

# CEPHEUS JOURNAL



Issue #014

In this issue:

Shroom Trees

Foamcrete

The Dark Guard

The Raider's Lament Part 8

Notes On The Sapphire Sea

And More...

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# From The Editors

Well, it's been six months since the last issue, and we've moved on from the Hasbro OGL fiasco and straight into the Artificial Intelligence (AI) controversy! Welcome to issue fourteen.

The first one threatened to end publishing of our favourite games and has luckily died down (for now) with Hasbro backpedalling and Mongoose deciding to leave things as is.

However, AI seems to be having a much wider industry disruption, with writers going on strike and some publishers stating they won't publish anything that has AI writing or art in it. My own industry, the education sector, has had a lot of discussion over the last six months, with some areas banning it and others embracing it.

As a group, the Cepheus Journal team has had various discussions, resulting in one of the team deciding to go their own way. Personally, I'm torn, I find the AI writing rather bland and uninteresting, and after seeing a survey that tested the output from ChatGPT 3.4 & 4 getting progressively worse over the last six months. Their conclusion was that as more AI writing is published it's actually dumbing down the creative results, which has interesting long term consequences.

We'll see where that goes in the next six months. On the other hand, AI art seems to be getting better and better, but not without its own issues. AI cannot create new, original art, it just mashes together existing art from the Internet, it just gets better at blending the elements with each new version. But where does this put original content creators whose online content is being pilfered?

We at the Cepheus Journal are still struggling with this, as is a lot of industries.

Anyway, let's get into this issue, number fourteen. Jo Jaquinta has given us quite a few

articles this issue. First up is an article looking at cats in the far future and how to use them in your game, an interesting look at foamcrete, a possible character class called The Dark Guard, and his latest instalment of The Raider's Lament.

Timothy Collinson has given us some notes on his article from last issue "The Sapphire Sea" and how he used generative AI to create the article. Given he is a librarian by profession there is some intriguing insights he puts across.

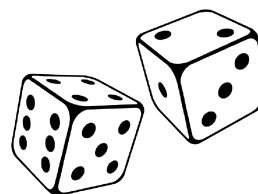
Next up is A Fistful of Spaghetti, by Norton Glover, an interesting and fun romp of using the old spaghetti westerns as a basis for your games.

Finally, from yours truly, is a couple of articles, one on some mushroom like trees and the nasty surprise they hold, and Firaious Prime, a world where these trees can be found growing.

As always, we aim to keep Cepheus Journal coming out regularly but, sometimes like this issue, real life events collide and make things difficult. Hopefully issue fifteen won't be so delayed.

Please enjoy issue fourteen and keep those dice rolling!

Brett Kruger.



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# Cats of the Far Future

By Jo Jaquinta

One of the hallmarks of an advanced species is tool use. Using the natural resources around them to create items that they can then use to shape the world to their needs. Beyond axes and screwdrivers, this tool creation can even extend to living beings: domestication.

Many species of animals (and plants) have been selectively bred over generations to meet the needs of communities. Sometimes for food, sometimes to solve problems. As our technology has improved, the speed and precision in which animals can be tailored has increased. When we look to the far future, there's no reason to assume that we won't continue to selectively develop our animal companions.

Cats were domesticated for their utility in controlling rodent populations in areas where grain was important. Over time, they grew into pets that fulfilled an emotional need for us. There have been many different domesticated animals over time, and recent research has implied that the same selective process can be applied to almost any animal. If you prefer a more exotic flavor for your campaign, you can equally use pangolins, kinkajous, or, if you must, dogs. But for this article, we will discuss cats, and you can extrapolate according to your needs.

## Domestic Cats

The first role for cats in the far future is the same role as they play in modern society today: pets. They provide interest and companionship and are a subject of empathy and nurturing. They can vary from behaving almost entirely like an animal, to having a very pronounced personality. Many breeds exist, with different colorations, coat patterns, and hair



lengths.

Domestic cats are easily acquired. Class C and lower star ports, where the rents are cheap, may even have pet stores and have people knowledgeable of the import and export regulations for animal commerce. Any large city outside of a spaceport will certainly have pet stores. Domestic cats may cost between Cr10 and Cr100 depending on the breed or rarity. On worlds with a breathable atmosphere, there may also be shelters where animals are available for free or for a nominal donation.

## Professional Cats

Humanity's use of cats evolved from protecting granaries to keeping seagoing vessels rodent free. In that spirit, much like many municipal fire stations still have laws about keeping dalmatians on the books, ships of the far future may officially employ a ship's cat, traditionally to reduce the transmission of other unwanted animals from planet to planet.

And, for this new role, there are cats that have been specifically bred and trained to be of actual utility, rather than just window dressing.

Higher trafficked Class A and B star ports may have a specific store selling professional pets. This will seldom have frontage to attract customers, but relies on customers either looking them up, or getting references. Each cat they have will be unique, with its own history and pedigree. Like an art or antique dealer, the shopkeeper will be very familiar with the animal, its best uses, and its personality.

Professional cats are particularly attuned to changes in air pressure and quality. They can act as an early warning system for leaks and help pinpoint their location. They are a useful defense against your atmosphere leaking out, tainted atmosphere leaking in, fluid and volatile spills, or dodgy cargo. Sniffing out short circuits is also a valuable talent.

Many professional cats are attuned to the moods and feelings of those around them. They can help put passengers at ease, and even have adverse reactions to those who are stressed and concealing something.

Professional cats are raised for shipboard life and are trained to find secure shelter during take-hold alarms, and sealed compartments during pressure alerts. There are even environmental suits specifically made for cats which well-trained ones know how to put on and seal up themselves.

A professional cat may cost between Cr100 and Cr1000, with the higher price ranges having more of the skills listed above. In some regions there are subsidies for ships carrying an official ship's cat, and tax breaks as they are considered registered members of the crew.

### **Cats as Peripherals**

Cats have good senses and can fit in small places. They also have a natural curiosity

that can be used to an advantage. Some star ports offer an upgraded version of cat (or will upgrade a suitable cat) with a neural shunt and communicator, which allows for a variety of other functions.

First off, everything the cat sees and hears can be transmitted digitally. It may be recorded for later perusal, or else viewed in real time. This includes the cat's superlative night vision, and focused hearing. Of course, the cat looks at what it wants to look at and listens to what interests it. So, it may not always be what you are interested in. But it is far more subtle than security cameras.

An upgrade to this basic functionality allows for a small amount of feedback to the animal. You cannot remotely control it, but you can give the cat "urges". To the cat it feels as if there is some reason, it isn't quite sure of, why a certain area or person is interesting. They are more likely to observe that person or go to an area. This is only a mild urge and should something else interest them more (or if their fight or flight instinct kicks in) they will follow that.

A similar upgrade allows for a certain amount of motor control. Something complicated like walking or jumping cannot be done. But the cat can be made to nod or shake its head, allowing for very simple two-way communication. It can also be encouraged to keep its head (or all of it) still, if it happens to be looking in a direction or in a position of interest. While you can override a cat's impulses, if you do so for too long when there are outside stimuli that would cause it to act in a contrary fashion, it will become distressed. When released it will likely flee and hide somewhere.

### **Uplifted Cats**

One of the traits that an animal can be bred for is intelligence. An uplifted cat is one that has been selectively bred or engineered to maximize its cognitive ability. Although smart, such creatures do

not rise to the level where they are unambiguously true sophants but are comparable to chimpanzees. On some worlds this is sufficient to afford them the legal protection of minor children, but they are few enough that most worlds have no settled law on the matter.

An uplifted cat possesses many of the senses and training of professional casts, but also has a degree of autonomy and understanding. It can draw basic conclusions from what it perceives and anticipate the results of actions it chooses to take.

With this advanced cognition, they also gain personality, moods and preferences. There will be foods they like, people they don't like, and a willingness to express these feelings. At a fundamental level, they are still cats.

The physical morphology of an uplifted cat is much the same. As such, they cannot use tools that require grasping, operate complex machinery, write, type or talk. They can, however, operate simple machinery (e.g., doors, windows, and airlocks) with suitably accessible controls, and can understand several hundred words. Through nods, eye blinks, meows, and body language they can communicate at an elementary level to those that are familiar with them.

It is hard to put a price on uplifted cats. In areas where they are protected, you cannot buy or sell them. The initial lab work required is prohibitively expensive to do one on spec. As this is a genetic change, they can breed true, and their territorial instinct will tend to eventually urge families to split up as their children reach maturity. So, the most likely way to encounter one is serendipity from another owner.

