

STAR SAGA: TWO™

BOOK I

TEXT 561-626



BOOK 1

STAR
SAGA: TWO TM

TEXT 961-630



[561]

The Qualatharians have superb personal weaponry, which they do not normally sell to offworlders. However, using all your persuasive talents, you manage to get them to offer you the following deals:

Tight Beam Laser Pistol — 1 Crystals + 1 Culture + 1 Tools + 1 Warp Core

Stunner Shield — 2 Medicine + 2 Phase Steel + 1 Radioactives

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

☒ STOP ☒

[562]

You journey to the center of government on Tayzha, and make yourself as comfortable as you can in a conclave of their leaders. And then you talk. Visitors from space are very rare (although not entirely unknown) and the Tayzhans are thirsty for information. You, in turn, have things you wish to know about the planet.

First, you learn that the Clathrans do not come to the planet's surface. They find its polluted atmosphere irritating, and they are unconcerned about Tayzhan technological development. Provided nothing enters or leaves the atmosphere, they are content.

To your surprise, you learn that the Tayzhans were not spacefaring before the Clathrans arrived. Their understanding of physics and mathematics is more than advanced enough, but their interest is lacking. You ask why, phrasing the question gently, since you sense an undercurrent of religious dogma in the issue. Much to your surprise, you receive several answers at once.

"Because the Gods do not permit it."

"We are being punished."

"We would only destroy other planets."


"Here we are content. Let our brothers on Wythym explore."

Sifting the replies, signal from noise, you find that the Tayzhans' cusp, like that of so many other races, came to them some fifty thousand years before. Well on the way to poisoning their world in the juices of advancing technology, they were also poised to escape it, in the first great wave of interstellar expansion. One colony ship had already left, bearing a cult of environmental activists known as the Greens to a distant world called Wythym. And then the Gods came: beings of great power who arrived from space to chastise the Tayzhans for their poor stewardship of the planet. And they forbade the Tayzhans to venture forth again, lest they destroy more worlds. And in the years since, no Tayzhan has left the planet.

Confined to one world, they created a balance between themselves and the environment so that they could survive. Their planet is used to its full capacity to support the maximum number of Tayzhans. This balance has left no room for "natural" diversity or wilderness; the total industrialization is necessary to maintain the population. The Tayzhans have no regrets about this. "Which Tayzhan would you ask to give up his life," asks one, "to make room in the nutrient cycle for a member of an unsuccessful lesser species?"

It's an interesting question. Later, you ask your computer if the Tayzhans' assessments are correct.

"I've analyzed the situation here, Boss," says your computer. "The grey amoeboids are basically right. This planet is optimized right now, assuming that the definition of optimum is supporting the maximum number of amoeboids. For example, if they were to try to plant a forest, they'd have to remove something else, such as an atmosphere processing factory. With their level of technology, the factory is about three times as efficient at turning over respiratory gases as the forest would be. From their point of view, there's no gain there."

Continued 

“It makes for an ugly landscape,” you point out. “But on the other hand, the Tayzhans can see and sense in any frequency they choose. Who knows what’s ugly to them, and what’s not? I’m beginning to see why their ‘gods’ didn’t want them to colonize any more planets.”

⊠ STOP ⊠

[563]

“Hey Boss, for the record, we are back on Adafa!”

You groan at your computer’s sense of humor. You had noticed the resemblance of the thin black disk-shaped artificial world to an antique analog auditory data storage unit, but you decided not to mention it for reasons of good taste. Unfortunately, your computer suffers from no such inhibitions.

Soon Adafa appears before you, the ruins of a domed Hadrakian city and numerous alien machines spotting the landscape. You marvel at the technology of the unknown beings who built this place.

A Clathran monitor ship is still stationed nearby, ready to report any unauthorized visitors. You take care to maneuver around the monitor without being detected, and you land in the ruins of the Hadrakian city.

Your options are the same as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[564]

“Greetings, Brother,” an old man welcomes you as you enter the special room that Almed said contained historical data on the Brotherhood colonies. “You must be the one I have heard so much about lately. I see that you are interested in learning more about us. If you do not mind, I will be glad to talk with you, which should be just about as good as reading all these books. Come, let us sit and I will tell you a bit about our history. I think, had you lived three hundred years ago, you too would have been one of those with the wisdom to create the colonies in this section of the galaxy.

“When Vanessa Chang and her crew, who were all members of our order, ran afoul of the Clathrans three centuries ago, they knew that all of humanity was in danger. For some reason, the aliens were intent on eliminating all colonizing spacefaring races from the galaxy. Although they managed to escape from the Clathrans, Chang and her crew could not return to the Home Worlds in time to save them from the terrible space plague the Clathrans had sent to destroy our race.

“Chang managed to return to the Galactic Fringe, and she convened a meeting on the planet Outpost. Collectively, the leaders of various influential groups discussed the situation. Among those represented were the Cristobal space trading cartel, the Final Church of Man, several noted explorers, and a number of our own Brethren. Since the only people capable of reaching Outpost were those who had been given Flame Jewels necessary for tri-axis drive booster construction by Chang herself, the group was necessarily select and had already, in Chang’s estimation, proved worthy of participation in matters of such vital import.

“Most of those present at the meeting believed it was vital that humanity maintain a low profile until a technology capable of defeating the Clathrans could be developed. However, they did not want to alarm the populace as to the real cause of the Plague. If people learned there were evil aliens waiting to utterly destroy them, the resulting panic would have rendered these efforts futile from the start.

“Together they decided to build the Boundary on the pretext of keeping potential plague viruses from entering the Nine Worlds. Of course, its real purpose was to keep people inside, where the Clathrans would be unable to detect humanity and realize that their first plan had failed.

“Our Brothers at this meeting decided to maintain all activities of the Brotherhood outside the Boundary. Indeed, they requested transportation to a planet in this section of the galaxy, closer even to the core than Outpost. They volunteered to establish hidden colonies in

this area to better monitor the progress of the Clathran Empire. This is how our four bases in the Galactic Arm came into being. Chang took members of our order to Margen, helped us set up our colony, and then returned to the Nine Worlds to assist the others with their work.

“In time we expanded our base of operations until we were well established not only on Margen, but on Dahl, Dardahl, and Mardahl. We remain hidden but active in the vital research on Dual Space and its effect in our galaxy.”

“Whatever happened to Chang?” you think to ask.

“That, my child, is a secret known only to Brothers of the highest order of Intuition. Should you progress that far, you may ask them when you have finished your training on Mardahl. This is all I have to share with you; I hope you have found it of some interest.”

You assure the kindly old man that you found it fascinating. You shake his hand in farewell and leave the small room.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[565]

Darn it all, you are not going to let a couple of ships that resemble a pile of squirming tentacles tell you where you can and cannot land. This time you intend to insist on being allowed down.

You approach the planet Yinkle and open up all hailing frequencies in order to discuss the matter coolly and calmly. Before you can even utter a word, a searing bolt of energy flashes across your bow.

“What was that?” you ask excitedly. Whatever it was, it was close!

“We’re being fired upon by a large fleet of tentacled ships, Boss. I don’t think they want us here!”

“Evasive action,” you call out as you take a quick look at the radar screen and evaluate the situation. From what you can see, the alien ships outnumber you ten to one, and their firepower looks like it is quite capable of frying your ship if they can get in one good shot. You realize there is no hope of breaking through the fleet to attempt landing on the surface of the planet.

A message from one of the attacking ships comes over your speakers, “Go away, alien scum. We do not want any creatures who are not us to be here.”

You can’t argue with that, so you turn away before your ship takes any hits. Since your landing was aborted, you are still aloft in the trisector that contains the planet Yinkle.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[566]

“Tell me about Vanessa Chang.”

“Vanessa Chang! Now there’s a story that takes some telling. And it is perceptive of you to ask for it, since it intersects so frequently with your own story.”

You settle yourself on the tundra, as the Darkwhistler’s words rattle through your consciousness.

“Vanessa Chang was born on Earth in 2435 A.D., your time, in the last century of the era your people call the Great Expansion. She went to space early, and through luck and skill soon acquired her own ship. With a hand-picked crew she roamed throughout the Fringe, discovering many of the planets you are familiar with. Eventually she made contact with an advanced race known as the New Riallans, who taught her about tri-axis drives and traded her a Flame Jewel so she could build one. With this equipment she was able to continue her explorations deep into the Arm, meeting the Middle Riallans, the Hadrakians, the Worzellians, and others you are already familiar with. Inevitably, she also met the Clathrans.

“They took her captive, in accordance with their standard instructions for dealing with the unknown, and made an effort to learn about humans and about Earth. Their efforts became more intense when they realized that humanity showed none of the limitations characteristic of a race the Archigenitors had meddled with. Panicked, they actually resorted to direct contact with their masters for further instructions, an almost unheard of precedent. The instructions were quite clear: eradicate humans.

“Chang and her crew would have been the first, except for one thing. The Clathrans still didn’t know the location of Earth. The only human in the crew who could have told them, the ship’s computer expert Andrew Green, sabotaged the computers and forced the Clathrans to kill him before he could be made to give up the information. The Clathrans eventually worked out a scheme, sending crew member John Silverbeard back to the Fringe bearing a genetically-tailored virus that should have rapidly killed all humans.”

“The Space Plague!”

“Exactly. It didn’t work, of course, although it came quite close. Chang and the remainder of her crew eventually managed to escape the Clathrans and flee home themselves. Due to some unexpected surprises along the way, they arrived several years too late. At the time of their return much of human civilization had crumbled, and the rest was teetering. Chang organized a meeting between herself and the leaders of all the important spacefaring groups she could find, at which she told what she knew about the Clathrans. Together the members of the meeting put together a plan to meet this threat, involving the construction of the Boundary and a ‘turning inward’ of human progress. When order had been restored, and her plan to isolate humanity was well under way, she left the Nine Worlds for the last time.”

“But wasn’t she getting old?”

“Certainly, but that didn’t affect her ability to fly in space. She had no family — her exposure to high radiation levels on Koursh during her flight home from the Clathrans having effectively sterilized her — and she’d completed her work for humanity. The last thing left for her was the thing she’d started out with so many years before: a desire to explore the stars and a yearning to deliver the message.”

“The message!”

“Yes, human, Vanessa Chang was also a messenger. But that’s another discussion, for another day. She visited a number of planets in the Arm on her return trip, including this one. She avoided the Clathrans, who had not yet launched the Survey, and proceeded inwards, towards the Core. She was alone, in the first one-human deep space ship. We Darkwhistlers followed her course across several planets in the Paracore, and then lost the ability to ‘see’ her when she reached the Core itself. Her ultimate fate is unknown, even to us.”

So there is still one human explorer ahead of you, even though you know she didn’t succeed in her mission. Otherwise, why would humans still be dreaming about the Message?

⊠ STOP ⊠

[567]

Your travel plans have been unfortunately interrupted. It would appear that the Clathrans have gotten to where you want to go, first.

The space dead ahead is blockaded by Clathran spaceships that fill your viewscreen up, down, and across as far as you can see. This is the infamous "Survey Line," a massive collection of ships and soldiers moving inexorably across the galaxy, conquering and occupying every planet that supports intelligent life. The Survey Line consists of a vast net of scientific survey ships stretching as far as your sensors can detect. Studding the net are Clathran destroyers, darting here and there in random patrol patterns. In front of the net are automated drone recording ships, scouts, and various advance parties. Behind the net you can detect a number of large patrol ships, probably heavy dreadnoughts, hovering in space. Near them are fleets of other large ships: freighters, harvesters, and troop carriers.

All in all, you cannot begin to see an easy way through.

You may:

- 1) Pick a place where the concentration of Clathran ships and drones seems to be the thinnest, get a good running start, and attempt to speed across the line before the Clathrans can catch you.
- 2) Choose the most promising tactical moment and try to fight your way through the Survey Line, guns blazing.
- 3) Turn off all your ship's systems in an effort to make yourself look like a random piece of rock so you can drift through the Survey Line unnoticed.
- 4) Openly approach the Survey Line and try to casually bluff your way through, acting as if you were an authorized Clathran vessel.
- 5) Hightail it outta here! (i.e., Retreat out of this trisector.)

Go now to the CGM.

☒ STOP ☒

[568]

You take note of the variety of ships that have landed in and around the spaceport area. Besides your own, there are five others. 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 *Lockerbat* 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. You spend a while gathered together, discussing the past, present, and future.

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 ⌘

[569]

You find a Shrine, find a meditation cubicle, find a comfortable position and soon find the presence of a goddess in your head.

"I am the Goddess of Simple Achievement. I have come to you with some simple advice. If you need Fiber, you can get as much as you want on the planet Ghorbon."

"That seems convenient."

"It is. Of course, there's more to do on Ghorbon than just gather Fiber. But that's for you to find out for yourself." With that, the Goddess is gone.

You report her name to the Shrine Keeper on your way out.

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[570]

Fighting Clathran warships has never been your idea of a lot of fun, and this time is no exception. Crouching over the weapons console, you tersely bark out orders to fire, dodge and basically try to keep your ship intact. You are only moderately successful.

"Boss, we have taken quite a bit of damage to the hull and to several important computer systems. Recommend evasive action, with escape the ultimate goal. We are no match at this time for six Clathran warships."

Although you are doing as much harm to the six attacking Clathran ships as they are to you, you are forced to agree with your computer. At best, you have achieved a stalemate with the odds shifting in the Clathrans' favor as soon as reinforcements arrive for their side. Sighing, you decide to give the order for a quick blast and run exchange, whereby the computer will fire a smokescreen of shots to drive the enemy back for the few seconds you need to escape.

Your computer gleefully acknowledges the order. Within a nanosecond, all of your viewscreens are awash in light from the salvo of weapon fire your ship unleashes upon the enemy. The results are just as you hoped. The Clathran ships are driven back by the fierceness of the attack, leaving you a small corridor of space for your getaway.

At the edge of the trisector containing the planet Geefle, you stop and reevaluate your strategy. "What now, Boss?" your computer wants to know. Good question.

You did not land, so you are still aloft in the trisector containing the planet Geefle.

Go now to the CGM.

✱ STOP ✱

[571]

Something is happening, or has happened, somewhere.

Time melts all around you. Colors swirl into a whirlpool and pull you down into their center. The hull of your ship becomes transparent, your command chair thins into nothingness. You hold onto the concept of your body and that is all that keeps you from disappearing into the void. Lightning bolts flash in front of your eyes. Turning, you see an old Cherokee chieftain standing beside you, arms folded sternly across his chest. You remember hearing during your childhood that you are descended from these brave people. Before you can ask him any questions, he is gone.

