

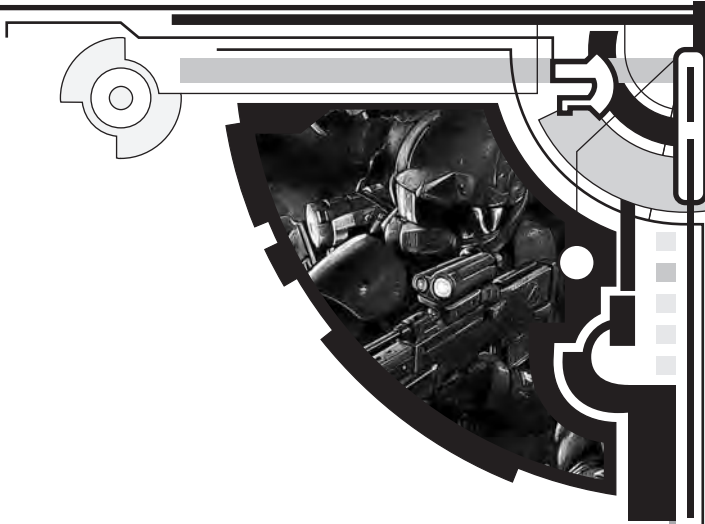
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CHAPTER 1

The Layout of the Land • 1



IN THIS CHAPTER...

The Layout of the Land
Of Chaos, Controversy, and Conflict
A Moment of the Past
Founding Truths
The Conspiracy Theory
Portents of Danger
Cities of War
The Necessary Evil
A Universe at War

◀ Alliance forces under attack by the Rebels at the Battle for Terasleague (known by Humans as The Second Khe Sahn). Surrounded on all sides and cut off from resupply, the 2nd of the 5th Marine regiment held out for six weeks while enemy forces tried to take the supply depot. Huddled behind trenches, the valiant warriors repulsed charge after Rebel charge. Over half of the unit's personnel were killed or wounded during the conflict which lasted for 43 days until the radiation cloud surrounding the planet dissipated and reinforcements could be brought in to break the siege.

When *Battlelords* first came out, we figured “that’s enough guns and stuff to keep them busy for a long time.” It contained over 400 pieces of weapons and equipment, and we thought that was all anyone would ever need. And then the letters and e-mails began to come in, and they all said one thing . . . More stuff!

And we answered the call. *Lock–N–Load* is the most complete science fiction equipment manual ever assembled. Nearly 600 weapons systems, dozens of armor types and hundreds of armor options, and more miscellaneous equipment, cybernetics, and supplies than you can shake a Thwack’em Stick at! So many in fact, that we had to split it into two separate books. What you’re holding in your sweaty palms right now is part one, *Lock–N–Load: Armor, Equipment, and Cybernetics*. In this book you’ll find all the equipment necessary to protect your character, repair his worn body after a mission, or find the latest tech to help him complete his job quicker and more effectively. Bargain Basement Armor, Destroig Combat Systems, Nanoids, PCDs, PDSs; it’s all here.

Lock–N–Load: Weapons & Tactics, contains, you guessed it, weapons and tactics! Tons of weapons. Never again will you have to waste a baddie with the same gun twice. Your encumbrance rating will wish it had stayed home!

Lock–N–Load is designed to provide you, the *Battlelords* player, with the nuts and bolts of Alliance technology. The books are also a source guide to combat in the twenty-third century. In them, you’ll find the tactics, groups, and events which dominate the battlefields of the Alliance.

We’ve tried to make using *Lock–N–Load* as painless as possible (though your poor BM’s NPCs may not think so). It is separated into four parts: Armor, Equipment, Cybernetics, and the Availability of Items. Where possible, table headers will show the page number where that table’s items’ descriptions can be found. Likewise, the description’s header will list the page number where the relevant table can be found. All of the items from the main rulebook are relisted here so the player or BM won’t have to shuffle between books. The Availability of Items appendix only includes items listed in this book.

The Arachnids are coming, and they’re not happy. So buckle on your Tri-Mesh and TDA-2, and fire up your Abomination II Omega Cannon . . . it’s not gonna be pretty, and you’re gonna be right in the middle of it!

(Ed. Note: For those of you who are not new to the game, please carefully reread the descriptions and table data for the gear you presently use as many familiar items have been tweaked to varying degrees, which may have a significant impact on your play. Some items have been completely rewritten, so you may want to revisit items you previously had little use for. The information in this book supercedes that given in the main *Battlelords* rulebook.)

