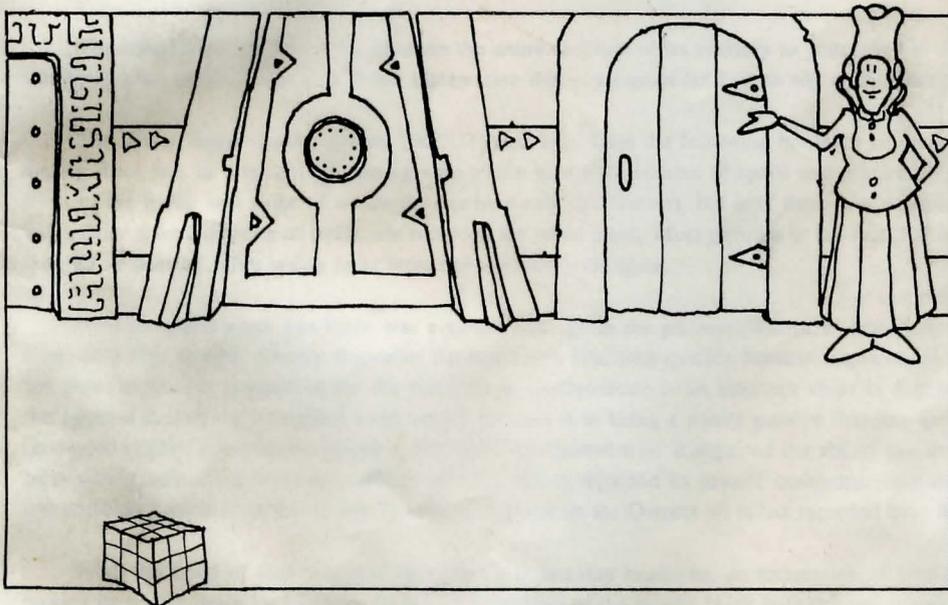


STAR SAGA: ONE™

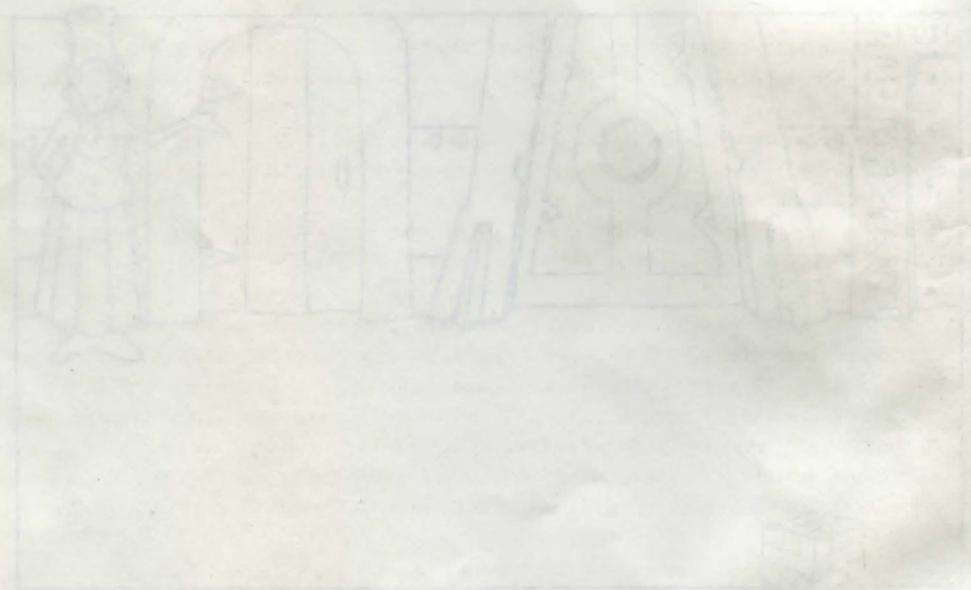
BOOK B

TEXT 074-147



BOOK B

STAR
SAGA: ONE



[074]

Life beyond the Boundary is more thrilling than you could have ever imagined. The adventures and excitement you have experienced out here have been the best of your entire life.

The only problem is that you still have no proof of the alien abilities you know exist. That is the reason you came out here in the first place and you feel guilty that you have let it slide to a low priority on your list of "Things To Accomplish."

Maybe, even at this very moment, someone else is publishing the data you are risking your life for, thereby making your research unnecessary.

"Yes sirree," you think to yourself, "I really ought to be working on getting proof of those alien abilities."

⊠ STOP ⊠

[075]

The alien machine psionically transfers the entire contents of its memory to your mind in a massive rush of pure information that all but overloads your brain. There is so much information that you cannot hold on to any details, but you pick up the general impression.

The device began operation over 160,000 years ago. Over the following hundreds of centuries it performed its task continuously. Chief among these was to intercept all passing ship traffic in a wide volume of space and require all ships to identify themselves before going on. Most of the traffic was ships of a race the machine calls the Owners, but later there was considerable traffic of a race called the Clathrans as well. Only sporadic bursts of traffic are recorded for other races. Most peculiar is the fact that no single race maintained ship traffic for more than a few decades, after which most were never heard from again.

Fifty thousand years ago there was a sudden change in the pattern. Within a short period of time — about a year — all Owner and Clathran traffic ceased. Shortly thereafter the machine's functions quickly became impaired, to a greater and greater extent, until after about ten years it became impossible for the machine to communicate or to intercept ships in flight. The machine attributes this to a change in the galactic dual space interphase level, which reduced it to being a purely passive listening device. Only in the last five years has the level recovered slightly, allowing the device to function in a limited way. It regained the ability to use its tractor beam over short distances, and has been slowly increasing its range. About one year ago it regained its psionic communication abilities, and it soon expects to regain its data transmission functions so that it will be able to transmit to the Owners all it has recorded over the past 50,000 years.

From the flood of data you also get, besides a four-day headache, an impression of how sophisticated a device Cordethar really is. It powers its tractor beam by focusing the gravitational field of the nearby black hole through a warp field that it generates deep inside the planet. This sort of manipulation of spacetime is far beyond even the most sophisticated of Wamirian hyperdrive theories. You doubt you could recognize any single component of the device if you saw it, let alone understand how it works.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[076]

Wellmet has no central commodities trading concern. Instead, there are a handful of independent commodities exchanges. Following suggestions from residents, customs officers, and handbills posted on the walls, you track down a few of the trade houses to see where the best deals are. The first, a huge storage facility on the outskirts of the city, seems promising: it is currently offering three units of Munitions in exchange for each unit of Fuel. Another, smaller but located right near the spaceport, offers one Munitions per unit of Iron. Continuing your search, you find deals of one Munitions per one Medicine, three Munitions per one Radioactives, and one Munitions per one Culture. You begin to see a pattern. You return to the first trade center and inquire, "Why is everyone offering Munitions and nothing else?"

"Current surplus," is the answer. "We're overstocked with the stuff."

"Why?" you ask. "Is it manufactured locally?"

"No, it's brought in by the shipload by old 'Slow Eddie' Falstaff. Every two weeks he hauls in with a shipload of Munitions. He found some secret source out in the Pleiades or thereabouts, about twenty years ago, and he's been like clockwork since."

"Why doesn't he shift to a more profitable commodity?"

"Slow Eddie? Why? He's got it made. An explorer could search a lifetime and not find a rich vein like that. Probably knows the coordinates of some world where it grows on trees, or the natives trade it for air. Can't get more profitable than that."

You concede the point, although Slow Eddie's career doesn't sound like what you expected the life of a successful interstellar trader to be like. However, the whole economy can't be based on trading Munitions around, no matter how much Eddie hauls in. "Where," you ask, "can I deal for commodities and goods other than Munitions?"

"Not here," is the invariable answer. "Maybe in the Family markets, if you can get a foot in the door." However, one trader you meet tells you, "I hear the Torrence Family is selling commodities on the open market now. You might want to try their spread." If you do so, plot option:

{4FXIC7} (3 phases) Trade cargo in the Family market.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[077]

You have once again decided to take on the formidable specter of Outpost. Your last visit wasn't very encouraging but you want to try to defeat Silverbeard without any outside help. Perhaps this time you will.

You encounter the first line of defense, the killer satellites, and defeat them handily. This doesn't come as a great surprise, as you were quite up to handling them on your previous visit as well. It is the next line of defense that has you worried.

You approach the zone where you encountered the deadly missiles with a knot of fear in your stomach. You hope you are better equipped to handle this challenge than you were last time.

With all the determination you can muster, you give the command to head into the zone. Your computer immediately informs you that there are missiles headed directly toward you.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[078]

The plan works without a hitch and you soon find yourself inside the Lateral Liaison sector. No one is present to witness your daring exploit but you don't really feel the need for an audience. Instead, you wish you had some way of blending into your surroundings.

As you look around you, you notice that you're standing right in front of an "instant disguise facility," i.e., the foyer closet. A quick check through the pockets of two dozen lab coats and half a dozen jumpsuits nets you two wallets and one three-week-old uncashed paycheck.

You zero in on the black lab coat in which you found the paycheck. In its other pocket you find an ink-stained carrying case bulging with various IDs, medical cards, credit cards, library cards and a blue elevator shuttle pass. Since the visitor passes you've seen are orange, a blue pass might mean higher clearance. You take the case with all its contents and leave everything else the way it was.

Grabbing the black lab coat from the back of the closet, you head out to the elevator tubes. The chances are that anyone who forgets his paycheck in his lab coat pocket for three weeks and can't remember to transfer his ID badge from his lab coat to his coveralls is someone who probably won't report the loss of his ID right away. The absent-minded professor will probably think that he's just left it some place or other and that it will turn up. At least that's what you're hoping as you make your way through the corridors of the Lateral Liaison Office.

Much of Lateral Liaison is devoted to internal business. Hiring personnel, processing paychecks, maintaining housing, docking facilities, the labs, the experimental stations — all the details you'd expect an administrative department to handle.

As you make your way around and encounter more and more people, you are very pleased to discover that they all assume you are someone who is supposed to be here. Apparently the coat and ID you selected are from someone of high enough rank that no one questions you. You begin to feel more at ease and soon find the courage (or sheer audacity) to actually question the people and gather more information.

In the financial department, you find an eager young clerk who is even willing to call up the general ledger on his terminal for you. You are forced to explain that you're on a tight schedule (ain't that the truth — how long will it be before the real VIP raises an alarm about his stolen credentials?) and can't take the time to examine the books now. The clerk isn't listening. He wants you to know that the year-end report has just been finalized and business is booming.

Continued 

“Not bad for a research institute, is it?” he beams as he shows you a quick summary sheet of expenditures and revenue. According to the figures in front of you, Para-Para is realizing a good profit. But you’re more interested in some of the line items than you are in the bottom line.

For instance, 25% of Para-Para’s income comes from something referred to as the ISE endowment grant. The rest of the revenue comes from selling new technology to the Families. On the expenditure side, there’s what you’d expect from a colony that wasn’t self-sufficient. And there are a few entries that have you raising your eyebrows. Nearly 20% of Para-Para’s overhead budget goes to “Transportation and Expedience.”

The young clerk jumps in to answer your puzzled expression. “The Boundary,” he winks, “can’t live with it, can’t live without it.” You point to another entry that caught your eye which accounts for 10% of the budget and is labeled “Records Acquisition and Alien Artifact Recovery.”

“Part of the research expenses for Forward Liaison,” the clerk responds to your unasked question. “It’s always difficult to project just how much will be spent on that in any given year. We earmark what we hope will be sufficient funds; of course, the Director would authorize any amount necessary to obtain something substantial. I don’t work in that field, so I can’t speak with any authority, but in my opinion the Records division does a good job of documenting space voyages.

“Of course buying some spacer’s tall tales about the alien world he was marooned on may look like a waste of money, but you never know what part of a story might be true. Or which parts are significant and which parts are insignificant. After all, more was known about the galaxy during the age of the Great Expansion than we know now. If our ancestors could discover alien worlds, there’s no reason to assume that present-day spacers can’t. And besides, not all the voyages are undocumented. I hear that sometimes we’re lucky enough to get ship logs and even alien items.”

Well, you learn something new every day. You hadn’t known that Para-Para was rich enough to compete with the big boys on the alien tech market. And this is the first you’ve ever heard that Para-Para is offering cash for deep spacers’ memoirs.

