
TRAVELLER

SECRETS OF THE ANCIENTS

THE DARK GATE

The seeds of our current situation were sown hundreds of thousands of years ago. The Ancients transplanted human populations from Terra to a dozen other worlds. On some planets, they left technological relics, and those relics inevitably accelerated the development of those cultures. On others, the transplanted humans were left to fend for themselves.

The accelerated cultures grew faster, expanding out from their homeworlds at a rate proportional to their technological advantages. Could the success of the old Vilani empire be the result of a deliberate plan by the Ancients? Did they give the Vilani enough of an advantage so that they would conquer the stars, but run out of drive as they ran into the vibrant, energetic Solomani?

Is our civilisation the result of a massive psychohistorical engineering project? Was the course of our development set by the Ancients when they planted our ancestors? Or is our Imperium a historical accident, a barbarian empire that sprang up in the ruins left by an earlier civilisation?

How do we discern the invisible currents of history?

- *The Ancients: A Psychohistorical Analysis, Unpublished Monograph by Professor Ujinka*

The Dark Gate is the ninth adventure in the *Secrets of the Ancients* campaign. If you are a player, **stop reading now**. If you are a Referee, then you should first read **Section 0: Secrets of Secrets** to get an overview of the campaign. In the previous Section, the characters escaped an Imperial prison in the Pixie system, and obtained clues about the location of Seven's secret stronghold from Grandfather's dreams.

Depending on how the characters dealt with the Imperial interrogators and escaped the prison, they may be:

- On the run from the Imperium, in a stolen scoutship.
- On the run from the Imperium, flying the *Star Hunter*.
- Working with the blessing of Imperial intelligence.

- In a stolen scoutship, but the Imperium has yet to start hunting them.
- In a similar situation not covered here.

This adventure assumes the characters are in a scoutship and are fleeing the Imperial authorities. If this is not the case, the Referee will need to modify the adventure slightly.

Access to *Alien Module 2: Vargr* is strongly recommended but not obligatory when running this adventure. If you do not have access to that book, replace the Vargr frigates and corsairs with other combat-ready ships of the same tonnage.

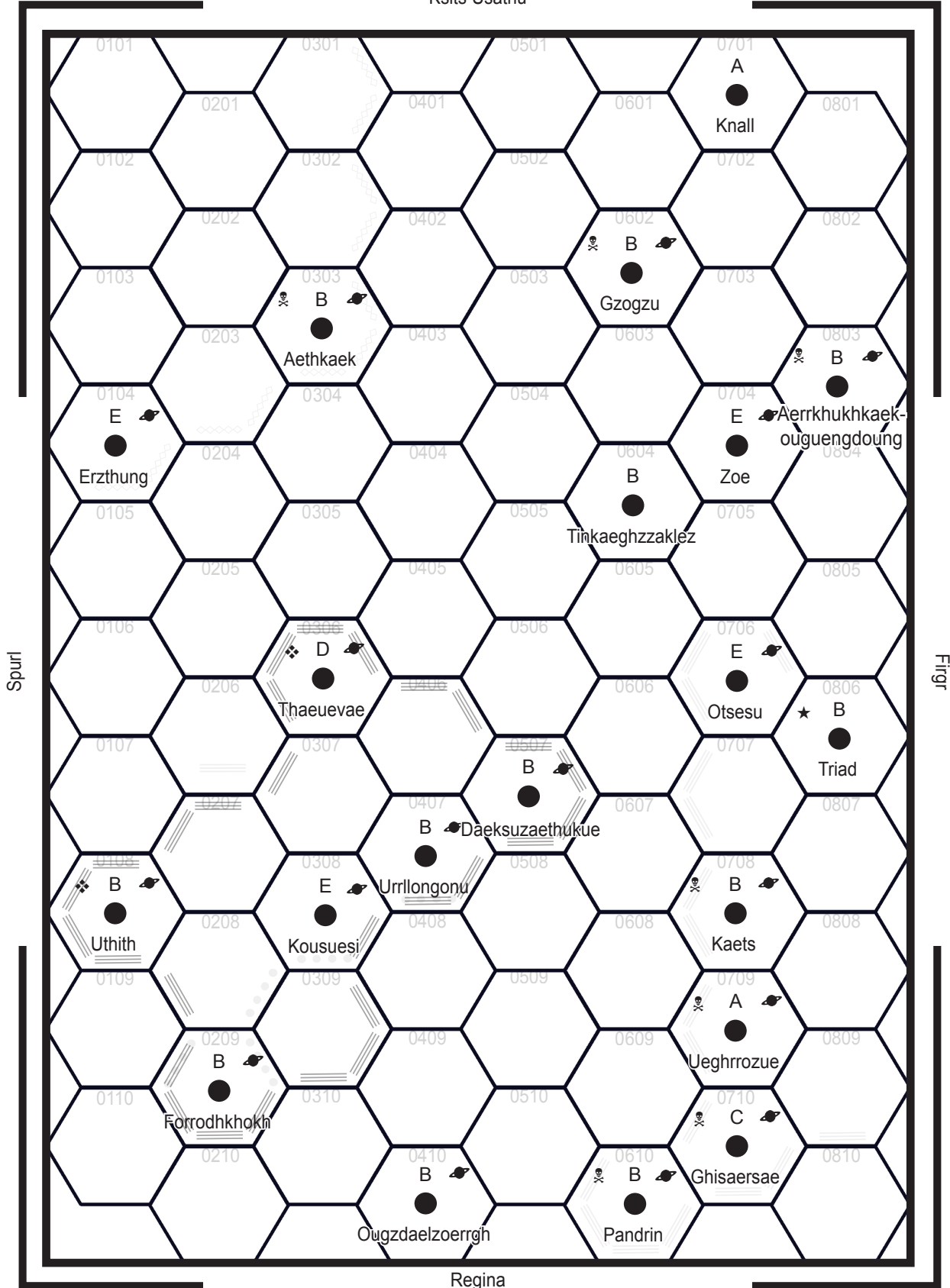
Adventure Synopsis

Grandfather's psychic imprint continues to grow in strength and influence. The host's dreams become more detailed, pointing the way to Seven's secret base. The characters know it is located in Uthe subsector of Gvurrdon sector, one subsector coreward of Regina subsector. They will need to scan all the garden worlds in Uthe to identify the world seen in the dreams.

Grandfather's dreams also point the characters towards a hidden cache of Ancient artefacts. By default, this cache is located on Pixie itself; if getting to Pixie is infeasible due to the events of the previous section, the cache can be moved to Regina/Beck's World or Uthe/Kousuesi. This cache contains Ancient weapons and tools the characters will need to survive the challenges to come.

Getting to Uthe subsector means travelling across the coreward quarter of Regina, crossing in Vargr space, and exploring the pirate-haunted systems close to the Imperial border. En route, they are intercepted by Vargr forces belonging to the 40th Squadron, who force the characters to travel to the fleet's base at Daeksuzaethukue in Uthe subsector.

There, the characters meet a Vargr 'prince', Aethgors. He attempts to detain the characters as his 'guests'. While at Aethgors' palace, the characters are targeted by Seven's



Spurl

Firgr

Regina

assassins. After defeating Seven's agents, the characters must persuade Aethgors to aid them. His scouts can identify the world the characters seek – it is Zoe, a world four parsecs coreward of Daeksuzaethukue.

At Zoe, the characters need to find the Dark Gate that leads to Seven's realm...

Grandfather

At this stage of the adventure, Grandfather is capable of taking control of his host's body whenever he wishes. The psionic seed planted by Grandfather has grown into a full-fledged personality. In effect, the player character *is* Grandfather... but this comes with a cost. Grandfather is a mutant Droyne, and his super-intellect does not 'fit' into the human brain. Every time Grandfather takes control, his presence 'overloads' the host's brain. A medical scan of the host shows a massive spike in neurological activity and blood pressure when Grandfather manifests.

Explain to the host player that his character can 'call upon' Grandfather whenever he wishes, and that Grandfather can apply his astounding intellect or psionic abilities to any task, but that each time Grandfather is 'summoned', the character permanently loses one Endurance. Grandfather cannot be summoned if this would kill the character. The Referee can also have Grandfather manifest as a *deus ex machina* if circumstances warrant.

Even when Grandfather is 'dormant', the character gains considerable benefits (see the Dreams of Grandfather in Section 8: In the Emperor's Name), such as +3 Intelligence, numerous extra Science and Engineering skills, and psionic abilities. When Grandfather is active, his powers are even greater. Assume Grandfather can accomplish any technological task as long as he has the necessary components, and that he can make components from lower-tech materials given time. Grandfather's psionic abilities are equally potent – he has complete mastery of all known psionic disciplines.

While it is extremely unlikely that Grandfather dies at this stage of the adventure, assume he can transfer his mind into another host if necessary.

If the characters demand answers from Grandfather, see the sidebar on page 4

Vargr Guards

There are several places where the characters may run into Vargr guards. Use the statistics below.

STR 5 DEX 9 END 6 INT 7 EDU 7 CHA 5

Gun Combat (appropriate weapon) 2, Investigate 2, Melee (brawl) 1, Melee (bite) 1, Recon 1, Stealth 1, Tactics (military) 1

Pick One Set:

Mesh (2) and Autorifle (3d6 Auto 4)

Flak Jacket (6) and Rocket Launcher (5d6)

Vacc Suit (8) and Laser Rifle (5d6+3)

1. DREAMS OF DISTANT WORLDS

In the pocket universe, Grandfather used a secret weapon against Seven. The orbital weapons platform masqueraded as a doomsday particle weapon, a huge anti-ship cannon designed to disintegrate Seven, but its real purpose was to steal Seven's most closely guarded secret from the monster's mind. Grandfather's weapon stole the location of Seven's family archive – and then trapped his rebellious son in the pocket universe. If the family archive is destroyed at the same time as Seven's physical body, the Ancient cannot resurrect himself.

