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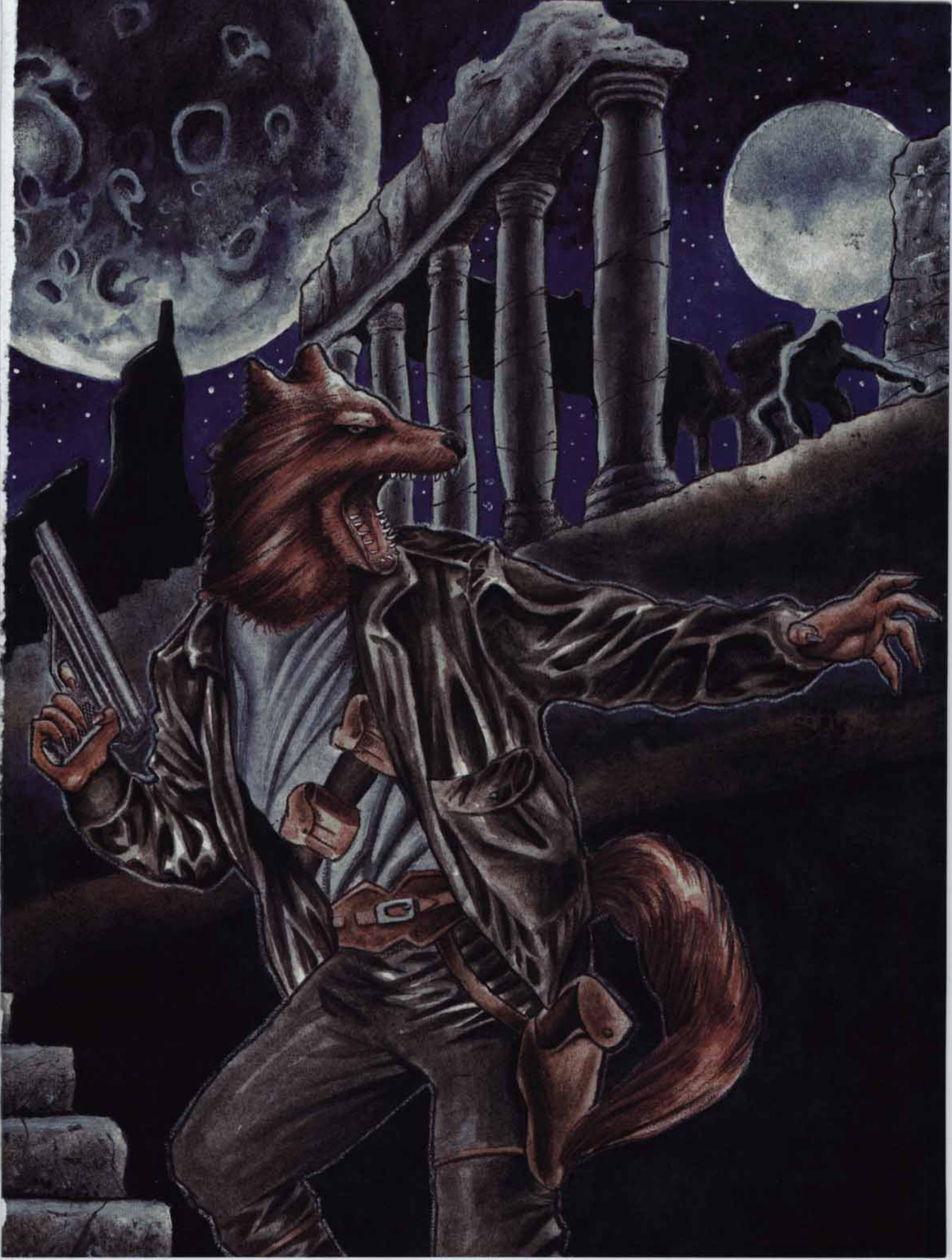
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MARC MILLER'S **TRAVELLER**[®]

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SCIENCE-FICTION ADVENTURE IN THE FAR FUTURE

Test your legal skills at the "Trial of the Century" on page 5.

Locate one of the most precious gemstones in the universe for the Emperor himself on page 29.

Will you take the money or will true love prevail? Page 41.

Run the gauntlet, noble-style, on page 73.

Bring the notorious Captain Swing to justice on page 85.

A devious plot is developing in the name of colonization on page 101.

THE FUTURE IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER

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Traveller[®],

Science-Fiction Adventure in the Far Future

by Marc Miller

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The game and universe presented in this book envisions a referee or game master as the ultimate supervisor of game play. The publisher is prepared to answer questions about Traveller provided a stamped, self-addressed envelope accompanies the request.


 Imperium Games, Inc.

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1: THE TRIAL

This adventure concerns the trial of the Empress Glorianna of Tegrón, one thousand years after the alleged incidents took place. The scenario can be played with as few as four players, with NPCs added to fill out the vacant positions. More players, however, are suggested. Minimally, the players take on the roles of the prosecuting attorney, the defense attorney and the jurors. The evidence for and against her is balanced in order to allow the jurors to actually decide her guilt or innocence. Ideally, the party will be large enough to permit players to also take the roles of some of the major NPCs, and even that of the empress herself.

THE STORY

The planet Tegrón was abandoned by the First Imperium just after the fall of the Long Night. Sitting as it did on the fringes of known space at that time, it had little to offer the empire. The system holds two rather small gas giants, but the potential yields were deemed too insignificant to warrant exploitation. The world itself was and is an idyllic place with a vertical axis that keeps its climate moderate all year round, but there is little to interest miners. Heavy metals are more common in other systems, and gem stones and other substances of value are relatively rare. Consequently, the faltering Imperium found better, more profitable places to occupy its dwindling resources.

Tegrón did not fall with a bang, however, or even a whimper — in fact, it didn't really fall, it just slipped a bit. It clung to its technology with a tenacity rare among the out-flung remnants of Imperial Society. The Tegrónese became innovators and scavengers; reclaiming necessary elements from seawater and mining their junk yards and trash heaps. They stayed in-system, keeping to themselves, and then discovered that their two paltry gas giants contained tons of rare gasses, gasses they skimmed and sold to the few interstellar wanderers who happened into their system. But soon even this limited trade dried up as the Long Night descended on stellar civilization. Nevertheless, Tegrón endured, perhaps because of the enlightenment from the ancient philosophy elaborated in the Book of Harmony. This lengthy treatise, which few have read but all believe, teaches caution and deliberation in all things. "The harmonious person sleeps a four-night before altering the color of his garment" is its fundamental principle, and is usually taken to mean, "think long and hard before making even the most insignificant change."

PCs take the roles of the prosecutor, defense attorney, and jurors for the trial of an ancient and self-styled "Empress Glorianna, The Light of Tegrón," a former duchess who has laid in cryosleep for 1,000 years for her part as leader of a brutal, repressive government. Recent archeological evidence suggests that she gave a direct order for the execution of over 1,000,000 of her own citizens. Glorianna's sentence is about to

expire, but now she is awakened and informed that new charges, of mass murder, have been filed against her.

Cryosleep was the punishment when she was convicted. The reaction against the massacres of her "Imperial State of Light" was so great that the death penalty was abolished in favor of 1,000-year cryosleep sentences, by which time all victims would be dead, the prisoner's power base evaporated, and memories faded. The prisoner would wake as a pauper and spend the rest of his or her life in slums and gutters — no ID cards, rations support, medical assistance nor any other kind of aid is permitted to them. But life is always preferable to death.

Glorianna's government left such a bad taste that nobility was abolished on the planet, and the governing body renamed the "Tegrónese Popular Commonwealth Ecology;" it remains so today. But even the harsh memories of the most brutal excesses fade with time, to be replaced by nostalgia, and a longing for the "good old days." Against a backdrop of complete equality and the eradication of poverty and classes, stand the "Nobles-under-the-Hill": After their disenfranchisement, the nobility went underground, secretly keeping records of their genealogies and making sure their children married into other noble families. In addition, the Ecology is a pretty boring place in which to live. There is cradle to grave security and no one wants for food, clothing, shelter, or education. On the other hand, the only excitement to be had is in the small space fleet kept to ensure security and to enforce the Ecology's 20% mining tax on the in-system mining of the two gas giants by outsiders. The tax is based on the Ecology's projected profit scale, not the actual value. Still, the yields of highly concentrated rare gasses are substantial and few complain.

Then there are others who seek change, in spite of the Book of Harmony. There are also several cabals of malcontents, proto-revolutionaries who would make common cause with the nobles should a leader appear and a revolution take place. Chief among these are the Chaos Party and the League of Merit. The Chaos Party, with its Manifesto of Randomization, encourages all other dis-

sident groups as part of its credo. They believe that only through a process of randomized events can individuals and societies continue to evolve. They see the Ecology as a static and stagnant society, certain to doom Tegrone to a slow and agonizing death. Glorianna's trial is a trial not of one woman's role in ancient history, but of the contemporary civilization. They are poised and ready to use either outcome as standard for revolution.

The League of Excellence works closely with the Chaotics and the Nobles-under-the-Hill. Their goals may seem at first glance to reflect those of the nobility, but this is not the case. The League also seeks the restoration of a nobility system, but their concept is very different. Rather than hereditary *honors* and titles, the League would establish a rank of lifetime peers, based on merit. Upward movement would be by achievement alone, on a sliding scale that uses an increase in wealth as its barometer of success. They have convinced the noble underground that hereditary peerages and honors would continue to be respected, and passed down, although they have no intention of keeping their promise.

THE SETUP

The characters may be travelers, miners, or members of a scientific expedition — it makes no difference. Once they enter the system, a squadron of Ecology fighters approaches their ship and escorts it to "Station Garamunda" for customs inspection and taxation assessment.

Upon entering the station, they are met by a contingent of armed Peace Ministers who escort them to the temporary offices assumed by Jardon Runista, First Minister of Planetary Peace for Tegrone. Jardon is a huge, balding, well-fed man who is tottering on the edge of obesity. He is seated at the head of a large gray metal table. His chief assistant, Berinadra Cointer, an attractive lady who appears to be too young for her position, is seated to his right. On the table are several stacks of paper and two computer interface screens, one before each of them.

Jardon smiles as the characters enter the room. He dismisses the guards with a shooing wave of his hands and says in a hearty voice, "Sit, gentlemen, sit!" He gestures expansively to indicate a number of chairs (exactly one per character) set around the table. "Would you care for some refreshments?"

The characters are probably more confused than anything at this point and have a lot of questions. But the Tegrone, particularly government officials, are a slow and deliberate people. In accordance with the Book of Harmony, everything takes place within its own structure. Refreshments come before introductions and small talk comes before business. If the characters accept his offer

of refreshments, Berinadra will leave and return with steaming cups of a local hot beverage called Tentrax. If the characters refuse and insist on knowing why they were brought to this place and what is going on, Jardon will call back the guards and have them taken to holding cells to "ruminate for a night on their discourtesy."

When he feels they are ready, Jardon will introduce himself and Berinadra, who is styled the First Underminister of Justice. He will then question them about their ship, their purpose, and their cargo. What he is really doing is testing them in typical, deliberate fashion. His Peace Ministers have already placed any remaining crewmembers (NPCs) in "protective custody" and swept the ship from computer banks to the cargo hold. All the answers are at his fingertips. If the characters attempt to lie to him, he will order them to the holding cells to "contemplate on the sacredness of truthful dealings." If they are honest and forthright, he will get to business once the Tentrax cups are empty.

"Let me tell you a story," he says at last. "Long ago, a thousand years ago, in the time we call The Rule, there was a woman. In those days we were a rigid society, governed by castes with titles and land that were, in turn, ruled by the castes above them. This woman, whose real name is not known, set out to make herself the ruler of all castes. This she did, proclaiming herself Empress Glorianna, The Light of Tegrone. At first, she did bring light; she stripped the nobles of their authority over the people and stopped the worst of their abuses. But, as time went on, her own power corrupted whatever there was left of her original vision and she embarked upon a campaign of terror. You see, she began to think of herself as the Mother of all Tegrone — indeed, that was one of her titles. And so she banished the Book of Harmony and replaced it with herself. Any offense, no matter how minuscule, was a crime against nature, because it was a crime against the Mother. She created divisions of shock troops, christened them the Radiant Lights and empowered them to crush lawlessness and rebellion wherever they found it. And, of course, find it they did. Throughout this period, our contact with the Imperium was severed; there was no one on whom we could call for help. As her excesses grew, so did the resentment of Tegrone. We are a meditative and considered people, for so the Book of Harmony teaches us, but we had had enough. A leader arose, Tram Popernot, and he united the hundreds of opposition factions into one strong movement. Glorianna was overthrown and the Ecology established in its place. Glorianna was arrested and tried for treason and tyranny. She was sentenced to cryosleep for 1,000 years and stripped of all possible rights and pensions when she awoke. Her sentence expired last week.

"A month ago, however, historians uncovered evidence that directly links her to the worst massacre in the history of the planet. We have unearthed an edict, bearing her signature, that ordered the death of every man, woman, and child in the province of Hyldar, which was central to a peaceful protest movement at the time. It was, in fact, the Slaughter of Hyldar that ignited the revolution and unified the world. At her original trial, she claimed she did not control the details of the actions of the Radiant Light units, that there were too many of them to oversee and besides, that's what officers were for. She said she regretted the results, but took no personal part in those tragedies. And we believed her." Jardon pauses, then stands to ask, "Who among you has experience or training in Art of Law?"

While he will accept any skill in Law, the character with the highest skill level will be appointed prosecutor, the next, defender, and the rest become jurors. If no character has Law skill, he will take the highest two scores in Education characteristic for the positions.

He then tells the characters that they will serve the Ecology in this trial. They have no choice and, unless they are prepared to fight their way out of the extremely well-defended station, their ship and belongings will be confiscated and they will be placed under permanent "house arrest" on the planet. They are recruited as jurors so that the Ecology can display its impartiality to its citizens and any off-world observers. If there are any noble PCs, they should hide their status; Tegrone officials don't look with favor on those who they view as "decadent relics of a bitter past." The best solution is to go along with plans of the Ministry of Justice.

The trial is the key to the revolution. If the empress is found innocent (and the evidence, provided by planetary historians, is ambiguous at best), the status quo will remain intact. If guilty, she could now be sentenced to death and that would unite the nobles, inspire a leader from within them, and consolidate the remaining dissidents. The PCs will have to judge her guilt or innocence, all the time being plagued with threats and bribe offers from several fronts.

Jardon and Berinadra inform the characters that they will supply them with everything they need, from lodgings and meals to investigative and legal staffs. Also, they will be paid Cr8,000 each for jury duty and Cr10,000 for the services of the prosecutor and defense attorney. In addition, a Cr2,000 bonus will go to the winning side.

They are then escorted to showers and told to bathe. While they are in the showers, guards confiscate their personal effects, except for shoes. When they come out, they find long, comfortable Tegrone robes waiting for them.

The characters should know better by now

than to protest, but if they do, Jardon treats them gently, explaining, "This is for your own protection and for your acceptance on our world. The Tegrone people tend to be insular and don't countenance strangers readily." The real purpose, of course, is to be sure that they do not carry any weapons or equipment down to the surface. Any character who does have something hidden in his or her shoes, however, will succeed in keeping it.

THE ARRIVAL

The characters are taken planetside and treated even better than they were led to believe. They are housed in spacious comfort on the upper floors of a great palace, a country estate that once belonged to the ruling family and is now kept as a state guesthouse for visiting dignitaries. Each juror has a private room with an opulent bath that includes a sauna and a spa-tub. Bowls of fruit and nuts rest upon ornate credenzas, and on-call servants, who in this egalitarian society are called "associates," see to their every need and grant most of their whims.

The prosecutor and defense attorney are housed in separate large apartments with live-in associates who have their own quarters within the unit. The attorneys are instructed not to communicate with each other for any reason; the penalty for the first offense is a fine of 50% of their promised fees, a second charge will negate all fees, and a third will land the offenders in prison. Both attorneys are given offices on the palace's ground floor on opposite ends of the building, plus a staff of four: a secretary, two investigators, and a "Legal Associate" (a Tegrone law expert). Each attorney is also given the *power of subpoena* to summon any and all persons who may have testimony to give in this case, and the *power of seizure* to requisition any relevant documents. Finally, they are told that they have only two weeks to prepare for the case, because "swift justice is true justice."

RECEPTION

On the day of their arrival, the characters are informed that there will be a gala reception and feast given the next night in their honor. Until then, they are free to familiarize themselves with their new duties.

The next night, three carriages, all drawn by a matched sets of four white, graceful antlered beasts pull up outside the characters' residence at the appointed hour. There is one large carriage for the jurors and two smaller ones for the prosecutor and the defense counsel. The characters are escorted in royal luxury and taken to the Palace of Honor, a building whose sole purpose is the staging of official parties and welcomes.

Inside the palace are tables heaped with food

and formally dressed associates who carry trays of a variety of beverages. None of the rooms have doors, so one space flows comfortably into the next and the ambiance is similar to being outdoors, with no limits or borders. The guests, government ministers, and their hangers-on are all elegantly attired. In the background, a large string orchestra is softly playing Tegronese classics. And so their own trial begins as members of the government and supporters of the status quo vie with each other as well as clandestine parties for the characters' attention. Many of the people they will meet are merely self-serving status seekers who want names to drop over dinner. A few, however, can be useful, and one in particular is important to the defense.

As the invitees enter the halls, a heraldic assistant trumpets a fanfare and the Herald of Precedence announces new arrivals by name, including the characters. Certain notable personalities are detailed below. Except for Jardon, these are listed in no particular order, and the GM should stage the introductions as necessary.

This is the time for the characters to make contact with any who seem sympathetic to their plight. Tegronese custom calls for the exchange of business cards whenever an introduction is made. The characters have no business cards; it's a conscious decision made to protect them from harassment, but the people they meet do and each will present his or her card after a handshake.

Jardon Runista

UPP: 668CFA

Skills: Administration-2, Carousing-4, Computer-1, Diplomacy-2, Instruction-2, Law-4, Leadership-2, Philosophy-3, Research-1.

In a society that boasts of its egalitarianism, Jardon is unique. He is a natural aristocrat: sophisticated, urbane, and genuinely committed to the original principles of the Ecology. He is an honest man in a bureaucracy of dissemblers. Born with no special advantages save his own skills, he achieved his high position through hard work, determination, and skill at the law. He cannot be bought, but he is blindsided by his own views of "the truth." One of his truths is that Berinadra is as honest and impartial as he is.

Jardon is aware of the political factions who oppose the Ecology, but dismisses them as a "minority of malcontents" who "couldn't stage a coup if they owned title to the palace."

He treats the characters as respected colleagues, but is constantly on guard against breaches of protocol. Polite to a fault, Jardon accompanies the characters, guiding them through the morass winding of people and making introductions.

The first introductions he makes, through, are to present 1st-Class Chief Gunners Caulder (UPP:

877876) and Missen (UPP: 998676), as "personal guards due their high stations." The real purpose of the two guards in ceremonial dress uniforms is to protect them and to keep the two attorneys from speaking to each other.

Berinadra Cointer

UPP: 688BD9(9)

Skills: Administration-2, Carousing-1, Fast Talk-1, History-2, Law-3, Psionics-1.

Psionics: Telepathy-2.

While Jardon is completely honest in seeking an impartial trial for the former empress, Berinadra is a less enthusiastic supporter of fair play. The Cointer family suffered greatly at the hands of Glorianna's Radiant Lights and her father and all of her father's fathers never let the family forget it. She was raised to hate and to be discrete.

A strong but untrained telepath, Berinadra did not rise to her position at the age of 24 by legal expertise alone. While she would never consider entering false evidence, she will begin her campaign to convict Glorianna by planting suggestions in the character's minds at the party. To do this, she uses both Send Thoughts, promoting the idea that Glorianna must be guilty because she is Glorianna, and Telepathy, projecting the association of the name Glorianna with feeling of revulsion and evil. Her attempts to influence the characters can be discovered by any trained psionist or anyone able to read surface thoughts or emotions.

Joser Malin

UPP: 8989B9

Skills: Administration-1, Art-1, Bribery-2, Carousing-2, Fast Talk-1, Fencing-2, Forensics-2, Ground Craft-2, Law-2, Leadership-1, Pistol-2, Stealth-1, Streetwise-2.

A mid-rank bureaucrat in the Ministry of Planetary Security, Malin is a member of Nobles-under-the-Hill, the scion and heir of an ancient baronial family who insists on being addressed as "Your Excellency" during meetings of the underground. From his position as Second Assistant Undersecretary to the 3rd Deputy Minister for Dissension Control and Truth, he is able to alert the various underground factions of impending government actions against them. He stands accused by some factions, though, of promoting his own cause by selectively neglecting to inform others when armed raids are scheduled on their sites. He denies this, and replies simply that he is not always free from observation. The truth is, for whatever reason, the Nobles-under-the-Hill remain cloudy shadows in the archives of the Security Ministry, while the Chaos Party and the League of Merit have thick dossiers worthy of much more sinister organizations. That Joser has not been discovered is due more to the incompetence of the

Ministry of Planetary Security than to any talents he possesses.

Joser, of course, is a supporter of Glorianna. He will try to sway the characters, especially the jurors. He does this with what he thinks is subtlety to avoid charges of jury tempering. His method tends to be Socratic: he asks questions to lead the characters to the conclusion he desires without overtly stating his own intentions. "Do you think the Empress could have been as evil as the historians make her out to be, or is her reputation merely based on the need for graduate students to find new subjects for their theses?" He will ask. Or, "Do you think that the evidence is rather thin? I mean, after all these years of no witnesses and no concrete records but a piece of questionable paper, it seems hard to fathom." If he is not convinced he is having an impact on the characters' thoughts, he will offer substantial bribes.

He is tall and extremely well dressed in a long, blue velvet robe and a scarlet office stole set with double silver bars every 12 inches that reaches the hem of his garment. A slight scar, the result of an illegal duel, graces his right cheek.

Dupresse Delagato

UPP: 988CD7

Skills: Administration-3, Art-2, Carousing-3, Communications-1, Computer-3, Dance-1, Disguise-1, Fast Talk-2, Intrusion-3, Perception-2, Philosophy-2, Streetwise-1.

No one suspects that Dupresse is the founder and remains a leader in the Chaotic Party, despite the fact that she publicly flaunts chaos in her dress and in her person. She is more than a party member; she embraces chaos as a philosophy of life. Officially, she is the mistress of Parton Casmir, Minister for Economic Development and Energy, hence her presence at the welcoming party. Parton dotes on her and, unaware of his lady's outside activities, thinks her eccentricities are "charming." It is said that Dupresse was behind what is called Pie-a-Minister Week, when all twelve chief government ministers received a pie to the face, but the perpetrators were never caught. In fact, her attempt to strike a blow for chaos backfired. So popular was the event that it is now staged annually as a national holiday and a fundraiser for the Ministry of Health and Sanity. She is also reported to have placed a virus in the computer system of the Economic Ministry that transformed all data relating to Tentray production into random flashes of multicolored light that swirled the information base into a metaphorical, but very real, meaningless cesspool.

A tall woman given to eccentricity in outfit, she is wearing a severely cut robe that clings tightly to her thin, narrow body. The gown is colored in progressing shades of randomized pastels, each fading

into the next so that it begins at the floor in soft but brilliant vermilion scallops, changes to blue, then green, white, and orange, on their way up the garment. Finally, the rioting hues blend around her neck in a chaotic rainbow of disturbing color.

Dupresse doesn't really care if Glorianna is guilty or not, and a thousand years is a long time to hold a grudge. She believes, however, that chaos will best be served if the empress is found innocent. She will regale the characters with tales she invents on the spot: "You know, I read once that Glorianna was just a puppet of the Archduke Girard von Holdenglut — maybe we should exhume and try him?" And "Did you know that Glorianna was actually born poor? Poor people don't kill other poor people, I'm sure." She also carries a pouch of live, harmless Tegrone spiders and delights in plopping them into wineglasses when her victims' attentions are elsewhere.

Burdrys Colonos

UPP: 779AB8

Skills: Administration-2, Bribery-1, Carousing-1, Communications-2, Craftsman-3, Electronics-1, Interrogation-1, Instruction-1, Intrusion-1, Law-2, Mechanics-2, Rifle-2, Writing-1.

Once sarcastically described as a "low-potential high-achiever," Burdrys Colonos is Chief Rehabilitation Officer for the Ecology's prison system. Short, balding, and soft-spoken, he is also a member of the League of Excellence. While his position does not bring any special benefits to the League, save for making the lives of incarcerated League members bearable, he holds one secret that the Ecology and its ministers are not about to reveal to the characters — that there are two others currently in cryosleep whose testimony could be crucial for the defense.

Although he cannot speak openly about the prisoners in this gathering, he does have a plan. Burdrys is an amateur quill maker and enjoys creating ancient writing instruments that he presents as gifts. Before he left for the welcoming party, he quickly crafted two of them. He carries the wrapped presents in a long pouch slung from his belt. The one he will present to the prosecutor is wrapped in gold paper. This package contains a quill pen made from an exceptionally long red feather and a small, fluted bottle of hand-made ink. The pen for the defense attorney is similar and wrapped in silver paper, but this handsome quill features a blue feather and contains a small recording chip, preprogrammed to play once, when the pen is picked up during a condition of silence — in the privacy of the defense counsel's quarters, he hopes.

Burdrys is conservatively dressed in long brown robes with a metallic gold overstole fringed in the same shade of brown as his garment. He will make

his presentation publicly, when there is a lull in the festivities and when he is certain most eyes are on him. He enjoys the irony of striking a blow without anyone being the wiser. When a break does come, he will ask the herald to get the attention of the guests and assembled notables. "Esteemed colleagues," he announces, "most of you are aware of my, um, hobby. I have made a pen to present to each of our, um, new volunteer officers of the court." He then hands the packages to the characters who are the defense and prosecuting attorneys. "Made by my own hands, gentlemen, and coming from the office I hold, I trust these instruments will remind you both of our appreciation for your work here and the duties you have assumed." After smatters of half-hearted applause, the party resumes. If the defense counsel opens his package to display the pen and ink bottle, nothing can happen here, because the recorder is set to play only if background noise is eliminated.

Dommingard Colarty

UPP: 988A9A

Skills: Administration-4, Carousing-3, Communications-2, Investigation-3, Jack-of-All-Trades-1, Law-5, Long Blade-1, Pilot-1, Pistol-2, Streetwise-1.

The head of the Ecology government, Chief of State, and "Minister of Ministers," Dommingard is usually addressed as Mr. First Minister. A large and muscular man of striking features, he appears to be more suited to roles in tri-vid romances than cast as head-of-state. He wears his flaxen hair long, reaching almost to his waist, and secures it into a ponytail with velvet ribbons on official functions. His clothing is expensive, but not flashy, for he learned long ago that clothes were meant to ornament his appearance, not distract from it. He wears soft blue robes trimmed in white knotwork at the edges and a simple gold chain of office around his neck.

Dommingard is a shrewd politician with his ear to the ground. He does not rely solely on agents of the Ministry for Planetary Security for his information. He has operatives, paid out of his own purse, in every part of the capitol city and more scattered about the planet. He is completely aware of what a guilty verdict would mean and is determined that no revolution will ever succeed under his "watch." To forward that goal, he has already taken certain steps. Both Legal Associates assigned to the characters are in his pocket and scheduled to report to him on a daily basis. He has ordered the Security Ministry to locate and be ready to detain any and all serious dissidents in the event of a guilty verdict. Finally, he has doubled his own guard, well aware that for symbol's sake, he would be one of the first victims of an insurrection.

Confident of his own preparations, he feels he

can afford to be magnanimous to the characters. In addition, Dommingard began his career as an attorney himself, and he still values the law. He is sincere when he tells the jurors to be just in their deliberations.

When he greets the characters, it is with an honest smile and words of encouragement. "Let no one deter you from finding and rendering a true verdict. There are many who will try to influence you in one way or another, please stand firm for justice and you will be amply rewarded."

Twin Moons, Velvet Light

As the evening winds down, the orchestra takes its last break and returns to perform the final number of the evening. "Twin Moons, Velvet Light" is a traditional Tegrone sonata, the playing of which always indicates the end of festivities and the time to depart. As the guests begin to leave, Jardon rounds up the characters and leads them out to their waiting carriages. He bids them a good night and then leaves himself, walking swiftly in the bracing night air.

The characters are driven back to their residences and return to their quarters, Gunners Caulder and Missen remain with the counselors and take up station outside their doors, respectively. They will remain discreetly in the background until the end of the trial.

The jurors will probably want to discuss the evening's events, and as if to aid their decision, a light repast has been prepared. If any character suspects that their room is bugged, they are free to search for listening devices. There are three obvious low-tech transmitters meant for them to find: one under the base of the table lamp on the credenza, one behind the lighting control panel, and a third placed under the low table in the center of the room. A fourth, a sophisticated bioelectric membrane, cannot be found without a detector. It is on the plastic cover of the lighting panel, in plain view. The bioelectric device is monitored by a voice-activated recorder and spot-checked every four hours.

The prosecutor is left to his own devices in his quarters. He may simply go to bed, or he may think to try to contact his shipmates. While there is a vid-phone in the spacious, well-equipped apartment, it is programmed not to connect him with any of the characters. If he made a contact at the party — say, Dupresse Delaggato or Burdrys Colonos — he may call one of them and ask them to make a third party conference call to the jurors or the defense counsel. He can do this safely, as the single apartments are not bugged, and both Burdrys and Dupresse will comply. If he calls the jury party, though, he will be in trouble if any of them mentions his name. It will only take the next review of the tapes to trap him. Jardon will be lenient the first time and fine the prosecutor only

10% of his promised fee, but he has the vid-phones removed from all of the characters' quarters and issues a stern warning about any further infractions — and he means it.

The defense counsel, alone in his quarters, may plop his gift on a table and retire to his bed. In that case, he gets a good night's sleep and awakens refreshed and ready to start his tasks. At some point, however, that evening or the next morning, he will probably want to open his gift and take it out of the box. If this occurs in his quarters, the message will play. If it happens in his office with his staff around him, nothing will be heard. If he does not remove the pen for three days, the recording will self-destruct.

The message of the pen is as follows:

"There are two witnesses of whom you will not have heard. Subpoena the testimonies of Duke Gilannd de Raneroes, and Colonel Fanar Highmount, 3rd Baron Highmount. Both are in cryosleep detention at the First Minister's Primary Treatment Facility located in this city. The Duke's berth location is L14-7009, Colonel Highmount's is at G09-7704. Remember well. This message repeats once and self-destructs." The message replays again before a puff of odorless smoke rises from the quill.

TRIAL PREPARATIONS

Tegronese Law is similar to American Law. A jury verdict must be unanimous, and the accused is considered to be innocent until proven guilty. The judge (the referee), however, may not direct a verdict nor set one aside, but must abide by the jury's decision. The only exception to this is in the case of a "hung jury," the judge must find one way or another in the jury's stead. In such instance, the jury is polled for their individual verdicts and the judge usually rules for the majority — although he is not required to do so. There is no appeal. The accused is also required to testify on his or her own behalf, regardless of the wishes of counsel. There is also a mandate that both sides in an adversarial contest supply their opponents with copies of all hard evidence.

In addition, a plea must be entered by the accused 48 hours before the trial officially begins. There are only three possibilities: not guilty, not guilty by reason of insanity, and not guilty by reason of extenuating circumstances. Tegronese Law does not permit a defendant to plead guilty.

For the crime of which Glorianna is accused, the judge is required to pass a sentence of death by hanging, if she is found guilty. If the jury finds her insane, the judge is bound to sentence her to live out her life in a state mental institution.

The Jurors

The jurors are free to wander the city, and it is a place of marvels and beauty, with fabulous parks, bars, and businesses of every type. They are assigned guards for their protection, but these guards will stay in the background and do not interfere with the characters. The jurors may go anywhere and talk to anyone. On the other hand, there is not a person in the city who doesn't know who they are. Since most of the citizens of the Ecology have already made up their minds about Glorianna, those who wish to influence them will accost them at every turn. Some of these incidents may involve fights, wherein the guards (UPP: 888767) will come to their aid. The populace is almost evenly divided between those who want to see the empress hang and those who either believe that she could not have ordered the Slaughter of Hylidar, and those who think an atrocity committed 1,000 years ago is ancient history not worth pursuing. Incidents may occur in taverns, on street corners, or in museums.

Individual jurors can allow themselves to be bribed or influenced — at their own risk, of course. A "hung jury," (one that cannot agree on a verdict) could be an interesting result, especially of one jury held out due to a bribe.

The Attorneys

The defense and prosecution will need to prepare their own cases. To do this, they will need to interview a variety of people with the intent of calling them to the stand during the trial. Samples of testimony are given for each of the potential witnesses. The information they disclose during interviews will be substantially the same testimony they give on the stand. The jury, however, should not be present during these interviews. They will hear these stories during the trial itself.

The prosecution and defense can require testimony from anyone on planet, including the First Minister and the defense counsel, if they can demonstrate that it is germane to the case.

The referee, as the judge, should allow both sides a lot of latitude during the trial and be as impartial as possible.

The Prosecution

The prosecution appears to be open and shut, but woe is to the trial lawyer who thinks this is a simple case. Cut off from the defense and with no good sources of information, the prosecutor will have to find his own way.

The only hard evidence for the prosecution consists of a single piece of paper, an ornate document festooned with ribbons and seals in the style of ten centuries past. It is an order to one Colonel Highmount, addressing him as "My Dear Baron," and ordering the "cleansing of the Village of Hyl-

dar, infested as it is with radicals, cutthroats, and brigands." The instrument is signed "Glorianna Emporatrix" and sealed with her signet.

In order to substantiate its find and the truth of it, the prosecution will need to subpoena the archeologist who made the discovery, one Benato Carosar, Ph.D. (UPP: 667CD8). Dr. Carosar, thin to point of emaciation with a sharp, hawk-like face, is only too happy to get his name in the media. He will not only testify, but also tell the prosecutor more than he wants to know. He found the document in a sealed chest while excavating the ancient Imperial Palace. He was curious, because the chest was found under the paving stones in the old stables. After prying open the container and carefully opening the brittle document, he was astonished. He called the local Security Office and reported his find. He will also make it clear that he is absolutely convinced that the document is in Glorianna's hand.

If the prosecutor asks his investigators to find him handwriting analysts, they will locate Professor Plazo DeRink (UPP: 776CC8). DeRink, a teacher of ancient languages at EcoPolytechnic University, is a slight, fussy man whose hobby is analyzing and comparing documents to authenticate them. He will ask to take the document with him to "perform tests." If this is denied he will become quite upset. (Even if the prosecutor is willing to comply, his staff will forbid it, calling Jardon if they must. They are not about to let the only piece of real evidence to be removed from the office vault.)

"But, I must make tests, compare samples. The paper needs to be dated, the inks identified . . . how can I do that here? And in less than two weeks? Preposterous! A study like this should take months to complete, to be sure it is genuine!"

If the prosecutor does not suggest that he can requisition any and all equipment the professor needs, his Legal Associate will. In fact, there is plenty of room in the palace for a lab and no excuse to move the document. A guard will be assigned to the instrument with orders that it does not leave his sight.

Finally, the prosecution needs to establish what happened at Hyldar. To do that, his investigators contact two seated scholars of history, both of whom have impeccable reputations. Professor Silars Renauter, Ph.D. (UPP: 778DD8), is the chairman of history department at Capitol University. An expert on the period of The Rule, he has published three scholarly books on the subject. He will establish what events lead up to the Slaughter of Hyldar and the subsequent political and economic results.

Professor Janusia Comporte, Ph.D. (UPP: 678CD8), teaches political history at the same university. She will solidify the facts and details of Glorianna's reign. She will also elaborate on her own thoughts of why Glorianna changed from

popular ruler to vicious tyrant in the space of three short years. Her theory, as delineated in her two books on the subject, is that the empress went mad after being jilted by a courtier with whom she was very much in love.

It is possible that the defense will try to enter a plea of "not guilty by reason of insanity." In this case, the prosecution should take the position that, regardless of her present state, she was sane at the time of the Slaughter of Hyldar and use its witnesses and those of the defense to prove it. The prosecution may also call any non-player character as witness; for example, Berinadra Cointer would be only too happy to testify to the atrocities that were perpetrated on her family.

The Defense

Given the popular bias in the case, the defense has its work cut out for it. If the defense counsel has found and listened to the recording hidden in the quill, he will want to wake and interview Duke Gilannd de Raneroes and Colonel Fanar Highmount, 3rd Baron Highmount. If he has not and the tape has destroyed itself, Burdrys will find an excuse to visit him in his office and give him the information. This is a more risky course of action, but Burdrys is driven to it.

The prosecution, in accordance with Tegrone Law, has made available the full text of the order to raze Hyldar. This document needs to be carefully refuted in court, if the defense is to exonerate Glorianna. Burdrys may be able to help, because in his studies of ancient writing instruments, pens, and inks, he has developed his own reputation as a handwriting analyst. If the defense does not learn of this in the course of its investigations, he will volunteer the fact at the trial in order to refute prosecution witnesses. On the other hand, he is not above lying in order to prove Glorianna's innocence.

Defense counsel may be tempted, after interviewing Glorianna, to go for a "not guilty by reason of insanity" plea. While this is permitted under Tegrone Law, it is not a wise decision. The prosecution, in this case, will attempt to prove that, no matter what her condition now, she was sane at the time of the Hyldar incident. To prove it, they will use historians and even the defense's own witnesses.

When the testimony of the two who are in cryosleep is subpoenaed, the Legal Associate may raise an eyebrow at a revival order. It will be obeyed, although the LA will insist on being present during all pretrial questioning. Both prisoners are revived successfully and, after a brief recovery period, they are dressed in black prison robes and escorted to the palace offices of the defense counselor.

It is best if the two men are interviewed separately, but if the attorney decides to speak to both men, neither will tell the complete truth. Both men

are aware that the age in which they find themselves is radically different than the one they left and they are reluctant to reveal too much.

Gilannd is a reserved man, not given to volunteering anything, but answering questions truthfully. Careful questioning will reveal that he was both the lover and chief advisor of the empress.

- If he is asked directly about Hylidar, he will respond that he was out of the capitol at the time of the massacre and was only informed of it later. He may have heard something about the involvement of Colonel Highmount, but he's not sure what, "It has been a thousand years, after all." Of course, if the two men are interviewed together, he says nothing about the Colonel's possible involvement.

- If inquiry of his whereabouts during the Slaughter of Hylidar follows that question, he will respond that he was coordinating efforts against the guerrillas in the Seshwick Highlands.

- If he is asked if he thinks that the empress would (not that she did) issue such an order he snorts and exclaims, "of course not."

- If defense counsel does his job and pushes him as a hostile witness, he will slip when asked yet again about where he was during the Slaughter, and mutters something about a sailing vacation in the south. Beyond that, he cannot be forced to go and insists he know nothing.

Colonel Fanar Highmount, 3rd Baron Highmount, is a different kind of man altogether. While he is also reticent to speak in the presence of his former superior, if questioned separately, he will reveal much. In spite of his former title, he is a spit-and-polish military man with nothing to hide. He is blustery, gruff, and to the point, but he will try his best to fill in the blanks for the defense. The colonel was the field officer-in-charge of the military operation that resulted in the Slaughter of Hylidar. He does not believe he personally was to blame for what happened, but things did get out of hand.

- Even if no one asks, the colonel, who suspects that he is the one on trial here, will state flatly that his orders came directly from Duke Gilannd.

- If asked about the document in the possession of the prosecution, he will swear that he has never seen the document, that orders were seldom written in those days, and that if it exists, it's a forgery.

- If questioned about the Duke's relationship with Glorianna, he will say that he was always in the field, so he does not know, but he has heard they are lovers.

- If asked if he knows where the Duke was during the period in question, he will answer that the Duke's command vehicle, or at least one flying his banner, was seen observing the action at Hylidar.

- What happened at Hylidar? The colonel has no

idea. It was a standard sweep operation in which suspects were to be rounded up. A shot was fired, but he cannot honestly say by which side, and his troops "went mad. Good men, disciplined men, ignored orders and began firing at anything that moved... cats, dogs, kids, didn't matter. I screamed for them to cease fire, but it was as if, in their madness, they didn't even hear me. When the smoke cleared, we lost fifteen men out of a division, and there were no civilians left alive in Hylidar. I still don't understand what happened."

Empress Glorianna

Due to the Tegronese requirement that the accused testify in their own defense, Glorianna must be interviewed and called as a witness. She is being held in special cell built into the palace basement and she is more than ready to talk. Like her fellow cryosleep associates, she is dressed in a simple black prison robe — yet somehow, she makes it a statement of elegance. She carries about her an aura, not just of presumption, but also a very regal presence, the embodiment of authority.

She does not approve of these proceedings and is anything but cooperative. Haughty and proud, her answers are flippant, condescending, and almost arrogant. She believes her first trial was a grave error, and this one is ludicrous in the extreme. She will protest her innocence in every response and she will also insist on being addressed as "Your Imperial Majesty," "Empress Glorianna," or, at the very least, "Glorianna Tegrone." Her answers may be vague or erratic, a condition inflicted upon her, she says, "by that wretched cryosleep. Even my pores are larger than they were." While her answers may elicit pity or laughter, her presence commands respect.

- If asked to state her full name she will reply simply, "Glorianna Tegrone, Empress and Mother of You All."

- If asked that she participated in any way in the Slaughter of Hylidar, she responds "Yes, it was a great festival. I supplied the meat animals and the wine, and the village provided the entertainment."

- If defense counsel asks about her relationship with Duke Gilannd, she laughs. "The dear boy, a bumblebee in a forest of drones. Do you know he was a mere stable tender before I elevated him for Services to the Crown? And such services... Do you think my hair looks nice, short like this? It's sort of growing on me." And then she laughs again.

- Did she sign any documents relevant to Hylidar? "How do I know, I signed documents all day, almost every day. Gilannd, Treshin, my Prime Minister, or Petrare, my Chamberlain, were always waving things under my nose." She scrunches up her face and drops her voice, "Your Majesty, you must sign this immediately, it's for the relief of the poor. Or the commissioning of an officer. Or to finance a

statue to your greater glory." Her voice returns to normal, "Sign, sign, sign. They were worse than the Advertising League with their signs." She laughs again. "I told them to make a stamp."

- Did she always wear her signet and, if so, how many copies existed? "No, I kept the silly thing in my desk, it was heavy and discolored my finger." She pouts.

- Was a stamp made? "Oh, I suppose so, after a while they left me alone unless it was for something so major they feared my wrath. I did actually read some of them, you know. I'm hardly an ignorant peasant, no matter what my detractors say."

- Did she ever order anyone's death? "Yes, Treshin's and Petrare's. Gilann discovered they were traitors and I had their heads removed for it. No one else that I remember. Of course, that was so long ago. I'd like some wine now, please."

Whether Glorianna is guilty or not, the defense must proceed as if she were innocent. The attorney will probably do a better, more impassioned job, however, if he thinks she is without fault in the matter.

While Glorianna must be called to the stand, the defense may choose when she is to be called. If the attorney himself believes her to be innocent or insane, he may want to present her as his final witness. If he thinks she's guilty, he may wish to lead with her, hoping to create a smoke screen through subsequent witnesses and perhaps cause the jury to forget a little about her testimony.

PUBLIC PLEA

Forty-eight hours before the trial, the judge must assemble all parties to hear Glorianna's plea. The jury and all interested non-player characters should be present. Glorianna has the choice of making the plea herself or of having her attorney make it for her. If she elects to have her attorney announce her plea, the session will be brief and the judge will order the plea to be entered and the hearing dismissed.

If she decides to do it herself, those gathered in the courtroom are in for a long harangue, for it is her right to speak before entering her own plea. If she does not do this now, she will at the trial — for after both attorneys are done with their examinations, the judge is required by both custom and law to ask the defendant if she has anything to say on her own behalf.

Glorianna will deliver a long and rambling speech, repeating much of what she said when she was interviewed. But here she will continue with statements that range from her personal beliefs to observations on the day's weather. Her voice changes when she comments on those things not relevant to her reign and becomes almost girlish.

"I am your Mother, so how can you believe I

would hurt you? The sky is dark today; do you think it will rain? If you come back to me, and restore to me my rightful place, I will forgive you all and we can be a family once more. I don't like rain. Once when I was a girl it rained for three weeks and I thought we would all drown. I am innocent of your blood and the blood of your ancestors. Was it not you who drew my blood? Rain is the true test of the spirit of Tegrone, don't you think? Was it not you who rejected your mother in favor of a politic of boredom. You may accuse me of many things, but my Rule was never dull. Monotony makes for a poor people and I made you rich!" She will continue in that vein for a while; finally her voice trails off, she takes her seat, humming her own state anthem.

THE TRIAL

The courtroom is the same one in which the Public Plea was held. Large and ornate, like most public structures on Tegrone, it is comfortably appointed in native woods and the tanned hides of the beasts of the forest. The judge's bench, a high platform that looks like a pulpit, commands a view of the entire room. Large wooden tables are provided for the defense, the prosecution, and the prisoner, with four guards standing in a "prisoner's box" to the left of the defense table. The jury sits on plush, leather-backed benches to the right of the prosecution station.

Once everyone is seated, the judge will toss a coin. While it is airborne, the prosecution will call either heads or tails. When the coin comes to rest, the bailiff will pick it up and announce the results. Whichever side wins the toss begins their presentation first. Closing arguments are the reverse of the coin toss.

The trial proceeds normally, and defense and prosecution may both object to lines of questioning they feel are inappropriate. When both sides have concluded and the judge has asked the defendant if she wishes to make a statement, the case goes to the jury. The judge may wish to "charge" the jury, reminding them that they must base their decision solely on the evidence and testimony given, not on any emotional issues raised.

The jury should deliberate in private, deciding on the guilt or innocence of the accused. Once they have made up their minds, or if they decide they cannot reach a verdict and are "hung," they should return to the court and render their verdict.

The judge will ask Glorianna to rise and hear the verdict, and the foreman of the jury will read it. Whichever way it goes, the crowd will react. (Remember that 50% believe her guilty and 50% either don't care or think the whole trial is an error.) The major characters outside of those in legal roles will react according to their own beliefs. Glorianna herself accepts either decision

stoically, appearing every inch the great ruler she once attempted to be.

Finally, the judge will pass sentence or set Glorianna free — free to haunt the alleys and garbage dumps, for all of her privileges as a citizen remain revoked.

AFTERMATH

If Glorianna has been found innocent, the entire party is taken to the offices of First Minister Colarty to be paid according to the original "contract," less any imposed fines and the defender is given the promised bonus. Colarty tells the characters that they have free run of the city and a week to relax, all expenses paid. He adds that they may then return to their ship with his personal thanks and the thanks of the Tegrone Government. If the ship happened to be a skimmer, he attaches an additional bonus — they may mine the gas giants of the Tegrone system for one month free of taxation.

If Glorianna was found guilty, the bonus goes to the prosecutor, and the contract is paid, again less any fines. However, the revolution began in earnest the moment the verdict was rendered, so no trips to governmental offices are given. Armed dissidents begin shooting up the courtroom in an

attempt to rescue the empress. The guards will protect the characters and return fire. The judge will pay the prosecutor, defense counsel and the jurors, in this case, but they are left with two choices: flee immediately and hope that the rebels have not taken Station Garamunda yet, or join one side or the other as mercenaries.

If they flee, there is a 50% chance that the space station has been taken over by the rebels and they will have to fight their way to their ship. The government has returned their personal effects and will supply weapons to any character without them.

If they choose to stay, the rebels are better funded than the government and will offer not only credits, but also estates and titles when they succeed. Pay scales will depend on combat experience and prowess. Of course, if the rebels lose, they could be executed. The government coughs up much less in the way of payment, but most of the army is on their side. There will be no lands and titles but hospitals and healers for the wounded, with the promise of radical equipment and military support. First Minister Colarty even hints at a permanent, tax-free right to mine the gas giants, whether the characters are miners or not — he may even give them the right to sell it.



2: ALL THE UNIVERSE'S A STAGE

In this adventure the characters may take the roles of either ship's officers or theatrical players — who are also spies for the Imperium. While the role of Captain Sir Cristoro Santerine, Duke de Santerine can be an NPC, it is suggested that he be replaced with one of the player characters. In the course of this adventure, the cast and crew will discover a new, previously unknown race that is almost, but not quite, a cousin to humans — and either forge peaceful relations or create an interstellar war.

THE STORY

Lesser sons of the nobility staff run *The Frolic*, a secure trader that has been refurbished for theatrical performances and heavily armed to protect its crew. The ratings that see to the running of the ship, of course, are base-born, but the officers and the acting troupe, called the Leg Breakers' Company, aboard are all of noble origins. This can lead to some unusual and potentially humorous conflicts in off-duty situations; an ensign who is the third son of a duke, for example, out-ranks an off-duty commander who is the second son of a baron. Of course, when active assignment resumes, normal naval rankings and protocol hold regardless of social position.