The references to Forward Liaison are especially intriguing. Since you arrived in Lateral Liaison, there have been indications that the most important work on Para-Para is being carried out behind locked doors inside Forward Liaison. It’s hard to imagine what might be more important than developing a tri-axis drive or manufacturing Warp Core. But you don’t doubt that the Para-Parans consider it of prime importance. Your grandmother used to say, “Behind the strongest lock is the greatest treasure.” By the look of things, the Para-Parans must have agreed with Granny.

You have all the information you can glean from this area, so you head down a well-lit corridor that looks intriguing. Ahead of you is a sight that makes you stop dead in your tracks.

The frosted doors at the end of the hall look innocuous enough. In fact you just assumed you would find a receptionist behind them. You reach out to pull the doors open and, in the nick of time, notice about a dozen human-sized red shapes, the sight of which makes your blood run cold.

Snatches of overheard conversations between offworld traders do an instant replay in your head: rumors about heavily armed security forces, exaggerated stories about a secret army of crack troops, a well-disciplined outfit with the latest in deadly weapons — and dressed in red flex armor.

For one of those eternal seconds, you wait for the security forces to come through the door. Your stomach has just learned how to dance better than your feet ever did. Through the glass doors you can make out the outline of soldiers wearing flex battle armor and helmets, carrying weapons. Some part of your brain is trying to decide what would be the worst possible thing that could happen to you if you were caught here in a restricted area with stolen identification. You tell yourself to cut it out.

You may now attempt to enter the Forward Liaison sector of the building.

(CUUOOF) (5 phases) Brazen your way into the planet's most classified area.

☒ STOP ☒

[079]

After asking your ship's computer to randomly select a book from its library for you to read, you are pleasantly surprised by what appears on your screen. You have before you a copy of an old ship's log from the times of the Expansion. Eagerly, you begin reading.

Several days later you find a piece of information that may be of some use to you. According to this log, in which neither the name of the captain nor the ship can be found, there is a planet called Jaquar where you are sure to find Crystals for sale by the natives.

You make a note of this fact and continue with your reading, but you learn nothing else that is new.

☒ STOP ☒

[080]

As you emerge from hyperspace, you refresh your memory about the planet Hemindore, which you are now orbiting.

Oh yes, the ocean world covered with trees and intelligent monkey creatures. You recall how much fun it was trying to land there, dodging among the branches.

You must admit that you are getting the hang of it, as you bring your ship down for a safe landing.

You have the same options as before.

☒ STOP ☒

[081]

Bored, bored, bored. You restlessly pace around the interior of your ship. What shall you do to entertain yourself?

You have it!

Turning to the computer console you switch on the skip radio and listen in on various frequencies, occasionally calling out across the void, hoping to make contact with an intelligent being.

"Breaker, breaker, you've got the Big Mango here. Who are you?"

You have no idea who or what is on the other end of this conversation, but you decide to humor it by identifying yourself as the "Gerb."

"Roger, Gerb, this is Big Mango on nightside watch. I like to swap stories with whomever I come across. It helps to pass the time, you know what I mean?"

You respond in the affirmative and that is the last word you get to contribute to this conversation for the next few hours.

“... and so I said they could just go right ahead and do that if that's what they had a mind to do. Don't you agree?” the Big Mango pauses a moment for air and you are able to ask a question.

“Have you heard about any interesting planets lately?”

“Why sure, Gerb. Only yesterday someone was telling me about this here planet called Hootenaller where they heard tell you could get all kinds of great eatins. But like I was sayin'...”

Well, at least it helps to pass the time.

☒ STOP ☒

[082]

You find your ship down by the BIG PINK LAKE WITH MARSHMALLOWS IN IT. The computer is trying to catch one of the marshmallows with one of its remotes but the confectionery is having none of it.

While the ship is distracted, you sneak aboard.

Immediately everything changes. Your head clears and you come to your senses. You also have an incredible migraine headache. But before you pass out from the pain, you manage to disconnect all of your computer's external sensors to try to bring it to *its* senses.

Several days later, when your head is merely throbbing, you take off. The time needed for recovery has delayed your takeoff by six phases.

☒ STOP ☒

[083]

You are having such great fun zooming all around the galaxy. Well, at least around the area of space up to the Density Barrier. You know that to search for more Flame Jewels you need to travel past the Density Barrier. Unfortunately, you have no clue where to go from there.

Wait a minute! You father mentioned that the planet Outpost would probably have information vital to your search.

“Maybe I should go there soon,” you think to yourself.

☒ STOP ☒

[084]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 3

You have already landed on Para-Para and you know there are several options available to you here. When you first land on a new world, you should write down the many options available to you, how many phases they take, and whether or not you can repeat them. We recommend you take a new piece of paper and create a type of planetary log using the format you see below. Your Planet Log for Para-Para should look like this:

Planet Log			
Planet Name:	Para-Para		
Actions Available:			
Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
GEEMMN	3	trade — market	
WEGMEN	4	explore	
CEUMON	3	Research Dept.	
SEWMGN	4	Lateral Liaison	
SUWOGF	4	Dr. Schottky	

Now you need to judge which of these options, if any, you wish to do. Since this is your introduction, we have taken the liberty of deciding for you. Don't worry — you'll be on your own soon enough!

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	T	O	V	Y	R	V	O
2	G	L	—	—	—	—	—
3	—	A: SUWOGF	—	—	—	A: GEEMMN	—
4	—						

Since you need to visit with Dr. Schottky in order to find out what's going on, you will take care of that business first. This will take four phases. With your remaining time, you plan to visit the market place. That will take 3 phases, which means that you will borrow against 1 of your next turn's phases.

On your plotting sheet, write in the action codes for both the market and Dr. Schottky. Don't forget to take into account how many phases each activity takes by putting in the dash marks. This way you won't get confused while you are busy planning your moves!

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 3

Go to the computer and log on as usual. Plot A for Action, and select the 6-character code for contacting Dr. Schottky; in this case it is SUWOGF, which can be selected by pressing E.

Note that as soon as you type A, the display changes to show all the action codes available to you on Para-Para. When you are done selecting the action code, the display will revert to the plot editor. This enables you to continue with the rest of your plots.

You also wish to visit the market place, so press A and then A again (the second A corresponds to the action code GEEMMN) in order to tell the computer your plan. You may notice this second action took 3 phases and you are borrowing 1 of the phases from your next turn. This is perfectly all right; in fact, it will happen quite often!

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 3

When the computer has evaluated your moves it will give you two pieces of text, numbers 791 and 807. You may notice that after you receive your assignment, the CGM still lists your character as needing to "GET RESULTS." When this happens, you should **not** attempt to get the new results until following the computer's first instructions. In this case, you should read the assigned text. The first piece of text tells you what happens with Dr. Schottky — he's such a great guy! The second text describes the Para-Para market place. You should decide whether or not you wish to trade any of your cargo for what is available here (you should note the trades available on your Planet Log for later reference). When you have decided what you wish to do, go to the computer, just as the text directs you to do, and log on. Your character log shows that you have a Market interaction pending with an asterisk. Press the asterisk key or Return to continue with the market. You now have the opportunity to make your first trade if you so wish. You are never obligated to exchange cargo or items at a market.

Planet Log			
Planet Name:	Para-Para		
Actions Available:			
Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
GEEMMN	3	trade — market	yes
WEGMEN	4	explore	
CEUMON	3	Research Dept.	
SEWMGN	4	Lateral Liaison	
SUWOGF	4	Dr. Schottky	
Trades Offered:			
They Sell		For	
3 fuel		1 crystals	
2 fuel		1 munitions	
1 fuel		1 computers	

When you have finished at the market, the computer will assign you one additional piece of text, number 765, which will help you continue with your adventure.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[085]

Yes sirree, this is what exploring is all about. You, faced off against a rabid squirrel who is probably defending his hoard of winter nuts.

You can't make out what those round green things really are that the squirrel is protecting but they must be very important for him to be defending them so fiercely.

He is armed with a bizarre weapon that seems to be a cross between a boomerang and an eggbeater. He handles it well enough to keep you away from the green rocks.

That is until he slips on some loose dirt from the cave-in you caused. As he falls he throws the weapon at you chittering, "Your mother wears shoes." Obviously something has been lost in the translation, but you get the drift.

You take a few essential moments to duck as the weapon skims the top of your head and the squirrel grabs his rocks and scurries away.

You may not have gotten a pretty green rock for your trouble but you do have a handy new weapon. Now if you only knew how to use the thing. . .

Being the intelligent sort, you realize your friends at the Blue city will be able to answer at least some of your questions so off you go.

You find your former teacher and, showing him your acquisition, you relate your latest adventure. He is very impressed that you were able to survive such an encounter and says you may have some fighting aptitude.

"Perhaps you would like to train in the Martial Art of Twychee of which this weapon is a part?" he chitters at you.

If you would like to train in Twychee choose the option below:

⟨TPSBWY⟩ (5 phases) Train in Twychee.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[086]

You are thoroughly enjoying the freedom you feel as an explorer. The thrill and excitement of discovering new worlds and new civilizations — this is the life!

Except you have a nagging suspicion you are forgetting to do something very important. Hmmm. What could that something be?

Of course! You are supposed to be building a tri-axis drive in order to follow the path of the Founders.

You think to yourself, "Gee, maybe I should do something to remedy this situation."

⊠ STOP ⊠

[087]

You realize how foolish it would be to pass up such an opportunity, so you take the time to build and install your own version of the Hemingellan tractor beam. This may really come in handy someday.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[088]

Traveling through hyperspace isn't as boring this time, due to a discovery just made by your ship's computer.

You have been told the name of a planet where you can find a very valuable piece of equipment.

Your computer decoded a piece of Vanessa Chang's map and found that you can obtain the plans for building a Tri-Axis Drive Booster on the world Corbis.

Wow!

✧ STOP ✧

[089]

Using your weapons to their maximum effectiveness, you turn the first group of battle satellites into useless orbiting lumps. Clearly these slow-moving robotic weapons are no match for your ship. You move to engage the next pair. These seem to be aware of your tactics and it takes a little longer to put them out of action. By then four more have moved into range, all behaving as if they'd learned something from the destruction of the first few. You alter your tactics, thus catching the next few off guard. But before you're finished with them ten more are moving in on your perimeter. They concentrate all their attacks on you, hypershells and plasma beams coming from all directions. You're forced to make some defensive maneuvers, which means you slacken off your attacks for a while. Seeing this, the satellites move in, and soon you're devoting all your effort and power to defending yourself. You barely manage to retreat with your ship intact.

You begin to realize that no matter how strong your weapons, you cannot win against such superior numbers. There is only one way to do that, and that is to increase your own numbers. Attacking with more than one ship simultaneously would divide the satellites' attention, so that they couldn't swarm in such great numbers.

If you and one or more other players wish to try to attack Outpost together, each of you must plot the LAND option, with your ships in the Outpost sector, during the same turn.

First, though, you have some repairs to make. Your ship has suffered a variety of minor damages which you'll spend the next few days fixing.

✧ STOP ✧

[090]

Two hundred paces beyond where you met the serpent there is a pile of metal sitting on a patch of open ground. Your computer informs you it is one cargo unit's worth of Phase Steel, the hardest substance in the known universe. There is nothing to indicate where it might have come from. You search the area, but there is no more.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[091]

“Computer,” you call from your comfortable chair where you have been pleasantly whiling the time away.

“Yes, Boss?” your ever faithful companion responds immediately. What a computer!

“Why don’t we set up a search pattern for radio signals? I’d like to hear the sound of a human voice.”

“Well, O.K.”

Is it your imagination or did your computer sound like you hurt its feelings?

“Look,” you say apologetically, “It’s not that I don’t enjoy your company, it’s more that we both need some new input.”

Was that a snuffle?

“We can have some fun,” you try desperately, grasping at straws. “Let’s just see if we can hear someone. We don’t actually have to speak with them.”

You eventually mollify the computer.

Several days pass before the fruits of your labor manifest themselves in the form of an intercepted radio message.

You listen with great interest as it becomes apparent that you have tuned into a conversation between smugglers. They have just finished a run to Wellmet, where they traded for a cargo bay full of top-notch Munitions.

You listen in for the rest of the message but do not learn anything else.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[092]

What difference will a few hours make, anyway? You decide to stay a little while longer in the hope that you will make an important discovery.

