

Mercenaries of the Galactic Frontier

Orpheus: Eclipse Enforcer

This story is told from the point of view of the featured character. This work does not claim to be a definitive history, but stands as an account of events from one character's perspective. Some names have been changed -Editor

In the early decades of the twenty-fourth century the Eclipse was created to organize the criminals of the Galactic Core into a stable business enterprise. The original leaders of the Eclipse were visionaries who believed greater profits could be achieved within an orderly, unified criminal enterprise. Under their guidance the Eclipse grew into a powerful criminal organization. By the mid-point of the twenty-fourth century, the Eclipse controlled much of the galaxy's organized crime and had gained a mythical stature in the folklore of humanity.

The members of the Eclipse lived by a strict code that prohibited unnecessary harm; members of the Eclipse were not allowed to kill innocents or commit violent crimes in the public view. They were required to be professionals and were held to a high standard of conduct. Criminals who acted against the codes were hunted down and killed.

To maintain order within their own organization, all Eclipse members maintained an honor amongst thieves; Eclipse members and their interests could not be harmed by other members. Eclipse groups operated in clearly defined territories and did not compete against other Eclipse groups. Disputes were brought before Eclipse leadership and settled by democratic decision.

The public believed the leaders of the Eclipse to be well-known criminal figures, but the truth was more insidious. The true leaders of the Eclipse were hidden in the shadows. There were two levels of leadership- The Inner and Outer Circles. Both swore oaths to uphold the Eclipse Code and to serve the dual ideals of the criminal brotherhood - Profit and Peace.

The Inner Circle ruled the Eclipse and gave their instructions to Outer Circle members who passed them along to the low level public leaders. The Outer Circle members were recruited from the wealthy, powerful and brilliant throughout the galaxy. Business masterminds, military leaders, scientific geniuses, planetary governors and such were recruited in secret. If they served well as Outer Circle they were brought into the inner elite.

The Eclipse was maintained by individuals known as Eclipse Enforcers who were carefully chosen from the thousands of bounty hunters who worked throughout the galaxy. These Enforcers underwent considerable testing and those who were successful were initiated in a ceremony attended by all inner circle members whose identities were concealed by screens and voice modification.

The Eclipse Enforcers worked directly for the leaders of the Eclipse, receiving instruction via encrypted transmission. They carried messages between the Inner and Outer Circles, served instructions to the public leaders of the Eclipse and brought recruitment offers to potential members of the Outer Circle. The Eclipse Enforcers were privy to the greatest secrets of the galaxy. Each Inner Circle member was required to contribute to payment of Eclipse Enforcers.

In the beginning, the Enforcers were men and women of strong moral virtue and high ethical standard. They swore to uphold the Code and bring to justice any member who violated its tenants. Eclipse Enforcers became well-known personas in the galaxy; most worlds treated them like celebrities. Some say the Galactic Coalition looked away, trusting the Eclipse Enforcers to keep peace and to protect the innocents.

Slowly, as the leadership changed, the code was honored less and less, until finally a group of Inner Circle members joined forces with a number of Outer Circle members. These traitors in the ruling circles made a bid for galactic power. They betrayed the Eclipse Code by using a group of Eclipse Enforcers to assassinate other circle members and take over their interests.

When their actions were revealed, the traitors began to eliminate other circle members who were

not part of their bid for power. This caused a shadow war throughout the galaxy. Hover-cars exploded, mansions burned and rumors spread alleging that many of the most powerful, well-known and respected people in the galaxy were actually leaders of the Eclipse. The brutal conflict raged for almost a year, until the traitors were able to consolidate power sufficiently to dominate the Eclipse.

The end of the Eclipse came in the year 2396. The traitors of the Eclipse who participated in the violations against the old codes were mysteriously assassinated. The brutal killer was believed to be an Eclipse Enforcer who had survived the shadow war and was bringing to justice all those who broke their oaths.

Following the assassinations the organization was unable to remain unified and fragmented completely. By the year 2405 there were many independent criminal groups expanding their influence and attempting to fill the power vacuum left by the fall of the Inner and Outer Circles. These Eclipse Remnants, as they were called, were little more than groups of pirates, smugglers and murders who operated throughout the galaxy and made their base in the Galactic Core.

This is a tale about, Orpheus, one of the most famous bounty hunters of the old Eclipse. The events described herein occurred during the final decades of the old Eclipse.

Star Date 2381.

Chloris System. Planet Terpsichore.

The planet Terpsichore was a dirt ball on the fringes of the frontier. Flat ground, limited vegetation and lots of wind created dust storms in dry weather and muddy mires of misery when it rained.

There was only one space port on the planet. It was little more than a wide dirt field with a few structurally unsound hangers. The hangers were at least fifty years old. Their steel frame supported corrugated panels, many of which had blown off in the frequent wind storms that plagued

Terpsichore. A fuel depot, located in the northeastern part of the field, was covered with peeling red paint and a patchwork of repairs.

Most ships were grounded far from the falling hangers and ill-repaired the depot.

A rusty, metal chain-link fence, fallen in more than a few sections, roughly defined the outer perimeter of the field. Beyond the fence Terpsichore's largest city had grown up in a vast collection of unplanned urban sprawl.

Traditional wooden frame buildings sat next to prefabricated domes and pyramids with photo-electric panels covering their surface. Many of the buildings had false fronts painted with bright enamels in an effort to give the muddy-brown world some color. Many of the facades were now peeling and faded, but one could still read the signs painted in script and bearing words like Hammer's General Store, Credit Slip Saloon and The Original Terpsichore Hotel.

The streets were unpaved and muddy from a recent rain. They were choked with all kinds of battered vehicles- dune buggies, electric motor-bikes and atomic hover-cars. Alongside these high-tech vehicles were more than a few horse drawn wagons and large-wheeled pedal bikes. All were covered with caked on red-brown muck.

Narrow wooden platforms, built as sidewalks along the streets, allowed for mud free access to the storefronts. Despite its dilapidated appearance Terpsichore was a popular destination for settlers from frontier worlds. The bars were renowned throughout the galaxy and law enforcement was lax. Smuggled good were available for ready purchase at deep discount rates and people came from everywhere to arrange deals or make purchases.

