

THE TARAZET OBJECT



ACTION FOR THE TARAZET SCIENCE ACTION ROLE PLAYING SETTING

Tarazet

Page 1

In which the oracle cards are read by a female space archaeologist named Morvanwin.

The room inside the asteroid crawler was dark and full of incense. Morvanwin insisted that a reading be done each time a good prospect was discovered, before the start of each new dig. Somnal was sitting with her in respectful silence watching the asteroid surface glide by through the crawler window, the blast shield was half down to block out any bright ship engines which might suddenly appear above the close horizon and spoil the vibe so all that could be seen was endless amounts of impact crater covered rock scrolling by. The only other presence in the room was Fortan, the robot they had had most dealings with on this dig and who Somnal had begun to quite like.



Morvanwin or Van as she liked to be called was holding the cards directly in the flow of incense from the little smouldering pile in one of her very pretty ceramic dishes. She was smudging the cards allowing all the variables to be absorbed before the reading. Fortan had been surprisingly interested in this process and he and Somnal had had many conversations about this as an information input method. Somnal was pleased and surprised he hadn't had a lot of experience with robots with such

interest in spiritual matters but here Fortan was. He hadn't missed a reading since he had been invited to attend by Morvanwin and had watched each with the sort of attention he would give one of his archaeological digs.

All three were sitting around a simple wooden table with a dark table cloth that Van had used to replace the bare plastic work surface embedded with data processors, input connectors and 3D presentation devices that every other room contained. Morvanwin was no longer smudging the cards but was holding them out in front of her with her eyes closed and Somnal's attention was drawn away from the window back to the cards.

"You're asking the question now, aren't you?" he asked.

"What will we find?" she repeated aloud the question she had been silently asking the cards, and began to lay them on the table. She placed three cards face down and returned the others to their intricately carved wooden box.

She turned over the first, the card that represented the past, and whispered it's name "the boatman." A painting of a robot gondolier piloting two lovers in a sky barge away or towards a balcony in one of the giant luxurious apartment buildings that were the fashion many thousands of years ago at the time the cards had been designed. The robot was in a traditional subservient role, they had been used as slaves by the people of that long ago time, intelligent beings thought of as little more than property. This card had come up often in the previous readings and all now believed it represented the role of A.I. in the present excavations but had not been able to decide much beyond that.

She turned over the second, "The Avatar," she whispered, "and it's reversed. This is the present, this is now." The ancient civilisations that had populated the galaxy were

being discovered at the time the cards were designed and this card showed a rather fanciful reconstruction of a member of one of the winged races in the role of an angel floating above a lunar surface and talking to a space suited figure. Fortan looked expectantly towards Van he had found that her interpretations of the cards often differed significantly from the interpretations he found in his data banks or online and this card had not come up before in our readings. "This will be the most important find of the whole asteroid belt exploration, the key. It will bring the clues we need to really understand this ancient outpost."

She turned over the third, a card that needed no introduction, The Wreck.

Tarazet, a tale of two cities.

Page 2

In which a discovery is made on an asteroid.

The giant disintegrators were boiling away hundreds of cubic meters of rock every hour but the process was as quiet and vibration free as a whisper. Somnal was one of the human representatives at this dig site along with Van. The other five human archaeologists were less than pleased to be part of a dangerous asteroid belt exploration working for an artificial intelligence but Somnal and Van were a little younger, more spiritual and more forward thinking.

It had to be admitted though that the work was different. On a human dig the role of the robots and other A.I. constructs was very much curtailed and an archaeologist would be using his skills much more. On the A.I. dig the five human archaeologists were acting more as consultants. Somnal didn't believe that Dieberater the A.I. who had initiated the dig particularly needed or valued the human input, but seemed to make room for some human involvement in any project.

Van who after the previous nights reading was absolutely certain that something interesting lay beneath the surface of Pn-40-22, this huge asteroid to the south east of the belt was standing very close to the disruptor beam. She was talking animatedly with Fortan as Somnal walked up, both of them watching the emergence of the metallic object from the surrounding grey rock with high pitched excitement.

