

Space Rangers

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Chapter 1 -- Bad Day at the Office

Some days start better than others.

This was not one of them.

I'm Sara Levi. At 5' 8 with the curly hair and straight nose given to me by my Jewish heritage, I've been called a good-looking brunette. I am also a Confederacy Ranger.

So what does that have to do with me having a bad day? Well I had been investigating a slavery ring based in the Empire of Men but operating in Confederacy space. Nasty chaps, these guys were picking off underdeveloped colonies, killing everybody and destroying everything they couldn't sell, nuking the colony till it glowed and selling the proceeds and chattel (that's right, sapients) over across the Arm in the Empire.

Personally, I've never understood slavery. Free women (and occasionally men) work so much better at everything. But that's not how it is seen in the Empire.

Now if the slavers had attacked a world like my homeworld, Liberty, there would have been a few less slavers in the Galaxy. We like to shoot at people; it keeps the blood moving, particularly when they are shooting back. If you shoot at me you are bound to get your damn fool head blown clean off. Makes me a fun girl to have at a party if you don't mind things getting a little out of hand. Unfortunately, slavers prey upon worlds that can't or won't defend themselves.

So the Confederacy Congress decided to send in the Rangers to prove the existence of the slavers as an organization under the direct influence and protection of the Empire of Man or, failing that, undermine and destroy the slaver ring in the most effective manner possible.

Which meant, in this case, they sent me.

I was just about ready to wrap up my investigation and even had enough names of the big dogs in the Empire to make my case before the Confederacy. The slavers I was spying on were in fact collecting fuel to make the final jump home from a comet wending it's way inbound in a solar system whose star just happened to be almost smack dab between the trailing arm of the Confederacy and the leading arm of the Empire.

The system in question has two habitable terrestrial planets, a rarity in anybody's book. Why these slavers hadn't cleared the worlds which had technology no better than that you'd find during the Terran European Middle Ages and would have been an easy mark for these guys, I'll never know, but as it was they often traded for supplies with one of the kingdoms on Loran, the world that orbits closer to the sun. This particular kingdom on

Loran practiced slavery. That being the case the standard trade was slaves for supplies.

While most of the slaves they had pulled in their last job could be sold in the Empire of Man, a few, for whatever the reason, had proved to be too much of a problem. The normal practice for recalcitrant or less than useful slaves is to push them out of an airlock, but with Romant being between here and there it made sense to collect the bunch that were not going to work out and sell them to the locals. That might actually be why the Empire slavers didn't do in the planet, after all, it's hard to find good help 5000 light years from any place "civilized".

Be that as it may, Grogh, he was the piece of work in charge of this lovely band of miscreants, decided it was my turn to head down to Romant on Loran and negotiate with the natives for supplies.

So in a shuttle with 6 of my 'fellow' slavers I was sent along. The fact that we were not carrying any "cargo" to show off our wares should have tipped me off but we were in low Loran orbit before I put two and two together and realized I must have been compromised.

Which is where my day began to suck really bad.

Chapter 2 -- Don't Take a Knife to A Gunfight

Actually, I'm a little slower than that.

It wasn't until a .9mm Ripper was pressed against my temple from behind by Boaz Neet that I realized I was the sample and my jig was up. Boaz was one of Grogh's beastly boys, not real bright, but loyal as a dog and big as a gorilla. He also had all of the scruples of a shark.

"Sara," I heard whispered into my left ear as the Ripper was poked into my temple, "Boo." Boaz laughed.

I was going to laugh along, after all Boaz had the sense of humor of a psychopath, he was the kind of guy who as a kid used to stomp on kittens for fun. His next line though wiped that thought from my head.

"You thought you Rangers had us didn't 'cha." My skin began to crawl and I felt the blood chill in my veins. He ground the Ripper into my scalp, "Grogh had you figured out though, and now we're going to sell you to Bika in Romant and that will be that." He started laughing again and from the laughter around me I realized that I was well and truly trapped...if I hadn't been a Ranger.

Let me explain. Since Rangers are basically information gathering tools we need to be able to gather accurate information that cannot be modified and therefore will stand up in

a Confederacy court. There really are a lot of ways to do it but Rangers like effective, so grafted to the inside of my skull is a super high density full sensory recording system that uses a feed from my own senses. In essence I'm a walking breathing recording device. Problem is that bone isn't rigid enough to mount the hyper dense media that will give my skull 5 years of continuous full sensory feed. So the bone in my head, actually all of my bones, have been replaced with a ringcarbon polymer that is carefully shaped to look like real bone, even on a deep scan, but is in fact 100 times stronger than titanium.

So if I hadn't been a Ranger, poking me in the head with a Ripper was a good way to get compliance or sign my death warrant. As it is, a Ripper is designed not to be able to punch holes in a ship in space. Its magnetically propelled needles could do a lot of damage to soft tissue. The ringcarbon in my head, however, wasn't even going to be scratched...which didn't really account for what it was going to do to the soft tissue surrounding my skull, but what the heck, I'm a Ranger, if I had wanted to die in bed of old age I would have stayed at home.

So, instead of sitting there quietly or pulling back from the Ripper, I pushed against it. Hard. The buzz of 1000 rounds per minute bounced off my head and ricocheted around the shuttle cabin. I didn't wait, however, for Boaz to be surprised.

Instead I slammed the quick release on my acceleration couch and cleared my own weapon.

Don't get me wrong, Rippers are great, but I like the authoritative bang of a really big chemical explosion. It just seems to scare the bejesus out of people.

Especially in an enclosed space.

Being an anacronist like my Da I prefer pump guns in spite of the fact they take two hands to use effectively. I like the fact that if you rack it and pull the trigger it goes boom.

Always.

