Eclipse Phase Campaign Arc: Chasing Mr. Jiang

A few months ago my gaming group completed an 11-session Eclipse Phase story arc. I've already posted an earlier version of this all-inclusive writeup on tumblr, but this PDF has been cleaned up slightly. It may also be a more appropriate distribution vehicle, given the length of the writeup.

GM Lessons Learned

- Help the players by giving them enough detail about the game universe that they can build motivation, biases, and goals for their characters.

- There are enough competing factions in the Eclipse Phase universe that if the player characters aren't in general ideological agreement, maintaining a coherent game will be difficult. There may not be alignments in EP, but it is important to pay close attention to motivation.

- Leverage existing EP resources for NPCs and be ready to adapt them to your game on the fly. There aren't enough fully fleshed-out NPCs for EP yet, so hack what's available.

- Keep reading the game books, even if you've already read them. While the rules aren't dense, the game universe is, and nothing disrupts game flow like looking up info about a faction or how mesh infiltration works.

- Remember that most of the players won't know as much about the game universe as you, even if they've read the same books. Things like how people get from place to place inside an aerostat, or how infomorph indents spend their time, or what the punishment for theft on a Jovian-controlled mining vessel need to be fleshed out by the GM. Keep giving them more details than you think they need, and they'll get a better grip on the game.

- Always be thinking, "What happens if the PCs get killed right now?" While EP makes it easier to GM because you don't have to figure out clever ways to help players avoid killing out their characters, the ramifications of morph death in EP can have a lot of bearing on story flow.

- Don't be afraid to wing it. For example, interplanetary travel times are a very complex topic. Slice the Gordian Knot by declaring how long it takes to get from Planet X to Planet Y, and move on with the game.

The Game Sessions

1: Leaving Octavia

While the mechanics are straightforward, the setting for Eclipse Phase is so vast, so complex, so well developed that I was concerned that no amount of preparation would be sufficient. My approach was to keep the scenario small and tightly focused. In fact my intention was to run it almost tournament style, so we could all get comfortable with character creation, combat, and the overall Eclipse Phase milieu. After this one, the thinking went, we'd no longer be noobs. The players could create new characters and we'd embark on the "real" campaign.

Lo and behold, the session was a blast. The player characters were a pair of wildcat miners in a hurry to leave Venus. With a vicious Pax Familae enforcer hot on their tails, they made a clean getaway on the Pointe du Hoc, a cargo vessel piloted by an old friend. Unfortunately, two hours later the Pointe du Hoc was intercepted by what appeared to be pirates. Thankfully for our (anti-)heroes, something about the whole thing seemed fishy, and quick thinking (and a couple of great rolls) gave the player characters the leverage they needed to survive the encounter.

In the end they wound up in a pirate vessel whizzing toward the Kuiper Belt, having convinced the notorious arms merchant Mr. Jiang that they were worth keeping around. We all enjoyed the first run so much that we decided to keep rolling with it, rather than build new characters and start fresh.

Eclipse Phase is like Shadowrun in that it can be intimidating to a GM. Creating a sense of verisimilitude without bogging gameplay down in cumbersome details can be a tall order. The lessons I've learned from years of running Shadowrun games are applicable here. The trick (at least for me) is to compartmentalize, start small, and gradually expose the players to more. Details about technology, political factions, and so on need only be explored as circumstances dictate. Until then they are presented in broad background strokes.

2: No Recourse

This was another fun session. The PCs were deposited at Phelan's Recourse by Mr. Jiang, with a mission to drop off Cyrene, a piece of transhuman cargo who, while seemingly dull as a box of rocks, supposedly was very important.

Accompanied by one of Mr. Jiang's enforcers, a very patient Neo-Gorilla with a knack for games, they found their way to Indus Flower, a mind-bogglingly lush and spacious habitat that made the scruffy PCs feel positively out of their element. In the course of contacting Snihal Vishwa, a "Facilitator" who was ostensibly to take possession of Cyrene, they realized they had a choice as to whether they would protect Cyrene or give her over.