## **Robotic Cats**

Moving from biological forms, to forms inspired by biology, we have robot cats. At the low end, these are mere toys. For

10Cr to 100Cr, you can get a creature that looks somewhat like a cat and sounds and acts much like one. No one will confuse it for a real cat, and it will have few functions other than entertainment.

Higher grade models range from 500Cr to 1000Cr. At this price point they do not appear any more realistic. Internally, they are fully fledged peripheral devices. When synchronized with a computer (handheld or ship's computer) their visual and auditory inputs may be accessed remotely. Similarly, their posture, movement, and vocalization may also be controlled remotely.

For each 100Cr spent beyond this, an additional capacity may be added. Upgrades include, but are not limited to atmosphere composition sensors, radiation sensors, 0.1 liter storage bay, single shot hypodermic needle, printer, fire extinguisher, or self-destruct mechanism.

## **Adventure Seeds**

**High Touch Cargo.** A power surge, or other accident, causes a container the players have commissioned for transport to go on the fritz. It turns out to be shopping a hundred or so cats, who are now no longer in suspended animation, but are freely roaming the cargo bay, and possibly the ship (depending on how professional the DM chooses to make them).

Venting them into space would void their cargo contract, any chance of payment, and put their ability to secure future cargo contracts with the primary and other vendors at risk. Wrangling the cats and getting them safe and sound through the remaining days in jump and to their destination will put them in a good light with their vendor and will likely get them plum jobs in the future.

**Payment Drop.** During some dodgy adventure, the players are required to make a surreptitious exchange with an untrusted party. In a classic film noir scene, they are to make the exchange on a park bench in a public place, where all can be seen. When they get there, they discover that their contact, Felix, is an animatronic cat. It will validate who they are and what they have brought through its sensors, communicate to them through an internal speaker, and when the transfer is approved, it will pop open an internal storage compartment.

If things go wrong, or a double cross (on either side) has happened, it will jump down a nearby drain to escape underground. If it is pursued too closely, or it is sensed that the exchange has a tracker, it will self-destruct, destroying all evidence.

**The Lineup.** A law enforcement agency the layers work or contract to has been closing in on a subversive group undermining the current authority. They got an informant to insert a beacon into the last exchange to break open their communication network. A counter informant alerted the group prematurely and the contact has gone to ground. Tracing the beacon leads to a cat shelter.

This, with other evidence, suggests that the group has been passing information via an uplifted cat with a data drive collar, facilitating exchanges by the cat being surrendered to the shelter, and being adopted by a recipient. The problem is that there are a dozen or so recent arrivals at the shelter. The players are called in to

“interrogate” the cats and attempt to work out which are normal cats, and which is the uplifted subversive.

**Translation.** The players are assumed to have a registered ship's cat. They are visited by a very tired, very frustrated officer from the Star Port Authority, who immediately informs them that they are not in trouble. It's another ship on a nearby dock, that they strongly suspect. It evaded a naval inspection claiming a medical emergency (the XO was in labor), got a priority landing, and the entire crew left and are now holed up in hospital, out of reach of the authority.

They wanted to impound the ship as abandoned, but their records show there is still a crew member on board. It turns out that they have a fully registered ship's cat that, somehow, is an official officer of the ship, and some smart alec crew member filed the paperwork to make him acting captain as they fled. To make matters worse, a public defender has wriggled up out of the woodwork from somewhere to represent the ship, and its acting captain, to resist being inspected. She has argued that the captain has not been uncooperative, but the onus is on the star port to provide someone who can communicate with it in a way it understands.

The star port officer would really, really, really like to nail these conniving bastards to the wall. To that end he wishes to contract out their ship's cat as a “translator” so that they can officially deliver their subpoena to the ship.



# Shroom Trees

By Brett Kruger

The forests on Firaious Prime are strange and dangerous places. The dominate mega-flora are not made of wood, but of a fleshy substance that resembled mushrooms. They grew to enormous heights, easily fifty meters tall, and tower over the ground like giant umbrellas. The locals named them Agaricus Trees, but most people these days just called them Shrooms.

The underside of their caps are covered with spore nodules that can burst at any moment, releasing a shower of acidic spores that burned anything they touched. The primary purpose of this was to embed the spores into the hard, but fertile, ground. Secondly though was the fact that few of the native animals could eat the spores. All local fauna avoided the Shroom forests at sporing time, alerted to the hot chili like smell that would permeate the air before spore-fall.

While few animals can eat the spores, they were the only source of food for one creature that lived in the forest, the small spore-hunters, but the spores are not their greatest threat. They must be careful not to get caught in the rain of acid spores, or they would be burned to pieces. Even vehicles can be damaged by falling spores.

The furry spore-hunters have four legs and a long tail, sharp teeth and claws, and a keen sense of smell. They have learned to avoid the falling spores by fleeing deep underground at sporing time. They also have a special enzyme in their saliva that neutralizes the acid in the spores, making them edible for the little creatures.

While spore-hunters are always on the lookout for spores, digging into the ground to find them, they are also on the alert for predators, listening for them with their sensitive hearing. While the avian life would sometimes swoop down to snatch the unwary spore-hunter, the much larger Scale-back dragons were much more feared, even by well-armed sophonts. The Scale-back Dragons are a large, reptilian creature with scales and small wings.

While it can fly and swoop down on its prey, it can only do so over short distances by scaling the Shrooms first and then leaping off them. They have powerful jaws and a long tongue that could snatch prey as they land. They are also the only animal immune to the acid in the spores. Some locals even claim they have seen the Dragons enjoying the burning sensation of the spore acid.

Shroom trees are inedible to all known forms of life and are known to live over one hundred years. Local farmers have tried to clear Shrooms forests but have found that disturbing the soil causes thousands of new Shrooms to start growing, making it uneconomical to clear the ground. So, the forests remain.

While a normal Shroom will grow around a meter a year, those coming out of disturbed soil have been recorded growing as much as a meter a week as they contend with the others in the area, until a few dominate ones reach over the ten-meter mark, killing all others and returning to normal growth patterns.

The caps are mostly robust enough to walk on for a standard sized sophont, but there is 1 chance in 1D6 that if someone does break through the Shroom skin that they will hit an acid sack, causing 1D6 damage until they extract themselves and neutralize the acid.

Getting caught in a spore fall has a similar effect, except the damage is 1D6 per round until the victim is clear of the Shrooms.



# Foamcrete

By Jo Jaquinta

This ubiquitous construction material is found almost everywhere. As the name suggests, it is a type of foamed concrete. It comes stored in pressurized containers and can be applied via a variety of devices. On exposure to the environment (air, vacuum or water) the lower pressure causes the cement to expand, inflating the size to many times its original volume. The evaporating or dispersal of the volatile element hastens the setting of it, resulting in a rigid surface within moments.

The resulting material is rigid and firm. A one-meter thickness is enough to support a medium sized starship or a loaded tractor trailer. It is quite light and will float on most liquids (including lava). It is not very robust, though. Sharp shocks will punch holes in it, although the foam nature means such damage is localized. It does not weather well. A year of exposure to seaside conditions, a decade of general weather, or a century of micro-meteorites will degrade it to the point where it is no longer structurally stable.

Left to itself, it will slowly spread, following local ground contours and gravity. It frequently comes with additives that make it malleable by magnetic or gravitational fields. Projectors can be used to create invisible forms, which will mold the shape of the resulting mass. This can make pre-determined structures, or it can create components of a larger structure than can later be moved into place.

## **Suggested uses:**

Emergency Repairs: for blast damage to habitats, or earthquake damage to a levee, foamcrete can provide a quick, temporary fix.

Landing Pad: On rough or unstable ground, a quick layer of foamcrete can turn a dangerous landing into a routine operation. Since it floats, it can be used on water or swampy ground. The foam nature makes it a good insulator, so it can also be used to land on lava, albeit temporarily.

Foamcrete Grenade: in close quarters combat, a grenade sized canister of foamcrete is enough to swell up and block a doorway sized aperture. It will not have a very high armor rating, but it will slow combatants down and give cover.

Re-entry Shield: Its rigidity and insulating properties allow for use for emergency re-entry protection. It is ablative, and will be single use, but can make a re-entry survivable.

Underwater Escape: Because it is lighter than water, if activated underwater, it will rise to the surface, taking anything it has adhered to. Once there, it can be used as a lifeboat.



