
TRAVELLER

SECRETS OF THE ANCIENTS

THE HUNT

Make no mistake – the Imperium will make the spacelanes safe. Pirates, smugglers, raiders, thieves, enemies of member states, the vastness of space is still not large enough to hide in. If you break the laws of space, the navy will hunt you down and the navy will destroy you. With this Ducal order, the navy allocates another two hundred ships to pirate hunting duty.

No matter how many ships we send out hunting, though, we will not succeed without the co-operation of other space traffic. The Imperium calls on all free traders and independent ships to aid the anti-piracy effort. Report any suspicious vessels. Do not transport or purchase cargo without correct purchase orders. Carry your share of the mail and retransmit it immediately upon arrival. If all ships follow these simple regulations, we shall draw an invisible yet inescapable net around the pirates.

And then, we will shove the whole bloody lot of them out the airlock and let the bastards choke on vacuum.

- Admiral haut-Vacari's broadcast on the new Regina Subsector Security Initiative, Year 1101 of the Imperium (unedited version, not for transmission)

The Hunt is the third adventure in the **Secrets of the Ancients** campaign. If you're a player, **stop reading now**. If you're a Referee, then you should first read **Section 0: Secrets of Secrets** to get an overview of the campaign. In **Section 2: Homecoming**, the characters attended the funeral of Vlen Backett on Alell, where they learned that he was involved in a strange conspiracy. They visited Vlen's hunting lodge in search of his will, whereupon they were attacked

by Imperial Marines. Backett was under investigation by Gand Holcess of Imperial Intelligence. Holcess's ship, the **Alahir**, followed the characters to Alell.

This adventure takes place in the Regina subsector of the Spinward Marches. The year is assumed to be 1105. The player characters are assumed to have fled Alell on Backett's scoutship, the **Star Hunter**; if they somehow managed to get away in their own ship, then replace references to the **Star Hunter** with their own ship.

Adventure Synopsis

Having escaped Alell by fleeing into jump space, the characters must choose their course across the Regina subsector. They have two obvious destinations – the worlds of Boughene and Beck's World. According to the documents recovered from Backett's lodge, a belter once found some Ancient relics in the asteroid belt, and Backett believed there might be an Ancient site somewhere in the system.

Beck's world, further to the antispinward, was once definitely home to the Ancients. There is a tunnel system beneath the blackened surface of this world that been partially excavated by researchers. One of these researchers is Juni Volsang, who possesses the secret of a technique to detect hidden Ancient structures.

The characters must travel across Regina, avoiding the Imperial authorities. Do they head straight for Boughene, gambling that they can stumble across the hidden Ancient site before they are captured? Or do they travel all the way to Beck's World, and get the G-Band detector equipment before looping back to Boughene. Both choices pose a different set of hazards to the characters.

Extra Passengers

It is possible (if unlikely) that some of the travellers from Alell are still on board the **Star Hunter**. The characters could have wannabe-hunter Bard Jocell, gang thug Morgan or clueless Hans Backett on board. They might even have Arisa with them, either as a prisoner or a spy. Bard, Morgan and Hans can all be used as replacement player characters if someone died on Alell; they can also be used as extra crew members if the PCs are short on manpower. Otherwise, they ask to be dropped off as soon as possible in a civilised system.

If Arisa is on board, then she attempts to win the confidence of the PCs and learn everything they know before fleeing the ship and making contact with Gand Holcass. If the PCs have taken her hostage, then they can try negotiating with Holcass, but this just means they will be treated slightly better when they are eventually captured and interrogated. Try to keep Arisa alive, but if the PCs do end up murdering her, you can replace her with another Imperial Intelligence officer.

1. HUNTED ACROSS THE STARS

As soon as Gand Holcass gave the order to arrest the characters, he set events in motion. Invisibly, inexorably, the machinery of the Imperium is moving to capture the characters. The characters' names and the identity of the **Star Hunter** were transmitted to Alell's starport, and there they were entered into a database of wanted criminals. Copies of this database are automatically sent to all other starports and Imperial vessels. Bank accounts that are definitively connected to persons on this list are also frozen, although this can take several days. Depending on the law level of a world, the local police authorities may also become involved in the search.

The Imperium is limited by the speed of communication. There is no known method of delivering messages faster than the speed of light, except via jump-capable ship. The Imperium has a network of couriers, the X-boats, which bring messages between key worlds at high speed. Other ships, ranging from official mail-boats to passenger liners to tramps, carry messages to worlds off the X-boat network. The warrant for the characters'

arrest propagates unevenly out from Alell, arriving at different planets at different times.

The table below shows when word reaches each system near Alell. The times given in the table are approximate – if the characters head straight for, say, Efate, then they might arrive ahead of the news and so be able to operate freely in that system for several hours. (Remember, a ship spends approximately one week in jump space, and the duration of a jump can vary by up to 10%).

Not all of the inhabited systems in the Regina subsector are listed below – the adventure assumes that the characters take a course towards either Beck's World or Boughene. If the players decide to head somewhere else (say, by arcing around through Jewell subsector) then the Referee will have to improvise. (It is best to inform the players openly that they are leaving the prepared adventure.)

Likely Routes

The **Star Hunter** is capable of Jump 2; the **Alahir** is faster, with a Jump range of 3. Captain Holcass' tactic is to make a quick jump to the nearby system of Efate, which is on the x-boat network. The x-boats will carry the news to other systems on the network, while the **Alahir** refuels and jumps to Pixie, to alert the military base there. From Pixie, the **Alahir** moves to Boughene – according to the evidence from the wreckage of Vlen Backett's lodge on Alell, he had an interest in that system.

The most direct route to Boughene for the PCs is to jump to either Efate or Uakye, refuel there, and then jump straight onto their destination. Both Efate and Uakye get the PCs' arrest warrant on week one, so even if the PCs go to those worlds directly, they have only a short time before the news catches up with them. A safer, but longer alternative is to head via Whanga to Feri, or even Whanga>Roup>Feri>Boughene.

If the characters choose to go to Beck's World instead, then their route will go via Feri or Pscias.

Give the players the map of the Regina Subsector (page 7) and a printout of the Library Data accompanying this adventure.

Jumping on the Run

When the **Star Hunter** jumps into a new system, it may be detected by the local authorities. If the characters are ahead of the Imperial arrest warrant,

System	News Propagation Time (weeks)	Detection DM	See Page
Efate	1	+6	6
Allell	0	+0	6
Yres	3	-2	6
Menorb	2	-1	8
Uakye	1	+2	8
Whanga	2	-7	8
Knorbis	2	-3	8
Forboldn	3	-3	8
Pixie	2	+2	8
Boughene	2	+3	9
Feri	3	+2	9
Roup	4	+0	9
Pscias	4	-1	9
Dentus	4	+0	9
Kinorb	3	+0	9
Beck's World	5	-4	10
Enope	5	-1	10
Wochiers	6	-4	10
Yorbind	4	-3	10
Shinothy	6	+0	10

Accidental Criminals

The player characters are innocent of the crimes that Gand Holcass accused them of committing. They are not part of Vlen Backett's conspiracy, nor are they plotting against the Imperium. Some players might prefer to concentrate on clearing their names instead of investigating rumours of the Ancients. Point out to such players that they need some sort of leverage before the Imperium will listen to them, and that finding a previously undiscovered Ancient base might be enough to convince Holcass that they are not who he believes them to be.

then they can go about their business without hindrance; if news of the arrest warrant has already reached the system, they risk being arrested or attacked if they go near inhabited worlds.

In each new system, run the following checklist:

1. The ship arrives in the system.

Where does the ship arrive? Most travellers jump in as close to the mainworld as possible, but the characters could also arrive near a gas giant, a secondary world or just jump into deep space. A ship that emerges in the middle of nowhere will not be

detected as quickly as one that appears close to the mainworld, but deliberately aiming for deep space can be suspicious, and it also prolongs the amount of time the PCs must spend travelling to a refuelling point.

If the PCs made an accurate Astrogation roll, they arrive close to their destination. A poor Astrogation roll means the ship arrives wildly off course. Pick the region of the system the PCs arrive in from the following list:

On Approach to Mainworld: Within 200 planetary diameters of the mainworld's surface.

Close to Mainworld: Within 1,000 planetary diameters of the mainworld's surface

Close to Gas Giant: Within 1,000 planetary diameters of the gas giant

Close to Secondary World: Within 1,000 planetary diameters of the secondary planet's surface

Deep Space: None of the above

2. Local Sensors May Detect The Ship

Hiding in space is extremely difficult – a ship is a hot object against a very cold background. Technologically advanced sensors can also pick up the shower of tachyons and other energetic particles generated by an emergence into real space. However, just because

a ship can be detected does not mean it will be. Roll 2d6 on the Detection table below.

Arrival Zone	Detected?
On approach to mainworld	4+
Close to mainworld	6+
Close to gas giant	8+
Close to secondary world	8+
Deep Space	10+

If the PCs ship is detected, go to step 3. If the PCs' ship is not detected, go to step 5.

