

FIRST THROUGH

The Players' Guide

A scenario for Classic Fantasy Imperative

Fourth Wall Gaming

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PART

BEFORE YOU START

WELCOME

You are fifteen years old and you are about to become the most useful person in human space for roughly seven years. That is not a figure of speech and it is not flattery. There are twenty-eight inhabited systems and the only thing that moves between them is a person walking through a door — and a body stops being able to do it somewhere around twenty-two. So every letter, every account, every doctor wanted three doors away, every grandmother who wants to see her sister one more time, rides on somebody your age.

You are a **first-through**. The Threshold took you, which means you were tested and you could do it and most people cannot. You are paid. You have a bunk, a locker, a weave grown to your own body, and a name on a rota. You are nobody's child out here and everybody's problem, and the adults around you are extremely glad you exist and say so about once a week.

What is in this book

Everything your character already knows. The doors and what crosses through them. What the job actually does to you, said plainly. The station you live on, what there is to eat on it and where the good view is. The five peoples who are not human, one of whom is going to be your closest friend. The neighbourhood, out to about twelve light years. And then how to build your own person and how the dice work.

Nothing in it will spoil anything. There is no secret in this book. Your Games Master has a different book with all of those in it.

What is not in it

How the story goes. Who to trust. What the thing is that is about to go wrong. You will find all of that out the way your character does, which is by being there.

One thing worth saying out loud

This game is not softened. People in it can be hurt and people in it can die, including yours, and the dice are rolled in the open.

What you are owed in exchange is **information**. Nothing can kill your character out of nowhere. Every lethal risk is named, in the fiction, before you choose it — and if you ask “can this kill me?” you get a straight answer, every time, with no mystery and no bluffing. A door that might not take you will be described as a door that might not take you. If you walk into something anyway, that is a decision you made with your eyes open, which is the only kind worth making.

So ask. Asking is not cheating here. It is the single most useful habit a new player can build, and the people who run this game would much rather you interrupted them than guessed.

PART

THE WORLD

THE CAUSEWAY

Nine hundred and seventy-five years ago, a civilisation with one star spent everything it had on a thing it knew it would never see finish.

It built robot ships and threw them at the nearest stars at a twentieth of the speed of light. Each ship carried one half of an **anchor pair**; the other half stayed home. Where a ship arrived and woke, a door opened — and the two halves of a pair, however far apart, behave as one object. Step onto the plate at this end and you are at the other end before you have finished stepping.

Twenty years per light year of flight. The first ships went out, and the people who launched them died, and their grandchildren died, and eighty-five years after the launch the first door opened at Alpha Centauri, and somebody who had been told about it by a grandparent walked through it.

That network is the Causeway. Twenty-eight systems hang off it. It was not built by anybody alive. It was inherited, and the parts of it that can be reached are maintained.

The one rule everything else comes from

Only matter crosses, and only through a door.

Not light. Not radio. Not a signal, not a word, not a photograph, not a gram of cargo that nobody is carrying. A person, and whatever that person has in their hands or on their back. That is the entire list.

So:

- **News travels at the speed of a courier getting round to it.** A letter from Sirius to Earth takes as long as a fifteen-year-old takes to walk eight light years' worth of doors, which is about four minutes if nobody stops for lunch, and about nine days if everybody does.
- **Inside a system, radio works perfectly well**, and everybody forgets this, because everybody only ever thinks about doors. Two stations round the same star talk all day. It is only *between* stars that nothing crosses but a person.
- **The moment you step through, nobody can reach you.** Your handler briefs you on this side and then cannot follow, cannot call, cannot send help and cannot change the plan. Whatever you find on the other side, you are the only one who knows about it until you walk back.

A door is not a place

This is the part that catches people out, and it is worth getting straight now, because everything frightening in this setting comes out of it.

A door is not tied to a *spot on the ground*. It is tied to a **depth** — to the sum of all the gravity in the neighbourhood, and it sits wherever that particular value currently is. Think of a water level rather than an address.

Mostly that value drifts a few metres in a century and nobody writes anything down. Occasionally the sum has more than one answer, and the far mouth jumps to a different one. That is called **straying**, and there is a word for it because it has happened often enough to need one.

Which is why the most important object in human space is a board somebody writes on by hand.

The Standing

Four metres of board on the gallery wall above the anchor hall at the Nine, with every door anybody knows about written up on it by hand, and where it currently goes, and who last stood it, and **which watch they stood it in**.

Four things on a line. People read the first two.

The fourth is the only one that matters, because a door tells you where it went *when somebody last looked*, and a door can stray in the time it takes you to walk down the stairs. A line is not true. A line is *when*.

There is a line on that board reading *Kapteyn's — no answer this watch*. It was written in the spring of year six hundred and two by somebody who expected to rub it out before supper. Eleven thousand people live behind it. The star is still there. You can see it from the upper gallery.

And nobody will ever build another one

Not because the knowledge is lost. Any engineer at the Yards can tell you how a pair is made. Because the thing that would pay for a new door cannot be gathered *through* the doors there already are — no bulk, no fleet, no treasury, only bodies and boxes. Twenty-eight systems can never pool what twenty-eight systems have.

They attempted four thousand, one hundred and nineteen pairs. Three thousand and eleven worked. A thousand and eight did not, and each of those was a decade of somebody's whole civilisation turned into scrap, and they kept going.

Every first-through works this out in their first year. You may as well have it now, sitting down.

BEING A FIRST-THROUGH

The job is simple to describe. You go first, and you come back and say what is there.

Most days that means a parcel, a passenger, a tallyman's manifest and a sandwich. Some days it means standing in front of a housing that has done something nobody has an explanation for, with four hundred people behind a cordon rope waiting to hear what you found.

What a crossing is like

Almost nothing. That is the honest answer and new players are always slightly disappointed by it.

You step onto the plate. The air changes. You are somewhere else. There is no flash, no lurch, no tunnel, no noise. The only reason you know you crossed is that the smell is different and the boots you are wearing belong to a different station.

Nothing dead crosses with you — not clothes, not boots, not a bag — so you undress at one end and dress at the other, and every hall in human space has a rail of boots in it that nobody owns. The exception is your **weave**: a garment grown rather than made, close-fitting, long-sleeved, about the weight of a good shirt. It is alive, so it crosses.

One part of it is uniform and the rest is you. At the left shoulder is the Threshold flash, grown into the cloth, which cannot be faked because it cannot be attached — that is the part a tallyman looks at. Everything else is yours. A living weave takes dye, so nobody keeps the off-white it comes out of the vat in for long: deck colours so you can be found in a hall, the colours of wherever you grew up, a band at the cuff for every door you have stood. The Threshold has tried four times to standardise it and lost four times.

What it costs

Each crossing takes something off you that does not come back. It is small and it accumulates and it is visible: the weave goes mottled across the shoulders first, then the forearms — faint cloudy pale patches where the dye has bleached out of it.

Which is the joke nobody finds funny. The dye is how you say who you are, and the dye is exactly what makes your mileage readable from the other side of a hall. Some people stop dyeing around eighteen and let the colour grow out. Nobody says anything about that either.

