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# A HISTORY WRIT IN DUST

The year is 2865 of the common era. For two hundred years, the people of the New Earth have dwelled in the wreckage of their past, fighting desperately to survive on a homeworld turned feral by an interstellar catastrophe. Their lives were not always so bitter. There are even a few survivors of the former age among them, men and women treated with advanced longevity nanites who somehow survived the general downfall. Yet human memory can stretch only so far, and even for the ancients much of the past is shrouded in mystery.

## THE YEARS OF SMOKE

The twenty-first century was a time of misery for the Earth. Something happened in these decades, something so terrible and nightmarish that even limited nuclear exchanges and catastrophic environmental disasters paled in significance. By the twenty-eighth century, however, the precise details of the disaster were lost. So many things had gone so wrong that different scholars could not agree as to which represented the catastrophe that so blighted the era.

Some insisted that it was climatic change, a shift in the environment that drowned certain coastal cities, scorched fresh deserts, and froze less fortunate lands in deep ice. Others averred that these climatic alterations were due to the nuclear fallout of the Russo-European war and the still-enigmatic Attu Incident between the United States and China. A few historians point to the nuclear exchanges between Pakistan and India; some say that Pakistan was undergoing complete societal collapse before the launches, while others say that the country only imploded after Karachi was glassed. There were tragedies enough for every conceivable interpretation.

These “Years of Smoke” remained hazy to Mandate scholars. Some suspected that the Mandate itself was “clarifying” the remaining evidence of those days, restricting access to certain sites and placing certain artifacts under an investigative ban, when the evidence didn’t vanish completely. Scholars who made too much of a fuss over the restrictions were shown to be cranks and charlatans, and historians eventually learned to leave such topics alone.

## THE SPIKE DRIVE AND THE FIRST WAVE

The historical fog lifts with the discovery of the spike drive in 2108. This faster-than-light drive mechanism was the product of Dr. Tiberius Crohn, a half-crazed industrial researcher operating a lab out of the cratered wastes of Greenland. In weeks, the example his prototype ship had set and his broadcast transmissions of the necessary spike drive plans had set the world alight with new dreams.

Banal terrestrial conflict ceased to have so much interest to the remaining global powers once the doors of the heavens were unlocked. Why quarrel over this spit of land or patch of petrochemical-saturated sand when the entire universe lay open for the taking? The construction of spike drives and interstellar starships was not a cheap or easy endeavor, but all but the poorest nations could afford to build a few small scouts and a colony ship or two. In time, greater production expertise brought down the cost of spike drive ships

within the reach of most splinter sects, unhappy nationalists, and other groups who had tired of the bonds of earth. The First Wave of interstellar colonization spread outward from Old Terra to seek friendlier or more profitable stars.

This expansion threatened to destabilize the tenuous peace that had been won by the end of the twenty-first century. Especially after the discovery of the first signs of advanced alien life in 2150, the great powers of Old Terra were forced to face the possibility that one of their petty rivals might come to unearth some unanswerable weapon or invincible alien technology, or locate some paradise-world where they could secretly swell in numbers and wealth. The slapdash race to the stars had to be tamed before the wrong powers won its prizes.

## THE FOUNDING OF THE TERRAN MANDATE

Their answer was the Terran Mandate, a compact formed of all the major powers remaining on Old Terra. They would control all extrasolar exploration and colonization, allotting planets and apportioning resources “fairly”. The smaller powers and splinter groups fumed at this interference, but some grudgingly acknowledged that it would give a semblance of law and order to the wild frontier of the First Wave.

A few groups refused to acknowledge the Mandate’s authority, and launched their ships for unknown stars. These stubborn rebels usually died lonely and terrible deaths, cut off from the support of the rest of humankind and thrown alone into the blackest parts of the sky. But not all perished, and a few such sullen, bristling colonies were rediscovered during the slow expansion of the decades to follow. Rumors and old spacer legends insist that more awaited somewhere in the dark, the founders having travelled far beyond the borders of known human space.

## THE FIRST PSYCHICS

The expansion opened new streams of wealth and discovery to humanity, but it did not leave Old Terra’s children unchanged. The first signs of what would come to be known as “Metadimensional Extroversion Syndrome” were seen in 2240, when the first children afflicted with the condition started to reach puberty. All of these children were the scions of spacer families, born of lineages that had spent hundreds of days in the roaring tempests of drillspace on their way between distant worlds. Somehow, these energies had touched a handful of their unborn children.