Frontier settlers were readily identified by their worn clothing that was simply cut from somber earth-toned fabrics. Frontier men wore long duster coats, covering denim pants and cotton shirts. An oval shaped hat with a turned-up brim completed the outfit. Many of the men wore guns belted low on their hips. Frontier women wore various ensembles depending on their occupation. The married women who kept house or worked in the shops wore traditional calf length dresses of simple pattern and basic earth tones. The women of the range dressed similar to the men, but with tight denims and jackets that clung to their waist and accented their feminine curves. The tavern and dance hall girls wore frilly costumes that hid little and exposed much.

Clothing marked visitors to the frontier as well. Persons from the Prime System planets were

easily recognized by their off the rack shirts and slacks with bright colors and pressed creases, while persons from the Galactic Core were just as easily identified by their dark clothing and skulking manner. Nomads, the transient space-born people, traveled in small isolated groups set apart by their reticent ways and their well-worn, grease-stained flight suits. They kept to themselves while visiting various shops to broker deals for merchandise, information or commodities.

Along the wooden sidewalk, a twelve-year old boy followed an elderly gentleman through the crowds. The boy had dirty blond hair and green eyes; he was dressed in simple cut jeans, with torn knees and a tattered tan jacket. He was a child of the frontier, most likely orphaned when his parents met some tragic demise.

The man was dressed in an exquisite, white, knee-length tunic that was trimmed with gold thread. He was most certainly from the Prime System, perhaps from the planet Themis were it was popular to imitate the dress and architectural styles of Rome and Greece - two civilizations of old Earth.

The man wore his purse on his belt; a foolish thing to do while walking the streets of Terpsichore's bustling, if battered metropolis. The boy darted forward and with practiced ease cut the man's purse strings with a small knife. The purse dropped into his hands, but before his fingers could close over his bounty, the small sack was pulled from his palm by the old man's wrinkled fingers.

"I'll take that back," said the man.

The boy attempted to run, but the old man's other hand clasped on his arm with a grip that was impossibly strong.

"Thief," sneered the old man.

"No," replied the boy. "You offered me your purse by wearing it on your belt."

The old man smiled and asked, "What is your name boy?"

The boy looked away.

"My name is Lucius," spoke the old man. "You don't have to tell me yours. . . Names are not important in my business."

The boy struggled attempting to escape, but Lucius held him fast. "Don't be in such a hurry boy an opportunity has presented itself to you. Do you want food in your belly and a roof over your

bed?”

“Nothing is free,” said the boy.

“I can promise you an honest job,” spoke Lucius. “You will clean pots and pans and sometimes serve food. You’ll never go hungry and always have a roof over your head.”

“There must be more to it,” spoke the boy, warily.

“My offer is genuine,” spoke Lucius as he released his grip.

“No way,” said the boy as he backed away. Life on the street had taught him everything had a price.

“Run back to your street, boy,” sneered the man. “Go to your life of ignoble crime. Justice will catch up with you one day.”

The boy turned to run, but his eye caught the ring on the man’s finger. . . The scales of justice . . . The ring of a judge sanctioned by the Galactic Coalition. The boy stopped and tentatively returned to the elderly man.

“You’re a judge?” asked the boy.

The man nodded. “I am the Honorable Lucius Van Drate.”

“If you are offering an honest job I’ll accept,” said the boy, for he did not like his life. He knew there was something better and the old man did seem genuine. Judges had to be good people, didn’t they?

“Are you an orphan?” asked the Judge.

“Yes,” replied the boy. “My father brought my mother and I to this world to start a farm. He was swindled by a land agent and took a job cleaning the streets. A year and a half ago my parents were murdered when a burglar broke into our home. I have been living on the streets my father cleaned ever since.”

The boy related his tale without any emotion. The streets had made him hard, but the man could see the boy knew the difference between right and wrong. The child could be saved.

“Instead of a foster care system the government uses orphaned and unwanted children as workers within governmental agencies,” explained the man. “The children are given a place to live and receive a basic education, in exchange for the services they provide. You will be assigned to work in the kitchen of the courthouse where I preside.

“After one year I will summon you again and offer you another job, one that will allow you to serve society and live well, but only if you meet these three demands: One. You will never answer a single question about your past; mention neither me nor our arrangement to anyone. Two. You will not commit another crime. Three. You will educate yourself. Do you agree to these terms?”

“Yes,” spoke the boy.

Judge Van Drate who was well known throughout the galaxy for his harsh, unyielding sentences motioned to the alleyway between a pair of buildings, “Accompany my associate.” The judge motioned to a dangerous-looking man standing in the shadows wearing a black jumpsuit that bore the insignia of the Supreme Court of the Galactic Coalition.

As the boy was led away, the Judge reminded, “If you honor my demands I will see you again in one year.”

Star Date 2382.

Prime System. Planet Themis.

One year later.

The planet Themis was the seat of government for the Galactic Coalition, from this planet the broad expanse of human controlled space was administrated. In this city were the governmental offices that housed the thousands of bureaucrats and elected representatives from the numerous worlds in the Coalition. It was here these great men and women met in the great domed coliseum to debate and decide the course of humanity.

The buildings of the capital city were constructed from polished, white ferrocrete and reached hundreds of stories into the sky. The bases of the buildings were ponderous square structures with wide stone porches overhung by roofs supported by towering columns. Above the bases, most buildings had a stepped construction that gave the appearance of rising towers.

The exterior walls of the buildings were adorned with marble statues recessed into tall arched nooks and dotted by glass-steel windows. White ferrocrete skywalks covered by shining energy shields stretched from building to building on various levels. All of the roofs had platforms for

VTOL vehicles owned by the wealthy that disdained the use of the roads beneath the buildings and a steady traffic of vehicles passed in streams overhead following electro-magnetic projections that guided the vehicles along established flight paths.

