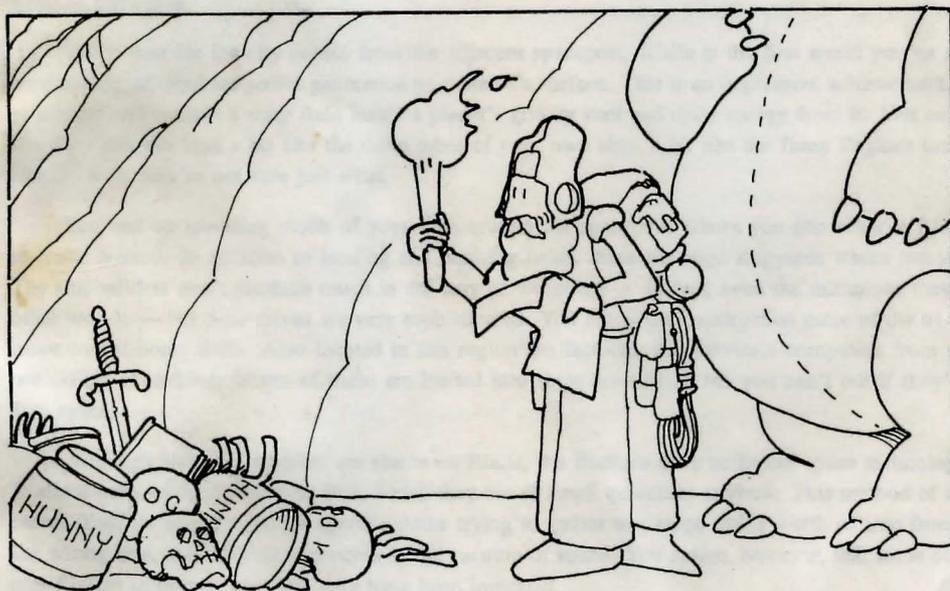


STAR SAGA: ONE™

BOOK H

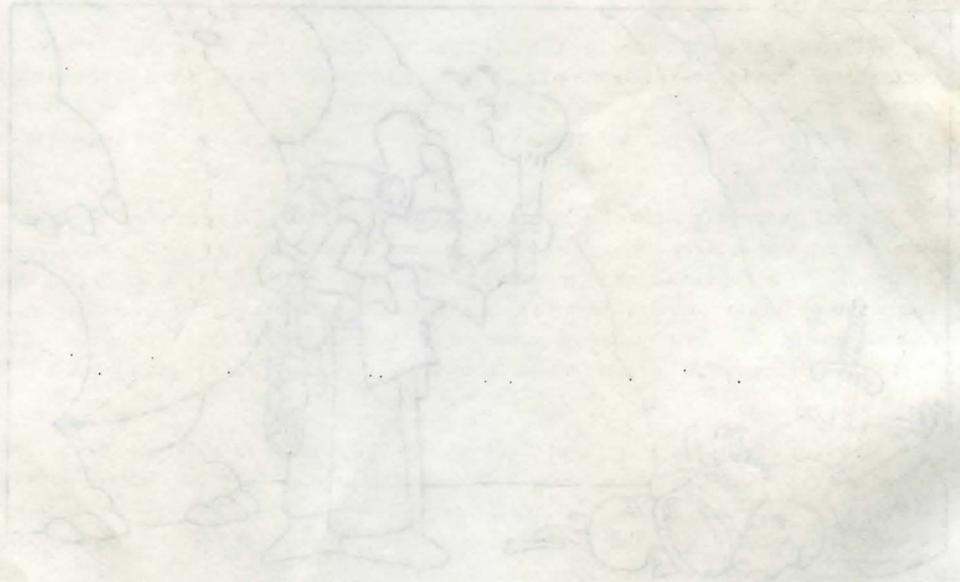
TEXT 509-568



BOOK II

STAR
SAGA: ONE

TEXT 200-383



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c

[509]

You decide to look the city over before committing a lot of time to learning to talk to the Riallans. The Riallans, for their part, don't really seem to care whether you learn their language or not, as long as you don't get in the way. Since their movements are fast and often unpredictable, you quickly learn to duck so as to let them pass over you.

An even greater hazard is the Riallan architecture, which is designed for beings who float several feet off the floor. Some floors are steeply sloped, or sharply canted to one side or the other. In many places the floors are crisscrossed with pipes, wires, ducts, and other utilitarian objects that you're used to seeing on the ceiling. Worst of all, in some places the floor is missing entirely. To the floating Riallans, chasms without bridges, stairwells with no stairs, and catwalks without protective railings are no problem. To you, they are at best annoying obstacles, at worst deadly pitfalls, and more than once it is only the low gravity of Rialla that saves you from serious injury.

It's a shame you have to spend so much time watching your feet, for there is a great deal to see. The Riallans, free from the requirements of horizontal floors and vertical walls, have built their city with an amazing variety of forms. Near the ground are elegant curves and arches, geometric designs that Euclid would never have imagined. In the higher reaches where weight becomes critical, the buildings are spheres, supported and joined in clusters by shape-stressed frames that also serve as passageways. Very little steel or other metal is evident anywhere; most construction is of translucent hardened glass and polymer composites that seem to change their shapes automatically to adjust to shifting stresses and loads.

The power for the city comes from the adjacent spaceport. Rialla is the first world you've seen where space drive technology has been successfully adapted for power generation on a planet's surface. This is an impressive achievement, for it means that the Riallans have managed to control and contain a warp field inside a planet's gravity well and draw energy from it. You can only get a brief glimpse of the system, but the parts you see look a bit like the drive tubes of your own ship, a bit like the Jump Engines that power robotic cargo drone ships, and a bit like... well, you're not sure just what.

You end up spending much of your time around the spaceport, where you can observe Riallan space technology, and where it's easier to move around. In addition to landing and berthing fields, there are large shipyards where teams of Riallans assemble hulls and drive units. The shipbuilders don't produce much in the way of weaponry — in fact, even the munitions they use to fracture asteroids are imported from other worlds — but their drives are very sophisticated. You see under construction more of the tri-axis drive ships, as well as cargo drones and more conventional hulls. Also located in this region are factories that fabricate computers from semiconductor materials, which the Riallans are skilled in making. Many of these are loaded into ships for export, but you can't tell if they're being sent to other parts of the planet or into space.

Although metallic elements are scarce on Rialla, the Riallans have sufficient space technology to gather and process asteroids. Thus the Riallans have no need to import iron, which they use in small quantities anyhow. This method of mining would be terribly inefficient for other races. You, for example, could spend months trying to gather one cargo unit's worth of iron from asteroids — they're hard to locate, always the wrong size, and difficult to process in the vacuum of space. You notice, however, that some of the heavy machinery the Riallans use looks non-Riallan in design, and thus may have been imported.

By far the most interesting things on the planet are the busy Riallans themselves. How they live, breathe, and sense the world around them remains a mystery, and how they manage to float in the air is a question that becomes more baffling the more you watch them. Several times you try to make a closer examination of the Riallan organism. You are unsuccessful. Either they fail to understand your intentions (despite your elaborate pantomimes and hand signals), or they are not willing to cooperate, or they are too busy to pay any attention to you at all, because none will sit still long enough for you to even get a good look. In any case, there's probably not much you could learn without elaborate analytical instruments such as those of your ship's medical unit. The only way you could examine a Riallan more closely would be

to capture one and take it to your ship by force. Of course, only a ruthless or desperate being would ever do such a thing. If you are such a one, you may attempt:

(HAA66P) (4 phases) Capture a Riellan and bring it back to your ship for study.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[510]

"Computer," you call out as your ship emerges from hyperspace. "Give me a readout on the planet dead ahead."

A moment passes before you receive the information.

"Dead seems to be the word, Boss. Readings indicate the surface is primarily ice and the atmosphere has no oxygen at all. The temperature is subzero across the entire planet. There's no sign of life anywhere."

"There should be something on your screens. After all, we were told to come here. Is this just someone's idea of a practical joke?"

"Just a minute, Boss, there is a small human colony, surrounded by a huge clear bubble that has just become visible on my screens."

"Why didn't we see it immediately?" you want to know.

"Sorry, Boss, but it came out of nowhere."

As you approach the bubble, you are hailed by an escort ship in an Old English dialect that your computer recognizes but cannot place. You can more or less make out what he is saying and can communicate readily without a translating device.

"If you truly seek the way to truth, and wish to endure another ordeal, you may land and enter our colony," is the frightening message you receive from the other ship.

Swallowing nervously, you take the ship down and land at the spaceport. As the ship's berth is being cycled underground you try to see as much as possible of the nearby city before you are given the signal to disembark.

No one is present to greet you, but you notice a marked corridor and a sign saying, "This way to the Temple."

You decide this is the route you should take, so off you go.

Your footsteps echo hollowly down the passageway, reminding you of another corridor you have traversed, on a distant planet that was somehow strangely similar to this one.

Soon you arrive at a massively built door. Above it is the sign, "TEMPLE." You have arrived.

You may now choose the following option:

(HOAF6I) (7 phases) Enter the Temple and begin the ordeal.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[511]

The old hangar squats next to a flat open stretch of rock that forms a natural landing pad. The building looks like it's been there for a thousand years, though you know that's impossible — it was clearly built by humans. The seasonal rains have covered the walls with blue-white mineral deposits, which the wind has eroded into streaks and swirls. The metal that shows through is brown and pitted with rust, worn almost through in some places. The broad hangar doors and the overhead landing door will never open again, but to the side, a small door with hinges rusted clean away has fallen askew. Through this opening you enter.

The building has no lights or power, and looks like it never did. From the inside you can see that it is constructed very simply of a metal-foam frame and expanded panels of "rustproof" steel. Dripping water has painted broad stripes down the inside walls, and the steel grating that forms the floor crunches under your feet.

In the dead center of the hangar is a ship, also marked with age but seeming bright and new compared with the building. It's not a tiny ship, but it has no cargo hold, and its shape is very boxy and spare. There is no elegance in the lines, no viewports, not even a ladder to reach the hatchway. It is little more than a drive engine welded to a pressurized crew compartment.

It does, however, have a name etched on its bows, in lettering drawn hastily and by hand: *Lockerbait*.

This was Vanessa Chang's last ship — the legendary vessel that brought her crew home from its last voyage of exploration. Of course it would have been left on Outpost; Chang and her crew would have made the final journey back to Wellmet on a safer ship operated by some other spacer passing through Outpost. You wonder if it hurt her, to make that final voyage as a passenger.

It isn't easy to climb up to where you can reach the hatchway, and even more difficult to find a foothold that gives you enough leverage to turn the wheel of the pressure seal. The hatch looks like it might have been fabricated from an inside pressure door from the old ship's wreckage. There is no airlock. You pull yourself inside.

The crew compartment is a single chamber, lined on three sides with couches for the crew. The fourth side holds the navigation and sensor controls, and in this one area the builders of the *Lockerbait* didn't cut corners. The ship had to know where it was going, whether the crew survived or not.

A single light on one of the panels glows faintly. You take a closer look; it is the power-on light from a simple voice recorder module. All of the other controls are dead. The meaning is obvious. You lean forward and press the playback switch. From out of the past, a woman's voice speaks:

"This is Vanessa Chang, recording on the *Lockerbait* ship log, Outpost planet surface, November twentieth, Two thousand four hundred ninety-three. All previous log entries have been deleted.

"Our mission to warn the homeworlds of the Clathrans' intentions and prepare a defense has failed. So, apparently, has the Clathrans' first attempt to exterminate the human species. I will record my limited knowledge of this course of events, in case it may prove useful to those who follow me here.

"It was eighteen years ago that Engineer Miller of my crew discovered the possibility of adding a third axis to the warp field of the Wamirian hyperdrive. This innovation would make it possible to pass across the Density Barrier. The idea was just a theory at the time. To actually build one required a material with unheard-of electronuclear properties. We never thought that such a material might actually exist. Miller tried many experiments to synthesize an adequate crystal. He was never successful.

"Fifteen years ago we found a Flame Jewel in the possession of an alien race. The science officers quickly recognized that Flame Jewels have the necessary properties for a tri-axis drive. In order to obtain one in trade with the aliens, one of us had to volunteer to test

an experimental space drive based on an unfamiliar principal called a 'jump engine.' I was opposed to the idea, but Science Officer Sherin Mosswell insisted on being the subject. She wanted to observe the process and perhaps learn the secret of the aliens' new technology. She threatened to resign from the crew and return on her own. I should have called her hand. At the test, the experimental ship never reappeared at the receiving station.

