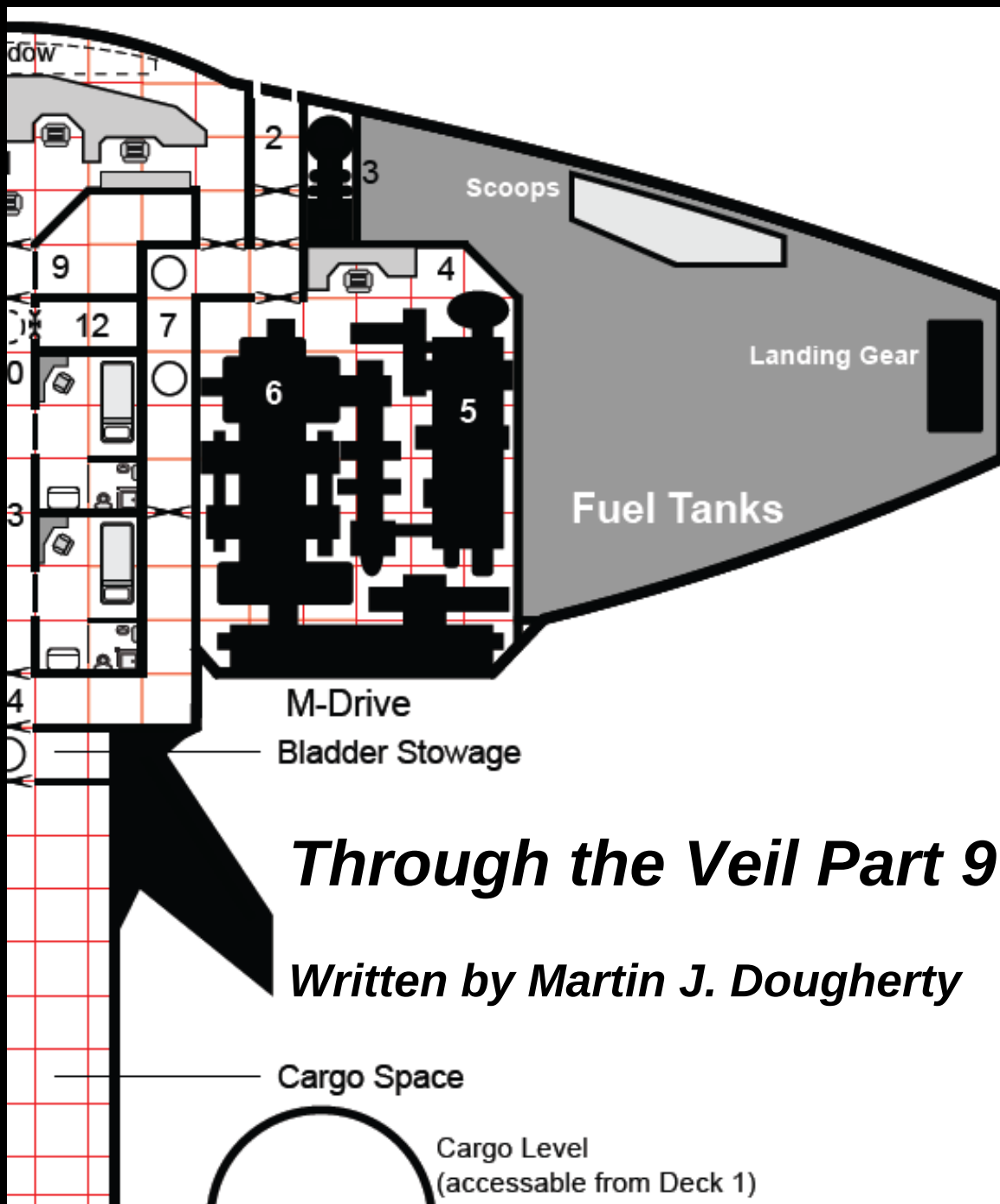




OUTER VEIL



Through the Veil Part 9

Written by Martin J. Dougherty

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THROUGH THE VEIL 9

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REFEREE'S INFORMATION

NSSC 2810 X300000-0

An otherwise unremarkable rockball world, NSSC 2810 is important only as the site of an unofficial naval/exploration base. The base is not marked on any star charts and has not been officially acknowledged to exist but it is a properly sanctioned operation and the personnel there are not renegades.

