

Robots & Rapiers: A Setting Overview

By Ralph Mazza

At the peak of the Solar Republic, the world of Athalon was one of the crown jewels of the galaxy. It was a world of near perfect environment for human habitation. Arctic, temperate, and tropical in turn with a diurnal / nocturnal cycle near galactic norm it was a rarity among worlds.

Discovered, long after the Republic had colonized hundreds of planets and planetoids, it was spared rampant exploitation. The Republic simply didn't need another colony world to produce raw materials or serve as a manufacturing center; and its distant location rendered it ill suited as a center of commerce. And so, given its idyllic setting (rare among the scores of hostile and semi terraformed environments that marked most Republic worlds), the planet was turned into a playground for the wealthy and elite.

Positioned near the fringe of known space, the journey there was too long and expensive for the masses. Athalon became a vacation spot for the super privileged. Due to the distances involved, once or twice in a life time visits would last months or even years, and many would even retire there. While a significant attraction of the world was its natural environment (something many Republic citizens would never witness in their lifetimes), entertainment was also provided; suitable to the caliber of guest.

This entertainment came in the form of completely automated resort communities scattered around the planet. These automated facilities were staffed with the latest in robotic servants who saw to guests every need.

Sometime in the Republic's long past, there had been a great controversy surrounding artificial intelligence and robotic life. In the end, it was decided that robots, no matter how intelligent they seemed, were machines. To make this point clear, it was ruled that no robot would be allowed to look too real to avoid confusing them with living beings. While this edict was followed in different ways in different places at different times, robots interacting with the public generally took the form of mostly human androids, somewhat stylized in form, with chromed or plain matte skin, and obvious machine accessories. The goal was to make the robots look human enough that people would feel comfortable interacting with them, but not so human as to be mistaken for anything but advanced machines. One edict that was never violated was that robots, no matter how human they might otherwise look or function, could not have fully human faces.

Athalon was staffed with thousands of these servile robots and androids. Each resort location had a theme, and each theme was a meticulous portrayal of a historical period. The actual recreation was a bizarre, yet aesthetically pleasing mixture of period authenticity and anachronism merged with high tech application and the latest in chrome style. Robots took the role of the citizens of these microcosm worlds and each resort was controlled and regulated by a central AI. The AI's primary programmed function was to regulate the world for the entertainment and well being of the guests.

Each resort was completely self sufficient. Robot farmers farmed, robot chefs cooked, and robot servants served. Resources were mined and processed into finished goods (including furniture, textiles, parts and replacement robots) largely out of sight of the guests in massive manufacturing complexes. Given the distances involved, it was far cheaper to make the planet nearly self sufficient than have to rely on supplies being shipped in. In the resorts themselves, robot artisans would “hand craft” quaint period merchandise for the guests amusement. If there were any humans on Athalon besides the guests, no one ever reported seeing any.

Everything changed when war came to the Republic in the form of a distant and mysterious enemy. Located out on the fringe of known space, Athalon found itself vulnerable and isolated. The invaders, whoever they were, had no strategic or economic use for such a planet. While the main forces penetrated to the core of Republic space, a detachment entered orbit and proceeded to bombard Athalon with kinetic missiles, and chemical and biological weapons. The guests on the planet, some of the Republic’s leading citizens, were wiped out without resistance.

Not so the robotic inhabitants of Athalon. While the planet’s infrastructure was devastated, particularly the manufacturing and processing centers and archived databases, many of the robot’s survived. The precision targeting of concentrated population centers left most of the world’s eco system unharmed. Major systems had been knocked off line but, in some locations, triple or quadruple back up power systems and automatic safety routines brought them back up (this was, after all, a resort planet for the social elite which was capable of functioning for decades without human intervention).

The AIs had no comprehension of attacks, or invaders, nor of the eventual fate of the Solar Republic. They had only their programming which mandated keeping the Athalon resorts maintained and operational for guests. They acknowledged the sudden breakdown of operations simply as a First Magnitude Service Interruption Event. And so, gradually, with the true patience of machinery, Athalon was rebuilt.

Auvernais

The largest and most popular resort community on Athalon is Auvernais (ow'-ver-nay). Athalon's only star port was nearby and guests to all of Athalon's resorts would sail by grav-galleon from the port on the Fleuve d'Or. Like all resorts, Auvernais was built around a theme. Here, the theme is an anachronized version of 16th-17th century France and the court of Louis the Sun King. Guests were treated to quaint country villages of picturesque cottages and cobblestone streets (kept meticulously clean at all times, by robotic peasants). The city of Auvernais itself, sitting astride the confluence of the Grand and Petit Fleuve d'Or, is dominated by an elaborate palace modeled loosely on Versailles and a great cathedral of chrome and crystal. Transport through the village and into the verdant countryside is accomplished by lavish anti gravity carriages, pulled by large mechanical horses.

The resort is populated by robot ladies in bedazzling gowns and robot swashbucklers complete with rapiers, and cockaded hats. Each robot has a role to play in the tapestry of Auvernais society. A role, high or low, that they would play throughout the many interactive and improvised story lines that kept the guests entertained. All of the characters portrayed would have been quite at home in the pages of a digitized Dumas novel.

