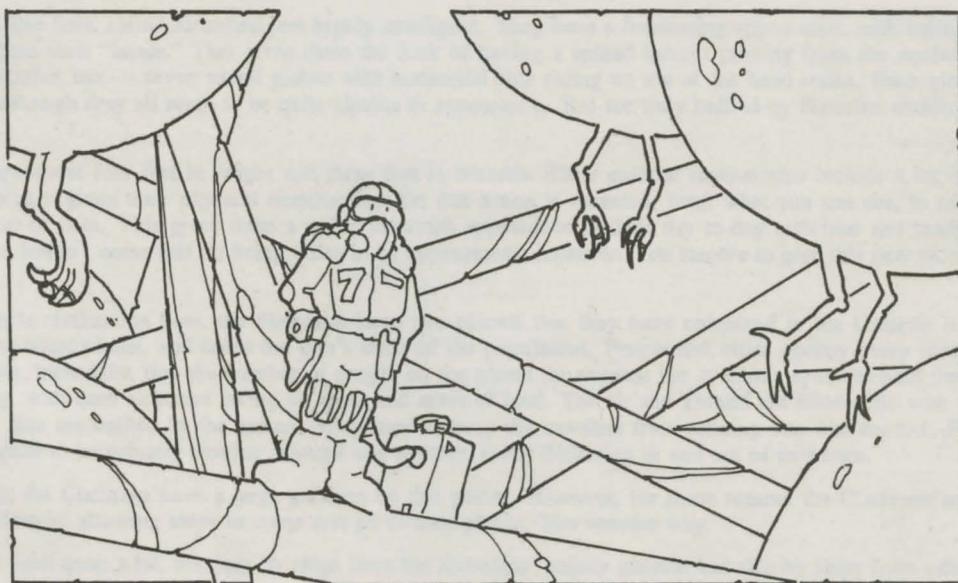


STAR SAGA: TWO™

BOOK L

TEXT 761-835



BOOK I

SAGA: TWO

THE



[761]

“Boss!”

Your computer wakes you from a sound sleep by shouting in your right ear. “We have just left hyperspace and are about to assume orbit around the planet Sirissi. Would you like me to run a full scan analysis?”

You are not at your best when you’ve been abruptly awakened from a sound sleep and asked a silly question. You are therefore a bit short with the computer when you reply, “If a full scan on the planet will keep you busy for a few hours, then maybe I can get some sleep!”

Your computer spends the next several hours running a complete survey on the planet you are now orbiting. Since you can’t fall back asleep, you use the opportunity to rouse yourself from your nice warm bed and prepare yourself for the exciting day ahead. While you are brushing your teeth, you hear the signal which indicates that the computer has finished with its analysis of Sirissi. You quickly rinse your mouth with a handful of water and head out to the control room.

From the data you get, you are able to learn a great deal about the world below you. In fact, you are a bit overwhelmed with the deluge of information you receive. This is due to the fact that the planet is not only populated with intelligent beings, it is overpopulated. Moreover, the civilization is highly advanced technologically. The mass of life and technology crowded into every available habitable space pulsates with information. This is both good and bad for you. The more information you have on a new world, the safer it is for you, but the sheer volume of information here will take days to sort through. Sighing, you begin the task.

The beings who live here, called Sirissians, are highly intelligent. They have a fascinating appearance, with multiple sensory organs atop stalks which sprout from their “heads.” This gives them the look of having a spiked haircut running from the equivalent of ear to ear. The sensory organs are peculiar, too — seven round globes with horizontal slits sitting on top of the head stalks. Each globe apparently performs a different function, although they all seem to be quite similar in appearance. You are truly baffled by Sirissian anatomy. At least it works for them!

The Sirissians are about four feet in height and three feet in breadth. Their cultural mannerisms include a lot of bending at the waist, which looks none too easy given their physical dimensions. Yet this action is essential, from what you can see, to ending conversations and consummating any sort of deal. This gives them a rather clownish appearance in their day-to-day activities and tends to make you think of them as harmless. You haven’t come this far being taken in by appearances, however. You resolve to give this new race the respect you always give the unknown.

In addition to their civilization here, the Sirissians have two planets that they have colonized in the Galactic Arm: Takata and Ululu. However, Sirissi is the home planet, and holds the lion’s share of the population. People and cities occupy every inch of available space. In fact your data indicates, incredibly, that the number of people on the planet far exceeds the available space to hold them all! Buildings cover the surface completely, with each structure taking up acres and acres of land. The air and ground are filled solid with vehicles traveling from one place to another. You are baffled by the system being used to keep the travelers from running into one another. From what you can tell, people and vehicles seem to be actually moving *through* one another, eerily flickering in and out of existence.

You also see that the Clathrans have a large garrison on this planet. However, for some reason, the Clathrans are interfering very little with the Sirissians’ lifestyle, allowing ships to come and go as they please. You wonder why.

The spaceport is used quite a bit, not only by ships from the Sirissians’ colony planets, but also by ships from other races. The Clathrans don’t seem to mind an ongoing trade industry here. That’s not like them either. Maybe they assume that any ship in the area is either friendly or neutral — or else how would they have gotten here? You pray for them to continue to be so complacent. It certainly makes things easier for you.

Directing your computer to home in on the landing beacon, you make contact with the landing port and get permission to set down. You don’t know how you can possibly navigate through all the traffic, but you allow your computer to follow the signal being broadcast from below, trusting the natives to know what they are doing. Sure enough, you make a perfect landing and step out onto the planet’s surface.

A welcoming committee of Sirissians bobbles over to you and offers assistance in directing you to wherever you wish to go. You explain that you are new to the planet and aren’t sure what activities are available. They bow a few times while conferring in low tones amongst themselves. Then they turn back to you and give you the following list of options:

- (27H8RK) (3 phases) Visit the interstellar trading market and see what sorts of commodities can be traded.
- (67B8WK) (4 phases) Learn more about how the Sirissians handle living on such an overpopulated world.
- (2XHNRV) (4 phases) Purchase Cargo Bay Expansion units, which the Sirissians have available for sale if you are interested.
- (6XBNWY) (7 phases) Try to contact a secret organization the Sirissians have for resisting the Clathrans.

✂ STOP ✂

[762]

You scuttle into the asteroid field and shut down your systems, but this tactic avails you not. The Clathrans, it would seem, are well and truly irritated. A dozen large harvesters close in on the asteroids and begin systematically destroying them. It takes some time, but you have no avenue of escape from their ruthless efficiency.

You are captured.

✂ STOP ✂

[763]

Whap! Even with all of your training in combat, you do not see the slap coming. Brother Ultermalen glares angrily at you and says, "Do you think we are children here playing a game? Our very existence is at stake and you insist upon fooling around. Leave immediately and do not return until you have prepared for the test you know will be given you." He turns angrily on his heel and leaves you standing alone.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[764]

Your special abilities make it possible for you to infiltrate even crowded buildings without attracting undue attention. One such place is the Central Computer Record Office, which apparently serves the rest of the city as a library and database.