Seven fought the weapon's intrusion into his mind. He was able to block Grandfather from extracting the exact location of the base, so all Grandfather got was fragmentary information. Grandfather himself had only milliseconds to absorb the information before Seven blasted the weapon's platform – and Grandfather – to atoms.

The dreams experienced in Section 8: In the Emperor's Name describe the information obtained as follows:

A world. A garden world, Earth-like, shimmering oceans, green forests. Atmosphere composition includes an unusually high amount of neon. Gas giant, three moons, one of which is a captured iceball. Vargr, enslaving a minor race of amphibious sea-slugs. Uthe subsector, only a short distance. Deep beneath the crust, a hidden fortress. SEVEN's base. SEVEN's family archive.

Interrogating Grandfather

If possible, the Referee should keep Grandfather 'off-stage' for as long as possible. Make sure the players are the ones driving the plot, not an all-powerful NPC. However, players being what they are, it is possible that they pin Grandfather down and demand answers from him. If they do so, the first thing Grandfather points out is that he cannot be active for long – his host's brain is incapable of emulating Grandfather's peerless intellect for extended periods of time, so they must keep this interview brief. (Remember that the host loses Endurance permanently for every few minutes of Grandfather's activity.)

Grandfather explains the following in an efficient, clinical manner, using as few words as possible. Speak in sentence-fragments. Expect players to keep up. No excess verbiage. Pure information, not pointless debate.

- SEVEN is one of Grandfather's errant children, and must be destroyed.
- The only way to stop SEVEN is to simultaneously destroy him and his family archive. Destroy him first, and he will be resurrected in the archive. Destroy the archive first, and he will build another. By luring him into the pocket universe, Grandfather was able to find the location of SEVEN's current Archive and prevent him from building another.
- Grandfather retrieved information about the location of SEVEN's archive from the Ancient's memory. Garden world, neon-heavy atmosphere, sea slugs, Uthe. Find it!
- If the characters have not done so already, he urges them to find the supply cache before heading into Uthe.
- Now stop bothering him, he is busy using the host's subconscious to plot his next move.

If the players realise that they need to search Uthe subsector for a garden world matching those criteria, then Grandfather's host stops having the dream. Otherwise, the dream keeps repeating with greater intensity until the players realise what is going on.

Searching Uthe: Imperial Library Data lists UWP data for the worlds of Uthe subsector, although this data is untrustworthy and out of date. The Vargr extents are notoriously chaotic; a world might change name and government a dozen times in as many years. Even population levels can change rapidly, as wars and pack migrations sweep across the stars. A quick search shows that there are eight Garden worlds in Uthe.

Triad and Tinkaeghzzaklez can be eliminated as contenders – they lack gas giants. Ghisaersae can also be struck off – the planet is well surveyed and the moons do not match the specifications. The evidence for the other worlds is inconclusive. While planets like Daeksuzaethukue are comparatively well trafficked by Imperial ships, there may be a small colony of 'amphibious sea-slugs' in some isolated area.

2. WE NEED A SHIP

The characters may be in need of a jump-capable ship, or want to trade their current vessel for something less traceable. Any high-traffic starport offers the possibility of obtaining a new vessel. The naval base at Pixie, for example, sees hundreds of ships coming and going, ranging from jump-4 x-boats and couriers to far traders to multi-megaton warships (although stealing an Azhanti High Lightning is slightly outside the scope of this adventure!) Other excellent places to obtain a new ship include Kinorb, Ougzdaelzoerrugh and Triad.

Obtaining a ship

The characters can obtain a ship in the time-honoured manner – by taking out a 40 year mortgage on a new vessel. In a pinch, Grandfather's host (or Grandfather) can use psionic powers to

Name	Location	Statistics	Bases	Trade Codes	Allegiance	Gas Giants
Forrodhkokh	0209	B75877B-A	—	Ag, Ga	40 th	G
Thauevae	0306	D546008-C	C	Ga, Lo	40 th	G
Urrlongonu	0407	B566545-9	G	Ag, Ga, Ni	40 th	G
Daeksuzaethukue	0507	B645677-A	—	Ag, Ga, Ni	40 th	G
Tinkaeghzzaklez	0604	B544233-A	—	Ga, Lo	Va	—
Zoe	0706	E757499-5	—	Ga, Lt, Ni	Va	G
Ghisaersae	0710	C758646-7	C	Ag, Ga, Ni	Va	G
Triad	0806	B587777-8	N	Ag, Ga, Ri	Cs	—

40th: 40th Squadron

Va: Vargr

Cs: Imperial client state

convince a weak-willed bank manager to hand over the cash. This option is available only to characters who still have a good reputation, or have items or information to trade. Revealing the location of, say, the Ancient cache (see below) could give the characters enough leverage to get a loan.

Alternatively, asking around the starport in Kinorb puts the characters in touch with **Fiezel Lollops**, a trader. Lollops is an experienced merchant, but he never got the hang of piloting. His previous crew quit in a disagreement over danger pay, so Fiezel is looking for a replacement set of deckhands for his Far Trader, the *Hosal Dhosa*. He intends to travel to Triad, an Imperial client state in Uthe subsector, bringing a cargo of Imperial luxuries to sell to the culture-starved natives. If the characters sign on, they can fly the *Hosal Dhosa* around Uthe subsector in search of Seven's base. Lollops offers them standard pay for starship crew, plus a 10,000 credit bonus each once they arrive at Triad.

The *Hosal Dhosa* is a 200-ton Far Trader equipped with two double turrets in hardpoints. The rear turret has two pulse lasers; the forward turret has a pulse laser and a sandcaster.

Playing Fiezel Lollops:

- He is an old free trader, with the swollen face and chubby body of a man who's spent a lot of time in zero gravity.
- Laugh and make really bad jokes and puns. Call the characters 'lads' and 'mates'.
- Play him for laughs; he has no idea about the Ancients, Imperial Intelligence, the threat of Seven or anything else. He is just an ordinary Imperial citizen, caught up in events far beyond his comprehension.

Stealing a ship

Under normal circumstances, stealing a starship is a difficult task (see *Spacecraft Security* on page 143 of the *Traveller Main Rulebook*). Even getting on board is challenging. If the characters try to steal a ship at a starbase, they have to bypass the starbase's security as well the ship's defences. If they try to hijack a ship, they have to get on board first and then overcome the crew.

However, there is an opportunity to steal a ship comparatively easily in the Pixie system. The naval base at Pixie is home to one of the Spinward Marches' pirate-hunting squadrons. Ships from this base patrol the coreward border of the Marches and escort ships on the jump route to Triad. There is a naval prizeyard on Pixie, a graveyard where captured pirate ships are brought. Some of these ships are scrapped; others are refitted and auctioned off by the navy. The yard is only lightly guarded

and some of the ships are still functional. If the characters break into the prize yard, they can find a 100-ton scoutship that's fully fuelled and ready to take off. Roll 1d6 times on the *Old Ships* table on page 136 of the *Traveller Main Rulebook* to determine the ship's state, alternating between the Military and the other two columns.

Another option is to hijack Janter Riles' courier ship (see page 7).

Trading for a ship

If the characters are in possession of a scoutship or other vessel, they can swap it for a new, 'clean' ship that the Imperium will not recognise. Such an exchange can be completed at any non-Imperial world, or at an Imperial world with a Law Level of 4 or less (like Dentus or Yorbind). The trade is arranged by a Vargr fixer named Gvarney, a grizzled old ex-pirate. She offers the characters a battered old scoutship (again, roll 1d6 times on the *Old Ships* table on page 136 of the *Traveller Main Rulebook* to determine the ship's state, alternating between the Military and the other two columns). The cost of the scoutship is 27.5 MCr, -3 MCr per roll on the *Old Ships* table. If the cost of the ship is less than the value of the character's vessel, Gvarney offers a straight swap; if the battered scoutship costs more than the character's ship, Gvarney wants the difference in price + 500,000 Cr. She will accept Ancient relics in trade.

Imperial aid

The final option is for Arisa or Galen (see Section 8: In The Emperor's Name) to provide an IISS scout vessel. This can happen even if the characters broke out of the *Gaesh* instead of being released; as long as the characters parted on good terms with one of the Imperial intelligence agents, a ship can be provided. The characters are contacted by encrypted radio, and informed that an unmanned scoutship is being left in orbit of one of the gas giant's moons near the *Gaesh*. On board, the characters find TL14 Vacc Suits and gauss pistols for the entire party, plus 500,000 credits in cash and an Imperial Warrant.

3. THE PIXIE CACHE

En route to Vargr space, Grandfather's host has another psionic flash. He suddenly remembers the location of an Ancient weapons cache. This cache was established after the Final Wars, for the use of Grandfather's agents, so it almost certainly still exists. The characters can choose to ignore this cache if they wish, but that means ignoring the possibility of finding something useful.