I've never had one jam or not fire and in my book that beats all other considerations in the same way four of a kind and a joker pisses people off in poker. My gun of choice is a Liberty made, five shot plus one in the pipe, pistol with a 25cm barrel and a spring-loaded stock. Since I hadn't really expected to need my shotgun till we had turfed I hadn't reloaded my 24mm sawed off with flechettes, instead I was loaded for bear. While normally a pump gun has to be racked to do it's thing but the first shot - if you have one in the pipe - does not require anything but clearing the safety. So as I cleared the chair and tumbled in zero G to brace myself on the far bulkhead I lined up Boaz, clicked off the safety and pulled the trigger. A blast of Heavishot caught Boaz in the upper chest, as the bulk of the shot went through his neck and separated his head from his body. The recoil carried me to the wall and I was racked and ready as another one of Grogh's thugs tried to draw a bead on me. They had obviously never been in a freefall fight with a shotgun because they were clearly shaken from the blast and aiming where I would have

been if the recoil from the shotgun hadn't hurled me across the bridge.

Bad for them. Good for me.

I triggered my shotgun and caught the one that seemed the least dazed in the face. With that blast, and using the fact that the recoil had given me purchase on the wall, I leaped across the cabin to the open hatch leading out of the cockpit racking as I went. Ripper flechettes poured around the cabin as I dove through the hatch and I saw one of the idiots who had been shooting at me stitched across the chest with a burst from one of his compatriots. That didn't bother me that much though, because I suddenly realized there wasn't enough blood in the air.

I'd just sprayed 4 liters of blood from two bodies plus the spray from the Ripper that had chewed on my head, all over a room less than 4 meters cubed and rather than there being a massive cloud of red globules all over the place I saw almost nothing.

A bad sign on a ship in vacuum.

My ears were ringing from the blast of my shotgun, but I knew with great certainty that I'd breached something and not a second later the bridge hatch slamming shut confirmed it for me. Well, scratch 6 idiots. I was in fact feeling rather proud of myself as I reached up to my scalp to see how bad I'd been mangled when the main braking thrusters cut in.

I was slammed to the wall at 2 Gs and held there for 10 seconds until free fall reasserted itself. As I untangled myself from the wall I realized my day had just gotten worse. This shuttle had been designed to land anywhere it could put its tail down. The problem was that the computer to control that landing was in the cockpit as were backups 1 and 2. Not a problem, you understand, as long as the cockpit was in good shape, after all human reflexes really were not up to a tail down landing on manual unless you were gifted with reflexes like a cat, had an innate sense of 3 dimensional space and a lifetime of practice.

Unfortunately, something had punched a hole in the cockpit (Shotguns in space...bad Ranger! No candy for you!) and in about 3 minutes plasma from reentry was going to be pouring into that hole. With a little luck the computers might survive 2 or three minutes after which I would find myself on a really big rock, falling from a really big height into a .67 G gravitational field onto what at the speed I was going to be going would definitely be considered a solid surface.

Not good.

I reloaded my shotgun and scrambled for an escape shell.

Chapter 3 -- Escape!

Escape shells happen to be one of the best mix of high and low technology anybody ever

came up with. The idea is simplicity itself. Stuff whatever you want to land into a shell of self-ablating high temperature ceramic and throw it at the ground. When gravity has dragged it far enough into an atmosphere, you fire off a couple of parachutes and the shell lands safely on the ground.

Simple, effective, and almost safe.

Really sophisticated shells might also have stasis life support for really long waits to be rescued and the ability to make a powered landing on light gravity planetoids to give you options. The fact of the matter is that anyone surviving a spaceship catastrophe is generally considered one lucky son of a dog and most people think that giving such a lucky sapient a fighting chance to make it out of the whole thing alive is only sporting.

Groghe, however, was a tight fisted bastard and didn't give a pile of feces about being sporting so the shell I was racing for was probably going to be one of the cheapest mass-produced designs the Empire of Man ever made.

Which still gave me a fighting chance over staying on the shuttle.

As I feverishly jammed myself into the escape shell I tried to make a quick inventory of the equipment I was about to jump into the fire with. For myself, I was wearing my spacesuit, a top of the line light work suit sans helmet. Luckily for me the helmets from the one size fits nobody safety suits used the same locking ring standard as my own suit so I simple grabbed one on my way past. As for weapons I was carrying my shotgun, a pair of double barreled derringers that used the same ammo, a trio of ceramic and ring carbon defensive knives and a ceramic coated titanium Kukri impregnated with diamond and ringcarbon whiskers. The last could cut anything softer than hardened steel without dulling and would have been able to be hammered through a titanium bulkhead if you could find the right angle and hammer. For the shotgun I still had sixteen Heavishot rounds, 6 high explosive grenades and 6 long-range hypersonic high-explosive armor piercing gyrocs.

Those last cost me more than the rest combined, but at ranges higher than 25 meters (the maximum normal effective range of the shotgun) were worth their weight in gold. Accelerating continuously until they reached 100 km/second their internal inertial navigation would make them fly line straight until the motor burned out at 200 meters at which point inertia would still carry them another 200 meters before they would start to tumble. For that 400 meters anything that was in their way was pretty much going to be dead or dying unless it was wearing more than 1cm of ring-carbon armor or equivalent.

Not real likely.

Other than that I had about 2 liters of water in my suit and several days of nutripaste that tasted like a mix between fruitpaste and pocket lint and a pocket kit. Not the complete survival kit with everything but the kitchen sink I'd hoped for, but better than nothing.

I hoped one of the flechettes from my previously overzealous companions hadn't punched a hole in my suit as I slid up the lid of the escape shell and screwed it into place.

Then I punched out.

The good escape shells have diamond impregnated clear viewing windows at eye level because being in a tightly enclosed space, in the dark, with no visual stimulus for any length of time will drive most people completely bug nuts.

Unfortunately, this was not a good shell. I felt the puff as the shell was pushed away from the shuttle, felt myself slowly rotating under power in the dark as the shell automatically oriented itself toward the planet and then got kicked in the back as the main de-orbital boosters punched me out of orbit. 10 seconds of being crushed under an entire herd of elephants and then nothing.