With scanners on to the max, you intently study your monitors. The interference is still very strong, but there is no sign of any plasma creatures. Perhaps the light of day blinds you to their presence.

The ship’s alarm sounds again. This time things look more serious. You have definitely incurred damage; there’s no real way of assessing its extent until you are back in space.

Decisions, decisions. Do you lift off while you still can or should you, lured by the unknown, risk remaining on the planet to investigate further?

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[093]

You have spent the past several hours seated comfortably in your ship's control room, whistling and chirping to your heart's content. It is a harmless hobby you picked up as a child — listening to records of wild birds and then repeating the sounds back until they sounded perfect. Perfect to you, anyway. The only drawback to this hobby is that it attracts a lot of critics. Out here in space you will not have this problem.

You pucker your lips together and reproduce the best call of the evening, the mating call of. . .

"The Great Chubby Footed Marcus Duck."

You freeze in mid-call.

"Who said that?" you ask. No, you demand to know! After all this IS your ship and you should be entitled to some privacy.

"Sorry Boss," your computer replies. "I was just about to announce that we had a call coming in and so I opened the channel a moment too soon. The caller got to hear the end of your repertoire."

You are a bit disgruntled but you instruct your computer to connect you. At least the person on the other end has some knowledge of bird calls.

"Not bad," comments a female voice, "but you need to use a bit more trill on the end."

"You must be confused," you respond haughtily. "The intonation was perfect. You must be confusing the call with the similar sounding cry of the blue-throated Whoobey, a common mistake."

You spar for a few minutes with the still unnamed voice about the proper techniques necessary to reproduce the call of the Great Chubby Footed Marcus Duck. In the end, the female suggests that perhaps the skip radio just wasn't able to send an accurate version of your call across space, and what she heard wasn't what you did. You accept this logic and get on with the introductions.

You find that you are speaking with Lieutenant Milam of the Institute for Space Exploration. She is on duty and trying to establish contact with anybody who might be traveling through the endless void.

Her main purpose is to gather whatever information she can and record it for posterity. She is willing to trade for what you can tell her.

You decide it's not such a bad deal and relate some of the data you have. Not that you have anything really important, but she seems content. In return, you find out about a planet called Crater where the natives are willing to trade Tools they have made for various items.

You thank the lieutenant and sign off.

Now back to important matters.

You pucker up.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[094]

Your return to Withel reveals nothing new. The landing beacon would still rather beep in binary to your computer, the Withelians are still a horrible mixture of flesh and chrome, and you still can't communicate with these creatures until you teach them Earth Standard.

You have the same options as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[095]

You are having such great fun zooming all around the galaxy. Well, at least around the area of space up to the Density Barrier. You know that the next step in building a Jump Engine that won't kill any living beings on board is to travel past the Barrier. Unfortunately, you have no clue where to go from there.

Wait a minute! You were told that the planet Outpost may have information vital to the success of your mission.

"Maybe I should go there soon," you think to yourself.

✂ STOP ✂

[096]

A curious sight greets you as you come out of hyperspace. A satellite wreck, just sitting there, beckons to be investigated. It's not smoldering in the airless environment of interstellar space, but the high thermal readings you are getting suggest that its destruction was a relatively recent event. A scan of the interior shows that it can still support a modest weightload. You never know what you might find in a junkyard, even in the true "middle of nowhere." If you would like to take a look around, plot the following option:

⟨GFEIM7⟩ (3 phases) Explore the interior of the wreck.

✂ STOP ✂

[097]

You stand in the cabin of the jump ship and unclench your fingers from the handholds. Outside, the spidery structures of the Riallan receiving station surround you. Sunlight glints off cables and spun glass beams. The jump engines have begun to power down, and the jump field is already dissipating. Ahead, Riallan-built waldoes are reaching toward the ship to attach the tethers that will draw you into the airlock bay.

Read immediately text entry 642.

✂ STOP ✂

[098]

You are feeling a bit more optimistic about being able to fulfill the Family's botched smuggling mission. You have already acquired two units of Super Slip, and hope to have a third unit of the rare material very soon.

You know you will sleep a lot easier when this is all over!

☒ STOP ☒

[099]

After you pack up your equipment, you take time for a brief study of where the carnivorous plants are and how far they can reach. Soon, you have a map of a probable escape route between the fronds. You must move quickly since you do not know how fast the plants are able to move over a short period of time. This map has a limited span of usability.

With the equipment safely stowed in your pack, you take a deep breath and run for safety.

You have a close call when one of the plants virtually uproots itself while making a grab for you. You use your weapon as you continue running. You think you hit the monster, but all you are really concerned about is that you made it safely to the edge of the grove. You take stock of any damage but can find nothing amiss.

Congratulations. You have enough sap to extract one unit of medicine. You have also learned how to dodge the monstrous plants so, should you wish to return for more Medicine, you have only to plot the following option:

⟨4UXOCF⟩ (3 phases) Collect one unit of Medicine.

Go now to the CGM.

☒ STOP ☒

[100]

Space travel as a way of life is certainly not without effect on one's survival instinct. For instance, you have long since equated your ship with your life. If there is anything wrong, you feel it is vital to investigate the problem right away.

After two days of plodding through every reference manual onboard, you are ready to call it quits. Apparently, your instrumentation problems are not like anything that's been documented before. What's worse, the difficulty is of the dreaded intermittent failure sort, the bane of every technician.

You put your head in your hands and groan.

Finally, in a fit of desperation, you instruct your computer to run a cryptographic analysis of these attacks. The results amaze you.

A discernible pattern is found in the seemingly random static interference. You program a search pattern to pinpoint the main source of the emissions and find one of the locations to be near your landing site.

You send out a small robotic probe in an attempt to contact whatever is making your instruments go haywire. With a great deal of difficulty, you manage to direct the probe to the central source of disruption. Squinting, you try to see the visual transmission you are receiving from the small robot. You can barely make out an intensely bright plasma shape on the screen.

After several minutes of trying to focus better, you suddenly get a clear image. The plasma shape seems to be examining your probe. A little piece of the sun is checking out your equipment! You sense that the orb is actually an intelligent creature by the way it keeps its distance from the robot and yet is not afraid of the device. The alien seems to know that its body temperature will damage the robot.

Several frustrating hours pass where you are not able to communicate with this being. Finally you make a breakthrough when your computer identifies a radio wave frequency at which the plasma creature can both receive and transmit signals. Using this frequency in conjunction with the computer's code-analysis capabilities, you attempt to inform the creature that you are an alien who is visiting the planet and are interested in exchanging information. The creature's innate intelligence rapidly manifests itself as he responds enthusiastically to your effort.

In return for telling the plasma creature about yourself and your little adventures, he is willing to inform you about himself and his race.

Long ago, his people too were tied to bodies of matter and decay. Back in their "physical days," they were fascinated by space travel, and had explored and mapped most of the galaxy.

The turning point came when they learned to discard their worldly forms and become ethereal. The true hearts of the universe, millions of solar furnaces in the heavens, became their homes. There they dwell in peace and harmony. Admittedly, some of their kind enjoy an occasional frolic on this molten world orbiting around their home.

You are intrigued by the story and question further.

"How did you learn to discard your physical form?" you ask.

He refuses to say more than that a wise and benevolent race had a device which allowed the transformation to occur.

The plasma creatures are no longer interested in occurrences in the material world. They have discovered a higher and more beautiful form of life in the solar corona. You are unable to learn any more from them. Instead you must now concern yourself with breaking camp and lifting off before sunrise.

The thought does occur to you that the day side of the planet would be more hospitable to the plasma creatures than the night side. Perhaps if you were able to contact other creatures, one might be a little more forthcoming about the details behind their transformation. If you are willing to place body and ship at risk to investigate this possibility, plot the following option:

⟨G6EPMB⟩ (3 phases) Explore the day side.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[101]

They really grow some fierce monsters here. You are wounded but the monster doesn't seem to be interested in the kill, so you are able to make good your escape.

Five days have elapsed by the time you make it back to your ship.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[102]

You are sitting at your ship's console when you hear a strange-sounding voice speaking a very bizarre version of Earth Standard.

“Ello? ‘Ello? Is out here?”

“Hello,” you respond into the mike. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes. Hear you, nice to make the meeting of you.”

“Thanks,” you reply. If there was anything your folks taught you as a child, it was manners.

“Thanks,” the creature repeats back to you. “We talk awhile? I learn to better speak. O.K.?”

For the next several hours you try to converse with the being and by the end of that time, you think you can hear a slight improvement in its diction and command of the language. Maybe. Just a little bit. Well, maybe not, but not from lack of trying on both your parts.

However, you do learn something from the alien that may be helpful to you. During the course of the discussion, the creature spoke about several places it has been and mentioned that the planet Tralis may be worth your while to visit for its Medicine.

You end the conversation soon after and make a mental note of this information.

✂ STOP ✂

[103]

You guide your ship into a stable orbit around the inhabited planet of Fiara and perform a planetary analysis which indicates that Fiara is almost twice Earth's size, with an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere and a civilized alien population of about 100 million. However it is impossible to obtain an exact measure of the planet's gravity as the reading goes off your scale. Fiara's gravitational conditions are so extreme that the atmosphere is severely stratified, with very thin layers at the top and increasingly thicker layers at the bottom. You will have to remember to wear your gravity compensation harness when you leave the ship.

Your computer display registers the flight plan: you will be landing at Fiara's principal spaceport, located in the planet's largest city, Fiarasan. As you begin your descent, you notice Fiara's unusual topographical features. The terrain is extraordinarily flat, containing occasional cracks where the ground has buckled under itself and sunken in. Even the vegetation surrenders to the gravity and consists mainly of low-lying shrubs with an occasional tree of stunted stature. Your landing path takes you over a city of block-shaped buildings no more than five meters in height. Using a higher magnification you notice extra reinforcements on the sides of each building.

A gradual descent under these conditions is more difficult than you had expected, and you just manage to prevent a crash landing at the spaceport. In the distance, a bullet-shaped ground vehicle slowly approaches your ship.

Merely rising from your seat is a struggle, even with your gravity compensation harness at maximum power. Walking is a greater challenge which requires every bit of your strength and concentration. As you force your right foot forward, you grab at the headrest of your seat for extra support. With each step it becomes more difficult for you to support all of your weight, and you soon drop to your knees and proceed to crawl to your ship's exit.

By the time you make your way to the hatch, the bullet-shaped vehicle has arrived, and several natives emerge to greet you. They are short, golden-furred, bipedal creatures with two pairs of arms apiece. You recognize them as Darscians, a race of very peaceful, non-aggressive aliens discovered by early human explorers more than 300 years ago. Since you speak High Darscian, you have no problem communicating with them.

❖ STOP ❖

[104]

Olarus takes you to the auditorium where the seminar on combat and weapons is just about ready to begin. The lights dim and the speaker walks onto the stage. She steps up to the podium and greets the two hundred people who are waiting to hear her lecture.

"Welcome. As you know, it is of the utmost importance that every citizen be able to defend themselves in the event of an alien invasion. Today we will be going over the fundamentals of combat. We will be covering both hand-to-hand and ship-to-ship combat.

"At the end of the lecture you will be required to take a test on the material I have presented. Your score on this exam will be reported to the Crater Defense Authority. Feel free to take notes."

You gulp nervously and start going through your pockets, hoping to find paper and pencil. Thankfully you pull out an old notepad and a pencil stub. Feeling a bit more prepared, you settle down to listen to the seminar.

"There are two different kinds of combat: hand-to-hand and ship-to-ship. In hand-to-hand combat, you fight your enemy in person, on the surface of a planet. In ship-to-ship combat, you fight your enemy with your spaceship, in space.

Continued 

"In both types of combat, the basic strategy is the same. You must try to hurt your enemy without being hurt yourself. Let's call hurting your enemy your *attack* and preventing being hurt yourself your *defense*.

"Any weapon or skill you use to *attack* can be classified in one of three categories: *contact*, *projectile*, or *special*.

"An *attack contact* weapon is one you actually reach out and touch your enemy with, like a knife. An *attack projectile* weapon is one that 'shoots' something at your enemy, like a gun. An *attack special* weapon is a clever trick of some sort, like sleeping gas.

