THE GAEAN REACH

THE ROLEPLAYING GAME
OF INTERSTELLAR VENGEANCE

BASED ON THE
CLASSIC SCIENCE
FICTION OF
JACK VANCE

BY
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Pelgrane Press

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WELCOME TO THE REACH

"Too many wrongdoers escape with whole skins and profit! Revenge! There's the word! I wish you luck!"

A S IT SAYS IN THE SUBTITLE, THE GAEAN REACH IS A ROLEPLAYING GAME. If you have no idea what that means, we congratulate you for accidentally stumbling upon this text, which is aimed at a fervent niche audience. We wish we had the space here to teach you the basics of the hobby. Find friends who know what roleplaying games are, and have them demonstrate the basic concept to you. Incessantly bug one of them until they run a session for you and your friends. You'll be glad you did.

Although quite suitable for beginning players, *The Gaean Reach* calls for an experienced Game Moderator who is comfortable extensively improvising in response to player actions.

In *The Gaean Reach*, you play highly competent individuals of the distant future. Wronged in the past by a terrible foe named Quandos Vorn, you travel with a group of similarly vengeful companions, hunting him across the galaxy's weird and various worlds. Dealing out dry witticisms and deadly laser fire in equal measure, you gradually gather evidence of his plans and whereabouts, all the while anticipating the coming day of your final confrontation.

To play, you need this book, a single ordinary six-sided die per participant, paper and writing instruments, and a supply of tokens, like beads or poker chips. Forty or so ought to be plenty.

PROVENANCE

This iteration of the GUMSHOE rules adapts certain rules concepts, most notably the tagline system, which first appeared in *The Dying Earth Roleplaying Game*, which in turn is based on the classic fantasy tales of Jack Vance. Some of these inspirations come by way of *Skulduggery,* a later reconfiguration of those rules to one-shot play in any genre of underhandedness and verbal dexterity. To complete your collection of conceptual variations, pick up *The Dying Earth Revivification Folio*, which updates the original game to the simpler, faster *Skulduggery* approach.

MORE GUMSHOE IN SPACE

The Gaean Reach focuses tightly on the sublime novels of a single SF legend. The distinctiveness of his setting derives as much from the science-fiction tropes it omits as those it includes. On the grounds that people are alien enough already, you'll find no full-blown nonhuman civilizations here. Nor does combat between spacefaring vessels occur. Even its heroism unfolds within a spare, and unsparing, moral vision.

If you're looking for a game of investigative space opera that encompasses a broad spectrum of genre inspirations, check out *Ashen Stars*, also from Pelgrane Press.

You Are Probably Either a Man or a Woman

As advanced persons of the far future, we acknowledge the equality of men and women, even at the gaming table. Where cruel syntactical exigencies force us to refer to a single hypothetical player, we use the male gender. When we refer to a hypothetical Game Moderator, we use "she" and its associated pronouns. This policy adds clarity to certain pronoun-stuffed sentences. Any overarching generalization about the maleness of players or femaleness of GMs we staunchly disavow.

BUILDING YOUR VENGEANCE- SEEKERS

GM PREPARATION

Before the first session begins, make the following preparations:

- Send your players the Series Premise (see sidebar.) For your cutting and pasting convenience, this text also appears at the *Gaean Reach* resources page at the Pelgrane Press web site.
- Copy and cut out the three sets of build cards, as found in the Appendix or at the *Gaean Reach* resources page.
- Copy and cut up a sheet of taglines (Appendix, p. 94), or write, print, and cut up your own similarly piquant lines of Vancian dialogue.

BUILD CARDS

In the first step of character generation, players discover what their characters know, how they present themselves to the world, and what they can do. Having already cut out the build cards appearing below, you distribute them in turn to the players so that each receives one card from each of the three sets. Players are free to trade cards among themselves at any of the three stages.

Hand them out in three waves, giving the players time to assimilate what each card tells them about the characters they'll be playing. As you do so, explain as follows.

INTRODUCTION TO ABILITIES

Build cards supply your character's abilities. The ability name suggests what you can do. The number appearing after the name is its **rating**. This gives you a **pool** of points you can spend while performing actions using that ability.

Abilities split into two types: **investigative** and **general**.

Investigative abilities allow you to gather information as you track your Quarry through the course of the series. To have even 1 point in an investigative ability means that you are extremely well versed in its use. When you spend an investigative point, you gain benefits above and beyond the gathering of information essential to your revenge. You might elicit that information with impressive speed, spout supplementary facts of jaw-dropping obscurity, or gain additional aid from the witnesses you query. When checking with the GM to see if there's a spend to be made, you're asking her, "Could this moment be somehow cooler?"

General abilities allow you to overcome obstacles, often of a physical nature, when interesting failure remains an option. They use a different scale than the investigative abilities. To have 4 points in a general ability indicates competence; 8 points, ultra-competence. You most often spend general points to enhance your chances of succeeding at the task at hand. When deciding whether to spend or not, you're asking yourself, "How much do I really want this?"

In neither case does the expenditure of points exactly correspond to a concrete process in the fictional world. Rather, they dole out, in increments you control, the moments in which your character seizes the spotlight by doing cool things in keeping with his established specialties.

The Gaean Reach Series

In this game, your characters pursue vengeance across the many worlds of a loosely connected interstellar civilization of the far future.

Years ago, someone named Quandos Vorn did something terrible to you, and you swore to destroy him. Since that dark day, you've prepared yourself to hunt and confront this dread individual. Now you're finally ready.

Without forming preconceptions about what your character knows, how he or she acts, and what he or she can do, think of the terrible deed the object of your vengeance committed.

Also, think of a few possible names for your character. In the far future, some people sport pseudo-archaic names, while others have oddball or florid variations of names we know today. And some retain names that wouldn't be out of place on contemporary Earth.

Sample names from the source novels on which the game is based include Glawen Clattuc, Namour Clattuc, Eustace Chilke, Bodwyn Wook, Wayness Tamm, Myron Tany, Kirth Gersen, Tristano the Earthman, Attel Malagate, Glinnes Hulden, and Elvo Glissam.
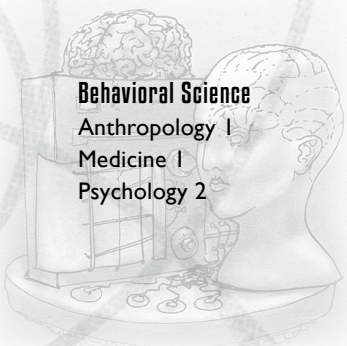
The rest will be revealed to you during character creation, at the beginning of the first session.

SET ONE: KNOWLEDGE

The Knowledge cards reflect the characters' learning and background. Players decide if they reflect their characters' life paths before the Terrible Deed, professional skills acquired since then, or a mix of both.

The entries appearing on Knowledge cards are all investigative abilities.

As players ask, consult the next chapter to supply ability definitions. Some are self-evident, others, less so.

Behavioral Science
Anthropology 1
Medicine 1
Psychology 2

Officialdom
Finance 2
Law 2

Exploratory
Astronomy 2
Geology 2

Humanities
Arts 2
History 2

Law Enforcement
Evidence Collection 1
Materiel 1
Research 2

Applied Science
Chemistry 2
Engineering 2

SET TWO: PERSONA

Persona cards show how the characters present themselves to others, through the tactics they use to get what they want out of people.

How much these poses represent their characters' true selves is a question left to the players. They can choose to address it now or let it arise organically in the course of the story.

Meticulous
Bureaucracy 2
Punctilio 1

Soothing
Flattery 1
Reassurance 2

Incisive
Negotiation 2
Scuttlebutt 1

Distingué
Flair 2
Flirting 1

Overbearing
Intimidation 2
One-Upsmanship 1

Sly
Impersonate 1
Nose for Mendacity 2
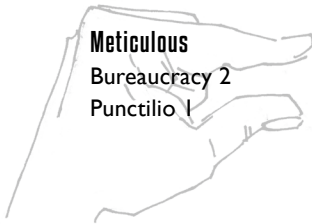
SET THREE: LIFE

Cards from this last set indicate the training and practical or professional experience the characters have accumulated over their lives. Although they probably reflect the changes the characters have put themselves through in preparation for the hunt, players are free to decide that some or all predate the Terrible Deed.

Except for the bonus investigative ability shown on the last line, all of the abilities here are general abilities, which the characters use to overcome the various concrete obstacles that will confront them throughout their quest for vengeance.

Characters who already gained the bonus investigative ability from an earlier card add the numerical ratings together.

Shady
Athletics 6
Filch 4
Gambling 4
Health 8
Scuffling 4
Shooting 8
Wherewithal 6
INVESTIGATIVE:
Nose for Mendacity 1

Skulk
Athletics 6
Health 8
Infiltration 4
Scuffling 4
Shooting 8
Surveillance 4
Wherewithal 6
INVESTIGATIVE:
Scuttlebutt 1

Resourceful
Athletics 6
Health 8
Preparedness 7
Scuffling 4
Shooting 8
Wherewithal 7
INVESTIGATIVE:
Research 1

Wrench
Athletics 6
Health 8
Scuffling 8
Shooting 4
Systems Repair 4
Vehicles 4
Wherewithal 6
INVESTIGATIVE:
Engineering 1

Doc
Athletics 4
Health 8
Medic 9
Scuffling 4
Shooting 8
Wherewithal 6
INVESTIGATIVE:
Medicine 1

Rich
Athletics 5
Health 7
Scuffling 6
Shooting 6
Wealth 8
Wherewithal 7
INVESTIGATIVE:
One-Upsmanship 1

TRANSFER TO CHARACTER SHEETS

When the card-trading, if any, is concluded, hand out a character sheet to each player. Players transfer the information from the cards onto their sheets, marking the values appearing after each ability in the appropriate "Ratings" columns.

As they transfer the numbers, they can adjust them somewhat.

They may shift any number of points between the investigative abilities listed on their cards, provided that no ability is reduced to 0.

They may shift any number points between the general abilities listed on their cards, provided no ability is reduced to 0. Reducing any ability by more than a few points may make the character fragile or hard to play.

When adjustments are completed, each player may:

- add a single investigative ability the character lacks, at a rating of 1.
- add a single general ability the character lacks, at a rating of 3.

Under the Quarry entry, each player writes *Quandos Vorn* (or the alternate name you've assigned to the Quarry character).

INTRODUCTIONS

Going around the table in seating order, ask each player to describe his character. Prompt as needed for each character's name, appearance, and reason for hunting Quandos Vorn.

Where fashion is concerned, explain that, while Vancian heroes often dress with austere simplicity, many denizens of the Gaean Reach favor fabulous garb.

Ask for a brief account of the character's life, before and after the Terrible Deed.

Players may specify that certain details of their pasts remain off-limits to the other characters, even though the other players know them.

Where necessary, invite the player to account for any surprising contrasts between Knowledge, Persona, and Life. It is in these unexpected combinations of elements that a character departs from convention and engages the group's imagination.

Rachel draws the following build cards: Humanities (Knowledge), Overbearing (Persona), and Wrench (Life). The first go together easily — professors often learn to run roughshod over others. But how did her character, Kelise Amaman, end up as a grease-spattered mechanic? "Quandos Vorn not only planted the bomb that killed my students, but framed me for the murder. I had to take another identity and flee my homeworld. Unable to again face the false safety of academia, and afraid of being found out if I pursued my distinctive theories under another name, I threw myself into the world of gears, diodes, and stellar engines — learning the practical skills I would need to pursue my revenge."

Especially when describing the Terrible Deed, players should feel free to invent worlds, situations, and secondary characters. Work with players to adjust details that don't fit the Gaean Reach setting. For example, if a player mentions full-fledged sentient aliens, which are widely believed to be nonexistent, you would instead suggest that they're really rapidly evolved offshoots of humanity, a commonplace of the Reach.

During the introductions, players may spontaneously choose to build on the Terrible Deeds or other biographical events described by others. These may imply that certain of the characters already know each other. Barring this, the characters actually meet only during the introductory scenes of the first scenario.

Hearing the Terrible Deed Rachel describes, Lisa says, "I was an acolyte of the Cult of Explosive Majesty, pledged to marry its priest and bear a new divine king for our people. But Quandos Vorn came to our world and stole the dibranium ore it was my sacred duty to guard. Unknown to my character, Threen, it's this undetectable explosive he used to kill Kelise's students.

"Having failed in my duties, I was excommunicated, which to my people is a fate akin to death. I can never regain my spiritual grace — but I can kill Quandos Vorn."

IF YOU HATE QUANDOS VORN SO MUCH, WHY HAVEN'T YOU KILLED HIM ALREADY?

Next, invite the players to collectively explain why it will require a massive and heroic effort to find and destroy Quandos Vorn. Participate in the spitballing to ensure that you can draw an entire exciting series out of their manhunt. While letting them take the lead in describing Vorn and the difficulties of hunting him, be sure to pose the following two questions:

- Quandos Vorn might be standing next to any one of them right now, and they wouldn't know it. Why is that?
- To get to Quandos Vorn, do they have to go through a series of his confederates, each nearly as terrifying and formidable as he?

Throw in some or all of these additional prompts if the group has trouble thinking up suitable obstacles:

- He is known to hide out on a spectacularly inhospitable world. What nigh-insurmountable difficulties await his pursuers there? Or are they insurmountable, period, in which case the vengeance-seekers will have to wait for him to leave his redoubt?
- Does Quandos Vorn enjoy official status or legal protection on the worlds where he might easily be found? What is its nature, and why will it prove difficult to penetrate?
- Is Quandos Vorn beloved by ordinary people who will act against you if you openly strike against him? Who are they, and why do they admire him?

You'll later bring these ideas into play as Pitfalls the vengeance-seekers encounter in the course of each scenario (p. 70).

DISTRIBUTE TAGLINES

Randomly distribute three taglines to each player. As these are used in play, you'll replace these with others from your pile of unused taglines.

START PLAYING

Still other revelations about the characters and what they can do may await, but that happens in play. Start your introductory scenario.

Alternate Quandos Vorns

If one or more of you have played the game before, you might want to select a name other than Quandos Vorn as your Quarry. Should you do this, remember to change the introductory message to players.

On the other hand, you might enjoy the literary frisson of always hunting a different Quandos Vorn every time you play.

And let's not be gender exclusive. Vancean villains in the Quandos Vorn mode are usally male, but maybe your group would prefer a female nemesis, in which case they'd be pursuing Quanda Vorn.

THE RULES OF REPRISAL

T HIS CHAPTER PRESENTS THE CORE RULES YOU'LL USE TO TELL YOUR STORY of vengeance in the Gaean Reach.

The GUMSHOE rules system takes as its core thought the idea that it's never interesting to fail to get information. If your ultra-competent characters look in the right places for clues leading to Quandos Vorn, they'll find them. They'll get other information as well, and have to sort the relevant from the distracting as they zero in on their Quarry. That's where the mystery comes in — in piecing together the puzzle. This streamlines the investigative portions of play, by editing out the frustrating bits where you roll and fail to get a crucial piece of intelligence, and the GM must then thrash about improvising a workaround — hoping you don't fail again when you get to it.

Other obstacles lead to interesting plot developments even when you fail — you might get attacked by alien creatures, imprisoned in a pit, or knocked out of the sky when your airborne vehicle malfunctions. Even here, however, the system allows you to shape your success and failure, by selecting moments in the spotlight and spending points to increase your chances of glint-eyed triumph.

ABILITIES

This section explains what you can do using the game's various abilities. Bullet-pointed lists of sample actions are indicative, not exclusive. Expect your GM to reward creativity in applying abilities to tasks, so long as the attempts you describe exist somewhere on the continuum of plausibility.

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES

Using these abilities, you'll find and follow the circuitous trail of the hated Quandos Vorn.

If you typically use the ability by simply remembering a fact you've already learned, it's an **academic** ability.

If you use it to get someone else to tell you something, it's an **interpersonal** ability.

Technical abilities often require you to take physical action of some sort as you inspect a piece of evidence.

Some academic abilities can be used like interpersonal abilities under particular circumstances, which are given in bullet-points followed by the ☯ symbol.

Anthropology   (ACADEMIC)

Mankind's multi-millennial diffusion across the Gaean Reach has infinitely complicated the study of human culture, mores, and behavior. Experts such as you grapple with the infinite variations of human social arrangement — and the mysterious persistence, across countless societies, of selfishness, obstruction, and cupidity.

You can:

• identify artifacts and rituals of living cultures
• describe the customs of a foreign group or local subculture
• extrapolate the practices of an unknown culture from similar examples
• predict the behaviors of individuals in response to stimuli (assuming that their reactions will fall within the norms of their culture)
• interact successfully with individuals from tribal and post-human cultures ☯

Arts   (ACADEMIC)

You exhibit a voluminous familiarity with the art practices of human (and, where applicable, devolved sub-human) cultures throughout the Gaean Reach, past and present. You can:

• detect fakes
• judge the skill of performers and artists
• issue authoritative critiques
• name the culture, planet of origin, period, and aesthetic tradition that produced a work of art
• estimate the resale value of an art object
• speak elevated art lingo to aesthetes, earning their confidence ☯

Astronomy   (TECHNICAL)

You can read and interpret a star map. The three-dimensional spatial relationships between stars, planets, and other major heavenly bodies of the Gaean Reach are thoroughly imprinted in your memory. You can:

• plot the fastest and/or safest course between two destinations
• extrapolate the intended destination of another ship
• recall the properties and hazards of documented stellar and subspace anomalies
• extrapolate the behavior of astronomical anomalies
• find inconsistencies in accounts of interstellar travel

Bureaucracy   (INTERPERSONAL)

Wherever you go in the Gaean Reach, you will find a petty official who wishes to impede your activities. Your superior grasp of procedure and preternatural awareness of typical stalling tactics allow you to entangle official interlocutors in the very red tape meant to stop you. By striking fear into the hearts of functionaries everywhere, you can:

• access official records
• extract information from bureaucrats
• guess what governments are covering up, and why

- secure permission to enter government installations and use their resources

Chemistry   [TECHNICAL]

You study chemical substances and the molecular science that lends them their properties. With portable science kits or, in complicated cases, access to a fully equipped laboratory, you can:

- identify nonorganic compounds
- specify the properties of toxins, hallucinogens, and other nonorganic compounds that interact with living beings' body chemistries
- match samples to sources, for example, correlating a soil sample from one location to the dirt on a target's boots
- identify sources of contamination and alteration in a mineral sample
- identify the planetary or extraplanetary origin of a mineral or compound
- synthesize small quantities of specific compounds
- determine whether a compound is naturally occurring or was synthesized

Engineering   [TECHNICAL]

You know how structures, devices, machines, and vehicles are put together, from the fabrication of parts to final assembly. You can:

- identify the designer, or design tradition, of a device, structure, or machine
- date an obsolete piece of equipment
- relying on your knowledge of design practices, guess the interior layout of a building or starship
- from its remnants, determine how a ship, structure, or device was damaged or destroyed
- identify an industrially processed material

Evidence Collection   [TECHNICAL]

You can collect pieces of evidence without contaminating them. While anyone can spot a bloodstain, broken lock or glass, or bullet fragments in plain view, you can:

- scour a scene to find its carefully hidden samples of trace evidence
- mentally recreate a sequence of events by eyeballing the spatial relationships between objects found at a scene
- tell when evidence at the scene has been faked, moved, contaminated, or otherwise interfered with
- lift fingerprints from a scene and match them to the contents of a fingerprint library

Finance   [ACADEMIC]

You understand commercial transactions, bookkeeping, securities exchanges, and interstellar banking. You can:

- spot accounting irregularities
- follow money trails to reveal shady activities
- trace funds to their source
- assess the fiscal health of a business, government, or institution
- tell if complex deals are favorable, unfavorable, or fraudulent
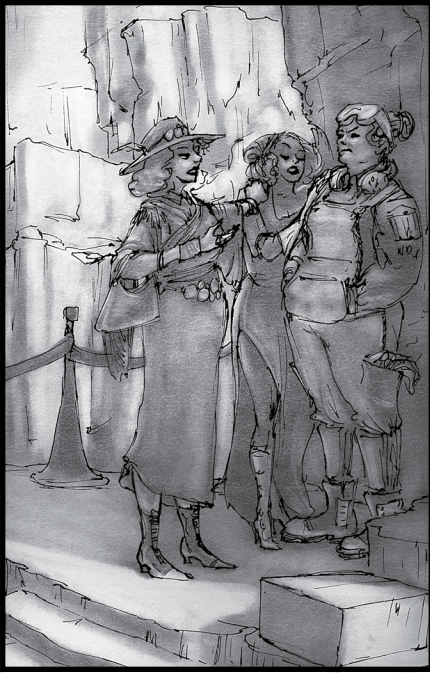
On a spend, you may be able to skim or divert the proceeds of illicit transactions from a wrongdoer's accounts into your own or those of someone else you wish to benefit.

Flair   (INTERPERSONAL)

You instinctively sense and replicate the prevailing fashions and modes of any society. Whatever superficial qualities render a person magnetic and popular in any given culture, you adopt them as easily as donning a hat. Doubtless you prefer the more outlandish, perhaps even peacockish, styles of worlds where lavish extroversion is celebrated. Nonetheless, you can as easily assume the dour garb and sullen mien considered desirable by ascetics or puritans.

You can:
- appear at ease in any social situation
- win the confidence of socialites, gadabouts, scenemakers, worthies, and upper crusters
- impress members of the lower orders who admire the rich, the suave, and the trendsetting

- where fickle tastes reign, predict or inculcate new fashions

Flattery   (INTERPERSONAL)

Within seconds of meeting a new person, you can accurately guess the compliments he most wants to hear about himself. By smoothly lacing these into your conversation, you put the subject at ease, making him receptive to your requests for information or other assistance. You adjust the effusiveness of your praise to meet local norms, so that it never seems overdone or self-serving.

Flirting   (INTERPERSONAL)

Your raw sexual charisma wins the cooperation of others, who fall in love — or at least lust — with you after a brief interaction. How thoroughly you choose to romance them after getting the information or aid you seek is up to you. Many of the subjects you successfully use this ability on are interested in nothing more physical than winks and banter. You never blunder into making a pass at an unreceptive subject — your finely tuned sense for romantic niceties tells you how far you can go with any subject.

Geology   (ACADEMIC)

You are an expert on rocks, soils, minerals, plate tectonics, and planetary formation. You can:
- analyze soil samples, crystals, and minerals
- determine the age of a rock stratum
- date and identify fossils of known life-forms
- evaluate soil for agriculture or industry
- identify promising sites for resource extraction
- anticipate volcanism, seismic events, avalanches, and other planetary phenomena
- determine the properties and origin of unknown mineral compounds
- find sources of fresh water

History   (ACADEMIC)

You're an expert in recorded human history, with an emphasis on its political, military, economic and technological developments. You can:

- recognize obscure historical allusions
- recall capsule biographies of famous historical figures
- tell where and when an object made in a past era was fashioned
- identify the period of an article of dress or costume

Impersonate   (INTERPERSONAL)

You're good at posing as another person, whether briefly misrepresenting yourself during a phone call or spending long periods undercover in a fictional identity.

Successfully disguising yourself as an actual person known to those you're interacting with is extraordinarily difficult. Brief voice-only mimicry requires a spend of at least 1. Face-to-face impersonation requires a spend of at least 2 to 3 points for every five minutes of sustained contact between you and the object of your impersonation. Especially wary or intelligent subjects cost more to hoodwink than dull-witted walk-on characters.

Intimidation   (INTERPERSONAL)

You extract information and other concessions from others by inducing anxiety, or activating their impulse to submit to a person they recognize as superior. When dealing with the weak and submissive, you immediately seize emotional advantage, which you proceed to coldly exploit. This bullying may be physical, emotional, or both. In the first case, you invade your target's boundaries, emphasizing your greater size or strength, making implied or explicit violent threats. In the latter, you threaten more sophisticated punishments, from financial doom to personal humiliation.

Law   (ACADEMIC)

Your quest for vengeance will require you to navigate a tangle of laws intergalactic, planetary, and local. Though Quandos Vorn may have committed criminal violations on a historical scale, you will as often as not find yourself blocked by minor officials doggedly intent on the enforcement of petty codes and regulations. Understanding of underlying legal principles allows you to bluff your way through the unfamiliar precepts of the obscurest backwater world. You can:

- tell when an individual's otherwise inexplicable actions are designed to exploit or evade a particular law
- pinpoint a speaker's planet of origin or law school from the legal arguments he makes
- distinguish real lawyers from fraudsters
- identify laws you can use to hamper your opponents or exert pressure on third parties
- sense when local authorities have been suborned
- assess the legal risks attendant on any course of action

Life Sciences   (ACADEMIC)

Training in botany, biochemistry, evolutionary theory and zoology allows you to:

- identify the likely environment a plant sample grew in
- name the home planet of a plant species from a sample
- determine whether a plant grew on its planet of origin or elsewhere
- tell whether a plant has been genetically modified, and at what point in its history
- forage for food plants, or plants with needed medicinal qualities, even on an unfamiliar or undocumented planetary environment
- identify plants which might be toxic, carnivorous, or otherwise dangerous
- spot the symptoms of plant-derived poisonings
- find times of death for corpses from the insect larva found in tissues

- distinguish deaths from animal predation from those caused by sentient violence
- match the species of an animal life-form to its tracks, spoor, hairs, blood, or tissue
- extrapolate the mass, body morphology, behavior and/or ecological niche of an undocumented, unseen animal species from any of the sample types in above example
- predict the behavior of an animal, given its species or ecology
- tell whether apparently normal animals have been genetically altered, either from tissue or hair samples or from observing their behavior
- make inferences about unknown animals by studying their fossilized remains
- trace the origins of an organism, distinguishing local from invasive species, taking into account the effects of rapid speciation

Materiel   (TECHNICAL)

As an expert in weapons, munitions, and military equipment past and present, you can:
- identify unknown weapons
- pinpoint the age and planetary origin of nonstandard weapons and military vehicles
- when inspecting the body of a murder victim, identify the weapon used, along with other kinetic circumstances of the killing, such as:
  - the angle of blows
  - relative size of the attacker
  - trajectory of weapons fire
- identify weapons or munitions from damage done to physical objects
- defuse bombs and traps
- reconstruct exploded bombs, determining their materials, manufacture, and the sophistication of the bomb-maker
- safely construct and detonate explosive devices of your own

Medicine   (TECHNICAL)

You can examine and diagnose injuries and ailments of the human and human-derived form. (To be able to treat patients, also take points in the general ability Medic.)

In living subjects you can also:
- tell if a disease is natural or man-made
- identify toxins
- identify the planetary origin of uncommon diseases
- predict likely time of death in the case of a fatal condition (or one that will become fatal if untreated)

With dead patients you gain additional latitude. By performing autopsies, you can determine:
- the presence of intoxicants or other foreign substances in the bloodstream
- the contents of the victim's last meal
- cause of death when not apparent from visual inspection of the corpse

If your rating is 2 or more, and your Medic rating 8 or more, you received formal medical training. At your discretion, you may be an accredited physician, or formerly so.

Negotiation   (INTERPERSONAL)

You are an expert in making deals with others, convincing them that the best arrangement for you is also the best for them. You can:
- haggle for goods and services
- mediate hostage situations
- swap favors or information with others

Nose for Mendacity   (INTERPERSONAL)

Many people of the Gaean Reach maintain but a loose affiliation with the truth. In this environment, an instinctive sense for the difference between routine deception and relevant falsehood speeds your appointment with ultimate vengeance. You can tell when people are lying to you, overtly or by omission, on a matter sufficiently important to them that they feel a sense of guilt or anxiety. This emotional distress reveals itself in one or more verbal tics or gestural tells.

Nose for Mendacity is not a mind-reading ability. It does not tell you what truth your interlocutor conceals. Nor does it reveal whether it will prove as important to you as it does to the subject. (Sometimes point spends will net you hints in one or both directions.)

Inexperienced or casually motivated untruth-tellers may yield information you seek if you accuse them of lying. Others will transparently redouble their efforts to deceive.

Dissemblers unencumbered by guilt or fear may not trigger your Nose. This exception covers practiced liars, sociopaths, psychopaths, and individuals with psychologies altered by devolution, genetic tampering, futuristic pharmaceuticals, or advanced cognitive therapies.

One-Upsmanship (INTERPERSONAL)

By arousing and then dashing their hunger for superior position in any social encounter, you wring concessions, including useful information, from the status-conscious. You do this by identifying the qualities that grant status in the situation at hand, allowing the target to believe he has them in greater measure than you do, and then proving him decisively wrong. After deflating him, his sulky cooperation ensues. Such duels of status may revolve around:

- fashion and style
- connoisseurship of art, food, or other luxury goods
- knowledge of obscure and useless topics
- possession of rare collectibles
- name-dropping
- displays of wealth
- travel experiences
- colorful anecdotes

Status seekers infest nearly every world of the Gaean Reach. Many are bluffers. When you engage in One-Upsmanship, the extent to which your sallies are authentic remains up to you. In the end, the reality of your claims is less important than the panache with which you deploy them.

