

GURPS[®]

Fourth Edition

MACGUFFIN[™] ALPHABET



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THE MACGUFFIN ALPHABET: TWENTY-SIX ADVENTURE SEEDS BY STEFAN JONES

One of the first SF magazines I got my hands on contained Harlan Ellison's "The Chocolate Alphabet," a collection of 26 short vignettes about odd stuff. He'd written it while sitting in a store window or some such. Although I can only remember one of the items ("Elevator People"), I admired the form. This is my contribution to it.

Alfred Hitchcock invented the term MacGuffin to refer to an object – a statue of a falcon, the prototype of an advanced bomb sight, a book containing a secret code – which a story's characters are after. Hitchcock did not believe the nature of the object was important. The characters never *use* the

MacGuffin; its utility lies outside the scope of the story. It's simply there for a character to unwittingly lose (or come to possess), leading to shots in the dark, encounters with femme fatales, attempted kidnappings, and fistfights on parapets.

I don't care for the neutral aspect of MacGuffins. It's a bit cynical, and a bit of a cheat. I mean, what fun would *Star Wars* be if the story ended when its MacGuffin – the Death Star technical readouts – were simply delivered to the Rebels? I like MacGuffins that *do* something. Here is an alphabet of MacGuffins; objects around which adventures may be woven, unless they're just there to just distract or baffle.

A IS FOR ANIMAL URN

The Tirsopi have cremated their dead for millennia. Burning a corpse frees the deceased's soul from earthly ties, allowing it to begin its journey to its proper level of the afterlife. Only the worst sorts of criminals are buried.

After a fabulously complex ritual, the ashes of the deceased are mixed with clarified butter and pounded into a special urn shaped like an animal. The type of animal is determined in part by the person's character, but mostly by a council of politically connected elders who weigh in on the beloved's social worth. Snakes, mice, and pigeons are reserved for ne'er do wells and tithe-cheats. Turtles and cows do for most people.

The ashes of high-born and heroes are packed into images of the noble otter, brave wolf, or crafty pig.

Most urns are glazed clay. The wealthy may commission urns of bronze or polished lead. The urns are stored in miniature straw houses built in catacomb niches. There they must rest undisturbed for a thousand years, lest the soul's transition to the afterlife be disrupted. Unfortunately for the survivor's peace of mind, each urn, however humble, has a precious gem hidden in it. This treasure is presented by the spirit to the celestial authorities at the end of its journey; too often, this *bakshesh* ends up in the pockets of grave robbers.

B IS FOR BED OF DREAMS

A queen-sized bed, with a platform and headboard of austere but elegant design, fashioned from glossy, dark gray wood whose grain resembles fish scales. Four drawers for storing linens are built into the base of the bed. Connoisseurs of fine furniture will note a resemblance to a line of bespoke furnishings sold to the very wealthy; however, there are no maker's marks or labels.

The bed is wonderfully comfortable. A sliding panel in the headboard conceals controls to adjust the mattress' firmness

and temperature and to create a program of nature sounds and subtle white noise to lull the occupant to sleep. There is even a device for spicing the air with mild aromatherapy scents. It would be hard *not* to get a good night's sleep in the bed.

The bed's features don't end there. Concealed in the base are a brain scanner, a cerebral stimulator, and a powerful but specialized neural-net computer. These devices are accessed by a remote control that the bed's designers didn't intend for the sleeper to know about, much less use.

After several weeks analyzing a particular sleeper's brain, the computer will be able to detect his emotional state, and on command trigger a hypnagogic trance. This awesome, exhilarating, "waking dreaming" state is believed to be behind reports of alien abductions, visits by angels, and assaults by succubi. Left to himself, the sleeper's subconscious mind will fill in the details, resulting in vivid good dreams or bad nightmares. In any case, the subject will become subtly addicted to the experience.

At this point, a controller with access to the remote can then direct the bed to add emotional cues to the trance, using scents, pheromones and audio clues. With skill and practice, an operator can induce specific scenarios, such as "lustful encounter" or "fearful pursuit." The sleeper's subconscious mind fills in the details. The pursuer in a chase situation, for example, might be a flock of evil crows, a pack of wolves, or a clown with a chainsaw, depending on the sleeper's subconscious fears.

C IS FOR CLYDE'S DILEMMA

"Hey . . . stop, don't put in the application!"

*Mulrich looked up from his terminal. Ledner had stopped by a window and was pointing at something in the rear lot. "That's a Woodring **Dynamic**, isn't it?" he asked, "Is it available?"*

The sales manager cringed, but joined him at the window. "The craft is for sale," Mulrich said, "but there are . . ."

*"I can't say I like the paint job," Ledner interrupted, "but if it's in running condition I'm buying it. My purser and mechanic spent ten years serving on a **Dynamic** and told me they'd take a pay cut if they had a chance to work on one again."*

*"The **Clyde's Dilemma** is in very good condition, but, as you say, the paint job . . . ah . . ."*

"I can live with that."

"Well, there's the matter of its history. You see . . ."

Ledner laughed. "What is it? Shady title? Death ship? If the price is right . . ."

"No, we have clear title from the one previous owner and no one died on it as far as I know, it's just . . ."

"Well then," Ledner interrupted, "if you don't mind I'd like to see it."

*Mulrich dialed Kumar. "Muniz? Mr. Ledner would like to see the **Clyde**."*

"You hold off on that paperwork until I get back," said Ledner as he headed for the stairs. Once he'd gone Mulrich sat down and debated whether to blank the contract for the Astron Systems Percheron that Ledner was ready to pay a premium for mere minutes before. He held off until he heard a half-expected cry of disgust and surprise through the rear window.

The deal breaker strikes again, he thought, and pushed the delete button.

The Dynamic Class Light Shuttle

The *Dynamic* class orbital shuttles are sturdy, high-performance craft designed for operation in a wide range of atmospheres. They have limited VTOL capability and can be outfitted with a variety of landing gear, making them well suited for operation on frontier worlds. While the class is no longer in production, spares are widely available and used craft in good condition often get premium prices.

Operating the bed requires a Brainwashing-4 skill roll, and can only be attempted once per eight hours of sleep. The subject can resist the assault with an opposed Dreaming skill roll.

The operator can gain bonuses and penalties for familiarity with the subject (-2 for a complete stranger, +1 for a stranger with well known likes and dislikes, +2 for a close friend, and +4 for a family member), days the bed has had to prep the subject (-2 for under a week, +2 for over three weeks), and the number of previous attempts (+1 for every success, +2 for every non-critical failure).

A successful roll allows the operator to effectively set the subject's mood for the day, reduce or raise morale, and pass on vague but compelling oracular advice or warnings. This can also be used in conjunction with traditional uses of the Brainwashing skill – a successful use of the Bed grants a +2 to any other use of the Brainwashing skill that day.