Erie silence.

I felt like a woman in a coffin and I knew I was a long way from home.

Chapter 4 -- Landfall

Luckily for me the escape shell was working like it should and within 5 minutes I was being buffeted by the upper atmosphere as I skipped through it going 20 times the speed of sound. Lucky for me until you realize that hitting the atmosphere without the mass of a spacecraft or shuttle to cushion the blows, even as tenuous as it is at those heights still feels like you are being rolled down a long flight of stairs. I was buffeted and slammed around for I don't know how long before my first parachute deployed and gave the shell a pop. I wasn't oriented very well for that first tug and it yanked my neck something fierce but the two follow up drogues got the shell relatively well oriented and gravity started loading up below my feet as I fell. I still couldn't see anything and I still didn't know where I was in relationship to anything, but the telltale readout in front of my eyes told me the temperature of my shell was dropping to the point that I was not going to be flash fried by plasma and my overall speed had dropped to the point that I had choices.

Not good choices mind you, but choices nevertheless.

They came in two varieties. One, I could stay with the escape shell all the way to the ground. Two, I could crack the shell and ride a personal parachute to the ground.

The advantage of staying with the shell was that, barring a catastrophe like having your parachute ripped off by a tree or rolling off a cliff, the shell would see me safely to the ground. The disadvantage was that tree. If something tore away my chute before I hit the ground, I was in deep, deep refuse and not likely to see tomorrow. While the shell would survive just about anything short of a ballistic landing, my body was not going to like any impact higher than 90 or so meters per second which meant a fall of greater than 3 or 4

seconds would scramble me like the yolk in an eggshell, .67 gravity or no. Problem is that I didn't know what was under me and wouldn't until I landed or cracked my shell.

Fun choices.

Oh yeah, I also had less than 30 seconds to make the choice as I needed at least a kilometer and a half of space to make sure I wasn't going to land somewhere really bad and according to the readout I was just about there.

Decisions, Decisions.

I've never been one to let fate decide so with 10 seconds to go, I activated the cutting charges and the escape shell that had taken me thus far burst into 6 pieces that rocketed away from me.

I looked down.

Into darkness.

Landing at night. Goody.

I popped my chute and then tried to fire up the helmet optics...and found out that whoever made the safety suit I'd stolen my helmet from had probably been the same cheap bastard that had built the escape shell. There were no helmet optics, just 3 antiglare shields. Since I'd put them all up before I'd loaded the shell I was pretty sure I was seeing what there was to see, which in the dark was nothing.

Joy.

Well since the helmet didn't have any optics I guessed it was time to use my own and activated my eyes. Fun thing, my eyes, I hadn't activated them the entire time I had been undercover because they give off a slight but noticeable EM field and while it is only detectable at less than 1 meter and then only with special dedicated sensors, I still hadn't wanted to run the risk. Since I was no longer undercover, I ran up the gamma and tripped the eagle eyes and got the fright of my life. I was falling right into a forest and it was less than 10 meters away!

I picked up my feet, braced for impact and was slammed through the foliage like a rag doll on a string. When my vision cleared from the jostling I found myself hanging facedown from a tree branch bigger than most of the trees back home on Liberty. Below me was another tree branch and I was pretty sure the ground was NOT just under that one.

I guess I had finally landed. Sort of.

Lucky me.

Chapter 5 -- Out on a Limb

Actually, I was pretty happy about the whole thing. I was alive when just half an hour ago someone had wanted to make me a slave or dead or worse. I had landed on a planet with a breathable atmosphere and a carbon based ecology that wasn't so different that I couldn't eat it with the right vitamin supplements. In spite of being in what looked to be one of the biggest godawful trees I'd ever seen, my parachute had not been torn from my body. I had enough water for a couple of days, enough food paste for a couple more and enough vitamins from my pocket kit for a somewhat extended stay on a planet far less habitable than this. Also, I was armed to the teeth. Other than a bath, a set of warm arms to cuddle with and a really strong drink what more could a modern girl ask for?

Well something to wipe myself with other than leaves came to mind, but that not being something I expected to see for quite a bit I quit bitching and began cutting myself down. It took me almost an hour to do right but when I was done I had over 100 meters of cord I had salvaged from the parachute and enough of the chute itself to make a pretty comfy hammock shelter. Rigging the hammock into a pack I started slowly down the tree to the first major branch and found, to my surprise that it seemed to grow right into the tree trunk next to it making a bridge.

Pretty nifty if you ask me. Turned out that Boaz had been a really lousy shot too and I'd had one, maybe two flechettes bounced off my head. While they were going to leave an interesting scar, my hair would cover it and in a few days it would be pretty well healed if it didn't fester. I patched myself up as well as I could with the first aid supplied in my pocket kit and tried to figure out what to do next. Since the helmet from the safety suit had no particularly redeeming features other than the fact that it had been airtight, I was going to ditch it in the crook of the tree...until I thought of another use for it. I did, however, shuck the air re-breather and most of my suit. It was a great design, but it did weigh a fair amount compared to my clothing and with the exception of the boots, didn't really add up to a decent tradeoff since the suit didn't breath at all. I did cut a vest out of the chest section for warmth, a bit of protection and some nifty gadgets that were attached to it. Made of tightly woven ringcarbon impregnated with a flexible polymer cutting it was a stone bitch but the vest would protect me against some serious abrasions and nastiness and anyways the water bladders were integrated into it. Hell it was even bulletproof if the gun wasn't too big. I also kept the suit gloves. Working rope without gloves is not much fun.

I then walked across the branch/bridge to the next tree.

