

A Plague on All Your Houses!

by M.J. Dougherty & Neil A. Frier

Art by John Lucas, Colorized by Keith Johnson

Introduction

The unstable political situation in the Republic of Garoo provides an excellent adventure background. Unable to stomach Darrian expansion in the region, the Republic's War Council is playing a dangerous game of brinkmanship, trying to remain independent by playing off several factions against one another. This has resulted in a termination of diplomatic relations with the Imperium, though the megacorporation Naasirka is seeking an exception to the blanket ban on Imperial trade to/through Garoo. The reason for Naasirka's heavy involvement in the Garoo situation remains unknown.

The Zhodani Consulate has made statements of support for the Republic's stance and has deployed a single vessel to the system. This is seen as a token gesture of support, but the implications of a Zhodani warship in orbit above Garoo are considerable. Most important, firing on the Zhodani ship would be an act of war against the Consulate. Its presence considerably reduces the threat of direct military intervention by the Darrians or the Imperials, and moves the situation into the diplomatic arena.

The Republic is in an impossible situation. Unwilling to back down, unable to accept Darrian expansion, and with support available only from an unwelcome source, the Republic must somehow chart a course through these perilous times to achieve true independence.

This series of adventures (of which this article is the first) explores the Garoo Question, and in time will lead to a final answer. The adventures are intended to be played in the order they are presented, but can stand alone if need be.

The setting can be used for other adventures, but covert (or at least deniable) operations are the order of the day. This is a difficult diplomatic situation, not an open war. Thus Imperial agencies must work through deniable cats paws such as mercs or free traders. Overt operations must be seen to comply with local law and diplomatic courtesy.

It seems unlikely that the Republic can survive the situation it has created, but time will tell and the actions of individuals may well be decisive.

GM's Information

This adventure was devised by Neil A. Frier from an original concept by the Keith brothers, first presented in GDW's Double Adventure 5: *Chamax Plague/Horde*.

In the closing days of 1120, the War Council of the Republic of Garoo issued a decree that all pro-Imperial and pro-Darrian companies and personnel must immediately leave

the Republic. A second announcement a few days later stated that while most Imperial and Darrian companies were merely fronts for spy networks, the Naasirka Corporation was a loyal friend to the Republic and would be excepted from the order.

Holotapes purporting to show preparations for armed resistance by Astroburger staff were later dismissed as media grandstanding on the part of the corporation, but for a time the situation was very tense indeed. However, the various corporations packed up to leave and two Imperial Marine assault vessels, the *Major Aaron* and the *Major Aidan* were diverted from a training exercise to evacuate the Imperial embassy staff. These operations were carried off with a minimum of fuss despite the tight time frame dictated by the War Council.

A mercenary team was sent to the Sternmetal Horizons installation on Garoo III. The team had orders to forcibly remove the miners if they chose to be excessively stubborn.

Only the miners weren't the problem.

Players' Introduction

All player-characters are part of a mercenary unit organized and equipped as an Imperial Marine security squad (p. T:SM116). The squad comprises a four-man fire team led by a corporal. If there are more than four players, additional personnel can be assigned -- a driver for the ATV, a medic, communications specialist, etc.

Characters can be created with the Imperial Marine template, and could use the Heavy Weapons Specialist, Combat Engineer, or other suitable templates. No more than one of any type of specialist should be assigned to the team.

Scene 1: Arrival at Garoo III

As the Imperial Marine assault vessel *Major Aaron* awaits landing permission above Port Herty, the only spaceport on Garoo III, an Imperial Marine lieutenant calls the team to the utility room for a briefing. Details of the world of Garoo III are made available. A full description of the planet has already been published, but here is a short overview:

Garoo III is a chilly little planet with a breathable standard atmosphere. Somewhat dry with many stretches of desert and rocky badlands, the world has no inhabitants other than the port staff and a few scattered mining and prospecting operations.