There is a small installation of little more than a few bunkers connected by tunnels on the planet's surface. It houses 24 personnel and could shelter several times that number in an emergency. The installation is mainly used to store munitions, spares and large quantities of fuel away from the main base and as a site where a ship can be grounded for repairs. Some tasks are easier to perform on the ground and the rudimentary landing pad on the surface is sufficient for this.

The base itself is in orbit above the planet. It consists of two old freighters joined together by a framework of tubes and gantries. In theory the ships could be cut free and they retain their manoeuvre and jump drives but for now their drives are used for station-keeping and the occasional orbital adjustment.

There is room at the base for numerous small craft and several ships under 1,000 tons to dock. The station is supplied with fuel brought from the nearest gas giant by cutters. These fill the freighters' tanks; the fuel is then used to refuel visiting vessels. The fuel is refined aboard one freighter and passed to the other for storage. Large tanks on the planetary surface contain addition fuel in case a large amount is needed. The current storage capacity exceeds any possible demand by an order of magnitude and the cutters keep the tanks topped up at all times.

The station is home to a couple of exploration ships and Navy patrol vessel. The station sometimes receives visits from civilian vessels whose captains are in on the secret of the base. It is intended that the existence of the base will eventually be made public as part of a drive to open up the new frontier but only a few captains know about it at present. These include the transport and freighter crews contracted to resupply the base, so the secret is leaking slowly out. This is not a problem as the base is not a 'black project'; it is merely an initiative that has not been made public yet.

Facilities at the base are not extravagant but there is more room to move around than on a small starship. The interiors of the two freighters have been extensively modified. The portside freighter is imaginatively named Portside and is full of workshops, fuel processing equipment and holds filled with all manner of spares. Portside is also the docking and maintenance area for the fuel cutters. Starboard, as the other freighter is predictably-known, has accommodation and leisure facilities with a decent mess area that can almost pretend to be a restaurant. Starboard also hosts a microbrewery, distillery and no less than four bars that serve a selection of highly experimental beers, cocktails of hard liquor and various flavourings and, occasionally, some 'proper' booze shipped from the Outer Veil or the core worlds.

Other than for security patrols, the base has a 'no weapons' policy and only a few areas are off-limits. The environment aboard the base is fairly relaxed outside of the standard public order and shipboard safety rules. Visitors are normally restricted to Starboard unless they have good reason to visit Portside, and they can expect to explain that reason to patrols and at a checkpoint before entering the link tube between the two hulls.



EPISODE 9: THE OUTER EDGE

By the time the *Naddod* arrives at NSSC 2810 John is unconscious more often than not. Despite the medication he has received it is obvious that he is not going to last much longer.

The ship is greeted by the station and is directed to a docking berth on the starboard hull of the station once identification codes have been accepted. There are other ships present: a FNH Navy auxiliary and a scout ship are berthed at the 'naval end' of the docking area, while a converted *Morgana* class vessel is located at the 'visitor's end'. This is the Independent Commercial Vessel *Morey's Hope*, captained by John's old associate Alexander Morey. Amber is noticeably uncomfortable at realising Morey's ship is at the base but will not say why.

DOCKING AT THE BASE

The docking is routine, though if the characters have declared that they have a serious medical case aboard they will not be allowed to enter the station until they have been examined and declared fit by the base medical officer. In the meantime John will be taken rapidly to the station sick bay for tests.

The examination does not take long, and the medical officer, a 23-year-old lieutenant named Sven Barclan, pronounces them fit and not carrying any infection. They are then cleared to visit the station, though the usual rules apply – no weapons, and permission is needed before visiting the portside hull.

Offloading of cargo can commence straight away. Everything but the Colonel's cargo, which is not destined for the station, is transferred. There are few questions about the manifest; the station is expecting a delivery that more or less matches what the manifest claims is in the containers.

Once the cargo is transferred, the crew can take some liberty aboard the station. There is not that much to do – some basic sports facilities for games like squash that take up little room, bars and a mess hall that pretends to be a restaurant, a few small shops and a lot of corridors that look a lot like corridors everywhere. Although not exactly grandiose, the base facilities are a lot better than what can be found aboard *Naddod*, and more importantly perhaps they are different. After staring at the same bulkheads for long enough, even a different bulkhead starts to become attractive.

In addition to trying to have some fun whilst waiting for the results of John's tests, the characters have a few options.

Talking to the Base Commander about 'Iceland'

The base commander is Commander Katherine Uxal, a busy career naval officer with little time to meet with freighter crews. Her support-staff are not receptive to the characters' attempt to get in contact, referring them to watch officers, technical crews and various other departments that normally deal with visitors.