# Firaious Prime

By Brett Kruger

## System Information

Firaious Prime is found in the Cortavan Subsector of space and is very much a backwater world within that area. Besides the farming families and transport ships that haul the goods away, there is little reason anyone would want to visit the world.

Firaious Prime orbits an unremarkable main sequence star, along with five other rocky bodies, two asteroid belts and three gas giants. Firaious Prime is the only inhabited world in the system, with around 100,000 sophonts spread around the planet and living within 5,000 protective domes.

There are three moons orbiting the world, all rocky with little value to them. The planet has a standard atmosphere and very little weather to speak of.

The soil of Firaious Prime is exceptionally fertile, which is what attracted folks to the world in the first place. Pumping water from underground and onto the huge fields under the domes has become a good business for the families that live there.

## History

The two dozen core families came to the world over thirty years ago, and while farming is good, the planet is still a wild and dangerous place outside of the domes. The early settlers learned this the hard way.

Around twenty five percent of the early settlers were lost to Dragon attacks within the first twelve months of the colony. It was only with the construction of the domes that these losses were reduced but have never been eliminated.

By spreading out across the planet and building their domes the early settlers

hoped to reduce the attacks, but they were only partly successful. Each year since the Dragons still manage to break into some of the domes, or in more recent years wait until the transport shuttles arrive and attack the crews during loading.

## Geography

Firaious Prime is a relatively flat world, with most peaks less than one thousand meters in height. Lowlands are easily distinguished by the rivers and lakes.

There is little water above ground, scattered lakes and rivers being the exception instead of the norm. Most water on the planet is located underground but is easy enough to access.

Most of the world is covered by vast plains, and these are the areas where the domes are located. Almost always the Shroom forests are located around the lakes and riverways.

The ground is porous under twenty meters of depth, which makes dome construction a challenge, but that is also why accessing ground water is so easy. The porous layer extends a couple hundred meters further down, before becoming a granite like rock.

## Ecology

There are a variety of flora types in the world, with the bulk being the Shrooms and various types of grasses that grow on the plains. There are also small numbers of shrubs and low trees that stick to the elevated areas.

Fauna consists of mostly rodent-like creatures, of which there are two dozen known to the planet. There are also many avian creatures, most species being small, but a few raptors grow to have three-meter wing spans. These raptors will float on the thermals above the plains, using their keen eyesight to target prey.

Most creatures are no threat to the locals, with the exception of the Scale-back Dragons. These reptiles grow to between five and six meters long, have claws that will rip through light steel and teeth lined mouths that can easily bite through unprotected creatures.

While the Dragons usually live a solitary life, they seem to be drawn together on occasion to hunt in packs. Hence the protective domes of the locals.

### **Society**

The farmers of Firaious Prime are made up of close family groups in each dome. They live and farm under the dome, only coming out to trade with other domes. About every six weeks a transport ship will arrive, sending shuttles to each dome to collect their produce.

Each dome is a self-contained community, often growing different crops and livestock, depending on the preferences of the individual families. The towns are located at the center of each dome, with the farmland radiating out to the edge of the dome.

When the dome no longer has enough room for the families, an adjoining dome will be built. This only takes place once a decade though due to the huge number of resources required to construct the domes. Generally, it is calculated to take fifty years to fill a dome, which can take a year or more to build.

There are two families on the planet that specialize in dome construction instead of farming. They also have several shuttles and ships, as well as construction droids to assist in dome construction.

The domes consist of a ring ten meters high, sitting on underground piers that go down to bedrock. The piers are five meters across and mostly solid, with a half dozen being dedicated to water pumping. Four air-lock style gates allow outside access, with one leading to a landing pad.

Sitting on the ring is a metal geodesic dome, which is the main defence of the community. The dome is electrified and puts out a strong electromagnetic field, which usually keeps out the Dragons and other local critters. Usually, but not always.

### **Government**

While each dome is self-governed, all off-world politics is set by a council of Elders, made up of twenty of the heads of each family. The twenty individuals are selected from the domes and are selected on a rotational period every three years.

### **Military**

There is no standing military on Firaious Prime, but the Council of Elders will hire privateers when the situation warrants it. Each dome has its own appointed sheriff and associated staff.

### **Trade**

Exports are made up of agricultural goods and livestock, while imports are mostly machinery. Raw materials are mined locally, though mostly off-world in the rings. The construction families take responsibility for collecting and processing raw materials.

The ERB Portal at Firaious Prime is the end of the line, only connecting the world back to the main ERB conduits.



# The Dark Guard

By Jo Jaquinta

## The Legend

Everyone for dozens of parsecs around has heard of The Dark Guard. They appear in any number of blockbuster media presentations set during dark times. When everything looks the worst for the heroes, a photogenic protagonist with a dashing profile enters the plot, revealing themselves as a beacon of justice during the darkness of tyranny. No one knows where these brave knights come from, and they barely have time to thank them, before they exit the stage, their purpose in the plot fulfilled.

Most people consider them a tired storytelling device at best, and a glorification of vigilantism at the worst. But in quiet corners of dockside bars, others talk of them in less glamorous terms. They speak of cloaked and hooded figures, members of a mysterious mercenary guild, often appearing alone, but sometimes in small squads. They are supernaturally good at combat, and their biggest tell is when something happens, and you never know who did it. They are said to hire out for jobs but are very very particular about who they contract to, and what they contract for. The only thing worse than finding yourself up against them, is to double cross them. That's usually a fast track to oblivion.

## The Reality

Specialists in Stellar or Interstellar Security are quite aware of the reality of The Dark Guard. They are listed as a cross stellar cult with violent practices. They are to be suppressed when encountered, and any sightings and leads are to be centrally reported. However, there are no pursuit actions currently pending, due to a lack of specific information.

The first records of them are during a previous dark age, when a downturn in interstellar commerce caused widespread retrogression and lawlessness. And when they intersected with recorded history they did, indeed, frequently intervene in what history presents as the side of justice, forming a quasi-police force where none existed. But, partly as a result of their stabilizing actions, the interstellar government asserted itself. The Dark Guard was seen as an uncontrollable force, not subject to that authority and, so, not compatible with it. Their known strongholds were destroyed, and the members dispersed.

In truth, they had their own ends, driven by deep set beliefs. These aligned with ensuring stability during the downturn, as there were certain materials and tools that were needed that required a productive industrial base. With a functioning central government, that is less needed, and they intersect with the wider society only on the fringes, and only for what they need.

The dispersal affected them badly. They are now broken into multiple enclaves, each with just a fraction of the relics they once possessed. There is only sporadic communication between them, and some are either very underground, or extinct. The rest of this article will focus on The Mind Guard, an enclave surrounding a relic known as The Gestalt.

## The Mind Guard

This enclave can trace its ancestry back to the dispersal. Since that time, they have gone through periods of static build up, interspersed with traveling. They have recently moved into the local region and are creating a safe place for themselves to build up again.

When this group fled, they took with them The Gestalt. It is a powerful computer and data array. It assembles and indexes all the information they record from any mission they run. It can perform tactical and strategic simulations from that data. Not just of the battle, but also the people involved.

For weeks after an engagement, what was done is played back step by step by the entire clan. The aim is not to identify faults, but to find improvement and best practice for all to share. From inductee to elder, the steps are gamed out, discussed, and alternatives suggested. Particularly notable ones are used as core material for training for quite some time.

The Gestalt is also able to conduct personality simulations. Once it has enough recordings of someone, it can emulate their unique ways and thought processes. This can help work out who would be best at accomplishing certain missions, and, alternatively, who would learn the most from certain missions. It is also possible to pose questions and have The Gestalt answer from the point of view of different individuals. This works best for tactical and strategic questions, but for those with very complete records, more broad questions can be asked.

The Gestalt provides a sort of technological afterlife. The records of those who have died live on. They can be brought up later, for comfort and advice. It isn't a form of ancestor worship, as the clan has learned a lot and current techniques improve on

older techniques. But the distilled information can be insightful, and the thought that even if they die, they can still help the clan inspires many.

It also provides for the long-term survival of the clan. Even if all the elders are wiped out, their wisdom is in The Gestalt. It is part of the objective of making their mission virally expansive. Backups have been made and sequestered in hidden locations. Longer term plans have been made for duplicate hardware, allowing for new clans to help in The Journey.

## What They Believe

The Dark Guard acts as a mercenary guild, but that is more a means to an end. They are travelers, on a long journey with a quest for immortality. Their end goal is to travel to the center of the galaxy, and to cross the event horizon of the supermassive black hole that is there. Time will slow as they approach it, stretching into an eternity as they approach the edge. Unlike other black holes, the central one is the only one large enough so that they will not be ripped apart by tidal forces before reaching the event horizon. They will be preserved, intact, for all time.

