

GAME MANUAL

# PANDORA

FIRST CONTACT



## EPILEPSY WARNING

PLEASE READ THIS NOTICE BEFORE PLAYING THIS GAME OR BEFORE ALLOWING YOUR CHILDREN TO PLAY.

Certain individuals may experience epileptic seizures or loss of consciousness when subjected to strong, flashing lights for long periods of time. Such individuals may therefore experience a seizure while operating computer or video games. This can also affect individuals who have no prior medical record of epilepsy or have never previously experienced a seizure.

If you or any family member has ever experienced epilepsy symptoms (seizures or loss of consciousness) after exposure to flashing lights, please consult your doctor before playing this game.

Parental guidance is always suggested when children are using a computer and video games. Should you or your child experience dizziness, poor eyesight, eye or muscle twitching, loss of consciousness, feelings of disorientation or any type of involuntary movements or cramps while playing this game, turn it off immediately and consult your doctor before playing again.

### PRECAUTIONS DURING USE:

- Do not sit too close to the monitor.
- Sit as far as comfortably possible.
- Use as small a monitor as possible.
- Do not play when tired or short on sleep.
- Take care that there is sufficient lighting in the room.
- Be sure to take a break of 10-15 minutes every hour.

USE OF THIS PRODUCT IS SUBJECT TO ACCEPTANCE OF THE SINGLE USE SOFTWARE LICENSE AGREEMENT

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# INTRODUCTION

**Pandora: First Contact** is a science fiction turn-based strategy game on an epic scale. In the future, mankind has discovered a new, earth-like planet, capable of supporting life, it has been dubbed “Pandora”. This planet features a wide variety of eco-regions, from the frozen ice lands of the north, to vast deserts and lush tropical forests in the south. It is also far from desolate, hosting dangerous alien wildlife that are more than capable of wreaking havoc on the invading humans, from deadly swarms to agile predators, and there is even talk of a giant in the oceans!

In the rush, various factions have risen up in a battle to gain supremacy over this new world. As they strive to take control, each faction will research and develop numerous new technologies, discovering new weapons and industry, whilst opening trade agreements and forging alliances with other factions to gain a foothold. As they spread they will discover ancient ruins and artefacts from alien civilizations that will grant advantages over their rivals.

Utilizing a vast technology tree, factions will discover new technologies that will improve their colonies, with upgrades such as new buildings, operations, weapons, units and many more...

New weapons technologies even allow you to design your own units, choosing from a variety of different classes, weapons, and armour to maximize their strength and efficiency on the battlefield. Tailoring them to fight the war you have chosen!

Use powerful military operations such as drop pods for behind-the-lines attack or unleash hell with black hole generators that can destroy entire landscapes.

Expand your colonies with new cities, ensuring that you manage production whilst keeping the population happy. But remember

the more you expand your borders the closer you get to other factions’ borders, so diplomacy must also be incorporated into your strategies.

Good luck!

# SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

## Minimum System Requirements

**Operating System:** Windows XP SP2 / Vista, Mac OS X 10.7, or Linux

**Processor:** Intel Core 2 or equivalent

**Memory:** 2 GB RAM

**Hard Disk:** 1 GB space free

**Graphics:** OpenGL 2.0 compatible with 256 MB VRAM (NVIDIA GeForce 6600 series / ATI Radeon 9500 series) and up-to-date graphics drivers

**Display:** 1024x720

**Peripherals:** Keyboard and mouse

## Recommended System Requirements

**Operating System:** Windows 7, Mac OS X 10.8, or Linux

**Processor:** Intel Core i3 or equivalent

**Memory:** 4 GB RAM

**Hard Disk:** 2 GB space free

**Graphics:** OpenGL 2.0 compatible with 512 MB VRAM (NVIDIA GeForce GTX 260 series / ATI Radeon HD 4870 series) and up-to-date graphics drivers

**Display:** 1920x1080

**Peripherals:** Keyboard and mouse

# WINDOWS

## Installation

Please ensure your system meets the minimum requirements. To install the game, either double click on the installation file you downloaded or insert the Pandora DVD into your drive. If you have disabled the autorun function on your drive or if you are installing from a digital download, double-click on the installation archive file, then double click on the file that is shown inside the archive. Follow all on-screen prompts to complete installation.

## Uninstallation

Please use the Add/Remove Programs option from the Windows Control Panel or the Uninstall shortcut in the games Windows START menu folder to uninstall the game. Uninstalling through any other method will not properly uninstall the game.

## Updates

Pandora will automatically check for updates when started. If an update is detected, you will be shown the changes for the update and have the option to start the automated process of downloading and applying the update or to skip the update and continue playing the currently installed version.

## Patches

From time to time updates will be compiled into larger stand alone patch installer files. These can be downloaded outside of the game and run on a different machine so if your gaming PC does not have internet you can still update. These patches will be less frequently released but if you have any issues with the auto updater they are the backup plan to keep you updated.

All our patches are available free on our website and can also be downloaded quickly and easily by clicking on the “Update” link in your Game Menu or by using the “Update Game” shortcut in your Windows START menu folder for the game.

## Registration

We highly recommend registering your game first before playing. You can simply do this through the game menu, from Multiplayer or directly at Slitherine’s website at:

[www.slitherine.com/sign\\_up](http://www.slitherine.com/sign_up)

We strongly recommend registering your game as it will give you a backup location for your serial number should you lose it in the future. When registering you can choose to sign up to the newsletters to receive regular updates, offers and discounts on Pandora and the rest of Slitherine’s catalogue so it is worth registering!

Thank you and enjoy your game!

## Game Forums

Our forums are one of the best things about Slitherine. Every game has its own forum with our designers, developers and the gamers playing the game. If you are experiencing a problem, have a question or just an idea on how to make the game better, post a message there. Go to [www.slitherine.com](http://www.slitherine.com) and select forums from the menu bar.

## Need Help?

The best way to contact us if you are having a problem with one of our games is through our Help Desk. Our Help Desk has a dedicated support staff that answer questions within 1 working

day. Support questions sent in on Saturday and Sunday may wait 48 hours for a reply. You can get to our Help Desk by mailing [support@slitherine.co.uk](mailto:support@slitherine.co.uk)

## MAC OS X

### Installation

Extract the distributed .zip file by double-clicking it and then double-click on “Pandora.app” to start the game. When using Safari with newer versions of OS X the .zip file may be automatically extracted. You may have to explicitly allow Pandora to start by holding down the ctrl key and clicking on “Pandora.app” and selecting “Open” or by going into “Apple menu > System Preferences... > Security & Privacy > General tab” and under the header “Allow applications downloaded from:” selecting “Anywhere”.

### Updates and Patches

Pandora will automatically check for updates when started. If an update is detected, you will be shown the changes for the update and have the option to start the automated process of downloading and applying the update or to skip the update and continue playing the currently installed version. If you are having problems downloading using the auto update system we will from time to time release packaged larger installers on the site.

## LINUX

### Installation

Extract the distributed .zip file, browse inside the extracted “Pandora/Binaries” directory and double-click (execute) “Pandora” to start the game.

### Updates and Patches

Pandora will automatically check for updates when started. If an update is detected, you will be shown the changes for the update and have the option to start the automated process of downloading and applying the update or to skip the update and continue playing the currently installed version. If you are having problems downloading using the auto update system we will from time to time release packaged larger installers on the site.

## USER DATA

User data such as saved games, screen shots, configuration and log files are stored in the following locations:

Windows Vista/7:

“C:\Users\

Windows XP:

“C:\Documents and Settings\

Mac OS X:

“/Users/<user>/Library/Application Support/Proxy Studios/Pandora/”

Linux:

“/home/<user>/<user>.config/.Proxy Studios/Pandora/”

## MODDING

The “Data/” directory in the installation directory is managed by the updater, do not modify it. Any added or modified files may be deleted or replaced.

For modifications create a “Data/” directory with the same structure in the user data directory outlined above. Files placed there will be loaded instead of their distributed equivalents.

## **COMMON TECHNICAL ISSUES**

### **Graphics Drivers**

Please make sure you have the latest graphics drivers installed if you are experiencing issues with starting the game. This is particularly common on laptops with outdated brand drivers.

### **Background Applications**

Any applications running in the background may negatively affect Pandora. Certain applications can lead to more serious issues such as limited connectivity and game crashes. It is highly recommended that you close all background applications before launching Pandora to ensure the best performance and stability. After you are done playing, feel free to re-enable these applications.

Some applications may load when the operating system starts and are not obviously indicated. For example, they may not appear in the taskbar but they may be among some of your active processes or services, using your system’s resources. These programs may cause crashes and other difficulties when playing Pandora.

### **Security Applications**

Antivirus and firewall software play an important role in your computer security. They help protect your computer from viruses, malware and spyware infections. However, when protecting your computer, they can prevent legitimate

programs, like Pandora, from installing, updating or running. Disabling or temporarily uninstalling your security software can help resolve these conflicts.

Note: Some security programs will continue to partially run even when disabled. They may require full uninstallation or reconfiguration to resolve.

If you are not comfortable configuring or uninstalling your security software, please contact your security software’s technical support department for assistance. They may also be able to help you configure their product to not interfere with future game installation and patching.

## **SUPPORT**

If you are experiencing problems running Pandora, you may contact us in one of several ways.

Before contacting us, please be prepared. In order to assist you as efficiently as possible, please describe the circumstances clearly and include all of the game’s logs and, if applicable, a save game. These are stored in the user data directory described in a previous section. We may also ask you to provide additional information.