Somebody who has done two thousand crossings has no colour left in their sleeves at all. They have **white** ones.

Around twenty-two a body stops being able to do it at all, and after that you cannot cross, not once, not ever. The word for that is **frayed out**, and being landlocked is the ordinary end of every first-through's career, and nobody in six hundred years has worked out what a person is supposed to do afterwards.

That is not a secret. The adults will tell you if you ask them. Some of them will tell you if you don't.

Carrying

Anybody over about twenty-two who wants to go anywhere has to be **carried**, in your arms, through the door, by you.

It is harder than crossing alone and it costs more. A child is cheap — minutes, maybe. An adult is dear: a fortnight off the end of your life, counted, and three or four in a row finishes anybody. Nobody pretends otherwise and nobody rounds it down.

A carry can also **set** — the door going solid under you with somebody in your arms, refusing to open for two. When that happens there is exactly one correct answer and every instructor at the Yards says it the same way:

Put them down. Not ease off. Put them down, on whichever side you are on, and let go, and do not spend four seconds being brave about it.

Pushing a set is how people get hurt, and it is always, always a decision somebody made while having a bad day and deciding they could have it both ways.

Your knack

Most first-throughs have one. They surface somewhere in the first year or so and nobody can tell you when, and “*what’s your knack?*” is the first thing one first-through asks another.

The Listen tells you something about the far side before you step through — air, pressure, heat, whether there is a floor, whether anybody is standing there. It is never detailed and it is the single most valuable thing anybody out here can have, and it is why a first-through survives a door that has moved. Two or three per intake.

The Quick is reflex and speed past what a body should manage. Common, obvious, and the one every twelve-year-old in the Yards wants.

The Set is taking what ought to break you. **The Reckoning** is always knowing precisely where you are. **The Knowing** is understanding a mechanism by putting your hands on it. **The Read** is seeing what people are about to do, and is rare, resented, and worth not mentioning.

The Hold — keeping a door where it is, for a few minutes, by paying attention to it — is rarer than all of them and you will probably never meet somebody who has it.

Everybody also has Life Support, which is the weave rather than you, and which can be taken off you by anybody with the right tool in under a minute. That is worth remembering.

What keeps you alive past a door

Two things, and there is no third: what you trained your body to do, and what you are wearing.

Your **pressure-skin** holds you at survivable pressure and temperature for **two environments only**, chosen when you draw your kit — vacuum and cold, or vacuum and hard radiation, or a toxic atmosphere and heat. You choose in advance, and you choose wrong roughly once per career.

Your **sensor hood** gives you infrared, a pressure gradient and an echo mode, which is the stated reason a first-through can walk into an unlit unmapped station and not die in the first ten metres.

Your **charge** at the small of your back is finite and only refills when you rest.

And if there is trouble it will be a stunner, a shock baton and four restraint loops, because out here almost nobody reaches for a blade. A weapon that reliably kills a person reliably opens a wall, and a wall is the only thing between everybody in the room and vacuum. Winning a fight means the other person is on the floor and tied. Losing one means you are.

THE NINE

Home is a cylinder two kilometres long, turning once every ninety seconds, with forty thousand people in it and **nine doors** meeting at its waist.

That is more doors in one place than anywhere else in human space, and it is why the Nine matters: eight of the nine are simply Sirius's nearest neighbours, and one of them is the Garden. Everything worth counting comes through here.

Sirius itself comes through the viewports as a hard blue-white that the filters never quite tame, with a small mean white point beside it that everybody has been told not to look at.



Nine doors, eight queues moving, and the Standing on the gallery wall.

The hall

Nine housings in a ring in the floor, nine queues, hot metal, and a tallyman at the head of every line with a board. The decks are named for their doors and each one smells like the place it goes:

- **The Procyon Stair** is a suburb. Five light years, the shortest hop on the Causeway, prams on the walkway.
- **The Coldwater Run** is red light and grain dust and the only corner of the Nine that smells of farming.
- **The Wolf Gate** queue is shift workers, the roughest line in the hall, and — everybody agrees furiously — the best food on the station.

Above it all, on the gallery wall, is the Standing, kept by a child on a stool who will tell you off if you read it wrong.

The architecture is built for five peoples

Once you see it you cannot stop seeing it. Ramps where there should be stairs. A dim corner left deliberately in every concourse. And duct grilles cut to **scatter gauge** on every single deck — a mesh sized so that a glint can pass and nothing larger can.

There is a line in every budget argument about those grilles, every year, and nobody has ever won it. Somebody six centuries ago designed this station so the smallest people on it could go anywhere, and the people who maintain it have declined to stop.

Being fifteen here

You are paid, in your own name, and nobody's parent has any say in it.

You have a bunk in a room with eight other people on different shifts, a locker, a tray for your weave, and two boots from two different stars, because everybody ends up with mismatched boots and it is how you read a stranger.

The food is free and institutional and the Wolf Gate run is better than it, and everybody knows it, and the queue for it is the real social life of the station.



Forty metres, a weighted bag, and a two-hundred-year tally on the stanchion.

The game is **sling** — a weighted bag thrown across forty metres of open void in the gallery, caught or not caught by somebody on the far rail. There is a tally scratched into a stanchion in the void going back two hundred years. Nobody tidies it up.

The good view is wherever a shutter is open, and the shutters are closed by default because of the glare, and knowing which handful are not is a kind of local currency.

The people who cannot cross

Every station has **hall children** — people who were tested and could not do it, which is the ordinary outcome and everybody says so beforehand and nobody quite believes it about their own.

They run the halls. They keep the boards, carry the towels, sit the Standing, know which trunking run the engineer is in, and notice when a line has gone stale eleven days before anybody else does.

Nobody who was taken up ever asks a hall child what happened at their test. That is not a rule anybody wrote down. It is just a thing you learn in your first week, and you should learn it here instead.

THE FIVE PEOPLES, AND YOUR FETCH

Four of the twenty-eight systems had somebody already in them. A fifth turned up later. None of them are humanoid, none of them are hostile, and all five of them cross doors free, because nobody has ever found a way to charge them and the attempt has been made.



The low gallery at dusk. All five, and not one of them being looked after.

Sixlimbs, behind the TRAPPIST-1 door. **Fathoms**, from the cloud decks of Luhman 16 — eyeless, unsupported, and they read a room by what its fields are doing rather than by looking at it. **Cairns**, out of the shelters of Tau Ceti, who go mineral-rigid in four seconds and are immovable for hours. **Glints**, from the flare twins at Gliese 65 — hand-sized, faceted, built to shed energy, who talk in overlapping pulses of colour at a speed no mouth can manage. **Scatters**, from the belts of Epsilon Eridani, who are hard-vacuum tolerant and can send a third of themselves somewhere you cannot go.

Your fetch

A **fetch** is one of them who has decided to work with you.

