

The History of Capsaa

The history of Capsaa

by Cliff Dale

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or find out more about the

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The History of Capsaa

Deep in the constellation of Apparatus Sculptoris, you will find the planet Capsaa, pronounced cap-sah it is just off the cosmic equatorial plane at Right Ascension: 00h 47m 33s and at a Declination of minus 25° 17m 18.0s.

The planet Capsaa was discovered in the early 40th Century, quite by accident as it happened, and it became one of those seemingly insignificant places that turned out to be quite important in the greater scheme of things. It was a strategic jump point for many a commercial and fleet ship, it had a good source of water, and abundant fuel reserves that were always available to commercial and military sources alike, no distinctions and no favouritisms, though there were limits, and protocols, this meant only registered shipping and transport could officially use these supplies. This denial of service to the few led to many heated disagreements and conflicts over the years, but those who only had the intention to refuel and resupply, and were refused permission to dock, were often the recipients of a backhanded deal, one that saw the unregistered vessel supplied and serviced off world eventually. More often this was to gain some favour from a potential source of threat rather than an illicit money-making scheme, though make illicit money it did.

The true events have probably been expanded upon and exaggerated, but the discovery of Capsaa went something like this –

A deep exploration research vessel (DERV) was looking for a planet to evaluate for commercial exploitation, it had been in deep space for nineteen years, the DERV had made one or two minor discoveries, but it was not as satisfying as expected, now they were slightly lost, off track. It was true, things were not going as they had hoped, other events kept cropping up, there were delays, they were let down by other third parties, and when plans did seem to progress, the end result was disappointing, so, they were looking for pastures new so to speak. They had just jumped from sector 05D3 and were looking to sector 18M4 as a new place to begin looking at alternatives, now though, they were in deep trouble. They had appeared from the Hyper Jump and were busy re-evaluating their astral position when they were literally mugged by Pirates looking for cargo to steal, they had none. They pleaded their case, emphasising that they were a research vessel, and informed the attacking ships that the only cargo they had were food stores and minimal fuel reserves, it made little difference, the Pirates were unimpressed and unsympathetic, and they simply used the ship for target practice. The DERV managed to return fire but was outgunned, the ship was damaged to the point where the performance of its engines was impaired, and the hull compromised in more than a dozen places, and although they had

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managed to repel the boarders, it was at quite some cost. The ship needed a place to hide, there was a need to run and to make repairs, and to once more re-evaluate their position, but this time for a far different reason.

The HyperDrive went offline, though they had managed a short burst in emergency jump mode, that EJM was all they had, and for a while, it was all they would get. The stress of powering the HyperDrive unit without the normal build-up saw the drive couplings fail, and this had left them drifting with no Ion Drive unit power at all. As the ship was dumped out of HJ it was by chance that they also lost the pursuing forces when they unceremoniously arrived in this unfamiliar territory. The added bonus was that several of the pursuing ships slammed into the back of the DERV and its rearward facing force field generated deflector shields, these were valiantly protecting the already impaired engines from further damage, but even so, there were now several more dents at the rear of the ship. Several of the pursuing Pirate ships wrongly assumed that all this debris now glancing off their own deflector arrays meant that some Imperial fleet vessel was in the HyperDrive slipstream, they knew the wreckage was not from the DERV, now they expected to become the hunted. The warning call quickly went out and the Pirates broke off the pursuit of an already lost cause, all those still in one piece fled the scene.

For the DERV, it was a windfall moment, they had lost the engines but also lost the chasing pack of marauders, ultimately, this was an unexpected stroke of good fortune that saw them survive the encounter, not that they may actually survive the experience if they could not gain some motor control. They drifted for four days before they could even get the basics working properly.

Life support was functioning in most places, and they had managed to get the shielding operational to protect the already compromised hull, though structural integrity was weak, it was all holding together. The repair teams were working overtime to plug the holes, to repair punctured integral internal walls, and to shore up and strengthen damaged hull frames, only then could they attach the new plating panels to seal the damaged hull. If they needed to run again, with the gaping holes in the plating and the shattered hanger joists, they knew they were not going to get far or survive long without this work being completed, this was more than just a basic repair job.

The Engineering teams were working hard to get the engines back online too, they were basically intact, just electrically compromised in several places. Aside from the disconnected drive couplings, they also had many relays that had shorted out, and even some that were missing altogether, in their place was a hole that had been rent through the hull plating by the raiders weapons fire, taking the vital control systems with it. They had to wait for damage control to fix the external gaps before they could begin their own internal repairs, theirs was already delicate work in a confined space, attempting it in a space suit just made it harder, slower, and more hazardous. They were fortunate that the TrASCC Reactor was still online and not compromised, if it had of been, then, apart from

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being irradiated, there would have been a mighty impressive flash as the Triple Accelerated Super Conducting Cyclotronic Reactor went critical, exploded, and vaporised everything for a thousand clicks. This small but efficient triple core reactor was powering everything that was currently running, shielding, lighting, life support, power tools and medical facilities, it was at its limits of power output, and the inner core temps were rising, that was never a good sign. There was the added risk of a criticality cascade accident running amok, this may yet finish them off if they could not restart the Ion Drive cluster soon, no pressure, they just needed to get it done now.

