their winged ancestors used to fly from world to world.

In the millennia since their return, the Argent Flight has worked hard to colonize the three worlds and the smaller chunks of rock that drift between them. Numerous flocks of Shikrai live throughout the torus. Each flock focuses on a different trade or calling, and any member of the Argent Flight can join or leave a flock as they choose. Their actions are coordinated by the Murmeration, a council of representatives from each flock who direct the Argent Flight from their spindle tower sanctuary on Avar.

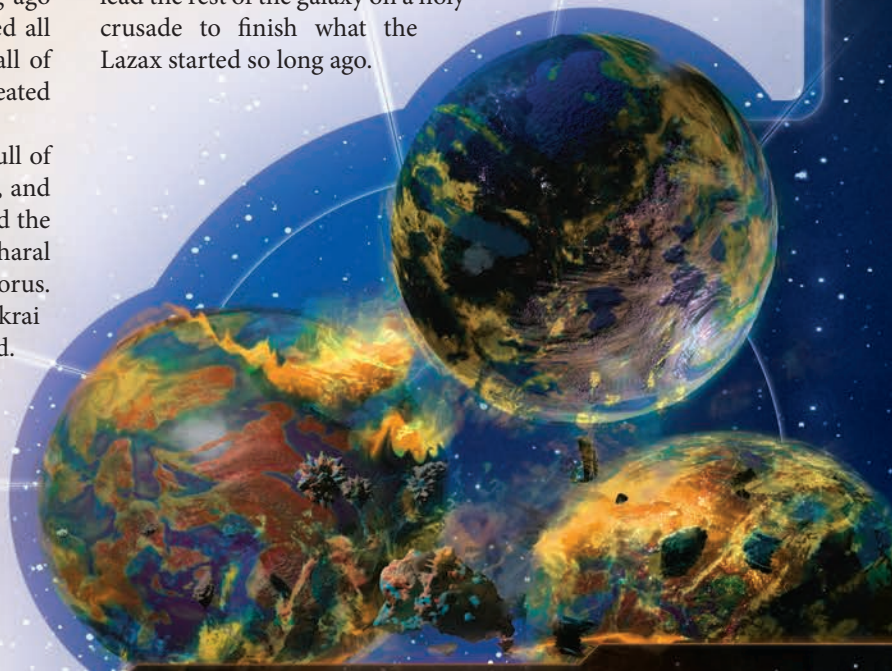
The Murmeration continues to quietly recruit promising members from the various Shikrai worlds, though the population of the Atharal Torus is now large enough to be self-sustaining. It has also developed beyond simply a martial order into a fully functional society. Large-bellied cloud-scoops dive

into the atmosphere of Hacid to gather rare gases that can be refined into industrial compounds, while the comet-miners of the outer system keep the Atharal Torus well-supplied in fresh water.

The Argent Flight has even genecrafts the massive, zero-gravity trees that live free-floating in the Torus so that they grow edible fruits, and has built mechanical grav-wings so that its members can soar from planet to planet once more.

However, the Argent Flight still remembers its sworn oaths. Millennia of service have seen its duty evolve into something akin to a religion, and the Shikrai see themselves as sacred guardians appointed by the galaxy's rightful rulers. The various flocks never revealed themselves to the wider galaxy during the Twilight Wars. Instead they fought their own battles in the shadows against the Mahact's sleeper agents and greedy explorers who ventured too deeply into Shaleri Space. And they succeeded in their task until a new race, the Creuss, sent an expedition past the Tolari Pulsar too large to defeat in combat.

In the aftermath of the Mahact's awakening, the Argent Flight has begun to gather its forces. The Murmeration is in accord; the time for secrecy is past. Already, agents move amongst the Shikrai worlds, calling worthy fighters to take the vows of the Flight. In the open-air ship docks of the Atharal Torus, master shipwrights have laid down the keels of sleek, gull-winged destroyers. The Argent Flight knows, now that its ancient nemesis has returned, that it has no choice—it must lead the rest of the galaxy on a holy crusade to finish what the Lazax started so long ago.



ATHARAL GAS TORUS

✦ Population	1.84 billion
✦ Government	Confederation
✦ Leadership	The Murmeration
✦ Disposition	Dedicated
✦ Tendencies	Military

The ecology of the Atharal Torus is a biological wonder. Many animals have evolved to travel between the three worlds. Some, such as the Tol-whale, even spend their entire lives soaring in the gas ring.



"YOUR FORM IS FRAGILE AND WEAK. LET ME
RELIEVE YOU OF YOUR HARDSHIPS."

—*That Which Molds Flesh*

THE VUIL'RAITH CABAL



Philosophers and scientists have long theorized that the galaxy is only one of a host of realities. These other dimensions exist on a different plane, and the physical laws one takes for granted in this space—such as gravity and entropy—may be wildly different or nonexistent. The existence of fabled worlds like Mallice seems to support such conjectures, for the world may exist in one such alternate reality. Some researchers even attempt to predict the nature of these theoretical dimensions. However, even the most deranged scientist could not imagine a universe of seething, fleshy masses floating in a thick, cloying mist, or the ravenous creatures that could thrive in such a place.

After the disaster on Acheron, a single Letnev corvette returned from the depths of Shaleri space with the horrifying tale of what had befallen the Creuss expedition to Ixth. As the various members of the Galactic Council began to gather their forces to deal with the Mahact, the Mentak Coalition dispatched one of its fastest void sloops to reconnoiter the Acheron system and see what the Mahact may be up to.

After a week's hard travel, the void sloop drifted quietly in past the Acheron system's icy outer bodies and got its first good look at the gateway to Ixth. To the crew's shock, the planet was no more. Acheron had shattered into shards of rock that now tumbled around an immense roiling vortex of gravitational instability that seethed with a baleful purple light.

The vortex was in the midst of consuming the inner system. Even days out, the sloop's commander could feel the strain on her vessel, and watched in horror as Acheron's star twisted and writhed under the assault. But she pressed on, as close as she dared. There was no sign of the Mahact or the Creuss expeditionary armada. However, there were strange readings amongst the tumbling remnants of the planet. When one of the sensor returns suddenly accelerated toward her ship, the commander had her crew put about and fled for open space. That was the last successful expedition to the Acheron system.

In the months following the event, researchers and intelligence operatives began to make conjectures about what new threat had fallen on the galaxy.

Ixth, supposed paradise and ancient home of the Mahact, sat far outside the bounds of the galaxy. In order to construct a gateway that could reach across the gulf of intergalactic space, the Mahact had to sink it deep into the very fabric of space-time. As part of their entropic field research, the Naaz-Rokha theorized that the wormhole may have crossed the threshold of this universe, into an entirely different dimension.

When the Mahact awoke, they ripped their world from its orbit and flung it into the galaxy's heart. In doing so, they destroyed the Acheron Gateway, leaving a great gaping wound in the planet's heart and in the fabric of the universe.

Through this rift came the Vuil'raith—a race of creatures from beyond the stars, resembling the demons that haunt many of the galaxy's oldest myths. No two are alike, and they range in size from tiny monsters no larger than a finger to great fleshy beasts as large as dreadnoughts that swim through the

void. They have infested the twisted space around the bones of Acheron. From there they gather their forces and cast their covetous eyes upon the galaxy.

The Vuil'raith are not mindless monsters. They possess a malign intelligence and powerful ambitions. They are even led by a Cabal, though the council has no set size. If a Vuil'raith is vicious and powerful enough to slay all of its rivals, eventually it amasses enough power to join the Cabal's ranks. It remains a part of the Cabal as long as it can dominate a significant horde of lesser Vuil'raith and keep its foes from slaying it to lay claim to its holdings. However, there are no true allies in the Cabal; only mutually distrusted rivals bound by shared interests.

The Cabal has set out to sow dissension ahead of its invasion. Cults of the Vuil'raith fester in the shadows of the galaxy's great cities. The weak-willed and disaffected are drawn to serve the Cabal, some with the hope of reaping grand rewards, while others simply want to watch the galaxy burn. The Vuil'raith send their agents to advance their interests and weaken their foes, and even the halls of the Galactic Council may not be free of their taint.

Meanwhile, the worlds on the edges of Shaleri space have come under assault from the Vuil'raith. Looming flesh-ships smash system defense fleets from the void, and crackling portals open in the streets to disgorge hordes of ravenous demon-beasts. With the Acheron rift providing an anchor into this reality, the Vuil'raith work tirelessly to build additional gateways to their hellish domain, their only desire to rip open the heart of Mecatol Rex and set a gateway amongst its bones.



ACHERON VORTEX

✦ Population	Unknown
✦ Government	Cabal
✦ Leadership	None
✦ Disposition	Voracious
✦ Tendencies	Military

While there may be a scientific explanation for the Vuil'raith's existence, that is cold comfort for those who must face these nightmares made flesh.



"The future must be preserved at all costs."

—The Nomad

THE NOMAD



Shortly before the Creuss Expedition left to plumb the depths of Shaleri Space, a number of sensor nets and observatories began to receive messages broadcast from the very heart of the galaxy. These messages repeated in a multitude of languages, and warned of a dark future to come that must be prevented at all costs. What struck the various scientists as odd was the source—the galactic center being utterly devoid of life—and the means of transmission. The messages were not sent via supraluminal communications, but instead broadcast on ancient radio frequencies. That meant the message had been sent thousands of years before the Lazax first founded their empire on Mecatol Rex.

In the confused wake of the Creuss disaster, the galaxy's network of data brokers began sharing stories of a wealthy individual who was hungry for information. Brokers rarely met with their new client in person, but the few who did said they were a nondescript humanoid wearing an environmental suit and shrouded in merchant's garb. They referred to themselves only as "the Nomad," and paid in valuable information as often as in coin. The Nomad seemed particularly interested in any information regarding the failed Creuss expedition, and about the scattered rumors of nightmare demons haunting Shaleri space.

Some argued that the Nomad had to be a mask for members of a larger organization. Anyone could use an environmental suit to obscure their identity, after all. Others insisted that the Nomad was a single individual, even in the face of rumors that they had conducted business in several different star systems across the span of a few days. Still, most dismissed the Nomad as a harmless curiosity—until Sumerian.

Space Station Sumerian encircles the frostbitten world of Arcturus. Though the ice-locked planet has few inhabitants save for the smugglers who hide caches of contraband on the surface, the massive station is one of the busiest independent trading ports in the galaxy. Laws are loose and enforcement lax, so one can buy nearly anything in one of Sumerian's hundreds of markets and bazaars. Ships from every corner of the galaxy dock in its shipping bays, and the various galactic powers have traditionally left Sumerian alone while quietly skimming riches from the businesses conducted there.

In the course of a few weeks, the Nomad took over Sumerian, seemingly by chance. A series of licenses, contracts, and deals ended and began at the perfect time to grant the Nomad control of the station's operations and most of its major factions. The few magnates and mercenary leaders who attempted to resist the takeover simply vanished. The head of Sumerian, a trader by the name of Huro M'es, ended up being quietly arrested and imprisoned.

With the Nomad in control of Sumerian, they began to expand their grasp over the surrounding systems. It quickly became apparent that the Nomad had access to nearly limitless sums of money, and they used their funds to buy influence in planetary governments and outright control of corporations. At the same time, mercenary groups began flocking to Sumerian, drawn by promises of lucrative contracts. Whole starships were purchased through shell corporations and eventually ended up in Sumerian docks, being refitted with military weapons and hardware. The Nomad also brought with them a small cadre of loyal agents that they seemed to trust to act in their name. The most feared of these was the Creuss warrior Ahk-Syl Siven, whose armor glowed with intermingled blue and crimson sparks.

Many have since come to realize that the Nomad is the center of a creeping web of influence and blackmail that stretches across the galaxy, and at the same time has also amassed a formidable mercenary army. However, all attempts to covertly eliminate this nascent threat have thus far ended in failure. The Nomad seems to have an almost prescient ability to anticipate threats and defeat them. Whoever the Nomad is, they clearly are enacting a plan of mind-boggling scope and complexity. Now, as their agents infiltrate the Galactic Council and mercenary warships set out from Sumerian's docks, many suspect that the ultimate goal of that plan is Mecatol Rex.



SPACE STATION SUMERIAN

✦ Population	167 million
✦ Government	Station Master
✦ Leadership	The Nomad
✦ Disposition	Altruistic
✦ Tendencies	Economic

Before the Nomad's arrival, Sumerian was run by Station Master Huro M'es, with the support of a coalition of merchant magnates. After the Nomad took power, many of the merchant guilds have also seen sudden leadership changes.



"KNEEL."
—Airo Shir Aur

THE MAHACT GENE-SORCERERS



Gene-sorcerers. Mad tyrants. Kings. The Mahact are a primal tale from ancient history. In the distant past, the Mahact dynasties terrorized the galaxy with their infighting and gene-sorcery. They could warp the forms of living beings, compel eternal obedience with a gesture, and turn the biospheres of entire worlds into seething, caustic hells. They unleashed their most vile technologies in war or even in debauched sport, and it seemed, even as their houses crumbled, that their fall might bring down all of civilized space.

But in the midst of their orgy of self-destruction, a new Empire rose to challenge them. The Lazax, a young and fiery race, led the effort to destroy the Mahact and restore peace. When the last Mahact King was slain, the Lazax claimed the fruits of their victory, establishing just dominion over the ashes of the Mahact's kingdoms.

However, the truth was somewhat more complicated than the Lazax wished anyone to remember.

The new Empire did overthrow the Mahact Kings, slaying many of them and claiming the Mahact's main fortress of Mecatol as their own. However, the Mahact were too powerful to defeat utterly. The last of them retreated from Mecatol, sowing anarchy and chaos in their wake, and leaving agents and sleepers to do their bidding. They fled the galaxy to their original home, the planet of Ixth. This world lay far beyond the furthest wisps of dust on the galactic arms, unreachable except through the great wormhole gate of Acheron. Here, in their ancient fastness, the remaining Mahact plotted their eventual return.

The Lazax pursued their foes to the entrance of the gate on Acheron, but every attempt they made to invade Ixth failed. So the young Empire tried a different plan. They studied the gate's arcane workings, and though they could not destroy it, they could shut it down. Thus, Lazax engineers deactivated the gate and buried its machinery beneath an entire ocean to guarantee that none would ever discover it again. They even purged all nearby worlds of life, turning surrounding space into a wilderness.

Without control of the machinery on Acheron, the Mahact could not reopen their gate, or even rip it free and set its endpoint somewhere else in the galaxy. They were trapped on their dying world, overlooking a galaxy that was steadily forgetting their existence. Eventually, the remaining Mahact entered the stasis crypts beneath their dead city, to sleep until the stars burned out around them.

And there they remained, until the Creuss expedition discovered the Acheron gate, opened it, and awoke them.

In an instant, the first Mahact saw the Creuss explorers and used arcane techno-rituals to dominate them and summon their ships through the Acheron Gate. Then, having no desire to remain prisoners on Ixth, the Mahact used the gate machinery to rip Ixth free from its star and hurl it into the heart of the galaxy. Never again would they be trapped on their homeworld.

Now Ixth sails untethered through the galactic core, and the Mahact survey their former domain. Though there are only a handful of them left, each has the power of eons of techno-sorcery at their fingertips. The remaining Mahact turn to their

own holdings, awakening their Ixthian bio-factories and assemblers, and summoning their dormant agents and their genetic descendants.

The corridors and halls of Ixth's great city-machines fill with the gene-sorcerers' thrall clones. Immense dreadnoughts have begun to rise from the underground assembler halls to hang in orbit over the planet. Legions of gene-crafted warriors assemble in the mustering squares, ready to march to war.

As the Mahact began to marshal their forces, a single golden ship appeared in orbit over Mecatol Rex. It descended to the Senate Possessional in the heart of Mecatol City, touching down on the perfectly manicured trille grass lawn. The hatches opened, and four emissaries stepped out. Each was one of the observers the Council had dispatched to the Creuss expedition to Ixth, reported lost by the few survivors who escaped. Now they wore robes of gold and steel, and were flanked by hulking Creuss legionaries, whose armor seethed with an ominous crimson glow.

They walked into the chambers of the Galactic Senate without fanfare or invitation and stood in the middle of the hall. Before the stunned audience, they announced that they were the emissaries of Vertar Auran Oblis, first amongst the galaxy's rightful race of rulers. They went on to say that, as Oblis was a magnanimous ruler, all those who surrendered immediately would be favored slaves.

The emissaries returned to their ship and left the city behind. However, many fear that it is only a matter of time before a golden armada returns to the sky above Mecatol Rex. And when it does, the Mahact will return the world to the center of their kingdom.



IXTH

✦ Population	Unknown
✦ Government	Coalition
✦ Leadership	Vertar Auran Oblis
✦ Disposition	Imperious
✦ Tendencies	Objective

To most other races, the Mahact are a dark fairy tale turned to life. While some panic at their resurrection, others are misguided enough to believe they can use the Mahact to their own advantage.

The Galaxy Awakens

Mecatol Rex. The center of the known galaxy and seat of the former Lazax Empire. Scarred by the flames of betrayal, Rex is a specter of a fallen empire and of ages long forgotten, yet it remains an object of reverence—and desire—in a galaxy of conflict and uncertainty.

Once, the great city that spanned its surface was the pinnacle of civilization. Today, Mecatol City is naught but a blasted shell of its former glory, a grim respite in the toxic Sea of Desolation that covers the majority of the planet.

Even so, its parabolic history of decadence and destruction does little to deter those who would seek to harness its power. The Winnaran custodians who dwell within the remnants of the city maintain what is left of the former capital, waiting for one of the Great Races to step forward and take up the mantle of the former Emperors.

But who among the races of the galaxy could fill the void left by the Lazax? To lay claim to the throne is a destiny sought by many, yet the shadows of the past serve as a grim warning to those who would follow in their footsteps.





The Rise of Legend

In ages past, when the last of the Mahact kings were slain and the galaxy was brought to its knees, a new Empire emerged from the ashes and bitterness of war. At its forefront were the Lazax, then relatively unknown. They chose Mecatol Rex as the seat of their fledgling Empire, abandoning an ancestral homeworld that has since been lost to the mists of time.

System by system, the Lazax swept through the galaxy. To each civilization that stood against them, they issued the same command: accept the benevolent sovereignty of the Empire. To be at odds with the new Empire would be madness.

It is likely that the Lazax met little resistance. The tyrannical oppression of the Mahact had primed the galaxy to stand with the young Empire, and the Lazax's promises of generosity and fairness did not fall on deaf ears. Of those that rejected the law of the Lazax, no record remains.

As the Lazax Empire grew, so too did the power of its subjects, uplifted by the Lazax and nurtured by the strength of the Empire. For tens of thousands of years, the Lazax ruled. Benevolent and fair, they shared the wealth and knowledge of the universe with their subjects.

With the firm guidance of the Lazax, the galaxy prospered. Economies flourished, advancements in the fields of medicine and engineering spread, and the Great Races of the Empire worked together in harmony, despite their various troubles and past conflicts. The peace of the Lazax Empire was known to all.







THE SUN SETS ON AN EMPIRE

Even as the Empire flourished, whispers of unrest began to take hold in the galaxy. Beneath the veneer of prosperity and advancement festered a complacency that would see the Lazax Empire to its end.

