

IMPERIAL FIEFS



Imperial Survey 6



Written by: Rustin Quaide. Developed by: Bill Bridges. Art by: John Bridges. Maps by: Chris Howard.

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A Knight's Tale

Salutations to Emperor Alexius, my liege lord, *Imperator Pacificus*, the Emperor of Universal Peace, whose calm demeanor brings stability and order to the center of the Empire, and whose wisdom and might spread out like the rays of a central star, pacifying the remote regions of barbarism and lawlessness. In the tradition of those earlier reports done by my fellow Questing Knights, I shall provide a brief introduction about myself before starting my report on the Imperial Fiefs — the worlds of Byzantium Secundus, Tethys, Stigmata and Nowhere.

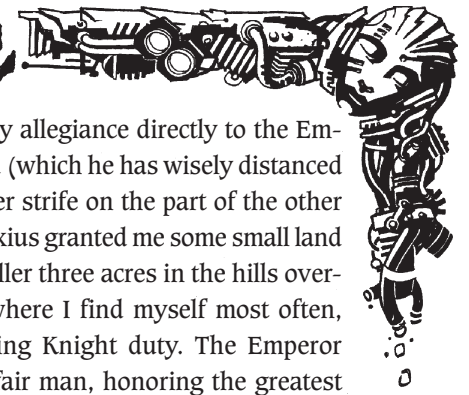
My father came from a distaff branch of the Orlando family, and could claim a drop of Justinian blood from a remote ancestor, Lady Aurora Justinian, second daughter of Count Virgil Justinian, whose lands were seized by the Keddah on Grail after the assassination of Emperor Vladimir Alecto. She wed a free man of reputed wealth, Luis Orlando, and moved with him to Tethys. This is all public record. Unlike some poor freeman, who claim to be bastard sons or granddaughters of the great nobles, our claim is there, in the Nicea Codex, but it has neither helped nor hindered my family, as my branch dropped from noble to freeman status ages ago. Once on Tethys, the Orlandos became weapon suppliers to the Regency, producing military clothing, gear and small sidearms as members of the local Orlando Guild (named after my family) for generations.

My mother came from a more liberated family, the Cincas from the free city of Maguat, who were, however, escaped serfs from a minor Torenson estate. Seven years residence in Maguat makes one by law a freeman; hence the saying: "City air makes a man free." As a child, I remember mother rolling her eyes and leaving the room when father would tell my sister and I about the ways of the universe. Sipping on his evening beer, his feet propped up on his favorite stool, father would explain that the universe needed an emperor. He would then go into his long explanation of the hierarchy of station, from the lowliest serf to the highest lord, which mirrored the Pancreator's reflective hierarchy of celestial saints and angels. "A higher truth holds together the Known Worlds, one mixed with the allegiances of ethical powers — the great nobles, the Church, and so on," he would say, drawing a picture in the air of orbiting worlds circling a great sun, symbolized by his flush face.

"The Emperor, Pancreator grant one returns to us — the Emperor looks after the affairs of the great nobles, who look after the affairs of the minor nobles and guilds, who look after the freemen and serfs, who look after us, and we owe the next higher station our allegiance, so great are their cares, as the Church, in descending order from Patriarch to parish priest, administer our souls." I would listen in awe, and line up my little military toys accordingly. My mother — I suspect now she had some taint of Republicanism in her family — would call us children to bed after too much of this talk. I would sleep at night, dreaming of planets circling a flush red star — the Emperor!

The Emperor Wars were a tense time on Tethys, as so many loyalties to varying families had been encouraged by different royal houses during the long night of the Regency. Tired of overseeing the night shift of our little guild sidearms factory, at age 16 I ran off to Glarson's Point, where the pro-Darius faction of the Regency armed forces were recruiting. Already knowledgeable about firearms, energy swords and armor, and of freeman status, I went into a sort of officers training school held on one of the harsh moons of the solar system (I cannot say more, nor divulge the location). After six months of drilling, parading, handling weapons, and enduring forced night marches, I was commissioned as Lieutenant Orlando of the 9th Tethys Loyalists, and sent to Ravenna with 900 soldiers from Blight Town, the toughest, meanest S.O.B.s Tethys had to offer. I think they respected me because I had copied the royal demeanor so well, and I heard the men say I was some sort of Hawkwood bastard — the nephew of Darius. I did nothing to discourage these rumors, but the troops also liked the fact I knew my weapons and could repair any malfunctioning sidearm.

One day, news came that Darius had been killed. I, along with Captain Marchuko and Count Julian Hawkwood, immediately declared our forces for his nephew, Alexius. Two months later, we were thrown into battle on Stigmata, to rescue the Garrison from the Symbiots. This was a harsh battle, even with command of the air, and the 9th was in the thick of it. Captain Marchuko got cut off attempting a rescue of a small band of Stigmata loyalists outside Sytan. Marchuko and his men were now surrounded in the same fortress the Stigmata loyalists had been. Disobeying orders, I took 230



soldiers and surprised the Symbiots, storming the fortress and picking up our banner, while getting the 70 survivors out. I personally slew a leader of the alien forces. Upon return to our lines, I expected imprisonment or death for disobeying orders, and was immediately arrested. However, the following day I was released and brought before Alexius Hawkwood, who forgave and reinstated me. Word of our rescue had revived morale (badly needed) on Stigmata, and I found myself something of a folk hero to the troops.

Later, after the Emperor's coronation, I was knighted personally for acts of bravery during those years, the most notorious being my action on Stigmata. I found myself a knight of the Emperor, owing allegiance to him alone. This was entirely new, and the other houses did not know at first

what to make of it. I owe my allegiance directly to the Emperor, not House Hawkwood (which he has wisely distanced himself from to avoid further strife on the part of the other major houses). Emperor Alexius granted me some small land on Tethys, and an even smaller three acres in the hills overlooking the Imperial City, where I find myself most often, when relaxing from Questing Knight duty. The Emperor Alexius is a judicious and fair man, honoring the greatest and least of his subjects. I stand as testimony to the grace and honor he has bestowed on me, a guildsmen's son with serf's blood now raised high.

Sir Armand Orlando,
Imperial Knight,
Order of the Phoenix

Byzantium Secundus

Byzantium Secundus, jewel of the Empire and the Imperial Throne World, beckons like a great star across the Known Worlds, circled like moons by the lesser houses, guilds and Church. The Church, House Decados and certain guild leaders deny this characterization, and the Li Halan and Hazat attempt a vain theater in which the recent past has not happened. All one need do, however, is go to the Imperial City and see the ambassadors from across human space and beyond, and the truth of my assertion becomes clear. Truly, this world is the greatest epic poem, crafted by the Pancreator, using humanity as the principle character. This isn't, as an old al-Malik noble told me, the old Regency World.

"There is an excitement in the air," the refined count told me, sniffing the calming *gova* leaves and crushing them into his warm tea. "The fashions, the parties, the intrigues — all are drawn here, moths to the imperial flame. In the old days, the Regency banquets would be ignored by polite society, you know; people would go to embassy affairs or witness yacht races, anything to avoid the solemn poetry and dull complacency of the Court. Now, it is standing room only — and the girls, all vying with each other for the Emperor's eye. It is enough to wish one was young and stupid again... no offense." The count later excused himself with a young courtesan, who was, unfortunately, barely 16 and the daughter of a Hazat noble, thus causing another scandal for a season already thick with them.

If my remarks on Byzantium Secundus are brief, it is because there are many fuller books out there about the imperial world, the best guide being titled simply *Byzantium Secundus*, written by a native, a former magic lantern writer and art designer in the corrugated industry who desired to

find more informative uses for his pen. I should add that Byzantium Secundus is 85 percent water, and slightly larger than Holy Terra.

History

I am no historian, but I did consult a number of libraries for my research. The best was in the Imperial Archives. The planet was experiencing a reptilian age similar to Urth's Mesozoic when a ship from the energy consortium IOPEC, rumored to be called *Hrunting*, landed here in the 24th century. IOPEC executives, many from the Asyad family, named the planet New Mecca. However, after a few generations, the colonists felt more loyal to each other than the off-world corporate owners, and a slow rebellion began to foment. As the First Republic lost outlying planets to the emerging independent governments, it sought New Mecca as a base to launch successful counterstrikes against the rebellious worlds. Already the deadly vice of Sathraism had affected pilots leaving the New Mecca jumpgates, and this caused further conflicts.

House Hamid led a noble armada to victory against the First Republic on the planet, and the name of Baron Santius became enshrined as the ancient liberator of the world. People still leave petitions on his statue today, seeking address for wrongs; this has been the custom for generations. The Hamid helped humanity lead the counterattacks during the Ukar War, but were not as successful in battle as other houses. Led by Patriarch Palamedes, the other houses captured more territory. During this conflict, New Istanbul, as New Mecca was also called, suffered raids from the Ur-Ukar (c2800?).

The Hamid were overthrown by House Cameton, led by Viscount Psellus, who wed Duchess Malukah Hamid, thus



Byzantium Secundus Traits

Cathedral: Cathedral of Saint Maya (Orthodox)

Agora: Port Authority (the Authority, a local guild)

Garrison: 10

Capitol: Imperial City

Jumps: 0

Adjacent Worlds: (All nightside) Aragon, Criticorum, Leminkainen, Madoc, Pentateuch, Pyre, Shaprut, Sutek, Tethys

Solar System: Vesuvius 1, Santius 2, Byzantium Secundus 3 (Jericho), Aden 4 (new Malta) Magog 5 (Tuszla, Amida, Cyril), Iblis 6 (Derelict)

Spacestations: Diadem (Imperial Fleet), Cumulus (Merchant League)

Tech: 6

Human Population: 6 billion

Alien population: 600,000

Resources: Grain

Exports: Grain, starships, politics

Landscape: Mostly water, with swampy island continents dotted with city sprawls.

uniting the world's two royal families. He established the Market Authority and was responsible for promoting the planet as the cultural center of human space, using his resources to attract men and women of learning and the arts. Aside from creating a major commercial center, Viscount Psellus desired to usher in a golden age of letters and sciences, and so established several universities. He needn't have worried, for if history teaches us anything, it is that the arts follow money.

The Market Authority soon spread its power across human space until most of the nobility were in debt to it. This gradually led to the mercantile interests pushing for a Second Republic (3500?-4000), to standardize the trading routes and establish a stable universal currency. A revival of democratic ideas, spreading from old Urth and Istakhr, helped spread the message, along with new technologies. New Mecca became the capital of the Republic, and the population expanded.

The Greater Senate and the Second Republican Palace, whose ruins dot the Sevirian Hills outside the Imperial City, oversaw the greatest concentration of power and wealth humanity had ever seen. However, the misuse of technology and the corruption of the later Republican ministers and presidents led to its downfall. When a barbarian incursion from what is now Vuldrok space landed in 4000, the Ten Great Houses used this as an excuse to land troops, ostensi-

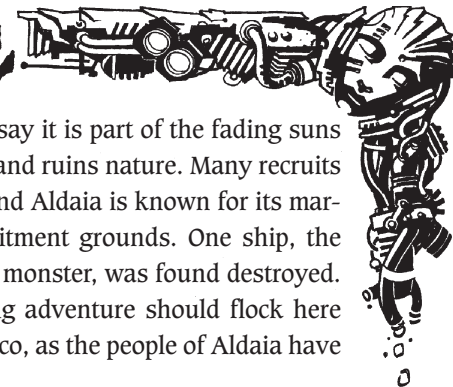
bly to save New Mecca, but actually to finish the Republic forever. The Church had warned about the sins of technosophy, and it stepped in to lead the common people away from the dangerous devices the Republic had left behind. A later pro-Republican revolt in 4004-4009 almost redelivered the planet to the Republican forces. This part of the planet's history is largely ignored by noble historians.

New Mecca was renamed Byzantium Secundus and eventually fell to House Gesar. However, the barbarian incursions continued for 500 years, and finally Vladimir Alecto united the Known Worlds and chose this world as his capital. After his victory over the Vuldrok king, Froljir the Ill-Fated, he came here for his coronation and met sudden death in 4550. House Gesar was subsequently wiped out in wars with the al-Malik and Decados. Since then, House Cameton reemerged as the leading royal house on the planet, but was overshadowed by the Regency set up after Emperor Vladimir's assassination.

The assassination of the last regent, Samitra Li Halan, led the way to the Emperor Wars and Alexius' ascension to the title of regent and then later, Emperor. The Siege of Jericho, which occurred on Byzantium Secundus' moon towards the end of that conflict, ended when a mysterious bombardment destroyed its atmosphere plants, leaving many Imperial forces dead, but more of the Decados and Hazat forces perished than initially thought. I lost an uncle there, and was stationed on Byzantium Secundus at the time, watching Cameton forces.

Now ruled by Emperor Alexius, Byzantium Secundus enjoyed an amazing recovery, and one can scarcely believe that this was a war-ravaged world just over a decade ago. Some soldiers and even other knights I have met were alarmed at Alexius's dropping of his leadership of House Hawkwood, but I assured them this was a shrewd move that would help both friends and foes. If Alexius had claim over the Hawkwood and Imperial worlds, it would ignite another civil war with the other houses. Shrewdly, Alexius set himself up as Emperor of all the worlds, showing no favoritism. He has also shown great strength by displaying that he does not need to directly rule more than the Imperial lands, which he knows are enough to keep his military forces second to none. Emperor Alexius called the bluff of his enemies and left them even more awed by his power and imperial authority than before. "The man who surrenders a noble house gains a universe," as the 42nd century Eskatonic seer Balthazar said.