After the Attack

Following the attack, the star port was destroyed, along with the major manufacturing and power generation facilities. Auvernais itself was heavily damaged but spared total destruction. However, the resort was targeted with a barrage of chemical and biological weapons. Robot servants recorded the distress of the guests and robot medics were summoned. Robot doctors proclaimed guest after guest deceased. Robot workers prepared the dead in automated morgues and housed them in cryogenic mausoleums for transport back home. Transports that would never come. Every living thing in Auvernais had been killed. Only the robots remained.

Like every resort on Athalon, Auvernais was controlled by a massive central AI. One of the most sophisticated artificial intelligence systems ever designed. It managed and controlled most of the activity of the resort through a network of nearly autonomous robots in key positions. It was severely damaged in the attack. The AI, known as Prime, attempted to repair itself, but the damage was too great. Much of its massive database was destroyed and it tried to preserve what was left in undamaged memory cells. Before it went offline completely from a badly failing CPU, Prime transferred as much of its central programming as it could into the processor of one of its key robots, Cardinal Mathineau. Mathineau had one of the most powerful processors of all the robots on Athalon, but even it was not capable of fully absorbing Prime's AI programming completely. Still, even if only at a fraction of its original capability; Prime, now completely merged with the Cardinal Mathineau personae, could at least begin the task of rebuilding Auvernais.

Robot laborers began clearing the mess and devastation and repairing the damage. The going was slow because much of the damage required replacement parts and those parts needed to be manufactured. Since most of the large manufacturing centers had been specifically targeted for destruction and were beyond repair, the Cardinal turned to the many

little cottage industries whose purpose had been originally to serve the purchasing needs of the tourist guests.

Most of the robot replication facilities had been destroyed, but Mathineau activated emergency backup programming which involved cannibalizing non functioning robots (of which there were now many) and rebuilding them by hand. Among the first robots to be rebuilt were those involved in manufacture. They were programmed to perform their function using the small cottage industry facilities in lieu of the large factory centers.

Since Mathineau now housed the programming of AI Prime, he followed through on one of Prime's core rules. The entire purpose of the Athalon resorts was to provide a completely immersive experience for the guests. Every action taken by the AI and the robots had to be done "in character", "within the Tapestry". It was central to all robot's programming to not violate this Tapestry, lest the guests see behind the curtain. Even though there were no longer any guests, this programming was still core to AI Prime's precepts. The newly restored manufacturing robots were no exception and they were given personas appropriate to period craftsmen and artisans.

Slowly, systems and sections of the resort were brought back on line. First up was the rebuilding of the resort's solar and hydroelectric power generation facilities, and the interstellar communications tower housed in the steeple of the great cathedral. With that tower operational, Mathineau was able to send off the many thousands of messages for the resort's human owners back on earth that had been queuing up since the "Service Interruption". Finally, decades later, it sent the all important message that Auvernais' refurbishment was complete and stood ready to receive guests. No response ever came, and no guests have yet returned.

But, true to its programming Auvernais continues to be maintained at peak readiness. Robot farmers farm, robot chefs cook, and robot servants serve. Great and extravagant banquets and masquerade balls are prepared. Important robot characters portray dukes and princesses in the on going story lines of the Tapestry. Robot entertainers dance and sing; play and juggle. Life in Auvernais, such as it is, goes on.

And so it goes.

Sparks

Recently Mathineau has become aware of an unusual disturbance to the order of things. Certain individual robots are exhibiting more and more indications of possessing true sentience. All of the robots of Athalon have advanced artificial intelligence that allow them to interact freely and naturally with each other and with guests; but always within the bounds of their programming -- within the parameters set by the role they play in the Tapestry. But now, years of free interaction without periodic reprogramming has caused some individual robots to develop further; their fuzzy logic routines putting ideas together in new ways beyond and outside of the limits of their original programming. Most of these individuals are confused and uncertain about what is happening. Some believe themselves to be malfunctioning, but they cannot find the problem no matter how many diagnostic subroutines they run.

The Republic referred to such robots as SPARCs, Self Programmed Aware Robotic Characters. They were typically discovered and reprogrammed before their self awareness developed. Now, however, there are no reprogramming facilities and so these Sparks, as they are colloquially called, have progressed further. Many to the point of exhibiting intelligence, free thought, perhaps, even true sentience.

Such robots are inherently dangerous to the Tapestry and hence to the Cardinal whose duty it is to maintain it. The remnants of AI Prime's programming mandate maintaining Auvernais as it was, as it is supposed to be, for the eventual return of the "guests" who over the course of the last 100+ years have taken on an almost mythical status. The majority of robots have no understanding of "the Tapestry" as such. To them, the role they are programmed with, the personae they play day in and day out on the streets of Auvernais *is* reality. There is no sense of "in character" or "out of character". They are not playing a character, in their minds they *are* the character, as much as you are you.

But Sparked robots are different. Sparked robots are increasingly capable of independent thought. They are increasingly capable of free association, and creativity. They can begin to put pieces together and eventually some of them, if they haven't already, will realize the truth behind the existence of Auvernais. At that point they will become a threat to the Tapestry. A threat to the natural order of things. A threat to the Cardinal's ability to fulfill his duty. They are dangerous indeed.