The *Clyde's Dilemma* was sold to Muskoga Survey Sciences, who modified it for duty as a laboratory ship. It served as a base station for research teams conducting biological and geological assays on candidate colony worlds. Muskoga commissioned other custom versions of the *Dynamic* class shuttle. Some were modified to carry and service exploration vehicles, such as ATVs, collapsible boats, and airships. Others were outfitted to transport biological specimens in secure, climate-controlled cages. The "town hall" variant was equipped with an extra reactor, a water filtration plant, and a high-capacity telecommunication station; these services could turn a tent city into a comfortable home away from home.

The *Clyde* has two decks. On the upper deck are (from fore to aft):

- The cockpit, with three acceleration couches, an electronics cabinet, and a valuables locker.
- An emergency supplies closet, with first aid kit, life rafts, three emergency evacuation spheres, and a gun rack.
- An airlock with racks for three EVA suits and a cabinet with hull repair gear.
- A mess closet with microgravity meal prep gear, cabinets for food stowage, a small freezer, and a water tank.
- Passenger cabin with 12 acceleration couches, personal stowage lockers, and a small but elaborate entertainment center. A set of null-G exercise equipment is stowed in the ceiling.
- A head, with a shower and miniature laundry usable in null-G and landside.
- A larger closet outfitted with equipment lockers and several small sample freezers.

The lower deck can be reached by hatches in the floor of the upper airlock and in a corridor to the rear of the passenger cabin. On either side of a central passageway are a cargo bay (12' x 35' x 10' high), a parts and spares locker, and a small airlock. At the aft end are hatches for inspecting the reactor and engines.

The *Clyde's* cargo bays have been outfitted as laboratory space. Work tables and equipment racks have been welded to the floors and walls. Extra lighting, power outlets, water taps, and data network wiring were also added. The rear 10' of each bay is equipped with cargo nets and tie-downs for general stowage.

The Deal Breaker

Clyde's Dilemma participated in four planetary surveys during its eleven years of service with Muskoga. Its last assignment was on Lewis Abner, a promising world being evaluated for colonization. The shuttle was infected by the "deal breaker" one night while grounded near an ancient, ruined city on the southern continent. On morning inspection, the survey crew noticed what was later described as a crop of "evergreen ivy" covering the lower third of the craft's hull. The thin, almost gelatinous vines and needle-like leaves traced an intricate design on the hull, curling and kinking in patterns resembling Celtic knots or a pencil maze. The plants proved easy to remove . . . at first. The researchers took samples and got on with their work.

Because the vines avoided the shuttle's windows, thruster nozzles and other external gear, the crew was not alarmed when, over the course of the next day, the vines spread over the entire hull. They got a bit nervous when their lift date approached. The vines had shed their leaves, hardened, and bonded with the *Clyde's* hull. The pearly-blue strands resembled strands of "angel hair" spaghetti; a single filament could run for a hundred yards. Worse, it became apparent that the patterns formed *pictures* . . . tiny, intricate sketches of local animals, survey equipment, and expedition personnel! Many

of these portraits showed the crew naked, contorted into strange positions, or doing improbable things. The *Clyde's* captain likened the images to the doodling of a bored, talented school child.

Removing the tendrils proved difficult; they proved harder than the hull plating they clung to. A crewman working with a diamond grinding disk needed four hours to scrape off a square foot of the stuff. On completing its mission, Muskoga management ordered the *Clyde* to assume an elliptical orbit around Lewis Abner and make repeated, high-G aerobreaking maneuvers through the world's atmosphere. This thoroughly sterilized the hull, but did nothing to remove the patterns. The shuttle was carried home in an evacuated carrier bay, and subject to a year of quarantine and study. When the tendrils proved to be paint resistant, the *Clyde* was quietly put up for sale.

Analysis showed that the living vines were a vector for a sophisticated nanotech mechanism. The filaments they deposited are a form of carbon tube, doped with a small but significant amount of a stable superheavy element. (A variety of superheavies were found in Lewis Abner's soil, apparently industrial waste left by its long-ago inhabitants.) A few of the other plants found on the expedition proved to have nanotech "passengers," and – while none of these proved harmful – the world was declared unfit for colonization.

D IS FOR DICTATOR IN A BOX

"Dictator kits" have been the subject of urban myth and works of popular entertainment for decades. Some rumors claim the kit contains a mind-control machine, others a nanotech culture capable of turning a "zero" into a charismatic giant.

When an actual kit – a plain wooden crate full of books and quaint microfiche slides – was obtained by a crusading journalist, people dismissed it as a hoax. Several dictator kits – some intact, some incomplete – have surfaced since then, and are prized by collectors of unusual books.

In brief, the kit is a guide to manipulating media and political processes. The central text, a multi-volume work titled *The Plan: An Effective Man's Guide to Durable Leadership*, is clearly written, brilliant, and cynical. Based on a chillingly analytical view of human social behavior, it provides a variety of ways of attaining political power, applicable to a variety of social systems. It includes hundreds of detailed case studies of political, economic, and military campaigns.

The microfiche slides contain thousands of boilerplate posters, screenplays, articles, and other works designed for the aspiring dictator to customize and deploy in his rise to power. Also included are plans for electronic devices (such as a TL7 phone system designed from the ground up for surveillance) and recipes for psychoactive drugs.

An educated, widely-traveled person looking over these materials will recognize some of them from his travels, and conclude that at least some of the techniques described in "The Plan" are actually in use by the autocratic rulers of various colony worlds.

None of the materials in the kit contain bylines, copyright dates, or any obvious clue to their origin. Analysis of the crate *The Plan* is shipped in reveals something quite chilling: The wood is from no known species of tree, and contains isotopes suggesting it was grown on a world in a distant part of the galaxy.

E IS FOR EPHEMERAL GIFTS

Somewhere along the line, the austere Dardiradad tradition of grudging but automatic hospitality (which included the exchange of small presents) clashed with the immense wealth bestowed on them by the Tarbite Franchise. The result was ephemeral gifts. Intricately detailed, and often made from precious metals, expensive fabrics, and hand-made deckled papers, these trinkets, toys, and ornaments were deliberately designed to fall to pieces after a short time. Examples: An exquisitely folded silk and paper bird with flapping wings,

whose actuating cord comes loose after a day's play; a tiny windmill meant to be placed in an open window where the humid breezes will simultaneously turn the vanes and undo its lightly glued seams; A gold leaf and glossy red paper noise-maker which shreds after the tenth or eleventh "pop."

