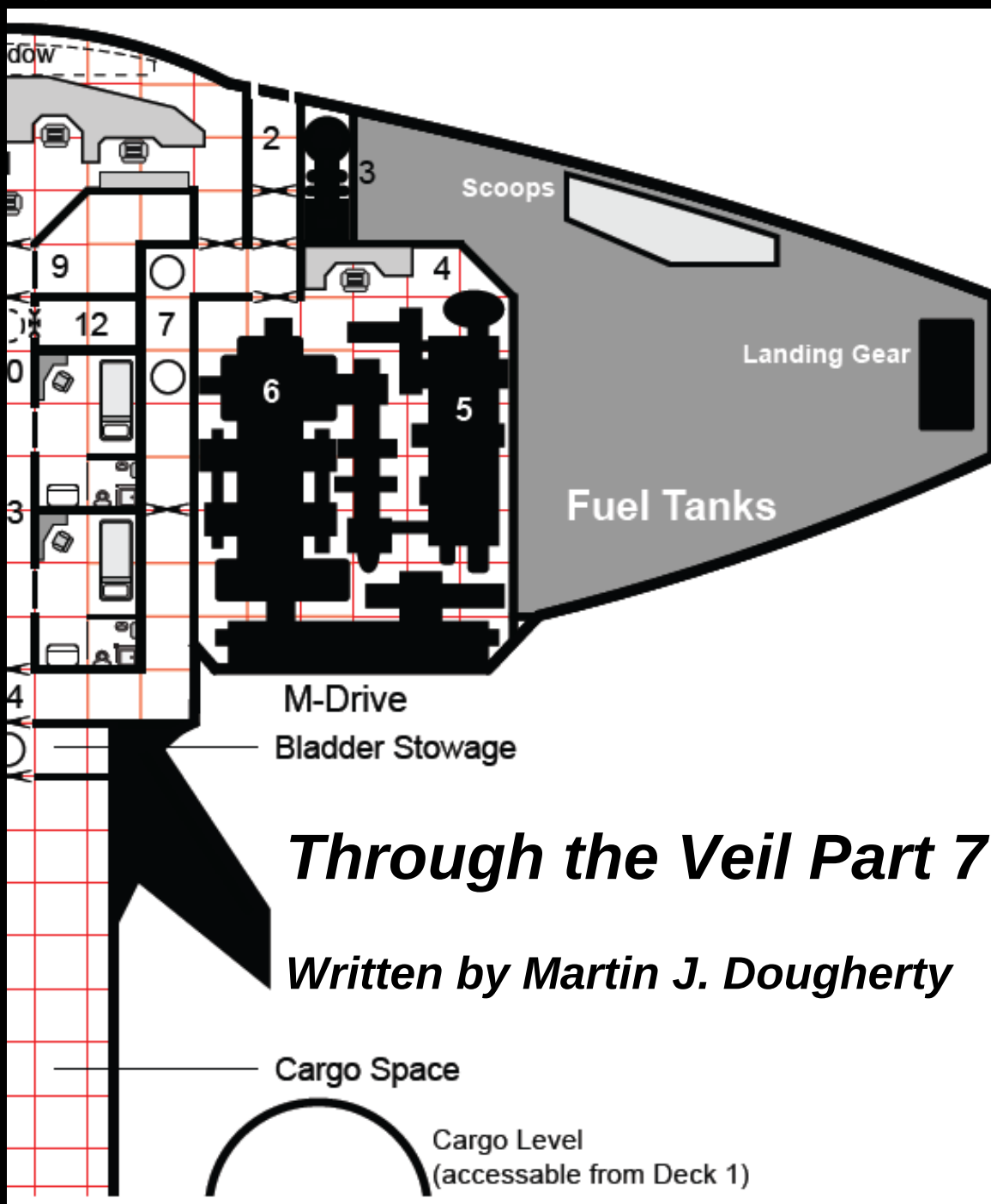




OUTER VEIL



Through the Veil Part 7

Written by Martin J. Dougherty

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THROUGH THE VEIL 7

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REFEREE'S INFORMATION

BETA PAVONIS SUBSECTOR

Beta Pavonis subsector lies almost entirely beyond the fringe of explored space. This does not mean that no-one has ever been there; missions have undertaken basic mapping and the presence of various planetary bodies is noted in the star charts. In some cases this is all the available information in the official databases and often carries an 'unverified' flag.