Byzantium Secundus is made up of the five island continents Aldaia, Ghastr, Viridian and Old Istanbul, Harmony and Tamerlain. Many of the islands are slowly sinking into the seas, a symptom of the fading suns phenomenon. Luckily, the Emperor can call on the best engineers in the Known Worlds to address this problem, and even recover land from



the sea in some areas. As a general rule of thumb, the nobles prefer the uplands, while the sections closer to the water are often crowded with serfs and freemen eking out a living.

Let us now explore.

Aldaia

A continent largely Orthodox in outlook, Aldaia is covered in thick fogs but is still surprisingly cool and pleasant. Although it is home to House Cameton, the Li Halan and Imperial authorities also have some holdings here. It is most famous for the Horace Library, founded by St. Horace, disciple of our beloved Prophet Zebulon, and also the Imperial Eye Central Command. I spent my time here on the estates of Earl Hikado Li Halan, in the mountainous region. A sophisticated man, the earl and I engaged in sword practice and long talks on military history, a subject that fascinated him. "I hate military books with bad maps," he said, an assessment with which I agreed. Hikado is descended from a branch of the Li Halan that converted before Prince Cardano. "Indeed, we were once considered the black sheep of the Li Halan," he said. "It turns out, we were two centuries ahead of the rest of my illustrious clan."

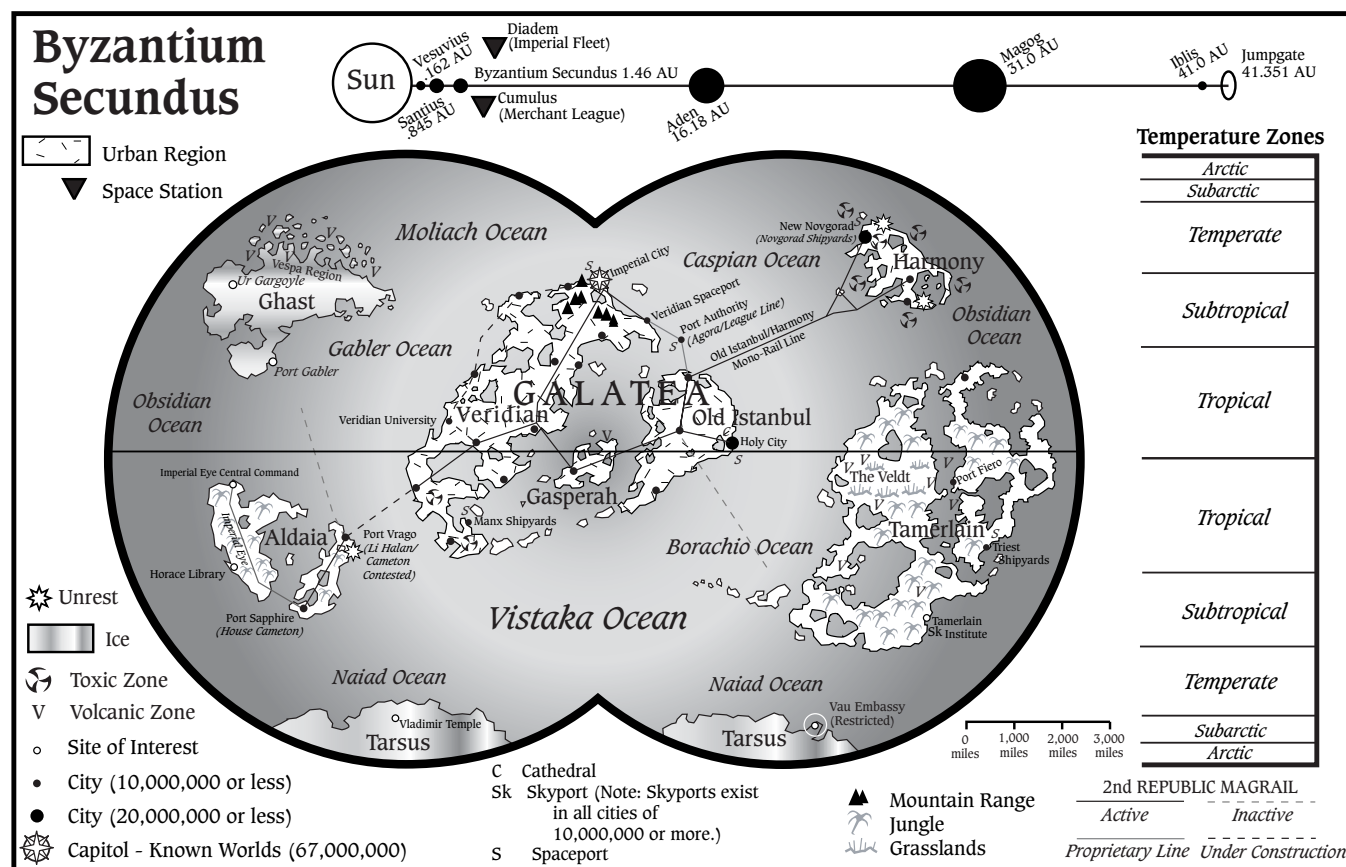
Recently, a great reptilian sea monster began disrupting shipping on the Obsidian Ocean, and parties are being recruited to hunt the serpent down. The monster, captured on vid, is an immense reptilian beast, larger than any wit-

nessed on the world. Some say it is part of the fading suns phenomenon, which twists and ruins nature. Many recruits have signed on to hunt it, and Aldaia is known for its martial arts and imperial recruitment grounds. One ship, the *Athena*, sent out to find the monster, was found destroyed. Any young warriors seeking adventure should flock here immediately to hunt Mardraco, as the people of Aldaia have named the beast.

Ghast

A largely desert continent where physical conditions changed so rapidly during the fading suns phenomenon that much of the wildlife did not have time to adapt. Many of the plants and animals died out over the last thousand years. Homesick people from desert planets often find dwellings here near the coast; the interior is much too harsh.

I made a hasty visit in the company of fellow Questing Knight, Lady Sharifah al-Malik, who confirmed that yes, Ghast reminded her of her desert homeland, and that yes, she was sick of deserts. We managed to find some entertainment in gambling at an "unofficial" casino. I longed to see the Tepest Desert, rumored to possess pre-Adamite Gargoyles. "It has roving bands of the Changed," Lady Sarifah told me. "If you prefer their company to mine, you can go, but if you prefer some culture, I recommend you remain at my side." I did so. Incidentally, the Emperor has brought





order here, and there is a new military camp where I spoke to the imperial service recruits about duty.

One of the desert posts, however, Eastmark Keep, manned mainly by Cameton and some imperial forces, has found itself under assault from a fierce tribe of the Changed, who are adept at night attacks and digging subterranean passages into the ancient fortress. I spent a week with the forces, numbering about 125 under Baron Yurik Cameton, an old but much loved leader who lost his two sons to a night attack. I witnessed such an attack, when hordes of the Changed arrived with a fierce desert wind, and we fought on the battlements, finally driving them off with the loss of 12 men on our part. The Changed possessed sophisticated tunneling equipment and weaponry, and are obviously being supplied by some faction with interest in the desert.

"Tell any who wish to help us that they are welcome," the old baron said. I left in summer by airship, when desert dust storms gusting up to 200 mph ravage the region. Little aid is expected until late fall, when the storms abate. Although ordered to leave the keep by his house rulers, Baron Yurik vowed to hold onto his family holdings, regardless of cost. "I have a debt to settle with the slayers of my kin," he told me. I promised that once my assignment was done I would return to aid him. Truly a brave and noble man such as the baron should not perish attempting to save his people and fief from these desert marauders!

Viridian and Old Istanbul

Here are the wonders of the throne world! The Imperial City on Viridian is worth visiting just for the beauty of her parks, museums, and buildings, many of them built in the eclectic Second Republic styles. An excellent system of mono-rails connects all parts of the city. The Imperial Palace, dominated by crystalline towers that once housed one of the two Presidential Estates of the Second Republic, is worth seeing.

The Imperial City is large, so it is good to get a native guide. I recommend the Stahr clan, who run the modest Phoenix Inn on Starlane Way. Say hello to Madame Starh and her two daughters if you go: they can give you an excellent tour rife with political intrigue and scandal. Embassy Row is worth a visit, especially if you are from a non-imperial world. A word of caution: at sunrise and sunset, the main rails are filled with imperial bureaucrats, who can be a haughty breed, even if their titles are Chief Assistant to the Assistant Chief in the Imperial Park Resources agency. If you need to travel at these times, my advice is to find a native who knows how to navigate the back roads.

The Emperor recently dedicated the new Imperial Gardens, a zoological wonder. Old Istanbul contains the Holy

City, whose architecture is Old Urth Mediterranean, with her mighty walls and circles leading to the magnificent Cathedral of St. Maya. Housing a great bureaucracy, the city improves in beauty as you ascend her levels. I was able to talk with one of Archbishop Palamon's Eskatonic associates on matters relating to the soul.

Harmony

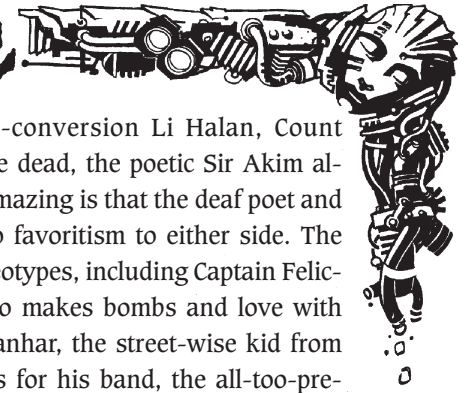
I only visited this small northern continent island for a week. Set in the northern Obsidian Ocean, it is home to the famous Novgorad Shipyards. Many of these shipyards, while still mainly controlled by the Decados, have changed ownership recently, bought by a pro-Emperor faction. The Decados owners find that they are now working for the Empire, and rumors circulate that the head of operations might soon resign, to be replaced by a candidate who looks more favorably on the current political situation. It is whispered that the Emperor's men are forcing the Decados out. Rumor has it that some military men, followers of the emperor cult named "the Reborn Sun," are behind the intrigues. It is also known that the Decados will not give up such a strategically valuable foothold on Byzantium Secundus and the workings of the Imperial Navy without a fight. The air is thick with intrigue, and the recent murder of a pro-Alexius Engineer is rumored to be the work of the Jakovians.

Of Harmony itself, I can say little. It is largely an industrial area, and the pollution in certain regions is considerable. There are, however, isolated pockets of beauty to be found. Many off-world aliens dwell here, and I found myself wondering at times how many Ur-Ukar have settled here.

Tamerlain

The southern and eastern regions of this continent are quite enjoyable. Small, walled towns of white-adobe architecture glisten by the Naiad and Obsidian Oceans, but much of the interior and northern regions are still uninhabited and have always been so. The Emperor has begun to connect the stable southern cities to the north by a series of roads and rails, so the conquest of the Veldt, the grass and jungle region of the north, may finally occur. Here, some of the indigenous reptilian wildlife remains, and it is not uncommon to be surrounded by small flocks of scurrying, four-foot high predators known by the natives as red dragons, or *redras*. They come only out of idle curiosity as you walk some of the more protected trails.

Tamerlain boasts the famous Tamerlain Institute of Technical Redemption, where engineering students train. I have a story about Tamerlain, because I once visited the Veldt in the company of one of my old sharpshooters, Sgt. Joseph Glavine of the Imperial Army. He informed me that the army goes here for survival and jungle training, and that once on maneuvers, his company, after settling in for the night in



pitched tents, found that the local proto-primates, known as Sky Monkeys, had been stealing supplies. Some of these creatures had broken into the ammo tent and were playing with grenades, tossing them back and forth among the great trees in a play of wild abandon. Occasionally, they would pelt the soldiers with them, and sometimes the explosives went off. A ridiculous situation: the company under attack by a bunch of chattering Sky Monkeys. "How did you deal with this?" I asked Joe, who merely smiled and said, "We don't think of the enemy as human."

Sometimes I wonder why people do not know more about the past. It was on Tamerlain that the subject of the great 41st century epic poem, the *Fall of Rhea*, based on the Republican revolt of 4004-9, took place. You can still walk about the ruins of Rhea and find amazing artifacts. I did so for a week, uncovering some old helmets and Republican battle gear. The city is abandoned, and the jungle has reclaimed most of it. The survivors founded the small town of New Rhea further north.

It was in Rhea, in 4006, that a Republican coup against the Ten Royal Families rose and captured the city. Under the Republican General Brutus Aurellius, the entire continent fell into the hands of ex-Republican military captains. General Aurellius was an amazing tactician, winning 13 battles against House Gesar. In the most famous of those, his right wing broke the noble troops and sent Duke Walid Gesar fleeing (like the Persian king Darius from the legendary Urth conqueror, Alexander), delivering to him the city of Rhea. The entire planet was briefly in danger of falling from noble control, when the Gesar called on the Ten for aid. I guess Aurellius is not studied today because the noble histories of the Gesar and Cameton try to darken his name, and his conquests were an embarrassment to their shaky hold on the world after the Second Republic was overthrown. Aurellius was slain at the Battle of Tenafer, and his followers retreated to Rhea.

The Fall of Rhea concerns the siege of Rhea by the Ten, as the Republican forces fell back. It is well known on Byzantium Secundus. Certainly, the usual stereotypes are there: in the royal camp is the all-too-noble Hawkwood commander, Duke Jonathon Hawkwood, the sly Decados, Baron

Dimitri, the sorceress pre-conversion Li Halan, Count Mencius, who speaks to the dead, the poetic Sir Akim al-Malik, and so on. What is amazing is that the deaf poet and author, Raszori, showed no favoritism to either side. The Republicans have their stereotypes, including Captain Felicity Felix the Anarchist, who makes bombs and love with equally furious passion, Manhar, the street-wise kid from Acheon who steals supplies for his band, the all-too-predictable slang-speaking Ukar, Blomad-Norr, and the sly trickster, Captain Odysseus Cicero.

