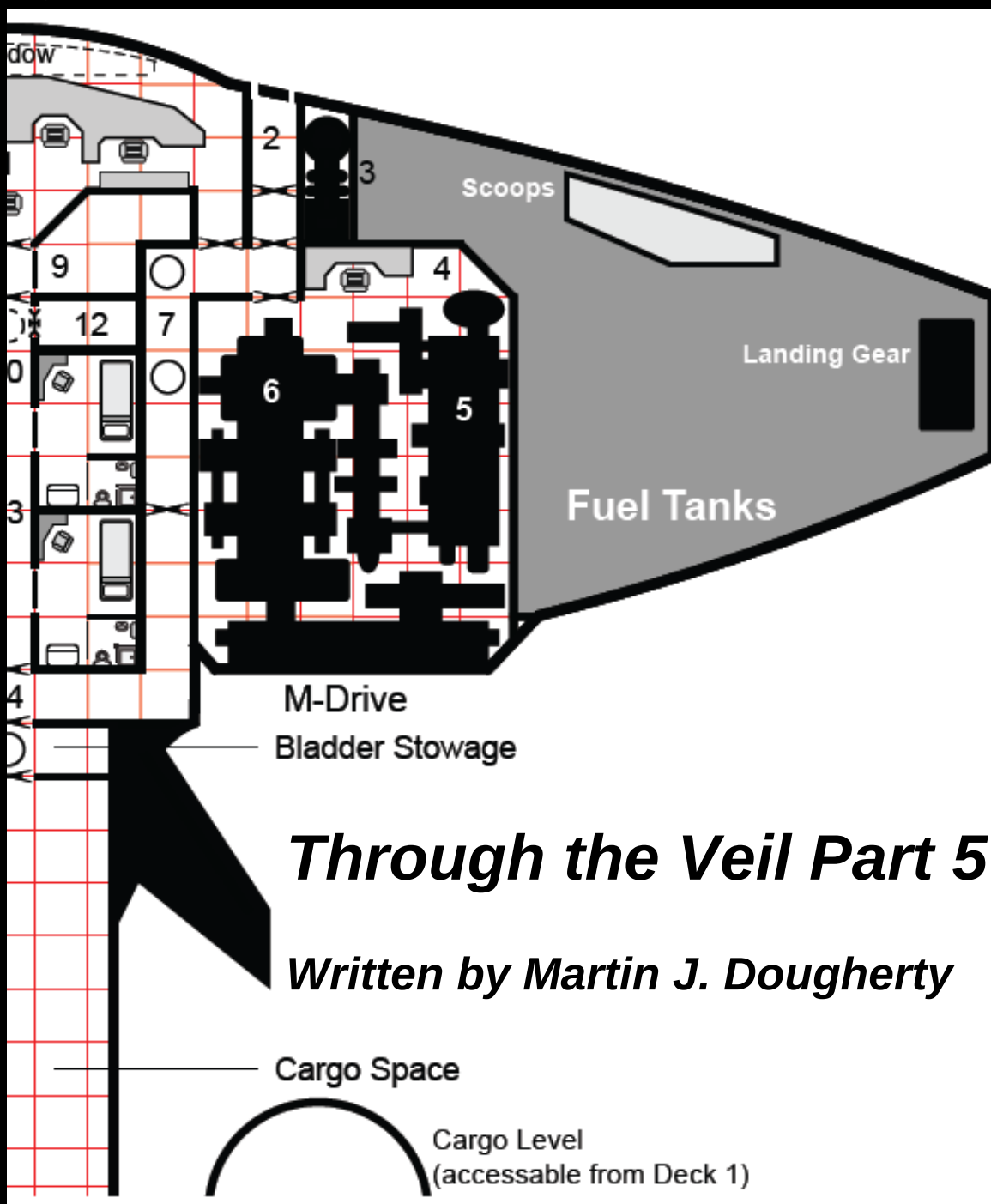




OUTER VEIL



Through the Veil Part 5

Written by Martin J. Dougherty

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THROUGH THE VEIL 5

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THROUGH THE VEIL 5

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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 on the 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.

NSSC 2115 X300000-0

NSSC 2115 is a typical 'rockball' planet. With no atmosphere and no surface water, it is an unattractive prospect for colonisation, though in the future a surveying mission might find mineral deposits that make the planet economically attractive. At present, the surface has been cursorily mapped from orbit and a few samples of the surface rock and dust taken but little more than that.