3. The ship is investigated

Legally, all vessels must broadcast a transponder signal, identifying the ship's name, serial number, owner and home port. This transponder is embedded in the ship's jump drive and cannot be easily changed. The transponder signal can be overridden by blocking the transponder and broadcasting a false signature instead with a Comms roll. Blocking the transponder hides the ship's identity as long as no-one comes close enough to notice the jamming or scans the embedded transponder directly.

Hiding the transponder signal: Comms + Edu, 10-60 minutes

If a ship lands at a starport or near inhabited regions, it can be examined. Every ship, even those of a common design, has identifying marks ranging from hull paint and serial numbers to scars and patches. Even if the transponder has been changed, an undisguised ship can be physically examined and investigated. A ship's identifying features can be changed with a Mechanics check.

Disguising the ship: Mechanic + Dex, 10-60 hours

The third route for investigation is to challenge the crew via radio. The PCs may choose to give false names to anyone who contacts them over a communications channel. This requires a Deception check.

Lying to the authorities: Deception + Soc, 1-6 minutes

The chance of a ship being identified as a wanted fugitive depends on three factors – the Law Level of the planet (determining how thoroughly incoming ships are examined), the difficulty of deceiving the investigators, and how long it has been since the word of the characters' arrest warrant arrived. To determine the alert level, roll 2d6 – if it is equal to or less than the

number of weeks since word first arrived, the planet is on Medium Alert. Otherwise, it is on High Alert.

For each of the three potential ways the characters might be identified, roll 2d6, applying the DMs listed above and the Effect of the PCs' efforts to disguise themselves, if any. If the result is a 7 or less, the characters are identified as fugitives or suspicious travellers, and may be intercepted: go to step 3. If the characters are detected, but not identified, go to step 4.

Interception

If the ship is identified as a wanted fugitive or otherwise warrants investigation, then the local authorities will intercept it in some fashion. The interception method varies depending on where the ship is.

At the starport: If the ship is in a hangar, the hangar is locked down and the ship is not permitted to leave. The characters are arrested by starport security if possible.

In orbit: The ship is intercepted by whatever assets the starport has available. Depending on the system, this can be anything from a battered old system defence boat to a squadron of fighters to a multi-thousand ton warship.

Near the mainworld: If the world sees a lot of traffic, or has a naval presence, then the starport may assign an asset (as per *in orbit*) to investigate the suspicious ship. In less secure systems, then the starport may just challenge the vessel and order it to land at the starport, or ask another free trader or trustworthy ship to swing close to the suspicious vessel and investigate.

At the gas giant/secondary world: If the secondary world is inhabited, then there may be other ships there, like at the spaceport. If the secondary world the characters visit is uninhabited, then they may be the only ship there.

In deep space: Unless their ship is positively identified as a wanted vessel, then the chances of the characters being pursued into deep space are small; instead, the starport will covertly alert other bases and ports in the system, warning them to watch the suspect ship and to detain it if possible.

Some sample encounters are in the Surface Encounter and Space Encounters sections, below. If you have access to **Traders & Gunboats**, the vessels in that

book make excellent encounters; otherwise, stick to the ones in the *Traveller Core Rulebook* or designs of your own creation.

4. Refuelling

See Refuelling on the Run, below.

5. Adventuring

The characters' bank accounts may be frozen; if they do not have cash or trade goods on hand to pay for fuel and repairs, they may need to take on odd jobs from patrons along the way to keep flying. The Subsector Encounters section lists short missions for every world the characters are likely to visit along the way.

6. Departure

Once the characters have finished their business, they need to get back into deep space and jump on to the next system. If the characters are not already wanted criminals, then this is an excellent time for news of their arrest warrant to arrive in-system. The characters should always be running just head of the law; keep the pressure on them at all times.

Hide and Seek

The rules above present a semi-abstract method of determining whether or not the characters are detected as they travel across the Regina subsector. The Referee should not be enslaved by these rules – use them as a way to build tension. If the characters come up with clever ways to avoid pursuit, then give them dice modifiers to their rolls. Every time the dice hit the table should feel like a 'ping' in a submarine war movie. Characterise everything – this isn't a routine sensor sweep from a Class C starport, it's the *Star Hunter* hanging in space over Enope, hoping that their bluff about suffering transponder damage from a Vargr attack holds up.

Never give the players *no* chance of survival. Never say *'ok, there's no source of fuel in the system other than the starport, and you'll be blown up or arrested if you go there. I guess you just float in space until the air runs out.'* At the same time, you should throw the full weight of Imperial law enforcement against the characters. Keep them on the run – if they evade one patrol, there'll be another along in five minutes.

Surface Encounters

Pick the most appropriate encounter or roll randomly.

1. 1d6 starport staff. These may not be official guards; a small starport might not have a dedicated security staff, or the starport administrator may prefer to keep the arrest as low-profile as possible. These staff are equipped with whatever armour and weapons are commonly available on the world, given its law level and technology level.

2. 1d6+1 starport guards, equipped with stunners, slug rifles and flak jackets. They are trained security officers, but are more used to dealing with petty thieves, stowaways and smugglers than hardened criminals.

3. A single experienced Imperial officer, who either covertly observes the characters (if they are only suspected of being wanted criminals) or else tries to talk them into surrendering. If that fails, he is backed up by 2d6+2 heavily armed starport security guards, equipped with combat armour (TL11), stun grenades and laser rifles. They may be mounted in vehicles.

4. The starport administrator, accompanied by 2d6+2 armed guards, as above. The administrator wants to find out what the real story is; if the characters roleplay well, they may be able to either cut a deal with him or turn him into an ally.

5. 1d6 Imperial Marines in battle dress with plasma guns, backed up by 3d6+3 local militia forces equipped with the standard armour and weapons for the planet's Technology Level and Law Level.

6. An Imperial Marine fire team (2d6 individuals) in battle dress and carrying heavy weapons. Their orders are to secure the player characters by any means necessary. If they have to, they'll start by smashing through the roof with plasma guns.

Space Encounters

Pick the most appropriate encounter or roll randomly.

1. 1d3+1 fighters, either 10-ton light fighters or 20-ton multipurpose fighters (see *High Guard*)

2. A battered Serpent-class System Defence Boat

3. A 60-ton boarding craft, escorted by 1d3+1 fighters (see *High Guard*)

4. A Gazelle-class close escort
5. A Corsair-class interceptor, with 1d3+1 fighters as escorts.
6. An Imperial warship. Fighting is pointless.

Refuelling on the Run

Hydrogen is the most common element in the universe.

However, most of it is burning up in stars, or floating in diffuse gas clouds, so it cannot be used as fuel by a band of player characters on the run from the law. To mangle Coleridge, **hydrogen hydrogen everywhere, and not a drop to fill our fuel tanks.**

If the characters have not been identified as fugitives, then they can simply head to the starport and fuel up there as usual – assuming that there is a starport, that they can get in and out before word of the arrest warrant arrives in-system, and that they have the cash to pay for fuel (if they do not have the money, then they may need to find a local patron to earn some money).

If the characters want to stay away from the starport, there are other sources of hydrogen.

Gas Giants: A ship with fuel scoops can harvest hydrogen from a gas giant. Scooping takes 1-6 hours and requires a successful Pilot check. The fuel must then be refined; note that the **Star Hunter** has fuel scoops and a fuel processor to refine scooped fuel.

Water: If a planet has water on its surface, then this water can be collected via hoses into the fuel scoops and then refined. Even if a planet has no liquid water, there may be ice frozen at the poles or underground.

Alternatively, if a planet is inhabited, there must be water present, even if it is shipped in from offworld. If the characters do not dare land at the spaceport, they can just land at some isolated settlement and take on water.

Ice: If there are no suitable gas giants or water-bearing worlds in a system, or if the characters are especially paranoid about remaining undetected, they can scour the outer reaches for ice-bearing comets or asteroids. Finding such an object and rendezvousing with it takes 1d6+2 days.

2. REGINA SUBSECTOR

As the characters make their way across the subsector, they may need to earn some money to buy fuel, especially if their personal accounts have been frozen by the arrest warrant. The worlds listed below are the ones most likely to be visited by the characters.

Efate

The characters can easily hide among the teeming billions of Efate. This highly technological planet is a virtual anarchy, and it is only the presence of the Naval base in orbit that keeps it in check. Anything goes on Efate – unlike the hidebound culture of Regina, Efate is a wild freeport. Strange subcultures appear and vanish overnight. The planet has a high technology level (TL14); cybernetics, genetic engineering and personal augmentation are universal among the natives.

Patron: Zaar, of **Lucidity Enfolded.**

Payment: 5,000 credits per person

Mission: Zaar runs a subjective-reality entertainment business, where the memory engrams of interesting and exciting individuals are copied and sold to the jaded aesthetes of Efate. Offworlders and travellers are a popular choice for engram readings, as they bring experiences unavailable even on this cosmopolitan world. Zaar wants memories that are especially personal, traumatic or compelling; to earn their pay, the players must describe the memories their characters are donating.

Twist: The memories can be seen by the other characters; the PCs may end up revealing more than they intended.

Yres

This planet is a waterworld; the atmosphere is radioactive, so the population live in domed cities on the ocean floor and in underground structures. Each city-state has its own government and legal system. A Vargr attack a century ago destroyed much of the planet's infrastructure, and the population now lack the technical knowledge to repair their habitats.