"We kept the tri-axis drive system a secret. With the Flame Jewel we built the first prototype. It worked perfectly. For the next few months we made only short journeys over the barrier. We found nothing interesting until we discovered this world, which we named Outpost. It was a perfect planet for a supply cache for voyages deeper into the galactic Arm, a counterpart to our old cache on Cordethar but on the high side of the barrier. We made three runs to ferry materials and supplies, then built a small station here.

"For the next five years we explored the region of the galaxy beyond the Density Barrier, which we call the 'Arm.' In time we went farther and farther around the Arm toward the galactic core. In the second year we discovered a source of Flame Jewels. Several of these we later passed on to a few other explorers, along with the plans of the tri-axis drive. This was during a period of intense exploration in the years 2483 to 2487. For the most part we continued to keep the drive secret, for several reasons, not all of them justifiable. Whatever our motives for keeping the secret to ourselves, I feel it's very fortunate that we did.

"I won't try to record here any detailed account of the planets and aliens we made contact with. Most of my logs for this period were destroyed when we sacrificed our computer at the Clathran base Morikor. In general, the alien civilizations we encountered were older than those in the Fringe, but more static as well. Unlike in the Fringe, we found no examples of ongoing colonization or expansion. In fact, in the Arm as well as in the Fringe, we found artifacts of many races on many worlds that suffered fatal catastrophe at the height of their civilizations, shortly after they reached the technology level for space exploration. Others were still viable, but had developed sudden aversions to space travel or other psychological or cultural barriers to expansion. We now understand all too well the significance of these patterns.

"Five years seven months ago we encountered the Clathrans. From the very moment they detected us they were implacably hostile. Their ship was a war ship, one of the few space vessels we had seen in all our travels that was designed solely for battle. My ship was boarded by force and my crew and myself were taken prisoner. We were interrogated aboard the ship and later taken to a planet, Morikor, for further study.

"Physically, the Clathrans are reptilian or possibly amphibious in nature. Their skin is covered entirely with small green scales. They are humanoid in shape, but larger and more massive than us. Those we saw massed about four hundred kilos, but they may have represented the largest individuals. They breathe air in which a human could survive. They communicate by voice. They use arms and hands to manipulate tools and weapons. These were far from the most 'alien' aliens we'd met on our voyages. We considered them ugly but not repulsive. The Clathrans, for their part, seemed barely able to look at us without profound revulsion. Their treatment of us, and their whole manner of behavior in our presence, indicates disgust, hostility, and — just possibly — a certain measure of fear. Those who dragged us from our stations after they boarded our ship, for example, seemed repulsed by the idea of touching us. They had to be goaded to action by their commanders.

"Many times, when the headaches have become almost unbearable, I've regretted agreeing to the translator implant. But it served us well on Morikor. I was able to understand enough of the Clathrans' conversation to discover their intentions. It didn't take long to realize that they intended to use us as test animals for the purpose of finding a way to destroy our entire species.

"Why? I'm not certain. The Clathrans must know that there are many life forms on many worlds in the galaxy. Why does humanity in particular inspire their wrath?

"I speculate here, but I think the reason is that they don't know about us. When they were experimenting on us they were continually frustrated because they had no past records to refer to. Think about what that means. It means that they expect to be familiar with every species of intelligent life in the galaxy. The dozens of races we found couldn't possibly be more than a tiny fraction of all of them. Yet the Clathrans expect to be able to identify any alien that comes along! It implies that some time in the past they made a survey of every life-bearing planet in the galaxy and studied all of them. Perhaps they did more than study. Fifty thousand years in the past seems to mark a period of

dramatic change in many alien cultures. Perhaps the Clathrans deliberately altered civilizations to their liking. Perhaps they destroyed those they couldn't alter. Fifty thousand years ago our species was just beginning to form what might be called a civilization. Perhaps they passed us over then. Perhaps they didn't expect any new race to be able to reach a spacefaring stage in only five hundred centuries.

"Whatever the reason, it was clear we had endangered our whole race and would have to refuse no sacrifice to prevent endangering it further. Top priority was to prevent the Clathrans from learning the coordinates of the home worlds. Computer Scientist Green made one necessary sacrifice when he destroyed our computer records at the cost of his own life. With the computer files erased, only the memory of Navigator Friday still held the secret. When the Clathrans mind-wiped Doctor Dighton and took away Helmsman Silverbeard, we decided that we had to escape or take our own lives. At the time there didn't seem much difference between the two options, since any escape attempt seemed certain to end in our deaths. Friday asked me to kill him to make sure the Clathrans didn't force him to reveal the coordinates, but I refused. We needed his knowledge to have any chance of finding our way home to warn the home worlds of the threat.

"Our attack on the guards took the Clathrans by surprise. We had deliberately avoided showing any sort of physical strength during our capture. We tried to make them think we were only capable of wielding weapons. The larger Clathrans never expected a physical attack, or were confident that no such attack could succeed. The five of us remaining — Miller, Donaldson, Cyphus, Friday and myself — made good use of our darthan and kothan training. We disabled two guards, took their hand weapons, and escaped the laboratory. We made for our own ship, only to find it disassembled. For several hours we eluded the Clathran guards as we searched the spaceport complex. We never found where they had taken Silverbeard.

"What we did find was thousands, literally thousands, of ships. We counted almost three hundred of the large battle cruisers and many smaller ones. Most of them didn't look like they were in use; they looked brand new and fully operational but seemed to be in storage. We also saw fifty more cruisers under construction. We hid on a medium-sized warship that was in the process of being outfitted. We stayed hidden while the four-Clathran crew came aboard and piloted her into orbit. Then we killed the crew and took the ship. Five days had passed since our capture. We left behind three friends and heroes: Computer Scientist Andrew Green, Doctor Richard Dighton, and Helmsman John Silverbeard.

"Engineer Miller and Weapons Specialist Cyphus did an excellent job of figuring out how to put the ship into warp, and how to operate the most important systems. Navigator Friday, though wounded in the escape, found a way to get us on course for the Fringe. We couldn't find a subspace radio communications system to get word back to the home worlds. Com Officer Donaldson says there was no subspace radio set on the ship. The Clathrans apparently use some other communications system that sends messages in tight beams only to other Clathrans, and this was the last thing we wanted to do.

"Soon after we crossed the Density Barrier, the ship's drives began to fail. They weren't made to operate in the Fringe and we realized there was no backup drive system, not even thrusters. We made a landing on the uninhabited planet Gazan. We still expected Clathran pursuit. We weren't sure if the Clathrans had a way of tracking their own ships. So we left the ship and took off in its shuttlecraft, which did have a thruster drive.

"We knew then that we had failed in our attempt to warn the home worlds, for to cross space on thrusters alone takes years. The only way to survive the trip was to use deep hibernation, like the first colonists did in the twenty-third century. The engineers rigged hibernation cells from parts of the life support systems of the stolen cargo ship. We took off, set an approximate course, and went into hibernation. There was still no way to transmit a message. Subspace radio, of course, is only possible when a ship is in hyperspace.

"After three years under thrust we wandered into a star system and nearly crashed on the planet Koursh. Walter Friday, our navigator, died. With his earlier injuries — and injuries get worse under hibernation instead of healing — he couldn't survive the shock of our hard landing. The ship wasn't damaged beyond repair. We took off again. This time we set the hibernation cells to awaken one of us every month, to scan for familiar stars and adjust our course.

"Eighteen hard months later we came to Fiara, the site of a Darscian colony we had once visited. The shuttlecraft was spent. Fortunately, we convinced the Darscians to give us another ship — this one — with a real two-axis hyperdrive. We named it *Lockerbait*, and began modifying it for our use.

"While on Fiara we contacted a human spacer via subspace radio and learned about the Plague. We didn't get much information, but what we got was bad enough. When the *Lockerbait* was ready, we set off for Cordethar, where we kept supplies and parts, including a handful of Flame Jewels.

"On Cordethar we met Reverend Eric DeVries and his crew of religious disciples, aboard the quest ship *Archangel*. They had also just returned from an expedition into the Arm, and though they had not run into any Clathrans, whatever they found had scared them just as much. Working together, we added a tri-axis drive booster to *Lockerbait*, dismantled all the caches on Cordethar, and took the Flame Jewels. Then we sent subspace transmissions on all frequencies asking that all human explorers capable of getting there meet us on Outpost.

"Since the only explorers capable of reaching Outpost were those we had personally given Flame Jewels to, they answered. Among them are myself, Reverend Eric, and our crews; Luther Cristobal, the leader of a large space trading cartel; the Bastion sisters Joy and Monique, founders of half a dozen colonies; Soulsinger, the first to cross space solo; and several representatives of the Brotherhood who prefer not to reveal their identities. We meet here now to decide what to do next about the Clathran menace.

"The plague that has reduced the home worlds to a state of panic and anarchy is beyond doubt the work of the Clathrans. However, it now seems to have peaked. Its lethality is on the decline. This we don't understand. The first reports from the home worlds, which we didn't learn about until after leaving Fiara, was that the mortality rate of the first cases was one hundred percent and that the disease's spread was unchecked. Although no cure has been found, the plague now kills less than one in five. The latest reports attributed this to the activation of an immune mechanism in the human system that was previously unknown. Doctor Dighton may have been able to make sense out of that, but none of us can. The important thing is that the species will survive.

"And what then? Several unknowns haunt us.

"First, did the Clathrans somehow find the coordinates of the home worlds, despite our efforts? John Silverbeard was our Helmsman. He may have memorized the coordinates, deliberately or inadvertently, during our travels. The Clathrans may have brain-wiped him or forced the secret out of him. Or, the Clathrans may have been able to use the medical data they collected to connect us with information from a previous survey, leading them to Earth.

"But I don't think so. If they knew where we were, they were quite able and willing to destroy us by force. Instead they sent a plague carefully synthesized to affect only humans. With the plague agent, they didn't have to know where we were. They may have spread it across space, until some human picked it up and carried it home. The belief that the Plague reached the home worlds by way of Wellmet supports this.

"Second, do the Clathrans know that the Plague has failed? We don't know. But if they don't, we have to keep them from finding out.

"Third, will the Clathrans try again? Again, we have no way of knowing. But if they do we must be ready this time. Luck may not save us again.

"Fourth, are we to blame for bringing this threat down upon all humanity? Is every plague death a murder to be laid at our feet?

"The survivors of my crew must find their own answers here. I can speak only for myself. In the end, it is better to have found the Clathrans first. This way we have at least a chance for survival. If they had found us first, humanity would have been doomed.

"And they would have found us. The fleet of new ships, under construction and in storage, that we saw on Morikor can have only one meaning. The Clathrans plan to make a new survey of the galaxy. They must have been building for centuries. Perhaps it will be as long as

three centuries more before they're ready, and another two before they reach Earth, but someday they will come. In ten thousand ships they'll sweep across the galaxy, around the Arm and into the Fringe. By then it will be too late. Before then we'll have to bring the fight to them.

"It's a long way to plan, for a handful of explorers overlooking the ruins of our home worlds. We can't reveal the whole truth to the population at large. The result would be disbelief or panic, either of which is useless. Entrusting the knowledge to a few risks the secret being lost. We have no proof of what we've seen, and little knowledge to go on.

"But we're not helpless. We have almost unlimited wealth. We also have, between us, the trust of large parts of the population, despite the backlash against space travelers that's set in. We can use that very xenophobia toward our ends. We have formed a plan. It's not perfect but it is better than nothing.

"The first priority is to prepare a defense against any further attacks by the Clathrans in the near future. Like the worlds in an old science fiction story once faced with a similar threat, we will create a Space Patrol. The Space Patrol will stand against any direct invasion. Of course, if the Clathrans invade in full force, no weapons we can muster will stand against them. But they may send one ship, or a small fleet. It's worth the effort. The Space Patrol will, unfortunately, have to defend against human beings as well. There will be a perimeter, a Boundary. No one may be allowed to cross the Boundary from outside. This is harsh, but it's the only way to guard the home worlds against further plagues or other indirect attacks.

"The Boundary will also reduce space exploration. Those inside will be discouraged from leaving. Those outside will be preoccupied with keeping the remote colonies alive. Humanity's attentions will turn inward for a while. This is also necessary. The Clathrans must capture no more humans for the next hundred years. If we're lucky, they'll think we're extinct.

"Creating the Space Patrol won't be difficult. The people of the home worlds have turned against space. They'll welcome the idea. All that is needed is a strong leader to bring it about. The *Archangel* quest has agreed to help us by putting the religious leaders on our side. They are as frightened as my crew is. They won't talk about what they encountered on their own voyages in the Arm. Whatever it was, it seems to have disturbed them as much as the Clathrans scared us.

"While the Boundary is in place, over the next century or so, technology must continue to advance. We have to develop better drives, better weapons, better computers, better shields, and better sensors if we are to face the Clathrans some day. We plan to endow organizations to study these areas over the coming centuries. Some of them may have to work in secret for a while, because they'll appear to be working against the Space Patrol.

