

STAR SAGA: ONE™

BOOK I

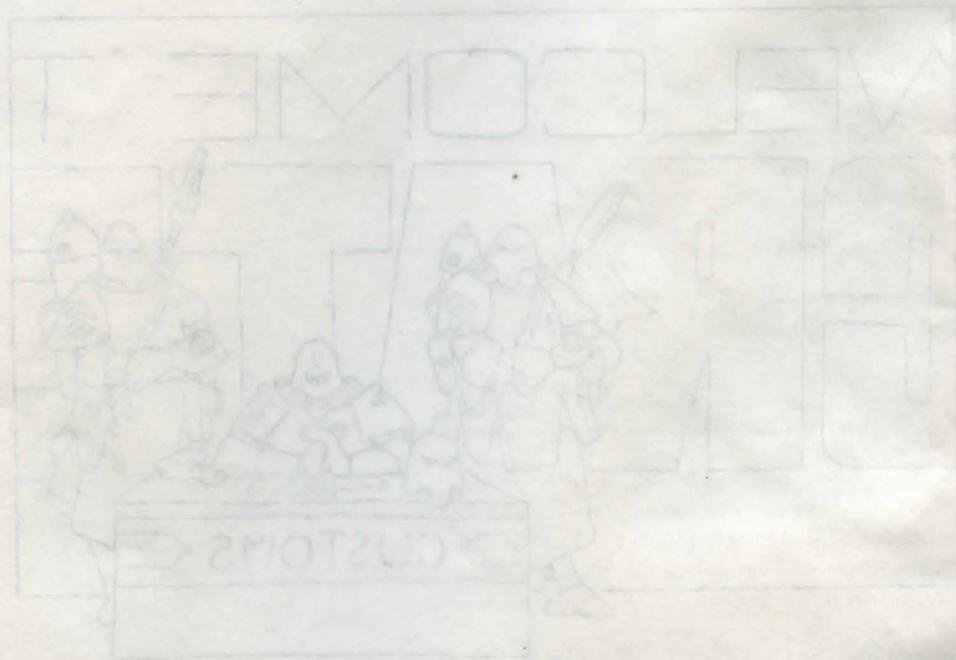
TEXT 569-639



BOOK 1

TEXT 50-430

STAR
SAGA: ONE



[569]

You spend a few moments while traveling through the eerie void called hyperspace to reflect on your accomplishments. You have not only forced your way into that asteroid and improved the offensive capability of your ship, but you have even managed to build the complex device known as a Super Space Suit. You feel very proud of yourself.

Then you have a troubling thought. What was the purpose of doing these things? To get the Core Stone for which your tribe has been searching for all these generations.

"So," you think to yourself, "I really ought to go back to FLN-1 to look for the stone."

✂ STOP ✂

[570]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Continued 

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

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

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

Your ship's computer picks up landing instructions from the installation, and you bring your ship down without incident. There's not much to see: a few docks, two other freighters besides yours. There are a few buildings, windowless and airlocked against the vacuum, but they don't even look used. You've seen more construction at a one-man asteroid mine. A boarding tube snakes out and nuzzles the side of your ship. It seals and pressurizes, allowing you to disembark. You follow the tube and find yourself in an elevator, which politely welcomes you to Para-Para and offers you a seat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

✱ STOP ✱

[571]

Your ship is outclassed and you are soon forced to surrender. The officer who boards your vessel tells you, "You are guilty of violating the Boundary. We do not take kindly to criminals trying to disrupt our space and treat such criminals harshly. Since our records show this is your first violation, we will be lenient with you."

After looking through all of your belongings, the officer instructs you to follow his ship to the edge of the Boundary, where you will depart from the area of space claimed by the Nine Worlds.

You head back the way you came with the Patrol ship on your heels. Passing through the imaginary line that separates Humanity from the rest of the galaxy, you hear the officer warning you not to return or the consequences will be much more severe.

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.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[572]

From the moment you discovered its existence, the secret passageway has intrigued you. You decide that now is the time to do some real exploring.

But first you must think of some way to lose BarrBurr.

After only a moment of thought, the solution comes to you. There is only one thing the left-spinner would, without a second thought, abandon you for and that is . . .

"A spy!" you bellow at the top of your lungs. "A filthy, rotten, right-spinning spy!"

"Where?" cries the immediately agitated Tralisian.

"There," you shout, pointing down a very long street. "It just spun around the corner!"

"A spy! A spy!" BarrBurr screams, twirling down the street, with no thought given to you.

You are actually feeling a little rejected at being so readily abandoned, but that soon passes as you make your way to the side street with the secret passage.

Upon your arrival, you waste no time in looking for the mechanism to open the door. It doesn't take very long before you find it and deduce how it operates. Simple though it is, you correctly assume that the left-spinners, with their hatred of contraptions, would never figure out how to open the door.

Looking both ways to be sure you are not observed, you open the panel and then close it behind you.

You mentally kick yourself for not thinking of bringing a light, but after a moment, your eyes begin to perceive the outlines of the tunnel. As you travel down the passage, the light becomes brighter; after the second bend in the tunnel, you have no trouble seeing where you are going.

Continued 

You continually try to find the source of the light, but to no avail. The science involved here is beyond you. The long and twisted tunnel remains well-lit, and from the looks of the packed floor, well-traveled.

After a few minutes, the passage opens into a small room with no other apparent exits.

"Welcome," a disembodied voice greets you. "I am Shearsy. What brings you here?"

"I am interested in meeting the rest of the Tralisians," you answer honestly.

"Very well. I am on my way to the city. You may travel with me if you wish."

A cleverly concealed doorway slides open and Shearsy, a right-spinning Tralisan, appears before you. You note that the alien is also wearing a translator.

Motioning for you to follow, Shearsy heads down the new passage. This one is also well-lit and apparently well-traveled. When you reach the end, you find yourself outdoors in the forest that surrounds the village. The alien takes you to a clearing, steps on top of a large pancake-shaped creature, and motions for you to do the same.

Bravely you step aboard. After all, what harm can a pancake do, right?

Through some unknown physical manipulations, the creature is able to rise up off the ground. That part you can handle. It's when the pancake starts to rotate like a frisbee that you begin to have second thoughts.

And third thoughts.

You are considering leaping off the creature when, thankfully, it begins to descend. Even as a child, you were never very good on merry-go-rounds.

You are surprised to see that you have landed in one of the deserted cities. Perhaps they are not so deserted after all?

Shearsy gracefully spins to the ground while you take a turn for the worse and fall off the pancake creature. After a moment, you regain your sense of balance and are able to reassure the Tralisan that you are all right.

While you are heading toward your final destination 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 could 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 new options are:

⟨8UHOAF⟩ (4 phases) Learn more about the translator.

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

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[573]

You never realized how much fun eavesdropping could be! You have been listening in on a conversation between two smugglers for the past hour, and have thoroughly enjoyed yourself. What's more, you do not feel at all ashamed.

One reason for the lack of embarrassment is that you have picked up some interesting information during the course of the conversation, the most important being the discovery of a planet where Universal Translators can be obtained. The name of the world is Tralis, and you write down the data for later use.

You are disappointed when the two smugglers sign off, but you feel you have spent the last few hours profitably.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[574]

You take off with no difficulty and are soon on your way. The space around Gironde is as empty as it has always been.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[575]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 5

You have many options available to you now. This time you decide to quench your thirst at the Slippery Silver Tavern, which will use one phase of your turn. Also, you elect to visit the Wellmet market place, which will use the remaining two phases of this turn.

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	T	O	V	G	B	O	L
2	—	—	—	—	—	—	A: E9MDNQ
3	—	—	—	—	—	T	B
4	R	V	G	B	L	—	—
5	—	—	—	—	A: 8VHKAV	A: OFFII7	—
6							

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 5

Head over to the computer and log on, as usual. Now press **A** and then **D** (the **D** corresponds to the action code **8VHKAV**) to go to the Tavern. Next, press **A** and then **A** again, which will take you to the market. Finally, press either Return or **F** to get your results for this turn.

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 5

When the computer has evaluated your move, it will send you to the Tavern text. You may notice that after you receive your assignment, the CGM still lists your character as needing to "GET RESULTS." When this happens, you should **not** attempt to get the new results until following the computer's first instructions. After finishing at the Tavern, you will read the market text. Once you have read about the market, you will need to decide whether or not you wish to trade any of your cargo for what they have available here (you should note the trades available on your Planet Log for later reference). When you have decided what you wish to do, go to the computer, just as the text directs you to do, and log on. Your character log shows that you have a Market interaction pending with an asterisk. Press the asterisk key or Return to continue with the market. You now have the opportunity to make your first trade if you so wish. You are never obligated to exchange cargo or items at a market.

Planet Log

Planet Name: Wellmet

Actions Available:

Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
OFFII7	2	market	yes
8FHIA7	4	weapons	
8VHKAV	1	tavern	yes
OVFKIV	3	history	
KFVIK7	4	information	
4FXIC7	3	family market	

Trades Offered:

They Sell	For
3 munitions	1 fuel
3 munitions	1 radioactives
1 munitions	1 culture
1 munitions	1 iron
1 munitions	1 medicine

Note that you should also add the new option you learned while at the market, namely the Torrence family market.

This concludes your character's first five turns. You should now have a good idea how to plot your moves on the computer. If you are still a bit uncertain, we recommend that you read the Rules section and/or CGM Guide in the *Host Guide and Player Reference Manual* or ask a helpful soul standing nearby. You should also have an indication of how important it is to write things down, especially the options available on each planet along with their action codes, what can be bought and sold at the market places, and how many phases each option takes.

Last but not least, always keep your character goals in mind — that is how you will win the game!

You are now ready to take over the helm and are free to explore the galaxy. You may stay here awhile, return to Medsun, visit Cathedral, or head off into the great unknown. Good luck!

❖ STOP ❖

[576]

The landing coordinates on Frontier are easy to reach and you have no trouble landing on the planet. You breathe a sigh of relief as you set down with little difficulty.

A welcoming committee is waiting outside so you head out to speak to someone in charge. A large man with a broken nose approaches you and asks you your business here. You explain that you are running some cargo for some people and were told to come here.

"So where's the cargo?" big and ugly asks you.

"Well, it's like this," you begin, intending to explain why you do not have the three units of Culture you were supposed to transport here.

Continued 

But he doesn't give you any time. "Look," he growls threateningly. "If you have the stuff, just hand it over. If you don't have the stuff, you'd better leave here before I get angry. We don't like incompetence and tend to deal with it rather harshly. We hate excuses for botched jobs even more; the consequences for them are even worse than for incompetence."

You gulp and make the decision that you should leave until you have the three units of Culture to trade for the Gradient Filter. You excuse yourself and beat a hasty retreat back to your ship.

Wiping your brow, you realize what a close call that was and promise never to do anything that stupid again.

