

A Gentle Stroll

July 2026 — Issue Ten



Green Fog
by Tiffanie Gray

Collation File

Green Fog by Tiffanie Gray ... 1

Collation File ... The Collator Supreme ... 1

The Fox's Den ... Nicolai Shapero ... 26

Ronin Engineer ... Jim Eckman ... 22

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade ... George Phillies ... 6

Editorial Note

The transition to bimonthly does not seem to have worked that well. Perhaps it will improve with time.

Please email PDFs of your zines to the collator, George Phillies, phillies@4liberty.net The due date of the next issue will be July 6, 2026.

General rules: Publication is bimonthly. Contributors are expected to stay on topic and remain civil to each other. Discussions of contemporary politics and graphic pornography will be rejected. Recall that A Gentle Stroll will appear with our other zines on our web pages, so matters you would not want seen by the public should go elsewhere. You retain all rights to your material, except that the N3F may use your submissions in this magazine, which may be distributed to subscribers and/or N3F members, and may be placed on our web site or other electronic archives.

Comments on AGS 9

Jim Eckman/Ronin Engineer rct me: The campaign notes totaled something over a million words, last time I checked. And yes, it has been more than mildly entertaining.

George Phillis/A Rhodomontadulous Promenade rct me: I already have more than enough on my plate in the way of work to be published, without adding another series. THE CHINESE CURSE: HIGH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS is at the galley proof stage right now (it's book 4 in the series). Books 1 through 3 of the series are available from Jarlidium Press, as book 4 will be Real Soon Now.

Others: RAEBNC

Kensho Tangle

By G. S. Cole and N. C. Shapero

Kensho, Oshenji Prefecture, New Sparta, Second Empire of Man

"Good afternoon, Professor Fox."

"Good afternoon, Major Fox. Why did you ask for this meeting?"

The two vulpine Uplifts considered each other for a moment; their tongues and ears flicking briefly to test the air for scents or sounds of any third party. None could be detected, reducing the risk of in-person observers. As they were in an outdoor patio, if they faced away from the walls, they were less exposed to emplaced sensors. A steady breeze was blowing, which reduced the hazard of non-detectable 'smart sand' sensors, inasmuch as such would be continually borne away by the breeze.

"Don't you mean, 'why did I ask for a private meeting, to be kept secret even from my shipmates'?" Major Richard C. Fox asked, smiling.

"Perhaps a better description would be, 'what need do you see to keep this discussion secret'," Professor and Doctor Cynthia Fox replied. Her ears and eyes were focused on him and her non-verbal posture and other semiotic cues all signaled 'caution' and 'suspicion'.

"No. I would like above all one particular piece of information – but I have other ways to obtain it," Major R. C. Fox answered. He turned away from her and looked into the breeze. "I would appreciate it if you would run with me through the forest for a bit."

"Are you trying to get away from your people?" Professor Fox said, chuckling softly.

He looked over at her. "No. I am trying to evade 'Imperial entanglements'."

"You already have 'Imperial entanglements'. Your mere presence here involves the Empire, the Senate and the Family. There is no way to avoid this," she said.

"I intend to do just that," Richard C. Fox said, and pointed in the direction of the nearby woods. "Less than a thousand meters in that direction is a small waterfall in your little manicured forest park. If we discard all gear, all clothing, and bathe in the stream – washing our fur vigorously – and then jog through the forest without putting our clothes back on, we will be free of 'Imperial entanglements'."

“Ah, so you’re worried about being spied upon. Or are you trying to catch ‘more than a sniff?’” Professor Fox asked, grinning a tooth-covered grin.

Major Fox cleared his throat. “I was not making an advance on you, Professor and Doctor. I simply wish to remove any of the more obvious surveillance opportunities as viewed by my era. The foliage would block line-of-sight remote scans and overhead surveillance, while the wind and our cross-movements through it should prevent ‘dusting’ efforts.”

Professor Fox laughed, and her eyes laughed as well. “The park is a Senatorial and Imperial Preserve. For the safety of campers, there are numerous surveillance devices distributed throughout the forest. It would be a major undertaking to clear the park of even a small fraction of those monitors – even if the Prefecture’s budget would tolerate it, the effort would take far too long to be practical. Unless, of course, you and your group plan on remaining here on New Sparta for the next season or so.”

Major Fox nodded. “As an Imperial Preserve, the monitors will be individuals for whom ‘security’ is a profession. They will understand how to keep a secret, and I share their interest in protecting this present. I want to discuss the crucial point of our detention, Doctor – the hazard of contamination of the causal chain. I would prefer to do so with only the most discrete of observers ‘looking over our shoulders’.”

Doctor Cynthia Fox blinked.

“Our duties and duty – separate and mutual – require such consideration and effort, Doctor,” Major Fox said curtly. “Unless you can assure me that your Empire has no such concern at all, based on a mastery of all aspects of time travel and its possible consequences.”

“The Empire makes no such claim of mastery,” Professor Cynthia Fox said.

“As for not involving my subordinates – I am asserting a commander’s duty. Which is to say, I am accepting a burden. Knowing full well that if you desire and need – ‘You’ in this being the Empire – then they, too, can be questioned or examined later. Sadly, this is one of the very rare circumstances where information probably needs to be considered and not merely disseminated.”

Professor and Doctor Cynthia Fox continued to look at the Major from the past, but while her scent and body language spoke volumes, her voice was silent.

Major Fox grinned, briefly. “I will point out that I am notorious for not thinking like a military officer – either of my time or, I will wager, yours.”

“I reserve the right to wear some clothing – for modesty’s sake,” Professor Fox said, putting down her personal link and setting off towards the park.

Ten kilometers in to the Imperial Preserve

“I am not a botanist, yet I wonder how much one from my time might think and feel walking here,” Major Fox said as he looked around. “To me, this simply says ‘temperate Earthlike climate’. To a botanist, it could be a wealth of inferences and sociological realizations.”

"You seem to be fairly good at extrapolation," Professor Fox said, as she readjusted the scraps of fabric that she had stretched across "strategic areas". "As well as being one very lucky tod."

"By what measure?" he asked curiously.

Professor Fox chuckled, "you managed to avoid being terminated by Imperial Defense Command, though you managed to nearly give cardiac arrest to at least a dozen individuals of increasingly higher rank. You managed to say the right thing at the right time – just before they might have issued the firing command to Planetary Defense."

"Did they even detect the beings we call 'space dolphins'? Or was it just us?"

"It's one of the reasons that you're here to ask the question," Professor Fox said.

"Ok, discretion being the better part of valor, perhaps I'll just refrain from further inquiry," Richard C. Fox said. He shook himself and then worked his fingers rapidly for a few seconds. "That waterfall was pretty cold. Is it Spring?"

"The water is runoff from the V'Shoka glacier. It's early Spring, and at this latitude, the water does run fairly cold. You said you weren't a botanist – are you a planetologist?"

"A layperson can tell the difference between new growth and established foliage. And it doesn't take an advanced degree in the planetary sciences to tell that water is cold. Doctor Fox, would I be correct in presuming that your people are debating whether or not we should be kept in this time, as opposed to any effort being exerted to see us try to return?"

"Even if I knew – which I most emphatically do *not* – I doubt that I could tell you," Professor Fox said.

"Balderdash," Richard C. Fox snorted, his ears lowering. "It's a standard question for chronological temporal transitions. Hell, that sort of question *got* me into this uniform in the first place," he added with a slap on the left-behind pocket patch he was currently not wearing. "Metaphorically speaking," he added with a grin, fingers twining through his red fur.

"My specialty isn't Intel – it's in 'digging the bones'," Professor Fox said. "That, and trying to teach the next generation."

"We are most definitely not 'citizens', or members of your political entity's 'security forces', we certainly have a 'need to know' – as it is our lives and interests being considered," Richard said firmly. "We – my companions and I – are working from that assumption, at least. That you are debating whether or not we should be 'let go' – or bottled up. Both of which present theoretical and pragmatic conundrum for standard causal reasoning."

"If you were to take back contaminating information to your time, it could change the flow of events – and if you are a part of something important, your failure to return could also result in changes to the flows. Imperial Security is doubtless considering this 'problem'," Dr. Fox stated this as a plain fact, her entire background messaging reading 'bland'.

"It's a problem only when your temporal perspective is limited," Richard said. He slid his eyes sideways and grinned again. "Which is true for ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the population and nine-nine percent of the time, I grant. At least in our time, and probably equally so for yours. Time travel is not a daily part of your lives, is it?"

"We know enough about it that some might try and do it. History can be changed – and even with our understanding of sociodynamics, we don't know enough to predict *what* will happen if we change the past," Professor Fox said. "You concluded our lack of familiarity how?"

Major Fox laughed. "The length of time it is taking your decision-makers to work through their tangled thinking! It would be much faster were this a commonplace, or even daily, occurrence. Reflexes always are faster than conscious deliberation, whether for a single body or a body politic. But reflexes take experience – and a lot of it – to develop."

"That sounds like something ... someone I know would say," Dr. Cynthia Fox responded.

"Ye-es. Tell me, Dr. Fox: what would you insist on as a test, to assure you that I know what I am talking about?" Richard asked.

She shook her head and looked at him directly. "A test?"

"Yes. To prove that you should listen to me," Major Fox paused, looked at her, then looked away again as he continued speaking. "You have exhibited a professional's reserve, Doctor Fox. I have noted how carefully you have avoided speaking about anything which might contaminate temporal causality."

"As have you. A bit surprising, that," she said.

His ears perked up and he looked at her. "Surprising?"

She nodded. "We have information which your time does not. Your duty is to find out – to seek out advantage, for your leaders. Your civilization. What duty could you owe to us?"

He chuckled slowly. "That depends on my definition of 'my civilization' – which might not be limited to a specific temporal slice or lifetime."

Her eyes widened. "Meaning?"

Major Fox smiled at the other vulpine. "Perspective. Perspectives, actually, Doctor. If I wished to communicate information which I felt you could use to better effect a wiser determination – for all our sakes – how could I persuade you, that you should listen to what I say?"

"I would have to weigh whatever you said against my experience and judge as I thought best," she answered.

"As would anyone sensible," he said with a tone of light, almost mocking – self-mocking – condescension.

"Yes."

"We each, however, have experiences that the other does not. Agreed?"

“Yes, certainly.”

Richard turned and looked at her directly. “How could I convince you that mine is superior? That I have better perspective, better knowledge, than you do?”

“Of course you do, when it comes to your time; you are more immedi—”

His upthrust left hand stopped her speech. Richard looked at her, then shook his head from side to side, once, slowly.

“You are operating from an assumption, Doctor, that because we are from the past, that we must necessarily know less about this problem than you do.”

“It is highly likely. From your statements, your people are just beginning to explore space. We have been exploring for far longer, and have a *little* bit better idea of what is ‘out there’,” Professor Fox said. “There have also been other ‘temporal drift’ cases, that we’ve dealt with.”

“Hence my reference to a test,” Major Fox said. “What would you think was a fair test?”

“I don’t know,” she said evenly. Her tone of voice was firm and dry, and her body posture was considerably stiffer.

He turned to look around the wood, and then, while facing away from her, spoke again. “Then let me propose a test.”

“By all means,” Dr. Fox said coolly; she did note his intentional effort to be unable to ‘read’ her response.

“I will state three truths which you know to be true, and also know,” he turned around and faced her directly, “that I could not know – if your presumption is correct. ‘Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action’.”

“Do I grant you a wish for each such truth?”

“No, Doctor. You are not the only one who fears contamination of some sort. There are real concerns about temporal contamination – mine no less than yours. What you do, is both personally accept, and endeavor to persuade the more influential members of your government to accept, this truth: that we are mutually striving to prevent a temporal snarl. That our judgment must be jointly reached and not one imposed by apparent strength of position or resource.” His lips twitched. “I no less than you seek to avoid catastrophe, or even significant disturbance.”

“Why should I accept your test?” she asked.

“Because it’s the least disruptive method to affect the smoothing we both seek. Neither of us possesses overt power sufficient to create too much consequential secondary effects upon its exercise; we will merely be exchanging minor bits of information,” Richard said. “Though the import will be readily apparent to you, you need not further extend that affect. Unless or as you choose to do so.”

“This is the reason for your precautions?” Dr. Cynthia Fox asked.

"If they are not sufficient, then I earnestly urge you to better them. I do not think it would be wise for others to gain access to this through means you and I both are aware of as being within the purview of an 'intelligence service'," Richard said.

She stared at him. "You are serious about this. What about your subordinates?"

"They know I have knowledge they do not. My wives know this. Even the one who is a burgeoning telepath," he added. "They have – we have – lived with this sort of concern for a couple of years now. We're not always successful, but we learn from our errors. Mostly."

"A ... telepath?" Dr. Cynthia Fox blinked.

"As is our first-born son. As have been others I have dealt with."

"We have no records of such – the records were doubtless lost, but ..."

"Exceedingly few, yes. We will not be dealing with the Altha'ani and Shidran-kas with that surprise yet to be sprung upon us," Richard said. "Incidentally, that does not count as one of the three truths to my mind. You may have been ignorant about it, but that only reveals the gap between our times."

"Three ... truths. How will I know them to be true?" she asked, her ears tipping forward.

Richard smiled. "Aren't you really asking, how will you know that I could not have known them?"

"That, too," Dr. Fox admitted.

"Have we agreed on this test? I don't want to shoot at a moving target."

He waited for another minute before the vixen nodded.

"Very well. At a dinner a season ago – the end of winter, start of Spring, two weeks before a certain event – your husband made you very angry by referring to you as his 'lady'. He then immediately and with some effort sweet-talked you out of your flash of anger at his faux-pas," Richard said.

"I – you –" Dr. Fox jerked her head back and her brush bottled up to twice its normal size. "That is – there could not have –"

"In our time and culture calling an educated, sophisticated, refined, and well-bred female a 'lady' is a definite compliment," Richard said. "Though I grant it is a dying cultural norm, one nearly faded from the practices of life. That term does not – unless intentionally weighted with non-verbal semiotic traces – contain the insulting connotations current to your culture."

"You asked about that!" Cynthia Fox snapped.

Richard shrugged and spread his hands. "Review all the contact records – your conversations with Jennifer Lotor, and the rest of us – all our limited and monitored taps into your entertainment and other channels. That referent match will not be found." He smiled. "I know, because I myself checked our records for such before today's walk and talk, and found none."

"That..." Dr. Fox stopped. It was too easy a check to make, for it to be a bluff – because she would do so. Yet that assertion matched her memory, too. She shook her head. "I take it, that is one of the three 'truths'?" she asked. "As well as your answer to my question as to how I could or would know them to be truths? Because I had personal experience in our time to judge against?"

"Yes."

"We already know you're not a telepath, so you couldn't have learned that information through a scan – and none of your crew are telepaths either, we checked."

"You haven't even told us who your husband is. I've noted that evasion, Doctor – and it's been obeyed by all others of your time who've spoken with us. Some two weeks after that dinnertime conversation – no, that's the maraschino cherry, we'll wait on that," Richard said, changing his mind. "After that dinner you both went to see a classic – Shakespeare's 'The Tempest'."

Dr. Fox choked off her first response and turned away. The lay of her ears, the shape of her brush and the trembling of her fur – and body – spoke of the tension she was feeling and reacting to. "Another verifiable assertion, I see," she said, nearly panting from the tension.

"Oh, yes. But before the dinner – before you and Senator Joseph Charles-James Fox, your husband, began dressing for it – he suggested that you compare the spectrographic and chronologically-corrected astronomic – astrographic? – the records for the sun around which Marz orbited to confirm that you had indeed found the original solar system. Namely, the Terran solar system around which orbited Mars, the first colonized extra-terrestrial planet, and Earth, the believed evolutionary cradle for humankind."

Richard smiled and consciously controlled his breathing, making it steady and even. "This is why I was willing to so readily share the information about that system's planets, their names and pronunciations, with you, Doctor Fox. Because I was only giving you that which I knew – for all functional effect – you already had. If only recently, and as a result of your successful digs on Mars."

Dr. Fox turned back to face him, her mouth hanging open.

"Three truths. Four, if you include your husband's name. Five, his position. As for the maraschino cherry – your galactopolitics have just undergone a discontinuity, a shift, based on his most recent annual speech to the Imperial Auditors. In which he challenged all to be inclusivist rather than exclusivist. Doctor Fox, I know these truths – and more – but my subordinates do not. Nor have I disclosed them to my own time and then-current leadership. Yet if I, if we, are not returned, then they shall be disclosed – and the currents of time will most definitely be shifted for those who might otherwise have lived and connected our 'then' and this 'now'." Richard smiled and looked somewhat to the side. "You could surprise me now, Doctor Fox, were you to prove to me that your time was in fact more 'effectively cognizant' about such tangles, than I have shown myself to be."