It is a hell of an epic, and the author, rumored to be a doctor during the siege, knows his warfare. At the end, the Republican dream collapses with the capture of Rhea after a three-year siege and space bombardment. Sly Captain Odysseus Cicero survives the violent death and capture of the Republicans, stealing a Decados space cruiser for his escape, vowing, at poem's end, to

*Spread the word of democratic freedom
To the chained and frightened of a hundred worlds
and to
Awaken the masses to their worth
Tyranny has won, but I shall spread freedom
Like a virus into the corrupt dreams of the usurpers*

It is hard not to find noble sentiments in this poem, and both noble and Republican values are given amazing amounts of space and detail. Since I follow the noble code, I will end by quoting Duke Jonathon Hawkwood's dissertation about noble rule:

*We who govern do so not for glory
But stand as protectors over our flock
Led astray by ambitious politicians.
We are the Protectors of the weak,
Guardians of the faith, who take no Happiness
In the defeat of our enemies
Who, although wrong of cause,
Fought with honor.*

[**Note to the reader:** More information on Byzantium Secundus can be found in the **Fading Suns** sourcebook *Byzantium Secundus*.]

Tethys

Tethys is the chief industrial world and armory for the Empire, and is most famous in history as the birthplace of St. Amalthea. It is also my home, and if I talk too much of her excesses, it should be remembered that growing up on industrial Tethys was normal for me. It is the sight of green and pleasant landscapes on other worlds that I find strange. Beauty, like warfare, takes time to become accustomed to. Still, there are places here where deforestation has not occurred, and it boasts isles and mountains as pure as those on other worlds. Tethys is a tough planet, breeding warriors, weaponsmiths and skilled space engineers, as if the planet were a furnace turning out human products for the imperial military.

Spying and bribery are rife here, featuring fierce competition for contracts. In Nuevo Madrid everything from bribery to blackmail to murder has been used to obtain weapon design and tech plans. The Wordwrights Guild prospers as high-powered guilds contract it to slander rivals and their products in hastily printed rag sheets. The Promoters Guild and Stewards are also more numerous these days. Still, imperial unity has made the world safer, and civil unrest is largely a thing of the past.

There was once a jumproute, now lost, between Urth and Tethys, and the two planets were once referred to as sisters. Tethys was one of the first colonized worlds, but the site of its original settlements are in dispute, with both Nuevo Madrid and Tulasca vying for the honor. The planet was lush, with a temperate climate and filled with colorful birds and mammals. It was a paradise world, not heavily settled by the agracorp Verdeco until the 2400s. The corporation was supposedly progressive in outlook, allowing its workers many freedoms denied by the other corporations of the First Republic. Hence, when other worlds began to break from Urth, the loyalties of many on Tethys remained with Urth, for of all the colonies, Tethys seemed one of the better treated. Nonetheless, some anarchistic utopians claimed lands in the wars of independence, while the corporations remained neutral or friendly to Urth.

After the fall of New Mecca to the royalists, however, Tethys tentatively declared her independence. The Primeval Grove Poets and the Red Star Anarchists influenced the culture and developed much of the governing philosophy of the world. Economically, however, Urth corporations continued to hold much of the politics and control, and many of the older families looked forward to a day of reunification with the motherworld. This was due, I guess, to a combination of educational opportunities and democratic practices that made the citizens of Tethys quite unlike her royalist

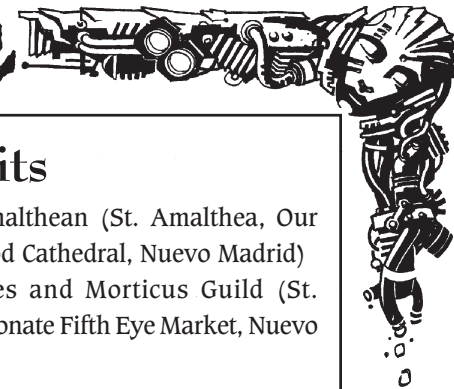
and even republican neighbors, who they viewed as backward and unprogressive. In 2642 and 2678 Tethys even signed alliances with Urth, and there was much cultural cross-fertilization between the motherworld and the former colony.

Tethys's most famous native was Saint Amalthea, born in 2701. The spot where the founder of the Amalthean sect was born is also contested, with the more scholarly view holding to an old church in Sihya. Others maintain it was in what are now the ruins of an ancient First Republic hospital some 20 miles outside Sihya, where her mother, Aruna Sahir, was a doctor who specialized in bone setting (*Omega Gospels, Amalthea 1:7*). It was on Tethys that Amalthea founded the beginnings of her Compassionate Ethics, and felt Universal Compassion for all things.

The Compassionate Ethics were themselves influenced, some say, by the Primeval Grove Poets and certain traits of the prereflective followers of Saint Buddha. It was here on Tethys that her first followers came to her, before she healed Zebulon the Prophet on Grail, and it was here that she was briefly wed to Mael Llewellyn, who was killed running medical supplies during the siege of Nuevo Madrid. Her first meeting with the Empyrean Power, "the Miracle on the Hill," happened when she was 10; this was the first of her contacts with the Empyrean Angel Ahnkelbion. Her followers have a shrine here, and the place is known for its miraculous cures in her name. Amalthea grew up in a peaceful time on Tethys, which was shattered by a brutal three-year civil war.

Major Huang, head of the planetary security forces, attempted to seize the planet in the name of Terra and the Revived First Republic, in conjunction with a last, brief flickering of Urth's military power. The Revived Republic was a political/military faction on Urth that used a popular political party called "Memory" to attempt to reassert Urth's power. At its height, it held much of the fractured home world under its sway. They named themselves the Republic and considered themselves the heirs of the zaibatsu, but were in fact military careerists. These Urth militarists aided Huang's rebellion. New Istanbul (Byzantium Secundus) aided the consortium that ran Tethys, and finally sent enough reinforcements to end the Urth-inspired rebellion forever.

It was during this war that Amalthea's healing miracles began, which every child knows from the Omega Gospels. Her uncle, the strange scientist/theologian Dr. Victor Erling, found some means to bend space and time in his tower, which was bombed during the war, releasing strange energies in the area of Shade Hill. The angel who guided Amalthea



Kecaritomene, Ahnkelbion, urged her to travel to Grail and spread her Compassionate Ethics. It was there she healed Zebulon. In later years, after Zebulon's Ascension through the jumpgate, Amalthea settled on Artemis. Tethys, however, is ever known as her homeworld.

After Huang's rebellion was crushed, Tethys found itself under the rule of the Sung family, who started out as democratic reformers but within three generations ruled as despots. The Sung allied Tethys closer to the Hawkwood family, breaking from New Mecca, but an opposition formed that eventually overthrew the tyrant Tesar Sung in 3002. It was under the Sung that strip-mining first occurred and silt from the mining lined the bottom of various bays, destroying many salt-water ecosystems. While Tethys was one of the first worlds to welcome the Second Republic, it was already becoming stripped of vital ores, timber, uranium and other resources — as well as fresh water — as it supplied many commodities to other worlds.

At the time, Tethys relied on many renewable energy sources, but by 3870 it had fallen into an economic depression, as many natural resources became depleted. Only the advent of cheap entertainment vid and appliance manufacturing kept some sectors of the economy running. Oxygen-producing plants were installed in critical areas to keep the air breathable. Over 90% of animal life faced extinction, along with numerous plants. The political rulers, surrounded by wealth and answerable only to corporate profit, were estranged from the people, and did not have the power to halt the natural and economic devastation of the world. When the Second Republic fell, the corporate political rulers were so despised that the people welcomed the nobles, and hunted down their former rulers, slaying them in orgies of destruction. The walled community of Brandercroft, which housed many of the corporate elite, was besieged until it fell, its survivors burned alive.

It was, however, the Crafters Guild, an alliance of small businesses, craftsmen, farmers, and Scravers, that set up the next government, for they provided much of the local opposition to the Second Republic rulers. The Crafters Guild had welcomed noble help in removing the last vestiges of Republican rule, but was a shrewd enough bargainer to keep most of the greater noble families off-world in exchange for providing low-cost weapons, repairs and food. Other guilds settled here, and the Masque and Carnivalers — then part of the same guild — had great representation here during the times of strife, when barbarian incursions were frequent. It is said that three men, Mr. Robert Smith from the Crafters Guild, Señor Montoya from the Masque, and Aliz Zamarova from the Seeders Guild, concluded the treaty with the nobles that kept them off-world — an amazing feat, as Tethys could not long withstand the Ten.

It was the Windsors who largely gained control of the

Tethys Traits

Cathedral: Orthodox/Amalthean (St. Amalthea, Our Lady of the Weeping Blood Cathedral, Nuevo Madrid)

Agora: Scravers, Reeves and Morticus Guild (St. Amalthea of the Compassionate Fifth Eye Market, Nuevo Madrid)

Garrison: 7

Capital: Nuevo Madrid

Jumps: 1

Adjacent Worlds: Byzantium Secundus (dayside), Delphi (nightside)

Solar System: Agni (Sun), Amon (0.307 AU), Kaanta (0.823 AU), Tethys (1.102 AU; Soma), Aragon (3.088 AU), Azlan (7.237 AU, 6 moons), Goya (12.27 AU; 3 moons), Turan (38.27 AU), Jumpgate (59.17 AU)

Tech: 7

Human Population: 863 million

Alien population: 2 million (estimated)

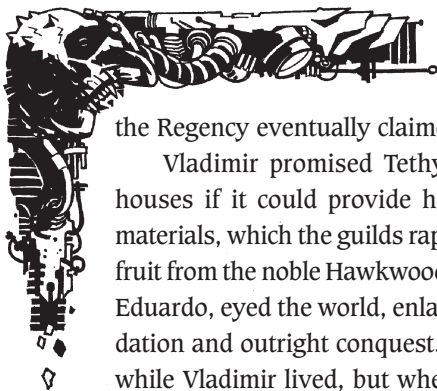
Resources: Ores, seafood, agriculture, salvaged materials, coal, masonry, zinc, plaster, sand

Exports: Refined ore, military tech, chemicals, melee weapons, medical equipment, iron, specialized military clothing, ammunition, military think machines, armor, automobiles, military attack vehicles, light starships, classified military materials, soldiers

Landscape: Tethys is 43percent water; it used to have even more, but plaster deposits filled up some of the bays and inner seas. Tethys is roughly the size of Holy Terra, with a year of 359 days. Plankton farms dot the seas while the land is given up to military industry and food production. Tethys has been strip-mined of many valuable ores and minerals, although some deposits remain deep in the world. Human civilization has destroyed nearly 92% of the native higher animal life; most existing animals are descended from Urth imports.

world, opposed only by the Crafters Guild. Twice Tethys fought off large-scale Vuldrok space attacks, the first time at the Battle of Amazonia in 4304, when the native forces under Richard "The Red Prince" Windsor defeated the invading enemy. The other time was in 4547, when Vladimir Alecto landed and joined forces with the Tethys militia and Windsors in defeating one of King Froljir's chief lieutenants, Ragnor Thorsonn, at Two Horse Fields. The Vuldrok were drawn to the world due to the tech factories and weapons plants, and they had some supporters on the planet. After Vladimir's assassination, the other houses turned on the Windsors, seized their fiefs, and with the remnants of the Crafters Guild, flushed out their followers. No single faction could cement its hold on Windsor lands, however, and





the Regency eventually claimed Tethys.

Vladimir promised Tethys protection from the noble houses if it could provide his armies with weapons and materials, which the guilds rapidly agreed to. Already, a dark fruit from the noble Hawkwood tree, Baron Wynston-Smythe Eduardo, eyed the world, enlarging his fiefs through intimidation and outright conquest. His power was held in check while Vladimir lived, but when the first Emperor suddenly perished, the baron moved, instituting a terrible war. The hastily set up Regency renewed the Vladimir-Tethys alliance, and a Regency army composed of Houses Li Halan, Decados, Hazat and Justinian defeated Baron Eduardo in a swift campaign in 4565-6. Ignoring the pleas of House Hawkwood, the victors executed the baron as a sign to any who would meddle in Tethys affairs. The baron, however, had permanently smashed the strength of the Crafters Guild on the world, and other guilds quickly moved into the power vacuum, notably the Scravers and a consortium of weapons and armors guilds.

Each regent installed some family troops and created fiefs on the world, but these fiefs were kept small and in balance by the jealousy of the other houses. As military recruitment and production, however, became the de facto way of life, a military ethos developed on this world of service and loyalty, and the weapons producers vied with each other for contracts. Its history is rife with regents attempting to pillage its resources for their own worlds (building fleet ships only to “sell” them to their own houses, etc.). That era ended when our Emperor claimed the Imperial Throne. Tethys is an Imperial World that serves the Imperial Navy and armed forces. Still, some of the old fiefs remain, and while most welcome the change in status from a Regency to an Imperial World, there are some people who hold to royal and guild loyalties over imperial ones; they are, however, not the majority. Each of the major families has a few adherents here — usually, but not always, within their own fiefs. Some guilds prefer one noble patron to others. The Blade Guild, for example, is extremely close to the Hazat family, their best customers.

