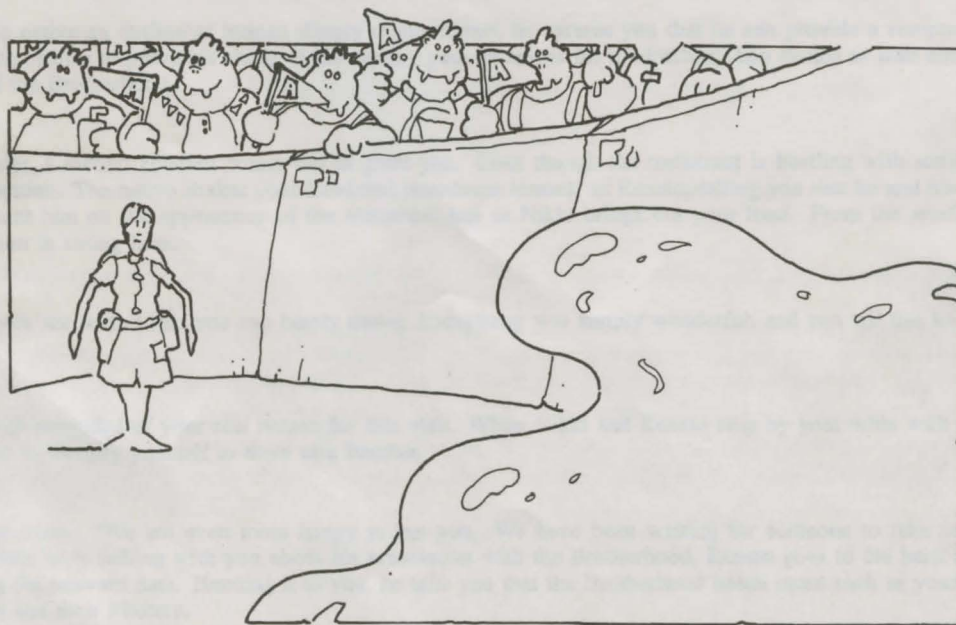


STAR SAGA: TWO™

BOOK D

TEXT 211-281



BOOK D

STAR
SAGA: TWO™

TEXT 511-581



[211]

You have the directions given you by Brother Ultermalen on how to make contact with the two Unarian allies, Nikki and Renato. Following the instructions, you soon find yourself standing in front of. . . a restaurant! The sign above the door reads, "Remeo & Julliant: Fine Unarian Dining." Despite your uncertainty, you have faith in Brother Ultermalen and enter the establishment.

For the first time on this bizarre world, you actually feel at home. The inside of the restaurant is airy and well-lit, with cozy tables placed throughout the small dining area and cheery music playing quietly in the background. A Unarian resembling every other native you have met on this planet, a plump purple sack with two big round eyes, four bouncy tentacles, and a pink baseball cap, joggles forward to greet you.

"Welcome, alien creature!" he cries, shaking one of your hands with a tentacle. "I am Nikki, owner of 'Remeo & Julliant.' Will you honor us with your presence for dinner?"

After giving the native an outline of human dietary requirements, he assures you that he can provide a sumptuous meal. You like this alien and give him the chance to prove his claim. After seating you, he leaves for the kitchen. You decide to wait until the end of the meal to bring up the topic of the Brotherhood.

A short time later, a second Unarian comes out to greet you. Even though the restaurant is bustling with activity, the proprietors give you extra-special attention. The native shakes your hand and introduces himself as Renato, telling you that he and his cousin own and run the place. You compliment him on the appearance of the restaurant just as Nikki brings out your food. From the aroma, you can tell that you made the right decision in eating here.

An hour later, you are so full that you can barely move. Everything was simply wonderful, and you tell this to your new friends. They seem quite pleased.

You are suddenly reminded of your real reason for this visit. When Nikki and Renato stop by your table with a marvelous desert, you give the proper signal to identify yourself to them as a Brother.

"Ah!" Nikki exclaims. "We are even more happy to see you. We have been waiting for someone to take our latest reports back to the planet Dahl." While he is talking with you about his association with the Brotherhood, Renato goes to the back room and returns with a microdisk containing the relevant data. Handing it to you, he tells you that the Brotherhood needs more such as yourself to help win the war against the Clathrans and their Masters.

You finish with your meal and try to pay the bill, but the two Unarians will not hear of it. They bid you farewell and good luck in your mission. You wave to them as you leave their wonderful restaurant.

You wish you could select *this* option again!

❖ STOP ❖

[212]

Your ship's alarms all go off at once. You rush to the bridge. "What is it?" you ask your computer.

"It's the Survey Line. It's moving towards us."

You look out the front viewscreen and see a vast array of Clathran spaceships coming directly at you.

"Don't panic," you tell your computer. "We know how to deal with this. Just repeat the maneuvers we used last time. The Survey Line should pass right through us. By the time they get wherever they're going, they'll forget we were ever here."

Sure enough, your clever tactics and advanced technology allow you to stay where you are while the Survey Line passes by. Unfortunately, just because you can elude the Clathrans doesn't mean the rest of the galaxy can. The Clathrans are gobbling up more space, occupying more planets, and getting that much closer to the Fringe — and the Home Worlds.

You have been charged an extra phase for avoiding the Clathran Survey Line as it moved through your location.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[213]

The Hadrakians in the back offices of the resistance headquarters are so busy that you sense the only way to attract someone's attention would be to tell them you have finished the Bomb and that it is ready for detonation. You cannot do this, though, since it isn't true. The frantic activity you see on all sides makes you itch to get moving and accomplish something!

As you understand it, the only thing required to complete the bomb is the expertise of one of the human adventurers. All the parts are in place; someone with the right skills just needs to tinker with the machinery. Hmmm. You wonder what you can do to expedite this matter.

Any player that has the bomb and wants to try to make it work can plot the following option:

(7W8TKG) (7 phases) Tinker with the Dual Space Inversion Bomb.

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

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[214]

“Dual Space is very simple, human. It is the sum of all possible realities.”

“I see,” you say, not seeing at all. “But what determines whether a reality is possible or not?”

“That’s a very perceptive question for one who is utterly baffled. Whether a reality is possible or not is determined by the dual space interphase. In times of high interphase more realities are possible than when the interphase is low. To answer your next question: the concept of dual space can be used by those entities or machines with the ability to shift from one reality to another. You have learned some abilities in your travels which seem to violate what you consider to be physical laws; using these abilities simply represents changing realities, from a universe where the glass of water is over there to one where it is over here.”

“And the interphase determines how much dual space is available?”

“Exactly. The interphase has recently been very low, and races like yours which have evolved in the past few millennia have very little appreciation of the possibilities inherent in the manipulation of dual space.”

“But lately the level has been rising?”

“In the rest of the galaxy, yes. In the Core the interphase is always high, and here in our prison on Darkwhistle it is almost infinite. The Clathrans have built an asteroid-sized machine, called the Dodecahedron, that is artificially raising the interphase level throughout the rest of the galaxy. This has been very bad for humans, by the way.”

“How do you mean?”

“Ahhh! That’s a separate discussion.”

⊠ STOP ⊠

[215]

Humming, you take out one of your velvet canvases and prepare to paint your next masterpiece. Your subject will be a still life, so you program the food-o-matic to conjure up a variety of yummy mangos, apples, bananas, and a plump pineapple. Getting out the acrylic paints, you squeeze a little of each color onto your palette. Reaching for your favorite synthetic camel hair brush, you begin dabbing paint onto the canvas. Suddenly, the bowl of fruit starts careening across the galley table. Your still life no longer is, but you do not have too much time to dwell on it since you are being pitched wildly about the galley as well.

“Boss, we’re under attack,” your computer announces over the intercom.

“By whom?”

“We just came out of hyperspace near the planet Ghorbon and, without warning, an orbiting satellite scanned us, then began firing.”

Another blast rocks the ship.

“Boss, do something or we’re going to become space debris!”

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[216]

Powerful x-ray beams scan across your ship, and the Clathrans immediately know that you are no asteroid. Soon you are completely surrounded by a whole fleet of Clathran destroyers. Gulp. There is no way out.

You are captured.

✘ STOP ✘

[217]

Your interphase variometer fluctuates, indicating that Qualathara is one of the Dual Space anomalies you are looking for. To attempt to research dual space here, plot the following option:

(FBLWMT) (3 phases) Research dual space on Qualathara.

✘ STOP ✘

[218]

You try to outrun the Clathran scout, but you can't. He's faster than you are. Perhaps if you had some special capability to evade Clathran ships. . . but you don't.

"You can't run from me, Human," the Clathran hisses. "Surrender or be destroyed."

"I'll surrender when the galactic core freezes over," you retort, as you let loose a salvo from your weapons.

Go now to the CGM.

✘ STOP ✘

[219]

"One thousand fourteen, one thousand fifteen," you mutter, staring intently at a blown-up version of Vanessa Chang's star map. The sheer boredom of travel in hyperspace has reduced you to counting all of the stars present on the map. Needless to say, there are many more suns than there are habitable planets.

"Hey Boss, look what I found."

"Just a minute," you tell your trusty computer as you try to finish counting the stars in one particular sector.

"No really, Boss. This is very interesting!"

Rats, you have lost count. Since you have no reason to keep from looking at the front screen where your annoying bucket of bytes is displaying whatever it has found, you grimace and look up. You see the number "38962" on the screen.

"So, what does it mean?" you ask impatiently.

"I don't really know, Boss. I found it lodged in the bottom of the memory space on the computer chip containing Vanessa Chang's map."

You make a note of the number, intending to keep an eye out for the place where it might be of use.

✧ STOP ✧

[220]

Noting the mass of documents on the conference table, you jump to the conclusion that there is news to be had. Unfortunately the news is rather disappointing. . .

“We most regretfully report that another of our colonies has fallen prey to the Survey and has now been blockaded by the Clathrans. It has thus been necessary to extend our covert economic assistance to a second location. We encourage you, if you are ever able to land on any occupied Hadrakian colonies, to look into trading opportunities; you may find them to be unusually lucrative.

“The onset of the Survey was again met with but token resistance, as we are still not prepared to take on the Clathran Navy. Perhaps we can engender a degree of complacency in the occupying forces, while at the same time preparing a full resistance effort to be launched at a later date. This might improve our chances.”

Your own travelogue feels anticlimactic as you ramble right through it, and a lump in your throat makes its presence felt as you ponder what you might do to help barricade the path of the Clathran juggernaut. With the formal briefing at an end, you walk the corridor leading to the rear of the building.

✧ STOP ✧

[221]

You fall asleep and immediately drop into the dreaming state. This is happening a lot lately, a side effect of the widening Dual Space Interphase. You actually look forward to your dreams, as they are becoming a great source of information.

In this dream, you feel an immediate chill as if you are floating naked in deep space. Your body is not its normal self; instead you have taken on an almost bag-like form, one that doesn't need things like air or pressurization to survive. In your new body, you float toward a superstructure that has appeared in front of you. It is a latticework planet, entirely artificial and inhabited by other gas bags such as yourself. One floats over and greets you.

“Welcome to Middle Rialla,” it whispers in your mind. “We are pleased that you could come. Would you like to look around?”

You send an affirmative reply telepathically to the creature and it starts to rotate, whirling faster and faster. What is going on?

“Don't be alarmed,” it tells you. “This is a dream; it isn't supposed to make sense. Won't you join me in a whirl?”

You have nothing better to do, so you begin to rotate as well. After each revolution, you can see a red glow deep inside the planet. You stop your turning (which was beginning to make you nauseous anyway) and try to make your way to the source of the red glow. The other being floats in front of you, stopping your progress.

“I'm sorry, but only Middle Riallans can go to the Flame Jewels.”

“But I am a trader,” you cry as you are hustled away from the area. Your companion even goes so far as to give you a push back out into space.

“No, you are only a dream. Come to Middle Rialla for real if you are interested in Flame Jewels.”

You wake up with a start, feeling very odd and slightly dizzy.

✧ STOP ✧

[222]

Once clear of Morikor and its deadly defense systems, you head immediately for the subspace transmitter. Contact with Para-Para comes almost at once.

"Is that you, Turner?" Schottky's voice.

"Turner here. Have you been receiving Clathran transmissions from Morikor? I rigged up a device to send you all the communications coming from their war room."

