

for EABATMv2

AethosTM

light years and millennia from home...

 BTRC

greg porter




Aethos™

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Humans are not native to Aethos. We arrived here, kidnapped, nearly a thousand years ago. Aethos, a planet-sized spaceship, arrived in our ancestral solar system, and tried to dismantle the Old Earth for raw materials. Old Earth forces were not able to completely stop the Aeth, but were able to save the Old Earth from destruction. However, the Aeth did great damage to Old Earth, and also lifted huge sections of it more or less intact and deposited them here, along with the people who lived on those territories. This was the Exodus, a terrible time that both destroyed and remade us as a people.

- from *Standard Educational Primer*, year 3

VIGNETTE

They always said it would happen in *his* lifetime, but for a young man, a lifetime is a long time, and Carson never gave it much thought until the skies turned dark and it started raining blood. Not *literally*, but the iron-rich sediments of the Belt were blown into the upper atmosphere when Aethos' engines fired up. They turned the skies a ruddy hue, and the rains that followed were the color of congealed blood and left stubborn brown streaks as they dried.

Carson thought a drive sufficient to move a planet would have a vibration, but he couldn't even tell Aethos was slowing down. Granted, it would take a century to drop to orbital speed for the solar system they were entering, but it ought to shake a *little* bit. *It did rumble sometimes*. The *manuever* jets were the size of supervolcanoes, and when they fired, you could feel the heat a hundred kilometers off. The sound...you didn't *hear* it, you *felt* it.



But what the Aeth did with their planet, they did for their own reasons, living deep inside Aethos and seldom wandering the surface. Terrans were not consulted in the matter, no more than they were consulted when the Aeth kidnapped millions of them nearly a millennia ago and dropped them on the surface to fend for themselves as Aethos slowly accelerated away from Sol, driven off by Earth's space armada.

The news was nothing but the Arrival, pundits, politicians and preachers in equal measure, telling, warning, demanding. The Cartoo were probing the western borders, looking for any Terran weakness, retreating from displays of strength, never *quite* declaring war. The Conscription Laws had not been activated in centuries, but they were still on the books, and were why every young adult still had to get at least a passing grade in marksmanship and fortitude in order to graduate from secondary school.

Everyone had an opinion about the Aeth, and that's about all they had. Despite living on Aethos for nearly a thousand years, Terrans only knew enough about the Aeth to fill a thimble, with plenty of room left for a thumb. The preachers said that this was the beginning of the Last Days, and the chosen fortunate would enter the eternal Kingdom of Man without ever dying, but Carson wasn't so sure. His uncle was an archaeologist, and while he never said so, he hinted that there were a lot of things people took for granted that weren't necessarily so, that history was sometimes less about facts and more about making people feel good about themselves.

Carson was young enough to be conscripted, but old enough to know which jobs and trades were exempt in the various stages of national emergency. On a world with ruins of dozens of dead races and their alien technology, archaeologists were a strategic asset that seldom saw the front lines. *He decided to give his uncle a call...*



WHAT IT'S ABOUT

Aethos is a hard SF world with the overall trappings of fantasy. *What does that mean, exactly?* It means that:



- the world is bigger than the adventurers will ever know
- there are entities beyond mortal understanding that cannot be challenged or changed
- there is a superstitious dread or religious awe of these forces, with powerful people calling for appeasement and others for hostility
- there are arcane forces unknowable and barely controllable in the hands of a few
- there are non-human races with motivations and goals and needs different than our own
- the world as you know it has been this way for many generations

and last,

- the times, they are a changin'

Aethos is *still* hard SF, it is just that the hardest of the SF is in the hands of beings the adventurers may never meet (and probably do not want to).

The *actual* background of Aethos will be explained in some detail only because this is a science-fiction gameworld and many of you like to read about the foundations and what is behind the scenes. Otherwise it only has as much bearing on things as the solar system would to adventurers in a fantasy world. The background is just that, background, a description of 'what is', to give players a grounding in what is going on and why. To adventurers, it will usually just be things that they take for granted, whether it is true or not. For instance, whether or not the world is flat makes little difference to an adventurer in a fantasy world unless they step too close to the edge. In Aethos, exactly what the Aeth are capable of makes little difference to adventurers. Unless you cross one, in which case the results would be about the same as if you *had* stepped off the edge of the world.