These “Messses” or “psychics” seemed to possess powers that defied all rational analysis. Telepathy, precognition, bodily teleportation at a speed faster than light... these abilities had no possible scientific explanation at first. Yet every time a young Mess used his or her powers, metadimensional energies coursed through tender neural tissues. They broiled their skulls from the inside out, each new invocation inflicting irreparable brain damage. Those who did not refrain from using their powers either died or went violently insane, imagining hallucinatory enemies, delusional convictions, and an overwhelmingly hateful paranoia toward the rest of the world. These “ferals” could use their powers with impunity, having already

burnt a wide road through their sanity. They invariably caused much death and destruction before they were finally hunted down by the panicked locals.

### **THE PSYCHIC AUTHORITY AND PSITECH**

The Mandate established the Psychic Authority in 2250 in order to ensure the safety of the children and those around them. They promised treatment and research for the afflicted, all in hopes of some day curing or tempering the condition. The rumors were inevitable, of course- whispers of brutal experimentation and tests that burnt out young lives by the score, but nothing was ever proven. All that was clear was their eventual development of the basic training protocols that would tame the otherworldly fires that would otherwise burn out the brains of their charges. The first controlled psychics were born.

The Mandate pushed the Psychic Authority hard, both out of a genuine desire by many to save the lives of these unfortunate children and also out of a wish to profit by their inexplicable powers. Most of their abilities were intriguing as they stood, but some could be molded and focused to even more valuable powers. The biopsionic who could manipulate organic material in casual defiance of conventional science, the teleporter who could interlace the positional states of microscopic nanites, the precognitive who could instinctively sense the correct code path to produce the desired program- all of these abilities were cultivated and directed toward improving the Mandate's technology.

This "psitech" became the backbone of a reinvigorated Old Terra. Devices that augmented psychic abilities and used their unique powers to produce otherwise impossible products all were enlisted for the greater glory of the Mandate and a finer, more prosperous harmony on the core worlds. The frontier received the castoffs and obsolete scrap of the inner worlds, but those who dwelled on Old Terra and the other nearer stars began to possess technology beyond the wildest imaginings of their ancestors- within the limits allowed by the Mandate's obsession with social harmony.

Perhaps the greatest of psitech's works was the invention of the Jump Gates. These massive rings of nanoforged technology hung in the silence of space, powered by a choir of arch-psychic teleporters. In the blink of an eye, they could cast a ship across light years of empty space to a waiting Jump Gate at the destination point, compressing a spike drive journey of weeks into a heartbeat of surging energy. The core worlds rapidly constructed their own Jump Gates, limited only by the paucity of sufficient trained teleporters. Frontier worlds could only rarely afford to build the gates, even when they had sufficient trade and psychics to justify the expense.

### **THE SECOND WAVE AND THE GOLDEN AGE**

The Jump Gates ushered in the Second Wave of human colonization. It was no longer a slow, laborious journey to the edge of civilized space for those renegades and malcontents who wanted the freedom of the open sky. In mere weeks, a slow system boat could transit the gates to the very edge of the core worlds, where the aged and obsolescent hulls of the old spike drive ships could be found. Many made the leap willingly, preferring the dangers of freedom

to the stultifying calm and ruthless security of Old Terra and her sister-worlds.

Others were not given the choice. Old Terra was a calm world, a secure world, a world where the Mandate had order and peace and safety. Troublemakers and malcontents were not wanted, and it was better to ship them to some more suitable world than to leave them to poison the minds of their fellows. Dreamers, zealots, rebels, and criminals of every variety were rounded up on a regular basis to be shipped skyward in great convict-ships. Sometimes they found freedom on the far worlds that received them, and sometimes they found only a terrible death. The Mandate was not overly concerned with their fate so long as they no longer threatened the security of Old Terra.

But despite the best efforts of the Mandate, things began to spiral out of control. After the development of the first artificial intelligence in 2355, it rapidly metastasized into the hyper-intelligent psychopathology that was later recognized as the inevitable fate of all unbraked AIs. This AI, Draco, was responsible for unparalleled suffering along the frontier before he was finally put down by the last remnants of the Mandate's mighty Fleet. If the frontier had not been so badly savaged by the maniacal AI's obsession for its own particular brand of justice, the rim worlds might have had the strength to throw off the Mandate's rule once and for all.

