

A Black Die Affair

Here's the Story

The Crew is minding their own business while cruising through the Black, when they see a large ship in distress. A cry for help reveals a first-class liner in critical trouble. The laws regarding assisting fellow spacers isn't as set as the rules for ships at sea were on Earth-That-Was, but there is always the chance that getting involved could lead to a reward. However, things are rarely what they seem in the Black and, where there is a fortune to be made, the adage that no good deed goes unpunished also comes to mind when a fancy black tie shindig becomes an affair to die for.

Game Master's Notes

This three act adventure is for four to six player characters of mixed Greenhorn and Veteran level. The story starts In Media Res with the crew en route between worlds either with or without a cargo, when they receive a distress signal from a luxury liner in critical distress. The PCs have to make some quick decisions to save many more survivors than their ship was ever designed to carry at one time. However, they soon find they have taken aboard a deadly menace that pursues them with a vengeance. The PCs must act quickly to elude this threat to save not only themselves but the survivors they have rescued.

A Black Die Affair is an adventure in three acts of two scenes each, with Act One consisting of *A Night to Remember* and *Any Port in a Storm*. Act Two leads to *We're the Government, We're Here to Help* and *Head for the Hills!* The story concludes in Act Three with *No Good Deed Goes Unpunished* and *No, Honest, We're the Government and We're Really Here to Help*.

Act One Scene One: A Night to Remember

Designed to be the most luxurious liner ever to ply the spaceways, the Star of Sihnon has more than managed to meet that goal. Catering only to the most exclusive of clientele of the already highly fashionable Five Star Line, this ship exudes luxury and craftsmanship from every surface. From the staterooms to the common areas, as if any portion of this exquisite ship could be considered 'common,' to even the crew quarters, the Star of Sihnon not only sets the standard of luxury, she is the standard by which all other liners must be measured. - Five Star Line Brochure

This part of the adventure begins In Media Res with the crew already en route between worlds. They can be carrying cargo or dead heading to their next destination, either on their way to a job or having just finished their last job. The only caveat is they must be in a remote area far from any habitable planets or moon.

The crew is cruising along when suddenly, the communications band of the Cortex turns to hash from a powerful jamming signal. Any skill roll used to try and over ride the jamming proves to be impossible due to the strength of the signal and a AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence + Technical Expertise* (or HARD (11) *Intelligence + Knowledge*) will know that for jamming to be this effective, the transmitter has to be very close. Before the crew can react to this situation, have the PCs roll a HARD (11) *Alertness + Perception* to spot an explosion on a ship in the distance. Shortly after this explosion, the ship is wracked with a series of even more violent explosions clear for everyone to see. If this doesn't draw the PCs in to investigate, an EASY (3) *Intelligence*

+ *Technical Expertise* picks up a weak distress signal from the liner The Star of Sihnon. The sensors are degraded by the jamming and suffer a two-step penalty. An AVERAGE (7) ship's *Alertness* + ship's *Perception* will also identify the ship. Assuming the PCs choose to get involved, as they close in, they spot escape pods ejecting from the stricken ship. The wave from the liner is garbled from the jamming, but the captain is asking the PCs to take on survivors as the explosions have wrecked so many escape pods that they no longer have enough for all the passengers. If the PCs hesitate, the captain offers a reward of ten credits per passenger with a voice dripping with contempt for the Crew's greed.

Docking with the burning liner is a HARD (11) Ship's *Agility* + *Pilot* roll. Once docked, the number of survivors is much larger than expected, large enough that the PC's Ship's life support is going to be severely overloaded. The exact numbers will vary based on the size of the PC's ship, but should be no less than 75 survivors. The number of survivors is based on the results of the explosions that have doomed the ship. The Star of Sihnon was designed to carry 240 passengers and 100 crew. The crew consisted of the captain and first mate, 18 flight operations (pilots, navigators, and mechanics), 60 wait staff, and a full orchestra of 20. The initial explosion kills 2d6 of the flight operations crew. The more massive secondary explosions kill 1d6 more of the flight crew, 4d6 of the wait staff, 2d6 of the orchestra, and 4d6 passengers. The liner carried 34 ten-man escape pods with 17 on each side, but the massive explosions destroyed 12 of the starboard side pods leaving the ship unable to evacuate the remaining survivors. On average, the explosions will kill 46 of those on board. The Star of Sihnon had a full load for this special cruise of 340 before the blasts for a total of 294 survivors. The remaining escape pods can hold 220 leaving an average of 74 survivors to be rescued by the PCs.

While access to the Cortex is jammed, the ship's onboard database is still accessible and an AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence* + *Technical Expertise* is needed to locate an uninhabited, but partially terraformed moon within range. Even though the terraforming isn't complete, there is enough of a breathable atmosphere that the Crew can stage the survivors there long enough to await a proper rescue. It will also take a HARD (11) *Intelligence* + *Mechanical Expertise* to jury rig the life support to temporarily handle the overload long enough to reach the moon. If this roll fails, the additional time taken to get the life support reconfigured causes a one step penalty to the roll to escape the doomed liner, with a Botch causing a two step penalty to the escape roll.

As soon as the last of the survivors are taken aboard, but before the PCs undock, there is a frantic signal from the captain of the liner, his engineer is losing control of the situation and the PCs have to launch now if they are going to escape. The rapid series of explosions is treated as an attack roll at a FORMIDABLE (15) level. The pilot must roll Ship's *Agility* + *Pilot* to steer the ship away free of damage, with the ship suffering Basic damage if the pilot's escape roll fails.

As the Crew makes its way clear of the catastrophic loss of one of the finest liners in the 'Verse, they find themselves with a teeming mass of panicked passengers that fill every possible space of the ship and possibly a damaged ship to boot. This is especially true if the PCs are carrying a cargo, which will cause a two-step penalty in all rolls made to keep the survivors calm during the trip to the uninhabited moon.

What the Crew doesn't know is what caused, what was considered a first-rate liner with an unparalleled track record of safety to so completely fail, the reason...a violin. However, this is not just an average violin, it is an Earth-That-Was artifact known as a Stradivarius and one of only ten known to exist in the 'Verse. This seemingly simple instrument is worth a mind-numbing amount of money, enough money in fact that a team of thieves conspired to steal this priceless relic of a bygone era. Their plan was simple, plant an explosive charge to disable the liner, have a ship waiting to jam any distress signal, and during the evacuation, overpower the first chair violin of the ship's orchestra that had the Stradivarius and escape via their ship jamming cries for help.