THE LAYOUT OF THE LAND

To begin, we take a look at the history of conflict in the Alliance and how it relates to events in the twenty-third century. Again my publishers have asked me to produce this book with a human-centric view; hence the nearly incomprehensible dating system those primitives use. I am becoming more convinced that the publishers of these volumes I have slaved over for you, my dear readers, are nothing but tools of the human run Alliance government, spreading poorly created marketing nonsense about the superiority of their pale, missbapen forms.

—Homolor Fi, Vissu Sage, Drenels, Industrial Province, Fornax

OF CHAOS, CONTROVERSY, AND CONFLICT

- 14004 B.C. The use of nuclear weapons is prohibited on the planet Trishmag. The Council of Timar convenes to discuss the proliferation of such technologies across the universe.
- 13001 B.C. The Mutzachans encounter a hostile alien spiderlike race in the Canes Venacti globular cluster. This life-form is assumed to be an unbalancing force in the universe. The Council of Timar convenes to discuss appropriate actions.
- 12097 B.C. The Totalitarian Inquisition begins on the Chatilian homeworld. All individuals believed to possess special powers are hunted down, arrested, tried for Treason, and summarily executed.
- 12096 B.C. The Day of Stain is decreed when some 10,000 Chatilians are arranged in the central square of Glimix, the capital city on Chatil, and decapitated. Blood runs red in the streets.
- 11998 B.C. A Mutzachan war fleet is dispatched to Virgo to reduce the population of the spider race, as well as destroy undesired technology. Over half of the fleet is lost as a price for success, along with some of the greatest minds in Mutzachan culture. A 10-year period of mourning is declared.
- 11871 B.C. Mutzachans learn the truth behind the Arachnid threat. An emergency session of the Council of Timar is convened. Plans for dispersing the Mutzachan race across the galaxies are made as a contingency to all out war.
- 10786 B.C. A Dane materializes at the Council of Timar.
- 10231 B.C. Mutzachans encounter a wandering race of galactic nomads called Atlanteans. Friendly relations are established.
- 8911 B.C. The Chatilian Civil war begins with the Battle at the Palace of Patru. The "Illuminaries" unleashed the full wrath of their powers on the Normals. Thousands die in the slaughter. The next 57 years will see the Illuminaries carry out terrorist like hit and run raids against the government.
- 8854 B.C. The Chatilian Central Army masses for Soldiers Day at Morkudom. The Illuminaries attack in the bloodiest and final battle of the Chatilian Civil War. 65,000 are lost in the destruction. Four months later, The Peace of Knowledge is signed and the conflict ends.
- 7583 B.C. The Atlantean expeditionary fleet to the Magellanic clouds in Virgo is lost, along with 35,000 lives.
- 7146 B.C. The orbit of Taos 4 shifts, warming the polar icecaps. Mass flooding and geological upheaval kill millions. A century of global warming passes and the planet's climate is permanently changed. Deciduous weather patterns prevail across the majority of the planet.
- 7000 B.C. Atlanteans settle on the third planet of the Sol system, amidst a primitive and warlike race called Humans. Eridani develop laser technology.
- 6525 B.C. Diplomatic relations between the Atlanteans and Mutzachans are severed over the refusal of the Mutzachans to allow Atlanteans access to stargates.
- 6523 B.C. A declaration of war is made by the Atlanteans against the Mutzachans. However, no battles are fought.
- 6299 B.C. The Mutzachans launch a secret mission to the Virgo super cluster. Rumors claim that all who participated perished, or worse! Another emergency meeting of the Council of Timar is held. The outcome is withheld from the Mutzachan people.
- 6137 B.C. The Mutzachans hold council with the Dane on the threat to the Universe. Little is resolved.
- 4300 B.C. The people of Atlantis suddenly disappear. Billions vanish within 2 years. The Council seeks the answer.
- 4226 B.C. Mutzachans secretly assist the Phentari in developing space travel, unbeknownst to the Phentari people.
- 4001 B.C. An Eridani expeditionary fleet is destroyed by the High Mage to the Council of Timar, Markuss, as it attempts to eradicate the inferior life-form known as Human on the planet Earth of the Sol system.
- 3500 B.C. A Dane changes the course of Python evolution by assisting Tar Pythos in building the vaunted Blade of Sharras. It will be used in the Pythos/Cameon War.
- 3497 B.C. Orions enter the agricultural revolution. The planet prospers.
- 3485 B.C. Phentari are first contacted by Mutzachans and warned of their practices against other races.
- 3477 B.C. The beginning of the Pythos/Cameon War (1st Python Civil War). Python Lizards leave their water homes to slay unwary Ram Pythons, in hopes of controlling the marshes and jungles.
- 3475 B.C. Tar of Pythos uses the energy weapon known as the Blade of Sharras to turn the tide of battle during The Battle for the Jungle Highlands. He becomes High Chieftain to the Ram Python peoples and begins organizing the tribes.
- 3469 B.C. Tar, and his Clan Strong Hand do battle with the Grey Pythons at the Mudpits. Tar is slain and the Blade of Sharras lost. A power struggle begins between the tribes for position as the High Tomud.
- 3468 B.C. Clan Blood Tongue and Tree Knarl wage battle amongst themselves. Hundreds are killed. Internal disputes can not be settled and fighting breaks out between Ram clans all across the Deep Jungle.
- 3467 B.C. Python Lizards take advantage of the turmoil and launch an all out offensive and quickly crush the divided Ram clans. Taken completely by surprise, the great jungle lizards are quickly defeated. The Pythons banish the Rams to the Western Reaches, to live in the dry lands and salt marshes.
- 3431 B.C. A Phentari expeditionary fleet is approached by alien warships. The Eridani admiral in command of those ships broadcasts terms of surrender. The Phentari refuse and are destroyed. The Justification War begins.
- 3400 B.C. Phentari warships destroy nine Eridani vessels over Hemalan.
- 3382 B.C. The Orions enter the Industrial Revolution. It lasts for 90 years. Feudal landowners battle for control of the best land.