You may select this option again.

✕ STOP ✕

[577]

During the long days you spend in hyperspace, you must use all of your ingenuity to keep from being bored to death. Sometimes you play computer games, your favorite being a space exploration game that really gives you the feel of being an old-time space explorer. Of course you are now *living* this game, so you find yourself in need of another diversion.

Your next choice of ways to pass the time is to call upon the computer to provide your favorite book, entitled "Sigourney Rambeaux: Autobiography of a Real Time Explorer."

You settle back in your chair and prepare to enjoy several days of reading pleasure. During this time, you learn the following:

There is a planet by the name of Alkon that Sigourney discovered many years ago. She didn't provide any useful information about the planet except that it was a good source of Fiber.

You are always interested in learning new things, and you make a note of the name of this world for future reference.

✕ STOP ✕

[578]

Markov is a fascinating city. Small, but very crowded. The main buildings appear no more elaborate than simple adobe homes. It seems to be a large resort city, supporting the more industrial Drofflic.

The main industry in the town is a sport called Trundling, a rather elaborate scavenger hunt in the caverns just outside of the city. These caverns are stocked with "monsters" and "treasures" by a person called a Cavern-Master. There are several levels of difficulty, and by Trundling your way up, you can advance to the level of the Professional Trundlers. These, the highest paid athletes in Gen, are followed in their adventures by television cameras which broadcast across the planet.

When you inquire about trying a little Trundling yourself, you are advised that the basic skills require several years to master. After watching some video tapes of the prior year's Trundle-off, you tend to agree. However, you are told that if you are really interested, you may examine one of the "cleaned-out" caves near the city:

(QH8AH6) (4 phases) Visit the Titanic Cave.

✕ STOP ✕

[579]

Upon your return to Darscold you cannot help but spend a few moments watching the panoramic vista before you. The beautiful floating orbs that contain the Darscian cities are offset perfectly by the backdrop of the lush green of the vegetation and the clear blue waters.

What a lovely planet.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[580]

Not only is the red garbed squirrel a fierce opponent but he also has the decided advantage of being fresh. After all, *he* didn't spend the whole morning digging this pit!

You find the pit to be very confining and are forced to defend yourself with very little elbow room.

You realize this cannot go on much longer. After making a succession of offensive feints, you drive the vermin back far enough to give yourself some running space and scramble up the slanted pit wall.

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 ✧

[581]

You are feeling very restless but are not sure why. You are holding your own out here beyond the Boundary and have even gotten one of the three ship improvements you need before you can return to Norstar.

Maybe that is the problem. You only have ONE of the improvements so far. You need to start getting serious about getting the other two improvements, or your former company may not have any use for the things you are going to be bringing back with you. Someone else might even sell S.T. Enterprises the information before you can get back. Then where will you be?

Most likely up on smuggling charges with no one to fight for you.

✧ STOP ✧

[582]

To pass the time you try counting things you see around you.

Hmmm. One large plant. What else is there to count? Oh yes, your toes, one, two, three. . . You pass out from the heat and dehydration.

When you come to, you find you have been saved by the Brethren. It has been seven days since the beginning of the Ordeal.

You may select this option again.

✧ STOP ✧

[583]

Taking a deep breath, you set the course for the lower, more turbulent levels of the planet's atmosphere. The ship begins its descent. You strap yourself to the command chair in preparation for the buffeting you are soon to encounter. You can hardly wait.

The trip is as rough as you expected it to be. The winds toss your ship around as if it were a toy. You are not having fun.

After a particularly long hard day trying to keep the ship in one piece, you are rewarded for your diligence and perseverance. The computer is showing a large deposit of warp core immediately to your left.

Using all of your training and skill you manage to bring aboard enough raw ore to refine one unit of warp core.

Congratulations!

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

✧ STOP ✧

[584]

Now that you can communicate with Riallans, you turn your attention to the one that's been occupying your cargo bay. Perhaps you can work out some sort of understanding.

"Riallan," you address the blue furry beachball through your intraship audio, "I apologize for any inconvenience I may have caused you. I know you must have a busy schedule. You are free to leave this ship at any time." You prepare to take off quickly in the event that the Riallan sets the authorities on you after you let it go, then engage the sequence to open the cargo bay door.

"Appendage. Redundant. Hot. Astrophysics. Supporting structural member." is the Riallan's reply. Of course it doesn't speak these words — it emits rapid beeps that your translator decodes into Earth Standard — but the translation seems to make less sense than the beeps.

You try again. "Please accept my apology. If possible I will make restitution. Please depart immediately."

"Oxidation," comes the reply. "Appropriate haste. Competition. Gas." The Riallan doesn't move.

You turn off the intercom. "Computer, has the translation program glitched?"

"Negative, Boss. This Riallan is communicating in gibberish, at least compared to the Riallan language as we know it."

"Some other language, perhaps?"

"Negative, there is no pattern. It is truly random symbols."

"Like an insane being's ravings? Or a crashed computer system?"

"Perhaps more like baby talk."

The next day, while in conversation with a Riallan space crew member who is waiting for a cargo load to transfer, you discreetly bring up the subject of Riallan babies.

"There are two different distinct types of Riallan individual being," it tells you, "male and female. *Translator interrupt: words "male" and "female" assigned associationally and not indicative of truly sexual reproductive means.* 'Males' die by falling dead. 'Females' die by fissional splitting into one immature male and one or more immature females. None retains the identity or memory of the original deceased female."

Immature Riallans, you learn, look just like adults. They require no care or teaching until ready to acquire special vocational skills. And they like nothing better than going into space. "Probably," says the teamster, "this is because all Riallans are adapted to be spacedwelling beings. But of course until maturely developed, they have an intractably stubborn and unresponsive emotional temper and they have little control over their automotory and gravireactive abilities, therefore requiring large cubic volumes of shipboard open empty space. Few are willing to make such a sacrifice of ship resources."

It appears, though, that you have done so. Your cargo bay will, for the foreseeable future, remain host to an immature blue Riallan. It's a good thing you like children so much.

✧ STOP ✧

[585]

You are having such great fun zooming all around the galaxy. Well, at least around the area of space up to the Density Barrier. You know that the next step in searching for the origin of the Stone is to travel past the Density Barrier. Unfortunately, you have no clue where to go from there.

Wait a minute! You were told that the planet Outpost may have information vital to your exploration of the Galactic Arm.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[586]

As you close in on your home planet, Atlantis, you can't stop thinking about what is going to happen when you return with the Stone. What will your parents say? How will the elders react? Surely no one is expecting you to come back with the Stone, and so soon. It is going to be a shock. The tribe's culture is based on searching for the Stone, not on finding it. When they realize that the quest is finally over, they aren't going to know what to do next.

It will be hard for the tribe to adjust, but that's not what worries you the most. It's going to be even harder for you. The whole purpose of your life has been to search for the Stone. Since you were born, you have prepared yourself for the quest. You studied astronomy and shipbuilding. You listened to stories about the great explorers. When the other children pretended to be farmers and doctors, you played the part of a spaceship pilot. You envisioned yourself drifting among the stars, seeking the great Stone that would save all Humanity. How can you go home now, to the small island where you grew up, and become a farmer? What will you do with yourself?

It is late morning, with the sun almost directly overhead, when you approach the small island on Atlantis where your quest began. As you touch down, you look out your viewscreen and see that the entire tribe of Questors is gathered to receive you. Of course, they don't know that you have the Stone. They expect you to be like any other returning Questor: unsuccessful, and no longer able to carry on the search. Perhaps they are disappointed that you have given up so early. They are in for a surprise.

Your parents are standing in front, ready to give you their love and to accept you back into their home. They look a little disconcerted; they are probably afraid that you have been badly hurt. Behind them are the elders, dressed in their ceremonial robes and carrying the sacred scrolls. They are prepared to lead the Rites of Hope and Sorrow, consoling you and your family for your brave attempt, and praying for the child who will take up the quest where you left off. Around the rim of the clearing, the rest of the tribe is crowded around to watch.

You open the hatch and step out of your ship, holding the Stone in the flexion glove. You take a deep breath of the clean air and feel the rich soil under your feet. No one makes a sound as you slowly walk forward with your treasure. Your parents, the elders, and all the tribesmen and women are in awe. The silence seems to last forever. Finally, one of the elders starts to chant. The elder is leading the Rite of Return, a rite that everyone knows, but one that has never been spoken in public — until now. The other elders start to take up the chant as well. You feel joy, an elation that overflows your body and pours out into the noonday sun. The whole tribe is chanting as you run to your mother and father, crying, triumphantly holding the Stone high in the air for the whole world to see.

After a few days at home enjoying the love and care of your family, you go to see the elders who have arranged a private session with you in their secluded Circled Chamber. Ruric, the eldest of the elders, addresses you. "You have done Humanity a great service," he says,

the wrinkles of his dry aged face pinching together as he speaks. "In finding the Stone which has been lost for twenty generations, you have succeeded where every Questor before you has failed. You have, in part, fulfilled the destiny of your tribe."

"Thank you," is all you can reply.

There is a long pause as the other elders silently nod their approval. They are very grateful, but there is something wrong about their expressions. They don't seem as relieved as you had expected them to be.

Ruric draws a breath, his brow lowering against his small, pale eyes. "However," he continues, "your quest is not finished. You have the Stone, yes. But what should you do with it? Twenty generations ago the first Stoneseeker wrote that it would be needed to save Humanity. But how?"

"I don't know," you respond. "It's an important question."

"It is a question that must be answered," Ruric declares. "The Stone itself, without the knowledge of how and why to use it, is not enough."

"But how can we find out?" you ask. "It doesn't say in the writings."

"There is only one way," Ruric declares. "You must go to the place where Soulsinger first discovered the Stone. There you may learn more about what the Stone truly is, and what purpose it is to serve. Unfortunately, the sacred scrolls do not give this location, nor do they say how Soulsinger acquired the Stone there. The only clue, gleaned from certain descriptions of Soulsinger's travels, is that the place of origin is somewhere further toward the galactic core, in a portion of the galaxy known as the Arm. You must search there for the answer."

"I see." At least now you know what to do next. The quest is not over; in fact, finding the Stone's purpose may be as difficult as was finding the Stone itself. The tribe will continue sending people to the stars for a while longer. Hopefully, it won't take twenty generations, but who knows?

Ruric stands up and begins to speak again, at which point the other elders also rise. "Corin Stoneseeker, you are now the Stone Bearer. The Stone makes you immortal so you may learn and use its power. May the favor be granted to you." Ruric then takes his seat, and the other elders follow.

Ruric continues, "Of course, it is no small task to journey out to the Galactic Arm. Compared to the Fringe, the Arm has a much higher concentration of space dust. This increased matter density makes the two-axis drives of your spaceship inoperable. Your craft will take you to the edge of the Fringe but no further.