That was the plan, however, several events conspired to make that plan go real south real bad and real fast. First, the explosive charge was too effective and rather than cause disabling damage, it ruptured the primary power conduit and ignited the main fuel tanks. The violent explosions caused by the fuel bunkers igniting in sequence caused so much damage that the liner suffered a cascade failure of the ship's hull integrity. The explosions also destroyed almost all of the starboard side escape pods and threw the evacuation plan into chaos. This resulted in the violinist not going to his assigned escape pod and being stuck in the crowd waiting in the hanger bay with too many witnesses to be able to waylay the man.

One final thing the thieves couldn't plan for was a ship to randomly be in visual range that would interfere with their attempts to grab the violin in the mass confusion by rescuing a large number of survivors at one time. One thing that did go right for the band of thieves was that they managed to get their inside man on the same ship that rescued the violinist, but in the confusion, their man couldn't signal the information of where the violin had gone. The thieves' ship had to ransack through several escape pods before they found a member of the orchestra that knew what happened to the violinist, and more importantly, the precious Stradivarius had gone. This took several hours and gave the PCs a long head start. Knowing how many survivors were aboard the Crew's ship, it was easy for the thieves to figure out where the PCs had gone and they raced in pursuit in an attempt to salvage their grand scheme.

Antonio Stradivari

Born in Cremona Italy in 1644 this unparalleled master began making violins in 1667. His instruments were so finely crafted that his methods defied duplication or explanation for centuries. What is known is that each violin was made of the finest hand carved maple and each was considered a work of art carefully blending form and function setting the standard used by violin makers since that time. Of the more than one thousand instruments made by Stradivari only ten survived the Exodus from Earth-That-Was. Each of these priceless treasures is so heavily guarded that they are invulnerable from theft. However, on very rare occasions, one of these masterpieces is allowed out of their vaults to thrill audiences of the Core worlds in sold out concerts. The violin aboard the Star of Sihnon is the personal property of a wealthy Londinum patron of the arts and onboard the liner under special loan to the Five Star line. This exclusive arrangement has been one of the finer selling points for the ultimate luxury cruises aboard the Star of Sihnon. Such special cruises are the social event of the season and are publicized well in advance. It was that coverage that led to the plot to steal the priceless artifact.

Act One Scene Two: Any Port in a Storm

A term dating back to Earth-That-Was with a meaning that in emergent situations, any answer to the immediate problem is acceptable even if under normal circumstances such an answer would not be desirable - Cortex dictionary entry on archaic English idioms

Packed to the gills with survivors, and possibly in a damaged ship, the PCs face two challenges. First, keep the overloaded life support functioning and second, keeping order among the dazed human cargo crowding every inch of their ship. To prevent panic as the survivors recover from their initial shell shocked state, the crew will need to roll a HARD (11) *Intelligence + Discipline* or *Willpower + Influence / Intimidation* every half hour for the four hours it takes to reach the moon to prevent their impromptu passengers from panicking. As mentioned before, if the PCs have a cargo, the ship is so overcrowded that these rolls suffer a two step skill penalty.

A FORMIDABLE (15) *Intelligence + Pilot / Astrogation* will shave a half hour from the trip and a HEROIC (19) roll will save an hour, while a Botch will add an hour. On reaching the moon, the atmosphere turns out to be very turbulent due to the churn caused by the atmospheric processors. This makes the landing approach very difficult and requires a FORMIDABLE (15) Ship's AGL + Piloting failing this roll terrifies the survivors and only a HEROIC (19) *Intelligence + Influence / Leadership* or *Willpower + Influence / Intimidation* will prevent a stampede. The panic that grips the survivors causes 1d6 casualties per round until the crew can enforce order or the ship lands in ten rounds. Once on the ground, the Crew and survivors are faced with a sere, windswept landscape that is still a welcome sight despite the thin atmosphere after the close confines of the ship.

Depending on the circumstances of the re-entry, there may be injured to treat and even though the passengers are, at best, still extremely agitated by their situation and will require careful treatment to prevent any further panic or outright riots. As the leader of the PCs is coming to grips with keeping a large number of barely controllable civilians under control, the Mechanic pulls the Captain aside and tells him he's got bad news. In addition to any damage suffered during their escape from the crippled Star of Sihnon, some one has sabotaged their ship and the damage is bad! How bad the captain asks, and the reply is the pulse drive has had a critical component removed (the Compression Coil) and there isn't a spare, so while the ship has power, it can not depart the moon. In addition, the atmospheric drives had a cable bundle deliberately cross wired causing an overload. This at least can be repaired, but it will take some time. The repairs will be a HEROIC (75) Complex Action with each roll taking a half hour. The PCs are now just as stranded as the survivors and the bigger issue is there is a saboteur on the ship in addition to no let up of the jamming that keeps them from calling for help.

As the Crew deals with new crisis, the passengers are now over what little grace period being free of the confines of the ship granted and are now beginning to squabble over food, shelter, and other basic necessities on the dry, rocky moon. There are many options to prevent the crowd from getting out of control and the GM and players are welcome to be as inventive as possible while devising methods to avoid rioting.

Providing food will go a long way toward settling the survivors down, but the Crew is highly unlikely to have anywhere near enough to go around. An AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence +*

Knowledge or *Alertness + Perception / Empathy* will figure out that handing out food without enough for everyone will cause the very event they are trying to avoid. If by some chance the PCs have enough food, typically in the form of their cargo, if they have one, then they will gain a one step bonus on all rolls to pacify the crowd.

Keeping the survivors busy by organizing them into teams is another option to delay trouble. This is a HARD (11) *Intelligence + Influence* to accomplish and will buy two hours of peace as they sort out who is going to be the leadership. If the roll is FORMIDABLE, it will gain a third hour.