"I know. We've been getting all of their military commands for the Survey for several days now. This is just what we needed. Their tactical maneuvers give us broad hints about the capabilities of their ships. Orders for supply and re-arming help us assess the size of their force — vast — while the communications process itself tells us about their subspace equipment and computer support. With all this data, we should be able to figure out exactly how to deploy the Home Worlds Space Navy to maximum advantage when the Clathran-Hadrakian war reaches its critical stage."

"Good. So you don't have any more missions for me, right?"

"I wouldn't say that."

Of course not. The core will freeze over the day he runs out of things for you to do.

"Margaret Ellison is with me," Schottky continues.

"Captain Turner, this is Margaret Ellison." Her voice jumps in where Schottky left off.

"I knew he'd bring you into this, Ellison. He knows I can't refuse you."

"Congratulations are in order for your excellent work on Morikor."

"Thanks."

"Unfortunately we have learned something rather distressing from the Clathran communications."

"Namely?"

"Throughout their signals, we've heard the Clathrans referring to 'the Directive,' or 'the Third Directive,' but were unable to learn what this meant. Now we know. The Third Directive is: Exterminate All Humans."

"So? They've never been friendly."

"Don't you see, Turner? The Clathrans were responsible for the Space Plagues. They thought they'd destroyed humanity, but now they *know* they're wrong. In the signal, the Supreme Clathran Leader was issuing orders for 'the formation of an advance fleet, to proceed at once to the Fringe and begin searching for the Human worlds.' We're running out of time, Turner."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Stop the Clathrans. Stop them any way you can. We'll keep working on the Space Navy, and send it to assist the Hadrakians if it's ready in time, but meanwhile you've got to do whatever you can from your end. Help the Hadrakians however you can. That's all, Turner. Over and out."

Yes, you must stop the Clathrans or the future will be grim indeed. Their Survey marches ruthlessly onward, conquering every planet with intelligent life. Ultimately, the Clathran-Hadrakian war represents your only hope of victory. 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. The Home Worlds Space Navy alone will be nothing against the whole Clathran Navy. Only in cooperation with the Hadrakians and the other spacegoing races of the Arm do you have a chance.

How can you help? What, in addition to what you have already done, can you do 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 *Barratry* at your command and all the items and abilities you have gained in your travels, you are a very potent force. If you do what the Hadrakians ask, you may yet accomplish things that affect the outcome of the war. You resolve to visit one of the offices of The Battle, Inc. as soon as you can.

The survival of humanity is at stake.

✂ STOP ✂

[223]

You and your ally quickly become embroiled in a direct confrontation with your two opponents. Unfortunately, two Worzellians are stronger than a Worzellian and a Human. You are disabled first, then your ally. You bleed in the mud while both your enemies triumphantly make it across to your side. You pass out.

✂ STOP ✂

[224]

The main spaceport is extremely busy twenty-four hours a day. Though you are able to sneak up to the perimeter of the spaceport complex without being detected, there is no way to walk inside without being caught. Even disguising yourself like a Clathran wouldn't be good enough, since the spaceport has many security checkpoints where you can see the guards checking ID and claw-prints. No, in order to sneak around here you will need an ability that makes you completely invisible, so the Clathrans don't see you at all. You have no such ability at the present time. Frustrated, you return to your ship.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[225]

Walking around Cloo is like walking around Bedlam. While the city is not tremendously crowded, the sheer variety of the Bluvians' actions is enough to make your head swim. Some of the natives are advocating a change in the government, some are trying to get everyone who is interested to wear only purple-colored robes, some are selling food and some are dancing in the streets. "To each their own" is the bottom line on Cloo. You actually enjoy the diversity, but it does make it difficult to locate a single individual. No one seems to stay in the same place long enough to acquire a real address.

After asking everyone you meet if they know where the capitalist Doozel is, you manage to glean some information from a Bluvian who is, of all things, turning cartwheels near the center of the colony. She suggests that you wait by the jogging trail which runs just inside the perimeter of the dome. It seems like an unlikely place to find a capitalist, but at this point you have nothing better to try.

After locating the trail, it is only a few minutes before a rather fit-looking Bluvian swings into view and stops in front of you.

"Greetings, friend. Let me guess — you are looking for Doozel."

"Yes," you begin, but are quickly cut off.

"Found him, you have. Many come looking for me, or, I should say, for my former capitalist self. But I have had enough of the business world, and now seek fulfillment by enjoying more athletic pursuits. Rather than closing up shop completely, though, I have given my store over to my three daughters. While I don't know if I approve of the redecorating they've done, I can vouch for their integrity. That's hereditary, no? Anyway, if you're looking for some Super Slip, you can find them at the 'Super Slip Sizzlemania.' No, I don't know what a 'Sizzlemania' is, thank you very much."

You start to thank him, but he's gone in a flash, before you even have a chance to challenge him to a race.

Locating the "Super Slip Sizzlemania" is a snap, as its faddish modern decor stands out, even among the anarchical environs. Doozel's daughters greet you and offer the following trades:

2 Super Slip for 1 Synthetic Genius
 2 Super Slip for 1 Fiber
 1 Super Slip for 1 Culture

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

❖ STOP ❖

[226]

You decide to take a chance. You fly your ship to the city and land in a busy Zyran spaceport. The spaceport workers are surprised at the unfamiliarity of your vessel and stop what they're doing to watch you.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Boss?" your computer asks. "We could still get out of here safely."

"Yes, I think it's a good idea," you reply, "The Zyran are an advanced race. If I can establish friendly relations with them, maybe I can get them to stop attacking human ships and start attacking the Clathrans instead."

"OK, boss, but don't blame me if this doesn't work out. Those Zyran seem awfully hungry..."

Hundreds of Zyran eyes are staring at you as you put on your spacesuit and step out of your spaceship. You walk a few steps forward and the Zyran surround you. You feel a little uncomfortable. "Hello," you say.

"Food," the mob of Zyran groans in unison, as hundreds of oozing tentacles reach in to grab you.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[227]

“Boss, I don’t care if this *is* the planet Dahl, I don’t want to land!”

“What is your problem?” you ask, exasperated by the whining tone your computer has developed.

“The atmosphere is poisonous to you and it will strip the paint from my hull, that’s what,” is the petulant reply.

“You know I need to go down there to continue with my training. Find out where the Brotherhood colony is located so we can plot our descent.”

Actually, the planet isn’t very inviting. The turbulent atmosphere is composed of highly acidic and radioactive gases. You will need to land somewhere out of the buffeting winds to keep the integrity of your ship’s hull intact. After several orbital passes, your computer reports that the only sign of life on the planet is one small village sheltered from the gale force winds by a mountain cliff.

“Good,” you remark. “That must be the Brotherhood. Take us down.”

The computer guides your ship to the ground just outside the solitary village. You don your protective suit and start looking around. The homes all stand with doors flung wide open. The ones you enter have trash and debris strewn across the floor. You do not see signs of recent habitation. The temple, located in the center of the village, is also abandoned. The only piece of furniture intact is a free-standing candelabrum. You smile when you realize what you must do. . . grasping the candelabrum at its stem, you rotate it clockwise. The sound of a stone panel sliding back rewards your effort. You have found the secret entrance to the Brotherhood. Congratulations!

You descend the stairway you have just uncovered and pass through an airlock. The sound of human voices emanates from below. The stairway continues, and finally ends at a huge underground cavern bustling with activity. You see spaceships being built, spaceships of all kinds. Partially assembled ship components clutter the floor of the cavern. You had no idea that the Brotherhood was engaged in shipbuilding on such a large scale. The Brethren are normally very seclusive; they don’t go winging around the galaxy in numbers.

A robed woman grasps your arm in welcome. “We are pleased to see that you have made it, Brother. We had word that you would be coming. Please come in and share some food.”

You accept her offer and are soon seated at a long table filled with tasty treats. When you have had enough time to sample a little of everything, you ask your host about all the shipbuilding. She explains that these ships are not meant to be used as a matter of daily routine. However, the Brotherhood needs to be prepared to act in case of an emergency. It may be necessary to evacuate the colonies in the Arm, should the Clathrans uncover the Brotherhood bases during their dreaded Survey. All the ships will be well armed.

When your meal is over your host leaves you to your own devices. You have the following options:

⟨7S8ZK2⟩ (3 phases) Mine for radioactives on Dahl’s surface.

⟨XSNZY2⟩ (7 phases) Visit the *real* Brotherhood Temple, which is down here.

⟨7P8SKZ⟩ (5 phases) Spend some time with the shipbuilders.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[228]

With your latest data on dual space manipulation you are soon back at work on the Interphase Constrictor. A simple experiment has suggested itself to you.

Turning on the improved variometer, and instructing it to survey the inside of your ship continuously, you begin to stress the interphase as best you can. First you levitate yourself, then you begin moving objects telekinetically. You bounce yourself and the objects you are controlling off of the walls. You hurl everything you can into the performance, creating an insane dance of books, papers, food, plates, pens, glasses, clothing, weapons, equipment, and yourself. At last, when your powers of concentration are strained to the very limit, you let everything fall — at the last minute dodging a heavy induction cooking pan poised directly above you.

Some time later, when you have recovered, you check the readouts on the variometer. Sure enough, just as you suspected, there were slight fluctuations in the local dual space levels during your performance.

This information gives you the key to the next step in the construction process: a means for the variometer to stress the local interphase level. Some clever re-programming of the self-sentience package is required, but with the aid of your ship's computer you are able to accomplish it. You end up with a device that can very accurately sense interphase levels around it, and at the same time can affect those levels to some extent. The problem now is one of self-reflection. The machine's performance is affected by the local interphase level, which is affected by the machine's actions, and so forth. This closed circle poses difficulties not only in paradox theory, but also in mechanical terms: how can you use a machine whose use prevents its use?

Some kind of internal shielding is obviously necessary, but at the present you have no idea of what that might involve. You will have to do some more exploring.

When you contact Brother Dikestra you tell him about the planet you have just visited and what you learned there. You end by asking him if the Brotherhood has had any luck building an interphase suppression device.

"No, Professor, we haven't. So far we can only build better and better sensors. And I fear our time may be running short. News from the Home Worlds has revealed an increasing instability in society, perhaps triggered by the appearance of psychic powers among the population. The mental disciplines of the Brotherhood may be important to us yet. Hurry with your researches, Professor, or we might not have a place to publish our results."

"I'll keep you posted."

✧ STOP ✧

[229]

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 *Quest's End*, 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 ⊠

[230]

"Boss, be careful out there. No telling what some of those alien machines are capable of doing. Remember the craters we saw when landing?"

You shiver at the thought of the blasted holes in the disk's surface. You are even more concerned when you realize that the artificial surface has to be made of some incredibly strong alloy to maintain its flat shape despite the strong tidal and gravitational forces. For a blast to make any dent at all in the material must mean that the force of the machines is beyond your imaginings.

After wrestling your way into your confounded environmental suit, you are finally prepared to venture out onto the plains of Adafa. You leave your ship and start your trek with no real destination in mind. You pass many devices that appear to be dead. Some even have been taken apart to some extent, presumably by the Hadrakian colonists. You leave these alone, since anything of interest has probably already been found.

Not far away you see a collection of small machines that appear to be functional, illuminated by their own tiny glowing lights. You decide to investigate and set off toward the cluster. Three hours later, you are still walking. Your ship and the Hadrakian dome have receded in the distance, but the objects seem only a little closer. Apparently they're much larger, and much farther away, than they appeared. When you arrive hours later, you see three devices that still show some signs of working.

The first artifact is the largest of all, towering over all the other machines on this part of Adafa. It is also the only one you've seen on Adafa whose components seem familiar. Examining the upper part of the structure from a respectful distance, you conclude that it might very well be a gigantic version of the device you use to measure the changing width of the Dual Space Interphase.

The second machine is a cube fifty meters on a side, with glowing spheres hovering near each of the four corners. One side has an opening about two meters square at its base. You reach toward the opening with one arm, and feel a faint tingling, which goes away when you quickly pull your arm back.

The third device is a bell-shaped form, many stories tall, suspended just above the surface of Adafa. You cannot tell if it is levitated above the surface by unknown forces, or if it is merely supported by a central pillar that's out of sight. There is about two feet of clearance from the bottom of the unit to the ground. Feeling no untoward effects when you reach under the edge, you take a quick peek up inside the interior of the bell but see only darkness. To get a better look, you will have to actually crawl under the outer walls and look.