You enter through an unguarded door, then skulk around inside until you find the main work room: a cavernous hall filled with computer terminals and industrious Clathrans. You spend several hours looking over shoulders and watching log-in sequences, until you think you know how to access the machine. Then you find yourself a quiet corner and an unnoticed terminal and get down to some serious electronic espionage.

You manage access to the central records almost at once, and then are faced with a choice of what to research. The answer is obvious.

Karnossus, you type in. The Clathran homeworld.

Top Secret, it responds. *Enter security clearance code*. Damn.

You try several other military topics, and get the same answer for each. Anything you'd really like to know about is locked up in a file with multiple safeguards. And one of the Clathrans nearest you may be starting to register your presence. He has looked your way several times, as if trying to figure out what's bothering him about the situation. In desperation you try one more topic.

Humans.

Words begin to scroll by you on the screen, and at first you are too surprised by your success to read them. The file turns out to be a short one, and you read through it quickly:

Humans are a sentient, spacefaring species believed to have originated in the galactic Fringe during the last few thousand years. Life on their home planet, known only as Earth (coordinates unknown), evolved extremely quickly: At the time of the last Survey, the most advanced species there could not have progressed beyond the most rudimentary tool-using stages, or else they would have been noted by that Survey.

Humans first came to our attention approximately three hundred years ago, when one of their long-range exploration ships was captured in deep space near Pekep. As with any previously unknown race, the human specimens were carefully catalogued both physically and psychologically. Their test scores (classified) were significantly abnormal, and this, coupled with the escape of several specimens from the processing facilities on Morikor, prompted a Core report to the Masters. This led directly to the Third Directive.

The highest priority is presently assigned to eradication of all humans from the galaxy, with corresponding importance attached to location of their home world and prevention of further colonization and exploration efforts. An initial effort to achieve these goals with a tailored killer-virus has evidently been unsuccessful: after hundreds of years of quiescence, humans have again been reported in the galactic Arm.

Future plans for dealing with the human menace include increased security on the Survey line as it enters the Fringe, advanced raiding parties, and further use of genetic and energy-spectrum weapons. Any citizens with information regarding humans, whether confirmed or not, should report them at once to Military Command on Morikor.

The Clathran sitting near you is definitely taking an interest now. You hastily blank the screen and slip away from the Central Computer Records Office, chilled to the bone by what you have read.

✂ STOP ✂

[765]

The planet Gloo is larger than most. Although 80% of the surface is covered with water, there is still plenty of land. The geophysical scan does not reveal anything particularly interesting, so you wait for your computer's report on the intelligent life on the world below you.

"I don't know if you want to land here, Boss."

"What's the matter?" you ask, envisioning a large Clathran base swarming with warships, "Are we in any danger?"

"No, there's no danger as far as I can tell."

"So, what is it?" You are getting a little annoyed.

"It's the natives, who call themselves Bluvians. They're ugly."

"What are you talking about?" You are surprised that your computer would say such a thing. You are concerned that your usually precise piece of machinery may be in drastic need of repairs.

"Take a look for yourself. I'm sure you'll agree."

On the overhead screen, the image of a large city appears, presumably coming from the planet beneath you. You cannot help a sharp intake of breath as you get a good look at the Bluvians. Yep, they sure are a sight.

They are the ugliest humanoids you ever hope to see. With squat bodies balanced rather precariously on short skinny legs, they seem barely able to support the bulk of their enormous hairy arms, while their faces look like they were put together upside-down. They apparently cannot avoid drooling, since their teeth are so large and misshapen that they cannot close their mouths all the way. Their ears, usually adorned with tacky jewelry, hang down behind their shoulders, and their matted, greasy hair grows most of the way down their backs while leaving

their wrinkled scalps bald. Your imagination also adds a noxious breath and body odor you are sure accompanies these beings. You are almost tempted to follow your computer's advice and beat a hasty retreat.

Common sense takes over in time, though, and you instruct the computer to land at the capital city, which is called Blerghh. Grumbling, it complies, and you wait to pick up a landing beacon from the spaceport. Instead, you are greeted by a message from the Bluvian traffic controller.

"Alien vessel, please state your orders."

"What?"

"Under whose orders are you landing here?"

"What do you mean, whose orders? Mine, of course."

"Then what is your rank?"

"I really don't know what you're talking about. Can I land on your planet or not?"

"Well, if you have no orders and no rank, you'll have to get permission. I'll put the request through. You can put yourself in a parking orbit until the answer comes back."

You instruct your computer to orbit the planet and wait. The hours go by while you wait, and wait, and wait. What could be taking so long? Finally, the word comes through and you are instructed to land at the spaceport and check in with the authorities on the ground. You touch down without any further hitches.

Once on the ground, you leave your ship and head over to the alien customs building. You are grateful that the air is breathable; you prefer not to wear your environmental suit whenever possible. When you get to the customs building, you are again forced to wait. This time, you are in a long line of traders waiting to clear customs. You notice that all of them have small insignias stitched to their clothing. Since you have no insignia, you must go to the back of the line, and anyone with an insignia gets to go in front of you.

After waiting almost the whole day, you get to the front of the line. The customs official is a greasy, drooling Bluvian female named Ooph. When she asks why you're here, you explain that you're a trader and explorer and would like to spend some time on the planet.

"Fine," Ooph explains. "You'll need to wear this." She takes two cloth stripes and pins them to your clothing just below your left shoulder. "This gives you one of the lowest ranks possible on Gloo. You must obey the orders of anyone with a higher rank, and to do anything you must get permission from an appropriate authority. Here are your orders." She hands you a piece of paper which says you may walk the city streets and trade at the commodities market. "If you want to do anything else, you'll have to apply for special dispensation at this office."

"How long does it take to get this dispensation?"

"Oh, not long at all. Two, three, maybe four months, depending on how busy we are."

"Months?"

"Presuming you want to do something fairly simple, like to get into the hospital. If you want to do something tricky, like visiting a museum, that might take a year or two."

"That's a long time! Do you Bluvians have to follow the same rules, or do you just make things especially difficult for aliens?"

"Oh, no, you don't understand. The rules are different for Bluvians, but not the way you think. Aliens get special priority. For a Bluvian to get into a museum, it might take five years."

"That seems terribly inefficient. How do you people get anything done?"

"Who cares about getting things done? As long as we follow orders, that's all that matters. Everything must go by the chain of command."

"I see."

You leave the spaceport and head out into the city. The inhabitants sure have a strange society. You wonder why they are so militarily organized, to the extent that they have to ask for permission or have orders for every little thing they do. In practice, it makes it very difficult to accomplish anything.

During your short walk, you are frequently stopped by Bluvians giving you orders. They do not really care whether or not you are in their military service; they insist on giving orders to anyone ranking below them. Alien visitors are fair game; the Bluvians just look upon them as the lowest-ranking beings in the universe. You are not surprised to see that even the Bluvian children have ranks, as well. In fact, one little cherub even orders you to buy him an ice cream cone.

You have no idea how the ranking system works. There are three basic types of insignias you see: squares, circles, and triangles. In addition, an insignia may or may not have up to two parallel stripes dissecting it. One thing you know for sure is that two stripes with nothing else is a very low rank. And with such a low rank, it is very difficult to get around the city.