Setting up reconnaissance parties to scout for caves that will provide shelter will also keep the survivors occupied for a time. The landscape of the moon is desolate, but there are a few scrub oak-like trees that give indications that there is water to be found. Organizing the search parties will require a HARD (11) *Intelligence + Discipline* to set up five teams and each level above HARD will gain an additional search team. The search will buy two hours of calm and each group that goes out has a HARD (11) *Alertness + Perception* chance to locate a suitable cave with a FORMIDABLE (15) roll locating a usable spring.

Act Two Scene One: We're the Government, We're here to Help

Marshals are Federal representatives of the Alliance government and on the Rim, these marshals frequently are the only source of true law and justice in the far flung reaches of the 'Verse. Known for their steadfast courage and fidelity, Federal Marshals are the paragon of what all law enforcement officers should strive to be. - Cortex recruiting ad for the marshal program

After a couple hours on the moon and with the initial busy work plans to keep the survivors busy completed, the passengers begin to get restless again. The leaders of the survivors demand to see the captain and they begin clamoring for answers on what the Crew is doing to help them survive the night. The crowd that forms quickly becomes unruly. The captain must make a HARD (11) *Willpower + Influence* to maintain control, if this roll fails the mood of the crowd turns ugly. As the rest of the captain struggles to keep the peace, the Mechanic is nearing repairs for the atmospheric drives on the ship (One roll from completion), a ship is spotted approaching and it is an Alliance Short Range Enforcement Vessel (ASREV) with the markings of Federal Marshals!

The ugly mood is instantly dissipated by the news of imminent rescue. The ASREV flares for landing and three crewmembers exit the ship wearing the proper uniforms of the sector marshals. An AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence + Knowledge* will know an ASREV has a normal crew of four. The leader of the group identifies himself and seeks out the Crew's Captain and begins with effusive thanks for their fine service to the citizens of the 'Verse. Any PC with Nose for Trouble or Trustworthy Gut get to make a HARD (11) *Alertness + Perception* to realize there is something odd about this man, what exactly that is they don't know, but something just doesn't feel right. The officer asks for a roster of the survivors and when told that in all the chaos of the escape that the Crew doesn't have one, he becomes very agitated.

The lead marshal demands an immediate mustering of all the survivors and will brook no argument about his order. The meandering, disorganized crowd makes this demand almost impossible to meet. After several minutes of no results, the marshal then changes his tack by asking if any of the ship's orchestra were rescued. If asked the obvious question of why the orchestra? He reveals he has specific orders to recover orchestra members first due to special consideration of the Five Star line. The PCs can now roll a HARD (11) roll *Intelligence + Knowledge* (*HIGHLY EDUCATED* will apply) to have heard about the "Stradivarius Cruise" that is the signature of the Star of Sihnon. If none of the PCs make the roll, the violinist steps forward to reveal he has the object the thieves are looking for and that there is a substantial reward for preventing the theft of the violin and its safe return to its rightful owner.

Mentioning this to the marshal or any resistance is met by drawn weapons. He invokes Alliance law that he is a special recovery team and that further resistance will result in being bound by law for obstructing justice. If this does not generate a fight, one of the survivors will interrupt that she is an advocate from Sihnon and will state her rights as a citizen of the Alliance, but before she can finish the lead marshal backhands the woman on the spot. If the PCs do not respond to this, the survivors will, rocks fly and the wild melee quickly results. The marshals are armed with pistols and are wearing mesh armor hidden under their uniforms. Run the fight normally, but due to sheer numbers, the marshals are quickly overwhelmed.

As the last of the marshals falls, the engines of the ASREV start and the ship executes a wobbly lift off. For a few terrifying seconds looks like it is going to strafe the crowd, but instead departs at full speed. Once the subdued marshals are searched the Crew quickly finds they are imposters without any valid credentials that they are actual Federal Marshals.

The GM should contrive that at least one of the marshals be taken alive to interrogate. This is an Opposed Roll of *Willpower + Influence / Intimidation* or *Intelligence + Influence / Interrogation* versus the fake marshals' *Willpower + Discipline*. If the PC wins the man will state "*Wilson will bring the others, no escape for you hun dan¹ meddlers, fiddle will be ours soon enough. Mark my words, the Boss is in too deep to let this go, he'll kill all of you to get that treasure.*" If the fight with the marshals resulted in them all sustaining fatal injuries, one will live long enough to choke out the same statement as his final words.

Going by the lengths the thieves have gone through to this point, the Crew realizes they have to prepare for some imminent violence and they have precious little time to do so.

¹ Jerks

Act Two Scene Two: Head for the Hills!

“There’s a lot of words you can say about mercs, unfortunately, none of them words you can use in polite company. Some of them guns for hire are professional, hell some are more professional than the Feds. And others, well, let’s just say that some give slavers a bad name. There is even some, like the Heilong² Commandos that might even give Reavers a bad name.” - Anonymous Rim Spacer, Maidenhead Bar Beaumonde

The warning from the captured (or dying) fake marshal is enough to galvanize the Crew into action, but his words are also enough to spread panic among the already frightened survivors. The Crew has to take control of the survivors and focus them to survive the upcoming fight. In order to quell the first hint of hysteria, the passengers have got to be reassured. This is a **HARD (11) Intelligence + Discipline** or **Willpower + Influence**, failing this roll results in the panic spreading rapidly and a one-step penalty to all further rolls to control the crowd with a Botch resulting a two-step penalty. Success stops the panic and a Critical Success gives a one-step bonus to further rolls.

Options for preparing for the upcoming fight are limited only by the player’s imagination. They Crew has no way of knowing, but they have only three hours to prepare before the thieves return in force. The first course of action for the calmed (or panicked) crowd is to get them out of harm’s way. If any reconnaissance patrols were sent out, the Crew may already have several caves to hide passengers. Each cave can hold 6d6 passengers. If no scouts were sent out, the PCs can do so now and will require a **HARD (11) Intelligence + Discipline** to set up five teams and each level above **HARD** will gain an additional search team. The search will take an hour with each group that goes out will get a **HARD (11) Alertness + Perception** roll to locate a cave suitable for taking cover.

Organizing the survivors into groups to take shelter in the caves is a **FORMIDABLE (15) Intelligence + Discipline / Leadership** or **Willpower + Influence / Leadership** Skill roll. A failure uses up a half hour and a Botch a full hour of wasted arguing before the survivors accept there is no other choice besides taking up arms, something none of the gilded passengers of a ship like the Star of Sihnon are even remotely qualified to do.

