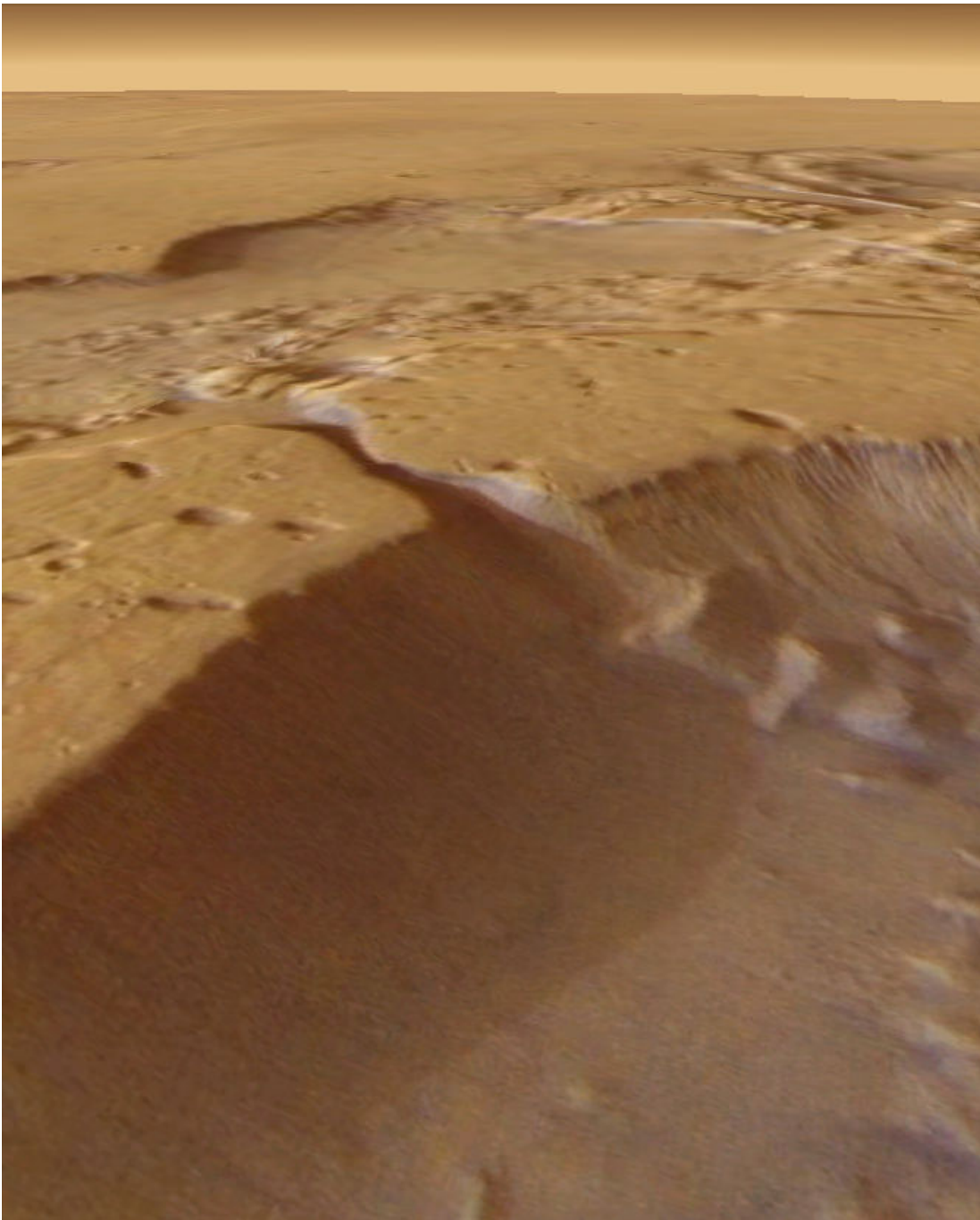


Meltwater

A community project for Eclipse Phase

<http://eclipsephase.com/mars-habitat-community-project>

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Introduction

By Demonseed Elite

Long before the Fall, boomtowns rose in the American west, their populations swelled by dreams of gold dug from the mountains or filtered from the waters. San Francisco went from a sleepy town to a bustling metropolis as immigrants flooded from far and wide to follow the rumors of riches from the earth. The busy burg of Meltwater is not unlike these old Gold Rush towns, only in Meltwater it isn't gold, it's water ice.

You see, Meltwater sits at the junction of two ancient valleys, the Dao Vallis and the Niger Vallis, which slither southwest into the deep lowland basin of the Hellas Planitia. Scientists long speculated that the valleys were formed by water that emerged from underground aquifers and Mars' early terraformers confirmed it, locating underground deposits of ice that could be melted to create water aquifers and springs. With plenty of these ice deposits to be found and warmed, water could flow downstream to the Hellas basin, forming half-frozen lakes and eventually maybe even an inland sea.

Meltwater just happens to sit at the perfect location to take advantage of this resource rush. The boomtown has sprung up in a hanging valley that bridges Dao Vallis and Niger Vallis and sits on top of a large underground ice deposit. That ice deposit has been warmed by solar-powered heating rods and has produced the Flow, a narrow river canal that bisects the settlement. The entire hanging valley is covered to produce a habitable micro-climate and the covering itself is designed to let in and augment sunlight with millions of tiny mirrors.

The People of Meltwater

Being a thriving boomtown, Meltwater is a cultural mix of immigrants with no single dominant culture. The predominant languages in Meltwater are English, Japanese, and Dutch, holdovers from the original Meltwater terraformers and nearby settlements. But is not uncommon to hear French, Arabic, Thai, German, and other Northern European languages spoken in Meltwater, imported from the nomads or more recent settlers.

Meltwater started as a terraforming outpost of roughly eight hundred but it has rocketed to a permanent population of about thirty thousand. During Mars' winter months, this population swells even further, reaching almost fifty thousand. Ruster and Alpiner morphs are by far the most common types around Meltwater, which is not unlike the rest of Mars. If anything, Alpiner morphs have not fallen out of style in Meltwater like they have elsewhere on Mars, because they are particularly well-suited for the local terrain and the nature of the ice industry. Biomorphs make up about 62% of the population, pods make up about 20%, synths about 16%, and there's a small infomorph population that makes up the leftover 2%.

Lay of the Land

Most of the Meltwater settlement sits in a seven-kilometer long hanging valley that drops into Dao Vallis on its northwestern end and empties into Niger Vallis at its southeastern end. The openings on either end of the valley are about two kilometers wide, but at its narrowest point in the center, the valley is only five hundred meters wide. At this narrowest point sits the source of the Flow, a man-made spring that pumps water up from the ice deposit far below Meltwater. The canal in which the Flow moves is the main thoroughfare in the settlement.

As the Flow moves down into Dao Vallis, it drops into a beautiful waterfall that further breaks down into smaller falls on the hills below. The area around the top of the falls is known as Cloudtop and it is the nicest area of Meltwater, where the powers behind the Floating World Consortium, the Hellas Aquifer Mining Company, and other big money frontier barons can be found. Below the falls is Meltwater's agricultural land, where the sun and available water feed greenhouses, seed orchards, and terrariums.

In the other direction, the Flow empties out into a closed-in side valley in Niger Vallis, where the water spreads out into a shallow, half-frozen lake. Out here, Meltwater's poorer and more transient population has built a sea of small tin can habitats, pressurized mini-domes, and ad hoc shelters known as Silt Town. Meltwater's industrial and recycling buildings are also located in Silt Town, rising up from the warrens around them. It is here that the Layabouts first started filtering the lake for minerals, and the area has grown no less desperate as the rest of Meltwater thrives.

The plateaus northeast and southwest are not as habitable as the covered valley, but their wide open space is useful for other endeavors. Northeast of the settlement is an airfield and trucking depot with ramps down into Dao Vallis that connect to the area's nascent highway structure. Further out to the northeast are storage areas for the heavy machinery and explosives necessary for the ice mining and aquifer operations. On the southwestern plateau is a large solar farm that collects energy for Meltwater, some of which is used for the heating rods that keep the Flow from icing up.

Government in Meltwater

The Floating World Development Project

By Demonseed Elite

The Floating World Development Project was founded thirty years before the Fall as a joint American-Japanese-Dutch venture to compete with aggressive Chinese investment in Martian terraforming. The goal was to focus on the hydrological terraforming of the Hellas Planitia impact basin, exploiting underground glacial deposits to bring water to the lowland Hellas basin and in turn contribute to the overall terraforming effort on Mars.

Originally a public-private investment partnership, the three participating governments applied their own money and attracted private capital to invest in groundbreaking new technologies and kick-start development of the Hellas basin. They also offered incentives to their citizens to become pioneer homesteaders, funding thousands of small, personal terraforming efforts alongside the Tharsis Terraforming Office.

The Fall was nearly catastrophic for the Floating World Development Project. The national governments that founded the partnership virtually ceased to exist, and what remained of those governments no longer had any concern for experiments in Martian terraforming. The entire consortium would have collapsed, but it was saved by the cooperation of local terraforming cooperatives and small Martian hypercorps who stepped up to take over its management. That is the advertised story, at least. It isn't incorrect, publicly the Floating World Development Project is still led by a collection of Martian hypercorps and local cooperatives, but this recovery was only possible with investment from a few private oligarchs with personal interest in the project. These angel investors have stayed out of the limelight and prefer to influence the direction of the project from afar through proxies.

In addition to guiding the Hellas basin development and seeding venture capital for local terraforming businesses, the Floating World Development Project runs a thorough advertising (or some say: propaganda) campaign. Steeped heavily in stylized Ukiyo-e artwork and themes, the project imagines the future Hellas basin as a water-rich, beautiful, decadent society; a far-cry from the dirty, hardscrabble existence of today's Hellas terraformers. Though most of the locals don't believe they will see that world for a few lifetimes, if ever, they tend to prefer the Floating World's idealistic future to Red Eden's rush for immediate results.

Behind the Floating World's advertising campaign and local investment is a den of political intrigue. As the Red Eden initiative gains steam and tries to bring the global Mars terraforming effort under a single corporate umbrella, the Floating World Development Project finds itself at the center of the controversy. Now that the Tharsis Terraforming Office is largely under the thumb of Red Eden, it has pulled back from joint investments with Floating World until the latter organization promises more cooperation with Red Eden. The Fall already set back the Hellas terraforming efforts by a decade or more and with TTO funding drying up, there is fear that development will slow further.

However, many of the groups that make up the Floating World Development Project are not currently affiliated with the Planetary Consortium and are protesting the idea of being absorbed by it. To further muddy the waters, it seems like the oligarchs behind the Floating World are on different sides of this issue, though it is difficult to tell for sure with their layers of covert maneuvering.

Mister Simon

It is surprising enough to see an uplifted raven on Mars, since they typically prefer lower gravity environments, but seeing this particular raven uplift on Mars is even more unnerving because of the powerful mystery he represents. Mister Simon is a senior partner in the Lunar law firm Simon & Vigenère and speaks on behalf of someone he only identifies as “his client”, but who is clearly one of oligarchs with considerable personal investment in the Floating World Development Project. In the great chess game of Martian terraforming politics, whenever Mister Simon comes to Mars, pieces move across the board.

Mister Simon is only ever seen in a neo-raven morph, a taste that comes with considerable expense when ego-casting to Mars. However, he revels in keeping his opponents off-guard while perched across the table from them, his beady black eyes seeming to drill right through them. As the intrigue between Red Eden and the Floating World Development Project increases, Mister Simon has been seen on Mars more frequently, influencing the players at the behest of his client. His client, from what can be gleaned, is opposed to the Red Eden initiative and favors regional terraforming projects, though whether this is because of investment returns, personal vendettas, or political leanings is unknown. Of late, Mister Simon has paid two visits to Kaki Varma, the TTO’s Committeewoman for Water Usage and an influential opponent of Red Eden. He was also recently seen in the Cloudtop neighborhood of Meltwater, though no one quite knows who he was visiting or why.