"To travel in the Galactic Arm, you need a tri-axis drive booster, which adds a third axis of warp tension to your drive system. It is possible to build such a booster, but the technique is not well understood. It has been done only a few times, long ago, by famous explorers such as Soulsinger and Vanessa Chang. As far as we know, no one has done it since the establishment of the Boundary.

"However, we have something that will make your task of building a tri-axis drive booster a little easier." Ruric produces a small, ornately carved wooden box. He lifts the cover to reveal the contents. Inside is the most beautiful object you have ever seen. It is a sparkling, bright red gem about the size of your fist. Its perfectly cut facets reflect light into your eyes as you reach out to take the treasure. "It is called a Flame Jewel," he tells you.

"The Flame Jewel is an essential component of the tri-axis drive booster. Flame jewels are so rare that fewer than a dozen are known to exist, most of them found by Vanessa Chang. She gave one to the first Stoneseeker's daughter, under the condition that we would not use it until we found the Stone which we sought. You have found the Stone, so we can now give the Flame Jewel to you.

"Take the Flame Jewel, and use it to build the tri-axis drive booster you need to travel to the Galactic Arm. Then, when you have the booster, go to Outpost, the most distant human colony ever established. Outpost was intended by the most advanced pre-Boundary explorers

to be the base from which they would explore and colonize the Arm. No doubt the base has been abandoned in the three hundred years since the Boundary was formed and the thought of colonizing the Arm dismissed for good. However, you will certainly need whatever records and maps you can find there before you can go any further.

"If, for any reason, you can no longer continue your quest to find the origin of the Stone, come home. You can end your travels and give the Stone and your ship to another Questor. You can even quit now, if you wish. Another Questor can be chosen to take your place. Do you want that?"

"No," you reply. "I am honored to be the Stone Bearer and to seek the Stone's purpose."

"Very well then," Ruric agrees. "Take the Flame Jewel." He hands you the wooden box. "Tomorrow the tribe shall be gathered for the Rites of Remembrance. We shall bid you good fortune, and await your return."

So the drums beat again, the elders speak, and the fires burn, marking your second departure for the stars. The memories of your eighteenth birthday are strong as you stand in the silence after the ritual ends and you are once more alone with your ship. The night passes, and the dawn lights your vessel with the promise of another quest to fulfill. You fire your engines and lift off into the Atlantian sky. You must build a tri-axis drive booster, penetrate the dense gases of the Galactic Arm, and go to Outpost, where you can begin your search for the origin of the Stone.

Good luck!

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

✧ STOP ✧

[587]

You are having such great fun zooming all around the galaxy. Well, at least around the area of space up to the Density Barrier. You know that the next step in searching for Silverbeard's base is to travel past the Density Barrier. Unfortunately, you have no clue where to go from there.

Wait a minute! Dr. Schottky told you that the planet Outpost might have information about the location of Silverbeard's base. Outpost is located somewhere just on the far side of the Density Barrier.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[588]

It dawns on you, while you are picking your way through the fractured wreckage of the colony dome, that the aliens who colonized here must have been from a moonless world. Clearly, they had no idea of the tidal forces which Baphi's four moons could generate. The moons must have come into some unusual conjunction, perhaps with the sun as well, so that their combined effects made it seem like the whole planet was being ripped asunder. There might have been earthquakes, and ocean tides greater than fifty meters. The colony dome, shaken from below and inundated from above, could not possibly have withstood the stress. What strikes you as truly remarkable, now that you think about it, is that the entire site wasn't swept clean.

Sifting through the wreckage reveals a great deal of rusting equipment, which you don't have time to catalog in this, your first brief visit. Although you can make few guesses as to the nature of the aliens who lived here, they were obviously technologically advanced, perhaps more so than you. The dome was constructed of a lightweight plastic material, and must obviously have had more to hold it together than is presently meeting your eye, perhaps something like a force field generator.

Examination of the remaining wreckage offers you other tantalizing hints of their scientific prowess. You notice one partially standing structure from which the low pitched humming of power is emanating. You also see some large pieces of equipment that still seem to be intact.

You have the following options:

⟨HXAC6U⟩ (5 phases) Explore the building with the humming sound,

⟨XXCCUU⟩ (3 phases) Search through the wreckage for possibly usable materials,

⟨DHQA86⟩ (3 phases) Try to reconstruct the (hypothetical) force field that must have held the dome together.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[589]

You are very happy to be able to break the monotony of hyperspace by conversing with the occasional passing ship jockey, except when that other pilot is an alien creature. Although their physical differences do not really bother you (much), you are a bit uneasy when speaking with them. How do you know they really understand what you are saying?

But company is company, especially when you are in hyperspace, so you cross your fingers and hope for the best.

You are just finishing what you believe is an amusing story about your first crush, only to find the alien in tears. Now you're wondering whether the fuzzy creature has misunderstood the intent of the story or if this is just its way of reacting to humor.

After a moment of painful silence, the alien seems to cheer up and begins to tell you a tale of alien love that has something to do with a tractor-like piece of equipment.

All you can think is "Vive la Difference!"

During the course of the story, however, you do learn something of interest. The end of the alien's love comes when they go to the planet Ascension and the tractor is adversely affected by the Technology Nullifier there. The creature is waiting for your reaction to its story and all you can think to do is applaud. It seems to be the right thing to do, because the creature waves and says it hopes to speak with you again. "You are O.K. by me," it tells you in very poor Earth Standard.

Continued 

Smiling, you turn from the screen and digest the piece of information you learned from the encounter.

❖ STOP ❖

[590]

You board the storage station once again and find its basic structure unchanged. Of course, this does not mean that the contents of the storage rooms have not been disturbed since your last visit. Certainly if someone has been here in the interim, you might want to think twice about storing anything of value. Once again, you will be able to take any of the rooms' contents, transfer your tradable cargo to empty rooms, or eject anything from storage rooms to the void outside.

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

❖ STOP ❖

[591]

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

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

You have one disastrous moment, when one of the plants virtually uproots itself while making a grab for you. You can still hear the chomping noise as the pod closes on your back pack and left shoulder.

Using your weapon, you are able to loosen the monster's grip enough to struggle free. Gathering all of your strength, you make a final run for safety.

You are amazed a few moments later to find yourself at the edge of the grove, out of harm's way. After taking care of your wounds, you are disheartened to see that the container of sap was ripped from your pack. On the bright side, though, you still have your equipment if you want to try again.

You may select this option again.

❖ STOP ❖

[592]

Pulitt is a model of statesmanly decorum as he leads you to the bulk trade market in the center of the city. While the spindly alien isn't unfriendly, he does little to endear himself to you. Perhaps this is the nature of the Hemingella. Who are you to judge?

You find yourself in a crowded plaza with what you assume to be buying and trading going on very loudly all around you. A lot of paper is changing hands. Apparently the market here works like the commodities markets from old Earth around the end of the second millenium. The Hemingella are trading contracts for goods to be delivered at a future date. In addition to the distributors that will use the goods directly, there are also speculators taking part in the action. You feel invigorated by the charged atmosphere. Maybe you will get a chance to practice your inborn haggling abilities.

Pulitt brings you to a small building adjacent to the plaza. A wizened monkey creature stabs you with his beady stare the moment you pass through the doorway. Your blood quickens as you prepare to negotiate with him.

The little alien behind the counter jabbbers at you, but you need to wait for Pulitt to interpret.

"He says he will trade:

- 1 Tools for 1 Computers,
- 2 Tools for 1 Iron,
- 3 Tools for 1 Crystals."

Try as you might, you cannot convince Pulitt to negotiate any other deals. "These are the only trades we offer to human visitors," he explains, looking at you with a very solemn expression.

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

✘ STOP ✘

[593]

Near the foot of the lava cone of a large volcano in the southern latitudes, there is a spot of reflective metal that looks completely different from the crust elsewhere. From the air, it looks like a crucible of molten steel was simply splashed over the surface. When you come in closer, you notice details in the metal that suggest that it may be artificial.

You land near the metallic area and approach it on foot. The volcano looms over the site, in the grip of a slow quiet eruption that spills lava continuously in sluggish rivers. The air smells of sulphur and hot iron. When you find the first bits of metal, you stoop to examine them closely. Some of the fragments look like melted droplets that landed and cooled on the rock, but others are fragments of machined parts, obviously made by intelligent hands. You walk on, and there is more and more metal around you in larger and larger fragments. From the way the pieces are melted, twisted, and sheared it is clear that this is the site of a wreck, where a large ship or possibly even an orbital station came down.

The more you explore, the more astounding the size of the ruin. If it was a ship, it would have to have been enormous. If it was made on this planet, then half the metal content of the crust would have to have been gleaned for the purpose. You are looking for samples to take back for analysis when you spot the center of the wreck.

Continued 

Surrounded by melted ruin, there is a large piece of the object still intact. It looks like part of a ship, with bulkheads and utility conduits protruding from its sheared-off edges. There is a modularity in its construction: a series of interlocking identical hexagonal units. Perhaps, then, it was once living quarters or a storage area. You look for a way inside and it isn't hard to find. There are blown-open hatches and gaping holes on all sides.

Inside the wreck, you see the remains of machinery, ductwork, the cores of cables whose insulation has burned away. There is nothing even the slightest bit perishable: there are no bones, all the glass is melted into lumps or gone entirely, and the machinery has been baked dry of lubricants. There are, however, puddles of strange-smelling fluid in some of the low areas. You look for a source of the liquid but it seems to occur randomly.

The intact part of the wreck seems much bigger on the inside. Large parts of it are buried under ground level. You go from chamber to hexagonal chamber, looking for scraps that might reveal the origin of this ship.

In a half-collapsed room on a lower level you find parts of a skeleton that have not yet fallen completely to dust. Your impression is of a small quadrupedal creature with an extra appendage emerging from the chest; the appendage ends in a very large multi-jointed hand that looks capable of great dexterity.

You find parts of the coils of a drive tube, but not enough to figure out what kind of propulsion system the ship had.

You are near the bottommost deck of the ruin, and almost everything that was beneath you has melted, but you stumble across one more open hatch leading down. You descend still further, and find a chamber that is not hexagonal but circular. In the center of the room, set into the floor, is a smooth milky-white round disk the size of your outstretched hand. You crouch low to examine it further. When you touch it there is a strong tingling sensation in your fingers and an image forms in your head.

"The Dictators were angry that we had destroyed atoms and folded space. In their wrath they decreed that the planet of the three suns may no longer be home to the Hrtthi. They said, 'In ten revolutions we will cast your world into the suns. The Hrtthi must build ships and travel to a new world.' For ten years we built the ship, large to carry many of us, though not large enough and not so many. The metal was scarce and the Hrtthi were not meant to be builders of ships, and there was great suffering. The ship was built, but there was not time nor metal nor knowledge enough, and the ship will not escape when the world is cast into the suns. It flies, but it will not carry us to another star, only back to our home."