NSSC 2115 lies beyond the Outer Veil, in a region that has been explored but sees very little traffic. This system is more well-travelled than many, since it provides a refuelling link for Jump 2 vessels capable of gas giant skimming.

Traffic density is still well below one ship a month on average but for this region that is still quite high. Ironically perhaps, the low traffic density makes systems like this relatively safe, since no pirate in their right mind will sit around for months waiting for a single ship to pass through within attack range. Conversely a vessel that gets into trouble has no chance of rescue.

NSSC 2314 X412000-0

NSSC 2314 is distinctly a borderline planet: its atmosphere is too thin to support human life without a pressure suit but the thin gas envelope of mainly carbon dioxide provides some protection from micrometeorites and helps regulate surface temperature. The planet does have some water mainly found in ice fields at the poles and in deep valleys.

These two factors make NSSC 2314 a more attractive prospect for colonisation than an airless rockball like NSSC 2115. Locally available water and the ability to extract some useful gases from the otherwise un-breathable atmosphere greatly reduce the burden on life support equipment and the cost of setting up a colony, though sealed structures remain a necessity.

The most striking feature of NSSC 2314 is the Dewenton Ice Ocean, a region near the South Pole surrounded by sheltering mountains. A vast plain of ice with scattered islands of rock fills the depression between the mountains. The depth of the ice varies considerably from one point to another; in places the ice ocean is just one or two metres thick, while in others the rocky bottom is several kilometres down. Deep crevasses exist at various points in the ice ocean, like trenches in a water ocean and so far these have defied the best instruments available; there is probably nothing at the bottom but ice but nobody can say for sure.

At certain times of the year, the planetary axis is aligned so that parts of the ice ocean receive increased sunlight, causing the ice to sublime in spectacular clouds of steam. More commonly, there is a slushy half-melted layer at the surface, which makes travelling over the ice in a vehicle hazardous due to it being highly slippery. The location of these regions is not always predictable, which can make a vehicular transit unpredictable and risky.

NSSC 2314 is not tectonically very active but there are a few volcanoes. There are vents under the ice ocean in places that can cause sudden melting in deep areas and the occasional explosion as a bubble of steam forces its way up through a weak point in the ice and bursts out, scattering fragments of ice as it breaks free. This is often followed by a plume of black smoke which is quickly extinguished by water running into the hole left by the steam eruption. Pockets of liquid water can be created over a vent, making the surface above treacherous to drive on.



EPISODE 5: BEYOND THE OUTER VEIL

After leaving Epsilon Cygnii, the characters' entry into jump is in some ways routine and in others very significant. They are leaving the Outer Veil and heading into the scarcely-explored reaches beyond. Others have passed this way before but not many. The chances of meeting another ship other than for a prearranged rendezvous are slim; if something goes wrong then the player characters are on their own. Ships occasionally go missing out here; even more rarely, they are found, but never with the crew alive. There are many ways to die in deep space and yet there is a degree of freedom not found anywhere else.

Refuelling at NSSC 2115

Jump emergence at NSSC 2115 is routine, but the emergence position is not close to the system's so-called mainworld. NSSC 2115 is an uninhabited (and, according to John, "uninteresting") rockball useful mainly as a navigational reference point. *Naddod* and her crew have no reason or desire to visit such a place. Instead the plan is to skim fuel from one of the system's gas giants.

Skimming is a moderately hazardous undertaking, inasmuch as there are always risks when operating in a gas giant atmosphere. This one is fairly placid as gas giants go, with few of the mighty storms that can endanger the most robust starship. According to sensor readings there are a few storms ongoing but it would be a simple matter to stay away from them. Refuelling should be as routine as it ever is.

Naddod dives into the gas giant atmosphere, causing sensor range to be enormously degraded. The ship vibrates and occasionally shudders and there are heart-stopping lurches from time to time. This is all normal, as is the roaring sound all around the ship. It is hard to sleep during the refuelling and most people are on edge, but there is no reason to suppose that anything is going to go wrong.

