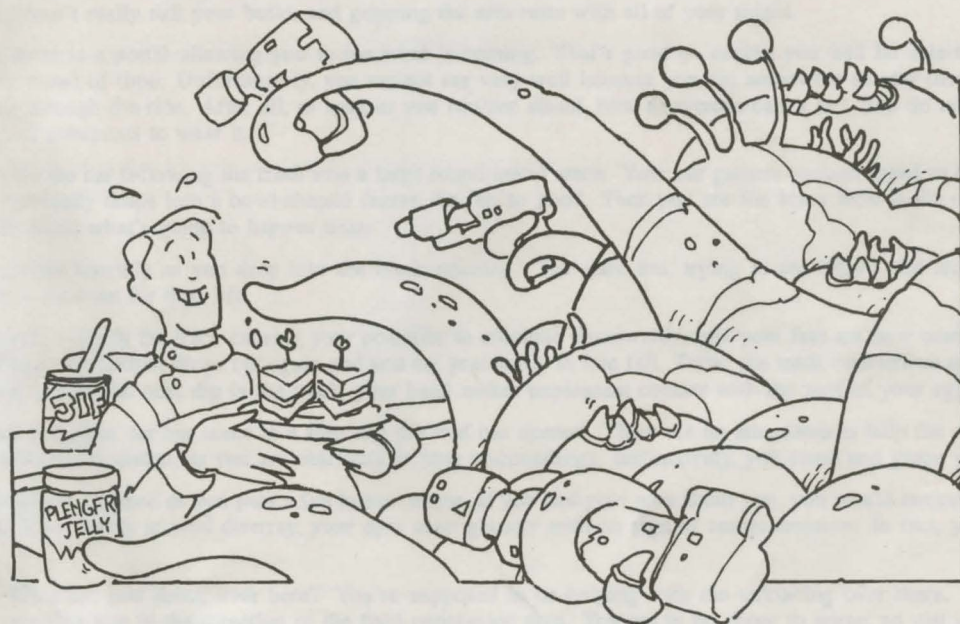


STAR SAGA: TWO™

BOOK E

TEXT 282-346



BOOK #

STAR: TWO™

STAR

TEXT 215-346



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[282]

You make your way back to Zyroth, homeworld of the hungry, multi-appendaged, gook-secreting Zyrans. The planet is still surrounded by spaceships, satellites, and weapons emplacements. Fortunately, this time they recognize you as a “friend,” and allow you to land.

“Follow the beacon down, Human” the order comes through, “And don’t try anything tricky.”

Your options are the same as before.

✧ STOP ✧

[283]

You can feel the excitement of the crowd as you all funnel into the entrance to the Omelet Maker. You are curious about a ride the Mardahlans would give such a name to — and just a little bit nervous.

The line narrows until you are walking single file into the darkened building where the ride begins. Each person steps up to a white oval-shaped car, steps in and sits down. The hinged roof is pulled down over you and latched. You are now in a completely enclosed capsule, seated in a chair that doesn’t really suit your build, and gripping the arm rests with all of your might.

In front of you, there is a portal allowing you to see what is coming. That’s good — maybe you will be able to brace yourself if you can see things coming ahead of time. Unfortunately, you cannot see very well because you are somewhat shorter than the Mardahlans. You decide to risk standing through the ride. After all, as long as you can see ahead, how dangerous can it be? You do not notice the seat belt or the sign admonishing all occupants to wear it.

The ride starts with the car following the track into a large round metal arena. Your car gathers enough speed to cause it to travel around the outer rim, which gradually drops into a bowl-shaped center. So far, so good. Then you see the black hole in the center of the arena. You have a nasty suspicion about what’s going to happen next.

Your stomach lurches horribly as you drop into the black opening. You stare out, trying to see where you are headed, but it is pitch black. All you can do is hold on for dear life.

Whoosh! You reach a dip in the track causing your posterior to continue downward while your feet are now coming up. Twist, the track bends to the right. Wham, the bottom drops out again and you are practically in free fall. Twist, the track corkscrews to the left. You lose your grip on the arm rests and with the next dip in the track, your head makes unpleasant contact with the roof of your egg car. You feel stunned.

You barely notice that your car has come to a stop and the roof has opened. There are no attendants to help the riders out, just as no one helped you in. It doesn’t really matter, as you are oblivious to your surroundings. Instinctively, you stand and grope your way outside.

You catch a glimpse of yourself as you pass a fun house mirror. If you had your wits about you, you would notice that you look decidedly green from your trip. Your hair is in wild disarray, your eyes stare glassily with no sign of comprehension. In fact, you look very much like an...

“Hey android! What are you doing over here? You’re supposed to be helping with the unloading over there. Get going!” the golden android yells at you, shoving you in the direction of the food concession area. You are in no shape to argue, so you go quietly and soon find yourself carrying boxes from a large truck into the backroom of the Banff stand. At least the boxes aren’t very heavy.

An hour or so of hard physical labor finally unaddles your brains. When you snap out of your fog, you quickly size up the situation and duck out. Pulling a comb from your pocket, you make yourself more presentable, straighten your clothing and check to see that your skin has lost its green pallor. Now that your appearance is back to normal, you return to the mainstream of Mardahland.

✧ STOP ✧

[284]

It's the giant amoeba again, and it's already gotten up a head of steam and is slithering towards you. You know from your last encounter with it that its surface is poisonous to touch, and that its method of defeating an opponent is by suffocation.

You resolve to do less thinking this time and more fighting.

Go now to the CGM.

✘ STOP ✘

[285]

You pick up the following transmission on your subspace radio, between one alien trader and another, and run it through the translator.

"Can you believe the nerve of those little yellow blobs, charging three rare cargos just to pass through one lousy stargate? Boy, that really gets me steamed." The signal fades out with a loud hissing sound.

✘ STOP ✘

[286]

The Darkwhistler draws close to you, and wraps you in one of its tentacles. You experience a fleeting sensation of violent movement, and then you are still again.

You stand on the balcony of a huge stone building, in the cold light of Karnossus' white sun. Two Clathrans stand in front of you, talking in low voices and idly scraping their claws on the stone railing. Behind you is a busy room, crowded with maps and communications equipment.

Before you can move, another Clathran rushes out the balcony door, catches sight of the two already there, and quickly turns and re-enters the room. Both times he passes right through your body, without so much as noticing your presence. Emboldened, you creep close enough to the first two to hear their words.

"Do you think we will make it this time?"

"Of course we'll make it. Is it not the Masters' command that we complete this Survey?"

"They also commanded us to eliminate humans, and it seems we have not accomplished that."

"Another report from the Survey?"

The first Clathran nods. "A ship got by, a small one, probably holding only a single being. The Sector Commander gave me a full description of it before terminating himself, and it matches what little we know of human technology. Who else would build a vessel with both dual and tri-axis drives?"

"There have been other reports as well, you know."

"I know, but I don't want to speculate on those. We'll just have to deal with the human vermin when the Survey reaches their home planet."

"How long to reach the end of the Fringe?"

"Ten years, give or take a few months. We're reaching the widest part of the galaxy now, and just beginning to accelerate."

“Wait! What’s happening?” cries the subordinate Clathran in alarm. The sun’s light is dimming, bringing a dark grey chill like nightfall over the stone city.

“At least one project is going well,” says the senior Clathran calmly. “The Dodecahedron reached its full operating potential three years ago, and it’s run without interruption ever since. Once in a while our orbit takes us into its shadow.”

“But surely it’s not so big it can eclipse our sun!”

“No, it’s small — only one point zero eight kilometers at its widest diameter. But it absorbs the light of the star over a much larger area. From space it looks like there’s a grey circle on the sun’s disk centered below the Dodecahedron’s orbit. The circle’s been growing, too.” The shadow lifts again and the sun returns to its normal intense cold brilliance.

“The energy that thing consumes!”

“It’s worth it. I don’t know why, but I do know that the Masters themselves ordered it. . . ”

The Clathrans fade away before you can hear any more, and you find yourself back on Darkwhistle.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[287]

You discuss your current plans with one of the Settled Ones in the back offices of The Battle, Inc. You are forced to disappoint her when she asks if you have yet managed to find the Clathran homeworld, Karnossus. You feel very badly when you see the look of dejection on her face which starts to melt into one of despair. You know that time is running out for the Hadrakians and you resolve to keep on trying to find Karnossus until you succeed. Also, at the back of your mind is the chilling thought that the safety of your own race rides on this as well.

You can search for Karnossus in *any* trisector. You recall what Colonel Theckta told you: Karnossus isn’t marked on any map; it is hidden in a seemingly empty sector of space. The option to search for it is:

(7F8LKM) (14 phases) Search for Karnossus.

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

Naturally, in order for your search to succeed, you will have to be in the right trisector. If you don’t know which trisector is the right one, you will have to find out somehow. Colonel Theckta’s suggestions were to look for clues on planets, infiltrate Clathran bases, and possibly even pray to the Hadrakian gods for information.

You leave the office of The Battle, Inc., promising to keep on searching for Karnossus. You try not to think about how many lives are depending upon your success.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[288]

You have noticed that even the adventuresome Hadrakian males only travel in groups beyond the safety of the city limits. That the fearless Homeless ones would take any sort of precaution implies that the dangers out there must be serious indeed! But that doesn't stop you from venturing into the dark forests on your own anyway.

Whistling a cheery tune, you pack a supply of food and drink, and start out on your journey. The forest is dark and almost impenetrable, so you decide to follow a path that was probably made by the passage of some huge reptile. This will enable you to travel a good distance today. Hopefully, you should be able to hear any monsters approaching before they get too near.

Lunch time finds you well along the makeshift path. You decide to stop and eat your two peanut butter and guava jelly sandwiches when you hear the sound of approaching thunder. Correctly guessing you are in the path of an oncoming beast, you quickly hide in the underbrush and wait for the creature to pass. You do not have to wait for long. Stride followed by tremendous stride, a huge tyrannosaurus comes crashing along the path you recently vacated. Roaring, presumably with sheer joie-de-vivre, it bellows in ear-deafening volumes. Wincing in pain, you press your hands over your ears and wait for the monster to pass.

The ground quivers in bone-shaking intensity as the tyrannosaurus strides past your hiding place. Pressing ever closer to the ground, you wait with bated breath to see if your hiding place will be discovered. The monster seems to have other things on its mind at this moment, because it looks neither to the right nor the left as it hastens along the path. You briefly wonder whether the beast has a rendezvous, but instantly decide not to even think about such a thing; it boggles the human mind. Instead, you rise to one knee and watch the reptile disappear out of sight.

... but not out of hearing. You can still hear and feel the creature stomping on the ground, and its bellows roar out loud and clear. You make a note to have your ears checked when you return to your ship to see if you have suffered any damage to your eardrums from the loud noise. Suddenly the roars cease. You wait for a minute but the only other sound you hear is a loud CRASH as if something tyrannosaurus-sized had just fallen to the ground. Your curiosity over what might have happened to the beast overcomes your fear of whatever stopped the animal dead in its tracks, so you decide to investigate.

Creeping quietly through the underbrush, you parallel the path you were on earlier. No reason to let what might be up ahead know you are coming, right? Softly, you part the vegetation and peer out into a clearing where you behold a strange sight. Before you is a large open area in the forest where you see a small lake, lush grass and succulent flowers. You also see your tyrannosaurus lounging along one end of the glade. From what you can tell, the creature is not injured, but it does have a rather glazed look to its eyes. It also has company, for laying contentedly all along the clearing are various other reptiles: aerosaurs, brontosaurs and even a hydrosaur basking half-in and half-out of the water, all of whom look, well, stoned! Feeling a bit confused yourself, you wait and watch the weird scene in front of you.

Weird it is. All of the monsters here are carnivores and natural enemies; yet, they seem to be content to lay together in this clearing and enjoy the afternoon sun. Why? The only thing you see that stands out at all is a single small minisaur going about its own business, chomping on the grass and leaves and sipping from the cool clear lake. Not one of the reptiles, all of whom should be taking swipes at the little two-foot-long creature for a midday snack, are paying the minisaur any attention, even when it grazes within snapping distance of their mouths. You sense that something is not right here and stand to take a closer look.

One step into the clearing answers at least one of your questions. You immediately feel as if you have walked into a sort of reverse energy field as a feeling of overwhelming mellowness sweeps over you. Ah, what a beautiful day it is! You collapse in a contented heap on the ground next to the tyrannosaurus. A warm breeze sweeps lazily over you as you lean back against the monster's tremendous thigh. Neither of you mind. You watch the fluffy pink-tinged clouds float peacefully overhead and think quiet thoughts. A nagging voice at the back of your numbed mind goes unheeded.

A cramp in your leg forces you to stand and stretch. While you are up, you saunter around the clearing and, while taking a closer look at a beautiful flower, you accidentally step outside the clearing boundary. Instantly you come to your senses and are your old intelligent, free-willed self. How interesting! You turn back to study the scene in the clearing again and observe the same scene you saw earlier, several large reptiles lounging around while one minisaur takes advantage of their docility and grazes in their midst. You wonder if there is a connection.

Stepping back into the clearing, you once more feel the calming aura that engulfed you earlier. This time, you are better prepared and manage to maintain intelligent thought while you experience this unique sensation. Sitting carefully just on the edge of the field's range, you can enter a semi-trance and try to discover what is affecting you this way.

Several hours pass until you are convinced you know the answer. It is just as you thought earlier — somehow the minipsor has an ability which allows it to calm any other living animal within a certain radius. This must be some sort of evolutionary feature, since without it the little reptile would be fair game and easy prey for any of these other creatures.

You endeavor to determine which parts of your mind are being affected and how. Using meditative techniques you have learned during your travels, you manage to single out the necessary mind action needed to produce this calming effect on other creatures; you feel confident that you will be able to perform this act when needed. You step out of the clearing and attempt the power on the first unsuspecting reptile you come across. Instantly the lizard develops a cross-eyed stare and collapses on the ground. Maybe you used too much power for a creature that is barely ten feet long! You ease up a bit, and the allipsor begins to look more like it is having a good time than like it is about to die. Very interesting.

You notice that night will soon fall and, although you are no longer nervous about meeting up with the local indigenous life, you decide to return to your ship. All the way back, you take every opportunity possible to practice your new ability, Mellomia, and have great fun. You have no doubt that this ability will come in handy before the war is over.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[289]

“Hey Boss, I’m getting a message on the subspace emergency channel. It’s in some kind of code. I’m not certain I’ve got it all decoded, but I can make most of it out. Looks important. Shall I bring it up?”

“Sure,” you say, hoping it isn’t another solicitation from someone selling high-end tri-axis drive ships.

