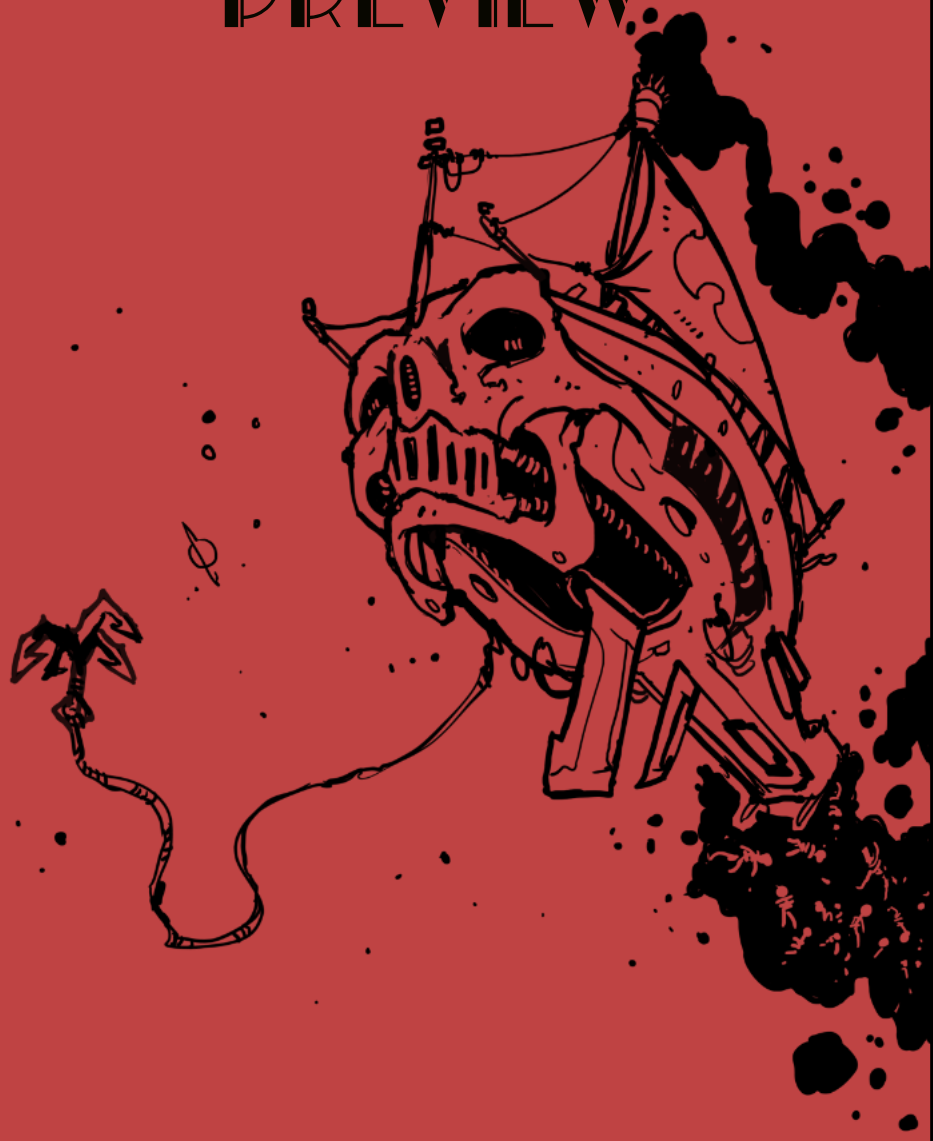# THE SYNDICATE PREVIEW

THE SYNDICATE PREVIEW

Writing, design, layout, and maps by Micah Abresch

Cover by Brandish Gilhlem
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Designed for use with
ShadowDark RPG

Basic Encounters

Act I
- [ ] Taking the Ship

Act II - III
- [ ] Suspicious Locals
- [ ] Recently Raided
- [ ] Wreckage

Act III
- [ ] Under a Bounty
- [ ] Restocking
- [ ] Another Bounty

Secrets

☐ The Map Code
Prior worlds visited, INT DC

21	18	15	12	9	6

☐ The Signal Code
Prior attempts, INT or Wis DC

15	12	9	6

☐ ☐ ☐ Decipher Network
CHA check DC

Rendezvous Routes
DC 15 INT to decipher

Naval Encounters

	Act II-III	Syndicate Ships (size)
☐	Survey Vessel	Gruenyon's Deathstalker (3)
☐	Simple Piracy	Ibishalak's Viridian Screamer (3)
☐	Aetherliner Raid	Shrez's Warbird (5)

	Act III	Syndicate Ships (size)
☐	Stalked in Space	Svayk & Thirni's Mithril Edge (3)
☐	Hunting Party	Pashel's Song of Fury (5)
☐		Avdit's Hellburst (3)
☐	The Convoy	Ruuko's Short Way Round (8*)
☐		Garrum's Incorgiable (5)
☐	Fresh Harvest	Pazzak's Gleaner (8)
☐		Nev's Hinh Groln (3)
☐	Vital Assistance	Bala's Strelka (1)*

	Act IV	Encounter Usage
☐	All or Nothing	Once the Syndicate is greatly weakened, the remaining ships stick together and try to force a final confrontation.