Indeed, nothing does; at least, nothing out of the ordinary. It is always wise to check for damage after a 'wilderness refuelling' of this sort, but other than a few things falling off shelves there seems to be no damage. That does not mean that the Referee cannot play to the characters' paranoia and let them worry about a non-existent problem.

In due course, *Naddod* climbs clear of the gas giant and enters jump, headed for NSSC 2314.

PLANETFALL AT NSSC 2314

At NSSC 2314, *Naddod* does emerge close to the mainworld, which is only a little more inviting than the previous one. At least this world has bright patches to break the monotony of dull rock. The ice fields are light gray except when direct sunlight hits them, when they glitter silver-white.

A routine sensor sweep indicates a few active volcanoes and a power source in the southern hemisphere. That's fine according to John; he hoped to meet someone here. And so *Naddod* begins to descend towards the ice ocean of the southern hemisphere. Ahead is a small archipelago of rocky islands poking up through the ice and on one of them is a starship.

As soon as they are picked up on sensors, the characters' ship receives an automated transponder challenge, followed by a verbal greeting from someone named 'Andersen' on-planet. John tells his crew to land, but seems strangely out of sorts. If asked, he says he doesn't feel too great; maybe lunch disagreed with him or the jump emergence has upset his stomach. That happens sometimes, but not normally to John.

Naddod approaches the island, flying over the ice ocean. Here and there small puffs of steam can be spotted escaping from the surface, but for the most part it is smooth and glassy, except where direct sunlight causes a fog to form above the surface. Without definite data on the ice thickness and composition, it would be highly risky to set down anywhere but one of the islands.

John directs the pilot to land on a particular island, which is now broadcasting a beacon. On the surface is a *Morgana* class vessel, or some variant of it, surrounded by a jumble of what looks like prospecting or mining equipment. There are two ATVs parked by the ship, with a handful of suited-up personnel working nearby. They stop and watch the ship land – probably in case of a dangerous error rather than curiosity.

The Prospecting Camp

The characters are greeted by Miles Andersen, leader of the group and, judging by the hugs and handshakes, living proof that John actually does have some friends. Andersen is welcomed aboard *Naddod* along with his wife Sandra and their 12 year-old daughter, Diane. John introduces the newcomers as 'his most troublesome and persistent clients' and breaks out the best booze.

John acted as a guide for Miles' earlier expeditions and was more or less responsible for the couple's meeting. Thereby hangs a long and complex tale to which both men allude without explaining much. Sandra and Diane are left at a bit of a loose end and will end up chatting with the crew for lack of anything better to do.

The Andersens and their team are on-planet doing 'really not very exciting research' as part of a long-term planetological research project. This involves a great deal of driving ATVs around on the ice and using radar to map the ice ocean bed and taking core samples of the ice and the rock beneath. Then there's the thrilling work of analysing the samples.



Not surprisingly, Diane is quite bored but she is clocking up a lot of credits towards university when she is old enough. In the meantime she has become something of an expert on mining equipment and the composition of ice cores and has pretty much played every videogame known to humanity to death. This will not stop her offering to own the sorry ass of anyone foolish enough to take her on at a game.

The reunion goes on through dinner and into the evening, taking John and Miles out of the equation as far as getting anything done goes. Sandra takes a comm call and okays her team to head out to collect some core samples, then suggests that maybe everyone aboard *Naddod* could work together to produce some dinner or something. Or at least, everyone but John and her husband...

At some point, John gets around to asking where someone called 'Morey' is, to which Miles replies that his ship came through a few weeks ago with a resupply shipment and left a couple of cargo containers for *Naddod*... along with an apology. His schedule was too tight to make the meet, which John seems to be quite upset about.

If the characters think to ask, Amber can inform them that 'Morey', that is Alexander Morey, is an old colleague of John's. They worked together for a few years before a dispute that she's never really understood caused them to fall out. John has been trying to make peace with Morey for years and he'd finally agreed to meet up and talk out their differences. They were to meet here, but the schedule seems to have changed.

Although John is upset that Morey is not here, he does enjoy Miles' company, which results in them both sitting up late and getting blind drunk while everyone else tries to find something to do. The next morning, Miles and John are both in no state to get anything done and the crates left by Morey's ship need to be brought aboard and stowed. Amber urges the characters to get on with that and to sort out refuelling.

