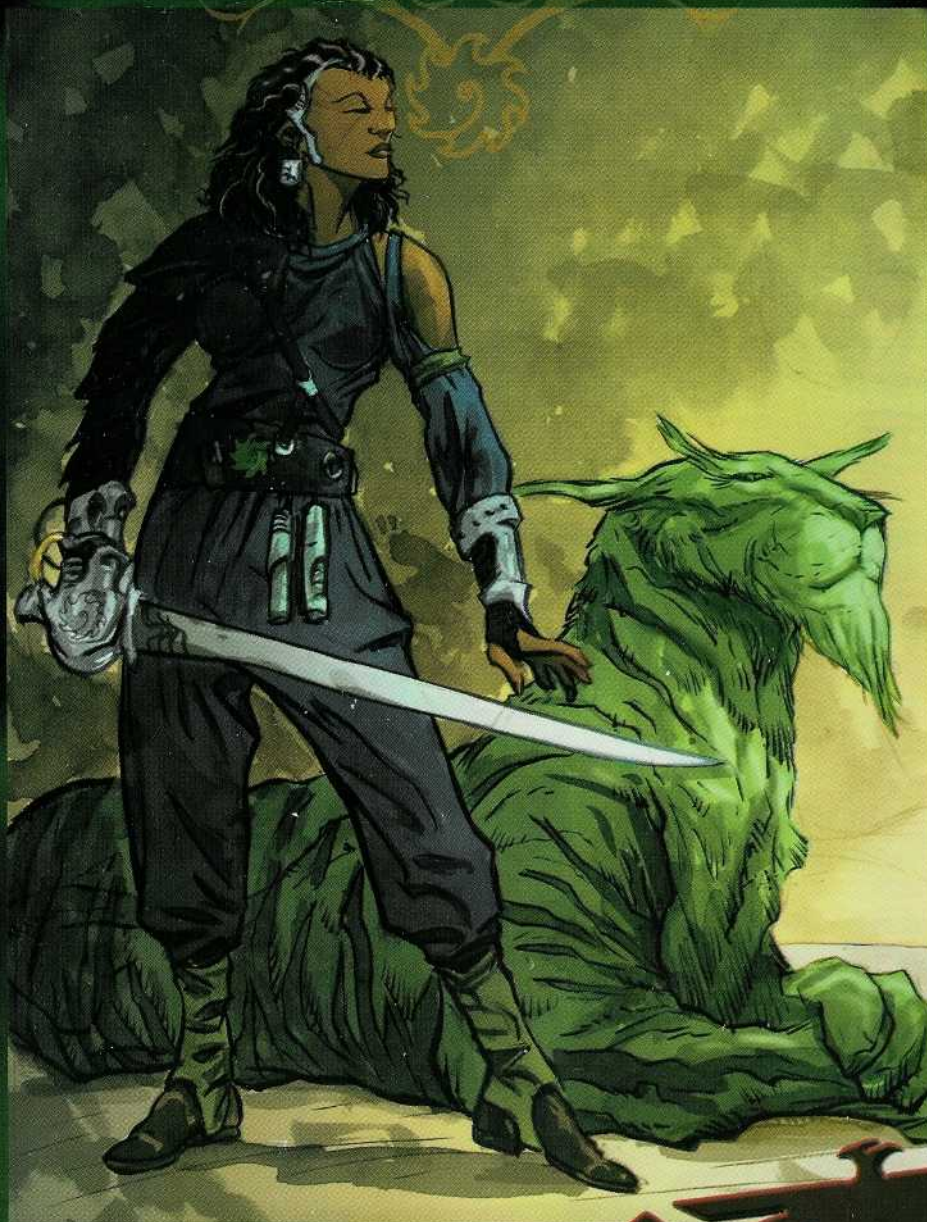




al Malík fiets



Imperial Survey 2



CLIMBING THE THREE MOUNTAINS

Lunar light illuminates our sweetest dreams, but nothing remains when the bright golden flower pierces the eastern clouds in shades of royal splendor, clothing the morning in her royal robes. The Friend awaits in the garden below. It is the Friend's cry who has scattered the seeds of dreams into silent pools of thought. When we walk together, the Friend and I, a Third walks with Us. Heed the whispered words of the Friend. Let them pierce your heart.

To the august Emperor Alexius I, Guardian of the Peace, salutations!

I am Lady Sharifah al-Malik of the Questing Knights, recently decorated for retrieving information from the barbarous world of Hargard. No doubt you enjoyed reading my informative dispatches, and so gave me the task of illuminating my family's worlds for the purpose of spreading knowledge, for which men call you Friend of Scholars and Navigators, and Father of Favorable Trade Winds.

I shall, for your pleasure, relate the following about myself. They say on Istakhr (among the desert *murrah* people, far from the civilizing influence of cities) that a village rejoices in the birth of a son; at a daughter's birth, only the sound of her infant crying breaks the silence that descends upon the family. I am fortunate, my father said, in that my birth was celebrated alongside that of my twin brother, Sir Abd al Jabbar, now captain assigned to Duke Hakim's Fifth Dark Legion.

My maid, Rahimateh, a superstitious but not unkindly *murrah*, said that my birth was interrupted by the howls of a desert demon, an *Afreet* from the unreflected realms who snatch infant girls from their mothers. But I did not cry in fear, a good sign. Father Hashim, the family priest, drove the demon off with the proper orthodox rituals. He substituted a swaddled doll, wrapped in rich silks, which the *Afreet* snatched from him and wailed back to the desert, thinking he had me — the first bargain I got the better of. I have been gifted, my mother tells me, in bargaining from that day on, and throughout my youth she often repeated (in exasperation) an old proverb: "The tide overwhelms all negotiations.

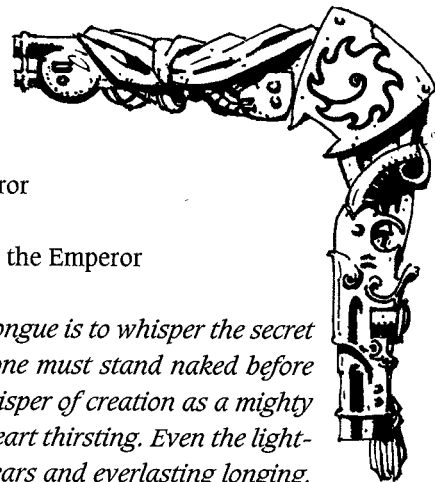
Just watch where it deposits you."

The tide became the Emperor Wars, and I was deposited here, to serve you, the Great Explorer and King of Kings. A daughter's duty is to her house, and my house warred during those tumultuous times with Decados and Hazat. I raised arms against the Decados on Criticorum, and fought against them on Aylon during the Ukari uprising, and later with Hawkwood forces in space over Byzantium Secundus. A daughter's duty also being to her house's benefactor (that is, our great friend and protector, the Emperor), I joined the Questing Knights after the wars, to be of service.

My left hand was shattered by Decados artillery fire on Criticorum. I had a cyber replacement made, an aesthetic I rather admire: the sword mistress of the al-Malik. You would be surprised at how many marriage proposals I get when I wear it. Never underestimate the desires of men. In politics, as in love, aesthetics is a weapon.

Now I have completed, on behalf of your Eminence, the Imperial Survey on the al-Malik worlds and fiefdoms. I hope that this work contains useful information, avoiding what is called in the Suq "the deceptive grace of the vendor's report before sale." My family covers much with the Graceful Tongue: weaknesses are dressed as strengths, and strengths are hidden behind a mobile army of metaphors. I am not blind to the prejudices of my family. Indeed, part of our training on the Way of the Three Mountains allows us to see them clearly and objectively, with no bias. But also remember that words do not constitute the entire truth. Generalizations and prejudices, while real, always have a way of escaping the dissector's instruments and becoming contumacious.

Every ruler sits on an ant hill, and it is best if the ruler is informed of what conditions are like in the kingdom under his feet, or else the entire ground could cave in without warning. An apt proverb, to which I might add: small termites bring the roof caving in, so the wise ruler inspects his house and the houses of his neighbors. Our homes, the al-Malik worlds, are open for inspection. This report shall cover



noble Istakhr, ancient Criticorum, fierce Aylon, glittering Shaprut and the lesser al-Malik fiefdoms for the enjoyment and enrichment of the Known Worlds. We shall inspect, as a buyer in the Suq, the unique qualities of each world.

To the Emperor Alexius, Lord of the Known Worlds, Protector of the Obun, First among Shantor, Great Brother to the Ukari, Upholder of the Faithful, Shield of the Guilds, and Guardian of the Peace, I present this work.

Kan ma kan
Pancreator yunsur aEmperor
There was, there was not,
Pancreator send victory to the Emperor

To give out the Graceful Tongue is to whisper the secret of the Beloved. To master it, one must stand naked before the Beloved and accept the whisper of creation as a mighty storm, unprotected, with the heart thirsting. Even the lightest whisper devastates us to tears and everlasting longing.

Criticorum

*"The Count's luck has fallen
He cannot pay the Duke's stiff fee
Tomorrow they will tie him to a tree
Where he will be shot by Infantry Regiment 23."*

— song from the al-Malik Criticorum barracks, originated when Count Esfandiyar al-Malik was executed for high crimes against the people of Criticorum by order of Duke Jabir al-Malik the Golden

Criticorum is the most populous and unruly of the al-Malik fiefs. The oft-heard boast that if the plot doesn't originate on Criticorum it will not succeed, has, unfortunately, some basis in truth. Founded by religious and political sects marginalized by the old Urth power structure, a thousand factions landed on Criticorum, and while the names and ideologies have changed, a thousand factions remain. Really, to be from Criticorum implies a certain political maturity and sophistication, and if citizens from Criticorum frown on the simplistic political developments of other worlds ("Not *another* pagan revolution!" the exasperated schemer and duelist, Baron Hamid al-Malik remarked upon hearing of Gwynneth's eternal problems), they make no effort to welcome outworlders into their culture, preferring the stab in the back from the faction they know to the offerings of strangers.

On the whole, though, I do Criticorum a disservice by these statements, for she is a beautiful world, with a fine history represented by the arts. The great Church muralist Pio Gamino (4404?-4478) and the Church poet Xerxes (4455-4551) hail from here, as well as the tortured Second Republic philosophical nihilist, Ragnor Akren (3844-3900), whom Xerxes properly placed in the unreflective hell of Ka'rihman in his *Inferno Cantos*. Architecturally, the city of Ost (old Ostgard), with her crumbling Second Republic Craftsmesh style, sinking into the Ilaha Ocean, is one of the most beautiful places in the Known Worlds.

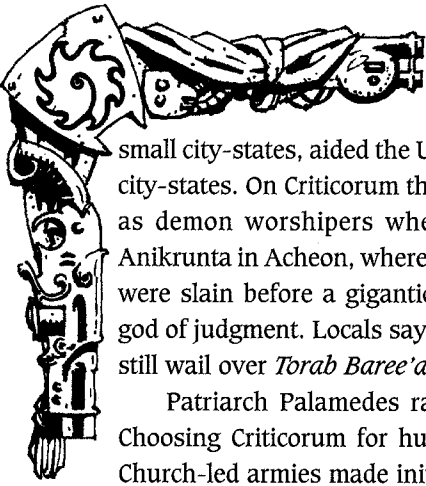
History

The first permanent human settlements on Criticorum, originally called Mazadarun (2520-2600?), hugged the Tabaristan Sea. These consisted mainly of religious sects that desired to escape overcrowded conditions on Urth and New Mecca. Other factions followed, and soon the planet had numerous settlements consisting of freezone advocates, democratic anarchists, libertarian freethinkers, constitutional republics, and utopian socialists. The planet swiftly became known as a haven for every freethinker, eccentric and political wildcard in the Known Worlds. Rather like Malignatius, minus the cold.

Criticorum's governors were elected, but Poe's Rebellion (2708?) against unpopular tax increases drove the last Governor off-world. Power was seized by the Bashshar Corporation, a large communication and weapons technology conglomerate. It left the planet's self-governing regions in autonomous but dependent positions. Munir Ibn Tarif, the greatest Urth scientist of his time, created the visionsynth drug known as Luxdei-3 while employed by the Bashshar Corporation. The ancestor of the al-Malik royal lineage, he fled to Istakhr, but his Criticorum-born daughter, Fatima, wed Kansbar Caspiri, President of the Bashshar Corporation. Family history, you understand. The seeds of Munir created the wondrous al-Malik garden, as my father would exclaim.

Eventually tiring of the Bashshar Corporation's rule, the city-states of Ostgard and Larrane rebelled. During this conflict, without warning, Criticorum was suddenly seized and conquered by the Ukari, the warlike cousin race of the philosophical Obun. Shattering the planet's orbiting defenses and seizing the large population centers in a matter of days, the Ukari stunned the planet with their attack. The Bashshar Corporation, with its desire to rule and its scant love for the





small city-states, aided the Ukari in subduing the rebellious city-states. On Criticorum the Ukari gained their reputation as demon worshipers when they raised the Temple of Anikrunta in Acheon, where trespassers against martial law were slain before a gigantic statue of the Ukari one-eyed god of judgment. Locals say that the ghosts of their victims still wail over *Torab Baree'a*, the Grave of the Innocents.

Patriarch Palamedes rallied humanity against them. Choosing Criticorum for humanity's counteroffensive, the Church-led armies made initial gains before bogging down during the siege of Acheon. When the human fleet besieged Kordeth the Criticorum Ukari, bereft of supplies and reinforcements, eventually surrendered.

The Bashshar Corporation swiftly reasserted itself, forming the Peltan Oligarchy. By 3200 the Caspari family named its members Dukes of Criticorum. When the Istakhr political visionary and mystic Arif Abdul Salam al-Malik the Faithful wed the reigning Duchess Nawar Caspari (3411), the people of Criticorum rejoiced. Arif and Nawar together broke the monopoly of the aristocratic-corporate powers, making democracy on Criticorum truly universal (Universal Voting Act 3422). Henceforth, the al-Malik ran the Bashshar Corporation.

Second Republic

The years of technical advancement, peace and progress were a boon to Criticorum, which was seriously considered for the capital of the new Republic. Acheon's fashions, arts and entertainment set the cultural milieu for much of the era. Yet by the Second Republic's last century, a strange pessimism crept in. Found in the philosopher Ragnor Arken's *Vedas of Life and Death*, *Hymns to Shiva*, an attitude of life's harshness and lack of meaning took hold. Arken himself saw that a cultural elite could produce an artistic milieu worth striving for, but the general pessimism of his remarks lead less thoughtful intellectuals to propose that life was essentially meaningless. Most famous perhaps was: "Zebulon: Holy Clown who briefly witnessed Entropy's Naughty Act in a Universal Peep-Show and spent the rest of his life Promoting the Event through second-hand pathos."

New Dark Ages

When the 10 noble houses seized Byzantium Secundus, many government officials and Republican fleet remnants fled to Criticorum, which remained in pro-Republican hands. For 200 years Republican law and institutions survived, but the collapsing economic infrastructure of Known Worlds trading began to affect the Acheon stock-exchange. A planet-wide depression struck in 4226. Starvation, unknown for a thousand years, returned when the corporate sea-farms collapsed due to lack of high-tech replacement parts. Next, the Red Guard (4238), a socialist-utopian party, seized power after a violent civil war. The next two decades witnessed the

dictatorship of Ahmet the Dragon (leader of the Red Guard), followed by the Decados and Li Halan conquests, ostensibly to end the anti-royalist threat which the Red Guard represented. When Duke Nobungana Li Halan died (4262), General Sorhab struck. Originally a captain in the Red Guard Army, he later joined the aristocratic opposition to Decados and Li Halan rule. General Sorhab triumphed, and declared himself Regent of Criticorum (4268-4299). Upon his death, the planet reverted to al-Malik rule. However, the legacy of the violent century, with its hidden spy-networks, midnight executions and sudden betrayals became a constant on Criticorum thereafter.

When Rahimat al-Malik (4322-4414, died, returned 4414-4465) seized power from the ruling Shaprut line, many on Criticorum saw him as an usurper. Rahimat created a system of knights, loyal to himself, who ran large sections of Criticorum's bureaucracy. My own Criticorum ancestors finally made their bid for power during the reign of Tahir Majnun al-Malik the Doomed (4530-93). Ja'far ben Sihnijah gathered his Criticorum forces and struck Istakhr, defeating Tahir's larger Ukar-augmented army at Mu'tasim Field (4593). Thus, my Criticorum relations ruled the al-Malik worlds from 4593-4827. Initially, a creative resurgence in the arts swept the al-Malik worlds, but after the first four strong rulers, decline set in. Those al-Malik who remained on Criticorum became arrogant, enriching themselves on government contracts until the entire planet was ruled by a system of plutocratic bribes and unrestrained plundering of public funds. Afraisyab al-Malik, Governor of Criticorum, attempted the conquering of Gwyneth in the weakening days of the dynasty (4810-12). The Hawkwoods swiftly retook the world, even briefly conquering Criticorum before negotiating peace.

Recent History

In 4827 an exile from the old Istakhr branch of the family, Al-Abbasah "Claudia" al-Malik, arrived from Aragon with house exiles and Hazat mercenaries, and deposed the last ruler of the Criticorum line, the capricious Duke Sufyan. At this stage, bereft of their former power, the native Criticorum al-Malik line fell into a stage of final decadence. When the Symbiot Wars began, refugees from the ravaged worlds sought shelter on Criticorum, severely taxing the social services and creating refugee cities which became easy victims for periodic shakedowns by the corrupt police. Duke Jabir al-Malik the Golden attempted to halt this with Mutasih investigations, which further alienated the local al-Malik when Count Esfandiyar, the Head of the Criticorum house, was executed for crimes against the people (4911). During this time Criticorum and Aylon defenses destroyed great numbers of Symbiot stealth ships. We continue to do so. The al-Malik stands on the front line against an enemy far more devastating than Vuldruk Raiders or the Kurgan Caliphate.



Increasing the garrison of the planet with Aylon and Istakhr troops, the local branch of the family began to be seen as conquerors rather than kinsmen. Their vocal consideration of themselves as the "true" al-Malik has caused a general seething unrest among Criticorum al-Malik. When the governors were chosen from Istakhr during the Emperor Wars, some rebelled. Naturally the Decados, whose nose is in every trash pile, offered aid to the rebels. When Duke Hakim supported Alexius in the Emperor Wars, Countess Carmetha Decados landed her Stigmata Garrison on Criticorum to seize the world. Duke Hakim sent in the Fifth Dark Legion, an army of pro-al-Malik Ukari, and for a second time Criticorum felt the terror of the Ukar.

The Fifth Dark Legion paved the way for victory over the Decados and my renegade kinsmen at Mount Rudaki (4991). It was there that I lost my hand in the Decados artillery bombardment. After the Emperor Wars, I dreamt of cushions but could not sleep on them, my martial life leaving me used to hard surfaces. But again, I digress. Today, the Istakhr-appointed Governor, Yusef abn Rahim al-Malik, has chosen advisors from among the Criticorum al-Malik. He is a moderate, yet on Istakhr they say he goes too far; on Criticorum, some among the plotting factions say he has not gone far enough.

Solar System

Budh: Beloved of romantic and trite poets everywhere, Budh possesses 0.83 of Criticorum's mass. Extreme heat and little atmosphere (minuscule amounts of helium and hydrogen, a Charioteer informed me) make it uninhabitable. Since it reflects sunlight strongly, it is called the Morning Star, and hence subject to banal musings on love and such.

Aristotle: Possessing 0.92 of Criticorum's mass, Aristotle was partially terraformed during the Second Republic. Today, only the domed Merchant League city of Herodotus remains, a mining center. Thick carbon dioxide creates a cloud cover which leaves the planet's surface extremely hot.

Criticorum: Criticorum's moon, Ardelle, serves as a military base, monitoring hostile Symbiot and Vuldrok ships. Commander Colonel "Blood 'n Spleen" Mossadas runs a tight base, as any off-duty officer will tell you between drinks.

Mehmet: Mehmet's Criticorum mass is 0.7. Rich in ores, she is mined by the League. The two moons of Mehmet, Czar and Sultan, were each asteroids captured in her orbit.

Khlebnikov: A small world with a diameter of 955 km, Khlebnikov is used as a military monitoring station.

Ellylon: With a diameter of 41,318 km, this near gas-giant extends her gravitational pull to seven moons. Life exists in Ellylon's upper atmosphere, with the huge balloon like myrbles and the flying predatory grapplers as the most noted examples. Ellylon is mined by two Prospector families

Criticorum Traits

Cathedral: Orthodox (St. Ignatius, Acheon)

Agora: Reeves (Vladimir's Way, Acheon)

Garrison: 8

Capitol: Acheon

Jumps: 1

Adjacent Worlds: Byzantium Secundus (dayside), Cadavus (nightside), Gwynneth (nightside), Kish (nightside), Kordeth (nightside), Pyre (nightside), Shaprut (nightside)

Solar System: Apollo (Sun), Budh 1 (0.356 AU), Aristotle (0.703 AU), Criticorum (1 AU; Ardella), Mehmet (1.573 AU; Czar, Sultan), Khlebnikov (2.98 AU, 1 moon), Ellylon (6.107 AU; 7 moons), Bhuta (32.37 AU), Jumpgate (55.03 AU)

Tech: 8

Human Population: 2.6 billion

Alien Population: 10 million (estimated)

Resources: Ores, timber, coal, agriculture

Exports: Refined ore, military tech, entertainment, chemicals, machinery, vehicles, textiles, clothing, cotton, timber, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, iron, jewels, gold

Landscape: Criticorum is 64% water. It is slightly larger than Holy Terra (13,045 km diameter) with a year of 348 days. Large plankton farms harvest the oceans and in many regions the once-endangered wildlife now thrives. The great southern al-Malik holdings contain numerous zoos, wildlife hunting preserves and cheap labor plants (about which, the less said the better). Unstable plate tectonics cause tremors that occasionally threaten the southern continent of Salamandra.