Syntdicate Crews

Syndicate crews are pulled from throughout the ring. If an ancestry is not noted, they could be from anywhere in the Ring.

Syndicate Initiate

Veteran pirate and raider, always ready for violence, or to run if that's the way to survive.

AC 10, **HP** 3, **ATK** 1 club +1 (1d4) **MV** near, **S** +1, **D** +0, **C** +0, **I** +0, **W** +0, **Ch** -1, **AL** C, **LV** 0

Syndicate Sailor

Pirates and scoundrels, scarred, cruel, and selfish.

AC 12 (leather), **HP** 4, **ATK** 1 cutlass +1 (1d6) or javelin (far) +1 (1d4) **MV** near, **S** +1, **D** +1, **C** +0, **I** +0, **W** +0, **Ch** -1, **AL** C, **LV** 1

Syndicate Thug

A particularly vicious specimen, inflicting pain as much for the fun of it as out of necessity..

AC 13 (chainmail), **HP** 10, **ATK** 1 saber +2 (1d8) or javelin (far) +2 (1d4) **MV** near, **S** +2, **D** +0, **C** +1, **I** -1, **W** +0, **Ch** -1, **AL** C, **LV** 2

d12	Random Syndicate Buyers
1	Tarix Dabbler, Navidemi fence in Slipfall
2	Ruqeb Factor, Navidemi colonial corporation facilitator
3	Thirgni Ashildruson, Devlienne aetheling with a fresh colony
4	Karvekh, Devlienne thane with aspirations of aetheling-hood
5	Sevri, Devlienne aetheling acquiring pressganged incantors
6	Vihk, Dead-God prospector who just found a deep vein
7	Lyrkinari, Calrivian reseller to the pirate market
8	Kairet, Calrivian captain making a black-market profit
9	Simmanyc, Calrivian quartermaster for a fleet
10	Masheg, Volpithi contractor of a Jealous Equation
11	Enmurulak, Volpithi forming a new cult in a fledgling colony
12	Sidabbi, Volpithi contractor of Umbral Automaton

The Campaign

Content

The Syndicate a slave-traders. This helps setup the campaign and make for an unambiguous enemy.

If that is not going to be fun at your table, the overall content can work fine if they are instead treated as cultists who are performing mass-sacrifices.

Not Stand-Alone

This is meant to help run a long-term Aetherdark campaign, but it is not meant to be a campaign on its own.

Rather, this provides a collection of encounters that relate to each other and can happen around other adventures the crawlers are undertaking.

There are several reasons your players might engage with this antagonist, but it is not designed to dominate your setting, and could be ignored without seeming implausible.

Crawler Motivations

After the initial adventure (Taking the Ship), there are three primary reasons that the Syndicate might be a recurring threat.

Finding Home. After escaping captivity, the crawlers are stranded in the astral sea. Their home world is not listed on the charts they have, so the clearest way to figure out a route home is to find a Syndicate captain who does have that in their logs.

Hatred of Slavers. Many players will want to pursue the Syndicate simply because they're evil.

Handling a Threat. Even if the players don't start out hunting the Syndicate, the Syndicate may hunt them. Killed Syndicate captains and stole a Syndicate ship, and no criminal organization can maintain respect in the underworld if it lets that sort of behavior slide.

Four Acts

This book includes sixteen encounters. They should not all happen, and they are unlikely to happen strictly in order.

Generally, the structure is divided into 5 acts, although the divide between them is not start.

Act I: Prisoners. Everything starts when the crawlers were captured and must take over the ship they're on.

Act II: Unknowns. All the Syndicate knows is that a ship vanished. They don't know who the crawlers are, nor what they want.

Act III: Threats. The crawlers have drawn the Syndicate's attention and it has redirected some resources to kill them.

Act IV: All or Nothing. The Syndicate is worried the crawlers will wide it out. The remaining ships have rallied together to ensure there are no easy targets.

Irregular Encounters

Five encounters happen at more specific times:

Taking the Ship only works as a 0-level start to a campaign.

