

QUICKSTART

The Fire Gives No Light

— ◇ —
*A Solo Journaling Game
at the Edge of the Empire*





A Roleplaying Game by **ODDPLAN!**

Written by **MASSIMILIANO PALLONI**

Based on the **PRESSURE12** engine by **NICOLA SANTAGOSTINO**

Illustrations

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The Fire Gives No Light

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The Fire Gives No Light

Somewhere east of the Empire, reality has forgotten its own laws. Like an old, threadbare coat, the world seems to be coming apart at the seams, slowly but with no hope of mending itself. The Imperial Academy of Sciences has named it **Anomy**: an event that appeared spontaneously and is spreading slowly, but without pause. Wherever it expands, nothing works as it should; nature is perverted, physics no longer produces predictable results, and people and animals forget what they are and how they work.

The good news is that its corruption has never spread more than a few meters a day. The bad news is that this apparent restraint has led the Empire to underestimate its effects. The Capital lies thousands of kilometers from the Zone where everything seems to be coming to an end. The Crown created a special Corps to study it and, as always, soon found itself distracted by matters far less important, but more pressing.

When you arrive at the Corps' Base Camp as its new Commander, the Corps has been reduced to a handful of tents battered by the freezing winds of the steppe, just a few kilometers from the Zone: a place already devoured by the Anomy and inhabited by Raiders, inexplicable creatures, and incomprehensible events.

You choose your Explorers to send into the Zone: deserters, prisoners, fools, and a few who still believe in the cause. You decide what little equipment they can carry, how deep into the Zone they must go, and you follow their adventures, one Challenge at a time. When they return to Base Camp, assuming they return at all, you count the materials they recovered, discover what they have learned, and write to the Crown, hoping that this time it will reply.

The Fire Gives No Light is a solo journaling game for a handful of d12s, a notebook, and a pen. It draws on twentieth-century post-apocalyptic literature and a fantasy Empire reminiscent of Tsarist Russia, and it does not promise a happy ending. Expeditions are interspersed with periods of downtime, during which you can use what the Explorers have recovered from their adventures to improve Base Camp, build better Items, and find new recruits for your efforts.

This Quickstart gives you one expedition and all the rules you need to see it through, with a couple of hints of what you'll find in the complete book. It is big.



What You Need

- ◆ A handful of twelve-sided dice (d12s); two might be enough.
- ◆ A notebook and a pen. If you're in the mood, you can also keep a small diary as a second journal.
- ◆ The sheets at the end of this Quickstart, preferably printed.

Content Warning: Inside, you will find references to physical violence, suicide, psychiatric illnesses, and the disgusting elitism of the ruling classes.

How This Quickstart Works

You are the Commander of the Reality-Affirming Special Corps, tasked with studying, containing, and surviving the Anomy, an elusive phenomenon that can alter the very fabric of reality in unpredictable ways.

You will not venture out on expeditions yourself. Instead, you will send your Explorers into the Zone, equipped and assigned to an expedition type. You will experience their adventures through their eyes, recording their exploits and hoping they return in one piece, perhaps with some good news to report.

Unlike the full game, this Quickstart follows a predetermined path, but every Scene is in your hands, and its outcome always depends on your own ingenuity and the luck of your dice.

The Gameplay Loop

Before You Set Out

Everything is already chosen for you: a Recovery expedition at Difficulty 2, four Explorers, and one Item each.

During the Expedition

The Explorers must complete two Scenes to finish a Level. Each expedition can have up to four Levels, each more challenging than the last. Every Scene is an obstacle to overcome, one Challenge at a time. At the end of each Level, you can decide whether to go deeper or turn back. Pressing on promises better loot, but also greater risks and a more difficult return journey.

When the Explorers Return

Count the materials, Items, and Expedition Points you have recovered. You also count your dead and bid them farewell one last time.

Downtime

The Commander writes to the Crown to report what the Explorers have experienced and discovered. What happens next, and whether anyone in the Capital answers, belongs to the full game [\[see Beyond the Surface\]](#).





Your Corps

Who Are You?

You look at yourself in the pocket mirror, studying your features as if they don't truly belong to you. The wagon journey was long, and what should have sounded like a promotion felt more and more like exile with every kilometer you traveled through the cold nothingness of the steppes.

The horses neigh as the cart stops, and the wheels let out an ominous squeak. The faint lights of a morning in the Empire's Northeast greet you. You adjust the gloves, beautiful and still spotless, on your nervous fingers.

You know you have worth, and you will learn to command respect as the expedition's leader. Your skills in some areas are second to none. You will turn this torment into an opportunity for redemption.

You reach the Base Camp, little more than a makeshift group of scattered tents. No one came to greet you. A handful of men, gaunt, their gaze lost on the horizon, desperately try to warm themselves by a fire too small to offer them solace. In the distance,

you hear something screaming—an echo of a tragedy you can no longer avoid. You must force yourself to remember where you are and why you are here, to resist the temptation to go back to the carriage and forget everything.

Choose a name and a reason for being here. Becoming the Commander of the Reality-Affirming Special Corps is, on paper, very prestigious. Still, you find yourself in a hellhole far from civilization, with extremely high mortality and constantly underfunded by the Empire, which seems to have forgotten about the Anomy. Perhaps you are here because you lost politically to a careerist opponent, or maybe you came of your own volition because it felt like the right thing to do. Whatever the reason, as Commander, you will have to manage your subordinates, decide how to allocate resources, update the Crown on your failures and successes, and decide which missions your Explorers will undertake, which you will follow through their eyes.



What's Happening?

The Empire's eastern borders, in the cold, wind-swept steppes. In a crimson-colored tent, you study a map of the region, its eastern edge marked in black. The Anomy is slowly eroding reality. No one understands why. The Academy scholars offer explanations that resemble folk superstitions more than science. The only certainty is that the Anomy is spreading—slowly, yes, but inevitably. Sooner or later, it will reach the outlying settlements and then the Capital. After an initial wave of shock and panic, no one seems to care much anymore. When the first reports hit the newspapers, the Emperor made a show of forming an elite corps of Explorers to study the Anomy and find a way to eradicate it. But as the news was pushed to the back pages and then vanished entirely, he returned his attention to court intrigue and expansionist ambitions in the South, leaving the elite Corps

abandoned, thousands of kilometers from the public eye and unable to stir the conscience of those in power.

You are alone, fighting something ineffable and not understood.



Your Base Camp

A small cluster of military tents gathered around a feeble fire, desperately kept alive with whatever the Corps has at hand. The only splash of color is the Commander's red tent, where expeditions are organized, Explorers give their reports, and the Commander writes to the Crown. There is little to see, but not for long, because the plan is clear: if the Crown will not help them grow, they will carve out a future for the Corps and the Empire with their own hands.

Unfinished Business

The Corps has already left things behind in the Zone. These two Threads start on your Expedition Log [[see Threads](#)].

Person: Nine-Fingers, the Corps' contact in the area. Someone is threatening him.

Story: An expedition the Corps lost on the road east, past the post station.

The Band

The Raiders are the Zone's other scavengers, and they see you as competition. While you have grander objectives, their comparison sometimes rings maddeningly true.

The band that haunts this part of the Zone is **the Widows**. Their leader is an old midwife, and you recognize them by their faces painted red. In the full game, you create the band your Corps will learn to hate.

Your Explorers

Every Explorer has an **Attribute**, a **Skill**, and a **Flaw**, and carries one **Item** into the Zone.

Attributes

Vigor: Physical prowess applied to all rolls tied to strength and endurance, or to resist effects that harm one's Health. Use this attribute in melee combat.

Instinct: The awareness of the surrounding environment and oneself. It applies to all rolls to trust one's gut, sharpen one's senses, and "read" clues in the world around them. This attribute is used in ranged combat.

Cunning: The ability to reason, acquire academic knowledge, and develop social skills. It applies to all rolls involving academic knowledge, logical deduction, and rhetoric. This attribute is used when performing rituals.

Ilyana Ilovic

Small at first glance, but in truth a woman of wiry muscles and unsuspected strength. Tough and impassive, she seems to find the Zone no worse than anywhere else, as though comfort were a mortal sin.

- ◆ **Attribute:** Vigor

- ♦ **Skill:** Surviving. Drinking your own urine, eating dead carcasses, and washing with mud is a humiliating yet efficient way to fend off nature's relentless aggression.
 - ♦ **Flaw:** Cold
 - ♦ **Item:** Rope. Fifteen meters. For climbing, binding, and restraining. Or ending it all on your own terms.
-

Timur “Cough” Zelenko

He watches the world around him with feverish apprehension, searching the folds of every shadow for the next threat to thwart. His extraordinary ability to go unnoticed is undermined by a nervous cough that always seems to appear at the worst possible moment.

- ♦ **Attribute:** Instinct
 - ♦ **Skill:** Hiding. Striking when you're not seen. Concealing when they want to skin you and bury you alive.
 - ♦ **Flaw:** Nervous
 - ♦ **Item:** Oil Lamp. Provides better light than a torch and can be attached to a backpack, keeping your hands free. The oil lasts for one expedition, enough for up to four nights of camp.
-

Zhanna “Widow” Stanic

She lost her husband during a hunting expedition she refuses to talk about, and it is the reason she joined the Corps. She does not like getting close to danger, but fortunately her aim is good enough to neutralize it from a distance.

- ♦ **Attribute:** Instinct

- ♦ **Skill:** Shooting. It took a few days to learn to use a musket, but it takes a lifetime to forget the eyes of the first person whose heart you extinguished with fire and lead.
- ♦ **Flaw:** Cowardly
- ♦ **Item:** Firearm. Pistols, muskets, and hunting rifles recovered from old expeditions or donated by the Empire, probably out of spite. Each comes with a pouch containing ten rounds of ammunition and gunpowder. Not much ammo, but most things that inhabit the Anomic Zone don't have a body that can be wounded.

Michail Todorovic

A former military police lieutenant, discharged after a psychotic episode during an ethnic-cleansing operation in the South. A living contradiction, combining extraordinary analytical ability with a mystical-religious view of the world that borders on the grotesque.

- ♦ **Attribute:** Cunning
- ♦ **Skill:** Investigating. Ignorance is a splendid companion of serenity. The investigator has only the torment of truth as their companion.
- ♦ **Flaw:** Superstitious
- ♦ **Item:** First Aid Kit. Gauze, bandages, scissors, a strong liquor for disinfecting, and for forgetting what is happening to your leg.

Standard Equipment

Your Explorers also have standard equipment available in their backpacks. Field Rations are the exception: they are eaten.

Knife: For cutting, carving, and marking objects or flesh.

Canteen: Full of potable water. It might be the only water available for the entire expedition, so don't waste it.

Field Rations: Enough for a complete expedition if everything goes well. Everything never goes well. The first expedition leaves with them already packed.

Sleeping Bag: Heavy, but not waterproof. It warms you just enough to keep you from freezing, whether by a fire or indoors.

Torch: One per backpack. Lasts one night.