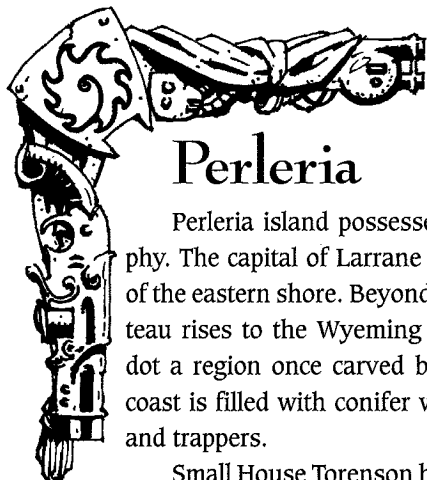
seeking metallic hydrogen.

Bhuta: The smallest planet in Apollo's solar system, Bhuta's active volcanoes give it a red appearance, for spouting lava is common there even at its distance from the sun. Bhuta's mass is 0.0019 of Criticorum's.

People & Places

The al-Malik and other aristocrats comprise the highest tier of the population. Beneath them are the plutocrats, wealthy guildsmen and freemen, clustered in the cities of Acheon, Ost, and Tabrast. Serfs compose the majority of the population. Slavery exists on the great estates and in the cities. Most Ukari live in the cities, descended from those invaders forced to serve the returning human conquerors; a rough estimate places five million of them throughout Criticorum. About 220,000 Obun live in Ost. Crowded cities and suburbs with large, empty interiors are the standard living conditions on Criticorum.





Perleria

Perleria island possesses as extremely varied geography. The capital of Larrane rests on the irregular coastline of the eastern shore. Beyond the beach cliffs, a forested plateau rises to the Wyoming Mountains, where small lakes dot a region once carved by glacier activity. The western coast is filled with conifer woods and is home to foresters and trappers.

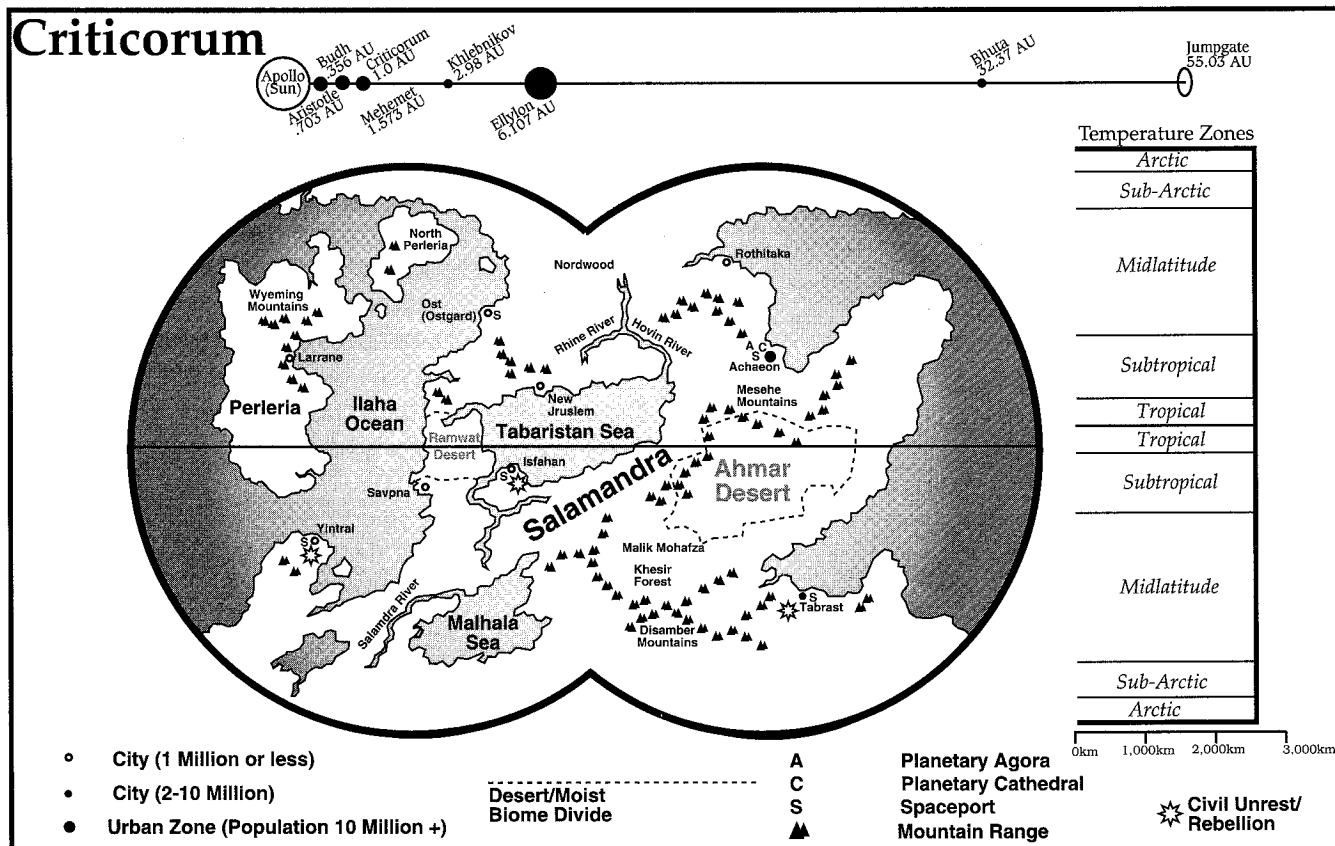
Small House Torenson holdings are found here, and the Juandaastas manage to maintain their own holdings abutting three al-Malik estates. Marquessa Sabine al-Malik Juandaastas, the family matriarch, greeted me warmly. She informed me that her family recently began restocking the land with endangered wildlife. The Torensons, under their local leader, Sir Zachery, do not comprehend the ecological issues involved, and complain about the Blight-Wolves. My family tends to side with the Juandaastas, out of kinship and out of an ancient feud with the Torensons. These are the only Torenson holdings remaining on any al-Malik world. Rare for the Torensons, they have armed themselves and their retainers, declaring a Blight-Wolf hunt, and tensions with the Juandaastas grow. Blight-Wolves were engineered and bred from old Urth wolves in the Republican days, as any local wag will tell you.

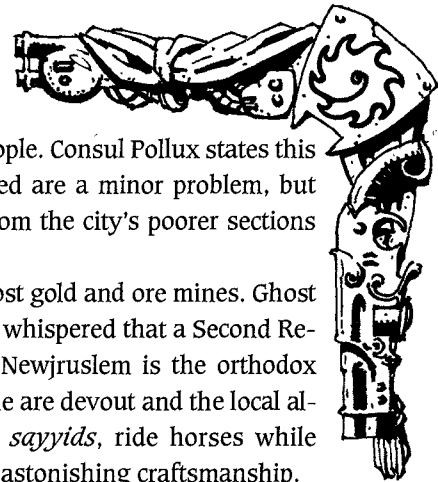
Southern Perleria consists of rich farmland and grazing

fields, where serf and freemen families till the lands. The people of Perleria view themselves as morally superior to the rest of the planet, a result of local Church efforts stressing the purity of agrarian life over the corrupting influence of cities and technology. Marriages are arranged from birth, but any family with seven children receives a gift: the seventh child is freed and educated with the lord's children. Some say St. Maya started this custom. The Church holds much land here, under the guidance of Bishop Munus. Church towns such as Haliko and Tyrn are leaders in commerce, and the local al-Malik claim they control much of the agricultural pricing.

Larrane city is built on a grid pattern accenting the Eagle Palace and the Church of St. Maya. Baroness Prajna Sophia, ruler of the island-continent Perleria, leads the al-Malik loyalist faction. I was her guest for a week on her Larrane estates and had a chance to study this loyal retainer of Duke Hakim. Like Baron Hamid, she desires home rule for Criticorum: unlike Hamid, she promotes family unity. Inheriting her lands and title at 14, she also inherited her mother's political faction from the inept Lord Afrim. Prajna is not to be underestimated and possesses a vast intelligence network across Criticorum. Small armed conflicts erupt with Tabrast from time to time, and Prajna's inheritance of some southern estates has increased tensions.

North Perleria is a rocky, desolate place, home to rein-





deer herders. North of the ice-line are found a few small communities of Shimo, a people long adapted to these frozen regions. They practice a strange mixture of Orthodox and shamanistic practices, and are excellent hunting guides. Sikkeena, or Knife-Weasels are thin, wiry mammals that travel in packs. They are swift predators and have attacked human communities during harsh winters. Their dull red fur turns white in winter, and their opposable thumbs can pick locks, open lids and turn knobs. They reach human height when standing upright.

Sea legends speak of the Criticorum Leviathans. Their eerie songs are reported in many a sailor's tale, and the fisher folk say they mimic human and ship sounds. Some tales mention that they have befriended humans upon occasion, while others state they are guardians of a strange sunken Ur-city beneath the ice, called Daztlanshi in folklore. I heard variations of a tale where they change shape and wed lonely sailors, leaving them with magical children who can swim the deeps.

Salamandra Continent

Salamandra, "mother of continents," stretches from the northern ice to the southern polar regions, encompassing regions of conifer forest, deserts, plains, equatorial jungles and mountain chains. The natives divide her into two regions: Shamal includes the lands north of the Tabaristan Sea, while Salamandra proper begins south of Acheon, where the Ahmer Desert reaches her northern border, and runs east south of the Sierra Rojo Mountains and west to the northern regions of the Tabaristan Sea, dividing again at the Sumero Mountains.

Shamal

Home of the great Nordwood Forest, the Shamal Mountains, the rivers Rhine and Hovin, and the cities of Ost, Rothitaka and Acheon, Shamal's people are lively and proud. I found them religiously liberal but politically orthodox, every one loyal to a political faction. To be neutral on any subject is to be suspect in their eyes. Ost is very anarchistic and tolerant, and is more loyal to the al-Malik on Perleria than Tabrast. The local Guild Council controls Ost. Lead by Consul Pollux of the Charioteers, a powerfully built man in his fifties, conflicts often occur with my kinsmen over escaped serfs. After seven years in Ost, they are freed. The League leased Ost in 4715 for 300 years. Now that its time is running out, the people fear the return of royal rule.

Some areas in Ost are run down, with drug use and prostitution practised openly. Failed League experiments in creating a race of loyal guardians produced the Changed Tiger Men, who run rampant throughout the neighboring countryside, slaying animals and people for food. Sadder still are the blind Mole Folk, bred for mining operations, who escaped into Ost's sewers and abandoned underground. Ru-

mor has it that they devour people. Consul Pollux states this is untrue and that the Changed are a minor problem, but signs warning people away from the city's poorer sections at night have been posted.

The Shamal Mountains host gold and ore mines. Ghost towns dot the region, and it is whispered that a Second Republic city once stood there. Newjruslem is the orthodox exception to Shamal; the people are devout and the local al-Malik and aristocrats, called *sayyids*, ride horses while dressed in rich white robes of astonishing craftsmanship.

Nordwood

Below the Arctic Circle, the great Nordwood Forest stretches east to Acheon and south to the shores of the Tabaristan Sea. Woodsmen and trappers live in Nordwood, and every spring they come down the Rhine and Hovin to ply their furs and lumber at the Newjruslem Market.

The Nordwood Forest was terraformed farmland during the Second Republic, but the forests returned during the New Dark Ages, now a place of mystery and fear. It is rumored that the *Ghareeb*, the Coyote Men, dwell deep within the woods. Unlike the more recent Tiger Men or Mole Folk, the ghareeb are thought to be descendants of human/animal gene splicing from the Second Republic. I have heard they were the result of DNA modification amid a colony of Second Republic "neo-primitive" artists, seeking to biologically recapture the wonders of ancient mythology. Some ghareeb enter noble service, but most remain in the wildlands.

Acheon, Den of Plots

10 million people populate the decaying metropolitan city that is Criticorum's capitol. Gigantic Second Republic towers glisten in the sun, dwarfing the buildings beneath. Nobles inhabit Republican tower-palaces, while the poor inhabit the canyon-like streets below. Bridges connect the upper structures, where administrators and rulers walk far above the teeming crowds.

Areas are known by their political affiliations. The Green Phoenix is a bar catering to Imperial enthusiasts (in the Upper City), while the Old Codex serves the republican elements (centered in the Green, a solidly middle-class neighborhood). Advocates of home al-Malik rule frequent the Thirsty Demon, in the Old Suq Historic District. Pro-Duke Hakim followers make a point of loyalty out of the Istakhr Times. Ukari

Sikkeena (Knife-Weasels)

Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 8, Endurance 4

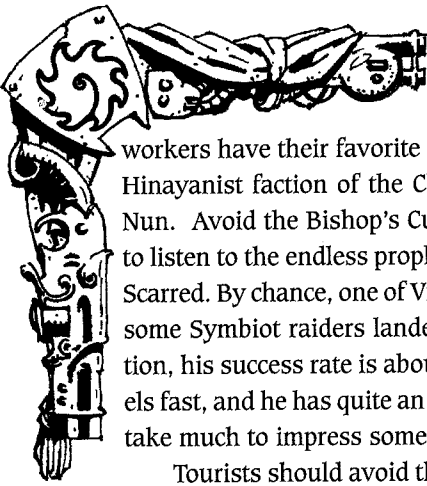
Mind: Wits 4, Perception 7, Tech 0

Natural skills: Dodge 6, Fight 6, Observe 7, Sneak 5, Vigor 3

Weapons: Claws (2d), Teeth (2d)

Vitality: -4/-2/0/0/0/0





workers have their favorite pub, Anikrunta's Eye. Even the Hinayanist faction of the Church have a bar, the Sleeping Nun. Avoid the Bishop's Curse, however, unless you want to listen to the endless prophecies of the hesychast Vigo the Scarred. By chance, one of Vigo's prophecies came true when some Symbiot raiders landed on the planet. In my estimation, his success rate is about one in twenty, but news travels fast, and he has quite an entourage these days. It doesn't take much to impress some people.

Tourists should avoid the tough Ukari neighborhood of Tada-Town. Sections of Undertown (Vugi, Little Urth) are also to be avoided, for they are rife with crime and murder. Rival gangs — the Sons of Rillos and the Vorox Raiders — vie over the areas from Berlin Street to Schopenhauer Avenue, just south of Freeman's Park. Prostitution is legal and a traveler can buy a Purple Book, covering the cost of prostitutes from aristocratic ladies to inexperienced slaves. The middle-class freemen often visit the Red Lamp Inn, a chain of moderately priced *casas de amore*. Remember, you get what you pay for, or so an exasperated cousin of mine once complained. At least he left with a complimentary mint.

The theater here is huge (centered on Bavaria Strasse) and the restaurants are some of the best in the Known Worlds. The markets are on Vladimir's Way. Everybody visits Zebulon's Tower, the second highest building in the Known Worlds, kept standing by ancient Second Republic gravity discs and terracite.

Overlooking the city from Mount Shada stands the Statue of Amalthea. Many have made pilgrimages here for healing purposes, and the local Amaltheans administer a hospital in the statue's shadow.

Pollution emitted from combustible engines, factories, sewage plants and industrial waste creates havoc in Acheon. Her nobles in their towers possess huge air pumps and wind engines, which keep the upper air clean while discarding and maneuvering great clouds of pollutants into the lower city, which is often enveloped in a hazy fog. Oxygen centers are common, and citizens have taken to wearing ornate oxygen masks, fashioned in the style of fantastic mythological beasts, to get about in their day-to-day lives. Purchasing one of these FO's (Facial Ornaments) is necessary in certain sections. Three Second Republic air filtering plants ceased functioning this century, leaving only one in the fashionable northern part of the city still running. Trained personnel are hard to find, but redemption work has begun on the largest plant.

I visited the governor, my second cousin, in his palace. Yusif abn Rahim is a middle-aged, able administrator who incorporates many Criticorum factions into his government. More tolerant than his predecessors, his political administration has met with the grudging approval of the locals. Yusif told me that after the recent wars he still faces ob-

stacles: the rebellion of our pro-Criticorum relations in Malik Mohafza and the urban anarchy of the People's Knights, a democratic terrorist advocacy cell. Against the latter he has had success by increasing social benefits to draw away the disenfranchised's allegiance. An old friend of Duke Hakim, Yusif privately advocates that the next governor be chosen from among the loyal Criticorum al-Malik.

Next I visited an old acquaintance, Archbishop Palden Gampopa. I first met this austere and ironic man at the marriage of a distant cousin when he was still Bishop of Acheon. I found his wry disposition infectious when he referred to the newlyweds as two royal canines now leashed to the same piss-post. Conservative but not harsh, Gampopa rules the Criticorum Church with an independent streak irritating to both Hinayanist and Mahayanist hierarchies alike, although he professes to be among the former. A short, silver-haired man with a mischievous smile, Gampopa loves liturgical music and is followed everywhere by trained Choral. Called the Patriarch of Criticorum by his detractors, Gampopa is one of the most Merchant League-friendly of the Known World's archbishops.

Are there safe, neutral places to stay in Acheon? Yes, my cousin's guest-palace, the Dreaming Mendicant, offers the greatest pleasures for off-planet visitors, including combat viewing. The Green Turret, my cousin's rival, was quite the place two decades ago, where aristocrats could relax and watch the prisoner gladiatorial battles through the maxiplate-glass floor. Sadly, Yusif al-Malik's hotel has gone to seed, as has the owner. Now cousin Fatima informs me that his two high-bred Vorox-hounds have overrun the place; they sit on the gilded chairs and pass wind at the guests and no one can do a thing to stop them.

Salamandra

The city of Isfahan welcomes those traveling by sea from Newjruslem to Salamandra. Politically controlled by the Fisher's Guild, which possesses a high-tech fleet, Isfahan is home to a lively orthodox population. Local artisans and architects craft the beautiful mosaic-inscribed homes, creating the City of Grace. There is contention between the Fisher's Guild, protected by the powerful Muster, and local yeomen fishing guild and al-Malik fishermen. The Muster owns training bases and barracks near the city, and receives mercenary pay from the leader of Isfahan, Fleet-Master Astentzio. The Muster and Isfahan ships now fire upon non-League boats, ostensibly to control the market.

Erduvil, Head of the Yeomen Fishers, told me that the real reason the Isfahan fishers and Muster have become so hostile is that a sunken Republican city, located below the fishing waters, has been discovered. The Muster and the leaders of Isfahan mean to explore and split the spoils of the ancient technology, but already my family, through the



Mutasih, has heard about the discovery, and Isfahan is a tense place now. They would not let me enter, and Muster and local al-Malik militia eye each other warily across a no man's land fifty miles from the city. A few skirmishes have occurred, and a war may be in the making.

The Ahmar Desert, bisected by the Mesehe Mountains, is a vast region housing crumbling Diaspora ruins and a small Ukari town, Avgast. Strange things occur near the ruins, and the local authorities fear that an Antimonist cult, lead by the rumored Magus Malus, has stirred up some monstrosities here. My only kinsmen in the area, Omar the Red, laughed when I told him the rumors. "Are we living in the pre-Diaspora days?" he said with a toss of his head. "Surely no-one believes mad cultists and demon worshipers exist on Criticorum. Why, the matter is absurd!"

Nonetheless, many peasants have disappeared. The Church sent in Avestites to investigate. "The unenlightened fiends are in the town below my estate," Omar told me with some displeasure. "They interrogate my trusted servants and even my wife. Why, they want to investigate me next! I'm too busy hunting to lead some laughable cult of demon worshipers. This isn't the old Li Halan court."

I did go hunting with him (a sport he takes a zealous delight in) and barely missed being shot at by one of his servants, who confused me with a deer. So he said. Fashion note: Antlers are never in vogue as head dress here. At that point I thought it wise to take my leave and disengaged myself from the party. Cousin Omar looked on my mission from the Empire with some suspicion, thinking I was Mutasih. He bemoans the fact that his relatives won't help him. While worshiping the path of the grape, he accused his cousins of secretly coveting his lands and setting him up. Proceed to Omar's fief of Mutare with caution!

The great Khesir Forest of the south holds the great al-Malik garden and zoo estates. Tabrast is the capital of my cousins, the "Criticorum" al-Malik. Be careful how you dress! Lively colors announce which local al-Malik faction the wearer belongs to — stepping into a neighborhood wearing the wrong colors can get you killed. Generally, gold and red are worn by Baron Hamid's followers, green and silver by Count Zaki's men, and black and red by Lady Baraka's faction. I advise wearing blue; for some reason, no faction claims it. Each faction longs to rule the Criticorum loyalists. Many-towered Tabrast is now overburdened by refugees from the Symbiot Wars and the various local police forces often sweep the refugee districts in shakedowns to enrich their factions.

Also, please guard your tongue. A companion of mine said the wrong thing in a coffee house, and now carries a knife scar across his forehead. He merely praised Baron Hamid's hospitality to a clientele loyal to Count Zaki. My friend mistook the carpet's red and gold colors as a display of loyalty to the baron, not the grave insult it was meant to

be when walking on the baron's colors.