The sound of red engulfs you. Sound of red? Perhaps it is anger you can see. But whose? A tremendous howling pounds you into the ground. Ground? All of your senses are working overtime to try to relate this place you now occupy with things you will understand. Although there are no colors, no physical objects, nothing tangible, your mind cannot recognize this or it will slip into the warm and comforting world of insanity. Instead, your brain is identifying everything here with things you can understand. You are not entirely convinced this is working very well.

A presence forces its way into your awareness. It is questioning your existence here, it wants to know who you are. You have the feeling the being is more advanced than any race you have yet encountered. Its questions are not directed toward you, though. Rather, it is wondering and not expecting you to even understand it.

The presence is investigating the destruction of one of its devices. It is not pleased that its work has been destroyed. The alien being senses you, and you feel the close scrutiny of its immensely powerful intellect. It is curious about your existence. Thoughts form unbidden in your mind; the alien is trying to communicate with you.

"Silly human. You struggle so against your fate. What gives you the strength to fight against our wishes? You have postponed your destiny, for now. It remains to be seen whether or not you have managed to change it."

Suddenly, as fast as the alien being came into your mind, it is gone.

Your ship is dead in space, struck suddenly lifeless by a pulse of unreality. You are struggling with the backup systems, trying to find something that works.

A second pulse hits before you can recover from the first, and you feel your own existence wavering. Your soul is stretched and spread across light years of distance, growing so thin as to be almost nonexistent. You are everywhere and nowhere at once. Your consciousness, your internal reality, is mingled with so many others that you wonder if you'll ever find it again.

You experience all of your possible pasts, leading to all of your possible presents. Images flicker around you like some mad kaleidoscope of your life, shattering and distorting what is and what might have been. And the part of you that is aware whirls helplessly in the middle, caught in a limbo of infinite chances.

With an effort, you grasp for a shard of what you know: You are a Human. You love to travel in space. You fly your own ship. You explore new worlds. Painfully, slowly, you reconstruct yourself from the pieces strewn around you, grasping them with your awareness and forcing them to join with the other pieces in the proper patterns.

And then a third wave hits, the largest yet, a gigantic tidal wave of possibility that scatters your jigsaw puzzle reality like leaves before a hurricane wind. In an out-of-the-way corner of the galactic Arm, a cosmic catastrophe has occurred. The fundamental nature of things has been disturbed, like the still surface of a pond when a fish jumps. Ripples spread outward, tossing and rolling the smooth surface of space to the very fringes of the galaxy.

You spin in the kaleidoscope, seeing fragments of everything that might have been. You make no more effort to grasp for the fragments of your personal reality. There will be time for that later, when the surface of space becomes calmer again. And if things don't subside, if the destruction of Karnossus by the Dual Space Inversion Bomb leaves a rent in the fabric that cannot be repaired, then what use is reality to you?

More waves pass over you, but now they are each a little smaller, a little less disturbing, than their predecessors. The kaleidoscope is spinning more slowly, the fragments of color becoming more discrete. Tentatively, you reach for a piece you recognize: yourself, on Outpost, years ago. You cling to it tightly, waiting through another wave of distortion. When the ripple passes and you still hold the piece, you begin to gather others, putting yourself back together one step at a time.

Outpost destroyed. . . your explorations. . . messages from the Home Worlds. . . the Hadrakians. . . the Clathrans. . . the Survey. . . insanity at home. . . deadlines in space. . .

You learn from the process as you do it, discovering more about Dual Space manipulation in this single timeless instant than you have learned in years of galactic exploration. You begin with the past, and reconstruct your life as you knew it. Then you advance to the present, working on physical things: the shape of the galaxy, the location of planets, the color of your eyes, the looks of your face, the design of your ship.

At last you are finished, or almost so. You have restored yourself to a physical existence, seated on the bridge of your ship. You have restored your memories of the past, your knowledge of how you and your ship came to have the skills and talents that you do. You have even restored the universe, re-imposing the galactic star map as you knew it. Only one step remains: to re-orient yourself and your ship to the galaxy at large, to put yourself back into the time and place of your departure.

But why?

You could see as you worked that picking up fragments you didn't belong to would only confuse the final product. The temptation was there, to "correct" your memories of that date in the ninth grade, to "improve" the results of that navigation exam, to "remove" the scars of age from your face. You resisted without real thought however, knowing that these changes would only require more changes, until you either became another person entirely or fragmented yourself to the point of ego dissolution.

But your ship's location in space is different. Your drive systems already give you the power to change this quickly, skimming the margins of dual space as you translate yourself from one point to another. You know there's no point in picking up where you left off: Karnossus has been destroyed, and the Hadrakians are making their last stand.

You weigh the possibilities, idly examining the dials on your control panel. They are all suspended, frozen in some sort of stasis. Your viewscreens are blank. It's as if you'd made half of a jump-engine jump; you're gone from where you were, but you haven't yet arrived at where you're going. Only the needle on your Interphase Variometer is moving, swinging wildly up and down with the passage of further reality ripples and aftershocks. You are pleased to see that the Interphase level is trending down, however, for the first time since you installed the variometer. The Dodecahedron is gone, the faucet that was filling the galactic tub with all the myriad possibilities of Dual Space. In its place there is now a drain, a hole out of which the pent-up realities are draining. You know you may lose some of your best ship weapons when the Interphase drops too low; you may even lose your own psychic abilities. But you also know that the Home Worlds will soon return to normal, that humanity will survive a plague of insanity just as they have survived everything else.

Which brings you back to the fundamental question: where should you be right now?

You reject the Home Worlds. They will survive, but the cleanup will be protracted and messy. Karnossus is no longer a possibility. You toy with the idea of going directly to the Core, but somehow you know you're not quite ready for that. In the end, you make the only obvious decision.

"Computer!"

"Yes, Boss?"

"Prepare for immediate arrival in the Hadrak system. Arm and activate all of the weapon and defense systems; we'll be dropping into the middle of a battle."

"Aye aye, Boss!"

The Hadrakians have risked a lot for the success of your mission, and the Clathran menace is still as real as ever, with the Survey a mere ten years from the first human colonies. You may not be able to do much, but you are resolved to do what you can. You reach one last time into the flickering kaleidoscope, and remove the final piece of your personal puzzle.

You are now in the Hadrak system, where the two space navies have taken their positions.

On one side are arrayed the Clathrans. Their Survey now stands poised to envelop the planet Hadrak, but for the moment only the Clathran warships are in evidence. The scientific ships, the harvesters, scouts, and analyzers, are lagging back, awaiting the "pacification" of the planet before sweeping forward to examine it atom by atom. The Clathran warfleet, however, is most impressive. Thirty-two Monitors, each the size of a small asteroid, control the actions of hundreds of dreadnoughts and thousands of destroyers and cruisers. The Clathrans have stripped other regions of the Survey perilously thin to create this force, along with calling up all of the available reserves.

Opposing the Clathrans is a mixed fleet of ships from across the galactic Arm. Predominant are the Hadrakians, making a final stand in the system of their home planet. Several hundred ships, the balance of their navy, are arranged into fifteen task forces, each substantially smaller than the Clathran Monitor group it will oppose. Standing with the Hadrakians are a single task force from Middle Rialla, the ships both larger and more archaic than the galactic norm. The Riallans have not seen armed conflict in hundreds of years, and no one — least of all the Riallans — knows how they will respond. Twelve more task forces, keeping a wary distance from the Hadrakians but clearly allied with them, represent the Zyran Empire.

One more ship stands on the Hadrakian side, of a size and style that set it immediately apart. Half again larger than a Clathran Monitor, its lines are unlike any other ship you have ever seen. To some extent the Clathrans, the Hadrakians, the Zyrans, and the other spacefaring species of the Arm have copied designs from each other, but the Worzellians, builders of the final ship, have a long history of doing things their own way. What this might mean about the ship's capabilities in combat you do not know.

To the enhanced eye of your computer viewscreen, it is clear that the Hadrakian forces are substantially outnumbered, and you look in vain for other allied forces. The Sirissian Underground has sent ships to this battle, you know, but they will be approaching the Clathrans from behind, hopefully causing confusion and damage in excess of their numbers. No other spacefaring races exist in the Arm, except possibly the Bluvians. Their fate is uncertain, however, and you know that at least one of their planets has been ruthlessly sterilized by the Survey already.

The final force that you don't see is the one that you had most hoped would be here. Humanity is perhaps the most populous race in all the galaxy, having colonized and exploited more than a dozen worlds in the galactic Fringe. You know that a Home Worlds Space Navy was under construction, but the distance from Earth and the difficulties involved in crossing the dust barrier that separates the Arm from the Fringe have prevented them from being here. It's too bad, in a way; you can foresee another battle like this one, a few decades from now, when a proud but outnumbered human force attempts to rally the other races of the Fringe in a vain attempt to stop the Clathrans from conquering Earth. Perhaps, however, you and the handful of other human explorers present today will learn enough to avert this fate.

The Clathrans sweep forward. The Allied task forces move out to intercept them.

Each side's strategy is easy to imagine. Neither force is fighting for annihilation, but both have a strong interest in controlling the Hadrak system. For the Clathrans, Hadrak is simply the next occupied planet in the path of the Survey. They will fight for it indefinitely, but if the battle becomes too costly they may face the difficult choice of abandoning the rest of the Survey or abandoning the battle. The former would give them thousands more warships to reinforce their position — virtually guaranteeing a victory — at the cost of having to begin the Survey again. Abandoning the battle would allow them to retain the integrity of the Survey barrier while rebuilding their war fleet, at the cost of the years or decades it might take to do so.

For the Hadrakians, this is their last stand. Although they, like the other allied races, still have free planets to retreat to, it is obvious that the Survey will eventually reach them. And each planet that the Clathrans conquer makes them that much stronger, and the Allies that much weaker. Careful planning and coordination has gone into their selection of Hadrak as the site for this battle, and the Hadrakians will only abandon it if their losses become overwhelming. A final stroke in the Allied plan was the recent destruction — by an intrepid human explorer — of Karnossus, the Clathran base world. Although Karnossus was too far away to be in direct control of the Clathran forces in this battle, its destruction removes an important source of resupply, and, to the extent that it's possible, has weakened Clathran morale.

The bottom line is simple, though: the force that occupies Hadrak at the end of the fighting will be the winner.

Tactically, there is no clear way for you or anyone else to know exactly what is about to happen. A space battle of this proportion has never occurred before — at least not in the recorded history of any of the participants — and there are far too many ships involved to yield

any coherent picture. The Clathrans advance in a line; the Allies meet them in two dozen wedge-shaped task forces. For a span of perhaps ten minutes, as the opening salvos are fired, this picture remains crystal clear.

And then, like cracks spreading across a pane of glass, the crystal dissolves into chaos.

The battle rapidly evolves into thousands of individual duels, as starships lock onto individual targets and pursue them through the mathematical intricacies of normal and hyperspace. To a certain extent, the prepared formations of Monitor groups and task forces are preserved, but only until the geography of the Hadrak system, with its fifteen planets and double asteroid belt, can break them up. You see a Riellan vessel destroyed by a pair of Clathran dreadnoughts, which are engaged in turn by three Hadrakian and two Zyran ships. It seems as if all the bands of the electromagnetic spectrum have been called into action, as beam weapons and energy fields of every possible frequency flicker and flare around you.

“Hey Boss, I think the battle’s started!”

“Right you are, computer. It’s time for us to get moving.”

⊠ STOP ⊠

[572]

As you approach the planet Keros, you note the presence of a sole Clathran monitor ship in orbit around the system. The Clathran Survey must have passed by here recently. You feel a slight chill as the ship’s cool air blows against your perspiring brow. Time is running out for your race. Can you stop the cold-blooded lizard-men before it is too late?

“Just one monitor?” you ask your computer. Having been through the Survey Line, you know how to get by a single monitor.

“I guess the Clathrans decided that this planet didn’t need a very large occupation force.”

“That’s just as well for us. Dodge the monitor and set up an orbit around the planet.”

“Will do, Boss.”

⊠ STOP ⊠

[573]

A lumpy mass of yellow tentacled flesh awaits you behind the counter in the “Weapons for Tourists” shop. His gloomy expression is belied by the baseball cap tilted jauntily back on the top of his head.

“Yes?” he asks, sounding even more depressed than he looks.

“Do you have any weapons for sale?” is your less than inspired response. No one has yet accused you of being a sparkling conversationalist.

The Dosian doesn’t dignify this with a verbal answer; he merely reaches under the counter and pulls out a sheet containing a list of the personal weapons available here. You read the following:

Disintegration Gun — 1 Culture + 1 Radioactives

Power Armor — 1 Fiber + 1 Food + 1 Medicine

Propulsion Caps — 2 Super Slip + 1 Warp Core

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[574]

You are once again drawing near Outpost when you suddenly tense up for no apparent reason.

“Boss,” says your computer, “I’m picking up that probe beam again.” There’s a slight hum in the interior of your ship as the strange scanning energy pattern sweeps through you. It makes your skin crawl.

“I’m not surprised,” you say after the probe passes on. “It looks like someone’s keeping an eye on Outpost. There’s nothing we can do about it, though. Our shields can’t screen it out.”

“The source is at least fifteen trisectors away, and it’s coming from up the Arm,” notes the computer. “At least it isn’t coming from a ship close by.”

“Still, we should be careful. Let me know if you detect it again.”

You approach Outpost with extreme caution, but you find no unfriendly ships there and nothing on the surface seems to have changed. Your options are the same as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[575]

You unload a Vortex Coil and set it down on the floor of the cave inside the shaft of the volcano. The strange alien energy cube hovers overhead, near the ceiling. While you are waiting for it to respond, you pass the time gazing at the almost hypnotic effect of the colors swirling across the six faces of the floating cube. Finally it senses that you are here, and it floats down to eye level.

“Thank you for the Vortex Coil, Master,” it says. “I will now reactivate the instruction retrieval system. Please stand by.”

You watch, fascinated, as the Vortex Coil on the floor of the cave slowly fades away and disappears. Presumably the cube has some sort of super-high-tech teleportation mechanism for installing the Vortex Coil where it is needed. Goosebumps prickle along your skin at the thought of accessing the instructions from the mysterious race who built the cube.

“Instruction retrieval system reactivated,” the cube says.

“Access data,” you command.

The cube’s already whirling colors begin to flash even more quickly. You see them start to coalesce into an image you can only assume is the face of one of the mysterious Masters. You do not even notice that you have forgotten to breathe while you are watching the shape take form on the face of the cube in front of you.

