

Crimes Against History

Modern Time

The Paradox Era

203 years ago

Over the previous century or so the influx of new ideas on the Homeworld has led to the creation of a variety of new technologies, many of them cross-breedings of House technology and (most startling, for the old guard) alien notions as to how technology should work. Several of the Houses experiment with machine intelligences, essentially "robots", devices considered utterly vulgar until now. Although these machines fall out of favour very very quickly, the concept of "servitor machines" refuses to go away, and some even suggest that timeships - which can be given any physical shape, the exterior being a mere gateway to the internal dimensional mass - should be given hominid, sentient forms. As timeships are already intelligent in non-humanoid ways, however, the idea hardly seems practical.

The Houses have never been noted for their imagination. Up until this point, every generation of timeship has been identified by number, the most recent ships generally being designated 88-Forms. But the technological revolution results in several Houses attempting to graft new systems into the timeships' internal architectures, resulting in endless mutations and a numbering system which makes increasingly little sense. The ruling Houses can just about tolerate ships with designations like 106-Form, 128b-Form, 161.55-Form, n+x-Form and pi-R-760-Form, but when the system gets so out of control that some of the latest vessels are designated 1056771z-Form the authorities decide to act. All timeships of the latest generation are re-designated 89-Form, regardless of any cross-bred elements they might carry.

It's a sign that the archons are prepared to step in to stop the new science getting out of hand. From this point on, a much closer check will be kept on the development of the timeships.

201 years ago

A new head of the Presidency is elected to lead House society. Something of a surprise choice, she promises a more open style of government and a more humanitarian approach, though it's generally thought that humanitarian is just a synonym for "interventionist". It's thought that her election is due to her field experience in the outside universe, the ruling Houses feeling that in the wake of new threats from the Spiral Politic it might be wise to have someone in charge who's used to dealing with the lesser species. The election is incredibly close, and the interventionist lobby is suspected of pulling strings, but as a personality this 411th head is on the whole popular. (Nonetheless, over the decades her approach will become far more ruthless and desperate than her inauguration speech might suggest.)

Perhaps the most telling thing, however, is the rate at which the Homeworld's getting through its leaders. Whereas in the old days a Presidency could hold office for well over a thousand years - or far longer, in the early days of the civilisation - in the present era the heads of House society have a tendency to survive for mere decades. And that, of course, just fuels the rumours of an imminent

catastrophe.

The new Presidency hardly gets off to an auspicious start. Mere months after the inauguration, the Great Houses become aware of a temporal crisis on eighteenth century Earth, during which certain forces are released which could potentially threaten the smooth-running of causality: but of course, this is nothing unusual. Problems like this occur all the time, as small, awkward lumps of history pop up in the timelines of the lesser worlds, and as usual an agent of one of the Houses is on hand to deal with the situation.

But this time things are slightly different. Although the forces in question are contained, the incident briefly sends out shockwaves which stretch as far as the Homeworld. During the crisis the head of the Presidency suffers a nervous spasm, a brief period of insanity which causes her to suffer appalling visions not unlike those of the 406th head... and then spontaneously release several hundred inmates of the prison-world.

Over two centuries after being incarcerated, Grandfather Paradox is once again free, and this time knows there's no point even returning to the Homeworld. In an act of truly legendary self-mutilation, the Grandfather slices off one arm with a rusty knife, to remove the criminal tattoo imprinted there - a biological link to the Homeworld - and thus sever the last connection to the other Houses. It's at this point that the Grandfather begins to form a stable organisation, or cult, now naming it Faction Paradox rather than House Paradox as a demonstration of its political ambitions in the outside universe. The ruling Houses broadly state that no member of Faction Paradox should ever set foot on the Homeworld, although as the death penalty isn't an option and exile is considered to be in bad taste it's not clear what they intend to do with anyone who breaks this ruling.

Once this has been achieved, the Grandfather simply vanishes. It's said that the founder of Faction Paradox wilfully erases all personal traces from the continuum, leaving no record of ever having existed on the Homeworld, leaving no remnants in the physical universe at all other than a carefully-selected group of followers and their relics.

(It's notable that the crisis on Earth which causes all this occurs in the late eighteenth century, at the same time that the early voodoo-cults are developing there. There does, at least aesthetically, seem to be a connection between early voodoo methodology and the ritual of Faction Paradox: in the same way that the voodoo-cults deliberately embrace the death and corruption endemic in the West Indies during the late 1700s, Faction Paradox takes a quite definite pride in confronting the Great Houses with the notion of their own mortality. The very word paradox has the same effect on a member of the Houses that the sight of a skull-and-crossbones might have on the mind of an eighteenth century human being, but whether the Faction informs the voodoun, or the voodoun inform the Faction, is a matter of debate. Also, it's unclear whether there's a direct link between the brief crisis on Earth and the Faction's "lifting" of the Eleven-Day Empire from 1752.)