Psychology (ACADEMIC)

Theories of the mind and behavior have come and gone over millennia of human dispersion across the vast Gaean Reach. Having distilled approaches both classic and modern, eternal and voguish, you can:

- assemble a profile of an unknown individual, based on his known crimes and outrages
- diagnose the origin of behavioral defects, whether psychological, neurological, or technologically induced
- outline a promising course of therapy for any of the above
- after casual observation, predict an individual's probable responses to future events
- suggest the interpersonal ability most likely to work on an observed individual

On a spend, you may be able to temporarily alleviate the symptoms of a psychological disorder through talk therapy or (if you also have Medicine or Medic) by dispensing pharmaceuticals.
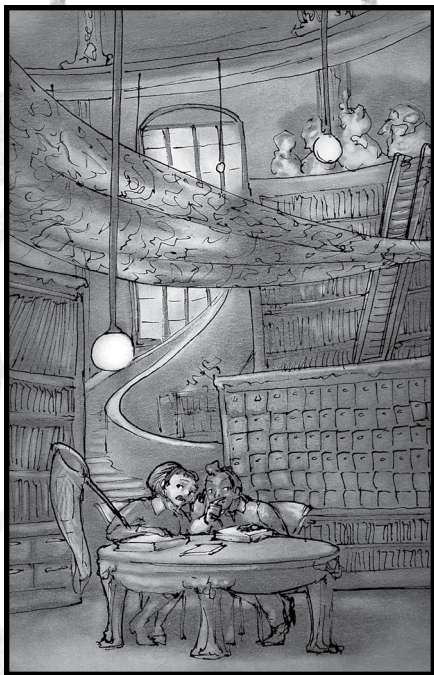
Due to the intervention of the interstellar leadership organization known as the Institute, the information protocols of the Gaean Reach remain mired at a level approximating that of mid-20th century Earth. Assembling information you do not already have remains a matter of entering dusty libraries and archives and sifting through moldy tomes and decaying documents. An efficient library system may require you to make an inquiry with a research staffer, undoubtedly using a complicated form and perhaps a punch card, which may or may not then be routed as intended. Where they exist at all, computer databases are stored on massive mainframes, which you must physically visit — often also entailing the intercession of an officious docent.

Often you find it easier to gain information by seeking out other experts in various fields. As you've prepared for your grim vengeance, you've accumulated a list of such contacts. When on familiar worlds, you can reach out to them for the facts you need, circumventing the oft-frustrating legwork of archival searches.

Punctilio   (INTERPERSONAL)

A devotion to etiquette unites Gaean Reach societies, including those with seemingly rough-hewn exterior qualities. By precise adherence to formalities, you obligate those who celebrate them to cooperate with you. They may do so grudgingly, especially if their goals run contrary to yours. But you've followed the unwritten rules with unwavering perfection, and, if civilization still means anything, they can only do as you ask.

Reassurance   (INTERPERSONAL)

You secure cooperation by putting the worried at ease. You can:
- elicit information and minor favors
- allay fear or panic in others
- instill a sense of calm during a crisis

Research   (TECHNICAL)

You are an expert in the difficult art of extracting information from libraries and other document holdings.

Scuttlebutt   (INTERPERSONAL)

You gather information by spending time in crowds, rubbing elbows, swapping anecdotes, and strategically eavesdropping. The clues you pick up fall within the common currency of social discourse:
- complaints about politicians and other power brokers
- scandals involving prominent individuals
- power plays within influential organizations
- suspicious or unusual activities
- colorful or appalling crimes
- shortages, new regulations, and other inconveniences of everyday life

Rather than playing out interactions with dozens of individuals over the course of a day or evening, you will most often tell the GM you're using Scuttlebutt, and get a summary of pertinent information. This assumes that you've also heard crazy rumors and patent

irrelevancies by the earful and used your judgment to sift them out.

On occasion, you may target a particular individual with Scuttlebutt, preying on their urge to gossip to pry loose nuggets of fact they ought to be keeping secret.

GENERAL ABILITIES

Using these abilities, you'll survive the circuitous trail that leads to Quandos Vorn. One hopes.

General abilities emulate the structure of procedural ensemble fiction, where each of the main characters gets a number of chances to shine per story. The clearest model for this appears in episodic TV. Over the course of a series, if not in every episode, key characters receive a roughly equal number of spotlight moments, in which they overcome major obstacles in a cool and compelling way. Each character does this in accordance with his or her key traits or abilities.

Here, pool points give you X opportunities to shine per scenario, where X is a somewhat fuzzy and unpredictable number. Your character may shine with an atypical ability, but more often than not triumphs by employing the abilities most associated with her.

If the mechanics seem weird to you, you are probably applying the simulative thinking of other fine rules systems to GUMSHOE, resulting in a classic expectations mismatch.

Your character does not, for example, become literally worse in her abilities as you spend points. Ratings remain unchanged as you spend points. Point-spending is something players do on the fictional level, not something that happens to the characters in their reality.

If your Athletics rating is 8, you are better, overall, at performing physical tasks than a teammate with an Athletics rating of 4. When making a pound-for-pound comparison, always use ratings, not pools.

However, if you've already spent 4 points, and your teammate has spent none, you now have a roughly equal chance of successfully performing Athletics-related tasks until the next refresh occurs. But you already have one or two successes under your belt, most likely, while he hasn't done anything to demonstrate his athletic prowess. You have already shown yourself to be the superior athlete by overcoming obstacles using your Athletics. All else being equal, you will be the superior athlete more often than a character with a lower rating.

Athletics

Athletics allows you to perform general acts of physical derring-do, from running to jumping to dodging oncoming or falling objects. Any physical action not covered by another ability probably falls under the rubric of Athletics.

If your Athletics rating is 8 or more, your Hit Threshold, the Target Number your opponents use when attempting to hit you in combat, is 4. Otherwise, your Hit Threshold is 3.

Filch

Your nimble fingers allow you to unobtrusively manipulate small objects. You can:

- pick pockets
- plant objects on unsuspecting subjects
- remove small items from desks, consoles, or storage units, even while others are present and supposedly watchful
- if imprisoned, slip cell keys or beam unlockers from the belts of guards
- hide small objects on your person
- surreptitiously relieve suspects and witnesses of their weaponry

Gambling

Win at games of chance — sometimes by cheating. If you decide to follow the rules, you easily calculate the odds of various standard bets and gambits. If you wish to cheat, you know how to palm cards, mark decks, and load dice.

Honest play can only bend the odds so far. Any time you are spending more than 2 points on a Gambling test, you are cheating.

You can spot the cheating of others.

If confronted with an unfamiliar game, you can quickly learn its rules and begin to intuit its optimal strategies. Where wagering is illegal or undertaken only in secret, Gambling takes you to where the action is.

Much of a gambler's success rests in his ability to disguise his talents until he moves in for the kill. You are adept at portraying yourself as a naïf barely familiar with the rudiments of the game at hand. You can figure out when to quit before angering your gambling companions, and when leaving the table without giving them a chance to recapture your winnings would itself start a fight.

Health

Health measures your ability to sustain injuries, resist infection, and survive the effects of toxins. When you get hit in the course of a fight, your Health pool is diminished. A higher Health pool therefore allows you to stay in a fight longer before succumbing to your injuries.

When your Health pool is depleted, you may be dazed, wounded, or pushing up the daisies. For more on this, see "Exhaustion, Injury and Death," p. 37.

Unlike other general abilities, Health really is a resource that depletes over time, the loss of which corresponds to a physical condition obvious to the character and those observing her. It's the exception that proves the rule.

Infiltration

You're good at placing yourself inside places you have no right to be. You can:

- deactivate or evade security systems
- sneak up on suspects and their hideouts, to take them by surprise
- find suitable places for forced entry, and use them
- defeat locks, from primitive metallic devices to sub-transient hatchguards

Despite its name, Infiltration is as useful for getting out of places undetected as it is for getting into them.
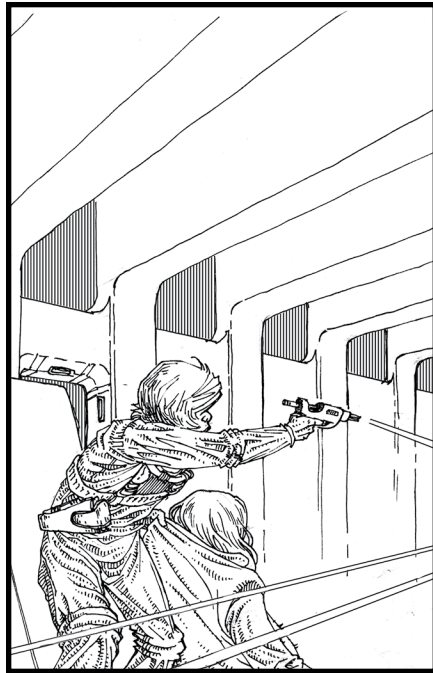
Medic

You can perform first aid on sick or injured individuals. For more on the use of this ability, see p. 38.

If your rating is 8 or more, and your Medicine rating 2 or more, you received formal medical training. At your discretion, you may be an accredited physician, or formerly so.

Preparedness

Preparedness allows you to have minor bits of gear on your person to suit the needs of a situation. Rather than preparing an exhaustive list of everything you're carrying in your pack, wait until you need something and then check Preparedness to see if you have it.

Certain abilities imply the possession of basic gear suitable to their core tasks. Characters with Medic have their own first aid kits; Gambling implies ownership of cards, dice, chips, dominoes and other game pieces. If you have Shooting, you own and carry a projac, and so on.

The sorts of items you can produce at a moment's notice depend not on your rating or

pool, but on narrative credibility. If the GM determines that your possession of an item would seem ludicrous or out of keeping with the Gaean Reach setting, you don't get to roll for it. You simply don't have it. Cell phones fail the setting fidelity test, for example. Any item which elicits a laugh from the group when suggested is probably out of bounds. Inappropriate use of the Preparedness ability is like pornography. Your GM will know it when she sees it.

Scuffling

You can hold your own in a hand-to-hand fight, whether you wish to kill, knock out, restrain, or evade your opponent.

Shooting

You can fire ranged weapons, from primitive archery and crossbows to antique firearms to the projacs and needle-guns prevalent today.

Surveillance

You can watch others without being watched in turn. You can do this from a stationary hidden position or while on the move, following people, creatures and entities without being seen.

Additionally, your keen perceptions allow you to spot signs of potential danger to yourself and others. Information gained from this ability might save your skins but doesn't directly advance the central mystery. You might use it to:

- see a xandrak lurking in the tall fronds of a pterophyte forest
- notice the rubbery stink of fused wiring just before your ship's helm shorts out
- have a bad feeling about those local bravos gathering with their festival poles

Players never know the Difficulty Numbers for Surveillance before deciding how many points to spend, even in games where GMs generously inform the players of other Difficulty Numbers. Players must blindly choose how much to spend.

When more than one player is able to make a Surveillance test, the group decides which of them makes the attempt. Only one attempt per source of trouble occurs, conducted by the chosen PC.

Systems Repair

You repair damaged or derelict items of technology, including machines, ships, vehicles, and computers.

Vehicles

You wring superior performance from standard vehicles, including boats, ground cars, trains, hover conveyances, and atmospheric aircraft. While nearly anyone can drive some or most of these, you can engage in high-speed pursuits and chases and safely execute death-defying stunts.

You also know how to operate nonstandard or exotic vehicles that require special training. In the case of completely unfamiliar vehicles, you can figure out the controls on the fly, quickly aping the skills of a trained user.

It goes without saying that you can operate a starship. Their controls are simple and automated. Interesting crises requiring ability tests occur on planets, not aboard spacefaring vessels.

Wealth

You solve problems by throwing money at them. You spend from your vast reserves of cash to hire services, acquire equipment, or purchase favors.

Wherewithal

Faced with traumatic events, the human animal defaults to two impulses — to fight or to flee. You have steeled yourself against the shocks that would paralyze an ordinary person. This ability allows you to suppress your instincts and continue toward your goal, unfazed. It also represents your psychic resistance against external influences, such as:

- brainwashing techniques
- sensory deprivation
- mood-altering substances
- psychological manipulation
- mind control powers of half-men or devolved humans

TAGLINES

Taglines encourage player characters to speak, and therefore to behave, like the hyper-articulate wits who populate Jack Vance's Gaean Reach novels.

(GMs are urged to immerse themselves in Vance before running the game, so that they can speak in the Gaean manner, giving the players an example to emulate.)

As play progresses, remain alert for opportunities to weave your supplied lines of dialogue into the narrative. If they don't crop up, bend the narrative toward situations where they might.

When you speak a tagline, raise your hand, or speak in a heightened way that makes it clear to the GM that you're doing so.

The GM awards you 0–3 tokens for each tagline spoken, depending on how adroitly you weave it into the proceedings.

0 tokens: Your use of the line makes no sense whatsoever. You get no token and don't get to replace the tagline.

1 token: Your use of the line makes sense but makes no apparent impact on the story or the other participants.

2 tokens: The line is used in an apt, entertaining, and satisfying way.

3 tokens: You use the tagline in a supremely hilarious or dramatic way, eliciting audible gasps and/or laughter. Three-token awards must be head and shoulders above the general standard established by the rest of the group and should occur once or twice a session, if at all. In groups where everyone masters tagline use, the GM raises the bar to ensure that 3-token awards remain rare.

Adjusting for Session Length

These rules assume an ideal session length of 3–4 hours. GMs should adjust rules based on session length if they run in shorter intervals.

Spending Tokens

Once earned, you can spend tokens on the following:

COST	BENEFIT
3	Gain a general ability no one in the group has, at a rating of 1
2	Gain a new general ability at least one other PC already has, at a rating of 1
1	Gain an investigative ability no one in the group has (special: see p. 44)
	Improve the rating of a general ability you already have, at a current rating of
2	8 or less,
4	8-12,
8	greater than 12,
	by 1 point
2	Improve the rating of an investigative ability you already have, by 1 point
1	Make a Desperate Bid, using a general ability you don't have (p. 32)
✘	Overcome a key obstacle (see p. 34)
✘	Refresh an ability pool (see p. 43)
2	Prevent an instance of damage, including instantly fatal gun wounds, by purchasing a Fortunate Avoidance (p. 39)

Transferring Tokens

Unless a test or contest is already underway, you may spend 1 token (returning it to the kitty) to transfer any number of additional tokens to another player.

Use 'em or Lose 'em

Players start each session with 0 tokens, no matter how many of them they left unspent at the end of the previous session.

TRACKING YOUR QUARRY

In response to the decisions players make about Quandos Vorn, the GM sketches out a loose scenario structure in which you move one step closer to your grim justice. It contains various choice points, so that decisions you make during the scenario exert an impact on the outcome of events.

SCENARIO GOALS

You will use your investigative abilities to move from scene to scene toward a final goal, advancing your ultimate quest to identify, confront and destroy Quandos Vorn. That goal might be:

- apprehension and interrogation of a notable henchman to Quandos Vorn (against whom one or more of you might also desire vengeance, if he contributed to a Terrible Deed)
- uncovering and disrupting one of Quandos Vorn's current schemes
- locating and sabotaging a facility or other key asset controlled by Quandos Vorn
- finding and rescuing someone held prisoner by Quandos Vorn
- investigating a crime, proving that Quandos Vorn committed it — thus separating him from certain contacts or resources

GATHERING CLUES

Achieve scenario goals by gathering the clues that lead you, scene by scene, toward them. The GM will plan to allow for various routes between scenes. Some scenes may or may not occur, depending on your choices. In other cases, you'll be choosing between possible directions forward, determining the order in which scenes occur. Your GM adjusts or improvises scenes to fit surprise choices that nonetheless drive the story onward.

Acquiring clues is simple. All you have to do is: 1) get yourself into a scene where relevant information can be gathered, 2) have the right ability to discover the clue and 3) tell the GM that you're using it. As long as you do these three things, you will never fail to gain a piece of necessary information. It is never dependent on a die roll. If you ask for it, you will get it.

You can specify exactly what you intend to achieve: "I use Finance to determine the location of the bank receiving Quandos Vorn's funds transfer."

Or you can engage in a more general informational fishing expedition: "I use Geology to see if there's anything weird about these rock formations."

If your suggested action corresponds to a clue in the scenario notes, the GM provides you the information arising from the clue.

> You're investigating the disappearance of Verka Vrat, the indefatigable journalist who exposed Quandos Vorn's attempt to take over the Institute. Searching the area where her hoverpod crashed, you tramp across the crunchy silicate surface of Padd's World.
>
> GM: "You spot a peculiar shack hidden amid the transparent rocks."
>
> You: "Peculiar, huh? I draw on my knowledge of the Arts to see if I can tell anything about it from its style of construction."
>
> GM: "From its biomorphic forms and distinctive support struts, you recognize it as the work of an extinct human potential cult, the Estimators of True Seeking."

Some clues would be obvious to a trained investigator immediately upon entering a scene. These passive clues are provided by the GM without prompting.

> GM: "As you draw closer to the shack, you spot droplets of what looks like blood on a jagged silica rock."

Scenarios suggest which clues are passive and which are active, but your GM will adjust these in play depending on how much guidance you seem to need. On a night when you're cooking with gas, the GM will sit back and let you prompt her for passive clues. When you're bogging down, she may volunteer what would normally be active clues.

Early in the series, or on a night when everyone's experiencing a collective caffeine crash, the GM might instead run the shack clue, above, like this:

GM: "You spot a peculiar shack hidden amid the transparent rocks. Who has Arts?"

You: "I do."

GM: "From its biomorphic forms and distinctive support struts, you recognize it as the work of an extinct human potential cult, the Estimators of True Seeking."

For groups preferring to hide the game terms, the GM can rely on an Vengeance-Seeker Ability Worksheet (see p. 99). Knowing from the sheet which characters have which abilities, the GM supplies passive clues without stopping to ask. Given a choice between multiple PCs who have the same ability, the GM picks either a character who hasn't had a chance to shine lately or the one with the highest pool in the relevant ability. The GM might stick with one approach or switch between them as the moment seems to demand.

GM: "You spot a peculiar shack hidden amid the transparent rocks." [Checks the worksheet, seeing that, of the various characters present, you have the highest Arts rating. Addressing you, she says:] "From its biomorphic forms and distinctive support struts, you recognize it as the work of an extinct human potential cult, the Estimators of True Seeking."

The exact give-and-take surrounding the provision of clues will vary seamlessly based on the situation. Typically your GM will sit back and invite you to take the lead, subtly taking up the slack as needed.

For each scene, the GM designates a **core clue**. This is the clue you absolutely need to move to the next scene, and thus to complete the entire investigation. GMs will avoid making core clues available only with the use of obscure investigative abilities. (For that matter, the character creation system is set up so that the group as a whole will have access to all, or nearly all, of these abilities.)

Certain clues allow you to gain **special benefits** by spending points from the relevant investigative ability pool. During your first few scenarios, your GM will offer you the opportunity to spend additional points as you uncover these clues. After that it's up to you to ask if it there's anything to be gained by spending extra time or effort on a given clue. You can even propose specific ways to improve your already good result; if your suggestion is persuasive or entertaining, the GM may award you a special benefit not mentioned in her scenario notes.

When players ask if an investigative spend is available, GMs should hear this as, "Could this moment be cooler, please?" Keep making it more impressive until they seem satisfied[*].

Spending points on benefits often gives you an advantage, perhaps in a later general ability conflict. Thus it is to your advantage to propose cool benefits to the GM, even when they aren't specified in the scenario.

The act of spending points for benefits is called a **spend**. The GM's scenario notes may specify that you get Benefit X for a 1-point spend or Benefit Y for a 2-point spend.

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[*] Set this advice aside if you sense that players are winding you up by insincerely demanding more for their spends. Tell them to knock it off. If this doesn't work, kick out the undermining wiseacres in favor of genuinely collaborative players.
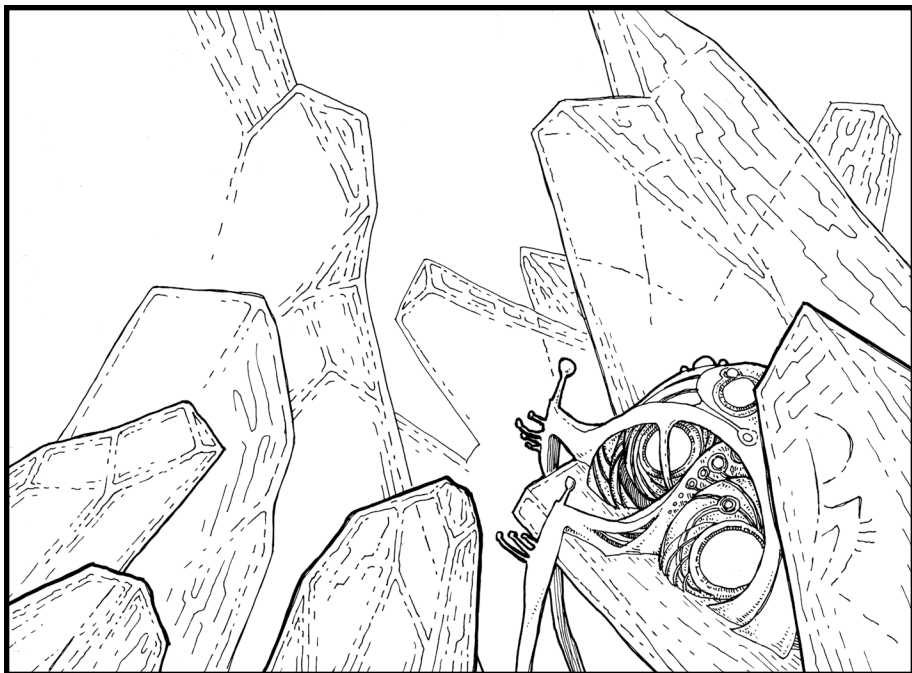
GMs who feel comfortable granting their players influence over the details of the narrative may allow them to specify the details of a special benefit.

Each benefit costs either 1 or 2 points from the relevant pool, depending on the impressiveness of the additional action and the scope of the reward. When asking you if you want to purchase the benefit, the GM always tells you how much it will cost. Additional information gained provides flavor, but is never required to solve the case or move on to a new scene. Often it makes the character seem clever, powerful, or heroic. It may grant you benefits useful later in the scenario, frequently by making a favorable impression on supporting characters.

"What do I know about the Estimators of True Seeking?" you ask. "I have 3 points in History."

The GM answers: "Reports vary. Their own histories portrayed them as a beneficial cooperative order dedicated to the awakening of a so-called inner soul. Their annals consist of moral injunctions from their leader, Tobormory the Omniscient, and an exacting ledger of his dietary intake. Screeds against the Estimators described them as exponents of free love, environmental devastation, and non-consensual flagellation."

"Hmm, I'd like to know more about them than that. Can I pay points to specify that I've studied these screeds and annals in detail, and can easily recall them?"

"Uh, sure," the GM says. "Spend a point."

"It's a deal," you reply.

"The accusations of free love and non-consensual flagellation sound rather rote. But environmental devastation?" you ask. "What did I read between the lines about that?"

"Later on in his diet log, references to a strange nutriweed start showing up. Near the end of his life, he's eating only nutriweed, and suggesting that it has brought him to new peaks of spiritual insight. He also urges his supporters to eat only nutriweed. This

Example Benefits

You'll likely improvise your way toward unusual uses of investigative spends. To get you started, here are some standard ways to reward spends:

You avoid trouble that would have worn down your general ability pools:

• **Engineering:** while searching a sailing vessel for clues, you note that it has been booby-trapped with a bomb that will go off when you try to return to the pier.

You gain an advantage in a future general test:

• **Psychology:** you identify local grandee Arabet Gonn as having a well-concealed problem with impulse control. When you later Gamble with him, the Difficulties of your tests decrease by the number of Psychology points spent.

You appear particularly masterful and knowledgeable:

• **Chemistry:** Someone in the group must interview the notoriously truculent chemical genius Tyron Dellic. You spend a point to specify that he was your mentor in university and the two of you are on cordial terms.

You resolve a problem faster than you otherwise would:

• **Flirting:** Information inquiries at the Van Dome Archive usually take at least two days, which would leave you at loose ends among the savage people of the Waterloss Basin. A Flirting spend, and a candelit dinner with the head archivist, secures you the plans to the filtration plant within hours.

provokes a schism, breaking the sect into the original Estimators, led by Tobormory, and the Reorganized Seekers of True Estimation, headed by his ex-wife."

"Hmm," you say, "typical small-sect dynamic there. But the nutriweed — it sounds sinister, almost parasitic."

"In fact, you recall that this was his ex-wife's complaint — that the Estimators had

been taken over in a silent coup, managed by a quasi-sentient plant."

"And let me guess: the hut is overgrown with a strange plant or vine."

"Yes, a dense gray-green vine with waggling fronds. It seems to be singing to you, beckoning your approach."

"Yikes! Did I read anything in the annals that might protect us from it, so we can still search the place?"

"Yes, Tobormory renounced his nutriweed-era revelations after he began to take calcium supplements. Soon afterwards he reconciled with his wife, and removed nutriweed from his diet entirely."

"Kelise!" you say, addressing Rachel's character. "Can you hook up some kind of calcium sprayer to destroy the vines?"

"Undoubtedly!" she says, anticipating that the GM's reply will be in the affirmative — as, indeed, it is.

"What eventually happened?" you ask the GM. "To Tobormory?"

"His wife poisoned him. But not with nutriweed."

(There's nothing about any of this, including the menacing vine, in the GM's notes. But by asking for a spend, you both created and neutralized a threat to the team and its investigation. You made your character seem impressive, while introducing a series of wryly entertaining side-notes about Tobormory and the Estimators.)

It never costs you points to ask for a spend when the GM can't think of any special benefits to offer you. It also never hurts to prompt a stumped GM with suggestions. "Can I maybe find a back exit with Engineering?" may get you further than "What can I get for an Engineering spend?"

Inconspicuous Clues

Sometimes the characters instinctively notice something without actively looking for it. Often this situation occurs in places they're moving through casually and don't regard as scenes in need of intensive searching. Your vengeance-seekers might pass by a holo-concealed door, spot a droplet of blood on a ship's helm console, or spot an out-of-place fungal organism growing on the underside of a fuel tank. Interpersonal abilities can also be used to find inconspicuous clues. The classic example is of a character whose demeanor or behavioral tics establish them as suspicious.

It's unreasonable to expect players to ask to use their various abilities in what appears to be an innocuous transitional scene. Otherwise they'd have to spend minutes of game time with every change of scene, running down their abilities in obsessive checklist fashion. That way madness lies.

Instead the GM asks which character has the highest current pool in the ability in question. (When in doubt for what ability to use for a basic search, the GM defaults to Evidence Collection.)

If two or more pools are equal, it goes to the one with the highest rating. If ratings are also equal, their characters find the clue at the same time.

To your surprise, you find a man dwelling in the shack, clad in stinking rags. The ragamuffin calls himself Gullen. He says that he was captured by rival scholars, subjected to a regime of memory-wiping experiments, and dumped here. When it was voguish, they embraced the inner spiral theory of social diffusion. Now inner spiralists are considered radical dissidents, at least on his homeworld of Twast. No one who wants to advance above the level of department sub-chair can allow these old ties to surface. Gullen, always a staunch outer spiralist, refused to cover up his old foes' former beliefs. Hence, his ignominious downfall.

Although Gullen is a former scholar who once tangled with inner spiralists, he was most recently a minor effectuator of Quandos Vorn's current scheme. When he realized who he was working for, and let that slip, his boss tried to wipe his memory and dumped him here.

The scenario notes indicate that Gullen should come off as less than entirely frank. In other words, he should waft an odor of deceit into any vengeance-seeker's Nose for Mendacity. Both your character and Kelise (played by Rachel) have this popular and widely useful ability, but you have 1 more point in that pool than Rachel does.

The GM addresses you: "You get a strong sense that the guy is afraid of you, and fashioning an egregious lie by assembling various true details."

General Spends

Occasionally you'll want to create a task at which there is no reasonable chance of failure, but which should cost the characters a degree of effort. To do this, simply charge the character(s) a   number of points from relevant general ability pools. Where tasks can be performed by cooperative effort, multiple characters may contribute points to them. The expenditures should usually be on the low side, at least if more than one character pitches in.

The GM wants the group to feel the cost of trekking across an arid plain, without risking their absolute failure, which would lead nowhere interesting. She requires at least one PC to spend 2 points of Vehicles and each vengeance-seeker to spend 2 Wherewithal. The first spend allows you to keep the clunky sand-churner you're riding in operating condition throughout the journey. The second reflects your collective demoralization in the face of the trip's extreme discomforts.

Leveraged Clues

A staple element of mystery writing is the crucial fact which, when presented to a previously resistant witness or suspect, causes him to break down and suddenly supply the information or confession the detectives seek. This is represented in GUMSHOE by the **leveraged** clue. This is a piece of information which is only available from the combined use of an interpersonal ability, and the mention of another, previously gathered clue. The cited clue is called a **prerequisite** clue, and is by definition a sub-category of core clue.

> *Psychology notes that Gullen displays anxiety when mentioning his daughter. Guessing that Quandos Vorn has threatened her or is holding her as a hostage, you use Reassurance to promise him that you'll protect her. He reluctantly tells you where he stashed the filament key.*

Pipe Clues

A clue which is important to the solution of the mystery, but which becomes significant much later in the scenario, is called a pipe clue. The name is a reference to screenwriting jargon, where the insertion of exposition that becomes relevant later in the narrative is referred to as "laying pipe." The term likens the careful arrangement of narrative information to the work performed by a plumber in building a house.

> *Early in the session, you search the starship of Zuiden, a suspected Quandos Vorn henchman. You use Evidence Collection to retrieve gilt fibers from its disposal unit. In a later scene, you track Zuiden to a masquerade. He must be the masked figure in the gold lamé cape! The clue from the earlier scene now allows you to advance the plot, by following or capturing Zuiden.*

Pipe clues create a sense of structural variety in a scenario, lessening the sense that the PCs are being led in a strictly linear manner from Scene A to Scene B to Scene C. When they work well, they give players a "eureka" moment, as they suddenly piece together disparate pieces of the puzzle. A risk with pipe clues lies in the possible weakness of player memories, especially over the course of a scenario broken into several sessions. The GM may occasionally have to prompt players to remember the first piece of a pipe clue when they encounter a later component.