Once the passengers are safely scattered, the Crew can work on hiding their ship. As none of the caves are large enough to hold their ship and with the lack of other refined metals on the barren moon to hide behind or near, their vessel is glaringly obvious to sensors, even with the degradation caused by all the jamming. The only source of refined metal that can provide even the slightest cover are the huge atmospheric processors. The Crew will have to make an **AVERAGE (7) Intelligence + Technical Expertise** followed by an **AVERAGE (7) ship’s Alertness + ship’s Perception** (with the two-step penalty) to locate the nearest processor. The pilot will have to make a **FORMIDABLE (15) ship’s Agility + Pilot** to fly through the turbulence the processors cause and set down close enough to the huge facility to obtain the proper cover. If the roll fails, they do not gain any bonus. If the roll succeeds they gain another step penalty with a Critical Success giving a two-step penalty (a total of a four step reduction counting the jamming penalty), with a Botch giving a one step bonus.

² Black Dragon

Having two ships, the thieves will grid search the area and eventually they will manage to obtain a clear line of sight to detect the PC's ship. Because of risk to the precious and very delicate Stradivarius, they can not threaten the Crew with heavy firepower, which forces the thieves to have to land and fan out to search on foot. Again, the imaginations of the players are the only limit to the types of tricks they can have waiting for the thieves once they are on the ground. The primary limit to the player's imagination will be time, which will be dictated by how long it took to get the passengers dispersed to the relative safety of the caves.

The biggest question is where will they keep the violin? They can hide it in one of the caves, on their ship, inside the atmospheric processor, or even choose to bury it in the desert. The violin is kept in a shock proofed (5S) and armored (3W) case giving it a reasonable amount of protection, but the instrument itself is extremely delicate and will be irrevocably ruined by even a single point of wound damage and outright destroyed by two points of damage.

Another major question is did the players learn from the first act of sabotage or not? If they did, they kept all the survivors off the ship and posted a guard at the entry ramp or the engine room or both. If they do, the inside man will not try to board the PC's ship and instead makes certain he is with the Stradivarius if the PCs hide the violin in one of the caves. Any PC with *Nose for Trouble* or *Trustworthy Gut* that can roll a FORMIDABLE (15) *Alertness + Perception* will realize this person is pushing suspiciously hard to be near the instrument. Whether the PC chooses a direct confrontation at that point is up to the PC.

Careful players that keep their ship guarded and the location of the violin hidden from all the survivors will have effectively neutralized the saboteur and should gain three plot points for their cleverness.

If PCs failed to guard their ship, the inside man slips aboard the ship to assist the thieves. The first thing the saboteur attempts is to sneak onto the bridge to send out an active sensor sweep. Since the jamming also keeps the thieves from communicating, an active pulse from the sensors is the next best means to give away the PC's hiding place. Sneaking onto a manned bridge is an Opposed *Agility + Covert / Stealth* versus *Alertness + Perception* roll. A second roll is needed to quietly access the proper panel and the saboteur must then make an AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence + Technical Expertise*. Finally, the inside man must then roll one more Opposed *Agility + Covert / Stealth* and *Alertness + Perception* Skill rolls to escape undetected. If any of the stealth rolls fail, the PC on the bridge can react to the sounds and any combat will be played out normally.

If the saboteur successfully sends out an active signal, the thieves' two ships will show up within ten turns and move immediately to the next scene. If the saboteur successfully escaped, he will wait until some of the commandos are aboard and attack any lone PC from ambush using an Opposed *Agility + Covert / Stealth* versus *Alertness + Perception* Skill roll to sneak into position.

Some possible surprises for the thieves include:

Burying cargo nets with scraps of spring steel to snap the nets taut. This is an AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence + Mechanical Expertise* or HARD (11) *Intelligence + Covert* Skill roll using a half

hour to rig and bury a ten foot by ten foot net. Any person caught in such a trap must roll a **FORMIDABLE (15) *Agility + Athletics*** to get free.

Using cloth, wire, and a small weight the PCs can create a “pop-up” target to fool a thief into looking the wrong way at a critical moment. This simple trick is an **EASY (3) *Intelligence + Mechanical Expertise*** or **AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence + Covert Skill*** roll and takes ten minutes per target. However, this trick will only work once on a given thief.

Rigging a dead man’s trap with a projectile weapon or hand grenade and a tripwire designed to bobby trap a doorway. This is another simple trick requiring an **EASY (3) *Intelligence + Mechanical Expertise*** or **AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence + Covert Skill*** roll and takes ten minutes per weapon, but the weapon will not reset and thus only fires once.

Hiding each of these traps is an **Opposed Roll of *Agility + Covert* versus *Alertness + Perception***.

The atmospheric processor facility offers dozens of places to hide and only requires a **HARD (11) *Agility + Covert / Open Locks*** to defeat the locks to enter the enormous structure and is considered a reinforced door of **Armor 10, Life Points 8**. One minor drawback of using the facility is the sound of the massive turbines, despite the extensive sound proofing, causes a one step penalty to sound based perception rolls.

Due to the jamming, nothing radio controlled will work, but anything passive infrared, pressure or land line activated will all work without problems. Once the three hour time limit is up, the thieves two ships close in, circle a few times, land, and the PCs get to see what they face, two dozen well armed and armored thieves spreading out to find the Stradivarius. An **AVERAGE (7) *Alertness + Perception*** will see the thieves are sporting a unit crest. A **HARD (11) *Intelligence + Knowledge*** or **AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence + Influence / Streetwise*** will recognize the unit as the *Heilong* Commandos, a notorious group of ruthless and outlawed mercenaries not known for failure or for taking prisoners.