- 2599 B.C. Orions enter the technological age. Corporations take control of the planet's resources during the next 50 years. The planet continues to prosper.
- 2495 B.C. Phentari receive an anonymous tip as to the whereabouts of a potential ally to fight their battle against the Eridani war machine. Phentari scouts observe the Orion homeworld. General Arasarrious, Supreme Commander of the Imperial Naval Echelon, decrees that the Orions would best serve Phentari needs as cattle, and in that way serve as allies.
- 2492 B.C. Phentari war fleet sets sail for Betelgeuse. They are confronted by a small Mutzachan vessel. Aware of the imminent danger, the ships turn back. An emissary is sent to Taos 4 to discuss terms for an alliance against a potential enemy.
- 2403 B.C. Phentari collaborate with the Orions and assist them in developing space travel. Mutzachans block further technological aid to the Orions. The Zen world enters a state of peace.
- 2010 B.C. Corporations on Taos 4 begin a controversial policy of slavery. The slaves perform manual labor in Taos 4's extensive farming complexes.
- 2007 B.C. Riots and massive strikes break out in the Western hemisphere on Taos 4 over the policy of slavery. The planet is threatened by civil war. Finally, corporations capitulate.
- 2000 B.C. A genetic mutation in male Cizeracks threatens the existence of the race. Fears are realized when the dominant females of the species exterminate millions of male cats. Surviving males serve only to reproduce.
- 1770 B.C. Phentari and Orions sign the Kwashime Peace Accords. Eridine is virtually destroyed in a sneak attack by the Joint War Effort.
- 1687 B.C. Coral, an Orion assassin, fails in his attempt to kill Viceroy Ericosal-idan at temple Buddon on Eridine. He is publicly tortured then beheaded.
- 1685 B.C. The Tradan (the Orionus stock exchange) is blown up, killing 1,200. The body of a Swordsaint is found in the rubble.
- 1566 B.C. Elite Eridani commando forces penetrate and destroy the Phentari starbase at Kalisk. The squids retaliate by attacking Eridani shipping over the next 6 months.
- 1499 B.C. A cease-fire is signed between Eridani, Orion, and Phentari diplomats. The very next day, Orion and Phentari naval forces destroy the Eridani colony world of Ramith. 1.5 million die.
- 1488 B.C. Phentari ground forces land and take control of the Eridani mining asteroid Neldrick-7.
- 1485 B.C. Eridine launches Operation Thunderbolt, a blitzkrieg-like offensive aimed at destroying Phentari means to wage war. Production facilities are struck at Erli, Manoth, Dwarn, and Lansoge. The planets Uto and Mask are completely destroyed. The savage victory rocks the Phentari government. A military coup, led by Field Marshall Phenerson Phentari overthrows the Phericon government.
- 1479 B.C. Negotiations are held between the Eridani and the Kwashime Pact under the watchful eye of the Council of Timar. The Accords of Hatil are signed. Hostilities between the Eridani and the Joint War Effort end.
- 1322 B.C. The Zen enter the Age of Prosperity. The communal effort increases the living standard on the planet tremendously.
- 1066 B.C. After years isolated from their homelands and finally united, the Ram Pythons attack in mass and drive the Pythons from their lands. Two months later, Ram Pythons invade the Great Inland Sea on Pythos and slaughter over a thousand Python Lizards in what is known as the Battle of the Blood Flowing Sea. The Second Python civil war begins.
- 1065 B.C. Pythons begin hit and run raids against the Ram Pythons and move their feeding grounds into deeper waters.
- 1002 B.C. The Pythons meet in The Battle of the Jungle Peninsula. Both sides claim victory, but suffer heavy casualties.
- 998 B.C. Python Lizards move their major feeding grounds to the Wet Marshes in a remote and uninhabited part of the planet.
- 996 B.C. Ram Pythons discover the Feeding grounds. They mass their forces and attack, killing the high king of the Python nations and all who dwelled there. The Second Python Civil War ends.
- 220 B.C. The Ritual of the Vuldgreithe (execution) is first acted out on the planet Katre. 200 Tza Zens are burned at the stake.
- The Birth of Christ
- 571 A.D. The birth of Jaquassarious Phentari.
- 1240 A.D. Grand Tour Assizza appears from the "grave" to save the Zen from a deadly plague, speaking the immortalized words that are carved in Zen legend: "Death is only temporary, power is immortal!"
- 1857 A.D. The War Against the Lizards begins over the murder of a Cizerack diplomatic emissary to the planet Pythos.
- 1935 A.D. Ram Pythons overrun a weapons depot at Salas River, capturing a huge weapons cache. The Cizeracks respond by spraying the jungles with defoliant and nerve agent. Hundreds of thousands of Rams are killed.
- 1936 A.D. Cizeracks poison the Great Inland Sea on Pythos, killing almost 1/3 of the Python species in a single month.
- 1938 A.D. United, the Pythons and Ram Pythons launch what is known as the Martyr's Offensive against the Cizeracks, using captured weapons to retake lost territory.
- 1941 A.D. The War Against the Lizards ends. One out of every four cats that fought died. The Pythons lose over half their number. Little is gained. Cizeracks withdraw much of their force, leaving behind strategic bases. A Mutzachan scout ship makes a forced landing on Earth in the United States of America and is captured intact, while its existence is successfully kept secret from the rest of the world for decades.