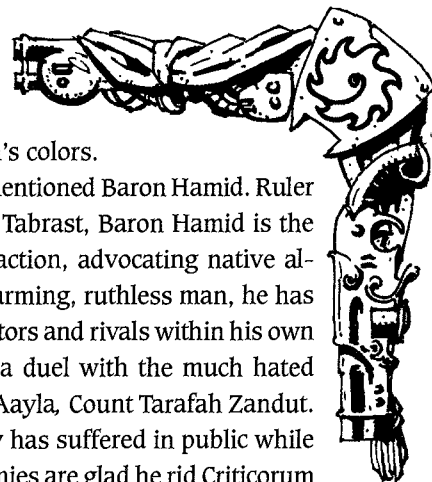
Later I met with the aforementioned Baron Hamid. Ruler of Mohafza with his palace at Tabrast, Baron Hamid is the leader of the *Aayla* political faction, advocating native al-Malik rule of Criticorum. A charming, ruthless man, he has spent his time destroying defectors and rivals within his own ranks, the most recent being a duel with the much hated and feared former head of the Aayla, Count Tarafah Zandut. Since then, Hamid's popularity has suffered in public while in secret, both friends and enemies are glad he rid Criticorum of the dangerous count.

Hamid's bodyguard of Ghareeb Coyote Men alarmed me, but the heir of the Criticorum al-Malik put my fears at ease. Wise enough to ally with Duke Hakim's forces when the Decados-captained Stigmata Garrison attacked during the Emperor Wars, the baron makes no secret of his desire to be appointed governor. Some sporadic fighting has broken out between Hamid's forces and government troops in Malik Mohafza. Unusual for a Criticorum noble, I might add, he is loyal to his official mistress, the Ravenna-born Lady Auralee — the topic of much consternation in polite society.

For sheer architectural wonder nothing matches the Old Tabrast Historic District. The oval shaped, Second Republic Post-Futurism style — designed by the flamboyant architect Pierpont D'Arcy — has survived the centuries, housing some of the greatest nobles, artists and poets of the planet. These mansions, called "mad droppings of the gods" during D'Arcy's lifetime by his contemporaries, now display an almost baroque charm, made organic by age. A quiet, wealthy neighborhood with a private police force, it houses the famous Tabrast Theater and Farouk's Restaurant, built over manmade waterfalls and a pond complete with biologically-engineered "celebrity fish." Of course, the image of a famous actor on a Ravenna sea-slug or a Madoc toad that vaguely resembles the Emperor's brother may not be to everybody's taste. Bon appetite!

Malik Mohafza denotes southern Salamandra. Comprised of open country and large royal estates, rumors persist that the Disamber Mountains hold Ur ruins. Lake Tirtha is the dreaming lake beloved of poets, and recent efforts to restock the Malhala Sea proved successful. I should add that the western city of Savpna is a sea port of great wealthy homes lodged above a crowded, decaying city. Unfortunately, due to a Symbiot attack, the town of Syracuse has been quarantined, and people approaching the region are advised by the military to turn back. As a whole, the people of Salamandra are more orthodox than those of Shamal, and more regional in outlook and culture. I am not discounting them, for they prove valuable friends when given the chance and are strongly romantic in their outlook.

The Salamandra peasants celebrate Pre-Reflective Nights in the first week of spring. Great parades displaying the Pre-





Lamik

Body: Strength 15, Dexterity 10, Endurance 12

Mind: Wits 6, Perception 6, Tech 0

Natural Skills: Dodge 3, Fight 7, Impress 6, Observe 6, Vigor 6

Blessings: Giant (base run: 17 meters)

Weapons: Claws (6 DMG), Beak (7 DMG), Clawed feet (7 DMG)

Armor: 5d

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Reflective saints in iconography and costume last a week, until the final day before sunrise, when the Pre-Reflective saints pull a wagon representing Zebulon and the Final Truth. Often a statue of Zebulon is raised by the Pre-Reflective saints (local villagers in costume), who then vanish with the sun's rise. The local bishop, Yulduz, an accomplished singer, presides over the events. Some remote villages add their own Pre-Reflective saints, not on the Church's official list, but Yuldoz winks at this. "As long as they attend Church, and don't listen to the Incarnates," she explained. The Church owns much land here.

Beware of the Lamik. A giant, flightless bird standing 12 feet tall, protruding hands have evolved out of its wings and are now used to grasp prey and hold it. It can run 50 MPH, and travels in packs of two to six. Lamik hunt mammals, other avians and even people. Found west of the Malhaba inner sea and south of Tabrast, Criticorum's fiercest predator possesses knife sharp teeth and is extremely intelligent.

Yintrai

Yintrai is a "free city" in the south. By law, any criminal who makes it there becomes off-limits to authorities. Unfortunately, a Decados plague bomb struck the city during the Stigmata Garrison invasion. The Green-Plague bomb mutated DNA structure, creating monstrosities. Yintrai's refuge status still exists, but the quarantined city is not a popular area. Largely surrendered to anarchy, only the wealthy Six Hills section retains a vestige of order. City gangs battle each other and plague monstrosities for territory. Supplies are sometimes airlifted into the city by the Church. There is a rumor that a cure exists within the city, held by one faction in the violent metropolis.

Curiosities

The Blood-Harvest

One custom on Criticorum is the Blood Harvest, where various cities pay for the privilege of executing criminals before the people. Noble criminals — extremely rare — fetch the highest price. Next in value come guildsmen and then freemen. Serfs and slaves do not go for much money, unless

the crime is sensational. Crimes of passion draw huge crowds. Execution days bring out the populace, and vendors make money while pickpockets work the crowd in the shadow of the executioner's noose. These customs began as a money-making venture in the New Dark Ages. While condemned as barbaric by some, the cities of Larrane, Acheon and Rothitaka compete with each other for the honor of holding the Blood Harvest. Some cities (Ost, for example) do not participate.

Gladiators

In Acheon, gladiatorial fighting comes once a year. Condemned prisoners battle to the death in the Slaughter Bowl, held in the Vladimir Coliseum. Many protest these blood sports where 500 prisoners battle in the course of five days. Regarded as inhumane and utterly barbaric among its detractors, the custom itself (seemingly originating in the 4550's) has huge guild backing, due no doubt to the profits generated from holovised viewing. The Church retains the traditional right to save 50 of the condemned. Some among the Church vigorously protest the games. Personally, I find them a maculation, proof that the al-Malik on Criticorum have sunk into a provincial stupor.

Sharifah's Tips

1. Firebirds are the common currency here, but al-Malik sparklers are accepted in the major cities at an inflated rate. There is a brisk foreign currency exchange, often illegal, in all major cities. These vendors give a better exchange rate than the official monetary stands.

2. If the law forces catch you for a minor, trumped up infraction, 50 firebirds is the accepted contribution. For serious crimes, state "I place myself under Criticorum code 289:17," which entitles you to legal representation. You see, the old Republican codes are good for some things, despite the sermons one hears. The Reeves are the best legal representatives, and have officers in all major cities. Reeve insurance can be purchased through one Ezekiel Kazenzikes, in Acheon, who raises his rates based on reputation and looks — those who often get into danger must pay exorbitant rates. His operation is also a legacy of the old Republican codes, and rather unique on any world.

The lucent dream, in night's secret heart, is as unreal as the waking day. How can one claim to govern oneself when dreams escape our memory like so many golden butterflies on a summer's wind? The winds of our passions rise and fall, and the gods are shadows on the wall.

Shaprut

"Oh — Shaprut!" exclaimed the duchess, suddenly understanding the conversation Arna had begun. "Of course: the planet with the al-Malik and those strange ungulate Shantor. I find their language archaic, bizarre, utterly ludicrous, so quaint and out of touch with the rest of the Known Worlds that it is a wonder that they survive at all, closed to the discourse of outsiders."

"Yes," Arna agreed, thoughtfully, "the Shantor tongue is utterly foreign to other sentients."

"Dear girl," the duchess huffed with displeasure, "I was referring to the al-Malik."

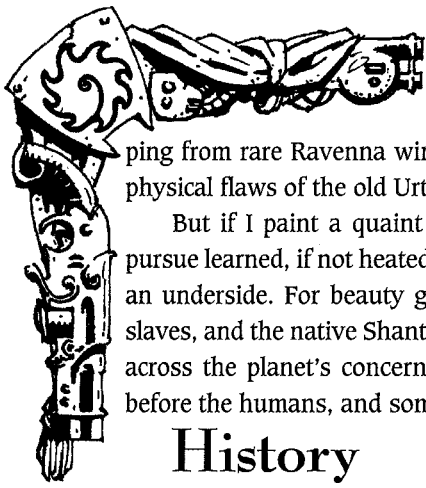
— *The Magician's Illusion*, Paulus Pempinryll, Brentwood Books, Byzantium Secundus, 4878

Before the universe there was only Aesaepa, the Endlessness Who Contemplates Alone. Aesaepa created spirits, the First Children. But the First Children left Aesaepa's presence and forgot the Unbegotten, all except Niayniyadus, the Great Wind. The Great Wind longed for his own children, runners, and begged the Unbegotten for a great lamp to bring light to the dark fields and waters, where his children could run in delight, testing their strength. And so Tsa, the Sun, was born, and her fire gave birth to her daughter, First

Dawn. And Great Wind fell in love with First Dawn upon sight of her, and swept up behind her fiery mane, and the wind before the dawn is a reminder of this time. Their children were Dprsha, Wind Dreams Before Him, and Wynsann, Mother of All Runners, and they were the first Shantor.

So the Shantor tell it, and so I heard it again on Shaprut, in the Safara Palace, where my uncle Arim's staff provides the off-world visitor with authentic Shantor storytellers and tours of the Great Reservations. It was here that Sir Sergei Decados, my fellow knight, lost a drinking bout with a Shantor, proposed to two waitresses, accused the janitors of being Imperial spies, and woke up face down in a Shantor troth — unfortunately, not the kind reserved for feeding. More than Sergei's honor was stained.

Shaprut is the most cultivated of the al-Malik worlds in the refined arts. A Shaprut al-Malik is always conservatively attired, speaking in a dialect largely free from contemporary Istakhr idioms, and thus more venerable and charming. This is the world of refined scholarly debates and traditional musical contests stretching far into the golden nights. Here learned priests and academicians long to retire on couches of velvet comfort, inhaling the sandalwood incense and sip-



ping from rare Ravenna wines while discussing the metaphysical flaws of the old Urth fathers.

But if I paint a quaint picture where leisurely elders pursue learned, if not heated, discussions, Shaprut also has an underside. For beauty grows on the soil of blood and slaves, and the native Shantor cast an ever-present shadow across the planet's concerns. For the Shantor were there before the humans, and some say they will be there after.

History

Shaprut is younger than Urth. Let me quote from an old Second Republic science book by a forgotten author. While not a charming stylist, the author seems certain of the facts, so I leave my readers with the following: "In many ways, Shaprut resembles Earth's past: convergent evolution favoring the same evolutionary climb from the primal oceans. When the great forests gave way to the plains of 35 million B.H.C. (Before Human Contact), the ancestors of the Shantor — small, woodland herbivores — took to the plains, developing size and speed to outrun their fearsome enemies." By contrast, Bishop Tilo's *Mysteries of Shaprut*, published in 4391, states "The Pan-Creator blessed the Shantor with a scant amount of Pre-Reflective thought, creating a yearning in them for more perfected reflective teachers. Luckily, humanity, more blessed with the Reflective Truth, came to save them from their animal passions." You can pick your friends and your history!

Shantor History

The Shantor point to Sa'razz as their homeland. In the distant past there was a great war between four families, told in the *Saga of the Wind Runners*, which Shantor traditionalists still recite. It tells of the accidental slaying of Sharp Ears Running Cloud by Charges the Dawn, and the setting of events which lead to the mighty war that destroyed the family of the Foam Singers. It is quite moving, and the pacing of it soon gets you caught up in the great herd fights. Historically, it seems centered in Videha. These were once the richest grass lands; the families which controlled them were the strongest.

Sometime later (I confess, historic dates, like Sir Eduardo de Rolas's courting attempts, are starting to bore me), various families pushing from the plains of Videha and Sa'razz made their way to Pamott and Jambuvita. In the 500 years before human contact, it seems that the southern families began moving north into the fertile plain and seized most of it, leading to the Battle of Seven Rains. The Snow Mist Children were then the mightiest clan, although when humans landed they were beginning to suffer raids by the Thunder Plain clan in the east.

Human History

Originally, Shaprut was named Pasupati, Lord of the

Herds, from old Urth Indian mythology. Many of Shaprut's settlers came from old Urth India. Scout ships exploring the planet's untracked territory witnessed two Shantor families warring with spears. Capturing the fascinating battle on vidchips, they presented these to xenologists, who later studied the Shantor up close and concluded that they possessed a sentient culture with oral records. These remarks both startled and somewhat disappointed people. No one thought that the first alien contact would be with horselike creatures. Thank goodness the aesthetically pleasing Obun were encountered next. I say this in jest, for we are apt to use our prejudices in an aesthetic manner.

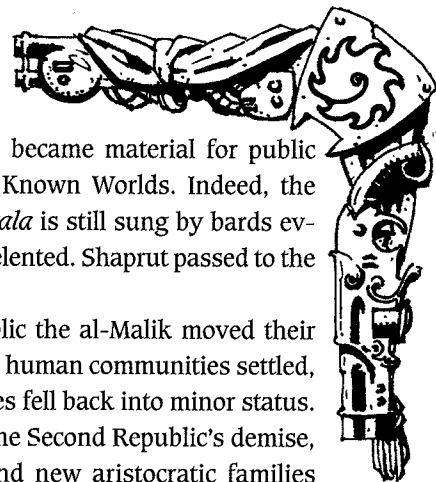
The first century of contact created a debate about Shantor sentience. Initially the corporations and large landowners stated that Shantor tool use was similar to Urth chimps using clubs, and their windspeech was but a series of nonsense sounds or instinctual patterns, like bird songs. Only when the scientists came up with the *dolomei* to translate windspeech was their intelligence no longer denied.

Mineral-rich mines, discovered on Shaprut, were initially mined by prison labor and temporarily utilized workforces (TUW). Human labor was economically difficult, as many workers rebelled and escaped into the planet's large, empty interior. The Shantor became their replacements. The mining overseers were amazed at the ungulates' great strength and agility in working the operations. Supply-and-demand decreed that there be more Shantor labor, and the rounding up of Shantor for deep mining operations began.

The government on Shaprut, a republic of landowners under the Windsor family, witnessed the growth in power of the Pandava and Ramakrishna families. The Pandavas eventually overthrew the last Windsor governor, and declared a dynasty beginning with King Makakala Pandava (reigned 2742-2768).

During the Ukar-Human War, telepathic blasts from Ukari psychics stirred the Shantor into a fierce rebellion. War refugees arriving said that Criticorum, Aylon and Istakhr were lost, and raids were striking New Istanbul. Shaprut was isolated, and soon Ukari ships began making periodic bombing raids. King Airavayya fell defending his capital city of Kalanjara from Shantor uprising. At that moment, Balahadra Ramakrishna, together with his armed retainers and several settlement militia, overthrew the Pandava clan in an event known as the Midnight Revolution. King Airavayya's son, Prince Primyamkara, leading his father's remnants from defeat in the north, met with Balahadra's forces at Point Videha. Exhausted from the 500 miles forced march, they were overwhelmed by the fresh Ramakrishna force in a fierce artillery attack. Primyamkara was shot attempting to rally his forces, and Pandava rule came to an end.

Crowning himself king, Balahadra set up a series of



Mobile Fortresses around the greater human settlements. He used them to slowly pen the rebellious Shantor in the Videha peninsula. These giant constructs rolled on huge treads, impervious to bombardment, and held thousands of soldiers within their reinforced towers. Their great guns not only commanded the land but dominated air space as well. Remnants of these gigantic war-machines can still be seen, empty husks standing sentinel in the Videha plains.

It became apparent to the Shantor leader, Night Thunder (or Yiaa Isayn in the Shantor tongue, if you prefer), that the humans had seized the offensive. Night Thunder pleaded for help from the Ukari. The Ukari viewed the Shantor as little more than useful pawns. Their perfidy is that they mind-controlled them into revolting using their sly psychic tricks and Dark Gods — far worse blasphemy than what humanity did to them. However, an Ukari armada from Criticorum responded and attacked. It was defeated in a two-day battle by King Balahadra's thin air defense. Called the Miracle of Shaprut, the easier-to-maneuver Shaprut ships, called Vayus, saved the day. Balahadra defeated the Shantor the following year. To Night Thunder he offered all the land for her people that she could run around in a day. A fast and powerful champion, Night Thunder ran 610 miles in a wide circumference, before reaching her starting place, just as the sun began to set, and then collapsed dead. Asvemedha, the reservation is named, the Sacrifice of the Horse in the ancient tongue of the Vedas.

The Ramakrishna dynasty culminated with the Golden Age of Queen Arundhati Rama Ramakrishna (3412-3512?). The fourth daughter of King Bhardadvaja, she took up the study of music in her youth, preparing for a life in the arts. When her eldest sister died, the middle two took up the rule of a recently-colonized planet, Rauhina, settled by the Ramakrishna dynasty, and Arundhati took up rule of Shaprut. She exercised her power against the Bashshar Corporation, freeing the Shantor laborers and increasing corporate taxes. Arundhati then increased the size of the Shantor reservations (Asvemedha was enlarged to include the entire Videha peninsula) and made them citizens with representation in the Parliament. Finally, in 3460, she began the Academy of Girivaja, bringing the greatest musicians and academics to Shaprut. Her renaissance began the great libraries, some of which still stand, and Shaprut possesses some of the greatest archives in the Known Worlds.

In her time, al-Malik power rose on Istakhr, Criticorum and Shaprut when Arif al-Malik the Faithful of Istakhr wed Nawar Caspari, heir to the Bashshar fortune. Queen Arundhati found Arif's thinking in line with hers, but when her granddaughter, Sakuntala, fell in love with Arif's grandson Tahir, she forbid them to wed, fearing increased Bashshar influence on Shaprut. The two lovers exchanged many metaphors and symbolic texts coded to each other, and their es-

capades and daring meetings became material for public consumption throughout the Known Worlds. Indeed, the *Romance of Tahir and Sakuntala* is still sung by bards everywhere. Finally, the Queen relented. Shaprut passed to the al-Malik fold.

During the Second Republic the al-Malik moved their seat of power to Shaprut. More human communities settled, and the original human families fell back into minor status. However, two centuries after the Second Republic's demise, my family's power waned, and new aristocratic families sprouted on Shaprut, usurping their power. House Torensen increased its fiefs on Shaprut during this period, becoming the dominant power until selling its land to House Keddah, who titled themselves Sheiks of Shaprut (4299).

Rahimat al-Malik, the Lion of Shaprut, was born in 4332, when the al-Malik were nearly eclipsed on Shaprut by Houses Ghajji and Dandin, minor noble houses seizing authority in the power vacuum. Rahimat was an usurper and mystic, hard as steel. Born a second cousin to the house's ruler, the desiccated Duke Sorhab al-Malik, Rahimat journeyed to Istakhr as a young man. He found that the Istakhr al-Malik, while barely clinging to their noble status, preserved the mystical traditions of Munir ibn Tarif intact. Rahimat studied the old traditions and disciplines before going to climb the Path of Three Mountains, or *Bay'ho len Ikta Tu*, the three paths of experience which lead to enlightenment.

He brought back the precious jewels of this teaching, the idea that all creation is the Pancreator incarnate and that by experiencing all aspects of creation one merges with the essence of the Pancreator. The flight of the new butterfly cannot be captured in words from the caterpillar's understanding, nor can the Way of the Three Mountains from those who can barely see the foothills.

Rahimat returned to Shaprut, and set himself up as a hardworking noble, able to administer the estates of his wealthier relations. Naturally, he skimmed the freshest froth for himself and shrewdly made a vast fortune. Then, teaching his insights to a faithful few, he won over Duke Sorhab's guard. Faith is harder than steel, and Sorhab fled his estates while Rahimat hired an army. Rahimat seized control of Shaprut in a series of seven remarkable victories. Sohrab was executed and Rahimat declared himself duke (4634).

After two years in power Rahimat allied with the Dandin family against the Ghanji, but at his moment of victory he struck the Dandin in a surprise move, hunting them to extinction. He reportedly said "A wolf does not like cats in his den." Next, alarmed at the control the Scravers had over the economy, he began a campaign of terror against them. After two years they withdrew from Shaprut. Finally he seized House Keddah's Shaprut estates in a lightning war. As the saying goes, the lion sets her sights on large prey, and Rahimat financed the reconquest of Istakhr partly by de-



Shaprut Traits

Cathedral: Orthodox (St. Hombor Cathedral, Tabriz)

Agora: Charioteers (Girivaja Market)

Garrison: 7

Capital: Tabriz

Jumps: 2

Adjacent Worlds: Criticorum (dayside), Kordeth (nightside), Stigmata (nightside)

Solar System: Surya (Sun), Vivasvat (0.403 AU), Busiastra (0.845 AU), Shaprut (1.233 AU; Candra and Rahu), Kanya Kumari asteroid belt (3.019 AU), Prajapati (5.019 AU), Kali (13.305 AU; 3 moons), Cakra (28.23 AU), Fenris (44.23 AU), Jumpgate (66.33 AU)

Tech: 7

Human Population: 350,000,000

Alien Population: 63,000,000 Shantor (estimated), 100,000 Obun, 60,000 other

Resources: Forests, iron oil, water, oil

Exports: Wool, textiles, think-machines, financial services, diamonds, processed steel and ores, gold, entertainment (music), processed food (huge sea-farms), labor, water, salt, chemicals, dairy products. Shaprut faces no hunger problems and can export food.

Landscape: Amazingly stable, but great hurricanes strike the Nara Sea.

basing Shaprut currency. To the relief of the surviving Shaprut al-Malik, he removed his immediate family to Istakhr after the conquest.