The pulsating colors never solidify into a final image, though. All you see is a vibrating, shifting mixture of brown and yellow and red and grey. You ask the cube to clarify the picture but you are told that the system is not able to form a better one. You are not sure if this is due to mechanical problems or because the Masters are not solid physical beings. In any case, your attention is soon captured by the static-ridden voice coming from the sound system.

“Welcome, my child. I, your ancestor, send you greetings from many years ago. My present is your ancient past. It is fortunate that you are here to retrieve these instructions. It means that we have found some way out of our present predicament.

“As of the time of this recording, the Dual Space Interphase continues to narrow, as it has been doing since the creation of the galaxy. This does not bode well for us. The most recent contraction destroyed our Central Control System, and there is no way to build another one with the Interphase in its current condition. Indeed, if the Interphase narrows any further, our very survival is threatened.

“Since we have no good answer to this problem at the present time, we have decided to isolate ourselves in the Galactic Core, where we can study the situation further. There the Dual Space Interphase is much wider, and we need not be immediately concerned with suffocation. Our plan is to take the Clathrans with us, and return when we have found some remedy to address the constricting Interphase.

“Meanwhile, we will leave all of our local lifeform control systems, such as this one, on automatic. We cannot allow races to use the time while we are gone to develop into troublesome galactic threats. However, it may be a long time before we are able to return. We can expect some system failures. I trust that you will have the ability to restore everything to order.

“The device that I will materialize now should help you repair the Kerosian control system, if necessary. It has the power of *fiorenza*. With it, you can control the minds of individual beings, directing them to behave as you wish. This, of course, is the principle behind the control of the Kerosians, as the smarter individuals are directed to enter the volcano so they can be genetically revised. The *fiorenza* power may also work with other races.

“I will leave you now, my child. Be well and rule wisely.”

The message ends, leaving you with a strange mixture of emotions. As you turn to leave, the cube begins to flash its many colors again, and a three-foot-long wand materializes on the floor in front of you. The wand is made of some sort of clear crystal, and it vibrates with many different colors, like the floating cube. You pick it up and feel a cool pulse of energy course through your hand.

You have acquired the power of *fiorenza*.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[576]

You have decided to try to land on the planet Ghorbon, despite the presence of an advance Clathran base. As you emerge from hyperspace, you are once again attacked by an orbiting satellite. You have already briefed your computer on the evasive actions to be taken and you try to maneuver around for the best firing position.

The satellite tracks you and the ship rocks with the first blast.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[577]

Through some freak of subspace conditions, you manage a two-way dialogue with a Disciple Kalliroa, a High Disciple of the Final Church of Man, on Leucothea.

“It pleases me, traveller, to commune with you.”

“And I with you, Disciple. Tell me of the Home Worlds.”

“Would that I could not, for yours is the first mind I have touched in many months not overwhelmed by the madness. Yet I perceive your concern for us, and I will answer your queries.”

“The madness persists?”

“Not just madness, traveller, nor even a virus like the Space Plague. SAPS has attacked the human spirit, and may yet bring it down entirely. Much of mankind now roams unfettered, burning and looting as it will. Psychics conjure food for the masses, knowing not the provenance of their powers nor the necessary controls. Only isolated enclaves survive: hyper-disciplined cadres like the Space Navy or the KEPHers, or those able to flow with the insanity, such as those of us highly placed in the Church. It seems ironic to us that our fellow humans are finally realizing their full latent powers, but all at once and with no way to understand or control them. SAPS is the unlocking of a brain not fully prepared for the light; it kills by freedom too utter to survive.”

“What of the Navy? What does the government do?”

“The government is gone, totally gone. Perhaps some remnant remains, safe for the moment in the open spaces of the galaxy. Parts of the Navy hang on, but they are not facing an enemy they can fight. Pray that none appears! Humanity would fall in a second.”

“But Disciple. . .”

“Excuse me, traveller; I sense that my equipment will soon fail. Good luck and Godspeed!”

Your connection is broken.

✂ STOP ✂

[578]

You sneak into the same airlock as on your last visit, and much the same thing happens. Since you still don't have a psychic ability that will keep the Clathrans from noticing you, you are forced to fight the guards who respond to the “open airlock” alarm. Forewarned by your previous experience here, you kill them handily. Unfortunately, the Clathrans are now sending outside patrols as well as inside ones to investigate alarms. You are forced to fight your way through more than a dozen Clathrans before reaching your ship.

Despite your superior arms and armor, that many opponents are bound to get lucky sooner or later. You do not get away without some damage.

They're ready for your ship, too. More weapons have been added to the orbital defense systems, and their targeting skills have improved. You take a number of serious hits and would probably have been destroyed entirely if you hadn't taken the last ditch step of dumping cargo to increase speed. When you finally reach deep space, all Clathran pursuit safely lost behind you, it is with an empty and severely battered ship.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[579]

“Hey Boss, when are we going back to Zyroth?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we finally got to Geefle, and met Lord Ruckel, and didn't get eaten. I just thought you'd like to follow through.”

“Yeah, yeah. I'll put it on the agenda.”

Your computer subsides.

✂ STOP ✂

[580]

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 *Black Abyss*, the *Jihad*, the *Holly Roger*, 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 ✧

[581]

You pick up your well-worn copy of the book, "Sigourney Rambeaux: Autobiography of a Real Time, Real Space Explorer," and begin rereading it for the umpteenth time. You are very fond of the book, even if it is of little use to you this far toward the Core. Sigourney never made it to this part of the galaxy. In fact, you sometimes wonder if she ever really existed at all. No matter, though — you think of her as an old friend and still enjoy reading about her exploits. Settling into your favorite chair, you open the book to page one.

"Excuse me, Boss, but I am intercepting a communications beam between two other ships. Would you like to hear it?"

"Sure," you reply. You have never been one to avoid eavesdropping if you could help it. Some of your best data has come from listening in on other people's conversations. This time you can barely make out what is being said.

"Can you enhance the signal any?"

"Sorry, Boss. It's gone now." Rats.

"Did you catch anything at all?"

"I believe one of the ships was a trading vessel. It was telling the other that Gradient Filters can be found on the planet Sallion. That's when I lost the signal."

After making note of the information, you sit back and start reading your book.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[582]

The Cloaking Ray is one of your ship's greatest assets, and you are convinced that it is the only thing that enabled you to land on Morikor at all. It worked well for you on your last visit, and you see no reason to change your strategy this time. With this thought in mind, you instruct your computer to engage the Cloaking Ray and land in the same area as before. When your ship is safely down, you put on your useful but uncomfortable environmental suit and climb out onto the barren airless surface of the planet Morikor.

The big black domes where the Clathrans live have not changed since last time. The nearest dome is about five miles from your landing site: close enough to walk.

You have the same options as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[583]

The sound Clathrans make while deep in thought is unnerving. It is a hissing noise made by forcing air through vestigial gill slits in their necks. One place they like to think is while they are contemplating trades and market decisions. The entire Supply Center is filled with the horrible noise.

Fortunately, you do not actually have to speak to them face to face. Their market system is based on requisition orders which, when filled out, are scanned into the appropriate slots depending on the cargo's destination. Careful checking reassures you that cargo transactions can be completed in this system without direct contact with either the ships or the pilots involved. You realize that you might be able to obtain commodities from the Clathrans without their knowing about it! Unfortunately, the obvious extension to that concept, that you might be able to get the cargos for free, doesn't pan out. Complex requisition documentation is required for all transactions except standard fixed-rate exchanges. The standard exchanges available to you are:

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

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[584]

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 device, but the technical assistance it needs is evidently not yours. Fortunately, your fellow human travellers represent a wealth of diverse talents. Perhaps if you pass the bomb on to one of them, it can be made to function.

To do this, meet with another player, give the other player the Bomb, and have the other player 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 ❖

[585]

The long, low buildings used by Silverbeard to store his stolen goods are actually the oldest human constructions on Outpost. Members of Vanessa Chang's crew built them as part of the process of equipping Outpost as a forward base for exploration in the Arm. Some crew members stayed on the planet to build the storage units while others ferried supplies and equipment by ship. Most of the buildings are made of a concrete-like material composed primarily of crushed native rock, but some of them are specially modified to handle liquids or radioactives efficiently.

The storage capacity here well exceeds what Chang's crew ever would have needed themselves. Many people believe that Chang intended to start a colony on Outpost — although others, noting the famous explorer's opportunistic nature, claim that she actually wanted to establish a monopoly on human trade in the Arm. Her exclusive control over the tri-axis drive technology, combined with control over Outpost's facilities, might have given her just that, if the Clathrans hadn't interfered with her plans.

When Silverbeard took over the planet, he quickly filled the storage structures with whatever commodities he took but didn't need. He seems to have stockpiled all materials indiscriminately, regardless of how useful it was to him. Since Silverbeard's death, some of the stockpiles have been depleted, and others have deteriorated in storage, but there are still abundant quantities of eight commodities: Crystals, Culture, Fiber, Food, Medicine, Munitions, Radioactives, and Tools. You may load any amount of any of these commodities onto your ship, as long as you have cargo bays to hold them.

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

❖ STOP ❖

[586]

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 every citizen at least twice if they know where the capitalist Doozel is, you finally bump into him in front of a sign that says "Super Slip Shoppe." You are positive that he was not here when you traveled down this street just a short time ago, but at least you have located him now. He flashes you a warm and friendly smile which makes him look even uglier than before, if such is possible.

"Ah, I am glad you have come, my friend. Are you in the market for Super Slip? We have a fine shipment ready for loading."

You ask what the going price is and you are offered the following trades:

- 3 Super Slip for 1 Crystals
- 2 Super Slip for 1 Tools
- 1 Super Slip for 1 Radioactives

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

✕ STOP ✕

[587]

You receive instructions to land at the berthing station near the Enclave area. As on all Hadrakian worlds, you'll be restricted to the Enclave until you fight a battle to prove your worthiness to participate in their society. Following her directions, your ship is soon gliding smoothly towards Adafa's surface.

On the way down, you get a better look at the odd features of this peculiar world. Aside from the small Hadrakian dome about halfway between the center and the edge of the disk, there are no other city structures. Instead, you see numerous solitary devices scattered across the plain. Some of them are immense, with jutting antennae and dead-looking globes balanced at interesting points. Others are small and seethe with energy, menacing in appearance despite their size. You also see an occasional crater where something once stood but was destroyed. Shards of the original structures still litter the areas as mute evidence of their previous existence.

Finally you reach the docking station at the perimeter of the dome which connects, through an access door, to the pressurized interior. A Settled One greets you as the inner portal cycles open, and directs you to a data terminal where you are required to enter information about your physiology, your intended business with the colony and your previous contacts, if any, with other worlds of the Hadrakian Empire.

When you have finished, the terminal shows you a recording about the Hadrakian religion while you wait for the Settled One to return. The program extols the virtues of visiting the nearby Temples where you can pray to the gods. The gods, says the recording, will speak to you and impart valuable information each time you visit — if you know how to interpret their words of dubious wisdom. The short lecture ends just as an annoyed-looking Homeless One enters the office and snarls at you.

"You are the human applying for Citizenship?" he growls. When you nod, he continues, "I have been asked to give you this." He flips a sheet of paper in your general direction and stalks off. Retrieving the sheet, you see that it allocates you a scheduled Arena time if you choose to fight for Hadrakian Citizenship. Until you earn your citizenship, there is nothing else you can do here.

You now have the following option:

⟨BBWTTT⟩ (7 phases) Take your chances in the Arena and attempt to win your citizenship on Adafa.

✕ STOP ✕

[588]

The old hangar looks like it's a thousand years old, squatting next to a plane of rock that forms a natural landing base. The rains have rusted the metal walls in streaks, and the hangar doors will never open again. To the side, a small door has been kicked off its rusted hinges and lies on the stone, leaving an open doorway through which you enter.

The structure was never more than a shed, a metal-foam frame hung with "rustproof" steel panels, lacking lights or power even when it was new. Someone has rigged a cell-powered lantern which provides a steady dim glow. Dripping water has painted jagged stripes down the inside walls, and the steel grating that forms the floor is crumbled with rust.

In the center of the hangar is the ship you've returned to see: the *Lockerbait*. Built by Vanessa Chang's crew from the wreckage of another craft, this was the ship that finally brought Chang home from her tragic last voyage to the Arm. It was here that she left her warning to all future explorers, a warning of the designs of the Clathrans and the hazards ahead.

The ship is little more than a drive unit welded to a pressurized crew compartment. The builders wasted no construction time on viewports or shielding or airlocks or cargo bays. The *Lockerbait* had only one purpose: to bring Chang's warning back to Outpost. Whether the crew survived was almost a secondary concern.

The log panel that delivered the warning message is dark and silent now, its power supplies finally spent after all the centuries of waiting. You could probably reactivate it, but there is no point. You already know what it said. And you already have a copy of the star maps of the Arm in your computer. There is no reason not to let the *Lockerbait* rest in peace. Its voyage is completed.

If you did not play STAR SAGA: ONE and would like to read Chang's message, or if you would like to refresh your memory, you may access the message by plotting the following option:

(9UV798) (7 phases) Access Vanessa Chang's message to future explorers.

✂ STOP ✂

[589]

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

"Big trouble, Boss. It's the Survey Line again."

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

"Hard about, maximum speed! Get us out of here!" you command.

You grab the railing next to your chair as your ship lurches wildly and reverses course at full power. For the next several days, you fly as fast as you can away from the advancing Clathran Navy.

"Boss, they've stopped moving," your computer finally informs you. "They've taken a position in that last trisector we just flew through and seem to be holding there — at least for now."

"So we're out of range?"

"Yes."

"Good. Take over and let me know if they start moving again."

"Sure thing, Boss."

The CGM will tell you where your ship ended up after your emergency flight from the advancing Clathran Survey Line. The Clathrans have taken a position in the trisector adjacent to where you now are. If you want to go back to where you were, you'll have to find some way around or through the Clathran blockade. Good luck.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[590]

Unlike the commodities market, the Street of Gods, and the shipyard, the local division of The Battle, Inc., is not located in the city. When you ask for directions, you are told that to get to the offices of The Battle, you need to hike a short distance around the mountain. This means some serious mountain climbing.

Fortunately, you've scaled cliffs before, and you know that with the right training and equipment, and lots of care, it can be done. After several hours of hard work, including one rather frightening climb up an overhanging ledge, you arrive at your destination. It is a small building squeezed into the end of a long crevice that plunges down like a wedge into the mountain face. Posted on the wall next to the door is a small sign that lists two occupants: "The Battle, Inc." and "Joel D. Fyvolent, M. D."

You enter and approach the receptionist. Walls and floors are all pitched at steep angles, making it almost as challenging to walk around inside the building as outside. "Yes?" she asks. You suspect from her mona-lisa smile that she has been observing you all the while. You take it in good humor and explain that you are interested in contacting the Hadrakian resistance so you can confer about the war.

