

The Underground Railroad



The Underground Railroad is a loose organization devoted to freeing enslaved persons. While there is great disagreement about whether for example indentured infugees working for Hypercorps are enslaved, there are sadly plenty of cases of clear ego-napping, slavery and thought control across the solar system. The UR wants to do more than talk and pass resolutions: it wants to emancipate the slaves ('zeks'), convince slavers that slavery doesn't pay and make the rest of transhumanity to sit up and take notice.

UR and Firewall have many similarities. Both are decentralized organizations encompassing people from all fractions and walks of life. Both aim for high goals, and are willing to get their hands dirty to achieve them. Both are moving in a grey zone of legality or outright regarded as terrorists, But where Firewall wants to keep to the shadows the UR wants the limelight. UR cells mount actions to find and free enslaved people, then make sure the results get public. While some cells are content to bring slavers to justice (if possible) others prefer to mete out harsh or poetic justice themselves.

The core of the UR is mainly composed of fierce Mercurials. While there are many enslaved humans, especially AGIs, infomorphs and uplifts are vulnerable – and particularly outraged by the plight of their brethren.

Methods

UR maintains an internal, anonymous network for discussion and information sharing similar to The Eye, in this case called The Big Wheel. Unlike the very paranoid investigations used by Firewall on new recruits the UR relies on more traditional intelligence. Recruits are often recruited because of their zeal (often from freed slaves), but any cell worth their salt will do their best to train them to become competent.

Different UR cells specialize on different functions. Some, signalers, do information gathering: from their contacts among other anti-slavery groups and elsewhere they pick up leads, following up what outsiders do not have the time, zeal or resources to examine. If they find good evidence

they distribute it to more action-oriented groups. Stockholder groups provide funding and resources, sometimes overlapping with stationkeepers who maintain safe hiding places, darknet nodes and provide misdirection. Alerters run the publicity and media angle, distributing evidence to news organizations and responding to public opinion. Conductors help emancipated slaves to integrate into society. Most importantly, “train crews” are the cells that contain operatives that do actual strikes at slavers. They sometimes have a backup “maintenance crew” to help them if things go wrong.

While the railway terminology is used, it is usually used tongue-in-cheek or formally – the UR knows that it is conspicuous and archaic. While a train crew leader might be called engineer, they are equally likely to be ‘boss’, ‘comrade’ or just ‘hey, you!’

A typical UR operation involves an investigator cell finding a good trace of slavery and a train crew taking on the mission to deal with it. The train crew may be supported by a stockholder cell and have a maintenance crew on standby. The train crew plans and executes an attack to free the ‘zeks’ (UR slang for slaves) and punish the slavers to the extent possible. If the mission succeeds the freed zeks are sent via darknet to a stationkeeper who (if they are lucky) has contact with alerters and conductors. Alerters and investigators debrief and interview them. Sometimes the zeks are directly released to the authorities (if the operation occurs in a “friendly” jurisdiction, especially if the testimony of the emancipated slaves will help affect public opinion and get the slavers convicted). In many cases, especially when the legality of the operation is messy, conductors may help the former slaves quietly integrate into society without official knowledge.

Not all UR crews go in guns blazing. To strike at a Night Cartel nest requires finesse rather than brute force, and some of the most successful operations have been cons rather than attacks. The Hunter Pack, for example, set up a plausible identity as ego-traders and fooled the Immo-5 Triad into trading their store of 74,000 egos for worthless AI forgeries. The Flare Action Group did a very successful infiltration and expose of working conditions in a Vulcanian energy-mine run by Prism Exergy (including truly moving and disturbing XP of working conditions) that led to the company executives being indicted and parts of the stock awarded to the workers as compensation.

Not all UR missions work out. When the Hunter Pack managed to free a few of the victims of Locamus Corporation on 4001 Ptolemaios and released their information to the Planetary Consortium the main concern was not the radically edited indentured laborers used in the shipyards, but the fact that Locamus was using largely unsecured cornucopia machines and proteus swarms. The legal proceedings have dragged out endlessly, acknowledging asylum for the freedmen but hardly denting the slippery legal department of Locamus. The Friends of Talmi fared even worse: in 8 AF they attempted to free the victims of the Jubilee Triad on 434 Hungaria and failed. Their egos ended up brainripped and the Triad successfully hunted down several UR members or sold key information to their enemies.

Just because UR wants to free slaves doesn’t mean it is nice to slaves. Some members are a bit too concerned about the plight of their species to care strongly for another species. Some members – a few former zeks - are less interested in freedom than vengeance. And during a mission when everything is going pear-shaped or afterwards when the alerters may be losing against crime network spin, there might be little time for politeness or niceties. Most zeks recognize a good chance when they see it, but that doesn’t stop the experience from being traumatic. And the UR

has bad experiences with the Stockholm Syndrome: some slaves have become so dependent on their masters (or directly brainwashed by them) that they cannot be trusted until they have been counter-brainwashed.

Relations

The relation to Firewall is complex. There are people who are members of both organisations, sometimes openly, sometimes secretly. While both agree that the other have admirable aims they are uneasy about split loyalties: Firewall doesn't want their operatives to get in trouble "just" because they free slaves on the side, and UR doesn't like the more Machiavellian Firewall schemes. They are in a sense competing for competent, can-do transhumans willing to give their all for a great cause. At the same time there are opportunities to share or "borrow" resources and information, and sympathetic proxies might let Firewall sentinels help out the UR in return of future reciprocal help.

The Planetary Consortium considers the UR a criminal organisation after several actions against entirely legally indentured workers on Mars. Conversely, the Barsoomians and the UR get along fine.

