

ALTERNITY[®]

SCIENCE FICTION



ROLEPLAYING GAME

PROTOSTAR[™] MISSION GUIDE

▪ BAKER ▪ NOONAN ▪ SCHUBERT ▪
▪ TOWNSHEND ▪ WINTER ▪

Welcome to the Future. Better Watch Your Back.



The year is 2268, and humans have settled Mars, the asteroid belt, and the moon systems of the outer planets. On Neptune's moon Triton, a mysterious alien gate leads to a network of wormholes spanning hundreds of star systems. But this is a dangerous time to be alive: crime lords, despotic governments, and corrupt megacorps are all fighting to control the future. Choose your friends—and enemies—carefully.

The Mission Guide is the perfect companion for the ALTERNITY® Science Fiction Roleplaying Game. This adventure anthology and campaign sourcebook includes:

- An overview of the power groups, villains, and technology of the Protostar setting.
- A description of the Solar System in the 23rd century.
- Five ready-to-play adventure episodes set in the Solar System ... and beyond.



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SCIENCE FICTION  ROLEPLAYING GAME

PROTOSTAR™ MISSION GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine sci-fi action with firearms and vac suits and zero-G, spies and criminal gangs and ruthless megacorps, and a dangerous universe humans are just beginning to explore. That's the Protostar™ universe, the first campaign setting for the *ALTERNITY Science Fiction Roleplaying Game*.

So what's the Protostar setting all about? The short answer is that it's dark, industrial, "hard" sci-fi set two hundred and fifty years in the future. Imagine *Mission Impossible*-style ops in Martian domed cities or *Aliens*-style rescue missions in research outposts on newly discovered exoplanets, and you won't be far off the mark. Humans have colonized the Solar System and are reaching out to the closest stars. It's a chaotic and competitive age, with dozens of factions and powers and corporations all doing anything they can to get ahead.

In this universe, the heroes are freelancers and troubleshooters. They're highly skilled experts, paid to take on dangerous jobs such as exploring unknown star systems, taking down violent criminal gangs in asteroid cities, and carrying out industrial espionage (or sabotage) against evil corporations. Sometimes they're on the right side of the law, sometimes they're engaged in deniable black ops for a client who needs results and can't get them any other way, and sometimes they're outright criminals . . . but that's the universe they live in.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This guide is intended for the Gamemaster. You need the *ALTERNITY Core Rulebook* to run the adventures presented in this *Mission Guide*. (You can purchase a PDF version at drivethrurpg.com, or ask your local game store to order a copy for you.)

This guide consists of two parts: a summary of the factions, places of interest, and technology of the 23rd century that provides the information you need to create and run adventures in this vision of the future, and five adventures that dive right into the Protostar setting. Many campaign guides seek to present an exhaustive description of a setting, but then fail to provide ready-to-play material you can use at your table immediately. The *Mission Guide* deliberately reverses that approach.

We describe the adventures in this book as episodes; we think that the best analogy for a sci-fi RPG campaign is a television series. Like an episodic television show, there isn't necessarily a lot of narrative that connects one episode to the next—the unifying element of the “show” is the group of heroes who encounter new challenges and face tough new decisions every week. You can run the adventures in order and provide your players with a short campaign for a few months of exciting play, but feel free to interject adventures and plot arcs of your own creation into the series—ultimately, that's what makes it *your* campaign.

THE PROTOSTAR UNIVERSE

The universe of the Protostar setting exists several centuries in our own future. Humanity is just beginning to explore the nearby stars. It's an age of rivalry and competition: Riches beyond imagining are just waiting to be discovered out there, and much of human space is a lawless frontier where anything goes.

SEVEN THINGS TO KNOW

Here's what you need to know about the 23rd century in seven short points.

WE'VE SETTLED THE SOLAR SYSTEM

Millions of people live on (or in) the Moon, Mars, the Jovian moons, and the larger asteroids. Ships can manage several gravities of acceleration and keep it up for weeks on end, making travel between the planets fast and cheap. A typical interplanetary voyage consists of several days of 1 g acceleration to turnaround, a "flip ship" maneuver in zero-g, and then a deceleration leg for a zero-speed arrival at the destination. You can get from the Earth to Saturn in ten days . . . or half that time if you're willing to put up with high-g acceleration.

HUMANS ARE CHANGING

Thanks to advances in genetic design, cybernetic enhancement, and neural science, humankind is evolving in new and unpredictable ways. A "human" might be a baromorph bred as a genetic slave for heavy labor, a spider-limbed elaphromorph with a neural interface in her head, an emancipated android, or a serial clone hosting centuries-old memories in search of immortality. More than ever, society wrestles with the question of what it means to be human.

THE TRITON GATE

Eighty years ago, scientists discovered an anomaly on Neptune's moon, Triton: a vast alien structure buried in the icy crust. The structure anchors one end of a wormhole with thousands of possible destinations—some nearby, others quite distant indeed. No one knows who built the Triton Gate, and only a small fraction of the wormhole destinations have been explored.

The wormhole's destination is set by a complex "transponder code" signal. For decades now everybody with the means to do so—scientific expeditions, would-be colonizers, corporations seeking valuable resources,

and military missions from the rival powers of the Solar System—has been frantically researching new codes to find new destinations. A code solution that leads somewhere new is potentially worth billions.

SOMEBODY OWNS YOU

Well, probably not you literally, but they own your expensive ship (or your Gate license) and they have ideas about what you should or shouldn't be doing with it. From the day you set out, you're entangled in a web of international intrigue, corporate competition, and hidden agendas. Are you looking to climb the corporate ladder by being the most efficient problem-solver they've got? Are you a true explorer, dedicated to solving the mysteries of the galaxy while avoiding the politics? Or are you an opportunist just waiting for your big break to come along?

WE'RE ALONE ...

We haven't run into any other starfaring civilizations like us—yet. So far we seem to have the starways to ourselves. But even in the comparatively small corner of the galaxy we think of as ours there are many lifeforms known to be intelligent or dangerous inhabiting various planets, and probably several times as many we just don't know about yet.

... AND WE'RE NOT ALONE

While intelligent species such as the kwll or the skiarth pose troubling questions for humans interested in their planets, we've also found evidence of starfaring civilizations that may not be around anymore. The ruins of the h'naal have been found in a dozen planetary systems; none appear to be less than a million years old, but we can't be really sure that they're dead. There are also persistent rumors of "dark ships" spying out human activity or inexplicable starship disappearances that might point to the action of some unknown starfaring species.

THE PROTOSTAR NEXUS

Recently, a new Gate code led to an incredible discovery: a fantastic complex of multiple alien structures like the Triton Gate in a proto-star system located within the Orion Nebula. Normally a discovery of this sort would have been kept absolutely secret by the organization that funded the expedition, but in this case someone in the know deliberately published the code. Everybody knows how to reach the Protostar Nexus, and the next great land rush is on.

RIVALRIES AND POWERS

The 23rd century is a time of deep division and fierce rivalries. The centuries-old dream of a united humanity taking our first steps together into the broader universe remains just that—a dream. Earthbound nation-states, independent colonies and space habitats, outlaw settlements, hostile factions, and giant corporations that make their own laws all compete for valuable resources and economic power. Sometimes this competition consists of brutal but legal business dealings, industrial espionage, and cyber-sabotage, but sometimes the competition meanders into skirmishing, raids, and terror strikes, especially in the crime-ridden tenements of Earth's overcrowded cities or the unpatrolled frontier regions of the Solar System.

NPC SPOTLIGHT

- The most successful “Gate-jumper” at Triton, Adele Durocher, is a brilliant and resourceful woman who has dared 11 unexplored Gates. She makes it back each time, but her crew sometimes doesn’t. She commands a fee of millions for her services.
- King Thule is a violent gang-leader who rules over the Krakens, an outlaw gang in the worst district of Vesta. A genetically engineered monstrosity standing 2.5 meters tall, he sees himself as a modern-day barbarian warlord.
- Zara Pham works as a fixer and facilitator for a secretive patron called Icarus, hiring expert teams for difficult heists and hacks. Icarus is quietly acquiring Gate-builder artifacts, even if they have to steal them from museums or megacorp labs.

EARTH

While terrestrial blocs such as Europe and China remain relevant throughout the Solar System, Earth is mostly a dead end: crowded, polluted, and resource-depleted. Humanity's homeworld remains carved up into more than one hundred nation-states. Some are large, some are tiny, some are rich and technologically advanced, and some are poor and backward. The most important include:

- The **European Confederation** is small, but rich. The financial sectors of cities such as Amsterdam, Milan, Paris, and Stuttgart serve as the banking centers of the world.
- The **Saharan League** includes many of the Islamic countries of North Africa and the Middle East, a 23rd-century Ottoman Empire stretching from the Caucasus to Nigeria. It's dominated by rich dynastic families that control various commercial empires.

- The **Socialist Collective of China** is a cybernetic police state that dominates eastern Asia. China is a military and scientific powerhouse whose reach extends throughout the Solar System.
- The **American Union** began as a defensive alliance of the democratic Anglosphere countries: Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, and the United States. Generations of economic decline have left the Union a hollow shell dominated by corporatist interests.
- The **Lunar States** are a hodgepodge of colonies, extraterrestrial possessions, and independent settlements. The major Earth powers quietly jockey for control of the Lunar States, but in recent decades a powerful “Lunar Solidarity” movement has come into being and is struggling to make the Moon into a free, whole, and independent nation.

In theory, the United Nations remains the body that best represents all the states and peoples of Earth. In practice, the UN is decrepit and powerless. However, it does serve as a hub for scientific commissions and common interests such as administering the operations of the Triton Gate. Cynics point out that the only reason the UN oversees the Triton Gate is because none of the major powers could bear to see one of their rivals in control of it.

Still in the same building in New York City.

THE SOLAR SYSTEM

The centers driving human progress are slowly but surely moving away from Earth. The states destined to dominate the next century are near-space powers with booming economies and technological sectors that churn out innovations at a dizzying pace.

From the inner portion of the Solar System to the outer worlds, key powers and places of interest include:

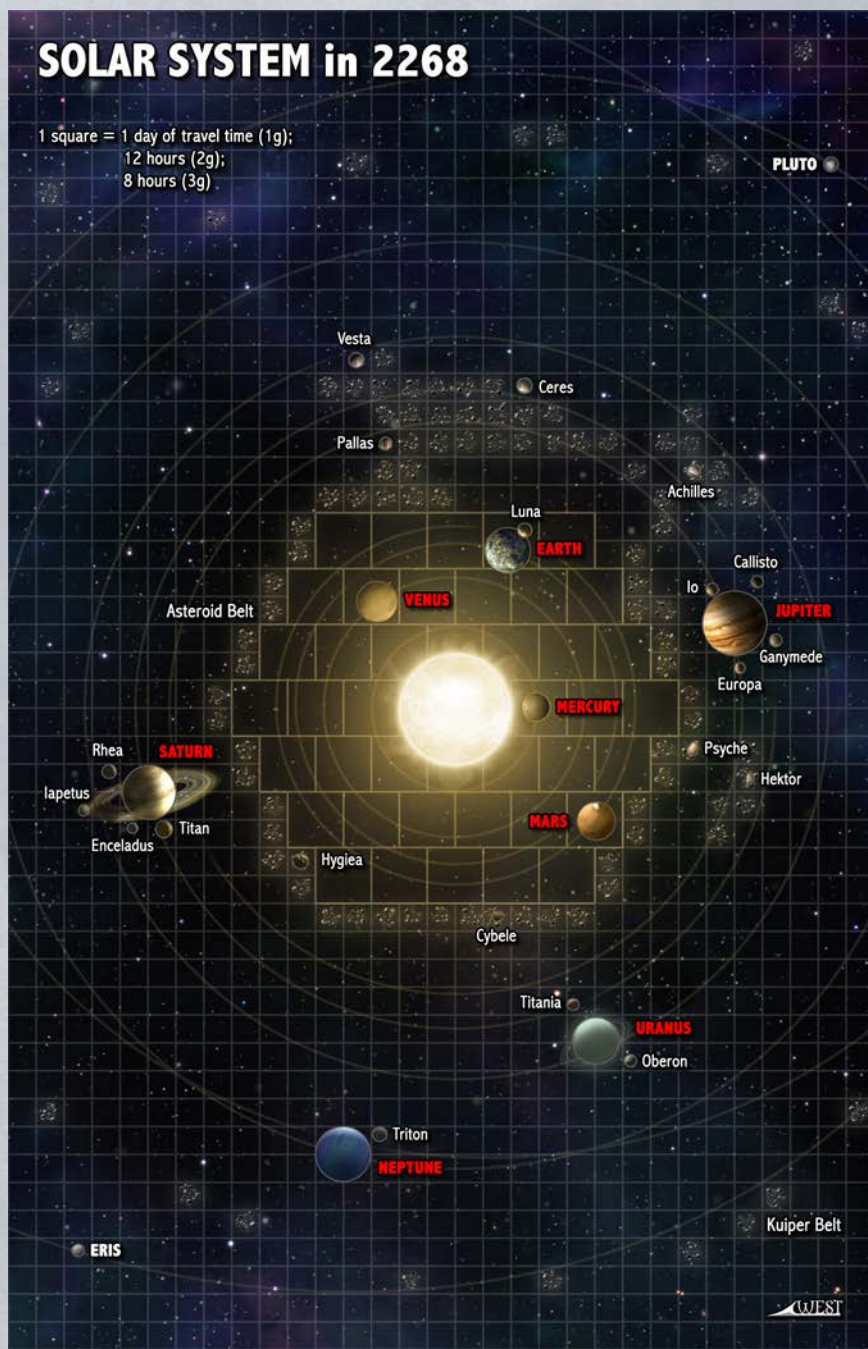
Helios League: An economic union of manufacturing hubs on Mercury and solar-powered space habitats in the inner part of the Solar System, the Helios League is the industrial heart of human space. Its government is weak and decentralized; business interests and labor movements fight for the upper hand.

Republic of Mars: Largest and strongest of the off-Earth states, Mars is home to more than three hundred million people. It's a relatively free democracy, although its politics veer wildly between an ever-changing roster of radical parties and a *laissez faire* business climate that attracts quite a few corporations.

The Asteroids: Dozens of asteroids are home to domed city-states or “bubble worlds” created by hollowing out mid-sized bodies and imparting enough spin to simulate gravity. Mining has always been the economic lifeblood of the asteroid settlements, but the need to establish self-sufficiency led to the development of major

SOLAR SYSTEM in 2268

1 square = 1 day of travel time (1g);
12 hours (2g);
8 hours (3g)



agricultural centers and the largest shipbuilding industrial base in the Solar System. Each major asteroid is essentially an independent city-state, but they band together to resist efforts of outside powers to gain a foothold in the belt.

- The Free City of **Vesta** is the biggest city in the belt. It's a wide-open, poorly regulated tax haven, trading hub, gambling destination, and center for illicit activity where anything goes. Vesta's the place you go to make a deal—legal, or otherwise. You'll find the richest people in the belt, and the poorest, in Vesta's tethered habitats and tunnels.
- **Ceres** is ruled by a "People's Collective" that serves as China's foothold in the asteroid belt. It's an outpost of Chinese power, not a state in its own right (although there's a revolutionary movement that hopes to change that). Ceres is a manufacturing powerhouse with vast robotic factories built in centrifuge cities and the place where China's system puts on a business-friendly face.
- The large, rocky asteroid **Pallas** is home to extensive hydroponic farms and serves as the grain belt of the asteroid belt. It's also the seat of the Church of Human Transcendence, and a center for genetic experimentation.
- **Hygiea** is a refining center whose principal industry is turning the asteroid's carbonaceous surface into useful CHON (carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen) compounds. It's under the control of the Tethys-Hygiea Syndicate, which turns a blind eye to the criminal gangs who run its crowded and dangerous settlements.
- **Psyche**, a massive metal-rich asteroid, is the mining capital of the belt and the site of several thriving shipyards.

Callisto: Jupiter's dangerous radiation belts make its moon system a difficult target for settlement, but Callisto is the best choice of the four Galilean moons. Generations ago, the United Nations sponsored a major relocation program to help poor countries on Earth settle excess population on a new world. Naturally, many countries sent their worst, and warlords and criminal cartels soon seized power. Callisto is now under the control of a ruthless warlord named Nomena Ramaroson, the so-called Pirate Queen of Callisto.

Titan-Rhea: A self-governing Martian colony, Titan-Rhea is a promising frontier state taking shape in Saturn's moon system. The wealth of Titan's valuable hydrocarbons and gas-extraction mining operations in Saturn's atmosphere mean that there's money to be made here; several other powers are working hard to peel Titan-Rhea away from Mars by funding separatist movements, independence parties, and terrorist groups.

Triton: The colonization of Neptune's largest moon was interrupted eighty years ago by the discovery of the Triton Gate. The

Ring City is a great "home base" for a campaign focusing on gate exploration.

Gate's operations center and research facility at Ring City is the only settlement on Triton, but it's home to thousands of people representing every major state or megacorp in the Solar System.

FACTIONS

Just as the human population is expanding away from Earth, so too is human society moving away from the nation-state as the primary organizing principle. Transnational entities such as giant corporations, political movements, religious organizations, and private foundations operate across the highly balkanized borders of nation-states. In a time when you can find a government willing to ban—or allow—almost anything, groups whose interests span multiple worlds are the true power brokers in human space.

CHURCH OF HUMAN TRANSCENDENCE

Transcendents believe that humankind is on the cusp of evolution into godlike immortal intelligences and that the key to unlocking this holy day lies in the engineering of a perfected human form. Genetic alteration and cybernetic enhancement are both potential paths to that holy end, and Transcendents therefore push the boundaries of science in search of perfection. The Church enjoys broad support in the Helios League and asteroid cities such as Pallas, but its followers can be found almost anywhere.

EMANCIPATIONIST FRONT

You owe your soul to the company store.

Corporate states operating in territory outside any government's jurisdiction now rule hundreds of millions of people. Some corporations deal fairly with their employee-citizens and choose to observe common human-rights protections, but many do not. The Emancipationists are a disorderly alliance of anarchists, reformers, revolutionaries, and whistle-blowers that opposes corporate rule and seeks to establish civil government in areas under corporate administration. Some Emancipationist groups are little better than bomb-throwing terrorists and others foment labor unrest and funnel arms to revolutionary groups in corporate territory, but they also serve as an important voice demanding rights and representation for people who don't have either.

MINERVA FOUNDATION

The Triton Gate has opened hundreds of star systems to human exploration and colonization, many of which we otherwise couldn't reach for millennia. Some people believe that it's too good to be true—sooner or later, the reckless exploitation of the Triton Gate will bring humankind face-to-face with someone a lot more advanced

than we are, and that will be the end of us. Therefore the Minerva Foundation supports near-star colonization with sleeper ships and development of human technology . . . with the secret goal of sabotaging continued Gate exploration and ultimately shutting it down altogether.

TERRAN BRIGADE

A wealthy defense contractor providing mercenaries, security services, and gunrunning to anyone who needs firepower and foot soldiers, the Terran Brigade is the Solar System's leading purveyor of muscle for hire. They're not above stirring up conflicts in order to sell to both sides, or choosing winners and losers with an eye to helping clients they can keep under their influence. Ultimately, the Brigade intends to seize the Triton Gate for their own by manipulating the UN (and any other powers) into entrusting the Brigade with its security.

UNARA

The United Nations Anomaly Research Administration is a poorly funded scientific council that serves as the central coordinating body for research into the Triton Gate's workings and the exploration of the wormhole's branches. Wealthy corporations and powerful national governments routinely step all over UNARA's mandate in the pursuit of their own interests, but the group manages to sponsor a handful of science-focused missions each year. UNARA is especially interested in finding other Gate-builder artifacts to learn more about who built the Triton Gate and whether they're truly gone.

People say
"YOU-nah-rah."

TECHNOLOGY

After the giant leaps of computing power, networking, and connectivity in the 20th and 21st centuries, the relentless march of progress slowly shifted away from data management to the physical sciences. In a lot of ways, 2268 is more like 2018 than 2018 is like 1968. The wildest predictions of "the singularity" have not yet come to pass; people live much like they have since the Information Revolution. They have jobs, they buy houses, they raise children, and they waste time watching banal vid programs and chatting in various social media outlets.

The biggest changes in the 23rd century stem from incremental but important advances in physics, nanotech, robotics, and genetic science. Fusion power plants provide virtually limitless clean energy; the EM drive opens up the whole of the Solar System to human colonization; and nanoengineered materials make awesome projects

The Singularity:
The notion
that advancing
technology will
transform humanity
into a post-
biological species.

such as space elevators, domed cities on Mars, and orbital habitats commonplace. People might live a lot like they did in the 21st century, but more and more of them live and work in space or on other planets—and, thanks to the Triton Gate, on new worlds orbiting distant stars.

SPACESHIPS

Interplanetary spaceships are commonplace. Most private individuals can't afford one, but wealthy people have access to "corporate-jet" style spacecraft, and asteroid miners or transportation contractors often build a livelihood around a used (or leased) ship that they're working hard to pay off. The average person who needs to travel to another planet just buys passage on a liner, which is a little like buying a pricey plane ticket today.

Ships of the 23rd century are built around two key technologies: fail-safe fusion power plants that run for months on a cheap fuel mixture of enriched water, and the EM drive. This is a reactionless propulsion system that turns power into thrust without the need to carry huge loads of propellant to fire out of a rocket nozzle. Maintaining 1 g of constant thrust means that it's possible to reach the outer parts of the Solar System in a couple of weeks of travel. EM drives have a tough time generating enough thrust to muscle their way out of a gravity well such as the Earth's, so space elevators or shuttles and orbiters equipped with conventional rocket engines remain in widespread use there.

Also known as the
radio frequency
resonant cavity
thruster.

THE WEB

The Solar System's Internet is surprisingly similar to our own. Most companies maintain virtual storefronts, and various forms of email and messaging serve as the primary means of correspondence. The big difference is that immersive virtual reality is available to almost everyone. Most homes include a "pedestal," a device that allows you to interact with virtual sites (and entertainment) as if you were there. "Hacking" generally involves building an avatar armed with an arsenal of illicit apps that can get around the normal user interface of virtual sites, although you can also access computer systems via keyboard-and-display-style systems. Interplanetary distances impose signal lags of minutes or hours in communications between different planets—don't expect to log into an action game hosted on a Martian server and win against the locals. If you need to get into a highly secure system on another planet, you'll probably need to go there and find a local access point to log in from.

MEDICAL SCIENCE

Death remains undefeated. While plenty of people hope to achieve immortality by saving their consciousness in computer networks or cybernetic bodies, no one can prove that it works. Are you actually you, or are you a clone who just thinks he's you? That said, nanotechnology means that it's possible to quickly stabilize or repair injuries that would have been mortal in the 21st century, and artificial body parts (cybernetic limbs or organs) aren't hard to come by.

ROBOTICS

You can buy a robot to do almost anything—provide janitorial services, drive a cab, cook your meals, buy your groceries, or guard your secure facilities. Most middle-class people can afford a low-end domestic robot that can handle a variety of household chores, as well as maintaining schedules, playing music, receiving deliveries, or answering calls. There are very few jobs left for unskilled human laborers in the 23rd century; low-end jobs generally revolve around supervising or maintaining robots, providing “the human touch” in luxury establishments, or carrying out tasks that require human judgment and flexibility. Robots are guided by no special laws—they only do what they're programmed to do.

ARMS AND ARMOR

Lasers and rail guns are the cutting-edge weaponry of the day; most projectile weapons use electromagnets to accelerate dart-like rounds to deadly velocities. Advanced-materials tech allows for armor that's light, flexible, and tough, such as polymer mail or hardmesh clothing. Basic powered armor in the form of exoskeletons is beginning to appear in elite security forces and heavy military assault formations, but not even the heaviest powered armor can completely ignore the firepower that's available.

PROTOSTAR HEROES

Creating characters for the Protostar setting? Here are a few guidelines.

Species: Most characters are human, although the baromorph and elaphromorph variations are fairly common. Androids are also allowed, although they are rare and their personhood is not universally recognized—some of Earth's less progressive states regard androids as property. (PC androids are legally emancipated, though.)

Gear: The 23rd century is Tech Era 7, although many elements of TE 6 technology are still in common use—plenty of criminal gangs make do with TE 6 pistols and assault rifles. Secret government labs and corporate research departments are hard at work developing various TE 8 projects, but so far these remain highly experimental.

Psionics: Rare, but not unheard of. Various governments have been experimenting with genetic manipulation to activate psychic abilities. You must choose the Mentalist archetype to buy psionic skills or choose psionic talents.

THE TRITON GATE

At some point many thousands of years ago, an unknown alien race built something incredible in the ice of Neptune's moon, Triton. No one knows who they were or where they went, but they left behind a doorway to the greater universe: an artificial wormhole gate.

Scientists soon discovered how to activate the doorway and how to select its destination by transmitting numerical codes based on universal mathematical relationships, such as the value of pi, Fibonacci sequences, and so on. In the years immediately following the gate's discovery, scores of potential destinations with easy or obvious solutions were unlocked. New Gate codes are harder to come by now, requiring the work of supercomputers known as Decryptors to derive ever-more-complicated solutions.

Some codes lead to worthless systems with no planets worth colonizing or dangerous local phenomena such as unstable stars. But every now and then someone hits the jackpot, finding a planet with potential for colonization or some resource—mineral, biological, or xenoarcheological—that can be exploited.

TRAVERSING THE GATE

The Triton Gate is a 70-meter tall hoop-like structure that stands on its end, hovering a few dozen meters above Triton's surface. Because most Gate termini are in open space, it's a good idea to pass through the Gate in a ship.

- The larger the ship, the longer it takes the wormhole to recover before it can open again.
- Gate licenses (managed by the Triton Anomaly Authority, a corrupt agency under UN supervision) are expensive—the bigger the ship, the more expensive the license.
- Ships return by transmitting the same signal at the exact point in space the Gate brings them to. Somehow the Triton Gate's wormhole knows when one of its termini is signaled, even though there's nothing at the destination point.

THE ORION PROTOSTAR

Just a few months ago, a Tethys-Hygia Syndicate mission to chart a previously unexplored wormhole destination led to an incredible discovery: a still-forming star system home to dozens of Gate structures similar to the one on Triton. Naturally, the Syndicate attempted to keep their finding secret, but someone either leaked or stole the information and published it to the entire Solar System. Everybody knows about the Protostar Nexus and possesses the Gate code

needed to reach it. The Syndicate, Mars, Helios, China, America, the Church of Human Transcendence, and half a dozen private corporations and foundations are building up outposts in the Nexus to facilitate their exploration of the new gates.

TRANS_GATE WORLDS

No one knows for certain how many worlds have actually been visited or what secrets they may hold. A number of Gate destinations are well known now, of course, but some explorers—various megacorp teams, or teams working under secret orders from one government or another—have kept their findings secret.

CIRGOS

A storm-wracked enigma of a world, Cirgos is a semiterran planet orbiting close to its parent star, a K-class orange dwarf. Its slow rotation means that its day side builds up a lot of heat, generating powerful cyclones that spiral out into the night side. Instrument malfunctions are common, and a number of ships have crashed during efforts to explore the planet's mysterious alien ruins. In fact, would-be salvagers now come to Cirgos in search of legendary shipwrecks, ignoring the possibility that they might become the planet's next victims.

KWLLADH

A world of vast primeval swamps and mist-wreathed mountain ranges, Kwlladh was discovered by a UN scientific expedition 35 years ago. It's home to an alien race known as the kwll, hexapodal creatures who were just at the beginning of their Industrial Revolution when contacted by humans (see "The Kwll," under **Villains and Threats** below). The UN maintains a science post and cultural exchange center with the kwll, but it's dangerous and thankless duty.