Soap: A crude, vomit-colored block. It doesn't smell good, but it helps to clean.

Clothes Brush: The Explorers are part of a military corps, so their superiors can inspect their clothes at any time. Even in a vapid act of discipline, there's power, but it has never happened and never will.





The Rules

Explorers

Carrying Capacity

Explorers have a carrying capacity of 8 Units; at the start of an expedition, 4 Units are used by the backpack (3) and the starting item (1). Both items and materials recovered from the exploration each occupy 1 unit.

Pressure

Pressure is the sum of an Explorer's mental, physical, and emotional stress during their expeditions. Each Explorer can reach **4 Pressure points** before the Breaking Point.

Upon reaching the Breaking Point, roll 1d12:

- ♦ **1–4: The expedition is over for them.** They walk back to the Base Camp alone. They take **everything they were carrying**, and the trip is safe. The others continue with one fewer member.
- ♦ **5–10: The Explorer dies.** Their items and materials are lost, unless another Explorer picks them up. A survivor can take the fallen's belongings, but only into their own free Units. Backpacks do not add capacity.

- ♦ **11–12: The Explorer becomes an Anomic Timing Bomb:** purify it or run away before it explodes! If you can't purify it, everyone must flee, and the expedition is over [see [The Anomic Timing Bomb](#)].



Challenges

Resolving a Challenge

When the outcome of the Explorers' actions is uncertain, and the situation may affect the story, face a Challenge.

A Challenge is a single roll. Almost every Scene is a Counter resolved through a series of Challenges, each success filling two segments and each success with a price one.

To face a Challenge, choose the Explorer you think is best suited and calculate their dice pool.

Every pool starts at 0 dice:

- ♦ Add 1 die if the Explorer's Attribute is the right one for the type of Challenge.
- ♦ Add 1 die if the Explorer's Skill matches the Challenge.
- ♦ Subtract 1 die if their Flaw hinders the result when applicable.

Roll the whole pool and **keep the highest die**. If the pool is reduced to 0 dice or less, roll 2 dice and **keep the lower**. Add any Item bonus to the die you keep.

An Explorer with neither the right Attribute nor a matching Skill starts from 0 dice, so choose wisely who faces each Challenge.

The final result tells you how the Challenge goes:

RESULT OUTCOME

1–4	Failure
5–7	Success with a price: fill 1 segment
8+	Success: fill 2 segments

Does the Flaw Hinder?

An Explorer’s Flaw subtracts a die when it hinders the result.

Ask yourself: is the flaw a limit in this Challenge?

- ♦ **Obviously:** A Cowardly Explorer facing a monster, or a Greedy one guarding a stash. In such cases, the Flaw hinders, and you don’t need to roll an Oracle.
- ♦ **Obviously not:** The Flaw has nothing to do with the situation, so it does not hinder.

Most of the time, one of these two answers is clear, and you should decide.

When you’re in doubt, or you want to see what happens if left to fate, ask the Yes/No Oracle: *“Does the Flaw get in the way?”*, setting the Odds by the Explorer’s **Pressure**:

Pressure Odds

0–1	Unlikely
2–3	Even
4	Likely

The more stress an Explorer carries, the more their worst side comes out. A Flaw can subtract only one die from a single Challenge, no matter how many ways it hinders.

Items

You can also use an Item to give the Explorer a bonus by rolling an extra d12 before attempting the task. Only one Item can be used in each Challenge.

d12	BONUS TO ADD TO THE CHALLENGE ROLL	THE ITEM...
1	+1	is lost
2–3	+1	is broken
4	+1	—
5–8	+2	—
9+	+3	—

When no die decided it, roll 1d12: on 1–4 the Item is lost; otherwise it's broken.

Price to Pay

A roll below 8 can be a failure or a success with a price, and both cases cost something.

A **Failure** (1–4) does not fill a segment of the obstacle Counter, although it may fill a Countdown. A **Success with a Price** (5–7) fills 1 segment of the obstacle Counter, and it doesn't fill a Countdown.

After a Failure or a Success with a Price, choose one of these four effects:

- ♦ **1–3 • The world worsens:** Roll on the “What Is Happening?” table [see [What Is Happening?](#)] and narrate how things get worse. Add 1 segment to the Counter of the next Scene that still has room (maximum 8). If no Scene is left in this expedition, the segment is lost.
- ♦ **4–6 • The Stakes rise:** Your next Challenge will be more difficult. Raise the Stakes by 1 temporarily.

- ♦ **7–9 • An Item is lost or broken.** Choose the one that makes the most sense, or use “Who Suffers?” to pick the Explorer. If nobody carries an Item, lose a consumable instead: a Torch, a night of Lamp oil, or one Explorer’s Field Rations.
- ♦ **10–12 • A Skill is unavailable:** The Explorer who rolled can’t use their Skill in their next Challenge, whether in this Scene or a later one.

Within the same Scene, you can choose each Price only once. When you have used all four, you can start again. If you cannot pay the Price you chose (nobody carries an Item or a consumable, or no Skill is left to lose), pay the first one available above it in the list.

If you are tempted to be kind to yourself, or can’t decide, let the die choose for you: roll 1d12 and pay the Price whose numbers it shows.

Stakes

Stakes define how much a Challenge can hurt. Pressure comes from things going wrong, so **only a failure or a success with a price can cost Pressure**: if the natural die result you keep, before bonuses, falls within the range shown below, the Explorer gains 1 Pressure. A complete success (8+) never costs Pressure.

The Stakes are tied to the Difficulty of the expedition. Still, they may scale up, temporarily or for the whole expedition, as the price of a roll, if you consider that a reasonable consequence, or for specific, harder Challenges.

STAKES	GAIN 1 PRESSURE ON A NATURAL ROLL OF...
Difficulty 2	1, 2, or 3
Difficulty 2 with a Stakes Raise	1, 2, 3, or 4

Counters

A **Counter** is a game mechanic that visualizes a task or the passage of time as a circle divided into 4 to 8 **segments**.

- ♦ To **fill** a segment, mark it.
- ♦ To **empty** a segment, erase one that was marked. A Counter never has fewer than zero segments filled.

A Counter is complete when all its segments are filled, and its effect then occurs. Whenever you open a Counter, decide what fills it. The most common cases are:

- ♦ An **obstacle Counter** fills 2 segments with every **success**, and 1 with every success with a price.
- ♦ A **Countdown** fills with every **failure**.

Danger Counter

A Danger Counter is a “one-shot” effect with immediate consequences in the current game session or in the Scene where the Counter was opened. It is the most common way to play a Scene, whether it is an environmental obstacle or a combat encounter.

The Danger Counter can also simulate a race against time, for example, escaping a powerful creature or preventing an Anomy manifestation from going off and nuking reality.

Examples of Danger Counters are:

- ♦ The floor of an abandoned house is crumbling (Counter 4).
- ♦ A Raider is returning to camp to alert everyone to your presence (Counter 6).
- ♦ An anomic wind is slowly changing the animals in the woods into feral superpredators (Counter 8).

Countdown Counter

When a Scene can be elevated by time pressure (the floor is crumbling, the Raider is running for help, one of the Explorers is bleeding out), open a

Countdown Counter next to the obstacle Counter. A Countdown is filled with failures rather than successes. Choose its size like any other Counter: the smaller it is, the more pressing the threat.

- ◆ **Each success** fills the obstacle Counter as usual: two segments, or one with a price.
- ◆ **Each failure** fills a segment of the Countdown.

If the obstacle Counter fills first, the Explorers resolve the Scene successfully, and the Countdown is dropped. If the Countdown fills first, the threat happens, and the Scene fails.

- ◆ The Explorer who failed the last Challenge gains 2 Pressure.
- ◆ Open a new 4-segment Danger Counter based on what just happened. When it is complete, the Explorers can move on.





The Expedition

How an Expedition Works

1. The expedition type, its Difficulty, the Explorers, and their Items are already set. Read where the first Level leads [see [The Expedition That Is No More and the Town That Never Was](#)].
2. Play the two Scenes in a Level, the Approach and the Core, in order.
3. When you complete a Level, read where the next Level leads, then decide whether to camp, go deeper, or withdraw.
4. Repeat for up to four Levels, or stop earlier.
5. Play the Way Back. The deeper you go, the longer it is.
6. Count your Expedition Points, your materials, and your dead [see [Coming Home](#)]. Then go to the downtime.

You can end an expedition after **any completed Level**. The deeper you go, the greater the reward, and the more dangerous the road home.

Recovery at Difficulty 2

The Crown seldom answers, so you take what you can from your distant neighbors' ruins. Recovery is the safest way to acquire **usable items**, but it earns few Expedition Points and a modest amount of materials.

The Difficulty (1 to 4) tells you how close to the heart of the Anomy you are going. This expedition is at **Difficulty 2**: it sets the Stakes of every Challenge, and how often the Anomy interferes with a Scene.

Depth Levels

Every expedition has up to four **Depth Levels**, each farther and more troubling than the last.

Level	Name	What it feels like
1	The Threshold	Inhospitable, familiar, predictable.
2	The Wilds	Dangerous, precarious, full of peril.
3	The Deep	Suffocating, mysterious, incomprehensible.
4	The Heart	Puzzling, alien, utterly lethal.

The Expedition Log

Start an **Expedition Log** to record the type, the Difficulty, and the Explorers' names; their Pressure and what they carry stay on their Explorer Sheets. The order of the Explorers in the Log will be used for a couple of Oracle tables. The Log also holds the list of **Threads**: copy into it the Person and the Story from your Base Camp [see [Unfinished Business](#)]. You will update the Expedition Log after every Scene.



Anatomy of a Level

Every Level has two Scenes, played in this order.

- ♦ **The Approach** is the scene of the journey in. It tells of the road they take, the river they wade, the walls they climb, and the first signs of danger they notice before it is too late.

- ♦ **The Core** is the expedition’s center: the place, event, or creature that drew the Explorers this far into danger, and that they may have to risk everything for. On a Recovery expedition, every Core is a **Salvage Site**: getting inside, recovering what you need, and getting out unharmed.

Each Scene is one Danger Counter, and its size depends on the Scene’s weight.

Level	Approach	Core
1. The Threshold	Counter 4	Counter 4
2. The Wilds	Counter 4	Counter 6
3. The Deep	Counter 6	Counter 8
4. The Heart	Counter 8	Counter 8

The bigger the Counter, the longer the series of Challenges: you can vary them (a hazard, then a creature, maybe a trap) to keep the Scene interesting.

Opening a Scene

1. Read the Scene in The Expedition section: it tells you where the Explorers are going and what waits for them.
2. **Roll the Scene Die (1d12).**
3. **Read the result.**

Scene Die	Result
1–2	Altered. The Scene happens as expected, but the Anomy has changed something about it. Roll on the Anomy Oracle [see The Anomy Oracle] and see what’s happening.
3–9	As expected. The Scene happens as written.
10–11	A Thread returns. The Scene happens as expected, but something from the Threads list comes back into it [see Threads].
12	Interrupted. The Raiders find the party instead [see The Raiders].