Ephemerals are not intended to be preserved. Not using one to destruction is considered crass. To still have an ephemeral around by the next time the gift-giver visits is something close to an insult.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, *old* ephemerals once given to *someone else* are considered collectibles, coveted with an almost fetish-like intensity by enthusiasts. The fact that these items were almost certainly stolen from their original

recipient, or belonged to people who *died* before they could be used up, has resulted in ephemeral dealers being ranked (despite their sometimes considerable wealth) somewhere between corpse-washers and Hoo-Dog pithers.

F IS FOR FORSAKEN ZOO

Almost everyone who meets a kiradle becomes a fan. The creatures' poise, social savvy, and aesthetic sense are so great as to cross species boundaries. Soldiers who meet the clever carnivores want to fight alongside them. Merchants who have dealt with kiradle wish they could take advantage of their negotiating skills. The trendy classes admire their elegant, decorative alphabet and the abstract art with which they embellish even everyday goods. Children who haven't met kiradle enjoy collecting action figures and watching animated holo-adventures.

If it only they didn't *eat* like that . . .

When a dozen kiradle applied to study at the E'Lay Academy of Industrial Design, legendary designer Barus Argent was assigned to create accommodations for them. He tasked a team of his students to design modern sanitary facilities for the sophonts.

Argent himself tackled the dining problem. It wasn't easy. The kiradles' own attempts to create "fast food" establishments always resulted in settings that were punitive and unnatural, as though designed to make the customer feel guilty for eating without the bothersome rituals their society required for social dining.

The result is a cross between an old-fashioned automat, a voting booth, and a pet store. Argent created versions designed to fit in a travel trailer and a hotel room, but the prototype was built into a storefront. Cages containing the cafeteria's current

bill of fare are displayed in the front window. The establishment is entered by a vestibule sized to fit one kiradle, ensuring only one diner at a time can enter. The vestibule's inner door must be unlocked with a swipe of a credit card; confirmation of payment also releases a handful of tokens (designed by kiradaphiles in the Academy's Department of Typography) of a number determined by the individual's weight. Closing the door activates a motor which draws a black curtain across the window.

Built into the back wall are cages with token-operated wire-mesh doors. The stock (provided by farmers and animal control officials) is replenished from opaque doors in the rear of the cages, eliminating any chance of accidental eye contact. A delay prevents more than five cages from being opened in a two-minute period, avoiding the perennial problem of overly-rapid feeding. Bundles of hard wood and dried bones for after-dinner teeth cleaning are provided free of charge. Automated cleaning equipment, adapted from gear employed in E'Lay's abattoirs, tidies up after the diner leaves.

The Academy's new students loved their cafeteria. It set the kiradle to wondering about other uses for human technology. What other stuffy, inconvenient, and aggravating facets of their steam-age civilization could be revolutionized?

By the end of the first term, some of the kiradle scholars were cooking up schemes to lure technicians to their home world . . .

G IS FOR GODMAKER

The Godmaker resembles two hula-hoops stacked neatly together. *Big* hula-hoops; the component "tubes" are ten miles thick and whole assembly is 400 miles across. Spines of stiff superconducting wires extend for thousands of miles from the outer "equator." It circles an exotic twin neutron star in a highly eccentric orbit. Navigation near the ring is perilous, thanks to radiation, belts of rubble, and the pulsars' powerful magnetic fields.

The Godmaker's rings are made from thousands and thousands of extremely advanced superconducting particle accelerators aligned and synchronized to simultaneously fire at a precise point in the center of the ring. The ring is energized when its spines plow through the intense magnetic field surrounding the neutron stars. The proper alignment of stars and ring occurs every five or six days. Once every five sweeps, the accelerators let loose, causing a surprisingly modest (500 kt) explosion in the center of the ring. Gravimeters will detect an immensely more powerful gravity wave. (Anyone nearby may sense this as a momentary, disorienting "tug" toward the center of the ring.) Careful and knowledgeable analysis of the phenomena reveals the momentary presence of a patch of primordial false vacuum in the middle of the

ring. The "explosion" and gravity wave are consistent with what happens when a false vacuum is accelerated to create a new "Big Bang" in a pocket universe.

Nestled deep in one of the rings is a gallery of human-habitable chambers lined with banks of control machinery and towering murals depicting the construction of the vast engine. The chamber is also full of loose artifacts, desiccated bodies (of numerous species), and garbage. Even a cursory inspection shows that the chambers have been the site of archaeological expeditions and a few pitched battles.

Near the center of the gallery is a heavily shielded chamber, just a few meters across and filled with a fractal "fuzz" of sensory filaments. A sapient entity who pushes its way to the middle of the chamber will be snagged by the filaments and held in place until the Godmaker's next blast. If it is still alive at this time, the filaments will thoroughly pierce and seemingly disintegrate the victim. Unknown to the casual observer, the creature's mind will be downloaded and embedded in the space-time fabric of the next nascent pocket universe created by the Godmaker's false vacuum blasts. What happens next can never be known.

H IS FOR HAB SEED

The Waltzers-On-Creation are an ancient, multi-species race that roams the Coreward frontier in vast *world ships*. Each ship is a cluster of three or more specialized, spherical modules. Propulsion modules contain dozens of fusion reactors, thrusters, and antimatter production facilities. Habitat modules have over a thousand square miles of landscaped living area under a protective crystal shell. Their interiors contain living quarters and public spaces capable of housing tens of thousands in high-tech luxury. Other modules contain miniature seas, or vast expanses of warehouses and manufacturing equipment.

Most modules were built at the beginning of the Waltzers' wanderings, 70,000 years ago. The craft are kept in repair by corps of robots equipped with nanotech processing technologies. In extreme cases, a severely damaged world ship can "grow" a new module by consuming several dozen asteroids and comets. This process takes decades, and requires that the ship be depopulated for the duration.

Known to only the Waltzer elite and a few dedicated researchers are *hab seeds*. These truck-sized devices are

capable of growing an entire habitat. The seeds are encased in a durable ceramic shell. Each one contains a powerful computer, a swarm of compact multipurpose robots, bins of nanotech processors, and an antimatter fuel cell. A hab seed requires more than a century to do its job. It spends most of this time building solar cell arrays, ore processing facilities, and small mining spacecraft. Once complete, these facilities begin harvesting materials from comets, asteroids, and small moons; this phase takes 20 or more years, depending on the availability of resources. Actual construction of the habitat only takes a dozen years.

The mining and processing infrastructure is left behind, dormant, once the module is complete. Many races have found and repurposed these facilities, not realizing where they came from or what they were capable of.

The Waltzer fleet has two hab seeds. Perhaps a half dozen more are scattered around the galaxy, their pitted shells appearing to the casual observer only as unusually symmetrical asteroids. A complex cryptographic key is required to activate a seed.