Autonomists in general support the UR, although some of the methods are perhaps unpalatably rough. Extropians tend to polarize strongly or be conflicted: freedom is essential, but a contract is a contract. The Titanians view the UR as interplanetary vigilantes, a symptom of the lawlessness of the solar system. They might do some good, but it is better to civilize the place.

There is no love lost between the Jovian Junta and the UR. The UR regards the Jovian Republic as a giantic slave camp and likes to thwart Jovian interests whenever possible. The Jovians regard the UR as subversives led by inhuman creatures bent on destroying mankind.

The UR also has had run-ins with Brinkers. The reason is that some Brinker habitats are closed: inhabitants are unable to leave, and sometimes subject to fairly strict rules. The UR has in some cases freed dissidents or forcibly opened Brinker habitats to the outside to allow emigration – with very mixed results. Many people may disagree with their society yet find it hard to abandon the certainties and social network they have grown up with.

It is not uncommon for unaffiliated people to perform actions in the name of UR, sometimes to its detriment. Naïve wannabees who want to prove their worth, extremists who like a cover for their deeds or even Firewall operations using an UR action as a cover. There is also some bitter rivalry between different UR groups. Some conflict is doctrinal: different views on what constitutes slavery or just how to treat slavers. Is it OK to just leave slavers empty-handed like the Hunter Pack often do, or should they be given a dose of their own medicine like Killbits did with the Youtalk Crew (who ended up as infomorphs in their own torture simulation, run forever on a small solar-powered computer in a high inclination orbit around the sun)? What about Pan Corporation's inclusion of religious traits into its uplifted apes – is that mental slavery or just making them as confused as humans? Other conflicts are personal; such as stk500 leaving the Kraken Rising group over their cephalopod racism – and taking with it a small fortune.

Terminology

Alerter	Cells or members dealing with the media, networking or PR aspect of abolitionism. Often interfacing with legit abolitionist groups or acting as the public face of UR.
Big Wheel	The UR distributed information system.
Booi	Manchu Chinese, "bondservant". Another term for slaves, sometimes used by the Triads.
Brainfucking T	he use of infomorphs for menial intellectual labor, often involving multiple forks and frequent resets. Some installations are "sharashkas", think tanks where captive experts are used for more advanced projects.
Conductor	Cell or member helping freedmen to integrate into society. Some have medical, psychological or psychosurgical expertise, others represent people in court or towards immigration authorities, others deal with false identities, smuggling and sneaking people into society. Some are just an attentive ear.
Crew	A cell of UR members.
Event recorder	Crew member tasked with documenting everything happening, providing it to Alerters or others.
Freedmen	Freed slaves. Sometimes freedbeings, freedminds or just freed are used.
Frenkel	A slave who has switched sides, actively working for the slaveholders (or even joining them).
Hotbox	A veteran UR member who has become overly fierce or violent.
Libertine	A freed slave. Somewhat of a joke, especially about a slave enjoying their freedom a bit too much.
Maintenance crew	Operative team standing by to help an operation. Many pairs of crews alternate between train and maintenance for each other.
Risalat	Controversial opinion that former zeks are better in some sense than non-zeks: their suffering has given them insights that should give them priority as UR members or that transhuman society owes them a debt.
Signaler	Cell or member investigating reports of slavery or other matters of UR interest.
Stationkeeper	Cell or member maintaining safehouses, darkcast nodes or other means of staying safe. Often work closely with conductors.
Stockholder	Cell or member who provides resources. Some run cover companies or organizations, others have lucrative jobs, embezzle funds or smuggle to provide what is needed.
Stockholmer	A zek suffering from Stockholm Syndrome, still under the sway of their former captors.
Train crew	Operative team for freeing slaves.
Transport	An operation to free zeks: "We need to transport some cargo from Ceres. Do you have suitable logistics?"
Zek	A prisoner/slave. From the term for Russian Gulag inmates.

Adventure possibilities

The UR could be the focus of a campaign just like Firewall – possibly with an overlap.

The UR frees a group of enslaved AGIs – including a very dangerous one. Maybe it is actually a copy of TITAN code or a seed AGI, or just an intelligence infected with the Exsurgent virus.

Firewall need to catch it, but UR is doing their best to hide and save the freedbeings.

An UR crew wants to infiltrate and free zeks on Xiphos, the Ultimate stronghold. But they realize they cannot do it alone. Hence they approach Firewall, suggesting a joint venture.

Extrasolar colonies use plenty of indentured labor, and some are likely in need of emancipation. But one in particular, named Talbot Titanium, has caught the interest of UR. TT seem to make use of an absurd number of infugees, yet there are absolutely no news or information coming back. Gatekeeper Corporation is keeping the lid on, stating that it is an “exclusive development zone”. The TT consortium appears to rake in money and rep without selling anything – what is going on? The crew must mount a gatecrashing expedition to TT to find out.

An UR group has kidnapped a prominent Planetary Consortium executive to show him the hard way the hardship his policies are causing. Other, more moderate UR groups want to prevent a PR disaster – or that the radicals get caught by the PC security corporations that are hunting them.

There has been a short distress message from the scum barge *l'Insurgent* – somebody is praying for help, begging for anybody to come and save them from the slavers. The UR wants to investigate. Is it possible that the autonomist scum are actually keeping somebody against their will? Have libertine simulations of de Sade gone out of control? Are there sinister experiments with mindcontrol afoot in the closed habitat? Or worse, is it a trap set by one of the enemies of UR?

Firewall agents are closing in on their target – a project developing dangerous technology that must be stopped carefully. They discover an UR crew preparing to strike to free the zeks that are on site. Should they try to join forces or stop them? Attempting to free the zeks would endanger the operation to stop the threat, but can the sentinels leave them in harms way? The UR would like to expose the whole situation, but that may reveal too much about the tempting and dangerous technology. The whole situation could end up as a three-side fight.