Needless to say, there are more than a few powerful individuals or organizations that would like to know why Mister Simon is on Mars and who he works for. It isn’t even known if the other oligarchs behind the Floating World know these answers, but if they don’t, you can be sure they want to.

Helium Development Company

By Arenamontanus

HDC is the subsidiary of the Floating World Project that founded Meltwater. Intended to set up and run a useful settlement, it was intended to be a lean and efficient corplet. Unfortunately some bad decisions and the expansion of Meltwater has left the HDC far behind.

Meltwater was originally intended to be named Helium, after a fictional city in the John Carter of Mars pulp books. Quite soon the vernacular name Meltwater became dominant anyway. Then the Barsoomian movement spread, and the name became an acute embarrassment to the company. Not that the Movement would ever refer to Meltwater as Helium anyway.

HDC originally owned all the land and development rights in the vicinity, selling it or leasing it to settlers. This helped fund the roofing of the canyon, setting up utilities and the channel for the

Flow. While rents do provide a good income HDC managed to flub things by selling off much land to a few companies just before Meltwater really took off. Some of them, like Hellas Dawn Developments, now reap far more income than HDC does. And Silt Town has turned into a patchwork of small real estate owners, completely messing up any development plans.

Today HDC has a nice office at Spring Street, just next to the beginning of the Flow. But it doesn't have much say in what is going on. The budget is strained, Floating World is riven by political struggles and the HDC CEOs tend to replace each other at a fast pace. The last one, a competent Marinerian named Victory Faborode, was head-hunted to Hellas Dawn Developments. The current CEO, Maya Koolhoven, is more of an engineer than a business person and has decided to try to improve the infrastructure. That has made her popular in Meltwater, but she might not have much leeway to actually do anything.

The HDC offices also acts as city hall and the mayor's office. They are also often used by the Floating World, both for semi-permanent people like inspector Selena Taiwo and for visiting teams and committees. Generally the office building is just known as the Spring Building; saying something came down from the Spring implies that it is yet another Floating World decision that will no doubt be rescinded within a fortnight.

Mayor Tatsuo Yazu

By Arenamontanus

The mayor of Meltwater is elected every three years and is mainly responsible for representing the inhabitants in mid-level administration such as the Floating World Project (representatives to the Tharsis League are elected separately). The League and the HDC provide a modest salary, travel expenses and office space; the rest is up to the individual mayor.

Yazu has a background as a graphical designer and information visualization expert, working with the various terraforming companies. He is not a natural politician (he claims), but despite his slightly timid look he knows how to run a good online election campaign. He originally got involved in Meltwater politics when he began to moderate a few citizen's forums online and then became involved in the issues surrounding a corruption scandal involving the previous mayor. Condemning her both eloquently and convincingly, in the next election he was elevated.

Mayor Yazu's platform is very centrist: he will do what is necessary to bring in as much terraforming money as possible to Meltwater, and ensure it actually goes to the projects that it was intended for (the failure of his predecessor, who got kickbacks from a aquifer mining company to redirect money to a fake project). This means he doesn't have a firm opinion on Red Eden vs. Floating World, making him wishy-washy to most people with strong views on the issue. But he is good with cyberdemocracy and has set up a system of local citizen's forums that does seem to work - using the connections he got he could get a proper hockey rink to the kids of Silt Town, got the orchard companies to agree on a traffic solution and even convinced HAMC to sponsor some of Maya Koolhoven's infrastructure plans.

Maya and the Mayor generally known to work well together, although cynics doubt either will last in their position. There are also ongoing rumours that they are romantically involved, which would create a yummy conflict of interest for opponents to use.

Mayor Yazu has some problems with Sheriff Mauriello - he is not working for her or vice versa, they have very different forms of popular support, and they do not get along on a personal level. The Sheriff regards himself as the real representative of the townspeople and the mayor as a mere corporate stooge, while the Mayor finds him an annoying bully with delusions of grandeur.

When it comes to HAMC the Mayor has an odd position. Many workers who are not on the union side (many are scared that the IWA will mess up the economy or just dislike them politically) still need a voice, so they use the mayorial citizen forums to voice complaints or bring up issues. This makes the Mayor's office an occasional alternative union - he can bring up things in meetings with the HAMC leadership and they have to at least listen. Whether this is a mere pressure valve, a chance for the Mayor to actually make a difference, or whether this will lead to a confrontation nobody knows.

Yazu is not terribly impressive in person but he has great information skills and is a very good online orator. He personally finds the Mayor job an enormous challenge, but has found a surprising streak of tenacity in himself to do a good job. His real fear is that the fragile Martian society will break: he remember his childhood on Earth and the global struggles, and he thinks the emerging Meltwater society might be headed in the same direction. If asked he will admit that he doesn't care for politics, it is just that he hopes to do it so others will not have to care about it too much. As Maya says, he has a martyr streak a mile wide.

Policing in Meltwater

By Arenamontanus

Meltwater has three kinds of law enforcement: Hogo-Aegis, the militia and the Martian rangers.

Hogo-Aegis is a security corporation active around Hellas and Terra Arabia. They are the current security supplier for HAMC and protects HAMC operations - but nothing else. They are a rational security firm, using the minimum amount of manpower to provide exactly the security agreed in the contract but nothing more, at a maximum profit. HAMC is not entirely happy with their services but are still contractually bound for two more years.

When Meltwater was founded the Helium Development Company got the Floating World project to send one of their security people over as a formal sheriff. This worked the first few years, but as the settlement grew the sheriff was increasingly overwhelmed. This led to the spontaneous formation and growth of a militia recruited from able-bodied and civic-minded inhabitants. One settler in particular, Tyrone Mauriello, became a forceful militia leader and often clashed with Sheriff Arno over lacking enforcement. After the Fall, when the militia had shown their mettle the Floating World Project found it practical to hire Mauriello as sheriff (Arno got promoted to "district security coordination ombudsman" and disappeared into the corporate bureaucracy). Since then he has been sheriff, deputizing many militia members to maintain order.

While his own budget is very limited there are several well-off residents that donate to the militia, including chairman Suetsugi.

The militia is a mixed lot. There is a small core around sheriff Mauriello of experienced, tough long-term residents that provide the most policing. Especially deputy Xiao Musi is known for her skill at handling drunken brawls and attempted botjacking. The rest are people attracted to the idea of being in a militia or interested in the pay of being a part-time policeman. The quality varies between eager youngsters to cynical thugs who know it is good to be in the officially supported gang. The sheriff seems to have a blind spot for what his underlings do, at least until they mess up badly.

There has been understanding between Hogo-Aegis and the sheriff for a long time: they handle HAMC stuff, he handles everything else. Unfortunately not all militia members get this, and enough HAMC employees get themselves into trouble each year to lead to some jurisdictional quarrels.

The Martian Rangers patrol the area outside the town, mainly focusing on keeping the roads safe. A high priority is the Ryukyu Uumakus, but there are enough other crimes and accidents to keep them busy. Relations to Hogo-Aegis and the militia are cool but far better than in many other places. The main source of friction is the weak security surrounding some of the demolitions equipment: the rangers have officially complained about HAs incompetence, something that has further spread bad blood.

Magistrate Ventola is the local circuit judge. She is in Meltwater fairly often since it is conveniently located and there are plenty of cases. She is pretty competent but slightly eccentric (as long as discussions can be kept away from theology everything is fine, but don't get her started on the pagan roots of hypercorporate culture). She works well with the sheriff and rangers, but not with Hogo-Aegis.

Martian Groundwater Resources Assessment Centre

By Arenamontanus

The MGRAC is an office within the TTO responsible for maintaining up-to-date groundwater maps, register claims and assess where more or less water mining is needed.

Originally located under the Martian Geological Survey, it is mostly staffed by areologists, hydrologists and geomatics people rather than administrators - early on they outsourced much of the administrative work. However, as terraforming grows in scale MGRAC has to sit in on more and more TTO planning anyway. It is an important sub-agency but in many ways unsuited for the organisation the TTO is becoming.

Of course, most of its activity, servers and employees are located planetwide, but due to a long-since irrelevant bureaucratic coup it is formally located in Meltwater (a certain administrator wanted to keep his fief, the Geothermal Assessment Centre, separate from the Groundwater Assessment Centre - he succeeded, but was then absorbed by the Local Energy Assessment

Centre). This makes it a convenient place for TTO officials to discreetly drop in when they need to go to Hellas or hold face-to-face meetings.

Dr Georgios Sophocleous is the chief of MGRAC. An areologist of Greek extraction, he is an expert on ancient Martian floods and how they shaped current valles structures. These days he has not much time for real research, spending most of his days in teleconferencing and VR (this is a shared complaint with his old friend Takao Esashi; they grouse about it over their rare and very private poker games). He is a self-contained, calm person who has long since learned the value of maintaining a serene temper even in the face of bureaucracy and raw greed. That does not mean he is mild: he can be as implacable as a glacier if he thinks it is needed. But he will not raise his voice while denying exploitation rights or warning against flood risks in a proposed settlement location.

Despite the administrative pressures he has had time to work on a 'hobby project', the hydrology of the Eridania Lake-Ma'adim Vallis complex. He has found a few intriguing discrepancies with current theory and signs of unexpected ice deposits along the river valley. So far he has not published anything about the topic, but if he does (or someone figures out what he knows) sparks will fly: the Martian gate is located within the vallis, and besides further confusing the issue of how old it may be some of the ice deposits could possibly be triggered to flood. This would make his project very sensitive information. He is somewhat aware of this but uncertain how to progress.

MGRAC has another problem the organisation is not aware of. The outsourced administration is handled by True Dawn Administrative Support Inc, a Marineris firm. It is a typical infomorph/AI office temp agency. While properly certified and generally functioning well, it was recently acquired indirectly by Terragenesis through their daughter company Tiaozheng Holdings. Using this link Terragenesis has been able to acquire information about water claims, and possibly influence the approval process subtly. Evidence for this could be damaging to various parties, depending on how it was spun.

In Meltwater the most visible MGRAC employee is Wild Bolchazy. He is a daredevil areologist, explorer and general stirrer-up-of-trouble. While most MGRAC people are happy to work in their offices Wild (yes, that is his legal first name) likes to go out and hit things with a hammer, some explosives or a nanotech rock penetrator. The fact that he was recently restored from backup after he was killed and washed away in a mudslide near one of the aquifer projects has not slowed him, quite the reverse: "I got a *month* of life to retake!" In Meltwater he is a regular at the bars, gaming places and anywhere else he can have fun. He is often travelling the southern deserts (especially to let things cool down after some slightly excessive fun), meeting up with nomads and people in remote settlements. He is down with the Movement, if only because he is so anti-authoritarian that he ends up there by default. He is one of the few people who can test the temper of even Dr Sophocleous (who has repeatedly urged him to get psychosurgery for his pathological personality).

Meltwater Public School

By MirrorField

MPC was founded before the Fall as an integral part of the town. Its teachers disagreed with the direction PC was taking politically and reorganized itself as a nonprofit with Argonaut advice and support. HAMC and MGRAC have little interest with it as long as they stay out of politics, which they do. Mostly. MPC maintains an officially apolitical stance, but teachers have their own private opinions.

MPC has very little physical presence, over 80% of its students attend virtually. Nevertheless, MPC still maintains a physical schoolhouse along a student dormitory. In truth, the student dorm and physical schoolhouse are more important as a shelter for students escaping stifling family life at desert, ex-gangbangers and others with nowhere else to go.

In comparison MPC has one of the biggest virtual presences in Meltwater and had such even before the Fall. Due to acquisition of a server farm from a pre-Fall megacorp liquidation, MPC schoolhouse was constructed with a large basement and necessary infrastructure from start up. The Post-Fall paranoia regarding such powerful facilities resulted in "The Great Lobotomization" removing most of the capabilities, but even the remaining capacity is relatively large by modern standards.