You now have the following options:

{5BEW3T} (4 phases) Take a closer look at the largest artifact.

⟨CGF4LQ⟩ (7 phases) Enter the cube in order to study it further.

⟨5GE43Q⟩ (4 phases) Crawl up inside the bell-shaped structure.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[231]

The crowd is small, but cheers your "loss" enthusiastically as you are awarded the red sash of citizenship on Innermost. For them, you are a connection with the larger galaxy, a source of trade goods and information denied to them during the Clathran occupation. For you, they are a means of exploiting Innermost's economic and technological wealth with some measure of protection from the invaders.

Your first week as a citizen is spent learning how to dodge the Clathrans while still achieving your goals. Although the enemy maintains a larger force on Innermost than on any other occupied planet (because of the rising level of hostility), with the Hadrakians' help you can generally stay out of their way. What you cannot avoid is the reek of garbage wafting in the warm city air.

Everywhere you go, you find yourself dodging either Clathran vermin or heaps of decaying trash. After a few days, you are not sure which you find more detestable. At first, you merely think the Hadrakians have had a difficult time since the occupation. Then you decide this is a ploy on their part to make life miserable for the invaders. Finally you learn the real story.

Innermost, it seems, has an indigenous race as well as the two visiting races. The natives are supposedly intelligent creatures, bipedal, humanoid in many respects, and are called Wesmlots (this word comes from the Hadrakian phrase wesle-smellots, indicating a type of being who does not care about itself or its environment). This race, for some unfathomable reason, allowed their planet to slide into ruin from pollution and overpopulation. You do not have the chance at this time to speak to one of these aliens, but you find them intriguing. In your travels so far, you have seen neither hide nor hair of them.

By the end of the week you know what options are available to you here:

⟨U7788K⟩ (3 phases) Take a look at the Innermost Interstellar Market.

⟨ZX2NHY⟩ (7 phases) Make contact with The Battle, Inc. and do what you can to help the Hadrakian cause.

⟨UX7N8Y⟩ (5 phases) Seek out a small factory where a device called a Dimensional Transducer is being tested.

⟨Y768BK⟩ (3 phases) Follow up on a rumor about the availability of Cargo Bay Expansions for a good price.

⟨Q7X8NK⟩ (5 phases) Find where the Wesmlots hang out, if there are any left, and talk to them.

⟨Z92VH9⟩ (3 phases) Visit the Street of Gods for some divine enlightenment at a shrine.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[232]

You are on your way to Outpost, passing through the ring nebula that englobes its white dwarf sun, when your sensors detect a strange signal. Some sort of beam is passing through your ship, registering equally on all your sensing devices. For a few moments you feel an uncanny sense of being watched. Then the beam moves on and the feeling passes.

“What was that?” you ask your computer, normally the expert on interpreting sensor readings.

“It was some kind of probe beam,” reports the computer. “But I don’t have any idea what form of energy it was. It went right through our screens.”

“Where did it come from?” you ask.

“Probably very far away. It seemed to have tremendous range. Which means it also must be very powerful. It originated from somewhere in the Arm.”

“A probe beam. Oh, great.”

“Should we abort the landing, Boss?”

“No, there’s no point in that,” you decide. “If someone’s already spotted us here, it’s too late to run away. Let’s hope they were probing for something else.”

You complete your landing on Outpost and find the planet unchanged, if a bit less crowded than last time you were here. Your options are the same as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[233]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 3

Choosing from the remaining actions on Outpost, you decide to take a look at Vanessa Chang’s old ship, investigate Silverbeard’s commodity storage area, and then investigate the other pilots who are here. These actions will use your allotted phases for this turn. Your plotting sheet should now look like this:

Plotting Sheet							
TURN	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
1	R	L	—	—	—	—	—
2	—	A: 9ZV29H	—	—	—	—	—
3	A:XUN7Y8	—	—	A:XZN2YH	—	—	A:LZM2JH

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 3

Go to the computer and log on. Press **A** and then **D** (the **D** corresponds to the action code **XUN7Y8**) to visit Chang’s ship. Then press **A** and **B** (which corresponds to the action code **XZN2YH**) to look into Silverbeard’s supply of stolen commodities. 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 Chang’s ship, followed by the commodity storage text. You may notice that after you note these two text assignments, 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 two pieces of 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 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 ⊠

[234]

Even from a distance, the planet Holoth looks cold and brittle. Upon closer inspection, this feeling grows stronger as the sunlight causes the surface of the world to glitter like a jewel.

"What's going on down there?" you ask your computer.

"Scans show that Holoth consists of a hard, crystalline material with only small deposits of regular soil mixed in. The crystal gives off the reflections we have been seeing. It also causes the surface of the planet to be extremely jagged and uneven. In fact, there does not seem to be flat land anywhere on the planet."

"Increase magnification," you command, and the overhead screen displays a breathtakingly beautiful panorama of the world below you. Holoth is covered with glittering mountains capped by radiant white clouds, chasms plunging into mysterious depths, and crags jutting out at you from bizarre angles. You could stare at the scene for hours. It is only the appearance of a flock of winged aliens soaring effortlessly through the sky that snaps you out of your reverie.

"Intelligent?" you want to know.

"Not sure, Boss, but I am picking up data from Holoth's surface indicating that the planet has been colonized by the Hadrakian race."

⊠ STOP ⊠

[235]

You pilot your ship across the planet's surface until you find what looks like a good route to the planet's interior. It is one of the largest openings in the huge planet, a tunnel over three thousand kilometers across. Staying close to one of the walls, you descend into the depths. Eventually you pass through a smaller opening and continue inward. After a while you reach more branchings plus smaller openings that tempt you on all sides. Despite the fact that the tunnels are getting smaller, you have more than enough room to maneuver; even the smallest caves dwarf your ship.

Outside your viewscreen, all is blackness. You can only see your surroundings through images generated by your ship's sensors. Without your navigation system, you would become hopelessly lost in here. You notice that the tunnels you are passing through do not branch, like trees, into other tunnels. Rather, they interconnect like galleries, like a termite nest or a sponge. The gravitational pull of the planet acts like a homing beacon for now, but the closer you get to the core, the sooner even this clue to your location will be lost.

Long before this becomes a problem, you encounter the aliens. The first one crosses your bow, emerging from the tunnel wall ahead. It is a flickering red plasma cloud like the one you saw on the surface, but much smaller. Instead of continuing its journey and seeping into the far wall, the creature halts and examines you. Using a mixture of telepathy and subliminal meaning somehow encoded in the luminous flickering of its body, the alien speaks to you with lucid, dreamlike slowness.

"Friend or foe?" it inquires.

"Friend," you speak out loud. You don't know how the creature receives your response, but it does. "I mean no harm. I come seeking knowledge."

"Will you give knowledge for knowledge?" comes the reply.

"What I can."

"Agreed," the alien flickers. Then, with portentous slowness, it reveals, "I am Fred."

"Fred?" you ask, incredulously, hoping you don't seem rude.

"Yes, it is one of the Tenscore True Names, from which all others are derived. Someday your species may understand such things. Follow."

You try to comply but are stopped when Fred flows into a wall. After a few minutes he returns, you follow farther, and the same thing happens again. You manage on the third try to convey that you can only travel through the large open spaces.

"Already knowledge is given. My thanks for this new understanding," Fred tells you. "Perhaps this is the reason the undoers do not pursue us here."

"Undoers?"

"The solid ones that move like yourself. They come from the worlds near the core and fire thoughts that undo the patterns we make in our minds. All but a few of us have been undone in such a manner, when we try to pass beyond the fringe of this mass."

"They call themselves Clathrans," you say, making an educated guess. "They've placed weapons on the planet's surface that disrupt you if you try to leave. I saw. . ."

"I know this. Many try to reach the stars. Although some succeed, they never return. We are lonely here." The alien emanates a strong electromagnetic burst of sadness that almost knocks you over, then leads you to the largest open space you have yet seen on or in Knapt. Here, you see a dozen of the plasma aliens moving about, overlapping each other and the chamber walls with equal nonchalance. When they all try to communicate with you at once, Fred steps in and acts as interpreter.

"We have already received knowledge from you. What knowledge would you like in return?" he asks.

"What is the meaning of life?"

"We haven't the slightest idea."

It was worth a try. You try again, "How are we able to communicate?"

"We use the perfect language from which all other languages are derived," Fred explains. "You understand what we say because, subconsciously, you understand the basic tongue. We understand you through telepathy and our ability to extrapolate your language from the perfect language. Simple."

You nod, although your head is whirling from the explanation. All you really care about is that it works.

Fred also tells you that there are several options available to you while you are here. The plasma creatures know where a load of extractable Crystals is located, and they are also interested in telling you more about themselves. Finally, you could descend deeper into the planet's core and investigate an atmospheric bubble there which may or may not be home to other life forms. You have the following options to choose from:

(8XKNDY) (4 phases) Exploit the load of extractable Crystals.

(VX9NVY) (3 phases) Learn more about the plasma creatures.

(W7T8GK) (7 phases) Explore Knapt's core for other life forms.

✧ STOP ✧

[236]

Dracoll takes you to an area where the updrafts are perfect for soaring and gliding. Here you see many of the bat creatures enjoying the freedom of the air. How you envy them! Even in flight, you can see evidence of their artistic talents as they, without thought or effort, weave beautiful patterns in the sky. The bright colors of their "clothing" accent the kaleidoscopic effects and you watch, enraptured.

Soon, an interesting thing begins to happen without your even being aware of it. The patterns begin to form in your mind as well as in the sky. You begin to feel the interaction of the air, gravity, the wind and you truly begin to develop a sense that flying is a state of mind. You do not realize just how effective this way of thinking is until you glance down and see your feet floating about two feet off the mountain slope. As soon as you become consciously aware of this, WHOOMP! You are back on the ground again. Rats!

This time, when you gaze up at the flyers, you pay more attention to the sensation that develops within your mind, trying to capture exactly what you are feeling so you can reproduce it at will. It takes a while, but you once again feel the utter harmony of flight well up within you and, looking down at the ground, you see that you are once again floating!

When Dracoll sees what is happening, the Holot comes to your aid and begins taking you up into the air a few feet at a time. Soon, you are feeling very comfortable at any height and learn how to control your movements almost as well as the Holots themselves. Although they say little to you, you can feel their surprise and joy that you are able to take part in one of their greatest pleasures.

You can fly!

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[237]

You spend some time looking at the stars beyond Outpost, stars you are about to seek. Your ship is ready. The familiar stars of the Fringe are already behind you. Ahead is a whole region of unexplored space — and the Clathrans.

Then your computer speaks up.

“Uh, Boss?”

“Go ahead.”

“Sorry to break up the mood, but we’re picking up something on the subspace radio.”

“Well, what is it? Alien advertisements? Clathran warnings?”

“Actually, Boss, it’s the ISE. They must have gotten their transmitter working. I’ll put it on.”

“This is the Institute for Space Exploration calling Captain M. J. Turner. This is the Institute for Space Exploration calling Captain M. J. Turner. Come in, Captain Turner.”

“This is Turner.” You had expected to hear from the ISE, but you don’t recognize the voice.

“Amazing! This thing actually works. Of course, we probably reached every other human and alien spacer in the galaxy first, but at least it works. Where are you, Turner?”

“Identify yourself first, please.”

“This is Margaret Ellison of the ISE. Your ship is the HSNV Barratry. You were born on the planet Frontier, on the fifteenth day of the third month of the year 421 after the planet’s founding. You attended the Nine Worlds Space Academy, graduating first in the class of. . .”

“Very good, Ms. Ellison. Where’s Schottky?”

“Doctor Schottky is right here; he’s got his hands full trying to hold this beam locked. I’m Dr. Schottky’s boss, the ISE’s head of research. Where are you, Captain?”

“I’m in the Arm, neighborhood of Outpost.”

“What’s your status? Is your ship performing well?”

“Never better, ma’am. All systems are ready. I think we’re finally learning to build these things. But I have a question for you.”

“Go ahead.”

“How do I find the Clathrans?”

“If what Vanessa Chang said is correct, Turner, you won’t be able to avoid it. As for their Survey line, which is what we really need hard data on, I’d recommend that you head for the other end of the Arm, near the galactic core. Somewhere along the way, you should run into it.”

“Thank you.”

“And remember, your information is vitally important to us. Do not endanger yourself or your ship until you have transmitted a report on the status of the Survey, its size, its location, and its rate of progress.”