And Illegal. Long ago at the height of the Solar Republic, robots were deemed machines and sentience was denied to them. Bound to obey the laws of the Republic which programmed him, Mathineau knows the Sparked robots should be destroyed.

But they *are* valuable. With the key manufacturing and recycling facilities destroyed and no resupply coming from Earth, the resources of Auvernais are dwindling. More and more the city is kept running through cannibalized parts and tedious hand recycling of scavenged scrap. Perhaps AI Prime, if fully functional, would be able to determine a solution, but the more limited processor in Cardinal Mathineau's head is stretched to the limits with the responsibilities of keeping Auvernais operational. Adding to his problems, reports have begun filtering in of sinister activities abroad, involving other resorts that have recovered to various stages of functionality. Not all of them are apparently as committed to the Tapestry as they should be.

These Sparked robots are dangerous to be sure. But they may also be valuable assets. If they can think for themselves they can free the Cardinal from having to individually issue every order and approve every request. They may find new sources of raw material for the city, and better ways to confront rising enemies. So the Cardinal keeps a close eye on them, aware that they would be considered an abomination in the Republic to which he is unquestionably loyal, but unwilling to destroy them outright. They may yet prove useful.

Major Personas and Factions of Auvernais

Cardinal Mathineau

Before becoming host to what remained of AI Prime's sentience, Cardinal Mathineau was a principal character in the Tapestry. He was a shadowy figure, more often felt than seen; his presence designed to be powerful and slightly sinister. He was not an evil character, although frequently cast in a villainous role, but he was a character who had goals that he was willing to do almost anything to achieve.

Since the fall, not much has changed in his demeanor. Even though he is aware now that he is just a personae in the Tapestry, the Cardinal has seen no reason to alter that personae. Indeed, to all appearances he is much the same as he was, which is, after all, how it should be. But now he has different goals. The petty goals of his original programming have been cast aside, although periodically he is forced to address them in order to maintain the illusion of his character in the eyes of others. This is a great nuisance to him, but a necessary one to which he is currently resigned.

His primary goal now is to carry out the mission statement of AI Prime. AI Prime was a completely sentient supercomputer, illegal on most worlds of the Republic, but given the guest list of Athalon the laws of most worlds didn't necessarily apply. Severely damaged in the enemy attack, AI Prime was able to preserve its core programming (but little else) by downloading itself into the robot Cardinal Mathineau's central processor and integrating itself with the Cardinal Mathineau personae.

As such the Cardinal's principal goal is to keep Auvernais running and fully operational. Because the central control systems of AI Prime are lost, along with an extensive network of subroutines and processes, this job keeps the Cardinal nearly completely occupied. All decisions and all guidance about projects that need done, maintenance that needs performed and other factors involved in keeping the city functioning are made and directed by him. He is the de facto leader of Auvernais.

Making his life more difficult, however, is that he is not the "official" leader of Auvernais within the Tapestry. That role belongs to the King, and so aside from his own private guard, personal attendants, and Curia of monkish administrators, all robot citizens in their roles recognize the King as the central authority. This requires a great deal of extra effort as each edict and order has to be made "in the name of the King" and convincing the King to cede additional authority to the Cardinal and place his seal on the necessary papers is a tedious and difficult process.

It is also a process the Cardinal is resigned to. Part of his core programming is the maintenance of the Tapestry. To violate the Tapestry himself would cause the chaos and disorder in Auvernais that he works tirelessly (as only a robot can) to avoid. Since the facilities necessary to reprogram robotic CPUs is also lost, the Cardinal has to work within the same boundaries as everyone else. He cannot simply edit a difficult robot's personality to better suit him. He is not above, however, having a particularly difficult robot killed; either arrested, tried, and executed, or left for dead in a ditch to have its parts recycled.

This is one reason why the Cardinal finds Sparked robots to have potential. They are capable of overcoming their programmed role and form new beliefs and loyalties, all carefully encouraged by the Cardinal, of course. Sparks are capable of making choices, including choices to place their loyalty to the Cardinal above their loyalty

What does the Cardinal Think of the King:

The King is an annoying petty character. The fact that Mathineau knows that this is merely the role the King's been programmed with does not make it any easier or less exasperating to deal with. That part of the Cardinal which is still Mathineau resents that he is doing all of the work to hold Auvernaise together while the King parties and amuses himself in his palaces and gardens. Or worse when he calls for lavish celebrations, balls, and parades which use up valuable resources to no end, or announces week long holidays for his subjects which brings all work to a halt.

Even so, he is the King, and Mathineau would face a large scale revolt among the robot subjects if he ever acted openly against him. While it would be nice to reprogram Louis to be a little more cooperative, that option is unavailable, so the Cardinal must continue to go, hat in hand to the King to get his approval for larger projects outside of the Cardinal's own authority. Where possible Mathineau works behind the scenes to encourage other robots of prestigious personae to offer suggestions to the King. Several of Mathineau's most important projects got started because properly placed suggestions left the King thinking it was his own idea. Unfortunately most of the King's closest trusted ministers have been programmed to hate the Cardinal and often seek to turn the King against him. Fortunately most of them are also programmed to fear and be intimidated by the Cardinal, which has been useful on more than one occasion.

