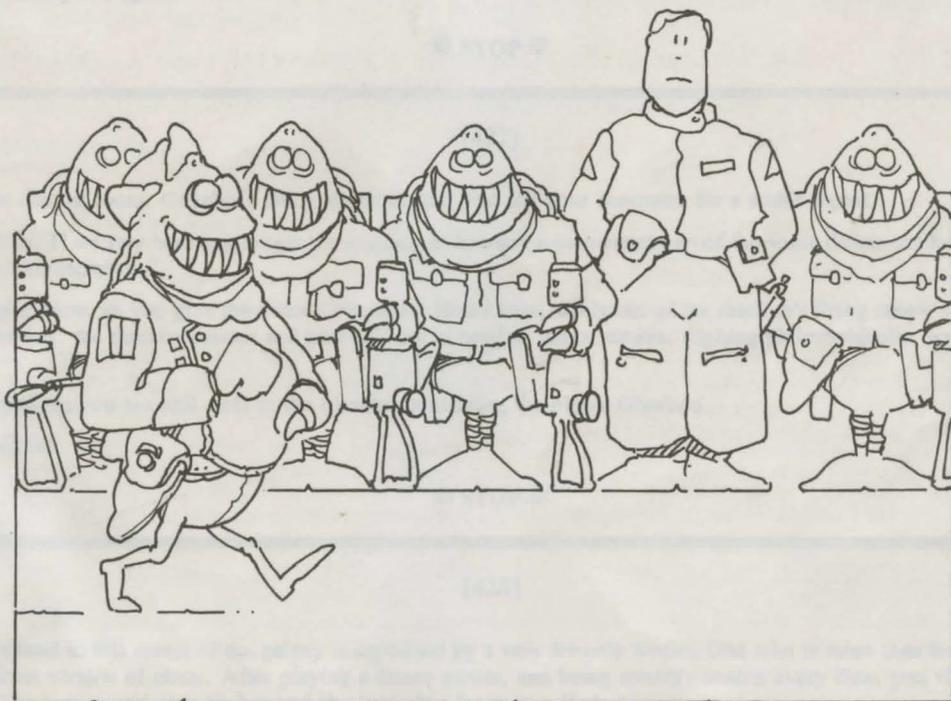


STAR SAGA: TWO™

BOOK G

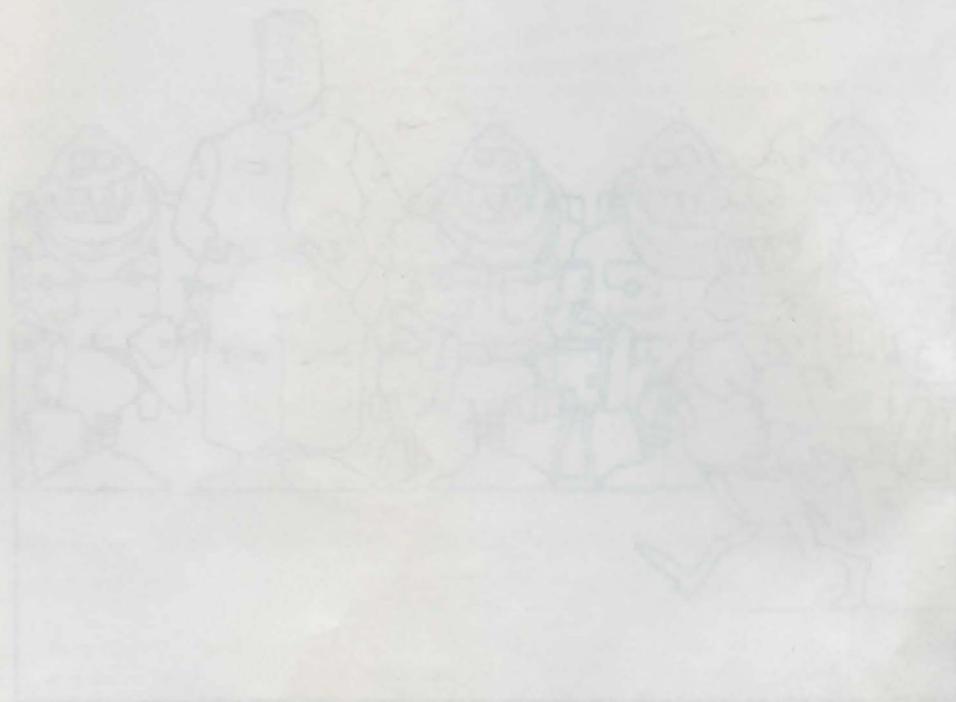
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BOOK G

STAR
SAGA: TWO™

ISBN 150-485



[426]

This Shrine is modelled on a simple and functional plan, obviously intended to get the maximum number of meditation cubicles out of the space available. When you find an empty cubicle, which you have to do yourself, since there are no acolytes here to show you around, it is as sparse and functional as the rest of the interior. There is scarcely room to shove the reclining bench out of the way, and the simple wood floor is rough on your back.

But the service is good. You have scarcely begun to meditate when a shrouded Hadrakian figure becomes visible to your mind's eye.

"I am the God of Time Retreating, the twentieth of those who speak to Humans. Fate has decreed that if you help the Hadrakians in their present dilemma, they will help you in return. If you need a source of Insulicon, you might visit the planet Tayzha. Good luck."

The god is gone as abruptly as he appeared. Musing over his words, you report his name to the Shrine Keeper (as the law requires) and make your way back to the spaceport.

You may select this option again.

✧ STOP ✧

[427]

Smoke fills your control room. Coughing and gasping for air, you ask your computer for a status report.

"It's no good, Boss. If we stay here any longer we're going to become a permanent part of the space debris out here. My recommendation is to evacuate the area immediately."

You couldn't agree more, so you give the evacuation order. Hours later, safely out of the satellite's firing range, you evaluate the damage. The report is disheartening: the thruster reactor and port hull are in need of major repairs. Sighing philosophically, you begin the arduous task ahead of you.

You could not land, so you are still aloft in the trisector containing the planet Ghorbon.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[428]

The Hadrakian vessel in this sector of the galaxy is captained by a very friendly Settled One who is more than happy to teach you to play Thrakkah, the Hadrakian version of chess. After playing a dozen games, and being soundly beaten every time, you slowly begin to develop a sense for the game. The next round, you tie her and she bares her fangs in a Hadrakian smile.

"Well done, Human. I find you to be an interesting opponent. Would you care to play another game?" Unfortunately you have other matters to attend to, so you are forced to beg off.

"Maybe another time," you tell her.

"Then travel safely and trade well," she says in the manner of one trader to another. You feel honored that she considers you to be her equal in this area. Apparently you really impressed her during the game. As if reading your mind, the Settled One speaks again.

"Thrakkah is designed to see into an opponent's mind and soul. I have seen that you are a person of not only good intellect, but of great intuition. This combination is always the sign of a real trader, even if you are not Hadrakian. Before we part, I will tell you that, should you

be interested in finding a good source of Primordial Soup, go to the planet Dardahl." She cuts her viewscreen off, leaving you to think about what she said.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[429]

"Hey Boss, weren't you planning to get lots of Flame Jewels for the Space Navy? I thought that was the whole point of going to Wythym."

"Mind your own business, bit-bucket. I've got my plans." Your plans seem to have included an accidental omission on Wythym, but you'll be damned if you're going to tell your computer that.

You resolve to pursue the Flame Jewel option on Wythym as soon as possible.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[430]

It isn't easy, but you finally manage to find the politician called Kyssander who, you are told, will help you arrange a group meeting with the citizens of Cloo. Your basic idea is to broach the topic of the advancing Clathran Survey Line and try to enlist the Bluvians' help in fighting the Clathrans. From what you have seen and heard while in the city, these Bluvians do not think too highly of the Clathran lizard-men and may be willing to help you. Perhaps the huge spaceship parked behind the abandoned Clathran headquarters can be put to good use.

The way the meetings work is that, each week, several people decide to give a talk or try to enlist others in some cause. Most of the Bluvians attend because the evening is so much fun. The meetings tend to be very disorganized; the speakers unlucky enough not to be able to speak well in public are often laughed off the stage. It sounds cruel, but the former victims rejoin the audience and have fun teasing the next speaker. You are third in line to give a talk and are very nervous.

The first two speakers each want to set up different governing systems. The first is asking for followers to a benevolent dictatorship she wants to establish, in which her people will receive ice cream and cake once a day for being her citizens. She gets several takers and you are tempted to join for a day or so, especially if she has Rocky Road ice cream. The second speaker wants to have a government which bans movies and books. He is laughed off the stage. It is now your turn, so you climb the four stairs to the stage.

You find yourself looking out into a sea of horribly ugly aliens. They are quiet for the first few minutes of any speech but will soon start shouting and stomping their feet if you are not able to hold their interest. These aliens are extremely intelligent and require that you know what you are talking about for them to take you seriously.

"Greetings fellow beings," you begin, and suddenly all of your nervousness fades away. Your special diplomatic ability surges to life, and you become the most charismatic orator your audience has ever heard. You do not speak long, just twenty minutes or so, but during that time you manage to convey all of your anger and indignation over what the Clathrans are trying to do to the Bluvians, humans, and every other spacefaring race in the galaxy. You talk about how wrong slavery and war are. You stir their yellow blood with your description of the fearless freedom fighters that will all pull together to defeat the menace facing you all. When you are done, you have the entire hall on its feet clapping and cheering. You bow and step off the stage.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[431]

The subspace signal you've been dreading comes at last from Para-Para.

"This is the Institute for Space Exploration calling Captain M. J. Turner."

You sigh. Maybe they're calling to tell you the war is over. "Turner here."

"Report, please."

You send your ship's log, from the point you last contacted them. There is a pause, then a new voice comes on the radio.

"Turner, this is Admiral Wilkins. Am I to understand that you have not yet crossed the Survey?"

"You're to understand I'm still alive, yes."

"Your difficulties mean little to me, Captain Turner. What I need is hard data on the plans and policies of the Clathrans, and I'm not getting it. You have a mission, and a duty to complete it. Do you understand me?"

You understand that Wilkins is your friend for exactly as long as you produce for him. "Yes sir!"

"Then get with it, Turner. The Home Worlds are depending on you!"

You break the connection.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[432]

Mentally, you have recovered from your surprise teleportation to the other side of the galaxy. You still feel a little dizzy, but that's it. You take your bearings and see that the planet Unaria, which you are now orbiting, is remarkably similar to Dosia. The spaceport is very busy, with a wide variety of spaceships coming and going. Orbiting the planet is another little moon with a black pit.

This time you decide to explore the planet and leave the moon be. You follow the landing beacon down with no difficulty and soon find yourself on the ground. It's nice to be on the ground now and then. You step out of your ship and pound the concrete landing pad with your fist to make sure it's really solid.

Heading over to the space terminal, you see a happy-looking alien waiting for you. Maybe you shouldn't attribute human emotions to this alien creature, but maybe you'd be happy too if you looked like she does: a plump, perky quivering ball of baggy purple skin with two big round sparkly eyes, four squat energetic tentacles to stand on, and a bright pink baseball cap set smartly on top of her smiling head. If you were this creature, you'd probably hop around whistling all day too.

"Hello?" you say.

The Unarian is distracted from its whistling and sees that you need assistance. "Well hello! Are you new here?" it asks cheerfully.

"Yes. Can you give me an introduction to your planet?"

"I'd be delighted! Welcome to Unaria, planet of the right-thinking Unarians, rulers of the Stargate and defeaters of the evil Dosians. We have many important activities for our visiting guests," the alien chirps melodiously. "We have several trading opportunities with both commodities and cargo drones. We have a lecture about the history of the Stargate and our long and god-fearing fight against the deplorable Dosian race. Also, for your convenience, should you wish to use our Stargate, you may purchase a Stargate Key for one unit each of Crystals, Medicine and Super Slip. I can't think of anything else right now, but please ask me any questions you might have."

"The Stargate? Is that the black pit that sent me clear across the galaxy?"

Continued 

“Yes. You have come from Dosia, then. My sympathies. You understand, then, why we must wipe out those evil beings. They’re so *depressed*. You must be relieved to be with us now.” The upbeat monologue ends and the happy-looking alien leaves you standing there to decide what action you wish to take next. You now have the following options:

⟨BZW2TH⟩ (3 phases) Go to the commodities market and see what they have to trade.

⟨GZ42QH⟩ (5 phases) Try to acquire a cargo drone.

⟨BUW7T8⟩ (5 phases) Attend the lecture about the history of the Stargate.

⟨GU47Q8⟩ (3 phases) Purchase a Stargate Key.

⟨CZF2LH⟩ (7 phases) Fly your ship into the Stargate.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[433]

You continue attacking your opponent, hoping to disable him completely. Unfortunately, he is a lot stronger than you are. Before you know it, he has recovered and knocked *you* down. Soon you are seriously injured. Meanwhile, your ally has defeated the other opponent. You bleed in the mud as you watch the remaining two combatants go at it. Because of the wound you inflicted on your opponent, your ally has the advantage and eventually wins. You pass out.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[434]

Your surprise attack is a very clever move. It catches the Clathran captain off guard and gives you a substantial tactical advantage in the combat. You wouldn’t normally have a chance against the huge dreadnought, but the element of surprise tilts the odds in your favor.

Unfortunately, you are unable to pierce the dreadnought’s heavy armor. Your attacking weaponry is just too weak. It is a small consolation that the dreadnought is unable to get past your defenses either. It simply holds you at bay until two more Clathran dreadnoughts arrive. Too bad — if you’d had better attacking weaponry and you might have disabled your enemy and gotten away.

The three enemy ships together easily incapacitate your ship and take you prisoner.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[435]

To see Brother Libra, the Dual Space expert, you make your way to a small room in the third basement of the temple. The stones that form the walls of the corridors are cold to the touch, so you try to avoid brushing against them as you pass. When you get to the room, you see that it is made out of thick stone blocks. It has no furniture, scientific instruments, computers, or even any books; it is empty. The damp air hangs oppressively over your head.

Enveloped by the room's pervading sense of gloom, you nearly jump out of your skin when you hear a loud cackling coming from immediately behind you. Turning, you see a woman with long dark hair, dressed in Brotherhood robes, giggling to herself. Brother Libra?

"What is so amusing?" you ask.

"The world is crashing down around our ears and it makes the sound of a child's toy tinkling. Tinkle, tinkle; hee hee." Her rantings sound like those of a person going insane because of the rising Dual Space level.

"The High Council said you could tell me something about Dual Space," you say, trying to get through to her.

"The core of the galaxy is erupting in a volcano of grief and sorrow. The gods are crying, and we must suffer the consequences." Now she starts sobbing uncontrollably. If she is a member of the High Council, you can understand why her chair was empty.

Before you can ask her any more, she turns and flees. You return to the temple above you, troubled by the woman's words.

✂ STOP ✂

[436]

"Er, Boss?"

You hate when the computer starts a conversation this way. It never bodes well. "Yes?" you answer.

"Do you remember that I mentioned a possibility of danger to health from being on the planet too long?"

Closing your eyes, you try to pretend you do not know what the computer is about to say. "Yes? What about it?"

"Well, I have just run a routine scan on you and have discovered that your health has been somewhat impaired by your proximity to the colored energy bolts."

"How much is somewhat?" you venture to ask.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[437]

You have realized that there is more to be learned on Golgotha than you thought. Now you are on your way back, to see what other mysteries or answers might be folded within the planet's many realities.

"Boss," says your computer. "There's something about Golgotha that I don't understand."

"There's a lot about it that I don't understand," you reply. "What's your question?"

"To put it simply, Boss, there doesn't seem to be any reason at all why you or any other human should be able to survive there."

"What? Why not?"

"I depend on the consistency of physical and logical rules in order to function. By all rights, so should you. The space around Golgotha violates those rules. When we're there, I go into a mode equivalent to system shutdown. But you tell me that you can deal with it."

"You're a computer. I don't mean to sound bigoted or anything, but that does make a difference."