Altered Scenes. The manifestation does not add a second Counter; instead, it replaces it with a different Danger Counter. The Counter keeps the size from the Level table. Keep the Scene's entry, and let the Anomy change the place and the Challenges.

Interrupted Scenes. The interruption replaces the expected Scene. The world has simply changed it, and the original Scene is not played afterward. The new Scene counts as the Approach or the Core it replaced, with the same Counter size. If the Raiders interrupt the Core, the Salvage Site is unreachable: they got there first. At Level 4, the Widows have reached the town that appears on no map, too: the fight takes place among its quiet streets, instead of The Other Camp.

Playing a Scene

1. **Open the Scene.** Read it, roll the Scene Die, and see whether the Anomy has a sensible effect on it, as described above.
2. **Name the obstacle and open its Counter.** Each Scene in this Quickstart gives you its obstacle. Give it a Danger Counter of the size shown in the table above, plus any segment added by the Price "The world worsens."
3. **Face a Challenge.** Pick the Explorer whose Attribute best fits what is happening right now. Start from 0 dice: add a die if their Attribute is the right one, add another if their Skill applies, subtract a die if their Flaw hinders, and consider using an Item. You can choose a different Explorer for each Challenge so every Explorer gets their moment.
4. **Roll.**
 - ♦ **On a success (8+),** fill two segments of the Counter and narrate how the Explorers make headway.
 - ♦ **On a success with a price (5–7),** fill one segment of the Counter, but pay the price [see Price to Pay].

- ♦ **On a failure (1–4)**, the Counter does not advance. Pay a price and narrate what goes wrong. If a Countdown is open, fill one of its segments [see [Countdown Counter](#)].
- 5. **Check the Stakes.** Only a failure or a success with a price can hurt the Explorers. If the natural result of the die you keep falls in the Stakes range (1–3 at Difficulty 2), the Explorer gains 1 Pressure.
- 6. **Repeat** with a new Challenge until the Counter is full. When it is full, the Scene is resolved.

Example: The Frozen River

The Commander decides on a Recovery expedition. There is no time for a cautious Approach, so she sets out immediately at Difficulty 2. The chosen Explorers are: Ilyana Ilovic (Vigor, Surviving, carries the Rope), Timur “Cough” Zelenko (Instinct, Hiding, Nervous), Zhanna “Widow” Stanic (Instinct, Shooting, Cowardly, carries the Firearm), and Michail Todorovic (Cunning, Investigating).

In the Approach Scene of the First Level, the Commander expects the expedition team to encounter a frozen river that separates them from an abandoned mill. She rolls the Scene Die: **9**. At Difficulty 2, the Scene is Altered on a 1–2, so there are no surprises: the river is exactly as she expected. Now the group has to cross it.

Since this is the Approach of the First Level, the Commander names this obstacle, a Danger Counter of 4, **“Cross the River.”** The ice creaks beneath their boots, so she also opens a Countdown, **“Thin Ice” (4).**

Challenge 1: Ilyana lays the Rope across the cracks. Vigor is the right Attribute, and Surviving applies. Her pool is made of 2 dice. She rolls a 4 and a 6 and keeps the 6. The Rope’s bonus die shows 9, which adds +3 without breaking the Rope. A 9 is a success, and it fills two segments: the **“Cross the River”** Danger Counter is now 2/4.

Challenge 2: Timur tests the ice ahead. Instinct is the right Attribute, and no Skill applies: 1 die. He rolls 2: failure. At Difficulty 2, the Stakes are 1–3, so Timur gains 1 Pressure. Something breaks beneath the river’s surface. The **“Thin Ice”** Countdown is now 1/4. The Commander pays the Price by raising the Stakes: the next Challenge is harder.

Challenge 3: Zhanna drags the supply sled over the cracks. This is a Vigor task, so her Attribute is wrong, and no Skill applies. Her Flaw, Cowardly, obviously hinders her on the cracking ice: a minus 1 dice pool means she rolls two dice, 4 and 9, and keeps the lower: 4. It is a failure. With the Stakes raised to 1–4, a 4 costs 1 Pressure. The Price the Commander chooses to pay is a broken or lost Item. Zhanna slips, and the musket slides into an ice crack. The **“Thin Ice”** Countdown is now 2/4.

Challenge 4: Michail studies how the cracks spread. Cunning is the right Attribute, and Investigating can be used for this Challenge: 2 dice. He rolls 4 and 3, keeping the 4: failure. With the Stakes back to 1–3, a 4 costs no Pressure. The **“Thin Ice”** Countdown is now 3/4. The Commander pays the Price with a Skill: Michail slips and hits his head on the ice, and, still dazed, he won’t be able to use Investigating in his next Challenge.

Challenge 5: Ilyana drags the rest of the supplies across the river, now riddled with dangerous cracks. She can use Vigor, but has no Skill or useful Item that applies to the Challenge. She rolls one die and gets 7. It is a success, but one that comes at a Price. One segment of the **“Cross the River”** Danger Counter fills, bringing it to 3/4, but the Price is someone or something drawn by the sound of the ice giving way. The Commander has already used the Stakes, the Item, and the Skill in this Scene, so she chooses “The world worsens”: the Core of Level 1 will have a Counter of 5 instead of 4.

Challenge 6: Timur is the last to cross. Instinct is a suitable Attribute, so he rolls one die. He rolls 9: success. The expedition team crosses the frozen river, filling the Danger Counter.

The Countdown stopped at 3/4, so it is dropped, and the Commander can update the Expedition Log. Timur and Zhanna are at Pressure 1, and you have lost a Firearm.

The Decision Point

When both Scenes of a Level are resolved, you are at a **Decision Point**. Take a moment to update the Expedition Log and weigh your party's state. Every Hungry Explorer gains 1 Pressure [see Food]. Roll for the Items found at this Level [see Found Items]. Then read where the next Level leads, and choose what makes the most sense, now that you know where the road goes.

Make Camp (*optional*), then **either Go deeper** into the next Level **or Withdraw** and begin the Way Back.

Making Camp

Camp lets you recover, but the wilds' darkness is scary and dangerous.

1. **Spend a light.** Burn one **Torch**, which lights a single night, or use the **Lamp oil**, which lights up to **four** nights. If the party has neither, they cannot make camp. They must push on or withdraw.
2. **Roll the Night Die.** Roll 1d12. On 1–4, the night is restless: nobody recovers.
3. **Rest.** Otherwise, each Explorer recovers **1 Pressure**.

You can make Camp only once at each Decision Point, and only if the party has a night of light to spend: each Torch gives one, and a Lamp gives four. The Explorers' standard equipment includes one Torch per backpack.

Going Deeper

The Explorers move on to the next Level, which starts from a new Approach. You can't skip any Level; you must play them in sequence.

Withdrawing

The Explorers turn around. They keep everything they have earned **up to the last completed Level**, and they begin the Way Back.

If you withdraw—and sometimes you must, to save your Explorers—you will never know what you might have found.



Threads

The Zone changes constantly, but it doesn't forget the traces the Explorers left behind. The people you saved or abandoned, the mysteries you left unexplored out of haste or fear, the dangers you left behind without neutralizing them don't necessarily disappear on their own, like the monsters under your bed when you were a child. They may come back, usually when you have the least time to deal with them.

The Thread List

Keep a list of **Threads** in the Expedition Log. A Thread is something the expedition leaves unresolved, written on a single line and marked as one of two types:

- ◆ **Person:** someone the Explorers have encountered and might meet again. A civilian in trouble, a Raider you let escape, someone with more secrets than answers.

- ♦ **Story:** something that happened but never reached a conclusion. For example, the Explorers failed to solve a mystery, left a debt unpaid, or abandoned something they should have taken with them.

Add a Thread whenever a Scene presents an unresolved element you would like to revisit in the future. When a Thread is resolved during play, cross it off the list. The list can hold up to 12 Threads; if you need to add a thirteenth, remove the oldest.

This expedition starts with two Threads already on the list [see [Unfinished Business](#)].

A Thread Returns

When the Scene Die shows **10 or 11**, the Scene unfolds as expected, but a Thread reappears within it. Choose the Thread, or roll Which One? among those still unresolved [see [Which One?](#)]. If the list is empty, the Scene unfolds as expected.

The Thread does not replace the Scene or add a Counter. Instead, it changes who is there, what they want, or what is at stake. If the Scene resolves the Thread, cross it off the list.



The Way Back

Finishing one or more Levels is quite possibly only half the journey. The Explorers still have to return, carrying what they found, and escape from unfathomable perils. Leaving the Zone is one or more Scenes.

After a Withdrawal, play the number of Scenes listed in the table below, based on the last completed Level. Use the usual rules, but the **Stakes are one step lower** than the expedition's Difficulty: at Difficulty 2, a natural 1 or

2 costs Pressure. The Explorers can try to trace their steps back, and they already understand the threats they may face.

Last completed Level	The Way Back
1	No Scenes. The Explorers walk home.
2	One Scene, Counter 4
3	One Scene, Counter 6
4	Two Scenes, Counter 6 and Counter 4

When the last Scene resolves, the Explorers reach Base Camp. The Scenes are in The Way Back [see [The Way Back Scenes](#)].

Flight

Sometimes there is no time for a Decision Point. Something has gone very wrong, and the Explorers must run. You can declare a **Flight** at any time, between two rolls.

- ◆ The Explorers abandon the Scene they are in. They keep only the rewards from the last completed Level (Level 0 if they have not completed any).
- ◆ Play the Way Back for that Level. If the Level is 0 or 1, there is no Way Back to play: the Explorers are still close enough to the Base Camp to run all the way home, and they bring back only the shame of it.
- ◆ The Stakes are **not** lowered.
- ◆ Open a **4-segment Countdown** called **Fear**. Every failure during the Way Back fills a segment. If it fills, the Explorers are so frightened that they abandon everything except their backpacks: materials, found items, and their starting Items.

Losing People

The Anomic Timing Bomb

An Explorer who has become a Bomb is already dead, and something else looks out of their glassy eyes. The party has to choose between **purifying** it and **fleeing**.

Purify

Open a Danger Counter, **Purification**, with 4 segments that fill on a success, and a Countdown, Detonation, with 4 segments that fill on a failure. The Explorers must make Cunning Challenges to complete the ritual. If Purification fills first, the Bomb is defused, and the expedition continues. If Detonation fills first, the Bomb explodes.

Flee

Declare a Flight, and lose the dead Explorer's belongings. The Bomb's Detonation Countdown replaces the Fear Countdown, and it fills on every failure. If the Bomb explodes, the expedition is over for everyone. Survivors are thrown back and stagger out of the Zone, keeping only the rewards from the **last completed Level**. They do not play the Way Back.

A Total Loss

If every Explorer dies, the expedition fails, meaning no Expedition Points, materials, or items. The Corps is a whole party shorter, and the Commander has grimmer news for the Crown.