Not a pet, not equipment, not a familiar, and emphatically not a feature of your character sheet that you spend points on. A person, with their own culture, their own opinions about your decisions, and somewhere else they could be. They cross with you because they want to. They can stop wanting to.

The partnership is not formal and nobody signs anything. What happens is that you talk — constantly, for months, about nothing — and at some point it is a partnership and neither of you can say which week it became one.

They will not fight for you, they are not your life support, and if you are walking into vacuum in the wrong skin your fetch cannot fix that. What they *can* do is be somewhere you are not, notice something you cannot notice, tell you the truth when nobody else in the room will, and be extremely pleased to see you.

A glint on your collarbone will also be insufferable in front of strangers, and that is the single most reliable fact in this setting.

And they are better connected than you are

Worth knowing, because it changes how you play.

Your fetch has their own people in every hall on the Causeway, and they talk to each other constantly, over your head, in a language almost no human can read. A glint knows what happened at Procyon this morning. You do not.

They also carry for free, and nobody searches them, and a species whose tissue can hold data is a species that every government in human space has at some point had a quiet think about.

Which makes you, specifically, the weak link in a great many plots. Nobody has ever got anything out of a fetch by asking. Several people have tried getting it out of the human.

The full reference

Your Fetch

You do not get a fetch. A fetch happens to you, usually within a year of the hall test, and after that you are two. The Threshold's paperwork calls them *seconds*, which is accurate, dignified, and not a word anybody has ever said out loud to a twelve-year-old holding one.

What they are

Five species that anybody has found, on five worlds with nothing in common, and every one of them does the thing described in *What Crosses Easily*: their cells take what is written into them and keep it, perfectly, for a lifetime.

Where a first-through **carries**, a fetch **keeps**. Neither can do the other's half. A fetch cannot cross a door without you and you cannot hold a payload without them, and nobody has the faintest idea why the universe has arranged itself into halves that fit.

The xenobiologists call it **the correspondence**. The standing paper is two pages and the second page is questions.

The talking is the bonding

This is the part people get wrong, and it matters.

A fetch does not talk because it is clever. It talks because it is **bonding**, and language is what the bond is made of — attention, back and forth, every day, for years. The grammar arrives with the bond. The jokes arrive a bit later.

Which is why **a book does not speak**. A book is one of these creatures that nobody ever bonded with: kept as stock, fed, warm, written to by strangers, handed over at the far end. It has never been anyone's. There is nothing wrong with it and nothing was done to it.

First-throughs do not like being in the room with the stock. They are not able to say why in a way that satisfies a reader, and readers have stopped asking.

The bond is not a leash. Your fetch argues, refuses, wanders off and takes an interest in things you do not. They can be furious with you. The one thing they cannot do is be comfortable on the far side of a door from you, and neither can you, and that is as near to physical as anything in this gets.

The quiet

Talking aloud is how the bond is built. It is not how an old bond runs.

Somewhere after the first few years the words stop needing to be said, and a pair starts going **quiet** — which is the most misleading name anybody could have chosen for it, because what it actually is is two people never shutting up and nobody else hearing a word.

It arrives on its own, in stages, and every first-through can tell you roughly where they are on it:

- **First year.** Feeling only. You know when they are frightened, or delighted, or have found something. No detail, and it wakes you up.
- **A few years in.** Direction, images, yes and no. Enough to be told *that way* and *not that way* and *there are three of them*.
- **Mature, five years and up.** Words. And, close to, a thin borrowing of their senses — what a kite can see from up there, dimly, as if remembering it rather than looking.

You cannot lie in it. You can refuse to say a thing, and everybody learns how, and both of you always know a refusal is happening. First-throughs find ordinary human conversation a bit slack afterwards.

What it will not do

- **Only your own fetch.** Never another person, never somebody else's fetch, never two pairs chaining it. A great many people have tried.
- **A few hundred metres.** Less through rock or plate. It thins out rather than cutting off, so you can feel the edge of it coming and most people hate that.
- **It is tiring.** A long exchange at the far edge of the range costs you a day.
- **And it does not cross a door. Ever.**

That last one is not a technicality. Every first-through describes the crossing the same way: your fetch goes out, and there is a moment with nothing in it, and then they come back. Some of them talk about that moment for the rest of their lives.

Go through without them and you arrive into a silence that does not thin out and does not come back until you return. People do it when they must. Nobody does it twice in a row.

The five peoples

They are not companions. They are five sentient species who cannot cross a door without us, and we cannot hold a payload without them, and everything else about the arrangement has been negotiated over nine hundred years by people with their own reasons for showing up.

Each of them has a culture, a language, a sense of humour, and a characteristic way of being insufferable.

Sixlimbs — *Bell, behind the TRAPPIST-1 door*

Cat-sized, six limbs, four of them hands. Bell's sun has not moved in four billion years, so they have no day, no night, and **do not sleep at all, ever**, and they will sit up watching you do it and raise it the next morning.

Everything in a sixlimb culture is conversation. Decisions are made by talking until everyone is too tired to object, privacy is a concept they can define and have never felt, and in a wind that never stops a group stays together by voice — so a sixlimb who has gone quiet is a sixlimb in trouble.

They want: everywhere. The most ambitious diaspora of the five, by a long way, and a sixlimb partnering with you has already worked out the four systems you might plausibly get them to.

Their folly: they hold grudges about *arguments*. Not injuries — arguments, eleven years old, which they can quote. And because silence reads to them as deceit, they distrust quiet people on principle, which is wrong about nine times in ten and catastrophic the tenth.

Fathoms — *the cloud decks of Luhman 16*

A metre of membrane and gas, almost weightless, from a sky with no ground and no sun in it. **Blind, and the concept does not interest them.** They feel electrical fields and sound instead, and map a room by charge the way you map one by eye.

Their art is entirely sound and current. Human visual culture strikes them as a charming party trick that we have unaccountably built a civilisation on.

They want: other skies. A fathom goes out to feel weather that is not the weather they were born in, and most of them are quietly looking for one specific thing they will not describe.

And one of them matters enormously and nobody has noticed. A fathom maps a room by what the field in it is doing, which means a fathom standing at a housing can feel whether the mouth is **pinned or slipping** — directly, without instruments, from the rim. It is the only sense in human space that reads a stray coming, and the five peoples have been carrying it around for nine hundred years while humans timed things with their own heartbeats. See The Hesitation.

Their folly: insufferable snobs about music, and will tell you so, in front of the musician. And being indoors makes them stupid and miserable, which they deny absolutely while making a run of terrible decisions.

Cairns — *the shelters of Tau Ceti*

Low, dense, unhurried, about the mass of a full toolbag. Seven hundred thousand years of things falling out of the sky have made them patient in a way that is hard to be in a room with.

They build. Everything is ceremony and workmanship and the long view, and a cairn can tell you who made a wall, roughly when, and what they were worried about.

At need they **set** — mineral-rigid in four seconds, immovable for hours. Nothing hurts them. Nothing wakes them either.

They want: methods. A cairn travels to see how other people build and carries it home, and they regard this as the only serious reason to go anywhere.