"Obviously, Boss. But I have no fact or theory available to explain just what that difference is. I wonder if it might have less to do with my being a computer, and more to do with your being a human."

You ask the computer to explain what it means, but you have entered the zone of the Dual Space anomaly and the machine has protectively shut itself down. You concentrate on Golgotha. You know from experience that landing will be tricky. The planet occupies a strange region of multiple shifting realities, and you must concentrate not only on the orbital mechanics of your descent, but on keeping the planet's position and characteristics firmly in mind. Otherwise the planet will shift randomly in space and time, making it impossible to reach.

When you've landed, you take a look around. Your landing site looks very much like your previous one. The probability of it being the same place is remote — but what do probabilities or appearances mean on Golgotha? Here, the past and the future seem more real than the present.

Your options are the same as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[438]

"Three against one," you chortle to yourself. You like these kind of odds. You only hope the enemy proves to be worthy of the effort.

"Use standard attack procedure," you instruct your computer. "I want to see what they are made of."

"Apparently they are made of sugar candy," your computer wryly observes as two of the three vessels crumple immediately under your initial attack. You are equally pleased to see the third ship flee from you before you can even order a second round of fire. Good.

You consider trying to board one or both of the damaged Zyran ships but you see that they have pulled together to a very good defensive posture. While they may have been easy to defend against, they will not be pushovers when it comes to being captured. After evaluating the situation, you decide the potential damage to your ship versus the possible reward of cargo is not great enough to risk your ship. Reluctantly, you give the order to pull away, leaving your former foes floating in space.

This adventure took some time, so you lose the rest of your plotted phases for this turn. You may resume your movement next turn.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[439]

You complete the dialogue and Brother Mathus asks if you have finished your Geas to explore the planet Golgotha. You tell her that you have not. She encourages you to keep trying.

"I know it is a difficult task," she says, "Few have completed it. However it can be done, I assure you. Though Golgotha may be far away, you should not give up. There is nothing more we can teach you until you fulfill the Geas."

With that, she walks out of the temple and leaves you alone.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[440]

You decide to take Groka up on her suggestion to visit the Wesmlot, Runkh, to learn more about the Chameleon ability. As you make your way to his home, you still do not see any of the natives in the city. But you do see a few "Hadrakians" who act a little odd. You are sure at least some of these are really Wesmlots using this weird ability of theirs to disguise themselves and blend into the background. You find this behavior odd, but can understand that the natives do not wish to be hassled by visitors about the state of their homeworld.

Finally arriving at your destination, you knock on the door. When it opens, you are shocked to see a large scaly Clathran soldier standing in front of you. Reacting quickly, you pull out your weapon and prepare to defend yourself.

"OOOH, wait! Don't shoot!" the large reptilian being whines at you. "I thought you were one of the patrols that comes around and harasses us." The soldier image wavers and is replaced by a weasel-faced humanoid who beckons you inside. Apologizing profusely, your host dumps a stack of litter from a chair and motions for you to be seated. Trying to avoid a still-wet stain of something on the cushion, you gingerly sit on the edge of the seat and introduce yourself.

"Oh, yes. Groka said you might come by. I am Runkh, mayor of Innermost. That probably sounds like a big job, but you have to keep in mind there are only about a thousand of us left and we all live right here in this city. Groka said you were one of the few visitors who are not rude and critical of the state of Innermost. We find this most refreshing. If you would like, I can tell you a bit more about us." You tell him you are interested and you learn the following.

Tens of thousands of years ago, the Wesmlots had a civilization on the brink of their Industrial Revolution. Unlike humanity at this point in history, they realized that the next step in cultural development would involve massive and probably very destructive changes to their environment. A planet-wide meeting was held where all of the pros and cons to such changes were brought up and discussed. By the end of the meeting, all were agreed that progress was the most important thing and the ecological balance of their world was of no consequence when compared to the massive benefits new industry would bring them in their day-to-day living. From this moment on, every choice made was for technological progress, no matter what the cost.

When resources began to show signs of depletion, the Wesmlots looked to space for new frontiers. Unfortunately there were no planets or asteroids near enough to supply them with new sources of material. Eventually they did not even have the material to build new ships to send out into the vastness of space, so they became planet-bound. But still they disregarded the ecological balance of their home. When the air became too foul to breathe, they designed filters to wear to screen out the larger particles. When the water became undrinkable, they designed more filtration devices to make it usable as well as advancing the field of medical care to the point where they could at least keep at bay most of the horrible diseases their filth was generating each year. Eventually, disease began to get the best of them and the population began diminishing. The remaining Wesmlots all gathered in one city, where the Hadrakians found them.

Being a trading race, the tigorillas were intrigued by the potential for new items to be found on Innermost. The most lucrative commodity was in the advanced field of Medicine. Until the Clathran occupation, this was the major export of the Hadrakians. In return, the natives received food and water as well as any other material they needed for the little industry that remained after the essential fall of their civilization. This was a great deal for both sides until the Clathrans came and closed the planet down. Runkh believes the soldiers would have been a

little easier on the people of Innermost if they had allowed themselves to be subjugated without a fight. Both the Hadrakians and the Wesmlots refused to take this easy way out, and are now paying for their resistance with a total Clathran blockade.

“But what about this disguise ability?” you ask.

“Oh, you mean Chameleon. This is a holdover from our earliest ancestors. We think it evolved to allow them the opportunity to observe and commune with nature. Our earliest relatives were a nature-loving lot who were not interested in any scientific advances unless they would not do any damage to the environment. That is why it took them as long to reach the point where the Industrial Revolution was possible as it took us to build our first continent-sized factory. They were getting nowhere because they used all of their time and energy trying to keep the planet in a pristine state. This is an impossible task if your civilization wants to progress and grow.”

“The ability allowed them the opportunity to study wildlife in its natural habitat, a totally useless benefit if you ask me. Anyway, we still have it and use it when trying to avoid unpleasant encounters with other beings like the Clathrans.”

You explain that you are very interested in seeing the ability in action, so for the next few hours, Runnkh complies and shifts from one shape to another. All the while, he is telling you what he is doing mentally to make this happen. By concentrating on his every action and word, you soon feel like you know what needs to be done to produce this effect. Taking a deep breath, you try to project your own shape as a weasel-faced Wesmlot. Sweat pours from your brow with the massive amount of effort you put into this act, but the gasp of surprise you hear from Runnkh is more than satisfying.

“This is wonderful!” he exclaims. “You look just like one of us.”

You step over to a mirror and are shocked by the horrible visage that greets you. Yes, you really do look like a Wesmlot. A terrible thought occurs to you — what if you can’t change back? Fear gives you the added strength you need to concentrate and reappear as your old beautiful self. You ignore the “uugh” sound that escapes Runnkh’s lips as you return to normal. You thank your new friend and take your leave.

Go now to the CGM.

✠ STOP ✠

[441]

Pharoan’s Photon Funhouse is actually an entire spaceport unto itself. It is located near the planet’s equator, and occupies a large tract of prime land between three of Hadrak’s busiest cities. Much of the shipyard is now taken up with repairs, service, and new construction for the war, but the part of the yard devoted to private contracts is still impressively vast.

Despite its size, Pharoan’s is not without its personal touch. You are greeted at the spaceyard’s main gate by a Hadrakian Settled One wearing an eye-taxing combination of purple and green that probably passes for conservative dress under local standards. Your experienced eye immediately identifies her as a salesbeing.

“Greetings, fellow citizen,” she booms. “Welcome to Pharoan’s Photon Funhouse. We’re a little busy now, what with the war and all, but I’m sure we’ve got what you’re looking for. Let me show you around.”

You are happy to follow her around and look at what the spaceport has to offer. Anything to avoid looking at her.

She takes you to a pink-tinted area called “private protection,” where you can have new weapons added to your ship for a fee. She does not have to work very hard to hold your attention. From what you can tell, the weapons available here are powerful — a good deal more powerful than anything you came across in the Galactic Fringe, in fact. It comes as no surprise when your guide tells you that “quality private protection doesn’t come cheap, but in these troubled times, it’s worth it.” You haggle with her for a while, and settle on the following prices:

Charm Armor — 1 Synthetic Genius + 1 Warp Core
 Quark Crusher — 1 Crystals + 1 Munitions + 1 Phase Steel
 Muon Glue — 2 Radioactives + 1 Culture

You can register your order with Pharoan’s computer system at your leisure.

"In addition," your saleswoman continues, "Pharoan's offers competitive rates for repair and overhaul. If you would like to have your ship repaired completely, just take it to the phosphorescent blue-colored repair yard. The cost to you is only one unit of any commodity, your choice, and we guarantee that the work will be done in three days, or your money back. You won't get a better deal anywhere else."

"That's some guarantee," you remark. "You're telling me you can fix my ship in just three days no matter how badly it's damaged? How do you do it?"

"I'd like to answer your question, but I'm just a saleswoman, not an engineer. I'm sorry. Maybe if you ask at the repair yard, they could tell you."

I might just do that, you think to yourself. You now have the following option:

(PWSTZG) (3 phases) Check your ship into Pharoan's Phosphorescent Repair Yard. This will cost you one unit of any commodity, your choice.

Go now to the CGM. You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[442]

As you approach Storage Station Four, you are again greeted by a faceless, inanimate welcoming voice.

"Welcome to the orbital region of Storage Station Four. Docking facilities are available for vessels of mass less than 125 metric tons. . ."

You're not sure that you're ready to put up with the whole piece of petty pedantry again. So you turn off the radio receiver.

"Computer, I'm going to take a little nap while we approach the station. Please wake me when docking is complete."

"OK, Boss. Just be sure that your seat back and tray table are in their full upright and locked position."

You vow to find out someday where your computer gets some of its ideas. Meanwhile, you rest contentedly, and in too little time, you arrive at the station.

You have the same options as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[443]

Ah! The smell of blood, the warmth of sand beneath your feet. The Arena makes you feel glad to be alive, and anxious to stay that way.

Your opponent steps onto the sand at the same moment that you do, and you see that it is an older Hadrakian, a Settled One. From what you have seen in the Enclave, they are slightly slower and weaker than their male counterparts, but far more vicious and cunning.

The Hadrakian springs while you are still thinking. You duck away in time, thanks to your enhanced agility, but then discover that the Hadrakian was not trying to claw you. She twists as she lunges past, and her whip-like tail lashes you across the eyes. She turns to press her momentary advantage, and you stumble back. . .

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[444]

You return to the steamy tropical world of Franclair, with its thick overgrown jungles and wide shallow seas. Here, you know, the Hadrakians have a thriving colony despite the interference of the native Francloons. But it isn't easy. The Francloons are constantly playing pranks on the Hadrakians, making for an uneasy cohabitation between the two races, to say the least.

As you draw closer to the planet, you suddenly realize that all of the ships coming and going from the surface are Clathran, not Hadrakian. Simultaneously, you notice the three monitoring stations in orbit, and your threat detection radar begins to make ominous noises.

"Evasive maneuvers!" you command. Images of being captured and tortured by the green-scaled lizardoids go through your mind.

"The Clathrans have conquered Franclair," your computer reports. "They have blockaded the planet and established a large occupying force down below. There are indications that a brief battle between the Hadrakians and the Clathrans took place here fairly recently. However, the Clathrans now seem to have the situation well in hand. The three orbiting monitoring stations and a fleet of destroyers ensures that only Clathran vessels are allowed to come and go."

"Is there any chance of us getting down to the surface without being detected?"

"Yes, it's possible. But there's no guarantee, of course."

You feel very fortunate that your ship is well enough equipped as to make dodging Clathran technology feasible. Treading carefully, you start to pick your way around the Clathran monitors and destroyers. It takes all of the skills and techniques that got you across the Survey to get you safely down to the surface.

Since the main Hadrakian city is crawling with soldiers, you land instead in a small village some distance away. Soon after you touch down, a team of Hadrakian Homeless Ones helps you hide your ship. A Settled One greets you, surprised by your presence. She introduces herself as the mayor of the village.

"Are not the Clathrans guarding the space ways around our planet?" she asks incredulously. You modestly admit that they are, but you were lucky enough to evade them. She is impressed by your capabilities and congratulates you on the good work you are doing.

You have the same options as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[445]

You return to the small wooden shack where The Battle, Inc. has its small office here. The building now has a fresh coat of white paint, and the sign overhead reads, "Pсорus Paint Co., Office Hours 900-1700 Every Day." You are not fooled by the sign; The Battle would hardly advertise itself publicly with the Clathrans watching over the planet. As before, the door to the building is unlocked and there is no guard, so you walk right in.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[446]

Innermost is very much as it was on your last visit. Twin Clathran Monitors still circle the planet, space debris still makes navigation difficult (and hiding from the Monitors possible), and the Hadrakian spaceport is still hidden in a scrapyard.

You land your ship, not without a few nervous moments as the Monitors and spy satellites scan you and miss, and then watch as the Hadrakians bury your vessel under a pile of metal garbage. You know that they will soon tunnel out an access path to your cargo bays once they are satisfied that the Monitors have been fooled, but you wince as the heap of trash covers your beautiful ship.

You have the same options as before.

⊗ STOP ⊗

[447]

You contact Para-Para as soon as you leave Morikor. In moments, you are talking with Admiral Wilkins. You tell him everything, then wait for his congratulations.

“You idiot! You moron! You useless excuse for a third rate spacer! ”

“What did I do?”

“You skipped the War Room! What do you think we want to know, anyway? Did you think we were at peace? You blundering fool! You worthless. . . ”

You turn off the subspace radio, before it overloads. It seems you will have to return to Morikor.

⊗ STOP ⊗

[448]

“It’s possible that we might be safer to wait on the planet,” says the computer. “Consider the stresses that this ship endures in flight. Compared to that, the force required to break up rock is rather small.”

“You mean we could stay here while they destroy the planet?”

“Possibly. It’s at least as likely as our chances of getting away if we run for it. This is an old planet with a cold core. That makes it as brittle as glass compared with liquid-core and gas-core planets. With our shields, we’re a lot tougher than rock or iron. I think, however, that we should relocate to one of the oceans. I don’t want vaporized rock to start condensing on the hull.”

“Aren’t the oceans going to boil away?”

“Not for a long time. The Clathran beams are very concentrated. They’re intended to penetrate the inside of the planet. They’re not just blasting away at the surface, because that wouldn’t do any good. They’ll probably try to fracture the planet’s core, then shatter it with some sort of detonation.”

You always feel strange taking the ship under water. It seems like you’re going to damage something. But you’ve landed in gaseous atmospheres that were denser and more corrosive than water, and of course your ship can take it. Your phase steel hull isn’t likely to rust. You find a deep ocean trench to wait in, and draw your ship shields tight around your hull.

You wait for a surprisingly long time. The Clathrans continue their beam bombardment for two days, causing frequent tremors and a steadily rising water temperature, but no more obvious effects. Then, there is an ominous lull.

Continued 

THOOM! A dull heavy thud reverberates across the ocean. You wait.

THOOM! THOOM! More hammer blows come from a greater distance. "Penetration bombs," suggests your computer. "Dropped from orbit like self-burying meteors. Once they're all in place, the Clathrans will detonate them."

"You mean those weren't bombs exploding?"

"No, we're only hearing them being put in place." Over the next hour you feel dozens more tremors. Twenty of them, says the computer, were direct blows, and the rest were seismic echoes.

There is another, even more ominous lull. "That's it," you decide. "Twenty bombs, just right for an icosahedral dispersion. Better put the shields at maximum."

