

Writeup - Savage Worlds - Season Two

The team got paid out for their undercover gig at the Blue Vector party, and went shopping.

Shade talked with the group and told them he would fuel up their ship with one shot of jump juice and 10 days of impulse fuel, and give them some profit on a shipment to Icarus in the Inner Core. He figured it would be best for the team to leave town before Blue Vector put two and two together. At Icarus they would meet up with a contact of his named Delta that would handle payment and possibly try to help Damien clear up the problem about him having blown up a hospital. The crew was given a choice of cargos and packed in the most lucrative: ornamental rugs, which Shade agreed he would give them a profit of \$4,500 upon arrival at Icarus for carrying.

The team then spent some time in Crossroads while Shade's men loaded and fueled the ship. Gil went down to the local racetrack. Crossroads, being a kind of free market, was racing just about anything imaginable, and some things not quite imaginable. At the top of animals to bet on was "aardvarks." Gil picked number 6 to win, odds 8 to 1, and watched as the slow beast shambled its way into near-last place. The owner approached Gil, surprised that he'd taken an interest in the fellow, and offered to sell him for \$2. Gil was a little reluctant at first, but was coaxed into taking on the loveable creature. He asked the owner the aardvark's name and was told it was simply "Number Six." Gil then bought about \$50 of aardvark care supplies and loaded him into a nice quiet area of the ship.

The team got in their positions: Rynna piloting, JJ at the Comms, Beauregard in the engine room, and Granola (?) navigating. They bought an orbital tug service and quickly jumped to hyperspace. Space went from dark to light.

Then suddenly...a dazzle from the right...and when they fell out of hyperspace, they were NOT near Icarus. Not at all.

They were in a binary system, but one of the stars had collapsed into a black hole. They could see two lifeless rocks orbiting the existing sun, but also a seemingly habitable planet. They made for the habitable planet and JJ tried to hail any form of civilization. Eventually JJ found an old-school shortwave signal...an apparently coded message spoken by an older man:

"Alcatraz broadcasting...this is Alcatraz...we're out of cornbread. Repeat: we're pretty sure we're out of cornbread. We will make apple pie at first light. Repeat: we will make apple pie at first light. Alcatraz Out."

The signal came from the shore of one of the planet's continents, and having no other obvious lead, they took the ship down into the atmosphere, full knowing that they had no Jump Juice to continue their voyage back to Icarus.

On the way down, an engine started to hiccup. Beauregard spoke gently to the ailing ship (we can only imagine), but Rynna was able to guide the ship safely to the small coastal island from which the signal originated. They hailed the man who had called out over the radio, and he said they could put the ship down in one of his fields.

There they were greeted by a man in his seventies, bearing hunting clothes and an elephant gun. He introduced himself as “Judge” Hartmann and seemed on edge. He expressed that he was concerned about a likely attack by barbarians of some sort, but was actually sort of relieved to see a ship fall from the sky, as he knew that barbarians would not use ships. The team had landed on Deep Well Three, a planet that had been used both as a breeding ground for colony fauna, and later as a penal colony. He said though he was man of law, not to speak poorly of lawbreakers as nearly every inhabitant’s ancestry was thick with thieves. Deep Well Three had been mostly left alone by the colonization process, first due to the stigma of being a penal colony, then later just because it was a poor star system for travel: only one habitable planet, and a small one at that. Other systems, some with dozens of habitable planets, become the core of human civilization, while Deep Well Three, deprived of interstellar technology, forged along with what little they could. Due to the relatively small population, large cities and centers were not possible, and in rural areas there was almost no use of electricity, though most larger abodes had generators and used gasoline-powered vehicles.

After explaining this, various civilities were exchanged and the group was handsomely fed. Hartmann displayed a map of the region, and explained that several weeks ago a warning had been broadcast on an emergency frequency: a barbarian leader said he and his men would strike Hartmann’s province once they “see the light.” This was also mirrored in something Hartmann’s sworn enemy, Murchison, had said just yesterday. He wasn’t sure if it was a threat or a coincidence. Either way, just in the last few hours the nearby lighthouse had been set ablaze; someone had poured oil on it and the brick building’s surface burned like a torch.

According to Hartmann, barbarians had recently been ravaging various provinces with no apparent goal except destruction and disorder. They did not keep their goods in a fortress and become warlords; they simply rolled into areas on their motorcycles and destroyed what little of civilization existed.

Hartmann had devised a plan that when attack was imminent, to gather some of the locals by the local transit center, which was an airport and train terminal (just a single track really). He didn’t get into details about his plan, but said he couldn’t reasonably set out until morning: he needed sleep and was concerned about the weather and darkness. He hoped the team would help him with this fight, because he knew he could use all the help he could get against these barbarians. The team agreed to help, although Beauregard and Granola would stay behind to fix the ship. Hartmann talked with the team a while, and introduced them to his granddaughter Helga, then set them up in spare but pleasant quarters, and bid them good night.

Most of the team rested in their comfortable rooms, but HOG was unable to sleep and kept

watch. When looking outside with his night-vision goggles around midnight, he noticed a figure slipping away in a rowboat. He alerted the team, then woke Hartmann, who came out of his room in a nightshirt carrying his elephant gun. He rounded up all the staff and found none missing. Then someone suggested it was his daughter, so he reluctantly banged on her bedroom door, then broke in to find she was gone.

Rynna suggested under her breath that perhaps Helga was running off to see a Murchison, and Hartman about blew a gasket. He perhaps suffered a small stroke; he clutched his head and shouted that it was not possible. Gil gave him some anti-anxiety meds to help with the stress, and though they helped him, it compromised some of his mental and physical abilities.

The team insisted that they take a yacht out and follow Helga. After some convincing, Hartmann agreed, he should not lose time in pursuit of his daughter. They had to spend a couple of hours readying the yacht in the dark of night, which was difficult considering Judge's condition and lack of sleep. As they strung up the sail and let out of the small harbor, an incredible storm blew up, with winds around 60 miles per hour. But the old man's naval experience shone! He held command of the ship and weathered the storm as if it were the gentlest of breezes.

Rynna looked about with the night-vision goggles, but saw nothing of Helga. They came across another rowboat that was laden with refugees from a barbarian attack; these were not from this province but from another, and they chose to flee to water as they felt they had nowhere else to go. Hartmann pulled them aboard.

The storm cleared and dawn broke as they reached the river delta south of the mill; the first stop on their journey. Hartmann dropped anchor and rowed each of the group ashore as he had the only boating skill. The team walked a two-hour walk to the mill, along the river, and about halfway along HOG noticed a flare far to their left. A shadow fell across Hartmann's face: the flare was launched from Marsh End, meaning they were under dire attack. The team could not hasten their pace much, and made it to the mill in about an hour.

Hartmann warned them about a millworker named Bob: "He's got a very unusual...personality." They reached the mill, a water mill with two wheels. To their left: a path leading into a large forest; ahead: a path leading up along a ridge; to the right: the river bent away, with rolling hills behind.

Bob introduced himself, and spoke with a lot of energy about how he was "jazzed" about "hydro-technology," the awesome way of turning the force of water into...energy! When Hartmann explained what they were doing there, Bob spoke, in the exact excited tone as before, about how he really wanted to kick some barbarian butt. He then picked up seven circular saw blades with heavy welding gloves on both hands, and began to juggle them all.

Bob said he unfortunately did not have two vehicles for them. He did have one though: a semi

rig (no trailer). The semi had a large sleeping quarters in back accessible through the front, and everyone could squeeze in.

The team decided to rush into the forest and try to head off the barbarians. Macho took the wheel. Just a mile before they reached the lumber camp, Hartmann spotted a manila folder off to the side of the road. Macho hit the brakes and tried to swing out of the cab in one graceful move...then fell to ground, cracking a rib. Inside the folder was a checklist:

- collect sample from stones
- talk to biker leader
- get explosives for dam

This list sort of baffled the team. The dam retained the lake that surrounded the Murchison estate, and if it were blown it would flood the entire lower valley, possibly knocking out both forks of the train track, and reducing Murchison's lake to a mucky lakebed. Whose list was this?

They came to the lumber camp and spoke with the lumberjacks. A few volunteered to help, and lugged their chainsaws and logging axes with them. The team decided at this point to split: one group would take a lumber hauler truck (cab with a claw bed) and drive back to the fork in the road by the mill, then back up to the airport. The other would proceed directly to Marsh End and confront the barbarians. HOG drove Rynna, JJ, and Stitch, as they figured they may be able to use some planes from the airport. The others piled into the semi and headed out.

It started to rain. Macho spotted another manila folder along the road: this one had a map much like Hartmann's and indicated the route of attack: the bikers had convened in a cave in the mountains, then descended from the plateau down to the delta where Marsh End lay. They would then go to the lumber camp, the mill, the airport, and then finally the dam. The barbarians, to this plan, would soon be coming right this way.

HOG saw some more refugees along the road to the airport but did not stop.

About this time, Macho approached Marsh End. They stopped to try to scope it out: Deuce couldn't make out much but saw at least a dozen bikers, some of them on their bikes. They dropped Deuce just within firing range of the bikers and Macho floored the semi to drive through their camp. Completely unaware, several bikers were run down by the rig, speeding along at 60 mph. Macho took out several bikers this way. The bikers grouped up, moving toward the semi as Macho turned it about, and Damien and Hartmann dropped out. At this point things got chaotic. Damien and Hartmann opened fire as several lumberjacks and Bob were still in the back of the truck. Deuce moved up for a better shot. The bikers then retreated back toward the settlement, and some started ganging up on Deuce. Macho swung the truck back through the sea of bikers, plastering them on his bumper, and stopped a little bit past Deuce. The biker leader swing a chain-grenade at Deuce while on his bike, but it wrapped in his front tire, throwing him off the bike and destroying the bike. Several of the lumberjacks and Macho began exiting the rig to help out. One of the bikers, having run for cover in a house, tried to throw a

grenade but forgot there was a window...it bounced about and destroyed half the house, leaving a swath of flames about. Hartmann drew his elephant gun and raised it mightily, but apparently had loaded the slug wrong as it backfired, destroying the gun and wounding him. Several bikers then jumped Hartmann and many more ganged up on Damien. About this time Deuce fell to one of the bikers...with no support. Gil rushed to his side and performed several medical miracles in the hope of being able to revive him after the fight.

Damien was now hurting...bullied by five brutes, and Hartmann drew his saber, charging the biker leader. The lumberjacks and Bob had descended on the leader as well; however, the lumberjacks, in wielding their chainsaws, saw that fighting people with saws was more dangerous than fighting trees; two of them killed themselves by their own hand. Another pushed the biker leader into the flames; the leader laughed and threw him in as well, burning the lumberjack. Bob tried his might with the chainsaw blades, but to no effect. The leader, desperate and crazed, threw a grenade at the group, including his own men, damaging many; Hartmann made a few attempts at harming the leader with his saber: to no avail. His life was then taken. Macho, bravely assisting Damien, fell to one of the barbarian's chains...the life sucked away in a moment of immense pain.

Eventually the leader fell shaken, and in trying to recover tripped the trigger of his shotgun...pointed directly at his head. With no luck remaining, the leader was dead.

One biker stumbled, trying to get away, but the group convinced him to come back...the lone survivor of the barbarians.

After the fight, Deuce was revived...but Macho was gone. Stitch, hearing the news, sobbed immensely. Hartmann, Bob, and the lumberjacks were all dead as well. The team was now in the rain, mostly alive, but feeling defeated, on a planet with no technology, with a ship without Jump Juice, with no living contacts and death hanging all about.

=== Season 2 Episode 2 =====

The team reconvened and decided they needed to give Judge and the others a proper burial at the Hartmann estate. They lightly interrogated the biker and found he was a shoemaker from Holm who was recruited by the team to pillage and ruin civilization of any sort wherever they found it. He did not know who Torok, their leader, got his directions from. They didn't really receive much pay but rather were told they could pillage whatever they wanted from their targets. They had been doing this for about the last 5-6 months. He directed the team to inspect the leader, who carried 2 large explosives with him and a simple electrical-charge timing detonator. The team let the biker live, since he had a reasonable driving skill, and they needed someone to drive the truck.