Priority Dispatch

FROM: V. Ilnvo, Marshal & Chief Executive Officer, The Battle, Incorporated

I am pleased to announce that one of our agents, a Human, has found and scouted the Clathran home base, Karnossus. As suspected, Karnossus is the primary site for the production of ships and soldiers for the Clathran Survey. In addition, our Human agent reports that a powerful device called the Dodecahedron is in orbit about Karnossus and has been causing the increases in the width of the galactic Dual Space Interphase.


After deep consideration, I have authorized an attempt to counterattack the Karnossus system and the Dodecahedron device in particular. Whatever the Clathrans’ purpose in building this Dodecahedron, it is probably well worth our while to neutralize it. Therefore, our Human agent has been given the framework and plans for building a Dual Space Inversion Bomb, a top-secret explosive which Hadrakian scientists have been working on for some time. It is hoped that the Bomb, once completed, will have the necessary sophistication and firepower to destroy the Dodecahedron, and possibly the Clathran homeworld as well.

Unfortunately, the Inversion Bomb is an experimental project; we have never built or tested such a device before. All members of The Battle are urged to assist the Human agent who has the Bomb plans. The agent may require one or more of the following items:

- 4 Munitions
- 1 Discontinuity Wave Generator
- 1 Stasis Field
- 1 Interphase Reflector

In addition, the agent may need technical assistance in the Bomb assembly. This is a maximum priority task. All agents should see to its immediate completion.

“Wow!” says your computer. You silently agree. The device orbiting the Clathran homeworld — the Dodecahedron — is evidently the source of humanity’s troubles. It is crucial that the Bomb be built as soon as possible, and used to destroy this evil device.

Continued 

If you are able to assemble the materials (including the Bomb Shell framework) necessary to complete the Dual Space Inversion Bomb, you may plot the following option:

⟨LVM9JV⟩ (7 phases) Assemble the bomb.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[290]

You fly your ship boldly into the black pit that you know to be the Stargate. You have an anxious moment when you hear something over your ship's intercom, but it turns out to be random static. As you pass into the gate itself, there is a flash of darkness followed by a flash of light. You feel dizzy for a moment, but you then emerge from the gate and find yourself floating above a planet virtually identical to the one you just left. But you know it is not the same; it is the sister planet of the world you just left, and you may land if you so desire.

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[291]

Subspace radio transmission from The Battle, Inc.

"To all agents: The Zyran inform us that they will be preparing to join the United Hadrakian Navy in the fight against the Clathrans. A good thing, too. We need all the help we can get."

⌘ STOP ⌘

[292]

"Bad news, Boss. It's three Zyran ships again, closing in from three different directions. They have us surrounded. Message coming in on visual."

A disgusting, brown, multi-tentacled Zyran wading in gook appears on your screen. "Cargo," he says. The three Zyran ships take aim at you. You can give them the cargo they want, or put up a fight.

Do you:

- 1) Surrender
- 2) Fight

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[293]

The Dardahlian economy, such as it is, is based on work chits. For performing some small service, the person receives a round wooden disk. This disk has no real value for purchasing goods, which are either free or barterable for other goods. The only use these chits have is to request help when work is to be done. The bearer hands one to the nearest Dardahlian and they help you with whatever task is at hand.

The only time you have seen these used as a form of payment is at the Dardahlian temple. Apparently the gods don't need food or togas, but they can use workers. When you go to the temple, you take the precaution of performing a small task and getting a work chit for your trouble. Now you can make a proper donation to the gods.

Entering the temple, you see you are the only one here. Six statues line the east wall. In front of each statue is a coin box where a supplicant makes their donation to that particular god. You see that all six gods in the pantheon are represented here. Now you must decide to whom you wish to "pray."

- A. Jannus, god of the air, has large beautiful wings and a noble brow.
- B. Bacca, god of laughter, seems to smile down at you warmly from her pedestal.
- C. Mirre, god of the land, wears a look of caring on her face.
- D. Senna, god of light, has his face turned toward the sky, and an aura radiates from his statue.
- E. Derva, god of knowledge, is hooded and holds an inverted candle in her hands.
- F. Plator, god of darkness, looks down at his supplicants with a smile you find chilling.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[294]

Having seen what the Bluvian insignias look like, you cleverly decide to make one of your own. The facilities on your ship are more than adequate for sewing an insignia that will look exactly like one worn by the natives. There are only two problems. First, will the insignia be enough to fool the Bluvians into thinking that you are a high ranking officer? Second, can you design an insignia of a high enough rank?

Hopefully, the Bluvians will take your insignia at face value and not stop to think, hey, what's this alien doing with such a high rank? After all, following the chain of command is all they care about. There's a chance they won't question a superior officer making requests and giving orders despite the fact that the officer shouldn't even *be* in their army. It would be cute if it worked.

Of course, it's important to construct as high a rank as possible. Otherwise, you may find it impossible to do things despite your clever improvisation.

What insignia do you wish to make?

- A. Square with no stripes
- B. Square with one stripe
- C. Square with two stripes
- D. Circle with no stripes
- E. Circle with one stripe
- F. Circle with two stripes
- G. Triangle with no stripes
- H. Triangle with one stripe
- I. Triangle with two stripes

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[295]

Your ship, the *Barratry*, is perhaps the most powerful single-pilot ship in the Galactic Arm. Because you are facing enemy ships that are much larger, this wouldn't mean very much, if it weren't for one thing: you are M. J. Turner, and you are still above all the best pilot in the galaxy.

And you're ready for the Clathrans. You know them, and you're ready for them. You know their ships, their crews, their weapons. You've visited their bases and hacked their computers. Powerful as they are, you know their limitations. And they don't know yours, if you even have any.

You activate some of your weapon systems — not your best ones — and some of your defensive systems — not your best ones. You want to see what they're going to throw at you, before you show them your best. You accelerate to something less than full speed, and you close in on the nearest battle group.

The Monitor ship is your biggest threat. But a Monitor can't really do much to defend its own group; its weapons are for attacking. So you aim for one of their destroyers instead. A half-decent pilot should be able to maneuver so that the Monitor can't fire without risking hitting its own escorts. You do. One destroyer goes down for the count.

But destroyers are kid stuff. Cruisers and dreadnoughts are more dangerous, especially when they outnumber you. They're following standard Clathran procedure, which is to try to surround you and overwhelm you with crossfire. You let out a little more speed, still holding a bit in reserve, and loop behind them one after another. You've worked this maneuver out on computer simulation a hundred times, and it works like a charm. Instead of surrounding you as they intended, the Clathrans end up strung out in a line, leaving their Monitor uselessly astern. You turn on your best electronic avoidance systems, specially programmed to make use of your knowledge of the frequencies and characteristics of the Clathrans' sensors, and make a blistering raking run across their whole formation. A dreadnought and two cruisers suffer heavy damage. Before you reach the Monitor, you reverse course in a three-axis loop you've practiced since you were a kid. The Monitor still can't fire, because the rest of its battle group is still lined up behind you. Again you rake the Clathran line from end to end, this time with your weapons on full, and the damaged dreadnought explodes in a spherical shell of mingled matter and energy. You escape behind the electromagnetic chaos of the fireball and take stock of what's left. The battle group is in disarray, just in time for an arriving Hadrakian task force to mop up. You circle around and search for the Monitor, now hopelessly separated from its battle group. You want to go one-on-one. But the Monitor is nowhere in your tactical range.

You look around for a new target. The battle has become a storm of conflict, with ships fighting in twos and threes and tens. You can't make much sense of it, except to notice that the Allies are outnumbered just about everywhere.

"Computer," you ask, "can you follow what's going on well enough to find us a target in a critical area?"

"Not really, Boss. There are too many variables to follow. And there are a thousand other computers all trying to do the same thing."

"All right." You choose a direction almost at random and close in. You meet another Clathran battle group head on, as it cruises in to help the group you decimated. The Monitor fires at you; you avoid the beams, but they're closer than you'd prefer.

"Boss, watch out. That Monitor has a long range."

"It's okay. I'm on it." You change course to repeat the strategy you used on the first battle group, maneuvering between the monitor and its escorts. But you don't get there. A tractor beam anticipates your course and almost gets a lock on you. You pull free, only to find yourself back in the Monitor's power alley. Another beam with your name on it swings toward you, forcing you to evade it by slewing in the opposite direction from where you wanted to go.

"Now you've made me mad," you growl at the viewscreen. You change course again, lining up on the point of the Monitor's hull closest to the bridge. You fire a blast dead-on, but the Clathran's shields absorb the energy.

“Boss, the other Monitor. . .”

Your ship lurches violently, suddenly enveloped in tractor beams. Another Monitor — the Monitor whose battle group you shot up — has snuck in behind you. You unleash your last measure of engine power and break free, with barely an ounce of force to spare, then look for a course that'll get you away from the double field of fire of two Monitors. The rest of the second battle group has closed up those positions.

You don't give up. Some of the best piloting the galaxy has ever seen keeps you alive for a couple of extra minutes. The cruisers and dreadnoughts keeping the lid on the box take some heavy damage for their pains. But you're not doing so well yourself. Your shields are taking hits, and your drives are out of whack from having to pull free of tractor beams with brute force. When the Clathrans start firing smart missiles into your trap, you start to long for the comfort of a nice quiet brig.

“All right, get ready,” you tell the computer. “The only way out of this trap is through one of those Monitors. I'll run the one to lower starboard. Put first priority on the weapons, because if it doesn't blow up by the time I get there I'm going right through it. And it's just a little too big to ram.”

You accelerate toward your chosen Monitor, concentrating your fire on its vulnerable parts. It fires back, bending your shields alarmingly. Some of your fire gets through, piercing the hull in places, but it shows no sign of getting out of your way. Your forward shield takes a direct hit, and your panel lights go dead. You try to veer off, but there's no response. The self-regenerating fuses will restore power in a few seconds, but that'll be too late. You blaze out of control toward the Monitor.

Suddenly the Monitor is surrounded with unimaginably brilliant white light that streams around its edges like the corona of the sun around the black disk of an eclipse. Something has hit the Monitor from directly behind, leaving you protected in its shadow. The Monitor goes dead in space. Your ship's power returns, and you veer off from your collision course. Behind the Monitor is the huge ship of the Worzellians, which is now trading beam and missile fire with the rest of the battle group. You swing around and help the Worzellian ship to escape. The Worzellians have weapons that are powerful way out of proportion to their shields. They can do a lot of damage, but they can't afford to take many hits.

“They're hailing us, Boss” reports your computer.

“Open the channel.”

“Worzellian Strategists to Human Warrior,” begins the message. “We greet you and urge you to save yourself.”

“Why?” you respond. “What do you mean? You just saved me.”

“You must leave this battle to save yourself. The Alliance cannot win.”

“Why not? Just because we're outnumbered?”

“No. It wouldn't even matter if we outnumbered them. The Allies have no strategy, and no plan for this battle. There is no communication or control. Each ship or task force fights on its own. Thus it cannot win.”

You scan the surroundings and wonder if the Worzellians may be right. The Clathrans outnumber the Allies in most sectors. They are making the most of this advantage, using their extra forces to pressure the Allies at every vulnerable point.

“Aren't you Worzellians supposed to be master tacticians?” you ask. “Can't you come up with a strategy?”

“We're just one ship,” say the Strategists.

“Two ships, now. We can get more. Do you have a plan?”

“Our first rule of tactics is to find the position of advantage,” say the Worzellians.

“That's easy,” you reply. “The planet Hadrak hasn't been taken by the Clathrans yet, has it? Then they must have surface weapons, which they'll be glad to use against any Clathran ships that get too near. Let's fight our way to the planet, and regroup from there.”

You and the Worzellian set course in formation toward Hadrak. Acting as scout and fighter escort, you guide the ship safely, engaging and disabling Clathran ships that threaten you along the way. A group of Hadrakian cruisers, some partly damaged, joins you midway, in time to help you overcome an aggressive Clathran force near the perimeter of Hadrak's range. Another Clathran battle group pursues you toward the planet, only to be driven back by heavy beam fire from the surface. A group of Zyran joins you, along with a single Riellan ship.

“We can’t sit here very long,” you tell the Worzellians. “What’s the next step?”

“We must build from this position. That is the second rule.”

You leave the Worzellians near the planet, and you and the mixed force of Allies begin sweeping out a larger perimeter. Each time you encounter an Allied task force fighting Clathrans, you help defeat the Clathrans and put the Allies in contact with the Strategists on the Worzellian ship. You tell the Strategists where the vulnerable points are in the Clathran ships and formations, and they pass the information on to each of the Allies. The perimeter grows larger. The Clathrans assemble reserve forces to attack the perimeter, and the battle becomes chaos once again. But there is a difference this time. The individual combats look as random as before, but the battle as a whole is being directed by you and the Strategists. Even as the secure perimeter zone collapses inwards under heavy pressure from the Clathrans, the invisible sphere of command and control grows outwards. When the Sirissian fleet arrives from behind the Survey Line, you’re ready to tell them where to attack for maximum effectiveness. When a fleet of ships from the human Home Worlds arrives, under the command of Admiral Wilkins, you get to tell him exactly where to go.

“If you want something done right, you’ve got to do it yourself,” you tell the Worzellians during one of the few quiet moments.

“That,” they answer solemnly, “is the third rule of tactics.”

The battle has begun to go badly for the Clathrans and, unlike you, they have no strong position to fall back to. Slowly the Clathran attack falls apart. Their ships regroup in defensive formations, then begin to retreat. The allies press the attack. Monitor ships fall victim to concerted attacks on their weakest points. Allies systematically tear into formations of cruisers and dreadnoughts.

The Clathrans know that there’s no advantage in expending their forces in a losing battle. They begin a systematic retreat. Your forces put priority on preventing any Monitors from escaping. No one believes this is the end of Clathran power, but the more ships they have to replace, the more time the Alliance will have gained.

“Don’t destroy the last Monitor,” you tell the Allies via the Strategists. “We need to take one alive.” Soon a Hadrakian task force has surrounded the last Monitor left in Hadrakian space and disabled its drives and weapons with careful attacks. You realize it’s the Clathran flagship you’ve caught. You hope the computers are intact.