Truth to tell, what to do next was something of a dilemma. I'm a pretty fair climber. Actually I'm a damn fine climber and Ranger training stresses climbing as a really good skill so I had gotten some great training in methods to do it even when you are not supposed to be able to. The problem is that any climbing requires a little strength and a lot of skill and I'd been running on adrenaline a too long to be up to anything more

strenuous than a hike in the woods. Unfortunately climbing up, down or around this tree was going to take a little more than that. Reaching the other side of the bridge I looked up and even with my enhanced vision I did not see sky. I decided perhaps it was time to get a little shuteye and make my next move in the morning.

Chapter 6 -- To Be or Not

What is that old saw? *"The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley?"*

Right. Bastard wasn't just a poet, he was a prophet.

As I was laying my plans for getting a little shut eye, something else was laying a few plans of it's own.

Dinner plans.

And I was invited.

The guest of honor...or rather the fatted calf.

I was just finishing rigging my hammock into the crook of the branch/bridge I was on when I heard the soft scrabble of claws on wood. It was the only warning I got as 300 kilos of moving meat dropped onto the bridge and came racing at me from the other side. With my Ranger enhanced sight I could see this thing was definitely a predator. Dagger-like teeth and claws the size of my Kukri, it moved like a cat and looked like a 4 armed, 4 legged reptilian gorilla with dragonfly eyes and a venus fly trap mouth that was almost a meter across.

My first though was "My they get big in low gravity!" My second thought was that whatever it was it moved like lightning and definitely thought it was a top of the food chain predator and I was about the right size for lunch.

Except I'm a human...and a Ranger...and I carry a big gun. Who said guns weren't a fashion accessory?

I cleared my shotgun and safety as fast as I've ever done it and even so it was a near thing. My first shot was offhand and clipped out a jangle of teeth but it was less than 3 meters away when I racked the slide, popped the spring loaded stock, snugged it up against my shoulder and pulled the trigger the second and third time. Shot two caught it's attention and along with shot number three pretty much stopped it in its tracks. Shot four carved off one eye and I was racking shot five when it dropped to the tree bridge and stopped purposeful motion.

Which isn't to say it stopped moving, but I don't count flopping around in your death throes as purposeful movement so I reloaded and watched as the thing jerked around for a

couple of minutes and then finally lay still.

Sleeping was suddenly not feeling like the option it started out as.

Of course not sleeping wasn't much of an option either. Having killed the, whatever it was, my nerves were a mess. I crouched down tight into the crook of the tree and tried to keep my eyes and ears open and my brain alert. Unfortunately trees are not particularly quiet places and every sound and creak and whistle made me feel like I was about to get jumped by something big nasty and toothsome with a sweet tooth for Sara Levi.

By the time daylight came up I was a wreck.

But I had not been idle. The amount of memory available to my built in recording system and the fact that it can handle full 6 senses of real-time input requires a bit of processing power. Five years of continuous feed is in fact so much memory that Rangers are encouraged to take up as much as a year of recording space with software of one form or another. In my case, I didn't have any built in kinesthetic drivers so I had room to run some fun programs. One of these is a forensic sound analysis program. It's kind of embarrassing to admit it but 4 billion years of evolution has not given humans a really good set of senses and what information our senses do collect are not always processed particularly well by our native wetware. Brains get distracted.

Which is where my forensic sound analysis program comes in.

While my brain can't handle processing more than the 6 or 8 most extreme pieces of stimulus at any given time, the computer in my head could not only handle all of the sonic input I could personally discern, but it could also 'hear' stuff I couldn't. Pretty spiff. Given enough time it could dissect all of the sounds around me for almost 50 meters and map every single one of them categorizing what it was and whether or not I needed to worry about it.

Actually the last part isn't part of the program, I don't have an AI, but once I had all of the sounds separated from all of the other sounds I could go sound by sound and categorize it. Having done so, I could filter it out those I felt were not particularly threatening, like the sound of leaves swishing. Even with my headware this is still a seriously complicated and time consuming problem, but by the time the sun rose I felt good enough about the setup to tell my computer to wake me up if an uncategorized sound crossed over a certain threshold. Trust me, I'm not really giving away Ranger tricks, there are a dozen programs available on the open market that will do the same thing but having taken the time to sort the aural input, I then could settle down in the slowly rising sunlight and finally get some sleep.

Chapter 7 -- Up

I didn't really get to sleep that long, perhaps 2 hours, but I felt like a new woman when I

was finally awoken by one of my alarms. Now I am not normally a heavy sleeper and I was trained to be awake and ready when my brain engages so I already had my shotgun out and tracking by the time my eyes opened. What had tripped my system were several large insecty things that had attacked the dead corpse of the bug eyed hideousness that had ruined my night's sleep. About as big across as my hand with 10 legs and 2 sets of mandibles, the buggy things looked dangerous and nasty but the second I moved, they took off in a clack and clatter of wing cases and re-ighted only after they were convinced I didn't think they looked tasty.

To be honest I wasn't real bright not kicking the body of the bug-eyed nasty off of the branch after I killed it, but I have to plead exhaustion and nerves. In any event, it had begun to get a bit interesting in terms of the miasma it was giving off so I decided that perhaps it was time to shove off. Which direction, however, was the question? Down or up. What helped me decide was the size of the pug ugly I'd blasted in the night that was now contributing itself to the bottom of the forest food chain. I definitely did not want to be wandering around underneath one of those. In Ranger basic I'd had a chimpanzee as one of my survival instructors and he was a big fan of teaching people how to move safely and effectively in the tops of trees. His theory is that anything that can climb higher than you in a tree was probably smaller than you and therefore would give you a fighting chance if you and it had to get nasty. He also had a couple of stories that pretty much proved that theory as big a heap as the ugly polluting the branch next to me but hey it was at least a theory and I was grasping at straws.

My other reason for going up was that I needed a fix for my inertial locator. Using the fluid in my inner ear was a little doohickey that could tell me where I was in relationship to any starting point. Over time it got more and more inaccurate, and in zero G wasn't worth a pile of sand but in a gravity field, if I could get it oriented, I would know within a few meters where I was in relation to where it had been set. Under the right condition it might even give me an idea of which direction I needed to go to get off of this planet.