"I ... no, we are clearly not," she said. "Though how you could know these things..."

"An archaeologist such as yourself must have *some* awareness of the scientific means to validate field-gained current information. Also, of the difficulties of passing

knowledge forward, too – there is the gap between the First and Second Empires, after all, into which the knowledge of Earth's very name, and galactic location, fell." Richard shook his head. "The answers are there, you need only accept."

It was several minutes before the Professor and Doctor Fox could answer. "Major Fox, I do apologize. In explanation, I would simply point out that this is the first time I have personally had to deal with 'temporal discontinuities'," she said.

Major Fox laughed, and then bowed in apology. "I'm not laughing at you, believe me. It's just my 'other viewpoint'. As an archaeologist, your *lifework* involves temporal discontinuities – though more from the specific dynamic of past to present than from time traveling spacers. Unless one begins working with chronological temporal scanners and travel, that is the experiential norm for most. But after doing so ... one becomes more an anthropologist, properly speaking, than an archaeologist." Richard looked at her. "Your apology is accepted, though not necessary."

"May I ... what would you feel it safe to tell me, about your, ah, sourcing for this information?" Professor Fox asked.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Richard quoted. "Doctor, for all that we experience time linearly, it is anything but. Also, until you accept the definition of 'that which works' as measuring reality, both physics and causality are each and collectively merely shared and limiting, fictions – though very effective and useful ones. At least most of the," he smiled, "time."

"I don't wonder that this is not something you would share with many," Dr. Fox said. "But that leads me to ask: why share this information with me?"

"But not with my own people? Because I believe it important – crucial – that we return to our time. For both our times' sakes," Richard answered. "For our one civilization. We are connected – multiply so – and the lines have not yet fully woven through. To cut them short or tangle them now, I deem unwise. The greatest fear your time must have is 'contamination'." He shook his head. "That fear is unnecessary – no. It is sensible, but must, like all fears, be self-limited and not all-encompassing, to keep a worse error from occurring."

"A worse error?" Dr. Fox asked.

"I do not know I could prove that keeping us here will be such. I fear so," Richard admitted. "In all other communications since our arrival – where the chance of uncontrolled leakages through myself and my shipmates, across the juncture we are, yet exists – I have strived to keep contamination minimized. As have you. But the pressure on your people to 'do nothing' – to keep us here, and thus avoid hazarding further tangle – must be great. We are, after all, explorers. Who could have been lost at any time in our voyage. That it should be to a place and time where we, personally, are alive and safe – allowed to continue on with our lives, as if just interrupted – may seem safer and more kind, than death or stranding or complete disappearance. To those putatively in charge."

"Yes. There are ... those who do take that position," Dr. Fox said. "But there are others who point out that the real question is what you might have done which you will not do, if you are not returned."

“Believe me in this, Doctor – the causal loops are neither absent nor resolved yet,” Richard said. “I do not know the tracks ahead – I do not know the end-state. Sometimes I have to wonder whether I know any of present or past, even,” he added with a rueful sigh. “But our work is not completed. I fear your society’s trying to halt our voyage here, will be a great mistake.” The thought of the Ring and Box, and the mutability of time, had him wondering whether –

“Could you undo it?” Dr. Fox asked.

“I don’t know that I could not. I don’t know how to undo it, but an impossibility only is established when one gives up without accomplishing that task,” Richard said. “In my time, the stubbornness of my breed line is as well-established as ... as the incompatibility of blood-types.”

“Suppose you were killed here and now?”

“That would be one of the greater complications and graver dangers – and not just for me personally, either; but for those whose lives would not be the same, as a result.” Richard thought of some of his ‘nearer’ timedives and shook his head from side to side. “Sadly, Doctor, I am not ‘just anybody’. Not at the ‘present’ for our currently-mutual past, at least. Not for a couple of decades, anyways, until my children are both born and mostly adult.”

“That seems ... how do you know that isn’t just emotional wishing?” Dr. Fox asked.

“We’re back to philosophy, Doctor, if you want to go down that line of inquiry,” Richard answered. “Do you want more ‘proofs’?”

“No, I don’t think I want to pursue that line of questioning,” Dr. Fox said. “But what ... what might I use to persuade others in my, ah, civilization? I don’t want to share what you’ve told me with them!”

Richard smiled – and it was not a friendly nor a warm smile. “Ask your sociodynamacists what it means to try and remove a ‘nexus point’,” he suggested. “Then ask – through several unwitting cut-outs – someone to ask Liselle Francis Reynard or Jenny Lotor, if they have ever heard that phrase.”

“I will certainly consider your approach. Another validation effort?” Dr. Fox asked.

“Yes. ‘Extraordinary claims demand extraordinary proof’, after all.”

“Your arrival certainly wasn’t ordinary,” Dr. Fox admitted. She opened her mouth – and closed it again. Paused. Turned away – and back. “What if ... what if this isn’t enough?”

Richard smiled, and this time his eyes narrowed and his ears flattened. “Then I throw a real punch,” he said. “Not my last, nor largest, either. I would rather use Art than Strength – but against an unwise or resisting *uki*, sometimes both must be combined. Then, however, damage becomes much more of a certainty than a concern – and belongs entirely to *uki*.”

“I don’t know that word,” Dr. Fox said.

“Not many do,” Richard agreed. “I wouldn’t advise asking around about it, either. People will want to know why you want to find that out – and that sort of questioning is probably not a good idea, not when it comes to moving gently and unobtrusively through the timestreams.”

“Is that even possible?” Dr. Fox asked, shaking her head. “Major Fox, I will do my very best to be as persuasive as I can.”

“I don’t know how much I can help there, I’m afraid,” Richard said.

“I – you have a very disturbing turn of mind, Major!”

“So I’ve been told by quite a number of people now, Doctor Fox. Like my curiosity, or other aspects of my personality, I’ve had to learn to live with it. I’m just amazed that my wives manage to do as well as they do, with so much less of a lifetime’s experience at doing so.”

“Wives – that’s another area of questioning,” Dr. Fox said. “Tell me this –” She stopped and shut her mouth, then spoke again, more cautiously and less eagerly. “If you think it is safe, that is. Major Lotor says that you are the first to be in a line marriage. Is that ... is that true?”

Richard looked at her. Then he turned up, fractionally, the corners of his lips. “It’s not smart to throw a punch without knowing the nerve-point it’s meant to effect, Doctor Fox. So ... in a further gentle persuasive hint ... I will confirm that to be the case. I will also add that I – we – can say more on this foundational aspect of lineages and custom. I am, or rather we are, my wives and I, not the only ‘multiple-spouse’ marriage of our time; even though we are, yes, the first.”

Dr. Fox’s breath seemed to fade away, and her whiskers and ears nearly wilted. “Oh.”

“Further than that I don’t think we want to go, not now and not unless it proves necessary,” Richard said, turning away and beginning to walk back towards where they had left their clothing. “Meanwhile, you have more to work with than before. While I hope I have a persuasive and effective advocate for all of our shared interests.”

“Yes, you have,” Professor Fox said, moving up jog alongside him.

“Good. I’d much prefer you to be the interface, and not to have to require and request personal contact with ... let me just call these individuals, ‘higher-ups’,” Richard said. “I think for the most part it will be much better if I am just a Major, and we are just an exploration team ... with little interest in personally finding out more about the ‘hows’ of many things, if we can just return to our putatively proper time and place.” He sighed. “Then I’ll have another chance to be creative about reporting, with precautionary sifting and classification, our mission’s progress and experiences. To practice delicately explaining to somebody there, and then, why I didn’t get more from you, here and now, for our advantage, back then.”

“But surely your superiors will understand...”

“The paperwork and after-action reports almost always give me as much or even more grief than the missions themselves. It’s a law, I tell you – a sociological law, just as

much as any law of the physical universe or legalism of collective society,” Richard grouched. “I may edit my reports *just a bit* this time.”

“I would expect that your ‘democratic’,” Professor Fox said, her tone making ‘democratic’ into a swear word, “superiors would ‘sweat’ you to get the ‘truefacts’¹.”

“Given the power of several of the ‘memetic mines’ that I’ve helped deal with, and a few successes in doing so, they’ve obviously decided that a tradeoff of ‘truefacts’ versus ‘goodfacts’ has been and continues to be worthwhile,” Richard said. “I have been intensively and repeatedly tested as to my intentions and capabilities. The best summary I heard was ‘definitely not safe, but useful’. That came from the head of our time’s Internal Security, no less.”

He smiled at her. “The Second Empire would hardly be the first government that I’ve thoroughly pissed off, at least on a momentary basis. Fortunately for me, so far, I’ve been dealing with reasonably sane and reasonable individuals, who don’t mistake a messenger for the import of the message.”

“Are you sure that you can count on that situation to continue?” she asked. They now had reached the waterfall and were picking up and putting on their clothing.

“No. I take precautions. Usually, I try to guarantee that a cover-up, instead of a reasoned response, will be the wrong that’s much more wrong,” Richard answered. “I also strive to cooperate with the core interests of the polity, if not the individual leader figures. When I lived in or dealt with an autocracy or tyranny, well,” he shrugged the belt into place, “I’d’ve used – have or would use – a different dynamic.”

“And if you are in error? If you make a mistake?” Professor Fox asked.

“People I care about die. Retail or wholesale.”

“One more question,” Professor Fox asked. She tucked her link into her pocket and then stood there, looking at him. “There isn’t anything that I couldn’t know or verify, which somebody else could not also discover. A mind scan, a records’ search, By reading my mind, or searching through our time’s records, or perhaps using some future time’s records. So, how can I – can we – trust you?”

“Because that question does not actually matter,” Richard answered. “Either we are who we say we are – and have nothing more in the way of science or abilities than we’ve shown we have – or else we are something, or someone – someones – else, who do have unanticipated and surprise knowledge, access, or talents. How could I prove either of us to not be from our mutual, and very far-advanced, future? How could I prove my technology is only what I tell you, and does not conceal from your ability to differentiate, vastly more potent capabilities, as yet unexercised?” He shook his head from side to side.

“I thought about that question from your perspective before this meeting. I’d had to, really, to act with judgment,” Richard added. “Professor Fox, how could I also prove that I haven’t just hypnotized you into believing me, leaving you with an illusion of free-will questioning?”

¹ Ok, I’m gaming this with the “truefact” and “goodfact” terminology I heard ‘lo these many years ago on Babylon 5. The Second Empire is not, despite some of the faces shown, an entirely nice government either (the Commonality had good cause to go to war with them). – Niall.

"But I – understood. You could also have ordered me, while under hypnosis, to just forget that I'd been hypnotized. But, but, but then –"

"But then our discussion goes philosophical once more, this time into epistemological territory," Richard nodded. "If you call it all a dream, it's solipsistic."

"I would wish it more hedonistic – that water was too cold!" Dr. Fox growled. But she had a smile lurking at the corners of her eyes and mouth, for all that her tone of voice – and scent – were still quite serious.

"Doctor, here's one consoling thought. If as I suspect we are on a critical path – or one of several possible such – then as long as we are acting freely and without surprise coercion, we should suspect that our future's guardians are not going to step in to shove us along – or away from – the danger or dangers we were ignorant of," Richard said. "There is a future ahead of both our times. If we are not on such a critical path, then the danger of error is lower than we fear. From this I can draw guarded optimism, still."

"You're not afraid because we haven't screwed up the situation completely?" she asked.

"Yes, that pretty well describes it," Richard answered. "Yet. But that won't stay true if I don't – if we don't – get back. I'm awfully afraid that a later 'me' might be the individual tasked with serving as the *deus ex machina*; I hate to make work for myself."

Senator Joseph Fox's Study, Senator Fox's Estate

"Joseph?"

Senator Joseph Charles-James Fox, who had been studying a well-crafted, multimedia policy presentation, paused the display and looked up at his wife. "I know that tone of voice. So, what needs my attention, now?"

Cynthia rose from her chair and moved to sit near, but not next, to her husband. "It's about our ... latest disruptive visitors."

The Senator turned off the presentation, and with a wave of the hand dismissed the display, which promptly melted back into his desk. "Our temporal castaways, you mean?" He waited until Cynthia Fox nodded. "Imperial Intelligence sent a rather frosty note about your 'discussion'. I am mildly irritated at having one of my wives parading around in little more than her birthday suit. But I informed them that you had said nothing to *me* about this discussion."

"I *was* wearing a swim-wrap. It covered all the 'naughty bits'."

"And not much more. I mean, really, Cynthia. Must you?"

"It was necessary to get their Major Fox to talk freely. He seemed to be worried about being surveilled."

The Senator snorted. "And he wanted to discuss matters in a Senatorial and Imperial Preserve? A Patrician park?"

"That, as much as anything, marked him as inexperienced in Imperial matters," Professor Fox said. "It was a simple matter, and *I was wearing more than your latest 'lady'*

wears to dinner!” Professor Fox finished, demonstrating that she had spent considerable time on voice training as well as on her archeological and scientific studies.

Senator Fox bared his throat. “I will speak to Justine about her style of dress...”

“Yes, do that, Joseph. But don’t complain about what I do out of necessity, when you accept what your latest ‘lady’ does to flaunt her scent and appearance and nothing more.”

The Senator looked up and past his wife. *Pick your battles wisely, and only take on the ones that you can win.* “Yes, dearest,” he said, and bared his throat again.

Professor Fox’s hackles settled, and she sat down in the Senator’s lap.

Asserting territorial imperative, are we? the Senator thought, but carefully kept silent.

“I needed to do some checking – facts and methodological, both,” she said. “I tasked three of my graduate students² with tripling-up on a few lines, to avoid ‘observer bias’. I’ve just finished reviewing their reports.” She nodded over at her terminal space; she, too, had been working this evening.

The Senator looked at her, took a deep breath to drink in her scent, and sighed. “They don’t know what they found? No, they don’t know what they found meant, but you do. While I – and the Imperium – will remain in the dark.”

“That’s right.” She noted the fractional changes in his fur and face. “Probe further – validate what I’m going to tell you, through any means that involves our visitors – that is. Who are....” she paused, then having re-ordered her thoughts, continued, “...more than we knew.”

“‘More’?” Joseph asked, his tone indicating both mild disbelief and a request for further information.

“Yes. In some ways, Joseph, you are the only individual currently known to be equal to ... their importance. Impact.”

“I find that hard to credit, my dear,” Joseph said evenly.

Cynthia shook her head from side to side.

“Well, then – tell us where and how we’re wrong, and we can fix that misperception,” Joseph said calmly.

“That wouldn’t be wise, or in my opinion, safe,” Cynthia said.

Joseph stared at his wife. “Cynthia....” His voice failed, as did his imagination and reasoning. “I don’t understand. You don’t seem to be making sense here. Help me understand?”

“I have information which I didn’t have before today, and which you still don’t have,” she said. “Information which if you had would lead you to the same conclusion – only then it would be too late to prevent the damage.”

² Graduate students are the greatest resource available to senior academics. They are bright, hard-working, and (for the most part) understand that they are “paying their dues” when they work on whatever crack brained scheme their thesis advisor has for them *this* time. – Niall.

"I ... if you can't trust your husband, who not-at-all-incidentally is Prime Minister, and a Senator³, then who, pray, can you trust?" Joseph asked.

"I would trust the emperor himself – if I would trust anyone," Professor Cynthia Fox replied.

"I am glad that at least the emperor has your seal of approval," Joseph said. "I would hate to have to turn in one of my wives for sedition."

"I would hate that myself. But you are doing somewhat better than I did. It took me nearly a half an hour to handle this myself," Cynthia Fox said.

"Just what *is* it that is so serious? You haven't yet said," Joseph said.

"No, I haven't. And I'm afraid that I may not be able to elaborate much. Our visitor – this Major – has intimated certain matters that make it rather ... delicate," Cynthia Fox said.

"He's bluffing," Joseph said, shaking his head from side to side. "He knows – we told him, often enough – that we're an Empire, and so he's bluffing – it *will* come to the attention of the emperor."

"No. I mean, 'no, that's not it'," Cynthia replied. "Joseph, he knows things about us that he cannot possibly know."

"I'm sorry, Cynthia, but what you just said makes no sense. How can he know what he cannot know?" Joseph asked somewhat irritated.

"I'm sorry too, Joseph. I am unable to answer the 'how'. I can only confirm that this paradox is very real," Cynthia said.

"So, you think the emperor – or one of the specialists from a lateral line – can confirm and, ah, 'deal with', our visitor's knowledge?" Joseph asked.

"I don't know. Joseph – if you don't listen to me now, then our visitor may well make a direct appeal to the emperor. And the emperor might well hear him."

"Our visitors aren't even subjects of his Majesty. The Senate..."

