

Rikti

3.1 History

In order to understand the Rikti and where they come from, you must first understand the nature of the universe. Bear with me a minute here. As is now known, thanks to the efforts of the Dr. Brian Webb, the universe itself is divided into countless alternate dimensions, each moving forward through time at roughly the same pace. Some of these alternate realities are nearly identical to our own, with differences that would be unnoticeable to even the most observant visitor. Others diverge significantly in certain areas (such as who won World War II) but remain recognizable as our own Earth. There also exist alternate Earths that went down a divergent path long, long ago, such that now they seem entirely alien to us. The Rikti Earth is one of these.

10,000 years ago, the so-called Rikti Earth (the residents would just call it Earth if they were to speak English) looked very much like our world did. It had even had its own versions of Oranbega and Mu, both of which had already disappeared from the face of the planet when first contact with an alien race took place. Travel between the stars is very, very rare, even across the vast multitude of alternate realities. The times and distances involved are so vast, that only the most technologically or magically advanced societies can even contemplate it. As it turns out, breaking the dimension barrier between realities is much easier (not that it's in any way easy or even very common). Thus, most of the "aliens" that have visited our Earth come from other dimensions, not other planets. However, on the Rikti Earth they received visitors from a genuine alien world. True extraterrestrials.

The residents of Rikti Earth in those days were human just like us, and equally primitive. Most of the world was in a stone or wood age culture of one sort or another, with a few city-states advancing into the realm of metal working. The great magics of Mu and Oranbega were gone, but religion and magic remained as powerful forces in the everyday lives of most people. Then the Progenitors came. The aliens arrived in a single starship that had just made a three thousand year journey through space at near-light speed. They were one of several hundred such ships that had fled their home world in the wake of an uncontrollable environmental disaster that rendered the entire world uninhabitable in just a few years. The aliens, already talented astronomers, had located a number of potentially habitable worlds but had never visited them because of the tremendous distances involved. Now they had no choice. They constructed space-worthy arks, each large enough to hold a few hundred passengers along with vast stores of food, technology, and complete DNA databases of their home world's flora and fauna.

The fate of the other arks remains a mystery, but the one that landed on the Rikti Earth found a new, and mostly habitable home. The ship had first made a series of orbits around the planet, carefully mapping it and studying its population centers. They chose a relatively remote, desert location in what we would call the Middle East as their landing point – somewhere well away from any sentient observers. The air was breathable but only just so. They took soil, air, and water samples, monitored themselves closely and, after a few months of undisturbed living, decided the place was safe to live in.

Their original plan had been to find a nice quiet corner of the globe, set up their own little settlement and start to slowly rebuild the world they had left behind, only this time learning from their mistakes. The Progenitors (as they would later be known) began to transform their environment, rejuvenating the desert landscape with soil and plants from their home world. They built a gleaming city of glass and crystal in which to live, set up a representative government to replace the militaristic system that had existed on board the ark, and generally settled in for

the long haul. They knew that, eventually they would come into contact with the locals, but they meant them no ill will. The people were so primitive that, to be honest, the Progenitors scarcely gave them a thought. The spear-wielding natives were certainly no threat to the aliens, and the planet was largely empty. There was plenty of room for both species and would be for millennia to come.

Then disaster struck. More precisely, disaster had struck the moment they started breathing Earth air without filters, but they didn't realize it for many months afterwards. Something in the air – some radiation or bacteria or virus or just some nasty quirk of fate had rendered them all infertile. Their dream of repopulating this new world with their own kind had come suddenly crashing to Earth. Of course they tried with all their might and intellect to find some cure – some possible processes for undoing the damage. Cloning, artificial fertilization, and every other attempt to circumvent the problem proved futile. It seemed that they were doomed to be the last generation of their kind, possibly in the entire universe.

Despair set in, and for some it led to madness. There were desertions – colonists who took whatever they could carry in a small vehicle and then ran for the hills. There were suicides – males and females who couldn't bear to try and live a life when there was no future. There were murders – desperate Progenitors who let the stress get to them and lashed out in misplaced anger against their fellows. And then, finally, there was an answer – a ray of hope from, of all people, a philosopher. If ever anyone had doubted the utility of sending a philosopher along on the ark (and many had), all those doubts were laid to rest when The Philosopher had an inspiration that transformed Rikti Earth (and possibly our own world) forever.

The Philosopher realized that there was one other possible way that their heritage and society could persevere. Their great achievements in art, culture, science, literature, and every other aspect of sentient endeavor were their true legacy, not their genetic material. It is the collective memory that makes a culture persevere through the ages. What your ancestors accomplished defines their greatness, not how they gave birth to the next generation. While they could not pass this greatness onto their own, biological progeny, there were those on their new home world who could benefit from their millennia of experience and achievement – the humans.

There was much debate amongst the surviving Progenitors about the Philosopher's radical notion. They all viewed the humans as a decidedly lesser species, and most doubted that the primitive beings were capable of truly learning the way the Philosopher suggested. The Philosopher agreed. The humans, as they were at the time, were not capable of truly understanding the true glories and wonders of Progenitor culture and technology. Therefore the only logical path was to change the humans – alter them until they could fully take on the mantle of the Progenitor's legacy.

Progenitor bio-technology was quite advanced, especially in the area of biomorphic modification. For centuries they had manipulated their own bodies to increase brain capacity, improve physical strength and endurance, and even alter their forms for aesthetic purposes. Progenitor culture viewed the body not as sacred, but rather as clay for the artist's vision – a starting place from which to build better beings. As a result, the average Progenitor lifespan was hundreds of years, if treated properly with biomorphic procedures. It would hopefully be just enough time to adapt the technology to humans and bring them up to speed.

Teams were sent out to surreptitiously capture humans for experimentation. The hunters were quite careful not to reveal themselves or to leave any sign of their passing. They took specimens from around the globe, sampling the full range of human tribes and primitive

cultures. Adapting the biomorphic technology proved more difficult than first anticipated. The human bodies were simply not as resilient as a Progenitor. The mutagenic gels and morphing chambers had to almost be redesigned from scratch in order to properly modify a human form. It took close to fifty years of hard work to finally perfect the system.

The end result was a series of relatively quick and painless procedures that could alter a human into something the very closely resembled a Progenitor. Some of the alterations were on a genetic level, but here they had to be careful, as they did not want to pass on the genetic defect that had rendered them all infertile upon arriving on Earth. Therefore the majority of the changes were instead structural. Implants of vat-grown musculature and skeletons. Warping of flesh and enhancement of brains and nervous systems. The process worked best on an adult human, but the Progenitors had also developed a modification regimen for transforming children and even infants as well (although these latter cases required several more treatments as the child grew into adulthood).

Early results proved quite encouraging. The modified humans were smarter, tougher, longer-lived, and more pleasing to look at than their apish origins would have suggested. The poor souls subjected to these experiments assumed the Progenitors were some kind of gods. It was only once their bodies had been modified enough to understand the kind radio-telepathy used by Progenitors for communication that they learned what was really happening. This first generation of the transformed consisted of about 300 individuals, the majority of whom became completely devoted to the Progenitors and their cause. The human mods were honored to have been chosen as the heirs to so great and noble a culture. They had enough genetic diversity that they could propagate the species for many millennia to come, ensuring the Progenitor legacy.

But not everyone went along with the plan. A few dozen malcontents managed to use their enhanced brains and abilities to slip away from their captors – a development that both delighted and horrified the Progenitors. They were pleased that their creations had proved so resourceful and intelligent. No human could have escaped thus. But of course they couldn't allow the escaped mods to run free through the world, exposing the Progenitors' existence to other human cultures. The results could be disastrous – probably for the humans.

Indeed, the results were disastrous, pretty much for everyone involved. Not surprisingly, the very alien looking escaped mods could not go back to their homes. When they tried, they were seen as demons and monsters. All of the runaways had gone their separate ways, each taking some Progenitor weaponry or other technology. Even a simple sidearm was more than enough to level an entire village. Unable to return home and unwilling to submit to the Progenitors, the mods tried to set themselves up as warlords or gods. They walked into towns and shot down anyone who didn't immediately fall to their knees. The Progenitors managed to hunt most of the escapees down, but not before events had spiraled far out of control.

This was still a time for gods on what we now call Rikti Earth. Just as the Banished Pantheon and other gods once walked the world openly, so to did the gods on the world the Progenitors had come to. Blind to all matters magical and spiritual, the aliens hadn't even realized such powerful beings existed. As for the gods, only a few knew of the Progenitors, and none of them cared to get involved with the unknown beings, at least as long as they pretty much kept to themselves. Now the escaped mods had made ignoring the visitors an impossibility. Their worshippers were crying out for protection from these horrible demons. The gods had to answer if they were going to preserve the source of their power – that being the faith humans put in them.

The Progenitors had managed to recapture or kill all but three of the escaped mods. This final trio had joined together, combining both intellect and resources to make a more formidable foe. They had also stolen some of the most powerful weapons in the aliens' arsenal, making a simple frontal assault undesirable. So far the Progenitors had managed to avoid losing any of their own, a trend they wanted very badly to see continue. Thus they were unwilling to take any great risks. The Trio meanwhile had succeeded in setting themselves up as "gods" in the Tigris and Euphrates river valley. Well, if not actual gods, then they had at least cowed the local population with a liberal use of plasma weaponry. But before the Progenitors could move to stop them, the original gods of the valley made their move and showed the Trio what true gods are really capable of.

Divine Jihad

Divine spirits, or gods, are supernatural beings that predate mankind and feed off the power of devotion and prayer. It's a very simple equation – the more people pray to a god, the more powerful that god becomes and the more it can in turn help its devotees. The people of the Tigris and Euphrates were praying awfully hard, and few of their actual prayers were directed at the cruel and alien Trio. Their gods heard their prayers from the beginning of course, but were afraid to act. The gods had little direct power over the Trio because the body modification process had transformed them into something no longer wholly of this Earth. A god of death who could normally strike down a mortal with a single thought held no sway over the aliens' mortal soul. At first the gods were willing to cede a bit of authority to these new gods, but it soon became clear that the Trio would not accept just a small piece. They wanted it all.

And thus the gods did finally march into war with the aliens. While they could not directly affect the aliens' emotions, thoughts, or fates, they still had mastery over the world around them. The Trio had built a shining steel ziggurat from which they planned to rule over the entire river valley. Thousands of humans had been herded together at its feet to offer praise and sacrifice to the alien "gods." Even while the other Progenitors prepared their response from a thousand miles away, the army of the gods struck. Bursts of Divine Lightning crashed down upon the steel ziggurat. Hurricane force winds drove desert sands to scour the metallic surface clean. The earth beneath its foundations shook with fury, bending and tearing the false temple. Meanwhile a rainbow of divine energies protected the gathered humans from the terrible tempest that rage about them.

For all their technology and advanced weaponry, the Trio had no chance against this array of natural disasters. Two of the three died from some combination of electrical damage and wounds sustained as the ziggurat was torn apart around them. The lone survivor was gravely wounded, but still alive. The warrior gods moved in to finish the attack, wielding spears of pure light and armored in clothing spun from prayers and devotion. As it turned out, prayers and devotion make great armor against the swords of men and other gods, but do little to stop a concentrated stream of plasma. The survivor killed three of the war gods before the others struck him down. The native deities had their victory, although it had not come without a price.

As the gods strode forth to receive the praise and adulation of their people, a flotilla of Progenitor Sky Sleds arrived with the intention of eliminating the Trio. They circled the scene of the fallen ziggurat several times, trying to understand what had happened and who these strange and apparently powerful entities were. With thousands of worshippers looking on and hearts full of rage that the Trio had killed three of their own, it didn't take long for the assembled pantheon to decide on a course of action. The winds began to pick up, the sky filled with thunder, and the warriors raised their spears to hurl them at these flying aliens.

Ever cautious and having seen what happened to the Trio's ziggurat, the Progenitor strike team decided that discretion was the better part of valor. They immediately fled the scene at supersonic speeds, not even giving the gods a chance to attack. In their wake they left several hundred micro-drones: robotic spy machines the size of insects that could feed them information, audio, and images from up to a thousand miles away. The Progenitors needed more data about these strange beings, and they needed it fast. For their part, the gods were happy to have scared the aliens off, but they knew the war was not over. It had just begun. They sent their own servant spirits and animal servants to trace the Progenitors back to their base of operations.

For a while both sides gathered information and readied themselves for battle. The Progenitors did not want a war. In fact they were pleased that the gods had taken care of the Trio on their own – that meant the Progenitors hadn't had to risk their own skins. They made several attempts to parley with the gods, but the gods rejected all attempts at peace talks out of hand. They felt that the aliens posed a threat that had to be dealt with fully and completely.

And so the war between aliens and gods began in earnest with the deities of the Tigris-Euphrates river valley marching en masse upon the Progenitors' base, accompanied by adventuresome and angry gods from other nearby cultures. They battered the base with lightning, wind, and hail. They sent plagues of stinging insects, tore the ground open with earthquakes and even rose a vent of hot lava up from the earth's core. But the aliens were ready. They had analyzed the Trio's destruction, and were prepared for such an attack, even on this unprecedented scale. Force fields protected them from much of the damage, and the rest they were able to repair with relative ease.

As the second wave of attack came – the gods themselves dressed for battle – the Progenitors let loose with their own defenses. They had armed their modified humans with advanced weaponry, sending them out to meet the gods in battle. Always fearful of their own mortality, the aliens decided to sacrifice all their heirs now and find more later. The battle raged for a three days and three nights, but in the end the aliens proved victorious. Although they lost all but a handful of their mods, the gods of the Tigris-Euphrates had been destroyed.

This first war with the gods set the pattern for everything that was to come. The gods would give no ground and brook no talk of peace with the aliens. The Progenitors could not maintain a secure environment as long as the gods were still gunning for them. And it was at this point that they realized that the gods would keep coming, maybe forever, as long as the people believed in them. While a plasma weapon can destroy a gods' physical form, its essence lingers on unless one of two things happens: another god consumes it (as the Banished Pantheon does on our own world) or people stop worshipping it. Already the gods that the Progenitors had just defeated were reforming in their temples back home. The micro-drones reported the divine resurgence to their masters, causing great alarm amongst the Progenitors. They needed time to make new human mods if this war truly was destined to continue, as seemed likely.

