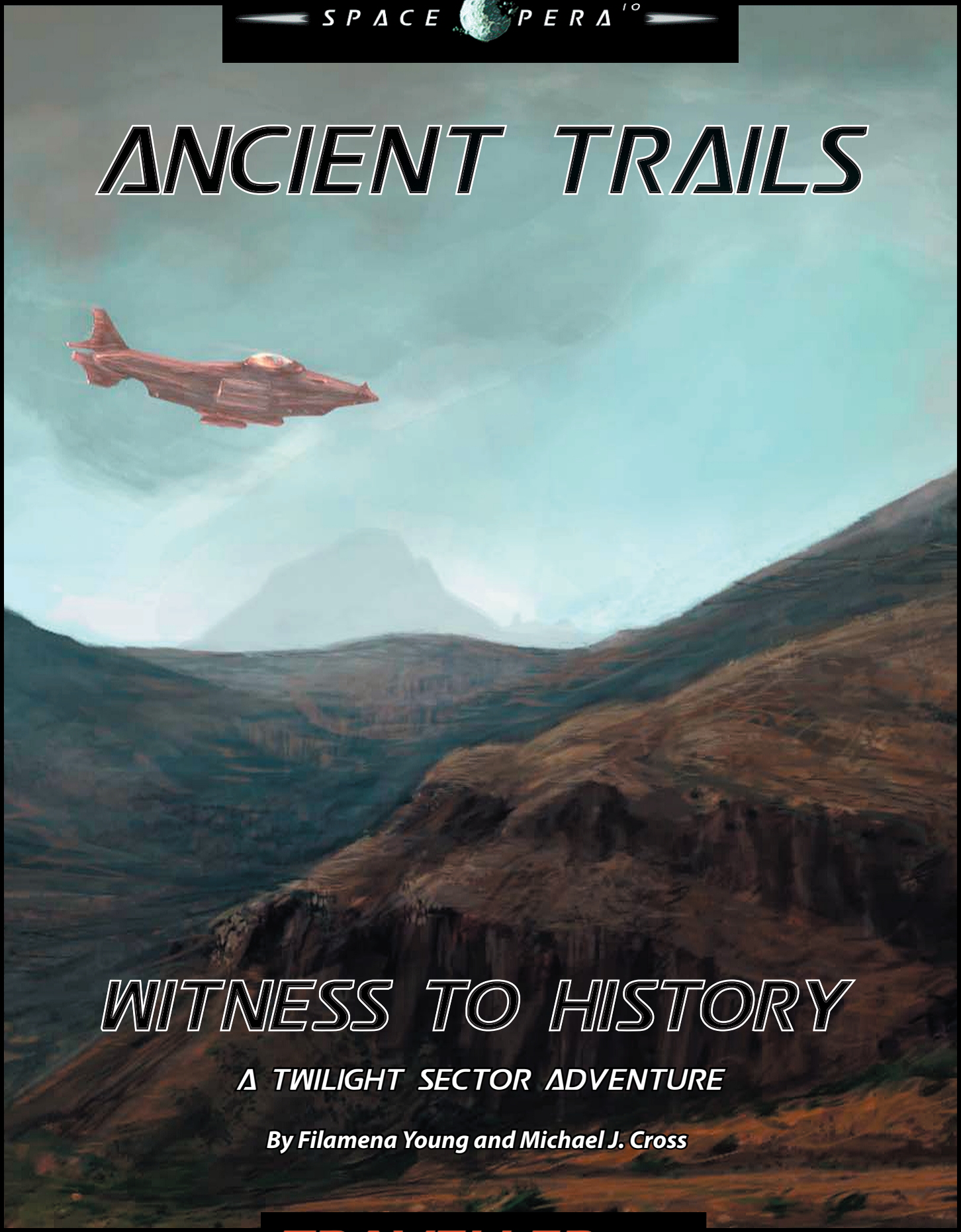
TWILIGHT SECTOR

SPACE OPERA

ANCIENT TRAILS



WITNESS TO HISTORY

A TWILIGHT SECTOR ADVENTURE

By Filamena Young and Michael J. Cross

TRAVELLER

Compatible Product

Traveller Guy (order #10464794)

ANCIENT TRAILS WITNESS TO HISTORY

A Twilight Sector Adventure

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WITNESS TO HISTORY

PROLOGUE

This installment in the *Ancient Trails* adventure arc entails a momentous discovery. Successful players discover not one but two at least partially intact ancient sites which should keep armies of scientists busy for years to come. It has the potential to turn the players into celebrities and thus alter their lives forever. (Referees need to consider this angle and how it fits in with their particular campaign when planning this adventure.)

This is not a combat-heavy adventure. It requires problem solving and the use of some of those other skills on the players' character sheets. That being said, if you have a bunch of gun bunnies with itchy trigger fingers in your group, feel free to throw in a pirate encounter or a group of desperados trying to break their buddy out of VanKilla Kiertotahti. The opportunity for a few very different combat scenes (and one traditional one) does exist. The adventure is now yours; we only hope that you have fun with it.

A MESSAGE FROM PROFESSOR ELSIE ITCHER

Elise Itcher, the renowned Professor of Engineering at the University of Saint Mary of Mars, has not forgotten the crews' help transporting delicate equipment for her in the past. In fact, she intended the transportation run as a test of the characters' mettle. Now that she has a better idea of how they handle dangerous travel, she has a specific mission in mind for them. She has experienced another of her "visions" and needs a capable team to run down the admittedly vague clues that it gave her. Elsie uses the pretext of a civil "thank you" – a courtesy call of sorts – to make sure everyone is alive and well. (This is especially important if the crew has engaged in other adventures between this one and *Ancient Trails: So It Begins*.) If they've made any significant waves in the Twilight Sector, she'll congratulate them, offer them advice, or warn them of any danger on their tail.

However, before she ends her courtesy call, she creates a moment of drama designed to suck the characters into helping her. The doctor's eyes roll up into the back of her head. She starts to tremble and shake; the players may think the violence of her shivers might pose a threat to her aging body. A few of her fellow doctors nearby rush up to make sure she doesn't swallow her own tongue. They congregate around, fussing over her before she throws them aside with sudden strength and begins speaking in a voice very different from her own. *(If you have it, play the Elsie : Tendrils monologue from the audio enhancements here.)*

"Three Basalt Towers rise from the ever desert
Where no volcano has ever spilled its deadly venom.
The towers reach with coal-black tendrils to the sky,
Coal-black tendrils whispering blaspheme to the sky!
Their whispers are the secrets of the originators. The first."

When the fit ends, she will shake off its effects: seemingly coming out of a dream. She says that the words are part of a puzzle she's been working out for a decade. Occasionally these fits come to her and she speaks a new piece of the puzzle (refer the players back to Elsie's other strange ramblings in the first adventure in this arc, *Ancient Trails: So It Begins*). In other dreams, she recalls mentioning the "ever desert" and believes it refers to the planet VanKila Kiertotahti. She says if the characters head to VanKila Kiertotahti and look for the towers, she will recognize them when she sees them. It's not much to go on, she concedes, but the discovery of this place could be worth a fortune… a fortune she's willing to share with the characters should they do the leg work for her. Her interest lies only in the truth surrounding her visions.