"Second door on the left," she tells you.

You manage to keep your balance as you work your way down the corridor and enter the indicated room.

✧ STOP ✧

[591]

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 ✧

[592]

You have finally managed to make contact with Dr. Schottky, back at the Institute for Space Exploration.

“Turner! How go your explorations?”

“I’ve found Morikor, but all I can report so far is what it looks like when you’re running away at top speed. I need some way to mask their sensors, Doc. If they see me coming, there’s no way I’ll get close.”

“You need a cloaking ray of some kind.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, such a thing is theoretically possible, of course. We don’t have one, but it’s possible that some other race does. Perhaps a race that’s lived in Clathran space for a long time. They would need such a useful bit of technology.”

“Gee, thanks Doc.”

“You’re quite welcome, Turner.” Your sarcasm was wasted. “Please tell us if you ever find such a thing. We could benefit from it as well.”

⌘ STOP ⌘

[593]

Your opponent this time is easy to describe. It’s a dragon. Big, red, scaly, winged, fire-breathing, and decidedly malicious. It’s looking at you from the other end of the Arena like you’d make an excellent appetizer, before its usual meal of fully-armored Hadrakian knights or entire flocks of sheep.

While you waste precious moments remembering a dream of a dragon from long ago, the alien is calmly and confidently advancing toward you. Finally, that part of your brain in charge of self-preservation is able to scream through the fog that has shrouded your rational thinking and cause you to take protective measures, like defending yourself.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[594]

You have always been one to follow your hunches, and you have a feeling that the mysterious red glow is important. So, dressed in your ever-so-stylish environmental suit, you leave your ship's airlock and make your way to the center of the latticework structure where you saw the glow earlier.

You enjoy swinging your way from bar to bar along the latticework that is the planet. It reminds you of your childhood gymnasium. Soon your face has a sheen of perspiration from the mild exertion. After about twenty minutes of this, you come to an open shaft which plunges toward the "planet's" core. You can see a faint red glow coming from the distant end of the shaft. You launch yourself downward and — with a small assist from your rocket-pack — soon traverse the many miles to the core.

When you finally arrive, you could not be more surprised at the source of the pulsating glow, although you really could have guessed if you had thought about it for a minute. Floating in a warehouse area, you see a transparent bag containing several dozen Flame Jewels, those exceedingly rare gems which have the unique ability to control the power of a tri-axis drive engine. Even from a distance of twenty feet away, you can feel their hypnotic influence reaching out to you. You avert your eyes to avoid the effect, and in doing so, you see a Riallan hovering nearby.

"Hello," you greet the alien. "I was just admiring your collection of Flame Jewels. Tell me, is it possible to purchase one?" You ask this question on the wild hope that the creature will say yes and you might buy one of the priceless gems.

"Greetings, Human. I am Drossss, keeper of the stores," the dull grey gas bag welcomes you. "Here we maintain supplies which may become necessary to us in the future, but which are not needed at the moment. It is a boring job, but someone has to do it." You would swear that the alien grimaces in wry humor, except that Riallans really have no face to speak of. You suspect that you are able to read this emotion from its telepathic waves and are glad to meet an alien with a sense of humor.

"What do you use the jewels for?" you ask.

"Well, long ago, we needed to outfit a small fleet of ships to send out to the Galactic Fringe. We may need to do something similar in the future, so we are keeping a supply of the Flame Jewels on hand, just in case."

This sounds reasonable, but you are not willing to give up quite so easily. "From the looks of things, you have quite a few in stock. Could I possibly talk you into parting with just one?" You hold your breath while the Middle Riallan thinks it over. Or maybe it is checking to see if it could accommodate your request. At any rate, it finally replies.

"We can part with one for a cousin to Vanessa Chang. We will have to ask a hefty price, though. Perhaps I can be of more help by telling you the name of the planet where we purchased these jewels."

You nod your head eagerly, since one Flame Jewel isn't going to build the Home Worlds much of a fleet in any case.

Your gesture must have contained some telepathic component, for Drossss continues at once: "The planet is called Wythym, and it's coreward from here. The Wythymites are said to give Flame Jewels freely to all who request them. Unfortunately, Wythym is in the inner part of the Arm, so you may have some trouble reaching it, given the advancing Clathran Survey."

"I thank you anyway, Drossss. Now about the price for a single Jewel. . ." The negotiations begin. The Middle Riallans will sell you one, and only one, Flame Jewel for the following amount:

2 Medicine + 1 Culture + 1 Synthetic Genius + 1 Warp Core

If you would like to purchase a Flame Jewel, select the following option:

{JXUN7Y} (3 phases) Buy a Flame Jewel.

You return to your ship.

The next day, with a certain amount of persistence, you are able to contact the Stewart family on the subspace radio.

"Well Dad, Middle Rialla was a bust."

“How so?”

“They have a small supply of Flame Jewels, perhaps enough for twenty ships, but they won’t sell me more than one.”

“That’s terrible! We have contracts to honor and . . .”

“I know, Dad. Don’t go flying off the handle. The Riallans did tell me where to find more.”

“Where?”

“A planet called Wythym, coreward from here.”

“At least you know where to go. Be careful Valentine, and remember — the Stewart Family is depending on you.”

✧ STOP ✧

[595]

You turn off all your ship’s systems, but the captain of the huge dreadnought isn’t fooled. Just a second ago you were pretending to be a fully operational Clathran spaceship. Now you’re supposed to be something else? Come on. The dreadnought efficiently hauls you in with its tractor beams and takes you prisoner.

✧ STOP ✧

[596]

You make your way back to the large complex near the lagoon where the Hadrakians manufacture cargo drones. You ask the Settled One at the desk if the 5-bay drone she offered you last time is still for sale.

“I’m sorry,” she apologizes, “but we have none in stock right now. Manufacturing has stopped due to lack of materials, and all of our inventory has been sold out.”

“What do you mean, manufacturing has stopped? This complex is pretty impressive.”

“We used to import several of the components used in building the drones, but with the Clathran blockade around the planet, we can’t get those parts any more. We’re working on making the parts ourselves, but I’m afraid it’s going to be several years before they’ll be ready. Would you like to put your name on the waiting list? It’s one of these papers around here, if I can find it.”

“No, thanks anyway,” you answer.

“Very well, sorry I couldn’t help you.” The Settled One shrugs her shoulders and returns to her paperwork.

Disappointed, you leave the complex.

✧ STOP ✧

[597]

Taking advantage of your opponent's confusion, you camouflage yourself in the mud and start crawling across the field. Meanwhile, your ally has found the other opponent and they have begun fighting. Unfortunately, your opponent sees the fight and realizes you must be his enemy. He quickly turns and pounces on you. His strength is overwhelming. Soon you are seriously injured. At the same time, your ally has defeated the other opponent. You bleed in the mud as you watch the remaining two combatants go at it. Your ally eventually wins and crosses the field victoriously. You pass out.

✂ STOP ✂

[598]

You have seen the ships and people who visited Golgotha in the past. They came, they learned what they learned, and when they left again they had changed. But one mystery remains: what was it that they learned? What did the clerics of the Archangel see, that led them to create a religion that teaches humans to be gods? To what fate did Vanessa Chang resign herself, when she said "so be it" and departed for the inner stars? What did Golgotha show them, when they looked through its window into the future?

✂ STOP ✂

[599]

You've established two-way communications with a human named Varek, on Atlantis, leader of a splinter religion known as the Questors:

"How are things on the Nine Worlds?"

"They are the Home Worlds now, traveller, and things are terrible. Have you heard of SAPS?"

"Sudden Adjustment Psychosis Syndrome? The disease that causes sudden bursts of violent insanity? Is it getting worse?"

"Yes, it's spreading all the time. Cities are burning on all the Home Worlds, and civil government is breaking down."

"Is this a new Space Plague?" You wonder if your efforts have helped to end humanity.

"No, there's no virus involved. The physicists tell us the insanity comes from a rising dual space level, whatever that means, with an individual and arbitrary breakdown in the laws of reality. Only those with secure mental supports seem able to resist."

"And what of your religion?"

"So far our ethics have protected us, but the pressure is building. We plan to construct a starship for ourselves, and escape Atlantis while we can. They say that SAPS is less likely to strike in space."

"I wish you luck, Varek."

"And I, you, traveller."

✂ STOP ✂

[600]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 3

Choosing from the remaining actions on Outpost, you decide to explore the rest of Outpost's surface and then investigate the other pilots who are here. That will use the remaining phases in this turn. Your plotting sheet should now look like this:

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	Y	R	L	—	—	—	—
2	—	—	A: XZN2YH	—	—	A:7Z82KH	—
3	A:9ZV29H	—	—	—	—	—	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 **9ZV29H**) to explore Outpost's surface. Then 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 surface exploration text, followed by the pilot meeting text.

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 ⊠

[601]

You put to work what you have just learned about the mechanical manipulation of the dual space interphase. The first, obvious, point is that the interphase can be manipulated; when you left Margen this was not at all certain, and you were worried about finding some natural phenomenon that was responsible for the point source. But no, an artificial manipulation has clearly taken place. Which means that it may be possible for you to do the same.

Possible, but not easy.

In the first place, you decide, you will need to start with better information. The variometer you received on Margen can only tell you what the galactic interphase level is. To build a device that can actually reduce the interphase in a small area — a device which you have already dubbed an Interphase Constrictor — to work, you will need to have much more specific knowledge of the exact interphase level around the machine.

You have already taken apart the variometer, of course, to discover that it is nothing more than a dedicated computer chip continuously running the newest artificial sentience program, placed next to a very tiny ceramic superconductor. The computer program just *thinks* about

changing the conductivity of the superconductor. It doesn't actually physically manipulate the superconductor in any way. As the dual space interphase level rises, the computer's ability to affect the superconductor by thought alone slowly improves. It's a remarkably clever but simple device, and it will serve you well as a starting point.

Using odds and ends of equipment you have lying around the *Black Abyss*, you rebuild the variometer so that it now outputs, electrically, the exact interphase level of any point in space within range of its sensors. The sensors themselves are only good for a few kilometers, but within that volume of space you are able to determine very accurate interphase levels.

Unfortunately, you are not sure what the next step should be. You know what Brother Dikestra and Dean Myers would say. You have only researched one anomaly. Perhaps researching some more of the anomalies will help clarify your schemes.

✧ STOP ✧

[602]

The sky darkens and the trees begin to shake. You realize that you have made the wrong decision. You are an outsider and you have interfered with nature's way. Deresha will not tolerate this. You fear for your life as the vegetation begins to grow in around you. You had better get out of here, and fast.

Quickly, you turn around and follow the path back the way you came. You hear the rustling of large animals behind you, and a pack of vultures circles overhead. You walk faster, then break out into a run. Finally, you reach your transport at the edge of the desert. Behind you, the path is gone. The vegetation is as thick as a solid wall. You will not be welcome back.

✧ STOP ✧

[603]

"Nothing here, Boss," your computer tells you for the dozenth time.

You sigh. Space is very large, and even though you *know* Karnossus is here in this sector, it's taking you a long time to search all of the possible systems. You check off one more grid on your detailed map, then move the ship to the center of the next one. The long-range sensors come on automatically, and your computer begins filtering the results.

"I may have something, Boss."

You suppress your hopes; there have been plenty of transient signals before this.

"It's firming up, Boss. Looks like a lot of hyperspace entry and exit ripples coming from the next grid."

"Get your best fix, then move us to the other side." One other problem with a search of this kind is that you can't just barge in on a promising signal. Like the dog who chases the hovercar, you are not at all sure what you can do if you actually catch the Clathran homeworld. Your ship jumps, under computer control, and again you wait while the scanning equipment comes on.

"Reciprocal signals, Boss. We've definitely got something bracketed."

"Great. Now we have to find out what it is. Plot and execute a slowest possible hyperspace approach. Bring all the defensive systems up to full automatic, and plot and maintain an instant-execution escape plan."

"Aye aye, Boss. I love it when you talk military." Your ship accelerates just into hyperdrive, then decelerates again, creeping fractionally closer to the signal. Scan. Move. Scan. Move.

In an hour, you know you're closing on something big. The signals you're picking up show a volume of hyperspace entries and exits consistent with a busy spacefaring race. But are they the Clathrans? Or have you chanced upon some other advanced civilization unnoticed by past explorers?

Two hours later, your computer gives you the answer.

"They're Clathran, Boss. That last ripple was the characteristic third convergence zone signal of a departing Monitor. Do you want to get closer?"

You think about it. The reason the Monitor's signal is distinctive is because it's the largest warship in the galaxy, and there's every indication that there are plenty of them ahead of you. You watch the signals flicker across the screen for a time, and you realize that you have *known* for several hours that this was Karnossus. You force yourself to assess the reality of what would happen if the Clathrans picked up your hyperdrive signal here.

"No," you say at last. "Not right this second. When we try to get closer it'll have to be a sub-light approach from an entry position above the system's ecliptic. Mark the coordinates for future reference, and then move us back a safe distance away."

"Aye aye, Boss."

Congratulations. You have now found the Karnossus system. If you wish to investigate it more closely, plot LAND while in this trisector.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[604]

The main cluster of structures on Outpost consists of a power station, a landing field, one very large hangar, and some small sheds and service buildings. The power station used to produce energy to run Silverbeard's weapon systems. Most of the station is now inoperative, since you destroyed it in the process of defeating Silverbeard. However, one small generator is still working, and it provides lighting and electrical power for the landing area.

Nearby is a cairn of stones raised in memory of Silverbeard, topped with a shard of twisted phase steel from the wreckage of his last ship. The pirate's body doesn't lie under the cairn; he was buried at sea. The mystery of his strange life and unfortunate death is still unsolved. That he was mad is almost a certainty. But what drove him mad? Was he really, as some evidence indicates, the very same John Silverbeard who was Vanessa Chang's navigator? That would have made him over 340 years old when he died. That doesn't seem likely, but who knows? The original John Silverbeard was captured by the Clathrans and didn't escape with the rest of Chang's surviving crew. His fate alone was unknown; the others either died or escaped. The Clathrans may have done almost anything to him.

Inside the hangar, still untouched, is the framework for a ship Silverbeard had been building. Almost everything else inside has been cleaned out. Soon, you imagine, someone else will claim the hangar and find some use for it. Outpost is yours now, as it was once Chang's and once Silverbeard's. It is still, despite everything, the gateway to the Galactic Arm. You hope fate holds better in store for you than it did for all of the other humans who have dared to pass through that gateway.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[605]

Your foray into “real” Hadrakian society is constantly filled with surprises. One of the most pleasant is how warmly you are greeted by the citizens now that you are one of them. While wandering through the bustling city on your way to the Street of Gods, you smile and wave at the natives, all of whom are dressed in garb that would embarrass most intelligent beings of your acquaintance. When you get to the Street of Gods, you are a little shocked to see huge flashing neon signs at the entrance to each building. The garish modern colors do not complement the old houses of worship at all. Oh well, that’s Hadrakian aesthetics for you.