The entertainers also double as Imperial Advance Agents, whose task it is to gather information and analyze the military, economic, and political situations on worlds not yet in the fold of the Third Imperium. In Milieu 0, explorers and scout teams are moving out into uncharted space far from the comfort of Sylea. The data they obtain enable Imperial officials to create a triage system, dedicating invasion forces to worlds with the highest potential yields and least amount of planetary defenses first, saving the stronger or poorer worlds for later campaigns. The conquest of more advanced planets has already spread from Core through the Corridor Sector, and Massilia is almost completely absorbed. All players in the theatrical troupe as well as lower ranking officers, regardless of actual title or lack of one, are called Lady or Lord by courtesy, since they are all scions of noble houses.

The characters' assignment will take them out of the charted sectors and into a frontier space beneath Massilia, temporarily codenamed Enigma. While they are to investigate whatever lies before them, they are also to look for signs of a rumored civilization called the Vrast. Military intelligence has received numerous reports of a high-tech civilization just outside the bounds of known space and wants to know if they are 1) a real presence and 2) a threat to the Imperium.

At one point, an outside force in the form of a Vrast silvermane cell may direct one of the characters' actions. If this does occur, the referee should take the character's player aside and explain to him what is going on. The character should

behave as if nothing is happening, that everything is normal although his body, including speech centers, is under outside control. His thoughts are his own, but there is no way to communicate them. His actions will become more apparent for the other characters to discover what is going on. What happens then depends on the crew and whether any of them can solve the mystery of the gold disk. (See "The Swamp" on page 23.)

THE VRAST

The Vrast are, of course, real. They are intelligent and aggressive, but not quite human. The Droyne seeded the Vrast on several worlds in this unexplored sector, as they did primitive humans in other sectors. The outstanding difference here is that the ancestors of the Vrast were Neanderthal, not human, cave dwellers.

The Vrast are *The Frolic's* real problem. As the result of an incident involving an ore ship, the characters' primary mission is to learn more about this race. When contact is made, the characters could cause a total armed conflict — a viscous genocidal war. On the other hand, if they are diplomatic, they may be able to make peace and sew the seeds to bring the Vrast into the Imperium. The choice depends on their attitudes and prejudices. The referee should make the Vrast appear to be as physically repulsive as possible, while at the same time, portray them to be sympathetic victims — the characters' choices should not be easy.

Vrast Physiology

The evolution of Vrast contrasts from humans in several respects. They are shorter and stockier than humans are, with large foreheads and heavy, bushy eyebrows. They are also stronger than humans (average Strength A) with slightly less agility and dexterity (average Dexterity 6). Their endurance, however, is just this side of amazing (average C). Both hair and eye colors range from brown to black; there are no blond-haired, blue-eyed Vrast. There are some Vrast who can pass for human, but they are relatively few — interbreeding with humans, if it ever occurred, ended when the Droyne plucked them for seeding far from human contact.

Their eyes are overly sensitive to light. Not in any crippling way, but most of them wear dark

glasses if they are outside when the sun is high.

Vrast speak the languages of all of the humans with whom they have come in contact. But their own language tends to be harsh and guttural. When they speak, in any language, their sentences tend to be short and to the point and their voices seem to attack words, twisting around them like wrestlers on a mat. They rarely waste words with adjectives or adverbs and tend to speak slowly, as if deep in thought.

Vrast Psychology

The Vrast evolved with certain psionic abilities that they never lost. While they are not telepaths per se, they can link their minds into a single consciousness when threatened or in combat. The linked mind is then under the control of the "silvermanes," a collective or "cell" consisting of the six most elderly Vrast in the fleet, brigade, or fighting body. The range of the collective mind is about one light year, although they can be boosted through additional cells of silvermanes. The decision-making speed of the collective mind is, for all practical purposes, instantaneous. The summoning of the collective is a natural, automatic mental reflex to life-threatening situations (like combat), although it can be intentionally created by any cell of six silvermanes as well. There is one Silvermane cell for every sub-fleet of three naval vessels.

The normal Vrast mental processes are also different from their human counterparts. The Vrast take more time to assess situations and arrive at courses of action than do human minds and frequently come to the same results following very different paths. This is not to say they are less intelligent, just that Vrast brains are otherwise wired. Vrast are careful, methodical researchers who plod from one development to the next in a logical progression. However, with a life span of close to three hundred years, they have more time to think, plan and create. Perhaps this is why, with a few anachronisms, the Vrast tech level is 11+.

Vrast Society

The Vrast have no formal, organized religion and no clergy. Their beliefs are held in common and are considered as the natural order of things, not something "outside" which they can choose to believe in or ignore. Every child learns how to conduct the simple ceremonies and rituals that surround the changing of seasons and the solstices, the celebrations of the lunar conjunctions, and the thanksgiving observances following the end of a long drought or rainy season.

The nature of the brains, however, has imposed on them a set of ethics perhaps unique in the known universe. Because the mental link reveals all of the Vrast minds that are in it when active, the Vrast are simply incapable of lying. With

other races they may hedge the truth, revealing only what they want to be known, but even those half-truths will be factual. For the same reason there is little crime or domestic strife, and there has never been a revolution in their entire history.

Vrast Culture

The Vrast may have left the caves, but the caves never left the Vrast. Many continue to live underground in tightly knit communities within massive caverns. The décor of those who choose to live in artificial homes on the surface is almost universally done in underground themes: walls are painted with rock formations or use actual stone, craggy pools and rock fireplaces are common, and some even go to the extreme of reproducing stalactites and stalagmites. Lighting tends to be subdued, furniture solid, and heating on the cool side.

The Vrast never developed the culinary arts to any great degree, so their food tends to be simple cooked meat or fish and stewed or raw vegetables. The one subject at which they do excel is brewing. Vrast beers and ales are strong, potent, and full-bodied. They make no wines, but they do have a powerful grain brandy blended from several of their ales and freeze-distilled.

Their arts reflect their origins as well. Sculpture is highly prized as both an art and a physical activity, but painting is almost completely ignored, being considered a pastime of children and the mentally deficient. Pottery making is a thriving but utilitarian art. While Vrast technology could easily mass-produce such items as plates, cups, and bowls, the Vrast prefer to make these items themselves. They are "primitive" out of choice, not because they are inferior.

Many Vrast write and perform poetry, although the standard tends to be terse lines and short stanzas rambling into long epics. Novels and plays are not Vrast norms, although, peculiarly, some of their epics have been made into operas. The Vrast do enjoy music, and developed the bagpipes independent of human culture. Pipers are well paid, and wandering professionals are gladly fed and housed without charge.

Nag Varami Hrast

The entire philosophy of the Vrast is contained in these three words. They were taken, or "saved" from their point of view, by the Droyne, and the Droyne did in fact preserve their race. Their word for humans, *daqushin*, literally translated, means "the (blood) hunters." *Nag varami hrast* means, roughly "no more days of death." The Vrast know humanity as the ancient enemy and their oral history, still practiced although they have been literate since the Droyne took them, preserves the horrors they suffered on Old Earth. They are also aware that the Vrast were not the only transplantees of the

Droyne. When their technology developed rudimentary space travel, they discovered the ancient enemy lurking close at hand. Based on their knowledge of human kind, the Vrast took action. They set out to conquer every new planet they found — in preventative self-defense. The Vrast are gentle masters and fierce, strong warriors. They fear humans, but do not hate them. Vrast never kill without cause or reason, and the humans under their “protection” are free to do as they please — so long as they do not threaten, or appear to threaten, the Vrast. If they do, retribution is swift and final with little mercy shown.

And while the Imperium has little or no knowledge of the Vrast, the Vrast has made it their business to know about the Imperium. After all, their survival depends on “knowing the enemy.” The Vrast wait patiently for discovery, which they know will come. It is just a matter of time, and there is plenty of that.

Vrast Politics

The Vrast political structure is a system of interlocking clan relationships. At its root are individual families, each headed by a tarash. The tarash may be either male or female, selected during the bonding ceremony by the casting of *dub-war*, or “the bones” (usually fragments of the actual bones of the couple’s ancestors), although in any case, descent is matrilineal and reckoned from the female line.

The tarash of each given geographical area meet at the equinoxes, twice a year, in a subclan council. They in turn elect a taran (equivalent to a baron) who chairs the council when it meets, and otherwise makes all the executive decisions for a particular collection of families. Clans above the subclan level are people who share, not the same bloodlines, but similar occupations or even hobbies. All the tarans of a given clan meet four times a year and they elect a tshar (clan chief, roughly a count) who is the head of the clan. The tshar of the clans meet once a year in high council, during the winter solstice. They are responsible for electing DjaVrast, the “emperor” who embodies all of the people. They are also charged with reporting to and advising the emperor as well as relaying the emperor’s decisions and concerns back down the chain.

These positions are all held for life, unless a council feels its leader is guilty of some infraction, either cultural or legal, at which time the members can vote the miscreant out of office and select a new one.

Because the military is also a collection of clans, they use the same titles, except DjaVrast. A ship’s captain is a tarash, a squadron commander is a taran, and an admiral is a tshar. Intermediate ranks are preceded by the prefix “jyr” (an executive officer or a “captain” of a one- or two-man

vessel would be “jyrtarash”) and ratings are simply referred to by their job titles.

The silvermanes constitute another sort of nobility. Honored and respected by all, each bears the honorific “Shria” (revered uncle) before their name. While in reality they bear no formal titles, and acquire their positions through age and psionic ability, even the DjaVrast pays homage to the silvermanes.

Vrast Technology

The tech level of the Vrast is 11+, or nearly that of the Imperium. There are major differences, however. Weapons and jump ship technology is quite similar, although Vrast designs tend to be more functional and less aesthetic than the proud patterns of the Imperium. The biggest difference is in civilian communications. The Vrast, for example, have no tri-dee, no communications corporations, and no broadcasting... not even radio. While there is radio and video communication between ships and wherever necessary, the Vrast prefer what little entertainment they have to be live and in small gatherings. Massive commercial broadcasting systems simply never occurred to them. The link also makes electronic communications less important to military operations than it might otherwise be. Most other technologies are in place and on-par with human civilizations in the Imperium.

Vrast Starships

The biggest difference between ships of the Imperium and Vrast vessels is in their design. Vrast ships are crafted to look like asteroids; not for any military reasons, but done purely for aesthetics. Regardless of size, the outer hulls are composed of stone. The Vrast have worked with stone for thousands of years and the intricate designs of their vessels’ surface features should come as no surprise. A slurry of ground stone is laid over the metal hull of the ships, then larger rocks are added while the slurry is still wet. When the material hardens, it is painted with the brown, gray, and black textured paints the Vrast use on almost everything. The material gives a +1 rating to the ship’s armor.

Specifics of the Vrast ships in size and design, other than the armor enhancement, have been purposely left vague so that the referee may customize Vrast fleets and sub-fleets to the size and power required for game balance. The armament carried by Vrast ships will be almost identical to the armament found on Imperial ships of the same size.

Emergency facilities, though, are unique. Each Vrast vessel encases within its shell a second and smaller ship. When a warship is in danger of being overwhelmed, the tarash can blow the outer hull, metal and stone, to project speeding shrapnel in

an ever-expanding sphere of protection while the inner, secondary ship is sealed and ready for action. Ships surviving the shrapnel storm are usually astonished to see a lighter version of the ship they thought they destroyed emerging from the cloud of metal and stone, lasers blasting cheerfully away.

The drives are the same, although they differ in design and placement. The Vrast do have both grav systems and jump drives. One major difference is in engineering command. The tarash of any vessel is also the chief engineer, as are most squadron tarans. The Vrast hold that no one should command anything he can't fix.

THE SETUP

If a player character replaces Captain Sir Cristoro Santerine, Duke de Santerine, adapt the scenes accordingly. The directive concerning their orders and mission, however, must be read to the assembled crew and cast.

The Frolic is docked at Corstat 0159, Starboard Coupling Bay F. The Corstat, dubbed "Valencia" for unknown reasons, is a bright orange station in orbit around Lashupil (3037/E665100-4) in the Core Sector. It is primarily a military re-supply and command center near the edge of Core, but it also has its civilian components.

The Frolic's current crew is just returning from a three-year mission into the Fornast Sector. Now there's only a tick left on the clock before the ship is turned over to a new crew, and the old one will board a transport for a pleasure world where the members will enjoy a well deserved six-months of R&R.

Captain Sir Fargo Ransom, his crew, and the Leg Breakers' Company are assembled on the bridge when the characters and the new crew arrive. The ship's computer plays the ancient two-note boson's whistle as the party steps into the oversized command center. Captain Ransom smiles a weary smile, looks to Sir Cristoro Santerine, Duke de Santerine (UPP: 889CDF), the new captain of *The Frolic*, snaps to attention and salutes. "Sir, in the name of the Imperium and according to orders received this date, this ship is yours." His face breaks into a grin as he adds, "Good luck, Chris."

"Thank you, Fargo, I shall endeavor to keep her name on the honor rolls, as you have done." Returning his salute, and to the surprise of the crew, Captain de Santerine embraces Captain Ransom. The two men roomed together at the academy and served their first duty assignments together as newly minted ensigns. They are old friends. "Can I buy you a drink, Captain?" Ransom asks.

"Only the first round, Captain."

Ransom calls to his First Officer, "First, dismiss the crew and company."

"Aye, Sir. Crew and company dismissed!" The men and women lately of *The Frolic* relax, pick up their bags, and leave, joking with the new crew and cast members on their way to the station quarters they will occupy while waiting for the transport. The two crews will meet again in the ship's bar and the new members can learn a few things from the retiring Leg Breakers.

De Santerine nods to his First Officer, Commander Dame Caterina du Maalere (UPP: 798CCDB), to call the newly assembled crew and company to attention. Then he speaks.

"In accordance with Imperial Standing Orders, I shall enter the following commands into the record and in the hearing of all here present. Computer, record."

"Recording."

"We are to proceed through the Massilia Sector, stopping twice at our discretion for the purpose of training runs for the acting company. On completion of the temporary training duty assignments, we are to proceed out of Massilia and into the uncharted space of the sector below it, currently code named Sector Enigma.

"There we are to investigate and report on any inhabited worlds we may encounter and, most specifically, to search for signs of a rumored civilization called the "Vrast" that is said to control the entire sector. The Vrast are recorded as a myth as far back as The Vargr Campaigns, but new reports suggest they may be more than a legend told to midshipman to keep them awake at night. Unlike the assignments you are used to, good gentles, we are on our own." He folds the orders and stretches out his hand. Commander du Maalere takes the sheets and tucks them into her waist belt for hard filling later at her station.

The Captain continues, "*The Frolic* is currently being refitted and re-supplied, therefore, see Chief Barshon for your berth assignments, find your quarters and stow your gear. Those of you with military uniforms, change into the costumes you will find in your staterooms and turn your uniforms over to the quartermaster on Deck 15 in the station. They'll be there when we get back. Remember to turn over *everything* that in anyway reflects your military status — insignia, medals, ship or troop patches, even naval knives and army socks. As of a two-day from now at 0800, this ship is to all appearances a civilian vessel. Until then, you are all on liberty. Dismissed!"

After Chief Petty Officer Barton Barson (UPP: A6CBA7) issues the crew their designated quarters and they stow their gear with the Quartermaster Corps, they are free to roam the station.

				Surface		Interior						
Crew				10	Pass	10	Low	0	Cargo	0	1	
Length					Width		Height		Tons	200	2	
Quality					Reliability		Built		Overhaul		3	
											4	
											5	
											6	
				2	Large Battery	3	2	0	0		2	
				2	Med. Battery-Barbette						3	
											4	
Name/Type				2	Maneuver	M	2				5	
The Frolic				2	Jump	J	0				6	
Mission				2	Power	P	3				7	
Exploration/First Contact				40	Armor	Armor					8	
Comments											9	
See text.											10	
											11	
											12	

SHIP CARD

FORM 41

The Frolic

Secure traders were the navy planning staff's choice for these missions. They are very large and extremely well armored. Other than increasing the firepower of these vessels with the addition of camouflaged meson batteries, there was little extra military prep needed.

Besides the military adaptations, the ships were fitted as showboats. Main cargo bays were converted into large performance theaters equipped with full lighting banks, seating for 300, dressing rooms, and rear-screen holo projectors for unusual set designs. A partition separates a library with over ten thousand volumes of plays, skits, and comedy routines going back as far as Old Earth's 16th Century. Separate bays were redesigned to store props and costumes, and others contain archives of up to 1,500 puppets, both hand and marionette, and workshops for creating more of them. One theater does have a large tri-dee screen with a library of contemporary vids, but it is only used when the acting company needs to go off-ship for military operations — in which case the ship's captain will announce that the cast is ill and present a popular trid in place of the scheduled entertainment. Since there is never a charge for these presentations, there are usually no complaints.

In addition to the theatrical features, there are fifteen two-man escape pods equipped with low berth bunks and automated deep-sleep controls. Located beneath the stage, there is an emergency bridge with engineering and fire control functions.

TWO DAYS ON VALENCIA

Like most Core stations, Valencia holds a mix of military and civilian features. The usual military installations, which involve most of the station, are complete for servicing and re-supplying Imperial naval vessels. Refitting and machine shops, rigorously manned weapons bays, cyber repair shops for robots and automated systems, and even a uniform manufacturing center can be found here.

Lift tubes, called by ID card and voice-activated, will take the characters to any level for which they have clearance. A station directory of all thirty levels of the Valencia is posted at each lift tube, and touching on a map will bring up on-screen a listing of the facilities on a particular level except Levels 18, 19, and 20, which are classified and will not respond to anyone not authorized to access them.

With two-day liberty, there are many opportunities to explore Valencia. Most of the retiring Leg Breakers will want to head to a comfortable place to relax. The civilian shops, which exist mainly to sell service men and women products they don't need at prices they shouldn't have to pay, do their business on two centrally-located decks in the heart of the station. This first deck, Swan's Promenade, serves the needs of the nobility, high-ranking officers (who are usually nobles anyway), and any others who can afford it. The Senior Officer's Star Lounge, staffed by navy personnel but managed as a concession by Deneb Food Systems, is on Swan's, as are tailor shops specializing in uniforms, five-star restaurants, and most other facilities usually found only on large luxury liners catering to aristocrats.

It is to the Senior Officer's Star Lounge that Captains Ransom and de Santerine meet to discuss one's past and the other's future. The actors coming off duty invite the characters and the new acting company to join them at The Green Bard's, a tavern/restaurant with an Old Earth façade done in veneers of genuine wood, real paper menus, and human waitstaff.

Both enlisted ratings and officers commonly refer to the other deck, the Lower Promenade, as "The Swamp." The Swamp attends to every conceivable desire, plus a few that are inconceivable. But it's not just enlisted men and women who are drawn to The Swamp. Many noble officers often put on civilian garb or even rating's uniforms to dally in here, unfettered by the conventions of class.

Bars and gambling houses are prominent on this deck, as well as less reputable establishments.

Sensory-deprivation holo units, called Dream Chambers (or just SenDep), can recreate anything that cannot be had in real time. And, for truly dedicated gunners and gunner-wannabees, hologame palaces provide thrills and target practice.

There is also a non-commissioned officers' club called the Chief's Domain, but it is not frequented as much as TaTwoo's, a navy theme bar that creates the illusion that officers do not exist and that enlisted crewmembers run the Imperium. The walls are covered with portraits of enlisted personnel that, though dead, became legends in their own time. Reproductions of medals and awards surround the portraits, and even the drinks have names like "2nd Mate Pensher's Brandy Bliss," "CPO Hravard's Rum Punch," and "Able Spacer Hensen's Barley Brew."

View from the Top

Commander du Maalere, First Officer of *The Frolic* is seated at a darkened booth, watching as Captain de Santerine enters the Senior Officers' Lounge. The waitstaff straightens and the maitre d' scuttles over to the desk. De Santerine is usually amused by what effect the silver ducal braid he wears on his left shoulder has, but at the moment he is distracted. Commander du Maalere glances away to avoid being noticed, as First Officer, her duty is to the ship, not just to the captain, and she is curious about the mission and the Vrast. She is close enough to eavesdrop and will recount the captains' conversations to the other officers, including those in the acting company.

Captain Ransom waves a glass at de Santerine and, ignoring the maitre d', he hurries to join his old friend.

"Sit down, Chris, take a load off."

At the intrusion of the waiter, the duke merely points at Ransom's glass and nods. The waiter goes off to prepare the order.

"Fargo, what's really going on here? Who the hell are the Vrast?"

"You always did come to point, Your Grace. We had no personal contact with the Vrast, if they do indeed exist, but one hears certain things. Two months ago, at least according to a NavOps commander I shared a few pints with, a Belaris Mining Corporation ore ship, *Gold Digger*, experienced a navigation malfunction and wound up outside of their assigned sector of Massilia. While going about repairs, the crewmembers were hailed by large vessel. Although a big blip apparently did appear on their sensors, all they saw out the view port was rock. Anyway, the hail was brusque and authoritative and demanded they heave-to and be boarded. Fearing pirates, the captain of the ore ship opened fire at the mass detected by the sensors. Just before *Gold Digger* died with all hands, they managed to fire off a distress capsule with a computer

record of the event. The capsule's signal was received by a liner, picked up and taken to the nearest naval base as per regulations. The officer I spoke to viewed the recording. He said he could not be sure the other ship wasn't pirates, but he didn't think it was a human, either. There was only exterior video on the recording, no visual contact with the speaker." Fargo drains his drink and signals for another. "I don't envy you on this one, Chris."

Commander du Maalere has learned what she came to discover. As the two captains begin to exchange tales of "No lie, there we were . . ." she slips unnoticed out onto the promenade and off to find her shipmates.

A Night at The Green Bard's

The characters can hardly refuse the Leg Breakers' invitation. In the first place, all of them are likely to be novices so they need tips on performing. In the second place, they are new to the station and could use guides. The Leg Breakers' tales can also lay the groundwork for later encounters.

Entering the tavern is more like entering a grog shop in ancient England. The waitstaff are called knaves and wenches, the beer is called ale and pours freely, and the meals are reconstituted beef steak in several varieties and haunch of faux chicken. "Genuine Venison" is also on the menu — at Cr200. The Green Bard has several back rooms for large parties, and the characters' own party, about thirty strong, is led by a shapely wench into the Boar's Head Room.

There are seated at an immense table with pitchers of ale at every four places and menus already on the table. As the evening wears on, the former cast of *The Frolic*, entertainers all, relate their experiences. This is a good chance for the characters to learn their new trades.

• "Miners," says one, "Let me tell you about miners and farmers. The brain of your average rock digger or sod grubber would dwarf an amoeba, I admit, but what good is a liquid out of its container? If you ever play a farming world, mining outposts, or a hard scrabble asteroid, forget the classics. Shakespeare is something you do with a long stick. Taliarea of Kange sounds like a foreigner to them. And don't ever mention the word "theater," they think it has to do with the tri-dee. If you want them rolling in the isles, telling you everything you want to know *and* paying you for the privilege, go with slapstick. They love it! One pratfall and these guys will give you the security specs for a whole system. Start hammering on each other's heads and they'll throw in the local codebooks. And if you simply must do a play, dig out the hand puppets and do Punch and Judy — brings down the house"

- “There are only three things you have to avoid: local politics, world politics, and system politics. Never, never, *ever* do a mortsaoul — the security hicks on the bush planets have no sense of humor when it comes to their bosses. You’ll find your passports and landing privileges revoked at least, and your neck stretched at worst.”

- “A little technology is a dangerous thing. You’ll find systems expanding into the outer worlds that still wear lead-throwing sidearms. Then there are those who still live by the sword, and no other weapon has “honor.” Once, we even found somebody who must have hung on since the Age of Man. They had grav cars and trucks that still worked, but they were so superstitious they left newborn twins at crossroads to die out of fear — twins are bad juju, y’know. Billy the Bard goes over well on planets like that, especially Hamlet; they think they’re sophisticated.”

- “Vrast? Yeah, we’ve heard of them. I personally think they are a myth, rather like corban stones or the third appearance of the Mhadi. I’ll drink to their health, but they are not real.”

The Swamp

If the characters don’t think of it themselves, sooner or later one *The Frolic’s* former company will suggest they go “slumming,” down to The Swamp. Next to TaTwoo’s is a tattoo parlor called Ravi’s Flesh Art. If none of the characters feel the need to decorate themselves, one of the NPCs will.

Ravi is a one-armed artist. Truly talented, he will create or recreate any desired work of art, and do it painlessly. He is also a former Marine sergeant who lost his left arm in a brush war to absorb a minor planet in the Betelgeuse system and was pensioned off with enough money to buy this shop. Ravi is also a Vrast, one of those few who pass for human. He has been an agent of the Vrast Empire since his second decade, and looked forward to going home when he retired. The Vrast, though, have a horror of disfigurement and so, when Ravi lost his arm, he had no choice but to continue in exile, picking up what information he can in The Swamp and sending it back. While not happy, Ravi is content to work for Vrast independence, he cannot be bought. But, while gathering information, Ravi also dispenses misinformation aimed at creating confusion and, he hopes, fear. During the laser tattoo session, Ravi will ask questions and give opinions, all in curt short sentences.

- “Where ya headed?” Since their orders are not secret and since everyone on this station has at least a minor clearance, the characters may tell him.

- “Enigma, heard o’ that. Alien Sector. Vrast. Spiders or somethin’. Big ships. Big Meson guns. Scary.” If asked where he heard this, he grunts, “old girines hear things.”

Finally, as he is finishing, he says, “Got some-

thin’ ya can have.” He fishes in his pocket for a small, gold disk on a similar chain; it appears to be valuable. The disk bears a symbol on one side and is blank on the other. The background of the symbol looks rather like intertwined grapevines and the strange symbol itself, bearing a resemblance to a language character, is superimposed over them. While the characters may think it vaguely familiar, it resembles nothing they have ever seen. He hands it to one of the new company players and says, “Wear this. Good Luck. Woulda been my head, not for this.”

He will not let the party leave without accepting the disk, playing the insulted gift-giver if he must. What the character to whom it was presented does with it after that is up to him. However, the consequences of keeping it could be serious.

The disk is a link-reception node that allows a Vrast silvermane link to control the actions, but not the thoughts (they are too alien to the Vrast), of that character.

If the character throws the disk away as soon as they leave the tattoo parlor, it leaves the story. If it is stowed along with other personal effects, it will play a role. If he or she wears it or even just keeps it in a pocket, the disk will play a major role.

After giving the characters a guided tour and a good time, the Leg Breakers’ Company heads for their own quarters to grab a few hours of sleep before shipping out. Sometime during the evening the party was joined by *The Frolic’s* new executive officer and as soon as the Leg Breakers leave, she relates the conversation between the captains that she “just happened to hear.”

The new company is on its own with another day to explore the station before their scheduled departure. While they learn little else of substance, they may make use of the station’s facilities and may hear additional rumors.

ON WITH THE MISSION!

At 0800 the crew and the cast assembles in *The Frolic’s* Main Theater. By tradition, before an acting ship leaves for its first assignment, they must choose a name for the troupe. The name can be anything, although such names usually reflect older theatrical customs, as did the Leg Breakers’.

Once that is done, *The Frolic’s* crew heads for their duty stations and the acting company goes to the low berth area. The ship is required to make two training stops on friendly worlds in the Massilia Sector before proceeding to Enigma Sector. The choice of destination is left to the referee and the performances to be given to the characters. The acting characters, though, should actually perform something — plays, skits, brief comedy routines... anything. How they successfully deal with the Vrast may well depend on their ability to read an audience and respond to it. The remarks of the Leg

Breakers' Company in *The Green Bard* may be used as guides for such performances and their likely reception with certain types of public in attendance.

If they haven't already, by the time they reach the Massilia Sector, the characters should have learned of what is being called Gold Digger Incident. If not, any people they encounter on any world on which they land will be more than happy to fill them in on the "true facts." They will hear the following in taverns, restaurants, or parties held after one of their performances. The "true facts" include all previous rumors but also these:

- An unknown electronic damper suppressed Gold Digger's weapon systems. (False.)

- The ship was boarded either by hideous aliens or viscous pirates and all hands were bludgeoned to death. (False.)

- There was one survivor who escaped in a pod, unknown to the navy. He is recovering in a hospital on whichever world *The Frolic* runs across this rumor. (True.)

- There were at least 10 ships in action against the ore carrier. Three of those were crippled. (False.)

- The ship's markings were straight out of the history books — Vargr. (False, the Vrast do not mark their ships.)

- Their alien eyes are oversensitive to light. (True. But there is no way anyone could know this — just one of those lucky guess rumors.)

The characters, will of course, want to interview the survivor. His name is Hiram Shavr and he was a Loaders' Mate on *Gold Digger*. When the characters enter the hospital, they are taken to a cryogenic recovery room where Shavr is just coming to his senses. The doctor in charge will only let them stay for a five minutes, so questions should be kept to a minimum. He speaks slowly and with difficulty, almost like he is trying to rediscover how to talk. Shavr is unaware that he is the only survivor, and the doctor asks the party not to inform him of the fact in fear of his reaction.

If the characters ask him what happened, he will shake his head. This is too broad a question for him to deal with. The doctor will ask them to "keep it simple."

When asked if he knows who attacked *Gold Digger*, he will reply, "Don't know. We never saw 'em. Bridge went on the comm to let us all know what was goin' on. I was in the hold. There was some kind of garbled hail and captain said one minute there was an asteroid where one shouldn't da been and the next minute it was firing at us."

If the characters ask him how he escaped, the doctor will shake his head and call the interview to a close. There is nothing more to be learned from the crewman anyway, since he was not directly involved in the conflict and was not on the bridge. The one solid piece of evidence the characters have come away with is a weak, but accurate,

description of the Vrast vessel.

Second Planet Fall

The second training run for the acting company should be held on a world as close to the new Enigma Sector as possible. After setting the course to the next performance, the captain gives orders to both the Operations Officer and the Sensor Station to "watch for asteroids or large pieces of space debris that appear to be moving contrary to their standard orbits."

As *The Frolic* approaches its assigned orbit around the planet, all actors who remain in cryosleep are awakened. On the bridge, the Sensor Operator sings out, "Bogey, sir. Small asteroid in Geosynchronous orbit around the planet, 200 kilometers out. Sir, it just launched a small canister that went to jump. Could be a message beacon."

"Can you track it?" asks the captain.

"No sir, it's gone. But there was a high-speed energy burst transmitted at the same time. The target, sir... the target appears to be *The Frolic*, sir."

The disk that Ravi forced on one of the characters is now activated. All emergency drone launches of Vrast scout ships automatically trigger an activation beacon that zeros in on the closest receiver within one light year.

If the character who accepted the disk disposed of it on the station, nothing happens. If it was placed with unused gear, its activation merely means that the Vrast have a locator signal on board that may become a problem when the Vrast get in range, since it creates a "heads-up" target. If the character is wearing or carrying the disk, he or she may feel a slight, brief warming sensation spread throughout the body, not a particularly unpleasant experience, at the moment of activation. If the character connects the sensation to the disk, and reports it, the golden disk may be disposed of or examined by the Communications Officer, depending on the decision of the character.

If the disk is examined, it will be found to be harmless. It has a strange symbol over intertwined vines on one side and what looks like an abstract fingerprint on the other. It is solid metal and cannot be opened. The "fingerprint" is actually a brain map of the person who carries it and becomes imprinted after three days of contact. It develops this pattern as it is worn or carried about and, when the unit is activated, allows a silvermane cell free access to the subject's motor neurons and synapses, permitting the hapless character to be worn like a suit.

If the examining officer shows the backside of the disk to the bearer, and if the bearer remembers that back of the disk as being smooth when he got it, he should report that fact. The officer will then ask how it came into his or her possession. If the disk is not destroyed, but kept in a safe or otherwise stored, it continues to act as a beacon. If

it is returned to the character, or if the character never suspects the gold disk, the actions of that character come under the control of the Vrast as soon as a ship bearing a cell comes into range.

If the device is jettisoned from the ship, it will continue to act as a beacon. If it is destroyed (through smelting, shattering it into pieces, etc.), it will cease to function.

At the same time, the bridge crew reports that the asteroid appears to be approaching. "Sir, that rock is starting to power up grav engines and weapons." Reports the Sensor Station.

Choices

The captain has several choices. He can try to hail the vessel and discuss its presence in this system with the Vrast scout. In this case, the scout will simply give his rank and name ("Jyrtarash Nratar") and state that he is engaged in system survey for his government. (This is, of course, true. All Vrast scouts automatically map every system they approach, even known ones — it keeps the fleet's star maps up-to-date.)

Presently out-gunned, outnumbered, and stalling until the arrival of the reinforcements demanded in his message buoy, Nratar will suggest a face-to-face meeting to straighten out any misunderstandings. If a meeting is arranged, he will want to hold it on *The Frolic*, both to gather information about the curious ship and to protect his own vessel. That proposal is probably unacceptable to the humans, for much the same reasons. If the meeting is held on *The Frolic*, Nratar will be contemptuous of his hosts and praying for the swift arrival of the sub-fleet. He will see the apparent comfort of the bridge and quarters as decadence, the characters' wealth displayed in the form of jewelry, watches, and clothing as a vulgar exhibition of financial status, and their ranks and titles as pompous and presumptuous.

More probably, however, one side or another will suggest that the meeting be held planet-side. If such a meeting occurs, the actors will get a chance at interspecies diplomacy — provided no one reveals that *The Frolic* is actually an Imperial Naval Vessel. If that happens, Nratar will merely play a waiting game until the summoned fleet arrives. He will give non-committal answers to everything and says that he has no authority to disclose anything.

All the World's a Stage

To keep the true nature of their ship from Nratar, though, the entertainers will have to perform. The people of this world want them to — they have been looking forward to it — and the troupers cannot escape their fate. After the acting company meets Nratar, they will have to assess what sort of performance to give in "his honor."

Since the Vrast has never seen any kind of theatrical act, this could be tricky, even dangerous. A serious or violent drama like *King Lear* may be viewed by their guest as reality, rather than a play, prompting Nratar to jump in and protect one of the characters.

While humor is not a specific Vrast trait, they do laugh. But again, the choices are limited. Political humor is meaningless to them, as is humor based on work, domestic, or military situations. Even slapstick, performed by humans or other races, is not a good idea. The first actor struck may find he has an unwanted ally. If any of these are tried with live actors, Nratar may conclude that these humans are crazy and advise the sub-fleet taran that they'd be an easy conquest.

If the Vrast is shown the puppets, however, he will marvel. They are not creatures, that much is obvious to him, so if they are hit or fall on a stage, he will view it as at least "clever." Almost any puppet performance will win him over, but given the dour disposition of the Vrast, Punch-and-Judy would perhaps work best.

In this scenario, the Vrast sub-fleet arrives two days later and Nratar will be pleased to make introductions and assist in drawing up a treaty of mutual borders.

On the other hand, de Santerine could also call for battle stations and power up *The Frolic's* own weapons. In this case, Nratar will make a run for deep space and jump. If *The Frolic's* engines are not on line, or if she is otherwise unprepared, she'll never catch the scout. If she doesn't stop the ship, it will rendezvous with the Vrast sub-fleet and lead them into the system.

If the ship does catch the Vrast scout, Nratar opens fire with lasers. It would be a simple task for *The Frolic* to destroy the scout, but such action is tantamount to a declaration of war against the Vrast Empire. The Vrast sub-fleet is two days out and it will come into the system with all weapons charged and looking for targets.

The Gold Disk

If the disk was destroyed, the results will depend on the interaction between the players, crew, and the Vrast. While the system location was sent in the message buoy, the silvermanes will have lost their biggest advantage and, despite Nratar's recommendations, the sub-fleet will find itself dealing with an unknown. In this case, the Vrast will hail *The Frolic* and be more than willing to discuss the situation. Even if the captain reveals the military nature of his vessel, things should proceed much like the events in "All the World's a Stage." After all, the Vrast will still be curious about the "theater," and it's a simple courtesy to extend. If it goes well, it may even smooth relations between the two empires.

If the golden disk was stowed and not worn, it is acting as a beacon for the Vrast sub-fleet. The beacon, routed through the silvermane cell, can pinpoint *The Frolic's* location to its precise co-ordinates. If the scout was destroyed, the Vrast come in shooting with deadly accuracy, ignoring all hails. In this event, peace is not possible (see "Further Adventures" to continue).

If the scout ship was not destroyed, they will be willing to talk first. In this case, if the captain identifies the ship as a "traveling performance vessel," the Vrast will be curious. The captain can then invite them to attend. Refer to "All the World's a Stage," and add the sub-fleet senior officers to the audience. It is still possible to prevent a war if the actors and crew play their parts well.

If the disk was kept and worn by any crewman, then, in any scenario that ends in conflict, the disk becomes operational when the fleet is still a day away. The Vrast silvermane cell will first force the character to transmit all computer logs, ship diagrams and blueprints, engine data, weapons capability data and crew health reports over the ship's communication system. The silvermanes will do their best to keep this action covert, implanting the thought that non-cooperation means an excruciatingly painful death. The most likely place for the data transmission to occur is in on the Emergency Bridge beneath the stage.

From that point on, the Vrast silvermane cell controls the character's actions, though not his thoughts. Still, he cannot convey what is happening to him, nor can he act in anyway that might reveal the presence of an unwanted party. He will appear to be normal, not zombie-like, and may even behave in the usual manner when not on a assignment given by his controllers.

As the Vrast sub-fleet comes closer to *The Frolic*, the control on the character strengthens and the silvermanes become more reckless with his actions, to the point where he can be ordered to sabotage his own ship. Disabling the computer would only be the first strike, and if the character is not caught, he will continue. Life support is the next logical target, followed by weapons controls and navigation. All of this can be accomplished from the Emergency Bridge, but, if the character is a ship's officer, the Vrast may be brazen enough to make him attack the bridge crew with a laser rifle. (All actions are standard and based on the character's UPP.) By the time the Vrast attack, *The Frolic* may already be in trouble.

The True Story of the Gold Digger

If the officers of *The Frolic* manage to sit down at the conference table with the Vrast, one of their first questions should be "What happened to the *Gold Digger*?" They will get a very different answer than the one found by the Navy in the

message container.

The *Gold Digger* apparently altered her logs right up to the point her captain opened fire. According to Vrast records, they suspected that the ore ship was trafficking contraband of some kind. What, they never learned, for the ship was totally destroyed. But when the Vrast taran of the sub-fleet hailed the ship, the *Gold Digger* responded as if to an Imperial Customs vessel, claiming they were empty of cargo and reporting their coded Imperial transport license. As the Vrast were trying to understand what they were receiving, the *Digger* powered-up her engines in a futile attempt to escape. Still, the Vrast did not fire, but gave chase, while ordering the fleeing ship to stop. After the third such hail went without a response, the taran ordered a laser burst fired across the bow of the *Digger*. The captain of the ore ship stopped his engines and came about. Thinking he was about to surrender, the taran ordered one of his ships to lock on and board her. As the Vrast ship approached, the *Digger* fired her laser cannons, went to full power, and tried to run right through the sub-fleet. That's when the taran issued its destruction. And, as the captain should have learned by now, the Vrast are incapable of telling lies.

FURTHER ADVENTURES

Advancing onward from this point depends on the outcome of the adventure. If *The Frolic* got into a firefight with the Vrast sub-fleet, it will be, at the very least, severely damaged and forced to flee. The adventure then becomes one of escaping to an Imperial starbase where reports can be filed, debriefings can occur and the survivors' safety guaranteed. Or the survivors may be picked up by any passing vessels to perhaps create more complications.

If *The Frolic* was damaged or destroyed in combat, the Imperium will not be amused. At least one character (and maybe more) should survive in lifeboats to tell the tale. In any scenario that results in war, the characters become the ranking (and only) authorities on the Vrast. They will have to accompany the Imperial Fleet on its quest for vengeance against the Vrast homeworld. Not knowing the truth about the *Gold Digger* Incident, "No More Diggers" becomes the rally cry for the Imperium. The conflict continues in total war, and no medals nor advancement will be awarded to the surviving crewmembers who are viewed as responsible for a war it will take years to win, if it can be won. Their respective noble families may even disown them.

On the other hand, if the result is a peaceful, albeit tentative, step toward mutual understanding, the characters will all survive and advance in rank and status. Appropriate medals will be awarded,

and our heroes will be reassigned to them... after an extensive debriefing. For its part, the Imperium will not consider the Vrast a primary threat. There is no reason to absorb them, since they were never a part of the original empire... at least that is the rationale. The truth is that the Vrast are on too much of an equal footing with the Imperium to make war an unwise choice, and peace, for the moment, is an excellent compromise.



3: THE 13TH CORBAN

In this adventure the characters are hired by one Baron Starkader Von Essenhauser in a quest for what may be the rarest gem in the universe and set free his family. The Emperor Cleon has received tips that a unique gemstone has been found on an airless world, far out on the Rim. The stone is an unknown variety of corban, a mysterious, priceless gemstone that is so rare only twelve are known, or at least believed, to exist. Knowing the value of this new one, even if it were a regular corban, Cleon has "invited" the baron's immediate family to be his "house guests" until that noble completes his task. It is not that he does not trust von Essenhauser, just that in this instance he trusts no one. If the baron is successful, his family will be returned to him and his noble house elevated to a County. If he fails, all is lost.

The baron and the characters will travel to an abandoned space station, find what clues they can and proceed to investigate an almost lifeless planet in a dying system. They will attempt to solve a mystery while looking for the emperor's treasure. Meanwhile, two other factions will also be searching for the stone.

Three ships are used in this adventure. They are not evenly matched, and that is intentional. However, it is recommended that the referee adjust the combat and jump capabilities of each ship according to the PCs' levels in the interest of game balance. Veteran characters with more resources should not have an easier time of it than those new to the game.

THE STORY

The corban stones themselves are beautiful and strange. The known examples are all the same shade of shimmering blue with tiny yellowish white fires flickering and eternally burning at their centers. They are all oval in shape, smooth and round, of about the same size — six centimeters in length, three in diameter. The corbans cannot be cut, polished, or worked and they are known to deflect lasers. They simply are as they are.

But their value lies not in their beauty but in the fact that, in a universe where everything can be copied, reproduced, made cheaply available to all, they cannot be artificially manufactured by any method tried to date, a fact that has raised their value to mystical extremes. It seems impossible to reproduce even the likeness of a corban. Attempts to capture their beauty on vids and holograms have failed, although the one in the possession of the Duke d'Albereen was successfully photographed using a primitive camera and hard "film." Still, even in the photograph, the gentle saffron flames at the stone's heart are just a blur of faint color.

Their origins are as controversial as their existence is unquestioned. There are many theories but none has ever been more than a guess. There is no solid evidence to support the theory that they were somehow created by a race unknown, and none to support the idea that they are a rare

but natural phenomena.

Of those known to exist, three are in the possession of noble houses, two are kept in museums under very heavy guard, and one is in the hands of an anonymous private collector. The remaining six are set in the Imperial Crown.

When Emperor Cleon sent archeologists into the ancient ruined palace of the First Imperium, he was startled by what they found. Beneath the throne in the Imperial Audience Chamber lay a vault, and in the vault was a gilded glassteel strongbox. The simple inscription on the lid, imprinted with the imperial signet, read, "Let These Stones Rest, Ere Time . . ." Within the strongbox nested six corbans. Cleon was curious about the inscription, but had the stones set in his own crown. The archeologists found nothing about them in the records and documents recovered from the Ziru Sirka site. But, in *An Account of the First Imperium*, an anonymous history written shortly after its collapse, there is a cryptic sentence, a footnote, really, that reads: "And so the Emperor, blessings and peace be His Name Forever, found the Stones of Fortune and Life. And so it was that they killed Him and hid the Sacred Stones from the face of man."

Corban stones are the only things in the universe that are genuine by definition. Only now there is a report of another one, different from all the others. A rose hued corban that glows with a silver flame at its heart, found on an airless world out on the Rim, has become the obsession of the Emperor. If the other corbans are priceless, this one is beyond priceless, and Cleon means to have it — and so do others.

Emperor Cleon is not the only person obsessed with corban stones, nor is he the only one who knows about the rose-red stone with the silver heart. Word about the stone spreads, no matter how many times Imperium bureaucrats code computer files with "Classified," "Secret," and "Top Secret." In addition to the chief antagonists of this adventure, anyone who is aware of what they are chasing out on the Rim is likely to go after it themselves. And, of course, there are always pirates.

Creouseus Menzies is a private collector who jealously guards the one stone in his possession. Rich beyond the dream of avarice, the heir to the fortunes of three separate shipping lines, Creouseus has a plant in the Imperial Office of Communications who is paid extravagantly well. His only duty is to find and transmit any information regarding corban stones. Creouseus knew about the rose-red stone before the emperor and sent his own agents to the Rim to find the hard-rock miner who made the discovery.

Creouseus's agents, his "brain thugs," as he likes to call them, are three men and a woman he rescued from life terms on a maximum-security prison asteroid to serve him. Reasoning that such people would become fanatically loyal to their benefactor (and they are), he keeps them in high style and only uses them for missions such as this one. They are already on their way to the Rim in a Naval Scout/Courier currently listed in Admiralty records as "The Shrike, Missing in Action." Creouseus slapped a coat of stealth paint on her, reconfigured her outhull antenna array, and rechristened her as the *Golden Hind*, after a legendary Old Earth warship.

The motivations of the second opponents are less covetous, but no less dangerous. The Brotherhood of Cerulean Light is a militant religious order. Their founder, Archlight Kellen of Whentwil-

low, was a student named Petyr Kells at Sylea Technology Institute, one of the two universities to hold a corban stone in its possession. During a close inspection of Sylea Tech's most prized exhibit on Physical Enigmas, Petyr received his first "vision." He said later in his book, "The Fall of Light," that the stone spoke to him, and perhaps it did. The mission of the Brotherhood is nothing less than the unification of the stones. They believe that when the stones are brought together in their proper order and form, the universe will collapse into a giant singularity and the brothers will somehow be the Founders of new, more perfect cosmos.

The Brotherhood claims that each of the stones has a name, and that the names indicate the purpose of the individual stones and the position of each when brought together. He has known about the rose stone, what he calls the "Null Center," for years, even mentions it in *The Fall of Light*, but he never knew its location. He does now.

The Brotherhood is small, with no more than a thousand adherents, but it does possess great wealth which buys many ears. It bought the same Imperial Communications Officer Creouseus used and the woman has since left the service for luxurious parts unknown.

The Brotherhood has hired a small tramp

				Surface		Interior	
	Crew	Pass	Low	Cargo	1	Stealth Coating	
	3	0	0	12.9	2		
	Length	Width	Height	Tons	3		
				100	4		
	Quality	Reliability	Built	Overhaul	5		
					6		
					2		
					3		
					4		
Name/Type	2	Maneuver	M 2		5		
Golden Hind	2	Jump	J 0		6		
Mission	3	Power	P 3		7		
Scout/Courier	10	Armor	Armor		8		
Comments	Belongs to Creouseus Menzies, private collector.				9		
					10		
					11		
					12		

SHIP CARD

FORM 41

				Surface		Interior	
	Crew	Pass	Low	Cargo	1		
	4	6	20	75	2		
	Length	Width	Height	Tons	3		
				200	4		
	Quality	Reliability	Built	Overhaul	5		
					6		
				2	Large Battery	2	0
						0	0
						2	
						3	
						4	
Name/Type	2	Maneuver	M 1		5		
Stellar Rover	1	Jump	J 0		6		
Mission	20.7	Power	P 3		7		
Freighter	0	Armor	Armor		8		
Comments	Belongs to Brotherhood of Cerulean Light				9		
					10		
					11		
					12		

SHIP CARD

FORM 41

freighter, equipped with both weapons and low berths for the trip to the Rim. The captain of their ship, *Stellar Rover*, is a member of the brotherhood.

THE SETUP

Baron Starkader von Essenhausser (UPP: 988CAC) meets the characters in a tavern in whatever location they found themselves in after their previous adventure. A quiet giant of a man, the baron gives the impression of a cargo handler rather than a sophisticated noble. He is dressed in a captain's uniform of the type favored by liner corporations and courier firms. His hair is long, past his waist and gathered into a ponytail, his jacket hangs open and there seems to be a catsup stain on his uniform blouse.

After asking around for an available party he is pointed in the direction of the characters. He approaches their table and asks, "Gentlemen, may I join you? I have a proposition that might interest you... that is, if you are free to travel?"

If the characters resist, he will offer to buy the next round. If they continue to demur, he will offer to pay their tab for the evening.