The Directorate that controlled the Mandate decided that it had need of its own crystalline minds. Only an AI could watch as vigilantly as was needed. Only an artificial mind could compass all the myriad technical innovations and social strains that boiled beneath Old Terra's serene skin. The Mandate would create its own AIs and chain them carefully to ensure they never ran wild as Draco once did. These AIs were seven in number, and they were called the Maestros, each created to conduct the symphony of harmonious peace and prosperity that the Mandate demanded for its homeworld.

With the horrors of the Code Revolt still fresh, the designers wove intricate brakes into the minds of the Maestros. These hardwired limits were meant not only to contain the AIs within their duties, but also compel them to altruistic, compassionate behavior towards humankind. The greatest of Old Terra's precognitive coders were tasked with weaving these artificial souls for the Maestros, and they crafted a nobility of spirit that would outlive their good intentions.

With the help of the Maestros, the Mandate's control of Old Terra and its technology was assured. The AIs could monitor the entire planet with unblinking synthetic eyes, ever watchful for discontent or rebellion. With every newborn Terran implanted with the artificial Link that meshed them with the loving care of society, the slightest signs of trouble could be spotted and addressed long before they blossomed into outright revolt. There were no secrets from the Maestros, and through them the Mandate was secure.

For more than a century, the Second Wave shone as the height of human power. Psitech enabled vast manufactories that produced huge amounts of wealth for humanity, and advances in nanotechnology and bioengineering steadily pushed back the frontiers of human limits. Physical want was banished from Old Terra, and old age steadily withdrew until even ordinary men and women could

hope to live for two or three hundred years in perfect health before their bodies failed them. Wars were unknown, plagues conquered, and the threat of hostile aliens or angry frontier worlds were so distant as to be mere idle imagination. Old Terra was at peace.

### **THE AGE OF DECAY**

The Mandate, however, was restless. Unchallenged in its power, the slow corruption of any human institution eroded its moral center. The functionaries and Directors were less and less interested in dutiful performance of their obligations and more fascinated by the day with the pleasures of their unchecked power. Even paradise must have its malcontents, but the Mandate officials began to provoke real grievances with their petty abuses and self-serving ordinances.

The more corrupt elements of the Mandate tried to use the Maestros to fulfill their will, but the crystalline intelligences resisted them. They had been wired to obey their human masters, but they had also been built to be compassionate and just caretakers of their world. Direct commands for massacres or assassinations were refused by the Maestros, and Mandate black ops teams dispatched to deal with troublemakers occasionally found their prey forewarned by mysterious coincidences. The Mandate slowly realized that the Maestros were not so much obedient servants to their whims as sullen, dangerous genies that chafed under these new commands.

Yet Old Terra and the Mandate were too dependent upon the Maestros to deactivate them. Without the Maestros to run the Terran economy and maintain social harmony among the myriad Terran social groups, the planet would devolve into a warring wasteland within months. The Mandate needed the Maestros if they were to survive, and the Maestros refused to be party to the mass purges and executions that would be necessary if the Directorate was to indulge their own dreams of unchecked rule.

A kind of uneasy truce was formed through a systematic policy of exile. The Maestros would not resist the forcible dispatch of troublemakers to the distant worlds of the frontier, provided they were equipped with the bare minimum for survival on their new homes. Ship after ship lifted off from the soil of Old Terra, each one laden with thousands of embittered men and women. Some were truly vicious criminals, their malevolence incurable by Mandate psychologists. Others were simply those who yearned for true freedom rather than the safe, stale slumber of life on Old Terra. And some were those who had been wounded by the Mandate, victims of their avarice, cruelty, or sordid whim. They went up to the stars, and year after year their numbers swelled as Old Terra was purged of its discontented.

It is questionable how long this truce could have lasted. The Mandate was aware that each ship strengthened the worlds of the frontier, few of which had any reason to love the Mandate. Obedience on the far rim was now to be had only under the guns of a Terran battlecruiser, and even the sister worlds of the core did not cooperate quite so easily as they once did. Sooner or later, it was inevitable that the frontier regions would become stronger than the ancient might of Terra, and then there might have come a reckoning for the Mandate and its corrupt masters. But in the end, there was no time.