Problem was that I needed something to orient the locator and that was going to require seeing something I could positively identify. Stars were straight out, but I was hoping there was one of the local planets in the sky where I could see it and I'd be able to correlate it's location with something useful courtesy of an astrogation program and the clock built into my head. It was a big if, but when you are alone a plan, any plan, is worth it's weight in platinum.

Even if it isn't a good plan.

So up it was.

The next trick was figuring out how to safely climb a tree trunk bigger around than a small starship. I estimated the size of the trunk as being perhaps 50 meters across. Obviously I was not going to wrap my legs around the tree and ooch my way to the top.

Which meant I was going to be free climbing.

Without the correct equipment.

On the up side I had almost a 100 meters of cord I had salvaged from my parachute and this was only .67 of the gravity I was used to. I also had an ace up my sleeve. Okay, maybe more of a deuce to bluff with, but hey, what do you want? What I had was a pair of winders from my space suit. Each winder is about the size of a pack of playing cards and has 250 meters of bucky tube line reeled tightly up with a small powered winder and a set of cerasteel friction breaks built into it. More importantly it had a latching hook that could be unlatched while hanging at the far end of the line. While there was no way I wanted to be handling such a thin line with my bare hands, the two winders were attached to the vest that was what was left of my spacesuit and each one could take up more than 5 tons of weight without breaking. While the winders themselves couldn't pull up more than about 10 kilograms, the brakes on the winders could be set to just about any tension and could be used as a friction brake if I fell. This meant that if I could find a way to attach one of the winders securely, even if it was below me, I would have a fighting chance of surviving a fall so long as I didn't tangle a limb in the ultra thin winder line and as long as I didn't hit whatever I was secured to when I fell. Securing the winder line proved to be the challenge. It took a while but I eventually managed to wrap the winder line around the bridge/branch, using my helmet as a swing weight.

Then I began to climb.

Free climbing is an art form. It is as intellectually stimulating as chess and as physically challenging as any sport you want to name. It also takes time. Luckily for me the tree bark was cracked and there were plenty of vines and lianas draped around the trunk. Not that that would have stopped me. I would have hacked handholds out with my fingernails if I'd had to. I was going up and that was it.

Move one hand. Check your grip. Move the other hand. Check your grip. Move one foot. Check your footing. Move the other foot. Check your footing. Move one hand. Hand grip by footing I slowly traversed up past 3 canopies before I finally saw the sun through the leaves above and let me tell you the beauty of the whole climb was breathtaking. When you are in survival mode you don't always appreciate the aesthetics around you but free climbing over 200 meters, one slow careful move at a time, straight up in light gravity gives you time to appreciate the view.

And what a view!

While green was the main color theme, the shades and variations are hard to describe. And the other colors? Blues, reds, oranges, yellows, purples, pinks. A veritable riot of colors abounded from the various 10 legged flying insects and flowers, fungi and mosses. And I quickly realized that this was ground zero in a biological war I was glad I wasn't ecologically part of. Every plant, insect (decisect??? What do you call a 10-legged creature with an exoskeleton and wings???) and animal was either out to get every other plant insect or animal, or trying to lure it in for some purpose or scare it off. I saw tiny

electric blue flowers that ate anything small enough to be enfolded in its petals. I saw a bug eyed ugly that was clearly related ecologically speaking to the one I'd fed to the bugs, but it was smaller than my palm and almost passive and cute...till it spiked a bug twice it's size with it's tongue and then sucked the thing FLAT. I was just glad I didn't put my hand down on it. After I saw that I was REAL careful what I put my hands on. The suit gloves both kept my hands from being abraded and gave me a great grip. Along with the grip tack souls on my boots I almost didn't miss having proper pitons and ascenders.

Almost.

Still it was quite a climb. When I finally took a break the size of the bridge/branches had narrowed and lengthened and some were perhaps 2 meters across and 400 meters long. At this level it looked like I could finally start traveling horizontally without too much trouble and the density of the foliage was such that I could fall and have a good chance of not ending up pancake on some branch waiting to be bug food. I climbed up one more level and started looking for a break in the trees. I had quit using the winders as a safety as the way I was moving they were more of a hindrance than the safety they had provided but I was glad I'd had them.

I was feeling pretty good and kind of cocky when I ran into one of pug ugly's rivals for top predator.

You'd think I'd learn.

Introduction

Space Ranger is an RPG about playing the people the galactic Confederacy call when the job just has to be done right...the first time.

In a Galaxy of 10 trillion nearbaseline humans and 60 trillion other sentient, about a quarter of which belong to the Confederacy, occasionally doing things through the regular channels just won't or can't take care of the problem.

When that happens in the Confederacy somebody calls in the Space Rangers.

A lot of people have misconceptions about Rangers. For one thing, they don't have any police powers. Any police force, legally or illegally constituted, can tell a Ranger to take a hike. Actually, about half of them outside the Confederacy and a few that are members will shoot a Ranger on sight. The only real advantage a Ranger has is the best training and equipment the Confederate Congress can afford and the fact that no Ranger can be tried in any Confederate court for any reason. The biggest disadvantage is that shooting a Ranger dead is not considered a crime in any Confederate jurisdiction.

By Confederate law.

In the Declaration of Confederation.

There are however some Confederate jurisdictions that will slap you with violating other ordinances like destruction of government property or felony littering for killing a Ranger which can be almost as bad.

As a group the Space Rangers are hard to get a handle on but here are few things about those who become Rangers.

One: Every Ranger is a 1 percenter in every sense of the word. Those who become Rangers, even before they receive their training and implants, are some of the most intelligent and extremely competent individuals in the galaxy. They have no problem pushing it harder and longer than everyone around them. Not one will back down unless there's not an ice cube's chance in hell of winning...and most won't even back down then.

