**­CRASH! / Lanterns of the Dead**

**By Nick Wedig**

**Everybody:**

Take a regular deck of playing cards. Remove jokers and separate the hearts numbered 2 through 10 from the rest of the deck. Give those hearts to the astronaut. The natives take the rest of the deck and shuffle it. Then go into separate areas to create characters. When everything is sorted out, the astronaut may rejoin the group.

**Crash!**

**Astronaut’s Book**

(STARDATE 1173.543.53.7)

Following a robot survey, the second moon of Upsilon Andromadae d was determined to harbor complex life. Following IntEx protocols, I have been dispatched to see if there are any sapients on the exomoon. Routine mission, really. Probably nothing. Maybe meet an unknown alien culture, though. That would be interesting.

(STARDATE 1173.543.58.2)

Strange moving lights detected near the planet's surface. Sensors can't figure out what they are. I'm taking the ship down to check it out.

(STARDATE 1173.543.58.4)

AUTOMATED RECORD

Unidentified blockage in port thruster system led to catastrophic mechanical malfunction. System nonresponsive. Assume crashed. Pilot status unknown. Ship viability unknown. Automated rescue teams will be dispatched. Estimated response time: 7.2 years.

**Assessing the Damage to Ship Systems**

Shuffle your deck and draw a hand of 3 cards. Choose one for the first ship subsystem. Draw a new card and choose another ship subsystem. Repeat until every ship subsystem has a card assigned to it.

The card’s number is the only factor that is important. Higher cards are more functional. Face cards are fully functional. Aces are entirely non-functional. Numbered cards are damaged, varying from slightly damaged (9s and 10s) to badly damaged (2s and 3s). As you lay each card on a ship subsystem, select one of the ship parts listed that you need to fix that subsystem (for example, I play an 8 on Cryostasis, and select that I need “16 liters of liquid nitrogen” to fix the cryostasis system).

**Ship Subsystems, failure state and the example materials needed to fix them.**

**1. Baryogenic lantern** (Warp core breach) – Beryllium sphere, glass sheets, plutonium or uranium

**2. Orbital Scale Thrusters** (needed to get off planet)– screwdriver, large amounts of hydrogen gas, a belt or chain

**3. Alcubierre warp bubble generator** (Failure to achieve light speed)– 0.8 kilos of exotic matter, a large quartz crystal, 1.21 gigawatts of electricity

**4. Navigation** (Drifting off course in the void) – as many magnets as you can find, fiber optic cable, soldering gun

**5. Cryostasis** (You never awake from cryosleep) – an effective cryoprotectant such as glycerol or glucose, 16 liters of liquid nitrogen, a metal cylinder at least three feet by six feet.

**Dealing with the Natives**

Language is the primary barrier to communication with native sapients. You'll have to figure out how to convey basic thoughts and gestures. To represent this language difficulty, you must always speak in gibberish. You can assume that your character is speaking English (or whatever future Earth astronauts speak), but the natives cannot understand a word you say. Only gestures and vocal tone can get through.

The native players will all be speaking in English. This means that you the player will understand a lot more that is being said than your character does. Do your best to ignore what is said and just watch the body language and tone of the other players.

Deliberately misunderstand what some people are trying to convey, especially when it is funny. Your role as astronaut is partly to try to rescue yourself, but you also are acting as an instigator to provoke the natives into interesting action.

**Repairing the ship.**

Each time that you find repair parts or substitute parts, draw cards equal to the number of players, but hand them to a native player without looking at them. Then each native takes the hand of cards and secretly discards one. (If it matters, you pick the order.) You the astronaut should wind up with a single card. If the card is higher than the card you first played, then you can replace the ship system’s current status with the new status. Either way, remove the card from the game and cross off that repair part.

If you ever have crossed off all three repair parts for a given subsystem, then you can’t get it working any further. At that point, all you can do is hope that the semi-functional system keeps working.

**Judgment**

If someone attempts an uncertain external task, it is your job to resolve it. Draw two cards and choose one for what the result of the action will be. Higher cards are better, while lower cards are worse. Face cards are complete successes. Numbered cards are mixtures of success and failure with 9s and 10s being mostly success and 2s and 3s being mostly failure. Aces are complete, terrible failure. Explain how they succeed or fail.

The card you pick as the result is removed from the game. The card you don’t pick is reshuffled into the deck.

**The Native Peoples and the Setting**

If you want to know something that your character might be able to observe on their own, pick a native player and ask them. They’ll know what to do.

**Leaving the Planet**

Eventually, you will have repaired your ship as much as you can. You’ve fixed what you could and just have to hope the rest works long enough to get you off this rock. Theoretically, you could try to launch the ship right away, but I wouldn’t risk it.

The ship can support two additional passengers, if you want to take anyone with you.

