GM Guidance

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Core GM Principles

1. Telegraph Risk: Always tell players what they're risking before they roll. "If you fail, the superstorm will catch you before you reach shelter—that's 1 stress per hour exposed."

2. Fail Forward: Failure shouldn't stop the story. Complications create new challenges: "You don't find water, but you notice tracks leading deeper into the ruins. Something else is looking for water too."

3. Respect Resources: Water, food, energy, and psychic stamina matter. Track them lightly but consistently. When players catch their breath, introduce resource-related complications.

4. Make Duskara Feel Alive: The wind never stops. The sky never changes. Settlements depend on each other. Actions have consequences across the twilight belt.

5. Say Yes, Then Complicate: Players want to attempt something cool? Let them try. Use checks for risky actions, then introduce complications on partial successes.

Campaign Frameworks

1. Caravan Expeditions

Premise: Players escort trade caravans between settlements, dealing with superstorms, bandits, predators, and inter-settlement politics.

Structure:

- Session = one journey segment (settlement to settlement)
- Introduce complications at halfway point and destination
- Build reputation with factions over time
- Escalate threats: minor predators → bandit ambushes → sabotage plots

Key Tensions:

- Protect cargo vs. protect lives
- Loyalty to employer vs. moral choices
- Speed vs. safety
- Faction allegiances

2. Settlement Management

Premise: Players are leaders/caretakers of a struggling outpost. Must secure resources, maintain infrastructure, and navigate external threats.

Structure:

- Session = one crisis (water shortage, superstorm, diplomatic incident)
- Use "catch your breath" to introduce new settlement problems
- Track population morale, resource stockpiles, faction relationships
- Long-term goal: achieve stability or relocate

Key Tensions:

- Survival vs. ethics
- Self-sufficiency vs. dependence on neighbors
- Tradition vs. innovation
- Individual needs vs. collective good

3. Ruin Exploration

Premise: Players investigate Deep Roads, ancient alien structures, or day-side ruins. Uncover Earth technology, psychic artifacts, and mysteries.

Structure:

- Session = one expedition into dangerous territory
- Use loot checks to find clues and equipment
- Build mystery over multiple sessions
- Introduce rival explorers, hostile factions

Key Tensions:

- Knowledge vs. safety
- Preserve artifacts vs. exploit them
- Share discoveries vs. hoard power
- Understanding vs. survival

4. Psychic Mystery Investigation

Premise: Players are troubleshooters for Weather Wraiths, bonding backlashes, and psychic phenomena. Blend detective work with action.

Structure:

- Session = investigate incident, identify cause, resolve/contain threat
- Use psychic abilities as investigation tools
- Complications escalate psychic phenomena
- Build toward larger conspiracy or natural disaster

Key Tensions:

- Help victim vs. eliminate threat
- Science vs. spirituality
- Control vs. freedom (for psychics)
- Short-term fix vs. long-term solution

Session Structure

Opening: Establish scene, location, immediate goal. "You're two days from Khal-Rim when the wind shifts. Your weather worker senses a superstorm forming."

Rising Action: Players make checks, skills degrade, complications arise. Let them decide when to catch their breath.

Complication (Catch Your Breath): When players reset skills, introduce new threat from complication table. Don't punish them—escalate tension.

Climax: Major challenge that resolves immediate threat but opens new questions or long-term consequences.

Resolution: Breathe. Reward progress. Tease next session.

Using Complications Effectively

Complications aren't predetermined events—they're prompts you interpret based on what's happening right now.

Roll "You've attracted attention":

- In ruins exploring ancient tech? A salvage crew from rival settlement heard noise and investigates.
- Camping in twilight belt? Wind serpent circles overhead, curious about campfire.
- Deep Roads navigation? Your resonance crystal's frequency attracted something in the dark.