"Of which you are the Prime Minister – mediates between outsiders and the Royals, *except where the House of Reynard chooses to take direct action*," Cynthia interrupted.

"Which our current Emperor has not done..."

"Since the Invasion, and the Occupation. Yes, I know," Cynthia interrupted, again. "I have very specifically not asked a most particular question about our visitors. Because once asked, it cannot be un-asked. Our visitor has not asked it either – but he knows that he can ask it. Also, that if he does, we – you – as Prime Minister – and the House of Reynard – *must* answer it. I believe he also knows what the answer will be." Cynthia paused. "Which would be more disruptive, no, which would be potentially more disastrous to our current and continuing peace, than almost anything I could imagine."

³ The OverGovernment is the name used by the Hegemonic ruling body. The ruling body of the Empire is the Senate (and, of course, the emperor himself, who is *not* a Constitutional monarch in the sense of the British royals). – Niall.

“That is a considerable overstatement of a specialist who’s experiencing a very unique thrill, and so has lost all perspective.” Joseph held up his hands to stop the angry retort. “That is what the Crown Conservatives will immediately assert – and quite probably a good many others, love.”

“Which would be part and parcel of that same disruption,” Cynthia said, shaking her head and torso to let the tension leak out again. “Joseph ... what is the *one* demand which anyone can make of either and both any government official and the Imperial House?”

“There’s a number of such – *habeus corpus*, springs to mind,” Joseph answered.

Cynthia sighed and growled together. “One demand, any time – even, or especially, in civil war – and from any person, which if wrongly denied causes both the individual and government responsible for that denial to be dismissed?”

Joseph blinked. “There’s only –” suddenly his throat dried up and voice failed completely, as he realized what he was about to say.

Cynthia nodded. “Yes. *That* one. An Appeal to the Emperor.”

“But that’s only supposed to be used for appeal of criminal conviction or sentencing – after a trial by a Crown Court...” Joseph began.

“But the wording of the Great Charter⁴ says that the appeal may be for resolving matters of fact, policy or law, without relation to a criminal matter. And it says *all sophonts*, not just Imperial Citizens,” Cynthia interrupted, again.

“But it’s usually interpreted to mean...”

“Something else, yes. And there are few enough people who are willing to risk the consequences of a direct Appeal. There is, after all, no appeal *to* an Appeal decision by the Emperor.”

“But this Major could not *possibly* know about the Great Charter,” Joseph said.

“What if he asks? What are we or any of his handlers to tell him? A lie?” Cynthia asked.

“Of course not! The very thought ... oh, yes, I see,” Joseph said, his ears, whiskers and tail all shivering. “But this Major – he’s not a pilot?”

“He’s not; but he is the commander of an FTL starship. Operating at the very start, by their admission, of Terran interstellar flight. One with ... knowledge of Marz, which the others in his crew admitted came from closer, family, ties, than they – and almost all other, ah, ‘Uplifts’, of his time, had,” Cynthia said.

She was aware that she was shading the truth, and suspected that her husband, reading her, could sense that – but she also knew that there were layers of complexities and probable misconceptions that would protect her. Because she was telling the truth, which included a suggestion that knowing all of the truth, directly, would not be a good thing. Which she’d already said – only now, he would be much more inclined to listen to and heed her assessment.

⁴ Yes, I’m thinking of a sort of Magna Carta for the Empire. Or the Second Empire. The pendulum swing to and from authoritarianism. – Niall.

"But still, the histories say ... otherwise," Joseph changed his own sentence mid-way through, shaking his head. "I ... you say, 'not asked'?"

Cynthia nodded. A split second later, so too did her husband – with a rueful tilt to ears and whiskers.

"'Yet'. Yes, I heard *that*. I also hear what you are not saying – or our visitor, did not say to you, to not-say to me," Joseph said. "Could he be bluffing?"

"He could," Cynthia said. "That, however, presumes – well, a number of alternative presumptions could be there. He could be bluffing, based on desperation. That wasn't what I read in his semiotics. I was paying full attention, even if I was also ... perturbed by some of his statements. He could have been bluffing and better at concealment than I am at reading – even though he mentioned that possibility, or hinted at it, rather."

Joseph nodded, listening and reading his spouse at the same time. His ears and whiskers flickered as she mentioned the double- and triple- blind lines.

"Part of my research involved reviewing all of our visitors interactions to see if the clues were there. They weren't." Cynthia shook her head from side to side.

"Oh, come now – this is common knowledge for e—"

"To us, yes. Common perhaps for 'every Imperial subject'. By their own telling – validated independently by no less than three separate experts – our visitors are from pre-Imperial times," Cynthia interjected firmly. "We cannot, therefore, use our measure of 'common knowledge' as the correct measure."

"While if they have it, then they are – must be – Imperial subjects or ancestors thereof, and thus are not presumable to be outsiders." Joseph sighed and dropped his shoulders fractionally, conceding the rest of that argument line to his spouse.

"Joseph, for someone to be able to communicate using indirection precisely requires them to have specific, particular, knowledge of the memes and practices of a society – and practice in that mode, too. The risk of mis-communication is too great otherwise."

"Hmm ... you're saying that, just as we have trouble with Shidran-kas and Altani⁵ whenever we try to short-cut what our contact xenologists tell us, these visitors would be expected to have trouble with us, if they were doing the same? They seem to deal readily enough with us," Joseph said.

"In limited circumstances – you must grant that their 'house arrest' counts as such; its purpose is to limit leakages and constrain the bounds of contact," Cynthia said.

"Yet their commander – this whole ship's complement – are their leading 'Alien Contact' specialists. By their own statements."

"With a whopping two direct and two indirect contacts to draw upon – again, by their own admissions," Cynthia said drily.

⁵ It's "Altani" in the time of the Second Empire, and "Altha'ani" in the 22nd Century CE. "L'Drey" is the name that the Altani (and earlier, the Altha'ani) used for the Shidran-kas – I've assumed that the Imperials would use a group's "own name" rather than the "other people name" applied to them, simply as a matter of diplomatic nicety. – Niall.

"They also share our heritage; a common language –"

"Would you expect a back-planet provincial to be able to intimate to one of the Prime Minister's wives a potential Appeal to the Emperor – and in such fashion that she, and she alone, could bring it to her husband's attention? Evading in such a task the best supervision by Imperial Security?" Cynthia asked.

"Well ... not unless the individual provincial in question had a tremendous flair for reading the people around him, no," Joseph conceded. "But –"

"A flair that his own people, and he, deny exists. Of course, that could be a bluff – but our Truthtellers don't see it either. Is he good enough to bluff them?" Cynthia asked.

"It is a possibility," Joseph said, but his head-tilt granted the improbability.

"Which incorporates a further presumption on your part," Cynthia added.

"Oh?"

"How does he know that I could and would share this with you?"

"Obviou—blast!" Joseph snapped, and his fists clenched even as he snarled. Not at her, but at his own unthinkingness. Then he looked at her. "That was another thing you were checking on?"

"Yes. No mention, no hint, anywhere, of my being one of your wives. Nor of your name, nor position." Cynthia shook her head. "What odds on that 'backwoods provincial' now, husband-mine?"

Joseph was shaking his head from side to side. "Unlikely at best," he said. "The odds – if it's anything a bluffer must do, it is not to cause his questioners to question his sincerity where they can test it readily. Once a person is known to bluff, the search begins for 'tells' – and for someone as, ah, impacted as he is reported to be, that would be a short search indeed." He shook his head. "We're still stuck with the 'good enough to fool our Truthtellers' alternative; but that leaves the presumption that you so delicately just pointed out to me." Joseph fought, then gave in to, his urge to stand up and pace about.

"Are there other alternatives you've thought of?" he asked as he swung around after the first full circuit.

"Yes, but the first one I was led to by our visitor," Cynthia said. "Suppose this isn't his first time loop?"

"But it is – according to his crew. In fact, it's their civilization's first one. Only it isn't a loop yet, and won't be unless we do send them back," Joseph said.

"Joseph – I used the personal pronoun for precision's sake," Cynthia said. "They may not have had 'need to know'."

He blinked. "Um. I had not thought of that fine a differentiation." He blinked again, and his pacing slowed. "Though it would be ... explanation ... of why he was given this command, at least in part."

"We can't know what his superiors, or other peers, or even subordinates, knew. Know. Might know. I wonder most about that last – he's indicated that if we don't send them back, information could be released to our detriment," Cynthia said.

"That ... presumes a great deal of foresight," Joseph said, shaking his head from side to side.

"Joseph, that was another line of inquiry I had one of my graduate students check. Our visitor – the commander – his subordinates know that he uses information which they don't, their time doesn't, seem to have," Cynthia said. "They also know that he's changed governmental – leadership – actions, in ways nobody could follow. He's even blackmailed his own government with the threat of releasing information which he shouldn't have had – in the sense of 'been able to get', as well as the sense of 'had in his possession'." She shook her head. "If this isn't his first time loop – excuse me. I'd say the probabilities of both being true simultaneously go up in order, if not linked, probabilities."

Joseph grimaced. "Another equation whose terms and values we cannot even guess at. That is a *very* discomfoting assumption, Cynthia."

"Because it shakes our sense of superiority."

He looked at her – then stopped his pacing to laugh, hard. When he finished – and finished wiping the tears from his cheeks – Joseph said, "Obliterates it. Which is good if it helps us replace arrogance with humility." He frowned, fingers against his muzzle. "Check my logic and reasoning, dear. Line one: we decide not to return our visitors to their own time."

"Not to try to do so; there's no guarantee of success," Cynthia amended.

Joseph shook his head and waved his hand through the air, dismissing the fine distinction. "From all reports our visitors' stubbornness quotient is suitably extreme; a necessity, for most explorers." He turned and swung back onto the opposite line. "We decide not to do so – that's 'Line One' – and our visitor invokes, ah, a 'higher authority'. If he was – is – bluffing, we experience a here-and-now crisis. One which no matter how unwelcome, is not likely to be destabilizing or deleterious to our time – or to anyone besides ourselves, really."

"I really – hmph. 'Check', not 'argue'. Yes, I accept that first path's summary," Cynthia answered. She quivered slightly with the effort of laying aside the tension she'd felt at the intimation that her husband would exchange his position for his principles that readily. Tension which was very real because she knew how very close they were to his doing just that.

Joseph nodded and, having reached the near end of his elliptical path, swung outward once again. "Under what I'll call 'Line 2', having called the apparent bluff, we – I – are proven wrong. And then we have the Loyal Opposition throwing a spanner into the works in the Senate. A 'bad thing'. Because the current disposition in the Senate is not as stable as the newsies are always saying."

"I would assert 'a Very Bad Thing', but that is again arguing. Which I am not," Cynthia replied. "Not to mention, the ill effects at their time."

Joseph flinched, but nodded. "A lesser line – the 'b' path – out of Line 2, sees us limit the damage to our time. We allow the Loyal Opposition to win, and I move out of the Prime Minister position – back to something like First Lord of the Admiralty," he gritted

his teeth. "This would also be a 'bad thing' in my not-so-humble-opinion, although there are a few in the Imperial House who might find it more pleasant than not."

"I will assert this would be a 'Very Bad Thing'. But I'm presumed to be biased, since I am your senior wife," Cynthia said with a deadpan delivery and expression. Which she immediately ruined by snickering.

"Glad to know that I have at least one person's confidence," Joseph said drily. "Still on Line two: our visitor is not bluffing – but he's wrong." He shook his head and worked his fists once, twice, three times, clenching and releasing them. "Things shake, but don't break. Bad, but manageable. Not comfortable. No ... let's call them, 'pre-effects'." He swung outwards, then paused.

"That works for both the line of 'do not release and was not as important', and 'did release and was not as important'," Joseph said. "Time may be more malleable – or more stable – than our theorists believe it to be, after all. So the range remains from Line 1 'a' – a bluff, and not wrong to keep, and no damage at all to either line – to Line 2 'a', not a bluff but accurate, and a disaster at both ends of a now-cut loop." He shook his head. "There's doubtless scores of secondary and further cascades which can be pursued. But we have no way to evaluate or 'hedge' our, that is my, decision."

"There, Joseph, is where I come in – and check you. Because you've already been told – or we've been specifically 'not told' rather – something that weighs heavily on the side of 'not bluffing'," Cynthia said.

Joseph halted his pacing and dropped his head into his hands. "I was trying to not think of that," he said somewhat raggedly. "Because it is emotionally very disturbing. So much so, I question my ability to continue to reason with rationality over emotion." He looked back at his spouse. "It's not that I don't trust you, dear. It's *myself* that I don't trust here."

"You could ask for help on this. From the Emperor," Cynthia said.

"That is a political coin that I would prefer to keep in my pocket, just now," Joseph said, and snorted. "Our visitor's at the center of this. If he really is a 'nexus point' as some of our people have suggested," he shook his head hard, several times, clenching his jaw as he did, "I rather doubt that the Emperor, or any one in the House of Reynard, would be interested in going toe-to-toe with him."

"So we need to decide what to do, still."

"No, my lovely senior wife. I'm going to take the path of least resistance, and let you try and figure out what to do with this one," Joseph said.

"And what will you be doing?"

"I will be relaxing in my little observatory. Looking at the stars..."

"While a vixen decides what to do?"

"Isn't that, in the end, how matters are usually decided? I rather doubt that Nicholas XIV makes any important decisions without at least taking the pulse of Katrina or Josephine," Joseph said.

"It's nice that you understand the way the Galaxy works so well, Joseph..." Professor Fox said, patting her husband on the head as she turned to move out to the garden, and his observatory.

Professor Cynthia Fox's Study, Senator Fox's Estate

There was *that* scent – so heavy, musky, and strong – that Cynthia Fox could barely keep from growling deep in her throat. Or throwing and breaking something.

"Doctor and Professor Fox, have you seen Joseph this evening?" the source of the scent said, after poking her nose into the Professor's study.

"He was out in the garden, puttering with his telescope, ***Lady*** Justine," Cynthia Fox said, barely keeping her temper and voice under control.

The other vixen took a step into the Professor's sanctum only far enough to permit a full curtsy, then she took several steps backwards, bowing her head as she did so. After the other left, Cynthia let out a single heartfelt "damn", just as another vixen stepped through the doorway.

"Is there something the matter, Cynthia?" the younger vixen asked. "Do you need an analgesic? Some..."

"No, Christine..." Cynthia shook her head, and sighed. "I'm just feeling particularly old tonight."

Christine went down on her haunches next to the older vixen and set her muzzle down on the desk. "If there's something that I've done to offend or upset..."

"Gods, no!" Cynthia interrupted, as she reached out and lifted the other vixen's muzzle in one hand. "It's nothing my junior co-spouse has done. It's just ... ***that*** vixen!" Cynthia growled.

Christine pulled back and licked Cynthia's palm before baring her throat. "Just what has Justine done this time, Cynthia?"

"Sometimes, Christie, she just ***is***. The ***arrogance*** of that creature – just because she lifts her brush and juices Joseph whenever he wants, she acts as though she were a co-spouse!"

"She is a ***Senator's Lady***, Cynthia. Would you honestly expect her to be otherwise? Besides, no matter how much practice she may have in sword-swallowing, Joseph doesn't love her."

"But he puts up with her arrogant behavior..."

"Puts up with'? Be honest, Cynthia, he enjoys having a younger vixen around. It's just one of his little 'quirks'. But don't expect him to ever father a kit by that shirona..."

Cynthia Fox jerked back. "Christine! You ***never*** use that kind of language!"

"Hmph! You only say that because you don't read my journals – the private ones, just for family. If you did, you'd know that I'm not all 'sweetness and innocence'. Just because you always get 'first go' doesn't mean that I don't sometimes get jealous of you, either, so please consider just how ***I*** feel about '***Lady Justine***'."

"I'm sorry if I've ever hurt you, Christine. As to 'first go' – that's always been by mutual agreement. Or at least I thought it was. Was I wrong?" A hurt tone crept into Cynthia's voice, reflected immediately in her scent.

Christine shook her head from side to side. "No, Senior-Spouse, I know the reasons – good ones – why we agreed all these years ago. But when that *creature* moved in to the estate, I felt like throwing things. So, I'm just 'venting' now – to let you know, at least, that you're not being irrational, nor are you the only one annoyed by 'The Great One's' behavior."

Cynthia leaned forward and licked the other vixen's nose. "Good old sensible Christine. You know when to tell me to 'shut up and soldier'. And to let me know that I'm not alone. I *do* love you for it." A more relaxed scent began rolling off the senior co-spouse.

Christine Reynard stood, then bowed her head and bared her throat again to her senior spouse. "Then my work here is, for the moment at least, done. Although one more item..." she pulled out a flimsie from a vest pocket. "This came in from the Residence a few minutes ago."

