OUTER VEIL

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Scoops

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Landing Gear

Fuel Tanks

M-Drive

Bladder Stowage

Through the Veil Part 4

Written by Martin J. Dougherty

Cargo Space

Cargo Level
(accessable from Deck 1)

SPICA
PUBLISHING

THROUGH THE VEIL 4

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REFEREE'S INFORMATION

AVANIM SUBSECTOR

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

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

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

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

Al-Tawhid E552285-7

Al-Tawhid is mid-sized world with a thin but breathable atmosphere. It is a dry and dusty place, with a few shallow seas that are in many cases little more than lakes with delusions of grandeur. Much of the planetary surface is desert, with fertile areas generally close to the seas or along watercourses.

Although listed in astrographic guides as 'temperate', Al-Tawhid is prone to considerable variance of temperature due to its thin atmosphere and lack of surface water. Nights are very cold and days can be hot, with storms being quite frequent. These are characterised by high-speed winds, which nevertheless lack force. Dust and small particles get blown around, but structural damage from wind effects is rare.

Many storms on Al-Tawhid are accompanied by very light rain, often in the form of a wind-blown mist that obscures vision and makes outdoors work rather hazardous. The mist may or may not be accompanied by lightning, which can strike out of an apparently almost cloudless sky.

Although Al-Tawhid is somewhat unappealing, it does still fall into the category of 'habitable worlds' and is therefore a desirable piece of real estate compared to the average rockball planet. Thus Al-Tawhid is a government colony project and had begun to receive significant investment. This has started only quite recently, so the colony is still in the beginning stages and remains very much a frontier outpost.

Al-Tawhid is home to some 500 people, most of whom are directly employed in the work of building a much larger colony. A few are independents who have chosen Al-Tawhid as a place to live or who are building up businesses in the hope that as the colony grows those who came in on the ground floor will benefit most.

While almost the entire official population of Al-Tawhid dwell in the starport, there may be a few unlicensed prospectors elsewhere, or even a small enclave hidden away in a remote area. The starport is currently a rather basic facility. Around the landing area are several ship pens (consisting of areas of concrete with a protective earth berm), with the port-town directly to the north of the main landing area. The landing pads and the town are not separated by any sort of barrier; it is possible to wander across the pad into any part of the town. However, there is a large earth berm around the whole facility, with gaps as exits facing north, east and west.

The town can be subdivided into four districts. The area nearest the landing pads contains several large but at present mostly empty buildings that will eventually house traffic control, customs and portside hotels. To the east of this is the industrial district, which at present is little more than several large hangars for earthmoving equipment. It is planned to eventually be converted to warehousing and a starship maintenance facility, though the latter depends upon funding that has not yet been approved.

To the west of the port buildings is the farming district, from where a bridge leads over the Mullerson River and out of the settlement. The Mullerson River is a reliable watercourse, in that it has flowing water year round but its level drops considerably in the dry season. It provides water for irrigation, which is used in the large expanse of fields and pastures currently being laid out. Earthmoving equipment is currently being used to dig irrigation ditches and lay foundations for farm buildings, though there are only a handful of farms in operation.

To the north of the port buildings is the main residential district, which is little more than an expanse of prefabricated buildings housing the majority of the population. Here and there a more permanent building has been constructed, and there are efforts to ensure that the prefabricated housing is not permitted to become permanent. The colonial administration imposes regulations supported by a buy-back scheme to encourage the building of permanent accommodation.

The intent is that the port will always be small, and serve only as an economic and administrative centre. Work is underway on three sites, which are intended to become true cities. The nearest is just a few kilometres north, up the Mullerson River. Another site is well to the south on the shores of a small lake. A third site has been surveyed but work has not yet begun.

Al-Tawhid has a sustainable local Tech Level of 7, though much of the construction equipment is of higher technology. The colonial administration is outwardly efficient and everything seems well planned, but there are some serious delays and snarl-ups causing necessary equipment to be delayed. Anyone walking around Al-Tawhid spaceport may find its unfinished appearance eerie.

Many buildings are shells waiting to be fitted out or are almost ready to be occupied but need some necessary items before they can be finished off. In many cases these are technological items such as wiring and conduits for the building's electronic systems. The structure could be lived in right now but that would make it difficult to finish properly when the necessary items arrive, which they are sure to do on the very next ship. The administration is under pressure to let people move into these structures, but so far has resisted on the (quite reasonable) grounds that everything will be more efficient and cost-effective if the plan is followed despite the delays.