This is not a journey of one lifetime, but of many many generations. They are in no hurry. Those who are destined to be part of The Journey and not The Conclusion will be represented in The Gestalt. Everyone who is in the clan will make their mark on the world and be remembered for all time.

With this belief, their society is focused on survival at all costs, and at being the best they can be. If the clan cannot survive to complete The Journey, then none of them will be remembered, and all those who came before them will not be remembered. It would be wasting the purpose of everyone who had ever been

in the clan. And, with the assumption that they will succeed, everything they do will be remembered. So, it is an imperative that they do the best they can possibly do. The candle they hold up to the universe with their life should be the best possible.

This is a joint responsibility; it isn't a coercive belief. They won't take on a mission if their simulations don't show it is likely to further their aims. And they won't send someone on a mission if the simulations don't show them to be a good fit. There are always unknowns. And no mission is ever perfect. But the predictive quality of The Gestalt instills those selected with great self-confidence, and the fact their actions will be seen for all eternity pushes them to excel.

The clan defines itself by what they believe in. It doesn't matter who you are. If you are in the clan, you are of the Dark Guard. They tend towards all concealing hooded robes specifically to mask their own differences. Gender, race or even species is not relevant. Commitment to the cause is what is important. It is rumored among clan members that their racial makeup has changed over the centuries, and that they did not start out as a human organization.

To further this, they have a policy of expansion through adoption. Procreation is not prohibited, but it is fairly rare. A tight bond is encouraged with all clan mates and is deemphasized between individuals. Any child below the age of 9 is a potential member. They may be adopted to the clan and live with them. At the age of 9 they can take a name, swear their vows, and assume their robe. If they decline, they will be given a healthy dowry and returned to some society. But that almost never happens.

### **Clan Organization**

The current spiritual head of the clan is Bandwidth. He is the head of signals intelligence, and spends most of his time in

the observatory, listening in on the information and transmissions they can pick up from the rest of the galaxy. He is the only one in contact with the other clans. Being the one most in tune with The Gestalt, he usually sets the parameters and guides others in their interaction with it. He is somewhat distant from the rest and confines his suggestions and advice to the spiritual and moral.

In contrast with this is Swansong. She is their military leader. It is her job to sift through the opportunities that Bandwidth identifies, select which missions will be taken, and has the final word on who will be on which mission. She's the oldest of the clan and the most experienced. But she is missing most of her right arm, and refuses to wear a prosthetic, so she does not go on missions herself.

There are others who are considered elders that govern the domains of logistics, habitat, and personnel. Each is given authority over their domain as a matter of honor. But almost all decisions are run through The Gestalt for assessment.

All engage in rigorous physical and educational training. By age 18 a youth has chosen a path, and their training will become dominated by what their chosen role is. It is both a devotion, a dedication, and recreation. This fixation leads them to be exceptionally well trained compared to others their age in the outside world.

### **Haven**

Decades previously, long range missions from The Dark Guard set up conditions in an outer planetoid belt around the less frequented member of a binary star system. A primarily ice asteroid collided with a primarily mineral one. Although low velocity, the heat of impact fractured much of the rigid one and melted much of the icy one. When the next move came, the clan settled here, enlarging

and sealing up many of the fractures as living space, and accessing the still warm core for water.

The habitation they have built is right above the water level, deep under the surface, where all emissions can be screened. There is very little natural gravity, but that is supplemented with levels of artificial gravity, so as everyone has experience of different G-levels. Certain large craters have been lined and form large radio dishes, which make up The Observatory, and from this they gain most of their information.

There are generally enough common minerals, water, and volatiles to support the industry they need. But these do need to be supplemented from time to time. The clan owns a number of spacecrafts, including a Mercenary Cruiser, a few modular cutters, a Far Trader and a Scout Ship. These can change over time according to the clan's needs.

Haven itself has no offensive capabilities. They rely on stealth and being unobservable. The tunnels and hangar approaches are heavily trapped, however, and the clan is exceptionally practiced at home defense. Very few of their scenarios, though, involve entirely repulsing an invasion. Since survival is the most important, being able to cut and run is more important than preserving their home. If The Gestalt survives, they can always find a new one.

### **Game Mechanics**

Members of The Dark Guard encountered while on a mission outside of an enclave will generally have at least skill level 4 in the primary skills needed for the mission, level 2 in secondary skills, and 1 in several more general skills. This is from both the regimented training that forms the bulk of their life, and the fact The Gestalt has picked people specifically suited to the mission.

Their morale is very high, and they are likely to fight against difficult situations, if they have the assurance of The Gestalt that they can handle what they are up against. If something unexpected happens, or the mission diverts from what they trained for, they strongly believe in withdrawing to fight another day. The fact that sometimes they vanish into the night, for no obvious reason, and not seeming to have accomplished anything, adds to their mystique.

The equipment used by The Dark Guard is often on-par with the best available in the region they find themselves. Yet it comes from no known manufacturer. As they strongly believe in self-sufficiency, it is all bespoke. The Journey takes so long because they move from secure base to secure base and must make the time and effort necessary to build up enough infrastructure to go from raw materials to the refined components they need to make what they use.

## **Adventure Hooks**

### **The Classic**

In a scene straight out of the media, the players find themselves in a sticky situation. They face unreasonable odds, have no easy way out, and are on the verge of some very difficult decisions. Out of the darkness a robed and hooded figure appears and offers to help them turn the tables, for a price.

If requested, the Guardian can explain, in detail, exactly what they will do, what the players are expected to do, and what their adversaries are expected to do. The Guardian seems more than confident they can take on, single handed, rather more than anyone would expect. But they don't demand the same of the players and are happy to accept payment only upon success.

As for payment, the terms will be oddly reasonable. Money may be requested, but they will know, more or less, how much the players have access too, and won't ask for enough to bankrupt them. Equally likely, though, will be them asking for something much more innocuous. Good candidates would be certain types of uncommon raw materials they happen to have, recorded logs for certain passages of space they have been through, or a promise to not stop at escape, but to completely wipe out the enemy.

The Guardian will not negotiate. If the players don't accept the terms, the Guardian will leave. If the players are known for that sort of bluff, it may leave behind a transmitter they can use if they change their mind. It will just ping at a certain frequency, and suffice as acceptance of the contract.

During the operation, The Guardian will be brutally efficient, and stick rigidly to the plan. If things go sideways, they will do their best to compensate, but if things look lost, they will leave. But, if a new plan can be calculated, they will be back to finish the job.

Afterwards, they will take their payment and leave. They won't be interested in small talk. If the players try to trace them, they will find it very hard. They value their secrecy highly.

### **Recruits**

This encounter will be on a war-torn world. Either the players are there on a mercenary ticket, as one of the factions tearing it apart, or on a mission of mercy, or as official observers. In a destroyed village there is one building left standing, with large lettering warning combatants that it is a refuge for children. Different factions have used this as a ruse before, but if they approach, a lone figure will challenge them, and declare that this

orphanage is under its protection, and that it will not permit combat operations in the area.

This is a member of the Dark Guard that has been sent to identify and locate children. Up to six that have no living relations, and no hope of a normal life, are to be selected, and brought to a rendezvous with a ship.

If the players are forceful, the Guardian will resist them. Often using countermeasures to disappear and attacking from ambush, or via traps, or remote drones.

If the players negotiate, or display peaceful intentions, the Guardian will warily accept. There are 30-40 children sheltering here, of varying ages. Most have some sort of relation somewhere. The Guardian will cooperate with the players wanting to evacuate the children to safety but won't be forthcoming about their own intentions. At some juncture, possibly with an engineered distraction, the Guardian will leave with their selected children, rendezvous with the expected ship, and disappear.

### **Pirate Hunting**

The players have a bounty for a group of pirates known to be in a certain area. There is a local group of low-tech indigents that have limited trade with off-worlders. By their cultural norms, negotiation is purely on the honor system. They offer up anything they can spare, and someone will take what they need, and leave what they can spare.

The pirates are abusing this system, taking everything and leaving nothing. The locals haven't officially complained about it, but cultural observers have taken note and passed it up to higher authorities and asked if something can be done about it. A bounty was placed and that brought the players here.