E-Mail:  
[support@slitherine.co.uk](mailto:support@slitherine.co.uk)

Forums:  
<http://www.slitherine.com/forum>

Websites:  
[pandora.proxy-studios.com](http://pandora.proxy-studios.com)  
[www.slitherine.com](http://www.slitherine.com)  
[www.matrixgames.com](http://www.matrixgames.com)

## TIMELINE

**1900s:** The human population is 1.9 billion. Rapid industrialisation drives more and more of the population to move to the cities. The population of the world is trapped inside restrictive artificial bounds, with nationalist propaganda using racial or cultural differences to justify difference of treatment... and wars. Roughly 10% of this century's population dies because of disputes over political differences.

**2000s:** During the last year of the old millennium, the total mass of humans and human food animals reaches 425 million tons – 98% of the total vertebrate life on the planet. All resources are being exploited at a greater rate than they are being renewed. The world financial markets, predicated on endless growth, repeatedly stutter. In 2004, SpaceShipOne becomes the first private space flight to escape the Earth's atmosphere, whilst NASA grounds all of its own space vehicles.

**2010s:** In this decade, private space flight is normalised. The wealthy reach out to the stars. In the second half of the decade, the first artificial orbiting hotel is built, though it's little more than a glorified space capsule to transfer money from one billionaire to another.

The first asteroid mining operation is set up by Noxium Corporation, providing the raw materials to build in-system craft in space itself, leading to a rapid ramping up of those in-system craft – all owned by Noxium.

**2020s:** Near-Earth orbit buzzes with activity, the majority of it private. The space-going governments of the world – China, the USA and Russia – increasingly rely on private corporations to maintain their satellite networks. Closed-system human habitats in space are common for the



wealthiest people and organisations seeking to avoid Earth's problems – and their taxes.

Meanwhile, in all but the wealthiest nations, the focus is on disaster control, as water, food and power shortages spread, and the global temperature slowly creeps up.

The western military alliances effectively become clients of a private military organisation, Empire Management, which proves much more effective at deploying its veteran military to troublespots around the world – and much cheaper.

**2030s:** The last of the ice in the Arctic Ocean melts.

The first and last of NASA's interstellar probes are launched towards those stars which promise to hold life, before the agency's operations are permanently restricted by the latest Senate shutdown. A Togra University breakthrough on Alcubierre



drive technology allows the probes to attain velocities near to 50% of the speed of light – and makes Togra's name as the primary international educational institution.

The Empire mercenary group starts colluding with the Noxium Corporation to divide up and limit access to space. Without Empire's military protection and access to Noxium's fuel, few space-going organisations survive long – so the pair thrive, absorbing military-industrial competitors rapidly throughout the decade, and coming to be known by the name of the Ceres Cartel. The two spread their stations and ships throughout the solar system.

**2040s:** Spiritual fads seize the starving masses of mankind, with the donations of billions poured into the coffers of mostly short-lived religions. However, one – Via Salvatum, AKA Divine Ascension – grows out of a popular social media site. It combines traditional religious and monarchical values with modern marketing techniques, subliminal messaging and AI-driven blackmail, to become the world's dominant creed, absorbing new and old religions alike.

Where this system doesn't take hold, a grass-roots Ecology movement – Terra Salvum – springs up, and affiliated

governments take control of large swathes of Africa and South America. Their de-industrialisation and forest-regrowth policies probably slow the peak of global warming by a decade.

**2050s:** The peak of human population arrives, at just over 8 billion. Given the massive concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, the majority of humanity is working to keep a very few space-bound people in extreme luxury. Much of the world's arable surface is devoted to low-tech subsistence farming, hugely more inefficient than the high-tech farms of the developed world. The economy of space, under the increasingly-divided auspices of Noxium and Imperium, barely notices the collapse of its Earthbound markets and begins a decade-long boom.

A decade of Divine Ascension donations are poured into constructing a great prayer-wheel habitat in orbit around Venus, converting the sun's energy directly into automated prayer. A very few individuals with great faith in the system are raised up to the habitat, where they cryo-meditate, awaiting their ascension to a promised land.

**2060s:** Like Napoleon 400 years before, the current leader of the Chinese Communist Party eliminates his rivals on trumped-up charges and manages to quietly turn what started as a movement for equality into an inherited possession – essentially a monarchy. What will one day be called the Solar Dynasty is established – and immediately buys itself access to space with the labour of a billion people, with the Prime Minister living in luxury aboard a private palace-cruiser in orbit around Saturn.

The image-manipulation squads at Empire Management have the company rebranded Imperium, in tribute to (and parody of) the Solar Dynasty.





In desperation for water, energy and minerals, the governments of the world turn inward and bloody-but-short wars are fought over the planet's remaining natural resources. The wars are bloody because, outside of Imperium's manpower-driven mercenary armies, the only weapons available to governments are atomic, bacterial or chemical and the only soldiers are guerrillas and insurgents. The wars stalemate, but leave even greater areas of once-arable land uninhabitable.

**2070s:** Reports from NASA's interstellar probes at the exoplanet Tau Ceti e arrive at Earth. Though temperate, the planet is comprised entirely of iron and unsuitable for life. Sensing a commercial opportunity, Noxium immediately begins development of interstellar colony ships capable of travelling up to 70% of the speed of light, using updated versions of Togra's Alcubierre drive. The ships are great sleep-pods, packed with cryo-tech to keep the colonists hibernating en route – and a minimalist military presence. To fund its own ships, Noxium sells others on the open market. Terra Salvum, unable to afford to buy them, steals the schematics.

Skirmishes between the troops of Imperium and Noxium on asteroids like Callisto end the forty-year long Ceres Cartel,

finally allowing widespread access to space again. Imperium steals the prototype colony ship from under Noxium's nose.

In most regions, primitive Civil Service Artificial Intelligences take over a larger and larger part of society's operations, driven mainly by democratic populations determined to take power out of the hands of short-sighted, war-mongering governments.

**2080s:** The discovery of Pandora in 2081. Messages from probe craft sent to the Nashira system fifty years before by the last of the space-going governments finally arrive back. They have discovered the first-and-only human-inhabitable world – Pandora. The superterran planet is a paradise; satellite analysis shows it to be rich in resources and possibly life.

In a bid to reverse global warming, the Civil Service AIs broker the first effective treaty on global warming and begin to seed the atmosphere with filtering and reflective materials, to start the planet cooling.

Given their penury and impotence, the governments of the world issue a final joint statement from behind the Earth's thickening protective shroud. They declare Pandora a global nature preserve, to only be explored cautiously in the interests of Earth and the planet's own inhabitants, without exploitation, and warns of grave consequences if this diktat is ignored.



Almost simultaneously, the orbital factions launch their colony ships towards Pandora.

**2090s:** AI governments have taken over the day-to-day running of Earth. Their technology is racing ahead of the orbiting colonies, who can only watch the planet change. For example, when the last natural pollinators go extinct they are rapidly replaced by artificial ones.

**2100s:** Earth's atmosphere is almost 100% filtered by the late 2100s, preventing heat loss or gain, but also communications, which are extremely infrequent. Traffic between the surface of Earth and space slows and ceases.

**2116 (2107 ship-date):** Whilst the colony-ships are slowing down from their transit, the solar system's depopulated orbital habitats finally lose contact with the AI-dominated Earth. The few space-based sensors, when turned towards the surface, can only detect large-scale tectonic activity.

The automated colony ships, carrying the worst and best of Earth's population, and travelling at 70% of light-speed, arrive



at Pandora on New Year's Eve 2107 (by the ship's atomic clocks). While special relativity means that only 24 years seem to have passed on board the ships, 33 years have passed on Earth and the shipboard passengers could have only seen the first 19 years of that.

Within hours, the ships are disgorging their colonization pods towards the surface of Pandora...

## FACTIONS

Globalization, the colonization of extraterrestrial bodies in our solar system, and the first successful construction of an Alcubierre drive in the second half of the 21st century resulted in a swift decay of Earth's old world order.

To stay relevant and stem the massive costs required to cope with global pollution and extraterrestrial engineering, most existing countries united in federations or merged with powerful mega-corporations from the private sector.

The resulting factions greatly differ in their ideologies and beliefs on how human society should advance into an unknown future.

## DIVINE ASCENSION



*"God has finally shown us the path to a new paradise, so do not fear my brothers and sisters – for I am destined to be the shepherd leading you to salvation."*

– Lady Lilith Vermillion, *The Path to Salvation*

\*\*\*

## **The Gospel of Lilith Vermillion.**

(Personalised edition, Dave Rimster, Grade 93, Church of the Baptismal Ordinance.)

Dear Dave,

This is my personal gospel. As I'm sure you're becoming aware, whatever branch of faith someone adheres to, the message of Divine Revelation is true for them. We are all unenlightened sinners (as evinced by your SpaceNook pages that I'm glancing through right now – I'm amazed you got away with that blackmail attempt when you were 17), but neither redemption nor enlightenment are beyond us. Indeed, I too was once a wastrel, as sinful and ignorant as you. Let me tell you a story.

