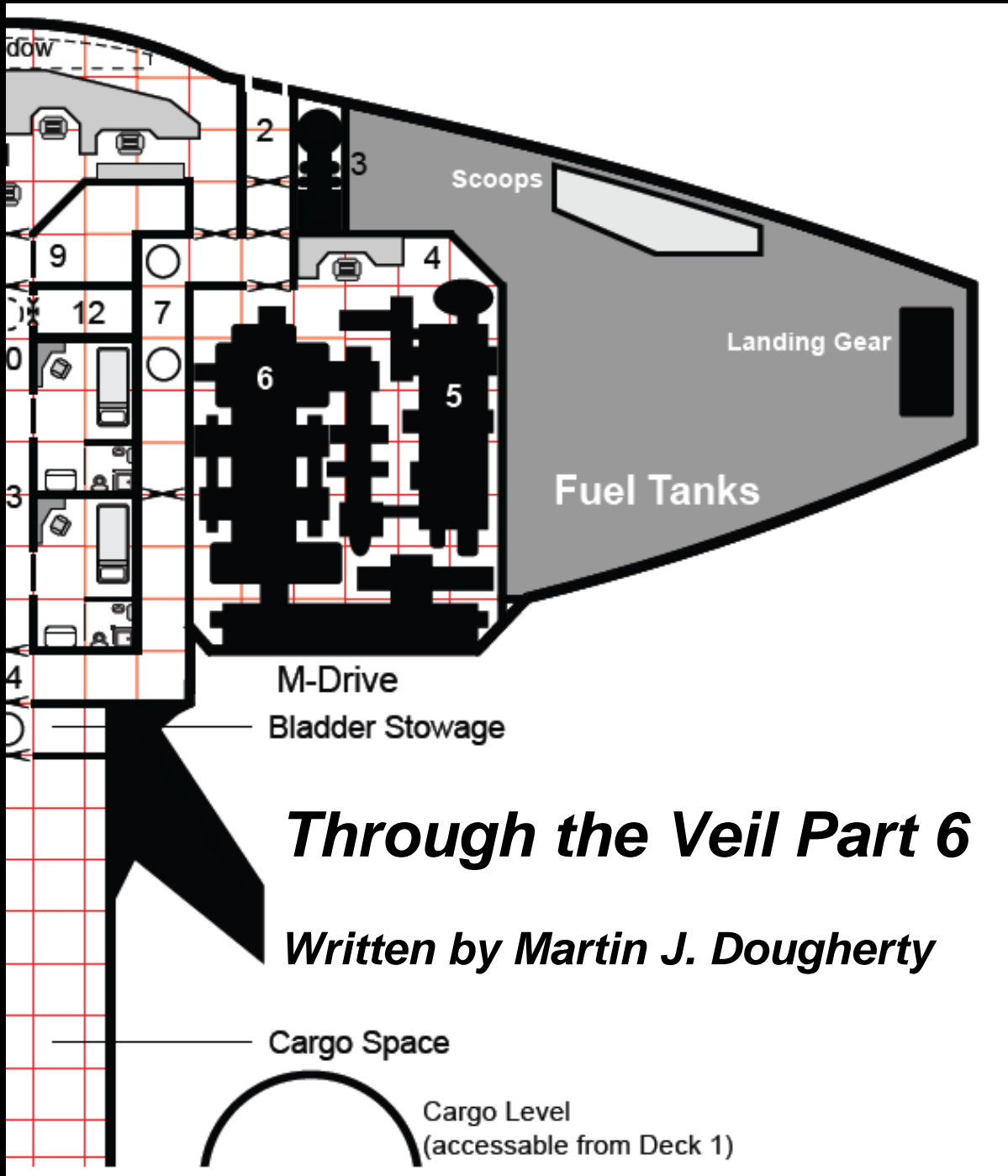




OUTER VEIL



Through the Veil Part 6

Written by Martin J. Dougherty

SPICA
P U B L I S H I N G



THROUGH THE VEIL 6

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THROUGH THE VEIL 6

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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 order in necessary items from the Core worlds near Terra, which is enormously expensive and time-consuming.

About half the sector lies 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.