The two partially built settlements are even more strange. Temporarily named Mullerson River and South Lake, they both consist of a nearly laid out grid of roads with foundations dug between them, and a few structures built ready to house the central reactor and town administration apparatus. Until then the only inhabitants are a few workers camped on the edge of town; heavy equipment is brought up from the spaceport when needed but these places are ghost-proto-towns for now.

About the worst thing that could happen to the Al-Tawhid colony project would be an influx of thousands of the colonists currently stuck at Avanim. A mob of ill-equipped settlers would trample the already delayed development plan in weeks, absorbing the entire budget in emergency measures to support the new arrivals, and forcing the administration to abandon the carefully planned development of the colony.

If the plan is carried though, Al-Tawhid will be ready in a couple of years to receive colonists into ready-built towns with schools, hospitals and workshops just waiting to be manned and used. Development would be swift from that point. On the other hand, if Al-Tawhid becomes a refugee camp or is settled in an *ad hoc* fashion it will always be a depressed backwater and probably a terrible place to live.

Epsilon Cygnii E687244-5

Epsilon Cygnii is a mid-sized world with a dense atmosphere and a similar amount of surface water to Earth. As such it represents a good prospect for colonisation in the long run, though at present it is little more than an outpost.

Ascraeus Civilisation ruins have been discovered on Epsilon Cygnii, though it is clear that most of whatever was originally there was destroyed. Several radioactive areas exist in areas that would logically be good sites for a city. Overlapping craters – or at least, suspiciously crater-like depressions in the ground – characterise many of these sites.

The present settlement is located in an area of uplands, on a modestly wide plateau suitable for food production or the construction of quite a large city. The current settlement is nothing more than a collection of small buildings clustered randomly around an area of bare rock which has been levelled off as a landing site.

The settlement is self-sufficient in a minimal way, in that its rather basic workshop can keep mechanical equipment working and make repairs to the colonists' few vehicles as long as nothing more complex than swapping parts or fixing external damage is required. Few starships use the spaceport and facilities are virtually non-existent, even to the point where visitors have to be billeted in spare prefabricated base units. There are no hotels or restaurants and virtually nothing in the form of recreation other than home-grown sports.

The most popular past-times on Epsilon Cygnii are home-grown sports played with whatever is handy, usually using the landing field as a playing area. The most organised game is a variant of baseball and the locals would be awfully upset out if a starship landed on the wrong part of the cleared area and obstructed the 'sort-of-diamond' marked out there.

As with many such small outposts, the colony's 600 personnel include a large proportion of explorers and scientists, some of whom work from a rather confused tangle of buildings at the edge of the settlement. A scattering of survey equipment, tools and junk – not all of which can be easily told apart – spills out from the 'science complex' and into the surrounding area.

Officially a regulated colony with an appointed director, Epsilon Cygnii has evolved into a democracy. There are many groups within the colony, few larger than a couple of dozen people. Some groups are a work team or the staff of a scientific project, some are groups of friends, others are just people who arrived on the same ship and became a mini-community and at least two groups are essentially pseudo-cricket teams who now act as a political unit.

Each group has a representative and whenever something needs to be decided the representatives all go into one of the larger buildings and shout at one another a lot until something like a consensus emerges. The Colony Director is then responsible for implementing whatever is decided and can co-opt anyone who is needed. This creates opposition in some cases to otherwise useful projects: groups will sometimes block a decision in case they have to carry it out.

Society is rather loose but the system works well enough for a small colony. In real emergencies most people will drop what they are doing and help without any hesitation or questions about what they get in return. Afterwards, there will usually be a lot of grumbling but the colonists know that they depend on one another – when there are just 600 people on an entire planet, cooperation is vital to survival.

There are a few outposts away from the main settlement, most of which are unexciting things like weather monitoring stations or temporary survey camps. The one that is potentially the most interesting is the 'ACRS' or Ascraeus Civilisation Research Site. This is located in the valley below the main settlement, and is manned by a handful of scientists and research staff who are picking through a small Ascraeus Civilisation site that escaped destruction when the rest of the planet was attacked…or whatever it was that happened...