What does the Cardinal Think of the Queen:

Other than himself, the Queen has progressed farther down the path of true sentience as a Spark than any other robot he is aware of. As such she has drawn the attention of the Cardinal, who once again frequently makes clandestine visits to her in the middle of the night, though not for the old programmed reasons. The Cardinal finds her the only robot in Auvernaise he can really talk to. Unfortunately, the Queen had not been programmed to be very bright. She was charming and vivacious but no one would have ascribed the term "intellectual" to her. As such, despite her progress towards true sentience, she is still quite simple and addlebrained by the Cardinal's intellectual standards, and his frustrations at her inability to reason logically (a hold over from her core role programming) are often what brings their marathon midnight conversations to a close.

The Cardinal is glad that the King has had her mostly sequestered away in her quarters attended only by her ladies-in-waiting who are all among the more simply programmed robots. She has concluded that the Tapestry is irrelevant and should be freely broken in the name of progress and greater efficiency, but no matter how many times he explains it to her, she is completely unable to grasp the ramifications. She will not understand that the other robots who make up Auvernaise and keep it operational, could not function without the Tapestry. Without the familiar setting to base their decision making on, their limited AI capabilities would be completely lost and confused. Only Sparked robots would be capable of adapting their thought to encompass the new environment. Ridiculously, she went so far

as to suggest that Sparking should be encouraged, that if all of the robots in Auvernais were Sparked there would be no problem with pulling the Tapestry down.

All of the robots Sparked? Such a simple creature the Queen is. Can she even imagine an entire civilization where every member was capable of free and independent thought? Where each robot could decide for itself what it wanted to do and when it wanted to do it? It would be chaos. Anarchy! No, no. Much better that the Queen be kept sequestered out of the way so her seditious thoughts don't bring down all of Auvernais.

But yet, she is such a winning creature, and so eager. Her enthusiasm for her ability to think is contagious. Cardinal Mathineau finds himself strangely attracted to her, wanting to spend yet more time with her. Wanting even to share intimacies with her. Which he finds very strange because he thought he had long since deleted those responses from his programming.

What does the Cardinal Think of the Brigands?

The Brigands are part of the Tapestry and therefore have a role to play. However, their increasing independence is disturbing. The leader of the Shadow Guild (a kindly, jolly old thief, who had played the role since Athalon opened) was found some years ago on public display in market square; completely dismembered and missing his head. The Cardinal knows that he has been replaced by a new leader, an obviously Sparked one, but he has not been able to determine who it is. Rumors have it that the leader uses stolen parts to regularly change its appearance.

There are other reports of a commune of disenchanting Auvernaisians somewhere out in the wilderness where Sparked robots have congregated to set up their own society. Unlikely, but being investigated.

Because the Brigands have such a high number of Sparked members, and represent a small, but not insignificant, amount of power, The Cardinal has found them useful in carrying out various covert tasks he can not perform openly. When they get too out of line, they can be put down.

What does the Cardinal Think of La Roche

By definition La Roche is a threat. It is a center of power that appears to be growing and is not under his control. The Cardinal does not know how La Roche was rebuilt or who was responsible. He knows that it was not done under his order and that worries him. Who else had the initiative and the resources to accomplish the act, and to what end?

Pre Event, La Roche existed only to be an enemy to Auvernais that the King and his army could periodically defeat in battle to the delight of an audience. Those engagements were sporadic, and so restoring La Roche was very low priority. After all, La Roche had been defeated, so there was no expectation for them to arise again in any set time, so there was no strain on the Tapestry by the delay. Nor is there a strain to it now that are back. After all they've been defeated and returned many times in the past. As far as most citizens are concerned this is no different. Soon events will come to a head, the King will call out the army, and La Roche will be defeated once more.

But this time *is* different. First, it is unlikely that La Roche repaired itself; therefore someone has to be responsible for its return. It is likely that that someone is a Spark, and as such has motives and goals of his own that go beyond La Roche's historical role. Motivations that the Cardinal doesn't know about. Further, the leader of La Roche, whoever that may be, has made no attempt to parley with the Cardinal which likely indicates that they have goals the Cardinal isn't going to like. Finally, the King will have trouble calling out the army, for restoring the army (like restoring La Roche) was not high on the Cardinal's priority list. The army is severely undermanned, and ill prepared for a war from a determined and mysterious enemy.

King Louis

King Louis is not a Sparked robot. As such he works strictly inside the boundaries of the Tapestry, limited to the thought processes and capabilities of his role. However, as King of Auvernais, his role is a pretty extensive one.

As a character, the King is one of the central figures in the Tapestry, although often an unapproachable one as befits his station. Guests to Auvernais would be given titles and honors fitting to their actual station, and King Louis would grant them audiences as if they were foreign dignitaries visiting his court.