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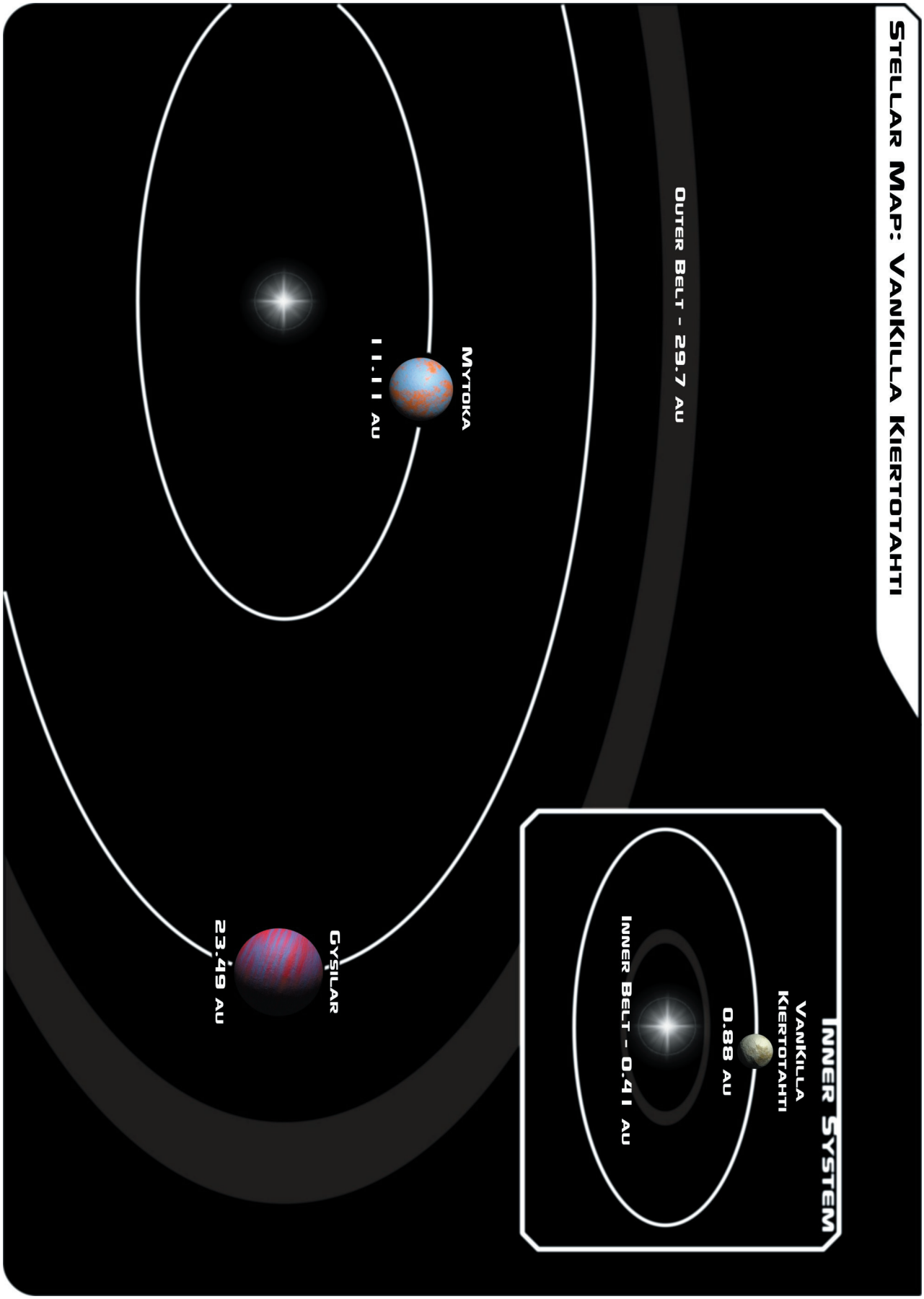

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The characters may decide that the trip in general isn't worth the chance of riches that may or may not materialize. This won't faze the professor; instead, she'll contact the ship's captain in private and advise him that she has friends throughout the system. If he doesn't comply with her request, life could become very difficult for him. But a velvet glove covers her iron fist and she immediately offers to help him secure some long-desired ship upgrade (at the referee's discretion). Optionally, referees could simply have her offer him a large sum of money to take on the job. It's not pretty, but Itcher isn't prepared to take "no" for an answer.

RUNNING INTO THE AUTHORITIES

As the players make their way to VanKilla Kiertotahti, they may encounter a Warden Service patrol vessel, The *Barrier Reef*, at the referee's discretion. The *Reef* is captained by Honus Berrywether a captain in the Warden Service. Referees should use a ship bristling with guns and big enough to intimidate the players. As it enters the characters' sensor range, it sends out the following message:

"Non-military ship, stand down and consent to be searched for contraband. We have had numerous reports of smugglers in this region. Your ship does not match any descriptions we've had yet, but policy states that we search random unspecified ships. Congratulations, you have been selected."

As soon as the message from the patrol ship fuzzes out, its weapons power up as a display of strength. If the players' ship attempts to run for whatever reason, the patrol ship will disable them and then arrest the crew, which the referee can spin into its own side adventure.

If the players consent to the search, the Warden Service officers quickly board their ship, moving to check the manifest against the people actually on board. This is a random search, but the captain seems totally focused on looking for something specific; minor contraband will be given only a warning at this time. The officers carefully explore bunks and the cargo area with a keen eye for secret hiding holes used by smuggler ships. If it's hidden, they'll likely find it. Regardless of what they find, it's not enough to halt the search; the Warden Service Captain grows more and more agitated the longer it takes to turn up nothing.

If the characters can talk up either Captain Berrywether or a member of the search team, they'll discover that the contraband search is a cover story. The captain is actually after a wanted fugitive who was reportedly somewhere the players recently visited at the same time as their stay. The captain is following up with any ship that fits that profile to ensure that the criminal hasn't smuggled himself aboard. So far he's been out of luck and it's having a clear effect on him. If they dig a little deeper, they'll discover that – along with a laundry list of other crimes – the criminal in question may have strangled the captain's sister. The captain won't hesitate to bend the law to suit his needs in these circumstances.

If the players appear sympathetic or at least act intimidated by the search, the captain offers them a future favor if they can help him find the criminal Jersey Simbolt.

"Simbolt…he's violent, but also careless. He'll kill a ship full of people if it makes it a little bit easier for him to get what he wants. He seems charming at first; he's always got a lot of stupid, loyal people doing what he asks. He'll play you, and then he'll kill you, and he won't ever look back. A classic sociopath. He was on his way to VanKila on a scout ship. He escaped somehow…killed the whole crew, then managed to disable the ship. He's loose in the system and I'm going to find him."