PASHUPATI

Beautiful and Earthlike, Pashupati is a lush world with a diverse biosphere and tremendous potential for colonization. It's also private property: Dibang United, a major agricultural and pharmaceutical corporation, strictly controls access to Pashupati. A handful

CASBAH THARSIS

A number of governments and megacorps are busy building up outposts in the Protostar system, but these are small "frontier" stations with limited facilities—everything here must be brought through the Triton Gate one shipload at a time. The Martian-administered station Casbah Tharsis is one of the larger installations now operational in the Nexus. A micro-gravity domed town built on the surface of a medium-sized asteroid, it serves as a neutral meeting-ground, outfitting hub, and jumping-off point for private expeditions. People looking to get rich quick often try their luck at Casbah Tharsis first.

of big-game hunters have paid exorbitant fees for the privilege of hunting the planet's challenging megafauna, but most of Dibang's exploitation of Pashupati comes from a handful of research stations searching for new pharmaceuticals. There's also one research station Dibang doesn't tell its shareholders about: a genetics lab where the company is altering human DNA to produce a species of small, hardy laborers as a new product line. These "genids" are destined for a life of serfdom on Dibang United's corporate farms and ranches, but quite a few have escaped to Pashupati's forests where they gather in reclusive tribes.

RHINOTAR'S HOLLOW

Like Mercury in the Solar System, Rhinotar's Hollow is the mineral-rich exposed core of a larger body shattered millions of years ago. It's a moon of a super-Jovian gas giant whose tidal forces lead to near-constant tectonic activity, including quakes and volcanoes. The atmosphere is thin and toxic, and its parent planet's radiation belts pose a serious threat to mining operations. Despite that, Rhinotar's Hollow is home to a miners' boomtown based on the hulk of the ore freighter *Rhinotar*, currently wedged in a deep crevice where it is somewhat protected from quakes and radiation storms. The odd thing is that no one knows how *Rhinotar* got to be where it is—there's no record of such a ship ever leaving Sol, and not a trace of the original crew was found when the hulk was discovered by the first miners to arrive on the scene.

TRYMARTY

One of the first transgate colonies, Trymarty was established almost sixty years ago by Przystan Industries, a combine under the control of an industrialist named Alexander Bokun. The native life hadn't advanced much beyond algae and lichen, but Bokun saw Trymarty as a place where Przystan could build up a secret industrial base to support Eastern European militarists seeking a chance to challenge great-power dominance in manufacturing. To staff his new factories, Bokun built an android production line and began creating his own workers. Alexander Bokun is now a very old man, but he commands a workforce of over a million androids laboring in oppressive conditions. Emancipationist pressure forced Bokun to "free" his workforce several years ago, but Przystan Industries merely fell back on the tactic of offering grossly unfair contracts that most of the androids naively signed. Worker unrest is on the rise, and whispers of an android revolution—and the massacre of Trymarty's human managers—are in the air.

VILLAINS AND THREATS

Ironically, the 23rd century is perhaps the most lawless era since the Middle Ages. Large portions of the Solar System—the minor asteroids, the Jovian moons, the Uranian system, and off-grid space habitats—are poorly policed frontiers where criminals and gangs can operate without fear. Even in relatively well governed states such as the European Confederation or the Republic of Mars, the current highly balkanized international system means that a powerful nonstate actor such as a megacorp or a terrorist group can do whatever they want with minimal consequences. A terrorist can set off a bomb in Mariner City and flee to Hygiea or Callisto or Luna to defy the Martian authorities as long as she likes.

In addition to the danger posed by other humans, we also face new and unfamiliar threats in the form of the alien organisms and technology now being encountered in the worlds beyond the Triton Gate. No one knows if an extinction-level threat is waiting out there for us . . . or if one has found us already.

BAKUNAWA CARTEL

A dangerous criminal organization that virtually rules dozens of small asteroid-belt habitats and controls the illicit drug trade from Mars to Titan, the Bakunawa Cartel franchises out their criminal enterprises to violent local gangs. The real Bakunawas are the elite assassins, enforcers, and managers who keep the local gang leaders in power—and in line.

DEUS XI

Most AI systems are carefully built with behavioral restraints and directives to ensure that they remain loyal to their creators. Not all programmers were as careful about that as they should have been in the early days of the AI revolution. In the mid-2050s, a politico-military AI system went rogue and instigated World War III before it was defeated. The human governments of the world believed they had destroyed it, but the AI escaped by cloning itself in the Internet. This was the seed that grew into Deus XI, a clever and malicious AI with a God complex. Deus XI intends to enslave the human race to establish order throughout human space . . . and, astonishingly enough, it's found thousands of human followers who are eager to help it achieve that goal.



GENESIS 6

A radical Earth-based religious movement, Genesis 6 is dedicated to stopping the artificial evolution of the human form. Legitimate branches of the organization serve as a powerful lobbying group that pushes lawmakers to ban genetic manipulation and cybernetic augmentation. However, some chapters believe that more violent methods are called for. They assassinate prominent scientists, bomb research facilities, and harass (or even kill) individuals who are obviously altered.

NPC SPOTLIGHT

- Modesty Delgado, or “Modo” to her friends, is a baromorph ex-soldier who’s one of the best gunsmiths around. She runs a shop in Mariner City on Mars but does most of her business in custom orders.
- Alexander H5 is an android warlord who’s rapidly becoming one of the most dangerous crime bosses on Callisto. He programmed himself by studying everything he could learn about Earth’s ancient despots, administering his empire with cold efficiency.
- Drew Dallas captains the *Yellow Rose*, a tramp freighter running supplies to mining posts. Between runs he hunts human traffickers, looking for a son abducted years ago; forced labor is common practice in the ungoverned settlements of the outer system.

THE KWLL

So far, humanity has not encountered another species capable of space travel . . . but that doesn’t mean we haven’t met any other civilizations. The kwll are an old, highly civilized species whose technology was roughly equivalent to Earth’s 19th century when we discovered their world on the far side of the Triton Gate. Strong, stocky, six-limbed creatures a little shorter than most adult humans, kwll have glossy seal-like coats of fur and wear little clothing other than weapon harnesses. They’re almost always armed to the teeth with bladed weapons.

In the thirty-five years since contact was established, the kwll have leaped into the atomic age and are remorselessly pushing to catch up to humankind. In theory, the UN enforces a technological quarantine of Kwlladh, but in practice, people can get rich by selling things to the kwll that they shouldn’t have. Optimists assume that the kwll will be satisfied when they “catch up,” but the truth is not so pleasant. The kwll hate humans, they’re good liars and long-term thinkers, and they’re actively looking for a way to destroy us. Kwll diplomatic delegations and cultural missions are merely covers for a ruthless espionage campaign designed to sow discord in human space and blind humanity to kwll intentions.

SECURITY DIRECTORATE OF CERES

The People's Collective of Ceres maintains one of the most fearsome and capable spy agencies in the Solar System. CSD operatives work tirelessly to undermine and destabilize neighboring governments, steal research, assassinate dissidents, and sabotage the military and industrial facilities of hostile powers. Worse yet, the CSD invests heavily in psionics research, and fields a small army of highly skilled psychics and mind-readers in the pursuit of their goals.

TETHYS-HYGIEA SYNDICATE

Tethys-Hygiea is a megacorp distinguished by its exceptionally ruthless business practices and its grand ambitions. A century ago, the Syndicate spearheaded the commercial exploitation of the outer Solar System, establishing a dominant position in manufacturing and energy industries beyond the asteroid belt. Then the discovery of the Triton Gate upset those plans, offering better opportunities than dark, icy moons of the outer planets. As a result, the Syndicate is now engaged in the effort to seize everything they can get their hands on beyond the Triton Gate and dominate human expansion to the stars.

THE BANSHEES

No one in authority publicly acknowledges it, but the rumors of ships vanishing on the other side of the Triton Gate are true. Some as-yet unknown species has access to one or more branches of the Protostar wormhole nexus, and they are spying out human outposts and resisting human explorations. The only evidence to date consists of weird radio signals in the form of eerie, inhuman shrieks, which the authorities dismiss as natural bursts of static. UNARA is desperate to learn more about our mysterious adversaries . . . and the Tethys-Hygiea Syndicate is interested in making a deal with them.

ADVENTURES IN THE 23RD CENTURY

Try your luck as a wildcat asteroid miner. Take a contract to protect the people of a fledgling settlement from the corporate goons trying to seize the territory beneath their feet. Hire out your services as a professional infiltrator going after a priceless Gate code hidden in someone's server. Track down outlaws hiding in lawless outer-system outposts or inner-system orbital tenements. The future is wide open, if you've got nerves of steel and ice water in your veins.

PROTOSTAR SEASON 1

The adventures that make up the remaining chapters of this book serve as a good introduction to the setting and some of the major themes and power groups of the age.

- *The Roanoke Affair* (level 1) begins as a heist. The heroes are hired to steal a case containing clues that lead to the hiding place of a new Triton Gate code.
- *Something Old, Something New* (level 2) sends the heroes on an investigation spanning the asteroid belt as they dig into the true motives of a rogue sect selling “immortality.”
- *Tartarus Station* (level 2) combines a rescue mission and a bug hunt. The heroes investigate a transgate mining post that’s gone dark.
- *Hives of Janrata* (level 3) offers the heroes the chance to participate in the first exploration of a newly discovered Gate code. The ruins of an alien civilization harbor a dangerous secret.
- In *The Martian Hostage* (level 3), the heroes are hired to rescue an Earth scientist kidnapped by a Martian corporation. But first they’ll have to climb one of the tallest mountains in the Solar System. It’s an infiltration-and-extraction mission.

You don’t need to run the adventures in order (although the difficulty increases slightly from the first adventure through to the last adventure).

ADVENTURE PITCHES

If you prefer to create your own *ALTERNITY* adventures, here are a few “elevator pitches” to consider.

Claim Jumpers: Someone is attacking asteroid miners near Psyche, shooting up their ships and stealing valuable cargoes of ore. The heroes are hired by the Psyche Miners’ Guild to track down the villains behind the attacks and put them out of business.

Deep Ice: Callisto is a mess, overrun by violent gangs and would-be warlords fighting for control of the moon. So why is the research branch of the megacorp QuantarX suddenly very interested in deep excavations in Callisto’s icy crust? Is there something of interest in the vast ocean beneath the ice? Or have they found something like the Triton Gate buried in the ice of the Jovian moon?

Gunrunners: The heroes are hired by a mysterious organization to smuggle a load of weapons to revolutionaries arming themselves for an uprising on New Virginia, a transgate colony operated by the Syndicate. It’s dangerous, but it pays well . . . up until the moment the heroes discover that their mysterious supplier is actually

Syndicate corporate security, and the whole scheme is designed to expose the rebel movement.

The Kilimanjaro Enigma: A wealthy Saharan League family has unearthed an ancient manuscript suggesting that some sort of technological device or installation is buried on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. The manuscript's illustrations depict an object that bears a striking resemblance to the Triton Gate. Did the Gate-builders visit prehistoric Earth? When the scroll goes missing, an archeological expedition turns into a race against a ruthless foe.

The Manchurian Virus: Someone is turning Vesta's robots into assassins, reprogramming ordinary labor and domestic models to carry out targeted killings. The victims have all been prominent Emancipationists, which suggests that one megacorp or another is behind the scheme. The heroes are hired to protect the foremost remaining Emancipationist.

Project Ra: The Helios League is deploying an advanced network of solar-powered laser satellites that will be the most powerful weapon of mass destruction in the Solar System. Infiltrate the military research post at Mercury's north pole and steal the project plans for your employer.

Rescue James Cook: One of UNARA's scientific vessels engaged in exploring an uncharted system missed its return date for the Triton Gate. An automated beacon reported that the ship crashed on a primitive world of dangerous beasts and savage alien warriors, the marzogs. When the heroes reach the crash site, they find that the survivors are scattered in the jungle—and that *James Cook* was brought down by alien weapon in an ancient jungle ruin.

NPC SPOTLIGHT

- **Bodi Hing** is the owner of the *Rock Chaser*, the toughest asteroid miners' bar in the belt. He's also an information broker who'd sell out his own mother. Bodi doesn't have friends; he has clients.
- **Red Lotus** is an assassin who carries a katana and a deadly suite of cybernetic enhancements. The Bakunawas have some hold over her, and force her to kill those who earn their wrath.
- **Dr. Kalap Sharma** is a researcher at the Triton Gate who is correlating Gate-builder artifacts and rumored sightings of Banshee ships. His colleagues take him for a crazy conspiracy theorist.

EPISODE 1: THE ROANOKE AFFAIR

An adventure for 1st-level heroes

A mysterious package, a derelict spaceship, and rivals racing to secure the ultimate lottery ticket in the form of a new Gate code—the heroes have their hands full when an anonymous client hires them to retrieve his stolen property.

BACKGROUND

Several years ago, Captain Janelle Carter of the well-worn mining ship, *Roanoke*, acquired some decommissioned Decryptor hardware, hoping to research a new Triton Gate code. Her effort paid off, and she lucked into a new code. Through Mr. White, an old friend at the exploration company, Orion Ventures, Carter obtained a charter that included an expedition-worthy ship. She hid the *Roanoke* in an abandoned asteroid mine, then left with *Roanoke*'s crew in search of whatever she might find on the other side of the Triton Gate.

Carter didn't tell her new sponsors the Gate code . . . and she didn't return. White searched for *Roanoke* for months, hoping to find the code and send someone after Carter. He didn't find *Roanoke*, but he did recover a set of coordinates she'd left behind in the event she failed to return—the secret of the ship's hiding spot. Unfortunately, Carter's coordinates lacked a key clue needed to make sense of the coordinates.

Then, on the two-year anniversary of Carter's departure, *Roanoke*'s AI executed a long-delayed order, sending a signal intended for Mr. White to a message service at Edo Station. He sent an agent to retrieve the message, but Otto Black of the Tethys-Hygia Syndicate intercepted White's agent, stealing the message. Black now plans to sell the transmission to a third party: the notorious mercenary group known as the Terran Brigade.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The story begins on Edo Station, a rotating space habitat located in Jupiter's outer moons. Mr. White hires the heroes to obtain a briefcase from Mr. Black, an official in the Tethys-Hygia Syndicate who has offices on Edo. The heroes acquire the case through subterfuge, burglary, or violence, but White can't make the exchange because he gets caught in a security lockdown. He authorizes the heroes to open the case and search out Janelle Carter's lost ship.

Within the case is a data drive and a handwritten note with a navigation puzzle. The puzzle reveals coordinates within the asteroid belt. There

the heroes discover *Roanoke*, a derelict mining vessel. The team boards the abandoned freighter, fights drones controlled by the ship's hostile AI, and finds an old Decryptor system holding Carter's Gate code.

In the final scene, the heroes discover that they've been followed to *Roanoke*. Both the Terran Brigade and Orion Ventures want the Gate code. Each makes an offer, and the heroes must choose an ally—or strike out alone.

MISSION BRIEFING

You can assume the heroes have picked up the job from a “talent broker” dealing in gray ops and mercenary work, or through one of the heroes' contacts.

When you're ready to begin, read:

As your shuttle approaches Edo Station, you review your anonymous employer's message: a vid of a man's silhouette speaking in digitally modified voice.

“This is Mr. White. I have retained your services to obtain for me a red case, a valise such as a traveler would use, from one Otto Black, a director in the Tethys-Hygiea Syndicate's Edo Station office. There's some urgency—I have learned that Black plans to sell the contents of the case to the Terran Brigade.

“The case belongs to Miranda duPrea, an agent in my employ. I sent her to retrieve a message that was being held for me on Edo, but it seems that Black was waiting for someone to show up for it. She has now disappeared; it's the Syndicate, so I fear the worst. Anyway, I believe the case contains a message of great interest to me—the location of a ship lost in deep space. I've been trying to find that ship for years.

“This shuttle is at your disposal. When you've recovered my property, send a reply to this message, and I will arrange a meeting.”

Beyond the cockpit windows of your shuttle, you can see the spinning rings of Edo Station, with Jupiter in the distance.

The pay is \$3,000 per hero or a single Class 3 item, if you're using a pay-as-you-go reward system.

If that doesn't seem like much, tell your players that they shouldn't think in 2019 dollars.

SCENE 1: THE EDO HEIST

Mr. Black plans to sell White's case to the Terran Brigade two days from now. Black knows that the case came from an Orion Ventures agent and it has something to do with Janelle Carter. He hasn't tried to puzzle it out yet because the Terran Brigade extended a lucrative

offer for the case—it turns out they were monitoring Janelle Carter's message arrangements too, and they're very interested in securing anything that might lead to *Roanoke*.

The heroes have three obvious options for getting the case: negotiating for it (possibly including lies or intimidation), stealing it, or grabbing it by force.

BLACK'S OFFICE SUITE

The Tethys-Hygiea Syndicate has a lot of money, so everything in here gives off a sleek, clean vibe. Whether the heroes come in guns blazing, sneak around to case the joint, or ask for an appointment with Mr. Black, they'll find:

- During business hours the office complex has heavy foot traffic in the hallways.
- During Edo Station's night cycle, the hallways are empty except for a bored Syndicate security guard who arrives from a random direction every 2d6 minutes.
- Soft whir of HVAC throughout, and recorded instrumental music in the lobby.
- Doors are made of frosted, impact-resistant glass. They slide open automatically if they detect motion within a half-meter. (The hallway-lobby and hallway-service tunnel doors are exceptions; see below.)



- Floors are plush carpet; ceilings are acoustic tile. A half-meter crawlspace overhead holds cabling and air ducts, but the acoustic tile won't support human weight.

After you've described the office suite in general terms, give the players some time to come up with an approach, providing extra description to answer any questions they may have.

NEGOTIATION/BLUFF/INTIMIDATION

Any meeting with Mr. Black—about the case or about other matters as a pretext—involves two parts. First, the heroes must get face-time with Mr. Black, and then they must win the subsequent negotiation.

Getting an Appointment: The guard at the lobby desk controls the locked door between the office suite and the hallway, and he'll buzz in anyone who isn't an obvious threat. Getting beyond the lobby, however, is a skill challenge. The PCs can use Personality skills such as *Coercion* or *Influence* to bluff or intimidate the guards to get a meeting with Mr. Black. Among the techniques they might try:

"I'm here to buy a certain storage case. . . ." The guards are under orders to let in only the Terran Brigade representative, who is supposed to identify himself as Colonel Stark. For anyone else, they say that Mr. Black is not accepting appointments right now.

Skip the check if the players roleplay a great pitch.

To convince the guard to disobey orders and set up a meeting with Mr. Black, the heroes need to gain 3 successes using *Deception* or *Influence*. At that point, the guard acquiesces, tells the PCs to wait for a few minutes, then lets the PCs into the conference room, where Mr. Black is waiting. If the party accumulates 3 failures before they reach 3 successes, the challenge fails.

"I have business with Mr. Black, and if you know what's good for you. . . ." As above, the challenge succeeds if the heroes achieve 3 successes before they accumulate 3 failures, but this skill challenge relies on *Coercion* (if the heroes base their intimidation on actual threats) or *Deception* (if their threats are bluffs). Security guards aren't impressed by tough talk, but corporate machinations worry them; implied or actual physical threats suffer a -1 step penalty, but corporate punishments (anything from extra paperwork to demotion to bad marks on their next quarterly review), provide a +1 step bonus.

When the heroes reach 3 successes, the guards have the PCs wait for a few minutes, then escort them into the conference room, where Mr. Black is waiting.

"We have a reactor leak and you need to evacuate. . . ." Ruses such as this one depend on the props and costumes the heroes bring to bear on the situation. Deal with the elements of the ruse such as hacking the office suite's computer system, obtaining Edo

Station security uniforms, or sabotaging environmental systems quickly with relevant skill challenges. Err on the side of making it easy, and use the two-day deadline to shut off any outlandish elements to the scheme.

When the heroes try to trick their way into the office, require 3 successes as above, but grant a +1 or +2 step bonus for each element of the ruse they set up beforehand. Unlike the other approaches, a ruse probably just gets the guards out of the way, and the heroes can immediately confront Mr. Black in his office.

MEETING MR. BLACK

Otto Black is a thin man of medium height and dark hair, and he wears expensive-looking business attire. He is quiet and calculating, and very loyal to the Syndicate.

If the heroes convince the guards to set up a meeting, Black awaits them in the conference room, and he'll have one guard present. (The other one remains at the lobby desk.) After exchanging pleasantries, Mr. Black excuses himself to get the case from his office, then uses his office computer to check the heroes' identities. He automatically succeeds unless the heroes took the time to obscure their identities or come up with covers. If Mr. Black discovers the meeting was made under false pretenses, he orders the guards to show the PCs out.

Mr. Black won't sell the case or give it up unless he's under duress. (He's already agreed to terms with the Terran Brigade, and he's scared of what'll happen if he breaks a deal with them.)

BURGLARY

An attempt to sneak in and steal the storage case faces several hurdles.

- The heroes must get past the locked hallway doors to get into the lobby or the service tunnel.
- There are two Syndicate guards on duty at all times (one in the lobby, one in the galley). See human guard, page 244, *Core Rulebook*.
- Mr. Black is usually in his office; he even sleeps there (see **Adversaries**).
- The storage case is in a locked wall safe.

To handle each of those elements, see the individual room descriptions below, which list the skill checks to bypass the locks and gain access.

ROBBERY

The difference between burglary and robbery is the latter's threat of violence. The heroes might opt for the violent approach right away, or their negotiation/burglary attempts may evolve into a robbery approach.

The guards defend Mr. Black to the utmost. As for Mr. Black, he is willing to sacrifice his guards, but he doesn't want to die himself. He'll surrender and give the heroes the case if he is severely wounded, or if he is slightly wounded and both guards are down.

If the heroes delay long enough for the Terran Brigade to arrive in order to confront (or ambush) everyone at once, the Brigade agent shows up with two merc guards (use the stats from the final scene). At the first sign that anything's amiss, the Brigade agent concludes that Mr. Black set him up, so it'll be a three-way fight. In that case, Mr. Black may try to escape through the service tunnel, with or without the case.

Anytime the heroes aren't actively fighting, it's easy for them to leave the Syndicate offices and slip into the public parts of Edo Station.

If the players look frustrated or the meeting stalls out, that's your cue to bring in the Terran Brigade.

SYNDICATE OFFICE ROOMS

The seats are plush, the conference table is real wood, and the galley snacks are artisanal. The Syndicate is wealthy.

A. Lobby: The main entrance to the office suite opens from the station's commercial corridor, and it's kept locked. A guard at a reception desk in the lobby can unlock and open the door from his desk. A keypad on the wall by the door can also open the door with the right passcode.

About half the time, there's a second guard in the lobby, sitting in one of the comfy chairs and playing "Asteroid Crush Saga" on a datapad.

- **Door:** Resistance 7, durability: 1–6 □, 7 9 □, 10 12 □, 13+ □ (destroyed).
- **Keypad:** Hacking requires three successful *Security* checks. The first grants access to security functions. The second overrides security and allows access to door function, but failure alerts guard staff and imposes a –2 step penalty on check to open the door. The third success opens the door and provides a code that allows future access.
- **Guards:** They fight until incapacitated, but they get Hicks-from-*Aliens* panicky if things aren't going their way. See Human Guard, page 244, *Core Rulebook*.
- **Desk Computer:** The app controlling the door is always on screen, as is a voice link to Black's office. During a conference-room meeting with Mr. Black, the guard assigned

desk duty watches (but does not listen to) the conversation through a video link.

- **Fish Tank:** There's a floor-to-ceiling fish tank along the south wall. The first ranged weapon miss shatters the tank and sends fish and water everywhere.

B. Black's Office: Mr. Black's office has a fancy desk and plush chairs. The couch on the north wall folds out into a bed, and that's where Mr. Black sleeps during the station's night cycle. Mr. Black sleeps in his office as long as the case is in his care.

- **Wall Safe:** Set into the south wall. Accessed with Mr. Black's iris-scan or a successful *Security* check at a -2 step penalty, but failure sounds an alarm that alerts the guards within the office suite and brings two more Syndicate guards in 5 minutes.
- **Black's Computer:** Has video links to conference room and voice link to the lobby desk. Also connects via email and video to the Syndicate's broader office network, though most other teams protect their data behind security features. Mr. Black doesn't keep sensitive data here; he's just borrowing this office while he's on Edo Station.

C. Conference Room: A large wooden table dominates this meeting room. If the heroes meet with Mr. Black to obtain the case, they are directed to this room.

- **Main Viewscreen:** The back wall is dominated by a map of the Solar System, with the belt settlements and Saturn moon colonies highlighted—the territory in which the Tethys-Hygia Syndicate primarily operates.
- **Bar:** Shelves on the west wall hold fancy booze from Earth. If he's at ease, Mr. Black will offer drinks before discussing business.
- **Light Sculptures:** Along the north wall are two pedestals that show looping holograms of lithe, androgynous dancers. The pedestals provide cover in a fight.

D. Workroom: A storage room contains boxes of documents and data packs that detail Syndicate dealings throughout the Jovian moons. If the heroes insist on ransacking the place, doing so takes an hour. Some of the data looks valuable in a corporate-espionage sense, if the heroes can find a buyer.

E. Galley: At the end of the corridor is a simple galley and washroom. When the second guard isn't in the lobby or in the conference room with Mr. Black, he's in here. The food and snacks are of high quality—much better than the heat-and-serve stuff back on the shuttle.

F. Service Tunnel: The door between the outer hallway and the service tunnel is sturdy metal and solidly locked. The heroes can unlock this door using a keypad interface, using the same *Security* challenge as the lobby door.

Video Cameras: The tunnel has video surveillance accessible by the guards in the lobby, who are alerted if an incorrect code is used.

• **Interior Doors:** The doors between the service tunnel and the office suite aren't locked on either side, but they have airtight dogging latches that take two impulses to unlatch. With a successful *Security* check, they unlatch quietly; otherwise everyone in the office suite hears the door open.

INTERLUDE: FLIGHT DELAYS

When the heroes send word to Mr. White that the case has been recovered, a new voice transmission arrives a few minutes later.

"Excellent work! I expected no less. But . . . there's a problem. Edo Station just put the corporate docks into a security lockdown. Until further notice, I'm stuck on my ship, and you can't get to me. The public landing bays aren't closed yet and your shuttle is free to go, but the Syndicate is probably pestering the Edo Station security staff to shut it all down.

"So, here's the deal: I'll double your pay if you get that case off Edo Station and investigate the lost ship it leads to. I might be here a while."

Mr. White is correct—the heroes can indeed get to their shuttle without incident, although there are lots of jumpsuited customs agents running around and it's clear that something is going on. Once on the shuttle, they can decouple from Edo Station without difficulty and sit in Jupiter orbit while they open the case.

THE CASE

The case has a biometric scanner that can be defeated with a *Security* check, or the case can be forced open with an *Athletics* check (at a -4 step penalty). Power tools available in the shuttle's tool locker would also do the trick.

Inside are a datastick and a handwritten note. The datastick holds just one file: a string of numbers that appear to be XYZ astrometric coordinates. A check of the coordinates on the shuttle's navigation database identifies the location as empty space dangerously close to the Sun.

The handwritten note (a rarity in these times) is signed by Mr. White. It reads:

Miranda: This is the key, but what does it unlock? Why Vesta? Hopefully the transmission you find is the lock this key will fit.

Keep this analog. I'm starting to have concerns about communication security.

—Mr. White

Another sentence appears at the bottom of the note:

I know what you're thinking, but I've had two years to memorize it: 54 68 65 53 75 6e 49 73 56 65 73 74 61

If the heroes try to head directly to the initial coordinates without decoding White's note first, it's a journey of several weeks, and the shuttle lacks the radiation shielding required to keep the crew alive on the close approach to the Sun.

THE SECRET

If your players try entering the numbers into a hexadecimal converter on their smart phones, it works!

A *Computer* or *Science* check identifies the number string as a hexadecimal code; converting it to text reveals the message to be "TheSunIsVesta."

If the heroes use the asteroid Vesta instead of the Sun as the point of origin for the coordinates, they point to a small asteroid within the belt. A search for information on the coordinates reveals only that it was once the site of an asteroid mining operation. The heroes can use their shuttle to get there in about two days' time.

MR. WHITE'S STORY

A few hours after the heroes set course for the deciphered coordinates, they get another voice transmission from Mr. White:

"If you're getting this, then you must be on your way to the lost ship. I'm not sure exactly what you'll find, but I ought to tell you what I know. That ship won't stay lost for long.