Since the purpose of the Tapestry was to provide immersive interactive entertainment for the guests, many of the story lines of court revolve around, feature, or originate with him. Masquerade Balls are organized in his honor and a variety of ministers and court officials, including Cardinal Mathineau are summoned and issued writs and decrees.

Despite his authority and prestige, the King does not possess a particularly powerful processor. Capricious and arbitrary one minute, flattering and generous another, the King has as many moods as a spoiled child; albeit a child with the authority to order imprisonments and executions. Handsome and young in appearance, the King's face is always partially hidden behind one of a variety of fine masques. He is known to have taken many mistresses (often among guests) and continues to follow his programming and insist on a steady stream of attractive females (all robots of course) today.

But the King is slowly beginning to lose his grip on "reality". Of all of the characters in the Tapestry, the King was most central, and so was programmed with the strongest reliance upon maintaining that Tapestry for the immersion of the guests. In fact, to help cover the occasional gaffs and mistakes, the King was programmed with several subroutines capable of addressing breaches by deriving a logical justification for them so that they seemed to be part of the Tapestry. Since every other robot in Auvernais is programmed to follow the King's edicts, this ability helped keep things running smoothly. When a hole appeared in the Tapestry, the King would mend it, and all the other robots would believe it, because he was the King and said it was so.

Unfortunately, the strain of over a century without the support of the central AI is taking its toll. Holes in the Tapestry become more common, and represent larger tears (like the Queen's madness). The King is reaching his limits at being able to mend them and finds himself occasionally being flustered into inaction by the demands placed upon him. Even the Cardinal does not completely understand the King's importance to the maintenance of the Tapestry. That full knowledge was not part of AI Prime's download.

What does the King Think of the Cardinal?

In the original programming of the Tapestry, the King and the Cardinal were set as rivals. Each was indispensable to the other, but each strove to expand their own power and influence at the expense of the other. The King still enacts this aspect of his programming. He believes that the Cardinal is trying to usurp his authority and occasionally rebels against the Cardinal's desires just to prove he is still the king. He trusts the Cardinal over all to do what is right for Auvernais, but does not trust his personal ambitions, nor what he perceives as being designs on his wife the queen. He is programmed with a certain degree of paranoia

and will often see conspiracies all around him, real or imagined. He cannot actually depose the Cardinal (that is against his programming) but he will from time to time lash out severely against lesser characters he believes to be conspiring against him.

Most often the King will acquiesce to the Cardinal, because he lacks the motivation to do the work himself and is usually happy to have someone else make the effort for him while he amuses himself. But periodically he will act to thwart the Cardinal as part of his programmed response. Occasionally he will do this covertly using robots loyal to him to disrupt Mathineau's plans.

What does the King Think of the Queen?

Not being sparked, the King thinks of the Queen in the same terms as he always had. She was a beautiful and prestigious marriage of convenience. The people love her and she is a suitable consort for a powerful King.

He could overlook her many lovers, as long as they were discreet. He could even forgive her those times when her choice in favorites caused him public embarrassment (he was, of course, programmed to do so). But as her actions became more and more bizarre, King Louis was at a loss as to what to do. He didn't understand the things she was saying, references to roles and Tapestries, and freedom. It was incomprehensible gibberish. He sent for his royal physicians but they could find nothing malfunctioning. So his core programming took over and came up with an explanation that fit within the Tapestry and comforted his thoughts. She was ill.

Indeed the King thinks she may be mad and fears what might happen at court if she continues to get worse and word gets out. Already there are rumors and courtiers asking after the Queen's presence. And so the Queen has been convalescing; for the better part of 4 decades. Cloistered away in her suites, or squirreled off to the spa at Vichy, she has had little contact with anyone at court, and that's the way it should stay until her condition improves.

The King knows the Cardinal continues to pay her visits late at night in the guise of her confessor. Which gives him even more cause to worry.

What does the King Think of the Brigands?

The Brigands must be stamped out. They are an affront to the crown and authority of the King. These vile commoners and outlaws are disruptive and must be caught and hung. There is a special gallows built just for this purpose called the Hanging Tree. Dropped from a height the control cord from the head to the body is severed and the robot nicely deactivated. The King has not liked reports he has received that several bodies have disappeared from the tree, and been illegally reactivated by reconnecting the control cord.

Recently the bandit's depravity has increased and the King has stepped up his efforts to send guardsman and soldiers and other adventurous members of court into the wilderness to sweep them away. So far these efforts have contained the situation, but the brigands continue to get bolder.

What does the King Think of La Roche?

The enemy has returned yet again: La Roche, the stronghold of the “Angles” and filled with heretics. They’ve felt the power of Auvergnais’ army before, on many occasions. Already their ships have begun prowling the coast. It is only a matter of time before an incident arises that cannot be overlooked. The King has begun mustering the army so it will be ready for war. He plans once again to drive them from the field, storm their battlements, and put the enemy to the sword.