Officially, the subsector has no population, inasmuch as there are no sanctioned or recognised colonies. There are some unofficial colonies that are listed as uninhabited and unexplored in the more pedantic star charts but more realistic map-makers chart the subsector's five unsanctioned colonies, of which Baldoon and Bolthole are the most important. Those charts that admit there is any population at all estimate it at no more than 10,000 people.

Beta Pavonis subsector is not a great colonisation prospect, since there are only four worlds with breathable atmospheres in the entire subsector. Expansion into the region is likely to be along the Bolthole Main from Avanim subsector. The Baldoon Cluster and the four worlds around Endless Blossom are more difficult to reach, although Endless Blossom's breathable atmosphere may make it an attractive colonial destination. This might create friction with the existing colonists, whose unofficial mission was to find a place to live in isolation.

A cluster of worlds along the Trailing edge of the subsector called The Tootega Branch provides a jump 2 link from Avanim subsector into Dark Reaches. The link is currently of little importance as Dark Reaches subsector has not been settled or even explored much but in time the port at Tootega may expand. This link has seen a few Naval ships and support craft in the past year or so, which is considered to be an unusually high level of activity for such a remote area. The destination and mission of these ships remains unknown.

Tootega C4A0232-8

Tootega is a small desert world with a thin atmosphere composed mainly of carbon dioxide and nitrogen. Whilst humans cannot breathe this mix it is not actually toxic. More importantly, Tootega's atmosphere contains a number of useful gases in unusual concentrations.

The world is officially not inhabited but there is one unofficial settlement. 'Corp Town', is the headquarters and just about the sole asset of the Tootega Corporation, which runs the facility and claims the whole planet as its territory.

Colloquially known as 'TootyCorp', the corporation runs a small mine and an atmospheric gas processing facility, both of which are co-located with the spaceport. TootyCorp employs nearly everyone on the planet, other than a few entrepreneurs who have opened some businesses and a handful of freelance experts on temporary contracts.

The Tootega Corporation ships out a few containers of high-quality rare earth metal ores, some unusual rock crystals and a large amount of pure gases for industrial uses. A small secondary income is made from starships using the port, which is one of the best for many parsecs. This is not saying much but Tootega is a place where you can at least get fuel and spares without having to make them yourself.

Like many frontier installations, Tootega is a free and easy place. There is a security force and they have some cells which are usually occupied by drunks sobering up. Most crime is limited to the odd brawl or theft and is quite often dealt with by the victim and their friends.

The corporation has not yet formulated a set of laws and the general rule is 'take care of your own business if you can; as long as it doesn't get out of hand, the corp doesn't get involved'. Those that do cross the line, such as persistent offenders, those who put others in danger by not observing sealed-environment protocols, or anyone who escalates violence beyond an acceptable point, will be put aboard the next available starship, forced into dangerous labour in the mine or simply shot while resisting arrest. Tootega cannot afford a 'proper' penal system, so the line between acceptable but antisocial behaviour and a thorough beating by the security force can be a fine one.



EPISODE 7: TOOTEGA

The *Naddod*'s foray into Beta Pavonis subsector is a fairly short one, with a single stop at Tootega to refuel and resupply before moving on to Trailing into Dark Reaches subsector.

John is up and about most of the time but he is clearly very ill. He is subject to dizzy spells and the occasional blackout but in between he can function almost normally, unless he is stressed or forced to do anything remotely strenuous.

John is bad-tempered at first if pressed about his illness but finally admits that he is "not so good, really". He encourages the crew to try to work out what he has contracted, not least for their safety, but with the limited available equipment this will be a problem. What can be determined is that John's blood chemistry is wrong; it contains a number of compounds that should not be toxic but seem to have become so. This phenomenon may be related to his illness and there is evidence that he is suffering from gradual organ failure: his body is slowly shutting down.

John obviously needs a hospital but the tiny colonies that exist this far out will not have the necessary facilities. A military or Naval base might have the necessary medical facilities but where would you find such a base out here?