NSSC 2312 X500000-0

NSSC 2312 is a barren rockball world on the very edge of 'explored' space. The definition of what is and is not 'explored' is not as clear-cut as many believe. To qualify as 'explored', a system normally has to be visited at least three times by exploratory or survey vessels. Second and subsequent visits are more detailed surveys or short 'verifications'. In the latter case, all that is necessary is a cursory attempt to corroborate the original exploration data. If a verification mission finds that a large deviation from the published data exists (such as the world has no moons when the original data reports it has several) then a more detailed survey is required to correct the data in the main databases. This survey is also subject to verification.

Certain exploration firms are very good at doing the absolute minimum required to produce an exploration report that will pass verification if not too closely examined. By cutting corners the firm can squeeze in a couple more jobs a year, improving profit margins.

A firm that wants to stay in business must do enough to avoid being discredited; if their reports are found to be largely invented then they will receive no more contracts. Those firms that cut it too fine or submit made-up data will quickly go out of business in a welter of lawsuits but it is possible to tread the line between a full and a cursory report for a long time with significant financial benefit. This is what occurred at NSSC 2312: the basic data is correct in that the mainworld is an airless rockball of the right size, the gas giants and other planets' orbits are right and so on but some inaccuracies exist in the survey. Most are generally too small and unimportant to be detected on a cursory verification sweep but a few are significant.

The innermost gas giant is used for wilderness refuelling and has a colder and denser atmosphere than noted in the exploration reports. Most ships use published data when plotting a refuelling skim, since making their own detailed measurements and analysis can take a couple of days. This can make the operation more hazardous than expected since the ship's velocity will result in hitting the atmosphere harder or at the wrong angle causing unexpected turbulence or skipping off the outer atmosphere. A good pilot should be able to deal with the problem but until updated data are published these risks remain.

NSSC 2111 X568000-0

Although slightly smaller and wetter than Earth, NSSC 2111 is an excellent colonisation prospect. Its thriving ecosystem is compatible with Earth life, allowing humans to eat local plants and animals or import their own. The climate is moderate at most latitudes and tectonic activity is limited, making this world a potentially delightful place to live.

Despite this, some of the indigenous wildlife might make this planet less attractive as a place to set up home. The seas contain some truly immense creatures that have not been extensively studied. Several species of aggressive ocean predators are thought to prey on the aquatic megafauna. The little available information consists of three paragraphs of text and a few hours of survey flyby video from a survey team that spent a short time on an island's shore observing the seas between there and the mainland.

Not much known about the land creatures, except that there are several species of plains and swamp-dwelling megafauna that move in small herds. These are perhaps mammalian or marsupial in nature, though some seem to have what look like feathers rather than fur. There are many species of land predators. These are mainly modestly sized pack hunters but there are at least a few big predators capable of bringing down megafauna.

NSSC 2111 is thus a fairly hazardous environment, which might influence the decision to colonise. However, with little data to go on the actual situation may be less or indeed more dangerous than is implied by the initial exploration report.



EPISODE 6: UNCHARTED WATERS

There is a perceptible change in the atmosphere aboard *Naddod* as the ship approaches the outer edge of the 'explored' region. The next couple of stops have been visited by mapping expeditions and the worlds have been cursorily surveyed but very few people have ever been this out far into the unknown.

Everyone has seen entertainment vids featuring alien death-traps, pirate havens and lost colonies of Neanderthal spacefarers (that one was actually quite good!) and rational people do not really believe that crossing a line on a map instantly makes a vessel vulnerable to crew mutinies, madness in the corridors and attack by hordes of unidentified vessels not, all the same, being this far out can feel a little creepy.

Some spacefarers compare it to standing at the very edge of the firelight on a dark night in the wilderness: you cannot see very far into the darkness just beyond the light but anything and everything out there can see *you*. Others prosaically compare it to sailing on the fringe of uncharted waters: there could be all manner of hazards out there but it is more likely that all there is, is more sea.

NSSC 2312

John sees no reason to visit the system's uninhabited rockball 'mainworld'. Instead he intends to make a gas giant refuelling and proceed to the next destination as soon as possible. He seems quite eager to get there but will only say 'you'll see' to those who ask. After the first few repetitions of that he starts to get annoyed.