Once again, it was the Philosopher who provided the key to victory. He realized that once again it was the humans that would offer a solution. They just needed to change their methodology for transforming the people of Earth into mods. He pointed out that the best way to destroy a faith is to replace it with another faith. In a sense, the Trio had the right idea: the Progenitors would need to set themselves up as gods so the humans would stop worshipping (and therefore empowering) their enemies. He further proposed including the body modification and training program within the ritual tradition of this new religion they were creating. Thus transmogrification

would become an act of faith. The mods would not be devils but rather angels.

Although many of the more scientific and rationally minded Progenitors felt profound unease at this plan, they could not possibly argue against its strategic merits. And so the aliens moved their base of operations from the remote desert to the center of the Tigris-Euphrates valley, where they proceeded to build a great crystal and steel temple-city. They fought the gods once again, defeating them before they could recover their full strength. After that, it was a simple matter to become divine. Their advanced technology provided food, shelter, entertainment, learning, and safety. Within a few short years they had one over most of the population. The old gods began to fade away and tens of thousands of men and women underwent the transformation and training process.

It was a process that, once begun, could not be undone. As their power grew, the old gods of neighboring regions grew jealous and worried. They joined together in war against the alien gods. The Progenitors had no choice but to expand their sphere of influence. Within a generation their priest/generals had march upon and seized both the Indus and Nile river valleys and adjoining lands. In another generation they would take the Yangtze as well. A hundred years after that and the entire globe would worship the aliens and begin transforming themselves into likenesses of their new gods.

Heirs to the Throne of God

Even as their followers and future heirs spread out across the globe, the Progenitors themselves were finally dying. Before he died, the Philosopher had codified the process of initiation and revelation that modified humans must go through on their path to becoming heirs to the Progenitor legacy. None of the aliens had intended to set up a religion, and ultimately they wanted to replace ritual and worship with rational thought and individual achievement. But they knew that as long as the threat of other gods remained present in the world, then the new religion needed to stay in place for the safety of all.

Thus, the Path of Salvation that humans embarked upon when they were first modified consisted of thirty-three steps. The vast majority of these steps involve learning the basic tenets and philosophies of Progenitor society. These beliefs ennoble such ideas as a balance between individual achievement and honoring the greater good; a fundamental respect for art, poetry, and literature; and a obedience to laws and social contracts. The process also included a direct education experience, forgoing formal schooling and instead planting ideas and knowledge directly in the person's head. This teaching tool works differently depending on the individual, but even the most adaptable human takes years to process and assimilate all the knowledge. Thus it can take half a lifetime for an average human to complete the entirety of the Philosopher's Thirty-Three steps.

Only those who completed the entire process learned the truth about the Progenitors. By the time they learned the truth, mods were ready for it. They had been purged of most religious tendencies and now understood their true roles as heirs to a great culture and society. They also understood the importance of keeping up the religious façade. The best of the best amongst the thirty-three steppers were groomed to take their places as gods, fulfilling the duties and identities of the various Progenitors as they died off. The Philosopher himself was the last to go, hanging on tenaciously for several decades more than any of his fellows. During this time he made sure that the system was totally secure and free from problems.

The upper tier of world society now centered around fulfilling the roles and duties of the 97 gods that the original Progenitors had established (one for each surviving Progenitor who

had helped pacify the planet). Each god had, as he or she died, established his or her own Lineage. These Lineages were comprised of thirty-third ranked mods who had received special knowledge and training relevant to that particular god's area of responsibilities. Each of the 97 had taken on a specific role in maintaining the world society/religion. Some controlled crops and food production, others manufacturing, others law enforcement and political affairs. They were really just bureaucrats dressed up in divine regalia, but this division of authority, power, and responsibility ensured continued prosperity and progress.

The Lineages produced both the successors to the 97 godheads and served as staff for the different deities and their duties. The Lineage system was so successful that there was a completely smooth transition from the original Progenitors to their heirs. They had realized their goal of passing down every last vestige of their knowledge and accomplishment, remaking Earth in their image. By the time the Philosopher finally died, he did so with a sense of relief and hope. His legacy was secure. All that was worthwhile and important in his culture would continue.

The Golden Age

It is not to an understatement to say that the world underwent a lasting and almost entirely peaceful golden age for thousands of years after the Lineages were established. The 97 godheads ruled according to their teachings – for it was almost impossible for them to think in any way besides the way that they had been taught. Their brains had actually been changed to accommodate the Progenitors' ideals. There was no war, and eventually the last of the gods and all of the world's magic were driven from the world forever. The earth became a technological paradise that knew nothing of disease, hunger, or war.

The body morphing process now began in early childhood. While still born physically human, society viewed this original body as but a crude, rough hewn, thing, waiting to be rebuilt in the image of the gods. All through infancy, childhood, and puberty, the bodies of every child on earth underwent a series of transformations, all the while receiving direct downloads of basic knowledge and social skills. There were no schools. All learning and socialization came through direct programming. They were brought up to believe in the 97 Gods and to eschew all other forms of religion and philosophy as nonsense. Until the age of around 30 when they completed the 33 steps of transformation and enlightenment, they were viewed as legally children, unable to make any but the simplest choices for themselves.

Thus did the strictures of religious orthodoxy and restrictive law keep the fires of youth in check until they could be tempered with wisdom and true knowledge. The young people performed all of the more menial tasks in society, from manufacturing and servant duties to tending the fields and maintaining machines. For them such work was a religious duty, part of their walk down the path to salvation. It was also a time for simple pleasures and learning, a time when expectations were low and children were allowed to have fun with their lives.

Once one reached adulthood (i.e., completed the 33rd step) then it was time to join one of the 97 Lineages and start working for the betterment of society as a whole. The Progenitors had placed a deep seated desire to improve and expand the knowledge base of their society. Each of the 97 Lineages was tasked with pushing forward development in a particular field of endeavor, such as physics, technology, art, literature, philosophy, or astronomy (to name but a few). The Philosopher knew that a society as ordered and controlled as the one he had helped create would have a tendency towards stagnation and stasis. Therefore he had been sure to inculcate his heirs with a need to do better and discover new things.

While discovery and creation might not have been as fast or free as they were on worlds that allowed for more diversity of ideas and methods (like our own), the millennia of peace and prosperity allowed the mods to make slow and steady progress. They managed to vastly improve upon the existing technologies, all the while adapting their training procedures to incorporate these new inventions. Standards of living grew higher and higher, until even the lowliest jobs for children were simple and pleasant tasks rather than grueling work.

By far the most important discovery came from the Lineage of Physics. A long-term goal had always been to return to the stars from which the Progenitors had come, possibly making contact with other explorers who had set down on other worlds thousands upon thousands of years ago. They of course knew where the other colony arks had journeyed to, but they had no efficient means of communicating with them. They had received several signals in the past thousand years concerning the arrival of other Progenitors on other worlds, but all of their news was still thousands of years old. The speed of light seemed an impossible barrier to break.

Instead of breaking the barrier, the Lineage of Physics had been working for several centuries on finding a way around it. Eventually this endeavor led to the discovery of teleportation, a powerful tool that revolutionized the entire world. The face of travel, commerce, and even how people lived changed forever. The teleportation technology was actually an outgrowth of the basic body morphing process, which broke down molecules to their atomic essence and then reformed them. Teleportation technology rapidly broke down the molecules completely and then transported them instantaneously through space and reformulated them upon arrival. Although it took quite a while to perfect, rapid and perfectly safe teleportation soon became commonplace throughout the world.

The problem of interstellar travel remained, since the teleportation process required compatible transmitters and receivers at both ends of the transport. Even the more advanced teleportation devices used today still require the establishment of a teleportation matrix that covers a whole city or even country (such as the hospital matrix used in Paragon City). But there was one hope. The Lineage of Physics built a massive teleportation receiver and then sent the plans for its construction to all of the other Progenitor colonies. Once the thousand year travel time for the transmission is complete (which should be soon now) then the other Progenitor worlds will be able to build their own transceivers and travel directly to and from Earth without the long wait.

The other great, world changing invention of the Golden Age came from the Lineage of Education. In addition to creating and updating the learning programs used to inject information into young people's heads, they also had the responsibility for improving the technology. One of their most significant advancements had been a network of small implants that they inserted directly into the brains of each living being. This simplified the info dump process, eliminating the need for some of the more bulky and expensive equipment that had been used previously. Then came a dramatic refinement on the implant network, a system that allowed the implants to act as both receivers and transmitters of data.

The result was instant, artificial telepathy. Anyone with the new implants could now choose to transmit words, images, and other data directly to anyone else with an implant. Although not nearly as efficient as the education downloads, this data transfer allowed a whole new kind of communication. Within a generation the sound of speech all but disappeared from the planet. Artificial telepathy became the sole form of discourse in the world. Even books and video images disappeared, replaced instead by transmitters that contained the stored memories of the thought and events. Art, theater, science, politics, and every other aspect of society changed forever.

Radical Elements

The Lineage System held society together for thousands of years, seeing it through its golden age and up to the present day. It is only recently that cracks have begun to form in the seams, and new intellectual and cultural forces have begun to challenge the established order of things. The mere fact that everyone receives the same exact education for the formative years of their life and the general attitude of reverence and awe that surrounds any concept that came from the original Progenitors meant that dissent was very rare and seldom very intense.

Some might find it surprising that the first great radical movement came not from the Lineage of Philosophy (which had long ago stopped coming up with new ideas and instead concentrated on defending and propagating the old ones). Instead it came from the Lineage of Journalists, an arm of the 97 that had slowly but surely grown more and more radical over the centuries. From the beginning the Journalists were as much watchdogs as reporters. Their job was to let everyone know what everyone else was doing. They had exclusive rights to poke their noses into the goings on in any of the other 96 Lineages.

Within the Lineage of Journalism was the Commentariate, a group whose job it was to opine upon events, synthesize information, and provide useful and detailed analysis of the news. For millennia the Commentariate had toed the party line and helped ensure that all the other Lineages did the same, but then a reform minded Commentator came to power. Widely recognized as a brilliant writer and incredibly persuasive thinker, the new Commentator seemed destined for eventual elevation to God of Journalism. But then he began producing commentaries and thought-articles that challenged some of the fundamental beliefs that held society together.

The Commentator began to argue that the 97 Lineages and the 33 Steps of Education were having a stultifying effect on thought and even evolution. He decried the lack of original thought in the world. These positions were unpopular, but not enough to lose him his job. It wasn't until he produced his final thought-article that the true extent of his revolutionary fervor came to light. The Commentator had dug deep into the Progenitor archives and uncovered a number of documents and studies from before the Divine Purging. These studies were made before the idea of modifying all of humanity had ever been imagined. Back then the Progenitors had planned to live in peace and harmony with the native humans. They had done a careful study of humanity's cognitive abilities and potential and found that it closely matched and possibly exceeded their own.

In other words, left to their own devices, humanity could have created just as great a civilization as that of the Progenitors, maybe even greater. Moreover, since it was now known the other Progenitor colonies had been established on at least half a dozen other planets, their culture did persevere, presumably without having had to resort to the radical tactic of remaking the local species' in their own image. The Commentator went on to conclude that the only logical conclusion was that the 33 Steps and 97 Lineages were accomplishing nothing more than the utter stifling of natural human achievement. He called for an immediate end to the False Religion and 33 Steps system of education. He called for a world of Free Thinkers, not slaves to alien knowledge.

As one might imagine, this call to arms did not go over very well. While the laws of the land protected free speech, particularly within the Lineage of Journalism and the Commentariate, they did not stop a wave of popular discontent. The Commentator's thought-article went out with the morning Media Transmission, so several billion people received it directly into their minds

before the Lineage of Journalism had a chance to pull it from broadcast on the other side of the globe. As a result, it took less than half an hour for several hundred million death threats and calls for imprisonment to flood into the Commentariate's headquarters. The God of Journalism himself called the Commentator before her and demanded that the Commentator retract his thought-article and denounce it as a hoax. He of course refused. Since he had broken no law he could not be imprisoned, but that did not protect him from losing his job.

The Commentator was transferred to a meaningless bureaucratic position within the Lineage of Journalism (removing someone from a Lineage entirely is quite rare). There he languished, unheard but not forgotten. Out of the two billion individuals who had received his original thought-article, the vast majority hated him for it. Only a tiny fraction took his message to heart – which still amounted to several million individuals whose entire life outlook had changed forever. Slowly, carefully, they began to find one another. In secret they formed underground networks of would-be revolutionaries. They shared their thoughts and ideas on how to someday bring down the tyranny of the Progenitors' Lineages and free the true potential of their long suppressed humanity.

The burgeoning revolutionary movement called itself the Free Mind Coalition, and for the most part worked in secrecy. Every time they made any kind of public declaration of principals or intent, the popular backlash was so negative that they were forced to withdraw. The Lineages themselves took no direct legal action, but mounted a spirited propaganda campaign against the Free Minders. Not only did the Lineage of Journalism decry the group at every opportunity, but the Lineage of Education began to alter its thought transfer protocols to include teachings specifically designed and created to deaden the appeal of Free Mind Coalition ideals.

The Coalition was not without its own propaganda techniques. They had members with expertise from all of the 97 Lineages and so had all the expertise they needed to mount a truly effective counterculture offensive. They first inoculated themselves against thought-propaganda by developing a process to rewrite their educations and filter out unwanted thought processes. This reeducation was a radical step, something that had never been attempted before. Therefore there was no law against it. Slowly but surely the Free Minders were building their own society and culture hidden within the folds of the Lineage System. Each day brought new converts and worldwide their number swelled into the hundreds of millions. The Lineage Gods were growing nervous and began seeking any excuse to act more directly against the Free Minders.