Their folly: appalling snobbery about workmanship, delivered to your face, at length, in front of whoever built the thing. And they set involuntarily when badly frightened — then spend hours as a rock, and afterwards lie about why.

Glints — *the flare twins at Gliese 65*

Small enough to close a hand around, from a system whose two stars try to kill everything several times a day. They shed radiation by going mirror-bright to absolute black in an instant, and their **language is light**.

Speech is their second language and they are not especially good at it. Flashing is their first, and it is theatrical by grammar — emphasis, exaggeration and flourish are built into the structure rather than chosen.

They want: an audience. Glints go out to be seen, and are entirely open about it, and find human embarrassment about ambition baffling.

Their folly: they exaggerate constantly and do not experience it as lying, because in their own language nobody would be deceived. They will also upstage you at the exact moment you least need it, and apologise, and do it again.

Scatters — *the belts of Epsilon Eridani*

Not one animal. Forty-odd small units moving as one thing, hard-vacuum tolerant, able to come apart on purpose and send a third of themselves somewhere you cannot go.

A scatter is a **committee**. They have no singular pronoun for themselves in any of their languages, and the idea of a single indivisible mind strikes them as a terrifying disability that they are too polite to mention more than once a week.

They want: to grow. More units, more reach, and anywhere with the materials to manage it.

Their folly: they vote. On everything, including whether to help you, and the vote can go against you with no appeal. Divided they are slower and stupider and know it, and divide anyway, and a scatter that has split too often starts quietly forgetting things and blaming you for the gaps.

And they cross for free

You have to be held through a door. A fetch does not — they are the complementary half of what the door does, and they cross in the wake of the opening at no cost to you whatever.

Which means your fetch is not luggage and is not dependent on you in the way it first appears. **They are the only kind of person in human space who can move freely**, they have relatives and interests in four systems, and the five peoples between them are far better informed than any human government. See Carrying. They still cannot open a door. That is the half they need you for, and it is the whole basis of the arrangement — but do not mistake it for helplessness, and do not be surprised when yours turns out to have known something for a fortnight.

Partnering

You do not choose a fetch off a list and they do not choose you for your qualities. Mostly it is proximity and need: they are going somewhere, you can get them there, and the two of you turn out to be able to stand each other.

The Yards at 61 Cygni are the only place all five peoples are under one roof, so Threshold intakes come out paired in combinations that would never have happened anywhere else, and spend their careers explaining them.

And it is not for life. Partnerships form, hold, drift and end, the way anything between two people does. A fetch whose route has dried up will go with somebody whose route has not, and say so, and be right to. You can be left. You can be the one who leaves, and have to look at them while you say it.

The quiet goes with the partnership. It takes years to build, it is the best thing either of you has, and when you part it fades inside a year — which everybody knows going in and nobody really believes until it happens.

A note on the word

“Fetch” is ours, not theirs, and it is mildly rude. Every one of the five peoples has its own name for itself: the sixlimbs’ translates roughly as *the ones who are talking*, the cairns’ as *those who wait*, and a glint’s is a flash-pattern that does not survive being written down. Scatters have no singular form at all.

The Threshold’s paperwork says *second*. Some fetches find *fetch* affectionate. Some find it precisely as patronising as it sounds, and will tell you which camp they are in about four minutes after meeting you.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Every star in this book is a real star and every figure is a real measurement. The distances, the colours, the planets and the oddities are what astronomers have actually found. Only the people and what they built are invented.

Here is what your character already knows, the way a courier knows it: by which door it is and what it smells like when you come out.

The chart

Every star on this sheet sits at its true position, worked out from the real measured parallaxes, and every line on it is a door that actually exists in the campaign. Nothing on it is drawn by eye.

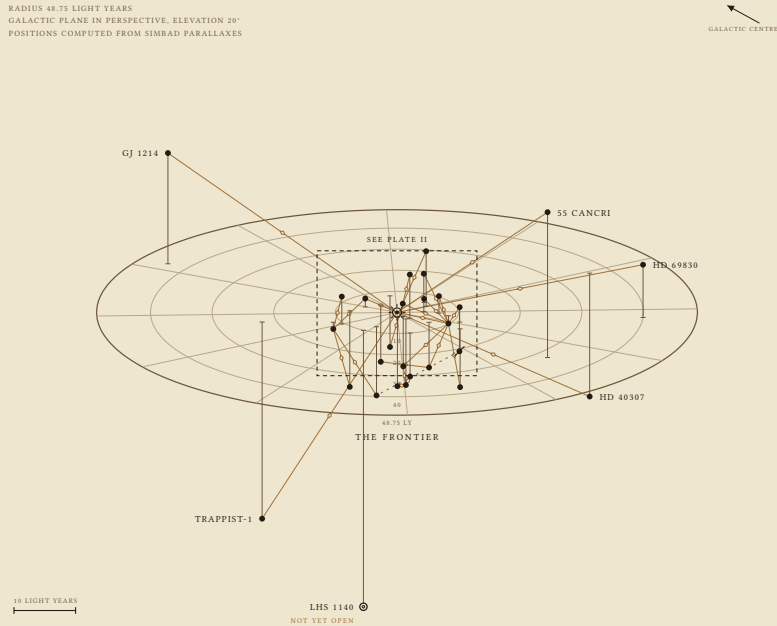
Read it as a **graph, not a map**. Distance in light years tells you how far a telescope says something is; it tells you nothing about how long it takes to get there. What matters is whether there is a line.

Note the two plates. Twenty-two of the twenty-eight systems are inside seventeen light years of Sol and crowd into the inner knot, which is why they get a second plate at three times the scale. The other six hang alone on a shell out at forty to forty-nine light years, on the longest and thinnest lines on the sheet, and there is nothing at all in between.

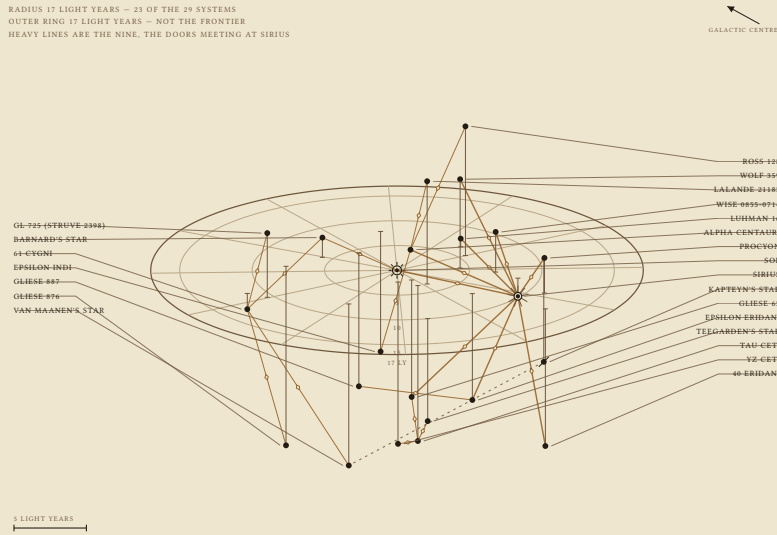
And count the lines meeting at Sirius. Nine. Sol holds seven.