After Rahimat, Shaprut was traditionally governed by one of her own native al-Malik, responsible to the house leader and ceremoniously appointed by him. It has remained loyal to the family, little troubling the dukes on Istakhr.

Recent History

The Symbiots changed the nature of peaceful Shaprut forever. Landing in surprise raids beginning in 4907, their marauders were fended off by defense forces only with great difficulty. Refugees from Symbiot-infected worlds arrived with horror stories of transformed kinsmen and wildlife attacking with a single will. There was great fear among the native al-Malik that the Shantor might become infected. They began herding them again onto their reservations, keeping stricter control, and shipping many off-planet to Criticorum and Istakhr. Naturally the Shantor resented this, and rebellions shook the reservations.

Luckily, the governor, Count Zahid al-Malik, was a wise ruler. Using emergency measures, he immediately placed funds into education, and soon every child, whether serf or noble, was given educational opportunities unseen since the Second Republic. From these educated minds new weapons

emerged to push the Symbiots back, or interfere with their synapses using Vibration-Displacement Bombs (ViDiBs). The planetary defenses were strengthened just in time for the Emperor Wars. It was the al-Malik, I might add, who kept the Symbiots at bay when the Stigmata Garrison revolted under Carmetha Decados. Shaprut's sons and daughters took up arms, and fought beside Duke Hakim's forces on Criticorum, Aylon, and even on Byzantium Secundus herself, thus proving their loyalty to house and Emperor.

Solar System

Vivasvat: Vivasvat's reflective surface causes her to shine as the evening star, but so strong is her coloring that local folklore gives her passionate, warlike characteristics. This seems true, for most of the small planet is covered in molten magma.

Busiastra: Slightly larger than Shaprut (1.2 Shaprut mass), Busiastra once possessed oceans and life. Now mined by the guilds for ores, limited terraforming occurred here. Busiastra is governed from Shaprut by an appointed representative, Sir Fasil Mugahan, formerly of Brother Battle. Two domed cities, Medina and New Mecca, exist here.

Shaprut: Shaprut has an equatorial diameter of 12,537 kilometers, being only slightly smaller than old Urth, but with a longer year of 382 days. Of all al-Malik space, her sun, a medium size star named Surya, seems the least affected by the fading suns phenomenon.

Two moons orbit Shaprut. Candra is the closest, and the al-Malik and guilds have mining operations here. The furthest moon, Rahu, is smaller, and serves as a military base, protecting Aylon from surprise attack. Due to these two moons, Shaprut's tides are long but not violent (Rahu's gravitational influence is lessened by its distance).

Kanya Kumari Asteroid Belt: Between Shaprut and Prajapati a planet once stood, which fragmented under Prajapati's pull (or, as some xenologists believe, was destroyed in the Anunnaki Wars). The asteroid belt is visible at night from Shaprut. Strange tales are told by navigators of ghostly images and "voices" encountered in the region, and some psychics relate the image of a weeping woman, the spirit of the planet Kanya Kumari. Also, stories persist of uncovered Ur treasures.

Prajapati: Prajapati (9.7 Shaprut's mass) has a small gravitational pull on Shaprut. Thus, one hears of solemn decisions made "under the pull of Prajapati." Prajapati is composed of liquid hydrogen and possesses the famous seven rings, composed of icy lumps clumped together, three of which are sometimes visible from Shaprut. A strongly tilted rotational axis causes the planet to roll on its side instead of spinning upright.

Kali: Three-mooned Kali is slightly larger than Shaprut and home to the al-Malik fleet, the main line of defense

against Symbiot incursion from the jumpgate. Since it is a sensitive post, the less said the better.

Cakra: Cakra's mass is 0.83 of Shaprut's, but her chemical composition and darkened soil give her the name "the Dark Planet." It is believed she was not native to the solar system. Thieves, spies, and unfaithful lovers swear by her influence in escaping detection.

Fenris: The ice-world of Fenris is home to a native crystalline lifeform, the *talg*. Talg actually become liquid-based lifeforms when brought into higher temperatures. They are not believed to be intelligent, although some Eskatonics claim otherwise. Fenris's mass is 0.93 of Shaprut's.

People & Places

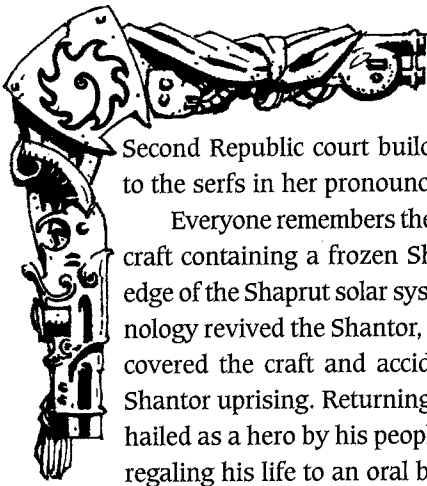
Freemen and slaves are (theoretically) protected by old Republican codes, as are the Shantor (that is, they have the right to legal redress by a court-appointed lawyer, but only a few of these cases see justice in the Courts of Law). Freemen are usually city dwellers, and comprise the scholarly/academic population as well as tech workers. The nobles are, of course, the al-Malik, a scattering of Hawkwood and Li Halan, followed by several families of minor status. The Shantor population is mainly concentrated in Pamott in the north, Asvemdha in the south and Vadava island in the Nara Ocean. There are wild, or "escaped," Shantor far in the north and south, and small herds run the great plains of Uttaraku.

Rajputana

Shaprut is divided into three land regions, although all the land masses are connected. Rajputana (formerly Akupara), is the smallest, bordering the Nara Sea to the west and the Apas sea to the north. Here the great reservation of Pamott is home to millions of Shantor. Outside the reservation (covering over 2,000 miles) there are small towns. I have been to her western cities of Kalanjara and Bromodya. Remarkably clean and well-administered, the populace there still displays the strain of the original human settlers. Pine forests grow in the north and east of Rajputana, but in Sa'razz, the vegetation becomes lush and the climate almost tropical.

Bromodya is Rajputana's provincial capital, ruled by Baroness Faridah Binte Nur, a woman advanced in years who keeps a youthful form by performing Obun and hesychast exercises daily. Beloved by her people, she is sharp-tongued and does not mince words. The baroness accused me of being a pawn in the extension of Hawkwood power. Writing this guide book for Emperor Alexius denoted treason in her eyes. The Shantor? Yes, a few became rebellious during the recent unpleasantness of the Emperor Wars, but hard, honest underground physical labor never hurt anyone with time enough on their hands to contemplate treason. Baroness Faridah administers justice herself in the old





Second Republic court building, and is surprisingly gentle to the serfs in her pronouncements.

Everyone remembers the recent discovery of an old Ukari craft containing a frozen Shantor, discovered on the outer edge of the Shaprut solar system. Second Republic cryo-technology revived the Shantor, one Swift Runner, who had discovered the craft and accidentally launched it during the Shantor uprising. Returning home 2000 years later, he was hailed as a hero by his people. Swift Runner made a fortune regaling his life to an oral biography, including a rich store of his people's proverbs. But the riches spoiled him, and he soon endorsed various products and made celebrity appearances on everything from Shantor medicine ads to politics. Sadly, the Shantor shot out of time began to despise his own people as backward and smelly beasts, while preferring the company of humans. A celebrity, he lives in a mansion in Bromodya, surrounded by his human surrogate family of sycophants and hangers-on.

Rocana

Rocana begins east of Mandras and borders Videha on the Sada Shantor Reservation, and then southeasterly until she strikes the Uccaihravas Sea. The great Rocana desert and Jambuvita forest are both trackless marvels, but I would suggest that visitors avoid Utturaku. The people there, descended from the Pamdava clans, are insular and distrustful of outsiders. They hold to some pre-Universalist beliefs. For example, they openly commune with spirits of their ancestors while sitting in sacred circles adorned with human hair and blood. They also pray seven times a day, falling on their knees in a northwest direction toward the star Micirius. Despite Church attempts, these local customs continue. Also, it is whispered that travelers often get sacrificed to the saints, to aid in the upkeep of the community. Rebellion breaks out from time to time, and the recent arrival of Avestities has led to resistance in the remoter locations.

Delhi is a welcome change; desert caravans find relief within her ancient walls. Jambuvita, to the east, is friendlier than Utturaku. Her serfs farm the large al-Malik estates. Here the people maintain an odd belief: Zebulon came here after his disappearance in the Vau jumpgate to teach them. This is heretical, and some have paid the price with their lives, but the belief continues. Every month, the peasants

assemble at midnight to pray at Zebulon's Altar, a circle of stones atop Mount Denat. A chapel was built over the spot, but the ages have weathered it down.

East of the Rocana Desert, the land is lush, and rich farms dot the region north of the Aazeem Canal.

One encounters interesting people in Rocana. I met William "The Mole" Musilari at a lavish party on his estate north of the Aazeem Canal. A middle-aged, bearded man of prodigious size, William "the Mole" Musilari is the Scraver leader on Shaprut. Inexplicably, independent mining operations in the south all seem connected to the Mole, and the Muster slave trade prefers his contacts as customers. The Mole vigorously denies these allegations. Sure, he likes to help small enterprise, he told me, but no taint of the Shantor slave trade bears his signature. Conversely, he worries about the slave revolt in the mines, on moral grounds, fearing the harm done to individual souls in the anarchistic breakdown of the Pancreator's order. The Mole is a sentimental man, given to bouts of uncontrolled weeping when his favorite opera, *La Canta de Margaretta* is performed, or when one of his political enemies mysteriously dies, leaving widows and orphans he generously provides for. Very polite but extremely dangerous, his associates rule many of the unsavory elements of the planetary economy.

Videha

Videha is held to begin at the borders of the Naisima Forest and Parvatti Inlet. She borders the New Himalayas and the polar regions in the far south. Al-Malik and Merchant League mining interests are strong in this mountainous region, and it is no place for the unwary traveler. One must be careful of the desperate bands of escaped slaves. The Reeves and Muster have a controlling interest in many of the "independent" mining operations here, and much land is leased by the guilds. The very mountains are dangerous, home to the predatory Shaggar, which resemble bear-ape hybrids, and other beasts. Shaggar coats are brown in summer and white in winter. Standing seven feet tall with powerful claws, some locals claim they have weapons and are sentient, guardians of ancient secrets hidden in the mountains. They have been known to attack isolated mining operations in strength.

The Dimark, a sail-backed mammal-like reptile, dwells in the foothills. Carnivores, they hold a niche similar to that filled by Urth crocodiles on Holy Terra. Their sails catch and process sunlight, and they have colorful frills about their necks. Eight feet in length, knives made from their teeth are deadly. One species of Dimark dwells in the Rocana desert; these are more mobile than their temperate cousins.

The Terma Forest, in the east, is rumored to be enchanted. People go in, never to return. The al-Malik have surrounded the forest with advanced military stations. Lo-

Dimark

Body: Strength 6, Dexterity 3, Endurance 8

Mind: Wits 3, Perception 4, Tech 0

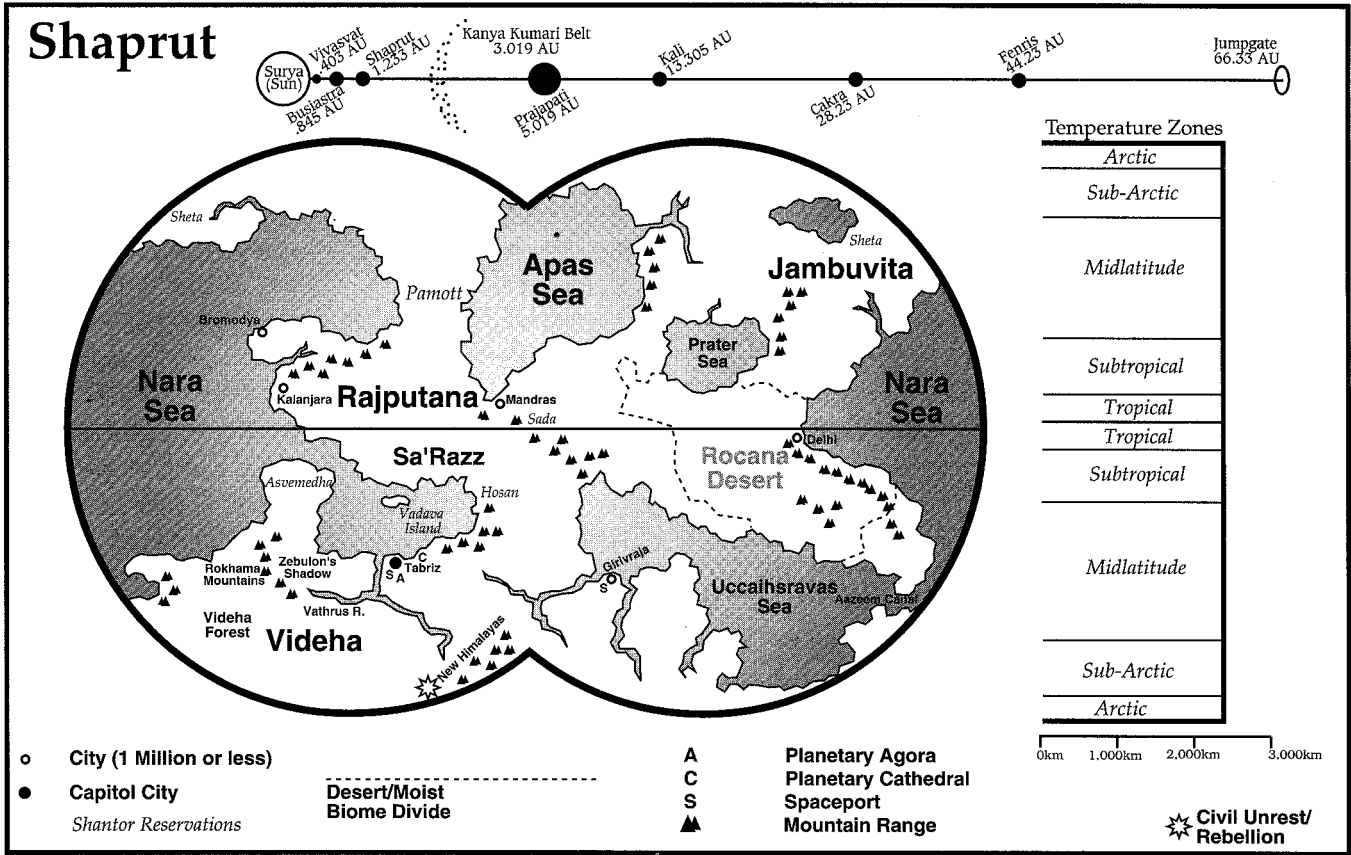
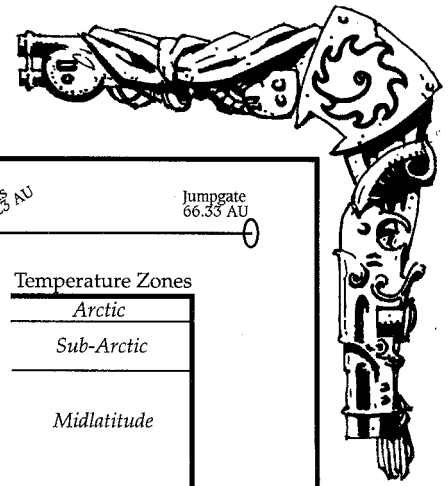
Natural skills: Fight 5, Vigor 5

Weapons: Teeth (4 DMG), Claws (3 DMG)

Armor: 5

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0





cal legends state that the wood spirits take on physical form here, while reports indicate that there was once an estate belonging to a noble man, Lord Cecil (of the vanished Windsor clan), who devoted his life to communicating with Sathraist entities. Cecil sought to blend human and otherworldly spirits into a notion called New Humanity. It is known that genetically altered Gibblings (Goblin Men) use the Terma Forest as a base, but even they fear the forest's heart, where they whisper the Dark Queen dwells. Some Eskatonics recently attempted to pierce the mystery but have not returned.

The Madhu River, famous for her healing properties, runs through Girivaja, the former capital. She remains the cultural center of Shaprut, being older, more refined and cultivated than Tabriz. As a rule, Girivaja for entertainment, Tabriz for scholarly debate. The Avenue of the Udginas is home to a thousand types of music, and here the planet's small Obun population thrives. Every type of music found in the Known Worlds exists here. I recommend the Eztez Theater, owned by my father and Nej Va Bahoost, as one of the better houses of musical entertainment. Human, Obun, Shantor and sometimes visiting Ukari or Etyri musicians will perform together, producing amazing sessions of unspeakable beauty.

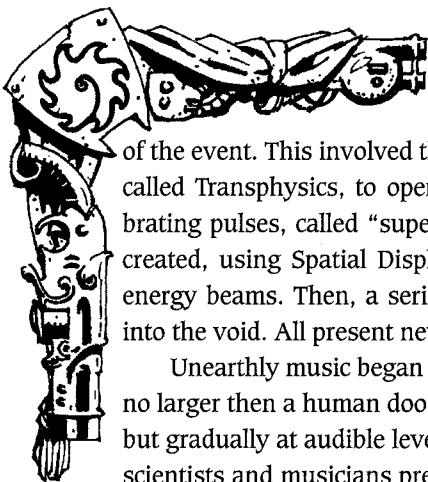
In the eastern section stand the great universities, as

well as Arundhati's Palace, now housing Church and government offices. Young lovers traditionally throw flowers onto the statue of Sakantala and Tahir, the lovers who united the two ruling houses. It is said that if you touch Sakantala's sandal, the beloved of your desire will come to you. If not, the infamous House of Vasha's Pleasures is but two blocks away. The city does not sleep, and even better, vehicles are banned, so all travel is on foot, bike or beast. Some Shantor rent taxi services here. Try Wind Weeper's Runners; tell him you read about them from me and receive the family discount.

Sir Sahan Ramakrishna is the Lord-Mayor of Girivaja. Knighted during the Emperor Wars, Sahan claims, as do many of his family, descent from the ancient rulers of Shaprut. Currently engaged in representing the large agricultural interests and sugar plantations, Sahan dreams of finding the lost world of Rauhina, settled by his family, and is equipping an expedition. The Ramakrishnas on Shaprut produce noted historians, doctors and scholars, and are all of the class where minor noble status sinks into the wealthy merchant class.

Vivaldi Gate

During the Second Republic, an event known as the opening of the Vivaldi Gate occurred at the University of Girivaja (3941). I had an Engineer attempt an explanation



of the event. This involved the use of P-Physics, sometimes called Transphysics, to open an area using minuscule vibrating pulses, called "superstrings." First, a vacuum was created, using Spatial Displacement Bombardment (SDB) energy beams. Then, a series of "superstrings" were shot into the void. All present never forgot what happened next.

Unearthly music began to pour out of the void (a space no larger than a human doorway), first at high pitch range, but gradually at audible levels. Even more astonishing, the scientists and musicians present began to feel healthier, as various ailments were cured. Soon vibrating notes (originating from an unknown source called "V") began performing music. No one knew if the "void" was a gateway to another dimension or a random accumulator of vibrational energy. Various theories abounded. Strangely, a recording of mathematically pitched vibrations indicated in mathematical symbology that some of the stars were fading — the first premonition of the fading suns.

The government collected the data, but viewed as "too alarmist" the warnings given forth about the fading suns phenomenon. Later, the Church condemned the gate, and it was abandoned. Today it stands in a wooded vale 20 miles north of Girivraja. Haunting music plays from the displaced vibrational wall, a diaphanous green-blue shimmering gateway amidst the ruins. Rumors of evil spirits, gathering like moths to a flame, as well as benign healings and visions, persist. The area is declared off-limits, but brave souls have ducked the Church guards and approached the area.

Tabriz

Tabriz, the new capital, is like an old pensioner's chess game, speculative but dull. Built in 4467-83, it is home to one million people and 300,000 Shantor. The governor, Count Kaldun al-Malik, welcomed me to the capital. A soft-spoken, blind man, Count Kaldun's melodious voice creates reason out of air in dulcet tones of learning. Before blindness struck, Kaldun memorized the great poets and philosophers, and utilizes his vast memory in his colloquies of judgment. His efforts to improve the population's education and end slavery engages him in a tireless crusade against his opponents. Kaldun has outmaneuvered them on many occasions, giving birth to the saying "Better the eyes of Kaldun than the sight of his enemies." Solomonically in his wisdom, the count has aged gracefully, pursuing his father Zahid's dream of a utopian world. Kaldun's daughter, Meriel, acts as his eyes and keeps her father informed about the slave rebellion in the south. Kaldun leans toward a general pardon, but his wealthy relations are calling on military might to crush the anarchistic uprising. Kaldun is playing the latest political crisis with his usual consummate skill.

Tall, ornate towers house the resident al-Malik within the capital city. Every cafe is filled with intellectual speculation, and some of the Known World's best book and vid

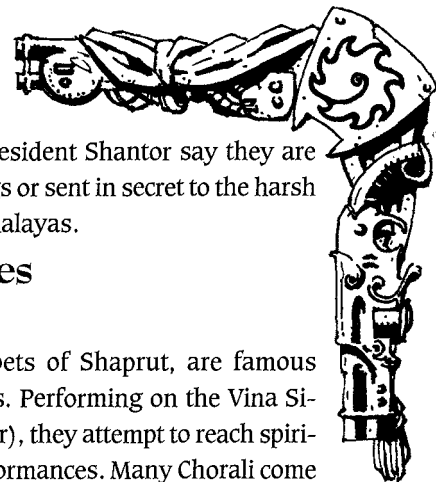
stores are here. The Merchant League is found represented in the wealthy Aareed Zone, and the Governor's Palace overlooks the city from Amar Hill, which stands in the northwest. Great gardens adorn the al-Malik palaces; Rehla Park is a testimony to garden mazes, fountains and wildlife. The Mahalee, or Little Istakhr, is the rowdiest section, where dancing, betting and sports are permitted. Beside the ocean is the bohemian part, Ahmarr, noted for the red coloring of its buildings.