EPISODE 4: EPSILON CYGNII

The next leg of the trip is to Epsilon Cygnii by way of Al-Tawhid. There is not a great deal at either world but Epsilon Cygnii is a slightly famous Ascraeus Civilisation site. John is quite keen to visit in the hope of seeing the ruins for himself. The others may not be so eager but at least both worlds have breathable air, which provides opportunities to walk outside and maybe get some fresh food.

INCIDENT AT AL-TAWHID

Al-Tawhid is a dull sandy-brown colour when seen from orbit, with little radio traffic and few other signs of life. There are power signatures from one small area of the planet and not much else. The atmosphere aboard *Naddod* is one of rather less than excitement as the ship enters the atmosphere.

Initially the orbital approach and atmospheric entry begins without incident. The air is thin and there is little turbulence as *Naddod* descends towards the planet's main (and more or less only) settlement. Suddenly, without any warning, the lights go out and *Naddod* begins to drop like a stone.

The lights are only out for a second or two but it seems like longer. A couple of seconds without control input is enough to cause the ship to start to tumble and during that time the internal gravity field is off. It comes back up gradually – as it is supposed to, in order to avoid injuries – but coupled with the ship's tumble this is enough to cause crewmembers to fall and skid all over the deck. There may be some minor bumps and scrapes but the momentary control loss is not enough to cause any very serious injuries. Not on its own, anyway…

Naddod has encountered a 'lightning zone', the local term for an area of charged air that can produce lightning without much in the way of clouds and rain. The electrical field around the ship caused a momentary disruption of the vessel's systems.

The bridge crew can quickly ascertain that they have virtually no instruments and the vessel's lifters are highly erratic. Radio and other related systems are down. *Naddod* may be able to transmit but cannot receive signals, including the port beacon or any other navigational aids. More importantly, she needs to set down right now, in case the drive fails again. The ship is more or less under control but might not remain so. With the erratic lifters, there is not enough thrust to climb back into orbit; one way or the other, the ship is going down.

The pilot should be able to manage a landing which will not cause too much damage, though that might not be immediately apparent. The Referee should call for skill checks and generally give the player characters the impression that their lives are hanging by a thread but it will later become apparent that things were not as bad as they looked.

The only way of getting any information about the ship's position and flight path is by looking out of the viewports, making landing a challenge. The crew can see the neat grid of a settlement ahead and with a bit of effort it should be possible to guide the ship in for a rough landing. This is complicated by an almighty crack as the ship nears the ground and a second cut-out of the controls. This is the ship's electrical charge discharging in a lightning bolt that will set fire to anything flammable nearby on the ground. Then, with a heavy impact, *Naddod* hits the ground.

Systems checks indicate that there has been some serious disruption of control systems by electrical interference and it will take a few hours to fully dissipate. In the meantime it is safe to go outside as the hull is nearly fully discharged now. It is odd, though, that nobody is coming to assist. The town looks rather strange from the ground: the nearest buildings look normal but there are no lights, no people and more distant buildings are nothing more than foundations.

There is something very odd about Al-Tawhid spaceport, or there would be, if *Naddod* had actually come down there. The player characters have actually landed at South Lake, which is in the early stages of construction and is completely deserted. Once the threat of a lighting zone passes the work crews will be able to return but by then it will be dark, so the first personnel will be back in the morning. Until then, the characters are in a ghost town.

The player characters' position is not especially hazardous and they will be able to lift off and/or re-establish communications with the spaceport once the weather conditions and the charge on the ship completely dissipate. In the interim, they are stranded in an eerie ghost town whose outlines rapidly become obscured by wind-driven mist and rain.

It is necessary to look at the ship from the outside, using diagnostic ports to determine if there is any damage to components. This is relatively safe, although the occasional static discharge might result in an episode of swearing and the waving of a mildly shocked hand. The only real hazards during the inspection are accidents such as falling into a foundation trench that has not been filled in. However, the player characters will not know that.

During the external inspection, the player characters will spot furtive movement in the surrounding area. Visibility is not good but they will get the definite impression that something is there. In fact, there is something there: a local animal named Randall's Pseudobear (for its discoverer and its resemblance to a Terran bear) but more commonly referred to as a 'Nuisance' by locals.

Randall's Pseudobear is an omnivorous scavenger that grows to the size of a large dog and is not generally aggressive. It gained its nickname after its habit of wandering into inhabited areas to scavenge for anything edible or shiny and, more importantly, for the destruction it can cause when trying to get at something it wants.