Patron: Engineer Qudanx of Esten/Thalis of Gerlais

Payment: 25,000 credits/75,000 credits

Mission: Qudanx, an engineer working for the city of Esten, hires the characters to help repair a damaged construction robot that was repairing part of the Esten dome. The robot's subsystems are beyond Qudanx's understanding, so he needs help.

Twist: Optionally, the characters can accept an offer from a rival city, conveyed to them by Thalís, to sabotage the robot. This will weaken the dome of Esten, forcing the city to evacuate that district and giving Gerlais the edge in their ongoing trade war.

Menorb

A hot, dry world, Menorb's primary activity is agriculture, mostly for export to the Vargr worlds. A high percentage of the native population are Vargr. Menorb is a traditional recruiting ground for the armed forces, and many natives take pride in the deeds of their ancestors.

Patron: Kwraal

Payment: 40,000 credits

Mission: Kwraal is a Vargr pirate and mercenary who retired from his life of crime a few years ago to become a law-abiding citizen. However, his farm is failing and he is running out of money. He considered going back to piracy, but he's had another idea. Menorb suffers from regular raids, so he has hired himself out as a private security consultant to other, more successful farmsteaders. When the Vargr show up, he chases them off with his fighter jet. Unfortunately, there hasn't been a Vargr raid in more than two years and his clients are cancelling their protection contracts. He wants the characters to fake a Vargr attack using their ship. They must terrify the locals, but not cause any actual damage or be captured by the authorities.

Twist: A Vargr raiding party shows up after the characters begin their fake attack run.

Uakye

Uakye is tide-locked towards the primary star; half the planet is in permanent daylight, the other half in eternal night. The few colonies are all in the twilight band between the two, where the temperature is bearable. Uakye is settled mainly from Efate, and there is considerable traffic between the two worlds.

Patron: Iacai Zhadhedn

Payment: 50,000 credits

Mission: Iacai is the rich adopted child of an artificial intelligence on Efate. She was partying with some of her friends on the nightside of Uakye; one of her friends wandered off into the ice, and they can't find him. The authorities have searched the area and found nothing, but she believes her friend is still alive. A chunk of ice broke off and is floating into the dayside; Iacai's friend Matez is on the ice, in a coma. He is still alive, preserved by his cybernetic implants.

To complete the mission, the characters must find the iceberg and retrieve Matez from his melting world.

Twist: The iceberg is melting rapidly; the characters cannot safely land there, and must make their way across the shifting surface on foot.

Whanga

Whanga is almost deserted; the original colony here was destroyed centuries ago, and while a second colonisation effort is underway, it has yet to bear fruit. The characters can wander the wilderness, secure in the knowledge that there are less than five hundred people on the whole planet.

Patron: Sternmetal Horizons, LLC

Payment: 60,000 credits

Mission: Sternmetal Horizons is trying to attract colonists to Whanga, but have met with little success so far. The characters must travel to either Roup, Feri or another world within two parsecs of Whanga and convince at least 1,000 people to sign up for the colonisation efforts. The characters are paid with a bond redeemable only at a Sternmetal Horizons office, and only after the colonists have signed up to a five-year indenture.

Knorbes

This planet is an Imperial game reserve; much of the planet is interdicted to prevent poaching. One of the most notable inhabitants is the Tree Kraken, whose liver is said to have anagathic properties. Characters on the run on Knorbes can hide within the game reserve, where high technology is banned without a permit.

Patron: Baron Holden haut-Leis

Payment: 50,000 Credits

Mission: The Baron wants to go on a hunting expedition into the depths of the jungle, in search of the fabled Tree Leviathan. According to the drunken tales of native guides, the Tree Leviathan is found only in the megaforests of the interior, where redwoods the size of skyscrapers grow. The Baron is determined to find this beast – and bring it back alive!

Twist: The Tree Leviathan is a myth; the Baron is convinced it exists, and will lead the characters to their death if they follow him.

Pixie

Pixie is a tiny world, little more than a moonlet. It is home to a naval base and a community of miners. It is also the second place that the *Alahir* goes after

Allel, so if the characters go to this system, they will be immediately identified and attacked by the navy.

Feri

Formerly a rich and peaceful world, a global conflict has broken out on Feri. Two coalitions, one loosely pro-Imperium and one pro-secession, are locked in a long-running war. Most of the conflict is relatively low-intensity; the belligerents have so far managed to keep the more devastating weapons off the battlefield (a TL11 war can render a planet lifeless), so most battles involve guerilla warfare and tactical strikes.

Patron: James Oapa

Payment: 40,000 credits

Mission: Oapa's family are somewhere in Sacrifice Zone 149, a region that has been designated a warzone following a secessionist attack. As a designated warzone, the two sides have unleashed all sorts of ghastly weapons in that area, ranging from autonomous hunter-killer drones to bioweapons. All traffic into and out of the zone is banned. Oapa wants the characters to fly into the zone, rescue any survivors, and then bring him and his family offworld.

Roup

A highly populated water-world, the people of Roup live on vast artificial islands made of organic material. These living islands are cultivated for both food and seaworthiness. Even the starport floats on one of these green platforms; the planet strictly regulates the number of ships who can land at any one time, to ensure the weight of ships does not sink the port.

Patron: Tazar Uk-Asad of the Routani Corporation

Payment: 60,000 credits

Mission: The Routani Corporation has developed a method of rapidly seeding new islands by dropping a slurry of hormones and protein into the ocean, mixed with capsules of an engineered retrovirus that causes microscopic organisms to bind together. They believe that this seeding technology is faster and more efficient than traditional island-weaving. Many citizens believe that the Routani method is dangerous, untested and may upset the delicate ecological balance of the oceans. The corporation has won – through lobbying and possible bribery – the right to conduct field tests, but no ship in the system will work with them. They hire the characters' ship to dump several test loads of the chemical slurry into the ocean.

Twist: The characters come under attack by natives who believe the Routani Corporation is poisoning the oceans.

Pscias

This world is under indiction by the Imperial navy. The characters cannot land here; the only option is to scoop fuel from the gas giant. There is an automated refuelling station where fuel can be purchased.

Enope

The caverns of Enope are one of the wonders of the subsector. This huge hollows have been turned into gardens and farmlands; each cavern mimics the conditions of a different world or climate, and is filled with lush plant life. The high population lives within the caverns and the tunnels that link them.

Patron: The Enope Academy of Outshell Advancement, a school for the few youths of Enope who want to leave their honeycomb world and explore space.

Payment: 50,000 credits

Mission: The characters are asked to take on four apprentices, aged between 10 and 15, who will accompany the characters to their next port of call. On the voyage, the apprentices will work as part of the crew and learn from the characters. After one jump, the apprentices will return to Enope on a different ship.

Twist: One of the apprentices, Hela, stows away on board the characters' ship. She wants to be out in space *now*, instead of waiting another six years in a TL6 school, reading dusty, second-hand accounts of space travel.

Wochiers

The high pressure of the planet's atmosphere makes it ideal for crystal growing and certain other large-scale industrial processes. It also makes the planet almost intolerable to humans; those who are unused to the punishing conditions suffer from earache, nose bleeds and other discomforts. The crystals grown on Wochiers are used by the Imperial Navy.

Patron: Ao Atan

Payment: 50,000 credits

Mission: Atan is a former engineer in the Wochiers Crystal Works, which makes huge focussing crystals for the Imperial Navy; these crystals are part of the spinal mount weapons. He was fired for embezzlement. He claims that he was framed by a Zhodani agent working in the crystal factory. Atan

suspects that the Zhodani is sabotaging the crystals by deliberately introducing almost undetectable flaws. The Crystal Works officials and the navy have both dismissed his concerns as paranoia and bitterness. He wants the characters to break into the Crystal Works and find the spy.

Twist: Atan is indeed the victim of Zhodani espionage, but not in the way he thinks. One of his closest friends, Durel, is a Zhodani spy. Durel manipulated Atan's mind and planted the idea to steal money. Now that Atan is out of the Crystal Works, and so out of the reach of Imperial security, Durel can steal the technical specifications of the crystals out of the engineer's mind.

Shinothy

The Shinothy system is also under interdiction; microscopic particles of antimatter exist throughout the system, and are extremely hazardous to shipping. The starport is in a zone that has been cleared of antimatter, but travel outside this zone is dangerous.

Patron: Yorbling the Epicure

Payment: 50,000 credits

Mission: Yorbling, a grotesquely fat creature kept alive by machinery, has decided to go out with a bang. He has eaten everything known space has to offer, but there is one taste he has yet to experience – the subtle, impossible flavour of antimatter. He wants the characters to collect a few micrograms of antimatter for Yorbling's last meal.

Twist: Yorbling is dying of an infestation of intestinal parasites, which is contracted by eating a delicacy from a world hundred of parsecs spinward of known space. What he does not know is that the parasites are growing into dog-sized predators within his capacious guts. Soon, they will explode out of his stomach and attack the PCs.