But for some reason the blast doesn't come right away. It is not until a half hour has passed, and you are about to suggest surfacing to see if the Clathrans may have left, that the sea vaporizes around you in an eerie and violent cataclysm. Suddenly you are surrounded by broken rock and chaotically moving gas as destructive sonic shock waves sweep through the planet's mass. The tiny fraction of this energy that penetrates your shields deafens you and vibrates the ship to its framing members. There is no burst of heat or light; just a sudden onslaught of mechanical force that attacks and overcomes the gravitational force binding the planet together. In a great spherical wave, the shocks from the underground detonations converge in Outpost's core, reinforce and cross one another, and race outward again, grinding rock from rock as they pass. It is a strangely slow process, not at all like the instantaneous vaporization of matter in the fires of a nuclear blast or at the focal point of a laser beam. It takes time for the crazed and stressed stone to fracture into powder, time for the debris blasting outward from the surface to sweep the atmosphere away, time for the seas to disassemble into a quadrillion individual struggling droplets that begin to boil away into gas. It takes entire seconds for these things to happen: the longest seconds of your life. Like just another piece of the planet, your ship is tossed and battered in the cloud of rock and dust that spreads across space like an avalanche falling in all directions at once.

By the time you gain some measure of control over your ship, Outpost is no longer a planet. It is a growing cloud of diffusing gas and tumbling stone fragments, and whether it will one day coalesce into a new planet, or spread across its former orbital path as an asteroid belt, is up to the forces of time and tide to dictate.

Your ship is badly damaged, but you know it can be repaired. The Clathran ships are already far away; they must have left soon after the bombs were in place. But the planet is gone, and with it. . .

"Hey Boss, cheer up. We made it. We've lived through the end of the world. Or a world, anyway."

You are now aloft in the trisector that used to contain the planet Outpost.

Go now to the CGM.

✘ STOP ✘

[449]

Because of their size and strength, the Clathrans as a race have always been respected and feared by the beings who encounter them. You are no exception.

After the first grueling minutes of battle, you find yourself wounded and exhausted. Fortunately you seem to have given as good as you got in the fight. The scaly brute is bleeding (if you call that green gook blood) in several places, but he still appears as fresh as when you started the battle. You begin to think about spending the remainder of your days in a Clathran prison camp.

Suddenly you are startled by a brilliant flash of light. Momentarily blinded, you crouch in a defensive stance and try to use all of your other senses to deduce what is happening. Seconds later, your eyesight returns and you see. . . the elderly Sirissian standing before you, with the Clathran soldier nowhere to be found.

"Thank you for your able assistance, Human. I was able to make use of the distraction you caused and pull out my personal atomizer. That is one soldier who won't try to bully others just to get his own way again."

"Is he . . . ?" you begin to ask, but stop as she nods her sensory stalks in an affirmative manner. "Won't there be trouble when he is found to be missing from the garrison?" you ask, now concerned about possible reprisals against the innocent-looking Sirissians.

"No, the Clathrans know better than to make an issue over the disappearance of one soldier. We will be all right." She stops, noticing your golden triangle badge. "I see you are already familiar with our own form of resistance. Your actions tonight have proven that you are far above the 1st level rank you now wear. I too am a member of the Underground. I will explain your actions this evening and tell them that I have promoted you to the second level. Here, take this."

Reaching down into a carry pouch she is wearing around her neck, she pulls out one of the golden triangles, much like the one you currently wear. She explains that she is a high-ranking administrator who has the power to make such promotions in the "field." You accept the second triangle and proudly wear it along side your first. She tells you that this additional triangle will give you increased status in the rebel city.

Returning to your ship, you wonder what the increased status will mean. You decide the only way to find out is to return to the rebel city. This could prove to be very interesting. You will have a new option when you are next on Sirissi:

⟨TXGN4Y⟩ (7 phases) Return to the rebel city, this time wearing two triangles.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[450]

You return to the huge Brotherhood temple underneath the Haunted House. The sacred chamber brings back memories of all the training you have completed along the Path of Righteousness and the Path of Intuition. The ordeals of patience and knowledge, the Geases to Unaria, Hadrak, and Golgotha, the teachings of Kothan, Darthan, Diplomacy, Illusion, and The Ghost — you remember them all as if they happened yesterday. But there is nothing more for you to do here. If you wish to continue your training, you must go onward, to the Paracore.

You light one and only one candle at the altar, and leave.

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[451]

You are not surprised to see that the tropical world Franclair is still occupied by the Clathrans. The spaceport is a Clathran military installation, soldiers are crawling all over the city, and a fleet of destroyers in orbit allows only Clathran ships to pass. Fortunately, your ship is so equipped as to allow *you* to pass despite the lizardoids' intentions. You land in the same small Hadrakian village as last time, keeping an eye out for troublesome Francloons as a team of Homeless Ones helps you hide your ship.

You have the same options as before.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[452]

A voice on the subspace radio: "Testing, one, two, three. . . Damn, is that power supply flaking out again? Help me with these cables over here."

"I'm receiving your broadcast very well," you respond. "Who's transmitting?"

"Damn surplus equipment. Hello? Hello? Do I have a signal going out?"

"Loud and clear. Please identify yourself."

"This is Marc Tremont broadcasting to all Tekkies on the Nine Worlds — excuse me, on the Home Worlds. I didn't know any of the rest of you had transmitters. Who's receiving me?"

"The Galactic Arm," you reply.

"No, seriously. Is this someone in the Feedback Labs?"

"No, this isn't the Feedback Labs, whatever those are. This is a tri-axis exploration vessel in the Galactic Arm. Are you sending from the Para-Para research station?"

"I don't believe it. This rig can't possibly be sending to the Arm. It's just something we put together out of spare parts so we could talk to the Tekkies on other worlds while we're stuck on Para-Para." From what you've heard of the Tekkies, you figure the spare parts he's referring to probably belong to someone else. In the background you hear another voice ask, "Does this mean we're in trouble?"

"Look, I don't care if you're Radio Free Transylvania. Can you download some data and send it along to the Institute for Space Exploration research people?"

"No problem. Just let me get a core unit into the loop — damn, what's the polarity on these number 2886's? Oh well, I've got a fifty-fifty chance of getting it right. How's that? You still there?"

"Still here. Ready to receive?"

"Go ahead."

You instruct your computer to send your ship's computer log, which contains sensor and instrument readings from your whole voyage, eliminating only sensitive data that you wouldn't want the Clathrans intercepting. After all, you don't know who else might be receiving this transmission. This takes a few minutes.

"That's all of it," you report at last. "Send that to the groups interested in navigation, propulsion, and weaponry. They might be able to extract some useful information out of it."

"Sure."

"So who are you guys? And why don't you just use the main subspace transmitter?"

"Too much red tape," they answer. "We decided to build our own, here in — uh — here in the Computer Science Department Rec Room."

"How are things in the Nine Worlds?"

"Could be better. Our last project was an analysis of the cases of mental disorder in the past few months throughout the Nine Worlds. We figured out that it couldn't possibly be an infectious disease causing it. The patterns of spread are all wrong. The only correlate is population. The densest population centers are affected first, regardless of how much they're isolated or interconnected with other populations. That pattern doesn't fit with an environmental toxin either. It would have had to appear in every city simultaneously but not in any isolated communities."

"What possibilities does that leave?" you ask.

"Not very many. Mostly there's a lot of wild theories. For example, did you know all those cases of psychic powers like telekinesis and remote viewing follow the same pattern as the mental disorders? Uh, by the way. . . this is all supposed to be top secret, okay?"

"Hey," interrupts the voice in the background. "How much power is this rig supposed to be drawing?"

"Beats me," says Marc. "Check the gauges."

"That's what I was doing. If these readings are right, we could be burning out every. . ."

The subspace link goes dead.

✧ STOP ✧

[453]

The lush green world of Rothane spins peacefully below you. The only thing marring its natural beauty is the ugly quarter of the surface where the land is scorched and burned. It is in the center of this barren desert that the Hadrakians have chosen to build a successful colony.

You instruct your computer to land at the Hadrakian spaceport. You have the same options as before.

✧ STOP ✧

[454]

The purple Unarian at the tourist lecture hall is very happy to see you coming. You get the distinct impression that she does not get a lot of business and is therefore looking forward to giving you her undivided attention.

"No one cares about history anymore," she complains, but in a cheerful fashion. "They are just interested in zipping through the Stargate as fast as they can. I'm glad *somebody* wants to learn about what is happening in the galaxy!"

The lecture is actually a 3-D movie. Settling back in the comfortable viewing chair, you watch the history of the Unarian people unfold before your eyes.

In the distant past, Unaria and Dosia were actually a single planet populated by a single race. This race was fairly advanced, technologically speaking, compared to other races in the vicinity at the time. They eventually began to explore space and colonize planets by using a highly developed warp ship drive, which you recognize to be a form of tri-axis drive.

About 70,000 years ago, the single race was somehow divided into two races, the Unarians and the Dosians, and placed on two separate planets with the Stargate between them. The Unarians became convinced that the Dosians were actually the evil side of the once-unified race and that they themselves, the Unarians, were the good and pure side of the race. Naturally, they decided that their mission in life was to destroy the evil half once and for all. If they could achieve this, the sundered planet would be rejoined and peace would reign. So the war began and has been waged for these many eons.

Since the two peoples have equal resources and capabilities, the end of the long war is not in sight, but the Unarians are convinced that one day they will be victorious. Unfortunately, because of the war, all real technological advances have ground to a halt, as have all space exploration and colonization. No real advances have been made since the war began.

The Stargate has proven to be a boon to many of the alien races wishing to travel from one part of the galaxy to the other. For a fee, one can purchase a Stargate key and travel through, saving much time in travel. Quite a few beings make use of this short-cut, the movie goes on to say. There is one notable exception, though: the dreaded Clathrans have never tried to pass through. No one knows why, but everyone is grateful for this small favor.

The movie ends, and you sit for a moment thinking about the happy-go-lucky Unarians. How they could want to destroy anything? Also, what caused this severing of the race into two sections? There must have been some powerful forces at work to do such a thing.

Continued 

Standing, you thank your host. You ask her if there is someplace where you may learn more about how the Stargate works. She tells you about a scholar named Machum, who has dedicated his life to trying to unravel the mysterious portal's secrets. If you want to, you can speak to him at the University. As you leave, she waves her tentacles at you and asks a favor, "If you run across a Dosian, make sure you are in a motorized vehicle!"

You now have a new option:

{5ZE23H} (4 phases) Try to learn more about the Stargate.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[455]

The Middle Riallans have a political discussion group which meets every week to discuss galactic events. They are already in the midst of their meeting when you join them by sitting quietly on one of the rigid bars and listening to the telepathic thoughts that sweep past you.

"It seems that the Clathrans are proceeding with their conquest of the galaxy and that they intend to subjugate any and all spacefaring races. They say that they're conducting a 'survey,' but that's just their word for war. Their 'survey line' is just another name for a battle line with which they are sweeping the galaxy, defeating or destroying any intelligent race in their way."

"What's more, it looks like they have the military might to do it. Where'd the Clathrans come from, anyway? Six hundred years ago we'd never even heard of them. Then they suddenly appeared out of nowhere, with all this manpower and technology. It doesn't make sense."

"I'm worried about our children in the Fringe, the New Riallans we created to perpetuate our species. What about them? They're an intelligent, spacefaring race with lots of technology, just the kind of race the Clathrans hate. At the current rate, the Survey Line will get to the Fringe in just a few years. What's going to happen when the Clathrans discover our New Riallans? The Clathrans have been known to exterminate whole populations!"

"Well, hopefully the New Riallans will be able to help stop the Clathrans. Let's not forget the human who came to our planet just recently, and gave us that great idea."

"You mean the idea of asking the New Riallans, who live in the Fringe, to send a fighting force to help the Hadrakians in their war against the Clathrans?"

"Exactly. The Hadrakians are the largest group fighting the Clathrans right now. They may not be able to stop the Clathrans by themselves, but if enough other races help out, you never know. There isn't much we can contribute ourselves given our lack of material, but our children, the New Riallans, are very capable with spaceships."

"We're still going to wait until we think there's a chance of victory, though. Aren't we?"

"Yes. It wouldn't do any good for the New Riallans to send their spaceships now. We have to wait until it looks like a little help will give the Hadrakians enough strength to win a decisive battle. Then we'll send a courier to the Fringe to ask the New Riallans for help."

You like the way the conversation has been going, and cannot help thinking an excited "Yeah!" You blush when several Middle Riallans turn in your direction.

"I see we have someone who agrees with our plan of action," one of them thinks. "If I am not mistaken, we have a human visitor among us. Welcome, Human." You give an embarrassed wave as you feel dozens of minds focus on you.

"Thank you," you answer telepathically, "I am honored to be here."

"And we are honored to have you. One of your race recently came to us, and gave us this excellent idea of asking the New Riallans to help fight the Clathrans. We don't want to just wait around while the Clathrans conquer the entire galaxy."

"My feelings exactly," you think back, "We all need to pull together to fight the Clathran menace. I'm delighted to hear that you're planning to contribute."

“Hopefully, it will make a difference. Well, I’m going off to eat. See you later, human.”

One by one the Riallans float away, leaving you alone on the rigid bar. You are satisfied that the Riallans are doing all they can to help the cause, which is all you can ask.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[456]

You ask the Darkwhistler about ship-to-ship weaponry, wondering what sort of response you’ll get. That sort of thing seems beneath them somehow, but they *do* claim to be omniscient. And you can use all the help you can get.

“Tell me about spaceship weaponry, oh mighty Darkwhistler.”

“Really, human, don’t you think that’s beneath me somehow? Never mind, I can see you need all the help you can get. Actually, your ship is pretty well equipped with offensive weaponry already. I couldn’t really suggest anything more without becoming redundant or forcing you to radical changes of design. There is one defensive system I might recommend, though.”

“Yes?”

“It’s called an Interphase Reflector. It’s designed to minimize the effects of dual space-based weapons on your ship. You probably haven’t considered this before, but as the dual space interphase rises, new and different offensive weapons will become possible. The Interphase Reflector is a counter for most of them.”

“Where do I get one?”

“No one makes them any more, human. The interphase level has been very low for thousands of years, and they’ve been unnecessary.”

“Oh.”

“But I can tell you how to make one yourself.”

“Oh!”

The Darkwhistler spends the next hour instructing you and your ship’s computer on how to build and install an Interphase Reflector. You will need the following:

- 1 Probability Membrane
- 1 Gradient Filter
- 1 Crystals
- 1 Fiber
- 1 Phase Steel

When you have all the components and wish to build an Interphase Reflector, plot the following option:

(98VK9D) (3 phases) Build an Interphase Reflector.

Please make a note of this action code; it is an “unlisted” option, so you will need to enter the code manually if you wish to select it.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[457]

Part of the demilitarized zone is a vast area dedicated entirely to medical facilities of all kinds. Wounded soldiers from all four of Worzelle's warring factions come here for treatment. After selecting a facility with the ability to treat alien visitors, you check yourself in for a brief stay. A team of efficient Worzellian doctors descends on you and starts working immediately.

"My, my," one of them comments, "It looks like you've been pretty active on the front lines. Now close your eyes. You won't feel a thing."

"Actually I haven't been very involved with your planetary war," you answer with your eyes shut. When you open your eyes you see tubes, needles, and equipment sticking into you all over the place. You feel comfortable, though.

"Well, whatever you're fighting, take it easy, all right?" pleads another doctor. "Our job is hard enough already. Now take a deep breath."

You inhale a pleasant-smelling gas, keeping your eyes open long enough to see a capsule-shaped lid being lowered over your entire body. You fall asleep. When you wake up, all the doctors, tubes, and needles are gone and you're feeling as good as new. Yahoo!

You wonder just what medical marvel the Worzellian doctors used to heal you so quickly. Not being known for your shyness, you leave your bed and seek out a physician. It obviously doesn't take too long to find one, and you ask about their medical device.

"Oh, that is our Advanced Healing Unit. The units we have here are extremely large, with most of the supporting equipment being located on the lower levels. But we do have the technology available to build a smaller unit, which you may wish to add to your own sick bay equipment on board your ship. Of course, the smaller unit won't perform quite as well as our units here; still, you may find it useful. If you'd like, I can give you the plans to build such a unit."