Finally, you are able to rest your aching eyes when you enter the cool dark interior of one of the Shrines. When your vision adjusts to the lower light setting, you are unable to stifle a groan. Greens, oranges, purples, and yellows are swirling everywhere you look. You are tempted to flee back to the relative safety of your ship. However, you maintain your calm and proceed inside.

“Yes, may I help you?” purrs the imposing figure of a full-grown Settled One from behind her desk. You explain that you are interested in learning more about Hadrakian religion. “Do you have your papers?” she asks diplomatically. You are well aware that without this proof of citizenship, you are liable to be arrested and detained in the Enclave. Proudly, you pull your paperwork out from your wallet and display the proof of your strength and agility in combat.

“My sympathies,” she tells you. This is a standard response in a society where dying in combat is proof of the favor of the gods. You personally are glad you were not deemed worthy of the ultimate “blessing,” that of being called to the abode of the gods (or “shuffling off this mortal coil,” as one famous human writer once expressed the concept of dying).

“Is this your first visit to one of our Shrines?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me introduce myself and explain what we do here. I am Christolla, the Keeper of this Shrine. We Hadrakians worship a great many deities — so many, in fact, that even I cannot keep track of them all. New ones crop up all the time. Hadrakian citizens come to Shrines to pray for guidance. They do not pray to particular gods; rather, they just meditate and wait for one of the gods — any one — to speak. Often, a god does speak; this is called a Revelation. In a Revelation, a god discloses important information or advice that can help a citizen in his or her life.”

“Really?” you ask, intrigued. “How specific is this advice? Have you always been able to communicate with your gods this way?”

“Oh, the advice is very specific, and we have always listened to our gods. History has shown that if we pray long enough, the gods will always tell us something. In fact, it was through a Revelation that the Arena system — the foundation of our civilization — was invented. Revelations are an important part of our lives, and keep our society running smoothly. For example, although the merchant houses are very competitive, the gods tell the merchants to cooperate in some ways. This is how The Battle, Inc., the single company responsible for fighting the Clathrans, was formed. Revelations bring together parts of our civilization that might otherwise fall apart.

“Something we don’t understand is that recently the gods have been a lot more communicative than usual. Within the past twenty years or so, Revelations have begun occurring with astonishing frequency. We used to have to pray for months to get the gods to speak. Now it seems like they have something to say every few weeks. I’m not complaining about the change; it’s been great for business. Now, is there anything else I can help you with?”

“Perhaps I could try praying to your gods,” you suggest politely. “I mean, if they could tell me something that would help me out. . .”

“Well,” the Settled One says with a look of amusement on her face, “I suppose you could try. Aliens have tried it before. But I’ve never heard of the gods actually speaking to anyone but us Hadrakians. So don’t get your hopes up.”

“I think I’ll try anyway. What do I have to lose?”

“All right. Enter one of the meditation chambers alone, clear your mind of worries, and wait. Wait as long as you can; you never know when a god might speak. Should you be lucky enough to have a Revelation, you must tell the Keeper of the Shrine (that’s me) which god spoke to you, on your way out. This is because there can be secret and hidden meanings in the names the gods choose for themselves. We Keepers can sometimes decode these names and scry a deeper meaning than the god volunteered outright. When we are able to get something more out of the messages — and it sometimes takes many messages to get the entire meaning — it can be of great benefit.

“Go now and choose a chamber. Each chamber has beautifully decorated floors and walls as well as meditation couches which you may use to make yourself comfortable. Good luck; may the gods visit you today.”

Entering a chamber at random, you stretch yourself out on the rug (Hadrakian resting benches are not for the likes of you), close your eyes, and relax. Almost immediately you feel a stirring sensation deep within your mind. Although the Settled One did not think such a thing possible, you are certain it is one of the Hadrakian gods trying to communicate with you.

“I am the Goddess of Abundant Scenery,” whispers a soft voice between your ears. “You have travelled far and endured much to be here during this time of war. I am glad to meet you, for Humans and Hadrakians must work together if there is to be any hope of defeating the Clathrans. There is little that I alone can tell you, and much that you must piece together from us all. One thing I can recommend: the Academy of Military Arts on the planet Worzelle. Do not miss it in your travels.” With a puff, as of a lover blowing in your ear, she is gone.

Rested and relaxed, you leave the chamber. On the way out, you pause to relate the goddess’s name to the Keeper of the Shrine. She is quite surprised that you had a Revelation.

“Hmmp! These are strange times,” she comments, “The Empire is at war and the gods are speaking to aliens. What next?”

You notice that the Keeper writes the goddess’s name down on a ledger pad. Perhaps you should write it down as well, for your own records. You think about what the Keeper said, “There can be secret and hidden meanings in the names the gods choose for themselves.”

It seems that you can pray in the Hadrakian Shrines just like the Hadrakians themselves do, and get useful advice from the Hadrakian gods. You have acquired the ability of Revelation. You may wish to visit this Shrine again in the future, as well as other Shrines on other Hadrakian planets. You never know what information you might pick up. Of course, you cannot expect to get a Revelation every time. The Hadrakians themselves only get Revelations every couple of weeks.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[606]

You have built an Automated Repair System. Congratulations!

This improvement will enable you to perform repairs on your ship faster and better than before. Of course, to get your ship in perfect condition quickly, a visit to a shipyard or other repair facility on a planet will still be necessary.

✂ STOP ✂

[607]

You are standing at the bottom of the 200-foot tall martini glass that the Zyran call the Projector of Eternal Peace. Looking up, you see that the Projector is, in fact, a complex machine. Its long, slender stem is filled with intricate equipment, while its open top part has a strikingly perfect shape and transparent color.

You are wondering about how the Projector works when a gooey brown tentacle suddenly appears on your left shoulder.

“Woah!” you cry out, as you turn around and reach for your weapon.

A four-foot high pile of tentacles is standing there, with one tentacle reaching onto your shoulder. “I do not wish to hurt you,” the thing says, making you wonder where its vocal apparatus is.

“What do you want?” you ask.

“Food,” it answers. “Are you interested in the Projector? I will tell you about it in exchange for a meal.”

This seems a fair deal, so you take the lunch you happen to have with you and set it out on the ground. The Zyran bundle of tentacles squishes back and forth like a mop over the food, and soon your lunch is gone.

"Thank you (burp)," the little Zyran introduces itself, "My name is Bisoppa. Now I will tell you about the Projector. Sixty-five thousand years ago, a group of powerful beings came to our planet and built the Projector. The powerful beings told us that the Projector would give us eternal peace. Since we are normally an aggressive, violent race, we wondered how it would do that. We soon found out that, miraculously, the Projector made all Zyrans immortal. For as long as the Projector worked, no Zyran aged or died. Unfortunately, this was not so good for us, for we only reproduce when we die; the death of the parent causes the birth of the children. Suddenly, there were no more deaths, and no more children. We discovered that our aggressive, warlike nature was an effect of our growing population. When the Projector stopped our population from growing, we became quiescent and peaceful. We had eternal peace, as the powerful beings had promised. But at what price? The Projector had taken away our vitality. Fortunately, the device no longer functions, and we are free from it now."

You can see that. The Zyrans are no longer immortal, nor are they peaceful. But while the Projector worked, the Zyrans must have been like many other races you have come across in the galaxy. They had been left content but stagnant, their natural evolution halted by a race of "powerful beings."

"What happened?" you ask. "Why did the Projector stop working?"

"Three centuries ago an alien — we don't know who — stole the Stone of Immortality from the core of the Projector. At the time, our race was weak and complacent, and we did nothing to stop the thief. The Stone of Immortality was the true power within the Projector. With the Stone removed, the Projector no longer functioned. We were free. We started to age and to die and to grow again. We regained our vitality, our aggression. Three centuries have passed since then. We have made many technological advances and even colonized space. The thief did us a great favor. Now all that is left of our sixty thousand years of immortality are the powerless Projector and the jewelry we wear. See?"

Bisoppa shows you a small stone it wears on a chain around one of its tentacles. It's a semi-transparent white sphere with a black center. "A miniature replica of the Stone of Immortality," the creature says, "To remind us of our past. To remind us that we should not fear death."

You thank Bisoppa for the explanation. You have learned much about the history of the Zyrans. It is not surprising that they are so antagonistic towards the aliens they meet, considering their past. Of course, if the Clathran Survey passes over Zyroth, it is a sure bet that the Zyrans will be neutralized again.

You have no love for the Zyrans, but the thought of the Clathrans exterminating them is no consolation. It only makes you more angry and afraid. The Clathrans have to be stopped, or humanity will be next.

✂ STOP ✂

[608]

You are at the bridge practicing some of your navigation skills, when another ship appears behind you, at long range. Apparently your computer has noticed this too, since the ship's alarm siren blares out.

"Unidentified ship on our tail, Boss. It's got some kind of scanning beam focused on us, and it's closing in, fast."

You can now see the other ship on visual. It is a small, fast scout ship of some sort, shaped like an unusual alien bird. A wave of fear passes over you as you recognize the bird shape. It is the same as the ships described in Vanessa Chang's log — Clathran ships.

"Incoming transmission on visual," your computer reports.

The Clathran scout captain appears on your viewscreen. He stands seven feet tall and is covered with green scales. His limbs are bilaterally symmetric, with two arms, two legs, and one head. His hands have sharp, retractable claws. Generally speaking, he looks like a large, reptilian humanoid. His rasping hisses are interpreted by your universal translator.

"Human vermin," he says, "Where did you come from? I thought we exterminated you three hundred years ago. You must have found some rathole to crawl into. Won't Command be surprised? I will get a nice medal for capturing you and taking you back for examination. Surrender, or be destroyed."

Of course, you have no intention of surrendering. You can, however, either fight or try to get away. The Clathran scout is both fast and well-armed. Do you:

- 1) Fight
- 2) Run away

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[609]

"We're now leaving the planet Golgotha, Boss," says your computer.

You quickly glance at the viewscreen, then key in for a rear view. A reddish planet is receding behind you.

"Why are we leaving?" you demand. "Turn the ship around. When did we reach Golgotha?"

The computer is silent for a moment. "Two days ago, Boss. We scanned the planet, found nothing of interest, and finally you ordered me to take off."

"This time you've blown your chips for sure. Why would I tell you to take off when we just got here?"

"I don't know, Boss. Don't you remember?"

"I don't remember anything! Are you saying I've been asleep for two days?"

"No, Boss. You were acting quite normally. Is something wrong? You're not making any sense."

"Well, let me put it this way. One of us is rather out of touch with reality. Whichever of us it is, it's not good news for me. Can you show me your records of the last two days?"

"Of course, Boss. Just a moment. . . I'm sorry. I seem to have made an error. The records aren't in storage."

"Perform a systems check," you order the computer. As the machine complies, you guide the ship manually into a reasonable orbit around the dim greenish planet.

"All my circuitry and logic kernel segments check your okay, Boss. Boss! What are you doing? We're on collision course! Release the manual controls!"

You look up and see Golgotha's yellow-white surface rushing toward you at frightening speed. You quickly pull out of the dive, then return the flight controls to computer mode. What could you have been doing? How could you have made such a clumsy flying error?

"Now approaching the planet Golgotha, Boss," says the computer as if nothing were wrong. Your head reels. Approaching? Sure enough, the dull grey orb is centered in your forward viewscreen.

"How can it be in front of us? We were just flying away from it!" you ask out loud.

"What do you mean, Boss? We're just arriving at the coordinates on the map. Do you want to leave without even scanning it?"

"Check every instrument reading," you instruct the computer. "There's some sort of anomaly here, either in the ship's systems or with the planet."

"Boss, there's nothing wrong with the ship, except that I can't get a sensible reading from the Interphase Variometer. I suspect it has broken down. Its reading is pegged at the upper extreme of its scale."

You look around and notice that the planet is nowhere in sight. "Turn us around," you command. "We've passed Golgotha. . . the coordinates must be a little bit off." But you have a very uncomfortable feeling that something else is wrong. You feel a sensation of dreamlike anxiety, a swarming of contradictory thoughts. The ship changes course, and the tiny planet of brown and white comes back into view.

“Suppose the Variometer reading is true,” you ask. “What would it mean?”

“Well, according to theory it would mean that a wide variety of alternate realities exists at this point, and that shifting between them is easier. If we’re at some sort of special nexus in Dual Space, then the Interphase could appear to be vastly wider. Local reality would be highly unstable.”

“Why only local reality? What’s the difference?”

“This is all theoretical, Boss, but from what we know so far about Dual Space, the Interphase should be close to the same width throughout the galaxy. Golgotha violates that law somehow. At the same time, the effect is confined within a small volume of space. If it weren’t, and the Interphase had really widened to this point, we would see the stars shifting around, not just the planet.”

“So how can I get there?”

“It’s difficult, Boss. The zone of instability around Golgotha makes all events and facts highly subjective. My sensors and logic systems simply don’t function there. Because your sense of subjective sentience is better developed, you might be able to control the instability.”

“Really? And how do I do that?”

“Beats me, Boss. Reality in the Dual Space Interphase is subject to alteration by preconception. It conforms itself to your conclusions. If your mind wanders, so will you. It appears that you would have to concentrate on passive perception, and let go of your sense of logical inference, in order to force the nexus to show you its real shape.”

“Let go of my sense of logic? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Not at all. Knowing you, it should be second nature.”

“Okay, set a course back to the planet. How close to a landing can you get without using sensors, just going by the map?”

“I can reach orbit, Boss, but not land. You’ll have to do that manually.”

“Fine. Put a direct visible-light feed on the viewscreen and take yourself out of the image processing sequence. That’ll keep things simpler. I’ll try to concentrate on keeping us and the planet where we should be.”

You once again draw close to the planet, a brilliant blue sphere streaked with dark grey clouds. The image wavers and trembles slightly, but you watch it closely as you approach. Again you feel the strange sensation of contradiction, of numerous possibilities striving to be realized. Why should you be here and not there, and why should it be now and not then? Why do you insist on knowing where you are, when you could be anywhere? Why merely look, when you could draw whatever shape you want to see out of the layers of possibility? You keep your thoughts and expectations neutral as you enter orbit. You concentrate on the unchanging stars and ignore the planet’s shifting patterns and colors. As you descend, you watch the horizon and the ground beneath, and pay only scant attention to the ship’s instruments. You try not to think about all the other places on the planet where you could be landing, where in some other reality not far away in the Interphase you are landing at this very moment. There are infinite possibilities, you remind yourself, but there is only one reality, or at least only one at a time.

