

Ananuru Express

By Alison Brooks

The world of Ananuru is barren. Its surface consists of mountains surrounded by "oceans" of dust. The mountains have a grandeur, however, while the dust oceans are spectacular, restless and dangerous. Under the right weather conditions, they produce beautiful light effects known as "dustbowls." The scenery led an enterprising tourism operator to view Ananuru as a base for luxury holidays, at a suitably inflated price.

Thus was born the *Ananuru Express*. The train is, as one might expect, highly luxurious, designed to minimize the risks of foundering in a duststorm, and indeed any other dangers to its passengers, who are the very rich.

The *Express* runs on a monorail suspended above the dust seas. Both train and monorail are protected from the dust by forcefields. It was decided that a monorail, the structure of which contained various sensor units, would enable the *Express* to be found quickly in the case of a breakdown. A free-travelling repulsor craft could easily disappear without trace if it broke down here.

INVOLVING THE PCS

If the PCs are members of the Rebellion, they can simply be assigned this mission, perhaps as a chance to relax after several hard-fighting scenarios.

If the PCs are not Rebels, they might be employed by another interested party to undertake the mission; they might stumble upon clues pointing in this direction; or they might be paid by a customer in tickets for the *Ananuru Express*, where they will stumble upon the plot without benefit of any prior knowledge. If they are employed by an NPC, the GM will have to decide the employer's motives. The employer might be a villain intent on getting the secret for his own use, someone of Rebel sympathies hoping to deprive the bad guys of the secret, or simply someone who is curious as to what is going on, but who does not wish to risk identification by using normal employees.

BRIEFING

Hakon deVille, the owner of the *Ananuru Express*, has obtained a datatape from an Imperial research project. This project was destroyed under mysterious circumstances, and it is believed that most of the scientists involved have defected to the Rebel Alliance. Hakon has decided to auction this datatape. The auction is to take place on the next trip of the *Ananuru Express*.

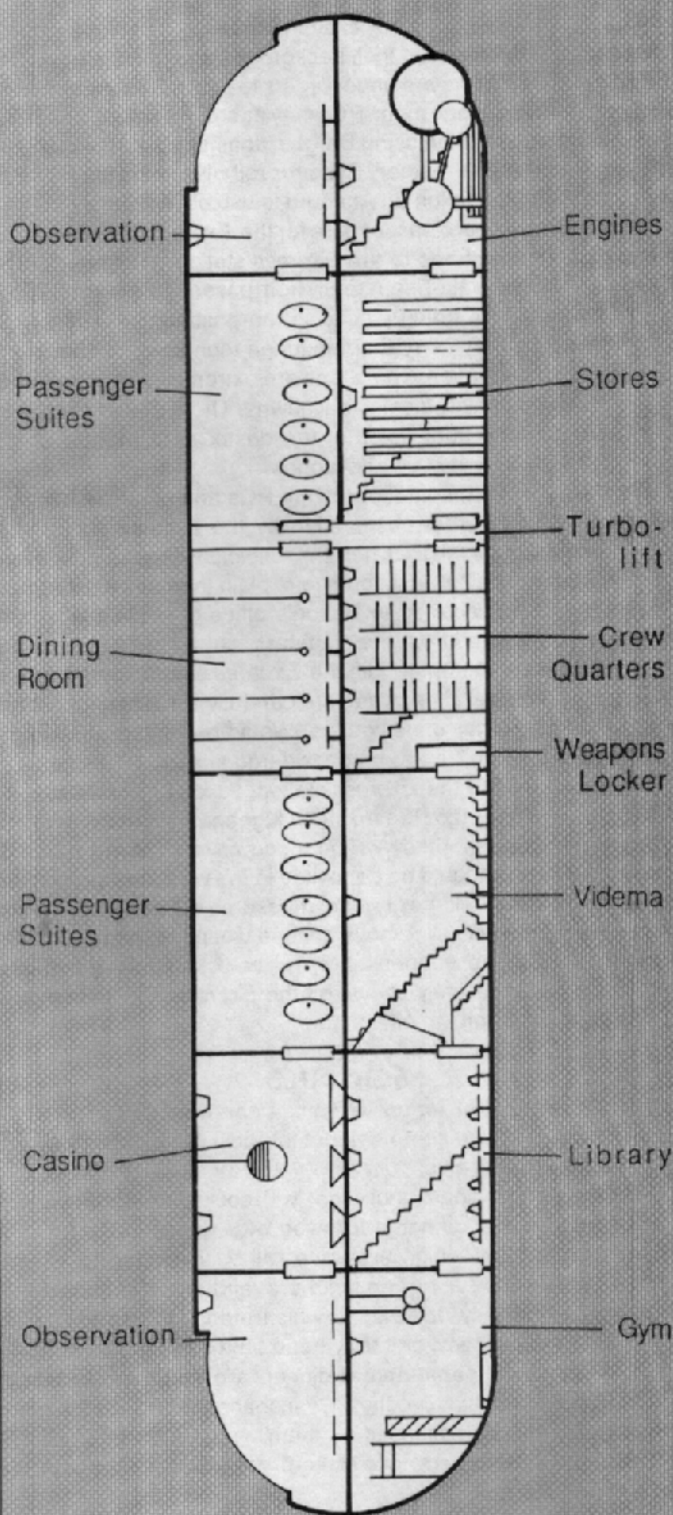
If the PCs are members of the Alliance, their briefing will include additional information: The research project was into viruses. The researchers were screened for Rebel sympathies, yet were so horrified by the implications of the research that they destroyed the project and defected. It is of the utmost importance that this datatape not be allowed to fall into the wrong hands.

The PCs are also given cash with which to attend the auction. If they are Alliance operatives, they receive a faked credit transfer which will not pass a computer inspection. Otherwise, the GM should decide what is available to them. In any case, it should not be enough.

If the PCs are entrusted with money by an employer, they will be given the credit chip immediately before embarking on the *Express*.

Star Wars

Ananuru Express Side View



Each carriage leads into the next on upper and lower floors, and has stairs and turbo-lift between upper and lower. Lower deck of each carriage has way down to escape dust-skimmers. Partitions are well insulated. There are small bars serving drinks in casino, dining room and observation decks; elsewhere, drink droids circulate.

ARRIVAL

Ananuru City consists of a spaceport and support facilities for the *Express*. The spaceport is protected by a force-dome. The cost of parking ships at the spaceport is exorbitant. PCs could park outside the force-dome, but they would risk dust damage to their vessel.

Imperial customs does not examine the ship, but closely questions each of the PCs as to their background and reason for visiting the planet. The officers are under orders to spot suspicious characters, but not to challenge them. PCs may attempt to smooth their way through the examination using Bargain against 4D for the customs officers. A Moderate Planetary Systems roll will remind the PCs that the customs examination on Ananuru is usually extremely lax.

From the spaceport, passengers for the *Express* can walk along a short parade of shops to the *Express* station. Luggage for the *Express* is normally taken separately from passengers (and checked for weapons before being placed in the passengers' suites), although the PCs may carry their baggage themselves if they don't mind attracting attention. The shops are extremely pricey, whether selling toiletries or high-fashion ballgowns. There is also a range of souvenirs, ranging from holos of the dustbowl to models of the *Express* in precious metals and stones.

Once they leave the spaceport, the PCs and other passengers are kept under discreet observation by the security staff of the *Express* company. If the PCs behave suspiciously, a member of the security staff will politely ask them to explain themselves; if necessary, they will be escorted to Hakon's office to explain why they should not be ejected from the planet.

The PCs may attempt to join the *Express* as employees rather than as passengers. Employees are carefully screened for assassins, spies and other undesirables. Would-be employees simply turning up will be unlikely to be considered suitable.

At the entrance to the *Express* station, various discreet surveillance devices check the PCs and their luggage if it is still with them. PCs are reminded that they will not need any weapons on-board, and that weapons should be deposited in the weapons store in the center of the vehicle. If they refuse, measures will be taken against them—cleaning staff will remove cached weapons, and if the PCs insist on carrying the weapons, they will be asked politely to desist and, if necessary, politely shown off the *Express*. Violence by the PCs will get them thrown off.

SCHEDULE

There are several formal events, from which PC (or NPC) absence would cause comment, but for most of the time, they are free to amuse themselves.

There is a formal dinner each night, with cocktails beforehand. On the second day, the dinner is followed by a dance in the forward observation lounge, which everyone will be expected to attend. Cultures rolls will be at a premium here, and the PCs should feel uncomfortable if they don't know which utensil to use for eating some imported delicacy, or if they tread on a partner's toes.

The PCs will be separated at dinner, allowing them to talk to NPCs. The GM should give the PCs a chance to assess the other passengers, and be assessed by them, in the form of small-talk (none of the passengers, nor Hakon, will talk openly about the auction).

The *Express* slides smoothly away from the station. During the days of the trip, the scenery will be a continual presence. An intercom informs passengers whenever a particularly spectacular view is available, whether it is dustbowls, a spectacularly beautiful sunset, mountains rising from the dust sea or a view of the dust sea from the top of those mountains.