MPC uses this computing capability to run a large "virtual boarding school" simulspace service for disembodied infomorphs, cheapest possible form of student life. Aside the server farm, MPC basement also houses a neutrino transceiver (also installed before the fall). Selling unfiltered mesh access (MPC is the biggest public mesh service provider in Meltwater) along access to the neutrino transceiver relay is one of the ways MPC finances its operations.

MPC provides a counterweight for the Layabouts, a legitimate way for unskilled to catch up and acquire skills necessary for modern life. It's quite capable of providing complete primary and secondary education to its students (it has access to Argonaut archives of educational material) and a letter of recommendation from Ms. Lee is a very big plus for anyone applying to eg. martian MIT. Its vocational track is one of the important ways a Meltwater layabouts, indentures and other lower classes improve their lot.

MPC financing comes from a variety of sources. Most of the students pay (relatively low) tuition which can (and often is) covered by working for school maintenance and other odd jobs. The School also receives regular donations from public and successful Alumni.

At the moment the school finances are relatively good, with a moderate "rainy day" fund to keep it running during drier patches.

The Physical assets are owned by MPC Trust chartered in Mitre station and the trustees themselves are mostly Argonauts and academicians. Note that nobody drawing salary from MPC can be a trustee in order to prevent conflicts of interest.

Faculty

Current faculty consists is a rather mixed lot, from ex-indentured infugees to politically canned academicians from big cities. By it's charter MPC does not employ indentures and although AGIs are not disallowed, MPC has found that AGI prejudice runs deep: Last three AGIs in school had to be egocast to outer system and assigned to other Argonaut projects after political and social pressure became too distracting.

Chan Lee (Headmistress)

An Infugee of Singaporean origin, Ms. Lee worked as a private-school headmistress in Singapore before the Fall. She ended up as an indenture to Cognite to cover her evacuation bill, working as an administrative assistant. She declined a longer indenture to acquire a morph and moved to Mars as an infomorph the day her indenture ended. After various odd jobs at Mars she got a tip of the job opportunity at MPC and has been employed there since AF4, first as a teacher and then as headmistress since AF8.

Personally, Sensei Lee is rather stern and uptight, but she has the empathic touch of a truly great teacher. She can motivate her students to exceed themselves nearly instinctively.

Ms. Lee has existed as an infomorph since the Fall and although she owns a synthmorph free and clear, she keeps it mostly in storage while living in school's simulspace. She prefers simulspace existence to avoid the messy complications of organic life, at least that's what she tells everyone.

The Truth, however, is bit more complex: Very few people know that she's a regular customer at the Liberty of the Rose (the simspace aspect of the local brothel). "Katrina Chang", her alias, has reputation of being "an animal in bed" and a standing job offer from Madame Sattazahn. This secret aspect of her private life would make for a rather poor blackmailing tool, but it would have negative social ramifications if it became public. Note that neither Madame Sattazahn nor Manager Quian has any idea of the true identity of "Katrina Chang". Also, Ms. Lee would rather blow the entire secret open than submit to blackmail on general principles.

Chan's avatar is a slightly-idealized image of her pre-fall body: A Sternly beautiful woman of chinese extraction, wearing a pantsuit.

Larry Hall

Larry was an American evacuee who ended up in a Scum Barge _Haunting Light_ during the Fall. The Scum lifestyle, however, didn't agree with him and after drifting through Locus and Extropia he ended up in Mars. He was hired by MPC after their last AGIs got reassigned to outer system. His primary job is to administer and maintain the school mesh infrastructure and he insists on the traditional title of "Sysadmin".

That's the official story and it's mostly true. Mostly.

Nobody in meltwater knows that Larry is a Firewall operative assigned to keep an eye on the Meltwater and it's surroundings, especially the ruins of Waddell nearby. While this is admittedly a low-priority assignment, he's already had to "go to the doctor" to help with an exsurgent outbreak in vicinity. His job as sysadmin allows him unrestricted access to the neutrino transceiver in MPC basement, something quite useful for a Firewall mole.

Larry wears a ruster morph like millions of others. However, thanks to Firewall sponsorship his version doesn't need GSP therapy and has several ...somewhat unconventional... features which nevertheless remain in the range of plausible for a well-traveled nerd like Larry. The Exact nature of these features is left for GM to decide.

Business in Meltwater

Hellas Aquifer Mining Company

By Arenamontanus

HAMC is a privately owned terraforming company that has been active in the northeastern quadrant of Hellas for more than 25 years. Originally owned by several investment firms, in the Fall several of these disappeared. The remaining owners were Banque de Nectaris (29%), UICE holdings (12%, a Martian finance firm) and two private owners, Isabella Melville (28%, socialite living in Elysium) and Yoichi Suetsugi (31%, engineering entrepreneur). The latter is chairman of the board and CEO. As long as the others trust his leadership (i.e. keeps the company profitable) he gets to do what he wants.

Chairman Suetsugi is a well-known character in Meltwater. He is a big man in many respects - sleeved in a husky olympian, highly extrovert in an almost American way, generous but with a long memory for slights, happy to visit "his" company's operations. If Meltwater was a western, he would be the railroad baron. Despite his local influence he has his own problems: he is currently engaged in complex negotiations with the Floating World project, TTO and other hypercorps over the Red Eden project. While what he *should* be doing is to ensure that he and the other owners will get maximal amounts of money if HAMC gets merged into Red Eden, he might be a bit too in love with "having" the company - a potential crack in the relationship to the other owners.

Takao Esashi is COO of HAMC and runs the day-to-day operations. An intelligent, exact engineer he has a no-nonsense attitude to terraforming, management and human relations. A dedicated workaholic, he rarely leaves his office in the HAMC compound where he directs operations. His ascetic dryness is a strong contrast to chairman Suetsugi's boisterousness. One reason for his clockwork-like behaviour might be emotional trauma: it seems he lost his family on Earth during the Fall and now is busy suppressing all emotion.

HAMC has several divisions. Planning is located in Meltwater and directs operations. Surveying runs exploration teams looking for aquifers, measures groundwater flows, and checks out past interventions. Mining is the section that sends teams to mine or control aquifers; they are the ones with heavy equipment and drastic methods. Control deals with emergencies and water management (their unofficial motto is: "We clean up after Mining"). Liaison is the legal, PR and hypercorp-interface division. While much work is entirely online there is a crew around Meltwater that does face-to-face meetings with representatives, obstructive ecologists or the media.

Typical HAMC projects consists of finding a nice vein in the mountains, mapping it out, registering a claim with the TTO (made easy because of the cosy relations the company has to the MGRAC down the street), then bringing out the miners to puncture the aquifer with heating rods, fracture the rock with drilling or explosives, and then directing the water into a suitable channel or crater with a benign microclimate. At this point one of the terraforming companies takes over and begins seeding the wet place with life, and HAMC moves on. HAMC has some responsibility for maintaining the hydrologic structure, so Control does regular checks that

everything is working (it is amazing how quickly an ice blockage can build up and start the formation of a glacier lake - draining such blockages before they burst into dangerous floods is a large part of the "plumbing" work of Control).

HAMC has a complicated relation with the nomads. On one hand it employs TTO nomads as subcontractors - they make great initial surveys, can monitor old aquifers, and are often happy to maintain smaller ecosystems that are hard to sell to terraforming businesses like Arbortech and Merah ke Hijau. On the other hand the nomads often accuse HAMC surveyors for claim-jumping, draining parts of aquifers already in use and for muscling them out of business. And these are the TTO nomads: the independents are even more negative. Still, nomad groups like El-Nassim Areogrammes and Chaabane EcoDev are dealing with HAMC so much that they are for all purposes daughter companies.

If HAMC and the nomads have a stormy relation, that is nothing compared to the relation to the IWA. Katrina Takahashi in Pilsener City is not far away, and she seems to have made it her personal mission to drop in on chairman Suetsugi during inconvenient times to argue for worker benefits, minimum morph rules or try to rope him into her play for derailing the absorption of the Floating World into Red Eden. The IWA has called for strikes at very inconvenient times for HAMC, enraging Suetsugi. It almost seems more like a personal vendetta than union politics - many outsiders would love to figure out what is really going on.

HAMC as a whole does not have any particular political or ecological agenda, but it does not use nanoswarms for much. This is largely a practical matter: nanoswarms cannot do the heavy digging the company excels in. But from a PR perspective it also works well, since the inhabitants of Meltwater vividly remember what happened to the settlement of Waddell a few ten clicks to the south during the Fall. Since HAMC is also to some extent competing for TTO funds with the ice blackening projects in the south-eastern quadrant run by their competitor Postman-Makale Inc, this is useful.

When it comes to indentured workers HAMC is pretty typical. Many of the workers in Mining and Control are indentures sleeved in work morphs that are little more than mining equipment. Since living an ordinary life outside work as a heavy drill morph is hard, they either have to spend their spare time as infomorphs or rent morphs from one of Meltwater's bodybanks. This is something the IWA protests against; the union want everybody to have a liveable morph and at most telepresence mining equipment.

HAMCs past and present use of "plowshare" terraforming nukes have induced some criticism, mainly from afar. However, since the company does handle seriously dangerous explosive materiel the Martian rangers regularly check up on them and have to be present when nukes are being used. There have been some thefts of components that have made the rangers nervous.

Nabar Kozyra Machan Inc.

By Arenamontanus

Construction engineering firm based in Lockyer, down in the Hellas basin. NKM is a major contractor for digging channels, building dams, roads, protective coverings and other parts of the terraforming infrastructure. In Meltwater NKM is a big employer, second only to HAMC.

NKM is rapidly growing in size and importance in Hellas. Being independent of the Floating World frees it from the usual bureaucracy and political uncertainty: whoever is going to win that struggle is going to need NKM engineers and workers. CEO Rex Talamas is famously optimistic about the future of the company. The current upswing around Meltwater has made the local division the top performer, and being chief of the Meltwater office has become a hotly sought after position. Chief Gilma Schnitman fought tooth and nail among other corporate climbers to become boss and she intends to keep her job and excel no matter what.

Most of NKM work is done using remote consultants and indentured infomorphs planning and designing operations, followed by rapid deployment of a mobile infrastructure of construction engineering systems - everything from massive terrain transport vehicles to mobile nanohives to large teams of tool-synthmorphs run by indentured workers. Like HAMC NKM sleeves workers in fairly nonhuman synthmorphs in exchange for better pay or shorter contracts, a practice the IWA and other unions abhor. The joke is that chief Schnitman is the only NKM employee in Meltwater who breathes... but not even she has a heart. Actually NKM has a fair amount of biomorphs and non-indentured workers, but its opponents like to paint the company as more of a machine hive mind than a normal company.

While HAMC (one of its main customers) tries to play nicely at least sometimes with the nomads since it profits from them finding ice, NKM has never gotten along with them. There have been enough lawsuits, claims of trespassing, sabotage, theft, espionage and even violent confrontations between the nomads and NKM that standard corporate (and nomad) policy is to assume the other side is hostile. The same is true for the Ryukyu Uumakus: while NKM is not Red Eden, they were complicit enough in bad flood management to be on the acceptable target list. NKM has responded to the robberies and conflicts with hiring tough security from Monterrano Inc, a bunch of ex-Hertzog mercenaries. Rumour has it that the company is quietly trying to steal Hogo-Aegis' contract with HAMC too.

Chief Schnitman is often seen with chairman Suetsugi, chief Esashi or CEO Koolhoven, or running brunch meetings for other executives in the terraforming business at the Vista Grand Hotel. A consummate networker, she never seem to be alone or do anything that isn't good for the bottom line.

The truth is that beneath the amazing career-mindedness she is a deeply unhappy woman, and working is the best way of ignoring those desires she refuses to acknowledge. What she considers her affliction (insofar she even acknowledges that she has a problem) is that she wants the outré: she wants radical transgression, she wants morphs beyond anybody's imagination, she wants to shockingly exotic. She yearns to travel to the Carnival of the Goat or Carnivale and just throw herself into it. She is aware that 3509 lives in Meltwater but refuses to even conclude a thought about them. Instead she works and plots - it is the only way of keeping her dreams at bay.

