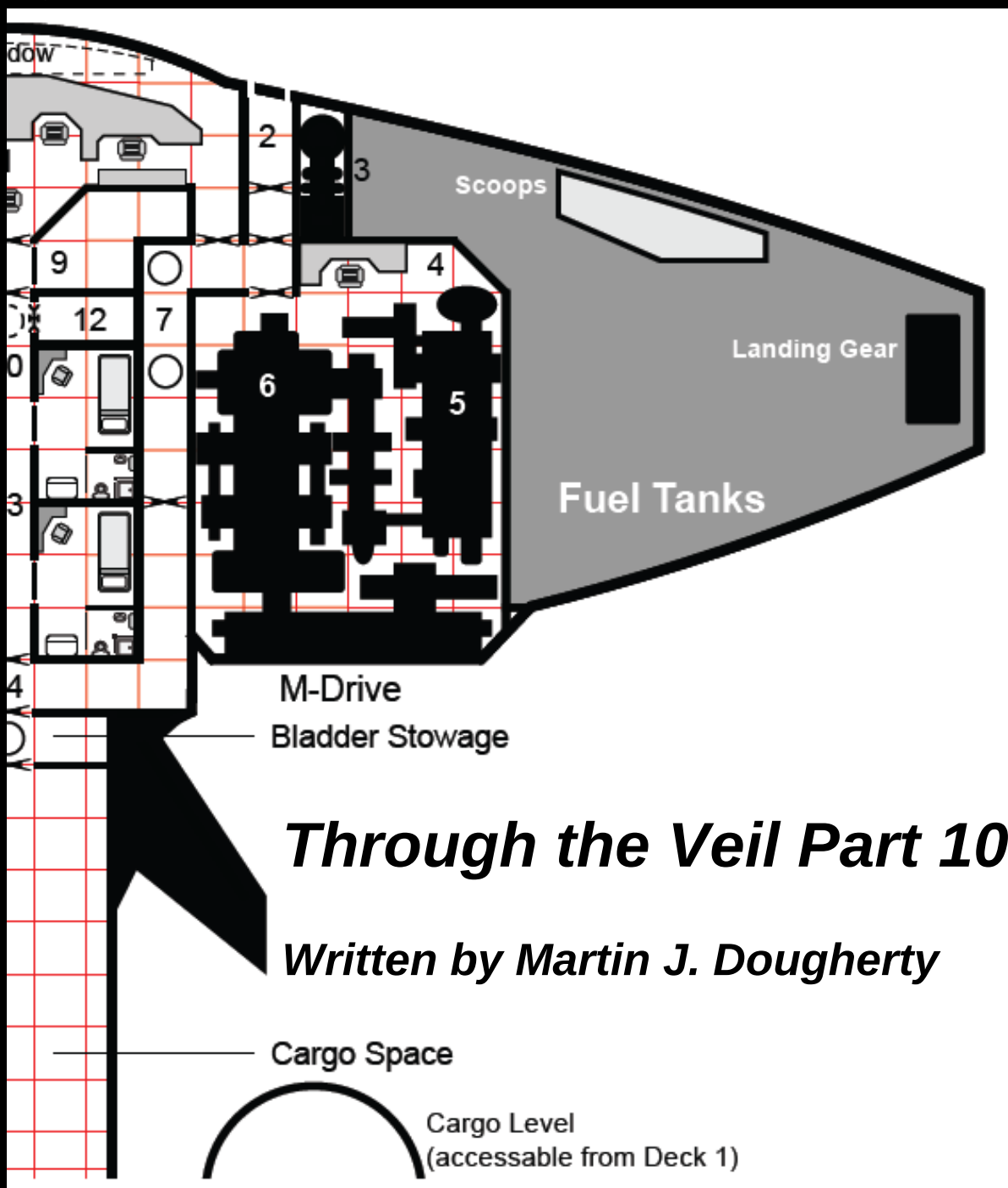




OUTER VEIL



Through the Veil Part 10

Written by Martin J. Dougherty

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THROUGH THE VEIL 10

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In memoriam

David Chase

(26 October 1963 – 26 March 2014)

With thanks and appreciation.