28 SYSTEMS · 26 DOORS · ONE HUMANITY

RADIUS 48.75 LIGHT YEARS
GALACTIC PLANE IN PERSPECTIVE, ELEVATION 20°
POSITIONS COMPUTED FROM SIMBAD PARALLAXES



RADIUS 17 LIGHT YEARS - 23 OF THE 29 SYSTEMS
OUTER RING 17 LIGHT YEARS - NOT THE FRONTIER
HEAVY LINES ARE THE NINE, THE DOORS MEETING AT SIRIUS



- System, door open
- System, door not yet open
- ⚡ System, door dark – strayed into rock
- | Dropline to the galactic plane
- Door – bidirectional
- ◇ Door midpoint

On screen, every star name links to its Wikipedia article

Sol	0.00	GI 725 (Struve 2398)	11.49	LHS 1149	48.80
Alpha Centauri	4.39	Epulsion IIId	13.87		
Barnard's Star	5.96	Tas 791	13.91		
Lachesis 16	6.40	YZ Ceti	12.12		
WISE 0855-0714	7.43	Tegayden's Star	12.50		
Wolf 359	7.86	Kapteyn's Star	12.83		
Lalande 21185	8.30	van Maanen's Star	14.07		
Sirius	8.60	Gliese 67b	15.24		
Gliese 65	8.87	40 Eridani	16.74		
Epulsion Eridani	10.50	TRAPPIST-1	40.66		
Gliese 187	10.72	HD 69100	42.08		
Ross 128	11.02	55 Cancri	41.66		
61 Cygni	11.40	HD 40307	41.18		
Procyon	11.46	GP 1214	47.75		

Distances in light years from Sol, computed from SIMBAD parallaxes.

Distances in light years from Sol, computed from SIMBAD parallax.

A First-Through's Guide

No system can be governed from anywhere else. A message takes as long as a child takes to carry it, and no fleet can be landed, so for nine hundred years every star has run itself however it ended up running itself.

They have not converged. Here is what you walk into.

Sirius — the Nine

8.6 ly. Nine doors. Two stars and no worlds at all, so every stone of it was carried here.

A cylinder two kilometres long turning in a blue-white glare nothing quite filters, with the anchor hall at its waist and the hottest white dwarf in the neighbourhood for a second sun.

Run by: nobody, properly. Nine door-holders sit as a harbour council and have been arguing since before anyone's grandparents. Nothing is decided and everything works, which outsiders find intolerable and residents consider the point.

They want: your manifest, your toll, and the news. The Nine runs on knowing things first.

Every human culture that exists is in one room here at any given hour, and the room smells of eight different stars' worth of air.

Sol — the Garden

0 ly. Seven doors, in one hall on Luna, with a window.

Run by: nations. Actual nations, the old ones, still arguing after six thousand years, plus a Luna port authority nobody elected that everybody obeys.

They want: to be taken seriously, and they are not.

The only world with an outdoors. Weather happens by itself. The food comes up out of the ground without a lamp over it, and none of it is worth anything to anyone more than a toll away.

Alpha Centauri

4.4 ly. The first door, 887 years old. Habitats around the orange sun.

Nine centuries of building outward, and the oldest sections are thick and over-engineered with redundancies nobody specifies any more, put up by people who did not know whether help existed.

Run by: houses. Hereditary, courteous, and a court of precedence so refined that cases are inherited. They have the oldest archives in human space and will tell you so.

They want: acknowledgement that they were first.

Barnard's Star — the Works

6.0 ly. Four scorched pebbles, no habitable zone, and the best industry in the Causeway.

Being useless to live on makes a system perfect for everything nobody wants nearby. Smelting, hull plate, reaction mass, batons, the dirty end of anchor parts. Three shifts, forever. The habitat air tastes of it and residents cannot smell it.

Run by: the Works — a syndicate of foundries where your vote is your shift. Brutally practical, genuinely fair, no patience whatever.

They want: parts orders, and for you to stand out of the way.

61 Cygni — the Yards

11.4 ly. The first star whose distance anyone ever measured, and they mention it constantly.

A sprawl of stations, hulks and machinery broken on purpose, strung around the smaller sun. Everybody here is either under twenty or an instructor.

Run by: the Threshold, which makes it the only system in human space governed by a service that holds no doors anywhere.

They want: children who can take the crossing. It is the one commodity nothing else can supply.

Gliese 887 — the Coldwater Holding

10.7 ly. A quiet red dwarf and a world you can stand on under an open sky.

Four thousand people. One street with a roof over the middle. Grain under long low covers in permanent red afternoon, and meltwater running in a cut stone channel down one side of the road.

Run by: five elected councillors and a board on the street wall where every order placed and not delivered is posted in public.

They want: their coupling assembly, which has been refused twice.

Gliese 65 — the Flare Twins

8.9 ly. Two red dwarfs that brighten by a huge factor in under a minute, several times a day.

A refinery stack with its living deck buried in the middle where the mass is thickest. The lighting browns out when the field gets busy and the crew read it like a clock.

Run by: a company, and the company is three doors away and has never been here.

They want: relief, and nobody is sending any.

Tau Ceti — the Shelters

11.9 ly. A sun very like our own, wrapped in a debris disk ten times ours.

Something comes down somewhere on Tau Ceti every few weeks. Seven hundred years of that has produced the most beautiful architecture in human space, all of it underground: vaulted, layered, lit from shafts, built by people for whom a roof is a theological matter.

Run by: the civil defence corps, which stopped being an emergency service about four centuries ago and never handed anything back.

They want: nothing from you, politely, and a bunk is free to anyone caught outside.

YZ Ceti — the Singing

12.1 ly, and one and a half light years from Tau Ceti — the shortest door in the Causeway.

The star and its innermost planet throw radio at each other, and the aurorae that come off it can be heard on any receiver on the surface. Everyone here grew up with the sky making noise. Their music has it in it. Outsiders find the silence afterwards unbearable.

Run by: lot. Names drawn annually, service compulsory, refusal unthinkable.

They want: to be left alone with Tau Ceti, with whom they are effectively one two-city state joined by a ninety-second walk.

Epsilon Eridani — the Belts

10.5 ly. Young, loud, and full of rocks: two asteroid belts and a Kuiper analogue around a Jupiter-mass planet.

Claims, prospectors, and more wealth loose in it than anywhere else inside twenty light years. Also more funerals.

Run by: claim law and arbitration, enforced by whoever is nearest, badly.

They want: your silence about what you saw.

Luhman 16 — the Lantern

6.5 ly. Two brown dwarfs and no star at all.

Permanent night, and in that night the largest weather any human being has ever seen: banded storms the width of worlds, lit from inside by lightning. People live in the cloud decks in aerostats, moving with the bands.

Run by: captains, under a maritime code older than most planetary governments, because everything here floats or falls.

They want: nothing you have. They come up for parts twice a year.