I IS FOR INHERITANCE STICK

The Hyliph ruled a large portion of the galaxy some 300,000 years ago. The key to their power was a collection of extraordinary, monumental artifacts found in the home system of an elder race. Unfortunately for the Hyliph, their unwitting benefactors were not extinct, but only resting for a bit before moving on to greater things, and the artifacts were analogous to a thesis project . . . one that had not yet been turned in for evaluation. The Hyliph found themselves the target of an extermination campaign. Few of their subject races were willing to help them, and within a century the race was extinct, their empire shattered, and much of the galaxy reduced to savagery.

Seeing the end approaching, one of the Hyliph's last outposts decided to preserve something of themselves. They created inheritance sticks; baton-like information stores whose incredible storage capacity is matched only by their durability. Tens of thousands of the sticks were produced and distributed to every world still accessible by the besieged Hyliph. Some were buried under hastily erected obelisks; others were attached to corner reflectors and dropped on dark, lonely ice planets.

The Hyliph's prosecutors never caught on to this desperate campaign, but their genocidal war destroyed most of the inheritance sticks anyway. Still, the sticks do turn up now and then, and records of their discovery – and occasional wars over their possession – turn up in many volumes of galactic history. Phony inheritance sticks, some of them hundreds of thousands of year old, now far outnumber the genuine article.

An inheritance stick is about 2" wide and 20" long. They are extraordinarily heavy; nearly 50 pounds. (The weight is mostly due to a narrow, rigid ribbon of strange matter embedded in the stick's core.) The outside surface is smooth, hard and glossy, and a vaguely bluish off-white in color. There are two silver spots, about a quarter inch wide, near each end.

Besides the weight, anyone handling a stick will notice its extreme slipperiness. It is very difficult to hold a stick other than by clamping a hand over each end. The case itself has a DR of 15. It takes about 20 damage points to bust open a stick, and another 10 to render it nonfunctional.

Careful inspection of a stick under a microscope reveals that the surface is marked with row upon row of tiny pictograms. These describe a numbering and measurement system, and pictorial directions showing how two different electrical currents are to be run through the silvery spots. (This first step is a cinch to any Tech Level 6 race.) Doing this activates a holographic projector which shows how to create a reader capable of tapping the stick's fabulous stores of knowledge.

The sticks contain something of everything about the Hyliph, including their genetic code, several giant libraries worth of books, years worth of media programming, great heaps of scanned-in ephemera (from lingerie catalogs to personal letters) and exacting architectural plans for dwellings, monuments, factories, and public buildings.

J IS FOR JAN'S ERROR

Soul posts began appearing in curio markets 12 years ago. These sturdy cylinders of synthetic marble are 18" in diameter and a yard high, and topped with a hemisphere of what looks like polished obsidian. On the bottom of the posts are metal

plates which, if unscrewed, reveal carefully labeled electrical contacts. If 12 volts DC is applied to the correct posts, the black hemisphere appears to become transparent, revealing an animated holographic bust of a human individual. All of the posts

found to date show rugged peasant folk of all ages, dressed in simple, severe clothing. The images appear to be aware of their surroundings. Some can talk and answer questions.

About half of the holograms are unresponsive. They have the “thousand yard stare” of the severely traumatized. If questioned, they may wince or “turn away” from their questioner. Of the images that can talk, most babble the same few phrases over and over. These include passages from the Bible, genealogies, and more ordinary talk:

“Pay heed, for here is the receipt for plain bread, which every maid must learn. Take three measures of flour . . .”

“Do you know the signs of the drunkard? The signs of the drunkard are seven. Learn them well if you wish to be a virtuous man. The first sign of the drunkard . . .”

“Mother says the cows need milking. Mother says the cows need milking. Mother says . . .”

Some passages hint at something terrible:

“A fruitful field is a man’s pride, and it’s tilling his duty. How is a man to guide a plow without hands?”

“This is not right. The times of tribulation are over and yet here we are in hideous limbo.”

A very few of the images are lucid enough to respond to questions. Careful and patient interrogation will reveal that the posts are all that remains of Plain Simplicity, an isolated pastoral settlement. A quick record search will show that Plain Simplicity was located on Chalmburg, a colony world ravaged by a swarm of comets nearly a century ago.

According to the soul-posts’ account, Jan Kewunzana – a criminal scientist on the run from the law – approached the settlement and warned them of the approaching comets. In exchange for sanctuary from his pursuers, Kewunzana offered the settlers’ best and brightest a refuge of sorts. He would transfer their minds to solid-state computers embedded in indestructible pillars. After Chalmburg’s ecosystem had recovered, automated machinery would create new bodies for them.

Jan fulfilled half of his promise. After two years of frantic effort (which included bloody raids on neighboring settlements for parts and materials) the inventor produced several “Salvation Boxes,” each the size of a house trailer. A person entering a door at one end would find himself in a dark maze.

After blundering around for a few minutes he would feel groggy, fall asleep, and be drawn into the machine’s innards.

About two people in three were ejected a few hours later, unharmed except for a shaved head and a migraine. The rest were destructively brain-scanned and cremated. A few days after a person walked in, a soul post rolled out. Kewunzana claimed that in addition to an interactive persona the posts contained a digitized DNA scan of the preserved individual. The posts were mounted on metal bases scattered throughout the settlement, so the “Preserved” could give counsel and reassurance to those preparing for the end in human form.

After all of Plain Simplicity’s population had a chance in the Salvation Boxes, the rejected transferred the posts (and the preserved population’s worldly goods) to a deep cave and prepared to take in a final harvest. Jan Kewunzana disappeared at about this time, leaving behind a note promising that he would return with cloning equipment. Criminal databases show him active on other worlds after this.

The Preserved describe one final horror: Rather than being left to slumber until their new bodies were ready, most of the posts were powered up by terrified survivors fleeing the disaster up above. The Preserved could provide nothing but prayers and condolence. The posts remained active long after the last refugee died of starvation. By a cruel trick of fate, the posts’ emergency power supplies outlasted the lights. The minds of the Preserved spent months in the still, dark caverns, the only illumination provided by the posts’ flickering images, the only sounds their own voices.

Adventurers who visit Chalmburg will find it in an awful state. The initial impacts set entire continents afire, evaporated seas, and triggered a decades-long winter. The world is still wracked by violent storms, earthquakes, and many active volcanoes. The only land life remaining is hardy grass, worms, and imported cockroaches; even with the help of terraforming technologies the world will not be hospitable for several centuries.

Investigators with access to the colony’s records will have no trouble locating Plain Simplicity’s sad ruins and the cave complex. It shows signs of recent looting. Evidence suggests that all but one of the Salvation Boxes (which were built inside of sturdy stone shelters) were carefully removed.