Finally, bolstered with enthusiasm by their success, the Coalition went too far. They developed and began to use a subliminal thought-broadcast system designed to weaken and undermine the teachings of the Thirty-Three Steps. These devices broadcast thoughts designed very specifically to break down the education programming and bypass the filters against uninvited thoughts. This flagrantly violated a number of different thought-protection and mind-privacy laws. The Lineage of Law and Lineage of Justice had the perfect excuse to crack down on the Coalition.

The resulting crusade against the Free Minders succeeded in driving the group entirely underground and imprisoning most of its most influential thinkers and leaders. The standard penalty for any crime had long been re-education, a process whereby the criminals memories and inclinations were totally broken down and rebuilt from scratch, leaving them a productive member of society once more. To the Free Minders, such a fate was especially horrifying, as it went against everything they believed in. Many chose suicide over reeducation, becoming martyrs to the dying cause.

The revolutionary thought group did survive, but only as a shadow of its former self. Indeed, had it not been for the inter-dimensional war with Earth, the group might have disappeared forever. But there remained a fervent radical cadre that was prepared to take the Free Mind Coalition's beliefs to its logical conclusion and who operated in the strictest secrecy. They believed that not only was the Progenitors' education program a menace, they also revolted against the entire concept of body-morphing. They pooled their resources and, in hidden safe houses and underground facilities scattered across the globe began to do the unthinkable. They raised normal, unmodified human children.

They called themselves Body Purists. There have never been more than ten or twenty thousand of them on the entire planet, and until very recently the rest of the world – even other Free Minders – had no idea that they existed. Hidden away in their secret underground or undersea domiciles, they embarked on an ambitious plan to bring humanity back to what it once was. Children are raised the natural way, with no body modification or thought implants. They even communicate using a spoken language, something that hasn't been heard on the planet for hundreds of years.

The Body Purists had access to the same files and archival material that the Commentator had originally used to make his case for a restoration of human based thought. For the Purists, these files were like religious texts. They combed every inch of them for the minutest details about human life before the Progenitors had come. Among the gems they found were comprehensive descriptions of the ancient religions and the war against the gods. Having rejected the 97 false gods of the Lineages, they decided to revive worship of the old gods. With the help of sympathetic Free Minders (who had retained their morphed bodies), they collected artifacts and ancient tablets from the times before the war. Prayers, ceremonies, and sacrifices became commonplace within the secret society of Purists.

Slowly but surely, in largely unseen ways, this renewal of faith in the defeated gods began to bring magic back into the world. The long dead deities began to awake, making their presence felt in dreams and through signs and portents. It wasn't much, but it was enough to keep the fires of faith burning. Were it not for the Interdimensional War, such a small body of extremists might not ever have had any lasting impact on the world. As it turned out, they played a very large role indeed.

The Interloper

There had never been any exploration of other dimensions. Indeed, their entire existence remained firmly rooted in the realm of the hypothetical. There had been some discussion of them while the Lineage of Physics was working on teleportation, but since the group had moved on to cold fusion and nanotechnology, the topic was largely forgotten. Thus when Nemesis discovered the world in his interdimensional travels, they had no way of detecting his presence. The Prussian Prince of Automatons was fascinated by this strange alternate Earth inhabited by aliens. Having never encountered true extra-terrestrials, he saw a whole new world of possibilities opening up before him.

One of the things that both intrigued and vexed Nemesis the most was the method of communication these alien beings used. Or, more specifically, the lack of any kind of obvious speech or written language at all. His equipment could not detect any radio transmission or psychic energy because the thought transmitters used a process based on teleportation technology that is nearly impossible to detect without knowing what you're looking for. Of course the amazing teleportation technology that the aliens used also grabbed Nemesis' attention, and

it was by pure chance that his investigations into the teleportation network clued him in to the artificial telepathy process.

Even after this discovery it took Nemesis several months to unravel the complex and multi-layered language of pure thought. A lesser mind would probably have been driven insane if exposed to the barrage of thought-transmissions that Nemesis subjected himself to. Eventually though he did crack the language and began to unlock the fascinating history of this alien world and its residents. First and foremost he was amazed to discover that they were actually human beings, although in their own language they called themselves Rikti (which was the Progenitors' word for their own, alien race). Nemesis had to learn more, so he began abducting individual Rikti and interrogating them, pumping their minds for every last piece of knowledge. He was careful to cover his tracks very well, taking only a few Rikti from widely disparate locations and Lineages.

From his "studies" Nemesis came to several key conclusions. First of all it was obvious that the Rikti were much more advanced, technologically speaking, than the humans of his own home dimension. Second, their world spanning, monolithic government and society meant that once he found the right level to move them, he could manipulate an entire planet's prodigious resources at once. All he needed to do is find the right lever. He found the key deep in the Rikti's history, dating back to the time of the Progenitors when there was a great war with "gods." Nemesis presumed these gods were super powered beings of some sort, much like the ones that plagued him so back on his home world. The war with the gods was the last major war the Rikti had known and it had happened thousands of years ago. By this time the enemy gods had become bogeymen – the stuff of legends, stories, and primal nightmares. If Nemesis could tap into the power of that fear, he would have his lever.

The Rikti had a very small standing army, whose role was mostly that of a deterrent against any kind of radical terrorist or revolutionary attack that might conceivably arise. Such threats had only manifested a handful of times in the past few thousand years, but since the Lineage of War existed, so to did the army. Still, it was amongst the smallest and least influential godheads in the world when Nemesis began to weave his deadly web. The Lineage of Justice had responsibility for enforcing the laws and maintaining the peace. The average enforcement officer did not carry lethal weapons, since most crime was non-violent or involved fist fights and simple brawls. Since only members of the Lineage of War could carry lethal weaponry, violent crime was all but non-existent on Rikti Earth.

Thus the Rikti were ill-prepared when Nemesis launched his attack. He had spent over a year creating perfect automaton reconstructions of some of the most notorious gods from the Rikti's ancient war. In addition he had created some equally impressive replicas of Paragon City's greatest heroes, including the Statesman. Thus he had an automaton force consisting of a fearsome mélange of his greatest enemies and the mythical threats to the Rikti way of life. All told there were some 50 automatons, each with the capacity to deal massive damage in a very short period of time. Nemesis sent his creations through a portal into one of the more densely populated regions of Rikti Earth. The automatons carried out a lightning strike, taking care to be seen and remembered by as many Rikti as possible. They destroyed a few buildings – killing hundreds in the process – and then had a short, deadly, one-sided encounter with local law enforcement. With thirty dead law enforcement personnel in their wake, they returned to the dimension from whence they came.

Thought-transfers and memory downloads of the attacks spread across the planet in mere hours. The whole world was stunned. The Lineage of history quickly confirmed that some of the

attackers were identical to the most fearsome of the old gods that the Progenitors had fought. The Lineage of Governance called an emergency meeting of the 97 Godheads, something that usually only happened once every ten years. They needed answers and they needed a plan.

Meanwhile, deep within their hidden caves and secret lairs, the Body Purists also heard stories of the old gods attacking. No one was more amazed than they were that their prayers had been answered in so dramatic and public a manner. The attack spurred on their faith to new heights. For the first time they actually believed with all their hearts that the old gods really were out there. And so their belief began to make it so, and the old gods' power grew more and more. So to did the Body Purist movement. They found a number of new recruits in the weeks and months after the attack, people who'd had their core beliefs shaken and were looking for answers. While 99.999% of the Rikti population responded to the attacks by rallying behind their government and their civilization, that small percentage lost their faith entirely. The Body Purists were, in some cases, there to give them a new one.

The long-dormant Lineage of War immediately took the lead. They called upon the Lineages of Engineering, Manufacturing, and Education to help ramp up a massive weapons manufacturing and military training program. They also set the Lineage of Physics on the task of finding where these gods had come from and how they had hidden themselves. Nemesis had expected as much from the Rikti and had left enough clues and residual energy signatures that he knew the Rikti scientists would begin to piece together the puzzle.

Meanwhile, back on our own world, Nemesis was busy setting the second stage of his plan in motion. He undertook a series of high-profile missions designed to gather Paragon City's greatest heroes together in an effort to capture him. He then led them on a merry chase through the city that ended in the headquarters of the Portal Corp. He had already prepared the scene and had, an hour or so before, sent a pulse of energy through the portal that he knew would alert the Rikti to its location. Nemesis seemed to flee through the portal – although in fact he used another doorway to a much safer locale, tricking the pursuing heroes into thinking he'd gone to the Rikti Earth. Determined not to let their quarry escape, the heroes followed him through, only to have the portal snap shut behind them.

Three months to the day, on the anniversary of the Trio's destruction at the hands of Rikti Earth's old gods, a band of a dozen human heroes stepped out onto Rikti Earth in a plaza smack dab in the middle of one of the world's largest cities. Immediately the locals began to flee in terror while the human heroes looked on in confusion. While they tried desperately to re-open the portal home, the Rikti military began to descend on the plaza, using teleportation devices. Nemesis had added one extra flourish to his trap. He had set up a hidden thought transmitter beneath the surface of the plaza where the portal had opened. It began broadcasting thoughts and images of war, death, and religious fervor for the old gods. The Rikti of course thought it was Statesman and company stating their intentions. They immediately opened fire.

The resulting conflict between Rikti and heroes lasted for over an hour and raged throughout the city. Three of the heroes died in the battle along with close to 1000 Rikti soldiers and civilians. Still inexperienced at war and decidedly out matched by the powerful heroes, the Rikti armed forces had a tough time of it. For their part, the heroes wanted no part of this fight and were doing the best they could to simply find their way home again. Eventually that's exactly what they did, re-opening the portal and fleeing back to the safety of their own Earth. They shut the portal behind them and began to mourn for those they had lost. For the heroes it was just another wild, albeit tragic adventure. They had been through equally challenging encounters scores of times.

For the Rikti it was another, even more Earth-shattering moment. The gods were back, and apparently they were more powerful than the histories said. It was their worst fears writ large in the devastation on the city streets. Now all of society bent itself towards the fight against the returning gods. The Lineage of War's number swelled, as over 50% of the newly educated children were funneled into War's ranks as they finished their 33rd Step. This unprecedented step swelled the ranks of the Lineage into the tens of millions, all of whom began to receive new and special training.

Meanwhile, the research minded Lineages turned all their efforts to creating new weapons to fight these old gods. They developed battle armor to protect their soldiers and more powerful plasma and energy weapons designed to pierce the toughest god-skin. They also began to weaponize the various drones and robots that played such an important role in Rikti society, creating scouts and cannon fodder for the impending war. The Lineage of Morphology developed new body modification techniques to increase the strength, endurance, and reflexes of the soldiers as they went into battle.

But one problem remained? Where were these gods? How could they find them? Fortunately for them, Nemesis had left enough clues for them to figure out the truth. These gods had come from some sort of parallel dimension, a theoretical concept that now proved to be absolutely true. With the entire Lineage of Physics working on the problem, it only took six months for them to discover the secret of interdimensional travel. In truth, the research behind the teleportation system had already done most of the work. It was simply a matter of looking at old data from a new perspective and a different set of assumptions. The Rikti created their first dimensional portal 8 months after the evil gods had last attacked them.

The Lineage of War dispatched spy drones through the portal to our world in an effort to learn more about the enemy and where they came from. The truth of the matter was readily apparent. These were not the same old gods they had fought before. No, this was something much worse. This was an alternate Earth where the Progenitors had never come with enlightenment. It was a place where the gods paraded about in gaudy costumes and meted out justice or death as they saw fit (the Rikti had a hard time telling hero from villain). It was a savage, warlike place where humans were barbaric enough to still wear their birth-bodies without modification. Their intent was now obvious – the humans and their gods wanted to invade the Rikti so they could spread their backwards and disturbing faith.

The Rikti only knew one way to react to a threat like this. In all their great and glorious history there had been but one true war – Progenitors vs. Gods. The Progenitors had won by destroying every last god and every vestige of their faith. The Rikti would have to do the same to this other world if they ever wanted to be 100% safe and secure. And so plans were laid for the invasion of Earth.

Invasion: Earth

The Rikti planned well for their invasion. They spent months using robotic drones to scout the entire globe. They learned the world's major languages, discovered how to monitor and decode their public and private transmissions, and made a rather detailed catalog of their military capabilities. They also spent a great deal of energy trying to learn all they could about the Earth's gods, or "heroes" as the natives called them. While they did achieve a greater understanding of these heroes, compiling a detailed catalogue or threat analysis proved difficult. Many heroes keep secret identities and have private lives despite their rather public antics. As such, the Rikti had no clear estimation of just how tough fighting the world's super powered

heroes might be.

The Lineage of Economics began to press for some kind of forward movement on the invasion plan. The Rikti economy was beginning to stagnate and faced a possible depression due to the radical shifts away from a service/luxury oriented economy to a military/industrial focus. The Lineage of War, after much debate, finally agreed. They had learned all they could about the foe. Their plans were solid, their goals clear. The time for war had come.

The Rikti attack plan's success centered upon fully exploiting the element of surprise. Therefore, they wanted to attack as many key targets at once, before the humans could mount an organized defense. While their teleportation and dimensional portal technology would allow for quick assaults on relatively unprotected targets, the troops would have no support once they got to the other side. Therefore, before the big invasion that everyone on Earth remembers, there was a series of much smaller, but equally important incursions. The Rikti sent through advance teams to set up bases of operation beneath their target cities. Hidden deep beneath the ground, these secret fortresses would serve as command and control centers once the true invasion force arrived. Together the bases would also form a teleportation matrix, allowing the soldiers to use their teleporters to move in and out of combat while on Earth. Without such an established matrix, their teleportation equipment would have been useful.

The most important role for these bases though was to serve as fortified gateways back to the home dimension. Maintaining a sizable and permanent dimensional portal requires a great deal of energy and technical expertise, so rather than have multiple portals spread all over the planet, they decided to establish one main entry/exit point in the largest base – the one located beneath Paragon City. The teleportation matrix would then link the other bases to the portal. Of course, in an emergency, the other bases had the equipment to open up their own doorways home, but the God of War did not want 28 different established entrances to the relatively undefended home world.