"The Residence?" Cynthia said, and reached out for the flimsie. "What's in it?"

"Didn't open it – it came security sealed from the printer for you."

Cynthia took the flimsie and checked it carefully, then looked sheepishly up at Christine. That vixen was often too curious for her own good, but the Imperial sigil on the flimsie was enough to quiet the inquisitive, and the seal was unbroken and untouched.

"Can you open it, before I die of curiosity?" Christine asked.

Cynthia chuckled. Trust Christine to get her out of one of her 'moods'. She slit the seal with her index claw and read...

Imperial Residence, Kensho, Oshenjii Prefecture, New Sparta, Second Empire of Man

"Good evening, Doctor and Professor Cynthia Fox, my name is Richard Michael Reynard," the vulpine uplift at the entry to the Residence said. Like every member of the Imperial family, the uplift was a shade over a meter and a half tall⁶ and whipcord thin; he held out his right hand to allow the vixen to kiss the baronial signet ring. The taller Professor Fox went down on one knee, and kissed the proffered ring. The type 7 uplift then waved for the Professor to rise, then turned and beckoned the taller vixen to follow him.

As they walked through the Residence, Richard Michael asked questions of the Professor regarding her findings in the Marz digs, with a sure touch as to both artifactual and methodological details.

"Has the Family raised an archeologist, now, my lord Baron?" Professor Cynthia Fox asked, as they halted at a heavy biometric locked door.

⁶ Type 7's average roughly 155 centimeters tall, and mass around 50 kilos. Adult males and adult females are roughly the same height, on average, as well as the same mass. There are virtually no sexual differences (except, of course, for the obvious, in primary and secondary sexual characteristics). – Niall.

The Baron laughed. “My dear Doctor and Professor Fox, while I have been hoping to have the opportunity to gather more in the way of details regarding your recent excavations, I’m afraid that I’m little more than a ‘talented amateur’ – though I *do* sometimes daydream about running away and becoming a *real* archeologist, in between bouts of digging through the Imperial Archives. I follow the science – try to keep up with what is, and is believed to be – but, sadly, only as an educated layman, and an observer at that. Family obligations prevent me from taking direct action.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, my Lord. My profession lost a potential talent when you were born to the Reynard instead of the Fox line,” Professor Fox said.

“Ah, yes, we each have our crosses to bear,” the Baron said, as they came to a heavy vault door. He leaned forward, pressed his palm against a DNA scanner plate, winced and rubbed his palm after the sample was taken, then after staring into a pair of eyepieces for retinal scans and reciting a nonsense rhyme into a microphone by the side of the door, stepped back as the multi-ton door began to open.

“This seems a bit much in the way of security for a simple audience room – unless it’s the emperor himself that I will be seeing?” Professor Fox asked.

“No, it’s just me. But ‘even paranoids have real enemies’,” the Baron replied. He waved the Professor into the room, and then followed her, locking the door behind him and accessing another biometric series of locks. “There, now we can set to work.” He turned and led Cynthia to the one desk in the room, and then activated a monitor and keyboard as he summoned up chairs for the two of them. “I have to establish a secure link to the House Archives – we should be able to proceed in a minute or two.”

While the Baron busied himself with the security protocols required to establish the interface, Cynthia looked around the room – careful to avoid looking anywhere near the Baron’s keyboard (even though it was behind an opaque shield that covered both the keys and the baron’s hands up to the elbows).

“I am most appreciative of the Imperial attention, milord Baron,” Cynthia said, as that individual looked towards her from the private monitor.

“The House of Reynard appreciates your efforts, Doctor and Professor. You have been a good and kind friend to the House on other occasions. It would be ‘poor form’ for us to not pay attention to one who has been such a good friend to us in past,” the Baron replied. Professor Fox turned her head and bared her throat, as her ears flushed with blood.

The Baron coughed, looked aside, and tapped on the keyboard. A starfield appeared in the air between them.

“Is that random, current or historical?” Professor Fox asked.

“Your *real* question?”

“Well – do the House Archives contain sufficiently similar starfield records – time-compensated ones – that could validate our site’s shots?” Professor Fox asked, her scent betraying a slight sense of embarrassment – as well as considerable curiosity.

The Baron chuckled. "In other words, you want to know if the Archives hold the key to where Yarth *really* was, if you could only ask the right question. Not to mention where our 'friends from somewhere else' might truly be from."

"I have a copy of the star patterns as viewed from our dig sites," Professor Fox said, taking a memory crystal out of a vest pocket and holding it out to the Baron.

"The Archives already have a copy of your papers, including the detailed star charts taken by your group's astrographic people," the Baron said, waving away the crystal, and typing on the keyboard again. "I have just told the Archives to scan your starfield shots and compare them with all First Empire and earlier comparable records. Now, while we wait, perhaps we might discuss the matter of our 'friends from somewhere else'."

"They are ... an interesting case, my lord Baron. If they are who they say they are – and there is every indication that *they* believe their story – then I think it might well be in our mutual best interest to find some way to allow them to return to their own space-time," Professor Fox said.

"And if they are not? If this is a clever plot on the part of the Commonality, or even a faction within the House to upset matters?" Baron Reynard asked.

"I can't speak to that possibility – though if their commander is a 'nexus point', as has been suggested, would it not be better to 'move the piece back', rather than risk introducing a wild variable into 'now'?" Professor Fox asked. "As to their being here as a front from some divergent faction with the House of Reynard, do you or does the House think it likely that a member of the House of Fox would act as a pawn for such?"

"Not likely, but the possibility needs to be considered. As I said, 'even paranoids have real enemies'."

Cynthia Fox shuddered, and rubbed the back her neck. "I would point out that *my* branch of the House of Fox has, at the very least, shown its loyalty to the House of Reynard and to the emperor."

The Baron chuckled. "My dear Doctor and Professor Fox, you have no need to worry about 'losing your head'. I mention the possibility of rebellious members of both Houses because our House genealogists and geneticists have had access to the tissue samples taken of our visitors, and they do appear to be consistent with uplifts from sometime within the first through third centuries."

"Pre-Imperial?"

"Possibly, based on," the Baron looked down at a hidden screen, "'mitochondrial DNA analysis', they could be from anything from the first to the tenth generation of uplifts and, based on similarities between the genetic structure of their commander, his line likely split off from the Imperial line no more than a generation or two earlier – although it is clearly Salic descent – he is, from the House of Fox, despite his height. Blood will tell, after all."

"Then if *he* remains, he would be a potential legitimate claimant to the Imperial throne?" Professor Fox.

“As I said, Salic descent. Although given the interruption of the Mad Queen, one might argue that he was still a legitimate claimant,” the Baron said.

“I’m afraid that I never really focused on the Interregnum – the First Empire and the Second after the Rise are much happier times to investigate.”

“While it might be presumptuous of me to suggest it, you might wish to study the Interregnum a bit more in future – much of our current system of government was honed during that sad period – and our *real* understanding of social dynamics began with the Resolutionists of that period,” the Baron said.

It was Professor Fox’s turn to chuckle. “I didn’t mean to imply that I’d never studied the period – I began my master’s thesis on Dugovnii’s seminal work at the Resolutionist’s Grand Institute before changing it to a study of the Original System question. It’s just that I preferred to focus on other, more pleasant eras,” she said.

“We’ve always known, Doctor and Professor Fox, that Humanity and the Clans began in a single star system. Based on your recent work, we believe that we’ve found our ‘Original System’ – our ‘evolutionary cradle’ as it were,” the Baron said, and smiled a lip covered smile. “The House was always vigilant in its protection of the home system, at least, until we ‘lost’ it.”

“But we know that the First Expansion was rapid – dozens of systems came under control of the First Empire within a single person’s unaugmented lifespan. Yet the data from ‘our friends’ indicates that they have only a few extrasolar outposts, and at best one other colonized world.”

“Which would be consistent with Second Century Yarthé, Doctor and Professor.”

“Then you’re saying that the House of Reynard *does* believe these individuals to be from late pre-Imperial Yarthé?”

“Subject to a few ‘minor’ problems. Their language is basically an early form of modern Anglic, with all the problems that *that* implies. It is easy to err as a result of the similarities – what they are saying, and what we *think* that they are saying, and vice versa. Take the word ‘stellar’ for example,” the Baron said.

“I am quite aware of the problem, my lord Baron,” Professor Fox interrupted. “I was referred to as a ‘lady’ by someone who only knew that early form, recently,” Cynthia said.

“Oh! Ah, well ... no offense intended, surely,” the Baron said, his ears flushing with blood. “I assure you, no one in the House of Reynard would make such a mistake – or if he did, he *would* be punished.”

“And the ‘offender’ did not intend any insult either. But there may be – a linguist probably could make that a definite assertion ‘there are’ – differences when a singular and plural combine or separate. But the original title for the emperor named him as ruler ‘of all the Earths’ – and *that* plural and singular never merged. I am aware of what this might mean – and were our visitors to learn of this, I suspect they, or at least some of them, would be also.”

“So, what do you propose that we do with these ‘visitors’?”

“We either help them return to their own time – if it does appear that they are from the early First Imperial era – or that we keep them here, and merge the vulpine members of their party into the appropriate Houses.”

The Baron shuddered. “No matter how – no. The truer the contender – and anyone with their lineage could be made into a contender, will he or nil she, by the factions most interested in divisiveness or personal advantages – the more that such a potential claimant was likely, or seen as likely to win such a contest, the greater the divisiveness would be. The best solution would be ... well, intermarriage and letting the lines blend over the next several generations. It could easily bring on an Imperial crisis – and, given recent events, that would be ... unfortunate.”

He shook his head. “There could even be calls for abdication and replacement by what would be, now, a ‘senior’, or more closely related, lineage. To the First Emperor. There were ... displacements, and separations. During the Empires, let alone the Inter-regnum. To the extent a closer genetic comparison was found, the pressures would increase.” He shook his head again, harder.

“So, the House of Reynard would push for returning the ‘visitors’ to their own time,” Cynthia Fox said. It wasn’t a question.

“Given the alternative, it would not seem as though we would have much choice – in the interest of Imperial stability,” the Baron said.

“Since our unintentional visitors want to try to return home,” Cynthia said, “causing as little disruption as they can, it would seem that both parties have a common goal – and common interests aplenty.” She smiled sweetly. “While it is true that ‘paranoids can have enemies, too’, it is also true that ‘Emperors can encounter innocent passers-by’. The second may be rarer than the first – but that’s usually because the paranoids are so often so zealous in their suspicions.”

“Professor Fox – you understand that everything that we have discussed here must be kept between my House and yourself?”

“Of course, my lord Baron, of course,” Professor Fox said, and leaned forward to kiss the Baronial ring.

“Then we have an understanding ... excellent!”

“And there is just one small matter where the House of Reynard might show its ‘appreciation’ of my silence.”

“That would be?” The Baron asked.

“Nothing important – a trivial matter, really...”

Professor Cynthia Fox’s Study, Senator Fox’s Estate

Senator Joseph Charles-James Fox glared at his senior wife. “And just where is Justine?”

“Oh, I’m sure that she’s *somewhere*, Joseph. I’m not quite sure why you’re asking me, of course. It’s not my place to keep track of all of your little ‘toys’,” Professor Cynthia Fox answered sweetly.

“As if that stopped you in past – answer honestly, Cynthia, just where is Justine?”

“I am answering honestly when I tell you that I don’t know. Besides, she was getting a bit old for you, wasn’t she? Surely you can find another *younger* tail with which to entertain yourself?”

“Hmph! Well, I suppose she *was* getting a little bit long in the tooth for one of my ladies. But I don’t want it said that I treated her harshly – you *will* see to it that she is sent a proper ‘parting gift’ wherever she might be.”

“Of course, Joseph. I will have Christine arrange for the standard ‘parting gift’. If that is all, Joseph?”

“I suppose so...” the Senator said, and retreated from his senior wife’s den.

[To Be Continued]

Ronin Engineer for A Gentle Stroll #10

by Jim Eckman,
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Notes

Those interested in a copy of Wanderer can e-mail me.

IRL

Art and trains, good and bad.

Worldbuilding

Last issue I published the outline for the worldbuilding section. I've been working on an introduction, but I changed priorities to the robotics details. Would it build a murderbot? Yes!

Next issue

Some robot definitions?

Reactions to Issue #9

Wasteland Critters by Tiffanie Gray – Nice!

The Fox's Den - N.C. Shapero – “*Kafka, the Roleplaying Game*”? *Ok, now that is something I may well steal.*- it probably already exists.

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade - George Phillis – Thank you for the compliment on my worldbuilding outline and introducing American geographical fiction

Wanderer Extract – goodies list

Having fun trying to reformat the 1997 files into something more readable, robotics stuff near the end.

EQUIPMENT

FIELD SHELTERS

COST WEIGHT TL

PONCHO

10cr .5kg 2

Waterproof tarp which can be used as a rain coat or as a shelter. Adds +1 to survival BCS.

SHELTER HALF

12cr 1kg 4

Waterproof half of two man tent with optional bug netting. Weight reduced to 0.5kg at TL

12. All tents add +2 to survival BCS.

1 MAN TENT

25cr 500g 13

Nylon tube tent with closeable ends. Adds +2 to survival BCS.

2 MAN TENT

75cr 3kg 13

Nylon tent with floor and much more room than above, usable in arctic conditions. Adds +3 to survival BCS

4 MAN TENT

150cr 4kg 13

Larger version of above.

8 MAN TENT

300cr 10kg 13

Larger yet in form of small cabin.

16 MAN TENT

1kcr 75kg 13

Larger yet, used for PORTABLE SURGERY and PHARMACY in mild climates.

32 MAN TENT

2kcr 200kg 13

Largest tent normally manufactured, used often as temporary barracks or field hospital ward.

PRESSURE TENT

750cr 10kg 14

Double walled inflatable tent which will maintain atmospheric pressure. Designed for two people with water and air recycle. No airlock and very cramped.

PREFORMED CABIN

1.5kcr 100kg 16

A 3×3×2.5 m cabin made out of polyfoam. Comes in kit form and can be assembled in twenty minutes without special tools. Can be dismantled for transport. Units can be linked and pressurized but lack life support.

BASE MODULE

3kcr 200kg 16

A PREFORMED CABIN with an additional 2 m hall that can be used as an airlock. Unit includes air recycle/heater unit.

SURVIVAL EQUIPMENT

COST WEIGHT TL

POP FLARE

5cr 125g 10

Self contained flare which rises 300m and burns for 30s when fired. Adds +10 to spotting BCS of searchers. Visible 40 km at night, 10 km in daylight.

SMOKE FLARE

5cr 125g 11

Produces a smoke cloud 20×100m in one of eight colors. Adds +10 to searchers spotting BCS in daylight. Visible 10 km.

SIGNAL STROBE

15cr 125g 11

Flashes brightly every five seconds, visible at night for 5km, lasts four hours. Adds +5 to searchers BCS, night only.

FUSION STROBE

1.5kcr 500g 16

Fusion powered device combining ELT, xenon strobe and smoke generator into one package. Device will broadcast emergency message automatically, it will also flash a strobe visible for 25 km, and has a smudge pot option, which will burn any combustible material, generating a smoke plume visible for 10 km.

SIGNAL MIRROR

1cr 25g 1

Mirror for holographic signaling. visible 3km adds +2 to spotting BCS, daylight only.

SIGNAL PANEL

25cr 1kg 11

10m square nylon panel, yellow on one side, blue on the other. Adds +2 to spotting BCS, daylight only. Material is radar reflective, and may be fashioned into a radar beacon visible for 100 km.

SIGNAL ARRAY

1kcr 1.5kg 16

Fusion powered, self illuminating version of above. Adds +4 to spotting BCS, day or night. May be used for sending messages by switching on and off, visible from orbit.

SURVIVAL KNIFE

36cr 500g 11

12cm knife with fishing kit and permanent match in hilt. Adds +1 to Character's Survival BCS.

SURVIVAL BELT

100cr 9kg 13

Kit includes all basic materials required to hunt, fish and build shelter in any terrestrial environment. Adds +5 to survival BCS.

SURVIVAL VEST

50cr 3kg 13

Kit includes: LIFE VEST, 2 POP FLARES, 2 SMOKE FLARES, SIGNAL STROBE, water purification unit, SURVIVAL KNIFE, and 2 days D RATIONS. Designed for survival at sea, this adds +5 to survival BCS at sea, or +2 on land.

SURVIVAL PACK

3kcr 35kg 13

A general purpose survival kit with D RATIONS for 100 days, several waterpure units, emergency blankets, etc. Enough gear for up to 20 people to set up for an extended stay on any terrestrial type planet. Adds +7 to survival BCS.