In 4600 the Morticus Guild formed from the bakery family of the same name, and grew to take over large areas of food production, as well as food and medical transportation. They filled the vacuum left by the Crafters Guild, the remnants of which still work under the names of the Pluardo and Redcliffe Guilds, who, between the two families, produce the best lasers and blasters in the Known Worlds. The Emperor made these two guilds, along with my family and nine other competing families, his unofficial “approved” producers of the lighter firearms, and their products are now engraved with the imperial insignia. Off-world guilds, such as the Reeves and Scravers, formed a strong presence following the Symbiot Wars of the early 4900s. In conjunction

with the native Morticus Guild, the three are called “the little sisters” to their big brother, the Emperor, and, next to imperial law, carry the most clout on Tethys.

A word should be said about the other worlds of the Tethys system. Azlan, the most famous, actually retained a tentative independence until the time of Vladimir Alecto. It had been terraformed during the Second Republic, and when the Windsors gained Tethys, much of the opposition fled there. In the past 300 years, many of the terraforming engines began to fail, and only in the equatorial belt are there any people left, mostly mining guilds mixed with a few farming family guilds, who utilize vast greenhouses. Three of Azlan’s six moons are military bases, where imperial training goes on. It is said that the elders of Azlan leased them to Vladimir Alecto for 2000 years in exchange for some guarantees on their liberty.

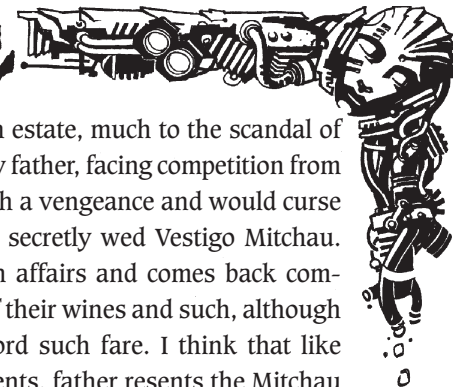
I cannot comment further, save that I received some training there, and the facilities house some of the toughest camps I have ever seen. “The armies of Alexius are crafted on Azlan’s moons,” as the saying goes, and I firmly believe that it is here that the future of imperial power lies.

Tarquinia

I began my visit home at the festival of St. Horace in Nuevo Madrid. Everywhere carnival-masked revelers posed as saints and demons or serfs dressed as nobles and nobles as serfs. All of this had a strange leveling effect, and when I bumped into an old man seemingly imitating a confused knight, I was relieved to find it was my father, sans costume. Indeed, these festivals took me back to my youth, and as much as I find Tethys a loyal and serious world, there is an underside of play and frivolity that is hard to explain to the outsider. “How is mother?” I asked, while a parade of patriarchs swept brooms after the mule-riding drunken revelers brigade, who call themselves the Shiners, due to their shining swords.

“She’s waiting back at home, son, with your sister and her daughter,” he replied.

I could feel the criticism already: why wasn’t I married? Father is old fashioned, and thinks I should have gotten over Beatrice by now (Pancreator and St. Lextius bless her soul, she died on Stigmata battling the Symbiots). I have, and wish to speak to him of Lorraine, but decide not to be premature and jinx the thing, which happens anytime I mention my wishes to the old man. That’s why I ran away and joined the military. If I told him my plans I would still be managing his factories while he criticized my plans to anybody tired enough to listen. In some ways, I preferred the honest dread of the Symbiots to his criticism. As a matter of fact, whenever I began to tell my old friends about battling the Symbiots, dad would burst in about the incredible munitions order he had to fill out practically alone at the plant,



what with the Red Weeping sickness keeping so many of his workers at home, making it sound like he deserved a knighthood for performing his job, Symbiots be damned.

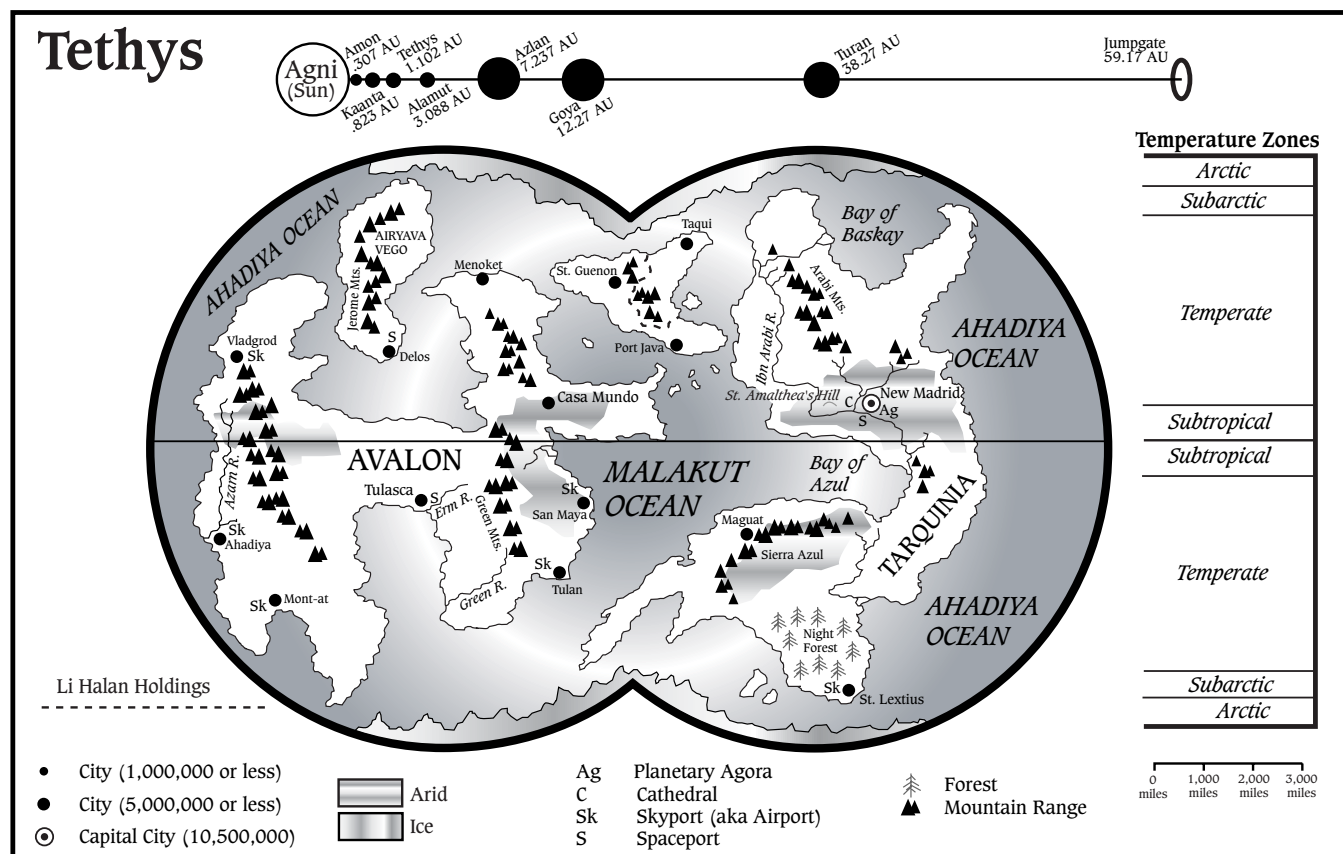
He has mellowed some, and I asked him if we could stop at St. Amalthea's Hill, where I owed a small donation in Amalthea's name for a cure I received from one of the Sisters on Stigmata. He agreed, and I meditated briefly at the hill some miles outside Nuevo Madrid, where Amalthea first received her miraculous calling. The Amalthean Order has a small Church there, and they accepted my offerings.

At home, in the guild town of Overso outside Nuevo Madrid, we had a reunion. I asked my sister Auralee to take me around Nuevo Madrid the following day, and she did so. It has grown even in the years since I left, with the Imperial Courts and Governor's Residences rising over their old Regency counterparts. This is where the Regency long governed the world, and the great houses still have estates in the old Regency Section, but the center of power and authority has moved on. Much of Nuevo Madrid is given over to the production of small arms, shields, energy generators, cybernetics, think machines, armor, and even medical supplies (this operation is often overseen by the Amaltheans).

The Mitchau family of weaponsmiths recently relocated from Aragon, as imperial authorities promised it land and low noble status in return for a cut of its profits. It managed

to purchase an old Torenson estate, much to the scandal of the noble Tethys families. My father, facing competition from them, used to hate them with a vengeance and would curse their names until my sister secretly wed Vestigo Mitchau. He now goes to their lavish affairs and comes back complaining about the quality of their wines and such, although he himself could never afford such fare. I think that like many old-time Tethys residents, father resents the Mitchau for obtaining imperial patronage but remains secretly in awe of them, for he is very loud in telling anybody bored enough to listen that his first grandson has both Orlando and Mitchau blood, and will benefit from both. Actually, my bother-in-law Vestigo has only helped my father by combining operations with him, although you couldn't get the old man to admit it.

Vestigo joined my sister and I on our jaunt, and we ate in the newly fashionable Tres Rios section of Nuevo Madrid. Much of Nuevo Madrid is unfortunately squalid, made almost unlivable by bad factory conditions and the strip mining of Second Republic metals. This section, known as the Crawl, houses many of the poorer workers in unsanitary apartments, although the new Imperial Housing Authority recently surprised everybody by enforcing tenant rights against distant landlords.



Maguat

Next, I went to my mother's small city in the Sierra Azul Mountains. In old times, silt and ore mining took place here, filling the inland bays with their refuse, but now the production of bows, swords, steel armor and guns makes Maguat known for quality low-tech products. Indeed, with a populace of only 325,000, it actually boasts a small alien workforce numbering 10,000, mostly Obun and Ukari metal workers and miners. The atmosphere of Maguat is more relaxed; it is run by a council of city elders responsible to the Emperor, and retains its ancient charter and freedoms under Imperial Law.

I do not know why, but Maguat has made a name for itself in poetry, rivaling the al-Malik and Li Halan worlds. In the 4970s Le Blum settled here, followed by a few Rampart exile poets. Today, she even has a native school, the Pastists, who believe that, according to their oddly worded manifesto: "Light retracts to its origin as words retract to their primal meaning. We are all primitives. *Ils n'ont point abdiqué, crispant leurs mains tenaces sur des tronçons de sceptre, et rôdent dans les vents.*" The last part is in Francais, an ancient Urth language, supposedly an offshoot of Latin. It is suddenly the language of poets and intellectuals; there is no accounting as to why. Certainly, Latin is more universal, and even ancient languages like Chinese, English, and Spanglish more influenced our current tongue (although Francais, or a descendent thereof, was spoken for many centuries on Rampart). I attempted to learn it some years ago, but my pronunciation is terrible. Those lines, by the ancient Urth poet Verlaine (?) read: "They have not abdicated, their stubborn hands grip stumps of scepters, and they wander in the wind."

I was invited to a party of these poets by an old friend who, after suffering the loss of two fingers in an industrial accident, quit the factory life to follow the muse. They were all interested in my battle with the Symbiots, whom they tend to interpret as "Pan-inspired Nature." Indeed, when guests dressed as ancient pagan Gjartin gods began talking, one of them, dressed in deer antlers with a flute, came to me and informed me that he had seen Bjako, the Gjartin fertility deity once worshipped on Tethys. "Ah," I replied, "in the time of Zebulon a cry shook Tethys in the reign of Pro-Council Mencius, clearly stating 'the Great God Bjako is Dead!'"

"True, true," the deer-dressed poet slurred through his wine soaked breath. "But it is scandal, the work of rumor-mongers and gossips. The old gods have returned." He then began to dance, slipped in a puddle of libation, and cracked his head open on the ground.

"Now the great god Bjako *is* dead," another poet said, garnering general laughter. I found the whole incident in poor taste, and helped two others move the poor man's un-

conscious body. The Pastists do believe that the ancient pagan gods of Gjartin myth have returned, awakened by a curious Ur artifact, an inscribed rock recently unearthed in the hills by an earthquake. I tried to follow this, as well as their poetry, but soon called it a night.

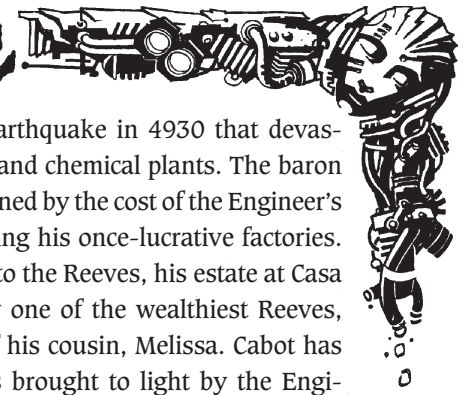
Still, something is up in the hills about Maguat. Two weeks later, a woman was found torn to ribbons. Some said that the poets were reviving the Bjako or Pseudo-Rapello Gjartin mysteries — Rapello being an ancient singer ripped apart by a crowd of female worshippers who rushed him onstage at some concert event honoring songs to geological entities. I checked with one of the town's constables. He said no; it was as if a mighty predator had torn the woman apart. He said that they had called an Eskatonic in from Nuevo Madrid but did not want to involve the Church until they had more clues. This is partly because the town has ill feelings towards the Inquisition and Temple Avesti, and fears the Church will send no saner representative to deal with the supernatural. I do not know. As the stars dim, ancient evils awaken, and every man must look to his sword.

Avalon

Avalon, Tarquinia's twin continent, connected to her across a narrow isthmus, was long ago deforested and strip-mined of its resources. In St. Amalthea's day it was still heavily forested, the most beautiful region of the world. Some of the forests have begun to creep back during the past two centuries, and lumber farms belonging to the Woodwright Guild are present here, as are many of the agricultural lands run by the Morticus Guild. Small noble estates still control the last arable land on the isthmus and in the shadow of the Green Mountains.