What didn't help was that the computronics were also a mess, the ships internal computerised systems were all over the place, some of it worked on some levels, on others it failed as the control mechanisms had been compromised by some damage or another, rendering it necessary to repair these internal links too, once external repair teams had plugged the gaping holes to the darkness of the deep, the vastness of space. Everyone who could be was outside on the hull, cutting away damaged panels, plasma welding new strengthening joists in place, splicing new carbon fibre nano tethers, and checking the wiring looms for damage. Even the walking wounded were dragged in to help, everyone that could, was required to get the ship functioning again, they needed the engines to be able to regain control of a ship drifting blindly in the deep. They needed to know where they were, perhaps as important, they had to know where the raiding forces were.

The medical teams had never been so busy either, it had been a brutal and relentless encounter, sadly, there were many they could not save, and many others that had already been lost to the void where a hull decompression event had dragged them screaming to their untimely and unpleasant death. They did what they could for the injured, repaired what was feasible and removed what was not possible to fix, they saved those they could, and mostly hoped for the best for those that were gravely injured, it only worked for some.

It was on the fourth day of drift that they managed to get the navigational equipment back up and running, on the Large Object Collision System monitor they saw the unknown planet and its several moons, and they soon realised that without drive engine control, they were going to crash into it, and soon. Engine repairs became the priority, without drive they were finished, they knew there was nothing that could save them from an uncontrolled entry into the atmosphere of the planet looming before them, time was the limiting factor and they were now aware of that constraint. The LOCS software told them the bitter truth, they had sixteen hours to get some sort of control, it was simply a matter of regaining drive control or nothing else would matter. It was the manipulation of docking thrusters that had already stopped them spinning, and stopped them rotating end over end, but they needed more than that, they needed to stop the forward momentum. Further use of the gas venting vectoring mechanisms was not going to be sufficient to stop the mass of the ship from slamming into the surface of the ringed planet now presented directly before them. If they could

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not re-ignite the big ion drive cluster of engines, then they were destined to become just another crater on this so far unnamed planet.

The navigation crew had been busy trying to discover where they were, and they thought they had now worked it out with a high degree of probability. The planet was designated as PC17827761, uninhabited, with a breathable air content (with filtration), a near Terran like atmospheric pressure, and it had water and limited vegetation. It was some good news in an otherwise desperate few days, all they had to do now was stop the ship before they became part of the landscape, and it was all hands on deck as the surviving crew tried to work miracles to get the drive engines reignited. No one seemed to know who did what to get it operational, but four hours to impact they regained power to the drive engines, and now with limited control, they set about deceleration to attempt an orbit around this relatively unknown planet. They dare not decelerate too quickly as the hull integrity was still not good, but an inverse slingshot move was possible, it would slow them down using the planets own gravitational forces rather than the fragile power they had available. The engines were sound, but the control systems were fragile, no one was sure if they would survive the stresses of deceleration. They knew that they could now side-step crashing into the planet's surface, that was some relief for the hyper-overworked and stressed crew, all they needed to avoid now were the five moons. They plotted their course and realised that it was going to be successful as long as the ship held together, they had to pray that all the systems managed to stay connected as they effected deceleration. The calculations were made, course plotted, and hopes raised, as the button was pressed, and they could feel the G-forces of inertia kicking in. The damaged ship creaked and groaned, in places it moaned and screamed, some of the crew were sure it twisted and vibrated in places it was not supposed to. The surviving crew could eventually breathe a collective sigh of relief as it held together, despite the unusual sounds of the tortured metals protesting as the manoeuvres were performed without mishap, orbital stability was achieved. It was something of a minor miracle considering the state the ship was in, and compared to the uncontrolled drifting they experienced before, this allowed the mass of repairs to take place with some degree of safety, and with slightly less urgency.

With the re-firing of the Ion drive cluster they now had more control and more internal power available, they could scale down reliance on the TrASCC reactor and start worrying about some of the not so critical systems, they still needed to get everything working so that they could at least totter toward the nearest space dock for repair. Eventually, they had to earn their keep and get back to looking for commercial opportunities on distant planets.

The long-range detection systems were brought back online, and they could finally see that they were alone in this sector of space. They knew they were still vulnerable, so the tactical decision was taken to hide in the synchronous orbit of the second biggest moon, there at least they should remain undetected should the raiders come looking for them again.

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The scanning array was duly repaired, and brought back online once they had recalibrated the sensors, and whilst the ship was undergoing its own essential repairs, they tested it on the PC17827761. It was only then that they saw the potential of the planet below, with its wide variety of resources, and the ease of access to them, it was a revelation, they had stumbled on the jackpot. They checked out the planet's designation and commercial charter status, it had only been lightly scanned and basically ignored, so they promptly laid claim to the planet and its commercial rights, those still living would be in line for a good bonus, they had earned it. Sadly, they would get a bigger share now there was less crew aboard, so many had endured so much, perhaps it was destiny. The Company were consulted, and in an unusual step, they formally named the planet after the ship that had brought them there, Capsaa.

The ship had happened upon the planet by chance, not design, and by this time it was something of a lifeboat rather than an exploration vessel, nearly becoming just another spot on the very colourful landscape still spinning slowly below them. It was also true that by further chance they had decided to test the scanning array, surveying the planet as they made their repairs, the rest, as they say, is history.

Had the scanning array failed to function then they would have limped away, heading home for repairs and crew replenishment, missing the opportunity of a lifetime, fate is not always cruel, though it did have its moments for some.

It was perhaps an odd beginning to its foundation, but Capsaa was an odd little planet really, it had its uses, it was never going to be a tourist destination, it was never colonised to expand the human race, life on Capsaa was always a commercial decision.