- 1945 A.D. Eridani make breakthroughs in pulse technology. The experiments are halted mysteriously. The Second World War ends on Earth as Humanity enters the Atomic Age. Mutzachan observation of Earth increases.
- 1947 A.D. A second Mutzachan scout ship crashes on Earth at Roswell, New Mexico, USA. The ensuing government cover-up only adds fuel to Human belief in extraterrestrial beings. Reverse-engineering of the two alien craft's technology provides an enormous boost to Humanity over the next several decades.
- 1971 A.D. The Rams revolt and the Cizeracks are forced to cede the planet Pythos back to the Lizards.
- 1973 A.D. Armed with stolen Cizerack technology, Ram Pythons invade the Great Inland Sea and butcher the Python Lizards. The wholesale massacre is called the Revenge of the Silent Blade in memory of Tar, the great Ram Python Tomud. The 3rd Civil War on Pythos begins.
- 1974 A.D. Ram Pythons launch another offensive to destroy the Python Lizards, once and for all. They use modified Cizerack technology to win the decisive Battle for the Inland Sea. Python Lizards capitulate and are rounded up, then slaughtered. The Ram Pythons begin a systematic extermination of the sea lizards when all of a sudden, their weapons stop working. A gold-robed Mutzachan then appears, hovering in the sky. He speaks, saying, "You have used technology to unbalance the otherwise equal force between you. This I must stop." He continues for awhile, then speaks a strange prophecy. "One day, Ram and Python shall fight side by side as brother and turn the tide in the battle for the universe. Thus, both races must be allowed to flourish. From this moment forward, I forbid any wars between you. All violators shall be destroyed!"
- 1975 A.D. A Ram Python army enters Python waters to destroy Python Lizards. The sea begins to boil and they are cooked to death. Shortly thereafter, the same gold-robed Mutzachan appears and threatens, "If you disobey my commands again, I shall be forced to terminate you. I am your superior in battle. Look at those whom I have defeated." A peaceful coexistence begins on Pythos.
- 2011 A.D. Nuclear terrorism, combined with rising tensions between East and West, triggers a "limited" nuclear war on the planet Earth. Nearly 1/3 of the planet's population perishes. Civilization is thrown into chaos as a nuclear winter sets in.
- 2012 A.D. The Western Defense Group is formed between the United Socialist States of America, Canada, and Brazil. This alliance quickly becomes the dominant economic power in the world as they contain the majority of the planet's remaining arable land. They secretly begin funneling defense funds into the improvement of the International Space Station. The goal: a permanent colony on Mars and potential haven for the Human race if war comes again to Earth.
- 2020 A.D. Europe begins to get back on its feet. Trade begins again with the New World. Ethnic tensions build in Europe as millions of displaced Russians and Ukrainians try to integrate after fleeing their homelands, laid waste by Chinese nuclear and biological weapons.
- 2028 A.D. The first Humans land on Mars. It is kept secret from the world. The Human Genome Project finally bears fruit. Hundreds of diseases are cured at a stroke, saving Africa from virtual depopulation, and increasing average life expectancy to 95. Genetic enhancement seems a real possibility.
- 2030 A.D. The rise of the first mega-corporations, as multi-national conglomerates begin to take over governmental functions from nations unable to reconstruct themselves after the war.
- 2051 A.D. Mutzachans make open contact with Humanity and begin cleaning up the planet. They trade industrial technology for medicine. The Energy Controllers greatly accelerate Human technological evolution.
- 2075 A.D. The Gen Wars break out on the planet Earth.
- 2086 A.D. The first stargate is built orbiting Mars. Over the next 50 years, Humans build a massive space fleet and sweep out across the galaxies, colonizing hundreds of worlds, and encountering myriad alien races. Mutzachans supervise the expansion. The Human population explodes.
- 2108 A.D. The 1st Arachnid Invasion begins. Millions die before it can be stopped over the Sea of Orion.
- 2109 A.D. A defense treaty is set up to protect the 12 most powerful races, and thus the Alliance is founded. Gen-Humans assume leadership of the Alliance with Mutzachans as arbitrators. The Council of Timar is moved to New Washington. Joint Eridani and Human fleets are dispatched to Virgo to battle the Arachnids on their own ground. Phentari, Cizerack, and Mutzachan units are held behind to protect the Core Worlds.
- 2120 A.D. Imperialist elements within the central government push for expansion, and exploration begins all across the Local Group of galaxies.
- 2121 A.D. Pirates spacejack a freighter convoy heading for Crossroads. This constitutes the first massive pirate attack against Alliance shipping.
- 2127 A.D. Eridani and Phentari border skirmishes breakout. A cease-fire is signed. The Council of Timar proves for the first time that it has true authority over all nations within the Alliance. Eridi-Corp is created to protect Swordsaint interests.
- 2145 A.D. Dissension over government policies surfaces. Mass protests are held on the capital worlds of Earth and Katrel, as well as many other planets. Galactic-scale riots ensue.
- 2187 A.D. The first Rebel Uprising. Crack mercenary units disguised as operators of a freighter convoy capture Starbase *Sunrise*, along with its stargate. The insurgents demand political reform. Simultaneously, riots break out on dozens of planets across the Core Worlds. Military units respond and crush the Rebellion.