Two: The Rangers are the good guys. This does not mean they won't lie, cheat, steal, kill or otherwise destroy just about everything in sight to do their job or save the Universe, but no Ranger will be allowed to get the training and implants that make them truly frightening until they have proven beyond any shadow of a doubt that they believe in freedom and the ultimate rights of sentient beings. Not necessarily nice guys, but good to the bone.

Three: Rangers have the coolest toys and the best training. Every Ranger is given nearly indestructible bones and a computer/recording system second to none. Add to that full

sensory implants that allow them to see like an eagle in the dark, feel someone walking up behind them and hear like a bat and they become some pretty tough hombres. But it doesn't stop there. They also have integrated subcutaneous body armor, tremendous strength and reflexes so fast they are hard to follow. All that in a package that would pass all but the deepest most comprehensive and invasive scans. And if that isn't enough they also get the best training money can buy. They are taught how to do just about everything.

The final package is a walking talking sapient catastrophe who can go almost anywhere and do almost anything. Almost.

Rules

The system for Space Ranger is the based on the absolutely amazing system created by Steve Darlington for the Matrix RPG "THERE IS NO SPOON" with extra mechanics cribbed from "F.A.T.E." by Fred Hicks and Rob Donoghue of Evil Hat Games and "Orbit" by Jeff Diamond of Psychobilly Games.

Character Creation

Characters in Space Rangers are defined by two basic Attributes and Body. The Attributes are Expertise and Spark. Body is the Character's ability to take damage.

Space Rangers

A Ranger starts with an Expertise of 3 in EVERYTHING and a Spark of 2. They start with 5 in their Body Pool and 5 in their Spark Pool. Space Rangers also start with their signature Implants which include:

- Ring Carbon Bones
- Internal Computer/Recording System
- Strength Enhancements
- Reflex Enhancements
- Integrated Body Armor
- Auditory and Visual Enhancements

The total package gives the Space Rangers a TOTAL Expertise 3 in EVERYTHING. They also have an additional +1 to Expertise when doing anything requiring Brawn or Agility. Further they have a Spark of +4 when trying to do anything that might be affected by their Implants.

From there the Ranger has 3 points to spend at character generation towards Innate Advantages. Some examples of Innate Advantages are:

<u>Innate Advantages</u>	<u>Cost</u>
Maximum Spark (5)	2
Expert in a single Area of Expertise (4)	1
Mastery of a single Area of Expertise (5)	2

Extra Body chip	1
Special Abilities	Varies

non-Rangers

In spite of a Ranger's advantages some people may want to play non-Ranger characters. Non-Ranger characters start with an Expertise of 2 in EVERYTHING and a Spark of 1. They start with 3 in their Body Pool and 5 in their Spark Pool.

Then a Non-Ranger Player gets to make a choice. Their Character can be Agile, Brawny, Smart, Social or Technical.

Agile Characters start with an Expertise of 3 in everything related to being Fast or Agile and +1 Body defined as the ability to Dodge out of the way.

Brawny Characters start with an Expertise of 3 in everything related to being Strong and +2 Body defined as being Tough.

Smart Characters start with an Expertise of 4 in everything related to being Smart and Knowing things.

Social Characters start with an Expertise of 4 in everything related to Social interactions.

Technical Characters start with an Expertise of 3 in all Technical Endeavors and an Expertise of 5 in one specific Area of Expertise.

From there the non-Ranger has seven (7) points to spend at character generation towards Innate Advantages. Some examples of Innate Advantages are:

<u>Innate Advantages</u>	<u>Cost</u>
More Spark (2)	2
Maximum Spark (3)	3
Proficient in a single Area of Expertise (3)	1
Expert in a single Area of Expertise (4)	1
Mastery of a single Area of Expertise (5)	2
Extra Body chip	1
Special Abilities	Varies

Areas of Experties

The following is a very short and not particularly comprehensive list of possible Areas of Expertise.

- Hand to Hand Combat (which includes fighting with the hands and feet as well as short to medium melee weapons like knives, clubs, hand axes and short swords)
- Close Quarters Battle or CQB (which includes longer melee weapons like long

- swords and spears and close range gun fighting with pistols and shotguns)
- Sniping (which includes any long range weapons fire)
 - Computer Hacking
 - Acrobatics
 - Driving/Piloting
 - Hacker
 - Repair/Tech/Electronics
 - Diplomacy
 - Presence
 - Intrusion
 - Perception
 - Con Artist
 - Demolitions
 - Endurance
 - Doctor
 - Specific Knowledge
 - Linguist
 - Parcour

Special Abilities

In the high tech, high action galaxy of the Space Rangers many sapients have a large variety of physical enhancements, in fact most are not even human. To reflect this Players can choose a wide variety of Special Abilities for their Characters. Below is a short, and not very comprehensive, list of possibilities that can be used as benchmarks for figuring out possible Special Abilities. Talk it over with your GM, the sky is the limit!

Implants

Agility Enhancements

+1: Cost 2

+2: Cost 4, -1 Brawn

Integrated Armor -- Extra Body Chips

+1: Cost 1

Integrated Computer

+1: Cost 2

+2: Cost 4

Sensory Enhancements

+1: Cost 2 per sense

Strength Enhancements

+1: Cost 2

+2: Cost 4, -1 Agility

Racial Enhancements

Feline: +1 Agility, -1 Social, Natural Weapons: Cost 2

Canine: +1 Social, Natural Weapons: Cost 2

Ursine: +2 Brawn, Natural Weapons, Large Size: Cost 3
Rodent: -1 Brawn, +2 Agility, Small Size: Cost 2
Exotic: Albino, -1 Brawn, +2 Social: Cost 2
Heavy Worlder: +2 Brawn: Cost 2
Spacer: -1 Brawn, +1 Agility, +1 Technical: Cost 1
Paragon: +1 Brawn, +1 Agility, +1 Smarts, -1 Social: Cost 2

