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# The Stellar Beacon

Winter 2019 Hopepunk Issue

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## Hopepunk

In *One Atom of Justice*, *One Molecule of Mercy*, and *the Empire of Unsheathed Knives* novelist Alexandra Rowland, explores hopepunk, the new sci-fi sub-genre she identified last year.

## Aphrodite on Deck

A solarpunk-themed scenario for *Return to the Stars* by designer Brie Sheldon

## Fallen Juggernaut

Emmett O'Brian brings us a "hard sci-fi" adventure where players explore a mysterious megastructure.

## Beginning Gamemaster Pep Talk

Comics writer and illustrator Amy King, provides encouragement for new game masters *from* a new game master.

## The Stars, My Sandbox

Non-linear story prompts for *Return to the Stars*.



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Winter 2019 | Hopepunk Issue

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## Upcoming Events

### Granite Game Summit March 8-10

We'll be bringing a prototype of *Liberty Tree: Resistance and Rebellion* to this open and social tabletop gaming gathering

### March Equinox Wednesday, March 20

Time is evenly split between day and night, marking the start of spring or autumn.

### Pax East March 28-31

Join us at gaming's biggest event on the East Coast!

### Lyrids April 16-26

Meteors shed by a comet, visible within the Lyra constellation representing the lyre of Orpheus. It is expected to be most intense on April 22nd.

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## Launch!

Welcome to the inaugural issue of the *Stellar Beacon* zine, which supports the sci-fi RPG *Return to the Stars* with new adventures and also explores gamer and geek culture more broadly. This issues contributors are:

**Alexandra Rowland** is the author of *A Conspiracy of Truths*. She attended Truman State University where she studied world literature, mythology, and folklore. She can be found on Twitter as [@alexrowland](#).

**Brie Sheldon** is a game designer, journalist, and editor, and creator of the [Script Change RPG toolbox](#). They have worked on live action and tabletop games including *Let Me Take a Selfie*, *Of the Woods*, *Firefly Smuggler's Guide to the Rim*, and *Bubblegumshoe*. Brie was assisted by Cultural Consultants Agatha Cheng and Daniel H. Kwan of the podcast *Asians Represent!*

**Emmett O'Brian** is a writer, artist and small time publisher at the helm of Store32, offering RPGs like *The Artifact* and *Steampunkfitters*.

**Amy King** is the writer and illustrator of the web comics *The Muse Mentor* and *Harlowe Vanished*. She has done work for Dark Horse, and drew the illustrations in her article. [www.amymarieking.com](http://www.amymarieking.com).

**Alex Cutri** drew the cover illustration. He has published work with Marvel, Dark Horse, and Image.

**Rachel Lapidow** edited the zine. She has edited several tabletop RPGs including *Honour*, *Upwind*, *Return to the Stars*, and is currently working on *An Atlas of the Horizons*. [www.RachelLapidow.com](http://www.RachelLapidow.com).

**Mark Sabalauskas** is the author of *Return to the Stars*. He wrote the GM story prompts for *The Stars*, *My Sandbox*.

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# One Atom of Justice, One Molecule of Mercy, and the Empire of Unsheathed Knives

Alexandra Rowland

*They have built an empire of lies  
Where the dead beneath are buried twice  
To better feed the living above  
And you can keep the teeth of hunger off your  
own neck  
Only if you tell the ravening lies yourself  
And they too want to live*

...

*Let us build together  
The empire of unsheathed knives and hungers  
Where we will not lie in small rooms and say we  
want poetry  
When all we want is to live  
Let us pave the streets in corpses  
They are paved so already, and we cannot raise  
the dead  
But let us leave them out next time  
Let us bury lies instead of the living  
Whose mouths we stop up with stories  
Let us build it soon, if not today  
"Victory Condition" by Astolat.*

In July of 2017, I coined the word “hopepunk”, initially defined very simply in a Tumblr post: “The opposite of grimdark is hopepunk. Pass it on.” When asked to clarify, I wrote: “The essence of grimdark is that everyone’s inherently sort of a bad person and does bad things, and that’s awful and disheartening and cynical. It’s looking at human nature and going, ‘The glass is half empty.’ Hopepunk says, ‘No, I don’t accept that. Go fuck yourself: The glass is half full.’ Yeah, we’re all a messy mix of good and bad, flaws and virtues. We’ve all been mean and petty and cruel, but (and here’s the important part) we’ve also been soft and forgiving and *kind*. Hopepunk says that kindness and softness doesn’t equal weakness,

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and that in this world of brutal cynicism and nihilism, being kind is a political act. An act of *rebellion*.”

I believe the purpose of this article’s commission was to have me write something uplifting.

I don’t know if I can. I think it would be (I’m afraid it would be) *nice*.

Awful word, *nice*. A word to silence anything that discomfits you: *You won’t make any progress toward those basic civil liberties you want if you can’t be nice about it.*

*Nice* is nonthreatening. *Nice* is comfortable. *Nice* is a quiet neighborhood with white picket fences and white minivans and an overwhelmingly white demographic, where we don’t talk about things if they aren’t *nice*.

The world has never been *nice*. The world has always and only been a never-ending, Darwinian struggle for survival, an “empire of unsheathed knives and hungers,” clawing at each other and climbing over each other in a mad riot, pushing our boots down into someone else’s face to heave ourselves up a little higher or risk being trampled ourselves.

But once in a while, the people toward the middle of the heap manage to look down and see the mass of wretched bodies below, the base of the pyramid that’s supporting them, and for a moment, they see the instability of their own position, that their pyramid isn’t built on solid ground but on human flesh and human pain. For a moment, they see, and the illusion of *niceness* is wrenched away from them, and they weep, but still, *still* not for the people below them whose suffering has gone on so long. They weep like children over the teddy bear that’s been snatched out of their hands. They weep only because the world suddenly isn’t as *nice* as they thought, and it’s hard to deal with that.

*Nice* is an illusion, and so is the suddenness of realizing the lie. You see others’ pain only when it’s gone on for eternities already. It is not new—the world has always been on fire. In the first weeks of the news

about ICE separating children from their families and putting them in detention camps, I reached out for old protest songs and my fingers landed on “Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos),” first recorded in 1948. 19—fucking—48.

The world has always been on fire. We have always been monstrous to each other.

But alright. Hopepunk.

First, you must understand that everything is stories: money, manners, civilization. It’s all just little tales we tell each other, little collective hallucinations. A set of rules so that we can all play pretend together.

**Hopepunk says that *kindness and softness* doesn’t equal weakness, and that in this world of brutal cynicism and nihilism, being kind is a political act. An act of *rebellion*.”**

Terry Pratchett was, perhaps, a little less charitable—he called them *lies*. “HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN,” Death says in *Hogfather* (ellipses in brackets indicate where I made omissions). “AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING TO BELIEVE THE *LITTLE LIES*. [. . .] TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN *SHOW ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY*. [. . .] AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME . . . SOME *RIGHTNESS* IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.”

And in reply, Susan protests, “Yes, but people have got to believe that, or what’s the *point*—”

“MY POINT EXACTLY,” says Death.

But when you stop believing that there is even an atom of justice in the world? What’s the point then? How do you go on without that? What’s the point?



I'm afraid. I'm losing my story, my belief in an atom of justice. I watch it happen, a little more every day, unraveling from my hands—and I'm a professional storyteller. If anyone should know how to keep a strong hold of these threads and stop the edge from fraying, I should be able to, right? And if I can't manage to hold onto it, then how can anyone else?