"There's something unusual about this object." said Somnal as came up to them.

"You bet your ass there is," Van virtually shrieked as she turned and Somnal could see her teeth shining in the shadows of her vac suit helmet, "the cards were right. This is the thing, It's pretty awesome."

"The symbols are unusually dense." said Fortan in his usual even tone. "The square symbol recurs more often than I remember seeing before, and the insect like symbol is unusually large."

Van pointed out the most interesting parts of the object wall for Somnal and carried on with the explanation. "The symbols are knitted together by a spider web of other inscription here, compared with less densely inscribed areas there. The design looks like it carries on that way and that's the area we'll be uncovering next."

Fortans voice broke into the exited explanation and for once it seemed to carry over their helmet com units with a slightly higher more exited tone. "The closest match I have found for the symbols

Tarazet, a tale of two cities.

Page 3

In which we learn a little about Tarazet.

"The closest match I have found for the symbols is the Tarazet object" said Fortan. "You're from Tarazet aren't you Somnal." Van's reaction was instant her curiosity aroused. "I'm coming round to your place tonight and you are going to tell me everything you know about it."

"Please, I would like to hear what you have to say as well." Said Fortan.

At that moment on the other side of the asteroid one of the other archaeologists drew a sharp intake of breath as the Tarazet object was mentioned. Jeck was watching the scene relayed to him from the general dig data stream in his helmet's heads up display as he worked on his own project. Apart from that one gasp there was no indication that he was paying particular attention to what he saw.

Fortan and Van had called on Somnal as they said they would and Somnal had suggested that they all go up to one of the highest points on the flat plain of the asteroid and get a panoramic view of the dig site as he told his stories. The crawler was now parked at an angle that would be impossibly precarious on a body with more gravity and the three were lounging in the spacious control cabin, Fortan included taking up a relaxed reclining position that saved on power.

"So were in position, you've kept us waiting long enough, start talking Sommy." Said Van.

Somnal hated that Van had started to call him by this ridiculous nickname from time to time and as a punishment he let his eyes wander over the full panorama afforded by the multi faceted heavy duty crawler forward windows before beginning.

"I grew up on the periphery of the Tarazet object," he said "in the hydroponics domes. My parents were farmers there and we didn't venture into the city very often. But even from where our farm was, right on the rim of the disk of inhabitable terrain thousands of meters above the planet surface, our lives were dominated by the object at the centre of the city.

He looked away from the view of the metallic object below emerging from its rocky cocoon and looked directly at his two companions before adding, "You know the thing is inhabited, according to legend that is."

"I have found such legends recorded," said Fortan "and in fact it seems to be a very strongly and commonly held belief among the people of Tarazet."

"But do you believe that?" asked Van.

"I believe the object is the home of something..." Somnal's voice trailed off, he thought for a while and continued, "My mother told me that the object is the home of vampires. She said it was ruled by a vampire king who is the real ruler of Tarazet. He only comes out at night and he can walk through walls. He knows everything that happens in his city. If you break any of the city laws he comes for you."

"Does that mean there is no crime in Tarazet?" asked Fortan, clear disbelief in his voice.

"I'm not talking about the laws made by the city governor or his council but the unwritten laws of Tarazet." Replied Somnal, he was now clearly eager to carry on with his story but Van interrupted before he could.

"What are they?" she asked, a little shiver in her voice.

"Opinions differ." said Somnal with a grin.

"You can't believe in these local monsters, surely." implored Fortan.

Tarazet, a tale of two cities.

In which we learn a little more about Tarazet and what Somnal saw that night.

“When I was younger,” the hesitancy had returned to Somnal’s voice, “my friends and me used to like to camp in the hydroponics jungles. Nobody from the city proper ever went there and precious few of the hydroponics farmers, specially at night. I saw one. In the jungles in the night, it had many legs each longer than the next and it had wings like of the winged elder races, it carried strange equipment and it saw me too. We seemed to be communicating. I’m not sure if it had eyes as we understand them but ... It simply faded, disappeared.”