Roll "Equipment malfunction":

- During combat? Weapon jams, forcing tactical improvisation.
- Extreme environment? Thermal suit regulator fails—take stress or retreat.
- Critical moment? Comm crystal dies mid-transmission, losing vital intel.

Roll "Route is blocked":

- Pursuing bandits? They collapsed tunnel behind them.
- Escaping superstorm? Debris avalanche cuts off shelter path.
- Routine travel? Territorial creatures nest across your route—detour or confront.

Key Principle: Let context shape complications. Don't introduce superstorms in caves or predators in settlements unless it makes fictional sense. The complication table is a springboard, not a script.

Frequency: Complications happen often in Breathless—multiple per session. Keep them quick and tactical. Save major plot events (settlement disputes, ancient reactivations, faction wars) for deliberate story moments, not random complication rolls.

Balancing Resource Depletion

Don't micromanage. Track water, food, and energy loosely. Use scarcity as narrative flavor, not tedious accounting.

Make resources matter during complications. "You find shelter, but there's no water source. How do you ration what you have?"

Reward clever thinking. Players improvise water reclamation? Reduce stress or avoid complication.

Use abundance sparingly. Finding a hidden cache feels meaningful when resources are usually tight.

Psychic Abilities and Balance

Psychics aren't mandatory. Non-psychics contribute through skills, equipment, and ingenuity.

Overuse has consequences. After 2-3 psychic feats in a session, impose stress or require rest.

Psychic abilities create opportunities, not solutions. Weather working can't stop a superstorm, only redirect it. Deep bonding doesn't make creatures invincible.

Narrative power is fine. If a player's thermal sensing creates a cool moment, let it happen without a check.

Responding to Player Actions

RPG storytelling emerges from player choices and system interactions. Don't plan outcomes—respond dynamically using Breathless mechanics and Duskaran context.

Players Track Bandits Into Ruins

Player Action: "We follow the bandit tracks into the abandoned settlement."

GM Thinking: *They're pursuing actively. Risk is moderate—bandits might be waiting, ruins might be unstable. I'll use complications to add texture without blocking progress.*

GM Response: "Make a Navigate check to follow the tracks through the debris."

Player Rolls: 3-4 (success with complication)

GM Improvises Complication: "You follow the tracks to a collapsed building. The bandits definitely went inside, but you hear movement—could be them, could be something else nesting in there. Also, your wind compass is acting erratic. Metallic interference from the ruins, maybe?"

Key Principle: Let the check result tell you what happens next. Don't pre-plan the bandit ambush—let complications build toward it organically.

Players Repair Geothermal System

Player Action: "I want to jury-rig the regulator with parts from our thermal lance."

GM Thinking: *Creative solution. Resolve check, but risky—one mistake and the vent could destabilize faster.*

GM Response: "Love it. Make a Resolve check. If you fail, the lance is destroyed and the vent becomes more unstable."

Player Rolls: 1-2 (fail with complication)

GM Improvises Complication: "The lance shatters from thermal stress. Molten components spray—everyone take 1 stress from heat exposure. The vent's pressure is building faster now. You've got maybe hours instead of days."

What Happens Next: Let players respond. Do they evacuate? Find another solution? Call for outside help? The story emerges from their choices under pressure.

Key Principle: Player creativity deserves checks, not automatic success or denial. Complications make their choices matter.

Players Negotiate With Hostile Faction

Player Action: "I offer them half our water tokens to let us pass."

GM Thinking: *Reasonable offer. But these aren't reasonable people—they're desperate. Commune check.*

GM Response: "Make a Commune check to see if they accept."

Player Rolls: 5+ (success)

GM Response: "The leader eyes your tokens. 'Half. Plus information. Where'd you come from? What's happening in Khal-Rim?' They're suspicious but willing to deal."

Alternative Roll (3-4): "They take your tokens but demand you leave your thermal suits too. 'Insurance,' they say. You can pass, but you'll be vulnerable to the cold ahead."