As described above, the cache's location is assumed to be on Pixie, but it can be transplanted to another world if necessary. The cache is hidden inside a shallow cave on a cliff face in the wilderness. Exploring the cave shows no sign of technology, other than a strangely flat surface at the very back of the cave. Touching this surface and sending the right psionic signal (any character with a Psionic Strength score can do so) causes the rock to ripple and transform, revealing a teleportation portal like the ones the characters have already seen.

Stepping through the portal brings the characters into another cavern. The air in this cave is hot but breathable, and smells of metal and chemicals. The cave is bubble-shaped, without any visible exits other than the portal. Huge metallic ribs line the walls and pulse with a dull red light. There is an underlying sense of pressure. Checking instruments reveals that the characters are four thousand kilometres directly below the cave on the surface.

The Ancient cache is crammed with cryptic gadgets and treasures. It reminds the characters strongly of the hangar under Vlen Backett's hunting lodge (see Section 2: Homecoming) or Caol's weapons cache in the pocket universe (see Section 7: The Death of Grandfather), but this one has an emphasis on Imperial and Vargr items. There are suits of clothing, travel documents, personal effects, and cash (250,000 credits in cash, cheques, and treasure). There are also several items of immediate use.

Shimmersuits: There is a set of Ancient shimmersuits, one per player character. These Ancient garments combine the benefits of a high-tech vacc suit and protective armour. Unusually, the shimmersuits are designed for humans, not Droyne, suggesting they were manufactured well after the Final Wars.

Disintegrator gauntlets: There is also a set of metallic bracers that can be worn over a shimmersuit. These are Ancient weapons called disintegrator gauntlets. There is one pair of gauntlets per player character.

The Artefact: Grandfather's host is drawn to a large cylindrical apparatus, just small enough to fit through a teleportal. This machine emanates a considerable amount of radiation (not enough to cause immediate damage, but a worrying 1d6 rads/hour. When activated, the artefact projects a holographic interface. Most of the displayed information is incomprehensible to the player characters; a Hard (-4) Intelligence + Space Science (planetology) roll lets the character guess that the screens seem to be showing stellar data, describing fusion reactions and gas movement within the heart of the local primary star.

This device is a star trigger. The Darrians discovered this technology approximately two thousand years ago, but the Ancients got there hundreds of centuries before that. A star trigger alters the nuclear reactions within a star, causing it to flare or even explode. During the Final Wars, the Ancients uses star trigger technology as one of their many weapons.

Grandfather's host feels a strong compulsion to bring this artefact back to the ship.

4. CROSSING OVER

After leaving Pixie and grabbing the contents of the cache, the characters can set off in search of the garden world retrieved from SEVEN's memory. Refer to *Section 3: The Hunt* for notes on travelling between systems.

While Zoe is the characters' ultimate destination, they do not know this. Any character with Astrogation 2+ or Space Science (xenology) 1+ or who checks Library Data knows something about the worlds close to the border. Most of the systems in Uthe subsector near the Regina border are under the control of the 40th Squadron (see page 112 of *Alien Module 2: Vargr*), a relatively organised band of Vargr naval officers who have held those worlds since the First Frontier War five hundred years ago. Their current capital is Uthith, but they also have a large fleet base at Daeksuzaethukue. The other notable world is Triad, an Imperial client state held as a buffer against the Vargr. Either group would have better planetary data than the Imperium, so Triad, Uthith or Daeksuzaethukue make good initial destinations for the characters.

The characters need at least a Jump-2 ship to get to Uthe. The easiest jump-2 route is from Pixie back to Boughene (passing the gas giant where the whole pocket universe escapade began) and then down to Feri, then onto Beck's World and Kinorb, then Dentus and finally across the sector border into Pandrin. From Pandrin, they have several options. They can jump along the pirate-haunted 'Triad Corridor' to Triad, or else turn spinward and hop along the border visiting Ougzdaelzoerrgh and onto Forrodkhokh, Daeksuzaethukue and Thaeuevae.

With a Jump-3 ship, the mission becomes much easier – the characters can just hop across the border to Ougzdaelzoerrgh directly.

There are potential encounters or patrons at many of these worlds.

Piracy

A copy of *Book 6: Scoundrel* is useful for adjudicating piracy attempts. In brief, the procedure is as follows:

- 1) Both ships detect each other using sensors.
- 2) The pirate determines whether or not the target is worth attacking.
- 3) The pirate pursues its target, hoping to intercept the target vessel before it can escape to the safety of the starport or jump space. Most pirate encounters take place between 50 and 100 planetary diameters from a mainworld, or around a gas giant.
- 4) If the pirate gets within range, it uses lasers to worry the target, aiming to disable the ship's weapons and drives or puncture the fuel tank.
- 5) Most pirates accept the target's cargo as a suitable prize; it is much easier to fence a few cargo containers of high-value goods than it is to repair and sell a captured ship.
- 6) If the target refuses to surrender and dump cargo, then the pirate chases the target down and sends over boarding teams via shuttles or grappling lines. The boarders storm the target vessel and butcher the crew.

If the player characters are flying a 100-ton scoutship, they may be able to convince most pirates that they are not worth the bother of hunting down. The success of this tactic depends on where the characters are, how desperate the pirates are for booty, and how well the characters succeed with a Deception or Persuade roll.

Boughene

The system's gas giant is under Imperial Interdiction while the scouts investigate the gas giant, looking for more signs of the Ancient ship and examining the wreckage from the *Alahir*. Effectively, the system is on the verge of being declared an Amber Zone.

Patron: Janter Riles, TAS News Stringer

Payment: 10,000 Cr and a middle passage within three parsecs.

Mission: Riles is a reporter for the Journal of the Traveller's Aid Society, here to investigate why the Imperium suddenly has such an interest in an obscure gas giant. His ship, the Jump-3 courier *Kolhber*, is currently waiting in deep space between Boughene and the gas giant, just outside the interdiction zone. He wants the characters to help him find out what happened here.

Twist: The characters may try to steal Janter's ship. It is an unarmoured courier ship capable of Jump-3 travel. The only crew are Janter and his servitor robot, C-543.

Feri

Feri's locked in a low-intensity civil war between pro- and anti-secessionists, and the former faction are winning. The Imperium is covertly supplying weapons to the anti-secessionists; while interfering with the internal government of a member world is against Imperial law, the Imperium wishes to ensure the safety of the scout base in the system, which is a vital early warning station against Vargr attacks.

Patron: Ophus Glim

Payment: 10% of the value of the cargo retrieved

Mission: Ophus is a trader and scam artist in the starport, and he has gotten wind of something big. An Imperial transport is coming in, carrying weapons for the pro-Imperial faction. The transport looks like just another Far Trader, but it is crammed with illegal weapons. All the characters need to do is steal the cargo.

Twist: Ophus' information was right, apart from one tiny detail. The Far Trader is guarded by a squad of six Imperial Marines in Battle Dress.

Imperial Marines

STR 8 (13) **DEX** 8 (12) **END** 9 **INT** 9 **EDU** 8 **SOC** 6
Battle Dress 2, Gun Combat (rifle) 2, Heavy Weapons 2, Melee (brawl) 2, Recon 2, Sensors 1, Tactics (military) 1, Zero-G 2
Laser Rifle (5D6+3), Battle Dress (18)

Beck's World

The small colony on Beck's World is still rebuilding after the 'landslip' that ruined much of the town near the starport (see *Section 3: The Hunt*). Characters with a suitable Trade skill can earn 500 x Effect credits with an Average (+0) Education + Trade roll for a month's work here, but the sort of player who pauses on a race to save Charted Space from alien space demons in order to earn a pittance is the sort of player who has played too many computer rpgs.

Kinorb

If it were located anywhere else in the sector, Kinorb would have a hundred times its population and be mentioned in the same breath as Regina and Rhylanor. It is a beautiful jewel of a garden world, with verdant plains, warm shallow oceans, and a distinct lack of hostile native wildlife or pathogens. It is galactic politics, not planetology, that keeps Kinorb from being more influential. The planet is right on the edge of Vargr space, and is a primary target in any border conflict.

Kinorb was originally settled to support a naval base (since abandoned). Seeing the beauty of the world, many naval personnel retired there or brought their families there. These first settlers knew the planet's precarious situation – evacuation drills and invasion preparedness are ingrained into Kinorbian culture, and even a six-year old knows how to field-strip an ACR and how to find his way to the starport evacuation centre blindfolded. Today, Kinorb is also a key trading post for merchants dealing with the Vargr. There is a distinct social divide between the navy families and the traders, and between humans and the expatriate Vargr who make up an underclass of labourers and guards.

Patron: Second Watchman Garik

Payment: 20,000 credits.

Mission: Garik is from one of the navy families. His duty is to keep the planet in readiness for immediate evacuation. He struts like a martinet and is convinced the Vargr are always about to invade. He wants the characters to bring him to an old naval supply depot that orbits another world in the Kinorb system to retrieve some old surface-to-orbit minishuttles that were left in mothballs there.

Twist: A band of Vargr scavengers found the depot and are looting it. They are harmless teenagers, but Garik assumes they are scouts for an invasion force and wants them all shot.

Dentus

A relatively unremarkable world, home to Hudson Scout Base. Like Kinorb, Dentus's primary economic activity is trade with the Vargr.

The Scout base here has more detailed charts of Vargr space than are available commercially. If the characters break into the Scout base, or else use Contacts or Allies to bluff their way in, they can retrieve copies of these charts, allowing them to identify Zoe as their ultimate destination. Zoe is the only world in Uthe that matches all of Grandfather's dreams.