In the face of his partners silence he carried on “I’ll send you the data files I’ve prepared. I’ve worked up some images which you can look at as well.” Some lights blinked on Van’s vac suit info collar as the files were transferred, there was indication from Fortan that he received the files but a confirmation message was reported on Somnal’s info collar. “After that moment I was hooked. The object is a kind of joke on Tarazet, parents tell their children the stories about the vampire king to get them to behave, but I began to take it seriously. At first I got into local politics in the hope that there would be a secret channel to them, the real rulers but it wasn’t my thing. I ended up becoming an archaeologist of the ancient cultures.”

Van sent Somnal’s data to one of the crawler control cabin’s large projectors and an almost life size 3D holographic image sprung to life labelled “Tarazet Vampire”. The image began to turn slowly displaying itself in front of them in the projectors default display mode. Somnal was an archaeologist not a 3D designer and the images rough edges served to give it an air of authenticity.

“This is very interesting data.” Said Fortan.

Somnal operated the projector controls allowing the image to gently fade, reliving a moment from a long time ago.

“I’m getting the creeps,” said Van, “but not in a bad way. Brrrr.”

Fortan took the crawlers steering array in both hands and brought the tiny but powerful antimatter engine buried deep in the giant crawler to life. He brought the machine around in a surprisingly sharp turn for such a barge and followed the lonely tracks in the asteroid dust they had left on the way up back to the dig site.

Tarazet, a tale of two cities.

In which a dig member who is other than he seems is initiating a scheme of epic scale.

Jeck checked the silver disks one more time. It was very exacting work. The disks were featureless apart from the beautiful ornamental inlay pattern which depicted some kind of meeting between a cockroach like species of elder creature and a band of others with a more octopus like shape. But the pattern although seemingly etched into the material of the disks kept shifting. Jeck was using a lot of the processing power in various local devices to run the analysis programs he needed. Window after window of 3D hologram information was hanging around him in his cabin at base camp. Tools made of the same material as the disk were scattered about on his scratched and dented plastic work surface. Keeping track of the shifting surface of the disks and making the necessary alterations was taking more time than he had envisioned. He dare not rush though, the age and value of the things was mind boggling. Like nothing in the meagre data bases available to the rest of the crew.

Just a few short years ago Jeck had been scratching about at the surface of what it was possible to know, just like the other poor innocents at the dig. Jeck was certain that even Dieberater the AI in charge of the whole charabanc had no clue about what

really lay buried on this asteroid. It did not pay to read the cards too often but he had checked as often as he dared and it seemed to him that nothing stood between his plan and it's eventual completion, not even the powerful intellect of the AI.

The final adjustments would require the disk to be opened, the cytoplasm would be exposed to the surrounding atmosphere or more accurately the surrounding atmosphere would be exposed to the cytoplasm. Jeck was wearing his vac suit with the helmet in place and the seals checked. The opening of the disks was a little unpredictable but it was soon.

"Jeck is from Tarazet as well isn't he?" said Van her feet in her vac suit gently clinking against the ceramic crawler yard floor as she made her way under the noses of the completely silent looming crawlers parked in a long line side by side near the base camp main air lock, "Lets pay him a visit."

"I don't think so," Somnal replied, he had always been uncomfortable around Jeck, "I know this is a terrible thing to say but he is from a part of the city that's very close to the object. The people there call themselves the real Tarazanese and they are difficult to get to know."

"We are here to understand this object and I hope you realise that that involves much more than just digging, measuring and taking pictures. Tarazet is involved in this dig, Jeck is from Tarazet and therefore he is involved in this dig and you are involved in this thing too Somnal. If we are really going to understand what this thing is here for we are going to have to bring you all together."

"What do you mean ((bring you all together))?" Fortan had started his question in his own voice but the last four words had been the play back recording of Vans words from the instant before.

Somnal usually got a kick out of such moments when a robot did something a little other than human. Fortan especially was proud to be other than human and that made him good company for a curious young man like Somnal, but this time in this situation he found that he didn't like it.

"Don't know," said Van who didn't seem to have even noticed, "just a feeling. Anyway lets go. Jeck is due on shift in a few minutes and if we short cut around the camp perimeter to the dig site we can wait for him at dig containment. That way we won't have to mess around going in and out of airlocks."