Act Three Scene One: No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

"They was raised up durin' the U-War they was. The Heilong Commandos started out square enough when the Browncoats took them into service, but they went bad quick. They was hunted down by the Purplebellies right quick and no one was the sorrier fer it. That was until that Black Bart Chung raised them from the dead 'bout three years back though. He took up right were the first group left off, but didn't even pretend to be square. They was killers then, and they is killers now. Theys 'bout as wanted as any group o' folk can be, but you know the Feds, can't find their own pi gu³ with both hands and a mirror. So how do ya'll 'spect them to find a set of killed what don't want to be found? You ever hear the Heilong is comin' your way, you best find a way to git yerself gone or they'll spill your blood just fer breathin'." - Anonymous Rim Spacer, Maidenhead Bar Beaumonde

The details of the climatic battle will vary greatly based on the nature of the defenses and choices made by the Players. A map of the atmospheric processor and its immediate area is included, along with the location of several caves. The central theme of this battle is the PCs are dealing with ruthless, but very proficient killers. They use cover and suppressive fire effectively as well proper movement techniques. When fired on, they do not panic and immediately maneuver to flank and eliminate any threats.

Countering the commandos' tactics requires Opposed Rolls of *Intelligence + Discipline / Leadership* or *Intelligence + Knowledge / Tactics* verses the skill of the squad leader of each four six-man squad. The commandos have worked together for so long that they get a bonus to their skill roll for each squad after the first making the Opposed Roll. (Example: each commando squad leader has a Discipline d6 / Leadership d8 and if three squads are working together against one individual PC or a group of PCs at the same position, the senior squad leader rolls the Opposed Roll with a two-step bonus). It takes an AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence + Knowledge* or a HARD (11) *Alertness + Perception* to realize the best way to delay the commandos is to get them to split up.

Once aware of the commandos' weakness the only way to take advantage is to use trickery to create a believable diversion that forces them to split up. A Critical Success in the Opposed *Intelligence + Discipline / Leadership* or a FORMIDABLE (15) *Intelligence + Covert* roll will automatically split off one squad to investigate the diversion. Other diversions or ways of getting the commandos to split up are again, left to the imagination of the players.

Finally, aside from being able to choose the place of the final show down, the only other advantage the PCs have against these fearsome mercenaries is they have orders to subdue the crew as they need to interrogate them to locate the hidden violin. The surviving passengers have no such protection and the commandos will gladly cut them down without mercy. The need to prisoners forces the commandos to aim for limbs and to close in for hand to hand combat in order to subdue the PCs, which gives the PCs a chance for survival against a foe that would otherwise overcome them all too quickly.

This fight is meant to be obviously and completely overwhelming; almost like the PCs getting a slice of what it was like being at the Battle of Serenity Valley. The commandos are experts and

³ Bottom

are armed far better than the PCs can hope to be. The GM has to carefully run the battle so that the players feel they over their heads and about to lose, but not beaten so badly that become despondent. Allow the PCs to make their fighting retreat until they reach where they want to make their last stand. It is strongly advised that the GM deliberately fudge the commandos' attack rolls and to reduce damage to the PCs to minimum believable level. The PCs should be wounded and low on ammo when the final push by the mercenaries closes in on them.

As the PCs wait for the final assault, they hear a loud speaker asking for "the leader of the resistance" The leader of the mercenaries wishes to discuss the PC's surrender. Give the PCs a few rounds to exchange options with the commando leader before he issues an ultimatum, surrender now or be gutted like carp." Assuming the PCs choose to fight the mercs move in for the kill and move to the next scene. If they choose to surrender, before they can even raise their hands, likewise cut to the finale.

Act Three Scene Two: No, Honest, We're the Government and we're Really Here to Help

"We thought we'd smack the Browncoats good and hard at Serenity, show them they were fools for rejecting all the Alliance offered. We showed them alright, but they showed us something too. We rolled in with the most combat troops ever assembled during the entire war and they broke our first five attacks. They died by the thousands, but they took as many or more with them during every assault. The only thing that won Serenity for us was we had the supply train to keep replacing our losses and the Browncoats didn't. They didn't lose due to a lack of troops or will to fight, they lost because they ran out of ammunition first." - Memoirs of Weng Junren Alliance Army Captain, one of only fifteen survivors of the 804th Heavy Infantry Brigade

The commandos begin their assault with withering fire and the PCs are clearly about to be over run. Have the PCs make another Opposed Roll of *Intelligence + Discipline / Leadership* or *Intelligence + Knowledge / Tactics* against the remaining commandos, who still get their bonus for multiple squads. A success will allow the PCs to make a credible last stand, a failure means the commandos manage to surprise the PCs with a flanking maneuver than negates any cover the PCs have devised and a Botch allows the commandos to close into hand to hand range in a single round. If the PCs manage a Critical Success, they successfully hold off the assault.

Regardless of the results of the roll, as the situation looks the darkest, there is the roar of high performance engines and the booming thunder of a series of explosions. When the shockwave passes and the PCs take a look to see what is going on, they see a pair of ASREVs screaming over head and the two *Heilong* Commando ships are now burning wrecks. In addition, if the PCs have any communication gear with them, the jamming has stopped and their communication gear works again for the first time since the PCs spotted the Star of Sihnon in distress what seems like a century ago. It only takes an AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence + Technical Expertise* to signal the Federal Marshals and to pinpoint the location of the commandos.

Despite their sudden reversal of fortune, the *Heilong* Commandos remain professional and fight a hopeless battle against the ASREVs and even managed to damage one of the marshal's ships, but the mercenaries did not deploy with the weapons needed to fight airpower and are gunned down without mercy. If by chance the PCs were doing very poorly and the commandos were in hand to hand combat, the sudden loss of their escape ships stuns the mercenaries in close contact for two rounds giving the PCs the ability to attack the commandos only getting Innate Defense as their only actions.

Once the commandos have been eliminated, the two ASREVS land and real Federal Marshals meet with the PCs. They ask for a report and when the PCs have related what has happened to this point, the marshals want to see the survivors. Shown the caves where the passengers have taken shelter during the fight and gaining corroborating testimony, the marshals are impressed. When the Stradivarius is presented intact, the marshals nod to one another and one of them steps away to send a wave.

If the PCs ask how the marshals found them, they explain there was a long trail of escape pods that mentioned a freighter that took on a large number of survivors and that once they were aware of the existence of a "Good Samaritan" freighter, they just homed in on the source of all the jamming.