"We have all agreed to dismantle our tri-axis drives and keep them a secret after we return to the home worlds. Once we leave Outpost, none of us will return. If we figure correctly, no human will come here again for three lifetimes. We'll give the Flame Jewels to the new Institutes for keeping. Without them, no one can build a tri-axis drive. It's a shame that this technology must be lost for a while. It'll be needed some day. But when the Flame Jewels are rediscovered, someone will figure out what they're good for.

"One final thing: our star maps. My star maps of the planets of the Fringe I'll take back with me to the home worlds and give into the care of an Institute. As for the Arm, we've compiled the coordinates of all the planets of significance we know about on the high side of the Density Barrier. Some of these are from my own logs, from a copy I left here as a precaution before making my disastrous final trip. Others are from the records of the other explorers present. This map alone we will leave behind on this world. Look at the panel below this recorder. It is an internal memory unit similar to the one that stores my voice. There are instructions on it for reading the file into any computer. The file is encrypted as a precaution against Clathrans.

"Any person who uses these maps has a responsibility to do so in full awareness of the Clathran threat. Do not travel beyond Outpost with coordinates of any human home world stored on your ship in any form. If you have the coordinates memorized, don't go at all. Preventing the Clathrans from discovering the location of the home worlds must be your first concern. Store the coordinates here on Outpost, in a form that the Clathrans will never discover, so that you can find your way home when you need to.

“That is all I have to say, except: fare well, fellow explorer. I bequeath to you all of space. I also bequeath to you the Clathran menace. Farewell, and forgive us all. Where I have failed, may you succeed.”

The recorded voice shuts off.

You look at the panel. Below the voice recorder is a similar module, with an old-style computer connector. It is the data storage unit that contains the star maps of the explorers of Outpost. At the moment, though, your ship and computer aren't in shape to handle the data.

As you leave the *Lockerbait*, you are almost too preoccupied to notice the large objects stacked on the floor at the other end of the hangar. You can't make out what they are until you shine a light on them. They are raw Warp Cores, lined up in a neat row. You doubt that Silverbeard put them there; he probably never visited this place. Perhaps Chang and the other spacers assembled them and stacked them here so that spacers would detect them and find the message. However they got there, they're just what you need. You borrow some heavy equipment, haul a Warp Core back to your ship, and spend the next several days shaping it to replace your old Warp Core that was destroyed in the battle.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[512]

Under the fiery light of the nebula that fills the skies of Gazan, you set out to find Vanessa Chang's ship. The directions from the dead navigator's journal found on Koursh lead you to a rocky island in the middle of a steaming sea. Through the dense fog you can see a large volcano rising from the center of the island, crowning the chaos all around it with smoke billowing from its apex. The rest of the island is hot and barren. There are no settlers; not even vegetation can take hold in the ledges of hardened lava that form the ground here.

The only place on the island where you can land is a wide plateau near the bottom of the volcano and surrounded on three sides by large rocks and ash. The fourth side abuts a sheer vertical cliff. Set into the cliff is a large cave.

“Are we safe here?” you ask your computer. “What are the chances of this volcano erupting suddenly?”

“Don't worry,” the computer responds. “The volcano has been inactive for approximately 400 years. The ash on the ground is old and settled. The smoke coming from the top of the volcano is only steam. Of course, there's always the chance of an earthquake or a meteor shower, the planet being what it is, but the only way to guard against that would be to leave the planet altogether.”

If the volcano hasn't erupted in four centuries as the computer says, then the island would have been pretty much the same when Vanessa Chang landed here 300 years ago. She would have had to land on the very same plateau. But if she abandoned her main ship and took off in the shuttlecraft, what did she do with the ship?

The cave! It's more than big enough to hide a spaceship. You put on a life suit, leave your ship, and head over to do some exploring.

You enter the cave and follow its twists and turns. It is dark except for the illumination provided by your light crystals. As you work your way deeper into the mountain, the cave gets larger and larger until finally it opens up into a huge cavern. In the center of the cavern is what you came looking for: an alien spacecraft, and a mighty menacing-looking one at that.

Approaching the sinister craft, you look over all of its bristling armaments and whistle under your breath at its overwhelming capacity for destruction. The cave is deathly quiet but you owe the silence your life because you are able to hear the faint whirring as a gun turret, still functional after all these years, is brought to bear on your position.

The first blast hits where your head was a moment ago. You dive behind a rock for cover but it too is blasted into smithereens. Meanwhile, the ship releases a small robot from a side hatch. The robot quickly advances towards your position, burnishing a variety of close-range weapons, none of which look pleasant.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[513]

Pulitt offers to introduce you to the Hemingellans' most learned Elder. You accept, and soon you are being escorted into a very modest-looking home. You are introduced to Weren Thoggol, who greets you in perfect Earth Standard and welcomes you into her home.

As Pulitt is leaving, you take a moment to study this new Hemingellan. She is at least as old as any alien you've met, but that doesn't seem to slow her down any. She is covered from head to toe with a thick orange fur, and wears none of the decorative clothing the others seem to enjoy. When she turns to you after closing the door, her smile can only be described as grandmotherly, and you feel right at home.

After ten minutes, though, you realize that it is not going to be a one-sided discussion. For every word she says about Hemingella, she expects you to offer some information about humans. All in all, it is a fair trade.

You learn that there formerly were two sentient races on Hemindore. In addition to the Hemingella, there were the Lengia, who lived on the planet's surface before the onset of the flooding. The Lengia were much more adept at science and engineering than the Hemingella; the Lengia invented most of the machines the Hemingella now use.

Unfortunately, the price for modern technology caught up with Hemindore's inhabitants about 2000 years ago. Heavy pollution in the atmosphere caused what you recognize to be the "Greenhouse Effect," and the ambient temperature of the planet increased just enough to cause the melting of the polar ice caps.

Of course, this was a slow process, and the Lengia had plenty of time to construct a huge caravan of spaceships to leave the world whose ecology they had wrecked. Before departing, they offered to take the Hemingella along, but the offer was declined. Weren tells you there were many reasons for her people to choose not to leave, some of which you would not be able to understand. Their primary reason for staying was that Hemindore was their home. Since their trees thrived in salt water, and the plants and animals of the branches were safe as well, there was really no pressing reason for the Hemingella to go. The land-dwelling Lengia departed for a distant part of the galaxy and were never heard from again.

The current technology on the planet is somewhat uneven, since the Hemingella were only partially successful in adapting and reproducing the Lengian machines after the Lengia left. Thus they have been able to maintain the flying vehicles that travel among the trees, but the technique for "flying words" (as the Hemingella refer to radio) has been forgotten.

In return for this information, you spend several hours telling Weren about yourself specifically and humans in general.

When you've finished you thank the Elder for her time and turn to go.

An idea hits you as you are at the door.

"Elder, is it possible for me to travel to the old Lengian cities?" you ask.

After careful consideration, Weren answers you.

Continued 

“Your honesty and openness about yourself and your people is greatly appreciated. I will tell you the location of an old city beneath the water called Tchuros.”

You now have a new option:

(7WLGRE) (3 phases) Explore Tchuros, an ancient Lengian city now under water.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[514]

A comprehensive geophysical survey of the planet Darscold, made from a deep-space orbit, reveals it to be an Earth-type planet with an atmosphere containing a slightly higher methane and ammonia level than the norm, but still breathable.

The surface is composed of alternating oceans and land masses, in about a 3:1 ratio, and is covered in chlorophyllous vegetation. An extensive planetary civilization is apparent, with large cities, industrial compounds, and a medium-sized spaceport. You correct your landing path slightly, in order to end up at the spaceport. So far you have picked up no electromagnetic communications from the surface, but it's possible that they have not yet registered your approach.

A lower-level look at one of the cities, through your radar-enhancing telescope, shows it to be a collection of spherical bubbles of various sizes, each tethered to the ground by some sort of flexible cable.

Surface streets are visible beneath the bubbles, but there is also a good deal of traffic in the air above and around the city. The natives, as best you can tell, are bipedal and covered in short golden fur, with two pairs of arms and low, wide heads. Height seems to vary from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half meters, with mass appropriate for a well-built human male. In short, you recognize them to be of a race discovered by humans long ago called Darscians.

You land your ship without difficulty at the spaceport, then step out to introduce yourself to the welcoming committee which has gathered around.

One of the aliens steps forward and, in extremely poor Earth Standard, arranges for the berthing of your ship. It at once becomes apparent that you will get nowhere on this planet until you learn to speak the native tongue. Your only option, therefore, is the following:

(GPEBMY) (14 phases, or 7 phases with Telepathy or a Universal Translator) Hire a local instructor and have him teach you High Darscian. This option will cost one cargo unit of your choice.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[515]

As the faceted steel horizons of Gironde fall away from you and you point the nose of your ship toward the stars, a piercing alarm sounds and every indicator on your navigation console glows red.

“What is it?”

“Trouble, Boss. Spaceships. Hostile maneuvering patterns. On intercept course. Main screen.” You’ve never heard your computer talk so fast.

For another half second there are only stars on your viewscreen. Then the black ships shimmer into view as you get out from behind the planet’s shadow. First five, then ten, then over fifty ships close in on you from all sides. Each is a menacing obsidian shadow against the black of space, sleek and powerful and bristling with weapons.

“Evasive maneuvers!” you shout, then change your mind: “No, dead stop! Open communications! Who are they? What do they want?”

On the center of your viewscreen the view of the black fleet wavers and another image appears in its place. It is the torso and face of a humanoid creature with two arms, a thick neck, prominent brow ridges, and green scales covering its skin everywhere you can see. It’s eyes almost glow with rage and its face contorts with malice as it speaks:

“In full knowledge of the consequences, you have violated the Second Directive! Prepare to be destroyed!”

The image disappears as the black ships close in. “Who are they?” you ask your computer. “What do they want?”

“Unknown. The message was received in both Earth Standard and computer code, not in a native language. Gironde ground control calls them Supervisors but. . .” You don’t hear the rest because you soon become too busy to listen.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[516]

As you approach the planet Ouabain, you see you are confronted by the same puzzle of the three landing pads as before. You listen to the clue once again in the hopes it will shed a bit more light on the answer this time.

Below are landing pads three:

One has no floor;

One is no more;

One is the safe place to be.

“Study the riddle and the pads; we hope to see you soon.”

Once again your computer presents the visual images of the three ports. You study them carefully. The first landing port is to the north of your position. You examine the screen and see that it looks relatively normal. You see people going about their business, presumably the business of allowing ships to land. One possible exception to this otherwise ideal picture is the surface of the landing pad, which seems to be rough and uneven.

Continued 

The second port is directly below you; it too looks normal. It appears to be a bustling space port with attendants and mechanics coming and going. Closer study shows possible rust along the metal portions of the landing pad and even some cobwebs in the far corners. If this is the real pad, they certainly don't keep it in immaculate shape.

The third spaceport, to the south, is almost identical to the other two, the picture of normalcy. You can see nothing suspicious-looking here even after close inspection.

You must now choose on which landing pad you would like to try setting down with your ship.

- A) Landing Pad 1 to the north.
- B) Landing Pad 2 directly below you.
- C) Landing Pad 3 to the south.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[517]

You are embarrassed to admit that a four foot tall squirrel is your equal in battle. You are both wounded and weak from the exertion of the battle. You are beginning to wonder if the green rocks are worth all this and you are actually thinking of making an honorable retreat.

As you start to make your way back to where the pit wall is slanted enough for you to climb up, you note that the Squirrel doesn't seem interested in following you.

You are relieved because it is all you can do to pull yourself up the incline.

Breathing heavily from the exertion, you find yourself back on the surface, safe, if not completely sound, from your adventure.

You see the Blue Squirrellies are making a good showing of themselves and soon push the Red Horde from the camp.

The last thing you remember is cheering for the good guys before you pass out from exhaustion. It is two days before you are able to travel again.

When you wake up you find Rocky nearby. She is concerned about you and impressed that you were able to survive a Red attack.

"They are very fierce warriors," she says.

Later on, while everyone is preparing for the coming night, Rocky approaches you. You spend the rest of the evening discussing the battle. She fills you in on the details of the fight you missed while you were in the pit. You learn the Red Squirrellies were attacking her party to keep her from trading the ore with alien visitors. Fortunately the attackers were defeated and the mining expedition is safe.

She also tells you something interesting about chitterbang. She says you may know it better as Warp Core. She says it is possible to purchase refined Warp Core in the city.

You recognize the name as being a valuable commodity in the universe and if you wish, you may ask your computer about Warp Core.

You now have the following options:

⟨T9SDWQ⟩ (1 phase) Ask your ship's computer about Warp Core.