The Referee might want to make the characters believe they are being stalked by something very nasty but in fact the Nuisance would be far more likely to flee than attack and could easily be coaxed to take food out of a character's hand if a careful approach were made.

Shooting or hand-feeding the beast will both annoy John for different reasons. He does not like pointless killing; stalking a dangerous beast is one thing but something fairly harmless should normally be left alone but, equally, he does not want to encourage the local wildlife to start rooting through human garbage or wandering blithely through town. He advocates a simple solution like "yell and chuck a rock in its general direction" if the beast gets too close.

After a couple of hours, the weather clears and it becomes apparent that the characters have landed in the middle of a construction site. Traffic control at the spaceport has been trying to reach them and will express puzzlement at their choice of landing area.

It is a simple matter to hop over to the spaceport and begin the business of refuelling and looking for a cargo. This proceeds uneventfully and soon the characters are back aboard their ship headed for Epsilon Cygnii.

PLANETFALL AT EPSILON CYGNII

Epsilon Cygnii is a blue-green planet with lots of clouds, something that spacers often like to just look at. So many destinations are dreary rockballs or borderline-habitable deserts that a planet with water and weather systems is a welcome sight. Some psychologists theorise that the appearance of an even vaguely Earth-like planet is somehow comforting to those that live and work in space. Whatever the truth of that, Epsilon Cygnii is a beautiful sight through the viewports.

Landing is not a difficult business, though as with most dense atmosphere worlds there is a fair amount of turbulence during the approach. Final approach and landing are made amid heavy rainfall, which does not prevent a reception committee from forming next to the landing pad. People dressed in an odd assortment of high-visibility rain ponchos, military surplus clothing and the occasional brightly coloured fashionable rain coat have turned out to watch the ship land.

There is no reason for the gathering, other than the fact that ships are quite infrequent this far out and the arrival of new people is a welcome change in the routine of a place where there is little to do, especially when it is raining. The player characters will be welcomed unless they are particularly unpleasant and will find themselves invited to a party.

What actually happens is that several parties spontaneously develop at various points around the settlement and the player characters will be invited to most or all of them. People wander between dwellings, joining one party and drifting on to another when they feel like it, though many just settle down to a night of drinks and banter with their friends.

This is not uncommon in small settlements where there is little to break the routine and everyone knows everyone else. The tiniest snippets of off-world information and gossip, or even just new jokes, are pounced on enthusiastically by people who have very little outside contact. Geoff McWilliams has a habit of picking up a few spare copies of vid shows at each port of call and quickly makes himself popular by handing them out to anyone who wants one. The selection is quite varied and somewhat questionable in places but overall the gesture is greatly appreciated.

The characters have an opportunity for some harmless fun here; the locals are very accepting and will tolerate most behaviour out of a desire not to spoil the party atmosphere. There are limits but it would be relatively hard to get into trouble on this world, on this night. The following morning, it's back to business.

Interlude at Epsilon Cygnii

Unlike the last post of call, which was a planned operation steadily building infrastructure for a major colonisation project, Epsilon Cygnii is essentially a collection of people with jobs to do, who happen to live in the same place. There is no overall plan and whilst colonists will probably arrive, that is of no consequence to most of the people already on-planet. Perhaps 20% are engaged in work that could be connected with preparing for full colonisation and in many cases this work is peripheral to their main tasks.

For example, the data collected by the weather monitoring teams would be useful to anyone planning a colony but it is not being collected for that reason. The weather team is primarily concerned with studying dense-atmosphere weather patterns because they have a research grant to do so – their project is an academic one rather than direct preparation for colonisation.

The same applies to the team studying the Ascraeus ruins located close to the settlement. About 50 of the world's inhabitants are involved in the project, though most are drivers, data loggers and 'research assistants' – a term that covers everyone from a couple of graduate students assisting with the actual research to the guys that move heavy stuff and carry the kit for the research team.

There are six researchers, of whom, four are 'actual scientists' and two are self-proclaimed psionic sensitives who sometimes make useful suggestions. The team is run by Dr Claire Whitely, who is constantly scathing about the usefulness of the psychics but tolerates them partly because they are occasionally right and partly because she feels it is her duty as a scientist to leave the door open to off-the-map ideas until they are completely disproven.