"Just stick to the plan and keep going", John tells his crew. Astute observers might realise that he seems to know something they do not but he is not yet willing to explain himself. Amber spends an increasing amount of time looking after John, leaving Geoff largely in charge of the mission.

Geoff is increasingly distracted and has taken to wandering around the ship. He seems happy to have company if anyone encounters him or offers to walk with him while he makes small talk about endless trivialities. Unless the characters deliberately try to spy on Geoff and do an excellent job of it, there will be a fair amount of time when nobody knows where he is or what he is doing but that could also be said of some other crewmembers. Everyone has jobs they do alone or when they are conducting the daily 'walk around' inspections of the ship's interior.

There is nothing odd about a crew member being out of sight for a couple of hours now and then and, unless something makes the characters take notice, they will probably not realise that Geoff is off the radar more frequently and for longer than usual.

Geoff actually spends a lot of time doing inspections and maintenance, and wandering around the ship muttering in an effort to clear his head and relieve some of the stress he is suffering. That Geoff is experiencing stress is not surprising: John seems to be dying, the ship is off the edge of the map heading for a remote destination and, to cap it all, Amber has started flirting with him. This is a problem: Geoff is strongly attracted to her but does not want to compromise the mission.

Some of Geoff's off-radar time is spent undertaking some unobtrusive snooping. He wants to know why *Naddod* is all the way out here, what the ship is transporting and exactly what Colonel Schmidt is up to. Geoff has suspicions that there is more to this mission than the colonel explained back on Marcos.

Geoff's employers, the SEC (Survey, Exploration and Colonisation) Group, are concerned that someone might get a head start on the new frontier and that they might lose opportunities. Geoff's mission is to find out as much as possible about the situation and the intentions of the people involved. That does not mean that he or his employers would actually be opposed to an expansion in the area; they just want information about what is really going on. Geoff is none the wiser yet and does not want his trip to be a waste, especially if John dies without revealing what he knows about the mission destination.

PLANETFALL AT TOOTEGA

Any ship approaching Tootega has two choices of landing area: the port or anywhere else. Landing anywhere else is pointless; there is only one settlement on the planet and the planet has an atmosphere that is not breathable. There is no surface water so fuel has to be obtained by searching for ice, which is time-consuming, or drilling into an artesian basin, which is not feasible for a visiting starship.

Consequently the corporation town, or Corp Town, is the only feasible destination and soon the *Naddod* is settling onto a landing pad. As the ship touches down, Amber suggests that she can handle the routine procedures that John would normally do, such as obtaining fuel. The characters can leave the ship and do whatever they wish for a day or two. Amber stresses that the *Naddod* needs to get underway as quickly as possible, so any business the crew has should be conducted quickly. While the characters are planetside, Amber adds, there are some useful medications that would benefit her father. The colony's infirmary may have a stock and a purchase might be possible. She strongly urges the characters to see what they can obtain.

In Port on Tootega

There are no problems passing through Tootega customs, such as they are. Local security regulations are relaxed, except for those relating to environmental integrity and any experienced spacer follows best practise on that matter as a routine part of staying alive.

Although they are pushed for time, the characters have an opportunity to look around shops, to stock up on whatever they need and to grab a meal that is not shipboard rations. Although the selection of shops and bars is limited this could be the last chance to obtain any urgently needed luxury or just plain 'essential-to-have-in-jump-space' items.



Tootega Corp Town has a clothes and shoes store, with a rather limited selection, a hardware, tools and survival gear dealer who does more trade in repairs than sales, a rather clever food outlet that sells pre-packaged long-storage meals and serves the freshly made version in a small restaurant, three bars of varying quality and another store rather interestingly named 'SimsonStuff'.

SimsonStuff is a general dealer run by the Simson family. Their very varied wares include a number of items traded in or pawned to the previous owners. The store has a few 'departments' with similar items grouped on or around a counter but much of the stock is simply jammed in wherever it will fit. The result is both claustrophobic and colourful and a rummage through the more obscure parts of the store might turn up some unusual and all-but-forgotten items.

The Simsons sell a lot of guns, mainly to spacefarers who feel the need to have the latest weapon strapped to their hip or a classic hunting rifle on their shoulder. Their display ranges from classic and entry-level home defence weapons to obsolescent military hardware and a few experimental weapons, or those that never really caught on.