But maybe it's easier for other people—people who don't know that a story can be as fragile as a silk veil. Maybe they hold it tighter, less nervous of tearing it with rough handling.

I'm afraid of who I'll be when the last threads slip out of my fingers. I'm afraid of settling into complacency, of something in me breaking, of retreating into niceness as the last-ditch sanctuary before complete despair. And I don't mean this rhetorically: I have tears in my eyes as I write this. It's hard to breathe. My hands shake. I'm afraid.

"Hopepunk says [about human nature], 'The glass is half full,'" wrote the me who lived in mid-2017. Seems naïve now, doesn't it? Those

are the words of a person cloaked in a story that hasn't yet been worn threadbare and ragged; a person who thinks they have a sword in their hands, a person who thinks that they as an individual can make a difference, that there is some fundamental goodness in humanity.

**Awful word, *nice*.  
A word to silence  
anything that discomfits you:  
You won't make any progress toward  
those *basic civil liberties* you want  
if you can't be *nice* about it.**

What do we do when our hands are empty, when our warm cloaks are gone, when we look around and see how big the world is? When we see how helpless and insignificant we are, how the rest of the world isn't even particularly cruel or evil, just . . . mediocre? Complacent?

If there are gods watching over us, please, please deliver us from complacency.

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And if there aren't, if we're all alone in the dark and our candles are guttering: What do we do? How can we go on?

What's the point?

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Besides being monstrous to each other, there's another thing us humans are particularly good at.

Have you ever started a fire with two sticks?

Have you ever looked up into the night sky and thought that perhaps it wouldn't really be so hard to count the stars?

Have you ever built a library in Alexandria?

Have you ever walked to the North Pole?

Have you ever left someone you loved very, very much, even though you would sooner have torn your own heart out of your chest with your hands, because you had to do something important on the other side of the world and they couldn't come with you?

How do you do it? How do you manage when the task before you is enormous and impossible?

How do you do it? How do you go on?

Here's how you start a fire with two sticks: sheer, simple, bloody-minded obstinacy.

That's how you count the stars, build the library, and go to the North Pole. That's how you hold the story even when it's unraveling in your hands.

You grit your teeth, and bear the pain, and keep going: one star at a time, one brick at a time, one step at a time.

You can do a lot when you decide to be a stubborn motherfucker who refuses to die.

Here's a story for you.

When you fight, you win. When you believe in something good and noble, you prevail. People have an essential core of goodness in them. People will change their minds, will learn, will grow, will repent, will earn forgiveness. There's a light at the end of the tunnel. The dragon can be slain. The great evil can be obliterated from the world. Love always wins.

Those sound nice, don't they?

Those aren't hopepunk.

#

**That's how you  
count the stars,  
build the library,  
and go to the North Pole.  
That's how you hold the story  
even when  
it's unraveling  
in your hands.**

There's this other subgenre, slightly less well-known than grimdark, called "noblebright." Noblebright is about goodness and truth and vanquishing evil forever, about a core of goodness in humanity. It's most of the Arthurian legends, the Star Wars original trilogy, Narnia . . . in Tolkien terms, it's Aragorn, rather than Frodo and Sam (who are hopepunk as hell). In noblebright, when we overthrow the dark lord, the world is saved and our work is done. Equilibrium and serenity return to the land. Our king is kind and good and pure of heart; that's why he's the king.

It's all very nice.



You ask noblebright, “What’s the point?” and the answer is, “Vanquishing the great evil. Finishing the work. Saving the world. Winning.”

The work is never finished. The work will never be finished. There will never be a nice, comfortable utopia where we can rest on our laurels and sip strawberry daiquiris by the pool and trust that now things are Fine and we can all relax. Utopia is not a stable system. It doesn’t last. The best we can hope for is five minutes, an hour.

There’s no such thing as winning forever. Evil cannot be vanquished, only beaten back for a day or two, and then it trickles back in, like water seeping through the cracks in a dam.

Ask it of hopepunk, then: “What’s the point?”

And the answer is, of course, that the fight itself is the point.

It’s not about glory or noble deeds; it’s not about an end result because there is no end. There’s always a tomorrow, and when the sun rises again, we’ll still have a dam holding the water back. For now. But entropy is real, and dams must be maintained, and it takes all of us to do it, and it’s done by linking arms with the people next to you, by building a community with deliberate intent.

It’s about how the first step to slaying a dragon is for one person to say, probably drunk in a bar somewhere, “I bet it can be done, though.”

It’s about being kind merely for the sake of kindness, and because you have the means to be, and giving a fuck because the world is (somehow, mysteriously, against all evidence) worth it and we don’t have anywhere else to go anyway.



It's about digging in your heels and believing that one single atom of justice, one molecule of mercy does exist somewhere in the mindboggling vastness of the universe—believing in that, even if for no other reason than fuck you, buddy; fuck you, fuck you, fuck you. I do what I want and this, this is what I want; this is the world I want to live in: One where the atom of justice exists, even if I've never seen it myself, even if I'll never see it.

It's about doing the one little thing you can do, even if it's useless: planting seeds in the midst of the apocalypse, spitting on a wildfire, bailing out the ocean with a bucket. Individual action is almost always pointless. Hope and strength comes from our bonds with each other, from the actions we take as a community, holding hands in the dark.

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Nobility and righteousness look really stylish and cool, and they keep you safe from criticism (how nice!), but they'll tire you out.

Take bloodthirsty, vengeful joy where you can, because the night is dark and the fight is long and there are no knights in shining armor waiting in the wings to slay the dragon at just the right moment of dramatic tension. Be spiteful. Be petty. Be rude. Spray-paint someone's house. Grab your local senator and tar and feather them, I don't know. Do whatever you have to do, as long as you're doing something, as long as you're taking hold of the world around you in a real way and yanking it in the direction of Slightly Less Terrible. Armchair ethicists wonder, "If a man has a gun to your friend's head, isn't hurting him just as bad as him hurting your friend?" No, it isn't. Also, what's wrong with you? Punch the man with the gun. Save your friend. Not all kindnesses are weighted equally, and generalized, aimless, unradical kindness is no better than niceness.

Give a fuck about the world around you, about the people around you, about the people who aren't around you, about the people on the other side of the world, for no other reason than because they're people who love their children, who laugh, who dance, who kiss, who cry.

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You know why humans are so great at being monstrous to each other? Because when you forget that someone is a person, when you forget that they laugh and cry and love their children, being monstrous to them feels good.

That's all. Terrifyingly simple, isn't it?

But alright. That's a tool. As long as that's already hardwired into you, you might as well embrace it. Use it. Lean into it. Be monstrous to the monsters, if that's what it takes, if there're no other choices left.

And if you do have choices still, remember: Nonviolent resistance, too, comes from a place of rage.

Complacent people, nice people, don't stare down a squad of armed soldier-police. They don't walk up to the Dharasana salt works knowing that they'll be beaten bloody or killed. It's not a thing you do when you think there's any other way to make them listen. A person has to be angry about something to get to a point where they'd do that, where they'd wager their very life to hold the line.