When they accept, he pulls up a chair and sits. He waves at a waitress and points to whatever the characters are having to drink and says, "Another, and more for my friends!" Smiling, he turns to the party. "Gentlemen, my name is Captain Josial Trevon, formerly of the Imperial Marines. I'm not a man who cares for small talk, so I'll come right to the point. I am what you might call a "private contractor." I have been retained by a high-placed official in the executive department of the Imperium to recover a certain artifact for the government. The item in question was recently discovered, according to reliable informants, out on the Rim. I have been given substantial funds to finance a recovery expedition and I am authorized to offer you a very lucrative contract, if you will assist me."

When the characters begin to ask him questions, he sidesteps them, dancing around his answers. If asked what the artifact is specifically, he will state that he cannot reveal that information in a public place, "the walls really do listen in here." If the characters request the identity of his Principle, he will tell them that, due to the terms of his contract, his employer must remain anonymous for "he has many enemies." If any of the characters inquire as to the final destination of the journey, he will say only that the artifact is being held by a government agent named Chen Hing, on a space station in orbit about a small planet on the Rim. "It's a simple job, really, we just relieve him of his duty." Even if they ask him how much they are to be paid, he will dissemble, replying, "that will depend on the outcome of the journey. But I give you my word it will be more than you could make on any other assignment." He adds, "Enough, if we

are successful, to buy your own liner or even a small planet." He is also well aware that the characters have no other immediate prospects. The baron's secrecy and attitudes should be frustrating, but his offer must be couched in such terms that the characters want to at least investigate it further.

"Perhaps you would feel more comfortable discussing this privately on my ship?"

If the characters agree, he sets the time for the following afternoon, lays down enough credit to cover a party twice the size of the characters', he then tells them the name of the ship, ironically called *Ransom*, and its berth location and leaves.

If the characters do not agree, he offers them each Cr500 just to come aboard and listen to what he has to say. He will do whatever he can to get them on board, even hiring a gang of thugs to kidnap them should their reluctance prove final. Starkader is not an evil man, nor is he cruel, it's just that in the balance the characters weigh a lot less than the wife and three daughters he left in the tender care of Emperor Cleon.

Aboard the Ransom

A crew of two, "Trevon" and Mikil Sladery (UPP: 887986), mans the *Ransom*. Sladery's family has served the house of von Essenhausser for five generations. Mikil is fiercely loyal, but he is uncomfortable in his position as ship's engineer. He does not like the change in the relationship with his master; it's not "the way things are supposed to be," and he especially does not like calling the baron "Trevon," even if it is a pretend name, and will occasionally slip and begin to call him "your excellency." Finally, Mikil does not like the mission or the things he is asked to do. If the character onboard are there against their own wills, he will be upset about that as well. He knows the baron's mistress is being held and they are only doing what is necessary to secure her release. Still, there is nothing of honor in the methods they are using.

Mikil will never knowingly betray his master, but if the baron has had to kidnap the characters, he might be willing to listen to an alternate plan to change the baron's direction and behavior.

Once aboard his ship, Trevon treats the characters with courtesy and respect. If they are there voluntarily, he asks them to check any weapons they might be carrying in a weapons locker located near the main portal. Since he is apparently unarmed, he seems to be no threat. He does have onboard sensors that report any retained, hidden weapons, but if an alert sounds, he merely looks at a screen and then escorts them into a well-appointed lounge. The screen tells him which characters are still carrying weapons, if any, and the baron does have a small laser gun in an ankle holster. If any of the characters do go for a weapon,

Trevon will, without hesitation, use his own. Soft music, with a rather heavy emphasis on the percussion side, plays in the background. When they are seated around a large conference table, Trevon asks if they would care for any refreshments. Whatever they choose, he can supply. If they refuse, he merely shrugs and gets down to business.

"When I tell you what we are after, you will understand why I was hesitant to reveal anything in the tavern last night."

While he is talking, the characters have a 1- on 1D chance to hear a gentle, drumming throb almost blends in with the music coming from the wall-mounted speakers. If the characters ask what the vibrations in the background are, he will tell them that his engineer is running tests on the gravity drives, "it's nothing you should worry about," and continue with what he was saying. What the engineer is really doing, of course, is running up the grav engines for immediate departure.

If any of the characters become suspicious, he will excuse himself, saying that he will order the engine test halted, and leave. Once out the door, he trips the lock and a gentle hiss escapes out of the jets hidden in the walls. The vapor being emitted is sleeping gas developed by the Imperium. Von Essenhausser has no intention of harming his "partners," but he has no time to find new and willing aides, either. He will wait until they are out in space to continue the characters' education.

Regardless of what has happened to the characters, Trevon continues. "Our assignment, gentlemen, is to recover a newly unearthed black globe. And this ship is underway. I apologize for deceiving you, but I have no choice. Time will not wait for me to find a willing crew, as the Imperium has its, ah, 'detractors,' and you should be aware what it would mean if one of these devils fell into the hands of terrorists — sheer chaos, I assure you. I don't expect you to 'like' me, I only appeal to your patriotism or, at the very least, your sense of self-preservation. I did not lie about the rewards you will receive if this voyage wins the prize. At the

least, if we only try, 50,000 credits will be deposited into each of your accounts, and yes, I have the banks and the account numbers. What d'ya say?"

Any psionic characters who are empaths will receive very confusing emotions. It is obvious that, whoever this guy is, he is lying. Yet overlaying that impression is one of fear and trustworthiness. A longing, never far from the surface, that actually causes pain, and the empath is forced to withdraw.

The characters really have no choice. They have no weapons, they don't know where they are, and they might take the ship and wind up doing the captain's bidding in any event. If anyone suggests taking the ship, the characters are welcome to try, but the final outcome should leave the ship in the hands of the baron.

If the characters succeed in capturing the ship, they will not keep it long. One of the refinements to the *Ransom*, ordered by the emperor, is a tracking beacon that enables the navy to follow the vessel anywhere, should it depart from its present course. If the characters continue on to Desolation Station to search for the "black globe," of course, the Imperial trackers will assume all is well.

The *Ransom* is not a happy ship.

The Ransom

The *Ransom* is a far trader belonging to the Imperium. It has been refitted with state-of-the-art equipment and dedicated to clandestine operations. Fire controls and more powerful lasers and sensors have been added. While her normal crew compliment is five, her bridge controls are all slaved to the captain's chair, and a single pilot can operate it.

THE DESOLATION SYSTEM

The oddity about this star system is that it contains no gaseous planets, giant or otherwise. The other four planets in Desolation are airless hunks of rock, although the fifth is large and does have substantial deposits of heavy metals. There is no asteroid belt, and very little space debris between

				Surface				Interior			
				Crew	Pass	Low	Cargo	1			
				5	7	12	34	2			
				Length	Width	Height	Tons	3			
							200	4			
				Quality	Reliability	Built	Overhaul	5			
								6			
				2	Laser Battery	3	2	0	0	2	
								3			
								4			
								5			
Name/Type	1	Maneuver	M 2					6			
Ransom	2	Jump	J 0					7			
Mission	5	Power	P 3					8			
Far Trader	0	Armor	Armor					9			
Comments								10			
See text.								11			
								12			

planets. In this sense at least, Desolation is a clean system.

Distress

The third body in a five-planet system, Distress may have once been earthlike, before its sun reduced itself to the brooding red lump that sheds an anemic glow over this system. Three tiny moons chase each other around the planet, dubbed by the station crew as the Three Greyhounds and called Spot, Fido, and Jones. The largest is Spot, which is about ten kilometers in diameter; Fido is around seven clicks; Jones checks in at a mere three. Spot retains a wispy methane atmosphere, but Fido and Jones are devoid of everything but bare, lifeless rocks.

Distress maintains a nearly breathable oxy/nitrogen atmosphere. Surface water in the form of lightly frozen fresh water lakes and rivers, and spectacular ruins of an ancient and long dead race of beings are scattered about the surface. Who inhabited this place and what they looked like, no one knows. The race that was born, that built, and that died here had only one graphic art form. They left no paintings, no sculpture, no representations of themselves, or what their world once looked like. The only things that mark their passing are the massive and bizarre buildings whose stones now litter the surface of this insignificant little world and whose broken frames still point to the stars like accusing fingers.

Today, the only intact building on Distress is the unwieldy mass of a metal "balloon-hut" that is the Imperial Research, Exploratory, and Archeological Institute. Five failed professionals who could not be entrusted with more serious and more productive assignments staff the IREAI outpost. There are two mining engineers, two climatologists, and one archeologist. The characters will meet them if they venture planetside.

The mining engineers shuttle back and forth between the surface of Distress and Desolation Station above, checking ore, gas, and mineral samples brought in by transports, as well as investigating Distress' interesting deposits of unusual precious and semi-precious stones.

The climatologists are supposed to be researching the decline in the planet's environment. They should be trying to learn if the decay began before the sun started to fade or was it the result of the steady stellar downswing. Instead, they play cards, drink, and argue about the origins and evolution of the race called The Providers.

The archeologist is trying to decipher the language of Distress' original inhabitants. He is obsessed with his work but no closer to decryption than he was five years ago when he first arrived.

This is a cheerless bunch of third raters, rude even to each other and longing to be sent some-

place else, anywhere else. They are a brusque and uncommunicative lot.

Desolation Station

Desolation Station is aptly named. It is, or was, a research station charged with mapping the resources of the Desolation System. It is a bleak and lonely place. In a high L-5 orbit, it circles a small, greasy planet named Distress.

The station has several large cargo holds to receive ore, liquid, gaseous, and other mineral samples; docking facilities for six vessels; and three small transports of its own. (When the first ship of searchers arrives, however, it finds only a single transport docked at the station.) While not large, the station has certain amenities. There are athletic facilities, even a swimming pool. While food service consists of prepackaged frozen foods heated in instant convection ovens, they are cheap and reasonably good. There are no private concerns on Desolation since the station is exclusively government owned and operated.

The station is laid out as an ellipse in a series of round, concentric rings. The smallest rings are at the top and bottom of the station and the largest in the very center. At the top of the station, commanding the first three smaller levels, is a rarely used observatory. The first three of the six larger rings at the center hold the cargo bays and their adjacent testing labs. The next three levels, in order, are the crew quarters, food service/recreation, and the station offices. The next two levels contain guest quarters, and it is on these levels that the mining engineers have their permanent station accommodations. The docking facilities are on the bottom ring. Six graceful arms sweep up and away from the station for ships to dock at the ends of the arms and, once the airlocks are matched and the pressure is equalized, the crews travel down a long zero-G corridor and debark into the reception bay at the center of the ring. There is a large circular desk in the reception area where a bored crewmember receives hard-copy manifests after the transports have disgorged their loads into the assigned cargo bays and checks the documents of the infrequent visitors to the station.

Like all stations, there are external manual controls for everything, including docking facilities. While these are hardly ever used, they are kept in good working conditions by the station crew. The station is also lightly armed with a selection of laser batteries of the referee's choice. Again, for the sake of game balance, do not overarm the station. These weapons are defensive only, and have not seen regular maintenance in over five years — what's never used is rarely serviced, unless, like the manual controls outside, it directly affects the lives of the crew. Desolation Station has never fired a shot in anger, or even at a target.

ARRIVALS AT DESOLATION

It is left to the referee to decide which group of seekers gets to the Desolation system first. As of now, the baron and the characters are unaware of the two ships trying to beat them to the stone. Both the *Golden Hind* and the *Stellar Rover* are aware of each other, due to their common agent's lack of scruples, but neither knows about the Ransom. The *Ransom's* assignment was commissioned just after the antagonists' contact left the service, and this could be an advantage for the characters. On the other hand, *Ransom* knows nothing of the competition.

Whoever is here first will be unable to raise the station by any means of communication. The vessel will have to dock manually, secure both docking clamps, and matching the airlocks from controls on the exterior of the station. The first arriving party is in theoretical control of the station, for they will find the station abandoned. Everything is working: life support, computers, lights, video display screens, there is even food in the freezer lockers — and five fresh but cold, half-eaten meals on the dinning table. An investigation does reveal a few anomalies, including an abruptly terminated communications recording, but there is nobody home.

First Arrival: Ransom

If the first arrival is the *Ransom*, the characters will have their work cut out for them. All attempts at raising anybody aboard the station fail. No response, not even static, despite repeated hails on all frequencies. The characters will have to perform an EVA (Extra Vehicular Activity, a term whose origins is lost in time) in order to gain entrance to the station. They will have to suit up, exit the vehicle, find the emergency manual docking controls, and figure out how to activate them. After that, they will have to match and seal the airlocks.

Still, this journey has just begun. Floating through the corridor, they are summarily dropped in the reception area when gravity pulls them down. The screens at the reception workstation glow brightly, a soft wooshing of air should tell them that the life support systems are operational, and the gravity that so rudely brought them to the floor is an indication that all systems, including the grav unit, are in fine working order. But there is nobody home.

It is at this point that at least one of the other two rival vessels should arrive. The baron and the characters are in control of the station, but they know nothing of their opposition at this time. The incoming vessels will request docking privileges, unaware of the situation. The *Golden Hind* will claim that it has dispatches for the commander of

Desolation Station, while the *Stellar Rover* act as if she is making a normal delivery of supplies destined for the IREAL station on Distress. Once on board, all try to find the same information without letting the others know what they are doing.

When the investigation moves forward, the only thing that seems strange is a thin film of a greenish substance coating one of the chairs behind the desk. Tiny globs of the stuff also dotted the desk's surface and the computer keys. The same substance will appear on any piece of furniture, hardware, or equipment where one would expect crewmembers to have made physical contact at work or play.

If there is a character skilled in chemical analysis, the greenish substance is found to contain animal proteins, amino acids of the types necessary to sustain human life, and an unidentifiable lime-colored, hardshell molecule. The unknown molecule is bonded to each of the protein molecules and appears to be slowly consuming them.

Anyone with computer skills can open the station's logs and duty reports; there is nothing very secret here and no need for encryption. All stations report to the central station computer, so these files can be accessed from the reception desk, or from any workstation later if the characters decide to explore Desolation Station.

If the characters decide to explore the station before examining the logs, they will find few clues. If they check the food service area on Level Eight, their senses are assaulted immediately by a raw, fetid odor. There are five dinners in various stages of completion on one of the tables. The meals have been unattended for some time and are the source of the smell. The utensils have been neatly arranged on both sides of the plates.

If they enter the exercise room on Level Nine, they will find what looks like a laser burn on one of the mats hanging from a wall. In the locker room there is what may be a bloodstain, about ten centimeters in diameter, splashed across one of the mirrors above the sinks.

If they examine the observatory and turn on the view screen, they may discover that, instead of focusing on deep space, the scope has been reprogrammed and moved to now looks down on the IREAL station on the planet. If they adjust the magnification, they will see what looks like an intact, balloon-shaped building, but no human activity can be detected.

Besides the computer files, the only other thing of interest is a sketch of an oval-shaped object with rays in its center. This is laid atop the station commander's desk in his office on Level Ten. Other than that, everything appears to be normal and looking as it should. There are no signs of violence save the single bloodstain in the locker room, and it really appears that the station's

personnel simply left.

Once the computer files are examined, the communication logs show only standard traffic from inbound and outbound transports, daily contacts with the IREAL base planetside, and the final communication, a response to a greeting hail from a passing liner one week ago — in short, nothing particularly unusual.

If none of the characters suggests that they play back the final transmission, the baron turns to them and says, "Why don't you play that for all of us to hear?"

"This is Maxaree Liner Constant Constellation calling Desolation Station... You there, Wyatt? Go."

"Where else would I be, Shindar, at a virtual spa on Distress? Go"

"We have a few guests for you, Wyatt. Some archeologists bound for Distress. Big, rugged looking . . ."

"Hey, Shindar, come back. Go... Shindar, c'mon, stop playing games! Go."

At that, the recording ends abruptly.

Once the characters have completed an exhaustive search of the station, the baron will suggest that they return to Level Eight and get something to eat. The food service area still has frozen meals of many varieties in the freezer locker and the cooking equipment is in good shape. The characters will probably want to avoid eating in this room, however, due to the sickly-sweet rotten odor. They may choose to eat anywhere they like, but the food must be prepared here. If anyone suggests that they go back to the ship, the baron will concur.

As they start to eat, the baron looks at the characters, face furrowed in thought. "Well, let's examine what we know. Comments, ideas, guesses, gentlemen?" When the characters present their ideas about the fate of both the liner and the station, the baron will listen quietly, interjecting questions and playing devil's advocate when necessary.

If the characters suggest that the liner taken over by a person or persons unknown who then invaded and captured the station, the baron will ask "But, where are they? Where is the liner? Where is the crew of this station?"

If anyone suggests that the crew is still on station in the form of the green filmy stuff, he state that he needs more proof of that conjecture than some proteins and a few amino acids. He will also ask his own questions if the characters do not raise them first. The following questions assume that the characters have made a thorough search of the station. He does not ask about things they didn't find.

- "What about the recording? It is possible the *Constant Constellation* simply suffered a communications malfunction? Why is the recording audio only?" (There was no malfunction on the ship. The

recording was audio only because the communication equipment was not under Shindar's control at the time.)

- "And what do you make of the laser burn and the bloodstain in the gym?" (The laser burn was the result of a hallucinating crewman who thought he was under physical attack. A swimmer who bashed his head against the corner of a locker left the bloodstain there; this was an accident.)

- "What of Chen Hing, the agent we were supposed to meet here? There is no sign that he was ever aboard this station, or if he was, what became of him." (Chen Hing is not dead, but he might as well be.)

- "What about the realignment of the 'scope?" (This is a valid and obvious clue.)

- "Is Celeste Syndrome a possibility?" (If this were the case, the bodies would be in a close orbit, but there is nothing in any direction of space near the station. It should be clear that that's not what happened.)

If anyone asks for a definition of Celeste Syndrome, the baron replies, "Celeste Syndrome is named for an ancient sailing vessel on old earth. The *Mary Celeste* was a merchantman found adrift in mid-ocean. There was food on the table, coffee on the stove, and the ship was under full sail — but there was no one aboard her. There were many theories about her fate. The one that made the most sense was proposed by a much later psychologist who theorized that the crew suffered some sort of mass delusion and jumped overboard out of fear of an unknown, imagined threat."

If the subject of the sketch they found in the Station commander's office is raised, the baron will have to decide whether to take the characters into his confidence. If the characters have managed to build at least a professional working relationship with "Captain Josial Trevon," Baron Starkader will tell them the whole sorry tale and reveal what is actually depicted in the drawing. Then he apologizes for anything he has had to do to get them to this place, and politely ask for their aide in freeing his family, should their search prove fruitless.

If the characters' attitude toward the "captain" remains antagonistic and confrontational, however, he will keep his silence about the stone and his family and merely mutters, "Looks like someone like to draw." From this point on he becomes more withdrawn and surly. He gives vent to his anger when dealing with the characters and he is not above making sarcastic remarks demeaning their stations in life, the origins of their parents, and their apparent lack of ability to perform even the simplest task.

During their discussion, one of the characters, or the baron, suggests that nothing more is to be found on the station and their next step is to make

planetfall and investigate the IREAL base on Distress.

First Arrival: Golden Hind

If the *Golden Hind* arrives ahead of the other two ships, the characters will be at a severe disadvantage. Having no idea what has happened on board the station, the origins of the scout/courier docked here, or Creouseus Menzies' brain thugs.

Once aboard, they learn the details given in the previous set, but with much more difficulty.

Approaching the station, the captain orders the usual hail. "Hello, Desolation, this is the far trader *Ransom* out of S'dors' world. We request permission to dock and come aboard."

Cassandra d'Emeoning is the chief of the Menzies' brain thugs. She pauses, uncertain of how to proceed. Captain Trevon repeats the hail twice more before she replies.

"Far trader *Ransom*, state your business and your reason for being in this system. This is only a research station with no commercial enterprises and no need for trade."

Captain Trevon thinks for a moment. If any of the characters has a suggestion he will gladly consider it. If not, He replies, "Ahoy, Desolation, we are declaring a Ship's Emergency. Our cupboards are empty, we need water, and we are, I hate to say it, lost. Our nav computer is down and our star charts do not cover this sector. . . Can I ask where we are?" A Ship's Emergency is a demand, not a request. Cassandra has no choice if she is going to continue her charade. If a suggestion by one of the characters was followed, the results should be the same, but the referee will have to create the reply.

"Permission granted, *Ransom*, dock at Station Arm 5 and come aboard. Leave your weapons behind and report to me, Cassandra d'Emeoning, Chief-of-Station, in the reception area. Desolation, go."

"*Ransom*, aye and go."

"Chief-of-Station" is not an Imperial term — Cassandra was thinking on her feet. A sharp character may comment on this, but if not, Captain Trevon says, "I think we have a situation, gentlemen." He will explain that the station commander's title is not known in the standard nomenclature of protocol and, when they enter, they should be on their guard.

From here on, the referee should allow the characters to interact with Menzies' creatures. On their part, Cassandra and her subordinates will try to keep the characters from learning anything of value and will resort to violence when they have to, particularly if they find out the real mission of the *Ransom*. The *Ransom's* crew will probably have to take back the station somehow, in order to learn what they must. Since they are unarmed,

unlike Menzies' goons, this will not be easy. As a last resort, they might be forced to return to their ship and go to the planet below.

Arrival: Stellar Rover

If the *Stellar Rover* beat the others, the characters may have a little easier time getting on the station. The Brotherhood of Cerulean Light is a gentle, peaceful faith that teaches kindness and pacifism. Their philosophy, however, will not deter them from their "sacred mission" to recover the stone, however, and they can be dangerous. They prefer not to kill, but their goal is nothing less than the creation of a "perfect universe," and they will do what they can to bring this about.

Archlight Kellen of Whentwillow himself is the mission commander and he is also well trained in the psionic arts. Four large, burly brothers accompany him, dressed in blue robes and each carrying a staff that conceals a fully charged laser.

The Brotherhood will have no problems with allowing the *Ransom* to dock and bringing her crew on station. They are curious about what they have found (see "Arrival: The *Ransom*") and will even ask the characters to help them solve the mystery of the missing crew. If any of the characters reveals the purpose of their visit, however, the brothers will become secretive, suspicious, and take action when they must.

Other On-Station Scenarios

The setup of the three ships can be used in a variety of ways. All three might arrive at the same time. Both *Stellar Rover* and *Ransom* are armed. The *Golden Hind* carries no weapons, because Menzies wanted speed and stealth, not battle and the potential loss of his ship. The *Hind's* crew, though, carries state-of-the-art side arms and laser rifles. If a space battle does break out between *Stellar Rover* and *Ransom*, *Golden Hind* will use the opportunity to gain the station.

If any two arrive on station together and both tell each other convincing lies, they might even decide to work together. This is more likely to occur between the characters and the Brotherhood of Cerulean Light than the other options, but given the motivations of all parties concerned, anything can happen.

In the unlikely event that all three groups decide to work together, the station can be swiftly searched and a joint decision made to head planetside. In this case, each of the three groups will use the station mystery as an excuse for further investigation ("Law of the Spaceways, y'know") of the planet below. None of the principles will suggest calling in the Imperial Marines for a formal investigation. If one of the characters makes such a recommendation, one of the NPCs will say "And tell them what? We have no evidence that any-

thing is actually wrong here. For all we know, this station was intentionally abandoned on secret orders. Let's see what we can learn before sending for the Imps."

When the decision is finally made, all three ships will probably head for the planet, for none of them will trust the others enough to travel with them. In any event, the little courier/scout is too small for such a party. If one of the ships does carry more than one group of seekers, there will be a fight for control of the vessel.

THE PLANET CALLED DISTRESS

Once the party or parties land, their first choice should be to investigate the Imperial Research, Exploratory, and Archeological Institute base, housed in the large balloon-shaped building a scant kilometer from the landing facility. The base is large enough to hold the entire party, for it appears that the staff has a lot more room than they need. The base itself is broken into five compartments. The first, at the entryway, consists of a small alcove and six offices branching off of a single corridor. The second contains sleeping quarters and accommodations for twenty. The third holds the galley, recreation equipment and a "commons" area. The fourth section contains a variety of labs and gadgets that serve the various analyses performed here. The fifth is a sealed storage room equipped with its own coded airlock.

While the atmosphere of Distress is breathable, light oxygen masks would make the short trip to the base more comfortable. Once the characters arrive at the base and enter through the airlock, they find a shambles. Papers, clothing, broken parts of field equipment are strewn around in a random pattern of violence. A closer examination will reveal the spots of the same green scum that was found on the station. Moving into the others areas of the base, they find much the same conditions. If any of the characters open the food freezer lockers in the galley, they will discover that they are empty. Unlike the station, other items seem to be missing. Magazine and book racks are empty, there doesn't seem to be enough silverware or dinner plates for the base's crew, and in the lab area it appears that someone tried to pull the base's radio out of its wall mounting and failed.

When they examine the storage bay, they will find that the door into the bay is sealed and locked. There is a standard 12-number key pad set in the center of the door and its readout strip carries the last number to be logged into it: 998125735. If any of the characters attempts to punch the ENTER key while this number is displayed, the door will become frozen in a few moments. Ice crystals form on the surface of the door and the readout screen becomes so encrust-

ed, the numbers cannot be seen. The door is frozen at -100 degrees centigrade. The characters will have to wait for another attempt unless they can figure out a way to thaw it.

Any character with computer hardware or electronic repair skills can overcome the door lock. The cover must be removed and the code manually reset to the original number. If this is done, the readout will appear blank, the number can be reinserted and the ENTER key will allow the door to be opened.

Once inside, they find the five members of the station and a sixth person, all armed with laser rifles which are pointed at the characters. The sixth person wears a silver-and-blue uniform with the insignia of Maxaree Space Lines blazoned on the pocket, and three gold-braided stripes on the cuff of his left sleeve.

"Just who the hell are you?" he demands.

The answer to that question is going to put a strain on everyone concerned. If he doesn't like what he hears, it is only too clear that he and the men behind him are more than willing to use their weapons. If that happens, the ensuing battle will devastate the party and probably ruin any chance for success.

If the characters can convince him that their whole party is there to "rescue" them, he will ask them if they have seen any "other bipeds" since they landed. He wants to know where they came from, when they arrived, and what they found on Desolation Station. He will also ask them about the condition of the rest of the IREAL outpost.

Only when he is convinced that the characters had no part in whatever happened, will he and the others loosen up. Finally he says, "Let's go to the galley, it should be safe there now. I'll tell you a tale. I am Shindar, First Communications Officer of the *Constant Constellation*."

Shindar is the only survivor of his liner and the station in this system. When the party and the IREAL personnel are seated in the galley, Shindar tells the following story. The referee can use this information any way that he chooses. It could be given in response to the characters' questions or just told as a chilling tale.

"We pass by this system every six months or so, it's part of our Rim Tour. We were two days out from Desolation Station when we received a distress call from a small ship's boat. It was strange, because there were no other ships within a couple of parsecs of that location that we could detect. We picked up the boat and brought it aboard. There were two young couples aboard the boat in low berths. We revived them and continued on our way. But they must have had some kind of short-term biological weapon as well as concealed lasers in their luggage. Just as we approached the station, I was sending a hail when two of them,

the women, all got up in black jumpsuits with tight-fitting breathing masks came in the COM office and shut down my video transmit. Then they fired a blast at me, hitting my side and I fell, passing out. They must have thought I was dead, because they left the office after switching off the communications array.

"When I came to, I made to an escape pod; that was an adventure in itself, and a painful one. But I watched them as I went. They had aerosol cans that they used to spray in the air — and the results! I saw a shipmate melt in front of my eyes not a minute after he came in contact with that stuff and I don't know why I wasn't affected, I should be green slime right now. Anyway, I ran to the pod bay and got to Desolation Station. Something similar must have happened there and at the same time, because the place was crawling with black-suited humanoids spraying that wretched green stuff. I got lucky twice; I took the precaution of entering through the emergency lock. I managed to avoid them, grabbed a transport and came here. They spotted the transport leaving and followed me down. Who or what they are I don't know and I don't think I want to.

"I rallied the people here and we carried everything we needed into the storage bay. I rigged a cryo unit to freeze the door, hoping to kill any of that airborne stuff before it got in here. Must have worked. We are still alive."

"They came then. Man, did they come. From what we saw there were about a dozen, all dressed in those black jumpsuits with oxy masks that completely hid their faces. You all could have been part of them and we would not have known it. Before our video monitor went black, we saw them tearing up the place. They looked like they were trying to find something, but I have no idea what. They sprayed the air with that green stuff and that's when I froze door and the seals.

"They tried to get in here, but couldn't. That was a few days ago, we've lost track, and then you showed up. I guess they just left.

Sooner or later someone is going to have to ask him if he knows about the stone. When they do that is, of course, up to them, but if they are joined by one of their competitors, finding the appropriate time will be difficult.

The Thirteenth Corban

Shindar has the stone, although he has no idea of what it is. He found it on the station while climbing through a ventilation duct, running from the terrorists from the liner. The silver flame in its center caught his eye and he put it in his pocket almost reflexively, and he does not remember the action. In order to get to look at the stone, he will have to be led with questions. He may not know what it is, but he's not stupid and will probably fig-

ure out that it is valuable when asked about it.

If one of the characters asks him about the stone in private, describing it from what is known, he will reply, "Oh, you mean this?" and pulls the stone from his pocket. "I almost forgot I had it. What is it and who does it belong to?" As a liner officer in the employ of a major corporation, he holds a reserve commission in the Imperial Navy. When the baron reveals his identity and the name of his sponsor, Shindar, who is an honest man, will throw in with the characters to get the stone back to Sylea. This is the only safe scenario. The characters will have to continue their charade, and the baron will suggest that they get to their ship and continue on their course, since there is nothing here.

If Shindar is asked about the stone in the presence of the other opposition groups, he will note their immediate attention and become suspicious. "What's this bauble you're looking for? Is it valuable?" He will look for answers to his questions and might reveal the stone in private to the group in whom he has the most trust.

Publicly he says, "Can't claim I've seen it." He will play it cagey and keep his discovery to himself. The characters and the baron may have to reveal themselves in front of the others in order to gain his confidence. If this happens, there will be a battle inside the IREAL base, the winners getting possession of the stone.

In any event, combat will ensue against any of the three groups that has the stone, if the others are aware of it. If the characters have it and get off planet, they will be followed by both the *Rover* and the *Hind*. Any transmission made about the stone, even on secure monitors, will be picked up by the other ships and the *Ransom* will become a target.

The terrorists who took the *Constant Constellation* are left for a later adventure. Their identity and purpose is unknown and should remain that way. They do not return to Distress and there is no way of knowing why they left when they had the base personnel trapped in a less than totally secure storage area.

FURTHER ADVENTURES

If the characters have succeeded in their quest, they head for Sylea, and the baron reunites with his family. The baron and the emperor are both grateful for their help and will offer bonuses up to double the original figure. The baron is elevated to counthood and his former shipmates go on their way.

If the Brotherhood or Menzies' people got the stone, the baron will insist on chasing after them

In any event, they should be able to figure out that if they catch the ship, they cannot just go in with blazing guns. The stone is a small object; indestructible, yes, but it is easily lost. The characters will either have to board the ship somehow and overpower the crew or follow it until it either docks or makes planetfall and then try to recover the stone. The baron, as an agent of the emperor, can call on the Imperial Navy and the marines if he needs to by claiming the vessel holds undefined "contraband." Of course, to do that they will have to track the opposition back to some sort of civilized sector, as there is little help out on the Rim.

If the stone is lost — if Shindar is killed before he reveals that he has it and there is no examination of his clothing, for example, or if one of the other groups gets possession of the stone and is

destroyed in battle — subsequent searches will prove to be futile. The Thirteenth Corban disappears from history and destined to become merely another space myth.

In that event, a dejected baron releases the characters, unless they elect to join him in freeing his family. Busting people out of the Imperial Palace is not a job for draftees, and if they join him, Starkader wants to be sure they are with him all the way.

If they decide they would rather shake themselves loose from the company of the baron, he will take them to the nearest populated space station and give them the payment he promised them.



4: RETIAN AND JUENAIRE

The characters are hired by an attorney in the employ of Retian III, Duke of N'Alba. His Grace has empowered the attorney to offer Cr50,000 each to guard his son, Retian IV, Heir of N'Alba, until his wedding day, which will be two weeks after the characters arrive on N'Alba. In addition, so that they may mingle with his aristocratic friends and relatives as near equals, he has prepared temporary Letters of Arms Patent, raising all characters to Knighthood. While these are temporary, he has it in his power to make them permanent Knights Companion in the Order of the Fifth Star, of which he is the Knight Commander. All they have to do is to watch and deliver Retian IV to the Palace Sanctuary on his wedding day, alive and unharmed.

What the characters do not know is that they are to attend the heir at every moment, waking and sleeping. It is not that the duke fears an outside threat, although that is a remote possibility, but his real desire is to keep Retian from escaping his fate. His fate is marrying Portiabbee Crampell, daughter and heir of Duke Conar Crampell.

For his part, Retian is in love with Juenaire Montcrief, daughter of a minor baron of an undistinguished house, one engaged in a long feud with the Fitz Allens, the house of the duke and his heir.

While the characters are to be well-rewarded for their efforts on behalf of the duke, their own sympathies should lie with the heir. The duke is arrogant, haughty, and has a touch of cruelty. It will become clear that this marriage is part of an elaborate scheme of his to seize power in the quadrant. There is even a hint of treason in the air. The heir is just the opposite of his father. The young Retian is hungry for friends and aides, but he can pay nothing and, should his escape plan succeed, will never have a chance to bestow titles on anyone.

The characters will have several chances to choose sides. What they decide will depend on their own standards of honor and ethics.

THE STORY

His Grace, Retian Fitz Allen III, Duke of N'Alba and the N'Alba Star System, arranged the marriage of his son and heir, Retian IV when the young man was but a baby. He did this with an eye toward expanding his own territory and wealth through the union of his son and the daughter of Conar Crampell, Duke of Creinaught and Tegreen. His dream is to bring together all three systems under his own house. In order to accomplish this, he is going to abdicate the ducal seat in favor of his son as a wedding present. As soon as an heir is born to the new duke and duchess, he will declare himself Regent of the Kingdom of N'Alba, Creinaught, and Tegreen before quietly removing his domain from the tax rolls and governance of the Imperium.

But Retian does not want to marry Portiabbee, Duke Conar's daughter; he wants to marry Jue-

naire. Unfortunately for his father, young Retian is in love with Juenaire de Montcrief, the third daughter and fifth child of a minor baron on Trellis, the other inhabited planet in the N'Alba system. Retian and Juenaire met when they were both in college and they have been in each other's thoughts ever since — and neither has any intention of marrying anyone else.

When Retian returned from college with an engineering doctoral degree in his hand, his father had him placed under "house arrest" by his own security people. This was but six months ago. Retian has the run of the palace and may have any entertainment he desires, but he simply may not leave the palace building itself.

To make matters worse, the Montcriefs and the Fitz Allens have had a blood feud going on for a century and a half. It began when the Montcriefs held the Ducal Seat of N'Alba, and then lost it when the emperor summarily removed them for unspecified charges of "gross malfeasance" and "misuse of exalted status." The Montcriefs were reduced in rank to mere baronial status, and were sent under Imperial escort to a small estate on Trellis. The Fitz Allen family, headed by Retian I, was installed in their place. The Montcriefs accused Retian I of causing the demise of their fortunes and swear to this day that there are papers and computer files in the ducal safes that will prove their allegations and just intentions.

For their part, the Fitz Allens dismiss such accusations as "inflammatory, jealous ravings of a spoiled and fallen house." Over the years, they have even come to believe their own rhetoric and view the Montcriefs as little more than threadbare, social-climbing "nobility trash," who shouldn't be allowed in the company of their betters.

One particularly notable aspect of the N'Alban culture is that the N'Albans have a finely honed sense of honor, and unlike most civilized worlds, they enforce breeches of conduct by the practice of dueling with swords. And the dueling code has very strict rules. No one has died in a N'Alban duel in ten centuries. It is considered to be cowardly, base, and even treasonous to actually take a life in combat. Rather, the N'Albans scar the cheek of

their opponent and, once that is accomplished, the contest ends. Duels between members of the two noble families are legendary.

THE SETUP

While the characters are relaxing after finishing their last adventure, an attractive woman in her late twenties approaches them. She is well dressed, soft spoken, and there is no hint of threat in her behavior. "Gentlemen, ladies," she addresses the party, "are you available for hire?" Without waiting for a reply she continues, "I am Aimei Flageolet, attorney at law and factor for His Grace, the Duke N'Alba. Are you interested in earning a lot of credits for a two-week assignment?"

Of course, if the characters are not interested, Aimei will find another band of adventurers. If they are willing to listen she will continue. Her remarks can also be used as answers, if the characters question her first.

"You understand that what I am about to tell you is confidential. You should not repeat it to anyone, although you can reveal your destination, the N'Alba System.

"Could a lady get a drink in this place?" She will not say more until she is served, or, if the characters are in an establishment without a bar, she will say, "Let's find a place where we can talk."

When they are alone, she will take a scanning devise from her purse and check the immediate surrounding for bugs. After she is satisfied, she will explain in a voice just above a whisper.

"His Grace is about to celebrate the wedding of his son, namesake, and heir to the daughter of the Duke of Creinaught and Tegreen. The marriage was arranged long ago by the two families, but there are those who fear the political power such a union could create. Duke Retian III has authorized me to offer you 50,000 credits each to attend and guard his only son, Retian IV. Your duties will be light, but you must be on constant guard, every hour of the day and night. Do I have your interest so far?"

When the characters answer in the affirmative, she says, "Good, for there is more. Everything is to be provided for you. You are to be clothed expensively as lesser members of the nobility and your cover will be that you are old college friends of the heir. To that end, His Grace has provided temporary Letters of Arms Patent. These will elevate each of you to the brevet status of Knights Companion in the Order of the Fifth Star. His Grace assures me that if you acquit your contract satisfactorily, he has it in his power to make these Letters permanent and he will do so. For your part, however, you must draw up acceptable coats of arms that can be displayed on your luggage and blazoned on your clothing. Let me have those tomorrow morning and I will see to their transmission and installation on your effects." The referee

should have the characters actually come up with arms for themselves. Any simple book on heraldry or even an encyclopedia article can provide basic guidelines. The arms should be simple and say something about the person who bears them

If some of the characters are already nobles, she will say, "So much the better. I will still need your arms. But the knighthoods stand, and you may add them to your other honors."

She hands them each a business card with an address about three blocks away, "Come to my office at ten in the morning and I will have your passage and everything else ready for you." She rises, "I will see you tomorrow, then. Goodnight." With that, she turns and leaves.

The characters have time on their hands and can do what they wish until the morning.

TO N'ALBA!

When the characters' arrive at the attorney's office the next morning, she greets them warmly. "Gentles, how good of you to come. I have your documents ready, as well as your berths. Would you prefer high passage or low berths for the journey?"

The characters should consider well, and Aimei will offer advice if asked. It is her opinion that, in order to accustom themselves to this new, if temporary, lifestyle, they should take the high passage. Subjectively it will be a longer voyage, but the rewards are as great as the learning experiences for the high passage on this trip is flooded with a variety of nobles going to the wedding. They may pick up some useful information that will assist them in the performance of their duties.

If the characters choose high passage, they will be ensconced in a stylish luxury seldom known for the journey to N'Alba. The liner that will ferry them to the duke's domain is one of the newest in the Maxaree Fleet. Christened the *Stellar Swan*, she weighs in at over 6,000 tons and is equipped with every comfort and indulgence imaginable. It could be a pleasing way to travel and may even offer unique encounters in the interim.

If they choose the low berth option, they will board the *Swan*, be directed to a large and comfortable low berth area, and each will have his/her own small suite. They will, of course, spend the entire trip in cryosleep, waking only when the *Swan* is in orbit around N'Alba.

Whatever they choose, she will agree to. Then she asks, "Have you each designed coats of arms, as I requested? Please let me have them." She takes the designs and waves them over a scanner, saying, "These are now logged with the Imperial College of Arms and are being blazoned on your new clothes, luggage, and personal effects on board the *Swan*."

She hits a key on her desk top, orders a ground car, and personally escorts them to the

starport and to the shuttle that will take them to the *Stellar Swan*.

Aboard the Swan

If the characters have chosen high passage for the trip to N'Alba, they will be pleasantly surprised. They enter the ship through a large access lobby. From here on, they had better get used to being called "Sir/Lady (first name)," since the liner personnel will only address them in these terms.

The lobby entrance is equipped with scanners and ship's personnel who, dressed in crisp white uniforms trimmed in silver, will ask them if they are carrying any arms. It is both illegal and contrary to liner policy to permit carrying weapons on board, and seasoned travellers know this. A ship's attendant takes any weapons they turn over and stows them in special passenger's lockers, handing the characters receipts for them.

If any character attempts to keep a weapon on his person, even a pocketknife, the scanners will set off a loud klaxon-type alarm and armed security guards come running into the lobby. The characters who held out on the attendant will be forced to turn over the offending weapons, this time at the points of six laser rifles. The guards are very polite but demand the confiscation of the weapons, regardless of size. The characters are told that the weapons will be returned when they disembark the *Swan*. If this happens, security will note that these are people to be watched throughout the voyage.

When the weapons are stowed, the attendants take the characters' electronically encoded tickets, pass them through a verifier, and return them.

"Sir knights, these tickets are your door keys, pass them over the reader at the entrance to your suite and the doors will open. You may also take to the large display behind us and touch your ticket to the reader. The map will then light your suite and trace the route you must follow to get there. Thank you, and thank you for sailing with Maxaree Lines. Next, please!"

When the party finds its suite, high on the starboard dorsal side, they should be more than impressed with the quarters Aimei Flageolet has selected for them. The carved, genuine wood double doors open onto a large commons room with plush reclining chairs. There is a table-mounted holoset, and credenzas along one wall. A sideboard has been prepared with several bottles of quality champagne and a light afternoon repast of fruits. Breads, crackers, and cheeses from several worlds are laid out with great artistry. The light fixtures are golden, their light levels voice-controlled. The first moment one of the characters speaks, a cleverly concealed door opens to reveal a man in his thirties wearing a crisp uniform with "Steward" embroidered over the left breast pocket.

"Sir knights and ladies, allow me to welcome

you. My name is Jhermack, and I will be your personal steward for this trip. May I show you some of the features of your suite?" Jhermack shows them each to a spacious private room, displaying the bathrooms and the functions of the multi-headed showers. In each of their rooms, he has already laid out their evening clothes. Every individual jacket is complete with a pocket patch bearing the wearer's arms, seemingly embroidered in silver and metallic threads. Finally, he shows them the broad tapestry pulls that are used to summon him. "If you need me at any time, day or night, you have but to pull this call."

If the characters ask Jhermack questions he will answer them precisely and with great deference. He will nod, almost bowing before each reply. If they ask about supper, he will tell them that he will serve them in the suite's common area, if they like, or they may dine in the Ship's Dinner in the High Passage Mess with the captain and the officers, or they could choose from any of the ship's twelve elegant restaurants. "Reservations have been made in all of them, you need but to tell me which is your pleasure and I will cancel the rest."

If the characters ask how expensive these places are, he replies in surprise, "You do not know? But, my masters, you pay for nothing! All has been provided for you. You will never see a bill on this ship."

He will describe the restaurants if requested. Each is based on a theme, and the food is of extremely high quality in each. The themes are left to the referee, but one example is "Above the Salt," a medieval-themed diner where the best food is served to those wearing white who are elegantly seated "above the salt," with rough dinners, beer, and rowdiness lie below it. There is also the "Stardeck" which is a domed bistro with a view of space unlike any other, and "The Warf," a recreation of an Old Earth San Francisco seafood shanty. The Warf serves sea creatures from dozens of different worlds prepared with authentic techniques.

If the characters choose the Ship's Dinner (or sometime later if they do not), they will meet Count Megual de Goudy. De Goudy is a huge, robust man whose lifestyle is etched on his face and in his girth. He is the primary agent and a close friend of Duke Retian and he is on board to keep an eye on the characters. Once they meet, he insists that the characters call him Megual and party with him after dinner. The count has an excellent nose for taverns and fun spots and, if the characters can get him in his cups (which is difficult), he will tell them why he is onboard.

If they press him further, he will reveal their true task. "You see, gentles, it is not outside forces who, although some do not like this marriage for political reasons, are the threat. No, no. The threat is from young Retian himself." He leans forward and says

in a stage whisper, "He wants to escape his duty."

If the characters ask why, he responds, "Posh! She is not a comely woman. Thin hair, pole skinny, and no shape to her at all. She got a nose like a scryhawk and a personality to match. That's reason enough. Is there more ale?"

As the journey continues and de Goudy gets to know the characters better, he will drop hints about junior Retian's real reasons. "Maybe he found something better... Who knows, eh?" "There is this feud. You know, old family, bad blood..." "I guess my old friend doesn't want his son to marry beneath his station." "Juenaire Montcrief is a rose among the dandelions." If ask to explain that one further, he shuts up, realizing he may have said too much.

When the *Swan* is about two days out of N'Alba, he will call the characters together for a meeting in his room. After refreshments are passed by his manservant, he will dismiss the man, hesitate a moment, and then tells them, "Look, I don't mean to be telling you things I shouldn't. At the same time, however, it appears to me that you have not been given all the information you require to do your job. I know young Retian well; I practically raised the boy. He wants to escape so badly, that I wouldn't be surprised if he hired thugs to kidnap him or bought himself a ship and a crew or is planting bombs in the palace. He almost hates his father for doing this to him, and I fear for the life of the duke. Not from his enemies, but from his own son. You will have to be with him constantly. Waking and sleeping, stay in his rooms, and gods, don't even let him into the bathroom unattended. The boy is smart... hell, he's brilliant. First in his engineering class as an undergraduate and later as a honor graduate student. He could make a bomb from a piece of flypaper, a kilogram of bicarbonate soda, and his own spit. Watch that boy every minute, the duke will not reward failure in this instance. Not that he ever does, anyway..."

The rest of the voyage is left to the referee's discretion. There are a variety of facilities aboard this flagship liner and all kinds of opportunities for additional adventures onboard — and in some pretty unique settings. (To flesh out the details, please refer to the *Naval Architect's Manual*.)

When the *Swan* finally docks with Alpha Station, high above N'Alba, the characters disembark with most of the nobles who were on board. Their weapons are returned to them and they catch the shuttle down to the planet. By this time, Megual de Goudy has attached himself to the party and travels with them.

At the arrival station they are met by a grav-limo driver holding a sign that reads "Order of the Fifth Star." They are ushered through the terminal by the count, who merely waves his Customs

Exempt pass at the agents for them to hurry through. The driver already collected their expedited baggage, he tells them, and escorts them to a waiting limo flying ducal standards on its fenders.

AUDIENCE WITH THE DUKE

The party's new site of employment, The Palace of Five Stars, was not built by the Fitz Allens — nor by the Montcriefs, for that matter. N'Alba, or New Alba, as this world was then known, did not slide far during the Long Night. Her technology lasted almost a thousand years and when it finally collapsed, as did the empire she created. For at one time New Alba was an empire in its own right. Not only did she rule her own system and the systems of Creinaught and Tegreen, but those of two other stars as well. The palace was built during the greatest period of her expansion, when the Empire of the Five Stars was at it height and seemingly eternal. But fall she did, ending as a mere duchy of the Third Imperium. The palace and its name, however, stood. Constant maintenance and repairs were needed to keep the structure. Its appearance became a focal point for the inhabitants of the planet; its gleaming domes a matter of pride.

When the Montcriefs were installed here, they saw to updating the palace and installed the most modern equipment and facilities imaginable. It was a contributing factor in their demise, for so many credits were lavished on the palace, that they were forced to increase taxes, which led to bureaucracies, corruption, and unrest.

The palace is a spectacle of alabaster and gold leaf. Twenty long, thin spires rise above it like minarets, and gold leaf covers the onion-shaped domes at their peaks. Tall colonnaded pillars support the Grand Entrance with its symbolic staircase rising in five sets of five stairs separated by broad landings. After the first three sets, in honor of the Empire of Three Stars, there is a wide landing and the staircase splits to right and left branches. The pattern is also followed on the interior.

Flickering gas torches, an anachronism on any world sophisticated in the ways of the stars, line the walks. The palace lawn contains a formal garden that, when viewed from the second floor balcony, reflects every detail of the palace's façade as if seen on a moonlight night.

The characters' limo drives up to the foot of the lawn. Their driver opens the long sliding door on the side of the limo and tells the characters and Count Megual de Goudy that he will take their luggage through the service entrance and on up to their rooms. A long walk, almost a full kilometer in length, takes up the front door of the palace where three more servants in the duke's livery meet them.

The servant in the center wears a gold braid over his left shoulder. With a bow, he says, "Good

morrow, your Excellency, and to you Sir Knights. Your arrival has been anticipated. Your Excellency, His Grace is in the Old Library and wishes for you to attend him immediately. Sir Knights, if you will follow me I will show you to your rooms."