You are soon the possessor of the blueprints and instructions for building your own Advanced Healing Unit. In order to make one of these devices, you will need the following components:

- 1 Primordial Soup
- 1 Probability Membrane
- 1 Fiber
- 1 Synthetic Genius
- 1 Tools

When you have all the components and want to build the Advanced Healing Unit, plot the following option:

(788KKD) (3 phases) Build an Advanced Healing Unit.

Please make a note of this action code; it is an "unlisted" action, so you will need to enter the code manually when you wish to select it.

Go now to the CGM. You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[458]

The streets on Dardahl are always filled with happy laughing natives. The males play their pipes while the females sing and dance. You are really enjoying your stay here. Just walking from place to place is fun!

You are headed for the Shaman that Winnsa told you about. From the nymph's description, she is a mysterious figure who never allows her face to be seen. You are intrigued by the prospect of meeting someone who allegedly performs real magic.

The Shaman's home is located on the edge of what passes for the city. Dardahlans are so carefree that they build homes in a very disorganized fashion. The result is a loose gathering of homes with a central area for socializing and outer area for growing food. Streets eventually are formed by foot travel wearing down the grass. The street leading to the Shaman's house has been traveled so much that there is actually a wide groove in the dirt made by passing feet.

Surprisingly, the Shaman is alone when you reach her home. She beckons you in while she stirs a bubbling cauldron. You glance at her face to see if the rumors are true. Yes, she is wearing a veil which covers all of her face except her eyes, which are wrinkled with age. Her wings are a dull gray and hang limply on her back.

"Come in, come in," she cackles. You have visions of a play read long ago in school, the title of which escapes you. "What brings such a visitor to my humble abode?"

You introduce yourself and explain that you are very interested in the subject of magic. You tell her that you have heard about her prowess in the mystical arts.

"Poppycock," she laughs. "I am an old woman who knows a bit about herbal lore and such. That's not to say I can't pull off a few tricks that defy explanation, but most of that is behind me now; I am too old. What have you learned about magic? I can see in your eyes that you have learned a lot in your life."

You like the nymph and spend the rest of the time telling her about some of your adventures. You even demonstrate a few of your abilities. She enjoys herself and offers you some soup from the pot she has been stirring.

After you eat, she tells you that she hasn't had such a good time for years. "Not since my mate passed over," she says, her eyes misting at the memory. "Here, let me give you something in return," and she reaches into a bag of goods resting near the pot.

You try to say no to the gift, as you have enjoyed yourself as much as she, but she insists.

"It is not much, but you may get some pleasure or use out of it," and she pulls out a small pouch filled with a bright blue dust. "This is mesmerizing dust. The people here like to use it on themselves to have fun." She blows some of the dust into your face. . .

Instantly you are enthralled with the world around you. Everything seems so much clearer and purer than you remembered. You are content to sit there for the several minutes it takes for the dust to wear off. When you are yourself again, you thank the Shaman for the gift. Then you bid her farewell, for it is getting late.

"Thank you for coming to visit. It is nice to have someone come by who isn't looking for a love potion or something else silly. Take care and be well."

You leave her behind and head back to your ship. When you arrive, you have the dust analyzed.

"Boss, it's a good thing you only had a small dose of this stuff. Any more might have put you into a coma. But analysis indicates that it will come in handy as a personal weapon."

"How do you mean?" you ask.

"Well, if you are attacked or you attack someone, just throw a bit of dust in their face first. The chemicals here will give most organic life forms the same sort of reaction you had. That will either give you time to escape or to attack. Either way, it is a good weapon."

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[459]

From out of the past, a woman's voice speaks:

"This is Vanessa Chang, recording on the *Lockerbait* ship log, Outpost planet surface, November twentieth, Two thousand four hundred ninety-three. All previous log entries have been deleted.

"Our mission to warn the Home Worlds of the Clathrans' intentions and prepare a defense has failed. So, apparently, has the Clathrans' first attempt to exterminate the human species. I will record my limited knowledge of this course of events, in case it may prove useful to those who follow me here.

"It was eighteen years ago that Engineer Miller of my crew discovered the possibility of adding a third axis to the warp field of the Wamirian hyperdrive. This innovation would make it possible to pass across the Density Barrier. The idea was just a theory at the time. To actually build one required a material with unheard-of electronuclear properties. We never thought that such a material might actually exist. Miller tried many experiments to synthesize an adequate crystal. He was never successful.

"Fifteen years ago we found a Flame Jewel in the possession of an alien race. The science officers quickly recognized that Flame Jewels have the necessary properties for a tri-axis drive. In order to obtain one in trade with the aliens, one of us had to volunteer to test an experimental space drive based on an unfamiliar principle called a 'jump engine.' I was opposed to the idea, but Science Officer Sherin Mosswell insisted on being the subject. She wanted to observe the process and perhaps learn the secret of the aliens' new technology. She threatened to resign from the crew and return on her own. I should have called her hand. At the test, the experimental ship never reappeared at the receiving station.

"We kept the tri-axis drive system a secret. With the Flame Jewel we built the first prototype. It worked perfectly. For the next few months we made only short journeys over the barrier. We found nothing interesting until we discovered this world, which we named Outpost. It was a perfect planet for a supply cache for voyages deeper into the galactic Arm, a counterpart to our old cache on Cordethar but on the high side of the barrier. We made three runs to ferry materials and supplies, then built a small station here.

"For the next five years we explored the region of the galaxy beyond the Density Barrier, which we call the 'Arm.' In time we went farther and farther around the Arm toward the galactic core. In the second year we discovered a source of Flame Jewels. Several of these we later passed on to a few other explorers, along with the plans of the tri-axis drive. This was during a period of intense exploration in the years 2483 to 2487. For the most part we continued to keep the drive secret, for several reasons, not all of them justifiable. Whatever our motives for keeping the secret to ourselves, I feel it's very fortunate that we did.

"Five years seven months ago we encountered the Clathrans. From the very moment they detected us they were implacably hostile. Their ship was a war ship, one of the few space vessels we had seen in all our travels that was designed solely for battle. My ship was boarded by force and my crew and myself were taken prisoner. We were interrogated aboard the ship and later taken to a planet, Morikor, for further study.

"Physically, the Clathrans are reptilian or possibly amphibious in nature. Their skin is covered entirely with small green scales. They are humanoid in shape, but larger and more massive than us. Those we saw massed about four hundred kilos, but they may have represented the largest individuals. They breathe air in which a human could survive. They communicate by voice. They use arms and hands to manipulate tools and weapons. These were far from the most 'alien' aliens we'd met on our voyages. We considered them ugly but not repulsive. The Clathrans, for their part, seemed barely able to look at us without profound revulsion. Their treatment of us, and their whole manner of behavior in our presence, indicates disgust, hostility, and — just possibly — a certain measure of fear. Those who dragged us from our stations after they boarded our ship, for example, seemed repulsed by the idea of touching us. They had to be goaded to action by their commanders.

"Many times, when the headaches have become almost unbearable, I've regretted agreeing to the translator implant. But it served us well on Morikor. I was able to understand enough of the Clathrans' conversation to discover their intentions. It didn't take long to realize that they intended to use us as test animals for the purpose of finding a way to destroy our entire species.

"Why? I'm not certain. The Clathrans must know that there are many life forms on many worlds in the galaxy. Why does humanity in particular inspire their wrath?

"I speculate here, but I think the reason is that they don't know about us. When they were experimenting on us, they were continually frustrated because they had no past records to refer to. Think about what that means. It means that they expect to be familiar with every species of intelligent life in the galaxy. The dozens of races we found couldn't possibly be more than a tiny fraction of all of them. Yet the Clathrans expect to be able to identify any alien that comes along! It implies that some time in the past they made a survey of every life-bearing planet in the galaxy and studied all of them. Perhaps they did more than study. Fifty thousand years in the past seems to mark a period of dramatic change in many alien cultures. Perhaps the Clathrans deliberately altered civilizations to their liking. Perhaps they destroyed those they couldn't alter. Fifty thousand years ago our species was just beginning to form what might be called a civilization. Perhaps they passed us over then. Perhaps they didn't expect any new race to be able to reach a spacefaring stage in only five hundred centuries.

"Whatever the reason, it was clear we had endangered our whole race and would have to refuse no sacrifice to prevent endangering it further. Top priority was to prevent the Clathrans from learning the coordinates of the Home Worlds. Computer Scientist Green made one necessary sacrifice when he destroyed our computer records at the cost of his own life. With the computer files erased, only the memory of Navigator Friday still held the secret. When the Clathrans mind-wiped Doctor Dighton and took away Helmsman Silverbeard, we decided that we had to escape or take our own lives. At the time there didn't seem much difference between the two options, since any escape attempt seemed certain to end in our deaths. Friday asked me to kill him to make sure the Clathrans didn't force him to reveal the coordinates, but I refused. We needed his knowledge to have any chance of finding our way home to warn the Home Worlds of the threat.

"Our attack on the guards took the Clathrans by surprise. We had deliberately avoided showing any sort of physical strength during our capture. We tried to make them think we were only capable of wielding weapons. The larger Clathrans never expected a physical attack, or were confident that no such attack could succeed. The five of us remaining — Miller, Donaldson, Cyphus, Friday and myself — made good use of our darthan and kothan training. We disabled two guards, took their hand weapons, and escaped the laboratory. We made for our own ship, only to find it disassembled. For several hours we eluded the Clathran guards as we searched the spaceport complex. We never found where they had taken Silverbeard.

"What we did find was thousands, literally thousands, of ships. We counted almost three hundred of the large battle cruisers and many smaller ones. Most of them didn't look like they were in use; they looked brand new and fully operational but seemed to be in storage. We also saw fifty more cruisers under construction. We hid on a medium-sized warship that was in the process of being outfitted. We stayed hidden while the four-Clathran crew came aboard and piloted her into orbit. Then we killed the crew and took the ship. Five days had passed since our capture. We left behind three friends and heroes: Computer Scientist Andrew Green, Doctor Richard Dighton, and Helmsman John Silverbeard.

"Engineer Miller and Weapons Specialist Cyphus did an excellent job of figuring out how to put the ship into warp, and how to operate the most important systems. Navigator Friday, though wounded in the escape, found a way to get us on course for the Fringe. We couldn't find a subspace radio communications system to get word back to the Home Worlds. Com Officer Donaldson says there was no subspace radio set on the ship. The Clathrans apparently use some other communications system that sends messages in tight beams only to other Clathrans, and this was the last thing we wanted to do.

"Soon after we crossed the Density Barrier, the ship's drives began to fail. They weren't made to operate in the Fringe and we realized there was no backup drive system, not even thrusters. We made a landing on the uninhabited planet Gazan. We still expected Clathran pursuit. We weren't sure if the Clathrans had a way of tracking their own ships. So we left the ship and took off in its shuttlecraft, which did have a thruster drive.

"We knew then that we had failed in our attempt to warn the Home Worlds, for to cross space on thrusters alone takes years. The only way to survive the trip was to use deep hibernation, like the first colonists did in the twenty-third century. The engineers rigged hibernation cells from parts of the life support systems of the stolen cargo ship. We took off, set an approximate course, and went into hibernation. There was still no way to transmit a message. Subspace radio, of course, is only possible when a ship is in hyperspace.

"After three years under thrust we wandered into a star system and nearly crashed on the planet Koursh. Walter Friday, our navigator, died. With his earlier injuries — and injuries get worse under hibernation instead of healing — he couldn't survive the shock of our hard landing. The ship wasn't damaged beyond repair. We took off again. This time we set the hibernation cells to awaken one of us every month, to scan for familiar stars and adjust our course.

"Eighteen hard months later we came to Fiara, the site of a Darscian colony we had once visited. The shuttlecraft was spent. Fortunately, we convinced the Darscians to give us another ship — this one — with a real two-axis hyperdrive. We named it *Lockerbait*, and began modifying it for our use.

"While on Fiara we contacted a human spacer via subspace radio and learned about the Plague. We didn't get much information, but what we got was bad enough. When the *Lockerbait* was ready, we set off for Cordethar, where we kept supplies and parts, including a handful of Flame Jewels.

"On Cordethar we met Reverend Eric DeVries and his crew of religious disciples, aboard the quest ship *Archangel*. They had also just returned from an expedition into the Arm, and though they had not run into any Clathrans, whatever they found had scared them just as much. Working together, we added a tri-axis drive booster to *Lockerbait*, dismantled all the caches on Cordethar, and took the Flame Jewels. Then we sent subspace transmissions on all frequencies asking that all human explorers capable of getting there meet us on Outpost.

"Since the only explorers capable of reaching Outpost were those we had personally given Flame Jewels to, they answered. Among them are myself, Reverend Eric, and our crews; Luther Cristobal, the leader of a large space trading cartel; the Bastion sisters Joy and Monique, founders of half a dozen colonies; Soulsinger, the first to cross space solo; and several representatives of the Brotherhood, who prefer not to reveal their identities. We meet here now to decide what to do next about the Clathran menace.

"The plague that has reduced the Home Worlds to a state of panic and anarchy is beyond doubt the work of the Clathrans. However, it now seems to have peaked. Its lethality is on the decline. This we don't understand. The first reports from the Home Worlds, which we didn't learn about until after leaving Fiara, was that the mortality rate of the first cases was one hundred percent and that the disease's spread was unchecked. Although no cure has been found, the plague now kills less than one in five. The latest reports attributed this to the activation of an immune mechanism in the human system that was previously unknown. Doctor Dighton may have been able to make sense out of that, but none of us can. The important thing is that the species will survive.

"And what then? Several unknowns haunt us.

"First, did the Clathrans somehow find the coordinates of the Home Worlds, despite our efforts? John Silverbeard was our Helmsman. He may have memorized the coordinates, deliberately or inadvertently, during our travels. The Clathrans may have mind-wiped him or forced the secret out of him. Or, the Clathrans may have been able to use the medical data they collected to connect us with information from a previous survey, leading them to Earth.

"But I don't think so. If they knew where we were, they were quite able and willing to destroy us by force. Instead they sent a plague carefully synthesized to affect only humans. With the plague agent, they didn't have to know where we were. They may have spread it across space, until some human picked it up and carried it home. The belief that the Plague reached the home worlds by way of Wellmet supports this.

"Second, do the Clathrans know that the Plague has failed? We don't know. But if they don't, we have to keep them from finding out.

"Third, will the Clathrans try again? Again, we have no way of knowing. But if they do we must be ready this time. Luck may not save us again.

"Fourth, are we to blame for bringing this threat down upon all humanity? Is every plague death a murder to be laid at our feet?

"The survivors of my crew must find their own answers here. I can speak only for myself. In the end, it is better to have found the Clathrans first. This way we have at least a chance for survival. If they had found us first, humanity would have been doomed.

"And they would have found us. The fleet of new ships, under construction and in storage, that we saw on Morikor can have only one meaning. The Clathrans plan to make a new survey of the galaxy. They must have been building for centuries. Perhaps it will be as long as three centuries more before they're ready, and another two before they reach Earth, but someday they will come. In ten thousand ships they'll sweep across the galaxy, around the Arm and into the Fringe. By then it will be too late. Before then we'll have to bring the fight to them.

"It's a long way to plan, for a handful of explorers overlooking the ruins of our Home Worlds. We can't reveal the whole truth to the population at large. The result would be disbelief or panic, either of which is useless. Entrusting the knowledge to a few risks the secret being lost. We have no proof of what we've seen, and little knowledge to go on.

"But we're not helpless. We have almost unlimited wealth. We also have, between us, the trust of large parts of the population, despite the backlash against space travelers that's set in. We can use that very xenophobia toward our ends. We have formed a plan. It's not perfect, but it is better than nothing.

"The first priority is to prepare a defense against any further attacks by the Clathrans in the near future. Like the worlds in an old science fiction story once faced with a similar threat, we will create a Space Patrol. The Space Patrol will stand against any direct invasion. Of course,

if the Clathrans invade in full force, no weapons we can muster will stand against them. But they may send one ship, or a small fleet. It's worth the effort. The Space Patrol will, unfortunately, have to defend against human beings as well. There will be a perimeter, a Boundary. No one may be allowed to cross the Boundary from outside. This is harsh, but it's the only way to guard the Home Worlds against further plagues or other indirect attacks.