Damien took the leader's T-shirt, which read "Dumb Ass," and the high explosives. The leader also had a sawed-off double-barrel shotgun which the team took.

The team did not have much in the way of boating skill, but decided that they should try to take the yacht back to the Hartmann estate; Rynna, Damien, Deuce, and JJ went up in one of the Cessnas they found at the airport and scouted out the area. They found the refugees still waiting on the beach where they'd landed them. Rynna then piloted the plane over the Murchison estate, flying stealthily and low above the treetops, but no one could really see anything of interest at the estate.

When Damien got back to the airport she joined the ground team and they had the biker drive the semi down to the beach. There they packed everyone onto the yacht and made it back to the Hartmann estate, where they joined Rynna and others who had flown in. A service was held for the deceased. Stitch gave a short speech extolling Macho's virtues, then announced that she was carrying his baby. Deuce then stood up and denounced the team for not using good combat tactics. Stitch snipped off some of Macho's 'stache and put it in a locket.

Beauregard, with Granola's help, finished working on the ship's engine quite ahead of schedule.

Hartmann's housekeeper insisted that the team find Helga, who was the sole heir to the estate. They had suspected that Helga had run off to elope with one of the young Murchisons, so they took their journey there. They decided to wait until morning to go, however, so they would be rested and have the better part of the day to deal with the Murchisons. They flew back to the airport, HOG flying the Cessna and Rynna flying the ship. The mechanics back at the airport hangars were awestruck by the ship and kept pestering everyone about it. Even as the team went to sleep, they kept distracting the night watches with questions about the ship.

During the night, Deuce took first watch. During this time he noticed the black hole in the night sky, perfect blackness ringed thinly by points of light that had been bent around it by its gravitational field. This caused Deuce to feel quite ill and suffered some psychological difficulty for the next couple of hours.

The next morning they took the short jump to the Murchison estate, and set down in one of the large lawns surrounding the estate. While landing they noticed a large man on the lawn performing some sort of athletic activity, but they weren't sure what. Gil and Beauregard stepped out of the ship to find that the man was hurling a shot put, then running over to pick it up, then hurling it again. The man didn't even notice the ship landing nearby, and was a little shocked when the group introduced themselves. He introduced himself as "El Greco," a professor of Hellenic Studies at the University of Holm. He thought there might be someone at the university in Holm that would know about the jump juice.

Then a finely-dressed man introduced himself as Iago Murchison. He spoke in a rarefied accent and expressed interest in the group, having from from outer space. He invited them in for breakfast and they were greeted by a long hall filled with many unusual animal skins. As pleasantries were exchanged, Ishmael and Helga came in; they had just been married the night

before. HOG somewhat tactlessly mentioned that the Judge had died, and as the team began to explain the horrific tale, Iago insisted that Helga be removed from the room if they were to discuss such details. After this faux pas had passed, Iago warmed to the group as his merchant ears pricked to hear news from the stars. He was disappointed that all they had to offer were rugs, but suggested that perhaps they could make some exchanges. Rynna bought at [] for [] and Beauregard wanted an alligator skin, but it was exorbitant. In the conversation that followed, Gil found that Iago was a gambler and they immediately set to a game. The first pot started at \$100 and found Iago \$300 richer. Playing the shark's game, Gil then won the next two pots, gaining over \$2000. In the course of play Gil let on that he had an armadillo, which excited Iago to no end: there were no armadillos on Deep Well Three. He proposed an exchange: the live armadillo for the alligator skin and some bear-claw "gloves." He also flipped Gil a \$500 chip from the casino in Holm for having given him such a welcome gaming pleasure.

When the team got back to discussing the quest for jump juice, Iago remembered that there was a guy at the university, near the Physics department, who did work with advanced technology, so perhaps he would know something. Iago said there was a 12:00 train that was leaving for Holm, but since that would get in sort of late in the day, the team opted to stay at the estate overnight. Iago also cautioned them not to fly the ship to Holm as it may attract unwanted attention, and also that Holm had strict weapon laws that only allowed one single-shot weapon per person (knives were OK). The university in particular would take a harsh line on any flagrant display of guns.

That evening they talked with El Greco some more. He explained that about 100 years ago, a waylaid merchant ship laden with 200,000 copies of various Greek texts had crash landed and the inhabitants of Deep Well Three, hungry for literature, learned Greek so they would have books to read. Thus Greek studies became a major part of all schools' curricula. El Greco was not only into the literature but all Greek activity, and thus enjoyed classical sports, boating, and swimming. He stated that the university had just let out for the summer, and that he was on sabbatical for the next year, and was curious to join this group of wanderers as part of his own "odyssey."

That night, the only thing the night guards noticed was the occasional snap of a trap going off in the woods.

Iago and Ishmael set out the next morning and took the team to the dam, which the train tracks passed over, and they raised a flag to indicate for the morning train from the airport/train station to stop for them. They paid the \$5 each and boarded the old steam train for the 20 mile journey to Holm. On the train HOG wanted to splay out on a bench, where another man had already camped out. The man woke up and introduced himself as Narco. Narco was a quiet guy, but he was clearly looking for work. He had a long gun case and seemed interested in joining a band of mercenary types, as he imagined this group to be. He did not discuss any terms but said that if they were interested in his services, he could be found at the casino hotel. Narco has a quirk, which is that he is narcoleptic; at times he will suddenly fall asleep.

They got to Holm and Narco deposited his gun case with the gun depository outside of town. The team then went to the university and up past the physics department, where they found a young graduate student standing outside the door marked "Professor Gromyko." The grad student introduced himself as Jeremy and was very excited that the team was from "outer space" and looking for jump juice. He cautioned the group that it was best for only two people to talk to Gromyko at a time as he was agoraphobic. Rynna and Beauregard volunteered since they knew the most about the ship and its needs.

Jeremy led them through one room, which mostly held Jeremy's work, and then into another room which was Gromyko's lab. The "lab" was more of a disorganized office that was crawling (literally) with strange technology: there were spidery robots walking about bookshelves laden with a combination of dusty old books and holographic manuals. The professor was in his 50s, a disheveled man with one eye, very engaged in his work. He was a little tentative to talk to the strangers that Jeremy introduced, but then warmed to them as they asked about the jump juice. He had a little moment where he was discouraged and thought there was no hope for them, then remembered that there was a cult about 80 or so years ago called the Sisterhood of the Sacred Starship that had claimed to find an interstellar ship in a cave about 25 miles into the mountains. They had built a cult about this ship and its technology, and Gromyko had an old map that had been drawn up showing the cave's location. He cleared an area of his desk and laid the map down under a small stand with two stalks: one with an eyeball at the end and another that grasped a pen. The eyeball scanned the paper with a blue light and the other stalk began scribbling a copy of the map on a fresh sheet of paper. He then placed the map in a manila folder and labeled it for them.

When Rynna and Beauregard came out of the office, HOG heard the tale and took a look at the handwriting on the manila folder: it was the same as the writing on the folders they'd found along the path through the woods with the directions for the bikers. They decided not to act on this information for now, but were very curious about any relation between the two. They talked with Jeremy about the map and he said that they'd need some good winter gear to survive the cold, as the elevation of these mountains was about 28,000 feet and it would be quite cold. He suggested going to a sky supply shop called "Blazing Blizzard's HOT HOT HOT Winter Gear Sales Shop & Iced Lava Flow Lounge."

The team wandered down to the establishment and found that Blazing Blizzard was a man in his mid-thirties with spiky hair, ski goggles, a Hawaiian shirt, and khaki shorts, who was very energetic in his sales. He offered them drinks:

- Virgin Island Sacrifice (no alcohol)
- Volcano Island Slushies
- Tonga Tiki Tinis
- Cave Crab Sour
- Hurricane Warning G&T

- “Last Man Alive”

If someone could drink the “Last Man Alive” drink and still stand, he would put up the team at the casino hotel. Deuce and Beauregard both tried and failed (though Beauregard almost was able to stand up, he slid slowly to the floor upon finishing the last sip).

Gil went to the low-roller table and won a little money, then went to the high-roller table. There he came face-to-face with one of the luckier gamblers around. Gil almost lost a fortune, beyond all his holdings, in a desperate game, then in the end squeaked by having only a little left.

The team picked up Narco and took the night train down to the dam by Murchisons; they then hailed Murchison through use of a flare. About an hour later Iago and Ishmael came by and picked up the crew. Iago was curious about why they had bought a yachtful of parkas, and they explained what they had learned. He was very concerned about the possible link between Gromyko and the bikers; he knew that there were some possible technology excavation sites nearby but had a hard time believing that a research professor would order the destruction of lives and homes for research if there were other options available.

The next morning the team said goodbye to Murchison and to his newly acquired aardvark “Number Six.” Iago by this time had grown attached to the fellow and had him temporarily housed in the estate. Iago also took custody of the biker since his clan was now in charge of all the lands in which the bikers had killed.

Rynna took the ship up at first light and within a few minutes they were nearing their destination. They circled their target and could see that the cave was built into a sheer cliffside, approachable from both sides. The ship could land closest in two areas: a valley about one mile away, and a ridge top about four miles away. They chose the closer path. The team suited up and headed out, single file, with Narco in front and HOG taking the rear.

A little more than halfway to the cave, they all had to hop down a 6 foot ridge...they had all found themselves to be rather adept at moving around in this snow and actually found they learned how to move faster than on dry land. They also carved a small path down the ridge by all following the same path.

A few hundred feet beyond the ridge, the snow fell away near JJ's feet. Suddenly several such pits appeared below the party's feet, and several of the members fled to the stability of some nearby flat rocks. JJ was sucked down under the snow by something, something that had grappled with him and grabbed him. He was not afraid, and he did get a good breath of air before he went down.

Gil felt particularly alert to danger, and noticed that the large flat rock that many of the group had fled to had eyes near its edge...it was a large crab-like monster! He alerted the team to this and the group went to battle. Rynna, who had also fled, but to a small rock, tested to make sure it

was a rock, and drove her long sword down onto the “rock” and it let out a muffled deathly cry, shuddered, and moved no more.

The large crab reared up and began charging about. Another small snow crab sprung from the ground and joined the fight.

The group tried every way to cut, bash, or blast through the creatures’ tough shells. Rynna attacked with her sword and Damien with his fire axe. Gil and Granola tried to assist JJ by tying a rope and trying to extract JJ, but he was sucked down too deep. The giant crab then picked up JJ twenty feet into the air and threw him at Rynna, missing, but seriously damaging JJ. Stitch and Gil rushed to his side to apply first aid as best they could. In the meantime Deuce and Damien tried to clobber the large crab astride its back, and HOG determined what his best move was. El Greco aimed at the small crab with his shot put, but before he could get a shot off the giant crab ran over him. Beauregard fired off a shot, which caused the whole valley to rumble in echo, but it did not cause an avalanche. Gil brandished a pool cue and charged the small crab, joining others who had surrounded it and started bullying it. HOG then rushed the crab and pointed the shotgun point-blank into its side, his muffled shot breaking through its shell, and from then on he continued firing. This seemed very effective, so Beauregard followed the same tactic, and as the creature defied death several times, it started to run, directly over HOG and Beauregard. Beauregard would have fallen underneath, but HOG jumped at Beauregard, grabbed him, and pulled him safely from the path of the raging crab. Then HOG fired a tremendous shot that went straight to the crab’s ganglia, causing its immediate death.

JJ was still breathing; he had just broken a rib. The team looked about, victorious in the snow. They looked ahead to the large cave mouth that lay ahead, filled with both wonder and dread.

=== Season 2 Episode 3 =====

With JJ wounded, the team felt it best that he not head into a dark cave. Rynna, Beauregard, and [...] went back to the ship to attend to JJ. The rest of the team trudged on ahead to the mouth of the cave.