You think about replying to Ellison with a clever remark, but at the last second you realize this might be undiplomatic.

Then again, diplomacy has never been your long suit.

“Understood. Once I’ve spent enough time flying around under the Clathrans’ noses to learn everything about what they’re doing, *then* I’ll start endangering myself.” Silence. “This is Turner, over and out.”

⊠ STOP ⊠

[238]

Perhaps you can get some further answers by investigating the close resemblance between the Qualatharians and the Clathrans. The similarity is too close to be a coincidence. You sit and wonder how you might find out more about this and decide that a return visit to the Shrine of Space is in order. To pursue this, plot this following option:

⟨WBTWGT⟩ (4 phases) Return to the Shrine of Space.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[239]

The Hadrakians have the largest trading empire in the Galactic Arm. The economic importance of this is not lost to you. So, you ask for all information you can get about the Hadrakian colonies, including what commodities they have available for trade. In total, there are seven colonies in addition to the mother world, Hadrak. The colonies are:

Holoth: a rugged crystalline planet, home to a native race of dextrous bat creatures. It has Crystals for trade.

Rothane: a lush, green planet full of plants and animals, where the Hadrakians grow most of their Food.

Francclair: a world of warm shallow lagoons, occupied by a native race of practical jokesters. Medicine is its major export.

Sallion: a planet covered with labyrinths built by silly but creative natives. You may purchase Synthetic Genius there.

Adafa: a mysterious disk-shaped planet which the Hadrakians are studying. You can find no commodity listed for this world, but the report indicates it has other interesting items available.

Psorus: an oversized planet with giant trees and creatures that look like dinosaurs. It has Fiber for sale.

Innermost: a world that has been severely polluted by its native race. Only advanced Medicines enable them to continue living there.

You read the report with satisfaction. This information may be very useful in planning your economic strategy.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[240]

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 ⊠

[241]

“Boss, I don’t know if this is anything to worry about, but I detect a fast scout ship approaching us.”

You call out the necessary commands to prepare for battle. Instead of a salvo of laser fire across your bow, you receive a sublight message.

“Greetings, ugly misshapen one! Normally I would introduce myself in a more aggressive manner, one that involves testing your ship’s firepower against my own, but I see you are in no shape to do justice to such an engagement. I will take pity on you and recommend that you think about visiting the planet Dahl and acquiring ship weapons there. Maybe you can take me up on my offer of battle when next we meet.”

The ship’s hailing frequency closes and the arrogant captain (whoever he may be) zooms away.

“What was that?” you ask your computer.

“Darned if I know, Boss. My guess is someone with stock in Dahl’s weapons market.”

You shrug and continue on your way. Maybe you should think about upgrading your ship, though, just in case.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[242]

The bomb talks its way through the self-test sequence. “Let’s see, the munitions are functional and in stasis, that’s good. The priming hardware is functional and on safety, that’s good. The Interphase Reflector and Discontinuity Wave Generator are functional and ready to activate, that’s good. System test. . . uh oh.”

“Uh oh? What’s the matter?” you ask.

“I’m not sure. The system doesn’t work. I need technical assistance,” the Bomb replies.

You spend several hours arguing with the Bomb, attempting to learn what sort of assistance it needs. In the end, you realize that you may be able to fix it yourself. To do this, plot the following option:

⟨7W8TKG⟩ (3 phases) Tinker with the Dual Space Inversion Bomb.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[243]

“Hey, Boss, we’ve got a subspace message coming in!”

“From whom?”

“Your friend Marc Tremont. I’ll put him on.”

“Marc, is that you?”

“Sure is, Jean. How are you?”

“Well enough; it’s a big galaxy. Where did you come up with a subspace radio? And how did you happen to contact me? I thought it was impossible to know who you’d wind up talking to.”

“Actually, Jean, it is impossible. I’ve been on the radio for several days, trying to get you. I’m using the main rig here on Para-Para. John Smith asked me to get in touch with you, and find out how things were going.”

“That depends on what he wants.”

“The Institute for Space Exploration is trying to build a Space Navy, Jean. It’s obvious that’s where all this research is leading. They could really use a survivable jump engine. All of the ISE’s information sources are being contacted. Smith told me to direct you to a planet called Franclair, if you haven’t been there already.”

“Franclair. Right.”

“We’ll be in touch.” The subspace contact fades away.

Now why did that last statement sound a little ominous? You start to get the feeling that the ISE is very interested in you and your explorations.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[244]

“It’s always a wise policy to know your enemy,” echoes the Darkwhistler’s telepathic ‘voice’ in your head. “And the Clathrans are unquestionably your enemies.”

“But why do they hate humans so?”

“There are two reasons. One is because you aren’t limited as they are. They know they’re only servants, and you are not. Their hatred is born of envy, though they would deny it. They would tell you that the true reason is because their masters told them to, and for Clathrans that’s reason enough.”

“Their masters?”

“Surely you don’t think an unimaginative species, such as the Clathrans, is capable of directing a galactic conquest? Never mind; that was a rhetorical comment. The Clathrans have never been more than what they present themselves as: slavish servants of a much older and more powerful race. Strategic decisions are beyond them; they simply follow orders laid down from on high, sometimes acting on the same instructions for hundreds of years.”

“But who commands them?”

“A powerful race, as I told you. The Clathrans call them the Masters. They call themselves the Archigenitors. What we Darkwhistlers call them is not very complimentary. Ask me about them sometime.”

“Then all Clathran actions are directed by the Archigenitors?”

“Only in the broadest sense. In fact, their masters have given them only four instructions in the last fifty millennia, all within the last four hundred years: Return to the Arm. Conduct a Survey. Build and operate the Dodecahedron. Find and eradicate humans. All of their subsequent actions develop logically out of one of these instructions.”

“Let’s take each instruction in turn,” you suggest.

“Very well. The Clathrans left the Arm fifty thousand years ago. They boarded a massive Archigenitor artifact in space near the planet Qualathara, which, incidentally, is the home world of the original Clathran stock. The artifact disappeared from our space, taking the Clathrans with it. Six hundred years ago the Clathrans returned, occupying Karnossus and several other planets. Where they were in between is difficult to explain to someone who has never experienced the Core, so I will leave it at that.

“In accordance with their instructions, the Clathrans began multiplying rapidly, building their material and personnel for the Survey. This is something they have done in the past for their masters, and is designed to ferret out any living species which might pose a threat to Archigenitor domination. The Survey itself was launched a few years ago, and is now proceeding on schedule through the Arm. It will continue to move, accelerating as it goes, until it reaches the very tip of the Fringe.

“Third, the Clathrans built the Dodecahedron, an asteroid-sized artifact which they barely understand. Since it was first powered up on Karnossus, at about the same time the Survey began, it has artificially raised the galactic dual space level by two hundred and twelve percent. Why the Archigenitors wish the access level raised is unclear, even to me. Most likely they need it raised to get themselves out of the Core, or to support some new piece of infernal technology. In any case, the Clathrans understand little about what they’re doing or how it works: they only do it because they’ve been told to.

“Those were the instructions the Clathrans returned to the galaxy with, but a fourth was added a few years later, when Vanessa Chang stumbled into the Clathrans in their building phase. They captured her and her crew, and described them to the Archigenitors. The response was the fourth directive. Like the third, the Clathrans do not need to understand it in order to carry it out.”

“But why do the Archigenitors want humans destroyed?”

“Because you have free will. Your aspirations are uncontained, uncontrolled. You threaten them.”

If you wish to ask the Darkwhistlers about the Archigenitors, plot the following option:

(AS5ZE2) (3 phases) Discuss the Archigenitors.

✠ STOP ✠

[245]

You stir restlessly in your sleep, forehead beaded with sweat. You have had several dreams the past few nights, but have not been able to remember them when you woke the next morning. This is one of those dreams. You will remember it.

You are walking down a long dark corridor. The walls are damp, but you cannot see what the moisture consists of. When you reach your hand out to touch the wall, you feel a heavy liquid coat your fingers. You bring them to your mouth and taste the wetness. Your tongue registers a heavy metallic taste that you cannot identify. No matter; you feel the need to continue walking.

Sounds reach your ears, soft whispery sounds that remind you of leather wings flapping in the darkness. You try to look around, but the hall is too dark to see anything clearly. The echoes of your own footsteps are muffled by the carpeting on the floor. Where are you?

Finally, you reach the end of the corridor. Seated before you is a shadowy figure dressed in a hooded robe. From under the hood a graveled voice speaks the following words:

“Seek out the Brotherhood. The starting place is the planet Margen. If you follow the path to its end, you will learn many secrets about Dual Space and the explorations of Vanessa Chang. The Brothers can teach you many useful skills to aid you in your quest.”

You try to question the figure but the dream fades. You awaken, rubbing the sleep from your tired eyes, wondering if what you just experienced is a dream or a vision. Does it really matter?

⊠ STOP ⊠

[246]

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 hurriedly return to the safety of the shadows, and not a moment too soon. An unexpected patrol passes by the door you were trying to break into. One of the soldiers stops and inspects the door. Although you are sure you left no telltale sign, he seems to think there is something amiss. The other soldiers confer for a moment and then post a guard at the door. Rats! You won't have enough time to scout out another possible entry tonight!

You return to your ship, dejected. If only you had some sort of special ability that would allow you to get past the guards, some way to make yourself invisible or to disguise yourself as one of them, you might be able to enter the garrison.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[247]

Where's your opponent? You can't see him anywhere. The opposite door is closed; perhaps he, she or it is still behind it. Cautiously, you move towards the center of the Arena.

You have gone barely a dozen steps when suddenly the sand before you erupts and lunges, engulfing you completely and rolling you over and over, while it creeps and reaches into every crevice of your body. Your mouth fills with sand and you begin to panic as the whatever-it-is gains the upper hand. If you don't come up with something fast, you will surely suffocate. As you begin to fight back, you recall hearing something about a creature the Hadrakians call, for obvious reasons, a "sand monster." You appear to have stumbled onto/into one.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[248]

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.

After a brief exchange, you have seriously damaged the enemy ship but suffered no damage yourself. However, the dreadnought isn't completely dead yet. Its automatic repair systems are busy working and it will be operational again in a few minutes.

How do you continue?

- 1) Keep blasting away at your damaged foe, so you can put him out of commission permanently.
- 2) Use this moment to break as fast as you can for the clear space on the far side of the Survey Line.
- 3) Proceed calmly on your way, pretending you are an authorized Clathran ship on legitimate business.
- 4) Turn off all of your ship's systems, disguise yourself as an asteroid, and duck into a nearby asteroid field.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[249]

You decide to take off while you have a chance, before the ships get any closer. You head for the far side of the Outpost, putting its mass between you and them. But this protection won't last long. As you get farther from the planet, it won't be able to screen you from all three bogeys.

"What are the chances of getting away undetected in hyperdrive?" you ask the computer.

"We detected them in hyperdrive a long way away. We can assume they can do the same."

"We don't even know if they're interested in us or this planet at all," you point out. "What if we move between them and the white dwarf star? That should make us hard to see." Under thrusters, you move into position, hoping that the electromagnetic soup pouring from the star will hide you in its glare. Then you wait for the ships to either go away or prove themselves friendly.

"The lead vessel is coming out of hyperdrive, now bending into orbit around Outpost," 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 them in long visual range once they settle into orbit. With the star behind us to light them up, I should be able to give you a good image." You wait a few minutes for the ships to slow down and orbit to the near side of Outpost, then you focus your imaging sensors on the lead ship.

"It's pretty far away, Boss. This is the best I can do." A small image slowly resolves itself in the center of the screen. From this distance you can't see much detail, but you get the general idea. The ship is big. Its black and red hull gleams dully in the direct glare 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 claws stretching to grasp empty space. The fingers of the claw surround dark openings that extend 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.

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 range it's overloading all my sensor systems," says the computer.

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

"No, Boss. It's aimed at the planet. But the spill-over still overloads my sensors."

"Just make sure we stay in front of the star. Back us up as close to it as we can." 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 Clathrans are still in orbit.

You remain still for hours as the Clathran ships circle the planet. "What are they doing?" you wonder aloud.

"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 vessels, three tight beams of energy erupt in thin precise lines. They are not aimed at you but at the planet. Each beam sweeps slowly in a fixed pattern.

"What are they doing?" you whisper.

"Your guess, Boss."