⟨DPQB8Y⟩ (3 phases) Purchase refined Warp Core.

Because of the recovery time you required, this option has taken nine phases instead of seven.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[518]

There's nothing like working long hours in the wide-open spaces, brisk winds, and refreshing cold rains of Hootenaller to make you long for the cramped, stale, smelly cabins of your ship. However, you manage to locate and gather sufficient quantities of edible plant life to fill one of your ship's cargo bays.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[519]

The Bridger seems pleased to see you again and is more than willing to set you up with another smuggling run.

The conditions are the same as before. You run the Boundary to Frontier where you will trade three units of Culture for a Gradient Filter, which is yours to keep for your services.

However, if you fail to complete your mission, the consequences will be bad. You shudder to think about what actions the gruff Family Member considers to be "bad" and promise to come through with flying colors.

When you have run the Boundary and would like to complete the mission, plot 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 ⊠

[520]

"How is the ship holding up?" you ask the computer.

"Very well. At this range the beams have no effect on us. Our armor and screens can easily dissipate the energy."

The heavy particle beams aren't forcing you away, but you can't go much closer either.

"Can you locate the power source for those beams?"

"Yes, it's on the planet's surface. But it's well out of our range."

You spend a few of your precious minutes devising a plan. You will try to make a very fast attack run on the power plant that supplies the beams. Making the run through all the beams will be very dangerous and will almost certainly damage your hull. You know it is your only way of defeating the power beams, so you instruct the computer to lay in the best flight path down to the planet's surface.

Your computer highlights the location of the power plant as a blue dot on the viewscreen. When you get the word that all is ready, you give the order to commence the attack.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[521]

You are directed to an underground walkway that leads from the spaceport to the colony's central dome.

The underground walkway ends just inside the dome. The entrance is unguarded, so you walk in. The city is an impressive sight. The buildings are all spherical, and of different sizes and colors. The largest buildings are in the center of the dome, surrounded by smaller ones near the edges.

You notice that a Darscian is motioning for you to come to a red spherical building over to your right. You enter the building and talk to the four-armed golden-furred creature.

"Hello," you say.

"Hello," he answers. "Welcome to Ioreth Colony. My name is Erdis."

"I am terribly sorry for my violent actions when I landed here," you explain, "I was poisoned by a flower. . ."

"Try to put the acts of aggression out of your mind," Erdis suggests, "You must be calm."

"You mean you're not angry?"

"Angry? We are sorry that you were sick. You will be safe inside the dome."

"Uh. . . thank you." Of course, the Darscians aren't upset, since it is not in their nature to feel hostile emotions. Nevertheless, Erdis's total lack of fear and anger is a little unsettling. It makes you feel even more guilty. There is a long pause as neither of you is quite sure what to say next. Erdis takes out a brush and starts grooming the fur on his arms.

"Why didn't you answer my radio signal?" you ask. "I tried to contact the spaceport before I landed, but no one answered."

"Oh." Erdis seems a little embarrassed. "We couldn't hear you. Our radio equipment is broken."

"Broken?"

"Yes. A recent alien visitor got sick the same as you and destroyed our radio station."

You talk with Erdis for a while longer, and learn that the building you are in is the alien receiving center, where alien visitors are welcomed to Ioreth Colony. You ask some questions about the colony, and come up with four possible activities to pursue:

(7DLQR8) (3 phases) Trade commodities with Ioreth's colonists.

(NTJSZW) (3 phases) Learn about the Darscian planets.

⟨7TLSRW⟩ (5 phases) Learn how Ioreth Colony was constructed.

⟨JDZQ58⟩ (7 phases) Travel to an outpost deep in Ioreth's wilderness, where the Darscians are studying the native animal life.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[522]

You slam your fist against the console in frustration. Although the scan reveals the presence of small quantities of warp core, there is not enough present in the area to make mining worthwhile.

You have this feeling there is a mineable load somewhere on the planet, though. Where there's smoke, there's fire, right?

Perhaps another scan would help you decide what to do.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[523]

Remembering the traffic problems you had the first time you approached the Riallan spaceport, you come in thrusting hard on the g's and slice the atmosphere at maximum deceleration. Most spaceports would haul your engines for that kind of behavior, but the impatient Riallans seem to care only how fast you can make it down. Apparently those floating fuzzy beachballs don't mind a few sonic booms — in fact, judging from the high-pitched birdcalls they use to communicate, you wonder if they can even hear them.

The Riallans meet you on the ground. Actually, you're on the ground, while the Riallans, as usual, float several feet above it. They reiterate the rules — watch your step, no spitting, no charge for air — and point out the direction to the spaceyards and the Universal Iron Exchange terminals. Then they hurry away, as only Riallans can.

Your options are the same as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[524]

You use the time between landings to reread one of your favorite possessions, the log of one of Humanity's greatest explorers, Sigourney Rambeaux. Of course you only have a reproduction of the original log, but that doesn't make reading about her adventures any less real to you.

One of the entries catches your attention. It reads, "Corbis was a lucky stop for me. I was running low on Fluids and was able to stock up while there."

Very interesting.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[525]

It is difficult to relax with the gale howling past your ship and the rain dripping off everything. You finally have to close the hatch to shut the noise and dampness out. Instead of a soft lawn, you lie in your ship's best acceleration couch. Slowly you force yourself to relax, somehow overcoming that contradiction and clearing your mind of all thoughts. This time you don't let your thoughts wander, and you don't wait for alien images to intrude. You create your own images.

You visualize the planet you are on, its red giant star, the uncounted trillions of cubic kilometers of space that wrap in ever-expanding layers around the system. You let it rotate in front of you, taking in the paradox, the reality of empty space, the solidity of nothingness. The view changes; the volumes of emptiness collapse into a two-dimensional image spread before you like a mural on a wall. You reach out and pull at a corner of the picture. It peels away as you pull on it, and beneath it is another picture just the same. You pull them away like the pages of a tablet and look at one after another. Each one shows the planet Hootenaller, prominent in its center. The sheets flash by faster, until the image is a blur. Which is the real one? Who can decide?

You can. You drop your hand, causing the motion to stop, and the blur freezes into place. Once again you see from space the orbiting planet in its three dimensions and stellar scale. Except that it is a little bit smaller, and of a lighter color. . .

Outside it is raining and the rocks are shaped like talons.

✧ STOP ✧

[526]

Symbolix is a Withelian firm dedicated to the mathematical study of language and speech. The company spokesbeing to whom you end up speaking informs you that Symbolix has made great strides in the scientific quantification of these fields, to the extent that they are able to offer (for the Withelian market only) mechanical implants for the brain and vocal cords that produce improved vocabulary, comprehension, diction, and maximum voice amplitude. Although you are not really interested in applying for such an implant, the fact that it exists sets you to thinking.

You approach the same salesbeing again the next day, and ask to talk to one of the company's research scientists. You manage to get an immediate appointment with the head of research and development, who listens enthusiastically to your idea, and insists that Symbolix and you set to work at once to implement it.

You finish the project several days later. You have gained the complete plans for a human Universal Translator:

- 1 Synthetic Genius,
- 1 Computers,
- 1 Culture,
- 1 Tools.

This device will let you communicate freely, after an initial adjustment period, in almost any alien language you should chance to encounter. Symbolix, in turn, has acquired an understanding of how to build exportable Universal Translators for all sorts of alien races. When you leave them to return to your ship, they are already deep in the midst of ten-world marketing schemes and plans for disposing of their vast profits.

Now all you have to do is get the things together for your own Universal Translator, then plot the following option to make it work:

⟨HMAN6J⟩ Build a Universal Translator.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[527]

Although the atmosphere contains relatively high concentrations of certain very potent neurotoxins, the lake turns out to be an almost pure solution of them. Immersing oneself in it would lead to such a mind-bending trip that you wouldn't want to try predicting the results.

Carefully collecting a sample of the liquid, you bring it back to the ship for closer analysis.

You are baffled by the actual chemical composition. Sitting back in your chair, you wearily stretch your arms and legs, cramped from the hours of exhaustive study you have been performing on the mysterious liquid. Unfortunately, you knock over a glass of Yummy Soda, a drink you are never without, and it spills into the container of pink lake.

And they both disappear.

Tentatively, you reach out to touch the container, or, rather, the place where you last saw the container. Lo and behold, your hand bumps into the glass as if nothing were any different. It seems the combination of Yummy Soda and pink lake form an invisibility potion.

After many more hours of testing, you find the liquid is actually safe to use on a human and will provide the wearer with invisibility for a short amount of time, depending on how much you smear on your body.

You return to the lake and safely package a good supply of the liquid with the soda.

Congratulations, you have made a very good find.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[528]

You succeed in blasting open the hatch, revealing a long dark tunnel going straight down towards the center of the asteroid. Your instruments indicate that the tunnel is several miles long, so it will take some time to explore it.

Another possibility for action is suggested by the presence of some pretty good radioactive ore in the crater, which you can carry away in your cargo bays.

Your options are:

⟨EGMENM⟩ (4 phases) Mine a unit of radioactives from the crater.

⟨UGOEFM⟩ (5 phases) Explore the tunnel leading towards the center of the asteroid.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[529]

Many of the missiles fail to find you, their guidance systems confused by jamming signals. Others home in correctly but are unable to detonate when they get there, their warheads disrupted by unfamiliar energy fields. Those that do detonate fail to damage you, their violence expended uselessly against resisting screens of reshaped space. As a result, you are undamaged by the missile attack. Still in formation, you draw closer to the planet, alert for any sign of further hostility.

This time Silverbeard broadcasts no taunts over the com link. He simply fires. Two dozen beams of a golden-yellow color and unbearable brightness lance from the surface of Wellmet. Several converge on each of your ships, and they hit.

From the instant they're fired these beams are locked on to you. There is no evading them, no disrupting them at the source. Only your most passive defense systems are of any use. You can only hope your ships' armor and protective shields can resist them.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[530]

You find yourself talking to one of the smugglers from the planet Wellmet.

After giving him an alias (you don't need to have the galaxy know where you are), you spend the next several hours conversing with one of the most interesting people you have ever had the pleasure to meet.

The old merchant has been to many places and seen many things. You are fascinated by his tales of travel and exploration. Of course, you suspect you are hearing some secondhand tales that may have been embellished just a bit, but you listen intently to his story of how he escaped from an alien prison.

Hours later you are forced to sign off in order to finish some necessary maintenance you have been neglecting, but you have much to reflect upon as you do your work.

One piece of information you believe to be reliable is the possibility of obtaining a Particle Catalyst the old explorer said he saw on the planet Firthe.

You make a note of the planet's name and continue with your work.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[531]

Some unkind fate has forced you to return to Alkon, a prospect you relish with the same eager anticipation as your annual dentist's appointment. As you fly over the jungle, you remember how backward and uninspired the city looked on your last landing. Glancing out the window as you head down, you see nothing has changed.

While looking out the viewport you think to yourself, "If nothing else, at least the Alkonese are amusing to look at," and you wave to a purple, multi-tentacled, warty being who is assisting you in the docking of your ship. You note with a smile that it is your old friend, Freddie. Perhaps this time you will take him up on his offer to teach you the language.

Your options are as follows:

⟨GGEEMM⟩ (2 phases) Hire Freddie to serve as your interpreter. This will cost one unit of your choice of commodity.

⟨WGGEEM⟩ (14 phases, or 7 phases with a Universal Translator or Telepathy) Learn Alkonese from a local expert (a cousin of Freddie's who needs the work).

⊠ STOP ⊠

[532]

You are "resting" your eyes when you hear a strange but decidedly human-sounding voice call to you from your radio.

"Hello, is there anyone out there?" the voice wants to know.

You instruct the computer to open the transmitting channel and you reply, "Hello, I read you loud and clear."

For the next few minutes you find yourself exchanging pleasantries with an Ensign Grey from the Institute for Space Exploration. She is very friendly and is interested in trading information with you.

You decide that this is a reasonable offer and you accept.

For what little you feel free to tell her (you don't want to give *everything* away), you receive the following data:

On the planet Gnarsh you will be able to obtain Fluids should you so desire.

That's all you learn. It would seem that you aren't the only one who knows how to play it close to the vest.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[533]

Your intrepid band of adventurers has once again decided to take on the formidable specter of Outpost. You confer over the radio as you approach the planet, trying to decide on the best course of action this time.

You choose to continue your earlier strategy of attacking in formation, which proved to be so successful against the killer satellites, and you wish each other good luck as you dive into the ring of death.

You are more than a match for the firepower of this line of Silverbeard's defense and you easily defeat the satellites. Next you prepare for the missiles you found to be impassable on your last visit.

Just as before, you approach the missile zone in formation, bringing all of your defenses to bear. With the proper planning, you hope to be able to defeat this line of defense as easily as you did the last.