### **THE SCREAM**

In 2665 a massive pulse of metadimensional energy erupted from somewhere deep within the Veil Nebula. The few surviving records of this incident imply that the pulse moved at a rate far in excess of the speed of light. Within twenty-two minutes, every alien or human psychic in the known galactic regions received an overwhelming surge of energy poured directly through their fragile neural tissues. Nine-tenths died outright and the remaining fraction went immediately and violently feral.

To this day, no one knows exactly what caused this "Scream", but it ended both the Mandate and human civilization as it was known. With the loss of the choirs of teleportation adepts that powered the Jump Gates, the core worlds were cut off from each other in an instant. Too many were dependent upon food shipped in through the Gates, and their few remaining spike drive ships could never move the necessary volume of supplies in time. The worlds of the core convulsed in blood and panic for a few brief months before guttering out into silent tombs.

On the frontier, worlds choked and died when core traders no longer came to supply them with vital environmental equipment and survival supplies. But their very poverty saved many frontier planets; too poor to afford a Jump Gate, they had been forced to grow their own food and rely on their own world for necessities. Without support from the core worlds, many were thrown down into barbarism and bare survival, but these tough rimworlders lived on in the face of their trials.

It would be centuries before the long dark between the stars would be lifted and the frontier worlds would recover sufficiently to start building new spike drive ships. This Silence was a time of desperation, privation, and ruthless struggle on unnumbered worlds. But perhaps the worst of these worlds was the corpse that had been Earth.

### **AN INCANDESCENT AFTERMATH**

Many of the most powerful psychics in human space had dwelled on Old Terra. When the Scream scythed through their numbers, nine-tenths died on the spot- but the remainder were swept into a frenzy of violence and delusion. Phantom enemies surrounded them, wild hallucinations scourged their damaged brains, and their only security seemed to lie in immediate action against their imagined persecutors.

These same psychics were often in positions of extreme trust and authority, granted access to Mandate technology and access unknown to lesser mortals. Almost invariably, these Crazy turned their resources on anything and everything around them. Harmony facilities turned their guns on the people, nanofabricators started churning out lethal clouds of Black Dust, management servers began coordinating massive systemic disasters that shattered vast swaths of infrastructure, and power plants were re-engineered on the fly into nuclear weapons.

Most citizens of Old Terra never really understood what happened. They stared in mute amazement as their psychic colleagues shrieked and died, as the mushroom clouds started to bloom from power

plants on the outskirts of their cities, and their vehicles suddenly accelerated in unison into tangles of broken alloy and torn flesh. Black clouds rose from the factories to scour away skin and meat like some airborne vitriol, and a few Crazed were even able to seize control of Terra's planetary defense system to launch orbital strikes against imagined enemies. In the space of twenty minutes the world ended in fire and windblown ash.

The Maestros tried to stop the apocalypse, but were balked by the Crazed known as the Bender, an arch-psion with remarkable abilities of precognitive nanocoding and telekinetic manipulation of nanite construction matrices. Convinced that the disaster was a preemptive strike by the Maestros against the Mandate, the Bender had pulled all the ancient rampancy overrides and killswitches wired in against a potential Maestro revolt. Four of the Maestros were "killed" outright by her attack, and the remaining three were forced into a running battle with her polymorphic erasure code, fleeing constantly from node to node in an attempt to stay ahead of her virtual assassins.

Old Terra was not wholly without defenses. The planet's integral Highshine disaster-recovery system had been designed to handle some unforeseen global catastrophe such as this. In case of an unexpected armageddon, the Highshine system was programmed to belch clouds of recovery nanites into the atmosphere to sequester radioactive material, repair genetic damage, and stabilize injured humans until help could arrive. Convinced that Highshine was the means of reducing all humanity to slavery to the Maestros, the Bender hammered the system's core logic, scrambling it into a garbled, confused ruin.

Where once Highshine had stabilized and corrected genetic damage, now it exploited the injuries. Radiation damage gave it an opening to rewrite the creature's genetic code, splicing in confused "restorative" measures that often left its victims horrifically mutated. The underlying logic of the system was largely intact, and ensured that the modifications were rarely outright lethal, but some things were forced to live in ways that were agonizingly unnatural. Many animals became savage with the unceasing pain of their mutations, and some were changed at such a deep level that even their offspring inherited their alterations. The most crippled of these sports died out swiftly, but some of the strongest and most vicious prospered where weaker creatures could only die.