*The saloon doors bash open as I fly through them, then again as a cheap Shieldlite suitcase follows me, spilling the paraphernalia of addiction across the street. "And stay out!" comes the traditional yell. With an air of practised resignation, I, Lily Maroon, pick up my case, pack it, flip open my phone, dial a number, and start walking. "Hi Joe, it's Lil..." The phone cuts off, audibly. I whistle, amused, and try again.*

*Many streets and many calls later, it's getting dark when a phone call is finally answered amenably.*

*"Come on in, Lily." Franklin's house is sparse and serious, with movie posters on the walls and computer hardware taking up what once was the sitting room. "You'll be sleeping upstairs, in the utility room." I make a move for the stairs, but Franklin stops me. He's a sparsely-built man himself, close-shouldered but he's always put up with my visits – except now he's being serious. "Lil, I have to say, there are a few house rules. No drugs, social, legal or pharmaceutical. No whoring. No scams. No stealing or lawbreaking in general." This sounds like no fun at all! I open*

*my mouth to protest but he shushes me. "And you'll be working for me until you find something better. It's a social media start-up called SpaceNook. You used to be a damn good programmer – and I need that. I can pay well". In the dark, I smile. "Sure, Franklin. Sounds like a plan." That was the start.*

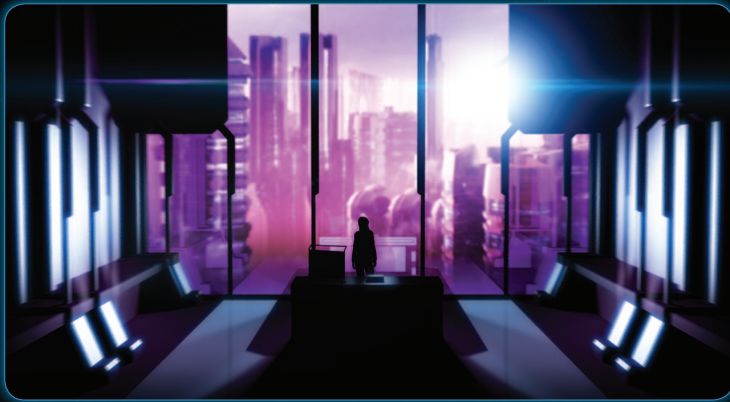
Of course, as soon as the chance came for real power – real money – I seized it. SpaceNook, under my guidance, rapidly achieved a global scale, absorbing the lesser social networks, and Franklin eventually was persuaded to step aside, letting me become CEO. But power didn't make me a better person. It's important to remember that the gods are always watching.

On the side, I'd started up another business, a religious network tied into SpaceNook, called Divine Ascension. It was just a simple application of economic principles to the religious market. I made a religion for everyone, every variant of diseased mind and devotion, all built using off-the-shelf AIs and SpaceNook's white-labelled back-end.

It's amazing how fervent worshippers become when they realise you've got access to all their dirty secrets, isn't it, Dave? And what did you do with that Vietnam-era grenade, anyway?

*At some point I was Mrs Maroon, CEO of SpaceNook and Divine Ascension. I know, big leap. I sat in my glass-walled office on the 90th floor of some architect's penile fantasy, idly going through a fellow CEO's SpaceNook page, trawling for dirt, when I heard shouting. Through the glazed double doors of my office, I saw a familiar thin figure arguing with my secretary, Butch, unaware of the security apes coming up behind him. I buzzed through. "Let him in, Butch." I say. "And tell security to stand down. For now."*

*Franklin walks through the doors, flustered. "Franklin, my dear," I start, before he cut me off. He was always doing that.*



*“Lilith, we have to talk. I know what you’ve been up to with the user data. It can’t carry on. You’ll get arrested.”*

*I turned away, mainly to hide my smile. “Oh, Franklin, don’t be so naive. We’re protected. I’ve a top-notch team whose job it is just to manage the senators, prime ministers, bishops, judges and so on. If we ever had government trouble, they would too. Anyway, all I’m asking for is donations to these very worthy religious causes. That’s no crime, is it?”*

*Franklin snorted. “Does any of that money go to anyone but you, I wonder? What have you done to-”*

*There was a strange clicking noise from the floor-to-ceiling window and a hole appeared in my desk. And another. Standing quickly, I saw the glass crazing like the world’s fastest spiderweb. I never felt the bullet hit me.*

Of course, I’d posited, unwisely perhaps, that my competitors were rational actors – but not how rational. I’d assumed that they’d take one look at the horrible dirt I had on them and the minute demands I was making and just play along. However, one of them, and even with all the world’s dirty secrets at my

fingertips I never found out who, had taken out a very valuable contract on my life. The only bullet that hit me went through my frontal cortex.

*I floated on clouds, an angelic vision of a new world built in god’s image in front of me. Through the haze I heard broken phrases; “...massive stroke... ..age to prefrontal cortex... huge personality shift likely if... opiates to keep her under...” and Franklin’s face swam in and out of my view as he sits at my bedside. But I didn’t want to wake up. This new world was so tantalizing, so real, that it mattered more. While I slept, everything changed.*

It wasn’t just the near-death experience, or the missing pound of grey matter, but I woke with a whole new outlook on life. I knew that all the nastiness we’d made – all the blackmail I’d done – had been with a true motive in mind, even if I hadn’t realised it at the time, hadn’t known it was part of God’s plan. I’d built the perfect society for bringing people closer to God, a God I too now believed in. And I had a mission now.

I redesigned Divine Ascension. Instead of being a million separate churches, now it was truly one. I set it up like a game, so that as you progressed through the levels of the church’s knowledge you give up more of your secrets, property and freedom, in return for more of the church’s secrets – and a top-grade secret of all of them is that they’re all part of Divine Ascension. Churches of Christians, Muslims, Scientologists, Samaritans, Sikhs, Nuwaubians and the rest. Churches for the truly moral, for the greedy, for the racially-pure, or even for gun-nuts like you. All one.

The big plan, which you’re going to help me with Dave, is to go to Pandora, the new planet. Pandora is our promised land – our new home, our homage to God, the end of all our pilgrimages

and hajjes. We are going to take this world and remake it in God's image.

And Dave, you have been chosen to help. Of course, it's not mandatory. But you've told my church \*so\* many interesting stories in confession. I particularly like that one about the endangered sea eagles and the high-powered rifle. So, if you don't fancy doing God's work on an alien world, you could stay here and help the police with their enquiries instead. I'm sure they'll be dying to talk to you.

Anyway, I'm guessing I'll see you on Pandora!  
God's love and blessings,

Lilith Vermillion, Founder, Divine Ascension.

\*\*\*

The Divine Ascension is a theocratic monarchy and the colourfully-named Lady Lilith Vermillion is its absolute monarch. Born as simple Lily Maroon in 2010s rural America, Lily's wild early years hardly gave signs that she would one day be regarded as next-to-god by billions; drinking, gambling, blackmail and more sordid sins all came naturally to her.

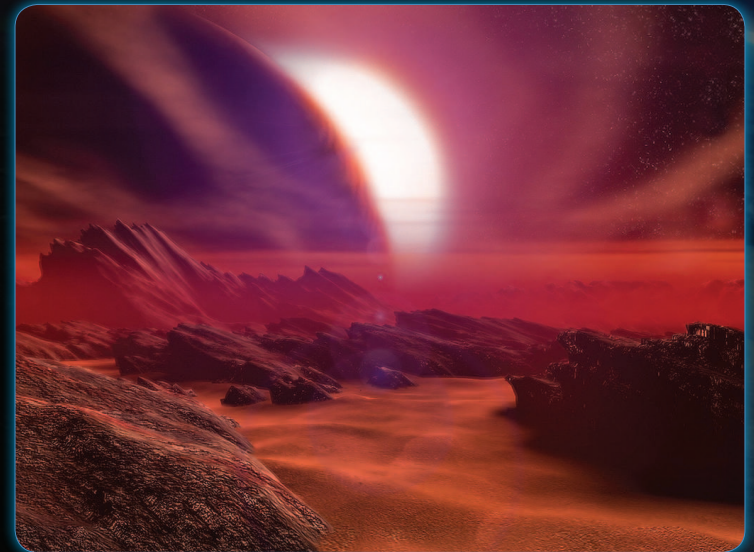
Her first steps on the path to godhood came, though, when a nerdy drinking buddy signed her up to a major social network as a prank. Never having used these, Lily saw, where few had before, the potential for social networks as a natural outgrowth of evangelical organisations – and as a tool for blackmail.

Taking elements of major modern cults, and using her underworld connections, Lily founded the world's first entirely online religion in 2028. Then the second. And third. In fact, Lily Maroon renamed herself Lilith Vermillion and with the help of Togra's off-shelf AI designers founded hundreds of

new religions, some riffing on old favourites like The Greek Autodocs Church, some entirely new, like Blessed Abduction, but all plugged deeply into user's online lives. Each one was subtly different, but all had Divine Ascension and the unity of all religions as their heart, their eventual revealed truth.

That wasn't Divine Ascension's biggest secret though. The precepts of the church were extremely hierarchical and to reach the next level of salvation believers had to put their trust in their higher-ups – revealing their darkest secrets as part of ascension rituals, projected live on the social network. Essentially, every step up the hierarchy knew the dirty secrets of every person below them. And Lady Vermillion, aided by data-mining AIs, sits at the top.

Now imagine trying to leave such a network. You're all being automatically-blackmailed, your income siphoned, your friends



and family incentivised to betray doubters so they can be “healed” at the special reformation camps in Siberia. There’s no way out save to disappear entirely.

By the 2040s, Divine Ascension was one of the largest religions on Earth. Some of the followers truly believed; those who didn’t kept their mouths firmly shut. But now the really strange part started. Lilith, a grasping materialist since birth, finally found herself with the luxury to rest, think; and found that she genuinely had faith, in herself, as a god. Now this might have been an outgrowth of the medicinal compounds she was accustomed to taking, and it didn’t change anything about the cruelty and authoritarianism of her organisation – but it changed the religion’s aims. She was a god; now she wanted a planet of her own.

Using the fabulous wealth of a tithe drawn from a billion people, Lilith had Noxium build her a fabulous space cathedral, a gothic rotational habitat that was decorated as a prayer wheel, turning the sun’s rays into rotational force, and hence prayer, and incidentally gravity. With her faithful few, she retreated into meditative cryo-pods in the hub of the habitat. Here they lay, ageing only slowly, waiting for the discovery of a world she could call her own – and the science to get there.

In the 2070s, the Pandora announcement invigorated her religions. Vermillion’s instructions were clear – her cryo-pod and those of the faithful were loaded straight into her custom-built Noxium colonisation ship and sent to the stars, while her fearful faithful prayed for her deliverance (and many secretly hoped she never came back).

