

“In the beginning, all was NULL – or perhaps it was (void*) – we’ll never really know, so we may as well stop worrying about it and get back to obsessing over how we’d rather be fornicating.” [From “The Klk’k guide to one’s interstellar locale” 12th ed. Ivan Klakln tr. J. Valthorpe catalogued Andolian central distribution, 3263]

1. A REALLY LONG TIME AGO

The beginnings of the universe are especially interesting to physicists, but not to xenologists, if only because the lack of heavier elements made most forms of life and any recognizable civilization impossible.

2. Some Supernovas and Several Billion Years Later

Somewhere between 12 and 40 million years ago the first interstellar civilization(s?) wandered out from core-ward into this area of the galaxy. At least, this is the current theory spawned from research on the records of the Ancients. No direct data concerning the existence of these beings has yet been found. Based on a passage from what appears to be a historical text found on the Uln homeworld, these predecessors of the Ancients have become known as ‘those who have only names’. This is believed to be a reference to either the homogeneity of their civilization, or to some practice of personification of each of this group’s viewpoints. Detractors to this whole area of research point to this naming scheme as further proof that what was uncovered was not a history text, and instead hold to the view that it was more likely a cheap sci-fi novel.

3. Some Few Million Years Later

While there is much contention about the nature of the predecessors of the Ancients, the Ancients themselves left enough rubble strewn around the galactic arm to convince even a fairly hardened skeptic of their having dwelled in these parts. The Ancients appear to have been made up of at least two major species groups, and interacted with at least three others, albeit it is not known whether these were client species, or contemporaries from another part of the galaxy. Their reign over this region lasted until about 1 to 2 million years ago, whereupon they rapidly ceased to be present. There is a wealth of evidence that severe infighting played some part in the destruction of the Ancients, but, assuming there were victors in such a conflict, little is known of what became of them.

The best source of such evidence, however limited, is the Uln homeworld. While they are quite sensitive about the subject, the widely held belief among the major races is that the Uln are the descendants of the Ancient’s equivalents of lab monkeys. The Uln culture sprang up among the remains of a sprawling set of Ancient structures, and advanced in technology faster than their biology or social structures could adapt, leading one noted human researcher to note upon seeing them, ‘It was as if I had suddenly come across a spacecraft piloted by Homo Erectus – if they hadn’t been so ill prepared for the gifts they unintentionally received, they would have conquered the entire arm’. Fortunately for the aspirations of dominance held by other species, the Uln were decidedly unprepared. Indeed, they spent so much time blowing each other up with weapons they didn’t entirely control that it is a wonder that either they or the ruins on their planet still survive.

The ruins, however, did not escape unscathed from the genesis of the Uln culture. While assuredly the largest known source of information on the Ancients, the ruins deliver little coherent information about many key aspects of the Ancients' existences, largely due to vast portions of many buildings having been turned to dust.

4. A Few Thousand Years Ago

The histories of the Humans, Rlaan, and Aera are best begun in this more recent time period. We shall address them in chronological order:

- **The Rlaan**

The Rlaan would be an interesting study even if they had never achieved space flight. Alone among the known sentient groups, the Rlaan are naturally composed of multiple, in this case, two, species. The speciation of the defender and worker casts appears fairly recent in biological terms, as the two species can, and on not rare occasion do, mate to produce viable, but sterile, offspring. This split between the hunter and gatherer, military and civilian, is a major thread in Rlaan culture, and cannot be overlooked in any attempt to understand them.

The Rlaan civilization was the first of the major space-faring races to venture to the stars, and they did so in typically methodical Rlaan fashion, spreading out systematically from their homeworld in sub-light vessels. The period between the beginnings of the Rlaan Diaspora and the Rlaan development of FTL travel was quite long, and it is a testimony to the stability and homogeneity of Rlaan culture that there was precious little cultural drift between the mother and daughter colonies over the centuries before FTL travel, leaving the only noticeable changes between the colonies technological developments and local eccentricities.

With the introduction of FTL came the second wave of Rlaan expansion, and the Rlaan's first encounter with intelligent life, in the form of the primitive **Saahasayaay**. The Rlaan took the stone-age tribes as their first client race, and managed to control their advancement enough to keep them from obliterating themselves, all without being harsh enough to inspire intense resentment on the part of their clients. The limitations on their inclusion in the power structure of the Rlaan Assembly were deemed insignificant when compared to the gifts of advanced technology that the Rlaan brought to their first clients. The situation with the Rlaan's other two client species, the Lmpl and Nuhln is even more one of admiration rather than insurrection, as these two species are the result of Rlaan experiments in adapting sub-sentient species to environments that are inhospitable to Rlaan workers, and have been bred for maximum psychological pliability. The Rlaan continued their expansion slowly, but unimpeded, until their first meetings with the Humans.