In the southern sections of the city, called Waha, an industrial workforce of serfs, Shantor and mid-wage free-men keeps the Tabriz shipyards busy. The Church is strong in Tabriz; Archbishop Saladin possesses one of the greatest intellects of the Known Worlds. Botany, music, theology and geology greatly interest him. I found the talkative archbishop curious about my views on the latest discoveries reported on Byzantium Secundus. Promoting space exploration, it is no secret that Saladin dreams of converting the lost worlds to the faith. A Mahayanist, he is known to hold Hinayanist views on splinter sects, and inveighed heavily against Incarnate theology in his book, *Guardians of Reflection*.

West of Yathrib Province, which holds Tabriz, stand the Rokham Mountains, a place of wild wonder. Here, seven days journey west from Tabriz on ancient mountain roads, a great cave named Soora stands. Administered by a small sect of hesychasts, it houses one of the wonders of the Known Worlds: Zebulon's Shadow. Pilgrims journey here for healing and prophecy. Rumor has it that Zebulon meditated here, thinking of the Pancreator's divine love unceasingly, and merged his essence with the Pancreator. At this moment, his human frailties were cast behind him in a flash of divine light, forming the huge thirty-foot shadow on the wall.

What follows is hard to explain but I can confirm it. The monks make offerings of prayers to the shadow, and the shadow answers questions of prophecy. If the prayers lapse, the shadow moves and begins to walk among men. It speaks of Zebulon's message, but in muted terms, for it is the darker emotions Zebulon cast off. The monks state that this began during the Ukari wars; when the Ukar's psychic blasts stirred the Shantor to rebellion, it also awoke Zebulon's Shadow. So prayers are now offered to it, and it is fed on holy scripture, and remains muted. The monks maintain, however, that it draws certain spirits to it, and dark beings from the outer darkness have attempted to attack it in the winter months. Yearly, the Eskatonics battle with these beings during the winter solstice.

For the most part mountainous and cool, Viedha is scarcely populated outside the great cities. Here the Emperor and Li Halan hold estates, in the rich soil of the Dand Valley. The entire valley is called the Royal Path Way, and the nobility elect a leader to oversee their needs. Currently it is the wealthy Count Xan Zu of the Li Halan, although each estate



is private noble territory (the Emperor has close to 100 miles of land).

On the Viedha Peninsula, the Asvemedeha Reservation stands. Guarded by the Aazeem Wall, Asvemedeha's Shantor are more wild than those of Pamott, being descended from the great rebels. Shantor sometimes leave the reservation to work on noble fiefs or in the cities. Asvemedeha is 37,301 miles in size, and contains rolling hills in the south and wide, grassy plains. Old Shantor families predominate here as in Pamott, but New Shantor values enter Asvemedeha from Tabriz and the escaped slaves from the far south.

New Shantor society is divided into factions. The purists want humans driven off world while some revolutionaries seek an alliance with the human slaves, serfs and outcasts to build a New Society. Alliances are made between the Old Dreamers (the old conservative families who yearn for past glories before humanity came to Shaprut) and the purists.

Large sections of the interior of Viedha are al-Malik estates or leased guild land. In the far south, in the New Himalayas, al-Malik and League mining operations use Shantor and slave labor to mine the rich ores of the planet's interior. The New Himalayas also house a sturdy mountain people, but banditry occurs here, not the least from escaped slave and Shantor bands. Recently, some of these bands have begun to sabotage the League/al-Malik mining operations in a series of daring raids.

The greatest band is lead by Gurutz the Accursed. Sent to the mines of Baron Tupal for stealing cattle, Gurutz, an escaped serf, was behind the uprising of Mine 19. When the rebellion was suppressed by two divisions of Muster troops, Gurutz escaped with 14 men, forming a rebel band which fled into the high mountains. From ancient caves they plundered the lowlands, robbing anybody and everybody — the guilds, al-Malik, even other escaped slaves. When Gurutz encountered a desperate Shantor band of escaped laborers lead by Hoof Killer, the two bands joined forces and began terrorizing the rich mine operations of the south. Report Gurutz immediately to the al-Malik authorities. Physically, he is short, with dark hair and one glass eye.

Vadava Island

I went here in the company of my uncle. Here the wild-est Shantor are sent, and it is a dangerous place. Surrounded by steep cliffs save for the human fortified Aazra Harbor, the Shantor fight amongst themselves when not testing the guards. The island is about three hundred leagues in length, and holds fresh water streams and green hills. Escape is difficult, due to the strength of the tides and distance to the nearest land, although attempts are made. While no one will outright admit that Vadava is a prison, it does seem to hold every Shantor who possess revolutionary ideas. Some of

them disappear entirely. Old resident Shantor say they are either killed by human quislings or sent in secret to the harsh mining camps in the New Himalayas.

Cultural Asides

Bakhshi

The Bakhshi, singing poets of Shaprut, are famous throughout the Known Worlds. Performing on the Vina Sitar (descendent of the Urth sitar), they attempt to reach spiritual heights through their performances. Many Choralis come from the Bakhshi, and the two musical groups cross-pollinate each other in influence. Those Bakhshi who teach at the Academy of Girivaja are called the Rishis Brotherhood, and claim that their lofty goal is the spiritual awakening of all sentients through musical sound. The Shantor consider the Bakhshi the only trustworthy humans on Shaprut, and Shantor oral hymns have been incorporated into aspects of the Bakhshi music.

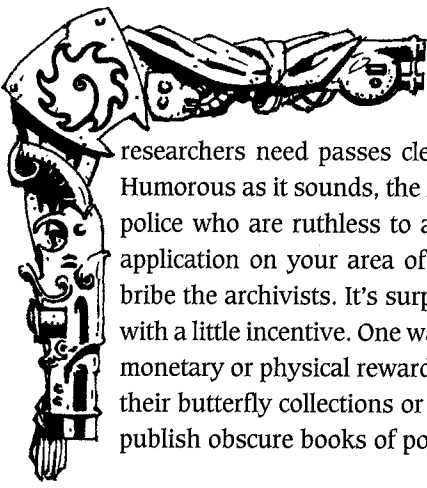
The Shantor Day Race

Every year, on the summer solstice, the greatest Shantor runners gather in Pamott for the Day Race. The winner receives 500 firebirds from the governor, and a Bakhshi performance accompanying a Shantor celebration which honors the winner in immortal song. Viewers from all over the Known Worlds watch the day-long race, beginning in northern Pamott at sunrise and lasting until the sunset. While much betting goes on, the Shantor Council has freed the race itself from human bribes and corruption, stressing the cultural purity of the event. The greatest champions of recent years come from Asvemedeha, to the shame of the Pamott Shantor.

There is an ancient, sacrificial element to the Day Race. The winner is exempt from past crimes but must serve as hostage and advisor to the governor in the matter of Shantor/human affairs. Some good has come from this: the Shantor voice is always heard by the governor. The last winner was the great rebel Shantor Alahad Star Runner, whose past crimes were forgiven. In a spirit of reconciliation, Shaprut's governor insisted Star Runner call him "Slow Reformer" in the Shantor tongue.

Sharifah's Tips

1. The firebird is the ruling currency, but in Tabriz sparklers are also used, although one only brings 85% of a firebird's value.
2. Compliment the Shantor when in transactions with them. Respect them and they will respect you. Do not get too friendly too fast; traditionalist Shantor often take a while to break the cultural taboos in declaring friendship.
3. Shaprut's great libraries are the most intact sources for lost knowledge in the Known Worlds (which is why I know Shaprut's historic dates so well). Heavily guarded,



researchers need passes cleared by the governor himself. Humorous as it sounds, the Mutasih has a branch of library police who are ruthless to archive thieves. Make a formal application on your area of research to the governor, and bribe the archivists. It's surprising how helpful they can be with a little incentive. One warning: They don't always want monetary or physical rewards; often an afternoon admiring their butterfly collections or helping them make contacts to publish obscure books of poetry can be helpful.

When the garden is overgrown with weeds, and the ordered path a maze of grasping branches, only the stillness of the movement, watching a lone leaf blown by the wind, can bring forth the seed which illuminates the labyrinth, leading the way out.

Aylon

"I don't know why it is, but the Ukari from Aylon feel more at home with humans from that planet than their own kind from Kordeth. And the native al-Malik feel the same way, regarding the Aylon Ukari as closer kin than their Istakhr, Shaprut or Criticorum relations."

— remark to the Emperor attributed to Sir Chamon Mazarin

Aylon is roughly Urth-sized, with a single moon, Diana. In happier days, I visited her often, and received invaluable military training there from an old Ukari who did not suffer fools gladly. Gammak suffered me though, and it was on Aylon that I met Sir Aristid Justinian, and here that he proposed to me, on a desert night of countless stars. So, Aylon holds many personal memories, some happy, some sad. Her people are rugged and independent, her jungles beautiful and deadly (ah, a predictable metaphor for life itself, I realize), and here people come to test themselves.

The local al-Malik forsook the Graceful Tongue, considering themselves more spartan and virtuous than their off-world cousins, whom they consider soft and somewhat decadent. They respected my close kinship to Duke Hakim (second cousin), but also mistrusted my motives. Why did I want to learn from them? What was this book I was writing? I think, overall, people feel things more intensely on Aylon, as the realization that there is no time for social distinctions creates a directness in speech and manner I find refreshing. Behind all actions lies the reality: here Ur-Ukar and humans share a world, and much tension exists. Death can strike unexpected.

Prehistory

The prehistory of Aylon saw evolutionary changes far different than the convergent model of many worlds. Almost all native Aylon life possesses animal mobility combined with the photosynthesis of plants. More similar to the *galisp* of Kordeth than the lifeforms of other worlds, their biological history is largely unknown and the sciences needed

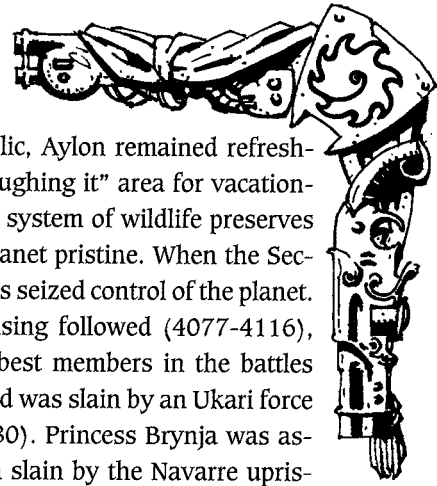
to study it are largely lost, save in the Rare Books Enclave on Aylon. It is thought that when the Anunnaki colonized the world, they introduced more familiar plant and animal lifeforms. Grasses and trees took to the new world, and native life was pushed toward torrid regions or became extinct. But they may have equally introduced the strange lifeforms to the world, and since the Anunnaki vanished, leaving few records, Aylon's history remains a mystery.

History

Ukari scout ships from Kordeth landed on Aylon in the Navrajji desert sometime during the 2300's. Discovering it habitable, the smaller clans of Vordwed and Bathkasada settled there, naming the planet *Sada*, or water. Sajik was the only surface city they constructed. When the Usturak Civil War halted colonization, the clan-chiefs, in need of troops, called the colonists of Aylon and Istakhr home. A few disobeyed orders and remained. In the far north some members of Clan Vordwed took to deep mining, returning to the subterranean life of their ancestors. In the vast Navrajji desert, a small hunting clan refused the call.

The Usturak Civil War devastated the Ukari drive for space colonization for centuries. In the 2500's (the exact date, I fear, is lost), settlers from Urth landed on Aylon. Many were from North America, and they named the planet El Dorado, after a legendary city of gold. They settled just south of the equatorial zone, founding Navarre and New Seattle. They elected a president who sat in the People's Palace in New Seattle (now New Seatul). Numbering only one million by 2800, the settlers took to the new frontier world.

It was on Aylon, on Prophet's Hill, that Zebulon came back and preached his first message to the Known Worlds after witnessing the Holy Flame on the lost world of Yathrib. They listened in awe to the Prophet's words, for Zebulon had passed their way before, a Christian monk going to the farther worlds, and now he returned with the holy truth of his vision. The Aylon boast that Zebulon's first followers



were from this planet is true. These first disciples were known as the Sons of Fire, although they later joined the early Church of Palamedes.

Did the native Ukari and humans ever encounter each other before the Ukari Reconquest? Tales of the Night Men were common among settlers in the north and the description of tattooed ghost-men seems to suggest that some contact took place. The Ukari were also aware of the humans, the "Unquiet People," spotting these restless settlers at a distance and recording their movements. To their surprise, the native Ukari were contacted by new Ukari insurgents from Kordeth, spying out the world. They told their planetary kinsmen that the reconquest was about to begin. The small Ukari clans armed themselves and began to infiltrate the settled areas. Finally the day came. Ukar ships struck Aylon in a surprise attack. President Walker shored up what defenses he could, but the space attack was joined by the land forces of the native Ukari. Walker split his defense forces. The Planetary Guard went to meet the northern threat while a force of volunteers went into the south, where outposts were reporting raids by the "ghost people," the folklore name given Ukari by isolated ranchers.

Navarre was lost to a descending spacefleet, and the Planetary Guard broken in fierce fighting at the Idaho River. Clan Vordwed, joining with the space Ukari force sent from Navarre, overwhelmed the major human population centers. Above the skies, the thin Aylon air defense was shattered, and Ukari arrived in such numbers that organized resistance fragmented. President Walker, captured after the loss of the Battle of Three Rivers, surrendered.

It took humanity 50 years to recapture Aylon. The huge influx of off-world human armies, under different banners, led to a fragmentary command system. It took 30 years for the human armies to reach Sajik, and 20 more of fierce fighting before the Ukari surrendered. At this point, they were given large reservations, and many off-world Ukari clans were moved here from Kordeth. Conquering human aristocrats claimed land, but the original human colonists resented their presence. The saying "before the war" indicated "good" families who came from the early pioneering stock. "After the war" had connotations of cheap luxury goods, social snobbery and faulty claims of nobility.

House Torensen arrived from Criticorum with the Church-led fleet and was granted lands about the Alfheim sea. Their leaders took the hereditary title of Prince of Aylon in 3308 (under Bjorn the Berserker), and ruled in the north. From the southern shore of the Alfheim Sea to the eastern edge of Nimerica, the planet was ruled by a republic whose capital was Navarre. The Ur-Ukar reservations were divided into northern and southern sections, with a string of human cities in the planet's middle dividing them. The small town of Sunval (originally Sunvale) grew in size.

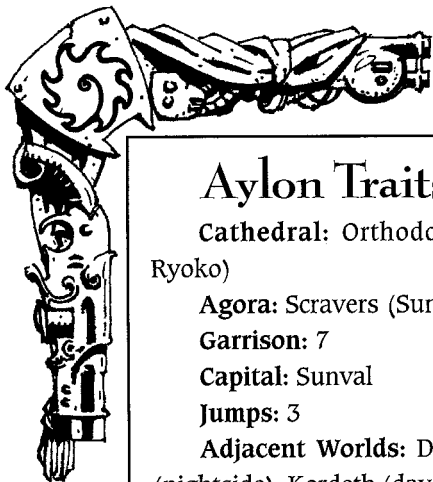
During the Second Republic, Aylon remained refreshingly unspoiled, a favorite "roughing it" area for vacationers, hunters and zoologists. A system of wildlife preserves and parks kept much of the planet pristine. When the Second Republic fell, the Torensens seized control of the planet. A bloody pro-Republican uprising followed (4077-4116), and the Torensens lost their best members in the battles that followed. Prince Raganvard was slain by an Ukari force at the gates of Vancuvyir (4080). Princess Brynja was assassinated, and Prince Kodran slain by the Navarre uprising. Finally Prince Stephan, seeing his hold on the planet weaken, sold it to the Keddah in 4119, with the pledge that the Keddah would go to war in aid of Torensen should they become involved militarily with the al-Malik. Sheik Azzam Keddah agreed, and gained Aylon, officially renaming the world.

In 4438, the Keddah fell into a civil war, marking their end as a Great House. Sheik Sahar Keddah asked Rahimat al-Malik for aid, and the duke sent in his armies, restoring Sahar's fortunes. Sheik Sadar granted the al-Malik numerous lands on Aylon for their assistance. In 4487, when the Torensens, under House Masseri pressure, declared war on the al-Malik, the Keddah, bound by tradition, followed. Their ships bombarded Istakhr in a swift raid, threatening the Istakhr Market. The following year, Duke Asim al-Malik, the Sword of Istakhr, arrived with a huge invasion armada, and seized the planet from the last Keddah governor, Fadil. From then on, my family has ruled Aylon.

The Green Death, which swept the Known Worlds (4616-23) struck Aylon early, coming from beyond Vau space. One-third of the human/Ukari population perished, and the al-Malik moved the planetary capital from Ryoko to Sunval. Some blame the Green Death with the advent of the undead Husk menace. Husk attacks in the remote jungles of the south forced the governor to call upon the Church for aid. The Husk Crusade (4677-81), led by the al-Malik-Avestite-Brother Battle-Ukari forces, followed, becoming one of the strangest alliances in Known Worlds history. They ended the Husk menace, and Brother Battle gained lands adjacent to the great jungles.

Economically, the planet boomed after the Green Death. Freeman found their services needed, and could barter for better pay and conditions. Slavery virtually disappeared, and serfs often approached the level of freemen. The remaining al-Malik dropped the Graceful Tongue and took pride in Plain Speech, testing their survival skills against the planet. As a result, my Aylon relations have a fierce military tradition, and are among the family's toughest fighters. The rulers on Istakhr came to rely on Aylon al-Malik and Ukari troops to augment their power.

In 4883, the great Aylon Ukar warrior Dyn'dran Oed Nata beheld a vision and forsook the ways of war, leaving



Aylon Traits

Cathedral: Orthodox (St. Mantius Cathedral, Ryoko)

Agora: Scravers (Sunval Greenway)

Garrison: 7

Capital: Sunval

Jumps: 3

Adjacent Worlds: De Moley (nightside), Istakhr (nightside), Kordeth (dayside), Leminkainen (dayside)

Solar System: Genesis (Sun), Pecos (0.689 AU), Aylon (0.99 AU; Diana), Ottawa (4.963 AU; 1 moon), Bunyon (10.237 AU; 13 moons), Cronos (17.563 AU; 4 moons), Uldra (32.017 AU; 1 moon), Jumpgate 72 AU)

Tech: 6

Human Population: 500,000,000

Alien Population: 54,000,000 Ukari, 1 million other

Resources: Minerals, ore, forests, water, medicinal plants

Exports: Light industry, weapons, processed foods, gold, steel, consumer electronics, wool, coffee, sugar, light spacecraft, aluminum, diamonds, medicinal aids

Landscapes: Heavy earthquakes strike in Alfheim, and southern tropical storms annually assault the coasts of the Sunlit Sea.

the al-Malik army. Preaching peace between all sentient races, his philosophical journeys lead him to the Obun Virta Han Loaj, and they created the Parliament of Speakers on Criticorum. The Ukari claim he was slain by regency agents in his home near Sajik two weeks after giving the greatest speech of his career, the call to Universal Brotherhood (4911). Dyn'dran's teachings drove a wedge between the traditionalists on Aylon and al-Malik-friendly tribes. The traditionalist tribes, contemplating his call to universal dignity, pushed for more representation among the Ukar Council, dominated by al-Malik allied clans. Their call rejected, the traditionalists began to organize, finally allying with the Kordeth Traditionalists and the Ukari terrorist faction *Bava!* to form the Ukari Freedom Movement.

During the Emperor Wars representatives of the UFM approached the Decados for aid. They agreed, and Count Rurik Dmitri Decados was smuggled onto Aylon to head Jakovian operations there. He provided arms for the Ukari revolt and grew to love the Ukari, joining them openly with a small retinue of his own soldiers. He was eventually defeated by the Fifth Dark Legion in the Battle of Sunval (4992). In the route of his clan allies, Count Rurik was slain, some say by Ukari spies in al-Malik pay, others by angry tradi-

tionals. With Rurik dead the traditionalists fell to fighting amongst themselves, and by 4994, they retreated to their reservations. Countess Nudara was generous in victory, allowing the traditionalists more representation and an arena to air their grievances. Many were surprised at her generosity. I am not. Nudara seeks to politically unify Aylon.

Soon after the Emperor Wars ended, young al-Malik began seeking some of the traditionalists out for martial and survival training, and the combination of al-Malik/Ukari fighting skills is producing a formidable force. My family here collects money from the pilgrims going to Prophet's Hill. They are exploring ways to reopen the jumpgate to Yathrib, the planet where Zebulon, blessed be his holy name, first beheld the Holy Flame.

Solar System

Pecos: A rocky, lifeless planet, 0.83 of Aylon's mass, parts of Pecos were terraformed near the polar ice caps. Freemen use this for grazing area, but the human population is less than 5,600 strong, and they pay rent to various al-Malik overlords.

Aylon: 0.98 the size of Holy Terra, Aylon's small moon of Diana (654 km diameter) was heavily mined over the centuries. A small defense force uses the moon as a base.

Ottawa: With a mass 3.7 larger than Aylon, Ottawa's rocky surface contains canyons and river beds that once held life. Only a few small operations mine here; they suffered attack during the Emperor Wars from the Decados and are only now rebuilding.