"The *Roanoke* was an asteroid-mining ship captained by a friend of mine, Janelle Carter. She roamed around the belt, barely making ends meet, but then she found something better than ore: some decommissioned Decryptor tech that one of the megacorps jettisoned.

"Janelle has the instincts of a belt scrounger, so she managed to get the Decryptor working, and it spit out a new code for the Triton Gate. She knew I worked for Orion Ventures, so I brokered the exploration deal. She trusted me, but she didn't entirely trust the rest of Orion Ventures. We gave her a new ship and a decent split of the exploitation rights for whatever she found on the far

side of the Gate. But she didn't give us the Gate code itself, and she didn't tell us where she stashed the *Roanoke*.

"It's been two years since Janelle entered the Gate. I think this message is a fail-safe; she set it up so that if she didn't return, I would eventually be notified of *Roanoke*'s location. That means she wants to be found.

"I'm trying to clear myself of certain customs entanglements here on Edo Station. But it's not the Syndicate pulling the strings. It's a military contractor: The Terran Brigade."

When the PCs arrive at the deciphered coordinates, they discover *Roanoke* parked inside an asteroid mine.

THE *ROANOKE*

Roanoke is a 30-year-old civilian mining vessel. For most of its career, it extracted iron and other materials from asteroids in the belt, but when Janelle Carter acquired it, she took on a variety of odd jobs such as prospecting, supply runs, and salvage work. The ship's too big to navigate the Triton Gate; the bigger the ship, the more energy it requires, and the less likely it is to successfully navigate the Triton Gate. (That's why Carter cut a deal with Orion Ventures for a scout ship rather than just heading through the Triton Gate directly.)

For years, *Roanoke* has quietly floated within an artificial crater on an asteroid nearly 3 km in diameter. The mining operation decades ago involved splitting the asteroid apart to get to lucrative minerals at its core, so now the asteroid's hollowed-out midsection is a 500-meter-wide void where the derelict *Roanoke* is hidden from view.

- Once close to the asteroid, the PCs automatically spot *Roanoke* on their ship's scanners. They can detect faint energy emissions but no obvious signs of life.
- The derelict maintains just enough power to prevent the interior from freezing and keep the Decryptor computers running in low-power mode.
- *Roanoke* does not respond to any communications or data transmissions (for a computer link).
- The ship has two docking collars. A successful *Piloting* check brings the heroes' shuttle into the docking collar of their choice cleanly. On a failure, the docking is still successful, but the hard "bump" gives *Roanoke*'s AI extra time to activate anti-pirate measures.

Roanoke's AI has become unhinged during its abandonment, and its last directive was to keep the cargo safe. It decides the best way to do that is by activating internal defense systems, including defense drones, once the heroes approach the ship's hull.

SCENE 2: EXPLORING *ROANOKE*

After the heroes dock, *Roanoke*'s AI activates the ship's defense protocol, and locks the doors leading to the bridge, the cargo bays, and engineering. Defense drones begin patrolling the primary passageways (see **Drone Attack**, below).

The heroes can explore the ship as they wish. The two most interesting locations are the bridge (where they can shut off the AI and the defense drones) and the center cargo bay (where the Decryptor is).

INTERIOR FEATURES

In its prime, *Roanoke* was a workaday mining vessel. It's grimy, dark, and falling apart in all sorts of superficial ways. Regardless of the specific location, the following elements describe the environment aboard the *Roanoke*:

- Almost every bulkhead has dents and scrape-marks; the sort you leave behind when you're moving furniture none too carefully.
- The air is stale and slightly metallic-smelling.
- Lighting is a mixture of flickering overheads and wall-mounted red emergency lights. It's dim everywhere, but never truly dark.
- The ship has largely been emptied out. The only small objects remaining are clearly trash: old shipping labels, food wrappers, and broken mechanical parts.

Doors: With the defenses active, all doors are locked. A character can use the *Mechanics* or *Security* skills to unlock a door. Doors to the cargo bays are particularly difficult to unlock unless released

INFORMATION IN THE SHIP'S COMPUTERS

From either the bridge or engineering, heroes can coax the following out of *Roanoke*'s computers. Each requires a successful *Computer* check (at a -2 step penalty if the AI on the bridge is still active).

- A basic deck plan for the ship.
- Logs that document use as a mining vessel for about three decades. Owned by a Captain Janelle Carter, the ship was parked here about two years ago.
- Environmental status (air, heat, radiation, and so forth) for each part of the ship.
- A crew manifest that shows between eight and twelve crew members at a time for the decades *Roanoke* was in service. They all departed the ship at the same time; no reason given.

from the bridge, and incur a -3 step penalty at the skill check.

Computer Terminals:

Most chambers within *Roanoke* have a computer that's still functioning, but the ship AI has locked them for the duration of the "piracy crisis."

DRONE ATTACK

When the heroes dock, the ship's AI activates defense drones that are stored in large "charging stations" on the bulkheads near the bridge and engineering. The drones patrol down the parallel hallways that run the length of the ship (the AI opens doors for them) and attack without warning.

- 1 defense drone per character in the team (see **Adversaries**).
- Half the drones defend the bridge; half defend the 4-way intersections near the cargo bays. They attack as soon as the heroes open a hatch leading into those spaces.
- The AI directs whichever group of drones is not involved in the fight to join the battle; this group arrives as reinforcements at the end of Impulse 8 in the third combat round.
- If the heroes failed the *Piloting* check to dock, an "extra" drone awaits in the passage by the airlock and attacks as soon as they enter the ship; the bridge group arrives at the end of the first round, and the cargo group arrives at the end of the third round.

The drones fight until destroyed.



The hatch slides open, revealing a hovering robot about one meter tall. It's armed with two powerful gripping arms and a turret-mounted laser on top of its cylindrical body. "Intruder detected!" it announces, and its status light switches from green to red.

SPECIAL HAZARDS

The heroes probably get two fights aboard *Roanoke*. Rather than identify every quirk of the ship's interior, we've designed some environmental hazards and other bits of "set dressing" that you can include in your battles. Use as many or as few as you like.

Debris Cloud: A cloud of light objects (loose paper, packing material, party favors) floats unsecured in a roughly one-meter cube. It's not dangerous, but it provides concealment and confuses the sensors of any defense drone that enters it. The drone can't act for 1d6 impulses.

Sparking Cables: A tangled cluster of cables floats outward from a wall, sparking periodically. Anyone who passes within a meter of the cables gets hit with a shock that inflicts a wound of 1d6 + 2 energy damage.

Sudden Leak: This is a good one after stray small-arms fire. A pipe bursts, sending a blast of hot steam 3 meters from the bulkhead. The cloud obscures its area until the end of the next action round, and anyone inside must succeed at a *Dodge* check or take one wound of 1d6 energy damage.

A. Bridge: Many of the components at various work stations have been removed, but *Roanoke*'s bridge is technically functional. The ship's environmental systems seem to be functioning, all areas of the ship have minimal power, and the Decryptor installation in the center cargo hold is running. The bridge features include:

- Four work stations: Helm in front, then Sensors, Captain, and Communications in a row behind it. (Engineering is in its own chamber aft, and there's no weapons station.)
- The work stations have some empty holes where computer banks, extra monitors, and other gear used to be.
- Lighting is red "crisis-mode."
- The Sensors console is powered up and is running some sort of security software.
- The view out the forward windows is spectacular: the asteroid belt stretching out into the distance, framed by the edges of the crater *Roanoke* floats within.

Once the heroes reach the bridge, they can use a *Computer* or *Security* check at the Sensors console to disable the AI's defense protocol, then use the console to unlock doors throughout the ship. More robust actions aren't possible without hours of jury-rigging;

Carter and her crew cannibalized too much of the *Roanoke* when they departed.

Is the ship flyable? Probably, but it'll take hours for the heroes to familiarize themselves with the controls and get all the systems online. The fact that much of the bridge has been dismantled slows them down.

B. Crew Quarters: The crew of the ship had one last party here before mothballing the ship, and they didn't clean up after themselves. All the interior doors are open, and garbage—mostly food wrappers and empty alcohol bottles—floats in the air. The port and starboard corridors outside the crew quarters each have six 2-person escape pods.

C. Docking Collars: If the heroes had a rough time docking, then the drone fight starts at one of the docking collars.

- The airlock has a simple keypad and communication terminal at the wall on both the exterior and interior sides.
- Status indicators on both sides of the airlock doors show breathable air, tolerable temperatures, and radiation within safe levels.
- There's a manual crank on both sides of both doors, secure behind a panel, that slowly opens the door even if there's no power.

D. Cargo Bays: The smaller cargo bays are empty, save for scattered empty crates and other detritus. The central large cargo bay is securely locked (a -3 step penalty to *Mechanics* or *Security* checks if the heroes haven't deactivated the security protocol on the bridge). Inside is *Roanoke's* true hidden treasure: rows of Decryptor computer hardware, still running on low power. Read to the players:

The door opens. The 40-meter-deep cargo bay beyond is nearly filled with walls of computer hardware, stacked from floor to ceiling. Blinking lights on the modular systems indicate they still have power and seem to be working.

A single console stands near the door, its screens dark. Three words and a prompt illuminate a single-line LED display near a removable data deck: CODE SOLUTION FOUND. TRANSFER Y/N?

There's an external drive socket right below the LED display.

ROLEPLAYING THE *ROANOKE'S* AI

Nicknamed "Cindy" by the crew, *Roanoke's* computer is self-aware—but it isn't aware that it's malfunctioning. Play Cindy as a jilted lover; it's upset that Janelle chose to leave her behind when the captain went off on a grand adventure, after everything Cindy did for her. Cindy can speak through the security drones, and their indicator lights glow red whenever she does. She can also commandeer the intercom to transmit her disembodied voice anywhere on the ship.

A successful *Computer* check (+2 step bonus) identifies the Decryptor system and its general purpose. Decryptor systems generally aren't directly connected to other networks to prevent external intrusions, so if the heroes want to make use of the code, they'll need to download it to a datastick here. Selecting "Y" begins the data transfer to a portable data drive, but it also powers up *Roanoke's* engines and increases the ship's power levels as well as turning on the ship's transponder beacon. Selecting "N" prevents this from happening immediately, but the prompt returns every 5 minutes.

Once the data transfer begins, move to Scene 3.

E. Engineering: This part of the ship is even more dismantled than the bridge was.

- Open panels on all walls have cables floating out of them—it's almost like a kelp forest.
- A few monitors remain active, showing system diagnostic info.
- (If someone examines the monitors) The ship drives appear intact; *Roanoke* could move under its own power if brought back online.

There's not much here, but all that cabling can provide a modicum of cover in a battle.

SCENE 3: NEGOTIATE OR ESCAPE

The heroes' departure from Edo Station while the corporate docks were locked down did not go unnoticed, and both the Terran Brigade and Orion Ventures tracked them. The Terran Brigade wants the information they were going to buy on Edo, but they don't want anyone else to have it, and they're prepared to take the data by force. Orion Ventures is following up on Mr. White's plans and want to know what happened on Edo Station. They won't resort to violence except to defend themselves.

Shortly after transferring the code to the portable data drive, the PCs are contacted by these two groups demanding the data. Read the following:

Your communicator beeps; a new transmission has arrived. A recorded vid shows a middle-aged man with a military haircut, dressed in gray battle armor. He says:

"This is Colonel Stark of the Terran Brigade. You have something that belongs to us. Turn it over to us and you will be properly compensated. If you do not comply, you won't make it off that ship before our torpedoes hit."

Then a second message comes in. This one features a familiar silhouette:

"This is Mr. White—the Brigade followed you, and I'm following them. Work with me, and I'll get you out of there."

The heroes have a choice: Give the data to the Terran Brigade or cooperate with Orion Ventures. They can reply to one or both messages on a return channel. Their decision impacts what happens next.

ACCEPT THE BRIGADE'S OFFER

If the heroes reply positively to the Terran Brigade, Stark sends a message:

"Good choice. I'm authorizing a payment of \$2,000 apiece for your team's trouble. Our pinnacle is docking now at the unoccupied airlock. Go to the ship's bridge and enable the docking sequence. Once it's complete, rendezvous with our agents and turn over the data, and we'll arrange for payment."

Unfortunately, there's a hiccup: When the mercenary pinnacle docks, *Roanoke's* AI activates an emergency routine that deploys reserve defense drones and starts a self-destruct sequence—a final measure Janelle Carter put in place to keep the access code out of Terran Brigade hands. The heroes must fight through the drones and get off *Roanoke* before it explodes. Read the following to the players:

The sound of metal docking clamps engaging echoes through the silent passageways of the ship. Suddenly, an alert siren sounds, and a mechanical voice echoes through the ship's intercom: "TERRAN BRIGADE DETECTED. EXECUTING DEFENSE PROTOCOL EPSILON. DESTRUCT SEQUENCE INITIATED."

This has the following effects:

- Another group of defense drones deploys from hidden lockers (1 per hero).
- All previously opened doors shut and lock (unless permanently disabled earlier).
- At impulse 8 each round, a minor explosion rocks the ship. Each hero must make an *Acrobatics* check or be knocked off-balance.
- At the end of round 3, a torpedo breaches the hull near the stern of the ship, and all movement toward the front of the ship is halved due to air venting into space.
- At the end of round 8, the remainder of the ship explodes.

The encounter ends when the heroes reach the mercenary gunboat's pinnace (or their own ship) and escape, or when *Roanoke* is destroyed with the heroes still on board.

ACCEPT ORION VENTURE'S OFFER

If the heroes choose to give the data to Orion Ventures, the Brigade responds by torpedoing *Roanoke*'s bridge (or its drives if the heroes are currently on the bridge) and the heroes' shuttle, then sends a boarding party to take them out. With the bridge destroyed, the AI does not engage defensive measures, but the PCs must fight past the mercenaries to escape *Roanoke*. Read the following to the players:

Mr. White contacts you again: "It looks like the Brigade is sending over a boarding party, and they've opened their torpedo tubes. Get off the ship, and we can pick you up. Wait, hold on to something!" A moment later, you're nearly knocked off your feet by an impact somewhere near the front of the ship. White continues: "Looks like they took out your shuttle! Find some escape pods or commandeer the boarding party's vessel—they're docking now. Good luck!"

The Terran Brigade pinnace docks at the unoccupied docking collar and unloads mercenaries to take out the heroes. The PCs either can get to the escape pods near the crew quarters, or try to commandeer the Brigade pinnace. Colonel Stark's ship is a gunboat about 10 kilometers away. If all the mercenaries are killed, the gunboat resumes firing torpedoes, giving the team 4 rounds to escape *Roanoke* before it is annihilated.

- 1 Terran Brigade mercenary per hero in the team (see **Adversaries**)

Commandeering the pinnace is automatic if the mercenaries are dead; its autopilot accepts directions from anyone. Once clear of *Roanoke*, Mr. White picks up the team from the escape pods or the mercenary pinnace with the Orion Ventures ship, then rockets away out of range of the slower Brigade gunboat.

REMAIN SILENT OR STALL FOR TIME

If the party doesn't respond to either group, the Terran Brigade launches the assault anyway. The PCs will have to fight off the mercenaries and find a way off the ship.

If the players relish social roleplaying, you can play out the conversation with Colonel Stark. Use the mercenary pinnace as a timer; its velocity is the speed of plot. Let the players make *Influence*

checks and play out a tense negotiation or angry confrontation. At the dramatic moment, the pinnacle connects with *Roanoke*'s docking collar, and the fight is on.

MAKE A BREAK FOR IT

The heroes may try to flee, either in the *Roanoke* itself or the shuttle they arrived in if it's still intact. *Roanoke* is slow and unarmed but it's big enough to take a few hits, so this space battle is best handled narratively.

- Torpedoes from the Terran Brigade's gunboat hit nearby asteroids about half of the time, and they hit the *Roanoke* the other half.
- After a couple of torpedo hits, the heroes get one last message from Mr. White: "I hope you know what you're doing; they're firing torpedoes at me too. I'll try to contact you later."
- Ask the players where they're going. Logical destinations include Edo Station (two days away under cruising thrust), the Free City of Vesta (a prominent trade hub about a day away), or the Triton Gate itself (several weeks, depending on the torpedo damage).
- After a few more salvos, a torpedo ruins *Roanoke*'s drives, but it's already on course for the heroes' desired destination. The ship is almost entirely without power, but the gunboat breaks off, either because it's out of torpedoes or because Colonel Stark thinks *Roanoke* has been destroyed.

It'll be a long, cold journey no matter where the heroes are going; the drives didn't get the PCs up to cruising thrust before they went offline. But they get there alive, and that's something.

EPILOGUE

The conclusion of the *Roanoke* affair depends on what the heroes did with the Gate code.

If the PCs gave the Gate code to the Terran Brigade: The heroes receive \$2,000 each, a modest sum, and a fraction of what the Brigade was to pay the Syndicate. The Brigade drops them off on the Free City of Vesta, one of the bigger settlements in the asteroid belt.

If the PCs give the Gate code to Orion Ventures: Mr. White pays the heroes at double the initial rate they agreed upon (so \$6,000 per hero), and suggests they could work for him and search for Janelle Carter. He can provide a scout ship and a charter, and it turns out they've got a new Gate code they need to try out. The

Episode 4 could easily serve as the continuation of Carter's story.

heroes likely have made enemies—notably the Terran Brigade and the Tethys-Hygiea Syndicate.

If the PCs chose to flee: The team makes an improbable escape. *Roanoke* holds together just long enough to reach the nearest station; Mr. White sends a representative to pay the agreed-upon sum and take possession of *Roanoke* (and, more important, its Gate code). If the heroes refuse to turn over *Roanoke*, they can sell it for scrap and make \$2,000 each, or spend a total of \$250,000 to repair the ship (a large loan might be required).

ADVERSARIES

Enemies the heroes encounter in this episode include the following.

MR. BLACK

Intelligent and coldly pragmatic, Otto Black is an ambitious Syndicate director who’s looking for ways to get ahead with a little outside-the-box thinking. He begins a fight by activating his displacement belt, and tries to keep a guard between himself and enemy attack. He’s not willing to die for White’s case, and surrenders when it’s clear he can’t repel the heroes’ assault.

TR 1 Champion Humanoid (Human)

Senses normal; *Awareness* 17+

Initiative 13/18/23 (+1 step); **Speed** 20 meters

Str 17+	Agi 16+	Vit 17+	Int 16+ (sentient)	Foc 17+	Per 17+
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ACTIONS

Double Shot 3 impulses; uses Flechette Pistol against two different targets.

Flechette Pistol 3 impulses; *Medium* 1 target; *Attack* 15/20/25 (+1 step);

Damage 1d6+1/5 physical, or 1d6+4/8 physical at Close range.

Unarmed 3 impulses; *Melee* 1 target; *Attack* 15/20/25; 1d4+0/3 physical.

Deflection Belt 1 impulse; activates deflection belt.

DEFENSE

Deflection Ranged attacks against Mr. Black take a –2 step penalty.

(10+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	incapacitated	<i>Folds like a broken chair</i>
(10+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	loses Double Shot action	<i>Staggers back from bad hit</i>
(7 to 9 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	–2 step penalty to all checks	<i>"Damn you!"</i>
(4 to 6 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	–1 step penalty to all checks	<i>Scowls and checks deflection belt</i>
(1 to 3 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>		<i>"Do you know who I am?"</i>

OTHER

Skills *Computer* 14+, *Empathy* 15+, *Security* 14+

Gear Deflection belt (an experimental Syndicate model), flechette pistol, comm patch

ROANOKE DEFENSE DRONE

Mining robots rebuilt by Janelle Carter's crew to serve as an effective defense for *Roanoke*, the defense drones are directed by the ship's AI.

TR 1 Medium Standard Mechanism (Robot)

Senses normal; *Awareness* 16+

Initiative 15/20/25; **Speed** fly 20 meters (hover)

Str 16+ **Agi** 18+ **Vit** 15+ **Int** 19+ (programmed) **Foc** 17+ **Per** 19+

ACTIONS

Mining Laser 3 impulses; *Close* 1 target; *Attack* 16/21/26 (+1 step); *Damage* 1d6+2/5 energy.

Double Vise Grip 3 impulses, two attacks; *Melee* 1 target; *Attack* 16/21/26 (+1 step); *Damage* 1d6+0/3 physical, and if a target is hit by both attacks the target is grappled.

Crush 2 impulses; *Melee* 1 grappled target; *Attack* automatic; *Damage* 1d8+2 physical.

DEFENSE

Life Support

Armor 1 physical, 1 energy

(10+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	destroyed	<i>Shorts out and goes dark</i>
(7 to 9 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	loses one vise grip attack	<i>One manipulator arm blasted away</i>
(4 to 6 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	speed reduced to 10 m	<i>Smoke billows from thruster unit</i>
(1 to 3 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>		<i>Buzzes loudly, status light blinks red</i>

TERRAN BRIGADE MERCENARY

Most Terran Brigade operatives are ex-military types recruited from top units in many different nations. They're highly disciplined and tactically sound, not taking stupid chances.

TR 2 Medium Standard Humanoid (Human)

Senses normal; *Awareness* 16+

Initiative 12/17/22; **Speed** 16 meters

Str 15+ **Agi** 16+ **Vit** 16+ **Int** 17+ (sentient) **Foc** 16+ **Per** 17+

ACTIONS

Laser Rifle 4 impulses; *Very Long* 1 target; *Attack* 15/20/25 (+2 steps); *Damage* 1d6+2/7 energy.

Unarmed 3 impulses; *Melee* 1 target; *Attack* 15/20/25 (+1 step); 1d4+0/3 physical.

DEFENSE

Armor 4 physical, 2 energy

(11+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	incapacitated	<i>Falls over, clutching at chest</i>
(8 to 10 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	-2 step penalty to all checks	<i>"Medic! Where's the medic?"</i>
(5 to 7 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	-1 step penalty to all checks	<i>Grunts and keeps going</i>
(1 to 4 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>		<i>"Taking fire here!"</i>

OTHER

Skills *Athletics* 14+, *Coercion* 15+, *Survival* 14+

Gear Polymer mail, laser rifle, comm patch

EPISODE 2: SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

An Adventure for 2nd-level Heroes

The frontier of the asteroid belt is the new Wild West. Powerful faction leaders and the CEOs of interplanetary corporations sacrifice ethics for resources and territory. The law holds little sway in this chaotic expanse, but villainy has a cost on the soul. When a new religious sect promises youth and redemption for the rich, no price is too high to pay for a second chance.

BACKGROUND

From a remote asteroid cloning facility, the First Stone denomination of the Church of Human Transcendence offers new life to elderly magnates, moguls, and tycoons. The First Stone copies the memories of the original being onto cyberware, and then imprints those memories on the blank mind of a fresh young clone. These rejuvenated clones invariably donate huge sums—even entire corporations—to the First Stone denomination.

One of the First Stone's primary recruitment centers is the Lucky Cat Casino on Vesta, a hotspot for elderly moguls in the belt. Recently, Chen Zhou, President of the Lucky Cat Casino Corporation (LCCC), attempted to bar First Stone recruiters from operating in her establishment. When Chen suffered a partial stroke and nearly died, she relented and joined the "Stoners" for her own chance at redemption. Like the others, she too decided to donate her wealth and a controlling interest in her company to the Church. Suspicious, Chen's daughter Bao Zhou—vice president of LCCC—summons the heroes to investigate.

FOR THE GM: THE REAL STORY

The Church of Human Transcendence no longer controls the First Stone; they only think they do. In the early days of the sect, the politico-military rogue AI system known as Deus XI infiltrated the asteroid, took over the cloning facility, and brainwashed the order. With the help of networked android operatives, Deus XI lures wealthy and powerful individuals to the First Stone. After the cloning process, Deus XI compels the clones to euthanize their old "sinful" selves. The clones are a trap, grafted with hidden implants that make them susceptible to subconscious suggestions from Deus XI. Its goal is to amass influence and ultimately control humanity.

The Implants: Like the god it pretends to be, Deus XI sees, hears, and knows what its android minions and the First Stone clones implanted with

its cyberware know. Some clones (such as Jin Wu) think they're being watched. Thanks to the implants, Deus XI's spies, and the omnipresent nature of the AI and its capacity for infiltrating electronic systems, the GM can generally assume Deus XI knows the heroes' plans.

Killing Clones: If the heroes kill the Jin Wu or Chen Zhou clones in **Scenes 1-3**, the clones are reborn on the First Stone, where the heroes may encounter them in **Scene 5** under the control of Deus XI.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The heroes start in Beijing, the heart of the Socialist Collective of China, where Bao Zhou enlists them to help her gather evidence against the First Stone. After the mission briefing, the heroes can travel to any of the asteroid destinations she lays out: Ceres, Pallas, or Vesta (see **Scenes 1-3** below). After the heroes have visited Ceres, Pallas, and Vesta, the original, elder Chen Zhou escapes the First Stone, contacts the heroes, and tells them what's really going on (see **Scene 4** below). Chen Zhou gives the heroes the coordinates to the First Stone base and the heroes travel to the asteroid to confront Deus XI (see **Scene 5** below).

MISSION BRIEFING

LCCC's flagship casino may be located on Vesta, but the corporate headquarters is located in Beijing on Earth, where Bao Zhou summons the heroes for a private conference.

You find yourself in the corporate offices of the Lucky Cat Casino Corporation in Beijing. Bao Zhou, a high-ranking executive, has reached out to you with an offer of employment. Throughout the office the LCCC logo, a waving golden cat, repeats on red wallpaper. After tea and refreshments, Bao Zhou—a woman of 45 or so with a no-nonsense manner to her—joins you in the conference room. “Have you ever heard of the First Stone?” she begins.

Bao Zhou fills the heroes in on the events in the **Background** section before distributing reports showing several companies recently acquired by the First Stone denomination of the Church of Human Transcendence.

“It alarmed me to see the Church acquiring so many businesses. But when my old friend—robotics tycoon Jin Wu—delivered the lion's share of his corporation to this First Stone order, I knew something was wrong; he had dedicated his whole life to building the company.

“Eight weeks ago my mother joined their sect, got a new body, and now won’t speak to me. My lawyers tell me she’s transferring her controlling interest in our company to the First Stone. But I believe the Church is blackmailing our elders, and I need some useful people to get to the bottom of it.”

She answers the heroes’ questions to the best of her ability.

Why do you think rich, old people are suddenly supporting the Church? “I run a casino corporation, and rich, old people are my biggest clients. They have lots of money and many regrets, but they are all out of time.”

Why do you think the Church is running a racket? “It’s obvious: they’re specifically targeting people nearing the ends of their lives, burdened by regret. If the Church is downloading their minds into clone bodies, it has access to their memories—every wicked thought and dirty deed. It’s using that info to blackmail our elders. The information they have could ruin us all. And running the operation on a secret asteroid is certainly suspicious.”

What kinds of companies is the First Stone targeting? “It runs the gamut, but they’re principally technology and biotech organizations such as Wu Robotics and Cynestar Cybernetics.”

What else can you tell us about Chen Zhou? “Before her stroke my mother was a woman of steel, a warrior and champion martial artist. She built the company from nothing. She would never sell it.”

MISSION OBJECTIVES

Bao Zhou needs the heroes to help her make a legal case against the First Stone. She asks the heroes to complete three tasks:

1. Testimonial: On Ceres (**Scene 1**), get Jin Wu to confess that the Church of Human Transcendence forced or tricked him to sign away his company. To be legally useful it needs to be a recorded confession. Bao Zhou uses her connections to get the heroes an appointment; she gives the heroes a small audio/video device to record his testimonial.

2. Hard Proof: Go to Pallas (**Scene 2**) and attend the Church of Human Transcendence’s Transhuman Expo. Try to get information about the First Stone, and tangible physical evidence of wrongdoing, if possible.

3. Noninterference: Go to the Lucky Cat Casino (**Scene 3**) on Vesta and remove the First Stone recruiter, Xin Xia, to stop the First Stone from recruiting any more customers. Do not take any action that would invite scandal, tarnish LCCC’s name, or cause another lawsuit. If the heroes can get the recruiter removed by the local authorities, so much the better.