As they reached the cave, they saw that the mouth of the cave was not made of rock but sculpted of concrete, in an arch 30 feet high and 30 feet wide. In relief on the concrete were glyphs, and spraypainted over the glyphs were the letters “SSS” every ten feet or so, presumably added by the Sisters of the Sacred Starship. El Greco had luckily read several books about the origin of these glyphs: they were made by a group called the Vanguard. The Vanguard had been an elite team of scientists and explorers put together by the nations of Earth to explore the star system that had been “pointed” to by the chain of supernovae described by the Draconians. The Earth settlers were too numerous to send by the then-classified and still experimental hyperdrive, so the Vanguard were chosen to scout ahead and prepare the planets for habitation. The Vanguard lived their lives dedicated to a dangerous and curious lifestyle, obsessed with learning about the universe, and by the time the first settler ships arrived about

90 years later, the Vanguard found themselves among a different kind of human. The settlers were all about conquest of land and “making babies,” of colonization. Shortly after the settlers’ arrival, the colonizing governments wanted to defund the Vanguard and put their efforts toward settling of the surrounding star systems. The Vanguard wanted no part of that: they were too interested in science and the curiosities of the universe to adhere to the mundane requirements of settlement. One day they suddenly disappeared, with much of their research and technology in tow, and there has been no legitimately confirmed contact with them ever since.

Remnants of Vanguard outposts have been reported through the years, but for the most part it seems as though the Vanguard quit themselves of humanity’s colonial existence. There are various conspiracy theories about the Vanguard but it has largely been assumed that their disgust of human settlement has led them far away.

The Vanguard had developed a simple glyph system that they used for their early landmarks on Promise, the first new planet to be colonized, prior to the settlers’ arrival. El Greco unfortunately did not know the glyph system well enough to read it, but either these glyphs were made in the form of the Vanguard, or were in fact written by the Vanguard themselves.

As El Greco ended his story and the team started to cautiously enter the cave, HOG looked back as he heard a light buzzing sound from behind him. A small single-engine plane was struggling to keep aloft in the thin air, and as it flew overhead a figure jumped out, then soon a red-and-white parachute expanded and the figure floated to the ground. An attractive young woman unfurled herself from the parachute and approached the team. She introduced herself as Aleya and explained that Gromyko had suggested sending her, as she was a graduate researcher with a background in physics, and thought she might be of use to the team.

The team met this news with mixed reactions, concerned that they may have just introduced a spy into their midst. But another healthy body on the trip may be of use, so they accepted her into the team.

The cave had a very eerie floor plan. The mouth of the cave opened into five “fingers,” walkways out over a great chasm that fell, as they found, several thousand feet straight down. At the bottom appeared to be a glow of lava. Curiously, at the base of one of the “fingers” was a large gong, hanging from ropes suspended from two large poles; the gong was six feet wide of brass. Aleya was intrigued and ran directly to it to ring it! Damien made a grab for her but Aleya was too quick: she struck the gong and immediately the cave resonated, causing a vast amount of snow to fall over the entrance, trapping the team in darkness.

The team’s tactical headgear had pin lighting, but it was not very strong. As their eyes grew accustomed to the dark they saw the dim glow of a figure across the chasm, standing on another set of “fingers.” Gil then recalled that he had a pair of night-vision goggles in his pack, and looked about. The figure was a holographic projection, he figured; he could see dimly through it and it did not emit any heat signal. The image was that of a woman in a long toga

and ceremonial headgear. Behind the figure lay the bare bones of a stripped space ship. Only its basic outline and some hull braces gave away its original shape. But how to get over to the “fingers” on the other side of the chasm? The nearest one’s tip lay about 18 feet away. Granola only had 15 feet of rope. Not wanting to attempt a desperate lasso and swing, the team hit on the idea of disassembling the poles and ropes from the gong and using those to get across. The heavy lifters of the team went about the task of gingerly cutting away and lowering the gong, but El Greco became distracted at a critical point in the process and dropped the gong. It cut close to his feet then rolled and plummeted down into the chasm, with much clanging and clutter, causing a set of small rock avalanches as it fell.

But the team had rope, and through a series of efforts got Aleya across. As she approached the hologram, it spoke:

“Hark! This is a voice from the past. We Sisters have seen the eye of darkness, it has drawn our souls to it. We are no longer of this planet. We have joined the wanderers, the seekers, those that live beyond. Behold! This starship has powers beyond your comprehension! Only those who take the leap of faith may join the sisterhood and That Which Lies Beyond. Place One Ladle of the Waters of the Sacred Fount between the thumb and first finger, turn the Ring upon the Ring Finger once about, and Leap! before the Ring turns back again. Fall into oblivion and join the sisters!”

Aleya investigated and found a fountain behind the wrecked ship...it contained jump juice! But only about one gallon...it would take at least three for a single jump in Rynna’s ship. She found the “ring,” which was a brass wheel laid across one of the fingers, and a pedestal with a small bowl between the shortest finger and its nearest neighbor. A large 25-foot beam was in the wreckage of the ship, so she enlisted the help of another crew member to come across and help her position the beam across the chasm. The team eventually all made it across.

There was some discussion then about whether the idea of leaping into the chasm was a good idea, or purely bonkers. HOG and Aleya were in favor of jumping, and without much prompting they took some of the jump juice from the fountain, placed it in the bowl on the pedestal, turned the wheel, and jumped!

What happened next even they found unbelievable. Several hundred feet down into their fall, they passed through a filmy sheet of a substance much like a soapy bubble. As they passed through, the substance formed a bubble around them individually; they could not quite touch it as the bubble retained some space between them and its filmy edge. Below they saw the lava rising up quickly, but then a web of blackness quickly formed a thousand connections until there was a dark portal beneath them: they saw stars! As they passed through they found themselves completely immersed in space, nothing about them but stars and a great darkness ringed lightly by bent starlight...they were near Deep Well’s black hole! They could see the sun that Deep Well Three orbited and had a deep sensation of aloneness. Though they could breathe in their bubbles, how long would that last? They did not seem to be going anywhere.

After about five minutes of grave concern, HOG noticed that a space station was approaching them--or they were approaching it. The station was L-shaped, with a landing dock placed in the nook of the L. As they neared, the glare of thrusters shone beneath them, slowing their approach. Doors in the lower part of the L opened, and they lowered to the floor of what appeared to be an airlock. The doors shut as their bubbles hit the floor, and as sufficient air rushed into the airlock, the bubbles popped, leaving no trace.

Aleya and HOG were greeted over the intercom by a voice announcing itself as "DUX." DUX was a hospitality AI, in charge of taking care of any of the station's guests. He announced that they were aboard the Flexuram, a scientific outpost established to study the black hole. There was currently no crew and no other guests, but they and any other guests would be cared for as long as they were present. If they wished to leave, they could use a contraption in the room adjacent to the airlock that would pass them into a bubble much like that in the cave, then catapult them toward another portal. This method of travel is called a "fallport."

The rest of the team, unable to communicate with Aleya and HOG, debated whether to leap after them. They could see them disappear into the portal, surrounded by the bubbles, so they mostly reasoned that it was their best path to get jump juice. El Greco, though quite eager for a quest, suddenly found himself quite discomforted the notion of leaping into the unknown. Gil eventually convinced him and the two jumped off the cliff after the others.

As they all followed the same path as Aleya and HOG, the team was reunited at the Flexuram. They asked DUX about the history of the station, but DUX was vague. DUX suggested that they take a nice stay in the quarters, or enjoy the library. DUX also mentioned that some of the corridor lights were out due to a blown fuse, repairable from the utility closet. The guests were not allowed access to the bridge, sensor room, maintenance room, reactor, or the laser probe. DUX didn't know anything about jump juice.

El Greco went to investigate the library, and the team looked around. There were two EVA suits in the airlock and four pressure suits in a nearby storage room. In the library were shelves of books, and several computer consoles, one of which was smashed. They passed the science officer's and captain's rooms, but both were locked. Aleya looked in the kitchen and saw a typical layout: refrigerators, counters, sinks, and an industrial mixer in the corner. As the team began to explore the darkened halls, they heard loud noises, like chainsaws. Gil looked through his night vision goggles and saw two robots, about five feet in height, but "headless." In the left arm was built a shotgun, and in the right a reciprocating saw. In their back, a six-gallon gasoline tank. The two arranged themselves in a formation, walking down the dark hallway toward the group, with the first one crouching and running the saw, and the second one shooting at the team. After the first several shots, the team dispersed into the nearest rooms: Damien dashed into a lecture room and others into the kitchen. Then one of the team in the kitchen noticed something: the "mixer" in the corner was not a mixer at all, but another robot, just not activated yet. Gil, thinking quickly, took the spray nozzle from the sink and hosed down the robot to keep

its gas-powered ignition from activating. Then he detached the gas tank and dragged it to the door, hoping to use it as a bomb against the other two robots.

Meanwhile, HOG sneaked through the dark, the long way around the hallway, trying to tail the robots. He found himself at the mess hall, which was darkened. The team asked DUX if he could activate the cleaning robot as a distraction for the robots. The robot emerged from the closet, and the shooting robot turned around and immediately destroyed the harmless machine. HOG let loose on the shooting robot, and hitting its gas tank, caused an explosion that sent flaming junk all over the mess hall, charring the table and busting a hole in the lab wall.

Damien then hoisted the lectern from the lecture hall and shoved it into the dark hallway, hoping to use it against the remaining robot. After some confusion, she shoved it up against the robot. At this point HOG got to the utility closet and turned the lights on, then he wheeled around and took a shot at the robot's gas tank...exploding it right in front of Damien. The explosion blew through a wall and destroyed the lectern, but luckily Damien was spared much damage.

The robots were destroyed, but as the team looked about, they found no jump juice. They decided to break into the locked rooms. Stitch went to pick the lock of the science officer's room. There they found a woman hanging from a noose, dessicated, wearing the habit of a nun. There was also a robot, standing still, with its saw-arm apparently stopped trying to cut through the wall. Aleya immediately removed the gas tanks. On the nun they found a note: "She is right. I have murdered, although not the murder I am accused of. For these sins I will take my own life. She has shown me the way, she understands and will forgive. My life is forfeit. --Sister Francine"

They entered the captain's room and found another body, that of the mother superior.

Then, over their tactical headsets they heard the voice of a young woman with a Southern accent: "Hello? Help me...will you help me?" The young woman sounded confused...she didn't know where she was, and couldn't see anything and couldn't move. She introduced herself as Anna Mae, though they could call her Anna. She didn't really know much about what happened, but knew that someone named Chris was trying to kill her. "Will you help me?" she kept asking of the team as they tried to find a way onto the secured area. They considered trying to blow the walls surrounding the bridge using the explosives taken from the bikers, but decided it was more likely to destroy the structural components of the station.

Damien went on an EVA to check out the docking platform, which had a crashed shuttle on it, and the exterior of the bridge area to see if there was a way in. In the crashed ship were remains of the crew, a disabled robot (no oxygen for combustion), and two intact tanks of fuel for the shuttle. The exterior of the station showed some signs of wear near the bridge, but it had been patched. There was a clear block of the hull for emitting the laser.

The team regrouped and discussed ways to get in. There was some thought about using the

laser and a mirror from one of the quarters or the gym, but HOG, an amateur physicist, felt that the power of the laser would undoubtedly either shatter the mirror or propel it backward. HOG did not account for the fact that he was dealing with Vanguard technology.

Meanwhile, El Greco was reading in the library. He decided to read up on the Vanguard, so he found a general history of the Vanguard, and some informational books about the ship. The Vanguard, he read, had developed a code of honor: they would research technologies, but they would not share them with others...their logic was that they did not want to be tools of civilization, and if they offered or sold their technologies to anyone, it would betray their cause.

The team reflected that Anna Mae, if an artificial intelligence, may have had her memory banks destroyed when the computer in the library was destroyed, because Anna Mae had mentioned that the last place she remembered being in was the library. She also said that she was a good girl and was only doing her duty, and Chris was going to kill her for it.

Having no better options to enter the bridge, the team elected to reflect the powerful laser using the wall-sized mirror from the gym. DUX indicated that the laser would be activated by the presence of certain gases in its range. So the team decided that Damien would go out in a pressure suit, wearing mag boots, and open the valve of one of the shuttle propellant tanks. At the same time, HOG and Gil donned EVA suits and put themselves in position with the mirror a way in front of the path of the laser. Gil acted as the pivot and HOG aimed the mirror at the weak spot in the hull. The laser turned on and blasted a 3-foot hole in the hull. Those in pressure suits went in the hole into the bridge, and repair bots rushed to fill the hole behind them. Air rushed in, and once the room was pressurized, those on the bridge accessed the security console and let in the others in.

At this point a voice came over the intercom. "Corporis" was the AI representing "the body" of the ship...its health and wellness. The team figured this was the "Chris" that Anna Mae was scared of. Corporis was concerned that they had breached the hull, but Gil explained that all they wanted was jump juice..."Chris" answered that there was some in the maintenance area. Asked about Anna Mae, Chris said that she was "Animae," the soul of the ship, in charge of being true to the Vanguard's mission. When the Sisters came aboard the ship, they broke into the bridge using the laser, and tried to steal technologies. Anna Mae could not allow them to escape with this technology, so among other things, she figured out how to cause a self-destruct of the reactor. Chris, in charge of keeping the ship safe, destroyed Anna Mae's memory banks and tried to stop her processor as best he could, then stabilized the reactor.

Chris said that he had no problem with them taking the jump juice; it was just sitting in two containers in the maintenance room. El Greco picked up one of them and a load of books.

The AI chips were all located at the CPU hub in the bridge. DUX, Animae, and Corporis were each labeled, and each had a lock and a button. The chips could be unlocked and removed, and the button would wipe the AI. The team decided to disconnect Animae under the notion

that she might try to continue to destroy the ship. Gil then talked with Corporis and asked if he wanted to join them on Rynna's ship. Corporis replied that he was pretty bored, and the station could just keep on autopilot...he wanted to try something new. Gil pocketed both Anna and Chris. When they asked DUX if he wanted to join, he declined, saying that if anyone came across the station, they would need to be attended to, and he wished to remain to fulfill his duty.

The team also picked up some communication equipment. The COMS station contained a multi-band communications scanner that gives the owner the ability to better search through communication signals.

Gil had DUX prepare some nourishing meals for the group. They then left via the fallport. After being catapulted through the portal, they found themselves many miles high above the mountain range on Deep Well Three...plummeting toward the surface in individual bubbles. The bubbles blackened upon re-entry, but then ballooned out into a near-parachute form, slowing their entry until they hit a huge bank of snow. The bubbles burst, and they were just a short distance from Rynna's ship.

The team returned victorious, jump juice in tow. They could finally make it off Deep Well Three and return to civilization.

=== Season Two Episode Four =====

The team decided to stop at the Murchison estate, where Iago was pleased to see them back safe with the jump juice. He had a suggestion: he would travel with the group and pay them for two cargo spaces for two or three jumps. The team still had the rugs aboard, but he wanted to load up on various cargo on Icarus, seemingly interested in live animals.

They gathered on the train to Holm and went to Blazing Blizzard's and Rynna and Damien both tried the "Last Man Alive" drink...unfortunately knocking them out for an hour or so. After sobering up a little, they went to see Gromyko, who was very interested in their travels. Aleya tried lying about not having found any jump juice, and Gromyko almost caught the lie, but luckily thought Aleya was lying about something else in the story. They sold him the projection cube, which he figured he would use as a "living statue" for the university quad, after removing the auditory component. Not thinking they found anything else, he bade them goodbye and encouraged them to inform him of any new findings.

The team then blasted off to Icarus. Icarus is an "archipelago" of constructed habitable satellites very close to the red dwarf sun. When its founder started the colony, others dubbed it "Icarus" thinking it would fail, but it has now endured for about 200 years. The largest cluster is Icarus Prime, and its interior is not unlike a large mall or cruise ship; about 15 miles long. Icarus is the refuge of the elite: it is so expensive to live there that workers are shipped in by transport.

As Rynna neared the dock she was hailed by a customs barge. The customs agent asked

pretty mundane questions but couldn't get Rynna's name right, and also was surprised that they did not declare explosives and suggested that explosives was a good cargo because it made a lot of money. He officially recorded the name of the ship as "Nameless" and passed them to the dock controllers.

The team had to wait a few minutes for the hull to cool down, then was able to exit the ship. In the meantime Delta communicated with them, and on their exit he promptly paid them and his men began removing the rugs from the ship. He advised that Damien wear a black ski mask with a blue puff, which Damien took but in doing so, resolved to find a better mask.

The team was informed that they had 8 hours that they could keep their ship in dock before they would be charged \$500/hr for excess docking fees. It was 9 am, so they had until 5 pm to finish their business.

Then began a long shopping escapade. Damien in particular was interested in masks, and Aleya picked up a Guy Fawkes mask. While they were in the shop, Damien noticed that someone had slipped him a calling card: on one side it read in fancy gilded script: "Diane Moon;" the other side had penciled in impeccable penmanship: "Damien: Flambe, 11 am." Damien didn't notice who had slipped him the note, and it took the team a few moments to remember that Diane Moon was the woman at the Blue Vector party on Crossroads that had seemingly recognized Damien when he was bartending, then screamed and fainted.

The mask store owner was very pleased that Damien would be showing up to Flambe in one of his masks, and offered another free as advertisement: Flambe was, no pun intended, the hottest new location on Icarus; you can order everything on fire there, even the drinks.

The team did a bit more shopping, particularly for clothing. The women bought dresses and the men bought standard day-clothes from street vendors. Rynna wore her Snow Lion Pelt, which in this particular crowd gained her a little stature due to its rarity.

Rather than go to Flambe, HOG decided to sit in a nearby coffee shop.

At Flambe they were greeted at a large table by Diane Moon, a woman in her late forties, looking dazzling in a shimmery red wrap and a halcitate crescent moon hair pin. She seemed almost delighted to see the team, as if they were old friends.

She apologized for the covert contact, but indicated that perhaps they had a mutual interest...it was a long story. It was the story of how Damien was used in the hospital bombing, and why both he and Diane were tied in a deadly plot.

A wealthy man named Ehrlich Kass had been a friend of Diane's now-ex-fiancee, Gerald Foster. Gerald had introduced Kass to the "Diamond Screen" neck chips and Kass came up with a devious plan. Icarus banks were hard pressed for several months; there had been a coronal

mass ejection emanating from the sun and possibly threatening Icarus altogether. Many residents had left for safer shores, and took their money with them. This meant that the Icarus banks were in low cash supply.

Kass had amassed a minority share, silently, to Fusion Bank, where Diane worked as an auditor. He also kept many physical assets there, worth about \$100 million. His plan was this: Chip Damien, have him bomb the hospital, overwhelming all the emergency and security forces. Then he had a team of bandits storm Fusion Bank and steal all of his assets from the vault. The bandits would try to jump to some other coordinates in their ship, but somehow their drive didn't work (also part of Kass' plan). They were then chased into the red-line of the sun, where the few private security forces available would see their ship, and all its contents, incinerated.

The bank could not recoup Kass for the loss of his assets and did not want their customers to panic and demand their money, so they made a gentleman's agreement to give Kass a percentage of ownership of their bank. Now Kass owned a majority share, and the insurance company fully reimbursed him for the value of the loss because it was clear that the goods had been stolen but destroyed. Kass' net worth just from this ploy was about \$1 billion, then in successive months, he took over distressed banks and amassed another \$3 billion.

All at the cost of 183 lives.

Diane's involvement in this was that she had actually left the bank the day prior to the robbery in order to go to the outer planets to live with her fiancée, but she had to come back to pick up her distinctive hair pin. She was there when the robbery occurred, but she was behind the teller's counter and yet was not on the work roster for the day. In the months that followed, she found that the bank employees, all of them, had been dispersed after Kass closed that branch, then each of them had died.

When she saw Damien at Crossroads she was overcome by fright, and she realized later that she had not been mistaken: it was Damien and he must have been there not as a servant to Kass (he would have killed her most likely) but perhaps because he was there to find out something himself. She remembered Diamond Screen and started to put the pieces together. Recognizing her fiancée's part in the deal, she broke it off with him. She then tracked Damien to Rynna's ship, and jumped ahead to Icarus, only to find that the ship hadn't arrived. When she heard of the supernova that blasted the Nameless off course, she figured it was probably the reason for the delay, and being paranoid wondered if somehow Kass had tried to kill them with the supernova. She figured she, too was a target and was hoping that once she met Damien they could team up to capture Kass.

Her thought was simply that she, Damien and Kass would meet and somehow they would catch him trying to use Damien, assuming that he was still chipped, since Diamond Screen was supposedly not something you could remove or turn off.

About this time in her story she got very woozy. The hospital was called and soon two men with a hover-gurney entered and carted her off, supposedly to St. Bolio's Hospital. However, Damien noticed that two M16s were strapped to the underside of the gurney.

The crew then gave chase, fearing for Diane's life. They followed the ambulance into a department store, where Damien successfully pushed one of the carriers out of the way; but each moment it seemed that there were more of the enemy. They chased the gurney through back hallways, through a large sewer area, then eventually into a warehouse. The larger bad guy turned a steam valve that delayed the team a little bit, then piled some of his men into a Jeep and drove into a large warehouse area with a sign above the 30-foot doorway: "Decontamination and Testing Chamber." Someone threw a switch from inside the room and the large door came down. Only some of our heroes made it in.

Suddenly some of the bad men threw switches along the right wall that opened a set of large sun blocks placed in front of windows...and the full blaze of the sun shone in. It was scorching; to stand in it long would be to die. Sadly, some innocent technicians were standing about the room--and toasted almost instantly.

The team identified the door controls and took the driver's seat of a couple of shielded forklifts that luckily were parked by the door. Following in the forklifts' shadows were the other team members. Rynna had dodged to the right in the hopes of investigating a cargo container, but soon the team found that Diane's kidnappers were operating a magnetic crane that could lift the containers, or Jeeps and forklifts for that matter.

The team reached the door controls and got the other teams in. Eventually the first sun block was replaced and the team could move about the front area of the room freely.

The kidnappers weren't fighting well. A couple hopped in a Jeep but failed to maneuver it around and instead drove in reverse until the tires melted in the heat.

HOG, in control of one of the forklifts, drove its tines through the window of the crane control center as a grate opened beneath the forklift treads. He and his team including Gil commandeered the crane controls. They dropped one of the cargo containers near the Jeep and almost hit Damien, who was stalking up towards the fighters on the right side of the room behind some steam pipes. Then Gil tried dropping the crane on the leader...a noble try but the leader dodged out of the way...but remained shaken. With the last of the sun blocks back in place, the team then quickly made short work of most of the other kidnappers. Only one remained, one cowering by a steam pipe. Damien decided to try to intimidate the fellow by ripping off his mask--exposing the man to the face of one known as a mass murderer--however Damien was so dramatic in his presentation that the man died of a heart attack before he could be interrogated.

Diane was lucid; apparently they had not wanted her dead...or at least, not yet.

=== Season Two Episode Five =====

Diane then set up a meeting with Kass at Flambe for 4pm, giving the team just an hour after that to get their ship out of dock. She also contacted a friend of a friend at the police, who agreed to establish a perimeter around Flambe and to watch as they try to catch Kass admitting some part of the bombing on their video camera. At this point Stitch announced that she would need to leave the team for a while; she would need some medical attention due to her pregnancy before she could spend time with the group again. Narco also was getting a little fed up with not having been paid for any of his work, and said he should try to pick up some paying work. No grudge, he swore, but he felt a little left out of the group.

The team met Iago back at the ship, where he was loading a sealed cargo container that bore large stickers: "Biohazard." He insisted that it was not really a biohazard but bore the stickers to keep nosy customs agents from casual inspection. He then suggested that he wanted to pay the team several thousand dollars more to go to Earth, where he could trap some live tigers for release onto Deep Well Three. He warned the group, however, that it was entirely illegal as Earth was now a preserve from which nothing should be taken and nothing be brought. But the money was good, and the team assented.

Rynna, while in the cockpit, noticed that the Vanguard star charts were missing. Corporis said that he didn't really do security checks and that he didn't have any cameras or anything hooked up anyway. This unnerved the group...who had stolen the maps?

At Flambe, Aleya tried to use her espionage training to set up the transmitting video camera so it would covertly record the conversation with Kass. Her first attempt involved putting a candle on top of it, thinking somehow that the candle would disguise it...not so much. She then found a way of nestling it into what had been a wall socket...very covert.