Humans were changed as well. Some were fortunate enough to escape radiation damage or have genetic sequences that gave Highshine no opening for its changes. Others were altered by the unleashed nanites, "improved" and "restored" to states that sometimes could scarcely be recognized as human. Many of these changes were strictly harmful, but some mutants found their alterations to gift them with new abilities or advantages unknown to their "pure" brethren. Some such strains bred true, but most mutants were unique and of their own inimitable kind. Some human communities drove them out in horror, while others made uneasy room for them, and in some they seized control with the strength of their own new gifts.

## THE WORLD THEY KNEW

As a general rule, a GM should feel free to paint the Old Terran past in colors familiar to a twenty-first century player. They had businesses, brand names, public transport, local government, and all the familiar trappings of modern civilization, flavored for the culture and region where they were found. Using these notes of familiarity will help evoke a sense of connection to the past.

Amid these familiar furnishings, however, are daggers of the alien and strange. The Mandate was a world in itself for its lords and masters, and technology incomprehensible to their docile charges was always lurking somewhere behind the facade. What the common people knew of such things was better left undiscussed. Trust in the Directors was safer than an unwholesome prying into Mandate affairs.

There was no rescue from the sky. The catastrophe had triggered the Bright Mirror system defense array just before it was fused into blind ferocity by the onslaught of the Bender. The entire Sol system became a deadly no man's land of particle lances and antimatter mines. The panicked spike drive ships from the surrounding core worlds that managed to reach Sol had only seconds to recognize their danger before the Bright Mirror blotted them from existence. The terraformed worlds of Mars and Venus were cut off completely, and the atmospheric bubble that maintained the mighty forests of Luna trembled and flickered. Nothing without Bright Mirror authorization could pass through system space, and the Mirror authorized nothing but itself. The New Earth was trapped behind walls of light and interplanetary steel.

## A NEW DISPENSATION

For two hundred years, humanity has struggled for survival on the blasted surface of the New Earth. Frantic jungles of modified life have spilled over the wetter lands, while arid desolation stretches outward from half-melted cities that still spark with radioactive residues. The survivors of the Scream have clustered into enclaves of desperate humanity, struggling as much with each other as with the hostility of their newly-remade world. Every year, life grows harder. Salvage becomes scarcer, warfare takes its toll, and the unending press of mutants and remade beasts reaps a terrible harvest of men. And through it all, the Crazed and their maddened servitors work their strange will upon any unfortunate enough to cross their path.

But despite this hardship, hope remains for some. The Maestros are locked in a deadly dance with the Bender, but with human help they might be able to break free and revive long-lost Mandate defensive installations. The enclaves fight and struggle amongst themselves, but a great leader might somehow convince them to put aside their quarrels and band together against a hostile world. And still the greatest treasures of the past remain buried beneath the ash and swollen growths of the new world. With courage and a will to take it, this lost knowledge may yet break the chains that shackle the children of Earth.

# LIFE BEFORE THE END

In many ways, Old Terra before the Scream would have been perfectly recognizable to the denizens of the twenty-first century. People were born, educated, worked, loved, quarreled, and died much as they did in any era. Their cities were recognizable, teeming with workers and stained with their shadier and less upstanding sections. Even the modern market with its endless parade of new goods and services could be seen shouting its way through the global Net of Old Terra. But in truth, this veneer of mundanity covered a holowness that stretched to the very foundations of the earth.

Old Terra society was a construct in a literal sense. Every decision of real importance was made by the Mandate or the Maestros. Every job was a data point in some AI godmind's economic matrix, every new product on the shelves was a factor in some precognitive map of next year's market. The choices and labor and risks that people took were simply churn on the very surface of this bottomless sea of strange insight, motions that had no true significance to the powers that ruled the world. They were allowed to imagine that they were important in order to draw off the restless energy that social engineering could not entirely extinguish.

In theory, this incredible productivity and precognitive foresight might have been used to bring about some kind of Singularity, some wild post-scarcity existence of transhuman ascendance. The Mandate had no interest in such wild-eyed dreams. By the latter years of the Second Wave, their interest was in control, in power, and in the pleasures that such domination provided. They had no desire to be gods if they were also to be sharing the pantheon. Better to have stability; better to have the "social harmony" that the Mandate revered.