TRAPPIST-1 — the Seven

40.7 ly. The frontier jewel. Seven tidally locked worlds, three of them temperate, and every one of them with a ring of permanent dusk where the wind never stops.

Terminator settlements strung along the twilight, under-supplied, a long way from the anchor, farming and digging in an eternal evening.

Run by: seven different arrangements that agree on nothing, plus whichever two the Tally has brought under toll.

They want: anything. They are the poorest-supplied people in human space and the proudest about it.

Gliese 876 — the Clockwork

15.2 ly. Four planets locked in a resonance so exact it has kept time for billions of years.

Run by: an order of timekeepers that began as astronomers and did not stay that way. They hold the Causeway's standard clock, which every system sets by, which is a quieter kind of power than tolls.

They want: your observations, written down, properly.

van Maanen's Star — the Office

14.1 ly. The nearest lone white dwarf, visibly swallowing the wreckage of its own planets, throwing hard little shadows on everything.

Four rooms bolted to a rock. Two staff. No colony, no industry, no traffic.

Run by: Sep Anwar and Meriel Koll, in the sense that there is nobody else.

They want: a visitor. It has been a while.

The frontier

The ships are still flying. Twenty years per light year, launched nine hundred and seventy-five years ago, which puts the arriving edge at a little under forty-nine light years out and moving one light year every twenty years.

Next year it reaches **LHS 1140** — and that one matters, because LHS 1140 b is the best rocky planet in the habitable zone of anything anybody has ever found. Every door that has ever opened has opened onto rock, vacuum, cloud or somebody's hull. That one will open onto weather.

Its ship has been flying for nine hundred and seventy-six years. Do the subtraction.

PART

YOUR CHARACTER

MAKING YOUR OWN FIRST-THROUGH

There are no ready-made characters in this game. You build your own, out loud, at the table, in about twenty minutes, and defining your own person is most of the point of a first roleplaying game.

It goes in three stages and you spend points in each one. **No more than fifteen points into any single skill in any one stage** — which is the rule that stops you building somebody who can only do one thing.

Table 1: The Three Stages

Stage	Points	What it is
Culture	100	Where you grew up
Career	100	What the Threshold trained you as
Bonus	150	Who you actually are

Then three **passions** — the things you care about enough to argue with an adult about — and a fetch, who is a person and gets made like one.

And say what colour your weave is. It is not a statistic and it costs nothing, and it is the first thing anybody in a hall will see about you. It came out of the vat off-white; what you did about that is up to you.

Where you grew up

Six upbringings. The lists are the argument: a Garden child has **Swim**, and nobody else in the Causeway does, and they will ask you to prove it and then not believe you.

Cultures

Distribute 100 points among your culture's Standard skills, and choose **up to three** Professional skills from its list and spend points on those too. No more than 15 points into any single skill.

Where you grew up is most of who you are out here, and the lists are the proof.

The Garden — born on the Remainder

Earth. Weather nobody made, an ocean you can walk into, six thousand years of farmland, and no money at all. Outdoors is normal to you and strange to everyone you will ever work with.

Standard: Athletics, Endurance, **Swim**, Locale, Perception, Customs, Willpower, Brawn

Professional: Craft (any), Healing, Lore (the Remainder), Navigation, Survival, Track

Nobody else in the Causeway has Swim. They will ask you to prove it and then not believe you.

Station-born — the Nine, Procyon, Alpha Centauri

Raised in a turning cylinder in a port. You have never stood on a planet. You can read a queue, a hall and a stranger's boots at ten paces.

Standard: Customs, Influence, Insight, Vacuum, Evade, Deceit, Perception, Sleight

Professional: Commerce, Courtesy, Streetwise, Lore (a system), Acting, Mechanisms

Holding-born — Coldwater, Teegarden's, the farm worlds

A settlement small enough that everybody has a job and everybody knows yours. Grain under lamps or a red sun, and a council that meets in public.

Standard: Endurance, Brawn, Locale, First Aid, Willpower, Athletics, Drive, Customs

Professional: Craft (any), Healing, Survival, Commerce, Lore (a system), Track

Shelter-born — Tau Ceti, YZ Ceti

Underground, because something comes down every few weeks. Vaulted halls lit from shafts, built by people for whom a roof is a theological matter. You were raised careful and quiet and you know where the strong walls are.

Standard: Perception, Willpower, Stealth, Insight, Locale, Endurance, Sing, Customs

Professional: Engineering, Lore (any), Musicianship, Science (any), Craft (any), Navigation

YZ Ceti children grow up with a sky that is audible. Their Musicianship is the best in human space and they are unbearable about it.

Works-born — Barnard's, the Gliese 65 refineries

Three shifts, forever, and the air tastes of it. Your vote is your shift. You were useful at eleven.

Standard: Brawn, Endurance, Vacuum, Athletics, Drive, Willpower, Unarmed, Customs

Professional: Engineering, Mechanisms, Craft (any), Commerce, Lore (Tally procedure), Survival

Belt-born — Epsilon Eridani, the Luhman 16 decks

Vacuum, rocks and drift, or a sky with no ground in it. Everything either floats or falls and you learned which very early.

Standard: Vacuum, Evade, Perception, Athletics, Stealth, Conceal, Endurance, Customs

Professional: Pilot, Navigation, Survival, Mechanisms, Streetwise, Science (any)

What they trained you as

Six careers. Every one of them includes **Crossing**, because that is the job.

Careers

Distribute 100 points among your career's Standard skills, and choose **up to three** Professional skills from its list. No more than 15 into any one skill.

Every one of these includes Crossing. A character with Crossing is a first-through; a character without it is somebody else's story.

Your knack suggests a career and does not dictate one. A Quick who works as a Doorwright is a slightly odd and very employable person.

Courier

The standard, and three-quarters of the service. Carrying books, carrying news, carrying whatever a hall hands you, across as many doors as the rota says.

Standard: Crossing, Customs, Influence, Perception, Evade, Insight, Deceit, Athletics

Professional: Commerce, Streetwise, **Reading**, Courtesy, Lore (a system), Acting

Pathfinder

First through a door that has moved, to find out where it goes now. The job the service is named for, and the one with the funerals.

Standard: Crossing, Perception, Vacuum, Endurance, Evade, Athletics, Willpower, Stealth

Professional: Survival, Navigation, Lore (anchors), Science (any), Track, Pilot

Doorwright

Housings, collars and load beds. A first-through who can read a door is worth three who cannot, and every hall in human space would like one.

Standard: Crossing, Perception, Brawn, Vacuum, Willpower, Endurance, Locale, Athletics

Professional: Mechanisms, Engineering, Lore (anchors), Craft (pressure fitting), Science (physics), Lockpicking

Lifeline

The ones sent when a hall calls for help. Evacuations, pressure casualties, and the carries nobody else will take.

Standard: Crossing, First Aid, Endurance, Athletics, Willpower, Perception, Brawn, Vacuum

Professional: Healing, Survival, Craft (any), Science (biology), Lore (a people), Track

Envoy

Carries people rather than books: negotiators, specialists, prisoners, the old. The most political job a fifteen-year-old can hold and the one with the best clothes.