All or Nothing is triggered when the Syndicate has lost over half its ships, immediately shifting to Act IV.

Under a Bounty & Another Bounty can happen at any time, but they are preceded by the crawlers seeing a bounty notice in port.

Vital Assistance is not a standalone event. Rather, it should be added to another event in Act III or IV if the encounters seem too weak for the crawlers.

The Ringspace Setting

This can be used in any Aetherdark game, but is written as though it's in Ringspace, so referenced worlds like Devlienne and Volpith will need to be changed if you use this elsewhere.

The Syndicate

Ships plunge from the sky, striking undefended towns deep within the kingdom. They set fire to fields and chase dirtbound prey before them, snatching up enough to fill their ships, then vanishing to the stars.

Goals

Seeking out recently-discovered worlds, they pillage what they can, selling the treasures and slaves they have snatched up, using the profits to build exapnd their navy.

Although simple greed is the core of the Syndicate, and currently the limit of their ability, they have higher aims than mere piracy.

The eventual goal is not simply to make a profit, but to build to the point where they can compete with the major colonial corporations of Navidem and begin establishing control over whole worlds.

Strategy

Although they are still too small to be a threat, the Syndicate also knows it's too small to defend itself if a major power focuses on it.

The emphasize secrecy above profit, although greed often gets in the way of this goal.

Tactics

Codes. Signals flashed with a mirror and lantern help Syndicate ships recognize each other despite their false flags.

Secrecy. In theory, the Syndicate avoids conflict. In practice, the captains are pirates and have trouble resisting easy prey.

Discrete Meetings. To avoid notice, the Syndicate only meets buyers at remote locations in the astral sea.

Typical Buyers

The Syndicate makes its profits by selling slaves and treasures to the wealthy of the ring for a variety of purposes.

Navidem

Traders from Navidem get illicit goods from the Syndicate, then resell them for more in the markets they have access, just pure greed at work.

Devlienne

The colonies of Devlienne always need more laborers, and they prefer to import foreign workers, who lack the ties necessary to organize a lasting rebellion.

Dead-God Mining Concerns

People with no connections in the ring can be set to work in ichor veins no one else would dare touch.

Calrivi

Although Calrivi can always use more labor, he is primarily interested in additional sources of bottled spirits to fuel his armada.

Volpith-4

Greed and labor are motives, but more stark is the need for varied and strange sacrifices, as the patrons of their cults are often well-pleased by beings from worlds they cannot personally visit.

Secrets

As the crawlers continue to encounter the syndicate, they may uncover some or all of these secrets.

Clear Goals

Encourage players to invent their own plans if they decide to go after the Syndicate, but if they are struggling, just tell them that these are viable options.

Improvisation

Each of these secrets gives a specific check to acquire it, but innovative play should allow other methods to reveal the same knowledge.

Likewise, if the players have their own clever ideas of how to hunt the syndicate, alternative secrets can be offered to aid their efforts.

Collecting Logs & Maps

Unless noted otherwise, every ship has a logbook and a map on-board.

Given the chance, the captains of ships will try to destroy their logs and maps if they are losing, but as the books are usually kept in a cabin while the captain is fighting on-deck, they rarely succeed.

The Map Code

Requirement. DC 21 INT to decipher syndicate charts after arriving at any world marked on those charts.

Reduce the DC by 3 for each prior location on Syndicate charts that have been visited.

Boon. 3 XP. Grants the ability to read Syndicate charts and maps.

The Signal Code

Requirement. DC 18 INT or WIS to decipher the signals being sent by a syndicate ship.

Reduce the DC by 3 for each prior attempt at deciphering the signals, at most once per encounter with a Syndicate ship.

Boon. 3 XP. Grants the ability to interpret and send Syndicate signals with a mirror and lantern.

Decipher Network

Requirement. Find the contacts for the Syndicate in 3 major ports, having deciphered the Signal Code to make contact safely.

DC 12 CHA check to chat up port officials in a city to find a Syndicate contact. A critical failure on a check alerts the Syndicate.

Boon. 3 XP. When sighting a Syndicate ship, spend an action studying it to recognize the exact ship, learning the name of the commander, their reputation, and the armament of the ship.

Rendezvous Routes

Check. DC 15 INT check to decipher a captain's intact logbook.

To get additional attempts, after having completed Decipher Network, DC 12 CHA in an appropriate port to find a Syndicate contact, then try to decipher the logbook again.

Result. Each logbook has enough details to determine the route some Syndicate ships will be taking to meet a buyer.

Further research may uncover which ships would use that route of who the buyer would be (The encounters in this book do not detail who the buyer is.)