The fact that the Rikti managed to establish their bases in almost complete secrecy (a few people did notice, but no one believed them) in just a few weeks is a tribute to their ingenuity and drive. With the bases established and their supply lines secure, it was time for the true invasion. Back on Rikti Earth, one of the greatest logistical efforts in history was undertaken – the establishment of tens of thousands of portals all around the globe, each corresponding to a different, precisely chosen location on Earth. There were a few technical problems and snags that caused a delay before the entire network of doors was established. During this delay people on Earth had a chance to react to the strange portals opening up in their skies. While this partially reduced the effectiveness of the surprise attack, the War God would not divert from the plan – the troops would go in only once all the portals were active.

When they were ready, about an hour later, the Rikti simultaneously attacked the world's 28 largest cities, spread out around the globe, committing their entire strike force at once. The effects of this first strike were absolutely devastating, destroying power grids, jamming communication networks, blowing up fuel depots, and striking hard and fast at military bases, government buildings, police stations, and super powered hero organizations. Then the heroes started fighting back, especially in places like Paragon City where there were large numbers of them.

The general progress of the war is well known – massive casualties on both sides, a slow but steady grinding away of the heroes as wave after wave of heavily armed Rikti and their drones attacked human held positions. Paragon City was lucky enough to have heroes strong enough to preserve at least some of the neighborhoods. Other places like London and Mexico City were

much less fortunate – they were both basically burned to the ground, utterly destroyed in those first few days by the massive Rikti battleships and other heavy weaponry.

The Rikti had put a lot of faith in their super-sized battle craft. Although nothing like them had ever existed in Rikti history, the researchers at the Lineage of Innovation had managed to develop near perfect battle platforms. Armed with banks of plasma cannons and protected by powerful force fields, just one of the flying ships could take out an entire city. Conventional human weapons were totally ineffective. Only a large nuclear blast could have taken one down. But because the craft came through the dimensional barrier directly above their target cities, the humans could not safely use nuclear weapons without also destroying the city they were trying to protect. Even worse, the huge ships teleported directly from one target to the next, ensuring that they were never out of proximity to heavily populated areas (at least until they were done depopulating them).

What the designers of the battle craft could never have anticipated was that a single, ultra powerful hero could do more damage than a nuclear weapon. Especially if that hero was the Statesman. Although the huge war ships did trillions of dollars of damage and killed tens of thousands of human soldiers, heroes, and civilians, not a single one of them was still in the air after the third day of the war. The world's heroes concentrated all their efforts on taking out the flying behemoths. Some of the most powerful, like Statesman, could simply tear into them with their bare hands. Others used more subtle means – including magic, teleportation, and other powers the Rikti hadn't been able to prepare for. The loss of these incredibly advanced and expensive weapons systems so early in the war was a huge blow to the Rikti. Right away they knew that this would not go as planned.

The war settled down into a more conventional battle, with the significant difference that instead of one or two fronts, it was now being fought on more than 50 fronts as the Rikti spread out to other targets. Their ability to teleport meant that the Rikti could attack virtually anywhere at any time, giving them a huge tactical advantage. Any time the Rikti learned of a concentration of supplies or the location of any kind of command center, they would attack it – either with soldiers or just by teleporting high explosives to the location. It took three months for Earth's greatest scientist, Dr. Steven Sinclair, to come up with a way to block the teleporters, and even this was only effective within a relatively short radius of the jamming device. Still, it allowed humanity to secure at least some especially vital locations from Rikti teleporters.

The War Comes Home

Meanwhile, the humans were desperately searching for some clue as to where these aliens came from. Statesman was one of the few surviving heroes who remembered humanity's single previous voyage the Rikti home world. The others had already died in the war at that point. He directed Dr. Sinclair to go through Portal Corps' old records and see if there was any more data available about the aliens. Surprisingly, the Doctor found a fairly extensive file on the Rikti, who had apparently been visited once before by Portal Corp employees. The file said that they were an advanced, aggressive race and that communications had been established. The beings even learned to speak English. The report also suggested that the Rikti version of Earth was running dangerously low on natural resources and could either be a potential trading partner or a dangerous enemy. Dr. Sinclair presented his fellow heroes with the bad news – the Rikti could talk but apparently they didn't want to. They were desperate and ruthless and there would be no talk of peace.

Of course the entire file was false, planted in the Portal Corp records by Nemesis in an effort to fan the flames of war. Nemesis knew the Rikti well enough to realize that a peace agreement

was indeed possible. Fortunately, the Rikti method of artificial-telepathy was so alien that it didn't show up as either psychic or radio communication. As long as Nemesis could keep a wall of ignorance between the two sides, the war would continue and the world would grow weaker. Then, in its most desperate hour, Nemesis would ride to the rescue, drive back the alien hordes, and be hailed as the new Emperor of Earth.

The one mistake Nemesis made was not altering the Portal Corp records of exactly where the Rikti dimension was. With this knowledge, Dr. Sinclair was able to reverse engineer a device that could detect energy signals emanating from that specific other dimension. It was through this device that the heroes learned just how the Rikti were sending reinforcements to their armies here on Earth. Beneath Paragon City, deep within Rikti held territory, was a huge portal – the sole permanent gateway to Rikti Earth. If they could shut that portal, hopefully permanently, then the heroes would have a chance at stemming the tide and reversing the course of the war.

Back on Rikti Earth the war effort was taking its toll on the public psyche. At first there had been regular thought transmissions from Earth, showcasing the victories over the humans and their barbaric gods. The Rikti had a long tradition of freedom of knowledge and the press, so the Lineage of Journalism pulled no punches when it came to broadcasting thought-pieces about the war. But the Rikti had never in their whole history been exposed to such large scale and ongoing violence. War was utterly alien to their experience. Public support for the invasion began to wane quickly as the casualties began to mount into the tens of thousands. The promised “quick, decisive war” was proving to be a much bloodier and longer lasting affair. Eventually the God of War took the unprecedented step of asking the Lineage of Journalism to tone down its thought broadcasts and focus on more positive war news.

But amongst the Body Purists hidden away beneath the earth's surface, all the news was good. Their human brothers and the ancient gods were resisting the alien hegemony. They kept telling themselves that soon, very soon, the gods would return to their world and rescue them from the false gods of the Lineages. The Purists began studying the news from Earth very carefully, learning all they could about these pure humans and their brightly colored gods. When the moment of salvation came, they were determined to be ready.

Although the war had stabilized somewhat, the Rikti were still clearly winning. The entire world economy had been devastated in just a few short months. Food and fuel became incredibly scarce as international shipping and commerce ground to a halt. The humans needed to end the war, and end it quickly. And so was born the so-called Alpha and Omega plan, wherein a mass of heroes would frontally assault Rikti positions (the Alpha team) while a small group of 50 heroes would use magic to infiltrate the Rikti base and pass through the Portal to their home world (the Omega team).

The Omega Team consisted largely of mystic powered heroes, since it was now well known that Rikti technology was particularly vulnerable to magic. Among these magicians was the reincarnation of an ancient Middle Eastern god, now lost to history. He went by the name Enkidu, but this was only one of his later manifestations as hero and demi-god. As it happened, Enkidu's inclusion in the Omega Team turned out to be particularly fortuitous. Omega made its way into the Rikti base and remained undetected until they approached the chamber containing the dimensional portal. At that point they could proceed no further without breaking their veil of invisibility, and a furious battle ensued. Several members of the team were captured, including Ajax, and several more died in the fighting. All told, 43 members of Omega Team made it through the portal.

What happened next is common knowledge on the Rikti Earth, but a complete mystery to everyone in our own world. The portal led directly into the heart of a Rikti Military complex that spanned hundreds of square miles. As expected, the other side of the gateway was just as strongly guarded as the base they had come through. But that was all according to plan. Omega team had brought along a powerful mystic artifact, the Heart of Shiva, which they intended to unleash upon the Rikti military base and then retreat back through the dimensional doorway. Unfortunately, as soon as they entered the Rikti earth, the doorway's failsafe system kicked in, locking out any travel through between the dimensions – in case there were any more invaders following behind. The doorway's emergency shutdown caused an energy feedback that blasted back through the portal, causing a massive fireball to erupt back on Earth. This unexpected side-effect of the emergency shutdown procedure (which had never been fully tested) caused extensive damage to the Rikti facility beneath Paragon City, effectively eliminating its usefulness as a base of operations.

Caught in a deadly crossfire, the heroes of Omega Team decided that self-sacrifice was their only remaining course. They would detonate the Heart of Shiva, destroying the gate, the city around it, and themselves in the process. Then Enkidu received some kind of strange telepathic message, in a voice not unlike his own. The voice told him to save the device's power and instead fight their way to a specific location just outside the military base. Overcome with a divine certainty that this was indeed the correct course to follow, Enkidu urged his fellow heroes to hold off on detonating the Heart and to come with him. With no time to debate and no desire to commit suicide, the others agreed. The two score heroes fought their way through the military base, killing or maiming hundreds of Rikti soldiers and losing eleven of their own number in the process. Then, with a last great effort they burst through the outer wall of the facility and into the open air. In that moment they were teleported away.

The voice Enkidu had heard was not his own, but it was the next best thing. It was the voice of the original Enkidu diety that had once existed on Rikti Earth. Known as Inliki, the god was among the dozen or so deities that the Body Purists had begun to worship in the past few decades. He had been growing more and more powerful ever since the war began and the Purist's faith increased. When his counterpart from Earth entered the Rikti dimension, Inliki immediately felt his presence. He reached out to his alternate self and discovered the Omega Team's entire plan. While he saw the merits of it, he also sensed the tremendous power within the Heart of Shiva, and he knew he had a much better use for such energies.

The disoriented heroes were more than a little surprised to suddenly find themselves in an underground chamber surrounded by somewhat strange looking humans. Communication would have been a real problem had Enkidu and Inliki not shared an immediate telepathic link. As it was, this link made it easy to overcome issues of confusion and mistrust. Inliki learned from Enkidu that the war on Earth was going very badly, and that if the Rikti weren't stopped, humanity would probably lose. The Omega team's goal had been to put at least a temporary, hopefully a permanent stop to reinforcements so that maybe the rest of humanity could turn the tide of the war. While the main doorway between the worlds had been destroyed, it would be a simple matter for the Rikti to open up another one. Inliki doubted that it would take them more than a few hours.

The earthling heroes grew despondent at this news. They had felt sure that the Rikti would take month to recover from their attack. Maybe if they'd been allowed to detonate the Heart of Shiva, they could've really made a difference. Some in the group wanted to go back and do just that. But Inliki had a better idea. He wanted to use the Heart's power to cut off the Rikti from

Earth forever. By combining the faith of the Purists with the magical knowledge and skills of the surviving members of Omega Team, he felt sure that they could devise a way to tap into the Heart of Shiva and cut off all inter-dimensional ties between the Rikti and Earth. If successful, they would have won the war for humanity and struck a powerful blow for faith and Puritanism on the Rikti world.

And so it came to pass that Inliki, Enkidu, the other heroes, and the Body Purists conceived of a grand ritual to surround the entire world in a shatterproof shield of faith. As an especially galling touch, Inliki included an element in the ritual that would let everyone on the planet know exactly what had just happened. The gods had returned and they had a message of peace. They had harmed no one, but merely ended a war that would destroy both worlds. They called upon the Rikti to put aside their arms and look into their hearts as human beings. Knowing full well that the Rikti had no knowledge or even ability to perform magic or deal with mystic threats, the conspirators could safely announce their methods and intentions. They hoped that, by doing so, they would incite larger numbers of Rikti to join their side and oppose the war. At the very least, they hoped it would convince the Lineages to open up some sort of peace process in the hopes of getting back their lost soldiers, although how such peace talks could be conducted with the link between worlds severed was left unclear in the hurried planning.

Not surprisingly, the Purists' announcement did little to foster peace and understanding. Instead, it only added fuel to the fire of panic and anger that was sweeping across the globe. Every family had at least one member serving in the Earth invasion force, and they were unwilling to hear any talk of peace as long as the soldiers were still in harm's way. The Lineages also began to panic, because it was now clear that the viral contamination of worshiping gods had broken out on their own world, thanks in no small part to the Earth heroes who had invaded their planet. The strong negative reaction certainly didn't surprise the Purists – they had expected as much. But the announcement also had its intended effect. It made the whole world aware of both the Purists and the return of the gods. Recruitment and conversion became much, much easier.

In the months following the "coming out" of the Purists and the return of the old gods, the Lineages cracked down hard on any kind of dissent and launched a worldwide manhunt for the terrorists. Despite this effort, new worshippers began to pore into the Purist's ranks, swelling their numbers into the hundred of thousands. They had been preparing for such a day for decades and had more than enough room in their hidden bases for the converts. Of course a number of these were spies sent by the government to try and crack the Purist secret. Unfortunately for them, the team of Earth heroes included several powerful and talented magicians who had woven powerful enchantments that could detect any lies or false converts. The Rikti government failed to infiltrate the Purists, even as their influence began to spread. A new war was brewing.

Cut Off

Back on Earth, the Rikti invasion force immediately felt the effects of being shut off from their home dimension. Once the main portal beneath Paragon City went down, Rikti bases all around the globe began to set up their emergency portals and try to establish contact with the home dimension. News traveled very fast – the way home was blocked, and no one knew why. The assumption was that the humans had, as part of their recent assault on the Paragon portal, used some new weapon or technique to cut off transportation between the two dimensions.

This was even more of a devastating blow to the Rikti than the humans could have hoped for. The invasion force still numbered hundred of thousands of soldiers, all of whom had high tech equipment that required a constant stream of new parts, recharging, and servicing. Centuries of using teleportation as the primary means of transport had ingrained a "just in time" philosophy

of supply and resource management. The invasion force on Earth did not maintain any large supply caches, hospitals, repair facilities, or any of the other behind the scenes resources needed to keep an ultra-modern army fighting. They relied on the home dimension for all of these things, teleporting what they needed back and forth through the portals.