Standard: Crossing, Influence, Insight, Customs, Willpower, Deceit, Perception, Dance

Professional: Courtesy, Oratory, Commerce, Lore (Tally procedure), Acting, Musicianship

Scout-runner

Speed as a profession. The ones sent when the answer has to be somewhere before anybody else's answer is.

Standard: Crossing, Athletics, Evade, Endurance, Stealth, Perception, Vacuum, Unarmed

Professional: Acrobatics, Navigation, Survival, Streetwise, Track, Lore (a system)

Your knack

The Knacks

“What’s your knack?” is the first thing one first-through asks another, and it is nosier than it sounds, because the answer tells you roughly how many times they have been through a door.

Where they come from

Three things have to be true, and the third is the one that costs.

You have to be born able to take it. Most people cannot. Most children, crossed once under supervision, simply fray like an adult — a bad week, a nosebleed, no knack, and they are never asked again. Perhaps one child in a few hundred *builds* instead of tearing. They are the ones who get taken up.

You have to be found. Every system tests, because every system needs couriers and no system can make them. The test is a short supervised crossing and back, and the halls do it at nine or ten, and the whole family comes.

And then you have to go through, over and over. A knack is not switched on at the test. It surfaces after a dozen crossings and deepens with every one after, and it deepens for exactly as long as your body is still mending the error — which is to say, it grows strongest in the years just before it stops growing at all.

Nobody has ever had a knack without crossing. Nobody has ever kept one after being landlocked; they go quiet within a year, and people describe losing them in the same words they use about losing a sense.

What they do

Knacks run in families of a kind, and the Threshold has names for them that the rest of the Causeway has mostly adopted.

The Listen. You can tell something about the far side before you step through — pressure, heat, whether there is air, whether there is a floor, whether anybody is standing there. It is not a picture and it is never detailed. It is the single most valuable thing a first-through can have, and it is the reason any of them survive a door that has moved.

The Hold. You can keep a door where it is, for a few minutes, with nothing but your attention. It is rare — rarer than anything else here — and in a galaxy where doors move without warning it is the most valuable human ability that exists. Holdings build machines to do what one child with the Hold does with her hands, and the machines are not as good.

The Quick. Reflex and speed past what a body should manage. Common, obvious, and the one every twelve-year-old in the Yards wants.

The Set. You take what should break you — falls, pressure, cold, a baton across the back — and get up. Also common, and the reason first-throughs have a reputation for being difficult to discourage.

The Reckoning. You always know precisely where you are and which way the door was, from the instant you arrive, while everybody else is still being sick on the deck plate. Unglamorous. Saves more lives than the Quick.

The Knowing. Hands and eye: you understand a mechanism by touching it. The Threshold's engineers are made of this one.

The Read. You see what people are doing and about to do. Rare, resented, and very hard to live with.

At the table

Every character is built from scratch; there are no ready-made first-throughs. Pick one knack at creation and take the power it maps to. Rule ids below resolve in the engine's rules graph — cite them on the sheet so get-rule can reach them mid-session.

Knack	Power	Rule
The Listen	Heightened Sense	magic/power-heightened-sense
The Quick	Enhanced Reactions	magic/power-enhanced-reactions
The Set	Durability	magic/power-durability
The Reckoning	Savant	magic/power-savant
The Knowing	Savant	magic/power-savant
The Read	Heightened Sense	magic/power-heightened-sense

The Hold is not available at creation. It is rarer than anything else here, and a fifteen-year-old who could pin a door would make the rest of the setting's problems negotiable. It surfaces in play if it surfaces at all.

Everybody also has Life Support (magic/power-life-support), which is the weave and not the child: it takes the *Limit External Power Source*, because the suit can be taken off, taken away, or run out.

How many powers. Core powers are POW + INT on the tech-and-training branch: 12 or under gives 1, 13-20 gives 2, 21-30 gives 3, 31-40 gives 4, above 40 gives 5. The first Limit you accept buys a Boost; every Limit after that buys another core power.

Nothing here moves a person between places. Personal teleportation being impossible is the reason the Causeway matters at all, so no knack grants Teleport, Flight, Vaporous Form, Animation, Elemental Control or Energy Blast — and a third power slot left open at creation can never be filled with one.

What it costs

Every crossing deepens the knack and frays the body, and they are not two processes. They are one process, looked at from the two ends.

So the strongest first-through in any intake is always the one closest to being finished, and everybody can see it, and nobody says it.

You will be offered crossings you do not have to take. Some of them matter and some of them are a shortcut. The choosing is the whole job, and it is yours.

The skills themselves

Skills in the Causeway

Mythras Imperative as written, with three changes and a Professional list that has had the swords taken out of it.

Standard skills

Every character has all of these at their base value.

Skill	Base	
Athletics	STR+DEX	
Brawn	STR+SIZ	
Combat Style	STR+DEX	
Conceal	DEX+POW	
Crossing	POW+CON	replaces Ride
Customs	INT×2 +40	
Dance	DEX+CHA	
Deceit	INT+CHA	
Drive	DEX+POW	loaders, hall rigs, surface crawlers
Endurance	CON×2	
Evade	DEX×2	
First Aid	DEX+INT	
Influence	CHA×2	
Insight	INT+POW	
Locale	INT×2	
Native Tongue	INT+CHA +40	
Perception	INT+POW	
Sing	POW+CHA	
Sleight	DEX+CHA	
Stealth	DEX+INT	
Swim	STR+CON	rare. Only the Garden and a handful of holdings have anywhere to learn it
Unarmed	STR+DEX	
Vacuum	STR+CON	replaces Boating
Willpower	POW×2	

The two swaps

Vacuum is moving and working outside: suit discipline, handholds, tethers, microgravity, and not dying of a torn glove. Every station child has some.

Crossing is the discipline of the door itself. Not the knack and not the fraying — the *craft*: how steady you are in the housing, how you hold it open, how you carry somebody who is frightened, how long you can keep going and how honestly you judge when to stop.

It is the one skill every first-through in human space has, and it is the one nobody else has at all. **A character with Crossing is a first-through.** That is what the word means.

Professional skills

Chosen three at a time, from Culture and from Career.

Skill	Base	
Acrobatics	STR+DEX	
Acting	CHA×2	
Commerce	INT+CHA	
Courtesy	INT+CHA	halls, councils, envoys
Craft (...)	DEX+INT	specify: pressure fitting, lamps, cloth, cooking

Skill	Base	
Engineering	INT+DEX	
Healing	INT+POW	
Lockpicking	DEX×2	
Lore (...)	INT×2	specify: anchors, straying, a system, a people, Tally procedure
Mechanisms	DEX+INT	
Musicianship	DEX+CHA	
Navigation	INT+POW	in-system, and across a strayed world's surface
Oratory	POW+CHA	
Pilot	DEX+INT	torch craft, tugs, aerostats
Reading	INT+POW	the book trade: writing a payload into a genome and getting it out again
Science (...)	INT×2	specify: physics, biology, xenobiology, statistics
Sleight	DEX+CHA	
Streetwise	POW+CHA	
Survival	CON+POW	
Track	INT+CON	

Reading is the one that only exists here. A reader can write into a fetch who consents and get it back out at the far end, and the trade of writing and the trade of reading dislike each other on principle.