Hopepunk isn't pristine and spotless. Hopepunk is grubby, because that's what happens when you fight. It's hard. It's filthy, sweaty, backbreaking work that never ends. It isn't pretty, and it isn't noble, and it isn't nice, though I expect the natural inclination (and even my own instinctive inclination) is to make it so—to forget the word “radical” in the phrase “radical kindness,” to forget the “punk” part of “hopepunk,” which is really the operative half of the word. To forget the anger of it and let it soften, because softness is what we're aching for. We want the world to be better—kinder, more just, more merciful. We still yearn toward noblebright, toward an honest and desperate belief that love conquers all. Except, when the other guy has more guns and fewer moral objections than we do, it doesn't.

We forget, sometimes, that we have knives too in this empire. That we can unsheathe them, that we can turn our blades to the defense of an

atom of justice and a molecule of mercy that might not even exist—except . . . except for where we make them exist, in the hands we hold out to each other, and in the shelter we offer even when we ourselves are exhausted, footsore, and filthy, with the wolves at our doors.

There are no heroes and no villains. There are just people. That's hopepunk: Whether the glass is half full or half empty, what matters is that there's water in that glass. And that's something worth defending.



## The Stars, My Sandbox

Headlines from the Convention Authority:

- Consul Arsenault proposes "The Eden Initiative" to terraform the desolate planet Gluch, with the aim of encouraging Galtean raiders to demilitarize.
- Incident Response Team disables rogue AI flooding streets with bubblebath. Assistant Con Chair Valdez reminds all makers that "coziness" is not a valid reason to mute goal-content integrity safeguards.
- Recruits wanted for a covert ops team tasked to evacuate a persecuted furry community living in hibernation/hiding on a world of religious fanatics.
- The smell of grease and the sound of thunder fills the air as Mecha Polo semifinals begin!

*story prompts continue on page 16*



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# Aphrodite on Deck

By Brie Sheldon  
Cultural Consultants Agatha Cheng and Daniel H. Kwan

**Scene Summary:** Players arrive on the Aphrodite, a massive solar-radiation powered colony of airships that is suspended in the middle of Ishtar’s atmosphere. When the players engage with residents, they’ll discover that an unusual blight is killing the colony’s plants, and it’s unclear at first whether stellar diplomatic relations or colony infighting is to blame. The colony’s experts are stymied by how it keeps getting reintroduced, but are too busy keeping it at bay to investigate. Can the players help find the source?

**GM objectives:** Introducing the players to the situation should be enough to get them interested, and you can act as the sounding board for their investigative ideas.

**Optional musical cue:** Kali Uchis’s “After the Storm” (featuring Tyler, the Creator and Bootsy Collins).

## Aphrodite Colony

The Aphrodite Colony is a massive airship colony, made up of a series of connected airships floating mid-atmosphere in the habitable clouds of the planet Ishtar. Ishtar is a Venus-like planet and isn’t truly livable; however, in the clouds, the colony has thrived during its young life. Aphrodite was established fifteen years ago after massive efforts from the populace of a nearby planet, Gunyam. Gunyam experienced climate failure and its people were unable to escape through interstellar travel. Aphrodite houses people from all over, most recently those who have traveled

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from far away along with those who are the remnants of Gunyam. A population of hundreds of thousands make their home here, unable to find a habitable home planet because of the failed Stellar Beacon.

The colony has mimicked desert, tropical, and beach environments with water ported in from Gunyam—now a volcanic wasteland whose atmosphere the Aphrodite skims for water vapor. The airships have nearly idyllic climates. There are huge numbers of scientists (ecologists, meteorologists, botanists, and more) living on Aphrodite who make the airship biomes function beautifully, including performing terraforming tests in the desert environment. Aphrodite’s cultural sectors have entertainment and food unique to the colony. There are, however, some inter-colony politics due to the newer residents wanting to change things that the original Gunyamian residents are happy with; some of the Gunyamians are unenthused about the new residents; and other, smaller groups are simply trying to find a place in this heavenly home.

## The Airships

The airships are functionally massive biomes with designed interiors to match the tropical and beach landscapes of Gunyam, and an arid, lifeless desert environment similar to Ishtar’s surface (without the planet’s dangerous atmosphere as a constant); several of the desert airships have undergone semi-successful terraforming and have been opened to the public. The colony itself looks like bubbles in the clouds from afar, revealing transparent barriers that show the interiors of many of the airships as traveling vessels come closer.

Inside, the environments seem very natural, but have an underlying infrastructure of tubes to transport goods easily. These clear polymer and metal tubes occasionally peek through the biomes’ landscapes like unnatural roots where

each airship connects to the next. The Gunyamians designed the airship structures to blend into the background of the biomes, but these tubes are one way to see the inner workings of the technology. The colony has been here for a while, and it’s impressive that the maintenance workers keep so much of it functioning and together.

Still, the residents raise their voices angrily when problems are found. There are different approaches by different groups, but generally the Gunyamian natives use street protests with music and chanting if there are any unresolved mechanical issues. Newer residents tend to fill the digital mailboxes of the maintenance center or

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**The Aphrodite is made up of a series of connected airships floating mid-atmosphere in the habitable clouds of the planet Ishtar.**

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schedule official meetings to discuss the matters. There are also mixed groups of residents of varying ages who have their own methods, including holding public meetings and visiting other residents to gather support for making repairs. The Aphrodite residents are often very active in ensuring that their colony remains safe and livable.

## Tropical and Beach Environments

Gunyamians traditionally ate fish and shellfish as a large part of their diet, so the beaches have aquaculture areas—manufactured saltwater and freshwater in various airships that allow residents to fish. There is even one large airship that functions as a “river” with water and small islands for residents to swim, fish, and play in. Residents

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value these aquatic resources strongly, and there are water features—mist showers, fountains, mock creeks—all around the various airships.

The plants have spread throughout the airships as they would naturally in the outdoors. Plants are placed wherever residents desire them, and the initial plans of the airships had vegetation existing in most spaces, which had been true in the colony up until the blight started spreading. The animals mostly run free, except for in the science sectors and maintenance areas, which are blocked off with card-access-only barriers. Residential areas even have to deal with pests like a normal planetary colony would, but since much of the original structure was metal, it's much harder for creatures to chew through the walls. The small squirrel-mice, called *kittas*, still do try very hard, though.

## Cultural Districts

The cultural districts are mostly populated with Gunyamian residents who are well established in the colony. These districts are generally located in the tropical and beach airships, branching out to smaller spaces where the newest cultural districts have been founded. Inside them, visitors find lots of Gunyamian music, food, and drink, including the root tea *tucha* that is very popular and the center of rituals and celebration. It's a blend of flavors somewhat between green tea and dark roast coffee from Earth, so it's highly sought after.

Food includes fish, shellfish, and a number of smaller faunas, but a significant portion of the population is vegetarian for part of their calendar year for spiritual purposes. Instead of fully fasting like some cultures, they simply cut out a large portion of their diet. This serves a useful purpose on the airships, where it is difficult to keep substantial livestock. They have a variety of fruits, grains, and vegetables to eat year round, though

not all of the seeds were brought over from Gunyam. They have a barley-like grain called *lix* that's very filling, and a number of sweet berries and stone fruits. The dark-green vegetable that is in most cooking is called *qing cai*, which can be steamed and packed tightly, turning it into a steak-like dish. All of these foods are shared with the rest of the people in the colony, but many of those who have moved to the Aphrodite keep modified versions of their own natural diet. This means that there is a market for bringing in outside proteins during the Gunyamian fasting period, because the colony discourages killing the Aphrodite's animals beyond a certain percentage.