One other thing you learn during your walk is that although there is little evidence of it now, the Clathrans once had a very significant presence here on Gloop. There is a large Clathran headquarters building, right in the middle of the city, which is as old as the city itself. The building is now closed down, and there are no signs of Clathrans anywhere. You wonder what that means, and if there is any chance of the Clathrans returning to the planet.

Having completed your tour of the city, you review the possible activities available on Gloop:

- ⟨BNWYT6⟩ (3 phases) Trade at the commodities market.
- ⟨GN4YQ6⟩ (3 phases) Spend some more time observing the structure of Bluvian society on Gloop.
- ⟨BMWJTU⟩ (3 phases) Attend a lecture given weekly on the importance of chain of command.
- ⟨GM4JQU⟩ (4 phases) Go to the library and learn the history of the settlement here on Gloop.
- ⟨CNFYL6⟩ (5 phases) Visit a factory where the Bluvians manufacture Probability Membranes.
- ⟨5NEY36⟩ (3 phases) Admit yourself to the military hospital.
- ⟨CMFJLU⟩ (7 phases) Poke around the closed Clathran headquarters building.
- ⟨5MEJ3U⟩ (5 phases) Try to sew your own Bluvian insignia.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[766]

The buoy's single laser, designed for vaporizing space debris, is no match for your armed ship. You destroy the buoy utterly while taking no damage yourself, and watch its pulverized remains fly apart in all different directions. You only hope that your attack prevented the buoy from sending any data on your ship back to its hypothetical Clathran owners.

The presence of Clathran buoys this far out in the Galactic Arm does not bode well for you. The next Clathran object you run into may not be so easy to deal with.

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 ⊠

[767]

The line for the Haunted House is as long as ever, but you wait patiently for your turn to step into the egg-shaped car that will take you into the realm of terror inside. When that time arrives, you bravely enter the car and make yourself as comfortable as possible.

The car lurches forward and enters the first tunnel. All light disappears and you tentatively reach out to ward off any possible obstructions. Your hand immediately encounters a cold slimy gooeey mess. "Urgh," you choke out as you duck down to avoid being touched by the awful stuff on your face. When you think it's safe again, you reach up to test the air space. You feel nothing, so you reseat yourself on your precarious perch. Soon, you find yourself in a room with the sign of the Brotherhood, the inverted candelabra. Once again, your car stops, allowing you to leave and enter the temple through the secret door. Using the elevator, you descend into the depths of the Brotherhood and find your contact, Brother Mathus.

"Welcome back, Brother. Are you prepared to be tested?"

You nod.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[768]

You are having a subspace radio conversation with one Jen Cristobal, a 'free trader' operating out of Wellmet.

"... so I said that if he wanted me to boost munitions the swag'd have to be good, ya know?"

"I understand. Do you fly munitions to Wellmet?"

"No more, buddy. Too strange there, and gettin' kinda unfriendly. Listen, I gotta rock. Only got a single axis drive, an' if I don't turn it around now, I'll fly right through my next planet."

✂ STOP ✂

[769]

You decide to ignore the warning of the port official and fly through the Stargate without permission. Ignoring the stream of protest coming over your ship's radio, you fly at top speed into the black pit. There is a flash of darkness. Then comes the expected flash of light. But the light does not subside. You and your ship are left suspended in a field of uniform whiteness.

For days you try to break out of the unfathomable white nothingness. You try activating your warp engines, firing your weapons, using every power that you have. But nothing has any noticeable effect. You are trapped.

Eventually, while you are in the middle of reading one of the thousands of books and magazines from the Complete Donahue Collection, the whiteness suddenly disappears. You 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.

"Boss, I am receiving a message via subspace radio."

"Let's hear it."

There is some static, then the message, "We have fined you two weeks time for flying through the Stargate without permission. Do not repeat this crime. We can make the penalty more severe if we wish." You get the feeling they mean it.

You have been charged 14 extra phases for the time you were caught in the Stargate.

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[770]

Cautiously, your ship quiet and your drives powered down to their minimum, you enter the fringes of the Karnossus system. It's not the safest place in the galaxy to be, but it's much safer than going any closer. The intense white sun is far away. The Clathran worlds and starship fleets that cluster around it are all but invisible at this range. But you know the Dodecahedron is there, absorbing part of that sun's energy and driving the Dual Space Interphase ever wider.

Unfortunately, the Clathran fleets and the Clathran homeworlds are between you and the Dodecahedron. The amount of force arrayed against you is staggering. There are at least a hundred full-sized planets in the system, arrayed in interweaving orbits, somehow manufactured or brought into the system from elsewhere by the Clathrans. Many of them are primarily production facilities or population centers, but you can bet that all of them are equipped to help defend their sisters in lower orbits. In addition there are dozens of large orbital stations and at least a thousand operational ships, and that only counts the ones that are under power. No doubt others await in shipyards and bases.

Any attack you attempted would fail, even though you possess the one weapon that has a chance of destroying the deadly Dodecahedron. But what good is the Dual Space Inversion Bomb, when there's no way to get it to the target? Looking for any weak spot, you may have overlooked, you instruct your computer to begin yet another scan of the system.

"Boss, something's happening," the computer announces suddenly.

"Have they detected us? Get ready to warp out of here."

"I don't think so, Boss. Their formations are shifting around, but not toward us. Communication beams are flashing in all directions."

You lie low and wait to see what happens. Soon the movement of the Clathran ships begin to make sense. Many of their battle groups are forming up and preparing to move out of the system, toward the Survey Line.

"The communications concern the planet Hadrak, Boss. There's a battle shaping up there. There are more ships opposing them than they counted on. The Clathrans are calling more force to the front, and the fleets here are leaving."

"Are they all going to leave?" you ask hopefully.

"Not all at the same time," answers the computer. "But many of them will. There's going to be a lot of movement in and out of the system, and a lot of confusion as they redistribute their forces. Eventually, I suspect, ships from the farther parts of the Survey Line will be called back to defend this system. But for a while Karnossus will be vulnerable."

You silently give thanks to all of the members of the Alliance. They may have won a victory that will save humankind, before their final battle for Hadrak even begins. You wonder if you'll live to see that battle.

"Get ready to attack as soon as conditions are optimal," you command. "Tell the Bomb to get ready for its big moment. We have one chance to destroy the Dodecahedron, and this is it."

The option to start your attack run is:

(N8YK6D) (7 phases) Attack the Dodecahedron and drop the Bomb.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[771]

The residential area is intriguing, with its homes and schools and Clathrans going about their everyday business. You also discover that there is a commodities market located in this area, which interests you. However, in order to mingle with the Clathran civilians you are going to have to look and act like one of them. This will require some kind of ability to disguise yourself, which you do not presently have. Therefore, you must return to your ship.

You may select this option again.

✧ STOP ✧

[772]

Showers of sparks cascade across the ship's console. Smoke begins to billow out of the service ducts. Your computer makes one of its more brilliant observations.

"Er, Boss? I recommend we do something to enable us to get away. Our current strategy does not seem to be working too well."

You swallow the rude retort you want to make and concentrate on the business at hand. You are obviously no match for the six Clathran warships currently pounding away at you. But you also lack the firepower to blast a getaway corridor.