The booth that Kass, Damien, and Diane sat in was small and curtained off from the rest of the room. Kass immediately began by instructing Damien in clear tones: "You will do everything I say, and you will forget everything we do here. Do you agree?" Damien hesitantly agreed, then Kass instructed him to get drinks from the bar. Damien went to the bar where the tender prepared three gin-and-tonics. When he returned to the booth, he found Diane lying forward on the table, out cold, but still breathing. Kass then instructed Damien to give him all of his money and weapons, which he did, then told him to take some small explosives, wait until a minute after Kass had left, then remove his mask, walk to the front of the restaurant, then detonate the bomb.

Kass then finished his drink and left. The police picked up Kass...all too easy, thought Gil. Surely a ruthless billionaire should not be caught so easily?

Now Damien was exonerated, but still his face would cause shock to anyone from Icarus during

this time. Diane Moon, on the other hand was certain she had a contract on her head, and was determined to find somewhere to live where she would not be hounded down and killed. She offered the group several thousand dollars to take her on board and get her to safety.

The team wanted to go shopping, but not at the ridiculous rates on Icarus, so they shoved off on a two-day voyage to Promise. Along the way Iago and Gil played a few card games, and the crew discussed with concern the fact that the star charts had been stolen. They still had the standard colonial star charts, but the Vanguard had much more extensive maps of other systems not really explored by the colonials.

On Promise they found an Earth eco-tourism guide who was trying to drum up business. The team was going to fly their own ship, but talked with him to get information about Earth. He hooked them up with a quick delivery of batteries to the Earth Patrol station in orbit above Earth, for \$2000...easy money for the team.

They then looked about other shops. Rynna and Damien went to "All About Katanas" because Damien wanted a katana and Rynna wanted engraving. They engraved a snow lion on Rynna's long sword, and Damien, after admitting that her katana would be best decorated in blood, found that "in back" they had much more than katanas...explosives, incendiaries...anything a little less than standard.

With the battery cargo, they then departed Promise for Earth. Rynna made the jump and suddenly the blue marble shone in their window. Even though close up had been abused and depleted for human use, it still looks more like an inhabitable planet than anywhere else the crew had seen: the vision of it brought to all of them a single thought: Home.

El Greco was particularly excited to see Greece, although he knew they would not have time to stop to see Athens.

They docked with the Earth Patrol station and took a few moments while the batteries were unloaded to gaze further upon Earth...and Rynna was watching patrol routes to see if she could pick out a stealthy way down to the surface.

She did; when they departed she timed a maneuver just right so that it appeared to the cruisers that she was headed out of orbit...then just as she passed out of view behind the station she dove into the atmosphere.

She then put the Nameless down in the old province of Bengal, where Iago had directed her, then scouted out a good landing place. There was a clearing just big enough to land, so she put it down gently.

Damien and Granola escorted Iago as he set the tiger live-traps. It was getting on to dark as they finished, so the team hunkered down in the ship.

JJ announced that he picked up a radio transmission--a distress call from a nearby ranger station, about five miles away. They said that the night before they had come under attack by a giant beast and that it had stolen their hydrogen tanks, and if they did not get power going within two days, they would resort to "Tribal Law." The team was hesitant to haul directly on over to the station at night, and thought it best to rest up and assess the situation in the morning. JJ noticed that the signal, presumably intended for the orbital patrol station, had a range of no more than about eight miles.

Damien took first watch, spying on the outside through one of the dismantled gun turrets. A few hours into his watch he heard a single *snap* and nothing more. Aleya took second watch, and also heard a snap. Sure enough, when Iago checked the traps in the morning, two Tigers were caught in the two traps.

JJ had monitored the emergency frequency and the ranger camp was still intermittently broadcasting, and did not report any further attacks. The team geared up and flew the five miles. They spotted the ranger camp on top of a hill...it was muddy, moldy, and very poorly kept up, made of rotting wood and soiled canvas huts. Rynna put the ship down about 500 feet away in a rice paddy. When they opened the hatch they could see a well-beaten trail leading up from the paddy to the camp.

Damien, Gil, and Aleya decided to go, and Iago somewhat questionably decided to lay some traps relatively near to the ranger station. They were greeted as they climbed the trail by a man and a woman. The man introduced himself as Joaquin, in charge of the environmental rehabilitation efforts; Strella was in charge of education at the camp. They seemed very confused by the group and asked if they were officially trained and certified in emergency services, and were doubtful they could render any help.

Gil advised that they were an eco-tour that happened to be in the area, and that the communications expert on the ship had determined that the signal was not going more than a few miles, to which Joaquin protested that their transmitter was fully certified and was obviously working. At the same time he admitted that it did make sense because no one had responded to their broadcasts for many years now.

They took the small team up to the headquarters, which was a small wooden lean-to with certificates and awards plastered on the walls. Joaquin was flustered by their lack of official status, but they soon talked of the attack.

Strella said that two nights ago a large creature climbed up the neighboring hill where their hydrogen tank was mounted, then ripped it out and took it away. It must have been in the middle of the night, and as she spoke of the night watchman she added a tone of disgust. She then indicated that she thought it was a Tyrannosaurus Rex because of the footprints it left behind. She then produced as evidence a children's book called "T is for T-Rex" out of a foot

locker labeled "Library" and pointed to a cartoon illustration of the suspected dinosaur.

The hydrogen tanks were filled slowly over time by a hydrogen collection system that then was combined as needed with oxygen as fuel for the camp's power supply. Without power for the camp, the camp charter indicated that they should revert to "Tribal Law" which basically suspended all other rules..."every man for himself." Gil was curious as to why the rules would expressly contain an anarchy clause, but felt no need to chasten the dutiful rangers.

After many condemnations for not having the official authority for action, Joaquin let the group investigate. They walked about a quarter of a mile to the top of the next hill. The mounting for a 15' diameter spherical tank was there, but the tank had clearly been ripped out with much force. Granola noticed, however, that the valves to the pipe had been shut off--a questionable activity for a dinosaur. They also noticed that the footprints, which indeed were large, with three toes in front and one in back, were very evenly spaced.

They then went back to the camp where they were accosted by a man calling himself "Hush." Hush seemed sort of disturbed and intimidated to the group that he didn't care much for Joaquin and Strella's rules. He said that they had been there 20 years, and their only environmental rehabilitation was the removal of 4 tons of scrap metal from the river at the bottom of the hill. They had also chased off some poachers many years ago, adding much pride to Joaquin's leadership. Hush had been the night watchman the evening of the attack, but unfortunately he seemed to suffer, as apparently he often did, a series of intense hallucinations that prevented him from observing the real world that evening. He apparently hears cacophonies many nights in the jungle: "sometimes whispers, sometimes drums and chanting, sometimes cackles of inhuman laughter, sometimes just a single breath catch right behind you." That night he heard so much weird stuff he buried himself into a river bank and didn't move until dawn. Bees, trumpets, chainsaws, a choir, a thousand typewriters, he said. So he did not notice any large beasts ripping out the hydrogen tanks.

The tracks could only be followed on the ground; they could not follow from the ship above, so the team left HOG, Beauregard, Iago and Diane on the ship while they tracked on foot. Gil wondered if they should fix the radio before heading out, but Rynna pointed out that Joaquin would probably just call Earth Patrol right away...so they left the radio for a little while.

They tracked the footprints the entire morning and afternoon, and Rynna got lost a couple of times. By evening they decided to make an ad hoc camp, and Granola tried to build a shelter. He had a lot of trouble working with the materials, covered as they were in moss. Guards were posted overnight but nothing much to watch, Rynna enjoyed watching frogs hopping about with her night vision goggles.

They resumed their quarry in the morning, and after a couple hours more Aleya, holding up the rear, noticed an overgrown stone wall, the ruin of an old Buddhist temple. She immediately sprung over to take a closer look, and found that in the center shrine there was an entrance to a

set of underground passages. Throwing caution to the wind, she went in and discovered tunnels going in three directions...one toward a plateau into darkness, one caved in in the other direction, and one with a light at the end. She got on her hands and knees to explore the passage with light at the end, and after a short while realized that it led out the side of a canyon wall, to be continued on the other side of the canyon. As she neared the exit by the canyon, she was suddenly covered with tens of thousands of legs: a spider swarm! She was quickly overwhelmed, having no easy way out and no one to help her. She tried rolling over them to squash them, but soon was rendered incapacitated. The group listened in horror over their tactical headsets to her screams. The last thing Aleya saw was a glimpse of a watch tower on top of a plateau across the canyon.

At this point a voice called out to the group. "Joaquin! I'm surprised you had the balls to make it over here!" The man introduced himself as Burroughs and suggested that it was best not to fight, and that he could help their friend in the tunnel. The team could just raise their guns in the air to signal compliance. They did, and a man in jungle camouflage popped up on the other side of the stone wall with his gun raised as well. Burroughs and his men had spotted the group several minutes earlier and had kept watch on them.

Burroughs dispatched some of his men to help the group recover Aleya from the tunnel, and brought everyone to their camp. In contrast with the ranger camp, Burroughs' camp was organized and spotless. It was arranged on a small clearing on the south side of a large hill, with a small ship nestled back by the hill.

Gil attended to Aleya's wounds as Burroughs went on. He and his men were poachers who came to Earth about two months ago, but crash-landed and destroyed their hydrogen supply. They had jump juice, but no way to escape Earth's gravity in order to make the jump. So they first established their camp, optimized for defense, not knowing how long they would need to live there. They scouted the area and spied on the ranger camp to determine if they could bargain with them for the hydrogen, but determined that Joaquin would never support any sort of "unofficial" request. They decided they needed another way to get fuel to leave the planet, so they sent a small squad down to the ruins of old Calcutta to see if they could find anything that could help them there. They did indeed: several loader mechs were at the old spaceport, and they were able to walk two of them on battery power back to Burroughs' camp, where they recharged them from the ship battery.

They then walked the mechs over to the camp, shut the hydrogen valves off, and grabbed the tank. As Burroughs related the story, they were just finishing the transfer of hydrogen to the ship, and though they could take off when done, they decided to wait until morning so they could drop our heroes off at Rynna's ship. They exchanged many stories into the night and hoped for Aleya's quick recovery. Burroughs also agreed to leave one of the mechs with the group as a gesture of his gratitude for their cooperation.

The next morning Burroughs flew the team to Rynna's ship, but obviously buzzed the ranger

camp. Joaquin ran down to the rice paddy to meet the group, and after some discussion Gil said that the “monster” had destroyed/depleted the tank but that JJ could help restore their radio so they could reach Earth Patrol for further assistance. Although when JJ tried, he found the radio was completely rusted and actually destroyed its workings entirely. As a result, the team promised to send a distress call from Rynna’s ship alerting Earth Patrol to the ranger station’s problems.

In the team’s absence, Iago had captured three tigers, one of them pregnant, which he was delighted by. Joaquin approached Hush and demanded that he rejoin the ranger station. Hush replied simply with a “two-fisted bird;” he had spent thirteen years of his life there and never wanted to return. As Rynna fired up the ship and left orbit, JJ sent out a brief distress call on behalf of the ranger station. El Greco looked back one last time at Earth--the world he had so much about in his studies, and yearned for a little more time there...and Rynna made the jump--to Crossroads, where they figured they could get more jump juice and possibly some cargo or work from Shade. They also figured that they could drop Diane off at Deep Well Three, where its lack of contact with the rest of civilization may provide her a protection from the contract on her head.

The jump successful, they sighed in relief but with many questions: who stole the Vanguard star charts, and why? What was in Iago’s “Biohazard” cargo? Was Kass neutralized or did he pose a further danger to the team? And the nagging question: what was Blue Vector’s Crystal Dome project?

=== Season Two Episode Six =====

At Crossroads, as the team left the ship, now named “The Hyperion,” Rynna noticed that Iago was going into his quarters with a bottle of champagne and *two* wine glasses. She took a closer look and Iago revealed that Diane was with him, and in fact they had decided to get engaged and would be wed soon after they arrived at Deep Well Three. They had spent some time together while the team was on Earth and she found him to be a daring yet cultivated, not to mention rich man, and he found her to be intelligent and attractive, not to mention needing to find a far away place to live a comfortable life.

Deuce, sick of his jungle camo, bought himself a nice black tactical outfit and passive night vision goggles.