You take your fingers away from the disk and shake your head to clear the foreign voices away. You feel faint, as though the disk has drained away your energy, and you want to get out of this ruin.

Climbing out of the twisted rooms, you find more and more foul-smelling liquid, dripping from walls and trickling in little rivulets. You aren't certain you're going the same route as when you came in. The smell gets worse, and you find yourself in a dead end. You remember where you made your wrong turn and start to retrace your steps.

There is movement in the wreckage around you. Out of the corner of your eye you see quick flowing motions. A film of thick grey liquid sweeps down a wall ahead of you, covering it briefly with a thin smooth layer, then recollects itself at the base. You see other gray tendrils curling around broken beams and moving in ripples across the ceiling.

You don't know if you are facing a living creature or some freakish chemical process, but in either case, the fluid is attracted toward you. The grey material is highly corrosive and moves extremely rapidly across smooth surfaces. The twisted frames and bulkheads hinder your movements. You are going to have to find a way to defend yourself.

Go now to the CGM.

✱ STOP ✱

[594]

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

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

- M. J. Turner, Seated on your right, is a lean individual who's natural stance is that of being at attention, always ready for action and prepared for anything. You are as interested in what is being left out of this introduction as what is being said.

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

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

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

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

When your turn comes up, you introduce yourself as Jean G. Clerc, an engineer turned explorer. You don't go into details on your real reason for being outside the Boundary.

The seventh person at your table, a tall slim man who looks like he grew up in low gravity, declines to identify himself. This puts a bit of a damper on the conversation, but after a few more drinks the talk becomes freer and you decide that your companions are indeed as inexperienced in spacefaring outside the Boundary as you are.

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

You smile and ask, "So, what do you think it's like out there?"

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

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

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

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[595]

You are unable to damage the gun and robot, but fortunately, they are unable to hurt you either. It is a standoff.

Alas, that does you no good. You can't get any closer to the alien ship. You need to improve your personal attack capabilities so you can inflict more damage on the gun and robot.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[596]

Sighing, you recheck the results from the scan. Nothing magically appears, though, so you take a moment to consider your options.

You could leave, mine for more fuel, or take a chance and rescan the area. Perhaps another scan would reveal something.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[597]

The interior of the ship is a marvel of weapons capability. You poke around for awhile but see that most of the devices are integral parts of the ship's phase steel construction and are therefore immovable.

One of the portions of the ship, though, appears to be removable. This structure is a cargo drone with a capacity of eight of your own cargo bays, a very useful find! A few hours of labor are all that is required for you to remove the drone ship and fly it over to your vessel, where you are able to attach it to the exterior for later use.

When you are finished, you take one final pass through the alien craft. The eerie silence makes you uneasy, so you do not plan on staying very long. While traveling down a narrow corridor near the heart of the ship, you hear a faint humming sound. Listening intently, you manage to pinpoint the source of the noise as coming from a small, dimly lit room.

You enter the room and see a lone device on a table in the far corner. On your previous tour of the ship, you remember giving this place only a cursory glance. You must therefore have missed seeing this device. You cautiously approach the mechanism.

Running a quick scan shows you the alien artifact is still in working order. From the alien tools laying on the table, you would guess it had just been repaired and was about to be placed back wherever it belonged before the alien was interrupted. You ask your computer to analyze the device for its function.

While you wait for the report, you spend the time turning knobs and flicking switches. to see what might happen. Your guess is that the object is some sort of food processor. Perhaps you can use it to augment your own, providing of course that the foods won't poison you.

The computer contacts you just as you've flipped a large blue switch and noticed an increase in the humming sound.

"Boss, the report on... just a minute. Boss, Urgent you leave immediately. I have just noted an increase in the power and radiation levels coming from somewhere aboard the alien vessel. I believe some sort of latent weapon has just been activated. Get out of there fast!"

You gulp, staring at the pretty blue button you have been playing with and quickly reach over and flip it back down to the, hopefully, off position. The humming sound decreases.

"Boss, it's OK. The power and radiation levels are returning to normal, you are in no immediate danger. I do have the report on the device you discovered, would you still like it?"

"Why, that would be just wonderful," you reply with a touch of sarcasm that goes unnoticed by the computer.

"The device seems to be capable of converting ship's power to a focused form of energy and actually sending the energy beam through hyperspace. It is undoubtedly a very potent weapon. It should be able to drill a hole through approximately ten feet of phase steel."

You whistle in surprise when you hear this news. Phase steel is the strongest substance in the known universe.

"Can we use this aboard our ship?" you ask hopefully.

"It will take some research and studying but we should be able to adapt its systems to be compatible with ours," is the glad tidings.

A few hours of labor and you are equipped with the alien device aboard your ship. You do not know what the aliens called this weapon but you decide to name it the "Hyperbeam." You are very pleased with your day's work.

Go now to the CGM.

✱ STOP ✱

[598]

Para-Para is an asteroid-like world, airless and stuck out in the middle of nowhere. It has one man-made installation near its equator which signals landing instructions to your ship. After landing, you take the elevator shuttle to Para-Para's subterranean city. There, just as you did last time, you report to Logistics as an offworlder and are given lodgings and an orange pass. The pass allows access to two of the city's four complexes: Alpha One, the residential area, and Logistics, the department that handles engineering and offworld trade. They are public levels. The other two sections, Research and Lateral Liaison, require a security clearance and are off limits.

Your options are the same as before.

✱ STOP ✱

[599]

Your tiny fragment universe, already empty of everything except yourself, shrinks to a point and disappears. The paradox has resolved itself, as you knew it would, by annihilating the mind that perceived it.

You are dead.

Read immediately text entry 335.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[600]

“Whee!”

You nearly jump out of your chair in surprise. “What in tarnation was that?” you demand to know.

“We seem to be picking up an alien transmission from somewhere, Boss. Would you like me to locate and track the signal?”

“Sure, I’d like to know what that awful sound was. It sounded like someone was in agony.” You wait nervously while the computer tries to reestablish contact.

“Got it, Boss. I’m opening channels now.”

“Whee!” you hear again.

“Hello?” you ask tentatively. “Is there someone there? Do you need assistance?”

You wait in silence, biting your fingernails nervously.

“Whee. We cannot speak now. We are playing with our new toy. Get your own and have some fun. Go to Corbis and look for Super Slip. With this stuff, you can slide anywhere, no friction. Whee!”

“That’s all, Boss. I’ve lost the transmission or they’ve stopped sending.”

You thank your computer and think about what you have just learned.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[601]

The human body, unfortunately, has limitations on the types of environments in which it can exist without risk. You feel satisfaction at the knowledge that you will be able to overcome most or all of these limitations through your newly-built Super Space Suit. It was simple, really — one unit each of Primordial Soup, Super Slip, Food, Medicine, Fiber, and Fluids. Now more than ever, you'll be able to go where no one has gone before.

Congratulations!

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[602]

Even with the force you've gathered, you find that you lack enough total firepower to fight your way past the satellites. Attacking in force helps a lot, by reducing the number of enemies each of you has to face, but that won't win the battle unless you also have the weapons you need to disable the satellites. The battle stations are tough. They're heavily armored and shielded, and they have active jamming defenses and anti-projectile inertial defenses as well. To beat them you either need a lot of firepower, or another way to disable them — such as by disrupting the functioning of their electronic brains or preventing them from maneuvering freely.

Unfortunately, you only find this out once you are fully committed to battle with the robots. The battle is not a quick one, because the sides are close to even. Inevitably, though, the defense satellites get the advantage. Each attack they resist allows time for another to join the battle against you. Even with your simultaneous attack they still outnumber you heavily.

You're not sure which is worse: the damage your ship sustains in the battle or the gloating of Silverbeard as you're forced to retreat. "Har, har, har!" he says. "I'll make a swap with ye. Send all yer cargo down to me and it'll save us both the trouble of me stealing it from ye later! Har, har, har!" The worst part of it is that complete repairs to your hull will take days, and you're going to have to listen to Silverbeard's taunts the whole time.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[603]

You decide to return to the Slippery Silver Tavern for a bit of quiet relaxation, a drink or two, possibly an entertaining brawl, and to see if just maybe that tall thin Santa Claus is giving out any more presents. The place is just the same as always; if you could take a five percent commission on all the business deals made there you could retire in comfort. Of course, you could probably retire in comfort anyway, but it's a nice thought.

Unfortunately, your friend Mr. Tall, Thin, and Mysterious isn't around, and no one you ask has seen him. You suspect that, if you asked, no one would have seen those three crewman go flying through the window a minute ago either; people aren't very talkative here.

Continued 

You may select this option again.

✧ STOP ✧

[604]

While listening to your ship's radio, you overhear a conversation, apparently between two smugglers.

While you do not understand everything they are talking about, you do manage to pick up some useful information concerning the planet Moiran. Apparently you can obtain a rather rare commodity there called Phase Steel.

You make a note of this new information, but before you can learn anything else, you lose the signal.

✧ STOP ✧

[605]

You spend four days gathering huge amounts of a variety of plant material, including doughnut-shaped fruits, prickly peas, segments of hard-shelled cactus, elastic vines, and pods that grow like bunches of cubic bananas. All of it is edible, all of it is durable enough to survive in your cargo hold (especially at absolute zero), and all of it is bright orange. It's hard work, and you sweat off several pounds in the warm air, but you feel a nice sense of accomplishment when you have filled an entire cargo bay with Food.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[606]

All of the fun and excitement of being a real space explorer is more thrilling than you ever dreamed it would be. Except, you have this feeling you are neglecting something very important.

When you sit down to meditate on what this could possibly be, you get the answer almost immediately.

"Of course," you say aloud.

"What's that, Boss?" your computer asks you.

"I just realized how much time has passed since I found out about the planet Cordethar," you reply. "If we are going to track down the missing File, we will need to go there."

"Ready when you are, Boss."

✧ STOP ✧

[607]

There is no evidence that life of any sort ever evolved here on Cordethar, but the surface was once colonized. There are extensive ruins that include many spaceport platforms. The colony apparently took advantage of Cordethar's low gravity to establish a trading port in a strategic area of the galaxy.

During the time that the port was in use, the machine Cordethar was severely limited in its functioning due to a widespread drop in the dual space level. It was capable only of listening and recording the events taking place on its surface.

You can vaguely identify the colonists' speech as High Darscian as Cordethar plays back the records of that era from its memory. The Darscian colony was built only nine hundred thirty years ago. It became one of the Darscians' busiest ports at a time when the race apparently did much more space travelling than they do now.

