

The Spark

by Paul Drye

Players' Information

Until recently, Yarkand was a dry but pleasant world, home to a small colony devoted to low-tech agriculture. Isolated from the wider Imperium, its few thousand inhabitants lived in one settlement on a subtropical coast. In 1114, a new volcano, named Mount Angkava, burst through the planetary crust about 15 kilometers (9 miles) from the main colony. Life on Yarkand has been hard since then, and the population has dropped significantly. Additionally, a preliminary survey of the situation by subsector authorities has determined that Mount Angkava is merely the front-runner of an impending subcontinent-sized geological event, much like the Deccan Traps in Terra's ancient past. Nearly a cubic kilometer (0.24 cubic miles) of volcanic rock has been belched out of Angkava already, and this is a tiny fraction of what is to come. If those studying the event are correct, it will be thousands of years before life can return to normal.

Recently, reports began filtering in about troops of orkuch, a rare local animal that had been documented but rarely seen up close. To escape the destruction caused by the volcano, some were apparently migrating into areas claimed by Humans.

What was most surprising about the reports was the apparently intelligent behavior of the orkuch -- getting into locked pens to kill small livestock, for example, or the way they quickly learned the capabilities of the colonists' firearms. All the stories were hearsay -- Yarkand is too low-tech and poor for even the most primitive video equipment -- but soon artifacts began turning up: some chipped flint points, and an animal-hide web that would fit an orkuch's body. With these in hand, the Scout Service was asked by the planetary government to determine if a new sentient species had been discovered. If so, any number of events are possible in the near future for Yarkand: a new Red Zone, a relocation offworld for the Human colonists, and an emergency survey of the aliens' range, with an eye to transplanting them outside the area of the coming natural catastrophe. It is up to the Scouts on the scene to recommend an appropriate course of action.

The Scout Service's expedition, including the party, has just arrived on Yarkand.

GM's Information

Unless the adventurers are active members of the Scout Service with expert-level skills in biology or anthropology, it's likely they are the supporting contractors -- the lucky souls who get to tramp out into the woods, looking for artifacts, nests, and individuals of the new species. Wilderness skills and equipment would be most useful, and access to an air/raft would help.

Note that the time pressure imposed by the continuing eruption of Mount Angkava would

justify the inclusion of less-qualified help. The expedition has been thrown together hurriedly, and any labor on the spot is of use.

The group has two goals, neither of which is apparent to them at the beginning of the adventure:

- Uncover the fraud being perpetrated by the locals, which is intended to fool the Scouts into declaring Yarkand a Red Zone for the protection of the orkuch, and not incidentally pay to have the colonists relocated off-planet.
- Discover that the planted evidence has just muddied the waters -- that the orkuch are, in fact, sentient, even if in a qualified way.

Anyone who asks for information on the orkuch will find that little is known; the following minimal library data is available:

Orkuch: A pseudo-mammalian animal native to Yarkand (Urnadnim/Antares 1226). Orkuch are ground-dwelling omnivores, with considerable ability to move in the trees of their native habitat when necessary.

The Locals

The Human colony on Yarkand is threatened with extinction by the impending geologic upheaval. They have hit upon the idea of making the orkuch seem intelligent, with an eye to having their world declared a Red Zone for the protection of the new "sophonts." If that happens, they believe they will be relocated offworld. (It is left to the GM whether or not this is the actual Imperial policy for this situation.)

All the planet's adult citizenry are in on the hoax; it was adopted at a meeting of the local Town Council several months ago (with a population of barely 3,000, everyone still lives in one small town and its surrounding area). The primary perpetrators are a set of five people, all notable citizens, including the current Mayor, Aldus Mariappen. Other locals are recruited as needed.

The hoaxers will use the following tactics: arrange for reports from outlying farms of intelligent behavior by orkuch; plant fabricated flint tools, remnants of campfires, and other primitive-looking artifacts in the region; and arrange for local guides to lead the investigators to the planted items. No local actually believes that the orkuch are sentient.

If and when the adventurers uncover the fraud, they will need to decide if their party will end their investigation with a negative finding, continue investigating, or join the conspiracy for the benefit of the doomed colonists. Before the hoax is uncovered, the GM may wish to encourage personal connections between the Yarkani and the scouts in order to make the decision more difficult -- the colonists aren't really criminal, just decent people pushed into a corner.