As time passed, the Lazax emperors grew comfortable in their lofty positions. Concerns over the future of the Empire were gradually replaced by petty internecine squabbles and political maneuverings. While the strength of the Lazax was still irrefutable, the Emperors had grown blind to the ever-growing ambition of the other Great Races. The solid foundation of the Empire was being weakened from within.

Then came the spark that would ignite chaos throughout the Empire. The Letnev, one of the first civilizations uplifted by the Lazax, had grown frustrated with overbearing Imperial trade sanctions and set up a blockade around the Quann Wormhole. The obstruction of one of the galaxy's major trade routes did not sit well within the Empire.

The humans of Sol, the youngest of the Great Races and who fostered no great love for the Letnev, quickly grew tired of the Letnev's posturing and fired upon the blockade, igniting a full-scale war between them.

The Lazax military, no longer in control of the situation, attempted—unsuccessfully—to intervene in the conflict, drawing the ire of both sides, who responded to the Lazax's interference with outright hostility.

With two of the Great Races in open rebellion, the Hylar—who had long grown weary of the meddling oversight of the Lazax—seized the opportunity to secede. In the short span of several years, the Empire had devolved into chaos.

The early decades of the Twilight Wars saw the Lazax scrambling to hold onto peace and stability in the Empire. Many of the Lazax refused to believe that their Empire, which had existed for nearly twenty millennia, could ever truly fall. A select few, however, foresaw the inevitable.

The leader of this prescient group, a disillusioned Lazax councilor by the name of Ibna Vel Syd, saw that the Lazax could not maintain their position of power. He begged the Emperor to consolidate his military might at Mecatol Rex, the Empire's still-beating heart. Unwilling to believe that the right of his forebears could ever truly be challenged, the Emperor dismissed Vel Syd's concerns as baseless fear-mongering and made no effort to regain control of the failing Empire.

Furious at the Emperor's complacency, Vel Syd led a group of loyal followers and a small contingent of renegade Hylar scientists to a planet far beyond the borderlands. As they made their desperate escape, they destroyed the Hall of Cartography in Mecatol City so that none who suspected their plan could ever uncover their secret destination.

The Emperor, reeling from the betrayal of one of his own and utterly helpless in the face of three full-scale rebellions, fell into a deep depression. Unable to muster the resources to deal with even the problems that arose within Mecatol City, he left the governance of the Empire to his subordinates.

The final fate of the Lazax was sealed when a massive fleet of Sol ships appeared without warning in the skies above Mecatol Rex. With the Lazax's Mecatol Fleet away in a foreign system, Mecatol City was utterly defenseless. The destruction was absolute. The last Emperor of the Lazax, Salai Sai Corian, died in the Sol bombardment, and a successor was never named.

In the years following the destruction of Mecatol City, the Lazax were hunted down and exterminated without exception and without mercy. Only the Winaarans, faithful servants of the Lazax, remained true to the Empire, and they were powerless to stop the massacre. Those that tried to interfere were slaughtered in kind. Within twenty years, the Lazax were but a memory.





The Twilight Wars

Without the unifying presence of the Lazax, the Empire quickly devolved into chaos and war. The Great Races, no longer shackled by Imperial sanctions, clashed over territory, over positions of power, and in some cases, out of spite.

The Sol, Hacan, and Jol-Nar, complicit in the betrayal of the Lazax, sought to cannibalize the power of the Empire. Conflict erupted throughout the galaxy as the various factions raced to protect their sovereignty and stake out their claims of the fallen Empire's territory.

Vast fleets of advanced warships exchanged deadly volleys in massive battles. Thousands of ships and lives were sacrificed for the most minuscule of territorial gains. For each battle won, another was lost, and the wars continued unabated.



An Age of Unrest

Even the sanctuaries of some Great Races would not remain untouched. During the initial years of the Twilight Wars, the Letnev captured Archon Tau, one of the peaceful Xxcha home worlds, an act which would lead to the eventual militarization of the Xxcha and, during the fight to retake their home, the complete and utter devastation of the garden world.

The scientists of the Hylar race, unbound by the guiding morality of the Lazax, leaned heavily on slavery and experimentation. Having subjugated a fiery race known as the Gashlai many years prior, the Hylar forced them to build a weapon of unmatched power, which the Hylar in turn unleashed upon the unsuspecting N'orr.

For hundreds of years, the Twilight Wars dismantled the progress and wisdom of the last twenty thousand years. Finally, their civilizations reduced to ashes, the Great Races withdrew quietly to their respective home systems, unable to sustain any further losses. The galaxy was in shambles, but at last the Age of Twilight had come to an end.

Distant Suns

Millennia have passed since the final battles of the Twilight Wars. The subjects of the former Galactic Council have forgotten the abject horrors of war. A quiet stillness has taken hold in the galaxy in the absence of conflict, and over time, the Great Races have recovered a portion of their former strength. Reconstruction, though it has taken many years, has seen many of the homeworlds of the Great Races return to their pre-war states.

Yet beneath the placid surface, the galaxy stirs. Some, no longer content to remain within the bounds of their reduced territories, have begun to look beyond the stars of their home systems. The spark of ambition drives them forth to seek new frontiers.

On the fringes of the borderlands, cautious explorers in search of valuable commodities chart new routes into systems never before touched by civilization. Newly discovered garden worlds—overflowing with natural resources—funnel rare minerals into the economies of those lucky enough to have found them. These discoveries usher in an era of revitalized prosperity and commerce.









Echoes of the Past

Even as the events of the present blaze a path toward the future, so too has the past come back to life. Returning to planets once inhabited by citizens of the Empire, the races of the galaxy are reestablishing their former colonies.

In some cases, long-lost outposts have been found to be alive and well, thriving in the absence of war, and have been brought back into the fold of civilization. In other cases, entire planets, once bustling commercial hubs or centers of culture and learning, have been found utterly devoid of life. Littered with the skeletons of ancient starships, these planets serve as grim reminders of the wars of ages past.



THREATS FROM BEYOND

With the reemergence of the Great Races—and the promise of an empire reborn—comes danger as well. Not all in the galaxy wish to see the Empire brought back to life, and the sins of the past cast a pall over Mecatol Rex.

During the early years of the Twilight Wars, when the Lazax councilor Ibna Vel Syd and his compatriots betrayed the Emperor and fled Mecatol Rex, little could be done to search for them. The Emperor would never learn of Vel Syd's fate, and for thousands of years, it was assumed that they had perished.

But the story of the Lazax was far from ended. Vel Syd and his people, their lifespans augmented by Hylar technology, evaded the genocide of their brethren on a new homeworld. It was a time of great sorrow for the Lazax, but it was also a time of new beginnings.

On their harsh new world, the survivors found that more and more of their organs needed to be augmented with machinery in order to survive. So much of their bodies had become machine that they barely resembled their former selves. Thus, the L1Z1X were born.

As the centuries passed and the L1Z1X consolidated their power, Ibna Vel Syd occupied himself fully with revenge, claiming that the L1Z1X would one day retake the Empire. Unknown to Vel Syd, however, a divide was growing within his people.

Mordai, one of Vel Syd's original coterie and Chief Enhancer of the L1Z1X, aspired to something greater. He became obsessed with ridding his own body—and those of his followers—of all organic tissue.

During one of his experiments, Mordai mistakenly infected himself with a recursive virus that, unbeknown to him, slowly drove him mad. As the virus eroded the mental state of Mordai and his followers, they took on new personas.

Calling themselves the Nekro, they turned against their former brethren, citing reluctance to abandon one's organic form as a weakness that must be purged.

At great length and great cost, the L1Z1X managed to defeat the Nekro, who had by then fully devolved into mechanical insanity. But in the black of space a single infected satellite was overlooked by the L1Z1X. The Nekro would survive, and recent rumors of missing ships and entire colonies gone suddenly silent prophesied an ill omen for all.

Nevertheless, the shadowed legacy of the Lazax is far from the only threat faced by the reemerging civilizations of the galaxy.

Near the Shaleri passage, trade vessels have gone missing with no explanation. Unknown alien craft have been spotted by patrols, only to disappear without a trace moments later. These strange occurrences might have been attributed to pirates or to the gravitational anomalies present in Shaleri space if it weren't for one thing: the emergence of the Creuss.

Hailing from a space beyond the Shaleri passage, the intentions of the Creuss are unknown. Although they claim to be a peaceful race, there are those who insist the Creuss are connected to the tragedies that frequent those regions of the stars.

Even stranger than the Creuss are the Arborec. A race of harmonious plant-like organisms, the Arborec each function as part of a greater whole: the Prime Symphony. Unable to communicate vocally with the other races, the Arborec resort to unconventional means—reanimating the dead tissue of other sentient beings and using the animated organism as a vessel.

Understandably, the Arborec's unusual methods of communication have been met with apprehension—and in some cases outright disgust—by the other races. It is all too possible that the Arborec might be far more ambitious than they appear.

These dark forces move about freely just beyond the fringes of civilized space, and even the Lazax themselves would have been ill-equipped to defend against them. As the light of a new dawn illuminates the galaxy, the darkness draws ever closer, threatening another dark age.

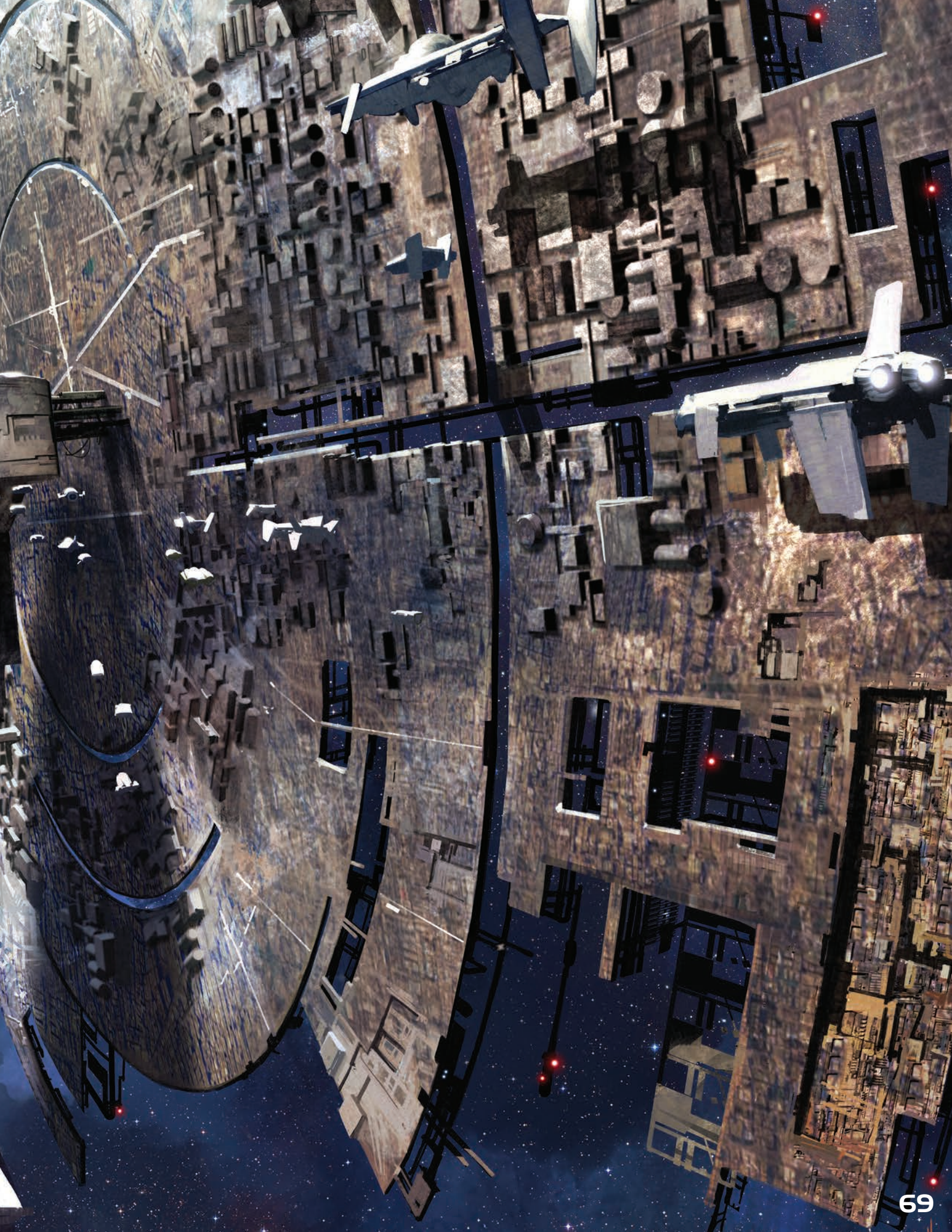


The Shadow of War

As the threat of danger looms over the galaxy, old alliances are being forged anew—and old rivalries as well. From beyond the Mahact Plateau, cautious envoys from strange, never-before-seen peoples arrive at Mecatol Rex, eager to evaluate what lingering power—or ancient technologies—might be found on the devastated planet.

Many of the lost technologies of the Lazax have been rediscovered. However, some former members of the Empire have begun secretly developing weapons of immeasurable power, keeping them hidden in the shadows of their homeworlds.

One such weapon, known as a “war sun,” is the terrifying result of Hylar weapons research from the early years of the Twilight Wars. Despite ethical concerns that surround the use of such raw, indiscriminate power, there are those who would risk the dangers of such a pyrrhic weapon to secure their place in the galactic order.







An Empty Throne

Gone is the weariness of war known to generations past. Even those races that played vital roles in the downfall of the Lazax are filled anew with vigor and pride.

Mecatol City—the ever-faithful Winaarans its sole custodians—is a shining beacon on an otherwise shattered planet. Unoccupied, its throne awaits those who would claim it, though none yet have the power to do so.

Now, the Great Races reach out from their ancestral homes, eager to prove themselves worthy successors. Border skirmishes between neighboring systems threaten to break the uneasy peace as the armies of the Great Races aim to return to their former glory.





Dawn of a New Era

As the galaxy churns inexorably toward its future, the Great Races have begun to feed the flames of their war machines. Each vies to become the indisputable ruler of the stars.

An epoch of great struggle threatens to engulf the galaxy once more. It is a time of steadfast alliances and bloody betrayals. Of words and of war. Of deep-seated honor and hard-won glory.

It is the dawn of a new era.

Pax Magnifica Bellum Gloriosum!



The Prophecy of Ixth

The Lazax. Founders of the greatest empire to span the galaxy. Hailed by some as benevolent rulers and powerful warrior-philosophers. Despised by others as vicious despots and arrogant dictators. Even a thousand years since their fall, few can consider them as anything but the Emperors of the entire galaxy. But there was a time when the Lazax were just another young and fiery race, and the galaxy was ruled by others.

Long before the Lazax, in the days of hallowed antiquity, legends and stories speak of the rule of the gene-sorcerers; the dreaded Mahact. Little is known about them save that their powers of cloning and genetic manipulation were nearly akin to magic, and that they divided the galaxy into many feudal holdings, each controlled by a Mahact family. The reign of the Mahact lasted for centuries, but it could not endure under the weight of their own decadence.

The dynasties of the Mahact kings were already crumbling under the weight of infighting and their debased technologies when the Lazax stepped onto the galactic stage. The Lazax armies crushed the remaining Mahact, slaying the last of their kings and purging their scourge from the civilized stars. Then, they built their reign on their legacy as liberators. They had saved the galaxy, and in return, its grateful citizens greeted their new masters with enthusiastic acclaim.

And so the Lazax Emperors set about ruling their new Imperium. Over twenty-four millennia, the Lazax prospered, waned, and eventually fell. Plenty of time for the rest of the galaxy, even the Lazax themselves, to forget about the struggles that had seen them rise to power in the first place. Plenty of time to forget about old horrors from the dawn of galactic history.

But those old horrors had not forgotten about them.

Within the Old Deep, the lightless warrens and passageways that lie far below Mecatol City, are vaults from the earliest days of Lazax rule. Some are cunningly hidden, while others are defended by fiendish traps and powerful barriers. Even the Winnaran custodians do not know what secrets they may contain.

However, as the powerful factions of the galaxy began to expand beyond their borders once again, they dispatched emissaries to Mecatol City. Some were politicians or soldiers sent to negotiate treaties or prepare for war, but others were scientists and historians. They hoped to rediscover the Lazax's secrets and perhaps even give their own peoples some advantage in the conflicts to come.

One team had been sent from Creuss on the basis of fragmented information discovered from a wrecked ship found drifting in the depths of Shaleri space. With the codes and maps recovered from the dead captain's vault, they unlocked an archive within the Catacombs of the Primals so old it had been sealed before the Lazax had declared their Empire. Within these ancient records they found something the galaxy had searched for across millennia.

They found a map leading to Ixth. Fabled paradise of a million dreamers, promised land of a thousand faiths, the legend of Ixth was as old as the Lazax. Although no one could agree on exactly where Ixth was, or what could be found on this legendary world, everyone did agree that the race that found it would reap immense riches and wield immeasurable power.

The Creuss believed they knew how to reach it. The discovery shocked the various great powers of the galaxy out of their constant struggles, and ignited a fevered race to discover the fabled world.



Sovereigns of Eld

The maps led to a planet called Acheron, in the far reaches of Shaleri space. The Creuss mobilized an expeditionary armada without delay. However, the rest of the races of the Galactic Council unanimously decried their actions. The Creuss, not wanting to spark a war on every front, agreed to allow non-Creuss observers to join their expedition.

The expedition sailed around the turbulent space surrounding the Singularity of Manon, using the distant Torali Pulsar as their guide. Even as they delved deep into the unexplored nebulae beyond the Pulsar, they began to come under attack. Fast raiding ships struck at the edges of their fleet, and mysterious ambushers attacked scouting parties as they set down on planets along the way.

But the expedition pressed on. Eventually, they came across a clutch of dead planets circling an ancient dwarf star. The system appeared entirely without note, but clues within the maps made oblique references to such a place. The Creuss searched each planet in turn, and eventually they came to the innermost, a lonely world of dust and black oceans. The expedition's scholars consulted their research and agreed; they had finally found Acheron.

The Creuss carefully swept the planet with their most powerful sensors and dispatched probes and parties of explorers to the surface. Soon, their persistence was rewarded. Buried beneath the depths of Acheron's deepest sea were the ruins of a civilization that had been ancient before it had been flooded. At its heart was a gateway; an artificial wormhole larger and more powerful than any other that the galaxy had ever seen.

The Creuss immediately set about trying to unlock the gateway, pushing their formidable understanding of wormhole physics to its limits. And, soon, they succeeded. They opened the gateway, and stepped through to Ixth. They expected a paradise.

They were wrong.

Too late, the Creuss discovered that the prophecies of Ixth had been lies. Instead of a promised land, they discovered a tomb-city on a planet outside the galaxy. Instead of riches, they discovered horrors from a forgotten age. And instead of power, they awakened the Mahact.