Aethos is meant to put modern adventurers (and their players) in a more primitive state of mind. Millennia ago, the world was a dangerous place, full of utter unknowns. The sun rose and set, but no one knew what it was. They just knew that as the seasons changed and the days grew short, life left the land. Disease could strike from nowhere, taking young and old, rich and poor, powerful and powerless alike. The vital rains sometimes did not come and there would be a drought, or they would pour so much there would be a flood. Fiery-haired stars crossed the sky, heralds of doom. The sun would darken in midday for no reason, and sometimes the earth would tremble, bringing the strongest of mortal works to the ground with ease. Nature and everything in it seemed capricious and sometimes even spiteful.

And when people struggled to understand 'why?' and 'how?', they were armed with little more than trial and error. If their wife was in difficult labor and they swore to offer a sacrifice to the mother goddess if they survived, and they did, then it was a data point that said 'praying to a deity helps'. If there was a drought and the rains came after everyone threw their shoes into the river and danced barefoot in the streets, then you get a data point about 'how to end a drought'. If the livestock deaths stopped after you burned that odd old woman hermit, you got a data point about 'burning witches is a good thing'.

From these things traditions, superstitions and even religions evolve, accumulated irrational behaviors based on ignorance, an incomplete understanding of the world, or the human need to assign a reason or purpose to explain why bad things happen to good people. People who are otherwise highly rational carry deep-seated irrational beliefs about the things they cannot explain. *Black cats are unlucky. You can curse someone by wishing them ill. Certain numbers have a mystical significance. The sun is a flaming chariot driven across the sky by a god.* And so on.



Aethos is a high-tech version of this. Humans on Aeth are just as rational as you or I, but they live on a world where there are things that simply *cannot* be explained through rational thought, analysis or the scientific tools at their disposal. The saying by Arthur C. Clarke that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic” is at work here. And many, *many* humans on Aethos fall into the same trap as primitive humanity. They confuse coincidence with correlation, give magical qualities to the unexplainable, and assign human values and motives to forces that do not share those values and motives. *They believe what they want to believe because it makes them feel good to believe it, because to believe the truth would make them less important in the grand scheme of things.*

Aethos is a world where people go about their high-tech daily lives, because they have to eat and keep a roof over their heads, but it is also a world where people have a deep, superstitious dread of powerful forces that are both real and beyond understanding. They hope, seek and sometimes pray, to appease, cajole or even control forces far beyond their understanding. These unknown forces make otherwise reasonable people act in unreasonable ways. This can be dangerous, both to themselves, those who may be under their authority, and even to all humanity. For unlike the ancient gods, the Aeth are *real*, they *did* ravage the Earth and getting their attention focused on you is not likely to be good thing.

So, you have the high-tech world of things that adventurers can understand, the Aeth, which they cannot understand, alien neighbors whose values and goals may not be compatible with yours, human leaders subject to the temptations of power and the irrationality of centuries-old tradition and belief, plus a major change that will affect everyone on the planet over the course of a campaign. *Everything you need for a smashing good time.*

The difference between a Greek believing that a volcano was an entrance to the underworld and a human on Aethos believing that a scarth tower is an entrance to the world of the Aeth from which no one returns is that for the human on Aethos it is *true*...

For the players

This is what you, as human inhabitants of Aethos know as truth, the legends and history you were taught in school, what is known by examination of the artifacts and the historical record.

Humans are not native to Aethos. We arrived here, kidnapped, 935 years ago. Aethos, a planet-sized spaceship controlled by the Aeth, hollow and several times the size of Earth, arrived in the solar system of our ancestors after a century-long deceleration, and tried to dismantle the Earth for rare elements and raw materials, choosing Earth rather than other bodies in the solar system for reasons known only to the Aeth. The Ancients, a previously kidnapped race living on Aethos, warned Earth of the threat long before the Aeth reached the inner solar system, giving humanity several decades to prepare a defense. Earth forces were not able to completely stop the Aeth, but were able to save the Old Earth from destruction. However, the Aeth did great damage to our ancestral homeworld, and also lifted huge sections of Old Earth more or less intact and deposited them here, along with the people who lived on those territories. This was the Exodus, a terrible time that both destroyed and remade us as a people.