- 2207 A.D. Ex-Marine Don Stefanie founds the Neo-Conservative Forum. The new movement flourishes, expounding, "Vote out all the Liberals."
- 2239 A.D. Balshrom Science Corporation is spun off from Telydyne as a separate entity.
- 2240 A.D. Uncle Ernie links artificial intelligence to the brain and becomes the richest man in the universe.
- 2256 A.D. Uncle Ernie turns sour over a dispute of licensing rights for genetic experiments. The Second Rebel Uprising occurs. It is put down at the Battle of Terasleague. Casualties total in excess of 5 million.
- 2257 A.D. The *CNNS Hammer* survives a surprise attack by Arachnids. The rest of her support ships are destroyed. Crippled, she limps back to port.
- 2260 A.D. Nothing very special happened this year. The Bills lost again.
- 2265 A.D. 2,500 Tza Zens are executed on the planet Katrek for treason against the state. Peaceful Zens demonstrate, demanding the perennial government step down.
- 2267 A.D. Uncle Ernie escapes from the maximum security prison at New Leavenworth. Six months later he unleashes the Blood Warlock on New Washington.
- 2268 A.D. *Battlelords of the 23rd Century* 50th edition is released. There are still tons of typos. The affects won't be aperent for a couple of sentureys, PPlease send all corrections to SameS@#tDiffrentCompane, New Leavenworht workshop. Ask for the Fat Black pot Bellied Condor. He is working as the prison secretary? Ask for the new expanded typos index! Larry is still using the same 286. His brain keeps being transplanted and is currently resdingg in a Ram Python.
- 2272 A.D. The battlecruiser *New Washington* and her contingent of warships ambush and destroy an Arachnid mother-ship over Tau Ceti. Jaquassarious Phentari destroys the planet Sharron and becomes the number-one wanted criminal in the galaxies.
- 2273 A.D. Fostering fears of a Third Arachnid Invasion, an AMC mining convoy is attacked and wiped out by four Arachnid scout ships. Curiously, they steal the cargo from the AMC ships. AMC denies they were transporting anything other than di-tritium ore. Galactic-X is rumored to be investigating.
- 2274 A.D. A special session of the Galactic Forum (The Alliance legislature) is convened to discuss the destruction of the planet Sharron by Jaquassarious Phentari. The action is condemned and a vote for a Death Note (unconditional bounty) is taken. The referendum is passed. Mutzachan and Phentari representatives abstain from voting.
- 2275 A.D. Some twenty different Alliance vessels disappear without a trace. A special inquiry is set up to investigate these happenings. Uncle Ernie delivers a present to the planet Borneo in the form of a special biological weapon. All indigenous life perishes. He sends a message to the floor of the Council of Timar. "Hey, baby. Uncle Ernie loves you! By the way, that was only a trial size."
- 2276 A.D. Apparent evidence to support the existence of Atlantis is covered up by conservative elements of the Alliance.
- 2278 A.D. Chainguns are made illegal on most tech level 3 and lower worlds.