The store makes its living from selling mundane basics such as kitchen utensils and entertainment vids shipped in for sale to the locals but relies on sales to spacefarers to bring in the real money. The store has other things that starfarers tend to buy, ranging from spacecraft-specific tools and spares, to refurbished vacc suits, to all manner of amusing items that people with too much time on their hands and a salary they cannot spend tend to buy.

Away from the obvious 'departments' there is an element of blind luck as to what can be found on or under the shelves. There is even a small, working grav skimmer under a tarpaulin in the middle of the floor, though its power cells need charging. The family would love to sell it as it takes up a lot of room but it is expensive and most customers do not have the need.

Obtaining Medication

If the characters start asking about medication, they are referred to a TootyCorp executive called Anton Clys, whose office is not far away, like everything in Corp Town. He is a very young man for his post, though very well qualified, who has ended up as a 'junior executive in charge of just about everything'. Clys is not a medical expert, it turns out.

Clys's main problem is in the mine just outside the town. Part of the mine has become flooded due to leakage from the artesian basin that supplies starship fuel for the port and drinking water to the town. Pumps normally keep the mine dry but they have broken down and the two repair crews sent in to fix the problem came back with some very strange excuses for not going back in.

According to the crews, there are 'little, scuttling things' in the mine, which have a habit of biting anyone who ventures into the deeper areas. This would not normally be such a problem as the creatures are not very big, except that the bites cause vacc suit punctures that have forced the teams to withdraw.

Clys's problem is that if the mine becomes inoperable then the world's economy will be crippled. What he needs is someone with experience of simple machinery to enter the mine, go to the pump room, fix whatever is wrong with the equipment and get the lights and other electrical equipment back on.

Clys says that the crew can have free fuel and a supply of the drugs they need in return. This is not a bad offer; the drugs are expensive and might be needed by someone in the town before the next supply arrives. The task should take no more than a few hours and Clys is not willing to budge on his end of the deal. He needs the mine reopened and the solution, in the form of the characters, is right in front of him.

Entering the Mines

The mine consists of a 150 metre vertical shaft served by an elevator, which terminates at a main underground cavern. From here, several tunnels run off, most of them horizontal. 'Carrybots' bring raw ore to a central point, where it is sorted by machine and loaded into boxes for transit to the surface. The actual mining is done by machines but they are closely supervised by human operators. The material left over after the valuable ore is removed goes into a 'powdering' machine and is turned into rock-based cement. This cement is pumped into old tunnels to refill them, or formed in moulds into blocks which are then used as building materials or supports for areas of the mine that are still being worked.

The upper works still have lighting and power and the machinery still works but they are largely played out. A wide tunnel slopes down to the lower level, a further 100 metres underground and this is also lit. The lights in the cavern at the bottom have failed and there is about 25 centimetres of water in the cavern. The characters' vacc suits are proof against shallow water like this, though the sensation of slogging through water is strange.

The withdrawal from the mine was orderly. Most of the robots and machines were removed before the water reached them and electricity was shut down in areas where the water could cause a short. There is still a fair amount of clutter around the cavern and this could cause a character to trip. Moving quickly is both hazardous and extremely hard work. The only light available is what the characters have with them; there is always the danger of failing to see something truly dangerous, such as the edge of a catwalk or a collection of sharp tools under the water.

The Referee should note that the mine's intercom system is inoperable and vacc suit radios will only work over very short distances underground. Characters who wander off will quickly find themselves out of touch with the rest of the group.



The lower cavern is rougher than the upper one, with a couple of tunnels that go down quite steeply from the floor rather than the walls as in the upper cavern. It can be difficult to determine water depth just by looking, so a character crossing what appears to be solid floor might find there is nothing under their foot when they put it down. At one side of these floor entrances, the drop is a few extra centimetres; enough only for an uncomfortable stumble. It is possible that a character might not realise what is happening and go forward a few more steps before realising that the water is now much deeper.

At the other side of the entrance is a drop of several metres to the floor of the tunnel below. In most cases there is a safety barrier but not all of the drops are marked. A character who steps off the edge might be able to hurl themselves backwards but if not then they will pitch forwards and fall into deep water.