Obtaining fuel is a matter of running hoses to the edge of the ice sheet, placing heater units and waiting for a pool to form, then drawing up water to be cracked for hydrogen by the ship's processors. Lacking anything better to do, Diane offers to help. She is actually very knowledgeable about this sort of process and if the characters are willing to take advice from a 12-year-old they will find their work goes more easily. However, before the characters are far into the process, Sandra radios them.

Sandra says that her team has a problem. Their ATV has developed a fault and normally she or Miles would go out in the other one to assist. But Miles is really quite unwell this morning and should not drive or be left in charge of machinery and both Sandra and Diane have work to do here. Sandra asks if the characters would mind driving out to the other ATV and rendering assistance. It seems to be a drive train fault; not the first one they've had here. The ATV might be fixable on-site or could need towing back.

Driving On the Ice Ocean

The other ATV is about four hours' drive away across the ice sheet. It is crewed by three personnel who have worked for the Andersens for some time:

- Pete Lyndley, age 38 (team leader/hostile-environment specialist)
- Dawn Garner, age 31 (planetary scientist)
- Miklos Heron, age 24 (equipment operator)

Miklos is a fairly new recruit, who hired on six months ago for this mission. The others have been with the Andersens for three years or more. They generally work well as a team, with Pete acting as field mission controller and advisor on operations in a hazardous environment and Miklos supporting the others as a sort of multi-skilled technician. Dawn is the heart of the team, who does most of the expert work and analyses the samples as well.

Early in the drive, the characters can talk to any of the field team, who explain that their ATV has slid into a depression in the ice and 'done something' to its drive train while Miklos was trying to lead-foot his way out. There is no immediate danger and the team are going to continue with their work while the characters come out to help them – they are a bit surprised to find newcomers assisting instead of Miles, but no matter so long as the problem is solved.

Later on, the characters find that they can only talk to Dawn, since both Pete and Miklos are busy. The players may assume that they are working on the ATV and Dawn will not think to explain further, but in fact they are setting up a hoist to send one of the team into a crevasse they have uncovered. This is a unique opportunity and the field team have reasoned that since assistance is on its way they might as well finish their job while they are here.

About 20 minutes before the characters arrive, the character of their radio conversation with the field team changes abruptly. Miklos comes on the air, sounding breathless and rather strange. This is because he is wearing his vacc suit and is outside the ATV, using its radio for a relay. Miklos is agitated and obviously scared, but from his babble the characters will be able to discern a couple of key facts:

- Dawn has 'got stuck in the hole';
- Pete 'went to sort it out' and is now 'stuck as well';
- The winch is jammed.

It may take a while to get Miklos to calm down and explain properly, at which point the characters will be almost at their destination and can see for themselves what Miklos is babbling about. The situation is actually much, much worse than they might have thought – Miklos has not noticed what has been happening around him; he has been too busy trying to rescue his companions.



The Field Team's Predicament

As the characters approach, they can see the field team's ATV parked at a slightly odd angle, tilted to the side and down at the back. It is in a small depression in the ice, a collection of tools and equipment around it. Miklos waves frantically from close by, making 'come-no-closer' gestures.

Miklos quickly explains that the team found a deep crack in the ice and used the portable winch to lower Dawn into it, to collect samples. She reported going down about three hundred metres and finding a cavern in the ice, which she entered. When she went off the air, Pete went down to assist and was able to locate her. She had fallen in a pool of meltwater and damaged her suit, which Pete was able to fix. However, the winch jammed when Miklos tried to bring Dawn back up, stranding both of them down there with limited air. Pete's radio is working, but range is very limited to he is relying on the fibre-optic communications backup built into the winch apparatus.

Inspection shows that the winch is thoroughly jammed and needs dismantling to repair it, but that is a workshop job. Fortunately, the second ATV carries a field kit of its own which includes a backup winch. It should be simple enough to send someone down with spare air tanks for Dawn and Pete, then to bring everyone up one at a time. However, there is another problem.

Astute observers will have noted that the ATV at an odd angle and may have wondered why. Closer inspection results in an alarming conclusion: the ATV is sinking.

The characters may figure out (and Dawn will, sooner or later) that the melting and subsiding ice under the ATV is connected with the crack and the cavern underneath. Something is causing the ice to melt and a clue to what might be offered by temperature readings in the cavern. It is getting warmer in there and wisps of smoky gas can be seen drifting out. Once the penny drops the team will probably realise that there is a volcanic vent in the area, which makes it a distinctly unhealthy place to be stuck.