- **The Humans**

Humanity has, throughout its history, been a balkanized organization. Starting with tribes whose members numbered in the dozens, and moving on to nation-states with millions of adherents, the human homeworld never knew the rule of a single culture. Having moved out of an age of industry and into an age of information and communication, many hoped there would come to be some great alloying of the myriad thoughts of humankind into a coherent culture. While the opening of the world to all sort and manner of information exchange did render

the nation-state obsolete, it merely produced a different form of balkanization. Free to contact any other human on their planet, membership in a community came to rely far less on physical location and became more an issue of shared worldview. Unfortunately for the utopians among the humans, these viewpoints were too divergent to alloy. Even as humanity took to the stars, it remained an uneven mix of groups nearly as willing to obliterate each other as to assist any other group. So it was that the first colonies were financed and defined by members of one of several major factions on the homeworld, and their daughter colonies likewise. When strides were made by the Andolians and the Unadorned, whose ability to share data was somewhat hampered by the 40 year delay in data from either side, toward the development of FTL travel, those groups which had already made it to the stars secured their place in power at the expense of those colonists who were still in sub-light transit. Upon their arrivals many decades after their launches, this last unfortunate wave of sub-light travelers found themselves unwanted visitors to their intended homes, hopelessly out of synch with the cultures which had developed, and became known as the Forsaken, banding together on less hospitable worlds to preserve what was left of their identity.

FTL brought humanity into both its first contact with other intelligent forms of life, and into its first fratricidal dispute in interstellar space. The first human group to meet intelligent life was the Unadorned. They encountered a species they named the Mishtali who were enjoying a prolonged and happy bronze age. The Unadorned treated them with a benign neglect, which, given the cultural oddities of both the Unadorned, who come close to religious reverence in their views on computers, and the Mishtali, known for being the source of the 'cult of the devourer' wherein the religious rituals are accompanied by the consumption of the remains of alien sentients, is believed by many to have been just as well. Other client races did not fare so well. The pre-sentient Dgn, altered by the Shaper and Lightbearer factions into the modern Dgn and Shmrn, were little better than slaves. While the Shapers made no pretense of treating the Dgn with anything resembling equality, they did so with some measure of respect and without cruelty. The same could not be said for their more extreme brethren the Lightbearers, who, believing themselves to be the forefront of evolution in the entire galaxy, sought to claim their place at the throne of all sentients. Unfortunately for the Klk'k, it was the Lightbearers who first found them. The Klk'k are unique among human client races in that they had already reached a technological level similar to that of humanity in the mid-twentieth century CE when they were discovered. This level of advancement, however, was of little concern to the Lightbearers, and they set about subjugating the Klk'k to further the glory of humanity. Fortunately for the Klk'k, the Andolians discovered them only some weeks after the first Lightbearer pacification vessel had arrived at the planet. While the treatment of the Dgn had not sat well with the Andolian population, they did not feel it their place to interfere in the experiments of another faction on a species it had created. The Klk'k, however, were existent sentients possessing obvious culture and technology. The Andolians were outraged, and, sending one of the three exploration craft that had entered the

system back to Andolian space, proceeded to evacuate to their landing craft and autopilot their vessels into the Lightbearer pacification troop transport and the largest of its escorts. As few spacecraft were military in the modern sense, this was the only way for the Andolians to disrupt the occupation, leaving the Lightbearer troops short on re-supply while the Andolians slowed the pacification troops with guerilla tactics.