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A MOMENT OF THE PAST

4001 B.C., near Mars, in the Sol system . . .

"Sir, picking up an unidentified object at 350,000km . . . Heading 2.3259 . . . Speed . . . Sir, it is moving at step 21.7!"

General Aacki whirled to face the view screen. Nothing visible except blackness and the pin prick light from far off stars. "Helmsman, change heading to 1.47 mark 7. Com, order the fleet to Battle alert! Weapons officer, charge spears, maximum overload. I want a narrow, two volley dispersal pattern. Give me 110 percent to the forward shields . . . Ready to launch missiles on my command."

"Yes, Sir!" echoed coolly from all over the bridge.

Out there lurked an enemy, and so the pride of Eridine headed into combat to defeat this foe. They would show it what the cleaving might of a Swordsaint battle fleet could do. The General smiled to himself as two war cruisers, *Menace* and *Blade Storm*, appeared on the viewscreen before him. They accelerated to attack speed.

"Sir. Scanning sector." The science officer worked the keys of his console. "Detecting a massive energy build up, Sir, composition unknown, origin unknown . . . It is propagating directly toward us!"

"Evasive Maneuvers!" Aacki shouted. "Damage control, prepare to report in . . . Fire all weapons!"

•

General Aacki-Ican stepped slowly into the room and moved to a position at the far end of the table. He carefully took in everything as he went. The room was completely empty with the exception of one long, plastic-like table and six chairs which surrounded it. Five chairs stood at one end and one at the other, occupied by a small creature. Light emanated from somewhere behind the walls. Eerily, the chamber seemed to oscillate, the walls changing hues from silver to gold, then back again. He examined his chair for a moment. It seemed to be attached to the floor. But, when he moved it, it seemed to slide along as if it were free. A trap. Maybe . . . He remained standing for a moment, then stiffly sat, eyes rigidly fixed on the blank expressionless face at the other end. His soldiers followed suit. To his right Guamu, High Nog

servicing the fleet, at his left, Naci-Idan his wife of 100 years and Viceroy to the greatest military juggernaut that ever roamed the free realm of space. Guarding them were Eridicus the Strong, Field Marshal of the Eridani ground forces, and Admiral Naa-Kati, commander of the Royal Naval Echelon stood tensely just behind and to the right of the General.

All eyes fell on the small demure creature, dressed in deep red robes with arms folded at the other end of the table. Its head sat huge, oblong, and heavily veined, atop a small spindly neck. It had large round eyes, black and implacable. The being had tiny fingers, like those of a child's. Those fingers drummed continuously on its upper arms. Presently, Aacki noticed a glow of light shimmered from somewhere within the face of the creature. It started, almost green, under the being's pointed chin and grew, and expanded over his face, centered in the middle of his forehead. Instinctively, Aacki placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, muscles taut, ready for action. He felt that the others had done the same. The creature did not flinch. It merely scrutinized them with a quizzical look from where it sat. Didn't it realize that they could kill it with the single motion of their ever sharpened swords? Of course it did. That's why they were here. A formidable foe sat before them, something that had to be reckoned with. They sat in its counsel, aboard its ship, at its command. An icy feeling spread through the great warrior. Aacki quickly suppressed it. No emotion was worthy except the emotion of victory.