If the characters ask any questions, they are simply ignored. The gold braided servant turns abruptly and starts up the staircase, taking the left-hand branch. If the characters have any hand-carried items, the other two servants will collect them. In any event, they follow behind the adventurers.

The chief servant merely expects to be followed. If the characters show any reluctance, or wish to meet with the duke first, the count reassures them and says, "Go with Lovatt, the duke will see you in due course. Hurry, now, Lovatt can be quite cross and one's life station means less to him than perhaps it should. I don't know why 'ol Retian keeps him on, frankly. Oh, if you are hungry, I'll have one of the servants bring you whatever you would like." While Megual is more or less an ally of the characters, he will insist that they follow Lovatt if they still show any reluctance to do so.

Their quarters are in the family wing, flanking and facing the door to Retian IV's suite. Their clothing has been hung up or put away by the servants, and bowls of fruit and nuts, along with bottles of spring water, are set out for their refreshment. There is no strong drink in evidence, and it appears that that is what the duke demands.

While they are discussing the events of the past few days, there is a knock on the door. It is the condescending and well-poised Lovatt. "The master would have you attend him." He says and turns without waiting for them.

The characters follow Lovatt to the Old Library. There are plenty of distractions going on between their quarters and the north wing that houses the library. Several parties are going on in the rooms of other guests, and people just seem to flow freely from room to room and suite to suite. If feasts and festivities distract the characters enough, to say nothing of more than a few beautiful women in gorgeous gowns and well-dressed young nobles out for a good time, they might try to join in. In that case, Lovatt will enter any room one or more of them happens to be in, grab the miscreants two at a time by the back of the collar and drag them back into the hallway. He will allow no dalliance until after they've seen the duke.

The characters are escorted into an immense library in what must be an older part of the palace. This area looks almost like a castle with damp, cold stone walls. Sealed cases containing thousands of volumes rise toward the ceiling thirty feet above their heads. The duke and Count de Goudy are seated comfortably in high-backed leather wing chairs, sipping brandy from crystal snifters. There is a long table with enough chairs to seat

both the nobles and the adventuring party.

As they enter, the duke waves grandly toward the table and says, "Sit, my lords, we will be with you shortly." After the characters take their chairs, the duke and count join them. If any character made the mistake of sitting at the head or the foot of the table, the places of the duke and count respectively, the senior noble will simply stand behind them and clear his throat. Neither will sit nor speak until the character moves to another seat. But nothing will be made of the faux pas, either.

"Sir Knights," he begins, "I asked my factor to employ me some adventurers of good character and she sent me you. I trust her judgment and I hope you will only give me cause to go on trusting it." The duke is tall and thin and peers at them over the tops of archaic half-glasses. His eyes are cold and hard, and there is no mirth about him.

"His Excellency tells me that he has found you to be acceptable for the task ahead, and I will make do with that. I am told you have been briefed as to the problems I am having with my son, have you any questions?"

The duke is harshly honest. If the characters ask about the feud, he will spit on the wooden floor and say, "There is no feud. One does not hate one's inferiors; one merely tolerates and guards against them. Their opinions, on the other hand, are fecal night soils and not to be listened to or believed by knights in the employ of the third generation of Fitz Allen princes of N'Alba.

If the characters ask any other questions, the duke responds in the same haughty manner. Count de Goudy is silent through the exchange, but the characters may catch him rolling his eyes at some of the duke's posturing statements. He will answer any questions the characters have bluntly. If they ask him about the possibility that Retian may have arranged his own kidnapping, he will tell them that it is a distinct possibility. "He had friends in college, a bunch of athletic young nobles. They had a sort of gymnastics company, human pyramids, triple-jumping, that sort of thing. Many of these friends are, of course, coming to the wedding. You should keep an eye on them; I'll have a dossier sent to your quarters."

"By the way," he says, "I assume you are well-armed? You may need to be. Ask de Goudy for any additional items you may need."

And one final thing. My son is elegantly crafty. Before he was five years of age, he learned how to navigate inside the walls of the palace. This place is honeycombed with unseen routes, and he knows them all. Take nothing for granted. If he offers you food or drink, be polite, but refuse it. Eat only what is provided for you by Lovatt — some of the other servants are sympathetic, shall we say?"

At the end he will say, "If you fail me in this

regard, you will come to wish that you had been stillborn. If you succeed, you will feel the equal weight of my generosity. Now, it is time to meet your charge."

As if summoned by a gong, the omnipresent Lovatt enters with a young man of about twenty-four years of age. He is simply, if expensively dressed, and carries himself like a cat poised to move at the slightest whisper of danger. His eyes, however, hold a keen intelligence and a deep-seated rage.

Before the duke can make the introductions, the younger man grins impishly, "So, you are to be my jailers? All right, so be it. Come with me and we'll see if there is still some fun to be had in this mausoleum." And with that, he sniffs past Lovatt and heads for the door.

The duke merely waves his hand at the party, a signal for them to begin their duties. "Gentles, may I present my son?"

All of the scenarios presented in the next section should be interspersed with normal activities within the palace. There are large buffet meals to be eaten, new holo vids to be seen, and full-dress balls are held every night. Retian wants desperately to leave and will grab at every chance to do so. He is more than capable of improvising, and should lead the adventurer's on roller coaster chases all over the palace.

THE HEIR'S PLAN

Retian the Younger has concocted several plots to escape his future, from the simple to the complex. All involve getting to an old and unused barn about five miles away from the palace on the ducal estate. In the barn, secretly flown in under an arranged sensor "blackout" is a scout/courier, *The Falcon*, fueled up and ready to go at the push of the ignition marker.

His first plan is already underway. He is going to be as charming and as cooperative with his "jailers" as he can be. He intends to show them a good time and to slip away at the earliest possible moment. He doesn't really believe he will get away this easy, but he wants to test the party's alertness.

The festivities going on in the several rooms the characters passed on their way to the Old Library are his traps. In order to make things as easy as he could on his son, the duke told Retian to spare no expense and, if round-the-clock parties were what the young man wanted, that was fine with him.

As the characters and their charge enter the first party room, Retian is buoyant and cheerful; he introduces the adventurers as "old friends from school." He also tells them that since they will never remember all the names of those they meet, "Just refer to everybody as milord or milady, and you'll get along

fine. They're all bleedin' nobility anyway."

As the characters follow him from room to room and from cluster of people to cluster of more people, there is ample food and drink. If they do not partake, Retian will encourage them to "Eat, drink, there is little else to do here that's not on the holo!" When he feels they have been lulled into complacency, he will finally lead them to a room that contains a table of sweet delicacies, prepared by one of his confidants. Beneath the table is a special plate holding chocolates from Old Earth — very rare, very expensive. Dropping his voice to a stage whisper, he says, "I knew father would hire someone, I just did not expect a great bunch like you. Here, these are from my own private stock." And so saying, he whisks out the plate of chocolates and offers them to the characters, taking the only piece marked with a white chocolate "R" for himself. "Here, please."

The chocolates are laced with a sleep drug that causes intense drowsiness within five minutes and unconsciousness in twenty. The drug has a duration of four hours. Any character who eats the chocolate will succumb. Retian will try to make his way out of the palace through a series of passages and sealed rooms that are a by-product of centuries of remodeling. In this, he will not be successful, he is stopped by Lovatt in an accidental encounter while trying to escape through the servants' quarters.

If the characters refuse the chocolates, he nods knowingly, now aware of their level of alertness. This will not stop him from trying one more time. Most of his friends and their partners are sympathetic to his cause. The ladies, in particular, are supportive of his romantic quest. As he leads the characters into yet another party scene, a group of beautiful young women (and men, if there are female characters), one for each member of the party, attach themselves to the adventurers. The women begin to question the characters, looking into their eyes with admiration and perhaps a touch of promise. "Where have you been, what places have you seen?" "Have you ever met a non-human?" "I hear you've actually been out to the Rim" To a character with a scar, "Where did you get that?" And on and on, flirtatiously flattering their egos, lulling them to what comes next.

In the meantime, another accomplice, a servant this time, with a tray of drinks stops at the small gathering. Each of the noble ladies takes a glass from the tray and nod expectantly for an adventurer to follow suit. The same sleeping draught is in the drink that was in the chocolates.

If the characters let down their guards and take a sip, it produces the same result as for the chocolates. But again, Retian will be stopped, this time by his own father who has him taken, under guard, to the Old Library.

In either of these scenarios, the characters are also brought to the library and the duke threatens all of them. "I warned you about him," he says, pointing a finger at his son, "If there is a repeat of this, I shall dock your pay by 50%." He turns to Retian, "As for you, even if you do escape, I will have you tracked down and chained to the altar where you will marry Portiabbee Crampell and I'll have you both shipped off to a locked and sealed agri-dome on Tegreen until you produce an heir! DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR!"

If the characters followed the duke's earlier advice and abstained, Retian will regroup and try another plan. He is not discouraged, and merely chalks up these experiences as learning his enemies' strengths and weaknesses. So far, though, there are no weaknesses.

Plan B

Retian's old college buddies, Team Nebula, are ensconced in the guest wing of the palace. The young heir has set up a performance of their spectacular skills at the ball to be held this very evening in the main ballroom on the stage at the west end of the grand chamber. The team, of which Retian was once a member, dances a high-flying, acrobatic performance that never fails to hold guests enraptured. Retian's plan is simple. He will perform with the group and slip out with them, and they will cover his escape to the tiny ship — with lasers if they have to.

To this end, Retian introduces the characters to the members of the troupe. The team makes a big show of demanding that Retian perform with them, "You are aware, aren't you, that he was the best and highest flyer of us all?" They beg and plead until the characters give in. Meanwhile, one of the troupe, who bears a striking resemblance to Retian, dresses himself as the heir. He will provide an element of confusion when the break is made.

When the troupe begins its performance, it will be hard to follow who is actually who while they are in the air. Another member of the team waits backstage, behind the curtains, in the same costume as Retian. The plan is for the young heir to be catapulted as high as the top of the ballroom's five story ceiling. He then tumbles down, is bounced off one of the other performers and lands rolling on the stage. An accident. He rolls toward the curtain, the other performer rolls out, and Retian is away. After the performance, "Retian" appears as himself until he is detected.

If one of the characters spots the switch, is suspicious of the "accident," or maybe just concerned over Retian's health, the game is up. The characters will stop him before he can get away. The members of the troupe will attempt to help him, but Retian waves them away. "This game has not run its full course," he says.

Of course, if the characters do not allow him to perform, the plan fails at the outset.

Plan C

His easy plan having failed, Retian tries again. This time, he attempts to appeal to the characters' sense of honor and their own romantic ideals, assuming they have any. He does have a secret, however. Retian is a natural but weak empath. He can influence moods and feelings, but only with small groups at no more than four at a time, and only for short periods, fifteen minutes, maximum. He is aware of the limitation to his talent and always tries argument first. When he senses an opponent wavering, that is when he will perform an empathic "push" to tip the other person to his side on an issue. It came in handy for college debating, and his team never lost.

Regardless of what happened in the first encounter, the adventurers return with Retian to his suite. Retian's suite is, for all practical purposes, escapeproof. The hidden door behind the full-length mirror was covered over with glassteel, under orders from the duke, before Retian finished college. Its permanence is a regular feature on the maintenance crews' schedules. His room is searched daily by Lovatt to keep him from gaining access to weapons. The only thing he is permitted is the dueling saber that is as much a part of clothing as it is a weapon.

Retian will attempt to reduce their numbers and tire them out if they can accept his logic. "Gentles," He says, "We must reach some sort of accommodation here. It is obvious that my quarters are fairly spacious, but still, such a large party cramps these rooms and must be uncomfortable for all of you. Why don't you set up a rotation at night — for, I assure you, even I must sleep. Why don't, say, two of you stay with me while the rest get some sleep. Then, perhaps every two hours or so, you could relieve each other on watch. I don't really want to make this too difficult for you."

If the characters do not agree, he shrugs and retires to bed to consider his next move. He does not want to deal with the whole party, if he can help it, and he does have a few tricks in this room that not even Lovatt is aware of.

If the characters do agree, he will cordially thank them, assuring them that this is the best solution for all concerned. Once the others have gone to their own rooms, he turns to his guards.

"I am not very sleepy, gentles, how about a nightcap?" He is well aware that this earlier ploy won't work again, and he would never consider adulterating good Creinaught Whisky anyway.

If the characters refuse, he will offer to ring for Lovatt to bring them anything they wish. His goal this time is to convert them, not drug them out of the way. If they still refuse, he says, "Nonsense, I hate

drinking alone. Have some of our local tea, if you wish, it's really quite good." And rings for Lovatt.

Once he has seen to their comfort and has them relaxed, he looks at them with a crooked smile. If the characters did not succumb to his tainted chocolates and drinks, he says, "I should have known I couldn't fool you. I have to be honest; I had a knockout concoction put in the chocolates and the drinks. You are wise and observant. I like that."

If the characters did suffer the effects of the sleeping draught, he looks at them sheepishly and says, "My father's right, you know, you shouldn't trust me."

He will continue in this vein until one of the adventurers asks him why he wants so badly to run away. If none of them do, he will say, "I suppose you wonder why any man in his right mind would want to escape from this?"

From here on, and with each subsequent group of characters, he will tell the story outlined earlier. He will play on the characters' sympathies, asking them if they've even been in love or been kept a virtual prisoner in their own homes and to imagine how that would feel. He will also tell them that Juenaire Montcrief's father has no more use for him than his father has for Juenaire. "The two men hate each other as their fathers did before them. There is nothing that can mend the breach between our two clans, save perhaps a wedding that neither of them will consent to. I am at your mercy, gentles. I do not ask that you betray my father, only that you think about what I have said. And, being honest again, I have no resources of my own, all you see around you is the exclusive property of my father. I can offer you nothing if you decide to assist me. But, if you do not, then there is nothing in the offing for me either."

If the characters seem to be sympathetic, he will attempt an empathic "push," to win them over. But the effects of this are temporary, and the characters must finally make their own decision about their loyalties. If any of the characters have psionic training, his pushes are easily blocked. This could lead to an interesting discussion later, between those characters who support Retian and those who do not. Whatever decision is made, it should be a group decision. If this does not happen, the party will oppose itself.

If the characters remain aloof and committed to their contract, Retian will find other ways to circumvent his jailers. One of these is in the bathroom. There is an old trap door whose edges are barely visible. The trap door leads to a slide and the slide leads to the palace's central refuse dump.

This suite of rooms was once a kitchen attached to the main ballroom. The ballroom has since been moved to the first floor of the structure and the trap door no longer serves any legitimate

purpose. There is no escape here for Retian because the offal that comes into the refuse dump is forced along tubeways and into a recycling center where it is shredded, pulverized and forced into bags. It is then spread over the estate's lawn and crops as fertilizer. Large pieces of plastic or metal are siphoned off and put through extractors for smelting and reuse.

Retian has the door rigged to respond to a sudden reduction or increase in the levels of light in the sitting room. If any of the characters goes into the bathroom for any reason, Retian has only to say, "Lighting down five." The trap door opens and the character begins the long slide into the refuse holding tanks. He will then try to jump the other when he goes to investigate. If this ploy works, he is out the door and down the hall like a bolt from a meson gun. A loud klaxon alarm will wake the other characters to the chase. If they do not see him depart, they will have to split up to cover both directions of the hallway. To the left of their doors, the hall dead-ends after three turns. To the right, it leads to the main guest quarters.

Last Chance

Retian's final plan, his last resort, is to change places with Lovatt, his father's Chief of Household Staff. Lovatt's duty requires him to immediately answer any summons by the family. Retian, the engineer, has cobbled together an interesting set of devices. Working with primitive tools and bits of electronic scraps, he has made two portable hologenerators — one carries his likeness, the other the image of Lovatt. Small batteries power the devices with a half-hour's life in them, which he hopes would be enough. Each generator is the size of a hatpin, with the batteries in a small ball at the top.

His plan is to get Lovatt alone in his room, knock him out with a marble lamp base as Lovatt is lacing his breeches, and hide the Retian generator on Lovatt's person. Then he will simply walk out the door, looking like Lovatt, go down the hall, out through the servants' quarters and get to the ship. It matters not how many of the adventurers are in his suite when he does this, since Lovatt is probably the only person they would allow being alone with Retian.

It is late afternoon and at least two of the characters are with Retian when he rings for Lovatt. "Gentles, I rung for the family servant. You know him, Lovatt. I wish him to assist me with my dressing for tonight's ball. I have a rather spectacular new outfit, but it requires someone to do the lacing. Is that all right? After all, you will be here and you know there is no exit from my room. Lovatt will be with me, in any event."

The characters will probably agree. If they do not, Retian will ask that only one of them come

inside, due to the room he needs to get into the new clothing. If two characters insist on attending him, he will dismiss Lovatt, saying he doesn't feel well and changed his mind. But he will only delay his plan and wait for a new set of guards to try again. One guard and Lovatt he feels he can take, but he is not about to try for three.

If the characters agree, Lovatt comes to the suite, enters Retian's bedroom with him and, twenty minutes later, walks out again. "That should suit the master, gentles, he will be with you shortly." An observant character will have a chance to notice a flicker in the Lovatt image, like a gentle wave on a still pond. If the characters notice it, they will then have to decide whether or not to act. If they do nothing, or if the flicker passes without notice, Retian has an excellent chance to get to the hidden *Falcon*.

In a moment though, after "Lovatt" has left, they will hear a groan coming from the bedroom. When they investigate, they will find an indignant "Retian," complaining about that "damned scamp." If the characters are confused, "Retian" shouts, "I'm not him, you fools! This is one of his creations meant to throw us off-guard. Go after him!" The Retian image then begins to flicker. Once the characters realize what has happened, the chase is on.

If all else fails, and there is no other opportunity, Retian will excuse himself, go into the bathroom and flick on the Lovatt image. When he comes out, the characters should be surprised and uncertain of how to react, just long enough for him to make another attempt. This time he will try for the roof. The entrance to the roof is concealed behind a niche in the hallway. A ladder leads to the roof and the roof in the rear of the palace slopes low enough that he can drop off and land gently.

The Falcon

The Falcon's cargo hold is empty except that some thoughtful soul provided hammock type acceleration couches. The ship can now carry a total of 16 people in an emergency.

PATRICIDE!

As his impending nuptials draw closer, Retian becomes angrier and more determined. This interlude occurs at least three days before the wedding day. The following series of events is indicative of Retian's state of mind, and the characters had better intervene.

The characters are dressed in the best finery with which duke has provided them. They and Retian are in the main ballroom on the first floor. The room is packed with a glittering array of some of the most important nobles in the Imperium, even Archduke Wheynoe, the emperor's first cousin, is in attendance in representing the Imperial Throne. The characters may be dancing or talking with the people around them, but there should always be at least three watching Retian. At this time, they should be reminded of the N'Alban dueling conventions cited earlier, perhaps through a conversation about dueling with one of the guests.

Suddenly, Retian's father appears through the mass of people, heading straight towards his son. As the father approaches, the son draws his sword and calls out, "I challenge your right to sell my life like chattel. You put my mother in her grave with your machinations and I will see you dead before I see you achieve your twisted dreams." With that, he strikes at the duke, who pulls his own saber quickly enough to parry the blow, but the fight has begun. Both men are fairly evenly matched, although the youngster has speed and agility on his side. Young Retian slowly backs away, parrying and thrusting all the while. He is leading his father up the staircase, trying to get a height advantage over him. Like an eagle stealing a prey, the duke lunges, Retian dances away, slashes up, then cuts downward and marks the duke's right cheek, adding one more scar to the dueling chevrons already there. This is the point at which the fight should stop — but Retian, in full rage, has no intention of leaving the older man standing. His father begins to lower his guard when Retian attacks again, this time taking a slice into the

				Surface		Interior			
				Crew	Pass	Low	Cargo	1	
				1	3	0	13	2	
				Length	Width	Height	Tons	3	
							100	4	
				Quality	Reliability	Built	Overhaul	5	
								6	
								2	
								3	
								4	
Name/Type	2	Maneuver	M 2					5	
The Falcon	2	Jump	J 0					6	
Mission	3	Power	P 3					7	
Scout	10	Armor	Armor					8	
Comments								9	
See text.								10	
								11	
								12	

duke's left arm.

If the characters do not intervene, Retian will continue to press his attack until he kills the duke. If this happens, their patron will be dead and the heir taken off to detention and charged with murder. The adventurers will be stuck on the planet as material witnesses in protective custody until Retian's trial, one year from the date of the incident.

If they attempt to stop the fight, they will probably have to jump Retian and pull him down to the floor. If they use laser pistols, bystanders or even Retian and the duke could be hurt accidentally. If they draw their own swords, things could get bloody, as Retian's friends are in the crowd and they are similarly armed. Any further bloodshed will result in the civil authorities locking up every person with a drawn weapon until they can sort it all out — after at least three days.

If they successfully jump Retian and avoid further violence, the duke will call his security team to take Retian to his room until "The lad cools off." He will then reward the adventurers by publicly knighting them in the company of the Archduke, making their new stations permanent and forevermore closed to challenge.

FURTHER ADVENTURES

If the characters remain loyal to the duke and Retian is forced to marry, the wedding is a spectacle not to be missed. A two-hundred voice choir heads a processional that takes half an hour to complete. Lords and Ladies high and low, arrayed in heraldic order of precedence down the rows and rows of pews, and all the glory of ancient pageantry is displayed before them. And the characters have places of honor, as the entire first row is reserved for them and decked with the duke's own arms and livery. Following the ceremony, the adventurers are paid and thanked by His Grace.

They already have their knighthoods, and the duke informs them that they are to travel back to the planet from which they came in much the same luxury that delivered them to N'Alba. The story of their close association with the duke and their parts in the matter of his son, however, precedes them. From their arrival at the planetside terminal to the day they step off the liner, attendants, passengers, and crewmembers treat them as mercenary pariahs. Since he was a baby, the people have always belonged to Retian, not his father, and they have spread the story of the characters' "evil" deeds far and wide.

If Retian escaped on his own, the characters are on the run from the duke and those of his men who are not busy chasing the heir. They will be joined by additional forces lent by Duke Conor, who is now as angry as Retian III is. The characters' only hope is to get off-world as fast as possible before the duke has them taken to the torture pits in the lowest basement of the old palace. He is not amused and will not pay them, and if he catches them they will wish they were never born.

If Retian seduced the characters with his romantic story and they threw in their lots with him, he asks them to accompany him in his quest to elope with Juenaire Montcrief. Her father, on their small estate on Trellis, is keeping Juenaire away from Retian. They might as well, for if the duke catches them, he will treat them even more harshly than he would if Retian merely escaped on his own.

Trellis is a garden world that keeps to traditional ways of doing things. They do have grav cars, but the roads are mostly dirt, kept picturesque by the tourist board. Large wineries grow their raw materials in an idyllic climate. Juenaire's father owns one of the smaller estates dedicated to winery art and it is here that she is being held.

5: THE PRINCESS CLONE

This adventure revolves around a question of identity. A young woman who was the victim of an outrageous plot hires the characters to regain her lost title and territory. Because of some rather unique circumstances, however, her people may not immediately accept her. From the moment she introduces herself, the characters are on the run. Her father, Duke d'Arbonne, committed a grave and terrible injustice on his only child, replacing her with a clone after she was born and even before her mother, Darrida, escaped with her. He considers his natural daughter to be a loose end, one he will have to close. For the old duke is dying, he is going to abdicate the throne in favor of his cloned daughter, thereby cutting off his wife and natural daughter from any and all inheritance — a final act of revenge.

To ensure a smooth transition, the duke has decided that it would be better if the princess, Belinda, had a terminal accident. He has hired an independent mercenary company, Gresh's Hardbacks, to accomplish this, and provided them with the girl's last known location. While she is meeting with the characters, the mercs have found her apartment and set up an ambush.

Once (and if) the characters get her away from the mercs and off-planet, they will be chased all the way to d'Arbonne, if they cannot outwit them. After they arrive, assuming they have lost the mercenaries, there is the added challenge of Fortress d'Arbonne itself, a reinforced command center the duke has made his home. Originally designed to protect the duke and his military leaders from the retribution of the Imperium he was once plotting against, the structure is near impregnable. It consists of ten levels and only the first, the lowest security level, is above ground. Besides retinal scans, vid cams, and palm readers, there are also stations that read implants at the entrance to every elevator from Level Four on down. The implants, embedded behind the left ear of those with them, are worn by everyone with access to levels five and below of the fortress, and identify the person, rank, and authorizations for lower levels, living quarters, and other restricted areas. The party will have to gain at least one implant (the programming does allow for "guests"), to progress to the fifth level. But the first four levels have no implant readers, relying instead on retinal scan and palm prints.

Certain officers have multi-area authorization, but only the duke and his cloned daughter have "All Access" implants. There are two connections between levels: emergency stairways and a staggered series of elevators, and each elevator only provides access between two floors.

But the pretender is not without planetside allies. There are those who served her mother and remain loyal to her. Her father's vicious excesses, his institution of slavery as a punishment for crime — especially "political crime" — and the continual, mysterious, and uninvestigated disappearances of hundreds of citizens have created

small groups of revolutionaries. While unorganized and often at cross-purposes, they require only a leader to coalesce their movements.

While stealth is not an option here, the characters will have to concoct a cover story to disguise their real purpose. Belinda's plan is to replace the clone with herself and act the part of her double until after the ceremony of installation. When she is enthroned as Duchess d'Arbonne and with the characters at her side, she will reveal her actual identity to the man she has hated for so many years.

While this adventure stands alone, it can be greatly enhanced if the referee has copies of the *Starships* book for spacecraft encounters in the d'Arbonne system and the *Emperor's Arsenal* tome for weapons used throughout. As always, game balance should be your chief concern. There is no adventure if the characters are killed before they can begin. By the same token, an easy quest is not much fun, either. Therefore, adjust anything sited in the text to suit the abilities and firepower of the characters. They should have to think and to work hard in order to win against their foes, just don't make it too hard — nor too easy.

THE STORY

The wedding of Princess Darrida and Duke Constantinus d'Arbonne was a gala affair. Although the bride was some fifteen years younger than her new husband was, they appeared to be a happy couple and friends of both thought this a good match. Belinda's mother, however, was unaware of the duke's appetite for cruelty when she married him. His late night sojourns to the deeper levels of Fortress d'Arbonne became ever more frequent as their first year together progressed. He returned from these episodes smelling unpleasantly of carrion and offal. She pretended to be asleep, although on these occasions he was more amorous than usual. She saw spots of blood on his clothing, sometimes even on his face. His Lady was repulsed, but fascinated. What was her husband doing? What was his secret? One night, the duke's young bride decided to follow him. What transpired that night she



never revealed, not even to her own daughter, but it was then she decided to leave the duke. These events took place the day before she discovered that she was pregnant.

The young duchess resolved to stay until the birth of her child, since her husband's money would see that she had the best care imaginable. But she laid her plans to leave as soon after the delivery as possible and take her baby with her.

The duke, though an evil and brutal man, was anything but stupid. As his young bride grew ever more emotionally distant from him, he surmised that she would probably vanish after the birth of their first child. Well, he thought, let her go. He had grown tired of her, anyway. But the birth of an heir presented an interesting problem. He could merely take the child from her, but that could leave him open to retribution, for his wife was not without influence among the upper levels of the Imperium nor was she without friends. He began to concoct a plan by which he could have his heir: raise her in his own image, and get rid of the woman and her whelp at the same time. He would play the attentive husband throughout, even attending his daughter's birth. His own doctor would perform the delivery and carefully remove the child's caul to his lab. There, out of sight of wife and servants, he would clone the child and make sure his wife left with nothing of value.

And so it began. His cloned daughter was also named Belinda, and he did raise her to be his reflection. As far as anyone except the attending physician knew, this Belinda was his daughter. Strangely, however, the doctor died of a coronary two weeks after the surrogate delivered the girl. The surrogate died in childbirth, saving the duke the Cr10,000 fee he had promised the woman.

At the age when most children with a bent toward darkness were pulling the wings off small, native insects, this Belinda was learning classic forms of torture: the rack, the iron maiden, thumb screws. She also learned newer techniques, such as how to create images from the terror of a subject's mind and the proper use of electronic probes. Her father was a grim taskmaster, driving the child ever further into his deranged world.

As the cloned Belinda grew in stature, so she grew in power. She followed a darker side of her character, one her sister was unaware of in herself. By age fifteen, she had gone from being a rapt student to full partnership in her father's cruelties and he had her supplied with an "All Access" implant. As she grew in depravity, she became as feared and despised by the people of d'Arbonne as her father. By the age of twenty, she was clearly her aging father's equal, some of the guards said she was his master.

Constantinus was no fool. He knew his natural daughter could very well have the same abilities

as his cloned Belinda. He believed that sooner or later the girl or her mother would raise forces and return to claim the girl's birthright. His early concern was replaced with obsession as the clone grew in violence. He knew that someday he would have to face the child of his blood, and he spent his haunted life looking for an edge.

Almost a quarter of a century has passed and the duke is aging. He has announced his abdication in favor of his "daughter," the clone, and the date of the clone's elevation is fast approaching. Belinda, his natural daughter, wants her birthright back in order to provide the aging Darrida a few years of luxury before she dies. She is also an idealist and sees herself as the savior of the downtrodden and oppressed people of her father's corrupt duchy.

THE SETUP

The characters are in a bar or a recreation center when a young woman who looks to be about twenty-four years old approaches them. She is very well dressed and extremely good looking. She appears to be a natural red head, uncommon in the Imperium because the genes for that hair color hair are generally recessive. Her clothing exudes credits — any characters who are into *haute couture* may recognize her garments as some created by Zebeglan of Closen, the most expensive designer in the near systems around Sylea. She introduces herself as Belinda d'Arbonne and begs a moment of their time, but in private. "I wish to hire you on a matter of some urgency. You do have rooms nearby, is it not so? Can we continue this conversation in your apartments?"

If the characters say "no," she invites them to her rooms. A beautiful woman, apparently in distress, the prospect of a new contract... what kind of cad could refuse such an offer? Belinda will buy them drinks, if that is what they desire. She will even pay for their previous tab, and lavish exotic foods on the party, but she will not say any more until they are alone.

If the characters decide to go to her suite now, the following incident takes place. If they go to her apartment later to pick up her clothes and equipment, the encounter will take place at that time.

As they approach the door to Belinda's second floor apartment, she motions them to silence. Checking the edge of the door and the entry plate, she whispers to them, "I placed a hair on the plate and between the door and the jamb, but they're not there now. Someone may be inside." The characters are attacked as soon as they open the door. Five black-clad mercenaries (UPP: 767766) armed with highly illegal spurt guns (TL12, Damage Rating 2, Contact range, 0.2kg, Cr2000 each) are startled and open fire.

If the characters react quickly enough, they have the advantage of surprise — the thugs are expecting only Belinda, not an entire party of adventurers. The mercs carry razor-sharp knives as backup weapons and are skilled in their use (Short Blade-2). If the spurt gun attack fails, they will shift to melee combat.

If the characters manage to eliminate all five mercenaries, further pursuit will not be a problem. By the time Gresh learns his first team was wiped out, the trail will be cold. He may track them to the spaceport, but Belinda, who captains her own ship, has filed a false destination plan.

If one of the mercs escapes, they have a half-hour window of safety, before Gresh's Hardbacks pick up the trail. In this case, the characters can lose them only in space.

Belinda's Story

Although young, she has a strong presence and seems to be a natural leader. If the characters refuse or put her off, she will tell them she will "pay for their ears." When they are alone, she tells them her story.

"I am, by birthright, the Duchess d'Arbonne. When I was born, my mother was forced to escape my father, a vicious man and a tyrant who dreamed of a greater empire than one lone ducal system off the beaten spaceways. My mother, Darrida, is a princess in her own right, but of a weakened house. She made her plans to leave with me soon as I was born. In this, she was successful. But Constantinus, my father, sensed or learned what she was doing.

"Mother and I are not without sources on d'Arbonne. The doctor who delivered me was one of many men hopelessly in love with my mother. He managed to send her a report some months after our escape. He said that when I was born, my father forced him to take the caul in which I was born to his lab and clone me. He allowed my mother and I to escape, but put up a good show of a chase.

"My father is dying, my double is set to inherit my birthright and I need to stop it. We later learned that my father raised her in his own image and she is as evil as is he. I will pay you the price of an imperial scout if you will help me, and I have a plan.

"Security at Fortress d'Arbonne is almost impenetrable, but since my clone is an exact copy of me, if 9 months younger, no matter what ID system is used I should be able to pass through it. Our hand and fingerprints, retinal patterns and appearances are identical. She is, in a way, me. I have a map of the fortress, current pictures of my physical counterpart, and a ship that was donated by an old admirer of my mother. We will slip into

the system and I will replace the clone and free my people from their torment. Will you help me?"

If the characters talked to her in her apartment after the attack, they gather her things and leave for the spaceport. If this discussion was held in their quarters, they leave for hers and run into the mercenaries' attack.

INTO DEEP SPACE

The exact location of the d'Arbonne system has been left intentionally vague. The referee may place this system in any logical quadrant of space, but the journey should require at least two jumps. The d'Arbonne system consists of ten planets, including three gas giants. While there is a lot of debris in this system, there is no actual asteroid belt. The system is difficult to navigate, but, on the other hand, there are lots of rocks to hide behind.

If the characters did not eliminate Gresh's Hardbacks at the apartment, they are pursuing them now. The Hardbacks want to complete their contract, but if they can scoop up Belinda's safari ship, the *Star Witch*, they will award themselves a bit of a bonus when they resell her. While they carry more firepower and armor and have a superior structure, they can be eluded. The Hardbacks are greedy and will bring the *Witch* into their main hold if possible. If this occurs, the characters will have a fighting chance in the belly of the raider.

The safari ship's sleek design will allow it a narrow entry into the Hardbacks' ship, the *Vulture*. If the raiders succeed, they will seal the outdoors but they will not start artificial gravity. Since they are used to operating in such conditions, their reasoning goes, those on the *Star Witch* are probably not. Once the hold is pressurized, they will blow one of the hatchways and storm aboard. Given the value of the safari ship, they will prefer to damage her as little as possible, inflicting only what they themselves can repair later. Once they dispose of the crew, they will put a prize crew aboard her and return it to their base.

Belinda is a competent pilot (Pilot-3), but if there is a character in the party with a higher rating than she has, she will defer command to that character. In any event, she will ask for the opinions of all pilot-characters aboard on how best to escape, elude, or destroy the *Vulture*. The survival of the pretender duchess and, indeed, of the party, should be the responsibility of the characters.

Belinda will inform the characters that the *Vulture* must be dealt with before proceeding to d'Arbonne. If the corsair follows them, they will alert her father of their presence in the system and he will place all of his forces on Red Alert Status. "And then his ships will easily destroy us before we even get a million kicks in."

				Surface				Interior						
				Crew	Pass	Low	Cargo	1						
				5	12	0	3	2						
				Length	Width	Height	Tons	3						
							200	4						
				Quality	Reliability	Built	Overhaul	5						
								6						
				2	Laser Battery	2	0	0	0	2				
								3						
								4						
Name/Type	1	Maneuver	M 2					5						
Star Witch	2	Jump	J 10					6						
Mission	1	Power	P 3					7						
	0	Armor	Armor					8						
Comments								9						
See text.								10						
								11						
								12						

SHIP CARD

FORM 41

				Surface				Interior						
				Crew	Pass	Low	Cargo	1						
				10	0	20	110	2						
				Length	Width	Height	Tons	3						
							400	4						
				Quality	Reliability	Built	Overhaul	5						
								6						
				3	Laser Battery	3	0	0	0	2				
								3						
								4						
Name/Type	3	Maneuver	M 10					5						
The Vulture	2	Jump	J 4					6						
Mission	3	Power	P 4					7						
	40	Armor	Armor					8						
Comments								9						
See text.								10						
								11						
								12						

SHIP CARD

FORM 41

The Star Witch

The *Star Witch* is on loan from a friend of Darrida's. The ship was altered to carry 12 passengers instead of the standard 6 by converting part of the cargo bays into makeshift quarters. Conditions are cramped onboard the *Star Witch*, but at least she is armed. Her holds are stocked with a variety of exotic weaponry, including one PCMP (Plasma Cannon, Man Portable).

The Vulture

The *Vulture's* chief weakness is that she is low on everything. She was docked for repairs and refitting when the Hardbacks threw the mechanics off of her and launched out of sequence. She is carrying less than half her normal fuel load (50.1 vs. 118). She has full lasers, but her Fire Control is significantly reduced, because it was being upgraded when she lifted off and is mostly in pieces. The referee should make any other appropriate adjustments, but the *Vulture* should represent a very real threat.

The d'Arbonne Run

If the characters managed to eliminate the Hardbacks and get off planet without pursuit, the trip to the outer reaches of the d'Arbonne system is fairly uneventful. Likewise, if they eluded, crippled, or destroyed the *Vulture*, they have an easier time for the rest of the voyage to the outer limits

of the system. About 250,000 clicks from Cinder, the outermost planet of the system, Belinda throws the controls to a complete stop and calls a meeting in the dining area.

"My friends, from here on we must be extremely careful. Informants within my father's military told me that he started tripling his in-system patrols about a month ago. Do not underestimate his abilities — I do not. He has a bit of a private navy, granted him by the emperor years ago because of some serious problems with local pirates. Pirates that, no doubt, were in his employ so that he could request forces. At last report, the naval forces of the Duchy of d'Arbonne include fifteen light, two medium, and five heavy fighters. In addition to this, he has three patrol cruisers and one destroyer assigned to him all under detached duty, and all vessels are staffed by d'Arbonnese members of the Imperial Navy."

If the characters ask about the loyalties of the crewmembers and officers, she replies with derisive snort.

"Loyalties? The emperor would like to think that these are his men. I assure you, they are not. Over the years my father has placed men who were loyal only to him in positions of command. And he knew they were loyal only to him. Some of them he holds secrets over, secrets that could ruin careers and destroy entire families if made public.

Some of these men are kept loyal by their passionate participation in my fathers' — how shall I put this — lower-level entertainment centers? And a few, not many, but a few, are loyal because my father has their families marked for death and worse if they do not obey his every word. Even the emperor cannot buy these men."

If the characters were able to capture the *Vulture*, they'll have a divided crew, but two ships. Even if they only have the *Space Witch*, they will still have to deal with Constantinus. What they need is a positive plan. Belinda will provide them with a map of the system and advice gleaned from the intelligence reports supplied by her allies over the years.

"Cinder," she tells them, "is a prison planet. Most of the prisoners there are 'political.' In this case, it means they opposed daddy. We have enough firepower to land there and take the prison — we can't take all of them with us, just the best. But we can put them in charge."

She recommends that they put in a short-range distress signal to alert the warden and guards that a ship is going to land, welcome or not. The guards, completely oblivious to any threat, will comply and the operation should come off without a hitch. The only real problem is knocking out the above ground communications center before the attack on the prison itself. Given the anti-personnel weapons in either the *Space Witch* and the *Vulture*, this should be a cakewalk. Cinder is supposed to be "escapeproof," and the prison command corps was never given arms rated higher than TL10. The characters can take as many fighters from the prison as they can hold. If they have both ships, this could be the start of a formidable force. Although the non-player characters are weak and anemic, they are driven toward revenge — and StarWitch has arms for all of them.

After the attack on Cinder, she recommends a twisted course: hiding behind the gas giants, sprinting between the free-floating asteroids, and working their way toward the second plant, d'Arbonne itself. The referee may use any of the previously mentioned types of vessels in confrontations. The characters will have to stay hidden or launch the first and most destructive attacks as to not alert the duke of their presence. It will be a game of hide and seek, nip and tuck. As the ship (or ships) darts in and out of their hidey holes, Duke Constantinus's ships will read the blips on their screens as targets, either genuine ones or as "foo fighters," sun spots, random energy bursts, and space pulses. The characters will have to be extremely careful, as discovery, even if they destroy the patrol craft, could be fatal.

The details of these of actions are left to the referee. Direct encounters with d'Arbonne defense forces are not recommended. If they do occur, there will always be one or two officers on board

the enemy vessels who will attempt to rise above their captivity or enslavement to the duke and try, unknown to the proto-duchess or her hired help, to assist them — without recording or second-party observation, of course.

PLANETFALL

If the characters have made it through the system undetected, their troubles have just begun. While internal passports and travel passes are required on d'Arbonne, Belinda has blank documents that can be inscribed with the appropriate statistics. These are not foolproof, however, and close inspection can reveal them to be forgeries. The pretender duchess has also altered her appearance for the journey. She wears a thick wig of black hair and, using theatrical make-up, has given herself 20 more years and 30 more pounds. She begins by explaining that, as she sees it, there are three possibilities:

"The first is to land on Cretoria. Cretoria is the largest continent on d'Arbonne, and it has the largest military contingent on the planet. There is a man there, one of my mother's friends. He has been experimenting with a new technology for teleportation. If it works, it allows site-to-site travel on planet. Big if. But, if successful, we could teleport into the fortress on the exact level we need to be to find my sister.

"Second, we could land on Plentorium, the second continent, and try to rally the populace. The people there are bitterly opposed to my father and we could foment a revolution there that would divert forces and attention away from the fortress. But then, we would still need to get to the fortress.

"The third possibility is more risky, but perhaps the better course. We could land to the south of Fortress d'Arbonne and walk in through the front door."

"Whatever we decide, we cannot be captured. What do you suggest?"

For any option they select, the characters will have to slip down at night and hide their ship under some kind of cover. Normal military patrols will be suspicious if a large space vessel is sitting out in a cornfield, and they couldn't come down in or near a city. Belinda will recommend one of the large barns in the outlying farm districts or trying to set down in a forested or mountainous area. Whatever is chosen, they will have to find transportation that is less conspicuous than an interstellar spacecraft. If the farm option is selected, there are usually trucks, with the keys in them, parked near the buildings. The owner, however, may not be amenable to having his equipment stolen.

Remember that the two Belindas are identical in all ways except for the implant. The clone has gained such a reputation as her father's arrogant and spiteful lieutenant that most people will be reluctant to help. The exception, of course, are

those who know Darrida and are loyal to her. Belinda and the characters will still have to convince any potential allies that she is who she says she is, and that this is not just the start of a new ducal game.

At any given moment there is a 50% chance of discovery by military or police authorities. The military has charge of patrolling the outlying areas; police take care of the cities. Unless they occur in areas in which the characters just shouldn't be, most of these encounters will be perfunctory, such as bored guards casually reviewing documents they have seen a thousand times before. But a few, about one out of five, will be conscientious enough to really examine their papers. When this occurs, the characters will either have to start talking fast or fight their way out when the guard goes for the laser in his side holster. If they get into serious trouble, Belinda will take the lead if none of the characters do. She will flash her green eyes at the guard and attempt to convince him that their papers are valid, just old and that they are Rockers who got lost on their way back from a friend's party. She has a 10% chance of convincing the guard, but her plow will at least slow him up.

If the characters do encounter a patrol, the referee should try to mix in some interesting weaponry from *Emperor's Arsenal*. But if that volume is not available, laser rifles and pistols are standard issue for military personnel. Police tend to favor older, lower tech automatic weapons that fire hollow point lead bullets.

Option 1: Landing on Cretoria

If the characters decide to go down on the continent of Cretoria, they will find that every city and town has a garrison. Cretoria is where most of d'Arbonne's major industries are located, and there are manufactures here that the duke does not want the Imperium, or anyone else for that matter, to find out about.

Cressan Dandry, Ph. D., the friend of Belinda's mother, lives and works in the city of Albonsen. He is a physicist who works on secret projects for the duke and on his own dreams in his spare time. Apolitical, Cressan ignores the rumors concerning the applications of his projects. "Not relevant," he has been heard to say, "science has no opinions." He is a fussy little man of 67 years who mutters to himself continually. He never married, except to his work, he has few friends, and keeps to himself.

He met Belinda's mother while they were both students at a sector university. The differences between them, the book-bound student without a social life and the glamorous princess to whom everything came easy, created an instant bond. If Cressan is loyal to anything outside of physics, he is loyal to her. Darrida befriended him and made sure he was included in her circle, whether others liked it or not. He has always been grateful to her for the

few years he spent outside his self-imposed shell.

Getting to Cressan is not going to be easy. The nearest area in which they could safely put down is a full seventy-five clicks from the city of Albonsen. The location is screened by mountains and rugged country rarely visited. There are few farms here and the only permanent residents are a half-dozen Rockers, men and women who have dropped out of society to eke out subsistence in the mountains. The Rockers are solitary, withdrawing even from each other, but they are, on the whole, an honest lot. There is nothing to fear from the Rockers and one might even decide to help them scale the mountain. The best place to set down is in a deep valley that will require some arduous climbing to leave.

Once they do make it out of the valley, they will find the roads to and from the city heavily patrolled, and the only people who travel to Albonsen are those with business there and trucks bringing in supplies or taking out both refuse and new inventions. The characters could decide to travel at least part of the distance on foot, hiding from road vehicles in the dense forests. Their only other options are to hitchhike or to steal a vehicle from a rest area on the road.

If they hitchhike, they will have to break into smaller groups of no more than three, and they can find this out the hard way. A large party on the road afoot is cause for suspicion at any time. There are bandits on the highways who hijack trucks for their contents, so drivers, no matter how lonely, are leery of strangers. Even worse is the danger of a police or military patrol wondering what they are doing so far from civilization.

When they finally get to Albonsen, they find a small, clean city that is dedicated to original research. It is a place of few restaurants, hotels, or theaters. Those who work here prefer to go elsewhere for recreation and entertainment. Because of the work conducted here, the area is very sensitive. Police patrols use military equipment and hardware. There are only three entrances to the city, each with guard stations that are manned around the clock. The city is also surrounded by a perimeter force field on three sides. The fourth side looks out over the sea and the sheer cliffs prevent entry from that side.

Once the characters manage to get inside, finding Cressan is relatively easy, because Belinda has his address. Albonsen is a planned city and its addresses reflect positions on a block set between two coordinates. For example, Cressan lives at 10023.7 or the seventh house on the west side of 100th north of 23rd. Security inside is relatively light, given the difficulty of getting in, but there are constant intermittent patrols. The police know almost all of the citizens who belong here and strangers are automatically stopped.

Cressan is a man who rarely sleeps, preferring to take short catnaps from time to time as

required. When the party arrives, Belinda does the talking. Cressan knows who she is and has received word that he might expect a visit. He invites them in, sets a pot of tea on the stove, and tells them to find seats in his small living room.

"I understand what you are asking," he says after Belinda tells them their purpose, "but I don't think, hmm... Well, I don't know. I may be able to do what you ask, but the risks... No, I'd rather not. And there are other problems... Yes, problems with the devise."

If the characters do not ask about the "risks," Belinda says, "If you're concerned about retribution from my father, that is what we are here to end."

"The risks I speak of, no, they're not political, but from the devise itself. I have never tried to send anything through without a receiver on the other end. It is possible, oh my, yes, it is. It should work. Minor adjustments I can make. But I'm not sure how to aim the transmission. End duration I can do, that will stop you and put you down, but where, that is the worry... Yes, where?"

Any characters with navigation skills should be able to help him create a time and direction vector that would be accurate within two kilometers. It is not possible to translate them directly into the fortress. However, a five-kilometer clear space surrounds the fortress on all sides. Part of the duke's defense against frontal assault was to ensure it could not be done by stealth and would give his soldiers an unobstructed field of fire.

"I can send you in groups of no more than three, no more. At ten-minute intervals... yes, that should do. I know the fortress's elevation, yes, but accuracy? I can assure you won't wind up in the group, but you may have a short drop. A drop. Two feet... No, more. Maybe three."

If the characters ask him about security inside the clear area, he laughs. "There is none, unless you fall on top of someone coming out or going in. His Grace fears no man inside his compound, only those who would wish to get there. Yes."

If the characters agree to use his transporting device, there is a 10% chance of failure. In addition, each group of characters transmitted will land between 1D feet above the group, falling to the macadam below.

Proceed to "Fortress d'Arbonne" section.

Option 2: Landing on Plentorium

This option may be the most risky and may turn into a campaign of its own. If the referee does not want this to be available, either eliminate it from consideration or have Belinda explain why this might not be the best possible plan. (No information about allies, possible hostility from the various underground groups, lack of intelligence concerning the terrain, military/police installations, and so on.) On the other hand, this is an

opportunity for some free-flowing role-playing.

The fact is that, in spite of its reputation for revolutionary zeal, the farmers of Plentorium are pretty peaceful bunch. They are organized into secret cells and societies, and they do have large caches of weapons and even a couple of older, air-breathing jet fighters hidden away in their barns, but they can never quite bring themselves to an actual conflict with the government. They bluster and shout, issuing broadsides over the Net and distributing pamphlets in village markets, accusing the government of everything from dinning on babies to the recent fall in the price of agri-stores. But the Continental Governor dismisses these groups and their actions as "Mere debating societies blowing off steam. We think it's a positive release for them."