My small estate, granted me by the Emperor, is in the Green Mountains. It originally belonged to the Regency, and which leased to a Juandaastas noble who couldn't pay the required rent. Two years after his death, Alexius, as lord over all Regency lands, granted it to me. It is a stone castle, overlooking a green and pleasant valley, and comes with some serfs. My mother made me feel guilty about this, and so I lessened the fees on their rent, and made terms where they could eventually purchase their freedom. I hired two of them to run the small winepress, so I have a small profit. Honestly, I am rarely here, and it hardly feels like home.

One day on Byzantium Secundus, I received a visitor who claimed the land was hers. That is how I met Lorraine, the bastard daughter of the old lord, Juan Pedro. She said this half joking, and, feeling amused and bored, I went to lunch with her, and the rest is history. While her father never officially acknowledged her, he did send her to a finishing school on Byzantium Secundus as a favor to her mother, both to get her daughter out of serfdom and to find a suitable marriage. She hadn't found one, because the only young



men she met were similarly trained at private academies to increase their station in life by marrying refined women of the lesser nobility. The real nobles could spot social climbers a mile away. Lorraine gave up on the academy to pursue her study of music, and so we became entwined. Besides, a legitimate knight with freeman status is proper enough for an unacknowledged bastard daughter — we looked it up in *Rolando's Rules of Royal and Noble Etiquette*, the ultimate book on said matters.

Some naval training occurs near Avalon, and it also hosts mountain militia training. Recently, more scavenge-mining for Second Republic materials has been initiated, and a Scraver team dredged up a small, intact Second Republic ship from the soft bottom of the Tio River.

The continent is largely run by “the three sisters,” although small Decados and al-Malik fiefs dot the landscape. There is competition among various guilds for farming, mining and timber lands, and recently the small Harvester Guild came to conflict with a minor Decados count over forest land, a war the Harvesters are surprisingly winning. The Decados count, an unsavory character named Ivan, swears that the Harvesters are allied with Ur spirits of wood and stone. Again, strange signs and rumors, but I had not the time to investigate these matters.

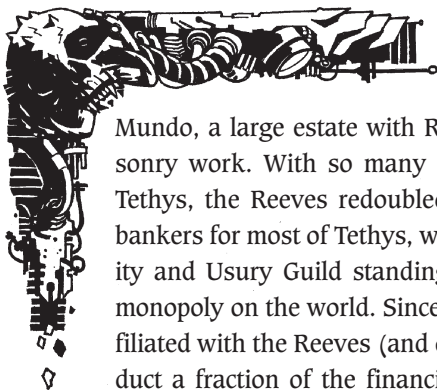
The Supreme Order of Engineers, during some terraforming work on the estates of Baron Rodrigo y Dios

Hazat, caused a massive earthquake in 4930 that devastated the baron's granaries and chemical plants. The baron found himself financially ruined by the cost of the Engineer's bill and the price of rebuilding his once-lucrative factories. Forced to sell and foreclose to the Reeves, his estate at Casa Mundo now is overseen by one of the wealthiest Reeves, Cabot Winters, on behalf of his cousin, Melissa. Cabot has found many profitable ores brought to light by the Engineer-induced earthquake, and has the old factories running at a capacity well beyond the means of the Hazat baron. The serfs of the old Hazat estate, who formed a well-oiled fighting machine in the Hazat style, found employment in the Muster. The baron's descendents, living on reduced means in Tulasca, claim the entire affair was a set-up by the three guilds to enrich themselves on their grandfather's land.

Evangeline Winters, Cabot's sister, informed me otherwise. “We actually saved the poor baron, who had taken an insurance claim with our guild,” she said. “The Reeves were not responsible for his contract with the Engineers, and indeed, our insurance at least has his family living above street level.” This is true. The baron's son, himself a baron in title only, lives with his large clan in an old house in a respectable section of Tulasca. They would be mistaken for successful freemen if not for their coat of arms and two old servants who follow them everywhere.

The Reeve presence on the world is centered at Casa





Mundo, a large estate with Regency-style towers and masonry work. With so many imperial contracts coming to Tethys, the Reeves redoubled their efforts to become the bankers for most of Tethys, with only the local Tethys Charity and Usury Guild standing in their way of a complete monopoly on the world. Since the local banking guild is affiliated with the Reeves (and only has the resources to conduct a fraction of the financial transactions the off-world Reeves do) many say that the Reeves really do run the world. Still, old blue-blood Tethyians use the Tethys Charity and Usury Guild out of a sense of local pride.

The Scravers and Morticus Guild possess such muscle that the Reeves need them for transportation, agrarian and other services, and the “three sisters” have an alliance. The Scravers run many small operations, from Second Republic materials salvaging to casinos, brothels, restaurants and the lucrative local mining guilds; their cumulative interests on Tethys are huge. “Oh, to marry a Scraver’s daughter, and live on pure off-world water, “ as the song goes.

Tulasca

This city, run by Dean Benita “the Fox” Ivankov, head of the Scravers, claims to be the oldest city on the world, a claim disputed by Nuevo Madrid. Since the Dean of the Scravers is not often present, real power falls into the hands of Carmen Ivankov, Head of Operations and Personnel. She agreed to meet with me in the Scraver headquarters in the old Alecto palace. Tulasca has every vice known to our unhappy race, from prostitution, gambling, alien wrestling and fighting, taking a back seat only to Criticorum. Yet Carmen places a positive spin on things. “Prostitution beats starvation, and many of our workers wed above their station to wealthy clients,” she said. She then rattled off the better services of Tulasca, including the Air and Water Purification and the Toxin Removal Guild, all controlled by the Scravers, and the latter so popular that they even have a vid show with a loud theme song.

I made it a point to walk alone through the city, finding, as I often do, that areas which people say are to be avoided are fine in daylight (save for the beggars). I meditated on the lack of civil spirit under these guild cities. Everyone was competing. Except for some local sports teams, there seemed to be little unity. I walked in the old and poor Santos District (a.k.a. Blight Town), where poverty proved the best preserver of the wonderful ancient architecture. There are gangs here, but I displayed my shield with the Emperor’s banner, and they all came up to look at it. Having served with their older brothers and sisters, I knew how to deal with these people: give them something to fight for, and they become the most loyal, toughest soldiers in the Known Worlds. I gave my usual speech about the nobility of imperial service,

and some of these tough kids bought me some wine and listened to my tales. I even got two of the older ones to sign up. “The Emperor is the *jeffe* of my gang,” I said, sounding like a walking cliché, but they bought it. *Jeffe* is slang for leader or boss.

One of their leaders said to me: “Those Church monks come here, and they say the Pancreator is the father of all gangs, but the Emperor, he has starships and armed men. I bet the Pancreator couldn’t raid a rival’s territory — you need muscle, like the Emperor’s starships.” I wasn’t sure if my message was getting through, but in some manner the idea of noble service was communicated. I actually enjoyed my time here, and three gangs acting in unison guarded me.

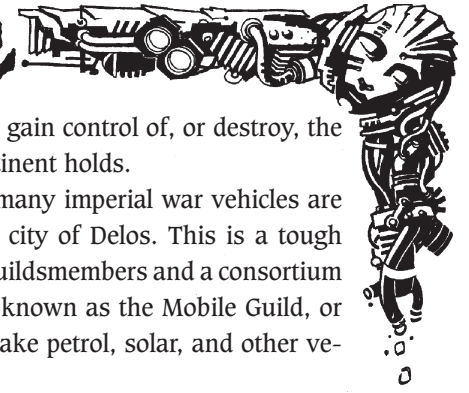
The government services, clustered around the old Alecto castle, are in the southern area known as the Urth Quarter, because many Urth people settled here well into the Second Republic. They tell me it is Urth-like in its small shops, restaurants and performances, but two-thirds of it is now administrative and guild territory. The extreme west and north, along Stone Creek, house the wealthier inhabitants, in Palamedes Park and Vladgrod. There are some here who are noble and whose ancient traditions of hospitality make a knight feel welcome. Many marveled at an Imperial Knight coming here, and had plenty of questions. I guess my small drop of Justinian blood helped me open doors, although my family lost any claim to noble titles eight centuries ago.

Sumeru

A small, mountainous island continent, named after the great mountain that rests in her midst, this is a sparsely inhabited region. The Li Halan maintain a fief here, and the Eskatonics have some land, but large parts of it are claimed by the Sea Harvester Guild and Morticus Guild. Many of the people here were relative latecomers to Tethys, arriving in the Second Republic and early Age of Nobles, and are still considered half-natives by the rest of the planet. I never spent time there before, but went now.

The freemen here are proud and numerous, living mainly in Port Java. They have managed to keep the mountains off-limits to many, for they were strip-mined long ago of precious ores and metals. Still, wildlife made a comeback here, and I enjoyed the sight of sea cattle swimming upriver to their spawning grounds in the mountainous pools, a beautiful and rare sight on Tethys.

I visited the Eskatonic monastery St. Guenons, and then moved on to the Li Halan fief, nestled in the west of the small island continent. Lady Daria displayed her millirice farms, and we spent some time hunting. She managed to keep her estates by staying out of planetary politics during the Emperor Wars on this largely pro-Alexius world.



Airyava Vego

The western continent is home to some of the great industrial shops and factories, where air and spacecraft components are manufactured under well-guarded secrecy. Although no maps display their locations, it is general knowledge where these imperial towns are located. These factories were left over from the Second Republic and seized by the Ten. For a time, more than 10 factory towns, vying with each other in stiff competition, produced air and space equipment for 10 different houses. The Engineers and Charioteers vied with each other for noble contracts, and small turf wars often erupted between the competing factions. Vladimir put a halt to this, claiming control over the continent and consolidating all the competing bases under his authority, a practice the Regency continued.

In the Regency days, control over the Airyava Vego base was a sought-after prize. Each succeeding regent in turn would place her house in the top management/overseer position of the Regency Air Intelligence Defense (RAID) bases, and gather the most technology before having to turn it over on the ascent of the next regent. In such chaotic times, the RAID Base Commanders eventually ran things, and the more powerful ones possessed the clout to stand up to various regents. Even Halvor Li Halan, first and only Theocrat of the Known Worlds, could not get Major Rio, Commander of the Airyava Vego Raid labs, to turn over recent discoveries to the combined Regency/Church fleet. He excommunicated the commander in his role as Patriarch, an order that was rescinded after his death from the mysterious illness that swiftly consumed him. Indeed, both barbarian incursions

into Tethys sought to either gain control of, or destroy, the valuable resources this continent holds.

Aside from the bases, many imperial war vehicles are produced here in the small city of Delos. This is a tough town, filled with Engineer guildsmembers and a consortium of smaller weapons guilds, known as the Mobile Guild, or “mobies” for short. They make petrol, solar, and other vehicles.

Imperial military families recently began to settle newer communities along the western coast and inner lakes. Here, a strong attachment to our Emperor is visible, and an old war comrade, Shannon le Belle, escorted me around. Le Belle, a noted mapmaker and think machine expert, settled here with her husband at a small winery on the western plains. She looked over the draft of my travel itinerary (correcting many errors) before showing me some of the newer towns. Even retired veterans keep up military appearances; these imperial towns are similar to military bases in concept and design.

It was here that I found an old Hazat knight, Sir Juan Monty. Possessing an artificial leg and arm, the old knight said that he knew I needed instruction. “The Emperor has created a knight, but you need a tradition for the newer Imperial Knights to follow.” I listened carefully, as he trained me in prayer, concentration, and a new way of looking at the world. “Remember,” he said after testing my sword skills, “all divisible things go back into one, and when you understand that in your soul, then you will be a knight.” I decided to invite the old warrior to my small estate, to train me in more of the mysteries of knighthood.

Stigmata


The Imperial Navy blockades the Stigmata jumpgate, protecting the Known Worlds from the Symbiot threat. Symbiot attempts to reinforce their monstrous legions usually fail, since imperial orders are to destroy any unauthorized ship entering the system. League and noble ships have to gain permission to enter. They are escorted (and hence, boarded and inspected) by the Imperial Navy. Occasionally, deserters from Stigmata commandeer a small supply ship and try to run the jumpgate; sadly, most are blown to bits in the cold vacuum of space.

Stigmata stands in a war-zone between the Known Worlds and an enemy created from the genetic alchemical perversions of Second Republic science: the Symbiots. Having served here and fought on this world, I can safely write that the immensity of this struggle has driven warriors insane, and only the strongest maintain their composure. Most

information about Stigmata is classified. The invasive scanning one has to go through — every body cavity searched — just to get to Stigmata makes the trip unpleasant. There is nothing like being stripped naked and probed by medical and special ops units while they explain what they are doing in front of 20 new recruits, all the while making jokes about one’s skin condition. A trained Vorox in an antigravity circus, forced to blow bubbles while singing some twisted version of a popular Ravenna song while dressed in enormous clown clothes, has more dignity!

History

Discovered during the early Urth Diaspora, the planet then known as Shiraz and later Sepulcher underwent (and still undergoes) massive geological upheavals. Early on, a few mining towns dotted the world, but it was the arrival of



St. J'waltan and his early band of Universal Church Brethren who first made their mark in history. St. J'waltan's band descended from early followers of Zebulon from Aylon named the Sons of Fire; they were among those who heard the Prophet's first sermon when he returned from Yathrib. Succored by the early Church but scorned by the corporate royalists of their time, the Agniites (named after the ancient Urth Hindu deity of fire, Agni) came here seeking a home. In a miraculous action, St. J'waltan sacrificed himself to appease the angry world, and the geological shifts and volcanic activities stopped (2933). You can still see the spot, in the Durem Mountains, where the world accepted St. J'waltan's sacrifice. The beatific face of the saint, carved from stone on a mountainside, stands as a monument to faith. When the world is troubled, the carved saint's head assumes a redder pigmentation.