K IS FOR KING RAPID BLUE

*“A comic book?” said Lee, “You waste my personal time showing me a comic book? Oh, wait, I’m sorry, ‘graphic novel,’ right?” The detective shoved the stack of thick **manga** back at Tets and glanced around the pawn shop’s dusty back room.*

*“Hey, you know I hate calling you down here,” complained the fence, trying not to whine. “I know you don’t like my style, but have I ever really messed with you? Come on, look at them! Come under the light here and really **look**.”*

Lee picked up the book at the top of the stack, opened it under the fence’s jewelry inspection lamp, and began browsing.

“Along the edges, between the edge of the page and the frames. See?” asked Tets. The detective shook his head. “Crap, your eyes aren’t altered for polarization, are they? We sea people have some advantages! Hang on . . .” He ran down the aisle, rummaged through a display case, and returned with a pair of antique sunglasses. “Here, put them on and try again.”

Lee donned the shades, positioned a page directly under a reading light, and looked again. He tilted his head from side to side, shifted the page, and held his own reading glasses over the shades. “I’ll be damned,” he said at last. He flipped to the beginning of the book and skimmed through, grunting occasionally. After checking several of the other volumes Lee straightened up, handed Tets the glasses, and began gathering books.

“Well?” asked Tets, “is this worth your while? Worth something?”

Lee inhaled, winced, looked the fence in the eye. “Yeah,” he said, grudgingly. “You were right to call me and I won’t forget it. For now, close up shop. Send your wife to visit her mom and get out of town yourself. Maybe think about going back into the family business and getting as far out to sea as possible until this blows over.”

The lurid, smartly scripted *King Rapid Blue* adventures are

read by millions throughout the sector. The art and copy are sent in electronic form to dozens of local publishers, who lay it out according to local custom, edit and translate the stories, insert advertising, and either print paper copies or distribute it through local networks. Despite the expense of shipping physical, bound-paper literature, many locally produced copies find their way between worlds, in crew lounges and spacemen's duffel bags.

Recently, intelligence agencies have begun seizing print editions of *King Rapid Blue*. The most sought after were issued by the government printing office of a rather sinister authoritari-

an regime. Printed in a tiny typeface, visible only under bright light when viewed through polarized lenses, are marginal notes describing, in painstaking detail, arms deals, the positioning of strike fleets near strategic worlds, massive clandestine currency transfers, and meetings between the regime's secret police and the officers of respectable megacorps.

Are the notes from a legitimate source? A passive-aggressive prank by a bored compositor? Black propaganda orchestrated to start a conflict?

L IS FOR LARRY PRIN'S ARMY OF DARKNESS REVUE

The original Larry Prin lived over a century ago, on Old Earth. He bred and gene-tailored the first creatures in his Army of Darkness – 12 enormous and brilliant wolfhounds – to help him steal pharm animals, genetically tailored sheep and goats that produced pharmaceuticals in their milk.

After some initial success, the heat got too intense for Prin. He fled his native New Zealand and relocated the troupe to Northern California, set up operations on an isolated ranch, and founded a traveling animal show. The dogs took to show business rather well. Some did clown acts, others performed

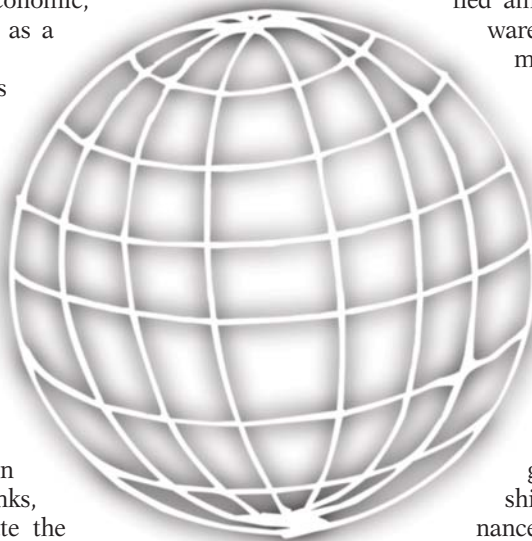
acrobatic feats. One pair managed to learn to juggle torches. At first, Prin took the troupe to small-town carnivals. If he couldn't get an actual booking, he would set up in the carnival parking lot and pass a hat. The troupe grew larger and more diverse as Prin started adopting and training discarded GMO pets: Talking pot-bellied parrot-pigs, HandyKats, and UltimOtters.

The Army of Darkness Revue is now run by a third generation of Prins. The show has added other attractions: Human and robot performers whose unique talents or compromised pasts do not allow them to work in more reputable venues.

M IS FOR MILLION-WORLD GLOBE

The globe itself is a spherical, high-resolution display device, some two feet in diameter and massing 50 pounds. The images it creates are crisply detailed and richly colored; when provided with proper information it can display political, ecological, economic, and demographic maps as well as a basic geographical layout.

The globe is useless without its base: A round platform about three yards across, with ornate railings, padded benches, and a yoke of articulated, polished chrome rods in which the globe is mounted. The base appears to be a 19th-Century antique made from dark, aged mahogany; the woodwork is in fact a thin veneer, covering a sturdy aluminum alloy frame. The floor of the base and the balusters contain the processor arrays, storage banks, and power supplies that operate the globe. The artifact's name comes from its theoretical capacity.



The globe was commissioned in the middle of the 21st Century by an elderly, eccentric software billionaire. The initial data set included maps of the Solar System's terrestrial planets and major moons. For many decades, it was shuffled among various private collections, museums, warehouses, and the headquarters lobbies of multi-world corporations.

Accompanying the globe wherever it went was a collection of spare parts, instruction manuals, jury-rigged interface cables, and data massagers. The accumulated lore and tools allowed the globe to be updated with information on the worlds humanity explored.

Somewhere along the line the globe's whereabouts were lost to general knowledge. Every few decades the legend of the globe was rediscovered and embellished. Centuries later, the crew of a long-range survey vessel recovered the globe from the bridge of a derelict alien starship of baroque design and unknown provenance. The globe now contains records of over 50,000 worlds, most of them totally unknown.

N IS FOR NI'ER DERELICT

It would be hard to find a better place to hide a spaceship. The ice and dust of Dandelion IV's ring system, and the gas giant's fearsome radiation belts, concealed the wreck for nearly 70,000 years. The d'gro-d'gri merchants that finally spotted the tumbling ship traded its location to miners working on Dandelion II-a. Had they known its provenance, the d'gro-d'gri would have kept the secret to themselves, and returned with a battle squadron to guard the find.

The derelict is huge; at least 50,000 tons displacement. It is coated with a crust of ice, dust, and sulfur compounds. Chemical and isotopic analysis of the crust and hull provides an age for the ship: at least 73,000 years, and possibly twice that. The drive and crew quarters have been heavily damaged by ages of impacts with debris, but the lozenge-shaped cargo bay is still intact. Cutting into the bay will require some effort, as the airlocks and cargo doors are corroded and crusted shut. The bay's many chambers are filled with a tightly packed matrix of high-tech cushioning elements. An individual packing element resembles a slick, black soccer ball. When placed in contact, the balls cling to each other and expand to twice their normal volume. Items caught between the elements are held in a firm but not crushing grip.