The one marshal that sent the wave returns and asks the PCs to take the members of the orchestra with them aboard their ship and follow them into orbit. When the PCs explain their compression coil is missing, one of the marshals heads for his ASREV and returns with a suitable replacement. This only takes an AVERAGE (7) *Intelligence + Mechanical Expertise* to install and as soon as the ship is ready, the marshals signal the PCs to follow them as the undamaged ASREV lifts for orbit. On reaching orbit, the PCs are stunned to find one of the Alliance's majestic cruisers, the Sun Tzu waiting in orbit. The PCs receive instructions to release their controls for docking. Once aboard the cruiser, they face a tense moment as a squad of Alliance soldiers board and take up positions to either side of the boarding ramp. There is a short pause and several Alliance officers board their ship. One officer steps forward and cordially introduces himself as "Captain Phillip Wilson Whitlow." The PCs can introduce themselves and the captain invites everyone aboard the Sun Tzu.

The conference room is crowded when they arrive and Whitlow steps to the podium with the PCs taking the stage along side him. Once everyone is in position, the captain begins to address the assembled officers and, an EASY (3) *Alertness + Perception* roll to see, a live Cortex feed.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Alliance, we have found the remaining survivors of the Star of Sihnon. The assets of the entire sector were brought to bear on locating and bringing home every member of the passengers and crew of the lost liner. Until now, the reasons for the loss of the Star of Sihnon were unknown, but now, thanks to the actions of some quick thinking and brave citizens of the Alliance, we have the answer to that question. And that answer ladies and gentlemen was sabotage!" Whitlow is clearly an accomplished speaker and allows that stunning admission to work through the crowd before continuing. *"Not sabotage for the traditional reason of a statement against our august government, but sabotage for the most base of reasons... greed. The Star of Sihnon was destroyed by a band of thieves bent on stealing a priceless treasure from Earth-That-Was, an object that has brought pleasure to millions that the avarice of a few would have denied that pleasure for their own petty self-indulgence. That object however, is here again safe thanks to those same quick thinking and brave citizens of the Alliance. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Stradivarius."*

Long accustomed to being in the spot light, the violinist smoothly opens the case and holds the priceless instrument high for all to see and to thunderous applause. When the applause finally dies down, the violinist places the Stradivarius back in its case and steps back with the PCs, Whitlow nods and continues.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Alliance I now present the crew of the [Ship's Name]." Whitlow then proceeds to name every member of the Crew to polite applause. Once everyone has been named, the captain continues. *"There will be much more to follow on this amazing story of heroism, but for now, this will conclude these proceedings. Good day people of the Alliance."*

The PCs are now heroes whether they like it or not and are feted as such when the Sun Tzu takes them, whether they like it or not, on a cruise of the Core worlds. The Five Star Line pays the Crew 5,000 Credits for rescuing the survivors and another 5,000 Credits for protecting the survivors from the depredations of the mercenaries. In addition, the owner of the violin pays the Crew 10,000 more Credits for preventing the theft of the Stradivarius.

However, if the Stradivarius is destroyed, the reception is someone less effusive. Everything up until the PCs have docked on the Sun Tzu precedes exactly the same, but rather than the gracious captain of the cruiser, they are met by the frosty executive officer who gruffly introduces himself as Commander Jacob Taylor. *“The captain sends his regrets that he is detained and that he wanted me to relay that he understands that you did your best in an impossible situation. On behalf of the Five Star Line, I am authorized to pay you ten credits per head for the passengers rescued aboard your ship and a five hundred credit bonus for protecting them against such long odds.”* Taylor then pulls the notes out from his tunic, hands them to the captain, and then signals for the members of the orchestra to follow him onto the Sun Tzu. As soon as the others have left the ship, they are given instructions for undocking. The PCs pull away from the massive cruiser and are allowed to resume their interrupted voyage.

NPCs

Generic Survivor

AGL d6 STR d6 VIT d8 ALE d8 INT d8 WIL d6 Life Points 14 Initiative d6 + d8

Traits: Highly Educated (minor asset), Soft (minor complication)

Skills: Animal Handling d6 / Dressage d8, Athletics d4, Influence d6 / Conversation d8, Knowledge d6 / Core Culture d10 / Music d10 / Politics d8, Medical Expertise d2, Perception d6, Performance d6 / Dance d8, Planetary Vehicles d4, Technical Expertise d4, Unarmed Combat d2

Equipment: None, besides a hodge-podge of fine clothes hastily donned during the evacuation.

Background: A self-indulgent Core World citizen completely out of their element now that they are out of their pampered luxury environment. Their most common attribute will be similar to that of a whining and complaining spoiled child.

Passenger Leader

AGL d6 STR d4 VIT d6 ALE d6 INT d10 WIL d6 Life Points 12 Initiative d6 + d6

Traits: Highly Educated (minor asset), Friends in High Places (minor asset), Moneyed Individual (major asset), Lightweight (minor complication), Soft (minor complication),

Skills: Animal Handling d4, Athletics d4, Discipline d4, Influence d6 / Bureaucracy d10 / Conversation d8 / Politics d10, Knowledge d6 / Core Culture d10 / Music d10 / Politics d8, Medical Expertise d2, Perception d6, Performance d4, Planetary Vehicles d2, Technical Expertise d2, Unarmed Combat d2

Equipment: As above

Background: Not all that different from the rest of the spoiled Core World survivors, but due to their background in leading businesses, they possess the basics of leadership. They will however, complain the loudest if given even the slightest shred of authority.

Fake Marshal

AGL d8 STR d6 VIT d8 ALE d8 INT d6 WIL d6 Life Points 14 Initiative d8 + d8

Traits: Intimidating Manner (minor asset), Crude (minor complication)

Skills: Athletics d6 / Dodge d8, Discipline d6 / Intimidation d8, Guns d6 / Pistols d8, Influence d6 / Persuasion d8, Knowledge d4, Mechanical Expertise d2, Medical Expertise d2, Perception d6, Planetary Vehicles d6, Technical Expertise d2, Unarmed Combat d6 / Brawling d8

Equipment: Federal Marshal's uniform and badge however, no confirming identification, Ballistic Mesh, Pistol with two reloads, Stun Baton, and Ship Linked Hand Set.