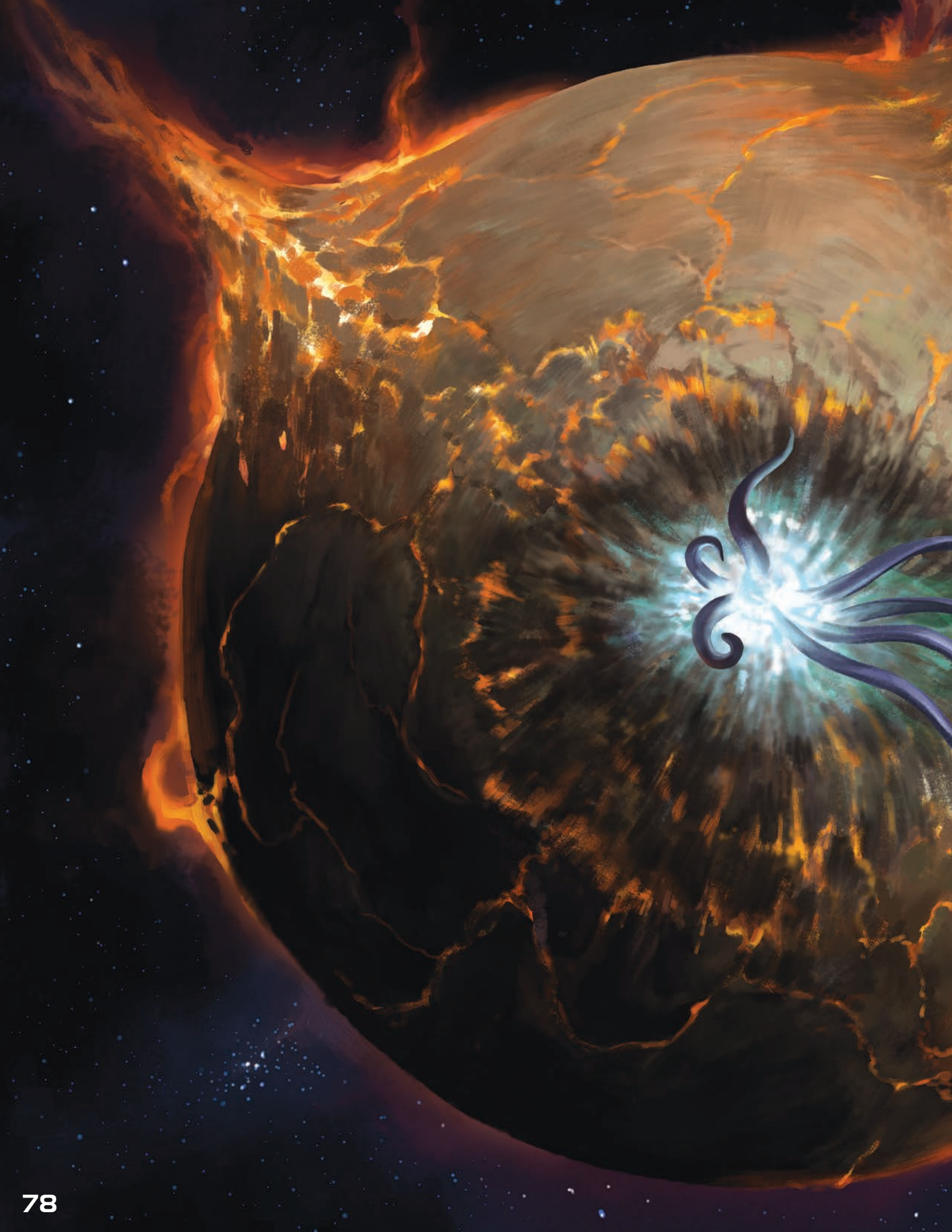
For Ixth was their ancestral home. Driven from the galaxy by the Lazax, unable to return through the sealed Acheron gate, the Mahact had entombed themselves to await the day when someone would make the mistake of reopening the gate and awaken them.

Those belonging to the Creuss expedition were the Mahact's first victims. Their sorcerous technology allowed the Mahact to remake the Creuss' ethereal forms, crafting them into loyal servants for their new masters. From the entire expeditionary armada, only a few observers from the other races were able to escape to warn the rest of the galaxy.

Once awake, the Mahact were able to regain control over Acheron and the gate. The Mahact worked frantically and with single-minded purpose to ensure that they could never be isolated or exiled again, and they had little concern for other consequences of their actions.

So they unleashed the full force of their ancient machines, unbinding the wormhole from Acheron. Energy capable of maintaining the gateway until the stars burned out was unleashed in a moment, expanding its structure to swallow Ixth whole and hurl it into the midst of the galaxy's bright core stars.

This drastic act destroyed the gateway. On Ixth, the mechanisms simply vanished, lost amongst a hundred dimensions of space and time, and leaving a glowing crater in the middle of the Mahact's capital city. On Acheron, the consequences were far worse.





The Collapse of Acheron

The violent severing of the gateway from Acheron ripped the fundamental fabric of the universe asunder. A massive gravity rift tore the planet to whirling shards, and split the star system in twain.

Then it began to grow, becoming a massive gravitational vortex that consumed the Acheron system. The sun writhed and twisted under the assault, and the remaining planets slowly crumbled. But that was not the worst. The power of Acheron's wormhole gateway meant that, when it was destroyed, the rift became a gaping wound in reality. Through this wound spilled vicious creatures from a parallel dimension. Calling themselves the Vuil'raith, they seem to have sprung fully formed from the darkest nightmares of a hundred different species.

The Vuil'raith, however, are all too real. They seek to destroy the boundaries between this reality and their own, and in doing so, merge the galaxy into a warped and hellish extension of their home. Worse, their malevolence is matched by their cunning. They have courted allies amongst those cast aside and discarded by their own species, promising that those who serve the Vuil'raith now shall be lords of creation when the new order comes. For every world that falls to the voracious appetites of the Vuil'raith fleets, another collapses after being undermined by traitors from within.

In their bid to retake the galaxy, the Mahact unwittingly unleashed yet another threat, one that is possibly more dangerous than themselves.

New Alliances

The return of the Mahact has also spurred the rise of other races to prominence on the galactic stage. The fragile balance of power between the traditional members of the Galactic Council has shattered under the pressures of these upstarts.

On many worlds, the Titans of Ul rise from beneath the ground. Once slaves of the Mahact, millennia of slumber have freed the Titans' minds from domination. Now they strive to carve out a place for themselves in the galaxy.

Long ago, the Argent Flight accepted the task of ensuring the Mahact would never return to plague the galaxy, and worked to accomplish it in secret. Now that their ancient foe has returned, the time for secrecy is over.

Even more mysterious are the forces of the Empyrean and the Nomad. In both cases, recent events seemed to have spurred them to action. More black-hulled ships have been spotted lurking on the edges of known systems, while mercenaries flock to the Nomad's promises of fantastic wealth.

Others see the galactic upheaval as an opportunity to be grasped. The newly formed Naaz-Rokha Alliance looks at its peers with contempt. Isn't it time for a younger species to chart the course of galactic affairs?









Tides of War

Beset by new rivals and ancient threats, the elder races of the galaxy rush to form alliances and build up their military might. As outposts and fortresses fall silent along borders, and night skies flicker with the light of distant weapons fire, planets everywhere ready their defenses and prepare for war.

Some believe a glorious new era is about to dawn—that a light might be forged that can resist the coming darkness. A glorious Imperium, rising from the ashes of the old.

But others know that old grudges run too deep to be so readily healed. They fear the galaxy is perched on the precipice of titanic conflict, and that the return of the Mahact will send it all plunging into the abyss.

TWILIGHT IMPERIUM



BY CHRISTIAN T. PETERSEN
TWILIGHT IMPERIUM 3RD EDITION (2005)

My name is Mahtom Iq Seerva.

I am the Winnaran keeper of the Custodian Chronicle, and I write this from the ancient Tower of Annals in old Mecatol City. Since inheriting the duties of the chronicle from my father, I have enjoyed the inspiring views of great buildings, ancient towers, and the bright lights of life that stretch into the distance. Yet, like the shadow at my feet, I can never escape or forget the lethally finite borders of this city. Less than a thousand leagues from my tower, great shields protect us from the poisonous dust that is the Sea of Desolation, the terrible wasteland that covers most of the planet.

My people, the Winnarans, have kept this city safe for more than three thousand years. Ever since the time of the Great Scourge, we have been the caretakers of the Imperial Throne, the Imperial Records, and the Galactic Council here on Mecatol Rex. We have indeed been faithful to the promise that we made to the last Emperor.

My hands tremble as I write this, for events are now unfolding which I believe to be the harbinger of great change. I foresee that our custodianship will come to an end in my lifetime.

This is why I have contacted you. I will seek to give you a brief yet true summary of the recent history of our galaxy. I give this to you because I know that you will spread this knowledge far and wide. As we enter the dangerous years before us, I fear that the galaxy shall have great need of the past.

It is told that the Lazax Emperors arose from the ashes of the Mahact kings. Little is known of their early ascension, but it is impossible to deny that the Lazax must have been a profoundly intelligent, benevolent, and wise people. After their rise to power, we know that the Lazax chose the central planet of Mecatol Rex as their home world. The year the Lazax first arrived on Mecatol Rex is recorded in the Imperial Chronicle as "first" and marks the beginning of my account.

For ages, the borders of the Lazax Empire expanded outward. As inhabited systems were discovered and annexed into the Empire, the Lazax allowed these newfound civilizations to join the Galactic Council: the governing body that represented the needs and voices of the Empire's people. The Great Races: Xxcha, Hacan, Letnev, Hylar, Human, and N'orr were all represented in the council, as were hundreds of lesser civilizations and independent systems.

Yet, as the years passed, discoveries of new civilizations and planetary systems slowed. Little by little, the mood of the Empire changed as technological and intellectual growth abated. Craving constant advancement, the Great Races began to look to the power of the Lazax and the resources of their neighbors. Greed and ambition grew in the hearts of statesmen and councilors. The once-noble spirit of the Empire turned suspicious and fearful. It is during this time that the first conflicts between the Great Races are recorded in the Imperial Chronicle. The Galactic Council became a seedbed of intrigue, and the turmoil ushered in a time of spies and assassins. First in secret, and later in public, the Great Races began to build their fleets and armies. Many embarked on territorial expansion that extended beyond their original charter. Border strife and resource disputes proliferated, gnawing at the very foundations of the Empire. This was a time of growing darkness known now as the Age of Dusk.

Throughout most of this age, the Lazax still held authority without question. Except for a few minor and unsuccessful rebellions, few dared to openly challenge the Emperors. Blinded by millennia of unchallenged rule, the Lazax could not perceive the mounting ambition and discontent that grew around them. As centuries passed, tensions between the Great Races grew deeper, and so did their desire for power and control. In the end, hatred was their only common ground: hatred for the Lazax, Imperial rule, and for the benevolent arrogance of the emperors.

A small affair near the Quann Wormhole was the spark that would set the galaxy aflame.

Protesting Imperial trade oversight, the Baron of Letnev began a blockade of traffic through the Quann Wormhole. Because the prickly Letnev had often been troublesome, an unconcerned and unhurried Emperor sought to solve the conflict through the Galactic Council.

However, the blockade obstructed significant Sol trading activities and prevented vital supplies from reaching a handful of Sol colonies that soon were struck by famine and disease. After nearly eight months of fruitless debate in the Galactic Council, the patience of the Sol Federation ran dry. Without warning, the blockading Letnev ships were attacked and annihilated by a Sol task force acting without Imperial mandate, and the Quann Passage was reopened.

Angered by the unilateral militancy of both Letnev and Sol, the Emperor attempted to consolidate his control by issuing the Maandu Edict: a rule which would place all warships under direct Imperial supervision.

The Maandu Edict was the stone that shattered the brittle Empire. The Letnev, Sol, and Jol-Nar civilizations announced their immediate withdrawal from the Council, drawing the galaxy into civil war. The Quann Conflict marks the beginning of the Age of Twilight.

As civilization fought civilization—as a thousand territorial disputes erupted over a few years—the Lazax desperately sought to hold together their crumbling Empire. Imperial fleets fought across the galaxy, but their power was ultimately stretched too thin. In the seventy-third year of the war, an alliance of Sol, Jol-Nar, and Hacan launched a surprise attack on Mecatol Rex itself. The last Lazax Emperor and his entire family were killed during the first Sol bombardments, and no successor was named.

Of all the planets in the galaxy, no planet was more war-torn than Mecatol Rex. Over the course of only a few years, the planet's ecology was ravaged by bombardments, its population nearly wiped out, and its green fields blasted into a toxic wasteland.

After the death of the Emperor and the loss of the throne-world, Imperial control collapsed. The Lazax became hunted across the galaxy in the vengeful wave of murder that is known now as the Great Scourge. Lasting only twenty years, the scourge resulted in the near-complete annihilation of the Lazax race. Until recently, no Lazax had been seen in the galaxy for more than three thousand years.

The Twilight Wars continued for centuries, but no race was powerful enough to seize the throne and risk suffering a similar fate as the Emperor. Slowly, the strength of great civilizations failed as their economies crumbled and as knowledge and technology was lost in the destruction and strain of long war.

And so the Age of Twilight ended in a slow whisper. The time that followed, now known as the Dark Years, was a period of economic, cultural, and intellectual collapse. The Great Races retreated into their own small, safe areas of space, abandoning what they could no longer hold by force. After several millennia, the Dark Years came to an end, and a calm but uncertain period of rebuilding began.

As I write this, the Great Races of the galaxy have regained elements of their former strength. Here on Mecatol Rex, the Galactic Council is growing in influence once more, while civilizations new and old, are re-colonizing the neighboring systems abandoned during the Dark Years.

Signs of great change are everywhere. This year, as if walking out of ancient prophecy, the Lazax returned from the darkness of history in a foreboding cybernetic form. To me, their coming is like the first wind of a terrible storm. I feel as if the galaxy is waking—as if an ancient beast stirs from slumber in a dark cave.

The day will soon come when a new Empire will rise. For the sake of all, may the new Emperor have not only the power to seize the throne, but the strength to conquer the peace.

If not, I fear that a sea of desolation will drown us all.

SHATTERED EMPIRE

BY CHRISTIAN T. PETERSEN
T13: SHATTERED EMPIRE (2006)

At the end of empire, a faint wind rustled through Salai's robes. It was a calm, warm evening, and the bruised purple outline of the setting sun was still visible on the horizon. An evening made for calm contemplation and peace.

Instead it was neither.

For most of his adult years, Salai had come to this balcony to breathe the clean air and admire the lights of Mecatol City. Yet tonight, the lights were scattered and few, the usual bustling traffic was scarce, and the air was tainted with the acrid scent of burning and foreboding. Salai glanced to the west, where distant columns of dark smoke still rose, obscuring the western stars.

"Your Highness?"

Salai did not turn to greet the owner of the voice. It belonged to High Councilor Verus Da Ishnu. The councillor knew his emperor's displeasure at being inter-rupted on his evening balcony stroll, yet for months Verus had interrupted him regardless. Salai gently shook his head and sighed. He could hardly blame his old friend. These were difficult times.

"The fire continues." The emperor gestured towards the plumes of smoke in the west. "It has been burning for months. Please tell me that we are making prog-ress?"

Verus emerged from the doorway and approached his emperor. "They have con-tained the spread of the fire, but the work goes on. The Hall of Cartography was vast, and our resources are now limited..."

"The continuing call for reservists has drained our public sectors." Salai shook his head. "Is that not what we tell the citizens?"

It was a question that Verus Da Ishnu knew better than to answer. Verus felt a twang of the gnawing fear that had been growing within him since the Hall of Cartography was destroyed. The nagging fear of the impossible.

"And Ibna?" Salai Sa Corian, the last Lazax emperor, turned to his advisor.

"There is still no word of Ibna Vel Syd." Verus didn't understand or appreciate the emperor's empathy for the renegade junior councilor. Even before his trea-son, Ibna's presence had become destructive in court. His nervous outcries, bor-dering on panic, had been far from useful in procuring any long-term solution to the crisis.

"And his ships?" Salai glanced towards the stars, resuming his slow walk along the balcony. Verus followed.

"Still unaccounted for, I'm afraid. Our navy..."

"Yes, I know," Salai sighed, "It is stretched thin." His eyes seemed to glaze over as he studied the distant suns that shone in the Mecatol night sky. "Ah, Ibna. Where have you gone?" Salai lowed his eyes to look at his old friend. "I envy him, Verus."

"This traitor?" Verus could barely contain his frustration. "Rats flee a sinking ship, my Lord, not a captain!" As he spoke, he immediately regretted his words. The acidic fear within him twitched again.

The emperor's lips curled in stark amusement. "Is our ship sinking, Verus?"

"Of course not, my lord! I certainly did not..."

"What I mean, Verus, is that I envy the freedom of the rat."

Verus paused. "Not words I would use at your dinner speech, my Lord."

The emperor burst into friendly laughter, his spirit raised for the moment. "No, I better not." The emperor took his friend's arm as they walked. "I am glad to employ so esteemed a councilor. Especially when he saves me from rhetorical folly involving vermin."

Verus smiled back, it was good to see Salai jest; it did not happen often.

They continued their walk in a rare moment of silence. The emperor's smile soon faded. "I stand with the ship, Verus. Sinking or not. I stand with the ship!"

"Of course, my Lord. And we stand with you."

The emperor nodded. "Well, Verus. Will you please tell me why you interrupted my evening walk this time?"

Verus led the emperor into the throne room. On a normal night, the room would be bustling with councilors, ambassadors, military officers, and representatives from every corner of the galaxy. Court staff would be busy filling cups and pro-viding light meals to a crowd buzzing with intrigue and ploys of power.

Instead, tonight the room was dimly lit, strangely hot, and only the inner circle of Salai's councilors was present.

And the visitor.

The stranger stood taller than even the Lazax. Entirely cased in a gold-bronze metal, only its glowing eyes could be seen burning beneath an expressionless golden mask. Salai could feel the strange heat emanating from the creature, a pulsing, living heat, unlike any that Salai had known in the past.

The creature, somewhat clumsily in its heavy armor, bowed gently. Its eyes, flick-ering with a living fire, dimmed in respect.

A servant brought Salai his translation device on a golden tray. Salai placed the device over his ear. "Who are you?" Salai's voice was kind.

"I am Feramon Azh." The voice of the stranger was like that of coals grinding in a furnace. "I am of the Gashlai people from distant Muaat."

Salai spread his arms in the traditional welcome. "Be well received here on Mecatol. Even in these troubled times, the empire is glad for your arrival and your presence!"

"We ask for your help," the Gashlai began. "We are a people enslaved." The creature inched forward towards the emperor, its fiery eyes pleading.

The emperor listened to the tale of the Gashlai and their mistreatment by the Jol Nar. As the creature finished its tale, Salai moved towards it, reaching to touch its armor, but as he felt the boiling heat of the metal, he slowly returned his hand to his side.

"We are at war against the Hylar. We have no control over their actions," the emperor said. Across the room, councilors nodded their silent agreement.

The disappointment in the eyes of the Gashlai was evident. "But you are emper-or! You are strong!" he continued. "You can free Muaat, and the Gashlai will help you in your war!"

A Lazax admiral came to whisper something in the emperor's ear, but Salai waved him away. "Our forces are hard pressed, Feramon. Despite my compas-sion for your plight, we cannot spare even a single ship."

"But you must help us!" The Gashlai inched forward again. "The hope of my people rests with my mission here. You cannot fail them!"

"I am sorry, my friend." The Lazax emperor was powerless. It seemed the whole galaxy was pleading for help, while truly it was the empire that needed help from the galaxy. This audience was over.

The eyes of the Gashlai dimmed again in disappointment, but he did not step back. "Wait!" There was a hint of tension in his voice, a taste of desperation. The creature touched a small control at his side, and with a hiss of hot air a small door opened in his chest armor. The palace guards sprung to the emper-or's side.