Bursting an element requires a surprising amount of damage (20 points); authorized cargo handlers use chemically treated gloves whose contact causes the elements to instantly contract and go dormant.

The bay's actual cargo is a fabulous treasure; hundreds of items of great artistic, cultural, and religious import, from scores of worlds. The crates and boxes are all carefully labeled, with micro-engraved plaques describing not only the item but the creatures that created it and what it meant to them. They are the equivalent of the Mona Lisa, the Holy Grail, King Tut's burial mask, Michelangelo's David, and the terra cotta warriors of China. Their original owners considered many of them priceless, in many cases worth dying to protect and waging war to retrieve.

Historians who get wind of the find will have a hard time believing the news. If the predicted age of the ship is correct, the derelict could be the first hard evidence of the existence of the Ni'er, a long-extinct race whose avaricious exploits are the stuff of legend.

Of course, if the Ni'er really existed, and there actually was a treasure fleet, then the legend of their horrific downfall may be true, and the agents of their doom – the Gyken-JAT – may still be out there.

O IS FOR ORANGE SYMPHONY

An envelope, liberally stamped with the rarely seen, amusing but dreadful MEME HAZARD icon. Inside: A bundle of sheet music, for a classic symphony orchestra, bylined by someone or something named M-MNUL 332.

M-MNUL 332, a late 21st-century AI, figured out the neurological basis of humanity's affinity for music after 10 years of analyzing the brains of coma patients who had willed their bodies to science. With the permission of its handlers at the Lanier Institute, M-MNUL 332 created instances of itself with this peculiar attribute, and began experimenting with compositions that tickled themselves' newly acquired fancy. It declared its study complete after its 15th try, purged its extra instances, and moved on to other pursuits.

The Institute's famed Electric Orchestra performed the "Orange Symphony" for a live audience once. A third of the audience succumbed to ecstatic seizures and died within hours. The survivors, on learning that there would be no more performances, were left disconsolate, bereft, and suicidal.

Treat the "Orange Symphony" as an Addiction which is cheap, incapacitating (with the possibility of a *brainstorm*, below), totally addictive, and illegal. The addiction is psychological, and attempting to break the addiction often results in Absent-Mindedness and Chronic Depression. Characters who are especially cultured, emotionally sensitive, or aesthetically inclined may suffer up to a -4 penalty to their Will roll. "Posthuman" characters with unusual neurological makeup or modifications may receive up to a +4 bonus to their Will roll. Robots, aliens, uplifted animals, and the like won't be affected by the symphony at all.

Brainstorm: During each performance, the victim suffers a very mild epileptic fit (treat as an Ecstasy affliction, p. B428), and must make a Will-2 roll. On a failure, the epileptic fit increases to *severe*, and is treated exactly like Epilepsy (p. B136). At the end of this severe seizure, make a HT-2 roll; on a failure, the fit *continues*.

P IS FOR PAPER-MACHÉ PODS

Pods. Hundreds of pods. Green and gray and beige seed-pods, about a yard long, with fibrous surfaces and nasty translucent veins. Each pod is neatly packed in a bubble-wrap envelope, with a label bearing the name of a defunct Czech film production company.

Most of the pods are made of paper-maché and coconut-husk

fibers. Some of the pods are only ends and sides, made to be assembled into frighteningly high stacks.

A few are plastic and rubber, with hidden connections for air hoses that, when pressurized, cause the pods to split and erupt, pouring out hideous pale pink gunk laced with plastic tendrils and a wriggling, faceless, dummy fetus.

Q IS FOR QBF

Dmitry K. Belyaev didn't intend to start the mid-21st century's Fad Pet craze when he began selectively breeding silver foxes in 1959. But the adorable tame foxes that emerged from his simple experiments set the stage for producing domestic versions all sorts of animals via direct genetic manipulation.

The market was initially dominated by QBF, Ltd (Quick Brown Fox) of Vancouver, B.C. Holding the patents for a vital genetic template, QBF's initial offering included the officially licensed version of Belyaev's Fox, the Guard Grizzly, and Otterly Adorable pool otters. With time others entered the field, resulting in a dizzying number of offerings and, predictably, cheap and sometimes mentally unstable knock-offs. All of these exotic pets have one thing in common: Sterility. The genetically neuter "end product" animals are created by

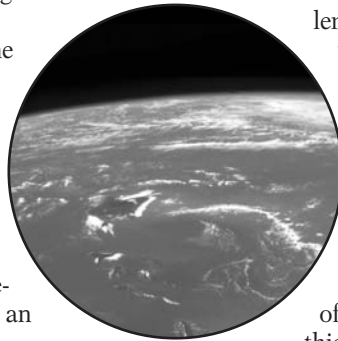
implanting templated eggs in non-domesticated breeder females. Bio-piracy through cloning couldn't be prevented, but even by 2100 the process was still expensive compared to simply buying a licensed version.

One member of the cutthroat exotic pet industry has moved the struggle for dominance to the home and neighborhood streets. Exotics are normally tolerant of other species, but a fraction of each of the firm's product animals has been designed with great intelligence, cunning, and an overwhelming contempt for their competitors' models. While not beyond outright murder, the creatures are more likely to trick their rivals into doing something dangerous, and are even clever enough to frame them for making a mess or destroying valuables.

R IS FOR THE ROMER GUTS GARDEN

Romer, a habitable world on the outskirts of settled space, is unusual if only because of its sun, a class A star named Hecktate. Scientists have determined that Romer was terraformed about three million years ago. It is cooler and denser than Earth, with a strong magnetic field and thick atmosphere that prevent its surface from being scoured by Hecktate's copious output of UV radiation and solar winds. There is little land life, beyond a few varieties of hearty ground cover and some nocturnal insects.

Romer's engineers passed from the scene long ago, but archaeologists and paleontologists have found evidence of at least two more recent periods of colonization. One of these left a remarkable set of artifacts, the "Guts Garden." The site, a plaza of neatly dressed stone more than a kilometer on a side, was preserved under the shifting sands of an equatorial desert.



The "Garden" consists of twelve enormous three-dimensional exploded-view anatomical models, each of a different alien species. The major organs and skeletons are rendered in colored stone, apparently cast from molten rock. While they cannot be sure of the scale, scientists speculate that a human heart, if similarly modeled, would be the size of a large house.

The organ models are laced with passageways and galleries. Archaeologists have found evidence of outbuildings and galleries outfitted with mounting brackets and frames, leading them to believe that the site was a museum or educational exhibit.