"Boss!" your computer whines as another wave of particle beams splashes energy from the outer hull.

"Shut up! Run the shield decoy program!"

"Been nice knowing you, Boss." Obeying your command, the computer initiates an emergency maneuver that you designed some weeks ago. It involves flickering your electromagnetic defensive screens on and off in a particular pattern designed to fool the Clathrans' sensors into misjudging your velocity. The danger is that if it doesn't work, any hit while your screens are down will destroy you.

A Clathran ship moves in for the kill. "Boss, it's not working! He's headed right for us! Try another program!"

"No, keep it up," you command. You watch, knuckles white on the control yoke, as the destroyer moves in. Beams scorch toward you... and disappear into empty space far behind your ship.

"He overshot!" says the computer. Eager for the kill, the Clathran has maneuvered out of position. You see empty space in front of you.

"Put all power into the drives," you yell. "Get us out of here!"

The residual g-forces press you back into your seat as you take advantage of the opening. The Clathran ships are still confused and their pursuit is too late and too slow. You have sustained severe damage, but you've escaped.

You did not land, so you are still aloft in the trisector containing the planet Geefle.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[773]

In the center of the spaceport is a tall tower, which you enter, figuring it's the logical place to locate the spaceport traffic control center. Not daring to press your luck testing your disguise abilities in the close confines of the elevators, you silently walk the two hundred flights of stairs up to the observation level, which overlooks the whole expansive spaceport area. In the center of the control room, Clathran soldiers monitor the computers that relay instructions and information to incoming military vessels. Around the periphery are Clathrans at sensor screens, observing and directing individual ships when necessary. Each ship's needs, priority, and rank are carefully weighed. The only speech you hear is when a controller is giving a ship landing instructions or when a pilot needs special assistance.

Some of the Clathrans stand over a different sort of screen, doing nothing but watching. You realize that these are control centers for the ground-based weapon systems that protect the spaceport. Though there is no sign of any special alert or attack underway, the weapons are always powered up and ready.

The observation level is unusually cold, even by the normally chilly Clathran standards. It is well below forty degrees Fahrenheit; if it were any colder, you'd have to worry that the Clathrans might see your breath in the air. The Clathrans themselves don't have this problem. Their exhalations are as cold as their bodies. You wonder whether the cool temperature in this room is a requirement of the equipment located here, or whether cooler temperatures help the Clathran observers remain more alert.

Pekep is indeed a very busy world and one of the main centers of operations for the Clathrans. There is a great deal of traffic landing at and lifting off from the spaceport and, by listening in on the communications and watching the traffic patterns, you are able gather data on where the ships are coming from and where they are going. You find a comfortable place to stand, out of the way of the watch officers who pace from station to station alert for trouble, and patiently do just that.

After a day's surveillance you have learned quite a bit. About thirty percent of the traffic is on its way to the Survey Line, carrying soldiers and supplies. Ten percent is headed for another Clathran base, Morikor, which is a forward command and control center for conducting the Survey. Another ten percent is going to Ghorbon, a new advance base the Clathrans are building on the far side of the Survey Line, which will serve much the same purpose as Pekep when the Survey passes there.

However, fully half of the traffic is traveling along routes to the Clathran home system, Karnossus. Karnossus is the hub of the Clathran Empire, the production center for most of the ships and soldiers needed to carry out the massive galactic survey. It is by far the most important Clathran planet in the galaxy. The flight patterns of the ships going to and coming from Karnossus indicate that it lies somewhere in trisector number seven hundred seventy-three on your map.

There is no planet dot for Karnossus on your map, since Vanessa Chang only marked the planets for which she knew the exact coordinates. However, since you know the exact coordinates for Karnossus, you can go there by simply flying your ship to trisector number seven hundred seventy-three and plotting "Land."

⊠ STOP ⊠

[774]

Using all of the weaponry and training at your command, you dodge the laser blasts of the satellite as well as you can, but still you find your ship taking hits you can ill afford. Clearly, you will have to put that menace to navigation out of commission once and for all before your ship is seriously damaged. After dodging the next barrage, you order your computer to bring your own guns to bear on the space satellite.

"Ready to fire, Boss."

"Remember, we don't want to destroy the thing, just fry its circuits. This may keep whoever put it up here from learning more about us."

"Roger, Boss."

Continued 

You see a flash of light shoot from your gun port to the center of the satellite, completely deactivating it. Now that you have a moment to breathe, you direct the computer to prepare a summary report on the planet below you. You need to decide quickly whether or not you should even stay in orbit around the world; sometimes discretion is the better part of valor.

“Boss, I have some good news and some bad news.” Sometimes you wonder if you should give the old bucket of bytes a complete overhaul and rid yourself of its quiriness. But then, who would amuse you during the long flights between planets?

“Well?” you ask, irritated that you have to do so.

“Ghorbon is a Clathran planet.”

“Is that the good news or the bad?”

“Sort of both. While the Clathrans have a large base of operations located on the northern half of the planet, they do not seem to stray from there. The rest of the planet looks clean and should be safe for landing. There are several satellites in orbit around Ghorbon, but some of them are not functioning properly. With any luck, the soldiers will think the deactivation of the satellite that attacked us was due to a malfunction. I suggest, though, that we land as soon as possible in case they decide to come up here to check it out personally.”

You heartily agree. Looking at the rest of the data on the world beneath you, you see that it has a comfortable temperate climate in the northern hemisphere, a lot of dense jungle in the southern hemisphere, and a wide strip of desert separating the two hemispheres at the equator. It is not surprising that the Clathrans are content to stay in the more livable northern half of the planet. However, you decide to set the ship down in the southern half to try to keep yourself hidden. You choose a landing site where there are plenty of trees that can be converted to the commodity Fiber. Giving these instructions to your computer, you prepare for landing.

✂ STOP ✂

[775]

You return to the solid diamond pond and set up your equipment, but you are unable to produce any Diamond Cloth. Apparently, you are missing one or more of the components necessary for its production. A review of the component list and/or your possessions would appear to be in order.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[776]

From a distance, the giant latticework which constitutes the Middle Ri Allan “planet” resembles nothing more than a gigantic tinkertoy project. As you get closer, you see the automobile-sized gas bags twisting and soaring through and around the structure. These, as you know, are the Middle Ri Allans, telepathic creatures related to the Ri Allans you had encountered in your adventures in the Galactic Fringe.

You have the same options as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[777]

You take your ship to the outskirts of the city, keeping low to the ground to avoid notice. You disembark and begin hiking towards the city. Eventually you get close enough to observe a cluster of Zyran buildings. The cluster consists of several large semi-transparent globular shells interconnected by a maze of fibrous strands. A conglomeration of brown Zyran fills the place.

Using your powered binoculars, you can make out a huge mass of heads, tentacles, and various other body parts, plus plenty of the gook that the Zyran secrete wherever they go. Curious, you move in for a closer look. Your special abilities ensure that you won't be spotted. You go right up to the entrance and take a few steps inside.