"The Boundary will also reduce space exploration. Those inside will be discouraged from leaving. Those outside will be preoccupied with keeping the remote colonies alive. Humanity's attentions will turn inward for a while. This is also necessary. The Clathrans must capture no more humans for the next hundred years. If we're lucky, they'll think we're extinct.

"Creating the Space Patrol won't be difficult. The people of the Home Worlds have turned against space. They'll welcome the idea. All that is needed is a strong leader to bring it about. The *Archangel* quest has agreed to help us by putting the religious leaders on our side. They are as frightened as my crew is. They won't talk about what they encountered on their own voyages in the Arm. Whatever it was, it seems to have disturbed them as much as the Clathrans scared us.

"While the Boundary is in place, over the next century or so, technology must continue to advance. We have to develop better drives, better weapons, better computers, better shields, and better sensors if we are to face the Clathrans some day. We plan to endow organizations to study these areas over the coming centuries. Some of them may have to work in secret for a while, because they'll appear to be working against the Space Patrol.

"We have all agreed to dismantle our tri-axis drives and keep them a secret after we return to the Home Worlds. Once we leave Outpost, none of us will return. If we figure correctly, no human will come here again for three lifetimes. We'll give the Flame Jewels to the new Institutes for keeping. Without them, no one can build a tri-axis drive. It's a shame that this technology must be lost for a while. It'll be needed some day. But when the Flame Jewels are rediscovered, someone will figure out what they're good for.

"One final thing: our star maps. My star maps of the planets of the Fringe I'll take back with me to the Home Worlds and give into the care of an Institute. As for the Arm, we've compiled the coordinates of all the planets of significance we know about on the high side of the Density Barrier. Some of these are from my own logs, from a copy I left here as a precaution before making my disastrous final trip. Others are from the records of the other explorers present. This map alone we will leave behind on this world.

"Any person who uses these maps has a responsibility to do so in full awareness of the Clathran threat. Do not travel beyond Outpost with coordinates of any human world stored on your ship in any form. If you have the coordinates memorized, don't go at all. Preventing the Clathrans from discovering the location of the Home Worlds must be your first concern. Store the coordinates here on Outpost, in a form that the Clathrans will never discover, so that you can find your way home when you need to.

"That is all I have to say, except: fare well, fellow explorer. I bequeath to you all of space. I also bequeath to you the Clathran menace. Farewell, and forgive us all. Where I have failed, may you succeed."

The recorded voice shuts off.

⊠ STOP ⊠

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HOW TO PLAN TURN 3

Choosing from the remaining actions on Outpost, you decide to investigate Silverbeard's commodity storage area, look around the spaceport area, and then get together with the other pilots who are here. These actions will use your remaining phases for this turn. Your plotting sheet should now look like this:

Continued 

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	R	L	—	—	—	—	—
2	—	A: 9ZV29H	—	—	—	—	—
3	—	A:XZN2YH	—	—	A:7Z82KH	—	A:LZM2JH

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 3

Go to the computer and log on. Press **A** and then **B** (the **B** corresponds to the action code **XZN2YH**) to look into Silverbeard's supply of stolen commodities. Then press **A** and **A** again (which corresponds to the action code **7Z82KH**) to explore the spaceport area. Thirdly, press **A** and **E** (which corresponds to the action code **LZM2JH**) to meet the other pilots. Finally, press Return or **F** to get your results for this turn.

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 3

The CGM will send you to the text describing the storage buildings where Silverbeard kept his supply of stolen commodities. You may notice that after you note this text assignment, the CGM still lists your character as needing to "GET RESULTS." When this happens, you should **not** attempt to get the new results until following the computer's first instructions. In this case, you should read the text and then return to the CGM.

When you return to the CGM, you will have the opportunity to transfer as many units of the stored commodities as your ship is able to hold. Select the commodities you wish to take by number; you may press **U** for Undo if you change your mind about taking something, and start over.

When you are finished with the cargo transfer, the CGM will instruct you to read the text for looking around the spaceport area followed by a piece of text which describes your rendezvous with the other pilots.

This concludes your character's first three turns. You should now have a good idea how to plot your moves on the computer. If you are still a bit uncertain, we recommend that you read the Rules section and/or CGM Guide in the *Host Guide and Player Reference Manual* or ask a helpful soul standing nearby. You should also have an indication of how important it is to write things down, especially the options available on each planet and any significant information you learn as a result of them.

Last but not least, keep your character's goals in mind — that is how you will win the game!

You are now ready to take over the helm and are free to explore the galactic Arm. You may remain here awhile or head off into the great unknown. Good luck!

⊠ STOP ⊠

[461]

Your computer interrupts you again.

"Boss, I have bad news," says your computer.

"What is it? Is the food warmer broken again?"

"No. I've been following up on the observations of Outpost. It looks like your hunch was correct. Outpost is gone. The planet's just not there any more."

"How can you tell? Can you image planets from this distance?"

"Only if I know where to look. And I know where Outpost should be. It just isn't there. There's some sort of haze in its position, but no planet."

* * *

Outpost is gone.

This means, of course, that you have no way of navigating back to your home planet. You erased that data from your ship's computer, so the Clathrans couldn't find the coordinates of the Home Worlds if they captured you.

You think about your situation, as you plan your next actions. What does the loss of Outpost really mean? What hope did you have of ever going home again anyway?

It means a lot. You and the other humans in the Arm are isolated. You can send and receive information via subspace radio, but that's all. For some purposes, that's enough. You can warn the Nine Worlds of whatever you learn about the Clathrans, and what you find in your explorations, and maybe that will help them. But the Nine Worlds won't broadcast their location to you over subspace radio — the Clathrans might be listening in. That means you no longer have any way to find your way home. Not unless the worst happens and the Clathrans find out where the Nine Worlds are, anyway. Then, you can join your race for a futile last stand.

Perhaps you may find other humans in the Arm who know the way.

Perhaps Vanessa Chang left other markers behind as she flew the *Fool's Errand* into the Arm on her last, secret journey.

In any case, your only hope of going home lies ahead — in the Galactic Arm.

The night is very dark in your tiny cabin aboard your ship. You try to sleep, but can't. You watch the stars for a while. Then, not really asleep, you begin to dream.

You see the stars of the galaxy in your dream, and realize that they are very beautiful things, like jewels strung on infinite spiral silver wires. So beautiful — how can you resist taking them? You can't; why should you? You take one, then nine, then a dozen more, holding them in your hand, and they don't burn you.

You hold a star full of ugly, misshapen creatures, drooling in a pool of arrogance. You hold a star full of muscular, white-furred tigorillas who leap excitedly from planet to planet but never get where they want to go. You hold a star where war is eternal, a star where creativity is useless, and a star where your face is hidden behind a golden mask in an amusement park. You look at another of your stars and see a multitude of midgets, too many to count, walking through each other. "Hello," you say to them, but they are not listening. In another star you see old, dark beings who know everything there is to know, whistling in your hand. These stars are all different, but somehow, they are the same.

Just in time, or too late, you notice the dragon, twisted darkly among the streams of stars, newly awakened, restless. It coils in agitation, and looks around for the source of its unease. It senses that some of the stars from its shining hoard are missing. It opens ten thousand eyes and extends ten thousand claws. It is searching for you. You close your hand tightly around your stars to keep them hidden; they might dim and flicker and go out, but you don't notice.

The dragon raises its head and open its giant maw, straining against the golden leash that chains him to a pit in the Galactic Core. He takes a breath of starry void and turns to face you. A thousand eyes transfix you in the dim glow. A thousand claws reach to rend you.

You think to yourself, this is just a dream and this dragon cannot hurt me. And the dragon answers, you are wrong, this is *my* dream and I can do with you as I will. And the dragon opens his great maw and breathes out not fire but light. As the light grows brighter and brighter, the stars dim to black coals and you hear in the distance the screams of the blinded. In the awful light you see that the dragon is right: you are nothing, mere twistings of shadows and smoke.

The light shines deep down into the pit, you hear the stirrings from deep within, and fear fills you. The golden chain rustles. The dragon lunges to engulf you. But its light becomes tangled in your shadows and goes out. Then you are in darkness: no stars, no dragon, just the pit and the fear within. In the dark you hear a voice, repeating over and over the question: Do you have the message? Do you have the message? But you can't answer the question, not because you don't know the answer but because the evil in the pit is awakening, approaching, and you must get away from it. You flee in the dark, and the question follows you: Do you have the message?

As you flee, you open your hand and the stars fall out: the star of the dark omniscient whistlers, the star of the midgets walking through each other, the star of the amusing golden mask, the star of the white-furred tigorillas, and the star of the ugly, misshapen droolers. The dragon has them all again. And you? You are back aboard your ship, seated facing the viewscreen, unable to sleep. You hear again in the back of

your mind the voice from the darkness saying, Do you have the message? You think about Outpost, twice destroyed, and about your distant worlds.

The night is a very long one.

⊠ STOP ⊠

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As you step onto the packed sand of the Arena, you see that your opponent is again a green-scaled Clathran lizard-man. You're still not sure why the Hadrakians allow Clathrans into the Arena, but that's not your problem now. . .

Your opponent eyes you warily before moving out towards the center of the arena. The crows hushes expectantly as the fight begins. . .

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[463]

The moon-sized golden dodecahedron looms in front of you, magnified on your forward viewscreen. You know that this device is responsible for the rapidly increasing width of the Dual Space Interphase, turning reality into a guessing game and causing humanity to go insane on its home worlds. It must be destroyed. You are here with the most powerful bomb you have come across in your travels in an effort to do just that. You hope it will be enough.

Taking a few of the precious seconds you have before a Clathran ship might detect you on its sensors, you stare at the device. It is slightly smaller in size than Earth's moon and is made of an alien material your computer has been unable to analyze. Instead of being round, it is twelve-sided, but perfectly symmetrical. You wonder if this is a necessary part of its construction or if its builders were partial to the number twelve. You may never know the answer to this question. No matter. All you are concerned with right now is dropping the bomb and praying it has the desired effect.

You decide your best chance is to sneak as deep into the system as you can get without engaging the enemy at all. As you build up momentum and approach lightspeed, you deactivate your drives and put every active system on standby. At high speed, but without active warp fields or electromagnetic emissions to give you away, your ship glides towards Karnossus like a shark beneath the seas of space. Plunging towards the sun in a cometary orbit which will bring you rapidly close to your target with very little warning to the Clathrans, you ponder what you are about to do.

Die, most likely.

You whip through the outer system, maneuvering between two battle groups that are in the process of joining their formations to accommodate a third group approaching from out of system. Intent on their complex maneuvers, accustomed to traffic moving in all directions through the system for the past several days, they don't notice you. You enter the region of the factory worlds recently vacated by the huge fleets that had been on station there. You pass the asteroid belts and the bustle of billions of Clathran workers, strategists, and soldiers. Perhaps they will all die too. No one knows exactly how destructive the Dual Space Inversion Bomb will prove to be.

Alarms sound and telltales flash on your control boards as ships of a Clathran Battle Group pin you down with their sensors. "Time to bluff!" you tell your computer. Following your prearranged plan, the computer broadcasts conflicting messages in the Clathran language in all directions, each of them offering a different explanation of who you are and why you're 'authorized by your superiors' to fly downsystem. In the seconds it takes them to figure out who you are — or at least who you aren't — you are past them and into another belt of planetary orbits. They follow you, but their drives are cold and by the time they catch up it will be too late.

The planetary orbits drop behind you, and the starship construction stations loom ahead. Beyond them there is only one thing between you and the sun: the Dodecahedron. It's time to activate the Bomb, and begin your final maneuvers.

You start the arming sequence and give the Bomb its instructions.

"In a few moments I will eject you and propel you towards the Dodecahedron. You will maneuver towards it, attach yourself, and then wait thirty seconds before detonating. Understood?"

"Right! Thirty. . . twenty-nine. . . twenty-eight. . ."

"Nononono. . . You begin your countdown after attaching to the target. Got it?"

"You know, you are getting on my nerves. I don't like resetting my clock."

"Fine. Hold your countdown. Begin after attaching, on my mark. OK?"

"OK."

But you're not going to make it without a fight. The battle group you left behind must have called ahead to the construction stations. The stations are firing at you. They'll quickly get your range unless you begin evasive maneuvers, so you turn on your drives and begin your final approach. At the same time, you open fire on the construction stations still ahead in the system's heart. Not designed for defense, the stations disintegrate under your attack. You are now so close to the energetic star that you are actually within the outer corona, and your warp fields blaze around you like proud sails of glowing plasma. Alarms sound almost at once, as your ship acknowledges Clathran detection signals and threats from the vessels now closing on you from upsystem. You already know that none of them is close enough to catch you. Not right away, anyway. They are firing beams at you, but at this range your shields easily dump the energy. The star itself is more dangerous; its gravity and radiation are intense. But you can take a little heat. You don't plan to stay long.

You plunge to within a kilometer of the Dodecahedron, so that it fills your forward viewscreen with its malevolent golden glow. Your ship ejects the Bomb automatically, as happy to be rid of it as you are. It spirals down towards the surface of the Dodecahedron.

You watch the Bomb all the way to a landing, holding your position relative to the Dodecahedron until you see it bind firmly to the surface. Then you trigger your radio.

"Bomb! Begin countdown now."

No response.

"Bomb! Bomb! Begin countdown!" The Clathrans are closing in.

Your radio picks up a semi-sentient giggle, then the voice of the Bomb. ". . . twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three. . ."

You are five seconds late, but you nonetheless make an effort to escape from Karnossus, firewalling your engines as you blast outwards through the corona and into the system, trying to reach a safe position for engaging hyperdrive before the Bomb detonates. Clathran ships are closing in from all sides, but you ignore them. They won't destroy you in the next twenty seconds, and after that, they'll be the least of your worries.

". . . eleven, ten, nine. . ." Your computer is continuing the countdown. You clear the outermost asteroid belt, and slap the controls for an emergency acceleration. Your tri-axis drives fire almost at once, and you flicker out of the Karnossus system.

You reappear only a short distance away, at the maximum range of your active sensors. Your curiosity may kill you, but you have to see what happens.

". . . three, two, one, detonation!"

Karnossus strobes once, then disappears.

Just like that, in the wink of an eye, the entire system vanishes. Hundreds of planets, thousands of warships, and billions of Clathrans are simply gone. *To where?* you wonder, but you don't have time to think about it. A wave of unreality, the expanding ripple from the explosion, passes over your ship.

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As the discussion draws to a close, you begin to think about where you want to go next. It appears that your fellow explorers will be spreading out in many different directions. Before you part, you all agree to keep your subspace radio transceivers tuned to a common frequency so that you will always be able to communicate with each other at will.

On your display screen, you call up the map of the Galactic Arm, the only star map now in your computer system. You wish you had more information to go on, or some concrete clue that would lead you in the right direction. But the Arm is almost entirely unknown. The only way to learn is to explore. You will have to set your own course from here.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[465]

Whatever it is that's stepping onto the sand at the other end of the Arena from you, it's got you outweighed by at least five hundred pounds. It looks like some sort of overgrown gorilla, with two pairs of arms, a gaping mouth, and lots and lots of muscle. You look into its eyes, seeking some glimmer of intelligence, and discover a purposeful cruelty. If you are indeed unable to best the alien, it will not be a pretty sight.

The monster begins to lumber across the sand in your direction. It's in no hurry, but it also isn't acting like it expects you to get away.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[466]

"Boss, don't be alarmed, but I am picking up a conversation between two Clathran ships."

"Are they after us?" you ask, snapping to and prepared for action.

"No, I don't think they know we are in the area. I'll put the translation on the speaker."

"... been to the planet Gloo. Those repulsive Bluvians are useless if they don't keep up the Probability Membrane supply," you hear one Clathran tell the other. "We suspect they've been trading them to other aliens." The reply is too static-filled to understand, and then the transmission is lost.