The objective is to retrieve the Sternmetal personnel and return them to the port for evacuation. Personal belongings may be brought along, but any mining equipment is to be left behind. The team is given the following specific orders:

- The team will proceed by ATV to the Sternmetal Horizons base 93 miles from Port Herty. Vessels are only permitted to land at the port, and things are tense enough at present without defying the injunction. The drive will take about 10 hours.
- All 12 Sternmetal personnel will be evacuated. Reasonable force may be used to

ensure compliance with the evacuation order. Under no circumstances will Sternmetal personnel be allowed to remain behind.

- The installation is not broadcasting or acknowledging transmissions, as of three days ago. A major sandstorm blew through the region at the time communications ceased and may have damaged the antenna. It is possible that the miners know that evac is on the way and are being deliberately difficult. The corporal will assess and deal with the situation on-site, subject to the proviso that all Imperial personnel must leave Garoo III.
- It is not expected that the base personnel will actively resist the evac team, though they will certainly protest and be awkward about it. All base personnel are Imperial citizens and on the payroll of a major Megacorporation known to aggressively seek redress for mishandling of its employees and equipment by outside agencies. The team will act with all due courtesy at all times.

Personnel Roster for the base:

- Adkhar Ekiir, mission leader
- Arthur Broxon, chief geologist
- Vaul Ricson, geologist
- Sara Murmas, geologist
- Marsha Koskavie, geologist
- Gamiir Enleshkaadshar, security officer
- Andrea Smith, mechanic
- Shallar Tarchaka, miner
- Magel Hispotai, miner
- Dr. Sabola Togota, medical officer
- Pierre Donshalon, cook
- Boris Tolomane, clerk

Technically, the Sternmetal personnel are supposed to be unarmed in compliance with local law. However, it seems likely that the team has a few guns hidden away in case of trouble. They should not have anything that can damage combat armor.

In addition to the team's ATV, the miners have a few vehicles of their own. Transport will not be a problem.

If the team members ask any questions, there is little that the lieutenant can add. All she knows is that some kind of hideous diplomatic mess has exploded in the Garoo system

and the Imperial Navy has been saddled with a rush job of getting civilians out for their own good -- whether they like it or not. There are no answers available, so all the Imperial military can do is obey their orders, do their part, and let the higher-ups sort out the mess.

The briefing concludes as landing permission comes through. The team has less than one hour to collect their equipment and prepare for the mission, which is to begin as soon as the ship touches down.

Available Equipment: In addition to whatever personal weapons the group has with them, a small amount of equipment is available from stores. This amounts to:

- 1 snub pistol per team member
- 1 manpacked 4mm VRFGG-10 with a full, 500-round hopper
- 3 4mm gauss rifles with RAM grenade launchers; 3 magazines and 4 HE grenades per gun
- 1 4mm gauss pistol with 3 magazines
- 1 set of TL12 combat armor
- 3 combat environment suits, with light infantry helmets, LI visors, and short-range communicators
- 1 multiview goggles set
- 1 first aid kit
- 1 mini toolkit (mechanical)

If additional equipment is required, the team will have to convince the *Major Aaron's* supply officer to release it. This will not be easy, as he doesn't think any team member needs more than one weapon, and is opposed both to the potential for overkill on the part of the team and to the paperwork involved in releasing stores unnecessarily. Persuasive team members may be able to pry loose a few extras, but there are no more gauss rifles or heavy weapons aboard, and whatever they get won't be much.

The team will be issued a tracked ATV. This vehicle is as described on p. GT147, except that it has been converted to an APC by the addition of 15 seats. The vehicle carries a 4mm VRFGG (which must remain on the vehicle), a medkit, and a few spares for field repairs.

Scene 2: Into the Wastelands

Port Herty is situated at the edge of the Dorian Wastelands, an area of rugged mountains and shifting sand dunes. It is surrounded by a 10-foot plasticrete wall with a pair of weapon towers guarding the only entryway.