Later, Second Republic terraforming methods did not take well to this world. Nonetheless, the population grew during this time. The Agniites retained many of their own beliefs, tolerated by the Universal Church, until near the end of this epoch, when Church missionaries brought them more into the fold. After the Fall of the Republic, the al-Malik and League exerted the most control over this world, until the Symbiots attacked in the early 4900s. The al-Malik defenses were shattered, and many refugees hastily deserted Stigmata to Criticorum. The al-Malik and League, save for a few small fiefs and holdings, surrendered the world to the authority of the Regency, who rushed in the fleet and armies to hold the world. Psychics and theurges turned the tide and brought the sides to a rough stalemate. Church authorities belatedly recognized the merit in using psychics as warriors against the Symbiots, who seemingly had little defense against telepathy.

I can state from experience that the arrival of the Manifest Light Legion on Stigmata, comprised of both theurges and psychics, made every serf, enlisted warrior, and noble in the Third, Fifth, Seventh, Ninth and Eleventh Imperial Legions sleep better.

The stalemate was held on the world until the Emperor Wars. Countess Carmetha Decados, then the Stigmata Garrison Commander, took most of the Regency armies and attacked Criticorum, leaving behind a small guard with no reserve. The countess attacked the al-Malik as soon as they allied with the Hawkwoods, but her forces met defeat when the Fifth Dark Legion, the al-Malik Ukari shock troops, surprised them at the Battle of Rudaki (4991). The countess's best warriors - the bulk of the Stigmata Garrison troopers she had mobilized as her force - met death when the Ukari's night attack led to a rout.

Meanwhile, the Symbiots, sensing the weakness in the Regency defensive lines, attacked, rolling back humanity's defenders onto the plains of Durem and besieging the mili-

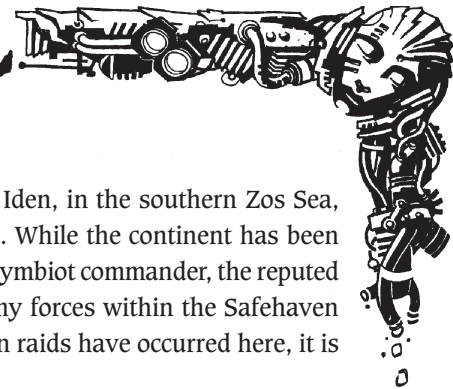
tary headquarters at Sytan. This bitter siege lasted five months. The Garrison was down to a week's rations and nearly out of ammunition when the "Miracle of Sytan" occurred. Hawkwood and Regency forces, under the banners of Alexius Hawkwood, made surprise landings behind the Symbiot forces and in Sytan, adding supplies, manpower and relief. Alexius broke the siege and routed the Symbiots in his famous Three Victories, which pushed the Symbiots back to their original position on Durem's eastern coasts. It was the relieved Sytan garrison that first hailed Alexius as Emperor. Next, Alexius made a daring raid onto Iden, crippling a Symbiot army, before following up with a cleansing operation in southern Durem, a region so inhospitable that both our forces and our foes have abandoned it. Today, raids and counterraid occur, but the Emperor's Peace has driven the fight from the Symbiots, who seem to hold onto their own territories as best they can.

Durem

I landed here, in Sytan. Sgt. Porfirio and Father Andrus, a hard-drinking theurge of the Eskatonic Order — and, incidentally, an expert and historian of military tactics — met me here. Sgt. Porfirio was a serf from a Hazat world when I met him, but he rose in the ranks due to a series of daring reconnaissance missions, and now owes loyalty to the Emperor. Indeed, displays of the Emperor are everywhere here: on banners, buildings, parchment, and items of sale — everything from liquor bottles to good luck tokens. It is said that the rumored quasi-sect of emperor worshippers known as the Reborn Sun originated here among a pro-Hawkwood faction of the Garrison. Whatever the case, the Emperor is certainly popular here!

I inspected some imperial troops. They should be complimented for their bravery and, upon retirement, be given communities to live in — barracks communities, perhaps on a frontier world, both for fear of Symbiot contamination and because many Stigmata soldiers have a hard time returning to the peaceful, daily lives of the Known Worlds. I suggest retiring them to the island continent of Thrace in the Geber Sea, home to many deserters. This would not only allow a watch on a potential rebellious province, but keep the veterans on-world, albeit far from the front lines. I, who only served here one year, still sometimes awaken at night in a cold sweat, reaching for my blaster, hearing in my mind the twisted human/animal screams of the enemy. If soldiers remain here more than three years, they are hard to redevelop as civilians.

Many accounts of war have humorous or cynical stories — indeed, there is on Criticorum and Byzantium Secundus a school of writers, sometimes composed of ex-servicemen, who think war has no larger meaning and is just a grinding death-machine that chews up young soldiers



on the altars of egotistical commanders and nobles. Yet here I have seen true heroism and redemption. Once, when my small company suffered from sudden worm sickness and diarrhea, a Symbiot night attack threatened to finish us. Suddenly the company pariah, Cecil “Droopey Drawers” Slagg, hurled himself on the Symbiot leader with a grenade and blew off his own arm, taking the life of the inhuman captain. We routed the demoralized Symbiots, and each of us fought for the honor of taking Slagg to the Amalthean healers. From pariah to hero in one day!

Father Andrus took me to some of the pubs about the base. “There seems to be a lull in the fighting,” he said. “Rumor has it that we have held a conference with some of the Symbiots’ minor captains, but whatever the reason, it gives the men some time for rest and relaxation.” I attributed these rumors to the sort of talk soldiers start from time to time to keep up morale. Another rumor states that retired Stigmata veterans are rewarded with employment in some lush tropical Leagueheim resort; this one has been circulating in various forms since I was here. Stigmata was, however, quiet for now, and when I toured the front, there was little recent action but for the usual attempts at reconnaissance by both sides.

Iden

The island continent of Iden, in the southern Zos Sea, is occupied by the Symbiots. While the continent has been firebombed from space, the Symbiot commander, the reputed Ogla Dukeer, hides his enemy forces within the Safehaven Mountains. Although human raids have occurred here, it is off-limits.

Thrace

Largely ignored by the fighting, Imperial deserters seek refuge here. I did not visit. I cannot stomach a community of deserters. While a man may lose his wits and flee during fighting, as happens at times to even hardened veterans, his duty is to return to his unit, suffer whatever punishment is warranted, and continue. A community of deserters only reinforces the worst values of men individually, although some deserters will fight hard and display bravery to retain their freedom. Recently, there have been rumors that the deserters have an alliance with some Symbiots deserters. Every soldier knows a version of this rumor: over the hill some of our men and theirs have deserted and formed their own territory. Believe me, versions of this have been going on since Kaiser Wilhelm’s war on old Urth.

[**Note to the reader:** More information on Stigmata can be found in the **Fading Suns** sourcebook *Legions of the Empire*.]

Nowhere

Nowhere is a world beyond history, for she swallows all history into herself like a collapsing star and spews it out pell-mell, so that the most eclectic and amazing things stand side-by-side. The atmosphere is faint, requiring breathing apparatus for long-term outdoor travel or short-term exertion, but the pressure and gravity is normal, so spacegear is not needed. Nowhere is a largely dead world, with few areas of native vegetation. The soil is black and cursed, although I have seen the monks of Maelestron Monastery and a few hermits produce miracles here with the soil.

Outside of the few cities and military bases, nomads roam at will, the descendents of Nowhere’s original inhabitants. They scavenge the old Second Republic ruins and sell the artifacts to offworlders at Necropolis, the only port open to space traffic. No major artifacts have been found for about a century, leaving many to believe that the old ruins have been tapped out, although useful stuff is still here — the Second Republic materials alone are worth the trip. To get at them, interested parties engage in smuggling, poaching and

even bribery of imperial officials, although the current imperial authorities are a lot more draconian about punishing violators than the old Regency hands.

History

Nowhere beguiles the researcher with scant sources, but I finally bribed a woman from the Archivist Guild on Shaprut to use her vast libraries to find something, for all I gathered on-world was local folklore. Nowhere, originally named Sao Paulo, was discovered in the 25th century. Although a few small families settled here, no large-scale migration occurred until around the 29th century, when settlers from Urth arrived. Nowhere bypassed the bloody history of the first-wave settlements. It seems that this planet once yielded a bountiful agricultural crop, and was noted for its fertile valleys and fields. There were signs of pre-Adamite ruins, with the Ur-pyramids dotting the equator standing as mute testimony to an earlier presence.

During the Second Republic, large agro-clans controlled



Nowhere

Cathedral: Orthodox (St. Claudius Cathedral, Necropolis)

Agora: Eastway (Scravers, under imperial contract)

Garrison: 6 (recently reduced)

Capitol: Necropolis

Jumps: 4

Adjacent Worlds: Stigmata (dayside)

Solar System: Eon (Sun), Cyclops (0.423 AU), Nowhere (2.98 AU; Ananda), Soma (21.56 AU), Gargantua (38.24, moons: Astarte, Kali, Persephone), Jumpgate (75.4 AU)

The moon Ananda holds signs of Ur artifacts, but only a family of Scravers, contracted by the Emperor, mines there.

Tech: 6 (Second Republic ruins and Ur artifacts)

Human Population: 1.7 million

Alien population: 7,937

Resources: Ores, Second Republic artifacts, fossil fuel

Exports: Refined ore, small weapons, Second Republic materials and artifacts, slaves, gravel, refined fuel, paints, jewelry, artwork, musical instruments.

Landscape: Largely desert, although the mountains hold some fresh water. Nowhere suffered immense devastation nearly a thousand years ago, destroying a once lush world. Nowhere's shallow seas, which recently covered 1/5th of the world, are gone.

the planet's politics, with the Balazar family holding the pre-dominate role. Late in the Republic, due to technical discoveries made at the University of Pao, an incredible technological jump in the production of android and cloned servants reached new heights, and the Republican military invested heavily in the region. Soon the wealth in the technology fields overran the agricultural clans, and the final century of Republican rule saw the seven techno-clans seize political power. When the Ten noble families and barbarian incursions ended the Second Republic, Nowhere was ignored, and she lent her military and technology to the Republican cause. After the defeat of the Republican Admiral McGowen at the Jumpgate Battle of 4012, the planetary defense force closed the jumpgate rather than face invasion.

When the world was rediscovered around 4388, a seemingly dead world met the Masseri scouting force. There were many rumors on the planet about how the former garden paradise was destroyed: strange, hybrid semi-human invaders, the blasphemous perfidy of an Antinomist, or the mad hubris of a theurgist were all blamed. The latter seems to be the most common found in folklore, and is the explanation accepted by the Church.

The Masseri party found people adapted to desert life

who still possessed some technology, but the University of Pao and the surrounding "zygot valley" were destroyed, along with many of the greater tech factories. No one can identify with precision when this happened, but an old hermit I encountered who counted the tree rings off a mighty fallen oak showed me the year, and it would correspond roughly to 4100, only a few generations after the jumpgate closed.

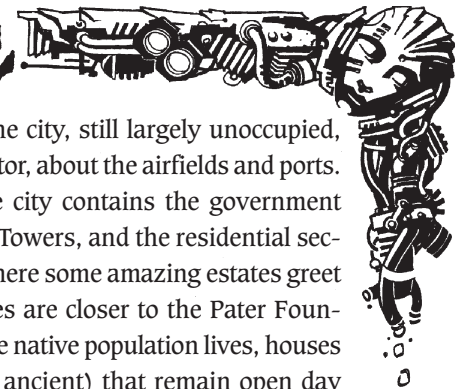
The Masseri claimed the world, and travelers would occasionally report rare technical finds. For a time, a small League/Church/Masseri governing party existed (4200-4515), with small policing powers, but the world was administered from Stigmata. Finally, in 4514, Duke Rurik Alecto conquered it for his family. It was said that Emperor Vladimir outfitted his armies with rare finds from Nowhere, and that some Ur technology his followers found there helped pave the way for his victories. After the Emperor's sudden death, a joint Justinian/Torenson attack "liberated" the world from the Alecto yoke, and the planet eventually became the fief of the Regency. The later fall of both families saw them relinquish their holdings on the world to the Regency in exchange for more valuable lands or badly needed funds to maintain their noble lifestyles.

The rise of the desert tribes occurred during the Regency days, as the Nassari nation grew. From 4600 on, there have been occasional clashes with between the nomads and Regency forces, and inter-tribal warfare between the tribal confederations. The power of the Red Ochre Nasaari, once the largest confederacy, was broken by the Regency's aid to the White Lizard Nassari and Blue Hawk Nassari (4807), and now the White Lizard Nassari claim the largest territory. Recently, disturbances of an alien — and some say, demonic nature — have occurred in isolated spots on the world, a sign of the fading suns phenomenon.

The solar system itself is quite barren. The ruins of a Second Republic base are found on Nowhere's moon, Ananda. For a time the Masseri utilized and repaired it, but for nearly 100 years the base has been declared off limits. Rumors abound of strange Symbiot spores that have infected the base, and much of it was destroyed in 4916 from space bombardment. Today, no one is allowed in or out, under threat of death.