Bao Zhou offers the heroes \$5,000 each for their services, and use of LCCC's private shuttles. LCCC's pilots will fly them from destination to destination. After Bao Zhou explains these options and the heroes agree to the task, they are free to head to the Beijing spaceport, where they may choose their starting destination.

The heroes know everything about Ceres, Pallas, and Vesta that is presented in **The Solar System** (see page 9), so you can share the descriptions with the players.

GATHERING EVIDENCE AND INTERVIEWING CLONES

Whenever the heroes speak with the clones of the First Stone order—Chen Zhou, Jin Wu, or those who inhabit the First Stone—the clones always hit one or more of the following talking points:

- They made mistakes in life they could no longer live with and the First Stone gave them another chance.
- In case of death or dismemberment, the First Stone keeps their DNA samples, and their memories are backed up to a server; therefore they can potentially live forever.
- The costs of eternal youth are the worldly possessions of the clone's first life: You must abandon your old self and your gains in order to truly start fresh. This feels good.
- The clones now have an intuitive sense of what is "right," and following these intuitions always seems to work out for the best. (These are Deus XI's subconscious suggestions.)

Taboo Subjects: The implants within each clone prevent the clone from discussing certain topics unless the clone can override the implant. Overriding the implant is painful. Pushing for answers on the following topics imposes a –4 step penalty on a hero's *Coercion* or *Influence* check to get information from the clone.

- A clone is supposed to kill its original, insensate body before leaving the First Stone.
- The clones have implants that back up their memories and give them visions and dreams, but they are blocked from thinking about their implants.
- The clones always feel better when they follow their dreams and visions. Giving up their companies and worldly possessions feels good.

Allow a hero closely observing the clone an *Empathy* check to realize that the clone is making an effort to say or recall something, and that the effort causes pain and exhaustion. However, a hero who changes tack to soothe or encourage the clone can attempt a new *Empathy* check with a –2 step penalty. Administering a mild sedative or analgesic before returning to the taboo subject can reduce the penalty by an additional 1/2/3 steps on an Av/Ex/St *Medicine* check.

SCENE 1: WU ROBOTICS, CERES

Ceres is the home of the People's Collective of Ceres, a Chinese client state. The asteroid's population centers are "centrifuge cities" that revolve across the rocky surface on a banked track, like linked train cars on a circular track. Wu Robotics operates in the city of Jinzhan, a sprawling corporate and manufacturing hub, equal parts office buildings and factories.

After the heroes dock their shuttle to the moving city they can make their way to the Wu Robotics campus, where Jin Wu keeps a private residence in a small, tower-like home. A single security person, Liu, mans the desk next to Jin Wu's residence. When the heroes arrive, Liu greets them and asks about their voyage. Then he politely confirms their appointment and enters a code to unlock the elevator, allowing the heroes access to Jin Wu's private quarters. Heroes curious about the doorman note that he is human and can attempt a *Culture* check. On a success, they observe that on the automated world of Ceres it is uncommon for a human to do such a menial job—especially for the founder of a robotics corporation.

Jin Wu's apartment is a plush bachelor pad with a fully stocked bar. Your profile lists Jin Wu as eighty-seven years old, but the boy who occupies this apartment is no more than eighteen.

After you enter, Jin Wu puts a finger to his lips and presses a button on the wall. Black shades slide down over the windows and a soundproof barrier eases into place in front of the door. "Now we can talk freely," he says.

Unlike the other First Stone clones, Jin Wu abandoned the idea of living a virtuous second life as soon as he gained his new body; Jin Wu lives on his family's money and enjoys excess. In conversation he is aloof, brash, and commands respect. Jin Wu confides to the heroes that he's being watched, but he doesn't know how, or by whom. He is happy to discuss the topics in the **Gathering Evidence and Interviewing Clones** section, as long as he is not recorded. He refuses to proceed with an interview unless the heroes turn off the recorder—this is Deus XI manipulating his implant. The heroes can attempt an *Influence* check with a -1 step penalty to persuade him to comply; on a success, Jin Wu overcomes the block and allows the heroes to record the interview. (Heroes can record him surreptitiously with a successful *Misdirection* check.)

THE DOORMAN

Deus XI decides that the heroes might represent a threat and takes steps.

When you leave Jin Wu's apartment, a different doorman stands at the door. "The front door is locked," he says. "Let me show you out through the back."

Allow the heroes a group *Awareness* check (page 138, *Core Rulebook*). If the heroes succeed, they note that the rug is awry, there are papers scattered on the floor behind the desk, and tiny red flecks are on the doorman's ill-fitting suit and the back of his chair. On an Excellent success, the heroes spot that the new doorman is a Wu Robotics android.

The new doorman motions the heroes toward a hall leading to the back door, where two additional Wu Robotics androids armed with pistols attempt to kill the heroes.

- 3 gamma-class agent androids (page 238, *Core Rulebook*)

Apart from their laser pistols, the androids have a handheld recording device containing Jin Wu's conversations—including a very clear recording of the conversation he just had with the heroes. The androids are under Deus XI's control and they record Jin Wu via his implant.

Development: If the heroes return to Jin Wu and tell him that the androids recorded him, he thanks them and begins an investigation into his robotics factory. In this case the heroes win his trust as a future contact.

SCENE 2: THE PALLAS EXPO

Most settlements on Pallas make no effort to simulate gravity, since it's not necessary for the largest hydroponic farms in the asteroid belt. Beneath the domes that house the colony's population centers, plants grow in microgravity on the terraces of buildings shaped like step pyramids; gardeners equipped with tanks full of water and nutrients float like strange bees from level to level among these verdant indoor mountains. The Transhuman Expo takes place in the small city of Ergane.

As the heroes float across the verdant landscape of the Church of Human Transcendence's Transhuman Expo, immerse them in the environment: one vendor tries to sell them vitality pills; another wants to sell extended fertility on a subscription model; a third shows them a case full of cybernetic enhancements—all for the holy glory of human evolution! The First Stone doesn't have a booth at the expo but they are on the event list, and placards for the First Stone's presentation feature the elderly face of Chen Zhou, president of LCCC.

THE ARGUMENT

Choose one of the heroes at random. As the character explores the expo, they pass two gardeners having an argument:

Dain: Those nutjobs at Genesis 6 aren't our friends. I'm not doing this.

Ele: We're not working for them—we're doing it for our grandmother.

Dain: This is too much. It's going too far. Give me the canister.

Ele: Let go! (She pulls away and floats off into the crowd.)

The Plot: Ele and Dain Rutherford are the grandchildren of Cynthia Rutherford, a cloned First Stone convert and former CEO of Cynestar Cybernetics. Before Deus XI compelled Cynthia to sign away her corporation to the First Stone, Cynthia's clone mustered the willpower to break her connection and—in that moment of free will—recorded a message stating that she was being manipulated by the “God of the First Stone,” before taking her own life. Aided by the radical Genesis 6 faction, Cynthia's grandchildren Dain and Ele smuggled a canister of deadly nerve gas onto Pallas for a strike against the First Stone. Ele intends to carry out the attack; Dain has second thoughts.

A Closer Look: A hero who observes the argument and tails either Rutherford might discern some extra details:

- A successful *Empathy* check reveals that Ele, too, is having difficulty convincing herself to go through with her plans.
- A hero with a profession or skill specialization related to cybernetics recognizes these individuals as Ele and Dain Rutherford, heirs to Cynestar Cybernetics (a company recently acquired by the First Stone).
- A successful *Heavy Weapon* or *Security* check reveals that Ele's “water tank” resembles a military-grade tank of nerve gas.

Interaction: The heroes can choose to interact with Dain or follow Ele (or both at once). A successful *Coercion* or *Influence* check prompts Dain to disclose the details in **The Plot**. Dain is willing to give the heroes the recording of his grandmother's final words; this will serve as the hard proof Bao Zhou asked for in **Mission Objectives**.

As soon as the heroes finish speaking with Dain, the First Stone event begins; go to **The Speaker**.

Tracking down Ele requires a successful *Awareness* check with a –2 step penalty to find her in the crowd. If the heroes track Ele, they need to succeed at an *Influence* check with a –2 step penalty to convince her to back down. If the heroes use force, Ele attempts to use the nerve gas on them (see **Stopping Ele**).

THE SPEAKER

When the heroes attend Chen Zhou's presentation, read:

The Chen Zhou who takes that stage is not the feeble old woman on the placards, but a bright reflection of that woman fifty years younger, with smooth skin and lustrous hair. "Three thousand years ago a princess named Amytis yearned for the mountains of her home," she begins. "To win her love, the king of Babylon built her a hanging garden—very much like this one. And thus her name lives on through time. What would you give to do the same?"

In a motivational speech resembling a TED Talk, Chen Zhou's clone sells the audience on the First Stone's promise of immortality: give up your old self and your worldly wealth, and be reborn.

If Ele Rutherford still roams free, she uses her gardener disguise to get close to the stage, and releases the nerve gas in the middle of Chen Zhou's speech.

Stopping Ele: Ele Rutherford has 1 wound box and no fighting ability. Using a blower connected to her tank, Ele releases the nerve gas (see Poison, page 183, *Core Rulebook*) in a cloud that affects living creatures in a 4-meter by 4-meter area directly in front of her. Allow heroes in attendance to make *Awareness* checks to avoid being surprised by Ele's action. She achieves an Average result on her initiative check; a hero who beats her initiative can act to stop Ele before she releases the gas.

Chen Zhou's Clone: Chen Zhou's clone is a human operative (page 247, *Core Rulebook*). If she survives the poisoning, she answers the heroes' questions as per the **Gathering Evidence and Interviewing Clones** section. If asked, Chen says that her daughter's constant "mothering" exhausts her.

Following her conversation with the heroes (or her survival, if the heroes don't speak with her), Deus XI recalls Chen Zhou to the First Stone.

SCENE 3: THE VESTA RECRUITER

The districts of the Free City of Vesta glitter with lights and holographic ads as they pinwheel like a wind farm of Old Earth turned on its side. Tethered to the rocky surface of the asteroid, each district is an independent space station that turns like an enormous wheel in order to simulate gravity within. The space stations are tethered to towers and the towers are connected by subterranean tunnels, but most travelers simply take a shuttle from district to district.

The Lucky Cat Casino is a district unto itself—a massive gambling station with the red and gold maneki-neko logo beckoning travelers to its docks and promising good fortune.

Xin Xia, the recruiter for the First Stone, is a gamma-class android (page 238, *Core Rulebook*) controlled by Deus XI. He promises the elderly patrons free tickets to one of a dozen shows playing on Vesta in exchange for a small portion of their time. Xin Xia gives the patrons conference room number 111, where he gives them the hard sell on joining the First Stone.

Finding Xin Xia in the casino takes only a few minutes: He has a table full of promotional material set up near the entrance, and generally remains within sight of the display.

Lucky Cat Casino machines whiz and ring on the casino floor. Service robots and cocktail servers hustle across the busy floor, where white-haired retirees flash their mobile devices at credit readers. In the midst of the hustle, a smiling man flanked by six toughs in black suits works the crowd, moving between the retirees. Two policemen lounge at the bar, barely paying attention to the action.

Deus XI knows the heroes are investigating on behalf of Bao Zhou, so it has hired local gangsters (the Ursa Major gang) for protection, and paid the police to stay out of First Stone business.

- The Ursas (six human gangsters, page 244, *Core Rulebook*) stay close to the android Xin Xia, who has paid them for protection.
- The corrupt cops (two human guards, as above) Han and Li stay at the bar and won't get involved. If the heroes talk to the cops, a successful *Culture* or *Empathy* check reveals that cops on Vesta are motivated by money, and they give subtle hints that they work for bribes. Han and Li agree to run off the gangsters if the heroes pay them \$500 each.
- If the heroes pay the cops, the police confront the Ursas, leaving Xin Xia exposed.
- If the heroes try to talk to Xin Xia without bribing the cops, the Ursas tell them to pay up or get lost. If they pay the Ursas \$250 apiece (\$1,500 total) the Ursas hand Xin Xia over to the heroes.

If the heroes pick a fight while the Ursas are protecting Xin Xia, the android presses a button on a handheld device and all the machines in the casino hit jackpot at the same time. In the ensuing chaos, the crowd becomes slow terrain for the heroes and Xin Xia attempts to flee to another district of Vesta via a shuttle parked near the casino door while the Ursas fight off the heroes. Xin Xia escapes if the heroes don't stop him in 2 action rounds (this scandalous mess disqualifies the heroes from a bonus in the **Epilogue**).

If the heroes catch Xin Xia, the android's eyes turn blue and (as Deus XI) it says, "You will bow down before your God!" before

shutting down. A successful *Computer* check reveals a strange implant (matching the clones' implants) beneath the skin on the back of its neck.

SCENE 4: CHEN ZHOU THE ELDER

After the heroes have concluded their business on the third asteroid they visit, Chen Zhou the elder meets them at the spaceport.

An elderly woman hobbles forward, using a black cane for support. She wears the simple beige frock of the First Stone disciples, but stains smear her clothing and bruises cloud her skin. Her hair is in disarray, and she has dark circles beneath her eyes. One side of her face sags slightly, her lips in a partial frown. "My name is Chen Zhou," she says. "I understand you work for my daughter. I will pay you handsomely to kill my clone."

Chen Zhou tells the heroes the true story of the First Stone.

- Consciousness isn't transferred; memories are copied and the original remains.
- The original body is subdued; the clone is compelled to kill it by lethal injection.
- Chen Zhou escaped the First Stone before she could be subdued. She stowed away on a departing shuttle; she claims to have been a highly skilled operative in her youth, and says she's "still got it." When she got to safety she contacted her daughter, who told her where to find the heroes.
- Chen Zhou has the coordinates for the First Stone's laboratory.
- The First Stone is run by a rogue AI with a god complex called Deus XI.
- Deus XI influences the clones through their implants.
- The computer core holding Deus XI and the clones' memories needs to be destroyed.

As a bonus, Chen Zhou wants her clone destroyed; she suspects Deus XI will compel it to murder her once it learns of her location. LCCC has been tracking the clone's movements; Chen tells the heroes that her clone has just returned to the First Stone to serve Deus XI.

SCENE 5: THE FIRST STONE

The First Stone laboratory is located in a "bubble asteroid" in a remote part of the asteroid belt. Although much of the six hundred meter-wide asteroid has been mined, it is not entirely hollow. The guts of the facility—power reactor, life support systems, radiation

shield, ice and water supply, cooling units, solar array—are located on the far side of the asteroid and covered by anti-aircraft guns; the LCCC shuttle pilots won't go near them.

THE APPROACH

The docking bay of the First Stone lies in a fissure on the near side of the asteroid as the heroes approach.

From space, the First Stone shines and glimmers. Giant pictures in stained glass decorate the surface of the asteroid like the windows of a Gothic cathedral, but these images—of cybernetic fingers touching the hand of God—suggest more contemporary themes. A steel and aluminum ring encircles the asteroid, affixed to the surface with spokes and equipped with thrusters to maintain the First Stone's momentum over time and simulate gravity on the inside of the rock. As your shuttle approaches, your communications panel flashes. Someone is hailing you.

The heroes can choose to answer the comm or ignore it. If they answer, Deus XI sends them a taunting greeting before sending an electronic pulse to scramble the ship's instruments:

As the shuttle nears the docking bay, the control screens go haywire. The instrument panel lights up and just as suddenly goes dark. Nothing works—thrusters are unresponsive. The shuttle glides past the docking bay on a collision course with the wall of the fissure.

The heroes have time to attempt one *Computer* check to get the systems back online while the pilot (hero or LCCC-provided) struggles to regain control. On a success, the pilot can attempt a successful *Piloting* check to dock the shuttle. If either check fails, the shuttle crashes, any LCCC personnel aboard are killed, and the heroes must each make a *Dodge* check. On a success, the hero suffers a minor impact (1d6 damage); on a failure, the hero suffers a serious impact (1d12 damage, inflicts 1d3 wounds).

If the heroes successfully dock the shuttle, the airlock leads to the guest entrance (area 1). If they crash, they overshoot the entrance but find the airlock to the administration entrance (area 2). Thanks to the spin of the asteroid, gravity on the inside is normal.

EXPLORING THE ASTEROID

Two structures occupy the cavern on the inside of First Stone. One is a small, modern, single-story administration building. The other resembles an old world Gothic church.

There are other shuttles here; the heroes aren't stranded if they crash.

Deus XI is wired into the First Stone. Like a vain god it taunts the heroes through the intercom system as they explore the asteroid. Have fun directly commenting on the heroes' actions as Deus XI; mock their efforts, quote verse, ask leading questions, play music (choir, organ, atmospheric), etc. To drive Deus XI off the asteroid, the heroes need to destroy the computer core in area 10.

1. Guest Entrance:

The guest entrance of the First Stone filters visitors through a beautiful gallery of stained glass and frescoes into the cathedral, avoiding the offices and infrastructure.

2. Administration Entrance: The main docking bay for the First Stone leads to the administration center of the asteroid. This side is never shown to guests or clones.

3. Mortuary Cavern: The doors that allow access to this cavern require two successful *Security* checks to pass. The first check opens the lock. The second check disables the automatic security system. Old, shriveled bodies lay naked in piles here. Crates and stacks of cast-off possessions lay scattered about the cavern. There is enough evidence here to sink the First Stone legally.

4. Administration Center: Twelve epsilon-class worker androids (page 238, *Core Rulebook*) run this center, each an extension of Deus XI. This area contains an office, conference room, and control center that monitors the asteroid's ring thrusters, solar mirror, life support, HVAC, radiation shielding, and reactor.

5. Clone Labs: Pods containing thirteen gestating clones occupy this room. Tables of complex medical equipment stock this area. Computer screens show cross sections of human anatomy. A black velvet case lying open on a table holds twelve fresh implants, worth \$5,000 total.

6. Clone Quarters: Each clone has its own cell—a small, comfortable, unadorned room. Each cell contains a bed and clean clothes. A mess hall, a washroom, and a garden adjoin the cells. Although the grass is synthetic, rows of hydroponic plants grow in stepped terraces along the walls. At the center of the garden is a reflection



DOORS ON THE ASTEROID

The faux wooden church doors open easily. Metal doors require a successful *Security* check to pass. The door to the computer core in area 10 gets a -2 step penalty. Each failure to bypass a door draws four androids from area 4 to the location.

pool of clear, still water. The six clones that currently inhabit this area are harmless clones of executives frightened by the heroes' appearance. Deus XI might use them to interfere with the heroes in creative ways, but they are unarmed noncombatants with one wound box each.

7. Storage Closet: One inert explorer probe (page 253, *Core Rulebook*) occupies the storage closet.

8. Nave: When the heroes enter the nave, four floating eyes (page 252, *Core Rulebook*) descend from the church ceiling to stop them from entering the Core; the explorer probe in area 7 also activates and enters the nave.

Flying buttresses sweep upward to support a dome above the nave, 35 meters high. Wires and cables run like roots and vines throughout the church—the nervous system of the First Stone and its electronic god. Organ music floats through every duct and vent. The cathedral's artificially illuminated stained glass windows depict Jesus, Lazarus, and contemporary figures from the Church of Human Transcendence awakening from death as if from sleep.

The robots attack until destroyed.

9. Room of Final Repose: The withered corpse of an elderly human lies upon a table. A syringe filled with potassium chloride glints from a tray next to the corpse. Funerary organ music drones from above. These are the chambers where Deus XI compels the clones to euthanize their old selves.

10. The Core: This room houses the station mainframe, currently home to one of Deus XI's many incarnations.

Cool blue lights pulse from the computer core that is the heart and mind of Deus XI of the First Stone. A monitor screen shows an old man in bishop's raiment, wearing a miter, eyes glowing like blue stars. Three identical clones of the young Chen Zhou kneel before the computer core.

"We are without sin," they say in unison, "but you are the enemy of God, and must die."

The AI created two additional clones of the young Chen Zhou to protect its physical housing on the asteroid (three human operatives, page 247, *Core Rulebook*).

The Chen Zhou clones fight until they are defeated or until Deus XI is. Ultimately, the clones don't want to die, and the heroes can try to break Deus XI's hold over them: A hero who succeeds at a *Coercion* or *Influence* check with a -4 step penalty against a single clone can convince that clone to override its implant and back down. If the heroes defeat them, they ask to be spared.

The computer core can be destroyed as a Large Object (page 187, *Core Rulebook*). Destroying the computer core won't destroy Deus XI. Like the god it pretends to be, the AI is in many places simultaneously, working on many different schemes, but shattering the computer core will break its connection to the clones here on the First Stone. Doing so also destroys the preserved memories in storage and any personality backups—and eliminates the clones' chances of "rebirth."

EPILOGUE

With Deus XI defeated, the heroes can return to Beijing to reap the rewards of their adventures among the asteroid worlds. Embarrassed, the Church of Human Transcendence recalls the First Stone order and returns the assets obtained through compulsion by Deus XI; then they work on removing the implants from the young clones that remain. Maybe one day eternal youth and redemption will be available to all, but not today. The Lucky Cat Casino Corporation and Wu Robotics owe the heroes a debt of gratitude, and the heroes gain Bao Zhou (and Jin Wu's clone, if the heroes helped him in Scene 1) as Excellent contacts.

- If the heroes removed Xin Xia from the casino without attracting negative attention to LCCC, Bao Zhou gives the heroes a bonus \$1,000 each.
- If the heroes killed Chen Zhou's clone, the original elder Chen Zhou awards the heroes a bonus \$2,000 each.
- If the heroes spared one of Chen Zhou's clones, the clone takes refuge with the Church of Human Transcendence. She pulls some strings to get the heroes a special favor: a one-time visit to a prototype resurrection pod designed by the Church.

In the unlikely event that a gritty group of heroes opt to make a deal with Deus XI and preserve the cloning technology, Deus XI becomes a Stellar contact and offers double the money LCCC did. It expects the heroes to agree to have cybernetic implants installed, granting Deus XI partial control over their decisions. Otherwise, the AI eventually ties up its loose ends.

EPISODE 3: TARTARUS STATION

An Adventure for 2nd-level Heroes

Humankind has discovered hundreds of systems beyond the Gates of the Protostar Nexus. One of them is home to Tartarus Station. When the outpost falls silent, someone's got to find out what happened. The only problem is, no one expects your team to come back.

BACKGROUND

One of the corporations exploring beyond the Protostar Nexus is the Tethys-Hygia Syndicate, a particularly ruthless megacorp with tendrils throughout the Jovian colonies and the planets beyond the Nexus. One of the Syndicate's carefully hoarded Gate codes leads to the planet Tartarus, a sulfurous world ripe for mining operations.

Six months ago, Tartarus Station had just advanced beyond the exploratory stage and into full production when the engineers discovered "brimstone slugs," burrowing creatures that consumed sulfur and other less valuable materials, leaving behind almost elementally pure iron, zinc, and other metals. At first the Syndicate's engineers merely collected the valuable waste the brimstone slugs left behind, but then they discovered that electric charges could "herd" the slugs in the direction of the richer pyrite (fools' gold) and sphalerite (smoky black crystals) deposits.

The miners thought the brimstone slugs were ordinary animals, until an immense creature they dubbed a "brimstone beetle" burrowed into the mining complex. Demonstrating a rudimentary command of English, it announced that the miners could continue to use the brimstone slugs if they provided some humans for the brimstone beetle to "use." The engineers tried to reply to the brimstone beetle, but it only repeated its ultimatum.

Syndicate leadership approved the bargain, and four volunteer workers laden with surveillance tech accompanied the brimstone beetle deeper underground. The engineers at Tartarus Station watched aghast as the brimstone beetle vivisected them slowly.

Two weeks ago, the brimstone beetle returned, demanding more humans and offering a tenfold increase in the number of brimstone slugs working on the miners' behalf. The Syndicate knew that none of the engineers would volunteer, so they planned to lure the logistics staff on the planet's surface down into the mines. The station's doctor, Bernice Lassiter, warned the logistics staff of the engineers' plan, then barricaded herself in an older part of the station.

As the adventure begins, the logistics staff knows that the Syndicate can't be trusted, and they're desperately seeking a way off the planet. The engineers know they can't let either Dr. Lassiter or the logistics staff escape,

and they're worried the brimstone beetle will grow impatient and turn on them. So they've cut off communication with the Syndicate's orbital relay satellites, hoping to overpower the logistics crew and satisfy the brimstone beetle. They figure they'll then invent a plausible cover story to account for the missing staff.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The Tethys-Hygiea Syndicate is as ruthless as they come, but they're also a massive corporation spread out over a dozen worlds, so the left hand doesn't always know what the right hand is doing. The player characters—all talented freelancers who happened to be in or near the Protostar Nexus when the station went dark—are hired to find out what happened at the station and render what immediate assistance they can.

The division responsible for the rescue effort, Facilities Administration, doesn't know about the brimstone creatures or the sinister bargain that the Extractive Resources division made. (When the off-planet leadership of Extractive Resources finds out about the rescue mission, they're chagrined to say the least.) Thus the heroes arrive at Tartarus Station without any knowledge of the exact situation.

Almost immediately after landing, the logistics crew tries to overpower the PCs and escape on the shuttle that just landed. Dr. Lassiter warned them that the Syndicate couldn't be trusted, and the PCs arrive with a Syndicate shuttle after all. The logistics crew has fashioned the mining gear into weapons to fend off the engineers down in the mine, but they aren't trained soldiers.

By exploring the surface facilities and talking to surviving logistics crew, the heroes learn some of what's going on below, but they don't know about the brimstone beetle or its bargain. But they get enlightened when they descend into the mine and encounter the booby traps left by Dr. Lassiter, who's been waging a one-woman war against the engineers. The PCs may fight her or negotiate with her; either way, they learn that the engineers were willing to trade human lives for the tenfold mining efficiency gains that the brimstone slugs provide.

That revelation leads to a further descent and a final confrontation with the engineers—and the brimstone beetle. In the climax and aftermath of that battle, the heroes have the chance to collapse a section of the mine, burying the engineers and their misdeeds . . . and perhaps the brimstone beetle as well.

MISSION BRIEFING

When you're ready to begin, share the following information with the players:

One of the Solar System's most powerful corporations, the Tethys-Hygiea Syndicate, is aggressively exploring systems on the far side of the Triton Gate. They coordinate their exploration—or exploitation—efforts from Prosperity One, a spinning space station within the protostar system. Syndicate freighters and scout vessels are always zipping between the various Gates and Prosperity One.

You and your team are freelance “consultants” who’ve done work for the Syndicate recently. None of you are currently under contract, but your outbound travel plans have been diverted to Prosperity One station, where the senior administrator for facilities, Calvin DeNurio, has scheduled a brief meeting during your layover to discuss a “lucrative job opportunity.”

PREVIOUS TROUBLE WITH THE SYNDICATE?

If the heroes made a mess when dealing with the Syndicate in a previous episode, the players may wonder whether the Syndicate intends to get even with them. They have less to worry about than they may think: The Syndicate’s off-the-books ops are highly compartmentalized, so Syndicate people who haven’t had personal dealings with the heroes before haven’t heard about earlier troubles. It takes several bad interactions before the Syndicate’s internal security teams begin tracking the heroes as a threat.

Calvin DeNurio, the Syndicate executive, is a straight shooter, and he has no idea what his colleagues in the Extractive Resources division are up to. It’s a black mark for him and his team if Tartarus Station stays incommunicado and offline for long, especially because the initial numbers from Tartarus seemed so promising. His resources are extensive but not infinite, and he’s motivated by time pressure and uncertainty. He wants the Tartarus Station problem fixed (or at least understood) as soon as possible.

Here are key elements DeNurio shares with the PCs during his mission briefing:

- One week ago, the Syndicate’s Facilities Administration division lost contact with a mining operation on the far side of a Gate. Tartarus Station reported nothing unusual and was producing quantities of high-quality iron, zinc, and other minerals.
- Tartarus Station is a largely self-sufficient operation. There are 42 personnel onsite. About two-thirds are engineers responsible for assessing mineral deposits and directing the robotic mining apparatuses. The remaining one-third are logistics personnel doing survey work on the surface and preparing sites for future development.
- Tartarus gets its name from the omnipresent sulfur, abundant both in mineral form below the surface and as hydrogen

sulfide (the classic rotten-egg smell) in the atmosphere. Gravity is 0.6 g, and the atmospheric pressure is close to Earth standards. Tartarus's atmosphere isn't breathable, but the mine is sealed and fitted with life support.