TRAVEL EQUIPMENT

PARACHUTE

250cr 15kg 9

Simple nylon parachute. A chute **MUST** be packed by a skilled individual. A character without the PARACHUTING skill must make

a DFT CST or suffer 2 d20 subdual damage.

GRAV' CHUTE

500cr 5kg 20

As above except chute is not packed, it is recharged, and it can be used to descend from orbit. Unskilled use is the same.

CLIMBING GEAR

200cr 5kg 12

Nylon ropes, slings, crampons, pitons etc. All the equipment for a technical climb. Adds +5 to CLIMBING BCS

ARCTIC GEAR

300cr 20kg 8

Skis, snowshoes etc. for arctic travel.

TROPICAL GEAR

100cr 5kg 8

Axes, machetes, mosquito nets etc.

SCUBA GEAR

750cr 25kg+ 11

Tanks, hoses, regulators etc.

ZODIAC

200cr+ 50kg+ 10

A super tough inflatable boat. Above is a 2 man raft, add 100cr and 20kg for each additional person or 75kg equipment. Max speed 50 kph

OUTBOARD MOTOR

500cr 10kg 10

Small outboard motor. Runs 1 hour on 1 liter fuel/10kg engine weight. Add 10cr/1kg for each additional person in boat. Speed 10 kph, cost and weight double for 25 kph and triple for 50 kph. At TL 16 fusion powered version available, cost 1.5 kcr, no fuel requirements.

SMALL ATV

1kcr 100kg 12

3 seat, 3 or 4 wheel all terrain vehicle. 50 kph 100km range on 6 liters of fuel. At TL 16 fusion version available, double cost but no fuel requirements

SNOWMOBILE

2kcr 300kg 12

1 or 2 person 100kph snow vehicle. 100km range or at TL 16 fusion for additional 1kcr.

VERY noisy.

JETSKI 2kcr
250kg 13

As above but over water vehicle.

JET-PACK

5kcr 50kg 14

Personal jet flight. fly at 200kph for up to 30 min on 20 kg fuel. TL 16 fusion powered version adds 1 kcr cost, fly for up to 24 hours before recharging

GRAVPACK

15kcr 20kg 19

Much more practical device using antigrav. Allows user to fly at 200kph for up to 12 hours before recharging. Optional wind fairing increases speed to 300 kph but adds bulk and 10kg. Fusion power pack adds 1 kcr, 500 hour life between recharges.

ULTRALIGHT

2kcr 75kg 12

Very small nylon and tube steel aircraft. can be packed into a package 1 meter in diameter and 2.5 meters long. requires 12 hours to set up. will fly 400km at 80kph with 2 people, or 1200km with 1 person and no other weight. TL 16 version adds 1.5kcr and has no fuel requirements.

MOTORCYCLE 1kcr+
70kg+ 10

1 or 2 person. Weight and cost increase along with speed.

MONOCYCLE

3kcr 20kg 16

Gyro-stabilized 1 wheel fusion powered motorcycle. 1 person only, 200kph, excellent cross country and turning performance.

GRAVCYCLE

25kcr 60kg 19

2-3 person anti-grav flying device. shape similar to a motorcycle, 24 hours continuous use before recharge, 300 kph.

RATIONS

All rations listed below are per single meal. Generally characters will eat 2 meals per day in the field, not 3.

A RATIONS 2cr
75kg 8

Boxed, canned, meal including entree, fruit, candy, etc.

B RATIONS

.5cr .06kg 0

High protein bar, jerky, or fortified candy, Characters subsisting on D rations will suffer 1 point of subdual damage for each 3 days, damage recovered as soon as real food is available.

C RATIONS 1.5cr
.5kg 8

Similar to A RATIONS but more concentrated and less tasty.

D RATIONS 3cr
.35kg 13

Bagged, dehydrated meal, requires local water to cook. Can be eaten raw but you don't want to.

E RATION 10cr
.125 19

High density, high tech survival ration. This ration will sustain an individual for a full day, contains all required nutrition, and tastes like particle board. Yech.

F RATION 15cr
.075 22

Like above, but higher tech. Can be reconstituted with water, or eaten dry. Comes in a wide variety of flavors and reconstitutes into a more or less passable imitation of food. Ration includes flameless heat tab to allow warming in any environment.

THERMAL PROTECTION

PARKA See CLOTHING

THINSALATE SUIT See CLOTHING

CATALYTIC SUIT See CLOTHING

EMERGENCY BLANKET

5cr.03kg 13

Reflects body heat, included in all survival equipment listed above except knife. adds +1 to survival BCS.

PONCHO LINER

30cr .75kg 12

Quilted, filled Dacron blanket which snaps into a PONCHO to form a sleeping bag. Much more comfortable than emergency blanket.

AIR MATTRESS

25cr 1kg 9

Keeps user from contacting highly heat conductive ground. Cuts required thermal protection in half. +2 to survival BCS in arctic environments.

DACRON BAG

100cr 3kg 13

Sleeping bag useful for any non-arctic environment. Additional 100c overbag allows use in arctic. Not overly affected by wetness. Adds +5 to arctic survival BCS.

THINSALATE BAG 500cr 1.5kg 14

Sleeping bag made of THINSALATE which is almost as good as a vacuum for insulation purposes. Will work on any terrestrial world and is waterproof. Adds +7 to arctic survival BCS.

CATALYTIC BAG 1kcr 2kg 16

Sleeping bag which includes an internal heating system running on HEAT TABS. When used with insulation pad, will keep user warm at any temperature. Fits over a CREW VACC SUIT or ENVIRONMENTAL SUIT.

THINSALATE BLANKET

250cr .75kg 14

Blanket of material described above. Usable as ground cover or to boost temperature rating of a bag. Adds +1 to survival BCS.

CATALYTIC BLANKET

500cr .8kg 16

Blanket of material described above. Usable as a ground cover or to boost the temperature rating of a bag. Adds +2 to survival BCS.

THERMAL SUIT

5kcr 1kg 18

Open mesh clothing to be worn underneath other clothing. Maintains users body temperature at any level under almost any

condition. Adds +2 to survival BCS in cold OR hot environment.

HEATER/STOVE

100cr 1kg 11

A chemically fueled unit that can heat a tent, cook food, or melt ice. Burns 1 l/hour (.75kg/liter). Adds +2 to survival BCS in cold environments. At TL 16 fusion powered version available, at 1 kcr

HEAT TABS

.25cr .03kg 10 A tube of tabs, 1/2 tube

boils a CANTEENs worth of water or cooks a C RATION. Adds +1 to survival BCS in cold environment.

THERMAL IMPLANT

50kcr Nil 23

Character has the equivalent of a THERMAL SUIT grafted under their skin. Adds +5 to all SURVIVAL BCSs, and does not require any special protective equipment for temperatures +50 to -40 C. Character has a slightly "pebbly" complexion afterwards. Fusion power unit must be recharged once per year.

ALIEN ENVIRONMENT GEAR

FILTER MASK

.1cr .01kg 4

A simple dust mask, useful for dusty or slightly corrupted atmospheres.

OXYGEN BOOST UNIT

\50cr 1kg 13

A small oxygen bottle designed to assist non-natives in a moderately corrupted atmosphere. Must be recharged at least once every 2 days.

COMPRESSOR 150cr .5kg 14

A small compressor for thin atmospheres, includes insert for filter cartridges. Runs 1 week on battery.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUIT

1kcr 4kg 16

First cousin to a VACC SUIT but cannot be used as one. Suit is fully sealed and can either run of local atmosphere using a

complex filter/rebreather system or it can use the REBREATHER below. Suit is flexible and will handle temperatures up to 100 C in mildly corrosive atmospheres. May be fitted with VACC SUIT attachments (qv).

REBREATHER

500cr 1kg 15

Recycles exhaled air, works 24 hours on internal batteries. TL 16 version add 12 kcr to cost, runs 3 months.

FOOD MILL 1kcr

.75kg 17

Will extract edible food from native food sources. Can be set up to handle any races needs. End product tastes a little like unsalted oatmeal, and looks like baby food, but is safe. Runs 1 week on battery. Fusion pack adds 2 kcr to cost, runs 3 month.

AIRTEEN

200cr .09kg 17

AIR extracting CANTEEN. The internal coating of this canteen will extract water from the air in all but the driest environments including all terrain style deserts. Good for 1-5 people depending on moisture available.

WATERPURE STRIPS

5cr .03kg 16

100 WATERPURE tabs. 1 tab renders 1 liter of water drinkable or .5 liters sterile for medical use.

WATER IMPLANT 20kcr
Nil 22

Character has a kidney/bladder implant allowing them to recover 90% of the water used in excretion. This reduces the character's water needs by 50%. A normal human requires 2 liters of water per day, a character with this only requires 1. If coupled with the THERMAL IMPLANT above it reduces their water requirement to 100cc (.1 liter) per day, due to their not sweating.

OXYGEN IMPLANT

40kcr Nil 22

Character has a fusion powered unit implanted

in their rib-cage which breaks carbon-dioxide down into carbon and oxygen. This reduces their air requirements by 90%, IE. they take 1 breath every hour or so. Must be recharged once per year.

BODY FAT IMPLANT

10kcr Nil 22

Character has a fusion powered device in their digestive tract which synthesizes all necessary vitamins and proteins from their own body fat. They can survive for 10 days for each additional kilogram they weigh over their "perfect" weight.

DIGESTIVE IMPLANT

60kcr Nil 22

Character can digest virtually any organic matter, any will pass any poisonous matter it accidentally ingests. Fusion unit must be recharged once per year. Character's BCS is -5 for any skill dealing with food or taste, including ETIQUETTE, due to their lack of taste-buds.

SPACE EQUIPMENT

PRESSURE SUIT

750cr 3kg 14

Basic plastic pressure suit, with clear plastic helmet and a small, 4 hour belt pack providing oxygen only. Very light weight designed for use inside a ship with no temperature or radiation protection. good for no more than 5 minutes outside a ship.

EVA SHELL

2kcr 15kg 14

Strong flexible shell for working outside a ship in hard vacuum. Includes thermal and radiation protection, a propulsion unit and an environmental pack good for 4 hours outside the ship.

REPAIR SHELL

10kcr 25kcr 14

Heavier still, rigid construction with flexible joints. Compatibles with the STRENGTH UNIT (q.v.).

EXPLORATION SHELL

10kcr 25kg 14

Much like the repair shell, but optimized for use on a planet's surface. Has pockets, attachment points for gear etc.

RE-ENTRY SHELL

5kcr 20kg 16

A one use ablative shell to allow a character to reenter a planet's atmosphere. Includes parachutes for breaking and decent. Will only fit rigid vac suits or powered armor

STRENGTH UNIT

50kcr 2kg 21

Available either as a stand alone unit or as a built in a rigid vac suit (powered armor has a more advanced version of this system) As a stand alone unit it adds +10 to the character's STR, runs 1 hour and resembles a loose weave fishnet jumpsuit. It will fit under other cloths. As a built in it doubles the character's STR, and runs 4 hours. The system may be turned on and off to extend it's run time.

MANEUVERING JETS

10kcr 4kg 14

Small, powerful jet pack allowing the user to fly for up to 15 min. at 200kph on a planet's surface. In zero gee they will work for 4 hours due to the much lower thrust requirements.

FUSION MANEUVERING UNIT

25kcr 4kg 19

As above, but 24 hours on a planet's surface, or 2,000 hours in space

EXTENDED EVA PACK

30kcr 15kg 15

Back pack environmental unit good for up to 24 hours

RECYCLING UNIT

15kcr 10kg 19

Fusion powered unit which will maintain air, water and temperature for up to 2 weeks.

RATION DISPENSER

2kcr 1kg 14

A simple feed tube system to allow user to eat while suited up. holds preformed tablets.

STANDARD RATIONS

10cr 500g 14

Normal sugar/protein tablets. A 1 day ration.
CONCENTRATED RATIONS

100cr 500g 19

High tech ration to match the recycling unit.

This is a 2 week ration. The tablets taste like orange flavored sawdust.

OTHER VACC SUIT ATTACHMENTS Many other systems can be attached to a standard vacc suit, these include: Visors; any vision enhancement goggles are available as a vacc suit visor. Commo equipment Any SR Comm or communicator can be fitted for hands free use in a suit. Auto Docs: any of the PORTABLE (P) AutoDocs (q.v.) may be fitted to any Vacc Suit. An Inertial locator may be fitted, as can a military HEADS UP DISPLAY (q.v.).

FIELD GENERATOR

200kcr 250g 24

The ultimate "Vacc Suit". This unit generates a field which prevents air from escaping and radiation from entering, allowing the wearer to work in a shirt sleeve environment in hard vacc. For those with a great Deal of faith in technology.

LIFE VEST

50cr 1kg 13

A very simple pressure tight bag for people who don't know how to use a vacc suit.

Includes a small clear window and air for 24 hours.

LIFE PRESERVER

200cr 1.5kg 14

Much like the life vest but bigger. A very simple pressure tent which will hold 2 people. Air for 1 person for 24 hours. Really designed for space doing medics and technicians who need a small piece of atmosphere in which to do their job

LIFE RAFT

2kcr 100kg 15

For REAL emergencies. A flat panel which

will seat 6 people, with a pressure tent over the top. Air and water for 1 week. The bottom of the panel is ablative and, in dire emergency, the whole thing can re-enter, like the vacc suit re-entry shield. There is a 05% chance it will malfunction in re-entry and kill everyone on board, but sometimes it's worth it.

PRESSURE TENT

5kcr 20kg 14

A sturdy synthetic fiber tent with a re-breather and a heater/cooler system and an ingenious airlock. Can be used as long term (up to 2 weeks) shelter in space.

SUIT PATCH

5cr 60g 13

Self adhesive patch. Will hold full atmospheric pressure.

HULL PATCH

50cr 2kg 13

Same but 1 meter square of material

LIFE SUPPORT CAN

50cr 500g 15

Expendable, one use environmental unit which extracts CO2 and gives off Oxygen and heat. Runs 48 hours from time tab is pulled and will keep 2 people alive.

LIFE SUPPORT UNIT

2kcr 5kg 16

Unit which extracts CO2 and water from the air and will give off oxygen and liquid water as well as heating or cooling as required. Runs 2 weeks on a battery and supports 10 people. Spare batteries weigh 1 kg and cost 500cr. At TL 20 a fusion version becomes available which runs 1 year.

CLOTHING

PARKA

200cr

4kg 0+

A basic piece of cold weather gear. As the level of technology increases, the materials shift from furs to synthetics. TL 6 weight is 2 kg, at TL 8 weight is 1 kg.

EXPEDITION PANTS

100cr 3kg 0+

Similar to parkas, weigh the same at TL 6 and TL 8.

BOOTS

75cr+ 1kg 1+

Semi-custom walking boots fitting to personal tastes.

BOOT PACKS

50cr .75kg 1+

Fur-lined overboots for arctic use.

COLD WORK CLOTHES

45cr 2kg 1+

Wool shirt and pants with cotton underwear or similar synthetics.

TEMPERATE CLOTHES

35cr .75kg 1+

Cotton, linen, silk or similar synthetic materials.

TROPICAL CLOTHES

50cr .65kg 12+

Nylon/cotton fabric in loose weave, hat included.

CASUAL WEAR

75cr+ 1kg 1+

Normal clothes for low to middle class. Styles will vary greatly.

SOCIAL WEAR

150cr+ 1kg 1+

Normal clothes for middle class and for informal gatherings of upper classes. Styles vary tremendously and repeated wearing of the same clothes is usually a social error.

FORMAL WEAR

350cr+ 1.5kg+ 1+

Tuxedos and such, frequently only worn once. Some societies accept the use of rental clothing for this purpose.

THINSALATE SUIT

350cr 1kg 14

Light weight arctic weather jumpsuit, good down to -75C. Adds +1 to survival BCS.

CATALYTIC SUIT

650cr 1.5kg 16

Suit with internal heating system, can be set for any temperature range. Made of a fishnet weave and will fit under most forms of

clothing. Adds +2 to survival BCS.

VISION AIDS

FLASHLIGHT

Magneto powered flashlight with rechargeable batteries.

COLDLIGHT STICK

.25cr .015kg 10

Heatless light source equivalent to 10 watt bulb. Lasts one hour with one use only. TL 15 version gives 10 times the light, for 24 hours.

COLDLIGHT SPOT

2cr

.045kg 14

Equivalent to 75 watt bulb, lasts three hours, one use only. Again, TL 15 version gives 10 times the light for 24 hours.

BINOCULARS

75cr .75kg 10

6×50 power. Adds +3 to Observation BCS for objects over 100 meters away.

BINOCULARS

125cr .075kg 13

10×50 power, fit in a shirt pocket. Adds +5 to Observation BCS.

TELESCOPE

1kcr 15kg 9

A 100mm telescope with spotter scope, camera adapter, tripod, etc.