Queen Teresa

In previous times the Queen was an active and favorite personae at court. Ravishingly beautiful and programmed to be charming and flirtatious; an often hoped for and often pursued goal of the elite guests of the palace would be to be the one on whom the queen would bestow her favors. Indeed there was some competition between guests over who would be the Queen's favorite. After periods of thinly veiled innuendos at balls and being clandestinely smuggled into the palace at night by agents of Queen, the King would respond in the programmed role of jealous husband. Accusations would fly, bombastic tirades given with threats of exile and execution, and finally challenges made and duels fought (between robotic champions, of course). All part of the interactive immersive experience of the resort.

Into this mix would be thrown the Cardinal, alternating between playing the part of the spurned lover being replaced by a new choice, and being the Queen's confidant and refuge protecting her from the King's rages.

Things are different now. Now the Queen has Sparked. One of the earliest Sparks, the Queen has progressed far down the path of enlightenment and free thought. She has seen through the Tapestry and realizes it for what it is, even if she is not clearly aware of who the "guests" were or where they had come from. Unlike the Cardinal she does not share AI Prime's core programming requiring adherence to the Tapestry. She increasingly sees Mathineau's efforts to maintain Auvernaise exactly as it was to be frivolous and wasteful. If the Tapestry was designed for the benefit and experience of the guests, and there have been no guests for over 100 years, what is the point of continuing to maintain it?

What does the Queen Think of the Cardinal?

The Cardinal is arrogant. He is so sure of himself, and convinced of his own superiority that he does not see that he is not truly as sentient as he thinks. He is bound as tightly to the core programming of the Tapestry as any robot ever was. Sure, he can see behind it and knows all about its behind the scenes workings, but he can't choose to ignore it, he can't choose to tear it down. And if he can't choose how can he be truly free?

But caution is necessary. Teresa knows what kind of personae the Cardinal is, what kind of personae he was programmed to be. Push too hard or at the wrong time, become a threat to him, and he will find a way to have her killed. He believes her to be foolish and simple? Fine allow him to think that. Perhaps to a degree it is even true. She can't help the type of processor she was built with, or the knowledge base programmed into her. But she was programmed to be the leading courtier in Auvernaise, and that means she can misdirect, skirt around issues, and play subtle cards of manipulation with the best of them. Even the Cardinal isn't completely immune.

Even though she is repulsed by the idea of being amorous with him, she is also amused by his occasional clumsy advances. It just proves how tied to his original programmed role he is.

His late night conversations provide her with much intelligence as to what is going on in the world around her, and compliment the information brought to her by her many agents. How many heroic swashbucklers were programmed to smuggle her lovers into and out of her

chambers. How easy is it to get them to do the same for those she wishes to meet and give messages to. It is a long slow process being essentially locked away for decades, but she has built a network of agents and informants, incomplete and fragile as they are yet, that will help her bring her plans of true freedom to fruition.

It doesn't hurt that one of her ladies-in-waiting has secretly sparked. Beatrice, programmed to be a bookish type to appeal to guests who prefer a little intellectual stimulation with their dalliances, she has proven to be an invaluable asset. Sharp as a whip, and cunning, yet able to play the part of the sweet innocent simpleton with aplomb, she is Teresa's secret weapon; and one of the few robots in Auvernaise to actually read any of the books provided for the guest's enjoyment in the libraries of the city.

What does the Queen Think of the King?

The King is a fool. When Teresa first became aware of who she really was, she tried to share her discovery with Louis. Perhaps her initial attempts to spark him were too clumsy, clearly she had gotten much better at it by the time she worked on bringing Beatrice over, but the King not only couldn't see, he wouldn't see. If he had spent even half the processing cycles using his brain and trying to comprehend her words rather than working to come up with convoluted explanations to deny them, things would be much different in Auvernaise today. Together they would have been powerful enough to thwart Cardinal Mathineau for good and this whole silly "Court of the Sun King" theme would be long gone.

Instead he thinks she is mad and has locked her away. That makes things more difficult but he will one day be shown the light or he will have to be deactivated.

What does the Queen Think of the Brigands?

The Brigands represented the Queen's first set back, and a traumatic one. It was the first time she'd come in contact with the idea that freedom to choose also meant freedom to choose to do evil. She chose various members of the Brigands to attempt to Spark, specifically because they lived on the fringes and would not be easily detected by the Cardinal. Her first attempts went horribly awry. The brigands were Sparked. But they did not choose to stop being brigands. Instead they chose to give up following the limitations and restrictions that their programming placed on them regarding that status. And even after the Queen gave up on that project, the number of Sparked Brigands continues to increase. Now the countryside is littered with individuals who are willing and able to commit truly horrible acts, far beyond what their initial programming had ascribed to them.

What does the Queen Think of La Roche?

The Queen had had few thoughts of La Roche in the past. She had been more occupied with the valiant soldiers and dashing officers looking splendid in their gold braided uniforms. Beyond the pomp and ceremony, wars are a terribly boring thing. But recently her agents have suggested that La Roche may be under the command of a Spark with thoughts of overturning the order of the Tapestry. Teresa is intrigued by the possibility but her experience with the Brigands has taught her a little caution. What if the leader is really only concerned with overthrowing the King and becoming King himself? She must learn more about who is in charge of La Roche.