Within the wall lies a drab collection of prefab huts and fuel bladders clustered around a dozen landing pads. Most of the buildings are owned by the Customs Corps and used as offices, to house personnel or for other official purposes. A few are leased by private concerns, including Cotarii's Handy Allstore (a general store in the old tradition of such places), the Badland Rest (the world's only inn) and Honest Thiaais' ATVs (a garage and vehicle rental center).

The port is a pretty depressing place, taking utilitarianism to an extreme.

Weaponry is much in evidence among the Customs Corps personnel. All duty personnel wear sidearms, and flak-jacketed guards patrol the wall top and among the buildings. They are armed with TL9 ACRs, inferior to the marines' weaponry, but there are a lot of them. There is a distinct atmosphere of tension among the Garoo personnel. They are not hostile towards the team, just nervous at the situation.

As soon as the ATV rolls out of the cargo bay, an open-topped Customs Corps buggy signals that the team should follow it closely. The buggy leads the ATV on a path well clear of the fuel bladders, then out of the main gateway. There, a Customs Corps trooper jumps down from the buggy and approaches the ATV.

She hands over a datapad with precise coordinates of the Sternmetal base and warnings of bad terrain along the route. Wishing the team a safe journey -- she appears to genuinely mean this -- she tells them that they are clear to arm their weapons and proceed. Weapons probably are already armed, but this is official confirmation that the team no longer has to be discreet.

Note that blatantly ignoring the locals' directives will draw a sharp repeat of the order and even a warning shot. The Marines' CO will order them to comply. Failure to do so could

lead to a free-fire incident which will result in a criminal trial for the survivors.

Assuming the team does not disgrace the service, they proceed for the first 40 miles through a landscape cut by flash-flood valleys, dotted with thorny bushes and coarse grasses. The data supplied by the Customs Corps allows avoidance of really difficult going, and this stage of the drive is relatively routine.

Gradually, the countryside gives way to the real wastelands, and driving becomes a real effort. Traversing the dunes and rocky wastes is very tiring, and the team may wish to spell the ATV driver to avoid excess fatigue. Three Vehicle skill rolls are required to avoid problems along the way. Success on all rolls brings the ATV to the base after 10 hours. Failed rolls will force the team to backtrack and lose 1-3 hours, or may result in minor mechanical problems with the ATV. A critical success on any roll shaves 1 hour off the journey time.

There are no major hazards in the journey, but fiendish referees may enjoy seeing the team struggle to repair a thrown track in the bottom of a rocky gully, with suspicious movements along the rim. This is an opportunity for a little problem-solving and to shake down the team before the action starts.

Scene 3: The Base -- Outside

The Sternmetal base is situated among the ancient sand dunes, backed up against a rock outcrop. The action of wind around the outcrop has piled up huge permanent dunes, obscuring the base from a distance.

The installation itself is a steel structure standing 10 feet high. In front of it is a cleared area from which the sand is partially held back by fiber netting over the nearby dunes. There is a thin film of sand over everything.

On the cleared area sits a fuel bladder, a generator hut, and two tracked ATVs. These are tough and rugged vehicles similar to the one the team is using, except they have no weapons mounts. They do have an impressive set of lights rigged up, to support field prospecting operations.

No light can be seen from the base as the storm shutters are firmly down over all windows.

Smart adventurers (those making a Survival: Desert roll) will realize that the sand in the compound is minor wind drift, not the result of a major storm. There is no drifting within the cleared area, which would be expected if the base had been hit by a major sandstorm.

Initial Investigation: A closer inspection of the ATVs reveals that one of the vehicles is totally wrecked. The side facing away from the Marines as they approach has been melted. Further investigation shows that metal has dripped onto the ground and left a pool of re-solidified metal inside the vehicle, but there is no sign of heat or plasma damage. A Chemistry (IQ-6) roll allows the inspector to realize that the most likely cause was a highly reactive acid. Miners might have access to such a compound for sample separation. The other ATV appears to be in working order.