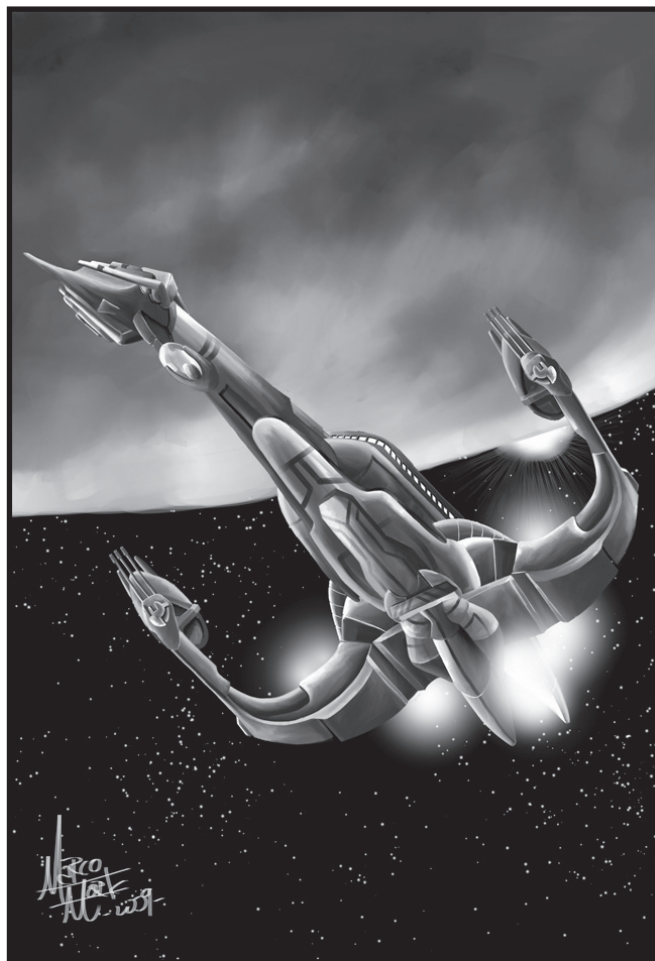
Pandrin

Pandrin is a desert world, divided between Human and Vargr. It was originally a Human colony, but was seized by the Vargr during the Second Frontier war. The two races are largely segregated, with the Vargr having the upper hand.

Patron: Walker Robotics.

Payment: Cr. 1,000,000

Mission: A shipment of robots was sent to Daeksuzaethukue but never arrived. Director Kung of Walker Robotics offers a Cr. 1,000,000 credit bounty for any information that leads to the retrieval of the cargo. He suspects pirates at Ueghrrozue or Kaets stole the cargo.



Twist: The real crime took place much closer to home. Vargr at the starport secretly unloaded the cargo containers and replaced them with scrap metal. The trade ship will limp home in a few weeks, and the crew will claim their cargo was stolen by pirates. They will then ship the stolen cargo to Daeksuzaethukue and sell it on the black market. If the characters investigate the Vargr-run starport, they can find witnesses who point them towards the criminals.

Ghisaersae

This is a Vargr agricultural colony, with a population of some seven million (65% Vargr, 35% Human). The population is scattered thinly over the whole planet; each tiny village is surrounded by hundreds of kilometres of farmland. The planet has invested heavily in Walker Robotics agri-mechs.

There is a Corsair base on Ghisaersae, commanded by a Vargr corsair named Nokhu. He rules a pack of three 400-ton corsairs and five 200-ton seekers. He also has a salvaged Gazelle Close Escort hull that he intends to refit as his flagship. Nokhu is a well-established raider; these days, he makes far more

money in bribes than he does from stealing cargo, and has 'arrangements' with several corporations and trade lines.

The characters can pass through Ghisaersae space and refuel at the Corsair base or at the gas giant (which is guarded by two seekers and a corsair) if they pay Nokhu a tribute of 500,000 credits. If they refuse, he will order his forces to attack.

Ueghrozue

The water-world of Ueghrozue is ruled by the granddaughter of its original conqueror. 'Queen' Tsae is a savage autocrat who rules from a floating city on the planet's coppery ocean. The Ueghrozue fleet is considerably more advanced than many of the other corsair fleets in the subsector, and has been the subject of numerous punitive strikes by the Imperial navy. Currently, Ueghrozue is at peace with the Imperium, but there are large numbers of 'rogue' corsairs who Queen Tsae claims to have no control over.

The characters' ship is approached by a Vargr corsair as soon as they jump into Ueghrozue. This corsair scans the character's ship for cargo. The characters need to either negotiate with the corsair (Captain Rzo) or else flee to the safety of Ueghrozue's surface where Queen Tsae will be obliged to protect them until the corsair 'leaves'. While on Ueghrozue, the characters are overcharged for everything, their ship searched and any Ancient technology confiscated as contraband.

Patron: Scout Narmos

Payment: Cr. 50,000

Mission: Gruff Narmos is an Imperial emissary and an observer, here to ensure that Queen Tsae keeps to her peace treaty with the Imperium and does not engage in piracy. Narmos can help the characters retrieve any confiscated goods if they agree to help him. He has growing suspicions that some other power is helping fund the 40th Squadron, and believes it may be the Zhodani. He wants the characters to visit the 40th Squadron base at Daeksuzaethukue and snoop around.

Twist: Narmos' suspicions are partially justified – see *Those Who Kneel*, page 13.

Kaets

Kaets is a wild and lawless world, haunted by corsairs from Ueghrozue and other nearby worlds. No government dares claim the space around this world; attacks on shipping are especially common here. As soon as the characters jump into this system, they are targeted by two Vargr pirates. One, Captain Vorsang, has a 400-ton corsair-class ship, the *Teeth of Narzabul*, while Captain Reng has two 200-ton seekers. Both pirates are desperate for a prize, so they both target the player characters' ship.

Escape in this situation is tricky – the three ships come from different angles, so there is no clear escape vector towards the jump limit. The characters must either engage the enemy ships, bluff the Vargr into fighting each other, or use their own advantages (like their Ancient technology) to escape.

Triad

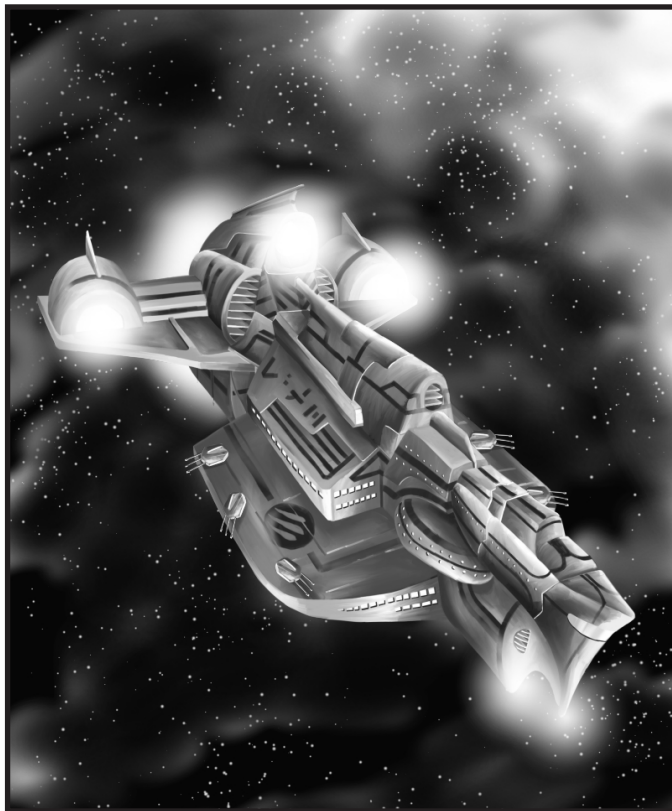
This wealthy planet's economy is based on agriculture; Triad is the breadbasket of Uthe. It is a Client State of the Imperium and has the protection of the Imperial navy. The Imperium originally settled Triad as a warning post against Zhodani or Vargr aggression, but many of the current residents of Triad have more loyalty to the Vargr packs than for the distant Iridium Throne.

Patron: Bora Doshuss, Human Genetic Engineer

Payment: Cr 175,000

Mission: Doshuss is a freelance genetic engineer who was hired by one of the massive agri-combines of Triad to research a strange fungal infection. She believes the infection can be cured using samples from an analogous crop species from the world of Thaeuevae. She hires the characters to bring her to Thaeuevae and obtain samples from that world.

Twist: Thaeuevae is under interdiction by the 40th Squadron (see Thaeuevae, page 11).



Ougzdaelzoerrgh

Formerly a relatively minor Vargr world, settled by outcasts and runts, Ougzdaelzoerrgh recently became another Imperial foothold in Uthe subsector. The Vargr of this planet have signed a contract with Oberlindes Shipping Lines, allowing the company to use their world as a supply depot and trading post. A relatively high-tech Class B starport sits in the middle of a coal-powered city.

Patron: Ernst Wegener, Oberlindes Factor

Payment: Cr. 10,000

Mission: Oberlindes have established a secure compound in the middle of the city, referred to as the human district by most of the Vargr. Part of the Oberlindes contract with the Vargr government requires them to police the human population and ensure they do not cause trouble. Lately, Vargr troublemakers have started causing brawls and riots to discredit Oberlindes, and Wegener suspects a competitor is behind it. He wants the player characters to investigate.