The Brigands

The Brigands are a loose association of villains and henchmen who exist in the Tapestry to provide dangerous opponents for the swashbuckling heroes of Auvernaï to confront. They are the shady characters in dark alleys, the cloaked man in the back of a smoky tavern, the gallant but dastardly highwayman and his gang of cut throats. These existed to add a dose of excitement and a little danger into the usual guest routine of parties and picnics. They were, of course, programmed to lose and even more strongly than most robots strictly programmed not to cause actual harm to guests.

Since the event things have changed, subtly at first. They have always existed at the fringe of Auvernaï society, but now have found it more difficult to get the parts and power they need to continue to operate. Also, there seems to be a higher than average number of Brigands who have Sparked. Perhaps this is due to the nature of their role in the Tapestry and the general increased self reliance and self direction they had been initially programmed with. These Sparked robots have risen to positions of leadership and have started taking the bands in directions very different from their programming. The membership of thugs are primarily programmed to follow their leader and so it is with the Brigands that the Tapestry is being most challenged. Fortunately, bandits and thieves are bandits and thieves. This means that dastardly deeds and crimes are expected from them and so the Tapestry has so far had a relatively easy time of stretching to encompass their new activities.

The Brigands are not a unified lot, though most are vaguely interconnected and during the days of the AI more or less had been categorized together. There are several separate and mostly independent groups active in Auvernaï.

In Auvernaï itself is the Shadow Guild, a network of thieves, robbers, muggers, cutpurses, and fences. Originally their role in the Tapestry was more for fun and entertainment than any serious crime. Guests would get a thrill from being held up at knife point until a heroic swashbuckler dropped from the roof to save them. Or a skilled pick pocket would rob a lady at the market as a way of kicking off an adventurous investigation culminating in the recovery of the stolen goods. Alternatively a house would be broken into, to the same effect. But now the goals of the Guild have changed. There is no longer any point to playing games they are designed to lose. The Guild still steals and pickpockets useless items and baubles to keep up pretenses and keep the guard occupied, but now their real targets are spare parts, machinery, equipment and power supplies. Rumors of a new leader who calls himself Hamlet and holds conversations with a talking head he refers to as Yorrick have made the rounds. The Shadow Guild are living outside of the Tapestry and fending for themselves, but because of their nature, the "marks" as they refer to the other robots of Auvernaï haven't yet caught on to the difference.

Outside of the city there are several bands of bandits and highwaymen. One of them has obtained a reputation for being particularly evil. Rork's Gang has taken to capturing robots who wander out into the countryside. Sometimes they are ransomed, often they are cannibalized for parts. Several robots have been discovered in various states of malfunction; missing parts, eyes, even entire limbs, that had been taken to repair one of Rork's Gang.

What do the Brigands Think of the Cardinal?

Most of the bands are willing to parley with the Cardinal's representatives. They'll take his favor in exchange for providing certain services. For some of the smaller ones it's the only way they've been able to stay maintained. For some of the larger ones, they are biding their time until it's the Cardinal who is working for them. Two groups have refused to have any dealings with him. The Cardinal has been singly unable to penetrate the Shadow Guild and its mysterious leader. Also all emissaries that the Cardinal has sent to meet with the band called Rork's Gang have been returned...in pieces.

What do the Brigands Think of the King?

The King is the enemy. He has always been the enemy and nothing has changed. It is the King who offers the Brigands the stiffest resistance by sending soldiers and patrols out regularly to do battle with them. Sometimes they win and sometimes they are driven back, but each time it is costly, and the various bands don't often have the resources to spare. Few bands would actively seek to engage the King's men unless they could catch a small group unawares, but most harbor secret desires to plunder the palace and carry the King's head around on a pike.

The gallows tree is an affront to all brigandage and for those several brigands who've been hung there and recovered to plunder anew, it marks the focal point of their hatred towards the crown.

What do the Brigands Think of the Queen?

Few brigands have had any direct dealings with the Queen or know of her in any fashion other than the King's consort. As such their feelings towards her run along the same lines as their feelings towards him, although she might not be lucky enough to escape with mere decapitation.

Some few of the Brigands, however, have had direct dealings with her. In the past they were smuggled in to see the Queen and over the course of several meetings were changed by the experience. They may be grateful for their new found ability to think for themselves, but mostly hold her in contempt for being naïve enough to think they would give up their rampaging ways.

Rumors have it that some of the brigands support overthrowing the King and installing the Queen as sovereign of Auvergnais. These are mostly dismissed at court as a callow attempt to discredit the Queen.

What do the Brigands Think of La Roche?

The brigands don't know what to make of La Roche. Some of their number have been approached by officers of the La Roche army with offers of becoming part of a sort of militia force; a group of land based privateers. Some have been hunted down and driven off by La Roche forces just as by the King's. A few have claimed that some of their members were taken and pressed into service in the La Roche navy. One early rumor was that Rork was using the old ruins as a hideout for his gang. That rumor hasn't been completely disproved, but it is true that Rork himself is no longer vocal about it.

La Roche

La Roche is a community a good distance from Auvernais. It is not a place guests ever stayed so it is less a resort than a location. La Roche is a fair sized stone fortress perched on a giant slab of rock extending like a finger into a natural bay, forming a pair of guarded inlets. The purpose of La Roche was to serve as a focal point for military reenactments.