The only events designed to be found in this way are The Convoy (...) and Fresh Harvest (...), but any other ship could be found by this means, depending on the shape your campaign has taken.

Survey Vessel

When to Use This

As the crawlers approach a planet that isn't colonized by The Ring, or as they are lifting off from one.

Setup

- Gruenyon's Deathstalker (size 3) is flying in the clouds, mostly hidden, surveying new worlds for syndicate depredations.
- As the Deathstalker is actively keeping watch and is likely to see the crawlers at the same time they are spotted.

Naval Tactics

If there have not been many events with the syndicate, the Deathstalker won't know that the crawlers' ship is stolen and will instead think it's an ally in an unexpected location and will try to signal it.

If the Deathstalker knows the crawlers' ship was stolen, they will usually attack if it looks damaged, or flee if it does not.

Boarding Tactics

Captain Gruenyon was an assassin by trade, and rather than fight a losing battle on-deck, he and his crew will vanish belowdecks to ambush anyone who comes down.

As gecks, the crew can cling to the ceiling, meaning that they have a decent chance of an ambush, even in the tight confines of the Deathstalker's hold.

Same Place, New Map

The cabin has a set of maps marking the current location on a different overall map, allowing it to count as an additional visit for the purposes of deciphering the map code.

Gruenyon's Bounty

Past assassinations have put a 500gp bounty on proof of Gruenyon's death.

Gruenyon's Deathstalker

A white-hulled ship, black smoke billowing from the exhaust tubes at the rear. Vague shapes shift in the smoke, glowing silvery-white.

AC 12 (bone), **Hull** 15, **Spd** +2, **Mvr** +3 (Gruenyon), **Size** 3, **Ram** blade (3d20 siege, 3d2 injuries), **ATK** 1 heavy steel bolt (far) +5 (1d8 siege)

A small, tightly-knit crew of geck survivors from the Scaleback uprising.

CRW 12 syndicate sailors, **AC** 12, **ATK** +1 (1d6), MV near (climb), **Key Cre**w 4 syndicate sailors, Gruenyon, **LV** 3

Captain Gruenyon

*A slight, reptilian man, scarred face twisted by a cruel grin.*

Mean-spirited, an unpopular leader who keeps his crew in line through fear.

AC 15 (leather), **HP** 29, **ATK** 1 poisoned dagger (close/near) +5 (2d4) **MV** near (climb), **S** +1, **D** +4, **C** +1, **I** +1, **W** +3, **Ch** +2, **AL** C, **LV 6**

Execute. Deals x3 damage against surprised targets.

d6	Deathstalker Decks
1	Captain's cabin
2	Ballista battery
3	Steering orb
4	Lock-Up
5	Cargo bay
6	Necrofurnace
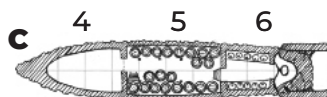
d3	Crew Events
1	Ambush. Deal 1d8 damage to one enemy in the key-fight.
2	Soul dust. Soot vented from furnace puts all actions targeting beyond close at disadvantage next round.
3	Murder. Instantly kill, not injure, a random crewmember.

Suspicious Locals

When to Use This

When the crawlers are landing on a world outside of Ringspace and the locals see their ship descend from the sky.

Setup

- The locals saw a ship fly overhead recently.
- Rumors have spread, and the locals expect the crawlers to fit one of the stories they've made up.

A Different Ship

The locals saw a smaller ship, trailing dark smoke (Gruenyon's Deathstalker).

The Priest's Tale

Assuming no more would come after a few days, Augur Davio focused on encouraging good morals.

- Demons were let drawn by disloyalty to the gods.
- People must accept their fates and fill their roles.

The Knight's Tale

Still wishing he'd gone on more adventures, the Eques Tomas is talking about how these foes must be vanquished.

- The enemies stayed in their flying ship from fear.
- If the peasants would just listen as he trained them, they could defeat any invader.

The Milkmaid's Tale

Elys actually saw the ship when it landed, but nobody believes her as they think she's just trying to avoid trouble for sneaking off for a tryst during the day.

- Strange, reptilian humanoids crept from a bone-clad hull.
- They had wet, slippery skin and huge eyes.
- They want to eat people, but luckily didn't see her.

Simple Piracy

When to Use This

At any time that the crawlers are between worlds in Ringspace.

Setup

- The Viridian Screamer (size 5) spotted the Eshikara (size 8, Bulk Trader, AD ...) and signaled their intent to it.
- The Eshikara agreed to stop, not wanting to be massacred.
- The crawlers are just in sight, unnoticed by either of the ships.
- The two ships will reach each other in one round and begin boarding actions the round after.