Twist: In fact, the real troublemaker is Wegener's head of security, a Vargr called Kyragh. He believes that the best way to secure Oberlindes' hold on the planet is to overthrow the government. He intends to keep paying Vargr mercenaries to provoke the situation until Wegener agrees to take the leash off Kyragh's security teams and seize the planet.

Forrodkhkhokh

A typical Vargr world, Forrodkhkhokh has been under the control of the 40th for generations. The garden world is divided into hundreds of estates, each owned by a single officer from the ships who fly the flag of Forrodkhkhokh. A junior officer's family might hold a few square kilometres; a captain rules over a whole nation, and if the Squadron Leader is Forrodkhkhokh-born, he also holds the title 'Lord of Forrodkhkhokh' in addition to his naval rank. The whole planet holds the navy in the highest esteem.

Patron: Engineer Khuegarkhu

Payment: Estates on Forrodkhkhokh

Mission: Khuegarkhu was the assistant jump engineer on board the Vargr frigate *Kuezgatho* until there was an accident on board. She was blamed for failing to correctly calibrate the jump drive, but she is convinced the refined hydrogen actually contained impurities. She wants the characters to serve as expert witnesses (if they have Engineering (jump) 3+, and to test a sample of the "refined" hydrogen in their jump drives. If they assist her, she offers them land in her family estates – estates she stands to lose if she loses her rank.

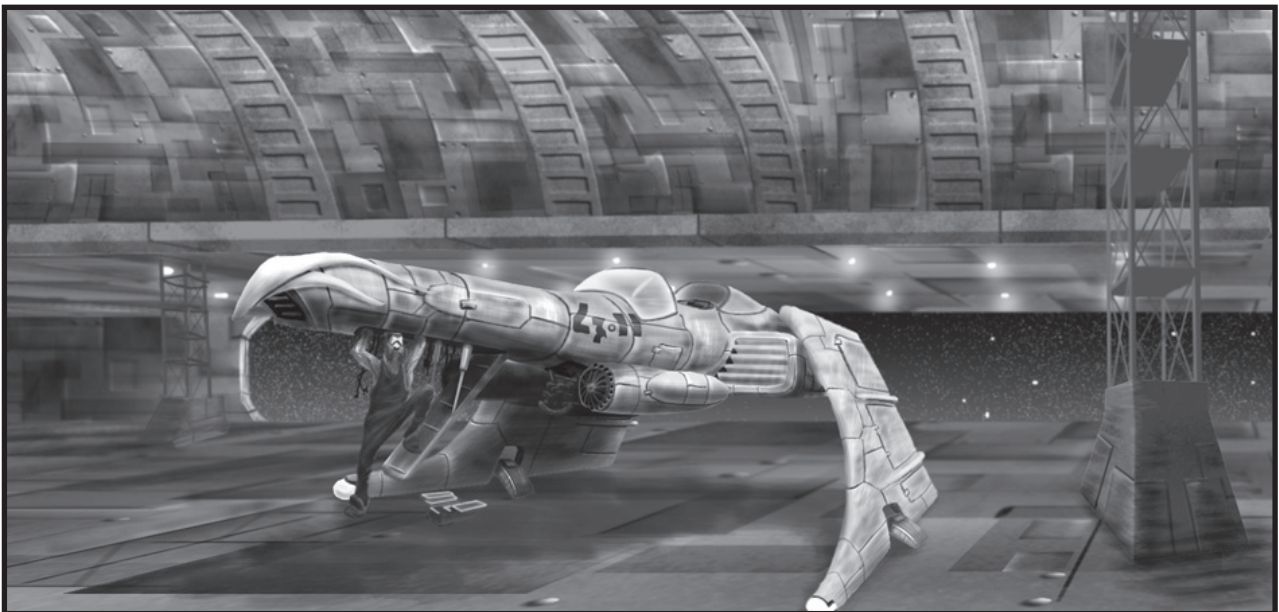
Twist: While the hydrogen is impure, the engines should have been able to handle it. Khuegarkhu was responsible for the accident – but if the characters admit this, they will get nothing.

Uthith

Uthith is the home of the 40th Squadron. If the characters jump into this system unescorted, run *The 40th* (page 12).

Uthith is a small desert world, dotted with domed cities and surrounded by shipyards, supply depots and defence satellites. The 40th Squadron may only be a tiny power in the grand scheme of things, but a visitor to Uthith could be forgiven for assuming that they were something far greater when the ships blot out the sun as they pass.

Visitors to Uthith are not especially welcome – the Squadron takes security very seriously. Uthith itself is only Law Level 7, but that applies to the planet itself, not to the space around it. Any approaching ship is intercepted and searched by Vargr defence forces. Those who attempt to smuggle forbidden cargoes or spy on the heart of the 40th are summarily spaced.



Patron: Gulliuvus Hachs

Payment: 20,000 credits

Mission: Hachs claims to be a wandering free trader who is trying his luck in the Vargr extents. He asks the characters to bring some personal effects of his friend Vadol Moraine on Regina. The personal effects are harmless souvenirs, holograms and other curios.

Twist: Hachs and Moraine are actually both Zhodani spies. The personal effects are indeed completely innocent, but when the characters agree to the trade, Hachs surreptitiously tries to imprint a telepathic message into one character's subconscious. He first uses *read surface thoughts* to scan for telepathic shields, then uses a specialist form of *send thoughts* to imprint a message that will eventually be read by Moraine. If Hachs is unlucky enough to try this on Grandfather's host, then he has a momentary mind-to-mind encounter with the Ancient and is driven instantly insane by information overload.

Kousuesi

This waterworld is lightly populated. There are no cities or industries on Kousuesi, just a few island communities of elderly Vargr. Vast woven rafts are used to fish the seas, and the planet exports cracked hydrogen and compressed foodsticks to the 40th squadron ships.

Landing on Kousuesi is an exercise in frustration for the player characters. There is nothing of interest on this planet. If the players persist in searching for a patron here...

Patron: Trugh

Payment: 5 credits/day

Mission: Working on his fishing raft, hauling in lines and beating fish to death with a Vargr fishing mallet. Backbreaking, messy, slimy, salty, perilous work.

Twist: Trugh's a racist Vargr who thinks Humans are all dishonest, whining, cheating scum. He sits in a little tent in the middle of the raft and derides the Player Characters all day. He has got an eye for embarrassing details and a knack for memorable descriptions.

Urrilongonu

This garden world is one of the 40th Squadron's jewels, and is heavily defended. If the characters jump into this system unescorted, run *The 40th* (page 12).

Urrilongonu was once a human colony that was seized by the 40th Squadron. The planet was largely evacuated before the war, but still has a strange mix of Human and Vargr architecture. The Vargr retained many of the Human laws and customs, so the planet feels like a strange mirror of a typical Imperial world, only with wolves instead of hominids. Many of the Vargr technocrats are fascinated by the Imperium, considering it to be

a source of high culture and fashion. Indeed, it is considered a mark of good breeding in some circles to refer to this planet by its human name of Quantar instead of its new Vargr name. The naval officers of the 40th mock the Urrilongonuans as 'hairy monkeys' and 'broken dogs', but Urrilongonu is a vital part of the 40th's civilian economy.

Patron: Dhakya

Payment: Her aid and influence

Mission: Dhakya is a mid-ranking Vargr noble – one of the Human traditions retained on Urrilongonu is the custom of using noble titles. She wants the characters to accompany her to a fashionable soiree and impress the other Vargr with news and gossip from distant Regina. If the characters can comport themselves as upper-class Imperial citizens, then Dhakya offers them whatever help she can give them, such as information about the 40th or local star charts and planetary data.

Thaeuevae

In the Imperium, this would be a Red world, an interdicted planet surrounded by warning buoys and SDBs. There was a Vargr colony on Thaeuevae until recently, when explorers in a deep cavern system became infected with a previous unknown virus. This plague spread through the population incredibly quickly, causing blindness, fevers and even death in many cases. The colony was abandoned.

There is still a naval base in orbit, manned by a skeleton crew. The 40th Squadron intend to reclaim the planet at some point in the future, once their scientists develop a cure for the plague. The virus affects Humans, Droyne and Vargr, but not Aslan, Hivers, K'Kree or most minor races.

If the characters evade the patrols and land on Thaeuevae without taking safety precautions, they risk infection. Characters on the surface must roll Endurance 8+ every four hours to remain healthy; if the roll is failed, the character begins to lose his sight (-2DM to any vision-based checks) and must make another Endurance check every four hours to avoid taking 1d6 damage. A character who passes three Endurance checks in a row has successfully fought off the infection. A character who receives medical care may add the Effect of the Medic check as a +DM.

The Vargr cities on Thaeuevae can be looted for credits and equipment, or the characters can complete the mission obtained on Triad here.

Daeksuzaethukue

Another garden world, Daeksuzaethukue is the domain of Aethgors, one of the most influential leaders in the 40th. See *Those Who Kneel and Those Who Die*, page 13.

5. THE 40TH

Flashback to five hundred years ago. The surviving ships of the Ngoerrgh Togzekhz fleet fight their way back to Vargr space in the aftermath of the First Frontier War. There, they carve out their own pocket empire in the midst of Vargr civil war.