On the other hand, what these disruptive elements have never had is a single leader. Someone who could unify them and focus their cause in one overriding message. Belinda is that someone. But "how" is another matter. She has no real contacts here. Her mother's few friends on this continent are all dead except for Hriam Chambaner, and he is in a nursing home. If he could be found, he might supply some names, but beyond that he is useless — not that Belinda knows which hospital or where it is located, anyway.

The characters may choose to land almost anywhere on the continent. Large barns provide a perfect hiding place for their vessel. Plentorium is almost exclusively agricultural, having a three-crop growing season, and is out of the harsher planetary weather patterns. It is the perfect "bread basket" for d'Arbonne. Farms in Plentorium are huge by any standards, comprising many thousands of acres. The government and the men who work them jointly own them. The government's share is 51%, the farmers split the other 49% equally — just one of their complaints. On the other hand, the government supplies all of the hard machinery, transportation costs, and marketing expenses.

Once they choose a site in which to set down, the die is cast. All farms are similar in layout. The huge storage and equipment barns also hold both agricultural products and equipment. About a klick away, in most cases, are the three or four barracks-like structures that house the quarters of the working farmers. A small house adjoins these units, sometime attached, sometimes not, for the use of the farm manager. The managers are elected by the working farmers from among their own, a concession grudgingly made by the government some years ago during the first and only farm strike in d'Arbonne's history.

The characters will have to move the farm machinery out of the barn, bring in the ship on the grav engines, and put the agricultural equipment back in place. If they can figure out a way to camouflage the ship, like dumping a load of grain on

it, so much the better. They will then have to make contact with the farmers somehow. Belinda will suggest that they try to approach one at random and talk to him.

What Belinda and the characters do not know is that the farmers have information from a plant high in Constantinus d'Arbonne's circle of administrators, that the duke has a new plan for agriculture. He wants to eliminate the semi-independent farmers and replace them with convicts. Still smarting over his perceived defeat at the hands of the strikers, he has proposed that the convicts be the very men who currently farm his land.

The farmers are ready, but there is the further problem of Belinda. If she remains disguised, her purpose could fail, and she becomes just another revolutionary, no closer to the ducal chair than she was when the characters found her. If she reveals her true identity and sheds the trapping of her masquerade, she may not be believed. The farmers might even think that the duke has put his daughter up to this in order to have "charges" on which to enslave them on their own farms.

It is up to the characters to come up with the solution to this quandary. They must find a way to convince the farmers that what they say is the truth. Vid broadcasts showing the duchess-elect at civic and official functions will do no good, since those could easily have been recorded previously. Some of the older farmers may remember Darrida, if not personally, from news tapes at the time. In this case, they will question her about Darrida's life since then and may believe her if the characters can support her statements without appearing like well-rehearsed actors.

If the characters have the aide of the farmers, Belinda suggests that her party should continue on to the Fortress while the farming community begins a full-scale uprising. The distraction on Plentorium should pull enough of the garrison troops from Fortress d'Arbonne to make their access easier. As always, if one of the party has a better idea, she is more than willing to listen.

If and when the party gets to the island on which lies the duke's stronghold, see "Option 3" before proceeding to the "Fortress d'Arbonne" section.

Option 3: Landing Near the Fortress

If the characters choose this option, they will have to practice as much stealth as possible. While the duke believes his outer planet defenses to be unbreachable; he is paranoid about attacks on his person. Every 20 minutes there is an automatic scan that sweeps the entire hemisphere for unauthorized traffic in the skies. None has ever been found although the occasional false reading will trigger an alarm and send a squadron scrambling. There is a 2- on 1D chance that the *Space Witch* (or the *Vulture*, if it was captured) can slip through the

twenty-minute window. If they do trigger the alarm, there is a 1- on 1D chance that they will actually land before the squadron even takes off. Since none of the scanning blips has even been real, controllers and pilots have become complacent. They no longer sprint to their craft but stroll, joking about the "phantom intrusion" and discussing the weather.

If the characters do have to face the squadron, they should easily defeat the air-breathing jet fighters, but that is only the beginning. The alarm is now sounded all over the planet. Neither the duke nor the military will know who is attacking them, simply that, this time, there is a very real threat. The characters may go to a fallback position found in one of the other options, but their task is complicated by the fact that now they are being actively searched for.

In the case of discovery, they may choose to return to space, find a hiding place, and wait for another opportunity after the heat cools. In this case they have only a 1- on 1D chance to escape discovery by d'Arbonne's forces, who are now actively searching for an enemy.

If they do manage to evade the scans and touch down, there is little or no cover. The fortress is located on an island, the Isle d'Arbonne, which was chosen for its isolation. The only structure on this hunk of oceanic rock is the fortress itself and a small, external hydrofoil ferry station. The hydrofoil ferries transport the island's few non-resident workers to and from their homes in Cretoria.

The perfect landing site is a large flat rock table about fifteen miles from the perimeter of the fortress. This will mean a long and difficult walk over some of the craggiest, rocky ground on the planet.

As soon as they land, Belinda ditches her make-up and restores her appearance. She has brought along austere black form fitting clothing, the style that her double is most frequently photographed wearing. As soon as she is changed and dressed, she calls a meeting. "I do not know much about this island, so be on your guard. I do not think my father would bother with patrols in such an inhospitable place, but we can't be too careful. There may also be some strange beasts I am unaware of."

While the characters do not have to worry much about patrols here (though there is a 3- on 2D chance that an overhead watch flight might spot them), they do have to be careful. This rocky island is home to two nasty, carnivorous predators. The first, a horned wolf called a drox, charges his prey and leaps, spiking at the eyes with sword-like horns before inflicting a bite to the throat that can be fatal. Drox are solitary creatures and never hunt in packs. When prey is scarce they are known to attack each other. (Weight: 25 kg; Hits: 3D/2D; Wounds: +1D; Weapons: horns/teeth; Armor: none.)

The second is even more dangerous. The "shreean" is a silky amphibian that hunts on the island after the sun goes down. They are silent, folding their sea flippers up against their sides and slithering like snakes over the stony terrain. The swimming muscles in their tails enable them to stand upright to a height of 10 meters. They "leap" at their victims by lashing the grounded tail and encircling the hapless prey, constricting and sinking in their razor sharp teeth at the same time. (Weight: 100kg; Hits: 5D/2D; Wounds: +1D; Weapons: teeth/constriction; Armor: 2.)

Both predators are relatively rare, and it is doubtful that the characters will have to face either type more than once or twice. In the case of the drox, however, they will meet them again at the fortress.

Besides the predators, the trip to the outer perimeter of the fortress will not be easy. There are no paths through this forest of stone, and little grows here. The characters will have to climb up and down sharp hillocks and craggy peaks, although these are low, no more than 200 meters at their highest point. If the characters have equipment that will enable them to fly over the rough ground, Belinda will veto the idea immediately. "We do not know how low the scans are set. We could show up on a screen only to be met by armed guards and daddy's cutthroats. No thank you!"

When the party arrives at the outer defenses of the fortress, what they see might surprise them. The duke, who describes himself as just "an old-fashioned man," has a unique system. Two archaic chain-link fences topped with parallel razor wire stretch all the way around the fortress. They are separated by an expanse about 12 meters wide. Between the fences are a dozen half-starved drox. They are kept hungry to make them even more vicious than they already are. Near to the point of reverting to cannibalism, the drox will attack and devour anyone who attempts to cross between the two fences. There is only one gate, electronically operated from inside the fortress. The twin wings of the gate swing to seal off the animals, allowing only approved guests and personnel to enter. The duke has placed motion-sensitive video cameras at strategic locations around the fence to capture the "fun," should anyone uninvited be foolish enough to make the attempt.

Belinda will again veto any method of flying over the fences for the same reasons cited above. There is also an electronic field dampener that reduces the effects of laser, pulse, and other energy weapons by 90% — the duke does not want his "sport" corrupted by the slaughter of his animals.

When the characters figure out how to enter the five-kilometer clear zone, go to "Fortress d'Arbonne."

FORTRESS D'ARBONNE

A simple entrance with a door awaits the characters after their five-klick trip. To the left of the door is a palm print scanner and Belinda easily opens the portal. On entering they will discover that there is no guard on duty, and the hallway, for the moment, is empty.

The first four levels of the duke's stronghold are relatively easy to pass. There are countless nooks and crannies to hide in, so often has this place been changed. Each of the levels has traffic in them all hours of the day and night, for these are the bureaucratic offices of the duchy. Belinda tells them, "Look as if you belong and know where you are going. Bureaucrats are a slug-headed bunch and will not be suspicious unless you manage to look like a tourist. Besides, for most of them it's better not to ask too many questions, especially not when they think I am my father's daughter. And absolutely no shooting unless there is no other way out. If a fight breaks out, we are probably done."

Constantinus made allowances for crafty thieves or assassins, however, which is why the first few floors are relatively easy to pass. His theory was "come in to my parlor — come deeply into my parlor." If any did pass the fences, they were welcome to take their best shot, which isn't likely to succeed.

The first two levels have no guards, just periodic palm or retina scan stations, and Belinda is quickly recognized and let through. Each level has an elevator to the next, but they are not adjacent. The characters will have to search the hallways for them. While this may be annoying, they should proceed to the third level without any serious challenges, but the tension should grow as they descend deeper.

The third level contains the offices of the military and secret police organizations. Both branches patrol the corridors here. Belinda will put up a blustery show of authority should any of the guards be so bold as to question her. "Worm, would you like an expense-paid trip to the tenth level? No, I thought not. Do your job and don't question your betters."

When they find the elevator to the fourth section, they begin to have problems. When they press the touch screen for Level Four, the elevator asks them to state authorization number for that level. If they cannot come up with a good idea (Belinda's is "0002, Belinda"), and if no one thinks to suggest to Belinda that she try a voice-override on the program (which will work), they will have to find another way down.

If no one else suggests the idea, Belinda will say, "Why don't we take out a guard and lift his ID papers. His number should be in it and we can use that." This ploy will also work, since the computer program is a relatively simple one. The problem is

getting a guard alone, since they always work in pairs. On the other hand, Belinda makes a stunning distraction.

When they reach Level Four they find it is similar. The ducal space force command is located here and security is even tighter than on the floor above. Again, with Belinda as their shield they should be able to bluff their way through most encounters. When they get in the elevator to Level Five, however, the elevator will not respond to their commands, even if Belinda tries an override at the character's suggestion. It simply refuses to work. A character may attempt to reprogram the lift, but there is a 5-on 1D chance of setting off an alarm on a failure. Belinda will caution the party not to try it, in case the computer is set to alert the guards, but, if the characters insist, she will go along.

To reprogram the elevator (5 minutes).
(Edu + Electronics) < Staggering (4D).
5- on 1D chance of setting off alarm if failed.

If the alarm is set off, Belinda will try to persuade the guards. One of the guards will ask about her implant, "is it malfunctioning?" She will respond that it is and that she changed her mind, she needs to go back to the agri-level (Two). This is believable, considering the source. It also gives the characters and Belinda a chance to discuss the situation and arrive at a solution.

If they try the emergency stairway, the door will not open. A small sign bolted to the door reads "No Implant, No Entrance."

When the characters have figured out that they need an implant to go further, they will have to acquire one. It should be obvious that mere guards are not implanted, but if not, they can try. If any character has Medical skill, the process should be easier. The implant is a 2-cm capsule behind the left ear, and it is partially exposed. But while they will have to remove the implant from their victim, Belinda needs only to carry it. The duke could have made the process easy on his officers, but he enjoyed the pain that was inflicted during the operation.

Once they acquire an implant, they are off to meet the other Belinda. If they had to retreat to Level Two to discuss this new development, working their way back down will be faster, since they know where the elevators are. There will still be encounters on Levels Three and Four, but they should pass these relatively easy. When they enter the elevator to Level Five, the speakers announce, "Welcome, Commander Drauge. Proceeding to the ducal residence."

Confrontation

Entrance to the duchess's quarters are marked with her arms (a rampant white drox on a field of red) and a white dainty bar over the top of them to

indicate her status as the heir. There is little traffic in these halls but servants moving about, knocking their foreheads at the sight of Belinda.

The implant will not work on the clone's door because she has had it set to admit only herself without restriction. Belinda knocks on the door and it swings open. The characters see two identical women staring at each other in shock, neither one quite believing the mirror image they see.

And then the clone makes her move. She attacks Belinda with the ferocity of the totem animal on her coat of arms. The characters may draw weapons, but probably will not know which one to shoot. Both women yell at the same time, "Stop them, you fools!"

If the characters can stop the fight and question each woman, it should be fairly simple to spot the clone — after all, they have had weeks of shared experiences together. They will have to be careful, however. The clone is intelligent and crafty; she may discern the correct answer from the phrasing of the question.

When the characters discover the real Belinda, they will have to decide what to do with the other one. They should have figured out that the clone's implant is special and remove it from her. From there they will have to hide or get rid of the clone and set Belinda up to take her place.

FURTHER ADVENTURES

If the characters are successful, Belinda is installed as the Duchess d'Arbonne the next day. Her father and all of his henchmen are fooled by the real daughter and will not recognize their mistake until it is too late. Belinda will contact the farmers in Plentorium and arm them, bringing them to the fortress to help her eliminate her father's henchmen and secure her rule. In this, she will require the help of the characters and will offer them the *Star Witch* (and the *Vulture*, if it was taken) in addition to their promised payment.

Their first task, however will be to explore the lower levels of the fortress and free any prisoners they find there. Levels Six, Seven, and Eight have special prisons, some of which house family members of the fleet to ensure the officers' loyalties. Others hold people who are fodder for the duke's experiments. Level Nine was His Grace's private "workshop," and no good ever came from it. The infamous Level Ten hold twenty large rooms, each given over to a form of torture, from the ancient and archaic to modern and electronic. This is a level best destroyed.

If the characters have failed to achieve their goal anywhere along the way, their ship (or ships) are captured or destroyed. They have no choice but to regroup and continue their attempts to restore the rightful daughter to the ducal seat of d'Arbonne.



6: A PIECE OF THE ACTION

In this adventure, the characters are unknowingly summoned before the Emperor himself. He wants to hire them to investigate and collect the back taxes of a recalcitrant and ancient noble house. If the characters have participated in any adventure in this book, the tales of their exploits has come to the Imperial Ears. If they participated in "The 13th Corban" and were successful, Emperor Cleon expresses his gratitude. (If they failed or if they helped the baron free his family, they'd best change their names and feign ignorance.)

The Emperor knows that he is being cheated out of his revenues by an ancient noble house in the Oasis System, a planetary system on the edge of the Crab Nebula. Cleon offers the characters 1% of whatever he can collect in exchange for hard evidence that the family is deceiving him. He has sent numerous official operatives into the system, but one by one, they have all disappeared. He want the characters to assume the roles of wealthy yachtsmen, infiltrate Oasis society, and find out what happened to his agents and how much the family owes in back taxes.

To complicate matters, and unknown to the Emperor or the characters, the system of Oasis possesses a mirror duplicate hidden in the folds of the galactic clouds of the nebula. The mirror system, called Sisao, is the source of Oasis' wealth and also the place where all financial records are stored. The characters will have to uncover this and then travel to the mirror system in order to accomplish their mission.

If the characters are not very cautious, they will end up like the others who were sent before them — wealthy, but with a complete change of personality and identity, and no knowledge of Oasis or the nebula.

THE STORY

The Oasis planetary system consists of four planets. Oasis Prime, the third planet from its sun, is a light and airy place of palm trees and fig groves. Five small continents are surrounded by one planetary ocean system. Life on Oasis is easy, as there are no winters and snow, except in the higher reaches of its two small mountain chains. Little clothing is or needs to be worn and the planet's bounty is such that hunger does not exist.

The Clarentias, who have ruled here for thousands of years, are a unique house. While there is no real explanation for it, for the last thirteen hundred years, the house has consistently birthed only twin sons, in spite of the odds and the laws of genetics. But these twins are not identical, but rather mirror reflections of each other, both physically and mentally. One is always fair skinned and

blond, the other has dark complexion with dark brown or black hair. While both are always intelligent, their minds work differently to arrive at the same solution to a problem from totally diverse methods. Even their perceptions of the universe are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Where one will be good, kind, and gentle, the other is evil, cruel, and a tyrant. Still, the brothers have a bond one to another, and their highest loyalty is always to the other twin. They are usually referred to as Iago the Light and Iago the Dark.

The phenomena began with the births of Iagos III. Their father was stunned when his wife delivered twins and his shock and terror grew as the boys began to grow up. Fascinated by their differences and surprised by their devotion to each other, Iago II devised a plan to separate them. . .

Hidden deeper in the nebula is a carbon copy of the system itself, four suns and G2 star shrouded in sensor-proof swirling clouds of raw star stuff. This second system reflects the same dichotomy as do the twins. While the Oasis system is light in heavy metals and elements, the four planets of the reflected system, Sisao, abound in them: gold, platinum, and other metals rare elsewhere.

Sisao's fourth, earth-sized planet is so heavy that miners are forced to wear grav belts just to move about. The third planet contains five smallish continents, in the places where Oasis has seas and possesses an atmosphere richer in nitrogen than oxygen, but still very breathable.

Iago II ordered a city be built on the third planet, called Sisao, in the reflecting system. When Iago the Dark reached his adulthood, he made him Prince of Sisao and shipped off to his new domain. This also enabled him to empty Oasis's jails and prisons. Iago III, the Dark son, would need a populace, and, his father reasoned, why not people the place with his own kind?

A few years later, Iago II died and Iago III became Prince of Oasis. One of his first acts was to contact his brother, whom he had not seen since the exile, and arrange a meeting half-way between the two systems. It was at that meeting that the two decided to pool their resources. Iago

the Light was not above making a profit and Iago the Dark wanted his brother to be as prosperous as he was. To that end, they decided that the Oasis System should be the overt contact with the rest of the universe. Sisao would remain hidden, but its metals and trade goods would be siphoned through corporate traders on Oasis. Profits would remain on Sisao, to maintain the image of Oasis as a planet of indolent partygoers. Taxes could be safely ignored, with all records kept on world known only to the brothers and the few who carried traffic back and forth between the systems, and their chief accountant. Of course, profits were not the only motive for withholding taxes, since neither brother wanted any knowledge of the wealth they found getting out, making them targets for governments and raiders. And many of the heavy metals they own have military applications. Even during the Long Night, it would not have been wise to let a buyer in on the source of their materials.

And so the two systems developed a common tradition of secrecy and evasion. Sisao continued to be the dumping ground for Oasis's criminal element, and no one much complained. But after so many years, they are having difficulty disposing of their income without attracting attention. Oasis is a party planet in fact as well as in theory. The government subsidizes everything from health care to weddings. But the government of Oasis still must keep up its front, portraying the very image of a poor but happy people.

The successors of Iago III, the Light, have cultivated the practice of image creation and raised it to a fine art. The exteriors of all government buildings are worn to the point that one might wonder what holds them up. Scraps of paint still adhere to the signing in places, and none of them are more than three stories high. Most of the interiors are lit using old-fashioned florescent tubes that cast a brittle, harsh glare on the dusty surfaces of desks and cabinets. Computer workstations appear to be out of date, but it is only a facade. The systems underneath the plastic are state-of-the-art.

The palace is no exception to the rule of apparent devolution. The walks leading up to the main entrance are concrete, broken and cracked, in places even dangerous to negotiate. The formal garden that surrounds the palace is overgrown and unkempt, more a habitat for varmints and small game than a garden. But once inside, a dramatic change occurs. Inside, the palace is a magnificent structure of gold, silver, marble, and onyx. Entire rooms are given over to a variety of entertainments: tri-dee, holoscreen, and even sensory depravation centers can be found. A staff of hun-

dreds runs the palace around the clock and anything and everything is always available. And when the staff goes off duty, they may participate in the festivities just like anyone else.

Society and government on Sisao are very different. While the citizens here are as wealthy as those are on Oasis, there is no need to draw a veil of poverty over the culture. Iago the Dark's subjects openly flaunt their wealth, wallowing in modern, opulent cities seemingly without a care. An active trade in people has developed between two systems, and it is common for citizens of both cultures to spend six-months in one and six-months in the other. Dual residences are also the norm. In fact, it is rare for an outsider to deal with the same people for more than a few weeks before the personnel changes completely in whatever department they had contact with.

THE SETUP

The characters are in a restaurant, tavern, or just walking down the street of whatever city they happen to be in, when a tall thin man with cadaverous features approaches them. "Excuse me," he says, "but are you gentles available for a mission?"

If the characters answer "yes," he introduces himself as Kadler and asks if there is somewhere they could speak privately. If the party wants at least some information first, he will insist on a secluded location first.

When they are alone, Kadler will continue. "Gentles, my principle, whom you may call Mr. LeRoi for now, has a task in mind for you. It may have its dangers... frankly on a hazard scale of one to ten, we rate it at, perhaps, a six. Honestly, I doubt you have ever had an assignment quite like this."

When the characters ask about payment, Kadler will say only that his principle will discuss that later. "But, allow me to suggest that it will be 1% of a very substantial sum of credits."

He will answer no further questions about the details. Simply saying, "I am sorry, but Mr. LeRoi wishes to discuss this with you himself. Honestly, I know no more. I can assure, however, that your conference with him will not be in vain. . . And, of course, you can always refuse."

With nothing left to lose except their own obstinacy, the characters should agree to at least hear out what Mr. LeRoi has to say. If the characters ask, or if they do not, Kadler tells them, "Mr. LeRoi is in his suite on the space liner *Orion* currently orbiting this planet. If you will just hear him out, I think it will be to your profit."

What do the characters know? Nothing; still,

they should at least be curious. It will do no harm to check out the offer.

Aboard the Liner Orion

Arriving on the Transstellar Lines' *Orion*, observant characters will note that the usual security and guard system ignores them with a nod to their guide. Whatever weapons they are carrying are simply "passed;" doors open to them; elevators are at instant call; and Kadler seems to be known by all. As they enter the elevator, Kadler turns to them. "Good gentles, please do not be shocked. Your employer is a man of some renown and not a little fame. Therefore, when you meet him, pay the proper respects, but do not be completely subservient — his Imper... well, let's just say that my chief does not stand on ceremony. When we enter his suite, be so good as to stow your arms in the anteroom lockers."

The elevator ascends to what appears to be a forbidden level. The indicators all go up to level "30," still they continue. A blue screen replaces the green one they were watching, and the readout continues the floor count: 31, 32. . . At 33, the lift stops.

The elevator doors open onto a magnificent scene. Before the characters are seemingly endless, structured gardens. Strategically located within the garden, the finest statuary from more than 100 worlds are discretely placed to almost blend into the formal hedges. The figures come from a variety of worlds: ancient Greek warriors from Earth, the fabulous sea nudes of Peitrepos of Rigel-3, an exquisite example of Cygnus-6's pre-millennium anti-constructionist period, etc. In a side display case reside the Imperial Crown Jewels, the six corban stones of the Imperial Crown glowing with warm, eternal light.

Kadler leads them through the maze of shrubbery and into a small sterile anteroom with white walls and a rack of shelving along one wall. "Please place your weapons in the cubicles provided; they are not permitted in the next room. And please do not be too formal. My employer, no matter what his titles, prefers to be addressed in private as 'Sir.'" If the party has not yet guessed the identity of their employer, entering the next set of doors will leave no doubt.

Kadler punches a code onto a circular computer screen and two ornate doors, apparently made from animal tusk ivory, slide open with a whisper. Before them is a large desk made of onyx and trimmed with gold. The surface of the huge desk contains two separate computer stations and is littered with stacks of paper — some in serious danger of collapse. Behind the desk sits an average-

looking man who seems to be much smaller than he appears on the vids of him that everyone has seen. A large conference table with a dozen chairs, all made from one exotic wood or another, adjoins the desk. The entire room has a working, operational feel to it. In the center of the table is a large holo-platform.

With a deep bow, Kadler says reverently, "Gentles, may I present my employer, Emperor Cleon I."

If the characters bow, curtsy, or kneel, the emperor waves their respects away with a gesture of impatience. "Gentles, I have little time for formalities and even less for private ceremonials. Please sit down." And he moves to the head of the conference table.

When the characters are seated, Cleon continues. "Of the many genuine problems I have to deal with every day, there is one that defies all efforts to handle through normal channels." He presses a concealed panel on the surface of the table and the holo-screen leaps to life. When the shimmering colors and images resolve, a star and its planetary system are displayed. "What you see here is the Oasis System. The system lies just inside the Crab Nebula and was perhaps the first system to coalesce out of that star nursery. In any event, it has been held by the same family since before the Long Night."

Cleon switches the image and the face of a young man, dressed in the now-threadbare finery of a distant age takes form. "The man you see likes to style himself as 'Prince' Iago XIX, and he is the nineteenth to bear that name in his line. However, he is listed within the Imperial Order of Precedence as Baron Iago." Impatient with himself, he waves his hand in front of this face. "No, that's all irrelevant, a minor irritant compared to the major surgery I will ask you to perform.

"The fact is that Iago and the Oasis system owes enough taxes to buy a fleet of Solar Class Battleships."

If the characters begin to ask questions here, Cleon waves them away, telling them to let him detail this story in his own words.

"You may indeed wonder why the tax officers of the Imperium are not assigned this task. The answer is that they have been. I have sent six tax officers, all ranking captains and above, to Oasis. Each has returned only to report that Oasis is a poor system and, according to their audits, should be receiving the bounty of the Imperium, not contributing to it. And then... and then, six months or so after they return, they disappear." The Emperor glares at the image on the holo-screen and begins to drum his fingers on the table. "Even after they

vanished, we never considered a connection with Oasis. There was no reason to. Tax collecting can be a risky occupation and the officers met with foul play on current assignments and it was investigated that way — so we thought at the time. Then about three months ago, a drunken gambler was arrested for causing a disturbance in a casino on Anguish — some humorist's name for a pleasure planet in the Deneb System. The local police fingerprinted the miscreant and automatically forwarded them to the Intra-Imperial Crime database. And guess what? The prints belonged to one former Lieutenant Colonel Marisia Jentarre, the third of the Oasis investigating officers to vanish.

"Bureaucracy being what it is, however, Marisia was long gone by the time an Imperial Detention could reach Anguish. Where she is now, who knows?" Cleon sighs, rocking back and forth in his chair. "They said she paid a fine and left in her small space yacht." He brings both hands down on the surface of the table with a loud slap. "My officers are very well paid, but Lieutenant Colonels do not own space yachts unless they are independently wealthy and she was not! I want to know what is going on. Are they being bribed? Blackmailed? Brainwashed? Jentarre had an impeccable service record and that's one of the reasons I sent her to Oasis! She conducted bribe stings, so what is happening?"

If the characters ask why he doesn't just send in the marines, Cleon answers, "On what grounds? That a missing officer had too much to drink and got herself fingerprinted? That I *think* Oasis and its noble house are holding out on us? That I *think* they are subverting my officers? I have no proof of anything." He flips off the holoscreen. "No. I have a reputation for impartiality to maintain. Then too, the Clarentias, Iago's house, are an ancient family. If I made any overt move, even if it was justified, the other houses would view the situation not with favor, but with fear. There are wheels within wheels, gentles, and I don't intend to be crushed under them."

When the characters ask just what will be required of them, Cleon smiles a cold smile and ticks off numbers on his thumb. "Number one, I want to know what is going on in that system. What is Iago doing to turn my agents? Number two, what is the source of Iago's real income, where does it come from and how much is it? Number three, what does he owe? One of your jobs is to collect it. I shall brevet each of you to the rank of Colonel in the Imperial Intelligence Service. And you will receive full pay for those ranks while on duty. I will also give you one percent of any collected taxes to share between you or 100,000 cred-

its in the event you come up empty handed. Of course, you will have an expense account. And finally, I will place a yacht at your disposal. If you are successful, you may have it. You may give her any name you like. Now, here's my plan..."

Cleon goes on to outline his specifics. The characters are to appear as wealthy tourists looking for a good time. Iago is not to know their real identities or what they are after. "In fact, no one outside of this room will know about this enterprise. How you conduct yourselves is up to you, just bring me answers.

"One final item. If Iago is bribing my agents, he may try to bribe you if your cover is blown. I will meet any amount he offers, just come back." Cleon waves a weary hand toward the door to signal that the audience is over. "If you have questions, Kadler can answer them. I have an empire to run."

Kadler escorts the characters out into the anteroom to collect their weapons. If the party does have further questions, now is the time to ask them.

When they are finished Kadler says, "You may take the shuttle back planet-side if you have an equipment of personal gear to bring up. Otherwise, I will take you to your ship in Bay D9."

If the party chooses to return to the planet, they find the trip uneventful and return to the *Orion* to take possession of their vessel. What awaits them in the cargo bay is a 200-ton standard yacht, the toy of the nobility and the dream of space grunts. The characters should choose a name for her and Kadler will see that it is registered and painted on the ship.

ONTO OASIS

The trip to the Oasis system should be fairly easy, except for the following encounters intended to prepare the characters for their new assignment and invest them in the society of the planet. These encounters should be brief, with the odds in favor of the characters. They may choose to slip by all of these, but if they participate, their job on Oasis Prime will be much easier.

- The character's yacht is stopped by an Imperial Navy destroyer and boarded by Marines looking for contraband. If they are carrying anything that is not quite "legal," they may have to show their Imperial Intelligence credentials. If they are "clean," the inspection is merely cursory and they are politely sent on their way.

But sometime, during the encounter, one of the Marine officers will ask the characters for their destination. If they are honest and tell him Oasis, he laughs and says, "Really! My uncle is Royal

Steward of Oasis Prime. Let me give you a note for him, he'll get you into the party cycle there," he says wistfully, "You don't want to miss that."

- The party's yacht comes out of jumpspace in time to witness a pirate corsair attacking a small liner. The liner seems to be holding her own, but she could use some help. While the yacht is unarmed, the characters may come up with a plan to chase off the corsair.

If that happens, the liner is bound for Oasis and one of its passengers is a 12-year-old boy named Iago — the grandson and heir, after his father, of Prince Iago.

Young Iago is well aware of his station and, when his ship docks at Oasis's solitary space station, well ahead of the character's yacht, he informs his grandfather, "These people are heroes, they really are, they saved my life." And a grateful prince makes them welcome in his domain.

- A distress signal is picked up by the character's yacht. It comes over standard channels, but there is no sound of urgency to it. The person sending the signal seems almost bored, or half-asleep. "Mayday, mayday, this is the space yacht *Sunrider* inbound to Oasis. We have here a rather droll emergency, any vessel in this sector please respond." When the characters acknowledge the signal (as by law they must), a voice comes back, "Is that another yacht? Thank the stars! Look, we are not in any serious difficulty here, I mean, it's not like "life threatening" or anything. The fact is our chef was going to make pheasant under glass with truffle sauce tonight and, this is rather embarrassing, we seem to be out of truffles. Can you assist?"

If the characters check their very well stocked larder, they will discover that they do indeed have truffles. When the Emperor sends a yacht on a mission, it is *fully* equipped.

While the *Sunrider's* transmission is a flagrant violation of Space Law, ship-to-ship etiquette, and thousands of years of the sea and space protocols on thousands of worlds, the characters would do well to respond. If they tell the *Sunrider* what they think of her and continue on, they will arrive on Oasis Prime with much more difficult task — inserting themselves into the framework of noble society.

If they do respond and take the truffles to the *Sunrider*, they are welcomed by a group of young nobles who are already well into their cocktail hour. "Gentles, we welcome you in our hour of need, will you dine with us?"

- If the referee chooses not to use any of the preceding challenges, he may write his own, or

simply have the characters arrive in the Oasis system without a clue. In this case, their task will be much more difficult.

To Oasis Prime

If any of the first three options above were chosen, the characters will have learned the following:

- If the Marines in the first scenario boarded the characters' ship, they have an automatic entry into Oasis society. The note they carry from the officer is addressed to Cowly Crunnard, Royal Steward. Presenting the note at the reception station orbiting Oasis Prime will get them through customs and security as if they were natives. The officers and personnel of the station treat them with the respect due high-ranking military officers or nobles. Cowly himself is jovial, fat Falstaff. He also happens to be the prince's chief accountant, and if there is any set of computer files they need to break into, he owns them.

- If they saved Iago's grandson from the pirates, the boy calls them aside to thank them. "You will *not* go unrewarded for your heroism," he says, "My grandfather is richer than the Emperor!" And the lad is correct. On their arrival in the system, an escort of medium fighters with Oasis military markings — a brown palm tree on a white circular field surrounded by another light blue circle — flanks them. The squadron commander hails them "Don't worry there, my lords, we're your honor guard!"

The flight escorts them to the Oasis Reception Station. As they debark their yacht, a brass band strikes up "Hail the Conquering Heroes." And a delegation of nobles is waiting to lead them to the prince.

- If the characters were on the *Sunrider*, the tipsy nobles revealed that Oasis is not a single solar system, but has a twin unrecorded in the Imperial databases. Hidden inside the clouds of the nebula, about a light-year and a half from the documented Oasis System lies its twin. The twin system is rich in heavy metals, just which ones, they are not told. One of the young lords winks at them, "An'," he slurs, "His nibs, our noble prince, has a twin too — they all do!" He adds in a whisper and then laughs.

One of the young nobles is a Clarentia and a cousin of the current Iago. He invites the PCs to the palace as his guests. "Every family member has a suite of at least five rooms. I can't really use all of mine. Besides, you rescued us from a horrible fate!"

ARRIVAL ON OASIS

However the characters have dealt with the previous situations, when they arrive on Oasis, they will need to make contact. If none of the brief encounters were resolved, they will have to do their own investigation. The people of Oasis have grown complacent over the years. Their lives are easy, and, while they delight in the facades they have created, they rarely feel the need to guard the secrets of their wealth on their own planet.

The streets are filled with well-worn shops displaying expensive goods inside. But the government, as on Sisao, subsidizes the prices of wares on Oasis. Any goods purchased here cost but 10% of their normal value. Almost anything is available except for military hardware. Oasis has never been attacked, has no fear of revolutions, and the need for such equipment has never arisen. Military vessels and equipment are purchased by the government for its own space forces, but beyond that there is no need. All weapons sold are of sporting and hunting varieties, especially for large game, which is a popular endeavor for both men and women. Nearly every home has at least one weapon of some type.

The wooden sidewalks give way to marble floors and wonderfully decorated interiors in the shops and stores of Oasis. There is a tavern on almost every block and any libation the characters have ever had or heard of is available, at very modest sums. The people are friendly and gregarious. At any shop or tavern they enter, they will be able to find answers to some of their questions and nearly everyone they meet will invite them to the continuous party at the palace.

If they ask where the planet's wealth comes from and how merchants can offer quality goods at such ridiculous prices, they are told that the government has a strong income from some out-of-system holdings and choose to support the well-being of its subjects. "And," they are told, "Cowly Crunnard is a wizard of an accountant. He even has his quarters and office in the Royal Palace."

If they ask why they buildings look so disreputable outside and so lavish inside, they will be informed that, "Imperial spies make regular flyovers to assess our tax status for the Empire. What they can't see won't show up on holoshot."

When they do decide to go to the palace, or if they participated in one of the encounters that supplied them with an entry, they will find that both Cowly Crunnard the Royal Steward and Prince Iago XIX the Light are readily accessible during any of the functions held at the palace. There is a 3- on 1D chance that one of them will be in attendance at any given moment.

The Palace

A party is in full swing when the characters arrive. The huge palace contains four ballrooms, each with a different band. Bars are dotted throughout the whole structure. Not all of these people know each other and the characters should be able to blend right in.

The palace consists of three large floors. The first is the party floor with its ballrooms and entertainment centers. The second is given over to government offices except for that of the Royal Steward, who has his office next to his apartment on the third floor. The third floor holds the residences of the family with a few kept for visiting dignitaries. If the characters delivered the truffles to the *Sunrider*, they will be housed here and breaking into Cowly's office will be less risky.

Their first goal is to locate Cowly Crunnard's unlocked office. This is on the third floor, the residence wing, and just off the elevator. While security is lax in the palace, they should exercise caution. Those who have apartments on the third know each other, and strangers will raise questions. If they are caught in the hall or coming off the elevator, the first reaction will be, "Oh, are you lost? Allow me to escort you back to the party floor."

If they are caught in Cowly's office, an alarm will be raised and guards are summoned off the party floor. If they do not escape, the prince will confine them to their quarters pending his disposition.

If they are successful in getting into the Royal Steward's office unseen, they find his computer sitting on a large desk. While the files are encrypted, any character with computer skills should be able to break the code and enter. Once inside, however, they will find exactly what they were meant to find. More evidence that the meager income of Oasis is being pumped back into its society. The actual files are in Cowly's office on Sisao. The only reference in these files that might alert them are a series of notes following a dozen cryptic entries that simply say "Sis."

If the characters do a computer search on "Sis," they pull up a screen from the local computer showing the twin systems as reflections in a mirror, with text reading, "Sis, or Sisao, is the twin of the Oasis planetary system. Consisting of four planets reflecting the opposite natures of their counterparts found in the Oasis System, Sis is well hidden 1.5 light years away in the cloudy texture of the Crab Nebula."

The site they have found seems to be a child's educational page and no other information is available.

If they were unable to get to the office, they will have overheard references to Sisao, or "Sis," during the party from two people openly discussing their plans for the coming year. The computer terminal in their quarters, wherever they are staying, will yield the same information on a data search. But no more than that given above.

If they speak with the prince or with the Royal Steward and ask questions about the outward and inward appearances of so much of Oasis, they are told quite honestly, "We have an off-world source of income and we choose not to flaunt it in the face of those who might want to take it from us." If they press the matter, suspicions will be raised, and the party watched.

If the party was caught in Cowly's office, or if their actions prompted surveillance, they will be sent to Sisao as spies to be dealt with by Iago the Dark. Pleading their status as colonels in service to the Imperium will do them no good. Iago and his people don't care what they are; they could be advance men for pirates for all they care. They committed the one serious crime on Oasis, and that is tracking the revenue source of the planet. If they were successful, they should have enough information to plot a course, even a rough search course to Sisao themselves.

GOING TO SISAO

If the characters head out for the twin system on their own, they will have to find it first. If the stellar navigation system permits, they can simply do a 360° search in all directions for a distance of 1.5 light years. Since star systems of any type are rare in the Crab Nebula, the one they find is Sisao.

Their arrival in system is met by a heavy destroyer demanding to know who they are and what they are doing in the system. Their response must be carefully crafted. If they say they come from Oasis and heard about the system, they will be believed on 3- (1D). If they attempt to lie, i.e., they have an emergency or that they are lost, the destroyer will ask them what their destination was. If the warship's officers still suspect them, a boarding party is sent to "aid" the characters or call their bluff. If they use the "lost in space" excuse, they send a navigator and an electronics equipment specialist to assist them. If they claim an emergency, they will be asked the nature of the emergency and again a helpful boarding party will be sent to investigate and aid. If no malfunction is found, or if their story about Oasis is not accepted, they are presumed to be spies and taken to Sisao in chains (see "Taken Away to Sisao").

If the characters have bluffed their way through to the planet, they bring their boat down onto a

landing pad in Iagoville, the planet's primary city. Iagoville is aglitter day and night. The city looks as if it is made of crystal and glass. There is only one hotel for visitors, however, since most people visiting from Oasis keep a residence here and there are few, if any, outsiders coming to town.

Anything available on Oasis is available here and at the same low prices. Gambling establishments and nightclubs are common, as are theaters, health clubs, and spas. In Iagoville, one's enjoyment is limited only by one's imagination. There is even a shop offering to put you into your own tri-dee adventure.

The government offices occupy a central plaza in the center of the main district. A thirty-story edifice of glass and steel lies in the center of four park-like areas with fountains continuously spraying colored water into the air.

The office building is easier to get into than to leave. Traffic into the building is heavy and there are no guards at the one-way entrance. The exit is a different story, however, as long lines wait to leave with briefcases and purses open for display. Guards run electronic detection devices over everyone seeking to go outside.

In the center of the lobby is a large kiosk that lists the office roster for the building. Checking this, the characters will find that the 30th floor is entirely given over to "Offices of the Royal Steward." Getting to the offices is a simple matter of an elevator ride. But the elevator doors on the 30th floor open into a guard station. There is a small line in front of the guard. He politely asks each person for the proper clearance documents. When it is the characters' turn, they will have to do some quick thinking.

If they had met Cowly, they may say that he told them to look him up. In that case, they are in. The guard calls Cowly's office for confirmation and they are allowed to pass. They will come upon a huge vista, a massive office without walls, plus desks cluttered with calculators, computers, and phonebanks. At the front, in the center, is an immense desk even larger than Cleon's, wherein sits the jovial Royal Steward. Now it becomes a matter of accessing a computer on the sly and copying off the information for Cleon to have hard evidence in order to move against Oasis.

But, if they did not meet Cowly, or if they say they were looking for another office and pushed the wrong button, that will be accepted and the guard will ask where they wish to go. Whatever they say, he will tell them the correct floor and wish them a pleasant day.

If they decide to shoot it out with the guard, they can easily overcome him, but an alarm will be raised. If they do not succeed in losing the guards

searching for them, they will be arrested and taken to the prison (see "Taken Away to Sisao"). If they do manage to elude capture, they can leave the building, carrying out nothing, of course, and go somewhere to consider their options.

The major difficulty is getting the file disks out of the building. Getting at the files is not a problem, because they are not encrypted and any computer station on the 30th floor can access the financial data they are seeking. The windows on all floors except the first three do open. They could sail the disks out the window, waltz through ground floor security and then attempt to recover them, or they may have another idea. If they succeed in leaving the building with the data, however they get it out, they can return to their yacht and leave the system.

If they are caught at any point along the way, the mission is a failure and they will be lucky to escape without getting their minds wiped.

Taken Away to Sisao

If the characters were shipped to Sisao because of their actions, they are placed in leg irons for the trip and transported on Cowly's personal yacht. Their weapons, of course, are taken from them and their yacht is impounded to be refurbished, painted, and sold out-system. The characters are not searched, except for a pat-down. If they have anything carefully concealed on their persons that would not be found in during a light search, they will be able to keep it. Cowly's yacht is customized for single-handed operations, so if they can slip their leg irons, they may have a chance at overpowering him and taking the vessel.

During the voyage, Cowly tells them the whole history of the systems and the family that governs them. He is polite enough and encourages them to ask questions. Knowing what is in store for them, he has nothing to loose and his answers are honest.

Asked where the actual financial records are kept, Cowly replies, "Why, on Sisao, of course! We would not risk such information falling into the hands of people like you. I make weekly trips to Sisao to run the books and take care of disbursements. All transactions are handled on Oasis, but electronically filed on the twin. Then all record of them is erased. Simple system, really."

If the characters want to know what happened to the previous agents Cleon sent to the Oasis, he replies, "Oh, the same as will happen to you. Your memories will be, ah, adjusted. You will be supplied with new identities and shipped to as far away from here as we can find places to settle you. And, of course, you will not be kept together. But

you will not be left destitute, either. You will have bank accounts large enough to keep each of you in the style of a royal duke for the rest of your lives, should you choose. You just won't remember your lives up to the point where they begin again."

It should be obvious that he cannot be bribed or intimidated unless they can escape and threaten his life. If they do not escape, the yacht's boat will take them to Sisao where they will be imprisoned for a day or two before the mind-wipe process can begin. The doctors need to be sure their vital signs are stable, and it takes a while to push through their new identities and documents. Their irons are removed and they are placed in a single large cell.

Escape from the prison is barely possible, but it can be done. The confinement area is on the ground floor and the prison is quite old and rarely used. The cells have brick walls on three sides with a barred window. The front of the cells is barred and open to the corridor. Three times a day a jailer, always a different person, comes to ask them what they'd like to eat and returns an hour later with their meals. He never opens the door; he just slides the trays through a narrow opening near the floor.

The jailers cannot be bribed on Sisao any more than functionaries of Oasis can be bribed. Still, this is an old prison, not much used. The jailer's positions are make-work jobs meant for those who like to justify their income as having been "earned." They are not used to prisoners and tend to be less watchful than a regular security guard would be.

If the characters can convince him that one of them is sick or injured, he will call a doctor and open the door. The characters could conceivably grab the guard as he bends down to slip in the trays, but their actions would have to be very swift.

The age and condition of the cell provide another means of escape. The bricks around the window are beginning to crumble, and have not been repaired. If they can loosen the mortar around two of the five bars over the window, they should be able to squeeze through. The problem here is to time their destruction of the window area with the appearances of the guards and to keep noise to a minimum.

If the characters do not escape within two days, the doctors and two jailers will come for them in their cells. Their leg irons are refastened and they are led to a sterile white room with enough chairs to handle all of them at the same time. These look like dental chairs with restraint straps. The characters may try to fight, but if they do, the doctors have the edge. Each carries a

pneumatic syringe loaded with a knockout compound. If the characters begin to get out of line, they will be injected, by spray, and fall into a deep sleep. If the entire party is overcome, their minds are wiped. They are given new identities and personalities and wake up light years away — rich, but having no idea of how they got there.

FURTHER ADVENTURES

If the characters were successful in infiltrating and copying the financial records of Oasis and Sisao, they will have quite a tale to spin before the Emperor. Cleon, for his part will offer to make their commissions permanent. He will grant them the yacht as promised, award them with medals, and transfer 1% of the amount he now thinks he can recover into their accounts.

If the characters decide to take Cleon up on his offer and accept their commission in the Imperial Intelligence Service, they find that their first assignment is to assist the fleet being sent to the twin systems to recover the Emperor's lost revenues.

If they wish to remain independent and refuse continued duty, he will thank them for their service and send them on their way.

If the characters were brain-wiped, they are separated by thousands of light years. Even if they were on the same planet, however, they would not know each other. New characters should be rolled up and each told where they are, that they have just awakened and they have no memory of the proceeding adventure. But as they continue on, some of their earlier memories may begin to return, for the Sisao's technology is not perfect. After one year each character has a 3- on 1D chance to recover all previous knowledge. They may then begin to contact each other and even return to carry out their mission, should they choose to do so. There is also a 3- on 1D chance that any given character will be driven mad by the conflict of real vs. implanted memories and spends the rest of their lives in a luxurious asylum for the mentally deranged.



16:43:17 TARGET ENGAGED



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7: THE GAUNTLET CRUISE

This adventure breaks down into two parts. The first is a lovely and luxuriant cruise for twenty days. The characters will meet many types of royal people. Because of the characters' birthright they are treated with respect by almost everyone. However, these royals are an aloof group of people. Many of them will impart wrong information about the upcoming gauntlet test in hopes of moving up the inheritance ladder. All of them get greater monthly allowances if there are fewer cousins when the trip ends. The secret service is there to protect each of them, but some of the cousins can be very clever in their attempts to do what the gauntlet decks couldn't accomplish.

The gauntlet decks are to be deadly, but not impossible to run through. Clever characters should be able to figure their way out of many of the dangerous tests. A character will probably take some damage, that is a given, just how much damage is the unknown part. There is no turning back once the gauntlet decks are entered. Those who try to go back out will be shot dead by the large security detail there. On the other side of the decks is an extensive medical facility, so if the characters survive and are able to walk out of the two gauntlet decks, they will be well-taken care of.

Characters may bring anything they wish into the test that still allows them to walk on their own two feet. In other words, they could not put themselves into a tank and take the challenge. Any number up to ten people can help them with the run. These people can bring equipment as well. Allies who are wounded will be picked up after the royal cousin has left the area. These failed allies can never go through the gauntlet rooms or even enter the ship again.

THE SETUP

The first note read:

The Queen and I praise the day the Planetary Secret Service found you. You are the son of our dear lost daughter Elenia. Please seriously consider our cruise invitation. It would please us greatly to see you in person.

*With great hope and love,
King Simonal
Hallen World*

The second note was an engraved invitation, heavy with royal seals and planetary codes:

*Dear Royal Cousin,
Every ten years, the world of Hallen sends out a gauntlet cruise to determine the fitness of all members of the royal household under the age of fifty.
Our records show that you are a lost*

cousin of the royal house and are entitled to lands and a yearly planetary stipend of 100,000 Hallen credits. Titles and lands will be awarded if you take the gauntlet cruise and survive to leave its unloading dock on the day the ship lands on the planet Hallen.

Bring yourself and any ten (or less) friends and any gear you wish — vehicles or larger objects will not be allowed — to your planet's M-5 colony in seven days. The ship will dock for five hours. If you are there, you will be picked up for the cruise of a lifetime.

*Cordially yours,
Evan Hallen
Court Secretary*

You find it very hard to believe your eyes as you read the two notes for the tenth time. It would seem there was a reason your long dead mother had been so secretive about her past. She was a princess. You knew your father was an old merchant captain. He wasn't the most successful of men. He wouldn't have been suitable for a planetary princess — unless she'd run away with him, ignoring the desires of her parents. Your father and mother had been happy all the days of their lives. You're sure she never regretted leaving.