On Pandora, Lady Lilith Vermillion sits at the top of a social pyramid that combines the worst parts of Facebook, Scientology and North Korea. Her zealous followers worship her for being



God’s instrument to express his will among men. She believes it’s her destiny to show her people the right path, and lead them to a prosperous future in a promised land. Pandora is that promised land. Woe betide any heathens who get in her way.

## IMPERIUM



*“Yeah sure, I’m aware that for some of our guys fighting in this hellhole it was a living nightmare and traumatizing experience. But for me... it was Tuesday.”*

– Admiral James Heid, *The Callisto Conflict*

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*The itch... had returned. After an age of peace, She had woken from uneasy dreaming to find a scrabbling against Her flanks, a handful of crawling contacts worrying at Her. Her memory*

*strained to remember the sensation, uniquely ominous in Her experience. Whilst she sifted millennia of her history, long-dormant membranes on the scale of fields read out and overwrote, the sensations spread, deepened...*



Striding between bastioned structures, Procurator-General Suleimann brandished his antique clipboard as a symbol of authority. He ducked into the corpsmen's bunkers and noted the scuffing on their boots. On the production lines, the sweating workers doubled their efforts as he passed. Ears dulled in protective headgear, deep underground, he watched mining robots blasting the rare ores from the surrounding Earth and, nodding, he made his inevitable notes. Atop a spindly windmill, a hundred metres up where the researchers risked their lives to dredge the air for ideas, he gazed down on the whole of the colony, from the tight-packed down-tents to the bureaucratic centre, to the remains of the landing craft and then outward to the reinforced plascrete walls, manned with sentries. He nearly smiled.

Ducking into the command bunker he nodded past two guards. Behind a functional desk sat Admiral Heid, burly with authority, toying with his rosary. A corpsman stood behind his shoulder. "Report." Heid barked.

"All is nominal, according to predictions." reported Suleimann, stiff-faced. "All units are performing admirably, production and research are on track, and casualties are within expected bounds. Monkhouse lost a man to an unfocused mining laser and a soldier died from drinking methanol in illicit moonshine. We've already found the still and-"

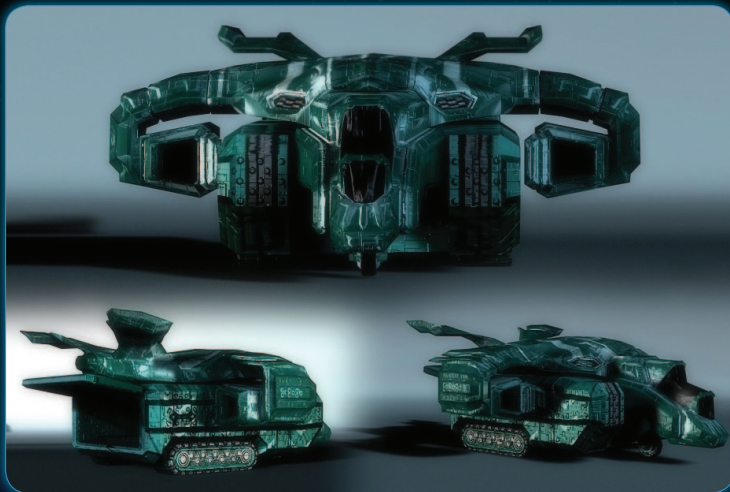
The Admiral glanced up at Suleimann. "You're not telling me about the natives. Are they reacting?"

"Ah. We've encountered no hostility from the wildlife, though we've avoided approaching too closely. Ecologist Oniha recommends we try to stay distinct from any part of the ecosystem – prey or predator – and ensure that we take no direct action against the apex lifeforms for the moment."

The admiral leaned back. "Oniha is an idealist." he said "Until the researchers have a better idea about what we're dealing with, it's not wise to relax. Do the corpsmen know about her opinions?" Suleimann nodded, uncomfortable.

"That was unwise, but the damage is done. Sergeant, ensure all watches are doubled, as are the penalties for dereliction of duty. One hole in our defences could cost us everything. Dismissed." The corpsman nodded and hurried out. Suleimann bowed and turned to follow.

"Suleimann – George – while I'm stuck behind my desk, you're my eyes out there. Don't let me down."



*The threat was again apparent, the archives had been found and She finally remembered what She needed to do. Mentally She shrugged. In her abdomen, a hundred eggs blossomed new, vicious life from a dozen species. And, scattered across the planet, that inoculating life closed on the causes of Her woes...*

The terrible gale abated, the windmill's mad oscillation slowed and ceased. Suleimann wiped the sweat from his eyes and dragged himself up to peer over the flimsy guardrail. A scene of disaster met his eyes. The compound's high wall was a gap-toothed wreck where xenos had thrown their lives against it, wave after wave. Medical technicians were dragging aside the wailing, sobbing injured. Dark, acrid smoke rose from where the few able bodied corpsmen were incinerating corpses both human and alien, while reinforcements hurried to shore up the walls.

The sole researcher who'd stayed with him in the windmill's nest moved carefully, warily over along the platform to Suleimann.

"Sir? We barely survived that. Will we get support from the other colonies?"

Suleimann shook his head, mute. The researcher looked grim. "Sir, with respect. If that's what I think it is, we'll need it." The researcher pointed to the hills and proffered her binocs. Looking through them, Suleimann saw one of the great xeno structures that had seemed so dead when they arrived. Its surface roiled like a wet balloon and split, birthing a new squad of the insectile monsters. "Mother of..." he muttered, and ran for the stairs, leaving his clipboard spinning in his wake...

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At the end of the 20th century, war got expensive, fast. When a single-shot dumb missile costs more than a small town, you can't just fire them at anyone – but the Western powers did, fearful of losing even a single soldier. Most first-world soldiers never got within a mile of a living enemy, and their autonomous drones.

Meanwhile their developing-world opponents cobbled together countertech from video game consoles, how-to guides on 4chan and sheer bile. It was asymmetric warfare to the nth degree, one side using money, the other lives.



For the West it got to the point where a single soldier's death was a tragedy – so it was simpler to hire veterans, mercenaries and the insurgents themselves. The corporation that fronted all this –



that provided a one-click military solution anywhere in the world, dropping bombs like ordering pizzas – was Empire Management, originally an internet logistics firm run by Chad Harrigan and Buck Smith, a pair of Muscle Marys from Venice Beach, California.

Empire's rise to dominance was fast, thanks to the terrorism scares of the 2030s. It was often rumoured that Empire's boys supplied the terrorists too – indeed, that they instigated minor insurgencies in key mineral territories when the global warfare levels dropped. Empire's troops, raised in private camps to work in squads called 'legions', were recognised as the best on the planet. Soon, warring factions could bid against each other for Empire's protection in a territory – with the auction loser often surrendering and the winner paying the full fee, with no troops or bombs ever deployed.

With the private space race in full flight, Chad and Buck saw a new opportunity. They approached the management of Noxium, offering them a simple deal; access to space in return for the elimination of their competitors. Noxium agreed and, in a series of short-lived skirmishes, space became the fiefdom of the two corporations, with Empire absorbing other military firms, and pretty much merging with the US military. An internal marketing-squad renamed the firm Imperium in the late 2060s, in parody of the Solar Dynasty.

Chad and Buck didn't make it through the 2070s – a loophole in their procurement software saw a disgruntled employee dump a small satellite-rod on their rural Californian home, obliterating it and the local area – and the company was left in trust for their body-building club. Operationally, it was taken over by a young veteran, James Heid, a self-styled admiral, who'd grown up in the Spartan training camps of Ceres.



Within a few years of Heid's appointment, his first major challenge arrived; the Pandora discovery and the revelation that Noxium was working on transports without the involvement of Imperium. Heid's reaction was characteristically

calm. During a long-distance conference call with the Noxium board, he raised the issue – and was rejected, explicitly. At which point Heid panned his camera to reveal that he was on Callisto, already silently conquered by his troops, under his personal command, and that they had seized the prototype colony ship.

Heid's decision to fly personally to Pandora is pragmatic. His forces don't need Pandora – but the company's pride couldn't stand the concept of wars without Imperium, and he was sure war was going to come on Pandora.

## NOXIUM CORPORATION



*"In this day and age, supply and demand are the driving forces behind our society. I made an immeasurable fortune by understanding the market, by buying and selling at the right times, and to the right people. In this world, provided you have the liquidity, nothing is impossible."*

– Director Eric Preston, *Planetary Markets*

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## **Imperium Headquarters, Ceres, Asteroid Belt.**

Admiral James Heid, nominal head of the Solar System's premiere mercenary organisation, Imperium, was not a man prone to anger. Yet, his hands gripped his interrupted reading material a little harder as his adjutant, Suleimann, read out his findings.

"...and following the discovery of the extrasolar planets, the three core factions – Togra, Solar and Noxium – have been quietly collaborating on building up colony ships to go to these worlds. It's unique non-replicable tech. And we're, uh, not invited to the party."

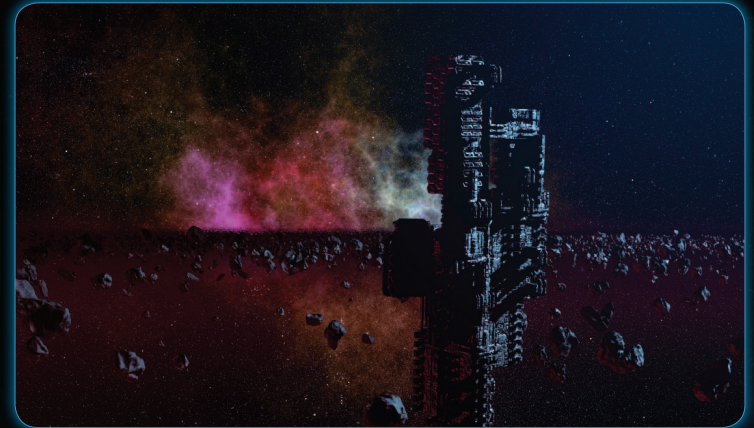
"Damn. Noxium has been our ally for 30 years. Why screw us now?"