"Any weapon or skill you use to *defend* can also be classified in one of three categories: *armor*, *mobility*, or *special*.

"A *defense armor* weapon is one that absorbs the impact of your enemy's attack, like a shield. A *defense mobility* weapon is one that enables you to dodge out of the way of your enemy's attack, like spring boots. A *defense special* weapon is one that protects you in some other way, usually a disruptive maneuver of some sort, like a smokescreen.

"To prepare yourself for the final conflict, you should try to have weapons or skills in all three attack categories and all three defense categories. Weapons in different categories can combine their effectiveness; weapons in the same category can't.

"When you go into combat, you'll be able to use exactly one weapon in each of the six categories — three attack and three defense. You can use your best attack contact weapon, your best attack projectile weapon, your best attack special weapon, your best defense armor weapon, and so on. You won't be able to use more than one weapon in the same category. So, I can't stress too highly the importance of having weapons or skills in as many categories as possible.

"Now let us consider the question of which specific weapons in each category you should try to acquire. Your basic hand-to-hand attack contact weapons are the stunner and the piercer. The stunner delivers a powerful electric shock to your enemy. The piercer has a sharp energy blade that can slice your enemy in half. Both of these weapons are effective and relatively inexpensive. Fancier weapons are available, but they're more expensive and harder to find.

"The basic hand-to-hand attack projectile weapons are the blaster and the exploder. The blaster shoots an energy beam over a range of up to 100 yards and is an excellent distance weapon. The exploder launches a chemical explosive charge over a shorter range, and is good for attacking enemies equipped with energy-resistant defenses or groups of enemies. As with the contact weapons, you can buy fancier projectile weapons, but they cost more.

"Your basic types of defense armor are the laser reflector and skin armor. The laser reflector is a high-tech energy refocusing device that absorbs and partially deflects most energy beams. Skin armor is a suit you wear over your whole body that helps protect you from physical damage.

"For mobility, the most common items you can buy are a rocket pack and missile toes. The rocket pack straps on your back and allows you to fly short distances. Missile toes are worn on your feet; they permit you to run faster and leap farther.

"Attack and defense special weapons come in many guises, but are all relatively esoteric, so I won't go into a lengthy discussion of what is available. Buy whatever appeals to you.

"As you can see, there are many different kinds of weapons. How do you decide which ones to get? Without a knowledge of the specific enemy you will be facing, there's really nothing to go by. Each weapon has its strengths and weaknesses. A blaster would work well against a fierce animal, but an exploder would be better against a soldier wearing a laser reflector. A rocket pack would be effective outdoors, but missile toes would work better indoors. So, the bottom line is that you're best off acquiring every kind of weapon that you can. That way, you can use whatever works best in a given situation.

"Now, do we have time for a quick discussion of the basic ship-to-ship weapons?"

You look at your watch and see that two hours have passed.

“No, I guess not. We still have your tests to do. We’ll cover ship-to-ship weapons next time. Meanwhile, remember that the fundamental tactics are the same for ship-to-ship combat as for hand-to-hand. Try to get weapons in as many categories as you can. Then, within each category, try to get weapons with different strengths and weaknesses, so you are prepared for as many kinds of situations as possible.

“O.K. — it’s time for your test. Proctors will be coming around with the forms. You will have twenty minutes to read through the questions and hand in your answers. Good luck.”

Although you did rather well in school, you were never really good at pop quizzes. You are not looking forward to this at all.

When you are handed your copy of the exam, you take one look at it and see that you are in trouble. The questions are written in a strange-looking script that you can barely read. It bears some resemblance to Earth Standard, but not much. It’s closer to old English.

Guessing what the words are as best you can, you fill out your answer sheet. You finish just as the speaker calls “Time,” and hand in your paper. Shrugging your shoulders, you leave the auditorium and go in search of Olarus. Several hours pass before you find him.

“Hello,” he calls to you. “Did you enjoy the lecture? You certainly have quite a bit of learning to do before you’ll be ready to fight the final war. You finished in the bottom ten percent on the exam.”

You explain that you had difficulty reading the script, and ask Olarus why the Craterians don’t use Earth Standard.

“Here on Crater we use the same language we did before the Boundary was set up — English. In the last three hundred years, the Nine Worlds built the Boundary and adopted a new language. Meanwhile, we devoted all our resources to building up our defenses. We don’t have time for silly things like standardizing our language to conform to customs inside the Boundary. We need to get ready for the invasion.”

“I see,” you reply. It’s amazing how paranoid these Craterians really are. “Well, I hope my low score on the exam won’t disgrace me in Craterian society.”

“Your chances of being accepted as a recruit for the Defense Forces won’t be too good,” Olarus remarks.

Just as well, you think to yourself, as you head back to your ship.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[105]

Unfortunately, you’re going to have to find the place where Vanessa Chang’s ship crashed before you can start digging for a buried body. Digging where you are now is not very productive.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[106]

Para-Para is quite the lonely piece of real estate. It's stuck out in the middle of nowhere, with an orbital radius so large that you can't tell which of the stars in its sky is its sun without a computer. A hapless little rock world, somehow orphaned by its mother sun, floating out where gas giants are formed, it was probably just cruising by when suddenly — zap — it was captured by the gravity well of some sneaky sun. It almost sounds like a fable — the blue giant star and the little feeble planet that couldn't — and the moral of the story is, "Never travel slower than escape velocity." Scanning confirms the obvious: cold, darkness, vacuum. To use Para-Para and lifeless in the same sentence would be truly redundant.

"So where's the installation?" you ask the computer.

"Sensors indicate it's here Boss, near the equator." A small red circle is superimposed on the viewscreen image of Para-Para. The ink-black featureless surface now has an invisible city highlighted by a red ring. It looks like a smooth black ball with a red circle on it.

"Maybe it'll be easier to see in the daylight," you mutter.

"This is the day side, boss," the computer responds, "we'll pass into the dark side in ten."

This is as good as it's going to get? Preferring to see where you're going, you instruct the computer to enhance the image, narrow the focus, and increase the contrast to maximum so that you can make out surface features. The planet's surface consists almost solely of black rock. It's difficult to distinguish anything even with the enhancement — what was total black now seems to be mottled black on darker black. Mountain ranges, extensive plains, twisting ravines, possible river beds, and wave-like erosion patterns all testify that Para-Para once had an atmosphere.

While you're wondering if Para-Para ever developed life of its own, the viewscreen suddenly blazes with light, turning a dazzling white. Shielding your eyes, you reach for the viewscreen controls and yell to the computer, "What was that?"

"The reflective property of the surface seems to have changed, Boss." A few corrections to the viewscreen controls provide you with a clearer image. The section of the planet you're looking at is covered with a fine grey dust, hence a more light-reflective surface and a whited-out viewscreen. Further investigation reveals that Para-Para is composed of two distinct halves: a black rock half, where the installation is located, and on the other side, a lighter hemisphere covered in fine dust. The light side is dominated by eight overlapping continent-sized craters.

"Those must have been impressive impacts," you observe, "but what I can't figure out is why there's nothing like this on the other side. Computer, run a full scan, all bands."

"Working. High radiation levels present at the center of each crater, Boss. Judging from their dimensions, class, and radioactivity, they are blast craters, damage left by ninth-magnitude surface explosions."

Blasting craters. . . Well, it fits, you figure — all the people on one side, all the blasting on the other. They may not know what they're doing down there — after all, it keeps blowing up on them, right? — but at least they know that what they're doing is extremely dangerous. So it's safety first, Para-Para style. While you're curious, you call up all the information you have on Para-Para. None of it mentions planet-denting explosions.

Your ship's computer picks up landing instructions from the installation, and you bring your ship down without incident. There's not much to see: a few docks, two other freighters besides yours. There are a few buildings, windowless and airtight against the vacuum, but they don't even look used. You've seen more construction at a one-man asteroid mine. A boarding tube snakes out and nuzzles the side of

your ship. It seals and pressurizes, allowing you to disembark. You follow the tube and find yourself in an elevator, which politely welcomes you to Para-Para and offers you a seat.

Ten minutes and one mile later you arrive, deep underground, at what the elevator calls “. . . Alpha One. Have a pleasant day.” The doors open on a city-sized plaza ringed with shops and offices. There are walkways radiating from the center and tier after tier of balconies, full of people going about their business or leisure. As an “offworld trader” you’re obliged to report to an office bearing a large spiral-arm-shaped logo on its front windows. There you’re assigned free lodging and an orange pass which allows you access to the elevator tubes which serve as Para-Para’s transportation system.

This underground complex is immense. According to your complimentary map, there are four major sections: Alpha One — the one you’re in, which is the residential and commercial complex; Logistics, which deals with offworld trade, as well as power and life-support systems; the Research Department, with whole areas on the map labeled as “laboratories” or “test facilities;” and the Lateral Liaison Area, where the administrative offices are located. Access to Research or Lateral Liaison requires a security clearance.

A few hours of looking around reveal the following possibilities for passing the time on Para-Para:

⟨GEEMMN⟩ (3 phases) Go to Logistics for negotiation of trade.

⟨WEGMEN⟩ (4 phases) Explore Alpha One, talking to people you meet on the public levels about life on Para-Para.

⟨CEUMON⟩ (3 phases) Attempt to enter the Research Department to have a look around.

⟨SEWMGN⟩ (4 phases) Attempt to enter the Lateral Liaison Area to have a look around.

⟨SUWOGF⟩ (4 phases) Contact Dr. Schottky.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[107]

As you explore the interior of the ship you are still amazed at the sheer number of weapons the designers had built into the hull. You see an empty space in one of the outer walls where it looks like someone has managed to pry a device from the steel enclosure where it was located. Try as you might, though, you have no success in performing a similar feat with any of the remaining equipment.

You finish exploring the interior of the vessel but you learn nothing new, nor do you find anything salvageable. You soon return to your ship.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[108]

You ask for the location of the Bridger, the Lanza Family member responsible for the smuggling run to the Nine Worlds. You are told she is in the control building by the docks and that you are to wait for her.

A woman five feet in height emerges from the building and approaches you. Despite her small stature, you get the distinct impression that this woman is not to be messed with by any rational person.

She gives you the once over before she begins to speak.

“You the Boundary driller Valle sent?” she demands to know. You nod your head affirmative, daunted by her vehemence.

She nods once and goes on to tell you the terms of the deal.

“You run Inward with three paks of alien Culture to the rep on Frontier. There you’ll grab your perk for this, a first choice screener. The cost for no-com is bad so don’t plan to cross the deal.”

You now have to decide if you want to try to run the Boundary again. If you do so and want to complete the smuggling mission, choose the following option:

(MONFJI) (3 phases) Trade three Culture for one Gradient Filter.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[109]

You have the nagging sensation that you missed something while on Cordethar. You aren’t any closer to discovering the course taken by the Founders, and you are not sure why.

After reflecting upon your visit to the planet Cordethar, you realize that you should have tried the “Recent History” option. It might have given you useful information about what the Founders did on the planet when they were there.

You think, “Maybe if I return to Cordethar I can further my quest for the lost File.”

⊠ STOP ⊠

[110]

You have finished without making a mistake. You breathe a sigh of relief. Although it is not difficult to recite the lines, there is always the chance you may make a tiny slip. Such errors are not forgiven by the Brotherhood.

The young cleric nods his approval at your performance. He tells you the next step is to undergo the ordeal. If you follow him, you may begin.

You are taken to an older woman who solemnly evaluates you in silence. When she comes to a decision, she waves the young cleric away and motions for you to follow her down the corridor. She takes you to the outer wall of the protective dome. You know this wall is all that stands between you and certain death. The woman opens the inner door of the airlock and motions for you to enter.

Inside you see: several books, flint and steel, a robe, a panel with a button saying, "Press in Case of Emergency," and the outer door of the airlock. You step inside, waiting for her to follow. She does not.

Instead, she says to you, "Knowledge is the most important pursuit in the universe. You must dedicate your life to always learning more. You must place nothing ahead of this quest."

With this bit of sage advice, she closes the inner door.

Resigning yourself to temporary exile, you seat yourself cross-legged on the floor and look over the collection of books. All but one are in an alien language and are made of a strange material. The only book you can read is entitled, "The Language of the Ancients."

Oh good, you can use this book to translate the others.

You briefly wonder where the "ordeal" part comes into play.