The 40th should have collapsed. They lacked the industrial base or the internal coherency to build an empire. In truth, they had help from two factions. The first were the Zhodani, who were eager to have a semi-stable threat to the Imperium right on the Regina border. The second went unseen by everyone, including the 40th themselves. By mischance or design, the 40th Squadron's petty kingdom was right on SEVEN's doorstep. For five hundred years, his agents have been in the shadows of the 40th. They do not control the empire, but they do lend support when needed, in the form of weapons, space parts, technical expertise or intelligence. Thanks to SEVEN's covert aid, the 40th have been a formidable fighting force despite their comparatively low population and lack of an industrial base. They keep nuisances at bay...

Flashback to several months earlier (*Section 4: Descent*). The player characters have just discovered the Ancient transport ship in the atmosphere of the gas giant Komesh, and confronted SEVEN in orbit. Unable to defeat the Ancient, the transport ship fled into jumpspace and headed for the portal to Grandfather's pocket universe. Using TL25+ sensors, SEVEN was able to track the transport as it moved through hyperspace and followed it to the portal. As SEVEN chased the transport, it sent a message to its secret base on Zoe. SEVEN's mechanical hypermind, an intellect as keen as Grandfather's but warped by bloodlust and hatred, determined there was a possibility that the player characters might escape the transport on board the *Star Hunter*. SEVEN therefore signalled his followers to be on watch for the player characters across Charted Space.

And they have found them.

Run this encounter when the players need direction, or when they get close to the 40th Squadron's worlds (or if they need saving from pirates or some other threat). A pair of Vargr frigates, accompanied by a 600-ton Corsair-class ship, approach the player characters' ship and hail them by name. Alternatively, the characters can be intercepted while landed at a starport; the two frigates drop out of the sky and hover above the starport like the incarnate judgement of an angry god.

The frigates are commanded by an officer named **Rrurrko**.

The lead Vargr frigate contacts you. The image of a silver-furred Vargr female in a naval uniform flashes onto your screen. 'I am Commander Rrurrko of the 40th. By order of Aethgors, you are to cut your engines and stand down! No harm will come to you... if you co-operate fully.'

The three Vargr ships completely outgun the player characters' ship. Fighting back is not an option. The characters can try escaping, but the frigates have Thrust 4 and are carrying Thrust-9 heavy fighters which can chase down any starship. If the characters agree to go peacefully, then the corsair scoops up the player characters' ship and jumps for Daeksuzaethukue.

Captain Rrurrko

Rrurrko comes on board the player characters' ship to question them directly, accompanied by a squad of Vargr marines. Unlike many of the other Vargr the characters have met in Uthe subsector, Rrurrko and her crew are utterly professional, with a crisp naval discipline that a first-rate Imperial navy crew would envy. Rrurrko commands her ship with a quiet charisma; her crew love her and are eager to serve her.

Rrurko has her orders from Aethgors, and will carry them out as best she can. She initially assumes the characters are spies or weapons merchants, and treats them with respect. If the characters are insulting, evasive or violent, then Rrurko's patience is quickly exhausted and she treats the characters as prisoners.

Playing Rrurko:

- Growl at the back of your throat when speaking
- Address everything to the loudest or most forthright player, assuming that he is in charge because of his higher charisma.

Rrurko

STR 6 DEX 9 END 7 INT 9 EDU 10 CHA 9

Admin 1, Astrogation 2, Carouse 1, Comms 0, Computers 2, Engineer (power plant) 2, Flyer 1, Gun Combat (energy pistol) 2, Gunnery (turret) 2, Leadership 3, Mechanic 2, Pilot (spacecraft) 2, Recon 2, Remote Operations 1, Sensors 1, Space Science 2, Tactics (fleet) 2, Vacc Suit 1, Zero-G 2
Vacc Suit (8), Laser Pistol (3d6+3)

Rrurko can tell the characters the following, if the players roleplay well and convince her to trust them:

- Aethgors is one of the great leaders of the 40th. His word is law on Daeksuaethukue, and he sits on the council of captains. He has risen far for such a young officer.
- Her task group was not the only set of ships sent out to hunt for the player characters. Other ships are patrolling planets from Ghin to Torrrez searching for them.
- Her orders describe the player characters as they appeared at Komes. If player characters have died or been significantly altered since then, her orders do not mention these changes.

The Church of the Chosen Ones: Rrurko is a devotee of the Vargr religion known as the Church of the Chosen Ones. This sect believes that the Vargr were chosen by the long-vanished Ancients to be their successors. If the characters mention the Ancients, she becomes intensely interested and demands to know more. Grandfather will *not* reveal himself in this scene – he suspects that SEVEN established the Church of the Chosen Ones to gain leverage in Vargr society (after all, it is exactly what Grandfather himself would do, and SEVEN is a clone of Grandfather) and that exposing his presence would be perilous.

Fighting Back

Player characters being player characters, they may choose to fight back against being taken prisoner by the 40th. A ship-to-ship engagement is suicide; the best approach is to wait until they are scooped up by the corsair, then board it and attack while in jumpspace. If the players choose this option, they can fight their way clear and then continue to search for Zoe while being pursued by Aethgors' forces.

6. THOSE WHO KNEEL AND THOSE WHO DIE

Daeksuaethukue is a glowing golden world, a world of forests and savannahs. The only civilisation appears clustered around the starport, and hovering over the starport is a huge floating grav-platform, suspended halfway between earth and sky. This is the palace of Aethgors, a prince of the Vargr.

If the characters came here independently, then they are spotted by Aethgors' agents at the starport and invited to meet with the leader. If they were brought here by Captain Rrurko, then she personally escorts them to meet with Aethgors.

The combat scene to come (...*And Those Who Die*) is extremely dangerous; if the characters are not equipped with the shimmersuits from the Ancient cache, you may wish to tone down the weapons carried by the Chosen One priests on page 16.

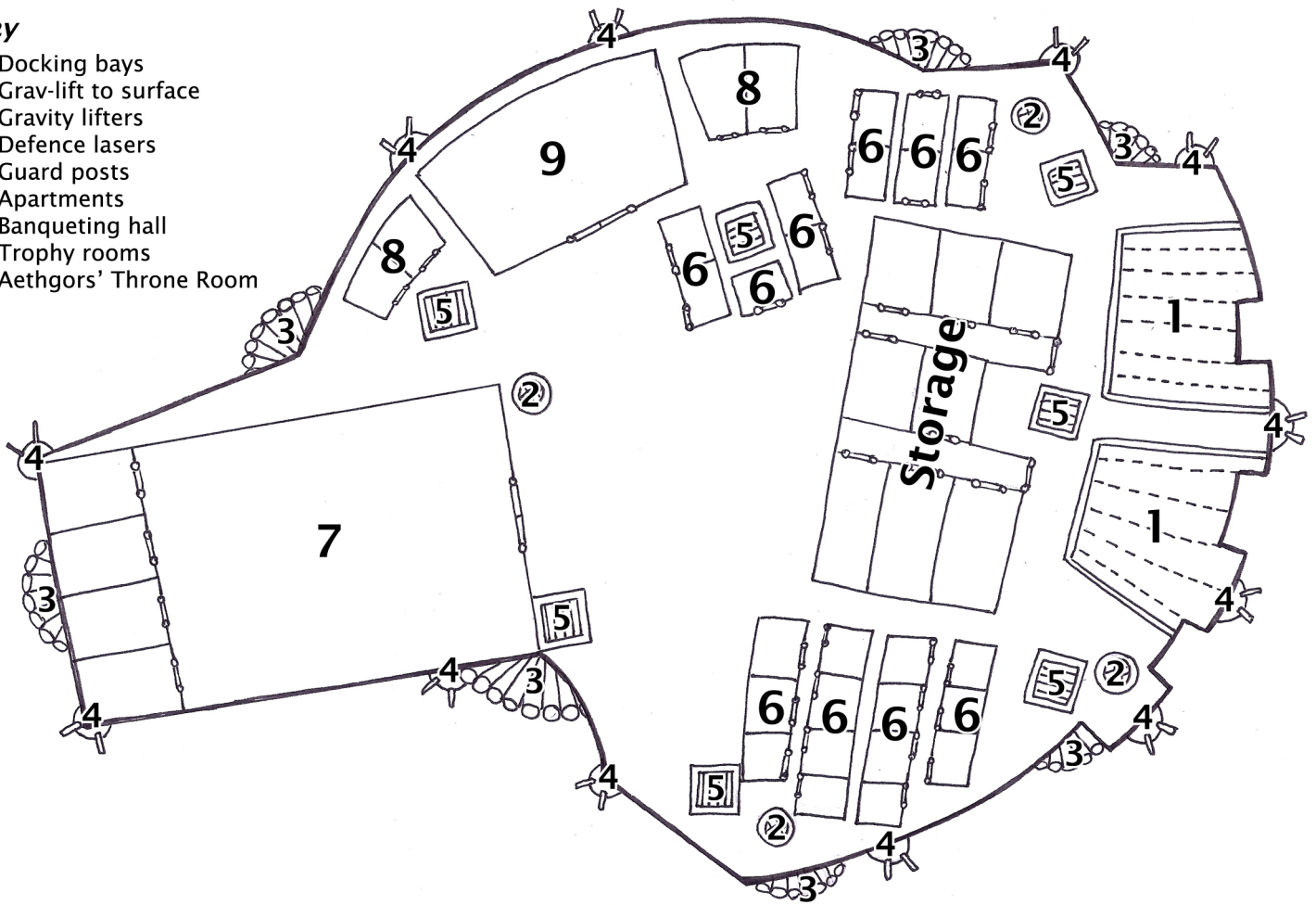
Aethgors' Palace

The 40th Squadron does not practice inheritance, nor do family connections count heavily. They have no aristocracy, no nobility save the navy. To rise to the rank of leader, one must be a masterful commander and tactician, blooded in a thousand silent engagements amid the stars. Aethgors' palace is half pirate's den, half naval college. There are elements of sybaritic luxury here – looted treasures, dens where you glimpse Vargr curled around strange hookahs or rutting like dogs, banquet tables groaning under the weight of food – but underlying it all there is a steely discipline, and a devotion to their leader. Any of these Vargr, you can tell, would die in a heartbeat for Aethgors.

