

Phaethon Station

by Aaron A. Reed

BRIEFING: After hundreds of dead and barren worlds, the Eighth Extrasolar Survey found Phaethon, the first and only known alien planet to be blessed with life.

Every inch of every biome writhed with it, swarmed with utterly strange, unquestionably advanced forms: oceans threaded with golden neuronal strands, cyclopean mounds of organic matter shifting and remaking themselves like restless cities come to life, millions of flying creatures flocking in mathematical patterns too complex to comprehend. Some thought dozens of intelligences thrived on Phaethon—others said the whole world was a single entity. It was unquestionably the most important discovery humankind had ever made.

To a people still struggling with the sins and mistakes of the past, it was a promise—that perhaps with the help of siblings among the stars, we could learn to be better. But the promise remains unfulfilled. All attempts to communicate with Phaethon have failed. Or have they? Scientists posted to orbiting Phaethon Station report only frustration, but also high rates of emotional distress, hallucinations, and intrusive thoughts.

Sorties to the surface are dangerous, with shuttles often swallowed by miles-wide mouths or permeated by inscrutable miasmas. Whether these are attempts to communicate or whether humanity is entirely beneath Phaethon's notice remains a mystery. None who return ever ask for a second tour of duty.

Then, three years ago, something changed. All comms from Phaethon Station abruptly went dead, and no expedition sent to investigate has returned. Your ship *Solace* is a last-ditch effort with a range of different voices and perspectives aboard, a final attempt at first contact before the system is abandoned for good.

Perhaps you will be the ones to finally break through and understand what, if anything, Phaethon is trying to say... whether you return to Earth to share the story, or not.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT IN PLAY?

ACT ONE: PHAETHON STATION

Play the first two scenes at the Solace and the Airlock, then enter the station. Each time you move to a new location, draw from the Station deck and place the card adjacent to an existing location, forming a map of the station's current configuration (which bears no resemblance to any blueprints you might have on file).

When you draw **ENCOUNTER** Scene cards that mention "creatures" or "beasts," they appear to be former members of the station's crew. They still seem human, at least at first. Are they really there, or only echoes, illusions? What has changed in them beneath the surface?

When you encounter **ANOMALY** Scene cards, you can choose for it to be a shift of location. Draw a new Location card and replace the current location with it. Is what you now see around you an illusion, or a real truth that was there all along?

When you trigger a Mutation, consider whether the change happens to your body or your mind. You may feel your mental patterns shift and adjust, as if an alien force is trying to rewire your brain. Do you suddenly see the world from a whole new paradigm or with a different perspective? Do you find aspects of your own humanity suddenly alien, or bizarre ideas reassuringly familiar?

ACT TWO: THE SURFACE

After five or six locations, your characters descend to the surface of Phaethon. On the ride down, follow the instructions on the Campfire card, adding one thing: *"What, if anything, do you think the intelligence here has been trying to communicate?"*

As you move to locations on the planet's surface, first draw a Fate card, then let the person whose fate has arrived draw from the Memory deck, placing cards in a line leading away from the Campfire.

Though you are on an alien planet, these locations seem drawn from your own mind. When you Take Stock, describe the things that make these places seem familiar, but also the details that the planet's intelligence has distorted.

ENDGAME

The Center is a chance to finally communicate with Phaethon.

Play out the Endgame as normal, with your wish expressing your desires for humanity and Phaethon's relationship: knowing everything you now know, do you still want to make first contact? Escape and quarantine this system forever? Achieve a personal desire, or make an appeal for your species?

Decide, and play out the final moments as in the base game.