A standard vacc suit is not much less buoyant than a typical person. Slim-fitting advanced suits have less air in them and are actually prone to sinking quicker. The helmet is the most buoyant part of course, so characters will at least sink feet first.

Swimming in a vacc suit is extremely difficult and immersion results in an immediate sensation that water is penetrating the suit. This is not immediately the case and electronics will not fail immediately. Vacc suits are intended to keep air in, not water out and the seals are not designed to withstand pressure in that direction. Water will slowly seep into a suit that is immersed but this will take hours before becoming dangerous unless the suit is in deep water with a high pressure. Electronic systems will continue to work underwater in the short term but water in a vacc suit will eventually lead to electronics failures.

Fortunately, there is no need to explore these deeper tunnels while they are full of water. The pump room is located at the end of a 200 metre tunnel running out of the side of the cavern. It used to be a wide ore vein and has become an equipment storage and utility area. It is very cluttered, with objects under the water posing a trip hazard. There are even a couple of abandoned carrybots feebly attempting to push through the water. Their batteries are low and they cannot make a good contact with the floor due to buoyancy; if they were weighted with ore, tools or something similar, they would be able to make slow progress along the tunnel floor so long as underwater obstructions could be avoided. The carrybots' lights still work but are not on as the machines' automated systems attempt to conserve any remaining power. The tunnel to the pump room has a quite uneven floor and angles downward slightly, which may alarm some characters.

There are creatures in the water. The creatures are a nuisance rather than a major threat. They are between 20 and 30 centimetres in length, shaped somewhat like a lobster with a pair of powerful claws that could easily make a hole a vacc suit. They swim away from the characters rather than approaching them but it is possible that one might get stepped on or nip at a character as they pass.

The creatures breathe water and it is most likely that they got in from wherever the water is seeping in from but they can survive above the surface for several minutes. They are clumsy out of water and are easily avoided by anyone who can move quicker than a very slow crawl.

The creatures should cause little more than alarm and some annoyance, even if one manages to nip a hole in a vacc suit. That will let water in but not very quickly. Shooting at the creatures creates a danger for everyone. Bullets lose velocity very quickly in water and are unlikely to cause much harm once they have gone into the water, which is where the target is likely to be. They can ricochet off the surface if fired at an acute angle and may strike a hard surface under the water before they lose velocity. A bullet that re-emerges from water after a ricochet will have shed much of its velocity but will be on an unpredictable trajectory.

The Referee should reduce damage from guns by 1d6 per metre of water the bullet has passed through, rounding down. For example, a weapon that normally does 3d6-3 damage would only do 1d6-3 damage to a target two metres under water. That said, shooting at the creatures is not really necessary.

Fixing the Pumps

The main electrical control system for the lower level of the mine is a fairly large piece of equipment that sticks up out of the water. A few indicator lights remain lit despite it being in safety-shutdown mode. The characters may be concerned about reactivating the system while they are standing waist-deep in water but a good look at the system suggests that there will not be much danger of a shock or other dangerous discharge.

Getting the power back on will take about 20 minutes of work, most of which is taken up with tracing diagrams of power distribution centres to work out if there is going to be a spectacular problem. When the switch is thrown the result is anticlimactic.

Other than a few more indicator lights coming on and a systems diagram appearing on the power unit's display nothing happens immediately. Elements of the display flash repeatedly and then go out; as they do, lights come on in that area. A couple of fixed machines also start up, which may cause momentary alarm. The sudden change in lighting and movement of machines confuses the eye and some characters may think they saw something dive into the water off the top of a tool cabinet. No impression other than 'something about the size of a big dog, black and shiny' comes to mind and there is no sign of whatever it was, if it was anything at all.

After this distraction the characters will realise that the pumps are not working. The distribution display shows a break in the power network leading to the pumps. Tracing this means looking under the surface of water that is about 1m deep at this point and tracing the heavy-duty cable from the power distribution unit until the break is found.



The point at which the break has occurred is obvious: a power distribution box has been broken open or could it have been gnawed open? The main power unit has automatically cut the power to the distribution box, which is just as well, as the investigating character is staring at bare power cables whilst immersed in water. After the shock of realising this wears off, they will conclude that the box must be inert or they would have already been electrocuted.