Aethgors' Palace

Key

1. Docking bays
2. Grav-lift to surface
3. Gravity lifters
4. Defence lasers
5. Guard posts
6. Apartments
7. Banqueting hall
8. Trophy rooms
9. Aethgors' Throne Room



1. Docking bays
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7. Banqueting hall
8. Trophy rooms
9. Aethgors' Throne Room

The guards escort you to Aethgors' throne room. It reflects the dichotomy of the wolf. The room itself looks like something from a TL2 barbarian's hall, all wooden benches and serving wenches and stone floors before a huge metal throne. However, floating in the air above and around you is a holographic display of neighbouring star system. Dozens of symbols glimmer, denoting the location of Vargr, Imperial and Zhodani ships, each tagged with a glyph marking how old that data is. From the look of the hologram, the 40th Squadron is very well informed.

As you enter, Aethgors turns to you. The intensity of his physical presence is like a blow. His eyes burn with conviction and intelligence, reminding you instantly of the primordial Vargr Hunters you encountered in the pocket universe.

He grins, exposing a mouth of needle-sharp fangs. 'So, you are the Chosen Ones of the Chosen Ones, eh? Sit! Eat! Let us talk!'

Aethgors greets the characters and bids them to sit and relax. Servants bring in all manner of delicacies and the characters are served fine wines and other drinks.

Playing Aethgors:

- Be completely confident and proud.
- Do not walk – stride. Do not sit – instead, perch on a chair or spin it around and straddle it. Do not just talk to the players, look them dead in the eye and hold their gaze. Rule the room.
- Snap orders to your minions, but treat the player characters as equals.

Aethgors

STR 8 DEX 10 END 9 INT 11 EDU 10 CHA 14

Admin 2, Advocate 1, Astrogation 2, Carouse 3, Comms 3, Computers 2, Deception 2, Diplomat 1, Engineer 0, Gunner (turret) 1, Gun Combat (slug rifle) 3, Leadership 3, Mechanic 1, Medic 0, Persuade 2, Pilot (starship) 1, Recon 1, Sensors 2, Stealth 1, Survival 1, Tactics (fleet) 3, Vacc Suit 1, Zero-G 1
Gauss Rifle (4d6 Auto 4), Combat Armour (14)

Those Who Kneel...

Aethgors explains the following to the characters:

- The Church of the Chosen Ones is an influential sect amid the worlds of the 40th. The religion has little hold among the navy crews, but it is popular among the ground-folk.
- The high council of captains was asked by the Church to find the player characters.
- Aethgors wants to know *why*. He dismisses the Church's claims that the Vargr are the chosen people – if the Ancients really existed and cared about the Vargr, then surely they would be around helping the Vargr race, instead of leaving cryptic clues and scattered artefacts. The gods care nothing for the Vargr or anyone else.

The Vargr is a keen judge of character – and his throne room is wired with high-tech sensor systems and polygraphs imported from offworld. He can determine if the player characters are lying to him (unless a player character succeeds at a Hard (-4) Endurance + Deception or Intelligence + Deception test to fool the sensors). The best option here is for the characters to trust Aethgors and explain the threat of SEVEN and their search for the world glimpsed in Grandfather's dreams. If they do this, he decides to trust them and brings up a hologram of nearby systems.

Aethgors highlights one garden world four parsecs away. 'This is Zoe' he says, pronouncing the Human name as Zhouree. 'Only a few Vargr dwell there. No starport worth a damn. The Squadron never goes there... but I've tracked Church ships coming back from that system. I've always wondered why...'

At this point, the priests arrive – see ...*And Those Who Die*, below.

If they try deception and fail, then Aethgors turns them over to the priests and will not help them afterwards.

7. ... AND THOSE WHO DIE

From outside, you hear a sound halfway between chanting and howling. The doors swing open, and a procession of robed Vargr enters. They wear voluminous white robes, and some of them wear elaborate headdresses or what appear to be ceremonial wings.

The leader of the procession steps forward. 'Lord-captain Aethgors, the Ancients will bless you for your aid in this matter. Strangers, your arrival has been foreseen by our seers, and it is foretold that you will be the ones who guide the Vargr people towards apotheosis. Please, accompany me to the Temple of the Chosen Ones, where all secrets will be revealed.'



This is a blatant lie. The priests are here to capture or execute the characters. Call for Intelligence + Recon rolls from the characters. The character who gets the best Effect spots a familiar face among the Vargr. He recognises Nvor, a Vargr who he last saw in Grandfather's memory-imprints during the war against the Dyabyuse (see *Section 6: Secrets of the Ancients*). Nvor must be more than 300,000 years old at this point, but it is unmistakably him.

Nvor produces a strange-looking weapon from beneath his robe and takes aim at Grandfather's host...

Earth-Shattering Kabooms

Call for Initiative rolls. This fight should be a bloody, high-octane affair. The characters are likely armed with Ancient disintegrator gauntlets and armoured in shimmersuits; some of their foes have comparable protection. In effect, the player characters and some of the Chosen One priests are fighting with weapons thousands of years more advanced and hundreds of times more destructive than anything the Vargr possess. This is not

We Go Peacefully With The Murderous Cultists

While it is unlikely, it is possible that players may choose to accompany the Church of the Chosen Ones. If they do so, then they are brought to a church in the city below the platform, where they attempt to separate Grandfather's host from the rest. If the characters continue to co-operate, then the other characters are herded onto a 400-ton Vargr corsair bound for Zoe, while Grandfather's host is first injected with a powerful version of fast drug that induces a coma.

Nvor reassures the characters, promising them that they will be rewarded for bring 'the Enemy' to SEVEN. He dismisses any concerns about SEVEN being trapped in the pocket universe – even if Grandfather's scheme succeeds in destroying SEVEN's current body, then the Ancient will automatically be resurrected by his family archives. SEVEN is a god, and gods cannot die.

The players' best hope at this point is to storm the Church's ship and bring Grandfather's host out of the coma before it reaches Zoe. If they still fail to take control of their own fates, then they are brought through the gate to SEVEN's realm, where they are dissected cell by cell and neuron by neuron. Their adventure ends in infinite suffering and the triumph of SEVEN.

a fight where the characters take can cover behind walls – this is a fight where the enemy have the firepower to blast the wall to cinders with one shot. There should be no way to avoid collateral damage. Go over the top for this one – crack the grav platform if you can!

- Along with Nvor, there is one Ancient assassin per two player characters.
- There are another five Church priests who will fight alongside the assassins, but are equipped with only TL12 weapons and are not as much of a threat.
- If the characters have convinced Aethgors to help them, then he fights alongside the player character, as do his guards. Otherwise, the guards just try to protect Aethgors and the civilians, and shoot back at anyone else who's firing at them.

Nvor

STR 12 DEX 14 END 12 INT 10 EDU 12 CHA 8

Deception 3, Gun Combat (energy pistol) 3, Leadership 2, Stealth 4, Recon 3

Ancient Plasma Pistol (16d6), Shimmersuit

Ancient Assassins

STR 6 DEX 8 END 7 INT 7 EDU 9 CHA 6

Gun Combat (slug rifle) 3, Stealth 2, Recon 2

Gauss Rifle (4d6), Concealed Tailored Vacc Suit (8)

Priests

STR 6 DEX 8 END 6 INT 9 EDU 9 CHA 7

Gun Combat (energy pistol) 2

Laser Pistol (3D6+3), Concealed Tailored Vacc Suit (8)

Escaping the Platform

There are plenty of air rafts and personal flyers docked at the platform that the characters can use to escape. If Aethgors is willing to aid the characters, and survives the assassination attempt, then he offers the characters the use of his personal frigate. Otherwise, the characters need to head back to their own ship and head for orbit.

8. ONTO ZOE

If the characters' ship is still in the custody of the 40th Squadron, then the chaos ensuing from the attack on Aethgors' platform works to their advantage. The Vargr guards are thrown into disarray by the Church of the Chosen One's attack, so the characters have an easier time breaking into the starport and retrieving their ship. Behind them, the city explodes in flames and rioting as the Vargr loyal to Aethgors turn on the church.

Furthermore, 40th Squadron policy is to keep all ships fully fuelled at all times, so their ship has a full tank of refined hydrogen. The characters can take off (possibly dodging a few patrols if the Referee wishes to add further challenge) and jump. With a Jump-2 ship, the best route is a jump to Otsesu and then onto Zoe.

If the characters continue to explore Uthe subsector in search of the right garden world, then the only other candidate is Tinkaeghzzaklez.

Tinkaeghzzaklez

The garden world of Tinkaeghzzaklez is controlled by the corsair lords of Aethkaek, who use it as their private hunting grounds. The planet is protected by orbital defence satellites that automatically fire without warning on any unfamiliar ships.