Characters who can successfully persuade, name-drop or otherwise forge a path through the routine obstructionism can get an appointment for a few minutes' interview.

Commander Uxal meets with the characters in her office. When the characters bring up the subject of Iceland, she looks nonplussed for a moment, then chuckles. Nobody but John Hedley calls it that, she says. Damn shame he's sick, he was a fine explorer in his day. Anyway, if John's ship is headed for, well, the place John calls 'Iceland' then she'll provide the location. John helped find the place, so maybe he'd like to be buried there – assuming he doesn't pull through.

The final destination, Commander Uxal says, is NSSC 3009. The place doesn't officially have a name yet – and no, it will not be entered in the charts as Iceland – but it does have a few people living there. Good people, she adds somewhat cryptically but in a tone of warning that suggests that she feels protective about the place. The colony is unlicensed and unofficial, and has been supplied with equipment she is supposed to not know is being diverted from supplies meant for her base. Having found out put her in a difficult position, but thus far she has decided to not look too closely at the situation.

To that end, she warns the characters to keep quiet about the colony, even around the base. In time the situation might change but for now any involvement with the project is risky for the careers of those still in the service. If she thought less highly of Admiral – Colonel, she corrects herself – Schmidt she would have reported the whole matter in accordance with the regulations. As it is, she is covering for him for as long as she can, and she hopes he remembers that when word inevitably gets out.

Commander Uxal has little time to spare, and bids the characters a pleasant – and tight-lipped – stay after handing over a data chip with navigational information for the NSSC 3009 system.

Geoff and the Cargo

The characters might by now have realised that Geoff is very curious about the part of their cargo that came aboard from Colonel Schmidt's ship and has not been offloaded even though *Naddod* seems to have reached its destination. Even if they have not, the questions he begins to ask will surely alert them.

The characters might have assumed that Geoff knew something about the cargo, but he does not. Indeed, a significant goal his mission is to find out what is being shipped and where. He will try asking a few questions of the other crewmembers, but chances are they know as little as he does. Next, he tries to use them as a conduit for finding out. He makes leading statements like 'so, we still have some cargo aboard. What's that all about?' in the hope that others will investigate and maybe find something out that gets shared among the crew.



Geoff knows from John's earlier statement that the ship has another destination after the station, and correctly assumes) that this is where the cargo is bound. What he wants to know is: what is the cargo, who is it for, where is it going and who is involved?

If he cannot get some kind of answers from anyone aboard, Geoff will eventually resort to breaking in to the cargo containers. This is not very difficult, but it will be obvious to anyone who looks at them closely that they have been tampered with, even if Geoff is careful to replace seals and reset electronics as best he can. A character with good Electronics or Computers skills could probably spoof the automated recorders, and someone with Intrusion or similar skills might make a better job of replacing the seals, but unless Geoff can convince someone to help him, there is a fair chance that someone will notice the crates have been opened.

All the same, he is willing to take the risk. While others are off the ship or distracted by some task, Geoff and anyone he has talked into helping him will break into the crates. What they find raises some new questions.

Most of the contents of the crates is typical colonial-supplies stuff, such as hand tools, spares for power tools, vehicle and machinery components, clothing and footwear, and a fair amount of startlingly mundane items like bags of preserved crop seeds. However, there are also a number of military weapons. One of the crates contains no less than fifty assault rifles, plus ten light support weapons and a large quantity of ammunition. There are also a few disposable anti-tank weapons and some anti-vehicle mines.

This equipment is not paramilitary colonist-militia gear; it is Marine-issue weaponry, apparently straight from the manufacturer. There is enough here to outfit a decent mercenary unit, and more importantly it is all illegal. Possession of military weapons is tightly controlled, as is shipping them without a license.

At this point Geoff has a whole new set of questions. Being caught with the weapons would be a serious offence, but the crew would probably get away with being charged with something lesser like being accessories to shipping the weapons rather than a possession charge. They might be able to prove that they did not know what was in the containers. At least, that would be true if they were sealed in their crates – but now they are not. Going to the authorities at this point could land Geoff in big trouble, or it could be the only way out of a serious charge – if he blew the whistle on a smuggling ring as soon as he found out about it, he might even be rewarded rather than punished.