200 years ago

The original birth-House of Grandfather Paradox collapses, following the long-term insanity of its members. As the term House refers to both a bloodline and a physical location, the word "collapses" is well-chosen in this context.

Society hardly notices, the old House having long since fallen into disrepute and obscurity. Only a few members of the bloodline survive, although the House has one last legacy to leave the Homeworld: the civilisation witnesses its first natural childbirth in ten-million years when an alien biological unit, brought to the Homeworld by the House against all usual protocol, mates with one of the Homeworld's

servitor-classes. For the ruling elite this is the latest in a long line of unpleasant surprises, but many begin to question whether introducing alien biomass to the birthing-process is such a bad idea. These few years see more change in the structure of House society than most of the previous millennia.

(The survivors of the collapsed bloodline plan to build themselves a new House, though records are vague as to what happens next. It's generally believed that the survivors die out in the difficult years which follow... but their disappearance from history occurs at exactly the same time as the rise of Faction Paradox, the Grandfather's own new line. The two may or may not be connected. It merely needs to be pointed out that traditionally, the Faction does have a habit of recruiting members from among the homeless and dispossessed.)

188 years ago

The Great Houses finally begin to realise that something appalling is about to happen to the Spiral Politic. Though details are at first unclear, House agents in the field report encounters with other House agents from the future - itself a sign that the usual rules of causality are no longer in effect - a future in which the Homeworld is engaged in a desperate war with an enemy who has the ruling Houses outgunned on all fronts. The visions of the mad, suicidal 406th head are turning out to be true... at least in part. The name and nature of the enemy, however, remain unclear. The Houses begin to wonder whether one of the lesser species might be preparing to usurp the Oldest Civilisation, while a few consider the possibility of a new breed of Yssgaroth. On the other hand, many still find the notion of a new war inconceivable and refuse to take the information seriously.

The head of the Presidency instructs her people to put most of their resources into identifying this future menace, and new research is carried out into timeship technology, in the hope that better weapons can be grown into the ships' systems. This concept of "cross-fertilisation" reflects the debate over the natural childbirth issue, and much to the distaste of the old guard research begins into the possibility of returning to a more dynamic sex/death system. Membership of Faction Paradox grows accordingly.

c. 175 years ago

Faction Paradox begins to build up its influence in history, deliberately setting out to alarm and intimidate the Great Houses, recruiting members from the lesser species and scandalising the Homeworld further by granting these recruits equal status with its followers from the Houses (even giving them the archaic title for junior members of a House, Cousin). The Faction makes its first attempts to corrupt and recruit certain notable agents of the ruling Houses, and begins experimenting with biological weaponry, almost mocking the research ordered by the Presidency. The Faction also begins building a homeworld for itself, a monstrous black parody of the original Homeworld, and as ever there's more than a little gallows-humour in the Faction's actions... at least at first. Its members seem to feel that their primary purpose is to goad the ruling Houses, and the protocols which the ruling Houses are supposed to uphold.

On the Homeworld, the increasing War anxiety is the perfect breeding-ground for the Faction's own brand of paranoia even though the Faction's agents are technically forbidden to set foot there. For many of Faction Paradox's new recruits, the thinking is that when the Homeworld and its unseen enemy wipe each other out then the Faction can emerge triumphant: though whether this was the Grandfather's plan is another matter. Thus the Faction, again mimicking the ruling Houses, slowly becomes a far more aggressive force.

Meanwhile, the notion of natural childbirth becomes increasingly acceptable on the Homeworld itself. The first generation of natural births arrives, the head of the Presidency tactfully failing to mention that these increased numbers are largely necessary because of the coming War. Words like “mother” and “father”, long-since considered obsolete, return to popular usage. And as the only House already employing these terms is Faction Paradox, the Faction seems somehow justified in its beliefs.

146 years ago

On the Homeworld, certain other moves have been made in anticipation of the new War in Heaven. Eight colony worlds have been crypto-formed into cloneworlds of the Homeworld, as decoys as well as bolt-holes, the notion presumably being that each of the Nine Homeworlds can be transported to a different location in order to distract the enemy. Nobody points out that the mad 406th head of the Presidency planned exactly the same thing. In addition, various once-outlawed weapons are assembled and readied on the current head's orders.