Necropolis

I first arrived, as all offworlders do, at Necropolis. Tall buildings built of a shining, obsidian alloy of Second Republic make dominate the lone spaceport of Nowhere. Originally named Rudra, the city is older than the Second Republic. When the jumpgate reopened, the Masseri scouting force discovered Rudra still inhabited, but only by one-tenth of the previous population. They huddled near the Pater Fountains, one of the few sources of fresh water on the world,



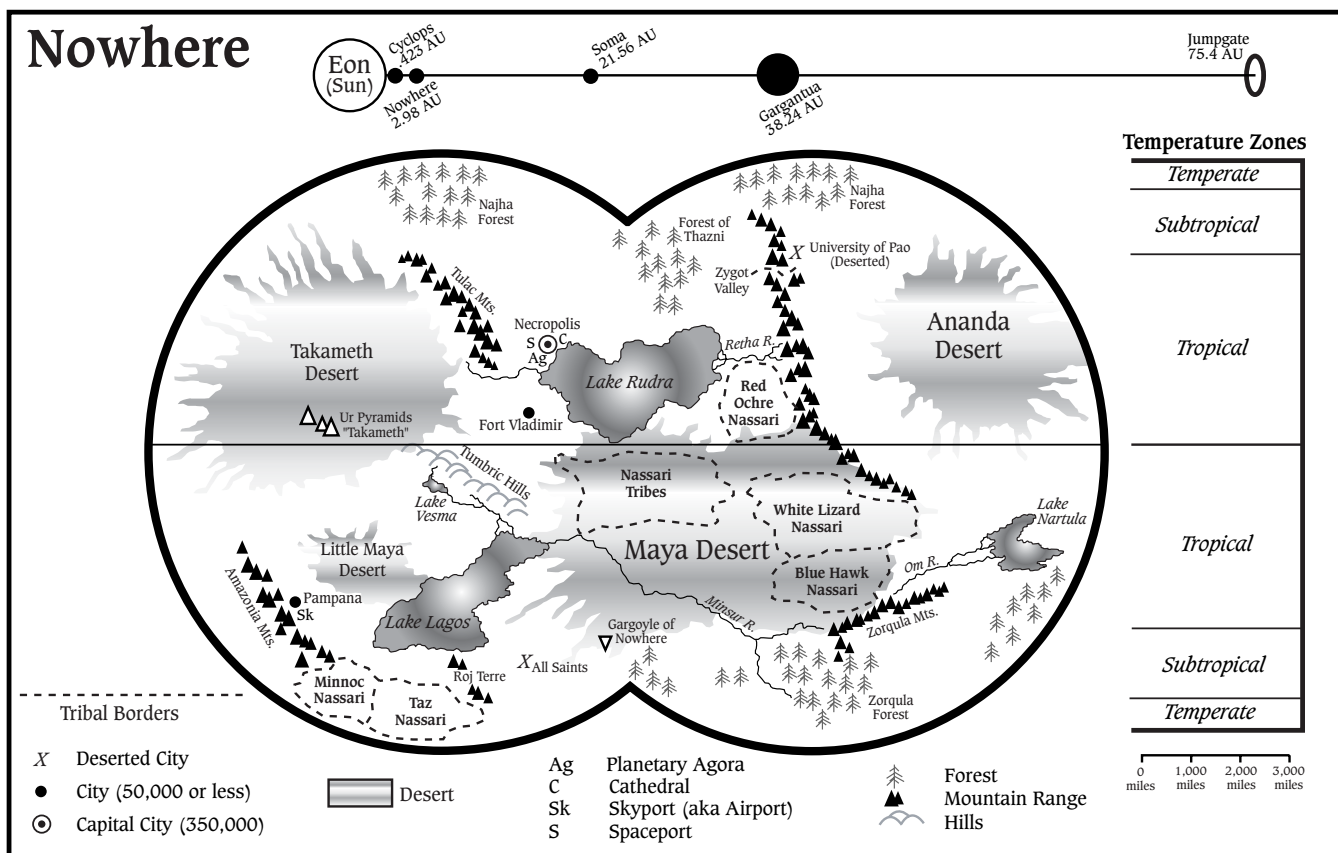
aside from the Tulac Mountains. The black glistening towers, with their spectral spires, caused the al-Malik poet Salimann to name the city Necropolis, which stuck, although the natives still refer to it as Rudra. The Masseri discovered a limited government working under the resident Universal Church bishop, and continued to allow the Church authorities its claim to governance. The Universal Church declared that the planetary Church had not relapsed, although she sent theologians to help the resident Church hierarchy advance to current positions. Outside Necropolis, with its population of 350,000, are the nomads, who carry vestiges of the old faith with them.

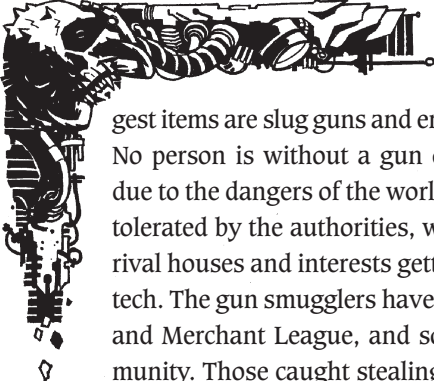
The ancient Trinitine Tower houses the Imperial Governor and Garrison Commander, General Albrech Brech. I found him and his men to be quite enthusiastic supporters of the Emperor, and they welcomed me with good cheer at a private dinner. Brech is the bastard son of a Hawkwood mother. Disowned by his family, he joined the Regency military, where he became an early supporter of Darius, and later, Alexius. He told me of the usual problems — troop morale and nomad raids— but with the capture of the Tumbric Hills, he pushed the nomads far into the interior. He raised the morale of his men by instituting a rotating system of off-world leave and allowing military families to come to Necropolis and Fort Vladimir, although they are not stationed anywhere else on world.

He gave me a tour of the city, still largely unoccupied, save in the southwestern sector, about the airfields and ports. The occupied section of the city contains the government offices, near to the Trinitine Towers, and the residential section known as Old Rudra, where some amazing estates greet the visitor. The richer estates are closer to the Pater Fountains. The Eastway, where the native population lives, houses shops (some modern, most ancient) that remain open day and night. Lights lead one to the St. Claudius Cathedral. St. Claudius, the page of St. Lextius, is the guardian of the world, an appropriate choice.

Bishop Lucio Borges had taken ill, so I could not see him. He is almost a century old and in poor health — blind, in fact — but is considered by Nowhere's natives to be their leader, since he was born in Necropolis. He has weathered all sorts of political changes with unusual adeptness. It is said his major concern has been to give the nomads the correct teachings. He has sent them numerous priests and monks, with some success, an encouraging thought when one considers the problems our beloved Church faces on other worlds, where heretical faiths spread like wildfires that must be put out.

I visited the shops. The Scravers have a presence here, but less than I expected. I was amused to find pirated copies of last season's magic lantern shows from Byzantium Secundus and Midian. Smuggling goes on here — the big-





gest items are slug guns and energy guns, along with shields. No person is without a gun of some sort outside the city, due to the dangers of the world. Gun smuggling seems to be tolerated by the authorities, who are more concerned about rival houses and interests getting access to Second Republic tech. The gun smugglers have connections with the al-Malik and Merchant League, and sometimes even gain legal immunity. Those caught stealing ancient technology are often publicly executed as an example to others — two Decados and one Li Halan smuggling rings were broken over five years ago with a number of public executions. Since then, things have quieted down.

There is also a small slave smuggling operation, an evil legacy from the days of Regency corruption, where nomadic people — ostensibly freemen — would be taken off-world for labor. Emperor Alexius cracked down on this, for which the nomads were thankful, but it still occasionally continues.

Fort Vladimir

Fort Vladimir was a military base founded by the first emperor to keep a watch on the nomadic tribes. Strategically placed to guard Necropolis 100 miles to the southeast, the fort was built over an already existing military installation used by the city of Rudra for a similar purpose. The Alecto family modified it extensively, stretching the defensive perimeter walls. Fort Vladimir houses a huge garrison, and inside it is like a small city with its own courts, stores, schools and entertainment centers.

The Regency forces used the fort to harry the nomads and as a supply depot for long raids into the desert. By 4780, the fort was so successful that it broke the power of Ulto and his nation (Green Scorpion Nassari), and there was subsequent talk of decommissioning it. Already, a sort of small town was growing up outside its perimeters, and fewer troops were needed for garrison duty. Friendly nomads would come and barter, and the fort was considered an easy assignment until 4902, when the Symbiot Wars began. No one officially admits that the Symbiots landed here, but suddenly the fort was again vital, and reconnaissance and hit-and-run missions against suspected infiltration areas became common.

During the early Emperor Wars, three clans of the Nassari, stirred by an insurgent Jakovian Agent, attacked with such savagery that they breached Fort Vladimir, armed with mysterious Second Republic weapons. Only swift reinforcements from Necropolis broke the siege, and the Regency force's command of the air soon scattered the invaders. The fortress commander, Captain Rezzori, assured me that the agent was captured. "We've had good relations since then," he said. "In the old days so much information wasn't shared — when the Regency changed hands, the old royal family gathered all the reports and left, often leaving the new

regent's agents to start from scratch. Thank the Pancreator, things are more efficient now."

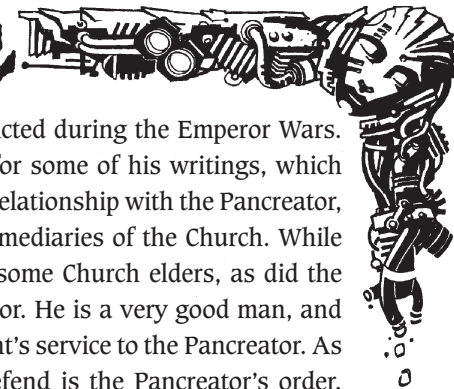
Outside Fort Vladimir's ionic mesh gates, the desert Nassari constantly yell to the soldiers, begging and haggling. You can find anything in these camps huddled about the imperial bases, but these people are a distraction, sometimes despised by the military, which periodically sweeps them from the area only to have them encroach again. Everything from weapons, sex, drugs, and pirated vid entertainment is for sale. How these remote people get their hands on these materials is hard to say; surely a complex smuggling ring operates under the imperial forces' intentionally blind eyes. The smugglers appear to operate through guild and imperial underground networks. Guns, lasers, swords, and other weapons can be bought here with impunity. Recently, a major in the Imperial Forces was caught by the Imperial Eye and removed as a warning.

I can honestly say that while these desert people are beggars, they are also ingenious. Nothing given them gets wasted, and some still drive about in 300-year-old Regency petrol vehicles that have remained in the same families for generations. They do not have the luxury of throwing items out, and they make use of everything given to them. Many carry ancient oxygen converters you would swear go back to the Second Republic — and you might not be wrong.

The soldiers call the market camp that sprawls beyond Camp Vladimir "Little Istakhr," after the famous Istakhr Market. Sometimes the soldiers "adopt" a young begging urchin as a mascot, especially if the child has no family, and give the kid money and education. At times, some of these kids have joined the Imperial Forces and become quite good soldiers, not only as interpreters between the Nassari and the Imperial Forces, but also due to their fearlessness in battle.

Sadly, some of the bastard children begat by soldiers and Nassari are not accepted by the tribes, and they live a scavenging life, stealing military supplies, riding undetected in transport ships, and forming gangs that compete with each other for food and territory. They are known as Sharzi by both the imperial forces and the Nassari. The word might be a derivative from the Nassari word *Shardiza*, or "young (wild) animal." These children sometimes get adopted by the time they grow up, but they are more likely dead by then. Their life is a sad one. If caught sneaking onto military lands as an adult, they are often shot. If a gang gets too strong, the tribes move in and wipe it out. A few escape this life by skill or luck, or adoption by a sympathetic adult. Most do not. You don't see many Sharzi in their 20s.

One can lose one's faith in human nature on Nowhere. I remember being on leave when a woman approached me, offering sex for food. I bought her the food but refused the sex, for which some men on base called me stupid and naïve.



She was nineteen, the daughter of an Imperial Forces Supply Officer. She ran off-base with her lover, a soldier, whom her father forbid her to see. He deserted the military to marry her, but was slain by a local thief for his military cloak. Her father wouldn't take her back, and she was attempting to survive, hoping to buy her way off-world to find her distant aunt on Byzantium Secundus. I offered to get the funds to pay her fare, but when I went back to meet her in Sao Triste she did not show. I sometimes wonder what happened to her. It is the task of a knight to help the weak, but I feel I failed here.

Maelestron Monastery

This 380-room Second Republic, eclectic-style stone mansion was built for the union of Osumi Li Halan and his bride, the Countess Alexandria Decados, in the waning days of the Republic. When Osumi died, Alexandria consulted a spiritual medium who informed her that the restless dead had cursed the couple for the vile sins of both families. The curse could only be abated if the widow kept building a mansion to house the spirits of those slain by both houses.

Masons and builders labored night and day to carve ghastly statues, bizarre architecture and tortured images while Alexandra dined with the ghosts in bizarre, 12-course meals that always seated 17 — herself and the dead. Finally, the exhausted work force rebelled and bricked her, alive, in her solarium, where she perished. The Decados family regained the mansion when contact with the world was renewed, but it proved a financial drain to maintain and was given as a gift to Brother Paulus of the mendicant monks. Paulus served as a sometime confessor to the last Decados owner, Duke Mikhail, who lived on Cadavus. The cynical say he was bought off and given a gift in remote Nowhere to keep silent. However he gained it, Brother Paulus who turned the ghastly structure into a monastery.

It is an interesting place, haunted in the western portions (I witnessed a ghost descending the stairs in the company of three monks). The resident monks, both male and female (housed in separate wings of the mansion) practice the Via Corporeus, a system of bodily contortions, yoga, and martial arts called Fa-do, which is supposed to bring the practitioner away from "reflected consciousness" and closer to the Pancreator.

I spent a week here, marveling at the monks' work with cotton and clothing creation. It was a curious place, perched on the edge of the Maya Desert. Despite the purification rites performed by the monks, an unsettling feeling still pervades the deeper portions of the Maelestron Monastery, where some claim that Alexandra's hungry ghost moves about in eternal damnation.