Other Abilities

- **MacGuffin:** Your Character ALWAYS has the right Equipment or can make it on the spot. This equipment will never give you Advantage; it just negates any Disadvantage for not having the right equipment. : Cost 3
- **Smoking Hot Babe:** +2 to social interactions when dealing with the opposite sex heterosexuals or same sex homosexuals of the same or physically compatible species, -1 Social when dealing with the same sex heterosexuals or opposite sex homosexuals of the same or physically compatible species: Cost 1
- **Wealth:** The default assumption is that you have enough basic resources to get around. A person with wealth has even more.
You are rich: Cost 1.
You have more resources than you know what to do with. Cost: 4
- **Don't Shoot Me!:** There is something about the character that makes opponents fire a warning shot, threaten or otherwise fail to attempt to kill the character when given a chance. Character must be visibly unarmed and not acting in a threatening manner. Cost: 3, this is NOT available to a Ranger.

Conflict Resolution

In Space Rangers the only dice you need is 2 ordinary six-siders. It helps if they are different colors just so you can designate one an Expertise die and the other a Spark die.

You do not roll for any action that would be considered easy or normal, Space Ranger is about keeping the action moving and rolling for every little thing would slow things down. Because of this you only need to roll if the circumstances would be considered difficult and the outcome could have a detrimental or salutary effect on the Characters.

The standard method of conflict resolution is Fortune in the Middle with the Players narrating their own successes or failures. This means that the Player declares their action in the broadest of terms (I'm going to shoot at him, I'm going to try to sneak by the guard, etc.) then rolls to see the effect.

Once the Player knows what happened they get to tell you how it went based on the roll. **This is key.** It is the Player, not the GM that narrates the effects of a Success. This isn't to say that the GM has no say, however. The GM can modify the narration based on the level of the success if the Player is taking it a bit too far, but for the most part the Players are responsible for telling everybody what their Characters are doing. A Player also does

not necessarily have to narrate a Success as a success. A Player could narrate a Success as a failure that gives the Character an Advantage later on.

***Example:** A Ranger is sniping at a charging Rinox and gets a single success. Rather than taking a Body chip from the Rinox, which the Player knows has a whole boatload, he asks the GM if he can get a point of advantage should the fight go to melee range. The GM says yes and the Player narrates how the shot creased the Rinox across the skull causing no real damage but pouring blood into it's eyes making it less capable of seeing the Character when it finally closes to melee range.*

The GM of course has a final say on this.

Below are the possible kinds of Tests. Every conflict is resolved with two dice in this manner as follows:

Standard Tests

Standard Tests are made when you are attempting any action that would be affected by both skill and luck and a Character has a Spark of at Least 1. Most conflicts are resolved with a Standard Test. Players can make Static and Opposed Tests.

A Static Test is when there is not someone else or something else trying to specifically stop you from accomplishing your goal.

An Opposed Test is when more than one individual is involved and more than one has a roll. In this case the higher success level wins. If there is a tie, then no side gains a significant advantage.

To resolve a Standard Test roll the Expertise die and the Spark die. If you roll under your Expertise with your Expertise die you have an Expertise Success. If you roll under your Spark with your Spark die you have a Spark Success. If you roll under both your Expertise AND your Spark you have a Double success. A Spark Success is always better than an Expertise Success but a Double Success is truly extraordinary.

IF a Character gets a Double success and the Opponent gets NO successes this is a Critical Success. In this case a Player can choose either to take their 3 Body chips OR 3 levels of Advantage (See Combat below) or they can narrate a “**Gonzo**” result (Thank you Jeff Diamond for the idea!). In this case the Player can take the Author stance and narrate an unexpected result, a “wild” success that is COMPLETELY unrelated to the expected result or a “wild” failure that advances the plot and/or moves the game along. The result CANNOT break the laws of the universe or the verisimilitude of the game.

***Example:** Ranger Sara Levi rolled a Critical Success when bullyboy Boaz Neet put his Ripper against her head. She decided a dead Boaz Neet was a good Boaz Neet and narrates accordingly. Two rounds later she got another Critical Success and her Player realizes that being in a gunfight with 5 Slavers is going to whittle her down if she isn't real lucky, so she narrates that one of her shots blows a hole in the cockpit. This is bad*

but since she had previously narrated herself outside the cockpit, when the pressure door slammed shut on the Slavers she has a fighting chance to make it to the escape pods and get out before the whole shuttle is pancaked on the ground. Her actions killed nobody directly, and in fact could be classed a failure, but ultimately it moved the story along in a positive manner.

Some Tests have a difficulty modifier. These are only applied when actions are clearly more difficult than they would normally be.

Difficulty Modifier

Extremely Difficult Tasks:	-1 to Expertise
Near Impossible Tasks:	-2 to Expertise, -1 to Spark

Spark Tests

There are circumstances in which Expertise has no real likelihood of affecting the outcome of a Conflict. There are also circumstances in which a Player wants their Character to attempt something that is unlikely to succeed. In these cases the Player would make a Spark Test.

Roll the Spark die. If you roll under your Spark with your Spark die you have a Spark Success. A Spark success would beat an Expertise Success but not a Double Success.

Expertise Tests

Expertise Tests are made when someone without ANY Spark attempts any action.

Roll the Expertise die. If you roll under your Expertise with your Expertise die you have an Expertise Success. Any other type of success beats an Expertise Success.

Combat Tests

Combat works exactly the same way as any Opposed Test.

There are 3 basic Areas of Expertise for Combat, Hand to Hand (which includes fighting with the hands and feet as well as short to medium melee weapons like knives, clubs, hand axes and short swords), Close Quarters Battle or CQB (which includes longer melee weapons like long swords and spears and close range gun fighting with pistols and shotguns) and Sniping (which includes any long range weapons fire). All are rated at Expertise 3 for Rangers and Expertise 2 for Non Rangers unless improved at character generation or through character growth. The Character with the higher number or quality of successes gets to decide what happens to the opponent. If there is a tie then both Characters strived and shots may have been fired and dodges, blades may have been crossed but the ultimate outcome gives neither Character an advantage or disadvantage.