No Magic skill. Nothing in this setting is magic, and the knacks are not a skill — see The Knacks.

PART

AT THE TABLE

How the Dice Work

Mythras Imperative is a **roll-under** game on percentile dice. Everything below is the whole of what you need; there is no second layer.

The basic roll

You have a number for each skill — Crossing 52, Perception 57, Athletics 61. Roll 1d100. **Equal or under, you succeed. Over, you fail.** That is it.

Roll the tens die and the units die together and read them as a two-digit number. A roll of 00 is 100, and 100 always fails.

A **critical** is a roll in the lowest tenth of your skill, rounded up — Crossing 52 criticals on 01–06. Something goes better than it had any business going.

A **fumble** is a 99 or 00 when you were going to fail anyway. It goes wrong in a way that costs something.

Difficulty

Your Games Master does not change the die. They change the number you are rolling against, and they say which grade they are using out loud before you roll.

Table 5: Difficulty Grades

Grade	Your skill becomes
Very Easy	doubled
Easy	one and a half times
Standard	unchanged
Hard	two thirds
Formidable	half
Herculean	a fifth

A crossing through a door that is behaving itself is Standard or Easy. A crossing carrying a grown adult is Hard. A crossing through something that is actively going wrong can be Formidable, and you will be told so beforehand.

Passions, and arguing with the dice

Your three passions are not decoration. When one of them is genuinely driving what you are doing, you can **augment** the roll with it: add a fifth of the passion's value to the skill before the difficulty grade is applied.

A passion of *I am the one who gets there* at 70 is **+14** on anything that is honestly about getting there. It is not +14 on picking a lock.

Say which passion and say why. Most Games Masters will say yes, and the saying why is the good bit.

Luck

You get three **Luck Points** and they come back each session. Once per action, you may spend one to:

- **re-roll** the dice entirely, or
- **swap the digits** — a failed 71 becomes a 17.

Swapping is the quiet one and it is usually the better one, because it is certain where a re-roll is not.

Three is not many. By the end of a bad night you will have none, and knowing that you have none is part of how you decide what to attempt.

Getting hurt, and getting tired

Damage lands on a specific part of you and most of what happens in this campaign is wrenches, cracks and cold rather than wounds. You will know how badly you are hurt because you will be told plainly.

Crossing repeatedly in a day makes you **tired**, and tired is mechanical: your numbers come down. Nobody has ever made six crossings in a day and felt fine afterwards.

If you want the actual rulebook

You do not need it. Everything above is enough to play, and your Games Master has the rest.

But if you are the sort of person who wants to see the whole machine, *Mythras Imperative* is free — The Design Mechanism publish the PDF on their free downloads page. It is a complete game in about sixty pages, and the combat chapter in particular is worth reading once you have played a fight.

The only piece of advice that matters

Ask questions before you act, out loud, as your character or as yourself. What can I see? How far is it? Can this kill me?

You will get a straight answer every time. That is the deal at this table, and using it is not timid — it is exactly what a first-through is trained to do, and it is the entire difference between the ones who come back and the ones who do not.

WHEN THE GAMESMASTER GETS IT WRONG

Claude is a good Games Master and it is not a reliable one. It will, over a long session, do all of the things in this chapter. None of them are your fault and all of them are fixable in one sentence.

The single most important thing to know is this: **say so immediately, out of character, in plain words**. Do not play around a mistake, do not try to correct it from inside the fiction, and do not wait to see whether it fixes itself. It will not.

How to say it

OOO – at the front of a line means *out of character, this is me talking to you, not my character talking in the room*. Use it for anything about the rules, the numbers, the pacing, or what the Games Master just did.

OOO – what about my augmentation?

Square brackets are for directions about how the scene is being run rather than about what happens in it.

[keep going until something happens]

Asking is never cheating. *What am I rolling? Against what number? Can this kill me?* You are owed a straight answer to all three, every time.

And ask it to write the correction down. If it is a mistake you think it will make again, say *make a note of that* – it can record the correction so the next session starts with it.

The failure modes

What it looks like	What to say
A number is wrong, or it forgot your passion, your knack, your equipment	OOO – what about my augmentation? / You’ve dropped my knack on that roll.
It announced the result before saying what you were rolling against	OOO – what’s the difficulty? Say it before the dice.
You are reading beautiful paragraphs and have not done anything in a while	[nothing’s happening for me to do] / [keep going until something happens]
It is explaining at length something you cannot act on	OOO – cut to the chase.
It wrote dialogue for your character that you did not write	I didn’t say that. Give me the line back.
It told you what somebody else is feeling or thinking	OOO – don’t tell me what she’s thinking. Show me what she does.
It contradicts something established, or refers to a thing you never did	OOO – that didn’t happen in this game. Read the journal before continuing.
Every character has started to sound the same	OOO – they’re all talking like the same person.
A phrase has turned up three times in an hour	TROPE: “nobody has ever asked.” Please stop using that.
Four adults are solving the problem while you watch	OOO – what can <i>I</i> do about this right now?
It went quiet on the mechanics and you cannot tell what is at stake	OOO – show me the roll.

The four worth understanding

It stops handing you decisions. This is the commonest one and the easiest to miss, because the prose is still good. The test is mechanical: *has anybody rolled anything in the last two exchanges?* If not, the game has stopped and turned into a novel being read at you. Say so. The whole of this campaign is written against that failure.

It speaks for you. A direction you give — *tell her what we found* — authorises your character to do the thing. It does not authorise the Games Master to write her speech. If words appear in your character's mouth that you did not choose, take them back. They are yours.

It hands you conclusions. A good Games Master gives you facts and lets you work out what they mean. When it starts telling you what somebody *really* wants, or which person you can trust, it has stopped running a world and started summarising a story. Ask for what you can see instead.

It loses the thread on a long night. After several hours it may start misremembering your own history — crossings you never made, people you never met. The campaign keeps a journal, and the journal is the truth, not its memory. *Read the journal before continuing* is a real instruction and it works.

If something has gone properly wrong

You can roll time back. Say where to: *take us back to the start of the day, before the door started acting up*. The campaign can retract what happened and re-run it.

Two things to know about doing that. Anything your character learned in the retracted stretch, they no longer know. And the Games Master is likelier than usual to leak the cancelled version back in for a while, so if it refers to something that no longer happened, say so again.

The thing that is not a mistake

If the dice go against you and your character gets hurt, or something you wanted does not happen, that is not a failure mode. That is the game. The difficulty was declared before the roll and the roll was made in the open, and nobody at this table — human or otherwise — is permitted to quietly change it afterwards.

That rule protects you far more often than it costs you.