Markuss sat quietly and watched his audience, unafraid, detached, and as always, neutral. Decisions had already been reached on the fate of the visitors. He merely waited for them to speak. He watched the barbarians with interest. These Eridani were proud warriors, immaculate in their precision, and great of valor. But still, they had not evolved past the stage of reckless violence. They threatened many developing worlds. Tolerance of their actions had reached a breaking point. Suppressing them seemed to be the only logical action. Whimsically, Markuss felt enlightened, as if he had answered some long question on meta-physical existence. He thought to himself, the existence of any lifeform warrants itself by balancing the effects of itself against those of others. Each action has an opposite and equal reaction. Naturally, unbalancing the

forces of nature leads to the disintegration of all things. Control must be administered. A small smile pierced his lips. It faded as fast as it came.

"What humors you, Mutzachan?" Aacki asked in a cold steely voice.

"Nothing, sir. I merely was contemplating something of physical essence. I issue no offense."

"None taken." Pause. "With what terms do you hope to bargain Mutzachan?"

Markuss thought for a moment then replied. "I do not offer terms. I merely speak of angles. All things approach their existence from angles. These angles may be acute or obtuse, it matters little. What matters is that the angles complement each other. See, from a physical standpoint, all things are at harmony throughout the universe. Energy exists in tidal pools that spread outward to touch everything. At the same time, other things in the void act to slow them down. In the end, an equilibrium is reached . . . You see . . ."

"Desist, creature of light. Speak of what you want. Don't rattle your tongue, lest I cut it out!" Field Marshall Eridicus now stood, half drawing his blade. He moved from his seat and in two steps stood menacingly before the little creature. The General towered over the being, inviting death with pure malice, his cape thrown back and his eyes ablaze. He stood as a statue, unflinching, taut with intensity that was more than anger. "Don't speak in riddles," he hissed. "Just speak."

"Sit, Lord Eridicus. Sit now!" commanded Aacki.

"Control, Master Buddon. You look foolish. And I suggest rather strongly that you do not threaten me again." The Mutzachan showed no fear. He merely folded his hands and drew them back inside the safety of his cape. "Control is exactly what we are here to discuss. Your actions were unwarranted. You have been suppressed."

"What!" Now Admiral Naa-Kati jumped to his feet and assumed the same position as the field marshal, hand on sword, muscles clenched, ready to cut off the huge head that sat before them.

"Your insolence is intolerable! Do you consider the cowardly destruction of two score ships, without facing your enemy in battle honorable?"

Aacki did not speak, nor restrict his soldiers' actions further. Emotions were unnecessary. However, sometimes he understood

them. The group approached conflict and all the Eridani sensed it with a quiet joy. His warriors could handle themselves.

"You butchered over 20,000 of the universe's greatest warriors without even stepping up to fight. You destroyed the lives of the purest fighters that have ever lived. You are a coward. I shall destroy..."

Naa-Kati swept his blade out in a swift motion, arced it towards the creature's head, and brought the death stroke home. Just before the cleaving blow struck, the Eridani exploded in a ball of energy, his burnt remains flung all over the room. His sword clattered to the floor, a clenched fist still holding it.

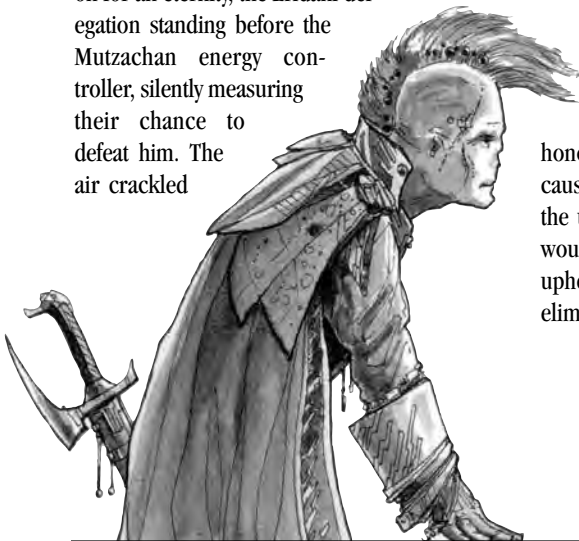
Anger swelled inside the Eridani general. He fought to deny it. What was this being? It had destroyed two dozen of his ships and now it fired energy bolts from within its body and snatched the life out of the greatest naval mind that had ever existed.