The only way to find out is to board the ship and overcome the Clathran crew. With the Hadrakians’ permission, you join the ring of waiting ships and wait to begin the boarding operation.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[296]

The Enclave trading center is a dull and lifeless place. The quiet Hadrakian Settled One who meets you here is patient and answers your questions regarding available trades. When you hear the deals they have to offer, you wonder why they even bother staying open. When she sees your look of disbelief, she smiles, showing her gleaming white fangs, and politely suggests that you obtain your badge of citizenship in the Arena. Then you will be eligible for the much better trading found at their regular marketplace. Until you can leave the visitors’ Enclave, you are completely at their mercy regarding trades. For what it’s worth, this is what they have to offer here:

- 1 Fiber for 1 Munitions
- 1 Fiber for 1 Radioactives

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[297]

The Enclave trading center is a dull and lifeless place. The quiet Hadrakian Settled One who meets you here is patient and answers your questions regarding available trades. When you hear the deals they have to offer, you wonder why they even bother staying open. When she sees your look of disbelief, she smiles, showing her gleaming white fangs, and politely suggests that you obtain your badge of citizenship in the Arena. Then you will be eligible for the much better trading found at their regular marketplace. Until you can leave the visitors' Enclave, you are completely at their mercy regarding trades. For what it's worth, this is what they have to offer here:

- 1 Food for 1 Culture
- 1 Food for 1 Tools

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[298]

Your Bluvian friend Thurk leads you back to the hangar where you may, if you wish, purchase a 3-bay cargo drone. This drone will enable you to instantaneously transport cargo to any planetary commodities market you have already visited or to any player. For rules describing how to use your drone, consult the *Host Guide and Player Reference Manual*.

(Note: if you already have a drone, you can only keep one at a time, so the CGM will automatically discard the smaller drone.)

Thurk reminds you that the price of the drone is 2 units of Munitions and 1 unit of Phase Steel.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[299]

The Holots are very well adapted to the mountainous landscape of their homeworld. Physically, they closely resemble old earth bats except that they stand over four feet tall and have a twenty-foot wing span. They are warm blooded, have a short thick fur covering their bodies, wear clothes purely for ornamentation and are very intelligent. They are also extremely shy. You have a difficult time getting one of their race to speak with you.

For a day or so, you are content to watch the Holots, observing their behavior from a distance. You already know they live in the vast caverns that riddle the planet and have an artistic talent that they apply to everything they do. They enjoy roosting up toward the ceilings of the caves where they have fashioned numerous sculptures in the crystalline rock. From the ground, you can barely discern the art, but when you take a few hours to actually scale a crystal cliff inside one of the caverns, you really begin to appreciate their artistic talent; their work is breathtaking.

Finally, you get the opportunity to talk to a Holot. This happens as you are descending from your rooftop journey and slip, almost free falling the last fifty feet to the ground. Before your slide begins in earnest, you feel a pair of strong hands around your torso, pushing you back to the safety of the wall. From there, you are able to work your way back down to the ground. When you have both feet back on the planet's surface, you turn and are surprised to see the Holot standing there. The alien descended beside you to make sure you had no further mishaps.

"Thank you," you say. It nods, which you take for acceptance of your thanks, and stares at you. You take the chance that this indicates an interest in conversing and you introduce yourself. When the Holot continues to stare at you, you continue speaking. You tell the odd creature

a little about yourself and some of the adventures you have encountered in your travels. The alien's response is to fold its wings and hunker down on the floor. Maybe it wants to converse! You take a seat and remain quiet, hoping this will prompt the bat creature to begin speaking.

Sure enough, after a moment or two of silence, the Holot introduces itself as Dracoll. Its voice is very high pitched, almost out of human hearing range, but you are able to decipher its squeaky words. You spend hours crouched on the cavern floor, talking with the alien and learning whatever you can.

The Holots are an ancient people who have always loved their beautiful planet. They have several sexes, not just male and female, but the full explanation of how things work when it comes to making little bats doesn't make much sense to you. For one thing, reproduction is only possible in the caverns here on Holoth. No artificial cavern anywhere else, no matter how authentic, will do. The Holots don't understand why they are restricted in this odd fashion, and neither do the Hadrakian biologists. Nonetheless, the limitation is very real. Several times, the Holots have visited other Hadrakian worlds and tried to reproduce there, but the result is always failure. Therefore, they have resigned themselves to looking at the great dark sky that surrounds their planet at night and knowing that the worlds out there are for other races, not for them. They must be content to stay on the home planet they love, and is that such a bad thing?

You ask Dracoll about the signs of advanced technology the Hadrakians have uncovered on the planet, such as 50,000 year old high-tech parts from spaceships and even warp drives. Is it possible that the Holots developed advanced technology some time in the past? Dracoll answers this with a shrug. There are some legends that the Holots, or perhaps some ancestor race from which the Holots evolved, had a technological civilization long, long ago. If so, there must have been a terrible cataclysm to wipe that civilization away, for no records or memories of it have survived. The Holots today really don't care about these questions. They prefer to live in the present and let the past be buried forever.

When the Hadrakians first came to Holoth, the two races did not have the kind of camaraderie they do now. The Holots are by nature a shy race, and they were frightened by the Hadrakian ships and equipment. However, a Hadrakian diplomat eventually worked out an agreement that was to the benefit of both races. The bats permitted the tigorillas to live here if they preserved the planet's environment and did not interfere with the bats' way of life. In addition, the bats helped the Hadrakians gather Crystals in exchange for music and art supplies that are very difficult to find in quantity on Holoth.

You knew about the Holots' interest in art but had no idea that they were musically inclined as well. When you mention this, Dracoll opens its mouth and, you presume, sings. Unfortunately its song is too high in sound frequency for you to be able to appreciate. Oh, well.

The Holots' one real passion, though, is flying. According to Dracoll, the ability to fly comes from a certain state of mind. The Holots don't understand why the Hadrakians have never shown an interest in learning how to do this wonderful thing. You try to explain that neither you nor the Hadrakians have the physical capacity to perform such a feat, but Dracoll isn't hearing any of that.

"Have you tried it? Perhaps I can teach you," is what Dracoll tells you. You are inclined to be skeptical but, should you wish to meet with the bat creature later on and try to fly like a bird, a plane, a . . . , anyway, if you want to try, plot the following option:

{4MQJXU} (5 phases) Learn how to fly, if you can.

Dracoll finally stands and, with a graceful downthrust of its wings, soars aloft. From this long discussion with him, you really feel like you have gained a better understanding of the Holot race.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[300]

You have built a Cloaking Ray for your ship. Congratulations!

You spend some time testing the Cloaking Ray and observing its operation. It is, as you have guessed, a very effective defense, especially when your intentions are to avoid rather than engage the enemy. It doesn't actually make your ship invisible, but it may seem that way to your opponent. The Cloaking Ray actively interferes with the enemy's sensor systems to prevent them from detecting you in any frequency or energy band. Its only limitation is that it can be overwhelmed if too many sensor systems are scanning you from many directions at once, such as might happen if you are in a melee of many ships.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[301]

The Goddess of Deceased Enemies, who makes herself known to you soon after your meditation begins, appears as a Hadrakian Settled One with jet black fur and a grim visage.

"I am one of those who speak to Humans, perhaps because of my name."

"I am no enemy of yours," you think.

"No, in fact we are allies. Take this advice, Human. You can go to the place called Darkwhistle to get your questions answered, but don't go there empty-handed. Fate has decreed that you must be prepared to give up something in return for the answers you seek."

"And I'd hate to have her mad at me."

"I see that you understand me well, Human. Good luck!"

Your visitation is ended and you take the moment required to report the goddess's name to the Keeper.

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[302]

You are nauseated by the Zyran's sticky brown bodies suddenly closing in all around you, but you can't let that slow you down. Fighting for your life, you use your most powerful weapons and special abilities to fend them off.

"The alien fights like a Clathran," you hear the Zyran's gurgling to each other.

Unfortunately, you are hopelessly outnumbered. Healthy Zyran's move in to replace the injured ones, and soon you are losing ground. The mob is getting closer and closer. You have to do some quick thinking. You grab a Zyran who seems particularly well-respected and point your weapon at it.

"Stand back or I'll shoot!" you yell out.

The mob momentarily backs off, heeding your warning. Then, one Zyran in the crowd breaks away and rushes towards you. You barely have time to notice how ugly this one looks, with eight legs and a flat head like a giant cockroach, before you are forced to react. Without hesitating, you kill the attacking Zyran with one lethal blow.

This seems to hold the mob in check. But you are taken aback by what happens to the dead Zyran. It is transforming into something else.

The legs and head of the gruesome creature break off, exposing the guts inside. Something's moving in there. A whole litter of baby Zyrans! Goaded into action by the death of their parent, ten or twenty of the gooey little things crawl out of the dead Zyran's body. They climb all around their parent, and then, they begin eating the dead carcass.

So this is how Zyrans reproduce. When the parent dies, a litter of babies "hatches" from the parent's guts and eats the parent's dead body. Great.

The Zyran who you're still holding hostage turns to speak to you. The mob keeps its distance.

"You are a good fighter," it says.

"I don't like the idea of being eaten," you answer. "I came here to offer a truce. We should fight our common enemy, the Clathrans. Not each other."

The hostage pauses for a moment to consider your proposition.

"That is an interesting idea. Perhaps we should not eat you, for now."

The crowd seems disappointed, and pulls back a bit.

"I appreciate that," you reply.

"You may contact our king to discuss this idea of yours."

"Your king?"

"The leader of all Zyrans. On our home planet, Zyroth."

"Will I be allowed to land on your home planet? How do I know I will not be attacked there?"

"Tell them of your mission when you arrive. Tell them Lord Ruckel sent you."

The mob parts, letting you return to your ship. You let Lord Ruckel go. "Go only to Zyroth to talk," Lord Ruckel warns as you return to your ship, "If you land here again, you will surely be eaten."

❖ STOP ❖

[303]

The market is teeming with Hadrakians dressed in garish clothing and going about their business. The Settled Ones are quietly running the various trade offices, sharply contrasting with the loud and brash Homeless Ones, who are performing the physical half of running the place. Together, they balance each other out and you see a well-run trade center — even though the bright contrasting colors you see everywhere tend to make you nauseous.

You take a minute to watch two male Hadrakians hoist heavy crates off a transport vehicle when you spot trouble in the form of a Francloon scuttling under the truck bed. Before you have time to react, the damage is done. Pouring a fluid onto the street where the Homeless Ones are unloading, the Francloon dodges out of the way as the first Hadrakian steps into the puddle. The fluid is some sort of lubricant and causes the big guy to start sliding across the street, carrying a heavy crate, feet flailing in every direction. An oncoming car has to swerve sharply to avoid hitting the Hadrakian and manages to side swipe several parked vehicles instead. Meanwhile, the unfortunate male is still trying to keep hold of the crate, stamped in large letters “FRAGILE,” as well as his balance. He is finally able to slow himself while still holding his load, at least until a second Francloon nimbly skips out into the male’s path, carelessly tossing the peel of a long yellow fruit under the other’s feet.

WHAM!!! Down goes the Hadrakian, crate crashing to the ground, jars of ball-bearings that were once safely inside the crate spilling out onto the roadway and sending any poor unfortunate pedestrian in their path flying.

The once orderly market center is in chaos. A nearby Settled One sees your look of disbelief over the entire affair and explains patiently, “The Francloons like nothing more than to disrupt our day.”

“So what do you do about it?”

“We recover as gracefully as we can.” You notice that another Settled One has taken charge of the situation and is calmly issuing orders. Soon everything is back to normal.

“Aren’t you going to take any action against the Francloons?” you ask.

“We have learned that paying undue attention only makes them worse the next time. Occasionally, the Homeless Ones will react strongly — they like to get revenge — but we Settled Ones prefer not to reward bad behavior. The Francloons only want an audience and we refuse to give them one.”

You think you understand, but are not sure you could stand to live here. You admire the perseverance of the Hadrakians in coping with this bizarre challenge.

Continuing on about your business, you enter the Trade Center and see that Medicines, harvested at the nearby lagoon, are for sale. The odd electromagnetic properties of the sea water in the lagoon causes the kelp that grows there to have unique healing properties, making this Medicine very potent and valuable. You may purchase some for the following prices:

3 Medicine for 1 Warp Core
2 Medicine for 1 Culture
1 Medicine for 1 Fiber

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

⊗ STOP ⊗

[304]

The world of Sirissi is so crowded that, for all intents and purposes, it is one huge planet-wide city. The sheer volume of people and traffic whizzing by you on the ground and in the air is tremendous. Coupled with this, there is the peculiar phase-shifting that everyone and everything seem to do here, yourself included. Although you do not actually feel yourself appearing and disappearing, you have seen your reflection in a glass window and you are definitely flickering in and out with the rest of the inhabitants. You have no clue what is happening or to where you are shifting.

You are very curious about the Sirissians' technology for controlling and regulating traffic. During the time you have been here, you have yet to see even one accident. Given the volume of people rushing from one place to another, you are not sure how this is possible. You decide to find out.

One of the nice things about Sirissi is the ease with which a visitor can learn the whereabouts of a particular place. Located at street corners everywhere are information booths which dispense data of virtually any type to whoever asks. You duck into one to learn where you can find out about traffic control. The booth attendant offers to make an appointment with an official at the Control Center if you so wish. You do.

Soon you find yourself seated in the outer office of the assistant to the assistant of the subgroup involved with assisting the secondary section of the Traffic Flow division in the fourth sector. You don't wait long before you are ushered into the office and introduced to the Sirissian behind the desk.

"Greetings, visitor," the Sirissian bobbles as you enter. "I am Manager 126 of the second level traffic flow. What can I do to be of assistance?"

You give your best imitation of what passes for a bow here, as protocol is essential on alien worlds, and introduce yourself. You try not to look at the alien's sensory organs bobbing and weaving in a seemingly random fashion atop the creature's head. They tend to make you dizzy if you stare too long.

"I am actually fascinated by your traffic control system. How do you keep all of the ships and people from careening into one another?" you ask rather tactlessly. The alien doesn't seem to mind your bluntness, however, and jumps excitedly out of her chair.

"Marvelous, isn't it? For obvious reasons, we needed to develop a foolproof method of quantity transport. Before we invented the Phazor we had millions of accidents. And that was centuries ago when our population wasn't nearly as great as it is today."

The little alien gives a shiver. You assume it is a reaction to the awful thought of all the accidents in times of old and how bad it would be today if they hadn't discovered this Phazor gizmo.

Either that or it was the Sirissian equivalent of sneezing. You wonder if you should say "Bless you," just to be on the safe side. You do not have time because the manager is leaping from her seat and gesturing for you to go over to the window. Pointing to the immense amount of traffic whizzing by the glass, she tells you something about the Phazor.

"Long ago, one of our most brilliant scientists, Researcher 375, discovered the doorway to other dimensions. This was both good and bad. It did eventually lead to the Phazor, but the effects of entering another dimension are immediately fatal to organisms accustomed to living on our plane of existence. The shock of shifting over is too much for anyone of our race.