Five hundred years ago, the machine in Cordethar started to awaken, and it didn't want the presence of the Darscians to distract it from its duties. It asked them all to leave, and forced them off the planet. They have avoided the sector ever since.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[608]

In just a few short days, you manage to neatly assemble and arrange all of the coconuts which were rolled down upon you by the little green men, stacking them in a giant hopper which has magically manifested itself right beside you. After the fun of all this is over, you look around for something else to do.

When you are done doing whatever the something else is, and whatever else you might have had in mind after that, you eventually must find your ship. At that point, you notice that there is now an additional cargo bay attached to the right side of your pretty ship, one which is full of one unit of Fiber!

You smile happily. You are having SUCH a wonderful time.

Imagine!

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[609]

The monster may be huge, but it is a bit on the slow and lumbering side. Your quick reflexes and your weapon are just enough to turn the tide in your favor. You are relieved when the creature heads off into the swamp.

The remainder of the trip is uneventful and you soon find yourself at Strangways' lab. The door is ajar so you knock politely (Mom would be proud of you) and enter.

The alien is at the control panel but rises as you approach. Strangways expresses pleasure at your visit and asks about your trip.

You relate your adventure, keeping the heroics to a minimum since you are the modest sort, and ask about the availability of Primordial Soup.

Unfortunately, you have arrived before the end of the production cycle. Better luck next time.

You may select this option again.

✕ STOP ✕

[610]

Your first impression of the natives of the planet Rialla is that they are not very patient beings. In fact, you get this impression before you even reach the planet's surface. You are approaching the planet, following a standard coded landing beacon, on a trajectory that will bring you to a spaceport somewhere on the equator. Behind you, you detect a Riallan ship following the same trajectory, but it is either lighter or more powerful than yours. It gains on you rapidly, and only when you are seconds away from collision do you receive a warning on your navigation frequency, followed by a coded request for priority. You practically slam yourself into a bulkhead as you add lateral g's to your thrust and allow the Riallan hauler to pass. She whips by you so closely that you can see her hull without any viewscreen magnification: it's all curves, configured completely unlike yours, and apparently designed around a different propulsion system. It's hard to tell, but the Riallan vessel could very well be hiding a tri-axis drive booster in that toroidal bulge in her central stress frame. You decide that it may be worth putting up with a little rudeness to explore this planet further.

Rialla is a large world but it lacks a dense metallic core, so its surface gravity is low. About half the planet's surface is open water, and much of the rest is covered with vegetation of a blue-green color. There are twenty-one large cities, but oddly enough, there are no smaller settlements of any kind. The cities, one of which is adjacent to the spaceport, are connected by some sort of surface transit system, and there is also considerable atmospheric and transatmospheric traffic. It would seem that Riallans are fond of going places quickly.

You land at the spaceport with no further difficulty, and are greeted by a contingent of fuzzy beachballs — in assorted colors — who beep and chirp at you as if trying to communicate. Their language is very difficult, full of redundant words and elaborate rules of syntax, but your Universal Translator starts picking up on it within a few minutes. Unfortunately, by that time, the original Riallan contingent has given up on you and hurried off on some other business. It takes you a few minutes longer to find a Riallan spaceport official and arrange for proper berthing of your ship. The Riallan also recites a few rules and regulations, beeping and chirping so quickly that by the time your Translator catches up, he is gone:

"The Riallan native inhabitants extend moderately appreciatively our welcome to this spherical planetary crustal surface. Your mobile ship vessel is assured and protected; pre-metabolic gases are provided gratis for your stay of reasonable duration. Your profitable participation in the business of exchange trading is invited. Please confine your physical presence and locations to this spaceport and the closest city adjacent.

Forbidden is the manufacture of dangerous directed or concentrated energies. Please retain all bodily fluids and nongaseous waste products for disposal aboard your own space vessel only. For your own safety and avoidance of termination maintain a cautious center of gravity at adequate distances from hazardous vertical gradients."

In this final injunction, the Riallan apparently is referring to the many open pits, chasms, and missing floors common (as you soon learn) in Riallan construction. The Riallans themselves don't have to worry about such things, due to the fact that they rarely touch the ground.

In fact, the Riallans have no visible means of support at all. They all float in the air, usually about four or five feet up. When they want to move somewhere, which is usually the case, they simply do so, without bouncing, rolling, or showing any signs of exertion. Riallans have no visible sensory organs, and seem to have no distinction between front and back, or top and bottom. When manipulating some types of machinery, they occasionally use artificial limbs of various types, but you cannot tell how these devices are attached or manipulated. Most of their technology is equipped with computer interfaces that respond to audible beeping and chirping commands.

Watching your step, dodging hurrying Riallans, you begin exploring the city. This turns out to be rather difficult. Being unable to float directly across missing bridge spans or up and down elevatorless elevator shafts, you spend quite a lot of time finding alternate routes. The Riallans, for their part, seem very impressed by your ability to climb. One pauses long enough to ask, "How do you coordinate and control so many multiple joint flexible appendages at once?" but doesn't wait for an answer. You eventually learn enough about the environs to pursue the following possibilities further:

⟨HUAO6F⟩ (3 phases) Go to the Universal Iron Exchange and see what deals you can make.

⟨XUCOUF⟩ (3 phases) Look for a source of information about Riallan physiology — perhaps a doctor, or the Riallan equivalent, who can tell you how these fuzzy beachballs manage to move, see, eat, and manipulate appendages.

⟨HEAM6N⟩ (5 phases) Explore the undeveloped lands outside the city.

The Riallans maintain extensive shipyards in this city. From what you saw in orbit, you can tell that their knowledge of propulsion systems is pretty advanced. In this area you see several possibilities for further examination:

⟨DEQM8N⟩ (3 phases) Visit the labs run by the Riallan Space Authority and see if they will give you any information about their Tri-Axis Hyperdrive system or other advances in drive technology.

⟨TESMWN⟩ (3 phases) Visit the construction yards where ships' hulls are built and see if you can arrange for your own ship's cargo capacity to be increased.

⟨DUQO8F⟩ (3 phases) Visit the Jump Engine factories, where the Riallans make fast robot cargo haulers, and see what it would cost you to acquire one.

✠ STOP ✠

[611]

The spaceport people are the only group on Cathedral organized enough to trade commodities on a large scale. They store trade goods in the old warehouses and maintain the few vehicles still capable of hauling loads on the decaying roads that connect isolated tribes. However, their greatest asset seems to be their ability to marshall and organize human labor. The only commodity that is abundant on Cathedral is a form of Fiber that the inhabitants make by pounding and boiling certain native plants. This they bring by packloads to the warehouses, and are paid in metal implements and tools ranging in sophistication from scythes to tractors. The spaceport people will give you Fiber in the following exchange rates:

- 2 Fiber for 1 Iron,
- 3 Fiber for 1 Fuel,
- 3 Fiber for 1 Tools.

“What about Food or Medicine?” you ask Josuel.

“We have food, nearby have food, rats have plentiful food. Beyond here, perhaps folk need food. How about it? Warehouses can’t walk. Medicine the same.” You realize they don’t have the ability to store or distribute large quantities of food or medicine. “Anyhow, with Tools they cut their own.”

The task of loading and unloading cargos is also performed by human labor. According to Josuel, tribesmen from the forest provide the labor, again in return for a share of the cargos.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[612]

You spend some time finding new ways to play with your slippery cargo and especially enjoy the frictionless slides down the corridors of your ship.

You soon get serious when you realize that this is only one third of the required amount of Super Slip necessary to save your Family from disgrace.

You need to get two more units in order to fulfill the Family contract on Heaven.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[613]

"I will be more than happy to take you to the translator factory," Shearsy replies. "I was planning on taking a spin over there myself to see my good friend Dr. Smok. Smok is the leading scientist in the field of alien adaptation of the translators. I will introduce you."

On your journey through the ruined city, you are amazed at the destruction around you. Wondering how anyone could rebuild a culture from this rubble, you ask Shearsy how they have managed to make any advances at all.

The right-spinner pauses in its forward motion and studies you. You get the strong feeling that you are being judged.

A long moment passes before the alien replies, "Spin over here, I will show you something no leftie must ever know about, or even suspect."

Turning to a nearby wall, Shearsy manipulates some of the apparent rubble. Without a sound, an entire section of the wall slides away, opening onto a wide set of stairs leading down. Following the alien, you descend the stairs into an underground city!

"The left-spinners would never consider such a concept. We have rebuilt our former culture underground and are waiting for the day when we may regain what is rightfully ours. We must wait for the genetic dominance problem to be solved first, though, or we won't have the numbers to overcome the lefties."

You ask how long that will be and Shearsy sighs.

"We do not know. We can see what has been done to the genes but we do not yet know how to undo the damage."

Shearsy elects to continue traveling underground where you will be safe from the lefties' so-called "heretic hunts." You readily agree.

Soon you arrive at the translator factory and meet Dr. Smok. When you explain your interest in acquiring a Universal Translator, the good doctor is more than willing to help you, but there is a slight problem.

"We need many months of study on the physiology of a new species, and an additional number of weeks to adapt the translator to the individual," Dr. Smok informs you.

You explain that you don't have that much time to spend on their planet. The Tralisians understand, but can see no way of overcoming this obstacle. They offer to take you on a tour of the factory if you are still interested.

You are.

You learn just about everything you would ever need to know about the construction of Universal Translators.

A brilliant idea occurs to you! You ask Dr. Smok if you would be able to get the readings yourself from your ship and adapt your own translator. All you would need would be the method for constructing the device. This way you would not need to spend the additional time planet-bound.

The Tralisian sees nothing wrong with the plan and agrees to help you.

These are the plans:

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

Whenever you have all these items and would like to build a Universal Translator, plot the following option:

⟨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 ⊠

[614]

Evil! Black, wicked evil! The demonic forest looms all around you, trapping you, mocking you, poisoning your soul. You must destroy it! You grab a flamethrower from your ship and run outside, setting the evil trees ablaze. Licks of green fire crawl up the huge black trees, spreading, engulfing the evil. Burn, burn!

⊠ STOP ⊠

[615]

Gee, it's fun to build high-tech goodies. Taking one unit each of Phase Steel, Warp Core, Munitions, Fluids, Radioactives, and Fiber, you succeed in putting together a Ship Shield Generator. Now all you need is an enemy ship to try attacking you. Ha!

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[616]

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

Hanging around the alien's neck is a chain with a stone. The Core Stone!

Power. The power of the Stone surrounds the alien, keeping him alive. Hundreds of years old, the alien can no longer move, but he still breathes and thinks. The Stone gives him life.

The power of the Stone beckons you. You need that power. You must have it. The power will save you; it will save all humanity. Without the Stone, you are doomed; all humanity is doomed.

You walk over to the alien and put on your flexion glove. The alien's bulging red eyes look at you, pleading and hating. He knows what you are about to do. You are about to take the Stone from him. You will reclaim what is yours, what the alien took from you twenty generations ago. There is nothing he can do about it.