What's notable about the cloneworlds is that according to the final orders of the current Presidency, they're entirely off-limits to the rest of the Homeworld, the agents who maintain them being given strict instructions never to have any contact with the ruling Houses. The official reason for this is that the cloneworlds have been laced with the history and culture of House society, and that they're to be kept sterile in case back-up copies of the information are required: but this leads many to question whether the inhabitants of the other eight Homeworlds know their worlds are forgeries, or whether they all believe themselves to be living on the original.

The head of the Presidency retires from service at this point, her final fate unknown. It's suggested in some quarters that she may have become the head of the Presidency on one of the other Homeworlds, presumably to complete the illusion that her world is the original. Other rumours suggest that even she might not realise she's been moved to a fake. Without her the Homeworld is thrown into some confusion, as various political factions debate the future of civilised society. Though some wish to follow the old Presidency's preparations for the War, many Houses still hold that the War is an impossibility, and refuse to take any further precautions- at least until there's some evidence as to what this supposed enemy might be. Perhaps surprisingly, the interventionists are among those who argue against the possibility of warfare. Unopposed for the last few centuries, their view is that any potential enemy can easily be neutralised before it becomes a real threat.

For now, it's the nay-sayers who win out. The new head of the Presidency is nondescript and obstructionist, and demonstrates a complete inability to reign in the rising paranoia of the Houses.

126 years ago

One of the original renegades from the broken generation of the Houses (born c. 1,076 years previously) unexpectedly returns to the Homeworld, having spent much of the intervening time consorting with the lesser species across the Spiral Politic. His return is particularly surprising given the number of crimes for which he's wanted. However, he claims to bring with him the first solid evidence of the future enemy, an enemy which - as he explains to a closed session of the ruling Houses - even the interventionists don't have a hope of neutralising.

Most of the House elite are convinced. The Presidency itself isn't, and from this point on becomes more obstructionist than ever, almost as if it's terrified of facing the facts. To accept the evidence as true would, after all, be an acknowledgement that the entire Presidency is built on a faulty premise.

The Homeworld is not eternal.

c. 100 years ago

One of the many worlds on which Faction Paradox attempts to spread its influence is Dronid, ancient home of the (failed) rival Presidency. Dronid is a perfect site for the Faction: its culture is already littered with time-active relics of the Great Houses, and the natives have become partly dependent on the salvaged technology. Safeguards left behind by the Houses ensure that the locals are unable to abuse this technology to too great a degree, but working covertly the Faction manages to build itself a powerbase on the world, not so much a cult as an underground criminal organisation. (Dronid is a magnet for unsavoury technology-hungry species, and as a result the planet's political landscape revolves around off-world criminal groups. Dronid is one of the most unashamedly corrupt worlds in the whole of the sentient continuum.)

Eighty-six years ago

In a desperate, last-ditch effort to prove that the future War is a myth and that no enemy can possibly exist, the head of the Presidency himself leaves the security of the Homeworld as part of an expedition designed to colonise the stretch of the Spiral Politic which (according to the returning renegade's information, at least) forms the enemy's current home. But if the act is designed to re-enforce the status quo, then it's flawed from the very beginning. The Nine Homeworlds aside, House society has never, ever done anything as vulgar as setting up off-world colonies.

Nor is the project a success. The expedition never returns. The remains of the Homeworld's leader are returned to the ruling Houses in a condition which has still never been satisfactorily explained, and House society receives its first, conscious, deliberate message from the enemy.

It becomes painfully clear that War is a probability, if not an inevitability. The hardline interventionists suddenly fall silent, abandoning their obstructionist stance and making their own, covert, preparations. The ruling Houses themselves, robbed of yet another Presidency, turn to the only individual they can for guidance: the renegade who first brought them proof of the enemy's existence, the only individual on the Homeworld who has first-hand experience of what the future might hold, despite his former criminal tendencies.

So begins the final Pre-War Presidency, with the renegade acting as adviser to an increasingly panicked House elite.

c. Seventy years ago

The interventionists know full well what the prospect of War means. They understand that in a cross-dimensional conflict, a defeat for the Homeworld won't just mean their own demise but their complete eradication from history. For a culture which is a form of history, the thought is appalling. The interventionists, who still regard themselves as the elite of the elite, decide to take extreme action. They intentionally remove themselves from the timeline, but under controlled circumstances, possibly employing the same techniques which the Grandfather of House Paradox used in order to retire from history. Cut off from the main body of causality, these elitist interventionists become the Celestis, their intention being to observe the War from outside the Spiral Politic.