Slowly the Gashlai brought out an engineering drafting device from the com-partment. "If you save the Gashlai, we will give you this."

Salai took the device and glanced at the Hylar schematics. The emperor gestured for the admiral to come forth once more. Their eyes grew in surprise as they realized what the schematic meant.

"The Hylar are building this monstrosity?" Salai asked. The Gashlai blinked and nodded. "My people have been slaving to build this vessel for years," the creature sadly announced.

The emperor glanced at the admiral, who looked longingly at the schematic and the powerful weapon it promised.

The emperor was about to speak again when the door to the throne room sprang open with a clamor. Led by the High Commander of the Lazax forces, a group of naval and diplomatic personnel burst into the room. Their faces were grave, and hints of perspiration beaded on their foreheads. Wary of the alien in the center of the room, the High Commander approached Verus, whispering news in the councilor's ear.

"Yes?" Salai inquired. Something was wrong.

"My lord," Verus began. "The Hacan and the N'orr...their entire diplomatic contingents have secretly departed. Their districts are empty."

"But why?" Salai demanded. But as he looked into the face of the High Commander, he knew. "We are betrayed?"

The high commander only lowered his eyes, deep embarrassment in his face.

Salai moved calmly to the great western window. As he approached the glass, the first bomb fell, splitting the night in yellow and orange. Hard shadows flared across the room. In the night skies above, Salai could see the emerging outlines of the Sol fleet. Like a vast swarm of black birds, the vessels soon shrouded the stars.

Salai turned to the people in the room. They looked longingly at him, as if some secret legacy of the imperial blood would spring forth and vanquish the enemy. Instead they saw only tears.

Salai moved calmly to the Gashlai, who was clearly shaken over the sudden events. "Go home, friend Feramon. I hope that you and your people find a safe way out of the destruction in the years ahead. If you survive this night, tell your people that they must carve their own destiny."

The last emperor returned the engineering device to the creature. Placing his hand emphatically on its metallic arm, Salai ignored the instant blistering of his skin. "This knowledge is too late for us. Keep it. It may yet benefit your people!"

The Gashlai quickly retreated, the room palpably cooling at his departure. Another explosion shook the city and the imperial tower trembled. The emperor tore the imperial chain from his neck, precious metals and gemstones spilling on to the floor. "This twilight imperium is no more. Save your families."

The others in the room came alive with a sudden panic, most rushing blindly to the doors. "Remember the peace of the emperors!" Salai shouted after them.

As the echo of his words rang through the room, a sharp sound rang through the low rumble of bombardment. The High Commander, having discharged his service pistol on himself, instantly collapsed. His blood slowly saaking into the imperial rugs. Salai hardly noticed.

Verus came to his emperor's side for the last time. Together the two stood in the trembling tower, silently witnessing a bloom of fires grow in their city like a gar-den of destruction.

The next wave of bombardments destroyed the imperial palace and everyone therein.

SHARDS OF THE THRONE

BY CHRISTIAN T. PETERSEN
T13: SHARDS OF THE THRONE (2011)

Scout Unit H256, Sol 67th Marine Division

Second Moon of Kal Haddar

Captain Jael Ducan was annoyed. The men, recognizing his sullen mood, gave him a wide berth as they expertly moved into the dark and desolated civhab block. It was the fifth month of campaigning, and the H256th's first incursion.

Five months coagulating in the hold of a third generation cruiser, only to be dropped on an abandoned moon for a survey mission. Jael spat bitterly onto the ashen soil. Some incursion.

While the coreward and central battle groups of joint task force Salient Sun had been engaged with the enemy for weeks, the rimward group had seen no action. A few naval skirmishes, sure, but no honest work for leatherneck specialists like the men of unit H256.

Roeto's going to return home a barkin' Colonel, and I'll be lucky to get combat pay. Jael's friend had been assigned to the central battle group. Everyone had heard rumors of the successes that the 81st had chalked up against the L1z1x on Tiamat and Hercalor. He's going to be unbearable, the braggart.

"I don't like this, Captain."

The sound of the deep, heavily accented voice broke Jael's introversion, upping his annoyance another notch. This notion of a "joint" task force was well and good, but expecting him to be happy about a "training embedment" was beyond reasonable.

"I don't like this, Captain Jael," Groc Yyscho repeated. The huge Xxcha warrior's yellow eyes warily scanned the abandoned buildings around them, his slug-rifle held ready. He's actually nervous. Jael was disgusted. They're expecting me to train a rookie.

"I heard you the first time," Jael snapped and stopped. "Listen, I don't like this either. We're stuck in the arse-end of rim space, scouting a worthless barren moon while all the glory is had coreward. On top of that sad story, I'm stuck with training your scaly behind. So, there's plenty not to like."

Jael gave the alien his hardest don't-mess-with-me face. He needn't look to know his men were watching the dress-down with wry smiles.

But Yyscho wasn't cowed. He calmly studied Jael with his big yellow eyes, starlight dully outlining the leathery hide of his beaked face. Moments passed.

Jael was the first to break, sensing the unseen attention of his men waning. Damn alien.

"And what is it exactly," Jael growled, "that you don't like, Groc Yyscho?"

The Xxcha studied Jael for another second, blinked, then gestured towards one of the structures they'd just passed. "We were told the '1X abandoned this moon," he said, using the Sol shorthand term for the L1z1x enemy.

I wonder if he knows that we call his race the '2X? Jael glanced at the structure towards which Yyscho was pointing. It was an old '1x defensive position, now silent and broken in the cold night air.

"That's right. They abandoned the sector," Jael said. "And we're here to survey the little half-robo rats and roaches they left behind." Jael gestured at the Xxcha's heavy slug-rifle. "Think your little boom-stick can handle that, Xxcha?" The men grunted in restrained amusement.

Ignoring the slight, Yyscho stepped away from the Captain and moved towards the ruined structure.

"Yet, their defensive positions are destroyed," said the Xxcha, pushing at one of the splintered beams. It grated across the dilapidated pile, pulverized ceramics and metal girders shifting in the darkness.

Jael sighed. Kal Haddar Moon classroom, Professor Ducan presiding.

"Scorched earth!" Jael said as he bent down to gather up a '1X rifle from the rubble, dust falling from its broken barrel like water from a faucet. "Don't leave anything behind for your enemy!" He waived the broken weapon to illustrate the point, then let it drop back onto the street. And let them waste their resources scouting this worthless orb of a moon.

"Their weapons are still here, as are the targeting systems." Yyscho pushed more rubble out of the way. The main heavy repeater-gun was still in its stand. Below the weapon, sophisticated targeting and communications systems sat powerless in their chassis, all covered with the fine dust that seemed to be everywhere on this moon.

Jael shrugged. "Must've been in a hurry." He turned and gestured for his men to continue their patrol. They roused soundlessly and moved into the darkness ahead. The Xxcha continued to rummage through the ruined structure.

"This one wasn't in a hurry." Yyscho's accent made the last word sound like whuuri.

Jael turned. Enough with the lessons. He was about to bark at the Xxcha again, but stopped.

In the rubble lay the broken body of a '1X guardsman. Augmetics covered the lower face and pate of the soldier, but his organic eyes, filled with dust, were open in death. His armored chest plate had been torn apart with what appeared to be massive shears.

The Xxcha looked at Jael carefully, as if measuring him. Then the alien sighed and undid the safety of his slug-rifle. "The enemy did not abandon this moon because of us, Captain," he said. "They fought something here before they left." Ysho checked his ammo count. "Or maybe they didn't leave," he continued, tilting his head at the dead soldier, "maybe they died here."

Jael walked back to the ruined structure and knelt to study the mangled body. As he did, Ysho studied the civhab around them, yellow eyes looking for signs of movement in the silent windows.

The H256th had been inserted into the largest of three primary settlements on Kal Haddar's second moon. The place had been home to a community of foodstuff colonists, to farmers. The atmosphere on the moon was thin but breathable, and the soil supposedly excellent for growing roots. The settlement, called

"Astaria" according to the charts, was human, but like so many remote human settlements of this age, not part of the Federation. Instead, it had given its fealty to a Naalu governor a system or so coreward.

Jael guessed Astaria had once been home to a few hundred thousand souls. A rootfarmer metropolis.

They were all gone now. Dead most likely. Or slaves to the 'IX. Orbital bioscans had shown nothing alive on the moon with a signature larger than that of a small dog. The place was depressing.

Jael traced a finger along the massive cut in the armored chest of the dead 'IX guard. Did the colonists do this? Did they rise up against the invaders? Unlikely. The 'IX were unforgiving and effective warriors. A mob of farmers wouldn't have stood a chance. If not them, then who? Jael reached for his comlink and pressed the transmitter.

"Higheye, this is the H256th, do you copy?"

Ysho didn't glance down, but Jael could sense the alien's satisfaction in having the issue escalated.

The transmitter buzzed. "H256, this is Higheye, copy."

"Higheye, this is Captain Ducan. Give me Traw."

"Stand by, Captain."

Ysho seemed to sniff at the air, his head cocked towards the sky. The large alien warrior was growing more restless by the second. Jael noticed a feral quality in the Xxcha's careful movements. Had he misjudged his embedded trainee? What do you smell, alien?

"Something's about to happen, Captain Jael." The Xxcha slipped a small device out of his battlesuit, his slitted eyes intently studying the readouts. A motion sensor. Jael had a similar device in his pack. Expensive. Among Federation scouts, only captains or higher were outfitted with lightweight motion sensors.

"You should recall your men, Captain," Ysho said, in as close to a whisper the alien could muster. He expertly slipped the sensor back into his suit.

"Motion?" Jael asked. Why am I whispering?

The Xxcha shook his head. "Intuition."

"Jael, what do you have?" Colonel Traw's voice boomed in the receiver. Ysho frowned at the volume level. Jael turned it down.

"Jael?" Colonel Traw was not a man accustomed to waiting.

Ysho looked down at Jael, big yellow eyes intent and alert. "Recall your men, Captain."

Jael ignored the Xxcha. "Sir, we've found...something here." He considered his next words. "Do we know for sure why the enemy abandoned this moon?"

Jael sensed Traw's impatience. "As I told you in mission orientation, Captain, they've withdrawn to support their defenses against our coreward action..." The colonel suddenly paused; Jael heard agitated chatter in the background. "Stand by, Jael. Seems I got another unit checking in."

Damn.

Jael switched transmission frequency. "Gather and caution," he said in a low voice to the H256th's unit channel. Ahead, in the shadows, his men would check their weapons and start their return to him.

That was when the first distant explosion lit the dusty atmosphere with a dull orange flash. A second or so later, the dull crunch of impact followed. Jael estimated the distance to be two miles to the south. Sliver rocket. A Federation scout unit had fired its heavy weapon. At what?

The remote clacking of firearms followed, then another rocket impact.

"H256th, to me!" Jael stood and roared down the street. Transmitter be damned.

More rocket blasts, more rifle fire. This time to the west. Another Federation unit had engaged. Engaged what?

The men began expertly emerging from the shadows ahead, silently and with weapons ready. Lt. Germaine stopped a few feet from Jael, a curt dip of his head an unsaid inquiry, What are your orders?

Jael was about to say "we go south to help" when he saw subtle movement out of the corner of his eye. A long dark shape slithered

against the dust and rubble with a metallic sound, like a chain dragged over dry leaves.

"CONTACT!"

Pvt. Jens fired into the darkness. Muzzle flashes lit up the dark street. Ysho grunted unhappily.

Jens's shooting seemed to wake more of whatever it was Jael had seen. Over the clattering of rifle fire, Jael heard the slithering noise intensify, this time from several directions. And there was another sound: the thin sonic whine of batteries, servos, and forced air coolant systems coming online. Dozens of them.

Pvt. Jens died, and the firing momentarily stopped. His body had been sliced in two by such sharp force that it left him standing whole for a few seconds before he slid apart.

Then the street came alive.

From windows, from alleys, from beneath dusty rubble, things rose. Slim snakelike appendages of dark banded metal, each a dozen or so yards in length. They emerged like a school of kraken breaching the surface of a grey ocean. At the tip of each tentacle was a slim leaf-shaped blade, black and sharp in the starlight.

A low thump sounded to Jael's right, followed immediately by the splintering of black metal vertebrae and flying fragments that stung his face.

The shot from Yysho's slug-rifle had severed the closest of the tentacles, its live end thrashing like a wounded snake. The business-end, the one with the bladed spike that surely would have speared Jael's head, undulated in death-throes at the captain's feet.

Pandemonium erupted as the men of the H256th all began firing as one.

Like a kick in the eardrum, Jael felt the jet vacuum of a Sliver rocket shoot past him. Fifty yards ahead, the rocket impacted its target with a dull crump that sent dust and metal fragments spinning through the already thick chaos of rifle-shots and waving metallic appendages.

The recipient of the rocket was briefly revealed in the red bloom of the explosion.

It was as large as a Carnivore class tank. Its bloated exoskeletal body was segmented in black metal plates that twisted like living scales, propelling the monstrous body towards Jael's unit. The thing had no head or face – only a nexus of those metal tentacles, each extending nearly a city block to slash and stab at the soldiers. Jael unslung his rifle and sent a volley of plasma in the general direction of the monstrosity while he tried to read the tactical situation.

Three of his men were dead already, Lt. Germaine among

them. A few more wounded but nobly keeping up the job of destroying flailing tendrils with rifle-shots and heavy slugs. The things seemed to come from everywhere. There must be at least five of those monsters out there! Jael thought. The able men of the H256th, a good dozen now, were dodging and firing the best they knew how, but this couldn't last long. Jonas Kemp, the unit's heavy weapons specialist, sent another Sliver rocket into the darkness before he was impaled simultaneously by three tendrils. Howling, Jonas was violently retracted into the darkness. Jael never saw Jonas again.

Yysho fired another shot. The stabbing head of another tentacle exploded in a mist of metallic dust.

"Into the yellow building!" the Xxcha boomed over the din.

Even if his accent made it sound like Jollo Booldun, Jael couldn't agree more. He repeated the order with a bark, adding a traditional Sol "Go, Go, Go."

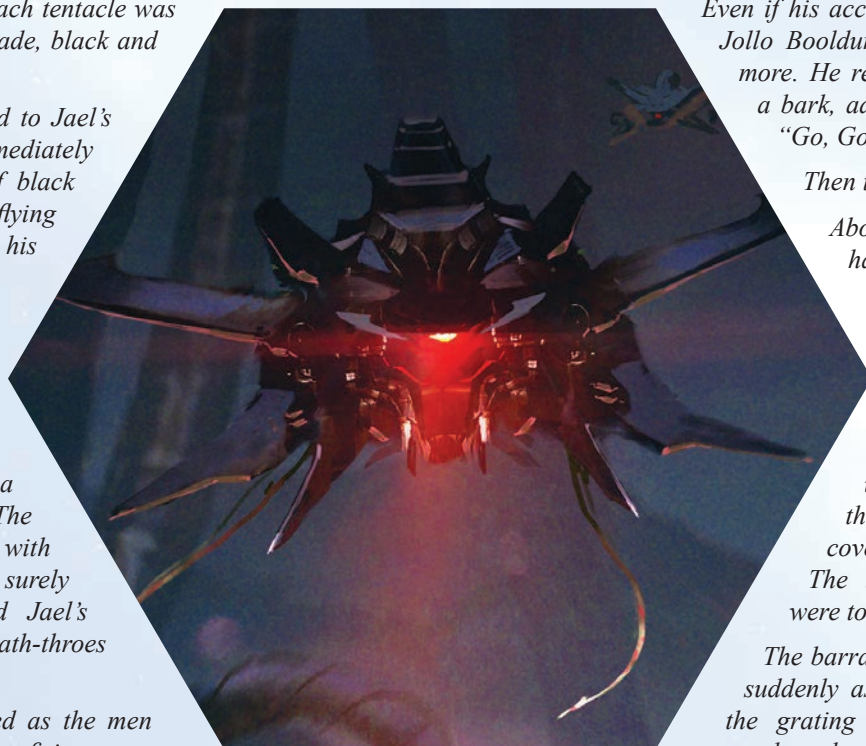
Then the flyers struck.

About half of Jael's men had ducked inside the doorway of the yellow civhome when the sky suddenly began to rain molten darts. Jael took three hits to his upper shoulders before throwing himself into cover under the doorway. The two men behind him were torn to shreds.

The barrage of darts stopped as suddenly as it had started. Over the grating and banging of the tentacles, they heard an unfamiliar oscillating whoop of many small but powerful propellers. Then, like evil daddy longlegs, about 20 enemy drones dropped into street view. Each of the machines had three lightweight propellers protruding from serrated backs. Hanging from each drone was a collection of slender robotic legs, each brimming with strange lightweight weaponry. Their heads consisted of a balled collection of whirring cameras, moving and refocusing constantly, each emanating a dull red glow.

"Let 'em have it!" Jael ordered his men.

Jael emptied his plasma magazine into the face of the nearest flyer. The thing disintegrated, legs blowing off of it like rotten stalks. Its head exploded with an electric hiss, and its body crashed to the ground in a mess of metal joints. One of its propellers had been pried loose by Jael's shots and careened like a saw blade into another of the flyers. The second flyer was torn apart in a storm of white sparks. Gotcha!



Another four of the insectile machines were destroyed by Jael's men before the remaining drones had calculated their situation. Delicate servos whining, they each raised two of their many legs in line with the yellow civhome, and the hellish rain of darts started again.

The survivors of the H256th fell to the floor and rolled desperately against the front wall as thousands of tiny red-hot darts disintegrated the plaster of the outside walls and anything in view of doorways and windows. The sound was thunderous. Dust and bits of building flew everywhere.

After what seemed an hour, but couldn't have been more than a few seconds, the intensity of the shooting lessened. Jael straightened his helmet and brushed the dust off his face. His ears were ringing and he didn't feel right. He was dizzy, nauseous, his vision blurry. C'mon soldier! He shook his head to clear it up; it didn't help. Did they use gas? A sickness suddenly erupted in his middle, and Jael heaved his guts onto the floor. As he recovered, he realized Yysho was next to him. One of the Xxcha's strong arms had propped him against the wall, while the alien investigated the wounds on his back.

"What! Are you a Medic trainee now?" Jael quipped drunkenly. The Xxcha didn't laugh. It wasn't funny.

A few of the men had started returning fire, and from the sound of it, they were nailing a few more of those damned daddy longlegs. The Xxcha produced a thin plastek-sealed cylinder from his vest. He bit off the cylinder's wrapper and plunged its short thick syringe into Jael's upper back. Jael squealed like a stuck pig, the needle stabbing him like a knife. The '2X must have some damn tough skin. The injected fluid stung like a scorpion bite. Almost immediately, Jael's entire body began to burn like hot soup.

Yysho grabbed Jael's moaning face, prying open one of the captain's eyelids. "Arsenic poisoning," the alien mumbled and released Jael. "From the dart wounds."

Jael threw up again, a dry heave. His body still felt like warm goo, but his vision was clearing a bit already. "Thanks, I get that a lot."

"You'll live." Yysho nodded in satisfaction and took up his slug-rifle to help in the defense. "At least for another few minutes," he added.

The barrage of flaming darts continued, now rejoined by the tentacles stabbing at the walls and lashing the windows and doorways. The screech of metal on ceramite was like a needle poking in the brain. The noise cleared Jael's head.