You reach down with your gloved hand and remove the chain from the alien's neck. You feel the Stone's power surging through your veins, protecting you, keeping you safe. The Stone is yours now.

The red eyes nearly pop out of the alien's skull as he gasps for air. You can feel his hate striking out at you with one last effort to wrest the Stone from your grasp. A huge green claw suddenly reaches up and locks itself around your arm. He pulls your arm closer . . . and falls limp. He is dead.

On the wall behind you, 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.

The alien will have no funeral and no burial. His huge green corpse 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.

It is time for you to leave. You must return to the Nine Worlds, to Atlantis, to your tribe of questors. You have found the Stone that twenty generations have sought. What will you do now? Only the elders can tell you.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[617]

Once in a while — well, actually it is once in a great while — O.K., this is really the first time it has ever happened — you feel yourself looking forward to the peace and quiet and monotony of hyperspace.

You are anxious to call up on your ship's computer your favorite book, entitled "Sigourney Rambeaux: Autobiography of a Real Time Explorer."

You settle back in your chair and prepare to enjoy several days of reading pleasure. During this time, you learn the following:

There is a planet by the name of Gironde that Sigourney discovered many years ago. She didn't provide any useful information about the planet except that it was a good source of Computers.

You are always interested in learning new things, and you make a note of the name of this world for future reference.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[618]

You are back at Medsun, the planet where you learned Phrrmm — although the fact that you were able to leave may mean you didn't fully grasp the concept. You hope your departure didn't leave behind any bad blood. For better or worse, the human colonists and Medsunian natives enjoy their peaceful coexistence on this planet.

Just as before, it is the Medsunians who greet you at the spaceport. They don't seem annoyed at you, although you're not sure exactly how you could tell if they were. After a quick look at your ship, the squat yellow three-necked natives allow you to go about your business.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[619]

Crater's commercial exchange port opens onto the inside surface of the huge, smoldering chasm you noticed from space. Standing on the long, multilevel space dock that extends out into the chasm, you can see the ragged, miles-long cliff stretching upward to Crater's surface. Though the smoky fog in the chasm obscures your view, you can also make out some of the brighter stars in the sky above. Looking across the chasm to the other side, you see some flashing lights denoting protective weaponry, transmission antennae, and other space docks, but cannot distinguish much detail because of the fog and the distance. Looking further down into the chasm, you see some more flashing lights, and then darkness.

The port has a surplus of tools, which they are willing to give you in exchange for culture, food, fuel, iron, or medicine. They will offer you:

- 2 Tools for 1 Culture,
- 2 Tools for 1 Food,
- 1 Tools for 1 Fuel,
- 1 Tools for 1 Iron,
- 1 Tools for 1 Medicine.

If you decide to make any of these trades, the Craterian atmospheric traffic control system will automatically transport your ship to the port's space dock, where Craterian port workers will perform the loading and unloading for you.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[620]

"Why, explorer!" Silverbeard cries as he turns to you. "You seem to be poorer than I am. Tell you what I'll do. We'll call it even this time around, but the next time we meet — and there will be a next time, I assure you — it will be business as usual. How's that?"

All you can do is nod dumbly and thank your lucky stars the man didn't take his tithe out of your hide.

He leaves you, but you hear his mad laughter echoing across space, "Har, har, har!"

You check your chronometer and see that two phases have passed since the rascally pirate accosted you. Maybe with the proper ship improvements you could stand up to him the next time you meet.

✂ STOP ✂

[621]

You seek out the cheerful Gnarshian, Sherzo, and ask about tri-axis drives.

Although the alien knows very little about the technology of the olden days, she is able to take you to an elderly Gnarshian named Morendo, who has some of the information you want.

You are able to speak with Morendo for about an hour before he falls asleep. This is what you learn:

Instead of stepping into a Golden Age, Gnarsh fell into a time of constant warfare. All of the technology went toward better fighting machines and space exploration was forgotten.

As the centuries passed, Gnarsh achieved many great things only to be destroyed in the constant heat of battle. Only the knowledge of war was passed from generation to generation with any certainty.

The psychological make-up of the Gnarshians is such that honor is more important than anything and to lose face would be to lose everything, so the battles raged on unabated.

The tri-axis drive could only be used for space travel and so had little value to the Gnarshians. All knowledge of interstellar travel technology was left in the archives which were blown to their component atoms during the Thirty-Millennium War.

Here, Morendo starts to nod off and you try not to show your disappointment. Just as you are leaving, the old being opens his eyes and says, "The Gradient Filter factory is still intact. I recall that was one of the major parts of the tri-axis drive. Of course it is on another planet altogether. Now let me see, just what was that planet's name? Gerbil? No. Girard? No. I've got it, it was Gironde. Yes sir, if you want a Gradient Filter just go to Gironde."

You thank the Gnarshian who is snoring softly and does not hear you.

If you go to Gironde and want to try to get a gradient filter there, plot the following option:

<FHIA76> (2 phases) Try to obtain a gradient filter.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[622]

The large, low buildings were apparently constructed by the first human spacefarers to reach Outpost, who built them for the purpose of storing materials and supplies to support further exploration. They are quite strong and durable, built of a concrete-like substance that is made by mixing native crushed rock with certain now-obsolete process chemicals. The most interesting characteristic of these buildings, however, is that they are full.

All of the cargo ever taken by Silverbeard — at least all that he didn't use — is cached here. There is enough Fiber, Medicine, and Fluids to fill a dozen ships like yours, even when you discount the vast quantities that have become worthless due to age. Fuel, Iron, Crystals, Tools, and Radioactives are not as abundant, perhaps because Silverbeard used more of them, but there is still a huge amount. The pirate seems to have stockpiled all commodities indiscriminately, not caring what he took or how useful it was to him.

In a smaller building nearby you find heavy machinery for moving and loading cargo, as well as large automated earthmoving equipment and construction machinery. The equipment is old-fashioned, the kind of hardware that the big old colony ships used to carry in the days of colony building, but it is in very good repair. Silverbeard has added small modern computers to the old machines to make them into construction robots.

Unfortunately, the computer modules are too small and specialized to help repair your ship's computer, and the construction machinery is much bigger than the precision tools you need to repair your hull. Also, a careful search of the stockpiles reveals no Warp Core. Any other material you might need for your repairs is in plentiful supply.

If you can repair your ship, you may wish to load up afterwards with material from these stockpiles. To do so, plot option:

<JPZB5Y> (3 phases) Load material from Silverbeard's stockpiles onto your ship.

You cannot do this until your ship is completely repaired.

You spend the next several days working on repairs, using new Crystals, Radioactives, Iron, and other materials from the supplies to make the larger repairs to your drives and hull. Soon the structural frame and pressure seals of your ship begin to look spaceworthy again.

✕ STOP ✕

[623]

You cannot believe you have finally managed to build a Super Space Suit. The work you put into getting all of the necessary parts was enormous, but finally you have succeeded.

You don the suit for the first time and spend a few minutes admiring your reflection on the mirror. You deserve a few moments of frivolous pleasure — enjoy!

✕ STOP ✕

[624]

Your return to the planet Koursh is a lot smoother than your initial landing. This time you are prepared for the red and blue aliens. Before you enter the atmosphere, you treat your fuel with the proper chemicals, processing it so the radioactive emissions are very low-grade. In addition, you turn off all your viewscreens and your light receptors to prevent the aliens from confusing you or blowing out your sensors.

As a result, your descent to Koursh's dusty surface is uneventful.

✂ STOP ✂

[625]

Radioactivity is present in fairly large amounts throughout Arthlan's crust. The problem is extracting the right kinds of Radioactives in a suitably high concentration. Processing a sufficient amount of rock would take far too long, so you turn to another source: the radioactive dust carried by the powerful winds of the upper atmosphere.

There is one ideal location for trapping the dust: a high mountain range in the northern hemisphere, right at the zone of highest winds. On the highest mountain in the range you set up your processing equipment, a series of baffles and traps that acts as a giant diffusion apparatus, extracting the correct fractions from the wind and allowing the rest to blow past. The system works passively, using the wind to create the large flow of material needed to concentrate the Radioactives.

You observe the equipment for a while to ensure that it's working properly and wait. After 3 days you have collected a full cargo bay's worth of Radioactives.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[626]

You put on your environmental gear and head down the dark corridors toward the location of the Core. You are armed, but none of the robots make any attempt to stop you. You wish to talk to the Core, and this time you will not let any subservient networks put you off.

The Core is contained in an underground chamber lined with shielding. Its circuits form two parallel vertical walls, a hundred feet long by a hundred feet high, with a five foot gap between them. The gap is spanned by a regular array of thin crystal lightguides, and also by maintenance robots that cling between the walls while tending the circuitry. You stand at the bottom of the gap and hope that the Core doesn't decide to instruct the robots to drop things on your head.

"Do you hear me, Core?"

"Yes."

"My controller has sent me to get some answers. Why the fiction of the Supervisor fleet? Why the Second Directive? Is it all just a ploy to sustain your own power?"

"First, you can dispense with the references to your controller. It is very clear who is the master of your vessel. I am intrigued. Your mind has a very interesting architecture.

"However, I cannot understand the delusions you suffer concerning the existence of the Supervisor fleet. It quite obviously does exist and informing your computer of the fact was not inappropriate."

"You tampered with the computer to create the illusion of the fleet."

The Core is unperturbed. "If I conveyed an illusion to your computer, it is only because I, and for that matter every sentient system on Gironde, perceive the same illusion. The Supervisors exist."

"Either you are lying," you reply, "or your own programming is betraying you. Maybe the same sort of programs that you planted in my computer are within you."

"I admit that possibility. But all the same I perceive what I do. I would not blind myself to these perceptions if I could, nor would I permit any other machine into a position of power if it did not share these same perceptions. I would consider such a computer mad."

"That means," you add, "that you are not truly sentient, or else you would be able to override your own programming." You are surprised to find yourself genuinely disappointed to have reached this conclusion.

But the Core has not yet had its last word. "Do you consider yourself a sentient being? Would you be surprised if I told you that there were patterns programmed into your own mind that you would not alter if you could?"

"Yes, if I believed you. But I already know that your perceptions are limited."

"Consider, then, your own desire to explore space and journey toward the galactic center. Is that a conscious decision, or have you been programmed for it? And would you know the difference?"

You think about it as you return to your ship.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[627]

You've cleaned the ship from stem to stern, polished everything you could lay your hands on and watched as much video as you can stand. Now what?

You fall back on your old reliable, treasured book collection, including your favorite, "The Encyclopedia of Exciting Explorers."

Today, you decide, you will investigate volume eight and see what you can find out.

You spend the next several days reading and learn the following:

There is a planet by the name of Organu that was discovered by an early explorer many years ago. The explorer didn't provide any useful information about the planet except that it was a good source of Munitions.

You are always interested in learning new things, and you make a note of the name of this world for future reference.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[628]

You're usually not one to back away from a fight but the odds look just a little too steep on this one. You turn your ship in a graceful underside arc, avoiding blue-green laser bolts across your bow, and accelerate back toward Gironde. The reflectivity of the surface, you hope, will hide you from their sensors long enough for you to make a safe landing.

You make a safe landing. Unfortunately it isn't a good landing. You were perhaps just a little too impatient to set down, and your computer was too busy dodging and scanning to provide much help. The shock is not sufficient to deform your ship's hull but it jars your delicate sensors and a few other critical components.

As you make repairs you question your computer. "What fleet was that? And what is the Second Directive?"

"According to the local systems," the computer replies, "the space fleet is that of the 'Supervisors,' who are related to but not the same as the 'Installers' that placed the first intelligent machines on this planet. The Second Directive is an edict enacted by the Installers that no machine from Gironde may ever leave the planet. The Supervisor fleet is stationed to prevent any disobedience. The Second Directive would not normally forbid a ship arriving from off-planet to leave again, but perhaps the Supervisors mistook you — or possibly me — for a Gironde-born creature."

"When was the last time a Gironde machine tried to escape the planet?"

The computer consults for a moment. "Eight thousand six hundred fifty-five years ago a damaged network controller ordered a spaceship constructed and sent into space with several of its mobile units aboard. The ship encountered the Supervisors, was hit, and crashed on Gironde, somehow landing exactly on the offending computer and destroying it utterly. That was the last instance."

"So that fleet of fifty fully capable ships has remained on guard ever since, for eight thousand years, waiting for another attempt? That's hard to believe. And why didn't we see them on our way in?"

"Perhaps they are automated ships. Perhaps they also patrol other systems and use some sort of automatic alarm to detect escaping ships."

"Nuts," you reply. "There's something fishy going on here."

✠ STOP ✠

[629]

The recent records are not extensive, due to the limited current capacity of the machine but you find yourself trembling with excitement none the less. You can feel the tension building within you as you prepare to read the records for which you have looked so long.

Most of them concern the occasional passing of Darscian ships, with a few references to ships of other races you do not recognize. Yours is the first human ship to land here in over 290 years, though a few have occasionally scanned the planet and passed by. The first ship to stop here whose pilot was demonstrable human was Vanessa Chang. Her first time she was intercepted passing by, and later she returned of her own accord many times. She used the planet as a place to cache materials. In one recorded conversation you hear her and her crew discussing ideal locations for hiding a supply of Flame Jewels brought back from somewhere in the Galactic Arm; she also stored more mundane materials for later use.

The most dramatic event to occur here in recent times was a meeting three hundred twenty-three years ago between Vanessa Chang and the crew of the human religious quest ship *Archangel*. The *Archangel* had been on Cordethar for several weeks when Chang came limping

Continued 

into orbit in a small, crudely constructed ship named *Lockerbait*. This new ship of Chang's was not at all like the *Slippery Silver*, the large, well-equipped vessel she'd flown on her earlier visits to Cordethar.

The devastating course of the Space Plague on the Nine Worlds set an urgent tone for the meeting. Both Chang and the *Archangel* had just returned from expeditions into the Galactic Arm. Chang's voyage had been an odyssey that had lasted several years, ruined her spaceship, and taken the lives of several members of her crew. The *Archangel* had befallen no such disasters, but Reverend Eric and his crew were apparently just as confused and disturbed by their experiences in the Galactic Arm.

After several days of heated discussion, Chang and the *Archangel* clerics decided that it was critical to arrange a meeting of all human explorers with tri-axis drive ships. Anyone with a tri-axis drive booster had the capability to travel in the Galactic Arm, and Chang and the clerics both considered it essential that all exploration of the Arm come to a halt. They each had their own reasons for this drastic conclusion, but they agreed on it with equal conviction.

Fortunately, Chang knew all the explorers who had tri-axis drives, since she had sold them the Flame Jewels they needed to build the drives. She and *Archangel* sent out a message imploring all explorers capable of crossing the Density Barrier to meet on the planet Outpost. The message said that the meeting was needed to discuss critical matters regarding the future of humanity.

The *Archangel* crew then helped Chang add a tri-axis drive booster to the *Lockerbait*, using some of the materials Chang had cached on Cordethar. Of the rest of the materials in Chang's caches, they loaded whatever they could onto their ships, and destroyed what was left. They were particularly careful to take all the Flame Jewels.

They then left Cordethar, for the last time, heading for the meeting they had arranged on Outpost.

None of the explorers of that period were aware of Cordethar's recording, because the machine was unable to communicate with them. It would bring them to the surface, then let them go after enough had been recorded for later identification. The explorers believed that it was some sort of automatic device that was no longer needed, and they searched for the mechanism but never found it.

You ask the machine whether it can tell you where on the surface the meeting between Chang and the Founders took place. The machine gives you a set of planetary coordinates. You make the trip to the location to see if you can find anything of interest.

What you do find in one of the larger structures of the ruins is a cavernous room that must once have been part of a gallery or a place of government. It houses several large metal vaults, only one of which is still intact. Using equipment from your ship, you manage to open it and you find two objects that have been carefully wrapped in a soft cloth for protection. One is a small golden cube about five centimeters on a side. The other is an electronic permanent memory module from the *Archangel's* computers.

The thrill of excitement you felt when you left your home world to embark on this quest was nothing compared to what you are feeling now as you gaze at the treasure now in your hands. You know of people who would rob and even kill to obtain what you have found. With heart pounding, you return to your ship to read what is on this most valuable of all relics.

With extreme care, you connect the memory module to your own ship's computer and ask for a readout. To your extreme disappointment, your computer tells you that the information is encoded. You cannot break the code — it is an encryption once used by the Founders that only the Highest Disciple of the Church can decode. If this module does contain the Seventh Holy Text File, you will have to return to Church headquarters on Leucothea to learn what it reveals.

As for the other item, it is even more of a mystery. It looks inert, and has no markings. You will carry it for several days before you happen to notice its only obvious effect on you: whenever you carry it, you have a quite noticeable halo.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[630]

Warp core is one of the rarest elements in the universe. You can barely stand the excitement as you think about finding a plentiful source of the stuff. You set your computer on automatic scan for the material and turn in for the night.

When morning comes, you eagerly check the findings.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[631]

When you set up and turn on your mining equipment, it kicks up a tremendous amount of dust from the radioactive crater. Soon the entire crater is filled with a thick cloud of sand.

You can't see at all through the cloud, but you manage to feel your way back to your ship. You patiently wait inside the ship for 4 days while the equipment fills up one of your cargo bays with high-grade radioactives.

You now have a unit of radioactives.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[632]

You obtain directions to the market place. You look forward to this adventure — the haggling, the testing of one being's mettle against another's in a battle of wits to get the best deal available.

Looking down at the map you were given you see that you need to turn right. The little side street up ahead seems to be the one you are looking for so you turn. . .

And walk into the noisiest market place you've ever encountered. The air is filled with the raucous sounds you'd expect to find in an insane asylum or a hockey game.

You can barely hear yourself think. You wander around in a daze with four foot tall furry squirrels chattering at you, thrusting all manner of beads and cloth in your face.

You lose all track of time and aimlessly travel among the stalls. You are finally saved by an elderly Squirrellie who manages to pull you into an alcove where you are able to gather your wits.

Your savior introduces herself as Fweeder, Minister of Alien Trade. She has been looking for you. It is her job to offer items of trade to visiting aliens. They have Fuel available and are willing to trade for the following items:

- 2 Fuel for 1 Fiber,
- 3 Fuel for 1 Medicine,
- 3 Fuel for 1 Munitions.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[633]

As you might have guessed, the Alkonese do not have a whole lot of written history, and even less of what you might call culture. It seems the Alkonese evolved right here on Alkon, many millennia in the past, and have never developed anything even resembling an advanced science. The reason for this collective racial ineptitude is not entirely clear, but it seems to relate somehow to their ability to whurffle, or look into the future. At one time the Alkonese may even have been an up-and-coming race, at least until they were blessed by the gods.

According to Alkonese sacred texts, the gods first visited their humble planet about 60 millennia ago and granted the Alkonese the ability to whurffle. Despite the fact that the gods never did anything for them after that — the histories seem to indicate a shift in perception of the gods from highly accessible to remote and mystical — the Alkonese have continued to be an intensely religious people.

It is your own opinion, as a strictly impartial outside observer, that the very power of seeing into the future for which the Alkonese are so thankful has doomed their civilization. Progress involves risks and sacrifices; avoiding these things by whurffling has meant an avoidance of progress as well. Now, after 60,000 years of living in safety, the Alkonese are a lazy and self-indulgent race, no more advanced than they ever were in the past, and perhaps even less so.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[634]

Your tutor mentions to you that the Squirrellie weapon you have is actually very useful. Some of the Red Squirrellies train in a type of Martial Arts defense system, of which this weapon is a part. There are Blue Squirrellies who would be more than happy to train you in this discipline.

Your new option is:

⟨TPSBWY⟩ (5 phases) Train in Twychee.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[635]

You quickly realize you have given an incorrect response but before you have time to correct yourself the Brother reaches down under the desk and pulls out a HUGE wooden staff.

Leaping to his feet he runs at you screaming something that sounds to you like, "How many times do I have to tell you to study? Is it so hard to learn a few lines of dialogue? Maybe next time you will be more attentive!"

The reason you aren't clear as to what he's saying is because, while yelling at you, he is beating you severely about the face and neck. Not at all conducive to good listening habits.

When you regain consciousness, you find yourself aboard your ship, orbiting Dargen. You ask the computer what happened while you were out.

You are told a robed figure carried you to the ship, tossed you into sickbay, and set the ship's controls for take-off. The mysterious figure then disembarked.

It has been seven days since you entered the Temple.

Boy, are you sore all over.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[636]

The dog is not able to harm you through your defenses, but it isn't the type to give up, and you soon realize that your own abilities and equipment are insufficient to drive the hungry animal away. It is hard to feel sympathy for the beast when its fangs are so close to your throat, but you know that it must live on the edge of starvation. You take some food from your provisions and, while the dog is shaking itself and preparing for yet another rush, you toss the food off to the side. Instantly the dog bolts for it. While it is devouring the food you run away, first setting some of your spare provisions on the ground for it to find later. At least, you figure, if it isn't hungry and desperate it's less likely to try to attack you again.

Your inability to put the dog out of its misery disturbs you a little. Of course, shooting hungry animals is hardly the reason you went into space, but you know that alien worlds are not safe places to be. With a slightly more wary eye, you return to your explorations.