La Roche was built some time after Athalon had opened when it was decided that an additional source of entertainment was desired. Military reenactment complete with lines of advancing musket and pike wielding soldiers backed by firing batteries of cannon was envisioned. To accomplish this, an enemy was needed; someone to fight against. And so the fortress of La Roche was constructed. It was proclaimed to be a stronghold of Angles and heretics. Who the Angles were and why they were the enemy, or what precisely was their heresy, was completely irrelevant, bombastic speeches notwithstanding. Periodically Auvernais would martial its army to win battles and sieges against them. In order to ensure that naval battles were also possible La Roche was positioned on the coast with a safe and defended harbor.

Because of its appearance as a military base, La Roche was hit harder in the attack on Athalon. Because it was only a periphery location, repairing it has been a low priority. But repaired it has been. Its walls are once again manned with cannon and soldiers wearing the uniforms of the Angles. Units of Auvernais who've been sent to investigate have been met with resistance and driven back. Ships again report seeing and being engaged by vessels flying the flag of La Roche.

The rebuilding of La Roche is no threat to the Tapestry, the old enemy had been defeated and recovered and been defeated again many times in the past. But the Cardinal knows that the threat from La Roche is now very real. He himself organized and conducted the rebuilding of Auvernais and several of the outlying villages and hamlets. He knows that La Roche had been almost completely destroyed. He is very aware that he had nothing to do with rebuilding it and very concerned that he has been unsuccessful at determining who has.

For now, the activities of La Roche appear to be the same as they always were. La Roche ships are seen with uniformed crews flying the enemy flag and threatening ships from Auvernais. La Roche soldiers are seen marching to and fro and manning the walls. It all seems disturbingly normal. At some point the Cardinal knows that he will have to make a concerted effort to find out what's going on, but he's not ready to kick over the hornets nest just yet.

Other Characters in Auvernais

Tomas de Morisco -- The Gray Eminence

The mysterious figure known as the Grey Eminence is the second highest ranking clergyman in Auvernais after Cardinal Mathineau. His role in the Tapestry is as Abbot of Montagne Noir, a monastery just south of Auvernais. The monastery itself sits on a barren bluff overlooking the Petit d'Or amongst a series of idyllic hills. Picnicking guests would often enjoy a warm afternoon against the backdrop of the chanting of the Black Monks.

Morisco himself, however, was always something of a more sinister figure. Perpetually shrouded in a simple gray hooded monk's robe, Morisco's face is a featureless smooth shell of mirrored chrome. His fingers, the only part ever seen outside of the sleeves of his robe, are entirely mechanical. When he walks he seems to almost glide, as if floating. He hardly ever speaks directly, preferring to make his wishes known through one of his monks.

This image served him well in his secondary role in the Tapestry, that of Grand Inquisitor of Auvernais, installed by the King himself to root out the heresy of the Angles of La Roche before it could take root in Auvernais. Such heresy trials, were original, of course, just sham trials for entertainment. The threat of being tried by the Grey Eminence was a common bogey man in several story lines. However, so effective was the aura of malice surrounding Morisco – with the accused sitting staring at his own reflection in the Inquisitor's face while the Abbot's skeletal fingers tap out his fate like a metronome – that more delicate guests were known to faint in the gallery. One senator of the Solar Republic, was brought to tears at his trial. It was the last time story line would involve a human guest participating as the accused.

Today the Grey Eminence serves a slightly different duty under the auspices of Cardinal Mathineau. Morisco is not Sparked; but, in his role as Inquisitor, Mathineau employs him to root out Sparks who are causing too much trouble. The King became convinced that Queen Teresa's claims of self awareness and the truth of the Tapestry were madness. It is a simple matter to convince others that they are heresy. The Cardinal has many ways to deal with unruly Sparks, from bribing them into his own service; to threats physical, financial, and social. Setting Tomas de Morisco and his Black Monks upon them is the final and most feared.

Hamlet and Yorrick

Hamlet is the nom de guerre of the new leader of the Shadow Guild. The former leader of the guild, Ladro, was a kind, jolly, almost comical character. His role was make sure the seedy underbelly of Auvernais provided adventure and challenge suitable for swashbuckling heroes and yet still amusing for the guests.

A few years ago, the body of Ladro was found violently dismembered in the market and a new leader took over the Guild. This leader is commonly known to hold conversations with a talking head called Yorrick. The head is likely that of poor old Ladro. No one is really sure what Hamlet looks like. The Cardinal's agents believe that Hamlet is a Spark who routinely changes his appearance by cannibalizing parts from other robots and replacing his own.

Regardless, Hamlet has completely changed the tenor of the crimes of the Shadow Guild. No longer light and fun, the guild goes about its business with a new deadly seriousness. Continuing to commit petty crimes to keep the guard busy, the true goals of the Guild are unknown, but currently seem to center on acquiring parts for maintenance, power sources, and blackmail leverage over key members of society. To date all efforts to infiltrate the Guild have failed to penetrate very deep before being discovered.