When you finally fire up the ship to leave, you’ll check to see if the systems work. Starting with the baryogenic lantern, then the computers, thrusters, warp bubble and finally cryostasis. If you have an ace in the system, the ship fails automatically. If you have a face card in the system, it works fine. If you have a numbered card, then you draw another card to see what happens. The subsystem keeps working if you got a card of lower rank than the system’s value. If you got a card above the system’s current value, then the subsystem fails catastrophically. You can probably figure out what exactly happens from there: thrusters failing means the ship never leaves orbit, while failure of warp systems means you’ll never leave the solar system, etc.

You only get one shot at this. Either you get off planet or you don’t. If you try and it doesn’t succeed, then the ship is damaged beyond repair in the attempt. Even if you survived, the ship is torn to shreds and you’ll be stuck on here.

**Going Native**

It’s perfectly reasonable for you as astronaut to choose to stick around on this planet. Maybe you attempt to launch and fail. Maybe you don’t. Either way, you need to find your own place on this world. If you pursue this course, you don’t have to worry about your ship, but you will have to worry about your relationship with the natives. If they’re hostile to you, you don’t stand much chance of surviving. You’d better work to find some allies among the native people and a way to survive long term on this rock.

**Natives:**

**The eldest player should read:**

Our world is dying. We, the people of this land, have forgotten the old ways. We must perform the “lanterns of the dead” ritual and ask Ahuatlot for help. The paper lanterns represent the spirits of the dead, rising up to the stars by the heat of the light within to ask for blessings. We pray that they will not be weighted down by the Cratnukla, the spirit of stupidity and laziness that draws prevents noble action. Perhaps the disaster can be averted somehow.

You, my people, are the true people of this land! This land is our land, and we the people embody this world. The world we live is a reflection of ourselves, and that we are a reflection of our world. Now we must meditate upon what defines us as we are… and as we are not.

For character creation, we will use a deck of playing cards. Each suit is symbolically tied to a figure out of native myth:

**Hearts** are *Ahuatlot*, the Wise Healer who represents peace and understanding.

**Diamonds** are *Bahanaxel*, the too-clever-for-her-own-good coyote-like predator (technically a kind of crustacean).

**Clubs** are *Cratnukla*, the large, stupid, slow moving flightless bird, covered in a tortoise-like shell.

**Spades** are the *Delkaba*, an aggressive rodent-like insect. Delkabas are known for fighting creatures many times their size.

Each player will write two concepts down. These concepts will either be central to The People or they will be unknown to The People.

It is good to have concepts that will be relevant to the crashed human astronaut. You want things that will come up during the game either because they’re specific and relevant to the astronaut’s escape attempt (“What is this ‘metal’?”). Or you want concepts that are broad and affect every aspect of culture. For example, *Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K Leguin has a society of humans without gender. Even though this doesn’t directly impact the protagonist’ goals, it shapes the native culture and complicates the relations between the visitor and the natives.

It is also good to have a mix of concrete and abstract concepts. Some concepts should be physical things that you can point at: e.g., “Ape”, “Money”, “Water”. Others should be more intangible items and pieces of culture and philosophy: “Love”, “Fiction”, or “Outer space”.

Once you have a list of concepts, you need to decide which are centrally important to the culture and which are unknown. Deal 3 cards to each player. They will use these to define which are essential and which are alien.

**Bahanaxel's warning**: The cards you use during cultural definition will not be used in play, while the cards you don't use now will be the myth deck for the game. Thus, if you make your society peaceful and friendly initially, you will have problems later on. But if you build in conflicts and problems right away, you may find the situation easier later on.

Starting with the eldest player, every player places one card next to a listed concept. Then you pass your hand to the left, draw a card and do it again. The suit of the card placed determines how the native culture relates to the concept.

**Hearts** – This concept is of central importance to the people, culturally or biologically. How does it shape the people? Why is it so important?

**Diamonds** – This concept is important to the people, but it is warped or different in some way. How does it work differently among the people?

**Clubs** – The people have no such concept, but they do have a similar concept. How does their culture substitute one concept for another?

**Spades** – The people have no such concept as this. Even to speak of this idea is taboo. How does the people survive without this idea?

**Delkaba’s Warning**: Never let the astronaut see the cultural information sheet. The astronaut must figure out how to navigate an alien culture all on her own.

Once you’ve defined how the culture relates to each concept, pass your cards to the left and draw a card once more.

Now is probably a good time to pause for a moment and discuss what the culture is starting to shape up as. What is their power structure/society/government like? Who is in charge? How advanced are they technologically? Don’t feel like the myth text here is restricting you to a Bronze Age or earlier society. The only limit on the native culture is that they haven’t developed radio communications or spaceflight yet. (This is so that their culture is unknown to the crashed astronaut.) You just have to get a rough idea of the culture. You’ll define it more as you create your PCs and as you play.