TROUBLE

On the third day out, the *Express* is attacked. This is an attempt

by Hakon to evaluate the passengers. He hired these thugs, through an intermediary, to try to hold the *Express* up. He ensured that they were able to get through the usual security on-planet. *Express* security is quite good, but it takes the unarmed staff some time to reach the weapons storage and deploy themselves.

The attack is straightforward. The PCs are in one of the observation lounges when they see a dust-skimmer coming toward the *Express*. It attempts to land on the roof and blast its way in. A third skimmer comes from the side and ducks beneath the *Express*. The attackers attempt to disable the *Express*'s motors.

The skimmers are armored (4D hull, speed 3D), but their heat dissipators are vulnerable. These are at the rear of the skimmer. It requires a Moderate Technology roll know of them and a Very Difficult blaster shot to hit. The dissipator has 2D Strength; disabling it cuts the available power, and the skimmer is forced to limp away.

The observation lounges have skeet blasters, to knock down target drones for the passengers' amusement (Damage 2D). They are fixed in place and cannot be turned inside the vehicle. Otherwise, the PCs will have to obtain weapons from storage or from the thugs, or brawl with them.

If the thugs get that far, the thugs will attempt to grab passengers to ransom them. If the thugs attempt to flee, the PCs can pursue in the *Express*'s escape skimmers. These are not armed, but they are fast (Speed 3D) and durable (3D+1 hull). Shooting from them could be an interesting trick, as it is not possible to open the windows.

If any of the thugs are taken prisoner, Hakon has them taken "for interrogation" and removed from the *Express* by a recovery skimmer from the port. Hakon is apologetic about "this regrettable lapse of security" and assures everyone that it will not be allowed to happen again.

NPCs

Thugs: 10 thugs in each skimmer. *Stats:* As Normals. *Skills:* Blaster 3D (stun-only blasters, 4D damage).

Staff: The staff of the *Express* is discreet and efficient, making the voyage as luxurious as possible for the passengers. Many staff members are also trained in coaxing difficult passengers to behave well, and they double as security guards. They don't carry weapons, unless they have reason to think they'll be needed. The staff members are well-paid and in secure employment. They do not normally accept bribes.

Hakon deVille: Proprietor of the *Express*. Hakon appears smooth and urbane, but is ruthless when it suits him. Hakon enjoys verbal fencing with his guests. His attitude is the expansive host, encouraging guests to enjoy themselves. *Stats:* Gambler. Determine skills as required.

Luna: Hakon's secretary and bodyguard. Tall, elegant, efficient and loyal to Hakon, Luna appears to be a companion/secretary. *Stats:* Bounty Hunter. *Skills:* Blaster 5D, Brawl 5D, Brawl Parry 5D, Cultures 4D, others determine as required. Luna is the only person to carry a weapon on the *Express*, a blaster in her handbag.

Tol, Gemmy and Chral: Gamblers. These three know nothing about the auction—their reason for being here is to win money from rich people. They are pleasant and amiable. In fights, they try to stay under cover. *Stats:* Gambler. *Skills:* Determine as required.

Bles, Rae and Dran: Green-skinned alien racketeers. Their culture emphasizes family commitments over mere technicalities such as legal niceties. They take little part in the social whirl. In fights, their sole concern is each other. Bles gives the orders; her niece and nephew obey them. *Stats:* Pirate. *Skills:* Determine as required.

Hamnet: Crime boss whose illegalities are sufficiently under cover that he doubles as a respectable and wealthy businessman. Hamnet enjoys the trappings of success. He is middle-aged, overweight and shrewd. His only foible is his daughter, Icomia, for whom he will do anything. In a fight, he will allow his bodyguard to do the work. *Stats:* Armchair Historian. *Skills:* Determine as required.

Icomia Hamnet: Hamnet's daughter; a 12-year-old, spoiled, unpleasant brat. She throws her weight around and will accost a PC at some stage thus: "I want you to play cybersquash with me. I want you to lose. If you don't, Daddy will have you killed." In a fight, she's liable to get in the way. *Stats:* Normal. *Skills:* Determine as required.

Wesson DeLameter: Hamnet's bodyguard. Well-dressed but quiet. *Stats:* Pirate. *Skills:* Determine as required.

Tanis Hal: Hamnet's secretary. Beautiful, well-paid, but harassed from attempting to keep Icomia under control. *Stats:* Loyal Retainer. *Skills:* Determine as required.

Kane Mihal: Street-thug who has struck it big. His clothes are too loud, as is his conversation. He defiantly uses the wrong implements at meals, rather than admit he doesn't know which to use. In a fight, he will take risks in order to show off to any attractive women. *Stats:* Brash Pilot. *Skills:* Determine as required.