Its actual colonisation date is a bit unclear, like its early history, but over time it had been inhabited to be mined for its ore, its surface was dotted profusely with minerals and gemstones, much of which you could scoop up by the handful, and its liquid gas fields were bubbling away just begging to be stored in underground tanks, waiting to be syphoned off to power much of the galaxy in some shape or form. It wasn't that big a planet, perhaps two-thirds the size of the Terran homeworld, and by comparison, it was a harsher place. There was sunlight, and although its Sol was weak, it provided enough warmth in most places to keep it from freezing solid, though both polar regions were very cold indeed. At both poles, a warm day was measured in the minus fifty degrees Celsius range, and around the gas pools, it was a rather bone-chilling, lung freezing, minus one hundred and fifty, sometimes colder. The average daylight temperature for much of the surface was perhaps more pleasant by comparison, around plus nine degrees, and it was constant throughout the solar year, the only real variations came at the poles and the equator. At night, the temperature slowly leached from the surface materials, the base granite rock managing to hold on to any residual heat as long as it could, and by the time the daylight arrived again, it was down to

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a solitary one or two degrees Celsius, waiting once more to be reheated by the slowly arriving sunlight from the distant Sol.

A solar day was ninety-two hours standard time, and the orbit around its sun was long by Terran standard time too, just under four years, but it was stable, seasons were not present and organic plant life on the surface was limited because of this.

Terran based food crops struggled, grown in covered hydroponic ponds they could not survive outdoors for long, and where they were planted outside of these ponds in experimental trials, they never re-seeded on their own. The most prolific of the Capsaa flora consisted of just basic grasses, tough and sharp-edged, easily cutting a man's skin if he was daft enough to grab hold of it, and here and there were fern-like plants, settling in voids in the rocks where it could, struggling to keep its roots attached in the occasional howling gales. There were no trees on Capsaa, the winds would tear them from the surface, there were, however, coloured flowers that seemed to survive the winds, some of which had huge leaf-like structures that turned side on to the wind direction allowing it to pass without causing damage, but they were not the same thing as trees.

Indigenous animals or native population were not found, there were some natural bacteria, and there was also basic algae and lichen type growths that were found on the rocks and at the water's edge, though not in any great abundance. All the flora seemed to have no purpose, it wasn't edible, there were no animals to eat it, they were sometimes colourful, but there were no insects to pollinate them, it was another oddity to this already odd planet. Perhaps it was no surprise that there was no indigenous population, the plants were tough, stringy, bitter tasting, and there were no meat sources to hunt, the water was undrinkable as the taste was foul, the air, for humans at least, was unbreathable for the most part, but there were other harsher places in this vast cosmos that had abundant life, perhaps it lacked just the right qualities, or perhaps, it was just odd.

The place was quite flat, no mountains, and very little in the way of hills, rather than hills there was a rocky granite ring, and this was dotted with stone monoliths pointing skyward, and even these were not that tall. The whole planet was littered with a multitude of coloured granite protrusions everywhere, it was what gave the planet its ringed look, it had small rock outcrops, some bigger ones that were perhaps as tall as an average man, and a few large ones, often not much taller, but wider at the base. These formations appeared in the various colours that made up the rings, each was a base of grey granite, mixed with a mineral deposit of a particular colour, much of this was commercially poor in value, but where it was found on the surface without the granite attached, it had a greater worth. Where the winds had whipped small pieces out of the rocks it formed the coloured soil, perhaps more sand-like, but similar in colour to the rocks, and it was this which saw Capsaa designated as a ringed planet. Each ring was different geology, that gave the particular colour, and for whatever reason, the winds didn't seem to mix them up at all. The best scientific guess was that the centrifugal forces in action as the planet formed, separated the various elements

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into the coloured layers as it cooled, it gave the surface a very distinct look. It was perhaps the reason the coloured ring soils didn't blend, maybe each soil colour was a different weight, maybe this was why it would always separate.

After coming out of HyperDrive, as you slowed to approach the planet on your final landing vector, you clearly saw this effect from some way off, it looked inviting, it looked genteel, hospitable and homely, sadly, this was an illusion, it was a tough place to live, not dangerous, at least not for the most part, but it wasn't as welcoming as the colourful rings implied. Capsaa was not the place for family, it was a working environment, and once it had been developed, even hundreds of years later, there were still no communal facilities. Each enterprise kept themselves to themselves, and there was a rivalry, though it was not confrontational, and pleasantries were often exchanged, it was just that the various groups didn't seem connected. Perhaps this was more to do with the way of the modern world, you kept your nose clean, your eyes averted, and you survived another day.

On Capsaa the weather was another of those odd things, the planet did have clouds, and it had some truly spectacular electrical storms, it also suffered from some ferocious winds at times, but it rarely rained. Given the amount of water in the sea, the proliferation of water pools and rivulets dotted around the various rings, it was a surprising fact. It was the often-raging winds that stopped the collection of the gemstones in particular, and it was the deciding factor that prompted the construction engineers to build most of the buildings underground, typically, only twenty percent of a building was visible above ground, the rest was hidden and protected from the savage sand blasting when a storm blew its way past their location, often as daylight returned to the surface and a moon's orbit passed overhead. After the storms, there was an odd glow to several of the rings, some brighter than others, and in the dark, there was a phosphorescence that gave the planet an eerie look.