TESTS

A test occurs when the outcome of an ability use is in doubt. Tests apply to general abilities only. Unlike information-gathering attempts, tests carry a fairly high chance of failure. They may portend dire consequences if you lose, provide advantages if you win, or both.

Even in the case of general abilities, the GM should call for tests only at dramatically important points in the story, and for tasks of exceptional difficulty. Most general ability uses should allow automatic successes, with possible bonuses on point spends, just like investigative abilities.

There are two types of test: simple tests and contests.

SIMPLE TESTS

A simple test occurs when the character attempts an action without active resistance from another person or entity. Examples include driving a treacherous road, jumping a gorge, sneaking into an unguarded building, binding a wound, shooting a target,

> ### Die Rolls
>
> All die rolls in GUMSHOE use a single ordinary (six-sided) die.

disconnecting a security system, or resisting mutant mental powers.

The GM determines how hard any given action is by assigning it a Difficulty Number ranging from 2 to 8 (occasionally even higher), where 2 offers only a slim chance of failure, 4 is the norm and 8 verges on the impossible. The player rolls a single die; if the result is equal to or higher than the Difficulty Number, the character succeeds. Before rolling the die, the player may choose to spend any number of points from the relevant ability pool, adding these to the final die result. Players who forget to specify the number of points they want to spend before rolling are stuck with the unmodified result.

> *Zuiden hurls a grenade into the information depot you hoped to ransack for clues to Quandos Vorn's location. Grabbing a flasgo bat conveniently decorating the archive's wall, you try to bat it harmlessly out the window. The GM decides that this is a harder than usual action and secretly assigns it a Difficulty of 6. You have 8 points in your Athletics pool. With Quandos Vorn so close at hand, you decide to go all out. You spend half of your pool, 4 points, on the attempt. You roll a 5, to which you add the 4 spent Athletics points, for a final result of 9. That's well over the Difficulty. "You succeed with aplomb!" the GM exclaims. You take up the narration: "The antique stain glass of the ancient window shatters as the grenade punches through it, exploding harmlessly as it tumbles down the adjacent cliffside."*

The GM never directly reveals Difficulty Numbers. She may, in response to player questions, give rough verbal indications of how hard a task seems to the naked eye:

- "You've got plenty of time — unless you slip."
- "The last time you slid for a blast door that far away, you made it. The time before that was a different story."
- "If you make it through, it'll be a miracle."

The test represents the character's best chance to succeed. Once you fail, you've shot your wad and cannot retry unless you take some other supporting action that would credibly increase your odds of success. If allowed to do this, you must spend more pool points than you did on the previous attempt. If you can't afford it, you can't retry.

> *Panicking as the prospect of an unwanted reunion with Quandos Vorn grows nearer, the scholar Gullen switches his allegiances and grabs the helm of the airskimmer you're piloting. While Kelise subdues him, you must use your Vehicles ability to right its course before it crashes into a stand of screamnettle trees. The GM assigns this a Difficulty of 4. You spend 2 points from your Vehicles pool on the attempt, but roll a 1.*
>
> *"You're caroming toward the trees!" the GM cries.*
>
> *Since she isn't describing you as hitting the trees, you realize that she's taking mercy on you and will give you another chance — if you can justify it.*
>
> *"Is there an emergency gyro system?" you ask.*
>
> *"There is, but it's leaking fluid."*
>
> *"What if I spend a point of Systems Repair in addition to a bigger Vehicles spend, to fix it and pull out of the death spiral at the last second?"*
>
> *"Sounds good," says the GM. "Try it!"*
>
> *To qualify for this attempt, you must spend not only your proposed Systems Repair point (taking your pool in that from 4 to 3) but at least 3 Shuttle Craft points. Fortunately you have 4 points left, so you're good to go. You hate to spend all of your spotlight time as a master of Vehicles this early in the episode, but a crash in the screamnettle forest, populated by carnivorous thrasps, poses too many lethal risks. The Difficulty Number of the piloting attempt is 4. You roll a 2; adding the 3 points expenditure, you get a final result of*

5. Executing a hair-raising barrel roll, you kick the gyroscopes back in and right your course. The skimmer rockets graze the forest canopy, severing a mere few of its razor-sharp leaves.

Success... at a Price

Failure to overcome certain external obstacles can stall the plot just as much as failure to gain information. When an obstacle seems to call for a test, but the GM can see that failure will result in a dull or frustrating dead end in the storyline, she adjusts the test so that it determines not whether the group will overcome it, but whether they'll pay a heavy price for doing so.

You trail the dogsbody Ums, hoping he'll lead you to the starship his master is readying for a trip off-world. Finding the starship will keep the story moving, so the GM decides that you will, whether your Surveillance test succeeds or not. What the test decides is whether you arouse the attention of drunken off-duty port workers, looking for a target for their Beating Day festivities.

In a well-conceived test, something good happens on a success and something bad happens on a failure. In an unsatisfying test, something good happens on a success and nothing happens on a failure.

Tests Without Points

If you have a rating in a general ability, you can always make tests with it, even when your pool is 0. Your result is the unmodified die roll, which must beat the Difficulty on its own.

If you have a rating of 0 in a general ability, you can make a test on it as a Desperate Bid. To make a Desperate Bid, justify how it is that you're able to attempt this action that is normally beyond you, and spend a token (p. 24). Your result is the unmodified die roll, which must beat the Difficulty on its own.

Margins

In some special tests or contests, the difference between difficulty and result is used to determine the degree of failure or success. This number is called the **margin**.

Piggybacking

When a group of characters act in concert to perform a task together, they designate one to take the lead. That character makes a simple test, spending any number of his own pool points toward the task, as usual. All other characters pay 1 point from their relevant pools in order to gain the benefits of the leader's action. These points are not added to the leader's die result. For every character who is unable to pay this piggybacking cost, either because he lacks pool points or does not have the ability at all, the Difficulty Number of the attempt increases by 2.

You, Kelise, Threen and Lacadae attempt to sneak into the Relict Gallery in Brindle to perform tests on the famous Botticelli painting Primavera. *You believe that it is a fake sold by Quandos Vorn to fund his current scheme. You, with an Infiltration of 8, take the lead. Kelise, Threen and Lacadae have 0, 2, and 4 points in their Infiltration pools, respectively. Threen and Lacadae pay 1 point apiece; their pools go down to 1 and 3. Because Kelise has no points to spend, the Difficulty Number of the Infiltration increases from 4 to 6. (If the group left her behind, it would be easier to sneak in, but she's the one with the art expertise.) You spend 3 points on the attempt and roll a 1. This would have overcome the Difficulty, if it weren't for Kelise's involvement. Clearly, she failed to fully apply her perspiration dampeners before the mission, setting off the security system's breather array.*

In many instances a group cannot logically act in concert. Only one character can try to palm a single object at any one time. Two characters with Preparedness check their individual kits in sequence rather than checking a single kit at the same time.

Piggybacking applies only to simple tests.

Cooperation

When two characters cooperate toward a single goal, they agree which of them is undertaking the task directly, and which is assisting. The leader may spend any number of points from her pool, adding them to the die roll. The assistant may pay any number of points from his pool. All but one of these is applied to the die roll.

When the vengeance-seekers gazed on the gardens of Sakmot, the world's isolationist elders declared them to be in possession of state secrets, barring them from ever leaving. Your ship has been impounded, and you've been assigned involuntary menial jobs as part of Sakmot's guest worker program. To have the ban lifted, you intend to exploit the gambling yen of its Citizenship Minister Rienmolle. Three of you will play him at his game of choice, the convoluted dice-and-card game called Flop.

Kelise (Rachel), with 4 Gambling points left in her pool, takes the lead, with Threen (Lisa) assisting. With only 1 Gambling left in your pool, there's no point in your trying to assist, because you need to have at least 1 extra point left to pay the cooperation cost. Both Rachel and Lisa spend all of their remaining points. Rachel's 4 points add to the die roll as usual; Lisa spends 2, but adds only 1 to the result. Rachel rolls a 3, to which 4 and 1 are added for a result of 8. This beats the unrevealed Difficulty Number of 6, forcing Rienmolle to bet a sum you know to be out of his financial reach. You usher him into a smoky backroom to discuss the issuance of the necessary permits.

Obstacle Costs

Certain general tests require more than a result that beats the Difficulty. To succeed, you must also spend an Obstacle Cost of 1 or more tokens. You decide to spend the tokens only after you beat the Difficulty, saving you from ever uselessly expending a token.

The GM reveals the need to pay an Obstacle Cost only after the test proves successful. When players are unwilling or unable to pay the Obstacle Cost, any pool points spent on the test are refunded.

When you fail to pay an Obstacle Cost during a contest, the GM may declare that your opponent successfully truncates the contest, leading to a temporary setback for you. The classic example is a fight, from which your enemy successfully and definitively escapes. You are never killed or harmed by failing to pay — just stymied.

Like pool points and tokens, Obstacle Costs do not simulate a physical reality in the fictional world, but rather emulate the structure of satisfying stories. In Jack Vance's novels, characters often meet their nemeses early in the narrative, where they interact with them and are unable to best them. Guns in this universe may be fatal on a single hit, but circumstances intervene to keep primary antagonists alive, heightening the reader's sense of vicarious frustration and preventing the story from reaching a premature conclusion.

When a test succeeds but the Obstacle Cost is not paid, the GM describes intervening circumstances snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

Kelise fires her needle-gun at Quandos Vorn, getting off an expert shot. Her player, Rachel, spends 4 Shooting points and rolls a 6, for a result of 10, easily overcoming Quandos Vorn's Hit Threshold of 4. You, the GM, then announce that an Obstacle Cost of 9 applies to the attempt. Rachel has nowhere near 9 tokens, and therefore fails. She does not dock herself the 4

Shooting points she would otherwise have spent. You describe a construction vehicle suddenly lurching into the square, giving Quandos Vorn surprise cover. The glass needle shatters uselessly on its door panel, and Quandos Vorn escapes.

Obstacle Costs are sometimes graduated, meaning that they drop as the story progresses. For graduated costs, subtract the number of intervals in the session so far from the supplied number. Obstacle Costs never drop below 1.

Obstacle Costs listed in this book are notated like this:

OBSTACLE COST: 2
OBSTACLE COST: 8 (Graduated)

The first example is a flat cost, levied regardless of where you are in the story.

As you have already surmised, the second is a graduated cost.

Ratings as Difficulty Benchmarks

GUMSHOE is player-facing, meaning that, whenever possible, tests that might be undertaken by supporting characters are flipped so that they become tests made by players.

Supporting character ability ratings may establish Difficulties for PC tests. Supporting character ratings translate into difficulties as follows:

RATING	DIFFICULTY
1–7	4
8–12	5
13–16	6
17+	7

You are in the room when Doce, a supporting character, tries to surreptitiously activate a piece of ancient alien technology.

Rather than having the supporting character make a Filch test to succeed, the GM requires a Surveillance test from you, to see if your character spots his attempt. Doce's Filch rating is 12, making this a Difficulty 5 Surveillance test.

CONTESTS

Contests occur when two characters, often a player character and a supporting character controlled by the GM, actively attempt to thwart one another. Although contests can resolve various physical matchups, in a game of interstellar vengeance, the most common contest is the chase, in which the vengeance-seekers run after their enemies or run away from angry natives or slavering creatures intent on ripping them limb from limb.

In a contest, each character acts in turn. The first to fail a roll of the contested ability loses. The GM decides who acts first. In a chase, the character who bolts from the scene acts first. Where the characters seem to be acting at the same time, the one with the lowest *rating* in the relevant ability acts first. In the event of a tie, supporting characters act before player characters. In the event of a tie between player characters, the player who arrived last for the current session goes first in the contest.

The first character to act makes a test of the ability in question. If he fails, he loses the contest. If he succeeds, the second character then makes a test. This continues until one character loses, at which point the other one wins.

Typically each character attempts to beat a Difficulty Number of 4.

Pursued by a quasi-sentient reptilian humanoid called a stirb, you flee through the dusty canyons of Valbik. Your Athletics pool is 6; the stirb's is 10. As the fleeing character initiating the chase sequence, yours is the first character to act. You spend 1 point, dropping your pool to 5. Your ensuing roll is a 4, for a result of 5. This beats the standard Difficulty of 4.

You describe your success: "Kicking up oxide dust, I scuttle down the sloping hills!"

On behalf of the stirb, the GM spends 2 and rolls a 4, for a result of 6. It's still in the chase. The GM narrates accordingly: "Its clawed feet deftly scrabble across the rocks of its native habitat."

You spend another point, taking your Athletics to 4. You roll a 6, for a final result of 7. The GM invites you to explain what you've done to widen the gap. "On a flat surface, my running training asserts itself, allowing me a burst of speed."

The GM rolls for the stirb, spending 1 point and rolling a 2. That's a failure. "It stops short at the cavern mouth, gasping and flicking out its forked tongue," the GM narrates. "Clearly the stirb specializes not in the long chase, but the sudden ambush."

Where the odds of success are skewed in favor of one contestant, the GM may assign different Difficulties to each. A character with a significant advantage gets a lower Difficulty Number. A character facing a major handicap faces a higher Difficulty Number. When in doubt, the GM assigns the lower number to the advantaged participant.

A vengeance-seeker scrabbling without gear up a rock face finds it harder to move quickly than the well-equipped climber he's pursuing. In this case he might face a Difficulty Number of 4, while the mountaineer gets the lower Difficulty of 3.

Throughout the contest, GM and players should collaborate to add flavor to each result, explaining what the characters did to remain in the contest. That way, instead of dropping out of the narration to engage in an arithmetical recitation, you keep the fictional world verbally alive.

Zero Sum Contests

A zero sum contest occurs when something bad or good is definitely going to happen to one of the PCs, and you need to find out which one takes the hit. Each player makes a test of a general ability. A zero sum contest can be positive or negative. In a positive contest, the character with the highest result gets a benefit. In a negative contest, the one with the lowest result suffers an ill consequence. Tell the players you're using a zero sum contest and whether it's toward a positive or negative result. Players decide in advance how many points to spend to modify their rolls, keeping this number secret from other players by writing it down on a piece of paper. They then roll the dice, reveal their expenditures, and announce their final results.

> *Your character, Kelise (Rachel) and Threen (Lisa) flee from a velocisphere on the planet Numitor. The GM has determined that, for story reasons, one of you will definitely be caught by the creature-slash-device, making this a zero sum contest. Rachel decides to spend a whopping 8 Athletics points and rolls a 1, for a result of 9. Lisa spends 4 Athletics and rolls a 1, for a result of 5. You spend 4 Athletics and roll a 5, for a result of 9.*
>
> *Lisa's 5 is the lowest result. Her character, Threen, is drawn into the translucent sphere.*

Be cautious when treating events with negative outcomes as zero sum contests. Because they guarantee that something bad will definitely happen to one of the PCs, make sure that the negative consequence is distressing but does no permanent harm to the character. It might likewise be acceptable to decide that one PC falls into a trap, but not that the trap then crushes him to death — or seriously wounds him, for that matter.

Worse results of zero sum contests are acceptable if the characters have had some other fair chance to avoid exposure to the bad situation.

If players are tied for best result (in the case of a positive test) or worst (in a negative test), the tied players may subsequently spend any number of additional points from the pool in question, in hopes of breaking the tie in their favor. Should results remain tied after additional expenditures, the GM chooses the winner based on story considerations.

Fighting

Fights are slightly more complicated contests involving any of the following abilities:

- Scuffling vs. Scuffling: the characters are fighting in close quarters
- Shooting vs. Shooting: the characters are apart from one another and trying to hit each other with guns or other missile weapons

INITIATIVE: Determine whether the character who attempts to strike the first blow seizes the initiative and therefore gets the first opportunity to strike his opponent or if his intended target anticipates his attack and beats him to the punch — or shot, as the case may be.

As GUMSHOE is player-facing, how this works depends on whether the PC in the situation is the aggressor or the defender.

In a Scuffling contest, the PC gets to go first if his Scuffling *rating* equals or exceeds that of his target.

In a Shooting contest, he gets to go first if his Shooting *rating* equals or exceeds that of his target.

Otherwise, the opponent goes first.

In the rare instance where two PCs fight one another (when one of them is mind-controlled, say), the PC with the higher applicable rating (Scuffling or Shooting) goes first. If their ratings tie but their pools do not, the one with the higher pool goes first. If both are tied, roll a die, with one player going first on an odd result and the other on even.

A contest proceeds between the two abilities. When combatants using the

Scuffling or Shooting abilities roll well, they get the opportunity to deal damage to their opponents.

HIT THRESHOLDS: Each character has a Hit Threshold of either 3 (the standard value) or 4 (if the character's Athletics rating is 8 or more.) The Hit Threshold is the Difficulty Number the character's opponent must match or beat in order to harm him. Less competent supporting characters may have lower Hit Thresholds. Creatures may have Hit Thresholds of 4 or higher, regardless of their Athletics ratings.

DEALING DAMAGE: When you roll equal to or higher than your opponent's Hit Threshold, you may deal damage to him. To do so, you make a damage roll, rolling a die which is then modified according to the relative lethality of your weapon, as per the following table:

WEAPON TYPE	DAMAGE MODIFIER
Fist, kick	**−1**
Small improvised weapon, baton, knife	**0**
Archaic firearm, sword	**+1**
Projac, needle-gun	**– special –**

Archaic firearms refer to the conventional ballistic weapons of our era. These may still be found on some backwards worlds. For archaic firearms, add an additional +2 when fired at point blank range.

Common projectile weapons of the Reach are the projac and the needle-gun. The first fires bolts of energy; the second, triangles of glass. Either is fatal on a single direct hit. However, for characters vital to the narrative, you may have to pay an additional Obstacle Cost (p. 34) to score such a hit.

Characters never spend points from their combat pools to increase their damage rolls.

The final damage result is then subtracted from your opponent's Health pool. When a combatant's Health pool drops to 0 or less, that combatant begins to suffer ill effects, ranging from slight impairment to helplessness to death; see sidebar. Any combatants currently engaged with him in a close quarters fight can then deal another instance of damage to him.

Unlike other contests, participants do not lose when they fail their test rolls. Instead, they're forced out of the fight when they lose consciousness or become seriously wounded — see sidebar.

EXHAUSTION, INJURY AND DEATH

Unlike most abilities, your Health pool can drop below 0.

When it does this, you must make a Consciousness roll. Roll a die with the absolute value* of your current Health pool as your Difficulty. You may deliberately strain yourself to remain conscious, voluntarily reducing your Health pool by an amount of your choice. For each point you reduce it, add 1 to your die result. The Difficulty of the Consciousness roll is based on your Health pool *before* you make this reduction.

You are backhanded by an oilbear. Your Health pool drops to –3. As the oilbear withdraws to rifle through the contents of your rations pouch, you struggle to remain conscious. (Life Sciences tells you that this creature will wait until you're out, drag you to an impermeable bowl made of flower petals, lick you into liquid form with its acidic tongue, and then drink you.) You must make a Consciousness roll. The absolute value of –3 is 3, so this is the Difficulty of your Consciousness roll. Not wanting to become the oilbear's liquid diet, you expend another 2 Health points,

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* *In other words, treat the negative number as a positive. For example, if your Health pool is at −3, the Difficulty of the roll is 3, and so on.*

even though you don't really have any. That allows you to add 2 to your ensuing roll. Your die comes up a 6, for a final result of 8. You remain blearily awake, but your Health pool is down to –5. You lie there hoping your colleagues will find you.

If your pool is anywhere from 0 to –5, you are **hurt** but have suffered no permanent injury, beyond a few superficial cuts and bruises. However, the pain of your injuries makes it impossible to spend points on investigative abilities, and increases the Difficulty Numbers of all tests and contests, including opponents' Hit Thresholds, by 1.

A character with the Medic ability can improve your condition by spending Medic points. For every Medic point spent, you regain 2 Health points — unless you are the Medic, in which case you gain only 1 Health point for every Medic point spent. The Medic can only refill your pool to where you were before the incident in which you received this latest injury. He must be in a position to

devote all of his attention to directly tending to your wounds.

If your pool is between –6 and –11, you have been **seriously wounded**. You must make another Consciousness roll. (If you dropped from a positive Health pool into this range, you make only the one Consciousness roll.)

Whether or not you maintain consciousness, you are no longer able to fight. Until you receive first aid, you will lose an additional Health point every half hour. A character with the Medic ability can stabilize your condition by spending 2 Medic points. However, he can't restore your Health points.

Even after you receive first aid, you must convalesce. Convalescence takes four hours in a high-tech medical facility, including the sick bay of your ship.

When your pool dips to –12 or below, you are **dead**. Time to create a replacement character.

Fortunate Avoidance

In what is known as a Fortunate Avoidance, you may duck a single instance of damage — including an otherwise instantaneously fatal hit from a projac or needle-gun — by spending 2 tokens. You must then describe what happened to protect you from the strike.

Opponents do not recover the points they spent on the successful hit. They must satisfy themselves with having whittled down your token supply.

You can make as many Fortunate Avoidances as you can afford to pay for.

You may not pay for other characters' Fortunate Avoidances.

Only player characters take advantage of Fortunate Avoidances. A counterpart mechanic, the Obstacle Cost (p. 34) protects key supporting characters. You can overcome this by spending tokens.

After you unmask him at a garden party, Quandos Vorn shoots at you with a projac. The GM spends 3 of his Shooting points, taking him from 12 to 9, and rolls a 4, for a result of 7, which beats your Hit Threshold of 4. Ordinarily, you would not take damage but rather die on the spot, full stop. To avoid this, you spend 2 tokens on a Fortunate Avoidance.

Primitive Convalescence

Recovery from serious wounds takes a prolonged period when you are deprived of high-tech medical facilities. In an archaic hospital, your period of forced inactivity is a number of days equal to the positive value of your lowest Health pool score. (So if you were reduced to −8 Health, you are hospitalized for 8 days.) On the day of your discharge, your Health pool increases to half its maximum value. On the next day, it refreshes fully.

Recovery rates double when your medical care is nonexistent. This includes hospitalization in a facility provided by a pre-industrial society.

You must explain how you swerved from the path of certain doom: "I dive under the canapé table, knocking the punchbowl into the air. Quandos Vorn's projac beam strikes the bowl, refracting harmlessly into the flower arrangement."

Quandos Vorn's Shooting pool remains at 9.

Example Fight

While sifting through starport refuse bins in search of clues to Quandos Vorn's next destination, you are accosted by Stunklerth, a local ruffian-for-hire. In keeping with facility rules, you've left your projac in your own ship, and are armed only with a retractable

Projacs and Plotting

Vengeance-seekers do not survive by Fortunate Avoidance alone. In a setting with instantly fatal weapons, narrative convention, fostered by GM and players alike, keeps the protagonists from constantly facing that threat.

Quandos Vorn and his henchpersons have better things to do than chase after the vengeance-seekers with projacs. Their schemes thrive in obscurity; they don't want to draw attention to themselves by hunting their hunters. When they do draw projacs on the heroes, it's to get the drop on them and force them to do their

bidding — in story terms, creating situations the PCs have some chance of later escaping from.

This doesn't mean that these villains will show foolish mercy when they have the upper hand. Given the lethality of ranged combat, players must take their share of narrative responsibility for ensuring that its rarity remains plausible. If you create a situation where it seems incredible that Quandos Vorn wouldn't just shoot you with his super-gun, he will. To succeed, vengeance-seekers must remain at least halfway circumspect.

baton (+0 damage). Stunklerth wields a heavy wrench (also +0 damage). You try to talk him out of the beating he intends to administer, but enrage him further with an attempt at Intimidation. He swings at you.

However, your Scuffling rating of 8 exceeds his, which is at 6. You seize the initiative and get to strike first.

You spend 2 Scuffling, dropping that pool from 8 to 6. You add those points to your roll of 3, for a result of 5. This exceeds his Hit Threshold of 3, so you've hit him. (As per usual, you don't know the Threshold.)

Prompted by the GM, you narrate the outcome: "I unfurl my baton and, when he's in mid-swing, deliver a sharp crack to the jaw."

You roll an instance of damage: the die comes up a 4.

The GM drops Stunklerth's Health from 8 to 4.

"He growls," she says, "and resumes his swing." She spends 2 of his Scuffling points and rolls a 3, for an outcome of 5 — which beats your Hit Threshold of 4. "The wrench grazes your temple."

She rolls a damage die: it comes up a 1.

You drop your Health pool from 8 to 7.

Now you get to strike again. You spend another 2 Scuffling, leaving your pool at 4. You roll a 1, for a final result of 3 — the bare minimum you need to hit him.

"Wow, I really blew that," you say.

"Actually, you manage to clock him."

"He's a clumsier fighter than I thought," you exclaim, realizing that the odds are in your favor even if you spend less per attack from now on. You roll your damage die, and get a 3. You knock his Health from 4 to 1.

"He staggers back, a little dazed."

"Haven't you had enough of my baton by now?" you ask, speaking in character.

"Stunklerth is without relent!" says the GM, speaking as Stunklerth.

The GM spends 2 more of Stunklerth's Scuffling points, dropping his pool to 2. She rolls a 2, for a result of 4 — exactly your Hit

Threshold, and therefore a hit. But again she rolls 1 damage, dropping your Health from 7 to 6.

"He lands another glancing blow," narrates the GM.

This time you decide to spend just a point of Scuffling, since you have a 5 in 6 chance of landing another blow. Your Scuffling pool drops to 3. You roll a 3, for a final result of 4, hitting him. You roll damage, for 5 points.

Stunklerth's Health drops from 1 to –4. He must make a Consciousness roll against a Difficulty of 4, the absolute value of his negative pool number. Having established Stunklerth as bullheadedly determined, she decides to spend another 1 Health point on the Consciousness roll. (Any higher number would put him below the threshold for a worse injury category, taking him from hurt to seriously wounded.) She rolls a 1, for a result of 2 — lower than the 4 he needs.

"He weaves, wavers, and slumps against a trash unit," the GM narrates.

"I rifle through his belongings," you reply, "in case he has contact information for whatever middleman hired him."

Free-For-All Combat

Combat becomes more chaotic when two groups of combatants fight, or a group gangs up against a single opponent. The GM abandons the aggressor/defender model. Instead, the GM determines an order of action, ranking all participants in the combat according to their present *pool* values in the fighting abilities they'll be starting the fight with — Scuffling or Shooting. Ties are broken in favor of characters with higher *ratings* in those abilities. If characters are still tied, player characters win out over creatures and enemies, and early-arriving players win over late-arriving players.

The time it takes to go through the ranking order once, with each character taking an action, is called a **round**. When one round ends, another begins. When called upon

to act, each character may strike at any opponent within range of his weapons. Some alien creatures may strike more than once per round. They make each attack in succession, and may divide them up between opponents within range, or concentrate all of them on a single enemy.

Creatures may choose to use their actions to deal additional damage to downed or helpless opponents rather than engage active opponents. They automatically deal one instance of damage per action. Only the most crazed and bestial human enemies engage in this behavior.

Characters who join a combat in progress come last in order of precedence. If more than two characters join during the same round, the GM determines their relative precedence using the rules above.

The fight continues until one side capitulates or flees, or all of its members are unconscious or otherwise unable to continue.

Cover

In a typical gunfight, combatants seek cover, hiding behind walls, furniture or other barriers, exposing themselves only for the few seconds it takes them to pop up and fire a round at their targets. The GUMSHOE rules recognize three cover conditions:

EXPOSED: No barrier stands between you and the combatant firing at you. Your Hit Threshold decreases by 1.

PARTIAL COVER: About half of your body is exposed to fire. Your Hit Threshold remains unchanged.

FULL COVER: Except when you pop up to fire a round, the barrier completely protects you from incoming fire. Your Hit Threshold increases by 1.

Range

Standard handguns of the Reach, such as projacs and needle-guns, can for all intents and purposes shoot as far as you can see. Their range and accuracy render rifle-sized weapons obsolete.

If stuck with archaic weapons, pistols can strike targets up to 25m away, and long guns have an effective range of 150m.

Surprise

Characters are surprised when they find themselves suddenly in a dangerous situation.

Surprise supporting characters by sneaking up on them with a successful Infiltration test. The basic Difficulty is 4, which may increase for especially vigilant characters.

Avoid being surprised with a successful Surveillance test. The basic Difficulty is 4, but may be higher in the case of notably sneaky opponents.

Surprised characters suffer a +2 increase to all general ability Difficulties for any immediately subsequent action. In a fight, the penalty pertains to the first round of combat.

THE DROP

If one group has its guns ready when it surprises a group that does not have its guns drawn, it has "the drop." When an adversary has the drop on you and you make a sudden or unwelcome move, the adversary can shoot and automatically kill you. You always know when someone has the drop on you.

When you have the drop on a party, you earn its forced cooperation, unless its members are willing to die. You can use this to interrogate, restrain and/or transport the subjects to a new location.

If you have the drop on a group and decide to simply open fire, a combat ensues, in which everyone presently holding guns goes first in the initiative order, and any survivors on the other side then act.