The wide avenues between the buildings were paved with rough black ferrocrete. A variety of wheeled and hover vehicles traveled the broad tree lined avenues. Wide beams of colored lights shined across intersections, controlling traffics and slowing the guidance systems of vehicles should the driver become inattentive.

The sidewalks, laid with grey ferrocrete, were walked on by citizens wearing richly embroidered tunics belted at the waist. The tunics worn by the women generally reached to their ankles, but the men's stopped at their knees. They were sleeveless in the temperate weather and held together by gold or silver clasps at the shoulder. Many of people carried attaché cases.

There was no sign of poverty, degeneration or of the many ills that traditionally plagued human society. The people of Themis did not go hungry. They were happy people who valued the beauty of humanity's new home and were confident that the armed forces of the Galactic Coalition would protect them from any harm.

The Galactic Courthouse was the most prominent building of the Judicial District. In fact it was second largest building in the Capital City; only the Coalition Coliseum was larger. The massive courthouse was built in white ferrocrete and covered almost three city block. It was over one hundred stories high. The courts and chambers of the twenty-one Justices who presided over the Supreme Court of the Galactic Coalition were contained within. The Supreme Court was the highest court in Neo-Eden, whose jurisdiction covered all planetary courts.

Deep within this structure a young man with dirty blond hair and green eyes labored over a sink washing pots within the cafeteria that served the Supreme Justices of the Galactic Coalition. The boy scrubbed hard at a stubborn stain and hummed softly as he worked. The boy had labored in the kitchen every day for the past year without complaint. He didn't enjoy this work, but he was happy. It was honest work and would lead him to a better life than he had on Terpsichore.

The boy lived in a barrack house with other orphan boys and girls as wards of the planetary government of Themis. A Headmaster supervised the barracks and ensured the children completed the work schedule that controlled their lives. When the children came of age they were paid a lump

sum payment for their labors and offered a low level administrative job on one of the frontier worlds.

He was nervous today and working more slowly than usual. It was exactly a year ago that he had left Terpsichore with the Judge who promised to see him again in a year. He wondered if the Judge would keep his promise; he wondered where that promise would lead him. He dared to hope for an appointment in the Judicial Guard. He stood in awe of the dangerous-looking men and women, who dressed in crisp uniforms and carried themselves with precise military bearing. He day-dreamed about having a chance to wear the insignia of the courts and to be a defender of justice in the galaxy.

The boy finished the last pot and wiped his hands on a towel. He was the last person to leave the kitchen and as he moved into the hall the same judicial guardsman who had escorted him to the kitchen a year earlier met him in the corridor. The guardsman was dressed in a black tunic that bore the insignia of the court and armed with a laser pistol strapped into the holster on his belt.

“Come with me,” spoke the judicial guardsmen.

The boy obediently followed. He could barely contain his excitement. The old judge was keeping his promises. He had kept his side of their bargain. He had committed no crimes, fulfilled all his duties without complaint, studied in school and told no one of his past.

The boy was brought before Judge Van Drate whom he had met on Terpsichore twelve months ago. They met in the judge's darkened chamber with plush furniture and many ancient books sitting on shelves along the walls. Books were a sign of wealth and power; most writing was contained on disks and read from reader-screens.

“You upheld your end of our bargain,” began the Judge. “You told no one of your past and -more importantly- of your connection to me. You have not been accused of thieving and have done well in the school. I will uphold my end of our bargain.”

“What will I be doing?” asked the young teenage boy, unable to contain his excitement. Then he added, “Your honor.” A little embarrassed that he forgot to address the Judge properly.

“Are you tired of washing dishes?” asked the Judge in a kindly way.

“Dishwashing is noble work, your honor” said the boy.

The old man chuckled. “Is that what you think?” he asked.

“Your honor, the Headmaster says so and I would not wish to contradict,” replied the boy.

“What do you think?”

The boy considered his reply carefully. “Your honor I think dishwashing may be noble for some, but I would like to do something a little more noble.”

“Thirteen years old and very well-spoken,” mused the Judge. “You have done extremely well in school. Your teachers rate your intellectual and physical abilities highly. Your talents are wasted in the kitchen. Would you like to begin training as a Judicial Guardsmen?”

“Yes! Yes, your honor,” said the boy.

The Judge smiled proudly and spoke, “You will master physical combat, various personal weapons, vehicle weapon systems, navigation and piloting. You’ll study various academic disciplines and go through a basic military operations training program. Your days will be long and the training will be challenging, but the most important thing you will learn is the Law. You may quit at anytime and I will have you placed back in another less taxing job.”

“I won’t quit,” spoke the boy.

“I didn’t think you would,” replied Judge Lucius Van Drate. “I will see you again in five years after your training is complete.”

Star Date 2387.

Prime System. Planet Themis.

Five years later.

The boy, now an eighteen-year old young man, waited in the darkened meeting room deep in the headquarters of the Supreme Court Building. The boy had filled out into a man’s physique. He was fit and five years of hard physical training had left his muscles well-defined. His face was calm and framed by short-cropped blond hair. His green eyes displayed the confidence carried in the way he walked and moved. He was dressed in a grey jumpsuit bearing the insignia of the judicial training corps.

Judge Lucius Van Drate had not changed at all. Though well passed seventy he walked with a sure and steady step. The Judge sat across the table from the young man and laid the young man’s

school record between them. He did not open the file.

“You have completed the judicial officer training program with honors,” spoke Lucius. “You earned the highest grades in a decade and you beat the infamous hostage recovery test scenario without the loss of a single hostage. Your combat abilities are without equal among your peers. I am very happy to have plucked you from that dusty planet so many years ago.”

“Thank you, your honor,” replied the young man.

“How do you feel about becoming a Judicial Guardsmen?” asked the Judge.

“I desire to serve the law,” answered the young man.

Judge seemed to contemplate, “You are too good for them,” he spoke. “Your grades are excellent you should apply to a school of law and become a member of the bar.”

“I want to be in law enforcement. Your honor. I like learning, but I like action,” spoke the young man full of youthful exuberance.

The judge took a deep breath, “I do have another opportunity for you. It will involve much action and afford you an opportunity to make a great difference in the galaxy.”