There were what looked like cones sticking up in several locations, these survived the winds in the most part, mainly because the planet's rocks were tougher than the rough papcrete most of the buildings were made from. These cones were probably a gas vent at some point when the planet was forming, they all seemed to have holes in the middle that disappeared into the depths of the planet surface, some with the sparse vegetation growing out of the tops of them, some without, but virtually all appeared inactive now. Capsaa still had some volcanic regions that bubbled away with the odd lava pool and sulphur pit, though these hardly raised anything higher than a small cone-like protrusion that often fell over given time, these were the only signs that the planet was still alive beneath the surface. There had never been any recorded seismic activity of any great note, there was the odd rumble that registered on the equipment as some gas was released, or a lava pool expanded, but nothing drastic. This was good for the alien lifeforms now camped on its doorstep, and good for the various buildings buried in its soil, it was as if the planet had done what it was going to do, it had

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now settled into its shell and had no intention of breaking out of it, nor was it going to shake it up to remodel some of the barren landscape, prettily coloured as it was.

There was only the sandy region of the equator that appeared as a raised yellowed ring around the centre of the globe, it was a minor elevation change in an otherwise flat landscape, and it was very dry except where the Capsaean Sea sliced through the middle of it. The wide belt that was the centre of the planets ringed system was a hot and grimy place, the equatorial belt had no surface water pools nor active gas pools, and even the tough grasses struggled to survive here. The only real water here was the sea, it was a narrow and very shallow puddle in an otherwise vast and deep existence through the other coloured regions, and still, life at its edges struggled for a foothold in the dry heat. This pale yellowed ring consisted of mainly sandy soils, corrosive and foul smelling, perhaps it was no wonder the plants could not gain purchase in this nutrient-poor ground. There were yellowed sulphuric hard rocks that poked their head up through the loose soil, and here and there were long dead sulphur cones dotted about the region, a left over from the volcanic red ring that surrounded it on both sides. It was a foreboding place, full of unpleasant smells that harboured pockets of noxious gasses that would scorch unprotected lungs and peel layers off unprotected skin, and the heat was relentless but bearable. It did have its good sides, though they were few, here, were many of the gemstones the planet had to offer, the hard-compressed carbon-based type used in commercial production cutting tools, and brightly coloured gemstones still used in the finer jewellery, sought after by those that appreciated it and could still afford it. The precious gems were often handpicked from the surface, the commercial stuff was just below it, but much had to be done by hand, the surface was soft and shifting, you could not land a conventional craft on the sandy surface because it offered no solid crust, but you could drop in cargo containers and crew pods, and hover ships could simply pick them up again with the all-important cargo. Here the work was tough, it was hot, and it could be dangerous, an Environmental Protection Suit (EPS) was certainly an advisable precaution and thoroughly recommended, but it was the value of the product and the ease at which it could be collected, that tempted many a two-timer into a small but profitable venture on this distant outpost.

For Man, the air was breathable, just, it had all the right elements, but it was not in quite the right proportions, if you ventured outside without the breathing filter masks, you could survive for perhaps an hour or two, but rarely longer. For many of the invading species that were not born of Mankind, this atmosphere was sometimes perfect, for others it was toxic, they came and went over time, but none were there to bask in the limited sun or to take in the sights, but to strip the planet of its resources for their own gain, much like Man was doing in the first place. The difference was that they were waiting for Man to do the hard graft first, then they were just going to take the spoils of his labour. The planet was

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raided and conquered several times in its short and chequered history, and mankind managed to return when the raiders left after their slave labour eventually died off, or sometimes, they were rescued.

As radiation went, there was the usual cosmic background radiation, and there was some generated by the natural geology of the planet's minerals, on the surface, you didn't need an EPS most of the time, all you required was warm clothing. The local Sol didn't seem to produce particle events, it was perhaps too distant, and it was true that it was a very different makeup to the Sol that provided warmth and light to the Terran homeworld. As danger went, the wind was more likely to kill you than the levels of background radiation, it was some consolation at least, and meant there was no need for radiation shielding on the buildings to protect the people within.

There was also the good news that the atmospheric pressure was similar to the home planet which was most helpful, and it made a pleasant change from many other worlds that Mankind had colonised throughout the vast cosmos. On Capsaa, it was only slightly lower at 0.9ATM compared to the Terran standard 1ATM, some still used 760 Torr, rarely in these modern times was it referred to as the old standard of 14.7 pounds per square inch. The real bonus was that it was not necessary to have complicated machinery, the storage facilities were lighter, cheaper to build, and construction for buildings needed no special considerations other than to survive the winds, they were simple, and they were quick to erect, and they could be dismantled when you needed to move on to the next processing location, or, to abandon a building after some invasion attempt, and to subsequently repopulate in the aftermath of conflict.

Another thing that was good was water, it wasn't drinkable without filtration, its taste was disgusting, but it was good old H₂O, plain and simple water. There wasn't much of it running on the surface, but it ran deep underground and was more than sufficient for the life forms that inhabited the surface, there were a few small puddles of the stuff, the odd narrow river where there was a gentle slope, and plenty of little pool spots and rivulets that eventually drained into just the one sea, albeit a large one. The assumption was that the liquid hydrogen pools and liquid oxygen pools would intermingle underground to create the water, as it rarely rained on the surface, it was a logical hypothesis.