When someone has the drop on you, you may spend tokens on a Fortunate Avoidance and describe an event allowing you to fight back without being killed, or escape, as you prefer. The GM may adjust your description to better fit the situation or maintain believability. Like characters in fiction, you will typically learn something when the bad guys question

or capture you. For this reason, the clever vengeance-seeker waits until matters stand on the brink of irreversible direness before spending those tokens. Some of the best clues are found while held prisoner in an enemy lair.

When there are more people held at gunpoint than holding guns, prisoners may try to overwhelm you. Each character holding a gun can pick one adversary to automatically kill. A standard combat between ex-captors and ex-captives then ensues.

Because it would be absurd, characters can't walk around with weapons drawn at all times to avoid having anyone ever get the drop on them.

VEHICULAR CONTESTS

Your quest for vengeance may lead you to chase or battle enemies while driving or piloting vehicles.

Most such contests occur in ground conveyances, small aircraft, or boats. Starships don't fight each other in space, but may briefly engage after dropping out of intersplit into an atmosphere; see p. 53.

Vehicle contests pit the Vehicles ability of one combatant against another. They are either chases, in which one contestant attempts to decisively get away from another, or battles, in which the contestants attempt to wreck each other's conveyances, ideally in a way that injures the occupants.

Crashes

When a vehicle crashes, note the margin of the failed Vehicles test that led to the accident, which we'll call **M**.

Occupants make Difficulty 4+**M** Athletics tests to avoid injury. If they fail, the extent of the injury varies according to the type of craft.

GROUND VEHICLE: +1 damage

AIRCRAFT: two instances of +2 damage

BOAT: +1 damage; character falls into the water and risks drowning (p. 46)

Chases

A vehicular chase plays out exactly like a foot chase, except that Vehicles replaces Athletics. If the pursuer wins, the vehicle is mired, boxed in, temporarily disabled, or otherwise trapped, at which point the two sets of occupants confront each other in some other way — most likely by some combination of talking and fighting.

Passengers may use Shooting to attempt to injure occupants of the opposing vehicle.

Battle

A vehicular battle contests Vehicles vs. Vehicles; the losing vehicle crashes and is disabled.

Fixing a disabled vehicle requires a Difficulty 4+**M** Systems Repair test.

Vehicular Gunfight

A vehicular gunfight occurs when characters shoot at one another from moving vehicles. Play this out as a standard gunfight, with the following exceptions:

- Hit Thresholds of combatants in vehicles increase by 2.
- Rather than take part in the Shooting, the driver or pilot of each vehicle makes, as his action for the combat round, a Difficulty 4 Vehicles test. If he fails, the vehicle crashes.
- If the driver/pilot is hit:
  - by standard fire, he either pays for a Fortunate Avoidance or dies. If he dies, the vehicle crashes. If he lives, he makes an immediate Vehicles test (Difficulty 4 + the margin of the attacker's successful Shooting test); on a failure, the vehicle crashes.
  - by an archaic missile weapon:
    - and dies, the vehicle crashes.
    - and survives, he makes an immediate Vehicles test (Difficulty 4 + the number of Health points he just lost); on a failure, the vehicle crashes.

Combatants more interested in survival than victory can speed away, conclusively escaping, when the opposing vehicle crashes. Otherwise they can get out of the vehicle to continue the firefight, most likely ducking behind it to use it as cover.

TIME INCREMENTS

Certain GUMSHOE rules refer to various increments of time.

INTERVALS

Time for background tasks, such as routine ship maintenance, unfolds not in strict time periods, but according to the progress characters make in advancing through the story. These units of time are called intervals. A new interval begins each time the group acquires a new core clue. When more than one core clue can be gained during a single scene, only the first clue counts as starting a new interval. When a rule says, for example, that something happens after two intervals pass, it means that the group must gather two core clues in separate scenes.

> *You investigate mysterious crop failures on the world Zobund, which you know to be of interest to Quandos Vorn. After defeating the bureaucratic runaround at the Agricultural Output Agency, your attention is drawn to the recent arrival on Zobund of a shifty character named Xenius Peters. The GM's notes list Xenius's name as a core clue. One interval has just passed. When you go to strongarm Xenius, he collapses in mid-interrogation from an*

undocumented medical condition. The scenario marks this discovery as a core clue (it will lead to a shifty geneticist, who in turn will lead them to someone or something else). Two intervals have now passed.

EPISODES

An episode is the amount of time needed to complete a single scenario, or case. This may take one session of play or several. An episode typically starts with the introduction of a mystery and ends with its solution, followed by a quick wrap-up phase in which the PCs collect their earnings, balance their books, acquire equipment, and perhaps get started on ship repairs.

A scenario isn't really a unit of time. It starts as a plan, which may be as complete as the fully written one appearing at the end of this book, or as sketchy as a few scrawled notes or an idea in your head. In play, it comes to life as a full story, directed as much by the players' choices as by your preparations.

SESSIONS

A session is the time spent playing one sitting of the game, whatever that happens to be.

REFRESHING POOL POINTS

You can restore spent pool points by refreshing an ability. When you refresh, the pool returns to the value of the rating.

> *Kelise's Systems Repair ability is rated at 4. Right now, she has 1 point left in her pool. If she refreshes it, the pool increases from 1 to 4.*

AT THE START OF A SESSION

All pool points refresh at the beginning of each session. They reset to the value of the

rating even if your pool exceeded your rating at the end of the previous session.

INVESTIGATIVE REFRESHES

Refresh an investigative ability pool by spending one or more tokens. The cost of refreshing a pool is 1, plus the number of investigative abilities you have already refreshed this session.

> *Rachel wants to refresh Kelise's History pool. Already in this session, she refreshed*

her Intimidation ability. It costs her 2 tokens to refresh History. The next time she decides to refresh an investigative ability this session, it will cost her 3 tokens.

GENERAL REFRESHES

Refresh a general ability pool by spending two or more tokens. The cost of refreshing a general pool depends on how many general abilities you've already refreshed during the current interval.

For your first refresh of the interval, the cost is 2 tokens.

For your second, the cost is 4 tokens.

For your third, the cost is 6.

For your fourth, the cost is 8.

… and so on.

When refreshing Health, add 2 to the above costs.

You may not refresh during a contest.

IMPROVING YOUR ABILITIES

Vengeance-seekers gain or improve abilities as the action unfolds.

When a rating goes up, your pool goes up by the same amount. You can spend the newly added pool points at any time, including immediately.

When characters gain new abilities, they're not spontaneously acquiring them on the spot, by some unexplained process. They're displaying abilities they've had all along but have not yet had cause to demonstrate.

Invite players manifesting newly acquired abilities to explain why they have them. The classic way to do this is through a line of dialogue: "I read all of Baron Bodissey's planetary histories when I was in prison on Mangover."

CLUES WITHOUT ABILITIES

When the players encounter a piece of information keyed to an investigative ability none of the characters have, ask if anyone wants to spend a token to gain that ability.

If more than one player wants to spend a token, the one with the most tokens in hand may do so.[*] That player's character gains the ability, at a rating of 1.

If no one wants to pay a token for the ability, it goes to the player making the inquiry, at a rating of 1.

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[*] Break ties between players with an equal number of tokens in favor of the one who will next have a birthday.

The group has reached a cave where they think a confederate of Quandos Vorn has holed up. They look down at it from a ridge.

"Can we tell if there might be a second exit?" asks Rachel.

That question would be answered by the Geology ability, if anyone had it. But none of the vengeance-seekers was based on the Exploratory card.

"Does anyone want to pay a token for Geology?" you ask.

The players shake their heads. It's early in the session, and tokens are in short supply. Lisa has a token but doesn't think an interest in rocks and sediments fits her defrocked priestess character.

Since Rachel was the first to ask, you tell her that her character, Kelise, knows something about Geology after all. "Those years I spent dating a geologist have left certain facts imprinted on my consciousness after all."

"You can tell that the pipe of rock near the horizon is probably a second exit point from the cave complex," you tell her, supplying the clue.

A player assigned an ability after having initiated the inquiry can refuse it only by persuading another player to take it — not usually a difficult matter.

IMPROVING INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES

To improve the rating of an investigative ability you already have, spend two tokens. Its rating goes up by 1.

GAINING NEW GENERAL ABILITIES

To gain a rating of 1 in a general ability no one in the group has, spend three tokens.

To gain a rating of 1 in a general ability you lack, but at least one other vengeance-seeker has, spend six tokens.

IMPROVING GENERAL ABILITIES

To improve the rating of a general ability you already have by 1 point:

- spend 2 tokens (if the current rating is less than 8)
- spend 4 tokens (if the current rating ranges from 8–12)
- spend 8 tokens (if the current rating is greater than 12)

HAZARDS

In or out of combat, the characters' survival may be threatened by assorted hazards, from electrical shock to poisoning.

ELECTRICITY AND OTHER SHOCKS

Damage from exposure to electricity varies according to voltage. You can suffer:

MILD SHOCK, equivalent to briefly touching an ungrounded wire or damaged electrical appliance. You lose 1 Health and are blown backwards for a couple of meters.

MODERATE SHOCK, equivalent to a jolt from a cattle prod. You lose 2 Health and (if in combat time) your next four actions. You always lose at least one action but may buy off the loss of other actions by paying 3 Athletics points per action.

EXTREME SHOCK, equivalent to a lightning strike. You suffer one die of damage, with a +4 Damage Modifier.

The GM should always give you some opportunity to avoid being shocked, whether it be an Athletics test to avoid unexpected contact, or a Surveillance test to spot the danger.

If you are reduced to –6 or fewer Health, the current is assumed to have traveled through your heart or brain, causing cardiac arrest or brain damage, respectively. The GM describes appropriate symptoms and futuristic treatments during your sick bay convalescence.

Most other futuristic hazards can be emulated using the mild/moderate/extreme breakdown above. Simply change the narrative description and side effects, keeping the Health pool losses.

FIRE

Damage from exposure to fire varies according to the surface area of your body exposed to the flame, and it repeats for each round (or, outside of combat, every few seconds) you remain exposed to it.

MINOR EXPOSURE, most often to an extremity like a hand or foot, carries a Damage Modifier of –2.

PARTIAL EXPOSURE, to up to half of your surface area, carries a Damage Modifier of +0.

EXTENSIVE EXPOSURE, to half or more of your surface area, imposes a Damage Modifier of +2.

The GM should always give you a chance to avoid being set on fire. The Difficulty of extinguishing a flame is usually 4 but might be higher for anomalous flame-like manifestations or when you are coated with a futuristic accelerant.

SUFFOCATION AND DROWNING

From faulty airlocks to face-hugging protoplasmic life-forms, space travel and planetary adventure offer a plenitude of chances to die from asphyxiation.

When deprived of air, you get two minutes before the nastiness kicks in. After that point, you lose 1 Athletics every ten seconds, as you struggle to hold your breath. Once that pool depletes, you start losing Health, at a rate of 1 point every five seconds.

TOXINS

Toxins are either inhaled, ingested or injected directly into the bloodstream. They vary widely in lethality. A dose of a low-tech cleaning substance may impose a Damage Modifier of –2, where a viro-active nerve gas might range from +6 to +16. Inhaled toxins tend to take effect right away. Injected and ingested toxins take delayed effect, anywhere from minutes to hours after exposure. Their damage might be parceled out in increments, and may prevent you from refreshing Health points until somehow neutralized. As with any hazard, the GM should always give you a chance to avoid exposure to them.

VACUUM

When exposed to the vacuum of space without benefit of pressure suits, trained spacefarers know to immediately exhale. This prevents the explosive decompression caused by the disparity between vacuum and the gases inside a subject's body. Disposable supporting characters may not know to do this, or may forget in the panic of the moment, resulting in dramatically satisfying, hideous, instantaneous deaths.

Those remembering to exhale suffer immediate damage from dehydration, including injuries to the eyes and mouth. Paradoxically, this manifests as bloating, as the evaporation of water from tissues causes them to expand. Capillaries burst. Nitrogen in the blood shifts states from liquid to gas, causing the paralyzing pain divers know as "the bends." If the exposure occurs within a solar system, unshielded UV radiation sears the skin.

During this ten-second phase, the character takes a die of damage. He remains conscious and can take actions. He then falls unconscious, taking another die of damage every thirty seconds until rescued or dead.

A MORDANT FUTURE

E*ACH SETTLED WORLD IS* SUI GENERIS, *PRESENTING TO THE INQUIRING cosmologist a unique quantum of information. All these quanta are mutually immiscible, so that efforts to generalize become a muddle.*
— from the Introduction to *The Worlds of Man,* by the Fellows of the Fidelius Institute

VISTAS OF TIME

The action of a *Gaean Reach* series occurs in an impossibly distant future. Humankind has dispersed to the stars, and been settled on strange worlds long enough for new branches to sprout from its evolutionary tree. The common era lies in the past, and, with it, our familiar calendar and dating system.

The superseding system starts with a landmark event in the interstellar era. The books leave this undefined. If the question comes up, you, as GM, decide what happened on day one, year one in your version of the Gaean Reach:

- the invention of the intersplit engine, enabling faster than light travel
- the arrival of the first human settlers on a habitable alien world
- the estimated date when the total human population of settled worlds exceeded that of Earth

Novels of the Gaean Reach

The most popular books of the Gaean Reach are surely the Demon Princes series: *The Star King* (1964), *The Killing Machine* (also 1964), *The Palace of Love* (1967), *The Face* (1979) and *The Book of Dreams* (1981). Kirth Gersen, survivor of the notorious Mount Pleasant Massacre, pursues the vengeance he's trained for since childhood, systematically tracking and destroying its five leaders: the inhuman relict Attel Malagate, the immortal fantasist Kokor Hekkus, the impotent sensualist Viole Falushe, the sadistic prankster Lens Larque, and the chaos-loving Howard Alan Treesong. These provide the key inspiration for this game's focus on vengeance-seeking. If you've read none of the source material, start here.

The Alastor trilogy features three standalone novels each located in a separate planet of that interstellar polity. *Trullion: Alastor 2262* (1973) follows retired stellar patrolman Glinnes Hulden as he returns to his home planet and struggles to recover a birthright swindled from him by his brother. Pardero, hero of *Marune: Alastor 933* (1975) returns to his home planet seeking his expunged identity. In *Wyst: Alastor 1716* (1978), an artist seeking new horizons falls into a sinister conspiracy on a world of grimly ladled equality.

The Gray Prince (1974) pits rugged ranchers against the liberation movement of a pseudo-indigenous people, the Uldra.

In *Maske: Thaery* (1976), non-inheriting boondocks noble Jubal Droad breaks the conventions of a hierarchy-obsessed world. As an undercover security officer, he probes the traitorous activities of a high official whose arrogant negligence almost killed him.

The Cadwal Chronicles (*Araminta Station*, 1988; *Ecce and Old Earth*, 1991; *Throy*, 1992) center on a world run by a small elite as an ecological preserve. Its hero, Glawen Clattuc, uncovers a murderous cabal intent on destroying the conservancy.

1996's *The Night Lamp* details the quest of adoptee Jaro Fath, out of place on the relentlessly cliquish world of Thanet, to connect the nightmarish visions he had as a child to the murder of his biological mother.

Ports of Call (1998) and *Lurulu* (2004) follow wronged spacefarer Myron Tany as he weaves his picaresque way toward a confrontation with the imperious aunt who abandoned him at a backwater starport.

In these books you'll find the key elements that drive up a Gaean Reach storyline: wronged heroes, sinister conspiracies, and perversely organized worlds.

- the declaration of a particular interstellar organization or polity, perhaps a predecessor of the Oikumene
- a conclave of scientific authorities met and voted the new calendar arbitrarily into being

The main events of the Demon Princes novels commence in the year 1524. A minor character, the tavern-keeper Smade, is said in quoted introductory documents to have set up his establishment in 1479 and is still alive to give an interview to *Cosmopolis* magazine in 1923. From this we can conclude that stellar years, as we will call them in order to call them something, are either short compared to our own, or that Smade is very long lived.

Though hard dates disappear from them, later books in the cycle appear to take place a considerable time after the Demon Princes series — perhaps thousands of years. The so-called mad poet Navarth, who appears as a character in the third Demon Princes book, *The Palace of Love*, is cited as a literary titan of the distant past. This period holds him in a regard similar to ours for Shakespeare.

This gives you the freedom to assign any date to the events of your series. Until the
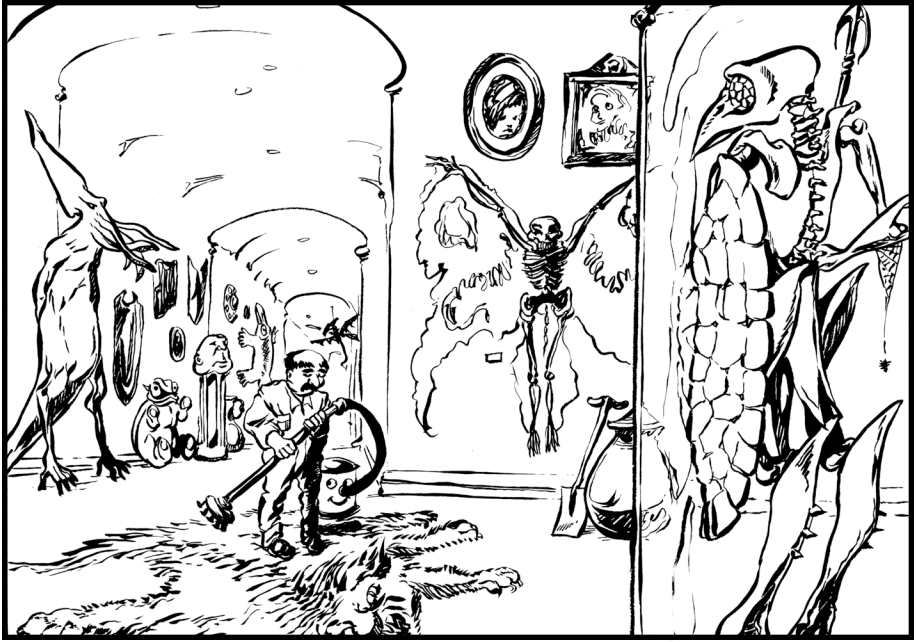
players ask for a hard number, you can do as Vance does and elide the issue entirely.

For ease of reference, we will refer to the Demon Princes era as the Early era, and the undefined even further future of the later books as the Later era. These are our terms and are not used by characters in the setting.

WORLDS OF THE REACH

Settlement of alien worlds proved the human capacity for variation. Each new planet quickly developed its own highly specific culture or cultures. After a brief period of experimentation and upheaval, these almost invariably ossified into static norms, which the locals follow with obdurate certainty.

PEOPLES AND CULTURES

Visitors to new worlds often find their social organizations bizarre or absurd. Although scholars agree that no two societies are truly alike, travelers find that certain traits of the human condition prevail wherever they go. Parochialism, self-satisfaction, greed, obstructiveness, egoism, pettiness, sloth and a passion for procedure rule the behavior of the common citizen.

A few figures of malignant evil and planet-spanning ambition magnify these general character flaws to a level of outright mega-villainy. The Demon Princes and Quandos Vorn typify this fortunately rare personality profile.

Though they sometimes seem equally rare, persons of determined character still exist throughout the Reach. Overcoming opposition ranging from the niggling to the viciously psychopathic, they oppose wrongdoers, protecting entire societies even when they act for personal reasons. These are the protagonists of Vance's fiction, like Kirth Gersen, Jubal Droad, and Glawen Clattuc. Depending on the choices they make, the vengeance-seekers might emulate them, or flirt with comeuppance by showing the same cupidity and baseness as those they encounter.

Often, their quest for vengeance will take the group to worlds on the brink of drastic upheaval. The old rules have been in unquestioned effect so long as to calcify, and now face pressure from outside forces. Quandos Vorn may be prolonging a corrupt old order or poising himself to exploit the chaos erupting from its death throes.

Peoples of the Reach speak a single language, which has remained mutually comprehensible over thousands of years. Though degrees of prolixity vary, most everyone favors an elevated discourse, lending itself to wit and elegantly phrased flimflammery. Certain catchphrases pepper dialogue wherever one goes. For example, people will tell you that your idea "has a certain merit," by which they mean to indicate that it lacks any merit whatsoever. The tagline system (p. 24) trains players to speak in this universal argot.

Aliens, Quasi-Sentients, and Post-Humans

Relics of past alien civilizations dot the Reach. The twenty-six planets of the Rigel system, for example, were clearly towed there and placed in orbit by an intelligent people of ancient provenance. They were here once, but have long since vanished. Over thousands of years, explorers have yet to encounter a spacefaring, truly alien intelligent species.

Quasi-intelligent humanoids live on certain planets, usually in an uneasy relationship of mutual violence with human settlers.

Tribal peoples of alien mindset occupy various worlds, but these invariably represent new human species that have sprung up over the millennia of the interstellar era. Physical changes, like golden skin or coral-like hair, often accompany radical behavioral reversions. All known offshoot species shuck off the bonds of civilization, and are considered devolved or degenerate. They would certainly disagree, frequently while holding one at spearpoint.

THE OIKUMENE

In the Early period, a central collection of planets, colonized during the first phases of the interstellar diaspora, maintains a loose political unity. Known collectively as the Oikumene, it is bound together by cultural norms, economic interdependence, and a few shared institutions: most notably the Institute and the IPCC. These take the place of a central government with the power of coercion.

Among the systems of the Oikumene are the Solar, the Vega, and the Rigel Concourse.

During the Later period the central hub of worlds has expanded to include planets once counted as among the depths of the Beyond (see below). The term "Oikumene" has fallen into disuse.

The IPCC

The Interworld Police Coordinating Company, or IPCC, starts as a private enterprise in the Early period and becomes a pan-governmental authority by the Later era. As the name suggests, it bridges the activities of various local policing entities, who, in exchange for following certain rules, sign onto it in an auxiliary capacity. Duly authorized IPCC agents — or weasels, as their enemies call them — are empowered to investigate crimes, apprehend suspects, and, where necessary, forcibly extradite them to planets where their offenses occurred.

During the Early period, they can't impose one world's law on another. In the Beyond, where criminals operate with impunity, they must do their work undercover, lest they be set upon, tortured, and murdered.

Leadership of the Early IPCC can be described as "rather loose," consisting of a director and a board of directors. At one point, the Demon Prince Howard Alan Treesong takes advantage of this less than robust governance to nearly gain its directorship.

The Later era sees an expanding interstellar authority, including a set of criminal statutes observed throughout interstellar space. IPCC

officers can not only enforce these, but require resistant local cops to step aside while they do so.

Dutiful local police officials cooperate with IPCC officers. When local authorities obstruct them, several possibilities could pertain. They might be actively corrupt, and in league with criminals such as Quandos Vorn. Or they might simply be foot-draggers, turf-protectors, or similar specimens of lethargic bureaucracy.

Characters who start play with ratings of 2 or more in Law can specify that they are accredited IPCC officers. They can expect automatic cooperation from dutiful local cops. They may need to spend Law or Bureaucracy points to gain it from others, if it's available at all.

Impersonate spends can convince locals of one's nonexistent IPCC status.

Rugged operatives may be accorded temporary IPCC accreditation. Law spends may be in order, in cases where the character actively seeks a badge. In some scenarios the IPCC may make the offer themselves, in which case no spend is required.

The Institute

The complex hierarchy known as the Institute serves as a shadow government of the Early period. The members and structure of the Institute are a matter of public record; its activities, much less so. In the absence of an interstellar government, it works behind the scenes to exert subtle influence on cultural mores, organizations, and even the availability of certain technologies. Without these covert acts of social engineering, the already tenuous interplanetary civilization of the Oikumene would grind to a halt, or so its members argue. The head of the Institute commands vast yet amorphous soft power. In *The Book of Dreams*, Demon Prince Howard Alan Treesong attempts to ascend to its top spot, which would make him the most influential man in the Oikumene.

Outwardly, the Institute resembles an absurdly elaborated Masonic lodge. Members, known as Fellows, progress from first level through a series of ranks, the apex of which is the 111th. Curiously, no one ever occupies ranks 100 or 110. Ranks from 101 up are occupied by a single Fellow apiece. Together with three 99th degree Fellows, their occupants make up the Dexad, the leadership group that sets Institute policy.

All lower-ranked Fellows simply obey, while attempting to curry favor with those above and scramble up through the ranks. Depending on necessity, they may never perform any actual missions for the Institute, instead spending all of their time on its internal politics. Often one cannot tell whether an instruction from a higher-ranked Fellow comes from on high, and furthers the social engineering project, or is simply a personal favor, in the back-scratching tradition of less prestigious service organizations.

Though high-ranking Institute members are well known as such, they are forbidden from openly acknowledging their status. To seek favor or reward from an Institute member requires discretion and liberal use of code words — a task for which the Punctilio ability is profoundly suited.

Early-period characters starting play with 2 points of Punctilio can specify that they are past or present Fellows. Current status grants greater access to the organization's favors, but it may also force the character to break inconveniently from his vengeance quest to perform dangerous tasks of enigmatic import.

During the Later period, the Institute is defunct, though certain of its projects continue to shape life in the Reach. Most persistent among these is its suppression of information and communications technologies, the absence of which is now taken for granted.

BEYOND

Surrounding the Oikumene is a collection of sparsely colonized worlds inhabited chiefly by starmenters and criminals. Its state of civilization
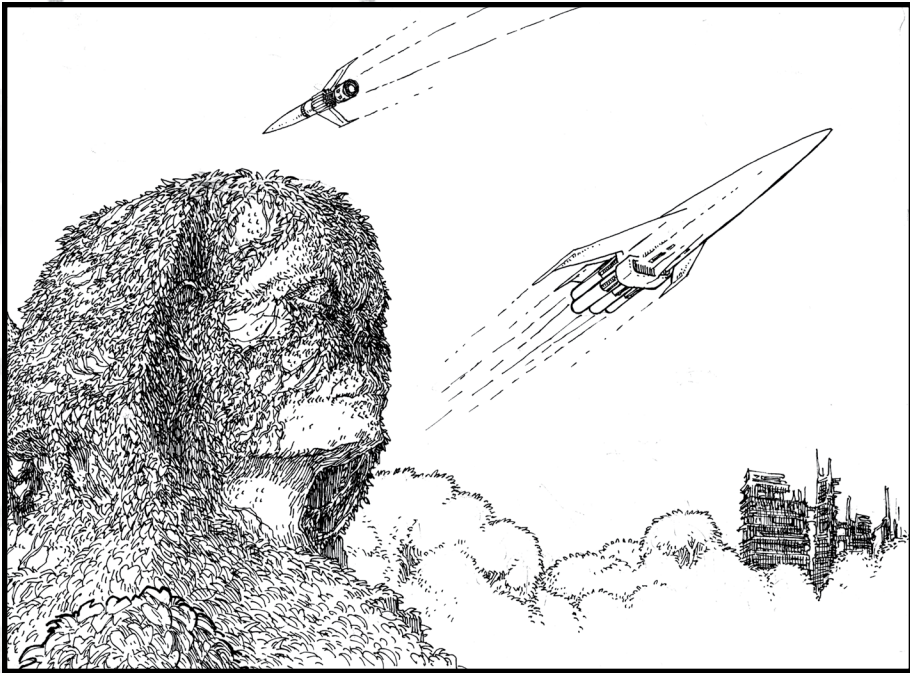
can be summed up with a popular aphorism: "Law cannot reach where enforcement will not follow." Following the brutal laws of piracy, its denizens keep a close watch out for undercover policemen, whom they refer to as weasels.

To "deweasel" such an operative is to expose his identity and then subject him to a course of excruciating and ultimately fatal punishments.

Traders, explorers and businessmen of fearless mien and shady repute also ply the Beyond. The former exploit the resources of distant worlds, shipping products to the Oikumene. World prospectors seek inhabitable worlds, selling the coordinates to colonizers for unthinkably huge sums.

As worlds are settled, the boundaries of the Oikumene push ever outwards, and fringe-dwellers must seek even further planetary redoubts from which to conduct their parasitical business.

Though colonization has slowed in the Later period, a Beyond still exists, much further out than in prior millennia.

OLD EARTH

"Even on Old Earth the wild places still exist."
   — Ecce and Old Earth

Humanity's birthplace should feel as alien to the players as any other world of the Reach. A chasm of millennia separates it from the familiar place they know. Place names may or may not have remained stable over that period. Societies attached to them have risen, changed, died, and been replaced. Our era is but a forgotten blip of egalitarianism; aristocratic families with histories going back thousands of years once again hold sway. The turbulence of early human history has long since settled into a general air of lassitude and quiet resignation. Yet in its hidden corners, the inquisitive may still find danger, especially when their investigations threaten the powerful.

ALASTOR

"Out toward the rim of the galaxy hangs Alastor Cluster, a whorl of thirty thousand live stars in an irregular volume twenty to thirty light-years in diameter. The surrounding region is dark and, except for a few hermit stars, unoccupied."
— *Trullion: Alastor 2262*

Adjacent to the Reach stands a true interstellar civilization that breaks certain of its usual verities. Its density allows it to thrive in isolation. A benevolent yet absolute hereditary authority, the Connatic, oversees its many planets from the shining steel and glass towers of Lusz, foremost city of the planet Numenes. He rules by benign neglect, gathering information from a network of informants but intervening only when necessary in the affairs of the variegated worlds under his command. Like the rest of the Reach, these eschew a common culture in favor of their own unique and surprising social structures. However, when political breakdown looms,

the Connatic steps in to issue reform decrees. These may tinker with dysfunctional aspects of a social structure or dismantle them entirely. Such sweeping changes may be made by Connatic agents or by the man himself. Like kings of legend, he has been known to walk among his people incognito, gathering facts and dispensing justice.