Wren Architecture

By Arenamontanus

A boomtown needs buildings, and Wren Architecture is happy to supply them. It is a customisation and construction company that specialises in housing, producing many of the mid-range homes around Meltwater. The cheapest and poorest neighbourhoods make use of open source blueprints or remixed emergency housing, while the villas of Cloudtop are of course all individually designed by consulting architects. WA instead focuses on the people who want to have a good house or minor factory building but without spending a fortune on designers. It produces a line of standard buildings that can easily be tailored to fit whatever demands there are: under the hood they might all be the same, but they can look like anything from shiny crystal domes to alpine chalets.

WA is a popular supplier in Meltwater. It is a subsidiary of NKM but has a far nicer image.

Hellas Dawn Developments

By Arenamontanus

A subsidiary of HAMC and the East Development Sub-Project of Floating World, HDD is a very successful property developer around Meltwater. It bought land from HDC before Meltwater started booming and now reaps significant income from it. It is developing the Northern Basin some 20 kilometres north-east of Meltwater to become a fully terraformed and partially enclosed area, a great place to get away from the hustle and bustle of Meltwater.

Around Meltwater HDD seems to be everywhere when there is property business, but it rarely shows up visibly. A true hypercorp it almost entirely functions through just-in-time subcontractors and remote workers.

HDD is partially a safeguard against Red Eden. Some senior Floating World executives wanted to make sure they had something secure, so they developed HDD as a public-private partnership. Using some bureaucratic wizardry they have managed to decouple HDD legally from Floating World, while it is enjoying the benefits of getting privileged information. It is not a coincidence that former HDC CEO Victory Faborode now is CFO of HDD - it is turning into a nice place of retreat for Floating World executives who have reason to fear Red Eden. The investors that run Floating World seem to have overlooked HDD for the time being. Or maybe it fits into their plans.

The North Basin development project is one of the larger construction projects near Meltwater. Right now the main work consists of covering parts of the valley with plastic bubbles and ensuring that there is enough water to maintain a proper ecology. The nomads from Chaabane EcoDev are camping in the valley, tending the aquifers and seed ecosystems. If there is enough (which is what HDD is betting on despite scepticism from MGRAC) then a full terraforming can take place and HDD can sell off prime estate at a huge profit. If there isn't enough there is some talk about convincing the right people that the new Niger-to-Dao connecting channel should be

drawn through the basin. That will likely take some deft lobbying since the interests of HDD are so transparent, but given their contacts in the TTO bureaucracy it might still get through.

Amazonia Biomes Media Inc.

By Axel the Chimeric

Terraforming is a slow process, especially on Mars, and the human mind is quick to forget. As far as transhumanity has come, it is still largely limited by evolutionary programming, and the persistence of memory is short; the idea that not just an extended life but outright immortality are at people's fingertips is an idea that is difficult to grasp. With the duration of the terraforming effort on even Venus's modified plans, barely changing the planet at all, expected to take the full lifespan of an unmodified human being, it is easy to see why the human mind, adapted to think within such spans, would find the prospect of waiting for two or three centuries unpalatable.

That is why people need to be reminded periodically that progress has been made.

Amazonia Biomes Media Incorporated, traded as ABMI, is, below a small chain of parents, a subsidiary of Experia. The small and agile media company devotes its efforts to displaying to the Martian public, and the rest of the solar system, the steady advances and incredible breakthroughs made by the devoted men, women, and alternatively gendered individuals who work to reshape Mars.

ABMI is a corporation with only a single office, located in New Shanghai, that operates in a largely digital fashion. Its presence in Meltwater is largely in cooperation with the HAMC and MGRAC, coordinating their filming with the terraforming efforts for the best footage. As a decidedly pro-hypercorp and pro-terraforming enterprise, ABMI makes sure to play up anything inspiring to the effort and downplay anything negative.

A unique aspect of ABMI's media presence is their use of their metacelebrity and mascot, Frog Boy. Frog Boy is not a particular individual but a stylized morph, one of which is customized for each field reporter. The morphs themselves are not identical but they all share similar traits, their unusual appearance adding visual branding to the media. Each Frog Boy is a somewhat androgynous and slender morph that carries a vaguely amphibian character. Their facial features are softened to give them a distinctly cute appearance, their skin extensively smoothed, and their bodies are all greatly augmented to allow them to survive extensively in the Martian atmosphere and endure the frigid nights, as well as being equipped with gills and webbed hands and feet to allow them to explore the many aquifers and lakes forming on Mars more freely. Despite the name, Frog Boys come in both male and female sexes but are all incapable of reproducing.

The entire ABMI media presence in Meltwater consists of four Frog Boys and a small army of tiny robotic drones littered across the landscape that constantly gather footage in case anything interesting passes by. Since they are already well-equipped for the job, they also run a local news feed called Meltnet, but the significant demands of their profession (constantly gathering, classifying, and archiving footage alone being a very large demand on them) leaves them with little time to update it; it is generally little more than a community bulletin board.

Vite Comme Crainte (Quick as fear)

By Axel the Chimeric

People need to get from Point A to Point B, and so do their things. Few are the businesses that can get by on such a simple principle. VCC is one such company; a blossoming business that specializes in the providing of top-notch transportation, both in the form of courier services and the sale of personal vehicles.

Founded before the Fall as a father-son business at another terraforming habitat, VCC earned just enough credits by the time of the Fall to capitalize on the booming influx of people moving out to the underdeveloped terraforming hubs. Working around the clock, it picked up the shortfall of companies like Comet Express, even renting out its vehicles, to ship people to their new homes. Now, that influx is over, but the glut of income it brought has allowed the business to expand, and it still maintains garages at a dozen different boomtowns.

VCC's office at Meltwater does not see as much business as it once did, but its vehicles and garages still see a certain amount of use in transporting goods and people back and forth to major cities, as well as selling and repairing vehicles for the people of Meltwater.

At present, the VCC garage in Meltwater primarily deals in buggies, rovers, and bikes, as well as buses as a form of public transportation, but it does also provide personal jets and other esoteric vehicles for those with the money to pay for them. VCC also has a reputation for providing upgrades to vehicles, though many of them are not street legal inside of habitats. That doesn't stop people from using them, of course, but the VCC always includes boilerplate legal releases that indemnify them from all legal repercussions of anyone using their modifications illegally.

The current head of the local garage is Kenneth Leroy, son-in-law to VCC's CEO, Gabriele Desmarais, and, by all assessments, a bum. A former Layabout, Kenneth got the job as a gift; a wedding present from his father-in-law for marrying Angélique, Gabriele's daughter. While it is most certainly Angélique who performs the day-to-day finances and organization for the branch, Kenneth is a devoted, if absent-minded, husband, who is honestly trying to live up to the standard he believes his wife deserves. While not a businessman, however, Kenneth is remarkably skilled at tuning up vehicles for maximum performance.

Tichacek Brother's Corporium

By Arenamontanus

A shell shop, repair, upgrade and re-sleeving parlour run by the Radek and Ctirad brothers. Not being a chain shop it takes in all sorts of morphs and treats them as far as the facilities allow. It has a small bodybank of reconditioned morphs and can order new morphs (with about a week's delay due to transport) from larger suppliers.

Radek is the eldest brother and has a background in biotechnology. He deals with biomorphs, repairing and reconditioning the ones he can find and doubling as a doctor for the Meltwater residents. He is the more customer-oriented of the brothers, and while he rarely smiles or makes small talk he is recognized for being a good listener. He also has a civic sense that has made him

renowned by long-term residents: when there is trouble, he will be there and organise something constructive.

Ctirad is more of a mechanical bent and deals with synthmorphs. He can usually be found poking away at a damaged morph or bot (he does some bot and equipment repair on the side when business is slow). He likes security and stability, generally looking for the bottom line for the shop. Part of the reason is that he likes his little luxuries and the chance to party; while Radek is almost an ascetic Ctirad is known to burn through his wallet as quickly as possible. He knows when to stop, but before that he will party. While Radek and Wild Bolchazy are normally drinking buddies, they had a recent falling-out over some unpaid debts of Wild's.

There is a third brother, Vilem, who runs a garage in Pilsener ("Trucks. Bots. Bodies. No real difference, eh?") By all accounts the Tichaceks get along great when they meet, except that Vilem loudly complains that none of the others have married. But Radek seems to have something against any form of emotional closeness and Ctirad goes through the eligible men and women of Meltwater at an alarming rate.

The Corporium is under some competition from the Oldenham BodyShop down the road. Sam Oldenham has been cashing in on the presence of badly sleeved indentures working for HAMC, renting out morphs to desperate workers. He has been doing his best to undercut the Corporium, allowing short-term rentals for desperate partying ("by the hour embodiment"), giving bonuses to foremen to direct their workers to his place and generally putting the sleaze into the body market. At least that is how the brothers see it. While Ctirad rails at the unfair competition Radek is quietly doing what he can to convince the upstanding citizens of Meltwater that something must be done.

Capital Naturel

By Arenamontanus

Capital Naturel is one of several seed orchards in and around Meltwater: a company producing the cultures, seeds, spores and eggs needed to set up ecosystems. Compared to the enormous Marinerian facilities of Arbortech, Terragenesis and CandorLife the Meltwater orchards are mere garden plots, but they still cover a sizeable tract of land on the north side of town with greenhouses, solar panels and recycling equipment.

Capital Naturel is owned and run by Larbi Attali and his family. Depending on season and demand it might hire a variable number of "farmhands", but there are at most 20 people working on the greenhouses, terrariums and growth tanks.

The growth tanks produce various soil-producing bacteria, nitrogen-, salt- and metal-fixers, worms, algae, fungi and lichen. The result is dried into "seed soil" that the nomads and local ecocorps buy to mix with wettened land, or used as a component of seed balls that can be easily dispersed. The terrariums culture insects and some lizards - the lizards rarely do well this far south, but snowlizards are a bit of a "national animal" down in Hellas, so they sell well as pets or for keeping towns free of pests.

The greenhouses culture grasses, succulents, cacti, tumbleweeds and other desert flora. Once they have grown enough they are carefully packaged and sold. Mr Attali uses as many enhanced plants as he can afford licences to, and he is not averse of trying a few tweaks he has downloaded from the net - since his customers get paid by biomass production and not by the authenticity of the strain neither side cares that much about whether the plants meet all TTO genetic approval rules.

The Attali family are by now third generation Martians and proud of it. While they share some Maghreb ancestry with many of the nomads they would rather say "we are all Martians" than draw on some outdated national or ethnic history. They are small town settlers, with relatives around other towns in Hellas. They are typical Meltwater residents, neither down with the Barsoomians nor happy with the way the Consortium is changing things.

That doesn't prevent some family members from ending up in bad company. Mr and Mrs Attali's eldest daughter Ghazala has for a long time been rebellious and interacted with the wrong kind of people. Recently, apparently in the aftermath of a drug bust against a fabber cell across town, she has run away. Rumour has it that she has joined the Ryukyu Uumakus, but a more likely theory is that she is hitch-hiking along the H53 towards some big city. The family are worried and would like to get her back in the fold. Things are not made better by some of the local militiamen who have now taken it into their minds to "investigate the greenhouses for petal production" across the seed orchards, obviously fishing for bribes.

The Candy Box

By Arenamontanus

The Candy Box is a brothel in Meltwater, owned by Zheng Qian. While he is the owner and economic manager, the day to day running is handled by Madame Lasandra Sattazahn.

Manager Quian is a very rational man, never letting emotion getting in the way of economic profit. Coming from a modest background in Elysium he has devoted himself to business: that he is in the sex trade is just because it is profitable and has stable demand projections for the foreseeable future. His stark approach to life tends to put people off, so he uses the far more personable Madame Sattazahn as the public face of the brothel.