The captain provides information about his quarry if the players agree to keep an eye out for him. They receive a file containing as much information as the officials have: pictures, known hang outs, know associates, and aliases.

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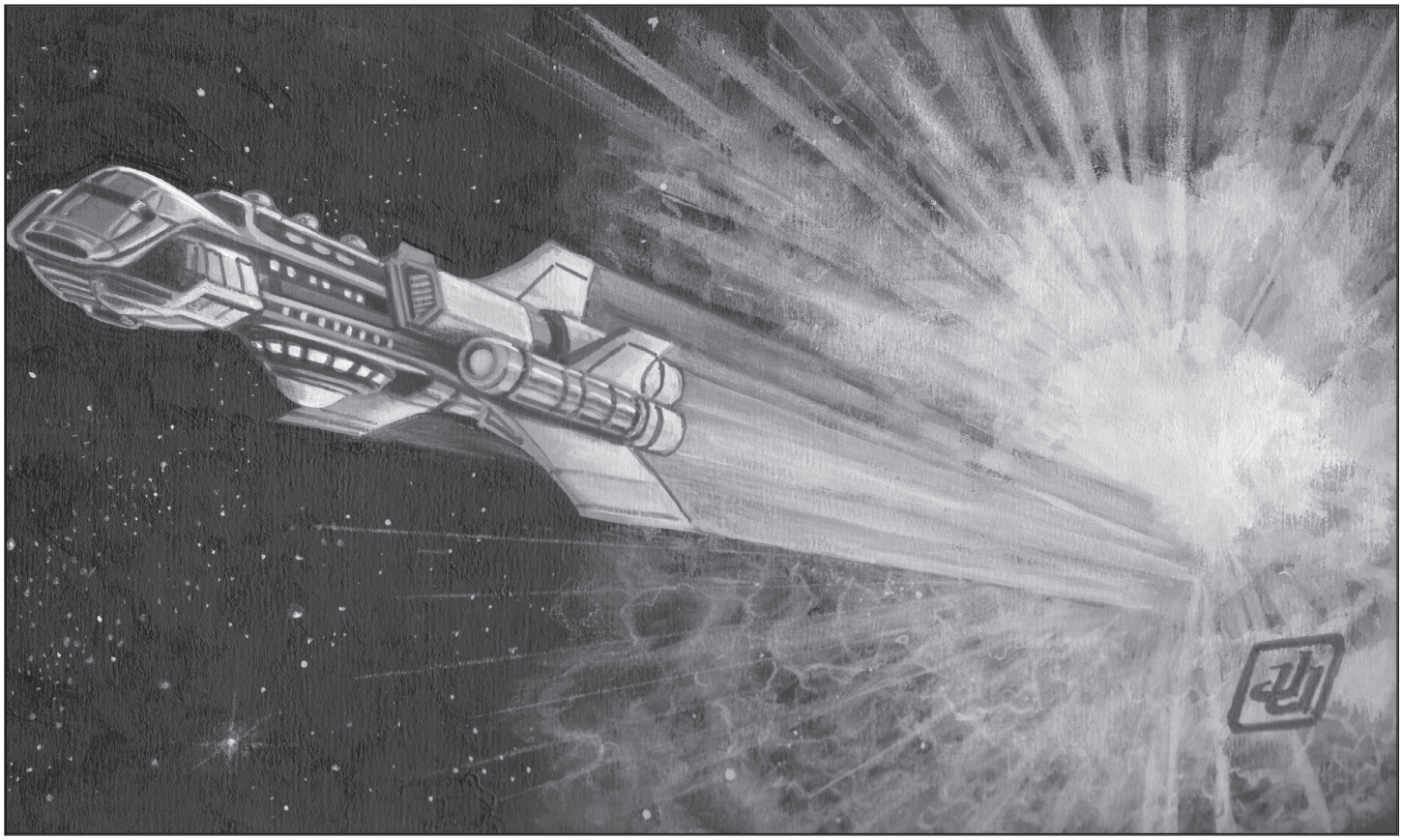
JERSEY SIMBOLT

Jersey Simbolt is the son of a rich Goliath Corp executive. He lived on Albrecht in the Koning Sector, just a few parsecs from the Orion Capital. He attended all the right schools, had all the right friends, and dated all the right girls… it's just that those girls often turned up dead. He usually hustled his way out of trouble, or used daddy's lawyer to get him off the first few times, but when he killed three of his "girlfriends" in the space of a month, no amount of lawyering could save him. Despite that, he produced a whole string of character witnesses at his trial – including a string of obviously smitten ex-girlfriends swearing that he wouldn't hurt a fly. Jersey's charisma can seemingly get people to do almost anything for him. How he managed to overpower the entire crew of the scout ship Trantis bringing him to VanKilla Keirtotahti though is still a mystery.

What neither the characters nor the authorities know is that Jersey possesses strong psychic abilities, letting him influence the emotions of those around him. This makes him particularly dangerous, as the characters may learn to their distress.



ON VANKILA KEIRTOTAHTI

Regardless of any sub-plots en route, the characters eventually make their way to VanKila Keirtotahti, since that's where Elsie's dream visions are set. However they have no idea where they should go after arriving on the planet, just Elsie's assurance that she would know it once she saw it. So on this slim premise and the promise of great reward, the players find themselves approaching the forbidding prison planet of VanKila Keirtotahti.

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As the ship enters into a low orbit, they must contact Admin Island and the Warden Service to request permission to land. The view of the planet on approach is dismal. A shanty city rises up out of a copper-colored background on the main land mass: according to the map, it's Hell's Gate, the largest prisoner settlement on the planet. It looks as if it might collapse in on itself at any moment. The soil is the same filthy copper color: lighter or darker in patches, but otherwise without character. The plant life appears as hard and colorless as the planet itself, and if any wild life exists, it must stay well hidden.

On approaching the planet, recurring signals from the Warden Service warn that any attempts to reach the surface of the planet without going through Admin Island will result in the destruction of the ship in question and permanent resident status to any survivors. The Warden Service leaves no room for doubt about the consequences of illegal activity on VanKilla Keirtotahti.

Admin Island is separate from the rest of the planet not just because of the water barrier that surrounds it but also by technology and status. The men and women who live on the island have built a simple but elegant utopia with the best technology the system has to offer. It takes a lot of manpower to run a prison world and not many volunteer for such an assignment. So the Warden's Service has invested a lot of money into making the island comfortable, clean and as unlike the rest of this desolate world as possible.

Once they land, the characters must submit to processing, which involves a great deal of paperwork. They can avoid it if any of them are particularly savvy with bureaucratic red tape, mention they're on a mission from Professor Itcher, and/or have a general idea where they're going (or just a guess as long as they sell it). (Admin skill check, Task level - Difficult -2 DM.)

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DEFINING THE TASK

The question now becomes, "where do the characters start looking for Itcher's mythical three basalt towers?" The planet has a high quantity of volcanic activity, so given Itcher's strange monologue, seeking out a place without such activity might be a good place to start. With the appropriate rolls, the characters may discover a number of places that fit this criterion. If you wish to play this out, require the players to make multiple skill rolls.