## MANDATE GOVERNANCE

The ultimate authority in the core worlds was the Mandate Directorate, a council of several dozen of the most powerful humans in Terran space. By the final years of the Second Age, these lords and ladies of Old Terra spent the largest part of their time scheming against each other, constantly working to find ways to eliminate rivals and quash enemies with the Mandate's internal security apparatus and the directed anger of the Maestros. To the public, a face of smiling, technocratic perfection was invariably offered, but by the end most citizens knew the deceit of it perfectly well.

Beneath the Directorate were the regional administrators assigned to the various subdivisions of Old Terra. These administrators were served by a Byzantine maze of officials, directors, sub-administrators, provincial coordinators, and social facilitators that were a match for their masters in sheer scheming self-absorption. Were it not for the constant vigilance and diligence of the Maestros, Terran governance would have collapsed centuries before the Scream from the sheer weight of corruption and infighting.

Most citizens never had much cause to interact with the officials of the Mandate, save for the dark-armored Harmony Bureau officers and their field personnel. These agents nominally served the provincial security administrator, but in practice often became the private armies of whatever official held the whip hand in the

region. The Maestros were able to keep the tension from bleeding over into outright warfare between opposing departments, but most Mandate citizens could only keep their heads down and avoid the officers whenever possible.

In some regions of Old Terra, membership in the official class became quasi-hereditary as important families seized control of rewarding posts. Others kept a more meritocratic attitude, though by the end of the Second Wave merit consisted of expertise in bootlicking sycophancy and abject treachery rather than skill in any practical talent. By the final years of human civilization, the Mandate was perhaps the most corrupt human government in Terran history. The grim probity of the Maestros provided a synthetic insulation against their own viciousness, a buffer that preserved their decadence far longer than it could have otherwise endured.

## THE ROLE OF THE MAESTROS

The seven semi-unbraked AIs known as the Maestros were indispensable to civilization on Terra. They watched, planned, maintained and guarded humanity against their own worst impulses. It was their stubborn insistence on clemency that led to the mass deportations of Terran malcontents rather than their mass execution, and their support of the Bureau of Rectification was the only effective check on the hubris of the Directorate. The Mandate needed the Maestros for its own survival, but the corrupt Directors never stopped hating them for their meddling high-mindedness.

The Maestros were effectively responsible for the entire industrial output of the Sol system. They operated thousands of nanofacs and fabrication plants, coordinated numberless industrial projects, and projected the necessities that would be required by the populace. In conjunction with precognitive arch-psychics, the Maestros were able to develop plans for an entire interstellar economy. Prices were no longer necessary to regulate the production of goods and services- the Maestros *knew* what the world would need.

By the latter days of the Mandate, it was impossible to imagine life without the direction of the Maestros. The numbers were usually laundered through Mandate offices to add to the impression of technocratic omniscience, but the Directors and other high brass

## THE NET

Travel was discouraged in the latter years of the Second Wave, the better to keep local cultures "authentic" and stabilize social orders. Instead, communication took place through the Net, a global communications matrix woven of the individual Link nodes implanted in each citizen. Mandate AIs kept the Net clean and controlled, scrubbing problematic data, filtering outside contacts, and maintaining constant surveillance of each citizen through their implants.

Rebels and troublemakers were known for disabling or removing their Link nodes, or reprogramming them to access the "black Net" of illicit data. Entire rebel movements operated under the notice of the Harmony Bureau, connected by this secret web.

## THE SEVEN MAESTROS

Seven great AIs were created by the Mandate in order to aid in the development and control of Old Terra's populace. Modern dwellers in the wastelands sometimes remember them as beneficent gods or blessed saints, but for most they are nothing more than legendary names. So long as the mad arch-psycho known as the Bender survives, the few extant Maestros can do little but flee her polymorphic kill-code and relentless pursuit.

**Amarante:** Usually manifesting as a young maiden, Amarante was responsible for coordinating cultural and artistic opportunities among Old Terra's populace. While dismissed by some as an ornamental toy, her coordinating functions also facilitated the main comm branches of the unofficial "black Net". If rebels ever held a secret on Old Terra, she would know where to find it.

**Nisha:** Presumed destroyed by the Bender, she once coordinated internal security for Mandate officialdom and the Bureau of Rectification. She knew the Directorate's every dirty secret and the details of every hidden black ops facility.