In the end they decided it was better to be their own masters than to submit to the will of Mr. Jiang, so they. Along the way they had convinced Miyoki, the Neo-Gorilla to leave Mr. Jiang's employ. To protect Madame Vishwa from retribution, they staged an elaborate subterfuge in which the PCs escaped Vishwa's locked-down residence, stole a chunk of credit from her account, and made their way to an egocasting facility. The game session closed with the group casting out of Phelan's Recourse with the intention of being sleeved into more capable morphs on the distant surface of Luna.

There was no combat in this session, and the tension was more abstract than usual. The questions the player characters had to answer were pretty big ones. Is it acceptable for transhumans to be treated as property? If so, is it acceptable for us to take part in that trade? What constitutes servitude? Do we extend the same rights to Uplifts that we would extend to any other transhumans? The tension was around the long-term effects of near-term choices. In the end the characters opted for more freedom, knowing that such a choice would likely draw the wrath of a very well-connected and dangerous individual.

Eclipse Phase brings up so many questions. If you really think yourself into a universe that includes Uplifts, digitized egos, morphs, and so on, you cant help but immediately bump into them. This is a game that makes generating a campaign theme or themes easy.

I'm still sticking to my initial plan, which is to keep it small. At this stage the pace is also fast, for two reasons: First, I don't have as much time to game as I'd liked. The days when I could spend days prepping to run a game are gone. I have a few hours in which to prepare, so I do so with flexibility in mind. Players will blow your best-laid plans, so rather than attempt to railroad them, I sketch out the potentialities, create a few key NPCs, and keep things moving. Second, I've found that nothing dulls a game like plodding. Endless hassling over rules interpretation kills a session faster than anything. So if it takes more than a minute or two to find the appropriate line in the rule book, I wing it. I know, that sounds sacrilegious, but the play is the thing. When the rules get in the way, play suffers.

3: Shackled

The third session in our Eclipse Phase campaign didn't go as well as I would have liked. We were all a bit off, but the biggest problem was that I made too many assumptions about visible options for players. When the setting is generic medieval fantasy, Wild West, the 1920s, or a well-established fictional universe like the ones found in Star Wars or Star Trek, players come to the game with a robust understanding of the game world. They may not know the specifics of a given campaign, but in general they understand what is possible and how characters interact with their world on a daily basis.

A setting like Eclipse Phase is another matter entirely. The folks at Posthuman Studios have done an excellent job of providing myriad details about life in the solar system after The Fall, but there is no way they can cover every detail. How do people go about their day-to-day business when they are living in a cavern under the Lunar surface? Where are egocasting facilities located and what sorts of businesses have sprung up around them? What is it really like to track down information in the mesh? How does a person's reputation get converted into support from strangers? There are answers to all these questions, but the game mechanics only take you so far. For a world to feel real, and for players to feel like their characters are alive and at home in that world, they need to have enough context to understand their options.

That's where I as a GM fell down. At several points I didn't do enough to flesh out the situation in a way that would help the players understand the importance of events that were occurring around the player characters.

We succeeded in moving the game along and discovered more about the player character motivations and personalities, which was great fun. They now find themselves in Shackle, targeted by the biggest group of thugs in the settlement, which is much less abstract than the threat of being caught by the arms dealer Mr. Jiang or a Claudia sent by Pax Familae. They've even discovered a useful clue that may help them unravel the riddle of Cyrene, their memory-wiped companion.

4: Sake Bombed

"You wake up feeling rather odd, disembodied. You try to move and realize there is nothing to move. You are not in a body."

That's how the PCs found themselves at the end of our fourth Eclipse Phase session, which was a rousing success in spite of the fact that it was also a failure.

The PCs and their two companions started the session on Luna. They had attracted attention in the Shackle settlement's oldest cavern, known as Old Shackle. After our last game session, I fed the players emailed results of research their characters had conduced. For each chunk of information I assigned an accuracy percentage reflecting their confidence in it. This was a fun way to fill them in on more of the context that had been missing in the previous session. It also gave the players the opportunity to figure out what they wanted to do next.