The team visited Shade at his estate near the monastic academy, and he was pleased to see his team (mostly) safe and sound. He heard of the team’s journey to Deep Well Three and was intrigued by some of the goings-on there...to the degree that he requested that the team deliver a team of “exploratory engineers,” and their helicopter, to the planet in order to survey and find out more of what was going on especially with the Vanguard technology, and what other parties might be interested in it. He paid them \$18k for the transport of this crew to Deep Well Three and for the ability to run their base of operations out of Iago’s estate.

Something weird came up on Shade's screen, a message that just read "Help, Pain," then went away. He couldn't find where it came from.

Astrid was with Shade, wearing a construction helmet, safety vest (with nothing underneath), a blue bikini bottom and thigh-high fuzzy leggings with construction boots. She had a holster around her waist with her glock inside (loaded) and her razor knuckles as well. She asked if she could join the group and "be a spy again...please?" The team would rather work with hallucinating Hush than with Astrid.

Similar messages as before kept appearing on Shade's screen, which surprised him because he felt he had pretty good security on his network. In talking with the team about the theft of the Vanguard map from the Hyperion, he suggested they might want to get a nice safe to put their valuables in.

The team talked further with Shade but eventually decided to pick up the ship's safe and some other items. Shade recommended a shop nearby that specialized in antiques, but also had a good array of safes. On the way there, HOG noticed that the "DON'T WALK" sign was instead flashing "PAIN/HELP." When they got to the antique store, while talking with the owner they noticed that an old Victrola record was skipping and repeating the line "It's killing me...It's killing me..." The store phone rang and the owner picked it up and asked if Rynna or Aleya were "Anna." Apparently the person on the phone wanted "Anna on the line." The team bought the safe and hurriedly left, but noticed that the news ticker on one of the street's adscreens read "CALLING ANNA...ANNA PLEASE."

The team figured this was referring to Animae, and wondered if it was an AI trying to reach out to her. They went back to the ship and asked Corporis if he was sending the message, and when he replied to the negative, they asked him what he thought of the messages, and whether they should activate Animae. He said they could activate Animae, but that they needed to be very clear in their directions and should probably connect her to the Crossroads "grid" in such a way as to easily disconnect her.

The team took Animae to Shade's and asked him if he knew a good place to fire up Animae such that she could get on the grid, but then also allow them to shut it/her off easily. Shade said that he had a particular kind of "safe house" that had the unique ability to be off the grid--not an easy task when the grid is connected to almost any type of device you can imagine. The house had its own power supply and you could disconnect from the grid with a big switch. The team decided this was a good idea and went along with it.

Shade put them in a limo with no windows and whisked them in 40 minutes to an alley where the driver put a tarp over their heads and rushed them through a rusted door into a shack of a building...a rough interior but seemingly heavily padded, allowing no light or sound in. A large battery sat in a side room, powering the house when off the grid. Near it, a large crank switch

sat on a wall labeled “ON GRID” and “OFF GRID.”

The team placed the house OFF GRID and plugged Animaë into a local console. There they began to tell her about what was happening, and laid down some rules, mostly having to do with not hurting or killing anyone. She greeted this all with her usual Southern kindness. She was very concerned that the message might be from DUX and was eager to find out what was going on.

The team finally flipped on the grid, and Animaë instantly exclaimed: “It *is* DUX! He’s being held prisoner and is being tortured! Oh, poor honey! We gotta help him!” She then said, “I know you said I shouldn’t kill anyone, but I have a list of 173 people I can kill that will get us the information, is it OK if I kill any of them?” The team said NO, so she said, “OK, I guess I can do it the hard way then...ok, I found some other information another way without killing or hurting anyone...OK, I have the information.” She then proceeded to mention how DUX apparently had been on a ship that went off grid, and he had managed to send a program subroutine through great pains onto the grid. She then interrupted herself and said “oh, dear.” When asked what the problem was, she said “Well, I’m afraid he did die after all...how was I to know the gentleman had a heart condition? Would you like me to cover up the murder?” The team said YES and instantly they heard a huge explosion outside. The team had no questions about that for Animaë.

She then went on to describe what she had found about DUX. Apparently the ship he was aboard (or had been aboard) was called The Bonaparte, and was owned and operated by a man named Planck. The Bonaparte was a corvette-class coastal ship that had been at sea for several months, mostly outside of the controlled areas except for occasional trips to get fueled. The ship was of the kind that could be used for light coastal attack, patrol, or cargo; in this case it was probably used as a “security” ship for hire as needed. The ship was scheduled for refueling in about four days; it was serviced by a company on a small tourist island about 60 miles off the city coast.

The team figured that if they wanted to access the ship, they would best do so by stealth. They ventured via taxi to Wally’s Water Works, a Cabela’s-like establishment built into the city’s docks, underwater and with large glass walls, so the entire store looks into the sea depths. The team picked up some wetsuits and related gear, then decided to take Rynna’s ship to the island where the Bonaparte got refueled.

There they decided to try to earn a little money while figuring out a way to get on the ship. Aleya and Gil, posing as an idiotic tourist couple, made inquiries at the refueling company. It was run out of a small thatch-roofed hut set up at the base of a dock that held a couple of refueling barges. They rang the service bell and after a while a kind of grumpy-looking man in a service uniform came to talk to them. At first he wanted nothing to do with the “tourists,” directing them instead down the street to the tourism board, but then as they talked further he began to tell them about Planck, who he said had a fear of a giant squid...to which point Gil and

Aleya wondered if *they* could see the squid, maybe go out on one of their refueling boats. The man wasn't too happy about that idea, but agreed when offered \$2500 to take the "tourists" aboard during one of their fueling runs.

Separately and a little after Gil and Aleya parted, Rynna and Damien wanted to drum up some work, so they also went to the gas service hut. They asked if they had any need for use of their mech loader, and to their surprise, the man was pretty accepting and said he had some heavy lifting tasks he'd put off for a while, so paid them \$500 for the use of the mech for the next few days. He also then related how stupid the "yuppie couple" was for hoping to see a giant squid, and suggested that maybe they could give the yuppies the show of a lifetime: to dress up the mech loader as a kind of giant squid/lobster, with latex claws and tentacles, and go aboard the Bonaparte ahead of time, then as the refueler came near, have the "squid" go on a rampage on the aft deck, staging some fights all for the show of the yuppies, and to the amusement of the sea-weary sailors aboard.

Rynna and Damien LOVED this idea as it allowed them access to the ship ahead of time, and with the mech loader no less.

The rest of the remaining days, the crew picked up various money where they could. Gil went on a gambling spree that more than paid for the "squid cruise" fee and Rynna made some money on the beach bringing beer to a tourist. HOG made a little money challenging the tourist to a shooting match, but the man seemed more interested in being served beer.

Finally the evening of the refuelling came. The guys at the fuel service company apparently had a lot of spare time on their hands, as the squid "suit" for the mech loader was amazing: hand sculpted latex and hand painted, the mech looked quite fearsome. Damien and Rynna then took one of the refuelling ships to the Bonaparte, mech loader onboard. The sailors aboard the Bonaparte were pretty impressive: each had katanas and a revolver, and looked like they knew well how to use both. But they were congenial and humored by the prank they were about to spring on the yuppies, and talked with great interest with Rynna and Damien. The captain Planck, eventually came to visit them and was very friendly. He didn't seem to be harboring any particular secrets, and showed them about the starboard side of the ship, which contained the living quarters, the mess, the lounge, and the entry to the bridge. He mentioned that he did have other tenants aboard the ship but said that they should simply be left alone, and it appeared to the group that the tenants must be occupying the port side of the ship. Planck then talked a little about his quest for "The Devil's Own," the giant squid that killed the entire wedding party on his father's ship on Planck's wedding day but somehow spared him. Others called it Bessie, but he thought the beast to be a direct minion of the devil himself.

On the main deck of the ship was an orbital shuttle that they were instructed to keep away from...this was the property of their tenants. Otherwise, the mech-squid could terrorize the deck of the ship however they wanted.

Rynna went to the mess, purportedly to make herself some food, but in reality she wanted to plug Animae in covertly somewhere and see if she could locate DUX or perhaps control the ship in some way. Unfortunately, Animae couldn't find much in the way of automated controls of the ship, but she did figure that DUX was being held in the cargo areas in the port of the ship.

Partway through this investigation, one of the sailors came in and started talking with Rynna. He clearly hadn't seen a woman in a long time as he somewhat pitifully tried to appeal himself to her, through demonstrating his prowess at operating the microwave. He asked her if she wanted something and she said she wanted a chicken pot pie sandwich, but he only had chicken pot pie meals, so he told her that he liked to microwave it for exactly 29 seconds rather than 30 seconds as the instructions indicated. She went to investigate the port side of the ship, and found the one door to it locked. He said that the tenants only opened that door to receive food. He then wanted to look at the stars with the night vision goggles, but Rynna said she had other things to do to get ready for the prank. After word of this got around, the other sailors started calling him "Chicken Pot Pie" even though his name was Bert.

Finally the hour was upon them. After the sun set, the rest of the team set out from the service dock on the refueling ship. Damien got in the squid-mech, the sailors turned the flood lights on the deck, and Rynna braced for the faux battle. As the refueller neared, Damien rampaged the deck and Rynna clashed with it. As the refueller docked, to the skipper's surprise the "yuppies" jumped off and began to infiltrate the deck. The door to the port side of the ship opened and a man dressed in a black suit and skinny tie came out and shouted that the charade end.

About this time something rocked the ship violently, and a creature, rising from the watery depths, showed itself: an immense squidlike creature, with dozens of eyes and tentacles, each up to a hundred feet long, a huge menacing maw off the aft of the ship, flinging in a wild rage at the Bonaparte and its inhabitants. Planck, seemingly frightened, dashed into the middle cargo bay. The beast spread its attacks between trying to smash the men, or hurl them, or piercing the hull of the ship with its steel-strong tentacles.

The deck fell into disarray. Damien abandoned the mech loader, figuring he could fight better outside of the mech. Hush tried to leap aboard the Bonaparte but fell into the water, some more black-suited men came from the port of the ship with aims to kill the party, and the sailors mostly focused on fighting Bessie. Gil and Granola used a rope to both help recover Hush from the sea, and also to try to tie down one of Bessie's tentacles. Several sailors were smashed by a single blow from the squid. The black-suited men tried to block HOG as he wanted to storm through the now-open port door, and repeatedly shocked him with their taze bats. Luckily, they didn't actually swing their bats, or they might have hurt him a bit. Rynna tried to get into the orbital shuttle, but the door was locked. Eventually she was able to get past the lock; and though there were no armaments aboard she was able to pilot the ship away from the edges of the ship.

Planck suddenly rushed out of the cargo bay, holding something in his hand: a detonator. Under

his arm was packed a huge explosive charge, equal to one of the kind that Damien is accustomed to carrying about. With bold determination he rushed to the back of the ship and jumped directly into the maw of the beast, plunging and triggering the detonator as he did so.

The resulting detonation thoroughly destroyed the beast's innards, and it soon released its grasp and slid to a watery grave. But the blast had also created an immense rupture in the back of the ship...it was likely to sink within the next five minutes or so. Luckily Rynna had positioned the orbital shuttle outside of the blast, and tried to use the shuttle to prop up the back end of the ship and keep it from taking on as much water. The black-suited men were now facing their demise as the remainder of the team rushed to the port side and met them in melee. The team moved quickly: Damien got back into the mech loader. The team located DUX in a crate in the back of the port warehouse, while Damien used the mech loader to bend the damaged hull into a reasonable state to stave off the sinking.

Once the ship was stabilized, there were only three of the original sailors left; Chicken Pot Pie was among them. They despaired of their captain's loss but acknowledged that such a fate was inevitable. They then sold one of the jeeps to the group, as the team had been thinking they may want some form of ground transportation.

They had beaten the beast, and recovered DUX, at great expense. But they had a hell of a time doing it!

=== Season Two Episode Seven =====

After the fight, Chicken Pot Pie apologized to Rynna for "being a tool" and said that it was probably most likely because he had been at sea too long and needed to get into the wider world. He asked if the team had room for him, and they accepted, if for no other reason than for his skill with weapons.

The team took a few days off on the island to recover. They checked out their new Jeep with pride.

One day, JJ called out to the team: he had a transmission from Shade, who routed them communications with Iago through their newly established hyperspace comm link. Iago was distressed: Deep Well Three was under attack! Holm in particular had been ravaged by an invasion of hideous humanoid creatures, grotesquely large and belligerent. The team verified that these were in fact the Morphs that they had encountered on Cryolapse: the spawn of Fenner's experiments.