Go now to the CGM.

✘ STOP ✘

[534]

After successfully running the Boundary, you plot a course for Heaven. You have the necessary information to find the people you need to speak with in order to try to negotiate a deal. Although you have only one unit of Super Slip, you plan to try to negotiate a new contract with these people.

You never have a chance. You radio ahead, but before you can set up the meeting they demand to know if you have the cargo. You try to explain that you have one unit and intend to get. . . but you are cut off in mid-sentence. You are refused landing privileges until you have all three units of Super Slip. They don't care who you are or what your story is. All they want is their Super Slip and they want it fast, with no more excuses.

"If that's the way they want to play," you think grimly to yourself, "then so be it." You must now come up with two more units of Super Slip in order to save your family's reputation.

You may select this option again.

✘ STOP ✘

[535]

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.

You look at the sparkling chips and ask, "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," Turner growls. "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?"

You catch Valentine's hand in midair and say, "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, Turner signals 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 document 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 ⊠

[536]

The tri-axis drive is every bit as powerful as you were told it would be. You can feel the thrum of your engine pulsing through your body like a heart beating all around you.

With this new ship improvement, nothing can keep you from accomplishing your new goal, finding the source of the new type of energy emanating from somewhere closer to the Galactic Core.

Thinking about your next step, you remember Dr. Myers' advice to investigate the planet Outpost for clues as to where to go once you pass through the Density Barrier.

With this in mind, you happily return to practicing your alien abilities. You never know when they may come in handy!

⊠ STOP ⊠

[537]

As you prepare to land on Harvard, you review the mixed feelings you experienced as you successfully traversed the imaginary line humans call the Boundary. Indeed, you were exhilarated by the capability to enter the area of the Nine Worlds, a feat you once thought nearly impossible. You were also excited at the prospect of demonstrating the abilities you have been able to learn. Nonetheless, you still felt a bit sad.

You have spent the time since then thinking about the future. You can't quite see yourself sitting peacefully behind a desk grading term papers for the rest of your life. The academic research situation hasn't changed inside the Boundary, and you still cannot legally perform research in your field while you are here.

Sighing, you decide to put such disturbing thoughts away for the moment and concentrate on the thrill of actually being able to demonstrate to your colleagues the alien abilities you had originally only hoped to record as proof of their existence. Won't they be astounded!

Night has fallen as you land at the deserted field on Harvard that Myers told you about and wait for her to appear. It doesn't take long before you see the lights from her vehicle approaching. A quick radio call confirms that it is indeed Dr. Myers, but she tells you she is not alone. Concerned, you give the password which really asks if everything is all right. She gives the counter password telling you the visitor is a friend and not to worry.

As the ground car pulls up to the landing pad, you manage to get a look at the second person in the vehicle. You immediately recognize him to be Dr. Steven Strassman, a professor of astrophysics at Harvard, and one of the top researchers in the field. You wonder what business brings him here.

Dr. Myers greets you warmly and congratulates you on accomplishing such a difficult mission. She asks about your travels and seems genuinely interested in hearing the whole story, not just the parts relating to the mission. You are so overwhelmed at being able to discuss your adventures with real friends that, for a moment, you are speechless.

You manage to get hold of yourself though, and invite them into your ship where you tell them the strange and wonderful tale that has been your life these last few months. They are dumbfounded by the adventures you have survived and eagerly await the recounting of your real mission, the discovery of three alien abilities that will set the scientific world on its ear.

Continued 

Myers looks around the ship asking, "Have you been able to bring proof that these abilities exist? Perhaps a video or some sort of artifact?"

Grinning, you give them the actual demonstration of the three abilities which you were able to learn to perform yourself. When you have finished, both of your guests sit there in wonderment.

Myers recovers first and says, "That is absolutely amazing! We had no idea humans could learn such things. We have read the historical tapes in the classified archives and there is no mention of even the possibility that such a thing could happen. You have done extraordinarily well."

Then she continues, "Lee, I have brought Steve along with me because he needs to ask you a few questions about what you have seen and learned while exploring the galaxy."

You look at Steve, who has remained silent up until now, and ask him what he would like to know. He looks at you intently and tells you about a discovery he has made since you were away.

He has invented an instrument, far more sensitive than any other in existence, which has picked up energy waves of a type never before detected by human technology. The energy is emanating from a place somewhere in the Galactic Arm, midway between the Galactic Core and the Fringe. The disturbing aspect of this discovery is that the new energy seems to be causing fluctuations in space.

"What exactly do you mean?" you ask Steve.

"We can't be sure, as it's really too early to tell, but the laws of nature don't seem to be holding up as they always have. Small deviations from what we consider to be constants in the laws of physics have been detected. These deviations are becoming more and more frequent as the level of this new energy increases. I would be interested in any data you could provide that would give me some insight into this phenomenon."

You take a few minutes to review what you have seen in your travels that could relate to this discovery but you come up empty. Looking up from your reverie, you suddenly put two and two together. You ask your colleagues if they think your astounding capability to learn totally alien abilities, something no explorer had ever accomplished before, was connected somehow to the new energy. Myers and Strassman are silent for a moment before nodding their agreement.

"I realize this is only a theory right now, but your new abilities show that something is different. Although we aren't sure whether the two things are directly connected, we should probably do some sort of investigation into why you are able to do what you do," Dr. Myers concludes. You agree with her, as a plan begins to form in your mind.

"I agree that we should study the 'Whys' of the alien abilities. Why could I learn them? Is it possible for others to acquire them? Are they tied into the new form of energy Steve discovered? Maybe another expedition is in order."

"Oh, Lee! We couldn't ask you to risk your life a second time," Dr. Myers protests, although you can see she likes the idea.

You do not have the nerve to tell her you are more afraid of the boredom of remaining inside the Boundary than of the dangers that lurk outside.

"We were actually hoping you would feel this way," Myers continues. "We have some information you will need if you are going to head toward the source of the energy and investigate the possible correlation between it and your new abilities."

"From our records we know that the density of interstellar matter in space increases as you get closer to the galactic core. Because of this, you will reach a point in your travels where your present two-axis drive will no longer function. The early explorers discovered that a third drive axis is needed to handle the higher matter density in the inner regions of the galaxy. They called the engine a tri-axis drive."

"In order to travel in the Galactic Arm, you will need a tri-axis drive. However, it is not easy to build such a drive. For one thing, the drive needs a very, very special component in order to focus and control the incredible amount of power it generates."

Here she pauses and, reaching into her briefcase, pulls out an object wrapped in a soft cloth. She hands the object to you and you slowly unwrap it as she continues with her explanation.

"You now possess one of the few Flame Jewels known to be in existence. As you can see they are. . ."

Her words fade out as you finish unwrapping the jewel and just sit gazing at the treasure. The brilliant colors of red and orange flash at you as you rotate the gem to see it from all sides. It is perfect. You stare deep into the center of the jewel and you can almost feel the pulsing power it is capable of handling. Slowly you return to the present. . .

". . . don't know how they actually built the drives but hopefully you can find out how to do it while you are out there."

Myers realizes your mind hasn't quite returned from the depths of the jewel so she pauses a moment to allow you time to focus on what she is saying.

Smiling, she finishes by telling you about an old colony located farther out than most explorers ever reached in their lifetimes. It is a planet called, fittingly enough, Outpost. This far-flung colony is located somewhere just on the other side of the Density Barrier, the line that separates the Galactic Fringe from the Galactic Arm. Although the colony has long been abandoned, there may be records and equipment still there that you would find extremely useful.

Myers and Strassman rise and shake your hand in farewell. "We are proud of the work you have accomplished but we are prouder still of what you are about to attempt. Good luck, Professor."

They leave you to your thoughts, but you are not alone. You have a real purpose now and an important mission to accomplish. Who knows what the consequences of the increase in this new type of energy are? Perhaps the fate of the galaxy rests on your finding the answers. It is a serious responsibility, but you are prepared to give it your best shot.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[538]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 3

You know that before the Boundary was built, the planet Wellmet was the main center of all exploring activity. You wonder if this is still true. Since you need to get as much information as possible about the galaxy, you decide to make Wellmet your next stop. Look at the map and plan your best route there. This is how your plotting sheet should look:

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	T	R	Y	B	R	L	—
2	—	—	—	—	—	A: FPIB7Y	—
3	—	T	B	Y	V	B	R

Continued 

First plot "T" to take off, then plot the trisectors between Moiran and Wellmet, "B,Y,V,B,R."

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 3

When it is your turn, log onto the computer as usual, plot T to take off from Moiran, and move B, Y, V, B, R, which will end the input part of this turn.

Did you remember to hit the Return or F key when you were finished?

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 3

Please note the text number, 862, the computer gives you at this time. We wouldn't want you to miss out on the next part of your adventure!

⌘ STOP ⌘

[539]

The planet Outpost rests in the quiet warmth of its white dwarf sun, deep in the center of a green glowing ring nebula on the farthest fringes of the space covered by Vanessa Chang's maps. It appears almost hauntingly lonely and peaceful, but you know better. It is strange to think that, in this remote sector of space, you have come to do battle with an enemy, and in spite of all the alien races in the galaxy, that enemy is a human being. The pirate Silverbeard has claimed Outpost as his own, and he's placed rings of battle satellites and perhaps other weapons to defend "his" planet from intruders. You have come here to reclaim it, and you haven't come alone.

You're already far too familiar with the capabilities of Silverbeard's defenses. Each station is armed with a single powerful plasma beam. Any one such beam would be a respectable threat, though your ship is more than capable of evading or resisting a hit. It becomes much more dangerous when numerous satellites concentrate their attacks. Multiple beams coming from different points in orbit are more difficult to evade. Also, each satellite has lower-energy beams of different kinds designed mainly to confuse your sensors. The satellites are not as maneuverable as ships, but they have thrusters that allow satellites from many different orbits to converge on an attacker.

The only way you can land on the planet is to destroy the satellites. Simply slipping past them would not be sufficient, because the plasma beams can fire downward as well, possibly even hitting you through the atmosphere after your ship has landed. Fortunately the satellites aren't indestructible, but it takes a good sustained hit with a powerful weapon to disable one. Also, the stations' robotic brains might be vulnerable to jamming or disruptive forms of attack. In the final analysis, it appears that the deciding factor in the battle will be your own attack strength. If you can effectively kill the satellites quickly and efficiently, you should be able to avoid any counterattack. If not, their superior numbers will prevent you from even approaching the planet.

In view of this, you have decided to attack in formation rather than try to coordinate attacks on different parts of the planet. Dividing your force would allow more satellites to engage each attacker, while running in formation will divide the battle stations' strength.

You are moving into position when a voice comes over the com link. It is a familiar voice.

"Har, har, har!" sneers Silverbeard. "You'll not be setting your grappling hooks into this planet, ye blasted swabs. My guns'll send ye right to the locker if ye tries to heave any closer. Har, har, har!"

No one answers the pirate. Instead, you give the signal to attack. In proud formation you accelerate forward into battle.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[540]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 2

Congratulations! Your take off was successful and you now find yourself winging your way across the empty void known as hyperspace. You spend the quiet hours getting to know your ship better. It will be your single most important companion in the months to come. You had better know what is where and how it works! You soon feel quite capable of handling any emergency which may arise. Just in time too; you are almost at your destination.

You need to finish plotting the moves to get you to Para-Para, then direct the ship to land. To do so, your plotting sheet will now look like this:

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	—						

The "G" means your ship moves to the green trisector, and the "L" indicates you wish to land. Don't forget to account for all 7 phases used during a first landing by putting dashes on the plotting sheet.

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 2

When it is your turn again, you will return to the computer and identify yourself as you did earlier. Press **G**, which puts you in the trisector containing the planet Para-Para, and **L** for Land. This will use the rest of your phases for this turn and borrow against 1 of your next turn's phases.

Don't forget, after each turn of plotting, to press either the Return or **F** (for Finished) keys to accept your moves, or **X** to remove any plots with which you are not happy. Otherwise the CGM will never know when you are finished!

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 2

Write down the text number(s) the computer gives you, in this case **106** and **84**, then press Return or **F** to release the computer for the next player. Read the two pieces of text the computer gives you so you can "see" what is now happening to you.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[541]

BarrBurr is more than happy to take you to the Leader, who is also in charge of the Rituals of the Universal Translator. You are taken to a building that is a bit finer than the surrounding structures. This, you deduce correctly, is where the Leader lives.

Your eyes take a moment to adapt to the dim candlelit room. A low chant begins and BarrBurr whispers excitedly that you have arrived just in time to witness one of the rituals.

A small group of Tralisians surround one of their number; it is they who are chanting. The lone alien in the center is holding two halves of a translator; both pieces are obviously damaged. BarrBurr tells you that this is the Ritual of Healing, the most difficult of all to perform. It has a high failure rate.