Gunyamian musicians use water and heat to alter their instruments, creating tension in strings and changing the flow of air, and playing percussion with traditional wooden drums made from Gunyamian plants. Music is a significant part of their culture and they relish sharing their music, both traditional and modern, with their guests. It is possible this is the best way they connect with the immigrants.

The immigrant cultural districts are smaller but still filled with a variety of cultures to rival distant, larger planets, with no one population in the majority. There are large bazaars, filled with colorful stalls alongside sleek, stylish structures that mix the varying cultures from outside of Aphrodite Colony. There are also districts that focus more on cultural mixing, where immigrants teach each other new skills from their respective, distant worlds. There is always a flurry of activity. It can be a little cramped, but expanding the colony would be a massive and challenging undertaking—most people are instead hoping for terraforming success.

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## Terraforming

Ishtar is below, a Venus-like planet with the potential to be terraformed. The colony scientists bring dirt and soil samples from Ishtar to test terraforming in the desert airships; these airships are filled with near constant noise and activity because of this. Residents who live nearby resent the ruckus, yet want the terraforming as the colony can only last so long if more people keep arriving. The immigrants come for many reasons: quiet, pristine environments; safety; even the technology on the station is a draw! The arrival of new residents shows no sign of slackening. Terraforming is going slowly, but there have been strong recent developments thanks to the knowledge base of new immigrants from other places in the galaxy.

## Encounter

Upon arriving on Aphrodite, players will see immediate evidence of the plant blight. Splotches of red and black cover the regularly green and blue plants, and it's clear that this has spread broadly across the colony. Shortly after arriving, they can meet with Dr. Qi Nu-wen, the Gunyamian botanist who is "Head Scientist in Charge" with "Great Hair." The botanist, who goes by Dr. Qi, has solid authority in the colony, but some people don't take them seriously when it comes to their work. They seem like a person who "Needs Some Backup" because they are routinely deserted by their subordinates. The staff are busy cleaning up after the blight, but it seems like there's additional trouble with communication. Players can ask Dr. Qi questions about the blight, and also investigate the colony's many airships, including the cultural districts and terraforming deserts.

## Talking to Dr. Qi Nu-Wen

This is a difficulty of 2 because Dr. Qi is under such stress. Players will want to test (overcome

action) with Science, Scholarship, Social Influence, or Networking for best results.

- Failing a roll means they don't find out much more beyond the basics about the blight—it appeared right after the most recent influx of immigrants, it causes food to lose its nutrient value, and leaves red-black blotches over the plants—and then Dr. Qi dismisses them, concerned the players are just more people coming to give them trouble.
- A tie provides the same information as above, but Dr. Qi is willing to speak to them again in the future.
- A success gains the above information, Ki's engagement, and also reveals that they've only succeeded in eliminating the blight by torching the affected plants and ground (this could be learned through player observation).
- On a success with style, Dr. Qi shows them to one of the labs where they reveal all of the above information, and also gives them passes to access all areas of the colony while studying the blight.

During the discussion, Dr. Qi mentions the four people in Contacts (page 15). When detailing the loss of food nutrient value, Dr. Qi mentions Wong Ki-Long, a Gunyamian matriarch, and details how the matriarch is raising concerns very loudly because she is worried about the plants for cultural reasons. People use the plants in a number of healing and meditating poultices and to honor the gods of the Gunyamian people in rituals. Even some immigrants use the poultices. When discussing the recent influx of immigrants, Dr. Qi remembers Wong Ki-Long mentioning Non Pallik and Sin Washington, both new to the colony.

Dr. Qi doesn't like Sin Washington, but does like Non Pallik, and it's obvious in how they talk about



the two people. Finally, they mention how Tuck constantly brings up the red-black splotches and talks about improper soil planting. If the players don't talk to Qi, these four people are all available for potential interactions. However, whether they investigate the environment first makes a difference.

### **Investigating the Environment**

Players will have a few opportunities to investigate the environment, starting from their initial landing at Aphrodite. There are also a few ways they'll recognize the problem at hand. Initially, what they'll see is leaves with red-black splotches covering portions of the plants as they enter the colony. Next, they'll see these plants at various locations, and note the unusually colored soil. They'll also overhear people in the colony talking about the blight and how it's affecting their livelihoods by making food scarcer. There also might be some arguments overheard about it being the fault of the immigrants or the fault of the Gunyamians! There are always people talking

on Aphrodite, and players can gain a lot—and additionally get thrown off course, if some complications increase excitement—by listening.

The difficulty for exploring the environment depends on whether the players have spoken to Dr. Qi already, or if they are trying to investigate on their own. If they have spoken to Dr. Qi, it is a difficulty of 2. If not, it's a 3. This can be revisited after talking to Dr. Qi. This test requires Science or Scholarship.

- If it is a failure, their knowledge remains mostly the same, but the game master should indicate that they might gain further information by talking to Dr. Qi. If they've already talked to Dr. Qi, they should engage in conversations with other NPCs. While players are poking around, locals will mention that the Gunyamian plants are too tough for this blight, an inaccurate declaration given the evidence.

- If it is a tie, Dr. Qi confirms everything above, but it's clear that digging into the other people in the colony could open more doors. They also notice that something is unusual about the soil here.
- With a success, they gain the previous knowledge and additionally discover that the soil is an unusual color compared to common gardening soil or fertilizer, and that this may be contributing to the blight.
- With a success with style, they discover the details mentioned above and also feel confident that the soil has something to do with the blight; they recognize that the soil is the same color as the soil that is in posters promoting terraforming.

## Contacts

Wong Ki-Long, is a “Gunyamian Matriarch” who has pressured the Aphrodite authorities to limit access to new settlers with her “Serious Social Clout”—explaining that the blight is caused by their presence. She “Doesn’t Like Newcomers,” which makes her tough to talk to. The players can run into Wong Ki-Long in one of the cultural districts, where she hosts tucha drinking ceremonies. If the players attend one of these ceremonies and get to speak to Wong Ki-Long, she will talk to them out of obligation but also out of passion, regardless of her ill temper.

- If the players talk to Wong Ki-Long, they can find out that she has definitely tried other methods to run newcomers out of town, but the blight is not her style—in part because it is often native Gunyamian plants that are affected, some of which are sacred, like tucha root.

Sin Washington, a “Dashing Retired Rogue” who moved onto Aphrodite the minute he could, insists

he’s “Just Looking for Quiet”; however, he has a “Bad Reputation” for causing trouble. He’s friendly but mischievous. Players can find Sin in one of the immigrant cultural districts in a tiny shop stall selling trinkets he’s carved himself. He’ll call out to them and invite them to look at his wares; his handsome but rugged appearance may give them pause.

If the players talk to Sin, they discover he truly is looking for quiet—and that includes ignoring his responsibilities to his old gang. He isn’t causing the blight, but the political unrest is partially his fault. When he was still active in his gang, they came to Aphrodite in force, disrupting the peace and giving immigrants a negative reputation for

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**The colony itself looks like  
bubbles in the clouds,  
revealing transparent barriers  
that show the interiors  
of many of the airships  
as traveling vessels come closer.**

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rabbleroising.