The PCs started by taking the 20 minute walk from Old Shackle to fabled New Varanasi. They took their time soaking in the atmosphere of the exotic city. Along the way the players and I discussed a variety of what we've come to call "sidebar topics" covering things like how most survivors of the Fall perceive morphing technology, how cultural norms remain strong on Luna even with all this liberating technology, and so on. We let the pace of the story move along at an unforced pace as we immersed ourselves in the environment.

Because they had already been receiving assistance from the powerful Vishwa family, the PCs were able to meet with the family scion, Sanjay Vishwa. He corroborated what they already suspected, which was that Cyrene, the woman whom they had saved from the arms merchant Mr. Jiang, had fled the Octavia aerostat on Venus weeks earlier. She had used an extralegal Venusian egocasting facility controlled by Pax Familae to cast to another dark egocasting facility in New Varanasi.

Cyrene had no memory of anything that had happened prior to being rescued by the PCs, so she was intent on paying a visit to the facility. The PCs wanted to sell her to the highest bidder, and figured they might get a lead by checking out the facility. So the criminals and their two unlikely companions, Cyrene and a gorilla uplift named Miyoki, made their way to The Sake Bomb, the cover operation for the egocasting facility.

The Sake Bomb serves as a simulspace lounge, a sort of heroin den for the immersive VR set. The PCs were taken aback when the proprietor knew Cyrene immediately and offered to buy her for 200,000 credits. They could have taken the money and run, but they squabbled with the proprietor over the fee, which led to a brief and catastrophic fight. They were caught off guard when she released a dose of Shake, a powerful muscle-control agent, into the reception area.

They regained consciousness wondering where their bodies went. They had no memory of any of what had occurred since they left Venus. It was as if the last four game sessions never happened.

The proprietor of The Sake Bomb had killed them, and their insurance policies had kicked in, triggering activation of their last archived egos. It was a shocking revelation for the players. We all knew that in EP death was different, but we hadn't truly grokked how this affected game play. For me as a GM it meant that I didn't have to fudge anything in an attempt to save the characters, since failure would not mean death in the traditional RPG sense of the word. In this particular case, because the PCs' cortical stacks had not been retrieved, for the players it

meant that for the most part their characters would not benefit from all they'd done over the course of those four sessions.

However, they did wind up with fatter wallets and higher reputations. If they want, they can tap into their social networks to try to piece together some of the pieces of what happened to them. They made both friends and enemies, and some of those NPCs will show up in the future for favors, with a desire for vengeance, or for some other reason.

We all had a blast with this session. It's starting to feel like we're getting a feel for how truly different transhumanity is from regular ol' 21st century humanity, and how different that makes this game.

5: Back in the Saddle

At the conclusion of the previous session, the player characters found themselves as informorphs in a life insurance hold on the Venusian aerostat Octavia. They started this session by gathering some info about the Claudia (Pax Familae member) who had been searching for them. Then they resleeved and hired a hacker named Blazer to follow along behind them, hiding their data tracks.

Their first goal was to find out what had happened to the original members of their little small-time band of thieves. One of them, the infomorph named Silus, made contact and let them know that Sachin and Waegoo had been abducted and turned into infomorph slaves by the very Claudia who had been hunting them earlier. Two other members of the gang, the drug-addicted Barsoomian hacker Pip and the twitchy-triggered Sam, had gone to ground in the barren outlands of Mars. Apparently they were hiding in the vicinity of the Burroughs Ecostation.

The PCs bought some gear, took a passenger ship from Venus to Mars, purchased more gear in Olympus, and took a Rail Eos maglev train from Olympus. After several stops, the train reached Burroughs. We ended the session there.