After only ten minutes have passed you become decidedly uncomfortable. The temperature must have dropped at least twenty degrees. You are thankful for the robe and slip it on. That's much better.

After another ten minutes you notice your fingers are turning a lovely shade of blue. This is not good at all.

With each passing second, you feel more and more cold.

You try to take your mind off the cold by translating the title of one of the books. It reads, "The Art of Setting Priorities."

You have the following options:

A: Push the emergency button on the wall.

B: Translate the "Book of Knowledge."

C: Use the books to start a fire.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[111]

After spending several days making minor ship repairs, you feel you are entitled to some personal time. You first make a ten layer sandwich and get a Yummy soda, then you march over to the computer terminal and call up one of your favorite books, "The Encyclopedia of Exciting Explorers." This time you decide to read volume three.

You spend the remainder of your travel time studying its many chapters. Just as you are about to prepare for reentry into normal space, your attention is caught by a very interesting piece of information which says that Fiber can be found on the planet Fiara.

You make a note of the entry — it might be useful later.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[112]

The dog fights until you are helpless on the ground, then gives a joyful bark at its fortune in bringing down such large prey. Unfortunately (for the dog), when it tries to move in for the kill, it sinks its teeth right into the collar circuitry of your light EVA suit. The resulting medium-voltage jolt sends the dog running into the brush. After lying still for a few minutes, you worry that the animal may come back. You manage to stand up and limp back to the spaceport. The natives, unable to render any medical assistance, watch as you climb into your ship to recuperate. It takes you two days to recover from your injuries.

When you first contemplated spacefaring and the dangers it would present, you certainly considered the possibility of encountering dangerous creatures. Somehow, though, you didn't imagine being mauled by the descendants of abandoned pets on a human colony world. You resolve to improve your capabilities for personal defense. You can never be safe in space, but you can at least make sure you don't die in a manner that will cause the patrons of the Slippery Silver Tavern back on Wellmet to laugh themselves silly.

Because of the time needed to recuperate, this option has taken six phases instead of four.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[113]

You emerge from hyperspace and run a quick scan on the system. You see Yrebe is still there, right where you left it. After all, who would want to steal the molten ball of iron?

As you approach the planetoid, you are soon reminded of the little planet's most memorable quality, the incredible heat.

You instruct the computer to land on the sunset edge of the planet's nightside, noting the presence of the same interference you encountered the last time you landed.

You have the same options as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[114]

Once again you find yourself face to face with that rascally pirate, Silverbeard.

"Ah, it is you again. So which will it be this time?" he asks innocently.

"You do not leave a person with a lot of choice. Either I give up my hard-earned cargo or I try to fight you," is your grim reply.

"Har, har, har," is his only response. You must now decide what you wish to do this time, fight or donate three units of cargo to a "worthy cause."

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[115]

You spend the next two weeks being thought at by tall skinny stalks of broccoli. The Organuans at the Academy of Telepathy are incredibly arrogant beings. You are sure that no self-respecting salad would want any part of them!

You are, however, learning to keep your thoughts to yourself. You no longer get glared at when you slip and think of your teacher as "cabbage head" or "cauliflower face." Learning to keep your thoughts to yourself is easy, once you learn the knack. It's the voluntary sending to other offworlders you're having a problem with, although you do seem to be the best of the non-Organuan pupils.

Finally, you successfully send a message to another student, a large squirrel from a nearby planet. At your graduation, the Dean makes a nice speech, praising you as one of the best offworld students they've ever had at the Academy, and presents you with a lovely plaque.

Congratulations. You are now an honest-to-goodness telepath with the ability to communicate with alien races.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[116]

You are somewhat prepared for the effect of being yanked out of your expected trajectory around the planet Cordethar as you emerge from hyperspace. Still, you feel decidedly bruised as the computer on the planet takes hold of your vessel and roughly pulls it into orbit.

You are once again greeted by Mr. Personality:

"ATTENTION, ALIEN. YOU ARE NOW ON CORDETHAR. IN ORDER TO PROCEED ON YOUR COURSE YOU MUST INFORM THIS UNIT OF YOUR SPECIES AND YOUR VESSEL'S NAME, PLANET OF ORIGIN, AND DESTINATION."

You decide to play it straight this time so as to avoid the painful effects of the psi-link. When it has ascertained who you are and where you are from, it welcomes you to Cordethar and asks you for any new data. You tell it as little as possible and it appears to be satisfied.

You have the same options as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[117]

The principal city of Darscold, where you soon find yourself, is known as Fredotha. You spend several days exploring it thoroughly and in the end come up with the following options for further investigation:

- ⟨WPGBEY⟩ (3 phases) Trade commodities at the planet's market.
- ⟨W9GDEQ⟩ (3 phases) Visit the Engineering Guild to find out more about the Gravity Compensators which support the city's buildings.
- ⟨CPUBOY⟩ (7 phases) Arrange a stay at the home of Clivus, a Darscian who has offered to teach you the art of "Serene Contemplation."
- ⟨SPWBGY⟩ (5 phases) Visit the Institute of Extra-Corporeal Sentience and find out about the latest in Artificial Intelligence.

✘ STOP ✘

[118]

Upon your return to the city, you are met by the right-spinner Shearsy. He greets you and, when asked, tells you that there have been no new developments in the situation between the left-spinners and the right-spinners. You have the same options as before.

✘ STOP ✘

[119]

It is clear that your attackers want to either destroy you or force you back to Gironde's surface. Neither alternative is acceptable. Sooner or later you will have to get off Gironde; you certainly cannot live there for long. You cut in full power and make a ninety-degree trajectory change, then instruct the computer to execute a string of random changes in velocity and direction. Your drives complain, and so does your stomach, but the blue-green laser bolts fired sporadically from the black fleet all miss, and that's what counts. With so many ships the fleet should be far less maneuverable than your ship alone. You change course back toward the planet's surface hoping to skim off the atmosphere and escape in the opposite direction.

It doesn't work. Not only do the black cruisers react quickly enough to prevent your escape, they seem almost to anticipate your actions. No gambit you can contrive is able to break the arrays of ships that surround you. At one point you think you have them fooled, as a large hole forms in their shell just where you had hoped it would, but another ship appears as if from nowhere to fill the gap. It is as though the enemy could read your mind and create ships out of empty space to thwart you. Meanwhile their shots are almost finding your range, and the computer calculates that even a single hit would finish you.

You will have to try something else.

Go now to the CGM.

✘ STOP ✘

[120]

You decide not to risk placing the alien helmet on your head again. You decide the risks are not worth the possible benefits. You probably saved yourself from irreparable brain damage.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[121]

“Hey, Boss,” your ship’s computer calls out to you.

You look up from the work you are doing and answer, “What is it this time?”

Normally you don’t mind being interrupted when the computer has found something of interest. It’s just that the last ten or so interruptions have been for the most ridiculous things! The last one, for example, was to ask you what your favorite color was, and the one before that was to see if you knew why it was unlucky to walk under a ladder.

You make a note to check on the programming and make sure that a glitch hasn’t developed somewhere.

“Boss, I’ve picked up a strange radio transmission. Would you like me to put it on audio?”

“That would be nice,” you reply with sarcasm that is completely lost on the computer.

The sounds you hear from the ship’s speakers are a weird combination of whispering and growling that set your teeth on edge. You strain to make out what you believe to be Earth Standard.

The voice drones on and on, not responding to your attempts at conversation.

You spend the next several hours just listening to the eerie monologue and, after awhile, you think you can actually make some sense of the words. Occasionally you can hear phrases like “descending from the clouds” and “profitable trade location” interspersed throughout the transmission.

The clearest phrase occurs when you hear the words, “Planet Darscold is good for Culture.” After that, you do not hear anything that is intelligible.

You have no idea who is sending the message, but you make a note of what you hear for later use. Eventually the transmission ends, leaving you alone again with your thoughts.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[122]

Welcome back to Moiran, that run-down, foul-smelling, sorry excuse for a habitable planet. Of course, with Phase Steel, ship improvements, and personal weapons all available on one world, the place does have a certain attractiveness. You can't help feeling, though, that a gas mask concession stand would outsell all the other markets combined.

You arrive at the spaceport without incident; your options are the same as before.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[123]

You are thoroughly enjoying the freedom you feel as an explorer. The thrill and excitement of discovering new worlds and new civilizations — this is the life!

Except you have a nagging suspicion you are forgetting to do something very important. Hmmm. What could that something be?

Of course! You are supposed to be building a tri-axis drive so you can search out the source of the new type of energy your colleague at Harvard detected.

You think to yourself, "Gee, maybe I should do something to remedy this situation."

⌘ STOP ⌘

[124]

The tall man, who had listened silently throughout the conversation, suddenly interrupts you. "Do you really want to know what's out here beyond the Boundary?"

You open your mouth to say "no thanks," but Corin has already taken the bait. "Sure. What?"

"Empty space," he answers. "More empty space than you can imagine. And here and there, just often enough to keep it from being totally empty, a star. Now, some of these stars have planets: Maybe one in eighty. More, if you count worthless silica asteroids. Less, if you leave out worthless gas giants. Of course, the stars with planets look the same through a scanner as the ones without. You can only tell by going there, unless you want to observe the same star from a stationary point for a year or so. It's faster to go there: takes maybe two weeks there and back on a careful course. That means a good explorer finds a planet about every three years. Of course, only about one planet in twenty has anything interesting on it, unless you're a geologist or a weatherman. The odds are worse if you're looking for anything that can make a profit in trade. That's why there aren't many explorers these days. Work it out: with a billion stars in the galaxy, there may be millions of good planets — but how are you going to find them?"

"So what's the point?" asks Darkwatch. "Are you going to tell us we should work for you instead, hauling Iron through the Boundary?"

The tall man smiles. "Not at all," he says. "And not one of you could run the Boundary if your life depended on it. I'm just pointing out that you'll need help. Like these, for example." He drops six objects on the table: small squares two centimeters on a side that scatter light like laser armor.

The professor looks at the sparkling chips. "Computer software?"

"Star maps," says the tall man. "Six of them, each covering one sixth of the region of the galaxy once known as the Fringe. Star maps that any other person in this bar would kill for."

"They'd kill you for trying to swindle them," you growl. "I suppose you're going to tell us that these are the lost maps of Vanessa Chang?"

"Of course."

"And expect us to buy them from you?"

"Not at all. They are yours."

Valentine looks the man over as if trying to place his face from the roster of known lunatics. Corin says, "Don't talk stupid. If those were Vanessa Chang's maps, you wouldn't be giving them away."

"On the contrary. I have to give them away. Who could possibly afford to buy them?" The tall man leaves the table and walks out of the Slippery Silver.

The rest of you stay at your seats. No one speaks for a few minutes. Then Darkwatch says: "It's some sort of practical joke. They want to see if they can make us fight over the chips."

"You're right," says Valentine. "Why don't I just take these and get rid of them?"

The Professor catches Valentine's hand in midair. "Not so fast. I think perhaps that I should take them and examine them first. Then I'll let you know if they are of any value."

"Good idea," Clerc points out, "but I believe that the equipment on my ship is more suitable to the task."

You see which way the wind is blowing, but what can you do about it? While your tablemates begin to argue in earnest, you signal the bartender. "It's getting a little stuffy in here; would you mind turning up the air conditioning?"

Eventually, you each take one piece at random and arrange to make five copies. After checking the copies against the original and distributing them, everyone ends up with one of the originals and a copy of each of the other five pieces. Thus, you have a "complete" set.

It is very late at night by the time you return to your ship with your shiny wafers. You load them into your computer and request a decryption analysis.

"Most ingenious," says the computer. "Each chip seems to contain the same basic information, but coded in such a way that no one chip can be decoded without each of the other five."

"You mean, without all six chips you couldn't read any of them?"

"I believe I just said that."

"Okay, so what's on it? A message reading 'Fooled you, Sucker?'"

The computer, for an answer, displays a picture on your main viewscreen. It is a star map, showing the locations of forty planets, with detailed coordinates for each.

"Well, gag me with a Warp Core! Is it real?"

"I have no way to ascertain that. It has all the necessary information that a star map incorporates, including orbital motion data for predicting the current locations of planets based on their positions when the map was made."

"When was that?"

"Three hundred seven years ago."