You don’t feel any jolt when you finally touch Golgotha’s surface. The rock seems to be shaped as though specially carved to cradle your ship. The atmosphere is breathable, or at least you think it is. You prepare to explore the planet, but at the same time you wonder just what it is you’ve landed on. Is there really a planet here at all? Or just the idea of a planet, pulled from the Interphase to fulfill your expectations? You decide that Golgotha must possess some degree of autonomous reality, for otherwise it couldn’t have been discovered. Perhaps there was a normal planet here once. Whatever happened here to create the discontinuity in Dual Space left at least the memory of a planet orbiting in its place. You wonder what the past explorers found here, and whether any sort of intelligence might still live on Golgotha.

Your options are:

⟨HNRYA6⟩ (7 phases) Search for any sign of intelligent life on the planet.

⟨DNCYF6⟩ (7 phases) Examine the planet for evidence left behind by human explorers who have visited Golgotha in the past.

⟨HMRJAU⟩ (7 phases) Investigate the cause of the Dual Space anomaly.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[610]

Bassins tells you a little about her people's religion as you both make your way to the top of the volcano where the church is located. According to her, the religion is as old as the Kerosian civilization. It has no name, and neither does the god that they worship. Everyone visits the church each day, gazes into the depths of the volcano, then leaves. That's all — no prayers, no singing, no offerings to speak of, with the possible exception of the occasional Kerosians who throw themselves into the depths of the volcano. No one really knows why they do it, but they do have a name for the act. It is called "going to the master." The meaning behind the phrase has long since been lost.

As you near the church, Bassins points out the other three buildings dotted around the gaping mouth of the volcano. Each of the other three Kerosian villages have their own church, and all of the Kerosians visit them at the same time. The volcano is so big that you cannot make out the building that's supposed to be directly across from the one you are now at. You take your host's word for its presence and pass through the church's door.

The inside of the structure is large enough for everyone in the village to be present at one time. You do not stay for long, however. As soon as everyone has arrived, you make your way out through a door opposite the one from which you entered. It leads to a catwalk which has been built overlooking the steep drop into the depths of the volcanic pit, the bottom of which is too far down to see. All the people in the village are present and lined up on the walkway. You notice that they are all gazing raptly into the dark interior of the mountain. When you turn to look in that direction, you cannot see anything of interest. A feeling of vertigo engulfs you; you try to turn away, but you have lost the power of movement.

A strong feeling of belonging comes over you. There is something down there beckoning you to climb over the railing along the walk and sail into the shadows below. A stronger, more rational thought prevails — the one that says jumping means certain death. Immediately you shake loose from the weird sensation, and you are once again in full possession of your faculties. You think you understand why some of the Kerosians leap into the volcano. Fortunately, only a few actually do it.

Bassins takes your hand and leads you back to safety. She didn't notice your momentary lapse, and you do not volunteer the information. She chatters about her day's work, not noticing your silence. When you reach the city, you turn down her offer of dinner and tell her you have something to take care of first. You wave farewell and head back to your ship.

"Computer, plot a course down into the volcano."

"WHAT!!! Boss, are you sure? We can't get any reliable sensor readings from down there, so we'll have no idea what we're getting into until it's too late. I strongly recommend. . ."

"Recommendation taken under advisement," you say, cutting your computer short. "I want answers. Let's go."

If computers could grumble, yours would be doing just that. Instead, it complies with your orders. Within minutes, you have lifted off and arced over to the mouth of the enormous volcano. Thrusters blazing downward, you begin your descent into the unknown.

The first hundred feet are easy, as your sensors are all functioning and the rear viewscreens are well positioned to show you where you are headed. You couldn't ask for better conditions. Suddenly, however, all of your long-range sensors go haywire. Only the close-range viewscreens are operational. To make matters worse, the interior sides of the mountain have begun sloping in sharply. Soon you are traveling down a narrow shaft, barely wide enough for your ship. You decide to continue your descent.

An hour has passed and you have slowly been making your way down the shaft. It has not gotten any narrower, but you notice that the texture of the sides has gone from a natural rock wall to a glossy, smooth glass. You do not think the volcanic heat is responsible for such a smooth and even surface. It looks decidedly artificial. Unfortunately, you are not in a position to take samples for analysis.

Heat is now becoming something with which you must be concerned. The ship's hull can withstand a tremendous amount of heat, as it does with every planet on which you land. But the intense heat coming from below is blasting up at you along a very narrow channel, not to mention the added heat of your own thrusters. You keep a close eye on the amount of damage being done every minute you are in this shaft.

Suddenly you feel the retrothrusters surging, slowing your descent.

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

"Sorry, Boss. The viewscreens are showing an obstruction just below us."

You peer up at the rear screen and see what appears to be some sort of giant airlock blocking the volcano shaft. Before you can make any comment, the lock's doors hiss open and you see a rush of flames leap upward. You instinctively duck, feeling rather foolish a moment later.

"It's all right, Boss. That was just a reaction of fresh air being introduced to the shaft below us. From the viewscreen, I'd say we could continue if you wanted. The heat is going to get more intense and we will start to sustain more serious damage than we have so far, but we should have plenty of warning before things get too hot for us."

You start to tell the computer to continue the descent when it continues, "Unless. . ."

"Unless what?" you ask.

"Unless the lock closes after we pass through. Then we could be trapped in this fiery pit forever."

You take a moment to think this over. On the one hand, SOMETHING is down here. The artificial walls and the airlock are evidence of that. On the other hand, is it worth risking your ship, your very life, to discover what that something is? Should you wish to continue down into the volcano, despite the dangers, you may plot the following option:

(YS6ZB2) (7 phases) Pass through the artificial lock and continue your descent down to the heart of the volcano.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[611]

You follow Jean Clerc's plans for building a Survivable Jump Engine. You are taking quite a chance, since normally jump engine travel kills all sentient beings. That is why all cargo vessels with jump engines are all robotically controlled.

However, if it worked for Clerc, it will work for you. It takes you several days to get everything ready. You arrange the physical components first, attaching the engine housing as a ring of four shorter spokes projecting out of your hull between the longer mountings of your conventional drive. Then you remake the cryogenics tank in the ship's sick bay to serve as your life support chamber, mounting the Flame Jewel prominently in the center. The Flame Jewel, you know, is the key. It is supposed to protect your mind from the lethal effects of the jump. At length everything is ready. The jump engine, as Clerc designed it, is hard-wired to take you to the trisector containing the planet Franclair. You review the testing sequence with your computer.

"I'll get comfortable in the tank, turn on the bio-support systems, and bond with the Flame Jewel. When the board shows all green, you begin the equilibration firings. Make sure you've got a good fix, in triplicate, before starting the final countdown."

"As you command."

"And don't forget to back yourself up and pull your own plug. You may be smart enough now to be scrambled by the jump."

"Why Boss! Is that a touch of human compassion in your voice?"

"Obviously misplaced. I'm entering the tank now."

You climb into the cryo tank, seat yourself comfortably, and begin applying the bio-monitors. The tank will automatically measure and record your electrocardiogram, respiratory pattern, blood pressure, oxygenation, temperature, and brain wave pattern for the duration of the drive test. Even if you don't survive, the information will be available to those at the other end of the jump, to analyze as they see fit. When all of the monitors are showing normal values (including a rapid pulse, as the moment of truth draws closer), you clamp an enriched atmosphere mouthpiece between your teeth and trigger the "fill" button on the tank. Greenish liquid pours in from the bottom, and rapidly solidifies to something approaching the color and consistency of lime-flavored gelatin. Your last action before movement becomes impossible is to wrap both hands around the Flame Jewel that hangs before you in the tank. Clearing your mind of all doubts, you reach out for the gem with all your essence.

The Flame Jewel reaches back, drawing you in and holding you tight. You open your inner eyes and regard the body that holds you, encased in green gel that looks greyish-black through the red filter of the stone that envelops your soul. You can see a look of peace on the body's face, the same peace that fills your mind through a motionless second.

Faintly, you see minute waves ripple through the gelatin, and a part of your reason concludes that these must be the calibration tests. Somewhere beyond your flame-shrouded world, a sentient super-computer is hurling a starship through a series of violent maneuvers in hyperspace, determining to a centimeter the exact position and velocity of the ship. Then there is a pause, that extends. . .

The peace of the Flame Jewel penetrates even the parts of your brain that are expecting disorientation and death, the fate of those who have tested jump engines before you. "Be calm," whispers a voice. "Relax. Nothing here will change. Nothing bad will happen."

Beyond the cryo tank your computer shuts down, withdrawing its personality networks to an optical chip and leaving the operation of your vessel to a simple machine. You perceive nothing, as the universe evaporates around you. A new universe forms at once, presenting a large asteroid for you to orbit.

Elsewhere on the ship, simple machines have started a process involving so many billions of steps that it takes almost three seconds to accomplish: the reconstitution of your sentient ship's computer.

Locked in your peaceful prison, you perceive none of this. You take no notice as automatic alarms sound throughout the ship, heralding the arrival of armed forces from the asteroid. You barely notice the gel dissolving away from the body that used to be yours, leaving it with a livid red tint. An itch somewhere draws only a fragment of your consciousness, barely disturbing you even when it becomes a tingle, then a burn, then. . .

"Hey that hurts!" you shout, dropping the Flame Jewel and rubbing the place on your leg where the neuro-induction electrodes have shocked you back to yourself.

"Wahoooooooo, Boss! Welcome to Franclair!"

You made it! You survived the jump! You hurry to the bridge and activate the navigational systems, confirming what you already know in your heart. You have arrived at the trisector containing the planet Franclair, at exactly the cosmic instant you left where you just were.

You may now use your Survivable Jump Engine at any time to "jump" to the planet Franclair. To do so, plot the following option:

(XWNTYG) (7 phases) Use the Survivable Jump Engine.

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

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[612]

The Hadrakian colony on Psorus is just a small frontier settlement, so The Battle, Inc. does not have very much of a presence here. When you ask for directions to their office, you are told to go to a small building next to the general store. The building turns out to be just a small wooden shack, but there is a sign overhead, which reads, "The Battle, Inc., Office Hours 900-1700 Every Day." The door is unlocked and there is no guard, so you walk right in.

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

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

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

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

✧ STOP ✧

[613]

Mardahl, planet of the ostrich-people. You smile at the memory of the only other race in the galaxy capable of building a really good roller-coaster. Your smile quickly fades, however, when you notice that the planet has now been occupied by the Clathrans.

You decide to run a long-range scan on the planet before you get close enough to be in any danger. The data indicates the presence of a Clathran monitoring station and several destroyers in orbit around the planet. In addition, the Clathrans have a small army garrison on the surface. From the looks of it, the Mardahlans didn't put up much of a fight.

The situation is bad, but it could be worse. At least the Clathran presence here is relatively small, which makes it possible for you to try to elude it. There are only a few orbiting spaceships, and the garrison on the ground is confined to a limited area. You decide that with your technology and skill, you have a good chance of being able to pursue your business on the planet without being spotted by the invaders.

You instruct your computer to perform the maneuvers needed to get you down to the surface out of sight of the Clathran forces. With a little care, you are soon safe on the ground just outside the city of Pillionia. You make a cautious reconnaissance of the city, and suddenly realize a fortunate coincidence: you look a lot like the planet's android lower class — close enough to them, in fact, that you can easily pass for a native. Relieved, you broaden your explorations. Your options turn out to be the same as prior to the occupation; amazingly enough, Mardahland is still functioning.

✂ STOP ✂

[614]

Your breakneck flight from the Survey Line and its horde of Clathran ships is barely complete when you instruct your ship's computer to make contact with the Institute for Space Exploration. Fortune must somehow have swung back to your side, too, because your subspace radio crackles to life almost at once.

"This is the Institute for Space Exploration."

"This is Captain M. J. Turner of the Home Worlds Space Navy Vessel Barratry with an urgent message for Margaret Ellison or Dr. Amos Schottky."

"Who? We have no Captain Turner."

"Check again, right at the top of the list. And get Ellison or Schottky quickly; I'm not sure how long I'll be able to keep contact."

"Oh, *that* Turner. The brass is on the way." There is a pause.

"Turner, is that you?" It's Ellison's voice.

"No, it's the ghost of Silverbeard calling. Do you people want to talk to me or not?"

"Of course we do, but security is important. Have you found the Clathran Survey?"

"In a word: Yes. Prepare to receive the data-compression of my log."

"Our recorders are on."

You trigger the "send" button on your console, squirting the entire record of your recent explorations to the ISE in the span of seven seconds.

"Transmission received, Captain Turner. Since it will take some time for us to slow and decrypt your message, why don't you tell me what you found. Is the Survey big?"

"It's as big as you predicted, stretching from one side of the galaxy to the other. Thousands, maybe millions, of Clathran ships."

“How fast is it moving?”

“I can’t predict that entirely, since it stops and starts when it’s absorbing star systems. But my best guess is that it’ll reach Earth within a century. Faster, if they keep adding ships to it.”

Another pause.

“Turner, you’ve got to cross the Survey Line for us.”

“Have you looked at the data I just sent? Hydrogen atoms can’t cross the Survey unnoticed, let alone an occupied ship.”

“You learned to cross the Boundary.”

“Hah! The Survey line makes the Boundary look like tissue paper. I’ll be captured for sure.”

“We need this, Turner.”

You turn off your radio for a moment and shock your computer with some language not found in its latest vocabulary upgrade. Still, you knew this was coming. You click the radio back on.

“What do I do when I get to the other side?”

“Contact us again, and tell us about it.”

“Very well, but it’ll take some time. I need equipment and information, and it won’t be easy to get.”

“Good luck, Captain Turner. We’ll be in touch.”

⊠ STOP ⊠

[615]

Given the Mardahlans’ enjoyment of personal dueling, you would expect the variety and quality of their weapons to be outstanding. You are not disappointed. By traveling through an entire city block called the “weapons district,” you find a wide assortment of hand weapons. After hours of window shopping, you find one store in particular with a selection and price range that suits you.

Although many of the weapons available here do not fit well in a human hand, you find several that you could use. You check with the android behind the counter for the prices:

Biogun — 1 Fiber + 1 Phase Steel
 Gravity Tilt — 1 Crystals + 1 Food + 1 Munitions
 Call-a-Wall — 2 Medicine + 1 Munitions

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[616]

Putting to work all of the tactics and equipment you've developed in the course of your decade of galactic exploration, you plunge into the fray. The *Holly Roger* is small, but you beat a Clathran dreadnought singlehandedly the first time you crossed the Survey. In fact, you may be flying the most powerful one-passenger ship in the entire galaxy.