Tuck, the “Local Expert” who claims to know everything about the blight—“They ‘Know It All,’ alright,” says Qi—but the expert “Keeps to Themselves,” and Tuck hasn’t shared any of this knowledge. Tuck is harder to locate, but if the players are wandering around the colony, it won’t be long before Tuck finds *them*, curious about what they’re doing. “*You don’t know everything if you don’t go looking around,*” they say. They will use stealth to follow the players around and eavesdrop on their conversations. Tuck will dodge the players a lot, but can be caught, even if they’re a little squirrely.

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Tuck does know everything, and they're highly suspicious of the terraforming work that's been going on in the desert biome islands. They point the finger at Non Pallik and Dr. Qi, saying Non is purposefully trying to destroy the colony, and Dr. Qi is doing nothing to stop him. If the players have already investigated the environment and succeeded, this gives them a good lead and some confidence.

Non Pallik, the "Soil Fiend," who is responsible for the terraforming plans and "Just Moved Here" last year when the terraforming efforts really took a leap forward. He's "Just So Tall" and his behavior is slightly odd. Players can find Non if they explore the desert airships or the science sectors, as he's always wandering around with spectrometers trying to find more soil to analyze in the hopes of solving the terraforming issue.

If the players talk to Non before investigating the environment, they should make a Social Influence test. A success or tie will result in Non being breezy and dismissive, but the discussion can be revisited. With a success with style, he's welcoming and willing to talk. A failure on the roll will result in Non being agitated and feeling wrongly accused. He will want evidence of the soil being a potential cause of the blight. If players pressure him after having a success *and* providing evidence, he'll agree to look deeper into it.

### **Digging In**

Further investigation will reveal that they are bringing soil up from the surface of Ishtar, and the Gunyamian water they are using to grow the plants is reacting with the soil. The terraforming and water group is supposed to purify the soil, but the purifier isn't filtering out the unique catalyst that's causing the blight.

### **Solving the Blight**

The players can work together with Non and Dr. Qi to create a solution using Science or Scholarship (difficulty 4).

- If they fail, they delay a solution and the blight will spread further before it's stopped.
- If they tie, it halts the spread of the blight, but a real fix will take time.
- Succeeding stops the blight and gives a rapid path forward.
- Succeeding with style will stop the blight, create a solution, and help recover some of the damaged Gunyamian sacred plants.

### **Summary**

Stopping the blight means a huge relief for Aphrodite politically, because it quells the massive fears, and also reduces the danger to their food supply. The players help to resolve a big crisis for the residents of the floating colony, and gain the respect of the residents for their efforts. As the players leave Aphrodite, they're honored by those they interacted with, and welcomed to return.

### **The Stars, My Sandbox, cont.**

On arrival in the Kypck (pronounced "Kursk") System a scan will pick up indications of is potentially interesting technological activity at two planets:

**Kypck VIII**—an observatory satellite orbits the moon of this gas giant. A Science 2 roll determines that it is monitoring a volcano on the surface; a success with style reveals that this is a rare cryovolcano erupting nearly pure water. A Pilot 4 and Make 5 challenge can recover optical discs that contain decade's worth of valuable data.

**Kypck IV**—This lush planet has no inhabitants; however there are robots running, maintaining, and extending a vast subway system modeled on the Moscow Metro. Searching uncovers a small outpost that had been preparing for expected settlers. The tiny advance team all died during the Great Silence. *continued on page 23*



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# Fallen Juggernaut

By Emmett O'Brian

This adventure is intended to happen soon after galactic travel is restored by the Convention Authority. The party is commissioned by the Scouts Academy of the Convention Authority to investigate what used to be a shipyard before the Great Silence. Alternatively, you may reframe the adventure as one the party stumbles across while exploring.

**Mission briefing:** Records from before the Martian hyperspace Stellar Beacon went dark indicate that the Latolli System was home to Harrison Shipyard. The planet was a hub for starship building and repair. To lift large starships into orbit, two orbital rings around Lat1 were constructed (see Orbital Rings section below).

Lat1 is the only planet in the system. Roughly the size of Mars, and with about one-third the gravity

of Earth, it is an inhospitably cold, rocky wasteland. The chilly temperatures facilitate computation and the use of superconductors. Lower gravity makes moving massive objects easier. It is also far enough away from its star that ships can jump in close to the planet. This makes it a suitable site to repair, build, and design origami drives.

First imperative: Survey the system and identify what ships may still be useable and if the ships are an asset or a threat. Any remaining ships could be a threat to the Convention Authority and any nearby systems.

Secondary imperative: Make diplomatic contact with governments that may be favorable while avoiding potentially dangerous associates.

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Tertiary imperative: To render aid whenever possible as long as doing so does not endanger the ability to complete higher imperatives.

**GM Background:** The orbit around the planet was once full of starships and space stations. When the Stellar Beacon stopped working, an inexperienced crew panicked and attempted to make a jump from the planet's orbit. As their ship broke apart, it collided with stationary ships which caused a growing cascade of orbital collisions.

The crashes caused a debris cloud that made travel into Lat1's orbit impossible. Advanced armor systems were quickly pocked and disintegrated. Space stations manned their defenses but were overwhelmed, destroyed, and added to the debris. This phenomenon is called the Kessler syndrome.

The orbital rings have taken damage, but the rings' AI used the superconducting magnets that hold the structure up to create an electromagnetic field that repelled much of the debris. These fields are still used to this day. The hundred-meter-thick housing of the rings have abraded to nearly nothing in places.

In three years, the Harrison Shipyard Authority fell apart. Although the company had contingency plans in place, the security forces ignored their corporate leaders and seized control via a coup. After ninety years, a workers' rebellion starved out this military autocracy and opened the way for the present Lateral Collective, a socialist government, to form. It has governed with a measure of competence for thirty years.

**Orbital Rings:** The rings are active structures, meaning they need power to stay up. They are like enormous monorails in reverse, where the tracks move and the trains stay in one place.

When the orbital rings were constructed, massive steel ribbon spools weighing 196.25 metric tons were brought into the orbit of Lat1. Each one was welded to the next. Twenty-five hundred of these

ribbons make a loop around the planet. Because each one is orbiting, the whole loop is orbiting.

Superconducting loops were strung around the ribbon and held up by electromagnetic fields fed by fusion reactors beaming power to the ring from orbiting starships. These loops are stationary over the planet, the ribbon moves but they don't. They would fall to the planet if the ribbon wasn't there to hold them up or if they lost power.

Structures like monorail tubes, ship launch sled rails, living accommodations, shopping malls, fusion reactors, and observation decks were built over the loops. Each ring is powered by a set of twelve fusion reactors built into the structure, these are visible as large nodes on the perimeter of the ring. The outermost is called the Orbit Ring; its function is to launch ships into orbit via launch sleds.

A second ring that's just like the first was made to dip down close to the planet's surface. Only a kilometer separates the ring from the planet. Cables strung between the ring and the surface allow travel to and from the ring. This is the Lift Ring which lifts ships from the surface to the Orbit Ring. It crosses over the Orbit Ring and above it, touching the Orbit Ring at two places.

The counterintuitive things about the rings is that when a person stands on or in one, they experience almost a surface level amount of gravity as the ribbon is orbiting but the structure around the ribbon does not.

**GM background:** When the player characters arrive, the Lift Ring has taken the most damage from debris strikes. When the Kessler effect was triggered, the rings' AI recognized the danger and released clouds of charged plasma. The electromagnetic (EM) field that holds up the ring has been modulated and intensified to deflect as many particles as possible.

After the disaster, the rings were largely abandoned. People feared for their safety as the

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rings were battered. To them, the rings no longer served a purpose, since with the debris cloud in place, there was no way to launch anything into orbit.

The Lift Ring has lost two of its fusion reactors to debris damage. The cloud has mostly stabilized, and impacts have become less frequent over the past hundred years, but the space flotsam still strains the remaining reactors. If the Lift Ring fails, falling segments could crack open the underground facilities that house the population of tens of thousands.

At any point when the players are on the rings and the proper command codes have not been entered, the ring's security drones can attack.

### **Security Drone**

Aspect: Attack from Cover

Skills: Blast 2

Stress 1

Consequence 4

### **Lateral Collective**

The Lateral Collective is the governing body of Lat1. Three leaders are in control over the three main inhabited sections of the planet. Although the leaders don't always work for the people—and they frequently bicker—they have kept the three sites working together for survival.

There are forty thousand people living in what was once various manufacturing facilities. Most of the space that was built to construct ships has been converted to agricultural and living spaces. Some portions of the vast facility could still be used to construct ships.

### **Bryn Harrison**

Bryn Harrison is the leader of the Harrison Shipyard and the mastermind of the workers'

revolt. She sees the arrival of a starship as a good thing for her people. If the debris field can be cleared, she is even more welcoming and wants to give lavish gifts to the player characters. She can be convinced of the need to repair the ring, but doing so will mean an enormous effort that she is not very excited to attempt.

High Concept: Decadent but Cerebral

Trouble: Grown More and More Greedy

Aspects: Consummate Administrator; The People Don't Know What They Want; Allow Me to Guide You

Skills: Self-Control 5, Networking 4, Scholarship 4, Intrusion 3, Empathy 3

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**Roughly the size of Mars, with about one-third the gravity of Earth, it is an inhospitably cold, rocky wasteland.**

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### **Clace Bobshed**

Clace Bobshed is the leader of the Engine Works. Clace is a politician through and through. The arrival of a starship is novel to her; her primary interest will be to find out as much about the visitors and where they come from as possible. Clace is not frivolous, nor will she take the ring situation lightly, but she is not a scientist and will seek to form a committee to study the problem, which will take time.

High Concept: Charming Woman of the People

Trouble: Thinks Her Excrement Doesn't Stink

Aspects: The People Need This; Good Delegator; Knows Where the Party's At

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Skills: Networking 5, Empathy 4, Scholarship 2

### Fanfall Patterson

Fanfall Patterson is the leader of the Computation Complex. Fanfall sees the arrival of a starship as a threat to the people but also as a potential asset. His plan is to make friends with the new arrivals and get a “tour” of the ship. Once on board, Pict, his advisor, will attempt to gain control of the ship while Jen, his “doctor,” will buy time.

High Concept: Ex-military Soldier Who Sided with the Revolt

Trouble: Aging and Unhealthy

Aspects: Let’s Get This Done; The End Justifies the Means; The People Need Protecting

Skills: Combat Arts 4, Blast 3, Scan 3, Intrusion 1, Scholarship 1

**Jen** (Fanfall’s “doctor”)

Aspects: The Doctor Thing Is a Cover for a Bodyguard; Single-Minded; A Deadly Weapon

Skills: Blast 4, Acrobatics 3, Combat Arts 3

Stress 1, 2, 3

Consequences 2, 4, 6

**Pict** (Fanfall’s advisor)

Aspects: Dangerously Brilliant, In Love with Jen to a Fault; Disarmingly Unobtrusive

Skills: Scholarship 4, Intrusion 3, Scan 3, Piloting 1

Stress 2, 4

Consequences 2, 4

### Disappointment (Scene One)

**Scene summary:** The ship arrives some distance away from the planet Lat1 to avoid being detected easily. Scans show that there are no intact ships in the system, but that there is a large debris cloud

around the planet. The crew must decide what to do.

**GM objectives in this scene:** Encourage the players to recognize the plight of the planet and the need for them to assist.

**Optional musical cue:** They Might Be Giants’ “End of the Rope.”

### Getting Started

Remember to reset your GM fate points to equal the number of players.

Describe the planet, the ring megastructures, and the cloud of material that surrounds the planet.

The players can radio the planet. For hours the only response they receive is from the ring’s docking transponder requesting a Harrison Corp. ID and serial number. The players don’t have one, but an Infiltration roll could allow them to fake one. If they do, they are sent landing coordinates on the Orbit Ring. After hours of repeated attempts to contact the planet, a Lat1 scientist locates a transmitter and responds, answering questions of history and the planet’s needs. The players’ ship could be a threat, so the scientist will not provide too much information. They can get in contact with representatives of the Lateral Collective, but this will take more than a day to arrange.

The players will likely want to help the planet; if not, they probably have aspects that could be compelled to encourage them to assist. Also, you could remind them that the tertiary mission imperative is to render aid. If the players plan to wait a week and return, they will be ignoring this imperative if they become aware of the dangers facing the planet.

Scanning the system will reveal more details of what the players are interested in. Important things they can survey for would include the debris cloud, rings, planet, and surrounding system. Suggestions for scanning results are



given for reference. Modify the information to fit the needs of the story.

Succeeding on a Scan of the debris cloud will identify it as the pulverized remains of starships and space stations. Succeeding with style reveals that a shuttle could attempt to pilot through, but it would be dangerous.

Succeeding at a Scan roll of the rings will identify the magnetic field protecting the Lift Ring is weakening every two hours. Succeeding with style will reveal that the remaining ten reactors are running over their rated capacity and are in danger of failing.

Succeeding for a Scan of the planet will show that the inhabitants of Lat1 live in underground construction facilities. Succeeding with style reveals information like the population of the facilities and shows that the construction floors have been cleared out for agriculture.

Succeeding in a Scan for ships will confirm that there are no starships in the system. Succeeding

with style could point to the debris cloud having materials and parts found in starships.

The ship cannot fly through the debris cloud, but a shuttle might be able to navigate through (passive opposition +6). This is a dangerous task and should require creating advantages, using aspects, and teamwork.

The players can attempt to disperse the cloud. Weapons fire can be used to punch holes in the cloud giving a shuttle an advantage. Be aware that doing so will alert the planet to the existence of a ship.

The grav drive of the ship could be modified to create a gravity plow that could be used to clear paths through the debris. The plow consists of a field of artificial gravity that collects the wreckage as it passes by, these collected debris can be melted into a single mass with the ship's weapons—clearing out large swaths in the orbital pass. The players could learn this if they try Science or Making rolls regarding the cloud. Clearing the fragments that could strike the rings

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will take four days of work. Succeeding with style on rolls may reduce this time to three days.

If the players have made contact with the scientist on the planet, they can suggest making a gravity plow if the players haven't explored that possibility.

Place one index card to show the scene aspect:

## Deadly Debris Cloud

### The Proper Course (Scene Two)

**Scene summary:** The orbital Lift Ring is in danger of failing. The crew could attempt to make repairs themselves or try and get the planet to do the repairs.

**GM objectives in this scene:** Facilitate the players' plan of action to assist. Act on the NPCs' agendas.

**Optional musical cue:** David Byrne's "Broken Things."

### Getting Started

Remember to reset your GM fate points to equal the number of players.