Most of the session consisted of me describing how Pax Familae operates (to the best of PC knowledge), what Mars is like, and how the gear they were purchasing operates and some of the different components of Martian society. One thing struck me as we were discussing these things: the Eclipse Phase does an excellent job of making it very clear that you're not operating in an undifferentiated, homogenized future. The planet or habitat you are on matters not just for physical reasons (damn, it's cold on Mars!) or historical reasons, but for cultural reasons as well. The amount of detail Sunward provides on Mars is just about right. There's plenty to chew on, but also lots of room for the GM to drop in more texture.

I've noticed that published Eclipse Phase adventures tend to occur on isolated outposts, derelict habitats, and so on. It is a horror game, so this makes sense. Isolation is a big part of what makes horror work. But it's also a great way of minimizing the complexity of the situation. As I think about how I'll prepare for the next session, I realize that even though my intent has never been to run a horror-focused EP campaign, if I had it to do over again I might start with a couple of those more traditional EP scenarios.

6: Burroughs

When we last left our antiheroes, they had just arrived at Bullhead Station, the terraforming facility situated nearest the Burroughs Crater in the Martian southern hemisphere. After

sussing out the station itself, they made their way to Carter's, an establishment catering to those in need of refreshment, stimulation, companionship, and entertainment. Chatting with a few of the locals, they were rather horrified to discover that all of this free trade wasn't so free. Someone took a percentage of everything. That someone was a Claudia, a member of Pax Familae, the very organization that was already looking for our heroes and had turned two of their friends into enslaved informorphs back in the Octavia aerostat above Venus.

The very reason our heroes were in Burroughs was to find two more of their crew, the hacker druggie Pip and Sam, the spreader of violence. Our heroes were justifiably concerned that in spite of their best efforts, this Claudia might identify them. But Blazer, their remote hacker, had been covering their tracks well, and their newest morphs were unknown to Pax Familae. As fate would have it, she noticed their entrance and struck up a conversation. Hearing that one of our heroes was not only a recreational drug enthusiast but also a gambler, she suggested that they pair stick around for the evening's festivities.

In a secret combat pit below Carter's, this Claudia brought in enslaved egos that had been placed into stolen morphs and made to fight other victims in one-on-one combat. Communities in the Martian outback tend to become insular, with their own strange habits. This was one that defined Burroughs. Every two or three weeks a new batch of victims arrived, and each time the Claudia made money off of the venality of transhumanity. The stands were full of screaming, yelling, drinking, smoking, people, all eager to vent their frustrations and let loose by betting on these to-the-true-death fights. When two uplifted baboons were brought into the ring, it proved too much for the other of our heroes, who firmly believes in transhuman rights. He was unable to contain his righteous anger, jumped down to the ring.

He called out for Pip and Sam, whom they hoped were in the crowd but had not yet been able to find. By this time the Claudia knew the identity of our heroes, but Pip and Sam were also there, in new morphs. Combat ensued. Guards were shot. The seething resentment and tension upon which the Claudia had built her little empire suddenly blew up. Fights broke out in the stands. Guards were gang-tackled. The surviving baboon went… well, ape.

The Claudia bolted, and our heroes followed her down to a secret hideout below the combat pit. Before they could get to the Claudia, she pulled out a frag grenade and set it off, killing the baboon and injuring our heroes. But they did find her ground-effect vehicle, and they made a clean escape from Burroughs, picking up Pip and Sam on the way out.

Now they find themselves driving away from Burroughs at top speed, even as radar shows a big Martian storm coming. In the next session we'll find out how that works out for them.

This was a really enjoyable session. For me it was our best Eclipse Phase game yet. The pace was good and there was a good mix of the player characters looking for information at Bullhead Station, interacting with the Claudia in Carters, creating utter carnage in the combat pit, desperately chasing after the Claudia, and hot-wiring the ground effect vehicle. The players were truly inhabiting their characters. I think it's taken a while for all of us to feel like we "own" the setting, but now that we've played a few sessions and worked out how this radically different environment works, the players seem to be able to use their characters with more confidence. It's starting to flow so well.