3. BECK'S WORLD

From orbit, Beck's World looks like a red-streaked black marble. The planet's surface was scorched and burnt aeons ago; most of the planet consists of jagged mountains and endless lava fields. Huge volcanic vents pump black smoke into the air, and the ash clouds are so thick that whole months can pass without a glimpse of sun. Most of the volcanic activity has subsided now, but the planet is still a few hundred thousand years away from having anything resembling a biosphere. The only native lifeform on the surface is a lichen-like plant clinging to the underside of the cooler rocks.

There is a colony on Beck's World, a lichen growth of habitation domes and prefabricated shelters on the shore of a milky-blue lake that is the only body of water on the surface. A few thousand desperate souls live on Beck's World. It was a pirate base for many years, until the Imperium offered the ruling gang legitimacy in exchange for an end to raids on shipping and the establishment of a listening post in orbit, to watch for Zhodani intruders. Today, the inhabitants of Beck's World are a mix of the exiled and the desperate, homeless travellers who washed up on this black shore and got stuck here. The 'government' is a paramilitary gang who control the life support machinery and the guns. There are a few Imperial technicians to maintain the listening post, and there is a single official representative, Fedic Jocan, from the Duchy of Regina.

For thousands of years, this planet was just a number in a Vilani database, an unremarkable rock on the edge of the Spinward Marches. Even the arrival of the ill-fated pirate Beck and his band of cut-throats barely rated a footnote in the library files. The system seemed utterly irrelevant, until a mining corporation surveyed the planet in 1020. They found that Beck's World had 'no commercial viable resources', but they did discover that the volcanic activity of the planet appeared to have been artificially induced. The surveyors suggested that a superheavy object such as a dwarf star had passed close to the planet, churning up the molten core. Geologists from the university of Regina began a series of investigations in 1069. Deep beneath the scorched crust of Beck's World, they found signs that the Ancients had a base here, hundreds of thousands of years ago.

Since then, there has been a constant presence from the University on Beck's World. On the edge of town is a small cluster of newer buildings where the researchers live and work. The existence of the Ancient ruins are an open secret on Beck's World – and a source of tension between the researchers and the other inhabitants. The locals believe that the archaeologists have found Ancient relics that are worth billions of credits in the caves, and that they should get a share of the profit. In fact, no especially valuable relics have been found, but what are facts compared to rumours of vast wealth and a ticket off this rock. The researchers are unaware of the increasing hostility of the locals. So far, the ruling gang has done nothing about the University base, fearing Imperial retribution, but they want the University gone as it threatens their grip on power. All it would take to trigger violence is a single spark.

In Orbit

The only other ship in orbit of Beck's World is a yacht, the **White City**. If hailed, the **White City** responds that the owner, Bay Venshar, is on the surface and is not available at present.

Landing at Beck's Town

Landing at the Beck's World starport is a leap of faith. To get there, you have to dive into thick black clouds of dense ash and soot, guided by a faint locator beam signal. When your ship finally breaks through the cloud cover, you wonder why you bothered – Beck's Town is an ugly carbuncle of soot-stained domes on the edge of a blue lake. The starport is just an irregular oval of semi-level ground. A holographic sign flashes on and off, advertising that you can get 'food, fuel and girls' here.

As soon as you land, a figure in a HEV suit slogs across the landing field and hammers on the airlock. You can barely make out his features beneath the dirt and mud on his faceplate, but he waves a laminated ID card at you. Apparently, he's the official customs inspector.

This charming fellow is Uro Phell. His job is to inform visitors of the law on Beck's World, and to see if they have anything worth stealing. Most of those who come to Beck's World are just as poor, desperate and dangerous as the locals, but occasionally some lost free trader or adventuring party land here and are never seen again.

Phell begins by explaining the customs of Beck's World. His speech is almost incomprehensible, as he mixes in loanwords from Zdetl (the Zhodani language) and Gvedh (one of the Vargr dialects), and his suit's speakers are clogged with dirt. **'Hey, ieprs, this Beck's World. Be it known that the thanes have laid down the law. No guns, nor knives, nor any other killsticks on Beck's World, save those held by the qafs.'** He slaps the shotgun at his side for emphasis. **'Fuel's three hunded creds a ton, impure. Aught else ye need, the thanes can supply. What's yer cargo and where're ye bound? Give me yer names and who ye owe fealty to, likewise.'**

While the characters answer his questions, Phell paws through their belongings, pokes around the ship and generally makes them feel unwelcome. He suggests that if they just want fuel, they should stay in their ship and pay the unreasonably high price for

unrefined hydrogen (300 credits/ton). If they want anything else, they can go into town, but they will have to pay an entrance fee of 200 credits per person.

Uro Phell

STR 9 DEX 7 END 8 INT 7 EDU 5 SOC 4

Broker 2, Carouse 1, Deception 1, Gun Combat (slug rifles) 2, Melee (brawling) 2, Mechanic 1, Persuade 1, Vacc Suit 1
Shotgun (4d6), HEV (7)

Playing Phell

- Intimidate the players. Push yourself into their personal space, take offense at minor slights, throw your weight around. You're one of the big fish in this tiny, sulphurous pond.
- Mock any suggestion that Phell is breaking Imperial law. The characters are on the very fringe of Imperial space, and that sunburst has little weight out here.
- If the characters mention the University of Regina, Phell unclasps the environmental seals on his suit, unscrews his helmet, ostentatiously spits on the floor, then replaces his helmet and reseals his suit. He obviously despises the university.
- If they hint that they are on the run from the Imperium, then Phell is amused, and notes that they should stay away from the Imperial agent in town, Fedic Jocan. He is **'a dangerous chabbifi'** who eats wanted criminals for breakfast.
- If they want anything else, then they should talk to the 'thanes', the gang who run Beck's World.

The Other Ship: There is one other ship at the starport; a ship's boat belonging to the **White City**. There is no-one on board.

Making Friends (and Enemies)

Once the characters leave the starport, they can head into Beck's Town. There are four obvious destinations:

- Closest to the starport is the largest dome, which is the colony's bar, trade hall, whorehouse and hotel. It's called, simply, Beck's Dome.
- Clustered around Beck's Dome are several smaller, better-maintained habitat domes. There is an anti-ship missile launcher mounted on top of one dome. The ruling gang live in this section; Uro Phell heads back to these domes after dealing with the player characters.
- On the far side of the starport is a battered dome marked with the Imperial sunburst. If the characters scrape away the inch-thick crust of soot on the sign outside, they learn that this is the official residence of the Imperial consul.

Bay Venshar and the White City

The characters are not the only people on Beck's World looking for Juni Volsang. There is a thriving black market in Ancient relics and curiosities. Bay Venshar is a dealer in such rare goods; he heard rumours that Professor Ujinka of the University of Regina had discovered a method of detecting Ancient sites. Venshar is here on Beck's World to acquire this method from Juni Volsang.

Venshar is more than two hundred years old, thanks to his use of exotic anagathics from Foreven sector. He looks like a twelve-year-old boy, as the drugs have regressed his body to just before puberty. He is fascinated by the Ancients, and claims that all the races touched by the Ancients – Humaniti, Vargr and the like – are part of a grand and glorious plan. This messianic vision is actually Venshar's version of a sales pitch. While a working Ancient relic is worth millions of credits, Venshar has made a career out of turning fragments of interest only to archaeologists into religious relics for the rich and gullible.

While in Beck's Town, Venshar cut a deal with the ruling gang. He intends to kidnap Juni Volsang and loot the Ancient ruins. He offered the gang money and a deniable way of getting rid of the university base in town. One of Venshar's crew is a geologist and a demolitions expert. She planted explosive charges in the rocky cliffs above the university base. Soon, these charges will be remotely activated, burying the base in an apparently 'natural' landslide. Even if the Imperium or the University uncovers proof that the base was attacked, the gang can just blame the long-departed Venshar.

The **White City** arrived at Beck's World 48 hours ahead of the player characters. The ship's boat carrying Venshar and his mercenaries takes off and heads for the dig site soon after the characters arrive. See **Departing Guests**, below.

- Finally, just outside town, unconnected to the rest of the domes, is a small complex of prefabs belonging to the University of Regina.

Beck's Dome: Read the following to the players. **The sign promised 'food, fuel and girls'. Outside,**

you saw that the fuel was unrefined hydrogen, and it looks like the food and the girls are equally suspect. The air is hot and greasy; there's some sort of meat on sticks for sale in one corner. It looks like roast space weevil. As for the girls, there are three of them, all surgically endowed using some cheap backstreet autodoc. They all have the same cosmetically-beautified face. Three sets of trapped eyes stare at you from behind production-line features.

Beyond the food stands and the prostitutes is a semi-deserted hive of scum and villainy. There are only a handful of patrons in the bar other than yourselves, and they all look at you hungrily. The bartender is a drunken Vargr who's busy licking the glasses clean when you enter.

The denizens of Beck's Dome are typical of this world; desperate, nasty drifters who would cut your throat for a low passage offworld and a shot of rotgut whiskey. If asked about Juni Volsang or the University of Regina, they grumble about 'offworld eggheads stealing treasure', and 'the Imperium keeping the common man down.'