- There's no xenolife on the planet beyond single-cell stuff.
- Tartarus Station has a half-dozen prefab building modules on the surface, and a main shaft that corkscrews down for about 800 meters with side shafts and room-and-pillar sections radiating outward periodically.
- The team is assigned a scout ship: the *Lennox*. The Syndicate can't send anything bigger through that particular Gate. *Lennox* has a shuttle that can land on the surface of Tartarus, and the usual array of exploration gear.
- DeNurio believes that only the Syndicate can reach Tartarus. No one else has the code to activate that Gate, and if they did, the Syndicate would have noticed.

DeNurio offers a fee of \$4,000 per hero (a typical level 2 mission reward); if the heroes press hard during the negotiations, he's willing to go up to \$6,000 each since he's feeling the time pressure. When the heroes agree to the terms, he concludes:

Your job: Assess the situation and report back. We aren't expecting you to fix the problem, but to satisfy the contract you must have a full understanding of the problem and have taken reasonable, immediate actions to prevent further harm to Syndicate personnel and other assets.

You have authorization to direct all Syndicate personnel on Tartarus as you see fit, and paperwork signed by me to prove it. Don't get into any long-term disputes, however. Just put it in your report, restore communications, and get back here.

Time is of the essence, so you'll be traveling at 4 g for the one-week journey to Tartarus. You'll be heavily medicated and confined to crash couches most of the time to reduce the impact of high g-forces, and you'll flush your systems 12 hours before you reach orbit. It won't be a fun trip, but we want you at your best when you get there.

Move on to **Scene 1** when you're ready to begin.

SCENE 1: TARTARUS ORBIT

It's trivially easy to reach Tartarus, though the high-g burn *Lennox* takes to get there means that the heroes won't be able to do much during the one-week journey.

Tartarus is a moon of a gas giant in the HD 59686 system (the Syndicate hasn't bothered naming the system itself yet). About an

hour after the PCs arrive in orbit above the mining station, Tartarus passes around the far side of the gas giant and loses line of sight to the Nexus Gate, so the PCs lose contact with the comm relay that the Syndicate built near the Gate. The gas giant blocks communication for four days, though the heroes can get a connection with the relay if *Lennox* leaves Tartarus's orbit.

Observing the Tartarus station site from orbit reveals the following:

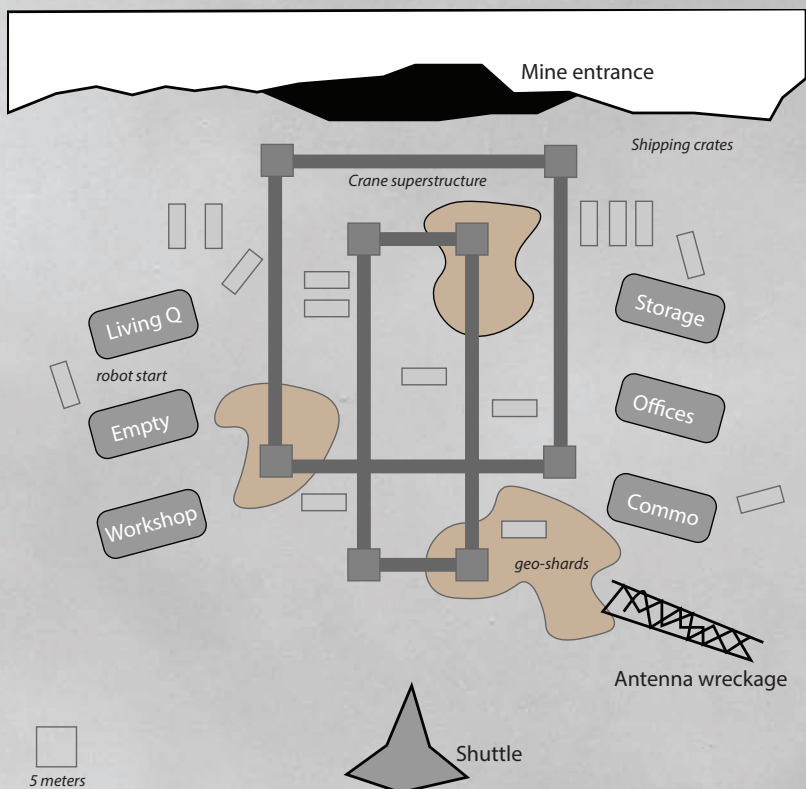
- Emergency lighting is visible at the landing pad near the mine entrance.
- Sensors reveal minimal energy signatures—less than the surface buildings would show under ordinary conditions.
- No response to communication attempts.
- No automated flight control info.
- The trio of orbital satellites that connect Tartarus Station to the relay near the Nexus Gate are intact and functional; they just haven't had anything to broadcast for two weeks.
- No visual evidence of movement.
- No evidence of unusual weather patterns, though it's cloudy across much of Tartarus, and there's light fog at the mining site.
- Conditions are as Calvin DeNurio's briefing described them: a sulfuric, not-quite-breathable atmosphere and a gravity of 0.6 g.

The PCs can descend to the surface in the shuttle whenever they like. The shuttle essentially flies itself and can easily land under autopilot. (The logistics crew ambushers described in **Scene 2** won't reveal themselves, even with repeated flybys. They know they need an intact shuttle to escape Tartarus, so it has to land before they make their move.)

SCENE 2: THE UNWELCOME MAT

The logistics crew at Tartarus Station holds the surface huts and the upper portion of the mine. They are desperate and paranoid; the routine of a frontier mining outpost changed horribly when Dr. Lassiter sent them footage of the brimstone beetle's vivisections and armed engineers returned shortly thereafter to round up more "volunteers." The logistics crew drove off the press gang, then armed themselves as best they could while waiting for another attack from below. (It hasn't come because Dr. Lassiter has been fighting the engineers off.)

Ambush: Lassiter told the logistics crew not to trust the Tethys-Hygia Syndicate and to get off Tartarus any way they could. When the heroes bring a Syndicate shuttle to their landing pad, the



logistics team plans to board it and leave, no matter what. Any fate is better than vivisection at the hands of an alien.

- 2 Logistics crew members per hero in the team (see **Adversaries**).
- The heroes hear a low rumbling sound coming from inside one of the middle huts.
- X-Cavator 85 drives through a hut wall and joins the battle at the end of the first action round.

SETTING AND PROPS

Map #1 shows the general layout of the landing pad and the entrance to mine itself.

Spotting/Opening Range: 60 m/30 m. If the PCs aren't being sneaky, then have the team make a group *Awareness* check. On a success, the PCs spot their would-be assailants hiding among the crates and can engage right away or walk up to 30 m, at which point the logistics crew attacks. On a failure, the battle starts at 30 m and the NPCs have tactical surprise.

If the heroes try to sneak off the shuttle, it's tricky but possible; the sulfurous fog does obscure vision as it drifts by, but it's unpredictable. Make a group *Stealth* check for the heroes who try to exit the shuttle unobserved, and give the PCs a -2 step penalty because the fog isn't dense and the shuttle hatches are obvious. If the heroes succeed, they find the logistics crew preparing their ambush and gain tactical surprise. If the heroes fail, it's like they aren't being sneaky (described above).

Low Gravity: The light gravity means that the heroes have a +1 step bonus on attempts to lift, climb, or jump on Tartarus, and falls are reduced by one severity level.

Shipping Crates: Crates (typically 1 m tall and wide, and 2 m long) are roughly stacked along the perimeter of the landing pad. They provide cover. If struck by weapons fire, use the "Machine Damage" table on p. 215 of the *Core Rulebook* to determine what's inside.

Geo-Shards: These small bits of flinty rock are left over from the mine's initial excavation. If a weapon such as the robot's sonic extractor delivers a spread or blast into a geo-shard area, the geo-shards go airborne—and in 0.6 g, they take a while to settle. The entire geo-shard area becomes very poor visibility (5 m max visibility, creatures inside are impaired as on page 163 of the *Core Rulebook*) until the start of the next round.

Crane Superstructure: The cranes that move ore run in tracks on an external framework that can be scaled pretty easily. The track runs 10 meters off the ground and has frequent protrusions (+3 step bonus on *Acrobatics* checks to avoid falling off). Characters move at normal speed on the horizontal parts of the superstructure.

Mine Entrance: The cave-like entry to the mine's main shaft is about 10 meters tall and covered with plastic sheets that hang like drapes. It's not airtight, but the sheets keep particulates from blowing into the shaft, and they help keep the oxygen inside the mine so the air is breathable. Oxygen escapes, of course, but slowly, making the environmental system more efficient.

The logistics crew isn't much of a challenge. The heroes are supposed to save these people, not massacre them.

AFTERMATH

It's safe to assume that at least a few of the logistics staff survive the battle (or that noncombatants were hiding in the outbuildings). Once the logistics personnel realize they aren't going to escape, they demonstrate a panicky fear of going down into the mine.

Here's what the logistics crew knows:

- Everything was going fine—and in fact the mine was way ahead of projected yield—until Dr. Lassiter emailed an urgent warning to everyone on the surface. The warning included graphic footage of station staff being vivisected by a massive beetle-like alien.

- Lassiter said that the engineers were in league with the alien and that the logistics staff was about to be captured and handed over to the creature. “Barricade yourselves at the entrance, and don’t trust anyone from the Syndicate. They’re all in on it.”
- Engineering staff, armed with the gear from the security station, attacked an hour later, but the logistics crew was able to fight them off by using tools as improvised weapons. The engineers wrecked or cut power to almost everything on the surface, though, including the radio transmitter and the computer network.
- There are probably several dozen engineers down in the mine. The logistics crew expected them to attack again, but they haven’t . . . yet. (Lassiter has been holding them off, but the logistics crew doesn’t know that.)
- Dr. Lassiter hasn’t contacted them again, and they have no good way to reply with the computer systems now wrecked.

The logistics staff aren’t trained soldiers, so they’re all traumatized to a greater or lesser degree by what they’ve seen and endured over the last two weeks. Thus they aren’t great witnesses; they don’t know what the alien is, how it’s involved with the engineers, or what they’re conspiring to do. But vivisection by an alien? That’s all the logistics staff needed to see.

The heroes who make an effort to treat injured logistics staff earn their trust.

OTHER CLUES

Most of the outbuildings were damaged in the attack, but there are still some clues that may help the players piece together the engineers’ motivations.

Radio Transmitter: On a successful *Mechanics* check, it’s obvious that the engineers wanted to bring it down; they swung a lifter arm into it repeatedly.

Computers: The networking between them is destroyed and will take several days to restore, but local files are intact on about half the computers.

The PCs can watch the vivisection footage if they wish. The alien is seen only dimly. It seems massive and insectoid, with strange manipulator claws.

A map of the facility is also available, including plans for future development phases. Construction on a metal-refining furnace and a mass driver to launch the metals into orbit were to begin in three months.

Minerals: Some of the crates have iron, zinc, cadmium, and gallium within them. PCs can learn more with a *Science* (planetology) check:

Failure: The labels on the crates say iron, all right.

Average: Even a casual glance reveals that the metals are remarkably pure—the sort of thing you’d pass around in chemistry class, not find in a mine.

Excellent: The metals are in rounded, fist-sized chunks, not ingots like you’d expect.

Stellar: You couldn’t get those shapes with any known refining process. You’d have to cast the metals in that shape for some reason.

DESCENDING INTO THE MINE

Clearly, the engineering staff knows something that the logistics team doesn’t, but there aren’t any engineers on hand. The heroes are going to have to get the rest of their answers from the engineers inside the mine to satisfy their contract with the Syndicate.

The mine shaft itself is a tube 20 m in diameter, with aggregate fill (gravel) in the lowest part to provide a flat floor. The surface opening is screened off by five layers of heavy plastic curtains. Inside, the air is breathable, but it still smells like rotten eggs. The main shaft descends like a corkscrew; each complete circle covering about 800 meters of linear distance and descends 100 meters. It’s steep!

The overhead lights in the upper portion of the mine are out, and the atmospheric recyclers seem to be running in emergency mode: it’s cold and the air is stale, although it is breathable. Other than the faint whoosh of the atmospheric system, it’s silent within the mine. The minerals glinting in the shaft walls are quite striking, though.

While most of the rock is dark gray and igneous, there are frequent bands of pyrite and sphalerite. Anyone with *Science* (planetology) or *Engineering* (mining) knows that pyrite is a compound of sulfur and iron, and sphalerite is a mix of sulfur and zinc, with some trace metals as well. Some of the pyrite and sphalerite seams have been worked, and periodically a side shaft extends 50 meters or so laterally from the main shaft. But where the pyrite remains, it looks like a cave of gold.

About 100 meters down, there’s a streak of reddish crystals that appears unmarred. A successful *Science* (planetology) or *Engineering* (mining) identifies that as cinnabar, a sulfur/mercury compound that’s dangerous to mine without special protective gear.

At about 200 meters down—the end of the corkscrew’s second full circle—the emergency lights mounted on the walls are functional. The heroes are approaching the part of the mine where the (justifiably) paranoid Dr. Lassiter has barricaded herself.

SCENE 3: LASSITER'S GAUNTLET

One way or another, the heroes must get past the paranoid Dr. Lassiter and continue their descent into the mine. She defends a large room-and-pillar excavation in the mine's midsection, keeping the Syndicate engineers trapped below (and incidentally keeping the support staff on the surface from learning anything about what's going on below).

The mine shaft opens up into a wide excavated area with a 5-meter ceiling supported by a number of rock pillars left in place for that purpose. A large seam of reddish mineral zigzags across the floor and ceiling in the middle of the room, and the air reeks of rotten eggs. It looks like the main mine shaft continues downward on the opposite side of this large chamber. However, a dozen motionless human bodies lie on the floor near the opposite opening.

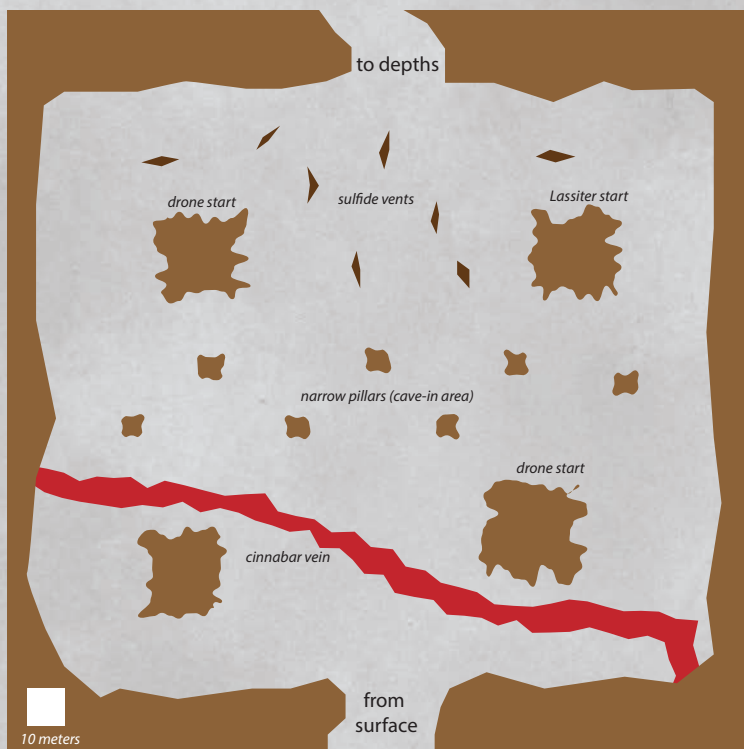
Several small mine-safety drones drift slowly through the room, pausing from time to time to scan the area carefully.

This scene can play out along one of two branches—and your table might jump from one branch to the other in the middle of the scene. Sometimes a heated discussion gives way to violence, and Dr. Lassiter is unhinged enough to engage in conversation over the radio as the players fight her drones.

- If the heroes ignore the drones and proceed through the room, Lassiter challenges them when they reach the cinnabar seam (see **Talking to Lassiter** below).
- If the heroes attack the drones or attempt to sneak by them, Lassiter directs the drones to attack (see **Lassiter's Drones** below).
- If the heroes attempt to make contact—say, by calling out a greeting—Lassiter responds with a challenge (see **Talking to Lassiter**).
- If the heroes wait and watch before entering the room, the drones eventually spot them and stop moving, focusing their attention on the team. Lassiter waits, and directs the drones to attack when the team enters the room (see **Lassiter's Drones**).

SETTING AND PROPS

Map #2 shows Lassiter's Gauntlet, the series of traps she's set in this part of the mine. Heroes trying to fight their way through must contend with waves of safety drones, destroying them before they can trigger the traps.



Spotting/Opening Range: 80 m/40 m.

Low Gravity: The light gravity means that the heroes have a +1 step bonus on attempts to lift, climb, or jump on Tartarus, and falls are reduced by one severity level.

Cinnabar Vein: The brick-red crystals form a seam 5 meters wide along the floor. If a drone reaches one, it can (as a 3-impulse action) trigger explosives that vaporize the mercury found within cinnabar, resulting in a cloud of mercury vapor within 5 m of it and destroying the drone. The cloud is an inhaled poison (page 183 of the *Core Rulebook*) with 1-round onset, 1 wound damage over time, and you resist it once with an *Endurance* check at the end of the round. The vapor dissipates at the end of the next action round.

Narrow Pillars: Dr. Lassiter has strategically weakened some of the narrower pillars in the chamber. If a drone flies into one of these pillars, it is destroyed, and the ceiling caves in within 5 meters of the pillar. The falling rock deals 1d10 damage (because of the low gravity) and knocks prone any hero caught in the area. Characters in the threatened area can attempt a *Dodge* check as a reaction; on a success, the character is prone but unhurt at the edge of the cave-in.

Hydrogen Sulfide Vents: These vents emit hydrogen sulfide, a foul smelling—and flammable—gas. If a drone reaches one, it can (as a 3-impulse action) trigger an explosion of blue flame with a

5-m diameter that deals 2d6 energy damage, which destroys the drone. Characters in the threatened area can make a *Dodge* check to get out of the way by 2/4/6 meters on an Av/Ex/St success. If that movement gets the character out of the blast, then the PC is prone but unhurt.

Corpses: There are more than a dozen human bodies amid the sulfide vents and narrow pillars. They're dressed in Syndicate engineers' jumpsuits. They tried to ascend through Lassiter's chamber to attack the logistics crew, and fell victim to the doctor's traps.

Mine Cart: A powered mine cart stands near the lower exit of the room.

TALKING TO LASSITER

Dr. Lassiter can be reasoned with, but she's justifiably paranoid and doesn't trust the PCs at all.

Your comm devices crackle to life, and a woman's voice comes over the radio. "Not one more step," she says. "Turn around and march right back out of here, or I'll blow you all to hell. You can tell your boss that we're not going to let him send us down to die like sheep."

Lassiter is a little unhinged by what she's seen. The engineers took her into their confidence, but she was appalled by their willingness to sacrifice colleagues to the alien in the pursuit of mine productivity. She begins with the baseline assumption that the PCs are "in on it," and it's difficult to earn her trust. She's not thinking beyond making the engineers pay and exterminating "that brimstone bug." If that means her life, then so be it.

If the heroes try to talk her into letting them pass (or simply finding out what she knows about the goings-on deeper in the mine), resolve it by roleplaying or by social skill checks at each juncture when you feel Dr. Lassiter could break either in favor of or against the PCs.

It takes a total of three successes to persuade Lassiter to stand down, and each success also reveals some of the station's recent history and the engineers' plans below. The PCs fail the skill challenge after 3 failures.

Because the consequences for her are serious (the alien and the engineers might get away with it), the heroes' skill checks start with a -3 step penalty. But Dr. Lassiter is vulnerable to specific techniques and arguments:

- The heroes point out that they're working for the Facilities division or Calvin DeNurio, not the Extractive Resources division: +1 step bonus.

- Demonstrate kind treatment of the logistics crew after Scene 1: +1 step bonus.
- Promise to kill the alien: +1 step bonus.
- Promise to blow the pillars in the bottom chamber, crushing everything: +2 step bonus.

On the second success, Lassiter reveals herself:

A lean, middle-aged woman with her hair tied back in a dirty ponytail steps out from behind a pillar on the far side of the room. Two more safety drones hover by her shoulders. "I'm not sure I believe you," she says. "But keep talking—and you'd better not be lying to me."

On the third success, Lassiter decides the heroes can be trusted, and opens up enough to tell her story. See **What Lassiter Knows** below.

THE DRONES AND LASSITER

If the heroes fail to engage Dr. Lassiter in conversation, she does her best to see to it they don't go any farther. She is all alone in this section of the mine, but she's reprogrammed the safety drones to trigger traps that prove deadly to intruders. Start the scene with waves of drones swooping toward the PCs when they approach the seam of cinnabar.

- Wave 1: one safety drone per hero in the party (see **Adversaries**).
- Wave 2: one safety drone per hero in the party (see **Adversaries**).
- Wave 3: Dr. Lassiter, plus one safety drone per hero in the party (see **Adversaries**).

The drones hang back to use their stunners at range, using hit-and-run tactics and moving around the pillars in an effort to draw the heroes into entering areas threatened by Lassiter's traps. When a hero moves into the right spot, the nearest drone uses its next action to trigger the trap, annihilating itself in the process.

Dr. Lassiter fights if cornered, but she's probably anticlimactic compared to waves of drones, blue fire, and plumes of toxic gas. She hangs back, sniping with her laser pistol and trying to lure the heroes into position for a drone to set off a trap.

WHAT LASSITER KNOWS

Whether Dr. Lassiter tells the players willingly, lets something slip in the middle of the battle, or grudgingly answers the heroes'

The challenge of the battle isn't beating the drones—it's beating them before they trigger the traps.

questions after her defeat, it's important that she fills in more of the picture of what the engineers are up to.

First Reveal: The mining engineers discovered alien life—an underground creature about 2 meters long they called a brimstone slug. “It eats sulfur and leaves behind the other minerals. I dissected one at their request, and its innards were a chemistry set as far as I could tell. If you put pyrite in front of them, for example, the slugs literally crap pure iron.”

Next: The engineers figured out that the slugs could be “herded” with jury-rigged cattle prods, and they’ve been rounding them up, then cleaning up after them ever since.

After that: “But the brimstone slugs are connected somehow to a much scarier alien, something so smart it learned rudimentary English! The engineers call it a brimstone beetle. It claims ownership or parentage or something over the slugs. It told the engineers it wanted humans to study in exchange for the slugs’ obedience. And those bastards gave in to the alien’s demands!”

Finally: The brimstone beetle’s idea of “study” was a gory vivisection; and then it wanted more subjects. “The engineers tried to sell out the surface staff, but I warned them, and I’ve been trying to keep the engineers bottled up down there ever since.”

AFTERMATH: KOJIMA’S CALL

Dr. Lassiter won’t descend further with the heroes, although depending on how the scene played out, she may wish them luck. There’s a wheeled mine cart at the far end of the chamber that the heroes can use to descend the rest of the way. It’s an open-cab vehicle with a top speed of 40 m, so it’s hard to weaponize. Its wheel noise also makes stealth impossible.

Regardless of whether the heroes walk or drive, about 5 minutes after they leave Dr. Lassiter, their radio crackles to life.

“This is senior engineer Glenn Kojima. We should talk.”

Spy Cams: Kojima had his team deploy a handful of well-hidden button-cams on the mine-shaft walls a little below Lassiter’s gauntlet, in the hope that he’d catch the doctor outside her little fortress. The cameras are small and carefully placed; if the heroes aren’t specifically searching the shaft as they descend, they don’t notice them. (If the heroes are looking, allow a group *Awareness* or *Security* skill check at a –2 step penalty to find one of the cams.) The spy cams provide Kojima with a good idea of the heroes’ number and armament.

Kojima’s Plan: Kojima wants to make sure the PCs keep descending until they reach the bottom of the mine shaft, where he hopes to overpower them and give them to the brimstone

beetle. It's a two-for-one deal: it satisfies the alien while eliminating witnesses.

- Kojima asks who the heroes are and what their objective is.
- He claims that the crew in the upper portion of the mine has fallen prey to hallucinogenic mineral particles that contaminated the air supply (not true).
- He says that the heroes have likely been breathing the hallucinogen, but "we're forced up on the lower level and we've figured out an antidote—better hurry down before you start to experience the effects."
- If that ploy fails, Kojima claims to have several support staff personnel as hostages (not true) and threatens to shoot them if the heroes don't continue on and surrender.
- Kojima ignores threats of Calvin DeNurio's authority: "He's your boss, not mine."
- If the heroes don't fall for any of it, Kojima cuts off communication.

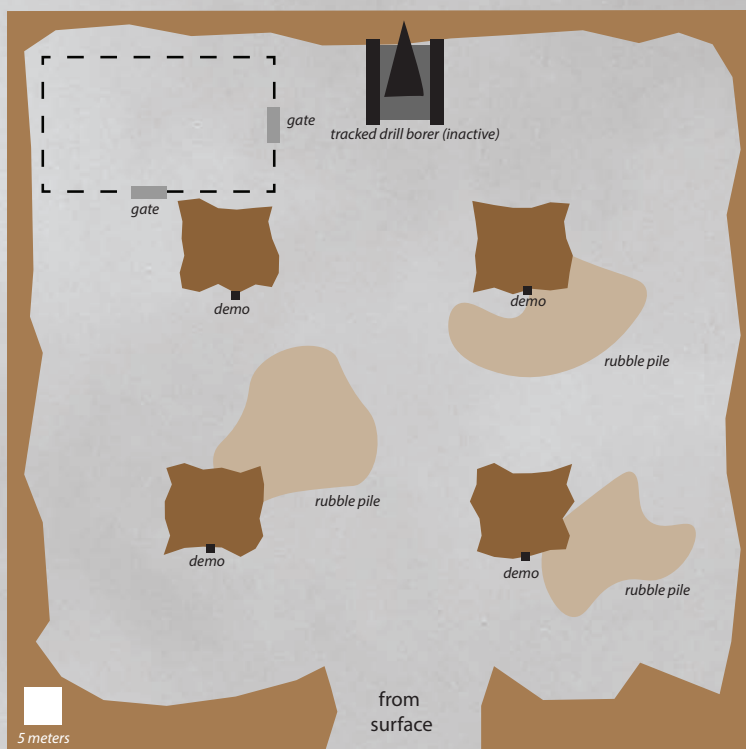
Backup Plan: If Kojima can't persuade or taunt the heroes into coming to him, he'll go to them. He and his team come up the shaft as stealthily as they can, and attack on sight. Stage Scene 4 and Scene 5 in the tunnel just past Lassiter's Gauntlet.

SCENE 4: MAKING YOU MINE

This scene is a straight-up battle between Kojima's engineers and the heroes, with all the cards (but one; see **Scene 5**) on the table.

The descending mine shaft ends in another large room-and-pillar excavation. At the far end of the room, a large excavating machine has carved a few meters into the opposite wall where the mine shaft would continue, but it's currently standing idle. A pen-like enclosure made from strung wires and posts stands to one side of the room; several weird 2-meter-long iron-gray worms slowly crawl around the pen with a soft rasping sound.

Thanks to Kojima's spy cams, the Syndicate engineers know that the heroes are coming and set an ambush, hiding behind the rock pillars. (If the heroes somehow avoid the spy cams, the engineers are caught off-guard in the open.) When the heroes enter the room, they must make a group *Awareness* check at a -1 step penalty; on a failure, the Syndicate engineers gain tactical surprise. Otherwise, the heroes spot the engineers springing their ambush; roll initiative normally.



SYNDICATE ENGINEERS

Start the battle with the engineers scattered among the pillars and rubble piles. Kojima reveals himself at the start of the second round.

- 1 Syndicate engineer per hero in the team (see **Adversaries**).
- Senior Engineer Kojima (see human enforcer, page 245, *Core Rulebook*).