Dr Whitley invites the characters to visit the excavation. It is a 'sensitive location' according to security regulations but this far from Earth that means little more than trying to make sure nobody pockets any artefacts. There is no security as such, though like all frontier-world inhabitants the researchers routinely have a few guns handy. Dr Whitley is not unduly concerned about the possibility of visitors running off with artefacts from the excavation. Some have suggested that she is a bit too relaxed about security but there have been no incidents to date.

The excavation is in a valley below the main settlement, reachable via a 20 minute drive in one of the settlement's vehicles. These range from typical exploration model ATVs to six-wheel pickup trucks that make several runs each day back and forth with personnel and equipment. The chief driver/mechanic/transport boss is Whitley's husband, Alex. Alex proclaims himself to be a 'professional dumbass' but is in fact a sharp and clever man whose talents run more to machinery, logistics and general problem-solving than theoretical scientists. He is well respected by the science team and is often consulted on matters that would normally be beyond typical support personnel.

The dig is a set of deep trenches incised into the valley's side. According to Whitley's best interpretation, the site was a small settlement that was buried by a landslide. She conjectures that this landslide occurred at about the same time that the rest of the planet was being bombed and was probably connected.

There are a few prefabricated buildings clustered around the dig and several research personnel are present at any given time. Much of the work is painstaking archaeology, extracting artefacts and fragments of what used to be walls from the ground then sorting and cataloguing them. This sort of work takes years but does eventually enhance understanding of the culture being examined. It is in no way exciting for visitors though.

There is one more interesting area, which Whitley and Alex will enthusiastically show the player characters if they are interested. A tunnel leads into the hillside, dug out of the earth and propped by industrial-strength mining supports. It is low and claustrophobic despite good-quality lamps and a flooring of metal mesh.

The tunnel is not long and opens inside a fairly large structure that remained more or less intact when it was buried. The structure is a roughly circular but irregular even where the walls have not been pushed in by the pressure of earth above. It is about five metres across with a domed ceiling. Although props and bracing obscure some of the walls and other areas have partially collapsed, enough remains of the original structure to feel distinctly alien.

There are several objects in the chamber, which vary from 60 to 120 centimetres in height and are made from what appears to be some kind of shiny rock, which is mostly dark with brightly coloured striations here and there. According to Whitely, the objects show signs of being shaped and polished, creating odd shapes that conspire with the striations to cause eyestrain in anyone trying to focus on them. No-one has been able to prove any definite purpose for them so far.

Whitley explains that she and the other researchers call this place 'the temple' because they can find no other possible function for it; 'used for ritual purposes' is an archaeologist's last resort for anything that cannot be explained and so far it is the only label that can be put on most of the Ascraeus artefacts that have been found here or elsewhere.

There is no threat here but the place has a curious feeling to it, possibly because it is underground and partially collapsed, or perhaps because of the oddly-shaped eye-straining objects. Most people find this 'temple' uncomfortable to be in for any length of time. Whitley confesses that in part she brought the player characters here to watch their reactions upon seeing the place. It might be useful to her research, or maybe not. Right now there is no way to tell what may or may not be relevant.

After the visit to the excavation site, there is little to do but refuel the ship and perhaps try to find a cargo. It is possible that somebody on Epsilon Cygnii needs items shipping out but the characters' destination is outward, making cargo unlikely from this point on.

If the characters are around when the rain stops, they might be challenged to a game of some incomprehensible baseball-variant on the landing pad but overall their stopover at Epsilon Cygnii is relatively peaceful and friendly unless they do something to spoil it. The characters could make friends here, making a visit on the return trip desirable.

The characters may also be aware that there is an entire planet just outside the settlement at Epsilon Cygnii, with just a few dozen people to explore it. At some future point the characters may wish to venture into the wilds of the planet, seeking answers to the mystery of the former inhabitants or maybe just for the sake of breaking new ground. After all, this *is* the frontier of human knowledge, both in terms of explored territory and the mysterious past of the region. Who knows what else remains to be found on Epsilon Cygnii?

OPPOSITION

Randall's Pseudo-Bear ('Nuisance')

Str 3 (+0) **Dex** 3 (+0) **End** 2 (+0)

3 kg omnivore/hunter

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

Weapons: Teeth (1d6 damage) Armour 0.

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