First they need to generate a map of the planet's volcanic hotspots using Science/Planetology or Science/Physics. Absent those, the characters could write a computer program that searches the system's limited Internet for all the information on volcanology and create a map of possible cold spots on the planet. Science – Physical Science – Physics, or Science – Space Science – Planetology rolls (Task Level Average, +0) will locate three areas on the southern continent within the area known as the Outback, and one area on each of the two northern continents named Van and Kila respectively. (Note that travel to the northern continents is prohibited for civilians without special clearance from the Warden Service; see the sidebar "Up North" on page 9.) It will take 4d6 hours to accomplish this task. If some other method is employed – such as using a computer database search to research and collate the necessary information – the Task Level becomes Very Difficult, -4 and the time frame becomes 1d6 x 10 hours.

Turning to the possible locations identified from their research, the player characters learn that the Outback is left wild and mostly unsettled. No prisoners live there; the occasional scientific expedition visits the continent but little else. Only general maps made from orbit are available. In the 30th Century, these types of maps are quite good, but they still lack the detail that only comes with boots on the ground and careful surveying techniques.

The continents of Van and Killa (a joke of Warden Service personnel who had trouble pronouncing the planet's Finnish name) house all of the planet's prisoners. The former houses the better behaved criminals while the latter houses the recalcitrant thugs. Searching for the three basalt towers there means dealing with the planet's prisoner population; the characters also need special permissions from the Warden Service just to access those continents. (See the sidebar "Up North" on page 9.)

Rumors persist of inmates who have escaped to the Outback and eke out an existence there. Such inmates need to live without the benefit of Oxyre® (a drug provided to everyone on the planet to help them breathe in the thin atmosphere and prevent carbon monoxide poisoning). The wardens mince no words with the PCs: should they come across any "locals" in the Outback, they should run…and immediately notify the Warden Service. "We'll be down to pick them up shortly." Anyone desperate enough to live down there – and clever enough to survive – is capable of anything. Even well-armed characters should be on their guard.

The players will hopefully realize that they were supposed to check in with Professor Itcher before setting out on their search for the mythical Three Basalt Towers. If they do, the Professor will advise them to go south, the direction indicated by her dreams. (She says she analyzed her vision and – based on physical cues such as the angle of the light – she believes that the players will find the towers on the southern continent.) If they do not remember to contact her, kind referees could have her send the players an e-mail with the information.

Whether they're using their own ship or a shuttle better suited for atmospheric travel, the characters presumably start out towards the southern continent on a hunt for the Professor's spires. If they instead choose one of the two other sites on the northern half of the planet (having first secured clearance from the Warden Service) then see the sidebar titled "Up North" on page 9.

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Surface Map: VanKila Kiertotahti

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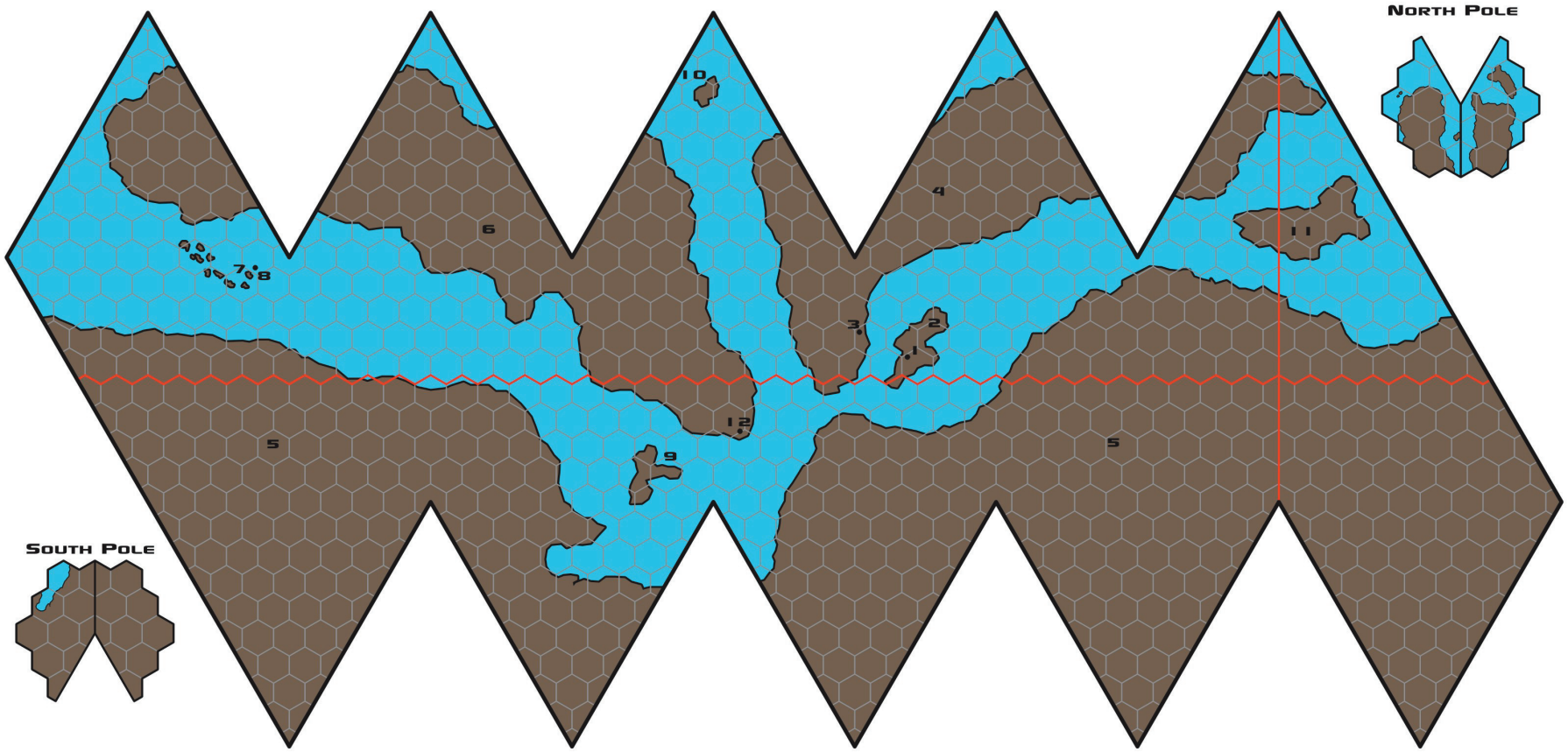

1 - Admin City Starport
2 - Admin Island
3 - Hell's Gate
4 - Van Level 1 Prisoner
5 - Outback
6 - Kila Level 2 Prisoners
7 - Rights Vale Islands
8 - Rights Vale Patrol Base
9 - T Island
10 - Top of the World
11 - Barren Island
12 - Stonegate Ferry

1 Hex = 240 km

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UP NORTH

Scientific expeditions to the northern continents are occasionally allowed; however, securing the proper authorizations takes months. Security for a northern continent expedition is also required and must be a detail of Warden Service personnel, paid at the expedition's expense. This can get pretty pricey. Players will likely think they can just sneak in. But possibly the number one thing that should give the players pause is the Warden Service's, "If it flies, it dies" policy. So any northern continent expedition needs to be a ground one: no grav vehicles. Referees should use all these facts to dissuade the players from embarking on a northern continent search.

If the players choose to do the unthinkable (which they often do) and conduct their own ad hoc expedition, then the enterprising referee should have them dodging Warden Service patrols as well as bands of roving inmates. An unsanctioned northern expedition should not end well for the characters.

OUT IN THE WILDS

The lifeless plain stretches out endlessly around the curve of the planet as it zooms past. The soil here is ruddier than on the northern landmasses. Water seeps up through the soil occasionally, looking more like thick old blood than the stuff of life. Most of the soil cracks like ancient leather. It makes the skin itch and the throat dry just to look at it. Here and there, violent winds have pushed huge half-ton boulders of pumice stone across the earth in odd west-to-northeast zig-zag patterns with no human or animal intervention. The boulders' grooves in the ground show their path for up to three or four years after they move, leaving the weathered earth criss-crossed with narrow "rock roads" whose feel suggests supernatural or alien origins. The reality is more likely a combination of the high slippery silt content in the clay and the relatively hollow nature of the pumice stone. Still, it grants the landscape a striking quality and conveys a feeling of tiny ants moving stealthily across a kingdom of giants.

The characters have presumably identified three areas in the Outback, The actual locations on the map are of little consequence, so referees are free to place them where they like; anywhere that makes for an exciting and intriguing journey will do. If however we ever need to identify the location of the Three Towers in any future Twilight Sector products it will be located in the Outback in the same hex as the westernmost "5" on the world map. If the players need a few extra challenges before reaching the locale, several encounters are detailed below.

ENCOUNTERS IN THE WILD

A Ship

Through visual observation, one of the players notices an improbably straight line knifing across the desert plain. Closer inspection reveals it as a furrow gouged out of the ground. Several breaks appear in it as if something skipped across the planet's surface: like a flat stone skipping across a pond. The characters must follow this pattern for at least 5 miles before finally coming to the end of the line. (If the players don't tell you they are examining the furrow you could have it mark the beginning of the line and make the players backtrack to find what caused it.) A crashed Scout ship, broken apart, lies half-buried in the planet's red soil.

The name on the side of the ship – the *Trantis* – vaguely rings a bell. An easy (+4) Education Characteristic roll jogs the memory, as does a simple (+6) computer search of the ship's library. The *Trantis* was the name of the ship transporting Jersey Simbolt.

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Use the Scout, Type S deck plans from the *Traveller Core Rulebook* (pg. 116) for the *Trantis*. She is unhinged at the hallway – separating engineering from the common area – and sliced through as far as the fuel processor which still attaches the rest of the ship to engineering. If the characters enter the ship (braving the strong winds on the surface to do so), they find that they are overwhelmed by the stench of the place. Two dead bodies lie on the bridge (#2), almost decapitated. The bridge sits awash in dried blood and the bodies are ripe enough to indicate the time of death: at least six or seven days ago. The nature of their injuries (straight cuts with a bladed weapon) suggests they died by human hands, not in the crash. Another dead body lies in the common area (#5) in even worse shape than the other two (having suffered a lot of posthumous damage in the crash).

The ship carries a lot of salvageable material including a model 1 bis ship's computer, avionics parts equal to about 25% of the value of a basic military system, and jump drive and maneuver drive parts equal to 10% of the value of a Drive Code A unit. The power plant suffered an explosion in the crash, rendering it so much junk. All of this takes time to harvest from the ship, however. The computer will be the easiest. Anyone with computer 0 or better skill can detach the unit for removal in a couple of hours. Removing the avionics will be a 1d6 hour operation and require an Engineer/Electronics (average, +0) skill check or an Astrogation (very difficult, -4) skill check to accomplish. Removing the drives takes 4d6 hours and requires the appropriate Engineer/Jump or Maneuver Drive (difficult, -2) skill checks. The problem will be the serial numbers on the units. The ship is clearly a Warden Service vehicle and they won't take the loss of their property kindly if it shows up on the salvage market. Registering the salvage makes it legal; the Warden Service will receive the bulk of the value for the items (90%) but at least the characters won't need to keep looking over their shoulders.

In addition to the salvageable equipment, the PCs find a mostly intact ship's locker. Referees should feel free to insert several weapons the players have been pining for in the locker. Any other survival equipment like rations or medical supplies could also be in the locker at the referee's discretion. The ship also contains a robotic autodoc in the corner of the common area (#5); it's not salvageable unless the players want to spend up to a week trying to disengage it from its current location without damaging it.

The crash suggests that the service's planetary monitoring system isn't as foolproof as the Warden Service believes: there had to be a blind spot for this ship to crash land here without being noticed. Also, if the characters look up the crew manifest, they see that the *Trantis* had a crew of four when it left Terra/Sol. Since the three bodies are male, the missing crewmember must be Arianda Ruiz, the ship's navigator.

The players find two sets of tracks leading away from the wreck heading south, though they are only visible for a few meters before the wind has wiped away all traces.

Referee's Note

Jersey Simbolt and Arianda Ruiz did indeed flee the ship heading south. Additional information on this angle is left to the referee to develop as needed. Jersey and Arianda do reappear later in the adventure at the Three Basalt Towers. If the players return to the *Trantis* for any reason during this adventure (for example, to use the auto doc), they will find a party of escaped convicts there, seeking to scavenge it. If the players did not clear the ship's locker of weapons, the criminals could be well armed.

On the Move

As the players make their way through the Outback, they will overfly a single individual on foot: an escaped convict named Arley Moore, serving a life sentence for murder. He will be spotted in an area similar in appearance to the badlands of South Dakota: steep cliffs, sharp rocks and long falls. Upon spotting the ship, Arley attempts to lose himself in this inhospitable landscape. He is skilled in Survival (Survival 2) and carries a bow (Archery 1) and will defend himself with his bow (TL 2) if necessary.

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OXYRE

The fatal flaw of VanKila Kiertotahti is its thin, tainted atmosphere and torrid average temperature. Volcanic activity produces a high percentage of carbon monoxide in the atmosphere, which tends to build up in the bloodstream: leading to carbon monoxide poisoning and eventually death. There have been some attempts to lower the CO2 levels but the gas is very intransigent. To overcome the atmospheric problem, the Warden Service uses a drug called Oxyre® developed by TransGen Corp. It only allows the blood's hemoglobin to bind with pure oxygen. This eliminated the problem of carbon monoxide poisoning and allowed much more efficient use of the available oxygen. If one were to attempt to survive on the planet without the use of Oxyre® or supplemental oxygen, it would be like breathing at an altitude of approximately 3500 meters (10,500 feet) on Terra; the average individual would succumb to carbon monoxide poisoning in 14 to 16 Earth Standard Days.