The bartender, Fangs, is more forthcoming with useful gossip, and can drunkenly explain that everyone thinks the University researchers are taking Ancient artefacts that should, by right, belong to the good citizens of Beck's World. If asked about Volsang, Fang remembers that one of the archaeologists was a young and pretty scientist (***'if you like 'em mostly hairless' adds the leering Vargr***), but he has not seen her around town. That probably means she is out at the dig site, which is off limits to anyone other than University personnel. He is not exactly sure where it is; probably several hundred kilometers north-west of the starport.

Fangs can point the characters to a guide, another Vargr called Gvarrul who lives on his own in the mountains. Gvarrul can bring the characters to the dig site, but will charge them a thousand credits for his services. Gvarrul is a bitter, eccentric old dog who despises everyone else and just wants to be left alone.

The Ruling Gang: Read the following to the players: ***This part of town is obviously fortified. The streets between the domes are narrow and have plenty of cover and kill-zones. The airlocks are armoured, and you spot several grey pillboxes that could be gun emplacements. You get the***

Gvarrul

Gvarrul was a Vargr corsair before he was wounded in battle; his former packmates turned on him and stranded him here on Beck's World. For the last thirty years, Gvarrul has lived on his own, nursing his grudge against his old crew. He survives by prospecting for diamonds in the mountains. He knows the wilderness of Beck's World better than anyone else.

He can guide the characters to the entrance to the cave network, but he will refuse to go underground unless the characters promise him passage offworld. If he comes to trust the characters, he may even ask to join them; he can also be used as a replacement character if a PC is killed.

Gvarrul

STR 7 DEX 9 END 6 INT 7 EDU 4 SOC 3

Athletics (co-ordination) 2, Melee (claw) 1, Navigate 1, Survival 2, Vacc Suit 1

Playing Gvarrul:

- Growl everything you say
- If there's one thing you've learned, it's that friends always betray you. If anyone is too friendly, they're planning to stab you in the back.
- Respect the natural world. Spacers flit from world to world and port to port; it takes thirty long years of living on a rockball to appreciate the dangers of groundside.

distinct feeling you're being watched. The streets are empty and conspicuously free of graffiti.

Up ahead, you spot the 'customs inspector', Uro Phell, and four other similarly-attired thugs. They stare at you as you approach.

The gang have just concluded a deal with Venshar to look the other way while he wipes out the University base; they certainly do not want any suspicious off-worlders hanging around as inconvenient witnesses. If the characters try contacting the gang, they are forcibly rebuffed by armed guards, and told to go back to Beck's Dome or their ship. The streets of Beck's Town are not safe at the moment.

This is an excellent moment to run ***Departing Guests.***

The Imperial Consulate: Read the following to the players.

The door to the consulate is open, and from inside you can hear someone being tortured. Wait, no, they're singing, and it's the song that's being tortured. The familiar strains of 'My Own Sweet Darrrian Lass' are being mangled by a drunken singer who's at least three octaves out of tune. Inside, under a portrait of Emperor Paulo III, sits a young man in a white spacesuit. He's swigging something blue from a clear plastic bottle in his right hand; his left hand is handcuffed to a black case.

This sorry fellow is Fedic Jocan, official representative of the Duchy of Regina. The case contains important documents that are not to fall into Zhodani hands if Beck's World falls. Being consul to Beck's World is the kiss of death for a career in the diplomacy corps; Jocan was effectively exiled here as punishment for insulting a superior. He spends his time getting drunk and pleading with the ruling gang not to hurt anyone of importance.

Jocan can – in a drunken, rambling and incoherent way – fill the characters in on the history of Beck's World – its origins as a pirate base, the establishment of a listening post and its subsequent entry into the Imperium, the mineral survey, the archaeologists and the ensuing dispute between the locals and the University of Regina. His main role on the planet, other than running away should the Zhodani show up, is to keep the gang in check and mediate disputes. As he has no way of fulfilling either duty, he decided to follow the example of half the local population and develop a nice little alcohol habit. Synthetic liquor filtered through volcanic rock is surprisingly drinkable.

Despite his ineffectual bearing and drunkenness, Jocan can be a useful source of information for the characters. If they help him take charge in the crisis that is about to erupt, he may be convinced to aid them. He could even transmit a false message to the Imperium, throwing the authorities off the character's trail for a few weeks.

Likely questions for Jocan:

Do you know Juni Volsang? Volsang...Volsang... oh, one of the University researchers. She repaired the listening satellite last year. I recommended her for a medal, in fact. I recommend everyone for medals. Would you like one? You won't get it, but it's terribly

annoying for the clerks, which is why I do it. Come on, let's all get medals!

What's this about the University taking Ancient relics offworld? Oh, by Cleon's beard! Not you too!

The University finds a few potshards and carved rocks, and suddenly everyone's convinced they've found something magical down there. Look, even if the University found, I don't know, a black globe factory, it would belong to His Imperial Majesty, Strephon, and his designated agent here is the University of bloody Regina. I didn't make the bloody law, all right?

Why does the Imperium tolerate the gang? Because, currently, all my masters care about is the listening post and the University dig, and as long as nothing interferes with *them*, the rest of this benighted rock could be run by cannibal newts or sentient fungi or flea-bugged Vargr. Actually, cannibal newts would be an improvement. The bastards might eat each other, and I wouldn't have to babysit them.

There's another ship in orbit, the *White City*. What do you know about that? Hmm. Not bloody enough, is the answer. Everyone's supposed to register with me on arrival – they don't, of course, but that's no excuse. Actually, you space tramps are always doing odd jobs for money, right? Meet someone at the spaceport, do a little work on the side, that's how it works, yes? If you find out what a bloody yacht is doing here, I'll pay you... 500 credits? Is that fair?

Fedic Jocan

STR 5 DEX 6 END 7 INT 8 EDU 9 SOC 9

Admin 1, Carouse 2, Diplomat 1, Deception 1, Melee 0, Vacc Suit 0

Rapier (1d6+4), Vacc Suit (8)

Playing Jocan:

- When talking, slur your words and sway from side to side.
- Turn everything into a self-pitying diatribe, if possible.
- Underneath it all, remember that you are the Imperial consul, the representative of the Emperor on this distant outpost. When put under pressure, stand up straight and have some dignity and composure.

The University Outpost: Read the following to the players.

This little complex of prefabricated shelters is plainly out of place in town. It's shiny and new, and hasn't got the same crust of soot and dirt

that cakes the rest of Beck's World. On top of the dome, you see a pair of figures in light-weight environmental suits repairing a communications dish. As you approach, one of them slides down the side of the dome and comes to greet you.

The characters are met by Kenton Wyld, a graduate student of geophysics from the University of Regina. His initial reaction to the characters depends on their appearance. If they look like dangerous thugs, then he assumes they are more locals here to complain about the University taking Ancient artefacts offworld, and responds forcefully. ***'Look, the University has permission of the subsector duke to dig here! You can't intimidate us into leaving!'***

If the characters are obviously offworlders, not locals, then Kenton is much more friendly. The students rarely see visitors. He welcomes them to Beck's World, but cautions them that if they are here to see the Ancient site, they will be disappointed. The dig site is off limits to non-University personnel. He does invite the characters into the University building so they can talk in comfort. There are three other researchers working here, but they are all busy.

Like the rest of the outpost staff, Kenton treats his time on Beck's World as a challenging stepping stone to a brighter academic career. He would prefer to either be out in the field or back on Regina, instead of running the communications relay and lab in Beck's Town. He will happily talk to the player characters if they bring news of events offworld.

Likely questions:

Juni Volsang: Dr. Volsang is one of the senior researchers; she is out at the dig site right now. Dr. Volsang is a genius. Everyone at the outpost has the utmost respect for her (and half of them have a crush on her).

Professor Ujinka: Wyld studied under Professor Ujinka back on Regina. He disagrees with the professor's conclusions (Wyld would count himself as a Homogenous Catastrophist, although his major is in geophysics not archaeology or xenology), but respected her work. He is surprised and saddened if the PCs tell him of Ujinka's murder.

The locals: Beck's World is a hellish place. He hasn't left the University compound in weeks, and really thinks they should just leave town entirely and establish a secondary starbase closer to the dig

site. The locals all think the University is stealing Ancient artefacts worth megacredits from the caves. The students have taken to sleeping in shifts after a series of break-ins.

The dig: The dig is in a cave system, deep underground. It is off-limits to everyone except University staff. They have established a base camp at a point one kilometer into the cavern complex.

Communicating with the dig: Normally, it should be possible to communicate with the dig, but they're not answering his radio calls. He was up on the roof checking the communications dish, but it is working properly, suggesting the problem is with the dig site. The camp is so far underground that conventional signals cannot penetrate the rock, so they have set up a network of relays. If one of those relays malfunctioned – a common problem in the caves – then the base camp would be unreachable until the network routed around the problem or the relay was repaired. If the PCs want to talk to Volsang, he suggests they wait at their ship until communications are restored.

The *White City*: He does not know who the *White City* belongs to, but he did see some strangers watching the University outpost last night. He assumed they were more trespassers – rumours of the Ancients always draws lunatics and conspiracy theorists.