Now fate had tossed you an unusual curve. As you scan the records for the planet Hallen, you don't find very much.

So you have read everything about your mother's planet and it doesn't tell you much. You feel you have to give this gauntlet cruise a try. It's foolish to give up 100,000 credits a year for life. On the other hand, the cruise sounds a bit deadly. You talk to your friends and get them to go with you. You get together what battle gear you think you'll need and wait for the gauntlet ship to arrive at the station. The starship arrives a day early. You are greeted by a very royal-looking steward, dressed in a dark green uniform, who looks at your party with a grim smile and starts giving you a tour of the ship as you all move toward your quarters.

"Good afternoon, my lord. I am your personal ship's steward, Jives. I'm also the head of your

secret service detail. You and your, ah, guests will be situated on 'A' Deck. This is the royal luxury liner H.M.S. Hallen. You are our last pick-up before starting the cruise toward the homeworld.

"I would give you a brief note on how the gauntlet cruise works: You have entered through the front door, in a manner of speaking. The only way you and your guests will be allowed to leave this vessel is through, uh, the back door, shall we say. In other words, my lord, you and your guests must pass through two very deadly levels of this ship before you're able to leave. Trying to escape or otherwise bypass the two levels will get you and your company killed by your security detail. I might look like a fop but my weapon's system can stop anything in power armor at a thousand meters.

"To continue, here are your suite of state-rooms. Each of you has a private set of chambers and all are connecting. I have stocked it with everything I could think of for your comfort. If there is anything you need, all you have to do is ring for me. You have been given a ship's credit of 200,000. Each of your company has been given a credit balance of 20,000. This is a gift from the king and queen, long may they reign. These credits will be useful in the ship's casino, clubs, and of course, at the ship's store. The ship's store, I might add, is filled with useful gear for the gauntlet as well as a wide selection of formal clothes.

"You should feel free to talk to the one hundred other royal cousins walking the ship. The ship's crew, dressed in Hallen green like myself will not answer questions about anything. They will treat you with the respect that your royal station deserves and try to get away from you as fast as possible. Fifty of the other royal passengers have survived the gauntlet cruise before. Feel free to ask them anything, but you will find them a very royal bunch, if I may be allowed to say so.

"The main computer can be contacted in any part of the ship. It will lead you to the gauntlet corridors. Many people prefer to traverse those deadly corridors immediately. Ten have already survived it. Thirty-eight have died in its paths.

"Lunch and dinner are always black tie affairs. If you didn't bring proper formal wear it can be provided for all of you. Every chamber aboard is monitored by security devices. You have the royal right to verbally order those monitors shut down temporarily, but I wouldn't advise it.

"The only advice I can give you about the gauntlet chambers is that once or twice during the course of the run you might encounter servants. These people will be dressed in Hallen green and will be offering you instructions. They are there to help and you must do what they ask to complete your quest through the passages. They are the only part of the gauntlet not there to trick and kill you. I will repeat this last bit. Do not trust a single

living soul who isn't dressed in Hallen green. Do you understand this?

"So, if there are no more questions, I will leave you. You will find that your cases have all been unpacked and stowed away."

The steward waits for your permission to leave.

Library Data on Hallen

Hallen: Backwater world in the Vland Sector.

Starport: One good quality installation, presenting refined fuel, also having the ability to overhaul all types of starships, with a shipyard capable of constructing naval and non-military ships.

Travel Zone: Amber. The planetary culture still recognizes the code of dueling.

World Size: 5000 miles (8,000 km).

Atmosphere: Standard.

Hydrographics: 50% water.

Planetary Population: 980 million at the last census, six years ago.

Technological Level: Average Imperial.

Law Level: 2, Portable energy weapons prohibited

Government: Charismatic dictator

Trade Classification: Non-Industrial

CRUISING RIGHT ALONG

A great deal of fun can be had from talking with the other royal cousins who are on the cruise. Each can have a story to tell and give a bit of advice about the cruise.

There are a little over 100 cousins aboard. Some of these harbor bad intentions and others will be helpful and good cousins. The character will have to discover which is which all by themselves.

Shipboard Life

Breakfast is served from 8 to 12. Lunch is served from 12 to 5. Dinner is served from 5 to midnight.

There's dancing 24 hours a day and many pleasant males and females to dance with. The gambling facilities are large and offer games from poker to dice to roulette. There are many other activities on the vessel as well, from electronic movies to stage plays. There is a large electronic library on board, but it doesn't have any information on past gauntlet runs.

There is a well stocked store on the ship where the characters can buy useful equipment and weapons. There is also a huge selection of formal clothes which are needed for dining on the ship.

Several skilled physicians will attend the characters to make sure they are in good condition before and after the gauntlet. These doctors do not approve of the gauntlet effort and offer to give the

participants painkillers and booster shots to make the characters a little faster.

The crew really don't want to talk to the passengers. They will be curt and polite, but in all cases they try to get away from a questioning passenger as soon as possible.

The royal cousins can go any where they want on the ship.

Cons and Schemes

#1: Several cousins try to get the characters alone. They then turn off the security equipment in that area with a verbal command. They reveal several sections of the gauntlet in a friendly chatter, but try to poison the character during the conversation.

#2: For 50,000 credits a cousin will sell you a secret code that turns off half of the computer-operated gauntlet compartments. The cousin says all you have to do is repeat the code numbers at the entrance of each room and the room will deactivate if it's computer operated. The cousin claims to have ran the gauntlet and the code worked perfectly.

#3: For 25,000 credits a cousin will offer to help a character escape off the cruise. The cousin tells the character that the gauntlet run is a death trap and only fools make the effort. A fast pinnacle can be provided to get the characters off the ship before they have to die.

#4: For 10,000 credits per room, a crewmember offers to sell all the twenty sections of the gauntlet run to a character. During these negotiations, a security detail comes in and blasts the crewmember to death. This only happens after several of the sections are revealed to the character if he/she is interested. The security detail bows to the royal character and takes the corpse away.

#5: There is a special and private card party going on in one of the royal cabins. The buy-in is 50,000 credits and the game is normal poker. During the game, all of the royals talk about the gauntlet this year and in past decades. It's supposedly worth the time just to hear about the sections of the gauntlet run. The game is rigged so that the characters will loose all of their credits, but they will hear about all ten sections of Level One as the card game progresses. Tell the characters that they are playing cards and loosing, then let them take notes as you repeat several key information from "Referee's Information" section for the entire Level One. Say them fairly fast. If they miss something, tell them that the royals don't want to repeat themselves.

Anton Hallen, First Cousin

UPP: 99BA98

Skills: Carousing-1, Fencing-2, Law-2, Vac Suit-1.

Anton is tall, good looking, and knows it. He

doesn't want anyone else to survive the gauntlet run. He presents himself as friendly and gives the characters a lot of bad advice, mainly about loading themselves down with armor and shields. He's more than willing to help equip them in heavy armor that will only hinder them.

Margretta Hallen, Ninth Cousin

UPP: 78AA78

Skills: Acting-2, Art-1, Bribery-3, Dance-2, Equestrian-1, Pistol-1.

She's lovely, but has the heart of a wolf. She flirts outrageously with all the people who haven't taken the gauntlet. She gives them terrible advice about the dangers of taking energy weapons on the test. She's only interested in getting others killed. If they survive the test, she will never talk to them again.

Mary Hallen, Very Distant Cousin

UPP: 68888A

Skills: Perception-2, Pistol-2, Ship's Boat-1, Stealth-2, Streetwise-1.

She's beautiful, but is all dead emotionally. She volunteers a great deal of sound tips about the gauntlet run, telling correctly about Level One's A and B sections. She also offers the characters shotguns, saying these are the best weapons for the course. But each of these shotguns will blow up to inflict 2D damage on the user on the third shot.

Jamus Hallen, Another Grandchild

UPP: AB9887

Skills: Aircraft-1, Fast Talk-2, Fencing-2, First Aid-1, Gambling-2, Navigation-2, Survey-1, Survival-3.

He's short, handsome, and very friendly. He hasn't done the run yet. He's a true believer in first aid and gladly offers to lend anyone a set of wonderful first aid kits.

Timothel Hallen, First Cousin

UPP: 6AC888

Skills: Diplomacy-2, Shotgun-2, Pilot-3, Tactics-1.

Timothel is not impressed with the rest of the royal bunch since he actually works for a living. He has done the run and will be happy to talk about the A to C sections on Level One. He would like more of his cousins to live through the test.

Angelique Hallen, Distant Cousin

UPP: 67BB69

Skills: Acting-3, Athletics-2, Bribery-1, Broker-2, Computer-2, Dance-3, Gambling-1, Trader-2.

She's lovely and very well dressed. She's looking for a husband among the surviving cousins. She is happy to meet anyone, but she really only wants to spend time with survivors, of the course.

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

The first gauntlet deck starts the characters out at the outside edge of the ship level. Consider it a long spiral of corridors and chambers slowly turning in on themselves until the characters have walked to the center of the level where they will find a lift to the second level.

Level One, Section A

Players' Information: Jives meets you at the entrance to the gauntlet deck. He has a squad of navy marines behind him.

"I'm sorry to have to inform you that if you try to back out once that chamber door is opened, this unit has very specific orders... Please do not make me have to give them a command. Am I clear, sir? If so, then please begin the test. I truly hope you survive."

You are looking down a long and wide corridor. There are seventy-five laser emplacements all along the metal corridor walls. It appears as if you have to run down the corridor taking laser shots. There seems to be a bend in the corridor at the other end. As you come to the edge of the corridor, the nearby gun emplacements swivel to your movement. Each gun must have a motion sensor attached. Great! What to do, what to do?

Referee's Information: There are only ten real lasers among a lot of fake ones. They act as simple laser pistols that shoot at the characters passing by. Roll 1- on 1D for the laser to hit each character. Hugging one wall to avoid a set of lasers won't work as the weapons can swivel 180 degrees. There are many things that can foul the motion sensors in the lasers. Smoke or fog will prevent them from working. The entire set of lasers can be destroyed by gunfire before they even enter the area. If the characters try coming back into this chamber from Section B, all of the guns will fire and kill them. Referee should keep careful track of the ammunition spent in each chamber.

Level One, Section B

Players' Information: You turn the corner and see a very long room. On the opposite side of the room is a door with an electronic key pad next to it. There is a table in the middle of the room laden with food and drink. The walls, floor, and ceiling are bare metal.

Referee's Information: On the food table there is a gold engraved invitation to eat what they will. Naturally, the food has been poisoned. The wines and waters are fine. There is a small note on the key pad that if the wrong numbers are pressed three times, the chamber will explode and kill anyone inside. Under the table, attached to the center of the underside is the five-number code to open the door. Most detection devices will be able to trick the key pad into working. Skill with electronics will also figure out the key pad (a Difficult task).

Level One, Section C

Players' Information: The door you've just gone through from the previous room becomes firmly locked with no keypad on this side of the door. You are at the entrance of a very large and long chamber containing row upon row of framed artwork. There must be over a hundred pictures in this area. Under each picture is a button. The first pictures on either side of the character's entrance are of the present king and queen of Hallen. At the other side of this long corridor is a large metal door with a flashing light above it. All of the rest of the pictures appear to be royal figures of various ages and poses. All of them are in the Hallen green royal colors. All of the buttons on the pictures are exactly alike. The pictures are made of some type of metal and cannot be removed from the walls.

Referee's Information: Pressing the king's button stops the flashing light and pressing the queen's button opens the door. Pressing any other button fills the area with poison gas. If the characters have brought gas masks the room fills with gas and empties in about fifty minutes and the door at the opposite end of the chamber opens by itself. Trying to mess with the buttons other than pressing them also causes the gas to flood the chamber.

Level One, Section D

Players' Information: You've come to the edge of a pool of water. There is no way to go around its edges. You must enter the water to get to the other side. In this fifty-by-one-hundred meter area you can see several man-sized things swimming in the depths of the clear water. Each looks large enough to swallow a man in one bite. On the other side of the still water is a ramp that leads up to a closed steel ship hatch. You can see the entire pond is very deep.

Referee's Information: The seven-tentacled horrors swimming in the depths of the pond are harmless (as anyone making a Staggering Biology task could tell you), but look menacing. The chemicals in the water sustain them and they wouldn't dream of eating the swimmers. Each creature will be curious about the swimmers and place a tentacle or two on their bodies as they move through the water. This obstacle is meant to get rid of a few of the heavy things the characters might be carrying. Swimmers can manage twenty or thirty pounds of materials, but any more will make them sink like rocks. If they don't have breathing apparatuses, they can't possibly make it to the other side while loaded with heavy equipment. The referee might encourage them to make several trips for the gear.

Level One, Section E

Players' Information: Jives greets you in the next chamber. He is dressed in Hallen Green. The premise is a simulation of a grassy knoll, with

trees surrounding the area. You are enchanted by the park-like nature of this section.

"This next challenge will be a bit difficult, I'm afraid." Jives has a set of ancient clothes he wants you to put on. "Our society practices dueling and many times during your stay on planet you will face duelers. The rules are quite simple. Each of you stands in the middle of the glade, back to back. The referee counts off ten paces and each of you walks those paces. You turn after the count of ten and fire. These dueling pistols are very inaccurate. Often neither side hits the other and honor is satisfied. Neither side is allowed to wear anything but the ancient dueling clothes. Power armor isn't appropriate in this instance. One last thing, if your foe turns before the count of ten, your seconds have the right to blast him away with any weapons they might be carrying. The same will happen to you, if you turn early. Let's get on with it shall we?"

Referee's Information: To refuse the duel is to be killed. The dueling character is facing a hologram. The artificial human is constantly positioned so that the character doesn't know this. The ancient dueling pistol he is given is huge, but will function perfectly. The duel is a test of bravery. The hologram will turn on the count of eight and the character's seconds should blast the hologram dead. The image will appear to take the shots and fall to the ground where its seconds will pick it up and carry it away. Jives will be full of praise for the action and will offer the group some safe food and drink, though he will not speak of what comes next.

Level One, Section F

Players' Information: You enter a ten-meter-by-ten-meter chamber with shower spouts lining the walls at ceiling level. There are two hatches on the other side of the chamber. Each hatch is opened by turning a large wheel to cycle open the door. A small note is affixed to the wall between the doors which reads, "One of these doors leads to the next section. Opening the other door releases the hydrochloric acid that will pour into the chamber and destroy anything here." Turning around you see the rear door sealing shut, but you knew there was no turning back.

Referee's Information: The right door is the proper one. The left door releases an acid that will kill anyone in the chamber. There are several ways to detect the false door. Tapping both doors reveals a hollowness behind the right door. There is a great deal of electrical power attached to the left door with the acid controls. Actually smelling the doors will reveal a faint scent of acid on the left door. It's also possible to bend or otherwise foul up the shower faucets so no acid comes out, even if they pick the wrong door. In this case, the right door opens after they destroy the first shower head.

Level One, Section G

Players' Information: The character sees a large movie-viewing chamber. There are exactly enough comfortable chairs for all characters entering the room. Each chair is large and cushioned. There are a set of three buttons on one arm of the chair. Along one side of the chamber is a set of tables filled with food and drink. There's a door on the other side of the room by the large screen. As the characters enter, the screen activates and the image of a man appears.

"Come in, come in. Be welcome, my lords, and sit down. You are about to embark on a small test of character. As you view this small movie you will be asked to make choices. Are you seated? Are you comfortable? The buttons on your chair are marked A, B, and C. In every scene of this movie there are three choices and two of the choices are proper and one is very improper. If you pick the improper one you will be killed instantly. Let's get on with the show, shall we?"

Referee's Information: First, it's possible for the characters to go through the door and ignore the entire movie sequence. The tape will keep playing without them. Second, it's possible to not sit in the chairs and make the button choices. The chairs are electrified, but can't kill those who are not sitting in them. Third, while the tape will encourage the character to make a choice, it will keep rolling and nothing happens if the character doesn't push a button. When the tape is done, the door by the screen opens automatically. Naturally, the food and drink on the tables are poisoned. In all cases, picking "C" is the deadly choice.

Scene One: The viewers see three pictures side by side, A is a huge yacht, B is a fast speed boat, C is a small sailing boat. "Which should you own?"

Scene Two: The viewers see three pictures side by side, A is a huge castle, B is a huge mansion, C is an apartment suite. "Which should you own?"

Scene Three: The viewers see three different types of duels. The "A" duel is done with swords and only draws first blood before stopping. The "B" duel is done with dueling pistols and the second duelist shoots into the ground as the first shooter misses completely. The "C" duel is fought with staple guns and both parties die from the wounds they suffered.

Scene Four: "Which bird should you own?" The "A" bird is an eagle in flight. The "B" bird is a falcon swooping down on its prey. The "C" bird is a pearly white dove.

Scene Five: "Which type of military would you buy?" The "A" group is file upon file of marching troops, all with the latest combat gear. The "B" group is row upon row of mechanized troops in current half-tracks and tanks. The "C" group is a set of the latest model aircraft.

"This concludes our portion of your test. If you

aren't a charred mass on the cushions of the seat, you may leave by the door by the screen. Thank you for your time."

Level One, Section H

Players' Information: You come into a chamber with a checkered floor. On each of the squares is a large dinner plate-shaped machine. On the white squares there are red machines and on the black squares are tan machines. There are ten rows, and at the far side in the middle of the wall is the exit.

Referee's Information: These red and tan machines are special mines. If the character steps on a white square first, all of the red mines will not explode. If they step on a black square first, all of the tan mines will not explode. Touching the other color mine causes them to explode for 2D damage in that square and all adjacent squares. It is possible to destroy all the mines from a distance and none of them will explode. If the characters have a means of flying they can also avoid explosions.

Level One, Section I

Players' Information: A dense fog fills this area. You can't tell if it's a large chamber or a narrow corridor. You can hear the sound of something or many things swooshing in the fog, but it's impossible to tell what they are. You can smell some type of motor oil in the air.

Referee's Information: This foggy chamber is filled with slicing blades that pop out of the walls, floor, and ceiling. If the characters can sense infrared they will have no trouble with the area and can easily walk through the seventy-five meter chamber. The blades are in constant motion and grow very warm. If the characters have anything that will shift the fog from their path, they will also have no problem ducking the blades. If the characters must take a chance and simply move through the fog, then they are in big trouble. Every ten meters there is a 1- on 1D chance of being struck by a blade, doing 1D damage. This happens to every being moving through the fog blindly. Metal detection equipment will alert their users and thus prevent damage.

Level One, Section J

Players' Information: The characters come into a chamber with a huge, artificial rock climbing wall. There are hand holds and toe holds on the face of the cliff, but the entire experience looks very difficult. At the top of the artificial cliff is an elevator to the next level. Falling from the middle or higher elevations looks fatal.

Referee's Information: The characters will be making four Average Dexterity rolls to avoid falling. On first failure, they fall with no damage. Second, they fall, taking one point of damage.

Third, 1D damage. Fourth, 2D damage.

If they thought to have ropes or other climbing gear, they don't fall at all and make the climb up the rock wall. The falling checks are made only if they can climb the wall only by hand.

Jives, dressed in Hallen green, is at the elevator. He is full of praise at the characters' survival. He has special medical kits that will totally revive the characters back to their normal health levels. He explains to them that they have done very well so far. There is only one more level to face, but naturally it's the tougher level. The group must now surrender all equipment in their possession, in favor of other equipment offered to them, with the only assurance being that each of the new gear will work perfectly. They are each given a skin-tight suit with a hood. They are told these suits are proof against all energy weapons. Each person can take one piece of the following equipment.

Fast Drug Injection: This doubles their speed for one hour, but then the user must sleep.

Chain Saw: This device works for thirty minutes.

Locksmith Kit: This set of tools will open any door in the gauntlet area.

Electric Lantern: This will light up a 30 x 30 meter area.

Night Glasses: This device allows the wearer to see in the dark.

75 meters of Nylon Rope: This rope is very light and very strong.

Crossbow: It comes with ten highly breakable but nevertheless deadly crossbow bolts.

Military Dagger: It has brass knuckle grip.

Level Two, A Section A

Players' Information: There are five locked doors in a circular chamber. You enter from the elevator and it closes its doors with a last wish of luck from Jives.

Each door has a symbol on it. The situation obviously calls for you to pick one.

Door #1: It has an image of a family tree with the royal house and all its current living relatives on the tree. You notice your name there. You notice the door handle is old and must have come from an old gate that has been out in the weather a long time.

Door #2: An image of a huge pile of bars of gold. The handle is a simple lifting latch that looks easy to open. The handle appears to be made of solid gold.

Door #3: A hologram image of you speaking to thousands of people. You appear well dressed and there are people with you on the platform who appear to like whatever message you are giving. The door handle is a complex set of buttons, but the code is right next to the key pad.

Door #4: A picture of a huge mansion with several vehicles in front and a huge pool in the back. The servants are lined up at the front gate. The round door handle is made of silver.

Door #5: Shows an image of a huge yacht at an expensive country club. It seems like a standard planet and the yacht looks great. This door handle appears to be the control wheel on a yacht.

Referee's Information: If the characters pick #1, they go on to the next encounter. If they pick any other number Jives greets them. He hands them a short note.

"Dearest Grandchild,

"It would appear that you are not worthy of becoming royalty on our world. You have failed this test. We are sad at this, and have taken steps to try to make you happy. Please, never try to come to Hallen, for you will be shot on sight. But we didn't want you to suffer death in the gauntlet after just finding you.

"Jives will send you off on a pinnacle from the ship. You can keep the pinnacle. On that ship will be instructions allowing you to gain help on several worlds to start a career of your own. 250,000 credits plus whatever you have left of the 100,000 will be placed in your account.

"With much luck and affection,

"The King, Your Grandfather"

Level Two Section B

Players' Information: There is a large steel box, divided into three ten-meter parts at the center of this chamber. The exit door is on the other side of the room. You try to open that door, but it's locked. As you near the box you see a hand-sized hole into the box. The contents of the box are not visible. A small note is at the side of the hole.

"Note to the Royal Gauntlet Runner, This is the Jomfar box and it is the ultimate test of your courage.

"I, your king, swear that you must leave your hand in this box for sixty seconds in order to continue with the test. You will be able to finish the test no matter what condition this box leaves your hand in.

"You have the word of the King of Hallen.

"Signed this day,

"King Simonal."

It seems you have no choice, as you look around the chamber.

Referee's Information: The box induces a psychic attack of unbearable pain on the person placing his/her hand inside. It does no physical damage whatsoever, but it seems that terrible things are happening to the hand. If the character does pull out, Jives comes in and tells them sadly that they have failed the test. Show them the king's note from the previous section and they are taken off the ship.

The referee should build the suspense of putting a hand inside the box. He should try to get the character to pull his/her hand out several times during the exercise. Make the character mentally place their entire arm in the hole. Begin very slowly and quietly to describe what is happening to the hand. As the seconds tick by, increase the volume of your voice and the speed of your description, perhaps like this:

"You've placed your hand and arm into the only hole on the box. Your hand feels a slight tickling sensation. You don't quite know what it is, but you've experienced this before.

"Ants, it's like lots of ants running up and down your hand. Now they are pinching you and the hundreds of bites really hurt. You try to brush them off and crush them in your hand and you feel that they are large. They start ripping your flesh and the pain is terrible. You feel the wetness of your own blood. They are going to eat off your fingers! Maybe you should pull your hand out because soon all your fingers will be gone, but only 15 seconds have gone by. A vibration in the box tells you something is opening up in the second section of the box, to where your wounded arm is. (Find out if the character wants to withdraw his/her hand.)

"Now you feel a growing heat in the box. Something hot is wafting on the palm of your hand. It's getting hotter and hotter. The bugs are falling off your ruined hand as they don't like the fire. Fire! That's it, the box is burning your hand! Flames are licking up and down your arm. You can actually feel your suit cloth burn away. Your flesh is bubbling. Your skin feels like it's turning into a charred ruin. You can't feel your hand now from the pain and the burning. Soon your arm will be useless to you for life. You wonder what will be left of it after this test. If you pull your hand out now you might be able to save it, but only 30 seconds have gone by. A vibration in the box tells you something is opening up in the third section of the box into where your now burnt arm is. You feel faint. If you pull your arm out now, you might be able to save it. You know there are good doctors on the ship. (Find out if the character wants to pull out his/her arm.)

"The flames have stopped. You can't feel your hand, but you can twist your arm from side to side. Then you strike something wet with your arm. The wet thing moves up and down your arm. You can hear sniffing sounds. Then a cold wet thing licks your arm. You can feel charred pieces of flesh pulling away from your arm. The pain is unbearable. There's something alive in there and it's licking your arm! Then fangs seize on your wrist. If you don't pull away now, your entire hand will be eaten! You still have fifteen seconds, but the creature is starting to put tremendous pres-

sure on your arm. You can feel each fang tearing into your burnt flesh. You feel the pain of bones crunching under the teeth of this monster. You must pull out now or your arm will be torn away! (Find out if the character wants to pull out his/her arm.)

"After sixty seconds you pull your unaffected arm from the box. It still tingles from the pains you felt. There are no marks on your hand. The door on the other side of the chamber opens."

Level Two, Section C

Players' Information: You come into a steaming hot chamber. You are on a platform raised slightly above boiling water. The platform is about twenty feet wide. The distance to the platform on the other side is about twenty feet. It's a difficult jump at best. On the other platform is a small life raft. If you had a rope you could easily rope the raft and bring it over to your side. If you don't have a rope, then you have a serious problem. The way out is on the other platform. The water is murky with steam and you don't know how deep it is. You do know that it's very hot and that heat is starting to sap away your strength. You will have to make some sort of decision soon.

Referee's Information: The boiling water will do 3D damage if any character becomes fully immersed. To leap across safely to the other platform is an Average Dexterity task. Failing the roll means they fall short and plunge into the boiling water. If they survive the damage, they can quickly get out of the water on the other side.

If they have a rope or think to use their clothes to make a knotted cord, they can get the boat. If they throw objects at the boat, it is possible to push it into the water and the boiling effect will carry it to their side eventually.

If they think of it, allow them take the boat and oars with them.

Level Two, Section D

Players' Information: As you enter this area you see three huge felines feeding on what appears to be dead cows. One hundred yards off in the distance is the door you need to get through. Next to that closed exit you can barely see another computer key pad blinking. You will have to go right by the felines to get to it. They don't see you now, so you could attack with the element of surprise. They are sure to notice you if you try to rush past them. Their savage claws look like they could tear you apart in one swipe. You've never seen cat creatures so huge.

Referee's Information: The cats are feeding. They won't move an inch if they are left alone. If they are touched or attacked, the animals will come at the party and try to kill the characters. (Weight: 1600kg; Hits: 8D/3D; Wounds: +4D;

Weapons: Claw 2D, Bite 2D; Armor: none.)

The key pad automatically opens the door as the characters approach.

Level Two, Section E

Players' Information: You come into a long corridor with a series of cages. At the end of the corridor you see a passage out. A sign is hanging at the center of the corridor. It reads, "FREE ONE." You see ten large cages. Each is locked by a large, complicated mechanism.

Cage #1: This cage has ten morning doves all calmly perched on a large tree at the center of the cage.

Cage #2: This cage has a lovely human female all dressed in white. She sits demurely on a cot. Her long black hair is braided into twin rolls at the side of her head. She smiles up at you.

Cage #3: This cage has some sort of robot at its center. You don't know much about the device, but you see several security stunners sticking out of its turret.

Cage #4: There's a huge snake coiled at the center of this cage. A large bulge in its middle tells you it's probably fed recently. By the size of its coils it must be at least twenty feet long.

Cage #5: At your arrival, a man leaps up from his cot. "Let me out of here for the love of your king, I beg you!" The man is well muscled and dressed in a light green jump suit.

Cage #6: At the center of the cage is a table with five laser pistols and five battery packs for the pistols.

Cage #7: Inside this cage is a table with a small coffer of gems worth about a million credits.

Cage #8: A huge war hound pants in this cage. It looks up at you expectantly, as if it expects you to free it. There are several man-sized leg bones in its cage. Each of the bones still has bits of meat on it.

Cage #9: Inside are three shotguns on strange cradles. The guns are pointing at the door of the cage. You can't help but wonder if the guns shoot when the door opens.

Cage #10: Fog and mist swirl inside this cage, making it impossible to tell what's in it.

Referee's Information: The locks on each cage door will be very difficult to break open. If one of the characters has lock picking tools, they will have no problem. If they have something like a knife, they can eventually do the job. But if they don't have metallic object, they aren't getting the locks open.

There is no problem if they ignore the sign and continue on to the next section. There is also no problem if they open more than one cage. The sign didn't say they couldn't.

Cage #1: The doves are harmless, but they crave human attention. They will constantly fly up

and get in the faces of the characters. They want to land on their shoulders and get attention. The fluttering will block vision and be a problem in battle.

Cage #2: The female is named Adwin. She is soft spoken and does want to be released. She will calmly explain to the characters that she has a split personality. Her second identity is a savage murderer who kills at every opportunity.

Cage #3: The robot is a fake shell.

Cage #4: The snake is in torpor and can barely move.

Cage #5: The man is Neval Archenstone (UPP: 777777), who pretends to be one of the royal cousins. He claims he was mistakenly put in the cage for the gauntlet run. He is a liar, a cheat, and would like nothing more than to kill the group. Neval has been told he will be freed from the ship if he can con his way out of the cage and kill at least one of the party members. He will try to make this look like an accident. He's a smooth talker and not to be trusted. He will bide his time and wait until the characters are at a disadvantage before striking.

Cage #6: The pistols are standard hand lasers and will function. The batteries are good for two shots for each weapon.

Cage #7: There is at least a million credits worth of gems in the coffer. It is bobby-trapped to explode if the gems or coffer are touched. The explosion will kill anyone in the cage, but will not damage those outside the cage.

Cage #8: The hound will be a faithful companion for anyone opening its cage. The dog is huge, eats like a horse, but its tremendous strength makes it highly dangerous. It has been trained to obey many simple commands.

Cage #9: The shotguns will continue blasting for as long as the door is open. The stands are bolted to the floor. It's necessary to ruin the guns before lifting them off the stands.

Cage #10: There's nothing in the chamber but a silent machine making the fog. If this cage door is opened, a hinged trap door opens in the corridor floor and all standing near the door will fall onto poisoned spikes at the bottom of a deep pit. If the fall or the spikes don't kill the characters, they will discover that they can't jump out of the pit. When the next royal cousin goes to take the test the pit crushes the characters and opens to ready itself for the next runner.

Level Two, Section E

Players' Information: The entrance opens into a large room. There is a long table at the center. Ten men, all dressed in Hallen Green are standing against the walls. Each man has a machine gun pointed at you. A voice blares out of hidden loud speakers:

"You have exactly 120 seconds to make your

choice. There are five different types of vials on the table. There are enough vials so that you and your group can drink from the same vial. The vials are well marked. You will drink from one of the vials in 110 seconds or less or you will be shot. The type-one vial has a virus that will reduce your hearing in half, permanently. You could get electronic enhancements, but your hearing will never be the same. The type-two vial is filled with a bacteria that will reduce your sight so that you will be totally blind in the darkness. Again, you can get electronic enhancements, but your night vision will be gone. The type-three vial has a bacteria that strips away your sense of touch. You will no longer be able to feel your body in any way. This effect is permanent and cannot be augmented by electronic means. The type-four vial has a set of chemicals that has a 20% chance of killing you. The type five-vial is filled with a virus that will make you sterile. If you drink from it you will never have children. You now have sixty seconds to make a choice."

Referee's Information: Reduced hearing will do little to bother the character. As the campaign continues, remember that lack of full hearing make certain tasks more difficult.

The reduction of sight will cause a +1 Die Modifier to hit with all missile weapons. In the dark they will be fighting as if they are blind unless they have night vision equipment.

The loss of their sense of touch will effect many things. In hand-to-hand battles, they will have a +1 Die Modifier to strike and do -1 physical damage. They will also grow tired easily.

They don't know it, but there is no chance that they will die if they drink the poison vial. It just makes them terribly ill for several minutes.

Sterility is sterility and it is not reversible.

If they ask any of the men which vial to drink, every one will suggest the poison vile.

Level Two, Section F

Players' Information: Inside this large, circular chamber is a balcony. Under the balcony are two very large wooden doors. Coming to the edge of the balcony is a lovely young woman. Again a loud speaker blares out:

"This woman has expressed some interest in you. She has seen you and found you charming. Look at her face. She has been given a choice. Through one of the doors below you will find a mass of unusually large rats. It is doubtful that you will survive their hungry attack, but you might. Through the other door you will find your next and much less deadly encounter. If you open the rat portal and die, this charming lady will get 250,000 credits and a modest mansion on Hallen. If you open the safe portal, the king and queen will make sure she has many chaperoned encounters with you, and should you two marry, the king and

queen will lavish many grand gifts on you both. Pick a portal."

As you stride for the doors, the lady takes off a glove and throws it toward the right door. There is a look of concern on her face. Is that a look of a woman concerned about loosing a great deal of money?

Referee's Information: The right door is the safe door. The woman is the Lady Alisandra, a court favorite and very marryable. A character making a Difficult Perception task roll will spot obscured royal Hallen Green in her dress and thus concluding that she is trustworthy.

If the left door is opened, a hoard of fifty huge rats comes and attacks the group. Each rat takes a hit and does 1 point of damage. They are savage fighters, but will all run when twenty of their number are killed.

If the character takes the right door, there will be some flirtatious role-playing happening in that character's future. The Lady Alisandra will be quite persuasive in her attempts to marry the character.

Level Two, Section G

Players' Information: There are ten doors in the new chamber you find yourself in. Each door is numbered from one to ten. At the center of the chamber are a table, chair, and a computer. The computer is turned on and you can read what's on the screen.

"BREAK MY CODE AND THE PROPER DOOR WILL OPEN. ALL THE REST OF THE DOORS END IN DEATH."

You see a short binary code below the statement. A person with any sort of computer training will be able to break that code on an Average Computer task roll.

Referee's Information: Other than the obvious, conventional method, destroying the computer system will also "break" the code. The characters can even get lucky that on 1- on 1D, one of them figures out the code.

All of the doors are electrified until the code is broken. Then any of the doors will open onto the next challenge. Door #1 pops open when the code is properly solved. Touching a door before breaking the code results in a stunning shock at first and death on a second try. The table and chair are metal and will not be useful in avoiding the danger. If they thought to bring the boat from the boiling water room, they can break down the door by using the boat's insulation as a shield against the voltage.

Level Two, Section H

Players' Information: The group comes into a chamber with several different types of aircraft simulators. They are labeled "A" to "D" respectively. The labeling seems to indicate the complexity

of the units. The "A" unit is quit simple, while the "D" unit is a complex military space fighter simulator.

The door on the other side of the chamber is locked.

Looking over the devices, you notice unusually powerful coils of safety belts and extra large power cables.

It's obvious you have to try one of these.

Referee's Information: Each of these flight simulators is an easy exercise for anyone with piloting or navigation skills. All others are trying to fly the units on pure luck.

As they enter the crafts they are instructed to buckle their safety harness. They are also told to take off safely, do a full loop, and land the craft in the simulation. If they crash, the simulation units will actually kill them.

It's perfectly all right for the characters to disengage the large power cables and binding safety belts in order not to be harmed if they fail the test.

In any event, if they are successful (roll 2- on 1D if unskilled), or if they fail, the other door clicks open. Pilots and navigators need not roll to see if they make it. They succeed automatically.

Level Two, Section I

Players' Information: The characters see a sandy pit in a very large room. There are rows of television cameras all around the room. As soon as the characters enter, a recorded roar of a crowd plays to the following announcement:

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the next event straight from the royal gauntlet ship! In this series we have a grandchild of the king. This new royal heir is being pitted against a blade man in a fight to the death!" The background roar picks up in volume and the announcement goes on.

"Lost for decades, this new throne claimant has done very well so far on the gauntlet cruise. Now, alone against the blade man, we will see the true meaning of courage under the threat of death. None of his supporters can help him. Only he and the equipment he has gathered so far can walk on the sands. If any of his friends try to assist, they will be shot to death where they stand."

Out from the only other door in the room comes a huge man with a large blade in his hand. He's wearing little, but a helmet and a loin cloth. The roar of the crowd grows even louder.

Referee's Information: The blade man is a thug (UPP: 888652). He is skilled in bladed combat and little else (Long Blade-2). He moves to the center of the sand and waits for the character.

The character could simply run to the sand door and escape and nothing will happen, but

The character could do the fight and if the blade man sufficiently cuts the character, he asks the crowd what they want and the crowd will not want death.

If friends help the character, they are all killed instantly by concealed laser blasters about the room.

It's perfectly all right to use the lasers from the cage room. No one said it had to be a fair fight. There is no referee, so any tactics is permitted in the ring.

If the character defeats the blade man, that character is revered all over Hallen and the king will be immensely proud of the character.

Level Two, Section J

Players' Information: You enter a large office with several secretaries typing away at very modern computers. The chamber appears to be a business office. Jives appears. This time he is not wearing his royal green uniform. Jives is in a black business suit. He praises your actions and says you have won. All you have to do is fill out the Hallen royal papers and the test will be over. The papers are in Hallenese which you cannot read but as you watch, one of the secretaries

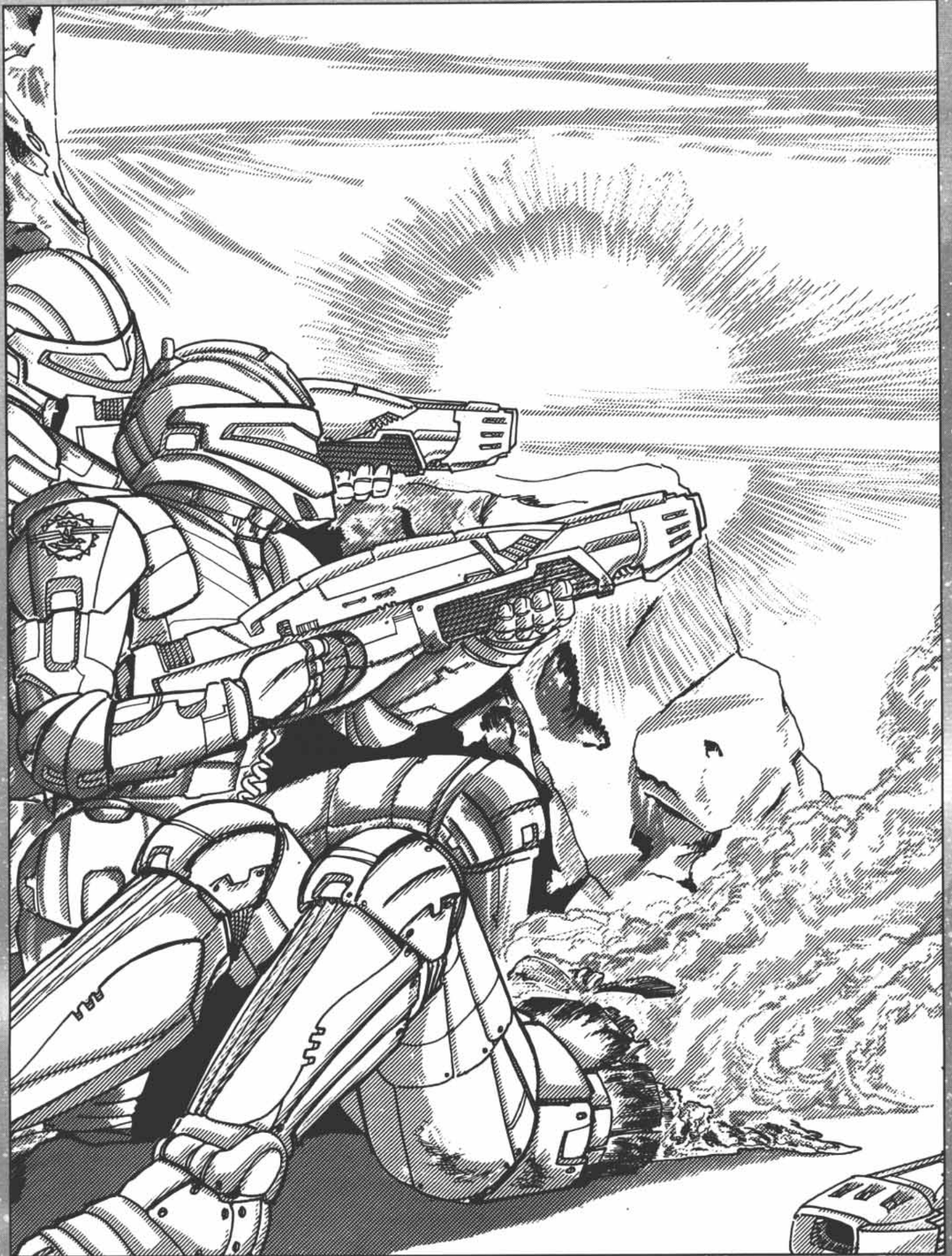
prints out a contract in Galanglic. There is a lot of legalese in the contract you don't completely understand. Jives is insistent that you sign, but he patiently takes the time to explain each part of the contract. You are still confused. You are told you can't go through the door that Jives points to, until you sign. He's waiting.

Referee's Information: Jives has been ordered to be the final trick. The contract the character is being pressured to sign will strip away all his rights and not allow him to land on Hallen in his lifetime. His children can come to the planet with full rights and honors but he never can.

Nothing stops the character from walking through the door. If he does, he wins.

This is the final test of wisdom and the character should suspect something because Jives is not in his royal green. The referee should also make it clear that this contract is unusually vague. Make sure Jives sounds very earnest that the character must sign the contract. Jives will tell any lie he has to so that the signing happens.

One way or another this ends the most dangerous part of the gauntlet cruise.



8: THE KHIIDKAR INCIDENT

This scenario is a mix of social interplay and action. The characters are pre-generated nobles or high-placed commoners in the service of nobles. They are visiting their liege-lord, and should be encouraged to act appropriately. The characters arrive on-planet as guests of the planetary ruler. Commoners will treat them with great respect. The referee should pay attention to the social customs of the world, especially regarding the right to bear a sword.

ADVENTURE OUTLINE

1. The characters defeat Captain Swing in the Khiidkar system and rescue Rane Haraani, the long-lost half-brother of the Marquis of Khiidkar, and Lord Ander Lavalii.
2. The characters convey Rane to the Marquis' palace at the Downport, where they are welcomed as heroes. The Marquis throws a huge party, with gentles and minor nobility from several worlds present.
3. Count Julian meets the Marquis' Daughter, Marai. With his new-found Hero status, the Count has a good chance at courting her. However, Lord Lavalii has similar ideas.
4. The Marquis issues rewards to the characters, then invites them to his hunting lodge for a private month-long holiday.
5. The characters are invited to take part in a hunt, chasing the local Crested Tusk-boar.
6. During the hunt, Marai's grav car is downed, close to Sir Donava. He protects her from the boar at considerable risk to his own life. Marai becomes infatuated with her dashing hero.
7. The characters have some leisure time on their hands. Sir Donava has opportunities to develop a relationship with Marai and to alienate his friend the Count.
8. The Marquis announces that his daughter will marry Count Julian. Marai is still infatuated with her rescuer, but remains fond of the Count. Rane tells the PCs that he has discovered that Marai's Grav car was sabotaged. He helps the PCs set a trap for the saboteur.
9. A party of assassins/saboteurs arrives to make another attempt.
10. Evidence from the assassins points at Count Julian.
11. The Marquis has Count Julian arrested.
12. Investigating, the characters go to the starport. They discover that Rane Haraani is, in fact, Captain Swing.
13. Rane kidnaps Marai. The characters give chase. Count Julian is freed to assist.
14. The characters catch Rane and a desperate fight erupts as he tries to escape.
15. Depending upon who survives, Marai marries one of her heroes. PCs are rewarded.

THE SETTING

Most of the adventure takes place on the surface of Khiidkar (1812/Core/B383688-9 Ni Ri) in the first years of the Imperium. It is home to Jole Haraani, Marquis Khiidkar. Haraani has been a strong pro-Cleon supporter for many years and was rewarded for his loyalty in the first round of Imperial Recognition. Haraani's power is based upon the economic might of his homeworld and his large investments in the industry of local space. He is known to be a fair and honest man, with a keen understanding of business. To improve the influence of his homeworld, Haraani amalgamated several companies into Khiidkarcorp, specializing in factoring and brokerage. Khiidkarcorp is a minor player in the Imperial game, but with its interests in many ports, the corporation is becoming a household name for reliability in finding the best prices for its clients' goods. Perhaps this explains the riches of Khiidkar, since the world's own products are marketed by Khiidkarcorp.

Khiidkar itself is a pleasant world, served by a large and busy B-class starport. The world has a diameter of 5232km, giving a surface gravity of 0.62gs. Atmosphere is dense, with slightly high carbon dioxide levels. These are not a hazard, and simply mean that plant life is lush and varied. Much of the world's 38% hydrographics (fully 22%) is concentrated in the Great Central Ocean, a deep basin mostly in the northern hemisphere. There is little ice at the poles, as Khiidkar is a warm world.

Living on such a warm, forgiving world, it would be easy for the 6,200,000 locals to become indolent and lazy, but this is not the case. Business and commerce are planetary pastimes on Khiidkar, which maintained at least a little offworld contact right through the Long Night. Overseen by a remarkably efficient Civil Service Bureaucracy, Khiidkar's population enjoy a comfortable lifestyle made possible by the world's tech level of 9. Ownership of any firearm is absolutely forbidden, and the use of one in any crime carries the death penalty. Locals are, however, allowed to carry knives and other small blades, with long blades such as swords "controlled." This in effect means that their ownership is reserved for those who can get a license — i.e., are of good social standing. It is, however, a rule on Khiidkar that "a gentle carries a sword." "Gentle" refers to both men and

women of high status, but the custom of wearing blades is mainly a male preserve. Any citizen of Soc 8+ will aspire to obtain a Blade License. Public display of the weapon allows the citizen to show his favored status, and is a prerequisite for gaining more social prestige.

The population lives in moderate-sized main communities of around 200,000 people, with as many in smaller communities scattered around the larger ones, which act as central marketplaces. Port City, which adjoins the large Downport, has a population of just under 500,000 inhabitants.

Policing is handled by a civilian force, which serves as much as an arbitration service as a police force. Most crimes are considered "civil" in nature and carry financial and social penalties rather than jail terms. Only a few crimes, such as murder, assault with firearms, etc., are considered "criminal" matters, carrying draconian sentences up to and including death. The policy is to penalize offenders within the social/commercial system. If they accept this, the matter is closed. If, however, a criminal chooses to live outside the bounds of society and does not care about social penalties then he/she is put out of the society permanently. The patrol officers carry either batons or swords, depending upon status. They do not use firearms on regular patrol, although backup units have an impressive arsenal.

Planetary military is well-equipped with Imperial-standard weaponry bought through Khiidkar-corp's factors on Sylea. Weapons scanners are of a similar high quality.

Many tourists visit this beautiful planet, and the locals try hard to make them feel welcome. The people are peaceful and hardworking, naturally friendly to strangers, and get along well with one another.

Among the "lower orders" who ply the trades that make the everyday world work, there is a little discontent. These individuals are not involved in big business and commerce, and some feel unfairly left out of the world's prosperity.

Armed craft are not allowed to enter the Downport. Any personal weapons aboard a ship must be surrendered at the Highport or the ship will not be allowed to proceed to the planet. Obviously, weapons do slip through the net, but most are stopped.

Connected to the large Downport by a 20-mile rigid Maglev rail tube laid on pylons set into the seabed, lies the Marquis' Reserve, a large island to which access is strictly controlled. The island is ringed by a set of sophisticated sensors and weapon detectors. Much of the island is untamed wilderness for the enjoyment of the Marquis and his guests. There is a "village" housing some 300 souls who serve the Marquis' Hunting Lodge on the island, plus security operatives. Close enough

to the Downport to be defended by its guns, the island has no need for defenses. There are a couple of weapons in storage for emergencies, but even Marquis' bodyguards carry only blades.

PERSONALITIES

These characters are created specifically for this adventure. Additional player-characters may be generated, but the following personalities should be used and controlled by the players.

Julian Talaton, Count Iruk

Age: 35

UPP: 89866D-8

Skills: Astrogation-1, Carousing-2, Computer-2, Diplomacy-3, Equestrian-2, Fencing-4, First Aid-2, Grav Craft-1, Ground Craft-2, History-1, Language (Vilani)-2, Law-1, Leadership-2, Pilot-3, Pistol-1, Short Blade-1, Vac Suit-1.

Possessions: TL12 comm with accessories, dagger, diplo armor, foil, patrol cruiser.

House Talaton is a vassal house of Duke Statarth. Count Julian's immediate allegiance is to Marquis Haraani of Khiidkar.