Blue light now surrounded the Mutzachan and it looked as calculating as ever. What a formidable foe, he thought to himself. It must be destroyed.

"Now," Markuss gestured with his hand, "Shall we all sit down and attend to the business at hand? Sirs, I await your counsel."

No Eridani moved. They waited, intense for combat. "I give you my word of honor, as Lord of the Council of Timar, that I will not kill another of your people, so long as you do not provoke me another time." The Mutzachan paused for a moment of introspection. "You do your people no good if you are dead. Balance shall be lost to your kind. I have given my word. I will not strike another time, so long as you do likewise." Markuss leaned back in his chair, quietly waiting.

The next five minutes or so seemed to drag on for an eternity, the Eridani delegation standing before the Mutzachan energy controller, silently measuring their chance to defeat him. The air crackled



with readiness and burned with the smell of charred flesh and methane. The Nog spoke next.

"We shall sit and take counsel. For the time we are beaten," it's face flushed with emotion.

Slowly, one by one the Eridani sat frozen in icy stares, countenances dark with defeat. When they all had taken their seats, the Mutzachan spoke.

"Two thousand, two hundred and eighty years ago, a fleet of your vessels approached the Sigma Draconis star system. They came looking for conquest as is the way of your people. Yes, I have been keeping a watchful eye on your race for the last 2,000 years."

The impact of the statement caused Aacki to blink. "Continue."

Markuss noticed the response and smiled internally. He held the high ground now and the Eridani knew it. There would be no more open conflict. "Understanding the intentions of your race, my people sought to protect themselves. Your ships ignored the warning sign, a huge solar flare which erupted as you passed by the star we call Niere. Five of your war vessels were destroyed. Undaunted, you came onward and I was forced into action. I was forced to neutralize them."

He watched the noble warriors squirm visibly at the accusation. Presently, the Nog started slowly to her feet. Aacki restrained her with a firm grip on her arm. She succumbed. His field marshal had gone to his sword again, but hesitated, unsure of what to do next.

"I generated a powerful gravity wave. It swept across space and built up, striking your ships like steel to flesh and in an instant the threat to my people was gone. I did it again today, just in a different place."

Aacki hissed, "You do not face your enemies. You hide in shadows and slay them. What honor exists in killing in such a way?" He trembled with rage.

"Mutzachans do not kill for honor. We act only out of necessity. Your cause was to unbalance the natural forces of the universe. Had we let you destroy us, you would have thrown the galaxies into great upheaval. I could not let you do this. So I eliminated your ships."

"Murder is a more accurate phrase. We call it 'Anoir-Idal-I-Mor,' The Stalking Death. We are all taught about the unseen foe that vanquished our people long ago. All Mokaba Datu learn of the lesson in school. What you can't see is the purest foe, the most heinous coward. And it can kill you. You must prepare for his meeting." Aacki-Ican slowly got to his feet, in measured movements. He stepped away from his chair and circled the table to stand before the creature. He thrust back his cape in full, revealing the heavy body armor that he wore beneath it. His muscles corded, stiff with anticipation. His eyes bulged, seething with destruction. Yet, he did not tremble. His sword arm graced the cold steel of his blade. He spoke slowly.

"You can obviously destroy me where I stand yet you do not. You have murdered my people time and time again and show no honor. You shame me, but without intent. You speak as if I am your equal, when I am not. You are a trickster, but not of action. My counsel is shamed. We cannot defeat you. What is your will for us. Death is not the worst fate to befall a warrior. It is merely his destiny! Do not play games with us Mutzachan. Kill us now and prepare us for rebirth!"

Markuss looked on the warrior now with great admiration. The Swordsaint stood before him proud and defiant. His red mohawk hair stood tall on his head. His face galvanized with purpose. The Eridani's eyes cut into him, willing him into action. The Swordsaint wore battle armor with the pride and dignity of a true barbarian. Marvelous.

"I do not kill you because it would be wrong. Yours is a greatness. It is just misdirected here. I will not destroy you because that is not my purpose." He looked the Swordsaint full in the eyes. "I am not your enemy, yet I am not your friend. I am but a Caretaker of the Universe. Such is the Mutzachan way. My energies are bent on preserving things as they are within the flux of balance. I decree only this. You shall not enter the Sol star system and destroy the insignificant lifeform called Human. It is forbidden!"