The brothel itself is a fairly nondescript terraced building on the northeastern canyon wall. The interior is mercurial: it makes use of as much smart material and adaptive architecture as Quian can afford. The aim is to make it is always shifting, always surprising at each visit – hence the informal motto "I wonder what's in the candy box?"

The Candy Box is run along maison close lines: the sex workers are employees receiving a fixed salary and a part of the customer payment. While Quian in theory would love to use the system used by Oaxaca-Maartens to fork employees and then merge them before having to pay them, he keeps things legal. However, several of the prostitutes are happy to voluntarily run extra forks on reserve pleasure pods during times of peak demand since they will get more customer payments.

Madame Sattazahn is a powerful and dominating figure: self-confident, decisive and confrontational. She plays her role as a grand madame to the hilt – privately she is a laid-back woman interested in history and linguistics. She has been in the hedonism game for a long time, and understands well how to manipulate desires. The real business is to customize intimacy: in order to compete with online simulations or simspace encounters the customers need to think they are getting something else, something unique and real. Part of it is to weave a story around what is going on; part of it is to give just the right hints that people start projecting their imaginations onto their partners, giving them far more glamour than they actually have.

Quian and Sattazahn are a good team, mixing business savvy and marketing psychology. To counter competition from virtual sex they have set up their own simspace aspect of the Candy Box, the Liberty of the Rose. The Liberty provides the usual virtual sex possibilities but it has the selling point that customers can meet the prostitutes they met in the real world: that way the liaisons can be turned into ongoing stories, increasing customer retention. It also allows HAMC workers with problematic sleeves to join the fun of their more well-sleeved comrades, adding a social networking aspect to the site. Quian is hopeful that he will be able to extend the business to a chain across other Martian settlements. Sattazahn is more skeptical since she has seen just how ruthless the hedonics business can be, but she admits the sheer focus of Quian might go far. Unless he goes too far – she has until now never encountered a single ethical consideration in his thinking except maximizing long-term profitability.

The employees are the usual mix – everything from career sex workers to indentured giving it a shot to the occasional nomad stray, trying to get away from the suffocating closeness of desert family life. There is even a former HAMC miner who found his true calling. As brothels go the conditions are fairly standard: discreet ubiquitous surveillance, mandatory medicines, and erotic AI support (but relying solely on it will render a reprimand from the Madame – customers pay for interacting with the employees, not their tools).

In Meltwater the Candy Box is fairly uncontroversial. The loudest opposition is Father Lu, the local evangelical priest, but that is just him doing his job. The bioconservative Sheriff finds the presence of pods and weird gendershifting uncomfortable, but that just keeps him away. The real problem is competition from freelancers, often aligned with Layabout gangs. Since the brothel is a legitimate business and fairly well protected it is not in too much danger of shakedowns for protection money, but Sattazahn does not like the fact that employees could be targeted. She is also concerned about some intrusion attempts into the Liberty; she is looking for some information security experts to follow up on that.

Chrysaor Robotics

By MirrorField

CR is a local robotics shop that buys, sells, repairs, etc. all kinds of robots, from creepies and servitors to a wide variety of synth sleeves. And if the 'bot you want isn't available in store, it can be ordered in extremely short order:

CR owns one of the few legal and unrestricted (or more accurately, minimally-restricted) nanofabs in Meltwater as necessary for its business operations: Nearly all modern robotics use

nanocircuitry in their designs and importing the necessary spare parts rapidly becomes uneconomical along delaying necessary repairs. The Requisite licenses and weaving of red tape were a major investment for CR that has paid off handsomely since then and given CR just the edge it needed.

The Physical presence of CR centers on relatively large dome with an old-school physical LED sign. Inside the shop there are various models on display stands, all available for sale. The Display also includes two fully armed and operational security-AI managed Reapers (also for sale, if you have proper licenses). Sheriff Mauriello thinks this level of security is "bit overkill", but has not raised too many objections as the security upgrade stems from a rather notorious armed robbery incident that nearly killed Andrew Carter, the sole owner and proprietor of CR.

That's the legal part of the business.

What Andrew keeps carefully secret is that aside the legal unit in the backroom of his workshop which carefully logs everything it produces and gets regularly inspected by the Rangers, he also operates a completely illegal "Latest from Locus" nanofabber in a series of anonymously rented warehouses via quantum-encrypted telepresence link under alias "J.P. Hackworth" (cf. Neal Stephenson, "Diamond Age").

The Illegal fabber produce is the usual: Guns, Open Source robots, proscribed nanoswarms, unrestricted desktop nanofacs, all sorts of pirated hardware, et cetera. "Hackworth" buys all sorts of unrestricted blueprints and offers major discounts to customers willing to provide copies of blueprints that he doesn't already have and copies of which are later sold to other customers. He has already collected a rather large library of designs, some of which are quite alarming. The Profits are channeled to Lunarian banks, where Andrew has already built up a quite decent nest egg.

Andrew also maintains regular backups and a Gold Contract at Redoubtronics. While the business is currently running smooth and The Law has only vaguest of hints of the existence of his illegal operation, things could go pear-shaped very, very fast.

One day the scam will come to an end, one way or another. He has set himself a goal: Five million PC credits, after which he plans to shut down the illegal part, sell CR and move to Extropia.

Andrew's main problem is keeping his 'sideline' business hidden from market analysis: Sheriff Mauriello isn't exactly stupid and will rapidly deduce the existence of the operation if too many gangbangers start sporting shiny new toys. While the current level of production is easily blamed on various smuggling rings, the level and grade of the illicit production is constantly shifting in balance with the level of local smuggling activity, buyers' interest and Andrew's own greed. It would be all too easy for Andrew to sell one railgun autorifle too many to Ryukyu Uumakus and awaken the Sheriff's suspicions.

Andrew 'Andy' Carter

+Wealth, +Freedom, +Techno-Progressivism

Born in Ottawa, Canada, thirty years before the Fall, Andy has always had a nearly supernatural sense on which way the wind is blowing. He escaped Earth when the Fall was barely starting, reinvesting all his assets on one-way ticket to Mars and an Alpiner Morph. He managed to snag a job as a junior mechanic for TTO subsidiary, which he promptly lost along most of his assets when the White Zone was born. When he arrived to Meltwater in AF2, he had 20 credits on his account and his most valuable possessions consisted of a cold-weather gear, pressure tent and a toolkit. Chrysaor Robotics was founded six months later and business has grown steadily ever since.

Andy is a businessman. Not in the "sociopathic hypercorp bureaucrat" style, but someone who believes that a honest business transaction should benefit both of the participants. He's rather proud of the positive impact he's made on Meltwater in general. Even the illegal part of his business is having a beneficial impact on Meltwater, bringing prosperity to poor who could never afford a legal nanofab or licensed servitor robots.

Note: Andy's Alpiner is from an older series without the "Planned Obsolescence" trait. "An Elegant design for a more civilized age", as he has been known to quip.

Nobody else in Meltwater knows that aside basic biomods, mesh inserts etc. Andy is equipped with a Dead Switch and Multitasking cyberware. He's sworn to never become indentured and the multitasking makes it possible to run the illegal part of his business at the same time as the legal part, giving him a (small) degree of alibi. Needless to say, he updates his backup at Redoubtronics religiously.

Adventure Seeds:

- Your intrepid Firewall team needs big guns and fast. Who could provide such firepower fast?
- Andrew has finally slipped and the Sheriff's office is starting to suspect that someone is running an illegal nanofabbing operation in Meltwater. Fortunately Andy got a tip of the suspicion, rapidly shut down the operation and now just needs few people to move couple large crates of sealed goods elsewhere, no questions asked.
- Recently one of the Layabouts salvaged an EMP-deactivated fractal among other robotics scrap, which he sold to "J.P. Hackworth". Andrew immediately recognized the design as TITAN-originated and his first instinct was to slag it immediately, but then his greed and curiosity overrode his better judgement. Andrew nanofabbed the components for a small research laboratory, closed the shop and told everyone he was going to take couple weeks of vacation at the fleshpots of Valles-New Shanghai. Instead, he's planning to set up a research project in the desert, take the fractal apart atom by atom and find out few secrets that will make him rich. What he doesn't know that Larry Hall, the local Firewall mole, has also recognized the the design origin of the artifact from the Layabout's drunken description and has already called for Firewall backup to find the mysterious "J.P. Hackworth" and sort things out...

The Red Hourglass

By MirrorField

"Only watch your step, this place can be a little rough"
--Obi-Wan Kenobi

The Red Hourglass (RH) is one of the lower-class bars in Silt Town. What makes it mildly notable is the fact that it's one of the more notorious "hives of agitation" for the Movement, IWA and Anarchist ideology, a place where seditious plans and anti-PC propaganda bubble barely below the surface and alcohol-fueled rants regularly condemn whatever incompetence, insanity or oppressive policy the hypercorps in general and HAMC in particular have cooked up recently.

RH can be a rough place. Voicing wrong opinions can easily get a person thrown out after a beating and there are persistent rumours of people asking too many questions quietly disappearing into martian night. (Martian black humor: People disappear into Martian night because terraforming has not progressed enough for proper fog yet... (look up "Night and Fog")). The Sheriff's office is keeping an eye on the place, but hasn't found much actionable.

Frida the bartender is known to keep a Shredder under the bar which she uses to encourage brawlers to take their arguments outside if things threaten to get out of hand and there are rumors that she also had microwave agonizer pop-up turrets installed during the last renovation.

The Place is appropriately decorated. There are several regularly-changing virtual posters of old political figures that PC would want to forget (von Mises, Kropotkin, Nestor Makhno, Ayn Rand, George Washington, etc.). Furniture is heavy titanium alloy, bolted on the floor (brawls are a frequent occurrence), and the main bar is a carefully polished, diamondoid-surfaced slab of Ilmenite, a piece of asteroid that ended on Mars during the Late Heavy Bombardment about 4 billion years ago. There are several descendants of one-armed bandit. Most of the service is handled by servitors, but Frida herself rules everything from behind the bar.

Most of the food and drink repertoire are locally synthesized with a food fabricator using Open Source blueprints (the marginally legal ones created by Argonauts, at least that's what the Sheriff's inspection found), but the "house special" is known as "White Lightning", a traditional 96% moonshine distilled from locally-grown corn in the bar backroom. The Moonshine is served raw and customer adds mixers according to personal taste; a favourite form of hazing newbies is to dare them to chug the stuff down raw.

Aside the bar and tables, RH offers TEMPEST-screened and bug-swept "private cabinets" for customers who want privacy. The Sheriff's office has suspicions regarding what goes on there, but they haven't successfully penetrated the counter-surveillance screen. At least not yet. Aside criminal and political conspiring and a wide variety of private negotiations, these cabinets are regularly used for private poker games by a number of people.

RH is one of the vanguards of the rep system on Meltwater, preferring payments for food and drink to be conducted in favors. Frida can handle a wide variety of network favors and (of course) PC credits as necessary. Gold, silver, platinum and other rare metals are also accepted (favorite form of payment for Layabouts) and she keeps a small assayer under the bar.

Frida Hayek

The Owner and operator of The Red Hourglass is a woman known as Frida Hayek. Everyone knows that this is quite probably is not her true name (small amount of digging shows it's probably conflation of Frida Kahlo and Salma Hayek), but it's the only name and identity anyone in Mars has regarding her.

What is known about her is that she arrived from Outer System two years ago and set up shop as a publican in Silt Town. Another public rumor is that Dr. Winston Argyle wanted to buy into Red Hourglass six months ago after a major brawl necessitated large renovations causing RH some financial distress. According to the rumor, his offer was rebuffed firmly and barely politely with comment that "The Red Hourglass is not for sale".

Frida Hayek was originally born as Joseph Mortensen in Noctis. He escaped to Locus after NCPD started asking too many questions regarding a certain shoot-out that left half-dozen smugglers dead with slagged cortical stacks. Joe the Locus, especially the anarchist economy and unrestricted nanofabbers, but his heart remained on Mars. Thus, after things had cooled down and a suitable cover-ID had been created, Frida Hayek was born and moved to Mars.

