

XENOMORPH

by John and Philippa Hughes

Background Briefing

RSV Shackleton

csiro-billington deep space research station





Darkness

We begin with darkness, expanding and eternal and complete.

We fall, tumbling through nothingness, a vast slow motion ballet. The darkness is flecked with minute dust-like white specks: cold and small and unimaginably distant.

With time (though what is time here, on the Rim, on the Outer Veil, at the *eschatos*?) two such specks grow steadily larger, assuming the form of incandescent spheres—twin binary stars. The first is a small yellow star, its lesser companion a red dwarf, locked so close that they touch, exchanging the raw gaseous stuff of creation. A scattered family of planets fall sullenly about the pair, balls of gas and ice and rock.

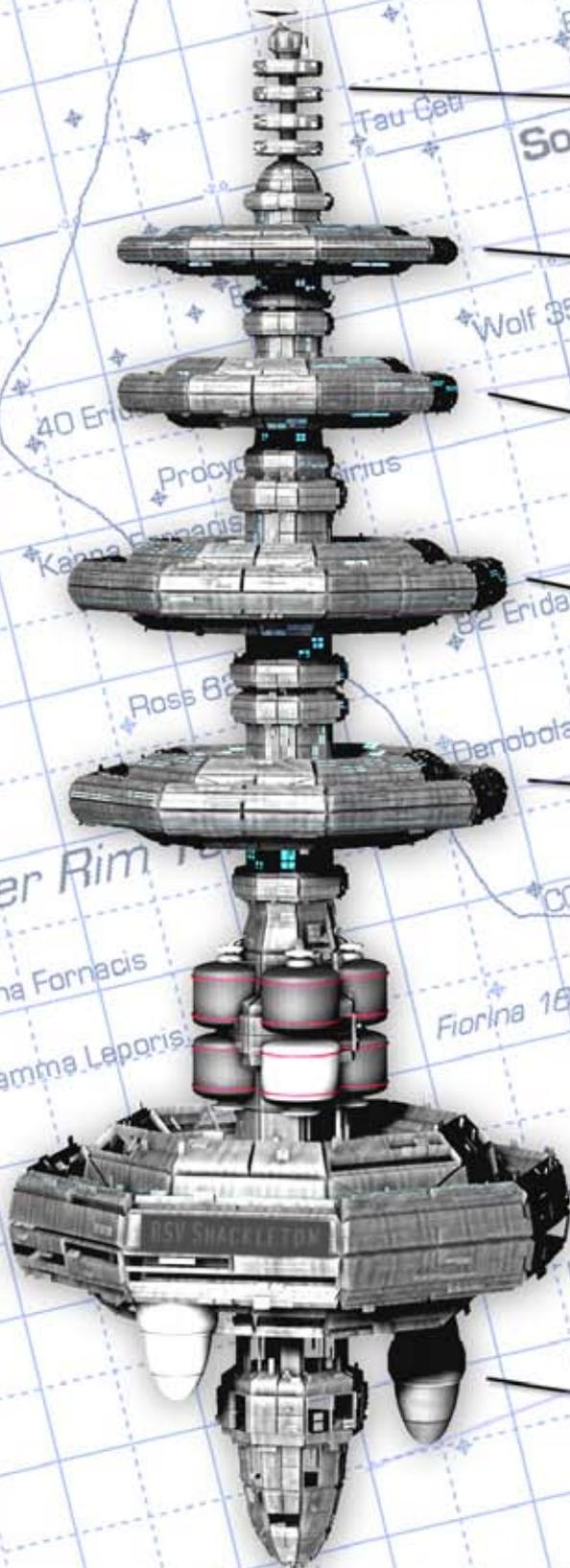
Now some animals are impudent enough to mark infinity, to name the measures of their world, to scratch names on the wall of time. So for the brief life of a species, a mere heartbeat when measured against the lifetimes of galaxies, these unassuming stars have names: **Erikidu Alpha and Beta, (UNGC 42783 α/β).**

The system was first mapped by an automated probe from the European Federation, back when states and nations still meant something. '**Fiorina (Fury) 161**' is the second planet of five; and the only one to nurture indigenous life. It is a barren rock world of extremes: searing forty hour days that boil surface water, and gelid nights that coat the storm-weathered rocks with carbon ice frozen out of the atmosphere itself. Indigenous life-forms are few: hardy lichen-like plants and tiny insectoid 'lice'. Life's evolution and survival here is a miracle, but life is always a miracle.

Survival is always a miracle.

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Galactic Quantum Density Mapping Array

Toorak
Executive, Command Et Control, Secure Research

Kilda
Health and Recreation, Voting share crew

Fitzroy
Research, Recreation, Voting share crew

Collingwood
Biochemical, Engineering, Non-voting share crew

Geelong
Reactors, Industrial, Asteroid Smelting

Port Melbourne
Main airlocks, Customs Et Cargo



Shackleton

High above its turbulent atmosphere, Fiorina 161 plays uncaring host to a recent intruder: RSV *Shackleton*, **csiro-billington's** deep space research station.

Shackleton comprises a series of cylindrical levels radiating from a central hub. Its core of metal refinery and life support was shipped across six parsecs from Gateway. The material for its further construction was mined from local asteroids, the ore smelted in an atomic furnace at the station's base.