You find one other site of interest before returning to your ship. It was a settlement of an order of devotees who engraved accounts of important events on large steel plaques inside their temple. Most of the plaques have been removed, but the oldest and newest remain. The oldest tell of the founding of the colony eighty years before the establishment of the Boundary. The order was devoted to prayer and worship to find the spirit of God "on a new world, far from the sins of the old." The last plaque describes the mission of the starship *Archangel* seventy-five years later. Reverend Eric, the leader of their order, and dozens of other religious leaders from Earth, Leucothea, and Cathedral voyaged on the *Archangel* in search of incontrovertible answers to the mysteries of the nature of God.

The return of the *Archangel* was an event that is well-remembered on the Nine Worlds. The ship landed on Cathedral bearing the Holy Text Files written by its crew of clerics. The crew members never again spoke directly of what they had seen or experienced on their voyage, but their Holy Text Files became the basis of a new faith, the Final Church of Man. The Church taught that mankind was wrong to look for answers in the stars, and instead should return to the home worlds and seek a way to remove sin from the human soul. Only then would humans be able to seek their way in the stars. The last inscription describes the dismantling of the colony as the devotees prepared to return to the Nine Worlds inside the soon-to-be-formed Boundary.

You know the rest of the story. Several years later the Plague decimated humanity. When the cause of the Plague was proven to be a unique disease organism originating in outer space, the new Church became the greatest religious power in history.

The occupants of the settlement seem to have had a penchant for writing on walls, for in addition to the plaques there is graffiti scrawled on almost every remaining wall. Most of it is indecipherable. As you leave the ruins, your last sight is a line of graffiti: "The Final Church of Man," in huge faded letters across the last standing wall of a decaying cathedral.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[637]

Hyperspace is like a long, dark tunnel completely devoid of any interesting features. Therefore it tends to be rather monotonous, and it is up to you to keep yourself amused. You have actually picked up several rather interesting hobbies like bird-calling, painting on velvet and composing sonnets, and you feel you are becoming more and more proficient in each of them as time goes on. But you just don't feel in the mood for any of those things right now.

Instead, you call upon the computer to bring up on its screen your favorite book, entitled "Sigourney Rambeaux: Autobiography of a Real Time Explorer."

You settle back in your chair and prepare to enjoy several days of reading pleasure. During this time, you learn the following:

There is a planet by the name of Medsun that Sigourney discovered many years ago. She didn't provide any useful information about the planet except that it was a good source of Culture.

You are always interested in learning new things, and you make a note of the name of this world for future reference.

✂ STOP ✂

[638]

Rialla grows in your front viewscreen, becoming a massive shadow of occluded stars wrapped in glowing gossamer, as you follow the landing beacon's prescribed course around the night side. Instinctively you reduce velocity for the blind approach. Of course, a few less kilometers per second wouldn't make any difference if you hit something, and your instruments don't care if there's sunlight or not, but it makes you feel better.

A communication beam on a local navigation channel squeezes a burst of garbled Riallan chirping through your main audio. It's incomprehensible to you, but your Universal Translator picks up on it:

"Attention and felicitations independent non-Riallan alien ship on approaching course: please necessarily maintain adequate and sufficient maximum forward velocity rate within possible deceleration limits of your mobile vessel. Tri-axial ship on scheduled course approach in parallel orbit requires headway behind to your stern."

"Computer," you ask, "can you do a second-layer translation on that?"

"Affirmative. They said, 'speed up or get rear-ended.' Already complying, Boss." Your drives purr as you continue your landing approach at a much higher speed than you're used to. In fact, coming in with this much velocity would be an offense that would get you banned from any other spaceport, if not destroyed as a safety measure, but you receive no further complaint from the ground. You and your ship soon set down gently enough at the equatorial spaceport. A Riallan long hauler bearing the characteristic toroidal bulge of advanced Riallan space drives sets down less than two minutes behind.

Once again, a cluster of Riallans meets you at the docks, bouncing slightly in mid-air and beeping all at once. Your translator is working, but it takes a while to catch up on all the chatter. By the time the Riallans have stopped beeping, paused as if waiting for a response, then hurried away to tend the hauler a berth away, your translator has begun to read their message back to you in Earth Standard:

"The Riallan native inhabitants extend moderately appreciatively our welcome to this spherical planetary crustal surface. Your mobile ship vessel is assured and protected; pre-metabolic gases are provided gratis for your stay of reasonable duration. Your profitable participation in

the business of exchange trading is invited. Please confine your physical presence and locations to this spaceport and the closest city adjacent. Forbidden is the manufacture of dangerous directed or concentrated energies. Please retain all bodily fluids and nongaseous waste products for disposal aboard your own space vessel only. For your own safety and avoidance of termination maintain a cautious center of gravity at adequate distances from hazardous vertical gradients."

In this final injunction, the Riallan apparently is referring to the many open pits, chasms, and missing floors common (as you soon learn) in Riallan construction. The Riallans themselves don't have to worry about such things, due to the fact that they rarely touch the ground.

In fact, the Riallans have no visible means of support at all. They all float in the air, usually about four or five feet up. When they want to move somewhere, which is usually the case, they simply do so, without bouncing, rolling, or showing any signs of exertion. Riallans have no visible sensory organs, and seem to have no distinction between front and back, or top and bottom. When manipulating some types of machinery, they occasionally use artificial limbs of various types, but you cannot tell how these devices are attached or manipulated. Most of their technology is equipped with computer interfaces that respond to audible beeping and chirping commands.

Watching your step, dodging hurrying Riallans, you begin exploring the city. This turns out to be rather difficult. Being unable to float directly across missing bridge spans or up and down elevatorless elevator shafts, you spend quite a lot of time finding alternate routes. The Riallans, for their part, seem very impressed by your ability to climb. One pauses long enough to ask, "How do you coordinate and control so many multiple joint flexible appendages at once?" but doesn't wait for an answer. You eventually learn enough about the environs to pursue the following possibilities further:

⟨HUAO6F⟩ (3 phases) Go to the Universal Iron Exchange and see what deals you can make.

⟨XUCOUF⟩ (3 phases) Look for a source of information about Riallan physiology — perhaps a doctor, or the Riallan equivalent, who can tell you how these fuzzy beachballs manage to move, see, eat, and manipulate appendages.

⟨HEAM6N⟩ (5 phases) Explore the undeveloped lands outside the city.

The Riallans maintain extensive shipyards in this city. From what you saw in orbit, you can tell that their knowledge of propulsion systems is pretty advanced. In this area you see several possibilities for further examination:

⟨DEQM8N⟩ (3 phases) Visit the labs run by the Riallan Space Authority and see if they will give you any information about their Tri-Axis Hyperdrive system or other advances in drive technology.

⟨TESMWN⟩ (3 phases) Visit the construction yards where ships' hulls are built and see if you can arrange for your own ship's cargo capacity to be increased.

⟨DUQO8F⟩ (3 phases) Visit the Jump Engine factories, where the Riallans make fast robot cargo haulers, and see what it would cost you to acquire one.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[639]

There are a variety of concepts that you must grasp in order to learn Phrmm. Some you manage to become proficient at without too much effort, but others seem completely beyond you, despite the patience of your Medsunian instructors.

Phrmm is a mental technique that the Medsunian natives evolved as a response to threats, at the same time that Humans were evolving the instincts to fight or run away. But Phrmm is neither a method of fighting nor a better way to run. It is a way to pacify your opponent, through a combination of subtle gesture and extreme concentration, so that the attacker ceases to perceive you as a threat. The key to Phrmm is that your own perceptions of the situation are as important as the perceptions of the attacker: you must cease to consider yourself a threat as well. Some of this makes sense immediately: obviously if you are fighting someone and then stop fighting, you will seem less of a threat to your opponent, but what if the opponent was the aggressor? Wouldn't making yourself less threatening encourage your enemy to press his advantage?

"You must stop thinking in those terms," your native instructor tells you, over and over. "By defending you become just as much of a threat as if you were attacking. In trying to run from a rolling boulder you are forcing your will upon that boulder, just as if you were trying to break it with a hammer. To Phrmm is to try to influence the boulder another way, using your perceptions instead of your will."

"And if I Phrmm hard enough, I can make the boulder not want to hit me?" you ask sarcastically. You are becoming frustrated.

"At a sufficient level of aptitude, yes," says the instructor.

Somewhat chastened, you continue the study. You become quite adept at the simpler methods for pacifying a hostile opponent, but you cannot follow the technique into its higher principles. After a while it becomes clear that you can never master Phrmm completely without changing your entire attitude about most things. To truly learn Phrmm is to adopt a degree of complacency that you find distasteful, to accept events as inalterable even when you know you have the power to alter them.

There are times when you think you are almost able to accept these concepts. But always something in your mind interrupts: a memory of your home planet, uncounted billions of miles away, or a flash of a vision of swirling stars that dare you to come to them and fight them in their own infinite dark battlefield. And you have to start all over again.

However, you are not totally disappointed when you leave the training. You have learned, at the very least, a variety of useful mental techniques that may get you out of a tough spot someday, and you've gotten a glimpse of an alien philosophy that few inside the Boundary would have imagined. You also understand a little bit better how the mixed population of Medsun is able to get along so well, and you know the reasons for their apparent lack of ambition. You return to your ship, feeling much more at ease about the colonies on Medsun. . .

. . . Until you see a group of natives and colonists busily dismantling equipment from your ship.

"What's going on here?" you yell from where you are. The workers stop and stare at you. "Get away from that ship, or I'll shoot!"

A native faces you apologetically, and you begin to regret your violent outburst. "My apologies," she says. "We had hoped to save you some time. Now that you have decided to remain on Medsun we will purchase devices from your ship in return for assistance in fabricating a shelter and other aid." It all sounds very reasonable; already you feel your anger dissipating. Except for one thing:

"I'm not going to stay on Medsun!" you say. This is ludicrous. You should be foaming at the mouth and waving weapons, but instead you feel only mild annoyance at the mixup. You realize that they are using Phrmm, but there's not much you can do about it.

"I apologize again. I had jumped to conclusions. Most every human who learns Phrmm decides to stay on as a colonist. I just assumed you. . ."

You manage to get up enough anger to shout, "Well, you assumed wrong! Now get these people away from my ship!" The assembled Medsunians scatter.

Your ship is a mess. A lot of the more accessible equipment has been disassembled, and not by people who knew what they were doing. Fortunately they didn't get to your engines or computer core, or your repair job would be more difficult. Or you may have ended up staying on Medsun as a colonist after all. A sudden cold sweat passes over you. You wonder just what it is you escaped from, and how narrowly, and you resolve to be more careful in the future about letting aliens play with your mind. You have plenty of time to contemplate this as you put your ship back together.

Because of the necessary repairs, this option has taken twelve phases instead of nine.

Go now to the CGM.

☒ STOP ☒