"With respect, sir, James. They're just playing the Great Game. Thirty years of affection means nothing. To be betrayed in this way... Well, I see it as flattery. It means they see us as a real threat. And they know they can't move against us, nor us against them. We should leave Pandora to them. It means nothing to us."

"I disagree. We need to be on this planet – who knows what military tech they'll find out there? We can't have them coming back here and taking us down. No, we need one of their ships. But you're right that we can't attack. If only I can think of a way of getting that ship." He looked down at the copy of the Odyssey in his hands and frowned.

## **Callisto Station, The Asteroid Belt.**

Security captain Darin stared out the porthole on Callisto's security station. There, floating immense in the stardock, was the Player of Games, Noxium's prototype interstellar colony



ship. His job was to defend that, against whatever enemies might be out there. His gaze drifted to the turrets surrounding it, his office and the entire stardock complex. With a near-infinite range, the turrets made his job too easy.

Still, he was obviously concerned as he bent over his control panel. The shipping arcs on Callisto station's traffic control screen were mostly nominal, save for a cluster of mining transports coming in from the asteroid belt. He could see that four of the steel shippers were all gradually drifting off route.

He tutted to himself and called through on the radio. "Transporters #3358, #3367, #3248, and #2800. You seem to be drifting off course. Can you explain? You need to correct."

The lead trucker radioed back. "#2800 here, chief. Yeah, we seem to have extra mass, funny. We're all newer models, save mine, so it's not a systems error. Could be dust accretion from our stop at Ceres, I guess?"

"We're on max security, #2800. I'm going to have to inspect. Out."

“Five-by-five. We’ll correct trajectory in the meantime. Out.”

Darin shut down the connection and headed out, gathering his security teams as he went.

### **Noxium Headquarters, New New York, Earth.**

The boardroom of the Noxium corporation fitted every stereotype you might expect, as did the men sat around the long, oval table. Thin men, fat men, old men, slick young men – but all men. Handmade suits that cost more than a house, immeasurably valuable paintings on the walls, discreet and smart adornments. The descendants of men who’d inherited, bought, and stolen power, the Noxium board knew how valuable morality was, down to the fraction of a cent.

The chairmanship and CEO, Eric Preston, was the young scion of an ancient mercantile family, as old as the Fuggers but more subtle. Despite his youth, Preston commanded respect around the board. When other children had been playing with dolls and soldiers, he’d been playing the markets, literally, gambling his pocket money to build up a hedge fund that had made him independently wealthy before he even came into his inheritance.

He stood up, buttoning his tailored jacket. “Gentlemen, welcome to the AGM. It’s been another stellar year. Profits are up, turnover is up, market share is up in all sectors. Everything beyond expectations. The details are in the yearly reports that are beaming to your devices and to the social media corporations right now.” On the wall, a ticker graph showed the company’s share price rocketing, as the news spread.

“Sadly, and this part is embargoed until we can talk to them, our partnership with Imperium must come to an end. The agreement to maintain a monopoly over access to local space

was highly profitable, but our analysts have them reacting negatively to their exclusion from the Pandora project. Jens, can you give them the stats?”

A gray-suited underling stepped forward, reading off a tab. “Our projections have this negatively affecting Solar System profits in the region of 9-17% for the indefinite future. We’ve also incurred significant costs in bolstering security at our settlements, taking another couple of percent off this year’s top line. Our fire teams are never going to be the quality of Imperium’s troops, especially not their ‘300’ assault squads, but the fixed emplacements at major bases should prevent any violent repercussions from the termination of the deal.” He stepped back, almost blending into the wall.

Preston nodded his thanks, and continued. “However, we’re still the dominant economic entity in the solar system. We still have access to the cheapest Earth-to-orbit tech, the cheapest, best-designed ships thanks to our own shipyards, and an effective monopoly on ore extraction. Imperium won’t dare offend us. They can’t afford to.”

### **Callisto Station, the Asteroid Belt.**

Darin’s light spacesloop swept into the shadow of the lead transporter, #2800. The ship was a great framework of interlaced steel, a fine strong cage built atop a solid base to contain the pieces of steel packed inside, backed by weak sub-light engines. It loomed above his craft like a metal cliff as it interfaced with the airlock. Other security teams, hastily scrambled, were attaching their sloops to the rear of the three newer transporters, and cautiously entering the cavernous interiors.

The transport driver greeted him and his team at the airlock, stinking of months trapped in his tiny cab at the front of the

leviathan transport. “Glad to see a face in the flesh!” he said, “I thought the handling was a little off, but I can’t work out why she’s bellying around. Come and look at the cargo.” He led Darin to the great central chamber.

Darin inspected the cargo perfunctorily, scanning it with a handheld device. It was all accounted for, endless stacks of inert steel, no life signs, nothing. It just appeared to be overweight. Over his headset, the other teams reported the same thing. “Return to base.” he commed to the team-leaders. “They must have been overloaded at Ceres.” He turned to the trucker, with a second thought. “It’s going to slow completion, but I’m going to quarantine you four out here. My job is to prevent anything suspicious coming through the perimeter.” The trucker nodded.

Darin’s sloop headed back to the security station, bellying a little. On its underside, four soldiers of the Imperium’s 300 division clung on with magnetic gloves, waiting for their moment.

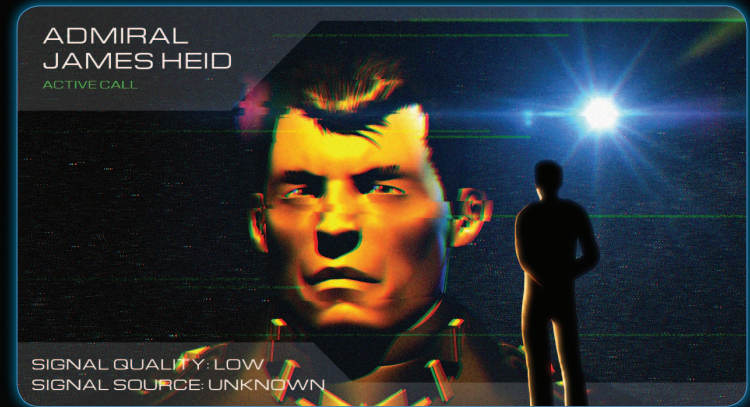
### **Noxium Headquarters, Earth.**

“So we’re agreed? Buy options on the company before dumping its stock. Good. Next on the-”

The intercom buzzed. “Sir, I know we have orders not to disturb you, but Admiral Heid is on Line 4 and is rather insistent.”

“Heid? Hmm. I guess we’d better get this done. In the meantime, execute plan IA3 – you should find the details in my private folder, password @3Headhunter – and put him through.”

The windows opaqued and the young face of James Heid appeared on them. “Hello Eric, hello gentlemen. Apologies for interrupting your AGM.”



“It’s no imposition, James. I was half-expecting you to call. What can we do for you?”

“Well, it’s a simple request really. We at Imperium have appreciated working with you over the past thirty years, but we’re a little concerned. We’ve heard that you’re working with Togra and Solar to design ships to travel to the newly discovered planet-”

“-yes, Nashira 667 Cc. We’re calling it Pandora.”

“To Pandora, then, and that you’ve finished your prototype ship. Congratulations for that. So we wondered if our mutual co-operation was going to extend to Pandora as well?”

“Ah, yes. We did want to talk to you about that James. Frankly, we don’t think we’ll need your security services on this new world – we’re focusing on taking infrastructure-building groups rather than, ah, less-productive groups. But we fully intend to maintain the Ceres Cartel in this Solar System.”

“Eric, you know as well as I do that none of our groups has a future in this Solar System. The Earth may be uninhabitable

soon and even Mars is far beyond the reach of our current terraforming tech. We need to move to Pandora and we need your ships to get there. Is it worth my asking again? I'm not going to beg.

"James, you're a friend and I respect you, but this is a purely commercial decision. We can't sell you a ship. I'm sorry."

"In that case, I'm afraid to say that the Ceres Cartel is at end. We'll see you on Pandora."

"James, don't be ridiculous. You can't get there. We're building the ships to get to Pandora and I'm – we're not selling you one."

"Oh, we know that. So we just took one. Look."

The camera panned back to reveal Heid in full spacer's gear. Behind him, a line of Noxium Construction employees were kneeling on the ground, hands behind their heads, whilst a group of the Imperium 300 aimed lance rifles at their heads. And beyond them, wheeling in the vacuum, heading away from Callisto's docks, was the prototype interstellar ship, The Player of Games, now quite obviously under Heid's control.

Heid waved at the camera. "Heid out." The image died.

The board was silent for a beat, then uproar. Everyone was shouting at once. Preston sat still at the table's end, his pale face impassive. The ticker on the wall showed the Noxium stocks in freefall.

"Gentlemen. Gentlemen!" he said. "GENTLEMEN." The room quieted. "Watch the screen." As the board turned to watch, the ticker stabilised and cautiously recovered. The room grew noisy again, this time with puzzlement. Preston explained. "When our friend Heid called, I suspected the game was up,

so triggered plan IA3. I had my subsidiaries bet the farm that our stock would drop after the AGM. By the looks of things, that bet covered our loss on the prototype ship, the costs of another ship and gave us a nice bonus on top. Now, to work, gentlemen. We've got a world to buy."

