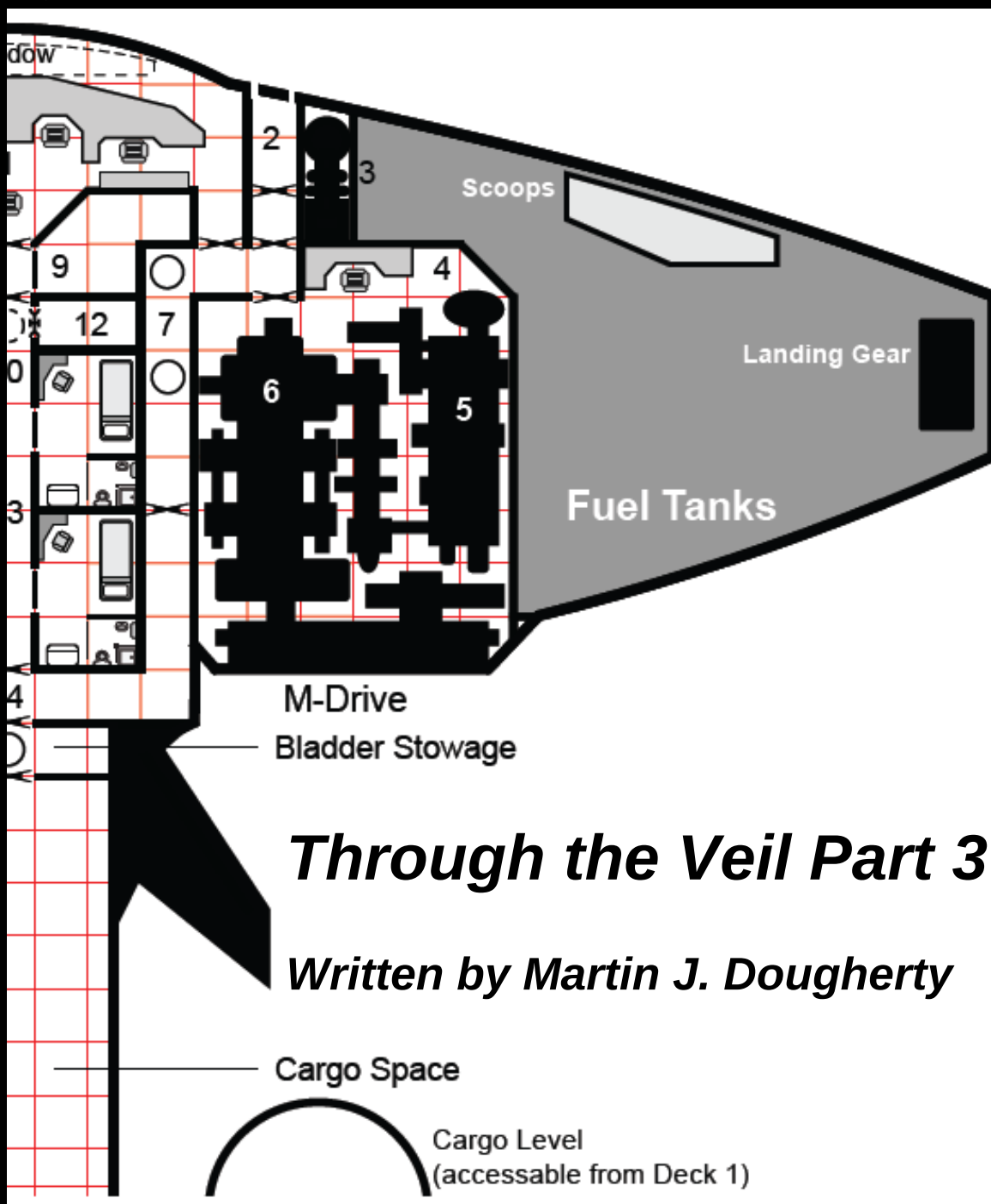




OUTER VEIL



Through the Veil Part 3

Written by Martin J. Dougherty

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THROUGH THE VEIL 3

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REFEREE'S INFORMATION

AVANIM SUBSECTOR

Avanim subsector is well beyond the 'civilised' regions and even its most important worlds have a fairly low population; even Avanim, the subsector capital, has less than 250,000 residents. This has implications for industry and economics in the region: what industry there is tends to be small scale and needs to be generalised in order to meet the various demands placed upon it.