Then the character will spot the eggs. Something has lain what appear to be eggs in the power distribution box. Some are broken and have hatched into the smaller swimming creatures, which are immature versions of the big one, while others remain intact. The obvious inference is that there is a mother creature around somewhere.

The character will eventually realise that, in order to get the pumps working again, it will be necessary to run a new power cable from the main distribution unit's auxiliary power outputs to the pumps. The pumps are located in a chamber full of water underneath this room.

Underwater Adventures

The diagram on the distribution unit screen shows the pump room is located at the top of a vertical 10 metre shaft that runs into the aquifer under Corp Town. Water seeps into the shaft and is then pumped up to a point just under the pump chamber. From there the water is redirected into a pipe system to the town's water storage tanks and to the starship fuel refinery. The top of the shaft is capped with a large metal hatch.

The broken power distribution box supplies power to the pumps; when the power was cut off, the pumps stopped working and water filled the shaft and flooded the mine. The mine will empty and the town's water source will be restored when the pumps are restarted.

To achieve this someone must enter the chamber, and descend 10 metres down in the water and attach a new power cable to the pumps. If the cable is properly connected and is not damaged then there should be no danger of electrical shock even if it and the pump is underwater – indeed, the pumps are intended to operate underwater. Turning the power on while the end of the cable is exposed to water should trigger a fail-safe that will cut the power from the room above.

At 10 metres under water a vacc suit and its wearer will experience an extra atmosphere of water pressure. The integrity of a vacc suit will be tested but it should hold out long enough to complete the job, assuming that the suit is not breached by accident or by creature. If it is, then air will escape and water will enter, fast!

The character trying to attach the cable may be subjected to nuisance attacks by juvenile creatures, which is a moderately serious problem as it may cause vacc suit leaks. Air pressure in the helmet will cause the water level in the suit to slowly rise, assuming the wearer stays upright of course, rather than instantly filling the suit; all the same, this is a problem.

Attaching the cable is a difficult task under ideal conditions but under the current circumstances it is a major technical challenge. The pump begins to operate once the power cable is attached and the power turned on but not as it should. The pump makes a grinding sound and does not begin pumping water immediately. A close inspection of the pump will reveal the cause of the malfunction: the carcass of a creature similar to the 'mother' in the chamber above. The pump has chewed through most of the creature and the pump has become jammed, causing the original flood.

It should be possible to dislodge the corpse or to break it up with a bit of hard work so that the pump can chop through. Once freed, the pump will operate at full capacity. It will take more than a day to empty the mine but in the immediate moment anyone nearby in the water risks being pulled into the pump mechanism and becoming a new obstruction.

Getting back to the surface will be a struggle, since there is now a downward current but once the characters are through the pump room it is simply a matter of slogging through the water back to the upper level and then returning to the surface.

The Referee may decide to have the larger creature attack some of the characters. It is most likely to do so in response to any disturbance of its mate's corpse, which was jammed in the pump, or perhaps anyone interfering with the eggs in the distribution box.

This problem aside, the characters can return to the surface and collect their reward, which may now seem a little paltry given the danger they endured. Clye might be bargained into giving the characters something extra but he is preoccupied with the colony's real problems. The mine needs to be reopened, the creatures cleared, the pumps properly repaired and the water system checked for yet more unwelcome beasties.

The play characters can collect the medication needed for John and return to the *Naddod* for the next leg of the trip. This will take them out of Beta Pavonis and into Dark Reaches subsector.

OPPOSITION

Tootega Water-Beasties

Str 4 (–1) **Dex** 6 (+0) **End** 3 (–1)

Aquatic Hunters

Skills: Athletics (Swim) 2, Survival 0, Recon 0, Melee (Natural Weapons) 0.

Weapons: Pincers (2d6 damage) Armour 1.

These previously unknown creatures normally dwell in the underground water reservoirs of Tootega. They resemble shiny black lobsters and have a powerful set of claws. Juveniles are not much of a threat to a human but the adults can grow to the size of a large dog and are capable of inflicting a serious injury on anyone who ventures into their territory.

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