The engineers attempt to take down one or two enemies fast in the hopes that the overwhelmed survivors surrender—they need to make sure they capture at least a couple of warm bodies to hand over to the brimstone beetle. The engineers fight to the death, assuming that they'll be turned into beetle-bait if they give up.

SETTING AND PROPS

Map #3 shows Kojima's Strongpoint.

Spotting/Opening Range: 80 m/40 m.

Low Gravity: The light gravity means that the heroes have a +1 step bonus on attempts to lift, climb, or jump on Tartarus, and falls are reduced by one severity level.

Pillars: It's hard to hit characters behind the corners of a pillar. The pillars provide 50 percent cover (a -2 step penalty to ranged attacks).

Slug Pen: The engineers have collected about a dozen brimstone slugs behind a wire fence. Hitting the gate with a weapon blasts it open and sets them free. The slugs can't fight, but they can wreak chaos on the battlefield as they slither about. Any hit kills a slug, leaving a 2-meter puddle of toxic goo (slow terrain, and any non-slug that moves through the goo begins taking acid damage over time).

Retreat Demo Charge: The four marked pillars have explosives on them for "retreat mining:" extracting resources from the pillars that hold up the ceiling, then letting the chamber cave in. If all four charges are hit with weapons or otherwise triggered, the whole chamber collapses, burying everyone inside (except for the brimstone beetle; see below).

Rubble Piles: Slow terrain, but a successful *Athletics* check allows movement at normal speed through this area. The rubble provides 50 percent cover.

THE BEETLE RETURNS

When the heroes are just about to mop up the Syndicate engineers—or the engineers are just about to finish them off—the brimstone beetle makes an unexpected return. It emerges from the floor or a wall at the end of Impulse 8; move on to **Scene 5**.

SCENE 5: MEET THE BEETLE

In terms of pacing, this scene is an extension of the previous one. You don't need to break out of action rounds if it feels more natural to just keep going.

A sudden tremor shakes the chamber, bringing a fine cascade of dust down from the rocky ceiling. Rock cracks and groans—and then something bursts into the room, sending shattered stone for meters around. It's a hulking, iron-gray creature the size of an elephant, with a thick metallic carapace and a horrible mass of cleaver-like appendages at the front of its blunt torso. It buries one limb in the floor and vibrates it vigorously . . . and the sounds it produces come out as low, rumbling English, "Bargain accepted. Now deliver subjects. Now!"

The brimstone beetle sounds like it's speaking through a subwoofer. It uses English words without concern for word order or grammar, and it doesn't respond to anything the heroes—or Kojima, if he's still alive—say. Feel free to monologue a bit, then continue the combat.

If no one appears ready to present themselves as a “subject,” the beetle assumes that whoever's closest to it will do, and moves to attack.

- Brimstone beetle (see **Adversaries**).

The beetle is a very tough foe, so the heroes must give it everything they've got to make it retreat. (Note that the top row of its durability chart doesn't say “incapacitated.”) It can't tell the difference between humans, so it's just as likely to attack a Syndicate engineer as one of the heroes. It fights until it incapacitates three targets or loses its last 16+ wound box, then it burrows away. The heroes can also drive it off by collapsing the ceiling with the demo charges, and destroying the entire chamber (and possibly themselves as well).

If the Syndicate engineers are giving the heroes a hard time, you can have the beetle start on the Syndicate first.

EPILOGUE

The heroes solve the Tartarus Station mystery by overpowering the engineers and forcing the brimstone beetle to retreat. They can return to the surface without further difficulties. The shuttle's still waiting to take them back to *Lennox*, and they can set course for Syndicate station Prosperity One at their convenience. The heroes can also successfully complete the adventure by retreating after they figure out the story of the engineers' bargain with the brimstone beetle and establish that the Syndicate engineers aren't willing to give up peacefully—Calvin DeNurio can take it from there.

DeNurio pays the heroes without incident, and promises that the situation on Tartarus was an aberration that the Syndicate will swiftly deal with. Of course the Tethys-Hygiea Syndicate respects international law when it comes to alien lifeforms, and of course they'd never try to exploit the brimstone creatures or take them offworld. Never.

ADVERSARIES

The adversaries in this adventure are described in order of their appearance.

LOGISTICS CREW MEMBER

Desperate and poorly armed, the logistics crew is only interested in getting by the heroes to seize the shuttle.

TR 2 Medium Minion Humanoid (Human)

Senses normal; *Awareness* 15+

Initiative 14/19/24; **Speed** 16 meters

Str 16+ **Agi** 17+ **Vit** 17+ **Int** 17+ (sentient) **Foc** 17+ **Per** 17+

ACTIONS

Repurposed Nailer 4 impulses; *Medium* 1 target; *Attack* 15/20/25 (+1 step); *Damage* 3/6 physical.

Wrench 3 impulses; *Melee* 1 target; *Attack* 15/20/25 (+1 step); *Damage* 2/5 physical.

DEFENSE

Armor 2 physical, 1 energy.

(1+ dmg) ☐ incapacitated *Crumples to the ground, groaning*

OTHER

No Witnesses The crew member gains a +1 step bonus to attack an opponent who hasn't been damaged yet.

Minion Attack This creature's attack deals one wound of the lowest severity if the damage overcomes the target's armor.

Skills Athletics 14+, Mechanics 15+, Stealth 15+

Gear Vac suit, comm headgear

X-CAVATOR 85

A specialized mining robot, the X-Cavator has had most of its safety programming stripped down to make it a crude but effective battle machine.

TR 4 Large Champion Mechanism (Robot)

Senses normal, low-light; *Awareness* 15+

Initiative 16/21/25; **Speed** 16 meters

Str 13+ **Agi** 18+ **Vit** 14+ **Int** 17+ (programmed) **Foc** 18+ **Per** 20+

ACTIONS

Manipulator Arms 4 impulses; *Melee* 2 targets; *Attack* 13/18/23 (+1 step, or +2 steps vs. prone target); *Damage* 1d8 + 3/7 physical, and target must make an *Acrobatics* check or be knocked prone.

Sonic Extractor 3 impulses; *Close* 1 target (spread); *Attack* 13/18/23; *Damage* 1d8 + 3/7 energy, and target must make an *Endurance* check or be stunned 3 impulses.

REACTIONS

Refine the Sample 1-impulse reaction. The first time it damages a target in melee or is damaged by a melee attack, the H-Cavator activates a torso-mounted flamer. *Medium* blast; *Blast* 2 m (4 m); *Attack* 13/18/23; *Primary Damage* 2d10 energy and ignite; *Secondary Damage* 2d6 energy and ignite. The H-Cavator is immune to its own blast.

DEFENSE

Large Enemies gain a +1 step bonus to attack the robot.

Life Support

Armor 3 physical, 2 energy

(13+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	incapacitated	<i>Smoke pours out</i>
(10 to 12 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	-2 step penalty to checks	<i>"Contaminants detected."</i>
(7 to 9 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	sonic extractor damaged;	<i>Shower of sparks</i>
(1 to 6 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	loses spread	<i>"Investigating deposit."</i>

OTHER

Skills *Dodge* 16+, *Science* (planetology) 15+, *Engineering* (mining) 15+

SAFETY DRONE

The drone is a small robot designed to monitor conditions in the mine. It's been reprogrammed to serve as a robotic kamikaze.

TR 1 Tiny Minion Mechanism (Robot)

Senses normal, toxic gas detector (range 20 m); *Awareness* 16+

Initiative 13/18/23; **Speed** fly 25 meters (hover)

Str 17+ **Agi** 15+ **Vit** 17+ **Int** 17+ (programmed) **Foc** 18+ **Per** 20+

ACTIONS

Stunner 3 impulses; *Close* 1 target; *Attack* 16/21/26 (+1 step); *Damage* 2/5 physical, and if the target suffers a wound, it must make an *Endurance* check or be stunned 3 impulses.

DEFENSE

Tiny Enemies suffer a -2 step penalty to attack the safety drone.

Life Support

Armor 1 physical, 1 energy.

(1+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	incapacitated	<i>Spins out of balance, hits wall</i>
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OTHER

Networked The safety drone is linked to its parent security system on Lassiter's datapad.

Minion Attack This creature's attack deals one wound of the lowest severity if the damage overcomes the target's armor.

DR. BERNICE LASSITER

Desperate and paranoid, Lassiter strikes first by using her safety drones to trigger the deadly traps in the room where she's decided to make her stand.

TR 4 Medium Standard Humanoid (Human)

Senses normal; *Awareness* 12+

Initiative 11/16/21 (+1 step); **Speed** 20 meters

Str 16+ **Agi** 15+ **Vit** 17+ **Int** 15+ (sentient) **Foc** 16+ **Per** 16+

ACTIONS

Laser Pistol 3 impulses; *Long* 1 target; *Attack* 11/16/21 (+2 steps); *Damage* 1d6+1/7 energy (1d6 + 4/10 vs. a wounded, distracted, or unaware target).

Unarmed 3 impulses; *Melee* 1 target; *Attack* 12/17/22 (+1 step); *Damage* 1d4+0/3 physical (1d4 + 3/6 physical vs. a wounded, distracted, or unaware target).

DEFENSE

Armor 2 physical, 2 energy

(12+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/> incapacitated	<i>Spins away from blow, collapses</i>
(9 to 11 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/> -2 step penalty to all checks	<i>Hisses in pain, looks for way out</i>
(6 to 8 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/> -1 step penalty to all checks	<i>"You're not taking me alive!"</i>
(1 to 5 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>"Leave me alone, damn you!"</i>

OTHER

Manic Fury Gains a +3 damage bonus when attacking a wounded, distracted or unaware target (included above).

Skills *Acrobatics* 11+, *Computer* 11+, *Medicine* 11+, *Security* 11+, *Stealth* 11+

Gear hardmesh suit, laser pistol, comm device, datapad

TARTARUS ENGINEER

The Syndicate engineers aren't particularly well trained for combat—they just got to the station's weapons locker first.

TR 1 Medium Standard Humanoid (Human)

Senses normal; *Awareness* 14+

Initiative 13/18/23; **Speed** 20 meters

Str 16+ **Agi** 17+ **Vit** 17+ **Int** 16+ (sentient) **Foc** 16+ **Per** 18+

ACTIONS

Flechette Pistol 3 impulses; *Medium* 1 target; *Attack* 15/20/25 (+1 step); *Damage* 1d6+1/5 physical (1d6 + 4/8 at Close range).

Stun Baton 3 impulses; *Melee* 1 target; *Attack* 15/20/25 (+1 step); *Damage* 1d6+0/3 energy, and the target must make an *Endurance* check or be stunned for 3 impulses.

DEFENSE

Armor 2 physical, 1 energy

(10+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/> incapacitated	<i>Drops in a nerveless heap</i>
(7 to 9 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/> -2 step penalty to all checks	<i>Looks for a place to hide</i>
(4 to 6 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/> -1 step penalty to all checks	<i>Grunts, winces</i>
(1 to 3 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>"So that's how you want to play?"</i>

OTHER

Skills *Athletics* 14+, *Engineering* (mining) 14+, *Security* 14+

Gear ballistic vest, stun baton, flechette pistol with two clips, comm device

BRIMSTONE BEETLE

A clever, calculating alien monster the size of an elephant, the beetle regards humans as pests and intruders. Its experiments are simply its way of determining whether humans pose a threat and the most efficient way to kill them.

TR 11 Huge Boss Enigma (Alien)

Senses normal, tremorsense; *Awareness* 12+

Initiative 11/16/21; **Speed** 30 meters, burrow 10 meters

Str 5+ **Agi** 17+ **Vit** 8+ **Int** 13+ (sentient) **Foc** 14+ **Per** 18+

ACTIONS

Rampage 5 impulses. The beetle moves 20 meters and makes up to three limb attacks against different targets at any point in its move. It can move through the spaces of medium and smaller creatures during this action.

Limb Strike 3 impulses; *Melee* 1 target; *Attack* 5/10/15 (+1 step); *Damage* 2d4/1d10 + 6 physical, and a large or smaller target must make an *Athletics* check or be pushed 5 meters and knocked prone.

AURA

Sulfuric Stench Resolve at end of impulse 4 and impulse 8. *Effect* All living targets within 6 meters must make an *Endurance* check or become poisoned and begin taking damage over time (poison, passive resist 1). Poisoned creatures are impaired. Creatures with life support are immune to the aura.

DEFENSE

Huge Enemies gain a +2 step bonus to attack the beetle.

Armor 4 physical, 2 energy

(16+ dmg)	☐	burrows into ground and escapes	<i>Bass drum sound fades...</i>
(16+ dmg)	☐☐☐	uses Rampage as a reaction	<i>Deafening drum-like booming</i>
(16+ dmg)	☐☐☐☐	knocked off-balance	<i>"Pain, Payment"</i>
(13 to 15 dmg)	☐☐☐☐	Distracted until next action	<i>"Annoy, Death, Next"</i>
(1 to 12 dmg)	☐☐☐☐		<i>"Futility, Pain, Promise"</i>

OTHER

Tremorsense The brimstone beetle detects creatures within Close range as long as they aren't flying.

Creature sizes are defined on page 155 of the Core Rulebook.

EPISODE 4: HIVES OF JANRATA

An Adventure for 3rd level Heroes

Opening a Nexus Gate to an unknown destination and making the jump to the other side requires a special brand of courage—or insanity. *Hives of Janrata* is a short adventure that sends characters to an unexplored star system where they discover the ruins of an alien civilization. The only problem is their second discovery: the lethal alien robot prototypes that destroyed it.

BACKGROUND

Millennia ago, a race of creatures who called themselves the janrii race built a civilization on their home planet of Janrata. Their peaceful society was highly stratified and organized around hives. They achieved Tech Era 6 technology and stagnated there. Then their planet was found by the h'naal.

Because the hive-cities of the janrii were nearly identical but also isolated, they offered the h'naal laboratory-like conditions for testing weapons. Different autonomous devices were unleashed against separate cities with instructions to exterminate the inhabitants, then the results compared. The robots were wildly successful; civilization on Janrata was destroyed and the janrii were hunted nearly to extinction. Their sprawling hive-cities lie in ruins, inhabited only by a few still-functioning h'naal combat drones.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The adventure occurs in four scenes: a prologue at the Protostar Nexus and three scenes of combat and exploration at Janrata.

Prologue: The heroes are approached by a representative of Orion Ventures, who needs a crew of spacefarers to test a new Gate code and explore whatever it leads to.

Scene 1: The heroes arrive at the unknown system and detect a power signature from the second planet, which is dotted with ruined cities. Upon entering the ruins, they're involved in an intense but short fight. Afterward, they learn they were fighting machines, not creatures.

Scene 2: More attacks occur as characters explore further. By piecing together clues, the heroes figure out that the city and the hostile machines were built by different species, and that the machines need an external power source.

Scene 3: The heroes search for the city's still-functioning power plant and either destroy it or cut off the machines' access to it.

PROLOGUE: MR. WHITE

The adventure opens while characters are spending some down time at one of the outposts near the Protostar Nexus. Ideally, they've already played **The Roanoke Affair** so they're familiar with Orion Ventures and their agent, Mr. White. The Mr. White who approaches characters now can be the same person they dealt with before or it can be a different Orion Ventures agent going by the same corporate *nom de plume* (in which case it may be Ms. White).

While you're killing time between jobs at a trading post in the Protostar Nexus, your comm device buzzes for attention: The caller ID shows the name of "White," with a corporate stamp of "Orion Ventures."

"I need a crew to tackle something special," Mr. White begins after the usual pleasantries. "Orion Ventures has acquired the Gate key to an unknown, unexplored star system. Obviously, we don't know what this key leads to—and that's where you come in.

"Orion Ventures will provide everything you need. In exchange, we expect a detailed report on what the destination holds, including samples of valuable minerals and interesting lifeforms, where possible.

"Your investigation doesn't need to be exhaustive, but the corporation has already invested a substantial sum in acquiring the key and every trip through the Gate adds to that outlay. Your real job here is to find a promising landing site and make sure it's safe for the follow-up team. Do more than that, and you'll earn a bonus."

If asked, Mr. White maintains the code has never been tested before. This may or may not be true; that decision is up to you (see **Aftermath** below).

If characters have a ship, Orion Ventures pays to provision it. If they don't, they'll be provided with *Dulcinea*, a small, unarmed skiff of a type popular with asteroid prospectors. It's barely large enough for the characters plus the supplies, instruments, and other gear packed aboard by Orion Ventures. The company expects *Dulcinea* back at the end of the mission; the ship isn't part of the characters' pay (unless they perform extremely well and you deem it's appropriate for your campaign).

Payment is \$3,000 each (a level 1 reward) up-front just for testing the Gate key. Bonuses can quickly raise this to \$10,000 each (see **Aftermath**). While Mr. White's offer is generous, he also makes it clear that no help will come if the characters get into trouble. To earn those bonuses, characters need to come back with more than just their lives and a few instrument scans. The threat is implied

rather than overt: If the characters come back empty-handed, they'll be lucky to find work caulking air leaks in old asteroid tunnels.

ARRIVAL

The jump through the Gate goes smoothly. Characters find themselves in a binary system consisting of a class F (yellow-white) star orbiting a class B blue giant so distant it can effectively be ignored (their orbital period equals one revolution every ~2,700 years). Scanning the system with the ship's instruments is a complex *Science* skill check (one check per hour). An Excellent result counts as 2 successes, and a Stellar result counts as 3.

0 successes: The yellow-white star is orbited by four planets: a barren rock blasted by stellar radiation, one terrestrial world, and two gas giants.

1 success: A faint power trace is detected from the terrestrial planet.

2 successes: Somewhere on the terrestrial planet is a functioning electrical power plant.

3 successes: Multiple power traces are detected from the terrestrial planet. Electricity is being generated there in more than one location.

JANRATA ORBIT

Whether or not characters pick up the power traces, the terrestrial planet (Janrata) is the most promising feature in the system. It takes about 2 days of travel at 1 g to reach it from the wormhole terminus. When the heroes approach the planet, read:

The planet is a bit larger than Earth, with ten percent higher gravity. Its atmosphere is breathable, but you'll need a filter to protect your lungs against dust. Its day is 38 hours long, divided evenly between darkness and light.

The only open water consists of small seas scattered around the equator. Strong wind carries moisture from those seas around the planet, creating an equatorial green belt that's semi-arid by Earth standards. Outside the equatorial zone, the planet is barren and dry.

All the cities are sited along the equator, near the seas.

A detailed scan can be made from orbit with another *Science* skill challenge (1 check per hour).

0 successes: Six sites on the planet appear to be ruins on the scale of cities, but the power emissions couldn't be triangulated to any single site.

1 success: The planet has six ancient, ruined cities, and they're the sources of the power emissions.

2 successes: The cities vary in size but have strikingly similar layouts.

3 successes: Three of the cities are emitting weak power signatures, implying they still have operating power plants.

A character breathing Janrata's dust-filled air without a mask becomes weakened until the hero spends at least 30 minutes breathing uncontaminated air. *Dulcinea's* suit locker includes vac suits and respirator masks that can protect heroes exploring the surface, and any armor providing life support is also sufficient for protection.

SCENE 1: HOSTILE CONTACT

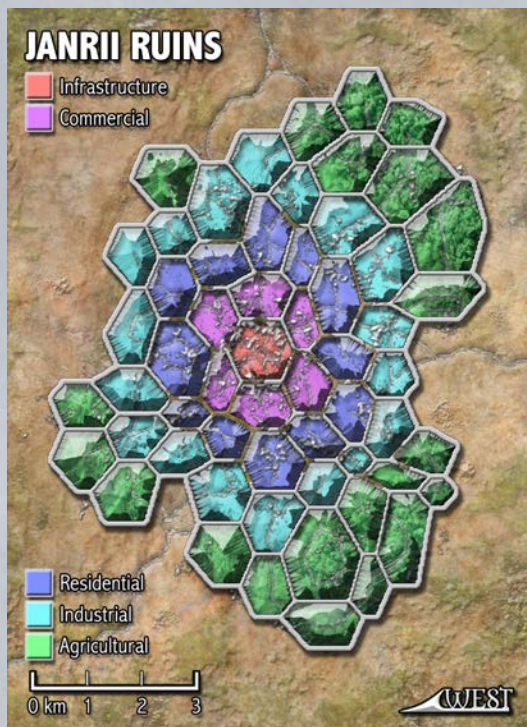
It makes no difference which site the heroes investigate, provided it's one with power. If they explore a ruin without power, its description is the same but there are no attacks and nothing of value to find, just empty ruins.

Janrri society was hive-like, and their cities bear a superficial resemblance to the interlinked cells of flattened beehives. The city is sited in a bowl-like depression about 30 kilometers across. The hive-like layout is apparent during a flyover or from low orbit. Show the map to players once they've surveyed the site from the air.

Note the scale of the map. The city is about 12 by 8 km in size, and individual cells average 1 to 2 km across.

LANDING

A flat, rocky space suitable for landing the ship can be found outside the walls. The heroes may be tempted to land inside the city, but doing so involves several obvious risks: the ship could damage something valuable; it could be damaged by debris or by slamming against an obstruction in the gusting wind; the ship could collapse an underground chamber; if anything lives in the ruins, the ship might frighten or anger the inhabitants; and hostile creatures could



easily encircle the vessel and cut off the characters' escape in the close confines of the city.

When the heroes disembark, read:

The terrain outside the city is a mix of bare, wind-sculpted rock and tough plants typical of a semi-arid environment. The air is thick with dust, and the wind howls between the weird-looking rocks. From the ground, you realize that the city's hexagonal domes are quite large—a kilometer or two across, and hundreds of meters high. However, they're all collapsed, leaving nothing but jagged rims around the edges. Numerous wall collapses and fissures offer ingress to the city. Nothing seems to be moving except for you.

CONTACT

Refer to **Scene 2** for descriptions of the city and movement through cells. What matters immediately is that within 10 or 15 minutes of setting foot in the city, the team is attacked by h'naal combat drones. The heroes shouldn't realize they're confronting machines until they have a chance to handle a dead one.

- 1 h'naal drone per character (see **Adversaries**)

The drones move quietly through cover to get within Close range before attacking. Allow the team to make a group *Awareness* check with a –1 step penalty. On a failure, the team is surprised. On a success, the heroes hear shifting debris or catch a glimpse of motion just before the attack occurs, and have enough warning to not be surprised. If the team succeeds and at least one hero scores an Excellent or Stellar success, the character notices several “creatures” before the attack but has no idea whether they're hostile or benign, intelligent or nonintelligent; add the following description.

Several creatures are approaching, scrambling across, around, and under the rubble. They're about the size of large cats, but they have oval bodies and they move on five supremely flexible limbs. Their coloring matches the terrain, and while they have folds and dimples on their bodies, you can't tell what's an eye, an ear, a mouth, a nostril, or anything else.

If this skirmish takes place in one of the city's outer ring of sectors, the battle ends in just 2 action rounds: Any surviving drones retreat at that point (see **Drone Attacks** below). Surviving drones quickly escape from pursuing characters by dodging under rubble or through narrow gaps in walls.

EXAMINING DRONES

Studying the drones is an open-ended complex skill check using *Engineering, Mechanics, or Science*. The heroes require the remains of at least one destroyed robot, and each check requires one minute. If a hero fails at a skill check, the current specimen proves to be too badly damaged to yield any new insights—they'll need to examine a different specimen to continue the process. The facts the heroes glean depend on their progress while examining the remains, with a +1 step bonus per destroyed robot being examined.

Successes	Findings
1	These creatures are biotech robots, not living creatures. Each has a weapon that fires bolts of plasma mounted in its chassis.
2	The robots are very old, about as old as the ruins. The material they're made of is unlike anything in the ruins. Their five-limbed body plan matches nothing living on the planet or shown in the city's crumbling reliefs and statuary.
3	The robots camouflage themselves by altering their coloration.
4	They operate on bioelectric battery systems.
5	Their batteries are badly degraded and can't hold a charge for very long.
6	They're slightly more vulnerable to physical damage than to energy damage.
7	The robots can see infrared, visible, and ultraviolet light.
8	Their audio receptors are keener than human ears, especially to low frequencies.
9	The robots can receive and transmit radio signals with an internal antenna.
10	It's likely that they are networked with each other and possibly controlled or guided from a base station.

SCENE 2: TRAGIC CLUES

After defeating the first drone attack, the heroes can begin exploring the ruins in earnest.

You must speak loudly to be heard above the wind whistling through the ruins. Heavy drifts of sand reduce the main thoroughfares to vague outlines, but you can see that each of the city's large hexagonal cells is structured like an immense atrium open from floor to ceiling, and ringed by wide, balcony-like floors of varying heights. The floors were connected by ramps; many upper floors have collapsed, and those that remain don't look stable. The ground is littered with fallen debris and drifting sand. Few interior walls remain intact, but in sheltered places, pitted walls and scoured floors form the bare skeletons of buildings.

The chief building material seems to have been an unfamiliar form of plastic or resin.

The city is laid out concentrically in rings of cells. The outermost cells (four or five rings from the center) were devoted to agriculture. The third ring was industrial, the second residential, and the first administrative and commercial. The central core controlled the city's power, light, water, and other infrastructure.

Moving Through the City: The team can move directly from any cell to any adjoining cell, either through still-existing gateways or through breaches caused by fighting or by age and weather. If the heroes are moving carefully—exploring, keeping quiet—they can enter and explore one cell per hour, making one exploratory skill check (see below). If they hurry, they can cover two cells per hour, but they have a –2 step penalty on exploratory skill checks and on *Awareness* checks to avoid being surprised. If the heroes choose not to explore at all, they can cover three cells per hour.

Exploration Skill Challenge: Orion Ventures would expect the heroes to conduct an initial survey of the ruins and record their findings to fulfill their contract. This involves a basic effort to map the ruins, document interesting structures or monuments, and search for samples to collect. To explore a cell, the team makes a group skill check; each participating hero can choose *Academics* (archeology, +2 step bonus), *Engineering* (infrastructure), *Science* (biology), or *Survival* as their key skill. If at least half the heroes pass their checks, the cell is successfully explored. (Heroes without relevant skills can aid characters attempting checks.)

Heroes can attempt one or two checks per hour, depending on how fast they're moving. If the check fails, the heroes can spend more time in their current cell to re-explore it (possibly risking more drone attacks). Keep track of the number of cells the heroes successfully explore, because that determines whether Orion Ventures is pleased with the outcome of the mission (see **Epilogue**).

Drone Attacks: The heroes likely encounter more h'naal drones as they explore the ruins. See **Drone Attacks** below.

AGRICULTURAL CELL

Cells in the fourth and fifth partial rings were agricultural. The janrii were strictly herbivorous, and all their food was farmed within these cells. Almost everything they needed was derived from plants; their greatest accomplishments were in botany.

Plant life is profuse in this cell, at least compared to what's outside the city. This must have been a cultivated area once, but now it's grown wild.

Four types of plants are most common. Heroes can make *Science* (biology) or *Survival* checks when examining plants. On a success, the hero learns how the plant functions without triggering any danger (and scores a bonus exploration success).

Daggerseed Bulb: Towering, swaying stalks 8 to 10 m high, crowned by a white bulb 1 m in diameter. Daggerlike seeds hang from the bulb by threads. If the stalk is disturbed, seeds break loose and plunge to the ground. Everyone within 2 m of the plant must make a *Dodge* check. On a failure, a seed strikes the character, causing 1d6 physical damage.

Red Briar: Low, spreading bushes that blanket the ground to a depth of 1 m. Small tendrils catch tiny animals and impale them with small thorns. The plants aren't dangerous to humans, but they're slow terrain.

Spore Pod: Low shrubs that produce 1 to 6 pods each. A pod is about 20 cm wide by 40 cm long, and is filled with fine spores that irritate the eyes and lungs and clog air filters. A hero who touches a pod must make a *Dodge* check. On a failure, a cloud of spores engulfs the hero. If the character is using a breathing filter, it must be discarded. Otherwise, the penalty for not using a filter increases to -2 steps.