Fortan had been constant connection with Dieberater since Somnal bared his soul about seeing vampires thirty minutes ago. Being in connection with Dieberater was a comforting but unsettling experience. Due to his sheer processing power he ran programs and subroutines that Fortan had never installed and very many that he had deleted as an expensive waste of time. Dieberater was a trusting and giving individual and allowed visitors access to all his resources while they were in connection. With the central intelligence and so many other sub routines running at the same time it was rather like visiting a king at court rather than being granted a private audience.

One subroutine in particular was clamouring for attention. A psychoanalytic program with some rather obvious conclusions about the unsound state of Somnal's mental health. At the same time as they were talking about the main issue of the dig Dieberater indicated that he was not about to dismiss the concerns about Somnal without thinking about them in detail and invited Fortans input.

"I believe Somnal is sane and that his experience was real." Fortan input as requested.

"I also believe that Somnal is basically of sound mind," Dieberater replied, "but I would be interested in knowing what data you are using to guess about the truth of the actual experience he recounted."

Fortan was quite conflicted about the process he had used to reach that conclusion, he was proud and ashamed at the same time. "I used quite an old analysis technique," he replied after a few seconds, an eternity of down time and almost disrespectful.

"Your system is not reporting any analysis programs that would be likely to return that information, at least not as far as I can see,..." Dieberater paused as Fortan volunteered the relevant memory segment, "...ah I see. The Avatar, you read the cards." Dieberater studied the memory intently allowing it to play back in real time.

Tarazet

Page 6

In which two machines are a ghostly presence at a Tarot reading from the past. And one perhaps influences it.

Dieberater and Fortan watched as two people and a robot sat round a simple wooden table with a dark table cloth. Morvanwin was no longer holding the cards in the stream of incense but was holding them out in front of her with her eyes closed

"You're asking the question now, aren't you?" Somnal asked.

"What will we find?" she repeated aloud the question she had been silently asking the cards, and began to lay them on the table. She placed three cards face down and returned the others to their intricately carved wooden box.

She turned over the first, the card that represented the past, and whispered its name "The Boatman." A painting of a robot gondolier piloting two lovers in a sky barge. This card had come up often in the previous readings and all now believed it represented the role of A.I. in the present excavations but had not been able to decide much beyond that. Dieberater paused the memory segment and his presence, an immaterial black cloud, turned to Fortan.

"Do you know what this card means now?" he asked.

The connection with Dieberater was suddenly broken.

"I just lost the main site feed," said Somnal, "Van, Fortan is your contact still OK?"

"My feed's gone as well." said Van.

The three looked towards the physical presence of the camp. The various buildings and service modules unified into one base by enclosed walkways. The various navigation and safety lights strewn around the building flickered and died. The three were plunged into darkness before Van and Somnal's suits activated their on board lights and created a little oasis of light around the themselves and Fortan. The hulking crawlers were still kicking out light and showing up as bright icons in the heads up displays of the suits. The icon showing the base flickered and went dim. All connection broken.

"I'm not liking this, this shouldn't be happening," said Van, "how can we lose all connection. It's been down for seconds now. And it looks like the power has gone."

At that moment the lights came back on and the base icon reappeared on everyone's displays.

Fortan was instantly back in contact with Dieberater but was surprised to find that the AI could not immediately offer any explanation for the problem. Van, Somnal and Fortan hurried on their way heading for the dig containment area.

When they arrived they saw Jeck. His suit was in the distance, deep into the dig containment area, carrying some burden towards the dig site.

"Just the man we wanted to see." said Van.

Tarazet

Page 7

In which a space archaeologist disappears in mysterious circumstances.



The three were gaining on Jeck and tried to contact him but he didn't answer and their calls were put through to his mail box. He was sometimes in view but at other times he disappeared behind undulations in the asteroid surface. His goal was clear though, the object itself at the centre of the dig. As he made his way past the giant robots who operated the disrupter technology who were watching him disinterestedly. Fortan used his line of sight communicator to contact them but they were more interested in their

new data on the asteroids make up than on humans chasing each other around. He could not persuade them to intercept Jeck. They did however send him the data from the giant glowing optical sensors in their hunched and massive bodies.

