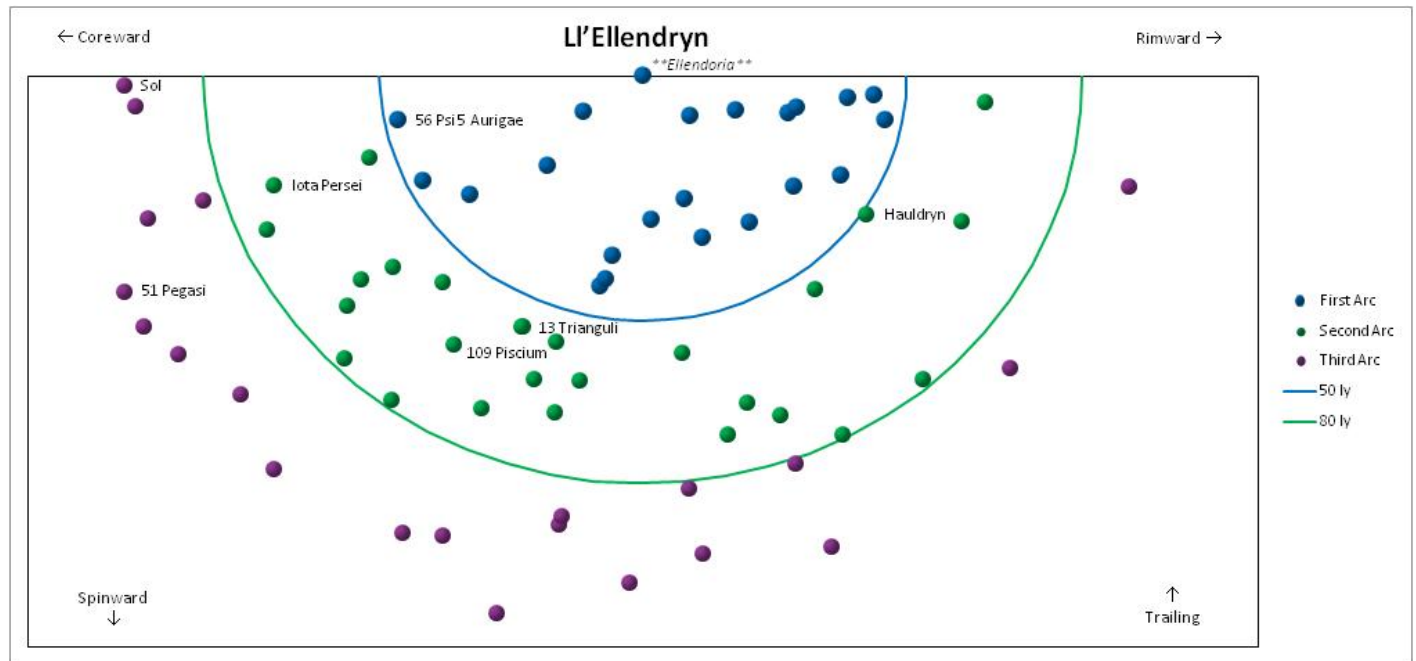


And Now for Some Science Fiction ...

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I'm a scientist, and it seems to me that if I'm going to write some fiction, it's likely to be science fiction. Like duh ...

OK, I'm probably wrong about that. Who knows (and I haven't researched it), maybe most scientists write romance or horror or something else that is totally unrelated to their career interests. However, I have noticed that a lot of marine biologists write some flavor of science fiction (including best selling author Diana Gabaldon).

Personally, I like science fiction because it allows me to create a universe in which I can philosophize endlessly about those things in this universe which drive me crazy. I get to make my own soap box, stand on it, and preach away all day without having anyone kick my feet out from under me (although I'm sure I will get critical reviews if I ever have a book that makes it to publication). All the while, my characters can have crazy adventures in wildly imaginative locales, and readers can be blissfully unaware of any of my philosophical ponderings. Sounds kind of seditious to me, but hey, isn't that something that lots of writers do – think of George Orwell and *1984*.