The Leader, in the center, slowly brings the two halves together, carefully aligning the edges. The chanting reaches a crescendo as the halves line up. Then a hush fills the room. The Leader flips the toggle switch and a green light shows on the translator. Everyone cheers; the ritual has been a success.

You have many questions to ask about the translators, but when BarrBurr introduces you to SeVille, their Leader, you discover they have very little to tell you.

After a few minutes of questioning, it is very clear that they have no real understanding of how the devices function. All they have are the rituals the gods left them over seventy-five thousand years ago.

The Ritual of Healing is used to try to repair a damaged translator. If the ritual is successful, the Tralisian who was responsible for the device is allowed to have it back. If the ritual does not work, which happens quite often, the gods are said to have decreed the responsible Tralisian to be unworthy of the honor of a translator, so the creature loses all rights and privileges of its (now former) position. It is a great dishonor.

The Ritual of Making occurs rarely, although it is always a success. A Tralisian who has achieved a certain high-level rank in the church may petition for a translator. If the petition is successful, the Leader holds a Ritual of Making. Here the Leader takes a translator from the secret storeroom and places the mystical and holy battery pack in the sacred compartment. With the flip of the switch, the blessed green light comes on and all rejoice.

No, they would not consider trading a translator for ANYTHING you might have, and if you ask again they will banish you for sacrilegiousness.

✘ STOP ✘

[542]

Vanessa Chang's map is proving to be invaluable to you. You have just been informed by your computer that it has decoded a section of the map and learned of a planet where you may obtain the plans for building a very valuable piece of equipment, the Tri-Axis Drive Booster.

When you ask the name of the planet, you are told it's called Rialla. You make a note of this information.

✘ STOP ✘

[543]

You've never been able to resist the lure of the unknown. So it's with few misgivings that you plot a course to explore the day side of the planet.

You venture into the sunlit half of the world with all sensors on full shielding from the heat and radiation. You find what you hope will be a stable patch of ground and set the ship down. Readings indicate that you should be able to remain here for a little while in relative safety.

With all scanners on full, you spend a busy couple of hours running all sorts of scientific tests. Just as the ship's alarm sounds to warn you of conditions rapidly becoming unfavorable to your own and your ship's well-being, you believe you may have detected an interference pattern similar to the one that led to your discovery of the plasma creature on the night side.

The ship's alarm sounds again. You check the readings and see that some damage will occur if you decide to stay for a short while longer in order to investigate this mysterious new reading.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[544]

Your ship is still no match for the Patrol vessel and you are (again!) forced to surrender. When the Patrol personnel board your ship, you recognize the captain as the same one who captured you earlier.

He looks at you with disgust. "Don't you ever learn? This time we'll take *all* of your cargo and give you a few presents to remember us by. Maybe that will teach you a lesson."

True to his word, the captain has all of your cargo unloaded and lets the crew rough you up a bit so you'll have a few bruises as a "reminder." As before, they escort you to the edge of the Boundary and give you dire warnings about what will happen if you persist in your criminal ways.

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 ⊠

[545]

When you got the first unit of Super Slip, you felt you were making some real progress. But that was a long time ago, and time is something of which you have a very limited supply.

Grimly, you renew your resolve to get the necessary second and third units of the precious stuff. Your Family is depending on you.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[546]

As your drives cycle back and you slide out of hyperspace, Wellmet's sun is already lined up in the center of your viewscreen. Like the first planet you visited, Wellmet is one of the few worlds outside the Boundary whose positions are clearly documented on standard star maps. Thus, among the multitudes of stars and planets that sift through the fringe of the galaxy's spiral arm, Wellmet is easy to find. Your ship, now powered by conventional thrusters, begins to decelerate in a carefully calculated curve that will bring you to the planet at a velocity suitable for making a landing approach.

"We'll be in orbit in six point seven three hours, Boss."

The idea of the computer speaking out loud never ceases to amaze you. It is newly equipped with what it calls a "three-sigma intelligence emulation package," which allows it not only to understand and answer questions in plain Earth Standard dialog, but to volunteer information as well, at what it thinks are appropriate times. Unfortunately, its idea of appropriate times isn't always in agreement with yours.

Six point seven three hours later, you are in orbit around Wellmet. From orbit, the planet looks just like Earth. It has oceans and green vegetation, though there is no evidence of any native animal life. If Wellmet had been the first planet you visited outside the Boundary, you might think that someone was out there prefabricating Earth-like worlds. In fact, Wellmet's remarkable resemblance to Earth is the chief reason it became the focal point of early space exploration and, later, a thriving nexus of interplanetary trade. Even today, after three centuries of isolation outside the Boundary, the name Wellmet is familiar to the people of the Nine Worlds.

Judging from the amount of construction, the human population of Wellmet is about fifty million. Most of the construction is concentrated in a single sprawling city on the north coast of one continent. The city covers a thousand square kilometers, and it teems with activity and traffic, but it's not a city of high towers and electrified streets. You see clusters of dwellings, factory buildings, transmission towers, and landing pads mixed indiscriminately with animal pens, cultivated fields, open rivers, and power plants. There is no single large spaceport, but instead a variety of private landing and docking facilities scattered across the town, ranging from gleaming automated cargo ports to bare concrete pads. Each facility broadcasts its own instructions and signals on different channels, leaving you in some doubt as to where you should land.

"Can you sort out that babble?" you ask the computer.

"Certainly, Boss. All of the privately owned spaceports are broadcasting their own traffic control instructions, along with conflicting claims as to which of them offers the best location and lowest rates for berthing fees. Some pads are set aside exclusively for ships in the employ of various 'Families,' or trading concerns. These are located on the safest and most efficient approach lanes, of course, and they're warning us to keep off their private property. Finally, there is a public spaceport of sorts, which charges no fees but requires that we force our way through all the other traffic to reach it."

"Forget about the private docks. Whatever they cost, we can't afford it. Can you plot an approach for the public 'port?'"

"No problem. Most of the traffic is old hulks, twice our mass and half our thrust. We can maneuver through it." You do, finding a path in the sky to the spaceport below, cruising past massive cargo ships, big slow converted liners, sleek fast smuggling rigs, and radiation-scarred prospector vessels that bristle with guns like wary old porcupines. You get clearance from the ground to land at one of the empty pads, and with help from the computer, you make a smooth landing.

On the ground, a delegation of spaceport officials meets you as you disembark. They are not unfriendly, and their speech is Earth Standard that is no more heavily accented than your own. They are required to search your ship for contraband cargo. As far as you know, any cargo carried across the Boundary is contraband cargo, but the officials tell you that they care only about certain drugs, weapons, and luxury items that are subject to import duties on Wellmet. You have none of these things on board, so you relax a little. When the officials realize that you've just come through the Boundary, they quickly conclude their inspection and spend some time pointing out the better hotels and trading agents in the area. They reassure you that the security of your ship is guaranteed in the public 'port, and they offer you any assistance you may require in adjusting to life outside the Nine Worlds.

You spend three days exploring the city (which is also named Wellmet), learning as much as you can about the planet and the people. What you find seems a series of contradictions. The people are unfailingly gracious and polite, yet a majority carry sidearms of one sort or another. Most people care more about experience and skills than titles and rank, yet whole sections of streets are off-limits to anyone who is not a member of one of the Families. Almost everyone expresses scorn or contempt for the Nine Worlds and the Boundary, but they admit that without the Boundary and the smuggling trade it generates, Wellmet would not be as prosperous a trading center as it is. The people of the Nine Worlds are referred to as "worms" — except for you, who in choosing to break out of the Boundary have earned their respect. Wellmet, you learn in the end, is a place that lives by its own rules, a gigantic frontier town where one spacer crew might gun down another for short-weighting a cargo load of Fiber, but would turn around and loan the Crystals out of their drives to a hard-luck case who needed them.

Through careful observation and conversation you identify the following options for further action on Wellmet:

- (OFFII7) (2 phases) Find out what the best deals are on Wellmet for trading commodity cargo.
- (8FHIA7) (4 phases) Spend a few days talking with spacers' supply merchants to find out what sorts of personal armaments you can obtain here.
- (OVFKIV) (3 phases) Learn what you can about the history of Wellmet from the records in the Wellmet Public Archives.
- (8VHKAV) (1 phase) Stop off at the Slippery Silver Tavern and hear the latest news and gossip from the spacers who frequent the place.
- (KFVIK7) (4 phases) Speak to experienced space traders around the port to learn what you can about navigation, exploration, and the hazards of space.

✧ STOP ✧

[547]

You spot a ship on your screen streaking past you at quite a high speed. Although you try to hail the vessel for some conversation and perhaps some information, all you get is an alien voice calling to you, "Sorry, no time. Must get back with Medicine we just picked up on the planet Ioreth. Emergency!"

You may not have gotten much in the way of conversation, but at least you got some useful information.

✧ STOP ✧

[548]

Dr. Myers is surprised when you contact her via ship's radio.

"Is there something you need? How can I help?" she asks, obviously concerned that you are in some sort of trouble. You are embarrassed to tell her you were just in the neighborhood and decided to drop in for a visit.

"Well, er. . ." you stammer. "I had some business to take care of and I wanted to see how the article was coming about the abilities I discovered beyond the Boundary."

Relieved, she tells you that the article is being written and she will need some time to work out the details of how it can safely be released.

Satisfied, you bid her farewell and head back out into space.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[549]

Your search for information on Riallan history is stymied by one problem: the Riallans don't show the slightest interest in history. In fact, their language doesn't really have a past tense, and their system for counting dates and times covers only future dates and times. If you tell a Riallan that your ship will land in six minutes, it may be interested, but if you tell it that your ship landed six minutes ago, it will wonder why you have bothered to convey such a useless fact.

Despite these difficulties, you manage to glean a few pieces of information, not from the functionaries or cultural centers of the city, but from the workers at the spaceport. The legend held by Riallan spacers is that long ago all Riallans lived in deep space. They didn't need a planet or station to live on, only a nearby sun as a source of energy. They lived much closer to the galactic Core, until some cataclysmic event forced them to move outward to the Fringe and seek refuge on a planet's surface.

There is certainly nothing to prevent these stories from being true. Riallan spacers know they can survive in space without ships or protective suits. They cannot travel interstellar space without warp drives, but they can maneuver over close distances using the same abilities they use to float above the floor and propel themselves along the inter-city transportation conduits. Temperature extremes and most forms of radiation don't affect them.

The Riallans themselves don't really seem to care if this story is true or not, nor do they remember what it was that drove them outward from their original star clusters. Whatever it was doesn't seem to worry them now, and they regard Rialla as their proper home.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[550]

Focused ever so intently, you prepare for the attack run. Your computer has already laid a course which will take you right over the power generator. One well-placed shot should destroy the energy source for those blasted (so to speak) beams and leave the planet open for invasion. You nervously lick your lips and give the order to commence your strafing run.

Your computer is doing a great job of evading the brunt of the planet's weapons as you dive ever closer to your goal. You successfully reach the generator with only minor hits to your hull, only to find yourself frustratingly thwarted in accomplishing your mission. Your ship's offensive weapons are just too weak to do any damage to the outer casing of the generator.

Cursing your luck, you are forced to pull up and head back out to the relative safety of space. Realizing that you almost succeeded, you feel you could actually blow the generator up next time if you increase the offensive power of your ship's weapons.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[551]

It has been a long time since you last saw your beautiful home planet and you are eager to disembark as soon as your ship has landed. The crowd that gathers around you greets you warmly and welcomes you back.

You turn toward your approaching parents and wave to them. They smile and hug you, asking about your journey and if you managed to find the Stone.

"I have not found that which is lost but I have many places yet to search."

Puzzled, they ask why you have returned. Even though they love you and are pleased to see you safe and sound, they do not understand what brings you home while you still have clues and leads to follow.

Frankly, you do not have a response to this question. You know how improper it is for you to be here now but still you came. You wisely decide it is time to leave and continue with your journey. Bidding your family and friends farewell, you take off, more determined than ever to fulfill your mission.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[552]

Bending against the wind, shielding your face with your hands, you continue your search along a jagged ravine. The wind increases, and you look for a way to go lower in the ravine for protection. Without warning a rock crumbles under your feet, and you go sliding down a steep gravelly slope.

When you recover your balance you look for a way to climb back up. You don't want to stay in an erosion gully where flash floods are a hazard. In the driving rain you grope for handholds in the loose stone incline and begin to climb. The slope levels off, and when you reach the top you are looking into a shallow basin about thirty meters across. Filling the basin is a horrible blue-green mass of some sort of thick sludge.