The generator is a self-contained fusion unit housed in a prefab hut. It is undamaged and working perfectly. Its cables run along a shallow trench to the base, covered by metal boards and a layer of sand.

The Base Buildings: Along the front of the base is a 5-foot wide balcony with a guardrail. The balcony, 10 feet off the ground, is reached by ladders built into the two struts that support it at the ends. Access to the base is through a main hatch situated on this balcony. This form of access is a common security feature in frontier installations.

The hatch is controlled by a simple electronic panel, and is not locked in any way. There is no other easy means of access, as the building is constructed of high-grade materials, with storm shutters closed over all windows.

Scene 3.50 -- Inside

The GM should devise a suitable plan of the building, including as many rooms and functions to the base as is deemed necessary. A large complex is good for lots of creeping about and character interaction while trying to discover what happened to the miners. It also presents more options in the later scenes. note, however, that a large, empty building may get boring for gung-ho players.

Certain rooms are necessary to the plot, and should be included in any base design:

A -- Entry Port: A bare room containing lockers for outdoor clothing and equipment. The area is somewhat messy, battered and obviously lived-in, but has not been damaged other than by daily use.

B -- Ore Sample Room: A scientific laboratory set up to carry out testing on ore samples recovered by the miners. The equipment is specialized to its role and is of high quality TL11 manufacture. Samples of various ores lie around the place, and a search will turn up three important facts.

- Most of the ore is pretty worthless. There is a very low proportion of useful minerals in nearly all of the samples.
- There are traces of uranium in some of the samples, enough that extraction with high-technology equipment might just be viable.
- There are traces of starship-grade crystaliron present. This material does not occur naturally but is grown in the manner of chemical crystals. The traces do not match known Darrian, Droyne, Imperial, or Zhodani patterns.

C -- Computer Library: This small chamber contains the base's main computers and a maintenance access port to the hardware. The room is intact and dusty. Running a check on computer records will take a few minutes, and will turn up the following facts:

- A broad vein of uranium-bearing rocks has been discovered, but the quality is very low.
- Drone sampler moles have discovered what appears to be a source of crystaliron.

- A second tunnel (designated Tunnel Beta) has been opened to investigate the crystaliron finds. Initial research seems to indicate that a starship crashed into the sand at some time in the past. There are no records of a ship lost on Garoo III in the miners' database, but this is not extensive.

D -- Store Room: This room is a mess. The door is melted in the same manner as the ATV and no food remains. Even parts of the shelving are missing. There is damage to the interior of the room, again apparently from some kind of acid weapon.

E -- Radio Room: The room and the equipment within have been destroyed. The floor has a large crater (from acid damage). There is also a good deal of small-arms damage around the chamber. On the floor lies an Instellarms 9mm ACR. The magazine is empty.

F -- R&R Room: This, the largest room in the complex, used to have video booths, a dining area and comfortable furnishings. It now resembles a war zone. The furniture is piled up at the doors and the walls are peppered with small-arms damage. There are three large craters in the metal floor.

G -- Drift Mine Alpha: Located at the rear of the complex, a sturdy door leads from a small storage/utility room into one of the two tunnels created by the robotic samplers. The door has been welded shut from the tunnel side.

If the team wishes to investigate the tunnel, they will have to get the door open or cut it away. It has DR 5 and 15 hit points. Small-arms fire will ricochet off the door and endanger personnel in the chamber.

Beyond the door lies a tunnel seven feet in diameter, with discarded welding gear on the floor close by the entry. Any radiation measuring devices will detect a strong source about a quarter-mile ahead. The tunnel is unlit.

If the team proceeds to the end of the tunnel, they will find the robot sampler standing idle at the end of the tunnel (1/4 mile, more or less). Beside it lies one of the miners, Shallar Tarchaka. Shallar is wearing a set of Sternmetal work coveralls and weakly clutches an ACR. Nearby are a few water containers and some empty ration packs.

Shallar is very ill from radiation poisoning and is semi-conscious at best. He will not be able to say anything until he has had several days' treatment in a high-tech hospital or the medical bay aboard the *Major Aaron*.

H -- Drift Mine Beta: The second tunnel leads from a similar utility space at the back of the complex, but the sturdy door covering this one is missing. Fragments of it remain, suggesting destruction by acid damage.

The room shows signs of a firefight, with extensive small-arms and acid damage. Amid the destruction lie four furry balls 18 to 24 inches in diameter. As the adventurers approach, the furry balls uncurl, revealing themselves to be spider-like creatures with an iris valve-like maw and no visible sensory organs. These creatures will attack at once with their formidable teeth.

The group should be able to hold the room against four of the bugs, but their problems are just starting. In the style of movies like *Aliens* or *Starship Troopers*, the characters get a few seconds of dialog to ponder the nature of their assailant or give some dramatic orders, and then . . .

Scene 4: The Horde

Alert characters may detect sounds of movement from tunnel Beta. This gives a few seconds' warning before a horde of bugs appears, skittering singlemindedly along the tunnel toward the group. There are a great many of them, their intent is clear, and they are not discouraged by losses.

By now it should be apparent that retreat is the only option. The bugs will attempt to cut off and trap the group, who must fight a running battle to escape from the complex. See the notes on the *chamax* (another name for the bugs), especially the note that when one is killed, its acid sacs explode and shower anyone nearby.

The retreat should be played for drama and pressure. Those who stand their ground with guns blazing are likely to be overwhelmed, while those who fight a smart and mobile battle have a (slim) chance of getting out alive. The *chamax* will not simply pour out in a wave. They'll do that once, perhaps, but they will also attempt to flank and pincer the team, or draw out and isolate individuals.

Conclusion

The lifeless wasteland around the complex at present keeps the *chamax* trapped, but in time the plague will spread. How much time is unknown. Assuming anyone survives to report, the Marines' CO will immediately warn the Garoo authorities, but they are likely to be skeptical. This makes for a second adventure, as a party of Garoo or Imperial scientists returns to the base to try to discover the truth.

GURPS Chamax

The bugs are from a now-dead world called Chamax in the Alenyar system of the Reidan Subsector, which is one parsec from Garoo. They were first detailed in the excellent GDW Double Adventure *The Chamax Plague/Horde* by W. H. Keith and the late J. A. Keith.

There are two types of *chamax*:

Maternals are huge slug-like creatures that move little and are fed by *hunters*. Their sole function is to breed. There is no way to fight through the tunnel to find out if a maternal is present. Juvenile maternals have wings and can fly considerable distances to set up a new nest.

Hunters resemble huge tarantulas the size of great danes with an iris valve-like maw. These are the "bugs" that attack the team. Within their bodies are acid sacs, which are impervious to the acid within, although the bug itself is not. The bugs are unintelligent,

but possess a strong hive-survival instinct. Hunters will spend their lives heedlessly to overcome an opponent or to defend the maternal.

Chamax hunters possess a sense which draws them to living creatures and seems to allow them to navigate their surroundings despite a lack of obvious sense organs. They are highly sensitive to radio signals and are attracted to them; personal comm units are likely to draw mobs of hunters.

Chamax and Combat: Hunters attack en masse with teeth and acid, and are never discouraged by losses. They are not stupid -- they will withdraw to mass for a new attack, to attack a more vulnerable or necessary target, or to outflank an enemy -- but if they must stand and fight, then they will do so to the death.

It is possible to shoot lumps off a chamax without really hurting it. Slicing enough limbs off might impair mobility, but the only sure way to kill a chamax is to rupture its acid sacs. The contents will kill the bug and rapidly dissolve it. To kill a chamax, a weapon must do 12 points of damage in a single burst or discharge. Lesser damage causes a spectacular spray of spongy tissue and the odd limb to fly off, but does no real harm.