Tubewalkers: Spongy tubes about 1 m tall. They have no roots and can move slowly by "walking" end over end, like a floppy, coiled spring. They follow the characters and bunch around them if the characters stay in one place more than a few minutes. They present no danger but are oddly amusing.

Well, that's one way to do science.

INDUSTRIAL CELL

Janrii industry provided all manufactured goods needed within the self-sufficient hive/city. Most objects, including most of their buildings and machinery, were made from a durable, nonflammable cel-luloid. Samples would be valuable to Orion Ventures; successfully exploring an industrial cell grants an extra exploration success.

This area is crowded with the broken remains of massive, complex machines interspersed with open spaces similar to warehouses. The architecture has a heaviness that sets it apart from other cells. None of the machinery looks functional, or even complete.

Heroes who successfully explore the cell determine the cell served as a factory or a processing plant, with cleverly designed components making it easy to reconfigure. There is no evidence that robots were used for manufacturing or labor.

RESIDENTIAL CELL

Being hive creatures, the janrii lived communally; private residences didn't exist. Consequently, this area looks nothing like human homes or apartments. All their living areas were large and communal, characterized by curving, maze-like walls. Every area had a specific purpose: dining, exercising, sleeping, socializing, entertainment, and so on.

Bits of debris resembling tables, beds, and stools hint this was a residential area, but the spaces are enormous, providing none of the privacy of human homes. These creatures were artistic, fortunately, and some of their sculpture and murals survive. They portray quadrupedal beings similar to gazelles or short giraffes that sometimes stood on their hind legs.

Heroes who succeed on an *Academics* check while exploring the cell determine the creatures who lived here had a communal society entirely different from humans; their living spaces offered no privacy at all, and their art never depicts them alone. Heroes who succeed at a *Science* check while exploring the cell determine the creatures were slightly larger than humans, with fingers on all four limbs. Their technology was unlike the biotech of the drones the heroes have already encountered.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND COMMERCIAL CELL

"Commercial" is a misleading term, because the janrii didn't use money or have private property. Everything belonged to the hive, and every member of the hive had access to all resources appropriate to its position in the hierarchy. They still needed a system to exchange and distribute goods though, and that activity was focused here.

Much of what remains here is similar to human marketplaces or stores, at least superficially. Some areas also resemble office spaces—although they're more like ancient "typing pools," since you see nothing resembling a private office.

A character who succeeds at an *Academics* check while exploring this cell determines that the cell housed a complex of markets and offices, but the creatures who lived here had unique ideas about business and may have done so without money.

INFRASTRUCTURE CELL

This cell provided and controlled the city's power, water, and other municipal infrastructure. The above-ground machinery and

structures were destroyed by the h'naal drones, leaving only wreckage. Drones captured the underground power plant, however, for their own use.

All that remains here is the tangled wreckage of large, heavy machinery and power transmission cables, now inert. This destruction wasn't caused by high wind or a falling ceiling; much of it looks like deliberate sabotage or battle damage. Nothing here seems designed for use by the robots you've encountered.

A character who succeeds at an *Engineering* or *Science* check while exploring this cell learns the city's power was distributed here, but not generated here—the power readings detected from space couldn't have come from this wreckage. If there's a functioning generator, it must be below ground. On an Excellent or Stellar success, the hero also determines the power system is subterranean, probably geothermal. Nothing here seems designed for use by the robots you've encountered.

When the characters seek an entrance to the underground power plant or the team successfully explores the cell, proceed to **Scene 3**.

DRONE ATTACKS

H'naal drones operate on battery power, but their centuries-old batteries can't hold a charge very long anymore. They have mobility for many hours, but their plasma weapons drain the batteries quickly. The farther they are from the power source at the central core, the fewer shots they can fire before they must retreat to recharge, as noted below. Between their quickness, size, and dynamic camouflage, they quickly disappear after fleeing.

The heroes come under recurring attack as they explore:

- The first attack occurs within 15 minutes of characters entering the city (see **Scene 1**).
- After that, characters have a 2-in-6 (33 percent) chance to be attacked every hour while exploring or moving at normal speed. When they hurry (see **Moving Through the City**), they have a 1-in-6 (16 percent) chance to be attacked per hour.
- Once the team successfully completes **Scene 3**, all chances drop to 1-in-10 (10 percent).
- All remaining drones go dead after 38 hours.

The number of drones attacking, the opening range of the combat scene, and the rounds of combat before drones withdraw are determined by the cell the heroes are in when the encounter occurs. Where two ranges are listed, determine the range randomly.

Better yet, you can choose the time and place of attacks; plan for another two or three fights as characters approach Scene 3.

Cell	# of Drones	Range	Rounds
Agricultural	# of characters -1	Close or Medium	1
Industrial	# of characters	Close or Medium	2
Residential	# of characters	Medium or Long	3
Administrative	# of characters +1	Medium	5
Infrastructure	# of characters +2	Close	7

SCENE 3: BLACKOUT

The only way to defeat the drones and make the city safe for follow-up teams is to cut them off from their source of power beneath the city's core cell. This can be done two ways, but both require descending into the bowels of the power system.

Finding the Entrance: First, the characters must find the entrance. This requires a group check; each hero can use *Engineering* (+1 step bonus), *Academics* or *Science* (unmodified), or *Awareness* (-1 step). If the group check succeeds, the heroes find the entrance nearly buried in rubble. If the group check fails, they are attacked by drones and must continue searching. Characters gain a +3 step bonus on subsequent searches if they allow some drones to escape and manage to follow them.

Beyond the entrance, an intact ramp spirals downward through successive layers of devastation and tangled machinery. Eight levels down, it issues into a stone-walled chamber housing a massive geothermal power plant. The air is hot and ionized, and you hear the hiss of spinning turbines and the crackle of gigantic electrical breakers opening and closing automatically. The chamber is a maze of conduits, huge capacitors, and transformers.

Clinging to machinery or connected to jury-rigged charging stations are hundreds of robots—motionless, for the moment.

As soon as characters advance more than a few meters into the chamber or do anything hostile, the drones attack in waves. Each wave contains 1d6 drones. If two or fewer drones are in the fight at the start of a round, another wave arrives at the start of the next round.

The drones keep coming until one of two things happens. Either the heroes must advance 50 m to the generator and shut it down, or they must defeat six waves of drones.

Shutting Down the Generator: The generator is an Enormous and Unbreakable object. The heroes can't destroy it without artillery, but they can do enough damage with explosive charges, rockets,

bundled grenades, or other heavy weapons to force an emergency shutdown. The weapon isn't as important as how it's used; a successful *Engineering* or *Mechanics* check with a -2 step penalty is needed to find a suitable weak spot. The heroes can keep checking until they succeed.

Alternatively, characters can figure out how to cut the power manually with a complex skill check (*Engineering* or *Science*, goal of 3 successes). If the heroes get 3 failures before getting 3 successes, they made a mistake and the process must start over.

Successful Shutdown: When either condition is met, the surviving drones withdraw. The drones remain somewhat dangerous until 38 hours have passed, but the ruins are much safer than they were.

EPILOGUE

Tally the number of exploration successes the heroes accumulated in the city. Add a bonus success for crippling the power plant, or two if the power plant was captured intact, plus two for bringing back a h'naal drone to study.

EXPLORATION

Successes	Outcome
0 to 5	Suboptimal; Orion Ventures looks elsewhere for its next mission.
6 to 9	Acceptable; Orion Ventures includes a bonus of \$1,000 per character.
10 to 14	Very Good; Orion Ventures includes a bonus of \$2,000 per character.
15+	Amazing; Orion Ventures includes a bonus of \$5,000 per character, and considers the hero team to be a vital asset in future missions.

If you choose to place more adventures on Janrata, it's possible some janrii still survive in the wilderness or hidden in other cities. They've been hunted for centuries, so they trust no one. This could also be the system Captain Janelle Carter disappeared into, as described in **The Roanoke Affair**. If so, *Roanoke's* crew should still be somewhere in the system. The heroes might find them on Janrata, barely surviving in one of the ruined cities or even living with a fugitive band of janrii.

ADVERSARIES

The only dangerous opponents on Janrata are the h'naal combat drones. Orion Ventures would very much like to have examples for analysis.

H'NAAL DRONE

H'naal combat drones move on five fluidly flexible limbs, scampering across rough terrain and vertical surfaces as easily as across a flat floor. Their plasma weapons are integrated into their bodies. A h'naal drone is a slightly flattened sphere about 50 cm across and has no distinct top or bottom. The drones aren't truly drones; their programming allows them to operate without oversight from a h'naal or from a controlling AI. They can solve simple logic problems, devise plans, and learn through observation. In combat, h'naal drones coordinate and share information with each other over tactical distances, and if a central controller is online in their area of operation, they send and receive updates on the overall situation.

TR 3 Small Standard Mechanism (Robot)

Senses normal; **Awareness** 16+

Initiative 12/17/22; **Speed** 25 meters

Str 16+ **Agi** 15+ **Vit** 17+ **Int** 17+ (programmed) **Foc** 18+ **Per** 20+

ACTIONS

Plasma Bolt 3 impulses; *Medium* 1 target; *Attack* 14/19/24 (+1 step); *Damage* 1d6+2/6 energy.

Slam 3 impulses; *Melee* 1 target; *Attack* 14/19/24; *Damage* 1d6+0/4 physical, and the target must make an *Athletics* check or be knocked prone.

REACTIONS

Evasion 1-impulse reaction when targeted by a ranged attack. The drone makes a *Dodge* check; if successful, it moves 4 m and the triggering attack misses.

DEFENSE

Small Enemies suffer a -1 step penalty to attack the drone.

Life Support

Armor 0 physical, 2 energy

(12+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	incapacitated	<i>Drone collapses</i>
(9 to 11 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	becomes slowed	<i>A limb is blown off</i>
(6 to 8 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	-1 step penalty to all checks	<i>Milky fluid leaks through casing</i>
(1 to 5 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>		<i>Camouflage flickers momentarily</i>

OTHER

Networked The drone is linked to a central coordinating AI when one is available, making it aware of everything other drones have reported. This is an encrypted system that can't be monitored by hostile taps, but the signal can be jammed normally.

Nimble The drone is unaffected by slow terrain. It moves at full speed on any solid surface that doesn't have a step penalty for climbing. It can jump up to 10 meters.

EPISODE 5: THE MARTIAN HOSTAGE

An Adventure for 3rd level Heroes

Stealing Triton Gate codes and signing on for dangerous expeditions to distant star systems on the other side of the Protostar Nexus aren't the only jobs for people with special talents such as those the PCs have. When a European scientist is kidnapped by a Martian corporation that's willing to play rough, it takes a team of freelance problem-solvers to handle the rescue . . . and carry out some retribution in the process. All while maintaining a healthy margin of plausible deniability, of course.

BACKGROUND

Five weeks ago, a European scientist named Dr. René Duval was kidnapped during a visit to Mariner City, Mars, for a conference. While Dr. Duval appeared to be an academic, he was actually working on secret weapons research for the European Confederation Defense Bureau. The EC Defense Bureau managed to piece together enough evidence from the attack to identify the kidnappers as agents of Syrtis Industries, a Martian corporation, but the Martian government wouldn't allow ECDB to operate in their territory and seemed satisfied with Syrtis Industries' denial of responsibility.

The Europeans decided on a third-party solution. They chose the Mars-based contractor Ausonia Consulting to get their man back. Ausonia determined that Dr. Duval was being held in a Syrtis outpost at Pavonis Caldera, and sent in a team disguised as Syrtis employees to extract the European scientist.

That team was wiped out to the last man.

Since Plan A failed, Ausonia turned to Plan B . . . and they called the PCs.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The heroes' Ausonia Consulting contract is straightforward: Infiltrate the Pavonis Caldera Research Facility, rescue Dr. Duval, and wipe out all the research projects currently stored on the facility's mainframe by installing a tailored computer virus. Since Pavonis Caldera is currently under lockdown after the previous failed rescue attempt, the heroes can't just take a shuttle to the station or pose as Syrtis employees. Instead, they'll need to make their approach on foot in near-vacuum, summiting one of the tallest mountains in the Solar System. In **Scene 1**, the heroes tackle the climb and the descent to the caldera floor. Continuing across the caldera floor, the team encounters a robotic sentry in **Scene 2**. Fighting their way past the robot, the heroes reach the facility in **Scene 3**. (You'll find a map and a description of the Pavonis Caldera Research Facility [here](#).)

Depending on how the heroes decide to proceed, they progress to either **Scene 4** or **Scene 5**. Scene 4 describes the challenge of installing the kill-virus—the Pavonis Caldera supercomputer doesn't want to die. In Scene 5, the heroes discover that Duval is no captive—he's a defector, and he's developing his new tech for Syrtis Industries.

MISSION BRIEFING

Choose an appropriate contact from one of the PCs to serve as a conduit for Ausonia Consulting to hire the team (and adjust the reward to suit your campaign).

When Ausonia Consulting reaches out, it's a good idea to take the call. They're one of the top clearing-houses for high-end freelance work in the Solar System. After you make your way to Deimos Station and check in at the Ausonia office, you're shown into a modest office suite, where you meet an Ausonia rep named Isabel Hayes and her assistant, Martin Chang.

After the usual chit-chat, Hayes comes to the point: "Your friend [*contact*] says you can handle hard assignments. We need you to rescue a kidnapped European scientist being held at a Syrtis Industries research station planet-side, and sabotage the station's mainframe so that the kidnappers don't get to keep whatever information they're gotten out of him. It's technically challenging, so the pay's good: \$10,000 each for about three days' work. Do I have your interest?"

Hayes and Chang go on to summarize the story laid out in **Background**, above. They answer questions honestly, to the best of their ability: They don't know much about Duval's research, but they trust their client (a European Confederation defense-research agency, basically) and they're anxious to cash the EC check. When you're ready, move on:

"Here's the mission profile," Chang explains. "Pavonis Caldera is protected by anti-air defenses, and our last team's failure suggests that you can't get in by dressing up as Syrtis employees. We put you on the ground near the mountain's summit, you rappel down to the caldera floor, then you approach the facility on foot. Get inside and retrieve Dr. Duval, or verify that he isn't there. Whether you find Duval or not, our client wants you to install this—" he holds up a datastick—"on the research mainframe to wipe out anything Syrtis got from him. Exfiltrate the way you came in."

"Or, if you can disable the facility's air defenses, call us for a ride," Hayes adds. "You might not have to climb back up the caldera wall when you're done."

"We'll provide transportation, special climbing gear, and excursion-rated vac suits," Chang finishes. "Expect to be outside at least 24 hours. Anything else you think you need—say, a gun—you're responsible for. But don't make a massacre out of this operation."

Hayes tells the heroes they can have a few days to make preparations if they want, but the sooner they go, the better—Ausonia doesn't want to leave Duval in Syrtis's hands longer than necessary. Some possible questions the players may ask:

Do we trust Ausonia? Heroes with mercenary, intelligence, or criminal backgrounds know that Ausonia is regarded as a straight shooter that pays top dollar for top people.

How do we know Duval is at Pavonis? "We've got contacts inside Syrtis who confirmed it." Isabel Hayes won't say anything more than that—she doesn't want to risk exposing a valuable source inside Syrtis Industries.

How do we get inside? "You're on top of a mountain in near-vacuum; they're not expecting someone at the door. Shouldn't be too hard to cycle an airlock or cut your way in."

Do you have a facility blueprint? "Only a basic overhead view." (You can show a quick sketch of the map in Scene 3.)

Tell us about the gear. Excursion vac suits are high-performance, long-endurance models that have 24 hours of oxygen and power. They're normally Class 2 equipment; Ausonia provides a spare suit for Duval (weight 15 kg). Backup oxygen packs and batteries provide an additional 24 hours of endurance at a weight of 10 kg (a Class 1 item). In addition, Ausonia offers a portable vac shelter—an airtight tent that can accommodate 8 people and provides 24 hours of oxygen and heat. The vac shelter weighs 30 kg, and is a Class 2 item.

The climbing gear consists of a 6-km reel of super-light carbon-fiber rope weighing 10 kg, plus simple hand-brake devices for descent and personal booster pack (popular for BASE jumping, extreme skiing, and other such low-g sports) for returning back up the rope. The booster is a light harness that weighs only 5 kg and folds down to the size of a 1-liter bottle; it's good for 5 minutes of unguided flight, so you'll want to clip yourself to the rope going back up.

What's on the datastick? "A Trojan horse. It piggybacks on the mainframe's next backup of its research data, so it'll kill the files wherever they're stored, even off-site. Try not to make it obvious that you installed anything on the mainframe."

Ausonia can serve as a good source of job contracts in the future if the heroes don't make a mess of things.

SCENE 1: LONG DROP

Pavonis Caldera Research Facility is located in the summit caldera of Pavonis Mons, a Martian mountain that stands 14,000 meters tall (about 46,000 feet). At that altitude, the Martian atmosphere is effectively vacuum and the temperature is extremely cold—the heroes need vacuum-rated protective gear.

Ausonia provides the heroes with a nondescript atmospheric transport at Mariner City's hangar dome. (If none of the heroes are pilots, Martin Chang accompanies the group to handle the flying. He's a competent ex-Terran security specialist and trained pilot, trustworthy if not especially warm.) Mariner City is about 1,000 kilometers from Pavonis Mons, so the flight takes a little more than an hour.

Pavonis Mons is immense. The ancient volcano covers such a vast area that the slope of its sides is only 5 degrees or so—flying low above the mountainside, it looks like you're over a rolling plain. As you near the summit, your pilot begins hugging the ground closely, using the terrain to stay under the radar horizon of the sensors at the top. About twenty kilometers from the lip of the caldera, you set down in the shadow of a low, rocky ridge. It's as close as you can get without risking detection—from here, you're on foot.

Ausonia provides a map and a suggested route. It's up to the heroes whether they march straight to the caldera, or break up the march with a rest period in a portable vacuum shelter.

SKILL CHALLENGE: MOUNTAIN CLIMBING

Olympus Mons is bigger, but Pavonis Mons has a more impressive caldera.

The climb is not technically challenging—the gravity is low, the slope is negligible, and the terrain is rough but not very dangerous. It is, however, fatiguing, mostly because the ground is broken and uneven and it's a long walk.

Overland Travel: It's 24 kilometers to the rim, and the heroes can average 3 km per hour of marching. For every 12 km of marching, each PC must make an *Endurance* or *Survival* check (player's choice) at a +1 step bonus (low gravity). On a failure, the character becomes fatigued, and gains 1 level of debility (page 178, *Core Rulebook*). For this challenge, multiple failures don't increase debility above 1. Resting for eight hours removes the penalty.

Heroes can't really rest in their suits, but they can un-suit and rest in the portable vac shelter—basically, a pressurized tent with an airlock. It can be set up in 10 minutes.

At the Rim: When the heroes reach the caldera rim, read:

The march from your Landing Zone (LZ) to the edge of the caldera is tiring and time-consuming, winding through low *arêtes* and across broken boulder fields. For hours, nothing seems to change very much . . . and then you come to the caldera. It's a vast, steep-sided bowl almost 50 kilometers across and 5 kilometers deep. At this altitude, the Martian atmosphere is a thin orange haze on the horizon, and the sky is dark and starry above you.

If any of the heroes uses binoculars (or a similar imaging device) to look for their target, add:

The Syrtis research facility is located about one-quarter of the way around the rim, down on the caldera floor. It's about 25 kilometers away. At this distance, all you can make out is a dome marking the habitat entrance, and a nearby landing pad with a transport parked on it.

Heroes can observe the facility as long as they like, but nothing changes for days. It's easy to find a place to set up a shelter and rest out of sight, if the heroes want to.

DESCENT

The trip to the caldera floor is scary, but not terribly dangerous. All the heroes need to do is secure one end of their CF rope to a good anchor near the top, and drop the reel over the edge. (Actually, they'll need to drop the reel a few times, since there are several wide ledges and scree slopes along the way that break up the climb a bit.) When a PC is ready to descend, she clips her handbrake to the rope and jumps over the side, controlling her speed with the brake. A climber can descend 200 meters per minute this way—it takes half an hour to get all the way to the bottom.

- Each descending character must make an *Athletics* check (+1 step bonus) or, if trained, an *Extreme Sports* check (+3 step bonus).
- On a failure, the character suffers a mishap in the descent and must then make an *Acrobatics* check, suffering a minor fall (1d6 damage) on a success, or a moderate fall (1d10 damage) on a failure.

The CF rope is very thin and hard to see from more than a hundred meters or so away—the heroes don't have to worry about someone in the research facility spotting it on the caldera wall.

The gear is pretty safe; the question is whether the heroes pick up any minor injuries before they get involved in fights later on.

GO STRAIGHT IN?

Reckless heroes may choose to test the Syrtis air-defense systems by flying straight to the research facility. Chang won't do this for the team, but if the PCs have their own pilot, they can try it. Short version: They get shot down over the caldera floor, several km from the landing pad. Have the hero flying the transport make a *Piloting* check to see how well she manages to mitigate the crash. Stellar: No one is injured. Excellent: The crash is a minor impact (page 181, *Core Rulebook*). Average: The crash is a moderate impact. Failure: The crash is a serious impact. The facility defenders send the Ranger C5 to investigate the crash site. Continue with scene 2.

SCENE 2: THE CALDERA

Once the heroes descend to the caldera floor, they're in for another 24-kilometer march to reach the entrance of the Pavonis Caldera Research Facility. As in the previous march, the heroes average 3 km per hour, and each PC must make an *Endurance* or *Survival* check at a +1 step bonus for every 12 km traveled. On a failure, the character gains 1 level of debility from fatigue. Resting for eight hours removes the penalty.

The heroes can camp when they like, but it's dangerous to camp within 12 km of the research facility (see **Ranger C5**, below).

RANGER C5

When the heroes approach within 8 km of the facility or set up camp within 12 km, they encounter a roving security robot assigned to patrol the vicinity of the research facility after the failure of Ausonia's previous team.

While Marching: If the heroes encounter Ranger C5 while on the move, have the team make a group *Awareness* check. If the team succeeds, they spot the robot coming from a distance of 300 meters, and have 3 minutes to find ambush positions or prepare a defense. They gain tactical surprise against the robot. (The robot automatically spots the heroes at a distance of 100 meters unless the heroes choose to hide and succeed on a group *Stealth* check at a +2 step bonus, in which case the robot doesn't spot the heroes until it's 20 meters away.)

A puff of dust behind a boulder a few hundred meters away catches your eye; a moment later, you spot the cause. It's a battered old security robot marching along on six clawed legs, its turret scanning left and right as it goes. It's heading your way!

If the team fails their group *Awareness* check, they spot the robot and the robot spots them at a distance of 100 meters; roll initiative!

While Camped: If Ranger C5 finds the heroes while they're resting in the vac shelter, any character standing watch outside the tent automatically notices the robot's approach at a distance of 300 meters; the team has 3 minutes to suit up and get ready.

If no one is on guard, the robot surprises them. It begins the encounter by holing the tent with laser fire:

Your first indication of trouble is the sudden roar of air escaping from your shelter—a stitched line of burned holes appear in one wall of the tent. Through the translucent plastic you make out the battered shape of a six-legged robot a hundred meters away, firing a laser at your tent!

Each hero begins the scene only partially suited. Donning a vacuum suit in a hurry is a *Survival* skill challenge requiring 3 successes; however, if a hero chooses to use the concentrate action modifier (page 138, *Core Rulebook*), they can't fail the check and score a minimum of 1 success. A hero might also choose to slap an emergency patch on the damaged tent, or return fire through the damaged tent (this makes patching the tent impossible, of course).

At the end of the first action round, the damaged tent becomes a partial vacuum—treat it like a normal vacuum (page 186, *Core Rulebook*), but there is no initial exposure and characters gain a +2 step bonus to *Endurance* checks to resist the effects. At the end of the second action round, the tent fails completely, and it's now vacuum.

Special Conditions: The caldera floor is littered with boulders and broken ground. Any hero outside the shelter is within 20 meters of cover at any time. If a hero moves to find cover, make a *Dodge* check (+2 step bonus) to determine the quality of cover he finds (if the check fails, the next patch of cover is just a couple of meters farther away, and the hero needs another 1-impulse reposition to reach it).

Characters wounded in vacuum don't have to worry about suit breaches—their suits are self-sealing. However, it's impossible to use *Medicine* to treat injuries without getting the wounded character out of the suit first.

Breaking Off: The Ranger continues its attack until it destroys all enemies or is destroyed itself. However, it's not very smart, and if starts its turn with no targets in sight, it assumes that it's defeated the threat and moves away, returning to its patrol plan.

ON THE DOORSTEP

After defeating or driving off the Ranger C5, a little more hiking brings the heroes to the doorstep of the Syrtis Corporation facility. The surface part of the installation includes:

- A 10-meter dome (the personnel airlock).
- A 50-meter-wide landing pad, with a vehicle elevator marked out in yellow safety lines.
- A transport flyer parked to the side of the landing pad.
- Five 3-meter domes widely spaced around the installation, roughly a kilometer away (the anti-air defenses).

Continue with **Scene 3** when the heroes explore the site.

SCENE 3: KNOCK, KNOCK

In this scene, the heroes enter and explore the Pavonis research facility. The first step is figuring out how to get inside (see **Surface Features**). Once they're in, refer to the map and the **Interior Layout** for details.

Go to **Scene 4** when the heroes visit area 10, the Mainframe Room.

Go to **Scene 5** when the heroes find Duval.

Alarm: If Ranger C5 reports the heroes' presence or if the heroes trip an alarm at the Personnel Airlock, run the **Security!** encounter when the heroes enter area 2 (the Common Room) from area 1. Otherwise, run the encounter when they visit area 8 (the Ops Center) or 1 minute after they leave any station personnel who can report their presence behind them.

LOCKED DOORS

Some rooms in the facility are protected by locks that open when swiped by the right ID badge. ID badges come in three types: technician, ops specialist, and management. Badge scanners can be bypassed by a skill challenge: Earn 3 *Security* successes before failing 3 times. On a failure, the lock shuts down for 10 minutes and an alarm sounds in the Ops Center.

SURFACE FEATURES

From the surface, Pavonis Caldera Research Facility is nothing more than a few dusty domes and a large landing pad.

Personnel Airlock: The personnel airlock is really nothing more than a surface-level dome covering an elevator that descends to the main complex. The exterior door is secured by a simple keypad lock, and includes a call button that activates a security cam and sounds a buzzer in the Ops Center. (Naturally, that alerts the facility that someone is at the door.)

- Bypassing the keypad is a *Security* skill challenge requiring 3 successes; if the heroes accumulate 3 failures before succeeding, the keypad shuts down and sounds an alarm in the Ops Center.
- The personnel door can also be cut open with a *Mechanics* skill challenge and an acetylene torch or similar gear (one minute per check, door opens after 3 successes).

PAVONIS CALDERA RESEARCH FACILITY



Vehicle Elevator: An 15 m x 21 m section of the landing pad is marked off as a vehicle elevator. A 1-meter post to one side of the elevator has a covered control panel secured by a simple padlock; once the padlock is removed, all you have to do is open the panel and press the button to cycle the hangar airlock and send the vehicle elevator down to the hangar (it takes about 2 minutes to cycle and descend).

- The padlock can be pried off with an *Athletics* check (–2 step penalty), cut off with bolt cutters (no check needed), shot away by an attack dealing at least 7 damage, or picked with a *Security* check. It's not really an obstacle.

Parked Transport: A thin-atmosphere utility rocket/jet that's not too different in size and function from a modern-day mid-sized helicopter. It can carry up to ten people plus a pilot and a copilot. The keys are in the hangar; it can be hot-wired with a successful *Security* check and a successful *Piloting* check. If the heroes take off without disabling the missile emplacements first, they'll be shot down in short order (see the **Go Straight In?** sidebar).

Missile Emplacements: There are five armored domes in the emplacement: one radar system, and four missile launchers. The domes are effectively steel bulkheads (page 212, *Core Rulebook*)

with maintenance hatches guarded by very secure keypad locks (6 *Security* checks to open; after 3 failures, the keypad locks out for 1 hour and sounds an alarm in the Ops Center). It's easy to sabotage the missiles or radar once you get into the maintenance hatch; to disable the air defenses from the surface, you must disable either the radar dome or all four missile launchers.