You don't know what it is. Your ship's instruments, when you fly your ship to the level ground on the other side of the basin, can't tell you what it is. It has a faint but markedly unpleasant odor, it emits a noise like a stopped-up waste recycling system, it sticks to most things it touches (though it doesn't seem to harm them), and even its color is vaguely nauseating. It's the only thing you've found in your exploration that isn't plants, useless rock, or rain, and you determine that the full mass of it would just about fill one of your cargo bays, but you're not sure you want it.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[553]

You return to Leucothea, home to the Church's headquarters, not knowing what sort of reaction to expect there. As a known heretic, you are subject to arrest if the High Council so chooses.

No one arrests you when you reach Leucothea. In fact, no one will speak to you or acknowledge your existence. Apparently the Council has placed you under Interdict. You are not surprised that your books and articles have been purged from the libraries.

Until you are able to prove your theories correct, no one will have anything to do with you on Leucothea. Feeling more than a little depressed, you return to your ship. As you plot your next course, you dream of the time you can return triumphantly with the lost File.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[554]

You nervously alight from the shuttle. What awful monsters await you in the swamp this time?

The path seems darker and narrower than you remember. There are more screeches and shrieks coming from the swamp than before, too.

Great.

You creep around a particularly nasty-looking bend in the path when all of a sudden you see. . .

Strangways' lab is just ahead.

That was easy.

As you enter the lab, you spot the Organuan working at the control panel. Strangways rises to greet you as you approach.

You exchange pleasantries with the alien for a few minutes, then inquire about the availability of Primordial Soup.

You are lucky enough to have arrived right at the end of the production cycle.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[555]

Gazan is a fiery world in the midst of a fiery nebula. A burning orange when viewed from space through the clouds of cosmic dust, a closeup view portrays the planet as a spicy patchwork of purple seas and yellow lands — painted in the dusky tones of a hundred suns-to-be. Your ship has weaved its way through the clouds and the asteroids, past the comets and the moons, and hesitates now, caught in a low and decaying orbit, resisting the seductive pull of a planet twice the size of mother Earth while you struggle to lay a course for the planet's single spaceport. Your ship's computer, blinded by the astronomical conditions and boggled by the forces at work on Gazan's orbit, is useless to you now. You must guide the ship down its landing path yourself, at the whim of the dust and the winds of the upper atmosphere, towards a faint and inconstant beacon on the limits of your sensory range, while all around you the galaxy is contracting and exploding and silently burning, a light show to end all light shows.

On the ground beneath, the landscape passes by. Civilization alternates with wilderness, cultivation with unchecked growth. The cities are made of floating bubbles, cast by the somber light into sinister shades of violet and orange, tethered by cables to the ground beneath, and looking more akin to the fruits of death which are said to grow beside the dusty paths of the Land of Shadow than to the products of any living sentience. The inhabitants — four-armed incubi with fur of blazing gold — seem cast to match their violent land, and all the more sinister in that their activities seem to be only the most natural possible, as if completely oblivious to the cosmic catastrophes at work in space all around them.

The spaceport at long last appears in your forward viewing screens, its modernistic towers looking like so many rock-carved freaks of nature when lit from behind by the flaming orange sky. You land your ship, and then carefully prepare yourself with a breathing mask for your first steps across the surface; surely no man can survive unaided on Gazan without benefit of his machines.

You are greeted at the door of your ship by a four-armed being with golden fur, whom you recognize as being of the Darscian race. The alien rapidly makes it plain to you that no one on this planet speaks your language. If you intend to accomplish anything here you will first have to learn to speak High Darscian, via the following option:

(FGIE7M) (14 phases, or 7 phases with Universal Translator or Telepathy) Hire a local instructor and pay to learn High Darscian. The instructor's services will cost you one commodity unit of your choice.

Go now to the CGM.

☒ STOP ☒

[556]

Despite their overwhelming numbers, your superior fighting capability is readily apparent to you and the spinning confections. They soon break off contact and flee.

You decide not to let this encounter ruin your trip, so off you go, exploring the desolate city, weapon at hand in case you meet any more natives.

The city seems to be deserted. The mob you encountered earlier is nowhere to be seen. The only sound you hear is your own footsteps, echoing down the empty streets. You continue exploring.

As you turn a corner you almost run into a Tralisian! You are both startled for a moment and each take the time to quickly study the other before reacting.

The alien speaks first.

"Greetings, welcome to the planet Tralis."

You have heard this before, and make no reply other than to keep your weapon at the ready. You notice the native is also wearing a translating device, slightly different from the other Tralisian's unit.

"I gather you have met the left-spinners already," the creature continues, pointedly ignoring your not-so-friendly manner.

That's it! You noticed something was different about this alien compared to the first group you encountered. This one spins to the right, while the others all spun to the left. You are not sure what this means, but it is probably important.

"I am Shearsy and I wish to apologize for the uneducated left-spinners. If you will be so kind as to follow me, I think I can show you some real hospitality."

The alien appears to be a reasonable sort, so you decide to follow. As you are traveling, Shearsy asks if you have any questions or if you would like to be shown anything.

You decide to utilize the creature's offer of instruction first and ask about the history of Tralis.

Shearsy is more than happy to comply, and this is what you learn:

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, when Tralis was a highly advanced culture, many wonderful discoveries were made by their scientists. But, alas, the Tralisians were not happy. They were planet-bound due to their physiological structure. For all of their science, they couldn't work past the problem of acceleration and the need for their bodies to be constantly spinning.

The Tralisians had another problem as well. They were split into two races, the right-spinners and the left-spinners. No one knew why, but the right-spinners were the scientifically adept segment of the population, while the left-spinners had no mechanical aptitude whatsoever. Over the years, the lefties slipped to the bottom of the social ladder and eventually ended up with the menial and custodial jobs.

About seventy-five thousand years ago, the righties discovered an early form of hyperdrive. This technology would have allowed them to overcome the acceleration barrier and explore space. At the same time, however, beings from a more advanced culture landed on Tralis. These aliens were greeted as gods by the lefties, while the righties were more wary and adopted a wait-and-see attitude.

Unfortunately, the aliens encouraged the idea that they were gods, and for some unfathomable reason spurred the lefties into revolting against the righties. The aliens kept any scientifically-based device from operating while the revolt was taking place. By the time it was over, the lefties had destroyed virtually all technology and killed many of the righties. Villages were set up outside the ruined cities and occasional forays were made to seek out and destroy any righties caught in the open.

The alien-gods then left, with a few gifts and commands to their new worshippers. One of the gifts was a large supply of translators and "rituals" to activate and repair them. Another gift was more subtle.

Through means the righties still haven't worked out, the gods genetically altered the Tralisians.

Before the coming of the gods, the birth ratio of right-spinners to left-spinners was 50/50. Two righties or two lefties had an equal chance of giving birth to either a rightie or a leftie; a rightie and a leftie were not able to give birth to anything.

After the gods' interference, however, lefties and righties both gave birth in the ratio of 75% lefties to 25% righties. Upon the birth of a leftie in the city, the child would be left, so to speak, on the outskirts of the village, where the lefties would take the child in and raise it.

At some point, over the years, the righties regrouped and set up a small, hidden, high-tech society in the heart of the abandoned cities. Through forays of their own into leftie territory, they established a spy network as well as a means of collecting supplies and other things. One of the first acquisitions was a working translator. Through study and experimentation, the righties built a working prototype of the device. At length, they even made some improvements and learned to adapt the translator to different races.

The right-spinner even drops a hint that they may be close to discovering how the gods made the genetic changes and reversing the effects. Then those left-spinning degenerates had better watch out!

You thank Shearsy for the information and ask if there is anything else of interest about Tralis. The Tralisian says the natural radiation of the planet, while not extractable itself, has produced some extraordinary mutations in the flora. Some of the visiting races have found the sap from the large trees to be a terrific medicine.

The alien's reply interests you. You already know that medicine is a valuable commodity in the galaxy.

Your options are:

⟨8UHOAF⟩ (4 phases) Learn more about the right-spinners' translator.

⟨KUVOKF⟩ (3 phases) Visit the rain forest.

⟨4EXMCN⟩ (7 phases) Go to the left-spinner village.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[557]

You leave Tony the Shark's place and begin making your way back to the spaceport. You find the twisting back alleys too much for your sense of direction and soon find yourself hopelessly lost.

"Oh great," you think to yourself as the noxious odors threaten to overwhelm you. "What else can go wrong?"

You should know better than to ask because you immediately find yourself in a torrential rainfall. It is over almost as quickly as it began, but leaves an extremely unpleasant aftereffect. The same way a slight dog odor is exacerbated by water, you find Moiran's extremely unpleasant planetary odor is severely affected by the rainfall.

Gagging, you stagger through the maze of passageways trying to reach an open area where you can breathe.

As luck would have it, you take a completely wrong turn and find yourself walking down a blind alley. Turning around brings you face to face with a mugger.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[558]

Since you want to find out as much as possible about the circumstances surrounding Vanessa Chang's journey, you ask the Darscians to help you find any old records that might be relevant. It turns out that the Darscians do have some records, but they are stored on an old-style computer bank in an archaic format. One of their information engineers is able to extract some of the data, but not everything.

You spend some time going through the incomplete records, and piece the information together as best you can. As far as you can tell, the sequence of events was as follows:

On February 28, 2493, Chang crash-landed a shuttlecraft in the Fiaran desert. When the Darscians rescued her, they found her and her crew in desperate straits with no fuel, no food, and practically no working equipment. The Darscians took the human explorers back to the city and helped them recover from their injuries.

Meanwhile, Chang borrowed a subspace radio and successfully contacted some humans closer to home (whether she reached Earth, or just some other explorers, is unclear). The news she heard was devastating: the Space Plague had broken out on the Nine Worlds and was ravaging the population.

At that point Chang became very upset. In fact, she and her crew displayed emotions of such extremity that the Darscian doctors were convinced the humans were going insane.

The humans soon pulled themselves together and began to make plans. They pleaded with the Darscians for a new spaceship, one that could take them to a planet called Cordethar (there is no indication of why they wanted to go to Cordethar). However, they didn't have much to give the Darscians in exchange for the ship.

The Darscians, who wanted to help, told Chang they would give her a ship if she could suggest a new planet for the Darscians to colonize. The Darscians wanted a planet that was rich in natural resources, but, of course, anything already inhabited by intelligent beings would be unacceptable. Other obstacles, such as climate and atmosphere, they could deal with.

Chang recommended a world known as Ioreth, which has a poisonous atmosphere and ocean, but satisfied the Darscians' requirements. She also mentioned a world she called Gazan, on the edge of the Fringe, which she thought would be ideal for the Darscians to colonize.

In return for this information, she was given the ship she wanted, a small but serviceable two-axis warp vessel. Chang named it *Lockerbait*, and after making some modifications to the ship, she and her crew departed for Cordethar.

✕ STOP ✕

[559]

Wearing the Super Space Suit, you open the door and walk in. You have entered the captain's quarters and are affronted with a gruesome sight. Sprawled across the floor is an immense scaly green creature, completely paralyzed but still. . . alive.

On the wall behind the alien an emergency generator is still functioning, making a distinct humming sound and transmitting the radio signal you detected from space. Evidently the signal is a distress call. You wonder how long the distress call has gone unnoticed, considering the condition of the ship. Many years, no doubt. Yet somehow, the alien has survived.

"Hello?" you greet him nervously.

He doesn't answer. He doesn't even move. Obviously, he cannot.

There is nothing you can do to help him. Your medical equipment is designed for humans, not aliens. Moreover, carrying the alien up the long tunnel to your ship is out of the question. Perhaps someone of the alien's own race will come to save him before it is too late.

Meanwhile, the alien will just have to wait. He seems to belong in this room, complementing the likenesses of fierce predators that adorn the walls and ceiling. You, on the other hand, do not belong here. You are an intruder in a world where there is no fear and no mercy, only predator and prey. You feel certain that if you had run into this alien when he was still healthy, he would have killed you or you would have killed him. There would have been no other alternative.

Fortunately, the current situation allows you another option. You can leave the disabled captain in his ship the way you found him.

✕ STOP ✕

[560]

You feel a bit foolish plotting a return journey to the planet Dargen. After all, you found a lifeless ball of ice on your previous visit. You're not sure if you believe the information you got on Gen that this planet is your next step in learning the ways of the Brotherhood. Oh well, you've made mistakes before and probably will again. You sit back in your chair and wait to see what happens.

"Sorry Boss," your computer reports. "If there's anything here other than ice, I just cannot find it."

Sighing, you prepare to leave orbit when you are interrupted.

"Just a minute, Boss, there is a small human colony, surrounded by a huge clear bubble that has just become visible on my screens."

"Why didn't we see it the first time through?" you want to know.

"Sorry, Boss, but it came out of nowhere."