"Of course we tried all sorts of experiments to alleviate this effect. We even used volunteers from other races in some of the tests, but there were never any survivors. However, Researcher 375 was able to use the fringe effects of the device to allow a partial passing through into neighboring dimensions. This meant that most of the subject remained in this world, but enough of its physical substance faded that the person could actually pass through solid objects. Two people could occupy the same place at the same time! One hundred people could, too! There is no limit.

"Manager 54 saw that an obvious application of the device was to keep travelers in traffic from running into one another. So, after a few years, we had a working system of traffic control. Later, we were able to adapt it to a more general use and thereby increase the living area of our planet tremendously. Since a percentage of the people are never actually on the planet at a given moment, we can actually accommodate more people here." You are suitably impressed and tell your host so.

"Why, thank you," the Sirissi replies modestly. "It is something we sometimes take for granted. I hope I don't sound boastful when I tell you that Researcher 375 was a distant relative of mine. I am happy to see someone appreciate all the work done by one of my favorite ancestors.

"In fact," she exclaims while bobbling excitedly about the room, "Why don't you come down to Flow Central and see the Phazor in action?"

Manager 126 seems so happy at the thought of your seeing the device that you can't refuse. You follow her down through the long and winding corridors of the huge building, eventually leading to the door of the Phazor Sector.

Eventually she stops in front of an unassuming door and motions for you to step inside. As you enter the room, you are surprised by the silence. Somehow you had the impression that the workings of such a device had to include a lot of noise. As you look around, you can see the sheer size of the machine. From where you stand, the room drops away for uncounted floors with virtually every foot taken up by the Phazor.

"Is that it?" you ask.

"Yes," the Manager replies proudly. "In fact, that is the first working model. It is still functioning even after all these years." She explains that this single device is capable of acting over the entire planet's surface and even in the upper atmosphere. The Phazor is tied into computer systems which tell it when two things are about to collide, but it does all of the rest by itself. The Sirissian sees how impressed you are.

You ask about the actual construction of the Phazor, but she doesn't know that much about its internal workings. However, the Manager does mention that a key component of the Phazor is something called a Dimensional Transducer. It is the Dimensional Transducer that is actually responsible for shifting an object into and out of different dimensions.

Flow Central has many Dimensional Transducers on hand, even though the Phazor uses only one of them. When the Phazor was first built years ago, no one knew how durable the Dimensional Transducer would prove to be. In case of breakdowns, they made many hundreds of Dimensional Transducers as spare parts. Not one spare has ever been used.

"It has been a very long time since anyone has really appreciated the work that went into designing this device. I am happy to see that you are capable of realizing just how wonderful it is. My ancestor and I would be honored if you would accept a Dimensional Transducer as a gift. They will never all be needed. I hate to see them going to waste. Would you like one? Could you make use of it?"

You are momentarily speechless. Then you manage to come to your senses and accept the wonderful gift.

As you leave the building carrying the unit awkwardly under one arm (despite its bulkiness, it weighs less than twenty pounds), you are already busily pondering what to use it for.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[305]

You enter the Shrine and, finding a meditation cubicle, you relax. Your eyes close.

Almost instantaneously, the goddess appears. It's the Goddess of Nasty Hassles. You wisely keep silent and she begins to speak:

"Find the planet Golgotha, silent Human. There you can see the twisted past and future unwinding into the present. And understand that my name means more to you than just that."

"I understand."

"I bet you do," she huffs, sarcastically. Then she's gone.

You're left. You tell the Shrine Keeper the goddess's name, then you're gone too.

Back to the mean streets.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[306]

The planet Dositia has an extremely busy spaceport. The spaceships coming and going are of countless varieties, including many unfamiliar alien designs. You are pleased to see this, since it suggests that the native civilization is technologically advanced and offers good trading opportunities.

As you get closer to the planet, you see something very unusual: a bizarre little moon. The moon is completely smooth and grey except for a huge black pit, more than fifty miles wide, that covers most of the side you can see. You swing around to the other side and discover a reciprocal pit of identical dimensions. It looks like the moon has a huge hole going right through it! In fact, looking directly at the hole, you get the impression of looking across great distance. However, you cannot see any stars out the other side, just blackness. Moreover, your scanners indicate that the moon is completely solid. What, then, are the black pits?

Your computer is as baffled as you are, so you decide to investigate the pit now facing you more closely. As you approach the pit, you get the shock of your life when a full battle fleet emerges from out of nowhere! The fleet heads straight for Dositia, and you see a second fleet lifting off from the planet's surface to intercept the first. Confused, you are quite content to pull back from the excitement and let the two fleets go at it, but that is not meant to be. One of the attacking ships lets you have a barrage of high-intensity energy rays, temporarily blinding your ship's sensors.

"Boss, I can't see!"

"Put forward view on screen," you order. "I need to see where we are headed."

"No can do, Boss. Sorry. The last thing I remember is heading down toward that pit for a closer look. I think we are about to enter. . ."

There is a flash of darkness, and an eerie sense of being displaced overwhelms you. You feel very dizzy and faint. An ancient voice reverberates inside your head. "You have angered the gods and now you shall suffer the consequences," the voice says. "You shall be split in two, and your evil half exiled to the other side of the galaxy. Eliminate the evil. That is your challenge now."

Before you can respond by screaming at the top of your lungs, there is a flash of light and your screens are once again functioning. Your ship is at full power. You see that you are just above the surface of the weird little moon, with Dositia floating peacefully below you. Apparently you have passed through the hole and come out the other side. There is no sign of the two battle fleets anywhere; for that, you are grateful.

"What happened?" you ask, bewildered. "Where did those ships go?"

"Insufficient data, Boss. They could have gone anywhere or stayed in the same place. A better question to ask is, 'Where did we go?'"

"What do you mean? Aren't we orbiting Dosia?"

"Negative. The planet below us, as well as the planetoid, are remarkably similar to Dosia and its satellite, but scans show that they are not the same. Also, the star patterns here are not those of the Dosian system. Give me a second to figure out where we are. Wow! Imagine that. We seem to have been transported clear across the galaxy."

Go now to the CGM.

☒ STOP ☒

[307]

"Execute," you say to your ship's computer. The three-axis drive flickers on, then off, and your position changes by several light years. This is the last of a series of carefully plotted movements, bringing you into normal space in the furthest reaches of the Karnossus system. If you have worked things out correctly, your entry ripple will pass undetected in the wake of a departing Monitor and your ship will seem like one more cometary body in an eccentric solar orbit.

"We're intercepting multiple scanning beams, Boss. There must be hundreds of sensor systems down there."

"What are they getting?"

"We should look like a rock. The outer hull is vacuum cold, and we're not radiating EM at all. Also, the beams are focused for much farther away than our current position."

"Good enough, I guess. Watch for any changes and stay ready to get out of here. Can you pick up anything from this distance?"

"Close to a thousand separate ship tracks, with frequent arrivals and departures. We already figured that. There's a summary of the drive signatures on the screen; it looks like the same sort of battle groups we've seen at the Survey Line and in action around the Hadrakian systems. Of course, only ships under drive are going to show up from here. As far as actual planets, there seem to be more than usual. In fact, if I had better data I'd say there were over a hundred, though some might be artificial orbiting facilities instead."

"We need to get a closer look at what's in the system," you decide. "How about we play dead and drop into a steep orbit through the system? We can slingshot around the sun and back out again, with everything shut down except the passive sensors. If we're lucky they'll think we're just another cometary mass."

"That should work, Boss, except for one thing. Like any other cometary mass, it'll take us years to reach the sun and back on a ballistic orbit. I'm just warning you because you do get a bit impatient at times."

"Bloody heck. We'll have to use the drives, then. Can our active screening systems cloak us well enough to make a pass within sensor range?"

"They should, Boss, as long as the Clathrans don't happen to focus a probe beam directly at us."

You work out a trajectory that will give you a long look at the system from within sensor range, without bringing you too close to any of the planets or operational ships. You decide to swing far above the system's natural ecliptic, where you'll have the best view and the lowest chance of detection.

"You know," you observe, "If I were the Clathrans, I'd consider smart-mining the higher stellar latitudes to prevent any ships from doing what we're doing now."

"Maybe that's why the Clathrans can't stand you, Boss. They know you could do their jobs better than they can."

Your enhanced visual-spectrum scanning systems soon provide you with your first, staggering, look at the Karnossus system. The sun is at least three times Sol-normal, and burns with a white-hot intensity. Ringed around it, at first scan, are at least a hundred planets of Earth size or larger. You count thirteen distinct asteroid belts and at least three dozen artificial constructs each the size of a small planetoid.

Many of the planets share orbits, and there seem to be at least two separate ecliptic planes, oriented sixty degrees apart. Spectroscopic detail reveals a stunning diversity in the composition and age of the planets, suggesting that the Clathrans have either moved planets here from other systems, or made new planets as they went along. Among those planets are manufacturing and storage centers for all of the commodities the Clathrans need to keep their vast fleets supplied indefinitely.

You turn your attention to the Clathrans' activities. After long observation, as your own ship circles the system, you begin to see a pattern. Heavy construction facilities are clustered near the center of the system, where solar energy is most readily available. The artificial planetoids turn out to be clusters of ships still under construction: whole Monitor-based battle groups, including fleets of dreadnoughts and cruisers, are being built together in these huge orbital factories.

Outward from the construction stations are the complex orbits containing many of the resource-rich planets. You look for signs of habitation, but mostly the planets are unoccupied. Extensive mining, farming, and manufacturing efforts are in evidence, but no large population centers. These are found farther out, in the series of asteroid belts. You see evidence of Clathrans numbering in the thousands of billions, and you realize that Karnossus is probably the central breeding ground for their vast military force. Small ships swarm around the asteroids like bees around a hive, mostly simple transport liners and light cargo vessels.

Continuing your scan, you look out to the edges of the system. Here are found most of the completed and fully-manned ships. You recognize training exercises underway in several quadrants, and you pick up hundreds of scattered military transmissions. As your ship glides past — fortunately without detection — you recognize one whole battle group, clustered around its Monitor like baby chicks around a hen, preparing to move into hyperspace and away. Perhaps it is another training exercise, or perhaps it is one more force joining the Survey as the war with the Hadrakians escalates. They vanish as you watch, and the hyperspace ripple of their departure momentarily blanks your sensor systems.

When sensor conditions are restored, you see that the departure of the battle group has given you a clear view toward the inner parts of the system. You scan the asteroids and planets nearest the star, recording all that you can see for future playback and analysis.

"Boss, take a look at the Interphase Variometer!"

The instrument that monitors the level, or "width," of the Dual Space Interphase usually maintains a steady reading. For many months it has silently registered the slow and steady widening of the Interphase across the galaxy. Now, it is behaving very strangely. Its reading is changing wildly, from a normal high level to off the scale. The fluctuations aren't random; they seem to depend on where the sensor arrays are aimed.

"Scan the Variometer across the system and tell me where the signal's coming from."

"The signal's strongest close to the sun, just on the horizon. It's not the star itself, but something in a very low orbit."

"Keep an eye on whatever it is, and keep me informed," you instruct the computer. "And turn off anything we have that uses the Interphase to operate; there's no telling what might happen as we get closer." The only thing you can't turn off is your brain, easily the most sensitive Dual Space equipment on the ship. *No psychic powers*, you tell yourself. *Keep your attention on business.*

"There it is, Boss!" But you have already seen it yourself.

There is a dark spot on the horizon of the star's disk, like a sunspot but larger and more uniform. Something is quenching the star's fires over an enormous circular area, almost a third as wide as the star's disk itself, damping its whiteness to a flat grey.

Orbiting close around the sun, centered directly above the grey spot, is a golden artifact, a tiny speck centered above the enormous grey circle. You look at it under the highest magnification. It tumbles as it follows its orbit, revealing twelve equal pentagonal sides, each about a kilometer across. *That makes it a dodecahedron*, you think, remembering your grade school geometry. *But why is it shaped that way? And just what is it for?*

You're not sure, but you think you can guess.

"I think I understand what's going on here," you tell the computer.

"What do you mean, Boss?"

"Well, let me put it this way. Imagine a big flat tub being filled from a faucet. If you measure the depth of the water for long enough in one place, you'll see it rise, right?"

"Of course, Boss."

"Okay, and if you measure the depth in different places you'll find it's just about the same everywhere, right?"

"Sure, Boss. But what does that have to do. . ."

"Tell me, then. What's the one place where you can measure the depth and get a totally different — and much higher — reading?"

"I see, Boss. Under the faucet itself."

"That dodecahedron is the 'faucet' for the Dual Space Interphase. It's the source of the increase."

"I think you're right, Boss. All the readings are consistent with that theory, and I can't think of any other that explains it."

"And it's getting its energy directly from the star," you add. "It's absorbing it somehow. That's what the grey spot is."

You look again at the smooth golden object. The dodecahedron is the wedge that has been forcing the cracks in reality to split open. This is the device that's widening the Dual Space Interphase across the entire galaxy — including the Home Worlds of the human race more than a million light years away. It is this Dodecahedron that is causing human civilization to collapse in insanity and chaos.

"We have to attack it now, while we have the chance," you say.

"What chance? Have you forgotten where we are, Boss? You turn on one active system now, or go one unit closer to that system, and we'll have more Clathrans on us than Rigellian sand flies on a four day old Zanfbeast corpse. I estimate our chance of surviving to fire on the thing at less than one percent, and I strongly doubt that one shot would do it."

You look at the Dodecahedron again, and resolve to attack it anyway regardless of the odds or the cost. But common sense takes over. The surface is putting out an energy spectrum you've never seen before. There's no telling what it's made of, or what defenses it has built in. Since it's capable of affecting the Dual Space Interphase, you wouldn't be surprised if it could use Dual Space to defend itself as well. You conclude that none of our weapons would be likely to hurt it, no matter how many hits you could score.

More than anything, the Dodecahedron reminds you of some of the other artifacts you've seen in the Arm, artifacts older than the Clathrans or any other race. Yet the Dodecahedron is a new construct, fully functional in all respects. You grasp for the connection, but for the moment it eludes you.

You content yourself with gathering all the information on the Dodecahedron that you can assemble, using the minutes while you complete your scanning pass. You set the instruments on automatic, and turn your attention back to the Dodecahedron. Already it is lost to sight again, amid the fires of the sun. Then carefully, so as not to attract attention, you feed a little more power to your drives to propel your ship back out toward the relative safety of the outer edge of the system.

[308]

The trek across the desert is long and arduous. It takes you over three days to complete, and you almost run out of provisions before you reach the safety of the northern trees. Gasping, you throw yourself into the nearest brook and cool your burning skin. You vow to be better prepared should you make this journey again in the future.

A day's travel finally takes you to your destination, the Clathran military base. Well, almost. You are getting close to the base when a Clathran patrol appears out of nowhere. One of the humanoid lizards catches a glimpse of you before you have time to duck behind some trees. He doesn't waste a second until he is firing off a blast from his weapon in your general vicinity.

"What is it?" one of the Clathrans asks her comrade. "What did you see?"

"I don't know, but it sure was ugly."

"Maybe it was one of those pesky natives?" a third soldier ventures. "You know how irritating they can be, scampering in and raiding our food supplies."

"If it was one of them, he was a BIG fellow!" They spend a moment or two checking the area, but you are long gone and they find nothing.

You decide that you have had enough excitement for the moment and gather enough provisions to see you safely back across the desert. Until you have some means of safely disguising yourself, you do not stand a chance of successfully infiltrating the base. Maybe you can return later if you have an ability that will enable you to poke around without being noticed.

The journey back across the hot sands is uneventful; you finally reach the safety of your ship. Gratefully, you collapse in the cool interior of your cabin and sleep a long and restful sleep.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[309]

You have returned to the cold barren rock the Clathrans call Morikor, the world where Vanessa Chang was taken after her capture by the Clathrans. According to her log, she managed not only to escape from this wretched world but to damage the fleet of warships being built here at that time. You are proud to follow her here and hope that you will be as instrumental as she was in setting the Clathrans back in their plans for galactic conquest.

Last time you had no way to approach the planet safely. The Clathrans saw you coming and powerful planetary beam weapons fired upon you, driving you away. This time you have something that you doubt they are prepared for: a Cloaking Ray. Using this device, you plan to sneak down to Morikor's surface without the Clathrans even knowing you are here.

You engage the Cloaking Ray and begin your landing approach. It seems to work, for the Clathrans do not react. The beam weapons remain silent, guarding against intruders more visible than you. Your touchdown is smooth and uneventful, and you secure your ship just outside one of the big black domes where the Clathrans reside. Of course, you leave the Cloaking Ray operating, to prevent the Clathrans from spotting your ship on the ground.

You put on your environmental suit, step outside, and approach the dome next to you. It's hard to tell anything from outside because the wall of the dome is perfectly opaque. Not only does the black material prevent you from seeing inside, but it also absorbs all electromagnetic radiation, sound waves, and so on. Your sensory equipment is useless.

Finally, you come across an airlock leading to the interior of the dome. This presents an interesting opportunity to do some real spying. Assuming, of course, that you are able to keep the Clathrans from seeing you.

You now have the following option:

(ZB2WHT) (7 phases) Enter the dome through the airlock.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[310]

Thurk accompanies you to the lecture. You are wondering if a Clathran will be present in person to give the talk, but Thurk assures you that their lizard-like masters haven't set foot on the planet for quite some time.

The Bluvians gather for the lecture in a large assembly hall. There are no seats, but the floor rises in steps to give everyone a clear view. The Bluvians present have temporarily stopped feuding, and seem to be in a good mood. They applaud and slap each other on the back of the head as the lights dim for the start of the lecture.

It is rather an impressive show. The narrator is one of the Bluvian-shaped Clathran robots. The robot uses a variety of audiovisual displays to illustrate a speech about the marvelous destiny of Bluvians as an elite space army. Three-dimensional images show Bluvian soldiers in elaborate gear piloting fleets of battle spacecraft against a variety of detestable inferior alien scum, in service of their revered Clathran masters.

"Above all," intones the robot to the gathered Bluvians, "you must follow the orders of the Clathrans. You have been created to serve the Clathrans, just as the Clathrans have been created to serve their Masters. When the Masters reclaim the galaxy, they will reward us all for our sacrifices."

The remainder of the lecture deals with more mundane matters. The Bluvians are given detailed technical instructions for improving their hand blasters (although this still leaves them well behind the state of the art) and a quick lesson in how to immobilize prisoners. They are admonished to ignore lies that other aliens may tell them and to vigilantly defend Bloo against intruders.

"How did you like it?" asks Thurk when the lecture is over.

"I'm not sure if I liked that part about humans being a virulent festering plague in the galactic fringe that will soon be burned into oblivion."

"You'd rather we didn't do that?"

"Definitely."

"Okay."

You still find it disconcerting to have the Bluvian always changing his point of view just to agree with whoever is speaking to him. This is a very interesting trait of the ugly alien race on Bloo. You decide to ask him more about the immobilization technique the robot had demonstrated earlier this evening.

"Oh, I couldn't show you that!" he tells you, shocked that you would even ask. "How would we ever be able to take you prisoner when we finally get the word to take over the galaxy?"

"You don't need to take me prisoner; we are friends."

"We are?" he asks, delighted. You get the feeling that you are his first "friend," and you feel a bit guilty about misleading him this way, but what the heck, all's fair. . .

So Thurk spends the rest of the evening teaching you the proper technique for paralyzing an opponent in hand-to-hand combat. Soon, you are able to render him unconscious on every attack. Fortunately he doesn't seem to mind.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[311]

You stand up and fight the opponent who was searching for you. Unfortunately, he is stronger than you are, and he seriously injures you. Meanwhile, your ally defeats your other opponent. You bleed in the mud as you watch the two remaining combatants go at it. Unfortunately, your ally eventually loses and the victorious opponent crosses triumphantly to your side of the field. You pass out.

✂ STOP ✂

[312]

When you are finished, the Darkwhistler thinks at you:

"For you that was good. Now I will take some matter."

You return to your ship to find, as expected, a freshly emptied cargo bay. There is no sign of where the missing commodity went, or how it vanished.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[313]

Despite the fact that the Hadrakian city is located in the middle of a virtual wasteland, the colonists have been able to slowly revitalize small sections of the desert. The amazing thing is that these small parcels of arable land produce tons upon tons of delicious Food, more than anyone could possibly expect. Given that this is only a small fraction of the planet's potential, you can see why the Hadrakians are so dedicated to maintaining a colony here. You can also appreciate why the green part of the planet is so rich in plant and animal life.

You are not at all surprised to learn that the main commodity of trade in Jewel is Food. When you ask the authorities about the going rates, they tell you that they will trade Food for the following:

- 3 Food for 1 Culture
- 2 Food for 1 Tools
- 1 Food for 1 Crystals

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

✂ STOP ✂

[314]

You realize almost immediately that you have failed in your response in the Brotherhood dialogue. You feel badly enough until you catch a glimpse of your friend, Brother Almed, standing deep in the temple shadows. You only get a quick look at the expression of deep disappointment on his face, but it is enough to make you feel even worse than a moment ago, if that is possible. You leave the temple filled with a sense of shame, and resolve to study the dialogue before you dare return here again.

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[315]

“Whoa Boss! Clathran monitor ship dead ahead!”

“What! Where did THAT come from?” you yelp as you prepare for evasive action. Sweat beads on your forehead as you spend every ounce on concentration and energy in avoiding the scans of the Clathran ship. Fortunately, your ship’s electronic defenses and your own experienced tactics are sufficient. There are a few tense moments, but by making a long detour, you manage to maneuver safely past the monitoring station and into the Adefa star system.

“Boss, take a look at this,” says your computer as the view on the screen magnifies. “It doesn’t look much like a planet.”

The only body orbiting the sun in this system is a disk-shaped object the diameter of a small moon. The disk is impossibly thin, perhaps as little as a few meters in thickness. One side of it is facing the sun. This day side is perfectly smooth and reflects so little of the star’s yellow-white light that from behind, it looks like a round hole cut out of the star background. You realize that it must be absorbing a great deal of solar energy. The other side of the disk, facing away from the sun, is also dark, because it’s illuminated only by the light of distant stars. But the night side isn’t smooth; it’s covered with scattered structures and protrusions that gleam dully in the faint light. In addition, there are the ruins of a domed city located halfway between the center and the edge of the disk. There are no signs of life anywhere.

“What sort of buildings are those? Magnify the view.”

You scan the dark night-side surface at maximum magnification. The objects covering it don’t look much like buildings; they look more like large machines. Their shapes and components are too unfamiliar to give you any idea what their functions might be. Many of them look damaged or ruined, but not all of them are dead. Some are surrounded with auras of fluid flowing light, others emit energy sporadically in various parts of the electromagnetic spectrum, and a few pulsate or rotate slowly in place.

The ruins look extremely old, except for the ruptured dome. The materials of the dome are more familiar, and it appears the dome was both built and destroyed much more recently.

“How does the disk stay in this orientation?” you ask. You have a vague feeling that it should be spinning, but it’s not. “What about gravity — does it have any?”

“Unknown, Boss. Adefa is made out of a material which I am unable to identify. I also cannot deduce what is giving the disk the gravity readings I am getting. Apparently, at any point on the disk there is a uniform gravity of approximately 1.2G perpendicular to the surface.”

“What keeps the whole thing from collapsing inward under its own weight?”

“Beats me, Boss. Whoever built this place must have been very, very advanced.”

“Are the builders the ones who used to live in the domed city? And who destroyed the city, the Clathrans?”

“My best analysis is that the city was built and occupied very recently by the Hadrakian race. The wreckage shows construction techniques characteristic of their installations on other worlds. The Hadrakians certainly didn’t build Adefa or the other artifacts. The disk itself and all of

its machines are composed of unknown materials, and are probably close to 100,000 years old. Therefore, I'd guess the Hadrakians probably came here to study this place, at least until the Clathran Survey reached it and blasted the colony into pieces."

"Why would they do such a thing?" you want to know.

"Not sure, Boss. This is a very odd place, though. Maybe the Clathrans thought it was important and didn't want the Hadrakians exploring here."

You order the computer to land at the remains of the spaceport in the Hadrakian city. Soon you are safely down and are able to disembark and do some exploring. Since Adafa doesn't have an atmosphere, you are forced to wear your environmental suit.

You spend several hours doing a reconnaissance of the place and have the following options:

⟨GB4WQT⟩ (3 phases) Visit the ruins of a large warehouse in the city.

⟨GG44QQ⟩ (7 phases) Study a telescope-like artifact that stands undamaged near the wreckage of the dome.

⟨CBFWLT⟩ (5 phases) Explore the plains of Adafa and investigate some of the other alien devices.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[316]

You are busy tuning every circuit and device on your ship to near perfection. You have a long voyage ahead. Activating Vanessa Chang's map of the galactic Arm, you begin to plan the route of your quest.

"Computer! Which of these planets did the Core Stone come from?"

"Sorry, Boss, my omniscience software package is due for an upgrade. Nothing Vanessa Chang left us says anything about the Stone."

"Come on, computer, you're supposed to be the smart one here. There must be some kind of a hint. Perhaps there's a reference to Soulsinger somewhere."

"Actually, Boss, there is one reference to Soulsinger here that you might not have seen."

"Give it to me."

"And I quote: '... learned of a new planet today, and a new alien race, from a fellow traveller by the name of Soulsinger. I talked with him for a few moments on the skip radio Friday's been tinkering with — it might someday be a useful invention, but right now it won't hold a signal long enough. Anyway, Soulsinger mentioned a place called Zyroth, inhabited by a race of passive peace-lovers called Zyrans. I think he found it kind of boring, though, since the last thing he said before Friday lost the signal was something about never going back there again. I've marked it as "low-interest" on the map; we'll get there if we can. Our own travels are proceeding well, now that the drive systems have been tuned. . . ' That's it, Boss."

"Zyroth, huh? Does she say where it is?"

"Even if Soulsinger told her, Boss, you know that the planetary coordinates aren't linked to the log entries in her recordings. She did it for security reasons, I assume, but it means that we can't know what planet we're finding until we get there."

"But at least now we know what to look for."

"Right, Boss: Zyroth. I'll keep my sensors peeled."

⊠ STOP ⊠

[317]

You pass the test and soon find yourself with Brother Almed, heading down a hidden staircase beneath the floor. Torches along the wall light your way, and within seconds you are in a large chamber below ground. You find that you like it down here; despite the fact that you are beneath the earth's surface, you get the feeling of lightness and airiness. Soft curtains draped everywhere decorate the walls. All in all, it is very beautiful.

Almed asks if you have finished your Geas. You hand him the memory device you got from Brother Gretzen on Hadrak, and he nods his approval. He then leads you to the "exercise room." You notice that all the trainers and acolytes are present. In a deep voice, Almed intones:

The Lecture: Master of Revelation

"You have mastered your dialogues well, and are truly a Master of Stealth. You are now ready to learn the rites of the next level of Intuition, the caste of Master of Revelation. As Master of Revelation, you will take upon yourself a new obligation, understanding. You must endeavor to understand the very forces of nature around you, as you understand yourself. As little as you may understand yourself, so much more must you learn of the same.

"The dialog of Mastery for a Master of Revelation is the same as for a Master of Stealth, except that after being asked the last question, respond as follows:"

Examiner: What can be learned from Concealment?

Answer: The nature of being Revealed.

Examiner: One's self can be seen from without.

Answer: And the message can be known within.

(Examiner now recognizes you as a Master of Revelation.)

Examiner: And what is the message within?

(You now recognize Examiner as a Master of Revelation.)

Answer: I do not know the Answer.

Examiner: You are truly a Master of Revelation.

Answer: And I know you to be the same.

"You will note that the Mark of your Geas has disappeared. You now have the ability of Illusion. Though it may take some time and painful effort to sustain, you have learned to actually change your appearance to the untrained eye to that of any being you wish to imitate. Use these skills with care, and remember: though you may appear differently, you can still be seen.

"You are now a Master of Revelation. If you like, you may now visit a special historical room on Dardahl which contains information about the history of the Brotherhood, its colonies in the Galactic Arm, and the involvement of the explorer Vanessa Chang. Only those who have become Masters of Revelation are permitted to visit this room. Furthermore, as a Master of Revelation you are obligated not to reveal any of the historical information you learn to those who have not yet reached your level of training.

"You cannot proceed any further with your training on Dardahl, for dialogues beyond the fourth level are not permitted here. If you wish to continue your training, travel to the planet Mardahl, and tell them what you have learned. You have come far."

With that, you are escorted outside the temple, and are bid farewell by Almed, who appears to you in the shape of an oversized Riellan sea-squid.

If you wish to visit the secret Brotherhood historical room on Dardahl, plot the following option:

(5SEZ32) (4 phases) Visit the Brotherhood historical room.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[318]

Safely past the Survey Line, you use your subspace radio to contact your superiors back home.

"This is Captain Turner, calling the Institute for Space Exploration." After several thousand tries, you finally get through.

"This is the Institute for Space Exploration. Go ahead, Captain Turner."

"Get Doctor Schottky. I've crossed the Survey Line and I've got data to send you."

"Wait one."