"You just happened to have medication for arsenic poisoning with you?" Jael asked the Xxcha between a round of firing.

The alien glanced at the recovering captain, shrugged, and took another shot at a drone that had come too close. The enemy exploded in a white flash of burning phosphor and the stink of ozone.

"You know what those things are, don't you?" Jael gestured

to the street as he groped for his rifle and inched toward the window. Damned if he wouldn't have some of the action too.

Yysho thought for a moment. "My commanders recently came to suspect something dangerous was infesting this quadrant," he said. Jael noticed smoke. The back of the house had begun smoldering, no doubt ignited by the heaping piles of red-hot projectiles. The Xxcha had seen it too, but seemed far more concerned with the enemy in front of the building.

"At first we thought the 'IX had some form of new weapon, an advanced force of some kind," Yysho continued. "But there were intercepts, indications that the 'IX themselves were fighting it."

"I guess this place proves that theory," Jael said as he stabbed his knife into a metallic tendril that had slithered over the windowsill near him. The knife grated in between two joints. Jael twisted the blade, sending sparks flying. With a violent jerk, the tendril retreated back into the street, Jael's knife with it.

The Xxcha nodded distractedly, he was now listening for something. Jael heard it too. A deep rumbling that made the floor jitter. Something big was coming.

Yysho gestured at Jael's transmitter. "Now would be a good time for another helpful talk with your CO!"

Jael grabbed his transmitter and adjusted the signal. Nothing. He drew back the flap of his equipment pack. The transmitter was smoking; it had taken two direct hits by the arsenic darts. Jael looked at the Xxcha and shook his head. So much for the cavalry.

The rumbling grew louder, and the ground began to shake tangibly.

A thought occurred to Jael. "Yysho?" he asked. "When you were assigned to the H256th, I was told you were a training embedment."

The Xxcha reloaded his weapon. "That's right," he grunted. It sounded like *das rewt*.

Jael grinned. "Except we weren't supposed to train you, were we?"

The Xxcha blinked once, then cocked his head to look at Jael with his large yellow eyes. "No, Captain," Yysho answered. "I was tasked to train your fleshy little behind."

Jael couldn't help but laugh out loud. It hurt his wounded shoulders. Then he noticed the rumbling had stopped. Whatever vile device the enemy was deploying, it had apparently rolled into position.

At least I don't have to worry about getting combat pay, Jael thought and reloaded his weapon.

The real fighting was about to begin.

FINAL DAYS OF AN EMPIRE

BY CHRISTIAN T. PETERSEN
REX: FINAL DAYS OF AN EMPIRE (2012)

They were caught on the 82nd day of hell.

The shadowy skyline of the Tarmalin sector had been within sight, and their grueling journey almost at an end. They'd been readying themselves for the final trek to whatever safety friendly ground could provide, but a Sol patrol had caught them in the open, and that had been the end of it.

They hadn't hoped for much. Like water, hope was in short supply in the devastation that had been the greatest city in the galaxy.

The Lazax body—tall, humanoid, with its four long arms and two long legs—didn't require a particularly high level of daily sustenance. A few pieces of fruit or a bite of a high-protein wafer could nourish a Lazax for a day, and was easy to carry besides. Water was a different story. Traveling through the ruined city had been an exhausting and thirsty business, and the four friends were far from young.

Water is life was one of the fifteen miscu, truths, taught to them as children. Ironically, it was water that would be the death of them.

The water that flowed in the city distribution network had been unsafe to drink. Too many of its pipes had been compromised, touched by chemical leaks or raw sewage where the Sols' bombing, uncaring of city services, had destroyed civilian infrastructure. They'd learned this lesson the hard way on the 17th day when they'd all gotten violently sick from drinking city water. Gil, Deino, and Peor had recovered a few days later, but Eemin had died from dysentery on the 20th day, and then they were three.

After Eemin's death, they'd been forced to forage for safe liquid as they traveled—in derelict shops, in coolers of abandoned civhabs, in automatic dispensers overlooked by looters. They'd even tried to cool steam from boiling city water, but were unable to capture sufficient amounts of liquid. The best source of safe water was the wellheads, the civic facilities that pumped groundwater from the granite bowels of Rex to Mecatol's trillion citizens. So close to the source, the water was yet untouched by the corrupting influence of war.

In his old life, the life he'd lived before Sol dreadnoughts had unleashed hell on his world, Gil Sai Dinish had been a Lazax councilor at the Civita Planetar. After they'd buried Eemin under a cairn of ceramic rubble, Gil had located a working data console. Here he'd used the privileges of a past life to acquire the location of every wellhead in the zones surrounding the imperial palace. Such was it that their journey to the Tarmalin sector had taken them from wellhead to wellhead, an indirect path from one life-giving island to another in a sea of death.

At the time of Emperor Sallai Sai Corian, the great city of Mecatol had stretched almost 4,000 miles east to west, and only slightly less from north to south. It had been an endless jungle of mile-high structures, elevated walkways, platforms, and sparkling towers covering the surface in a near-unbroken carpet of permacore and plasticon. Yet, as impressive as Mecatol had seemed from the air, the subcity that lay beneath its surface had been almost as developed as the city above.

Where possible, the three friends had traveled through the subsurface sectors and thoroughfares. The journey had taken them through cavernous halls—some hot and sooty from topside fires—along wide tunnels lit only by fading emergency sconces, and through smoldering craters where the bombing had penetrated so deep as to expose the levels below. At times, the topside fires had burned so hot they'd been forced to descend into long abandoned sub-levels. For a stretch of days they'd even been forced as far down as the upper chambers of the Old Deep. In that pitch black darkness, they'd felt their way through ancient warrens of causeways and habitats bored below Mecatol millennia ago. It had been a dangerous course. In many regions of the Old Deep, the air was poisonous, and a wrong turn could find the unwary traveler lost in some subterranean wilderness like the Catacombs of the Primals, the Starless Desert, or worse.

Closer to topside, they'd frequently come across great atriums filled with refugees—mostly mistrustful and hungry people who had fled the topside for the dubious safety of the subcity. The refugees had pieced together ragged shelters from whatever materials they could scavenge, forming large, shadowy shantytowns. Once, the three travelers had come across a long chamber which housed a village of the dead. Gil guessed the topside ventilation ports had been blocked by rubble, and after a few days the refugees' cooking fires had poisoned the air, asphyxiating the hall's inhabitants. The smell had been ghastly.

Aboveground, even greater dangers lurked. In their region of the city, Sol patrols were to be most feared, but a thousand things could get one killed in the new Mecatol. Gangs of looters that would kill first and steal later. Packs of flying ruvar birds that, driven mad by the poisoned rains and desperate for food, had become feral and savage things. And there was the endless Sol bombings. While the explosions could kill one well enough, they left behind a broken landscape almost as deadly. In those death zones—at the slightest touch of wind—deadly debris would fall from the burnt husks of structures above. At times, entire elevated civblock platforms would disappear underfoot, collapsing into the urban depths below, weakened girders giving way with rusty pops. Even the weather had turned deadly, especially the devilish storms of glass-dust that followed the worst bombardments.

And there was the war. Many of the great races were now fighting each other in the city, like crows squabbling over the choice morsels of a carcass.

On the 82nd day, the three had filled their bottles at the last wellhead. It was the seventh wellhead of their journey and they'd thought themselves quite adept at the process by then. Perhaps they'd gone complacent, perhaps the wellhead had been used by the Sol troops at the Tarmalin sector, or maybe they'd just gotten unlucky. Whatever the cause, they'd filled their bottles and had been leaving the facility when a Sol patrol had spotted them. Two Sol craft, hovering above, had trained their lights on the three old Lazax, blinding them.

Deino had acted instinctively. Of navy make and fiber, he was the strongest, and certainly the bravest of the three. As soon as the lights had washed onto their position, he'd thrown down his load and leapt back into the darkness.

It hadn't done any good. With an angry roar, the dual slug-spitters of a Sol craft had torn apart the shadows, Deino with them, and then they were two.

Gil and Peor had raised their hands in submission and their precious bottles had dropped. Water had spilled onto the street, and what little hope they'd had left spilled with it.

The beginning of their journey had started many cycles before hell came to Rex. Before the water had turned sour and the sky had burned. The four had been childhood friends, each of them a promising son of Lazax nobility. They'd been taught at the finest schools, eaten the finest foods, and grown to maturity in the finest quarters of Mecatol. Each of the four had come from families so ancient and wealthy that entire buildings on their estates had been dedicated to family histories and heirlooms. Undoubtedly, the four friends were among the most privileged in the galaxy. Their race was that of the emperors, the Lazax, the eternal rulers of the stars, and their future as bright as a sun.

As they came of age, the four friends had separated by careers. The duties of the empire were legion, and Lazax nobility of their stature expected to serve the glory of the emperor wherever needed. Peor San Welai became a powerful ambassador to one of the Lenoten collectives. Deino Aya Fillin advanced far in the imperial navy, and in time came to command his own wing of cruisers in the 502nd fleet. Eemin Gu Xaxos advanced to the role of section commander in the Mecatol Planetary Defense force before following his father's comfortable footsteps as a senior stakeholder in one of the eight Kenatar—the Lazax industrial conglomerates whose holdings and industry stretched across the stars. Of the four childhood friends, only Gil Sai Dinish stayed on Rex through his whole career, first serving as junior administrator in the Cor, and later as an emissary of the emperor to the Civita Planetar.

As all things in the universe, the four grew older. When they'd entered that uncomfortable age which lies past the peak of one's career yet before retirement, three of them had received

calls to serve the emperor's administration on Rex. Deino was offered a role as tactical adviser to an Admiral serving on the emperor's council of war. Eemin was to become elderman in the emperor's industrial committee, and Peor took the position of senior attendant to one of the thirteen Mirritan, the emperor's personal ambassadors to the Galactic Council.

Gil had remained an emissary to the Civita Planetar. His lifelong career on Mecatol had made him a well-connected individual, with comrades in hundreds of bureaucracies, and favors owed in many more. The other three suspected, with good reason, that it was Gil's subtle machinations that had brought them back together on Rex in the twilight of their years.

As they'd taken their new positions on Rex, they'd enjoyed their reunited camaraderie, their lofty positions at the imperial palace, and their roles as the senior patriarch on their family estates.

Then had come Eemin's clandestine meeting in the clid gardens.

After Gil and Peor surrendered in the courtyard of that seventh wellhead station, they were cuffed and taken onboard one of the Sol flyers. As they'd flown, their dying city passing underneath them, their legs had ached in remembrance of painful leagues walked and now quickly erased in the jet-wash of the flyer.

Their destination was one of the elevated warehabs near the Sallab slums—a monstrous construct recently converted to a Sol penitentiary. Spindly guard towers had been raised along the outer edges of the complex, and a squadron of Sol airborne gunships patrolled its perimeter like angry insects. When their craft approached, a gunship escorted them to one of the many freight piers that extended from the construct. As they approached for landing, Gil glimpsed a Sol landing zone to the south. There, a massive freighter was preparing to dock while columns of Sol troops and military supplies were streaming from the gaping loadport of another. Gil swore the freighters displayed the Hacan, not Sol, insignia. Upon landing, a terse Sol corporal took their names and positions on a filthy data-tablet. Then they were stripped, submerged in some foul-tasting chemical cleaning agent, dressed in grey prison robes, and each supplied with a fiberwool blanket of some unidentifiable dark color. Four guards then took them roughly in arm and brought them to their cell.

The cell was really more of a hall: a great metal-walled room filled to near capacity by hundreds of occupants, mostly Lazax civilians. As Gil and Peor were shoved into the cell, few inmates seemed to notice. Of those that did, none seemed to care.

Their new home had no beds, no bunks, no furniture at all to speak of. Other than the dull metal walls and the permacore floor, the only notable feature was the ceramic sheds that allowed inhabitants to relieve themselves in privacy. The shed's biowaste containers were emptied only every four

rotations, and the stench slowly accumulated to one that made Gil gag. Then the containers were emptied and the cycle of accumulating stench repeated itself all over again.

Food was served twice a day, each food ration accompanied by a small container filled with tasteless water. While the bland food sufficed, the amount of liquid was nowhere near enough to properly sustain a Lazax body. After a few weeks of incarceration, inmates slowly became dehydrated, their eyes and cheeks sinking, their tongues swelling.

They'd meet during the hour of the second moonset, the humdrum of merrymaking a muffled drone in the background. On the eve of every tenth rotation, the emperor would host a festive gathering for the empires' persona vitalis. Senior staff, the greater nobility, and the highest ranking of the ambassadors to the Galactic Council would mingle casually across the entirety of the palace grounds. It was no coincidence that Eemin had planned their meeting for such a night. With the socializing, the secret dealings, and the copious layers of intrigue bred in the palace on such occasions, few would pause to wonder why four senior statesmen with far-flung responsibilities would congregate in one of the many palace gardens for idle conversation.

This particular night had been a cool one. Moisture had gathered on the colorful flowers and the sharp leaves of the clid trees from which the garden took its name. They'd found Eemin standing by the balustrade on the eastern side; he had been visibly uncomfortable.

Far below, down and beyond the palace walls, the river Dorus moved incessantly south—a liquid slab of black marble, its inky blackness intercut by frequent whitecaps and the gusts of spray against midstream outcroppings. From the clid gardens, if one looked up from the Dorus, the vastness and lights of Mecatol would stretch as far as one could see in every direction. Dominus Island, on which the imperial palace was built, had once been a remote river islet, but the city had reached and bridged the Dorus long ago, enveloping the palace.

So great was Mecatol, the imperial city, that its sky never darkened. Upon the setting of the Gul, the ambient glow of ten trillion lights would soak the sky in a lustrous amber haze that could be seen far into space. Above the tangle of buildings scurried unending city traffic—flying vehicles of every size, each on some business or pleasure in the greatest city the galaxy had ever known.

Gil had seen the view a thousand times before and hadn't given it a second thought that night; only the great plume of smoke that rose in the far northeast had given him pause. Even after several weeks, the great Hall of Cartography was still burning. Ibna Vel Syd had set it ablaze and hightailed it to the stars, stealing one of the finest of the emperor's cruisers in the process. Vel Syd had been called "the doomsayer" or "the fearmonger" by his peers. Now he was referred to simply as "the traitor," and the once-proud name of Vel Syd

was spat upon and mentioned only with righteous scorn.

When they'd all arrived, Eemin had turned to greet them pleasantly. Then he had taken a deep breath and said in a firm whisper, "Vel Syd may have been right!"

Diplomats and councillors both, Gil and Peor had reacted to Eemin's words with expressionless caution. While they'd glanced at each other with calm they did not feel, Deino had responded more forcefully. "Are you mad?" he'd hissed between his teeth. Deino was a military man and he'd been outraged at the loss of a cruiser to Vel Syd's cowardly flight, not to mention the great loss of life at the Hall of Cartography.

Only the bonds of a lifelong friendship had kept Deino from storming off during those first minutes. Yet, by the time Eemin had made his case, even the old rear-admiral stood pale and taut in disbelief.

Eemin, with his connections to both imperial administration and private industry, had come across a disturbing sequence of information. Facts that, when followed, had led the old Lazax businessman to a dark conclusion.

He'd told them how Mecatol's Hylar freeunions perhaps were not as free from University influence as thought. When the Jol-Nar headmasters had abdicated from the empire some seventy years ago, the Lazax had begun to appreciate how addicted the empire was to Hylar expertise. The great majority of datanets, robotics, and even propulsion technologies, had emerged from the watery laboratories of the Hylar, and had been maintained under lucrative service arrangements with University unions.

After the Universities of Jol-Nar had resigned from the Galactic Council, many Hylar unions and expatriate enclaves had declared themselves loyal to the emperor in return for amnesty and rich contracts. While those "freeunions" were under careful observation during the first few decades of the conflict, in time they'd become an accepted and moderately trusted part of the empire.

"Why, in the last six cycles, have freeunion populations in Mecatol dwindled by almost half?" Eemin had asked, showing them immigration statistics illustrating how curious numbers of Hylar women and children had left Mecatol. Not in droves, but in a steady trickle; not in numbers that would raise suspicion, except viewed over time.

"Who maintains our defense systems?" Eemin had asked rhetorically, glancing at the still-angry Deino. It was common knowledge that maintenance of most military emplacements for centuries had been a joint effort between the Lazax military and freeunion contractors.

Gil had cleared his throat and spoken. That morning he'd returned from the Adminus Mecatol, where the three largest freeunions had declared a strike. During the past year, freeunion leaders had been seeking expansion of their charter, their demands aggressive, almost obstinate. "As if engineered to force a strike," he'd muttered.

Eemin had nodded knowingly and continued. He'd shown them how the administrations of both the Hacan and N'orr embassy quarters had been reduced to skeleton crews. "Why are they leaving Mecatol?" He'd asked as more of a statement than a question. "What do they know that we do not?"

Deino had become visibly nervous when Eemin suggested the decade-long state of hostility between the Sol and Jol-Nar rebels had been clever theater to create a pretense of conflict. "If they are near all-out war, why have Sol warships been docking at Jol-Nar shipyards?" Eemin had shown them supply manifests and classified subcontractor work orders from his industry connections.

Peor had interrupted gently, calmly concluding that a conspiracy of such scale would have been impossible to keep secret from the empire. "Why?" Eemin had countered. "Can our eyes see when we do not look? Can our ears hear when we do not listen?" Eemin had waved his arm in the direction of the distant smoke plume. "Only Vel Syd dared to question Lazax hegemony. He was met with mockery and dismissal. Was he the one-eyed man in the land of the blind?"

There were other facts and figures, subtle snippets of information one could easily dismiss as trivial, but when seen together formed a mosaic of troubling visage. Storm clouds were gathering at all sides of the empire, and few seemed to have noticed.

"My friends," Eemin had taken them by their shoulders and whispered emphatically, "I have come to fear that our empire is on the brink of collapse. That Rex itself may be in imminent danger."

They'd stood in silence after that. Sounds of careless laughter, superficial conversation, and the clinking of expensive glass had continued unabated from the corridors, halls, and garden terraces around them. After some time, Deino had said quietly, "I cannot believe it. It's inconceivable!"

Eemin had nodded sadly, then he'd turned to Deino and asked, "Where is the Mecatol fleet?"

Deino's eyes had dropped, a flicker of trepidation passing over his features as the last wall of his disbelief crumbled. Navy movements were confidential, and Deino couldn't betray his post by answering the question, but his reaction was all the answer they needed.

The Mecatol fleet was nowhere near Mecatol.

"Here's another one!"

Gil was jarred from the memories by one of the shock-prods the Sol guards used to control and corral the prisoners; 'cutors, they called them. One of the guards had a particular dislike for the elder statesman and seemed to take perverse pleasure in counting the blue-yellow welts he'd so amply provided on Gil's arms. Gil had come to think of the man as "Scar" for the deep fissure that crossed the man's left brow and had left him with a blind, milky eye. "Here's another one!" he'd growl in accented univoca, followed by a painful kiss of his 'cutor, a cruel grin splitting his ugly primate face, white eye shiny with glee.

Except for the daily inspection and Scar's pointless punishment, the stale days of imprisonment simply passed from one into the next. No news came from the outside world, and the mood of the inmates did nothing if not deteriorate. Some wept, many slept, a few talked in low voices, but most just passed the days in silence with blank, dehydrated stares. On rare occasions, nearby bombardments were felt rather than heard, the faint tremors their only reminder that the universe was alive and hurting around them.

After more than a fortnight, despite Gil's misgivings, Peor decided to raise a complaint about the water rationing and its deleterious effects. A few concerned prisoners reminded Peor that it was generally considered a poor idea to speak to guards or detention staff. Not only was dialogue rarely returned, but the presumptuous speaker would often receive a healthy 'cutor poke or two. Worse, anyone in near proximity would likely be 'cuted as object lessons.



Gil reminded Peor that on the day they'd arrived, a woman had asked the guards to be moved to the hall where her children were kept. "They're afraid of the dark," she had pleaded, "and they need their mother." The guards had answered with their simian laughter and then 'cuted her so badly she'd lost her mind. Afterward, the poor woman would just sit facing the wall, hugging her knees and whispering repeatedly, "They're afraid of the dark. They're afraid of the dark..."

Peor would hear none of it, and insisted on trying to improve their lot.

Two other elder Lazax, whom Gil didn't know, decided to join Peor in his request. The three stood together near the double entry door, waiting for the staff to enter for the scheduled emptying of biowaste containers. "We request to discuss the water situation with your officer," Peor said when the staff finally arrived, laden with suction equipment. The two other elders had nodded solemnly in solidarity. As expected, the accompanying guards 'cuted them until they were sobbing on their knees.

After the guards thought the three obstinate Lazax to be sufficiently cowed, they waved for the sanitation staff to proceed. But Peor slowly returned to his feet and said calmly, "I think you misunderstood me: We need to discuss the water situation with your officer."

Peor's defiance surprised the guards and prisoners both; it surprised even Gil. As the guards moved to 'cutor Peor again, many prisoners rose in disapproval, hands closing into fists.

Reading the sudden change in situation, the senior guard called for his comrades to hold back. Then he recalled the sanitation staff, and together they left the hall in quick step. The waste containers remained full and the stench was at an all-time high, but even so, Gil noticed a few rare smiles.

A few hours later, the sour-faced corporal who'd admitted them entered with a large contingent of guards. He glanced impatiently at the prisoners and then called loudly, "Who wants to discuss the water situation with me?" Still shaking from the earlier punishment, Peor and the two other elders rose slowly and approached the human. When they finally stood towering before him, he looked them up and down with contempt. Then, without warning, he drew his service pistol and shot each of the three in the head.

The hall erupted in a clamor, inmates cowering from the unexpected shots, screaming in fear, pleading for mercy. Peor, who in life had been so graceful, collapsed to the floor with a fleshy slap, and then they were one.

After the guards pulled the bodies out of the hall, the corporal, pistol still smoking in hand, gave the quailing prisoners a hateful look of warning. Then he spun on his heels and marched out without another word.

After their meeting in the clid gardens, his three friends had come to share Eemin's concerns. Regretfully they'd not

known what to do with the knowledge. Ibna Vel Syd had been a lone voice in the wilderness. He'd warned the emperor, he'd warned the inner circle, and he'd warned the council of military commanders. He'd urged the need to change, and he'd advocated for both prudence and action. In turn a charismatic and forceful individual, Vel Syd had attempted to change the course of the empire and he'd failed. Then he'd burned every trace of his plans and destination, and abandoned his race to rot in their complacency.

Despite their high birth, the four friends could not hope to match the access or power that Vel Syd had enjoyed. He'd been their senior by far, a personal friend and councillor to the emperor, and still none had listened. In leaving as he did, Vel Syd had sown such enmity within the inner circle and the military command to his ideas, that presenting the information Eemin had gathered would surely fall on deaf ears.

The four had lamented for weeks on their course of action. They'd sent their closest family members off-planet "for relaxation," but were at a loss as to how to convince their superiors of a looming danger of a nature they couldn't directly identify. Deino had advocated they simply run the risk of being declared anathema and forcefully present their findings to anyone that would listen. The three others had found such strategy too risky for their careers. Instead, they'd fretted and weighed their options, waiting for some moment of opportunity, perhaps some outside event that would support their concerns and give them a window for action.

When that event did occur, it had been entirely too late.

About a month after Peor's death, the prisoners were woken in the night.

The heavy doors slammed open and a dozen guards burst into the hall, shouting loudly for the inmates to rise. Anyone too slow or too sleepy got a taste of the 'cutor. Then the prisoners were paraded out of the hall, through a maze of metal corridors, down staircases, and finally into a brightly lit atrium where other groups of Lazax inmates were being assembled. All were dressed in the same dirty grey robes, eyes glazed from sleep and fear. Though the bright atrium was many times larger than the incarceration hall from which they'd come, it was filling rapidly as prisoners by the hundreds kept arriving in a steady stream.

After what Gil assumed was the last prisoner group had joined them, they were herded into long lines and their feet shackled. When the jailers had completed the shackling, two great metal doors on the far side of the hall were opened. With 'cutor prodding and a salting of shouts, the guards soon had the lines moving through the doors and a long march began.

In the hours of walking that followed, they crossed hall after enormous hall, corridor after long corridor. After some time, Gil was sure they'd left the prison complex, but the guards gave no evidence of their destination. They passed through halls untouched by war, while others were nothing more than

blackened shells. On occasion they crossed into the open where a taste of sulfur on the wind and smoke columns on the horizon reminded them war was still raging in the city. Then they'd invariably enter another civblock structure, which meant more halls and more dilapidated corridors. In the end, Gil lost count.

After nearly a day of marching, they arrived at a wide set of stairs. After a short rest, more for the benefit of the guards than the prisoners, they were coaxed up the steps. Upward they went, under the intermittent glow of faint light sconces. Upward, as a thousand footsteps echoed in the staircase shaft, thumping and scraping like the slow shuffle of some alien monster. Up, up, up toward some high destination.

Gil shuffled forward and upward, the magnetized shackles at his feet humming and his thighs burning with every step. The long miles of walking to the Tarmalin sector had given him a wiry strength he'd never possessed in his old life. Even so, the endless climb was hell on his legs.

Every few minutes Gil would hear the sudden slap of a pistol, sometimes ahead, sometimes behind. He'd invariably pass the results of those ahead—corpses that had crudely been kicked aside to give way to the climbing column of prisoners.

Up, up, and up. Gil's world narrowed until it consisted of three things only: the next step, the burning in his legs, and his memories.

One early evening, a Sol fleet had struck Rex from deep space without warning. Equipped with new mass-drives developed by the Jol-Nar, the Sol navy had taken the Lazax high command by complete surprise. As a result of freeunion strikes and other sabotage, great portions of Mecatol's planetary defense systems were off-line at the time of attack, including those of the imperial palace. Only a few sectors managed to form proper shielding and defense.

In the imperial palace, chaos had ensued. Palace staff, soldiers, and bureaucrats had run in every direction. Others had frozen where they stood, gaping at the impossible events unfolding around them. Servant automatons had scurried this way and that, sensors overloaded by the tumult and conflicting commands.

In case of some disaster, the four friends had planned to use Gil's shuttle to return to their home district. Unfortunately, their plans hadn't included a noble that, desperate to escape the palace, had crashed his craft into a docked luxury barge and converted the landing platform holding Gil's shuttle into a fiery wreck. Instead, they'd been forced to take a droma-lift down to the island surface and there managed to secure space on one of the few broadhull water ferries that supplied the imperial palace by way of the Dorus river.

As the ferry had pushed off against the pier, hundreds had already been swarming on the docks, all desperate for a place on one of the few departing ferries. Gil had seen several people fall into the rapid waters, shoved heedlessly off the pier by the throbbing crowds.

They'd been about a third of the way across the river when the first bomb had struck the island and the resulting shock wave had hit with unforgiving force. A group of passengers, three servants and a noblewoman, had been flung into the water as the swell from the explosion violently shifted the ferry's prow to the left, forcing the boat parallel to a rising wave. As the wall of water grew, the boat had begun to tilt dramatically sideways with the rising wave. Those passengers who managed to cling to something—a railing, a vent, or a solid piece of machinery—avoided certain death in the angry river. The rest plunged into the water like rotten fruit from a shaken tree. Peor had nearly fallen. Just as he had been about to slide screaming over the side, Deino had managed to grab him. For a minute, Peor had hung in midair, clinging to Deino's hands as the angle of the boat continued to tilt. For a few dreadful seconds, the boat had loomed near capsizing.

Then the boat had cleared the wave, and the deck had violently risen to rejoin them. As the boat slid down the back of the first wave, the captain had corrected the ferry's angle to meet the second wave head on. The resulting spray had taken another few passengers with it, but the boat had held.

A few wet and grueling minutes later, the ferry had managed to finally cross the Dorus. It inelegantly scraped against the permacore river barrier much further downstream than its accustomed landing. The remaining passengers, using an old line of steel rungs bolted to the barrier, had clambered off the ferry onto a mostly abandoned riverside roadway. The captain had climbed with them, abandoning the ferry to its own fate.

Upstream, the palace was burning. The great dome of the emperor had been cracked like an egg, and fire and smoke blazed from the large fissure. Smaller conflagrations raged across the entirety of the island, and walls were crumbling where mortar finally gave way. Gil had seen the clid gardens in flame before they disappeared in a cloud of debris as their entire wing of the palace crumbled into dust.

The sky had been thick with Sol military craft. Cruisers and frigates had moved slowly across the horizon while flights of fighters roared angrily across the sky. Far above in the evenfall light, great grey shapes of dreadnoughts and carriers could be gleaned, their huge engines emitting pallid blue glows in the darkening atmosphere. Panicked civilian traffic had skirted across the skies, abandoning normal traffic routes as Sol warships indiscriminately fired at all non-Sol vessels. The skies had been ablaze with burning transporters, freighters, personal flyers, and all manner of non-military vessels, all plummeting like orange rain toward the surface, tracing faint lines of smoke in their dying wake. The downpour of doomed vessels impacted buildings, antennas, landing platforms, or the planetary surface itself, where blooms of fire and dull booms had seemed to emanate from everywhere at once.

A few planetary defense systems had come on-line. Far to the north, in the direction of the Tarmalin sector, Gil had seen a huge Sol cruiser repeatedly hit by plasma tracers from PDS emplacements. Burning and breaking, the great cruiser began to tilt sideways and lose altitude. Like a falling citadel, they

saw it plunge to its death, the distance and size of the craft making it look as if it were in slow motion. After the careening ship had descended below view, a blinding flash and then a torrent of black smoke had emerged from its faraway grave.

Around them, the population of Mecatol had been in disarray. Gil had seen families hauling possessions into private flyers, only to be shot down as they emerged into the traffic routes above. Many individuals had been running, others looting, some just stood and stared at the skies. Some were wounded, a few of those being attended, but many that couldn't walk had been left to bleed.

Then a swarm of Sol landing craft had emerged from one of the carriers idling far above. Like heavy beetles, the craft had descended on the emperor's smoking island and no defenses had stopped them. By that time, the disparate group of ferry survivors had begun to scatter. Short of options, and little wish to encounter the Sol forces that were landing on the Dominus, the four friends had begun to walk. Their destination at first had been the Ahain nobility sector, the home of their ancestral estates. While it had been considered suitably close to the imperial palace, the Ahain was still more than 200 miles from Dominus Island. By air, this would have been a short jaunt. By foot, through a war zone, they'd guessed it would take four old men nothing less than twelve rotations to cover.

They'd walked during lulls in the bombardments, or when the attention of the Sol forces had seemed at a sufficiently safe distance. Sometimes, on the horizon, they'd seen the encouraging glow of shields and the plasma tracers of PDS emplacements.

As the days passed, civilian airborne traffic had all but disappeared, and only the constant to and fro of Sol military vessels had been seen in the skies. The bombardments had

continued unabated. Even for a fleet as vast as the one Sol had sent to Rex, the imperial city of Mecatol was much, much greater yet.

The four had slept where they could. During the first few days, the local citizenry had been surprisingly friendly, as if the attack had brought the city together. Private citizens and shop owners had freely opened doors and larders to the displaced citizens that walked the city.

But this camaraderie unfortunately did not last. As the Sol bombardment continued and little to nothing was seen of either imperial forces or planetary administrators, anarchy had begun to take firm root. What had been kindness and generosity was replaced by mistrust and hoarding. As the days wore on, a grey despair had begun to set in the dying city like gangrene in dying flesh.

On the ninth day of their walk, the four friends had found hospitality from a shop owner who'd kindly agreed to take them in for the night. She'd given them bowls of canned soup and a small bowl of pasteflakes. The four had eaten greedily, particularly appreciating the reinvigorating salty broth.

A few other dislocated souls had been resting at the back of the shop. Gil had struck up idle conversation with a dislocated family and learned with dismay that they'd come from the Ahain sector. They'd described how the ancient district had first been targeted by several Sol bombardments and later by hordes of looters. Those estates that weren't in ruins or burning had been looted or occupied by the many citizen posses that were forming across the city.

A wounded PD guardsman had been in the shop also. When he hadn't been coughing blood or drinking from a bottle of snada liquor, he'd told them of how Lazax forces had managed to organize themselves in a few sectors—that military frequencies were broadcasting summons to guardsmen,



police, or any loyal imperial citizen willing to help repel the cowardly assault. The Cor and the Fastness were two of such locations, and so were the Tarmalin, Arbaxes, Bec, and Sai Sallai sectors. The guardsman had sworn that forward Lazax naval forces were trying to break the blockade, and that some Lazax reinforcements had even managed to land in the Bec sector. Of the fate of the emperor or the central administration, he could say nothing.

The four friends had hoped to join the guardsman in the morning, to go wherever he was going. But the soldier had died of his wounds during the night. Of those sectors the dead guardsman had mentioned, only the Tarmalin was within reasonable distance of their current location. On foot, it would be a journey that would take months, but it was what little hope they had.

And so, on the tenth day, the four had begun their long journey to the Tarmalin sector.

The endless climb upward continued for several hours, and Gil was nearing the end of his strength. His legs were shaking so violently that he needed to prop himself against the corridor walls. Even the guards seemed too tired to care. What waits at the top of the stairs? he wondered. Another prison? Gil didn't think so. He expected they were being moved to some high platform for transportation. The higher the platform, the larger the shuttle.

At last the climb was over. They came to a landing and stopped. The temptation to throw himself onto the floor in exhaustion was almost unbearable, but the guards would have none of it. Any prisoner that tried to sit or collapsed got treated with 'cutors until they stood again or died where they lay.

More prisoners kept arriving from behind—sobbing, shaking from exertion—and the wide landing soon became crammed and hot. After more waiting, the guards finally opened a set of heavy plasticon doors and took the first batch of prisoners through. As the doors closed again, Gil felt a taste of cool air; he imagined he heard the whine of engines as well. They'll move us off-world, he guessed. In his youth, he'd heard rumors of the infamous prisons on Jord's moon. A senior member of the administration won't be sent to a work-farm, he hoped. Surely Lazax forces across the galaxy would regroup to punish the humans for this brazen attack. When that happened, a hostage like Gil would be valuable as Sol negotiated terms of peace.

When the doors opened again, Gil was pushed forward with the next group. Pressed into a second corridor, the guards shoved them forward with renewed urgency. The air was cool and breezy. Curiously, Gil didn't hear the expected drone of engines from an awaiting craft, instead he could hear only the crackling of 'cutors and the howling of outside winds.

Then Gil passed Scar, and the guard stopped him with a shove. It was the first time that Gil hadn't seen Scar smiling. Instead there was a different, colder look on the guard's face;

his white eye shone not with glee, but with some grim finality. Scar pressed something into Gil's hand, a wallet of some kind. Then someone from behind pushed Gil down the line and he never saw Scar again.

The sound of 'cutors discharging increased in intensity to a non-stop crackle, their ozone smell filling the air. Gil glanced at the small wallet the guard had given him. It wasn't a wallet, but some form of light pictoframe. Gil flipped the cover aside. Inside was a picture of a small human girl. Then he finally understood.

There was no shuttle waiting for him.

As the corridor turned, Gil entered a wind-blown room awash in broken furniture and rubble strewn across a mildewed industrial carpet. Abandoned ruvar nests clung to the molding where the walls met the ceiling. The most prominent feature of the room was an enormous hole that had been torn into the side of the building. The steel girders and permacore walls were twisted and bent like grass in the wake of a great beast. Gil guessed the building had been grazed by one of the many craft that had been shot out of the sky. Kernels of shattered plasticon glass covered the floor like sand, crunching beneath his feet as he was shoved toward the opening. Through it, Gil could see a grey sky and his city, skeletal and inanimate, stretching beyond sight. A frigid wind was blowing, howling through the scarred building like a broken-hearted animal.

The sound of the wind almost covered the screams of the falling.

Like the Sol cruiser he'd seen fall, Gil's last seconds seemed to happen in slow motion. A breathless clutch of fear gripped him, and the beating of his two hearts drummed on his throat like hammers. The pictoframe of the dead human girl dropped to the floor.

With 'cutors red-hot and smoking, with kicks of heavy boots, the guards pushed the line forward. Forward, through the hole and beyond their custody. Gil saw those before him forced to the edge, their grey robes catching the wind for a precious second before they were pushed from sight. Sound seemed to leave the world.

As the end came, Gil didn't feel the 'cutors as they kissed his back and thighs, prodding him forward, nor did he hear the yelling or the sound of the wind. Then he was at the edge, the wind catching his ragged robes for a fleeting moment. A mile below flowed the Dorus river. He saw the faint, falling bodies of those who had walked before him. A final shove, and then there was only air, and wind, and the blurry rush of the building moving past him.

The river will carry me downstream, Gil thought as he fell. The current would take him through his city on a last journey. Past the emperor's palace and the sunlit balcony where he had spent so many of his afternoons. Past the park shores where he'd played as a child with his three friends. Then at last, out of the city and out of history.

In the end, the waters of the Dorus rose to take him, and then they were none.