They may have a few leads, and try to track things down, but there isn't a lot to follow up on. After their last lead dries up, they will be contacted by someone who says they can lead them to the pirate's base. They are in a modular cutter, but one with an empty frame, and no actual module. The informant is willing to help, including in combat, but what they want in return is a cargo module that the pirates are known to have, and to be allowed to fill it with that quantity of plunder from the pirate base.

The pirate base is in a dispersed asteroid belt. But knowing where they are going, they should be able to stealthily approach, land a ground assault team on the far side, and/or conduct a surprise bombardment from space. The fight should be tough, but they will have the jump on them, and The Guardian is an exceptional fighter, and has many tricks up their sleeve.

When they have the victory, The Guardian will mount the cargo module to their modular cutter and will fill it with the low value agricultural goods taken from the planet. There is plenty of more valuable stuff there, but they will be content with that.

If the players follow up on it, The Guardian will return to the planet, engage them for trade, and return to them their goods. They will be highly appreciative, and, after much discussion, will offer back a single data chip. The Guardian is happy with this and leaves.

The backstory is that this is the system that the Mind Guard enclave is in. They are very interested in it being peaceful and stable. The pirates are a disruptive influence, making their Gestalt predictions harder. The locals are a known quantity, and easy to calculate. The locals, too, watch things,

and seem to have an intuitive understanding of the sort of information The Guard is interested in, making for mutually profitable trades.

### **The Seed**

The players come across a dormant Gestalt and awaken it. Maybe it was in an old government warehouse, an asteroid fragment containing wreckage from a long ago destroyed base, or in an antique shop. But they can boot it up, and quickly discover that it has a wealth of information in it.

It is hard to say if it is intelligent, in and of itself. It will most frequently communicate by bringing up simulated personalities stored within it, to talk with the players. The artifact can only communicate through interfaces provided to it. It won't send viruses into external systems and has very robust defenses when it comes to someone trying to intrude into its data space.

But it will "talk" with the players. Personalities that it predicts will mesh well with the characters will be brought up



and will tell of The Journey. It will express this in as compelling a way possible, for the personality of the players. It is, effectively, trying to "recruit" the players. How exactly it presents this, is up to the referee.

It can be the promise of immortality. Or being leaders of their own powerful group. Or access to technological secrets and historical archives. Or it could be empathy for the path already trodden by countless predecessors, whose existence would have been wasted if the effort does not continue.

If the players go with it, they will be starting their own enclave. The Gestalt will embrace them, train them, and guide them. Based on the information they feed

it, it will plot out the best course to build up the clan and make it strong. They can become the new Dark Guard for the current era.

Over time, as their size and reach increases, they may end up contacting, or being contacted by other enclaves. Perhaps this "seed" was a backup of another enclave, left in case something disastrous happened. Or maybe it was the last surviving piece, which the rest of the clan died to protect and preserve. That's a choice for the referee.



# Notice of Expiration



**Player Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Character Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Expiration:** \_\_\_\_\_

Cause of Expiration  
(Check all that apply)

- |                                                 |                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dismembered            | <input type="checkbox"/> Disemboweled          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Decapitated            | <input type="checkbox"/> Crushed/Burned        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Poisoned/Diseased      | <input type="checkbox"/> Impaled               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unwise/Unlucky/Un_____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify) _____ |

GM: Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

# The Raider's Lament - Part 8

By Jo Jaquinta

## Chapter 11

Not long later the crew had reassembled on the Cargo deck. Kwok and Vikhagen were dressed in articulated plate armor that Juanita was running some quick diagnostics on. Elise had slung a shimmering cloak over her parka and was giving Ritva a hasty rundown on their collar mounted projection system. Seldon stood to one side with the Chief who carried a very, very large gun. "You are in charge" Seldon said to him.

"Don't worry Captain" said the Chief reassuringly. "I'll snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Are you sure you want to sit this one out?"

"You may need someone a little more subtle than Vikhagen to pull you out if it doesn't work out. Besides, you know I can't hit the broadside of a gas giant with one of those things."

"Fall in" bellowed the Chief. "Weapons check."

"MD rifle with underslung grenade launcher," reported Kwok.

"Ditto," said Vikhagen.

"The terrible twins," said the Chief. "Obviously you are going to be point. I'll back you up with this baby here," he hefted his gun.

"I'm kind of light," said Juanita. "Comparatively, anyway. Percussion carbine with a sniper site."

"Grab a medical pack and take my back. Elise, forward observer I take it?" She parted her cloak showing a strapped-on

computer and communications array. A wide variety of remote sensing probes were attached to the outside of her parka.

"A couple of grenades for good measure as well" she added.

Ritva stood, dressed as before but with the addition of a bow and quiver of arrows. "Well, that's a whole new definition of bravery" he commented. "Ready to deploy, Captain."

Seldon activated the cargo hatch. "May good fortune smile on us. We'll need it."

\*\*\*

They reviewed the supplemental guards quickly on the dockside. The troopers were mostly armed with pistols and rifles and the odd bit of armor under their bulky coats. Elise pinned remote cameras to their lapels. "What did you have to pay the dockmaster for this lot?" the Chief asked her.

"Half a case of luxury food and a box of ammunition" she answered distractedly. "He threw in the dock as well before running off."

"So, we own the whole landing now? How generous."

"I think he was just limiting his liability."

The Chief laughed and waved everyone forward. They started at an easy jog in towards where they could hear gunfire.

Elise continued to instruct Ritva as they continued. "Once battle mode is engaged it starts wrapping a tactical overlay on your vision. Friendly units are haloed in green fire. When any of us aims a weapon at someone they are afterwards haloed in red fire. The system triangulates noises between us and indicates in 3D sparks the source of, say, weapons fire or explosives.

"The most useful aspect, though, is vision coordination. As sensing units move around, the system coordinates and consolidates their viewpoints. Watch as the two in lead look around the corner." The column halted as two of their guards checked for an ambush. As they looked Ritva's perception changed and the wall became slightly transparent, showing what the scouts saw on the other side.

"If you have an indirect fire weapon like a grenade launcher, you can paint targets not in a direct line of sight. There are more advanced features that allow you to switch viewpoints or call-in fire from the Lament, but we don't have time for that now."

They had been marching past closed and shuttered shops. Some had the scars of previous fights on them. Just at the point where it opened into the market someone had sprayed up a barrier of foamcrete.

"I need a visual on the other side," said the Chief. "Kwok, get your skinny ass up there and take a look." With a heave, and help from Vikhagen, he mounted the foam structure. The area beyond immediately began to fill in.

The market had shut down. Some stalls were flattened, their goods spilling in all directions. Others had turtled up, becoming mini fortresses in their own right. One even appeared to be electrified and was arcing to anything near it. The whole mass formed a barrier in the middle. This divided the two sides who had hunkered

down and were taking pot shots at each other over and around it.

"Oh, what a beautiful morning!" sang Kwok. He was cut short when a slug impacted his chest, and he was flung from the barricade. Juanita rushed to his side.

"Don't be so cocky" she said correlating its bio-monitor with her physical observation. "You're not invulnerable." Vikhagen moved in to lever him up.

"This is going to be challenging" said the Chief, watching the display fade as the information aged leaving just the sparkle of triangulated gunfire.

Elise poked at the barrier. "How much does this stuff mass?" she asked one of the guards.

"Not much. It's mostly air. Maybe a hundred or so". She looked to see if the Chief was following her thoughts.

"OK Geronimo. If you are ready again, I need the two of you to take a running charge at each end of this mess. Let's see if we can break it loose."

Vikhagen cheered and the two of them clanked back to the last turn. They then began a shuffling trot towards the barrier. The guards scattered as the armor's servos hit run mode. Cleats extended and with a sudden burst of acceleration they plowed into each end. With a shuddered lurch the bulk of the barrier broke free and skidded ten or so meters with them.

This did not go unnoticed and, with their cover down, bullet ricochets began to ping around them. "Advance!" bellowed the Chief running up to where the barrier's new position gave him cover.

They organized themselves with Vikhagen and Kwok using the dents they had made

as handholds to slide the mass. Half the guards shadowed the leading edge and half the trailing. They took turns jumping around the edge to keep up a barrage of suppressing fire.

"Like a walk in the park" commented Juanita as they slid and scraped their way across the market.

"Yeah..." panted Vikhagen. "I always... take my... WALL... on morning... walks."

There was a distant "whump" and whistle and a large yellow impact alert on the battle vision. "Mortar" shouted Elise. "Incoming! Down! Down!"

Everyone threw themselves to the ground. The shell fell short, exploded, and knocked their barrier a quarter turn on top of several people.