7: The Best Laid Plans

Sometimes a game session starts with a certain tone, then something shifts and it becomes a different game. I was reminded of this last night. My friend who had participated only as an

observer in the last game came in with a character and was ready to go. At first I think we were all just happy to be back at the table, and there was a fair amount of chatting and meandering. But then something jelled, and everyone focused on the mission in front of the characters. They wound up pulling off one of the most impressive bloodless victories I've ever seen in a roleplaying game.

In the previous session, Mochi and Cooper had escaped from Burroughs Station, Mars in a stolen GEV (ground effect vehicle). Along the way they had uncovered a really nasty slave fighting pit, created major havoc, found two of their missing friends, and killed a Pax Familae operative (a Claudia in our parlance). With the aid of their hacker friend Blazer, they secured a trade: transport off planet in return for an anonymized GEV and some credits. They were taken to a fast freighter and placed in a "coffin box", a self-contained freight box used by smugglers to move transhumans about without notice. Their trip to the Octavia aerostat above the Martian surface proved uneventful.

Then came the tricky part. They were in Octavia to free two of their friends, Sachin and Waegoo, who were imprisoned as infomorph by Pax Familae. The Claudias were running an "infomorph for hire" service called Brainwave. Some of the infomorphs were indents, but Sachin, Waegoo, and many others were enslaved and would never work their way free. Blazer hacked into the local Brainwave facility, and found the location of Sachin and Waegoo. This is where the game got interesting.

We play in a conference room at my place of employment. It's pretty sweet. There's a large whiteboard along one side, and a long table to game at. As the players started discussing how they'd make their assault on Brainwave, they used the whiteboard to sketch out concepts. One idea seemed particularly good to them, then one of the characters brought up a serious flaw. They'd move on to another idea. Probably a solid two hours were spent iterating through plans. It was unlike any of our other EP sessions, and as each idea was brought up and shot down, they became more serious, more devoted to figuring out a way to pull of the caper.

Then they realized something: They had the cortical stack from the Claudia they'd killed on the way out of Burroughs Station. That could be very, very valuable to enemies of Pax Familae. The Claudias were after our heroes because they'd borrowed 500k credits from the Claudias to run a legally questionable mining operation on the Venusian surface. The mining venture had tanked, the money had been spent, and the Claudias wanted their investment back. The Claudias held all the cards. But now our heroes had an ace in the hole. Any opponent of Pax Familae could take that cortical stack, pop it into an ego bridge, and start finding interesting and painful ways to extract the organization's secrets.

So the players hit on a brilliant idea. Their characters went public. They leveraged transparency. Putting all of the information about their initial deal with the Claudias and the ensuing troubles (including the events at Burroughs Station, which were rather embarrassing to the Claudias, to say the least), onto several criminal social networking nodes, they offered the Claudias a deal: Give us Sachin and Waegoo, consider the debt paid, and we'll give you the cortical stack.

The high-stakes bet worked, and the Claudias made the trade. The whole final plan was dreamed up and played out in about a half an hour. It was like popping a cork on a bottle of champaign. Now our heroes have a very different standing in the criminal world, and Pax Familae is off their backs, at least for now. Here's the last bit: As the player characters and their friends hopped on a ship to depart Octavia, they received a message from someone they didn't recognize. His name was Mr. Vishwa, and he told them they owed him a favor. The PCs

don't recall, but they do in fact owe him a favor from adventures previous versions of themselves undertook on Luna. I love this game!

8 & 9: It's the Characters, Stupid

Session 8 was really about all of us catching our breath. This campaign had taken off so fast and quickly become a series of rapid-fire events that the players and I all had to spend a few hours housecleaning. The PCs finally had a chance to snag some of the gear they'd wanted. I doled out some well-earned Rez points, we talked about the larger ramifications of the action in Session 7, and we came up with the idea of the PCs using a tricked-out cargo container as a mobile base of operations.