As you approach the bubble, you are hailed by an escort ship in an Old English dialect that your computer recognizes but cannot place. You can more or less make out what he is saying and can communicate readily without a translating device.

"If you truly seek the way to truth, and wish to endure another ordeal, you may land and enter our colony," is the frightening message you receive from the other ship.

Swallowing nervously, you take the ship down and land at the spaceport. As the ship's berth is being cycled underground you try to see as much as possible of the nearby city before you are given the signal to disembark.

No one is present to greet you, but you notice a marked corridor and a sign saying, "This way to the Temple."

You decide this is the route you should take, so off you go.

Your footsteps echo hollowly down the passageway, reminding you of another corridor you traversed, on a distant planet that was somehow strangely similar to this one.

Soon you arrive at a massively built door. Above it is the sign, "TEMPLE." You have arrived.

You may now choose the following option:

(HOAF6I) (7 phases) Enter the Temple and begin the ordeal.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[561]

You are quite pleased after your success in running the Boundary, and you plot a course for Heaven. You have the necessary information to find the people you need to speak with in order to try to negotiate a deal. Although you have only two units of Super Slip, you plan to try to negotiate a new contract with these people.

You never have a chance. You radio ahead, but before you can set up the meeting they demand to know if you have the cargo. You try to explain that you have two units and intend to get. . . but you are cut off in mid-sentence. You are refused landing privileges until you have all three units of Super Slip. They don't care who you are or what your story is. All they want is their Super Slip and they want it fast, with no more excuses.

Dejectedly, you decide to concentrate on getting one more Super Slip in order to save your Family's reputation.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[562]

The Riallan Space Authority offices are located in an upside-down dome suspended above the shipyard and spaceport areas. It is there that the Riallan port officials tend the central computers that regulate space traffic and ship schedules. With the critical construction yards off-limits to aliens, the Space Authority seems the most likely source for information about Riallan drives.

"Please quickly and concisely define your desires, business, and intentions," beeps a purple Riallan near the entranceway. Through the glass floor, which you probably shouldn't be standing on but have no choice, you can see Riallans moving in clusters of activity in the berthing areas below.

"I apologize for interrupting your busy schedule," you begin, that being the standard Riallan greeting, "but I am searching for technical information on the construction of advanced space drives."

"Are you referring to tri-axis hyperdrives?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry. That informational knowledge is too dangerous and therefore withheld." The purple Riallan moves as if to leave.

"Wait," you call out. "Can the information be purchased? I'm willing to trade." The purple Riallan pauses. A red Riallan emerges from another direction. The two confer rapidly.

"Perhaps we may offer you your desired information in exchange for your services. We have need of the assistance of a corporeal being such as yourself. There would be considerable overwhelming risk to your present life."

"What's the deal?"

The deal is that the Riallan Space Authority is trying to perfect a Jump Engine that can safely carry intelligent beings. One of the main reasons that Riallans don't often travel outside their home system is that hyperdrives — even tri-axis drives — are too slow for them. Few Riallans are willing to spend precious weeks aboard a ship. Jump Engines are infinitely faster, which is why they power all cargo drones, but the jump field has a disruptive effect on all sentient minds. The reasons are unclear, but no sentient being has ever survived a journey by Jump Engine.

The Space Authority has developed a new generation of Jump Engines that may someday make travel by living beings in ships powered by jump-fields possible. The prototype is not yet safe for Riallans. The only Riallan volunteer to try it died. However, the Riallans feel that your brain and nervous system, more compact and centralized than theirs, may be better able to survive. If you volunteer to make a test jump — a very short one, from one orbital point to another, about 500,000 meters — they will instruct you in the making of Tri-Axis Hyperdrives, provided you survive.

If you wish to volunteer, plot option:

(TUSOWF) (3 phases) Test the experimental Riallan Jump Engine on a short jump.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[563]

You are quite pleased after your success in running the Boundary and you plot a course for Heaven. You have the necessary information to find the people you need to speak with in order to try to negotiate a deal. Your plan is to convince them of your culpability in the loss of the Super Slip and see if you can convince them to nullify the old contract with your Family and make a new one with you.

You never have a chance. You radio ahead, but before you can set up the meeting they demand to know if you have the cargo. You try to explain that you intend to get. . . but you are cut off in mid-sentence. You are refused landing privileges until you have three units of Super Slip. They don't care who you are or what your story is. All they want is their Super Slip and they want it fast, with no more excuses.

Dejectedly, you decide to concentrate on getting the three Super Slips in order to save your Family from the awful mess your reckless actions have put them in.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[564]

"Here goes nothing," you mutter to yourself as you power up your drives for another attempt to escape the planet. From the ground your scanners cannot detect the black fleet of the 'Supervisors,' but neither can they assure you that the ships aren't up there waiting. Instead of lifting straight up you fly halfway around the planet inside the atmosphere. Pushing so much air around isn't really good for your drives, but being hit with blasters is worse, and you are hoping that by popping up far from the spaceport you can gain a few extra seconds to escape.

Unfortunately the black ships are waiting for you, arrayed as if they knew exactly where you would be. Once again, on your viewscreen, an ugly too-human face covered with greenish scales gazes contemptuously at you, framed by the obsidian-black gleaming of the Supervisors' battle fleet. "Do not make this difficult," the alien intones. "You know the penalty. Obey the Directive. Advance and be destroyed."

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[565]

A comprehensive geophysical survey of the planet Darscold, made from a deep-space orbit, reveals it to be an Earth-type planet with an atmosphere containing a slightly higher methane and ammonia level than the norm but still breathable.

The surface is composed of alternating oceans and land masses, in about a 3:1 ratio, and is covered in chlorophyllous vegetation. An extensive planetary civilization is apparent, with large cities, industrial compounds, and a medium-sized spaceport. You correct your landing path slightly, in order to end up at the spaceport. So far you have picked up no electromagnetic communications from the surface, but it's possible that they have not yet registered your approach.

A lower-level look at one of the cities, through your radar-enhancing telescope, shows it to be a collection of spherical bubbles of various sizes, each tethered to the ground by some sort of flexible cable.

Surface streets are visible beneath the bubbles, but there is also a good deal of traffic in the air above and around the city. The natives, as best you can tell, are bipedal and covered in short golden fur, with two pairs of arms and low, wide heads. Height seems to vary from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half meters, with mass appropriate for a well-built human male. In short, you recognize them to be Darscians.

You land your ship without difficulty at the spaceport, then step out to introduce yourself to the welcoming committee which has gathered around.

Since you already speak High Darscian, the matter of berthing your ship is quickly arranged with the spaceport authorities.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[566]

You have found everything you need to repair your ship, and so far you've made great progress on the work. In many ways your ship is better than new. Your drives hum with power, your peripheral systems are back in tune, the new anticorrosive surface on your hull shines, and your computer is its annoying but reliable old self.

After a few more days you've completed the final adjustments. You run a cable to the Lockerbait and read the star map stored there into your own computer.

Seated at the controls, you ask for a display, and an image of the Arm, dotted with unknown planets, spreads across your screen. It's an impressive sight, but it's also frightening. Somewhere in that long stream of stars the Clathrans wait, making their plans. Perhaps they've already begun the galactic survey that will bring their mighty fleets inexorably closer to the Nine Worlds. Perhaps you are destined to meet them on one of those remote worlds or in one of those vast gulfs of empty space. And yet those worlds may hold answers as well. In those swirls of stars you may find aliens, allies, and answers; new knowledge, new perils and new mysteries; danger and discovery and anguish and adventure.

"Where to, Boss?" says your computer. You smile to think how many times you've heard that question before, how many times you may hear it again.

But what do you answer?

THE END

You have reached the end of STAR SAGA ONE: Beyond the Boundary. To go beyond Outpost, into the new worlds of the Galactic Arm, you will need STAR SAGA TWO: The Clathran Menace.

This doesn't mean you must end your game now. You may continue to explore the Fringe and do any option except fly your ship beyond the edge of the map. For example, you may wish to build those new ship weapons that you learned about on Outpost. You may want to return to planets that you passed through quickly, and try some of the other options. There may be some planets that you never landed on at all; you may wish to explore them. You may also want to build your personal and ship's combat abilities to be as strong as you can make them before going on to the Arm.

The authors and programmers of STAR SAGA thank you for playing Beyond the Boundary. We hope you enjoyed it.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[567]

All of space is rearranging itself around you. The universe inverts and twists until all of it is between you and the brilliant white spark of light that defines your destination, five hundred kilometers away. The folded megaparsecs glow an angry red as space contracts to a single point and merges with the white light. The light pulls at you, as if seeking to draw your mind away from you and devour it. You hold on, resisting the pull, and in the next moment the process reverses. The light spreads out, growing and unfolding in intense blue streamers that spiral from the center point like a germinating seed. Galaxies stream toward you, accelerating to enormous speed, not the speed of light but the speed of infinity, the speed with which the universe expanded in the first infinitesimal fractions of time after the Big Bang.

Read immediately text entry 870.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[568]

You decide that trading is the next step, so you direct the computer to take you up to the orbiting space station.

Once again the computer is able to speak to the mechanized landing port, and you arrive safely. You even get instructions on how to transact any trades you might wish to make.

After you get the "all clear" from your computer on the breathability of the atmosphere, you follow its directions and soon find yourself in a vast corridor lined with trade terminals. Your mind boggles at the amount of trade possible at any given moment should the terminals all be in use. The computer in charge of all this must be amazing!

Far in the distance, you see an alien form standing at a terminal. The being is large and furry and has a beautiful fluffy tail. As you make your way down the corridor, the alien, without a glance in your direction, finishes its business and heads off in the opposite direction. Not wanting to shout, yet determined to make the alien's acquaintance, you follow.

After turning down several halls and corridors, you lose sight of the fellow trader, but are able to follow the sound the creature's toenails make on the hard floor. For a while, that is.

Soon you are hopelessly lost.

This is what happens when you do things without thinking them through first.

"Now what?" you mutter out loud.

"Does there seem to be a problem?" questions a disembodied voice.

Startled, you manage to pull your wits together enough to reply.

"I am not sure where I am or how I can return to my ship," you tell the air.

"That's not a problem. I'll be happy to guide you back," the air answers in a very pleasant tone. It seems to be a very decent sort, as far as air goes.

The air introduces itself as Taffyn, a former ruler of Withel.

You take this bit of information in stride and ask it (?) how it got on board the space station?

“Why, I *am* the space station,” Taffyn replies.

Things now make a bit more sense to you as you realize you are walking inside the apparent acme of the Withelians’ ubiquitous organic-mechanistic interfacing. Instead of turning parts of its body into mechanisms, Taffyn somehow chose to be placed inside a machine and control it from there.

You try not to shudder.

Both fascinated and repelled at the same time, you ask Taffyn to explain how such a thing is possible. You learn the following:

Eons ago, an alien race arrived on Withel. The Withelians were an up and coming young race that was fascinated by machinery and gadgetry. The alien race complimented the Withelians, and encouraged the fledgling race to develop this interest and “Wouldn’t it be a nifty idea to incorporate parts of machines as parts of the body?”

The Withelians took to this new concept with fervor. The alien race had brought with them a technology that would make possible the process of incorporating machine into organic matter. The difficulty of the process and the pain involved were in direct proportion to the extensiveness of the operation, but the Withelians were willing to suffer for such obvious improvements.

The alien race helped the Withelians build a huge machine where such a transformation could take place. The Withelians called the machine “The Constructor” and were well pleased.

Taffyn mentions that he was the president at this time, and as a way of saying “thank you,” the Withelian people voted to allow him to be the first person mechanized. Taffyn chose to undergo the entire process in one operation; after years of building and operating, he became the Space Station. Taffyn had always wanted to be where he could watch the world and the stars whenever the mood struck.

He was the only Withelian to go into space, however, since new improvements and regular maintenance could only take place planetside. This explained why, although technologically advanced, the Withelians never became a spacefaring race. Even the enticements of increased resources were not enough to pull them away from their unique Constructor and their new way of life.

The Withelian government, seeing the great demand for this process, didn’t want to lose the potential for power by allowing free and unlimited use of the Constructor by the masses. So they devised a system that made it very difficult for any but the rich and powerful to have parts of their bodies mechanized. Thereby was born the first Withelian monopoly.

The visiting alien race departed soon after and never returned again. Once a year the Withelians observe a day of inactivity to remind them of the less productive times before the coming of the Constructor.

You are amazed at the diversity of philosophies in the galaxy and, although you cannot conceive of ever embracing such a way of life, you can show a polite tolerance.

As the narrative ends, you find that Taffyn has indeed directed you to the great hall where you may now trade via the terminals for Iron in the following transactions:

- 1 Iron for 1 Crystals,
- 2 Iron for 1 Medicine,
- 3 Iron for 1 Food.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠
