

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Thirteen centuries ago, in a distant galaxy, the homeworld of the Dzjaeri (Diz-jeer-ree) was destroyed by the Empire of the Void, a consortium of malevolent aberrations, powerful alien entities, and nightmare creatures who dwell in the light-less gulfs between the stars. A few forward-thinking Dzjaeri foresaw their homeworld's destruction and fled the disaster in massive starships each designed to carry thousands of passengers in cryogenic hibernation. However, due to the imminent threat of global annihilation, the Dzjaeri engineers had to cut corners in order to build the hundreds of ships necessary to evacuate their world. Instead of constructing an entire starship from scratch, the Dzjaeri designed each of their starships around a central hull made from asteroids harvested from a nearby asteroid field. Though this greatly accelerated the construction time, the Dzjaeri starships ultimately proved slow and graceless. The Empire of the Void swiftly hunted down most of the hundreds of starships that fled during the final diaspora.

One of these fleeing starships was the *Ardent Hope*, whose crew tried desperately to escape the faster, more powerful vessels of the Empire of the Void. Battered by missiles, energy weapons, and horrific, insanity-inducing psychic attacks, the *Ardent Hope* sustained a great deal of damage while most of her sister ships were consumed by fire and madness around her. Miraculously, the crew of the *Ardent Hope* finally engaged the ship's *stardrive* and escaped complete destruction. Unfortunately, one of the Empire of the Void ships was able to strike the *Ardent Hope* with a terrible biological weapon: a missile containing a qomok kept in frozen hibernation. Mercifully, the missile failed to penetrate the *Ardent Hope* and instead embedded itself in the ship's rocky hull without detonating and dispersing its monstrous contents. And there it has remained for millennia.

An instant after engaging its *stardrive*, the battered *Ardent Hope* found itself thousands of light years from Dzjaera, and at least temporarily beyond the reach of the Em-

pire of the Void. Alone and lost among the stars, the *Ardent Hope*—piloted by "Father", the *Ardent Hope*'s near-sentient Artificial Intelligence—was able to repair some of its damaged systems. However, the damage was extensive, and the cruel weapons of the enemy continued to slowly eat away at the ship and her critical systems. The slowly decaying starship spent the next 1,300 years wandering blindly through interstellar space, desperately searching for a new world for its passengers and crew to call home. Eventually, its *stardrive* and systems on the verge of total failure, the *Ardent Hope* limped into orbit around the PCs' homeworld. As the ship settled into orbit, the Father AI woke the *Ardent Hope*'s command crew from cryogenic stasis for the last time, before failing permanently.

After assessing the situation, the command crew woke a small landing party of well-trained scouts and scientists. The landing party made a foray to the planet's surface and found the world's climate and atmosphere perfect for colonization. Unfortunately, the entire landing party died in terrible agony mere minutes after arriving planetside, as a bacterium in the world's atmosphere—harmless to native life—triggered lethal brain aneurysms in each of them. Unable to immediately colonize the world and unable to leave orbit, the Dzjaeri scientists began searching for a way to adapt or protect their people from the deadly bacterium. The Dzjaeri leadership decided to keep the majority of their people (numbering in the thousands) in frozen hibernation until such a cure could be found. A small team consisting of specialist researchers and support personnel began working in five-year shifts. A team remained awake for five years, and then returned to hibernation when they were relieved by the next team. During these five years, the awakened team performed critical research, studied the planet below with the help of robotic reconnaissance probes, and performed general maintenance aboard the *Ardent Hope*. This has gone on now for 300 years.

Over the past three centuries, Dzjaeri researchers used their robotic reconnaissance probes to study creatures on the planet below, often collecting the more interesting specimens. Finally, after years of fruitless

research, the Dzjaeri made a breakthrough. Sixty years ago, their scientists discovered an alchemical substance that, when ingested, temporarily prevented the deadly bacterium from killing them. This substance was an alchemical extract whose primary ingredient was fluid milked from the pineal gland of a humanoid brain stored in the back of a neh-thalggu, an alien brain-collecting aberration that also happened to have many members among the hated Empire of the Void. The Dzjaeri pooled together what remained of their decaying technology to create the *Silver Egg*, a technological trap designed to capture neh-thalggus and deliver them unconscious to the *Ardent Hope*. Over the last few decades, the Dzjaeri have captured nearly two dozen neh-thalggus and milked them of the precious pineal gland fluid. But, they require much more in order to synthesize a drug with enough potency to permanently protect them from the brain-eating bacterium. Unfortunately, when several neh-thalggus escape aboard the *Ardent Hope* and inadvertently rouse the qomok from its hibernation, the Dzjaeri—and perhaps the PCs' entire world—face a threat of unspeakable horror.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The PCs are traveling through a region of deep canyons and badlands, when they encounter a party of desperate barbarian tribesmen who claim that a band of giants recently raided their encampment and abducted nearly a dozen of their people. They offer the PCs a reward if they can rescue their abducted kinsfolk. When the PCs finally track down the giants, they discover the raid was engineered by a neh-thalggu seeking new barbarian slaves.

The PCs may have the opportunity to set an ambush for the giants and the neh-thalggu. However, shortly after combat begins a 20-foot long, egg-shaped, silver object suddenly appears overhead and emits a pulse of silvery light that envelopes all of the combatants. Everyone enveloped by the radiance is immediately lifted into the sky at an incredible speed and eventually transported safely to the *Ardent Hope*.

Once aboard the *Ardent Hope*, after combat with the neh-thalggu and the giants concludes, the PCs have the opportunity to befriend and speak with the Dzjaeri, who share their history and explain why they cannot yet colonize the planet below. Whether the Dzjaeri trust the PCs or not, they request a favor of them: they want the PCs to hunt down a band of neh-thalggus that escaped from their lab several days ago and now reside in the ship's Terrestrial Enclosure. They explain that they cannot enter the enclosure (and are effectively trapped on the Command Decks) because the enclosure's atmosphere is now tainted with a deadly bacterium from the PCs' homeworld. The Dzjaeri promise that once the enclosure is secure, they will revive several of their engineers from hibernation and have them build an escape pod for the PCs, which they can use to return to the planet's surface.

The PCs then have the opportunity to explore the alien jungle inside the Terrestrial Enclosure. After defeating the escaped neh-thalggu, the PCs discover clues that suggest that one or more neh-thalggus recently split from the main group and made their way to the Engineering deck. A short time later, the *Ardent Hope* shudders violently and the PCs can hear a series of distant explosions far below them. The Dzjaeri soon contact them and explain that an unknown entity has initiated the self-destruct sequence on the *Ardent Hope's* engines. If the sequence is not shut down, the engines—which keep the ship in orbit—will permanently fail and the *Ardent Hope* will crash onto the planet surface.

On the lower decks, the PCs battle several alien qomoks and have the opportunity to disable the self-destruct sequence. After rescuing the *Ardent Hope*, the PCs scour the ship for any remaining qomoks and are eventually summoned by the Dzjaeri to the Command deck. There, the PCs find the place in shambles and only a few of the Dzjaeri left alive. The survivors explain that an unknown alien (identical to the one the PCs just fought) attacked them and a slaughter ensued. Unknown to the PCs, one or more of the survivors is actually a qomok in disguise. The PCs must unmask the qomoks and rid the *Ardent Hope* of an unspeakable evil.