Backing his authority is an IPCC equivalent, the Whelm. Organized along military lines, it attracts excitement-seeking recruits from the Cluster's many sleepy backwater worlds. As its chief duty, it suppresses starmenters, spacefaring pirates feared for their program of rapine and ransom. Though unrelenting, its justice proves more humane than that dispensed by terrified locals, whose execution methods reveal a hysterical taste for the cruel spectacle.

A game set in the Cluster probably ought to stick to that setting. With three thousand inhabited planets, it alone offers more than enough scope for any series.

INTERSTELLAR TRAVEL

An engine known as an intersplit permits faster-than-light travel, and with it, transportation between the Reach's far-flung solar systems. To shift into FTL mode is to enter intersplit.

Ships are of three main varieties, the yacht, the trader and the liner.

Yachts are small craft capable of comfortably accommodating four to ten people. Popular models include the compact Fantamic Flitterwing and Distis Pharaon; the mid-sized Flecanpraun, Sissle Wanderway, and Scarab; the utilitarian 11-B Locator; and the luxurious Fortunatus Glitterway, Golschwang 19, and Sansevere Triumph.

Traders add a several-ton cargo capacity and subtract exterior sleekness and interior comfort from the above.

Liners are large commercial vessels for hauling passengers or, less commonly, freight. Interplanetary shipping focuses on items with a high value and compact size. Commodity shipping generally proves prohibitively expensive.

Even yachts are phenomenally expensive. If your group acquires one, it will be more likely by theft than by legal purchase. Vengeance-seekers intent on remaining sympathetic may choose to heist their ride from Quandos Vorn. If you as GM want to facilitate easy travel between planets (and therefore episodes), give them an early opportunity to perform the necessary hijacking.[*]

A trading-based series frame (p. 74) assumes that the group starts with a trader. Long tradition requires that it should be rickety.

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* In the in-house playtest, I let this happen during the bridge sequence.

Tracking Travel

To determine the past routes and/or programmed flight paths of a space vessel, inspect its filament, a small wire affixed to a monitor installed in the navigation console. The information encoded on the filament can be accessed in no other way. In keeping with the setting's paucity of communications and information technology, it is not transmitted to any other databases.

Some starports require pilots to submit their filaments upon arrival, in which case a record of recent past flights might be found among the installation's paper records. Any starport authority punctilious enough to track this information will guard it from the merely curious. Characters should expect to use Bureaucracy, Law or interpersonal abilities appropriate to the individual safeguarding the records.

As much as the IPCC might desire it, no comprehensive interplanetary system tracks the movement of ships through the Reach. Unless the Institute has something hidden away in a secret redoubt…

NAVIES AND ARTILLERIES

Spacefaring vessels don't fight each other in space, in or out of intersplit.

Dogfights can occur between spacefaring vessels within a planet's atmosphere. These play out as fights between extremely large and ungainly aircraft. Because combat can't occur in intersplit, the party hoping to avoid a fight can essentially disappear by exiting atmosphere and shifting to faster-than-light mode.

Starmenter vessels drop into atmosphere and bombard helpless populations on the ground, fleeing when they face airborne opposition.

Planets wishing to restrict visitors from entering their airspace erect gigantic anti-spacecraft guns capable of efficiently blowing any starship of any size to bits. This technology does not seem to exist in the Alastor Cluster, hence its starmenter problem. Why this might be is left as an exercise for the reader.

LOST TECHNOLOGIES

Though in many senses more fabulous than our own, what with its access to interstellar travel and ingeniously fatal sidearms, certain technologies known today have been forgotten in the Gaean Reach. Notably, its communications and computing technologies barely rival those of Earth in our 1960s.

There are walkie-talkies and radios but no omnipresent mobile phone technology. A suspenseful action sequence in one book revolves around a race to a landline telephone to call for help.

Likewise, portable computers, and a communications grid to link them, are unknown. Some businesses and governments may maintain large mainframes. That of the Connatic of Alastor, ruler of three thousand inhabited worlds, presents its official user a wondrous three-dimensional interface. But,

by and large, records are kept manually, on paper. Research is a matter of browbeating librarians to fetch documents or searching oneself through dust-choked filing cabinets.

Were the Gaean Reach a fictional creation, one might argue that the books describing it predated the information revolution. Since it is surely as real as the spiny zanf prowling outside my hibiscus-wreathed chateau as I type this, this explanation lacks proportion.

Clearly the Institute's subtle interventions into interstellar society suppressed these developments, out of an altruistic concern for mankind. The means by which it did this, and the precise chain of reasoning leading to so momentous a move, are doubtless hazardous to know. The animating facts are no doubt unavailable even to current potentates of that august body.

Backwater planets may lack basic technologies common to their neighbors. Many, for example, field no more than a handful of aircraft, which become key strategic resources in times of conflict.

These deficiencies stem from cultural or economic inertia. Societies develop around technological scarcity, accepting it as a given, even when the practical barriers that led to it fall away. Increased access to technology breeds social change, which most if not all worlds of the Reach reflexively block. Glint-eyed strivers might decry this failure of imagination as but one symptom of the odd mental lassitude prevalent throughout the human diaspora. Sensible souls reply that life is best on planets lacking the tools of destruction.

BARON BODISSEY

Among the educated, no authority is more frequently cited than the prodigious Baron Bodissey, whose twelve-volume treatise *Life* dishes out world-weary philosophy, outdated galactic travelogue, and a profusion of wry proverbs. A futuristic combination of Benjamin Franklin and Alexis de Tocqueville, he remains the Reach's most respected litterateur. For additional points, condescend to him even as you quote his prolific wisdom.

CURRENCIES

The standard currency of the Early era is the SVU, or Standard Value Unit. When first issued, the value of a single SVU equaled one hour of unskilled labor performed under standard conditions. Supported by a network of private financial institutions, including the massive Bank of Rigel, the SVU unifies the Reach economically if not politically. SVUs are accepted even by the outlaws of the Beyond.

SVUs exist in paper and coin form. Bank drafts allow large transactions.

Individual planets may subscribe entirely to the SVU system or accept it in parallel with localized means of exchange. Local currencies are often used for small transactions; one might purchase a meat bun or access rights to a map room with a copper or a dinket.

In the Later era, the sol has become the standard currency, worth approximately twice the SVU. Local currencies, such as the Alastor Cluster's ozol, replace the sol in some locales.

PLANETS

In the millennia since humanity first colonized other worlds, it has expanded ever outward to planets beyond counting. Here are a few of those worthy of note.
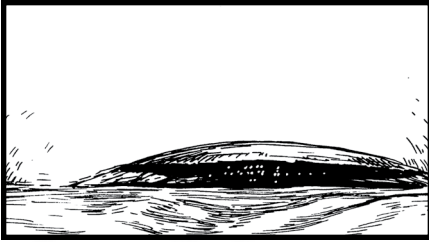
DAR SAI

STAR: Cora, Argo Navis 961

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: Standard planet with one moon, Mirrasou.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY: An inhospitable desert planet; a down-draft cyclone at each pole continually pours down rain, slush, and snow; the resulting groundwater drains first into the Bogs and then into the equatorial Hot Zone, or Wale, evaporating or sinking into the sand.

RESOURCES AND INDUSTRY: Black duodecimate lodes, composed of rare elements of high atomic numbers, are formed from wind-blown fragments of Cora's companion star, Fideske. Spices derived from bog-algae, such as ahagaree, are used in Darsh cooking and as a valuable export.

FLORA AND FAUNA: Countless varieties of **algae**, some as large as bushes (the Bogs). Poisonous **slime** (the Bogs). **Ooze** (the Bogs). The **lanslarke**, a winged predator. The **stiletto bug** (the Bogs).

PEOPLES: The **Darsh**, a bulky, fierce, and prideful people without central authority, live in shades and mine the duodecimates; their skins are roan, sometimes with a chalky undertone, and the men are hairless, the women hirsute; only the men leave the shades during the daytime.

TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE: Spaceship repair facilities are rudimentary. The shades are enormous parasols, often up to 500 feet high and shading 20–30 acres; water is pumped from underground aquifers and up the central shaft to run down over its surface and to fall down as veil and cool mists over the community beneath the shade. The men travel with small air conditioners under their robes.

EISELBAR

STAR: Bhutra (yellow giant)

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: Standard planet, slightly larger than Maske.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY: A planet of sands and salt deserts with water in the form of rivers, lakes, and glaciers. Sunlight is intense.

RESOURCES AND INDUSTRY: The export of chemicals derived in whole or in part from the indigenous slimes. Tourism, including the chemical processing plants and the nearby worlds, Dwet and Zalmyre.

FLORA AND FAUNA: Mobile **slimes**, many of them poisonous and feral, inhabit the surface sands; their metabolisms synthesize rare and valuable compounds. The **myrophode**, a plant with stemmed spore-pod. Many **decorative plant species** have been imported.

PEOPLES: The **Eisels** are a gregarious people with an egalitarian, but strictly ordered, society. They keep detailed accounting of debts and place a price on everything. Theft is a mortal crime.

TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE: The Eisels wear musical adjuncts, sound-producing instruments, to control their emotional environments. They use psychokinetic impulses or train their muscles to manipulate them. Visitors are given adjuncts with preset themes. Shades and screens, such as domes made of glass panels of various colors, protectively diffuse the sunlight. The shdavi is a local form of residential architecture; its tower with glass globe resembles the native myrophode.

FADER

STAR: Night Lamp

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: Slightly smaller than Earth standard planet with Earth standard gravity. It has two moderately sized silver-gold moons.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY: A single continent covers most of the southern hemisphere. Mountains cover the south of the continent. The center of the continent is forested. The north, east, and west portions compose a steppe.

RESOURCES AND INDUSTRY: Precious gems and minerals. Some of the original settlers were biologists who used the genes of select slaves to generate ideal workers. The early experiments failed, creating unusable or monstrous results. The Seishanee, slender, graceful, and docile half-men with clay-colored skin and brown eyes, were the end result. Seishanee perform all physical labor for the Roum, with grichkins (a more intelligent, randomly occurring, strain of Seishanee) acting as household major-domos and executing other complex tasks. Seishanee have vestigial genitalia and had to be generated at the Foundance by grichkins, from zygotes and a slurry made in part of human and Seishanee remains.

FLORA AND FAUNA: None of particular note (the interior forest consists of **tall, dark trees**), discounting the results of human genetic manipulation.

PEOPLES: The **Roum** are a proud, elegant, and isolationist people. The **Loklor** — a disastrous result of the settlers' biological experiments — are nomads, known as bandits and kidnappers of women. They are approximately seven feet tall with mottled yellow-russet horny skin. Their foreheads slant back into narrow crests barbed with short spikes, and their lower faces are pinched and thin, with their small mouths folded into pads of cartilage beneath their nose beaks. The white-skinned, black-robed **house-ghouls** are devious, trapping their lairs and going out at night to hunt for unsuspecting people. It is believed that their ancestors genetically modified themselves in an attempt to increase their intelligence, but the processes went wrong. Some chewed out of their boxes and infiltrated the crypts of abandoned mansions, spreading eventually to those of inhabited ones.

TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE: Advanced weapons are carefully regulated to keep them out of the hands of the Loklor. The biological studies of the past have been forgotten.
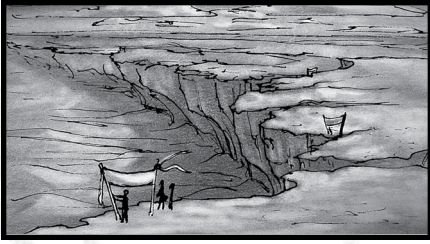
KORYPHON

STAR: Methuen

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: Standard planet.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY: Methuen glares pink in the ultramarine blue sky. The northern contintent is Uaia and consists of desert and the 3,000-foot-high Palga plateau. The narrow equatorial continent is Szintarre.

RESOURCES AND INDUSTRY: Vacation resort at Olanje on Szintarre. Minerals. Agriculture.

FLORA AND FAUNA: The **Juba tree**, dark green, hung with strands of scarlet blossoms. The giant **Uaian jinko**. **Flame-tree**. **Soum**, thick tough lichen (Palga). **Water-weed** (Persimmon Sea). The semi-humanoid egg-laying **erjin** is ferocious but can be domesticated by the Wind-runners; Uldras ride them and the Outkers use them as servants. Erjins communicate telepathically, and some Wind-runners know how to communicate with them. They average seven feet tall, with thick arms covered in striped fur, ending in six-fingered, black-taloned hands. Their heads grow stiff fibrous tufts. Their four small eyes are within folds of gunmetal cartilage on their necks, beneath a jutting frontal bone and fanged maw. A ruff grows from the cartilage folds to hang down over the bone-plated shoulders. The semi-humanoid **morphote** sports beautiful growths but is vicious, cunning, and unpredictable, comfortable in land and water, even being known to climb aboard boats, slaughter those aboard, and sail away. Both erjins and morphotes may have been advanced races, with the erjins invading from space, that devolved.

Mountain **gergoid**, a rat scorpion. The **sand-creeper** and the **armored sloth**, both related to morphotes. The **night-hawk**. The **walkinger**. The **bugle-bug**, which whistles when disturbed. The **criptid**, a long, low pad-footed horse variant. The **matador**, immense and black (Persimmon Sea). **Scissor fish** (Persimmon Sea). **Spark-fish** (Persimmon Sea). The **twitter** (Persimmon Sea). The **spang**, ten feet long, with prongs, barbs, hooks, and fangs (Persimmon Sea).

PEOPLES: The **Uldras** are nomadic across the southern littoral of Uaia. They eschew uniformity, displaying asymmetry in their arts and crafts. While some tribes and individuals have acclimated to off-worlders, many remain resentful. The men are tall with aquiline features, pale russet hair, and gray skin, which they dye ultramarine blue. One in a thousand is born as a wittol, albino, eunuchoid, short, and round-headed; they are regarded with superstition and serve as morticians, torturers, and emissaries. The women are squat, hips heavy and legs short, torsos and arms longer, with long faces with drooping noses. Their gray skins are muddy, and their hair is heavy and orange. The **Wind-runners** are nomadic across the northern plateau of Uaia. Their skin is pale brown and shows neither shadows nor highlights. Their curly hair is pale brown as well, and they usually wear ribboned talismans known as fiaps in it. Fiaps also protect vehicles and locations. They have small, blunt features with heavy jaws and pale buff eyes. They are generally peaceful and friendly though they may practice theft. They have a traditional hatred of aircraft and shoot down any they see. The *eng'sharatz*, or "**land-barons**", are descended from freebooters who forced Uldra tribes to sign over a vast tract of land ranging from 20,000 to 60,000 square miles. The **Outkers** are recent immigrants who live on Szintarre; they are intellectuals who incessantly engage in social activities.

TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE: The Wind-runners sail two- to three-masted wagons across the soum-carpeted Palga. They have ancient light-cannons, finely worked and decorated long rifles. The Uldras raid and duel in sky-sharks, crude one-person aircraft.

KROKINOLE

STAR: Rigel

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: Diameter: 9450 ft. Planetary mass: 1.23. Obit: 14th. Day length: 22 hrs.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY: Eight continents of diverse topography. Mt. Jovah in the Highlands, 42,102 feet above sea level.

RESOURCES AND INDUSTRY: The machine shops of the Whitelocks. Coffee and various other commodity and luxury exports.

FLORA AND FAUNA: The once-dominant, nearly extinct **Super-beast**; intelligent enough to craft baskets, boats, and ornamentation, they communicate in semaphore and organize in committees. The **roof-runner**, a segmented, many-legged worm (Krokinole Highlands).

PEOPLES: The diverse peoples include the following: **Ancient Alans**. **Arcadians**. **Batthalese**. The tundra-wandering **Druid Banquers**. The Highland **Imps**, with large heads, long pointed ears, protuberant mouths, sometimes with skin tinted chalk-green. **Jansenists**. **Oporto Fishermen**. **Singhels**. The industrious and ostentatious **Whitelocks**.

TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE: Skin-tone dispensers are a common fixture in Whitelock washrooms. The Whitelock capital, Patris, includes the River Arches. They are 800 feet high with 200 foot arches that straddle the river and contain shops, service centers, and studios.

MAZ

STAR: Kis (white dwarf)

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: An ancient, small world of 441 days (21.74 hrs) per annum with a heavy atmosphere and one large featureless moon, Oloë.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY: The sky is a sea-green color. A half-dozen shallow seas, some ranges of low hills separated by swamps or peneplains, interspersed slow-moving rivers. The summers are wet, winters dry.

RESOURCES AND INDUSTRY: Tourism. Its location and political nature make it a potential waypoint for imports and exports.

FLORA AND FAUNA: Maz mint. **Mosses**. **Galangal**, tall, rattling canes (swamps). The **lung-plant** (swamps). The **Gomaz** are unpredictable, telepathic humanoids. It is unknown how much they comprehend human thought. They are proud warriors, belonging to septs that they are linked to telepathically. They do not trade much with humans, since they primarily want advanced weapons, which are illegal for them to have. Adult Gomaz do not labor for their septs or outsiders, leaving all such tasks to their young, the bantlings. Their skeletal structure is formed of siliceous cartilage reinforced with calcium-magnesium carbo-phosphate which forms chitin on their skin. They carve the three chitin crests on their heads into distinct

patterns of spikes and barbs, based on the sept they belong to. They have been known to grow as much as 20 ft tall and are then called ogres. They are unisexual and implant their zygotes in their defeated foes. The white-veiled **night crake** (swamps). **The gargoyle**, with square-shaped wings and drooping long, muscular neck; they are opportunistic, carrying off carrion or helpless prey (Shimkish Mountains). White **grasshopper-like rodents** (mountains). The **flying snake**; organizing in shoals, they slide through the air on long lateral frills and are harmless to humans (mountains). The **lalu**, nocturnal hooter (plains). The **ixxen**, a blind white fox that travels in packs a couple hundred strong. They capture Gomaz infants and raise them; the Gomaz then act as the pack's eyes until they're devoured (plains). **Ten-legged reptiles** and **giant worms**, used as draft animals by the Gomaz.

PEOPLES: Maz is under the jurisdiction of three interstellar empires, including the **Gaean** Reach. The **Liss** are dark and lithe. The **Olefract** are so secretive as to be incomprehensible. Both races are hostilely xenophobic, the Liss to the point of obsession.

TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE: The Gomaz are an intelligent, if nonhuman, species. Examples of their work include iron tools and war implements, castles, and membrane wings for swooping flight. They have no written language and only rudimentary knowledge of mathematics. After their first contact with Gaeans and their export as troops, they captured a fleet and set out to conquer the galaxy.
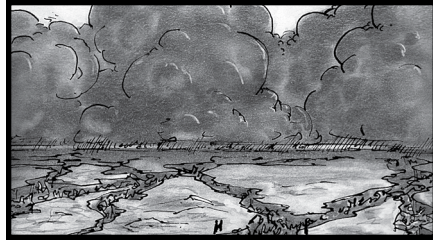
NILO-MAY

STAR: Yellow Rose

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: The single planet of the system.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY: Sunlight is mild, but it plays tricks with perspective. The planet is primarily wilderness. An equatorial desert circles the planet; channels connect the shallow oceans to the north and south of it. A high wall of black clouds constantly rain over the equator. The clouds are fed by trade winds from and returning to the poles. Oily rivers flow down from the desert uplands into the forests. The edges of the desert and along the rivers are covered in swamps.

RESOURCES AND INDUSTRY: Agriculture. Due to its isolation and lack of sufficiently exotic materials and items worth exporting to distant worlds, it primarily engages in trade with its nearest neighbor, Fader.

FLORA AND FAUNA: The **punkwood tree**. The giant **dendron**. Floats of **cottonpuffs** (swamps). **Blackrod** (swamps). Large **lizard-like creatures** leap about on the pads of the blackrod stalks. They build 30-foot-high conical structures of fiber and mucilage. **White worms**, which form tangled balls (swamps). **Web-footed, green-gilled andromorphs**, with long, jointed arms that end in eyes (swamps). The starfish-like **pentapod**, with 20-foot-long limbs (swamps).

PEOPLES: The human population (~7,000) centers on Loorie, the spaceport. They are a quiet people typified by a relaxed lifestyle.

TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE: No particular technological or scientific achievements.
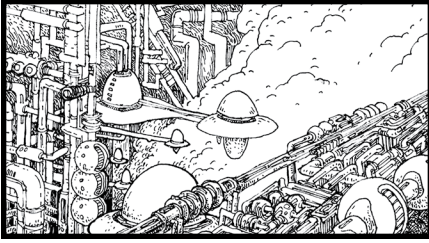
RHEA

STAR: Tyr Gog

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: A small, dense planet with a dozen anomalies. It has a canted orbit, reverse rotation, asymmetric shape, and extraordinarily diverse minerals and elements. It is theorized that it is not the result of planetary condensation but the compacting of numerous large pieces of other celestial bodies and debris, including asteroids and fragments from an exploded dead star.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY: The planet exhibits a diverse topography. There are two principal continents, Wreke and Myrdal, which are separated at the equator by the Straits of Scaime. The continents are as little as 40 miles apart over a span of 100 miles. The tides and currents in the channel, where the continents' oceans meet, can reach speeds of 30 knots.

RESOURCES AND INDUSTRY: The stellar interior's processes transform subatomic particles and rearrange them, creating mineral substances that are outside previously known science. The unique minerals are mined at the industrial complex on Wreke, where they are most accessible.

FLORA AND FAUNA: None of particular note.

PEOPLES: The **Gaean** inhabitants are organized in a caste system, with the members of the Twelve Families who run the mining industry at the apex. Three hundred strong and cooperative **Yips**, a human subspecies from Cadwal, descended from runaway servants and illegal aliens, were imported as laborers. Despite their physiognomy and disposition, they are psychologically incapable of functioning as paid laborers, and they had an attrition rate of 30% a month. They eventually settled in a coastal village, breeding with women from the countryside — on Cadwal, Yips and non-Yips are not interfertile, due to the inclusion of black spiderclam in their diet. The Rhean Yips also show signs of social evolution, with some Yips working harder for their own benefit and others learning from them.

TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE: Rhea's unique resources have allowed an entirely new field of chemistry to develop. The bridge that connects Wreke and Myrdal is an engineering feat, 200 feet high with concrete pontoons spaced at quarter-mile intervals, traversed by magnetic rail cars.

TASSADERO

STAR: Zonk's Star (white dwarf)

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: The single planet of the system, in close orbit to the star. Small.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY: Steppe is the predominant topography. Mt. Esperance, an extinct 20,000 ft tall volcano. Sunlight is soft and enhances dark colors. One scientist theorizes that Zonk's Star emanates a unique vibration that effects teeth and fingernails detrimentally.

RESOURCES AND INDUSTRY: Tourism, notably by the Zonkers, off-worlders who search for Zab Zonk's fabled pirate treasure — the authorities claim that no taxes or duties will be assessed for it. Winter sports are enjoyed at Mt. Esperance; ski-runs reach 20 miles in length.

FLORA AND FAUNA: The **frook**, a slender black tree. The **sorcerer tree**. Colonies of **purple jellyfish** that slide across the ground in 400 yards long by 30 yards wide. Their acrid odor permeates skin and can persist for months.

PEOPLES: Zubenites, population ~100,000, of Lutwiler Country. They are the local members of a religious sect espousing Unity and eschewing Duality (for example, the men and women appear alike to outsiders). They are stolid agrarian folk who look to their own affairs, including legal matters. Their skin is pallid; they are stout, with large round faces, coarse black hair, large moist eyes, and long noses with flat tips. Barbaric **nomads**, population ~50,000, of the Great Steppes and Far Regions. They are descended from the pirates who once used Tassadero as their base. The **Fexels**, population ~3,000,000, of Fexel Country. They are of ordinary Gaean stock and are avid sophisticates and pursuers of novelty. Each race is culturally and genetically distinct and does not associate with the others; the Fexels are hospitable to off-worlders.

TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE: No particular technological or scientific achievements.

TEEHALT'S WORLD

STAR: Unnamed.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: The day length is twice Earth standard.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY: By Earth standards, it is idyllic. The sky is a deep, dark sapphire blue. The air is cool and fresh, with no allergen-sensitive cultures. The planet's microbes are easily controllable by antibiotics. The environment seems to have a psychological effect on humans, attracting them to its primordial beauty.

RESOURCES AND INDUSTRY: Undeveloped.

FLORA AND FAUNA: The ecology is extremely symbiotic, with the life cycles of flora and fauna intertwining to an extent not yet understood. Flowers are rare, growing in small clumps. Trees are plentiful. The gray-barked **great king** is the largest species, rising 200 feet before branching. The slender **white-branched tree** is much smaller. The two tree species appear to be related, having similar structures. The **dryad** is bipedal and has a human-like torso and head structure, which has no features except purplish-green spots that function as eyes. Their arm-like appendages end in twigs with multi-colored leaves. Their skin is silver, green, and brown. They feed by piercing the soil with white proboscises in their feet. They are peaceful and show little interest in humans. There are large **hawk-like animals**. Enormous subterranean **grubs** are prey for dryads and the hawk-like creatures; their remains contain black pods that, when planted by the dryads, grow into the white-branched trees. **Wasp-like insects** with mandibles grow in fruit-like sacs on the great kings; they swarm and devour dryads. The surviving dryads extract black pods from the remains and plant them, apparently to grow the great kings.

PEOPLES: No unique cultures have yet developed.

TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE: No unique technology. An extensive ecological study has yet to be conducted.

GM TIPS AND TRICKS

This section, addressed to GMs, shows you how to prepare for and run your *Gaean Reach* series.

OPPONENTS

Manifold adversaries stand between the vengeance-seekers and their ultimate showdown with Quandos Vorn. They include:

- his employees, hirelings, henchmen and supporters
- dupes furthering his schemes unknowingly
- unrelated malefactors whose interests the group's hunt coincidentally threatens
- authorities who take as dim a view of interstellar avengers as they do of Quandos Vorn
- reflexively obstructive bureaucrats and functionaries
- dangerous creatures

OPPONENT STATISTICS

You usually only need game statistics for characters the vengeance-seekers will end up contesting against. Most witnesses, suspects and noncombatants require only a text description, indicating for example which interpersonal abilities they're most likely to respond to.

Opponents use the same Hit Threshold and weapon damage rules as player characters.

An **Attack Pattern** is an optional game statistic suggesting how the character might spend its Scuffling and/or Shooting points from round to round of a fight. GMs should always consult story logic and dramatic needs first and resort to the Attack Pattern second. Opponents who are angry or fearful will spend what they need to guarantee a hit. Others will spend more cautiously, saving their points for later just as the characters do. These numbers are a fallback if you can't decide how the opponent would spend or you're uncomfortable choosing to spend enough to guarantee a hit each time. Don't use them just

because they're there, even if you find the pull of numbers — oh, sweet, beautiful numbers — generally irresistible.

A security guard's Attack Pattern is 2/4/2. That means he'll spend 2 Shooting points the first round, 4 the next, and 2 for the next round. This will run through his Shooting pool of 8.

When you do use the Attack Pattern, increase the spends after each miss until the opponent either starts to hit or runs out of points. Once engaged, opponents figure out how hard the PCs are to hit and adjust their efforts accordingly.

Armor is subtracted from each instance of damage the opponent takes. Where a weapon or weapons is listed in brackets after the number, the Armor reduces damage only from those weapons. Some Armor may protect against all Scuffling attacks but not Shooting attacks, or vice versa. Armor does not protect against instantly lethal guns.

Obstacle Cost is the number of tokens a player must spend to be able to hit the enemy with an instantly lethal attack, which is almost invariably fire from a projac or needle-gun.

An opponent's **Alertness Modifier** represents its ability to sense your activities, whether through standard senses like sight and hearing, or exotic ones like echolocation, pheromone recognition, or energy-signature reading. When you try to sneak past it, the Alertness Modifier is applied to your base Infiltration Difficulty, which is usually 4. Where a technical hack is used to breach a secure zone, you might instead oppose Systems Repair against an Alertness Modifier. It also applies to Surveillance tests when you're trying to observe the opponent without being observed in turn. The Alertness Modifier reflects all of the individual's sensing capabilities, both natural and technological.

An opponent with a **Stealth Modifier** is either significantly harder or easier to spot with Surveillance. It alters the difficulty number for that or similar tests.

Man is the Deadliest Beast

With no fully sentient nonhuman civilizations in sight, man remains the most devious and destructive creature in the Gaean Reach. Here are baseline statistics for the sorts of people who will stand in the team's way, for you to modify as needed.

ASSASSIN

When the vengeance-seekers get too close to Quandos Vorn or other well-heeled villains, the dastards may hire trained killers to hunt their hunters.

ABILITIES: Athletics 12, Health 12, Scuffling 12, Shooting 12, Systems Repair 4, Vehicles 8
WEAPONS/DAMAGE: knife +0, projac
HIT THRESHOLD: 4
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: +2

BODYGUARD

Important persons pay others to protect them from harm.
ABILITIES: Athletics 10, Health 8, Scuffling 12, Shooting 4
WEAPONS/DAMAGE: baton +0, projac
HIT THRESHOLD: 4
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2
STEALTH MODIFIER: +0

CRIMINAL

Wherever local authority weakens, lawbreakers operate openly. When it is strong, they hide their activities beneath respectable veneers or are pushed to the fringes of society.
ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 8, Scuffling 8, Shooting 4
WEAPONS/DAMAGE: sap +0, projac (lawless areas only)
HIT THRESHOLD: 3
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: −1
STEALTH MODIFIER: −1

PIRATES (A.K.A. STARMENTERS)

Pirates descend on planetary populations in starships, staging violent lightning raids and vanishing back into the vastness of space. Feared and despised, they face hideous punishments when caught. They are rarely a match for planetary defense forces, preferring to direct their violence against the helpless and to flee upon the arrival of the strong.