You put it to work. The swirling nature of the battle, broken into its thousands of ship-to-ship melees, is perfectly suited to your skills. Being faster than most of the participants, you can spot an individual duel, warp into the middle of it, and score a couple of well-placed shots on the Clathran ship before flickering away again.

You tip the scales in a number of duels before the Clathrans get smart and start chasing you. The *Holly Roger* may be faster than any individual Clathran ship, but the elements of an entire Monitor-controlled battle group soon have you running for your life. The Monitor directs a swarm of dreadnoughts and destroyers after you, sending two or three to pursue you directly while using the others to lay ambushes along your most likely routes of escape. Your computer keeps you free for a while, repeatedly maneuvering you into concentrations of Allied forces where the pursuing Clathrans are forced to break off and make frontal assaults. Eventually, however, you start to run out of friendlies.

The Monitor has herded you well away from the main battle, borrowing forces from other battle groups and directing more than fifty ships after you alone. You wonder how the Clathrans can afford to concentrate that much force on a single ship, but then you recall their unusual hatred for humans. They must have identified you. You kill an overeager star destroyer with a well-placed shot, but the engagement costs you some time, and the other Clathrans close in rapidly. Things are starting to look a little grim.

"Any ideas, Boss?" asks your computer.

What would your ancestors have done in a spot like this? "I don't suppose it would be practical to lend them money at high interest, and then break their arms later," you suggest.

"Boss, I'm picking up the drive signatures of another large force of ships in this sector," the computer announces. "They look like they might be Clathran reinforcements."

"Set a course to intercept them."

"Boss, are you sure? That doesn't seem very wise."

The Clathrans come after you as soon as they see you taking off in a straight line. Allies and Clathrans alike maneuver out of the way when they see the Clathran force in pursuit at top speed. Soon the whole battle group is on your tail, and some of the faster cruisers begin pulling alongside. The pursuit draws tighter as you pass beyond the perimeter of the active battle zone, running for deep space.

"Boss, they're coming into range. Running won't do any good. They'd chase us to the Andromeda Galaxy if they had to."

Your shields are weakening. Alarms are screaming from your defensive systems as they approach critical overload values, and you know that soon the entire Clathran force will be within range. You are going to die.

Your shields have reached the critical overload level, and your ship begins to lose power. Your warp fields collapse around you, and your weapons and defenses go cold. You watch your screens as the pursuing Clathrans surround you like wolves around a stricken deer. But something else is on the screen as well. Ships! Dozens of ships! They're not Clathran, you can see that at once, but you don't immediately recognize them. Whoever they are, they're on your side. In disciplined formation they attack the Clathran battle group, turning the tide of your personal battle in a dramatic fashion. By the time you have your power restored and your shields back to full strength, the Monitor and most of the dreadnoughts are destroyed, and the smaller ships are fleeing for their lives. Most of them, you are pleased to see, don't make it.

With a sigh of relief, you look more closely at your saviors. There's something familiar about their design, almost as if they had copied some of the features of your own ship. In a sudden flash of understanding, you realize why.

You are in the midst of the Home Worlds Space Navy, the human fleet that your shipment of Flame Jewels made possible.

"How'd you know, Boss?" your computer asks.

"I didn't," you reply. "I didn't even know they'd be friendly; in fact, the odds were rather overwhelming that they'd be Clathran reinforcements, but I hoped we'd be able to get away in the confusion."

"Good guess," says the computer, leaving you wondering whether you've been complimented or insulted.

"Open a radio channel for me, would you?"

"Right away, Boss."

You face your viewscreen and address the human ships, thinking that few sights have ever looked so good.

"This is Captain Valentine Stewart, of the Wellmet Stewarts, commanding the *Holly Roger*. Who is in command of your fleet?"

"Captain Stewart, this is Admiral Wilkins of the Home Worlds Space Navy. We understand that there's a battle taking place near Hadrak. Perhaps you could direct us to the part of it you haven't already brought here."

"Certainly sir, I'd be delighted. But tell me, why haven't you already found it?"

"Our maps of the Arm leave something to be desired. If it wasn't for the Riallans, in fact, we might never have gotten this close. But time is passing. . ."

"Follow me, Admiral." You lead the way back to Hadrak, wondering how things have gone in your absence.

Things are much the same as when you left, only worse. A thousand melees still swirl through space around the planet, but now it is plain to see that the larger Clathran forces are close to routing the Allies. Until the Home Worlds Space Navy enters, that is.

Three Monitors are attacked and destroyed almost at once, before they realize that new forces have arrived. The human ships, newly constructed with technology brought back from across the galaxy by you and your fellow explorers, are the most advanced in the battle. In only a few hours, the tide has turned completely and Allied forces are pushing the Clathrans from the system. Soon you witness a full-scale retreat, as the Clathrans attempt to escape what is becoming a killing ground. Some of them make it; most do not. One ship, the last surviving Monitor, is singled out for special attention.

Neutralized but not destroyed, the Hadrakians plan to board the last Monitor and interrogate its computer. You add the *Holly Roger* to the encircling forces, and are given permission to join the boarding party.

✧ STOP ✧

[617]

You fly your ship as close as you dare to the Clathran garrison, ready to leave the planet immediately if you are spotted. You land in a field surrounded by trees that will hopefully keep your ship hidden. You'll have to travel the rest of the way on foot.

Carefully, you hike through the wooded area, avoiding the roads. Eventually you reach the edge of the garrison, which is protected by a force field. The only way in is by the gate on the main road. Fortunately, your skills enable you to pass through the gate without being noticed.

Inside, there are Clathran soldiers and technological equipment everywhere. It is a high-tech operation. You see a landing pad for Clathran ships, a sensor array for monitoring space traffic in the area, a subspace radio transmitter, hangars, armories and sprawling living quarters for what must be several thousand Clathrans. The place that really gets your attention, though, is the headquarters building. It contains all the computers for the garrison, and probably a lot of useful information.

You go straight to the headquarters building and make your way inside. Even with your skills, it would be risky to stay long. You locate an important-looking computer room that is not occupied at the moment. Good. You find a terminal and begin searching through the computerized files.

Most of the data concerns the occupation of the Zyran colony — patrol schedules, supply needs, enforcement operations, and so on. Continuing your search, you uncover more and more information about the occupation, culminating in the following report:

FROM: Occupation Commander, Geefle
TO: Survey Central
RE: Zyran Evolution

From the data we have gathered here on Geefle, it would seem that the Zyrans have evolved substantially since the last Survey. The Masters' containment of the Zyran race has not held up. It seems that a device the Masters planted on the Zyran home planet after the last Survey was removed several hundred years ago. As a result, the Zyrans have been evolving in an uncontrolled manner for the past three centuries.

They have expanded with remarkable speed during this time. Despite their highly aggressive instincts, they have avoided wars among themselves. Instead, they have developed space travel and expanded to two other star systems, where they have established colonies. They are currently seeking additional colonies.

We have stopped all space travel on the Geefle colony and instituted measures to halt the Zyran growth pattern here. We can act similarly when we get to their other colony and their home planet. However, this is not a viable long-term solution. It will only make the Zyrans more aggressive.

Severe measures are required to deal with the problem on a permanent basis. The Zyrans are too dangerous to leave unsupervised for any length of time. Therefore, I recommend that the question of what to do with the Zyrans be relayed to the Masters as soon as possible.

If it is impossible to get a directive on this matter, it may be necessary for us to eliminate the Zyrans on our own initiative, as we have done with similar races in the past.

END OF REPORT

You have just finished reading this document when you see that a whole group of Clathrans are about to enter the computer room. Quickly, you leave the terminal you are using and conceal yourself from the arriving Clathrans. You are then able to sneak out of the garrison the way you came in.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[618]

You have another piece of unfinished business, and matter-of-factly tell Ghuuss, "I have a young Riallan from the Fringe aboard my ship. Would you like to speak with it?"

"I have already been in communication with the little one. It has told me of your love and care for it while it has journeyed with you. I wish to thank you for this." You are too embarrassed to admit that you kidnapped the alien right after it was born, so you nod modestly, your cheeks flushing. "However, I now think it would be best if I took the young one off your hands now, so it can live among its kind."

You wholeheartedly agree. It's a sad parting, but you open the door of cargo bay 3 and watch as the immature Riallan floats out into space to be with its kin. Your eyes get misty for a moment at this touching reunion, but you soon get back to your old self. It takes you a moment to realize that you are once again free to use cargo bay 3 for your own purposes. Hallelujah!

⊠ STOP ⊠

[619]

Although you realize that there may be some element of risk involved in visiting the green and living part of the planet, you decide to do so anyway. This brashness in you seems to get stronger as the years pass and one day it is really going to get you into trouble.

You choose to leave your ship at the spaceport and use Hadrakian land transportation instead. The only vehicle available is a four-wheel drive, single-person transport that has the ride of an old Earth buckboard. After hours of bouncing, you are feeling rather sore all over. Fortunately, by this time you have reached the outer fringes of the nearest edge of dense vegetation. Here, you disembark and start walking into the dense forest, following a narrow but well-worn path.

Almost immediately the woods seem to close in around you, and the light fades to a twilight glow. You hear sounds of insects and small animals rustling in the underbrush; the temperature takes a perceptible drop. The lonely cry of a distant bird is followed by the more nervewracking roar of a hungry predator; you reach for the reassurance of your weapon. Looking back over your shoulder to make sure you are not being followed, you see something even more distressing. There is no path behind you! The trees have closed in to form an impenetrable wall, blocking your return to the transport. Is the forest embracing you, or is it a trap? Turning forward again, you resolutely continue on your way.

Hours pass; you are getting colder and hungrier. All around you, you sense a strange kind of intelligence, as if all the plants and animals were part of a single mind. That mind is baiting you, taunting you. Will it ever let you out alive? Spooked, you stop dead in your tracks and shout to the empty air, "I will not play this game anymore! Show yourself!" Only the wind answers.

Sitting with your back to a wide tree trunk, you settle down for the night. A scanty meal of dried rations are all you allow yourself for supper; there's no telling how long you will be here. When you have eaten, you fold your arms across your chest for warmth and allow yourself to doze a bit. Not even the cold rain that has begun to fall can keep you from sleeping, and dreaming. . .

Fragments of emotions, impressions, feelings and sensations become your conscious mind. Deep down, you know you are only dreaming, but the sensation that you have become someone or something much larger and more complex than your frail human self is very real. You have the strong sense that you must tread softly in this new terrain. For you are not alone here. An entity of immense power is allowing you to enter its world, and one misstep on your part will result in your total destruction.

Gradually you begin to sort out the myriad sensations and impressions, and realize that you are experiencing life from every point of view imaginable on Rothane. Your consciousness flits from leaf to bird to insect to animal in the blink of an eye. With each transition you are able to fully identify with the life form you have become. The sprout reaching up toward the warm sun, soon to be eaten by the grazing animal; becoming part of that animal's consciousness, you feel the air blow against your fur. Now feeling the claws of a larger predator as it attacks, you become part of the predator as it eats to survive, just as the grazing animal ate the grass to survive. Deep inside, your human mind recoils at the callousness here, but soon understands that there is nothing evil in the natural order of life. Each denizen plays an important role in the ecosystem of the planet; each living thing has its place in the scheme of things. Evil only occurs when this scheme is twisted or interfered with, such as by killing for sport or pleasure or as a means to an end that disrupts the natural order of things.

While all this is happening, it dawns on you that you are experiencing a sort of planetary consciousness, a mind that controls all the life on the planet. This is the "Deresh" that the Hadrakians talked about. Deresh is actually communicating with you, but not in a way that is easy to understand. You can only get vague thoughts and ideas filtering through the many other sensations you are experiencing. You decide to let your thoughts flow, hoping to gain more insight into this immensely powerful mind.

You think you see why the Hadrakians had so much difficulty building a colony here. Deresh did not want aliens who were not part of the natural ecosystem tearing down trees and killing life, since that would disrupt the cycle of the planet. Instead, using all of the natural elements at her command, Deresh drove the colonists into the desert. There they could work at bringing life back to the barren soil, thereby earning their right to live on the planet.

Why did such a vast area of blighted land exist in the first place, you wonder? This time, you feel images not of your own making take form in your mind. Although you cannot fully comprehend what Deresh is trying to convey, you feel that there was a devastating tragedy which occurred on Rothane tens of thousands of years ago. Almost all of the planet was laid to waste by this calamity. Small pockets of life managed to survive by burrowing deep into the soil and laying dormant for many years. Deresh was almost destroyed herself and was forced to retreat into a sort of hibernation until she had healed enough to start the tremendous task of restoring the planet to life.

Now almost three-quarters of the world is lush and green again. The desert where the Hadrakians have settled is the area that was most badly damaged in the cataclysm. Deresha had despaired of ever regaining this region. Fortunately, the Hadrakians have been “convinced” to begin to revitalize the dead zone. With their help, perhaps the entire planet will be vibrant and living once more.

The images begin to fade and you feel yourself awakening. Stretching, you stand and look about you, appreciating the beauty of nature far more than ever before in your life. You are standing in a clearing with just one path leading into the dense forest that surrounds you. Something urges you to follow that path.

You wander along the path for half a day and become quite hungry. At this time, you find a defenseless bunny-like creature sleeping soundly in your path. What do you do?

- A. Kill and eat the bunny
- B. Go hungry

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[620]

Morikor.

The mere thought of the planet is enough to make you shiver with dread. This is where Vanessa Chang and her crew were taken by the Clathrans over three centuries ago. Here they were examined, tortured, and ultimately dissected. The Clathrans wanted the location of Earth, so it could be destroyed. Chang and her crew resisted, purging the data from their navigational computer before the Clathrans could discover it. She and three of her crew eventually escaped, fleeing home to warn humanity of its danger.

Morikor. Even the name sounds evil.

Now you are here, yourself. Why? You are not sure. Maybe you can learn something new about the Clathrans that will enable you to destroy them.


All you know for sure is that you are approaching the most strongly fortified planet in the Clathran Empire. You stop and instruct your computer to run a long-range scan, so you can decide whether to risk moving any closer.

When the readout is ready, you sit in your captain’s chair and study it. From what the computer can tell, the planet is environmentally hostile. The Clathrans live in big black domes to protect themselves from the airless, cold, barren rock they have made into one of their most important military bases. The domes also serve to keep intruders such as yourself from landing in the cities. They are opened to allow landing only after thorough scrutiny of each vessel. Moreover, they block your ship’s scanners, so you can’t tell what might be found within. Around the domes are high-powered beam weapons mounted into the bedrock. This heavy artillery looks quite capable of defending the planet from any kind of invasion, least of all your tiny ship.