THROUGH THE VEIL 10

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REFEREE'S INFORMATION

NSSC 3009 X558000-0

NSSC 3009 is a hot prospect for colonisation. Its atmosphere is thin and there is somewhat less water than on Earth, but the air is breathable and terrestrial plants – and animals – can live there. In a universe of rockballs and airless moons, that makes this gray-blue coloured world a rich find indeed. In time, it may become a government-backed colony and receive massive investment. However, that day is a long way off.

NCCC 3009 has extensive deserts, and the equatorial region is particularly harsh. However, most of the land is habitable and some areas are well-watered and fertile. The second-largest continent has a huge inland bowl, sheltered by mountains and watered by three great rivers plus their tributaries, that is perfect for agriculture and the construction of cities. If the world is settled, this will be the cradle of civilization.

To the north of the Fertile Bowl, as it has been labelled by explorers, lies a deep rift valley with indications of mineral wealth close to the surface. The three great rivers flow east to the ocean, across a wide coastal plain that, whilst less welcoming than the interior, is entirely suitable for habitation. Great forests cover part of the bowl, becoming thinner to the south as the land rises. This is not only good country to settle, it is also quite beautiful.

Located so very far out from Terra, NSSC 3009 has received only a cursory survey and a note that it is a suitable location for a colony when practical. Indeed, charts of this region are not publicly available; initial mapping expeditions have not been followed by confirmation missions, and all data is thus rated as unreliable in the few databases that present it at all.

Although NSSC 3009 is officially off the map, there have been some less-than-formal expeditions into the region, and by the time government-sanctioned settlers arrive, the world may have already been 'landgrabbed' by others. Indeed, the process has already begun.

There is already an unofficial colony on NSC 3009. Actually, there are three colonies if each settlement is considered separately, but they are all part of the same group. The largest is the unimaginatively named Seeder Town, set up as a 'seeder' colony to receive other arrivals at a later date. Seeder Town has a population of about three hundred souls, most of whom are part-time technicians, mechanics and farmers as necessary.

Seeder Town was set up with some under-the-table assistance from 'The Colonel' (Carlos Schmidt). Although what he is doing is illegal, Schmidt feels that it is right. He has siphoned off a little of each shipment to the forward base, sending it through to the colonists on NSSC 3009.

They are not just any group of people who happened to turn up on an uncharted world, of course. Most are either former Marines that Schmidt commanded or who served with honour, or their dependents in the case where personnel were killed in action.

Some years ago, the colonel quietly put the word out that he was creating a place where former marines who had nowhere else could go. In many cases, the assumption that he was funding a veterans' rehabilitation and support program turned out to be correct, but those that met with the colonel's approval were given the chance to join the community at Seeder Town and the two satellite communities. There is no political agenda here, no attempt to create a militarised veterans' state, just the Colonel trying to look out for people who gave him their best when he asked for it.

The result is that about two-thirds of the households at Seeder Town contain one or more individuals who have military experience, and in many ways it shows. Roads may be nothing more than packed earth but they are arrow-straight and free from rubbish. The colonists may dwell in prefabricated shelters but most have neat gardens with white-painted fences. Seeder town may seem a little bizarre upon first arriving, but the place makes sense after a while. It is quiet, orderly and purposeful... and occasionally rowdy when there is a reason to celebrate.

A reasonable proportion of the population carry injuries of one sort or another, and in a few cases personnel were invalidated out of the service for physical or mental reasons. However, Seeder Town is not a retirement home for troubled veterans, it is more a place that a group of motivated people – who happen to be mostly former military – made for themselves. Many struggled to find a job or to fit into society when they left the military, but those seriously in need of rehabilitation were directed to medical or mental health care facilities rather than being transported to the edge of explored space and expected to build a new world.

The atmosphere in town is pleasant and welcoming for the most part. For all their military origins – or perhaps because of them – the locals are willing to take new arrivals at face value and are accepting of pretty much anyone who does not cause trouble. Likewise, the population are not apparently concerned about security. There are rather a lot of guns in town, however. These are mostly sidearms and hunting-type weapons, with a few military weapons that are possibly missing from some armoury somewhere. This is one reason why the population are not very concerned about outsiders causing trouble – they have military support weapons available if necessary, and most visitors know that.



Seeder Town has a concrete apron for use as a landing pad, complete with a ship dispersal area surrounded by earth berms, but nothing that could really be called a 'starport' as such. Ships are guided in from Mast Hill and met by a bunch of guys walking over from town – a hike of about 500m. Seeder Town is primarily a subsistence farming community with a little basic manufacturing. Farming (which includes raising cattle and sheep) is a fairly easy business on NSSC 3009; the soil is fertile and well watered, and the climate is generally fairly moderate. Cereal crops, fruit and vegetables grow quickly and without much effort, and the farm animals are easy to feed.

There are a few problems, of course. NCCS 3009 has an ecosystem of its own, and the local predators have taken something of a liking to Terran farm beasts. Protecting the herds is a full-time job which requires a fair amount of mobility. With relatively few vehicles available, the locals have become very good cross-country runners despite the thin air. Most farm hands think nothing of jogging a few miles between herds to check there have been no attacks.

The colony's few horses are generally used for rounding up cattle and chasing down sightings of predators if vehicles are not available. A new generation of Vaqueros is beginning to emerge on NSSC 3009; men and women who spend days in the saddle looking after their herds, then come back into town for a few well-earned beers. Most of them would say that they have come to love their simple life and do not want to go back to any other existence.

The two satellite communities are Mast Hill, a township of about thirty people about 10km west of Seeder Town, and The Dam Project, which is about 30km south. Mast Hill is a home-grown scientific outpost, with cobbled-together equipment for weather monitoring and a tall communications mast that sees relatively little use.

The Dam Project is even smaller. A dozen or so personnel live in construction shacks near one of the many minor rivers that flow through the region. They are engaged in preparation work for a dam which will create a large reservoir when it is completed. This will only be necessary if the population grows to hundreds of thousands, but the colonists have long-term plans – which should be obvious, given that their home is called Seeder Town, in the sense of a 'seeder community' being the basis of most planned colony missions.



EPISODE 10: EVERY BLADE OF GRASS

Arrival at NSSC 3009 (the locals just call it 'home' or 'our world', though it will probably gain an official name at some point) may be triumphant or bittersweet, depending on whether John is alive. The storyline assumes that he is, though if not his place will generally be taken by Amber.

John is still very weak, and will require several weeks or even months to convalesce. He is most definitely not up to rushing around the outback, and even if he were determined to try, he would most likely collapse within minutes and require medical treatment. Thus John's part in this episode is minimal; he is a weakened figure in a chair or leaning on a wall after walking for a couple of minutes, and this frustrates him enormously. That in turn leads to bouts of bad-temperedness which makes him rather poor company.

John will improve over time, and within a few weeks is strong enough to return to his more accustomed lifestyle. Between then and now, however, he is not much help with physical problems.

SEEDER TOWN

Upon arriving at Seeder Town the characters are greeted by 'Just Ken' Banksville, formerly captain Kenneth Banksville of the marine corps. Ken is 40-something, cheerful and highly active, and difficult not to like. In his former career he pulled several stints as a logistics officer and now handles the supply and production side of the colony's administration.

Ken is expecting several crates, and he knows what is in them. Not precisely of course; redirected shipments generally vary somewhat in composition, but he does know that there should be significant quantities of various necessities plus some military hardware. If the guns are not delivered, Ken will want to know why.

This raises a question for the characters – should they hand over the guns to an illegal colony? They can't get into trouble for that – not here, anyway – but making the delivery does technically make them accomplices in the whole illicit supply chain. When it was boots, beans and bandages that was one thing, but military weapons are in a whole different league.

If the characters attempt deceit, Ken will probably realise that they are lying since he knows there should be a shipment of weapons aboard. Outright refusal to hand over the weapons will be greeted with hostility but not violence. The crew will be told to board their ship and leave, and not to come back. The colonists do not want a fight, and will not go so far as to try to storm the ship though many of them are highly trained to do just that, but they will fight if forced to.

Handing over the weapons, negotiating, or demanding an explanation for why a colony needs milspec hardware are all possible options. The explanation is simple – the colonists are on their own and have no protection from anyone but themselves. So, if they get raided they have to be able to drive off the attackers with their own resources. Raids do happen, especially against unlicensed colonies that are not on the naval patrol routes.

Ken is willing to bargain for the guns, but he does not like it. The colonists will bear a grudge against a crew that demanded payment for something that – as far as the colonists are concerned – they have a right to. Their patron, Colonel Schmidt, promised them these weapons and has gone to great lengths to get them. It's not for some starship crew to start making demands. However, Ken will agree to a decent bargain, though the colonel might have things to say about it later.

If consulted, John tells his crew to just deliver the cargo as agreed. Colonel Schmidt is a friend and John said he'd do this; his crew should not take it upon themselves to break John's deals.

Cargo unloading is largely a manual process, with a single robotic lifter unit for the heaviest items. The colonists work efficiently, as might be expected, and soon have the cargo under cover. Since night is falling and the job is done, well then... that's grounds for a party.

The party mostly takes the form of people drinking locally-made beer and some harder liquor while chatting in little groups around the landing area. An impromptu barbecue gets started up soon after. The night is warm, and many people enjoy being outdoors. A few buildings stand open, and some groups wander off to houses or into the open buildings as the temperature drops, but some remain outside even during a brief rain shower.

Assuming the characters did not offend the colonists, they are invited to the party, and will be respected a lot more if they contribute something. Even just a bottle or two will win favour among the colonists, who are for the most part an agreeable bunch. After a long time in space or aboard stations, it is always pleasant to be outdoors and feel a natural breeze. Throw in a barbecue and a few beers, and a lot of spacers would think they are in heaven.



ASSISTANCE AT THE DAM

Amber thinks that it is best if John spends some time planetside at Seeder Town convalescing in a natural environment. This represents an opportunity to relax for the crew before beginning their next voyage, but within a couple of days it is likely that someone will have itchy feet. There is plenty to do for folks who want to make themselves useful, though, and perhaps a working vacation as a cattle hand or assistant gardener might be enjoyable. The colonists do have something more technical that the crew can help with, however.

Their dam project is highly ambitious for a small colony like theirs, and has run into some problems with the equipment they are using. The matter can best be explained by Sandra Perrique, the lead engineer (actually the only engineer) on the project. She is at the dam with her crew, some 30 km away, and the problem is best explained in context if the characters can see for themselves.

The dam is intended to run across a wide valley, from one high bank to the other, and represents a very large-scale undertaking for a handful of personnel. Thus far the only progress on the dam itself is the excavation of part of the valley walls where the shoulders of the dam will sit, and the marking-out of its projected course. Before any work can be done on the main dam, the colonists need heavier construction equipment than their two bulldozer/diggers, and will require materials for an industrial quantity of concrete. They are expecting to receive these at some point.

However, preparation work is ongoing in the meantime, which includes surveying the foundations and sinking a few test piles to find out if the ground is suitable. More importantly, the team are building a much smaller dam upstream to reduce the water level in the valley at the main site. This dam is partially completed, and is built mainly from natural material such as logs and boulders. It is a rather haphazard and even ramshackle looking construction, but it is only intended to be temporary.

Sandra's problem is that she does not have enough technically skilled people to operate all her equipment, so the project is becoming bottlenecked while the techies run from one area to another. The less skilled jobs, such as lumber jacking in the woods upstream, are going faster than the technical stuff, and Sandra basically needs people to carry out a series of surveys on the water, soil, rocks and geological layout of the valley as well as operating the diggers, repairing some damage to the workbot that is being used for log-shaping... the list goes on and on.

This is quite a big and varied job, with a fair amount of problem-solving required since the characters are working with limited equipment in a frontier environment. Some tasks have to be carried out while dangling down a cliff on a line, or up to the character's waist in cold and fast-flowing water. The work is rewarding though, as within a day or so the characters can see the project start moving once more as they clear the technical bottlenecks.

It is not all plain sailing though.

DISASTER AT THE DAM

The characters who try to repair the workbot will quickly become aware that it is an old and hard-used device, repeatedly repaired by its previous owners with parts that were not always quite the right ones. It is still in use because the colonists have nothing better, but it is only a matter of time before a final breakdown occurs, especially if it is used for heavy tasks like log-shaping. The 'bot not only shapes logs with tools attached to its manipulator arms, it also drags them down to the river. There, they are kept in a pool by a removable barrier until they are needed, at which point a bundle of logs is floated downriver to the temporary dam project.

All goes reasonably well until the workbot malfunctions and, instead of dragging a log into the river and placing it among the others floating in the 'ready-pool', the 'bot careers down the river bank and sends several logs smashing into those already in the pool. These in turn are driven through the barrier, freeing the whole cluster which is then carried downriver.

There is not enough warning to get everyone at the small dam project out of the way, and some workers are still on the dam when the large group of logs punches a hole in the temporary structure. Water floods through, endangering those working downstream. Worse, there is a real chance that the whole temporary dam might collapse, wasting months of work and possibly causing injuries or even deaths among anyone downstream.

There are several problems to be dealt with here:

- The workbot is still active and is lurching around erratically. Its power tools and its mass make it a threat to anyone nearby.
- There are two injured workers on an intact section of the dam, and another in the water among the logs.
- The dam itself is becoming increasingly unstable and might collapse

The Rogue Workbot

The 'bot has not turned to evil or anything like that; it is simply a dumb machine with damaged control circuits, moving randomly about. However, it is the size of a bulldozer and is equipped with manipulator arms that lash about, posing a hazard even if they did not have power tools on the end.

The 'bot could possibly be stopped by shooting it. It is not armoured, but it is a big metal vehicle. It will be difficult to hit anything important, so a precise kill-shot is not really feasible. Riddling it until it is thoroughly smashed up will work, but the bot is treated as having 4 points of armour against small arms, and requires 100 cumulative points of damage to render it immobile. This will also wreck the only workbot the colonists have, so might be considered a last resort.



Alternative methods of stopping the 'bot might include using a bulldozer/digger to push it over or jam it against something while an intrepid character boards the workbot and shuts it down manually. Trying to get it to run into a barricade or hole might work, but the 'bot cannot be lured – it is moving at random and will not follow a character who tries to lead it.

It might also be possible to leap onto the moving 'bot and shut it down. Again, the workbot will not actively resist this; it is malfunctioning, not directed by malign intent. Shutdown is just a matter of not falling off or being clobbered by a flailing tool-bearing arm whilst using the manual controls. There is an emergency shutdown but this only works on 9+ on 2d6; the malfunction is a pretty thorough one. If the emergency shutdown does not work, a character will have to open up the bot's control system and pull out cables until he finds one that gets a result.

Anyone close to the 'bot might be hit by a flailing tool arm. The base chance to be hit is 10+; the arms are not directed so being hit is essentially random, but a wary character might be given a chance to dodge. Anyone hit takes 1-3 (determine randomly) dice of damage. Anyone run down by the workbot would be crushed and killed, but it is not fast so anyone who can even walk briskly can get out of its way. The only real danger is to anyone who cannot move (e.g. casualties) or people who are trying to get close enough to shut the rampaging machine off.

If it is not shut down the workbot will eventually smash into enough trees and other obstructions to become stuck, and will remain there until its power runs down or the motor burns out. The latter would put the machine out of service indefinitely, as a replacement is not available, and may possibly cause a fire.

The colonists would prefer to shut down and fix their 'bot if at all possible, but are not willing to take insane risks to preserve it.

Rescue at the Dam

At the dam, two workers are trapped in the middle section, which is separated from the near bank by a widening gap in the structure. One more is in the water among a collection of large logs that bash into one another in the current. These individuals need rescue, and fast. Ideally, the dam needs to be shored up as much as possible, preventing a collapse for at least long enough to get everyone clear.

It is still possible to run along the top of the dam and leap across the gap, but not for much longer. Of course, since the dam is made from logs and boulders, it is uneven as well as wet and slippery. It might also be possible to move from one floating log to another, but this would be quite a feat of balance. The three casualties can offer only limited help due to their injuries, which include broken limbs and a concussion.

The characters will need to come up with a way to get the casualties clear and, ideally, to prevent the dam's collapse. The Referee should keep a rough track of time, and every 2d6 minutes, apply the next event on the list:

- The dam shifts and groans, and begins to leak from several points;
- The gap in the dam widens and some logs fall out. It is no longer possible to cross the dam by moving along the top;
- The dam bursts near the far bank, causing water to rush through the gap and many of the logs behind the dam to shift that way, gravely endangering anyone in the water. All Athletics rolls to swim become one level harder;
- The dam bursts, carrying away everyone on it or still in the water.

Swimming from either bank to the centre of the dam takes 1d3 minutes, or twice as long if helping a casualty. Every minute a character is in the water he may be jammed between logs or squashed up against the dam. This occurs on a roll of 10+ on 2d6. This assumes a successful Average Athletics roll to make any progress, otherwise the character cannot make any useful headway.

Running along the top of the dam takes 1-2 minutes and requires a Difficult Athletics roll to leap the gap and reach the centre safely. It is possible to pick one's way carefully along taking twice as long, but the gap must still be crossed somehow.

Falling off the high side of the dam causes 1-3 d6 damage. Most likely the character will bounce down the dam rather than fall all the way. Falling into the water causes no damage but the character will have to swim or climb back up the dam.

Anyone in the water when the dam bursts will be swept away in a torrent of boulders, loose timbers and logs. Any character caught up in the flood will suffer 6d6 damage, which may be survivable, and must then try to swim clear of the flood. They will likely end up well-downstream.

There are many ways the characters might go about the rescue. The Referee should keep note of the time taken to move from place to place, and also time spent wondering what to, going to get a bulldozer, or whatever else the characters want to do. A miscellaneous action such as assessing and reassuring a casualty, administering basic treatment and getting him ready to be brought to safety can be assumed to take about 1 minute.

AFTER THE FLOOD

Whether the dam is lost or not, the colonists are mostly concerned about avoiding casualties. Some of those on the dam survived several years in the marine corps, and being killed by a log would be anticlimactic to say the least. Thus the colonists will take great risks to save lives, but are realistic enough to abandon their hard work if it cannot be saved or would put further lives in too much danger. They will, however, greatly appreciate any help the characters offer.



After the disaster at the dam, everyone returns to Seeder town for a couple of days except Sandra and her assistant, who will assess the damage and decide what is to be done next. In the meantime, there is a survivors' party, which has an unexpected guest.

As the barbecue is being lit, someone calls out from the comms hut that a ship has entered orbit and is its way down. It's the Colonel, they add soon afterward. And sure enough, before the first steaks are ready, Colonel Carlos Schmidt's ship is settling onto the far side of the landing area.

The colonel and his crew have arrived with a couple of dozen new recruits for the colony, in low berths, plus some additional equipment. Schmidt is glad to see John's ship, and wants to see his friend (if he is still alive). He does, however, make time to talk to the characters during the party.

This is the far outer edge, the Colonel says. The colonists have made a home for themselves – literally – right on the edge of the map. It's a good place and he's trying his best to support the colony with a little underhanded – okay, outright illegal – support. Someday, official exploration will get out this far and even beyond, and there will be other worlds to colonise. But for now, these few dozen people are about as isolated as you can be.

So, he says, maybe the characters would like to be part of the big plan? It's not Jump science; just a bootstrap endeavour to create a viable colony as a base for further exploration. But there's so much to be done – supply runs, exploration of local star systems, surveys for resources in this system and even on this planet. That rift valley looks like it would reward an expedition...

Or maybe the characters want to turn around and head back in, through the Outer Veil and into the core regions. Whatever they decide to do, that's their business. Whatever they decide to do, the Colonel says after he hears the characters' tale, they have earned themselves a party. They've travelled through the Outer Veil to the unexplored reaches beyond. They've braved airless worlds and flying predators, ice lakes and flooded mines. It's been quite a trip.

Tomorrow the characters might have to decide what to do next, but for tonight there's beer and steak and a sky full of unknown stars.

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