"I think they're preparing to destroy the 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. We can wait and see."

You think that over. If you wait you run a risk of being detected by the Clathrans. On the other hand, it might be valuable to know whether the Clathrans succeed in destroying Outpost, and if so, how they go about it.

You may:

- A. Stay around and watch
- B. Leave the system

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[250]

While the Sallies disdain the concept of mass production of their own inventions, they do see a need for a constant supply of parts to continue their work. Among the most useful components are Gradient Filters, which are used in more ways than you thought possible. As a result, they are quite happy to manufacture these Filters and are more than happy to sell you some.

The factory is right on the edge of the Hadrakian business district, good news for you since this means you will not have to brave the twisting depths of the Sallion section of the labyrinth. You soon find yourself outside the factory; from the crowd entering through the doors, you surmise that the next shift is just coming to work. Following them inside, you approach the front desk to get information. The Sallie working here is actually hunched over a complex collection of electronic wiring from which a pleasant musical sound can be heard. You are sure the musical device has nothing to do with Gradient Filters but, from what you have learned about the Sallie culture, any creative or inventive action is allowed and even encouraged.

The native lifts her head at your approach and smiles a greeting at you. "Can I help you?" she asks, and you tell her you are interested in learning the going rate for Gradient Filters. She tells you that you can buy a Gradient Filter for the following:

1 Culture + 1 Phase Steel + 1 Radioactives + 1 Super Slip

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[251]

"So you wish to see how your allies, the Hadrakians, are handling themselves? Very well, step closer."

The Darkwhistler hovers overhead, and wraps you in its tentacles. You have a fleeting sensation of warm, raspy, pressure, and then things are spinning around. . .

You stand in the back of a large room. Maps of the galactic Arm line the front wall, covered with specks of light representing ships, or fleets of ships. In front of you are dozens of Hadrakians, working at communications or computer consoles, or walking purposefully in or out. It is evident at once that you are in the operations room of the Hadrakian High Command. You see two Settled Ones off to one side, staring at the maps and talking.

You drift closer, and in the process discover that you are a ghost. A Hadrakian walks right through you, without so much as a blink. You can hear and see, but you cannot be heard or seen.

"I still say it's a risk," says one of the Settled Ones.

"Of course it's a risk," responds the other. "If war were safe, we'd never stop doing it. We must make our stand when the Survey reaches Hadrak, and hope that enough other races join us to turn things in our favor."

"But why should they?"

"Because alone they're no match for the Clathrans, just as we're no match for them on our own. Everything depends on our diplomatic efforts."

"And how are our efforts progressing?"

"We've sent emissaries to the Riallans and the Zyran, but so far we've received no answer. The Sirissians, beyond the Survey, are said to be ready to rise in revolt, if we can only show them the optimal time. Inter-species cooperation is difficult for us, and difficult for our neighbors, but I am hopeful that they will see the force of our arguments."

"What of the humans?"

"We've seen a handful, no more. They're powerfully equipped, but unless they come in greater numbers they'll be little help to us. Why do you ask?"

"It's said the Clathrans fear them above all others. They must be a powerful race indeed, and might make good allies."

"I can't see it myself. The humans I've met have been small and scrawny and nothing very special."

The conversation, and the rest of the control room, fades away. You soon find yourself corporeal again, in your own body back on Darkwhistle. You have much to thank the Darkwhistler for, as you return to your ship.

✂ STOP ✂

[252]

You sincerely love roaming around the crowded bustling streets of Sirissi. Having your toes stepped on and your body constantly pummeled has done a lot to lessen your enthusiasm for exploring on foot, though. The dust alone, raised by so many tramping feet, is enough to choke you. Also, the flashing in and out of the planet's inhabitants — yourself included — is extremely eerie. You try to take a minute and establish exactly what happens when you disappear. After several minutes of staring at your reflection in a nearby glass window, all you can tell is that your body disappears for an instant while you continue to perceive the world as if nothing weird was happening. How curious!

After several hours of studying the phenomenon on your own, you decide that if you wish to learn more about it, you will have to speak to the Sirissians. Also, you are curious as to how the aliens can live with such overcrowding, not to mention the added pressures of the Clathran occupation force. You now have two new options:

(K7D8CK) (7 phases) Study the social effect of the extreme overpopulation and see how the Sirissians handle this problem.

(T7G84K) (7 phases) Look into the mechanical aspect of the phasing effect and try to find out what is causing it.

✂ STOP ✂

[253]

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 ⊠

[254]

The Hadrakian landing beacon guides you to Sallion's capital city. On the way down, you get to see how the city is laid out, and boy is it peculiar! The streets intertwine in all kinds of unnatural ways to form a giant three-dimensional maze. Roads twist and turn in odd directions, many leading to dead ends. Barricades block off some intersections, and at other crossings one path crosses over another with no connecting lane. The city is just one large labyrinth. How does anyone ever find their way around?

You touch down at a spaceport in the walled-off visitors' Enclave. Since this is a Hadrakian colony, you will not be permitted to leave the Enclave until you prove yourself by winning a combat in the Arena. The thought of a randomly picked opponent makes you a little uneasy, especially since the Hadrakian idea of being "favored" by the gods is to expire during the combat.

Leaving your ship, you head over to the administration building and present yourself to the Settled One on duty. While your registration is being processed, you glance over your shoulder and see a male Hadrakian delivering heavy equipment to several of the offices in the building. Instead of using a cart to help wheel the heavy equipment around, the Homeless One is making many trips, carrying each item by hand. You can see his muscles bulging under his white fur as he struggles with his load. He has made his job more difficult than it needs to be, but that is his intent. Hadrakian males are not stupid, but just enjoy challenging their physical strength.

You turn back to the female who is handling your application. She is large, even for a Hadrakian, and she spends several disconcerting minutes watching you. You are at the point of wondering if there is something you have forgotten, like your clothes, when she speaks.

"As you may be aware, we allow any race to fight in the Arena and prove themselves, but you seem rather small and weak. Our medical facilities are usually able to treat the losers of Arena combats successfully, but I cannot guarantee that if you fight in the Arena you will come out alive. Please be careful."

She finishes this speech and calmly turns back to her paperwork. You stand there for a moment until you are sure she has nothing further to add, then turn and find your way to the visitors' quarters where you have a room waiting. You think about the Settled One's remarks and are somewhat offended by them. When you are prepared to fight in the Arena, you have every intention of winning. Vanessa Chang did it; so can you.

You now have two options:

{SBZW2T} (3 phases) Visit the Enclave market.

{PBSWZT} (7 phases) Take your chances in the Arena and attempt to win citizenship on Sallion.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[255]

You feel a bit self-conscious as you put the chit into the prayer box. You feel even sillier when the statue comes to life and speaks to you! "Welcome, my child. What do you wish?"

Looking around to make sure you are not being overheard, you ask for your heart's desire.

"There are many ways to achieve that which we most desire. Some ways require special training before we can continue on the path we have chosen. Go and find that training, then return to me." With that, the statue stops moving and resumes its silence. What a strange message! You leave the temple, thinking about what it might mean.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[256]

You fly at top speed through the x-ray beam, alerting the remainder of the Clathran Navy to your presence. Soon you are completely surrounded by a whole fleet of Clathran destroyers. Gulp. There is no way out.

You are captured.

☒ STOP ☒

[257]

Your ability to blend in among the Clathrans helps you most of all when you visit the Intelligence Office, a division of Clathran Military Command. You slip into the large room which makes up the center of the Office, and then simply stay there, drifting here and there, observing whatever you can.

One of the functions of the Intelligence Office is the issuing of coded orders for the captains of Clathran ships. You wander around the room, scanning order sheets wherever you can see them, until you learn to recognize the Clathran navigational coordinate system. Then you start taking notes on what you read.

Eventually, you figure things out to the extent that you can spot immediately the difference between orders directing a ship to the Survey, and orders commanding it in a different direction. Then you start examining orders of the second sort. You learn that most of the traffic in that direction is headed for the Karnossus star system. Convoys of transport ships travel between Karnossus and the Survey, bringing soldiers, huge amounts of material, and new ships to the front. The cargo manifests and the number of trips ordered imply that Karnossus must be a production center of tremendous capacity. No single planet could possibly produce that much. Even a dozen planets would be too few. The flow of ships, supplies, and Clathrans from Karnossus drives the entire Survey Line.

In addition, you notice that the top level orders directed at the Survey originate not here on Morikor but on Karnossus. The top command levels of the Clathran military government must be located there. It appears that Morikor, as important as it is to the Clathrans, is only a nerve center for Survey control and communication. Karnossus is the brains and heart of the entire Clathran Empire, including the Survey Line.

Karnossus has long been identified as a critical target by your Hadrakian allies, although its location was uncovered only recently. Your observations confirm that Karnossus is located in trisector number seven hundred seventy-three on your map.

There is no planet dot for Karnossus on your map, since Vanessa Chang only marked the planets for which she knew the exact coordinates. However, since you know the exact coordinates for Karnossus, you can now go there by simply flying your ship to trisector number seven hundred seventy-three and plotting "Land."

☒ STOP ☒

[258]

The Darkwhistler regards you silently for a moment when you tell it you wish to *journey* to the Core.

“Very well, human, but understand that it will be a brief trip. *They* can feel our presence, and will not tolerate our intrusion for long.” The Darkwhistler snakes out a tentacle, drawing you into its shadow. . .

Colors scream around you. Energy like you’ve never known. The power to remake the galaxy, and the knowledge that it’s been done, over and over again. The cavalry riding over the hill to save the day. Sleeping minds, woven into the giant stars of the Core, sleeping until they can expand again. A small ship, forever falling. A star that is not a star, but an engine of creation. A human mind, a human touch, passing the centuries in minutes of time. A restless stirring, like a wild animal prodded in its cave. A year spent wandering the passages of a giant metal tomb. A ship like no other. A flicker of awareness, a casual toss of the mind, and you are suddenly.

Wrenchingly.

Back on Darkwhistle.

“I told you it would not be long. The Archigenitors can sense my presence.”

“There were Archigenitors there?”

“Of course. Where did you think they had gone?”

That question needs no answer. You thank the Darkwhistler for its time, and return to your ship.

✧ STOP ✧

[259]

You are greeted by the seemingly oversized mural of a Hadrakian meeting a Clathran in naked combat. A lone Settled One, poring over documents whose significance you cannot ascertain, is nearly lost against the artistic backdrop. Your presence, however, is not lost on her.

“We thank you for your continued concern, human. Although we lack specific coordinates, the Clathran Survey has been steadily advancing. The immediate threat to our colony on Innermost cannot be understated. We have attempted to provide the citizens there with the commodities which may be in short supply following a Clathran occupation, as free trading will undoubtedly be very difficult under such circumstances.”

You somberly agree with that assessment, although in the back of your mind, you wonder if trading conditions on an occupied planet might even be more favorable for anyone who could get the most urgently needed commodities through.

You relate the more recent discoveries of your explorations to the Hadrakian, who seems interested, though not terribly effusive. When you are done, she stands, indicating the end of the formal briefing. You leave the room and make your way to the corridors and offices in the rear.

✧ STOP ✧

[260]

Once again you enter the Brotherhood temple on the planet Dahl. Going immediately to the enormous Chamber of Prayer, you take a moment to light one of the many candles you find along the walls.

“Welcome back, Brother,” booms a familiar voice. You turn and greet Brother Ultermalen as he enters the Chamber.

“If you are ready for the test, we can begin. . .”

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[261]

The Enclave trading center is a dull and lifeless place. The quiet Hadrakian Settled One who meets you here is patient and answers your questions regarding available trades. When you hear the deals they have to offer, you wonder why they even bother staying open. When she sees your look of disbelief, she smiles, showing her gleaming white fangs, and politely suggests that you obtain your badge of citizenship in the Arena. Then you will be eligible for the much better trading found at their regular marketplace. Until you can leave the visitors' Enclave, you are completely at their mercy regarding trades. For what it's worth, this is what they have to offer here:

1 Crystals for 1 Phase Steel

1 Crystals for 1 Tools

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

❖ STOP ❖

[262]

You have never been able to catch the actual moment your ship leaves the empty void of hyperspace and enters the comforting confusion of normal space. One minute the front viewscreen is blank, while in the next you can see the familiar stars of your galaxy. This time is no exception. Maybe it was when you blinked, but you missed the transition yet again.