The Garden became a popular tourist attraction after it was excavated. Locals joked that it was the only reason to visit the world. This wasn't far from the truth, as they learned after the entire garden disappeared during a solar storm that forced the colonists into shelters. Evidence (including off-world junk food wrappers, a bloody work glove, and tread marks from a popular model of construction crawler) has led investigators to believe the thieves were human.

S IS FOR SALAMANDER TAP

The R'Viss Hordes have raged across the galaxy numerous times, leaving behind shattered space fleets, ruined settlements, and decimated populations. Between these senseless, short-lived campaigns, the R'Viss retire to their ancient deep-space habitats and live a sedate, tribal existence.

Few know that the R'Viss are mere tools, genetically engineered warriors following the dictates of plasma life forms living in a blazing quasi-star hidden in a six-dimensional pocket universe. These "salamanders" (fire spirits) are themselves artifacts; in essence, brilliant but single-minded AI computers running military management application. They communicate

with our space-time via incredibly ancient, intricate, and durable devices called "taps." Taps are small cylinders, resembling highly filigreed and ornate lipstick tubes. The ridged surface of a tap is covered with tiny holes, at the bottom of which is a photonic data port. Fiber-optic lines inserted into these holes can stream data between the "salamander" and more conventional computer equipment.

Deprived of the advice and guidance of a salamander, R'Viss quickly revert to a nomadic, barbarian way of life. An R'Viss colony with access to a tap is a time-bomb waiting to go off.

T IS FOR TALETELLER

No one knows how long Taleteller has been around. Elder races gossip about it; it is depicted in cave paintings found on the home world of the long extinct Charsommo. It came into possession of humans some 20 years back, and has changed hands nearly a dozen times since then.

Taleteller consists of a gnome-like animatronic mannequin and a small but massive throne. The mannequin is bipedal (at least currently) with mitten-like hands and facial features that look like they've been caught halfway through a morph between something unspeakably alien and those of a wise old man. (This is exactly the case; images of the mannequin from a few years before show a face that is far less human.) Its skin is a warm, rough, rubbery material. It wears a robe of what appears to be blue and white silk, but is actually something exuded from its body since coming to be owned by humans. The strands of strong plastic join the mannequin's posterior to its seat; the strands are just long enough to allow the figure to stand up and bow. The mannequin has DR of 2, and can take 16 points of damage before becoming inoperable.

Taleteller's throne masses nearly half a ton. It appears to have been carved from a single piece of polished marble. Sonic sensors will show that it is actually hollow. The shell, which is about 1/8" thick, consists of a super heavy metal alloy enameled with a lustrous mineral mined from the surface of dead suns. Inside is a small fusion power plant (runs on ordinary water; emits a mild flux of neutrinos), a store of nanotech repair bots, and a fabulously advanced AI computer. Given time and materials (hydrocarbons, fluorocarbons, fullerene carbon, and cellulose) the throne can generate a whole new mannequin. The shell has DR 15. 20 points of damage will

pierce the case, releasing a flood (100 RAD) of gamma rays. 25 points of interior damage will render the throne inoperative for 2d6 weeks; another 25 points of damage will ruin the self-repair function and put an end to Taleteller's career.

When introduced into a new culture, Taleteller carefully watches and listens to what goes on about it. Like a small child, it first communicates with gestures, enthusiastic babbles, and gurgles. With time (two or three weeks if properly stimulated) it becomes fluent in the local languages and eventually attains *Savoir-Faire*, *Public Speaking*, and other useful skills at level 16. When it feels as though it knows the psyche of its hosts, it lives up to its name and begins telling stories. These are always entertaining, and seem deeply "meaningful" in a *Aesop's Fable* sort of way. If allowed to banter with its audience and listen to gossip, Taleteller will eventually weave stores good enough to win awards and shake the composure of tyrants.

Taleteller's only goal is entertainment. It has no agenda. The best it can provide by way of advice or sage counsel is parables with rather obvious lessons.

Most frustratingly, Taleteller remembers almost nothing of the hundreds of peoples it has entertained through the millennia; its stories are always set in its current hosts' culture, or an allegorical variant. It can provide at most a two or three sentence description of each of its former patrons. It generally refers to them only when "dropping names" while setting up a tale. ("I have seen many great ships: The fabulous Golden Wheel of Schartz; the dreadful Black Hive of the Hubrino; the ten thousand rafts of the Banquastine City Ship. But none compares to the mighty *Titanic*.")

U IS FOR UNUSED PORTION

The seething nanite muck custom-ordered from the shadowy Coalition of the Twelve and *The One* worked as promised. Over the course of two decades Meatta's native flora and fauna withered and died, leaving behind a layer of sterile, nutrient-rich humus. The thriving marine ecosystems took longer to die, but in the end the world's oceans were scummed with innocuous green algae. Knowledge of the makeover was on a need-to-know basis. Meatta Settlement Concepts' own ecopoeisis teams found the job of creating a new life-web trivially easy, but were secretly horrified. The nanites couldn't erase fossils, and a few stray survivors of the old biological regime remained in caves and mountain peaks.

That was nearly a century ago. Meatta is heavily settled now, with dozens of thriving agricultural settlements. Its founding corporation was effectively disbanded decades ago, after paying a hefty premium in the form of land-shares to its stockholders. But Meatta Settlement Concepts is still alive on paper, its trivial remaining affairs tended by two paralegals and an assistant working out of a cluttered, second-story office. Unknown to them until recently, the firm has one remaining physical asset . . .

The cloaked but obviously nonhuman envoy from the Coalition of the Twelve and *The One* barely fit in the office door. It demanded the return, per contract, of unused materials provided to the company. It provided proof, based on chemical signatures left behind in Meatta's soil, that five canisters of terraforming goo were not used by MSC. Failure to return the unused material would result in penalties, up to and including reversal of the work the materials had done.

The office staff, whose working days consist of paying decades-old bills, disbursing fractional-credit royalty checks, and arguing whose turn it was to go for coffee, obviously felt a bit overwhelmed, and began looking for help. They can't provide many clues. The last definitive sighting of the canisters took place two decades ago, when they were shrink-wrapped to a pallet before delivery to a low-rent warehouse which has since changed hands four times, been abandoned, and burned down.

The nanites were tailored to Meatta's ecosystem, but they could still pose a danger. The tiny mechanisms' "discovery" mode, in which they explore their surroundings looking for target organisms, resembles a virulent, but usually non-fatal, plague. It affects everything, from people to house plants.

V IS FOR VALUABLE PRIZES

You can't blame the Adelphi Lateral gang for getting angry. When you are *promised* cash for pulling off a dangerous, complex, and highly illegal assignment, you should *get* cash.

Bearer bonds? Why, yes!