On the other hand, people who can obtain military-grade hardware like this tend to be powerful, and they tend to have an agenda. These weapons were shipped to the far end of the universe for a reason, and Geoff might make things worse for himself by drawing attention to them. The big question is: who they are intended for, but waiting to find out could be very hazardous and ups the potential charges from possession to supply of restricted arms.

Geoff needs to find out who else knows the ship is carrying weapons and who they are for. But that means admitting that he has broken into the cargo containers, and then he might have to explain why he did so.

None of the crew actually knows what is in the crates – Colonel Schmidt did not tell even John. However, John does suspect that there will be weapons in the crates, simply because frontier colonies need protection. He knows that the cargo is illegal, having been redirected from official shipments, so decided not to care just how illegal the contents might be. Nobody else can answer Geoff's questions, and of course John is unconscious in the base sick bay.

John's Condition

Amber eventually calls the characters with an update. The station medical officer is less experienced than she is, and not as skilled, but with her knowledge and his equipment they have managed to prove her theory that the compounds in John's bloodstream are indeed produced by parasites.

John's parasites, it turns out, are native to his homeworld and are in many ways beneficial. They assist the body in obtaining nutrition from the local plant and animal life, and help purge certain local toxins out of the system. The problem is that John's body is now totally dependent on the parasites and cannot survive without them, and they are dying. In fact they have been dying off for years, since the toxins that they take out of the host's bloodstream are essential to their survival and John has not had any food or drink from his homeworld in years.

What John needs is for his few remaining parasites to be given a source of the toxins they need, enabling them to survive and continue to support John's weakened organ functions. This is not possible since their home world is very far away and synthesising anything will take far too long. The only alternative is to obtain some new parasites. That means finding someone from John's homeworld who is carrying them and arranging a transplant. There is only one candidate on the station, and that raises another problem.

The candidate is Alexander Morey, a former friend of John's, but now... something else. But Morey has no reason to help John, and Amber knows why.

Amber said previously that she did not know why John and Morey fell out, but that is not entirely true. She knows there were hard words and possibly even a fistfight, and that John threatened to shoot Morey (characters with a good memory might spot a pattern here) if he saw him again. She does not know exactly what the fight was about, but she has a suspicion that it was about her. She had a relationship with Morey that ended rather badly, and it is possible that this was the cause of the feud.

Amber asks the characters if they will try to see Morey and somehow persuade him to help her father. She cannot do it herself, she says, because she needs to tend John. Whilst true, that is by no means the main or only reason.



This may be apparent if the characters suggest that Lt Barclan, the base medical officer, is capable of looking after John for a while. Amber will make other excuses and become defensive.

If the characters accept that she does not want to leave John's side, she will be content with that. But if pushed, Amber will angrily tell the characters that the reason John and Morey fell out was because of her. She used Morey and stole from him, and when he tried to confront John about it, John would not believe his friend. The incident ended in a brawl with threats to kill one another.

And there is the problem... Morey once threatened to kill John (though John made the threat first) and now he can do so easily. All he has to do is refuse to help, and since helping involves an invasive medical procedure it would be hard to blame him.

All the same, someone needs to go to Morey and beg for his help. This is John's only hope, and it's a slim one at best.

Confronting Alexander Morey

Alexander Morey is a 45-year-old career explorer. He hails from the same colony as John, but got out by joining the Scientific Commission. He rose through the ranks and ended up being sufficiently successful that he was given an exploration ship to command. He is still on active duty, assigned to exploring this region of space.

Morey knows that John's ship is in port, and has heard that he is sick. He is not sure what to make of that. The two used to be friends, and worked together on several projects. In addition to that, Morey owes John for something else, or so he feels. Had John and a few contemporaries of his not found a way to get offworld and make a name for themselves in the wider universe, Morey and many others would still be on their backwater colony. John showed the way, and Morey always considered it an honour and a privilege to be able to work with and learn from John, one of the great trailblazers of their culture.

At least, that was how it was up until the incident a few years back. Morey and Amber (he always calls her Amethyste, even though she tells everyone not to) became close, or so Morey thought, and he began to believe that they would settle down – or more likely, head off to explore the universe – together. Then she robbed him of over two million credits of Science Commission funds and left him. When he confronted John, Morey did not know for sure that Amber (Amethyste) was the thief, only that she was missing.

Amber had gone to John for protection when Morey came looking for her, and gave him a somewhat distorted version of events. Morey eventually pieced together what might have happened, hence his recent willingness to talk to John.