The published figures for the gas giant's atmospheric temperature and pressure are incorrect. A gas giant atmosphere is a complex environment, with temperature layers and significant variation from point to point that makes a simple temperature/pressure reading impossible. What is needed is a detailed model of the gas giant's atmosphere and behaviour but that will take many days to put together.

Consequently it is commonplace to use previously published figures. Unless an especially-paranoid pilot decides to sit in orbit for three days, doing complex maths to build a computer-generated model that, apparently, already exists, then *Naddod* is going to begin her refuelling skim using the wrong data.

The figures and the model derived from them are not massively incorrect but they are an estimate based on a cursory scan and contain inaccuracies. *Naddod* is buffeted a lot more than expected as she dives into the atmosphere to begin her skim. At first it seems that it is just a 'rough patch' but the turbulence goes on too long and hull temperature begins to rise due to compression heating: *Naddod* is pushing through denser than expected gas and is going too fast for her own good.

A series of alarms start going off throughout the ship, including the decompression alert. Although the gas outside is denser than expected, pressure is still lower than that inside the ship at this altitude. The crew do not yet know how serious the leak is or if there is any other damage.

What follows is a fraught few minutes searching for a leaking cargo hatch seal. There does not seem to be much other damage and what there is can be quickly repaired if it does not get any worse. If the pilot slows the ship and climbs to a slightly higher altitude, the refuelling operation can be completed. John calls for a close inspection of all the ship's seals which turns up a couple more that were damaged but did not fail. Repairs are simple on the ground but in flight repairs require opening hatches and working outside in vacc suits, which makes the job more lengthy and hazardous.

If the crew want to stay in orbit over the gas giant and make proper repairs then this should be allowed; the repairs will be effective and the work should not be too dangerous. If the technically-minded crew members can assure John that their temporary patches will hold until their next destination (which they will), then he prefers to get underway and make proper repairs on the ground, in shirtsleeves, maybe with a cold beer waiting at the end. He seems to be really looking forward to the next destination, with an almost-wistful longing.

NSSC 2111

The crew can see why John wanted to get here as *Naddod* approaches NSSC 2111. It is a beautiful blue-green world of wide plains, forests and really, really huge oceans. Spectacular cloud formations obscure much of the surface but between them are vast expanses of lush green and deep blue.

John finally explains that he has heard a great deal about this world from a colleague who was on the initial survey mission and he cannot wait to get on the ground and 'take a look at the local attractions'. He seems amused by this cryptic remark and will not explain why; he will laugh openly at anyone who mentions or searches for signs of a settlement.

Astute observers might detect an almost feverish intensity about John. He is normally well balanced and somewhat detached from events but here he seems almost blindly excited to be here. Something else not quite right about his demeanour as well but it is hard to place. If asked, John just says that he has been in space for too long and wants to get outside under the sun or the clouds, if it works out that way.



On approach to land, the crew of *Naddod* will be treated to a vista of forests, rivers and plains grazed by herds of creatures, some of which are really very large! Many are colourful, with what appear to be feathers instead of fur. John suggests a landing site on a hill or similar location, away from the herds but not too far away. He flicks excitedly through all the footage the ship's cameras can take (which is quite a lot; photographic safaris are one of the things this vessel was built for!) and exclaims delightedly from time to time, calling anyone nearby over to take a look at what appears to most people to be a very large animal eating leaves from a bush.

Once *Naddod* is safely down, John will suggest that the crew's first priority is to complete an external check of seals, and make checks for any other possible damage then make repairs. He adds that this world has an abundance of wildlife, some of which is large and some of which is predatory; a few creatures are both. Nobody should be outside alone at any time; anyone going outside should be armed or accompanied by someone with a weapon.

Although common sense tells John that repairs must come first, he is keen to get a closer look at the local wildlife which he has heard so much about. He pushes the crew hard to get on with the assessment and repair work and is more abrasive than usual with anyone who does not seem to be making progress.

Make Repairs Whilst the Sun Shines

It is warm and pleasant outside *Naddod*, with strange alien plant smells occasionally wafting on the breeze. The distant bellow from some huge grazing animal can be a distraction but the wildlife gives *Naddod* a wide berth for the most part. The damage assessment takes all the remaining daylight hours. It is simply a matter of starting at one end of the ship and carefully moving to the other, inspecting every seal, joint and plate along the way. As painfully boring as it is, this assessment will make actual repairs a simple matter and those repairs will mean that the ship does not suddenly spring a massive leak or suffer a structural failure in jump.

During the day there will be one incident of note, which could become potentially serious. A trio of flying predators, about the size of small dogs, swoops down at the most isolated crewmember. An experienced woodsman like John would be able to tell that this is not an attack as such but a sort of prey assessment but John will be raking through camera footage or preparing his gear for an expedition at the time and may not be able to comment.

The predators will make a claw strike at their target whilst passing by in a fast but eerily silent swoop. Their intent is to draw blood and see what the 'possible prey' does, rather than to bring down something to eat there and then. They will take easy prey but they are pack hunters capable of bringing down an animal the size of a deer if working together. Scouting groups like this one locate possible prey and return to the pack, which then returns to attacks *en masse* when the time is right.

The predators are hard to hit with firearms due to their speed. They will make no more than a couple of passes at people working outside before flying off but may return later to have another go. They are not unduly discouraged by loud noises such as weapon discharges, as many local animals make a lot of noise but if one or more of their number is brought down they will leave for a time.

It will become obvious that anyone working on the ship needs at least one person with a weapon watching the skies and working outside at night seems impractical anyway. The repairs are scheduled for the next day and the ship is sealed up at sundown. John is not pleased by the delay in launching his expedition but he is well aware of the necessity.

John's Expedition: Day One

John is keen to begin his field expedition the next day. He insists that everyone who comes must be armed as the local wildlife is pretty dangerous but he is not going to kill anything if he can avoid it. What he wants to do is to get video footage of as much of the local wildlife as possible, which can be studied to learn about this world's ecology later. John does not like doing what he calls 'drive-by science' but there is little alternative; *Naddod* needs to be underway as soon as possible.

John wants everyone to make free use of the cameras they will be given. Nothing is trivial: footage of bushes, rocks and a stream might not be the stuff of evening news programmes but it is important to build a picture of the world's ecology rather than just taking pictures of the biggest and most exciting creatures. As John says, 'you can't study a creature in isolation; you have to understand how it fits into the wider environment'.

The expedition moves slowly but purposefully out from the ship, taking detours to film interesting creatures or to get panoramas from suitable high points. The aim is to be unobtrusive, to avoid disturbing the wildlife too much and as long as the crew are careful they should be able to get good footage of a variety of creatures and exotic plants.

John's plan is to move in a wide loop; one day out, camp overnight and one day back. John would prefer to stay for weeks or months but the time simply is not available, so he tries to cram all he can into the available time. The climax of the day for John comes towards evening, when he scrambles up a rocky rise and begins excitedly filming what lies beyond. He keeps exclaiming 'They're real! And we've got footage!' and the like.

On the far side of the rise is a family group of grazing megafauna, an adult male, a pair of females plus four juveniles. They appear to be somewhat similar to gigantic armadillos but are covered with feathers. On the females and the juveniles these are predominantly dark brown and deep red in colour. The male is a splendid creature of bright reds and purples, whose long tail feathers splay up in a manner not unlike that of a peacock, only on an epic scale.



John is clearly a very happy man and decides to spend the remaining two hours or so of daylight filming the creatures. He says that they are known as Farrow's Peacock and were thought to be a myth by most reputable ecologists and frontiersmen. When a local predator comes a bit too close, the male splays out his tail and makes a booming roar that sends the threat scurrying off. John just cannot get enough of this and will not move from his vantage point until it is almost fully dark.

As the crew makes camp, John is happier than anyone has ever seen him, talking animatedly about how so many hunters have tried to find 'the Farrow' but ended up discovering Iceland instead. This is the pinnacle of his career as far as he is concerned; he has filmed the Farrow! He is sad to be leaving so soon but maybe he will be able to come back on the return leg, John muses. It is late before he finally settles down to sleep.

John's Expedition: Day Two

As dawn breaks the next day, the crew would expect John to be up and about very early, eager to press on and get more footage. Yet he is still in his sleeping bag, apparently sound asleep.

Closer inspection shows that John is not actually asleep; he is in fact semi-conscious. He is running a fever (39 °C) and, if woken, says he has a raging thirst, booming headache and acute pains in his joints. He is very weak and struggles to walk. He clearly needs medical attention and as time passes he becomes increasingly feverish and weak. Eventually he collapses and becomes unconscious.

Getting John back to the ship (or bringing the ship to John) is the only solution and could occur in various ways. The crew might have to struggle through the wilderness supporting John – and lacking his advice, they could get into serious problems – if they did not leave a pilot at the ship or it is still grounded with repairs ongoing. If there is a pilot at the ship, or one is sent back to get it, then the problem of moving John is simplified.

However, there is another problem. The same pack of flying predators that tested out the characters' edibility when they first arrived will begin to watch the group and will make an attack if they get the opportunity. Their usual tactics are to make diving claw attacks to panic and scatter a group of prey, then to mob an isolated individual and tear shreds off it until it collapses from blood loss. The constant barrage of wings and claws is frightening and confusing, though there are less actual attacks than the general chaos would suggest.

If the crew keep their heads and stay together, the predators can be fought off. As previously mentioned, they are not unduly frightened of loud noises but will be deterred if a few of their number are brought down by gunfire or well-timed swings with hand weapons. Alternatively, the crew might come up with another solution.

The Farrow's Peacock family are still in the area and the flying predators know them to be dangerous; they will not get too close, while the Farrow's will not feel threatened by the humans if they stay quiet. It might be possible to shelter under their protection until the ship arrives. It would delight John to see the mythical beast he has always hoped actually existed protecting him and his people as he fades in and out of consciousness.

Once John is back aboard *Naddod*, his condition can be analysed. His body is producing symptoms of infection and fever but there does not seem to be any obvious disease. *Naddod's* medical facilities are geared to traumatic injuries rather than analysing what might be a viral infection, so the answer is not immediately obvious. John does respond to generic treatment of his symptoms but he is weaker than usual and sometimes feverish and appears to be losing weight. He has an appetite; indeed, he is hungry and thirsty a lot of the time but does not seem to be getting proper nutrition from his food.

Although not really up to hard physical activity, John is still able to get about the ship and give orders and he wants to push on with the mission. If pressed, he will admit that he has felt unwell, on and off, for several months and has had similar bouts of fever a couple of times in the past year. Those were not as bad and he at the time assumed he had just picked up one of the many strains of cold or 'flu that get passed around among colonies as ships travel between them.

John's condition, outwardly at least, seems to worry Amber more than it does him. However, observant characters will note a change in his behaviour at times. He is actually more tolerant and friendly with people, as if he wants to make friends to be with him in his final days. He watches his footage from the expedition over and over, making notes and occasionally says wistful things like 'I hope Morey sees this someday' and 'well, I found the Farrow. I can die a happy man'.

John is quite convinced that he is dying but will not admit his fears to anyone, insisting that he is fine and unwisely trying to prove it with physical activity. It will seem to most others that he is just a typical tough-guy, refusing to admit that he is ill but those who spot the change in behaviour might realise that he knows his condition is extremely serious.

John does not know why he is ill but he is correct in that if he does not get the right treatment, he will die in the near future. Despite this conviction, John wants to press on to Tootega and thereafter to the final destination of the mission.



OPPOSITION

Flying Predator

Str 5 (-1) **Dex** 7 (+0) **End** 5 (-1)

3 kg Flying Chaser

Skills: Athletics 2, Survival 0, Recon 1,
Melee (Natural Weapons) 2.

Weapons: Claws (3d6 damage) Armour 0.

This creature has not been named by zoologists and so could be given a label that might stick by the crew of *Naddod*. Perhaps it might be named after whoever gets clawed first.

A single predator will not attack a human unless they are clearly weak or injured but in a pack they are quite capable of bringing down creatures larger than humans.

The usual mode of attack is for several individuals to swoop at the target at once from different directions, confusing and frightening it, while one or two others close in to make slashing claw attacks. Once the prey is sufficiently weak the pack descends on it to finish it off with claws and beaks and the feeding frenzy begins.

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