The extent of the damage to the rings is extensive, and the fact that the Lift Ring hasn't already failed is surprising. Describe the level of damage sustained. Segments of the outer structure are almost gone in places. Describe one or more of the fusion reactors shutting down and restarting every ten minutes. Scans or technical analysis shows the ring will not last the next two weeks.

If one of the fusion reactors was restored, it would extend the life of the Lift Ring. The players can make this repair on their own or convince the planet to do the repairs. One of the Orbit Ring's reactors can be removed and installed on the Lift Ring, or parts from one of the Lift Ring's failed reactors can be used to repair the other. A third option is available if the players can secure the

control codes to the rings, they can then modify their ship's weaponry to beam power from the players' ship to the ring or even from the Orbit Ring to the Lift Ring using the beam receivers that powered the lift coils before the reactors were installed.

The magnetic fields that the rings have deployed to protect themselves can create dangerous situations if they are not paused while the repairs are attempted.

Somewhere on the planet are the codes to disable the defenses, but no one has used them in decades. The previous military autocracy hid them, and it requires at least four days of research by the planet to find them. The players can shorten this time by possibly a day or two by helping and earning enough Infiltration successes.

If the players land on the planet, they should be met by the leaders of the Lateral Collective. Fanfall Patterson attempts to get a tour of the player's ship in order to take it over.

If the players attempt to do the repairs without the codes, they will have to hack into the ring's systems and temporarily shut down the electromagnetic field or deal with the dangerous forces they induce. Even if the debris cloud has been cleared, the ring AIs won't drop their protection. Metal tools or even metallic fittings in space suits can be thrown with great force if the characters are near the lift coils. The electromagnetic field is even more dangerous when the players are trying to move the magnetic segments from one reactor to another.

The players can land a shuttle on the Orbit Ring if they have secured landing codes. An electromagnetic rail sled catches the shuttle and slows it down. When the shuttle is ready to take off, the sled will accelerate it up to orbital speed, and then launch it. They can then transfer over to the Lift Ring at the point where the two rings touch.

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Moving one of the reactors off of the Orbit Ring and onto the Lift Ring is the fastest repair, but also the most difficult and dangerous. A failure while attempting to install the reactor in the Lift Ring could mean the destruction of the ring. This repair should take around two days. This time can be reduced to one day if the players have enlisted the aid of the planet and have made a successful Networking skill roll.

- Land on the Orbit Ring (Piloting skill difficulty 1)
- Remove the donor fusion reactor (Making skill difficulty 5)
- Remove the damaged fusion reactor (Making skill difficulty 3)
- Tow the reactor with the shuttle to the Lift Ring (Piloting skill difficulty 6)
- Connect the donor reactor to the lift ring (Making skill difficulty 5)

Using parts from one reactor to repair another will require getting control of the ring's monorail system to move quickly between the reactors. The reactors are 2,000 kilometers apart; thus, walking or using any other mode of transportation would take far too long. This repair should take around three days. This time can be reduced to two days if the players have enlisted the aid of the planet and made a successful Networking skill roll.

- Land on the Orbit Ring (Piloting skill difficulty 1)
- Hack into the rail system (Infiltration skill difficulty 2)
- Collect parts from one failed reactor to repair the other (Making skill difficulty 3)
- *If the characters have obtained the command codes, the following step can be skipped.* Time the monorail to avoid the strongest EM pulses (Scan skill difficulty 4), or hack the ring's system to halt the EM pulses (Infiltration skill difficulty 4)
- Repair the fusion reactor (Making skill difficulty 5)

If the players have successfully engaged the help of the planet, they can make Networking rolls to create advantages for these rolls.

Once the rings are stabilized, the remainder of the repair work can be completed by the planet. Clace Bobshed throws a triumphant gala to honor the heroic characters; the whole planet sees them off before the beacon reactivates. The Convention gains an ally that should one day help to more fully restore interstellar travel to the galaxy.

## The Stars, My Sandbox, cont.

**Lefebvre Expanse** The merchant guilds of this stellar cluster practice double descent. Starships are inherited matrilineally, while cargo and wealth are passed along through the male line. Approximately a third of the population are descendants of late 21st century asteroid miners, and have an additional two arms in place of legs, which are less useful in zero gravity.

Tension exists between those who support closer ties with the Convention in order to gain aid against the piratical Dank Lords of Gulch and those who are concerned that the Convention's long-term goal of helping worlds develop post-scarcity societies is a threat to their way of life.

- A starship captain whose ship is undergoing repairs implores the party to save her family's fortune by delivering their cargo on time. But will traditionalists be outraged at seeing a Convention ship powered by an origami engine delivering cargo in only a week?
- A holo-novella producer needs help publicizing a casting call for a historical melodrama set in Sol's asteroid belt. Will pay in memes supporting the adventurers' favorite causes.
- Rumors swirl that both pirates and a mysterious secret society are seeking "fatal engines" on the remote system Gnirkrod II



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# The Beginning Game Master: Pep Talk

By Amy King

Hi! I'm a new Dungeon Master, and you could be too.

I didn't initially plan to write anything about my foray into Dungeon Mastering (DMing)—after all, there are countless informative guides from people who have been playing for decades, across multiple editions and various types of campaigns. Every bit of insight you could ever want is already out there, a mere search engine query away. What could I possibly add to these tomes of experience?

Well, I am happy to say, I am here today to offer you my inexperience.

When I first started posting that I would soon be DMing a game, I was really struck by two things: first, the openness with which I was given

thoughtful advice by seasoned DMs, and second, how many other new DMs are out there! The responses were split pretty fifty-fifty, half from veterans eager to usher in the new generation of players, and the other half from . . . well . . . the new generation of players. As it turns out, aside from a shared passion for *Dungeons & Dragons*, the other thing we **all** have in common is that we get pregame jitters. DMing, even for someone who has been doing it for a long time, can be a little scary.

Personally, I was terrified for weeks leading up to my first game. I kept second-guessing if I was truly ready to do something like this, and worried incessantly that it had been a huge mistake. What if I let down my players? What if I made a

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massive blunder that ruined everyone's night? Or worse—what if there was no fun to be had, at all?

But I did it! I did it with the backing of hundreds of messages of advice, a wealth of useful guides, a shameful amount of tabbed browser windows, and most importantly, the rush of confidence when I could see the players were having a good time.

On that note, let's get started! What I really want to share with you are some tips to make the process of DMing less intimidating. I have only been doing this for a little over a month, which makes me the rokiest of rokiest; the people I'd really like to inspire are other rokiest . . . but you never know! Maybe some of this could be handy to intermediate DMs, as well.

With that in mind, please know that I am **very, very** new. These tips are in no way meant to be the word of law, but are rather my own views on what helped make the process less of an ordeal. I'd like to help my fellow first-time DMs get over their fear of testing the waters, and get excited to start up their own games. Be aware that these are suggestions, not commandments. Your game is your game! And . . .

### **You Can Do This!**

Yes, **you!** I don't care who you are. Correction, I **do** care who you are, I am sure you're a lovely person, but I mean this in the sense that it doesn't matter what your experience level is. Have you been thinking of DMing a game, but are worried that you don't have what it takes? That's total bologna. I only have a year and a half of experience playing, I am very averse to math, I tend to ramble and go off on tangents, and spellcheck had to help me with "bologna" just a sentence ago. If I can do this, and have the other players thanking me for the session afterward rather than running away screaming, I guarantee you can do this too.