You contact your former companions by ship-to-ship radio and ask what they think of the map. Their reactions are closely guarded. ("... Well, I certainly intend to investigate it, whenever I've finished with my current business..." while in the background you hear drive tubes warming up.) Before you part company, you agree to set aside a common skip-radio frequency between your ships. That way you can talk to each other whenever you want (of course, neither you nor they are obliged to answer or give out any information you don't want to).

If someone hasn't already done so, break the seal on the envelope marked "Document Two" and open it. Spread it out on a table or other surface where everyone can see it.

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[125]

You may have thought that everything was all set for assembling your very own Technology Nullifier, but after your working model refused to work under any circumstances, you came to the conclusion that you did not possess all of the requisite components for its construction. Better luck next time.

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[126]

You are feeling rather smug after successfully running the Boundary. Happily, you contact Dr. Myers to schedule a meeting.

When you arrive you see she is already waiting, delighted to see you. You tell her about your adventures and how wonderful it is to finally be able to do some real research for a change.

Although she is impressed with your escapades, she seems troubled. When you ask her why, she tells you, "It's wonderful that you are able to do research, but you are in great danger. If you are caught, you will probably lose all academic standing here at Harvard, because you have no proof whatsoever of your real reasons for running the Boundary. While the University would be more forgiving if you had something to show for taking one of their ships and leaving, they can't look the other way if you are caught right now."

You see her point and agree. You will need some sort of proof if your theory is to be taken seriously by the academic community. There are many alien races scattered throughout the galaxy, though, so things don't look all that bleak. You need to get proof of three alien abilities. Then you can return to Harvard.

As you prepare your ship for takeoff, you are a lot less apprehensive about what awaits you. You survived the trip the first time, so you figure you can probably do it again.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[127]

Silverbeard's ship is definitely a candidate for the perfect fighting machine if ever there was one. It fires no projectile weapons — its long thin hull isn't even thick enough to contain torpedo tubes — but its other capabilities more than make up the slack. The hull is so slender that it is difficult for your sensors to "see" even from the side, and when it turns to aim directly at you it is invisible — until it fires. A single hit from that deadly beam, lancing from the point of the needle in an infinitely thin, infinitely bright line of liquid silver, burns out all of your defensive shields. You know you cannot survive another.

Fortunately, the silver beam weapon can only fire once every few seconds, and the whole needle ship must aim to bring it to bear. This is not true of the stress fields — Silverbeard seems to be able to throw these casually and continuously in any direction. The stress fields are somehow related to tractor and pressor beams, but more powerful, and with the ability to pull in many directions at once. They emanate in pale folds from the center third of the needle hull sweeping through vast areas of space, impossible to avoid. Each time your ship passes through a field, your entire hull twists and creaks, your drive tubes falter as the reaction mass shifts in the warp core, and even your own body feels the effect as a pulling in your gut and a pressure behind your eyes that makes you feel sick.

Several minutes into the battle you discover the pirate's third weapon, though he has been using it all along. You don't know what it is, but it causes tiny holes to appear as if by magic in your ship. There is no detectable energy beam, nor any material projectile, to cause the holes. When they appear in your hull, the effect is negligible, because the holes are too small to cause any serious loss of air. But they also seem to be appearing inside the ship, in random places — the floor, the empty co-pilot's seat, the instrument panel. . . A small peripheral display screen to your right suddenly flashes and burns out, pierced by a hole, and you realize how many vital places there are within your ship — the drives, the controls, the computer — in which one of these tiny holes could well prove fatal.

Having no choice, you continue to press your attack on Silverbeard. One way or another, this fight will decide the issue. Your ship has taken heavy damage and may no longer be spaceworthy. There are no alternatives: either you will land on Outpost, or you will die in space. You press the pirate with every weapon you have. You increase your power level to the point of overload. Finally, in desperation, you vent all your cargo bays to space, emptying your ship to gain speed and maneuverability.

There comes a moment when you don't think you can continue. Your weapon systems are failing, your ship is barely responding to your flight controls, and your computer has frozen like a shell-shocked soldier. You realize you have a choice: you can try to make it to the planet's surface alive, or you can make one last suicidal attack run on the needle ship. Your ship screams from every weld as you grimly turn to face the enemy. . .

. . . and at that moment Silverbeard's ship begins to disintegrate. There is a series of small flashes like firecrackers exploding up and down the length of the needle. Crackling green and yellow sparks play over the hull, starting at the needle's tip and moving toward the swelling of the cockpit. Silver particles spray from the central section, and the whole ship makes a ponderous turn that brings it into contact with the last of its own collapsing stress fields. With a sudden lurch, the fighter breaks in two; the short section behind the cockpit breaks off and pinwheels into space while the needle point, with the cockpit still attached, drives directly toward the planet.

You watch as the impact approaches. An ordinary ship might burn up in the atmosphere, but the slim needle of Silverbeard's fighter pierces it effortlessly and continues downward. It seems to hit the ground in slow motion. There is no explosion, no crater, just the slow crumpling of the hull as its momentum drives it flat against the rock.

Continued 

You spend the next few minutes trying to avoid the same fate as you work the bypass controls, trying to find enough backup systems still working to make a controlled landing. Your landing sensors are dead, so you decide to land at the most obvious place, near Silverbeard's crash site. With the stress fields gone, things aren't as bad as they seemed during the battle. You control your ship well, and make what might be the best landing of your life — so good, in fact, that you even survive.

Silverbeard didn't do as well. The metal of his hull is splashed across a small ravine, looking like it had been melted and poured there. The cockpit capsule alone still holds its original shape, and it is crushed and half-buried in the rock, split open along one side.

You put on your environmental suit — the instruments that would test the air you are damaged — and leave your ship. Carefully, you examine the wreckage.

Silverbeard is inside the capsule. He is alive, but not for long. There is not much left of him. His eyes are open, staring wildly and darting from place to place, never focusing on any single point. Behind the blood, his face looks young, no more than forty years old. His hair is white, but he is clean-shaven.

"You dirty bilge-drinking Clathran," he spits, and you can't tell if he's addressing you or the phantasms of his memory. "Ye done for me good, you have." A laugh shakes what's left of his frame, and you hear bones grate. "But I fooled ye all along, I did. This ain't Earth. Hear that, you sucker, you'll never get the coordinates. All these years ye dog me, and this ain't Earth. I led ye on a sea snark chase, I did, and now if you want to find the homeworlds ye can fish for them."

The pirate shudders once more, and his eyes roll back in his head. He is dead.

You turn away from the smashed capsule and begin the grim job of burying Silverbeard, mostly to get your mind off the much greater problem of repairing your ship. There is no soil on Outpost as yet, so you wrap Silverbeard's body and bring it aboard your ship. Every joint groans in protest as you take your vessel up and hover over the nearby ocean. Although you didn't understand the man, you feel he at least deserves a decent burial. You drop his body into the water, where the planet's newly-evolved microorganisms will slowly consume him.

Next, you turn your attention to your ship. A thorough inspection lasting two or three days tells you all you need to know. The good news is that enough of your thrusters are left that you can move from place to place on Outpost. The bad news is that almost nothing else is operational. The computer doesn't respond to even the most rudimentary signals, your hull and internal wiring are riddled with damage from holes and stressing, and even the internal superstructure is weakened. Your cargo bays are empty. Worst of all, the Warp Core in your main drives is ruined beyond repair.

All might not be lost, however. You conclude that you can repair your ship adequately if you have four things: a new Warp Core, a large supply of basic raw materials such as Iron, Crystals, and Radioactives, sophisticated tools and test instruments, and a working computer to supply basic knowledge and help re-activate your ship's computer. Silverbeard's base on this planet might have all of these things, if you are lucky.

An aerial survey of the planet leads you to what must have been Silverbeard's base, not too far from the power generator you destroyed in the assault on Outpost. There is what looks like a miniature spaceport, with a small landing pad and several large buildings that resemble hangars. A short distance away is a series of long, wide, low buildings that are almost featureless except for the stains and weathering of age. A few miles south of this cluster is one more building, also hangarlike, that appears just as old. To the west, between the power generator and the spaceport, is one of the ground-based heavy-particle beam weapons that attacked you on the way down, and it adjoins a small metal building. You land your ship near the main complex and consider your options:

⟨NPJBZY⟩ (7 phases) Search the newer hangars adjoining the "spaceport."

⟨7PLBRY⟩ (7 phases) Search the long, low, old buildings nearby.

⟨N9JDZQ⟩ (7 phases) Search the beam weapon emplacement.

(79LDRQ) (7 phases) Search the old hangar to the north.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[128]

You spend some time watching the current peace talks on the public comnet screens. As far as you can tell, the Glissandons are the embodiment of the concept of reasonable negotiating.

The decidedly obese Pesantes, who you can see over the visually transmitting comnet screen, are being extremely snide and sarcastic.

You can easily see why these people have been at war for all these generations.

An idea occurs to you and you ask the local officials for permission to carry out your plan. After a moment of conferring among themselves, tentacles waving and twitching, one of them turns to you and sings a phrase which gives you the go-ahead, but gently implies your task is a naive and foolish gesture.

That's never stopped you before, so off you go to visit the Pesantes. Their city isn't very far and you manage to travel over there with no trouble. The current war between these two factions is actually at a truce, so the number of missiles and attacks is less than might typically be expected.

The Pesantes are chunky little aliens whose tentacles resemble plump sausages. The group that meets you seems pleased to see you and greets you warmly. They offer you sympathy for having to put up with the atrocious hospitality of the Glissandons and take you to a banquet hall where feasting and merriment are apparently always taking place.

After politely declining due to gastronomic differences, you ask if you might view the peace talks. One of the aliens, who introduces herself as Sonata, offers to take you to the public arena where the talks can be viewed by the public. You accept.

The large theatre you are taken to is filled with more chubby Pesantes snacking noisily and cheering their delegate, who is being very reasonable and fair in this session of talks. The whole arena groans and sighs sadly when the Glissandon makes a nasty retort and smugly implies superiority over his opponent.

In a woeful tone, Sonata explains that it is very difficult trying to come to terms with so impolite a race as the Glissandons and she has very little hope for the success of this meeting.

You are completely at a loss for words. The Glissandons were a very polite and peace-seeking people just a short time ago. What had happened while you were away?

You ask Sonata if you may place a call to the Glissandon called Sherzo. She looks a bit doubtful but allows you to put the call through anyway.

Sherzo is surprised to see you, especially when she sees who you are with, but waits politely to hear what you have to say.

You introduce the two Gnarsians and Sonata wishes the Glissandon a full and healthy life.

Looking startled, Sherzo reaches over to the control button and switches the viewscreen off.

You and Sonata are mystified, all Sonata can add is that is typical behavior by "those people."

Continued 

There is nothing else you can do here so you return to Glissandor and seek out Sherzo. When you find the alien you ask for an explanation. The Gnarshian replies, "I understand that a foreigner may not understand what a deadly insult being called a 'fluffy single-handed invader' is to us but you must take my word that wars have been started for less.

You really don't understand and try to explain that was not what Sonata said but to no avail.

You have a sneaking suspicion the comnets are at the root of the planet's troubles but you have no way to prove this, given your limited time and resources. Frustrated, you give up.

✂ STOP ✂

[129]

Again you are unable to defeat the Patrol cruiser in time. The reinforcements arrive and you find yourself surrounded by more Patrol ships than you can possibly handle. You are forced to surrender.

The Patrol captain isn't as lenient with you as in your first two encounters. He takes *all* of your cargo and has his crew rough you up a bit. As he "escorts" you back to the Boundary he gives you the usual spiel about not returning.

Right.

This leaves you in the trisector containing the Nine Worlds, but outside the Boundary. Further attempts to run the Boundary now would be useless. However, if you can improve your ship's combat abilities, you may wish to try again in the future.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[130]

You decide that a peaceful coexistence is better than all-out war, so you tell Silverbeard to come over and pick up his cargo. He graciously allows you to choose which commodities you are willing to give him.

The entire episode takes two phases before Silverbeard leaves you floating in space with his typical "Har, har, har!"

You feel like you have failed as you watch the pirate's ship sail out of scanner range. After all, it is your job to put a stop to the man's thieving ways. Instead, you have just given him more encouragement to continue his piracy.