Items in the Field

Found Items

A Recovery expedition can find a maximum of **4 Items per Level**. At each Decision Point, roll 1d12 to find out how many the Explorers have found at that Level.

d12 Items found at this Level

1	None
2–3	One
4–6	Two
7–10	Three
11–12	Four

For each Item, roll 1d12 on the row of the Level where you found it.

Level Common Special Unique

1	1–12	—	—
2	1–8	9–12	—
3	1–4	5–10	11–12
4	—	1–10	11–12

After that, roll on the tables below based on each item's quality. You can also choose the Common or Special Items that best fit the place where they were found: a Saber in a border fort, a Field Surgeon's Bag in a field hospital. Items found immediately take up Units.

Unique Items can't be picked manually and are always rolled. If you roll a Unique Item the Corps has already found, take the next one on the table.

A firearm found in the Zone comes with 1d6 rounds instead of 10.

Common Items

The tools and items most commonly produced and found in the Zone, unfortunately, are often scavenged from corpses.

d12 Item

- 1 **Rope:** Fifteen meters. For climbing, binding, and restraining. Or ending it all on your own terms.
- 2 **Hatchet:** Excellent for cutting, splitting, and shaping wood. It can also act as a hammer if you need to drive a stake in the black heart of an abomination.
- 3 **Shovel:** Digging, burying. A life of voids and fills, always with hands dirty from soil.
- 4 **First Aid Kit:** Gauze, bandages, scissors, a strong liquor for disinfecting, and for forgetting what is happening to your leg.
- 5 **Oil Lamp:** Provides better light than a torch and can be attached to a backpack, keeping your hands free. The oil lasts for one expedition, enough for up to four nights of camp.
- 6 **Fire Starter:** Fire once let us escape eternal darkness and barbarism. Fire is what will protect you today from what lurks in the folds of the night.
- 7 **Sewing Kit:** Mending seems like a hearthside activity until you lose your big toe from the cold.
- 8 **Firearm:** Pistols, muskets, and hunting rifles recovered from old expeditions or donated by the Empire, probably out of spite.
- 9 **Saber:** Some nobles gifted you shiny parade swords. Their money and material support would have been much more appreciated. However, the blades are sharp, and the Raiders or the mutated from the Anomic Zone can still bleed.
- 10 **Crowbar:** Useful for opening crates, doors, and skulls. Surprisingly effective at getting even the shyest Raiders to talk.
- 11 **Snowshoes:** It doesn't matter if they're two sizes too small, mismatched, or reek of death; you'd kill to keep them when you're knee-deep in snow or standing on solid ice.
- 12 **Spyglass:** A slightly dented, portable brass telescope. You'll be the first to know when it is time to run or pray for your soul.

Special Items

Rare Items, or Items so thoroughly looted by someone else that they have become rare. Some are fairly useless anywhere but in the Zone's dangers.

d12 Item

- 1 **Dead Explorer's Notebook:** Your comrade's sacrifice won't be in vain, as long as at least one of you isn't illiterate. Use it as an Item in Challenges that require navigating or figuring out where you are in the Zone.
- 2 **Fur Sleeping Bag:** A sleeping bag that smells like wet dog but still keeps you warm. When the party makes Camp, the Explorer who sleeps in it recovers 1 more Pressure.
- 3 **Officer's Revolver:** Once an elite military handgun of the Empire; now it's junk, like the rest of your weapons, just sleeker. Six chambers and a spare cylinder; it uses rounds like any Firearm. Breaks only on a 1–2.
- 4 **Double-lined Greatcoat:** A heavy wool garment with a name written inside. The blood stain on the inner pocket over the heart won't come out. Use it as an Item against cold. Breaks only on a 1–2.
- 5 **Portable Theodolite:** A brass instrument in a mahogany case. It consists of a prismatic compass, telescopic sight, and spirit level. Most of you can't even open the lock. Use it as an Item in Cunning Challenges to understand something related to the Anomy.
- 6 **Field Surgeon's Bag:** The result of a millennium of medical progress packed into a shoulder bag, yet what draws you most are the opiates. Use it as an Item in Challenges where you need to heal someone. If used on an Explorer, on a 9+, it also removes 1 Pressure from them.
- 7 **Shuttered Lantern:** A lantern rarely used by civilians, but many of you know it all too well. When you need to hide from the consequences of your actions, moving in the semi-darkness is very useful. Its oil lasts for one expedition, enough for two nights of Camp, and it can be used as an Item in Hiding Challenges when it is dark.
- 8 **Chaplain's Censer:** Use it as an Item in Social Challenges with believers, or against Presences with a religious theme.

- 9 **Stray Mule:** Extremely intelligent creatures mistaken for stupid because they often disobey orders. Yet intelligence also shows up in the ability to ignore commands from someone dumber than you. The Mule takes no Units and adds 4 Units to the party's carrying capacity. When a Price costs an Item, the Commander can choose the mule instead: it is lost, along with everything it was carrying.
- 10 **Imperial Map Case:** Imperial explorers once drew the finest maps in existence, with a margin of error of just a few centimeters. You hold one in your hands, a far cry from the memory-based scribbles you make at Base Camp. Once per expedition, skip one Scene of the Way Back.
- 11 **Hunting Rifle with Scope:** A bulky, loud, and difficult weapon to use, yet the favorite of anyone who comes prepared. Use it as an Item in ranged combat or Hunting Challenges. It gives +1 more bonus, to a maximum of +4.
- 12 **Tainted Bayonet:** Found in a cache in a place consumed by the Anomy. It seems to be in excellent condition and, for now, isn't speaking to you in your mother's voice. It can wound Presences without a body. Breaks only on a 1–2.

Unique Items

These items shouldn't exist, and no one will take you seriously if you ever mention them. Still, on your luckiest expeditions, you may come face to face with one.

Unique Items don't follow the rules that govern other Items: they grant no bonus dice and don't break under the usual rules. Because each one is truly unique, its table entry explains how it works, what it costs, and, if applicable, how long its effects last.

- ♦ **Between rolls:** it's used at any moment between two rolls, in a Scene, at Camp, or at a Decision Point. It takes effect at once.
- ♦ **Price:** what it costs.

d12	Item
1–4	February 30th Page: An old wall calendar, open on February 30th. You can tear the day off, and the same nonexistent date will welcome you. <i>Between rolls:</i> once per expedition, reroll a failed Challenge. <i>Price:</i> the Explorer carrying it gains 1 Pressure.
5–8	Vlad's Bone: A consumed finger bone you are sure belonged to someone named Vladimir. It hums when the Anomy is near. <i>Between rolls:</i> after you roll the Scene Die, roll it again and keep the result you prefer. <i>Price:</i> each time you use it, 1 Pressure to the Explorer carrying it.
9–12	A Promise of Tomorrow: A gift ribbon, perfectly preserved. Untied, it lets you glimpse what is yet to come. <i>Between rolls:</i> look at the next roll's result before choosing who faces the Challenge. <i>Price:</i> the Explorer who holds it gains 1 Pressure. Once untied, it vanishes like a fleeting dream.

Food

Each Explorer's standard Field Rations last the whole expedition. An Explorer who loses them is **Hungry**: at each Decision Point, they gain 1 Pressure.

Ammunition

A Firearm comes with 10 rounds. Each time you use a Firearm as an Item, mark one round. A firearm with no rounds is just a heavy stick.

Lost and Broken

A lost Item is gone. The Explorers' standard equipment is the only exception.

A broken Item can be carried home, taking 1 Unit. If it isn't worth the space, you can leave it behind.

The Raiders

On a Recovery expedition, every Interrupted Scene is an encounter with them [see [The Band](#)].

When the Scene Die shows 12, the Raiders find the party. The fight replaces the expected Scene and keeps the same Counter size: play *The Widows Find You* [see [The Widows Find You](#)]. Before rolling, the Commander may instead **pay tribute**: the party gives up one working Item for each living Explorer, and the Scene resolves.

If the party wins the fight, the Raiders flee, leaving behind a Special Item: roll on the *Special Items* table [see [Special Items](#)]. From Level 3 on, they leave a Unique Item instead: roll on the *Unique Items* table [see [Unique Items](#)].





Asking the Zone

When to Use an Oracle, and When to Face a Challenge

Oracles and Challenges serve different purposes: the former provide answers about the world around your Explorers, while the latter help you determine what happens to your party when a situation is risky or uncertain.

If the uncertainty is about...

Use...

What the **Explorers do** and whether they succeed

A **Challenge**

What the **world is like**, what is there, and what it does

An **Oracle**

For example, “Is the bridge still standing?” is a question for the Oracle; “Can Timur cross the bridge before it collapses?” is a Challenge, probably tied to a Counter.

How to Use the Oracles

The five rules below help you play solo without leaving behind the thrill of the unknown. Nobody’s watching you, but breaking them would probably detract from the experience.

1. **Ask only what you don't already know.** If you have decided the Raider is dead, he is dead. Don't ask the Oracle to confirm it.
2. **Trust your first answer.** Read the results and, if they leave room for interpretation, choose the first possibility that comes to mind, so long as it makes sense within the Scene. Do not second-guess what the Oracle has revealed.
3. **What the Oracle says is true.** Never re-roll because you don't like the result. If the result contradicts something you established earlier, look for an explanation that makes both true. Your Explorers are deep in the Anomy territories, where reality shifts and changes; you'll likely find an incredibly intriguing answer.
4. **Never use an Oracle to dodge a consequence.** A failed Challenge has a price. Your story will be better with some resounding failures.
5. **Write it down.** Keep a short log of each answer as you go. Half of the game's tension comes from a small, casual answer three Scenes ago coming back to matter. When an answer leaves something open, write it down as a Thread.



The Yes/No Oracle

This Oracle answers any question that can be answered with a “yes” or “no,” and you should use it most often.

How to Ask

1. **Formulate a closed question:** the “yes” or “no” answer should say everything you need to know. For example, “Is anyone inside the mill?” “Does the road continue past the river?” or “Is the man lying about the lamp oil?” are also acceptable.

2. **Decide the Odds:** start from what seems most reasonable in the fiction, then choose one of the five levels below.
3. **Roll 1d12:** If the result meets or beats your Odds number, the answer is **Yes**. Otherwise, it is **No**.
4. **Check the extremes.** A natural **12** is **Yes, and...** a natural **1** is **No, and...** Roll on the Boon or Complication table below.

Odds

Odds	Yes on a roll of...	Chance of Yes
Very likely	3+	83%
Likely	5+	67%
Even	7+	50%
Unlikely	9+	33%
Very unlikely	11+	17%

Setting the Odds

If you are unsure, start with **Even** and shift one step for each factor that clearly points one way. Do not shift more than two steps in total.

Fiction

Common sense and the setting help you judge how likely or unlikely a situation is. Ruins are often abandoned, wolves roam in packs, and Raider camps should have guards on watch. If the Oracle's answer would be unsurprising, shift the Odds toward Yes; if it would be surprising, shift them toward No.

The Explorers' Preparation

A lamp, a rope, or a relevant Skill can make a hopeful question more likely to get a Yes. Their absence can make it less so.