At the end of Session 7, the sudden notoriety generated by the PCs' very public judo move on Pax Familae had already led to a communique from Sanjay Vishwa, the wealthy, well-connected Lunar businessman. They accepted an assignment from him and prepared to find the notorious but slippery arms merchant, Mr. Jiang. As fate would have it, in the process of scouring the Mesh for information about Mr. Jiang at the beginning of Session 8, they were found by a "Mr. Johnson", who supposedly worked for a relatively unknown hypercorp involved in spaceship technology. "Johnson" was also looking for Jiang. Perhaps a deal could be arranged, in with the PCs could help Johnson and Vishwa simultaneously?

Johnson and the PCs both suspected that Jiang had fled to a hideout in the Kuiper Belt, far from any known casting facilities. Thankfully Johnson had access to a long haul freighter. The shipping container the PCs call home was stuffed in the cargo bay and off they went for a rendezvous with a second, faster ship that would take them on the eight month journey to Jiang's suspected bolt-hole, a frozen ball of methane at the deep, cold edge of the system. Side note: I went through the back-and-forth in the EP forum about space travel and how one might calculate travel times, and decided that it was all just too much effort. For me this is a game, not a simulation.

It didn't take the PCs long to realize that the faster ship they were in was a Jovian military vessel. After a few days the ships crew introduced themselves, and the truth was laid bare: This was a secret Jovian military mission, sent to find and retrieve Jiang. Apparently practically every government in the system was after Jiang, seeking to find what information he might have about the explosion that wiped out most of Phelan's Recourse. A contingent of marines held their noses at the PCs, but worked with them over the long months of travel, introducing them to their operational procedures and tactics, and learning what small amount they could about Jiang from the PCs.

The most interesting thing about this session was how the players managed this stretch of time. They concocted a scheme to keep the marines off guard and annoyed, in hopes that when the critical moment arrived, they would be able to sabotage the Jovians' violent approach and work some sort of deal with Jiang so he would come peacefully. Another aspect of this plan – in a worst-case scenario, the Jovians would fight Jiang's people and the PCs would be left out of it.

It was a tricky approach, one I hadn't even considered. But they role-played it beautifully. Cooper pretended to be on the outs with the other members of the PC group, while Mochi used every opportunity to subvert the chain of command and rattle the major in charge of the marine strike force. Finally they were able to convince the major that three of the PC group and three of the marines should enter the hideout, rather than the entire strike force. When they reached Jiang's hideout and approached in stealth landing pods, everything went bad quickly.

It turns out the major had lied and sent the rest of the strike force in separate pods. They were getting chewed up by warbots and booby traps. Then as the major moved into a deserted dining facility and lounge, Mochi provoked him one last time. The major was so irritated that he lost focus at just the wrong time, stepping on a pressure trigger that activated a mine. He was done, but the PCs almost got chewed up by the warbot that came to investigate. Only a beautiful bit of teamwork succeeded in defeating it.

Blazer gained root access to the local network and they quickly found Jiang's quarters. A bit more searching revealed that Jiang had been communicating with a contact of his who worked for the Go-nin Group at the Discord Gate. The fact that no spacecraft remained at Jiang's outpost made it easy to put two and two together. He was bound for the Discord Gate, and he was less than a week ahead of them.

The way the players came up with a plan for long-term psychological manipulation of the Jovian marines was just fabulous, because not only was it clever, but it's what the career criminals they play would have done. It was a fun session, and I can't wait for the next one this Friday.

10: Pinned

Along with three of their gang compatriots and what's left of a Jovian military strike team, Blazer, Mochi, Cooper and company started this session deep in the Kuiper Belt, at Jiang's abandoned and bloodied lair. Not 48 hours prior to the team's arrival, Jiang had communicated with a "useful" Go-nin Group employee named Yoshi Shiguru who worked at the infamous Discord Gate on Eris. The trail was clear, and as they sped toward Eris in a stealthy Jovian fast attack cruiser, the oil and water mixture of Jovians and anarchist criminals concocted a plan to sneak onto Eris, find Shiguru, and get to Jiang before he managed to secure a place in a gate expedition.