This sea was also an oddity, tides were erratic, mainly as the orbit of its five moons was also erratic, one could even say haphazard, but its biggest irregularity was that very few rivers drained into it, most of its water came from underground sources below the surface of the waves, and this would then flow back around again by the same method. The sea ran top to bottom of the planet, it looked like a large lake, a very large lake, and cut through all the various rings including the yellow equatorial ring, though it was very narrow and shallow there, it stretched all the way up one slice of the surface, eventually freezing solid at the poles at either end. There were no fish in this sea, it had no flora either, no

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weeds, no kelp, no crustaceans, it had some mineral content, but little in the way of nutrient, so perhaps being lifeless was no surprise.

The planet consisted of a discernible seventeen rings to its surface, in a very clearly defined nine colours, it really was a pretty sight, particularly if you happened to fly across where the vast Capsaanian sea was visible, this vista delivered a truly delightful and shimmering multicoloured sparkling surface, punctuated by the numerous coloured rings, and at the break of day, or at the onset of nightfall, it was a particularly impressive sight. At night it was also odd, there was a discernible glow to much of the surface, it had some sort of luminescence hidden within, it wasn't radioactive, and it didn't appear to be a natural bioluminescence, no one was sure how it was generated, but glow it did, sometimes brightly, sometimes not. It didn't appear in the soil as much as it did in the rocks, and it seemed harmless enough. If you went out at night then you could often see where you were going, but it certainly wasn't bright enough to work by, another of Capsaa's strange anomalies.

Capsaa's oddities continued with its satellites, there were five of them that were in orbit around it, and these were already named when the DERV arrived, unlike the planet. There were the aging moons of Hazelium and Paulinius, the largest of the five moons, a force to be reckoned with, both occasionally ruffling the waters on the surface of the seas and influencing the weather at times, creating storms that come and go just as quickly, to be forgotten until the next time they appear. Then you had the busy satellite that was Carolinicus, it always seemed to be dashing around the night sky, and sometimes, it was visible in the daytime skies too, it created many a wave and a storm when it appeared in close proximity to the other moons, occasionally affecting the orbit of all the others, sometimes in a good way, sometimes not, often though, it went on its merry way doing not much at all, just being there, visible, but dormant. The last two were the newer moons, offshoots of the others perhaps, there was the erratic orbit of Daleium, which in turn had two smaller orbiting satellites of its own, known as Ryanoris and Scotti, and the other was the tempestuous moon that was Anitarsius, this intersected often with Daleium, threatening collision but always seeming to avoid it in the end. The two smaller orbiting satellites would be pulled and pushed between these two when their paths crossed, but they would remain with Daleium as they parted company. All in all, these satellites coexisted happily in the greater scheme of things, tolerating each other's orbits in the main, and occasionally blowing up into something more volatile, only to return to calm as their orbital paths diverged once again. On the surface of Capsaa, particularly as orbits of the moons intermingled, there would be wind storms that generated abrasive dust clouds, sending workers scurrying for the EES dotted about the surface, these Emergency Egress Shelters were a safety bunker, built by SAA Construction, initially, for their own building crews, they would serve many of the various company workers well when the orbits of the moons affected wind speeds. These shelters were built into sixteen of the seventeen rings, there were

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none in the central belt, the surface was not stable enough to support them. If there was a dust storm at the equator, you ran for the nearest crew pod or Cargo Container and hoped they were not full already. The shifting sands of the equatorial belt were particularly rough, the grains of sand were glass-like, and given a good enough blasting, even the tough EPS would end up punctured, not a good prospect. There were a few horror stories of shredded bodies found after storms that seemed unlikely, but sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction. The rings of Capsaa were clearly defined, and from a distance at least, the nine colours didn't seem to blend into each other, they just ended, and another started. In reality, it wasn't quite like that, there was a blending of the coloured regions, but it was short, and each was unique in its own way. This blending of some of the colours left many a hard man gobsmacked at the beauty of it all, almost tearful at the wonders of the natural landscape before them, not that they would ever admit to such a thing. For some, there would be a flashing of coloured lights, complete with a dazzling display of dancing colours bouncing the light off the gemstones and mineral content in the rock, what seemed to be a myriad of sparkling stars, and for many of those that witnessed this magical sparkling event, this was also the realisation that it was the beginning of oxygen starvation of the brain, probably because they had removed the breathing filter masks to get a clearer view. Capsaa wasn't just for the hard men either, there were plenty of women on the surface, working just as hard, just as long, and making as much profit, being just as rough, and occasionally, just as ruthless. All were smart enough to know that this was not a place to bring up children, there were no facilities for them, no schools, no doctors, no recreational places, it was a hard life they had chosen, and one of those choices was to remain childless. It took a special type of person to work the surface, some coloured rings were easier to work than others, some were very easy, some were dangerous, but all of the rings would offer profit in exchange for hard graft.

The layers of geology followed a simple pattern, whiteish poles, pale brown, purple, blue, green, grey, darker brown, red and then the yellow equatorial ring, the widest belt visible, from there it went in reverse, back to the fiery red, on to the darker brown, the grey, green, blue, purple, pale brown, and then finally back to the dirty white at the southern polar region.