"I think they are completely out of range now, Boss, so we don't have to worry about being detected."

"How did we pick them up at all? The Clathrans don't use subspace radio very much."

"I don't know, Boss. I suspect we just happened to fly through one of their com beams."

Sighing in relief, you head down to the galley for a much-needed peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwich.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[467]

“Boss, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” you reply apprehensively. Your computer almost never asks permission for anything.

“Well, er, I’m not sure how to put this.”

“Just come right out and say it,” you say encouragingly. You are even more nervous now since your computer is *never* at a loss when it comes to speaking.

“Were you particularly attached to your cargo drone?” is the odd question you are asked next.

“Well, as drones go, it is. . . wait, you used past tense. What happened?”

“It seems that I have lost contact with the drone.”

“WHAT!”

“I said, the drone is no longer in contact with us. It is gone, vanished, kaput, disappeared, as is any cargo it might have been carrying.”

You sit down in the nearest chair. This is quite a blow to you and your mission. Your drone is, was, a vital part of your ongoing plan to defeat the Clathrans and accomplish your personal goals. You are not sure what to do without it.

“Explain,” you demand.

“Sorry, Boss. Because the amount of power needed to constantly monitor the drone is rather high, I only check on its status from time to time. The last report taken one hour ago showed there were no problems. However, when I just tried to contact it now, I could not get any response. It could be lost, stolen, or destroyed. My recommendation is to purchase another drone at the first opportunity. I will make the necessary changes in my program to monitor our next drone more frequently so we’ll have an idea of what’s happening if we run into this problem again.”

You sigh in frustration at the setback, but there is nothing you can do about it now.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[468]

If there was ever a time to make a break for the far side of the Survey Line, this is it. You fire all of your engines at once and shoot ahead at maximum speed. Hopefully, this will do it! You look behind you to see how far you’re getting from your last foe, the wounded dreadnought.

Oh, no! It’s incredible, but the huge Clathran ship has managed to repair itself and is hot on your tail. What’s more, it’s catching up! How does it go so fast? You try every kind of evasive maneuver you can think of, but to no avail. The dreadnought is fast, cunning, and strong, and there’s no surprising it this time.

Soon it has overtaken you. You exchange fire until two more dreadnoughts show up and clobber you. There was nothing you could have done. It looks like you’ll need some kind of special ability to evade Clathran ships if you ever hope to be able to run away from the likes of this dreadnought.

The Clathrans efficiently board your ship and take you prisoner.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[469]

Emerging from hyperspace, you brace yourself for a confrontation with the aliens on the planet Yinkle. Much to your surprise, your ship is not attacked.

“Boss, I’ve got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that we won’t ever be attacked by the aliens from Yinkle. The bad news is that it would appear that the planet is gone.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure what happened to it, Boss, but all that is left in orbit around this sun is a pile of cosmic debris. My guess is that the Clathrans did something horrible when the Survey Line passed through here.”

“Do you mean to tell me that an entire planet is missing?”

“Yeah. Scary, isn’t it?”

You have to agree. Since you have no planet to land on here, you are still aloft in the trisector that used to contain the planet Yinkle.

✧ STOP ✧

[470]

From your ship, you plan out a mapping and scanning run for the planet that will cover the entire surface. You want to find out if there’s anything else of interest on Outpost that you missed before. It will take several days to complete the search from orbit; you intend to scan from a low altitude, which will decrease the coverage of your ship’s sensors.

For the first several days in orbit you find nothing except the remains of more of Silverbeard’s defensive beam weapon emplacements, which you already knew about. Here and there are spots of other wreckage which you presume are fallen parts of the pirate’s destroyed battle satellites. At times, bands of thick clouds obscure the surface, delaying your scanning. Outpost’s oceans are small, but there is plenty of free surface water, and rainfall is frequent at most latitudes. Your computer notes that the planet is slowly but continuously gaining water as it sweeps up the trace gases that permeate its white dwarf star system in the aftermath of the star’s nova. Conditions are ideal for the formation of primitive life forms, and indeed the planet’s oceans abound with self-replicating molecules that may be precursors to unicellular life.

It is near the end of your search pattern, at a point almost exactly antipodal to Silverbeard’s base, that you find the anomaly. At first you see only a bright reflection, like a glint of starlight from a steel plate. Looking closer, you see that a broad rock face has been levelled off and smoothed. The plane is angled about forty-five degrees and forms one slope of a high ridge, as if a pyramid had been buried under a mountain, leaving one side showing.

“What’s that made of?” you ask your computer.

“It seems to be native rock, Boss, the same as the surrounding ground. Surface irregularities have been cut away to leave a flat area about two hundred meters on a side. It’s exceptionally smooth. It might have been cut with a laser. Notice the debris at the bottom of the slope.”

You land at the base of the cut, where the jumbled debris is in fact quite impressive. Large chunks of rock, cut off on one side to the same smoothness as the polished slope above you, lie in a jumbled heap. “Any idea of the purpose of this?” you ask the computer.

“My analysis indicates the four most probable purposes are, respectively, a trademark indicating planetary ownership, a signal reflector for astrophysics experiments, a playing field for a heavily handicapped ball game, or a sliding board for very obese aliens. Unfortunately the total cumulative probability for any of these is a rather small fraction of a percent. The next hundred most likely possibilities are, respectively, an unfinished interplanetary billboard, a landing field for wedge-shaped spaceships, a testing range for high-friction sneaker soles. . .”

“Enough!” you bark. “If you don’t have any idea, why don’t you just say so?”

“Hummmph. I thought you’d be impressed. My new capabilities allow me, when faced with a difficult problem, to formulate hypotheses based on much more divergent information that I was ever able to correlate before. To use more imagination, as it were. You should find this quite useful.”

“I find it quite annoying,” you reply. “I’m going to look at the rock a little closer.” You don your high-friction sneakers and walk to the slope, picking your way carefully through the jagged rubble at the base. The rock is granite-like, almost black in color but with tiny blue and white flecks distributed through it. You toy with a few loose stones and conclude that the rock is very hard and durable. Only hardened metal tools can scratch it. You inspect the edge of the smooth area and confirm that it is indeed part of the solid bedrock of the hills and not assembled from pieces. Somewhat reassured that there’s no reason to suspect danger, you begin to climb the incline.

The inscription is literally right under your nose before you see it. The words are carved into the smooth stone, halfway up the slope. The words are in Earth Standard, in letters no more than two inches high. They read:

*In Memory of Humankind
And Her Achievements*

We Will Be Avenged

V. Chang, May 30, 2519

“What the heck does that mean?” you wonder aloud as you descend the slope again. It doesn’t seem to make much sense. Why would Vanessa Chang create a memorial for a race she knew all along wasn’t dead? And why the date in 2519, when her last departure from Outpost was in 2493?

“Man is man, but Humankind is a woman,” quotes your computer. “Obviously Chang, if it was she who did this, had a computer almost as well-educated as I am.”

“I don’t care about the wording. What’s the memorial for?” you ask.

“As a first guess, I would conclude it’s another ruse against the Clathrans,” suggests the computer. “We assume they can decode Earth Standard, having mind-wiped Chang’s crewman Doctor Dighton. Perhaps they were supposed to read this and confirm that they’d succeeded in killing all humanity — except, of course, for Chang, who they would remember had escaped from them.”

“You think Chang really did this, then? Why’s it dated after her death?” you ask.

“The date of Vanessa Chang’s death isn’t recorded,” says the computer. “In fact, 2519 is the last year where there is any record of her. After that, she disappears.”

“You mean she disappears from the official records, or for real?” you ask.

“Both” says the computer.

“Hmmm.” You think about what you know of the famous explorer. After her last return from Outpost, she devoted her efforts to creating the Space Patrol and the Boundary. She apparently never told anyone on the Nine Worlds about the Clathrans, but everything she did was aimed at preventing any further contact between Clathrans and humans.

“Are there by any chance records of any spaceships disappearing at about the same time?”

“There were no ships reported missing,” says the computer. “But there is one discrepancy in the records. A ship named the *Fool’s Errand* was commissioned by the Space Patrol that year, but was never mentioned again in any context. There are lots of references to it having been under construction, parts and labor allocations for example, but no mention of it in crew assignments, duty reports, or service records.”

Vanessa, you are one sneaky scheming lady, you mutter to yourself. You find it amazingly easy to picture the woman, already in her eighties, having been partly responsible for the extermination of half of mankind and directly responsible for laying out the course of the next three centuries of human history, quietly boarding a spaceship and breaking through her own Boundary, returning to space for reasons always and entirely her own.

But the mystery still remains, why the monument? "There's something about that inscription we're missing," you tell the computer. "There's some other purpose to this thing. I want you to correlate every piece of data about that stone out there with everything you know about anything else until you find what it is."

"That could take days, Boss."

"Have anything better to do?"

"It depends, Boss. The ship usually flies better when I help."

"That's OK. We'll stay right here."

The computer outperforms itself. It is less than a day and a half before you are awakened by a joyous cry of "Boss! I have it!"

"What did you find?"

"Boss, you're not going to believe this. It's a fix on the location of Earth."

"What? You mean that inscription somehow encodes Earth's coordinates?"

"No, Boss." The machine is clearly enjoying itself. "It's much simpler than that. The thing literally points to Earth. It's oriented so that at midnight of May 30, 2519, Earth Standard Mean Time, a line perpendicular to the plane of the smoothed stone pointed directly in the direction of Earth. Knowing that, you can find the direction of Earth at any time by projecting the planet's motion back in time to that date."

"That's impossible. You could never calculate the planet's motion that accurately. Continental drift alone would set you off a skillion parsecs."

"No molten core, Boss. No continental drift. This planet's older than it looks. Remember that its primary has nearly burned out. The biggest source of inaccuracy is actually the effect of friction from the gaseous residue in the system slowing down the planet's orbit. And I can compensate for that in the calculations. Chang's computers probably couldn't, which means the marker would have been useless to her by about ten years after she set it. I guess that was less important to her than having a trail sign back to the Home Worlds that the Clathrans could never figure out."

"You found it," you point out. "Why not the Clathrans?"

"I found it only because I already know the real coordinates. It took me about two to the twenty-third power guesses before I hit on the right answer. If the Clathrans tried to figure it out they'd have to test out every possibility. They might just as well search every planet in the galaxy."

"Don't remind me," you reply. "That might be exactly what they're doing."

⊠ STOP ⊠

[471]

You employ the special Anti-Clathran Evasive Maneuvers you learned from the Hadrakians. Following the precisely prescribed pattern of changes in direction and speed, you confuse the Clathran scout's navigation computer and manage to get away.

"Clathran scout no longer in range," your computer reports.

"Whew," you reply, breathing a sigh of relief. There is no cause to celebrate, though. Just because you can run away from a Clathran scout doesn't mean that you can stop the Clathran Survey from marching across the galaxy and eradicating humanity. Where the scout came from, there are bigger, more powerful ships to worry about.

What's more, the Clathrans are now on the alert that there are still Humans running around. They tried to wipe humanity out with the Space Plague three hundred years ago, but that didn't work. If they knew where the Nine Worlds were, they'd send a huge fleet there tomorrow without hesitation. It may just be a matter of time. Unless you can do something about it, the Survey will eventually reach the Fringe — and the Nine Worlds — and the Clathrans won't make any mistakes.

This adventure took some time, so you lose the rest of your plotted phases for this turn. You may resume your movement next turn.

✕ STOP ✕

[472]

The market is located in the same building complex as the hospital. It comes as no surprise that they have Medicine to trade. Asking the Brother seated at a desk bearing the sign, "Trade Authority," for the current rates, you learn they will trade the following:

- 3 Medicine for 1 Warp Core
- 2 Medicine for 1 Synthetic Genius
- 1 Medicine for 1 Phase Steel

Go now to the CGM. You may select this option again.

✕ STOP ✕

[473]

As you follow the landing beacon down to the spaceport, you can't help but wish the Hadrakian colony was located anywhere on the living part of Rothane's surface, instead of in the center of the vast, barren desert. You gaze longingly at the inviting green of the forests and hills in the far distance until you are too close to the surface to make them out anymore. Instead, you see miles of arid burned land rushing up to meet you.

The city now begins to grow larger as you descend, allowing you to see that all is not dead and barren. The fringes of the Hadrakian colony have sections of green showing through the brown, indicating that the sleek-furred tigorillas might be making some headway in bringing the soil back to the point of productivity. Interesting.

Your ship sets down as instructed and you make your way to the non-citizens' Enclave, where you know you will have to win a battle against an unknown foe to earn admission to the rest of the city. You can hardly wait. You leave the ship and check out the limited options available to you at this moment. You may:

(N7Y86K) (3 phases) Visit the Enclave Market.

(M7J8UK) (7 phases) Take your chances in the Arena, attempting to win Rothanian citizenship by combat.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[474]

You find Civilian Estal and inform him of your desire to enroll in the Academy. He seems quite pleased. He directs you to the Academy building, where you officially sign up for the next training unit, to begin in two days.

In due course you put your ship under computer lock and move into Academy quarters. You and two thousand young Worzellians. You realize that this is going to be more complicated than you thought when you learn that very few Worzellians know Earth Standard and you are issued a uniform with four arms and one leg.

You have doubts at the beginning just how useful a two-week training course will be, considering all the experience you've had elsewhere. It turns out that Worzellians don't sleep very much, and during training they don't sleep at all. This adds additional unforeseen difficulty. The Worzellians regard your need to sleep as a medical infirmity, and they treat you with stimulant drugs. These keep you going day and night, and your mind stays clear. You worry about long-term side effects, though.

At first you also have doubts about the usefulness of learning to fight with strange Worzellian weapons and hand-to-hand techniques designed for creatures with four hands. You soon learn, however, that the training program stresses fundamentals in many types of combat. Since the worldwide war employs every sort of weapon from the most primitive to the most advanced, you are trained in principles that will aid you regardless of the exact weapons or circumstances of combat. You learn how to conceal your intentions, concentrate, prepare for unexpected attacks, be aware of your surroundings, and psyche out your enemy. There are four major disciplines that the Worzellians emphasize: *Oisii*, or "sneak," the strategy of using stealth to achieve objectives without the enemy noticing; *Takai*, or "bluff," the strategy of misdirecting the enemy and causing the enemy to make decisions harmful to himself; *Tiisai*, or "fight," the strategy of direct combat with the enemy; and *Hurui*, or "run," the strategy of using mobility and speed to avoid engaging the enemy.

"All four of these are equally important in war craft," says the instructor. "And yet only *Tiisai* involves fighting. Keep this in mind. Many warriors overestimate the importance of *Tiisai* because they mistakenly believe that it is the objective in war. This is false. All these disciplines, *Oisii*, *Takai*, *Tiisai*, and *Hurui*, are techniques. None of them is an objective in itself. All have their uses and many warriors will devote themselves to mastering one of them: *Oisii* for the saboteur, *Takai* for the diplomat, *Tiisai* for the assault troop, *Hurui* for the bomber pilot. But the true warrior will master them all, for rarely is one effective only in itself. A mission of assassination may require *Oisii* for approaching the enemy unnoticed, *Takai* for fooling the enemy into thinking you are a friend, *Tiisai* for the kill, and finally *Hurui* for the escape.

"Always remember the sequence *Oisii* — *Takai* — *Tiisai* — *Hurui*. When using more than one discipline in a mission, this is almost always the sequence of maneuvers you must use. It is not difficult to see why. *Hurui* offers neither concealment nor defense; thus, the enemy must already be disabled by one or more of the other three techniques before it can be used effectively. Similarly, *Oisii* and *Takai* both depend on the enemy's unawareness of your intentions, so neither is likely to succeed after using *Tiisai*. *Oisii* requires concealment from the enemy, while all of the other three disciplines attract the enemy's attention to the warrior; thus, *Oisii* must be used first if it is used at all. Therefore the order: *Oisii* — *Takai* — *Tiisai* — *Hurui*."