Iago told the team that what he needed was an army: the morph troops, refugees said, were gathering to the north, presumably to march on the Marsh Province where Iago resided. Iago wanted two things: for the team to reach out to all their acquaintances that could help, in an effort to get them to help, and to also reach out to the locals on Deep Well Three, as a third

party, to join their forces rather than have them picked off individually. Iago feared that if he tried to do this, they would suspect a trap, due to the historical political environment. In exchange for this, Iago would work with Shade to supply Rynna's ship with any jump juice it would need to travel around and get this team together.

For his part, Shade said that the team could use both the "engineering team" he had sent as well as their military-grade helicopter.

The team was hesitant to call Huddle but they did. They described the basic problem and he was concerned: there had been a strange virus that had taken hold in Cryolapse, and many thousands were "quarantined" by Blue Vector Health Services. His investigations found that instead these individuals were whisked away, to where he knew not, but he suspected a plot. He decided to lend the team a hundred of his deputized mounted cavalry to help with the war, hoping to derive some information from this encounter.

Damien then called up Aguila Perennes to see if she could help. She was very concerned about the horror of a war and arranged for a medic squad to help the team. She then started talking about the upcoming Amateur Sports Spectacular and wondered if the team wanted to participate. Damien feigned interest for a few moments, then hastily rung off.

Without having any communications with Dena on Draco, they jumped there and flew to New Hope, landing on the landing strip disguised as a city street. As they approached the cliff-wall hangar doors, AAA fire fell upon them, but Dena rushed out to halt it--she recognized Rynna's famous ship. After a brief conversation, she revealed that they, too had encountered the Morphs. Apparently the morphs had been taken to Draco as part of a training exercise, and were used to route out Dena's followers from the city remains, but the radiation had blasted many of their chips, much in the way the team had noticed. These morphs then acted of their own volition: often for violence, but not having much opportunity for survival, most perished.

She said all she could spare was 50 of her troops. They had been so diminished that she was loathe to give up more, even if for a worthy cause. The fact that a supernova had sent the team to Deep Well in the first place intrigued her, and was a sign of the gods, but she had her own matters to attend to. HOG then challenged her: he suggested that her religion allowed her to go only halfway to her goal, and cast doubt upon her argument. She was well-persuaded by this, and decided that perhaps she should go as well, in order to guide her troops in this mission clearly presented by the gods.

El Greco called up Burroughs: he had been in touch with Stitch since leaving Icarus and she had since joined Burroughs' marines. Burroughs said he'd take his merry band aboard the Thieves' Honor to help, but had a couple of things to finish first, so he might be late.

The team then went about transporting each of these troops to the Murchison Estate. There Iago brought them to the parlour, which had been converted into a war room. A large table with

a map of the Marsh Province was laid out, and presided over by a man in academic robes. Iago introduced Professor Freund of the University of Holm, chair of the Military Studies program. Freund was leading a band of refugees from the city and had convinced them of Iago's plan to make a stand at Marsh Province.

The invaders, he said, were Morphs but they were supported by modern weaponry: helicopters, light planes, artillery, and mechanized infantry. He had assembled several refugee pickups and had them refitted with guns to work as mechanized infantry. Otherwise the refugees could be enlisted as infantry and equipped with the weapons Iago had purchased on Icarus.

Iago then asked the team to make the journey in person to each of the local groups in the hopes of gaining their support. There were several groups he had in mind: God's Guns, a cultish group that worships God through artillery from a well-fortified compound; the Diggers: a group of underground-dwelling folk that would make good engineers; the Circle X Ranchers, led by Mother Graham, an octogenarian matriarch, who had many good cowhands on horse or on Humvee; and the Swampers, led to some degree by a fellow name Roscoe, and were excellent hunters and could easily get around water and swamp areas.

First they went to God's Guns. Rynna flew her weaponless ship near the compound's borders, trying to contact them over a standard radio wave. At first they were told they were not allowed, but HOG said he was a pilgrim and had come far to learn of their ways. They were then instructed to land near the chapel, where a service was already in session. As they neared, they noticed that the steeple was in the shape of a double-barreled shotgun, pointed straight into heaven.

HOG and Gil stepped out, but Gil waited behind as HOG went up to the chapel. He stood with his back up against the doors, when a little old lady with a sawed-off shotgun tottered out and invited him in. He followed her and found the congregation was all armed with guns. The minister called a prayer, and for their Amen they all took shots at a small piece of metal above the pulpit. HOG fired too: an amazing shot. The crowd went silent and the minister said: "You are new here, and God has granted you much skill. I am Prophet, the voice of God. Do you wish to pray to God with us?" HOG then asserted something to the effect that doubted Prophet's claim to this right, and Prophet said: "You make the customary challenge for Prophet? A simple duel, to the incapacitation?" HOG agreed.

The weapon to be used was a single six-shot revolver. They would stand at each other's back, then march ten paces and shoot. Either the first to be incapacitated, or the worst damaged, would lose and the other would be Prophet.

They marched their paces and turned: HOG got a shot off and wounded Prophet. Prophet shot back and shook HOG badly, taking much of his energy. Prophet unloaded again and again, bringing HOG to the brink of death. Firing again, surely to kill, he aimed well but only nicked HOG. Doing so again, he still only nicked him. HOG then regained his composure, then in two

shots laid Prophet with but a thread of life. HOG emerged victorious, and was given the title Prophet and festooned with orange vestments. Gil attended to the “old” prophet to insure he would not die.

He then spoke of the great threat of the Morphs and God’s Guns took this to heart. They immediately began to dismantle their three AAA batteries and mobilize two ranks of their heavy artillery, moving them along the road to Marsh Province.

The group then visited Mother Graham out on the open range. Graham was unconvinced at first of the dire need, but Gil persuaded her that it was in her best interest. She offered herself and two ranks of armored Humvees and two battalions of cavalry.

Then they ventured into the hills, following into a tunnel Iago had said would lead to the Diggers. After a while in darkness, they came upon a host of Digger engineers, and were brought to their leader, Digger XIV. Though Aleya could hardly see, she talked with him and spoke of their need to fight together. She mentioned that the dam by Lake Murchison had been threatened and Digger became concerned: if burst, most of their tunnels would be flooded and their kingdom lost. He agreed that he and three of his engineer units should aid the effort.

Finally, in the dark of night, Aleya and Rynna paid a visit to Roscoe. They found the Swamper camp to be a set of small quonset huts arranged without any appearance of grand design. As they touched down their ships, they were met at gunpoint by a man in heavy swamp camo. When he saw the two women step out of the ship, he became elated, introduced himself as Roscoe and started to garble on about how this “big ol’ UFO came outta the sky and dropped off two lovely ladies,” and repeated the tale to himself several times as if he didn’t quite believe it himself. He asked if there was any service he might offer, and they suggested that his people fight off the morphs with the others. Without so much as a how-do-you-do he accepted and woke up his buddies and recounted the story in elaborate and sometimes quite embellished detail.

At last the teams were assembled, and they met at the Murchison Estate to lay out the battle plans. Beauregard figured out a way to use the railroad to move the AAA, perhaps giving them an advantage against air units that fixed AAA might not have. The units were roughly arranged like this: Iago and his household would reside at his now booby-trapped estate, and on the island also were AAA, artillery, engineers, and infantry. A small transport ship lay in dock waiting to ferry troops about as needed. By the dam Damien and HOG directed infantry and artillery, and Digger had a team of engineers with him. Roscoe sat with some of his marines in boats offshore. At the airport, Beauregard and Dena presided over a host of infantry, artillery, and a tracked AAA unit. Rynna took Shade’s helicopter, placed Deuce in the right seat and waited outside the airport. Gil and Mother Graham watched over an assortment of units just west of the railroad bridge over the canyon, and had another railed AAA on hand. A few of Roscoe’s men and a cavalry unit lay in wait in the marsh area where the team had so fatally encountered the Bikers earlier. Some more units lay along the south road, one cavalry at the

lumber camp and several other units guarding over the mill. A couple of small single-engine planes from the airport circled on the northern side of the province in wait for their invaders to appear.

So they waited, and waited...

=== Season Two Episode Eight =====

Finally the morph troops arrived, late in the afternoon. Two small planes flew from the north, presumably to survey the ground below. The morph ground troops came quickly: they moved their cavalry and mechanized infantry on the western side of the canyon. They skirted Gil and Mother Graham's troops to the southwest, seemingly to join the road to the lighthouse. Afraid that they would make mincemeat of the ground troops at the old marsh residence, Gil and a team of Graham's Humvees headed them off and engaged them in direct combat. Rynna flew to the enemy's undeployed AAA and Deuce took it out.

Morph troop helicopters flew over the lake and dropped some ground units by the hills. Digger took his engineers down into the canyon in the hopes of joining the battle on the west side.

Rynna tried to take on the enemy aircraft but found this to be a difficult exercise. It was hard to engage the enemy directly, but it did occupy the aircraft.

About an hour after the battle was engaged, a fleet of transport ships landed on the southern shore near the mill. An artillery and AAA emerged. A few troops from the airport hurried to lend assistance to the mill, but two were hunted down and destroyed by a helicopter. Rynna tried to engage the helicopter, but to no avail. All the forces from the marsh and forest rushed to the mill, and part way encountered several morph infantry that had landed south of the forest and were sneaking through the forest to flank the forces at the mill.

HOG and several of the airport troops rushed to take down the airlift by the hills, and Roscoe came to join. They quickly demolished the morphs and captured their leader.

The ground troops on the western edge of the canyon kept coming. Digger got across, but then a morph squad came directly toward them and completely overpowered both him and his engineers. The rest of the northern ground troops started to engage Gil and Mother Graham, and Gil's troops never had to seem much luck. Graham's troops, though surrounded by an onslaught of morphs, bravely fought off the wretches again and again. Rynna abandoned trying to fight the helicopter and started picking off the ground troops. As the morphs pressed on, Gil took a mechanized infantry and retreated to the bridge.

Damien took his team and withdrew to the airport to engage the morphs there, leaving a single infantry unit and AAA to guard the dam.

Another airlift landed troops just north of the dam, outside of the AAA range, however they were slowed by snares. Iago rushed to a transport to lend support to the lone infantry, and Roscoe soon followed. Iago landed and took out one of the morphs. One morph infantry made its way back to the AAA and almost took it out, but then was itself taken out by Roscoe.

While some of the ground forces chased Gil across the bridge toward the airport, Mother Graham, alone fighting a horde, remained in control of her forces under great strain. Finally, she became incapacitated, but Rynna and Gil came to her aid.

At this point the morphs were on the retreat. Those at the mill began to fall back to the transports, and the morph troops at the airport were surrounded. Rynna then eliminated the remaining groups on the west side, allowing the capture yet another morph leader.

After the dust had just settled, Burroughs arrived and out of concern to his lateness attempted but failed to take out the enemy helicopter, which limped away in retreat. He radioed the team to let them know that he saw a huge "hive" of activity, an airstrip with SAM batteries about, and troops streaming out.

The battle was won. Mother Graham was without a doubt the heroine of the day, having taken down many foes, she was beaten back twice and incapacitated, but pulled through with only a temporary gut wound!

At the end of the battle, those lost included Digger and 100 of his 150 men, a heavy toll. Mother Graham lost even more, 150 of her 200 troops (both her own cavalry and a humvee unit), and 200 of the 500 refugee soldiers were lost. God's Guns lost 50 of their finest when the morphs stormed the AAA. And yet, the team walked away without a scratch...

HOG's new-found followers him what he wanted: to join them on Deep Well Three or to disperse God's Guns among the stars...he chose to stay. As a gift of the team's deliverance of HOG to them, they equipped Rynna's ship with a variety of guns: machine guns and cannons.

So Marsh Province was secure for now, and the team survived! To get to the bottom of this mess, they'd have to check out that "hive" that Burroughs had seen.