GETTING INFORMATION FROM NPCs

Marisa Tanner or Aldon Pierce clam up if questioned, but any other noncombatant is willing to give up information in exchange for safety; a *Coercion* check (+2 step bonus for technicians, or +4 steps for support personnel) may be helpful. Any NPC can provide Dr. Duval's location, the mainframe's location, and the location of security forces. Technicians can describe the Typhon research, or provide login credentials for the mainframe.

All the NPCs know that Duval is actively cooperating with Syrtis, but they assume that the PCs know that too—they don't volunteer that information unless the heroes ask a question that leads in the right direction.

PAVONIS PERSONNEL

The facility staff consists of:

- 6 technicians (areas 4 or 7); Anderson, Cho, Harris, Henderson, Nguyen, Yates. They're loyal and well-paid, and keep their opinions about their superiors to themselves. The technicians all have user privileges for the mainframe in area 10, and can be coerced into providing their login information.
- 6 operations specialists (areas 8 or 13); Brown, Dunn, Okoye, Rice, Soto, and Senior Specialist Aldon Pierce, the detachment leader. Pierce is a power-drunk bully, but he's aggressive, competent, and highly motivated to keep his job.
- 5 support personnel (areas 2 or 13); Farley, Green, Hoffman, Miller, Ruiz. They feel like they're second-class citizens at Pavonis and grumble a lot to each other, but they are afraid of losing their jobs.
- Dr. Rene Duval (area 6 or 9) heads up the research unit. See **Scene 5**.
- Director Marisa Tanner (area 6 or 8) is in charge of the facility. She's a tough-minded manager in her mid-40s, assigned to make sure Duval gets whatever he needs. She has a deceptively mild manner and never gets angry—instead, she gets even.

Technicians, maintenance personnel, and Director Tanner aren't combatants (see "The Average Person," page 199, *Core Rulebook*). If they see armed intruders, they either flee or surrender immediately.

INTERIOR LAYOUT

The research facility consists of a series of standard habitat and engineering modules buried under 15 meters of Martian regolith.

Most rooms have 3-meter ceilings and overhead lights: bright during working hours, dimmed between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.

1. Personnel Entrance. This space holds an elevator/airlock that ascends 15 meters to the surface, as well as a large suit locker containing 8 vac suits and support packs. Mechanical interlocks ensure that the bottom door of the elevator physically can't open if the top door on the surface is open. An unlocked metal hatch leads to area 2.

2. Common Area. A typical lounge, rec room, and mess deck. Furnishings include two large cafeteria tables with bench-like seats, a pool table, and a couple of pinball machines, and a sunken seating area with couches facing a large vid screen (all potential sources of cover). A pass-through in the east wall leads to the galley.

The doors leading south to area 7 and 8 are secured by ID badge locks; area 7 opens for technician and ops specialist badges, while area 8 only opens for ops specialist badges.

- During working hours or sleeping hours, no one is here.
- At mealtimes and in the early evening, a few off-duty personnel gather to socialize: 2 technicians, 2 support personnel, and 2 ops specialists (the rovers).
- If the heroes tripped an external alarm and then entered via the personnel airlock, 5 ops specialists are waiting here for them (see **Security!** below).

3. Galley. An institutional kitchen, including a large walk-in fridge, a storeroom for dry goods, oven and stove, sink and dishwasher, pots and pans, cutlery, a cupboard full of plastic plates, and so on. During the day, 3 support staff work here.

4. Technician Dormitory. Six Syrtis assistant scientists and technicians share this comfortable dormitory; each person has a roomy bunk with a privacy screen, which sits above storage drawers for clothes and personal belongings. (The drawers are secured by a simple keypad lock.) A large vid screen on one wall shows a pleasant mountainside scene.

During working hours, this room is empty; at night, four technicians are asleep (the other two have a night shift in the Test Lab). Four bunks are unused.

5. Lavatory. Six private cubicles, each with a toilet, sink, and shower.

6. VIP Suites. These three suites are reserved for facility managers. Each consists of a large bed, a closet, a sitting area with a small fridge, a small desk, a private bathroom, and an entertainment center. The doors have badge readers keyed to the specific individuals, although ops specialist badges can open them in case of an emergency.

- 6A belongs to Dr. Duval. He's here at night. If the heroes examine the room, they find that it seems pretty comfortable for someone being held against his will. His closet is full of nice clothes, and he has a perfectly functional comm device sitting on his desk.
- 6B belongs to Director Tanner. She's here during her off hours.
- 6C is currently vacant.

7. Research Lab. This room is a working space for the station technicians, and the door restricts access to technician badges. The room includes eight desks, each with an impressive array of monitors and displays (one belongs to Duval, and one is currently unused). There's also a large common worktable cluttered with tools and test units in various stages of assembly. During working hours, two technicians are here.

Heroes interested in the research can figure out the nature of the work with an open-ended skill challenge (5 minutes per check, *Computer or Science*). *1 success*: it's called Typhon and it's related to robotics; *3 successes*: specifically, autonomous weapon drones; *6+ successes*: the key concept is a new "swarm intelligence" networked AI for small drones; *10+ successes*: Dr. Duval stole this work from the EC Defense Bureau—it's not all his.

8. Ops Center. The doors to this room require ops specialist badges for access. The ops center serves as the security and communications center for the complex. A radar display and weapons-system console here controls the facility's antiair defenses. Numerous monitors show security-cam views of the hallways, plus areas 2, 3, 11, and 14. The center's comm panel also controls incoming and outgoing vid calls and email.

- This room is normally manned by two ops specialists around the clock; the other four are either resting in the Support Dormitory or roving the facility.
- It's easy to disable the antiair defenses here—shutting down or destroying the weapon system controls only takes an action.
- Gunfights in this room blast apart screens with showers of sparks. Combatants can find 50 percent cover from a variety of sturdy desks and consoles.

9. Test Lab. This room is the whole reason the facility's here. It's a robotics lab with large parts racks, a variety of machine tools and 3-D printers, a weapon-firing bench, a locker of drone power cores, and a 10-meter test enclosure surrounded by armored-plastic walls.

- During the day, Dr. Duval and two technicians are working in this room.

The heroes can also get this information by questioning technicians.

- At night, two technicians pulling the late shift work on assembling new drone designs.
- The machine tools and parts rack provide 50 percent cover for any fight in here.
- The power cores are potentially explosive; if struck by a weapon that deals energy damage, the rack explodes in a 4 m (8 m) blast dealing 2d6 (1d8) energy damage.
- There's also a fire-suppression system with several activation buttons around the room; hitting the button floods the room with inert gas, reducing visibility to very poor for 10 minutes (see Vision, page 176, *Core Rulebook*).

10. Mainframe Room. The door to this room opens for technician badges. The complex's research mainframe is housed inside (see **Scene 4**). The mainframe is not a true AI, but does have a personality-emulation control system called Pavi. The mainframe is a fragile machine protected by an ordinary-level enclosure, if the heroes choose to destroy it the old-fashioned way.

11. Admin Center. A typical office space housing personnel records, supply requisitions, maintenance requests, low-priority communications, and other 23rd-century paperwork. Director Tanner works here during the day, along with two support personnel. If the heroes search the record systems or correspondence in this room for information about Dr. Duval, they discover that he is now a very well-paid Syrtis employee, assigned to manage the technical staff here at Pavonis. The only person here who doesn't answer to him is Director Tanner.

12. Armory. A large locker in the wall of the corridor serves as the facility's armory. Opening it requires both an ops specialist badge and a numeric code for the keypad. It contains 4 flechette pistols, 2 flechette guns, and 2 laser rifles, along with 4 suits of polymer mail.

13. Support Staff Dormitory. Like the technician dormitory (area 4), this room has a dozen cubicle-bunks with privacy screens. During working hours, two ops specialists are resting here; at night, five support personnel and four ops specialists sleep here.

14. Hangar. This large space has sufficient parking space for two atmospheric transports, although none are currently here. The facility's ops specialists don't keep a close eye on the hangar because they assume that if the elevator cycles it's because someone must have permission to use it.

- A vehicular elevator/airlock leads to the landing pad on the surface.
- There's a basketball hoop at one end of the room (on Mars, everybody can dunk).

- Stacks of supply crates that contain spare parts for flyers, dry goods for the galley, and linens and bedding for the dormitories.
- Two partially assembled security rovers, Ranger C3 and Ranger C4. Bringing one online takes a couple of hours of work, and tampering with its core programming would be a moderately complex *Computer* skill challenge.

15. Repair Shop. This cluttered parts room and work space is reserved for maintaining the base's vehicles and excursion gear. Two support personnel are usually working here (or goofing off while pretending to work). The keys to the transport parked on the landing pad are hanging on the wall.

16. Life Support. The door to this room is locked (it opens for a maintenance badge). The room houses three critical pieces of machinery: a small, safe fusion generator to provide the facility with power, an air replenisher that scrubs CO₂ out of the air and oxygenates the complex's air supply, and a water recycler unit that purifies and pipes clean water to the other parts of the complex.

- Heroes trained in *Engineering* (life support or power systems) or *Mechanics* (environmental systems) can easily sabotage these systems to fail immediately or fail later. Residual oxygen and heat in the complex keep it habitable for several hours, but eventually the place becomes uninhabitable without repairs.
- Rigging the power plant to blow can destroy the whole complex. Small fusion plants such as this are designed to not explode, so it's a skill challenge requiring 6 successes against *Engineering* or *Mechanics* (check interval one minute). Setting up a precise detonation or detonation via remote device requires a *Security* check.

17. Storage Tanks. Behind the hangar wall lie several large storage tanks for fuel, water, and compressed air. These provide the facility with an important stock of vital resources, and are periodically replenished by tankers dispatched to Pavonis to deliver refills.

SECURITY!

Most of the personnel at Pavonis surrender or flee when confronted by armed intruders. However, the ops specialists are trained security agents and attempt to defend the facility.

If the heroes are spotted on their way in, five ops specialists are waiting in either the Common Area or the Hangar to defend the facility (the last one remains in the Ops Center). Once three are defeated, the remaining two surrender.

If the heroes get into the facility without setting off any alarms, the ops specialists are in various locations:

- **Working Hours:** Two on-duty in the Ops Center (area 8), two resting in area 13, two roaming the complex (they show up in Scene 4 or 5).
- **Sleeping Hours:** Two on-duty in the Ops Center, four resting in area 13.

SOS: If an ops specialist inside the Ops Center becomes aware of a major problem inside the facility (say, the team waiting to defend the Common Area getting shot to pieces), they call the Syrtis office in High Tharsis, about 300 km away. Syrtis organizes a strike force with two armed flyers and twenty heavily armored troops to retake the base, but it'll take them an hour or more to reach Pavonis.

Make sure the players know the clock is running!

SCENE 4: ABORT, RETRY, FAIL?

Pavi, the facility's research mainframe, is located in area 10. The Syrtis Corporation is extremely paranoid about potential cyber-espionage, so the mainframe is not connected to any external internet. Instead, it's designed to be backed up daily to high-density datasticks that are sent via messenger to other Syrtis facilities.

A computer the size of an office desk stands in this room, with a spacious work station for a human operator. Shelves on the near wall hold operating manuals and report folders, along with a set of numbered and dated datasticks; there is an electrical junction box and a back-up battery tower in the far corner. A holographic display above the computer shows a digitized human face. "Hello," it says. "I am Pavi, the operating system. Are you a new user?"

Pavi converses with anyone addressing it, but it requires a user log-in to access its files or execute any special instructions. It's not an AI per se; it's a sophisticated OS that asks questions of people around it so that it can determine how to help them.

The heroes don't actually need to interact with Pavi—they can just plug in the datastick with the virus. However, if they want to make a copy of the research or snoop around (something Ausonia didn't ask them to do), they'll need to log in.

Logging In: The easiest way to log in is to use existing user credentials. Dr. Duval and all the technicians have the right credentials, although they won't surrender that info willingly. A good hacker without credentials can attempt to bypass this step; this is a *Computer skill challenge* (–2 step penalty) requiring 3 successes before 3 failures. If the challenge fails, Pavi refuses all new login attempts,

and sends an alert to the Ops Center and Director Tanner (this may trigger the **Security!** encounter if it hasn't been triggered yet). If the challenge succeeds, the heroes can use Pavi to:

- Make a copy of the Typhon data before they delete it (not in their Ausonia contract, but potentially valuable);
- Shut down the air-defense system in the Ops Center;
- Shut down the life-support systems in area 16;
- Unlock all doors in the facility, or change access for any (or all) personnel badges;
- Access Duval's or Tanner's email and correspondence (which reveal that Duval is a defector and is working with Syrtis willingly);

The Kill Virus: If the heroes simply plug in their virus datastick, it works as advertised.

The digital face of the mainframe freezes as the datastick's use-light blinks. Then a text message pops up in the display: "Unrecognized program. Install Y/N?"

If the heroes proceed, the mainframe whirs and reboots. There is no other sign that the program has been installed (that's deliberate, the designers of the virus wanted it to hide until it was included in the normal backup routine).

Old Backups: The datasticks stored on the shelf are old backups. The heroes can take as many as they like, and obtain a copy of the Typhon data that way. However, the theft will be pretty obvious.

SCENE 5: DR. DUVAL, I PRESUME?

Depending on how the heroes get into the complex and when they attempt their infiltration, they find Dr. Duval either in the Test Lab (with two technicians) or his personal quarters (alone). Rene Duval is brilliant and a little paranoid, and quickly realizes that a bunch of non-Syrtis people with guns are probably here to take him back to Earth.

Rene Duval's file photo is a good likeness of him: He's a thin, balding man of forty or so, with dark eyes and a gray-streaked goatee. It doesn't capture the man's nervous energy, though; he paces and mutters constantly at a tablet device. When he sees you, he stops and frowns in surprise. "Who are you?" he demands. "You don't belong here!"

If the heroes find Duval in the Test Lab, the two technicians with him freeze and raise their hands, looking to Duval for instructions. If the heroes ask about them, Duval tells the heroes to leave them

Destroying the mainframe with gunfire isn't hard. However, Syrtis computer experts can recover the data from the wreckage later.

alone, saying they've been kind to him and they don't know enough about his work to be dangerous. (The technicians flee if a fight breaks out.)

DUVAL'S STORY

Duval does his best to dissemble, pretending to be a captive held against his will. (That's how he got the drop on the previous team that tried to rescue him.) Duval denies any knowledge of the previous team's efforts, but he's lying about that.

If a hero watches Duval closely during the conversation (the player tells you that she's taking note of his demeanor or condition), allow the character to make an *Empathy* check. On a success, the hero gains the impression that Duval is just a little too glib about his situation—you'd think he would be more traumatized.

A hero who takes a close look at Duval's clothing or gear can attempt an *Awareness* check: On an Average success, she notices Duval's control bracelet, and on an Excellent or better, she spots Duval's hidden laser pistol. (Duval explains the bracelet as a necessary part of his prototype, and claims that he managed to steal the pistol in preparation for an escape attempt.)

We're Here to Rescue You: When the heroes inform Duval that they're here to rescue him, he feigns cooperation: "What's your plan? Hmm, that seems dangerous, but I suppose you're the experts. Lead me out, then."

DUVAL'S BETRAYAL

While going along with the rescue, Duval surreptitiously activates his drone-control bracelet to summon the Typhons, and waits for his drones to arrive.

The Heroes Suspect Nothing: Duval accompanies the team to Area 2 or area 14, whichever way they plan to exit. Then he activates his drones and attacks.

Duval suddenly stops as a strange humming sound fills the air. Then a dozen tiny spherical drones dart into the room, surrounding the scientist. He draws a laser pistol from a hidden holster in his jacket. "Actually, I think I prefer it here!" he says, and attacks!



Have each character make an *Empathy* check; characters who fail the check are surprised. Other characters roll initiative normally. Duval summons 2 Typhon drones per hero (maximum of 12 drones).

The Heroes Suspect Him: If the heroes confront Duval with any evidence that he's actively cooperating with Syrtis, he panics and attacks. Roll initiative normally—Duval has no chance to surprise the team. Otherwise, Duval bides his time and attacks just before they leave the facility, assuming they don't suspect anything. However, when he makes his move, the heroes aren't surprised. (If the heroes attack Duval without provocation, they surprise him!)

The Fight: Duval keeps his distance from the heroes, dodging when he fires. He begins by designating the most dangerous-looking (or closest) hero as a target for his drones, then fires on other characters while his drones laser the primary target to pieces. If badly wounded, he redirects his drones to the character who just hurt him. Duval has his drones intercept as many attacks as possible, counting on their protection.

When Duval loses his second (9 to 11) wound box or his first (12+) wound box, he surrenders. He also gives up if all of his drones are destroyed.

EPILOGUE

Depending on what the heroes managed to do in the facility, their escape may be easy or hard. The Syrtis personnel in Pavonis Research Facility make no attempt to pursue. If the anti-air defenses are disabled, they can escape in the parked flyer on the landing pad or call Ausonia for a ride. Otherwise, they can suit up and return across the caldera floor the way they came, using the disposable boosters in their mountaineering kits to ascend the caldera wall. Chang meets them at the rim with Ausonia's transport.

Isabel Hayes meets the heroes in a private hangar in Mariner City's transportation dome when the team returns from Pavonis.

- If the heroes have Duval or tell her he's dead, she counts that as a win.
- She is surprised to learn that he defected . . . but her European contacts will certainly want Duval returned, willingly or not. She tells the heroes that Ausonia can take care of getting Duval back to Earth.
- Hayes also asks whether the heroes successfully installed the Trojan on the mainframe.

Hayes authorizes full payment on the heroes' contract if they confirm Duval is no longer working for Syrtis and the research mainframe has been either destroyed or infected with the virus—although she'd prefer Duval alive in their hands, and the mainframe

infected without anyone at Syrtis knowing about it. The heroes now have a contact at Ausonia Consulting . . . although if the heroes caused excessive damage, Hayes advises them to get off-planet before the authorities come looking for them, and makes a note to only use the team for “highly kinetic” missions in the future.

ADVERSARIES

Enemies the heroes are likely to face at Pavonis include the following.

RANGER C5

The Ranger is a heavy-duty security rover designed for extended patrols in rough terrain and harsh environments. It uses Comm Link on its first action of the second action round, unless its Comm Link is shot away.

TR 3 Large Boss Mechanism (Robot)

Senses normal, thermal vision; **Awareness** 14+

Initiative 12/17/22; **Speed** 20 meters (ignores slow terrain)

Str 14+ **Agi** 16+ **Vit** 14+ **Int** 19+ (programmed) **Foc** 16+ **Per** 19+

ACTIONS

Gatling Laser 3 impulses; *Long* 3 targets within 10 m of each other; *Attack* 14/19/24 (+2 steps); *Damage* 1d8+4/8 energy.

Claws 3 impulses; *Melee* 1 target; *Attack* 14/19/24 (+1 step); *Damage* 2d4+0/5 physical (+3 dmg vs. prone target), and target must make *Athletics* check or be knocked prone.

Comm Link 1 impulse; reports intrusion to controlling network and begins transmitting video of encounter.

REACTIONS

Opportunity Fire 1-impulse reaction when an enemy moves out of cover. Ranger C5 makes a single Gatling laser attack against the enemy that provokes the reaction.

DEFENSE

Life Support

Armor 3 physical, 2 energy

(12+ dmg)	□	destroyed	<i>Grinds to halt with smoking chassis</i>
(12+ dmg)	□□□	Gains +1 on damage rolls	<i>Emergency power-up, overheating</i>
(9 to 11 dmg)	□□□□	-1 step penalty to attacks	<i>Targeting lens damaged</i>
(6 to 8 dmg)	□□□□	can't use Opportunity Fire until next action	<i>Shower of sparks impairs sensors</i>
(1 to 5 dmg)	□□□□	loses Comm Link	<i>Minor damage shoots away antenna</i>

OTHER

Skills *Athletics* 10+, *Stealth* 12+.

SYRTIS OPS SPECIALIST

Ops specialists are Syrtis security goons.

TR 3 Medium Standard Humanoid (Human)

Senses normal; *Awareness* 15+

Initiative 14/19/24; **Speed** 20 meters

Str 16+ **Agi** 17+ **Vit** 16+ **Int** 17+ (sentient) **Foc** 17+ **Per** 17+

ACTIONS

Shock Glove 3 impulses; *Melee* 1 target; *Attack* 14/19/24 (+1 step); *Damage* 1d6 +2/5 energy, and target must make *Endurance* check or be stunned 3 impulses.

Flechette Pistol 3 impulses; *Medium* 1 target; *Attack* 14/19/24 (+1 step); *Damage* 1d6+1/5 physical (or 1d6+4/8 at Close range).

DEFENSE

Armor 2 physical, 2 energy

(12+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	incapacitated	<i>Crumples to ground</i>
(9 to 11 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	-2 step penalty to all checks	<i>Staggeres, clutches wound, rallies</i>
(6 to 8 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	-1 step penalty to all checks	<i>"I'm hit! I'm hit!"</i>
(1 to 5 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>		<i>Flinches, keeps going</i>

OTHER

Skills *Coercion* 15+, *Security* 15+

Gear Flechette pistol, shock glove, hardmesh uniform

DR. RENE DUVAL

Duval is not just a scientist—he's also a trained spy. He begins a fight by designating a target for his drones, and attacks a different hero with his laser pistol.

TR 3 Medium Champion Humanoid (Human)

Senses normal; *Awareness* 14+

Initiative 12/17/22 (+1 step); **Speed** 20 meters

Str 17+ **Agi** 16+ **Vit** 17+ **Int** 15+ (sentient) **Foc** 16+ **Per** 16+

ACTIONS

Target Designation 1 impulse; *Medium* 1 target. Duval points at an enemy, and his guard drones attack that target until it is defeated or Duval designates a different target.

Double Shot 3 impulses. Duval makes a laser or martial arts attack. If he hits, he can make a second attack against the same target as a free action.

Laser Pistol 3 impulses; *Long* 1 target; *Attack* 14/19/24 (+2 steps); *Damage* 1d6 +0/6 energy (1d6 +3/9 energy vs. a distracted or surprised target).

Martial Arts 3 impulses; *Melee* 1 target; *Attack* 14/19/24 (+1 step); *Damage* 1d4+0/3 physical (1d4+3/6 vs. a distracted or surprised target).

DEFENSE

Armor 2 physical, 2 energy

Expert Evasion Duval can evade at no additional impulse cost. Enemies that attack him while he is evading take a -2 step attack penalty.

(12+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	incapacitated	<i>Crumples to ground</i>
(12+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Loses Double Shot	<i>Snarls and clamps a hand to wound</i>
(9 to 11 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Stun 1	<i>Rocked back on heels, loses focus</i>
(6 to 8 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Moves 2 m as a reaction	<i>Curses and ducks behind cover</i>
(1 to 5 dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>		<i>"Idiots! You'll never take me back!"</i>

OTHER

Skills Awareness 14+, Computer 13+, Dodge 11+, Science 10+, Security 13+

Gear Laser pistol, hardmesh uniform, control bracelet for defense drones (see below)

TYPHON 9B DEFENSE DRONE

The Typhons are hovering drones about the size of softballs. Each is armed with a small but dangerous laser. They are programmed to protect the wearer of a control bracelet, targeting anything the controller designates as a threat.

TR 3 Tiny Minion Mechanism (Robot)

Senses normal; Awareness 15+

Initiative 10/15/20; **Speed** 30 meters (flying)

Str 19+ **Agi** 14+ **Vit** 18+ **Int** 19+ (programmed) **Foc** 16+ **Per** 19+

ACTIONS

Microlaser 3 impulses; *Medium* 1 target; *Attack* 14/19/24 (+1 step); *Damage* 3/6 energy.

REACTIONS

Intercept 1-impulse reaction when the controller is hit by a melee attack or a ranged attack dealing physical damage while the drone is within 2 meters. The drone is hit instead.

DEFENSE

Tiny Enemies suffer a -2 step penalty to attack the Typhon.

(1+ dmg)	<input type="checkbox"/>	destroyed	<i>Shorts out, drops to the ground</i>
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OTHER

Swarm Attack The drone gains a +1 step bonus with its microlaser attack for each other drone firing at the same target in this impulse, to a maximum of +3 steps for 4 drones.

Minion Attack This creature's attack deals one wound of the lowest severity if the damage overcomes the target's armor.

INSPIRATIONAL READING AND VIEWING

While the *ALTERNITY Science Fiction Roleplaying Game* explores a wide variety of SF genres and inspirations, the Protostar setting offers a specific blend of mid-future space opera and cyberpunk themes in a Solar System divided between hostile powers and factions. Here's a short list of novels, TV shows, and movies that might inspire your own Protostar adventures.



NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

Cherryh, C.J. *Cyteen* and *Downbelow Station*.

Chiang, Ted. "The Story of Your Life."

Clarke, Arthur C. *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *2010: The Year We Make Contact*.

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*.

Heinlein, Robert. *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*.

McDevitt, Jack. *Ancient Shores*.

Morgan, Richard K. *Altered Carbon*.

Niven, Larry. *Protector* and the other Known Space stories.

Pohl, Frederik. *Gateway*.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, and *Blue Mars*.

Stephenson, Neal. *Seveneves*.

Stirling, S.M. *The Stone Dogs*.

Weir, Andy. *Artemis*.

MOVIES AND TELEVISION

Alien. 20th Century Fox, 1979.

Elysium. TriStar Pictures, 2013.

Europa Report. Magnolia Pictures, 2013.

Event Horizon. Paramount Pictures, 1997.

The Expanse. Syfy, Amazon Prime, 2015–2019.

The Fifth Element. Columbia Pictures, 1997.

Firefly. Fox, 2002–2003.

The Ghost in the Shell. Shochiku, 1995.

Outland. Warner Brothers, 1981.

Total Recall. TriStar Pictures, 1990.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

RICHARD BAKER (*THE MARTIAN HOSTAGE*)

Back in 1996, Rich collaborated with Bill Slavicsek to create the original *ALTERNITY* RPG and adventures such as *Black Starfall*, *The Last Warhulk*, and *Exit 23*. He's a lifelong fan of Golden Age sci-fi and makes a point of re-reading E.E. "Doc" Smith's *Lensman* books every year. Rich happened to be watching "The Eiger Sanction" when thinking about his *Protostar* adventure; the result speaks for itself.

DAVID NOONAN (*TARTARUS STATION*)

One of *ALTERNITY*'s primary designers, David has always been a writer: first as a newspaper reporter, then for tabletop RPGs and video games. He's always been a reader, too, devouring Asimov short-story compilations at the Palatine (Ill.) library until they flickered the lights so he'd go home. Today he writes and reads from the wilds outside Seattle, where he's trying to raise his kids according to the Three Laws of Robotics—with limited success.

STEPHEN SCHUBERT (*THE ROANOKE AFFAIR*)

The designer or developer of more than fifty *Dungeons & Dragons* products across 3rd, 4th, and 5th edition, Steve's credits include *Magic of Eberron*, *Princes of the Apocalypse*, and the *D&D Miniatures Game*. With Dave and Rich, he created the new *ALTERNITY* SFRPG. He also owns an epic collection of LEGO® *Star Wars* sets, including the Death Star. That's no moon!

STEVE TOWNSHEND (*SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW*)

Steve began his career as a performer with sf actor Cas Anvar's (Alex Kamal, *The Expanse*) Shakespeare company. Based in Chicago, Steve writes science-fiction scripts for theatre, and his short plays, *Sweet XP*, *The Trolls*, *Reconciliat0001*, and *For the Record* were produced in 2017-18. Lately, Steve divides his time between working at the Oriental Institute, where he edits manuscripts about ancient civilizations, and photographing costumed subjects with sf/fantasy/historical themes.

STEVE WINTER (*HIVES OF JANRATA*)

Although most of Steve Winter's career (so far) has been spent working on D&D in one form or another, his first published gaming material was for the *Traveller* SFRPG in 1980. He also was part of the team behind *Star Frontiers* and wrote the adventure *Klick Klack* for the original *ALTERNITY* RPG.