Despite the impatience and recklessness which got him dismissed from the Naval Academy, Julian's family bought him a commission which was intended to lead to a desk job on Sylea, a uniform for social occasions, and an increase in political standing. Instead, Julian somehow gained a for himself a bridge post aboard the 20,000-ton cruiser *Revenge*. Proving himself a good pilot and a courageous officer during the Chanestin Wars, Julian was promoted quickly and made many friends, including a young Marine officer named Kathrine Irushii.

However, after 8 years in the service, the untimely death in a grav car accident of Julian's father forced him to resign from the Navy to take up his new responsibilities. Court life bored Julian, although he tried to guide his house to the best of his abilities. Recognizing this, Marquis Haraani appointed a custodian to watch over the Talaton lands, leaving Julian free to carry out the Marquis' will in the field.

For the past two years, Count Julian has fought against the Khiidkar Freedom Front, a band of anti-Imperial terrorists, at the express wish of his liege lord. It is his personal goal to capture the notorious rebel leader known as 'Captain Swing'. To this end, he operates a patrol cruiser crewed by his household huscarls.

Sir Donava Talaton

Age: 36

UPP: 78898B-3

Skills: Astrogation-2, Brawling-2, Carousing-1, Computer-2, Electronics-2, Equestrian-1, Fencing-1, Grav Craft-1, Gunnery-1, Language (Vilani)-2, Lead-

ership-3, Sensors-4, Vac Suit-2.

Possessions: TL12 comm cutlass, dagger, diplo armor.

Born into the Talaton family, Sir Donava is a cousin of Count Julian, and is both commander of the household huscarls and a trusted friend and companion.

For 12 years, Sir Donava served in the Federation Navy, winning several Mentions of Honor and a First-Class Naval Cross of Diamonds at the first battle of Mishaa. After rising to command on a small patrol cruiser, Sir Donava was offered to lead the house guards by his boyhood friend Count Julian. He thus became captain of the Count's personal ship, the *Talaton Principle*.

For the past 2 years, Sir Donava has assisted his friend in hunting down the notorious Captain Swing.

Sir Vargner Talaton

Age: 26

UPP: B6A78B-8

Skills: Brawling-1, Bribery-1, Carousing-3, Computer-1, Equestrian-3, Fast Talk-2, Fencing-3, Gambling-1, Grav Craft-1, Recon-1.

Possessions: TL12 Comm, dagger, diplo Armor, foil.

Unlike his brother Donava, the military life did not appeal to Sir Vargner. As his mother's favorite child he managed to avoid anything he wished to, and grew up rather spoiled.

Sir Vargner has squandered his family fortune in gambling, wine, and women, and Sir Donava has found a way to deal with the problem: assigning Sir Vargner to the *Talaton Principle*, ostensibly as communications officer. In fact, he has no real duties but is there simply to stay out of trouble. On his present salary, it will take Sir Vargner several lifetimes to pay off his gambling debts, and he is thoroughly disgusted with the assignment. A battle of wills had ensued between the brothers as Sir Vargner tries to sicken Sir Donava and get himself dismissed so he can resume his playboy lifestyle. Meanwhile, Donava tries to "make a real man" of his sibling.

Sir Vargner is no good and he knows it. He just wants an easy life of carousing and social excitement. However, he is no coward and has one redeeming feature — he is fanatically loyal to his liege. But he will rapidly fall back into his old ways, given a chance.

Major Kathrine Irishii

Age: 34

UPP: A89769-5

Skills: Athletics-2, Battle Dress-2, Brawling-1, Carousing-1, Computer-1, Environment Combat-1, Grav Craft-2, Leadership-2, Long Blade-2, Mechanics-1, Pistol-3, Recon-3, Rifle-4, Tactics-3, Survival-1.

Possessions: ACR, armored vac suit (flexible, 5 points), autopistol, TL12 comm, cutlass, diplo armor.

Kathrine always wanted to be a Marine, and was one of the first to volunteer for service aboard Cleon's new anti-pirate gunships. Her career was marked by a rapid rise through the ranks to finally command the Marine contingent aboard the cruiser *Revenge*.

It was aboard this vessel that Kathrine fought at the battle of Rorc's Asteroid. During the battle, the cruiser was damaged by heavy fire and lost maneuver. Kathrine's marines fought off a determined boarding attempt by the Chanestin Royal Marines and incidentally saved the life of Count Julian Talaton.

Count Talaton offered the position of his personal bodyguard to Kathrine when he became head of his noble house. The job would be perfect but for the fact that Kathrine has fallen in love with Sir Donava Talaton, a relationship which can never work.

Dr. Morris Kashintie

Age: 46

UPP: 564AEA-3

Skills: Administration-3, Carousing-4, Computer-6, Diplomacy-4, Electronics-2, Forgery-1, Grav Craft-1, History-2, Language (Vilani)-1, Law-4, Linguistics-3, Short Blade-1, Streetwise-2, Trader-1.

Possessions: TL12 comm, dress Dagger, personal computer.

With an impressive background in computer systems and administration, Dr. Kashintie won rapid promotion within the bureaucracy of House Talaton. This eventually led to a post as chief advisor to the Count himself.

While not a noble, Dr. Kashintie's manners are impeccable and his judgment excellent. He is the Count's most vital assistant at court, and is never without an idea or a good word.

Captain Swing is of great interest to Dr. Kashintie, because of his preference for computer hacking in many of his crimes.

Captain Duran Harshii

Age: 30

UPP: BB9868-5

Skills: Carousing-2, Communications-2, Computer-2, Equestrian-2, Grav Craft-2, Language (Vilani)-2, Melee Combat-2, Perception-2, Pistol-3, Streetwise-1.

Possessions: Autopistol, TL12 comm, cutlass, diplo armor.

From a good Sylean family background, Duran's career in the Navy led him into Naval Intelligence. Now as a liaison officer charged with ensuring that Talaton interests do not clash with Imperial policy, Duran has found this an easy

assignment as the Talatons are staunchly pro-Imperium. However, there is some concern that Count Julian's obsession with hunting down Captain Swing may cause problems, as it is believed that the rebel may be an ex-Navy officer which might cause some embarrassment.

Duran is ordered to support the Talatons to the best of his ability, unless their activities are obviously anti-Imperium.

Library Data (Available to All)

The KFF (Khiidkar Freedom Force) has been a thorn in the side of the Khiidkar authorities for some time now. Using terrorism and piracy, they have caused a great deal of damage and unease with the apparent intent of forcing a public demand of the removal of Imperial presence in the system. The KFF wants nothing other than full independence for Khiidkar and her dependent worlds. Under the leadership of the vicious Captain Swing, thought to be a renegade Navy officer, this party of rebels has been particularly successful for some years. Hunting down Captain Swing has become the personal mission for Count Julian Talaton.

THE SETUP

As the patrol cruiser *Talaton Principle* was taking up her station for another long and probably fruitless hunt, the ship received a GK signal from the liner *Stellar Velvet*. The signal was suddenly cut off, a very bad sign. *Talaton Principle* immediately changed her vector to render assistance. She found the liner a shattered hulk, with another ship accelerating away. This craft was identified as the *Mordent*, a corsair commanded by the elusive and sadistic Captain Swing, a name taken from ancient Terran history.

A weak signal from the wreck was picked up:

"GK. GK. GK. I am... only survivor. Please assist. GK. GK. Please respond, any ship..."

Talaton Principle began to match vectors as the unknown survivor began to transmit again. Evidently badly hurt, she went on, "Using vac suit radio. Can't get the suit on... All systems are down. They got control of the computer... cut off our comms. Astrogator got a GK off. They shot him. Shot everyone who moved... They went through the quarters, like they were searching for something... took some of the cargo... light stuff... Rounded up some prisoners. I tried to stop them..."

Suddenly the survivor's voice became less dreamy and acquired a hard edge. "Reactor's going. Break off, *Talaton Principle*. Break off immediately! I repeat, break off...."

The signal went dead as *Stellar Velvet's* reactor vented plasma through the ship. The wreck broke up before the rescuers' eyes.

Turning calmly to the astrogator, Count Julian said softly, "Are there other patrol ships close to

the marauder's position?"

"Yes sir."

"Which ship is nearest?"

"We are, sir," she responded flatly.

"Good!" snarled the Count. "Then leave the wreck for the system patrol. Pursue the *Mordent*!"

Turning in pursuit, *Talaton Principle* almost caught her prey before she reached the jump point. She landed a few hits but failed to stop the corsair from entering jump.

"Where's she going?" demanded Count Julian.

"She's definitely leaking fuel, my lord," replied the captain, Sir Donova. "Probably down to jump-1. That means Uushnem or Khiidkar."

"Uushnem's a hell-hole. I'd guess Khiidkar. They'll change their transponder codes and maybe strike again, since there's a lot of traffic at Khiidkar. We have to pursue." The Count's tone was grim as he spoke, "They're got getting away with doing THAT to our citizens!"

Sir Donova turned to the astrogator, "Set jump coordinates. Khiidkar. Match theirs and commence emergency jump procedure."

"Sir?"

"I said TAKE A GUESS AND JUMP!" Sir Donova snapped.

"Sir..." he saw her swallow hard.

"All hands," the captain said into the intercom, "Prepare for Pursuit Jump. Three minutes."

It had happened a week ago. Now the cruiser hurtled out of Jump, crew at Action Stations.

"Vessel ahead. Twenty thousand kilometers." the sensors operator reported.

"Transponder?"

"Claims to be a free trader named *Galiia*. Drive signature matches the *Mordent*."

"Excellent jump, astrogator," Sir Donova said quietly, then turned to Count Julian. "It's my ship, but the mission is yours, sir."

The Count nodded, feeling the tension mounting inside. "Attack," he said harshly.

"Warning shot, sir?" asked the gunnery officer.

"Yes. Right into her hull." the Captain replied.

And battle was joined.

BOARDING STATIONS!

Talaton Principle is pursuing the pirate vessel *Mordent* at close range. The pirate begins to accelerate frantically towards the planet. The characters have reason to believe that there are prisoners aboard.

Both vessels are low on fuel. *Mordent* cannot jump — she must escape or die. The unprepared jump has placed both ships several hours away from the 100-diameter point, with no SDB assistance for some time.

The pirates have a damaged power plant from the previous engagement. Already overloaded, it will fail after three rounds of space combat, leav-

				Surface				Interior		
				Crew	Pass	Low	Cargo	1 Bay	Ship's Boat	
				10	3	0	0	2		
				Length	Width	Height	Tons	3		
							400	4		
				Quality	Reliability	Built	Overhaul	5		
								6		
				2	Large Battery	3	3	2	0	2
				2	M. Battery-Barbette	5				3
										4
										5
Name/Type				4	Maneuver	M 10				6
Talon Principle				3	Jump	J 4				7
Mission				7	Power	P 4				8
Patrol				40	Armor	Armor				9
Comments										10
See text.										11
										12

SHIP CARD

FORM 41

				Surface				Interior		
				Crew	Pass	Low	Cargo	1 Bay	Gig	
				9	7	8	100	2		
				Length	Width	Height	Tons	3		
							400	4		
				Quality	Reliability	Built	Overhaul	5		
								6		
				1	L. Battery	3	3	2	0	2
				2	L. Battery	3	0	0	0	3
										4
										5
Name/Type				1	Maneuver	M 10				6
Mordent				2	Jump	J 4				7
Mission				4	Power	P 4				8
Corsair				21	Armor	Armor				9
Comments										10
See text.										11
										12

SHIP CARD

FORM 41

ing the *Mordent* defenseless and immobile.

It should also be noted that all but one of the *Mordent's* weapons have a very short range.

Talon Principle

This standard patrol cruiser has been modified by the removal of the G-carrier bay to create state-rooms for the noble passengers. Its current crew and passengers include Captain Donava Talon, Sir Vargner Talon, Count Julian Talon, Dr. Kashintie, Captain Harshii, one lieutenant, seven ensigns, Major Kathrine Irishii and her contingent of two NCO and five marines.

Boarding The Mordent

Once docking is achieved, the airlock can be blown open, and the marines can commence with their "action aboard."

The *Mordent* has been badly damaged, and the rebels are (apparently) trying to escape in the ship's gig. However, several rebels have remained behind to try to fight the marines off. They will stubbornly retreat through their ship, staging ambushes wherever possible and trying to kill or disable the marines.

Sensors aboard the *Talon Principle* will indicate that the *Mordent's* main reactor will go critical in 3 minutes (30 combat rounds).

Fighting Aboard the Mordent

It is important to stage-manage this fight correctly. The pirate vessel is outgunned but still dangerous. The referee may need to tweak the combat unobtrusively so that the *Mordent* is disabled and can be boarded rather than destroyed. The characters' ship should take some hits, but nobody important should be killed.

The noble player-characters may follow the marines through the corridors or lead the assault. Any player whose character does not assist the boarding party should control a marine for the boarding action.

Piracy carries the death penalty. The rebels have nothing to lose, and many are also fanatical in their hatred of the Imperium. Individual rebels may surrender, especially if wounded and cut off, but since they face the death penalty, most will fight like cornered rats, hoping to kill the marines and board the PC's ship. In fact, it is possible that a couple of rebels may try to sneak out of a hull breach and enter the ship by crawling across the hull. The referee may have the *Mordent* maintain internal atmosphere, allowing freer movement inside without vac suits, or may stage the whole fight inside a zero-G, lightless wreck. The pirates will gradually fall back aft, fighting all the way. Finally the PCs will force their way into a craft bay, to be confronted with the rescue scene. If they instead sat aboard their own ship, then the rescue

will be played out “off camera” and the triumphant marines will bring their rescued hostages aboard the cruiser.

Engineering: This large area is in chaos. An explosion has thrown shrapnel about the chamber, and radiation leakage from the crippled powerplant is approaching lethal levels — and rising. Four dead crewmembers lie about the chamber, killed while trying to repair the powerplant.

Cargo Bay: The huge bay, dominated by a pair of clamshell doors, is mostly empty. Some light cargo was taken from the ship *Stellar Velvet* — electronics components for the most part — but Captain Swing was after the passengers rather than the cargo this time, and was chased off before the rest of the cargo could be looted.

Bridge: Standard Bridge. Controls spark and smoke from battle damage. Two crewmembers are dead at the controls.

Forward Corridor: In this cramped corridor only 2 marines can enter at a time from the Galley. Two rebels (UPP: 999651; Skills: Long Blade-2, SMG-2, Vac Suit-1; equipped with Snub-SMG, broadsword, and heavy vac suit) have been detailed to make a stand.

Galley: A messy area filled with old rubbish and half-eaten pre-packed meals. Posters of holostars adorn the grimy walls.

Captain’s Stateroom: A large and lavish stateroom. On the wall is an Imperial Starburst with a sword slicing through it. This is the symbol of the Khiidkar Freedom Force (KFF). A search will reveal a 3-D picture of a beautiful dark-haired woman with the 2 moons of Khiidkar rising behind her.

Staterooms: Simple double-occupancy rooms. Very cramped.

Mid Corridor: Near the door to the rear corridor a barricade made from wall panels, chairs and other handy junk has been hastily thrown up. Three rebels (UPP: 777662, with laser rifle, pistol, and ACR, respectively) man the obstacle, ordered to make a final stand.

Cells: These are very basic staterooms with a head and a board for use as both bed and table. Cells 1-3 are open while Cell 4 is still locked. Within Cell 4 is a vac-suited figure who, upon release, identifies himself as Commander Lord Ander Lavalij, Baron Khivn, Hero of the Battle of Marker Rock. He was left behind to die by his captors.

Lord Lavalij will imperiously demand a weapon — preferably a sword — and to take command of the boarding party. He knows this will be refused, and is really only doing it for the sake of form.

Gig Bay: The scene is one of confusion. Two rebels (UPP: 698871) are throwing gear into the gig, while another — apparently a leader (UPP: 797686) — stands nearby pointing and giving orders with a snub SMG in her hand. Three soft-suited prisoners are close by, covered by a fourth

rebel (UPP: 978541) with an SMG ready. As the marines burst in, the leader sprints for the gig, spraying her SMG at the boarding party. The two on the ramp open fire with handguns. The last rebel opens fire on the hostages, downing two before the last jumps him, grabbing his weapon and trying to wrestle it away.

Once the firefight is over, the surviving hostage identifies himself as Rane Haraani, half-brother to the Marquis. He regains his composure well, and graciously thanks his rescuers for their timely intervention. They may have many questions for him, and he says he will answer as many as he can, but certainly could sit down and use a drink first — it’s been a rather bad day!

As a nasty surprise for the characters, there are also two explosive charges concealed within walls and backed by armor plate to both tempt them and make sure that they do not damage vital systems. These will be used as “landmines” to take a couple of the marines down and even the fight a little. It is not recommended that the referee blow up any of the PCs in this scene, however tempting this may be.

There is plenty of evidence to point at the rebel leader as being Captain Swing. Images of her have been recorded on previously boarded ships that managed to transmit their data files before the pirates gained control. The *Mordent’s* crew all obeyed her orders, her voiceprint activates certain secure systems — and both hostages can identify her.

But that is not the whole story. . .

Rane Haraani/Captain Swing

Age: 38

UPP: 6B988A-5

Skills: Acting-1, Brawling-1, Carousing-2, Computer-5, Equestrian-1, Grav Craft-1, Language (Vilani)-2, Leadership-1, Perception-1, Pilot-1, Short Blade-1, Recon-1, Streetwise-4, Survival-1, Tactics-2.

After university, Rane served a few years in the Navy, and eventually resigned his commission after a dispute with his CO. On his way home his ship was attacked and he was kidnapped. He had been missing for twelve years. . . That is the story, according to him, and it is partially true. In fact, he resigned to take another job, still in service for the Imperium but requiring that he be out of the public eye. He hints that he has been in the BIA or Naval Intelligence — or even another more clandestine Imperial organization. He shrugs when asked to confirm this and replies, “You know I can’t. Not even to you, sir. Perhaps if you can offer me the right authentication phrase?”

The characters can’t, because there isn’t one. Rane goes on to say that he was traveling on the *Stellar Velvet* undercover when she was pirated. An inside job, he thinks, but his investigation was

curtailed by... well, they know. Rane finishes by saying that he owes them a favor. If the characters would convey him to the planet, his brother the Marquis would be very pleased to see him. Technically, Rane has no noble status, being an illegitimate child, but he does have a blood tie.

Rane really did quit his Navy post, and really was kidnapped. But by then he had developed a hatred for all things Sylean, and managed to persuade his captors to let him join them. Now he is part of the Captain Swing "character" created by the KFF. He is the inside man, and also the brains behind many of their operations. He knows that the authorities are closing in, and needs to find a new way to keep the hated Imperials out of Khiidkar. His brother, in embracing the Imperium, has earned his undying hatred.

Rane is tall, dark-haired with a neat black goatee beard. He wears a simple tunic and trousers. He has a swordsman's calluses and a dueling scar on his left cheek.

Sahl Comannii, Rebel Leader

UPP: 8CA980

Skills: Environment Combat-2, Fast Talk-2, Leadership-2, Long Blade-2, SMG-4, Tactics-2.

Possession: Cutlass, heavy vac suit, SMG.

There is evidence that Sahl Comannii, the pirate captain, is Captain Swing. Fragments of data logs from pirated ships show her commanding the crew of *Mordent*. One very clear fragment shows her ordering a merchant crew spaced. Starport cameras have her image, and she is listed in Naval Intelligence files as a washout Naval Academy candidate who later vanished.

But there is more to Captain Swing than Sahl Comannii. Named for a leader of the "machine-breakers" during the Industrial Revolution on Terra, Captain Swing is a semi-fictional character, whose activities inspire the anti-Imperial KFF. Swing is a conglomerate entity whose main parts are Sahl Comannii and Rane Haraani. They operate as a team, with the intent of causing commercial damage — the best way to get a Khiidkarian's attention. Usually Haraani travels on liners and merchant ships as an "inside man," using a false identity. After gaining access to the ship's security systems and computer, he sets up an easy target for the "pirate" vessel. The victimized ship is usually destroyed to hinder investigation.

Commander Lord Ander Lavalii, Baron Khivn

Age: 30

UPP: 96846C-4

Skills: Carousing-3, Broker-1, Computer-2, Environment Combat-1, Equestrian-1, Fencing-1, First Aid-1, Gambling-1, Grav Craft-1, Ground Craft-1, Language (Vilani)-3, Melee Combat-1, Pilot-1, Recon-1, Sensors-2, Vac Suit-1.

Commander of the Fleet Destroyer *Imperial Retribution*, Ander is a real "space hero," athletic and handsome. He won the barony of Khivn, a region on Khiidkar, for his actions at the Battle of Marker Rock. In truth, he is an incompetent who simply got blindingly lucky, and he knows it. He lives the heroic role to the hilt, loving it but dreading the day he is forced to make another major command decision. The chance comments of others sometimes touch a nerve, and he reacts with hate, issuing vitriolic challenges. Since Ander always tries to kill his opponent, he has a fearsome reputation.

HEMCOMING

The characters' ship is given an honor-escort into the Highport, and the Marquis' own shuttle is sent to meet them and convey them to the palace, which is situated close to the Downport. The Marquis would be pleased to see his loyal vassals at any time, but they have defeated Captain Swing and brought his lost brother home as well! The Marquis is delighted and announces a reception that is to begin almost immediately after the characters arrive.

The characters will be expected to follow local custom and leave their firearms aboard the Highport. Even a body pistol would be a gross insult to the Marquis, who guarantees their safety. The characters are, as they may have to be reminded, his loyal vassals. He trusts them as they trust him.

The reception is a grand affair with more than a hundred guests. Many are gentles of good local family, while others are offworld dignitaries. The ballroom is a glitter of uniforms and sword hilts, while bright dresses and the glint of medals highlight the tastefully subdued decoration of the Grand Hall.

The Reception

In honor of their victory, a herald announces each character by name, title, and deed to loud cheers. As the characters enter the throng, they meet Lord Ander Lavalii, who is talking with Lady Teresa Vereen and Amade Vereen, telling of how he escaped his captors, defeated Captain Swing (with a little help from some marines who happened by) and rescued Rane from certain death...

Ander Lavalii is boasting, trying to impress the ladies. If the characters wish to put him in his place, it is necessary to defeat him in an opposed Carousing roll. If the characters manage to gain the ladies' attention, Ander will bluster, threatening a duel. He is in fact quite willing to fight over this, and suggests the following morning in the gardens. If the characters do not back down he will begin to make arrangements for the fight. However, the Marquis will hear of this and forbid his guests to fight one another, insisting that they

swear to put their quarrel aside. Ander will agree, but there will be considerable bad feeling between him and the characters, and he does not forget his grudge quickly.

To get to the dance floor — where they will have no shortage of dance partners — the characters will have to pass Sir Mikal Raada and Dame Karan Borphai. Sir Mikal will try to get the characters to sign up for a new business venture he is proposing — a complex profit-sharing venture dealing with investment in the industries of frontier planets. Dame Karan wants to size up appropriate characters as potential husbands.

Over at the bar is Major Grandt, discussing military matters with the Armistaads. They are chewing over the potential implications of the demise of Captain Swing for the anti-Imperial movement and the KFF. They will welcome expert opinions on the matter, but will not tolerate even well-connected fools.

The only spare space available is next to Minister Irene Kahlavnn and her husband, who welcome the characters in friendly fashion and immediately try to start a poker game.

Getting drunk and becoming a nuisance is not “good form,” and will be frowned upon. Drunken characters will not be thrown out as such, but will be quietly directed to side rooms by polite but determined attendants, who offer quiet incentives like rare vintages or expensive whiskies to get the character out of the way.

After a time, the Marquis enters. He wears the dress uniform of a Navy Commodore, his old rank in the Imperial Navy, confirmed upon retirement. Beside him stands a very beautiful young woman with long black hair. (The same woman in the picture found on the *Mordent*.) This is the Marquis’ daughter, Lady Marai.

The Marquis’ speech is short, and to the effect that he would knight the entire crew of *Talaton Principle* on the spot if he could, but that is the Emperor’s prerogative. Likewise, he cannot award promotions nor medals without the sanction of the characters’ commanding officers. But he can offer one man’s deepest thanks, and add that the characters may retire here on a generous pension if they ever choose to do so, or that they might consider leaving Imperial service and join his house forces. The offer will stand for as long as they live. For now, though, they have his thanks, his favor, and the promise that he will recommend them for a suitable reward to the proper authorities.

Turning to Count Julian, the Marquis draws his own sword, a decorative and very sharp Naval-Issue Flag Officer’s dress cutlass.

“Take my sword for your own. It is a mere token, but I trust it will serve you well,” he says formally. “Thank you for bringing my brother home.”

The hall goes suddenly silent at this. Rane was

never acknowledged by his father, although his parentage was no secret. The Marquis has vastly complicated the legal succession in a single sentence. But it is obvious that neither man cares. Rane is smiling broadly as his brother abandons formality and embraces him.

Then the party begins. The characters are someone to be seen with, and they are constantly being introduced to some new dignitary or another. Amid the whirl of social graces, Count Julian suddenly comes face to face with Lady Marai. There is a very definite attraction between them, throwing both momentarily off balance.

The referee is encouraged to stage additional encounters rather than just conducting the presentations. Everybody should feel the ambiance of a noble function, as well as having opportunities for role-playing. The whole event should resemble a Victorian ball, with swords and uniforms galore. Remember that even though nobles in Milieu 0 are “doers,” much of their work is done with words. Use Carousing and Diplomacy skills to interact on the right level, and the appropriate Performance skills to appreciate the statuary, comment upon the choice of orchestral pieces, dance to the music, etc. Culture is part of being a noble, and anyone without at least some appreciation of the final things will be thought of as a boor.

Sir Donova should also be given a chance to meet Marai at the ball. She will circulate the premise, spreading charm and friendly words wherever she goes, and remain just out of reach for much of the time.

The party will go on until the early hours of the morning, at which time the Marquis will retire. He will extend a personal invite to the characters to come with him and his brother to the Reserve, his private hunting lodge, for a month-long holiday in their honor. The characters cannot refuse — he is their liege lord. He promises to send messages to the appropriate parties so no one gets upset about this little trip. Ander Lavalii is also included in the invitation.

The Marquis Commodore Jole Haraani, FN (Retd)

Age: 46

UPP: 688ABD-4

Skills: Administration-3, Art-1, Astrogation-2, Broker-3, Carousing-3, Communications-1, Computer-2, Diplomacy-5, Equestrian-4, Fencing-2, Grav Craft-1, Leadership-2, Melee Combat-4, Pilot-2, Pistol-1, Recon-1, Sensors-3.

Marquis Haraani of Khiidkar is staunchly pro-Cleon. As a naval officer in the Imperial Navy and later as a politician, the Marquis supported the Zhunastu bid for power, and was rewarded generously. The Marquis is head of Khiidkarcorp, and runs the business interests well, though he longs for his younger days when he was adventuring in

the Navy, during which time he was placed in mortal danger on a daily basis, if his tall tales are to be believed. He certainly has many scars and is still an active huntsman.

The Marquis respects sound good sense — but he admires courage more.

Lady Marai Haraani

Age: 29

UPP: 4AACAD-8

Skills: Carousing-2, Computer-3, Dancing-2, Equestrian-1, Fencing-1, Grav Craft-1, Jack-of-All-Trades-1, Law-2, Music-1, Psychology-1.

An honors graduate at the University Of Sylea, Marai is her father's only child and the legal heir to all his holdings. She has served as his assistant for several years, and is well prepared to take over upon his death; she already runs several subsidiary operations in her own right. While she does not share her father's recklessness, she accompanies him on hunting trips, watching with a mixture of fond indulgence and real concern for his safety. Marai thinks her father takes too many risks at his age and often chides him gently about this. She knows better than to challenge him, though.

Other Notable Personalities

There are other high-status people present, but those listed here are perhaps the most prominent. The referee can provide more if necessary.

General Lew Armstaad: Commander of the ground forces defending the Downport region. He is here with his wife, Sarah, and their 18-year-old son, Dav, who just completed basic training and is dreadfully uncomfortable in his Second Lieutenant's uniform.

Minister Irene Kahlavnn: Irene is elegant, gracious, and charming. She is also very judgmental of others.

Rein Unaaldi: Local businessman and Minister Kahlavnn's partner. Short, plump, and untidy even in formal dress, Rein is a chain cigar-smoker who tries to interest all and sundry in a variety of card games. At the drop of a hat, he will have organized a game in a side room before applying his Gambling-5 skill to clean out his new "friends."

Major Karl Grandt: Grandt is a stiffly formal Imperial Marine, uncomfortable at diplomatic functions like this. He is assigned to the Marine unit at the Highport, acting as liaison to the Marquis' forces. He'd rather be in the company of soldiers.

Sir Mikal Raada: A local "corporate" noble, Mikal takes risks in business and in daily life. He has made a vast fortune for himself and for Khiidkarcorp, but it surely can't be long before he has a fall. Something of a daredevil and a rake, Mikal is nonetheless quite shrewd in his business deal-

ings.

Dame Karan Borphai: Karan is important in Khiidkarcorp's brokerage operation, dealing mainly in high-technology and starship components. She is seeking a diplomatic marriage to improve her standing.

Teresa Vareen: Both she and her 20-year-old daughter Amade are attractive, well-off gentlewomen, and both want to marry into the nobility. They have been rivals in the past, but often work together to improve their station. Both have had liaisons with Ander Lavalii on at least one occasion.

LODGE VACATION

The hunting lodge is actually a large modern complex of buildings, with a small grav port on the roof. Access is normally by Maglev-rail tube, as Khiidkar does not have the technology to maintain a great number of grav vehicles. The tube is a cheap alternative. There are a few Grav vehicles here, however, mainly open-top pleasure craft. The lodge is served by a village of three hundred souls about two kilometers away.

The lodge itself has a small staff of 25 servants, grooms, and technicians, including a couple of bodyguards and huntmasters. The lodge also has an extensive stable block with many excellent horses. The characters are each taken to a luxurious suite of rooms and made most comfortable.

The first evening is spent quietly enjoying the fantastic surrounding. The characters are treated to an intimate dinner with the Marquis, who chats about his adventures in the Imperial Navy. Rane eats heartily, but says little for most of the evening, except to tell a lurid tale of his escape from a lynch mob on Shakiisiir. He tells of mistaking some local custom about speaking to married women, but it's clear that he's not telling everything. The obvious inference is that he was there on a secret Imperial mission. His details are precise, because this even really happened to him, but he wasn't there for the Imperium, though. . .

Marai is present at dinner, and chats with some of the PCs. She is the Marquis' only child — his wife died years ago of a rare respiratory disease. She will someday be the characters' liege, and may have to remind them of this if they are disrespectful, but for now she can afford to be friendly. She spends quite some time renewing her acquaintance with her old friend the Count.

There will be few others present at the lodge, just the usual assortment of bodyguards and servants.

Over brandy, the Marquis suddenly smiles and says, "I think we'll go hunting tomorrow. Would you like that?" The characters are expected to voice enthusiastic approval, even when they recall or find out exactly how the Marquis likes to hunt.

The hunt will be on horseback, using lances and blades only. The quarry in this barbaric and dangerous chase is the local Great Crested Tusk-Boar, a large forest-dwelling animal with a ferocious temper and a tendency to trample or gore victims to death. It is a sign of both nobility and courage to slay a tusk-boar, an animal so vicious that it will try to tear apart a slain (or injured) hunter — despite being a herbivore — just out of spite.

The Marquis' only concessions to safety are to allow anyone who wishes so to wear diplo armor and to have a surgeon on call in the spare grav car. He himself wears only his traditional hunting costume, equivalent to cloth armor. He offers similar costumes to the characters. Marai declines to take part — she says she doesn't like to see helpless animals slaughtered, but smiles as if to imply she means the hunters. At the Marquis' insistence, she agrees to come along in a grav car to watch the new heroes make fools of themselves.

The characters should be quite safe, Marai adds wickedly, since her father has probably cleared the island of wildlife by now.

The Hunt

The following dawn, the characters assemble to be shown to their mounts. Each is issued a wicked hunting knife and a long lance of flexible tungsten-steel alloy, wrapped in leather. The characters are offered their pick of mounts from the extensive stables, and the hunt commences!

The Marquis and Rane ride out together at an excited canter, with the characters streaming along in their wake. The Marquis leads the characters cross-country, riding hard for the sheer joy of it, leaping streams and descending rough slopes, weaving in and out of the trees as if daring the characters to follow. Hovering above in the grav car, Marai watches with fond amusement as her father acts like a teenager.

Suddenly the Marquis reins in, waits for the others to catch up, then points to a large boulder some distance away across a wide bowl in the ground, dotted with trees and thick undergrowth.

"Fifty thousand credits and a bottle of brandy for the first to reach that boulder," he challenges. After a few seconds, he hurls his mount downhill at a breakneck pace. The characters are of course expected to join this madcap race, as Rane whoops in delight and plunges after his brother.

Social custom dictates they try their best, even the poor riders. All characters should attempt a Formidable Equestrian roll. Whoever makes the roll by the greatest margin reaches the boulder first. Failure results in a fall. Those who fail spectacularly may be dumped by their mount into a bog or stream, or may be last seen galloping away along the skyline yelling for help. . .

Note that Rane does nothing suspicious here,

and it is the Marquis who proposes the race. Some or even all of the characters will reach the boulder quickly. The Marquis then calls out that the hunt is to commence, and canters quickly off.

The party should at least try to find a boar. It is normal on a hunt of this type to split up and search, although riding in pairs is certainly acceptable. The Marquis, of course, believes that REAL men hunt alone. . .

For those who are merely riding around looking for a quiet spot to open the bottle of Chianti they filched this morning, they must make an Average Perception roll to avoid contact with the local wildlife.

To find the trail of the boar (for every ten minutes of active search):

(Int + Recon) < Average (2D)

or (Int + Survival) < Formidable (3D)

Die Modifiers: Moving slowly, -2; full gallop +2; lost in forest, -4.

Spectacular Success: Ahead stands a tusk-boar. You have a round of surprise.

Spectacular Failure: Lost in forest!

To follow/pursue a boar, roll 2D.

2: Not Good. The stupid animal ran itself over a small cliff and into a river. Make an Average Equestrian roll to avoid the same. The character must begin searching again.

3-5: This area is covered with fallen trees and trampled vegetation, a sure sign of rutting tusk-boars. Make an Average: Equestrian to negotiate the area safely, or fall off and take 1D wounds.

6-7: Thick Brush. Average Survival roll is required to recognize the dreaded redthorn ivy. Failure means that the character pushed through and was punctured by the lightly-poisonous thorns. Take 1D damage to Endurance. A simple antitoxin will counteract the poison, but there will be inflammation and soreness for a few days.

8-10: The character finds a trail recently crossed by horsemen. An Average Recon will allow the character to determine which trail is the freshest.

11-12: Marai's Grav car passes low overhead and startles the character's horse. Make a Difficult Equestrian to remain in control.

As the characters hunt, Rane rides up to the largest group. He says that he's lost the Marquis after seeing him veer around a thick stand of Oslin elms. Will the characters help him search?

Any character succeeding an Average Perception task can see the Marquis after a couple of minutes searching. What looks like a small earthquake hurtles through the undergrowth half a kilometer away, with the Marquis in pursuit. Apparently the Marquis flushed a tusk-boar, and is pursuing it. As the characters watch, the boar turns. The Marquis rises in his stirrups and thrusts his

lance at the boar, wounding it badly but losing the lance in the process. His mount dances past the slashing tusks, then the Marquis is off, pursued by the boar. At this distance it is impossible to tell, but he seems to be laughing. Rane wheels his horse to intercept the boar and gallops off. An Average Navigation roll is needed to head in the right direction among the trees, and an Equestrian roll is made in the same manner as the downhill race above, to determine who gets to the Marquis and the boar first. Count Julian should be nearby if possible, perhaps riding to the Marquis' assistance.

While the hunt is not intended to be lethal, it can be, and getting a little roughed up is considered part of the experience. Wimps who stay clean are subjected to ribaldry and jest all the way home. There are plenty of opportunities for comedy and mayhem with the characters galloping about the wilderness, some of them barely in control of their mounts. Characters who fail riding rolls should meet with some minor embarrassment, such as losing control of their mount and galloping off into the distance yelling for help as their comrades look on in laughter, or trying to take a shortcut between two large trees and riding right into a low branch — taking a die of damage and being deposited on the ground. This should be seen by the players and their characters as anarchic fun — a bit of chaos away from the formality of court duty.

The Grav is Falling

Marai's grav car fails at this point. It suddenly dips and then dives sharply into the ground closest to where the Sir Donova and anyone with him are. Marai is stunned, although not very badly injured. The car's communicator is smashed, and all of the lifter plates are buckled beyond repair. The car will never lift again. The car suffered a complete loss of control as its computer system shut down. This is not immediately apparent, and Marai is alive only because of her preference for controlling her vehicle manually — she was able to fight it all the way down.

As the nearest characters move towards her crashed vehicle, she begins to struggle feebly against the seat straps. Her grav car came down close to a stand of trees, from which noses a young tusk boar. Scenting the hated humans, the boar begins to trot towards the wreck as Marai tries to free herself.

The referee should make sure that the characters are well split up and thoroughly confused by the time of the grav car crash. The nearest character to the crash site must be Sir Donova. The characters should stage a rescue — perhaps distracting or slaying the boar, perhaps simply galloping up to free Marai and swing her into the saddle.

This should be a dangerous situation involving plenty of risk and probably some injury, but neither Marai nor her rescuer should be killed.

There should be no reason to suspect that Rane sabotaged the grav car's computer to fail. It would require a long investigation to determine that anything but a rare glitch had occurred, let alone who had hacked the computer. Rane never intended Marai to be killed — he wants her for himself. He engineered the situation in hope of causing a dissension between the hunting party as part of his plan to gain power on Khiidkar.

Marai will rapidly become infatuated with her heroic rescuer, which should drive a wedge between him and the Count.

Somewhat shaken, the characters will most likely make their way back to the lodge with a new tale to tell.

The Great Tusk-Boars

Weight: 400
Hits: 6D/3D (23/11)
Damage: 3D
Armor: 1

A character who is "downed" and cannot get away from a boar can be trampled, gored and chewed upon for 6D rather than 3D damage. Wriggling out of this requires a Formidable Brawling or Difficult Athletics roll. If successful, the character takes only the normal 3D damage.

The boar that is pursuing the Marquis has already taken 9 points from the lance. The young boar threatening Marai weighs 300kg, has hits of 5D/3D (15/11), no armor, but otherwise keeps the same stats.

It is recommended that the extra 'trample' damage delivered by the boars be reserved for characters who have brought diplo armor — just to give the referee a chance to make them sweat. A character who would be instantly killed by this damage should simply be gored in passing for 3D damage. That's bad enough for most!

Lances

Treat these hunting lances as heavy spears, doing 2D wounds, or 1D if thrown.

A lance will not break, but it might be dropped upon impact.

Its normal attack mode is as a spear from horseback, rather than in a couched, medieval fashion. Use Melee Combat skill. If the lance is couched for shock effect, the rider must make a Difficult Equestrian check to hit rather than Melee Combat. The weight of a charging horse adds +1D to damage, but the rider will have to drop the lance or be levered out of the saddle. Attacking in this way also requires that the character ride straight at the target. If it survives, it can make an attack on the horse as it passes.

Back At The Lodge

The characters retire to the lodge, probably nursing a few bruises and cuts. The Marquis is in good spirits despite his daughter's close escape. He favors those who assisted his daughter and himself, treating them like old comrades. This goes on for a few days in a long party. During this time, the characters can impress their hosts through display of culture and refinement (which will go down better with Marai) or derring-do and bravado that the Marquis will find amusing — he was that sort of young and reckless man once. Now he's older and still reckless, but can appreciate the finer things as well. Characters who discuss literature and poetry, who demonstrate their proficiency at musical instruments and familiarity with the arts, will garner more favor than those who demonstrate skill at arms, but the actions of all characters will be weighed by the Marquis.

The Marquis holds a private conference with Count Julian at one point, discussing the state of his domain and how very pleased he is with the Count. He asks how the Count feels about his daughter. He already knows, but wants to hear the answer. He then formally proposes that the Count wed his daughter at the end of the week (!), cementing an alliance between both houses and ensuring that the succession is in no doubt whatsoever.

The Marquis also holds an interview with each of the others, asking probing questions about their duties and their attitudes. He is pleased with all of them for their actions before they got here, and perhaps more so now that they've shown true heroism in the hunt. The Marquis makes no secret that he is trying to decide what reward to recommend them for, and adds that his favor is a powerful thing, but he demands total loyalty from his subjects, especially if they be highly placed. He wants to know that his daughter will have loyal people surrounding her when she accedes to his position.

Ander Lavalii goes to the Port City for a few days, saying that he has private business to attend to.

Meanwhile, Rane is carousing with the characters, especially the lower-ranked ones who may be feeling a bit left out. He swaps tall tales, especially about his amorous adventures in the boudoirs of the Core worlds, drinks heavily, and begins to bond with his new companions.

Marai spends as much time as she can with her new hero.

The jealousy between Count Julian and Sir Donovan has time to blossom here, and Rane begins to subtly stir such emotion in the two characters. Overall, though, this scene is a breather for the characters, a chance to use social skills during role-playing, and develop contacts for the future.

This scene can be as long or as short as the referee chooses. The interviews with the Marquis can be played out or glossed over at the referee's option.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT

The Marquis makes the announcement quite intimately, at dinner one night. He simply states that he has discussed the matter with the people involved, and has decided that his house will be strengthened by a marriage between Count Julian and his daughter, future Marquise Khiidkar. The Count should be delighted. Marai looks visibly confused — she is fond of the Count, but at present is very taken with her new hero. Besides, even though she agreed when her father proposed the idea, she can't help feeling a bit rushed and almost panicky.

Sir Donovan will probably be displeased, although he should be happy for his friend. The dinner breaks up in rather subdued mood, and the characters all wander away with their thoughts.

At this juncture, Rane approaches Sir Donovan and perhaps one of the other characters. He asks to speak privately with them. Once in private, he tells them something he has found out. While talking to the techs who are working on the damaged grav car and generally poking around (he shrugs and simply explains it away as an "old habit") he has come upon some disturbing news. The grav car failure was not an accident. Someone had rigged it to crash, although apparently not very well, he adds. Further, the vehicle garage has been compromised.

That is very worrying, since there are a limited number of people with access. The doors open automatically for anyone whose comm broadcasts the "authorized resident" or "noble guest" codes. The only people this applies to are the Marquis, Marai, the Count, Sir Donovan and Vargner, plus Rane himself, of course. Whoever entered the bay was able to partially wipe the data recorder, erasing traces of their entry. Rane was able to reconstruct some of the data to surmise that the night before the hunt, someone with authorization entered the grav car bay, remained there for half an hour, then left again after erasing traces of his or her passage. Now, either someone used very sophisticated techniques to gain entry, or one of the authorized personnel tried to engineer the crash for some reason.

Rane adds that he used the Marquis' name to lean on the Downport security forces. They were able to turn up little information, but have discovered that a number of known thugs-for-hire left the Downport region a while ago. He guesses they'll try to sneak in on the automated supply transport which arrives at 1 a.m. each morning. They'll not be able to bring in guns, because the whole island

is ringed with sensors, but they'll be dangerous enough. Rane proposes an ambush near the Maglev-tube terminal, take one of the thugs alive, and find out what's really going on. He suggests they keep the whole thing quiet to avoid tipping anyone off, since there is no way to be sure that the bodyguards are not involved.

Sure enough, dead on time the supply bullet arrives, and seven dark-clad men scramble out. A surviving, wounded thug will talk. He says that he was paid in Imperial Credits at O'Bryan's bar. He doesn't know the courier at all, but thinks he had some sort of uniform under his coat. The credit plaques bore the Planetary Seal of Gaadvlu. The only source of such currency is the Count's ship. A search by the Highport authorities will verify that a part of the ship's Contingency Fund is missing from the safe. This amounts to several million credits.

The Count is arrested and placed under house arrest in his suite.

The arrest should be a simple matter, too. It should be done as a polite request to surrender himself while "this sorry matter" is sorted out rather than a criminal confrontation. Most likely, Rane will advise the Count to surrender before he is arrested, since he is obviously innocent. It is, of course, the duty of those nobles present to request the Count's surrender, to inform the Marquis etc.

The Count is honor-bound to surrender himself at his liege's request. If he runs, the Marquis will send his men after the Count, and will demand that his companions pursue him. The consequences for the Count's status are devastating, and will "prove" his guilt.

Refusing to surrender to his liege brands the Count traitor, and serves Rane's ends as well. Even proving that he was innocent will not redeem Count Julian of his disobeying a direct command from his liege lord.

The Rent-a-thugs

UPP: 888754

Skills: Brawling-2, Melee Combat-2, Short Blade-2.

Possessions: Cloth armor, short blade (2D) or club/truncheon (2D).

The Truth

The KFF has a number of agents within the armed forces. One such is Ensign Vel Parii, a crewmember of *Talaton Principle*. Parii is not a fanatic, but merely a weak man from whom the KFF managed to obtain damning information. They have never used this information before, but having a man aboard the Count's ship has suddenly become most useful.

Rane is a computer genius. He hacked the computer of the *Talaton Principle* by tightbeam communicator. After that it was a simple matter

through a mixture of bribery and blackmail to get Parii to open the safe with the appropriate codes, then leave the ship — Rane thoughtfully provided authorization — and come to O'Bryan's bar on the Downport.

Rane has made it look like the signal was sent by Count Julian, included in it his authentication code. He has also fed a virus into the systems aboard the ship which will seal the airlocks and disable the communication systems. It will take a couple of hours to remedy this.

Ensign Parii travelled with a couple of marines who were on shore leave, but split up with them at the Downport (their leave is legitimate). Parii handed over half the money to the thugs and began to drink himself into a stupor as he realized what he'd done. Rane made sure there was a clear trail leading back to the Count, then arranged for the ambush of the rent-a-thugs, which should be a confused affair of swords in the darkness. Rane surreptitiously makes sure that one of his opponents is disabled but not killed, so he can extract the damning information — or better, get the PCs to do it.

THE INVESTIGATION

The characters will probably go to the Downport to follow up what the thugs said. O'Bryan's bar is easy to find. Before they can enter, the characters hear violent noises coming from an alley nearby. They investigate just in time to find a familiar-looking man in a dark overcoat being kicked to death by two thugs who flee upon seeing witnesses. The man in the overcoat turns out to be Ensign Parii. He has been robbed of the remaining solars. He is very badly hurt and barely conscious. He tells how someone found out his secret and made him take the money — the codes were sent to him by a man he spoke to by comm (voice only). He was ordered to take the money to this bar and give it to O'Bryan.

What the characters do with this traitor is their own business, but they are subject to local law. Inside the bar, O'Bryan is clearing up. Once his two bouncers are dealt with, the characters can have a little chat with him.

Under suitable duress, O'Bryan confesses that his instructions came from Captain Swing himself. O'Bryan is in mortal terror of Captain Swing, and will have to be thoroughly coerced. He keeps telling the PCs how Captain Swing will get them for this. If they claim he's dead, O'Bryan will laugh in their faces.

"Why, he was here just two days ago, scar and all. Told me what to do in person. You'd better lay off, or the Captain'll see to you!" He goes on like this until brought back to the subject by force.

O'Bryan can describe the man he knows as Captain Swing perfectly. Small dueling scar on the

left cheek, tall, black goatee beard. . . Rane Haraani!

Placing a call to the lodge, the characters will find themselves speaking to a sleepy comms-tech, who is very reluctant to disturb her Lord. When she does try, she can't find him. She sets others to search and asks that the characters come back quickly.

Asking for support from the Downport gets a disappointing response. There's security alert on after bomb threats have been received. The KFF have claimed responsibility. Intruders have been reported, and a launch has just taken off without permission as well, and the security staff are looking for a connection. The port commander will organize assistance as quickly as possible, but the chaos has a lot of manpower tied up. The characters can expect assistance in twenty minutes — but they can be on the island in ten.

As the characters make their way back, the technician gradually feeds them more information as she gets it. Information should be relayed in the following order, every few game minutes:

1. There's a disturbance at the village.
2. There's a lot of people running about the lodge — something's going on.
3. There was an explosion in the village. Everyone's gone to help. Still can't find the Marquis.
4. The grav car bay has been damaged somehow. Someone said there was a fire in the lodge.
5. The tech thought she heard gunshots in the lodge.
6. As the characters approach the island on the maglev bullet, the tech starts a new transmission, but only gets out "The Marquis..." before the commlink goes dead.

Bouncers/Thugs

UPP: A8A554

Skills: Brawling-4, Melee Combat-2.

O'Bryan

UPP: 465975

Skills: Brawling-1, FastTalk-1.

Meanwhile. . .