You have entered a plaza jammed with bustling Zyran. The constant sound of gurgling and the characteristic sticky gook permeate your senses. The Zyran individuals themselves vary greatly in appearance. Though each one is a collection of common body parts such as heads, eyes, mouths, tentacles, arms, legs, bones, hearts, and lungs, the number and position of these parts varies from individual to individual. For example, one Zyran has three heads in the center of its body with lots of tentacles wrapping all around. Another has a bony, box-like frame, with short, stubby arms sticking out between the bones. Another is an almost liquid blob of goo, with beating hearts bobbing up and down in the liquid.

Ugh.

Also, absolutely every Zyran is constantly eating. You see multiple tentacles shoving food into multiple mouths, suckers slurping, jaws chewing, throats swallowing, and stomachs churning by the thousands. Eat, eat, eat. Meanwhile, they all go about their other business. No wonder they're always looking for food. They're always hungry.

The Zyran don't use any clothing, except for a piece of jewelry most of them wear. It's a small white stone with a black center, about half an inch in diameter. The stone is attached to a chain and suspended from a prominent body part (which varies depending on the individual).

You recognize the significance of this piece of jewelry immediately, of course. It's a replica of the Core Stone! The replica is inert — that is, it doesn't seem to have the powers of the real thing — but why are the Zyran wearing it?

You now have an important lead towards finding the origin and meaning of the Core Stone. If you can find out why the Zyran are wearing replicas, you may also discover the true significance of the Stone. You may have to visit the Zyran home planet to get the answer, but if that is what it takes to complete your quest, you must do it.

You carefully note down all the information you've gained by observing the Zyran masses, and return to your ship. You ponder over the future of a race of rapidly expanding, always hungry, technologically advanced monsters. They'll never be content with what they have, and if the Clathrans didn't hold them in check, the Zyran could turn out to be a dangerous enemy to humanity.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[778]

You do not have all the items necessary to build a Stasis Field. Take another look at the plans and try again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[779]

The market area is virtually empty of Hadrakians and certainly empty of other traders. Since the Clathran blockade, business has ground to a virtual halt for the tigorillas here. Times are certainly hard when merchants are unable to find a market for the vast inventory of high-quality Fiber the Hadrakians have gathered from the giant forests on the planet.

On the other hand, this almost certainly bodes well for you as a trader. The Hadrakians are desperate for new goods, so they are even more willing than usual to make you a favorable trade. The current rates are:

- 3 Fiber for 1 Radioactives
- 3 Fiber for 1 Munitions
- 2 Fiber for 1 Synthetic Genius
- 1 Fiber for 1 Tools

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[780]

"Bleckkk!" sputters your computer in a very noncomputer-like manner. What in the galaxy could have induced it to make such a noise? Could it have found the half a peanut butter and sardine sandwich you have been saving in the refrigerator unit for the past three weeks?

You decide to rise to the bait by asking, "What's up?"

"Boss, we are approaching a Hadrakian colony planet called Innermost. From the looks of things, it is a decided casualty of the Clathran Survey, but that's not what I was reacting to. Even from this distance, the surface readings on the planet are so foul that I am going to have to rate this world a borderline health hazard."

"Does this mean. . ." you start to ask, dreading the answer, "that I will have to wear the Environmental Suit?"

"Almost, but not quite. If you promise not to take too deep a breath or ingest any of the unprocessed food or water, I think we can let you out with only a battery of preventive inoculations." With that settled, you turn to the Clathran problem.

"What is the actual status of the Clathrans here on Innermost?"

"From the initial scan, they have put in place a substantial occupying force. The readings show a lot of space debris, indicating that a fierce battle took place here. Obviously the Clathrans won, but I would wager that the Hadrakians put up some resistance. The Clathran soldiers have a large base below, as well as a number of monitor satellites orbiting the planet, but I think we can land if we tread carefully."

You think about the dangers of landing on a planet under Clathran occupation and decide you haven't come this far only to be turned back. The Hadrakians who have survived the takeover will undoubtedly be of great assistance to you in your own mission. Grimly you set to the task of sneaking down to Innermost's surface undetected.

Approaching the planet is a difficult business, as you are repeatedly scanned by high energy beams while navigating closer to the surface of the planet. Fortunately for you there is a great deal of debris in orbit around the planet, the remains of a number of Hadrakian naval vessels (and a few Clathran ships as well) destroyed in the Battle of Innermost.

The probe beams become more frequent as you get closer, until it seems that you are under constant surveillance. You keep your own power output to a minimum and change course repeatedly to prevent the Clathrans from getting a fix on you. The technology that allowed you to pass the Survey is operational, and is probably all that lies between you and a swift conversion to your component atoms.

The time you spend approaching Innermost is well spent, however, as it lets you map most of the planetary surface. You also intercept a number of clandestine radio messages, instructing (in a cryptic fashion) any visiting offworlders to land at a particular point near the equator. This, you suspect, is the planet's Enclave.

You direct your ship towards the Enclave, taking advantage of a temporary break in the Clathran scanning to plunge downwards. You make your atmospheric approach as much as possible on a ballistic trajectory, hoping to fool the numerous spy satellites into thinking you are just another piece of space junk captured by the planet's gravity well. You also instruct your computer to let the ship's outer hull heat up to a cherry red color, something normally prevented by the action of the ship's automatic energy conservation systems.

Because of the heat of your approach, you don't really see your landing zone until you're already sitting on it. You appear to have grounded in the midst of one of the galaxy's largest junkyards. For a moment you imagine that your instructions were incorrect, but then you catch sight of Hadrakians galloping towards you from a number of points, all waving for you to leave your ship. Mystified, you set the automatic protection systems, and comply.

No sooner are you clear of the ship than three bulldozers are pushing metallic debris over it. You recognize rusting aircars, old computing equipment, burnt-out rocket engines, and even a few kitchen fixtures in the mound of garbage which rapidly covers your once-proud vessel.

"What . . ."

"Monitor Beta will be scanning us in a little less than ten minutes," says a Hadrakian Settled One. "The Clathrans' ground pattern recognition software has become quite sophisticated. They would have spotted your ship at once and then we would have trouble."

"Oh . . . thanks," is the best you can manage. Your ship should be able to stand the abuse all right, but you wonder about loading and unloading cargo. The Hadrakian female anticipates you, however.

"We'll tunnel through the mound tomorrow, and give you access to the cargo spaces and your personal accommodations. For the moment, though, we don't have time."

"I understand. Why don't you show me around?"

"Certainly."

Despite the Hadrakian's politeness, however, the Enclave is very much what you expected: a small spaceport (disguised as a large junkyard) adjoining a small collection of buildings for trade and traders, a hospital, and several warehouses, one of which hides the inevitable Arena. Surprisingly, there is no enclave market. Therefore, your only option is:

(Z728HK) (7 phases) Fight in the Arena, attempting to earn citizenship on Innermost.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[781]

“You want to go to Earth, human? A wise choice. To know where we are going we must all return to where we’ve been. Step closer.”

The Darkwhistler sweeps over you, and you feel a sudden chill as it blocks out the sun. A tentacle reaches down and coils about you. There is a brief sensation of vertigo. . .

You are standing in Space Square, in New New York, on the planet Earth. A vast crowd surges all around you; in fact, they surge right *through* your ghostly body. Neon flickers off their faces as they gaze upwards towards the Chang building, at the end of the Square. It is New Year’s Eve, and the rocketship is just about to descend.