Their merciless raiding interrupted, the Aeth withdrew back inside Aethos and left our homeworld behind, taking us with them. We, no longer the nations of Old Earth, simply christened our new lands ‘Earth’, in honor of the world we left behind.



The battered survivors brought to Aethos were almost immediately attacked by the Cartoo, another kidnapped race, aggressive and rapacious. We fought them off, not just once, but several times over the centuries, and remain to this day in not a state of peace, but merely a cease-fire. The Drinn and Taaqq, our other neighbors, are more peaceful, and we trade with them and view them as friends.

Aethos is huge, with far more surface than the Old Earth, and three tiny suns instead of the one larger one our species evolved beneath. There are many other races across Aethos' vast surface, some we have yet to meet, others long extinct, known only by their ruins.

We cannot and will not ever forgive the Aeth, but neither can we challenge them. *Yet.* We are forever separated from the world our people came from, but we will always have a part of it beneath our feet.

The above is what you were taught, history in the most respected tomes, the gist of scary childhood fairytales and the most enduring dramas and legends. Like most good lies, it has kernels of truth embedded in it. *Which parts are true and which are false is up to the gamemaster...*

It is a mix of fact, hope, supposition and outright fabrication, but it is nonetheless what most people (including your adventurers) will believe. *At least at first.* Pointing out any internal inconsistency in the story is like telling a member of the Christian faith that there is no tangible evidence of the resurrection of Christ, or telling a Muslim that Muhammad was merely a leader, not a Prophet. That is, it will be met with incredulity, pity or hostility. For most people, a false belief that makes you feel good is preferable to a less uplifting truth. Whether an *adventurer* feels this way or not, or learns things that change their perspective (and what they do about it) *can* be a major part of the campaign.

What was written above is nearly as good as holy writ for the vast majority of Terrans. In addition, there is *actual* holy writ derived from the Old Earth faith called Christianity that adds another layer of drama and supposition to the tale, education or indoctrination that most people have heard since they were children. In this writ, the Aeth are literally the agents of Satan, living in a hellish underworld beneath your very feet, bound there by God and human heroism until the Final Battle that will defeat them once and for all and usher in an eternity of human rule over the universe.

Not everyone believes every bit of the Final Testament, but most believe some, and some do believe all. The Aeth are enigmatic, rarely seen, seemingly immortal, immensely powerful and have nothing comparable to human values. They are different at a level we cannot understand, and for humans, it is often only a small step from 'different' to 'evil'. That final battle against the Aeth is prophecied to be a thousand years after the 'New Kingdom' was founded. It has been 935 years since the Aeth kidnapped humanity, and Aethos is once again slowing down as it approaches a new solar system. Many believe that this is the start of the Last Days, as prophecied in the Final Testament, and indeed, the signs prophecied *are* coming to pass...

You are going to be playing ordinary (or extraordinary) people or even aliens, living on Aethos at the start of its Arrival in a new solar system. For humans, this is the first time, and the most dangerous. If a race transplanted to Aethos is going to go extinct, odds are high that it will happen because of events transpiring in the first Arrival after they were transplanted. Everyone is going to be on edge, for generations. Space programs will be restarted for the first time in centuries, and the Aeth, long unseen, are much more likely to be out and about. Despite the tempest, the lives of most will remain about the same. But adventurers? *Their lives are about to get a lot more exciting...*



OF GREAT IMPORT



If you are going to truly wrap your head around Aethos, to run it as a gamemaster or experience it as a player, you need to understand the Aeth. *Or more particularly, realize that you cannot understand the Aeth.*

The Aeth are, despite the beliefs of some humans, mortal creatures of flesh and blood. *Alien* flesh and blood, but physical beings bound by the same laws of the universe as everyone else. The Aeth have just figured out how to bend a lot more of those laws to their will and whim. Just as you and I are flesh and blood creatures, so are dogs, cats, mice and ants. You would not expect even the cleverest dog to understand even the simplest human technology. With training, use it, perhaps. But *understand* it? *Never*. Mice? You can train them to run a maze or push a button to get a pellet. Ants? You cannot really communicate with them at all.