Arley can explain how chewing the leaves of a local plant creates an effect similar to using Oxyre®. He can show the characters how to dig up tubers and hunt for rock rats to help them survive. Perhaps most importantly, he can relay information on Martin LeBay, a fellow prisoner whom the characters may run into when they reach their destination. He'll probably let slip a statement like "I thought you were some of LeBay's crazies. Finally got an air raft and was hunting us down." If asked about LeBay, he will respond that he's some kind of genius who was sent here and promptly escaped to the Outback. He's good at making tech from scrounged junk. That's about all he really knows about the man except he has quite a large following of other Outback escapees.

Arley
Convict/Outback Escapee
S: 8 **D:** 9(+1) **EN:** 10(+1) **I:** 7 **ED:** 7 **Soc:** 2 (-2)
Skills: Archery 1, Carouse 1, Deception 1, Melee/Unarmed Combat 1, Persuade 1, Stealth 2, Streetwise 1
Equipment: Bow (Short Bow 2d6+1 Recoil: 1), Canteen, Improvised knife, 20 feet of twine, Flint & Steel, Knapsack, Two freshly killed Rock Rats

AMBUSH!

Approaching their next target area, the players' radio scanning equipment picks up some strange static that seems to interfere with their reception and broadcast abilities. Considering the absolute ban of radios and internet on the planet outside the limits of Admin Island, it is odd to pick up any type of radio static out here in the wilds. At any rate, if the characters continue on to the target area, they will see the basalt towers appearing to rise up out of the horizon, looming unnaturally tall and thin. There is something strange – nearly profane – in the way the towers break the horizon with no other structures or mountains nearby. It is as if they are alien kings, ruling the landscape around them.

Once the characters land their ship to take a closer look, assailants rise up out of the sand where they have been lying in wait and open fire. Martin LeBay and his gang are waiting with jerry-rigged guns and other more unique weapons built specifically for desert life. Martin has refitted a soil sample drill he stole from a scientific site. Removing the sample tray and leaving the end of the sample tube wide open, he has created a tool that creates small sandstorms. The charged force allows him to direct the sandstorm and infuse it with an electrical charge. The men are dressed for desert combat, including goggles that will prevent blindness in the face of these man-made storms.

Martin LeBay: A Desperate Man

Martin LeBay has no good reason for being marooned on this desert planet. He's a victim of corporate politics gone very bad about two years back. In fact, before this hellish existence, Martin was a weapons engineer of some repute working for the black ops division of a huge corporation. He was very good at paying attention to company

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politics and had the morals not to look the other way. When he learned more than he should have, he came home to find his wife and child murdered and the authorities arresting him for the crime. The frame was perfect in every way.

Now, Martin has every reason in the universe to escape: revenge, justice, and a vast wealth of knowledge about what's going on in the world of black ops (only some of which he wants to expose). He has no interest in killing the characters, no matter what the rest of his gang may think. He's actually more likely to kill his gang if it came down to it. He just wants off the planet and for that, he needs a ship and a doctor. He's willing to take the ship now and wait for a doctor; if the ship happens to have a doctor, even better. As it is, he can't leave without setting off the ID chip implanted in every convict's skull. In theory, a doctor could remove it and enable him to leave the planet, and "in theory" is more than good enough for him at the moment.

Of course, Martin gets most of the criminals in the badlands weapons, food, and water. That has made him very valuable, and the rest of his gang or any other prisoners in the area won't let him go without a fight. The players need to devise a clever plan to escape and when they do, Martin plans on being with them. To that end, if he can get access to the players' ship, he claims to have planted an explosive device that will go off if the ship moves more than a kilometer from him.

Martin LeBay
Inmate Leader/Weapons Designer
S: 6 **D:** 9(+1) **EN:** 7 **I:** 12(+2) **ED:** 12(+2) **Soc:** 3 (-1) [9 before incarceration] **PSI:** 3
Skills: Computer 2, Engineer (Electronics) 1, Engineer (Weapons) 3, Gun Combat, Energy Rifle 1, Leadership 2, Jack of All Trades 1, Mechanic 1, Persuade 1, Science (Chemistry) 1, Science (Physics) 1, Science (Electronics) 1, Telepathy 0 (A latent ability, he has never really been taught to use it he just gets occasional images in his head like those he gets from the Three Spires. Referees should feel free to use this latent ability however it best serves the needs of their adventure.)
Equipment: Drill/Gun – This weapon is hard to aim (-1 accuracy) but has a large area of effect. It produces a powerful sandstorm in this environment. The effect covers a swath six meters long and two meters wide directly in front of the operator. Those caught in the area of effect must make an Endurance check if their eyes are not covered. They are blinded for 1d6 rounds if they fail the check. In addition, the mini-storm is electrically charged and those in the area of effect suffer 2d6 electrical damage.

Outback Inmates
S: 9(+1) **D:** 9(+1) **EN:** 8 **I:** 6 **ED:** 5(-1) **Soc:** 2 (-2)
Skills: Gun Combat (Rifle) 0, Melee (Unarmed Combat) 1, Melee (Blade) 1, Persuade 1
Equipment: Improvised knife, net gun – basically a spring-loaded spear gun trailing a net behind it. On a successful hit, the victim needs to make a dexterity check or be tangled in the net, requiring a Significant Action to free themselves. The spear itself does 2d6 damage.

AMBUSH RESULTS

There are a number of ways this ambush could go. Martin himself is not looking to kill or injure the players; he simply wants a way off this rock. To that end he will attempt to subdue the players with his drill gun and the net guns his compatriots use. Don't forget you have audio dialogue from Martin explaining his situation you can play here. Things could get deadly, though: the inmates' guns are potentially deadly weapons. If the players show any willingness to talk and Martin can retain the tactical advantage, he will attempt to negotiate for their cooperation. He uses his knowledge of the Spires and a tidbit he says he'll only reveal when they get him off planet but which he promises is equally compelling.

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REACHING THE COMMUNICATIONS FACILITY

After the dust settles from the ambush, and assuming the characters are still in control of their actions, they find themselves standing in the shadow of the looming towers.

The profane spires are not simply some geographical oddity; they actually belong to a massive communications outlet sending signals deep into space. The signals resemble telepathic communication more than artificial signals. That's one of the reasons they've never been detected. Martin knew that this was not a natural formation; his latent telepathy sensed something different about these towers. It also gave him a lingering sense of foreboding, but he did his best to ignore that. He would regularly lay in wait here, believing that someone with psionic ability would eventually detect this place and investigate it. He has also noted that the signals have recently become more frequent, though he doesn't know why.

He knows more, and if he's still alive then he's willing to share it, but not until after the characters get him safely off of the planet. Martin is willing to provide one bit of helpful information now, however. He knows how to enter the facility, though he's not willing to go in himself: the signals actually triggered a fear response in him when he tried.

If Martin is no longer available, getting into the tower could pose a serious problem. The entrance lies around the base of the spires but extremely well hidden (searches are formidable -6). Without Martin, the characters could rig up their ship's radar to do the job. (This should be a difficult (-2) task chain. The chain would consist of creating some sort of remote device they can cart around to scan the various parts of the area around the spires, then creating a program to interpret the data, since they aren't detecting a ship in space anymore.) Even if the players find the entrance to the spires, getting inside can only be accomplished by someone with psionic ability in close proximity (about 3 meters) to the entrance. At that point the facility will drain 1 psionic strength point from the person to open the door, and another one to power the interior as detailed below. Without a psionic player to drain, the only other way in is through the liberal application of explosives or the use of ship-grade weapons like a laser or particle beam.

The facility is empty, of course. There is no evidence of any living creature inside. There is no dust or debris in the interior and so no footprints or other evidence of habitation exists.

However they enter the facility, the following effects take place when they do: any characters with psionic abilities who enter the interior find themselves drained of psionic strength points at the rate of 1 point an hour. If no psionic individuals are in the group then roll randomly, and the lucky winner finds himself drained of 2 Endurance points per hour. The facility operates off this drained power (the original occupants had designated workers serving as "batteries," whom they swapped out regularly).

As they step in, read the following description:

The walls themselves light up with a warm glow emanating from the stone itself. The glow runs from chest height to about a foot above the head level of an average human. The light is soft and gives off no heat, seemingly coming from the very stone itself. No device or machine is in evidence. The hallway slopes downward into the earth under the sand's surface. It's cool, and grows more so as you go deeper underground. The doorways are all high, a little too high for what a normal-sized human would need. It appears as if the whole station was built for a much taller-than-average staff. There are odd protrusions and what appear to be stools carved from the rock itself scattered about the complex. The rock wall in front of them invariably consists of smooth flat stone. There are no computer interfaces or machinery as such, but whenever anyone gets within about a meter of one of the flat surfaces, it triggers a holographic projection displaying what appear to be knobs and dials.

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The displays also contain a number of alien runes. Close inspection (Computer, Archeology any Physical Science) reveals that only ten symbols are used throughout the holographic displays, suggesting that they represent the numbers 0 through 9. They have no idea what symbol represents what number. They need to dream up some experiments to deduce this information, which will probably take weeks if not months. They can notice, however, that there are rows and rows of numbers on everything. Some appear to be framed in the same way sentences and paragraphs are. The builders of this site may have used numbers as their entire written language.

ANOTHER COUNTRY HEARD FROM

When the players emerge from the interior of the spires complex, they again fall under attack. Any remaining inmates are now under the control of Jersey Simbolt who has used his tremendous Telempathy skill to dominate them. (Martin LeBay was able to resist and is hiding nearby. He's not willing to give up hope that the players will prevail and he may yet find his way off this planet. He can serve as additional support for the player characters if they need it.)

Referees should use enough inmates to provide a challenge to the players. Jersey and his concubine du jour Arianda Ruiz are both well-armed, having taken weapons from the Trantis's weapons locker. Jersey intends to steal the players' transportation and find his way off this planet. Although she is actively fighting against the players, Arianda is not entirely herself and should represent a moral quandary to any players who have

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deducted Jersey's psychic abilities. If things start going badly for Jersey, he and Arianda will make a run for it… and Jersey will throw Arianda under the bus in a minute if it will help him escape. This can increase the dilemma for the players, as they may have to decide whether to save Arianda (who may have been shooting at them just a few minutes earlier) or continuing their pursuit of Jersey (thus ensuring that no one else suffers under his mental control).

Jersey Simbolt
Psionic Wildling
S: 9(+1) **D:** 6 **EN:** 12 (+2) **I:** 10(+1) **ED:** 5(-1) **Soc:** 12 (+2) **Psi:** 15(+3)
Skills: Athletics/Endurance 1, Advocate 1, Art/Acting 2, Carouse 2, Deception 3, Diplomat 1, Gun Combat/Energy Pistol 0, Persuade 1, Stealth 1, Streetwise 2, Telepathy/Telempathy 3
Equipment: TL11 Laser Pistol, TL10 Cloth (5 Armor Protection)

Arianda Ruiz
Warden Service Navigator
S: 9(+1) **D:** 9(+1) **EN:** 8 **I:** 6 **ED:** 5(-1) **Soc:** 2 (-2)
Skills: Astrogation 1, Flyer/Grav 1, Gun Combat/Energy Rifle 1, Melee/Unarmed Combat 1, Pilot 0, Recon 1, Vacc Suit 1, Zero-G 1
Equipment: TL11 Laser Pistol, Vacc Suit (TL12, 6 Armor Protection), Wafer Jack

GETTING MARTIN OFF PLANET

If the players have agreed to get Martin off planet, they still need to return to Admin Island and hide him from the authorities. Their discovery might serve as leverage in this situation. If they announce what they have found, what little media exists on VanKilla Kiertotahti will swarm the players asking for details and interviews. The Warden Service staff will be abuzz and fawning over the players as well. All this hubbub can help conceal Martin.

Referees should ask the players for their plan to smuggle Martin off the planet, then sit back and enjoy the show. Reward any reasonable plans they come up with as long as they make use of the discovery as a distraction. If they instead choose to keep this a secret, subject their plan to the matter-of-fact but professional inspection the Warden Service will perform on their ship before allowing it off planet.

If the player characters are caught smuggling Martin off planet then the chips should fall where they will. They will likely join Martin as prisoners on planet, giving you a whole new campaign angle, though that probably isn't the result that you as the referee should strive for.

SPEAKING WITH THE PROFESSOR

Once the characters find the base and make their way back to Admin Island, they can either contact the Professor or she'll contact them. When they speak to her, she can barely contain her enthusiasm.

"I can't prove it yet, but I suspect that we are dealing with some of the original inhabitants of VanKila Keirtotahti: part of a vast ancient civilization. There's just so much about this system we can't yet explain, and I know in my bones that you've discovered the clues to help us fill in the gaps. The value of these discoveries is literally beyond measure."

Despite the priceless nature of what she's discussing, the professor forwards them a new advance immediately. (The amount of this payment is left to the referee's discretion, though we suggest something in the vicinity of a million credits. This is a huge discovery and unless the players take measures to avoid it, they will become celebrities.)

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THE PROMISE OF MARTIN LEBAY

Martin promised additional information once he clears VanKila Keirtotahti. True to his word, he provides them with a set of coordinates, put in his head by the spires with a strange suggestive emphasis on their importance. The players need to work a little bit to figure out the coordinates (Astrogation, Physics or any Space Science skills would be applicable, with a Difficult -2 skill check). They lead to an asteroid in the seldom-visited VanKila Keirtotahti inner belt. If the characters follow it there, run the encounter below.

ROBOTS!