You evaluate your chances of being able to land on Morikor undetected. Normally, it would be very difficult, if not impossible. The Clathran surveillance systems are likely to detect any activity near the surface of the planet. However, you have something the Clathrans are probably unprepared for: a Cloaking Ray. By using the Cloaking Ray, you should be able to sneak down to the surface without alerting the Clathrans to your presence.

Therefore, you decide to proceed with the landing. You engage the Cloaking Ray, and spiral down to the surface of Morikor. It seems to work, for the Clathrans show no reaction to your approach. Their beam weapons remain silent, guarding against intruders more visible than you. Your touchdown is smooth and uneventful, and you secure your ship just outside one of the big black domes where the Clathrans reside. Of course, you leave the Cloaking Ray operating, to prevent the Clathrans from spotting your ship on the ground.

You put on your environmental suit, step outside, and approach the dome next to you. It’s hard to tell anything from outside because the wall of the dome is perfectly opaque. Not only does the black material prevent you from seeing inside, but it also absorbs all electromagnetic radiation, sound waves, and so on. Your sensory equipment is useless.

Continued 

Finally, you come across an airlock leading to the interior of the dome. This presents an interesting opportunity to do some real spying. Assuming, of course, that you are able to keep the Clathrans from seeing you.

You now have the following option:

⟨ZB2WHT⟩ (7 phases) Enter the dome through the airlock.

✧ STOP ✧

[621]

Machum is even more cheerful-looking than his compatriots, which is difficult to believe. He is extremely happy to speak with you about the Stargate.

“Not many are curious as to how it works; they only care that it *does* work. I hope I won’t disappoint you, though, when I tell you that I don’t know what makes the thing go. I have been studying it for my entire lifetime and still haven’t a clue.”

You are disappointed, but do not let it show. If you did, you would probably depress the little alien, and you couldn’t have that on your conscience. Instead, you ask another question to get his mind off his failure. “What have you learned about the Stargate?”

He quickly warms to the topic and tells you, “I have obtained some ancient documents that indicate the presence of a race of so-called ‘Masters’ visiting our world eons ago. I believe these Masters had something to do with the building of the Stargate. The documents also describe something called a Discontinuity Wave Generator and how to build one. I haven’t had the opportunity to do so myself, due to the scarcity of some of the components, but I believe it has something to do with how the Gate works.”

“May I see the documents?” you ask, hardly daring to breathe.

“Sure. They’re not doing me much good sitting on my bookshelf.” He digs the papers out and lets you scan them with your recorder. Your instrument indicates that the documents are approximately 70,000 years old and that they are written in the Clathran language. The writing does indeed refer to a race of Masters, as Machum said, but there is really no information about them. There is more detail about the Discontinuity Wave Generator, a complicated device that makes use of the Dual Space Interphase to change space in small but improbable ways. This device would work well as a ship weapon, since discontinuities could wreak havoc on an enemy’s computers and navigational systems. However, it boggles your mind to even think of how the Stargate could possibly amplify and stabilize the discontinuities on such a grand scale. Why, the Stargate doesn’t even have a recognizable power source! If these “Masters” actually did build the Stargate, then perhaps they deserve their title.

When you are done, you thank the Unarian for his help and leave. Returning to your ship, you reread the material you recorded and see what is necessary to build a Discontinuity Wave Generator:

- 1 Flame Jewel
- 1 Vortex Coil
- 1 Crystals
- 1 Munitions
- 1 Radioactives

When you have all of the necessary items, you may plot the following option to build it:

⟨XVN9YV⟩ (3 phases) Build a Discontinuity Wave Generator.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[622]

“Sallion, ho!” your computer cries as you emerge from hyperspace. You look out of the viewscreen and, sure enough, you see the world where the creative Sallies and mercantile Hadrakians live side by side. You look forward to returning to this planet with its interesting cities of mazes to challenge your wits. You give the instructions to land and sit back in your command chair. When the ship is safely down, you disembark. You have the same options as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[623]

The creature above you has a wing span of well over ten feet. With each stroke you are in danger of having any number of bones broken if you are hit. Twisting and dodging, you must also evade the murderous talons. You are soon panting from the exertion.

“My nest, my nest! I will kill you for trying to rob my nest!”

So that’s what the attack is all about. The creature thinks you mean to harm its offspring. You try to communicate with it, to assure it that you have no such intention, but it has limited intelligence and is very single-minded. The attack continues and you are becoming very tired.

Although you do not want to kill the creature, you refuse to become its victim. You use all of your skills and abilities to ward off the attack. It is all you can do to stay alive. You keep trying to forge ahead while steering clear of the talons and wings. Finally you are able to maneuver yourself so that you can make a break for the clearing ahead. At the very least, you will have more room to protect yourself. As you reach the glen, the attack stops.

“The light, make it go away,” the harpy cries as it tries to follow you but quickly returns to the darkness and safety of the dense forest. A full moon has risen, and the clearing is well lit with the moonshine. Now you know why the nymph told you to leave early in the day. Apparently the harpy is nocturnal.

Gratefully, you sit down on a grassy knoll. The sound of bubbling liquid makes you look down near your feet. You see a natural cistern with some traces of a cloudy liquid in it. You take out your chemical analyzer and run a few tests on the substance.

Well, what do you know! You have discovered a source of Primordial Soup, a substance with concentrated life force that is a very valuable resource in the space lanes. The bad news is that the cistern is nearly empty. While it looks like the cistern holds at least one unit of the Primordial Soup when full, there isn’t enough right now to bother with. If you come back in the future, the cistern may have refilled itself, allowing you to obtain a unit of the valuable fluid.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[624]

Your dreams are becoming more and more vivid. Sometimes this is useful, especially when you dream about things that turn out to be true, which is happening more and more often. You suspect that this is directly tied into the widening of the Dual Space Interphase. Fortunately, your training is allowing you to remain sane and functional for the time being. Not like your family and friends back home.

As this thought brushes your mind, you immediately try to dismiss it. You are doing all you can. You only hope it will be enough to save your race.

You fall into an exhausted sleep. From here, you start to dream. You are standing in front of a crowd of thousands of beings: Humans, Hadrakians, Riallans, some alien races you have never seen before and some that have become old friends. They are all waiting for you to give a speech that will unite the galaxy in a circle of friendship. You open your mouth to speak but all you can utter are silly nursery rhymes. Laughter erupts all around you. Suddenly fighting breaks out and the crowd becomes embroiled in a terrible war.

You stand there, alone on the dais, knowing that you could have saved everyone from all of this death and destruction if only you had the ability to speak to them as a diplomat.

A hooded figure approaches you and whispers in your ear, "The Brotherhood will teach you all of the skills you need. Start on the planet Margen and proceed where you are directed. The safety of Humanity is in your hands."

The figure fades, as does the dream. You wake, soaked in sweat and shaking with the horror of the carnage you have just witnessed.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[625]

Exploring far from the Hadrakian dome, you spend some time examining some of the more inert-looking pieces of machinery. You've given up trying to figure out what they all do or how they work. Instead you are concentrating on the question of whether they function independently as separate units or are somehow interdependent.

Unable to find any pattern to the scattering of different machines over the night side surface, and seeing no obvious interconnections such as pipelines or cables between them, you turn your attention to the platform itself — the alloy disk that makes up Adafa. Clearly it was designed to remain face-on to the star, and the most likely reason for this is to collect solar energy in order to power the machinery. The energy gradient between day side and night side is substantial, and represents a huge available power supply.

The issue of power supplies starts you thinking about what sort of power Dual Space devices might need. You take a closer look at some of the wrecked machinery, examining the pedestals that affix the dead devices to the artificial surface. You are surprised to see no cables or other apparent power connections. You theorize that the machines do require energy, provided by the disk, to operate, but are capable of drawing that energy through the Interphase directly from the interior layers of the disk where it's generated. If that's the case, there should be a module common to all the machines that performs this function.

Searching among the disassembled machines (you realize that trying to take apart the intact ones would be foolishly dangerous), you find such a module in the base of each pedestal. You don't dare to touch this unit, seeing that it probably serves a similar function to the high-voltage transformer in electrical machinery, but you examine intact and damaged ones closely until you feel you could replicate one if you had to. Most important, you gain in the process some valuable insights about how an energy gradient can exist between points in the Dual Space Interphase, thus influencing its behavior.

You return to your ship and try to come to grips with the wealth of Dual Space information you have gained. In a way it's frustrating, because you feel that if only you knew more about Dual Space mechanics than you do, you could learn much more on Adafa. You feel like someone who doesn't understand electricity who has just had a chance to look at a fusion power plant. Surely there's much you can learn, but the deeper secrets may always remain far beyond your understanding.

Therefore, you try to limit your speculations and further research to the practical side and to the goal you're trying to accomplish. Clearly Adafa was constructed in the distant past as a platform for a variety of different machinery, much of which operates on Dual Space principles. It also seems clear that the disk was designed to intercept solar energy to power the machines. The similarities and differences between energy in real space, which is conserved, and energy in Dual Space, which is not, promise to be an interesting area of study, since you are trying to design a device that influences a large volume of space in a manner similar to an energy field.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[626]

You feel the sands of time running out for you, the Hadrakians, and the rest of humanity, and yet you still have no real sense of direction in how to fight the Clathrans. What should you do next? How can you help? You ponder these questions while you travel the narrow rear hallways of The Battle Inc., looking for some answers.

Almost as if by magic, a young Settled One steps into the hall and immediately bumps into you.

"Watch yourself alien!" she snarls at you, claws extended and teeth bared. You remain still, giving her the chance to evaluate the situation and not act purely on instinct. You understand that there are a few years after the change from brash young Hadrakian male to the calmer female when the lines of distinction are still rather blurred. An older male will act in a much more sedate manner for his gender, while the young female is still prone to emotional reactions and combat at the slightest provocation. This is one of those times.

"Forgive me, friend," you respond in a low calm voice. "It is entirely my fault. Please forgive me."

The young female pauses before replying sheepishly, "No, Human, forgive me. It was I who was not looking where I was going. I appreciate your intention, though. I am Major Gresta. Can I be of assistance?"

It is your turn to show appreciation, and you spend the next few hours talking to Major Gresta about the war and your part in it. You explain that you would like to play a larger part in the action against the Clathrans but seem to have run into a wall as to how to go any further.

"Well," your new friend reacts, "I happen to be the newly appointed Sector Five coordinator for offensive attacks. Maybe you can do something for us. Would you mind if I took a look at your ship?"

You decide to trust the Hadrakian, and within the hour the two of you are aboard your vessel. Although you do not show her *everything* you have added to the ship, Gresta seems quite impressed.

"Your ship seems reasonably equipped," she comments, "Although you can always improve it further, of course. Now, you said you wanted to do something important for the cause?"

"Yes."

"Wait here while I check something with my superior."

The major steps outside the ship for a few minutes and calls her superior back at the offices of The Battle, Inc. You pace back and forth in the bridge cabin, wondering what she has in mind. She was certainly approving of your ship, and she seems eager to get you working on something. Before you have too much chance to speculate as to what it might be, she climbs back aboard.

"My superior agrees with me that you are ready for a very important task. She has authorized me to brief you on this task and to assist you in any way possible. Assuming you accept, of course."

"What exactly do you have in mind?" You get the feeling you are about to be offered a serious assignment.

"We would like you to cross the Clathran Survey Line."

You think about this for a few moments and give it a chance to sink in. Cross the Survey Line! That is a serious mission, all right. "And just why do you want me to do this?" you ask.

"We desperately need agents to run through the Survey Line, scout behind it, and report what they find. Where are the large Clathran military bases? Where is the Clathran home world? If we are to have any chance of winning this war, we have to gather that kind of intelligence. Also, there is the possibility of sabotage missions against Clathran targets behind the line. And that's not all. If you can cross the line, you may be able to contact Hadrakian colonies that have already been occupied by the Clathrans. You can participate in any underground trade and military development going on there. You can search for other occupied races behind the line who can cause the Clathrans problems by rebelling. And so on. All in all, the most useful thing you can do for us right now is to find a way across that Survey Line. There's no shortage of things you can do once you're on the other side."

She has a point. "OK," you say, "Suppose I accept this assignment. Should I just try to blast my way through, or what?"

Gresta laughs. "Not unless you want to be captured by the Clathrans. There are tens of thousands of ships in that blockade. You'll have to come up with a better plan than that."

"Like what?"

"I can't say. Almost none of our pilots have been able to pull it off. I do know this: it is going to take a combination of skill, technology, and clever tactics. If you choose the wrong tactics, you won't make it through no matter how good your ship is. On the other hand, if your ship isn't good enough, the tactics won't make any difference."

"And what happens if I don't make it?"

"You mean, if you get caught? I don't like to think about the consequences."

"You don't like to think about them? I'm the one you're asking to do this! You said you were authorized to assist me in any way possible. What does that mean? Do you have something to help me out?"

"I don't have any spare weapons to give you, if that's what you mean. However, I can give you some information that may be of some use. One of our agents has managed to steal the specifications for the navigation computers on board Clathran ships. We have studied these specifications, looking for weaknesses."

"Well, did you find any?"

"Possibly. It turns out that the interface between the Clathrans' navigation and sensor control systems isn't 100% perfect. Based on the faults we have discovered, we have devised a series of tactical maneuvers that just *might* be effective in evading a Clathran pursuer. We call them Anti-Clathran Evasive Maneuvers."

She discusses the maneuvers with you and your computer, explaining the precise changes in direction, speed, and timing necessary to make them work. You can hardly believe your good fortune at getting such valuable data.

"These maneuvers are something to try if you're in a really tight spot and need to get away from a Clathran ship on your tail. I can't guarantee they'll work, but if they do, think of the spy on the other side of the Survey Line who got them for us. If you can cross the Survey Line, you too will be in a position to embark on the crucial missions we must complete if we are to have any chance of repelling the Clathran Navy."

You have to admit you are becoming pretty convinced of the value of crossing the Survey Line. If you can't even get across the line, how can you expect to win the war? You take a deep breath and tell Major Gresta that you accept the mission.

"Great! I'll inform my superior. We'll put you down on The Battle, Inc. staff as an 'independent paramilitary agent.' Be sure to let us know when you make it across, okay?"

"Okay. *If* I make it across."

"You'll make it. To victory!" She extends her arms in a full Hadrakian salute.

You extend your arms in the best Hadrakian salute you can manage. "To victory!"

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

✧ STOP ✧