Count Julian has spent a few hours confined to his rooms, fretting and trying to piece together what has happened. A few minutes ago, he heard what sounded like gunshots from somewhere in the lodge. Whether Count Julian decides his duty is to investigate (in which case the Marquis' security operative on guard outside will nod understandingly and say, "I'll have to insist upon accompanying you, sir. Don't try to flee or I'll stop you cold." He will allow Count Julian to move around the lodge freely), or to obey orders and stay in his chamber, he will quickly be summoned to the Marquis' side.

The old man is being attended by his surgeon, and is badly wounded. He has been shot twice, low in the chest. Ignoring the frantic surgeon's injunction to keep still and be quiet, the Marquis grasps Julian's hand and says, perfectly evenly, "Rane asked to see me privately. He'd had a coded signal from the Downport. He's found a pistol from somewhere. I saw him draw it, threw my wine glass in his face and jumped him. Old reflex, I suppose. Maybe it saved my life."

The Marquis goes silent for a moment, then continues breathlessly, "Maybe not. I tried to stop him, but I failed. He shot me down, killed two of my men who tried to protect me, then shot me again. Father was right to disown him. Worthless fool can't even shoot straight.

"Julian, he's taken Marai. The barracks are destroyed, the grav cars are disabled. He's heading east. Here's the code to the gun locker. Not much, but it's all there is. Go after him, Julian. Go after him and kill him for me.

"Count Julian, save my daughter. Please."

The locker contains two Magnum revolvers — hunting pistols with long-range scopes, plus a pair of hunting rifles. Grooms are readying the only transport available: horses.

With these few resources, the companions should set off cross-country in pursuit of Rane and Marai, who may by now be their liege.

The confusion at the Downport is KFF's doing, intended to aid Rane's escape with Marai. (it might also be useful to separate Rane from the group if they insist he accompany them to the Downport). Rane's plan was to murder the Marquis, discredit the Count and make the blame fall on him, and thus inherit rulership of Khiidkar. The plan has begun to go awry, but Rane believes he can still succeed. If not, he can use Marai as a hostage. If the characters can reach the launch in time to prevent him getting her aboard, they can thwart him. If not, he will make good his escape.

As an option, Rane also stole the ammunition from the gun locker at the lodge, forcing the characters to rely upon blades.

THE PURSUIT

The characters will be able to determine where Rane is heading, since a large metallic object has just showed up on scanners. Its signature conforms to that of a launch which left the Downport a few minutes ago, travelled underwater to the island to avoid detection and beached itself. The characters should be able to track Rane by using the Highport sensors or those of their own ship if it is back on line.

The characters will probably give chase across the island, armed with swords and lances. Using a

Marai across the sand towards it. There are five rebels aboard the craft, all armed with swords and handguns only (anything bigger would have been even more difficult to smuggle in).

The characters will no doubt race to the rescue, blades flashing in the dawnlight. A bitter fight ensues, until eventually the pirates are defeated. Then comes the final dilemma: Rane issues formal challenge — a death-duel with swords. If he wins, the characters will swear to let him leave in the launch, with Marai as a hostage (she'll be freed later). If they don't agree, he'll stab Marai and take his chances.

There is no time to bring in help from elsewhere. The characters cannot allow Rane to escape with Marai. If they are foolish enough to agree to this, then he will demand their ship in return for her life once he reaches the Highport. He'll then gather a new crew of cutthroats and begin his depredations again. The characters will have lost decisively.

The Count could legally refuse and try some other solution. Rane is not a "true" noble, but

honor dictates differently. So, on the sand in the misty dawn, Rane and the Count face off for their duel.

The Rebels

UPP: 989871.

Skills: Long Blade-1, Pistol-1.

Possessions: Autopistol, cloth armor, sword.

A HAPPY ENDING?

The Marquis survives his injuries. He is delighted to have his daughter back. A week later she is married to Count Julian (preferably) or Sir Donava, depending upon which survives. All the characters who participated in the rescue are listed for presentation to the Emperor at the next opportunity. They will be granted lands, medals and possibly promotions, and they'll always have a home here. The Marquis declares that as soon as he's fit, there will be another hunt in the characters' honor!



9: REVERSE ASSIMILATION

This adventure concerns a wandering noble and his entourage. They have been asked to tour a planet at the fringes of the Imperium and report their findings to the Imperial Ministry of Information. They are told that the planet is the subject of an experimental assimilation method which is hoped to be more cost-effective than the military alternatives. This new assimilation process is supposed to be peaceful, relying on Imperial immigrants to provide a good example of what Imperialization can bring to a planet.

What the noble and his friends find occurring on the planet is, of course, quite different. The implications and results of that bring about some tough choices and serious consequences for the characters. . .

Instead of a step-by-step adventure in "nugget" format, this adventure consists mostly of background material to allow flexibility for both the players and referees in pursuing their own vision of adventure within the presented framework. In addition, referees can draw upon the rich background provided here to create further adventures without having to invent and flesh out a new world. Likewise, players can create new characters with personal histories drawn from this material for the referee's later adventures. In short, the bulk of this material is intended as a springboard from which participants can propel themselves toward deeper role-playing experiences than ever before. Enjoy.

STANDARDS AND ASSUMPTIONS

The following standards and assumptions are used in the text of this adventure. The referee may alter them by using a different time frame, or by using a world in another Traveller subsector in order to integrate the adventure into an existing Traveller campaign.

Dates

All dates herein correspond to the Imperial calendar. The date for this adventure is 97; that is, sometime in the 97th year following the founding of the Third Imperium. The referee should indicate the exact date based on the local situation. Days within the year are numbered consecutively from 1 to 365. Thus, the last day of the year is 365-97. Once the adventure begins, the referee should allow time to flow normally.

The Setting

This adventure takes place on Kegir Impuu (3106/Massilia/E110977-6), which is well outside of the rimward Imperial border. Kegir Impuu is a small world, measuring about one thousand miles in diameter, with a trace atmosphere and water covering only about ten percent of the planet's surface.

Kegir Impuu has a population of more than three billion sentients, and is listed as a balkanized

world with an average law level of 7. There are, in fact, three sovereign states on the planet. One consists of Imperial immigrants, and has a population of about 25 million. The second comprises about 400 million humans which are thought to have colonized the planet sometime during the First Imperium. Nearly all of the humans in both of these states inhabit the huge crevasses lining the world's surface, taking advantage of the greater atmospheric pressure in those lowlands. The third and final society consists of about three billion barely-sentient aliens. Known as Verishnalo in the Vilani language, they live in the broad, flat plains and rolling hills that make up the greatest portion of the planetary surface. These aliens are presumed to be indigenous to the planet, and are well suited to the environmental conditions extant. However, their marginal sentience precludes them from interacting meaningfully with the human settlers.

Characters

This adventure is intended for use with a band of travellers consisting of a noble and his companions, temporarily under orders from the Imperial Ministry of Information to determine the status of the experimental Imperialization process on Kegir Impuu. However, it can be altered to use nearly any type of adventuring group. No specific skills are called for in this adventure, although the characters may find the following skills useful: Administration, Bribery, Diplomacy, Intrusion, Leadership, Stealth, and various combat skills.

Equipment

The player-characters should be allowed an opportunity to review the planetary characteristics and to select and purchase any equipment they think may be important to their activities. This selection period should be relatively brief, as ample opportunity to shop and buy will be available during the adventure.

THE SETUP

For the last century or so, the Imperium has been expanding at a phenomenal rate. Most of this growth has come as a result of worlds freely choosing to join because of the benefits available for so doing. The remaining worlds saw them-

selves surrounded by Imperial worlds and joined voluntarily, rather than having their markets and/or suppliers closed to them. All these worlds enjoy prosperity as a part of the Imperium's free trade association. Those worlds with great need of imported goods saw it as a way to get products and raw materials far less expensively than on the tariff-laden, extra-Imperial market. Conversely, those worlds with plentiful products and raw materials available for trade realized that siding with the Imperium would open new markets for their goods. Such worlds were happy to join, and their rulers took on new noble titles. In most cases, the primary reason for the worlds that did not join wasn't necessarily because they did not wish to submit to Imperial rule. Rather, they saw nothing to be gained by joining. Nearly all of these worlds were in balance, with neither a surplus to trade nor a shortfall to fill. Perceiving no economic benefit in the association, there was no allure to Imperial noble titles and trappings for the worlds' leaders. After all, those leaders were already the most important people on their own worlds, so why add some petty title in exchange for submitting to a far-off Emperor, with no trade advantage to make that bitter pill easier to swallow?

As the Imperium's borders grew, the Emperor saw the number of worlds which were unlikely to join any time soon was also increasing. He realized that using the military to bring them into the fold would be costly — and would in fact be counter-productive from an economic standpoint. Therefore, he commissioned the Ministry of Assimilation to find ways of bringing such worlds peacefully — and cost-effectively — under the Imperial banner. The members of the Ministry of Assimilation devised methods for fulfilling the duty laid upon them by the Emperor, then set about implementing those procedures on several worlds far beyond the frontier. These worlds would be the proving grounds for the various theories. Those methods proven to be most effective would then be presented to the Emperor for approval.

Kegir Impuu is the subject of one such experiment. The process chosen here has been termed, "Reverse Assimilation." Normally, immigrants are assimilated into the society they join. Newcomers conform to the majority culture. However, in this case the Imperial immigrants to Kegir Impuu have been tasked with showing the benefits of Imperialization to the natives. It is hoped that the Kegir Impuuvians will be thereby assimilated into Imperial culture. At that point, they will naturally see joining the Imperium as a logical choice. The Emperor has asked the Ministry of Information to perform independent assessments of the many experiments in Imperialization, in addition to their usual job of gathering and relaying information to the Emperor, the Moot, the lesser nobles, and the

public as appropriate. So far, the reported progress has been encouraging, especially on worlds that are undergoing reverse assimilation, such as Kegir Impuu. Even so, frequent reports are needed in order to keep abreast of the situation. In the best cases, a relatively impartial observer should be sent, to avoid the appearance of bias — especially if a negative report from the Ministry of Information causes the Emperor to discipline the Minister of Assimilation.

The Ministry of Information, armed with the authority of the Emperor in this matter, contracts a lesser noble to do an independent study of the progress on Kegir Impuu in this scenario. The noble and his companions are to disguise themselves as common immigrants, assess the situation, and report their findings. They have four months, including travel time from the nearby Imperial outpost on Niksham Luur, to complete their task. They can pick up any necessary equipment, identification, and other necessities at the outpost. The outpost's current commander is Lilia-va Chavez. They are to report to her upon arrival, as well passing their information through her back to the Ministry of Information. Transportation on a transport ship has been arranged.

KEGIR IMPUU

The Kegir system is binary, consisting of a dim, cool dwarf star with no satellites and a bright, main-sequence star with seven satellites. Orbiting the brighter star (known as Kegir I) at about 212 million kilometers is Kegir Impuu. It is a small, nearly waterless and airless world that is nonetheless the only habitable world in the binary system. The rest of the system includes four hotter planets (orbiting closer to Kegir I than Kegir Impuu) and two gas giants (at the outer fringes of the system). All six of these additional planets are incapable of supporting life.

Kegir Impuu's night sky lacks the benefit of a moon, but some of the system's features partially make up for that. Two of the inner planets are plainly visible with the naked eye, as is one of the gas giants. The dwarf star (known as Kegir II), however, is too far away (about 1000 astronomical units) to be recognized for what it is without the aid of a telescope. To the naked eye, it looks like any other star in the heavens. Kegir Impuu's inner space is equally unremarkable. It has a mostly-iron core surrounded by a molten mantle, topped by a thin crust. Although this gives it an earth-like geologic profile, the planet's gravity is too low (about twelve percent of earth normal, or 0.12 G) for the planet to have retained much atmosphere. It has what is termed "localized atmosphere," which settled into the great cracks and crevasses that developed as the world cooled. In addition, a thin, more generalized atmosphere is spread over the upper world.

History

Kegir Impuu has had a relatively peaceful history. The native lifeforms lived in harmony for millennia, before the first wave of immigrants came. They arrived thousands of years ago, and had a nearly disastrous effect on the world. But things stabilized, and have improved steadily since then. Now, though, with the current wave of immigrants from the Third Imperium, life on Kegir Impuu is quite a bit different. But then, no one promised that being the subject of an experiment would be painless.

Evolution

Billions of years ago (soon after accreting out in the geologic time frame), Kegir Impuu underwent a period of great volcanic activity. This released a variety of gasses, but the bulk consisted of carbon dioxide, nitrogen, and water vapor. Much of these gasses escaped the world's gravity well, but some stayed behind — most settling into the crevasses. These gasses formed the basis of what was to become Kegir Impuu's ecology. Millions of years later, Kegir Impuu developed life. For the most part of its history, Kegir Impuu was a scumworld: thick mats of bacteria were its highest form of life. Then the bacteria adapted, grew, and evolved, eventually becoming the type of single-celled plant life that used water to photosynthesize, thereby trapping solar energy. This produced oxygen as a waste product, and opened the door to the type of life familiar to humans. But first, it added oxygen to the mix of gasses that had previously settled into the crevasses. Billions of years later, those original lifeforms began to organize into multicellular organisms. One of the earliest and most successful of these was the Ata'aku, a flat, spiny creature with a hard carapace which lived in the rivers and lakes at the bottom of the crevasses. It had eight appendages, two of which were located directly above its mouth. They were used to grab food and stuff it into the creature's mouth, much as an elephant uses its trunk to the same purpose. The middle four appendages were arrayed and webbed in such a way as to provide lifting surface for the Ata'aku. Its two rear appendages were mostly useless, serving to confuse its predators as to which end to bite, as it gave the creature the appearance of having two heads, one on each end. If a predator went for the wrong end, the Ata'aku might lose its two useless appendages, but that was much better than losing the front pair (and thus the ability to catch a meal), let alone its entire head. The Ata'aku and its cousins eventually evolved into nearly all of the higher forms of animal life on the world. All of these creatures show their origins in their body shapes. Most creatures have either six or eight appendages, arranged symmetrically, with a centrally located head that groups the sensory organs

with the brain. In the plant world, the most successful species in terms of sheer numbers was a type of clingy lichen known as "berisha." Even today, the surface of the planet is covered by this plant. The lichen takes in carbon dioxide and releases oxygen during its respiratory effort. While the crevasses do boast a much greater variety of plant life, including some much larger than average lichen, these upper-surface plants are the source of most of the world's oxygen. This is mainly by virtue of the tremendously greater surface area available to them, as compared to the crevasse-dwellers.

Intelligence Rises: The Verishnalo

The dominant native lifeform on Kegir Impuu is a descendant of the ancient Ata'aku. As that venerable species evolved, the front appendages eventually formed stubby outgrowths to provide greater manipulation. As its descendants began to venture onto land, its four middle appendages became more leg-like, and the webbing was lost. The final two appendages (the "dead" ones) were lost to evolution, leaving only a pair of stubs. They call themselves Verishnalo, and they dwell in the thin atmosphere of the upper world. They are bilaterally symmetrical, with six appendages. Although capable of standing on two legs, the Verishnalo are most comfortable on four. Their two forelimbs are equipped with six digits each. Their digits have no joints or bones, and are thus able to turn and grasp in any direction. They have one eye on each hand, as well as a pair each on the left and right sides of their heads. Adult Verishnalo average three-quarters of a meter in height, one meter in width, and 1.5 meters in length. They typically weigh about 50 kilograms. Male and female Verishnalo show little variation in physical dimensions, although the males tend to have more colorful carapaces. Within the last four thousand years or so, the Verishnalo have developed increased intelligence in response to changes in their environment brought on by human colonization. Most of them now have the intelligence level of higher simians, but there are strains appearing with the equivalent of an 80 IQ on the human scale. Scientists who have studied the Verishnalo do not give them much chance of developing into a technological society, mainly due to the fact that their upper-surface dwelling provides little opportunity to discover or control fire, limiting its potential for metalworking and subsequent technological innovation.

Human Colonization

The planet was first colonized by humans in -3487. The first human colonists naturally chose to live in the crevasses, with their greater abundance of all the necessities of life, from breathable atmosphere to edible plants and animals. Initially they

lived in harmony with the Verishnalo, but as colonization continued and the population grew, the Verishnalo were eventually pushed out of their historical ecological niche and onto the upper regions. While this new environment definitely benefited the Verishnalo species in the long term by weeding out the vast numbers who could not survive in the much harsher environment, it also had the serious short-term consequence of nearly wiping them out. Naturally, the humans paid little attention to this trivia of their colonization. They built huts, planted crops, and hunted some of the larger wild beasts for food. Except for the Verishnalo, the consequences of human colonization were surprisingly minimal on the native ecology. This has continued to be true through the last three-and-a-half millennia. Within one thousand years of the first colonization, the human population stabilized, as the carrying limits of Kegir Impuu were obvious. A small planet begins with very little usable space, but the atmospheric conditions restricted growth here even more. The population stability and relative ecological harmony continued until very recently, when Imperial colonists began arriving yet again. . . this time from the Third Imperium.

The original human colony had a Universal Law Profile of AC1351A. The citizens were not allowed to carry weapons. They had severe product safety and workplace safety codes. There were strict constraints on communicating lies, but in other respects the mass communications system was remarkably free and open. All buildings were carefully rated for their safe capacity, but otherwise there were no restrictions on peaceful congregation. While military installations had checkpoints and access restrictions, the society as a whole was very free-moving. There were no personal property rights — the whole of society was considered to own everything within the world; there was no private ownership. However, personal privacy was scrupulously enforced, except in cases where the state has a compelling interest — such as in criminal investigations. The legal process was cooperative, with sentencing determined on a case-by-case basis by an ad-hoc group of jurists.

The TL5 Kegir Impuuvian society had an Economic Extension profile of 985F. The people enjoyed a great deal of wealth. Historically, no one has ever had to go without the necessities. Wealth was distributed on a very egalitarian basis. Many would consider Kegir Impuu to have had the ideal society. It was open, free, and fair. But since the Imperials have begun immigrating, the foundation of this society has been changing radically.

Imperial Immigration

In the year 28 I.E., Kegir Impuu was reconnoitered by Imperial Scouts. Observing a relatively low-tech world, with few people, few resources,

and a small carrying capacity, they passed it by. Kegir Impuu's people obviously had no need of the Imperium, and the Imperium could hardly benefit from contacting the people of Kegir Impuu at the time. But, that was to change. By 80 I.E., the Imperial expansion was slowing and pockets of resistance were developing. The Emperor decided that a new approach was needed: one which could be applied to worlds which saw little benefit in joining the Imperium, but which the Imperium wished to have in its fold. Thus, the Imperial Ministry of Assimilation was ordered to explore new alternatives. Kegir Impuu was chosen as one of the proving grounds because it offered little benefit to the Imperium. If it joined because of the experiment, that would be fine. And if it did not, there would be little loss. When it came time to force the final recalcitrant worlds into compliance, Kegir Impuuvians would be unprepared to put up any military resistance. That made it ideal for the experiment. So, the new assimilation theory was put into practice. Unfortunately, through either bureaucratic bumbling or sabotage by a rival Imperial agency, a monkey wrench was thrown into the works. Rather than sending hand-picked colonists, the first and second waves were heavily weighted with criminals from current Imperial worlds. Someone used Kegir Impuu as a dumping ground, although the leaders at the Imperial Office of Assimilation didn't know it. Within weeks of landing at the planet, crime became rampant. The Imperial colonists were raping and pillaging among not only the natives, but among their fellow colonists as well. Acting decisively, the colonist leadership clamped down. They imposed curfews and passed other highly restrictive laws. They also pulled their colonists apart from the natives, so as to avoid further sabotage of their mission (which was, after all, to show the benefits of being an Imperial citizen). Finally, the wealthy members of the colonist government imported security equipment and personnel for their own protection. Thus, the colony became a police state.

Progress Report

So far, the reverse assimilation process has not been going well. In addition to being confused by the criminal behaviors of so many of the colonists, the native humans had no use for even the better examples of Imperial ways of life. The colonist government, wishing to avoid retribution by its sponsoring agency, took measures to see that this attitude changed. The native humans had a near-perfect democracy and very good income distribution, so most of them were happy. To change this, the Imperials began playing upon the few greedy locals, offering them incentives to betray their fellows. Slowly, a government takeover began brewing.

In order to carry this off among a democratic population, those who were not enticed by personal riches or power over others had to be diverted from participating in politics. The Imperials have worked very hard to achieve that end. Initially, they imported suitable technology, including holovision broadcasting equipment, as well as a free holovision for each household. The Imperials then began re-broadcasting entertaining but nearly meaningless vid shows, movies, and sporting events that were also imported from off-world. These diversions not only kept some people from being active in their own communities, but they also conveyed the subtle message that Imperial culture is better than their own, and thus more desirable. These incentives for nonparticipation have been somewhat effective. The other side of the coin involved raising the cost of participation. They did this through legislation. For example, one measure called for a test of local historical knowledge to be passed before one could vote. This seemed reasonable to voters, especially given that it would apparently preclude the Imperial immigrants from voting. The measure passed with an overwhelming support. However, the results that the voters had expected to see did not occur, as the Imperial-designed test was written with the specific purpose of limiting the number of people who could pass. That is, the test consisted of questions about obscure facts, well outside of the oral folkloric history most people knew. Most voters failed miserably, even though they were all well-versed in the history of their world. That immediately precluded a lot of the local population from voting. At the same time, the elite Imperial colonists (who had studied up on the required knowledge) easily passed the tests. Finally, in a seemingly helpful gesture, the Imperials sponsored schools for teaching these now-necessary facts. People signed up for the classes readily enough, as they wanted to regain their franchise. However, the curriculum was given a slant that heavily favored the Imperial agenda. The history they were taught lead quite naturally to Imperial integration. Kegir Impuu's ties to the First Imperium were emphasized, as were the benefits of that long-ago association. The effects of the Long Night were also iterated, painting a picture of great loss upon the cessation of interstellar government. The final portion of the course focused on recent history, including the arrival of the new colonists. The strong implication was that the new arrivals would naturally help the Kegir Impuuvians reintegrate into Imperial society, reclaiming their long-lost ancestral prerogatives as Imperial citizens.

All of this has worked fairly well on about twenty percent of the population. They bought into the jingoistic perspective. The remaining 80 percent of the population still had to be dealt with,

and the Imperials were well prepared. This was, after all, a problem solved long ago by many cultures. Before the masses were able to regain the privilege of voting, the Imperials and their allies rammed through new legislation which opened the door for megacorps to come in and begin exploiting the world, its resources, and its people. The consequences of this were far-reaching. They were also quite effective in solving the problem of people controlling their own lives. The megacorporations soon rolled in. Free trade allowed for the import of food produced off-world and sold locally at a price far below what any local could charge. This drove people to jobs with the newly arrived megacorps, which paid them bare wages for doing boring, monotonous, and hazardous jobs. That helped to keep the people occupied, but more importantly it made them beholden to off-world companies for their livelihoods. Of course, the megacorps want docile employees, so they have sponsored a further increase in the public educational system, which they have rigged toward indoctrinating students in how to be "good citizens" in a pro-forma democratic, yet radically capitalistic society. Life is looking good for the Imperials — or, at least, for the wealthy ones.

The Resistance

Pockets of resistance still remain. Out in the far reaches of some crevasses, people stay committed to the old ways. They still grow their own food, and many refuse to participate in the new society. Some plan to mount a counterrevolution to reclaim their traditional government and ways of life. In the newly created industrial centers, protests sometimes occur. These are usually put down brutally by the police force, which is under the complete control of the megacorps and other Imperial interests.

Modern Kegir Impuu

As shown above, the present Kegir Impuuvian society bears little resemblance to that created by the first human colonists. Fundamentally, the relationship between people has shifted from one of equality to one of great disparity. Nevertheless, the physical qualities of the world remain the same, and continue to constrain and shape society.

Physical Data: Kegir Impuu (E110977-6) is 1,416 miles in diameter. It has a trace atmosphere, and 3% of its surface is covered by water. Its population of 3,582,373,572 is divided into about 500 million humans and 3 billion Verishnalo. The world is balkanized, with the humans living in the crevasses and having their own government, while the Verishnalo pursue their own primitive society on the upper surface of the world. At the equator, the surface temperature varies from 100 degrees

Fahrenheit in the summer to 70 degrees in the winter. To the north and south of the equator, average temperatures decrease, with the polar regions being constantly below freezing. In the crevasses, temperatures tend to be more moderate. At the equator, the temperature varies from 90 degrees in summer to 75 degrees in winter. Farther north and south, the decrease in temperature is less, as the greater density of the atmosphere in the crevasses retains the heat to a great extent.

Law: The newly reformed society on Kegir Impuu has a ULP of 92B9B56. Firearms are prohibited, and large blades are controlled through licensing and permit requirements. There are very little commercial regulations, consisting mostly of some loose workplace and product safety codes. There are severe restrictions on broadcast, print, and artistic media, as well as moderate rules governing all other forms of communication. All roads have checkpoints, and movement is greatly restricted. Privacy is a privilege of the wealthy. The legal procedures involve an adversarial process, with sentencing determined on a case-by-case basis.

Economics: The Economic Extension for modern Kegir Impuu reveals a world that is very inviting to businesses. The profile is 9773, translating to a great deal of capital available for investment purposes and few taxation drains on the system. However, the society is very unequal, with great masses of people living in relative squalor while a very few affluent people.

Transportation: The native humans mostly use mass transit to travel. Their trains are pulled by steam engines. The Imperials, on the other hand, most often use personal ground cars and trucks powered by internal combustion engines. However, the most common form of transportation for the locals — and an increasingly popular mode of travel for the Imperials — is the glider. This is only possible along the crevasses. Gliding right above the lip of the crevasse, it is possible to travel very quickly from point to point within and among the interlaced canyons. Since there is little reason for humans to travel beyond the canyons at this point, the gliders' limitations are not usually a factor. In addition to being an efficient means of personal transport, gliding has become an increasingly popular sport.

In the Crevasses: The tremendous crevasses of Kegir Impuu are interlaced across the surface. Home to diverse forms of life, they have also become the home of most humans living on the planet. Outside of the canyons, humans unaided by technology have no chance of long-term survival. Each crevasse has running water of some form within it. The larger crevasses have rivers, while the smaller ones have streams or creeks. Since all the crevasses interlace, the waterways do

as well. The waterways are lined with vegetation of all sorts, and are themselves home to abundant life. Fish of many sizes and types, as well as aquatic plants, thrive in the medium. Human settlements have also taken advantage of the abundant flow of water. They dot the sides of major waterways where the canyon walls allow it. Most of the settlement buildings are constructed of wattle and daub. Given the lack of precipitation and relatively small temperature variation, these settlements are adequate to the purpose in most cases. The newer, Imperial settlements are mostly constructed of the same materials. However, the wealthier Imperials have more elaborate homes, constructed from materials shipped at great expense from off-world. These homes are typically defended by metal fences, electronic checkpoints, and armed guards.

Daily Life: Life on Kegir Impuu is mostly dull at this point. Most people scurry from their homes to their jobs and back again, simply trying to avoid being noticed by the police force. Occasionally, however, brief protests will spring up. These are always put down quickly — sometimes brutally by killing all the participants, and other times by using rubber bullets, tear gas, and batons. For the workers, life is crushingly boring. Their jobs are meaningless and repetitive, most being of the assembly line variety. Working conditions are horrid, which puts the only excitement into most workers' jobs. Working sixteen hour days, six days per week gets wearing, and some cannot hold up to it. Each day several people die on the job simply because the repetitiveness coupled with their exhaustion caused them to make a fatal mistake. For those who avoid such fates in the workplace, the ride home can be much more interesting: Muggers, rapists, cutthroats and other unsavory characters prey on the workers as they travel home. The public transit system is particularly bad in this respect, but even walking a half-block from the train station exposes one to attacks by those the system has left behind. Even if one avoids being assaulted by a criminal, it is virtually assured that police harassment isn't far behind. The police are chronically underfunded, but they are allowed to keep any valuables confiscated in the course of their duties. Thus, shakedowns occur frequently, as officers prey on the underclass in order to make their own lives more comfortable. If an officer hustles, he can shake down enough workers to manage to squeak into the lowest upper-class income bracket. This is known colloquially as "hitting it." The upper classes have lives that are completely opposite of that of the common worker. Being approximately 20% of the population, these people work much shorter hours, rake in generous salaries, and live sheltered from the harsh reality that the overwhelming majority is subject to. Their homes are secure, as is their personal transport sys-

tem. In addition, the police work for the upper classes, rather than against them (as is the case for the average worker).

PERSONALITIES

This section presents several prominent personalities likely to be encountered during the PCs' adventures on Kegir Impuu. Referees should use the personal profile and background to help in bringing these characters to life during the game. In addition, the personal perspectives provided by these biographies lend the referee additional insight into life on Kegir Impuu.

Abby Ciliado

Age: 42

Height: 1.55 meters; Hair: Brown, straight, collar-length

Weight: 66 kg; Eyes: Light Blue

UPP: 7A6B84

Skills: Biology-2, Brawling-1, Chemistry-1, First Aid-1, Ground Craft-1, History-2, Leadership-6, Pistol-4, Streetwise-2, SMG-1, Tactics-4, Writing-3.

Abby grew up in the farming community of D'abo, in the southern hemisphere. She received the benefit of a good Kegir Impuuvian education, learning what she needed to know about life, history, and (most importantly) how to work the land. After school each day, she worked on the family farm, assisting in the production of Wa, a popular citrus fruit. In her teen years, she began learning the larger operations of the farm, in preparation for taking over the business from her parents some day. She excelled, quickly learning the fundamentals: accounts, harvest seasons, farming practicalities, and so on. Her personal life was equally excellent. She began dating Tod, a young man from a neighboring farm. He was a strapping lad with broad shoulders and finely chiseled features. But what she liked best about him was his dream. He had dreams of the future, of going out among the stars like the Ancient Imperials had done. Tod and Abby would sit and talk for hours of such things, not because they disliked Kegir Impuu and its peaceful lifestyle, but because they saw the wider universe as a place of wonder and adventure. Anything that could be out there, they imagined.

They continued their relationship throughout young adulthood, becoming closer as time went on. Abby finally chose to make a formal proposal to Tod, and he accepted. As was tradition, he came to live and work with her on her family's farm for the next two years, to ensure compatibility and fruitfulness. Within three months, Abby was pregnant. Shortly after a healthy baby boy was born, and their compatibility thus proven, they were wed. For the next twelve years, things just kept getting better and better for the Ciliado household.

Two more children, both daughters, were born. Abby's parents handed over the farm to Abby, but kept their traditional role as heads of the household. At the same time, the farm thrived under Abby's leadership. Through it all, Abby and Tod continued to dream of life off-planet. Then, the unthinkable happened. Aliens from the far-off reaches of the galaxy came to Kegir Impuu. Abby and Tod couldn't believe it. Here was a chance to learn what life was really like outside of their home planet. But that was not to be. Not as they expected, anyway. The early crime wave first hit the Ciliado family when Abby's parents were murdered by a burglar. Before she could recover emotionally, misfortune struck again. Abby's oldest daughter, while surveying the orchard, was viciously attacked and left for dead by some unknown off-worlder. The Imperial crackdown occurred shortly thereafter, but it was too late. The Ciliados had been devastated. Abby and Tod tried to pull their family back together in the following months, but, before the wounds could be completely healed, disaster struck. While they had concerned themselves with their internal problems, the world around them had changed. Somehow, the Imperials had taken control (while leaving a figurehead government in place), and their farm had been given to an off-world corporation for purposes of mining. They were thrown off their property, and had to watch in silent desperation as their orchards were torn up and the ground gouged in search of resources for export. The Ciliados, like most such dispossessed families, gravitated to the city. There, they found others whose lives, like their own, had been torn asunder by the invading Imperials. Most of them, in desperation, took the only means of living offered: wage slavery at megacorp-owned sweatshops. Abby and Tod joined them for a time, but they knew that route would not lead to happiness for their children. So, they fled to the outskirts of civilization, hoping to reclaim some semblance of their lost lives.

There, they found others like themselves: families that had lost everything, but who refused to submit to the rule of the off-worlders. Most just wanted to settle down and rebuild, but Abby saw that this was not to be. She knew the Imperials would just continue to encroach on them, continually driving people to the cities for exploitation. She decided to take a stand. She gathered people together into a guerrilla army capable of fighting back. Although they were unable to pull off an all-out frontal assault, they could achieve small victories. They could sabotage an oil rig here, break a strip-mine robot there. They could, and did, kill Imperials from time to time.

Today, Abby leads the largest outlaw contingent on the planet. She has proven herself to be a capable leader, with a great mind for tactics. She

knows how to use stealth, when to fight, and when to retreat. Her record and skill have won her the respect, admiration, and loyalty of her troops. She and Tod still dream of getting off world some day. But, now the dream has changed from one of adventure to one of locating Imperial sources and destroying them, so that no more come to their once-peaceful planet. For now, though, they continue to fight today's battles, hoping that at some point they will make it too expensive for the Imperials to continue robbing Kegir Impuu of its resources.

Siilen Nusiid

Age: 38

Height: 1.65 meters; Hair: Black, body wave, mid-back length

Weight: 65 kg; Eyes: Black

UPP: 899C9A

Skills: Administration-2, Art-1, Carousing-2, Computer-1, Diplomacy-4, Fast Talk-6, Forgery-1, Ground Craft-1, Intrusion-1, Leadership-2, Perception-3, Pistol-1, Stealth-1, Writing-1.

Siilen, a classic beauty if there ever was one, is very ambitious. She is not the best at anything of noble note, and realizes it, but she does know that her intelligence gives her an advantage over everyone around her. She also knows full well how to use her quick wits to talk her way into or out of just about any situation. She has never met her match in her area of expertise, and plans to use that expertise to feed her ambition.

Siilen began her working life as an administrative assistant in the Ministry of Information. She was very good at her job, and earned the notice of the Minister himself. He began delegating administrative tasks to her, and soon she earned his respect through good work and carefully feeding his ego. They had a brief, intimate relationship, but that soon ended amicably. The Minister realized (with her subtle help) that he could use her talents and dedication to reach his own goals, so he put her to work, digging out the dirt about his rivals and their Ministries. This earned him some attention from the Emperor and the enmity of his peers. More importantly for Siilen, it was good for the Minister's career, which meant it was good for hers. She was working undercover in the Ministry of Assimilation when word came down about the new assimilation experiments. She dutifully notified her true boss of this development, and he used his other agents within the Ministry of Assimilation to maneuver her into the position as the leader of the crucial Kegir Impuu project. Her job: sabotage the project, lay the blame at the feet of the Minister of Assimilation. She set about the task with her usual competence, including the masterful stroke of arranging for criminals to be shipped to Kegir Impuu as if it were an Imperial prison planet.

Siilen had plans of her own, however. She would not only sabotage the Ministry of Assimilation, but take Kegir Impuu as her own as well. She is attempting to spoil the populace on the Imperium entirely, and keep it focused inward. At the same time, she is setting up locals and fellow Imperials alike to appear as though they are responsible for the horrific conditions on the planet. She plans to reveal herself at the right time as an avenging savior, freeing the planet from the tyranny of the Imperial and local tyrants. Her off-world sources have recently indicated that the Minister of Information has grown suspicious of her. She knows that he has sent a team of investigators to Kegir Impuu, but does not know who they are or when they will arrive. She has prepared as best she can by briefing the top immigration official that the Ministry of Information has sent agents to uncover the Ministry of Assimilation's difficulties on this planet. She is also keeping her street-level hirelings on alert for suspicious immigrants. Siilen knows it is a dangerous game she is playing. She runs the risk of being tried for treason if officially caught, assassinated by locals before she can present herself as their savior, or simply killed outright by any of the officials she is double-crossing. But she is willing to play this deadly game for the rulership of a planet.

Theodor Kinnidi

Age: 48

Height: 1.8 meters; Hair: Gray, straight, collar-length

Weight: 105 kg; Eyes: Gray

UPP: 56587C

Skills: Administration-2, Art-1, Biology-1, Craftsman-1, Gambling-2, History-1, Instruction-1, Music-1, Philosophy-1, Watercraft-1.

Theodor Kinnidi grew up as a relative nonentity. Among the truly democratic peoples of Kegir Impuu, he did not shine at all. He wasn't the first-born of his family, so did not receive any administrative duties. He was not hardy enough to work the farm, so spent most of his time playing games or pursuing his passion for painting pictures of great leaders of myth and legend. He married a plain, although practical, wife. Had the status quo been maintained on Kegir Impuu, he probably would have lived the rest of his life in complete obscurity, dreaming of legendary leaders who were wholly unlike himself. But it just so happened that Theodor had been rotated to the required duty as constable shortly before the Imperials arrived. Thus, after the crime wave, he was expected to meet with the Imperials to work out a solution to the problem. He saw this as a way to become like the legendary leaders whom he adored, and came into the grasp of Siilen Nusiid. Siilen saw in Theodor one lever for the control

of Kegir Impuu. She used her powers of persuasion to win him over to her side. She showed him most emphatically how he could benefit from being loyal to her. It was effective; he was swayed. And he benefited thereby. Under Siilen's tutelage, he rose to power in the new world order. Although his wife was initially pleased by these changes in their social and political status, she soon realized how her husband was achieving these things. Embittered by Theodor's infidelity, but reluctant to commit the great sin of leaving her husband, she remains with him and hopes to somehow change him into the person she imagines he could become.

Theodor Kinnidi is now an overweight, balding man despised by his own people, but in the eyes of the Imperials, he remains a useful tool. He is in love with Siilen, although she does not return that affection. He tolerates his wife for the sake of appearances, but longs for the day when the more liberal social mores of the Imperium take hold, allowing him to toss aside his wife and publicly join with his true love. He rules his people in their name, but, of course, is actually in the service of the Imperials. He has aided in his fellow Kegir Impuuvians' devastation, and enriched himself as his planet's resources are plundered. In his mind, however, he is the visionary who brings his people, albeit unwillingly, to the promised land of Imperial greatness.

Maximilius Lavin

Age: 52

Height: 1.85 meters; Hair: Gray, curly, collar-length

Weight: 82 kg; Eyes: Brown

UPP: 878778

Skills: Administration-4, Brawling-2, Computer-1, Diplomacy-3, Equestrian-1, First Aid-1, Gambling-2, Grav Craft-1, Intimidation-3, Instruction-2, Interrogation-2, Investigation-2, Law-2, Leadership-3, Melee Combat-1, Pistol-1, Psychology-1, Shotgun-1, Streetwise-1.

Maximilius Lavin is another man in Siilen's grasp. He is a homely man without much to recommend him, and he knows it. He is, however, good at his job, and has taken pride in it. He sees the task of helping people join the Imperium and gain the benefits thereof as a very important one, and has taken it quite seriously... until recently. Siilen has persuaded him to do some things he isn't proud of: smuggling criminals through immigration, supporting the crackdowns on the locals and low-level Imperials, and generally breaking every rule in the immigration law books. At night, he is plagued by self-loathing for what he is doing. But, in the daytime, he cannot bring himself to correct the wrongs he has set into motion. And when he comes face-to-face with Siilen, he finds himself wanting only to please her. He rationalizes it all at

those times, telling himself that it all makes sense, and that it will all work out for the best in the long run. For now, he continues the tasks Siilen has set him, allowing his underlings to become lawless and brutal. He watches as the powerless are brutally oppressed, as the majority of the population starves, and as the world enters a critical stage. He watches and hopes what Siilen has told him is true: that the world will be better off in the long run if they stick to her plan. But the doubts return, and his cycle of self-torture continues.

THE ADVENTURE UNFOLDS

Drawing from the preceding background information, many adventures may be run on Kegir Impuu. By simply adding maps, NPCs, and scenario details as necessary to flesh out the scenario, many hours of shared storytelling may be enjoyed. This section provides the scenario details for the first adventure on this world, in broad outline format. Referees are encouraged to add nuances and data as necessary to adapt this adventure to their own style.

Receive Assignment

The characters will first receive their assignment (consisting principally of the information in "The Setup"), then proceed to Niksham Luur via an Imperial craft. During the assignment meeting, characters may ask questions of the briefing officer, Dr. Intiala Sinu of the Ministry of Information. She will answer their questions as best she can, but keep in mind that she is not aware of Kegir Impuu's historical details, which are for the characters to uncover during their mission. They will also be presented with a credit chit for MCr1 as their payment for this task. They may use the chit to make purchases for this adventure. Any money left over at the end of the adventure is theirs to keep, as are any equipment they may have purchased.

Stopover on Niksham Lur

The characters arrive at Niksham Lur, make final preparations, and set out on the final leg of their journey to Kegir Impuu.

Soon after arriving, the player-characters are contacted and asked to come to the office of Commander Liliava Chavez for their briefing about the upcoming trip, to receive their passage tickets, and to learn the latest information about Kegir Impuu. Commander Chavez will present them with their low passage tickets, their special baggage allowance passes for 100 kg, and tell them when and where they may board. She will then tell them that the latest news out of Kegir Impuu is that a new crackdown on crime has been deemed necessary. It seems some of the Kegir Impuuvians have been storming the government offices. Although

this is a good sign that they are seeing the benefits of Imperialization as opposed to the course their local government is urging, the resident Imperials have had to side with the local government for political reasons. Other than that bit of news, she can direct the characters to local business establishments where they can procure any additional supplies they may need, using the credit chit. Equipment of TL8 from any Traveller supplement is readily available here (save for starships and spacecraft). Gear from higher or lower tech levels is not as available. A given piece of equipment from TL9 will be available on a roll of 9-; TL10 on 7-; TL11 on 5-; TL12 on 3-. Availability for gear of lower tech levels follows a similar formula. When a character is looking for a given piece of equipment, check the tech level and make the appropriate roll. If it is successful, allow the character to purchase the equipment. Otherwise, disallow it.

The immigration ship for which the characters will be passengers of is a simple liner refitted for 100% low-berth capacity. Thus, it normally only allows 10 kg of baggage per passenger. However, special arrangements have been made for the PCs by the Ministry of Information. While they will have to submit to travelling via low passage, they each have a baggage allowance of 100 kg (the normal middle passage baggage allowance) per person. Successful use of the Bribery skill on the Captain, First Officer, or Baggage Handler will result in an upgrade to 1,000 kg (the normal high passage baggage allowance) per person. Under no circumstances should the PCs be allowed to bring more baggage with them than their allowance permits.

The journey to Kegir Impuu should be uneventful. The PCs are in cold sleep stasis, as are all of the other passengers. Since the point of the adventure is for them to observe conditions on Kegir Impuu and report their findings to the Ministry of Information, putting hardship in the way at this point doesn't serve a worthwhile purpose — especially since they're out cold and unable to respond, anyway. Similarly, it is recommended that the referee waive the cold sleep survival roll for the PCs this time, in the interest of getting to the meat of the adventure in a timely manner and with all PCs intact. There will be plenty of danger for them in the days ahead.

Arrival on Kegir Impuu

After exiting jump, the passengers are awakened from cold sleep. As the ship continues its travel toward the main world, passengers can get their first look at their new home. Kegir Impuu's surface is very easy to see, as it isn't obscured by clouds. From space, the planet appears to be a uniformly green ball. But, as the ship goes in for landing, it becomes possible to make out the massive crevasses lining the surface as dark gashes

that criss-cross as far as the eye can see. The larger surface area is covered by green, while the rolling hills are mostly black, with only patches of green here and there. Finally, the ship lands on the upper surface, within a few dozen meters of a crevasse. The immigrants are given their possessions and told to sprint across the intervening distance to the lip of the gorge as quickly as possible after the airlock cycles. At the lip of the gorge is a marker indicating the beginning of a path down to the bottom of the crevasse. The people are warned that the upper surface has a very thin atmosphere, and that any delay can mean passing out due to lack of oxygen. The airlock begins cycling groups of twelve through at a time.

At the bottom of the path down the side of the crevasse is the immigrant processing center. Imperial security agents hustle the immigrants to one of the many large, corrugated metal buildings nearby. Once inside, they are processed through immigration. Those who have valid Imperial ID's find the process impersonal but not onerous. Those who lack the essential ID, or who are found to have forged documents, will be brought to a holding room off to the side to be disposed of quietly — the local Imperials don't want a repeat of the first wave's prevalence of criminals. Since anyone travelling with fake identification is by definition a criminal, and since they don't have the time, resources or facilities to either research the case or send them back where they came from, the officials will simply kill all such immigrants. They have found that this procedure solves the problem nicely.

The remaining, law-abiding immigrants will be herded to a large area without any seating. At one side is a podium. Once all the legal immigrants are present, an immigration official will come to the podium (flanked by ImpSec agents) and deliver a speech. He will tell them that each person will be issued a short-term billet assignment in the immigration barracks. This assignment is good for two weeks, and includes three meals per day. Each person is expected to become self-sufficient at the end of the first two weeks on the world or lose all legal status. If they have no repatriation funds, they will be ejected from the society to live and die on the upper surface. He makes it clear that Kegir Impuu has no place for lazy people. But, he continues, those who are willing and able to work for a living will find the planet a good place to live.

The official goes on to explain voting privileges on the world. During the first two weeks on the world, the Kegir Impuu government will retain each immigrant's right to vote, and will cast those held votes with the majority during that period. Those who obtain employment and become self-sufficient will be able to claim their voting privileges at that time. Those who do not obtain employment, of course, will be denied such privi-

lege. What he does not say is that the government continues to cast votes for those immigrants who have been cast out onto the surface, which turns the problem of immigration into an asset (assuming, of course, that many of the immigrants fail to make the cut). This naturally gives incentive to the local Imperium-sponsored government to ostracize a lot of immigrants.

Each time the characters go outside of their living quarters for more than five minutes, roll 9- on 2D for an encounter occurs. Roll on the Random Encounter table in the Traveller rulebook to determine the overall nature of the encounter. Use the previous descriptions of life on Kegir Impuu as a guide to work out the specifics of the encounter and present it to the players.

Evidence Gathering

In gathering evidence for their report, the PCs can use recording devices to capture the abusive encounters and activities during their stay on Kegir Impuu. Or, they may attempt to bring a witness off-planet. Naturally, other methods for building a case are available, and the referee should encourage creativity in this pursuit, keeping in mind that the authorities of Kegir Impuu have a huge vested interest in making sure the true story never gets out. They have set up the ideal situation for themselves: huge bribes from megacorporations, near absolute power on the world, and all the perks that come with the two. They will do all in their power to protect themselves, just as anyone would.

In daily living, the characters will be subject to random police searches. Any recording devices or damaging evidence found will be confiscated and destroyed. The perpetrator(s) will also suffer punishment from a very stern "warning" to execution, depending on the nature of the offense and how persuasive the characters can be in convincing an officer of his innocence. Through liberal use of money, though, the PCs will be able to get away with just about anything — so long as it doesn't come to the attention of the authorities. In that case, the police officers will have to slap the PCs down or suffer the consequences. As with everyone else, the police will always act in their own perceived best interests. A referee who keeps that foremost in mind will have no problems running this adventure.

Leaving Kegir Impuu

Once the evidence has been collected, the PCs will want to leave the planet. This will involve

going through customs again, climbing up the side of the crevasse, and sprinting to the waiting passenger liner. Any suspicious items they are attempting to smuggle will be subject to search and seizure. As long as the customs officials see it as being in their best interests to look the other way, they may be successfully bribed by the PCs. Any attempt at bribery of customs officials begins as an Impossible task. For every Cr100 offered, decrease the task difficulty one level, to a minimum of Routine. Helpful modifiers should be awarded if the bribing character provides a good rationale for the guard to look the other way. For instance, a camera and rolls of film may be explained as, "My only remaining snapshots of my spouse, who passed away last week." This might earn a Die Modifier of -2 to the task, for example. Saying, "Yeah, these are pictures of police brutality, but here's 500 credits if you'll let it pass" should get a Die Modifier of +4 or more, as that gives the customs official even more a reason to confiscate the film!

The Return Trip

Once the PCs make it to the ship, they will again be put into cold sleep. About one week later, they will wake up to find that the ship is in orbit around Niksham Luur. A shuttle will bring them down to the starport.

Giving the Report

The PCs will give their report to Commander Chavez. Whether they choose to report the truth about Kegir Impuu or not, make a reaction roll to determine how their story is greeted (with Die Modifiers based on the evidence they provide). If the reaction roll is favorable, then their story was what the authorities were looking for — truthful or not. If it is unfavorable, then the authorities were hoping for the opposite story (again, whether true or not). Future events in the PCs' lives will be influenced by this reaction roll. They may be labeled troublemakers, bumblers, or worse, as a result of the reaction their report receives. The referee should ensure that this mission and its resolution have far-reaching consequences.

FURTHER ADVENTURES

After giving their report, the PCs may choose to return to Kegir Impuu. They may want to assist the resistance movement, or they may wish to link up with Siilen Nusiid, depending on how this adventure progressed.



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