Again Mochi worked wonders, convincing the captain of the vessel to send himself, Blazer, Cooper, the marine leader, and one other marine to the surface of Eris in a stealth assault pod camouflaged by a variety of means to appear as a random chunk of frozen methane. After being launched out of the cruiser, they endured a nerve-wracking 700km trip past the impressive defenses on Dysnomia before landing safely just outside the settlement at Torii, a half a click above the entrance to the gate.

Most folks from Luna, Venus and Mars tend to think of the Jovians as technologically backward because they do not embrace the separation of ego and morph. But their refusal to adopt certain advances has not constrained them in other areas, and may have actually spurred them to greater heights. After all, if you're going into combat with only one life to live, it pays to make sure you can kill the other guy before he kills you.

Wearing Jovian stealth suits and operating during the local "night" rotation, the team made its way into the settlement. Unfortunately, external security systems on one of the buildings raised a low-level alarm. Security guards were sent out, bounding across the low-G enclave, searching for signs of intruders. The team worked its way to the five story dome structure where Shiguru lived, and managed to hack past the building's external security. But failed attempts to get past an elevator door resulted in a full alarm being raised. A security team rushed into the building, and in the ensuing carnage two of the security guards were killed.

Frustrated at their inability to get their hands on Shiguru, the infiltration team snuck away from Torii. As the session ended, local security was sending out more patrols and the situation was getting quite dicey indeed.

I deliberately placed the players in a more difficult situation on Eris for a couple of reasons. First, it was important that they understand that getting anywhere near a Pandora Gate would be hard as hell. These are the most well-guarded facilities in the entire system. Second, with several sessions under their belts, the players had a good enough feel for the game world that I could throw more challenges their way. It was satisfying to see them react with fear as their plan crumbled and they were forced to improvise. It was even more exciting to watch how they pulled it together and played it smart, getting out of danger so they could come up with a new approach.

11: The End of the Beginning

Sneaking back to the outskirts of the Torii settlement, Blazer, the group's hacker, slipped into the local mesh undetected. He made contact with Shiguru. As one of a handful of Gate Scheduling Officers, he had the ability to get the team through the Discord Gate. Mochi, the group's master manipulator, convinced Shiguru that because they knew he had already been bribed by Mr. Jiang, it would be in his best interest to let them through as well.

After a hair-raising game of cat and mouse with the Ultimates, the three PCs and their two Jovian companions met with Shiguru. He led them through odd, obviously alien-constructed tunnels and into the Discord Gate control complex. Using his high-level security clearance and aided by no small amount of bluffing, the team was brought into one of the gate's six staging domes. The cover story was that because of an above-ground intrusion, Go-nin was providing additional security for this gatecrashing mission.

As fate would have it, this was the third batch of scientists and explorers heading to a newly-discovered exoplanet as part of the D329-K expedition. Well-funded and staffed by a secretive consortium of Inner System universities and hypercorps, D329-K had already found vast resources on the new planet. The expedition leader, Dr. Eve Sorenson, found the new addition to her party distasteful, but tolerable.

Then the prep was over. The door to the Gate Room opened, and as the expedition members walked through one by one, each felt that strange, disorienting bending of time and sensation before stumbling out into a wholly new planet.

The gravity was heavier even than Earth's. The single sun in the thin azure sky was smaller than Sol, bluer and more intense. The air was breathable, warm, thick and moist. Jungle foliage towered around the small clearing that surrounded the exit gate. A cacophony of animal noises greeted the gatecrashers as they rose up from their knees and shook away the gate-induced nausea.

Despite all this splendor, the characters had a job to do. They knew Mr. Jiang was hiding somewhere in the expedition, just as they were. They didn't know what sort of morph he was inhabiting. But they saw a figure at the head of the procession of recovering crashers stand up and make for the thickest part of the jungle. They pursued, knowing they'd found their quarry.

After chasing him for a time, they established ad hoc mesh contact and convinced him to meet them on ground of his choosing. En route to this meeting they encountered a small group of exceedingly large-mouthed, dingo-sized, hyena-like creatures and dispatched them. Finally

they reached Mr. Jiang. He stood at the top of a hill, an Olympian ready for anything the jungle could throw at him.