The Aeth have a level of mental development that puts them high enough that humans are somewhere down below a dog in comparison. We do not understand the Aeth because we *cannot* understand the Aeth. It is difficult for us as rational thinking beings to grab onto the notion that other thinking beings can be so far beyond us that we cannot even understand their concepts, much less their technology. *Would a mongrel appreciate the Mona Lisa? Would a housecat understand the notion of a parliamentary system of government? Do mice understand the nature of potential energy in that coiled spring the tasty piece of cheese is attached to?*

No, they dont. And humans are the same way with the Aeth. In our own limited way we put the Aeth into the *only* conceptual framework we truly understand, *ours*. We try to force their motives and desires through the filter of our own preconceptions, and this is like trying to shove bricks through a sieve.

So, as a gamemaster, player or adventurer, remember that the Aeth are 'just there'. They are *not* the 'great mystery' that the campaign is meant to solve, they are *not* hidden patrons, they are *not* defeatable villains. They are 'just there', like the suns in the sky. You take them into account, but you cannot do much about them, any more than we on Earth could do anything about the Sun if it decided to belch and obliterate the Earth.

We know it is possible, we know we cannot do anything about it, and we go on with our lives.

You and your adventurers are free to speculate on them all you want, and these speculations *can* have important ramifications in the *human* sphere, but in the end, you not only will be wrong in some way, you are incapable of even understanding the right answer. Even the questions humans ask about God are more likely to be answered correctly by religious scholars than questions about the Aeth are. For after all, man was supposedly made in the image of God, which is a lot closer than we are to the Aeth. Though God is an all-present being, existing everywhere past, present and future, we convince ourselves that God has 'human' qualities, a form in whose image we were made, yet seldom ask ourselves why God apparently needs eyes, hair or toenails. It is a contradictory part of our belief that gets shuffled off to one side in favor of the deeper truths believed by adherents of the Judeo-Christian faiths.



It is the same with humans and the Aeth. The humans of Aethos project their own feelings and needs onto them, making them gods, devils or scapegoats for humanity's problems, and as long as this makes them feel good, they ignore any inherent contradictions in this belief. Challenging human beliefs about the Aeth *is* going to drive many adventures and possibly get adventurers in a lot of trouble, but just as challenging the Church during the Protestant Reformation did not generate the final answers to the questions we ask about God, neither will a successful challenge to beliefs about the Aeth generate the final answers to the questions about them. *But it was useful nonetheless...*

We apologize if this is belaboring the point, and we will *still* bring it up from time to time later on, but you need to understand what you *cannot* understand if you are to have a good time in an Aethos campaign. The Aeth *are* out there, and there may even be very rare interactions between them and adventurers, but these will always be unfathomable and bizarre, and if you think you understand why the Aeth did or did not do a certain thing, you are almost certainly *wrong*.

What *is* Aethos, then?

Aethos is at heart, a high-tech/espionage/thriller/alien culture/exploration setting, with overtones of religious fervor, superstition and fear. The Aeth and Aethos *are* important overall elements, but they are in the end, part of the setting, *not* its major players (at least as far as the adventurers are concerned). From a *player* standpoint, the background can seem a little dark, or even overpowering. Old Earth is lost to you, and you are humanity's only remnant on this vast and still mostly unexplored planet.

But from the standpoint of the *adventurers*, what has happened to Old Earth or humanity in the past is as distant and emotionally insignificant as the Dark Ages or the Black Death are to us. Yes, these things *did* shape the history of the world and to some extent modern beliefs, but no, they are *not* emotional baggage that people carry around with them. Despite a potential one hundred fifty year lifespan, humans are still largely focused on the present, near future and recent past, all of which are going to become more exciting and emotionally influential as a campaign progresses.

An Aethos campaign can *simultaneously* have aspects of *James Bond*, *Indiana Jones*, *Blade Runner*, *Alien Nation* and *Casablanca* (if some of these do not ring a bell, go rent one or two). There are plots both in the short and long term, independent and intertwined, things to discover, things to keep hidden, things that eventually *must* be done and things that should *never* be done, and if the gamemaster is any good, the adventurers are going to be in the thick of it.

Coming up...

The next chapter deals with the actual world of Aethos and what the *adventurers* know or can readily find out about it, or things that the adventurers do *not* know but which really would not matter if they did. That should be sufficient to get you to the following chapter, which is making your adventurers. Following that is the gamemaster section, which covers the subtle and important difference between what is known and what is *actually* true, adventures and adventure ideas, gear and reference material.