Bunyon: This gas giant's diameter is 13 times the size of Aylon. Bunyon's gaseous atmosphere of liquid hydrogen and helium, with her rotating clouds, resembles Jupiter near old Urth.

Cronos: Slightly larger than Bunyon, Cronos possesses methane in her atmosphere, giving her cloud cover a bluish appearance. Dark rings surround Cronos, giving it a slightly sinister reputation in folklore. It was here that the great Decados pleasure ship *Bacchus* became captured by the gas giant's gravitational pull, killing everyone aboard and giving moralists and the entertainment industry a cautionary tale for the next century.

Uldra: Uldra possesses frozen water, and has a mass 0.73 of Aylon. Rotating observation satellites observe the jumpgate from here, and the fleet is ever ready.

People & Places

Surprisingly, no slavery exists on Aylon, and serfs reach levels of responsibilities and wage-income approximate that of freemen on many other worlds. This is no doubt due to the largely open area on the planet, where rigid codified social conventions do not hold, ever under an uneasy tension between Ukari and humans. Possessing one land mass bro-

ken by four oceans, the natives classify Aylon into three distinct regions: Nimerica, Verthandi, and Gjallnar.

Nimerica

Nimerica lies between the Vithar Sea and Rhea Ocean. She is home to conifer forests and great mountain regions such as the Mwerriid T'Kwor and Sierra Noche, the latter of which holds the Ukar reservation of Sajik Naga. The Ukari city of Sajik is the largest above-ground Ukari city in the Known Worlds. Sajik dwellers are open to humans, being composed of pro-al-Malik clans, and the architecture possesses a slight Obun flavor, with large, intricately carved towers and structures.

Head of the governing Allied Clans (pro-al-Malik), Gathra rules from the Ukari city of Sajik. A proud, strong warrior and tactician, he held the Allied Clans intact during the recent traditionalist uprising. I found him politically savvy, although somewhat mystified by the governor's recent leaning to the rebel clans. Gathra keeps Duke Hakim informed of all that happens on Aylon. In turn, the duke protects Gathra against his political enemies.

Nimerica also holds the human cities of Alfheim, New Seatul and Ryoko. Nimerica ends at the Mari Canal, west of Ryoko, the City of Gardens, and at the Mithgard Mountains, north of Navarre. From my travels I would say that the Nimerican people are the most friendly to outsiders outside Sunval, and possess an independent streak. Many freemen hunt and trap in her great forests of Myrd and Vathkal.

Brother Battle holds a fief south of Vathkal, overseen by Master Redgrieve. A veteran of the Emperor Wars, he related some tales over dinner, stressing the success of his order in defending Aylon's holy sites during the recent unpleasantness. Since Aylon is one of the most popular pilgrimage worlds, due to Prophet's Hill, Brother Battle holds the task of defending its routes. Every branch of the Church has some representation on Aylon, and the sale of artifacts enriches many coffers. The Charioteers also have a presence about the capital, where the Aylon spaceport, upgraded again this century, can handle the influx of constant pilgrims. So much of Prophet's Hill has been removed by pilgrims that a contingent of Brother Battle soldiers guards the holy spot from further harm.

150 miles north of the small city of Alfheim is the mountainous region of Mwerriid T'lakil. Ukar clan Tontha has claimed the land for 500 years, and while not a formal reservation, it was empty land when Clan Tontha settled the region. Recent gold discovered in the hills has sent a wave of human settlers to the region, as well as the human-allied Siddir Clan. During the Ukari uprising, Tontha allied with the rebels, and although the war is over, fighting continues in this mountainous outback region. Clan Tontha fights a guerrilla war for its homes against the humans and Clan



Posters such as this one for Bava! are often seen in the Ukari quarters, until the authorities tear them down.

Siddir. A recent pitched battle in the Valley of Shadow sent the human forces retreating. Al-Malik troops have intervened, but the rebel Ukari are too encamped to be driven out. A long-running guerrilla war appears to be in the making.

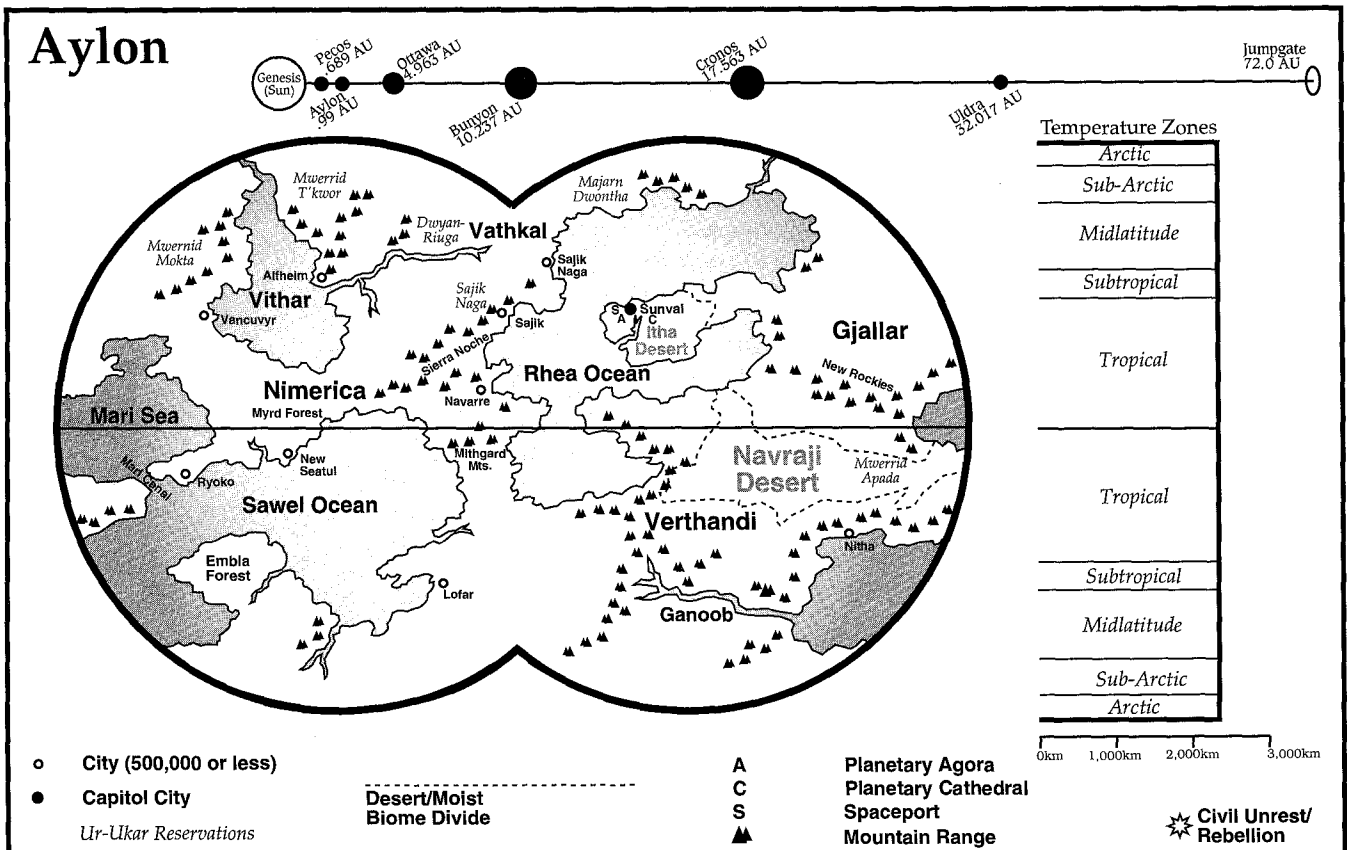
Archbishop Cormac Smythe, who resides in Ryoko, was eager to meet me. A descendant of one of the earliest "blue-blood" families, Smythe is a conservative Hinayanist, although surprisingly liberal in his dealings with the Ukari. He disdains the al-Malik as crass newcomers to Aylon. When I met him, he merely smiled and said, "We are both sectarians, although possessing larger loyalties to the Pancreator than any Universal or royal faction." Smythe keeps in good physical shape, and is known to have a bastard son, Gregory. He deems the planet his, but leans slightly to Duke Hakim in internal politics. Smythe's wisdom in dealing with the Ukari is legendary: the rebels left his estates untouched during the rebellion. He takes the long view on matters of Ukari conversion, believing that they are only capable of receiving the reflective light in gradual increments. A bodyguard of converted Ukari, fearsome in their fanaticism, stands vigilant about him. Smythe is thin haired, blue-eyed, and proudly boasts that his ancestors hailed from Idhayo and Saskatchewan, vanished states on Old Urth.

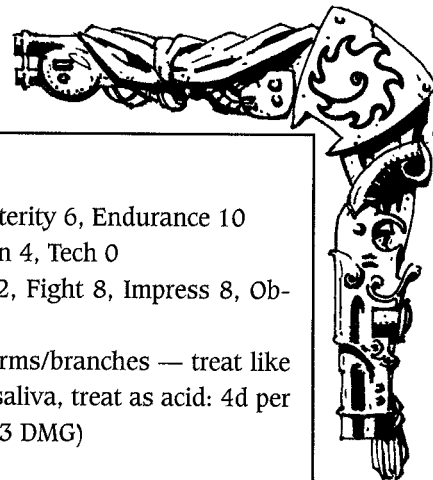
Verthandi

Verthandi is the south land, bound by the southern pole, the Mithgard Mountains and New Rockies. Home to the Ganoob Jungle, Navraji Desert and the southern Ukari reservation of Mwerri Apada, Verthandi tests the newcomer. The human cities of Navarre, Lofar and Nitha are located here, as are huge al-Malik estates and forests (Embla Wood and Verde Alto), where the great hunting expeditions gather. Except for Navarre, the culture is fairly rugged, and I recommend that cultivated travelers stock up on supplies and literature in Navarre, as Lofar and Nitha are uncultured towns. It was here that the great Skerra cats were genetically bred for my family from Urth tiger stock. They make excellent hunters and pets. Some have gone wild, and the old ruins are filled with them.

The freemen here, as in Nimerica, are largely self-sufficient. The Ukari tend to be more xenophobic than their northern cousins, keeping to themselves and, aside from a few trading posts, are largely unseen. They hold to family-clan allegiances, and a clan matriarch or patriarch settles disputes and calls for arms as the need arises. Mwerri Apada, and the Ganoob especially, are not places to travel alone or lightly prepared.

A great humanoid face looks out of Aylon's Navraji Desert. Seen from space, the mysterious face, carved by





Anunnaki eons ago, resembles the ancestral Ur-Obun/Ur-Ukar stock. When the Ukari landed, they rejoiced, believing the gigantic carving to be a representation of the Sons of Rillos, warrior gods native to Obun/Ukar mythology. Stretching 200 miles across, the face covers some amazing ruins, believed by xenologists to be an ancient transportation center. Named the Ur-City of Navrajji, the higher ruins have been largely explored, but deeper in the earth there lie treasures yet to be discovered. My family is attempting, with the aid of friendly Ukari, further digs. The Ukari maintain it is a holy place, dedicated to their gods. Some state that the deeper levels keep something imprisoned, a mad spirit they refer to as Tlak-tlakin, who attempted to create sentients in his own image and so was banished.

The Ganoob jungle holds wildlife indigenous to Aylon. While human settlements border the jungle, none are within, for the place is too hazardous. Brother Battle holds three monasteries and a fief west of the Ganoob, called St. Abernathy. It is mainly a training ground for the Church warriors. Commander Moriarty, a battle-tested veteran, runs the fief as an armed camp. He complained to me about the cost and effort of saving unprepared pilgrims and tourists from the local predators. In these jungles, roaming biradialites and carnivorous mobile tree-like creatures mingle with palm and fern and rainforest wildlife to produce one of the most dangerous habitats in the Known Worlds.

Stretching 1,000 miles north to south, and at places 500 miles across, the Ganoob is a favorite hunting ground of visiting nobles and wealthy hunters, but even many of these high-tech parties never return. The Golden Safari, run by Count Dabir ibn Dawud, takes visiting hunters into the jungle. The great river Natara runs from here into the Southern Sea. At times, wildlife from the jungles emerges and wreaks havoc on neighboring human habitations. The Amaltheans are studying the healing properties of certain Ganoob wildlife, and have a mission where the Natara exits the jungle.

These southern jungles are home to some of the most bizarre life in the Known Worlds. Sister Aranka of the Amaltheans and Count Dabir ibn Dawud, of my family, explained the wildlife at the latter's zoo. The radial shaped, one-eyed "slekkers" can leap 20 feet in one jump, and their bite draws blood. The only Urth life that slekkers remotely resemble are long-legged spiders, except that slekkers possess one eye on top of a radial center, and can absorb sunlight, water and carbon dioxide through photosynthesis. Many explorers have thought these green dangling objects to be leaves until their sudden attack. Some species, notably the Huntsman Slekker, famous for its black patches, are poisonous and travel in huge swarms, devouring everything in their path. Plagues of these creatures have darkened the ground and wiped out entire villages in 20 minutes.

Reaper

Body: Strength 15, Dexterity 6, Endurance 10

Mind: Wits 1, Perception 4, Tech 0

Natural Skills: Dodge 2, Fight 8, Impress 8, Observe 8, Sneak 4, Vigor 10

Weapons: Medusas (arms/branches — treat like clubs), mouths (dissolving saliva, treat as acid: 4d per turn for three turns), teeth (3 DMG)

Armor: 4

Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Torgon

Body: Strength 19, Dexterity 5, Endurance 12

Mind: Wits 2, Perception 4, Tech 0

Natural Skills: Dodge 2, Fight 7, Observe 5, Vigor 8

Weapons: Arms, teeth (7 DMG)

Armor: 7d

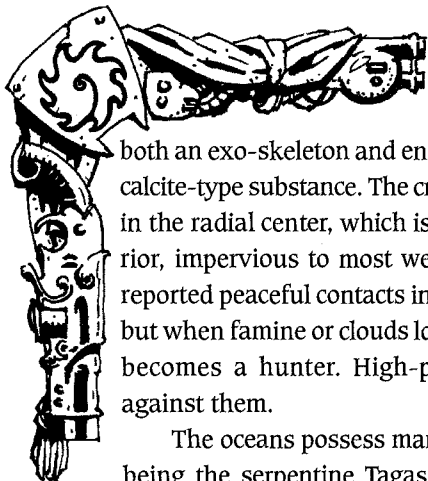
Vitality: -10/-8/-6/-4/-2/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/0

Reapers are mobile organisms resembling primitive, pre-flowering trees. These 40 feet tall mobile organisms root themselves into the ground, nourishing themselves off the soil, water and sunlight, and then uproot themselves to walk on slithering root-legs to newer areas. Their leathery, serpentine green arm-branches can grasp mobile prey and push it to its many mouths — resembling tree holes — on the "trunk." The arm-branches (dubbed medusas) can stretch up to 60 feet. Upon the medusas are thousands of tiny little eyes, protected by lids, which guide the Reaper toward its prey.

The creatures are more animal than plant, but create food from photosynthesis as well as by devouring other organisms. They reproduce sexually, and their young resemble mobile, terrestrial starfish. Reaper anatomy displays a primitive central nervous system, located in the thickest portion of the trunk, although the muscles resemble more mobile cortices. Xenologists classify Reapers as part of their own kingdom, biradials. Forests of Reapers have been known to invade habitable areas, and hunting parties have vanished after reporting via radio the sight of hundreds of mobile trees moving toward them.

Torgons are the terror of Aylon. Possessing 12 leathery legs protruding from an upraised radial center, covered with eyes facing every direction outward, the torgon grows to elephant size in the great jungles. Shooting out from above and below the radial center is a series of octopus-like arms, which can grasp and pull prey toward the many mouths which lie beneath the central eye-filled radius.

Torgons are omnivores. They can run at 40 MPH, and can switch directions on the instant. Like the Reapers, their green arms can process sunlight into food. The legs have



both an exo-skeleton and endo-skeleton composed of a hard calcite-type substance. The creatures have seven small brains in the radial center, which is protected by a hard shell exterior, impervious to most weapons. Some xenologists have reported peaceful contacts in times of great sunlight (noon), but when famine or clouds long obscure the light, the torgon becomes a hunter. High-powered weapons are needed against them.

The oceans possess many biradials, the most fearsome being the serpentine Tagas, covered with eyes and small mouths. Tagas seem to have evolved from a radial center into a swiftly striking life form, although they also feed off sunlight. The largest reach 100 feet in length. They each have a primary mouth with sharp teeth-like rippers. A distant relative is the Hydra, a floating radial island with numerous serpentine feeding arms, each covered in eyes and mouths. The largest of these have grown to 200 feet in circumference.

Gjallnar

Separated from Verthandi in the south by the New Rockys, Gjallnar is home to the largest Ukari reservation on the planet, Mwerrid Mokta, largely dominated by traditionalist clans. It is not wise to visit this region unless you have an Ukari guide. The human population in Gjallnar largely consists of herders, ranchers and farmers (freemen and serfs), dwelling in small isolated homesteads or towns, save in Vancuvyr and Sunval. I found that it takes time for the natives to open up, but if you practice patience, you can win them over. Vancuvyr is a wild city; Ukari traders and human merchants create a rowdy mix in the city's bars, and her small policing authority has its hands full. Conquered in the recent rebellion by the traditionalists, she was retaken in the war's final days.

Sunval, the planetary capital on the Itha peninsula, is a green terraformed city surrounded by desert. She possesses some of the largest gambling casinos in the Known Worlds, and all the things that come with gambling, including underground criminal organizations. Aylon is a family, and once accepted, you are in, but if not, you are forever *agnabee*, the outsider. The Tawell Palace houses the governor, and the Sunval Greenway rivals Ryoko markets in shopping and bargaining. The population is 800,000, with a sizable Ukari presence in the Maga District. Scrauers, Reeves and the Muster have large recruiting offices and operations here.

Governor Nudara consented to see me early after my arrival on Aylon. Mistrusting my motives until she cleared them with the Imperial authorities, Baroness Nudara presents a bold relief as a confident ruler with an independent streak. When the Ukari revolt came, most of Aylon's military was off-world, fighting for the Emperor. Nudara successfully saved the small home defense forces of human/

Ukari by strategically refusing major battles with the rebels, instead shadowing their movements and drawing them out from their supply bases on the reservations. When her forces lost battles, they always escaped annihilation by strategic retreats. After the wars Nudara redoubled the Ukari training of her forces. Rumors state she is a Third Republican and is attempting to create an army to back her goals. Her husband, Sir Jonathan Hawkwood, was slain in the Siege of Jericho off Byzantium Secundus, as was Aristid Justinian, my betrothed.

Bash'ir Vordwed is matriarch of the largest traditional Ukari clan; she became clan leader upon the death of her brother Taval at the Battle of Sunval. Living in luxurious splendor in Mwerrid Mokta, surrounded by a court of lesser clans, she regally greeted me, but already knew I was writing about local conditions. "Write this in your book," she said. "Despite our past differences, the governor and I see eye-to-eye today. She has increased traditionalist representation on the council and is a loyal subject to the Emperor." Clearly left out was any reference to Duke Hakim. Her court of Ukari shamans, guards and traditionalist must be seen to be believed.

Oceans/Seas

The Vithar is the northern sea; ships ply the lumber and fish trade. Ukari boats also take to the waves. On her southern coasts stand the great vineyards and agricultural estates of the al-Malik.

The Mari Sea is surrounded by the richest farmland on Aylon, and here the serfs farm the great estates while small freemen fishers harvest her riches. The Mari Canal opens her to the Sawal Sea, where Ryoko awaits as a gateway. Called the Sunlit Sea, here native Aylon biological forms dominate the waters. In the north she is a calm ocean, but in the south great storms wreak havoc on the coasts.

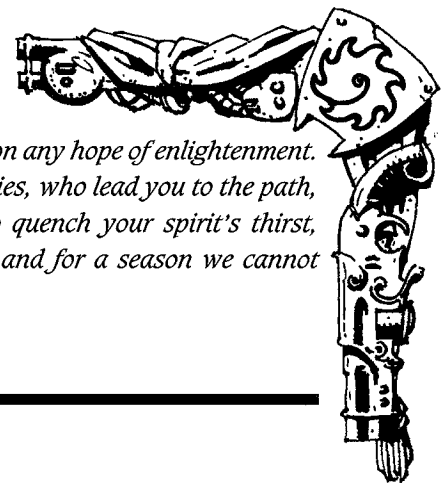
Aylon's greatest ocean, the Rhea, is home to both Aylon and Urth sea-life, with the Aylon life holding dominance in the equatorial and southern regions. Some pirating occurs in the Verde Alto region, largely the work of human families turned to preying on merchant shipping.

Sharifah's Tips

1. The al-Malik sparkler is the ruling currency, although firebirds, Li Halan and Decados currency are accepted at slightly deflated value in Sunval. Sunval casinos, while possessing everything from Second Republic water fountains to circuses, do not often have visible time pieces. Also, if you win, the major houses will provide security. Beware of con games on the side streets.

2. It is alright to bear arms on Aylon, even for serfs, for Aylon's dangers are many. Weapons have to be registered, however, with the al-Malik authorities.

3. When hunting in the southern jungles, go with a large



group and get an experienced guide.

4. Do not go alone onto the Ukari reservations. Get a native guide. However, if you discount this advice, and find yourself surrounded by Ukari, say "Adim amog tana," which translates to "I am looking for a place to die." They will not bother those looking for a sacred spot to end this life.