I held excellent conversations with Brother Aris, famous for his work *Gift of the Pancreator*, which was a salve to so

many spiritual wounds inflicted during the Emperor Wars. He was sent here as exile for some of his writings, which seemed to promote a direct relationship with the Pancreator, bypassing the priestly intermediaries of the Church. While not heretical, it displeased some Church elders, as did the rising popularity of its author. He is a very good man, and we spoke long about a knight's service to the Pancreator. As he said, "The order you defend is the Pancreator's order, and you must see your work, as I do mine, as a bulwark against seen and unseen forces which would bring harm to the design and intent of the Pancreator's work." So popular is he still that the Church is thinking of bringing him back to worlds where he is more needed, to fan the dying flame of faith in areas where vile sects of Incarnates spread.

Maya Desert

Covering the middle and southern regions of the planet, the Maya Desert is merciless. Beyond Fort Vladimir and the Maelestron Monastery lies a bleak land of harsh winds, sun and nomads. One small city, Pampana, exists in the Amazonia Mountains. Supplied by airships, it holds a population of 200,000 or so, many of whom are engaged in mining old Second Republic shafts and ruins, while the rest practice greenhouse agriculture with imported soil. The city is walled against the nomads and run by an imperial captain, Vijaya, a freeman born on Ravenna, who entered the military near the end of the Emperor Wars. He told me that he has led military incursions against the nomads but prefers a more peaceful approach, for Pampana is an oasis of Known Worlds civilization in the harsh southern desert of Nowhere.

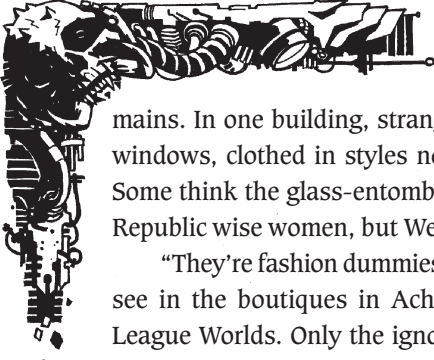
From Pampana, I went with two native guides to All Saints, vowing to find the Gargoyle of Nowhere, famed in legend.

All Saints

The end of all roads. Dust winds forever batter against window shutters. A small dog scurries between ghost town buildings, while a warm rain suddenly falls, becoming a heavy downpour, ending as soon as it begins, leaving red mud pools the consistency of blood. A swarm of insects appears and descends over the pools, breeding and laying eggs. Within half an hour the pools are dry, the ground hard. A hot breeze sweeps through the dry thorn-grass, creating shadowy monsters across the red desert sand. When night falls, the moaning winds echo off the gigantic buttes, howling in anguish. Dreams rise and fall, grains of sand blown by the night air.

In All Saints, the preserved Second Republic buildings stand above the shifting desert, an eclectic mixture of styles, all worn by the sand and winds. Most of the materials have been scavenged; here and there, the Taz tribe that controls the area continues the slow process of gathering what re-





mains. In one building, strange statues stand in air-locked windows, clothed in styles not seen since those lost days. Some think the glass-entombed figures are the cadavers of Republic wise women, but Weapons Spec. Howard laughed.

"They're fashion dummies, store-front dressing, like you see in the boutiques in Acheon, Istakhr, or some of the League Worlds. Only the ignorant sons of bitches who live here don't know that." He had a bitter laugh over that, because these glass cases were well-tended, and offerings are made to these beautiful mannequins. I wonder if they were once androids? Some of the nomads occasionally camp nearby before consulting the Gargoyle of Nowhere. This is the last spot before the waste, which holds the Gargoyle, and the occasional offworlder comes to ask questions. The nomads restrict access to the glass-encased figure to those they deem their wisest, for there is a series of tests a man or woman must undergo before consulting the oracles.

The nomads seem to regard All Saints as a holy place. Nearby, the red rock called by the natives *bloodstone* is mined. The Taz tribe claims possession of the mines, but any nomad who enters may mine; it is open to all Nowhere's people. While no fighting occurs in the famous canyon of the red earth, the Taz have fought several battles for possession of the trade routes and the lands about the mines. The Minnok seem to be their main rivals. Legend states that when the Second Republic fell, local Republicans and nobles clashed here, staining the ground red with their blood. The leader of the Republican forces was the Prime Senator, by constitutional decree the head of the Republican Armed Forces after the President, who perished in the sacking of Byzantium Secundus. Count Vassily Aleto, head of one of the most powerful noble houses, led the noble forces. It is said that the Prime Senator released the Atmospheric Int-bombs that sucked up all the oxygen above the noble host, before causing a chain reaction across the doomed planet. One wing of the noble army escaped the initial atmospheric attack, and engaged the Republicans in one of the greatest battles in human history.

So great was the slaughter that the survivors named Roj Valley *Rojterre*, the Valley of Red Earth. The survivors swore an oath to battle each other no more, and the pledge is still maintained through the ritual drinking of the sacred red powder made from this land, mixed by tribal leaders with water. The drinkers pledge peace in the name of the Pancreator.

It is said that the tribes are remnants of the two hosts, but some of the Minnoc believe that the Republican survivors withdrew under the earth, where they formed an underground city. I heard this rumor again and again. If there is any truth to it, this city has not been found. Even several offworlders, including an intelligent archeologist from Byzantium Secundus, Torrence Lang, seemed to believe it.

Several caves have been found with Second Republic treasures, and the deeper one looks, the more are found. I don't know if this is true or not. Many, even the best of people, believe rumors out of proportion to reality.

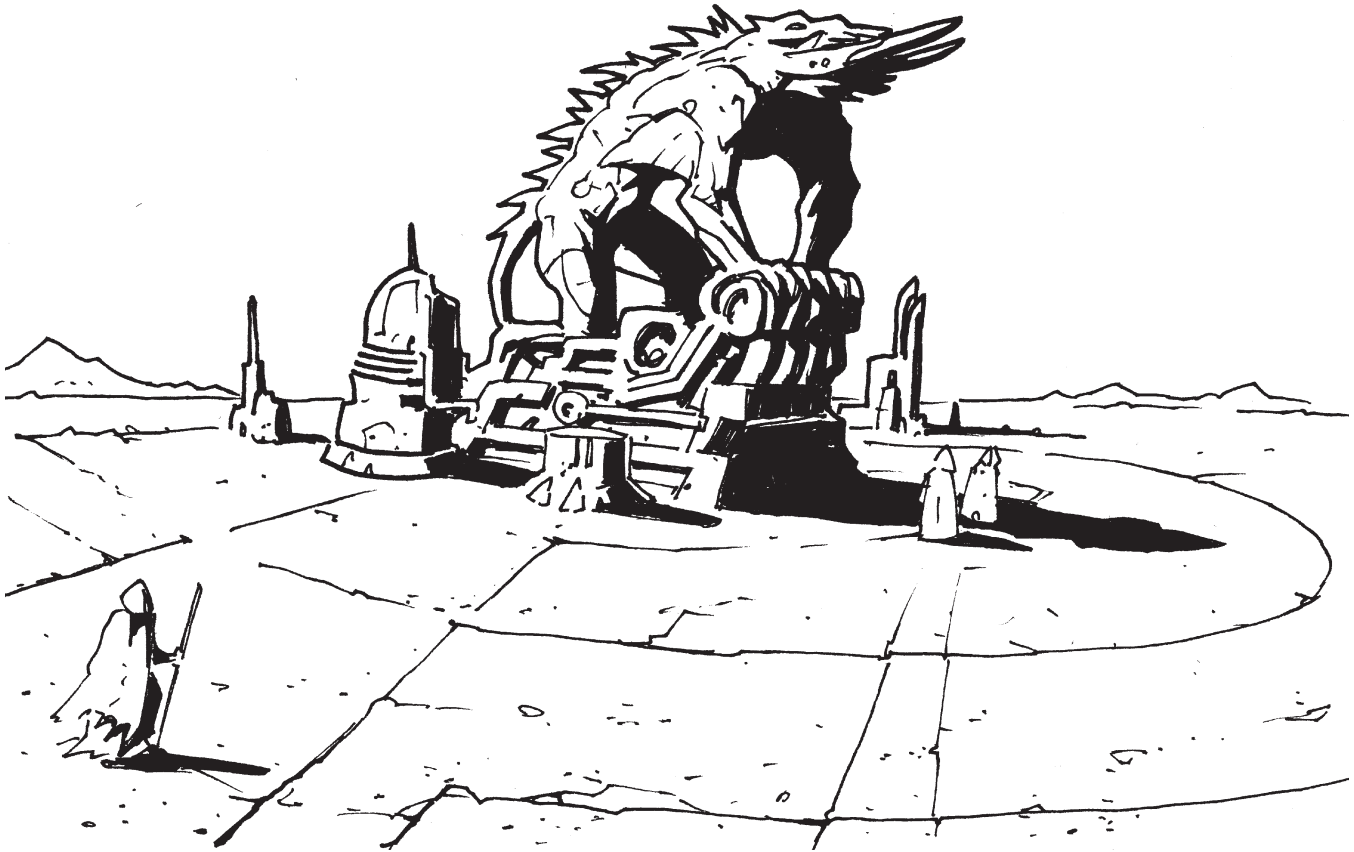
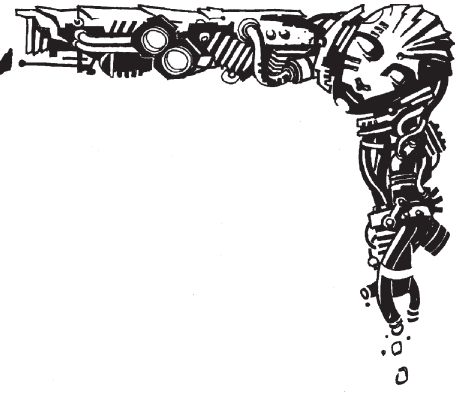
Urzenkai, the Gargoyle of Nowhere

Out in the vast wastes beyond All Saints stands the Gargoyle of Nowhere, called Urzenkai by the nomads. I resolved to find it and, taking two native guides, I went in search of the famed Anunnaki statue. The two guides told me that if the Gargoyle speaks to you, it is a personal matter, not to be discussed or shared. I asked them for more about the Gargoyle of Nowhere, and they told me it was left by the Dawn Gods (such was the guides' name for the Anunnaki) to guard the world against the return of the Night Realms. This gave me an insight into the mind of the nomads that was earlier denied me. I continued with my questioning, but more importantly, I listened to what they said.

The universe decays, they said, because the high sciences of the Republic robbed folk of their faith in the Pancreator. When the faith was destroyed by scientific wonderment, a psychic shield produced by billions of humans cut off communication with the higher, reflective realms. Beings from the lower realms found it easier to tunnel into our universe. Before, they were halted by angelic protectors sent by the Pancreator, but with a psychic shield composed of materialistic belief halting this higher communication, the lower beings bore their way in, opening doors to the nightmare realms. The end of the Second Republic and the strengthening of the Church briefly slowed the process, but soon the age will come when these dark beings show themselves.

I told them that there was an Emperor on the throne, and they said yes, but this was a hidden war, fought between powers. The Gargoyle protects us from them, they said. After four days we found the Gargoyle, massive and magnificent, the pre-human guardian of this lonely world. I asked a question, and the answer I received I am not permitted to write here, or communicate, save that it was personnel and not foreboding.

We were delayed in our return by fierce desert storms, but we finally came into All Saints. My guides said that their tribe heightened its protection of the Gargoyle because two years ago a man came, carrying explosives and possessed by demons. They had no choice but to kill him, as he cast no shadow in the noonday sun and he was walking, alone, in the direction of earlier pilgrimages. "The Gargoyle can defend itself," Jul-Taiku, the younger guide said. "We have to keep watch, however, for that is the bargain we made centuries ago when the planet went bad and Urzenkai saved us."



While I was in All Saints, I witnessed a husk attack. These are rare on this world, but the tribesmen said an evil sorcerer has inhabited some of the old ruins about Tathurn and has stirred the dead up. The nomads had protective amulets, and the husk attack became a slaughtering of the already dead. I joined in, but the fighting made me physically sick, as the hot sun carried their reeking smell, and I nearly vomited. Still, victory was ours, and I asked for more about this sorcerer. The tribesmen said she was an offworlder, an Eskatonic priestess who found something out in the wastes and now sought to control the passageways to the Gargoyle.

"She has some outlaws about her, a small force, but it is growing," they said. "We attempted to destroy her two years ago, but her forces hid in the desert and we could not find her, although we found one of their hastily deserted bases. The elders say she is possessed by an unclean thing, a demon of the waste places. She calls herself AK-Lanait, which is not known in our tongue, but is a tongue spoken, we believe, before people came here."

I made a report of their talk and submitted it to General Brech. He was already aware of her, and reconnaissance air patrols have spotted some human habitation in the ruins described. Brech awaited the arrival of a high Church expert, one of the Kalinthe, to deal with the situation. I felt depressed, and wondered why here, on an imperial world, some elder curse had found its mark.

There will be no spring here. There is a limit to what words are, what they can convey. Glyphs, symbols, characters with esoteric and common meanings fused into one convey nothing without intelligence. Somewhere, a wind demon howls idiotically as the dull, red sun sets. I try to remember my knightly vows, but before this landscape, all I can recount is my prayer to St. Lextius the Knight, which I can barely get out of parched lips.

There is a limit to what words are, an end to all words, finally. Against a backdrop turning gray, all shapes merge into one, awaiting the dark of night. I hold my small light-stick against the drowning evening, a distant star engulfed in subterranean currents, flickering without meaning.