Yes, and... / No, and...

A natural 12 or 1 means the answer is bolder than usual. Roll 1d6 on the matching table, or choose the entry that fits best.

Yes, and... (Boon)

d6	Boon
1	A useful find. Gain 1 material if you have room to carry it.
2	A moment of calm. One Explorer of your choice loses 1 Pressure.
3	A clue. The Explorers notice something that will help later. Write down a detail you can use.
4	A lucky break. An ally, a safe path, or a forgotten cache.
5	The Anomy withdraws. A Challenge is simpler than it looked, and you fill a segment of the obstacle Counter.
6	Advantage. Your next Challenge gains a free bonus die that can't break. It counts as the Item of that Challenge.

No, and... (Complication)

d6	Complication
1	Noise. Something hears you. Open a 4-segment Danger Counter, "Something approaches." On a Recovery expedition, it may well be the Raiders.
2	Something breaks. One Item carried by an Explorer of your choice is broken or lost.
3	A bad moment. One Explorer gains 1 Pressure.
4	The Anomy stirs. Roll on the Anomy Oracle.
5	Time slips. A Challenge is harder than it looked, and you empty a segment of an open Danger Counter or open a 4-segment Countdown, "Nightfall."
6	A wrong turn. Your next Challenge is harder. Raise the Stakes by 1 temporarily.

Other Simple Oracles

How Many?

When you need a number (“How many Raiders?”, “How many crates?”), roll 1d12.

d12	Amount
1	None, or almost none
2–3	One or two
4–6	A few
7–9	Several
10–11	Many
12	Overwhelming

When counting hostile forces, add the current **Depth Level** minus 1 to the roll, to a maximum of 12. The deeper you go, the more there are.

Which One?

When you have a short list of options and no preference, assign each a range of the d12 and roll. Divide the die as evenly as possible. Two options get 6 numbers each, three get 4 each, four get 3 each.

Who Suffers?

When the story calls for picking one of the living Explorers at random, roll 1d12. Number the Explorers in the order they appear in the Expedition Log.

Explorers alive	Roll
4	1–3 first, 4–6 second, 7–9 third, 10–12 fourth
3	1–4 first, 5–8 second, 9–12 third
2	1–6 first, 7–12 second
1	That Explorer, with no need to roll

What Is Happening?

Use this table when a Price tells you the world worsens, or any time you don't know what the Explorers meet next.

d12 Something happens...

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1 | The Anomy manifests. Roll on the Anomy Oracle. |
| 2 | A discovery. One Explorer notices something valuable, strange, or dangerous that the others missed. |
| 3 | Hostiles. Raiders, or something worse, appear. To know their numbers, use the “How Many?” Oracle. |
| 4 | A stranger. Someone the Explorers didn't expect to meet out here. |
| 5 | A hazard. The environment turns hostile: ice, fire, collapse, water, wind. |
| 6 | Supplies. Something useful is found, or something carried is ruined. |
| 7 | A trace of the Corps. Equipment, a grave, a journal, or a message from an earlier expedition. |
| 8 | A flaw surfaces. One Explorer's Flaw creates trouble. Choose the Explorer, or use the “Who Suffers?” table. |
| 9 | The light changes. Weather, night, or a strange sky shifts the Scene. |
| 10 | A mark of the Empire. A road, a boundary stone, a courier's boot, or an official notice. |
| 11 | Something about the Anomy. A clue about what it is or what it wants. |
| 12 | Something is watching. Nothing has happened yet, but you feel the danger in your bones. |



The Anomy Oracle

The Anomy has no goal or evil plan to thwart. It is neither a monster nor a place of power. It is reality itself, which has forgotten its own laws and is slowly devouring itself.

Use this Oracle whenever another table sends you here, when a Scene is Altered, or when you want to add something unsettling.

Roll once on each table. The first says what part of reality has stopped working, while the second says how it fails.

d12	Domain: what fails	Distortion: how it fails
1	Time	Loops
2	Distance	Reverses
3	Gravity	Stops
4	Light	Multiplies
5	Shadow	Vanishes
6	Sound	Crumbles
7	Memory	Swaps
8	Flesh	Swells
9	Matter	Mutates
10	Weather	Mimics
11	Names and language	Reacts
12	The dead	Wakes

Examples:

- ♦ **Sound + Mutates:** *The wind repeats the Explorers' words, changing them slightly each time until they become curses that could drive them mad.*
- ♦ **Names and language + Swaps:** *The Explorers' names have changed places. Also, their mannerisms when they speak are different. Are they really the same people as before?*
- ♦ **Gravity + Swells:** *The snow starts to fall upward. It is getting heavier as it goes.*

How to Play an Anomy Manifestation

An Anomy manifestation is rarely merely strange or unsettling; it is generally a threat your Explorers must confront and overcome. You must cross, endure, or stop the manifestation before it finishes: it is a **Danger Counter**.

In an Altered Scene, the manifestation reshapes the Scene’s own Counter. When a manifestation appears on its own, for example, when another table sends you here, use this size:

Depth Level	Counter segments
1	4
2	6
3	6
4	8

Reduce the size by 1 (minimum 4) if the manifestation is small or brief, or increase it by 1 if it is enormous or if it directly threatens the Explorers’ lives.



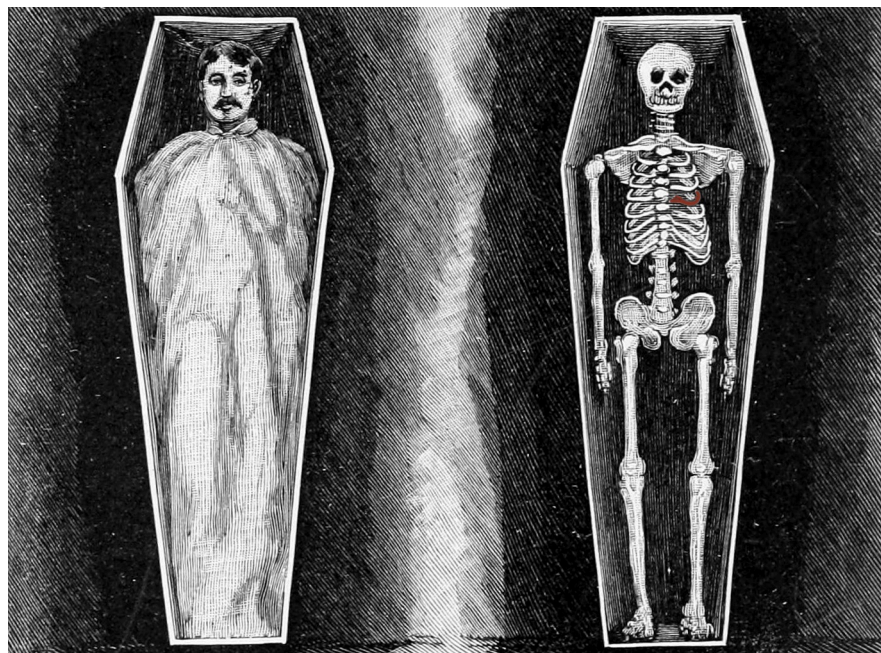
The Diary Oracle

The Commander follows the exploration through the Explorers’ eyes and merely reports what happened. The diary lets you make the game your story.

At the end of a Scene, an expedition Level, or a downtime, roll once on each of the two tables below. Read them together, trust the first idea that comes to mind, and write a few lines to see where they go. If you prefer, choose the combination that feels right instead of rolling.

d12	Write about...	...through...
1	One Explorer (roll: Who Suffers?)	What went unsaid
2	The Explorer you know least	What you left out of the report
3	Yourself	A small kindness
4	The Crown	A mistake
5	The Base Camp	What it cost
6	A place they passed through	What has changed
7	Something they carried, or left behind	A fear
8	The Anomy	A hope you don't trust
9	The dead of the Corps	A lie
10	The Corps' list of names	A memory it brought back
11	The cold, the land, the sky	A question you can't answer
12	The next expedition	A promise

Diary entries are not a game requirement, but they are the best way to keep the story consistent from one expedition to the next.





How to Play a Scene

The following practices will help you make every session of *The Fire Gives No Light* your own. They aren't rules, and you may know a better way to build your Scenes, but they are habits that keep every expedition from becoming nothing more than a string of results on a sheet of paper.

1. Find the Premise

Every Scene begins with a place and something happening, or about to happen. In this Quickstart, each Scene gives you both.

Then figure out why this is happening there and how the Explorers will approach the situation; take the first answer that makes sense, and write it down. This is the **Premise** of the Scene and will be the focal point of all the Challenges.

2. The Obstacle Lies Within the Premise

Each Scene in this Quickstart names its obstacle. Open a Counter and name it after the Explorers' objective, something active. For example, wading across a river, silently getting past a Raider checkpoint, or retrieving an Item touched by the Anomy from an old fishing hut. If the obstacle doesn't quite fit what has happened so far, adapt it.

3. Every Roll Answers a Question

Make sure that every Challenge has a clear successful outcome: what is the Explorer's objective? The Challenge should answer that question and give you something to build the next.

4. Short Successes, Long Failures

A success might take just one line in the Expedition Log: the rope holds, the Explorer leaps across the chasm, the wolf is driven off with fire. Instead, use failures and their Prices to drive your story. Start with difficulties and mistakes to truly test your party.

5. Let Failure Write the Next Challenge

The Price you pay after a success, or the failure you suffer, can perfectly set up the next Challenge. If an Item falls into the river, the next Challenge might be to cross without it. If the Stakes rise because someone made too much noise, the next Challenge might involve finding, neutralizing, or hiding from whatever heard you.

6. Build and Release Tension in Stages

A Counter with 6 or 8 segments might seem impossible to narrate, but you can break it into three parts. The first segments set the Scene: the Explorers look around, take in the situation, and test the waters (perhaps literally). The middle segments show the situation getting worse and bring the Scene to its lethal heart. The final segments resolve the situation.

For example, in an 8-segment Counter, the first 2 segments represent the first stage, the middle 4 the second, and the final 2 the third. When you don't know what the next Challenge should be, try to work out which act you're in.

7. The Final Success Ends the Story

The last roll, the one that fills the Counter, resolves the problem or at least ensures it is no longer a direct threat to the Explorers. Describe how the Explorers get out of the situation and what consequences the Scene leaves behind: injuries, deaths, or mysterious characters they might encounter again in the future. If something remains unresolved and intrigues you, note it down as a Thread.

What to Do When You Get Stuck

- ♦ Ask yourself what would make the situation worse or more interesting, and let it happen.
- ♦ Use *Who Suffers?* and assign the next Challenge to the selected Explorer.
- ♦ Look at the Explorer's Flaw: a Nervous Explorer might run into very different problems from a Greedy one.



Reading a Scene

Every Scene is an obstacle, indicated by a Danger Counter that you fill as you complete Challenges. The descriptions provide examples to assist you in telling how the situation develops, but you are not required to use them precisely as they are; feel free to select the parts you prefer and discard any that do not suit your situation.