### **It Isn't as Scary as You Think!**

One of my biggest concerns going in was that I'd forget all the rules and hold up the session by crying into the *Dungeon Masters Guide*, but I didn't do either of those things. Odds are pretty decent that you won't, either. The responsibilities of a DM are very different from that of a player, but the game remains the same in that it is a series of specific problems with a huge variety of ways to solve them—it's just that, as a player, you are generally the one doing the solving. A DM is here to present the bulk of the challenges and see what the players do with them.

Seeing as we all know there is nothing more fun than creating challenges for the DM, you should now be looking forward to having a job where YOU are the primary troublemaker. If you are open to what the players attempt to do, and try to facilitate it within the rules—which you are welcome to double-check during the session—then things will be just fine.

### **Expect to Make Mistakes!**

I forgot the rules to grappling in a puff of brain fog, had an enemy combatant disengage **and** dash on the same turn, and had an Unseen Servant remain at task even after breaking the sixty-foot range of the spell. But rather than give in to the embarrassment, I just honestly addressed the mistakes as best I could and, surprise, no one seemed to mind. The more attention you call to your muck ups, from a perspective of "Oh no, I'm the worst ever, I can't believe I did that," the more it will take away from the immersion. It's okay to mess up! What's important is that you either make the decision to look it up quickly before you make your ultimate call (as I did with the rules to grappling), fix the action as quickly as possible (as I did in the case of the disengage-and-dash), or to go ahead and let it happen and file that information away for next time (as I did in regards to the Unseen Servant who got to fire a cannon and blast a sea monster into giblets, which was



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ultimately far more memorable than the mistake I made to let it happen).

### **Stay Humble, Because You're a Player, Too!**

Don't power trip. Seriously. I know this seems like basic advice, but didn't you come here for basic advice? As the DM, you provide **a lot**: enticing story hooks, rich environments, and complicated relationships! But you are also a player in the game. You have a very different role, but this never means you are entitled to discourage a player's agency, or that you can twist situations 'til you get a desired outcome. It has been proven through rigorous academic testing that if an infinite number of DMs oversee an infinite number of players, there still won't be a single instance of the players doing what any DM expects. Look it up, it's science.

Don't take this to mean that you shouldn't have fun, though. You absolutely should! You are also a player, you simply have a different role. But you are not immune to the will of the dice. You are never safe from your carefully crafted plans

shattering in a hail of natural 1s or, even more unpredictable, the sheer, unshakable might of a table of inventive players. Embrace the fluidity of the game the same way that you do on the other side of the DM screen, be flexible with your story, let the players play, and you will soon find that you are playing as well! If you absolutely, positively, conclusively **need** an event to go one particular way . . . write a novel. But if you want to craft something that can be easily twisted, bent, and blown completely out of proportion, depending on the input from **everyone** at the table, then let's play some *Dungeons & Dragons* (or another tabletop game of your choice).

### **Choose Your Players Wisely!**

Make sure that aforementioned table of players have compatible interests so far as what they want out of a game. Some players want to loot every corpse and crate and bounce from encounter to encounter with little regard for plot hooks or moral codes. Other players would be content for every session to be a campfire get-

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together under the starlight, where they can all share details of their backstories. Most are gonna fall somewhere in between, and while there is always the possibility to mix and match player preferences and still have a great time, I think sessions run most harmoniously when everyone has a similar goal. Roleplay-intensive players are going to get the most out of a game with other roleplay-intensive players, and combat enthusiasts are going to get the most out of a game with other combat enthusiasts. This is less of a necessity as you gain more experience as a DM; however, if you are just starting out, being pulled in a lot of different directions during a session can cause you further anxiety, so I think for a beginner's guide, this is a pretty important thing to chew over.

Softly vet the people you are interested in playing with, and see if they have any strong preferences one way or another. Another thing to consider is that if you introduce a lot of strangers into a game together, there's potential to have them be less comfortable than they would be with people they already know, which is why I recommend you . . .

### **Have A "Session Zero"!**

I was surprised how many of my players had never had a session zero before! I think they are a great way to introduce players who have maybe never met, letting everyone get their expectations out in the open, and getting an early feel for what you, as the DM, should be preparing in order to make sure everyone has a good time.

You can look up some good information on what things to cover during a session zero, but I made sure ours at least covered introductions, what players enjoyed most about *D&D*, any situations that might make someone uncomfortable, and also laid out what I, as the DM, could promise to provide them and how I intended to approach certain rules and other issues.

Now, granted, my players are amazing people, and I don't think the session zero was a make-or-break thing, where the first session would have gone up in flames without it. But I'd at least like to think it helped, if not the players themselves, it at least let me know what I'd need to have ready.

Although, I will say, there is no session zero that will give you all the info you need. Things will come up during the game that you never expected, and this will become apparent within the first two minutes.

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**we all know  
there is nothing more fun  
than creating challenges,  
you should be looking forward to  
having a job where  
YOU are the primary troublemaker.**

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### **Accept That You'll Be Doing a Lot of Improv!**

Despite being can't-sleep-at-night levels of nervous, I was feeling very confident about my prep going in to the first session. I had a lot. I mean, I had pages. I felt great about it.

The players blew past all of it just a little after our first break.

I couldn't lose my cool, though, at least not on the outside. Although I felt I had prepared enough, as the session progressed, I made peace with the fact there was no way I could have prepared adequately for the players' whims, especially when what they really wanted was antivenom and smutty books, not necessarily in that order. (Another hot tip, make sure you have a catalog of smutty books and their plots ready at all times, because if you don't, you'll regret it later.)

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By the second session, I left a lot more open-ended, and was already much calmer about things going off the rails—sometimes literally. Learning to improvise is a very important skill to hone as a DM, but perhaps even more important is your ability to stay cool and never, **ever** blame the players for being creative in how they approach things. Try to have fun with it and see where it goes—you never know when something unexpected will make for a better story! Your players will appreciate you giving them the space to meaningfully affect the game; sticking too rigidly to your own plans, no matter how meticulous, is a recipe for resentment.

In those situations, where your months of planning go down the tubes in an instant, and you need to start from scratch? Laugh. Let whatever is happening be ridiculous and glorious. Take a minute to compose yourself and then figure out how to proceed.

### In Conclusion

I am still nervous about our upcoming session, even with a couple of them under my belt. I suspect I might always will be! But I am also looking forward to it more and more each time. And honestly, that bit of discomfort is nothing in comparison to the delight of providing a good game for interested players. Don't even get me started on the feeling immediately after a session, when everyone is abuzz with all that they achieved, saw, and if you are lucky, actually felt.

I hope that some of this took a bit of the pressure off if you've been considering picking up a Dungeon Master's guide and giving this a whirl. Although I have never been much for writing guides, I'd love to share my future thoughts on DMing as I go, particularly if they seem like they could be a good stepping stone for others, so please do let me know what you think.

Here's to having a good game!



### In the Next Issue

Far away from Earth, a tiny capsule revolves in a decaying orbit around a blue-green jewel of a planet. The capsule screams a message into the void:

“My name is Kara Silberman and I am. . . was. . . the leader of the opposition here on Takanawa’s Folly. Our colony has fallen into the hands of a corrupt regime that’s determined to undermine the principles of equality and morality on which our colony was founded. Many of us have tried to oppose the regime, but our best efforts have failed. If you can hear this, we need your help. *Please, won’t you help us?*”