For each level of success achieved, the winner may do one level of damage to their opponent OR gain a level of Advantage.

Example: If a Ranger punches a Thug and gets a double success and the Thug gets no successes, the Ranger can do up to three levels of Body damage to the Thug or 3 levels of Advantage.

Which brings us to Body. A Character's health is measured in Body, which is most easily kept track of through the use of chips. When the Character's Body Chips are all gone, the Character's plot immunity has run out and the Opponent can narrate the outcome any way they would like. This is never good - but it does not necessarily mean death. A Ranger might, for instance, only want to shoot the gun out of the Thug's hand. If the Character's death isn't appropriate, there are many other options including severe injury, unconsciousness or incapacitation, etc. There is also the possibility of gaining Advantage. The point is to prevent the Character in question from acting, and make his life difficult (and that of his fellows).

Characters who have lost all of their Body and are not declared incapacitated in some manner by the Player's narration can only make Expertise Tests and if opposed by any character that still has Body chips even Expertise Successes will beat them. Incapacitated Characters cannot make any rolls until they get at least one Body chip back. Once they do, they can act normally again.

Non-Combat Tests

This same combat process can also be used for Non-Combat Conflicts like negotiations, gambling, seduction (if the GM allows it) and so on. The only real change is that the Body chips lost are only lost in relationship to the Non-Combat Conflict involved.

Should the Non-Combat Conflict degenerate into a Combat, the Character would still have all of their physical Body chips, although, depending on the circumstances (and the GM's decision) the loser of the Non-Combat Conflict might be at a Disadvantage in the following Combat.

Healing and Regaining Body

Body chips may be regained through Downtime. For every scene that a character is inactive, off-stage or constrained by the whims of their enemies or their injuries, they receive one Body chip back. It is always up to the GM what constitutes a scene. GMs may also award Body chips to PCs for doing extremely cool or interesting things, or for creating dramatic opportunities: the better you dance, the longer you stay on the floor. These chips can take your total number above a Character's normal amount but only for the duration of that scene.

The "Woah" Rule

In the Space Ranger RPG the impossible and the amazing happens all the time. However, should a player describe something so impressively cool that everybody at the table stops and goes "woah" – or words to that effect - the Character's success may be assumed to be even better than what was rolled. GMs might award an extra Body chip (or more) of damage, give the PC a Body chip, improve the situation in the PC's favor or prevent something bad from happening (such as another PC being injured) among other things. (Thank you Steve Darlington!)

Advantage

Advantage or Disadvantage in the Space Ranger RPG has a specific meaning. In Character vs. Character Conflict anything that makes things easier for one side or the other is an Advantage. These could include, but are not limited to:

- Superior Equipment: Superior equipment could be a sword vs. a knife or a rifle vs. a pistol.
- Superior Position: Superior position could be the high ground or having someone surrounded or being on hard packed ground when your opponent is slogging through the mud.
- Taking Advantage rather than Body chips in a fight.

Levels of Advantage stack as follows:

1 Level of Advantage	+1 to Expertise Roll
2-3 Levels of Advantage	+2 to Expertise Roll
4+ Levels of Advantage	+3 to Expertise Roll

Advantage or Disadvantage will never be better than +3 no matter how good the circumstances are.

If Advantage would raise Expertise to +6 or higher, the Expertise becomes +5 and any extra raises Spark.

***Example:** Sara Levi whips up her shotgun to blast a pug ugly that dropped from the tree above and is charging her. She is a Master at her shotgun (Expertise 5) and has the Advantage of Superior Position in the form of range. Since that would give her an Expertise of +6 she instead gets an Expertise of 5 and a Spark of +1. With her revised Spark of 5 Sara rolls a series of Doubles. The pug ugly drops on the branch like a sack of potatoes and is less than a menace in next to no time.*

Equipment

The default assumption is that you have the correct equipment and or weapons to do what you need to do. Working without the correct equipment will either give you Disadvantage or Difficulty Modifiers.

Some Equipment may also give you Advantage. Superior Equipment may also give you a positive Difficulty Modifier in Static Tests. If these modifiers would raise Expertise to +6 or higher, the Expertise becomes +5 and any extra raises Spark.

Note: Superior Equipment is RARE. Most Equipment simply makes it possible to do things without penalty.

Also a weapon with ammunition uses up 1d6 “shots” of ammunition every round of combat unless the weapon is specifically a single shot weapon. Double barrels weapons

and sniper weapons can be considered single shot for purposes of determining ammunition use if appropriate. Automatic weapons can use up ammunition even faster.

These very simplified rules on equipment should not however discourage Players from being creative in describing their Characters or their stuff! Half the fun of playing RPGs is the cool stuff you can have. A set of vintage replica .45s may not have any more effect than a laser pistol by the standards of the rules, but they definitely help define a character.

There are, of course exceptions. Some weapons are so powerful that they do extra Body chips of damage if they hit. Likewise powered armor can reduce the number of body points of damage. As always the GM is the final arbiter.

GM Final Notes

When running Space Ranger you need to follow the advice of Lester Dent, the legendary writer of the pulp Doc Savage.

First: Pour it on! Don't give your players a chance to breath or to even think. Make them react. No matter how bad it is, make it worse. Shoot at them, throw them off a cliff, and drop a spaceship on them. Since they get to narrate their actions, it is your job to keep dumping it on them.

Second: Always start them in the middle of the action. If you have to have a little bit of dissertation take a page from a James Bond movie and start the game by shooting at them as they finish the job they had before the one you are about to give them.

Third: Pour it on some more!

Rangers are tough. They can take it.