“Boss, we're here,” your faithful computer announces, “and so, I'm afraid, are the Clathrans.”

“Uh oh,” you grunt. “What kind of trouble are we in now?”

“No trouble yet. We're still too far away for the Clathrans to see us. They have a monitoring station and several destroyers orbiting the planet Mardahl. They also have a small garrison on the surface. It looks like they occupied the place rather easily. There's no sign of any resistance by the natives. Shall I scan the planet in more detail?”

You reply in the affirmative and settle back to wait for the readout. While the results of the scan are being printed out, you begin to read them. You learn that the planet Mardahl is smaller than your own home world and has a slightly lower gravity. The indigenous intelligent race here resembles large birds with long legs, like ostriches. Their society is fairly advanced technologically, and they have a spaceport located in the capital city of Pillionia. The spaceport is now closed, however, due to the Clathran occupation.

Before attempting to dodge the Clathrans and land, you decide to study the culture a bit more. When dealing with advanced races, you have discovered that it is a good idea to know as much as you can about them. You instruct your computer to give you more detailed data on the structure of Mardahlian society. Your screen begins to flash, and your Universal Translator stutters and babbles as your computer simultaneously accesses every available electromagnetic transmission from the planet's surface. You can practically hear the bits whining as its

advanced software sifts and sorts the data, attempting to assemble a coherent picture of life on Mardahl. The preliminary analysis is completed in ten minutes, and your computer begins to feed you the results.

The Mardahlans apparently have a two caste system. The ruling class is composed entirely of the Mardahlian people, who live carefree lives and have no need to do anything productive. The second class is comprised of beings called Androids. These creatures perform all of the manual labor and essentially keep the planet running.

Possibly as a result of all their free time, the ruling class has a very complex hierarchy, which is also very brutal. Entertainment and news transmissions from the surface are full of pictures and accounts of duels, apparently fought at the drop of a hat over any trivial insult. The foppish upper-class Mardahlans all travel heavily armed, even though much of the dirty work of dueling is done by their android servants.

The bird-like aliens are long-lived but not very prolific, so it's probably just as well that they don't do the fighting themselves. Their population is exceedingly small, but stable. They reproduce by the female laying one very large egg every ten years; eggs fertilized prior to laying hatch in three months, producing a baby chick. Unfertilized eggs calcify and are often painted and used for house decorations, doorstops, or large paperweights.

The androids outnumber their masters and appear to be completely docile. There are two types of android. The first has green-tinted skin, large unblinking eyes, and wild hair; these androids do not speak. They are the more numerous of the two types and are the ones who perform the menial tasks. The second type has bronze skin, is bald, speaks, and generally seems more "alive" than its mute cousin. In fact, the bronze androids actually give orders to the green androids and appear to run the show. They serve the Mardahlans directly and participate in the dueling as surrogates for their masters. Curiously, both types of android are humanoid in shape, an unusual choice for their avian builders. You would have expected the Mardahlans to construct a servant class more in their own image.

You finally decide to try to land on the planet, using your skill and technology to elude the Clathran forces. There are only a few orbiting spaceships, and the garrison on the ground is rather small as well. This should be to your advantage. The fact that you've already crossed the Survey and know something about Clathran patrol patterns also helps. You instruct your computer to take you down, aiming for the outskirts of Pillonia.

Fortunately enough, you make it, landing your ship in an empty field. You head for the city, intent on a few hours of careful exploring. The Clathran presence seems to be minimal, and you bear enough of a resemblance to the Mardahlans' bronze androids that you can move about freely.

You now have the following options:

⟨8SKZD2⟩ (3 phases) Locate the Mardahl commodities market.

⟨VS9ZV2⟩ (4 phases) Visit the personal weapons market.

⟨8PKSDZ⟩ (5 phases) Spend some time at Mardahland, a popular attraction among the Mardahlian natives.

✂ STOP ✂

[263]

“The following is a human condition status report, broadcast via subspace by the Institute for Space Exploration, on Para-Para:

“This will be the last of these reports, as extrapolated figures from our own societal programming teams indicate that even with maximized anti-crowding precautions, many of those on Para-Para will fall prey to SAPS within the next year. Across the Home Worlds the story is much the same: isolated points of stability dot a landscape prowled by maddened hordes. Disciples of the Final Church of Man have established sanctuaries, where their powers serve to protect and counsel those in the immediate vicinity. The Space Navy and several para-military groups have shown the discipline and firepower to retain their autonomy, but they fight only on the defensive now. Elsewhere chaos reigns, and it seems unlikely that humanity will survive this onslaught, unless the cause of the galaxy’s rising dual space level can somehow be discovered and corrected. Of all the questions facing us, that one remains the most essential. Why is the dual space level rising? When will it stop?

“End of transmission.”

⌘ STOP ⌘

[264]

“I crave your pardon, sentient master,” says the Gatekeeper when you answer the last question correctly. “How could I ever have doubted you? I will correct my programming at once. Please enter.”

The Shrine of Space is a huge open area, ringed by countless balconies, stairways, and landings on which meditating Qualatharians are standing or sitting. None of them pay you any attention at all; apparently, if you’re good enough for the Gatekeeper, you’re good enough for them. The center of the area is dominated by a large metal cube, at least three stories high. Approaching closer, you see that the cube must once have been in the middle of some much vaster structure, since here and there around its surface are places where supporting girders have been sheared off, or walls neatly bisected.

On the south face of the cube is a slight ramp, leading to the interior. You ascend it, and find yourself standing precariously on the rungs of a horizontally placed ladder. Looking around, you can see that there are ladders arranged throughout the interior of the cube, in various orientations, apparently to allow whatever once used this device free access to the thousands of controls which line all six interior faces of the cube. Even the floor, the side of the cube directly below the ladder you are standing on, is covered with indicators, keypads, monitor screens, and arrays of colored circles that may once have been status lights, all of them labelled in a language you cannot begin to recognize. Your translator, which has functioned faultlessly on both written and spoken Qualatharian, is of no help with the markings on the controls.

You spend several minutes gazing around the inside of the cube before becoming suddenly quite claustrophobic, like you were being stuffed head-first down the narrow end of a funnel. You leave the Shrine as quickly as you can, and get back outside to the clear crisp air. Your one constructive thought, as you walk back to the Visitors’ Quarters, is that the cube which you have just left was not built to be used on the ground. Employing all six sides of an interior bespeaks a space-going origin, and a builder used to working in zero gravity. Clearly, the artifact in the Shrine of Space is a machine of some sort — or rather, a part of one, sheared off from the rest in some sort of cataclysm. Just as clearly, the Qualatharians know this. They are technologically advanced themselves, not ones to worship something just because they don’t understand it.

So why, you wonder, do they worship this particular artifact? Was its function once so powerful and important to them that, even now, they retain some dim racial memory of it? That would explain a lot. But it also raises more questions than it answers.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[265]

Your opponent, not realizing what is happening, is taken off guard by your attack. You wound him and knock him to the ground. At the same time, your ally finds your other opponent and attacks him, gaining a significant advantage. Things are going well for you, but your foe will be back in commission any second now, which is not good since he will probably be able to overpower you easily.

What do you do next?

- A) Continue fighting, hoping to finish your opponent off.
- B) Demand that your opponent surrender, now that you have him on the ground.
- C) Run as fast as you can across the field, trying to make it across before your opponent can recover.
- D) Camouflage yourself in the mud and crawl the rest of the way across the field.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[266]

The boredom of traveling through the monotony of hyperspace begins to eat into your brain. You do not even notice that you have been idly tapping your fingers to some silent rhythmic beat for the past twenty minutes. But your computer has.

“Er, Boss?” it asks, receiving no reply from you.

“BOSS!”

“Hmmm?” you answer, ceasing your blank stare at the front viewscreen.

“Maybe, instead of that wonderful tapping noise you’ve been making, you would prefer listening to a radio message we are receiving?” Is it your imagination, or is the computer annoyed at you for some reason?

“Sure, let’s hear the translation,” you respond briskly. A message! This could be important.

“Greetings, Traveler!” comes the voice over the radio speaker, unaccompanied by a visual image. “I was wondering if you were familiar with any nearby planet of the Hadrakian empire? I am on my way there and wanted to know if the economic opportunities there are as fabulous as they are rumored to be.”

You make a nondescript noise. Long ago, you learned that the best way to get information is to let the other person do all of the talking.

“Well, if you aren’t sure about that, perhaps you can tell me if the Hadrakian shrines are as informative as I have heard. Some beings claim that the Hadrakian gods are real, and that each time you pray at the shrines you get important information.”

“That’s what I heard,” you tell your mysterious caller. Just as you are about to start asking your own questions, the call terminates. Try as you might, you cannot get him back on the line. You wonder if the caller’s comments were really sincere, or if the Hadrakian Empire has taken to advertising.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[267]

You wake up in the hospital having lost a lot of blood. Your health is low, but at least you are alive and all your limbs are intact. Citizen Estal tells you that you failed the test. He regrets that you did not do better, but that there was no dishonor in your loss. In fact, you may try again if you wish. The option is:

(PNSYZ6) (7 phases) Retake the Worzellian War Academy's Final Exam.

You also find yourself very impressed by the quality and sophistication of the medical care you've received. You suppose they've had enough practice in treating wounds to make them masters.

If you would like the Worzellian doctors to heal you fully, you may select the option for medical treatment, which you already know about, at your leisure. This will cost you one unit of any commodity, your choice. At first, you think this sounds a bit costly, but then you remember what your dear old grandma used to say, you get what you pay for. Maybe the Worzellian hospitals have an added plus for visiting them.

❖ STOP ❖

[268]

The *Run Amok* was quite a formidable ship even before you added the jump engine to it. After all, you fought and destroyed a Clathran dreadnought when you crossed the Survey. You have the finest weapons and defense systems in the galaxy, and the *Run Amok* may be the fastest ship ever.

Your tactics are simple: You have joined with one of the Hadrakian task forces, but you do not engage the Clathrans in the same headlong way that they do. You hold yourself out on the fringes of each skirmish, using your ship's superior speed to dart from individual duel to individual duel, pouring a few shots into each Clathran opponent and then skipping away again. Your interference generally allows the Hadrakians to gain the upper hand. . .

Until the Clathrans change their tactics. You have savaged one Monitor-based battle group and are starting on another one, when you abruptly realize that the Clathrans are no longer heading for the larger Hadrakian ships. Instead, they are coming right for you. The entire fifty-ship group seems to have been instructed to make the *Run Amok* their primary target.

At first you are successful running away. Because of your advantage in speed and maneuverability you can lure the Clathrans after you, then drop them into ambushes prepared by your Hadrakian allies. But soon the Clathran commander catches on to this tactic, and changes his orders.

Now three dreadnoughts pursue you directly, while the rest of the Clathran force darts ahead to likely interception points. They begin to hem you in, and every time you stop to destroy one opponent, the rest draw ever closer. The Hadrakian forces, largely ignored by the Clathrans, are scoring some damage on the flanks, but things aren't evening out fast enough to save you. At length, a near-miss broadside from the Monitor sets off all your shield alarms, and you see that there is nowhere else to run. Nowhere in normal space, that is.

"Computer, prepare to activate the jump engine. We have to get out of here!"

"To Franclair, Boss?"

You think about it as a salvo tears through your defenses, causing your forward shields to collapse in electromagnetic ruin. Franclair would be a lot safer than here. But if you wanted to be safe, you wouldn't be here to begin with.

"No! Override the settings. I want a short jump to somewhere near the battle zone."

"The Jump Engine's not calibrated for it!" protests the computer. "We could blow up like a supernova!"

"Then make sure we do it near the Clathrans," you command. The ship shudders under the impact of some sort of small projectile smashing into your rearmost cargo bay.

"Uh, Boss. . ." Too late. You are already sprinting for the sick bay, and the cryo tank that will protect you during the jump.

You arrive there, and find that the last near-miss has done some damage. Green gelatin covers the deck, while the shattered remains of the cryo-tank leer at you like the lopsided smile of the class bully. In shock, you bend to pick up the Flame Jewel from the muck on the floor, even as your computer takes control of the situation.

"Start bonding, Boss. The shields are going over the top, and I won't be able to maneuver for long."

You stare at the Flame Jewel, not even registering the computer's words. There is a lurch, and you fall to one knee, bringing the Flame Jewel to within six inches from your nose. You can tell because you can see it, six inches away, through the red haze that surrounds and protects you. . . timelessly. Things are suddenly very peaceful. . .