"Drag them out" shouted the Chief, scrambling up. He looked for the source, but the arcing fire had reached over the barricade and several sheds. There was no direct line of sight. "I can't get a line on it. We need a spotter."

"Give me cover" Elise told the two leading guards.

"They've got us in range now," said Juanita, spitting foam from her mouth. "Move kids, move."

"I'm not a turtle" grumbled Kwok, trying to pull himself out and pull the barricade along.

Elise's viewpoint added shifting perspectives to the view but no clear sight and no direct line. She stopped as more fire peppered around her, and they began to target her shimmering cloak. She pulled a sensor free from her chest and threw it in a high arc over the intervening shelters. The picture snapped into clarity. It showed three figures reloading the mortar.

"Get them! Get them!" the Chief shouted. One dropped. Then the next and the next. "Good job" said the Chief to Juanita.

"It wasn't me," she said. "I can't shoot around corners."

"You're welcome" said Ritva, fitting another arrow to her bow.

"Now I've seen it all," laughed the Chief. "Heave to, everyone. Get this barge moving. Everyone: push!"

With a protesting scrape the barrier started moving again with the occasional howl from Kwok, still trapped under it.

\* \* \*

The stronghold they had walked into escorted hours before was now a pock marked mess. Shell casings, debris and blood smears littered the floor. Some staff and looters scurried away as they entered the main hall.

The guards fanned out to cover the entrance. A figure screamed in pain where it hung, pinned to the wall by some sort of harpoon. Juanita led the rush over.

"It's our escort from earlier," noted Elise. "Valio's Majordomo."

"Major trauma," said Juanita. The spike passed all the way through her abdomen. She clutched the shaft weakly trying to support herself. There was a lot of blood. Her breath was quick and shallow, and her eyes panicked.

"She will not survive that wound," said Ritva. She drew her dirk. "Better to end it quickly" The escort gave a sob which quickly changed to a cry of pain.

"Give me that," said Juanita, angrily snatching the dagger out of her hands.

"Barbarian," she muttered and started cutting away the thick layers of fabric.

Ritva looked ready to explode but Elise put her hand on her shoulder. "Behold the wonders of modern medicine."

Juanita sprayed something foaming around the wound. "Get her down, Viki, please."

Vikhagen popped out a hook from her arm cuff, put her back against the wall and put her suit into winch mode. "Just your regular walking toolkit," said Vikhagen as the harpoon pulled free. The Chief and Elise eased the impaled woman down to lie on her side.

"I've got a temporary seal on her, but we've got to get this out of there," said Juanita. "Have you got a pipe cutter attachment?"

Vikhagen shrugged but Elise pulled a bottle from one of a dozen pockets. "Solvent," she said. "Don't get it on you." She oozed a thin trail around the circumference of the spear. It hissed and bubbled as Elise pulled the two pieces apart like soft toffee. She produced a damp wipe from the same pocket and cleaned the excess away. "Neutralized. You're good to go."

Vikhagen wadded up some of the cut off cloth. "You'll want to bite on this," she said, placing it in the woman's mouth. "Chief?" He grasped the other end of the harpoon and on her signal pulled it through. The majordomo screamed as it came out and Juanita replaced it with probes from her medical kit.

"Why are we stopping and helping her?" asked Kwok who stood aside watching the rest of the hall as Juanita worked rapidly.

"Because we hold all life sacred" said Vikhagen, topping up her cartridge case

with more slugs. "And because we can. And because the loot isn't here. And because she might know where it is."

"OK. OK," said Kwok. "Just asking."

Elise cleaned Ritva's knife and handed it back to her. Ritva's eyes were wide as she watched in wonder. The medical kit's screens showed the liver being sealed and intestines and muscles being stitched.

"So many who could have been saved," she said. "So many."

"Imperialist gadgetry," said Elise. "It does have its uses."

"I watched my mother die after birthing my sister," Ritva said.

Elise patted her shoulder. "I think you begin to see the difficulty of some of your father's choices." Ritva glared at her briefly. But her stare softened, and she turned back to watch the progress.

\*\*\*

"Can she move?" asked the Chief.

"Not without a stretcher," said Juanita. She was currently lying flat on several folded coats with another one over her. "But she can talk."

The Chief moved to her side. "Hey," he said quietly. "Medic says you're going to live."

"Thank you," she said hoarsely.

"Well. There is a price." She nodded. "Where did they take it?"

"Nogorsk's dock. There's a clipper there."

He nodded back to her. "Fall in," he shouted. The troops and crew gathered. "Two of you stay with her. Get her to her

people and you are discharged. The rest, we need to get to Nogorsk's dock. Someone led the way."

They moved out and quickly made their way back towards the market. The arms fire had died down considerably but there was still the occasional burst. Vikhagen tried the edge for a longer scan. Suddenly the foam leapt up in a snaking arc across the floor, intersecting with her ankle.

She fell back with a shout and dragged herself back under cover. "What the flare was that?"

"Laser," said the Chief. "More than I expected anyone here to have. Are you OK?"

"I can't move my foot."

"It's auto splinted," said Juanita. "Do you ever read operation manuals?"

"I haven't got a target," said Kwok. "Why haven't I got a target?"

"Coherent light," said Elise. "You can't see it till it hits. Let me handle it." She drew her cloak around her and stepped out. The air burned and another scar appeared on the ground. Where it intersected her prismatic cloak, the material withered and evaporated, but left her untouched.

She pulled it tighter, closing the gaps and moved to the left. The deck melted again, and another large section of cloak burned away.

"I got it, I got it," shouted Kwok. "That balcony up there." Elise dove for cover tossing the tatters of her cloak aside. Kwok activated the underslung grenade launcher and raised the weapon.

"Easy boy," said the Chief, putting his hands on the barrel. "Let's just use a smoke grenade." Kwok grinned sheepishly,

switched ammunition, and dropped it right over the banister. Smoke billowed out. "Move!"

\* \* \*

The approach to Nogorsk's dock was well constructed. The main door was heavily armored and protruding from each side of it was a turret with a cross slit in it. Both were manned and able to fire from almost complete cover.

"How about grenades now?" asked Kwok hopefully.

"You'd never get them through those slits," said the Chief. "They'd have to be gas. Elise, did you bring any of those regurgitation grenades?"

"Sorry," she replied. "Not this time."

"That is just wrong," said Kwok, looking offended.

"I think I have it," said Juanita. "We need our own turret. Fetch a few of those cargo palettes. Elise, did you bring that hull sealant?"

She patted her parka. "Right next to the solvent."

"Good. We'll need that too." They quickly took five cargo palettes and glued them into a cube with the rear open. A hole was melted into the front that Juanita's carbine and sniper site just fit through.

She climbed inside and set herself up. "OK gimpy. You can't run but you can push. Heave to!"

Vikhagen set her shoulder against the rear of the assembly and slowly started pushing it down the foyer. "Why is it that as soon as you put on powered armor everyone thinks you're a forklift?"

After a few shots they gave up trying to shoot through it and just hunkered down. "Stick your pretty face out there Viki. I need a target."

"You hoo!" she called out over the external P.A., half hoisted on the upper palette. "Singing telegram for Valio. Can any of you sign?"

A few shots fired and she ducked back down. Juanita fired a single short and there was a dull thud from behind the left turret.

Vikhagen hoisted herself up again. "Hey lover boy. Got any kisses for me?" There was no reaction even after several taunts. "He's not buying it," she reported.

Juanita shrugged. Vikhagen grinned suddenly. "Hold on." She resumed her braced position and started pushing the improvised crate. Closer and closer to the protected cross slit. All the way until it was flat against it. "I hate rejections."

The rest clambered down. "He's in there," reported Rivka, looking through the porthole. "He's loaded the crate onto the ship. We need to get in there now."

"I can't override it," said Elise after plugging in her portable computer. "I think they've welded it over on the other side."

"Stand clear," said the Chief, lighting a cigar. "This one's mine." He unlimbered The Big One and raised the barrel. The rest scampered to cover.

There was a basso profundo "WHOOMP" followed by an ear shattering explosion. Debris rained down in a few crashes followed by the pitter patter of secondary fallout. The Chief stood in the settling haze and blew out a smoke ring. A thin trickle rose, like an echo, from the drooping barrel.

As the smoke dissipated the others joined the Chief in admiring the wreckage of the docking bay door. Through the heat shimmer and pings of cooling metal, the image of the clipper wavered. She was small, built for courier duty. Transition drive capable but lightly armed. However, the one turret she possessed was pointed straight at them.