Playing Kenton Wyld:

- The PCs are the first people you have met in months who aren't drunken or violent criminals. Be very excited to meet them! Show off your cool research, talk enthusiastically about the dig.
- Make it clear that the dig is off-limits.
- Speak so quickly you fall over your own words. Wave your hands excitedly. Use technical jargon.

Departing Guests

The player characters may run into Bay Venshar anywhere in Beck's World. This scene is just foreshadowing for a later confrontation, so do not make too much of it at this point.

Physically, Venshar looks like a twelve-year-old human; he wears an expensive custom vacc-suit and has a grav belt. He is accompanied everywhere by his two Vargr bodyguards, Krl and Vrk. Weapons are banned on Beck's World, but the two Vargr have cyber-enhanced physiques and implanted weapons such as claws. The fourth member of Venshar's crew

is a woman called Eshanta, a demolitions expert and the pilot of the ship's boat.

While in town, Venshar and his bodyguards visit the gang and make a deal with them, while Eshanta plants a demolition charge in the rocky cliffs above the University outpost. The four meet up at the starport and then enter their ship's boat. The small craft then takes off and vanishes into the smoky sky. Initially, it is on a course bound for the *White City* in orbit, but ten minutes after taking off, it changes course to head for the dig site in the north.

After landing at the dig site, the crew disembark and enter the caves. The ship's boat returns to the *White City* under remote control.

Playing Bay Venshar: See *Cutting a Deal*, below, if the PCs talk to Venshar.

Landslide!

Thirty minutes after the ship's boat departs, Eshanta's hidden demolition charge explodes, triggering a landslide. Thousands of tons of rock slide down the slope, smashing through the flimsy habitation domes of the University compound and engulfing the dome. The landslide is aimed at the archaeologist's buildings, but it also hits several other buildings in Beck's Town.

The cataclysmic rumble of the landslide is audible from everywhere in town. The landslide throws up a thick cloud of black dust, cutting visibility to less than two metres.

If the characters were unlucky enough to be in or near the University compound, they are caught in the landslide. Characters outside must make Hard (-4) Dexterity checks, and suffer 1d6 points of damage for every point of Effect below 0. For characters inside a building, roll 1d6. On a 1-3, the building survives but the characters are buried alive; on a 4-6, the building collapses and the characters take that many d6 of damage.

The following events happen in the chaotic minutes after the landslide. If present, the characters may intercede as they wish.

- **Kenton Wyld is the only survivor:** The research lab was crushed by the landslide, and the technician who was working on the roof was swept away and crushed. Wyld is initially trapped within the main habitat dome. He tries shouting for help.

- **Scavenging & Looting:** Half of Beck's Town arrives at the disaster site. Some of them are there to search the rubble for victims, but most concentrate on looting the wreckage of the University compound.
- **Jocan Panics:** The Imperial consul, Jocan, is woken from a drunken stupor by the sound of the landslide. Convinced that the Zhodani are attacking, he runs out into the dust cloud looking for the PCs. When he finds them, he demands that they bring him to Feri immediately, so he can send word of the invasion! If the characters can calm Jocan down and convince him that Beck's World is not under attack by psionic hostiles, then they can use the authority of the Imperial consul to take command of the rescue effort.
- **The gang arrives:** Soon after the landslide, Uro Phell and half a dozen other gang members arrive. They are armed with shotguns and stunners, and they threaten the crowd with these weapons until the crowd disperses. They search the rubble of the University compound for Ancient artefacts. Phell finds Jocan and informs him that the landslide wiped out everyone at the University compound, and suggests that Jocan return to the consulate in case there are secondary tremors.
- **No survivors:** Part of the deal that the gang struck with Venshar is that there would be no survivors to tie the relic dealer to the incidents on Beck's World. Therefore, if the gang finds any survivors in the rubble, such as Kenton Wyld, they will hide the discovery from onlookers and quietly bludgeon the unfortunate victim to death, making it look like he was killed in the landslide. If any characters were caught in the rubble, they will meet the same fate.

Scavenger

STR 5 DEX 6 END 4 INT 5 EDU 4 SOC 2
 Melee (brawling) 1, Recon 0, Stealth 1
 Improvised Club (1d6+2)

Gang Member

STR 8 DEX 6 END 7 INT 5 EDU 5 SOC 4
 Gun Combat (slug rifle) 1, Melee (brawling) 2, Recon 1
 Slug Rifle (3d6), Flak Jacket (4)

Aftermath

The most likely result is that the characters get involved in the rescue effort, find Wyld, and then have to escape the gang. The gang are not ready to

provoke a conflict in full view of the Imperial consul, but if Jocan is not present and there are no other witnesses, Uro Phell or another gang member might risk taking a shot at a troublesome player character.

A successful Explosives or Space Science (planetology) check confirms that the landslide was artificially triggered, probably with a standard mining charge.

Searching the debris of the University compound lets the characters find a map showing the location of the dig site. Alternatively, if the characters successfully rescued Kenton Wyld, he can guide them to the dig site. Kenton can also be used as a replacement player character.

INTO THE CAVES

The surface of Beck's World is composed of endless kilometres of broken black rock. At first, it's interesting to look out at the bizarre landscape and marvel at the twisted dragons and spiked monsters and congealed stone, but eventually all the shapes blur. You fly through a rainstorm of black sooty water that stains the hull of your ship an inky grey.

After more than an hour's flight, you descend towards the dig site. Idly, you wonder how they found this cave, as it looks no different to any of the thousand other openings you've flown over.

Outside the cave mouth, you see a flattish rock that's obviously been used as a landing pad. There are supply crates and pup tents in the shelter of a rocky overhang. The cave mouth yawns wide like the maw of some tremendous beast.

There is no one at this cave entrance; all the researchers are inside the cave. At the mouth of the main cave are two bright yellow poles topped with an orange box of electronics. These are comm relays, used to carry communications into the caves. The characters can tap into these comm network easily, but there is no communication traffic. The crates contain basic survival equipment – water and food supplies, breather masks, headlamps, helmets, heated suits, ropes, crampons, climbing gear and handheld seismic sensors.

A successful Recon check shows that another craft recently landed here – from the shape of the tracks, it was probably a large flyer, maybe a ship's boat. A Hard (-4) Recon check picks up four sets of prints

leading from the landing site into the cave. Two of the prints are definitely Vargr, the others are small humans.

Natural Hazards

The cave network is mostly unexplored, and is extremely dangerous. The upper section consists mainly of hollow lava tubes; the characters can walk along these low-ceilinged tubes, although they must crawl in some parts. The route through the cave network is marked with fluorescent paint, but in places the route is unclear.

There are a few natural hazards in the upper caves. Keep rolling on the Natural Hazard table, adding a +1 DM each time after the first, until the characters reach the base camp.

Base Camp

Read the following to the players.

This large cavern is illuminated by a glowing sphere attached to the high ceiling. There are half-a-dozen tents here, as well as more supply crates and scientific equipment – and everything, even the globe in the ceiling, is splattered with blood. People died here; laser-burns in the rock walls and torn hunks of human flesh bear testament to the carnage.

A search of the camp reveals that at least two bodies, possibly three. They were killed with laser fire, but then torn apart by something with claws and fangs – Venshar’s Vargr bodyguards. The camp has been looted by Venshar’s team.

Word from Below: There are communications relays at either side of the camp; those on the side closest to the surface have been blasted with lasers and disabled, cutting anyone deeper in the cave off from the surface. While the characters are searching the camp, they receive a message via their comms. It is Dr. Volsang.

‘This is Volsang calling base camp... can you hear me? We’re showing a functional relay network, so you should be receiving this... hello?’

Bah. Stiv, they’re not receiving. The whole grid must be screwy.’

If the characters respond to Dr. Volsang, she asks them to identify themselves. She tells the characters that she is in the primary dig site, at the bottom of the Big Stairs. Just follow the markers and they will find her – and then the signal goes dead, as Venshar disables another comm relay.

The chase is on.

NATURAL HAZARDS TABLE

Roll	Encounter
1	No encounter , just lots of tunnels.
2	Difficult climb. Each character must make an Average (+0) Dexterity check taking 1-6 minutes or fall, suffering 2d6 damage.
3	Confusing tunnels. A routine (+2) Navigation check is needed to find the correct route. If this check is failed, the characters lose any accumulated DM to rolls on this table.
4	Treacherous Floor. The floor beneath a randomly chosen player character collapses; he must make a Difficult (-2) Dexterity check or suffer 2d6 damage.
5	Rockfall. The ceiling collapses. All characters suffer 2d6 damage.
6	Relic. One of the characters finds a fragment of metal or ceramic bearing Ancient glyphs. This relic is worth 1d6 x 1d6 x 500 credits if sold on the black market.
7	Tight Squeeze. The tunnel becomes extremely narrow. Characters in armour must remove it in order to get through. Unarmoured characters must make a Hard (-4) Dexterity check to wriggle through; failure inflicts 1d6 damage on the character. If a character cannot make it though, he must find another route.
8	Evidence of Wrongdoing. The characters find (roll 1d6) either the corpse of one of the researchers from the base camp (1-4) or an explosive charge (5-6). The charge is set to be detonated by remote control, and can be disarmed with a Difficult (-2) Explosives skill check.
9	Base Camp. The characters have found the base camp of the archaeologists.