MICROSCOPE

200cr 5kg 10

A full microscope kit with staining equipment, lighting, and variable powers up to 300x.

Required for use of PATHOLOGY skill.

ELECTRON MICROSCOPE

50kcr 200kg 13

An electron microscope with power supply and microtomes. Adds +5 to PATHOLOGY or GENETICS BCS.

SEE MILITARY ELECTRONICS SECTION

FOR NIGHT VISION EQUIPMENT

#augmentations

VISUAL IMPLANT

30kcr

Nil 22

Character's eyes include the effects of the THERMAL goggles described above.

Character's eyes appear normal, but lack conventional retinas, and hence will not pass a RETINA PRINT security system.

#augmentations

MULTIVISION IMPLANT

100kcr Nil 23

Includes above plus magnification equivalent to the MICROSCOPE and BINOCULARS listed above. The character's eyes do NOT appear normal, and will cause a -2 on all reaction rolls, due to their mechanical appearance.

COMMUNICATIONS

DICTA GRAPH

3kcr 2kg 14

Voice operated typewriter with computer link.

TRANSLATOR

1kcr .35kg 15

Self contained translator. When supplied with the proper CHIP, the unit will attempt to translate any language. Voice activated with a voice output, the unit is prone to errors. Equivalent language BCS is 4, IE broken speech and poor grammar.

IDENTIFICATION EQUIPMENT

PERSONAL IFF

250cr 100g 16

Identification Friend or Foe. A simple transmitter which broadcasts a radio code to prevent the user being fired upon by friendly forces. always fitted to powered armor, it can be used by normal troops as well. runs 1 week in battery. range 3 km.

#augmentations

IMPLANT IFF

10kcr Nil 21

Exactly as above but surgically implanted.

Character may turn on or off at will, and may reprogram the IFF signal mentally, so as to maintain compatibility with current IFF codes. Will run up to 24 hours continuous, but then requires 24 hours to recharge.

VEHICLE IFF

10kcr 3kg 14

As above but to protect vehicles and aircraft from friendly attack. broadcasts a much more complex code and has a range of 200 km.

IFF LOCATOR

500cr 50g 16

A simple readout device to detect IFF signals. when fitted to a helmet the device will tell the user if the target they are aiming down on is friendly. always fitted to powered armor and trooper helmets, it will fit on any style helmet.

IFF RECEIVER

7kcr 2kg 14

As above but for vehicle IFF. also compatible with personal IFF

IFF FIRE CONTROL

L 3kcr

1kg 16

A very simple fire control system usually fitted to infantry heavy weapons, IE. tripod machineguns, support weapons etc. will fire on any target within it's set range (50-500 meters) which lacks the proper IFF. risky to be around but useful for perimeter security.

PERSONAL LET

125cr 150g 13

Emergency Locator Transmitter. Transmits a simple radio signal on a fixed frequency. Can be detected up to 10 km away. will run on internal battery for 2 hours and includes a simple hand crank generator to recharge the battery. TL 15 fusion pack gives 1 year continuous operation and 50g weight.

#augmentations

IMPLANT LET

5kcr Nil 21

Similar to the above, but surgically implanted in the character's rib-cage. Hidden inside one of the character's ribs, the device can not be seen on x-ray. Can transmit up to 2 hours

per day, battery is recharged by the character's body. Character controls when it broadcasts.

VEHICLE LET

1kcr 3kg 13

As above but for aircraft or ground vehicles. range 200km. includes ability to broadcast Morse code and can be set to automatically come on in the event of a crash or major accident.

PERSONAL LET LOCATOR

200cr 500g 13

Small, portable radio receiver "hard tuned" to receive LET signals. Usually used by rescue crews to track down an LET signal the last kilometer or so. TL 16 version with fusion pack weighs 125g.

VEHICLE LET LOCATOR

1kcr 2kg 13

Much larger receiver which will detect LET signals up to the listed ranges, but can only localize them to within a 1 km area.

NAVIGATION EQUIPMENT

ITEM COST WEIGHT TL

COMPACT LOCATOR

1kcr 60g 15

Small inertial locator system. Will tell the total distance and direction the user has traveled since resetting the device. Accurate to 01%, IE an error of $\pm$ 1km in 1 trip of 100km

#augmentations

IMPLANT LOCATOR

5kcr Nil 21

Exactly as above, but implanted in one of the character's ribs. self powering.

VEHICLE LOCATOR

10kcr 2kg 15

Larger and more accurate version of the above. Accurate to 00.1%, IE. 1km in 1,000km.

SHIP'S LOCATOR

50kcr

100kg 13

Still larger version as would be found on a large wet hulled ship. this system is for all

intents perfectly accurate, with no errors.

COMPACT GPS

1.5kcr 90g 14

A very small satellite navigation system.

Most civilized worlds have navigation satellites in orbit around them, with this device the user may determine his or her position within 100m any place on the planet.

VEHICLE GPS

5kcr 3kg 13

Larger and more capable system. Can determine the user's position within 1m.

RADIO NAV. SYSTEM

10kcr 50kg 10

Primitive navigation system using a system of the beacons described below. Cost and weight reduced to 1/10 at TL 13+

RADIO NAV. BEACON

1kcr 25kg 10

system of radio navigation beacons. 1 is required every 300km, in a grid pattern.

COMPASS 50cr

60g 10

Top grade military lensatic compass.

Compasses are invented at TL 4, and can be as cheap as 1cr.

SEXTANT

250cr 2kg 7

A fairly sophisticated device for navigation using the stars as reference points. Includes a copy of the charts and tables necessary to use. Required for LAND NAVIGATION skill.

CHRONOGRAPH 100cr

30g 13

High quality super accurate electronic watch, titanium case etc. Mechanical chronograph at TL 7 weighs 2kg and costs 5kcr. Some sort of accurate time piece is required for the skill LAND NAVIGATION.

#augmentations

IMPLANT CHRONOGRAPH

5kcr Nil 21

Cranial implant allowing the character to always know the correct time, the exact elapsed time from any bench-mark point etc.

Character may trigger or shut off ability at will.

CAMCORDER

500cr 1kg 16

Related to the CHIP READER, but optimized for map use. A flexible plastic screen with full color capability.

INTEGRATED NAV.

2kcr 1kg 17

Integrates the CAMCORDER above with a COMPACT LOCATOR and a COMPACT LORAN system. The user's location reads out on the map, along with any other pertinent information. NOTE this system requires prerecorded map chips to function.

CELESTIAL NAV. 5kcr

15kg 17

An integrated navigation system which will determine the user's location on the surface on any planet anyplace in the spiral arm. Includes it's own telescope and stellar database.

RDF SET 2kcr 3kg

13

Radio Direction Finder. Will locate the source of any radio or radar transmission. Accurate to 01% of the range to the transmitter, IE. will locate a 100 km away transmitter within 1 km.

AIRCRAFT ELECTRONICS

BASIC INSTRUMENTS

3kcr 20kg 10

Basic 5 flight instruments, minimum to lift a real plane (not an ultra light) off ground.

ADVANCED INSTRUMENTS

50kcr 50kg 13

Computerized equivalent, compatible with auto-pilots, automated navigation equipment etc. Much more accurate, gives a +1-3 modifier to AIRCRAFT BCS for simple piloting. No bonus in combat. Includes encoding altimeter and transponder to allow operation in congested air space.

BASIC AUTO PILOT

5kcr 10kg

Basic "keep the plane level" autopilot.
Incompatibly with automated navigation equipment.

ADVANCED AUTO PILOT

50kcr 50kg

More sophisticated system. Will successfully fly the aircraft to any predesignated point.

Can not take off or land.

INTEGRATED CONTROL

75kcr 35kg

Fully computerized system capable of operation without any human intervention.

Will literally run the aircraft from taxi out to landing without human input.

BASIC FIRE CONTROL

200kcr 50kg

Minimum fire control for a military aircraft, a stabilized gun sight and a tail warning radar.

Aircraft without this are -4 to all BCS rolls in combat.

ADVANCED FIRE CONTROL

500kcr 75kg

More sophisticated system integrating all aircraft sensor data into aircraft displays.

Gives +2 BCS modifier

HEADS UP DISPLAY

100kcr 25kg

Projects all relevant data onto windscreen, increasing pilot efficiency. adds +1 to all combat BCS rolls

HOTAS CONTROLS

150kcr 40kg

Hands On Throttle And Stick. A more ergonomic cockpit layout which allows more efficient operation. Adds +1 to all combat BCS rolls

LOOK-SHOOT SYSTEM

150kcr 35kg

Integrated laser-sensor system built into pilot's helmet. Automatically detects where the pilot is looking, and aims the craft's weapons there. Adds +2 to all combat BCS rolls

RECORDING AND DATA STORAGE DEVICES

STILL CAMERA

1kcr 1kg 12

A full photography kit including camera body, several assorted lenses, tripod, strobes, meter, etc. Film costs about .1c per shot.

COMPACT MOVIE CAMERA

30cr .5kg 10

An 8mm movie camera without sound. Film is 35c per hour.

MOVIE CAMERA

200kcr 40kg 10

A 35mm camera with accessories, power zoom, pan, and tilt, stabilized roller tripod, color correction, etc. Film is 300cr per hour.

MANUAL FILM LAB

1kcr 150kg 10

Enlargers, pans, tanks, chemicals, color testers, etc. All equipment required for all normal photographic work.

AUTO FILM LAB

6kcr 50kg 13

A fully automated film lab. Turn around time one hour.

VIDEO CAMERA

500cr 1kg 13

A fully self-contained unit, disks last one hour, batteries last hour and cost 5cr.

TRI-DEE CAMERA

2kcr 1kg 16

A unit much like the above except its tapes are three dimensional. Uses normal projection gear with polarized light.

HOLO CAMERA

15kcr 3kg 17

Unit takes full color holographic tapes that can be projected to any size.

TELEVISION

200cr 5kg 12

Standard TV includes a player for video disks.

TRIVISION

750cr 20kg 16

Same as above with three dimensional capabilities.

HOME HOLO UNIT

2kcr 15kg 17

A unit that will project life size and apparently real images up to 10 meters. Often found in high tech homes.

THEATER PROJECTOR

15kcr 200kg 10

Projector for 35mm film. Suitable for theaters of up to 1,000 patrons.

THEATER HOLO UNIT

500kcr 300kg 17

Projector for holo tapes. Suitable for theaters of 3,000 patrons.

RECORDER

75cr .25kg 11+

Standard cassette audio recorder. At TL 14 micro chips replace the tape, and at TL 15 optical media replaces the chips.

SOLID STATE CAMERA

300cr .09kg 14

Camera records pictures on small silicon chips.

PANSENSORY RECORDER

750kcr 5kg 23

A recorder capable of capturing all five senses.

PANSENSORY TANK

10kcr 300kg 23

A pansensory player device. One person at a time may use the tank. Used by high speed schools and jaded thrill seekers.

REPLICATOR-PROJECTOR

250kc 300kg 24

The ultimate in entertainment. Makes use of TRANSPORTER technology to actually create any scene, object or creature the user can describe. Generally tied to extensive data bases so that the individual need only tell the computer "I want to drive the 24 hours of Le Mans", or "take me to the harem of the Pasha of Persia". Detailed descriptions are not required. Generally built into a large room or bay of a ship.

OPTICAL MEDIA RECORD

2kcr .5kg 15

Keyboard device for storing data and programming on optical media. The

programmer is capable of transferring any sort of text, photos or maps into the optical media format.

POCKET O M READER

150cr .09kg 15

A 30x30x100mm device for reading optical media, includes flat display.

O M READER

3kcr 7kg 15

A 1mx1mx30mm device like above. usually attached to a wall. Also available in a desk top model at the same cost.

#augmentations

IMPLANT O M UNIT

30kcr Nil 22

Character has a reader implanted. They have instant, total recall of any thing in storage.

Reader is usually hidden under a flap of skin.

It requires 5 minutes in private to change

chips. This is NOT compatrable with computer MBM modules! Optical Media

allow access to information only, MBM modules allow access to skills programs.

OPTICAL MEDIA

1cr 3g 15

Storage device for above systems, capable of either color or black and white storage.

Equivalent storage of 10,000 books.

DETECTION AND ANALYSIS

EQUIPMENT

DOSIMETER

3cr 10g 12

Simple treated film which registers the character's exposure to radiation. All paying customers on starships are required to wear one.

SCINTILLATION COUNTER

500cr 1kg 13

Much like a Geiger-counter but much more sensitive

METAL DETECTOR

2kcr 1kg 15

Detects the presence of metals. can be set to detect quantities as small as 1 gm at short

range (10 meters) or ton quantities at up to 10 km.

THERMAL DETECTOR

5kcr 3kg 13

Similar to THERMAL GOGGLES q.v.. but more sensitive. Can detect the difference between a tank of water and one of oil by their heat signature, can tell the difference between real and artificial trees etc. will spot a human at 2km, or an AFV at 5km.

ENHANCED VIDEO

200kcr 10kg 14

Super enhancement of a video picture. Effectively reduces the range to an object by 90%, allowing the user to see at 1000 meters what they could normally see at 10 etc. max range 350 km.

AUDIO SENSOR

5kcr 4kg 14

Highly directional, highly selective audio system. Can pick out a normal level conversation, on a busy street, at 100 meters, or in a quiet environment at 2km. May be operated by telemetry.

SNIFFER

5kcr 2kg 14

Programmable airborne chemical detector. Device can be programmed to sense any sort of chemical, from tracking animals, to looking for bombs, to following a specific person. Sort of an electronic bloodhound. Note to use this device the character must know what he or she is looking for.

CHEM ANALYSIS KIT

20kcr 100kg 13

All the equipment to use the skill ANALYTIC CHEMISTRY. Includes glassware, scales, a centrifuge, a mass spectrometer, a gas chromatography etc. etc.

CHEM ANALYZER

25kcr 1kg 19

A single package replacing the above kit. Still requires ANALYTIC CHEMISTRY skill to operate. can be operated by long distance telemetry.

BIO ANALYSIS KIT 25kcr
120kg 13

All the equipment to use the skills BIO CHEMISTRY, ZOOLOGY, XENO-ZOOLOGY BOTANY, XENO-BOTANY, ECOLOGY and XENO-ECOLOGY. With the addition of an electron microscope the kit will also serve for the skill GENETICS.

BIO ANALYZER 30kcr
2kg 21

A single unit package to support any of the above skills. Does not include the electron microscope. May NOT operate by long distance, but may be used as a recording device to allow later analysis.

ELEC ANALYSIS KIT
15kcr 50kg 13

Equipment to do any form of analysis on electronic equipment, or on an electronic phenomena.

ELEC ANALYZER 32kcr
2kg 22

Single device to replace above kit. May be operated by long distance telemetry.

ATMOS ANALYSIS KIT
10kcr 50kg 13

Specific equipment to analyze a planet's atmosphere, specifically for harmful trace compounds which may not be immediately detected.

ATMOS ANALYZER
12kcr 1kg 21

Automated equipment for above tests. Requires 12 hours to run tests but does not require a skilled operator. Operation may be fully automatic.

MASS DETECTOR
7kcr 1.5kg 19

Will determine the mass and specific gravity of any object it is pointed at. Can be used to detect hollow walls, secret doors buried chambers within 100 meters of the surface etc. Range is 300 meters and may be operated by long distance telemetry.

SEISMIC DETECTOR

3kcr 2kg 16

Extremely sensitive seismic detector. Used to analyze earthquakes etc., also can be used to detect movement as it will register a person walking up to 1 km away.

SEISMIC ANALYZER

20kcr 5kg 16

Compliment to above detector. With this unit, the character may use seismic equipment to detect buried items, hidden rooms, rock strata etc. using the equipment like a land SONAR.

MOVEMENT DETECTOR

10kcr 1.5kg 19

Will detect any movement within 3 km. Can be set to ignore leaves fluttering etc. May operate on telemetry.

LIFE DETECTOR 17kcr

2kg 20

Detects multicell organisms only.

Programmable to detect only certain types of beings, or only those over a certain size, or only flyers, or only pine trees or, or... Range adjustable from 50 meters to 5 km. May operate on telemetry.

ELEC DETECTOR 9kcr

1.5kg 18

Detects electromagnetic activity. Useful to find hidden functioning electronics, of detect which robot is "playing 'possum" etc. May also be used as a recording device to allow a character to later analyze a broadcast signal.

COMPUTER ANALYZER

10kcr 3kg 16

Adds +5 to a character's COMPUTER REPAIR BCS.

ENGINE ANALYZER

15kcr 2kg 20

Adds +5 to STAR SHIP REPAIR BCS.