Havas Rar and Quil Nathan: Well-dressed employees of an arms manufacturer which is interested in the implications of the datachip. *Stats:* Tongue-Tied Engineers. *Skills:* Determine as required.

Saminalwala and Saminalwasa: These two are Fras, a species of humanoid tigers, aggressive and luxury-loving. They are litter-mates. They spend most of their time asleep or lazing about; the three or four hours a day when they are active, they spend in the gym bouncing around at an alarming rate. They give the impression of being extremely arrogant, which they are. In fights, they are aggressive. They are liable to eat fallen foes. They are representatives of a group of pirates in the next sector. *Stats:* Tough Native. *Skills:* Brawl 5D, others determine as required. They also have claws which give +2 damage.

Secesh Trant: The Fras' secretary, human, apparently quiet and as boring as the datawork she deals with. Trant is, in fact, the paymaster of the Fras pirates, and she is a member of the Destabilization branch of Imperial Intelligence. Her goal is to strengthen the Fras and to use them against enemies of the Empire. In fights, Trant keeps under cover. *Stats:* Old Senatorial. *Skills:* Determine as required.

SEARCH

After the initial sizing-up period, the various interest groups begin making attempts to locate the datachip. Bles orders her family to search the suites. Havas and Quil begin searching through the *Express's* computer systems. Kane attempts to persuade the employees to confide in him. Hamnet sounds out the PCs to see whether he could employ them.

Hakon knew that people would attempt to find the datachip, and so he has not left it in his suite. It is hidden in the sleeve of an obscure datachip in the library, on the principle of hiding a leaf in a forest.



If the datachip is destroyed prematurely, the GM should assume that it was a duplicate, placed to forestall such an eventuality, and have the real one concealed elsewhere.

AUCTION

Assuming that the PCs have struck Hakon as interested parties, they return from dinner on the sixth day to find a message glowing on their comm-unit: "Hakon deVille invites you to a special, one-only sale. Location: The videma. Time: Now."

In the videma, Hakon is on the stage, Luna nearby, the other bidders (Bles, Rae and Dran, Hamnet and Wesson DeLameter, Kane, Havas and Quil, the two Fras and Trant) scattered about the auditorium. Hakon says: "Gentlebeings. On offer tonight is the fruits of an Imperial top-secret research project. Havas, if we might?" (Havas hands it over ruefully; substitute a PC if they have managed to locate it.) "Still intact, I see. Well now. What am I bid?"

"How do we know it's genuine?" Hamnet asks.

"I'm afraid you'll have to trust me, as I had to trust the being I obtained it from. Bids?"

Bidding starts at 50,000, and goes up by 5000, then 1000, until it sticks at 98,000.

"Any further bids?"

"Yes," says Trant from the back. "Your life."

There is consternation. Trant mounts the stage, the Fras with her. She takes the datachip from the stunned Hakon.

"Gentlebeings, you are all guilty of treasonable activities. Just by attending this auction, you have committed a category 1 crime. You have two choices. You can either continue as you have been, running your organizations and retaining your power, or you can find the weight of the Empire coming down on you with full force.

"To choose the former course, all you need do is accept an advisor from our agency, who will ensure that you do not attempt anything that is against our interests. In return, we will turn a blind eye to your other activities.

"If you do not accept an advisor, or if anything should happen to our advisor, then, quite simply, you will be eliminated.

"Imperial forces from INS *Intimidator* are close at hand. Please do not think of violent activities. You would not live to regret them."

With luck, the PCs will start the fight at this point. If not, Kane will. If the players are slow in realizing, and poor in hand-to-hand combat, allow them Per rolls to realize that the back of the videma adjoins the weapons locker in the service part of the ship.

Once violence erupts, Trant will attempt to escape, while the Fras deal with the fighting. Trant will try to get to one of the escape skimmers.

DATACHIP

Protected by a powerful security code which requires three successive Difficult computer rolls to break, the datachip contains details of the Imperial project, which was to develop a virus which could insert RNA into the brains of sentients. Since memories are made of RNA, this would provide the Imperials with the potential of brainwashing which was self-propagating, and would destroy any chance of future rebellion. The Rebel Alliance will be glad to see the information destroyed.

ESCAPE

The NPCs split over whether to stay on the *Express* and lie low, or to take escape skimmers back to the spaceport. If the PCs are inclined to stay, have a message received that the *Express* is to be boarded and searched by an Imperial party. Hakon advises them all to leave. The skimmers are fitted with a homing indicator to the spaceport, which fortunately is only a few tens of kilometers from the *Express* at this point. TIE recons are launched to locate the fleeing skimmers; the PCs will have to dodge these and escape from the planet in a hurry. Ω