Tired of running, Mr. Jiang related the tale of how he had spent many years running a criminal organization back on Earth. How he had seen the rise of the AIs coming. How he had moved his operation to space. How after the Fall he had realized that despite the virtual eradication of transhumanity, people were still more than willing to fight and kill each other. How he had shifted to arms dealing and related smuggling and piracy operations.

He then told of how he had discovered that Cyrene, the runaway daughter of a minor Octavian politician had been abducted and altered, turned into a new kind of biological weapon. He described how when she arrived on Phelan's Recourse and met with five others who had been similarly altered, the combination of their pheromones triggered otherwise inert biochemistry, turning the six of them into a massive explosive device. This ultimate suicide bomb wiped out most of Phelan's Recourse and nearly pushed transhumanity into another spasm of war.

It was all orchestrated by one of the original TITANs, an AI called Splinter of the Mind's Eye, which ostensibly worked for Jovian military intelligence. As soon as Mr. Jiang related this part of the tale, Blazer, Cooper, and Mochi turned on Jask and Felix, the two Jovian special operatives. It ended with a wounded Jask and Felix surrendering. Mr. Jiang, following his own notions of honor, took their railgun assault rifles and suit helmets, and set them free.

Blazer went back to the gatecrashing group and discussed exobiology with Dr. Sorenson, telling her the truth about who he was and why he and the other PCs had crashed the gate. She was sympathetic, but she also informed him that Go-nin would doubtless send Ultimates through the gate to find them. Blazer reluctantly went back into the jungle to rejoin his friends.

After trying unsuccessfully to work an alliance with Mr. Jiang, the PCs decided to stay on this wondrous new planet for a while, exploring it and perhaps discovering a way to work with the scientists while avoiding those who might come through the gate looking to even old scores.

While the session was quite fun, this point in the evening is where things got truly interesting. At the start of the campaign we'd all agreed that it would be character-driven. While the Cyrene-Splinter story was the backdrop to everything the PCs encountered, how they dealt with it was really entirely up to the PCs. But here's the rub: We'd started with characters that had been hastily created as "throw aways". Our original intention had been to play the game a couple of times, then throw those characters away so we could start "the real" campaign.

But we loved the first session so much that we kept using those characters. Unfortunately over time we all came to realize that their skills and motivations didn't make for a cohesive group. Blazer wanted to preserve natural environments. Mochi and Cooper wanted to mine them. Mochi saw money as the only security, while Blazer saw it as superfluous. This wasn't a player clash by any means; in the course of fleshing out their characters, they all realized that the fit wasn't right.

Interestingly, as Blazer, Cooper, and Mochi spend more time on this astounding new planet, their goals may change. Mochi may realize that in this setting, money is worthless. Cooper may come out from under Mochi's shadow. Blazer may find that he misses the bustle of Octavia. Regardless, these realizations, if they come at all, will take a long time. This is

exploration best suited to backstory, not game play. So this is a natural end point for these characters.

Our plan now is for the players to create new characters. I'll run a more traditional Firewall-oriented game, and the PCs will be built to fit together better as a group. There will still be plenty of room for individual goals, personality friction, and so on, but as Firewall operatives they will all have the same north arrow.

I'm going to continue the campaign timeline, so these new PCs will start playing after the events put into motion by the first group. Splinter is still there in the background. The D329-K discovery is still there. Blazer, Cooper, Mochi, Mr. Jiang, Jask, and Felix are still on the newly-discovered exoplanet. Who knows what distant effects their actions will have on the new PC group?

Having now gone through a full story arc in eleven game sessions, I feel like as a GM I'm just beginning to tap into the potential of the Eclipse Phase setting. It continuously astounds me and provides me with exciting ideas, without making me feel dependent on the next sourcebook. That said, I'm ridiculously excited about Rimward, and can't wait for its arrival.

Credits

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