GRAV ANALYZER

6kcr 2kg 19

Adds +5 to GRAVIMETRIC REPAIR BCS

RAD ANALYZER 7kcr

3kg 18

Analyses the type and origin of radioactivity. Useful for troubleshooting ship's engines, or analyzing alien power

systems etc.

GENETIC SEQUENCER

15kcr 25kg 15

Determines the genetic makeup of a sample of organic materials placed in machine. Can determine the general species in a few hours. User must have skills in GENETICS.

Character may attempt to completely re-construct an animal from a single cell. Task project with turn of at least a week.

PENETRATING RADAR

5kcr 20kg 12

Gives vertical map of underlying strata.

Resolution poor, useless for treasure or fossil hunting. Valuable for analyzing layers of sediment or locating large buried structures, eg. buildings

GEO-PHONES 10kcr

100kg 11

Simple system using soundwaves to map large structures (several kilo-meters) across. Used in prospecting, looking for oil or determining ancient terrain features

GEO-DOPPLER 50kcr

50kg 14

More sophisticated system, which will resolve down to 10 cm. useful for doing large scale survey of site for archeological study.

GEO-AXIAL IMAGING

200kcr 150kg 22

Super-accurate 3 dimensional imaging of buried objects. Creates 3-D pseudo-photograph, accurate within 1mm, based on different densities of buried materials.

RADIO-ISOTOPE DATING

125kcr 300kg 14

Device for determining the age of an object based on radioactive decay. Uses Carbon-14 for relatively young samples, and other isotopes for older samples.

SPECTRAL ANALYZER

50kcr 50kg 16

Powerful laser combined with spectral analyzer. Automatically give analysis of underlying strata by boring a laser hole and studying products.

PALEO-GENETIC ANALYZER

150kcr 45kg 22

Analyzes the fragments of genetic material found imbedded in fossils material. Designed to work with the tiny fragments available under these conditions.

RPV TELEMETRY PACK

4kcr 1kg 13

Multi-channel 2 way communication system allowing a character to control, and receive data from, any of the above sensors which can be remotely controlled. Broadcast range 200km

COMPACT RPV

7kcr

10kg 14

A very small, 1.5 meter wingspan, Remote Piloted Vehicle. Either propeller or jet driven, the craft comes equipped with a high quality TV camera,(observation AST 10, CST 7, range 100 meters) a video recorder with a 2 hour capacity, an auto pilot, the facility to be controlled from the ground (within a 10 km radius only) and 5kg worth of additional space for magnification/thermal/starlite, other sensor systems etc. flies at 100kph for up to 3 hours. For an additional 3kcr camera can be up graded to AST 20, CST 13, range 500 meters.

RECON RPV

50kcr 120kg 15

Larger, more capable RPV than the above. Basic equipment is the same, except jet powered only, 500kph for 4 hours, ground control within 100km and full recording for any sensors on board. Basic camera is mounted to give 360 degree view, AST 22, Cst 15, range 1km and 100kg space available for other systems. At TL 19 may be upgraded to grav propulsion for additional 10 kcr. Unlimited endurance. For an additional 5kcr the RPV may have an onboard programmable autopilot freeing it from ground control.

SURVEILLANCE SYSTEMS

The "bugs" listed below share some common characteristics. In their basic form they are about the size and appearance of the head of a thumb tack, a disk 1cm in diameter by 3mm thick, or a cylinder 3mm in diameter by 2 cm long. They have a functional life of about 4 hours and a detection range of 5 meters unless otherwise specified. Video pickup bugs are particularly limited as they constrained by the physics of light. The basic bug has a transmitter with an effective range of 100 meters, and can be turned on and off by remote control.

AUDIO BUG

50cr nil 13

A simple microphone. Picks up voices at up to 5 meters

SR VIDEO BUG

250cr nil 15

Black and white photos from 0 to 5 meters from bug.

LR VIDEO BUG 500cr

nil 16

Black and white photos from 5 to 100 meters from bug

IR VIDEO BUG 750cr

nil 16

Photos of heat sources form 0 to 5 meters from bug.

TI VIDEO BUG

2.5kcr nil 17

Thermal imaging from 0 to 50 meters from bug.

MASS BUG

500cr nil 18

Once set the bug will detect any mass over 1 kg coming within 10 meters of it. Will NOT report the mass of the item, nor how many items, only that something new has moved into it's search area. Runs 2400 hours, or 100 days.

ER MASS BUG 2kcr

nil 20

Will detect any mass over 10kg coming within 100 meters, and will count the number

of items, also 100 days life.

METAL BUG 3kcr

nil 19

Will detect quantities of metal over 500g coming within 10 meters, 100 days life.

SONIC BUG 500cr

nil 15

Super sensitive microphone which detects, but does not reproduce, very faint sounds. Will detect a man breathing in a silent room at 10 meters, or one talking at 100. Will NOT record the sound, only signal that there is a sound present. 100 days life

CHEM BUG 500cr

nil 16

Will signal the presence of a single chemical. The bug is factory set for a single, specific chemical and may never be reprogrammed. Examples of bugs available are to sense perspiration of a specific race, explosives, petrochemicals, synthetic fabrics, products of combustion etc. About as sensitive as a well trained human nose.

TRACKER BUG 50cr

nil 13

A very simple radio broadcast unit. Designed to be attached to a vehicle and followed by the tracker below.

CRAWLER UNIT 500cr

30g 15

A bus which will hold 5 of the above bugs, 5cm long 2cm wide. May be disguised as a large insect with the parts kit included. will move at 2kph for up to 1 hour, or for 100 hours on the TL 18 fusion pack. Units with fusion pack can also power their bugs.

HOPPER UNIT 750cr

30g 15

Much like the above unit, but set up to "hop" up to 5 meters

GRAV FLYER UNIT

2kcr 30g 22

As above but will fly at 30kph for up to 100 hours.

BURST COMM UNIT

4kcr 10g 15

Stores up to 24 hours of data and transmits it in 1-2 seconds, thus defeating most simple bug detectors, which sense the bugs broadcast signal.

BUG SNIFFER 500cr

200g 13

Automatically detects any bug within 100 meters which does not have a BURST COMM UNIT attached.

MOP

5kcr 200g 17

As above plus, will detect bugs with a BURST COMM on a successful ELECTRONICS OPPS BCS roll

BUG TRACKER 4kcr

5kg 13

Will follow TRACKER BUG within 50km. SECURITY SYSTEMS

POLYGRAPH

3kcr 5kg 11

A Classic "lie detector" Can be defeated by a WILL CST or by a dose of QUIZPRUF (q.v.) drug.

MULTIGRAPH

10kcr 4kg 15

More Sophisticated device. Can be defeated by QUIZPRUF ALPHA and a WILL CST, any higher QUIZPRUF, or 2 WILL CST's. Adds +5 to character's INTERROGATION BCS.

V-S ANALYZER

7kcr 3kg 13

Voice Stress Analyzer. Can Assist in determining if a person is lying. Will work on a recording or a broadcast. Not CUMULATIVE with any other device, adds +2 to INTERROGATION or INTERVIEWING BCS.

INTERA-BOT

50kcr+ 50kg 16

For the less subtle interrogator. This special purpose interrogation robot adds +10 to the character's Interrogation BCS, and it's possession will get him summarily executed on most civilized planets. It has a 01% chance per day (non cumulative) of causing the

subject to go totally insane due to the combination of hypnotics, drugs, pain and terror.

CLOSED CIRCUIT TV

5kcr 10kg 12

A simple system with 4 cameras and monitors. Allows the character operation system to use his or her OBSERVATION BCS at the 4 locations covered. Additional camera/monitor combos are 250cr each.

ADVANCED TV SYSTEM

55kcr 20kg 13

Much more advanced system. 4 cameras and monitors, with the following enhancements; Automatic motion detector picks up any movement seen by any camera, IR filter allows user to see heat sources in unlit areas. Controllable zoom and gain allows user to "take a closer look" by remote control. Adds +5 to users BCS.

REMOTE SENSORS

The following items share some common characteristics. All are available in either indoor or outdoor versions. The indoor versions are smaller and more easily hidden, outdoor are in weatherproof packages. All are available either as wired or stand alone. The wired versions get their power from the system they are hooked up to, the stand alone have batteries, usually 24-48 hours life, and will broadcast up to 5km. All the sensors can be programmed to ignore "background" input so as to reduce false alarms.

PROXIMITY

200cr 30g 14

Will detect any object moving into it's search area. Programmable from 5 to 50 meters range and to detect anything from a few grams (short range only) to man sized.

LONG RANGE PROX

500cr 60g 15

Programmable from 50 meters to 500. Minimum detectable mass is 40kg.

LIGHT

100cr 30g 14

You can't steal what you can't see. detects the slightest trace of light. 100x more sensitive than starlight equipment.

MOVEMENT

250cr

90g 14

Detects objects moving within it's search area, programmable from 5 to 100 meters.

Sensitivity is settable to ignore small objects if desired. Will detect objects down to 5 grams if so programmed.

VIBRATION

100cr 150g 13

Will detect a person walking at 100 meters or a tank at 2km.

PRESSURE

50cr 1kg 12

A 2 meter square mat which generates a signal if pressure is applied to it. usually concealed in a floor to detect persons walking on it.

MAGNETIC

400cr

50g 15

This device will detect 25g (about 1 ounce) of metal at up to 100 meters. Max range is 500 meters, minimum mass is 1 kg at range.

SONIC

500cr 60g 14

Super sensitive microphone. Will detect the presence of (but will NOT reproduce) very faint noises. Eg. A person walking softly at up to 25 meters, a person talking at 200 meters etc. Does NOT allow user to record these sounds, only tells him they are there.

CHEMICAL

5kcr 90g 17

Programmable chemical detector. Can be set to signal on any chemical, so as to detect human breath or sweat, or non-humans, or knockout gas, or a petroleum leak or. . .

SENSOR CONTROLLER

4kcr 10kg 12

Control up to 100 wired in sensors, or up to 25 broadcast type. Requires electrical power.

SENSOR CALIBRATION KIT

5kcr 10kg 13

A dedicated computer set to establish the "normal" inputs for a sensor system, and for programming the sensors in the net.

SECURED ENTRY SYSTEMS

The following systems are designed to work with a security system based on a computer. The units listed below are simply Input Output devices for the computer. They could also be used as a "stand alone" door lock, controlling an electronic lock, or a powered door of the sort found on space craft.

VOICE PRINT UNIT

5kcr 2kg 13

A device for identifying individuals by their speech. The resonances set up by the throat and sinuses of an individual forms a unique pattern which is extremely difficult to reproduce and is as distinctive as a fingerprint. A simple tape recording WILL NOT fool this device.

PALM PRINT UNIT

12kcr 3kg 14

Automated device to take a "fingerprint" of the person's whole hand. Note the hand must be warm, a severed one won't work!

RETINA PRINT UNIT

20kcr 5kg 14

A device for scanning the subject's eyes to determine the pattern of the veins in the retina, a pattern as unique as a fingerprint.

EEG DETECT UNIT

5/50kcr 1/5kg 17

A device for identifying a person based on their brain waves. The costs and weights given are for remote sensors / controller. Each system must have a controller and may have as many as 100 remote sensors. Each person authorized to enter has a crystal grown for them, based on their Electro EncephliGram (EEG) This crystal is resonate at a combination of the frequencies found in their EEG, forming a unique pattern. The crystal amplifies these frequencies to allow the unit to detect them. A person without a crystal, or with someone

else's will be detected as an intruder. The crystal is 3cm in diameter and weighs 5 gm (about the size of a 25 cent piece).

MAG STRIP READER

500cr 1kg 13

A simple reader for magnetic strip encoded cards, with a key pad for entering codes.

Basically like an ATM.

CARD PASS SYSTEM 1/10kcr

1/5kg 13

More sophisticated system. Weight/cost is remote sensor / controller. All systems must have a controller and may have up to 100 sensors. The sensor will detect the code in the card from 3 meters away, even in a person's wallet. A classic application is for a ship's security system, the magnetic code is built into the DOSIMETER which safety regs require everyone to wear at all times. Thus any door the person's authorized to pass through opens as the walk up to it, and any door they aren't stays closed.

MAGNO-GRAV PRESSOR

500kcr 25kg 22

A VERY sophisticated device which detects contraband hidden on a person's body and "Picks his pocket", relieving him or her of any weapons, drugs, electronics, etc. they may be attempting to smuggle. System usually takes the form of a "malfunctioning" door, which diverts the subject's attention with flashing lights, messages on a screen, noises etc. Keeping them in the field until they are completely clean.

ELECTRONIC LOCK

200cr 500g 13

A simple electrically controlled lock which may be coupled with any of the security systems above.

MECHANICAL LOCK 10cr+ + 75g++ 5+

Basic mechanical lock. A person may only pick a lock of their tech level or below, and MUST have a pick set of tech level equal to the lock. Characters gain a BCS bonus of +5 for each Tech Level they have over that of the

lock.

MAGNETIC LOCK

200cr+ 150g+ 17+

Locking system using magnets and tuned electronic circuits, rather than mechanical parts. No wearing surfaces, lock will last forever. Requires correct pick set to open, otherwise as MECHANICAL LOCK.

BASIC SAFE 2kcr+

150kg++ 8+

Conventional dial combo safe. Small floor or wall model, larger models cost proportionately more. As with locks, can only be cracked by character of equal or higher TL. ANYONE can "brute force" a safe, but it could take days.

ADVANCED SAFE

20kcr+ 150kg++ 17+

Higher tech construction, ablative layers to discourage burning etc. Brute forcing this one would take a couple of weeks. Otherwise as above.

COVERT ENTRY / CONCEALMENT EQUIPMENT

STANDARD PICK SET

10cr/TL 10g/TL 5+

Standard mechanical picks to open conventional locks. Set must be at least as high Tech Level as the lock to be opened.

MAGNETIC PICK SET

100cr/TL 10g/TL 17+

More advanced equipment to open electromagnetic locks. Also must be of equal or greater TL to the lock.

CARD PASS SET

2.5kcr 250g 13+

System to "pick" electronic card pass systems. Consists of a card shaped probe and a computerized "pick" system

BASIC SAFE CRACKING

5kcr 5kg 8-16

Basic equipment to open simple mechanical safes. Must be as high tech level as the safe.

ADVANCED SAFE CRACKING

50kcr 50kg 17+

Equipment to open more advanced safes. Must be as high tech as the safe.

LIGHT GOGGLES

5kcr 1kg 15

Much higher gain Light Amplification system, related to the Image Intensification systems listed under Military Electronics, but 100x the gain. Allows user to see in light levels low enough not to trigger the LIGHT SENSOR security systems.

THERMAL SUIT

7kcr 2kg 15

This suit designed to mask the wearer's thermal signature. Will conceal the user from thermal detection or imaging. Like all the "SUITS" below, runs 24 hours on rechargeable battery.

THERMAL COVERALL

15kcr 5kg 16

Larger and heavier system to conceal Vacc Suits and/or Fighting Suits. These suits, having a much larger thermal signature are not totally concealed, instead their OBJECT CLASS is reduced by 1 level. (q.v.) Like all "COVERALLS" below runs 24 hours on battery stand alone, or indefinitely if worn over a fighting suit from which it can draw power.

PROXIMITY SUIT

7kcr 2kg 15

This suit of material to absorb electromagnetic radiation, as such it shields the user from detection by the PROXIMITY SENSOR security systems. Compatible with the THERMAL SUIT, but not with the SNEAK SUIT, as the Proximity Suit must be the outermost layer worn to be effective.

SNEAK SUIT 10kcr

3kg 16

A lightweight outer garment which detects the surrounding colors and adjusts it's self to match. Shift's user's spotting column 1 to the left. If the wearer is already Hidden, it subtracts an additional 2 from any observer's roll to spot.

CAMO COVERALLS

20kcr 4kg 17

Same system for Vacc Suits and/or Fighting Suits.

PRISMATIC SUIT

65kcr 4kg 19

More advanced version which actually reproduces the image of the background, making the suit effectively transparent. It reduces the user's spotting class 1 to the left, if it shift's beyond "F", it adds an additional -4 to any roll. Coveralls are double cost
DEODORANT

200cr Nil 18

Not your basic Right Guard. This is a complex family of chemicals which react with, and neutralize the 200 or so chemicals given off by the human body. this is 1 dose, and works 24 hours.

FALSE EEG GENERATOR

750kcr 5g/50kg 19

The cost given is for the machine to create the false crystals, the first weight is that of the crystal, the second is that of the machine. Note detailed information about the person to be simulated is required. at least 5 minutes with a PSY RECORDING AUTODOC or equivalent.

FALSE RETINA CONTACTS

20kcr Nil/4kg 16

Machine for creating false retina scan contact lenses. The contacts have a hologram of the desired retina pattern in them. This restrict the wearer's vision somewhat, but will get through security. All Observation rolls are -2 while wearing contacts.