5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .

A huge roar goes up from the crowd as the lighted ship slides down the face of the building. The New Year! Singing breaks out, here and there, and you can see many couples kissing. But then you see some other things as well: rocks flying through the air, fistfights, and armed police. In moments the crowd in the Square has become a howling mob, and a riot is raging around and through you.

Much of the crowd flees, but many people stay to break windows with telekinetically hurled rocks, or use pyrokinetic abilities to set fires. The police are overwhelmed, and the devastation in the Square continues unabated until at last there is nothing left to damage.

One hour into the new year, Space Square is a desolation of broken glass, shattered buildings, and bleeding bodies. And your own ghostly form, silently mourning the insanity of it all.

Eventually you fade out, and come to yourself again with the Darkwhistler backing away from overhead.

“Did you see what you wished, human?”

“My race is going insane!”

“They cannot adjust to their new mental powers, especially when gathered in groups.”

“But what can I do?”

“The short answer is: stop the Clathrans.”

⊠ STOP ⊠

[782]

Sitting in the control room, you watch as your ship emerges from hyperspace in the Pekep system. Immediately, warning lights start to flash and alarms begin whooping. You are not sure which is worse, the danger you are about to face, or the blasted alarms blaring in your ears.

“Emergency! Emergency! Clathran ships just detected entering scanning range,” the computer bellows.

“All right, all right,” you scream, trying to be heard over the alarms. “Shut off the bloody sirens already. We’ve been here before, you know.”

It is a relief when the noise ceases, but even in silence there is still a fleet of Clathran scouts backed up by warships streaking towards you from the planet ahead. Pekep is a major Clathran base, and until now you had no way to approach it. This time, however, you have a trick up your sleeve.

“Computer, engage the Cloaking Ray.”

“Yes, *sir*, Boss.” Your computer is almost as interested in seeing how this works out as you are. You feel a momentary vibration as the cloaking system envelops the ship in a total audio-optical, electromagnetic, and subspace invisibility field. “Cloaking Ray engaged.”

Immediately the scouts that were heading towards you are lost. Your ship is invisible to them and they have no way of tracking you. After a while, they give up.

Pressing your luck, you decide to use the Cloaking Ray to keep yourself hidden while you proceed cautiously to the well-populated planet ahead of you. You establish a high, oblique orbit around Pekep and instruct your computer to undertake a detailed scan. On your viewscreen you see a steady stream of Clathran vessels coming and going from the planet. Some are even in orbit right next to you — but while you can see them, they can’t see you. The traffic is approximately half civilian and half military in nature, and includes all kinds of craft: freighters, harvesters, passenger transports, scouts, survey ships, troop carriers, destroyers, and even a few heavy dreadnoughts.

The geophysical scan is now complete, and your computer reports that Pekep is, as you suspected, a major Clathran colony. It has a population of several billion of the green-scaled lizardoids, and has an advanced technological infrastructure. There are residential areas packed with apartment buildings, primary care and educational facilities for the young, offices and factories for adult workers, and busy military bases that cover nearly a quarter of the planet’s surface. The main spaceport is located at the edge of Pekep’s largest city, and handles both military and civilian traffic.

“Computer,” you ask, “What’s your view of this planet’s strategic role in the Clathran Empire?”

“Well, Boss, Pekep appears to be an important support colony for the Survey, since it has a full range of military and civilian facilities. Soldiers can be stationed here between assignments, ships can come here for repair and service, and supplies can be produced, stored, and recycled here using the planet’s industrial capacity. However, Pekep is still just a single colony. Its shipbuilding facilities, while impressive, don’t come close to being able to produce the vast numbers of ships required for the galactic Survey. Similarly, its ecosystem is not large enough to support the breeding, raising, and training of Clathran soldiers on a massive scale. Those functions — building the ships and breeding the soldiers — are the Empire’s key strategic activities, and they are not performed here. Therefore, I would rate Pekep’s importance as moderate, but not crucial.”

“Thank you.” The machine actually managed to deliver a succinct analysis, instead of going on and on for hours. You’d almost think it was getting smarter. “Now, is there anywhere we can land so I can set out on foot and find out some more about this moderately important Clathran planet?”

“I’m afraid the main spaceport is out, Boss. The traffic rate there is so high that even with our Cloaking Ray, we’re sure to be detected. However, I have found a smaller, older spaceport on the other side of the city which has been all but abandoned. From what I can tell, we could land there without attracting unwanted attention. The Cloaking Ray will keep us hidden as long as we want, and if another ship looks like it’s going to land too close to us, I can just lift off.

You run through a list of possible problems, but the computer has answers for everything. With nothing left to stand in your way, you give the order to land at the small spaceport. During your descent, you observe that the city is divided roughly into three sections: a well-guarded

military base swarming with soldiers, a residential area with homes and schools, and the industrial area surrounding the main spaceport. All three sections are busy with Clathrans going about their business.

While you would like to explore each of these places, you will need to be careful. There is no point in attempting an adventure somewhere unless you have the ability to get around without being caught.

You now have the following options:

<ZN2YH6> (5 phases) Sneak into the main spaceport during the busy time of the day.

<UN7Y86> (5 phases) Slip into the military base in the middle of the night.

<ZM2JHU> (5 phases) Mingle with the natives in the residential area.

⊗ STOP ⊗

[783]

With your opponent on the ground, you have a clear path to the opposite side of the field. You break for it, running as fast as you can. Your opponent gets up and tries to catch you with his superior speed, but he is wounded and you have too much of a head start. Out of breath and with aching legs, you make it across. Nice going! Meanwhile, your ally has defeated her opponent. She advances and takes on the remaining enemy. Because of the wound you inflicted on him, your ally has the advantage and eventually wins.

Congratulations! You have mastered the principles and application of Worzellian tactics — sneak first, then bluff, fight, and finally, run. You will be able to use this skill to good effect in future combats. In addition, you are now an honorary Worzellian warrior, a rare status for an offworlder. The fact that you are human seems to add even more significance to this status, and as an added bonus you will be able to use the Worzellians' medical facilities free of charge in the future. As you emerge from the Academy building wearing the black-triangle insignia of an unaligned warrior, you can detect a difference in the way the natives regard you. Many greet you and several even try to impress you by introducing themselves in pathetic broken Earth Standard. It's all a bit embarrassing. You return to your ship to try to catch up on some sleep.

Go now to the CGM.

⊗ STOP ⊗

[784]

Your interphase variometer fluctuates, indicating that Adafa is one of the Dual Space anomalies you are looking for. To attempt to research dual space here, plot the following option.

<GC4FQL> (3 phases) Research dual space on Adafa.

⊗ STOP ⊗

[785]

“Boss, when are we going back to Golgotha?” asks your computer one day, while you are flying a long open haul.

The thought makes you shiver. “Golgotha is a pretty horrible place. I would think you would be especially glad never to go near it again.”

“Well, yes, Boss. But it seems strange that you say you didn’t find much there, after coming all this way searching for it. Are you sure you don’t want to look again?”