From this point on they begin to see themselves as the new gods, as intangible, ineffable powers for whom history is a mere spectacle. Now purely conceptual in form, their only true intervention in the Spiral Politic is the acquisition of followers from among the lesser species: like all gods, without followers they have no mass and no meaning. To the rest of the universe, however, they're just impotent ghosts who play little real part in the War to come.

(Naturally, the date of the interventionists' departure is approximate by its very nature. All record of their removal from causality was, of course, excised along with the interventionists themselves. All that's known is all that can be surmised.)

Sixty-nine years ago

The Presidency finally sanctions research into the feasibility of an organic/timeship hybrid, or at least, a timeship capable of sentient thought in the hominid sense of the word sentient. It's now known, thanks to what little data can be gleaned from the Homeworld's future, that such a ship is possible... although the technologies involved in timeship construction are far too subtle for an artificially intelligence to be simply bolted on to a standard model. The most recently-created timeships are still 89-Forms, but as this new project is intended to see the creation of a truly new generation the ruling Houses decide that the experimental model will be known as a 101-Form.

The 101-Form is not a success. The details of the experiment are quickly concealed by the ruling Houses, but it's rumoured that the construction is such a monstrosity that it barely qualifies as a timeship at all, and that it's utterly beyond the control of its creators. As the ship's existence is officially denied, its ultimate fate remains unknown. Logic dictates that it should have been destroyed, although some claims maintain that the 101-Form was too difficult to kill and instead imprisoned at a secret location, while others hold that it simply escaped into the outside universe.

Whatever the truth, the Houses are clearly a long way from being able to engineer a sentient timeship from scratch. With the War now visible on the temporal horizon, the Presidency has to ask itself whether the new time-technology can really be perfected before the cataclysm. In the meantime, ordinary timeships are equipped for warfare, and another rubicon is crossed when the Presidency gives orders to specially engineer and mass-produce timeships for the purposes of battle. Thus the 90-Form military vessels come into service.“ Even in the prehistoric war with the Yssgaroth, timeships were never used in combat, at least not in open conflict. The Houses' agents, too, are adopting a policy of whatever's necessary, is right”. Many of those answerable to the Presidency, sent out on research missions to the outside universe, are not just pragmatic but positively amoral.

Sixty-two years ago

By this point Faction Paradox is itself becoming corrupt, turning into a purely political organisation dedicated to the acquisition of power, mainly through criminal means. Many in the group, particularly the younger members, are far more brutal and far less philosophical than the Grandfather's original followers. Or perhaps it's just a trick of the absence-of-memory.

On Dronid, the Faction Paradox contingent is typical of the corrupted order. The Faction's powerbase is nothing more than a local criminal network, led by a series of overseers who often have only a minimal understanding of Faction lore. It's at this point that a new criminal syndicate arrives on Dronid from off-world, and although the heads of this organisation remain unseen its ground agents are members of the lesser species with no known access to time-technology. On Dronid the syndicate

refers to itself as the Incorporate, the ruling body. With the Faction sinking fast, the Incorporate's followers rapidly develop their own local powerbase, and in a daring move execute the Faction's leader on the world. The result is a decade-long gang war.

Meanwhile, on its own makeshift homeworld, Faction Paradox's penchant for biological/ technological weaponry is starting to pay off. Biodata viruses are engineered which can, if properly applied, infect a victim and re-write his or her biology retroactively, turning the subject into a Faction agent from birth. It's unquestionably impressive, but some of the Faction's upper ranks - including Father Morlock, most talented of the young generation of biological armourers - begin to dwell on the possibility of introducing such a virus to an entire ecosystem...

Sixty years ago

The Faction is by now involved in drug deals, slave deals, and sundry sordid underworld arrangements across the Spiral Politic. They also begin peddling time-technology to the lesser species, with little regard for the consequences. Such is the Faction's reputation that the Mothers and Fathers are starting to think of themselves as untouchable.

They aren't. The Great Houses, thinking of the War and fast becoming paranoid, crack down and wipe out the Faction's homeworld. There are survivors, but the Faction's back is broken. Those members who escape settle themselves in the Eleven-Day Empire, which finally becomes a fully-fledged community rather than just a clearing-house. From this hidden base of operations they once again begin to send out feelers, setting up cabals around history and slowly infiltrating other societies, but this time it's a matter of survival rather than greed. With few resources available, contact with the other remaining Faction outposts - e.g. Dronid - suffers. The new wave of Faction Paradox has been taught a lesson.