Only Thanks

The galleon is glad to be saved, but they don't have the spare money to give a reward, as they're just transporting grain from a colony back to Devlienne.

More Thralls

Captain Ibishlak doesn't want the grain, she wants the ship and its people.

If the crawlers watch from a distance, they will remain unnoticed and realize that the situation turned violent on the second round of the boarding action.

Boat In a Bottle

There is a boat-in-a-bottle in Ibishalak's cabin. She may use it in an attempt to flee.

Boat in a Bottle. Can be shattered to transform it into a crystal-rigged sailboat (AD ...) for 24 hours, or until it is damaged.

Afterwards, the boat turns into loose wood pieces and rigging inside an undamaged bottle. Spending a downtime activity with tweezers and patience can reset the bottle to a ready state once more.

Ibishalak's Viridian Screamer

A compact, armored frigate, sickly green flames pouring from its aging runic plate. The hull is painted black, with red tiger stripes, or possibly red drips of blood.

AC 14 (bronze), **Hull** 35, **Spd** +0, **Mvr** +2 (Ibishalak), **Size** 5, **Ram** hammer (5d12 siege, 5d3 injuries), **ATK** 2 heavy steel bolts (far) +6 (1d8 siege)

Blank-faced people of all sorts, completely unconcerned with their own safety.

CRW 70 mindless thralls, **AC** 11, **ATK** +1 (1d6), **Key Crew** 8 mindless thralls, Ibishalak, **LV** 2

Worthless Thralls. Injuries among the crew never force a morale check. Only Ibishalak's personal safety is considered.

d8	Random Deck
1	Main deck & cargo lift
2	Control levers
3	Spell-bottle magazine
4	Arcane jet chamber
5	Galley & fore cargo hold
6	Fore bottle battery
7	Aft bottle battery
8	Aft cargo hold
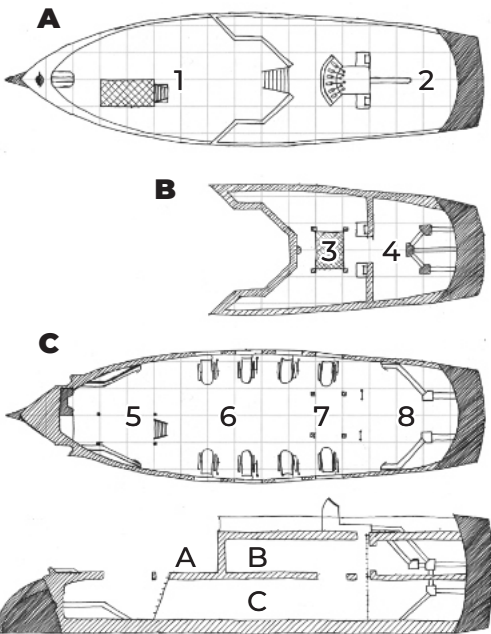
Captain Ibishalak

Young gnome with a demon-face tattooed over her own.

Always willing to negotiate a deal, although she'd rather subjugate your mind.

AC 11, **HP** 13, **ATK** 1 spell +3 **MV** near, **S** -2, **D** +1, **C** -1, **I** +3, **W** +2, **Ch** +3, **AL** C, **LV** 3

Agony (INT Spell). DC 11. Near. Target suffers 1d6 damage. If they take an action on their next turn, they take another 1d6 damage.

Enthrall (INT Spell). DC 13. Focus. Target with INT of less than 3 falls under Ibishalak's control. She decides how they act on their turn. They may also make a DC 18 CHA check to break the enthrall effect. Ends if Ibishalak dies. Permanent after 5 rounds.

Seed the Mind (INT Spell). DC 13. Target's INT drops to 1 for 1d4 rounds.

Bound Minds. If Ibishalak dies, her thralls are freed. They are confused and terrified.

d3	Enthralled Crew Events
1	Mindless Swarming. Deal 2d6 injuries and suffer 1d6 injuries.
2	Throw Stones. Roll an attack at +1 for 1d3 damage against all enemies in the key-fight.
3	Moment of Clarity. Do nothing.
4	One mindless thrall joins the key-fight.

Mindless Thrall

Pirates and scoundrels, scarred, cruel, and selfish.

AC 10, **HP** 9, **ATK** 1 club +3 (1d4) **MV** near, **S** +3, **D** +0, **C** +1, **I** -2, **W** -2, **Ch** -3, **AL** C, **LV** 1

Enthralled. Immune to morale and mind-influencing effects, unless the effect would end Ibishilak's Enthrall effect.

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