Established now for eight years, *Shackleton* is a typical orbital research station—labs and workshops, docks and storage areas, offices, crew quarters, gymnasiums, recreation areas, research bays and life support modules. It is home to eight hundred and twenty Company staff and their children, plus a small contingent of artificial persons: some fourteen hundred in total. It is overseen by **MOTHER (MU/TH/UR cb7500)** an autonomous artificial intelligence. A typical Company station, *Shackleton* is strictly hierarchical in both layout and operation, and is organised by occupation level and voting share, from the executive C&C in **Toorak** dome through the **Kilda** and **Fitzroy** and **Collingwood** hubs to the machinery and decommissioned furnaces of **Geelong**. The legal and organisational authority of the station Executive is absolute. Security is paramount: there is little outside contact, except through highly censored and dated media feeds.

Station personnel are highly trained professionals, a space-going elite. Everyone multi-tasks, everyone has two or more jobs. Most are on extended three or five year contracts.

Shackleton is a Company station. The Company, the Corporation, 'Kiy-ro' —**csiro-billington environments**. Kiy-ro — 'Greening your galaxy', 'Tomorrow's worlds, today'. The Company says that *Shackleton's* prime purpose is astrophysics research, scanning the cosmos for distortions in the quantum weave of nothingness. This may even be partially true.

Drop Bears

Part of the *Shackleton* security unit comprises an informal group known as the Drop Bears. In the station's construction phase they were vacuum welders and construction techs, performing dangerous EVA and frame assembly work. With construction complete, many of those who signed up for a second *Shackleton* rotation joined station security.

The Drop Bears are known for their larrikin spirit (muted since the recent death of security officer and Drop Bear Steven 'Ripper' Pearson in an airlock accident), and fierce group loyalty.

<<FEAR NO

<

<<UNCHAIN YOUR MIND>>

<<PEOPLE BEFORE PROFIT>>

<<A SHARE FOR ALL>>

<<DATA FREES - FREE DATA>>

<<ONE LIFE>>

Slow War

The Company is at war. It is a slow war, a careful war, but no less deadly for that. It is a secret war that must be carefully screened from outsiders and shareholders. The enemy is a rival corporation, **Weyland-Yutani**, together with its pawns the United Americas, the Colonial Marines, and the Interstellar Commerce Board.

Once power resided in nations, with their armies and diplomats and propagandists. But nations have failed and withered away. They are empty husks. All that remains are the Corporations. Corporations are the present. Corporations are the future.

On *Shackleton*, the slow corporation war has entered a deadly phase. Two hundred days ago, a **Weyland-Yutani** secret surveillance vessel was detected close to the station. There was a brief but expensive exchange of missiles. The spy vessel was destroyed.

The incident never happened. The incident had to be cleansed. All evidence had to be removed, even if it meant scouring every tiny scrap of twisted glass and metal from a quarter of a million cubic kilometres of vacuum, proof against the search and investigation that would surely come.

Shackleton Executive initiated effective martial law, total lockdown. As the slow weeks progressed, paranoia and suspicion rose to fever pitch. External communications were cut entirely for weeks at a time. There were rumours of enemy escape capsules, of survivors taken aboard *Shackleton*, even of *Shackleton* personnel shuttles that never made it back to Gateway.

The station has become a hell hole of low morale and fearful paranoia. Several personnel have been removed from active duty.

Tokens of frustration and dissent are beginning to manifest. They are all relatively low level – graffiti and anonymous electronic messages, hacked reports and false breakdown alerts. Executive has named these outbreaks evidence of an active terrorist cell with considerable technical expertise - traitors and spies. Station security has been tasked with tracking down the cell.

*“Survival
is always a
miracle”*

Life During Wartime

Shackleton is at war. Survival is order and hierarchy and routine. Survival means efficiency. Survival means obedience.

Outside is vacuum. Outside, the universe. The immensity of isolation empties your humanity, strips away all colour, all spontaneity of emotion. Your world is a constant fight against clinical depression, outlined in flickering blue-grey fluorescence.

Static all channels.

This is a secure command. Every breath and heartbeat is monitored.

You dream of open landscape and wake fitfully, drenched in sweat. The stress is constant. You are always waiting for the next alarm, the next systems failure, the next breakdown of mind or flesh or heart.

This is a command in lockdown, a command at war.

But you are not warriors.

You constantly check for shuttle arrivals or non-corporate pulse bands, desperate for the smallest byte of contact with loved ones greenside. You watch your bank balance rise and try to convince yourself that somehow it's worthwhile.

Time moves too slowly: an hour can be agony, a shift an eternity. Everyone counts down the days till the end of their rotation.

RSV Shackleton.

Life during wartime.



Mission Call

In the dark hours after general curfew, station security control is bathed in shadow.

Quiet all decks. Shackleton's tiny steel-enclosed world of some fourteen hundred fragile souls lies sleeping. A few rest peacefully, others not. All dream. Perhaps even MOTHER dreams.

With a soft repeated beeping, the watch officer's screen awakens to life. Down-scrolling letters reflect in the glass of a space helmet.

MOTHER calls, cryptic and insistent. Something is amiss.

MOTHER has something that needs doing.

On *Shackleton* a woman is sleeping. On *Shackleton* a woman awakes.

In the darkness, someone is weeping.

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PHENOMENON 2012

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ARE WE READY FOR DROP BEAR?

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