“Please, your honor, tell me,” asked the young man.

“I will only speak of this opportunity if you give your promise to never reveal what I will tell you,” spoke the Judge. “Even if you turn down my offer and you take some other job. You must never break your word.”

“I give you my word,” spoke the young man. “I’ll never tell your secrets.”

The Judge shook his head. “You are replying with the enthusiasm of youth. Your response lacks the wisdom of careful consideration. Think for a moment. Consider. I will need you to keep your word, under any circumstance.”

“I will keep your confidence,” replied the young man. “I owe you my life.”

“No,” spoke the Judge. “All I did was give you an opportunity. Your success has been on your own merit and I am very proud of you.”

The Judge was silent for a long moment and the young man finally spoke up, “Your honor. Why do you hesitate?”

“You are too good for the job I have to offer,” sighed the Judge. “I will secure you an appointment in the Judicial Guard. You are dismissed.”

“Your Honor, Please, tell me of the other job,” said the young man. “I can do it!”

Judge Van Drate closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. Then he spoke, “Nearly three decades ago I became disillusioned with the law. I had devoted my life to justice and the judicial bench, but I felt my efforts were not making a real difference in the galaxy. As the years passed, I become more discouraged. More laws were placed onto the books and the laws seemed to hamper the fair administration of justice. I was going to resign my appointment, because nothing I did truly influenced criminal activity in a manner to make the galaxy a better, safer place. During this time of self-doubt I was approached by an organization known as the Eclipse. Have you heard of them?”

“Everyone has heard of the Eclipse. They are a mythical criminal shadow government whose influence is said to reach across the galaxy. Their base is rumored to be located in the Galactic Core.”

“The Eclipse is real. An Inner Circle of thirteen members controls the entire organization through a network of operatives and intermediaries. The leaders of the Eclipse have been powerful, just persons throughout the galaxy- elected planetary governors, super-wealthy business executives, brilliant scientific geniuses, decorated military leaders and a Judge from the Supreme Court of the Galactic Coalition.”

The young man’s face betrayed his confusion, but before that confusion could turn to rage, the old Judge placed his hand on the young man’s arm.

“Hear me out before you condemn me,” insisted the Judge. “There has always been a Supreme Court Judge who serves on the Inner Circle. My mentor who was the head Judge during his day recommended me.”

“ Judge Merkton?” interrupted the young man hotly. “He was a hero! An advocate for justice throughout the realm. Merciless to criminals!”

“Yes,” agreed the Judge raising his voice. “He was all that, and a member of the Inner Circle of the Eclipse!”

“I don’t believe it.” The young man tried to deny the truth, but he could see it written in the old man’s face.

“Why do you think pirates no longer slaughter the crews of the ships they raid?” asked the Judge. “When was the last time a government administrator was killed or a prison raided to free

criminals? Judge Merton and the founders of the Eclipse brought order to all criminal enterprises throughout the galaxy. They created these prohibitions to protect innocents in the interests of improving profits. I am continuing his work to make the galaxy a safe place by forcing criminals to police themselves.”

“I can’t believe it?” spoke the young man. “The greatest criminal organization on the galaxy is controlled by the leaders of lawful society?”

“Despite governmental law enforcement crime will always exist!” insisted the Judge, “The Eclipse control crime from the opposite side of the law. Over the past five decades the Inner Circle has grown in power and our stabilizing influence has reached across the galaxy. The Inner Circle settles all disputes between criminal organizations. They have divided up the galaxy into sectors and hold everyone responsible to their code. Rogue criminals are hunted down. The Eclipse brings order to criminal activity and higher profits are realized for all. The side effect of this attracted me to the Inner Circle. We have made the galaxy a safer place. Crime is controlled and innocents are not harmed.”

“How would I fit in,” asked the young man, still not convinced.

The Judge sighed, “The Eclipse is a noble ideal, but greed, corruption and the other failings of humanity has lead to the downfall of greater organizations. There are things happening within the Eclipse organization that cannot be fully explained. Over the past few years certain profitable criminal enterprises throughout the galaxy have been consolidated under specific public leaders. I am afraid that some members of the Inner or Outer circles are acting in concert against the interests of other members. This will fragment the Eclipse and destroy all of our noble work.”

“I need a man on the inside who I can trust that is not connected to me,” spoke the Judge. “Everyone knows the Eclipse uses a core of individuals called Enforcers to carry messages, implement policy and compel compliance with the code of conduct. When members of the Eclipse violate the codes by straying from their territories, harming innocents or acting against the interests of the Eclipse they are judged by the Inner Circle. Eclipse Enforcers are assigned to execute these individuals. I think that certain members of the Inner Circle are using the Eclipse Enforcers to secretly murder key individuals in other member’s power structures. I want to plant an agent into the Eclipse Enforcers who can spy for me! I want you to get proof this is happening so I can reveal

the treachery to the other members of the Inner Circle.”

“How will I get in?”

“I will send you for training as a bounty hunter. After your training, I will secretly provide fund for you to purchase a ship and state of the art equipment. You’ll have to attract the attention of the Eclipse by collaring large bounties. I’ll use my connections to provide you with contacts, who will offer you tips on which bounties to collect. The connection between us will be untraceable. If you are good enough Eclipse Enforcers will approach you. If not you can continue living as a bounty hunter or return to the Judicial Guards and work for another Judge.”

“What will I do after I get in?” asked the young man.

“After you become an Eclipse Enforcer you’ll report directly to the Inner Circle and I’ll be able to make contact with you that will not arise suspicion. There is significant contact between circle members and the Enforcers. Together we will ensure that the Eclipse stays true to its noble goals. Do you have any questions?”

“You are reputed to be a pillar of the Judicial System,” said the young man as he shook his head in wonderment. “I don’t understand how you can allow yourself to profit from crime?”

“I do not profit from my involvement in the Inner Circle,” spoke the Judge firmly. “My share of the profits, and it is great, is sent secretly to various charities, but a portion has been kept to outfit my spy. You will receive a ship, weapons and a power armor suit with the best technology available in the galaxy. You will establish a secret base for yourself and begin operations for the Inner Circle.”