You actually wait several before a new voice comes on the line. You recognize it at once.

"Captain Turner, this is Margaret Ellison of the Institute. Dr. Schottky is indisposed right now. Please download your data."

"Indisposed, my retrorockets," you mutter, as you send the update of your log. "You want something from me."

"What was that, Captain Turner?"

"I said 'Here's the data, what more do you want of me?'"

"Thank you, Captain Turner. We do have a mission for you, if your ship is in good repair. . ."

This one must really be a lulu, if they're softening it up. "Go ahead."

"Somewhere on your side of the Survey is a Clathran base called Morikor. Intercepted transmissions and other stray data have led us to believe that it's the center for organization of the Survey Line. We want you to find Morikor and penetrate the Clathran defenses. Anything you learn will be of the utmost importance to us."

You stare in silence at the speaker. Haven't you done enough?

"Turner? We know you can hear us, Turner. The carrier wave is still up."

"I hear you."

"The information you've already sent us has been priceless, Turner. Because of it, our fleet-building plans are moving ahead at full speed. Penetrating Morikor will give us exponentially more. Hard data, on Clathran ships, formations, tactics and the like, will help us plan the war, not just the Navy." Ellison's voice is incredibly persuasive. "We need this, Turner."

"Very well, Ellison. I'll do what I can."

"I thank you, Captain Turner, on behalf of the entire human. . ."

"Over and out."

Morikor. Even the name is ugly.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[319]

Relying on your unique abilities to keep the Clathrans from noticing you, you work your way through the city under the dome to something called "the War Room." You come at last to a huge hemispherical building, a dome within the dome, set somewhat apart from the surrounding buildings. No walkways connect it with its neighbors, and armed guards are posted at each of the four entranceways.

When you at last contrive to enter the building, mingling with a party of high-ranking military officials to slip past the door guards, you discover that the inside is all one large room. The floor is laid out in ascending concentric rings, leading up to a single round platform in the center of the room. Each of the rings is covered with computer and communications equipment, manned by uniformed Clathrans. The inside of the overhead dome is covered with projections: graphs, maps, tables, live pictures and battle plans in an overlapping and ever-changing display. Clathrans bustle everywhere among the terraces, and the room hums with a thousand conversations.

You work your way carefully around the lowest terrace, watching and absorbing all that you see. It soon becomes apparent that the room is organized from the top down, with each officer on a higher terrace overseeing the work of two or three on the next terrace down. The senior commanders work together on the highest level, where they can look out at all of the projections and down on all of their subordinates.

With only a little more effort, you discover that this is the central control room for the entire Survey Line. You catch glimpses of star maps, subjugated planets, waves of harvesting and scout ships, and military formations. A brief flurry of activity to your right accompanies the attempt of a ship — you recognize its Hadrakian manufacture — to blast through the Survey. As you watch, the ship is surrounded by a ring of dreadnoughts and summarily destroyed.

Clearly, this is an important place, and with that thought comes another one: sabotage.

Working your way carefully around the rim of the room, you eventually find what you knew must be there, a low door opening into the face of the first terrace. Low-ranking Clathran workers move in and out through the door, carrying electronic equipment, tools, and even food and beverages to those working in the room. You wait for an opportune moment, and then slip inside.

Beneath the terracing of the War Room is a maze of small rooms and narrow passages. You work your way slowly through it, seeking one thing. Eventually, in a small room directly beneath the pinnacle of command, you find it: the main communication lines. Battle orders leave the War Room for a fleet as vast as the stars, and every one of those orders is carried to the subspace transmitters by the cables in this room.

Although you do not routinely carry explosives, for a job this small you can rig something up. Using the battery pack of your hand weapon, the timer unit from your wrist chronograph, and some wire and scraps you find lying around, you soon rig a small E-M Pulse bomb. When it goes off, the electrical signals passing through this room will become hopelessly and permanently scrambled. With luck, it will be some time before the Clathrans pinpoint the source of the problem, and even then, they may attribute it to an accidental malfunction. To help further this deception, you pile all of the garbage and loose equipment you can find into the room.

Then you set the timer, giving yourself two hours to clear the area. You hesitate for only a second before throwing the switch. You have no illusion that your action will cause more than a momentary delay in the Clathrans' march to galactic domination, but every moment counts. You start the timer.

Two hours later you are safely clear of the War Room, going about your business like any other invisible espionage agent in the center of the Clathran military machine.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[320]

Congratulations, you now have an impressive-looking Bluvian insignia. You hope it does the job. If not, you can always try making a different insignia.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[321]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 2

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

Planet Log			
Planet Name:	Outpost		
Actions Available:			
Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
7Z82KH	2	spaceport	
XZN2YH	3	commodities	
7U87K8	4	ship repairs	
XUN7Y8	3	Chang's ship	
9ZV29H	6	survey planet	
LZM2JH	1	meet pilots	

Choosing from the available actions, you decide that first priority is to explore Outpost's surface to look for interesting landmarks. This option will use all the phases you have available for this turn. Your plotting sheet should now look like this:

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	R	L	—	—	—	—	—
2	—	A: 9ZV29H	—	—	—	—	—

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 2

Go to the computer and log on. Press A for Action, and select the 6-character code for exploring Outpost's surface; in this case it is 9ZV29H, which can be selected by pressing E.

Note that as soon as you type the first A, the display changes to show the action codes available to you on Outpost. When you are done selecting the action code, the display will revert to the plot editor. This enables you to continue with the rest of your plots. In this case, you have nothing else to enter for this turn.

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

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 2

When the computer has evaluated your move, it will send you to the appropriate text. Write down the text number(s) it gives you, in this case 253 and 233, then press Return or F to release the computer for the next player. The first text will describe your exploration of Outpost's surface and the second will guide you through your next turn's adventure.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[322]

The planners in the back offices of The Battle, Inc. record your data on the location of Karnossus with great enthusiasm. While they are doing this, the commander comes over to you and asks you into her office.

"You have certainly done well for us! Tell me, what does the Clathran homeworld look like? Do they have weaknesses in their security? Can we break through and destroy their main headquarters?"

You explain that you did not take the time to actually try to scout out the situation there. Though you have pinpointed the system in trisector seven hundred seventy-three on your map, you have not tried to land there (at a safe distance from the Clathrans, of course) and look around. The look of expectant joy dies on the Hadrakian's face. You have the distinct sensation that you have disappointed her by not following through with your mission.

"Ah, I see," she tells you, then lapses into silence. "Perhaps you could return there some time in the near future? I do not want to seem ungrateful but, as you know, time is of the essence. We need to have the data on Karnossus as soon as possible so we can plan our next move. Unless we make some attack against the Clathran homeworld, I fear we have no chance against the Clathran Navy."

You agree with her and wish you had done a more thorough job while you were in the Karnossus system. Maybe you can rectify this error by returning there, scouting out the place, then returning here with the information. You leave the commander's office, telling her that you will do what you can.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[323]

The cold, brittle crystalline surface of the planet Holoth looms into view on your forward screen. As you spiral down to the surface below, you watch a flock of winged aliens circle a glittering mountain and disappear into a chasm. The beautiful murals painted on the sides of occasional Hadrakian buildings and mountain cliffs also attract some of your attention. The landing beacon guides you into the cavern with the smooth, artificial floor. This is the only flat place on the entire planet, and it supports a Hadrakian city, spaceport and Enclave.

You have the same options as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[324]

The gelatinous blob ruptures with a disgusting squelching noise. Globes of goo and heaven knows what erupt all around your ship, which is complaining loudly.

“Gosh, Boss! Look at me, I’m a mess. Don’t you think we could have defeated that bag of goo some other way?”

You do not take the time to answer the cry-baby, because your attention has been caught by silvery spheres that are floating past your viewscreen.

“What are those?” you ask your computer, who has to stop complaining long enough to run a quick analysis.

“Why, they’re monster eggs, Boss. This thing must have been ready to lay them when we approached. That’s probably why it attacked us.”

You feel a stab of guilt at the thought, but more practical matters await you. “They look interesting. What are they made of?”

“Hmmm, analysis shows they are comprised of the same material found in Probability Membranes. We could collect them and have one unit’s worth of the stuff, Boss.”

This sounds like a good idea, so you do just that. You toy with the idea of remaining down here, or returning at a later time to investigate more, but you wisely decide against it. You were lucky to defeat this monster, but if you ever ran across one just a bit faster or larger, you might not come out victorious. Sighing, you head back out the way you came.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[325]

You devote a week of your time to constructing a jump engine, but in the end you are completely frustrated.

“Something’s missing!” you shout irascibly.

“Don’t look at me,” says your computer. “I haven’t touched a thing. Why don’t we review the diagrams again?”

- 1 Flame Jewel
- 1 Dimensional Transducer
- 1 Primordial Soup
- 1 Warp Core
- 1 Crystals
- 1 Medicines

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[326]

You are whiling away your time on the bridge with a puzzle you recently picked up in your travels. It's an interesting kind of maze, a big white grid with black stones in it. The black stones can move along certain tracks set into the grid. The idea is to slide the black stones around in the tracks until you form a solid black path from "start" to "finish." It's harder than it looks. Of course, if you get tired of it you could ask your computer to figure out the answer, but that's cheating.

Suddenly all your ship's alarms go off at once. Startled, you drop the puzzle on the floor, swivel around in your chair, and grab the controls at the helm. "What is it?" you ask your computer.

"Trouble, Boss. Big trouble. Take a look at the forward screens."

You see an immense array of spaceships filling your viewscreen in all directions. There are all kinds of ships: scientific survey craft, destroyers, advance scouts, robot drones, scanning stations, heavy dreadnoughts, troop carriers, harvesters, freighters, you name it. This can be only one thing: the Clathran Survey Line. What's more, it's coming straight at you — fast.

"Hard about, maximum speed! Get us out of here!" you command.

You grab the railing next to your chair as your ship lurches wildly and reverses course at full power. The G-forces are almost enough to make you pass out. For the next several days, you fly as fast as you can away from the advancing Clathran Navy. You get no sleep as you must focus all your attention on keeping yourself as far as you can from the rapidly approaching Clathran fleets.

"Boss, they've stopped moving," your computer informs you.

"Stopped? You mean they're not on our tail any more?"

"Right, Boss. They've taken a position in that last trisector we just flew through and seem to be holding there — at least for now."

"So we're out of range?"

"Yes."

"Whew. I thought we were dead."

"Me too. But it looks like we'll be OK now."

"Good. Take over and let me know if they start moving again. I need to get some rest."

"Sure thing, Boss."

The CGM will tell you where your ship ended up after your emergency flight from the advancing Clathran Survey Line. The Clathrans have taken a position in the trisector adjacent to where you now are. If you want to go back to where you were, you'll have to find some way around or through the Clathran blockade. Good luck.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[327]

You approach the hauntingly beautiful fractal planet, Knapt, with some misgivings. You are not sad to be here again; rather, your hesitancy comes from the fear of witnessing another senseless death of the strange and wonderful plasma creatures from the energy beams. If you had several hundred years, you could disable all of the deadly weapons, but you realize that it is not feasible to try that just now. You have more pressing matters, like trying to save your own race from certain death at the hands of the Clathrans. Your real fear is that your time is running out.

You land near the same site as on your first visit to this world. The beam weapon is already disabled and you can lift off in a hurry should an emergency arise.

You have the same options as before.

✘ STOP ✘

[328]

After a few minutes of tough physical combat, you realize that this robot hasn't been chosen to guard this door from the Bluvians and any other invaders for nothing. It is a tough opponent; the sweat running down your face is getting in your eyes and blinding you so much that you are forced to step back and regroup. Amazingly, the robot does not press its advantage. Instead, it rolls back a few feet to its original position in front of the door. It takes you a minute to figure this out.

The Bluvians are constantly attacking anything and everything, so there must be occasions when this guard robot gets attacked by mistake. To keep from depleting the population, the robot must have standing orders to defend itself but not press the attack. Lucky for you! Now you can safely retreat without sounding any alarms.

You may select this option again.

✘ STOP ✘

[329]

The back offices of the Battle Inc. are even busier than before. The Hadrakians are gearing up for an all-out war against the Clathrans. You spend some time wandering through the offices looking for someone you know, but all you see are strangers. You are hesitant to take up any of the Hadrakians' time since you know that there is nothing new to report. The only thing they will really be interested in at this point is the construction and detonation of the Dual Space Inversion Bomb. And you know that hasn't happened yet.

You find yourself feeling somewhat guilty over this. After all, the Hadrakians have given you plenty of help in the past. You resolve to work toward the completion of the Bomb, in an effort to finish it before the Survey reaches Hadrak. To this end, you review the components needed to assemble the Bomb:

- 4 Munitions
- 1 Discontinuity Wave Generator
- 1 Stasis Field
- 1 Interphase Reflector
- 1 Bomb Shell

When you have gathered all of the components for the Dual Space Inversion Bomb onto your ship, and would like to engage the Bomb Shell self-test program, plot the following option:

(LVM9JV) (7 phases) Assemble the Bomb.

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

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[330]

According to your computer’s computations, the number of inhabitants on the planet, not to mention their possessions, homes, work places, and so forth, far exceeds the available space in which to fit them all. Some of the overcrowding is alleviated by the ability of the inhabitants to phase through each other, and some by subterranean levels of the world-city, but that by no means accounts for it all. You are determined to find out how the Sirissians are managing this incredible feat.

You step into a nearby Directory booth and explain what you are looking for to the operator. The little alien is puzzled by your request. It tells you that there is enough space for all and no more. What else can exist? Now it is your turn to be confused.

“But what about your living conditions? Where do you all sleep? Eat? Work? What happens when you die — do the bodies just evaporate?” With this last question, the Sirissian perks up.

“Ah, I suggest you speak with Mordant 214,” he says, giving you directions to find this being. You leave the Directory booth, not altogether sure you are going to get the answers you want, but at least knowing where to start.

Soon you find yourself at the proper address, flickering all the while. You glance at your reflection in the door and decide you might be able to get used to this effect after all, until a Sirissian flickers through you and the space you are occupying. You shudder at the sight, but otherwise feel nothing.

Shaking your head, you don’t dwell on what happened and step inside the massive building. It too has a tendency to flicker. You ignore this. Using the indoor transport system, you step on a conveyer pad that somehow brings you to the proper office. Quickly stepping off, you enter the small office before you.

Inside is a long metallic counter with apparently nonliving Sirissian bodies being carried by a belt in through a tunnel. You turn to leave but a voice stops you.

“Yes, are you looking for something?” asks a petite Sirissian, stepping out from behind the tunnel. Gulping, you explain that you are here to learn more about Sirissian society and the effects of such a large population on their planet. You ask if he is Mordant 214.