Convertible certificates from the Bank of St. Ayn the Objective? Also acceptable. (As the annoying jingle goes, "As good as gold and no questions asked.")

But disposable vacc-suit waste collection sacks (Ganges System, Unisex size 3, Pine Scent)? Unacceptable.

The fact that *ten cases* (36 count, packed for individual sale) of the bags were delivered right to the Lateral's luxurious "divvying up the loot and drinking to our success" suite seemed especially insulting.

After searching the boxes for their cash, the Laterals ordered up room service, emptied the mini-bar of alcohol, and drew up their plans for revenge. They checked out the next day, leaving behind considerable damage, an unpaid bill, and all but one of the cartons of waste collection sacks.

It took three months to track down their anonymous employer. While enjoying the spectacle of a waste collection sack being employed in a manner both highly peculiar and excruciatingly painful, one of the Laterals noticed an "instant win" sweepstakes ticket attached to a discarded wrapper. It proved to be worth \$50,000. The other thirty five packages in the carton had winning tickets as well, worth a total of slightly more than 10% of the money owed the Laterals.

You can't blame the hotel for selling off the gear the Laterals left behind in their suite. The cost of repairing the rooms was considerable. The management did attempt to contact their former customers, and did hang on to the confiscated possessions far longer than was their custom (the Laterals were *scary*) but business is business. They didn't get much for the confiscated property, and the purchasing manager ending up donating the waste collection sacks to charity . . .

"Which charity? Please, I have the receipt . . . somewhere around here. It's almost tax time and I assure you I . . . please, sir, you can put down the gun . . ."

W IS FOR WILBUR

He's a good dog, really. A sturdy husky mix with black fur and piercing blue eyes. Well trained, calm, gets along well with other dogs.

Wilbur has one problem: He talks. Not meaningfully, but in random phrases, like a parrot. (In fact, his voice box and his enhanced speech centers are patterned after those of a parrot.) Wilbur's selection of phrases is unnerving. They include passages from the Book of Revelations, phrases that *sound* like they might be from Revelations, plus a few very

personal sounding statements and accusations. ("You shouldn't have abandoned them." "You think you can hide, but in the end they'll find you out.") He delivers these in a voice of a 12-year-old girl with a refined accent and clear, deliberate diction. Sometimes "she" sounds mournful, sometimes wistfully hopeful.

Wilbur was enhanced and trained as a psychological weapon in an intelligence agency's campaign against an obnoxious corporate chieftain . . . now dead by his own hand.

X IS FOR XYLOPHONE RATS

Xylophone rats were created in 2034 C.E. by Lyle Carnhower, an eccentric performance artist. When exposed to a specific pheromone, the sturdy animals rhythmically slammed their heads into the ground. Carnhower displayed the rats in decadent night clubs and salons around the world. They "performed" in a large cage fitted over the bars of a large wooden xylophone. The "Contingent Symphony" proved a sensation. Recordings sold well, and the act was invited to perform in many prestigious venues.

When criticized by animal rights activists, Carnhower pointed out that a 20th-century mail-order house best known for its advertisements in comic books once sold "dancing mice" which suffered from an inherited

defect that made them subject to nervous fits. This sophistry failed to impress someone willing to put a stop to the act. Simultaneous attacks on the artist's studio and a Taiwanese genetic engineering firm resulted in the "liberation" of the rats' breeding stock and destruction of the sports' genetic records. Carnhower's "road company" was stolen from the hold of an airship during the act's tour of South America.

The head-knocking rats have made a return engagement, in the garbage heaps of slums surrounding an important spaceport. This new variety does not need a trigger to perform. Though they are considered a supremely annoying pest by most, some children have taken to letting the rodents loose on top of steel drums, naively recreating Carnhower's bizarre art.



Y IS FOR YALOW'S CACHE

Kinley snorted. "How the hell do you pack a Grauner 66 in a bale of straw?"

"It's in pieces? Duh?" said Kawasi, "Individually rubbed down with paraffin and shrinkwrapped, I might add."

"How about the armor?" asked Mayhew, "That in straw bales?" The technician and his crew guffawed.

"Plenty of ways to mothball a vehicle that keep it as good as new for 50 years. More." Kawasi looked around, defiant. "None of you had a neighbor kept a car in the garage since your dad was a kid?"

Sergeant De, surveying the crudely-printed manifest Kawasi had handed around, broke his silence. "Three Bethel Munitions Hailstorms. Obsolete. Can't get new shells." The man wafted the sheet behind him.

"You can on Lepule," shot back the Corporal, getting up to retrieve the manifest, "There are great crates of things left over from the insurrection. Anyway, the stash has 10 cases of ammo for them." He waved the sheet around. "Well? Do we take advantage of this or not?"

The name has changed through the years. The contents of the horde are updated as military technology advances. But the basic details remain the same:

A mercenary company found itself in desperate situation after the capture of the coup plotters it had been hired to back up. They fled into a sparsely-settled outback region, hoping to

get offworld by way of a neutral starport on the other end of the continent. They evaded detection for over a week, raiding towns for fuel and supplies along the way, but the noose was tightening. They made it to a railway junction in a town sympathetic to the coup plotters, where they made a difficult choice. With the help of the townspeople, they stripped down, mothballed, and hid their weapons in the village's barns and silos. After donning civilian clothing the mercenaries headed for the coast in hopper cars rigged with canopies simulating full loads of ore.

The loyalists caught up with them as the train was crossing a trestle bridge over a deep canyon. What happened next varies: In some versions of the tale, the bridge was blown. In others, the cars' hoppers were tipped, spilling the warriors into space. In another – adapted to video as *Long Ride Home* – the train was strafed by flying gunships; one of the craft, struck by fire from a commander's sidearm, slammed into the bridge, sealing the company's fate. A lone survivor (sometimes left behind in the village, sometimes a witness to the slaughter) made his way back home where he began the work of smuggling the cached weapons off-planet.

Is the story based on fact? Did the cache ever exist? At this point, it doesn't matter. Countless scam artists have used the tale to sell surplus gear (often in shabby condition) or simply con people out of their money.

Z IS FOR ZERO-ZERO-ZERO DEED

How many civilizations, seeing distant galaxies rushing away from them, assume they must be near the heart of all things? Perhaps most, and even after the true nature of the expanding universe is revealed to a peoples' great thinkers, many individuals believe that the Big Bang must have had a center, that they are near it, and that this place must be holy, or possessed of great power.

The Zero-Zero-Zero Deed is a mix of ancient urban myth and hoary con-game trick. Sometimes it is an actual deed, to a world or a star system or even a whole sector of space. Sometimes it takes the form of an encoded map. Sometimes cults form to guard the supposed location of the Center, where their most important shrine or holy-of-holies is hidden.



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