The early approach of your ship sets off an ancient, but active security system and causes the still-distant asteroid to spit strange defensive measures into space. A wave of small, segmented worm-like metal objects about one to two meters long spreads out; they move like robots rather than missiles or shrapnel, with specific and seemingly intelligent actions. You cannot quickly ascertain what sort of propulsion they use; they simply glide through the vacuum as easily as a snake across the desert floor.

These small metal objects swarm any potential attacker and overwhelm their defenses through sheer numbers. They attach themselves to the attacking ship and drain it of power. It works more to disable than destroy, which may say something about the nature of whoever created it.

The difficulty of the encounter depends on the number of robots coming at the players' ship. Use 2d6 robots per turret on the players' ship as the base. One fewer die worth of robots makes the encounter rather easy in most cases and one additional die could make it very difficult. Referees should also send in a second wave of robots if the initial wave proves too easy.

The objects launch at the players' ship from long range. The players should be able to fire on the objects at each range band (initially long, then medium, short, close and adjacent) before the objects impact their ship. Any hit destroys one of the objects, but they are very small targets… making attacks against them a difficult (-2) skill check. Missiles are totally ineffective against the objects given their size, though any energy weapon (laser, particle beam) works just fine.

Player gunners, pilots, navigators and engineers will have a lot to do during this encounter. Through skillful flying, a pilot can keep the swarm at bay (i.e, by maintaining the current range band between the swarm and the ship). The swarm is quick and maneuverable, making any attempt to evade them a difficult (-2) skill check. In addition, the swarm's movements constitute a moving math problem and any navigator (or player with gunner skill and no weapon to operate) can provide their gunners with improved firing solutions by using their math skills. Navigators can provide a +1 to hit to their gunners with a successful skill check or +2 with an exceptional check. Engineers can aid their pilots by providing more energy to the maneuver drives, providing a +1 to their pilots on a successful skill check or +2 with an exceptional one.

Once the robots close with the players' ship, they will attach to its hull and begin draining the ship's energy. For each robot attached to the hull, roll 2d6: this represents the percentage of the ship's energy it will drain each round (if you want to make this more random, have each robot roll each round). Once the robots' total reaches 100, the ship will not have power for any of its systems, including life support. Any players left on the ship at this point must either suit up or freeze to death while gasping for the ship's last scraps of oxygen.

The robots are rather simple minded and will initially ignore player characters outside the ship. Any hit from any projectile or energy weapon will disable a robot latched onto the ship. After 2 to 3 rounds of this, however, the remaining robots detach themselves from the ship and move to attach themselves to the player's suit (roll 8+,

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and the robot has attached). Any shots taken at a robot moving in this manner are very difficult, -4. Once connected to a suit, they will begin draining 10d6 percentage of the suit's power per round. When that number hits 100, the suit is out of power and the player character quickly begins to freeze to death (4d6 damage per turn; when Strength, Dexterity and Endurance all reach zero the character is dead).

LOST PRECURSOR BASE

Once the robots are destroyed, the players are free to approach the asteroid and possibly discover a second alien base. It appears as if the asteroid suffered under very heavy assault at some point. Huge sections of it have been blown away, as evidenced by the heavy laser scarring and signs of concussive blasts throughout the structure. A huge bay dominates one side of the asteroid. It has rubble strewn across its landing pad but skillful piloting lands the ship. (This is a 3-step task chain: the first allows safe entry into the landing bay, the second one positions the ship, and the third lands it with a difficult skill check [-2].)

The bay is powered, and springs to life as soon as someone or something enters it.

An airlock sits on one side of the rubble-strewn bay. The inside of the bay shows evidence of combat just as the outside did, with carbon scorings and melted fire lines indicating weapons usage. It appears that the invaders stormed this bay seeking a way into the asteroid. The bay itself is built on the same slightly larger-than-human scale as the facility at the Three Spires. Some scaffolding and bits of twisted metal appear here, as well as a few inert examples of individual robot segments like those that attacked your ship.

To access the rest of this facility, the characters need to get past that airlock. Opening it constitutes a task chain. First they must locate the control panel; it is not beside the airlock but on the wall directly opposite it and relatively well hidden, requiring a difficult -2 skill check.

The applicable skills are Notice, Recon, or Investigate; a through radar scan of the bay will also reveal the control panel. Next the characters need to either work the panel or bypass it. It takes a very difficult -4 skill check to figure out how to work the panel. Applicable skills are Research, Computers, or Engineering/Electronics skills. Bypassing the panel requires a difficult -2 skill check; Engineer/Electronics or Computer are the applicable skills. Finally the door hasn't been opened in thousands of years. Coaxing it open requires a difficult -2 skill check; the Applicable skills are Engineering/Power or Mechanic.

Once inside, the characters find technology similar to the kind at the Three Spires facility; this one, however, seems a little more advanced. Stools spring from the floor when anyone approaches a work station, and light emanates from a particular area as someone enters it. Whatever race inhabited this place must have left when the shooting started. A large open area that might have been an auditorium or command area holds the most interest. When anyone enters here, the room springs to life and a holographic display begins to cycle through images of a solar system and flybys of the various planets within it. The strange number/runes label particular images as they are displayed.

Perhaps the most important image is a scene from a planet showing a night sky and the various constellations… giving characters a clue as to its location. It won't be easy, but from the placement of those constellations, an AI or sufficiently skilled character with enough time could determine the coordinates for the planet. (Give the players some skill rolls to figure this out if they haven't on their own.) Any Physical or Space Science skills should give the players a chance to figure out the image's importance. In addition, the Investigate skill might cause a player to ask the question: is it possible to tell where this solar system might be based on the information in this display? Of course, the answer is yes.

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EPILOGUE

Like The Three Spires, this represents a major discovery, one potentially worth a lot of money. The players can deal with this information in a number of different ways.

1) They could keep it to themselves. Obviously, they would receive no monetary or celebrity acclaim for handling it like this, but it would give them all the time in the world to figure out the location of the new planet the holographic display revealed.

2) They could share the information with Professor Itcher. In that case they would receive a reward similar to (though likely greater than) they received for the Three Spires discovery. The University would share this information with the Orion government at some point, and the government would soon sweep in and demand confidentiality agreements from all concerned parties. In addition, the university and/or the government would begin researching the location of the alien planet. If the players want to get there first, they better hurry.

3) They could share the information with the Orion government, which creates a scenario similar to #2. The government would immediately require a confidentiality agreement but would likely offer a far better financial reward than the university. Of course, they would also immediately begin looking into the location of the alien planet, and the players would need to hurry if they wanted to be the first to discover it.

4) They could reveal their discovery through the media. They would receive large sums of money for the documentary rights, the movie rights etc. and in the process become celebrity explorers in the Twilight Sector. The characters could then trade on their fame for quite a comfortable living for the rest of their lives. However even in this scenario, the Orion government would eventually sweep in and interdict the site. The players might even become the targets of OSS disinformation campaigns should they talk about things the Orion government doesn't want revealed.

This is the second part of a three-part *Ancient Trails* adventure arc. The last installment involves the first visit to/discovery of the alien planet revealed in this adventure.

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