FALSE PALM GLOVES

12kcr 10g/5kg 15

Machine to produce tissue thin synthetic material gloves with the desired palm/ finger print patterns. Gloves generally not noticeable(count as HIDDEN thing to detect).

FALSE VOICE GENERATOR

8kcr 500g 15

Special computer system with adjustable speech sythsis system which will "speak"

with a voice print pattern matching the pre-programed pattern.

MEDICAL EQUIPMENT

PERSONAL AID KIT

10cr 500g 12

A Large bandage, several small ones, and some minor drugs. Adds +2 to FIRST AID BCS.

SMALL AID KIT

100cr 1kg 13

Requires a FIRST AID BCS of at least 5 to use. Adds +5 to BCS.

LARGE AID KIT

500cr 2kg 15

Requires a EMERGENCY MED. BCS of 10 and adds +10. Includes blood plasma, antibiotics, anti shock drugs etc. Designed for the military "Corpsman" or civilian paramedic. Can treat 5 people before needing a refill costing 100cr.

EMERGENCY SET

10kcr 200kg 15

Designed for a military aid post or hospital "ER". Everything to support emergency surgery or any other form of emergency care including cardiac arrest, child birth, stroke etc. Will support 1 physician and up to 10 nurses/EMTs. Can treat 100 people before expendables are exhausted. "refill" costs 1kcr.

SURGICAL SET 75kcr

500kg 13

All the equipment to do anything the surgeon wants to try, including cosmetic or reconstructive surgery, organ transplants etc. Will support 1 doctor and 6-8 nurses.

GENERAL SET 10kcr

150kg 13

All the equipment for running a small general practice doctor's office including diagnostics, light lab work, simple pathology etc.

FORENSIC SET

50kcr 200kg 13

The equipment for doing advanced pathology and medical investigation into causes of

death. The equipment to be a medical examiner.

WARD SET

10kcr 100kg 13

The equipment to support up to 20 patients who are recovering from surgery or other treatments. Requires at least 1 nurse and 2 orderlies to run.

LAB SET

20kcr 200kg 13

Equipment to do any sort of medical lab work a doctor can think up. Will support up to 10 doctors. Requires 3 Lab Tech with a minimum of MEDICAL PRACTICE BCS 10 to operate.

PHARMACY SET

100kcr 300kg 13

All the equipment, references etc. to run a pharmacy for a small hospital. Requires 1 pharmacist (BCS 15 PHARMACOLOGY) and 2-4 helpers to run. Each patient treated requires 100cr in drugs, set will treat 100

people (total refill 10kcr) before running low on critical drugs.

I.C.U. SET èxial Thermography, Magnetic Resonance Imaging, sonagram, 3-D imaging X-ray and virtual reality analysis.

Creates a full, real-time, color virtual reality output to aid in diagnostics. Any condition which has any physical symptom of any kind will be apparent with this system. Also very useful for post-mortem analysis (autopsy), or for archeology. Requires skilled character to operate and intemperate results.

ADV PATHOLOGY SYSTEM

500kcr 750kcr 15

Counterpart to above system. Does complete bio-chemical analysis of individual. Any condition, disease or poisoning which produces any biological or chemical change in a patient will be discovered by this device. Requires skilled use.

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #10

George Phillips
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Times have been interesting. On one hand, I more or less finished my Telzey Amberdon novel, which still needs a title. It is out to a whole bunch of gamma readers, a couple of whom actually gave advice. The advice, I would say, was very good, but whatever. If any of the readers here would care to read it within the next few weeks, I can send you a file.

The N3F website has been wrecked twice in the last month. The first time, the backups lost the last year of material (I still have it). The second time, after an hour and a half on the phone, they claimed that the nameservers were set incorrectly on their server (no, I do not know what this means) and had to be reset.

We will be moving to a new hosting service for the N3F web site, as soon as possible. Then it will need to be rebuilt, because the backup may or may not have malware of some sort.

Unless something got lost, we seem to be down to two contributors.

Comments

Ronin Engineer – The website problems went to 'more or less as bad as possible'. We are moving rapidly to find a replacement.

The Murdered Master Mage – Elaine really does not trust people very much, even though she is much safer from them than almost anyone else is. The people of the Ancient D&D Campaign have encountered

paper money, but are not sure how to understand it.

The Fox's Den Ah, military operations, politics, perhaps-friendly aliens with super weapons? A very clever mix. Most of the scheming seemed to be what might have been expected of the people involved under this situation. At the rate the tale is progressing, it will be quite long indeed when it finishes. The story is indeed well done.

No Tears for a Princess

"No!" she screamed. "No! No!" Her aura crashed back into place, sealing her memories in and the world out. She bent over, hands pressed against her ears. The reverberations of her aura's closing rolled back and forth through her skull. Suddenly she was afraid she was going to be sick to her stomach, with Grandoon still watching. "No," she whispered between rigidly controlled gasps for breath. Before Grandoon could answer, she stumbled to the side of the road, finally leaning against a massive elm. Its bark, rough and slightly damp, yielded slightly to her fingertips. She shut her eyes and pressed her head against the trunk.

Grandoon blinked. What had happened? Now Elaine was back under her screens, clearly much the worse for the experience. He reached to comfort her, no more than brushing her arm.

"Don't touch me!" Elaine snarled, pivoting away with feline speed. She stopped a few paces into the brush, facing him, fingers against her sword's pommel. She shook with emotion. Her words slipped between gasps of breath. "Was that what you meant - to share memories? You speak a few words, and ransack each other's private

thoughts, their dreams and hopes? This is what people mean by love? It's disgusting!"

Grandoon was acutely embarrassed. He had kept the conversation to the most innocent of topics, the sort which most people insisted on discussing. Disaster had resulted. Of course, she had been reticent about her own past; perhaps he should not have mentioned parents. "No, Elaine, really," he answered, "you only let me have the memories you were willing to share. The others remained yours." He bit his tongue. His last claim was not precisely true. While Elaine's aura went up, an image had formed in her mind: a slender, well-built woman in blue and silver gown, her back turned, standing in a barren stone-walled cell.

Grandoon and Elaine stood, facing each other. Finally Elaine stopped trembling.

"Is it really like that when people are in love?" she asked, catching her breath. Her voice was a mixture of curiosity and loathing, like that of a small child asking if lovers really enjoyed crushing their mouths against each other.

"Contact between minds, save among the mageborn, is seldom so strong. Under your aura you have a mage's Gifts, so I actually saw your memories -- those you willed to show me. Moonstruck lads and lasses share the emotion of sharing memories, not memories themselves."

"Grandoon, I'm not a mage. Nor am I mage-trained, no matter what I read." Her usual detached calm reasserted itself. "And never again is far too soon, so far as sharing minds like that is concerned." She still felt slightly sick, but managed to hide her discomfort. Abruptly she turned and resumed her march along the highway. He followed, trying to

deduce what had offended her. Was it like being kissed for the first time? She could have found the experience so shocking as not to bear repeating. Or had there been something specific, some particular memory she intended to keep for herself?

* * * * *

They walked through the night. Neither wished to speak. Tegel-La was well past the zenith, its brilliance sufficient to read a scroll. The Nightstar, dimming and sparking every seven heart-beats, followed by two hand-spans in Tegel-La's wake. Soon they'd want to camp. Elaine suddenly froze in midstride, gesturing in the same motion for Grandoon to halt. She listened intently.

"A horse's neigh," she whispered. "Well behind us. If it's on the pavement, its hooves are muffled."

Grandoon reached to his purse, withdrew a coin, and sent it spinning into the distance. Elaine faded off the road, leaning against a tree to string her bow. Finally Grandoon spoke. "The Eye of Round is hard to deceive. We are followed, indeed on horses with muffled hooves, by six knights with colors masked, two men of the cloth, and a pair of winged sea-trolls. They carry a variety of modestly potent thaumaturgic and spiritual protections. Baron Morgno! As usual, up to no good, save when he might be caught."

"Oh, great! He's not going home; he lives south of Arburg. It's a bit late for an after-dinner stroll, it being close to midnight. I can guess what he wants." She tapped the scabbard of her new sword. "I'm gonna fight eight guys on horseback, and two trolls, too? The eight guys, yeah, sure, but those trolls are tough. And sea trolls are real good trackers. In daylight I could dodge'em,

I think, but at night? No way. Not when I can't see, and they can. I suppose they've got extra horses?" Grandoon nodded. "Outrunning them's not real likely, either. Well, don't think I expect you to risk your neck against that crew. You can fly off, but I'm stuck here. I could give'm the sword. Naww, they'd kill me anyway. Besides, it's mine."

"Now, I only said that they had modestly potent protections against magic. When facing the Duke's overpaid amateurs, such trinkets would likely suffice. Against one of my professional skills, their protections are rather less effective. Would you fight the Baron one-on-one? His wards would require some preparation to disperse, short of violence that would level much of this forest, but his companions are less well shielded."

"Morgno?" Elaine grinned contemptuously. "I'll take that creep apart with bare hands. It's his army and trolls -- they're a bit much."

They hid behind a line of trees. Grandoon raised a fresh illusion: images of him and Elaine standing in the road, close besides each other. A phantasmal Grandoon pointed with one hand at Tegel-La, but kept his other arm firmly wrapped around the phantasmal Elaine's waist. The images stared eye to eye, less interested in the sky than in each other. As the Baron's troop approached, the phantasmal Elaine pulled the phantasmal Grandoon closer and leaned into his shoulder.

The real Elaine fumed. Lean on Grandoon, indeed! Who did the phantasm think she was, anyway? Unlike Morgno, she could tell that the figures were unreal, but she still saw what Grandoon had them do next. She dearly wished she had the opportunity to kick Grandoon in the shins, hard, but all she

could do was scowl in his direction. Grandoon's smile betrayed him. Despite the imminence of battle, he was teasing her.

Baron Morgno smirked. His prey were too preoccupied to notice his approach. A single slice with one hand alerted his retainers. One raised a fist, palm rearwards; a signet ring glowed pale orange as it swallowed the beat of the horses' gallop. They charged down the road, three abreast. The sea trolls loped behind, fangs bared and wings outstretched.

Grandoon shook his head, acknowledging the talent of the Baron's hired magicians. He could see the Baron charge, horse's hooves striking sparks against the stone. Even against the quiet of the woods, nothing could be heard. The Baron's voice, the rattle of armor, the battle cries of the men -- all were gone, swallowed by the ring's ensorcelments.

At the last instant, the illusionary Elaine opened her eyes and glanced over Grandoon's shoulder. The Baron saw her push Grandoon from the berm, struggling at the same time to draw her sword. Her speed was enough to frighten Morgno, but she was too late. His lance reached for her throat.

The lance pricked her form. She disappeared in a flurry of sparks, which scattered in all directions. At the same moment the illusionary Grandoon was swallowed by a concentric set of glowing rings which quickly shrank to nothing. The Baron reined in his horse. The disappearances were wizard's tricks, but ones only possible over small distances. Elaine must still be very close, well within the tracking range of his trolls. For all practical purposes, he had won. His men were protected against any direct assault by the mage. One girl on foot could hardly

prevail against a dozen opponents. Very soon the sword would be his.

Grandoon rose from the brush to intone the final syllables of his cantrip. A cone of violet iridescence sprang from one finger and enveloped Baron Morgno's men. The glare illumined tree branches, throwing shadows up into the sky. It became blindingly bright, then slowly faded. Elaine forced herself to peer through the brilliance. Baron Morgno and two lieutenants remained on horseback. Around them, men, mounts, and trolls had been reduced to a fine ash, which gradually crumbled and fell to the pavement.

Grandoon cursed to himself. He had promised only the Baron would survive. Two of the Baron's retinue remained. Elaine didn't wait for an explanation. She knew he'd have one. No matter what happened, you could count on a mage to provide a completely rigorous rationalization of his spell's effects -- after the fact. She had little faith in mages' promises, no matter how carefully worded. At least she only had to fight three men, instead of eight. She drew her bow.

Her first arrow glanced from a lieutenant's shield. The second and third transfixed him and his companion. A further pair of arrows rattled off the Baron's chest. The Baron laughed, loudly, while his men slumped to the ground.

"Give up, little girl," he shouted. "I wear enchanted armor, proof against all missile weapons. Though you had the strength of Hercules, you could not pierce it with a bow. Now, yield! Give me your sword as weregeld for my men, and I'll let you go on your way. Refuse, and I'll kill you, and take the sword anyway."

Grandoon stood back to watch. He wanted to see Elaine's prowess in combat; now he had his chance. She had dismissed the Baron as a nothing, scarcely a challenge to fight. She could prove her words without his further assistance.

Elaine dropped back under a tree. The sword the Baron so coveted was suddenly in her right hand. The Baron waved his lance at her, forgetting altogether that Grandoon would witness the crimes he intended to commit. "Afraid?" he taunted. "Afraid to come out in the open? Or are you afraid of horses?" She glared back. "Well, then, we'll fight on foot. The light chain you wear is scarcely a match for good plate. And don't think your sword is going to help. I wear a magic amulet, protecting me from the enchantments of ensorcelled blades. Against me, your sword is no more than good steel." He dismounted, the joints in his plate armor squeaking.

Elaine yawned affectedly. "Morgno," she said playfully, "You need one more amulet. What you need," she jabbed ahead, sword point touching him lightly in the stomach, "is protection from beer schooners."

"Impudent brat! What you need, more than all else, is instruction -- in showing proper respect for your betters."

They circled each other cautiously. The Baron stood a head taller than she. He charged, trying to use his weight and height to break down her guard. She stood her ground. They had not fought before. She was confident that he did not know her strength. As she blocked each of the Baron's blows, she felt her blade shift eerily in her grip. The sword was enchanted, then, even if it was ineffective against the Baron's amulet.

As they fought, part of her mind assessed the balance between them. The Baron was as slow and weak as she'd expected; his only real advantage was his armor. She tried a feint, luring the Baron toward her. He swung as she desired. She parried. Then she felt her blade shift against her grip, letting him through her defense. There passed an instant of recognition -- the enchantment was a curse, waiting for the optimal moment to reveal itself -- before he connected.

Her mail held, but his blow caught her in the ribs, still bruised from the previous day's encounter. Stunned by the shock, she dropped entirely into the defense, trying to hold him away. She could barely see. He sensed his advantage, and pressed in with a flurry of swings. For long moments, just holding him off left her stretched to the limit. She blocked; her sword tried to help him.

Then, suddenly, the struggle was over. The Baron lay unconscious, new dents in helm and breastplate marking her final strikes. In the end, she'd gone after him almost recklessly, beating through his guard time and time again. She couldn't remember that he'd connected against her, not after the first blow to the ribs. Now that he was on the ground, she was staggering. He had been a puny opponent, she considered. Her sword had more than compensated for his lacks.

Grandoon came to her side. "Ought I not bind your wounds?" he asked. His fingers searched out a bruise on her shoulder.

"Oh, come on." She forced herself to speak, then leaned almost drunkenly out of his grip. "I'm not gonna die, just because I got a couple cuts. I, I'm not even really bleeding, much. But take care of him." She gestured at the fallen Baron. "So he's a crook. He's

the Duke's crony. If something happened to him, there'd be too many questions, and who ever believes my side of a story? No matter half the daughters in his domain would cheer at news of his passing. If he's alive, he'll keep quiet, and cover up for all of us -- after all, those piles of ash used to be important persons."

She wished Grandoon would shut up and go away. She squeezed her eyes closed, remembering other times when she had been safely by herself, not forced to make a show of courage.

"The sword?" Grandoon asked as he stood over the Baron, making passes with his staff.

"Cursed." Her voice sagged. "Strong, too. That's how he kept getting through. I kept missing him, and not hitting, and not hurting him when I hit." His back was to her. She slipped off her helmet and pressed fingers against her cheeks, trying to force back the tears. The sweat stung at the corners of her eyes. "I wish, I mean, I'd really wanted something a little better than this." She peered away into the woods, which faded into a distant tangle of grays and blacks.

"I observe that you stand, while he reposes on his backside." Grandoon spoke without facing her. Mortals, he recalled, tended to forget that a mage's inner eye saw equally well in all directions. From her pose, she wanted the illusion of privacy; he could see no reason not to grant it to her. "I suppose he's accustomed to having his bully boys go into battle for him. And the others were just that -- personal retainers and thugs, men of importance, but not men who'll be missed by independent allies. There's a glade a little farther ahead. I'd thought to camp there. Will you stay with me again?"

"Stop already?" Grandoon nodded, then waited while she gathered her things.

"Grandoon," she asked, "How'd you like a cursed sword? I'd leave it for him -- serve him right -- but he'd be too suspicious. You must know some use for it." He accepted the weapon and its scabbard.

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