Background: Ordered to obtain the Stradivarius by guile, these strong arm types were the worst possible choice for the mission, but unfortunately, the only ones available at the time. Their failure was a foregone conclusion as proven by their actions during Act Two Scene One.

Heilong Commando

AGL d10 STR d6 VIT d8 ALE d8 INT d8 WIL d8 Life Points 16 Init d10 + d8 (d6+d8 w/armor)

Traits: Fightin' Type (major asset), Branded (major complication)

Skills: Athletics d6 / Dodge d10, Covert d6, Discipline d6 / Intimidation d8, Guns d6 / Pistols d8 / Assault Rifles d10, Influence d6 / Persuasion d8, Knowledge d4, Mechanical Expertise d2, Medical Expertise d2, Perception d6, Technical Expertise d2, Unarmed Combat d6 / Brawling d8

Equipment: Tactical Suit w/ Squad Helmet, Assault Rifle w/7 reloads, Pistol w/2 reloads, 4 Frag Grenades, Combat Knife, and a First Aid Kit.

Background: A band of outlawed and ruthless mercenaries, the *Heilong* Commandos are still highly proficient killers. Operating in well trained and finely honed squads, these professional warriors are deadly adversaries and more than a match for the PCs.

The Inside Man

AGL d10 STR d6 VIT d8 ALE d8 INT d10 WIL d6 Life Points 14 Initiative d10 + d8

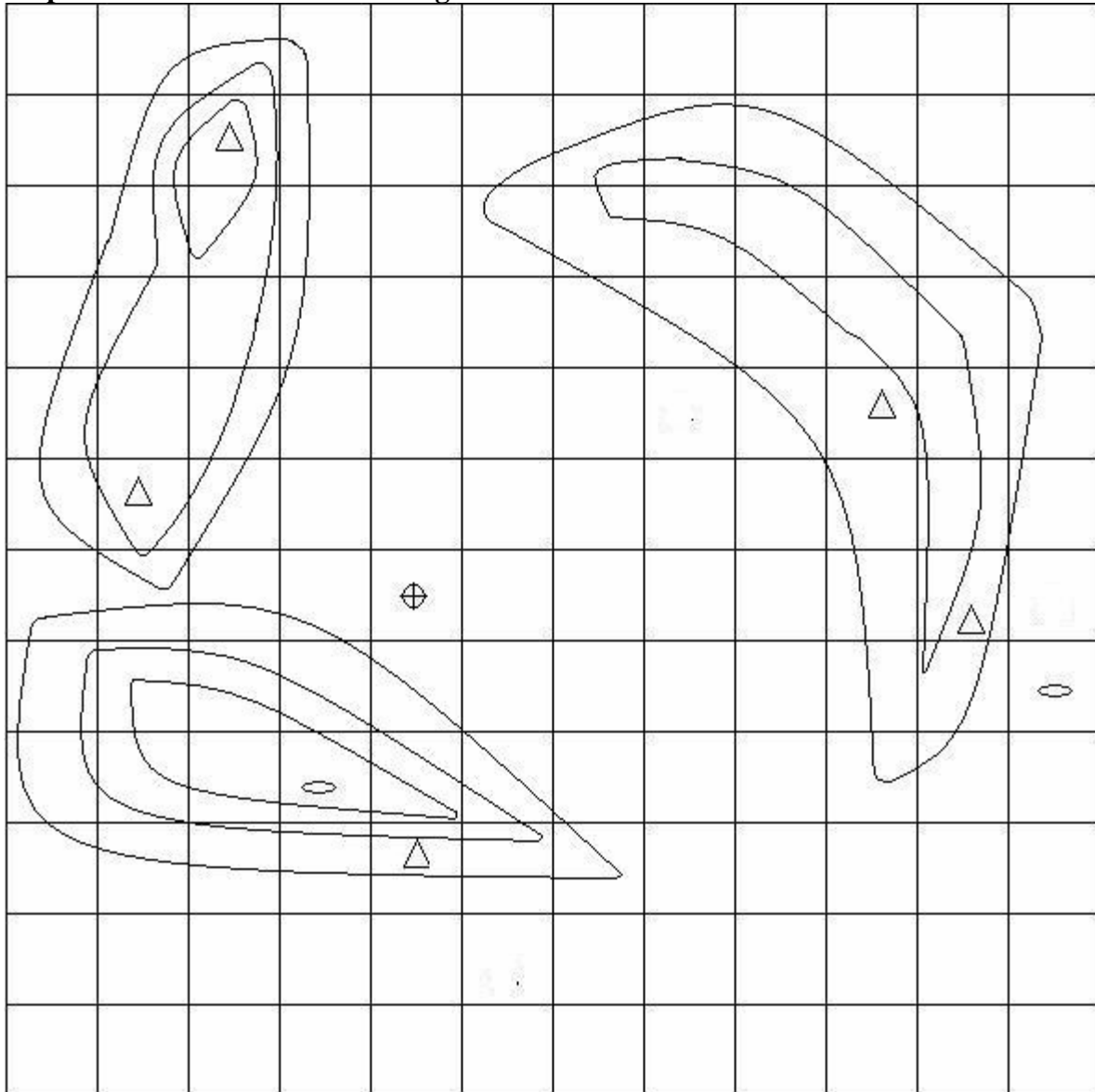
Traits: Talented: Sabotage (minor asset), Greedy (minor complication)

Skills: Athletics d6 / Dodge d10, Covert d6 / Sabotage d10 / Stealth d8, Discipline d6, Guns d6 / Pistols d8, Influence d6 / Persuasion d8, Knowledge d4, Mechanical Expertise d4, Medical Expertise d2, Perception d6, Planetary Vehicles d2, Technical Expertise d4, Unarmed Combat d4

Equipment: Fine set of clothes, Tailored Ballistic Mesh, Pistol with two reloads, a ceramic combat knife, and a set of Electronic Lockpicks, the rest of the covert gear was used on the Star of Sihnon.

Background: This professional shipjacker is deliberately only vaguely described so that each GM can pick who the "Inside Man" actually is, to include making the shipjacker a female. Regardless of who is the actual culprit, they are capable of causing chaos aboard the PC's ship if they fail to take proper precautions and the Inside man will assist the commandos during the final assault in any way if given even half a chance.