In Alastor and perhaps elsewhere, pirates are known as starmenters.

If Quandos Vorn is typical of the Reach's worst men, he commits or has committed acts of piracy.
ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 4, Scuffling 6, Shooting 8, Vehicles 3
WEAPONS/DAMAGE: sword +1, projac
HIT THRESHOLD: 3
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: −1
STEALTH MODIFIER: −1

RABBLE-ROUSER

Local militants seeking to upend the social order may complicate the team's quest for vengeance, perhaps as dupes of Quandos Vorn.

ABILITIES: Athletics 4, Health 6, Scuffling 6

WEAPONS/DAMAGE: club +0

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: −1

STEALTH MODIFIER: −1

RUFFIAN

On first wind of nosy outsiders, villains both local and interplanetary resort to an obvious tactic — the dispatch of obedient goons, to intimidate, beat, or capture the troublemakers.

ABILITIES: Athletics 7, Health 6, Scuffling 6

WEAPONS/DAMAGE: fist/kick −1

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: −1

STEALTH MODIFIER: −1

SOLDIER

Certain operations may bring the team into conflict with current or former soldiers. Wars between planets do not occur in the Gaean Reach, but multi-planetary authorities, such as Alastor, must sometimes send forces to quell local uprisings or pirate activities. Civil wars and wars between a planet's rival polities also lead to the training of military forces, some of whose members may find themselves at loose ends later in their careers.

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 8, Scuffling 6, Shooting 6, Vehicles 6

WEAPONS/DAMAGE: projac

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1

STEALTH MODIFIER: +0

SPY

Quandos Vorn's eyes are everywhere, often attached to skulking lackeys. Other organizations threatened by the team's activities may also employ persons adept in the watching and sneaking arts.

ABILITIES: Athletics 4, Health 6, Scuffling 6, Shooting 12

WEAPONS/DAMAGE: knife +0, projac

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2

STEALTH MODIFIER: +2

Creatures

The variegated planets of the Reach brim with bizarre forms of animal and quasi-animal life. Somehow the characters always wind up facing the most ferociously predatory or dangerously territorial of these creatures.

Human settlers of the Reach took familiar animals with them into space. Standard protocols required them to genetically alter these species to prevent them from becoming invasive threats to local ecosystems. Though by and large these were correctly followed, villainy and dereliction existed in the past as surely as they do today. Just as humans have devolved or evolved on countless planets, their animal imports must surely have done so as well.

More often the PCs meet strange and hungry beasts native to the planets they visit. The taxonomies and evolutionary trees of alien worlds may diverge sharply from the patterns of Old Earth. Their DNA may have more in common with trees, lobsters or bacilli than cats, dogs and horses. Whatever the anatomical makeup of the beasts of any given world, evolutionary forces generally arrange them into a familiar pyramid of predators and prey. Parallel evolution throws up recognizable forms tuned for survival in ecological niches found on many planets. Here are typical game statistics for generic creatures divided by ecological role. Customize them by describing unique attacks, defenses, other behaviors, and visual identifiers.

AGGRESSIVE HERBIVORE, CATTLE-SIZED

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 8, Scuffling 8
SCUFFLING WEAPONS/DAMAGE: gore/trample +2
ATTACK PATTERN: (Scuffling) +3/+1/+2/+1/+1
HIT THRESHOLD: 2
ARMOR: 0
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: −2
STEALTH MODIFIER: −2

AGGRESSIVE HERBIVORE, RHINO-SIZED

ABILITIES: Athletics 12, Health 12, Scuffling 12
SCUFFLING WEAPONS/DAMAGE: gore/trample +4
ATTACK PATTERN: (Scuffling) +3/+3/+2/+2/+2
HIT THRESHOLD: 2
ARMOR: 2
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: −3
STEALTH MODIFIER: −3

AGGRESSIVE HERBIVORE, TRICERATOPS-SIZED

ABILITIES: Athletics 12, Health 24, Scuffling 16
SCUFFLING WEAPONS/DAMAGE: gore/trample +6
ATTACK PATTERN: (Scuffling)
    +3/+3/+3/+3/+2/+2
HIT THRESHOLD: 2
ARMOR: 3
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: −3
STEALTH MODIFIER: −3

AGGRESSIVE HERBIVORE, SAUROPOD-SIZED

ABILITIES: Athletics 24, Health 36, Scuffling 24
SCUFFLING WEAPONS/DAMAGE: trample +8
ATTACK PATTERN: (Scuffling) +5/+5/+5/+5/+4
HIT THRESHOLD: 1
ARMOR: 4
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: −4
STEALTH MODIFIER: −4

APEX PREDATOR, LION-SIZED

ABILITIES: Athletics 12, Health 8, Scuffling 8
SCUFFLING WEAPONS/DAMAGE: bite +1
ATTACK PATTERN: (Scuffling) +3/+2/+2/+1
HIT THRESHOLD: 4
ARMOR: 0
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: +1

APEX PREDATOR, MEGAFAUNA-SIZED

ABILITIES: Athletics 16, Health 8, Scuffling 8
SCUFFLING WEAPONS/DAMAGE: bite, swipe
    or claw +4
ATTACK PATTERN: (Scuffling) +2/+2/+2/+2
HIT THRESHOLD: 3
ARMOR: 1
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: −3

APEX PREDATOR, MONSTER-SIZED

ABILITIES: Athletics 16, Health 18, Scuffling 18
SCUFFLING WEAPONS/DAMAGE: bite, swipe
    or claw +6
ATTACK PATTERN: (Scuffling) +4/+4/+4/+4/+2
HIT THRESHOLD: 2
ARMOR: 2
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: −3

PACK PREDATOR, DOG-SIZED

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 3, Scuffling 4
SCUFFLING WEAPONS/DAMAGE: bite −1
ATTACK PATTERN: (Scuffling) +2/+1/+1
HIT THRESHOLD: 4
ARMOR: 0
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: +1

PACK PREDATOR, WOLF-SIZED

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 3, Scuffling 4
SCUFFLING WEAPONS/DAMAGE: bite +0
ATTACK PATTERN: (Scuffling) +2/+1/+1
HIT THRESHOLD: 4
ARMOR: 0
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: +1

SHAPING YOUR SERIES

This section shows you how to springboard from the plot elements your players brainstorm during character generation to fashion your unique *Gaean Reach* series.

THE PLAYER-PROMPTED PROLOGUE

Once your players have defined themselves, and their Quarry, by describing why they have sworn vengeance against Quandos Vorn, get your series started with a player-prompted bridge sequence, or prologue.

Meeting Up, or Forging Ahead?

Before giving the prompt, decide whether the vengeance-seekers meet for the first time during the prologue or have already met and are now acting together.

The first choice creates opportunities for misunderstanding and comic byplay, and is best suited for groups you think will prefer to tilt toward the comic side of the Vancian setting. Players will often have their characters act at cross-purposes for a while before eventually coming to a mutual accommodation and agreeing to act together. This approach answers the classic RPG question, "why are these people a team, anyway?" though maybe in a picaresque, winking manner. It also enables groups who want to contribute more than their characters' actions to the story flow.

The second choice lends itself to a more serious tone. The characters first appear taking efficient steps in tandem toward their goal. It fits reactive players who think better in reaction to a GM's strong ideas or who would rather stay inside their characters' heads and find it distracting to pitch story ideas.

Whichever choice you make, start the prologue by picking a spotlight player. Make the choice intuitively, perhaps choosing the player:

• who's fastest with fun, playable suggestions
• whose backstory and/or reason for vengeance most suggest a likely avenue of investigation

• who could stand to be be drawn out a little

Ask the player what his character is doing to track down Quandos Vorn. As necessary, ask further questions to nail down the details. The player may suggest a location for his character, either inventing it wholesale or drawing it from the source books. Or you might insert the location into the discussion.

> *You pick Rachel to kick things off. "When we first meet her, she's taking action to find Quandos Vorn. What is that action?"*
>
> *"Hmm," Rachel cogitates. "Kelise is searching for the rare chemicals used in the bomb that killed her students."*
>
> ***Option One:*** *After a moment's thought, Rachel adds additional detail. "She finds herself on the planet Thadru, home to the Reach's most prominent merchants and arms manufacturers."*
>
> ***Option Two:*** *Rachel stands pat on her initial description. "Might you find them on the wilderness planet Vosko, whose carnivorous plants yield all manner of ultra-rare substances?"*
>
> *"That's exactly where I went!" Rachel agrees.*

The rest depends on whether you chose the meet-up or the forge-ahead.

MEETING UP: Before going on to kick off a scene featuring the player providing the main suggestion, intuitively pick another player and ask why his or her character happens to be on the already-specified planet. Keep prompting that player until a scene develops, in which the character confronts an obstacle in the way of the player's specified goal.

When this scene reaches a point of suspense, cut away to the next player, and do the same with him or her. Keep going until you've covered all of the characters, except for the one supplying the original prompt. Then go to that player, improvising

an obstacle that 1) stands between that character and a goal and 2) makes one of the other players either the immediate or eventual obstacle to that goal.

To facilitate this, you may find yourself pitching concrete ideas to certain players.

In playtest, the instigating player proposed that he was tracing the author of an academic paper, written in Quandos Vorn's unmistakable style. I then asked another player, who'd established his vengeance-seeker as Quandos Vorn's clone, why he had written an academic paper. "To lure Quandos Vorn, of course!" he replied.

Once you've got this rolling, keep cutting between the players until either you or they have nudged the scenes toward a meet-up of all their characters. Let the players gradually negotiate their way to team status. Then perform a bridge sequence, as described below.

FORGING AHEAD: After the instigating player sets up the situation and his character goal, intuitively pick another player and ask what her character is doing to help him.

Spin a scene out of this, encouraging each of the other characters to jump in as you go along. Depending on the flow of events, they might jump into an existing scene, or you might start another scene in which the feature character does something to further the instigating character's objective. Let everyone have a chance to do something interesting. Then perform a bridge sequence, as described below.

Bridge Sequence

In the bridge sequence, the characters discover a core clue leading them into the opening sequence of your preplanned opening scenario.

(You decide what preplanning means in this context:
- a fully-written published scenario, like the sample in the following section
- a partially sketched-out set of rough notes
- the headers of a scenario spine (see below), jotted down
- a rough idea in your head)

The core clue might indicate the full premise of the scenario. For example, if Quandos Vorn has kidnapped the space princess Alaia Skent, rescuing her might be the goal of one scenario. They might learn that he's done this and begin

Player Prompted Prologue

Pick Spotlight Player

Meeting Up
- What is spotlight player doing?
- Why is player B also on planet?
- What about player C, D, etc.?

Forging Ahead
- What is spotlight player doing?
- What is player B doing to help?
- What about player C, D, etc.?

Bridge Sequence

Intro Scenario Opening

the scenario by questioning witnesses at the scene of the crime.

Alternately, the core clue might provide the barest hint of information necessary to get them into the initial scene. In a scenario where the players uncover a Quandos Vorn operation on Duggan's Planet, they might only know the name of the planet — perhaps from intercepting a crew manifest. Once on Duggan's they have to nose around until they find the first of many clues leading them deeper into the plot.

SCENARIO SPINE

Each scenario builds itself around a spine — a loose collection of elements that together weave a mystery that feels like a story that Jack Vance might have written about the Gaean Reach. These elements are as follows:

Scheme

The Quarry doesn't just stand still while the vengeance-seekers hunt him. He, or his henchmen or other representatives in the scenario, actively seek to further their cause of domination and villainy. This section details what they seek, how they seek it, and what the consequences will be if the characters fail to stop them.

Counter-Scheme

This entry defines the vengeance-seekers' goal for the scenario at hand. If it is the last scenario, the goal is to capture and destroy Quandos Vorn. Otherwise, it is to learn something that brings them closer to finding him, weakening him in the process. It's this last bit — how the characters weaken him — that provides the episode goal. When the PCs achieve this (or definitively fail to do so), the episode has concluded, and it's time to move on to another one.

These situational goals of the counter-scheme might include:

• eliminating a henchman

• taking possession of an object[*] Quandos Vorn needs to complete his scheme
• sabotaging an installation, weapon, or other physical item integral to the scheme
• simply revealing a scheme to the authorities, who then act to prevent it

The Hunt

This section lists in quick summary format the ways in which the characters can learn of the scheme or figure out how to successfully perform their counter-scheme. It focuses on investigative scenes which, ideally, can be unraveled in more than one order. The Hunt brings in key elements of Gaean Reach stories:

• brutal systems of justice
• devolved humans and their alien customs
• environments of deadly beauty
• family schemes
• interactions with the IPCC
• intransigent bureaucrats
• laws both inflexible and extreme
• masquerades, festivals, bacchanals
• monstrous alien animals
• nonhuman indigenes, often closer to sentient than humans believe
• opaque machinations of the Institute
• pedants, poets and blowhards
• petty swindles
• societies who take abstract organizing principles to absurd extremes
• unspoiled worlds, and those who would spoil them
• violent sports with convoluted rules

Pitfalls

In the course of novel-length exploits, the lead characters of various Gaean Reach tales often suffer quite severe setbacks, frequently due to their own laxness or naïveté. These setbacks include:

• imprisonment by their enemies (by far the most common)

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* Students of story jargon know this object by a favorite Hitchcock term, the McGuffin.

- loss of ships
- loss of birthright
- murder of loved ones

A typical scenario includes the prospect of a terrible setback, often due to action undertaken by the Quarry or his cat's-paws. This assumes that the PCs avoid some of them. After a scenario in which they fall prey to a pitfall, the GM may want to keep the pitfall in the following one as a threat only. It adds to player anxiety but does not yet again hit them with a massive reversal — not this time out, at least.

When developing or improvising your own scenario, you can spare yourself the tedious effort of invention by deploying the preexisting ideas about Quandos Vorn generated during the "If You Hate Quandos Vorn So Much..." phase of character creation (p. 12). If the players decided that Quandos Vorn can infallibly track one of them at all times, fields an army of clones, reaches deep into the IPCC, and is constantly sucking another of them into his swindles, that's enough pitfalls to keep you going for the length of the series.

Just switch up the order unpredictably, occasionally have the antagonists of a given scenario take active measures against them, and you're well stocked with pitfall material.

When running a published or prepared adventure, look for opportunities to swap out the supplied pitfalls for player-generated ones.

Endpoint

The endpoint reiterates the goal by suggesting how the characters might bring the scenario to a close. Ideally, there exists more than one way to bring this about.

Scenarios end in one of two ways: on a **lead** or a **hard break**.

A lead ends on a forward-looking note: as a reward for their efforts, the group gathers a clue that will take them into the next scenario.

A hard break concludes with a setback for either the Quarry or the vengeance-seekers, but without a clue linking it to the next session. Instead, the clue kicking off the subsequent scenario appears in its first scene.

Sample Scenario Spine: The Truth Stealers

SCHEME: The devolved humans of Vinsk, called the Vinks, secrete into their cerebral cortices a natural hallucinogen enabling them to interact with the quasi-intelligent energy beings of its volcanic zones. When injected into a non-Vink, they scramble the subject's memories. Unlike other amnesia-inducing substances, this one eludes all effort to reconstruct the victim's mind. Quandos Vorn wants to use this on the last seven people who have seen his true face.

COUNTER-SCHEME: To find and destroy the harvesting plant.

THE HUNT: On **Planet Zayre**, where men and women may legally murder one another over access to the work of top fashion designers, the vengeance-seekers encounter a witness who knows of Vorn's interest in Vinsk. In the planet's only human city, **Protectorion**, they must overcome conservationist qualms to find a guide willing and able to communicate with the Vinks. Once near Vorn's likely contact point, they must **Win Over the Vinks**. When the Vink **Chieftain** is murdered, they must prove that it was not them but Vorn's men. This allows the **Expedition to the Volcano Peaks**, and in turn infiltration into the **Extraction Plant**.

PITFALLS: Depending on how they fare, the group faces additional dangers from the **Cultural Preservation League**, **Renegade Vinks**, or monstrous life-forms called **Lavasaurs**.

THE ENDPOINT: When they find the plant, the vengeance-seekers can destroy it, either on their own or with help of enraged Vinks.

SCENE TYPES

Written scenarios call out each scene by type, so you can see at a glance what purpose it serves.

Core scenes are those in which a core clue is offered, moving the group further into the story. Groups will play through most core scenes in a scenario.

Alternate scenes may or may not occur, depending on player choices. They may be fun digressions, or provide additional means of getting core clues.

Pipe scenes provide information that, while not moving the group forward to a new scene, proves either useful or essential in a later scene.

A **Pitfall** scene (called Antagonist Reaction in other GUMSHOE iterations) places the group in danger, testing their general abilities.

SERIES AS UBER-SCENARIO

A GUMSHOE scenario consists of interconnected scenes. Core clues serve as the connection points between these scenes. Ideally, various connecting paths can be drawn from the opening scene to the conclusion. The players shape the outcome of the scenario not only with their successes and failures in tests and contests, which can cause the narrative to branch in various ways, but by deciding which investigative paths to pursue, and in what order.

The *Gaean Reach*'s vengeance motif provides a wrapper that connects all of your series' scenarios, just as scenes connect up to form a scenario. You might visualize this as a Russian doll structure. At the end of each scenario except for the last, the characters discover a fact or gain some other benefit moving them one step further to their defining confrontation with Quandos Vorn.

ENDING YOUR SERIES

The vengeance-seeking series frame imposes a time limit on your series. Although we let you get to it by feel rather than imposing a suggested number of episodes, eventually the players are going to want to catch and destroy Quandos Vorn. It goes without saying that

What About Red Herring Episodes?

If your series were an ongoing TV show, you might have to pad it out with multiple red herring episodes, in which the vengeance-seekers think they're making progress, only to have their hopes dashed at the end. Fortunately, you can embrace the fact that the series ends when the heroes achieve their goal and create a satisfying saga of a roughly agreed-upon length.

Carefully gauge your players' frustration threshold before introducing an entire episode that leads them nowhere. Red herrings are fun when you can think your way past them. When the last scene of an exciting evening's play leads to a dead end, most players will rightly feel that you've wasted their time, out of fidelity to a misplaced sense of realism, or to a fictional trope that doesn't really fit here.

you'll want to steer this climax to as challenging and satisfying a conclusion as possible.

Some groups might want to keep going even after this ultimate triumph. In so doing, they face the question that bedevils Kirth Gersen throughout the Demon Princes series. What does he, a man raised from childhood only for vengeance, do with himself when he achieves it? Does he retire and seek a new life. *Can* he? If not, does he continue his quest, against villains who simply remind him of his Quarry, the five so-called Demon Princes?

Start the next episode of the rest of the character's lives with a scene in which they collectively decide what to do from here on out. (Ask them for an out-of-character decision ahead of time, via email or other between-game communication method, so you can prepare a scenario idea matching their conception of the new phase.) Have them specify the new personal goals that drive them to this pursuit, whatever it might be. In ensuing scenarios, include scenes that let them move, step by step, toward these goals.

For an open-ended continuing series, you may want to rummage *Ashen Stars* for ideas, starting with its "Personal Arcs" section.

TONE

The tone of Jack Vance's Gaean Reach novels shifts over time.* All of the books combine high-stakes adventure with dry, mordant wit. The first books focus on the former, with an underpinning of sly satire. Over the years, the balance tips in favor of comedy. Even within the Demon Princes saga, with its almost pathologically detached vengeance-seeker and utterly despicable villains, the installments written in the 1970s leave more room for comedy than their comparatively straighter 1960s predecessors. His final Gaean Reach series, *Ports of Call* and *Lurulu*, ventures into the outright picaresque. Although lighthearted compared to the Demon Princes books, vengeance still propels the narrative: young hero Myron Tany seeks the comeuppance of his fickle great aunt after she casts him off her space-yacht, stranding him in the middle of galactic nowhere.

By default, a *Gaean Reach* RPG series will hit a natural tone that is one step broader still than these last books. When they improvise together, players tend to reach for comic choices, which garner the biggest and most obvious reactions from the rest of the group. Embracing the dynamic of kidding and asides that dominate most gaming meet-ups is easier and more natural than fighting it. If the result takes you into sillier territory than Jack Vance would have gone, and you're having fun, you have no cause for dissatisfaction.

Some groups may want to adhere more precisely to his exact balance of wit and danger. They may be dominated by a player or players who remembers the Demon Princes books as straighter than they really are. Enforcing a more serious tonal balance requires agreement from the group beforehand and discipline during play. If you think this might be a desire for your group, talk about tone before starting. As GM, you do more to set the tone than anyone else. Avoid pop-culture references, slapstick, and exaggerated comic situations. Play your characters as cutting and witty but not goofy. Exercise an ongoing editorial judgment — when a player makes a suggestion or takes a move that breaks the agreed-upon tone, stop and ask them to adjust it.

If, in the course of the series, you discover that you want to accept the material's innate bent toward humor, you can always do what Vance himself did, and let more of it slip in as you go along.

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* A similar development occurs in his fantasy stories of the Dying Earth. Although some readers prefer them to the later comic works, Vance considered the straightforward early stories, influenced by Clark Ashton Smith and other sword and sorcery pioneers, juvenilia.

ALTERNATIVE SERIES FRAMES

By casting the PCs as vengeance-seekers, the game creates a clear core activity for their characters to pursue — one that happens to correspond to the key structure Jack Vance returns to again and again.

This justification for player action might be called a series frame: it creates a context, and collective goal, ensuring that players know what to do next.

Grim retribution isn't the only goal that might propel a *Gaean Reach* series, though. Any reason for the characters to travel from one odd world to the next, getting in and out of trouble, will provide you the connecting tissue to wrap a series around. Whatever you choose, make sure it implies something clear for them to do from the moment they touch down on a new world to the moment of their exit, with or without a shower of projac fire at their heels.

This section presents a few alternate concepts for you to flesh out.

EFFECTUATORS OF ALASTOR

Characters act as problem-solvers in the employ of an interstellar authority, possibly the Connatic of Alastor, who exerts a distant control over multiple disparate worlds. Empowered to intervene but required to keep a low profile, they visit a new world or worlds in each scenario, rectifying social ills and dispensing justice. In unusual cases, they may recommend to their employer that a society that has spiraled into degradation be reformed from the bottom up.

During character creation, players specify why their individual players have chosen to enlist as two-fisted social engineers, and what they hope to gain from the experience.

This frame suits a group that likes to follow a clear mission, as assigned by the GM at the top of each scenario, and those who prefer to play conventionally moral and heroic characters. It puts a Vancian twist on the core activity of *The Gaean Reach*'s sister game, *Ashen Stars*.

LOCATORS

The characters act as so-called Locators, using their starship to prospect for new, inhabitable planets on the far fringes of the Reach. More often than not they find worlds humanity has settled and then forgotten, leaving isolated societies to develop strange new cultures.

Investigative scenes center around attempts to find these new worlds, and to survey and understand them once they reach them. Pitfalls put them at odds with rival prospectors, criminals seeking distant havens, resident indigenes, and weird locals seeking to draw them into their own conflicts.

At the outset, players explain why their characters want to find a new Eden. Is it for the money, and if so, why? Or do they hope to found a new society of their own? In the latter case, you might extend the series into a settlement phase, in which the characters seek the information they need to protect their nascent utopia from forces intent on snuffing it out.

SPACE TRADERS

Evoke the action of *Ports of Call* and *Lurulu* by making the characters a crew of itinerant traders seeking commercial success among the disparate worlds of the Reach. Players may find this comfortably familiar, as it's a default series frame[*] from the granddaddy of all space-opera RPGs, *Traveller*.

During character creation, ask each player in turn to explain why his character seeks a fortune as a trader.

Each scenario begins with an opportunity to make a lucrative trade. Investigative scenes feature their attempts to track down the deal or to recover a cargo that was stolen from them as part of the set-up. Pitfall scenes revolve around their attempts to ward off competitors, thieves, swindlers and rapacious planetary-revenue agents.

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[*] *Not that they called it that…*

The series either continues indefinitely, in picaresque fashion, or is constructed as a sequence of small transactions which build to a final climactic deal that either makes or breaks the crew's fortunes.

SCRATCH-BUILT CHARACTERS

In keeping with its finite series frame, *The Gaean Reach* sets aside the more deliberate customization typical of GUMSHOE in favor of *Skulduggery*'s fast, randomized character generation system. This will suit most groups, but if yours is the exception, here's how to create characters from scratch. Players whose characters die can use these rules to create replacements — who, of course, also have good and specific reason to desire the excruciating demise of Quandos Vorn.

INVESTIGATIVE BUILD POINTS

Players acquire investigative ratings by spending a number of build points, which varies depending on the number of participating players.

# OF PLAYERS	INVESTIGATIVE BUILD POINTS
2	28
3	18
4	14
5+	12

GENERAL BUILD POINTS

Each character gets 50 points to divide between general abilities. Every character starts with a Health rating of 1. Like investigative abilities, 1 build point buys you 1 rating point.

Although there is no set cap on abilities, your second highest general ability rating must be at least half that of your highest rating.

Where having any points at all in an investigative ability implies a high degree of competence, spreads in general abilities cover a wider range of capability levels. A rating of 1–3 indicates that the ability is a sideline, 4–7 is solid but not off the charts, and 8 or more suggests a dedicated badassery that will be immediately apparent to observers when they see you in action.

When you choose to have ratings of 0 in certain basic abilities, you're defining your character. An Athletics of 0 implies a surprising feebleness and lack of coordination for a vengeance-seeker. A Health of 1 puts you on the constant verge of hospitalization.

Ability Master List

Investigative

- Anthropology
- Arts
- Astronomy
- Bureaucracy
- Chemistry
- Engineering
- Evidence Collection
- Finance
- Flair
- Flattery
- Flirting
- Geology
- History
- Impersonate
- Intimidation
- Law
- Life Sciences
- Materiel
- Medicine
- Negotiation
- Nose for Mendacity
- One-Upsmanship
- Psychology
- Punctilio
- Reassurance
- Research
- Scuttlebutt

General

- Athletics
- Filch
- Gambling
- Health
- Infiltration
- Medic
- Preparedness
- Scuffling
- Shooting
- Surveillance
- Systems Repair
- Vehicles
- Wealth
- Wherewithal

Investigative abilities are marked with symbols to help remind you of their functions. When you're wondering what you might do in a scene, look for the appropriate symbol.

If you typically use the ability by simply remembering a fact you've already learned, it's an **academic** ability, marked by a △.

If you use it to get someone else to tell you something, it's an **interpersonal** ability, indicated by a ◑.

Technical abilities, marked by a ▤, often require you to take physical action of some sort as you inspect a piece of evidence.

THE CERULEAN DUKE

I n this introductory scenario, the vengeance-seekers journey to the verdant planet Chernil, held as a nature preserve by a small but fanatical cadre of pseudo-entomologists. There an ally of Quandos Vorn, the mysterious master criminal and anti-ecology activist known only as the Cerulean Duke, plans a scheme of conquest and mass environmental destruction.

SCENARIO SPINE

The scenario breaks down as follows.

SCHEME

Deep in the protected jungles of Chernil's Generative Zone lies the Algal Lake, a depression filled with a green ooze. Having discovered that the planet's extinct nonhuman indigenes worshiped the lake as a god of destruction, the Cerulean Duke plans to enact an ancient ritual. This will bring it to life in its manifestation as a world-scouring destroyer. The ooze creature will destroy the pseudo-entomologist community, leaving the planet helpless against the Duke's plan to plunder it.

COUNTER-SCHEME

The characters seek to find, apprehend, and thwart the Cerulean Duke, hoping that he will lead them a step closer to Quandos Vorn.

THE HUNT

Bridge Sequence connects the scenario to the group-generated opening sequence that introduces the main cast.

In **Unwelcome to Chernil**, the group gains rare access to the planet and its main settlement of Vorven, either under false pretenses or as open pursuers of Quandos Vorn. In the latter case, they may be briefed by the peremptory **Preservation Justiciar** Ghalith Ghaal. **The Conservatarium** allows them to brief themselves on Chernil's strange environment and the culture of its psuedo-entomologists — particularly the territorial and suspicious Fostro Espen. **Statue Tussle** introduces them to the tale of the planet's lost indigenes. Queries at the tavern **Pseudo Pseudo** point them to the lush hazard of **The Generative Zone**. There they may seek out the Duke's **Hidden Installation** or investigate the Algal Lake, a.k.a. the **Proto-Leviathan**.

PITFALLS

Aggrieved pseudo-entomologist **Fostro Espen** may make trouble for the group in Vorven. The Cerulean Duke's **Spies** may confront them there or in the jungle. Should he take them unawares in the Generative Zone, the Duke tries to sacrifice the group to the **Proto-Leviathan**. And speaking of the jungle, what trip to this pristine destination would be complete without the threat of **Monstrous Pseudo-Arthopods**?

As always, you may supplement or replace these with player-generated pitfalls.

ENDPOINT

If the group foils the Cerulean Duke — perhaps after nearly being sacrificed to the proto-leviathan of the Algal Lake — they gain a lead of your choice, which draws them into your series' next scenario.