So I'm writing a series of science fiction novels based on an "alternate" reality taking place in the Orion Spur of the Milky Way Galaxy (which is our home region of space). Some plot teasers:

- while definitely in the realm of speculative fiction, most of the science in my writings is actually based on currently proposed scientific hypotheses (so not really as far out as it might seem).
- the region of space in which the story takes place was colonized by groups of closely-related peoples during a period of time spanning approximately seven million years. These people are more-or-less human (some more, some less).
- the main characters are hermaphroditic. What can I say? I'm a biologist. I like the idea of working with characters that don't have to be defined by the typical male and female stereotypes of our culture today.
- the homeworld of the main characters is orbiting a sun that is quickly becoming a red giant. This produces effects somewhat similar to what Earth might experience should global warming continue unabated. Life on a dying planet is hard, even with significant technological assists ...
- there's a little bit of something for everyone – adventure, exploration, angst, love, intrigue, rebellion, wilderness, fights, and the struggle to do the right thing.

And here are a couple of excerpts:

... looking up and out the Foalen's canopy, I could see the most breathtaking view. I'd been looking at it for three days now, and it still filled me with awe. We were in a low elevation heliosynchronous polar orbit around a planet in the Second Arc. Upside down with respect to the planet's gravitational well, the planet rotated above our heads as we orbited rapidly in a direction opposite to the planet's spin – sixteen orbits a day with ever-changing scenery. For two more days, the sensors studding the Foalen's hull, some of which were just newly installed by Kyrryl specifically for our search, would continue to collect massive amounts of information. By the time we were finished, the planet would be mapped, and we would have data on its gravity, magnetism, weather, climate, atmosphere, oceans, plant life, and much more.

However, as important as getting good, factual scientific data is, it was the beauty of the planet that captivated me. A mountainous desert planet, it wore a mantle of many hues – browns, reds, yellows, even purples. Without any plant life, the bones of the world lay bare, the ripples, curves, and ridges created as the surface buckled and heaved to the forces of plate tectonics were plain to see. The patterns were surreal, even mesmerizing, the scale grand. As I watched, a huge symmetrical volcanic cone swung into view, like a gigantic breast, frosted at the nipple with a layer of snow. And then we were out over the ocean – a deep, dark blue expanse of water. Here, there was life – our sensors detected chlorophyll, that all important compound that marked the presence of the base of the food chain. But what lived deep under the surface, even the Foalen couldn't tell us.

Human cultural regression always seems to follow a particular pattern. I've seen it on half a dozen planets now, and while the details of the pattern may differ, the basic descent is the same. Space flight technology is resource expensive. Some cultures manage this better than others, are more conservative in their use of technology, or live more sustainably within their planet's limitations; those who don't quickly deplete essential resources. Once resource limitation sets in, the first step down the path of descent is the loss of space travel. Many of the people in the LI'Ellendryn survive this by relying on those worlds that can maintain space flight to supply them with trade goods, communication, knowledge exchange, medical needs, and so on. But as more and more of our peoples slip back down the rungs of cultural evolution, there are fewer and fewer ships plying our space ways, and neither trade goods nor knowledge are exchanged.

As a culture loses its capabilities, its knowledge, even its history, there always seems to be an associated increase in violence. We humans are a violent lot at best, struggling to maintain a semblance of peace and goodwill. Add a lack of resources, poor medical aid, starvation, and suddenly people are very willing to fight each other in whatever way they can to get what they need. The desire to cooperate seems to be lost. Weapons always seem to be readily available. At first, we see a proliferation of high tech weapons – lasers, missiles, biological warfare. Over time, as technology fails, every culture seems to develop, or redevelop, projectile weapons or firearms, devices based on explosive charges. As metallurgical sciences become lost, we relearn how to make simple bladed weapons – knives, swords, spears, arrows. I haven't seen it yet, but I guess this slide could keep on progressing until we were hitting each other with clubs and stones.

I'll post more bits and pieces in future blogs.