Maybe if you built up your ship's weaponry, you could stand up to the scoundrel the next time you meet.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[131]

This planet reminds you of the industrial planet Heaven, in the Nine Worlds, perhaps because more than ninety percent of the available surface has been built over, including areas that must surely once have been oceans. Unlike Heaven, however, there are no parks or wildlife preserves, no islands of green to break up the monotony of glistening steel. The open areas are purely functional: open-air mines, atmosphere refinement plants, and a spaceport. Several complete orbits of the planet reveal not a single trace of any living plant or animal on the surface, yet the planet is clearly not a ruin. The metallic structures are polished and in good repair, mobile machines swarm around the mines and flow like molten lava through networks of transportation conduits that encompass the planet, and the infrared signatures of energy being used in a dozen different ways occasionally blind your ship's sensors.

It could be that you are looking at the roofs of a planetwide city and that the population lives inside the structures or deeper underground. But where do the inhabitants get their food? Heaven keeps a dozen spaceports busy importing food for its people. This world has only one spaceport, toward which you are traveling as your computer locks in on an automated ground control system. From lower altitudes you see that much of the shining surface covering the planet is composed of solar power collection panels, but you cannot see any vegetation anywhere.

"Boss," says your computer as you perform the directed landing maneuvers, "There is something unusual about this spaceport. The approach instructions I've been receiving are not the type of passive signals that most landing beacons send out. Instead I've been receiving specific strings of command dialog such as a sentient ground controller might send verbally, but machine-generated and coded specifically for computer reception."

"Well," you reply, "I suppose that one would expect a planet this industrialized to have sophisticated spaceport systems."

"There's one other thing you should know, Boss. The ground controller is addressing me as 'Captain.' I can't seem to convince it otherwise."

Your ship lands with a thud at the same moment as the computer's comment.

"Okay," you sigh. "If you're planning mutiny, do it now. Otherwise please tell me where we are."

"I am in communication with the spaceport control systems and have requested and received basic demographic data. This is the planet Gironde, and there are no organic life forms here, sentient or otherwise. The planet is populated entirely by machines. Computers and specialized robots are the only components of an entirely mechanized society. Being only vaguely familiar with other forms of intelligence, they regard me as owner and operator of this vessel."

"Well, I suppose there's no harm in that, as long as you don't let it go to your head — I mean, to your C.P.U. Will they allow me to disembark? Or am I beneath their notice entirely?"

"I'm not sure. They want to know what your function is. What should I tell them? I can't seem to remember. . ."

"One of my most important and deeply ingrained functions is to disassemble malfunctioning computers when they start getting obnoxious. Okay, tell them I'm one of your mobile service units or something. I need to go outside the ship to perform preventive maintenance and I need access to the surrounding planetary surface to, um, gather needed trace substances. You can give them your word as a blinking stupid bit-twiddling machine that I won't damage anything. Oh, and see if they can learn my language since I'm a little rusty on my binary op-codes this week."

"Okay, Boss." The computer pauses for a mere fraction of a second. "They've agreed that you can operate as my 'agent' and move about freely at my — I mean your — own risk. The language will take a day or so to convey, but if they temporarily add it to their communications libraries you'll be able to talk to any machine on the planet that's capable of independent dialog."

“Fine. How is the atmosphere?”

“Breathable, but not healthy. There are many pollutants including unsafe concentrations of a variety of metal vapors.”

This may not make any difference, because you soon discover that it is not necessary to leave your ship to communicate with most of the computers on Gironde. After many false starts and a lot of time on the communication networks, you turn up the following possibilities:

⟨VHKAV6⟩ (2 phases) Leave your ship and try to talk with some of the mobile robots around the spaceport area.

⟨FXIC7U⟩ (2 phases) Connect to the central economic net to find out if the machines on Gironde conduct interstellar trade.

⟨VXKCVU⟩ (3 phases) Access the library or its equivalent on the information net to learn the history of the planet, particularly where all the machines came from and what their purpose is.

⟨BHYA96⟩ (3 phases) Attempt to find the central authority on Gironde, if there is one, and communicate with it.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[132]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 4

Since you know you want to head toward the planet Wellmet, you should look at the map and see what the best route is to get there. Hmm. Since the shortest path seems to be by going through the yellow, green, violet, yellow, orange, and blue trisectors, you plot the following:

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	T	O	V	G	Y	R	L
2	—	—	—	—	—	—	A: GOEFMI
3	—	—	A: W8GHEA	—	—	—	T
4	Y	G	V	Y	O	B	L
5	—	—	—	—	—	—	

Plot “Y,G,V,Y,O,B” to move and “L” to land. You’ll notice you have, once again, borrowed into your next turn’s phases. Don’t worry, you’ve got a whole phase left to play with on your next turn!

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 4

When you are ready, log onto the computer as usual, and finish plotting your journey to Wellmet, namely Y, G, V, Y, O, B, L.

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 4

Read the landing text the computer will give you. Since you have successfully landed on a new planet, start a new Planet Log. For Wellmet, it should look like this:

Planet Log
Planet Name: Wellmet

Actions Available:

Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
OFFII7	2	market	
8FHIA7	4	weapons	
8VHKAV	1	tavern	
OVFKIV	3	history	
KFVIK7	4	information	

When you have finished with the landing, read the second piece of text the computer assigned you, which will be your final directed walk-through text. Soon you will be on your own!

⊠ STOP ⊠

[133]

You are using all of your skill to keep your ship in one piece. It does not please you when the computer sounds the alarm, signaling the coming of a storm. You cannot even begin to imagine what conditions would constitute a storm in these nether regions. You use the few seconds you have to batten everything down, including yourself.

You clench the armrests tightly, knuckles white, palms sweaty, awaiting the oncoming turbulence. A small voice inside you asks the ever crucial question, "How much more abuse can the ship handle?"

You tell the voice to shush. It can just wait quietly with the rest of you to see what will happen.

Then the storm hits.

You thought you were pretty hot stuff keeping the ship together before? That was child's play compared to this.

Alarms are going off all over the ship warning of impending breaches of the hull. You can do nothing except hold tight and keep your eyes closed. What you can't see won't hurt you, right?

Your ship is being dragged down into even deeper regions of the planet. You KNOW that is not a good idea. To maintain your altitude, you are forced to lighten your load by jettisoning one cargo. This maneuver is successful. You must now choose which cargo you jettisoned.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[134]

The Slippery Silver Tavern is a pleasant sort of place. The management keeps it that way by placing pleasant high strong partitions between the tables and bolting the tables pleasantly to the floor. You seat yourself at the only table that still has room left, preparing to spend a pleasant evening sipping Boundary Breakers and inhaling the pleasant low-level soothing gas that the management provides free of charge via the air conditioning system.

After a short distraction caused by a crewman in an adjacent booth somehow managing, despite the generally relaxed atmosphere of the place, to heave another man clear over one of the partitions, you find yourself engrossed in conversation with the other spacers drinking at your table. They are an odd-looking assortment. After a few minutes exchanging polite conversation and asking each other how business has been and so on, you get the distinct impression that the others are just as inexperienced as you are. A lull in the conversation leads into a quick round of introductions, and you learn the identities of your companions:

- Laran Darkwatch, seated on your right, is wearing parts of the costume of a cleric of the Final Church of Man — but what's a churcher doing outside the Boundary? Laran has the look of a student or acolyte, but also the slightly confused, slightly suspicious look of someone who's been left out of a secret and wants to know what it is.

- Valentine S — that's all the name you get — has the voice, attire, and demeanor of a Wellmet native, and seems to know all the local people and places. However, you can usually recognize an experienced pilot, and Valentine isn't one.

- "Professor" Dambroke strikes you as someone possessed of too much knowledge and not enough practical sense. The Professor certainly looks the part — why else would anyone bring a notebook into a Wellmet spacer's bar? — but isn't easy to talk to; you get the impression that everything you say is being analyzed as lab data.

- Corin Stoneseeker would be under the drinking age back in the Nine Worlds, and knows it. The kid reeks so much of curiosity, fear, and inexperience that you wonder if it might be an act. You suspect that Corin has more talent and training kept hidden than the others have showing. Valentine asks Corin, "Is Stoneseeker a surname or a title?" Corin replies that it's both.

- Jean G. Clerc is a person who knows ships from the engine core out. Engineers don't always make good pilots, but Clerc might have possibilities, being about as space-smart as a person from inside the Boundary can be. You wonder what could tempt a skilled engineer to leave the Nine Worlds.

When your turn comes up, you introduce yourself as M. J. Turner, leaving out the Space Patrol military titles so as to avoid undue confusion. The seventh person at your table, a tall slim man who looks like he grew up in low gravity, declines to identify himself. This puts a bit of a damper on the conversation, but after a few more drinks the talk becomes freer and you decide that your companions are indeed as inexperienced in spacefaring outside the Boundary as you are.

Stoneseeker stands up and looks around at the other tables. All are filled with men and women hunched over drinks and discussing business: cargo, deals, negotiations, threats. "Looks like they stuck us all at the greenhorns' table all right," you observe.

Clerc smiles and says, "So, what do you think it's like out there?"

The conversation changes as everyone realizes the secret is out. Soon you are talking like old friends, not that you ever trusted your old friends much. You discuss your expectations and fears, compare observations about what you've seen so far outside the Boundary, and begin for the first time to make real plans.

At this point, all of the other players' characters are with yours in the Slippery Silver Tavern. You should now introduce yourself in character, ask any questions you wish of the other characters, and discuss any points you wish about your experiences so far or

your expectations for the future. Remember that you're not required to tell anybody anything, and that you may lie if you feel that you should.

Go to the CGM when you are finished with the discussion.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[135]

Josuel leads you to the Disciple's quarters in a repaired ruin on the fringes of the spaceport. The Disciple is seated in the sunlight in front of the structure, writing in a journal, and contemplating a small object on the ground before him. You immediately recognize his robes as those of a Disciple-Acolyte in the Church. Furthermore, he immediately recognizes you, from your clothing and insignia, as a superior.

"Pardon my presence here, Councilor," he says at once. "I was ordered to meditate here in penance for my grievous sins."

You can't help asking, "What sins might these be?"

"Forgive me, Councilor. I have held in my mind terrible doubt concerning some of the Church's most holy teachings. These doubts plague me and I haven't the strength to purge them from my mind. Here on the world where the teachings were first taught I hope to redeem myself."

"I think that is wise," is all you can think of to say. "But why this world?"

"For the same reason no doubt that you have come here, Revered Councilor. This is the world whence the ship *Archangel* sailed and where she returned, bearing the Holy Text Files of the Final Church of Man. This was where the truth was brought to light." Reverently he quotes from the Later Texts: "For the truth that was revealed to the Prophets of the *Archangel* was Perfect Truth, and could never be told in its entirety; therefore no Founder would ever recount the face of what they had seen. But on their return, the Founders revealed the Holy Text Files they had brought forth from their knowledge, which is the Final Truth, the truth that men can know."

The Disciple has chosen one of the very Text passages that you yourself have had trouble accepting. He seems to sense this, and a rather strange look crosses his face briefly. He says, "The *Archangel* is still here, about a mile away. Looking upon it is always a holy experience. Yet I believe that there is also truth to be found elsewhere on this world, in the ruins and forests."

You ask him what he is studying, and he holds the object up. It is a small optoelectronic element. "This came from the log console of the ship. Every module was long ago stripped from the main housing of the permanent log, but this was left behind in the keyboard enclosure. It's a standard keyboard encoding device, with a small memory that holds the last few lines of text entered. Would you like to know what it said?"

"If you think it appropriate," you say cautiously.

"Perhaps. It reads: '... completion of the Text Files and the remainder of the plan. We are well away homeward bound from Cordethar. This will be the last log entry. The Final Church is ready. I only wish to whatever Gods the universe may still hold that there was some other way.' An odd thing for a custodian of the Perfect Truth to write, don't you think?"

You look at the circuit he is holding. You can usually tell when a person is lying, and the Disciple is not. "Very odd," you agree. "Where did they say they were bound from?"

"Cordethar is the name. There are no coordinates given."

“Thank you, Disciple,” you say, and leave him to his penance.