If the characters contact the corsairs by radio, they may be able to negotiate landing rights with a successful Difficult (-2) Persuade roll. If the characters visit Tinkaeghzzaklez, they find it to be an insular compound overlooking the wilderness, where the corsair lords treat their servants like slaves. The corsairs monitor traffic through their system; they have spotted several unfamiliar ships refuelling at the gas giant and jumping out towards Zoe.

Otsesu

Otsesu is a low-technology planet used as a supply base and hideout for pirates, and inhabited only by a handful of Vargr peasants and exiles. The 'spaceport' is a field of dirt next to a river. If the characters land here, one of the first people they

meet is a deranged Vargr prophet, Dzoerzthu, who rants about the impending return of the Ancients who will 'lead the Vargr to dominion over all the stars'. He was dumped here by a crew of corsairs who grew tired of his delusional ramblings. Dzoerzthu identifies one star in the heavens as being the 'fortress of the Ancients'; if the characters map this star to their charts with Astrogation, they identify it as Zoe.

9. FINDING THE GATE

The world of Zoe precisely matches the description given by Grandfather. The world is forested, and the atmosphere has a high partial pressure of neon. The system's gas giant has three moons, and one is an iceball on a long eccentric orbit that indicates a recent capture.

The planet is officially listed with a population in the thousands – in fact, the population of Zoe consists of several thousand Vargr and several million semi-intelligent sea slugs. The sea-slugs are a race called the Rynkatropa. Vargr bands colonised the planet and conquered the Rynkatropa, who at the time had barely reached TL1, in the hopes of turning the slugs into slaves. As it transpired, the Rynkatropa have difficulty surviving beyond the confines of their home, and make poor slaves. The Vargr have established factories along the shoreline where Rynkatropa slugs toil in what would be sweat-shop conditions if they had sweat glands, working to produce low-tech bulk goods for the markets of Gzogzu. The factory slugs are kept fed and disease-free, unlike their rural cousins, who suffer from epidemics that have reduced their population by almost 75% since first contact.

The largest settlement is located at the 'starport', which consists of a large slab of concrete near the shore. The starport is guarded by a dozen guards armed with rocket launchers. When the characters land, they are met by the local 'commandant', Songak, a cruel and arrogant brute who suspects all visitors of being troublemakers out to liberate the slugs or interfere with Zoe's fragile economy. They may also encounter another Vargr, a researcher named Kago, who knows more about the wilderness of the planet than anyone else.

Songak

Songak's typical of most of the Vargr on Zoe; he considers the sea-slugs to be nothing more than intelligent animals and assumes that offworlders are here to either poach his slug-slaves or to interfere with his business. He just wants the player characters gone. He admits, if bribed with a few credits, that the Church of the Chosen Ones ships visit the planet occasionally – local legend insists that the Ancients once dwelled on Zoe, but no sign of them was ever found. Sometimes, prospectors and adventurers visit Zoe looking for relics, but never find anything. He can sell the characters an 'archaeologist's licence' for 5,000 credits which he claims is needed to explore Zoe.

Emphasise the extremely parochial outlook of Songak. The characters are on the verge of fighting a battle to save the galaxy from monstrous Ancients, and the last hurdle they face is a petty Vargr thug who is convinced they are conspiring to interrupt his sea-slug slavery business.

Playing Songak

- Try to scam the player characters, and never trust them even for an instant.
- Scowl, growl and threaten the players.
- Chew the inside of your lip while thinking.

Kago

Kago is a Vargr biologist who is studying the Rynkatropa, specifically their diseases. He believes he can cure the epidemics that have ravaged the Rynkatropa population. He claims to care for the sea-slugs, but his real interest is purely academic, and his experiments rely on exposing sea-slug specimens to all sorts of diseases and toxins so he can gather data on their compromised immune systems.

Kago's laboratory is a floating structure in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by dozens of individual plastic test chambers where diseased sea-slugs suffer. If questioned, he mentions that while the sea-slugs have legends about 'gods of the deep' but he dismisses these as nonsensical myths.

Playing Kago

- Be a clinical scientist. State everything without emotion.
- Treat the sea-slugs as idiot children. Claim to care for them, but you really have little interest in them.
- Sniff before you speak.

Finding SEVEN

The starport has no sensors and does not track traffic through the system. Therefore, the characters need to find another way to locate SEVEN's base. The entrance to SEVEN's lair is located eleven thousand metres below the surface of the largest ocean on the planet; finding that entrance is the final challenge in this adventure.

Scanning from Orbit: A Formidable (-6) Intelligence + Sensors check is needed to detect the base's entrance from orbit.

Questioning the Rynkatropa: If the characters wish to make contact with the native sea-slugs, they have three options:

- **Breaking into a factory:** The shoreline factories near the starport are guarded by armed Vargr, but the characters can sneak or fight their way in. The enslaved sea-slugs understand Gvegh (the Vargr language) and have electronic speech synthesisers; if the characters agree to free the sea-slugs, then they will guide the characters to the 'dark gate' spoken of in their legends.

- **Rescuing a sea-slug from Kago's laboratory:** Similarly, Kago's test subjects speak Gvegh and have speech synthesisers. They can guide the characters to the dark gate. However, if the characters try removing sea-slugs from Kago's laboratory, the scientist objects and says that without his experiments, the sea-slugs will go extinct in a few years. No other scientist is working on the problem, and his experiments are at a critical juncture. Do the characters risk the future of a whole sentient species to accomplish their goals?
- **Finding a wild tribe:** The wild sea-slugs understand a few words of Gvegh, but lack the Vargr-built speech synthesisers that allow their enslaved cousins to speak in a comprehensible way (among themselves, the Rynkatropa communicate using modulated water jets and whistles. If the characters can make their desires known, and can interpret the sea-slug's gestures, the slugs will guide them to the dark gate.

Following the Church: The final option is to lurk in orbit of Zoe and wait for a Church of the Chosen Ones vessel to jump in. The characters observe the ship descend into the planet's atmosphere and dive into the ocean. Sensors then pick up a gravitic anomaly below the surface (as a force shield is projected from deep below to protect the Church ship from the crushing pressure).

10. A LEAP OF FAITH

Once the characters have located the entrance to SEVEN's realm, they need to get in. The entrance is eleven kilometres below the surface, far beyond the endurance of any starship. Even if the hull was able to resist being crushed, there are all sorts of weaker components (viewports, airlocks, weapon barrels, landing gear and so on) that might break under pressure. Just flying down into the trench is not an option.

However, if the characters have the shimmersuits, they can just... jump. The suits protect them from any pressure, no matter how intense. The best way for the characters to reach SEVEN's realm is to jump out of their spaceship, fall through the atmosphere, then sink for eleven kilometres straight down into the darkness...

... and the final confrontation.

No Shimmersuits

If the characters never visited the Ancient cache and do not have shimmersuits, then their only way to reach SEVEN's realm is to use one of the Church of the Chosen One vessels and trick SEVEN's servants into activating the protective shield.

LIBRARY DATA

40th Squadron

The 40th Squadron is one of the best-organised Vargr bands in Gvurrdon sector. They are descended from a squadron of Vargr warships that survived the First Frontier war and established their own petty kingdom in the chaotic aftermath of the conflict. The Squadron controls a loose alliance of a half-dozen systems. Individual planets have their own governments, but the Squadron's naval officers are the real power in the empire. The Squadron lacks the resources to maintain its full fleet without external help; in the past, the Zhodani have propped up the Squadron to threaten the Imperium's flank.

Church of the Chosen Ones

A Vargr religious sect who believes the Vargr are the chosen heirs of the Ancients and are therefore the rightful rulers of the galaxy. The Church was at its height some two hundred years ago, and today is more of a fringe cult.

Disintegrator Gauntlets

An Ancient device, these devices are heavy wristbands that project a field that breaks molecular bonds. The gauntlets are controlled by gestures. In the hands of an artist, they can be used to manipulate microscopic objects, perform surgery, or make repairs, but they can also be used as a weapon. Like other disintegrator weapons, the Effect of a successful Disintegrator hit is always equal to the Armour of the target, so a gauntlet attack does 4d6 damage to any foe, regardless of armour.

The Gauntlets are TL25, use the Melee (brawl) or Gun Combat (energy pistol) skill, and deal 4d6 damage. They are inexhaustible, as they recharge themselves from energy released by dissolving the molecular bonds.

Rynkatropa

The Rynkatropa are a Minor Race of Sophonts who resemble ambulatory sea slugs. They have three pseudopods that they use to manipulate objects and move on land, and communicate by whistling. They have four sexes (male, female, neuter and incubator) and had just reached TL1 when they were enslaved by the Vargr.

Shimmersuit

The shimmersuit is an Ancient artefact intended as a very high technology vacc suit with elements of armour and protective suit included as well. This alien artefact is an all-body covering which gets its name from the iridescent sheen of its fabric. They are made from an elastic material which stretches to accommodate a wide range of sizes in wearers.

The suit includes a transparent facemask and gloves that link into the suit and form a perfect seal. An oxygen regenerator in the belt gives up to 8 hours of oxygen. The suit can resist pressure up to 1,000 atmospheres and up to 1,000 rads of radiation.

As armour, the suit completely absorbs all laser damage harmlessly. Kinetic damage (blows, bullets and so on) are reduced to ¼ normal damage, rounding down. Fusion, rocket or plasma attacks do a mix of ¾ energy and ¼ kinetic damage, so the wearer suffers only 1/16th normal damage from such attacks.

The wearer of a shimmersuit also gains a +4 bonus to Strength. Shimmersuits are TL25.