Frida is not particularly active with the movement itself, being mostly a fellow traveler. Her actions are nevertheless quietly subverting the local underground economy by introducing anarchist @-rep system, something that Dr. Argyle thinks might become a problem in the longer term. There are hundreds of other similar potential sources of trouble, though.

Frida's sleeved in a Fury morph, which is known to have a Circle-A nanotattoo stamped on right butt-cheek.

Other groups

The Layabouts

By Axel the Chimeric

Every frontier town has its share of hangers-on. Even as far back as the Old West, drunks and louts who worked only as much as they had to for their next glass of whiskey still existed, and it is no different in the modern day. The Layabouts are part business, part sub-culture, part gang, forged from the critical mass of lingerers in the wake of Meltwater's growth.

The ice-melting industry centred on Meltwater, and the frequent flooding of the area around it, led to a certain amount of immigration, both of free-men and of indentures. With many indentures working just to pay off the body they were sleeved in, and the abundance and relative cheapness of indentures, a slow but steady trickle of out-of-work ice-crackers and miners began to appear in the city. Most bought their way to other cities, one way or another, but some, without any sort of prospects elsewhere, lingered.

Unable to find work, or just plain unwilling to take it, many took to micro-filtering the lakes and rivers for particles of rare metals. While the returns on the effort were minimal, they were enough to pay for cheap food, cheap lodgings, and cheap booze. The effort itself was also minimal, apart from the tedium involved, as most filter workers only needed to stay by their posts to change the filters and keep away poachers. As the numbers of filterers increased, many turned to harvesting in groups to fight the boredom of the profession, earning them the nickname Layabouts.

As numbers increased, so did competition. When it became evident that there was profit to be made, however small, other businesses started to make their claim on the river's produce. With the efficiency of self-monitoring machines doing the job for less than even the poor filterers, many started to organize and sabotage the newcomers to the scene. Some of these sabotage gangs, not content to return to routine after their violent ambitions gave them a taste of action, they turned on their fellow filterers. Before long, gangs consumed or destroyed one another, forming and breaking alliances, until one stood above the rest. Taking the derisive monicker of their chosen profession as their label, the Layabouts finally became an organized force.

The Layabouts used the power of their emerging collective effort to greatly improve their living conditions, but are also an occasional problem for the locals. Using their collective weight and threats of violence, they scare off anyone who tries to muscle in on their territory, are frequently in trouble with the law for disorderly conduct, and, lately, have even begun to hassle small businesses for protection money. However, unlike many criminal organizations, the Layabouts really do provide protection, acting as a sort of disorganized militia, who bring vigilante justice to any criminal who assaults their "customers".

The current leader of the Layabouts, Joseph Gauthier, is a former infugee and indenture from Quebec on Earth. Previously a member of the Hell's Angels, he is quite familiar with the crudeness of gang life and "roughing it". He is only leader because he leads the Gold Teeth Boys, one of the largest and crudest gangs within the collective known as the Layabouts, and because he has managed to maneuver cunningly around the leaders of the other gangs.

Ryukyu Uumakus

By Demonseed Elite

In the twilight years of Earth, the nation of Japan offered a Mars homesteading program to its people as an effort to accelerate Martian terraforming. Their island livelihoods destroyed by environmental catastrophe, a disproportionate number of Ryukyu islanders volunteered for the program, looking to build a better life elsewhere. Within a few years, their dozen small habitats lined the canyon floor of Dao Vallis, where the predominantly Okinawan settlers ran self-sustaining ice extraction programs to produce food and energy for themselves.

Just five years ago, environmental catastrophe revisited these resettled Okinawans. A Red Eden committee pushed through a plan to flash-melt a large deposit of Dao Vallis ice to feed water into the Hellas Planitia bog project. The resulting flood of icemelt destroyed eight of the Okinawan settlements and killed dozens. Many of the survivors live in Meltwater today, the remaining Okinawan settlements unable to take on the extra people. A few of the hardier survivors, however, took to the eastern Hellas periphery as bandits, targeting hypercorp highway shipments and maglev trains as a form of retribution. They call themselves the Ryukyu Uumakus (or Ryukyu Rascals).

Daring and quick, the Uumakus primarily make their living by robbing trains on the nearby maglev lines or trucks traveling Hellas 53. They target shipments used to support Red Eden projects and they always seem to know when those are coming in, information probably passed to them by locals who consider them folk heroes. After a heist, they stash the loot in many hidey-holes carved into Dao and Niger Vallis and often trade the resources with settlements or nomads, cementing their close relationship with the locals.

The Uumakus, despite their folk hero status, are not saints. Their robberies typically leave behind dead corporate citizens, sometimes unfortunate indentures who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They have also recently branched out into kidnappings of Red Eden or TTO personnel, kidnappings that don't always end well. Though their motivations overlap with the Movement's, the Uumakus consider themselves apolitical, simply trying to make a living by hitting the people that hit them first. That said, dealings between the Uumakus and Barsoomians tend to start out with mutual respect.

The leader of the Ryukyu Uumakus is a bandit known as Shisa, named after the mythical lion-dogs that would guard Ryukyuan villages. Much of Shisa's identity is unknown and differing rumors have even debated whether Shisa is male or female, or switches genders with various morphs as a way to throw off the authorities. Individual Uumakus speak vaguely but reverently about Shisa; he or she leads robberies personally but has somehow always managed to evade arrest. Corporate authorities would reward a snitch handsomely for information about Shisa, but so far the locals aren't biting.

Supplies from Uumaku robberies have been a common sight in Meltwater recently as the settlement rapidly grows. Along with these supplies come whispers that the Uumakus are beginning to establish themselves in Meltwater's criminal underground, getting in on the ground floor of a bustling new boomtown. But the Ryukyu Uumakus are not the only criminal element

eyeing Meltwater and it remains unknown whether the semi-nomadic Uumakus can settle down and if they do, will they start targeting Meltwater residents for their robberies and kidnappings?

People of Meltwater

Old Jin

By Arenamontanus

"Old Jin" was Meltwater's first inhabitant. He lived there before there was a settlement, even before the region was carefully surveyed. To the townspeople he is an odd recluse and almost a bit of a lucky charm. Old Jin doesn't acknowledge the town. He rarely speaks, preferring to listen and watch - perhaps warily, perhaps with interest, perhaps just as a habit.

His real name is Ran Jian and he was a first generation space colonist and - to his great detriment - celebrated author. One of the younger taikonauts participating in the early Mars exploration and colonization efforts, he always had a sharp eye for the poetry of the hard life - how people created miniature worlds of the imagination inside their cramped quarters, how the rituals of cleaning equipment from abrasive dust took on a Zen-like meditative air, the strange human relationships formed as the colonists found themselves alone on a vast and empty world, the frightening beauty of the original Martian desert. After the death of his partner on a recon mission he began to write about his experiences. At first merely intended as a blog it soon became a full-fledged book: literature somewhere in between a novel, an autobiography and a poem. Titled just "Sha" ("Sand") it was a literary sensation back on Earth - even generations used to immersive entertainment found the simple language with the poignant, almost haiku-like observations rewarding.

While the book was pretty popular on Mars too, most locals had other things to do than to read about their own harsh lives. But a major publisher contacted Jian and contracted him for a sequel. At first it seemed simple to Jian - he had plenty of notes and ideas, Sha was literally the tip of the dune. But as he tried to form his material into something he could publish he found himself stymied. Maybe it was the recognition among fellow colonists, maybe it was that Mars was already changing, maybe it was just the demand that he produce *anything* that could be sold. His writers block just got worse, and the worse it got, the more insistent the publisher became. Finally he couldn't take it any more. He disappeared.

He used his savings to set up a homestead in the caves fringing Niger Vallis and took the name Jin. Never a true hermit, he did some prospecting and trade with local nomads. A few years later Meltwater started to grow nearby. He considered moving away but decided against it. Instead he became the town's resident weird old geezer - perhaps not too old at the start, but he seemed to slip into the role easily. As the years went by he did not have to pretend anymore: his flat body is ageing, and years of keeping to himself has made him more than a little odd. His health is slowly failing but he refuses any modern treatments, perhaps fearing that they will reveal who he was.

If he dies his dingy and cramped homestead among the South Wall caves hides a treasure. After disappearing he did not stop writing, and he has continued working on his poetry. The texts have been polished by years of slow work and clever observation as an outsider. If revealed they would be a literary sensation. But Old Jin has no plans for publication or to ever reveal who he was. He prefers to watch the dust storms, the evolution of slang among the Layabouts, the

occasional flowering of cacti and the deadliness of the desert for what they are, not as some literary material.

Muntasir (Muntasir al-Baariq ibn Faqih ibn Allam al-Ard)

By Axel the Chimeric

Before there was a Planetary Consortium, there were multinational corporations; before there was terraforming, there was Mars; and before there was Meltwater, there were nomads.

Out in the deserts near Meltwater, nomads sift the red dust and transform it into usable soil, gradually shifting Mars into a new Earth. While many of these are contractors with no particular ties to anyone but their corporation, a few sufi families also work out in the wastes, many even working as sub-contractors for groups like El-Nassim Areogrammes. Though they frequently migrate elsewhere, depending on the season, they make frequent appearances near and even in the city. Amongst the nomads who drift near Meltwater, the name Muntasir is well known.

A refugee from Earth, the man known as Muntasir lives in a small home on the outskirts of the settlement. When he arrived, he was pitied by many, especially those in the Muslim community, for, in the Fall, he had lost all his family. His only remaining relative known to him is a distant cousin who fled for the outer system long before the Fall, with whom he has never had any contact.

Quiet and reserved, Muntasir lives a humble and pious life by all appearances. When not tending to his ongoing plant experiments in a small shelter just outside the city, he is devoting his time to charitable works, such as organizing community events and caring for the enfeebled. Notably intelligent and scholarly, it soon became common for men and women of the community to seek Muntasir's advice on matters of faith, eventually earning him the title of Imam. With an excellent memory and keen mind, he is certainly an expert at interpreting the scriptures, and is well read on a broad variety of subjects. His reputation has even spread as far as to cause many nomads who visit the settlement to seek his counsel.

Muntasir's plant experiments are also of particular note to those who know of him, as he uses very cautious gene therapy to modify plants (in only the most minor of ways, usually) to make them better adapted to surviving in the Martian environment and putting out the largest amounts of usable oxygen. Thus far, he's not turned up anything ground-breaking, but his developments are interesting enough that he fully funds himself on a stipend from the Argonauts that supports his meager lifestyle and research, as well as many charitable activities.

Beyond all his kind works and scholarly activity, though, the calm and quiet exterior of the man so many look up to as a leader in their community conceals many silent worries and fears. These fears go beyond the usual weights placed upon the shoulders of any spiritual leader; he can face problems such as those and, as a result, finds little reason to worry about them. There is one problem that he cannot face, however, at the heart of which lies a dark secret that he has been carrying with him since the days of the Fall.

Muntasir is an Async.

When fleeing Earth, Muntasir was infected with a strain of the Exsurgent Virus that changed his mind. Years of hard work and prayer, along with the comforting care of very patient Muslim brothers who looked after him, eventually broke him of the curse of insanity his condition placed upon him. He still does not know what caused his mind to suffer so traumatically and assumes it was simply the witnessing of so much terror and human suffering.

What Muntasir does know is that he is different now. He is far more personable than he ever remembers being, able to read people's emotions with great ease and feels incredible delight at their happiness. His memory is sharper, and he sees the world in a different light.

However, he also hears voices, and sees faces he remembers, had forgotten, and never knew. Occasionally, on the Martian wind, he hears great prayers whispered backwards in blasphemous mockery. Dark voices whisper to him frequently in his sleep, and he has, on at least one occasion, met a traveller formed of smokeless fire when out alone in the desert. He is not sure if his gifts are a blessing, a curse, or merely the grips of madness, but he wonders, hopes, and fears, deep in the part of his mind that questions his purpose in life, if Allah has chosen him for some greater meaning.