“Yes, I am. How may I help you? Would a tour of our facilities be of interest?” You nod uneasily. What are you getting yourself into?

Actually, the tour is very brief since the facilities are contained in the one room. You learn from Mordant 214 that, although Sirissians live a long time, they do eventually pass on to the next life, at which point their corporeal selves must be attended to. This is where the Mordant comes in. The organic shells of the little aliens, no longer inhabited by their former occupants, are sent here. They are processed and sent through the tunnel you see before you. By using a small and simple device called the Corporeal Decompressor, the bodies are compacted into protoplasm and sent on to the next stage of processing.

“The organic material is now free to be used by the former owners or by someone else who can show the need.” You are confused by this last remark but he cannot explain any further. You have the distinct feeling that these aliens are far more evolved than you understand. You have long ago concluded that the more inexplicable a society’s ways, the more advanced they probably are to you. This may not be logical, but it is often the case.

You study with interest the Corporeal Decompressor. It is a small green box with a button on top and an opening in the front. To use it, you point the opening at the body to be reduced to protoplasm and press the button. You do not know whether Mordant 214 feels badly about not being able to explain things to you more clearly, or whether he is simply a generous being, but when the alien sees your keen interest in the device, he offers you one.

"We have many of these units. Since you are a guest I would like you to have one. Please accept it."

Not having gotten this far in the galaxy by turning down such offers, you promptly accept. In return, you frantically dig in your pockets for something with which to reciprocate the gesture. All you can find is an old key chain stating that the owner is "#1." Quickly removing the key, you give the plastic thing to your benefactor. The alien appears pleased by the gift.

"Why thank you. I will treasure this always!" he exclaims, delighted with his new trinket.

You are equally delighted with yours. It is small and lightweight enough to be easily used as a personal weapon.

You spend a little more time with Mordant 214, but there is nothing else for you to learn here. Satisfied with the day's work, you return to your ship and show your new toy to the computer.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[331]

With little else to do, you decide to take advantage of the blast site and gather a free unit of Radioactives. After only a few short days, you have more than enough to load into a cargo bay.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[332]

After a while, it is clear that neither you nor the Zyran can gain the upper hand, but you have no intention of letting the alien eat you or even take your cargo. At a brief lull in the battle, the alien's repulsive form appears on your viewscreen. A jumbled mass of brown heads, arms, legs, and other body parts, it secretes a sticky goo that it doesn't seem to mind sitting in.

"Hungry," it says.

"Tough bananas," you retort, firing an energy blast at it. "Go get your dinner somewhere else."

It seems to take this suggestion to heart, for it takes off, escaping back in the direction it came from. "Thank heavens it's gone," you think to yourself. Unfortunately, your dinner is now cold.

This adventure took some time, so you lose the rest of your plotted phases for this turn. You may resume your movement next turn.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[333]

You spend several hours going over the Dual Space Inversion Bomb blueprints, then gingerly open the outer cover and begin to tinker. Soon you have taken it entirely apart. Sometime later you have put it entirely together again, making a few adjustments here and there. You are left with the feeling that you have not really accomplished anything.

You come to the conclusion that there is nothing else you can do to improve on the work you have already done. You shrug your shoulders and wonder if someone else can do better.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[334]

You feel compelled to seek out the remnants of the race that virtually ruined their own planet through neglect and greed. From what you have seen on Innermost, the indigenous race plundered and exploited their home to the point where no other animal life could exist naturally. The Wesmlots hacked down the rain forests responsible for most of the oxygen production on the planet; allowed their oceans to become completely covered by a layer of oil and waste, thereby killing virtually all of the marine life; destroyed much of the protective ozone layer in the atmosphere through irresponsible use of chemicals in many of the day-to-day consumer products; poured all sorts of pollutants into their atmosphere until the air was no longer breathable without filters; and essentially made their once beautiful planet into the seething pile of sludge you now see before you. How could any intelligent race do such a thing to their own planet?

You spend the first few days in a fruitless search for the natives. The Hadrakians assure you they do exist, but are very difficult to find. Squaring your shoulders in determination, you once again set out to find these elusive aliens. Keeping in mind their reported preference for squalor, filth and grime, you make for the grimmest part of the city, an area where the Hadrakians refuse to travel willingly, the government center. Here the Wesmlots would congregate in tremendous numbers, throwing all manner of trash and refuse on the streets until only small pathways were left on which to walk. As you travel along the disgusting walkways, you cannot avoid brushing against the walls of garbage that flank you on either side.

As you near the center, you see a small thin humanoid shape standing on a corner. You call to the creature, sure you have finally found a native, only to discover you are addressing a small Hadrakian male. How curious! Excusing yourself from the tigorilla's quizzical stare, you continue on your way. A short distance later, you see another figure standing in the shadow of an alley. Calling out, you dash over to where the figure is standing. As you approach it, you find yourself speaking to a statue of some long-forgotten Wesmlot official, not a live being at all. Rats! In your frustration, you kick the statue and turn to leave.

"Ouch!" you hear from behind you. Turning, you see a weasel-faced humanoid where the statue used to be, massaging her now-bruised ankle. Rubbing your eyes to make sure you are really seeing this native standing where the concrete statue was but a moment ago, you do not hear the female Wesmlot's question.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" you ask, still a bit stunned by her sudden appearance.

"I wanted to know why you kicked me, alien!" is the indignant reply.

"Well, I was frustrated because I couldn't find any of your people and took it out on the statue, or, er... on you. Sorry about that, I don't really know what happened. Did you see a statue here just a moment ago?" you inquire, feeling very confused.

She gives you a withering glare and explains that she IS the statue. Or, rather, she was disguised as the statue when you first saw her.

"We do not like speaking with aliens. For some reason, all who come to this planet are hypercritical of the care we have taken of our home world. As far as I'm concerned, it's no one's business but ours what we do with our world and I don't want to speak about it anymore." With this, she turns and begins to head down the putrid-smelling alley. Thinking quickly, you call after her.

"I agree," you yell. "If this is how you want your world, that's your prerogative." You are satisfied when you see her turn and retrace her steps back to where you are waiting. You feel a bit hypocritical, since you detest what this race has done to a once-beautiful world, but you also feel that each race has to be responsible for their actions and do what they think is best for themselves. You cannot judge their ethics without undermining your own.

The Wesmlot stands in front of you, flashing a toothy, albeit moss-covered grin. The native introduces herself as Groka and offers to show you around the city. You accept, and spend the next several hours tramping through mounds of muck-filled garbage. Groka seems to be enjoying the outing; it is all you can do to keep from being taken ill by the sights and smells.

The end of the tour comes none too soon when Groka tells you she has to leave for a previous engagement. You have been trying to get her to tell you more about this talent the Wesmlots have for disguising themselves to other beings, but she doesn't have the time right now.

"If you are really interested in the ability of Chameleon, that is, the ability to appear to other intelligent beings in guises that are harmless and non-threatening, you can speak with a friend of mine by the name of Runnkh." She gives you directions to find his home should you wish to visit him later.

As she is leaving, she turns and adds, "Also, there is a vast Plain of Rubbish just outside the city where you can go exploring. It is very dangerous, but you may find something of interest." With that, she is gone leaving you with two new options:

⟨YX6NBY⟩ (5 phases) Speak with Runnkh about the Chameleon ability.

⟨QXXNNY⟩ (4 phases) Explore the Plain of Rubbish.

✧ STOP ✧

[335]

It takes a moment to realize the boos are meant for you. The crowd always reacts this way, since your winning indicates that the gods are frowning on you. If they were smiling, you would now be laying face down in the dirt, much like your opponent is doing at this very moment. You have never been more happy to be out of favor in your whole life!

Dusting your clothes off, you head over to the platform where the Settled One in charge of the Arena is waiting to give you the brown sash of citizenship on Sallion. Retracting her claws carefully, she reaches out to shake your hand, a human gesture you can only assume sprang from Vanessa Chang's visit here several hundred years ago. The female Hadrakian welcomes you and indicates that you are now free to explore the rest of the city.

"Be warned, Human, do not stray outside the business district. You may never find yourself again," she says. When you ask what this means, she only smiles and tells you it is something you will soon discover for yourself. You turn and leave the Enclave.

Sallion is a gadget lover's paradise! Everywhere you look, natives and Hadrakians alike are playing with various toys and devices, many of which you cannot see any purpose to. You are fascinated with everything you encounter. Even crossing the street is an adventure, using a unique device which floats you over the moving traffic safely to the other side. You do notice that there is rarely more than one of any device; you wonder why this is so.

As you noticed during your landing, the entire city is indeed one vast maze. Streets fork in many directions, and if you take the wrong fork you wind up in a dead end. You have a detailed map of the Hadrakian business district where you are now. At the bottom, you see a warning which says the residential district is not subject to the same laws and requirements as the business area. Visitors are warned not to enter without proper supervision.

Sitting at a sidewalk cafe, you take the opportunity to watch the locals. They are fascinating. Physically, the Sallies are about six feet tall, slim of build, humanoid in appearance and constantly active. Even sitting down, they will be doing something. At the nearby tables, Sallies can be seen rearranging salt and pepper shakers, slipping forks and spoons into napkin holders (just to see if they fit), balancing glasses on each other, and so forth. You get the sense that they are constantly in a creative mode of thinking, which probably explains the multitude of gadgets you see everywhere in the city. It also explains the popularity of mazes, since they are usually found in a creative atmosphere. Yes, you can see that this is not going to be a dull city.

After exploring this section of the city, you now have the following options:

- (SGZ42Q) (3 phases) Visit the Interstellar Commodities Market.
- (PGS4ZQ) (7 phases) Stop off at the government-sponsored Clathran resistance corporation, The Battle, Inc.
- (JBUW7T) (5 phases) Visit the Sallion Rocket Works.
- (3BPWST) (7 phases) Take some time and get to know the creative Sallie natives better.
- (PCSFZL) (7 phases) Explore the Sallie section of the city on your own.
- (S5ZE23) (3 phases) Stroll down the Street of Gods and seek inspiration from the deity of your choice.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[336]

"Boss, come take a look. This is kind of pretty."

You look up from your reading to see what the computer is talking about. On the front viewscreen are brilliant red, orange and green lights flashing at you from space. The computer is right — they are pretty.

"What are they?" you ask as you head over to the screen for a closer look.

"Sensors aren't reading anything. Whatever they are, they aren't made of anything we have encountered before in our travels."

"Are they dangerous?" you ask, but before the computer has time to answer, one of the lights darts past your ship. You feel the shock from an explosion against your hull. "I guess that answers my question!" you shout. "Battle stations!"

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠


[337]

Whistling tunelessly, you are so engrossed with your latest artistic endeavor, a clay figurine, that you do not hear the computer calling.

"Boss, are you there?" Startled, you look up, and your faithful companion continues. "We are approaching Adata, and you may want to take a look." Intrigued, you leave your sculpture and head up to the control room, where the viewscreen confronts you with a strange sight. What you're approaching doesn't look like a planet at all.

Orbiting the sun in this system is a disk-shaped object the diameter of a small moon. The disk is impossibly thin, perhaps a few meters in thickness. One side of it is facing the sun. This day side is perfectly smooth and reflects so little of the star's yellow-white light that from behind, it looks like a round hole cut out of the star background. You realize that it must be absorbing a great deal of solar energy. The other side of the disk, facing away from the sun, is also dark, because it's illuminated only by the light of distant stars. But the night side isn't smooth; it's covered with scattered structures and protrusions that gleam dully in the faint light. In addition, there is one large dome which shows signs of life: about a tenth of its panels are transparent, and glow with light from within.

Compared with the other edifices, the dome looks recently built, and its materials and manufacturing are similar to what you've seen on other planets in the Arm. Around the dome's edge, you see stations equipped with conventional-looking spaceship docking, servicing, and cargo transport tubes.

Continued 

“How does the disk stay in this orientation?” you ask. You have a vague feeling that it should be spinning, but it’s not. “What about gravity — does it have any?”

“Unknown, Boss. Adafa is made out of a material which I am unable to identify. I also cannot deduce what is giving the disk the gravity readings I am getting. Apparently, at any point on the disk there is a uniform gravity of approximately 1.2G perpendicular to the surface.”

“What keeps the whole thing from collapsing inward under its own weight?”

“Beats me, Boss. Whoever built this place must have been very, very advanced.”

“Are the builders the ones living in the dome?”

“Negative, Boss. The disk itself and all the machines are made of the same unknown materials. They’ve probably been here for millennia. The dome, on the other hand, is composed mostly of ordinary materials and, judging from the lack of surface wear, was constructed within the last century. The inhabitants are of the Hadrakian race.”

⊠ STOP ⊠

[338]

A voice suddenly blares out over your subspace radio.

“This is Michael Rave broadcasting from the communications bridge of the S.P. Flounder, en route to Para-Para. Is anyone receiving?”

“I am,” you say. “You’re coming in loud and clear in subspace.”

“Subspace? So that’s what that dial meant. Are you far away?”

“Very,” you confirm. “Why are you going to Para-Para?”

“Actually, I was kind of drafted. There’s some project going on out there that they needed a technician for, so they took me. But I’m not upset about leaving Harvard, really. Too many riots on campus this year, and I’m not into occupying the Dean’s Office, if you know what I mean. Listen — I gotta run, I hear the First Officer coming back. Nice talking to you!”

⊠ STOP ⊠

[339]

The Hadrakian Empire is the largest trading consortium in the galaxy, and the planet Hadrak is its capital. With millions of brightly-colored warehouses, freighters, refineries, factories, orbital stations, and advanced facilities of all kinds, Hadrak supports as much economic activity as all of the Nine Worlds combined. More than fifty percent of Hadrak’s twenty billion citizens are employed in the merchant sector of the economy. The male members of this huge work force do all the dangerous and physically demanding work, while the older females organize and run the system.

The business structure is extremely competitive at all levels, to the point of chaos. This competitiveness is a holdover from Hadrak’s past, when each city was a fully independent entity. Now, citizenship extends across the whole planet, but the competitive spirit still thrives. The Homeless Ones fiercely guard their business “territory” from the chaos of the market. Furthermore, the Hadrakian colony planets still have separate citizenship requirements.

You wander over to the green and yellow Trader’s office to find out what interesting options are available to you in this fragmented environment. The Settled One you meet is on her way out, but she graciously takes the time to explain the layout of the commodities markets here on Hadrak. In addition, she shows you how to learn more about Hadrak’s seven colonies, which are spread throughout the Galactic Arm.

Finally, she mentions that you have received a formal summons to visit the First Merchant, the most powerful person in the Empire. You thank her for her assistance and she leaves.