In the entries, you will find:

- ♦ A **Countdown**, when time limits or pressure are involved. Like everything in the entries, it is a suggestion: open it only if it makes the Scene better, unless the entry says it is always open. The number next to it is its size. The Scene you open after a failed Countdown usually has none.

- ♦ **Challenge examples.** These consist of individual rolls that can fill the Counter, each having the Attribute most suitable for it. You may choose them in any order, create new ones, and change the Explorer at each Challenge.
- ♦ **Skill examples.** Skills that could add a die. Any Skill that makes sense in your story counts.
- ♦ **Price examples.** How the four prices of a Failure or a Success with a Price can look in this situation. They are divided by type using tags: **World** (The World Worsens), **Stakes** (The Stakes Rise), **Item** (An Item is lost or broken), and **Skill** (A Skill is unavailable). If the entry doesn't list the Price you need, narrate the consequence your own way, or use the Oracles for inspiration.
- ♦ **Narrative consequences:** things that can happen in the story for certain special entries, without a cost attached. Use them after paying a Price, when a Counter fills, or whenever events naturally seem to be heading that way.

When an entry has a **Countdown**, the **“Consequence”** section tells you what goes wrong when it reaches its end, and what the new Danger Counter represents.

When an Investigation Scene's Counter fills, the Explorers discover the answer. The **Answer example** offers one, but you can use your imagination or the Oracles to tailor it to your needs.

In this Quickstart, each Scene's heading shows its Counter size, which comes from where the Explorers are [see [Anatomy of a Level](#)]. If the Danger Counter becomes longer to resolve than the list of Challenges, you can repeat the ones already used, take one from a different entry, or follow the fiction and write something yourself.





The Expedition That Is No More and the Town That Never Was

You study your *Explorers* one by one, trying to tell whether they can hear your fear and doubts in your voice. Your hands are clasped behind your back, giving you a suitably martial appearance while doing a decent job of hiding their trembling.

«It's the muddy season. I don't expect help from the Crown anytime soon. Before we can study the *Anomy*, we need *Items* and materials, or winter will break us when it comes.»

You keep your left hand steady enough to point to a spot on the map, a little east of *Base Camp*, inside the *Zone*.

«There should be an old post station here. You might find harnesses, lamps, and clean paper. Raiders usually don't dare come this close to *Base Camp*, but our contact in the area, *Nine-Fingers*, told me they've grown bolder.»

You try to read the Explorers' reactions, but they remain impassive. Sometimes you think they don't understand you; perhaps your polished, bourgeois accent confuses them. Perhaps they are so hollowed out by now that ruthless Raiders and the Anomy are nothing more than background noise.

«Ah, one last thing: the Corps lost an expedition in this direction,» you say, tracing a line from the post station toward the depths of the Zone. «Find out what happened. And please, don't meet the same fate.»

Every Level below gives you its two Scenes in order. Before each Scene, read its opening text, then roll the Scene Die [see [Opening a Scene](#)]. When a Level is complete, its Decision Point tells you where your Explorers will go next.



Level 1 · The Threshold

Approach: The Whiteout · Counter 4

The way the world changes the moment the Explorers enter the Zone would be astonishing, if it didn't make every hair on their bodies stand on end. The air grows heavier, and for a moment they forget how to breathe, how to put one foot in front of the other without stumbling, even the meaning of the simplest words. It lasts only a moment, and the Explorers come back to themselves, but it is a good reminder of what will happen if they lose focus. They wade across a river swollen with mud, the cold water barely reaching their knees.

After a while, snow begins to fall. Softly at first, but every 100 meters it gets worse. And worse. And worse. The Explorers tighten their gloved hands around their pack straps, with the feeling that the worst is yet to come.

A snowstorm driven by a wind that seems to cut through flesh. The Explorers walk single file, heavy foot by heavy foot, with visibility no greater than an arm's length.

Challenge examples: Keep the line together (Instinct); Find a landmark to follow (Cunning); Dig a windbreak (Vigor); Keep moving while exhausted (Vigor).

Skill examples: Surviving.

Price examples: *World:* the party loses its way and goes where it shouldn't; *Stakes:* the line breaks, and an Explorer faces the next Challenge half-blind in the snow.

Narrative consequences: one Explorer falls behind and must be found; footprints in the snow, but they aren't yours.

Core: A Post Station • Counter 4

What the Corps hopes to find: harnesses, lamps, unused paper.

The Explorers reach the end of the trail dazed, as though born moments ago from a world that does not love them, struggling to understand where they are and, perhaps, who they are. The cold makes their teeth chatter, and their toes feel as though needles have been driven into them. Bent slightly forward, their boots swallowing snow with every step, they finally see the post station, surprisingly well preserved save for its shattered windows and weeds sprouting between the bricks. The lock is still closed, but

they can open the door by reaching through the missing pane of glass. No one seems to have entered for a long time, and everything has been left just as it was when whoever fled this place abandoned it. On the other side of the door, a wooden gate bears a sign reading “warehouse.” The Explorers hurry toward it, hopeful, but begin to hear a strange creaking from the boards beneath them, like the groan of a dying man.

The obstacle: The Collapsing Floor

Time and cold have made the stones brittle, damp has rotted the wooden beams, and pitch-black mold has taken hold; burdens too heavy for floors too fragile to bear your ambitions. Whatever the reason, one moment of carelessness is all it takes, and all that waits is the hopeless void of the fall.

Countdown (4): Ruinous fall. *Consequence:* An Explorer falls to the floor below. Open a new Counter to reach them and check if anything is broken.

Challenge examples: Spread the weight (Instinct); Brace a beam (Vigor); Find the load-bearing wall (Cunning); Leap the weakest section (Vigor).

Skill examples: Evading, Tinkering.

Price examples: *Item:* an Item is lost in the rubble; *World:* the door collapses, and the only route left goes deeper.

Decision Point

Nothing is simple in the Zone, not even reaching an abandoned post station a short distance from Base Camp. The party makes a short halt, and there is a moment of peace beneath the branches of an ancient tree before they decide what to do. Farther on, beyond the forest, lie the remains of a field hospital where they could gather medicine. It is marked on the rough, smudged-ink map the

Commander gave them. The Explorers can return to Base Camp if they wish, carrying the weight of a failure that will soon leave their comrades' bellies empty.

- ◆ Every Hungry Explorer gains 1 Pressure.
 - ◆ Roll for the Items found at Level 1 [see Found Items].
 - ◆ Make Camp if you want and can [see Making Camp].
 - ◆ Go deeper to Level 2, or withdraw [see The Way Back Scenes].
-

Level 2 · The Wilds

Approach: The Snares in the Woods · Counter 4

The forest shelters the Explorers from the weather, but makes them feel trapped and suffocated. Low branches scrape their coats and keep them constantly on edge. The bark of some trees has been stripped away, clearly not by any natural event. Only later, looking up, do they notice wooden medallions hanging from the highest branches on ropes, all painted bright red, each with a small bell tied beneath it. This place clearly has masters. The ground before them is covered with fallen leaves, forming a natural carpet that welcomes them into the depths of the undergrowth. Assuming it is natural.

Many thin but sturdy ropes stretch from the high branches down to the snow-covered path. Each rope is tied to a small bell that rings with an ironically cheerful chime. Looking up, you notice some traps have already caught an animal and, judging by how well they hold,

perhaps even a careless hunter. Whoever set them probably checks them often, perhaps hurrying when they hear the bells ring.

Countdown (4), always open: They are coming. *Consequence:* Whoever set the snares finds you. The new Counter is to flee or confront them: play The Widows Find You as a Counter 4 [see The Widows Find You].

Challenge examples: Spot the ropes (Instinct); Cut a rope without ringing the bell (Instinct); Climb the trees (Vigor); Free anyone who has been caught (Vigor).

Skill examples: Hunting, Evading, Hiding.

Price examples: *World:* A bell rings, and something now seems to be following you; *Item:* An Item gets caught in the wire.

Narrative consequences: You find something hanging from a tree that no one would ever want to catch.

Core: A Field Hospital · Counter 6

What the Corps hopes to find: surgical instruments, alcohol, laudanum, bandages.

The forest has proved a cruel host, and emerging on the other side gives the Explorers a moment to catch their breath and lick their wounds. It takes little time to find the old stone road again, now a pale imitation of the past, when carts traveled it busily every day. It leads to a small square overlooking an old, collapsed hospital that the army once used to treat the victims of its own errors in judgment. There should still be useful materials to salvage, unless other surprises are waiting in ambush. For a few moments, the wind seems to carry the sound of children laughing. It is probably just the distant whistle of the storm.

The obstacle: The Children's Drawings

You stand before what remains of a hospital ward. It seems to have collapsed inward, leaving a single interior wall half-buried beneath rubble and rotting timber. Its visible portion is covered in colored chalk drawings: creatures you struggle to understand, even in a child's simplified shapes, surrounded by symbols and block-capital words that make no sense. In one corner, figures hold torches, one for each of you. You are certain they are you. The chalk dust at the wall's foot is still fresh.

Challenge examples: Clear the rubble from the wall (Vigor); Decipher the symbols (Cunning); Identify the creatures (Cunning); Search through the ruins (Instinct); Figure out what the torches point to (Instinct).

Skill examples: Investigating, Scavenging.

Answer example: In his dreams, the child saw what would happen in the Zone after his death. The drawings depict the events in sequence, with the symbols forming a map. The final drawing, hidden beneath the rubble, reveals the next challenge the Explorers must overcome.

Price examples: *World:* one of the creatures vanishes from the wall when you are not looking, then reappears elsewhere; *Skill:* looking too much at the symbols burns the Explorer's eyes, so their Skill is unusable in their next Challenge.

Narrative consequences: Whenever you find another place with walls, you will find new chalk drawings.

Decision Point

The Explorers stop, exhausted and shaken, at the edge of the old Imperial road. Someone vomits, the sweat on their forehead freezing almost at once. Things could have gone better, but

someone is still standing to tell the tale. Now the map speaks of a sanatorium, probably still in good condition, unlike reality, which is beginning to fray. The clouds seem to change shape when watched; plants bend in the opposite direction from the wind. The Explorers could turn back, or discover what is waiting at the next stop.

- ◆ Every Hungry Explorer gains 1 Pressure.
- ◆ Roll for the Items found at Level 2 [see Found Items].
- ◆ Make Camp if you want and can [see Making Camp].
- ◆ Go deeper to Level 3, or withdraw [see The Way Back Scenes].



Level 3 · The Deep

Approach: The Choir of Drowned Promises · Counter 6

The sanatorium seems very close: they can see every detail of the building, yet the road seems to stretch with every step. New details appear, new scenes seeming to unfold before the Explorers' eyes like pages turning in a book. Time passes, but the faded sun seems motionless, like candlelight filtering through a hole in a sheet of paper. The party notices—or perhaps it has only just appeared—a frozen pond to their left. They seem to hear a mournful song coming from that direction.