For the first time since the war began, the fighting stopped. The humans were catching their breath, reeling from the loss of so many heroes in such a short period of time. The Rikti desperately attempted to reestablish contact with their home world, but everything they tried, failed. Without regular supplies from home, they simply did not have the resources they needed to continue fighting a full on war. The War Demi-Gods (equivalent to generals) decided that it was time to switch tactics. They would consolidate their resources, fortify any bases that remained a secret, and bend all their efforts to finding a way back home.

The Rikti began to withdraw from front line positions, scorching the earth as they went. In dozens of cities around the globe the Rikti set fire to anything they could and then disappeared underground. As the human forces moved in to retake the alien occupied territory, they were forced to deal with the fires and other disasters rather than actually confronting the Rikti as they retreated. Even so, the Rikti still suffered significant casualties during the withdrawal, chiefly in the five cities where the local heroes managed to trace them back to the bases and catch them there. In the following weeks, heroes and the surviving members of the Vanguard managed to root out eleven more Rikti bases, killing or capturing thousands more.

But after about a month, the trails went cold. The Rikti had succeeded in pretty much disappearing from the face of the Earth. The world's heroes could find no more bases – although they were sure some still remained active. As the Rikti had hoped, after a period of peace, the humans gave up the hunt and turned to the much more pressing job of repairing all the damage that the war had wrought. The Earth had never seen such devastation. It was estimated that there were currently close to 1 Billion people made homeless as a result of the war. Few major cities had power, water, or much of an economy to speak of. The whole world had to pull together to find a way out of these dire straits.

Desperate Times

The Rikti Invasion force had included not just soldiers from the Lineage of War, but also scientists, researchers, intelligence agents, and support personnel drawn from a wide spectrum of Rikti society. This turned out to be a lucky thing indeed, since the over-specialization of the Lineages meant that most Rikti knew very little about disciplines beyond their own area of expertise. Having scientists trapped on Earth ultimately saved the stranded Rikti from utter annihilation.

Once it became clear that there was nothing they could do to reestablish contact with the home dimension, the Rikti concentrated their efforts on fortifying their remaining secret bases and securing the supplies they needed to survive. Since they were biologically still mostly human (despite outward appearances), they could survive well enough on human food. When it came to more advanced items, like parts for weapons or teleporters, they were in real trouble. Although sturdily built and reliable, eventually they would need new pieces for their equipment. A certain amount of repairs, short cuts, and jury-rigging would help see them through for six months or a year, but these were complex devices that required factory made, machine parts.

A forward thinking scientist from the Lineage of Engineers devised a rather extreme plan to meet their needs. Already the humans were reverse engineering captured Rikti technology and building their own force field generators. Intelligence sources also estimated that the humans would have their own working teleportation matrix within the year, possibly sooner. The

scientist identified a set of fifty or so core pieces of technology that the stranded Rikti couldn't manufacture themselves. If they could get access to these parts, the Rikti could do the rest on their own. Since the humans already possessed much of the knowledge necessary to make the devices and would soon figure out the rest, why not point them in the right direction a little sooner.

While many argued that giving the humans technology was dangerous and would have terrible long term consequence, the supporters pointed out that the humans were smart enough to figure all of this out on their own. They certainly had more than enough captured technology to work from. Better to control the flow of knowledge and direct it in a manner that could help the Rikti. Without those parts, the force fields, teleporters, and energy weapons that the Rikti depended on to survive would soon fail them. And so a bold and admittedly bizarre plan began to form.

The Rikti needed to leak detailed schematics to private corporations who would quickly develop them and introduce them into the market as quickly as possible. In government hands the technology might be held in secret for months or, more likely, years, and the Rikti would gain no benefit. But in private hands there would be pressure to bring products to market, especially if the Rikti gave different pieces of technology to different corporations. The competitive capitalist environment would ensure a quick turn around time on the parts the Rikti needed.

There was also a very good long-term reason for developing ties with human corporations. The Rikti had pretty much exhausted their own resources when it came to figuring out why they couldn't travel back home anymore. Odds were, that since it was the humans who seemed to have closed the doorway, they probably had a good idea about how to open it up again. Since a great deal of the innovation and cutting edge science on Earth came from the private sector, establishing inroads with prominent tech companies might help them uncover the truth about what had happened.

But for either of these goals to be realized, the Rikti needed to find a way to safely and secretly interact directly with the humans. Throughout the war they had run passive tests on human captives, scanning their brains and attaching artificial telepathy devices to help in communication. While these processes had worked for interrogating POW's, they would not serve the Rikti purposes in their newest endeavor. The biological manipulations that every Rikti went through from birth to maturity warped their vocal cords. Even if the Rikti soldiers knew the Earth languages, they didn't have the physical equipment needed to speak.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. The Lineage of War had made some preliminary studies on how to reverse biomorph a Rikti, transforming him or her back into a human phenotype. The original plan had been to use such morphs as spies and forward observers, but it was decided that the psychological impact on the soldier would far outweigh the usefulness of having such undercover operatives. More simple put, in the minds of the Rikti, it was just too horrible a thing to ask of anyone. Well, now that matters had grown much more desperate, the standard for what might be too horrible to contemplate had also changed.

The Rikti only had a few dozen working biomorph chambers, all of which had been outfitted for medical purposes. Biomorph technology can heal a wound hundreds of times faster than conventional surgery. It proved difficult to modify and reprogram the machine to actually change Rikti morphology back to that of Earth's humans. Several of the early experiments failed miserably, causing death or insanity. But finally the project proved successful, or at least successful enough to make Rikti-humans that could pass as human under casual inspection.

They Are Among Us

The second step of the process proved much easier – learning the language. The Rikti had several working telepathy-based teaching systems they had brought along to help train soldiers on new technologies, tactics, and weapons. English and a half dozen other human languages had already been programmed into the machines before the war, based on pre-invasion intelligence work. It took only a few weeks to give the newly transformed spies perfect American accents. The harder part proved getting used to talking at all, which still seemed very clumsy and inefficient to the Rikti. Indeed, although over a hundred Rikti spies underwent the transformation into “humans,” only nine of that first class proved proficient enough at verbal communication to go out on the streets and interact with humans without raising suspicions. The rest underwent months of learning and speech therapy before they were ready.

Meanwhile, the first wave of infiltrators headed out into a world that had, until recently, been one giant war zone. The Rikti Demi-Gods of Intelligence had come up with a relatively ingenious plan. The U.S. government had already begun to put restrictions on Rikti technology – only licensed government approved research problems were allowed and all items had to go through government inspectors before being passed on to private research firms. Not surprisingly, there were a number of companies that did not relish these restrictions. As far as they were concerned, the bounty of alien technology was worth billions or even trillions of dollars in patents and products. Every missed opportunity or delayed research could cost a fortune in profits.

The Rikti infiltrators posed as scavengers, men and women who searched the ruins and war zones for Rikti devices and brought them directly to interested companies, bypassing the government inspectors. Of course the Department of Homeland Security had personnel assigned to stop exactly this type of behavior, but it was easy for the Rikti to use their teleportation technology and other assets to avoid the inspectors. The beauty of this plan was that the kind of companies that would buy illegally obtained Rikti technology were probably the same kinds of companies that would make other illegal and secret deals that the Rikti had planned.

Not surprisingly, Crey Industries and a number of its subsidiaries and partners were more than happy to deal with these “scavengers.” The Rikti ended up learning quite a bit about how to circumvent government regulations and inspectors. Within just a few weeks they had found nine different buyers for their “finds” (four of which were Crey owned or controlled). The Engineers had come up with a number of different innovative techniques for passing on the information they wanted to have the humans understand. Each company received a set of technology samples that at first seemed largely unrelated, but when puzzled together revealed greater truths and more fundamental technological principles and designs.

The Rikti’s main goal learning more about what had happened to the connection with their home dimension also met with success. One of the companies they sold technology to was the newly reconstituted Portal Corp Revival Group, a company that had been benefiting greatly from reverse engineering Rikti teleportation devices. The Rikti sold them several key pieces that helped them unlock the secrets of fast, safe, and energy efficient teleportation. In return, the Rikti not only had access to the specs and details of the new emergency transport teleport system, they also managed to get copies of the company’s top secret report on the inability to travel between Earth and the Rikti home dimension.

When they discovered that the humans were apparently as clueless as they were as to how and why access to the dimension had been cut off, there was a wave of anxiety. Their hope of finding the human key to returning home now seemed a fool's quest. There would be no going home anytime soon. The Rikti were going to have fight their war on their own, although this seemed like a decidedly losing proposition.

Lost and Found

Now that it was clear that they were on their own for the foreseeable future, the Rikti had to reevaluate all of their plans. Obviously the infiltration had been more forward looking than they imagined, since they would have to be living off the humans for a long, long time. Less well thought out was the technology sharing program. The Demi-Gods of War had justified the decision by pointing out that once contact with the home world was reestablished, the war could begin again in earnest. After all, the Rikti had been decisively winning the war. Another six months and humanity would have been lost forever. Now however, it looked like the humans would have an indefinite amount of time to rebuild their defenses, only now they could use Rikti based technology to make them even stronger.

Obviously the only morally defensible decision was for the Rikti on Earth to do everything in their power to retard or reverse humanity's progress. That meant fighting a guerilla war, something they had little experience with. They did however know that in any martial endeavor, the learning curve can be very steep, and its best not to pay the price with the lives of your own men if you can help it. Thus the Rikti looked way back into their own history for their inspiration on how to best fight the humans. The answer was of course, other humans.

Like the ancient Progenitors of old, the Rikti started kidnapping humans or using POW's to experiment on. They wanted to transform them into soldiers for the Rikti cause, but it quickly became clear that this was not a tenable long-term solution. They only had a dozen or so working biomorph chambers left, and those were being used overtime to turn Rikti soldiers into human-looking infiltrators. They needed a much easier to use method of recruiting humans to their cause. The biggest obstacle being that they were Rikti, probably the most hated and feared beings in the history of humanity. It seemed unlikely that many humans would knowingly ally themselves with the alien agenda.

One of the members of the Lineage of Biology who had been attached to the medics corps had noticed that the very hazardous byproduct from the biomorph chambers retained some of its soma-mutagenic properties. Normally the biomorph runoff was stored in sealed containers and then rendered inert through a long and relatively costly process. Centuries ago, when the biomorphing process had just begun, the Rikti had failed to take adequate precautions with the biomorphic waste, causing one of the biggest environmental disasters in their history. Ever since then, the substance had been viewed as too dangerous to deal with in any way but safe storage and long-term neutralization.

But this one visionary technician decided to break that trend and see if he could find some use for the material. After all, these were desperate times and they needed any edge they could get. Furthermore, they didn't have the equipment or facilities to properly deal with the waste material. They had to do something with it – although the general consensus was to just let it loose on Earth and cause what damage it might. After a series of simple tests, the technician discovered that, when properly applied, the biomorphic waste could still modify a living subject. Moreover, it retained some of the programming and patterns that it had originally held in the biomorph chamber. In other words, it had the capacity to remember a certain form and gradually

morph subject to that form with prolonged exposure. Now of course the down side was that, unlike the bio morphing chambers, the waste product also caused severe genetic damage, rendering subjects infertile and decreasing their lifespan by decades. But since humans, not Rikti, were the targets, this hardly seemed a significant drawback.

As a new generation of heroes stepped to the forefront to help rebuild the shattered Earth, the Rikti noticed that more and more normal humans were seeking something – anything to catapult them into the ranks of the elite. At the same time the economy had collapsed into ruin, leaving millions unemployed and homeless. Paragon City was clogged with hopeless humans looking for some glimmer of hope in their otherwise desperate lives. Already various villain groups were taking advantage of the weakness and despair, recruiting volunteers into their criminal cabals. The Rikti, never slow to take advantage of an opportunity, decided to do the same, only they would do it indirectly, through the help of the biomorphic waste ooze.

Rikti agents began to release quantities of the ooze into various underground and back-alley locales frequented by the homeless. They also seeded scraps of food, drinking water supplies, and even cheap liquor and moonshine with the substance. Only a very few select locations got this treatment. The plan was to keep exposure small at first, just enough so that word would spread of special areas where miracles happened to those who came there, but not enough to attract the attention of the authorities.

The Rikti had modified the biomorphic ooze so that it heightened strength and physique first and then made more dramatic physical changes. Exposure was also chemically addictive, giving anyone who came in contact a mild euphoria and a desire for more.

The changes took less than a month to start showing up within the homeless population. This first group was stronger and faster and smarter than anyone else. Not only could they protect themselves from thugs and villains, they could actually exert their own will on the world as well – taking what they needed or wanted rather than begging for it. Word spread, and more and more people began to flock to the mysterious sources of these miraculous transformations.

And then the sources dried up. The changed began to go through withdraw. It was only then that the first of The Lost stepped forward to provide them with more of what they craved. The original Lost were Rikti agents transformed into powerful, muscular, yet almost monstrous men. They claimed to have been normal homeless humans who found the true source of the miracles. Now they controlled it, but we freely allow access to the Source to any and all that wanted it. The Rikti had prepared a series of underground tunnels connected to the sewer networks where “The Source” would be available to human addicts. It didn’t take long for the humans to come running.

Instead of small quantities of otherwise invisible waste ooze that they had previously exposed the humans to, here in their Source Chamber, the Rikti gave the homeless addicts pure biomorphic ooze to consume, dramatically increasing both the speed of the changes and the power of the addictions. Once someone had partaken of the ooze they would never look back – they belonged to the Lost now. The longer they consumed the substance, the more powerful they would become. The more powerful they became, the more the biomorphic waste twisted their bodies into monstrous forms.

The Scavenger Races

The Rikti’s new army of human monsters grew quickly, and it didn’t take long before they started putting them into action. The Rikti controlled The Lost from afar. Only a few transformed Rikti

still masqueraded as the leaders of the growing drug cult, but even they began to recede into the background as the first addicts became fully transformed creatures – vaguely Rikti looking things – they took over leadership positions within the group. The original founders (the Rikti) became like gods, the benevolent Source of the transforming ooze who seldom asked much beyond an occasional assault on a specific location or the theft of a particular item.

The Rikti had developed a simple but powerful ideology for the Lost to follow. The Source was allegedly the Earth itself, offering up a miraculous substance that was meant to help cleanse the world of all the pain, suffering, and evil. Those who partook of the Source became the chosen warriors of the Earth, sent by God to overturn the old order – to raise up the meek and throw down the proud. Basically, it was every homeless person and downtrodden individual's dream. Take the power from those that have it and give it to those that don't. This simple philosophy resonated deeply with the Source addled brains of the Lost. They literally ate it up, and in the process became soldiers devoted to a cause.

The first duty of the Lost is always to expand its own numbers. Every human that becomes Lost is one Rikti have to worry about fighting. Now granted, only a small percentage of the population is going to want to crawl down into a cave and eat glowing mutagenic slime just to get superpowers, but the Rikti want the Lost to make sure they do get everyone who falls into that category. Second of all, the Lost are meant to be a force for terror and confusion in the world. The Rikti want them to make people feel unsafe, to divert heroes, police, and military away from other matters. Thus the Lost are encouraged to attack and steal anything and everything they might desire. There is no obvious pattern to the Lost's strikes, other than the fact that they seldom attack hardened targets head on. The Rikti encourage the Lost to be careful and not wasteful with their lives. The longer they live, the more damage they can cause over time.

And of course the third duty is to serve as a cover for the Rikti's other activities. Whenever the Rikti want something done that can't possibly be traced back to them, they use plan to use the Lost. This especially true when it comes to gathering materials, technology, and research subjects for their various experiments and undertakings. Indeed, although Rikti agents buy some of the technology they need from companies they do business with, they also send the Lost to steal almost as much. Their knowledge of the sewers makes it easy for the Lost to move about the city undetected while their seemingly random choice of targets for theft disguises any significance that law enforcement or heroes might attach to the theft.

The success of the Lost program gave the Rikti another idea. While humans homeless were certainly a very obvious sign of the city's decayed state, there were other wandering beings out there as well – particularly packs of feral dogs that had been separated from their owners during the war. Many of the early experiments with the biomorphic waste had been performed on these animals. The results had been quite fascinating, and resulted in the creation of ferocious, monkey-like creatures that hunted based on scent and sound. The creatures were almost impossible to control, and so at first the Rikti saw little value in making more of them once they'd perfected the Lost formula.

One interesting anomaly was that the dog-things bred true. They would mate and produce more such creatures and they did so at a remarkably fast rate. Once the Lost started to show real signs of success in their various endeavors, the Rikti decided to revisit the animal program. While these mutated beasts couldn't be controlled, it occurred to the Rikti that there were plenty of places in the city where they didn't want anyone to have control. They could simply release hordes of these vicious beasts into the city and add to the chaos. Yet one more distraction to

keep the humans from focusing on what was important.

A few modifications to the formula perfected the scavenger beasts. The Rikti also implanted a simple device that shocked the scavengers whenever they tried to attack a Rikti. The beasts quickly learned who to stay away from, and soon enough everyone and everything else was fair game. The creatures were released into the wilds of Paragon City and they continue to plague residents to this day.

With both the Lost and the Scavengers operating effectively, the Rikti bio-techs have recently decided to see if they can find other uses for the biomorphic waste ooze. Indeed, they have actually had to find ways to produce extra waste material beyond what would emanate from normal use of their existing body morphing chambers because they have so much demand for it. Plans are currently in development to create an airborne or water borne version of the ooze that could be used to dose large swaths of the city at once.

Spare Parts

Meanwhile, as their biological machinations unfolded, the Rikti's plans for leaking technology to compliant human corporations were also succeeding better than anticipated. The companies all rushed the Rikti-based products into production, creating a sudden influx of power sources, computer processors, communications equipment, energy arrays, and high-strength ceramics that are all crucial elements of Rikti technology. The Rikti front companies that supplied the original technology had shares in the patents, providing the aliens with a source of income with which they could legitimately purchase the equipment and parts they needed to renew their war effort.

First and foremost, the Rikti set about reestablishing their own manufacturing base. Rikti factories are complicated, delicate systems, but when all the parts are in place they work with amazing efficiency. The factories are also very adaptable, capable of being switched over easily for the production of a wide variety of different products, from weapons and battle armor to medical equipment and teleportation gear. Once just a few secret factories were up and running, the Rikti soon had the ability to manufacture everything they needed, as long as the flow of raw materials and specialized parts kept coming from the humans.

With their confidence returning, the Rikti decided it was time to once again go on the offensive. For a long while they had remained hidden, fearful of being found out while their resources were so depleted. Now it was time to take the fight back to the humans and to wage a guerilla war that would terrify the whole world once again. The Lost had been the first wave of that attack, but they were crude weapons – a cudgel. Now the Rikti needed an army that was more precise.

Rather than risking large numbers of Rikti soldiers in battle, the aliens began to manufacture robotic drones to act as front line troops. Drones had previously played a role as spies and intelligence gathering devices, but had only limited use in actual combat situations. On the Rikti home world, robots performed a number of simple functions, particularly in manufacturing, resource gathering, and food production, but the Lineage of War had always resisted relying on them for combat purposes. Once again, the dire straits of the Earth-bound Rikti caused a shift from tradition, and as soon as the factories were up and running, they began producing military grade drones.

The first model, and by far the most common, were simply a modification on the standard intelligence gathering drones. Capable of flight, these ovoid drones were equipped with powerful

camera lenses and electronic eavesdropping equipment as well as energy weapons. More than one human observer has noted that the drones look like satellites, which is in truth not far from the truth. The original drones were sent up into orbit around the planet, their lenses being more than strong enough to spy on activity on the ground. It is only in recent months that the Earth's heroes have finally cleared the skies of these prying alien eyes. The Rikti simply adapted to original pattern, adding weaponry to make them formidable foes in their own right.

The primary goal of these drones originally was to engage the enemy directly and learn as much as they could about them. In effect, the drones were sent out on "suicide" missions to do battle with any heroes they could find. They of course recorded and scanned the heroes in detail, transmitting the data back to the Rikti in real time. If the drones managed to kill a hero, all the better, but even if the heroes won, the true purpose of the drones was still fulfilled.

In the course of about three weeks, the Rikti flooded the skies above Paragon City with the drones. Each drone would then identify a hero and move to engage its target. Other drones made sure not to attack the same target, but rather fanned out and looked for other options. From the heroes' viewpoint, suddenly it seemed as if the skies were alive with malevolent robots. No one could even be sure where they came from at first, although scientists eventually identified them as being of Rikti design. This was the first large scale Rikti resurgence in some time, and it got everyone on the planet more than a little worried. But then, just as suddenly as they had started, they stopped – or almost stopped.

The Rikti continued to send out occasional flights of drones either to harass specific heroes or to gather intelligence about a certain subject. But the huge waves of attacks stopped after the drones stopped returning new results. The Rikti had managed to get video and detailed scans of roughly 95% of the heroes then active in Paragon City, along with police and military resources active in the city. This provided them with an extensive and detailed database about their foes, allowing them to plan their coming offensive much more effectively. Once they'd identified the heroes they saw as the greatest threats, they sent much smaller spy drones, like the ones used before the war, to follow potential targets, learning their routines and even their secret identities. The Rikti planned to use this knowledge to launch a series of pinpoint strikes when their enemies were at their most vulnerable.

Meanwhile, the Rikti engineers continued to work on more advanced and tougher combat drones. They came up with a variety of different designs, field-testing all of them against weaker and less well known heroes. Only a few of the designs proved effective, but the Rikti have since gone into production on these new model killing machines and hope to see them in action and in force very soon.

3.2 Goals

The Rikti have a huge number of goals, all of which are steps towards their two great objectives: get home or remake Earth in their own image. They fully realize that both projects could take lifetimes to accomplish and are more than willing to put in whatever time it takes. The strategists have broken their overall scheme down into a number of individual goals, each of which represents a different front in the war against humanity.

Contact with Home

With all the conventional means of returning home exhausted, the Rikti have still not quite given up hope that they might some day find a way back to their native dimension. One of the first

things they discovered when they started looking for methods to re-open the portals was that only their world seemed off-limits. They could still travel to other dimensions, although none of them had Rikti living on them as far as they could tell. Portal exploration is a dangerous, time consuming business, and it is only recently that the Rikti have felt comfortable expending time and resources on it. They have begun to send explorers (mostly drones) to other dimensions, hoping to find one either close to their own home or at least one that still has access to the Rikti home world. Although finding such a shortcut around the spell that cuts Rikti Earth off from the rest of the multiverse will prove impossible, the Rikti might well find some new allies in their ongoing war against humanity.

As part of their exploration effort, the Rikti have taken a serious interest in both the history of Portal Corp and any new efforts on the part of humanity to once again start visiting other dimensions. With their influence over the spread of Rikti-based technology into human hands, they want to make sure they have a stake or at least a spy in every laboratory that's doing extra-dimensional research. If anyone, anywhere learns something that might help the Rikti get home, they want to know about it.

Finally, the Rikti believe that they have one other, very wild hope for winning the war. It's a long shot, but one worth pursuing. It is not known precisely why the Progenitors never came to Earth in this reality, but the Rikti have managed to establish that other Progenitor ships did reach other worlds. Just like the other Progenitor worlds back in the Rikti dimension, the Progenitors in our universe have broadcast signals out into space alerting the other space arks of their locations. The broadcasts currently reaching Earth are between 800 and 1500 years old, depending on their point of origin, but they prove that the Progenitors are indeed out there.

The Rikti hope to find some way to breach the communication gap – to sidestep the speed limit on interstellar communication. They've already leaked what relevant information they have to their unwitting human allies in the technology fields. If they can find some way to transmit plans, frequencies, and settings for a teleportation set-up on another Progenitor world, then they can establish a link between the two star systems. The assumption is that any Progenitor created world would come down on the side of the Rikti in a war against humanity. Whether or not this is true remains to be seen.

Guerilla War

The ongoing guerilla war is just about to enter stage two. Since the end of the initial invasion and the closing of the portals, the Rikti have kept a low profile. Now that they've had a chance to rebuild their weapons caches and drones, they're ready to start attacking on a regular basis once again. If contacting other worlds and finding a way home are long term goals, the guerilla war is a short term endeavor. The war is being fought under the assumption that it will be possible to reestablish contact with the home world sometime in the next few years. If that's the case, the Rikti want the humans to be as weak and unprepared as possible when the second invasion force comes through the portals.

The first order of business is to kill or incapacitate as many heroes as possible without taking heavy casualties. The drone reconnaissance missions laid the groundwork for this effort. Now that the Rikti have detailed files about most of the world's heroes, they can properly plan for their attacks. The Rikti soldiers themselves try to avoid open fights in the streets – they leave such things to the drones, the scavengers, and the Lost. Instead they prefer to set up complex and clever ambushes or assassinate their targets from afar. They try to strike at heroes when they are most vulnerable and when the Rikti can attack from a position of overwhelming

strength. The increasing numbers of heroes active in Rikti contested cities makes their job harder and harder, but the heroes were the key to Earth's first victory, so the Rikti plan to do everything they can to eliminate humanity's most powerful weapon.

Of course heroes alone are not the only part of humanity's defense. Indeed, with the rapid growth in weapons technology that resulted from the study of captured Rikti equipment, the conventional soldiers will soon be better equipped than ever. If the trend continues, it will only be a matter of time before human soldiers are a match for the Rikti, at least in terms of firepower. Obviously this would be a disaster for the Rikti war effort, since they owe much of their initial success to their overwhelming technological superiority. Therefore, the Rikti continue to make deadly attacks against military targets, particularly weapons development and training facilities. They are actually having some success as well. More and more, people and governments are coming to rely on their super powered heroes rather than their military for protection. Recruitment is down and in the economic disaster following the war, the defense budget was cut just like everything else.

The second most important target is the Earth's defense infrastructure. From the Rikti point of view, one of the most frustrating aspects of losing the first invasion was that their advanced force field technology fell into the hands of the humans. Paragon City is home to a particularly infuriating use of the technology – the force field walls that divide the city into neighborhoods and secure areas make it difficult for the Rikti to move with ease. The force fields do interfere with Rikti teleportation matrices, forcing the Rikti to travel underground when they want to move between regions. Therefore the Rikti plan to do everything they can to destroy the force field network in Paragon City and other major metropolitan areas.

Of course the human's own teleportation network is another source of consternation. Casualty rates amongst heroes have declined dramatically since the emergency medical transport system was put into place. Thus far most of the Rikti's efforts to jam or disable the teleportation network have been unsuccessful, but it remains a high priority for them. Thus hospitals and other emergency medical institutions are new favorite targets for the Rikti soldiers, a chance for them to often kill two birds with one stone – striking a hero while he's weak and disrupting the infrastructure that helps make him better.

The fact that the Rikti are themselves somewhat responsible for helping the humans learn the ins and outs of their technology is not lost on them. The humans provide valuable resources for the Rikti, although the aliens often need more than they can afford or are willing to buy with the money earned from their secretly held patents. Therefore, a large portion of the guerilla war's focus remains squarely on stealing manufactured parts and raw materials for their own factories. Their ultimate goal is to siphon off as much of the production of parts as they possibly can while still leaving the human companies with enough money to stay in business and keep producing more.

Finally, there is the infiltration aspect of the guerilla war. The Rikti continue to body-morph more and more of their soldiers to look like humans. Although this puts them under severe emotional and physical stress, their value as undercover assets more than makes up for the costs. It was only very recently that human authorities discovered that the Rikti could make themselves look human, a revelation that incited a wave of panic throughout human society. Now that the humans realized that the Rikti could be anywhere among them, there was nowhere on Earth that felt safe.

At first the Rikti were quite upset when their secret was revealed. The ability to act human without any possible suspicions being aroused had allowed them to carry out their technology leaking scheme with relative ease. Now everyone is suspicious. The Rikti have decided to use the paranoid zeitgeist to their advantage, making lemons out of lemonade if you will. Human impersonators have now become very adept at shifting suspicion onto completely innocent people. A whole cadre of infiltrators now focuses exclusively on framing normal people as Rikti spies or impersonators. The object is to drive the planet into a frenzy of fear that effectively paralyzes the people with paranoia.