Key Principle: Success doesn't mean "get everything you want." Complications shape how success looks. The story continues either way.

Improvising During Complications

Situation: Players catch their breath after escaping predator. You roll on complication table: "You're running low on water."

Don't: Narrate "Your water is mysteriously gone."

Do: Build from context. "As you're checking supplies, you notice your water reclamation unit took damage during the chase. It's leaking. You've got maybe a day's water left unless you repair it or find more."

Then: Let players respond. Do they repair immediately? Risk pressing forward? Detour to known water source? Their choice creates the next scene.

When Players Surprise You

Player Action: "Can I use my Deep Bonding to ask the wind serpent where the bandits went?"

GM Thinking: *Not what I expected, but it's cool and uses their ability. How does this work in the fiction?*

GM Response: "Interesting. The serpent's been with you—it might have sensed them. Make a Commune check, and if you succeed, it can show you impressions of their scent trail."

Player Rolls: Success

GM Response: "Through the bond, you feel the serpent's predatory focus. It detected multiple human scents moving underground. There's an entrance to the Deep Roads you hadn't noticed—partially hidden."

Key Principle: Say yes to creative ideas. Use checks to see how well they work. Let complications emerge from the fiction, not from blocking player agency.

Pacing Long-Term Campaigns

Sessions 1-3: Establish Stakes

- Introduce settlements, factions, key NPCs
- Focus on simple missions (caravan escort, salvage, resource gathering)
- Let players experience core mechanics without overwhelming complications
- Build investment in community or faction

Sessions 4-6: Escalate Tension

- Introduce faction conflicts, political intrigue
- Increase environmental hazards (superstorms, predator attacks)
- Begin long-term mystery threads (ancient structures, psychic phenomena)
- Force difficult choices (rescue vs. profit, loyalty vs. ethics)

Sessions 7-10: Crisis Point

- Major catastrophe threatens settlement or region
- Multiple factions mobilize, players caught in middle
- Ancient mysteries begin revealing connections
- Resource scarcity reaches critical levels
- Boss encounters (rogue weatherworker, feral creature pack, corporate army)

Sessions 11+: Resolution and New Beginning

- Immediate crisis resolved but consequences remain
- Political landscape shifts based on player actions
- New threats emerge from resolved plots
- Players establish legacy (settlement founded, faction leadership, legendary status)

Managing Multiple Storylines

Main Plot: Overarching campaign goal (stop rogue faction, decode ancient mystery, survive mega-storm season)

Subplot A: Character-driven personal goal (find lost family, master psychic ability, build reputation)

Subplot B: Faction relationship (earn trust, expose corruption, mediate conflict)

Environmental Thread: Ongoing Duskaran challenge (water shortage, predator migration, geothermal instability)

Rotate focus each session: Session 1 advances main plot, Session 2 focuses on subplot A, Session 3 environmental crisis, etc. Let complications organically connect threads.

Handling Player Creativity

Player: "Can I use weather working to create a localized fog to hide our approach?"

GM Response: "That's awesome. This isn't a standard use, so it'll be a Stunt—roll d12 for Commune. If you succeed, you'll need to catch your breath before attempting another stunt, and the psychic effort will be draining."

Player: "Can my thermal sensitive detect if someone's lying by reading micro-temperature changes in their face?"

GM Response: "Absolutely. Make a Perceive check. On 5+, you sense deception. On 3-4, you get a vague impression but aren't certain. On 1-2, you misread the signals and might make a false accusation."

Player: "Can we befriend this wind serpent instead of fighting it?"

GM Response: "Maybe. It's territorial and aggressive, but if one of you has Deep Bonding, you could attempt to establish a connection. That would be a series of Commune checks over time. Without that ability, you'd need to find another way to earn its trust—offering food, protecting its nest, proving you're not a threat."

Key Principle: Say yes to creative solutions. Use Risk Oracle to assess difficulty. Let complications emerge naturally from bold choices.