SCENES

BRIDGE SEQUENCE

To finalize your bridge sequence (see p. 69) and segue into the meat of the scenario, present the vengeance-seekers with obstacles allowing them to achieve the following

- They discover that:
  - Quandos Vorn has allied himself with the notorious criminal called the Cerulean Duke
  - His minions were to rendezvous with the Cerulean Duke on the verdant planet Chernil.
- They intercept, misdirect, apprehend, destroy, or otherwise remove the minions from the picture.
- They arrange a means of transport to Chernil. (In playtest, they stole the ship the minions were to use to get to Chernil.)

Be prepared to adjust subsequent scenes based on the events of the prologue and bridge sequence.

UNWELCOME TO CHERNIL

SCENE TYPE: Core
LEAD-IN: Prologue
LEAD-OUTS: Preservation Justiciar, The Conservatarium
"Our mercy should not be overestimated."

As they drop out of intersplit, the vengeance-seekers' vessel is hailed by a sentry of the Chernil Planetary Defense Force, or CPDF. Identifying himself as Targeting Sergeant Tikmo Blent, he warns them that Chernil is, according to the precepts of the Planetary Integrity Preserve Pact, a protected zone. No

traffic to the planet's surface is permitted without formal authorization of Chernil's governing body, the Pseudo-Entomological Protectorate Authority (PEPA).

If asked what might happen if they land anyway, Blent points out that he has a massive laser aimed at their ship and will blow it to micro-shrapnel if they so much as graze Chernil's upper atmosphere.

Materiel affirms that Blent could easily have such a weapon at his disposal. Should he fire it, their best possible outcome is a fiery crash landing in the trackless and hostile jungle — and that will require superlative piloting.

Blent displays a tersely businesslike attitude throughout the exchange. In response to questioning, he provides the following information:

- The Cerulean Duke is indeed known to PEPA as the planet's most dangerous fugitive and frequent offender against its strict conservation laws. Blent then directs pointed questions at the vengeance-seekers, as if mentioning the Duke's name means that they are somehow in league with them.
- The name Quandos Vorn means nothing to him.
- Permission to land is granted only to accredited pseudo-entomologists, who must sign an Environmental Devastation Waiver.
- The Waiver affirms that the signatory, if charged with an ecological crime, agrees without fuss or unseemly resistance to a sentence of summary execution.

Any attempt to weasel out of this last provision gets Blent's back up, rendering the rest of the exchange tense. Only one intent on devastation would refuse so sound a proviso!

Nose for Mendacity doubts that Blent's threat to fire is a bluff.

In the Unlikely Event of a Crash Landing

Players with authority issues may be tempted to take their chances with a crash landing. The character with **Law** reminds them that this will severely hamper their hunt — they'll be fugitives from a harsh regime with a yen for summary execution.

Should they persist, Blent fires, and a Difficulty 6 **Vehicles** test is needed to steer the ship so that it takes only a grazing hit. It crashes in a distant steppe and is totaled. On another Difficulty 6 **Vehicles** test, each occupant takes only one instance of damage, instead of two.

When they emerge from the wreckage, CPDF soldiers have the drop on them, and convey them to Ghalith Ghaal, in shackles, for questioning. Before they get to the heart of the scene "Preservation Justiciar", they have to grovel their way back into his good graces.

Psychology indicates that he is strongly dedicated to his duties, jealous of his dignity as an authority figure, and likely to respond poorly to underhanded proposals.

Temporary permission to land may be secured by any one of the following abilities.

[CORE] **Impersonate** or **Life Sciences:** Pretend to be an accredited pseudo-entomologist. (Leads to "The Conservatarium.")

[CORE] **Law:** Argue that their pursuit of the Cerulean Duke is a matter of planetary security and that they should be granted permission to land in order to liaise with appropriate law enforcement authorities. (Leads to "Preservation Justiciar.")

[CORE] **Bureaucracy:** Claim that the appropriate permission has already been granted, and that the paperwork has surely been lost. (Leads to either "Preservation Justiciar" or "The Conservatarium", depending on whether the PCs present themselves as scientists or fugitive-trackers.)
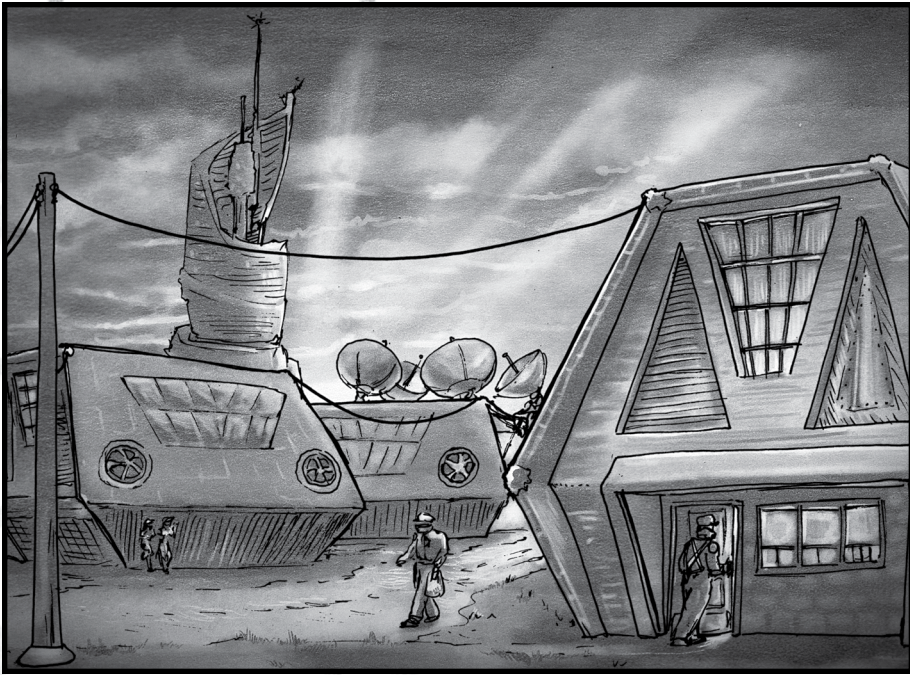
Vorven

Vorven appears to the casual observer as a mere outpost, consisting of widely separated structures arranged along an unpaved road.

When players ask about the community itself, they note the following:

- With the exception of CPDF officers, nearly everyone wears a jumpsuit. The most common suit is green. These suits bear a yellow emblem below the right shoulder, shaped like an insect or insect-like creature. Other suits are dirt-brown, without insignia. People wear caps and scarves to ward off dust from the road.
- **Arts:** Most buildings are grimly utilitarian and made of prefab materials—as if the original structures of a hardscrabble colony were left in place and carefully maintained, rather than being replaced, as they would be on most worlds.
- **Engineering:** Technological items have been chosen to favor energy efficiency and zero harmful emissions over all other considerations.
- **Anthropology:** Engaging in wasteful practices is undoubtedly a social offense here.
- **History:** Vorven is Chernil's only notable settlement, founded by people who meant to restrict development and population growth.
- **Punctilio:** The prevailing etiquette here is surely one of dour wallflowerism.

Blent grants permission to land at Vorven's pokey, backwater spaceport. Upon disembarking the vengeance-seekers note the distinctive smell of Chernil*: loamy vegetable

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*As experienced travelers know, each planetary atmosphere has its own unique tang, which is most keenly observed at the moment of landing. After a few minutes, the nose adjusts to all but the most noxious of aerial tangs.

decay, a coppery hint in the air, and a faint acrid reek. **Life Sciences** suggests that the atmosphere contains non-fatal trace elements of cyanide and other toxins, neutralized by naturally occurring antidote chemicals in the air.

CPDF foot patrolmen (not Blent himself) show up to direct them to their next destination, whichever it may be. They escort the group only if asked.

PRESERVATION JUSTICIAR

SCENE TYPE: Core
LEAD-IN: Unwelcome to Chernil, Statue Tussle
LEAD-OUTS: The Conservatarium, Statue Tussle
"Speak no further!"

The CPDF building breaks from the dour conservatism of Vorven. This tower of glass and glittering copper towers above the settlement as a biomorphic shape with few straight lines. Behind it stands the laser battery that stood ready to shoot the PCs' ship out of space.

Colonel Ghalith Ghaal wears a gleaming leather uniform, topped by a prow-like cap. He's a thin, wrinkled man with a proudly trimmed mustache. Pompous and peremptory, he will periodically bark at vengeance-seekers, telling them that they are forbidden to speak, when what they say displeases him.

A vast terrarium dominates his office. Force-fields hem in a squirming array of gigantic pseudo-insects and pseudo-arthropods, the planet's now-dominant life-forms. (**Life Sciences:** the "pseudo" indicates that the creatures are quite different anatomically from similar-looking Earth creatures, which were often imported to other planets after genetic modifications to prevent them from becoming endemic invasive species.)

Ghaal's massive desk, made from a translucent poly-plastic, serves as an aquarium. Grotesque marine pseudo-arthropods swim through it, taking periodic nips at one another.

Ghaal conducts the meeting as an interrogation, demanding a complete account of the vengeance-seekers' hunt for Quandos Vorn (whom he has never heard of before) and how the Cerulean Duke comes into it. It soon becomes clear that he doesn't trust them and thinks they might be working for the Duke. He bristles whenever the characters' account of themselves veers into impropriety.

To win his trust, one of the group — perhaps the most talkative one — must submit to the truth-bug test. The truth-bug is a worm-like pseudo-arthropod with a tiny barb on one end and a large, corkscrew-like prong on the other. An attendant brings it into the room in a glass cage. Ghaal pulls up his sleeve and allows the creature to jab his bare arm with the tiny barb. Then it skitters toward the PC and waits to jam the long prong into his forearm.

The jabbed character takes a −1 damage die. The truth-bug injects a substance establishing a light psychic link between Ghaal and the character, allowing him to trust the truthfulness of his statements — or to see through his deceptive ones.

With this trust in place, Ghaal is ready to share information about the Cerulean Duke and extend limited cooperation.

If the group asks specific questions, he supplies answers along the following lines:
- the Cerulean Duke has plagued Chernil for nearly two decades
- over the years, the CPDF has raided various recently abandoned headquarters
- his activities have defiled environments ranging from the steppes to the temperate rainforest, all the way to an underwater headquarters
- he traffics in endangered plant and pseudo-arthropod species, selling the organisms to off-world collectors and substances derived from them to pharmaceutical syndicates
- he can travel to and from Chernil with impunity, eluding detection and planetary defense systems; how he does this is unclear

- over the years, he has maintained in his employ a cadre of interstellar cutthroats
- the CPDF holds him responsible for the deaths of thirteen officers, and the maiming or torture of twice as many more
- he may have murdered as many as twenty-seven civilians — although any suspicious death in Vorven does get blamed on him as a matter of course
- no one knows his real name
- from his obsession with Chernil, it is widely assumed that he was born here and went renegade, but this is not actually known
- no two witness statements by people who claim to have met him describe the same person

If the group asks him for a dossier or other information dump: Ghaal shouts, "Bring in the dossier!" Attendants carry in a hamper-sized metallic coffin with airholes punched in it. Inside is a pseudo-arthropod resembling a plump, fifty-pound rump roast covered in a chitinous shell. Protruding from a ridge atop its back is a rubbery feeding tubule. Ghaal refers to it as a dossier-bug and releases it into the group's custody, absenting himself from answering further tedious questions. They may take the dossier-bug with them, so long as they swear to protect it from tampering by the Duke's agents, and to return it in good condition. (The information it contains has also been copied onto other dossier-bugs. The loss of the creature, though discouraged, will not prove crippling.)

To gain information from the dossier-bug, a character thrusts an arm into the carrying case. The creature's tubule wraps itself around the exposed flesh and begins to draw blood through microscopic suckers. At the same time it injects its host with a psychoactive linking chemical similar to that of the truth-bug. (**Life Sciences** can explain all this.)

The dossier-bug stores all of the CPDF's intelligence on the Cerulean Duke in its unthinking brain matter. (1-point **Life Sciences** spend: Chernil's extinct indigenes probably bred dossier-bugs to serve as repositories for their oral histories. Before that they were likely symbiotically linked to some other life-form able to make use of stored sensory data.)

The character can ask three questions before the interchange becomes taxing. For each subsequent question, the character loses 1 Health and must make a **Wherewithal** test (Difficulty 4 + the number of previous Wherewithal tests undertaken by the character during the current interval). On a failure, the character takes a die of damage and falls unconscious, with a Difficulty 4 Health test required to wake up. The felled questioner comes to naturally X minutes later, where X = 10 minutes per margin point of the failed Health test.

If discussions with Ghaal break down, he peremptorily dismisses the vengeance-seekers from his presence. A character can win him back with any of the following 1-point spends:

Bureaucracy: invoking mutual IPCC connections.

Flattery: praising Ghaal's terrarium, his aquarium desk, and/or the general shipshape quality his operation.

Flirting: raising the possibility of a later romantic assignation. (Ghaal's orientation happens to favor the gender of whichever character first makes a Flirting spend.)

Punctilio: displaying proper paramilitary etiquette, the character apologizes appropriately for the offense.

If the group asks for credentials or to be able to invoke their relationship with Ghaal and the CPDF in the course of the investigation, a 2-point spend of any of the following abilities seals the arrangement:

Bureaucracy: citing IPCC credentials.

Law: proposing an arrangement indemnifying him from any negative repercussions.

Negotiation: offering him the chance to take full credit for their successes

Reassurance: promising him that nothing could possibly go awry.

If they make this spend, they are referred to as credentialed, a state conferring certain benefits in later scenes.

[CORE] **Anthropology** or **Scuttlebutt:** If they haven't already secured lodgings at a Conservatarium, it occurs to a character during this interview that they need a cover story to explain their presence here. Otherwise they'll be immediately identified as out of place by everyone, including the Duke's agents. No one can visit this world, let alone move around freely, without a defined scientific remit. Supply this clue late in the scene, preferably when relations with Ghaal are headed in a positive direction. He agrees to arrange for accreditation with a Conservatarium of the group's collective choice.

THE CONSERVATARIUM

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-IN: Unwelcome to Chernil, Preservation Justiciar

LEAD-OUT: Statue Tussle, Pseudo Pseudo, Spies

"In which journals are you cited?"

Various scientific institutes lie along Vorven's dusty main drag, distinguished only by the order of pseudo-arthropod its practitioners study. These correspond to the patches researchers wear on their green jumpsuits. The group chooses the conservatarium they want to interact with — and might move to a new one after wearing out their welcome at the first. Conservataria include those devoted to pseudo-ants, -beetles, -spiders, -centipedes, -butterflies, -moths, and -crustaceans. Types without earth analogues also appear:

- behemoths: dinosaur-like herbivorous pseudo-arthropods
- dinoarths: (DINE-oh-arths) dinosaur-like carnivorous pseudo-arthropods
- psiarths: a pseudo-arthropod family, including the dossier-bug and truth-bug, that excretes a variety of psychoactive substances

A large yellow emblem of each creature order, rendered in paint, adorns the front of each forlornly serviceable structure. **Engineering:** constructed of polyconcrete cinder blocks, they're built to withstand gigantic creature attacks.

With Ghalith Ghaal's say-so, or with **Impersonate** or **Life Sciences**, the group can gain accreditation and lodgings at their chosen Conservatarium.

The admissions officer is Hedof Skah, a rangy, restless man whose nasal tones flute down the length of his prominent aquiline nose. Fussy and distrustful, he suffers from the psychological malady known as gatekeeper's disease. His first instinct is to prevent newcomers from entering his bailiwick. Failing that, as he will do here, he works to put them in their place. Without a 1-point spend by one PC on one of the following abilities, Hedof Skah later badmouths them, calling attention to them and otherwise hampering their activities in town:

Flair: showing off the extraplanetary accoutrements he disdains but secretly envies.

Flattery: praising his obvious academic sagacity.

Negotiation: offering him a benefit in exchange for preferred treatment.

One-Upsmanship: asserting social superiority.

Punctilio: confessing a shared love of empty formality.

Attempts at **Intimidation** make him an enemy, irreversibly.

On a 2-point spend, Hedof becomes their fervent boosters, singing their praises and intervening to prevent trouble.

Upon processing of the paperwork, Hedof presents the group with its jumpsuits, each bearing the appropriate order emblem. Unless they spent to win him over, he presents them with musty, wrinkled outfits.

Each Conservatarium shares an identical layout.

The first floor is devoted to administrative and shared space, including the admissions officer's desk, staff offices, and a small, disused common area.

Drudges of the Botanical Beat

At the town's fringes huddle dingier, smaller institutes dedicated to botanical study. **Anthropology:** plant researchers are clearly Chernil's low-status out-group. If there's action to be had, it will likely be found among the pseudo-arthropod fanciers.

[CORE] Anyone here can tell the group that the real social action occurs at the Pseudo Pseudo.

Laboratory space takes up the second floor. A loamy smell of botanical and pseudo-arthropod life emanates unceasingly from it.

Spartan dorm rooms take up the third floor.

As the PCs arrive at their shared dorm room, other unhappy researchers are being herded out from it, under protest. Whether arranged by Ghaal or Skah, room has been made for the group at someone else's expense.

[PIPE] One of the displaced researchers is the tall and dolorous Fostro Espen. Unlike his fellows, he modifies his jumpsuit with an impressive blue cape that billows dramatically regardless of atmospheric conditions. (**Engineering:** Miniature anti-gravity pads have been sewn into the fabric.)

Espen demands that the team leader cite his scientific bona fides, which can be accomplished with **Impersonate** or **Life Sciences**. Players can ask to spend to cement the quality of the impression. If they rely on Impersonate without a spend, Espen, who is the Cerulean Duke, becomes suspicious and later sends spies after them.

He makes no untrue statements in this encounter — he is really an expert on psuedo-insects and is truly offended to be forced to bunk with other colleagues — and so does not trigger **Nose for Mendacity**.

This encounter likely ends inconclusively, leaving the PCs to check out their room. Spare and institutional, its main features, aside from single beds and dressers, is a shelf bearing the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Chernilia*. Characters can use **Research** to skim the books, and then (now or later) ask questions about the world. Key answers:

- When first discovered by humans, Chernil was sparsely inhabited by non-mammalian humanoids who survived by photosynthesis.

- They were known as the Antler People, or Antlers for short. Each had four large, branching antler structures jutting from their heads. These may have been sensory organs of some sort.

- The last of the Antlers killed each other off shortly after first settlement.

- Historians differ on the extent to which human contact led to the extinction — the first conservationists may have slowed or accelerated it.

- Though the entire planet writhes with weird bioforms, the densest cluster occurs in the Generative Zone, a tropical rainforest noted for the rapidity of its evolutionary process.

- The most famous feature of the Generative Zone is the Algal Lake, a stone hollow occupied since prehistoric times by a unicellular autotrophic organism.

- The Algal Lake featured in the varied mythologies of Chernil's extinct indigenes, even those who lived on the other side of the world. They invariably identified it with a destroyer deity who periodically rampaged across the globe, exterminating sinners.

STATUE TUSSLE

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-IN: The Conservatarium,
     Preservation Justiciar

LEAD-OUT: The Conservatarium,
     Preservation Justiciar, Pseudo Pseudo

*"Be warned, sir — I deliver my footnoting with a
     steel-toed boot!"*

During a lull in the action as they move between sites in Vorven, the team spots a kerfuffle in front of a statue in a plaza offset from the main road. Two jump-suited groups shake fists and exchange insults.

The statue depicts, in noble savage fashion, three members of the extinct indigene race. With sad, upturned faces, the bronze figures turn their antler-like head projections to the heavens.

This may trigger **Research** facts 1–4, if the characters have scanned the *Encyclopedia Chernilia* but have yet to ask about indigenes. Or they might pull aside a spectator to the contretemps and get the lowdown from him.

Listening to the crowd, it becomes apparent that they're arguing about the first conservationists' role in the extinction of the Antlers. One group, composed mostly of scholars in green jumpsuits, argues that they prolonged their survival. The other, in which brown-suited service personnel predominate, says that they hastened their demise.

History shows that both sides have solid points to make but are also extrapolating wildly from insufficient evidence.

Leading the debate in favor of the early conservationists is Duna Delyn, a brunette of alluring but waspish aspect.

Making the case against is Morl Tiberglade, a broad-nosed former Adonis going rapidly to seed. **Nose for Mendacity** indicates a fundamental dishonesty in his posturing.

Just before the confrontation escalates into a punch-up, CPDF constables arrive to break it up, giving the players impetus to follow up.

Scuttlebutt, or a conversation with Duna Delyn, reveals that:

- her side regards the other as a front for the world's non-academic faction. They want to open up immigration and economic development, and so argue against the certitudes of the founder's cause.

- Morl Tiberglade was once a prominent pseudo-arachnidologist, but was drummed out of his Conservatarium.

- [ALTERNATE CORE] Rather than emigrate to some other world, as honor dictated, he purchased Vorven's sole nightspot, Pseudo Pseudo, and continues to stir up trouble.

- [DUNA ONLY] Although it never occurred to her that the Cerulean Duke might be behind the revisionist forces, now that she thinks of it, that's just the kind of evil he might have his hand in.

Morl Tiberglade, if asked, calls this base scurrility.

- His interest in the fate of the Antlers is purely one of academic truth.

- Whether Chernil opens up its economy is of no interest to him. He is but a humble taverner.

- The Cerulean Duke is surely behind the pro-conservationist argument. He delights in suppressing truth and promoting ignorance.

Nose for Mendacity: All of the above registers as deceptive.

PSEUDO PSEUDO

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-IN: The Conservatarium, Statue Tussle

LEAD-OUT: The Generative Zone, Spies

"What's a nice pseudo-arthropodist like you doing in a place like this?"

Pseudo Pseudo, a sprawling tavern with one floor surmounted by a gigantic sculpted pseudo-arthropod, rampant with mandibles outstretched, pulses with thumping recorded music and beery exhalation. As the town's only tavern, it provides a meeting ground for academics of all orders, along with service staffers, police, and officials.

[CORE] **Scuttlebutt**, in response to inquiries about unusual or suspicious behavior, notes that a group of off-worlders came in about a month ago. They wore the same jumpsuits as the vengeance-seekers, but didn't seem to know much about their scientific specialty. They asked about the Generative Zone in general and the Algal Lake in particular.

Engineering: Microscopic force-field generators are hidden in the tavern walls. (1 point spend) They were installed only recently.

Except for Ghalith Ghaal and Fostro Espen, the group might meet again here with any person they've met so far, following through with additional questions.

If they guess that the Cerulean Duke plans to reawaken the Algal Lake creature and send it to raze Vorven, confront Morl Tiberglade with this theory, and apply **Intimidation**, he crumbles, admitting, in response to questions:

- Yes, he's in league with the Duke, and that's the plan.
- The Duke's allies will huddle in the Pseudo Pseudo, protected by its recently installed force fields, while the giant creature flattens the rest of the town.
- He has never met the Duke, as far as he knows.
- It is only right that Tiberglade should participate in the destruction of this rotten society, which had the temerity to doubt

his theories on DNA recombination in cross-bred, parallel-evolved pseudo-arthropod progenitors.

- He doesn't know how the Duke intends to raise the Algal Lake creature, but it has something to do with petroglyphs.

FOSTRO ESPEN

SCENE TYPE: Pitfall/Alternate

LEAD-OUT: The Generative Zone, Spies

"Brace yourself for an unrelenting gasconade!"

If the players don't suspect Fostro Espen of being anything more than an offended, petty academic, he reappears to pepper them with questions about pseudo-entomology and threaten to have their credentials yanked. He might order the automated lock of their dorm room to be reprogrammed or otherwise engage in minor harassment. He stops toying with them if they seem to be getting too close to the truth, taking an air-car to the Generative Zone and waiting for them there.

[ALTERNATE CORE] If they break into his new rooms (**Infiltration** Difficulty 4), they find, among his papers, a map of the Generative Zone, with a line measuring the distance between Vorven and the Algal Lake. In the margins are various calculations.

1-point **Life Sciences:** These seem to be estimating the speed at which various gigantic exo forms might travel the given distance.

Should they fixate on Fostro Espen and successfully catch him in Vorven, he turns out to be a doppelganger of the real Cerulean Duke. Altered by surgery, his true mind wiped out by brainscaping technology, he was once Orbvet Sican, humble terraform laborer born on the planet Trabb. He confesses as much, taunting the group and telling them that they're doomed. "You'll never get to Quandos Vorn—my true self, the Cerulean Duke, will slay you first!" The doppelganger Espen knows about as much of the real Duke's scheme as Morl Tiberglade (previous scene).

SPIES

SCENE TYPE: Pitfall/Alternate

LEAD-IN: The Conservatarium, Fostro Espen, Pseudo Pseudo

LEAD-OUT: The Generative Zone

"A thrashing we are contracted for, and a thrashing we shall bestow!"

Should the vengeance-seekers too openly hunt the Duke in Vorven, he or Morl Tiberglade orders local minions to ambush them. They wait until the group is alone and in an out-of-the-way corner of town. They might try to lure them to such a location. To avoid calling attention to themselves, they keep their projacs holstered, unless the PCs draw theirs. As a starting objective they mean only to dish out an instructive beating, but switch to deadly force should the vengeance-seekers make it a killing matter.

ABILITIES: Athletics 4, Health 4, Scuffling 8, Shooting 4

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +0

STEALTH MODIFIER: +1

These black jumpsuited drudges are neither bright nor informed. Their job is to keep an ear out for do-gooders and weasels (meaning interstellar police).

[ALTERNATE CORE] If captured and **Intimidated**, one of them reveals that he heard Morl Tiberglade talking to someone who might have been the boss, about something called the Algal Lake.

THE GENERATIVE ZONE

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-IN: Fostro Espen, Pseudo Pseudo, Spies

LEAD-OUT: Proto-Leviathan, Hidden Installation, Monstrous Pseudo-Arthropods

Travel to the Generative Zone requires a personal aircraft called a skimmer or air-car. These are rare in Vorven, with access to them strictly controlled.

- The group can requisition one from the CPDF if Galith Ghaal credentialed them.
- They can sweet-talk their way into use of the Conservatarium's sole vehicle, either because they've already ingratiated themselves to Hedof Skah or by now making a 1-point **Flattery**, **Flirting**, **Negotiation** or **Punctilio** spend.
- They can steal a skimmer (Difficulty 4 for those belonging to Conservatariums, Difficulty 6 for a CPDF vehicle).

Seen from above, the Generative Zone is a lush canopy of shockingly bright green vegetation.

In the unlikely case of a group failing to inquire about the worst of the local fauna before heading to the Generative Zone, they see some monstrous pseudo-arthropods from their skimmer. Imagine dinosaurs, as constructed from insect parts.

Life Sciences: Unlike true arthropods, these must surely have internal skeletons; otherwise, they wouldn't be able to support such mammoth bulk.

If you have time and want to emphasize the challenge of traveling outside of Vorven, the group is challenged by an armed CPDF vehicle over the jungle canopy. They pass the challenge immediately if Galith Ghaal credentialed them. Otherwise, they must justify their entry into the restricted area with 1-point spends of **Bureaucracy**, **Law**, or **Impersonate**.

Should this go wrong, a Difficulty 6 **Vehicles** test allows the group to shake aerial pursuit. On a margin of 2 or less on a successful test, they take fire from the police skimmer while doing so. Each character tests Athletics in order, lowest rated in that ability starting first, against a Difficulty of 4, until one fails. That character takes damage +1.

If the ship was hit, its engine begins to sputter just as the group reaches its destination. A Difficulty 4 **Vehicles** test prevents a crash landing. The vehicle remains intact and no one is hurt. Otherwise, they'll need to find a new way home, and everyone on board takes a die of damage. Ask the players to appoint one character to make a single Difficulty 6 **Preparedness** test; on a failure, their food and water supplies have been lost, requiring them to forage (see sidebar).

The dense, twisted patch of rainforest known as the Generative Zone teems with creeping, crawling, chirping, howling life, both botanical and animal. Sights the group might behold while surveying the landing zone include:

- Two multi-legged pseudo-arthropods, one the size of a dog, the other the size of a horse, engaged in energetic, squishing coitus.
- A bat-like pseudo-arthropod swooping down on the skimmer-sized corpse of an herbivorous pseudo-arthropod, both stripping it of flesh and injecting bloated egg sacs into its marrow.
- A giraffe-like pseudo-arthropod ripping the leaves from a tall palm-like tree.
- A net of moving vines constricts around a man-sized butterfly, sucking its bodily juices through semi-translucent thorns.

(Save unused descriptions for later.)

Life Sciences: This area is an evolutionary "hot zone", in which high concentrations of biomass allow nature to rapidly throw up new species in a constant arms race of predator versus prey. Expect biological anomalies!

Under the lush, high trees reaches a layer of lush, medium-sized trees and bushes, which tower in turn over tall razor-sharp grasses and thorny brambles.

Life Sciences: This contrasts with the typical rainforest, which is sparsely vegetated below the high tree line, because the big

Foraging

Food and moisture abound in the rainy Generative Zone. The challenge lies in gathering it and rendering it safe for consumption.

Free-standing bodies of drinkable water prove elusive. Water can be gathered by:

- climbing palm-like trees (Difficulty 4 **Athletics**; take a −1 damage die on failure) and pouring gathered rainwater from their bowl-like fronds
- jury-rigging devices from cannibalized skimmer parts (Difficulty 4 **Systems Repair**); takes the skimmer off line or adds 2 to Systems Repair tests to fix an already downed skimmer
- completing any plausible-seeming scheme proposed by the players, with appropriate spends or tests
- **Life Sciences:** any water gathered here likely teems with all manner of exotic parasites and bacteria, and requires treatment.