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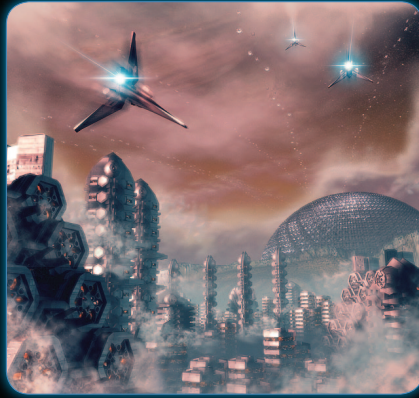
No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that Earth was being controlled keenly and closely by intelligences more subtle than most men's. The Noxium Corporation didn't exist then, of course. But the handful of greedy men who valued their own happiness more highly than that of a thousand others had existed since the 17th century.

The slow cartelisation of most economic markets really took off in the 19th century, but advanced marvellously in the 20th century, and in the USA in particular. By the end of 2000, the poorest 80% of people in the USA owned just 15% of the country's wealth – and that fell to 10% in the next five years.

By the 21st century, these financiers had reached an almost perfect capitalist state. They did nothing. They produced nothing. They gambled huge amounts of money on stock markets like roulette wheels, but hid it carefully when the taxman came to call. When the countries of the world, driven to desperation by their collapsing incomes, eliminated tax havens, these financiers just bought up the nascent space industry and moved into orbit.

Noxium wasn't the first company to make money from space habitats – in fact its main focus was on asteroid mining – but its establishment of the so-called Ceres Cartel with the Imperium mercenary group in the 2030s meant that it was quite soon the only business in town. Habitats that weren't launched

with the cartel's approval had a horrible habit of being struck by micrometeorites, exploding on launch or directing themselves into a burn-up orbit while the occupants slept. The commercial war was bloody but understandably short-lived.



The Ceres Cartel held together for the best part of forty years, until 2075 when the first interstellar probes reported back from the superterran exoplanet Tau Ceti e. Though the planet was uninhabitable, the prospect of space colonization suddenly reawakened Noxium's dozing commercial instincts and plans for interstellar ships were put into effect. Unfortunately, Noxium foolishly neglected to take Imperium into their new venture, instead allying with the production facilities of the Solar Dynasty and the design geniuses of Togra University.

Imperium's vengeful raid on the Callisto headquarters of Noxium's mining operation killed off the Ceres Cartel totally. The Imperium vacuum troopers took the prototype ship – intended for Noxium's own use – which Imperium then used to head to Pandora. It's worth noting that the Noxium board didn't blame the Imperium commanders for this, regarding space-piracy as an entirely legitimate business model, but instead focused their ire on Noxium's own security section, who soon found that, whilst accountants might be boring people, it doesn't take much imagination to cancel your bonus or throw you out of an airlock.

Retrenching and belatedly establishing their own security force, Noxium built itself a new colony ship, and hastened for the new markets of Pandora, ripe for the exploitation of its physical, human and financial capital. This will be paradise indeed!

## SOLAR DYNASTY



*“People need guidance. Without control and authority there is anarchy, and the masses would simply consume themselves. It is the duty of the few enlightened ones to lead those masses, to give them a purpose, to channel their strength. Unified they are privileged to serve in a dynasty that will shake the very foundations of this world.”*

– Prime Minister Yun Xi, *Leadership of the State*

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A small, bustling figure, bowed under a great stack of papers, ushered six men into the long windowless boardroom. Here, deep beneath the Solar Dynasty's City Number 1, in a reinforced meeting room proof against anything but the still-theoretical black hole bombs, the Solar Dynasty's nominal Standing Committee met.

The stern, upright men sat down in leatherette chairs around the table. Looking around their faces, though they were all of different ages, the resemblance was more than merely familial. These were six clones of the long-dead President of the People's Republic, Sheng Xi. Young or old, slender or rotund, they owed their place on Standing Committee of the Politburo, and their lives, to Xi's genetic line.

At the table's end, the bent secretary deposited the great heap of papers with a dusty thump on a placemat, sat down on a low stool, coughed, leaned around the pile for a glass of water, and spoke.

"Congratulations, Comrades one and all, on your elevation to the Central Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Solar Dynasty unified party. Your clone-father, may his works never fail, stipulated that only those who bore his genetic line could rise to this position for reasons of state security. Those of us who are born outside his blessed line can only work for the good of all under your direction."

A worn-looking, heavily-built clone interrupted. "I am Xilai Xi, newly appointed Deputy Party secretary of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. Secretary, you are not our chairman. Where is our chairman?"

"Ah, yes. That is the first point on our agenda. I have to regret to inform you that intelligence came to light of a counter-revolutionary element in the newly-elected politburo Central Standing Committee." The men around the table murmured their disquiet. "It would not be wise for a role as valuable as the chairman to expose himself to such risk. And anyway, he is currently being interrogated. Instead, I, as your secretary, am here to ensure that the traitor is found as quickly as possible. I have a squad of revolutionary guard outside, awaiting my signal."

Another aged clone interrupted, his round bland face carefully communicating irritation. "Secretary, I am Xi Dejang, Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. Traitors are my field, my remit. Why was I not informed of this beforehand?"

The secretary bowed his head, servile. "Because you yourself are suspect, and the Chairman so ordered it, before his own corruption was discovered. My apologies. Now, to business. Until I can guarantee which of you is the traitor, we will remain here. Does anyone have any information to share?"

The six men looked around the room. Lives spent in the morass of party intrigue had hardened each of them but, still, it was a psychological blow to be so accused at their triumphal moment. Each of the six scanned the room for weakness, racked their memories as to who might be the traitor – or traitors.

A moment. Another. The secretary cleared his throat. "So, no ideas? Not one. Let me prompt you. Hmm. Zhang Xi. You are party secretary of the National Committee of the People's Political Consultative Conference. As the head of our advisory legislature, you must be aware of dissent in the ranks?"

Zhang, a older clone with a face lined from smiling and scowling, seemed distressed. "I know of no such dissent!" he barked. "The legislature is free of counter-revolutionaries."

The secretary looked down, playing with a pencil. "And yet there is dissent," he said "according to this report from the Discipline Inspection commission headed by... hmm, Xi Dejang? So who is the traitor?" The two older clones glared at each other across the table, instant enemies. And the secretary smiled.

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An hour later, and the calm, smug atmosphere of the room had transformed. From the secretary's gentle prompting, each of the men had accused every single other, with old secrets or shared crimes or allegations of counter-revolutionary intent or simply flung dirt, and the room was a raging, ongoing row.

Gradually, the storm of accusations abated. Silence fell as the clones realised one after another that the secretary was himself silent. They watched in horror as he continued to transcribe the litany of their crimes on his great stack of paper. Eventually, he noticed their gaze. “Ah, comrades. So much material. So much misery, so many covered-up failures. Our dear clone-father would be quite proud of you – you have followed in his misdemeanours so very well.”

He pressed a buzzer and ranks of masked, armed soldiers filed into the room. “Now, comrades. You had better follow these men out, as the interrogators have some questions for you. Don’t worry, I am quite capable of carrying out this agenda by myself. Goodbye.” In silence and humiliation, the six clones trudged out.



“Now, Yun Xi” said the little secretary to himself. “It appears the next item on the agenda is the election of a Prime Minister for the Solar Dynasty. How does everyone vote?” He looked around the empty room and leatherette chairs, amusing himself. “Oh, my. It seems we have a draw. Well, in the sad

absence of this committee’s chairman who should have the casting vote, it appears the secretary must decide. Now, who should I vote for? Hmm.” Pulling a ballot paper out of his stack, he bent low to write a name into a box.

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Across the fields, mines and factories, the traditional three-chord tone blared, announcing important news. The people looked up, half with weariness, half with interest. “TO THE DELIGHT OF THE PEOPLE AND THE JOY OF OUR BLESSED, LATE LEADER SHENG XI, HIS CHERISHED SON YUN XI HAS BEEN ELECTED PRIME MINISTER TO THE PEOPLE. ALL HAIL YUN XI, LEADER OF THE SOLAR DYNASTY.”

In the fields, they hardly felt the change.

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The prevailing theme of the short twentieth century (1914-1991) was the clash of authoritarian ideologies. Communism, fascism and capitalism fought throughout the century, with none of them emerging with its reputation intact. Indeed, the only ‘ism’ that did emerge successfully was authoritarian pragmatism – as practised effectively by the Chinese Communist party from the late 1930s. By always acting in the interest of the majority over the interest of any single individual, the Chinese state emerged with a brutally effective economy by the late 20th century.

But, as Plato observed, regimes always decay towards tyranny. Chinese communism was no exception, though the efforts of the National People’s Congress to execute and subjugate overweening leaders to their authority until the early 2060s were impressively effective. It was only with the appointment



of Sheng Xi as Chairman of the Central Guidance Commission for Building Spiritual Civilization that they made a misstep.

Like Caesar and Napoleon before him, Sheng Xi made carefully-brutal steps towards the suppression of resistance. The early steps are of little interest – his birth in Xiamen, his rapid rise through the party and accession to the Politburo. However, his own business is of note – a firm specialising in genetic manipulation (essential for progress in the ranks) used by the elite to guarantee children and sons (rumoured to involve cloning technology for the more infertile cases). By the time of the final National Congress in 2062, Sheng was General Secretary and powerful – too powerful in fact, so that rumours rumbled in the state media that the Congress would take him down a peg.

What happened at the final National Congress, no-one really knows. The state media blames the detonation of poison gas bombs on Uighur and Nepalese separatists, but we do know

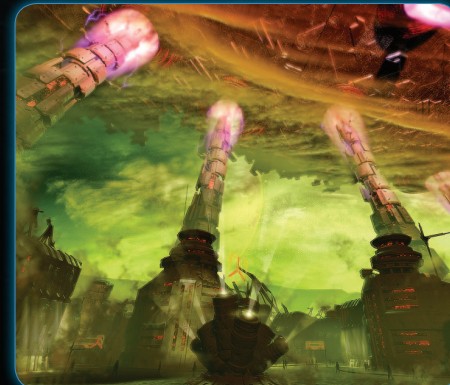


that after the event Sheng's authority was unchallenged. He changed his title from General Secretary to Prime Minister and, to prevent further attacks on the new Congress, had them all shipped up to a new Noxium-built habitat in orbit about Saturn.