The Big Stair

The Big Stair is only a short distance from the base camp.

It's a cliff that's more than a kilometre in height, a sheer drop into the yawning darkness.

If a character is brave enough to look over the edge, he sees four lights in the darkness, far below. These are the lights of Venshar and his team. If the characters want to try having a vertical firefight at a range of 500 metres, let them – the Vargr are only too happy to return fire.

Every hundred metres or so down the cliff, there is a convenient ledge. The archaeologists theorised that a flying creature like a Droyne could descend the Big Stair by gliding from ledge to ledge. The Stair is a natural chasm, a discontinuity between two continental plates, but it has been shaped by the Ancients.

There are three comm relays on the Big Stair – one at the top, one at half-way down, and one at the bottom. All three are required to relay a message from the end of the Stair to base camp.

Climbing the Big Stair: If the characters have grav belts or other flying devices, they can try flying down the shaft. This makes them excellent targets for Venshar's thugs, unless the characters want to risk flying blind by turning off their lamps. Flying also means the characters are very vulnerable to gravity bubbles (see below).

Alternatively, the characters can just climb down the Stair using ropes. The archaeologists have already hammered pitons and guide ropes into the rock, so abseiling down from ledge to ledge is not hard. However, if the characters want to move quickly, the Referee should call for Dexterity checks while climbing.

Climbing the Big Stair: Dexterity, Routine (+2), 5-30 minutes per ledge.

If the characters want to avoid being spotted by Venshar, then they have to turn off their headlamps

and descend the stairs in complete darkness and silence. This raises the Difficulty to Difficult (-2).

Unnatural Hazards

There are two hazards in the Big Stair and the caves below are of Ancient origin. The characters will run into both hazards as they descend. They are both defense mechanisms dating back to the time of the Final Wars that were accidentally reactivated by the archaeologists.

Gravity Bubbles: Invisible bubbles of warped gravity shoot up the shaft at random intervals. If a climber is caught in a gravity bubble, he must make a Strength check or be knocked off the wall by a sudden burst of energy. Assuming the character has a secure safety rope, he will not fall to his death at the bottom of the shaft, but he does take 1d6 damage and is temporarily disorientated.

Gravity bubbles are more dangerous to a character using any sort of flying device, such as a grav belt. The gravity bubble scrambles the device's internal systems, so the wearer falls like a rock. The gravity bubbles are designed to prevent flying drones from entering the caves below.

Panic Fields: This is a subtle psionic effect that permeates the Big Stair and the caverns below. The effect is more pronounced as one travels deeper into the caves. If a character makes a hostile action, such as firing a weapon or swinging a sword, he feels unusually paranoid and panicky. Keep track of the number of attacks made by each character; once a character's total equals his Intelligence score, the panic field effect takes hold. A character gripped by the panic field suffers a -2DM to all rolls, as he hallucinates shadowy enemies closing in from all sides. Deliberately dropping all weapons removes the panic effect.

The Ancient Shelter

At the bottom of the Big Stair is a warren of smaller caverns and structures, worming into the rock around the central shaft. Pyramidal temples and strange ovoid buildings protrude from the sides of the shaft, hanging there like the nests of improbable stone-eating wasps. In the last days of the Final Wars, hundreds of Ancients took refuge here.

Prescience

If the characters explore the Ancient shelter at the base of the Big Stair, one of the first chambers they enter contains a piece of Ancient artwork. It is an oddly stylised pictogram of Beck's World, resembling Aztec art. Six Droyne hide in a cavern at the heart of the world, their wings wrapped around their heads in terror. Hanging above the world is a space monster, a wingless worm in the shape of the Droyne glyph for 'seven'.

Dr. Volsang, I presume?

It is obvious that searching the shelter for Dr. Volsang and the other survivors would take much too long. Therefore, Bay Venshar has a more direct method. He and his bodyguards take up positions at the bottom of the shaft. If the characters have made their presence known, then Venshar and his team take cover; otherwise, they just stand in the open bowl-shaped depression at the end of the Big Stair.

Venshar uses a megaphone to shout a message to Dr. Volsang. His reedy voice echoes around the shaft.

'DOCTOR VOLSANG! I AM BAY VENSCHAR AND I AM A GREAT ADMIRER OF YOUR WORK. I WANT YOUR ANCIENT DETECTOR TECHNOLOGY, AND I WANT IT NOW. IF YOU COME OUT NOW, I'LL SPARE THE REST OF YOUR TEAM. OTHERWISE... THIS PLACE WILL BE YOUR GRAVE, DR. VOLSANG.'

Venshar is not bluffing; he has planted more explosive charges at the top of the shaft to bring the whole place crashing down. Once he acquires Volsang's 'Ancient detector', he intends to loot and bury the University dig. The same earthquake that wiped out the

Volsang & Stiv: The two surviving members of the archaeological expedition are hiding in one of the Ancient tunnels. They have no idea what's going on – they just returned from a long excursion into a previously unexplored tunnel to find the base camp destroyed and four strangers blocking the only way out of the caves. Their next action depends on what the characters do.

If the characters manage to climb down the Big Stair without being spotted by Venshar, then Volsang sneaks out of her hiding place and makes contact

with them. She doesn't know who they are, but they have to be more friendly than the Vargr mercenaries and the crazy kid.

If the characters attack Venshar, then Volsang hides in the tunnels until the firefight is over.

Juni Volsang: Volsang is a high-flying academic in the University of Regina. She was the protégé of Professor Ujinka, and her discovery of a method to detect Ancient sites using g-band emissions will confirm her reputation as one of the great experts in the Spinward Marches. She is paranoid about her research being stolen, so she maintains only a single copy of her work on her computer (she has a backup copy in a wafer jack in her skull).

Juni Volsang

STR 7 DEX 8 END 6 INT 10 EDU 10 SOC 8
Comms 1, Computers 2, Engineer (electronics) 3, Explosives 0, Gun Combat 0, Investigate 1, Life Sciences 0, Medic 0, Navigation 1, Recon 0, Remote Operations 1, Sensors 3, Social Sciences (archaeology) 3, Vacc Suit 0
Laser Pistol (4d6), Vacc Suit (6)

Playing Volsang:

- You're not sure what's going on here, but you're quick on the uptake. Your first priority is finding out what happened to your team, and getting out alive.
- You're very protective of your team; these grad students are more than your colleagues, they're your friends.
- You despise thieves; the Ancients are too important to be treated as historical curiosities.
- Speak in bullet points; outline your argument logically, never waste words.

Cutting A Deal

Bay Venshar is a murderer and a thief, but he didn't get to be two hundred years old without knowing when to negotiate. If the characters start waving guns around, and his Vargr mercenaries cannot eliminate the danger instantly, then Venshar will offer to cut a deal with the player characters. He assumes they too are dealers in black-market Ancient relics, and guesses that they are probably working for Ven Yosha. No doubt they murdered Professor Ujinka. He can respect professional work like that.

Venshar wants to be the only one who possesses Volsang's Ancient detector, but if he has to share his toys, so be it. His main bargaining tool is the ring

of explosive charges that he can use to collapse the shaft, but he will use these only as a last resort. He would prefer a compromise, where he gets access to the characters' knowledge of the Ancients in exchange for sharing Volsang's technology.

Bay Venshar

STR 5 DEX 10 END 5 INT 9 EDU 8 SOC 7

Admin 1, Advocate 1, Broker 2, Comms 1, Deception 2, Gambler 1, Gun Combat (energy pistol) 2, Investigate 1, Persuade 2.

Laser Pistol (4d6), Vacc Suit (8)

Vargr Mercenaries

STR 9 DEX 9 END 9 INT 5 EDU 4 SOC 3

Gun Combat (energy rifle) 2, Melee (claw) 2, Recon 1, Persuade 1, Tactics (ground) 1

Laser Rifle (5d6), Combat Armour (2)

Shin Yado

STR 6 DEX 7 END 7 INT 8 EDU 8 SOC 5

Astrogation 2, Comms 0, Gun Combat 0, Engineer (power plant) 1, Explosives 2, Mechanic 1, Pilot (spacecraft) 2, Vacc Suit 1

Laser Pistol (4d6), Vacc Suit (8)

Playing Venshar:

- Remember to speak in a high-pitched, childish voice. He's physically an adolescent.
- Murder and suffering are your stock in trade; Venshar is unencumbered by a conscience.
- Try to sound reasonable, even when talking about how you wiped out the entire University team just to hide your tracks.
- Initially, when talking about the Ancients, do so with a fanatical, religious tone in your voice as if discussing the Gods. If the player characters show no signs of being religious lunatics, then switch to your genuine attitude of pure greed.

Seismic Activity

There is one major flaw in Venshar's scheme – to send the remote-detonation command to the bombs, he needs to use the comm relay network set up by the archaeologists. If the characters disable any of the comm relays, the bombs cannot be remotely detonated. This can give the player characters an edge against Venshar.

If the bombs are detonated, then the gravity bubbles in the shaft give the characters time to get to cover. A character caught in the collapsing shaft is killed by thousands of tons of falling rock. The explosion

collapses the Big Stair and seals the Ancient Shelter off from the surface. Secondary explosions collapse the cave containing the base camp.