“You keep none of the wealth?” asked the young man.

“No,” insisted the Judge. “I serve the law, as did my predecessor. I am the self-appointed guardian of the Eclipse Code. If the Eclipse ever strays from its codes and stops being a benefit to society I will revel in its destruction. To me, as to my predecessor Judge Merkton, the Eclipse is a means to protect society and not a path to personal power or wealth.”

“I will do this,” replied the young man. “I will serve the Eclipse, but only so long as I am doing good in the world.”

“Good,” said the Judge. “And if you ever doubt the sincerity of my dedication to justice, I will release you from you oath of secrecy. You may reveal all that you know.”

The young man nodded, “If I learn that you have lied to me, I will reveal everything and destroy you.”

“I would not have it any other way,” spoke the Judge. “You will have another year of training in the best mercenary school in the galaxy and then another six months of pilot and suit training. Then you will be ready to work as a bounty hunter. Establish yourself around Prometheus in the Gemini System- many Eclipse Enforcers are recruited from that area of the galaxy. I will contact you again after your appointment as an Eclipse Enforcer.”

Star Date 2390.

Galactic Core. Planet Unknown.

Three years later. Fifteen years ago.

The chamber was lit by a single spot light shining down on the five men and one woman standing in the center of the chamber. The bounty hunters could not see into the darkness beyond the spotlight, but they were aware of movement around them as hidden persons were taking their places on a raised platform high above them.

The bounty hunters had made their living by capturing criminals under warrants issued by planetary judges and receiving the bounties paid by the governments. Every planet has its own local court and their judges are empowered by the Galactic Coalition to issue warrants for criminals fleeing their jurisdiction. The Galactic Coalition also licenses bounty hunters to execute these planetary warrants. The planets are allowed to set the bounties they pay for criminals at any sum they desire.

From the ranks of bounty hunters, the Inner Circle recruited those with the best reputations. The hunters are approached by a secret agent and asked to perform a series of tests. If these tests are passed, they are offered a position as an Eclipse Enforcer and then inducted in a special ceremony before the Inner Circle. These hunters had passed the tests and were about to be brought into the secret organization.

Most of the hunters wore standard issue military power armor that was customized by the user and painted in special colors and patterns to identify them. Bounty hunters liked to keep their identities a secret and they almost always wore full-face helmets. Most bounty hunters created

public identities around their armor and advertised their services.

Laws were created to protect the identities of bounty hunters so their families would not suffer reprisals from the criminals they hunted. The laws were so strict that the identity of a bounty hunter charged with a crime could not be determined, until he was tried and found guilty.

Two hunters, not wearing standard power armor, stood apart from the others. Their reputations were known throughout most of the galaxy and their services were in high demand on delicate cases. Pydrous, famous for his commercials on holo-shows, wore a suit of Edbrock power armor. It was top of the line, a very expensive model and was painted in a flame pattern. He carried his favorite weapon- a heavy plasma-thruster capable of vaporizing the strongest metals.

Orpheus wore a custom suit of polished chrome and black power armor. The manufacturer of the unique suit could not be identified. It was most likely an experimental model by a speculating manufacturing company. He carried an eclectic group of weapons.

In the shadows around the outer wall of the room was a circular platform twice the height of a man. On this platform, looking down into the center of the room were the thirteen members of the Inner Circle of the Eclipse. The darkness and an electronic cloaking field obscured them from view of the bounty hunters. A speaker system camouflaged their voice by introducing an electronic graininess to their words.

“You six bounty hunters have been chosen to join the esteemed rank of Eclipse Enforcers,” spoke Admiral Maximus commander of the Galactic Coalition’s fifth fleet. “You do not need to know our real names. Our faces are hidden behind these screens and our voices modified by electronics. We are the Inner Circle of the Eclipse and you are the instrument of our Justice. You will be paid well for your services.”

“You will receive your assignments via encrypted transmissions,” spoke Planetary Governor Amelius Roan. “You will complete your assignments promptly and your fee will be deposited in your credit account. Fees are set by schedule and no negotiation is possible. You may refuse an assignment and the assignment will be passed to the next bounty hunter. Refusing three assignments will result in your dismissal. You may terminate your involvement with the Eclipse by conveying such to us, but you may never publically confirm your involvement in our organization.”

“Revelation of our secrets will result in the termination of your life,” spoke the Mystic

Dolores Canterwheel. “The true leadership of the Eclipse survives by secrecy and mystery. It serves our purpose to have a public personas pretend to broker power. These lower level leaders follow our instruction and allow us to remain hidden. You will never reveal the Inner Circle as you have seen it this day.”

“Rumors will abound about your involvement with Eclipse as you conduct our business,” continued Dolores, “but you must never comment on their veracity. Let others claim to work for the Eclipse, but let its true enforcers remain silent except by action. It is better to die than to reveal what you know of us.” Then she added cryptically, “Do not be tempted to boast! Keep your oath while in bed and when in your cups. We have many ways to determine if you break your silence.”

“You will follow the codes of the Eclipse,” spoke Supreme Court Judge Lucius Van Drate. “You will avoid harming innocents or damaging property and will conduct yourself within the parameters of planetary laws so long as you serve the Eclipse. We are an institution of established order and you are the instrument of our enforcement.”

“The peaceful conduction of criminal enterprise is of benefit to society,” added Herman Westfall one of the richest businessman in the galaxy. “Higher profits are made when there is a no discord between criminal organizations or antagonism with the general population. Your task will be to remove criminal elements who are not willing to minimize violent or pernicious intrusions into the orderly administration of society.”

“Many of us are businessmen who value the bottom line,” spoke Crandel Marks who made a fortune in various financial transactions and owned his own planet. “The Inner Circle must ensure profits are kept high. The rank and file members of the Eclipse adhere to our tenants because they are doing better with us than they did without us. Profit and power is the motivation behind our unification.”

Orpheus listened to the members of the Inner Circle speak of high-minded ideals. He wondered how much of it they really believed. There ceremony was nice, but Orpheus did not appreciate it. He was happy when the presentation was concluded, and an electronically obscured voice spoke, “Go forth Eclipse Enforcers and serve the interests of an orderly society. Let peace and profit be your goal.”

Star Date 2392.

Dementer System. Planet Kalliope

Two years later.

Humans have always been compelled by some intrinsic desire to press the boundaries of their civilization into unknown areas. The colonists of Neo-Eden are no different from the pioneers of old Earth. Despite the many dangers the explorers push further into the bleakness of space.

Each year finds new worlds settled on the Galactic Frontier. The Frontier holds the promise of opportunity, blended with the despair of failure and the certainty of calamity. Despite the hardship, there is a wild excitement on the Frontier that is lost to the people in the Prime System. One minute a man can be scratching out an existence on a barely oxygenated world and the next minute, after hitting a mother load of precious mineral he can become wealthy beyond his dreams, but for most in these far-flung colonies life is not easy.

The colonists have to make do with second-rate equipment, medical care is lacking and law is desperately needed. The Galactic Coalition does not patrol the Frontier Systems, unless they have a specific interest in a particular world. The locals must hire mercenaries to deal with their problems. On most planets, local barons own the majority of the valuable land while the majority of the people are indentured workers.

The planet Kalliope was not unlike many of the frontier worlds. It had just enough atmosphere, water and minerals to make human colonization possible. Near the equator was a mountain range full of minerals. Thousands of roughly hewn log cabins dotted the area. Most cabins were home to prospectors who worked various claims, but one cabin in particular was the hideout for two hapless fugitives whose luck had finally run out.

The taller fugitive was armed with a laser rifle, while his shorter comrade blasted away with two cartridge revolvers. They were standing on either side of the cabin's wooden door and shooting threw the windows that flanked the door. The glass had been broken outward to provide a clear field of fire. The door was wooden and held closed by a plank slipped between U-shaped wrought iron pieces attached to the doorframe.

The two men appeared desperate. Powder smoke from the pistols mingled with the smell

of ozone as the laser rifle fired.

“It’s him,” cried the man with the pistols. “He’s followed us across seven worlds!”

“I told you this was a bad idea!” grumbled the taller fugitive. ““Hide out in the mountains,’ you said. There isn’t even a bathroom in this place- just that bug filled outhouse. I should have never listened to you. We should have hid out in one of the luxury suits on the Prime System . . .at least our final days would have been filled with beer, women and pleasure.”

“We’re not dead yet!” shouted the short man who sat down behind the window. He leaned his back against the wall and began reloading his pistols. The man’s nervous fingers dropped cartridges all over the floor. He fumbled with them, shoving them into the open chambers.

“We will be,” complained the man with the rifle as he stepped back from the window he was covering. “No one escapes from Orpheus!”

“Hey! What are you doing?” cried the other. “Keep shooting.”

“It’s too late!” replied the rifleman. “He’s on the porch. The big man threw down his laser gun in frustration. “Where is the shotgun?”

“No more shells,” said the shorter fugitive. He was finished reloading his pistols.

The door burst in and the armored form of Orpheus stepped through the shower of falling wood splinters. Even in the dim light, the chrome and polished steel of Orpheus’s power armor shone brightly. The surface was only marred by a few singe marks where the lasers had repeatedly stuck and ricocheted off the armor plating.

The fugitive who had thrown his gun to the ground raised his hands. “Mercy. Please,” begged the man.

Orpheus shot him dead center in the chest. The tall man fell heavily to the dirt floor of the cabin. He was dead.

The man with the pistol dove behind the heavy table that he had overturned as a place to make his final stand. “We were set up,” shouted the man with the pistols from behind the table. “Crandel Marks and Amelius Roan gave us the go ahead. They are both Inner Circle members! You should know that!”

Orpheus knew the names, but did not know any members of the Inner Circle besides the Judge, so he could not confirm what the man alleged. The Inner Circle was supposed to keep their

identity a secret.

“We would have never operated outside of our territory unless authorized! You have to listen. The Inner Circle are playing each other false.”

Orpheus paused. His gun wavered. “Explain,” spoke Orpheus.

“Thanks to enforcers like you, the Eclipse controls every criminal enterprise in the Galaxy, but now a few of the Inner Circle members want more power and are moving to get rid of the others. If you’re not careful you’ll end up just like him.” He motioned to his friend on the floor. “I can help you. We can work together.”

Orpheus tossed a grenade over the table. The man jumped up to avoid the explosion. Orpheus fired and blood bubbled from the fugitive’s mouth. The man tried to raise his pistols. Orpheus fired again and the man fell back behind the table. The grenade exploded and the man’s body bounced up and landed at bounty hunter’s feet. Orpheus placed another shot into the bleeding body. As he left, Orpheus pushed over the burning oil lamp to ensure the bodies were destroyed.

Orpheus had recorded the entire exchange and filed it with the others. Over the past few years he had collected a lot of evidence. He could authenticate none of it, but his task was to collect the information and supply it to the Judge.

Star Date 2393.

Gemini System. Planet Prometheus.

One year later.

The Gemini solar system is named for the binary suns that slowly orbit each other. Binary stars have a destabilizing effect on the solar system’s gravitation field enabling jump columns to form much closer to the center of the solar system than they would otherwise be able. Jump gates have been set around the edge of the solar system, enabling travel from Gemini to any of the other solar systems in the galaxy.

The Gemini System serves as a pit stop between the Prime System and the Frontier. Orbiting the edge of the Gemini System are numerous commercial space stations where ships can dock, refuel and purchase supplies. Many contain bars that are common hangouts where mercenaries can look

for jobs. Space pirates favor the Gemini System as a location where they can attack cargo vessels and retreat to the Galactic Core to avoid pursuit.

Prometheus is the system's only planet and is barely habitable. The pull of the twin suns creates earthquakes, unpredictable tides and violent electrical storms. Above the violent planet orbits the Exodus Station, one of the many space stations frequented by interstellar travelers and trades.

The Planet View Tavern was located on the outer ring of the station and was well known for its large glass-steel windows that provided an excellent view of Prometheus. The tavern was also well known for its privacy screens and encrypted communications systems.

Orpheus sat in a privacy booth in the back of the tavern and stared down at Prometheus. Orpheus always used the Planet View Tavern, because he knew he could trust the privacy of the booths. The tavern was owned by a man who knew the value of secrecy.

Orpheus turned his attention to the patrons of the tavern. About half the tables were filled by a group of genetic trooper space marines. The Coalition Military produced GenEs - genetically enhanced humans- who were grown in test tubes and subject to accelerated ageing until they enter adolescence when they are awoken and subjected to a strict training regime designed to turn them into the ultimate soldier.

A pretty waitress hung around the marines' tables much longer than was necessary. When she turned Orpheus noticed she had a black tattoo that marked her as a retired Fade. Fades were a group of GenEs who served the Coalition Military as scouts, spies and assassins. All GenEs could buy their way out of the military and when they left the service they were branded with a tattoo.

The rest of the tavern was filled with an eclectic mix of persons. None of them interested Orpheus. He was here to meet Pydrous, who was the last surviving bounty hunter in the group that joined the Eclipse ranks with him. Being an Eclipse Enforcer was very lucrative, but also very dangerous- only the best survived- and they rarely retired to enjoy the wealth they earned.

When Pydrous entered the bar his familiar flame power armor drew looks from the crowd. The people of Neo-Eden loved hearing about bounty hunters capturing fugitives and returning them to the planetary governments for justice. The profession of bounty hunter was romanticized and hunters like Pydrous played on these notions. He made appearances on holo-shows whenever

possible and was very well known. Of course rumors circulated about his connection to the Eclipse, but he neither confirmed nor denied their veracity. He lived on the edge.

“Hello, Chrome Dome,” said Pydrous through his suits external speakers.

Orpheus toggled the privacy controls on their booth. This ensured their conversation would not be overheard.

“We are being used,” spoke Orpheus. “Our assignments are falsely generated by a few members of the Inner Circle. We are killing persons who have not broken the code to give an advantage to a few members of the circle.”

Pydrous laughed. “Welcome to the real world my over-polished friend.”

“You knew?”

Pydrous was suddenly serious. “Don’t ask questions,” said Pydrous. “Our job is simple-we kill when and who we are told to-so don’t make it complicated.”

“The code . . .” began Orpheus.

“The code is just the excuse we use to ease our conscious,” interjected Pydrous.

“Our codes benefit society by making criminal activity orderly,” insisted Orpheus. “When the codes are broken the innocents suffer. The whole point of the Eclipse is to make crime less dangerous to society.”

“The point of crime is wealth and power,” corrected Pydrous. “And the Eclipse is merely an instrument to facilitate those endeavors. Don’t involve yourself in noble causes. We are killers for higher.”

“I serve the Eclipse because my service benefits society,” insisted Orpheus. “When the leadership violates the code their actions invalidate the organization.”

“Stay out of the politics,” warned Pydrous. “And don’t be so naive. The consolidation of power started years ago. The machinations of the Inner Circle are not your affair!”

“We must do something!” said Orpheus.

“What will we do?” laughed Pydrous. “Reveal the betrayals to the other members of the Inner Circle?” When Orpheus did not reply, Pydrous shook his head. “That’s insane!” he spoke, “You’ll just get yourself killed.”

“This is bigger than me,” Orpheus assured him.

“You got that right,” said Pydrous. “Walk away from the truth,” Pydrous warned as he rose from the table. “You’ll start something you won’t like! There is too much we don’t know. Do the jobs and take the money. The only noble causes are fast ships and faster women.”

Orpheus watched Pydrous leave with a sinking feeling. Three years had passed and he really didn’t know much. He had some names and a disjointed web of conjecture and supposition. Regardless it was time to contact the Judge and let him decide their next course of action.

Orpheus keyed in the transmittal coordinates and a short while later Judge Lucius Van Drate appeared on the scene.

“I have confirmed that the other Eclipse Enforcers suspect foul play, but they do not object to the brokering of power so long as they get paid.” Orpheus placed a silver wafer thin disk into the communications terminal and hit transmit. “This is the recent information I recorded. It confirms that Crandel Marks and Amelius Roan have linked with members of the Outer Circle to consolidate power among themselves..”

The Judge quickly scanned the transmissions. “It is time to act,” said the Judge. “If I delay any longer we may not be able to stop them. Your newest recordings indicate Eclipse Enforcers are active in their scheme. I had hoped them all to be just pawns.”

“I am sorry Judge,” spoke Orpheus. “There are at least five Enforcers, including Pydrous, who work exclusively for the traitors.”

“I am going to approach the members of the Inner and Outer Circles who are not implicated in this usurpation,” said the Judge. “This must be stopped immediately.”

“Please don’t do anything until I get to the Prime System!” warned Orpheus. “You will need professional protection.”

“I will be safe in the Court Complex,” spoke the Judge.

Star Date 2393.

Interstellar Space.

One month later.

Every bounty hunter needs their own ship; A ship is more than a means of transportation. A ship a hunter's home and a reflection of the owner.

While it was true some hunters relied on public transportation, most find it necessary to have their own ship. This was especially true when a bounty hunter needs to get someplace in a hurry without anyone knowing. On this occasion Orpheus pushed his ship past safe operating speeds as he raced toward Themis hoping to arrive before the traitors in the Eclipse made their move against Judge Van Drate.

The Shattered Sun was the epitome of efficiency. She was a sleek, long-range patrol craft that relied on speed, stealth and a very expensive sensor array to navigate quickly through space and avoid detection.

She was worth every credit Judge Van Drate had supplied to outfit her.

The Shattered Sun consisted of four compartments. She could be operated by one person, but can hold up to nine comfortably.

The bow compartment contained the cockpit. The view screen took up the entire front wall of the compartment. The command console was in front of a large black captain's chair. The living area of the ship was directly behind the command compartment. The area consisted of four staterooms with two bunks each, the captain's stateroom and lounge a table and chairs that rose out of the floor, a privy closet with sonic shower and tasty food preparation system.

The third compartment was used to store equipment and had a two-wheeled transport bike, weapons cabinet and large bay door, which opened to the outside. The stern-most and largest area of the ship contained the jump drive and sub-light propulsion systems. Fuel was stored in the bulwark of the hull and two illegal guns were mounted in pop-up turrets recessed into the belly of the vessel.

Orpheus had raced toward the Prime System, but learned he was too late as he dropped out of the gravity well outside the Prime System. The video scene in the command console of the Shattered Sun showed the devastation. The voice over explained, "Less than an hour ago a bomb ripped through the chamber of Coalition Judge Lucius Van Drate. The seventy-eight year old jurist and two clerks were killed in the blast."

Orpheus landed on the planet and after the security forces left the Judges Chambers, he moved in to conduct his own investigation. As he moved through the shattered remains of the judicial office he was startled to see Pydrous land on the balcony outside the chambers.

Orpheus moved back behind a wall and watched Pydrous enter.

“The sensors on my suit can detect your stealth mode,” announced Pydrous. Pydrous had his plasma-flamer cocked and ready. It was a powerful weapon, easily capable of vaporizing the armor plating of Orpheus’ suit.

“I killed the old Judge,” spoke Pydrous. “Then I left the bomb that destroyed his body and killed the clerks.”

“Why are you telling me this?” asked Orpheus.

“You’re my next contract,” laughed Pydrous. “I told you to leave it alone, but you didn’t. You’re not the only plant among the Eclipse Enforcers. Crandel Marks suspected the Judge might be suspicious enough to try to infiltrate the enforcer ranks so I was Mark’s plant. As soon as you talked to me in the Planet View I knew the Judge would soon reveal his hand.”

“The code . . .” said Orpheus.

“Enough of your sanctimonious jargon. The code is crap!” laughed Pydrous. “You’re the one loose end I am going to enjoy tying up.”

Pydrous squeezed the trigger on his plasma-flamer and a stream of super heated molecules lanced out vaporizing a section of the wall Orpheus was standing behind. Orpheus moved back into the shadows.

“Come on, Chrome Dome,” challenged Pydrous. “Didn’t you ever wonder who was better? You or I?”

Pydrous raised the plasma-flamer and fired again, but Orpheus was already moving. The beam sliced harmlessly past Orpheus expending its energy against a ferrocrete support pillar. Orpheus exited the judge’s chambers by leaping from the window. The anti-gravity boosters in his suit kicked in and the maneuver jets fired. He sped away from the judicial building.

He did not think Pydrous would risk firing into the open air, but he was wrong. The stream of molecules lanced out lighting up the sky alerting everyone to their struggle. Bystanders flying above in VTOLs and those on the ground were drawn to the life and death conflict of Pydrous and

Orpheus, two of the best-known bounty hunters in the Galaxy!

Orpheus continued to flee using the shielded walkways to give cover from the plasma-flamer. He knew it was only a matter of time before a blast struck him. Orpheus flew behind a skywalk in an effort to lead Pydrous around behind him. As Pydrous made the turn downward, Orpheus quickly revolved around the skywalk to come up behind Pydrous. Orpheus used his short blade to slice cleanly through Pydrous' plasma-flamer. The weapon sputtered, leaking fluid from its severed chamber.

Pydrous cursed and reached for his hand flamer, a smaller version of the broken weapon that was more than powerful enough to punch holes in Orpheus' armor. "I'm going to enjoy killing you," sneered Pydrous. "You're the only other hunter who may be as good as me!"

As Pydrous drew his weapon, Orpheus thrust his steel blade through Pydrous' chest plate and into the traitor's heart.

"Despite what you advertised on the vid-screens and holo-shows I always knew I was the better man," Orpheus told him.

Pydrous' body spun away. With the gyro-jets out of control and blood leaking from the hole in his power armor, the corpse bounced off two skywalks leaving bloody marks on the ferrocrete. On the second impact the armor broke apart and pieces of the body rained down on the street below.

Following the spectacular combat Orpheus disappeared from public view; everyone believed the Eclipse had killed him.

Star Date 2396.

Galactic Core. Planet Unknown.

Three years later.

Crandel Marks owned a planet and had the best security forces in Neo-Eden, but he was still afraid. He knew Orpheus was not dead. Orpheus has transmitted his evidence to the other members of the Inner Circle about two years ago and then disappeared.

The Inner Circle fragmented with recriminations on all sides and a bloody shadow war started. At the beginning Crandel was in a strong position supported by three of the thirteen Inner

Circle Members- Amelius Roan, Jamiston Breyer and Julia Dyran. A host of Outer Circle members hoping to climb into the Inner Circle when seats became vacate due to the war also supported Crandel.

Loses occurred on all sides and profits were down, Herman Westfall, ever the pragmatic businessman, was the first to suggest a truce. Admiral Maximus was the only one who objected. Crandel Marks was negotiating a truce when Amelius Roan angered by a statement made by Admiral Maximus had the Admiral assassinated. As it turned out the Admiral was sexually involved with the Mystic Dolores Canterwheel who killed Amelius Roan fro revenge during the final meeting of the Inner Circle.

A year ago on the anniversary of the old Judge's murder, Jamiston Breyer was assassinated. He was the first of a long string of unexplained murders claiming the lives of Outer Circle members who had allied themselves with Crandel Marks. Bombs, traps and execution style killings had claimed everyone involved in the power struggle that doomed the Eclipse.

Today was the third anniversary of the Judge Van Drate's murder. Crandel Marks spent the day inside his lavish estate protected by guardian robots, battle androids, retired GenE space marines and cyber-security forces.

"There is no way he can get me here," spoke Crandel to his reflection in the full-length mirror in his bedroom.

The mirror exploded into the room, sending a shower of shards everywhere. Orpheus stepped into Crandel's bedroom. Orpheus had tunneled under the house, cut through the slab foundation and into the air filtration system. A main duct ran adjacent to Crandel's bedchamber.

"It's not possible," shouted Crandel.

Orpheus shot Crandel through the heart and tossed a flame grenade onto the body to insure its destruction.