A Rescue

Getting Dawn and Pete out of the cavern is not especially difficult once the second winch is available. Dawn has some minor damage to her suit (and no working radio, forcing her to communicate by frantic gestures once she realises that the team is sitting on top of a volcano) and a badly sprained ankle, so will need some assistance. The characters should be able to get someone down there easily enough, hook up whoever is coming up first and send them on their way.

There is, however, a fair amount of meltwater in the cavern, some of which runs out of the mouth and drops deeper into the crack. Investigating the bottom would tie up the one working winch and reveal little more than a deepening pool of meltwater at the bottom of a crack in the ice ocean that is also very slowly getting wider. The real problem is not in the crack, it is at the back of the ice cavern.

The cavern and the crack above it were created by hot volcanic gas escaping from a chimney below the cavern, creating a bubble under the ice ocean which is now beginning to collapse. It will shortly break through into the crack, causing the surrounding ice to collapse and the formation of a basin in the ice filled with meltwater through which volcanic gas is bubbling, heating it a little.

The discovery of what is happening should add a certain urgency to the task of getting Dawn and Pete out of the crack, which will be intensified when the ground suddenly lurches and ice falls from the cavern walls and roof. Anyone looking into the crack can see a jet of water spurting out from the crack wall a few dozen meters below the cavern mouth, falling into the darkness of the crack. It should be obvious by now that the whole area is unstable and may be about to collapse.

Having managed to get the field team out of the cavern, the characters will now need to clear the area. Ideally, it would be good to save the stranded ATV, perhaps by towing it; or maybe someone has already fixed its drive train damage, in which case it can scramble out of the deepening basin in which it stands with some help from the other ATV's winch.

The whole area around the stranded ATV is slowly melting and is sinking into the bubble below the ice. As the characters make ready to leave the area, they will have to slog through knee-deep meltwater. Space suits are not really designed for this and the water leaches heat out of the suit in a way that space does not. The suits should survive a brief immersion but will fail within moments if forced underwater.

The climax of the rescue should be an attempt to reach one or both ATVs as the cavern below collapses, dropping the characters and their vehicle a metre or so instantly, into a sea of slush where some areas offer reasonable footing and others are almost completely liquid. The warm bubble of water under the ice breaks through into the crack in a few places and begins to flow out, which makes the basin deeper and – more importantly – suggests that sooner or later the whole side of the crack will collapse, washing the ATVs, characters and everything else nearby into the crack.

The ATVs will float and can propel themselves through water, though semi-frozen slush is a more difficult proposition. Ironically, although the damaged ATV cannot drive on firm ice it can travel through water, albeit slowly. It will thus be a useful lifeboat, though it cannot climb out of the melted basin unaided.

The Referee should play the final moments of the rescue for tension, with everyone struggling to reach the ATVs through melting slush, then trying to forge free of the melted basin as the crack wall finally gives way and a sea of warm water plunges into the depths of the chasm. The plume of steam and volcanic gas that results would be impressive if it were not quite so close.

Hopefully, the characters will manage to reach firmer ice before the final collapse. Otherwise they will have to find a way to prevent the ATV from being washed into the crevasse.



Once the initial collapse is over, what remains is a shallow but deepening basin in the ice ocean, with a pool of slushy water at the bottom. Bubbles of volcanic gas emerge through the slush from time to time. Smart characters might wonder if there are other warm bubbles under the ice and if so, could they harbour previously unknown life?

But that is a question for another time...

Leaving NSSC 2314

Naddod still has a mission to fulfil, though John would prefer to remain for a while. This is partly to ensure that his friends are safe and partly because he wants to see the ice basin for himself. Eventually, though, *Naddod* will need to press on.

As the ship climbs to orbit, ready to jump out on the next leg of its journey, John suddenly chuckles and points at the image of the world below.

"You know, when Iceland was discovered back on Terra, they told the folks back home that every blade of grass dripped with butter. I wonder what they'll say about this place in the colonisation brochure? Or what they'll call it? What do you call a frozen volcanic wasteland? Oh yeah, that's right. Iceland. We went to the stars seeking new lands to settle and we still ended up discovering Iceland."

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