Getting Out Alive

There are several ways that the characters can escape the caves with Volsang's technology.

- The most direct method is eliminating Venshar in a firefight and rescuing Dr. Volsang. They can then either steal her technology or convince her to aid them.
- They can cut a deal with Venshar, trading a peaceful resolution and their knowledge of the Ancients for Volsang's technology. Venshar can even become a recurring character in later games.
- They can force Venshar to flee by disabling his bombs and convincing him that Volsang's technology is not worth his life.
- If the characters are buried alive, then Volsang can find another way out through the caves.
- If Volsang is killed, then the characters may still be able to retrieve her technology, either from her personal computer or from the wafer jack in her skull.

4. BOUGHENE

Located on the fringes of the subsector, Boughene is a lightly inhabited system, home to a single Scout base and a few other space stations orbiting the mainworld. It sees little traffic, apart from scouts and ships on the way to the naval outpost at Pixie.

The Scout Base

As soon as the characters arrive in the system, they will be detected by the scout base and challenged. If they came straight here from Alell, then they may have arrived ahead of their arrest warrant; if they are here after Week Three, then the *Alahir* is waiting for them in this system. While most of the ships at the scout base are standard scouts, there are larger and better-armed vessels present.

It's 400,000,000 kilometres from the scout base at Boughene to Komesh, giving the characters two or three days of searching before they are intercepted by the Imperial forces.

Komesh

The largest gas giant in the Boughene system is named Komesh. It is a forbidding world of thick ammonia clouds and swirling storms. According to

Vlen Backett's records, a merchant found an Ancient statue on a metal-rich asteroid orbiting Komesh, and also detected distortions in the G-band. This evidence suggests there is an Ancient base somewhere near Komesh.

Komesh is orbited by a dozen large moons and hundreds of smaller objects, all of which have been exhaustively classified by bored scouts. The deeper reaches of the planet's atmosphere, though, have never been plumbed. If the Ancient base still exists in the system, the only place it could be is deep within the gas giant.

Only a fool would dive into Komesh's gravity well. The atmosphere is 89% hydrogen and 10% helium; the remainder is a mix of water vapour, methane and ammonia. There are many layers of clouds, concentrated around an altitude of 36,000 kilometres. At the upper limit of this band, the clouds are water and ice; deeper into the planet's atmosphere, the clouds are condensed ammonia and absorb almost all light.

Most ships scooping fuel from a gas giant rarely venture below the pressure level of 0.5 atmospheres (36,500 km altitude on Komesh). Diving below this level is extremely hazardous, as the ship risks being caught in the gravity well. Below this level, the amount of thrust needed to manoeuvre increases significantly. A skilled pilot can dive into the atmosphere and fly back out if his ship has sufficient momentum, and a talented engineer can wring more thrust out of a grav plate in an emergency, but is it still extremely dangerous.

Deep in the atmosphere, the temperature also rises quickly. Pressure, heat, the raging windstorms and ammonia sleet can push even the toughest ship to the breaking point.

Sensor Sweep

A series of successful Sensors check is required to locate the Ancient base. The 'base' is actually a ship moving through the planet's atmosphere, under the cloud banks, so three successful checks in a row are needed to locate it. The difficulty for the checks depends on how deep the characters dive into the atmosphere.

The deeper the characters dive, the more damage their ship endures and the greater the difficulty of the Pilot check to maintain control. Other player characters can aid both the Sensors check and the Pilot check using a task chain:

Science (planetology) Computers Sensors Engineer (power plant) Engineer (m-drive) Pilot

If the Sensors check is failed, the characters lose their bearing on the G-band distortions and must start again.

If the Pilot check is failed, the ship takes the listed amount of damage, **and** suffers a -2 DM to the next Pilot check. This DM persists until the ship returns to orbit. At deeper levels of the atmosphere, a ship takes some damage regardless of the Pilot check result.

If the characters have access to Dr. Volsang's sensor enhancement, it gives a +6 DM to Sensors checks, making the search much easier.

Into the Maelstrom

If the characters make three successful Sensor checks in a row, they detect an object at approximately 35500 kilometres. It is moving in an unpredictable pattern, either under its own power or being blown by the shifting winds. Either way, it is obviously artificial, and could be a floating platform or starship.

Altitude	Pressure	Sensor check DM	Pilot check DM	Damage
38000km	Vacuum	-10	+2	-
37000km	Trace	-8	0	-
36000km	1 atmosphere	-6	-2	0/2d6
35000km	300 atmospheres	-4	-4	2d6/6d6
34000km	10,000+ atmospheres	-2	-8	6d6/destroyed

If it is an Ancient artefact, then they can use it as a bargaining chip and escape the arrest warrant. The only way onwards is down...

LIBRARY DATA

Alell

Population: Hundreds of millions **Law Level: 12**
Tech Level: 10

Originally settled by the descendants of hotel staff, Alell has become a rich and influential world despite its extremely dangerous native wildlife. The population is clustered into a small number of fortified cities, although modern technology makes it possible to live in more rural areas. Alell's primary industry is tourism; secondary exports include wood, furs, pharmaceuticals and other material harvested from the jungles that cover 30% of the planet's surface area. Alell has a Class B starport whose original structure dates back to the First Imperium, and is considered an excellent example of *fin-de-siecle* Vilani design.

Beck's World

Population: Tens of thousands **Law Level: 14**
Tech Level: 4

Former pirate base. Beck's World is a volcanic wilderness with a minimal biosphere and few natural resources.

Boughene

Population: Hundreds of thousands **Law Level: 1**
Tech Level: 13

A scout base has been established at Boughene, as part of the continued surveying operations coreward and spinward of the Imperium. There is little else in the system of interest to travellers; the scout base is not open to visitors.

Efate

Population: Billions **Law Level: 0**
Tech Level: 13

With its high technology level and population, Efate is almost as influential as Regina in the subsector.

It is a major crossroads for trade and for Imperial naval operations – the 213th fleet is headquartered here. Visitors to Efate are cautioned that local customs and cultures are prone to change over short periods, and that the pace of life here is uncomfortable to many. To quote the Efate tourist board – *live fast, die young, get resurrected by our advanced medical technology.*

Feri

Population: Hundreds of Millions **Law Level: 9**
Tech Level: 11

Travellers are advised that a civil war is underway on Feri, and the world has a provisional amber classification. The starport is under Imperial protection, but other regions are subject to unpredictable violence.

Knorbes

Population: Millions **Law Level: 7**
Tech Level: 2

Knorbes is an Imperial game reserve; hunting permits are available to citizens of excellent standing from the starport. Visitors are advised that Knorbes is a technologically restricted zone, and permits are required to use any advanced technology outside the confines of the starport.

Menorb

Population: Billions **Law Level: 8**
Tech Level: 7

An unremarkable agricultural planet, known mainly for producing food for export to the Vargr market. Unfortunately, this has drawn more than its share of raiders, who snack on Menorb before moving on to more profitable targets.

Pixie

Population: Hundreds **Law Level: 3**
Tech Level: 13

The Pixie system is home to a forward operating base of the 213th Fleet. Travellers are requested not to travel to this system without due cause. The only civilian port is home to a small community of belt miners.

Pscias

Population: Tens of thousands **Law Level: 3**
Tech Level: 1

This system is classified as a RED ZONE. Do not enter.

Roup

Population: Billions **Law Level: 9**
Tech Level: 7

Roup is a water-world. The only stable 'land' consists of synthetic islands grown from webs of micro-organisms and seaweed. These huge rafts support vast cities, factories, farmland and even the starport. Roup's citizens practice aquaculture on a planetary scale, with whole oceans sectioned off using bubble-nets to maximise productivity.

Shinothy

Population: Tens of millions **Law Level: 2**
Tech Level: 8

This system is classified as a RED ZONE. Do not enter.

Uakye

Population: Hundreds of thousands **Law Level: 8**
Tech Level: 13

Uakye is tidally locked, so all settlements are in the habitable 'twilight zone'. The planet is closely associated with Efate, but Countess Parasii strongly affirms her planet's independence from the technarchy one system over.

Whanga

Population: Hundreds **Law Level: 6**
Tech Level: 7

This uninhabited world is open for colonisation under the auspices of Sternmetal Horizons, LLC.

Wochiers

Population: Hundreds of millions **Law Level: 12**
Tech Level: 9

The atmospheric pressure at sea level on Wochiers is more than four bars; the population therefore live in the mountains or in underground complexes. The high pressure makes Wochiers ideal for certain engineering projects, especially crystal growing. By tradition, all visitors to Wochiers must bring an offering of a living plant to the hydroponics caves; suitable plants are available in the starport gift shop.

Yres

Population: Tens of millions **Law Level: 0**
Tech Level: 7

The only surface structure on Yres is the entrance to the starport, which is an extremely impressive system of airlocks and tubes reaching from the surface to the seabed. The cities of this balkanised world are all underground and underwater. Visitors face an additional docking fee of 250 credits, which is an obligatory donation to the Yres Reconstruction & War Widows Fund. The atmosphere is highly radioactive; iodine tablets are available from public dispensers throughout the cities.