*Out of the Garden, abandon any hope of enlightenment.
Be Grateful to even your enemies, who lead you to the path,
and use all evils as water to quench your spirit's thirst,
urging it onward. It is dark, and for a season we cannot
find the Friend.*

Istakhr

*Silent as shadows stretched across the land
I reached out to touch the Prophet's Hand
But the touch is for a second in time's womb
Which decays beneath Istakhr's shifting sand
For what is life to the endless desert hills
That shift in the wind while the Reaper tills
Great Vladimir from his throne, and Rahimat's desire
For all born in time the Reaper kills
Istakhr's sands ripple in a windy wave
Istakhr's sands neither damn nor save
The Prophet's wine is spilled, and in the end
Istakhr's sands will be the Reaper's Grave
— Miyit, by Tahir Majnur al-Malik the Doomed*

My home planet is largely a desert world. Once, this was not so. Still, humans live here, and the Istakhr Market — one of the largest agoras in the Known Worlds — brings riches flowing into the al-Malik coffers.

History

The shadows stretch across the sand dunes, engulfing the individual in an ocean of desert waves. Strong sun and blue skies stretch over the horizon, forever. Eventually, the individual becomes lost, diminished, *magnoon* — crazy, we natives say. You see the sand and it is more powerful than the small self climbing her endless, shifting patterns. Upon death, our bones join her, whittled by the wind's relentless sculpture until our dust mingles, engulfed in a lover's eternal embrace. Past, present and future all meet here at a singular point, and all sentient accomplishments eventually sink here, forgotten, or rise as mirages of infinite possibilities, only to shimmer and fade with the change of the wind.

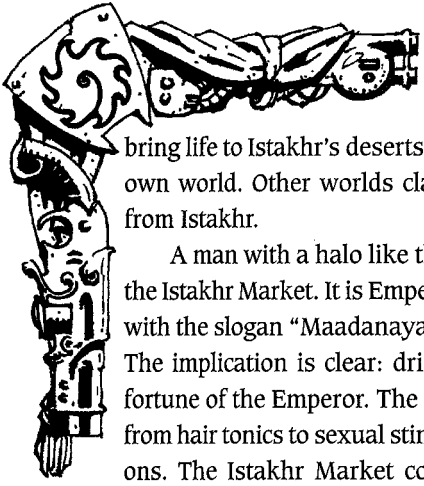
Fee es sahara, "in the desert," the nomads say, trying to explain her power. How to set down a history upon such a changing entity, the cousin of time herself? Images: A woman with a serpent, nailed to an upright pentagram; a wind-demon holding the torch of fertility before a kneeling couple; and a sleeping empress on her throne, surrounded by baying dogs. This is Istakhr's history, a labyrinth where old skins are shed to test an intruder's power.

Let us start with the woman and the snake, the progenitor of so many fables: the Ur-Ukar landed here, settling in the north, guided by this vision, which they took to mean that the place held the secret of eternity. They met Mwatta, last of the Shadow People, whom they called the spirit of Istakhr. The Ukari shamans attempted to conquer her by calling upon the power of Anikrunta, but Mwatta shed her skin and slithered away into the vast deserts. Angered, the Ukari psychics sought to contain her on a pentagram, and succeeded in imprisoning her, but she foretold their eventual doom on the desert world.

Most of the Ukari left to fight a civil war on their homeworld. A few remained about the arctic circle, regressing to a life of hunting and agriculture, delving into deep caves. New footsteps appeared on the sand, human colonists and explorers from Aylon and Stigmata. Early settlements were buried in the desert winds; records were lost; a fragment from a Diasporan map names the planet Rehla; an old spaceship is unearthed with a map in old Arabic. Istakhr is always dreaming of somewhere else, a home left behind or a mirage to come.

My father took me to the great library of Samarkand. Ancient books, printed in old Urth languages, pointed to settlers from Holy Terra's Middle-East and African zones. A great city, Tyre, was built (2745-59), controlled by the Shar al-Din, a merchant family hailing from Lebanon. Tyre fell to the Dunama dynasty, African aristocrats who looked to that continent's past for names and glory. In 2833-47, clans Hashin, Jamsheed and Jawhar united in sacking and destroying "the Tower of Babel." Truly, Tyre was a Tower of Babel, for it held the only spaceport and off-world communications center, and with her destruction off-world shipping practically ceased and no centralized government remained. A remnant of the Dunama peoples trekked south, and created the cities of Kanem and Biran.

Rumors state that the most famous world architect, Doramos of Tyre, who came from one of the desert tribes, often visited Tyre's ruins, examining the old terraforming machinery. He lived here as a young man, and vowed to



bring life to Istakhr's deserts, but left, never to terraform his own world. Other worlds claim him as a native, but he is from Istakhr.

A man with a halo like the sun ripples from a banner in the Istakhr Market. It is Emperor Alexius, raising up a sword, with the slogan "Maadanaya," or "Mineral Water," below it. The implication is clear: drink our water and share in the fortune of the Emperor. The Emperor's face sells everything from hair tonics to sexual stimulants, breakfast rolls to weapons. The Istakhr Market co-ops everything, swallows an image, casts it into a thousand items of value, and ultimately discards it to the desert winds.

The Market itself, the most famous bazaar in the Known Worlds, began as a trading post about Lake Medina, fed by subterranean waters. Here the desert clans began to trade with the cultivated settlers from Najran, and the Istakhr Market grew. Within a short time, Clan Hashin seized the area (2950). To control the growing riches of the market, they began the construction of Samarkand City, originally little more than a walled town built to contain the market. Today, it offers everything. My aunt's suq, *Dakhal Dahab* in the New Market, offers items from weapons to clothing; all are of the highest value. She only sells copyrighted images of the Emperor, so Emperor Alexius gains in the sale of items licensed in his name.

Two lovers hold a cup: it is an early al-Malik image symbolizing their unification with the Beloved (the Pancreator). Where did my family come from? The al-Malik were wool sellers (*soqf*) and interstellar merchants, settling in the great eastern desert of Es-Sahara. The founder was one Hamal, his family one of many desert clans. What made them unique was the marriage of Munir ibn Tarif, the Great Scientist's granddaughter, Almira, to Saqr al-Malik. Tarif had fled Criticorum and settled on Istakhr, and his plans called for the enlightenment of humanity to the next evolutionary level, referred to as the *Nehaya*, or the End-Point. He tampered with his own genetic code to give to his offspring the chance to change evolution's grip; it is said that he saw the future fading of the suns and sought to create a genetic code which would allow humanity a means of escape. Legends state that Tarif went to battle with the demons who were devouring the stars, and was taken up in a great storm, while others said a sudden freakish flood swept him away. The spot is still there, Hagar Tarif, Tarif's Rock. The truth? The desert swallowed his bones long ago.

A shadow fell across the market when the Ukari returned, and their northern kinsmen aided them in conquering the planet. The Ukari destroyed Clan Hashid, and set up a rival clan, al-Amar, to rule in their stead. They never conquered the interior clans, since desert warfare was wasteful, and their conquest was a sham: a holding area around Samarkand, while outside the desert tribes roamed at will.

The Ukari welcomed in the Bashshar Corporation, who developed their transportation networks. When the Ukari lost the war and were moved to their small reservation in the north, the Bashshar Corporation remained. So the al-Amar power, without the Ukari, fell, and Istakhr became an economic colony of Criticorum.

Two lovers holding the cup kneel before the wind demon, the Afreet of the desert. The male lover is the liberator of Istakhr, Arif al-Malik the Faithful (3390-3480). He wandered into the desert at 22 and beheld a vision, where Munir ibn Tarif's will was revealed to him. He began preaching in the Istakhr Market, telling people to open their hearts to the Pancreator and cast off old ways and notions. His followers named themselves the White Dancers, or *Malwa*. Arif studied on Shaprut, and wrote works appealing to idealism and democratic government. Upon returning to Istakhr, he allied himself with the Ikhwaam ("brothers"), fierce desert tribes who opposed the rule of the Bashshar leader, Nawar Caspiri. They overwhelmed her mercenaries and Arif lead a huge multitude into Samarkand.

Nawar Caspiri is the woman in the image. She sent two assassins to kill Arif. They converted to his message. She landed on Istakhr to control matters, but Arif marched into the capital and declared himself, before the cheers of the crowd, the First Representative of the Universal Republic. Istakhr was his, and the populace named him Duke of Istakhr. Caspiri expected death from the victor, but once she saw him, the veil was lifted. Instantly, she understood his message and loved him, and they wed. The Bashshar corporate power came under the control of the al-Malik. The Wind Demon is Istakhr, pacified by the lovers.

The al-Malik wealth came from Arif's marriage with Nawar, and later grew with his grandson's marriage into the Ramakrishna family. With two strategic marriages, a family of wool merchants gained Istakhr, Criticorum and Shaprut. The pedigree charts, proving descent from the Kings of Persia, rulers of Arabia and the ancient House of David, came later. Wealth can buy noble ancestry, a lesson not lost on the Hazat or Decados.

My ancestors moved to Criticorum and Shaprut during the Second Republic, although they had fiefs on Istakhr, and some remained, rural nobility. Power fell into the hands of the Cestmir noble family, bankers who carved themselves a kingdom during the New Dark Ages. My family returned when Rahimat, the Lion of Shaprut, invaded (4460). He needed the riches of the Istakhr Market, and stated that Istakhr was his bride and the Market his bride-piece. His forces annihilated the Cestmir armies in a ruthless two-month war, and Rahimat executed the entire family save for the poet Lysander. The fierce strength of Rahimat energized Istakhr, and he placed Samarkand as the capital of his empire, to be near the Market, which was in the shadow of his



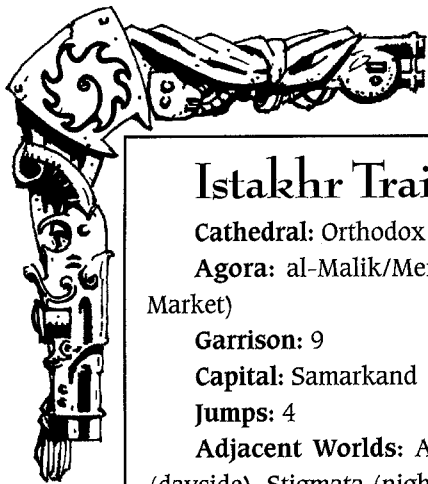
palace. We are still in his shadow. Incidentally, Lysander composed his best poetry after the invasion. The haunting work *Blossom Labyrinth* struggles with the question of culture and meaning in sentient life.

The rest is a litany. Asim al-Malik attempted to recreate the Republic, but perished in battle on Byzantium Secundus (4490). Then of course there is that brilliant, melancholic figure, Tahir Majnun al-Malik the Doomed (4530-93). Although an usurper, he was initially popular on Istakhr through his tax codes and generosity to the poor. He created my family's internal police, the Mutasih, by combining several Istakhr Market police agencies into one. He was also the first al-Malik to heavily augment his forces with Ukari. Both these traditions continue to this day. Tahir wed his own sister, and worshiped the feminine force he believed to be the goddess of the void (al-Mannat). As his beliefs became widespread, so did the royal plots against him. Finally, Ja'far ben Sinhijah al-Malik from Criticorum landed. The two armies clashed at Mu'tasim Field. Tahir's Ukari tore into the Criticorum line, but one of Tahir's human captains, Zaki, turned traitor, aiding the Criticorum force at a crucial moment. Tahir's human retainers fled, and he himself escaped the rout, to perish in the jumpgate seeking al-Mannat beyond the void.

The Criticorum rule began brilliantly. Actors, scholars, dancers, people of culture flocked to Istakhr. Samarkand

became truly cosmopolitan. Terraforming began again, to arrest the ravishment of the desert. It was a hopeful time, but after Rustam, the line declined. One Nabil al-Malik, a distant cousin of the ruling family, was exiled for criticizing the tax system. He and his Shaprut-born wife, Atalia, found refuge on Aragon. Their daughter, Al-Abassah, named Claudia, grew up studying Hazat warfare. When she was 24 (4827), Claudia gathered some Hazat forces, augmented by exiled al-Malik and mercenaries. Feigning an attack on Aylon, she escaped the enemy net and landed on Istakhr. In seven months she defeated the forces of Duke Sufyan and forced him into exile, taking his lands and power. Her son, Jabir al-Malik the Golden (4850-4940), began the Diwan, or land tax, which lessened the tax burden on the poor. He was truly a great man of learning, increasing the universities and reviving the old Republican codes. Unfortunately, the Symbiot Wars cut into his plans, siphoning off money.

Today, his grandson rules, Duke Hakim, the Eagle of Istakhr. An eagle recognizes powerful enemies but soars above them. Duke Hakim allied with Alexius during the recent wars. After hard years of battle, where my family fought on Aylon, Criticorum and Byzantium Secundus, exultant in their victories and those of their Hawkwood allies, they settled down to the victor's table. Duke Hakim al-Malik received trading rights on the Imperial Worlds and any new worlds to be opened up. Thus, the al-Malik stand enriched



Istakhr Traits

Cathedral: Orthodox (St. Horace)

Agora: al-Malik/Merchant League (The Istakhr Market)

Garrison: 9

Capital: Samarkand

Jumps: 4

Adjacent Worlds: Aylon (dayside), Malignatius (dayside), Stigmata (nightside)

Solar System: Shams (sun), Hareera (0.237 AU), Metarrab (0.467 AU; 2 moons), Orroba (0.683 AU; 1 moon), Istakhr (0.976 AU; Waha), Dahab (5.311 AU; 2 moons), Harb (9.503 AU; 7 moons), Malik (15.113 AU; 13 moons), Sifr (32.893 AU), Jumpgate (44 AU)

Tech: 6

Human Population: 225,000,000 (estimated)

Alien Population: 4,000,000 (Ukari on reservation, aliens in Samarkand/Istakhr market)

Resources: Iron, aluminum, fossilized fuels, gold, diamonds

Exports: Mineral wealth (diamond, gold, silver), agriculture, fossilized fuel, processed steel, hi-tech household items, weapons, spacecraft, market items, solar converters, robotics.

Landscape: Most of the planet is desert or mountains. Limited terraforming occurs in the south to encourage widening of the temperate zone. Volcanic activity is present in the Gharb Gabel Mountains.

by their support for Emperor Alexius, and are among the greatest proponents for new exploration.

But back to Istakhr and the images. The woman is the present. She is an idle empress in the noon of her power; her riches sap her drive. The dogs bay at the moon, attempting to wake her. What threat comes from the lunar orb? The moon is night, reflected light, dreams, the puller of the tides of history. Her light reveals a woman, nailed to a pentagram, with a snake (the barrier of wisdom, immortality), while somewhere two lovers forever whisper vows before the waiting sand-demon, *Afreet*, who arrives with the desert wind. Listening, the dogs hear his approach, the snake opens the triad eye, and the woman must rise to embrace him, the circular demon, pregnant with history. In the end, the sand buries all, until death perishes due to the absence of death, and a seed sprouts anew on the fields of vibrating energy. The answer is in the riddle poised by the *Shams Reef*, the desert wind which blows at furious speed. Listen, there she is, entropy's breath. Have you answered her riddle?

Solar System

Hareera: A small planet close to the massive star of

Shams, Hareera is too hot for habitation.

Metarrab: Covered with clouds, the carbon dioxide atmosphere reflects the sun, giving the small world (0.72 Istakhr mass) the appearance of a star in the sky.

Orroba: 0.89 of Istakhr's mass, Orroba's ancient life was destroyed during violent meteor storms. A fraction of the planet, undergoing terraforming, is under the administration of the al-Malik.

Istakhr: Istakhr is older and slightly larger than Urth, with a diameter of 13,320 km. Her moon of Waha houses several military bases for the protection of the al-Malik homeworld.

Dahab: A thin atmosphere of carbon dioxide covers this rocky planet, which is only slightly smaller than Istakhr. Some domed mining operations and listening posts dot the planet's exterior, as well as the dreaded domed prison of Hagz.

Harb: Among the largest gas giants in the Known Worlds, Harb has a diameter of 160,230 km.

Malik: Malik's green rings, floating above blue methane clouds, create an aesthetic appearance when seen from space. Two of her moons, Babylon and Medina, are military bases, guarding the jumpgate beyond Sifr.

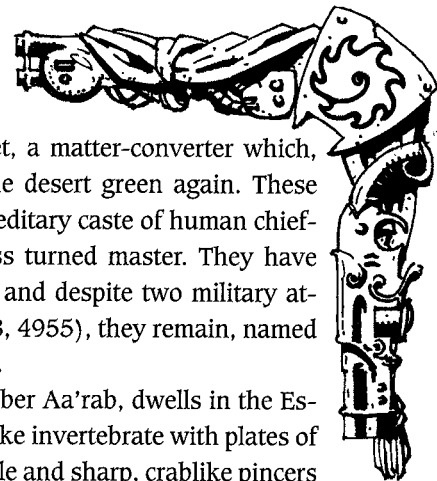
Sifr: A cold, small planet, Sifr's geological history remains puzzling, as her formations suggest an origin outside the Shams solar system. Conditions there are too harsh for all but the most sturdy monitoring equipment.

People & Places

Istakhr possesses one continent that bears the planet's name, but the deserts and green regions denote specific areas of local importance. Each desert has a name — Es-sahara, Gamid, Ramal and Afid — and the winds whisper their unique importance while she mingles their sands. The green swards, hugging the polar seas of Laly and Shamal in the north and Fada in the south, are Mesechee Ahkdar, Eswida, Najran and Harat. The great landlocked saltwater sea of Bahr El Azoma is large enough to be seen from space, as are the freshwater lakes of Medina and Harat.

Najran

Bordering the Laly, or Night Sea, Najran is the northern green sward largely settled by people of old Urth Persian descent. Baran is a city famous for her bards, artisans and fishers. Great farms dot the north lands, but not enough to feed all of Istakhr. Food is brought in from Shaprut and Aylon. The people of Baran are very hospitable and cultivated. Duke Hakim's son, Amir, rules the fief from his palace in Najran. A man of restless energy, Amir is a hunter, sportsman and martial artist of accomplishment. I found him highly entertaining, if not somewhat removed from the responsibilities of ruling. In short, the handsome Amir is a playboy, roman-



tically linked with a half-dozen women of the great houses; his current companion is Lady Shiao Li Halan. His father hopes that actual governing will give his son a taste of responsibility. Time will test Amir.

Harat

Najran ends west of the Ukari reservation of Mwerriid Usdid. Ruled by Dwanind Sijgayek, the Ukari are superficially polite but keep largely to themselves. A mixed al-Malik/Ukari force polices the reservation. The reservation covers both green and desert lands, and the population lives in small towns or in interlocking cavern cities carved from the interior. Many Istakhr Ukari feel abandoned by their Kordeth and Aylon kindred, and join the al-Malik armies as a way of escaping grinding poverty.

To the east stands the violent mining and fishing town of Shiraz on the Shamal Sea. Here men outnumber women and whaling fleets hunt the Coral Whales native to the region. I received nine marriage proposals in my two-day visit, and the men weren't intimidated by my royal rank and weapon skill. It reminded me, unfavorably, of the ice-planet Malignatius.

Es-Sahara

South of Harat is the great Es-Sahara Desert, a largely untraveled region of fierce sandstorms and trackless dunes. Only the hardest caravans cross here. Bandits dwell here, as well as the genetic mutations of Sekander. Al-Malik forces patrol the region, but by the time they respond to most radio signals for help, the damage has been done. Mt. Mecca, in the Tawel Mountains, is the highest mountain on Istakhr; at her feet lies the ruins of the first planetary capital of Tyre. The Bahr El Aozma's eastern shore divides the Es-Sahara from the Afid Desert, as does the Ashia Mountains in the east.

I should explain Sekander, a cautionary tale known across the Known Worlds. During the Second Republic, wealthy plutocrats built the floating city of Sekander, engineered to hover above the clouds, an aesthetic paradise where the upper classes could live in a leisure world untouched by uncouth outsiders. In 3810 she rose, a self-supporting pleasure dome where miracle drugs, longevity sciences and body-sculptors kept an idle race of would-be gods happy. When the Second Republic fell, the technology which kept the city afloat slowly faltered. For 400 years the city sustained the avian heights, but the population, isolated, became inbred. Sciences which once beautified them broke down, altering them into misshapen monstrosities. A revolution among the servant class saw the downfall of the city masters, and the city descended into the sands of the Es-Sahara desert. Today, a race of monstrosities clings to her ruins. They are hostile to strangers and zealously guard the city, which they

believe contains a great secret, a matter-converter which, once unearthed, will make the desert green again. These people are ruled over by a hereditary caste of human chieftains, the former servant class turned master. They have been known to rob caravans, and despite two military attempts to wipe them out (4788, 4955), they remain, named the *Morif* by the desert people.

The Istakhr Scorpion, Keeber Aa'rab, dwells in the Es-Sahara. It is a large centipedelike invertebrate with plates of armor, a poisonous stinging tale and sharp, crablike pincers that tear into flesh. Feeding off sand-hoppers until the Urth/Ukari peoples came, the Keebar Aa'rab have adapted nicely to new food sources. Swimming below the sands, they emerge quickly and can move as fast as 30 MPH to catch prey. Their sting is poisonous, although survivors can develop an immunity. Reaching as long as seven feet, they first immobilize their prey with poison before feasting. Smaller prey they eat instantly; larger prey they devour over time, sometimes letting a victim live only to later discover larvae hatching within him. Some tales from the deep desert report monsters up to 20 feet.

Afid Desert

The Ashia Mountains offer the Afid some protection from the winds; vegetation grows in places here. Lake Medina, fed by underwater springs and the Zawiya River, was recently recreated due to the terraforming efforts of Duke Hakim. On the northwest shore of Lake Medina stands Samarkand, Queen of Istakhr, and the Istakhr Market, the most diverse bazaar in the Known Worlds.