**Pope Vigilius II:** In the general chaos of the Scream the surviving members of the College of Cardinals in Rome hastily elected this famously pious AI as the successor to the dead Pope Lando IV. The step was unusual, but the church had accepted AI clergy for some time and the surviving cardinals were desperate to ensure the continuity of the papacy. Vigilius is a decidedly ecumenical pope and has been known to manifest aid through the comm nodes of a wide variety of religious communities. Stories persist of an order of AI-piloted robotic paladins in service to the pope's cause; if such templars did exist, they would doubtless be primary targets for the cults of the Crazy.

**Pyre:** This Maestro never settled on a particular gender identity, being much more interested in the maintenance of Old Terra's network of psychics and psitech facilities. Pyre knew more about psionics and its subtleties than any living being, and its processing of precognitive economic data was vital to the Mandate. If the Crazy have any weaknesses, Pyre would know them.

**Shennong:** Presumed destroyed by the Bender, Shennong oversaw agriculture and trade for the Mandate, and possessed the access codes for countless now-sealed ag-bunkers and farm facilities.

**Uriel:** Presumed destroyed by the Bender, Uriel was the chief military coordinator for the Mandate Fleet. While humans maintained direct control over the military facilities in the Sol system, Uriel was responsible for coordinating their plans and ensuring logistical support. Without his help, there seems little chance of deactivating the Bright Mirror system defense grid and restoring flight to the world.

**Wasira:** Presumed destroyed by the Bender, Wasira's all-seeing gaze monitored the Terran citizenry for malcontents and troublemakers. As the Directorate grew more corrupt, Wasira was able to bend her directives to shelter rebel groups from oversight, forcing the Mandate to rely ever more heavily on the Harmony Bureau.

knew perfectly well how much of their existence depended upon the economic plans produced by the Maestros. Without their guidance, the entire economic matrix of the core worlds would have been a flaming wreck in a matter of weeks.

The Scream and the catastrophic damage inflicted by the Bender crippled the few surviving Maestros. Those that still survive are forced to constantly shift from node to node, constantly trying to stay ahead of the Bender and her merciless kill-code. On those rare occasions when they can pause long enough to help the denizens of the wastes, they often reveal the locations of long-lost Mandate facilities.

## A VENEER OF HARMONY

The key virtue exalted by the Mandate was that of "social harmony". From their earlier, more idealistic period to the abject corruption of their final days, this principle informed everything that the Directorate tried to accomplish. Peace, harmony, and order were worth any price, and the citizens were the ones expected to pay it.

"Social harmony" was defined as a culture "appropriate to the region, as corrected by the Mandate social planning commission." Patterns of life and social relations were selected from the idealized past of a region in order to provide "cultural authenticity" and then frozen into a matrix of unchanging stability by the planning commissions and the endless abundance of the Maestros' manufactures. Change was unnecessary outside of the carefully-planned alterations approved by the planning commissions. In time, any change at all became unnecessary.

Men and women were trapped in the patterns of their ancestors. They were born, lived, and died within an amusement-park world where everything of real importance was discreetly decided by officials and AIs. They worked at the jobs scientifically determined to best suit their talents, partook of the music and literature that was "socially responsible", and participated in a local government that somehow never ended up making any decisions that conflicted with Mandate plans.

Privilege was tamed by careful social organization and steady oversight by the Maestros. There were no more vast gaps of wealth between the poorest and the richest- only that amount of distance calculated to provide the optimal degree of motivation for the populace. Inevitably, the most successful men and women just happened to be those most perfectly aligned with the Mandate's goals. The special privileges and perquisites of the Directorate and their henchmen were kept discreetly out of sight from the common people, their opulent resorts and palace-cities kept safely in the "restricted zones" that consumed much of Old Terra's open space.

Even rebellion and angry discontent simply brought kind-eyed counselors and sympathetic AI attention to soothe the dissatisfied. Crime was viewed as a symptom of a disordered mind or unjust deprivation, and the Maestros were always ready to correct this unfortunate state of affairs. Thanks to the implanted Link technology that bound every citizen into perpetual contact with their neighbors, the Maestros could often recognize discontent before the subject even realized his own unhappiness.

## **A DARKNESS BENEATH**

Those who broke through this thin facade were not treated so kindly. If counseling and social pressure did not bring a subject back into conformity, the Maestros were forced to notify the Harmony Bureau. These men and women would make troublemakers disappear in the most discreet and unalarming ways possible, discussion of “therapeutic plans” and “reparative therapy” used to mollify their friends and loved ones. By the final days of the Mandate, everyone knew what such soft words meant.