FLIGHT

BY CALVIN WONG TZE LOON
TI4: CODEX VOLUME I—ORDINIAN (2020)

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BROADCAST; "TARGETSTATUS"  
{FTL CORE; [DAMAGED]}  
{WEAPONS; [DAMAGED]}  
{NAVIGATION; [DAMAGED]}  
{ESCORT VESSELS; [DESTROYED]}  
COMMAND; UPDATE: "FLEETSTATUS"  
{SETSTATE: DESTROYTARGET; MARKERS: [PRIME]}  
FLEET.STATUS.UPDATED.ALLMARKERS[PRIME].  
PRIORITYZERO.  
PURSUE.  
PURSUE.  
PURSUE.
```

The Coatl, flagship of the Argent Flight, soared through the Ordinian nebula. A swarm of Nekro attack craft swirled and writhed in her wake, belching fire into the space between them. Sakora Aun Navori watched through the viewscreen as the ship scythed through graceful clouds and flickering lights—but the other members of Sakora's Command Wing had their heads to their consoles and hands to their earpieces as the Coatl burned; the aft hull was awash with explosions, the armor plates fractured into winking dust.

Sakora's eyes flitted between the multiple reports flying up on her command console—engine six was close to burnout. What remained of Security was evacuating everything aft of the Engine Room. The shuttle filled with survivors from the wreckage of Strike Wing Epsilon had been lost with all hands. Her feathers were all trying to stand up at once, but she willed them down—she had rotated to Captain now, and everyone in Command was looking to her for guidance. Part of her laughed—she was covered in her wingmate Valiksa Aun Erosai's blood and the bridge was bathed in ultraviolet emergency light, and here she was thinking about ruffled feathers...

It wasn't good. Damage Control had sealed the breach the Nekro boarding vessel had scored across their flank, but Sensors reported the enemy was focusing their attacks on that side. Engine Room was requesting a course correction to prevent the fuel lines from being exposed to enemy fire.

"Keep our starboard flank to them," she ordered. Behind her, Command Wing sped to obey. Suurik in Navigation calculated maneuvers under his breath, his skilled fingers sliding across the controls. Sakora's training kept her from looking back. Captains were placed in the front of the bridge. Trust your Wing. "Weapons, Damage Control reports aft battery nine cannot be salvaged."

"We need the power for engines anyway," muttered Zulek, who was on Weapons. "I could have a dozen batteries and we still wouldn't bat away that incoming..."

"Captain, enemy element breaking off from the main swarm," said Ikosavec in Onboard. "Another boarding party."

Suurik growled in frustration. "We can't let them board! The first wave wiped out Security!"

And Valiksa nearly died, she thought, but didn't say. "Onboard, get Suurik as much engine power as you can." Sakora tapped the button on her console to bring up a shipwide transmission. In her entire career, she had never heard a shipwide, and now she was delivering one.

"All Wings, this is Command. I am ordering maximum burn. I repeat, full engine burn. To your stations."

She keyed off the transmission, a prickling sensation traveling down her arms as she felt the ship begin to flutter and shake. "Engineering, report."

"Engine Room for you," said tall, deep-voiced Chekk, currently in Engineering. "Patching them in."

"Command!" the holovid burst into existence above her console as a harried face appeared in front of several blurred forms—people running, wings bristling, snarling orders at each other. She pulled her face into stoic serenity, Valiksa's blood still congealing on her eyelids. Her talons bit deeply into her palm. "Command, I can give you six minutes of max burn, but after that things are going to go ruffled fast!"

Punctuating Engine Room's point, the ship juddered as another weapons blast seared off more hull plating. She kept her voice even. "Define 'ruffled.'"

"Damage Control Six, to the aft bays, now!" Engine Room shouted off-screen before returning his attention to her. "The fuel lines, Command. They aren't built to withstand this heat. If they go, we'll lose the ship!"

"If we don't outrun the Virus, they will assimilate our mainframe," she said. The feathers on her back were screaming. "I will lose the Coatl before I let that happen. Do what you can, Engine Room. We're only a few solar units away from the Hololattice network."

"My Wing obeys," muttered Engine Room, closing the vid.

The transmission winked out. For a moment, Sakora saw only the nebula, a coruscating symphony of colors rushing before them. "Like infinite poetry," Valiksa had whispered once, as they leaned into each other, hiding in the crannies of the observation deck where no one could see them. "Lines carved into eternity, a language we spend our lives yearning to translate..."

An emergency blare from a console behind her. Sakora blinked, rubbing Valiksa's blood from her face. She'd been lost in reminiscence, like a hatchling on an updraft. She was currently Captain, front of the V—how many seconds had she wasted? Had anyone noticed?

There were no furious shouts, no calls for her to be relieved, no change in the atmosphere except for the increasing flutter of the deck as the ship approached 130% acceleration. The engines were burning up, the hull warping beyond repair. The pride of the Argent Flight—and under her command it might never fly again. They might clip her wings for this...

No. Valiksa must be out of Surgery by now, must be... or else being wheeled to the morgue...

The lump in her throat at the image of... no. No. I will not lose her. I will not lose this ship. I just need to focus... I just need...

"I am relinquishing Captain," she said, pressing the rotation command on her console. Command Wing Sakora rotating from Captain, her computer readout acknowledged. New position: Navigation. "Who's on relief? Chekk?"

"I believe I am."

Her voice. Sakora turned before she could stop herself, feathers prickling in joy and relief. Every shoulder in the Command Wing loosened a fraction. Valiksa was safe.

"Valiksa-lyr..." she said, without realizing she'd whispered it. There she was, her uniform soaked dark red... her eyes bright and her wings folded, poised. "Valiksa... the surgery..."

"Was a complete success." Valiksa attempted a smile. The bandage stretched from her chin to her hips. "I'm cleared for Command duty. I'll take Captain."

As her station slid backwards into Navigation, the second position in the V-shaped order of the bridge, Sakora watched as Valiksa's sleek form slid expertly into the Captain console.

Front and center, where she belonged.



"Navigation, course adjust," said Valiksa, her voice smooth, unruffled, as though she hadn't just taken a Nekro anti-armor flechette to the torso. Sakora stared at the mottled scar tissue on the Captain's neck, relief spreading through her. "Set bearing three-five-twelve-seven, hold twenty three seconds, then bearing three-five..."

No more thinking. Sakora needed to be Navigation now. Her hands took over. She was alive. They were both alive.

INCOMING: [NEWTRANSMISSION: (PRIORITYZERO)]

IDENT; UNIT8173. STATUS; OPERATIONAL.
LOCATION; TARGET. SUBLOCATION; BRIDGE.

COMMAND; UPDATE: "FLEETSTATUS"

{SETSTATE: CAPTURETARGET; MARKERS: [PRIME]}

FLEET. STATUS. UPDATED. ALLMARKERS [PRIME].
PRIORITYZERO.

"Captain!" shouted Sensors. "Nekro boarding craft accelerating!"

"That's impossible!" Chekk said, standing up so rapidly his chair flew into the station behind him. "We're at maximum burn!"

"Command Wing, maintain your composure," said Valiksa, her voice steady and even. The ultraviolet across her face made her look even graver. "Weapons, do we have nothing that can hit the boarding craft?"

A pained glance from Zulek. "Onboard? How many Fighter Wings at launch strength?"

"One, but... Captain..." whispered Ikosavec. "At this velocity... the Fighter Wing is... we'll never recover them."

She timed her hesitation precisely. A fraction shorter and she would have looked cavalier in ordering the squadron to its doom. A moment longer would signal weakness, indecision. Only Sakora even noticed.

"We cannot be boarded," Valiksa said, turning to face the Command Wing, her blood still glistening on her feathers. "If they make it on, the ship is lost, and the mainframe with it. Patch me through to the Fighter Wing."

Onboard nodded, the look in her eyes grim as she tapped her console. "Pilots, this is Command." Selfishly, Sakora closed her eyes in relief that she was not the one to give this speech. "There is a second Nekro boarding craft headed for the Coatl. Too many of our Flightmates gave their lives to repel the first wave. There will be no repelling the second, unless that craft is destroyed."

Again, that calculated hesitation. "As you know, we are at full engine burn. Once launched, your fighters will not be recoverable."

Valiksa stood, spreading her arms. The dozen faces of the last remaining Fighter Wing appeared in the space before her. She wanted to look each of them in the eyes. "In defending

our ship from the first wave," she said, spreading her wings to show them the full extent of her injuries, "I nearly gave my life. But there is no 'nearly' in the order I am about to give you. Pilots... you are exemplars of what it means to be Argent Flight. Many feathers!"

"ONE WING!" shouted the entire bridge, including the twelve tiny voices on the holovids.

"I order you not to your deaths," Valiksa said, folding her wings back behind her, "but to eternity. So long as the Argent Flight is remembered by the galaxy, so too shall your names. Pilots: Bring down that boarding craft. All our wind is with you now."

"TO ETERNITY!" shouted the pilots, their yellow eyes bright with determination as they gripped their controls. The Command Wing watched as the squadron launched out, ship by ship, into the rainbow void of the nebula, never to return.

As one, every member of Command pulled up a display of the squadron's vectors as they screamed to intercept the incoming boarding craft. The room was soon filled with their radio chatter as the pilots closed on their target.

"Six, you take point defenses, Nine, hit the engines—"

"Steady as we go in, don't let it slip—"

"Incoming anti-fighter barrage, everyone forward shields!"

"I'm hit! I'm hit! I'm going to try and ram the—"

Sakora closed her eyes as the first fighter vanished from the display.

"Evasive! Evasive!"

"This is Ten, they're launching fighters—"

"Break off, break off!"

"Three, watch out!"

A shriek from Sensor's console. "Captain," said Sensors, in a voice that drew everyone's view. "Captain, I..."

There was no need to explain. Right ahead of them, barreling so fast Sakora flinched back in terror, was a Nekro ship. The Alastor.

"NAVIGATION!"

Sakora slammed on the controls. The Coatl screamed to obey as she burned out every thruster they had to prevent them from splintering on the Alastor's bow. Warning lights lit up her console as Sakora subjected the ship to forces it was never designed to endure, hull section after hull section fracturing, close to snapping. The Coatl dove past the Alastor by a matter of kilometers, veering wildly off course.

"It's turning!" shouted someone, Sakora didn't know who. The Nekro flagship was turning, moving to smash into them...

If she'd pushed any harder her fingers would have cracked the durasteel. Engine six, unable to maintain the level of output Sakora was demanding, finally flared out, white-blue wash winking to black, and the other engines weren't far behind.

Just a little... farther...

"Onboard!" she shouted as she pushed the ship just out of reach of the Alastor, all six kilometers of duranium and plassteel screaming as she careened them off into the nebula once more. "Onboard, get me more power!"

"That's all she's got!" Ikosavec said nervously as the bridge watched the massive Nekro flagship speed past their viewports. No one had ever gotten this close to the heart of the Nekro fleet and survived... "Captain, Engine Room says—"

A screeching blare sounded as an alarm bathed the room in red light. UNAUTHORIZED TRANSMISSION.

"Captain, the mainframe!" shrieked Onboard as a blinding white light pierced the bridge.

BROADCAST; DOWNLOAD COMPLETE

UNIT8173; DEPLOY.NEWTECH: "AERIE HOLOLATTICE"

DEPLOY.

DEPLOY.

DEPLOY.

The Command Wing watched in horror as bright, shining light unfurled from the Alastor, reaching its hard fingers deep into the nebula, surrounding the Coatl for parsecs. A bright wall of white, the Aerie Hololattice, the top-secret defense system that was supposed to keep their homeworld safe from Nekro incursion...

UNAUTHORIZED TRANSMISSION blared from their consoles as every pair of eyes, feathers bristling, locked onto the Captain, whose console had automatically shut down—the source of the leak. Valiksa's eyes widened with terror as she realized...

"Nanites," she whispered, looking down at her wounds. "The damn flechette was covered in nanites..."

"YOU!" shouted Chekk, leaping from his station, his voice reverberating through the bridge. "Command Wing! Execute the traitor!"

"NO!" screamed Sakora, leaping to place herself between Valiksa and the others. "No! You'll have to go through me!"

"Sakora?" Ikosavec whispered in horror as Sakora prepared to stand her ground. "You betray your Wing...? For her?"

Sakora blinked. Her wings were at full span, her talons spread and ready... "I..." she began, taking in the rest of her Wing, who stared at her with expressions ranging from horror to fury. "For her... for her I would do anything."

There was a thud. Valiksa had collapsed, convulsing, the corruption in her bloodstream sending her into arrest. As the Coatl soared towards her doom, her Command Wing erupted into screeched shouting, officers falling over each other as feather fought feather in a howling scrum of bodies, all unity forgotten.

Outside, in the scintillating glow, the Nekro swarmed.

BY DANE BELTRAMI GUIDE TO THE IMPERIUM (2020)

The sound of gunfire echoed through the Hall of Cartography. Ibna Vel Syd grimaced. They had been discovered. It would only be a matter of time before the peacekeepers arrived. And the Winaarans. Ibna hated the Winaarans. His hands trembled as he navigated the imperial archives.

Ibna wiped the sweat from his brow and motioned to the soldier waiting by the door. "Send word. Detonate the charges on the thirty-fourth floor. I need more time." The soldier bowed and faded into the darkness beyond the doorway.

Ibna returned to his work, a bright blue planet flashing across the screen before him. A frozen planet. No good. He clenched his jaw. If he could not find a suitable planet, then all was lost. He slammed a closed fist against the wall. Damn them all. If only they'd listened. But no. Despite his position as a councilor, he may as well have been a janitor. Nothing he said would ever convince them of the coming danger. Nothing he said would ever convince them that the time of the Lazax was at an end.



A sudden explosion rocked the building. That would be the thirty-fourth floor, Ibna thought. The fires would keep them busy, at least for now. Anxiety began to set in. More planets on the screen. Dangerous native life-forms. Mineral poor. Primordial. Already habited. All of them worthless.

Bright lights illuminated the room as peacekeeper ships flew around the tower, surveying the damage. Sirens wailed in the distance. Ibna wondered if they realized—if they understood that this was no accident.

Ibna paused, his eyes locked on the data that had just appeared before him. A small star, far beyond the borderlands—Hazz—had a single, innocuous satellite. Poor in natural resources, but not starved. Relatively stable weather patterns. Decidedly too far beyond the outer rim to be a candidate for colonization or even mining.

Ibna's heart thumped loudly in his chest. He could barely swallow. This is it. Fumbling, he produced a data drive from his pocket and set it to download the planet's astrogation coordinates. Within moments, it was done, and he set the second phase of his plan into motion.

He removed a second data drive from his robes. It contained a program, one that Head Researcher Mordai had made for a single purpose—the eradication of all of the knowledge contained within the Hall of Cartography. No record would remain of Ibna's search. No record would remain of the tiny star of Hazz and the future homeworld of the Lazax. No record would remain of anything. Thousands of years of knowledge would be lost in an instant.

The program in place, Ibna turned and ran. Waiting for him on the roof, he knew, was the shuttle that would take him to the spaceport. From there, his family's cruiser, the Syd, as well as the Manda and the Hurwana, would escape from Mecatol City and begin the long journey to their new home.

As he stepped out onto the roof, the engines of a tiny cargo shuttle whirled to life. The hatch opened as he approached and within moments they had left the Hall of Cartography behind.

A voice crackled over the shuttle's comms channel. "Your orders, councilor?" Ibna leaned back into his seat, drawing his robes close around him. "Unchanged," he said. "There can be no record."

Ibna Vel Syd did not turn to see the Hall of Cartography as it was wracked from within by explosions. Later, when the Syd and its escorts took off from the spaceport, he did not turn to bid Mecatol City, the city of his youth, a fond farewell.

Instead, he confined himself to his quarters and spoke to no one. Mecatol Rex was no longer his home, nor was it the home of his people. Instead, Ibna Vel Syd turned his eyes upon himself, and he saw only darkness.

PROPHECY OF KINGS

BY SAM GREGOR-STEWART
TI4: PROPHECY OF KINGS (2020)

In all of her time spent exploring the galaxy, she had never seen an ocean being drained.

The Aris Vex had made orbit an hour ago, and since then Hiari Omar had not once left the corvette's observation blister. Beneath her lay a gray planet covered in dust storms and foaming, black seas. Nothing grew on its barren, ashen plains, and only the simplest plants struggled to survive in the mineral-laced waters. It was probably the least interesting world Hiari had seen, and yet she had traveled all the way from the Jord Institute of History, beyond the Creuss Gate, past the Torali Pulsar, and deep into Shaleri space, to be here.

And she wasn't the only one.

"Dr. Omar."

She started at the deep rumbling purr, then turned and smiled. "Durrug. I am sorry I did not notice you."

The Hacan envoy briefly closed his eyes and dipped his body in a friendly greeting. "I apologize for disturbing your contemplations, but the rest of the observer team was about to dine. Will you join us?"

"In a minute," Hiari said. "I want to watch a bit longer."

Durrug nodded. "It is an impressive sight. I will join you for a time, if you will permit me."

She shifted to provide space at the blister, and the larger alien joined her, staring out across the ships that hung in space above the world.

Months ago, Creuss researchers had discovered records buried in forgotten vaults on Mecatol Rex, decaying mag-plates that spoke of a world called Acheron, the gateway of Ixth. The Creuss dispatched a massive armada into this forgotten corner of the galaxy, hoping to be the first to find the fabled paradise world and reap the attendant glories of its discovery. Before the rest of the Galactic Council could insist on a multi-species observer team to accompany the expedition, Creuss scouts were already finding routes around the ravenous Singularity of Manon, and into ancient nebulae that were unknown even to these enigmatic aliens. By the time Hiari had been whisked from her apartment in New Moscow and brought aboard the Barony corvette, word had come that the expedition had found Acheron, and sensors had detected strange readings beneath the world's largest ocean.