There is one major difference between you and the Worzellians when it comes to fighting. Their bodies are physically much tougher than yours. In fact, it is almost impossible to kill a Worzellian through normal wounds. Unfortunately, your Worzellian sparring partners sometimes forget this difference. This forces you to pay extra attention to the defensive maneuvers they teach you. It also makes you a little bit nervous when Final Exam time draws near.

At the end of the training the instructors devise tests according to the trainee's skills and potential. The fire in the tests is live. Despite the healing ability of the Worzellian physiology, many die in this test. Those who lose and survive may repeat the training program or become nonmilitary workers, the lowest status in Worzellian society (although they may eventually become respected Civilians). Only the winners become full-fledged warriors.

The tests take place on an open field, and many neutral Worzellians, including the next incoming class of trainees, come to watch. You wait your turn nervously in a bunker at one end of the field, listening to what sounds like small-arms fire, waiting for your turn. You will only

be told what the test is, and what weapons you'll be using, at the very last minute. You'll have to think fast. Already it's too late to back out. To refuse the test is a dishonor so great that you would probably be banned from Worzelle.

Your turn comes, and the instructor tells you what the test is. He gives you a knife and a length of rope, then ties a purple band around your head. He informs you that when you step out of the bunker you will be at one corner of a square field. Three other trainees will emerge at the same time on the other three corners. The one to your right will be an ally of yours, also wearing the purple band, but you'll have no chance to speak to each other in advance. The pair opposite will be wearing yellow bands. They are your enemy. Your object is to cross the field to the opposite side. All you have to do is get across to succeed. However, you can score higher if you prevent the enemy from crossing or if your ally also succeeds.

A gunshot signal fired outside will be your cue to begin. As you wait, you notice a few details about the set-up. The field is mostly brown mud, and the uniform you're wearing will be excellent camouflage. You also notice that the purple headband you've been given is yellow on the inside.

The test is stacked against you, since the Worzellians are both stronger and faster than you are. You will probably need to use all of your skill and training, and take advantage of every edge you can, in order to succeed.

What is your first move?

- A) Close in on your nearest opponent and attack him.
- B) Run as fast as possible to the other side of the field, trying to avoid your enemies.
- C) Take advantage of the camouflage and sneak out of the bunker before the gun sounds.
- D) Reverse the color of your headband, attempting to confuse your enemies.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[475]

As you suspected, another chance to observe a dual space device operating over a large area has given you the information you need to complete the Interphase Constrictor. It turns out to be remarkably easy, really, no more than a simple application of existing energy-field technology to the particular phase and frequency requirements of your primitive device. There's just one problem. The field isn't big enough.

Your Interphase Constrictor works extremely well within the radius of its sensor fields. With it turned on and operating you are unable to levitate, bend spoons, or perform any of the other paranormal tricks you have come to take for granted over the past few years. Some of your newer ship weapons refuse to operate, and you suspect that similar weapons, directed at you from beyond, would also fail to function in the vicinity of your ship.

Your originally modified variometer had an improved sensor range of approximately two kilometers, giving it a total scan area of approximately 33 cubic kilometers. Since that initial modification was not difficult to achieve, you assumed that the sensor limitation could be overcome with increased power, higher-quality materials, or better design and construction. As the project developed, however, the sensor range never got any larger. Only now are you realizing the problem that this poses.

To protect Earth, or Harvard or Norstar or Leucothea or any of the other Home Worlds, from the effects of the rising interphase level, you would need to generate a field with a radius at least four orders of magnitude larger.

Unwilling to believe what your experiments demonstrate, you plunge back into the mathematics of dual space, the fundamental equations and computations that you have been neglecting recently in favor of experimentation. Finally, reluctantly, you confirm what you may have already suspected: a constriction field with a larger radius is just not possible. The constrictor will not operate beyond the range of its fine-tuned sensors; the sensors, in turn, are limited in their sensitivity by the Dual Space analogue of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. Beyond two kilometers, they are incapable of sufficient resolution for the operation of the constrictor.

Is there no hope for the Home Worlds? In despair, you contact Brother Dikestra on the subspace radio.

“Professor Dambroke, I’m glad you’ve made contact,” says Dikestra. “I’m afraid we have some bad news for you.”

“Go ahead, Brother,” you answer. How can things get worse?

“I’ve been working on the dual space problem ever since your last contact, attempting to model the mathematics of it. And even though we’ve made no progress in building a dual space suppressor, I think we’ve established a few critical theoretical points.”

“So?” You can guess what’s coming.

“I’ve reached the conclusion, confirmed by others in my department, that even if such a device could be built it would have a maximum operating radius of just over two kilometers, far too small to help solve the problems on the Home Worlds.”

Sure enough. “But couldn’t we build a large number of units, and deploy them next to each other?” You are hoping that Brother Dikestra has reached a different conclusion from yours, but you are doomed to disappointment.

“Surely you realize that two suppressor fields can’t operate that close together. Even at a hundred times the effective sensor range, the fields would still cause a destructive interference pattern which would destroy both devices.”

“Yes, I see that now,” you admit. “The Interphase Constrictor can’t save humanity on its own. So where do we stand?”

“I think we need to focus all of our attention on the Clathrans. It looks like they may be responsible for the increasing Dual Space Interphase level anyway. If we can defeat them, maybe that will solve our problems. If we can’t stop the Survey, it doesn’t matter what happens with Dual Space. The Clathrans will wipe out all humans anyway.”

You could not agree more. The Clathran Survey marches ruthlessly onward, conquering every planet with intelligent life. The only obstacle between the Clathrans and the Human home worlds is the Hadrakian fleet. Desperate to save themselves, the Hadrakians will be putting up a last stand on their home planet against tremendous odds.

Whatever the odds, the Hadrakians had better win or there will be nothing you can do to stop the Clathran advance. You must help the Hadrakians win their war. But what exactly is necessary? How will you be able to make a difference? You know where to find out: at the offices of The Battle, Incorporated. If you go there, the Hadrakians will not be shy about telling you what to do.

With the *Black Abyss* at your command and all the items and abilities you have gained in your travels, you are a very potent special agent. If you do what the Hadrakians ask, it is just conceivable that you may affect the outcome of the war. Who knows? The Interphase Constrictor may yet be crucial to your chances of victory. You resolve to visit one of the offices of The Battle, Inc. as soon as you can.

The survival of humanity is at stake.

Go now to the CGM.

✠ STOP ✠

[476]

You take note of the variety of ships that have landed in and around the spaceport area. Besides your own, there are five others: the *Run Amok*, the *Black Abyss*, the *Jihad*, the *Holly Roger*, and the *Barratry*. It is clear that all are from the Nine Worlds or nearby. All of them, obviously, possess tri-axis drive systems, or else they wouldn't be here. That means that their owners must each have obtained a Flame Jewel somewhere. You wonder where they got them. Over the past few days you have observed the pilots and their ships pursuing their own affairs: loading cargo from the stockpiles, exploring the ruins, and surveying the planet. You've kept a respectful distance while engaged in your own work, but you decide it would be a good idea to talk to them and find out what their intentions are in the Arm.

You speak to the others one at a time over ship-to-ship and in person. Eventually you conclude that it would be wise for you all to meet together. You arrange to get together in the decaying hangar where the *Lockerbait* rests.

In the dim light of the hangar, you look around at those who have gathered here so far from home. Every face you see is the face of an experienced spacer. You are relieved that none of them is a fool or an idiot. Of course, looking back on your own experiences, you can see that it would have been unlikely for a fool or an idiot to make it to this place.

You are all aware of Vanessa Chang's warning about the Clathrans in the Arm. You all agree to take precautions to protect the Home Worlds if any of you are captured by Clathrans. To ensure against any possibility of error or duplicity, you all go together to each person's ship and watch as they erase all navigational data of the Fringe, including the coordinates of the Nine Worlds and other human planets, from their computer systems. You agree to rely on the marker that Vanessa Chang left on the far side of Outpost. You instruct your computers to erase everything they know about the marker, including the very fact that it exists. Now, only you and your computer working together, in the presence of the monument itself, can reconstruct the path home.

When this is done, you have a sudden feeling of terrible isolation. In the past you have travelled to lonely and distant corners of the galaxy, and gone to many new worlds, but now necessity has forced you to give up all the familiar ones. Your link to your distant home seems very tenuous, and the tremendous risks you are facing seem real for the first time. You can sense that the others feel the same. Perhaps, you agree, you can help each other.

At this point, all of the other players' characters are with yours on Outpost. You should now introduce yourself in character. You may ask any questions you wish of the other characters, and discuss anything you wish about your experiences so far or your expectations for the future. You are not required to tell anybody anything, nor are you required to always tell the truth.

When you are finished with the discussion, return to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[477]

"Damn it, computer, I just can't get this thing to work." You've been trying to finish the Interphase Constrictor for days now.

"Maybe you need to do a little more research, Boss. There are still some anomalies we haven't investigated."

"How many have we researched?"

"Three. We still need one more."

"Okay, we'll do it."

✧ STOP ✧

[478]

The Hadrakian colony on Psorus is just a small frontier settlement, so The Battle, Inc. does not have a substantial presence here. When you ask for directions to their office, you are told to go to a small building next to the general store. When you get there, you find a small wooden shack coated with a fresh coat of white paint. There is a sign overhead which reads "Psorus Paint Co., Office Hours 900-1700 Every Day." You are not fooled by the sign; The Battle would hardly advertise itself publicly with the Clathrans watching over the planet. The door to the building is unlocked and there is no guard, so you walk right in.

The small room in the front is bare of both people and furniture. However, there is a door at the far side of the room, behind which you can hear some voices. You are eager to confer with the Hadrakians about the war, so you knock at the far door.

"Who is it?" one of the voices asks.

"I am looking for The Battle, Inc.," you reply. "I am here to discuss the war."

"You're in the right place, then. Come on in."

⊠ STOP ⊠

[479]

The Shrine of Space is easy enough to find, located as it is in the exact center of the city. It is an imposing building, put together entirely out of blocks of black marble, with a single entrance located in the middle of its north face. Although you are generally ignored by the planet's inhabitants, you are not sure how they will react to you trespassing here, so you wait until you can see no Qualatharians coming or going, before you make your way to the door.

Inside, there is a short hall ending in a wide archway, beyond which you can sense a huge open space. Before you can confirm this impression, though, you are intercepted by a robot.

"Halt," it says. "I am the Gatekeeper, and my instructions are to let none but Qualatharians pass. You seem in many ways to be one, but in other ways you are quite dissimilar. In accordance with ancient tradition, I must therefore give you the test of the five questions, which no true Qualatharian could fail."

"Very well," you snap. "Ask away."

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[480]

The huge tentacle easily grabs you around your legs, and waist, and chest, and. . . You lose consciousness before you see how much further one tentacle can coil about the body of an average human. The main reason for this lack of awareness is because the tightening of the monster's appendage, especially about your rib cage, is causing a distressing lack of oxygen. While this is probably not at all good for you, at least you do not have to watch while the monster begins dragging your body toward its mouth.

As it prepares to ingest you, the hydropsor loosens its grip just the tiniest bit, barely enough to allow you to expand your lungs and take a small breath of air. This gives you some oxygen, which gets your brain functioning to the extent that it is working on a way to get you out of this mess. Instinct alone keeps your body limp and the tentacle loosens even more as the creature opens its maw.

Timing things just right, you gather your strength and heave yourself out of the coils. Dodging the tentacles that try to ensnare you once again, you dart around the rocks that litter the ocean floor. The hydropsor makes several valiant tries to recapture you but, fortunately, it is unsuccessful. You manage to swing past the site of your mining equipment and grab it before you head up to the shallower and safer continental shelf.

The next thing you know, you are crawling into the warm embrace of your ship's medical unit. How you managed to get here you'll never know. The last thing you remember hearing before slipping back into unconsciousness is your computer saying, "Tsk, tsk, tsk. You look really bad this time, Boss. . ."

Days later, you wake to the smell of toast and eggs which your faithful computer has taken the liberty of preparing. After eating, you feel a little better and are now prepared to face the world.

Go now to the CGM. You may select this option again.

✧ STOP ✧

[481]

You have built an Interphase Reflector for your ship. Congratulations!

In its present form, the Interphase Reflector will make an effective defensive ship weapon. It will shield against most forms of attack, but will be particularly devastating against other weapon systems that operate on Dual Space principles.

✧ STOP ✧

[482]

You decide to stay on the planet's surface, making yourself as inconspicuous as possible until the ships go away or prove friendly. Nervously you watch their approach on the screen as they pass through the ring nebula that surrounds Outpost's star system.

"The lead vessel is coming out of hyperdrive, now bending into orbit," reports the computer. The closest blip turns from blue to red on the screen, indicating that your mass-detection sensors are now picking up its position instead of your warp-field sensors. "Orbit is at about ten thousand kilometers in a trans-polar sweep. The other two ships are following. They're heading for positions one hundred twenty degrees apart."

"Can you pick up any ship-to-ship communications?"

"No, Boss. They're talking to each other on tightly focused com beams. There's no way I can listen in."

"Can you identify them?"

"We'll have the lead one in visual range as it passes overhead. The star's aside of us, so I should be able to give you a good image." It takes several minutes for the ship to orbit into your sky. "Give me maximum magnification," you request.

An image of a smooth metallic plate fills your screen. "All right, wise guy. Give me less than maximum magnification, so I can see the whole ship."

"Sorry, Boss. Just thought I'd try to lighten things up a little, seeing as how we're probably going to die." The image of the orbiting ship now rotates slowly in the center of your screen as you ship's imaging sensors follow its orbit. Its black and red hull gleams dully in the glancing light of the white dwarf star, and its overall shape suggests a strange alien bird of prey. However, at the bow, instead of tapering to a point, the hull divides into six projections that spread out like a claw stretching to grasp empty space. The fingers of the claw surround a dark opening that extends deep into the belly of the ship, but whether this is a weapon or a drive system or a docking bay you can't tell. From what you know of Vanessa Chang's accounts, it's clear that this is a Clathran ship. It looks big enough to carry a crew of hundreds.

Suddenly the image on your screen dissolves into blue-white static. "What's happening?" you ask.

"It's that probe beam again. From this close a range it's overloading all my sensor systems," says the computer.

"Is it aimed at us? Have they spotted us?"

"It's not that tight a beam, Boss. They seem to be scanning the whole planet. They might have spotted us; I can't tell."

You fight the urge to bolt away at maximum warp as you wait for an attack. Nothing happens. After a few minutes of static, your screen clears and the Clathran ship has moved on.

You remain still for hours as the Clathran ships circle the planet. "What are they doing?" you wonder aloud. "They must have detected us by now."

"They're moving, Boss. They're opening up their orbit to a hundred thousand kilometers."

"Are they leaving?"

"No, just changing formation. Wait a minute. . ."

You jump in blind panic as the ships open fire. From each of the two vessels now in your sky, three tight beams of energy erupt toward you. They are not aimed at you but at the planet. Each beam sweeps slowly in a precise pattern.

"What are they doing?" you whisper.

"Your guess, Boss."

"I think they're preparing to destroy this planet."

"I agree, Boss. Though it hardly seems possible, it's the least improbable explanation."

"But can they really do that?"

"Outpost is an old cold planet. It doesn't have a molten core. That makes it, relatively speaking, as brittle as glass compared with a liquid-core or gas-giant-type planet. Look at how tight those beams are. They aren't just blasting away at the surface; they're aiming to fracture the inside. The hard part will be to overcome the gravitational attraction holding the mass together."

"How long will it take?"

"I can't begin to guess, Boss."

"Perhaps we should seriously consider getting the hell out of here?"

"Maybe, Boss. But they're sure to detect us if we do."