The off-white polar ice caps were, in part, frozen water, but they both contained small frozen lakes of hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen, and more importantly, larger lakes of frozen argon, the most commonly used fuel for Ion drive propulsion engines in many a spacecraft, this was perhaps what many were chasing when considering waging war to wrestle control of this abundant resource. Looming out of the white glare would be the polar rocks, a pale grey, plastered in glazed ice and wind-polished snow, here too were snow cones that stood tall and appeared to be the silent witness to the bubbling pools of liquid profit. Hidden on these pillars were pockets of platinum, sheets of Dolomite, mainly used for cosmic ray shielding in building materials, and of interest to the

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military was Calcite and tales of experimentation for a cloak of invisibility. This was a proper harsh environment, very cold and always a wind chill that would cut to the bone in seconds if you were stupid enough to remove a glove or a boot, and around the liquid gas pools, well, it was proper freezing, temperatures were often well below minus one hundred and fifty degrees Celsius.

Beyond the ice fields were the light brown tundra rings, a light-coloured soil, Limonite rocks, basalt encrusted with Olivine and sandstone spotted with Azurite, there was more Dolomite too, compacted hard and dotted with patches of the equally pale tundra grasses clinging to its fringes. The temperature increased dramatically at this point, there appeared to be some sort of thermal buffer that kept the cold of the polar region out of this section, no-one had quite figured out why, perhaps, it was all the copper-rich veins just under the surface. There was not much other commercial product found here, but it was a good place to set up the infrastructure to process and store the frozen gasses or the ores and minerals from other rings. The rocks were much the same as everywhere else, a marbled grey and pale brown, just sticking up here and there with no pattern or logic, nor any great elevation change. Oddly, there were fewer of the cones that were visible in all the other sections, but then much of Capsaa was odd. As the temperature had changed there were a few water pools dotted about, but there was the odd rippling pool of liquid gas that burbled and evaporated away, explosively hazardous if it happened to be a hydrogen pool, invisibly toxic if it was Argon or Nitrogen, mind-bending if it was pure oxygen and you had forgotten to secure your mask. Away from the barrier between the polar ring and the tundra, you could happily remove your EPS, but you still needed to keep your breathing filter mask firmly attached.

What followed was a purple-hued ring of an abundant crystallised gemstone and iron ores, it was tough and pretty, had some commercial value, and was easily mined, graded and stored, it was also a surface that was ideal for heavier industry and storage. The surface was proper tough here, you didn't dig holes in this stuff you blasted it or drilled, and the rocks seemed more prevalent, but it was an illusion, there were no more here than in other sections, but they were tough, proper rock solid pyroclastic extruded rock, and Chalcopyrite's, they were iridescent and beautiful like the iron-bearing hydroxide mineral of Goethite. There were also more of the water pools here, it seemed to dribble out of the pools and formed small rivulets that just disappeared into a crack in the surface somewhere, probably to appear in another pool close by. It was another of the rings where you could work un-suited, you just needed to be aware of the wind speed because the soil here was rough chippings on the very top, this would easily strip the skin off your bones if you were not quick enough to get behind a wall or find an EES.

Next, you had the blue ring, the colour ranged from the glorious deep cobalt blue to pale sky blues, all mixed with the base granite rock, it was rich in copper ores and minerals that were used throughout the galaxy for many things, from medical

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uses to energy production, and as such, it was an easy money spinner for commercial ventures. Some were highly prized, Covellite was a super-conductor, Titanium crystalline Agate and Blue Kyanite were used in thermal building materials. Rocks here were softer, the soil was less dense too, making it easier to get at the mineral and ore available, much more than in the purple sector before it. For the construction teams, it was easier to build here, you dug a pit, pile-drove your pillars and lined the hole with a preformed papcrete wall, bolted on your roof section, and the job was a good'un. The buildings here were more common too, many worked in this ring, or at least brought their days working back to be processed and stored. This was perhaps the only real place where everyone mingled, you had not only the storage bunkers, but the container port as well, and the brokers and traders who shipped the product off-world to the open markets in distant planets and galaxies, they were here too.

The next ring was the best ring for the indigenous plants, it was this one that produced a mainly green circle around the planet, much of which was a simple form of algae or lichen clinging to the rocks and the abundant copper ores in those rocks. This was the area with perhaps the greater proportion of surface water pools and small water rivulets that drained into the one vast sea on the planet, and where the rocks were wet, this algae and lichen clung to any surface it could, the edges of the many water pools were verdant with the stuff. The rocks also contained a green gemstone that was used to maintain light concentration in laser-based weaponry systems, amongst many other uses, this made it an important resource that got the attention of the established order in faraway places, and the unsavoury characters too. Beryllium was found here in good quantities, used for making alloys and found in starship skins, it was a rare resource indeed, highly prized, as was the Serpentine, used in the mineral liners for nuclear reactors. The green ring was also the ring that glowed brightest when the sun faded, though it was only really visible from a height, there was this eerie glimmer that you could see by, but not work by.

The grey granite ring was next, and this signified another temperature change, it also meant that there was little here of any significant value, but it was a good ambient temperature that was perhaps the better area for the many hydroponic growing ponds on the surface. Everyone had to eat, and the planet offered nothing in the way of edible plants, so what was grown on the planet was sold on the planet, there was no profit in exporting it off-world, though unlicensed ships often took any over-production that was too fragile to dri-freeze or cryo-store. Here, there were tough granites mottled with Azurite, the aluminium rich Andalusite that was also used in many an industrial furnace, and the spectacular iridescent Bornite rocks.