This time, when the Faction begins infiltrating other worlds it's careful to ensure that the Great Houses aren't alerted. It learns to plant itself in the cultures of other species, rather than flooding worlds with its own agents and technology. More and more emphasis is put on ceremony instead of weaponry. This policy has an effect on the Homeworld, too, as over the next few years a number of officially-outlawed cults spring up among the younger members of the Houses. Many of these cults believe themselves to be doing the will of the Grandfather, although most of their members are just bored newbloods picking up on the War anxiety.

Nonetheless, the skull becomes an increasingly common symbol amidst the spires of the Homeworld's capital. (By now even the elder members of the Houses have been fooled into thinking that the rites of the Faction are ancient rites, and that the Grandfather's knowledge dates back to the dawn of time. In truth it's the method of the Faction to be adaptable, and to wear whatever clothing suits its purposes... the organisation has invented most of its heritage from scratch.)

Fifty-six years ago

The end of the last Pre-War Presidency, and the end of the last true Presidency to date. The former-renegade-cum-adviser, who's done so much to prepare the Homeworld over the past few decades, now becomes the official head of House society: however, he refuses to take on the Presidency's official titles or vestments of office, claiming that the imminent War Era will require a different kind of leadership. He takes on the title of War King, a title which - with its military overtones, and its suggestion of an inherited monarchy on a world which still distrusts the notion of family - would have

been unthinkable just a century or so earlier.

It's the War King who paves the way for a genuine House Military, gradually replacing the old, inadequate ceremonial guard, though there's some doubt that the new wave of soldiery will be ready in time for the conflict. And despite his more pro-active outlook, the War King maintains the tradition of refusing to allow the Houses contact with the rest of the Nine Homeworlds.

Fifty-five years ago

Of course, there have always been other time-aware societies in the Spiral Politic: many of the lesser species have acquired a limited form of temporal engineering, although the Great Houses have always been quite certain that such technology will have no significant impact on the structure of causality. Now, however, things are beginning to change. The War King introduces the possibility of making alliances with other time-active cultures. Although the Houses should technically have access to any point in these cultures' histories, by entering into a pact the Houses might theoretically tie their own "present" to the "present" of one of the lesser species.

The suggestion comes about simply because it's already beginning to happen, without the Homeworld's permission. In some parts of the causal map, the histories of certain posthuman sects (which is to say, the bloodlines, cross-breeds and sub-species descended from vulgar humanity) are starting to intersect with the history of the Great Houses. It's unclear whether this is an inevitable side-effect of a universe entering War-time, or whether the enemy is already making alliances of its own, tying the posthumans to the War in order to turn them into troops against the Houses.

Whatever the truth, several posthuman groups are beginning to scavenge time-technology from the higher powers, a reason for concern in itself. Agreements, if not formal treaties, become the order of the day. And at the same time, the Homeworld begins to realise that there are some areas of the Spiral Politic which it simply can't monitor, almost as if the history there isn't "their" kind of history any more."

Fifty-two years ago

Once again, agents of the Great Houses find themselves caught up in their own futures. As the War King continues to make preparations across the span of the Spiral Politic, a rare combination of factors sees one of the Houses' agents come into contact with the next generation of time-technology by sheer accident. Perhaps as a response to the coming War, one unusually aware timeship - an old, obsolete, but nonetheless unusually well-travelled model - has decided to cross-breed with a human subject of its own volition. The inevitable result of this, according to the ruling Houses' information, will be the first hominid-sentient timeship: the very thing the ruling Houses have been trying to engineer since the 101 experiment. The Homeworld watches the progress of this cross-breeding with interest.

(What the Houses don't at first realise is that the timeship in question has used a combination of technologies to perform this cross-breeding operation. Some of the methods involved actually have their roots in the procedures of Faction Paradox, while other elements have been taken from the future, from an era after the beginning of the War. The cross-breeding is therefore something of a paradox in itself.)

Back on Dronid the forces of the Faction have fallen into disarray, with the Incorporate gaining

complete dominance and the Eleven-Day Empire unable to assist. A series of half-insane Faction leaders doesn't help, but what nobody yet suspects is that a greater story is playing itself out here. The Incorporate is in fact an intelligence-gathering arm, a feeler, for the enemy the Great Houses are to face in their War. (It's possible that the Incorporate may even be the first physical manifestation of the enemy, although acting under a false identity and concealing itself behind followers from the lesser species. It might explain the choice of name.)

As the Homeworld begins to understand this, an agent of the Houses is planted on Dronid, and local politics is manipulated so that he becomes the Faction's local leader. The ruling Houses are using Faction Paradox, albeit a particularly weakened part of Faction Paradox, to achieve their own ends. It's a sure sign of the Faction's waning influence. But most importantly, for the next year the War is to be fought on Dronid in microcosm, a model of the cosmic gang-war to come.

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