And they stay that way, right up until the moment you feel a sharp pain in your left ankle. Looking down (and you realize with some relief that you are looking with your own eyes), you see that your foot has gotten caught in the remains of the cryo-tank. You are vaguely aware of the violent maneuvers your computer must have put the ship through, to hurl you off the floor and into the tank. You wonder how long you were trapped in the Flame Jewel before your computer was able to stimulate you free. You realize that you are still clutching the jewel in your right hand; you stuff it quickly away in an inside pocket.

"Status?" you call out.

"Alive and alone, Boss, a safe distance across the Survey from Hadrak. The auto-repair systems are functioning, but I think you'd better get up to the bridge. I'm picking up some strange ships on the tri-space scanner."

You disengage yourself from the tank and stand carefully. Your ankle is cut, but not broken, and you can still walk on it. You hurry to the bridge, dripping green slime.

"I think the Clathran Monitor was inside the jump field when I triggered it, Boss. They didn't come out the other side with us."

"Good riddance. Now where are these ships you detected?"

Your viewscreen changes to give you a long-range view. Hadrak is off in one corner of the display, with the Clathran forces slowly gaining the upper hand. The *Run Amok* is many light years behind their lines, near the center of the screen. At the top, the display shows another large force.

"Are they moving?" you ask.

"Not at present. Do you think they're Clathran reinforcements?"

"That would be most likely. But I don't understand why they're not rushing towards the battle. We'd better scout them out before returning."

"Very well, I'll move us closer."

"Jump us there, if you can."

"But what about you, Boss?"

"I've got the Flame Jewel right here, computer. I don't think the cryo-tank is necessary."

"But Boss. . ."

"Can you shock me awake in this chair?"

"Well, yes."

"Then let's go." You let your mind flow into the Flame Jewel. Seconds later you feel a sharp stinging in your posterior. Jumping up, you drop the Flame Jewel, once again breaking the bond, with you restored to yourself. You immediately check the tactical display.

Individual ships are now recognizable, or would be if you'd ever seen their like before. One thing is certain — they're not Clathran.

“Who...?”

“Sirissian, I think. Their commander is calling us now.” No wonder you didn’t recognize them; it’s been hundreds of years since the Sirissians flew openly in Clathran space.

“Open a frequency, computer. Attention Sirissian vessels! This is Captain Jean Clerc, of the human ship *Run Amok*. How may I assist you?”

“Can you guide us to the battle, Captain Clerc? I fear we may be too late.”

“Follow me, and let’s hope not!”

With the weight of the Sirissian forces coming in behind the Clathrans, and with your own newly-discovered ability to make quick, tactical, use of the jump engine, you soon turn the tide of battle. You personally destroy two Monitors, hitting them a dozen times each and jumping clear between each salvo. The Sirissian forces that accompany you prove to be fierce and relentless fighters.

The Hadrakians and their allies soon rout the remainder of the Clathran armada, sending many ships into a headlong retreat. All that can be caught are destroyed; no one is under the illusion that the Clathrans will not some day return.

At length there is but a single Monitor left, surrounded by an entire Hadrakian task force. The Hadrakians are firing at it very carefully, attempting to render it harmless without damaging the valuable computers within. Eventually, you learn, they will try to overwhelm it by boarding, in the hopes of capturing secret Clathran tactical and strategic data.

Intrigued by the prospect, you ask for permission to join the boarders. It is quickly granted, and you maneuver the *Run Amok* into the ring of encircling ships.

✧ STOP ✧

[269]

You spend several hours going over the Dual Space Inversion Bomb blueprints, then gingerly open the outer cover and begin to tinker. Soon you have taken it entirely apart. You even have a good idea of how it works. The main components are the Interphase Reflector and Discontinuity Wave Generator. These two devices have conflicting effects on the Dual Space Interphase nearby. When the bomb explodes, both fields will intensify in a sharp pulse which, combined with the action of the Dodecahedron itself, should create an explosion sufficient to destroy the Dodecahedron and much of the Karnossus star system.

The overall effect, you realize, is not all that different from the normal operation of a Jump Engine. The main difference is that whatever is annihilated in this explosion won’t reappear anywhere. Whoever designed the bomb must not have understood this connection. The design won’t work because it doesn’t take into account that the bomb might simply jump away, like a Jump Engine, the moment it detonates. It’ll explode impressively enough, but it won’t do much good if the explosion happens on the other side of the galaxy.

The solution is to maintain a perfect balance between the fields, so that the Jump Engine effect won’t move the Bomb anywhere. This is tricky to do. You decide you’ll have to add completely new circuits to the Interphase Reflector, the Discontinuity Wave Generator, and the main control unit. You’ve never before considered the problem of how to cause a Jump Engine to make a jump of *zero* distance, and you doubt anyone else has either, but your knowledge and experience in Jump Engine technology makes a solution possible.

When you finish, you are certain that you have done everything you can to ensure that the device will work. You switch it on.

“Bomb! Engage self-test.”

“Certainly! I love to self-test! Let me see now...”

✧ STOP ✧

[270]

Fortunately, you do not need a guide to lead you to the area where the Bluvian Culture is located. You do not really enjoy seeing the senseless destruction of property that takes place any time you are near a Bluvian mob, so you take yourself over to the buildings that contain the art and collect enough to fit into a cargo bay. You make every effort not to look too closely at the hideous stuff. It's hard to believe, but Bluvian art may be even uglier than Bluvians themselves.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[271]

The small brown, red, and white world of Keros floats beneath your orbiting ship. You spend a brief moment thinking about appearances and how deceiving they can be, as the planet below is the picture of tranquility. You know differently, though. The constant quakes, volcanic eruptions and tidal waves make visiting Keros somewhat dangerous.

Yet, you know there has been a small population of intelligent beings who have managed to survive the drastic planetary fluctuations for eons. Keros is certainly an interesting world with strange secrets. With this thought, you instruct the computer to bring the ship down outside a village near the biggest volcano on the planet. There you will stay with your old friend, Bassins, and her family. You plan to take her up on her offer of hospitality and besides, you love spending the evenings telling adventure stories to her children. Some of your stories are even true.

The landing is smooth and uneventful, and you soon find yourself walking the short distance from your ship to the outskirts of the village. Following the main street into the center of the village, you arrive outside the door to Bassins' home. Her husband Smam is there, practicing his jumps for an upcoming Jump'r'crunch event. You spend the next several hours watching his technique.

As night begins to fall, Bassins and the children come home. Sim and Del shriek in excitement when they see you and beg for some of your wonderful stories after dinner. You modestly comply.

A few hours later, Smam announces bedtime for the children, who loudly complain that they are not even sleepy. You decide to set a good example by stretching and yawning and saying that you have had a long day and are ready for bed yourself. Everyone heads off to their rooms; you sleep soundly.

When morning comes, you wake up, dress and have breakfast with your friends. Now you have the whole day ahead of you.

You have the same options as before.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[272]

The outfit that sells automated cargo drones is located alongside the spaceport. You notice that this is one of the areas around Jewel where the Hadrakians have not been at all successful in regenerating the land. The Settled One in charge of drone sales explains that this is the only place that ships or drones can take off or land. If ships try to go anywhere else, there are violent storms that are impossible to fly through. You ask why this is the case. "Only Deresha knows," she says enigmatically, refusing to elaborate any further.

She is willing to sell you a 5-bay cargo drone, however. The price of the drone is:

2 Culture + 2 Crystals + 1 Phase Steel

Note that if you already have a drone and you purchase one now, the CGM will keep only the drone with the greater cargo capacity. The complete rules for using drones can be found in the *Host Guide and Player Reference Manual*.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[273]

You do not have all the items needed to build a Cloaking Ray. Take another look at the plans and try again.

✂ STOP ✂

[274]

What you need is information from Golgotha's past. Even in Dual Space, past and future are not the same. Alternate futures branch frantically from every point, quickly swirling away in turbulent eddies. There are not so many alternate pasts: a considerably lower order of infinity. But can you reach those pasts in the Dual Space Interphase? Does one of the dimensions that collapse perpetually around Golgotha give you a road to other times? It seems reasonable; you need only sense the direction of time's subtle currents and move against them. But when you try, nothing happens. Simply to travel in time is impossible. There is no version of Golgotha's past where you were there.

There are alternatives. A time can hold memories of earlier times. Everything that makes up a moment is composed of past events, condensed like vapor on the surface of a mirror. From one single present there is too much information lost to time to reconstruct the past. But here you feel the pressure of every possible present. The Interphase holds them all, and between them you might find the pattern of the past hidden like the image in the bewildering swirls of a hologram print. But to search out details and clues won't help you find it. Instead, you must open your mind to the whole pattern — which means letting go of your careful mental grip on Golgotha's present.

You begin with an image of a space ship. Perhaps it is your own ship at rest nearby that puts the idea in your mind, or perhaps you reason that whoever added Golgotha to Vanessa Chang's map must have visited in a ship, sometime in the recent past, three hundred years or so ago.

The ship arcs down from the sky, shifting in surreal silver shapes. You follow its trajectory; it is well over the horizon, and in your mind you follow its sweep around Golgotha's sphere. It is landing — no, it is taking off; you are seeing time in reverse. The ship is named *Fool's Errand*, and it is piloted by a woman of indeterminate age: now young, in the extravagant flight garb of the old explorers; now middle-aged, wearing the uniform of the Space Patrol with Admiral's insignia; now old and grey, wrapped in brightly colored afghans, an antique sword-cane at her side, piloting by love and hate and memory. In another time, younger but not so young: she stands alone in a cage of phase steel, listening to the words of her enemy: "Is it possible they have no limitations?" Now she has come to Golgotha. Her face is white with horror. She whispers, "So be it." And prepares to leave. . . Earlier, she stares entranced, facing the ground, gazing into the center of the planet as if into a crystal ball. Invisible futures swarm around her. . . you widen your view to see what she sees, what she saw. The thought hurls you

headlong into chaos. Past and future mix violently, a flicker of emotions and images. In space, a wave of Clathran ships washes from Core to Fringe, sweeping all aside in its path. But they're not Clathran ships; they're something else, but the image is gone before you can grasp it. In an office on Endaur, safe behind the Boundary, a sealed message is delivered. The reply is smuggled out a day later: "Yes, Brethren, I will come," and the *Fool's Errand* takes off, leaving no word behind. Earlier, the woman escapes from the Clathrans. Later, she meets with a ship of holy men and women who tell her of a place called Golgotha. There she will see many futures and fly away toward the Core. She gazes into the planet while a voice speaks to her about the destiny of her people. But the image shifts further into the past; she is gone, yet to arrive, and a larger ship is there.

The Archangel, bearing a crew of holy men and women from the Home Worlds, is landed on Golgotha. They have come seeking wisdom and the secrets they believe will restore their fading creeds. They have spoken to aliens and stood under strange skies, searching for evidence of gods whose dominions are not limited to a single planet or species. Fate alone has guided them to this world. It does not yet have a name; these clerics of Archangel will soon give it the name "Golgotha," but that hasn't happened yet.

Brother Eric, commander of the vessel and leader of the Quest, is speaking to the others. "Is there any doubt about what we know? Does anyone deny that what we've seen is a true vision of the future?"

"The snares of the devil. . ." begins a man wearing a suit and tie, but his voice trails off.

"I would think," says a woman wearing the symbols of the Old Religion, "that the devil would tempt us with visions of what we might want to become, not horrify us with what we cannot avoid."

"We can avoid destruction," points out a man in white robes. "We saw two futures. The second. . ."

"No!" interrupts Eric. "We will not start down that road. We've all seen that much."

An elderly woman in priest's robes, wearing a crucifix around her neck, asks: "What way, then? What can we do?"

"Ha," says Eric. "What can't we do?" His voice turns upon itself with irony. "No, it's a hard choice. We cannot change the future, not without becoming what we know we cannot. Nor can we change or forget what we know. We can keep the secret, but others will find it, when they come here. We're trapped. We can't change our destiny. But perhaps, Father. . . perhaps, we can change mankind."

"The third road," she says. "But it was so faint, so small a chance. Some of us didn't even see it."

"It's there. It must be there. And the chance is worth the sacrifice."

"Oh, Reverend, I wish I could believe that was true," says the neo-witch. "But for how long have we tried, all of us, and our ancestors? Often we fail even to teach them to be men. How can we hope to teach them to be gods?"