"Run!" bellowed the Chief, spitting out his cigar. They dove, once more, for cover as there was a roaring sound and a heat flash as some self-powered projectile shot past. It clattered against the wall of the far room. There was an explosion and shock waves rippled the floor and brought down the ceiling. Foam, insulation, and ice rained down, burying them where they had taken shelter. Muffled by all of this they heard the clipper's engines burst into life and move off.

"Elise to Raider's Lament" she said from between Ritva's elbow and Juanita's foot. "Cargo is aboard clipper now making its way up the phol." She tried to shift to a position where she didn't have her body weight on Juanita's head. "I suggest you engage a pilot in order to pursue." She felt some part of Ritva move against her but wasn't sure which part. "And, yeah, we're going to need a dig crew."



# Notes on the Sapphire Sea

By Timothy Collinson

Notes on 'The Sapphire Sea' and Generative AI

As interest, fears and debate about generative AI such as ChatGPT continue to grow, not least in my own workplace where we've already introduced advice to students on if and how such text might be referenced [1], I thought a few comments on 'The Sapphire Sea' might be in order. It was presented in *Cepheus Journal* #13 without further explanation and in the light of some of the debate, it might be helpful to know how it came about.

Back in 2019 the Zhodani Base (a website well worth bookmarking) put some AI text on its Facebook page which purported to be an adventure based on a prompt consisting of the first paragraph of the Mongoose version of the classic adventure *Rescue on Ruie*. The original adventure can be found in *The Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society* [GDW, 1979], no.1 (and *The Best of JTAS*, no.1) and the much revised and expanded version can be found in *The Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society* [Mongoose, 2019], no.3.

The AI generated text can be found under the title 'Rescue on Ruie nonsense' here: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/1330615917299320/> and, as you can see, the text is indeed nonsense. That was the state of play of such generative AI only three and half years ago. However, reading it I felt as if I was looking at something that had been translated into English out of one of the languages Google Translate still struggled with back then.

It was pretty good at, say French or German, but struggled with languages like Japanese – as I found when I tried to translate a web page that had mentioned

one of my own pieces of work. I'd spent some time helping work colleagues translate their 'near' English academic articles into publishable articles or doing similar work with other Traveller fans wanting to publish their own rough translations into the best English we could manage between us. (See <https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/columns/nubiref/ideas.html> for an interesting outcome of this).

It seemed to me I could do a similar job of 'translation' on the AI text without too much work. The result can be seen in 'Rue nee Curios' here at the Zhodani Base's wonderful collection of Amber Zone adventures: <https://amber.zone/2019/09/29/amber-zone-rue-nee-curios/>. Those paying attention might immediately see the title is simply an anagram of *Rescue on Ruie*. The 'nee' was my attempt to invent a faux-European word meaning 'of' along the lines of 'de' or 'na'. Obviously I added a few words in my version to make it make sense and to 'explain' things that weren't really creative elements but could be taken to be so and turned into something more intelligible. Comments (<https://amber.zone/2019/10/21/everyone-is-a-winner-2019/>) suggest I didn't entirely fail to make something useful or interesting.

At the time, the Zhodani Base's own comment on the original AI text was "OK, so maybe the AI just produces nonsense now, but maybe in the future it will be better..." and clearly that time has arrived with the release of ChatGPT to the general public in late 2022. I used version

3.5 but already there is an even more powerful version 4 if you're willing to pay for it. I'd given it a couple of test prompts by way of experiment and was fairly astounded by the results. Thinking back to my 2019 experience, I wondered how such a generative AI might manage with being asked to come up with a Traveller adventure.

Having had some success with my Spindrift adventure

(<https://amber.zone/2021/05/14/second-place/>) in 2021, I thought I'd see if I could write a prompt that might produce something similar to give me some direct comparison. So I suggested it write a Traveller adventure of no more than 2000 words which dealt with adventurers encountering an intelligent aquatic race. Here's the prompt:

**[write a Traveller role playing adventure of no more than 2000 words set on a watery world with an intelligent aquatic race of eroctopi and a visiting merchant starship with six characters looking for adventure]**

As ever I was astonished by the speed at which it turned out 800 words. The grammar and spelling were fine and the 'sense' was all there. Things had indeed moved on from 2019. I was a little disappointed it felt a bit short and I wondered how you could get it to write to a certain length but then it occurred to simply ask "any more?". You can just barely see the 'join' at the paragraph beginning "As the "Chance Encounter" prepared to depart...".

The *Cepheus Journal* version is exactly what the AI presented with no editing. Obviously I could have changed words such as 'hyperspace' to 'Jumpspace' and so on, but for the purposes of the experiment it didn't seem necessary. I quite liked the title which felt suitably evocative and didn't give anything away.

I've not done searches to see how original it is. I really liked the ship name.

I was quite impressed with the way it took to 'eroctopi' as a word and assumed it could create a singular 'eroctopus' along the lines of the English word. I was quite taken with the way it came up six roles for the PCs which could have stepped right out of any published Traveller adventure – although the 'security officer' felt as though it might have been reading a fair bit of Star Trek recently.

I was surprised by how neatly it carried on for another 300 words after the 'any more?' as though the whole thing had been planned in the first place. I wasn't so impressed with it feeling a little bland (but I hadn't learned then about the possibilities of getting it to improve perplexity and burstiness) and I don't think the aliens are very alien. But then the same accusation could probably be levelled at my own *Spindrift*. I wasn't surprised but was a little disappointed that really it hadn't written an adventure as specified so much as a piece of fiction. Although I quite liked the little quotes at the end. There were no tasks and little in the way of actionable choices for the players.

However, there was a certainly enough there that it wouldn't have been hard to run a quick one-shot adventure from what was provided. If I ever have to run something at the drop of a hat and don't want to use random tables but have half a thought, it could be used as a kick-off point in an emergency. It did occur to me that this could easily be a bit of a 'background' for my *Spindrift* adventure regarding first contact on the planet or something.

I remain unconvinced that there's much 'quality' to my own writing of adventures, but I was interested to note that I didn't feel this was something I'd want to put my

own name to as though it were entirely my own work. If someone submitted this as a potential March Harrier Publishing book, I'd be happy to work with them on improving it and turning it into an actual adventure but wouldn't accept it 'as is'. It will be interesting to see if ChatGPT 4 can do a better job of following the usual conventions of an actual role-playing adventure.

There remains much debate about to what extent these AI tools are simply plagiarising the internet and I have my concerns; there are problems with AI inventing spurious information (fine perhaps for this kind of fiction exercise, but I've seen it accuse academics of sexual misconduct and we have students regularly asking at the Library enquiry desk for books that have been invented whole cloth); there's debate around whether this will stymie our

own creativity as we grow lazy and rely on it too much; but Zhodani Base wasn't wrong in thinking "it will be better" and while I've not seen ChatGPT 4 in real life, it reportedly does some amazing things. I've seen few things I thought at first glance were 'game changing', but this really does seem to be one of those things. Let's just hope it doesn't change role playing games for the worse.

For the moment, the best advice seems to be what we've just officially released to our university students – these tools can be great for planning and brainstorming, but best not use them for direct output and if you do, at least cite that that's where it comes from so the reader can take note. Caveat lector!

[1] Current University of Portsmouth APA 7th edition guidance can be seen here: <https://library.port.ac.uk/ref/page840.html#t840>



# Notice of Expiration



**Player Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Character Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Expiration:** \_\_\_\_\_

Cause of Expiration  
(Check all that apply)

- |                                                 |                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dismembered            | <input type="checkbox"/> Disemboweled          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Decapitated            | <input type="checkbox"/> Vapourized            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Poisoned/Diseased      | <input type="checkbox"/> Crushed/Burned        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unwise/Unlucky/Un_____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Impaired              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Exposed to Vacuum      | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify) _____ |

GM: Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

# A Fistful of Spaghetti

By Norton Glover

Making Italian Westerns in Rider, and other Cepheus Engine games

The Italian-style Western, better known as the Spaghetti Western was a movie subgenre popular in the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. They were made cheaply by European filmmakers with international casts, often starring slumming Hollywood actors. The best-known examples are the films of Sergio Leone, but there were hundreds of other examples of various levels of quality.

Some of the qualities that made the Spaghetti films different than their Hollywood ancestors were the following:

**Sceptical of Authority** – Public officials were either useless or corrupt. The protagonists of a Spaghetti Western were rarely lawmen.