Now that you think about it, you realize that there was more you could have done on Golgotha. You might expect not to be able to understand such an unusual place right away. It seems possible that you’ve missed some of the most important secrets of all. You resolve to return there at the first opportunity, and explore the strange chaotic planet more thoroughly.

✕ STOP ✕

[786]

“Accessory City” is a region of Sallion located conveniently near the Hadrakian Business District; close enough that you have no fear of taking a wrong turn and entering the more formidable part of the maze. This area has been set up by the Hadrakians for offworlders to visit and examine some of the more interesting Sallie gadgets. Since each item is one of a kind (no Sallie would bother doing the exact same thing twice), their marketability in the space trade lanes is limited. Even if you manage to find something you can sell, there is no way to get more of it. So, the Hadrakians allow visitors to come and buy unique items from the Sallies themselves. This promotes good will for all concerned, and you may even be able to find a real bargain here.

The large building you enter is the main warehouse containing the majority of Sallie goods for sale. You browse along the aisles, examining all sorts of gadgets and devices. There is some semblance of order to the layout here, with sections dedicated to housewares, entertainment, personal weaponry just to name a few. You take a special interest in the latter. Although you look at many varieties of knives, swords, maces, blasters, grenades, and the like, what really catches your eye is a weird-looking gun called a Sallion Special. This gun is made out of all kinds of multicolored pieces that spin around and make funny noises. It’s anyone’s guess how it works, but it looks interesting. A test firing against a stuffed dummy of a Hadrakian causes the dummy’s arms and legs to suddenly become tied up like a pretzel.

“Wow!” you exclaim, impressed at the effect. You start looking around for a salesperson, so you can see what the Sallies want for this unique weapon. Finally, you spot someone who you presume works here. He is a Sallie who is busy building a big decorative pyramid out of various items lying around, including the sales merchandise. He has managed to build the pyramid to a height of over seven feet before running out of floor space. As he stops to shove some of the display tables out of the way, you take the opportunity to approach and ask about the multicolored weapon.

“Will the Sallion Special always tie my opponent up into a knot? Is that what it’s supposed to do?” you ask.

“Not necessarily,” he responds. “It runs off of a probabilistic generator. The effect is different every time you use it. Neat, huh?”

You are not too surprised to hear this. Strange and unpredictable devices are what you expect from the Sallies.

“How much do you want for it?” you ask.

“One unit each of Phase Steel, Radioactives and Tools.”

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

✕ STOP ✕

[787]

While making long hauls in deep space, you have a lot of time to try tuning into subspace transmissions from the Nine Worlds. Usually you are glad to hear whatever news you can get, even when it's not good news. But one recent item, passed along from the Para-Para subspace transmitter, is very disturbing. Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health have reported findings that suggest that the general increase in the incidence of mental illness, suicide, and stress disorders among the Nine Worlds might be caused by a single syndrome which is increasing in prevalence. Dr. Charles Elcrezis of the Harvard School of Public Health describes the symptoms of "Sudden Adjustment Psychosis Syndrome" as similar to those experienced by subjects of sensory deprivation experiments or persons experiencing an extreme change of culture or environment. However, even people living in familiar settings are affected by the new syndrome. Victims experience unexplained confusion and a sense of detachment from reality. In more severe cases, delusions and hallucinations are common. The prevalence of SAPS is highest in the most populous areas, such as cities, universities, and industrial centers. Says Dr. Elcrezis, "We don't know if this is a disease caused by an infectious agent, or a toxin, or just a natural response to the stresses of our changing times. However, it seems clear that the incidence is on the rise."

✕ STOP ✕

[788]

You do not intend to let such a simple thing as a maze get the best of you! After all, the Sallies have to traverse its passages every day of their lives just to get to school and work. Even the Hadrakians like the challenge of running the maze from time to time, especially the males who consider it a test of their manhood to get from point A to point B in less time than someone else.

Determined, you grimly take your bearings for the seven hundredth time and set out to find your way back to the spaceport on your own. Over the course of the next several hours, you see much more of the city than you had originally planned. You also see the Sallies in action changing sections of the maze passages. However, this helps you very little in discovering a pattern to the changes. You strongly suspect that the Sallies just make changes randomly whenever they feel like it. Watching one area for alterations is of no help to you at all. Sighing, you continue onward through the night.

Hours later, you see another Sallie crossing the street at a fork in the road. Should you give up now and ask for help?

- A. Keep trying to get out on your own
- B. Ask for help

Go now to the CGM.

✕ STOP ✕

[789]

"Damn it, computer, there's got to be a way to see into that dome." You are passing time in deep space by discussing the Morikor situation.

"It's completely shielded across the electromagnetic spectrum. You have to be able to enter the dome yourself."

"But how? They patrol the airlocks regularly."

"You just need to be undetectable, Boss."

"Undetectable?"

"Undetectable. Like you're not even there."

“But how?”

“I don’t know. How did you become telepathic? Telekinetic? How did you learn to whurffle or phrrmm? Maybe you should talk to some more aliens.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

Although you hate to admit it.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[790]

You emerge from hyperspace into the midst of a typical main-sequence planetary system. Your ship’s computer wastes no time in directing you to the only habitable planet: a steamy tropical world covered with thick overgrown jungles and vast shallow oceans. A single large city on the coast of the largest continent is the site of a busy spaceport.

“This is Franclair, Boss, the planet we’ve been looking for.”

“Besides the drive systems research, what else did Vanessa Chang have to say about it?”

“She noted that it was a colony world of the Hadrakians, and that it boasted its own semi-sentient native life form.”

“Semi-sentient?”

“A species known as the Francloons, which behaved very strangely — almost maliciously — towards her and her crew. They are apparently tolerated by the Hadrakians, but Chang was unable to work out the exact relationship.”

“I wonder what the situation is now.”

“We’ll find out soon enough. I’ve picked up landing instructions for the Hadrakian offworlders’ enclave.”

The stars whirl around your viewscreen, as the *Run Amok* begins its landing approach.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[791]

Today on your subspace radio you heard some disturbing news from the Nine Worlds:

This is Bix Billbee coming to you live from Monument, where just moments ago a fully-loaded passenger shuttle crashed into the center of the crowded space terminal here. Rescue workers are still on the scene, their efforts hampered by the radioactive contamination released in the disaster. The death toll is already in the thousands, with no exact figures yet available.

Although the cause of the crash must still be investigated, amateur operators in the spaceport area report that the pilot seemed to lose control in the final moments of his landing, screaming ‘No! Not the Dragon! I haven’t got it!’ Even so, an error must also have occurred in the shuttle’s automated systems for the crash to occur. More news as it happens.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[792]

The turbulent, acidic, radioactive atmosphere doesn't make the planet Dahl endearing to either you or your computer. Nonetheless you make your way down to the surface, for you have important business here. You may wish to mine radioactives on the surface or to follow the secret passage leading to the Brotherhood colony deep underground. There you can count on a tasty meal and a few days' stay among fellow human beings, a rare event indeed this far from Earth.