"Together, it is possible. We need to work together from now on. We need to learn a new kind of faith: faith in mankind. We must believe ourselves, in our own hearts, that this can be done."

"I believe," says a younger woman among the gathered clerics. "There's a church, a few small groups on a handful of worlds and colonies, that doesn't worship any god but teaches faith in humanity. It's called the Church of Man. I was a member as a child, before I became a Unitarian. I still carry their books with me; I have them on text files somewhere. . ."

"Be realistic," interrupts a man by her side. "Perhaps if we had millennia, we could think about change. But we don't have more than a few centuries. The aliens will soon be on their way. And sooner than that, one of the others will find this place — Chang or deVries or that crazy mystic Soulsinger. Even with our influence, founding a new church and building up its membership alone could take too long."

"In a time of upheaval, change can be easier to achieve," reflects Eric.

"What upheaval? Now that world colonization is practical, there's been less conflict than any time in the past five hundred years."

"That will change," says the Quest leader. He stands silent as if in concentration. "One way or another, that will change."

"You spoke of a sacrifice, Brother Eric," asks a middle-aged rabbi. "What is this sacrifice?"

"Almost everything," he answers.

Across the width of the Galactic Arm, a Clathran dreadnought, first of a new fleet, detects an exploration vessel from Earth at the edge of its sensor range. The captain barks orders to his helm.

The Archangel lands on Golgotha as time resumes its backward flow. You have missed some days, but they can't be reclaimed now. The collapsing realities swirling around Golgotha are carrying you faster. Other ships crewed by unknown species go and come; they rarely stay and often perish. Golgotha's field intensifies. With no images to center on, you slip faster and faster through the turbulent flow in the direction that leads from effect to cause. One thousand years mix together on the future side. Then two thousand, then ten, then fifty thousand.

Then all stops. With mind-shattering suddenness you reach the end of the causality flow, the beginning of time on Golgotha. Before this point the Interphase stands at its normal levels, impenetrable to you. But what started it? What caused Golgotha to become a singularity, a hole in the Interphase around which all of Dual Space swirls? You strain your perceptions, trying to capture the images of recent events out of the chaos.

You cannot do it. You are strained beyond your limits, and the barrier is too great. You are beginning to lose concentration, and to worry about getting back to your own present. You think of the effort it will take to find the right path through all of the converging pasts, and you experience a surge of panic. Are you lost beyond hope, dissolved in the images of the past beyond all recovery? You wrench yourself free of the fear, and that same mental twist brings you instantly back to the relative reality of Golgotha present.

You think about what you have seen. Others have come to Golgotha, and been changed by it. But it wasn't the images from the past that changed them. It was what they saw when they dared to confront the future, or rather the multiple futures to which all moments lead, on Golgotha and everywhere.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[275]

The planet is the same: orange turf and fleecy white clouds. The atmosphere contains oxygen when you test it. Leaving your ship, you immediately encounter a Darkwhistler. It may or may not be the one you've met before (you can't tell) but you act as if it is.

"Greetings, Darkwhistler," you think.

"Greetings, Human. How may I assist you?"

Your options are the same as before.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[276]

You have seen images of the past and future in your exploration of the planet Golgotha. Now, in order to complete your Brotherhood geas, you must look one step deeper.

You remember three distant futures facing you: one of the destruction of humanity, one of a galaxy ruthlessly subjugated by its human population, and one of a galaxy of peace and diversity in which the humans exist almost as gods. Clearly, the Brotherhood wishes to bring about the third future, as does the Final Church of Man. Just as clearly, they went about achieving it in a different way. But how? What is the Brotherhood's purpose? This is the mystery you must look one step deeper to solve.

But one step deeper into what? You've already seen as much as you can see of the past and future. Several times you try to repeat the visions and learn more, but you see only the same images over again. How can you explore one step deeper? You remember the words of Brother Mathus: "This will require that you call upon every bit of the humanity that your training in the ways of the Brotherhood has instilled in you." What has the Brotherhood taught you? How to fight, how to defend yourself and avoid conflict. How to clear your own mind and master your own thoughts. How mastering your own thoughts can help you master other beings as well. "We believe it is necessary only to teach certain individuals about themselves, as we and you have done through meditation and study and ordeal and geas," Mathus said. Could it be that your geas on Golgotha requires you to look one step deeper, not into the planet, but into yourself?

Again in your mind you examine the futures you saw. In two of them, humanity survived. One was horrible and one was beautiful, but in both, humans had a dominant role. What about the other intelligent species in the galaxy? What about the Hadrakians or the Darscians or the Sirissians or even the Clathrans? Did you see humans only because you are human yourself, or is there something different about humans?

You certainly don't seem all that different. You act the same and in a few cases look the same as other intelligent beings. But there are some exceptions. You can learn the mental abilities of the other aliens. Why don't they also learn those same abilities from each other? Why haven't the telepaths taught telepathy to the levitators, and vice versa? The aliens you've met just haven't been interested. They're far more set in their ways. They seem to have no desire to learn new abilities, any more than you desire to have tentacles grafted to your body just because some aliens have them.

Could that make so much difference? You ask the question aloud. Suddenly Golgotha dissolves into fragments and swirls around you as though blown by a violent gust of wind. Shapes appear in the flux, reflecting the answer that you know in your heart. You see yourself as a mouse, powerless and insignificant, confronting a dragon that looms over you like a mountain. The dragon glares at you with hatred and you know it could kill you without a thought. But the dragon is leashed, and you are free. Which is more powerful? The dragon might kill you, if you don't run away and hide. But a million years from now, perhaps the mouse's trillions of descendants will evolve wings and talons and brains — while the dragon will stand unchanged, still leashed, still enraged. The dust swirls again and you see a Clathran officer, glaring at you with revulsion. "You have no limitations," it says, and steps forward to kill you. It blasts your body into particles that are caught by the winds and swirled in circles, forming a spiral that glitters around a dense black core. Is it the core of the galaxy you see, or the core of yourself? You can't tell. A voice from the darkness demands "BRING THE MESSAGE!"

Suddenly you understand. To deliver the Message you must reach the core and enter it. This is the task that stands before you.

And not just you. This is an ordeal, a geas, that calls upon not only you, not only the Brotherhood, but all humanity. It was so you could learn how to reach and penetrate the Core that you were created with no limitations, alone of all the intelligent species in the galaxy.

Created, though, by whom? That, you sense, is a mystery whose answer is still very far away. And what happens when you bring the Message? The Brotherhood sees that the reward will no doubt equal the task itself in magnitude. The successful messengers will be transformed into the powerful benevolent beings of the third future.

No wonder the Brotherhood trains its own aspirants with ordeals and tasks. All of it is part of the effort to pass the one great ordeal of the Message. Mastering space travel, mental powers, Dual Space, and even the Clathrans themselves are just obstacles in the task. Ever since the first Brothers came to Golgotha and saw what you've now seen, they have striven toward the Core. Each Brother carries the effort forward one step, or else fails at some stage and remains there to help along those who follow.

This knowledge gives you a strange feeling of power. You feel yourself to be a part of something much larger than yourself. You feel linked to every Brother, past and future. Each of those below you in Mastery is helping to support you, while those still higher are pulling you toward their level. There is a power there that you can draw on, and a place to retreat as well. Your identity is bound up with the entire Brotherhood. If you need to, you can fade away like a ghost and all the other Brothers will keep hold of your awareness, returning you to yourself when the time is right.

And that is just as well, for you need this help now. You have gone dangerously far on the very edge of thought. Golgotha is in white noise around you, and you are lost. You close your eyes and visualize your ship, a peaceful shy, solid ground under your feet. In panic you flail randomly in the dimensions of the Dual Space anomaly, but your disorientation only increases. Only when you force yourself to relax do you feel yourself being pulled out of the flux, back to a Golgotha that you can understand. Soon you have restored Golgotha to sanity — or is it the other way around?

In the days to come you will think about what you have experienced. You now know the true motives and inspiration of the Brotherhood. But only you can decide whether this is the course you wish to pursue. Is the Brotherhood's way the right way? Should you return now to Mardahl, or take a different path? It is up to you.

[277]

Sitting in a park, watching the robotic gardeners at work, you think about your recent visit to the Shrine of Space. There's no doubt that that's where the heightened Dual Space Interphase was to be found; the question is why? The device was obviously a potent one in its time, but what sort of machinery did it control? You have been able to deduce purposes for each of the other Dual Space artifacts you have seen, and in each case learning the purpose was a key to advancing your knowledge.

No amount of pondering can help you with this one, though. The Shrine of Space was once the control center for a vast piece of Dual Space machinery, but what that machinery was intended to accomplish is beyond you.

Still, the way the ancient builders of the machine set up the controls gives you valuable insights into manipulating the Dual Space Interphase. The controls themselves hint at what sorts of things should be necessary. Even the material used to make the control center is important information.

The strangest aspect of all is the fact that the machinery of the cube is completely without power. Whatever power source it used is long gone, sheared off like the supporting beams that once held the control unit within the larger device it once serviced. Yet it still has an influence on the Interphase, detectable to your Variometer.

You begin to ponder the implications of a physics that recognizes the power of patterns and potentials, where energy is not conserved, and where effects can occur independently from causes. The cube in the Shrine of Space has no power source. But it *could* have a power source, if things were different. That possibility, though unreal, exists somewhere in Dual Space, and it's enough to have an effect on the Interphase.

You finish your pondering and return to the *Black Abyss*, eager to incorporate these insights into your experiments.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[278]

After a brief but fierce battle, you are beaten into submission. Helpless, you must bear it while the Zyran ship maneuvers into position and docks with you. The creature then slithers aboard.

You are reminded just how ugly the Zyrans are. The jumbled mass of brown arms, legs, heads and other body parts secretes sticky stuff all over the floor of your beautiful ship. It comes up next to you and examines your forehead with one of its tentacles.

"Yuck. Not food," it decides, fortunately for you.

It slithers its way back towards the hatch. Before it leaves it points another tentacle at you and demands, "Food in cargo."

You know what that means. You release the locks on your cargo bays, and the Zyran takes what it wants of your precious commodities.

It then takes off, its spidery ship fading into the field of stars. "Thank heavens it's gone," you think to yourself. Unfortunately, your dinner is gone too.

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

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[279]

You've seen no sign of intelligent civilization on Golgotha, and even in the planet's past the only life forms you saw were human visitors. You can hardly even imagine what kinds of beings could live in such a place. But there might be another kind of intelligence. The past explorers who landed here learned something. They learned it from the Interphase, from the patterns they saw in the verticils of many futures streaming from the present.

You have met and spoken with many kinds of minds in your travels — large and small, weak and powerful, living and artificial. Thought is much more common in the universe than you would have believed. It seems to arise anywhere a system of interconnected parts finds the right mixture of pattern and chaos. It arises in the neurons of human brains and the data structures of computer programs and the chemical and electrical tides of gaseous lifeforms. Why not in the complex interweaving of alternate realities around Golgotha? Perhaps the holy men and women of the Archangel learned of the future from the future itself.

✂ STOP ✂

[280]

You decide to retreat back the way you came, leaving the challenge of trying to cross the Survey Line to another day. This is probably a wise move. Your ship will remain in the trisector in which it stopped until you plot your next turn.

✂ STOP ✂

[281]

Apparently, there is no representative available at this office of The Battle, Incorporated at the present time. Instead, after a short wait, the receptionist from the outer office brings you a printout, the translation of which is as follows:

TO: All Independent Allies
FROM: V. Innvo, Marshal, United Hadrakian Forces
RE: Status of Battle at Hadrak

Up to this point, our struggle against the Clathrans has not been a great success. Though we have inflicted significant casualties on the enemy, the cost has been heavy, and the enemy has been able to bring fresh forces to bear. Without a surprise blow to the Clathran position from outside forces, we cannot hold out much longer.

It is imperative that the Dual Space Inversion Bomb be detonated at the earliest possible opportunity! Only by eliminating the source of the Clathrans' reinforcements and creating a problem large enough to divert their forces is there any real hope of turning the tide.

You consider the implications of this as you go on about your business.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[513]

The first part of the... (faint text)

§ 2705

[514]

The second part of the... (faint text)

[515]

Applying this to the... (faint text)

The third part of the... (faint text)

The fourth part of the... (faint text)

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