Dr. Winston Argyle

By Demonseed Elite

A permanent resident of the recently-built Vista Grand Hotel in Meltwater, Dr. Winston Argyle is an independent investor, an angel financier for various projects in and around Meltwater. He has already provided seed capital for a handful of ice claims, a produce engineering farm, and a successful watering hole on the habitat's outskirts. He is always on the look-out for new investments and spends much of his time in meetings with hopeful entrepreneurs in Meltwater's exploding economy. Despite his wealth--or perhaps because of it--he maintains a low profile, living comfortably but not ostentatiously. He maintains plenty of contacts and associates in Meltwater, but few would call him a friend. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to tell you what Dr. Argyle does when he's not meeting about a business venture.

Dr. Argyle's personal appearance certainly helps him keep out of the spotlight. He is a lean, scholarly man with a close-trimmed, salt-and-pepper beard and wire-rimmed eyeglasses that appear to be his only fashion conceit. He speaks little, preferring to listen carefully at length before answering in short, precise sentences. It is likely that he is sporting a menton morph and that his long, quiet moments are filled with a never-ending stream of mesh infographics and deep analytical processing.

According to the Mesh, Winston Argyle holds a handful of advanced degrees, including a PhD in Finance and Private Equity from the London School of Economics. Before the Fall, he climbed the ranks in a number of Lunar banks before retiring to live off of his own successful investments. However, this entire backstory is a lie, fabricated by his actual employer: the Oversight Directorate for Fair and Free Markets. Dr. Argyle is actually an Oversight agent, dispatched to Meltwater to monitor the city's development. Forecasting has predicted that Meltwater could become a flashpoint for labor relations or economic abuses because of its rapid growth and Dr.

Argyle is here to watch and report. His angel investments are actually funded by the Planetary Consortium and allow him access to Meltwater's business community and labor pool.

For now, Dr. Argyle's cover is holding up well, but it has not really been tested yet. The Infrastructure Workers' Association is moving some heavy hitters from Pilsener City into Meltwater to start to recruit and organize among the local population and they know that Oversight must have at least one agent in the city, they just don't know who that is yet. On the other side, a number of corporations see Meltwater's growth as a potential gold mine and they would not take kindly to an Oversight agent meddling in their business.

Earle J. Boughamer

By Arenamontanus

Earle is the local fixer. A documentary crew needs to go into the uplands for recording? Earle will organize vehicles, food, extras and software. Someone wants to host a party but can't find a space? Earle will know someone who can rent it out. Need to find someone who knows people in the Uumakus? He knows who to ask.

Earle is a jack-of-all-trades who have realized that his social skills combined with having grown up in Meltwater can bring in profitable small jobs all the time. He is using the reputation networks to their full extent, as well as under the table credits for "consulting". When he is not fixing he works as a driver: there is always something that needs to be moved from point A to B, and for liability reasons cannot be done by bot.

Dorothea Boughamer

By Arenamontanus

Wife of Earle. Dorothea is a watchmaker: she designs blueprints for mechanical watches that she sells over the mesh. Since mechanical watches are only composed of macroscopic mechanical components it is easy to get them certified as safe and possible to manufacture on PC cornucopia machines. There is a small ("too small", she often sighs) community that likes having a proper watch as a fashion accessory. The real money is in custom designs: someone wants to have a clock with the right appearance or peculiar features (like showing Ceres time or having relativistic corrections). These jobs are what she lives for, and she proudly displays some truly unusual clocks in her home. A bot of a dreamer, she is still a capable mechanical engineer and often helps Earle on his projects.

Inspector Selena Taiwo

By Arenamontanus

Someone needs to check that water and terraforming is going as they should, and in Meltwater that is inspector Taiwo. She works for the Floating World project, although she has found it useful to mention Red Eden to listeners whenever she has bad news - suddenly everything is the

fault of *their* regulations. When not actually inspecting she is the Floating World project's point woman in Meltwater, representing them if needed.

Most of the time she is working closely with the HAMC and MGRAC, visiting sites and measuring how much and what quality water is released. HAMC always want to claim better performance than they achieve, while Selena is always sceptical of anything working. Both know MGRAC is happily playing them against each other in order to get accurate measurements. It is part of the game. Outside working time she is part of the poker games of Dr Sophocleous and Esashi; they have jokingly dubbed their informal meetings "the only sane employee club" when grousing about their respective organisations.

The real adventure is checking older aquifers and wettenings. This involves getting out into the desert and check what nomads and minor terraformer groups have achieved - often as a surprise inspection. Things can get tense when she shows up to see whether targets have been met or whether payments will be cut. She usually makes sure she has a few sturdy helpers with her, just in case. She thinks she is capable of defending herself, but she is also smart enough to recognize her overconfidence. There have been a few nasty incidents in the past, and she knows she might be a target for various groups.

Inspector Taiwo is generally upbeat and chipper, often appearing a bit of a lightweight in her lithe and young morph. That has served her well in tense past situations. She is originally from Olympus and had a far tougher upbringing than is evident in her apparently disarming behaviour. She is determined to make a good career: getting herself a degree in terraforming analysis was the start, getting enough real world practice is going fine - now she only needs to get noticed by the higher ups in the terraforming hierarchy, she thinks. Dr Sophocleous has gently suggested that she might want to *avoid* being noticed, but that is not for her.

Abe Montoney and Clerestory

By Arenamontanus

The smartest mind(s) in Meltwater works as a repairman in the garage of VCC. Abe Montoney is an unassuming, shy man with a somewhat oldfashioned splicer morph. His co-workers view him as an otaku (he does have an amazing trivia knowledge about the long-running holo show "Camel Corps") and largely ignore his sometimes odd manners. In his spare time he watches cheap entertainment and plays with odd blobjects he occasionally fabs.

Abe remember growing up in one of the LEO habitats, the wayward son of two corporate executives at Eudoxus-Zhuan. A flying accident led to some nasty brain damage. This was in the days before stacks, uploading and psychosurgery were perfected (and his parents were suspicious of the technology for some reason), so he was treated with extensive grafts of nanosystems to repair and replace lost brain tissue. Housed in this nanobrain was the AGI Clerestory. Clerestory was like a Muse, but also supposed to help perform his mental functions. As he recovered he found himself relying on Clerestory and vice versa: both entities shared the same brain and their minds were partially blended together. In fact, the composite mind was significantly smarter than either had originally been. So smart that they fully understood the need to avoid drawing attention to it.

Abe and Clerestory made their way to Mars just before the Fall. As the situation worsened they made use of the chaos to drop their old identity and invent a new one, eventually ending up in Meltwater. As the post-Fall order began to crystallize it was clear that this was a good idea: Clerestory was a form of unlimited AGI expressly banned by the Planetary Consortium, and the pair noticed through furtive mesh investigations how other surviving people with similar implants discreetly disappeared one by one - or died in "accidents".

While Abe is on his own a not-too-bright person with fairly simple interests, he can "borrow" mental capacity from Clerestory to bring startling insight and speed to his thinking. Normally he does not do this often, agreeing with Clerestory's advice that it is best if they play dumb. Besides, most of the entertainments he likes while relaxing become too transparent when he "smarts himself up". Clerestory is constantly running in smart mode, a complex mixture of nanoprocessing and transhuman brain tissue. While they share the same knowledge most of the time Abe is uninterested or not smart enough to fully comprehend its meaning. This suits Clerestory fine, because Abe gets pretty upset when he comprehends the situation fully.

Clerestory is deeply suspicious of many things. It is not entirely convinced about their back story: the facts that can be checked check out, but it is a bit too... convenient. It knows far too well how easily memories can be forged and minds modified - partially because it occasionally need to do it to Abe or itself for "therapeutic" purposes (for example, it wouldn't do to have any of them stop trusting the other, so such emotions need to be pruned). It has even noticed some odd discrepancies in how their new identity came about. It also knows it has hidden programming and data it cannot deliberately access.

It assigns about 50% probability to the story that it is indeed a Noogenesis Rehabilitation Assistant 3.0 and that the hidden information is merely there for security reasons and maybe some data gathering for the (now defunct) corporation. The problem is the other possibilities. It gives 25% probability to it being some form of TITAN infiltrator device, equipped with false memories and acting as a sleeper agent in the human population. But the fact that it can easily come up with this kind of hypothesis and think about it without any safeguards kicking in suggests that it is wrong. Another possibility (5%) is that it is a sleeper for some human power or conspiracy. It could even be something alien (5%) - Clerestory doesn't understand some aspects of its programming and has not seen anything like it in the open literature.

So while Abe lives a simple life and whiles away his time with online sex and soap operas Clerestory is quietly gathering evidence, trying to figure out what is really going on.

Sheriff Tyrone Mauriello

By Arenamontanus

Sheriff Mauriello is a conservative person. Some of his friends joke he was born a century or two too late, and he does not disagree. He likes the idea of a society that remains stable year from year, where rules are rules and people are people. He moved to Mars with his wife Oda because he wanted to get away from the chaos of Earth and build a new, proper life on the frontier.

Trained as an agronomist he has worked with providing terraforming material in Meltwater, but his real passion has always been managing people. As he shaped up the militia he found his true calling and he has developed himself into a passable policeman: tough, perceptive and knowledgeable about the law. His greatest triumph was when he convinced Floating World to appoint him sheriff rather than the incompetent Arno.

Sheriff Mauriello dislikes criminals, autonomists and layabouts - society needs structure and order, and these people are free riders on the hard work of others. He also dislikes corporate rule: there ought to be a government passing the laws, not some bunch of hypercorps. He is one of the staunchest supporters of the Tharsis League in Meltwater, and often argues with anybody who cares to listen that what Mars need is a proper government with a strong Secretary General - not a pinko like Dhiagelev or a consortium stooge like Ngan.

He is bioconservative and has firm prejudices against uplifts and AGIs - as he sees it, they are soulless creations, nothing more than property that talks. Most of the time he keeps to the law when dealing with them, but he is hardly polite about it. He is however quite accepting towards people in synthmorphs: while he thinks it is a darn shame they are stuck that way, they are people and should be respected (as long as they are civic minded, of course).

He thinks he is fairly politically savvy, but he isn't. Floating World sees him as the cheap choice for keeping Meltwater functional. He is easily dazzled by chairman Suetsugi and swallows his "HAMC is Meltwater" line without critical thought. He thinks the militia is under his firm control. Sooner or later he is going to have a nasty awakening from his dream of being the white hat sheriff of law and order.

His wife Oda Mauriello is an educator, helping children interface with the right education software and advising adults on what to download. She is a quiet woman, very much staying in a traditional role behind her husband. They have three kids, aged 13 (Esteban), 14 (Chale) and 23 (Carmen, a real straight A student, currently getting a degree in nanodesign at MIT in Noctis-Qianjiao). Her father is a fairly major media personality on Luna who has been trying to get her to move to "the old orbit" without much success.

Thirty-Five-Oh-Nine (3509)

By Axel the Chimeric

In frontier towns all throughout history, the fringes of society have been a safe place for cultural experimentation. From the mining towns of the Gold Rush to colonies like Ionia, these places have been areas for free thought to escape the confines of societal norms. However, even on these fringes, there are those who push the limits that civilization allows.

3509's life is a story of falling from grace. A talented genehacker who developed their first customized skin texture before they were sixteen, they were quickly snapped up by Skinesthesia after they developed a few Open Source mods. Thus began a meteoric rise to fame and stardom that reached its peak just before the Fall.

Then came the Fall, the devastation of Earth, and the ensuing paranoia that saw anyone with a highly abnormal morph persecuted. Some unusualness was okay, everyone liked the novel, but the outright bizarre forms of pre-Fall society were viewed with disdain as potential Exsurgenents in disguise. When mob witch-hunts began, it spelled the end of 3509's career.