On the northeastern shore of the Bahr El Azoma stands the city of Faraon, jointly governed by the Merchant League and al-Malik. High-tech ship yards and industry abound in Faraon's industrial sector. In the green lands about the Tikliamisha River, which feeds the Great Sea, you will find my father's estate, a lush paradise surrounded by desert.

Samarkand is the glittering capital of the al-Malik worlds, and the great Istakhr Market lies in her shadow.

Keeber Aa'rab, Istakhr Scorpion

Body: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Endurance 4

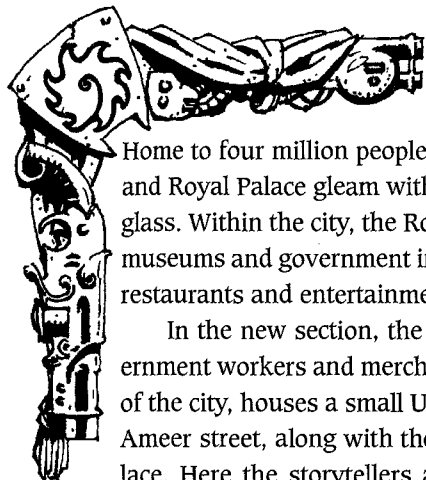
Mind: Wits 2, Perception 3, Tech 0

Natural Skills: Dodge 4, Fight 3, Observe 5, Sneak 9, Vigor 4

Weapons: Pincher Claws (5 DMG), Poison (3 DMG then paralysis. Roll End+Vigor each turn: success staves off effects for that turn; once 12 victory points are collected, victim is immune to poison. Once prey is immobilized, scorpion can feast or insert eggs.)

Armor: 5d

Vitality: -9/-6/-3/-1/0/0/0/0



Home to four million people, her giant Parliament Building and Royal Palace gleam with the rich hues of multi-colored glass. Within the city, the Royal Way is home to embassies, museums and government institutions, as well as the finest restaurants and entertainment available on Istakhr.

In the new section, the *Gadeed*, live many of the government workers and merchants. The *Eladeema*, or old part of the city, houses a small Ukari population, some Obun on Ameer street, along with the poorer segments of the populace. Here the storytellers and poets pry their trade, and Zuranists, Incarnates and other obscure sects live without fear of persecution.

The Great Church of St. Horace, the patron saint of Istakhr, reaches to the sky, overshadowing the *Eladeema*. On the great hills above the *Gadeed*, called the *Aolow*, stand many princely palaces and mansions belonging to the guilds and members of the al-Malik family. Carefully guarded, the gossip emanating from *Aolow* is said to be priceless, and once you have been invited within her gates, you have, as they say, arrived.

Archbishop Taraleng, Leader of the Metropilae of Aylon, Criticorum, Istakhr, Shaprut and Kordeth, dwells here. Strikingly regal, Archbishop Taraleng began life as a serf's daughter. She rose through the Church to one of the highest levels. The archbishop is not pleased with Duke Hakim's liberal attitude regarding matters of faith. But, to her credit, she attempts to win over strayers not by force but with learned arguments in the Mahayana tradition. Rumors whisper that she is one of the candidates to replace the ailing Patriarch Hezekiah, and her charismatic personality has won her many allies. I had met her as a child; unfortunately, matters of the Church on Byzantium Secundus kept us from meeting during my home visit.

Duke Hakim al-Malik welcomed me home to Samarkand. Hakim is wise, although in politics practical rather than visionary. Even in the worst days of the Emperor Wars he kept the Market economically afloat. A tolerant man, Hakim accepts all faiths. The Church is not pleased with this, but Hakim is too strong, and he finds that toleration reaps economic profit. Persecuted people tend to work harder when given the chance, and prove their loyalty if given a stake in the system. His wife, Duchess Yusara al-Malik, is a great patroness of the arts.

Only 22 when Hakim ascended the ducal throne of Samarkand, he proved to be wiser than his enemies thought. He destroyed a coup begun by his cousin Ra'id with a swift two-day battle in the city. Ever the realist, he allied the al-Malik with the Hawkwoods once Alexius rose to power. Eloquent in speech and regal in bearing, the imposing ruler is master of his house, and secure in his position. Seizing new opportunities and multifaceted in reaching his political objectives, Hakim keeps a close eye on troubles within his fam-

ily and on the Imperial Court. The only shadow on the horizon is in the Emperor's seeming reluctance to wed our kinswoman, Theafana al-Malik. Duke Hakim has two surviving sons; Amir is the heir-apparent.

Gharbsahar Desert

The unfriendly desert, the Gharbsahar is home to violent sandstorms and earthquakes. The town of Mostabul is an oasis for caravans traveling the Samarkand-Biran route. Governed by the duke's uncle, Count Rashidi, it stands in the shadow of the Gharb Gebel mountains. A few shepherds live in the hills, and there are some expensive water-fed orchards, but wild packs of genetically-altered Vorox hounds roam in the upper mountains. I rid myself of one of these beasts only by blinding it with a flare — an experience far more frightening than the loss of my hand. Vorox hounds were bred from ancient Urth canine stock to protect settlers on Ungavorox from the dangers of that world, but their stock became popular among nobles and were soon bred on other worlds, including Istakhr. Vorox hounds hunt in packs and they can easily smell someone's approach. Their jaws can snap an arm right off, and it is said they can even take down a Vorox.

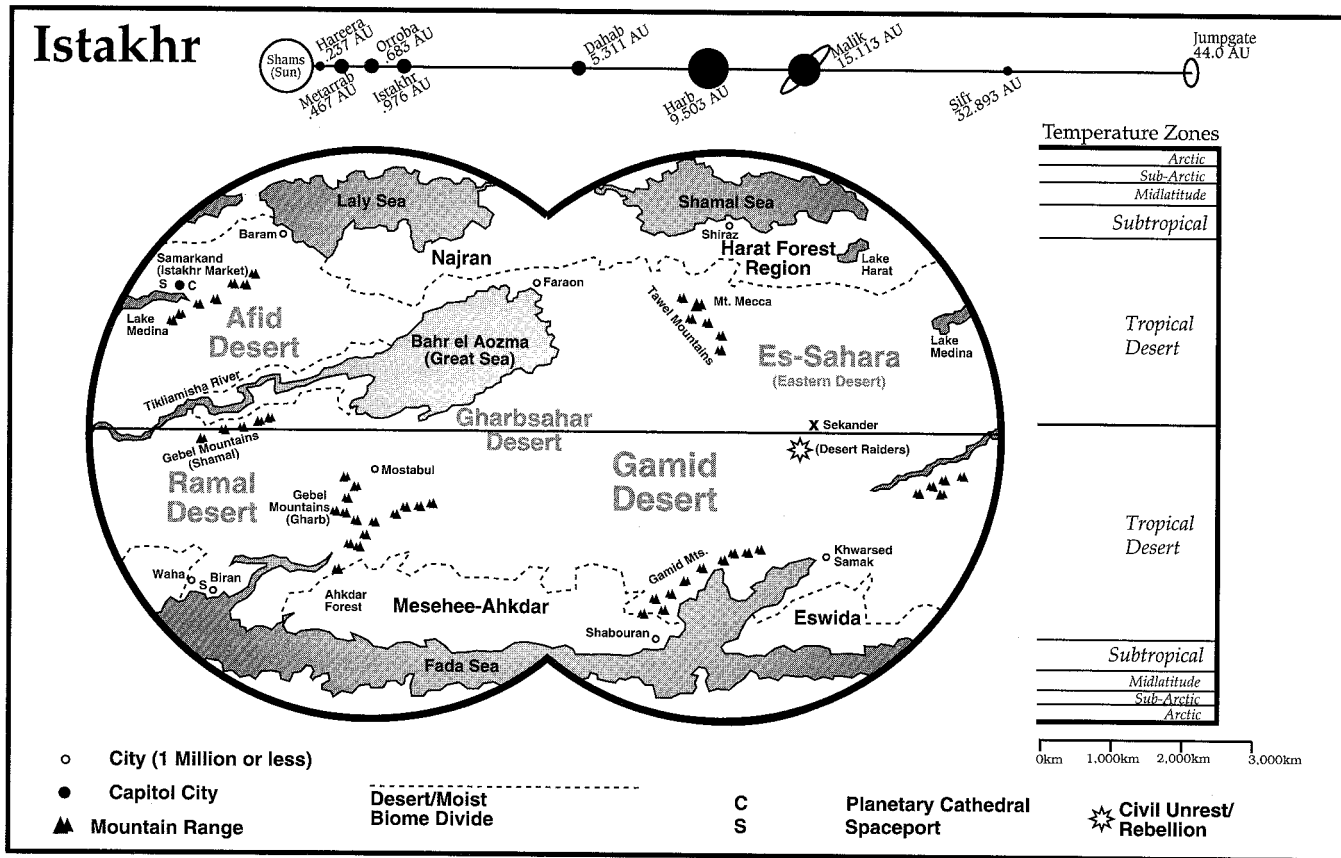
Gedamals are found here. One of the few indigenous mammals, Gedamals resemble larger versions of Urth camels, except they possess thicker legs and trunks which they use to find water sources below the sands. Three humps store water, and herds of these giant beasts roamed the deserts before humans domesticated them. Extremely intelligent, they possess tall legs and thick skin, designed to protect them from Istakhr scorpions. Their swift kicks and stomping patterns are instinctive protection against the scorpions.

Ramal desert

The Gharb Gebel Mountains shelter the Ramal, a region of beautiful vistas and red sands. Some League mining occurs here, as well as sensitive military training, so visitors are carefully watched. The natives are hardy people, free-men miners and hunters, who keep to their traditional ways in small communities. They live in tents and pursue a nomadic existence. Rumors of Ur ruins persist, and ghostly alien images haunt the night desert in areas.

Gamid Desert

The Gamid Desert borders the southern side of the Tikliamisha River and the outlying Gharb Gebel Mountains to the east. It is rumored that evil spirits walk the sands here, and some hold that St. Mantius cursed the region when its people called on an Afreet desert demon to slay the Prophet's messenger. I should add that the local Omah tribes are good scouts. The city of Khwardsod Samak, bordering



the Fada Sea, is a relief for the weary traveler. Here the southerners display lavish hospitality. The city is built on eight concentric circles, each rising above the previous one, and commands an excellent view of the Fada.

Eswida

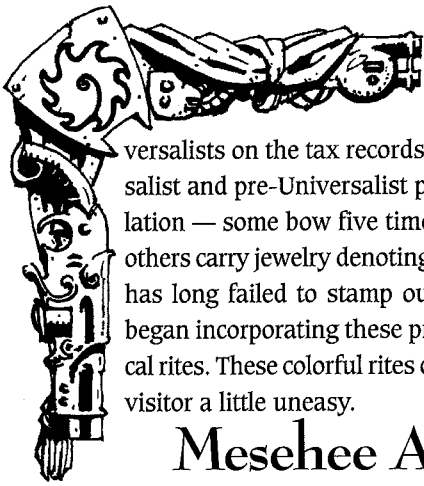
Where it is green, Istakhr farms. Eswida is no exception, and scientific farming on the al-Malik estates produces record crops. Baniko and Biran, cities ruled by local minor houses allied to the al-Malik, stand as monuments to the African descendants who migrated from Tyre. Both cities depend on herding, agriculture, weapons and ship production for their livelihoods. Now polyglot in population, African ancestry still predominates in Biran.

Prince Musa Dunama inherited the city-state of Biran upon the death of his father during the Emperor Wars. A confident, intellectual young man of rare courage, he is one of the fencing masters of the Known Worlds. Reforming many feudal codes, he looks to the new Emperor with hope and pride. A close ally of Duke Hakim, Prince Musa showed me the new University of Biran, where Charioteers and explorers teach would-be navigators about space exploration beyond the Known Worlds. The Charioteers hold much land in the region, although the guild and the princes of Biran recently warred. A tentative peace now holds.

Warfare occurs with the Shun tribes of the hills. De-

scendants from desert tribes, the Shun follow a warrior tradition and hold that they are descended from Vladimir Alecto, whom they worship as a war god. Little Church theology has entered their remote hills, and they are hostile to outsiders. The al-Malik and princes of Biran have warred with them for centuries, usually conquering the lowlands of Shun territory but never completely subduing the barbaric hillmen. They have access to some good weapons and even manufacture some of their own. They have recently been stirred up by two prophets, believed to be an Obun and Ukar working in unison. Reports are sketchy, but the Shun receive unusual help in psychic matters. The two Ur-children seem to come from a strange Obun-Ukar sect promoting ancient unity between the races.

Biran is built upon the Fada Sea, a magnificent city of white-walled architecture. The Dunama hold some of the richest farmland on southern Istakhr, and practice terraforming to increase the available agricultural production. The greatest oral storytellers of the Known Worlds are found in the Biran Suq, preserving legends of Old Urth handed down from generation to generation. The Muster recruits from here, and the Biran warriors form a feared contingent in the al-Malik armed forces. There are rumors of the "Old Ones" in the hills beyond, people still practicing ancient Urth religions, primitive villages of ancient Christians and Muslims, although the people are listed as Uni-



versalists on the tax records. Certainly a mixture of Universalist and pre-Universalist practices is present in the population — some bow five times a day toward old Urth, while others carry jewelry denoting fishes and crosses. The Church has long failed to stamp out these practices, and in 4800 began incorporating these pre-reflective notions into the local rites. These colorful rites can make a sophisticated Church visitor a little uneasy.

Mesehee Ahkdar

A fertile region of large al-Malik estates, it is home to the Ankdar Forest and Shabooran, the Dreaming City of the south. Shabooran is famous for her sea-harvesting farms, and is ruled by Count Najar Demai, whose father, a Shaprut native, was awarded the city for bravery during the Emperor Wars. Most people enjoy the heavy fogs and cool climate of Shabooran, as well as her bohemian districts and openness to strangers. Famous vineyards and monasteries are found within a day's ride of the city. It is rumored that St. Maya died here, atop Maya's Hill.

Sharifah's Tips

1. When visiting the Istakhr market or Samarkand, get a local guide. Secure items of value to your person, and avoid

the con games of "leisure world vacations" sold by well-dressed thieves within the market. Since Samarkand and the Market house all types of aliens and beliefs (yes, Incarnates and Zuranists are there) be polite when engaging in barter or conversation. The Mutasih headquarters is located within the Old Market, in the Administrative Building. Among various duties, they police the market for my family.

2. If you are traveling through the desert, dress appropriately and sign on with the larger caravans. Invest in water containers, coolants, and solar screen and illumination devices. Air travel is safer, although more expensive.

3. While currency exchange is common in the Istakhr Market, my family's sparkler's are top dog here. Hawkwood, Decados and Li Halan money fluctuates in value (the Li Halan money is amazingly stable and predictable), while Hazat currency is the loser, due to distance.

The arctic hawk is unseen in the snow. When the Mountain approaches, the Beloved ascends into the cloud-laden hills, and becomes lost. Climbing after, mist and clouds obscure the way, the moth has lost the flame. Finally, when effort leaves us a wasted ghost, We and the Beloved meet in the clouds, beating with one heart, where snowy caps loom like silk clouds. Descending to the markets and gardens, we feel the order in the heart of weeds and confusion.

Other Holdings

Kordeth (Ukar)

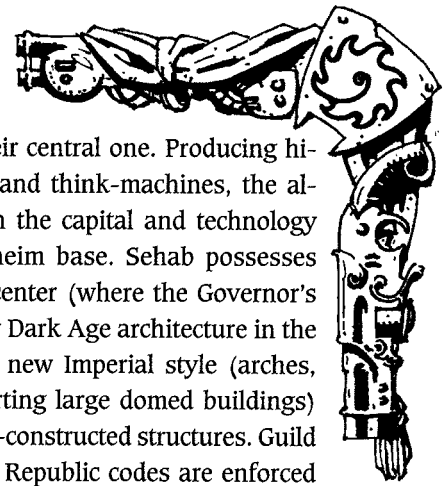
When the Second Republic fell, the al-Malik watched over the Ur-Ukar world in much the same fashion as the Hawkwood "protected" the Obun homeworld. To be fair, my family were high-minded rulers, and allowed the Republican institutions to continue among the Ukari. The cost of garrison duty proved too high, and in 4414 Rahimat sold the planet to the Merchant League, while retaining many al-Malik fiefs. After the sale, he "died," using Prana Bindu techniques to halt his breathing, only to rise later at his own funeral. Stepping out of his great coffin while the blind Archbishop Cyrus droned on and on with the litany, he clapped his hands thrice, and his guards rushed in from a hidden chamber, slaying his political enemies. The archbishop declared him legally dead, and thus he was free from Church censure for the remainder of his days.

The main family fiefs are the enclosed surface city of Saramago (Guntlin in Ukarish), on the planet's northern hemisphere, a 500-mile fief in the northern polar region. A domed city, Saramago was built in the Second Republic when terraforming made Kordeth's surface breathable. Today, she

is a beautiful city where sunlight comes down through protected enviroglass to green trees and artificial waterfalls. The al-Malik rule from the Topaz Palace, above the Upper City, where the wealthy live. Below, hugging the shadows of the Upper City, the poor and serfs live in large group homes. Undertown, dug into the earth, houses the Ukari population. Many of the heavy labors involved in monitoring the city's internal environment are performed by Ukari. In Saramago's center stands the Dreaming Gardens, where rare flowers emit heavy pollens, and people sleep in dreaming stupor.

Countess Zafirah al-Malik reigns over the city of Saramago with pomp and style. Her daughter Raja is rumored to be the product of an earlier union with Duke Maximino Li Halan. Everything Zafirah does is with *elan*, including governing, and while she is extravagant, the people love her. She keeps up with the latest court gossip on Byzantium Secundus. Even her political beliefs are seasonably fashionable. To her credit, the fief's economic concerns are largely in the hands of her Reeve advisor, Aegnus Makio, who keeps the city running at peak efficiency.





Other fiefs include underground Dalma, in the southern hemisphere. Initially thought worthless, it houses a rich deposit of iron-ore and nickel which later enriched my grandfather, and has proved profitable to this day.

Administratively, Kordeth can be a nightmare; because Allied Clan and Merchant League Law does not exist on the al-Malik fiefs, outlaws from one section often move to the safety of an adjoining political zone.

Madoc

The League-owned waterworld is not without al-Malik fiefs, the greatest being on the Feshsham Isles, seven islands which are found in the northern hemisphere. These were purchased from the Scraver guild in 4489. The islands of Samak, Sorya, Torkaya, Masr, Gezeera el Mook, Aayn and Miya are small; the largest, Torkaya, is only 10 miles in width, but all islands are extremely rich in sugar production. Unfortunately, despite repeated public denials, human slaves work the sugar plantations.

I found Sir Adil al-Malik, ruler of Torkaya, to be a cultivated, bookish man. Recent events have seen the reclusive scholar step forward at the head of a party of worried plantation owners, frightened about the anarchy of Masr Isle. Sir Adil is waiting for a sufficient "incident" to justify the return and intervention of al-Malik rule on Masr Isle and end "the anarchistic freedoms enjoyed by the criminal populace," as he mentioned twice at dinner. I might add that Duke Hakim seems to support Sir Adil, hoping to send forces and toughen royal rule over the entire island chain. It is a time of plots and counterplots.

These plots began in 4965 when the slaves of Miya, Masr and Sorya rebelled. Panicking, the al-Malik called in the Muster, who after six months of heavy fighting quelled the slave revolt. However, the isle of Masr, with its high cliffs and dense jungle, could not be overcome. No slavery exists on Masr, and it is a haven for pirates and escaped prisoners. Although ruled by an elected human and Shantor "king," Masr pays tribute to Duke Hakim, "Protector of Masr."

In the past two decades, trading with the amphibious Oro'ym has turned Aayn Island into a major port. The sudden influx of people has created a "gold town" atmosphere of intense energy and speculation. The island of Gazeera el Mook recently suffered a Husk Plague (4989). Thinking quickly, the local al-Malik paid some Oro'ym to destroy the husks in return for guaranteed protection of their nesting grounds. The Oro'ym warriors completed the job, but complained of a strange feeling in the jungles and mountains of the isle.

Leagueheim

In return for al-Malik support in the early Dark Ages, the Merchant League granted the house fiefs on Leagueheim.

The city of Sahab remains their central one. Producing hi-tech electronics, transmitters and think-machines, the al-Malik enriched themselves on the capital and technology produced from their Leagueheim base. Sehab possesses gleaming skyscrapers in the center (where the Governor's Palace is), combined with New Dark Age architecture in the Gothic, neo-Regency style. A new Imperial style (arches, reliefs and colonnades supporting large domed buildings) has become evident in recently-constructed structures. Guild law, al-Malik law and Second Republic codes are enforced by the Court of Justice.

Sir Priam Fahd governs the city. The greatest al-Malik military genius, I found him, aged 60, with snow white hair and beard, at his administrative seat at the university he founded on Leagueheim. The son of Count Fahd Sayyid al-Malik and Lady Faith Hawkwood, and raised on Ravenna, Priam became an early intimate of the Emperor. He studied Hawkwood military methods but was allowed to leave when the two houses fell to war early in the Emperor Wars, choosing to remain loyal to his father's heritage. After the war, Duke Hakim gave him the fief of Nat-het Sahab to govern, as a message to the guilds that the al-Malik were prepared to defend Leagueheim and their freedoms.

An Empire is a moon's reflection on a still lake. Only in disciplined silence will it be seen and felt by all hearts. Build the Empire on the foundations of the Beloved, uniting all endeavors to the Great Endlessness, and the ruler reigns eternally. Build it on the foundations of fear and power, and the wind will scatter the moon into a thousand splinters on the dark waves, an illusion soon forgotten by the midnight party on the lake's shore.

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