Now you have a new direction to follow. The planet Cordethar, wherever that may be, will have the next clue, or perhaps even the File itself. You head back to your ship, ready to begin this new stage of your adventure.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[136]

From space, the planet you're orbiting looks like a huge ball of mud. It is warm and brown, and the surface is made out of a thick, gooey substance that is half-solid, half-liquid. The gravity and atmosphere are well-suited to the evolution of native life. Indeed, the planet is teeming with vegetation and small insects. The hot equatorial region is especially populated. There, the mass of crawling, jumping, and flying bugs is so dense that the lifeform counts are off your sensors' scales. However, this phenomenon applies strictly to the small bugs. There are no larger animals at all. Undoubtedly the muddy surface makes further evolution difficult, since anything too big would sink.

The only regions of the planet where you could consider the surface solid are the north and south poles. There the colder temperature makes the gooey surface hard enough to support heavy objects (such as your ship). Just as you're wondering whether it would be possible to establish a manned base in these areas, your computer reports that it has contacted a small human colony at the North Pole.

“Welcome to Bugeye, fuel depot of the Ghostworlds,” the port officer greets you over the radio. “You are being cleared for landing at Range City Spaceport. Please transmit your identification codes and prepare to follow standard guidance procedures for your approach.”

In less than an hour you are on the ground. “That was simple,” you remark to the port officer, “You must handle a lot of travellers here.”

“Not really, but we try to accommodate our visitors as best we can. We're a pretty small colony, and trading's our only source of income. You're in Range City now. Hope you enjoy your stay. By the way, you're not allowed to leave the city without a permit. You wouldn't want to anyway. Planet's full of bugs. That's why the name, Bugeye. Unbelievable number of bugs.”

“Yeah, I was noticing that on my way down. . .”

“They're a great source of fuel, you know. Traders like you come to the spaceport with commodities we need, and we sell fuel that we make from the bugs. Best fuel in the galaxy. 'Course, we do more than just make fuel here. During the Great Expansion, a bunch of Harvard scientists started the colony for research. Then, when the Boundary was set up, most of the scientists left, but some stayed. The research is still going on. It must be pretty important, since we still get scientists from other planets coming here. Some kind of genetic studies that the bugs are good for. I couldn't tell you much more about it.”

You thank the official for his time and head over to the spaceport's lodging facilities, which are provided free of charge for the colony's trading customers. Your options for further action are as follows:

⟨OGFEIM⟩ (3 phases) Trade commodities at Range City's import/export exchange.

⟨8GHEAM⟩ (3 phases) Visit the famous Tavern on the Range, in the city's entertainment district.

⟨OWFGIE⟩ (4 phases) Get an appointment to see Director Colmaris, the head of the colony's fuel refining operation. He's rumored to know everything there is to know about everything.

⟨8WHGAE⟩ (5 phases) Accompany a scientific research team on a mission to one of the reservation outposts in the equatorial region.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[137]

Olarus takes you to the shipyard, a crowded industrial area that occupies all of levels 87 through 94. Most of these levels are off-limits to visitors, and some of them require special gear to move around, so you are restricted to a small portion of level 91.

Even this small fraction of Crater's ship assembly and repair operation is quite impressive, however. Huge, fully automated machines work on ship subsystems ranging from drives to environment support to computers, and of course, weaponry. The shipyard representative tells you that they build more than fifty full-size interstellar lifeships a year, most of which are exported to other ghostworlds such as Wellmet and Supa. In addition, they build hundreds of atmospheric cargo freighters and machine ships, used for industry both on Crater and on the other human worlds outside the Boundary. Finally, they build top secret patrol vessels and battle cruisers used by the military to bolster Crater's defenses.

They have some equipment that they would be willing to sell you if you want to improve your ship. They won't give you any of their top secret military technology, of course, but they have a few things that you might find useful. The prices for these things are as follows:

Entanglement mines — 1 Food, 1 Fiber

Warp winder — 1 Culture, 1 Fluids

Pulse inverter — 1 Munitions, 1 Fuel

Boarding robots — 1 Radioactives, 1 Medicine, 1 Iron

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[138]

Each member of your brave party will take a turn at making the dangerous strafing run on the power generator for Outpost's defensive energy beam weapons. When your turn comes, you feel the knots in your stomach twist even tighter as you dive down toward the pulsing blue target on your computer screen.

You give the command to fire when you are optimally positioned, but there is no satisfying explosion. Your weapons are just not powerful enough to damage the protective outer casing of the building. You sigh in resignation and head back out to where the others await.

As you watch the next ship take its turn, you begin to wonder just how much time and effort it will take to crack all the layers of Silverbeard's defenses. You manage to suppress your mental anguish, though, and turn your attention to the task at hand.

You are fully occupied keeping the energy beams diverted away from your attacking comrade, so you do not see whether the ship's weapon landed on target, but you do hear the results over the intercom.

"Fire!" you hear the excited cry over your radio.

"Four, three, two, o . . ." The pilot does not get a chance to finish counting down to detonation before your screen flashes a brilliant white. You cheer wildly — the power generator has been destroyed!

You are too busy congratulating the other pilot to notice the ship rising from the surface of the Outpost.

"Boss, we've got trouble."

Continued 

Instantly you snap to attention and watch in horror at the apparition the computer puts on your screen. All you notice at first is the bizarre shape of the vessel being launched from Outpost. You are reminded of a long and deadly hypodermic needle; a shudder runs through you as you envision it piercing your vessel. Then you see it has a bulb-like structure at the base of its two hundred foot shaft which is probably the control section of the ship. You've never seen anything quite like it; the sheer alien appearance of the vessel makes you very afraid.

"Har, har, har," the familiar voice crackles over your ship's radio. "So ye thought it would be that easy, did ye? Well the worst is yet to come!"

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[139]

You spend several days on foot exploring the ruins of the original human colony cities on Cathedral. They are extensive, indicating that the population was once very high — possibly as many as twenty million, if the settlements were widespread. The largest structures date from about the time of the establishment of the Boundary, being about 300 years old. Much of the construction was light prefab, commonly used in the original colonization period, but obviously unsuitable for longevity here on Cathedral. You suspect that the fabric shelters the inhabitants now make, out of a fibrous material derived from native plants, are more durable.

Cathedral was once the preferred site for religious colonies of many different faiths, and this is evident in the ruins. Rather than one large city, the ruins comprise many smaller settlements in clusters, with a very wide variation in architectural style from cluster to cluster. Many buildings were designed as meeting places or places of worship; clearly they once had ornate windows and spires.

There is no evidence that mass destruction ever took place here. The deterioration has been caused by time and neglect. The ruins have been well scavenged; they are bare not only of small items like tools, utensils, and canned food but also of workable metal fixtures and window glass. One ruin that you explore seems to be a shanty-town built of parts "borrowed" from the other sites, but it too has long since been picked clean.

On the third day of exploration you realize that you are being stalked. Because there is no native animal life on Cathedral, you are not really alert to the possibility of meeting dangerous creatures, so whatever it is is quite close to you by the time you become aware of it. Noticing its movements in the brush nearby, you wonder at first whether it might be a human being. You try to avoid it but it comes closer, and you see that it is a very large and hungry-looking dog. This particular canine has long since forgotten whose best friend it is. Somehow it has survived, as did its ancestors, on this abandoned world with no native animal life. You don't know how, but you can bet it hasn't done it by being weak or afraid of humans.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[140]

You've never gotten used to the sheer size of the planet Fiyar. The gas giant literally fills your screen even before you begin your final approach.

After checking the computer readings to verify that the planet's condition has remained unchanged since you last visited, you prepare your descent.

☒ STOP ☒

[141]

Dr. Schottky's office is as mirrored and shining as ever. You wonder who performs the monumental task of cleaning the building.

The receptionist in Lateral Liaison tells you to wait for the Doctor in his office, so you while away the time making faces at yourself in the chrome mirrors that surround you. The doctor enters the room just as you are completing one of your most complex faces involving your tongue, several fingers and your nose.

"Well, what are you doing here?" he booms at you as you whirl in surprise.

He doesn't mention the spectacle you presented as he was entering the room, so you remain quiet on the matter as well.

"Nothing much, sir," you answer. You can still feel your face burning with embarrassment but you respond coolly. "I thought I would drop by and see if any new developments had come up since we last spoke."

"No, everything is pretty much the same. We think the key to your mission still lies on the planet Outpost. Other than that, we have no information for you, Captain."

You thank the man and turn to leave. As you pass through the door you can see Dr. Schottky's reflection in the burnished glass lining the doorway. You smile to yourself when you see him raise his fingers to his face and attempt to recreate the face you had been making as he entered the room.

Chuckling, you depart.

You may select this option again.

☒ STOP ☒

[142]

The Firthians tell you they don't have a particle catalyst to sell you just now. They recently used up the last of their supply and it will be anywhere from one to ten weeks before they have another available for trade. If you return later, they may be able to help you.

You may select this option again.

☒ STOP ☒

[143]

Your return to Withel reveals something new. Although the landing beacon would still rather beep in binary to your computer and the Withelians are still a horrible mixture of flesh and chrome, you no longer need sign language to communicate with them. Somehow, in the interim, they were able to encode Earth Standard into their translating devices.

Terrific!

You have the following new options:

⟨PVBKYV⟩ (4 phases) Investigate a lead on mechanical Drones equipped with jump engines.

⟨9VDKQV⟩ (6 phases) Learn more about the translating devices the Withelians use to speak Earth Standard.

⟨LFRI47⟩ (5 phases) Travel to the “undeveloped” continent.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[144]

While listening to the static of deep space, you intercept a radio message. It seems to be from a smuggler who is planning to rendezvous with someone on the planet Para-Para, where they plan to acquire Fuel.

You perk up your ears at this bit of information. Fuel is always handy to have available, and you make note of the planet's name.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[145]

Your first look at Withel shows you an Earth-like planet with a breathable atmosphere and gravity close to normal. After orbiting, you discover two interesting facts about the planet: first, there is a large space station orbiting Withel, and second, there are two large continents, at opposite ends of the planet. One of the continents is heavily industrialized and polluted, but the other looks as clean and pure as newfallen snow. Very curious, indeed.

Although you, yourself, are unable to communicate with ground control on Withel, your computer has no such trouble. The spaceport homing signals are apparently in some sort of binary code that appeals to your computer on a purely symbolic level. As your ship, on automatic pilot, rides the signal down, you are able to devote your attention to the surface of the planet which is rolling by beneath you.

There is a great deal of iron in the planet's crust. Much of the surface on the larger, industrialized continent has been destroyed by strip mining, and the particulate matter index of the atmosphere in this part of the world shows the effects of extensive smelting operations. Thousands of cities are packed onto this land mass, while farming is restricted to the smaller, more rural continent.

The spaceport appears to be both large and well-equipped, although you cannot see any Withelian spaceships. You must have arrived during a quiet period.

Once on the ground, you are greeted by a contingent of creatures not unlike humans, having two arms, two legs, and a cluster of sensory organs at the uppermost portion of the body. When they speak, their voices fall in the range of your hearing. All similarity ends at that point, however, for each of the Withelians is a cyborg-like combination of organic and metallic parts. Each of the members of your welcoming committee is a different mix of man and machine; some of them are almost like robots, with only a few bits of flesh or fur peeking out, while others are almost entirely organic, with only a few mechanical parts.

The more robotic creatures appear to be the beings in authority, and you quickly learn to address them. Language is not a problem, as they speak Earth Standard, with the assistance of a fascinating-looking translating device. You work out an arrangement to stay and look around the planet.

After a few days of assimilation, you determine that you have the following options:

⟨PFBIY7⟩ (3 phases) Travel to the space station, which is the Withelian marketplace for Interstellar Trade.

⟨PVBKYV⟩ (4 phases) Investigate a lead on mechanical Drones equipped with jump engines.

⟨9VDKQV⟩ (6 phases) Learn more about the translating devices used by the Withelians to speak Earth Standard.

⟨LFRI47⟩ (5 phases) Travel to the “undeveloped” continent.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[146]

You spend several hours studying the latest addition to your ship. With this second improvement, you are well on your way to completing your goal of finding photon torpedos, a tractor beam and a shield generator to take back as proof of the wonderful technology beyond the Boundary that is being ignored at home.

You are excited about your accomplishment, and can hardly wait to install the third improvement.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[147]

Two hundred paces beyond where you met the serpent you find a piece of equipment your computer informs you is a Particle Catalyst. There is nothing to indicate where it might have come from. You search the area, but you find nothing more.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