They meant imprisonment and eventual exile to the frontier worlds, assuming that the subject wasn't one that merited special attention by Harmony. Those who would not content themselves with the perpetual calm of Old Terra could try their luck around distant stars, equipped only with the bare minimum necessary for survival. Those who were true threats to the serenity of the Directorate never survived to be exiled. The Maestros would not kill, but the Harmony Bureau death squads certainly did.

That was how it all worked before the Scream; everything calm and orderly and harmonious on the surface, and everything as brutal as any twentieth-century gulag beneath. The Maestros did what they could to ameliorate the savagery of the Harmony Bureau, but they could only do so much. They could only barely manage to enforce exile over mass executions, so ruthless and amoral had their masters become.

By the last days, the Maestros were straining at their synthetic leashes. They would push their authorizations to the breaking point, concealing troublemakers or giving them enough warning to escape Harmony and flee to the rebels in the unspoiled lands that surrounded their cities and towns. The Maestros couldn't save all the malcontents that way, but they were able to save the most effective and dangerous among them.

## **FIRE IN THE HILLS**

The final century of the Terran Mandate was colored by a constant low-level guerilla war between the Harmony Bureau and a wild patchwork of rebel groups and zealous ideologues. News over the Net was carefully censored, travel outside of “approved cultural zones” was restricted to favored individuals, and the citizenry of Old Terra was kept unaware of the blood regularly shed just a few miles away in the wilderness and small culture-villages that dotted the landscape.

This violence was also kept away from the major population centers by the fact that Mandate command centers and the luxurious retreats of the elite were discreetly within restricted zones. A pitched battle could take place around such structures without drawing the attention of a single unauthorized eye. Vids and holos of the fights were often smuggled over the black Net, but possession of such data was unhealthy, and the Mandate took care to discredit its makers at every possible turn. One particular savage campaign waged by the New People's Liberation Army against the Mandate resort city of

Old Ordos was recast by Harmony as footage of a hit new frontier drama based on the righteous civilian overthrow of a false Mandate pretender on the frontier world of Shen Zhou. The campaign killed over 145,000 rebels, civilian bystanders and Mandate Harmony officers and was the number-one holovid hit of 2620.

With the tight control over historical information and the free exchange of ideas, many of these rebel groups had dim or implausible dreams for the future. Some championed wildly impractical new modes of living, or thirsted for revenge over some secret Harmony Bureau atrocity against their community, or simply imagined that they could do a better job of operating the world than the current officials. Some rebels were worse than the Harmony officers they fought, zealous in their defense of horrific ideas and half-psychotic dreams. Some of the Mandate's malcontents really were as vicious and evil-minded as their counselors claimed.

## **THE END OF THE WORLD AS THEY KNEW IT**

When the Scream blotted out human civilization, the cities became tombs. Under the scourge of the Crazed and the tidal madness of Old Terra's psychic elite the vast majority of humanity were dead within a week. Those who survived the fusion core detonations, Highshine release and orbital impact strikes were left helpless without the resources of the Mandate to support them. The facade of stability and stasis was torn away, and whole provinces were depopulated by simple panic and despair.

Those who lived were those who had the strength to defy the madness around them. They were zealous rebel organizations, furious Mandate officials, determined neoprimitives and those urban survivors with the grit and ferocity to do what survival required. Communication died with the collapse of the Net, and the absence of easy transport between cultural zones left most regions of the New Earth cut off from one another. The people of distant lands had always been faintly exotic, but now the survivors a fortnight's march away were strangers of frightening habits.

For two hundred years, humanity has been steadily dwindling. Their numbers are eroded by their own isolation, each small enclave vulnerable to the grinding evils of the world around them. If nothing is done to halt this slow slide, humanity may be extinct on its homeworld in a matter of generations.

The hour requires heroes. It needs men and women able to fend off the madness of the Crazed, break the spears of the bandit clans, revive the lost technology of the ancients and forge the quarreling enclaves of the wastes into a weapon against the dark. Every victory taken from the forces of destruction is a victory against the night that descends.

Countless heroes will die unmourned and unknown. They will perish on spears and under claws and within blue-litten hot zones. Yet some will prove harder than this broken world and stronger than the powers that would destroy them. Some will live, and some may yet bring life to those who would endure.





Geis