The Explorers notice a small frozen pond ringed by snow-crueted plants. Voices sing a canon in overlapping intervals in a language they have never heard, yet understand perfectly. A hymn no living ear has heard in three thousand years speaks to the Explorers of love, of

hope, of a better future waiting to be embraced. It sounds so beautiful. It would take so little to join their choir. Perhaps, once you did, you would never need to leave it.

Countdown (4): The Choir takes a new member. *Consequence:* An Explorer walks onto the pond's dangerously thin ice to join the song. Open a new Counter to bring them back.

Challenge examples: Plug your ears (Vigor); Sing louder (Cunning); Blow the ice to stop them from singing (Instinct); Keep the others from answering (Instinct).

Skill examples: Persuading.

Price examples: *Stakes:* an Explorer starts humming the hymn, and it spreads like a contagion, so the next Challenge is harder; *World:* new voices join the choir behind your back.

Core: An Officers' Sanatorium • Counter 8

What the Corps hopes to find: morphine, a gramophone, first-aid kits, used clothes.

Not everyone has come out of the road as they entered it. Someone has cried every last tear, including those that were never truly theirs. Now the sanatorium stands before them, bearing the official insignia of the highest officers: a gray griffin on a field of gold, still clearly visible. A blanket of brown mist slides beneath the imposing entrance, curling through the air. Inside, they should find everything that would have been impossible to imagine back at Base Camp. After all, officers deserved the best, including morphine to treat the ailments of the spirit as well as the body. Common soldiers could console themselves for the pain of freshly

amputated phantom limbs with the tavern songs they loved so much. As they open the door, they notice that the mist is unusually dense. In the distance, a waltz plays on a gramophone that certainly should not be working.

The obstacle: Choked Dream in Sepia

A brown haze pulses and expands to the rhythm of a waltz. Wherever it passes, colors fade, and you no longer feel like yourself, but watch reality from a privileged, detached vantage point. Why hurry? Why run? Seen from another perspective, it is all just a dream. None of your problems matter.

Challenge examples: Keep walking (Vigor); Find a place where there is still color (Instinct); Remind the others what's real (Cunning); Hurt yourself to come back (Vigor); Refuse to sit down (Vigor).

Skill examples: Persuading, Investigating.

Price examples: *Stakes:* The Explorer is confused, and the next Challenge is harder; *Item:* an Explorer puts down an Item and can't find a reason to pick it up again.

Narrative consequences: An Explorer lies down, silent and motionless, looking up. You need to find a way to take them somewhere safe.

Decision Point

Their chests feel heavy, and it seems as though the party has been outside for years. The Zone is even more oppressive now, and the living who travel this deep begin to feel the first signs of their separation from reality. Sounds become tastes in their mouths. Abstract concepts become colors and numbers. Memories become images that seem almost within reach. A mad, shifting synesthesia, added to the dangers of a small town whose silhouette

they can see in the distance. A town that should not exist, yet stands there with its forbidden treasures. They could leave it alone and turn back now. If they go on, the road home will be longer.

- ◆ Every Hungry Explorer gains 1 Pressure.
- ◆ Roll for the Items found at Level 3 [see Found Items].
- ◆ Make Camp if you want and can [see Making Camp].
- ◆ Go deeper to Level 4, or withdraw [see The Way Back Scenes].



Level 4 · The Heart

Approach: The Storm That Loops · Counter 8

Despite what common sense would suggest, the Corps decides that it is too late to turn back. The town seems close, though something about it is wrong. The proportions and distances do not add up. Sometimes it almost feels as though they are already inside, hearing the bell above a shop door as it opens. The smell of fresh bread. The chimney sweep shouting to attract customers. And yet the party is still in the wilderness, if it can be called that, with its colors partly reversed and the sensation of walking through molasses. In the trance induced by the shifting nature of the place, the party risks failing to notice the danger ahead, cold and incomprehensible like everything else in the Zone.

The Explorers find themselves in a blizzard that freezes in mid-air, then reverses direction in a circular pattern. It comes and goes like a mechanical clock, with sharp, razor-like flakes.

Challenge examples: Pass between the flakes without touching them (Instinct); Understand the rhythm (Cunning); Blast them away (Instinct); Shield from the snow with something (Vigor).

Skill examples: Surviving, Investigating.

Price examples: *Skill:* a flake cuts deeply on the brow, so the Explorer can't use their Skill in their next Challenge; *World:* The storm learned to move in a single direction: it follows the party into the next Scene.

Core: A Town That Appears on No Map • Counter 8

What the Corps hopes to find: anything. The town is well supplied and far too quiet.

Anyone who has come this far could say without fear of contradiction that the Zone is less a place than the fury of a world breaking apart. And the fury does not pass when the sky clears, even if it clears to an unnatural periwinkle. Now the Explorers stand at the entrance to the town. There are no people in the streets, and they would have expected nothing else. But all the sounds are there. It is a living town, to anyone who only listens. Walls are being painted. Vegetables are being sold at the street corner, where only a rotting old cart stands. Children chase a ball, laughing, through an otherwise empty alley, save for a dead rat. In this place, where sounds have forgotten that they are supposed to be gone, there will probably be everything they need, and perhaps even things that should not exist. Maybe the Corps will find the missing expedition, too.

The obstacle: The Other Camp

Well hidden from the elements, you find a camp that looks like it was abandoned in a hurry. It takes only a few seconds to realize that it is

yours: the same tents, the same packs, the same blackened pot hanging over the fire. The fire is still burning. Beside it lies the Expedition Log, written in your own hand, with several entries dated a few days from now. The final page has been torn out in haste, leaving a jagged tear in the paper.

Challenge examples: Read the Expedition Log (Cunning); Search for the missing page (Instinct); Look for clues about what made you flee so quickly (Instinct); Compare your equipment with what you find here (Cunning).

Skill examples: Investigating, Scavenging.

Answer example: The Zone has folded in on itself, and your expedition will end here if you don't make different choices.

Price examples: *World:* you begin to remember things that have not happened yet; *Stakes:* the ink in the Expedition Log begins to fade as you read, making the next Challenge harder.

Narrative consequences: You can take an Item from the Other Camp, but you must leave one of your own in its place.

After the Heart

- ◆ Every Hungry Explorer gains 1 Pressure.
- ◆ Roll for the Items found at Level 4 [see Found Items].
- ◆ Make Camp if you want and can [see Making Camp].
- ◆ The road goes no deeper: begin the Way Back [see The Way Back Scenes].

The Widows Find You

Of the Raiders, what impresses you most is not their ragged clothes, worn in layers and probably torn from rotting corpses, nor the fierce, deranged eyes of those who traded their sanity for a hot meal. It is the smell. The stench of death, sweat, and excrement reaches your nostrils long before you see them. It is like the plague in a nearby village, carried to you on the smoke of burning infected bodies. Your plague has arrived, carrying rusty blades and rifles caked in mud. There is very little room for dialogue.

Challenge examples: Find a position of advantage (Cunning); Identify the leader (Instinct); Break their ranks (Vigor); Shoot the biggest one (Instinct); Buy some time (Cunning).

Skill examples: Persuading, Shooting, Evading.

Price examples: *Stakes:* they are craftier than you expected and surround you, so the next Challenge is harder; *Item:* something is lost in the struggle; *World:* one of them slips away to warn the rest of the band, and some of them follow the party; *Skill:* a rifle butt to the face leaves an Explorer dazed, and they can't use their Skill in their next Challenge.

Narrative consequences: the Raiders have learned something about one of the Threads, and will make sure to use it to their advantage the next time you meet.

Tribute. Before rolling, the Commander may pay tribute: the party gives up one working Item for each living Explorer, and the Scene resolves.

Spoils. If the party wins the fight, the Widows flee, leaving behind a Special Item [see [Special Items](#)]. From Level 3 on, they leave a Unique Item instead [see [Unique Items](#)].

The Way Back Scenes

The Explorers have done all they can, and now they must retreat toward Base Camp. The road seems longer than they remember, thanks to exhaustion and trauma. There is no time to notice how the Anomy is changing the landscape behind them, or how every glance makes the place stranger and more wrong than it was a moment before. They know they won't be safe until they reach the Commander, but they have no time to hold on to the thought. Faint howls rise from every direction and from none.

First Scene: The Pallid Pack

Counter 4 after Level 2, Counter 6 after Level 3 or 4.

Wolves that look half-dead, their gray coats ravaged by pustules and open sores. They advance like a funeral procession, in absolute silence. They are hunting you, though their bodies have long since forgotten how to digest what they kill.

Challenge examples: Cover your backs (Instinct); Shoot the leader (Instinct); Hold the line (Vigor); Climb out of reach (Vigor); Scatter them with fire (Cunning).

Skill examples: Shooting, Brawling, Hunting.

Price examples: *Skill:* a bite still bleeds after medication, so the Explorer is too exhausted to use their Skill in their next Challenge; *Item:* a wolf crushes an Item with its yellowed teeth.

Second Scene: The Thin Ice

Only after Level 4, Counter 4.

The Corps does not know how it is still alive, but it is not yet time to congratulate itself on their luck and thick skin. The river they waded on the way in, swollen with mud, is now frozen solid, though no frost has had the time to touch it. It is the only route available if they do not want to risk further lethal encounters by taking the long way around.

A frozen river or lake blocks your path. The ice creaks when you step on it. You feel vibrations beneath the crust, like a strong current that shouldn't be there.

Countdown (4): The ice breaks. *Consequence:* Someone goes underwater. Open a new Counter to get them out and warm them up before hypothermia snuffs out their life.

Challenge examples: Test the ice ahead (Instinct); Lay a rope across the ice (Vigor); Plan an effective route (Cunning); Drag the gear across (Vigor).

Skill examples: Surviving, Evading.

Price examples: *Item:* an Item falls from the backpack and sinks in the freezing water; *Stakes:* an Explorer trips and has to wade through freezing water, facing the next Challenge with numb legs.



Coming Home

You hear the trumpet and step out of your red tent, hiding your unease and fear of what the Explorers will tell you. You watch those returning and have the impression that you are looking at people who have endured years of imprisonment and torture at the hands of the Empire's worst enemies. Eyes staring into nothing. Features twisted and disfigured by terror, exhaustion, and pain. You feel your tear ducts swelling, but the sharp evening air keeps you from crying. The Explorers, your Explorers, did not deserve this. You have them tell you everything, hoping that, at least in some small way, it was worth it.

When the last Scene of the Way Back resolves, the Explorers reach Base Camp. Go through this checklist in order.

1. Note who returned alive, who withdrew, and who died. If no one returns, there are no rewards.
2. Use The Haul table to see how many Expedition Points you earned.
3. Use The Haul table to count the materials and apply the carrying cap [see What You Can Carry]. Add the Items found.

4. Write a Diary entry, maybe rolling from the Diary Oracle [see The Diary Oracle].
5. Begin the downtime.



The Haul

When the Explorers return, you learn what they brought back. The expedition’s rewards depend on **three things**: its type, its Difficulty, and the **last completed Level**.