You now have the following new options:

{JUV97V} (3 phases) Stroll through the Grand Bazaar, where most of the merchant combines have their bases, and do some commodities trading.

{3VP9SV} (3 phases) Respond to the summons from the First Merchant.

{SWZT2G} (3 phases) Find out more about the Hadrakian colonies.

⊗ STOP ⊗

[340]

You are taken into the room of the High Council of the Brotherhood. These rooms have been forbidden to all except those invited for an audience or members of the High Council itself. You are stunned and quite surprised when Mathus, after escorting you to a seat, steps up to the podium and takes her seat on the Council podium. You see a few familiar faces among the members of the Council, including those of Almed and Ultermalen, your former trainers. Several of the council chairs are empty.

"Many men and women have come before us these years, but few have come as far as you. Fewer yet have demonstrated the understanding of our Craft and the promise that you exhibit. Therefore, we give you a task worthy of your skills. Accomplish this, and we will allow you to advance beyond this level. Most acolytes end their training here in this room. You shall have a chance to continue, if you succeed.

"Centuries ago, explorers first discovered the world called Golgotha. What they saw there inspired and horrified them so much that they devoted the rest of their lives to persuading humanity never to travel in space. Among them were the Founders of the Final Church of Man, now the dominant faith of humans living on the Home Worlds. This Church teaches that the human race as a whole must learn to improve itself before venturing further. We of the Brotherhood don't share that belief. We believe it is necessary only to teach certain individuals about themselves, as we and you have done through meditation and study and ordeal and geas.

"To understand why, you must go to Golgotha. Explore it thoroughly and try to understand what you see. When you have seen all you can of present, past, and future, you must look one step deeper. This will require that you call upon every bit of the humanity that your training in the ways of the Brotherhood has instilled in you. Then, if you have learned well, you will learn more of our purpose."

Your option when you reach Golgotha is:

{DMCJFU} (7 phases) "Look one step deeper," as Brother Mathus instructed.

Brother Mathus continues: "When you have done this, return here, and you will be rewarded. But be warned: few have succeeded in this task."

"I accept the Geas to travel to Golgotha," you answer, summoning the courage to face the unknown challenge that awaits you there. You are taken back to the entranceway of the Haunted House, looking somewhat more pale than usual.

You may select this option again.

⊗ STOP ⊗

[341]

“Boss,” says your ship’s computer, “We’re coming out of warp in a few minutes. We’re almost at Outpost.” Centered in the viewscreen you see the distinct greenish ring of gas that surrounds the system, and in its center a single bright point of white light. The planet is still too far away to see, but you know what it’s like: terribly barren, all rock and water, but with a sweet atmosphere and a warm climate.

The planet Outpost has a very unusual natural history. The ring nebula is the remnant of an ancient supernova. The primary star was once an orange sun, but long ago went nova prematurely and became a white dwarf. Before its sun went nova, the planet was probably much like Venus in the Sol system: searing hot with a thick poisonous atmosphere. The nova explosion stripped away that atmosphere, and in the aftermath the planet swept up water vapor and other gases from the system. Now, it orbits just close enough to the white dwarf to have a mild climate and liquid oceans. Its atmosphere is breathable. It is possible that life might evolve here. Complex chemical structures resembling rudimentary microorganisms, able to replicate themselves, already exist in the oceans. But with a white dwarf as its star, the planet doesn’t have long to live. In a mere few hundred million years it will be a frozen rock orbiting a dead sun. If life is going to evolve here, it will have to do it in a hurry.

The history of humans on Outpost is equally strange and violent. Three centuries ago, Vanessa Chang used it as a base for her exploration of the Galactic Arm, and had dreams of establishing a full-fledged colony here. When the Expansion era explorers fled from the Arm in the wake of the Space Plague, Outpost became a symbol of their defeat. Later, the mad pirate Silverbeard claimed the planet, and for unknown reasons he fortified it with powerful weapons to prevent anyone else from landing here. Only after you defeated and killed Silverbeard in battle less than two years ago were you able to land on Outpost and learn its old secrets.

You pass through the thin haze of the gas ring, about a light-year away from the planet near its center. Once inside the ring nebula, you can no longer see it. It’s actually a hollow sphere of gas, but it’s only easily visible edge-on, so from any given direction it appears to be a halo-like ring. A few more minutes under hyperdrive brings you close to the star, and you ease off the drives as the planet comes into view.

You discover that you are not alone. Two other ships are also preparing to land, and you detect the warp fields of three more a day’s travel behind, following a course similar to yours. You don’t mind, as long as they’re human ships, and it appears that they all are.

Only one small area of the planet shows signs of past human presence, and you choose a landing approach that will set you down there. A broad expanse of flat rock serves as a landing field, and there are several old buildings in the area. Farther away are other isolated structures, all remains of various abandoned facilities or projects.

You have been on Outpost before, so you already have some idea of what can be done here. Your options are:

⟨7Z82KH⟩ (2 phases) Look around the spaceport area, which was built and used primarily by Silverbeard.

⟨XZN2YH⟩ (3 phases) See what might be left of the stolen commodities Silverbeard once kept at the nearby complex of long storage buildings.

⟨7U87K8⟩ (4 phases) Go to an installation several miles away where the pirate used to build his weapons.

⟨XUN7Y8⟩ (3 phases) Go to the ancient hangar where Vanessa Chang’s most famous spaceship is enshrined.

⟨9ZV29H⟩ (6 phases) Survey the rest of Outpost’s surface to see if there may be other interesting landmarks.

⟨LZM2JH⟩ (1 phase) See what you can find out about the other ships and their pilots.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[342]

The eternal optimist in you knows that this will be the time you get into the compartments of Storage Station Four. The skeptic (or is it realist) merely hopes to succeed. In any event, the lure of unknown goodies in the compartments still awaits you.

But first, you have to enter the correct five digits.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[343]

You have little trouble finding where the Bluvian named Plutarch works. The reason he is so wealthy is that he happens to run the largest and most important factory in the colony, at least for the time being. The factory manufactures Gradient Filters, rare and valuable technological components used in the manufacture of tri-axis drive engines, among other things. Unlike most of the businesses in the colony, which move around from place to place at whim, the Gradient Filter Factory mostly stays put. Moving all of the factory's heavy equipment would be a very cumbersome task, so the Bluvians don't attempt it very often.

You enter the factory's main office and are taken aback by the opulence you see around you. A female dressed in garish green clothing waits for you to approach the beautiful wooden desk behind which she is seated. Monogrammed stationery covers the top of the desk along with a monogrammed stapler, blotter and pen.

"Yes?" she asks when you approach.

"I am here to see Plutarch," you answer.

"I'm sorry, he's busy and won't be able to see you today. Would you like to buy a Gradient Filter?"

"Perhaps. But Plutarch did invite me to come and spend some time with him. Do you know when he'll be in?"

"I wouldn't count on getting to see him if I were you. He invites everyone to see him, but he's never here. He's too busy doing different things with his money. If you'd like to buy a Gradient Filter, the price is:

1 Crystals + 1 Radioactives + 1 Tools + 1 Warp Core

"The other aliens who come by here seem to think it's a pretty good deal. Everyone seems to need Gradient Filters these days. Do you want one too?"

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[344]

You know that the Clathrans have destroyed the planet Outpost, but you have come to look for yourself. The magnified view on your screen shows the ring nebula, still several hours distant, and the Outpost system within. The white dwarf star appears as a single bright pinpoint. And the planet. . .

The planet appears as a haze of gas and debris.

You watch as you move closer and the picture clears. Where the planet Outpost used to orbit, there is only a cloud of rock particles and gas slowly spreading.

"My god," you mutter to yourself. "They really did blow it up." Cold, lifeless, and inert, the cloud drifts silently through space. Perhaps millions of years in the future it will coalesce again into a planet, but that is irrelevant. Outpost is gone forever. "But how is it possible?" you ask your computer. "Wouldn't gravity hold the planet together?"

"According to Dr. Steven Strassmann of the Harvard Applied Physics Laboratory," your computer answers authoritatively, "It is theoretically possible to blow up a planet. What's more, it appears that the Clathrans have the technology to do it. Would you like to see a simulation of how it might have happened?"

"Sure," you sigh. "Put it on visual."

The front viewscreen blurs for a moment, then shows the planet Outpost whole, as it was before the Clathrans attacked it. You remember it fondly. Then, three huge warships emerge from hyperspace and begin to orbit the planet.

"One of the ships is launching projectiles," reports your computer. The ship is releasing a series of metal cylinders, each about twice the size of your own ship. You watch as it launches four sets of five cylinders each, the sets coming about fifteen minutes apart. The cylinders seem to be following purely ballistic trajectories as they spiral down toward the planet. As the first reaches the ground, you expect to see an explosion, but there is only a cold eruption of rock and dust from the impact. The cylinder is buried by the debris falling back into its own crater.

"Some sort of penetration bomb," suggests your computer. "They'll detonate them simultaneously when they're all in place." Over the next hour the other cylinders fall, landing in a neat icosahedral pattern over Outpost's surface.

"That's the last one," you observe. "They'll blow any time now."

But for some reason the blast doesn't come right away. A half hour later, the three Clathran ships leave orbit and move in formation out toward the ring nebula. A few minutes after that, Outpost's surface shivers in an eerie and violent cataclysm. There is no burst of heat or light; just a sudden onslaught of mechanical force that attacks and overcomes the gravitational force binding the planet together. In a great spherical wave, the shocks from the underground detonations converge in Outpost's core, reinforce and cross one another, and race outward again, grinding rock from rock as they pass. It is a strangely slow process, not at all like the instantaneous vaporization of matter in the fires of a nuclear blast or at the focal point of a laser beam. It takes time for the crazed and stressed stone to fracture into powder, time for the debris blasting outward from the surface to sweep the atmosphere away, time for the seas to disassemble into a quadrillion individual struggling droplets that begin to boil away into gas. It takes entire seconds for these things to happen. When it is over, Outpost is no longer a planet. It is a growing cloud of diffusing vapor and tumbling stone fragments, and whether it will one day coalesce into a new planet, or spread across its former orbital path as an asteroid belt, is up to the forces of time and tide to dictate.

Far away, the Clathran ships disappear into the distances of the Arm, leaving you alone with the ruins of a world.

"Of course that was just a theoretical simulation, right?" you ask your computer.

"Right, Boss. But under the circumstances, I'd say it's pretty accurate."

The viewscreen momentarily blurs again, and the real cloud of debris replaces the simulated one. You can hardly tell the difference.

Since you could not land, you are still aloft in the trisector that used to contain the planet Outpost.

❖ STOP ❖



[345]

"Ho Ho Ho" echoes the voice in your head. "I am the God of Jocular Noises, and you are the human I have been sent to impress, because of my unique qualifications."

"Your voice?" you moan.

"My name." says the voice. "It's important to you, but I cannot speak more clearly about that. What I can tell you is something about the Sirissian Triangle."

"Yes?"

"If you go there and do the right things, you can learn how to build a Stasis Field."

"Thank you, I'll remember that."

"You're welcome." The echoes fade away, leaving only a faint rattle inside your head.

You report the God's name to the Shrine Keeper, on the way back to your ship.

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[346]

The Plain of Rubbish stretches out for miles in front of you. It reminds you of an ocean; you can even detect a gentle swelling on the horizon from time to time. Common sense tells you this is more likely caused by the numerous rat-like creatures that thrive in this filthy environment. Still, you decide to venture into the trash to see if you can find anything of interest.

The garbage is well-packed, and you have little trouble going out into the Plain. Aside from the occasional slippery pile of goo you slide on, you easily make your way out across the sea of trash. Every now and then you stop and poke around through the refuse to see if you can find something of interest, but little catches your attention.

Several hours pass before you stop for a rest. Looking back at the city, you are surprised to see how far you have managed to come and decide it is time to head back. You walk parallel to the city for a few hundred yards so you will not be retracing your steps exactly. Who knows? Maybe you really will find something valuable in all of this garbage. And if pigs had wings, maybe they'd fly.

The buildings slowly grow taller and you grow tired. All of this careful walking is wearing on you. On a whim, you start looking for a discarded chair so you can rest. Another hour passes before your search is rewarded. Sticking up from one of the countless mounds of trash are four chair legs. You figure the rest of the chair is buried and start digging in order to pull it out. About half way through your self-imposed task, you hear an odd rumbling noise. What could it be? You stop your digging and cock your head to try to locate the source of the sound. Why, it seems to be coming from directly underneath you. Before the ground opens up and swallows you, the thought of all of the many rat tunnels that must permeate the Plains and undermine the integrity of the mass flashes through your mind. The image of Swiss cheese is the last thing you remember as you plunge into the yawning chasm that has appeared where you were digging.

Groaning, you finally reach consciousness for all of the good it does you. Every part of your body aches from the nasty fall you took. You do not even want to think about moving, but you realize you need medical attention as soon as possible, so you begin the long and arduous job of sitting up. When you are vertical, you check each limb and discover that nothing is broken — bruised and sprained maybe, but not broken. Glancing skyward, you are glad to see that some daylight remains. That not only means that your climb out will be a bit easier, but the inevitable nocturnal predators that usually inhabit such places as this will not be stirring for a little while. Aren't you lucky!

Something large and furry scampers across your hand. It is gone before you get a better look at it, but you suspect it is one of the countless rat creatures that built the tunnels in which you now find yourself trapped. You wonder if they are carnivorous. Shock begins to set

in and you shiver. Now you really must get going or you will become someone's dinner. Gathering all of your strength, you manage to work your way to a standing position. So far so good, but you still have about twenty feet of climbing to do before you will be out of this hole. Groaning at the pain, you start the long and arduous climb. Each handhold is difficult to find because the trash tends to shift when you put your weight on it. Or you might get a firm hold only to feel some horrible gunk ooze from under your straining fingertips. Each breath is even more difficult to take since you do not dare breathe through your mouth. There is no telling what germ-ridden decaying glop might fall into your gasping lips.

Grimly you take each step one at a time, breathing slowly and rhythmically through your nose. You enter a trancelike state where the pain fades and you do not think of anything but the next hand and foot hold. Slowly you make your way to the top of the pit. You reach up for the next hand grip only to find you are grasping at air. You have arrived at the top. Worming your way completely out of the garbage well, you cautiously stand, testing the firmness of the "ground" before you risk taking the next step. In this manner, you traverse the remaining mile to the outskirts of the city. Night has fallen, but you are relatively safe.

A Homeless One comes across your tottering body. Without asking any foolish questions, he scoops you up in his arms and carries you back to your ship. You sleep deeply for several days. When you awaken, you see that you are going to need some time in the sick bay.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠
