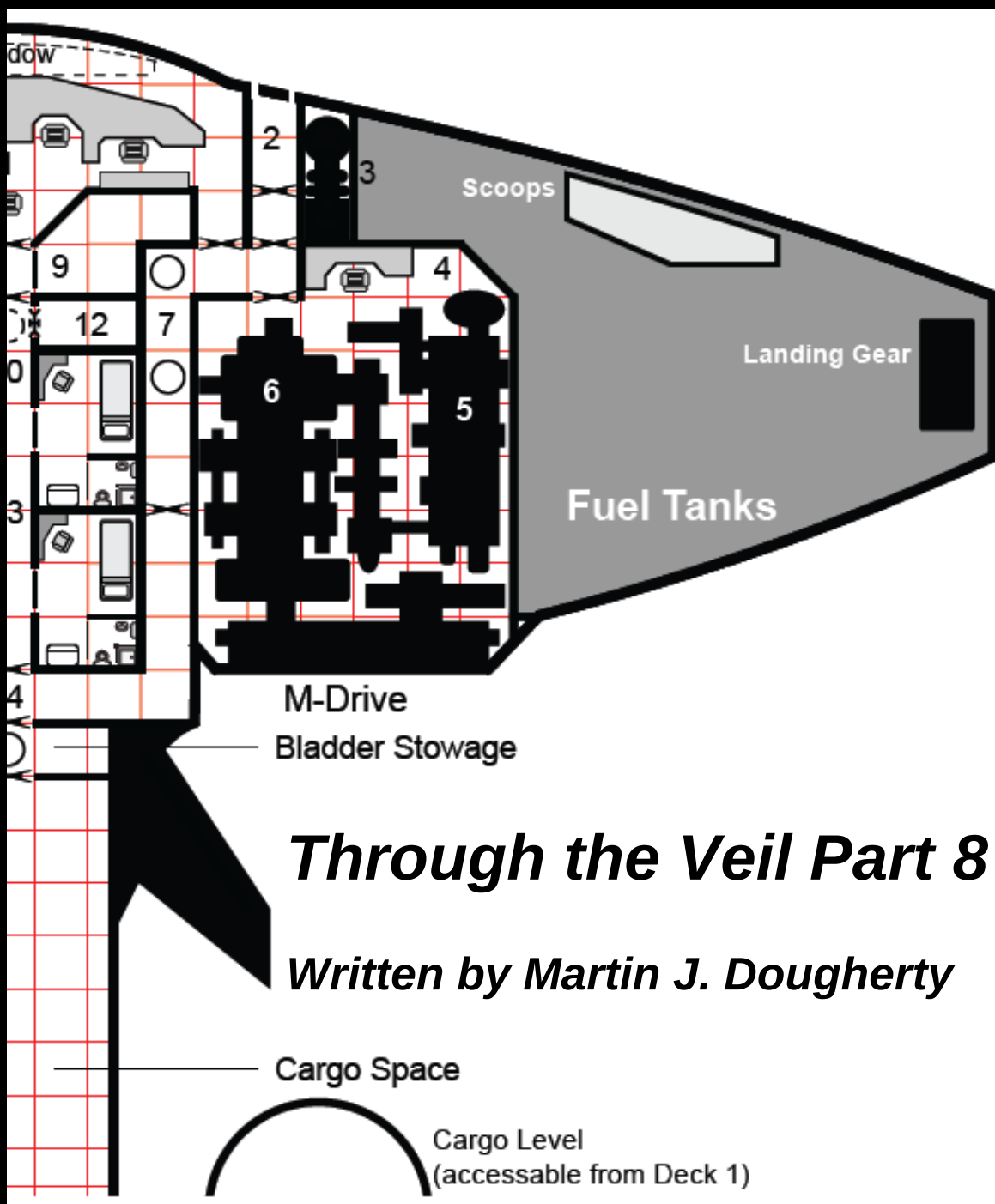




OUTER VEIL



Through the Veil Part 8

Written by Martin J. Dougherty

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THROUGH THE VEIL 8

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CONTENTS

REFEREE'S INFORMATION

2, 3

EPISODE 8: THE DARK REACHES

4

THROUGH THE VEIL 8

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REFeree's INFORMATION

DARK REACHES SUBSECTOR

Dark Reaches subsector lies beyond the official boundaries of explored space. That does not mean its systems have never been visited of course; several exploration missions have pushed this far out. However, exploration has been patchy and surveys even more so, resulting in very little solid data reaching the official databases. Most of what there is comes from a single survey of a given world or region, and has not been confirmed and corroborated by follow-up missions.

It is possible, of course, that unofficial missions have produced more concrete data on the region or at least parts of it, but these would not be entered into the main databases – not when there is big money to be made from developing a good find before anyone else gets there. Likewise, there may be 'official' data that has not yet been released.

When expansion into the subsector begins in earnest, it will be relatively easy to achieve; every single system is reachable by Jump-1 starships, albeit only by way of a lengthy transit in some cases. This, and the presence of several 'garden worlds' makes the region a good prospect for development in the future. At present, the subsector lies too far out from Terra to be a sound investment – there are worlds much closer to home that can be developed for lower cost, and these may start showing a return on the investment before the transports ships have even started their second run all the way out to the Dark Reaches.

Transit time is the problem here, and even with the advent of the Jump-2 drive the length of time a ship would be tied up just to make one shipment to a world in Dark Reaches makes large-scale investment impractical. However, for a smaller group there are some opportunities. The colony at Jormungand is an example of this. It consists of just a few thousand people and a fairly basic industrial base, and this was difficult enough to set up. A single transport ship brings in a trickle of new people and resources, every few months, but for now the colony has to be self-sufficient.

Colonies like Jormungand, if successful, can grow steadily and eventually become a major power. However, the process is very slow and a single disaster can cause the project to collapse. It may be that by the time full-scale development of the region is undertaken, Jormungand – or some other small, unofficial colony – will be well enough established to become the hub of expansion in the area. In this case it will probably be easier to buy out the colony or co-opt it than to try to set up a rival installation elsewhere.

In a region like Dark Reaches subsector, there is nothing to stop several groups all settling on different parts of the same world. If the settlements are far enough apart they might as well be in different star systems; most small colonies lack the transport assets to assist or fight one another, and there can be little competition for resources between two groups of under a thousand people on different land masses. Sociologists predict that most such situations will resolve themselves; one group will deal with its problems sufficiently better than the other(s) to emerge as the dominant power on the world, and the other will be sidelined.

NSSC 2510 X200000-0

NSSC 2510 is a tidally locked rockball orbiting close to its primary. Roasted on one side, frozen on the other, it is primarily notable for its possession of a small and extremely erratic moon. This body is probably a captured asteroid, and seems to be slowly disintegrating under the stress of being baked then frozen in rapid succession. Its orbit is rather eccentric and appears to be unstable – it may be that it is in the process of settling down or the capture is not quite perfect and it will zoom off again at some point. Alternatively, the moon's orbit may have been disturbed by some event in the past few thousand years. No detailed study has ever been undertaken.

NSSC 2510 is not a suitable place for wilderness refuelling, but fortunately hydrogen is available elsewhere in the system. The innermost gas giant is the best prospect, although its large ring system and several moons do make for a complex course calculation on approach and departure. This can extend the refuelling period by few hours and could make a hasty approach or Jump hazardous. However, for a crew that takes their time there is no great probability of disaster.

NSSC 2609 XA63000-0

Lying at the inner edge of the warm zone, NSSC 2609 is something of a 'hell world'. Although its atmosphere is breathable and there is some surface water, most of the planet is baked desert or rugged mountains. When conditions are right, the small equatorial sea can begin to boil around midday. Incredibly perhaps, there is life in this sea, in the form of extremophile bacteria that can tolerate high temperatures. There is only a little life on land, most of it in the form of hardy crustaceans that scuttle from one damp area to another and burrow into the sand to escape the midday heat



Of course, NSSC 2609 is not a 'desert planet' as such; there are large areas that are reasonably fertile and possess enough water to support small forests of extremely hardy cactus-like plants. These oases are mostly found close to the poles or in areas where mountains trap evaporating water and allow it to run back into the sheltered area. Away from these regions, surface water is rare; most of the planet's water is trapped in deep aquifers and sometimes comes to the surface as steam jets.

The presence of water and breathable air would normally make a world a good prospect for colonisation, but NSSC 2609 probably presents as many problems as a rockball with no air or water. A crew attempting to wilderness-refuel on the surface of this planet would need protection from the heat for personnel, and of course would need to find a suitable body of water. This might well mean trying to take up the near-boiling water from the equatorial sea.

NSSC 2610 X41000-0

NSSC 2609 is a near-rockball, with just a trace of atmospheric gas. This is mainly carbon dioxide. There is no surface water on-planet and no gas giant in the system, making obtaining fuel problematical. A ship could become stranded here unless some source of hydrogen were found. The only good solution would be to search for comets or ice asteroids that could be cracked for hydrogen, but a star system is a big place and finding something suitable takes a long time – during which supplies could easily run out. Systems of this sort are bypassed by most ships unless there is a good starport available, which in this case there is not.



EPISODE 8: THE DARK REACHES

This episode is intended to be relatively short compared to some of the others, taking the form of an interlude before the finale of the adventure as a whole. However, it may be that the players end up generating all manner of side trips and self-imposed delays.

The medication obtained at Tootega has helped stabilise John's condition for now, but it is obvious that he is still very ill and not getting any better. Amber has been able to rule out all known infections and diseases as a cause for John's condition, which leaves only a few possibilities. It may be that the condition is genetic, or simply a result of living a hard life. Amber is extremely frustrated as well as very worried; she cannot even figure out what is wrong, let alone help John recover.

NSSC 2510

Naddod's first stop in Dark Reaches subsector is the innermost gas giant of the NSSC 2510 system. The mainworld, such as it is, is a useless rockball with no real prospect of obtaining fuel, so a skimming operation at the gas giant is the best option. This does involve a carefully plotting course through the complex system of moons and rings that surround the gas giant, and there is always the possibility that data on this system is as wayward as the last giant that *Naddod* visited.

A delay to take detailed readings on the gas giant is not feasible, as John's condition is still worsening. Indeed, a seat-of-the-pants rush through the rings might be an attractive option as it will save several hours of careful manoeuvring. It is dangerous, however, and would require a good pilot to be at the top of their game throughout the passage.

Whichever option is chosen, *Naddod* will be able to complete her refuelling with only two incidents. The first is a fleeting sensor contact, indicating a metallic object with a small power signature, located in an orbit that places it inside the gas giant's atmosphere. In this location, it is, deep enough to remain hidden from most sensor scans outside the atmosphere but not so deep as to require more than the occasional low-power acceleration burst to keep whatever it is in orbit.

The object, craft or whatever does not respond to *Naddod's* presence, and will not react if approached or contacted by radio. If the crew choose to investigate, their fears that it may be a mine or a lurking pirate ship are allayed as they approach – it is a naval navigation beacon. These beacons are seeded throughout star systems close to Terra to assist in tasks such as threading through a complex ring system, (such as like the one here) or calibrating Jump drives during a fast transit. Beacons are uncommon this far out, to say the least. The presence of one suggests that the Navy has an interest in the system or expects a lot of traffic at some point.

The other incident is more personal. John decides to reveal the mission's destination, which is 'the naval base at NSC 2810'. There is no such base on any map, and indeed no indication that any kind of base has been constructed this far out. John might be hallucinating or something, but he seems rational enough as he explains that Colonel Schmidt is involved in the construction of what is currently a naval base but will eventually be an exploration-support facility. To get there it will be necessary to refuel at NSSC 2610.

The base is not the final destination of the mission, however. John tells his crew that 'after that we're going to Iceland.' By now they are probably fairly sick of his obsession with Iceland, but this is not a euphemism for his death or for a big disappointment, he says. There's a place where every blade of grass drips with butter and...well, it's a good place. They'll see. The naval base commander knows where it is, and if the characters tell her 'we're looking for Iceland' then she'll tell them how to get there. That's the final destination, the place that Colonel Schmidt wants his cargo delivered to.

John suddenly tells Amber that, "If this is genetic or hereditary, you don't need to worry" and begins haltingly trying to explain that she is not his daughter; well, she is as far as he is concerned, but they're not related by blood. Amber cuts him off by telling him she's known all of that for years. She ushers the characters out of the room at this point.

A little later, Amber joins the other characters, telling them that John is sleeping... and might not wake up. He is becoming very weak, and she thinks she has found a correlation between certain unusual compounds in his blood and his condition. As the concentration of the compounds has dropped, he has become increasingly weak. The compounds are organic and seem to be naturally produced, but she cannot find anything in the food or other supplies that might provide them.

The only solution Amber can think of is that the compounds are being produced by some kind of parasite or symbiote that John is carrying. But the correlation between the compounds and his condition seems to indicate that he needs them rather than them poisoning him. Since nobody else has the same symptoms or (if the characters consent to a test) seem to have the same compounds, she comes to the conclusion that John has carried the parasites or whatever they are for a long time, and his body needs them. If they are dying off, then that would explain the situation.

The only answer seems to be to either render John capable of surviving without his parasites or to find some new ones, or perhaps an artificial source of the compounds the parasites are producing. To prove her theory, Amber needs a proper medical facility, which hopefully the naval base will have. They need to get there as fast as possible, which raises another question.



John said that *Naddod* would refuel at NSSC 2610, but that is a waterless world, with no gas giants in the system. Going there could be a death-trap, and will at the very least impose a delay that John's failing body cannot survive. The best prospect for fuel might be NSSC 2609, but John seemed lucid and competent when he said to go via NSSC 2610.

Decisions need to be made, and *Naddod* needs to get into Jump as fast as possible of John is to survive.

Fuel Stop

John is not conscious much during the next couple of weeks, though he does not need life support to keep him breathing – not yet anyway. He wakes up a couple of days into the Jump and can explain the NSSC 2610 destination with a simple statement: 'There's a tanker. Obviously. You think I'm a fool?' John's heart is not really in the rant that follows if the characters say they've decided to go via a different system, but he does point out that so long as they get to the naval base, that'll do.

If the characters do go via NSSC 2610, they emerge from Jump over the mainworld to find a small naval auxiliary in orbit, positioned to refuel any vessel that has the right codes. It turns out that Colonel Schmidt has sent a few ships out via this route, and the tanker is a more or less permanent fixture. It is one of the loneliest and most remote deployments in known space, with a small crew stuck on a small ship in the middle of nowhere for weeks on end until their replacement vessel arrives and they can return to other duties. The crew are just glad to have someone to talk to, but they are very efficient in the fuel transfer.

If the characters decide to go via NSSC 2609, they will have to obtain their own fuel. This probably means landing on the surface of a very hot world and running hoses into water that is almost boiling. A gas giant refuelling would be possible, but it is likely that the course laid in was for the mainworld, and a transit to the gas giant would take days that John may not have.

The challenges inherent in the refuelling at NSSC 2609 are mainly technical and environmental. There are no very threatening animals and no people at all on-planet, but it is still possible that the crew might get themselves into trouble. The place is hostile but in its way quite beautiful, and the miracle of life might appeal to some characters – even here, in this baking hell, there are animals of a sort. 'Life gets everywhere' as a prominent xenobiologist once said. NSSC 2609 is proof of that; the place might be worthy of further study in the future, perhaps revealing some new secrets of how animals can survive and evolve in the harshest environments.

However, in the meantime the crew need to get John to the naval base before his body shuts down completely. Anyone who closely examines the straw that Amber is grasping at here will find it to be thin indeed, but it's what they have – maybe the naval base will have a medical facility that can help John, and maybe they'll take him to this mythical Iceland of his and bury him there. He'd like that, Amber says, but she's pretty sure he'd rather live another few dozen years.

And so, with fuel aboard from whatever source, *Naddod* enters jump and heads for the naval base.

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