The cadre's operations range from relatively simple things like planting Rikti made communicators and simple weapons in people's homes and then calling the police to much more elaborate ruse's. Recently the Department of Homeland Security has developed a complicated and expensive testing process that can detect whether or not a subject has ever been modified by Rikti body-morphing technology. In response to this test, the Rikti have taken to kidnapping innocents, rendering them unconscious and then altering their bodies in subtle ways – not enough for even the person to notice, but enough to render a false positive on the government test. The poor victim goes to sleep a human and wakes up a "Rikti," and doesn't even realize what's been done to him. At the same time, the Rikti themselves are already well on their way to developing a body morphing process that the test won't be able to detect.

Other infiltrators have more traditional duties. The Rikti have gone to great lengths to get their agents into government, military, and law enforcement agencies. Since the war devastated all of these groups, there has been a great deal of new personnel hired in the last six months. With records destroyed and identities lost during the invasion, performing an accurate background check is very difficult. The Rikti infiltrators use all these loopholes to their advantage and have managed to get close to 100 agents set up in various sensitive government positions. For now they are deep sleeper spies, not even passing on intelligence on a regular basis unless it's particularly vital. When the time comes, they will be ready to strike – probably crippling their various employers in the process.

But of all the Rikti imposters, the most devious and dangerous are the false heroes. The Rikti have always seen the god-like super powered heroes as their most dangerous foe. Unlike the military or police, the heroes don't have any central command system for the Rikti to infiltrate. Instead heroes work through a network of friendships, acquaintances, and contacts. Penetrating that network has proven a significant challenge, but not an insuperable one. There are currently seven false heroes working in Paragon City right now. Three of them have earned quite a bit of renown as agents of Hero Corps, while the rest are freelance agents and heroes who have developed substantial webs of contacts. All of the Rikti false heroes appear totally human and use technology as the source of their powers. This allows them to both blend in and be easily replaced by another body-morphed Rikti should some tragedy befall them.

Swelling the Ranks

The Lost represent the largest growing aspect of the Rikti offensive, even more so than the ever-increasing drone arsenal. The Rikti want to push recruiting even more, expanding the ranks of the Lost beyond just the homeless and hopeless to anyone and everyone they can get their hands on. While there are various initiatives aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the humans (see below), the fact remains that the easiest way to turn a human from an enemy to an ally is to turn him into a Rikti. Thus, the Lost and their Rikti masters are both in the process of testing new ways to deliver the biomorphic ooze to larger numbers of humans, especially military and police personnel as well as heroes.

The most obvious method has proven the most successful – the Lost have begun to package the ooze in syringes or vials and sell them as street drugs. The ooze's effects aren't nearly as euphoric as some of the hard street drugs, but they make up for this lack of false joy with a good dose of increased strength and toughness. The drug, known on the streets as ooze, is becoming more and more popular, especially among gang members. The Tsoo have already forbidden their members to use the drug, or even to sell it. Ooze is just beginning to have its transformative effects on the early-adopters. The Lost watch their customers closely, and as soon as they begin to exhibit signs of monsterism, they snatch the poor addict off the street and bring him into the Lost's ranks. Now the monster-addict has a home and a never ending supply of his new drug of choice. It really is the perfect strategy.

Right now the Rikti can't manufacture enough of the substance to make a large impact on the illicit drug market, and so they've begun to look for human partners in their endeavor even as they ramp up their own production facilities. A weakened variant of the ooze formula has been given to a less than above-board pharmaceutical company called IJP Inc. IJP specializes in sports related drugs, particularly various kinds of steroids. The modified ooze represents the best new strength-building drug to come along in quite some time and is not detectable by current drug tests. As a result it has become quite popular amongst amateur and professional athletes. The reduced dosage means that it will take longer for the drug's body morphing properties to manifest themselves, which is just as the Rikti planned. In a year there will be tens of thousands more addicts across the United States, none of whom know that they are turning into monsters. By the time they do it will be too late – their addiction will be full blown and the only refuge they'll be able to find is in the arms of the Lost.

Hearts and Minds

The Rikti know that as long as the human will to fight remains strong, they will always have an uphill battle. Of course, popular opinion could not be more against the Rikti and their cause. After all, the invaders nearly destroyed all of modern civilization with their attack. Nevertheless, the Rikti hope to, over time, win some support from the human population. Already with the Lost they are bringing humans to their cause, albeit through trickery and addiction. But there are also more subtle methods in play. For instance, music has begun to play an unexpectedly important role in the battle for human hearts and minds.

In their home world, the Rikti prison system uses a sound based therapy combined with telepathic projections to calm and reform prisoners. The sound pattern is keyed to certain base instincts and brain functions and ends up having an effect not dissimilar to a mild narcotic. This aural bombardment results in serene, easily influenced prisoners who become much more susceptible to rehabilitation. When the Rikti started taking prisoners during the war, they decided to use the same process to pacify the humans. While they could not transmit the telepathic messages, the sound therapy did have a pacifying effect.

After the war, several recordings of this sound regimen made by prisoners got released on the Internet. The sounds soon got mixed into dance tracks by various cutting edge DJ's and have since become a popular form of music in their own right. The euphoric effects remain intact, making the music actually addictive to those who listen to it. Through pure chance, one of the Rikti infiltrators heard the music playing on a subway passenger's headphones and recognized it for what it was. She reported the finding and soon Rikti researchers had a complete picture of what was going on. A sizable group of human youths were becoming addicted to Rikti prison music.

The Rikti have not been slow to capitalize on this hot new trend. They have been doing everything they can to fuel the fever for music with a Rikti beat. Their researchers have been experimenting with other tonal arrangements and then releasing them as bootleg recording over the Internet. The plan is to create a whole range of emotional and psychological triggers – music that inspires happiness or sadness, panic or calm. In and of itself it's a relatively weak lever with which to manipulate the humans, but the Rikti plan to combine it with other strategies for greater results – such as swaying elections, paving the way for other hearts and minds operations, and so on.

Musical mind control is but one aspect of Rikti technology that has begun to have a profound effect on human society. There is also a widespread craving to own and use Rikti technology. Although there have been several laws passed that require that any and all Rikti artifacts be turned over to the authorities, there is still a great amount of social cache attached to owning your own piece of the alien invasion. Indeed, there are numerous informal clubs and secret gatherings devoted to finding and swapping Rikti devices. One might think that most of the items would have been snatched up by now, and indeed that's true – at least as far as actual items lost by the Rikti during the war. Now it is the Rikti themselves who are keeping the black-market awash with new product.

The Rikti have begun to manufacture and release large numbers of small, relatively harmless items into the black-market through their infiltrators. Just as they seeded the high-tech companies with samples of their basic technology, now they're giving finished goods to collectors who will take them home and hide them away. Some of the more common items include nano-edged knives that cut through steel, life-sign scanners that detect all the biomass within 50 feet, listening devices for spying on your neighbors, signal jammers that keep your neighbors from listening in on you, small hand guns that can stun a human at 100 yards, and so on. They're also releasing some rarer and more powerful weapons and equipment as well.

The income gained from these sales is a purely secondary benefit. In fact, all of these items have secret tracking devices and hidden explosives built into them. Many also include monitoring equipment that allow the Rikti to see and hear everything going on in the room. Finally, about 1 in 10 of the black-market items contain low frequency broadcasting devices that send out inaudible but very effective mind altering pulses that subtly shift the owner's behavior and psyche. Taken together, the various modifications comprise a phalanx of secret levers that the Rikti are introducing into society at large. It's estimated that as many as 50,000 people in Paragon City alone have at least one Rikti artifact hidden away somewhere. For now the rigged items give the Rikti more eyes in the world of humanity and a way to subtly influence the people. In the event of an all out war, that's roughly 50,000 hidden bombs that can be detonated on command.

The Brotherhood of Our Other Selves

Strangely, one of the most successful movements to win human support for the Rikti didn't come from the aliens at all. Humans have long had a fascination with aliens, and even after a deadly and terrifying war, there were still some who believed that the people of Earth should make friends with the Rikti, not fight them. The largest group of such individuals is the much-maligned Brotherhood of Our Other Selves. The group's original leader, a man named Kevin Simpson, had bounced around the UFO enthusiast scene for two decades, writing various books about aliens from the Pleiades and how they contact us through dreams. Then, during the war, he managed to stumble on a real truth about the Rikti. Really, it was there for anyone

to see, but most people couldn't look past the Rikti's appearance to put the pieces together. The Rikti came not from space but from an alternate Earth. Therefore they must be highly evolved humans. Therefore, they were our brothers, not our enemies. The war was just a big misunderstanding.

The fact that Kevin Simpson was absolutely right has been largely lost in the controversy over his flamboyant personality, cult-leader status, and general reputation as a nutcase. Thus few people paid much attention to his wild theories. Even those who knew he was right – top clearance government officials and heroes, refused to give him any recognition or acknowledge his claims. Simpson's new Brotherhood of Our Other Selves languished in relative obscurity with less than 1000 members worldwide. Then, one day a world-class hero named Terrence Jackson, better known as Commander Conqueror, heard Simpson on a call-in radio show. Jackson had served with distinction as a hero for over a dozen years and had fought bravely during the war where he had been severely wounded. No longer in the hero business, Jackson still had plenty of fans and pulled a lot of weight in the world.

The retired hero had already come to many of the same conclusions that Simpson had, although he'd yet to put all of the pieces together. The war had not only crippled him physically, it had also touched him deep down inside. He believed with all his heart that it had been a misunderstanding – that something very wrong had happened to both sides of the conflict. He thought the only way to finally put an end to the conflict was to try and make peace with the Rikti and find out what it was they truly wanted. Simpson's on-air interview hit all the right buttons for Jackson. The next day he tracked Simpson down and joined the Brotherhood of Our Other Selves.

Jackson's alliance with the Brotherhood was international news. Although many derided him for the decision and hundred of thousands quit his fan club and sent hate mail, tens of thousands listened to what he had to say and joined the Brotherhood's ranks. Within a few months it became the leading proponent for peace with the Rikti and launched a series of initiatives to make contact with the aliens. Once it became public knowledge that there were Rikti infiltrators posing as humans, the Brotherhood was thrilled – that meant there must be some way to talk with the aliens. Eventually, they go their wish.

The only problem is, the Rikti don't want peace. Not even a little bit. But they are happy to use these peace-loving activists for their own purposes. Despite the fact that the Brotherhood is correct about the war being the result of a misunderstanding, the Rikti don't believe this fact any more than most humans do. They've all heard the human side of the story – that the Rikti invaded without warning, but the aliens assume this to be propaganda. They know what happened when the heroes attacked their city and they know what needs to be done.

Several Rikti infiltrators have made contact with the Brotherhood, pretending to want to open peace talks. However, the infiltrators refuse to meet with anyone but members of the brotherhood – they claim they just don't trust the human governments. In fact, the Rikti want to keep any unfriendlies at arms length from their infiltrators and so don't want to knowingly expose an operative to hostile forces. The Rikti are slowly but surely leading the Brotherhood on – giving them just enough to go on and continue to build their membership. The more humans who look upon the Rikti with hope and friendship instead of fear and loathing, the better.

The Rikti have begun feeding the Brotherhood talking points and pretty much telling them anything they want to hear while making no promises to stop fighting. Already a good percentage of the Brotherhood has been funneled into The Lost, swelling that group's ranks.

At the same time, the Rikti have begun using infiltrators to give money to the Brotherhood's political lobbyists in hopes of influencing government decisions in their favor. While they don't expect the U.S. government to declare an end to hostile relations, they do want the restrictions on ownership of Rikti technology and the listening to Rikti music to be lifted. That way they can get more of their trick technology and mind altering tunes into the public sphere.

The one intriguing thing about the Brotherhood is that they seem as interested in reestablishing contact with the Rikti dimension as the aliens themselves are. The Rikti of course support this endeavor fully, and have given the Brotherhood some key advice and technological support. Although the aliens doubt that the humans will have any more luck than they have, there's no harm in letting others carry on the research. Perhaps the human perspective will catch something the Rikti scientists have missed.

Living Space

Based on the very real possibility that the Rikti are stuck on earth for a long time to come, they have begun to make plans for a prolonged stay. That means, first and foremost, having secure and secret bases of operation where they can retreat and live in relative peace. There are of course very few, if any places above ground that would be suitable for such a base, especially in this day of advance spy satellites and increased states of heightened alert. In a move that, not surprisingly, mirrors the same decisions made by the Body Purists on their home world, the Rikti have taken to building their facilities underground and on the ocean floor.

The underground bases fall into two broad locations – those located near or under population areas and those in the wilderness. The urban bases are the most common and the smallest in terms of square footage. All of these bases are purely military in function and are really more supply depots and staging areas than actual bases of operation. Most of these were built before or during the war, although the Rikti continue to add new bases and modify existing ones. Up until recently, most of the Rikti on Earth lived in facilities like these – cramped and overflowing with machinery and defense systems. Originally they were all linked to the home world by a teleportation network, but since the portals closed they've been cut off from their normal supply bases. Recently, non-combat personnel have finally been able to move out of the urban bases to the newer wilderness facilities.

The wilderness bases are set deep underground far away from any lost cities, subway tunnels, or sewer pipes. There are currently five large and twenty-seven small bases of this type scattered around the globe. One of the large ones is deep beneath the Appalachian mountains, not to many hundred of miles from Paragon City. All research, manufacturing, and medical activity takes place in these isolated bases. The only way to access them is through either teleportation or burrowing through at least two miles of rock. The Rikti even teleport in their air and water supplies, so there is never any link to the outside world. Thus far, no humans have become aware of these bases, which is just how the Rikti want matters to remain. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, all the Rikti on the planet live in their forward deployment facilities beneath the cities.