A highly specialised industrial base is viable in a high-population region where there is a great deal of trade and it can be highly lucrative to specialise in a critical area. However, this is simply not possible the on frontiers. Local industry is somewhat inefficient where it exists at all but the alternative to home-building is to import necessary items from the Core worlds near Terra, which is enormously expensive and time-consuming.

About half the sector is considered to lie in the Outer Veil. Beyond this area, many systems have received only a cursory official survey. A number of small, unlicensed colonies are said to exist; some of them outright pirate havens and others merely off the official map. Consequently the region can be lawless and dangerous; Naval patrols are far less common in the outer systems and are fairly infrequent in the licensed colonies.

Avanim is an important military and government centre by the standards of the region, with a shipyard, repair facilities and military assets. The world acts as a staging area for colony missions and the population is sometimes swelled by large numbers of colonists undergoing final training for a well-organised mission or those who are stuck due to a logistical breakdown in a less well-prepared one. Avanim is a good place for experts to seek employment and for those looking to hire guides, surveyors, freelance scientists or mercenaries.

Avanim (Avanim 2018) B411585-A

Avanim is the subsector capital but in the Outer Veil that means less than in some other regions. Nevertheless, it is the most politically and economically important world in the area and is a hub of civilisation and technology compared to the surrounding region.

Avanim is a 'near-rockball' world, with a faint trace of atmosphere and a little water locked up in ice. The latter made it slightly more habitable than a true rockball and enabled colonisation to be undertaken on a fairly major scale. Exactly why Avanim ended up as the main world in the area is complex but once a certain amount of infrastructure was in place it made more sense to expand Avanim than to start again on another world.

The result is a fairly typical colonial-hub settlement pattern, with about half of the population dwelling in a single city around the spaceport.

Avanim City (or 'Avanim, Avanim, Avanim' as the popular song puts it) has a permanent population of about 110,000. There are several smaller cities, none of which have a population over 10,000. A few specialist facilities exist elsewhere along with various outposts but most of the planet's surface is uninhabited.

The majority of the permanent population are employed by the spaceport, FEconA's shipbuilding and repair yards, the military and the FNH subsector administration.

Avanim is home to small Naval and Marine bases that operate a handful of patrol craft to maintain law and order in the local cluster of worlds and which occasionally venture further out. Although the Naval squadron is scheduled to receive several new patrol frigates, these have not arrived yet. The local patrol force manages with a mix of older ships and a couple of naval auxiliaries that should be on logistics duties but have to undertake patrol work for lack of anything better.

There are rumours that the naval base is home to one or more Q-ships: merchant vessels with concealed armament, designed to lure in pirate ships and destroy them. Opinions vary on how likely this is to be true; many believe that there are disguised warships on patrol in the subsector but others are convinced that the rumours stem from the deployment of naval auxiliaries as patrol assets and are simply an exaggeration of the real situation.

The spaceport also has a small Science Commission base in an annex, from which a respectable flotilla of laboratory and survey ships operate. Tankers and supply ships have been sighted using the annex in recent months, along with a couple of private prospecting vessels, so it may be that a major effort to explore the region and identify exploitable resources is underway.

In addition to the permanent population, Avanim City has a large number of transients at any given time, some of whom are more transient than others.

There may be 60 to 70,000 people living in the 'Colonist Quarter' at any one time and some have been there for years. The majority are colonists who came or were brought to Avanim ready to board their colony ships and head out, and in any given month there may well be a mission or two. However, many got this far and simply got stuck.

There are various reasons for being stuck on Avanim. Some of the colonists were enrolled in over-ambitious projects that collapsed or could not move people out fast enough. Others paid their own way to Avanim in the hope of joining a mission, or were part of an unlicensed group that was stopped *en route*. These personnel had to be taken somewhere and Avanim was a convenient place to offload hopeful colonists, so here they stayed.



Many of these colonists still hope to get aboard a colony ship and will compete fiercely for places. Experts and those with useful skills normally find it easy to get a berth, often at the expense of more ordinary personnel. Thus the pool of prospective colonists at Avanim City is largely made up of people with fairly basic skills and nothing special to offer.

Living conditions in the Colonists' Quarter are overcrowded and pretty unpleasant. Many of the prospective colonists have given up on getting aboard a ship and are trying to make a life on Avanim. For some this means taking a job and becoming a permanent resident but some exist on casual labour and the proceeds of petty crime. The Colonists' Quarter threatened to become a lawless place for a time but has now been largely pacified by a special security force trained by the Marines. The 'specials' are not subtle but they keep a lid on the Quarter's troubles and are generally permitted to get on with their work without much oversight.

The Colonists' Quarter is not the only area where disaffection is rife. Some of the outlying cities are centres for Secessionist agitation. These settlements get little benefit from the investment that the capital receives to support its bases and subsector administration and life can be hard in these towns.

Dissent is primarily restricted to non-cooperation with the central administration and some occasional rabble-rousing amongst disaffected colonists.

However, there are a number of 'direct action' groups who engage in low-level sabotage and economic disruption, usually with great care to avoid loss of life. The administration's response to these groups is low-key and passive in the form of security measures and prosecution of the few agitators who can be caught. Resources are limited, which is why the administration does not take more assertive action. If harsher measures were attempted and then failed, the situation might escalate into something that could not be easily contained.

If requests for reinforcements and additional resources ever bear fruit, the administration might become confident enough to crack down on the secessionist movement and it may have to if disruption exceeded tolerable levels.

For its part, the secessionist movement tries to cause as much nuisance as possible without triggering a major response and occasionally has to act against its own people to prevent a loose cannon from triggering a major incident that might have serious repercussions.



EPISODE 3: AVANIM

Planet-fall on Avanim is fairly routine, although subject to some delays as quite a few ships are using the port. Many are Science Commission vessels flying out of the annex, or naval patrol craft coming and going on various missions. As she enters orbit, *Naddod* is intercepted by a Marine cutter escorted by a Naval fighter and is subjected to what should be a fairly cursory inspection and search.

A VISIT FROM THE NAVY

Searches of this sort are routine and do not normally imply any particular suspicion on the part of the authorities. Normal procedure is for the inspection craft to dock while an escorting fighter (or fighters) keeps station nearby as a precaution. The crew of the stopped vessel are expected to grant access to the inspection team but will not be disarmed unless the team has a reason to become suspicious.

Assuming nobody does anything stupid, the procedure is fairly standard. Six fully armed Marines in body armour with a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) and a Naval officer enter through *Naddod*'s airlock and exchange polite greetings with the vessel's master (in this case, John). After a quick examination of the ship's papers and manifest, the Naval officer takes a tour of the ship's operating spaces (bridge, engineering, weapons control area, etc.) and the NCO inspects the cargo holds, living areas and so on. Each has two Marines with him while two more guard the airlock.

An inspection will normally be polite but not unfriendly, providing there is no obvious threat. Anyone getting close enough to grab the Marines' guns or who makes suspicious movements will be warned off and it will only take a codeword over the radio to bring the team to full alert. At that point, the crew will be disarmed and detained while a comprehensive search of the ship is carried out.

This search is a bit more stiff and formal than usual; there seems to be some tension between John and the Naval Lieutenant commanding the search team. However, it is a simple routine inspection and there is no reason for trouble unless someone decides to cause problems. Of course, since *Naddod* was recently carrying contraband animals and the crew may suspect that one or more remains aboard, there may be some issues.

This is a routine situation that can easily be kept from escalating; there really is no threat. However the Referee might enjoy putting the players on the spot about irregularities in the ship's papers or manifest as a result of recent misadventures. Anyone with something to hide will be uncomfortable.

Amber stays out of the way during the search as much as possible and tries to get others to deputise for her when she has to speak to the Naval officer about the ship's accounts. She is happier to talk to the Marine NCO about stock levels for the ship's life support system or tax allowances for acting as a mail courier.

If the characters think to ask, they will not get a direct answer from John, Amber or the officer, one Lieutenant David Ilcombe but they may be able to piece together that Amber once dated Ilcombe and it ended in a massive fight. Her father failed to help by threatening to shoot Ilcombe if he ever saw him again, which has increased tension during the inspection. However, unless the characters do something stupid or fail to answer routine questions satisfactorily there should be no real problems and *Naddod* will be cleared to land.

Referee

Amber does actually have a history with David Ilcombe and her father really did threaten to shoot him but the situation is more complex than it appears. Amber was actually quite happy with Ilcombe and would have possibly settled down but she had an urgent need to move on and required a plausible reason for suddenly transferring to another post. She regrets engineering the breakup in order to leave her job ahead of an investigation into some 'accounting discrepancies'.

Five years on, she has suddenly run into David Ilcombe and her reaction is complicated while his is not. He was badly hurt by Amber's rejection and by her father's wholly unreasonable attitude when he tried to work out what went wrong. He still does not really know but, apart from a certain amount of lingering resentment, he has moved on.

THE LAST SHINING LIGHT OF CIVILISATION

As *Naddod* settles onto the landing pad, John reminds his crew that once they leave this system they will be headed out beyond 'civilised' space, so they should make the most of the world's amenities. They have a week to find any cargo that they can, engage in speculative trade, get blind drunk, eat pseudo-sushi or whatever else they want to do because, after that, they'll be leaving the bright city lights behind for the Outer Veil and beyond.

Disembarking, the crew find that Avanim Spaceport is much the same as most others of the type, just a bit bigger. It has a uniformed security force and a few Marine patrols; weapons are limited to handguns and similar sidearms and there are volumes upon volumes of resource recycling and conservation law. Fortunately most of this is common-sense stuff that any spacer would do out of habit anyway and it should be easy enough to stay out of trouble here...



The player characters can enjoy a couple of days' liberty whilst getting a feel for Avanim. If they want to look for a cargo or make arrangements for fuel and supplies, John and Amber will appreciate the help but they can handle these tasks on their own. While the player characters are looking around, they receive two calls, probably to different player characters.

Ilcombe's Call

The first call is from 'David Ilcombe' (who does not mention his Navy rank) with an invite to meet him and a couple of buddies from work for drinks. The player characters might well ask why some random stranger would make an invite like this and Ilcombe is happy enough to explain that he's the Navy officer from the inspection and wants to buy a couple of rounds as an apology for things being rather frosty. He will make the rather odd request that the player characters do not bring John or Amber with them.

If the player characters go along with Ilcombe's request, he hosts a modest but pleasant enough drinks-and-dinner gathering with a couple of his friends. One is an officer aboard a Science Commission survey vessel; the other is an administrator at Avanim. Amid the small talk Ilcombe tries to worm out of the player characters anything they know about Amber: if she's seeing anyone, does she ever mention him and so on. He seems to be still quite taken with her and comes over as rather pathetically trying to figure out what went wrong in their relationship.

However, appearances can be deceptive. After Amber left, an investigation discovered a number of issues with money and items missing from inventory. They were mostly small but valuable items such as advanced spares and components that could be redirected from a computer terminal and sold elsewhere without much hands-on involvement. Ilcombe suspects that Amber played him to get access to the naval inventory and the investigation did not do his career any good. He is not quite sure yet what he intends to do but seeing her again has caused a lot of old resentment to resurface and he wants some answers.

Referee

Amber did not deliberately play Ilcombe; the relationship was real enough. However, she did take advantage of the opportunities it gave her, which eventually placed her in a position where she had to get out or go to jail for a long time. If the player characters ask her, she is cagey about the whole business but intrigued by the idea that Ilcombe might still care about her. If enough time has passed, they might be able to get together.

Administrator Alderney's Call

The second call is all business. It comes from Administrator Claudette Alderney, who works for the planetary government. She wants to hire a few personnel for a discrete survey operation she has in mind and offers lunch and expenses in return for a meeting. It seems like everyone wants to buy the player characters dinner!

Alderney is an overworked middle-aged woman in an expensive suit, whose office implies a level of importance that is not matched by her modest salary. Like many world government officials, she is trying to do too much with too little resources and has now run into complications. Some jobs are not getting done either through incompetence or corruption and Alderney suspects there is more to it. She believes that the secessionist movement on Avanim is more serious than the official intelligence assessment suggests but without proof she cannot get the overstretched security forces to investigate.

Alderney has a simple job for the player characters. She will provide documentation and funds to hire an All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) and the player characters will ostensibly undertake a three day survey trip away from the capital. Such 'wildcat' surveys are common on worlds like Avanim: a team picks an area and undertakes a detailed survey in the hope of finding exploitable resources. The rights to a find are sold to the government for a modest fee, gradually building up a full planetary survey without draining government resources.

The plan is for the team to use the money provided by Alderney to 'buy' the survey rights to an area and then visit it. The player characters will, to all intents and purposes, present as a ship crew trying to make some money on the side. Alderney has suspicions that the secessionists are building a settlement of some kind out there and wants to prove its existence.

The task is simple and safe enough. Under the guise of prospecting for useful minerals or high-volume ice deposits, the team will scan for shielded power sources that would indicate a facility or maybe just building equipment. Alderney is not sure what she expects the player characters to find; perhaps the secessionists are installing missile launchers within range of the spaceport, or maybe they've found a motherlode of gold or uranium and are hoping to use it to fund their activities. Alderney is fishing for proof that the secessionists are up to something out there but she is not sure what.

The mission should be safe, as long as the team acts like a survey crew and plays dumb if they run into anyone. The secessionists will not want to trigger a crackdown, so they are unlikely to attack the survey party, should they be there at all. It is far more likely that any secessionists will pretend to be innocent surveyors or prospectors, allowing the group to pretend to be deceived and safely depart.

THE SURVEY

The crew will be provided with funds to hire one of several available ATVs at the spaceport and annex that are suitably fitted out for the mission. Vacc suits will be needed for excursions outside the vehicle, which is sufficiently cramped to make the player characters appreciate their cabins aboard *Naddod*; not much is still more than very little...



The survey itself is a matter of driving for about eight hours from Avanim City to the chosen area and then quartering in a grid pattern. The player characters are ostensibly looking for signs of underground water or minerals, which requires instruments to be watched carefully and the occasional walk outside to take samples. Their real mission of seeking shielded power sources that can only be detected from a short distance is carried out in much the same manner.

The team will spend a day and a half in their search before detecting what they are looking for. In the meantime they may actually find some promising deposits and can perhaps make a little money on the side from selling their finds. However, whatever other results the survey throws up, the crew will find a faint power signature after a while.

It is not immediately possible to identify what the source of power is, other than the fact that it is a fairly typical small reactor of a sort used in ATVs, small temporary and permanent facilities and some military applications including ground-based aerospace defence missile emplacements.

If the team choose to investigate, the signal can be traced to a nearby canyon, which could potentially have caves at the bottom suitable for hiding an installation. Even if it does not, a canyon would screen whatever was at the bottom from casual observation and might help reduce any electronic signature. There is no way to tell what is at the bottom of the canyon without either entering it and driving along the bottom or moving along the rim until whatever is at the bottom of the canyon can be seen.

The canyon twists and turns and its floor strewn with large boulders. There are only a few places where a descent is possible and nowhere that it is entirely safe. Even transiting along the bottom is not without hazards, as others have discovered...

Contact

There is no installation or missile emplacement at the bottom of the canyon. Rather, there is a tracked heavy-duty mining crawler has clearly suffered some sort of accident. It appears that a rockfall has struck the crawler's side, disabling it and breaching its internal crew space. The crew of four are all dead and are not suited up, which suggests that the accident happened very suddenly. There is no sign of any sort of violence, other than that perpetrated by nature.

However, there is a more serious problem.

The crawler was towing a large sled, of a type sometimes used to transport raw materials. This one has been heavily although amateurishly converted into a sealed unit with a power feed from the crawler. It has a rudimentary airlock at the rear and is still receiving power from the crawler. The power feed also contains a jury-rigged internal communications system and it is still live.

There are 24 people in the sled, mostly young men and women but a few children as well. They have no weapons, no tools, no suits and no idea what has happened to the crawler. All they know is that they stopped moving several hours ago and have not moved since. They have had no communication with anyone and all they know is that they are trapped in a closed metal box with limited air and supplies, and time is running out.

When contacted by the player characters, the people in the sled will be scared and make a lot of demands for information and help. However, they are at first unwilling to explain why they are in this position. They will eventually admit that they are all prospective colonists from Avanim City, who have been stuck in a slum there for months or years. They were offered the chance of a better life and took it; many of their friends left this way and some came back to tell them to follow.

The crawler and sled has been making semi-regular trips from Avanim City to a small mining settlement called Jassvil, bringing those that want to leave Avanim City. They are then able to transit on to some of the independent cities where they have a chance at a better life. The Avanim City authorities try to prevent this sort of relocation as they suspect that the independent cities are becoming hotbeds of alienation and secessionism. In order to prevent the secessionists gaining additional manpower, the authorities force decent people to live in awful conditions in Avanim City's Colonist Quarter where they tend to become disaffected from the colonial administration anyway.

Political issues aside, the player characters have a problem. There are 24 people, five of them children, locked in a steel box on a hostile planet. They have no vacc suits and will die if the sled is breached but they will die if they are left here. The crawler is open to the near-vacuum of the planet and stuck in the rockfall as well, but it can be driven by rescuers in vac suits if it is freed.

Choices

The trapped people cannot send a distress call but the player characters' ATV can. It would be picked up by the spaceport or a ship in orbit and assistance would soon arrive. This would almost certainly be a Marine or Navy vessel; the refugees would be detained and taken back to Avanim City.

In all probability, the refugees would not be penalised for trying to leave Avanim City as it is not technically illegal. However, the existence of a scheme to move people out of the Colonists' Quarter and take them to pro-secessionist cities would be exposed and measures would be taken to curtail it. In the short term that might be a small price to pay for survival but in the long term it means that these people and everyone else who might have followed them will see their hope extinguished.

There is an alternative, albeit a more difficult one. The crawler can still move and supply power to its sled but it would have to be freed from the fallen rock and driven by someone wearing a vacc suit. This and the fact that the cockpit is badly damaged would present quite a challenge but it could be done by a determined individual or a group working in shifts.



RESOLUTIONS

Ask for Help

If the player characters choose to request help they will receive it; soon the canyon will be full of Marines and volunteers from Avanim City. The refugees will be given emergency softsuits and transferred to a spacecraft to be taken 'home'. They will survive and the player characters will be praised by the authorities for their part in the rescue; they will have done a good thing and can be proud of their part in it.

Unfortunately the prospective colonists will be stuck in the slum once again. If the player characters check up on them they will find that no charges have been filed against anyone who tried to leave but there are now patrols to prevent a recurrence. The poverty of the Colonists' Quarter will be very apparent and signs of growing resentment will be evident. In the long term, the city administration would be better off allowing those who wish to relocate to do so but the city administration is too concerned with the balance of power and the increase in sympathy for the secessionist cause to see that.

Go it Alone

Alternatively, if the player characters take the hard road then they must do it without help. Freeing the crawler is a simple but risky physically demanding task. Once the jagged rocks have been moved aside the crawler's journey can continue. It will take 48 hours to reach Jassvil, which will be utterly exhausting for those driving the crawler. If there are enough player characters they can sleep in the ATV while someone else drives but the trip will still be a punishing ordeal.

The Referee can make the journey as difficult as they like, adding additional complications such as dust pools, rockslides and crevasses to further tax the player characters' resolve and abilities. Eventually the crawler will emerge from the canyon and make its way across the barren rock plains of Avanim towards the distant lights of Jassvil.

There are several vehicles now out searching for the well-overdue crawler so the player characters will be met short of the town by a group of armed and suspicious people. Seeing the damage to the crawler and the fact that it is accompanied by another vehicle, they have grounds to worry. On the other hand, at least it has arrived and is not surrounded by Marines. With such conflicting thoughts it is possible that the locals will be initially hostile but they will soon realise that the player characters are friends and rescuers and will escort the crawler into town.

Jassvil

Jassvil is a small, productive mining installation that is little more than a village. It also serves as a conduit for colonists leaving the capital and some stay on to work. Others filter into the pro-secession cities where their training and skills or their willingness to work for a living can be put to good use. At present the authorities do not suspect what is going on and the locals want to keep it that way but they are not willing to harm anyone who has rescued their people.

The player characters are invited to a welcome party, which is partly a wake for the crawler crew. The refugees are grateful and the locals are glad that their deceased friends at least made it home but there is no financial reward for the player characters. They will have to return to Avanim City and claim they found nothing or report the refugee operation if that suits them. The locals will not do anything to prevent the player characters leaving and will resupply the ATV whilst quietly adding a few little gifts – a bottle or two of local hooch, an embroidered toolbelt that was someone's prized possession and other small items of low credit value.

Among the gifts is a hastily framed image someone took of the crawler entering Jassvil. Through a smashed cockpit window one of the player characters can be seen at the controls. It is a small thing but it might be significant; if the player characters ever return here or to one of the secession cities they may find that they have acquired reputations as heroes.

Departing Avanim

After a final interview with Administrator Alderney, in which they may have to be creative with the truth, the player characters are free to board their ship for the next leg of the journey. They may have some questions for Amber but there will be time enough in jump for that. For now, all that remains is to lay in a course for Epsilon Cygnii and engage the jump drive. That and searching the ship one more time for missing Greepers.

Referee

David Ilcombe is not the person Amber was trying to get away from when she teamed up with her father, though John now thinks that he is. The encounter with Ilcombe should serve to spark some suspicions about Amber, which may be important later.

Amber will not admit the truth of the matter, which is that she embezzled funds from various organisations several times and has had to keep moving jobs as a result. She regrets leaving Ilcombe but she had to leave or face the prospect of jail. Amber does not want any of this to become common knowledge and would prefer to let everyone think that this was just fallout from a bad breakup.

OPPOSITION

Greeper

Str 2 (+0) **Dex** 4 (+0) **End** 2 (+0)

3 kg Omnivore/Hunter

Skills: Athletics 1, Survival 1, Recon 0, Melee (Natural Weapons) 0.

Weapons: Teeth (1d6 damage) Armour 0.

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