This habitat was, in fact, his pleasure palace, where complicit members lived a life of bliss. No-one knows what happened to any dissidents, but there was always a large supply of shipboard protein. With the consent of his Congress-slaves, Sheng changed the name of the country to the Solar Dynasty, and died in bliss, while his people suffered.

His clone-son, Yun Xi, became Prime Minister after him and it was he who took the Solar Dynasty to Pandora. Yun's people slaved in the shipyards of the asteroid belt for Noxium, turning the rare ores into the refined metals needed. His people also built every last interstellar transport, working long hours in leaky spacesuits until they dropped. Togra had the designs, Noxium the resources, and Yun had the manpower.

Yun Xi, like his father, is concerned with the greatness of his people. They only know him as father of the country, the

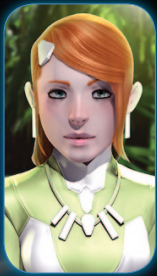


spiritual and physical successor to his father. But he seeks to remake the state in his image. His clones are seeded throughout the state in positions of authority; indeed, the majority of the colonists taken to Pandora are Yun's

clones too, with the other passengers just there as makeweights, in case genetic diversity is needed.

Yun's aim on Pandora is to build a perfect state in his image – strong, resolute and clear in purpose. He has already sold his state and his people to reach Pandora – if every other living thing has to suffer for the greater goal too, so be it.

## TERRA SALVUM



*“Our ancestors knew how much Earth was suffering, but they kept their ways, and we paid the price. Now that we have found this exciting new world, did we learn from the mistakes of our forefathers? And if not, how will the alien ecosystem react to our intrusion?”*

– Advocate Vivian Gardinier, Alien Ecosystems

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The children-were huddled in the glow of the campfire. They sneaked adoring looks at the old, old lady (“Maybe as old as 40!” they’d whispered to one another) who was tonight’s storyteller. She settled her old bones near the warmth and cleared her throat.

“Are you all sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin.”

“A long, long time ago, on a planet far, far away, there was a country called Brazil. And there Elora, mother of Vivian, was born.”

“One day a lot of men looked up at the sky and they saw a new star. Using things called tellys and scopes they looked closer at it and they grew hungry. For these weren’t men like your dads.



These were Eaters, men who just had to eat everything they came across, and leave a mess everywhere they went.”

“They’d already made a mess of their planet, which they called Earth. They’d eaten all

the trees and all the animals and all the water out of all the taps and they’d started turning the stone and dirt into food too. Pretty much all that was left to eat was the brave little fungus that would live anywhere; and maybe each other. ...and they’d really started to get bored of fungus.”

“So, when they saw the star they wanted it, and they wanted to eat everything on it. Now, I don’t want to scare you, but that star was here! It was our home, Pandora! And they wanted to come here to eat everything until it was just like Earth. So they built themselves huge boats to carry them through space, and they packed all their best knives and forks.”

“Luckily, not all the people were like those Eaters. Some of them, like Elora, heard what the men were up to and made a plan. Using scraped together old bits and their cleverness and their desperation to save Pandora’s life, they built themselves a boat just like the Eaters, and followed them through the long dark.”

“But there were problems with the boat. Because it had been built so fast and from so many strange parts, it wasn’t a very strong or large boat, though it was a VERY brave boat. So, up there in the long dark it started to fall apart; some of the dark started coming in through the planks of the boat.”

“Now, the families on the ship, led by Elora, had to make a decision. A lot of food had been spoiled by the darkness, and some people had been made sick by it. The decision was that all the young people would be protected and that the older people, like Elora, would keep the ship running.”

“So by the time the boat finally landed on Pandora there were very few old people left. They’d all worked so hard and used up so much of their life to protect the children that they were all sick with the darkness. So the remaining few pretty much let the children take over.”

“The oldest of the children was Elora’s daughter Vivian. So when they landed she said to the other children, “You stay here and help the oldies get to sleep. I’m going to go and warn all the things that live here about the Eaters.”

“Vivian went out into Pandora. And it was beautiful. There were great mountains and green trees and a blue sea so clear and clean you could see all the way to the bottom of it! She loved it on sight and swore that she would do her best to protect it from the Eaters, no matter what.”

“First she went to the Scites. They buzzed like great fairies around her and listened quietly to her. “Listen” she said. “The Eaters are coming and they eat everything. They ate The Earth and they’ll eat you too!”

“The Scites were frightened but their leader, the monstrous Devourer, boomed out in his great voice. “We can fly high – oh-so-high – that even the tall Galeth can’t reach us. So how will these Eaters?” So Vivian left them, happy they were safe.”

“Then she went to the Bugs to warn them. The bugs had never seen a human before so scratched around her with their giant claws and stared with their jewel-like eyes. When they saw she



wasn't scared they let her visit their Queen. The Queen was sat in all finery on a great throne in her egg-chamber, and listened to Vivian. “Listen” Vivian said. “The Eaters are coming and they eat everything. They ate The Earth and they’ll eat you too!”

“The bugs all shook as one, because they all have only one mind after all, but then the Queen stamped her feet and shook her great head, and said “The Eaters won’t eat us. There are too many of us to eat, millions and millions. And we won’t let them.” So Vivian left them, happy they were safe.”

“Then Vivian went to find the Aspidoch. She knew the Aspidoch was the oldest and wisest creature alive on the planet, and that he might listen to her. She travelled for weeks, sailing out into the centre of the crystal ocean until she saw what looked like an island on the horizon. It was the Aspidoch, sunbathing. She walked a mile up his belly to an earhole like a cave mouth and shouted. “Listen” she said. “The Eaters are coming and they eat everything. They ate The Earth and they’ll eat you too!”

“But” the Aspidoch said, “They won’t eat me. I’ll swim away. If they follow me, I’ll flatten them. And, anyway, there’s just too much of me to eat.”

“Vivian went home, reassured that her friends were going to be alright. When she got home, the last of the oldies had died. So they buried them in the gardens alongside her mother Elora and then she helped the other shipchildren build a paradise on Pandora.”

“Then there was a great flapping in the air. It was the proud Devourer, his great wings now all tattered and torn . “The Eaters have come!” he said, “and they’re eating all my friends. They have guns which can reach us wherever we fly! Help!”

“Before Vivian could answer, there was a great skittering and the Bug Queen arrived, borne aloft by her children, her chitin chiton in rags. “The Eaters have come!” she said, “and they’re eating all my children. They have tanks and robots to roll us into pancakes by the million! Help!”

“Before Vivian could answer either of them, a giant Galeth came galumphing over the hill. “The Eaters have come!” he said, “and the Aspidoch is hiding. They have boats and planes to find him, and the biggest knives and forks I’ve ever seen! If you don’t come soon, they’re sure to eat him up like a big plum pudding! Help!”

“And that’s the story. That’s where we are now. And the Eaters call themselves all sorts of names – Solo Dynasty, Imperious, Toga, Noxious and Devious Ascension – but they’re Eaters all the same. If we don’t help Vivian and our friends, there won’t be anyone left, and the Eaters will eat everything.”

There was silence round the campfire. One child burst into huge sobs. Another, slightly older, raised her voice, angry and

tearful. “That was a RUBBISH story! Stories are meant to have happy endings. It should have been ‘and then they all lived happily ever after’ not-”

“What?” interrupted the old lady. “Happy endings aren’t free. You have to fight for them. And it was a true story! I’m Vivian. And I do need your help.”

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The Earth-founded organisation that became Terra Salvum started out as an array of pressure-groups, scattered over the planet, in the late 20th century. As the 21st century progressed and the climate collapsed, they won more supporters to their cause, especially in the areas where natural resources were being over-exploited – Africa, South America and parts of Asia – and in liberal parts of the west.

Gradually, the organisations realised that the only way to talk to governments was to match their size. In the 2040s, following the formation of the greedy and polluting Solar Dynasty, these pressure groups merged into Terra Salvum, using their influence and financial power to make their opinions count just as much as the corporations. Their more-militant arm became especially feared in international waters.

When Pandora was discovered, Terra Salvum didn’t have the finances to buy one of Noxium’s terrifyingly-expensive cruise-colonisers. Thankfully with the aid of developing world hackers, the organisation managed to ‘acquire’ the blueprints for the ships. Friendly scientists donated their time and lives to rapidly decode these and the resources of a small nation were poured into building a single colony ship. However, the organisation simply couldn’t justify the extra cost of building hibernation units before launch – so they didn’t.



During flight, First Gardinier Elora gives birth to Vivian Gardinier. Despite never seeing a naturally grown flower, Vivian is raised alongside a small group of children as a fervent ecologist who has never known her opinions to be opposed.

With Elora's passing, a year before landing, Vivian is appointed as Advocate to lead Terra Salvum. Her peaceful followers – after more than two decades of imprisonment on a spaceship – long for a living world and are determined that the war for natural resources which bled old Earth white will never happen on Pandora.

## TOGRA UNIVERSITY



*“Since the beginning of time, mankind has traveled towards new horizons and discovered new wonders along the way. However, we scholars of Togra University travel even further by discovering the natural laws that exist behind each and every wonder.”*

– Doctor Alpheus Schreiber, *Discoveries of a New Age*

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“Sometimes, when you're crying, the world just jumps into focus. The water in your eyes wells up enough that a kind of lens forms and everything just sharpens and makes sense. The

sobs, the alien walls, the blood on your hands. They all just sort of – jump – and then it's all right. It fits. I mean, you're still going to die, but you don't mind so much any more.”