You may:

- A. Stay on the planet
- B. Take off

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[483]

Your resolve wavers for a brief moment as you near the walls of the Clathran garrison. Although the occupying force here is relatively small, the soldiers are not dispersed throughout the city. Instead, they are content to remain in this one area, running the occasional patrol to be sure the natives aren't openly planning an uprising. It is a funny situation. The Sirissians are more advanced than the Clathrans, but the Clathrans are more numerous and better armed. You wonder what would happen if the Sirissians ever wanted to try to oust the Clathrans from their worlds. The garrisons could be defeated easily, but the whole Clathran Navy is another matter. You doubt the Sirissians could take on the Clathrans all by themselves. They would need to cooperate with other races — which is just what you would like to get them to do.

After spending some time checking on the patrol schedules and the general comings and goings of the occupying forces, you feel you know enough to try to break into the garrison. You wait until the time when the fewest soldiers are on guard duty, then wait for the point about three quarters of the way through their shift. This is when the soldiers will theoretically be at their least attentive. You hope this will result in a successful entrance into the building.

Taking a deep breath, you begin to make your way toward the door you have chosen as your entry point. Just as you are about to force your way through the door, you hear the ominous sound of approaching footsteps.

You use one of your special abilities to prevent the passing patrol from noticing you. After a heart-stopping moment when the door refuses to open, you manage to convince it to swing inward and you enter the building. Although you feel well protected by your ability, you decide to leave as quickly as possible once you have accomplished your mission. Speeding through the corridors, you note the various offices and storage rooms, finally deciding on the darkened office of the Data Inspector, whatever that is. Carefully unlocking the door, you enter the deserted office. You use infra-red glasses to avoid having to turn on lights and begin assessing the available information you find here.

The Data Inspector has a good selection of reports, observations and recommendations on the Sirissian race. Making copies of all files you can reach conveniently, you are soon finished with your little espionage mission and heading back out the door. Leaving everything the way you found it, you leave the office and travel along the corridor until you are once again near the side door through which you originally entered the garrison. Checking first to make sure there are no curious Clathran soldiers outside, you exit the building and return to your ship.

Sitting down in your comfy chair, you skim the various reports. You can see nothing that will aid you in your fight but maybe the Sirissians will be able to make use of the data you were able to collect. When you are ready, you have only to plot the following option to take you to the Underground city. There you can try to make contact with Controller 1, and hopefully convince him that the Sirissian Underground should help stop the Survey now — before it is too late.

You now have a new option:

(29HVR9) (7 phases) Return to the rebel city and try to speak with Controller 1.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[484]

The probing and testing phase of the battle is over; the real fighting has begun. You are ready for it. Your ship, the *Jihad*, is one of the most powerful single-pilot ships in the Arm, the equal of many of the larger vessels in the battle. As you accelerate toward the active battle zone, a thought comes to mind unexpectedly: the realization that your career in space has now gone on longer than your prior career in the Church. Both have taken some strange turns. You never dreamed, when you first crossed the Boundary so long ago, that you would someday find yourself fighting in a space battle halfway across the galaxy. Or did you? What was it that inspired you to name your ship after the holy wars of one of Earth's ancient religions? Deep inside, did you know all along where your path would lead?

Clouds and coils of energy flash around you as you close in on the Clathrans. You begin evasive maneuvers, knowing that even at this distance you are within range of a lucky hit from the deadly Clathran Monitor ships. Your own weapons systems are coming to full power. On all sides you can sense the power and patterns of tractor beams and plasma bolts, insulting space and time and causing ripples in the Dual Space Interphase. The Interphase has continued to narrow since the moment of the Dodecahedron's destruction. Eventually it will narrow to its old ambient width of ten years ago. But its fall is not a uniform drop like the draining of a pool; it's more like the ebbing of the tide in a storm-swept sea. The suddenness and violence of the Dodecahedron's destruction has created turbulent waves and eddies in the Interphase, which you can feel sweeping over the battlespace as you approach the enemy.

You exchange fire with a small Clathran cruiser passing you at an oblique angle; it's on its way to engage a group of Riallan ships behind you, below, and to port. Before you can think about turning to pursue it, you are closing on a Clathran battle group which is harassing a lone Hadrakian vessel, perhaps a sole survivor or a lost straggler from one of the task forces that probed the Clathran formations earlier. You aim for the largest threat, the Monitor, and close in. You've faced such ships before, but never one as large and well-escorted as this.

"Get ready," you tell the computer. "I figure we have one free shot at this Monitor before the battle group figures out we're a threat. All power to the weapons, then switch to shields and ECM defenses when we've shot our bolt."

"OK, Boss. Our Host System, who art on Heaven, hallowed be Thy logname. . ."

You close on the Clathran like a thunderbolt hurled by some Olympian god. Shaking off the Monitor's halfhearted counterattacks, you unleash your weapons upon the Monitor's hull. A spot glows cherry red, and the nearby weapons bays stop firing. But the ship is still intact, and now it turns its full attention to you. You fly away with death seeking you from astern as the Monitor counterattacks. Just in time you get out of tractor beam range, and your shields absorb a few hits with minimal damage. On the corner of your tactical display you see that the Hadrakian has escaped, and the Clathran battle group is changing course to intercept the Riallan force nearby.

". . . and to the republic, for which it stands. . ." The computer hasn't quite got the hang of prayer yet, but now's not the time to discourage it. You make a loop in two axes to come around for another attack on the Monitor. This time you are under intense fire from the beginning of your attack run. You trust your defenses to misdirect most of it as you close to optimum range. You feel a tractor beam take hold of you at the same moment you fire your own weapons. A larger spot on the Clathran's hull glows red, and this time chains of explosions run away in opposite directions around the ship's equator. The tractor beam disappears, and the Monitor's warp fields collapse. Some of its weapons may still be operational, but it won't be going anywhere. A very lucky shot.

". . . and keep myself physically fit, mentally great, and morally awake. Amen."

Two dreadnoughts from the Monitor's battle group lock in on you; the others have maneuvered to trap the Riallans, who are now headed your way pursued by two other battle groups. You close with one dreadnought and damage its forward screens, but before you can escape, the two ships catch you in a crossfire. One powerful force beam hits you despite your defenses, disabling one of the axes of your drive system. By the time you can restore power, you are surrounded by Clathran ships. Outnumbered, you fight with all the weapons and countermeasures at your command. For a while your shields hold, but under fire from every direction they begin to weaken. The enemy has figured out your position and capabilities and is no longer fooled by your maneuvers and electronic jamming. You try to escape, but there's nowhere to escape to; the battle rages on all sides, above and below to the limit of your sensor range, and the Clathrans outnumber the Allies in all quadrants.

You feel a strange disturbance run through your ship, and for a moment you think another tractor beam has locked onto you. But it isn't a tractor beam; it's one of the wavelike peaks of the agitated Dual Space Interphase moving past you. This gives you an idea. There is power in being able to manipulate Dual Space. Can you use the disturbances to help you in this battle?

"Computer," you instruct, "take over the weapons systems. Fire on automatic, and use the defenses at will. Don't do anything fancy. Give me a full-sphere view on the main screen, and superimpose the tactical display on top of that. I'm going to try something."

The trick, you remember, is to see more than what's real, to see all the possibilities stacked up in infinitesimal layers in all the dimensions of Dual Space. Relocating reality in Dual Space is a simple act, not much different from levitation or telekinesis or thinking or any other mental power. All of them involve Dual Space in some way. They work by shifting reality within the Interphase in certain specific limited ways. But actually there are no limits. Any change is possible, if you know what the reality is and where to move it to. That's the hard part, to be able to find the point in the Dual Space Interphase that makes the change you want. You have that power. Or at least you used to, before the Dodecahedron was destroyed.

You concentrate on what you see on the screen, but at the same time you visualize the more complex layers of the Interphase around you. The first thing you see is a cloud of missiles coming toward you. In the microseconds before they arrive you imagine a different reality, one in which the missiles are improperly programmed and explode harmlessly in space. You search until you find that reality in Dual Space, and then you exert your will to reach it. The missiles, improperly programmed, explode harmlessly in space.

You notice that the computer has fired your main battery of beam weapons at the dreadnought that launched the missiles. The energy is deflected by the Clathrans' screens; only one beam gets through, and that impacts harmlessly on a reinforced section of hull. In Dual Space you find a different reality, one in which the beam that penetrates the shields hits just a hundred yards higher, where there is a vulnerable power conduit. The beam strikes the power conduit and the ship's forward screens go dead. Your next shots destroy the dreadnought.

The Clathrans fight on, their attacks failing while yours succeed, never realizing — having no way to realize — that you are pulling reality itself out from under them. By the time the Riallan force arrives, the Clathran battle group is in disarray. With room to retreat, the Riallans have a chance to regroup, and you join them against the two battle groups chasing them.

Your power over Dual Space varies during the battle as the Interphase echoes with the aftershocks of the Dodecahedron's destruction. Sometimes the Interphase widens greatly for a few moments, allowing you to deactivate whole weapon systems or change the positions of ships in flight; sometimes the Interphase narrows so sharply that you can't do anything at all. The Riallans seem to understand what you're doing, and they must be able to sense the Interphase as you do, for they begin timing their attacks to correspond with the widest Interphase periods and grouping to protect you when it narrows. But you can't take note of everything at once, and the Clathrans still outnumber you. Your concentration is stretched to the limit as you fight to even the odds. One Monitor is destroyed, and then another. Both of them take several Riallan ships with them. The cruisers and dreadnoughts, knowing that things aren't going as they should, but unable to understand why, fight all the more ferociously. But slowly, you and the Riallans gain the upper hand. The Riallan ships have strengths of their own: the ships of the New Riallans, from the Fringe, are fast and accurate, while the open frameworks crewed by Middle Riallans from the Arm are impossible to damage with most weapons. You fight until the Clathrans are in retreat — and then you don't let them retreat. You don't want them coming back and attacking from behind when you move on to another enemy group.

Now you have a substantial force uncommitted. This gives you the opportunity to help other Allies who are outnumbered. Your task force moves from sector to sector, evening the odds by destroying a cruiser here, a dreadnought there. When the Clathrans concentrate their forces against you, you fight them to the last ship, in skirmishes that can take an hour or more; otherwise, you try to stay mobile and help wherever you can do the most good.

As the battle goes on, the Interphase continues to narrow slowly. It becomes more and more difficult to concentrate, and more and more difficult to save yourself and your Allies from each new threat. Just when you decide you'd better warn the Riallans that you can't beat another Monitor, you realize there aren't any more Monitors around.

The Allies have gained the upper hand. It is now the Clathrans who are outnumbered in most sectors. Sirissian forces have joined the Allies during the battle, coming in from behind the Survey Line to take the Clathran rear guard by surprise. And another force, a force of human ships from the Home Worlds, has also arrived, bearing insignia identifying them as the Human Space Navy. Humanity has come in force to the Arm at last, three hundred thirty years after the Founders left in fear and hope.

One single Monitor ship remains intact, near the planet Hadrak. As the remainder of the Clathran force retreats, a Hadrakian task force surrounds the Monitor. They disable its weapons and drives with precise fire, hoping to board it and capture the valuable information in its computers. You learn that it is the flagship of the Clathran force. If the Allies can capture it intact, it will make your victory complete. You ask to join the boarding crew, and the Hadrakians agree. You maneuver your ship into position and wait for the opportunity.

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Before you sign up for the Arena, you spend some time walking around the Enclave. This is as far as you can go on a Hadrakian world until you have defeated an opponent in battle, so you make the best of it. You notice that the Hadrakian adults in charge of the Enclave are all female. This makes sense, since the "Settled Ones," as the females are called, hold all the instructive and administrative jobs. On the other hand, the Hadrakian young who are training to take the test in the Arena are all male. Once a male reaches maturity, he must win an Arena battle to earn his citizenship. He will then wander across the empire for twenty years as a "Homeless One" before changing into a female and settling down.

When you have seen what little there is to see here, you arrange to visit the main office where you will be able to sign up for combat in the Arena. Within hours, you appear at the scheduled time for your appointment. The Enclave administrator seems quite pleased by your decision to seek citizenship through an Arena combat. Since this will be your first time, you are assigned for instruction to one of the Enclave instructors, a Settled One by the name of Grishka.

"The Arena is a time-honored religious test here on. . ."

"Yes, yes," you say. "My computer already told me all of that. Just get to the rules."

"You are impatient for one so scrawny, human. . ." The claws of her forelegs snick out and in.

"Sorry," you reply sheepishly. Grishka, you realize, probably outweighs you by a hundred kilos. Just because the females are "settled" doesn't mean they have lost any of their fighting capability. What they have traded for the brashness and sheer brute strength of their younger selves is an ability to assess a situation calmly and act when the time is right. You have a strong suspicion that you should never underestimate a Hadrakian female, either in or out of combat.

". . . but that is understandable in one who is anxious to achieve divine favor. The rules of the Arena are very simple. At the beginning there are two moving bodies. At the end there is only one. No weapons which might harm the spectators — such as guns, laser pistols, flame throwers, or explosives — are allowed."

"That's it?"

"That's it. Do you desire instruction in simple claw-to-hand fighting?"

You politely decline. You're not sure you want to let the Settled One in on some of your secret abilities. Having nothing more to teach you, she announces that your combat will occur promptly in the morning and advises you to get a good night's sleep.

You are awakened by Grishka at first light and led to one entrance of the Arena which borders the Enclave. She motions you inside and then closes the door behind you. You find yourself in a stone-lined corridor, leading without interruption to another door at its far end. Above this second door is a timer, slowly ticking down towards zero. It looks as if you have about ten minutes to wait.

You take advantage of the chance to calm yourself down.

When the timer reaches zero, the door swings open. Taking a deep breath, you step through, and find yourself standing on a hard-packed sand surface at one end of the Arena. The capacity crowd of kneeling Hadrakians gives an appreciative cheer as you and your opponent enter.

At first glance you are relieved. You do not have to fight a female Hadrakian. Instead, you will meet with a young male Hadrakian! The sheer power of his muscles as they ripple smoothly under his gleaming fur is even more impressive than in his older female cousins.

Your opponent is smiling, or maybe he is just baring his fangs. For him, this is a way to gain his citizenship just as it is for you; however, he has all of his family watching from the crowded stands which circle the dirt floor of the Arena. Drawing a rather impressive piece of cutlery from a sheath at his belt, he begins a rapid advance.

Go now to the CGM.

✠ STOP ✠

[486]

“Morikor,” says your computer. You are on another tri-axis hyper-jump, enjoying another quiet day in space.

“That’s a dirty word, computer.”

“But Boss. . .”

“I know, I know. Sooner or later we’ll have to get it over with. Just don’t use that word again, okay?”

“Whatever you say, Boss.”

⌘ STOP ⌘

[487]

Your path is blocked by an obstacle you have encountered before: the Clathran Survey Line. With thousands of ships arrayed across the galaxy as far as you can see, the Survey Line will always make you nervous. Fortunately, this time you’re approaching the Survey Line from the back side, not the front. You see many large freighters, harvesters, troop carriers, and heavily armed dreadnoughts — all facing in the other direction. You pause for a moment while you decide whether you really want to continue along your plotted course. Then you realize it shouldn’t be very difficult crossing the Survey Line *backwards*; all the Clathran detection systems are designed to stop ships from crossing the other way. So you continue with your course as planned. Sure enough, the Clathrans aren’t expecting you, and with a little care, you make it through safe and sound.

Analyzing the Survey Line again from the front side, you conclude that it really shouldn’t present much of a problem to you any more. You know exactly what tactics to use, and you have sufficient technology and skill to make your way through. From now on, crossing the Survey Line will slow you down by a day or so, but that’s about it.

Therefore, in the future, when you cross the Survey Line, the CGM will simply give you an appropriate message, charge you an extra phase, and continue your turn.

You have been charged one extra phase for crossing the Survey Line this turn.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[488]

You have seen no marks or traces left behind by the explorers who visited Golgotha in the past. But you know they came here. If Golgotha were a normal planet, their experiences and secrets would be lost in the past. But you know that Golgotha can play tricks with time. Perhaps you can still reach them.

⌘ STOP ⌘

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