The next ring was a barren and dark brown baked soil, it was harsh and rocky, and the water pools were noticeably fewer in this region. It was perhaps much like any of the other coloured rings in that there were small rocks, medium outcrops and a few larger promontories that jutted out of the darker parched

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soils. Plant life was less noticeable too and the cones here were perhaps the only ones on the surface that looked like they might have a purpose, maybe some sort of steam outlet, but there seemed to be nothing at all except a dry heat haze shimmering above them. There was also the beginning of a smell that was not quite unpleasant, but it wasn't sweet either, here and there would be small sulphur pits and lava pools, and even smaller water pools, some of which were not actually water at all. This ring also had hidden surprises, quartz and mica having a similar silicic composition as granite, there was also microcline, beryl, and tourmaline, all of good commercial value, and there was plenty of the iron-rich siderite that was in common use all over the known cosmos.

The volcanic pre-equatorial ring that followed was often a fiery red, dotted with hot to the touch rocks, blackened topped lava cones and bubbling lava pools, every so often, you could smell the noxious yellow sulphur cones, and occasionally, you would come across flammable liquid gas pools that danced with a purple and turquoise flame flickering upon their surface. This was perhaps the most hazardous place on the planet to work, but the sulphur was good quality and the yellowed cones made it easy to find, and there were other red minerals in the rocks that were as useful, though not as easy to harvest. You had Cinnabar with the sticky-looking Mercury Sulphide, Red Jasper, Pink Dolomite and Feldspar giving the distinct colouration, and the precious crystal formation of Rubies and red Sapphires, all prized for their concentration of directed laser light in cutting tools and weapons systems. You could survive here without an EPS, but it wasn't advisable, it may limit your working time, but it saved your skin peeling off in the harsh, almost acidic, atmosphere that lay silently waiting for the unwary to wade into. This stuff was weird, you couldn't see it, it didn't have a pungent smell, all you felt was a prickly skin, it was then that you realised your epidermal layer was blistering and peeling off, if you didn't wash it off quickly then you could be in big trouble, but jump into any of what appeared to be water pools and you may find out how acidic this red ring could be. It was an unforgiving zone, you needed to watch your footing, or you could step into a small crevice that was full of sulphuric acid or boiling with red-hot lava, you needed to take care of any exposed skin, and to breathe the torrid air was a disaster waiting to happen. In the red ring, what you needed most was to be smart, give it even half a chance and it would more than likely try and kill you. There were very few buildings here, mainly storage facilities and the odd pumping station, but the temperature underground made it far too uncomfortable for habitation.

The middle of the planet was the equatorial ring, it was the only real elevation change on the surface and there appeared to be no reason for it at all, another of Capsaa's oddities. Its rise was maybe as much as twenty meters in height, then more or less flat again, there was a plateau to the top, up there were time-weathered yellowed rocks, clean and new yellowed cones, and in places, old and withered cones that had been ripped apart by the winds that swirled around,

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winds that picked up the soil to sandblast anything that stood in its way. The soil here was rough, it was sharp, almost like shattered glass, and the surface was not at all cohesive, it was very much like a sand dune on the Terran homeworld, though these ones rarely moved anywhere. There was very little grass here, partly because it was so dry, but also the Galena Limonite rocks poking above the shifting surface contained high levels of lead, and the pretty blue silicates of Wernerite poisoned it all further with sodium and aluminium sulphates, and the smell, it was worse than a Tilerian skunk rat.

On the other side of the equator, the coloured rings ran back to the white of the southern pole, and if you measured them, they were remarkably similar in size, almost equidistant, another of Capsaa's oddities.

As a commercial venture, being on Capsaa was a profitable one, but there was a downside to this success, others wanted a slice of the pie, but they were not prepared to buy into it. It didn't take long before the exaggerated stories of untold riches worked its way to the darkest corners of the remotest bars in the cosmos, plans for conquest were soon followed by soldiers of fortune on the ground, this meant piracy and forceful acquisition, and even this close to the Terran homeworld, there were many forces that operated freely. Not all were of human origin though, not all wanted bounty as their goal, some wanted conquest of the people, or fuel for their own battles with Terran forces elsewhere, or more worryingly, a food source, and not always from the hydroponic ponds.

By the time the 41st Century had arrived, the planet had been attacked on three dozen occasions, it had been abandoned completely five times, and still, they came crawling back, eventually. It had been said many times that if the conglomerates would pay up front for a defence force, then any loss of profits and downtime would be cut to a minimum, but as usual, this good advice fell on deaf ears. So, it was back to normal, it was as a direct result of its commercial success that Capsaa would become war-torn again and again, its resources fought over, and its stored wealth confiscated to be sold to the highest bidder in an illegal sale in another region of this troubled space. The planet would be frequently plunged into conflict, its buildings and its workforce abandoned, only to be re-occupied later and plundered for its resources once more, any subsequent colonisation was followed by more hard work and serious profit taking, until, once again, Capsaa came to the attention of those lost souls of the deep and general bringers of chaos and destruction, those intent on diverting the money and the goods for their own purposes. They were reasonably safe in the knowledge that any defence force on Capsaa were all volunteers, mainly untrained and ill-disciplined, and perhaps more importantly, underpowered. It was also true that any Fleet ship coming to the aid of this far-flung outpost would be perhaps a few weeks away, the raiders would be long gone by then, particularly if all they wanted was to steal the stockpiles.