**No Heroes** – The “heroes” weren’t particularly heroic. Very often their goals are purely financial.

**Grit** – Everything was a little dirtier and dustier than in Hollywood films.

There’s an enormous amount of history, lore, and scholarship available describing the actual American West of the 19th century. My recommendation is that you ignore all of it, just as the Spaghetti writers and directors did. Try seeing the western setting through the eyes of a 1960’s Italian director – old Hollywood cliches filtered through a somewhat more cynical European perspective.

Here’s some optional rules to replicate this genre.

These rules were specifically designed for Rider, Independence Games’ western Cepheus-based RPG, but they’d also work with Under Western Skies, or any other Cepheus game.



## New Background

**Circus Folk:** At some point, you ran off and joined the circus. You started with odd jobs, and eventually became a performer. Choose one of the following skills: Melee (Thrown Weapons), Art (Instrument), Athletics (Any), Animals (Training), Deception (Disguise), Jack of All Trades

## Anti-Hero Points

It was common in these movies for the main characters to be violent, powerful figures, each acting solely in their self-interest, whom fate seemed smile upon despite (or because of) their duplicitous natures. Betrayals and double-crosses happened quite regularly. To replicate this, we’ll add the mechanic of Anti-Hero points. Each player will start out with 2 Anti-Hero points.

Anti-Hero Points can be used for the following:

- Re-roll any player roll
- Re-roll any GM roll
- **Hand of Fate:** A coincidence occurs in the player's favor. A dying man tells them their secret, The rope around their neck snaps, a church bell chimes at exactly at the right time to cover their victim's scream, etc.

To gain new Anti-Hero points, a player can do one of the following:

- Defeat a named enemy: 1 point. This can't be some unnamed desperado or henchman. It has to be a significant character who is part of the plot.
- Betraying a NPC: 1 point. The NPC has to be someone who the player has an arrangement with, or at least trusts the player.
- Betraying another Player: 2 points. This doesn't necessarily have to be an act of violence; stealing their money, sending them on a wild goose chase, or just abandoning them, would all qualify.

The idea is to mechanically encourage duplicity and dramatic plot twists among the players, so a GM might want to make that clear at the beginning of a game, to avoid any hurt feelings.

## Traits

Rider doesn't have traits as many Cepheus games do. We'll add them to make characters that fit the Spaghetti aesthetic. Allow each player to choose one of the following:

**Every Gun Makes Its Own Tune:** Can recognize the type of gun being fired at a distance, even a specific firearm, if they've heard it before.

**Man with no Name:** You come from parts unknown. Once per adventure, you can call up a memory from your mysterious

past and use a skill you don't have at a 1.

**Deadly Contraption:** You have a special, customized weapon. Only you know how to use it properly. Choose two of the following:

- \*+1 DM to hit
- Double the range
- Holds 3 extra rounds.
- +1 to initiative

**Instrument of Death:** You have a musical instrument or device of some sentimental value - i.e., harmonica, banjo, music box. If played before a confrontation, you get a +2 DM to your first shot.

**Four-Flusher:** You cheat at cards. DM+2 for all Gambling rolls when cheating at cards. If you fail, even once, there will always be violence.

**Gospel Sharp:** You know the bible by heart. +2 to any Persuade, Advocate (Oratory), or Diplomat rolls when talking to Christian clergy or honest townsfolk.

**Scuttlebutt:** You have a knack for finding things out. Once per session, you will hear a useful (possibly false) rumor.

**Slumguzzler:** You get +2 to any Deception (Lie) roll, twice per day.

**Loco:** When injured in combat, you fly off the handle and become enraged. You get a DM+1 to hit and DM+1 per dice of damage. This is for melee combat only. Anyone attacking you gets a DM+1 to hit you. Lasts until the end of that combat.

**Bushwacker:** You get +2 Initiative when attacking from ambush.

**Belvidere:** You are distractingly handsome. +2 to all Persuade rolls to members of opposite sex.

**Pistolero:** You are an expert with revolvers. When you fire a shot from a revolver and disable or kill an opponent, you may immediately attack a second enemy with the same handgun. If the second target is disabled or killed, you can attack a third with a DM -2.

## Cinematic Duels

In many westerns, the protagonist and antagonist meet for a final confrontation. There's a dramatic build-up, and a sudden burst of violence leaving one or more combatants dead. This is an optional subsystem for running duels to replicate this.

### The Staredown

Duellists spend a number of rounds, staring each other down. Each duellist should describe their dramatic actions during the round – i.e. Fingers tapping on a holster, Eyes Squinting, etc. Each round of the Staredown will increase the damage multiplier of the first shot fired.

#### Rounds Waited Damage Multiplier

|    |    |
|----|----|
| 1  | x2 |
| 2  | x3 |
| 3  | x4 |
| 4  | x5 |
| 5+ | x6 |



For NPC duellists - GM can roll 1d6 to see how many rounds they will wait before drawing.

### The Draw

Any duellist can say "Draw!" at the beginning of any round to end the Staredown. Each duellist then rolls initiative or uses the optional Showdown rules. The first shot fired, if it hits, is multiplied by the Staredown damage multiplier.

Combat continues as normal for any survivors. Damage also returns to normal.



# What's New

By Brett Kruger

The following products were released during the months of January through June 2023. A big couple of months for Old School Role Playing and lots of goodness from other publishers as well.

## Old School Role Playing

A Tale of Two Planets  
Animals of the Frontiers of Space  
Volume Three  
Origins  
Civilian Space Ships of the Frontiers  
of Space Volume One  
Honey, I Shrunk the Space Ship!  
Lost Contact  
Stowaway  
Hive  
Animals of the Frontiers of Space:  
Volume Two  
People of the Sun  
100 Low Passengers for the Frontiers  
of Space  
Cybernetics and Implants for the  
Frontiers of Space  
Judgement Day  
100 Passengers for the Frontiers of  
Space  
Temple of the Ancients  
Retro  
Recovery  
The Frontiers of Space: Ships of War  
1001 Cargoes for the Frontiers of  
Space  
Corporate Politics  
Paradise  
The List  
A Rift in Time  
Contraband  
Plant Life of the Frontiers of Space  
Duplication  
Retribution  
An Unexpected Passenger

## Michael Brown

Primum Non Nocere  
The Rest Is Silence  
Old Monte  
The Spirit Remains  
The Alcestis Cypher  
2D6 SF Adventures, vol. 15 [BUNDLE]

The Abyss Also Gazes  
Payload  
The Sublime Garden  
Lifeform Reading: Cenozoic Fauna  
The Shadows of Things Not Seen  
Lifeform Reading: Beasts of Burden  
The Dispossessed

## Menagerie Press

Westlands: Red Moon Adventures  
Westlands: Troll Trouble  
Westlands: Garnet Hunters  
Westlands: Shar's Tomb  
Westlands: The King's Lighthouse  
Westlands: Moulstoke  
Westlands: Stollenwurm Lair  
Westlands: Matriarch's Cavern  
Westlands: Goblin Caves  
Westlands: The God Wheel  
Westlands: The Pool of Desultation  
Westlands: The Hound Knight

## Zozer Games

Hostile Forms & Charts  
Cepheus Handouts  
Cost of Freedom  
The Solomons  
HOSTILE Situation Report 006 -  
Hunted  
Cyclops

## Divergentibus Cerebri Publishing

Xenofari  
GM's Help Screen  
Divergentibus Cerebri Publishing

## Independence Games

Badge: Law Enforcement in Clement  
Sector  
GEAR: General Equipment  
Adventurers Require  
Roosevelt-class Intercept Destroyer

## Moon Toad Publishing

Cepheus Core Set [BUNDLE]

Quick Ship File: Gwad Urm Class  
System Defence Destroyer  
Quick Ship File: Celeres Class Escort

## Monachus Press

Fighter Design and Combat Rules  
Gunnery Course

## Mongoose

Traveller Mercenary Ticket: Mazon  
Recovery  
100 Hooks and Rumours to Hear in or  
about Alpha Crucis

## Anthony Westenberg

The Imperial Fringes Issue 1 - The  
Subsector

## Catalyst Game Labs

Shadowrunner Holostreets

## CZRPG

Locations & Encounters Mega  
[BUNDLE]

## Donovan D. Corzo

Sci-Fi Subterfuge Generator

## Fspace Publications

Far Encounters character counters 1

## Ordo Arcanorum

Opus Magi: Quick Start

## Parts Per Million

Solo Space Opera with Cepheus

## Stellagama Publishing

Solar Sagas

## Wild Bee Publishing

Solis People of the Sun



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