For John's part, he believed what Amber told him, i.e. that Morey had accused her of stealing Science Commission funds and threatened her, which is why he was so belligerent with Morey. Since then, various incidents have caused him to strongly suspect that she actually did steal the money (she did).

However, John has never attempted to find proof and trusts Amber with his own ship's funds. He does not want to know if his daughter is a thief or not, and cannot imagine the possibility that she would steal from him. He has never seen any of the stolen money, though, and would not accept it.

Morey is willing to listen to what the characters say, but he is angry and argumentative. The characters will have to be persuasive if they want to overcome Morey's quite natural reluctance to help. However, the deciding factor is this – Morey now believes (but cannot be sure) that John was misled by his daughter and thus the whole feud was both avoidable and also not the fault of either John or Morey. More than anything else, he wants to know if he is right. He wants to hear John's side of the story. But since John is unconscious or dying, the only way to make that happen is to help him.

Thus Morey will eventually agree to help. This means allowing a surgeon to extract some of the parasites from his organs and to implant them into John's. There is some risk with such an undertaking, but not very much. However, Morey is not receptive to the idea that Amber might perform surgery – there's not much danger of her stealing his heart, he says, but all the same he does not want her near him. It is not clear whether he means that she already stole his heart or that he now hates her... or both.

Saving John

If the characters fail or do not try to persuade Morey, he will figure out what is going on himself and grudgingly offer to let John have some of his own (still healthy) parasites as well as recipes for concocting medicines that will keep them healthy. John will be saved whether he damn well wants to or not, and Morey will consider that John owes him big time. At some point, he aims to collect on that debt, but at present he does not know what he might want from John.

If Morey's help is for some reason not available then John will die after a few more days of unconsciousness. He would probably like to be buried at the ship's next destination, Amber says, so the final Jump of the trip will be made with a coffin in the hold.

If John can be treated, then he will stabilise and begin a slow recovery. Morey visits him in the sick bay and the long-delayed ending of the feud begins. Neither man is very keen to discuss the matter with others, but the general story is apparent. Amber is indeed a thief, she manipulated and stole from Morey, and in so doing caused a feud between him and John. Although Morey is more than willing to forgive John – after all, he was only protecting his daughter – he has a tremendous amount of resentment towards Amber and will probably never forgive her.

Amber has always regretted her actions. Not the theft; she wanted the money and since it was 'corporate cash' rather than someone's life savings she has no real guilt about taking it. But she does regret that it pushed a wedge between John and Morey, who were good friends at the time. And she did really like Morey. Not as much as she pretended, but enough that in a different set of circumstances she might some day have become his partner in exploring the universe.



RESOLUTIONS

After a few days, John pronounces himself well enough to travel and heads unsteadily back to *Naddod*. There is one Jump left of the trip, but there are also some issues to be resolved... or to be mutually shelved.

Geoff's tampering with the cargo results in him being exposed as a spy or at least a sneak. John is so furious that he ends up collapsing; he is still very weak. Geoff tries to explain that he was simply assigned to find out what was going on, and that neither he nor his employers are hostile to the operation. Indeed, there are opportunities for cooperation. John is too angry to listen but too weak to do anything about the problem, so it will remain unresolved for a while.

There is also the revelation of Amber's thievery. The Referee should note that the reasons have been left vague in this adventure to allow whatever interpretation or additional plot hook seems suitable to be inserted. It may be that Amber steals for fun, or to put money together for some project. Perhaps she supports some humanitarian cause and seeks to funnel 'corporate money' to the needy. The Referee can assign whatever interpretation on her actions makes the best story.

What matters at present is that she would not steal from her father, and he would never believe that she would – but everyone else may have suspicions.

Eventually, as the shouting and arm-waving dies down, John comes to a weary conclusion. At another time he might have argued for longer but he's sick and weary, so he's made a decision. Okay, he says, so his daughter is a thief and his crew chief is a spy. And he's running guns to an illegal colony just off the edge of the map. So maybe there's no black and white in this one. But they do have a job to do. Anyone who wants to can leave the ship, and the rest will head on to Iceland to make their delivery.

If the crew can hold off stabbing one another for a week or two, they can at least get the job done. After that, well, either things will be resolved or they will not. John owes Morey his life, an apology and a couple of million credits, not necessarily in that order, so he'll see about paying that debt once his strength returns. The others can do as they please. But... if anyone who stays aboard must agree not to let recent events cause so much friction that jobs don't get done.

With that, John and his crew begin preparations for the jump to their final destination.

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