Such events, of course, were quickly noticed by both the Andolian and Lightbearer governments, and the first interstellar war in human history began. Although initially fought over control of the Klk'k homeworld, the twin realizations on the part of the Andolians as to the degree to which their industrial sector produced more and better military vessels and as to the degree that the Lightbearers had been willing to destroy the Klk'k caused the Andolians to expand the goals of their military action. The Andolians swarmed through Lightbearer space, destroying nearly all of the Lightbearer's military craft and unearthing a secret not even known to the Lightbearer's allies, namely, the existence of the spaceborn, a genetically engineered slave race of humans, designed to live their lives in zero gravity so as to prevent the Lightbearers from having to deal with such menial tasks as laboring in vacuum. It was this revelation that is believed to be most responsible for the lack of action taken by any other faction when the Andolians proceeded to eliminate not only the industrial capacity of the Lightbearers, but also the Lightbearers themselves. Those who did not manage to escape to Shaper or Highborn space, or were not fortunate enough to be killed in the assaults on their worlds, had the dubious honor of being turned over to the Klk'k, the Spaceborn, and the Shmrn. While fewer than expected Lightbearers were killed by those they had abused, the combination of sterilization and incarceration served to eliminate the Lightbearer meme from the realm of dominant thought.

These drastic events caused the major factions to invest some effort into the construction of a loose federation of all human colonies, with the major purpose not the advancement of mankind, but a policing against fratricide and a forum for the airing of grievances. Even still, the extreme balkanization of the human factions has rendered the Confederation slow to act and somewhat impotent against all except the most dire of situations. Nonetheless, by the time the Humans and Rlaan met each other, the Confederation had been in existence long enough to act with speaking authority for nearly all of the human colonies, and, despite some initial tensions due to the expansionist natures of both Human and Rlaan, the two entities have enjoyed a calm, if politically charged relationship that has benefited all species involved.

- **The Aera**

Woe betide a lesser race that its birthplace should be so unlike to a cradle. The Aera homeworld was a hellish jungle, and the Aera, like all species it begat, are superb survivors, having been adapted by evolution in a harsh environment. It is the misery of the jungle which has most profoundly shaped Aera culture. From the dawn of their civilization, the Aera have struggled to keep the jungle at bay. They embraced technology in all its forms, from its earliest incarnations as fire and axe, to the laser and crop duster, provided it could beat back whatever jungle

that invention's day held in store. However, the eventual Aera conquest over the jungles of their planet did not remove the mentality that had allowed their civilization to not be swallowed whole over the last few thousand years. The Aera went into space and space became the new jungle – a realm to be watched and controlled, lest from it come erosion of some new sort.

It is their deep comfort level with changing technology combined with their solid organizational patterns and assertive and wary nature which has allowed the Aera to advance to a point arguably beyond that of the Humans or of the Rlaan. Indeed, the Aera were sufficiently precocious as to have developed FTL travel before leaving their home system. However, even these great leaps and advances did not give the Aera what they could never have known they needed – a good position in the local jump topology. When the Aera met the Rlaan and then, soon after, the Humans, they found that these two groups blocked all hope of meaningful expansion core-ward. As diplomatic solutions to the passage of Aera fleets through the core worlds of the Humans and Rlaan were rejected, tensions mounted. Eventually, the Aera made an attempt to bypass Rlaan space with a long range point-jump vessel. However, due to less than forthright information on the extent of their empire, the vessel ended up in the middle of Rlaan space rather than bypassing it, and the effect of having even a lone Aera military vessel deep in Rlaan civilian space was to provoke a military conflict along the Aera/Rlaan border. At nearly the same time, the unfortunate Shmrn, having been granted a colony ship by the Andolians, nearly a century and a half previously, found that they had picked the wrong planet to settle on, as they now found themselves sharing a border with the Aera. This then prompted tensions between the Humans and Aera that, when the Aera realized that there was not going to be a diplomatic solution to their geographical dilemma, also erupted into armed conflict, with the Aera determined to punch through a corridor to core-ward expansion.

5. More or Less Now

The Rlaan and Aera are at a stalemate on the border, with both sides closing towards an unofficial cease-fire. The scaling back of hostilities along said border will no doubt increase the hostilities along the Aera/Human border. The Confed took quite a beating trying to defend its newly founded border worlds, and lost several of them, but has held fairly steady at all of the older systems. An Andolian task force was sent to defend the Shmrn, but the system became surrounded when the forces in the two connecting systems were both overrun. The status of the task force and the system are unknown. Also unknown is how well the Confed will hold up to an Aera assault on a single front. The Rlaan are unlikely to lend any serious assistance, given their need to maintain their own defensive front, and, although they would never acknowledge it, their desire to expand while the Humans are occupied. It is generally believed that the Rlaan both find unsatisfactory the Aera treatment of civilians (likely a result of the Aera having precious few civilians) and fear the Aera's aggressive tendencies too much to allow them to defeat Humanity, but they appear entirely willing to let them bloody the Confederacy to the point where its economy is entirely sunk into preserving its existence.