The Orkuch

The following information should be doled out to the group as they study the new species, as seems reasonable based on the actions of the group.

The orkuch body plan is broadly similar to the Terran fisher, or an oversized marten or weasel. Average weight is 30-40 kg (66-88 lbs.), and body length is about 120-140 cm (48-55"). Females tend toward the top end of the species' size range, while males are toward the bottom. They differ noticeably from their terrestrial look-alikes in the face, which is tipped with a flexible tapir-like trunk, and the back, where a hump is formed by spinal curvature and a small plate. The purpose of the plate is to protect an extension of the brain tissue out the open back of the skull and down the underside of the spinal cord.

Orkuch are oviparous, like the rest of Yarkand's pseudo-mammals. Females, as with other species in their order, are known to immediately retrieve their laid eggs and store them in a marsupial-like pouch until hatching. They live in troops of five to 10, evenly divided between adults and children (though occasional loners are found). Orkuch live in the densest part of the local forests, avoiding clearings, rivers, and any other open area where they can be seen easily. While primarily ground-dwelling, orkuch will try to escape up trees, and then along the forest canopy. Their body weight forces them to stick to major branches if they do this.

The species is sentient, though just barely. Most individual orkuch are not: all males and 5 in 6 females are only as smart as terrestrial chimpanzees (IQ 6). The residue of the female population is a bit smarter, though still very dim by most standards (IQ 7) -- just enough to put them on the other side of the intelligence line. The larger females have slightly larger brains, and a mutation that puts the extra capacity to good use has occurred in just the last few hundred years. This change is in the process of spreading throughout the gene pool. Their rise to intelligence has occurred so recently that the orkuch have few of the usual cultural markers of intelligence -- no language, no fire, and no writing. The smart females do use tools and have some interest in ornamentation, worked from the bones they retrieve from kills and carrion. Using their teeth, they chew the remains into useful or interesting shapes, and often store the results in their pouches. When tools are used, they are held clumsily with the facial trunk.

Orkuch intelligence is so close to the line of sentience that neural activity sensors will not give consistent readings as to whether they are intelligent or not.

Orkuch Racial Template (-11/-41 points)

(Intelligent female orkuch cost -11 points. Other orkuch cost -41 points.)

Attribute Modifiers: IQ-3 [-20].

Advantages: Brachiator [5]; Danger Sense [15]; Discriminatory Smell [15]; Extra Legs (Four total) [5]; Fur [4]; Night Vision [10]; Perfect Balance [15]; Sharp Teeth [5].

Disadvantages: One Fine Manipulator [-15]; Mute [-25]; Poor Grip [-5]; Short Lifespan 2 [-20].

Notes

Presentient: Males and 5 of 6 females will be Presentient [-20], as well as having IQ-4 [-30].

Illiterate: While all orkuch are currently illiterate, the intelligent ones do possess the ability to learn written languages if ever presented with an opportunity to do so.

Status: Orkuch have no social status in the sense meant by this advantage, but intelligent orkuch females are usually the leaders of their troops. Bear in mind that they cannot communicate except in the most limited ways with other members of their species, so their leadership is very limited.

Language: As with writing and the Illiterate disadvantage, intelligent orkuch do not have any skills for spoken or sign language but could learn them.

Events

Listed below are events that could occur to the adventurers while on Yarkand. The first five provide clues to advance the investigators toward one or both of their goals; the others are intended to show the effect of the new volcano on the Human settlers, but are not otherwise connected to the plot.