Map of the immediate surroundings on the moon

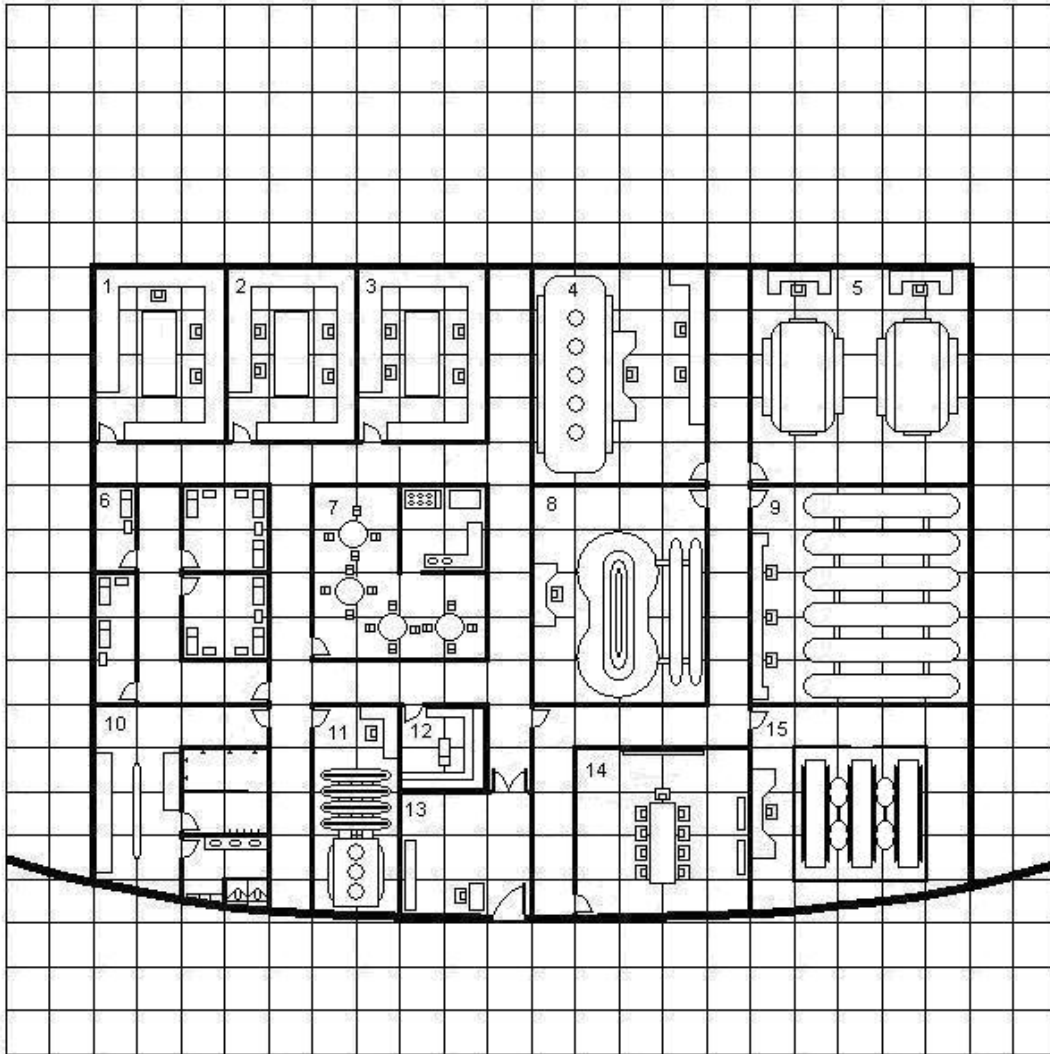


Each Square equals one kilometer

Legend:

| | |
|---|---------------|
|  | Landing Point |
|  | Cave |
|  | Spring |

Map of the Atmospheric Processor



Each square equals 10 feet

The internal doors are HARD (11) Agility + Covert / Open Lock to override and are Armor 4, Life Points 6. The internal walls are Armor 6 Life Points 10. The external walls (to include walls leading outside the detailed area) are Armor 10 Life Points 20. The external door is Armor 10 Life points 8.

Floor plan key

- 1) Central Cortex Tap – The central computer for the facility. Normally capable of full Cortex access, but all external connections blocked due to the jamming.
- 2) Atmospheric Composition Monitoring Station – The facility's constant inspection of the terraforming process and progress is measured here.

- 3) Atmospheric Mixture Control – The adjustments to any of the atmosphere’s elements are adjusted from these controls.
- 4) Planetary Processor Linking Station – This facility is one of dozens that dot the surface and they are kept in synchronous operation via these controls.
- 5) Power Generators – One of six power generators in this facility. The fusion plants are self-sustaining, but are loud enough to cause an additional one-step penalty to all hearing based Alertness rolls.
- 6) Transient Billeting – Consisting of two six person, one double, and one single rooms these quarters are for the terraforming teams that conduct maintenance on the equipment and other inspections every six months.
- 7) Transient Mess and Kitchen – Fully stocked with enough food to feed fifteen for two weeks. The kitchen is also stocked with a full range of utensils to include several large knives.
- 8) Gravitic Heterodyning Waveguide – The most critical part of the facility and the first of the three core components. The waveguide is how the facility drives the terraforming sequence until the atmosphere becomes self-sustaining.
- 9) Primary Induction - Extraction Coils – Driven by the infusion matrix, the coils provide the impetus that powers the waveguide, the second core component of the terraforming process. .
- 10) Hygiene Facilities – Standard latrine and shower facilities for the maintenance/inspection crew during their semi-annual rotations.
- 11) Life Support – Maintains the facility’s atmosphere and gravity to Earth-That-Was normal.
- 12) Infirmary – Completed equipped and stocked with sufficient medications to treat almost any emergency.
- 13) Operations – All extra-facility movements and day to day functions are coordinated and tracked at this station.
- 14) Conference Room – As part of any Alliance project, the support teams must confer with headquarters to keep the project directors informed of the facility’s condition and progress.
- 15) Central Infusion Matrix Coupler – The third part of the core of the terraforming process that provides the proper chemical and energy mixture to the induction - extraction coils.