Unfortunately, the acid is under pressure and will splash in all directions when a bug is killed. This may take out several other bugs but it doesn't do much for the local real estate, and means that hand-to-hand combat is not a viable option.

When a chamax is killed nearby, a fighter who is free to move may try to evade the acid splash by rolling DX or under. Failure means that the fighter is hit for 3d of corrosive damage. Walls, floors, other Chamax nearby, etc., are likely to be damaged by the splash. Other chamax evade damage at a DX of 8.

When a chamax attacks someone, it first grabs the target with its forelegs with a skill of 12, then drags him to its maw for a bite, which hits automatically for 2d damage. This action takes one combat round.

In subsequent rounds, the bug keeps hold and squirts acid over the victim. This automatically hits and does 1d damage in the first round after the bite, 2d in the next, and 3d in the third. 1d is added to the damage each round until there is nothing left to affect.

Anyone who can still move can escape the grasp of the chamax by rolling ST or under, with a modifier of -2 for each chamax that has hold of the fighter. A held victim can be freed by a friend on the same roll.

If the chamax holding someone is killed, the 3d acid splash hits automatically.

Acid Damage and Armor: If an individual is splashed with acid, there is a chance that it might be deflected by armor. Passive defense can be rolled, modified by movement, dodging, or spectacular acrobatics. If the individual is held, this does not apply (the acid hits automatically).

Various types of armor give protection against the chamax acid:

- Combat Armor -- 100 Points

- Combat Environment Suit -- 50 Points
- Light Infantry Helmet -- 30 Points
- Uniform/Coveralls -- 2 Points

Damage is cumulative, so when the points of a particular piece are exceeded, it is destroyed. The referee should keep track of acid damage and not inform the players how much they can stand.

Hibernation

Nests of chamax go into hibernation about 26 hours after no food can be sensed within a mile or so. They can remain dormant for an unknown (but very long) period. They also hibernate if temperatures drop low enough. The cold nights of Garoo III are sufficient to keep the chamax contained for the time being, but they seem to be able to override the hibernation impulse when migrating, carrying the maternal with them.

A chamax migration or the birth of a juvenile maternal could allow the bugs to spread to the Port Herty region and ultimately to dominate the whole planet.

Origin and Spread of the Chamax

It is thought that an intelligent species of pseudocrustaceans once inhabited the world named Chamax, and accidentally wiped out the only predator capable of keeping the bugs down. From that day on, the Chamax sentients warred with the unintelligent bugs, whose numbers exploded into an unstoppable horde. In this case, smarts weren't the evolutionary trump card they appeared to be elsewhere; the bugs overran the cities of the sentients one by one.

In desperation, the sentients built a number of automated, slower-than-light starships. Perhaps some were launched with survivors in low berths, as planned, but in the case of at least a few of the ships, the bugs were able to get aboard.

As the food supply aboard the ships ran out, the bugs went into deep hibernation, only awakening when conditions were right for them to breed and prosper. Thus, the chamax sentients' desperate attempt to preserve themselves became the means by which the chamax plague was spread.

How many infested ships are still on course for distant stars is unknown. Perhaps others lie beneath the sands of Garoo III, hidden from detection by uranium-bearing rocks or other natural phenomena.

Alternatives and Follow-Up Adventures

This is a very combat-oriented adventure, and casualties are inevitable. The GM might want to send along a few Marine NPCs as "spares" to replace characters killed early in the attack. Players may wish to play civilians accompanying the team, such as a slimy Sternmetal representative or an officious representative of the Garoo Customs Corps.

An entirely different approach to the adventure would be to play the miners as the horde bursts upon them. This will start with a few hunters and quickly escalate, and even with a tool locker full of ACRs, the miners are likely to be massacred.

For a truly gung-ho combat extravaganza, the referee may decide that the Marines' warning was ignored and the chamax have begun to migrate. They are about to fall upon Port Herty, requiring a desperate defense while the personnel are evacuated by starship.