To purify the water:

- combine a 1-point **Chemistry** spend with a 1-point **Geology** spend, to find naturally occurring substances to make the water potable; two characters can make one spend each
- make a Difficulty 4 **Preparedness** test, to have a water purification kit on hand

Life Sciences: 10% of plants will be edible and nutritious; 70%, nontoxic but nutritionally valueless; 20% highly poisonous.

On a 2-point **Life Sciences** spend, a character finds edible plants close by.

On a 1-point spend, foraging for plants requires a multi-hour tramp through the rainforest, providing occasion for a Monstrous Pseudo-Arthropod attack or ambush by the Duke's lackeys (as seems most entertaining/non-repetitive.) If the group specifies cautious movement, a piggybacked **Infiltration** test (base Difficulty 4) may allow them to watch from the underbrush as arthropods or lackeys stalk by along a nearby path.

Life Sciences: Thanks to evolution's inherent cruelty, the animal life that offers the highest nutritional value is also the largest and best able to defend itself against attack.

On a 2-point **Life Sciences** spend and Difficulty 4 **Shooting** (possibly by separate PCs), a foul-tasting but edible large pseudo-arthropod can be downed without further incident.

The group can cut the Life Sciences spend to 1 by going further into the forest, risking pseudo-arthropod or lackey encounters, as above.

With no spend at all, the group's hunting provokes a full-on giant pseudo-arthropod attack (p. 90).

plants take up all the sunlight. The thriving layered vegetation appears to survive through parasitism — either eating animal life or sucking the vital essence from the plants above. No wonder the discoverers of this unique ecosystem fought to preserve it for all time!

Anthropology: The nonhuman indigenes likely practiced ecological management techniques that rendered this food-rich area inhabitable, though not on a civilized scale.

[CORE A / PROTO-LEVIATHAN] **Arts:** If the Antlers practiced art at all, they probably carved rocks. A search for petroglyphs may turn up artifacts of interest.

[CORE B / PROTO-LEVIATHAN] **Geology:** The easiest rock faces to find are probably down by the Algal Lake.

[CORE A / HIDDEN INSTALLATION] **Engineering:** If there are man-made structures around, they've been carefully hidden, most likely camouflaged by layers of real vegetation. The muddy ground makes for poor foundations, so a search for near-surface rock strata could lead us to it.

[CORE B / HIDDEN INSTALLATION] **Geology:** A diligent survey of the area finds an area of solid ground large enough to hold an artificial structure. It must be somewhere in all this plantlife.
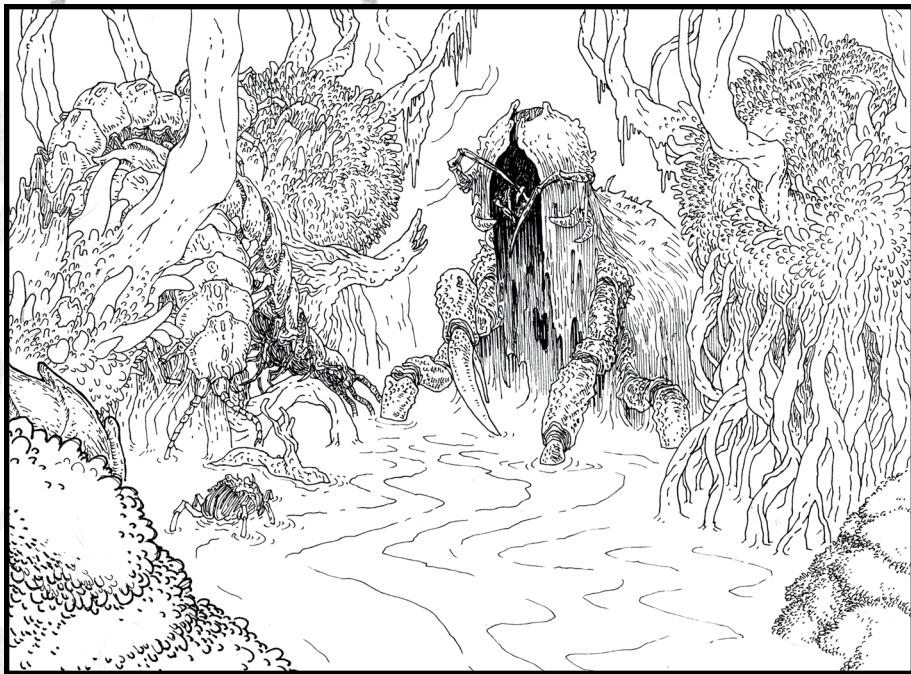
MONSTROUS PSEUDO-ARTHROPODS

SCENE TYPE: Pitfall

LEAD-IN: The Generative Zone, Hidden Installation, Proto-Leviathan

LEAD-OUT: The Generative Zone, Hidden Installation, Proto-Leviathan

"Hissss! Clack! Hiss clack hiss!"

The team can trigger dangerous encounters with hungry or territorial pseudo-arthropods by:

- crash-landing
- seeking out the Hidden Installation
- venturing into the rainforest to forage
- loudly squabbling
- hanging around being boring

Rather than treating these as automatic triggers, treat each as an opportunity to introduce some fun action into the storyline, where pacing demands.

Don't permit more than one fight with the creatures. One fight and one flight might work. Use predators for a likely fight and herbivores for a likely flight. The group faces one creature for every two PCs. Standard handguns kill them in a single shot. If the group downs them all with disappointing dispatch, more of them come crashing through the bushes.

Aggressive Herbivore, Triceratops-Sized

ABILITIES: Athletics 12, Health 24, Scuffling 16

SCUFFLING WEAPONS/DAMAGE: gore/trample +6

HIT THRESHOLD: 2

ARMOR: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: -3

STEALTH MODIFIER: -3

Apex Predator, Monster-Sized

ABILITIES: Athletics 16, Health 18, Scuffling 18.

SCUFFLING WEAPONS/DAMAGE: bite, swipe or claw +6

HIT THRESHOLD: 2

ARMOR: 2

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1

STEALTH MODIFIER: -3

In some instances it could prove satisfying to describe fleeing bad guys — the Duke's lackeys or the man himself — as being climactically

attacked and killed by suddenly appearing monstrous pseudo-arthropods. Do this only if it feels like a capper on a triumph scored by the PCs, as opposed to a deus ex machina to save their bacon.

Establish this possibility with a 1-point **Life Sciences** spend made as characters observe grazing pseudo-arthropods from a safe distance. The character notes that a particular fruit drives them to a hungry fury. By collecting this fist-sized fruit and later tossing it at an adversary (Athletics vs. Hit Threshold), the vengeance-seeker attracts a monstrous creature to attack and devour him. If this occurs before a satisfying encounter with the Duke, it also requires a 5-token key Obstacle Cost.

PROTO-LEVIATHAN

SCENE TYPE: Core/Pitfall

LEAD-IN: The Generative Zone, Monstrous Pseudo-Arthropods

LEAD-OUT: Hidden Installation, Monstrous Pseudo-Arthropods

"And only this morning I bemoaned my deficit of suitable sacrifices."

The Algal Lake occupies a kidney-shaped bowl of rock about a mile across and two miles long. It smells like a foot with a fungal infection, plus fish. The "lake" itself is actually a gelatinous, translucent green mass. Chunks of dead or dying pseudo-arthropods dot its surface.

Life Sciences reveals the following (break them up between characters if more than one of them has the ability):

- It is a living creature, neither plant nor animal but rather a eukaryote.
- It transforms back and forth in some sort of wave pattern between multicellular and unicellular states.
- Given its ability to dissolve the hard shells and bones of pseudo-arthropods, direct contact with it might prove unwise.

Geology: The stony lake bed suffers little if any erosion. It has been here for tens of thousands of years, in more or less its present configuration.

A nearly invisible dock of a translucent plastic material extends from the shore about sixty feet into the lake. **Engineering:** This would be invisible to airborne observers.

Arts: A natural rock wall near the shore, overgrown with vines, would be a likely site for petroglyphs.

The vines also secrete an acid when disturbed. If a vengeance-seeker moves to carelessly disturb them, offer characters the chance to make a 1-point **Life Sciences** spend. It warns them to remove the vines from a distance. Zapping the stone with a projac destroys the carvings beneath. Let the players think up a way to deal with the problem. Having a defoliant spray aboard the skimmer requires a Difficulty 6 **Preparedness** test.

The petroglyph shows a crude image of seven Antlers standing on a dock-like projection into the Algal Lake. Four are on their knees, hands bound behind their backs. Three stand over them, waving their arms at the lake.

Anthropology: This looks distinctly like a sacrifice, with the lake as receiving deity.

Evidence Collection finds a freshly dug pit covered over with leaves and other vegetation. Inside the pit is an unlocked metal chest. It contains four cycling helmets and eight big yellow lenses that fit into slots so that they descend over the wearers' eyes. Another four holes apiece appear atop each helmet; onto these screw antler-like projections, sixteen of which are found beneath them.

From these clues players should be able to deduce that the Duke means to recreate an indigenous ritual of sacrifice. The Algal Lake only responds to people who look roughly like the Antler people — hence the helmets. These were to have been worn by the minions of Quandos Vorn the vengeance-seekers intercepted during the bridge sequence.

This might be a good time for the Duke to show up with his men and get the drop on

them, attempting to substitute them for the missing sacrificial victims. Whether he does this the first time the PCs investigate the lake or later, he definitely does his best to make it happen. How the team gets out of it is, of course, up to them.

If anyone wearing a horned helmet comes into contact with the Algal Lake, its leviathan form partially manifests. It seems to be coalescing into a four-hundred-feet-tall quadrupedal organism with multiple antler-like feeding tubes. It uses these to smash at its enemies, or grab at tasty-looking persons wearing antlered helmets. Antler-less individuals attract its attention only if they do something to hurt it.

After snagging four antlered victims, it completes the transformation and solidifies into a stable version of the form described above. From this point on, it tries to smash anything that moves. It stomps for Vorven and destroys everything and everyone there. Then sensing that there are no communities left on the planet, it retreats to its lake.

Players can wait until this happens and then try to reconstruct a starship from the smashed remnants at the flattened starport.

More likely, they'll stop the creature from getting its four sacrifices, destroying Duke and henchmen in the process.

The leviathan shrugs off gunfire of any kind. When not yet stabilized, though, it remains vulnerable to other forms of massive harm, from explosives to skimmer hits.

Explosives can be found in the Duke's hideout or garnered through a Difficulty 6 **Preparedness** test.

Flying a skimmer into the proto-leviathan requires a Difficulty 3 **Vehicles** test — Difficulty 6 if the pilot wants to eject unharmed before impact. Otherwise the character comes into contact with the creature and takes +3 damage.

When it becomes apparent that his plan is unraveling, the Duke flees, followed by his men. If the Duke is eliminated, and the proto-

leviathan is no longer a threat, the henchmen simply surrender.

The Cerulean Duke

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 12, Scuffling 12, Shooting 8, Vehicles 8

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

OBSTACLE COST (lethal gunfire): 5

WEAPON: projac, sword +1

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2

STEALTH MODIFIER: +2

Play the Duke as the archetypal gloating megalomaniac. He delights in having fooled the group as Fostro Espen. His view is simple: the planet is his by right of genius. The thought of plundering it induces in him an unwholesome physical pleasure — likewise the prospect of sacrificing the vengeance-seekers to the lake creature. Until placed under duress, he has little to say about Quandos Vorn. He does not care to dwell on the brilliance of others.

Henchmen

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 8, Scuffling 8, Shooting 4, Vehicles 4

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

WEAPON: projac, sword +1

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2

STEALTH MODIFIER: +2

The number of henchmen equals the size of the PC group, minus one. The one who does most of the talking is Lorcan Woodleef, haughty when in command and sullen when the tables are turned.

HIDDEN INSTALLATION

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-IN: The Generative Zone, Monstrous Pseudo-Arthropods

LEAD-OUT: Proto-Leviathan, Monstrous Pseudo-Arthropods

"Who dares probe my lair?"

Layers of vegetation carefully conceal the Duke's hidden installation.

Evidence Collection: It would be completely invisible to aerial inspection, and is hard to spot even from the ground, where CPDF patrols would not venture without strong cause.

Made of wood and other natural materials, the installation is a single story collection of modest rooms. Its exterior is drably camouflaged. The interior, once someone sneaks inside (or is taken in as a prisoner), displays not the grandeur typical of an interstellar arch-criminal, but a rustic roughness. Pseudo-arthropod skulls adorn the walls. Furnishings are made from their bones and rich local woods.

The installation consists of a large common area, with kitchen, dining facilities, and a den. Lavatories adjoin it. A large single room serves as the Duke's living quarters. Everyone else sleeps in a matching barracks chamber. One large room serves as garage for the Duke's skimmer. A command center includes a blinking, beeping console from which the Duke's men monitor CPDF communications.

Anyone taken prisoner is shackled to a heavy chair in the den.

A rubbing from the petroglyphs hangs on the den wall.

A 1-point **Evidence Collection** spend in the skimmer garage reveals a hidden trap door. Inside it is a chest containing various weapons, including high-explosive grenades.

Amid the Duke's modest book collection, on a shelf in his quarters, one finds *Interviews with the Antler People*, an anthropological text by first-generation explorer Victus Vraio. The Duke has highlighted the cagey accounts of its subjects, who refer obliquely to a ritual to awaken the destroyer god, which becomes necessary when "men grow immoral and forget the ways of the forest." Scribbled in the margin is the note "lake would not bite. Disguise to look like Antler?"

If the vengeance-seekers have yet to meet the Duke or his men in the Generative Zone when they come here, they can set up a stake-out. To do so undetected requires a piggybacked **Infiltration** test (Difficulty 4). On a failure, the Duke and company come after them. Should they get the upper hand, they interrogate the vengeance-seekers and then set about sacrificing them.

After several hours (and perhaps a troubling visit from the local fauna) they spot several henchmen leaving the building. They can then either stalk or confront them, or wait till they've gone and try to sneak into the building in search of the above clues.

They might also enter the building when holding the Duke or others as prisoners, or after they've disposed of them, while seeking loose ends. This is an alternate scene, and needn't enter play at all.

CONCLUSION AND EPILOGUE

The scenario ends when the Duke is taken out of commission. The most fun way for this to occur is a showdown as he tries to manifest the lake leviathan. If the players pull the story toward another conclusion, improvise entertaining complications to make it equally as exciting.

However the story ends, the group gains a nugget of information about Quandos Vorn leading into the next scenario. This might be supplied by the Duke himself, under extreme duress, or a surrendered henchman, most likely Lorcan Woodleef. If no adversaries survive, the clue can be found as a carefully hidden file in or around the hidden installation. If they searched the installation already and didn't find it, indicate that circumstances changed between the first and second search. They might find a file open on the communications console, or a freshly jotted note on the Duke's sidetable.

I do not pretend to be proficient in the modus
operandi of the hanky-panky man.

A true scientist would not hesitate to
use his sense of taste.

My concern for nature only goes so far.

Condense your dissertation.

If only I could recall a pivotal fact.

The dispute is unworthy.

Who would question your authority?

A fine locale for a stabbing.

There are too many smells here.

Your verbiage here, I find
to be absolute jargon.

I suppose it is pointless to
complain of this outrage.

Circumstances force this
necessity upon us.

That would be a wonderful surprise.

We have already discounted
their emotions.

It is not torture; it is science.

My acts are motivated by idealism.

Would you care for some candy?

I must think. Fetch me snails and wine!

Your humor eludes me.

Be a good fellow and light
this cigar for me.

Have you misplaced your etiquette guide?

Perhaps I'm coming on a bit
stronger than would be tactful.

Call it what you like!

I can only say that we are making
progress in our investigation.

Let us review from the
beginning, without bafflement.

As Baron Bodissey once said,
"Let someone else look in the box."

I dispute your credentials.

This would look lovely, from a distance.

Give me pseudo-lepidoptery
or give me death.

I submit to the sublimity
of your weaponry.

Others might call this squalid.

Is this your creature, and does it bite?

The distinction is void.

I can only advise vigilance.

Somehow this all seems
a bit loose and untidy.

Let us have no more delay.

*Do not kill the bull
before the cow is fresh!*

That is the effect we are trying to achieve.

*You must alter the
public image you project.*

*We must learn to deal
impersonally with the topic.*

The passive tense was spoken in.

This tastes of arthropod.

I will heed your advice.

I consider that interesting news.

*Further interruption will
be harshly dealt with.*

Let us be guided by whim.

*It's rather a disorganized
way of handling an operation.*

What I have to say is important.

I think I must take my departure.

I'm tired of being mystified.

GLOSSARY

Episode: the amount of time to complete one scenario or chapter in your multi-stage quest for vengeance

General ability: an ability mostly used to overcome practical obstacles

Interval: the period of time between the discovery of two core clues

Investigative ability: an ability mostly used to gather information

Margin: the difference between a Difficulty and the final test result

Obstacle Cost: a price in tokens levied to allow you to overcome key obstacles

Pool: a number of points keyed to a particular ability, which you can spend for plot benefits, or to increase your chance of success

Quarry: the series' main antagonist, whom the vengeance-seekers seek vengeance against

Rating: a number establishing the usual starting value of your pool in a given ability

Refresh: to return an ability pool to the value of its rating

Session: one sitting of the game

Tagline: a supplied line of Vancian dialogue which, when spoken by a player in the game, earns one or more tokens

Token: a game currency you use to gain various benefits, including new abilities, improved ability ratings, and ability refreshes

TOKEN SPENDING CHEAT SHEET

Once earned, you can spend tokens on the following:

COST	BENEFIT
3	Gain a general ability no one in the group has, at a rating of 1
2	Gain a new general ability at least one other PC already has, at a rating of 1
1	Gain an investigative ability no one in the group has (special: see p. 44)
	Improve the rating of a general ability you already have, at a current rating of
2	8 or less,
4	8-12,
8	greater than 12,
	by 1 point
2	Improve the rating of an investigative ability you already have, by 1 point
1	Make a Desperate Bid, using a general ability you don't have (p. 32)
X	Overcome a key obstacle (see p. 34)
X	Refresh an ability pool (see p. 43)
2	Prevent an instance of damage, including instantly fatal gun wounds, by purchasing a Fortunate Avoidance (p. 39)

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES

RATING POOL

- ⛰ Anthropology ____ | ____
- ⛰ Arts ____ | ____
- 📑 Astronomy ____ | ____
- 🌐 Bureaucracy ____ | ____
- 📑 Chemistry ____ | ____
- 📑 Engineering ____ | ____
- 📑 Evidence Collection ____ | ____
- ⛰ Finance ____ | ____
- 🌐 Flair ____ | ____
- 🌐 Flattery ____ | ____
- 🌐 Flirting ____ | ____
- ⛰ Geology ____ | ____
- ⛰ History ____ | ____
- 🌐 Impersonate ____ | ____
- 🌐 Intimidation ____ | ____
- ⛰ Law ____ | ____
- ⛰ Life Sciences ____ | ____
- 📑 Materiel ____ | ____
- 📑 Medicine ____ | ____
- 🌐 Negotiation ____ | ____
- 🌐 Nose for Mendacity ____ | ____
- 🌐 One-Upsmanship ____ | ____
- ⛰ Psychology ____ | ____
- 🌐 Punctilio ____ | ____
- 🌐 Reassurance ____ | ____
- 📑 Research ____ | ____
- 🌐 Scuttlebutt ____ | ____

GENERAL ABILITIES

RATING POOL

- Athletics ____ | ____
- Filch ____ | ____
- Gambling ____ | ____
- Health ____ | ____
- Infiltration ____ | ____
- Medic ____ | ____
- Preparedness ____ | ____
- Scuffling ____ | ____
- Shooting ____ | ____
- Surveillance ____ | ____
- Systems Repair ____ | ____
- Vehicles ____ | ____
- Wealth ____ | ____
- Wherewithal ____ | ____

GAEAN REACH CHARACTER SHEET

CHARACTER

PLAYER

PORTRAIT

QUARRY

REASON FOR VENGEANCE

_____

_____

_____

NOTES

_____

_____

_____

HIT THRESHOLD [   ]

HEALTH

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
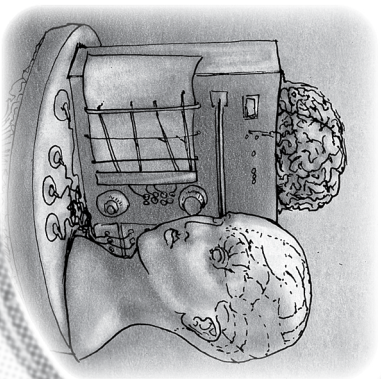
0 -1 -2 -3 -4 -5 -6 -7 -8 -9 -10 -11 -12

⛰ *Academic ability: remember something you know*

🌐 *Interpersonal ability: get someone to tell you something*

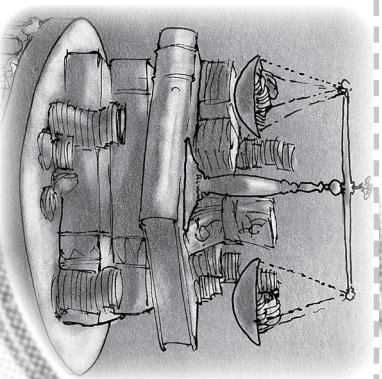📑 *Technical ability: take action, perhaps inspecting evidence*

GAEAN REACH VENGEANCE-SEEKER ABILITY MATRIX

PLAYER NAME					
CHARACTER NAME					
Health					
Hit Threshold					
Anthropology					
Arts					
Astronomy					
Bureaucracy					
Chemistry					
Engineering					
Evidence Collection					
Finance					
Flair					
Flattery					
Flirting					
Geology					
History					
Impersonate					
Intimidation					
Law					
Life Sciences					
Materiel					
Medicine					
Negotiation					
Nose for Mendacity					
One-Upsmanship					
Psychology					
Punctilio					
Reassurance					
Research					
Scuttlebutt					

GAEAN REACH *SCENARIO WORKSHEET*

SCHEME

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COUNTER-SCHEME

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THE HUNT

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PITFALLS

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THE ENDPOINT

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GAEAN REACH ANTAGONIST RECORD SHEET

ANTAGONIST NAME

TERRIBLE DEEDS

VENGEANCE-SEEKER   **TERRIBLE DEED**

VEIL OF SECRECY

FORMIDABLE CONFEDERATES

OTHER DETAILS

-
-
-
-
-
-

Behavioral Science

Anthropology I
Medicine I
Psychology 2

Officialdom

Finance 2
Law 2

Exploratory

Astronomy 2
Geology 2

Humanities

Arts 2
History 2

Law Enforcement

Evidence Collection I
Materiel I
Research 2

Applied Science

Chemistry 2
Engineering 2

Distingué
Flair 2
Flirting 1

Overbearing
Intimidation 2
One-Upsmanship 1

Sly
Impersonate 1
Nose for Mendacity 2

Meticulous
Bureaucracy 2
Punctilio 1

Soothing
Flattery 1
Reassurance 2

Incisive
Negotiation 2
Scuttlebutt 1

Shady
- Athletics 6
- Filch 4
- Gambling 4
- Health 8
- Scuffling 4
- Shooting 8
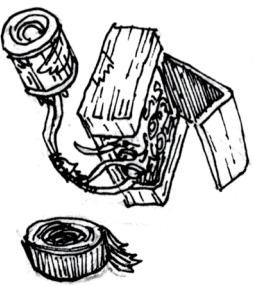- Wherewithal 6
- **INVESTIGATIVE:** Nose for Mendacity 1

Skulk
- Athletics 6
- Health 8
- Infiltration 4
- Scuffling 4
- Shooting 8
- Surveillance 4
- Wherewithal 6
- **INVESTIGATIVE:** Scuttlebutt 1

Resourceful
- Athletics 6
- Health 8
- Preparedness 7
- Scuffling 4
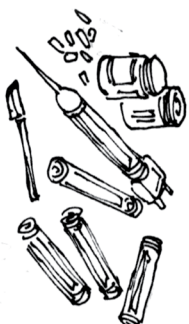- Shooting 8
- Wherewithal 7
- **INVESTIGATIVE:** Research 1

Wrench
- Athletics 6
- Health 8
- Scuffling 8
- Shooting 4
- Systems Repair 4
- Vehicles 4
- Wherewithal 6
- **INVESTIGATIVE:** Engineering 1

Doc
- Athletics 4
- Health 8
- Medic 9
- Scuffling 4
- Shooting 8
- Wherewithal 6
- **INVESTIGATIVE:** Medicine 1

Rich
- Athletics 5
- Health 7
- Scuffling 6
- Shooting 6
- Wealth 8
- Wherewithal 7
- **INVESTIGATIVE:** One-Upsmanship 1

Now I suspect you of weaselry.

One hears many strange tales.

You approach me as if I
were mentally deficient.

I am puzzled that you
choose to disobey the law.

I will accuse you of
molestation and threats!

Conjecture without facts is useless.

I claim no particular niche.

Your assumptions are of no consequence.

Is it too early for a taste of arrack?

No human effort can alter the Beyond.

It is a presumption to advise you,
but why not be sensible?

My engagements, with considerable
inconvenience, can be postponed.

Please do not stir yourself
to further philosophy.

A detached attitude toward
the problems of others is not illegal.

The difficulty no longer exists.

A matter to be forgotten.

Why be concerned over trifles?

Of course I am often
wrong in my suppositions.

You want your tiresome money.

Knaves and scoundrels are known to exist.

Why should we exert ourselves?

Your largesse is not of the regal variety.

The suggestion was poorly thought out.

I am immune to thirty poisons.

You are as safe as a two-hundred
pound statue of a dead dog.

These matters are
clear to me: you are fey!

This importance exists
from a single point of view.

That's at the very verge of slander.

Remember, there are witnesses.

A man without friends is
like a tree without leaves.

Let them live and die; it is all one to me.

There is a time for bravado
and another for caution.

I am in no position to
criticize your epistemology.

*The world revolves; the carpet
of knowledge unrolls.*

A wistful vision. It can never be.

*To answer this would be
to inflict a fact on you.*

*The contest is worth
more than the victory.*

Have I not inveighed against categories?

The Vine of Life grows a single melon.

*I have been blown by
winds like a bit of trash.*

Your questions are tiresome.

We live by different referents.

I cannot trace the linkage of ideas.

I admit to perplexity.

I cannot allow myself to ponder.

I am fastidious in this respect.

Your language is extravagant.

I hope you will repair your neglect.

*Did I not dissociate myself
from this entire farrago?*

This is not a pertinent response.

It almost impels one to theosophy.

A perfect refuge for ghosts and wipwarks.

*Please do not let your imagination
dominate your sense of proportion.*

You will allow me to use candor?

Life, death—these are imprecise terms.

I would not presume to give you advice.

Candidly, I find all this a bit unsettling.

Someday you'll congratulate yourself.

You have a fine discrimination.

The situation is hardly possible.

You are chasing foxfire.

I too am supercilious now and then.

One is as plausible as the other.

We could sit for hours defining our terms.

Even andropes can be guided.

The metaphor is not altogether reassuring.

*Behind your words I
divine a larger meaning.*

*There's mischief going on;
you must put an end to it!*

*Do not force unnatural
meanings upon my remarks.*

I doubt that's worth a hollow dinket.

A shame, that.

Well, we must hope for the best.

Status, whether we like it or not, is a key factor in human interrelations.

Please do not use the word 'we' so loosely.

I wonder if the parallel is quite exact.

The ambition does you no discredit.

The theory is as good as any.

That certainly is a valid point of view.

Quite bluntly, I find the situation incomprehensible.

Over-subtlety is an error as gross as innocence.

We've discussed the situation as much as necessary.

As an individual I sympathize with your plight.

Your hopes cannot be realized.

This is not a tea party for you and your toy animals.

Your concepts need reexamination.

Do you aspire only to turpitude?

The joke has lost its savor.

I perceive your ideological bias.

I have no time for facetiousness.

Hindsight is the least useful of our intellectual capabilities.

In the world we live in, your hypothesis is weak.

The past is never real.

Unless you can enforce a pattern on the flux of events, it is wiser not to try.

I suspect that I am going insane.

An exact balance between offense and retribution is hard to attain.

I would feel gloom and guilt, but for a single consideration.

Would you care to sit down and rest until you feel better?

You do not seem to be an impractical visionary, with eyes raised to the glory of the ineffable.

Speculation lacks all utility.

These are vapid mental constructions, nothing else.

The time for realism has arrived.

It is not a privilege we extend to every vagabond dog-barber.

This is deviation and skulkery!

That phase has come and gone.

That approach lacks spontaneity!

These are artificial distinctions.

We are faced with a hundred variations
and planning is a waste of time.

You misread every portent!

An attempt to predict the unpredictable is
an epistemological outrage.

I am grateful for your insights!

The fault is mine.

I must present my ideas more carefully.

In my poor way I will try to keep pace.

The implication of your
remarks eludes me.

I dismiss such thoughts with cool bravado.

These practical problems are
simply too large to be solved.

If I am to correct you, I must
speak without euphemism.

Your mental processes are untidy.

Cease your fulminations!

I countermand that instruction!

You issue preposterous manifestos!

It is not a serious matter.

It serves no purpose to admonish
me; the situation is unavoidable.

You have some cause for resentment.

I assure you that my
motives are irreproachable.

The possibility exists.

I deny all your allegations.

If anything, it tastes worse than it smells.

We will take a cumulative vengeance.

Standard whimsy once more.

Only the inept are deweaseled.

Your suggestion has a certain merit.

Your facetiousness has run its course.

These are interesting questions.