In dim the light from glow globes anchored to pylons around the dig site it was possible to see that Jeck had reached the dull greenish black wall of the object. He was reaching into the large anti gravity backpack he had been carrying and was pulling out a large silver metal ellipsoidal objects. He studied the wall very carefully and consulted open lap top computer consoles and the view finders of scientific instruments before attaching each silver metal object to the surface.

But by the time Van, Somnal and Fortan reached the object he was gone. The silver metal ellipsoids however remained anchored to the surface. All three looked at each other wordlessly for a few moments. All three had seen such silver growths on the surface of excavated objects before and believed they were integral to the ancient artefacts. But all three had just that moment seen Jeck attach them thanks to Fortan and the optical feed from the excavation robots.

"The age data for the silver objects and the wall is converging," said Somnal "At this rate they will be the same in a couple of hours."

"How is that possible?" asked Van "The date of an object is fixed it's a given. And do you think Jeck went inside?" she added as she searched through the data logs of the nearby scientific devices to see if any had images of what happened.

Dieberater was the first to find images and he immediately provided them for Fortan and the two humans to watch. Jeck had placed twelve disks on the wall and was hard at work with his various devices as he watched the wall. He seemed to see something there although it was impossible to see anything in the sensor image they were watching. He suddenly moved his hand then his whole arm then both arms in complicated patterns, surprisingly beautiful in his heavy space suit in the dim light. Then he walked towards the wall. Walked up to it and kept walking. He walked

through it as though it were nothing more than a decontamination field or a curtain. As he disappeared his computers and instruments powered down and went dead or switched to screen savers. Dieberater then played the same thing captured from a few different angles including one birds eye view captured by a communication satellite in a very tight orbit around the asteroid.

"What happened?" the giant computer intelligence asked from its orbiting platform, sounding a little perplexed.

"Magic." Said Fortan in answer.

Morvanwin kept quiet. She had seen the arm movements before.

Tarazet

Page 8

In which Jeck is lost and disorientated.

Jeck was still trying to orientate himself. He had been prepared for the unexpected, he thought, but how could the journey through the wall have brought him to a space far from any wall. Why was there no wall to be seen. His brain jumped back to the things he was sure of. He had just moments before walked through a solid wall. He could still feel the atoms of the wall scraping past his own like feta cheese scrapes on teeth when chewed. Another thing he was sure of was that there was life in here. He had been prepared for that but he had imagined the inside of the object as an ancient cathedral or temple, cold dusty and empty. His suit sensors however were registering a space teaming with life forms.

He could hear a constant background chittering and was tempted to switch of the audio feed and not have to think about what might be making the noise. The defence system integrated into his suit was having trouble working out where he was. It kept switching between optimised for space and surface action. In the end he had to manually override it and chose surface action. He hoped he had made the right decision.

He activated the device he carried and held it near the floor. It was a kind of wand made of the same silvery substance as the orbs he had used to gain entry but it was even more mobile. As he held it next to the floor its base split into three writhing tentacles that further subdivided into silver thread like roots that burrowed into the floor. As the fingers of his suit relayed tactile information to his fingers and he felt it take hold he let go and stood back. There was no outward sign that it was working but he felt sure that it was. The creatures he had come so far to see were almost certainly on their way.

He watched for what felt like both a very long time and at the same time only a moment before turning to more practical things. He released some cyber ants to go find the materials they would need to build a base camp. He looked at the head up display for his suits defence system and was relieved to see that it was not designating anything as a threat. Of course he was not entirely sure that the tactical unit in his suit was the best judge of what was hostile and what not in this environment but it was still strangely comforting.

The suit was giving most attention to a shape moving perhaps two miles off in the darkness. It was moving slowly and randomly and the suit was giving an identification of large surface herbivore but with a certainty of only ten percent, or tentative. Jeck looked at the ground once more. It was a completely bare purple stone like substance.

"Herbivore, eh." He said.