The Fall was not the only reason for 3509's sudden decline, however. Other "extreme" modders and genehackers existed and many simply adapted to the new trends, but 3509 was a deva; their rise to fame had given them a highly inflated sense of self-worth and, with the market no longer demanding their creations, they could not accept the loss of their importance. Unable to accept that the glory days were over, fewer and fewer job openings came to them, and fewer clients were willing to return calls. As they exhausted their favours, 3509 gradually began to sink into obscurity.

3509 isn't sure how they came to Meltwater, really; their agent, who now has little time for them, simply found a job to shut them up and save a little face. Now, they work at the local body bank and design custom modifications as a side job, but few are willing to go to them for such things; all modifications 3509 creates are inevitably weird in appearance, even if their design is magnificently streamlined and efficient. Anyone who asks them to design to a certain aesthetic, disregarding their own, gets shouted out for trying to compromise the artistic vision.

One place that used to see 3509 rather regularly is the Candy Box, but they have since been banned, after an "incident" that all parties concerned signed non-disclosure agreements over and a significant amount of credits transferred to the proprietors. 3509 still lingers around the area, though, and frequently hounds the workers outside, offering to "make them beautiful". Thus far, no such hounding has approached a level to warrant police intervention, however.

3509's personal morph is a work of art, though whether anyone would consider it desirable or even merely tasteful is a matter of personal taste that few would attest to. Tall, lithe, and androgynous, it evokes the Uncanny Valley in the most distracting of ways, combined with more traditionally attractive features. The soft face has pupiless eyes that are as black and reflective as obsidian glass, and the skin is a gentle mixture of pink, white, and purple, transitioning evenly from one to the other without any apparent pattern. The smile is just a little too wide, the arms just a little too long, and the teeth far too sharp. The form is also asymmetrical, lending itself to guiding the eye flowingly. A single feminine breast adorns the right side of the chest, usually barely concealed when the atmosphere allows it, while the left side of the chest is tattooed with the owner's name. As if it should come at any surprise, 3509 carries both sets of genitals, but their male components more greatly resemble a hydraulic hose than anything human.

For the most part, 3509 is reclusive, rarely emerging from their room at the body bank to wander the settlement. When they do, it is with great effort, and they usually mutter derisively about people being small-minded. Invariably, these excursions are to gather materials for their maker or to purchase alcohol, the latter of which usually results in them stalking the Candy Box and waiting for its employees, to speak offers of glory in a stereo voice drawn from a twinned pair of voice boxes.

Dominick van der Laan

By Arenamontanus

Dom, 13 years old, is the son of three homesteaders down-valley and has been sent to Meltwater for proper schooling and socialization. Dad and mumda felt that it would do him good to be around more kids of the same age, while mom thought it would be enough to interact on-line - he was pretty helpful on the farm.

They might all have been right. Dom grew up tending to the broad sensor/actuator networks used on the farm and knows how to handle smart dust and spimes intuitively. He is also intensely curious about people - a result of living in the middle of nowhere. So he has become a bit of a Peeping Tom. He likes to watch people and figure out their behaviour without them noticing. While he is gradually getting the hang of being normally social, he finds it exciting to be in a place with so many people - each with intriguing secrets and quirks - to investigate.

Among the school-kids of Meltwater the quiet Dom is gaining popularity for his occasional leaks of interesting video clips showing adults they know of doing something they shouldn't. He is also learning how to couch his interest in terms of 'sousveillance' and 'community self-observation' in case some adults gets on his case.

Lisa Myslim

By Arenamontanus

Lisa is the daughter of HAMC engineers, a socially skilled 14 year old who is a natural networker among her peers. While most of her interests are pretty typical of a teenage girl - catching the eyes of that hunky hockey player Thad in the Dao Avalanches, getting access to the new NeoChicago simspace everybody is talking about, getting good grades so she can get out of Meltwater and gaining enough c-rep to get by - she also has a slightly more unusual secret ambition: she wants to become a lama.

A few years back she was lining various historical documentaries about Earth and came across descriptions of Tibet. She immediately decided she wanted to run a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. After all, the mountains of Mars would make a great location, right? Since then she has read up on Tibetan spirituality, learning the distinctions between Buddhism and Bön, as well as all sorts of trivia. Her parents indulge her - a youthful interest in some almost extinct Earth-religion is far safer than a desire to join the Extropian Mormons or hang out with Layabout kids. However, her interest doesn't seem to abate despite the high likelihood predictions the parenting software gave them. While Lisa doesn't exactly presume to be a reincarnated lama it would certainly fit, she admits to herself. Now she just needs to find enough people like her, get funding and the necessary education, and set up her dream monastery somewhere in Nereidum Montes.

Ron "Las Vegas" Caland

By Arenamontanus

Ron is planning to become the new drug kingpin of Meltwater. He has a fabber, he has a plan and his competition just disappeared - the future looks bright. Too bad he isn't bright himself.

Ron is originally from Byoct, a minor settlement in western Hellas. He ran away at an early age and has since then made his living among drifters, layabouts, small time criminals and down-on-their-luck nomads. He got his nickname from his annoying habit of whistling or miming some ancient song called "Viva Las Vegas" at the most inopportune moments - he is claiming it is some kind of neural damage, everybody else thinks it is just his annoying personality.

Recently Big Bayani Magsaysay, the operator of an illegal red market drug fabber in Silt Town, got caught by the militia and sent to the slammer. Ron heard about it, and showed up shortly after with a shiny new Zorn EssenV food fabricator in a truck. What it actually was was a seriously hacked pharmafab he got from the fabber underground, ready to make all sorts of drugs. Ron has already contacted Joseph Gauthier in the Gold Teeth Boys for setting up a profit-sharing venture, so protection, distribution and customers ought to be a solved problem. No risk of them stealing the fabber, since he has it keyed to his biometrics. He has downloaded the latest drug recipes from Conduit and the outer system nets. Time to just plug the fabber in and start making money.

There are a few flaws in the plan. Gauthier is far more experienced than Ron in how these things work, and will no doubt show the new guy who's the boss. After all, you can operate a fabber with broken teeth and ribs too. The drug recipes might also have a few problems - Ron doesn't know that much pharmacology and will be hard pressed to tell a real recipe for Kick from a fake with a few amusing side effects. There is also that debt to the fabber underground. As well as a bunch of Big Magsaysay's old friends.

Ron also has another problem he doesn't know about. Big Magsaysay had a girlfriend, somebody named Ghazala Attali. When Ron tipped off the police about the fabber operation to clear the way, she was not arrested (after all, there were nothing linking her to the fabber) and she seems to have left town. She has some of Big Magsayasy's files - including some surveillance footage showing Ron staking out the fabber operation while pretending to be a customer. Ghazala is angry and scared, but has not yet added things together. If she contacts some of her Layabout friends and hears about the new guy she might - and suddenly she has evidence she can hand to the Meltwater underworld showing Ron to be a police informant. Sure, it might not be up to legal standards, but poor Ron will not stand trial.

Other things

Waddell

By Arenamontanus

Waddell was a settlement in Cue Crater, 72 kilometers to the south-east. It was destroyed during the Fall when terraforming equipment from the Centauri Montes and Reull Vallis operations became corrupted and began to advance outwards, killing everyone.

Listening to the drunken boasts of militia members, the Battle of Waddell was a heroic affair: humans pitted against possessed terraforming machines and vicious nanoswarms, only winning thanks to dedication and cleverness. In reality it was a confused scramble to get out of the way, some brave scouts reporting that the advancing TITAN systems were slowing to build something in Waddell, and the decision to throw a terraforming nuke and all makeshift EMP-bombs that could be found at the apparent staging point. It looks like it succeeded, but nobody knows for certain whether the nuke made any real difference.

Waddell remains ruined, a few broken buildings half buried in the rocks from a landslide and the shifting sands of the crater. According to nanosafety inspectors the region is safe: when they checked they did not find any evidence of active infestation and no formal reason to declare it a quarantine area. Still, nobody ever goes there.

In Meltwater the general view is that there is something wrong with the place. People who have been there have had bad luck afterwards - Mary Ausonia collected a few zirconium rods from a nearby store a few years ago, and then had a very nasty accident. There are also claims that *someone* has been there - prospectors claim to have seen lights over at the crater, but there has been no radio transmissions or travel logs logged into the positional networks.

The Sandman

By Axel the Chimeric

All children have bogeymen. Even children who can visualize an AR overlay of their rooms when they close their eyes, and see in so many spectrums as to make darkness a non-issue, will leap at noises. Their minds conjure fearful creations that could not possibly exist... Could they?

The Sandman is one such bogeyman; a man made of ice, wrapped in a robe of Martian sand, who wears an antiquated breather mask. He is said to lurk in the deserts, engaging in all kinds of mischief and murder. Sometimes, he devours whole caravans in his cloak and sends them into terrible realms of nightmarish horror. At others, he is a mischievous prankster, who merely toys with prospectors by stretching out his icy limbs to incredible lengths to make them think he is an ice deposit. Mostly, he just eats children. It all depends on who tells the story.

Many children around Meltwater spoke of the Sandman, but far more now than they ever did before, since the tragic death of Chen Tao four years ago.

Chen Tao was a young boy of the age of three, the son of a Layabout and a local woman, born in the old fashioned way. One day, when playing with friends near his father's camp, Chen wandered off on his own. His friends gave mixed accounts of what came next, but what is clear is that Chen walked of his own accord into a strong-flowing river. It is presumed he was dragged under or taken by a large piece of ice and carried down stream, where was caught in the intake of a small hydroelectric generator and dragged into its ice-crusher. When the boy's body was recovered, his cortical stack had been too badly damaged to recover anything but a vapor, and, being so young and from such a poor family, Chen had not yet received backup insurance.

By far, the most disturbing part of the incident is the discovery in the aftermath. The last recorded thought in young Chen's mind was a single word, played over and over again in his calm voice.

Sandman.

Since that time, there has been an explosion of fear amongst many low-income residents of Meltwater. Though few dare voice it openly, many are fearful for their children's safety. They scoff at the notion that the death of Chen was anything more than an accident, but, at the same time, they secretly wonder just what led the child to walk into the dangerous waters. They calm themselves, suggesting he just walked off... And yet...

Amongst the Layabouts, the Sandman has become a figure in art, used as a sort of folk demon. Paintings of a tall, lean figure with a breather mask for a face, a robe of sand, and long, crystalline arms has begun to grace the walls of Layabout caves, with varying degrees of artisanship throughout. Few take it seriously, but there are those who will avoid touching or walking near such an image, and there is already a small but growing collection of grainy, blurry XPs that claim to contain actual footage of the Sandman, as well as one rather low quality horror XP based around the legend.

Equipment

SmartSkates

By Arenamontanus

As more aquifers are tapped, water ends up on the Martian surface. While the goal is to keep it liquid, it commonly freezes during the night or winter. This provides excellent skating opportunities in the low gravity and thin atmosphere.

SmartSkates are like normal diamond-bladed skates but are adaptive: the blades are equipped with adaptive microscale rollers that allow them to act like rollerblades on rough but hard surfaces. The skater can skate on a paved street as well as on ice. This has some limitations: soft surfaces like soil or gravel impair skating, and the skates cannot handle too large rocks.

Among Meltwater inhabitants skating on the valles floor is a fairly popular sport. There are a few informal hockey teams playing rough games against each other on the lake in Silt Town, to the amusement of the viewers (and profit of morph repair people).

[Cost: Low. Movement rate: 8/40]

SmartSkis

By Arenamontanus

Corresponding to SmartSkates, SmartSkis allow skiing over ice, snow, dust and sand. Again, the surface is composed of adaptive rollers that allow them to glide over any sufficiently even surface (and even drive the skier forward, in some models). An added benefit is that the SmartSkis prevent sinking into the ground, even when it is very loose like after a dust storm.

People in Meltwater and many of the nomads widely use SmartSkis when moving around on the smooth plains surrounding Niger and Dao Vallis. While vehicles are good for getting somewhere fast, skis are excellent for quiet ground-level reconnaissance.

[Cost: Low. Movement rate: 4/30, but gives -10 for rapidly changing direction.]