Inevitably, it would eventually suffer more conflict as the result of its continued commercial success, and so, this process of occupation, conflict and

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abandonment was a repeating cycle. The rich ores, abundant gasses, and copious minerals that were mined by the container load were useful, they were often valuable, and many were essential, especially as a fuel source for interstellar travel, that made the planet worth fighting for, and worth defending. Despite all these conflicts, there was little in the way of an effective defence force, nor in physical defences themselves, those that wanted the commercial rights to mining didn't seem to see the security of their investment as a worthwhile expense, they were not going to pay for something that may never happen. As was perhaps the way of the modern world in these dark times, the population were considered as expendable too, conflict was seen as inevitable, and any drawn-out battle slowed production and ate into profit margins, war was a money pit and defending commercial installations was considered unsustainable, it left the inhabitants vulnerable, and like the planet, they too would be abandoned on several occasions. Many of those commercial installations had tough walled barriers to protect the equipment within, but more often than not, the consideration was not of defence from attack from some unknown force, but the defence from the forces of nature, the gusting winds.

That said, the inhabitants of Capsaa were a hardened lot, you needed to be tough to work on Capsaa, and when a marauding force landed, they would organise their own armed response to the threat, the Capsaa Proletariat Defence Force was formed to attempt to defend their way of life, it wasn't out of loyalty to the employer, it was more of a self-preservation thing, they knew what their fate was possibly going to be and it wasn't one they would like. Defence of the planet crossed company borders, they were all in this together, there was no uniform, there was no proper command structure, they simply defended themselves as best they could. To give them credit, the CPDF never surrendered when their backs were against the wall, even when abandoned by their employers they stood up and they fought them all, occasionally they won the skirmish. Sadly, and all too often, this defence was in vain, they were often outgunned, and the population, small as it was, were often removed with extreme prejudice by some invading force. Sometimes they would be spared only to be enslaved by the invading group until the next insurgent group arrived, often, only to be enslaved again until the good guys eventually showed up and released them. For some, the good guys would be too late, for others, it was a relief followed by renewed optimism as the forces of good stayed a while, perhaps licked their own wounds and repaired their own machinery, albeit the bigger machines of war, before abandoning those rescued to their own fate once again. Many of the rescued population had nowhere to go, no funds to go anywhere, and no other prospects, these unfortunates, the two-timers, had no choice but to remain on Capsaa. The mining rights and all other production rights still remained with the galactic conglomerates that had purchased the licences in the first instance, and they were often slow to re-engage the people, fearful of another attack, so, once rescued from the brink of one crisis, many were dropped headfirst into another. Those

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with some sense scrambled through the wreckage and recovered what tools and equipment they could scrounge, did a bit of illicit work for themselves, and even managed a few dodgy deals to finally get some funds together to leave this odd little planet that had nearly killed them more than once. Some though, had managed most of the above, but they never left, choosing instead to reinvest the money illegally gained, to purchase a small licenced operation for themselves, hoping to gain enough profit to retire on before the next wave of Pirates or invading aliens arrived to mess it all up again.

When the dust had finally settled, and the construction teams had been busy once more, the next influx of potential victims would arrive, eager to exploit the possibilities and opportunities that Capsaa had in store for them, they arrived on-mass, so full of hope, full of big dreams and often very full of themselves, eager to get started and to get rich quick. Then the reality of the situation they found themselves in soon dawned, it wasn't as easy as the advertising blurb made it sound, they encountered the very recent horror stories of some of those who remained on Capsaa, these tales further brought home the truth of this odd planet with its pretty colours on display, and its dark secrets veiled but not completely hidden. It was quite clear that the terror you could see in the eyes of many of the two-timers confirmed that those rumours were indeed true, and the multitude of blackened buildings, shattered hydroponics pools, and ruptured storage tanks, all were additional validation of the facts, lending credence to the tales that once seemed to be nothing more than an exaggeration. It was far too late to turn tail and run, it had cost too much to get here already, many would like to have bailed, but the breaking of contracts and associated financial penalties kept them firmly rooted in the danger zone, hoping that they would be the lucky ones, not just in the taking of profits, but being able to escape with their sorry hide firmly attached to their creaking bones. Some were lucky, some were very lucky and managed to sell not just their collected product, but their claim too, leaving the horrors for others to experience when the bogeyman finally showed up in his HyperDrive enabled gunship. For now, all you had to do was go with what you were given, immerse yourself in what was on offer and look to develop with Capsaa, perhaps help it to expand and reap further rewards, that and remember to duck when the screaming engines of some deep space raider came roaring overhead.

In many respects Capsaa was a plain planet, ecologically sound, it was modest but tough, reliable and resilient, colourful but simple, and if you treated it well then it would look after you, treat it with disdain and it could burn you, but that was rare and usually meant you had done something stupid. However, there was a dark side, although often hidden in plain sight, those events it displayed were few and far between, but they had the ability to change the scenery and alter the whole tone of the place, it was an experience many would like to avoid but were destined to play out. It was, on the whole, a nice place to be, a steady and considerate place, constantly evolving, allowing expansion, promoting innovation

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and pushing the boundaries, allowing things to go that extra bit further just because it could, continually rewriting the stories that would add to the future history of Capsaa. There was also a sense you could rely on Capsaa to do the right thing by you, there was no reason to, you had most likely only just arrived, but it appeared to offer something, invite you toward greater things, it seemed an immersive experience awaited, more rewards, a better future, you saw the basics, then realised the potential, and eventually, you grasped at the notions of what was perhaps to come in the future, would it be so? Only time would tell.

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