Decide as a group what current crisis the natives are facing. If they don’t do something soon, their culture will be destroyed, but they lack the ability to solve the problem. The crisis is probably a side effect of the concepts you dealt with above. What is this crisis?

**Character Creation**

Choose one of the concepts that someone else defined and a card from your hand. (Don’t have two players pick a concept from the same third player.) The card you play will define how your character relates to that concept / lack of concept in society.

**Hearts** – This concept is very important to you personally, and you have a positive view of this thing. Why do you revere it?

**Diamonds** – You are ambivalent or reluctant regarding this concept.

**Clubs** – You are suffering because of your society reverence/lack of this concept. How are the traditions of your people oppressing you?

**Spades** – You are angry at how the native society treats this concept. You wish the revered concept brought low or the missing concept brought into your lives. Why?

Pass your hand to the left and draw. Then play a card from your hand onto the remaining concept that you authored. (Use the same chart.) Now that you have your character relating to two concepts, you can start to define who they are in the culture and how they relate to its society. Tell the others your basic character concept and how you relate to those concepts. Pass your hand to the left and draw once again.

Now you will define the relationships between characters. Choose a character and a card. The card determines how you feel about them. They may feel entirely different about you, but that is up to the other player to decide. You may want to make a relationship map of the PCs and add in any relevant NPCs.

**Hearts** – You admire this person and wish to learn from them. Why?

**Diamonds** – You have a positive opinion of this person, except there is some factor complicating the relationship. What is your relationship? What is the complicating factor?

**Clubs** – You are rivals with this person. Why do the two of you not get along very well?

**Spades** – You hate this person. Why do you hate them?

Pass your hand and draw another time, so that everyone has defined two relationships. Then define another relationship. (Use the same chart.)

Pass your hand and draw once last time. Now you will determine what it is that you want from the astronaut. Lay down a card and describe what you want or think she can provide you once you meet her.

**Hearts** – You wish for knowledge and wider understanding. What in particular do you think that the astronaut can teach you and teach your people?

**Diamonds** – You want the respect of the astronaut and –more importantly – the respect of your people for showing that you are better than the astronaut. How will you prove you are the superior one?

**Clubs -** You hope that the astronaut’s coming will solve some problem that you already have. What do you think the astronaut is the answer to your problems?

**Spades** – The astronaut is an invader, a despoiler of your culture. You do not wish this outsider to meddle in your affairs. Why are you so opposed to this outsider?

Name your characters, in whatever manner is traditional among your people. Take the remaining cards in your hand and the remaining cards in the deck. Shuffle them together. The cards used in creating your culture and your characters will not be used in the game.

Get someone to fetch the astronaut and begin play.

**In Play**

**Scenes**

The astronaut frames the first scene. Thereafter, the native players each frame a scene in turn until you come back to the astronaut. Keep on going around like that.

At the start of each scene, draw a card. This card will give you an idea on how your character behaves in the scene. Does your character misunderstand and lash out at others? Or do you strive for peace, understanding and consensus? Or is the appearance of agreement just a false pretense?

The card you draw gives you an outline on how to treat the other natives during the scene.

**Hearts** – You are peaceful, friendly and understanding.

**Diamonds** – You appear to be friendly, but have your own malicious goals at heart.

**Clubs** – You just wish to be left alone.

**Spades** – You are angry, unhappy and argumentative.

**Language and Understanding**

The astronaut does not speak the tongue of this land. Her language is not the language of the native people. As natives of this land, you can all speak freely to each other. But communicating with the astronaut is fraught with troubles.

When the astronaut tries to convey ideas to you, consult your card. You as a player will likely have an idea what the astronaut is trying to get across. (If you don’t, play out your confusion until you start to get an idea.) Your character understands or doesn’t understand the astronaut according to the card you have for this scene:

**Hearts** – “Oh, I understand you perfectly”

**Diamonds** – You seem to understand, but in fact you accidentally or deliberately warp the meaning to be something else.

**Clubs** – You do not understand the astronaut at all.

**Spades** – Your character is offended and insulted by something the astronaut does.

**Ahuatlot’s Warning:** The astronaut is not a GM or an NPC. Nor are the people several GMs for one astronaut PC. The job of everyone is to create an entertaining story for each other.

**Setting Details**

When someone wants to know about the planet and its life and other details, they choose another player and ask them a Yes or No question about the setting. E.g., “Are there any large herd animals we can harness for the job?” The person asked draws two cards and chooses one. The card chosen decides how the responder can answer the question:

**Hearts** – “Yes, and…” plus amplifying details.

**Diamonds** – “Yes, but…” and details that limit the utility.

**Clubs** – “No, but…”

**Spades** – Your character is offended by something the astronaut does.

**Judgment**

Sometimes, you need to know if someone accomplishes some uncertain action. Ask the astronaut to adjudicate the results of the action.

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