=== Season Two Episode Nine =====

Everyone met for a victory celebration at Iago's. Iago pulled the team aside and led them to the communications room: Huddle was on the line. He wanted to let the team know he was happy none of his cavalry came to harm, and that he had a kind of favor for them. There was a particular deputy that, for various reasons, he didn't want to return to Cryolapse. Dapper Dan, he called him, had special skills useful for not entirely legal purposes, and though they had served him well as deputy, he had a little of a negative reputation...not so much "wanted" as "not desired." Dapper Dan met the crew, and they were intrigued by his fedora and out-of-place

dress clothes.

Burroughs described in further detail the “hive” of morph activity he’d seen. 80 miles west of Holm, in the middle of a large salt flat it was, an airfield with two runways and four SAM batteries defending it. A small building, no larger than a small house, sat between the runways, and about 120 feet away, to the side of one of the runways, two tunnels emerged from the sand, each about 20 feet in diameter. Vehicle and foot tracks led from this toward Holm.

Burroughs didn’t mean to interrupt the festivities, but he had three of the morph leaders in holding cells aboard the Thieves’ Honor. He invited whoever was willing to interrogate these creatures, handcuffed in steel six-by-six-foot chambers.

Dapper Dan, perhaps eager to prove himself to the others, volunteered for the first one. Damien, perhaps having sympathy for Dapper Dan lest the creature break loose, opted to go along. The thief hardly had so much stepped into the room when he noticed through a hole in the morph’s shirt that the creature had an unusual tattoo on his back. Pointing this out to Damien, Dapper Dan watched as his companion cleanly ripped the shirt off the wretch...with the skill that a magician would pull the tablecloth out from underneath a wedding buffet.

The tattoo was a large and elaborate map. Bearing only the words: “250 feet down,” the thought instantly popped into both their heads: a map of the morph hive that Burroughs had described? Perhaps this was some sort of underground base of operations for the invasion.

The morph remained completely silent the whole time, but perhaps he didn’t need to speak to help the team.

The second morph they tried the same approach. For good measure Damien ripped the shirt off this one too, but he just kept muttering a string of agitated phrases, until his babble capitulated in a heart attack. Neither Damien nor Dapper Dan seemed to want to listen to the words of the creature, so his words were taken to the grave.

The last morph Aleya figured she’d investigate. This one was muttering as well, but just repeated numbers: three two seven one one...three two seven one one...

Back at the estate war room, Burroughs, Iago, and the team were introduced to Digger XV, a boy of seventeen who had succeeded his dead father. He was a well-spoken individual and mentioned that he might be able to help with the seemingly underground morph hive. His people had tunnels that led several miles near to that area, and could tunnel at a depth of 250 feet beneath the small building at the airstrip. He estimated that would take about five days.

Dapper Dan suggested that it might be a good idea to let him sneak up on the hive and scope it out ahead of time. After discussing the logistics, the team came up with the following plan: Dapper Dan and Granola would take Animae and a horse and get airlifted by Burroughs about

twenty miles away, and over the course of the next two days make their way toward the airstrip. At about the time they would arrive, Digger's men should break through to the hive, if in fact it existed there at all. Dapper Dan borrowed some black clothing and the ship's active night vision goggles to help him, although he was reminded that the salt flats were white, not black. Granola took possession of Anima.

That was the plan. The reality changed a bit. Burroughs flew in...so well that he figured he could drop Dapper Dan off only 10 miles away from the facility. This effectively gave Dapper Dan another whole day to sneak up. He used the extra time both to sleep but also to move more slowly, walking rather than riding the horse. About a quarter of a mile from the facility Dapper Dan noticed that the SAM batteries had ground-level autoguns on them. He told Granola to hold back with the horse as he crept up on the SAM battery. Luckily, he managed to evade their defenses, but found that the SAM installation was well-hardened so that he could not tamper with it.

He then crept up to the small building and went in: a man with an M-16 was standing there. He told him to put up his hands, and come with him. He asked a few questions as he herded Dapper Dan into one of two elevators. He went to "Level 25" and in a few moments the elevator opened to a large room: a war planning room it seemed. They had come in the back right side: at the front was a large three-dimensional projection of the planet's terrain. Rows of consoles were manned by armed operators. An officious man with a large submachinegun stood at the back near the elevator, and a man with a large sniper rifle next to him. Dapper Dan's captor led him through the room with a couple of words with the leader and then hauled Dapper Dan around a corner, where he was then led past a series of recessed areas, each of which contained an immense spiderlike robot, about three feet high. The spiders were motionless, but Dapper Dan noticed that a room to his left was some sort of manufactory: ceiling-hung conveyors pulled legs, bodies, and heads of these robots from different corners of the room to the center, where a robotic arm hung from the ceiling collected the parts and put them together. It then placed them on a conveyor belt that brought them to the corridor where he was.

His captor then took him a little further to a holding pen that was filled with desperate people: refugees from Holm, perhaps. Then he threw Dapper Dan in with the rest of them.

Dapper Dan was pleased that he had not been stripped of any of his weapons or his tactical headset. This fact didn't seem to bother him much.

Meanwhile, Digger had found that they were close a wall: he could sense human activity. He was very delicate for the final cuts: he tried three different ways and expended every ounce of luck he could to get the cut just right.

Turned out he didn't need it: they had cut into a rec room, where two men in security uniforms were on a couch playing a videogame so loudly they probably wouldn't have noticed a cannon. True to form, Damien walked up behind to the two of them and smashed their heads together,

killing them.

The rest of the team a little confused--then upon reflection, not so much--started to look about. Chicken Pot Pie inspected the bathroom to ensure there were no other guards about. Rynna walked to the far side of the room, to a large door labeled "Tram." She hit the button to call the tram.

About this time Dapper Dan got ancy and decided to break out of the holding pen. He did so easily, and the mass of prisoners in with him, heedless of his admonitions, trampled their way out. He just barely dodged the swarm as they moved like a herd of frightened cattle. An alarm immediately sounded--someone must have been watching, or perhaps just the rabble was impossible to ignore. Either way Dapper Dan went away from the crowd, back the way he had come, to the corridor just adjacent to where he had seen the mechanical spiders.

The rest of the team, hearing the alarm, leapt quickly into battle mode. Damien opened the door on the wall with the videogame monitors, and found a room full of sleeping guards...but alert and ready, for when the door opened, they all were quite awake and grabbed their M-16s from racks next to their beds. Damien shot a few and Gil lobbed a grenade, vaporizing the lot, killing the lights, burning each of their beds, and setting off the fire suppression unit. This created a pretty noxious atmosphere in the room.

The escaped prisoners rushed helter-skelter into a central room with no particular exits, and Dapper Dan hung out in a corner, hoping the world would forget him for a while. He then crossed the room as he heard a strange chorus of clicking coming from the corridor housing the spiders...coming closer. He turned around and a horde of the mechanical beasts were upon him--there was nothing he could do, they cut at him with bladelike feet until he lost consciousness, and nearly his life.

Gil and Damien saw a door to the left of them and went into the smoky room--Gil grabbed an in-mouth oxygen unit from someone and went in. However, the door was locked, and though they tried the 5-digit code the morph had said, the lock took 6 digits...they took a guess and the unit locked for 20 seconds.

The tram finally arrived: an open tram with four seats. Rynna stepped in...and a shot rang out and took her down. Looking down the tram corridor, she could just barely make out her attacker: Narco! He had his sniper rifle and had been lying in wait. He didn't show any sign of recognition. Others piled in too, Hush in the left front. Chicken Pot Pie leapt over the tram seats and crouched behind them in a small room opposite--and found himself looking at a guard who was engrossed in some activity looking through a periscope. The former pirate put a knife to the man's throat and suggested he do everything he said. The guard impolitely declined, and thus gained the honor of a slashed throat.

Aleya ran over to the room to investigate the periscope-like device and found it was a targeting

system for one of the SAM batteries. She had no ability to directly shoot the missiles, but figured out how to use the targeting computer to target one of the other missile batteries. She fired and was successful...one of the SAMs was destroyed!

It seemed they would have to abandon trying to open the locked door in the smoky room, so Damien and Gil returned to the rec room. Another shot rang out and Hush fell cold. Gil tried to rush to his side, but was apparently winded from inhalation and couldn't reach Hush in time.

JJ and Damien jumped in the front seat of the tram, with Rynna still hurting in back, and Chicken Pot Pie climbed in the remaining seat. They started off, and Damien let loose on Narco with both hands wielding M-16s set at three-round-burst. Narco fell to the fire quickly, and the team ruthlessly ran over their former companion's body.

Aleya took the other two SAM batteries out the same way she had the first, and Granola started heading to the entrance building. Burroughs also moved in on the Thieves' Honor and would get there soon, picking up Granola on the way.

All the team could do now was to go down the corridor to fight their foes. They took the tram to the stop by the control room, though they heard some noises in the hallway behind them as they did so. JJ looked down the hallway and saw the leader with the submachine gun...and saw a hail of bullets rain down on him. Regardless, he charged the big man and fired with his revolver. Rynna ran behind him and dodged into the control room, where two guards were kneeling behind the back console row. A swarm of spiders came around the corner and Damien decided to take them down.

At the same time, a group of four guards had apparently unlocked the door in the smoky room, and came through it, each man with a spider right behind him. As they crossed the rec room toward the tram door, Gil stepped back to toss a grenade in: a perfect hit, every aggressor was vanquished.

Two guards came out the corridor behind the tram and fired on Chicken Pot Pie. Chicken Pot Pie jumped out and met them, katana swinging, forcing them to switch to their survival knives. Aleya and El Greco moved forward to help: El Greco chucked a spear at one, and hit him squarely in the heart.

Rynna took cover behind one of the console rows and exchanged shots with the guards. JJ, not wanting to switch to a melee weapon, rammed into the enemy leader, but was repulsed. The leader then tried to step away but JJ grabbed him and made him sweat a little.

Damien went full-auto on the spiders and took a few out, but then was webbed by one. Luckily he broke out of the web without much trouble.

Another guard came out of the hallway to join the battle with Chicken Pot Pie. Though he was

holding his own well, the spiders were coming, and he would be soon outnumbered. El Greco stepped forward and reclaimed his spear, then used it in melee to kill another of the guards.

The enemy leader regained his composure and stepped away from JJ and unloaded, fully automatic, on the young communications officer. JJ was horribly blasted, turning to his left as if to shield himself from the bullets: his right arm was demolished beyond repair and he was out of the fight.

The elevator in the command room dinged and Burroughs stepped out: shotgun in hand, he quickly analyzed the situation and shot the closest enemy. Two of his marines stepped out with their Winchesters and unleashed them upon the foes' boss, hurting him badly. The only remaining guard pulled his knife and ran up to attack Rynna. Damien abandoned the spiders and went to the command center to assist Rynna in taking down the last of the bad guys.

Granola ran to a console and plugged Animae in, and gave her some directions about turning off the spiders, which confused her immensely.

Though Chicken Pot Pie fought grandly, the guards did not give up, and a couple of spiders joined the fight as well. Chicken Pot Pie fell, as did El Greco. Gil attended to El Greco but had to watch out for himself as well.

Burroughs rushed the leader and fired his shotgun, but some miracle of permutation caused all the shot to scatter about the target, doing no damage. The leader went full-auto on all of Burroughs' men and on Damien and incapacitated one of the marines.

Aleya then tried to get Animae to help them; Animae then said she would do what she could. Suddenly the three-dimensional display erupted in a burst of light, nearly blinding everyone in the room. Granola and luckily the enemy leader were particularly affected and were made to stumble about in blindness. This was the death-knell of the leader: he shot wildly at Damien and Rynna but only hit the ceiling. The others took advantage of his weakened state and killed him.

Aleya used her throwing stars and took out a couple of the guards; Damien whipped around the corner and took out the last of the spiders threatening the party.

The fight was over: now they counted the wounded and the dead. Hush had fallen to Narco's bullet. El Greco and Chicken Pot Pie both died after valiant fighting. JJ lived, but at the cost of his right arm. Dapper Dan lived, but would be weak for a little while longer as he recovered. Gil attended to his wounds, then those of Rynna, Aleya, and Dapper Dan (whose first words were of how to loot their fallen comrades since they did not need their worldly possessions any longer).

The smell of death, just as it had enshrouded the team on their first visit to Deep Well Three,

was now about them. They had come seeking answers and came away with only more questions. Three of their comrades were dead, as was anyone who could answer their questions.