Now, a toroid the size of a space dock hung suspended between the sculpted silver hulls of two Creuss dreadnoughts. Hiari watched as invisible grav-fields reached down to the ocean hundreds of kilometers below; siphoning off the sea in a writhing funnel of water a kilometer across. It rose up, out of the atmosphere, and through the toroid, erupting into an ever-expanding cloud of shimmering ice that slowly wrapped around to envelop the planet.

"How foolish." This time, Hiari didn't turn. She recognized the burbling voice as belonging to Migun Thu, a researcher from the Universities of Jol-Nar. He maneuvered his environment suit into

the observation room, followed by an austere blue-gray woman in a formal uniform. Commander Teallian Den Marchand the Elder was the captain of the Aris Vex and official observer for the Barony.

Migun gestured a manipulator arm at the toroid. "Any sentient who can travel into space can venture underwater. Why waste so much energy to remove the entire ocean?" The aquatic alien seemed personally offended by the whole affair.

Teallian shook her head. "No, researcher. It's not wasteful at all."

"What do you mean?" Hiari asked.

The Barony officer gave her a small, superior smile. "It's arrogant, Doctor. Pure arrogance to demonstrate their power by reshaping a planet to get what they want. And I approve."

Two weeks later, the shuttle soared across the expanse of the exposed seabed. Through her cabin viewport, Hiari could see rivers of sludge flowed through the wasteland, slowly filling the drained abyssal trenches with mud. Already, dust storms were starting to whip up the drying silt.

On the horizon ahead, she could just make out the cliffs rising from the ocean floor. As the water receded, it had exposed a vast undersea plateau, hundreds of kilometers across. Atop the plateau were vast structures linked by pathways of smooth black stone that radiated out from a circular disc that lay in the center of the plateau. Using the Aris Vex's sensor suite, Migun calculated that the disc was five kilometers across and unimaginably dense. "That it has not collapsed under its own weight suggests it may be some exotic material—perhaps not fully in our dimension," he had burred excitedly.

He was incensed he could not study them in person, just as Hiari railed against being unable to explore the exposed structures scattered across the ocean floor. But their hosts insisted, politely but firmly, the observers remain in orbit. So they watched as Creuss ships descended on the ruins.

Five days into the exploration, the Creuss explorers uncovered... something.

The Aris Vex had been on the far side of Acheron when the ship's gravitic sensors registered a massive spike. Something more massive than the planet was stretching the fabric of space-time. By the time the corvette's orbit brought it above the city again, the disk had vanished, enveloped in a perfect sphere of infinite darkness. A wormhole. A wormhole five kilometers in diameter, buried beneath a forgotten sea.

The observation team had protested with one voice, threatening to report to their respective governments and return with fleets should the Creuss continue to bar them from this discovery. The Creuss acquiesced. Less than a day later, a shuttle had rendezvoused with the Aris Vex. There was room enough for all twenty-five of the official observers, but only barely. Hiari had chosen a cramped seat next to Durrug, rather than bear the company of the sanctimonious Brother Dormer of the Yin or the unsettling presence of N'ssika of the Naalu Collective.

But despite the packed and uncomfortable quarters, none of the observers had even considered staying behind.

Now the edge of the plateau was drawing near. The shuttle banked around one of the towers rising out of the side of the cliffs. Hiari gulped. From orbit, she hadn't realized just how imposing the massive, black stone buildings would be. They reminded her of temples, designed to inspire awe...or dread.

Even as Hiari shook off the stray thought, Durruq growled in the back of his throat. "I do not like the look of this place."

San Sinassa, the Creuss sent to mind the observers, turned from the pilot's seat. "We have found similar structures all across the seabed. Apparently, this is an entire lost civilization."

"I'd like access to some of those other sites as well," Hiari said. "If I'm going to get a clearer picture of this culture—"

"I'm sorry," Sinassa replied. "But some of our teams have come under attack by unknown assailants as they explored the ruins. Letting you venture on your own is too dangerous."

The observers looked at the Creuss with surprise. The Rokha Varish narrowed her green eyes, and her Naaz companion Cole climbed up on her shoulders for a better view. "Assailants? What assailants are these?"

"They're unknown," Sinassa said soothingly. "Once we have more information, we will certainly provide you with it. Ah, we are approaching the gateway."

The shuttle had been flying up a ravine leading into the interior of the plateau. Now it climbed, soaring over the lip to reveal the massive curve of the wormhole. A black sphere ringed by warped light. Still dozens of kilometers away, it filled the forward viewports. The observers fell silent.

"You could fly a Murmanifique battleship through that," Teallian finally whispered.

"Can you..." Hiari said. "Fly through it, I mean?"

The Creuss nodded, his posture conveying pride. "Our teams entered three hours ago. Prepare yourselves."

The shuttle accelerated, flying toward the absolute darkness of the surface. Hiari clenched her seat's armrests as she felt as if she was being wrenched in every direction at once. For a moment, or perhaps an eternity of moments, she was blind and deaf, smothered in complete nothingness.

Then, she could see again. The shuttle arced out of the wormhole, and they were soaring over a city.

A huge city, Hiari realized. The shuttle had enough height that she could see serried ranks of immense, cyclopean structures in all directions, stretching off to the horizon. Black stone, like on Acheron. And above that...

The dim light of a smoldering red dwarf star could not obscure the glowing disk that stretched from one edge of the sky to the other. One of the observers gasped. "Is that...the galaxy?"

"We believe so," Sinassa said. "Our scientists are working to identify this world's location, but our preliminary analysis places this at least fifty thousand light years from Acheron, nearly perpendicular to the galactic plane."

"...by the sacred depths," Migun murmured. Hiari thought she knew exactly how he felt.

The shuttle circled the center of the city before putting down in the courtyard of a construction that was immense even by the standards of the buildings around them. Hiari thought she could identify elements of the galactic-antiquity style in the massive ziggurat, but she had never seen anything like the fan of towering blades that adorned the summit...like a monstrous crown.

Get control of yourself, Dr. Omar, she thought sharply. You know better than to attribute human emotions to alien cultures like a first-year student!

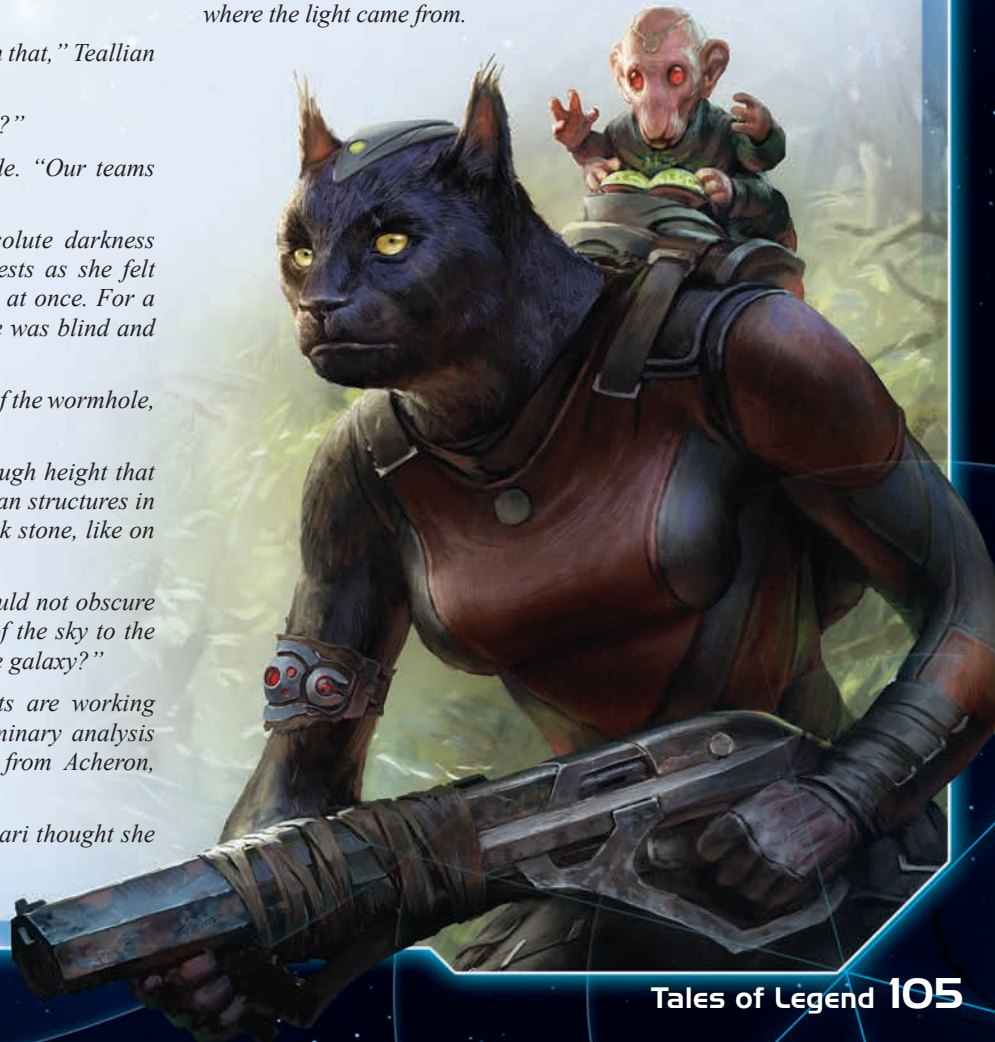
But she couldn't shake the ominous feeling as they disembarked. The courtyard was more black stone, perfectly fitted and partially covered by drifting dunes of dust. The lowest level of the ziggurat towered over them, at least one hundred meters high. Small Creuss ships huddled around the only visible entrance, an archway large enough to fly their shuttle through with room to spare. Creuss techs bustled about setting up scanners and deploying drones, paying no attention to the party.

As soon as they stepped across the threshold and a cavernous hallway beyond, Hiari felt a tingling sensation sweep across her skin. Durruq's eyes narrowed. "There's no dust in here."

"Amazing," Migun said. "That must be some sort of static field, and it's still functioning!"

Sinassa nodded. "Our advance teams report more impressive finds within. With your permission, I will take you to see them."

The team slowly made its way deeper into the heart of the structure. The passageways they followed eventually shrank, but the vaulted ceilings still loomed far over the heads of the observers. As the natural light faded away, they realized that the interior was lit by a faint blue lambency—though no one could tell where the light came from.



Hiari began to see decorations worked into the walls and columns, sharp geometric shapes with gold inlay. At one point, she drifted away and pulled out her savant, taking scans of a series of carvings until Sinassa politely insisted that she rejoin the group.

"I'm sure those bas-reliefs were of DNA helixes," Hiari whispered to Durruq. "There even appeared to be genetic coding beneath, if I can interpret their language."

The air grew colder the deeper they got. In approximately half an hour, Hiari's savant informed her they had descended over one hundred meters below ground level, and her breath puffed out in white clouds. She was about to ask Sinassa how much farther they were going when the passage suddenly opened.

The observers found themselves standing on a balcony overlooking a bottomless well over a kilometer across. The balcony stretched around the circumference of the well, and thin bridges ran out in regular intervals to a column that hung suspended in the center like a mechanical stalactite. The column was covered in machinery, pipes, conduits, and inlaid circuits that spread out across the ceiling far above, then ran back down the sides of the well and vanished into the depths.

"As you can see," Sinassa said, "this is clearly the heart of the structure, and where we have focused our efforts." He gestured to a number of Creuss who had crossed the bridges and were now clustered around the column. "We have discovered what appear to be large stasis pods embedded in the column. If you would care to observe..."

He began to walk across the nearest bridge. Most of the group of observers trailed in his wake, talking quietly but excitedly amongst themselves. Hiari saw the Winnaran xenoarchaeologist Toala Toaldar, a former colleague on several expeditions to the Mirist Stars, recording the entire chamber with her own bulky savant. She started to follow, but Durruq laid a heavy paw on Hiari's shoulder. "A moment, Dr. Omar."

He gestured to the wall behind them. Hiari saw that, amongst the conduits, writing had been carved into the walls. "Before we delve too deeply, would it be possible to decipher this?"

Hiari looked closer. "I think I might..." She began searching through her savant's files. "Yes! This looks like a pre-Lazax dialect we found on the ruins of Vira-Pics III."

She began to scan and review the lettering. Varish and Cole, along with Migun, had also remained behind to study the machinery on the walls. So had Commander Teallian, who was looking about with narrowed eyes. As Hiari searched for previously deciphered morphemes from the Vira-Pics site, she heard Durruq speaking to the Letnev officer. "Does this place disturb you too?"

"It does," Teallian muttered. "It's just...in all the stories, Ixth is supposed to be a garden paradise; a promised land. Does this really seem like a paradise to you?"

Durruq growled quietly in response.

A few minutes later, the heavy tread of his environmental suit heralded Sinassa's return. "Please, everyone. It would be wise if you would stay with the main group—"

"Just a moment." Hiari looked up. "I think I can read this."

Everyone—even Varish, Cole, and Migun—crowded around. "Well, go on then," Teallian said. "What does it say?"

Hiari started to go through the words closest to the door. "Well, this speaks of a sanctum...a refuge of royalty. This place, I think. Then it references Ixth, which is this planet...And then here's something about a mighty empire...one with dominion over every star in Ixth's sky. The Dominion of..."

She suddenly looked up, her face gray. "Sinassa. Tell your colleagues to leave that column at once."

"What are you talking about?" Migun demanded.

Hiari pointed at a set of letters. "It says... 'the Dominion of the Mahact, the Kings of the Galaxy.'"

A deafening crack echoed across the well, and the blue glow brightened. There seemed to be some sort of commotion near the column. Hiari could just make out figures backing away from a space in the machinery that was sliding open. Inside it was dark, with tiny points of blue light. Like stars.

A red flash lit the chamber, then another, and another. Hiari thought she could hear one of the other observers screaming. Then a billowing, hissing cloud of steam erupted from the column, hiding it from view.

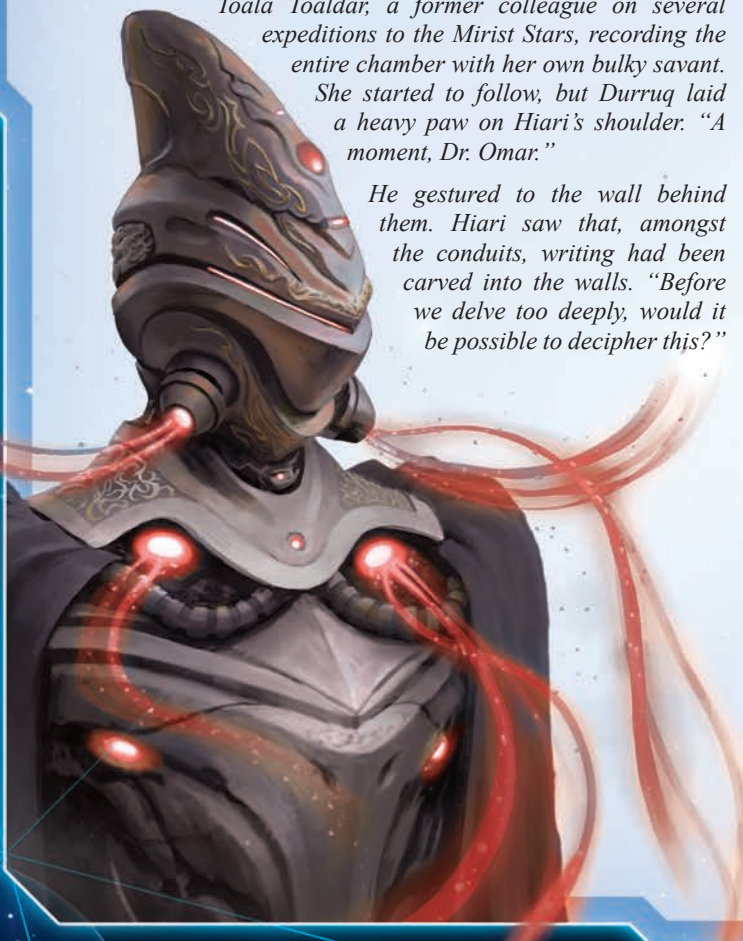
"We need to leave," Teallian said. "Sinassa?"

The Creuss warrior looked at her, then nodded. "Yes, I think so. I will contact the rest of the advance team..." His voice trailed off. Suddenly his suit began to spasm and shudder. Sinassa threw his head back and howled. Sparks of red began to leak from the joints of his suit, overwhelming the Creuss' normal cerulean glow.

The group began to back away as Sinassa suddenly relaxed, crimson light spilling from his armor. He studied the group for a long moment. Then he reached for his laser rifle.

His arm sheared off at the shoulder in a shower of sparks. Durruq growled as he spun, bringing his collapsible shudder blade back into an upward swing that split Sinassa from waist to shoulder. The Creuss screamed, energy erupting from his suit as he pitched over the side of the balcony.

The Hacan didn't pause to watch his foe fall. He sprinted for the hallway leading back to the surface. "Run!" he ordered.



Hiari and her remaining colleagues fled through the corridors to the surface. Screams still echoed down the passages behind them, and the glow in the air seemed to be brightening. Soon, glowing lines began to trace the carvings and decorations on the wall. The ziggurat was waking up.

As they ran, Hiari saw Durruq clutching his arm. "You're injured!" she gasped.

Durruq shook his head, and pulled back his hand. Blood oozed from the neat hole in his forearm. "Skin pocket," he growled. "Where I hid the blade."

"Skin pockets? Hidden weapons?"

The Hacan bared his teeth. "The Emirates felt it best—" he paused as they sprinted around a corner, blade ready "—to send an envoy with hidden talents."

Hiari kept running, but she couldn't stop watching Durruq out of the corner of her eyes.

They had just made it to the main hall when they were attacked. White, smooth-skinned humanoids sprinted from the shadows. Their faces were completely featureless, no eyes, ears, nose, or mouth. But they could sense the group's presence all the same and charged, thin needle-blades sprouting from their palms.

Durruq killed two with sweeping strokes, ducking under their grasping arms as he disemboweled them. Another leapt on Migun, only to have its needle snap harmlessly against the hard surface of the environment suit. A moment later, the Hylar activated some sort of defense field and fried the humanoid with a massive electric shock.

Hiari ducked out of the path of another humanoid, blocking its stab with her savant and wishing desperately that she had some sort of weapon. Varish and Cole didn't even stop. The tiny Naaz held on tight as the Rokha sprinted for the exit.

But despite their efforts, none of the team would have escaped without Teallian. The commander drew her grazer sidearm and calmly began firing. Each shot dropped one of the humanoids into a pile of twitching limbs and smoking flesh. Instinctively, the rest of the group clustered around Teallian as they backed for the exit with Durruq keeping her flanks protected if any of the creatures got too close.

They made it over the threshold and out into the courtyard just as the grazer overheated with a whistling scream. Teallian cursed and threw it at the nearest creature, then turned and ran. The Creuss who had been setting up the exploration base camp had vanished. So had their ships. But the observers' shuttle remained. Through the cockpit windows, Hiari could see Varish and Cole prepping the ship for takeoff.

Durruq and Migun sprinted up the boarding ramp, with Hiari right behind them. She turned to help Teallian aboard, only to see her gasp and stumble. One of the humanoids had closed and lunged, driving the needle-blade into her shoulder.

Without thinking, Hiari smashed the thing's featureless face with her savant. As it reeled back, she grabbed Teallian by the hand and hauled her up the ramp, the hatch hissing shut behind them both. Then the shuttle leapt into the air, flying fast away from the courtyard.

Migun grabbed the Letnev commander and helped her to a bench, while Hiari helped peel off her uniform jacket.

"How bad is it?" Teallian asked, grimacing.

"I'm not sure," Hiari said. The wound was a single round puncture with little blood leaking out of it. However, the skin around the injury was starting to turn ashen white. She reached for the emergency med-box and sprayed the site with contravenoms and a curative seal. By the time she'd finished, the white had spread across Teallian's shoulder and down her arm, and the Letnev was watching her own hand with horrified fascination.

"I don't know what this is," Hiari said. "It's not responding to any of the meds."

Teallian's fingernails all fell off at once. The skin beneath was smooth and fresh. She reached up, and pulled a clump of her own hair free. As she did, her hand ran across her ear, which was starting to shrink and shrivel. Teallian stared at the hair in her hand for a long moment. When she looked up at Hiari, her eyes were hard. "This is some sort of gene-sorcery."

She sucked in a deep, shuddering breath, then continued. "It's happening fast. Doctor Omar, listen to me. Get back to the Aris Vex. My crew has prepared for the possibility that we would discover something dangerous. Tell them 'Quann.' They will follow your instructions. Warn the Council."

Hiari nodded. "I will."

Teallian turned to Durruq. She could barely keep her eyes open, the sockets seemed to be sealing shut. "Now. Your sword." She held out her arm.

The shuttle erupted from the wormhole on Acheron, soaring toward the fleet. The remaining members of the team gathered in the cockpit. Nobody wanted to sit in the back.

No hails greeted the shuttle. After a long moment, Hiari activated the communicator. "This is the observation team, hailing the Aris Vex. Come in, Aris Vex."

Another long pause, then a burst of static and the voice of Lieutenant Drellixiar, the corvette's first officer. "Observation team, this is Aris Vex. Commander Marchand, is that you?"

"No, this is Doctor Hiari Omar. I'm afraid the Commander is dead." Hiari glanced over her shoulder, toward the crew bay. "She said that the code is 'Quann.'"

"Understood, Doctor. Stand by for rendezvous coordinates."

Information flowed through the shuttle's nav systems, and Varish hissed. "What are you doing in a polar orbit?"

"The situation here has become complex in the past hour," Drellixiar said. "We thought it best to keep a low profile."

"What do you mean, 'complex'?" Durruq asked.

"You should be able to see for yourself," Drellixiar replied.

The shuttle was just breaking free from Acheron's atmosphere and entering the black void of space. Suddenly they could see the Creuss fleet, in orbit over the wormhole.

Red lights danced across the hulls of the Creuss warships. The sculpted silver decorations now flickered with a smoldering, crimson glow. The fleet sank into Acheron's atmosphere even as the shuttle flew higher. No one scanned or hailed the shuttle, or seemed to even notice their existence.

Instead, one by one, the Creuss ships descended toward the plateau and began to enter the gateway.