The wilderness bases serve as refuges for the Rikti, serving not only as manufacturing and research centers, but also as a place for rest and recuperation. They include underground parks with plants and animals from the home world (recreated from DNA samples or by bio-morphing terrestrial life forms), restaurants, and entertainment centers. The Rikti do their best to provide all the comforts of home, although right now the amenities are pretty bare bones. Nevertheless, a furlough to a wilderness base is always appreciated by the front line troops.

The establishment of these secure areas has allowed for the inception of a new, long-term program: breeding. If the Rikti are going to be on Earth for decades (or even forever), then they need to perpetuate their species, or rather, their traditions, because of course at birth they are still human. Although it's hard for humans to tell the difference at first glance (or even on closer inspection), the Rikti do have both male and females on Earth in roughly equal proportions. The Rikti long ago did away with any kind of gender discrimination once bio-morphing made it impossible for anyone to claim that one gender was physically or intellectually superior to another. Males and females serve together in all the 97 Lineages as equals.

Normally procreation during a war violates the credos of the Lineage of War, but as with so many other things, desperate times have called for desperate measures. Now the Demi-Gods are actively encouraging their followers to breed. Once a pregnancy happens, the fetus is removed and brought up in a secure machine environment in one of the large wilderness bases where it is brought to term. After that, the parents do retain parental rights, although most children will be brought up by care facilities while the biological parents perform their duties in the war effort. Thus far there have been several thousand pregnancies, but the program is less than four months old, so there have been no births. The Rikti hope to have as many as 5,000 births within the next year and another 10,000 the year after that. Obviously this is a long term project that will require decades to see benefits, so the bases where these children are being brought up (and morphed from humans into Rikti) must be kept secure and secret at all costs.

The newest initiative is the establishment of underwater bases on the ocean's floor. Only one small base has been built thus far, in the Atlantic Ocean about 500 miles East of Paragon City. It is an exploratory facility that serves as a launching pad for various drones that are searching the sea floor for natural resources and potential allies. There are several civilizations beneath the waves that even the humans don't know about. The Rikti hope to establish diplomatic relations with these other societies and bring them into the war against the humans. They have already begun experimenting with bio-morph procedures to create Rikti capable of living and breathing underwater and a great pressures.

One of the more controversial proposed programs has yet to go into full effect, but it is in the test phase. The Rikti are exploring the idea of creating Infiltrator Communities – entire neighborhoods or small towns composed of nothing but bio-morphed Rikti posing as humans. These communities would allow for more detailed cover stories and provide safe havens for infiltrators and soldiers alike. The controversial aspect of the program is to allow the infiltrators to breed true – to have children and retain their human appearance but bring them up in the Rikti way. This concept flies in the face of every Rikti tradition and has not yet been approved, but some feel that it is the only way to ensure that the Rikti legacy survives, no matter who wins the war.

Magic and Mysticism

The one area where the Rikti remain most blind is the area of magic and religion. Ever since the war with the gods thousands of years ago, the Rikti have eschewed anything that smacked of the supernatural. When they arrived on Earth, they found that the supernatural is everywhere and it can be most deadly. Even though they don't realize what's happened on their home world (if they did, they would fear magic all the more), they got a taste of its power when they accidentally revealed the underground city of Oranbega and thus roused the anger – and armies – of the Circle of Thorns.

As much as the Demi-Gods of War might wish it otherwise, the Rikti realize that they must come to terms with these powerful forces, and so one of their latest initiatives centers around finding out more about magic. The Rikti are not even sure where to begin. Their most logical potential ally, the Circle of Thorns, wants nothing to do with them. After all, it was the Rikti who uncovered their secret city and inadvertently shattered the protective spells that kept it hidden and safe. Every contact between the two groups results in fighting, and the Circle seems capable of even sniffing out the Rikti infiltrators.

Therefore the Rikti have resorted to cruder means – kidnapping magicians and interrogating them for what they want to know. As it turns out, a lot of self-proclaimed mystics don't know nearly as much as they pretend to, and don't stand up well to torture and invasive mind control techniques. The Rikti have learned a lot, but most of it is nonsense that contradicts other things they've learned. The few real mystics they've gotten their hands on tend to be less forthcoming and much harder to keep in custody. Still, they have managed to learn a thing or two and their magical knowledge base is slowly expanding.

The Rikti investigators toyed with the idea of dealing with demons, but soon enough figured out that this was a bad idea after just one negative experience with the creatures. The Rikti don't like anything they can't control, and demons and spirits make them very nervous. Thus they're of two minds about a recent proposal by members of the Banished Pantheon. The followers of those malevolent gods would like nothing more than to work with the Rikti. After all, the alien invaders have been the greatest cause of chaos and suffering in human history – the first to really devastate the entire world at once. The Pantheon are pleased to offer the Rikti anything they want, but so far the Demi-God of Diplomacy on Earth remains torn – she doesn't trust the demonic creatures but sees a great opportunity.

Efforts by the Rikti themselves to practice magic on their own have thus far proved not only unsuccessful, but counterproductive. Much as on their own home world where the Body Purists have awoken long-dead gods, a few of the would-be Rikti magicians have aroused similar religious feeling within their own hearts. Two of these even went so far as to start worshipping human gods and, although they protested their continued loyalty, were judged unfit for duty. The Demi-God of War ordered their minds completely wiped and rebuilt from scratch in an attempt to scourge the viral meme of religion from Rikti society. Since then direct magical experimentation by Rikti researchers has been strictly off-limits, although a few continue on in secrecy. What will become of their occult investigations remains to be seen.

3.3 Behavior Patterns and Culture

3.3.1 Culture Shock

Being isolated from their home world and their native culture has had a profound effect upon the Rikti on Earth. All told there are probably 100,000 of the aliens hidden away in various underground bases, and fully three quarters of them are trained soldiers. This last point is particularly important, because it's indicative of a greater truth: of the 97 Lineages that make up Rikti society, only 14 have representatives on Earth. All of these are in the military, medical, or science fields, with no representatives from the arts, culture, philosophy, education, justice, or other non-military Lineages. This lack of diversity has had a profound effect on the stranded soldiers, since all of them are used to having those other parts of society active in their lives. Not only is it a morale problem, but the lack of diversity is actually beginning to change the way the Rikti on Earth think.

All Rikti receive the same basic education, which includes beginner level knowledge of and appreciation for all 97 of the Lineages. They know enough to understand each Lineage's basic tenets and functions and have the core philosophies down. What they lack are the various skills necessary to fully perform the duties of the Lineages. None of them know how to act or play instruments or write legislation or organize an urban renewal plan, but they know what all of those things should look like when they're done properly. The Rikti refer to this level of knowledge as "Evaluatory," meaning that everyone knows what everyone else's job should look like when done right. This ability to evaluate is crucial to Rikti society since it keeps the various Lineages honest – they can't shirk their duties or radically change their responsibilities because everyone will notice that the Lineage isn't doing the job it's supposed to do.

Now the Rikti on Earth are being forced to, in effect, reverse engineer the duties of all the other Lineages. They know what laws are supposed to accomplish, so when they write new codes of conduct for their military personnel operating undercover they have a general sense of what to do. The same goes for composing music or running the business side of their technology trading program with the humans or anything else. The Rikti are finding this shift in thinking a challenge, but certainly not an insuperable one. Indeed, the most amazing thing about the whole issue is that Rikti are beginning, for the first time in millennia, to think outside of their own Lineages. This is almost unprecedented in Rikti culture, but it is an unavoidable consequence of the current situation.

The result is basically a total breakdown of the Lineage system. Because there are so few Rikti and so much to do, everyone has to wear at least three or four different hats. Whoever's best at or most enthusiastic about something is usually the one who ends up doing it. As the Lineages break down, chains of command and areas of responsibility have also become muddled. For instance, there was no one from the Lineage of Manufacturing on Earth when the portals sealed, but manufacturing has become an important part of the current Rikti strategy on Earth. Setting up the new factories fell upon the shoulders of members of the Lineages of Engineering, Physics, and War, all of whom thought that they should be in charge. Ultimately it was someone from War that took command (as is often the case), but in the process he had begun to think of himself not just as a soldier of War but also as a new Demi-God of Manufacturing. He was not the first or last Rikti to see the wide-open situation as an opportunity for personal advancement.

Two factions have formed within the Rikti society. On the one hand there are the so-called Restructurists, who believe that the Lineage system should be entirely abandoned while on Earth and that either a new system developed or the whole undertaking put under the authority of the Lineage of War. Since the majority of Rikti on Earth are soldiers, it should come as no surprise that this is the more populous faction. Then there are the Traditionalists who believe that the Rikti on Earth should try and recreate the system that has worked so well on their own world for countless generations. They want to re-establish all 97 Lineages by transferring members from War into other areas of responsibility.

The Traditionalist program seems needlessly disruptive and over ambitious at first glance. After all, the Rikti are fighting a war, not running a society. But many now believe that they will never be able to return home and that their only hope for peace is to remake this Earth as the Progenitors once remade their own home world. Furthermore, a number of Rikti see great advantage for themselves if they were allowed to be founding members of one of the other Lineages. Once the war is over and the humans conquered, they will be bale to become Gods and Demi-Gods in their own rights, an honor few would be able to achieve back home. Even if contact with their native dimension gets reestablished, the war on Earth will continue until victory is complete. When that happens, the Earth will need its own gods too. Either way,

the Traditionalists feel that they have much to gain, both personally and as a people, from establishing the Lineages now.

So far, the Restructurists rule the day, but as the war lingers on and time passes, it becomes more and more clear that the Rikti might never be going home. Thus the Traditionalist movement receives more and more support. Already some Rikti have begun training themselves for roles in the different, currently unrepresentative Lineages. The leaders of the faction have begun to form their own Shadow Lineages, unofficial groups that study and train for the day when they will assume their new duties. The Demi-God of War in charge of all affairs on Earth has decided to let these Rikti do as they please – as long as they perform their normal duties as expected. He fears (rightly) that any attempt to crack down on the Traditionalists might cause a severe breach in morale and possibly even split the Rikti on Earth permanently.

3.4 Relations With Other Villains

Let's face it, no one likes the Rikti. After all, they nearly destroyed the entire planet, which wouldn't have good for any of the various villainous agendas out there. Even the Banished Pantheon needs fear to feed on. Nemesis himself was surprised at how devastatingly effective the Rikti invasion force was. He lucked out – the invasion was stopped, and even he's not sure why – and his plans continue forward as anticipated, in spite of events, not because of them.

That having been said, there are other villains who work with the Rikti, although many of them don't even realize it. The Rikti know exactly how hated they are, and have gone to great lengths to secure other means of finding and then exploiting new allies. Their human-looking infiltrators are their greatest asset in this effort, and they have used them effectively, even since their existence became public knowledge.

The Rikti allies fall into several categories, the first of which are those that don't realize (or won't even admit to themselves) that they're working with the alien invaders. First among these is Crey Industries, which has benefited more from Rikti technology leaks than any other company. Crey provides many of the manufactured parts the Rikti need to make their weapons, armor, and other equipment and it sells them under the table and in violation of several laws. In return, Crey has made billions upon billions of dollars from Rikti based products and patents. It's fair to say that Rikti technology leaks accounted for at least a third of the company's profits in the last six months. With numbers like that, the Countess is unwilling to look too closely at her new best friends. In return, the Rikti avoid attacking any Crey owned or operated facilities, and even the Lost holds back on fighting Crey. The close economic alliance between the two is too vital for the Rikti to risk disrupting it.

Another unknowing ally is Vahzilok, who has also benefited from Rikti tech leaks. In return he has provided corpses and live bodies that the Rikti use in their biomorphing experiments. Vahzilok has also provided many new members for the Lost. While he knows he's working with the Lost, he has no idea that the Rikti are actually behind the monstrous vagabonds. If he did, he would pull out of the alliance completely, but for now the two groups help each other in the pursuit of their individual goals.

The Banished Pantheon is a willing ally, although one the Rikti don't trust. Luckily, the Pantheon doesn't ask much in return. They want the misery and pain and desperation that the Rikti cause. Therefore, they're happy to do whatever they can to help the invaders fight their war. They are a constant source of information for the Rikti, although sometimes they like to play both sides against the middle. On more than one occasion they've tipped the Rikti off about some choice target and then given the same information to some heroes, ensuring a titanic battle that spills

over into the streets and causes chaos. The Rikti don't trust the Pantheon, but often times their information or assistance is too valuable to be ignored.

As he has been from the beginning, Nemesis is still takes a secret role in influencing Rikti affairs. While the aliens are aware of Nemesis and his followers, the two groups rarely clash. The Rikti certainly have no problems or qualms about fighting Nemesis, but the mad genius usually manipulates matters so that it makes more sense for the aliens to avoid a fight rather than seek one out. In the meantime, Nemesis watches the aliens closely. He desperately wants to know why contact with the home world was cut off, but he also wants to know what the Rikti are up to. He plans to keep the fires of war stoked so that the Rikti can eliminate as many heroes and governmental authority figures as possible. Then, at the last moment, he will sweep in and save humanity from the aliens when their heroes could not. At least that's the plan.

The rest of the groups pretty much universally despise the Rikti. The 5th Column thinks they're a huge threat to humanity and pure Aryan living. The Devouring Earth has it on strict authority from Gaia that the Rikti are no good for the planet under any circumstances. The Clockwork King doesn't much care for them, but is honestly too wrapped up in his own delusions to get involved. The Freakshow see them as just another set of potential oppressors, probably worse than the status quo. The Sky Raiders are largely veterans of the war against the Rikti, and their feelings haven't changed. The Circle of Thorns fears them and still hates them for shattering Oranbega's shield. The Tsoo hate them as well, because they're bad for business.

To sum up, the Rikti don't have many friends. They also don't need very many. Even cut off from home, they are the most powerful single force on the planet right now. It is only their own caution and the devotion of a world full of heroes and allied armies that keep them at bay. Like the British of old, the Rikti have no permanent allies, only permanent interests. Their most abiding interest is getting home. Failing that, they will rule this planet and remake it in the image of their own land, just as the Progenitors did.