Field-researcher Andrez stopped there, looked around and beamed proudly. There was a perplexed murmur from the assembled Ops team.

“What the FRAK?” yelled Hughes afterwards, as they walked out of the tent that was attached to the command ATV. “What the FRAK was that?”

“That, Hughie, was a motivational speech from our commander”, replied Abernathy, pursing her lips. “That is what happens when the only survivor from your only archaeological expedition on the only alien world you've ever been to has come back a few claws short of a Galeth and you need someone to command the next, presumably equally-doomed mission.”

“FRAKKING FRAKKERS!!” yelled Hughes, kicking out at a passive alien plant in frustration. It dodged preternaturally fast and grabbed one of his bootlaces with a spiked pinion.

“Think of it this way, Hughie.” said Abernathy, “At least he knows what we're up against and he's not lying to us about it. We knew what we were signing up for – the chance to see something no human has ever seen – and probably to die in the process. If I recall, that was the deal with coming to Pandora in the first place.”

“Yeah, but how FRAKKING low are our chances with him in charge? Let GO, you little bugger!” Hughes struggled to extricate his bootlace before it was slowly devoured by the tiny alien.

Abernathy pulled a folding scalpel from her pocket and, crouching, severed the bootlace, toppling the swearing Hughes

into the dust. The miniature alien uprooted itself and scurried off rapidly with its prize.

As Abernathy helped Hughes up, she looked at the great twisted ruins around them. “Hughie, old boy, my stochastic analysis is a bit rusty, but I don’t think you can reduce any odds to below zero.”

—

The ruins could have been anything: dining hall, power centre, hospital, playing field, signalling station or some more inconceivable function. Whatever they had been, they’d been carved out entirely by the same catastrophic energy that had destroyed every single ancient city on the planet and presumably wiped out the inhabitants.

Now these particular ruins formed a great hollow chamber, big enough to hold one of the colony ships that had brought the Togra researchers to Pandora. So large was it that the base of its distant walls dipped below the horizon before being lost in haze and shadow.



The Togra ATV convoy made its way through one of the great holes punctured in the sides of the structure, rolling over the artefact-rich rubble. The lead Seeker ATV held Andrez and his assistant Maçon, scanning the landscape for trouble. In the second ATV, Hughes crouched dourly over the wheel whilst Abernathy read the instruments and smoked her pipe. The third ATV held the female security team of thickset Baker and paranoid Legg-Hulme, and weaved to avoid every pothole. The final ATV, holding quiet Curie and messy Yaort was waiting at the chamber’s entrance, monitoring the situation and ready to run to a safe distance at any sign of trouble. That final team’s job was just to ensure someone, anyone, survived.

The target of the convoy was a distant cluster of low buildings that had somehow survived the energies that carved the chamber. The three vehicles pushed on through the dust.

An hour later, the team was on foot. Back in the dust, where the buildings began, the lead ATV was in two smoking halves, having triggered some revenant defence system on approach. Maçon hadn’t made it out and the gore-spattered Andrez had decided they should continue on foot. Baker was on point, toting a modified rifle of her own design. Hughes, Andrez and Abernathy were in the middle lugging analytics, medical and early-warning equipment. Behind them, Legg-Hulme was muttering nervously, covered in a range of homemade bombs and waving a pocket shotgun.

There was a chittering in the air. A shadow moved on a rooftop, disturbed dust blew between distant buildings. The team was definitely not alone, and it was getting closer to the centre of the ruins. Here stood something like a tall shard of glass, its translucency abraded by generations of diamond dust.

Time passed. As they neared a pulsating man-sized egg, Legg-Hulme's homemade bombs seemed to pulse twice in sympathy. She had time to stare down horrified, before they detonated, scattering her over the cowering Hughes and Abernathy. There was a silence. Andrez looked at the mess and, bending, took her battered shotgun. "Sad. No time for burials. Press on."

An interminable trudge through diamond favelas later, a distant explosion echoed off the chamber's walls. Abernathy radioed Yaort and Curie, but there was no response on any frequency. Andrez was impassive. "Dump the radio." he said. "And the other gear. Need to be faster."

At the next building, Baker poked her gun around a corner, only for the barrel to dissolve, sizzingly as it encountered some strange energy field. "Back" said Andrez. They backtracked to make their way around the field, tossing small stones to find its boundaries.

Finally, four hours into the trek, they reached the tower. "Slow now." said Andrez. It had an obvious doorway, much wider and lower than a man, but open. Baker, on point, bounded up to the side of the entrance, Andrez close behind.

There was a noise like creaking floorboards and Baker just... disappeared, seemingly falling sideways into a crack in the air that shouldn't have been there, before something detonates. Hughes and Abernathy are blasted into the tower. Abernathy is first to her feet. She can see Andrez kneeling in the dust outside the diamond tower, facing away from her. "Go on" he yells. "Baker is gone. Boobytrap. Seems to have cauterised my eyes. Can't even cry now. Ha! GO ON."

Abernathy doesn't need another order and hauls Hughes's battered body up a slope inside the structure. "Just think, Hughie." she



chatters, trying to drown Andrez's grim laughter. "If we both survive this, we'll have doubled the maximum survival stats for exploratory missions. We might get tenure!" Hughes groans in response, "We're already frakking dea-" then stops

as his handheld analytics gear starts twittering. "What's this? Power surges in the building. Let me down. Let go!"

Hughe's gear tracks the surges to a diamond wall like any other, which lights as the heat of his breath hits it. He breathes harder. The diamond tower above them peels away like sellotape, as does the ceiling above it. A light pours out from the buildings, is focused by the diamond shard, burns past the huddled figures, a beam focused on a particular distant star. Down in the dust, eyeless Andrez is shouting that he can see the light.

As fast as it starts, it cuts off. And then back on. In the dark moments, in the gap in the ruined ceiling, something is flashing faintly back from the stars, across impossible distances.

Abernathy sighs and relaxes. "No more shilly-shallying, Hughie. It's got to be a beacon. And we've lit it!"

"We have. But I wonder... who's coming?"

Abernathy looks around, frowning. Heaves Hughes to his feet. "Let's not wait around here to find out, hey? I think we've done enough exploring today." They shambled off in search of Andrez and a safe route back to the ATVs.

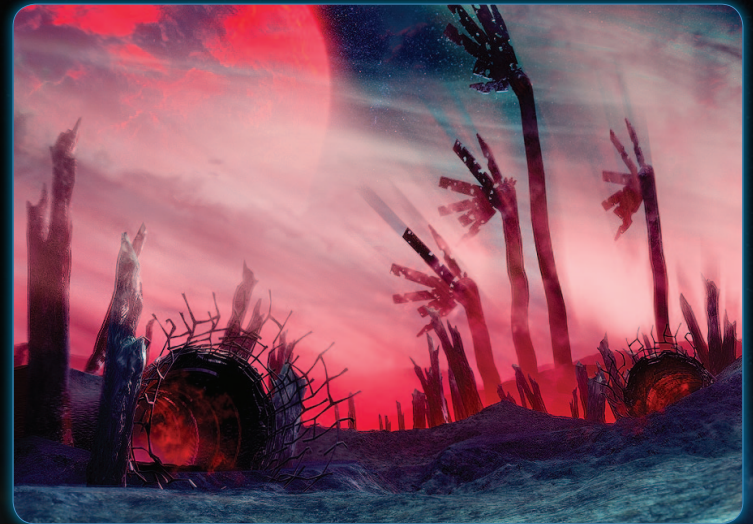
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Togra University was founded in 2022, with a specialism in cutting edge research in materials science – that is, valuing practical products over pure research. Despite that, in the 21st century, Togra’s professors received more Nobel prizes than the rest of the world put together.

Set up in 2022 by an anonymous donor, initially as a research lab to discover better materials for shower curtains, the University grew fat on corporate donations for its research. The line went that if you wanted to do something immoral, then you asked Noxium – but if it was immoral and impossible, then you asked Togra. Despite that, the scientists of Togra are mostly good, honest and upright people – just forgetful and a little too keen to chase truth at the expense of, say, a thousand lab monkeys’ brains.

It’s hard to show a history of people who sat in a lab for seventy years, but as those Nobel Prizes indicate, Togra has been behind most of the 21st century’s transformational innovations. It was Togra that supplied Noxium with the theory that allowed it to develop its expertise in zero-g mining. It was Togra which advised the Solar Dynasty on cloning techniques, so Prime Minister Sheng Xi could rule (in some sense) for ever. It was even Togra which devised the schemata that allowed the interstellar probes and the great colony ships to actually reach near light-speed without using up the energy of a small sun.

However, Togra’s board of governors, chaired by Doctor Alpheus Schreiber, has a severe dedication to information being ‘free’. So it was probably also researchers at Togra that helped Terra Salvum build their own interstellar colony ship. It’s likely to be Togra that let Imperium know about Noxium’s plans for the ship. And it was definitely Togra that supplied the open source AI cores that look like they could save Earth



from global warming – and might eventually take over more branches of government.

Most irritatingly for Togra, it was also these open source software AIs that helped Lilith Vermillion set up the social media / data-harvesting sites that eventually turned into Divine Ascension. Togra’s scientists are mostly disgusted with her manipulative, truth-avoiding religion (though, as the saying goes, ‘where you have two Togra, you have three opinions’.) On Pandora, their first aim is research; their second is to destroy Lady Lilith Vermillion.

Togra’s scientists and engineers value the human intellect and academic virtues, particularly respecting personal freedom. While this freedom might result in a lack of discipline or motivation at times, this faction shows unrivalled creativity, with the brightest minds in the known universe. However, just because they’re clever, doesn’t mean they’re all nice people.



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