Last completed Level	Expedition Points	Materials
1	6	2
2	10	5
3	16	8
4	24	13

Write them down: they are what you report to the Crown [see Writing to the Crown]. Materials are an abstract, fungible resource. That said, for consistency and to make your stories more interesting, you can decide what your Explorers actually bring back: scrap copper, church candles, a crate of wooden toys, or a sack of flour. Use the places and the Challenges to give you an idea of what your Explorers will take back from the Zone.

What You Can Carry

An Explorer’s **free Units** are what is left after the backpack and the starting item: normally **4**. Without help, an expedition of four Explorers can carry at most **16 materials and items**. If Explorers die or leave, the cap falls with them.

Items take up Units as soon as you find them. If you find an Item and have no Units left in your Explorers, you can swap it for something else you leave

behind. **Materials** are counted at the end. The carrying cap applies when you count the haul: what doesn't fit stays in the Zone.





Downtime

Writing to the Crown

T*he ritual is always the same: the Explorers return from the expedition, deliver their report, and you spend the night turning confused and distorted accounts into a clear, concise record to share with the Crown.*

After your first few letters, detached, objective, and military in tone, you realized that if you wanted anything from the Capital, you had to sell a story rather than an impartial report. You also learned that some letters take the long way around, passing from hand to hand and becoming bored chatter among minor nobles and officials, turning a tragedy into juicy gossip that catches the attention of the Crown's friends and enemies alike. So sending a letter to the useful person, rather than the right one, could mean the difference between a crate of rotten lemons and those bloody boots you have been begging for months.

The Letter

The letter is your chance to turn an expedition into a convincing story, one that impresses its reader and makes them more likely to help you. This

free-form part of the game lets you give voice to a Commander's creativity and frustration as they hope for change.

If you need help structuring the letter, answer these questions:

- ♦ **To whom?**
- ♦ **What do you report?**
- ♦ **What do you leave out?**
- ♦ **What do you ask for,** and how do you justify it?
- ♦ **How do you sign?**

If you want an idea for whom to send the letter to, roll 1d12 and consult the table below.

d12 Dear...

1	A clerk at the Ministry.
2	Your patron at Court.
3	The Archchancellor's secretary.
4	A cousin with an influential spouse.
5	The Dean of the Academy.
6	An old comrade, now a colonel on the General Staff.
7	The editor of a Capital newspaper.
8	The Emperor, so that means his chamberlain.
9	The widow of the previous Commander.
10	The Quartermaster General.
11	A provincial governor with a big mouth.
12	Nobody: <i>To whom it may concern.</i>

If you also need an angle, roll on the second column of the Diary Oracle [see [The Diary Oracle](#)].

If you need some inspiration, ask yourself:

- ♦ Do you mention the drawings?

- ◆ How do you justify the dead?
- ◆ Do you tell them the Widows are getting bolder?

A Letter from the Border

Dear Vanessa,

I hope this letter finds you well. No, splendidly well. I received your birthday gift, and I thank you most sincerely. It was a moment of genuine human warmth in the cold of this border, which grows darker and more inhospitable as the days pass.

I do not deserve such kindness, especially those delightful chocolates you wrapped with such care. It is a shame the journey and the cold ruined them after couriers carried them thousands of kilometers. Please know I appreciated them even without tasting them; the wrappers were beautiful!

I am glad your son has graduated from the Military School, though I would not use my own career as a measure of success, even without any false modesty. I hope he does better than I did, with distinction, and makes your family proud.

Thank you for asking after the border. As you know, these are troubling times. My people are exhausted, supplies are running low, and the Archchancellor seems unable to reply. It has been months. The situation is dire, and it seems to grow worse by the day. We feel the pressure of the Anomy mounting, like a headache that begins as a dull ache and slowly grows unbearable.

I do not know how to explain what we have seen without upsetting you, my dear Vanessa. The things that move in the Zone are not merely impossible; they defy the very nature of

life itself. On our last expedition, one of my men returned blind after being trapped inside a granary, where something had been crawling between the wooden ribs of the walls. He could not explain what had happened. He only keeps repeating, «Elia is thirsty.» We have no idea who this Elia is.

The men returned with their backs broken under the weight of the materials they had recovered, their eyes wide with the look of those who'd had to do terrible things to find them and bring them back. We need those resources, though. The men at Base Camp will devote themselves to turning the remains of our civilization into tools to protect us. I go to bed to the sound of our civil engineer's hammer, as he labors late into the night and seems to age a year every week to give us the best he can. Our cook wakes up at four to prepare tasty meals with what little we have, and he is the first to welcome back returning Explorers, with a steaming bowl of soup in hand and a few bad jokes on his pursed lips. I can only hope their physical and mental sacrifices will not be in vain.

To be entirely honest, there is one more gift I would ask of you for my birthday. I know it is brazen of me, but I do not know how to carry on without risking that all the Corps' sacrifices will have been for nothing, and that only the choices and mistakes made by my predecessors and me will remain.

You would be incredibly kind to make your cousin aware of the utter destitution in which my men are living, sacrificing everything as the last bulwark against the collapse of reality. If you can put in a good word with him and have him speak to the Minister on our behalf, that would be wonderful. I am not asking for preferential treatment. All I ask is that he read our

reports and give us concrete help so we can fulfill our calling to the fullest extent of our abilities.

Otherwise, Vanessa, by next winter, no one will be left to send chocolates to. And a hundred years from now, no one will be left to eat them.

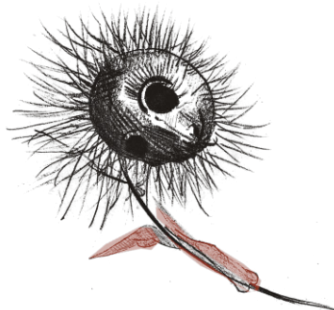
With affection, and always yours,

Commander Zinaida Sheremilova

The Courier Leaves

The courier takes the letter with the look of someone carrying out a job that is useless, if not actively counterproductive. He bows, then disappears outside the tent. You hear the click of his tongue as he sets the horse into a gallop, trying to leave the place as quickly as possible without running anyone down.

Now comes the hardest part: waiting for a reply, hoping it arrives, pretending everything is fine and that the Empire absolutely has the interests of your men at heart above all else. Only the future knows what will happen, and the future is a luxury when the days grow short, the cold cuts across your face, and the soup grows thinner by the day.





Beyond the Surface

To find out what happens next, you will have to wait for the full game and everything it has to offer.

Different Expeditions

You can send your Explorers on *Research* expeditions, where they will venture deep into the Zone, all the way to its beating heart, to study Anomy manifestations capable of tearing reality itself apart. Or you can send them on *Control* expeditions, where something that defies the laws of nature has awakened and is ready to transform and destroy everything it touches, and your Explorers must stop it.

A Camp That Grows

The Expedition Points recovered in the Zone can be used to build new structures at your Camp, such as the **Field Kitchen**, **Workshop**, **Alchemist Lab**, and **Occultist Tent**, giving you better tools and new opportunities to survive the dangers of your expeditions.

A Distant Crown

Ask the Crown for recruits, Items, and materials, then wait for a reply. Distracted and troubled by more local problems, the Crown might give you

exactly what you asked for, something completely useless, or even draw the wrong kind of attention from the Capital.

Hardened Explorers

The harsh laws of the Anomic Zone are formidable teachers, provided they do not mangle the Explorers' bodies first. Survivors grow, learn new **Skills**, and may one day retire with a **Medal of Honor**.

A Zone That Remembers

Anomic Events slowly rewrite the rules of reality, from a sun that rises later every day to the dead of the Corps walking west.

An Ending for the Commander

Once the Corps knows three **fundamental truths about the Anomy**, the Commander can write **The Final Letter** to the Crown. The Crown's reply will determine the Corps' future... if it has one.





This is no time to stop.

This was only the first expedition, and the Corps has many more to complete, paying whatever price it takes, anything to keep reality from tearing itself apart. The future of the Empire, and of your Commander, is yours to discover, but you will have to earn it, one expedition at a time.

Everything about the full game is here:



oddplan-rpg.com/the-fire-gives-no-light

The Commander's tent is always lit. Come back when you are ready to send your Explorers back into the Zone.



Sheets

Ilyana Ilovic

ATTRIBUTE	Vigor	SKILL	Surviving	FLAW	Cold
PRESSURE	    → the next point is the Breaking Point				
UNITS	        shaded: backpack (3) and starting Item (1)				
ITEMS	Rope ☐ broken ☐ lost ☐ broken ☐ lost ☐ broken ☐ lost ☐ broken ☐ lost				
SUPPLIES	☐ Field Rations ☐ Torch Hungry: without Field Rations, gain 1 Pressure at each Decision Point.				

Timur “Cough” Zelenko

ATTRIBUTE	Instinct	SKILL	Hiding	FLAW	Nervous
PRESSURE	    → the next point is the Breaking Point				
UNITS	        shaded: backpack (3) and starting Item (1)				
ITEMS	Oil Lamp ☐ broken ☐ lost ☐ broken ☐ lost ☐ broken ☐ lost ☐ broken ☐ lost				
SUPPLIES	☐ Field Rations ☐ Torch Lamp oil ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Hungry: without Field Rations, gain 1 Pressure at each Decision Point.				

Zhanna “Widow” Stanic

ATTRIBUTE

Instinct

SKILL

Shooting

FLAW

Cowardly

PRESSURE

→ the next point is the Breaking Point

UNITS

shaded: backpack (3) and starting Item (1)

ITEMS

Firearm

broken

lost

broken

lost

broken

lost

broken

lost

SUPPLIES

Field Rations

Torch

Rounds

Hungry: without Field Rations, gain 1 Pressure at each Decision Point.

Michail Todorovic

ATTRIBUTE

Cunning

SKILL

Investigating

FLAW

Superstitious

PRESSURE

→ the next point is the Breaking Point

UNITS

shaded: backpack (3) and starting Item (1)

ITEMS

First Aid Kit

broken

lost

broken

lost

broken

lost

broken

lost

SUPPLIES

Field Rations

Torch

Hungry: without Field Rations, gain 1 Pressure at each Decision Point.

Expedition Log

TYPE Recovery **DIFFICULTY** 2 **STAKES** 1–3 · Way Back 1–2

ORDER 1 Ilyana · 2 Timur · 3 Zhanna · 4 Michail

LEVEL	APPROACH	CORE	ITEMS FOUND
1 · The Threshold	 4	 4	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
2 · The Wilds	 4	 6	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
3 · The Deep	 6	 8	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
4 · The Heart	 8	 8	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

COUNTDOWNS   **+1 SEGMENT · THE WORLD WORSENS**
☐ ☐ ☐

WAY BACK   4 or 6 **FEAR** 

HAUL Expedition Points _____ Materials _____

THREADS

Person · Nine-Fingers, the Corps' contact in the area. Someone is threatening him.

Story · An expedition the Corps lost on the road east, past the post station.



no one expected that



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