- The first step dictated by the expedition's scientists should be the capture of at least one (and preferably four or five) live orkuch, to study up close. Capturing an orkuch is a Hard task rolled against Hunting skill. If the team thinks to recruit a local expert to help them, this difficulty drops to Average, as the locals know the woods fairly well. Successfully completing this task should provide some of the information the investigators need to know (listed under the heading "The Orkuch").
- At the same time, the scientists are interested in getting at least one dead specimen to dissect. The hunters are specifically ordered not to kill one -- it's Scout policy to avoid killing animals that are even suspected of being sentient. It will be necessary for the group to secure a pre-existing corpse. One possibility will be to approach the locals, who have been killing a few found attacking their livestock. Successfully completing this task will provide some of the information listed above.
- Also of interest: tools like the flints points first discovered, other artifacts such as clothes or jewelry, evidence of fires, and anything that might conceivably be construed as writing or trail-marking. If the adventurers elect to go it alone, there will be no evidence of the latter item, and they must roll against Tracking skill to find any one instance of the first three per 8 hours of searching. If locals are recruited to help, all four items are likely to be found, at the rate of one instance per 4 hours of searching, with a successful roll against Tracking+1. All of these items will be found abandoned, never in the presence of an actual orkuch. At this time, none will be found on the captured orkuch, or on any dead

orkuch. This will be a source of great frustration to the expedition's researchers; without this connection, they cannot definitively prove orkuch sentience. They are doomed to remain frustrated, of course, because virtually all of the evidence has been planted by the locals.

- On each expedition, led by locals or not, roll 2d plus the best Tracking skill in the group. On the first instance of 15+, the party comes across an orkuch near the corpse of a large animal, which it is apparently scavenging. The orkuch flees, but examination of the carrion reveals one bone, separated from the rest, showing signs of being shaped into a tool. It bears no resemblance to the flint tools found earlier. Further rolls of 15+ will produce more examples of the "alternative" artifacts, though no more in the physical presence of an orkuch.
- If the group sets out to find the sources of the flint used to make the tools, they will make some progress toward their first goal. Flint is a reasonably rare mineral in the area, so it shouldn't take too long to track down all the sources and examine them -- skills such as Geology, Prospecting, and Orienteering will help with this. With one exception, none of the flint beds has seen any use. The exception is not far from the colony, only about 5 kilometers (3 miles); only one other is closer. Staking it out produces no sightings of orkuch; however, if no mention of this blind is made to the locals, after 2d days of watching, a colonist will come to the site after some stone.
If the party thinks to check, chemical analysis of the tools found earlier will prove that they were all made from flint taken from this site.
- A significant eruption from Mount Angkava sends temblors through the colonial area. Buildings collapse, fires start. The local volunteer fire service is overstretched, and even the remainder of the population chipping in is not turning the tide. The adventurers are recruited to help, and will be particularly popular if they can think of a way to use their stellar-level technology to save lives.
- While engaged in other work in a small river valley near Angkava, the group is caught in a fierce downpour. About five minutes after the heavy rains begin, a wall of mud appears at the far end of the valley and begins rushing toward them -- the rain has soaked some of the enormous volume of volcanic ash in the area, and the resulting goo is being pulled by gravity down through the local watershed. The adventurers have only seconds to make it to their air/raft and escape. Anyone who does not make it to the raft will be buried, though the GM should allow one attempt per person to escape another way, should they think of one immediately (for example, climbing a tree). Regardless of whether they end up beneath the mud or in a somewhat safer location, those who failed to reach safety will need to be rescued.
- As the rains continue, more and more mudslides are plaguing the area -- until finally, what was left in town after the fire is threatened with burial. Although not a part of their mission, the Scout group agrees to be drafted into helping with the evacuation. A refugee shanty town needs to be set up near the Scouts' base camp (the only other source of reliable power on the planet), with the resulting

problems of food, water, and sanitation needing to be solved.

- If the group contains a member with a reputation as a ladies' man (or men's lady), a romantic entanglement with the Mayor would bring additional complications if the fraud is discovered. The GM should feel free to change the Mayor's gender if it will smooth proceedings.

Planet Data

Classic/MegaTraveller

Yarkand (Urnadnim/Antares 1226) E-682343-5 Lo Ni 302 Im F8 V

GURPS Traveller

Yarkand (Urnadnim/Antares 1226)

Starport: Class I

Diameter: 6,328 miles. Gravity: 0.79. Atmosphere: Dense. Surface Water: 17%. Climate: Warm. Population: 3,190. Government: Athenian Democracy. Control Rating: 2. TL: 6. Gas Giants: 0. WTN: 2.0. Trade Classifications: Lo, Ni.