You have the same options as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[793]

Your skip radio brings you a transmission from Earth, in the Nine Worlds:

In a press conference held today in his laboratory at the School of Public Health, on Harvard, Dr. Charles Elcrezis summarized current understanding of the Sudden Adjustment Psychosis Syndrome (SAPS). According to Dr. Elcrezis, SAPS is an acute mental illness brought on by prolonged exposure to large crowds. Victims suddenly lose contact with reality, often violently, and experience vivid and usually permanent hallucinations. The delusions often center on religious experiences, with the victim seeing himself as a messenger, sent to redeem those around him. Although the incidence of SAPS has been steadily increasing since its first recognition last year, Dr. Elcrezis feels that isolated cases have been occurring at public gatherings for much longer periods of our history: sporting events, public demonstrations, and heavy-metal rock concerts have long been associated with aberrant behavior.

Dr. Elcrezis ended by stressing the need for more public awareness of the SAPS problem, and more funding for research into its causes and possible treatments.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[794]

"Planet, ho!" your computer announces as you leave hyperspace and enter the new system. You make a mental note to check on the Western selection in the library. Obviously the computer has been viewing the books and movies a bit too frequently.

"So what do we have in store for us this time?" you inquire.

"The world below us is called Sallion. It has normal gravity, a breathable atmosphere, and not just one, but two, intelligent races. My analysis also indicates that it has quite a variety of advanced technology."

"Great! What can you tell me about the two races?"

"One is called the Sallies, and they are native to the planet. The other is the Hadrakians, who have set up a colony here. The two races seem to be living together peacefully."

⊠ STOP ⊠

[795]

True to their word, the plasma creatures lead you to a rich source of Crystals. The planet Knapt isn't structurally sound enough to contain viable mineral and metal deposits, so it comes as no surprise that this source is actually artificial. Eons ago, some visiting alien freighter, tremendous in size, must have visited here and become lost or trapped inside Knapt's labyrinth of tunnels. Ultimately, its fuel gave out and the ship crashed, falling through tunnel after tunnel until it finally settled in the horizontal branch where you now find it resting.

You take time to explore the interior but find nothing of interest, so you commence raiding the alien ship's cargo of Crystals. Your tests indicate that the Crystals are of the highest quality and will require little refining. The time-consuming part of this whole venture is prying open the cargo bay doors, but you manage. After four days, you have enough Crystals to fill one cargo bay.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[796]

Mathus smiles, and congratulates you on your smooth delivery of the dialogue. She seems quite happy that you have come so far. "Few Brothers pass this way, these days. We are pleased to continue your training."

Suddenly, you hear a buzzing sound. Mathus seems disturbed at first, then hesitant, and then she jumps behind a barrier of the rather labyrinthine set of corridors that make up this underground lair. You decide to follow, but cannot find her once you are on the other side of the wall. Then you hear a terrible clicking sound from the other side of the barrier. You decide to peek around the barrier when, as though from nowhere, an arm from behind you takes you by the mouth. Mathus whispers, "Not a word, not a sound," with an urgency you instinctively obey. Minutes later, a second buzzer sounds.

Mathus sighs aloud. You offer a puzzled expression. "You will understand soon enough," she says. "Let us go to the temple for your lectures." You walk through a complex maze and enter an immensely large temple, with an unusually ornate altar. At the front of the temple are a handful of acolytes. Moments later, as though appearing from nowhere, the temple fills with a few more witnesses.

Mathus waves her hand, and begins:

The Lecture: Master of Reason

"You have mastered your dialogues well, and are truly a Master of Revelation. You are now ready to learn the rites of next level of the Path of Intuition, the caste of Master of Reason. As a Master of Reason, you will take upon yourself a new obligation, that of selflessness. The order has a mission, as you will soon learn. Your obligation now is to give of yourself all that can be given for the sake of that mission.

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

Examiner: And what is the message within?

Answer: It is the reason for our very being.

Examiner: That reason is hidden within us.

Answer: In a manner we do not understand.

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

Examiner: How then, can we know this great reason?

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

Answer: I do not know the Answer.

Examiner: You are truly a Master of Reason.

Answer: And I know you to be the same.

“You are now a Master of Reason. Let the training begin.”

You are taken out to the labyrinthine corridors you travelled on the way to the temple. It is explained to you that the corridors are patrolled by large Clathran-shaped androids who are trained to fire at anything they see, be they Brother or stranger. Their weapons are fully armed, and they are programmed to kill. You are sometimes warned of their presence by a gentle buzzing sound.

Your next few days are taken up with classes, exercise, and android-dodging. It is a sport you would begin to enjoy, except for a few nearly fatal near-misses from time to time. You are amazed at how effectively many of the other Brothers hide when the androids appear.

Then, between classes, you get a sick feeling in your stomach when you hear the telltale clicking sound of the Clathran androids. You turn and face your enemy. There was no buzzer, and for a moment you wonder if this is a real Clathran storming the labyrinth. There is no time to react, or even to defend yourself. The Clathran fires at your shoulder as you drop to your feet in anguish.

Then, after a moment, you see that the Clathran was simply Mathus, using her masterful skills of Illusion. You have a strange blue welt where she shot you. “So that you might always be on guard,” she says. “This is the mark of the Geas of Reason. We have an important errand for you. Come with me.”

⌘ STOP ⌘

[797]

You have barely begun your meditations when you are visited by the God of Fast Starships:

“Look for the plans for an Interphase Reflector on the Clathran base Morikor. Remember my name. I’m number six. Gotta blast off now. Good luck!”

And so you are finished almost before you started.

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[798]

“Why are we searching for Karnossus, Boss?”

“Because it’s the Clathran home planet, and we need to find it to have any chance of winning this war.”

“But hasn’t it already been located? As I recall, it’s in trisector seven hundred seventy-three of our map.”

“There’s nothing marked there on the map.”

“That map is over three hundred years old, Boss. Since Vanessa Chang didn’t know about Karnossus, its location wasn’t marked. But according to our new information, it’s definitely there, and we know the precise coordinates.”

To visit Karnossus, all you need to do is go to trisector 773 and plot LAND.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[799]

With the combination of weapons and abilities at your command, you overcome the robot's defenses. You glance around to see if your actions have been observed. You are relieved that there is no one about, either robot or Bluvian. You try the door and find that it is locked, but you are able to force it open in a matter of minutes. Since there are no Clathrans actually on Bloo any longer, security has loosened up and no alarm is raised. You conclude that there is probably nothing of importance in the factory, but you decide to poke around anyway.

Slipping inside the building, you close the outside door behind you. In the hallway you enter there is barely enough light to see. Along the corridor you can see several closed doors. The end of the passage opens into a huge room filled with robots busily working, making new robots, repairing old ones. Given the Bluvian destructive tendencies, you can imagine that this repair facility is constantly busy. You do not want to draw attention to yourself, so you do not go all the way into the large hall, but just take a moment to see what is happening. The robots do not notice you. It has been too long since anyone came into the hall from your direction, and they are not prepared. This is just fine with you, since you doubt you could take them all on at one time.

You do see an interesting door marked "Robot Control Center," located all the way across the vast room. You resign yourself to the fact that you will never get to it alive. Instead, you turn back and start exploring the closed offices behind you.

All the rooms are very much the same in that they have empty desks and file cabinets in each. You are about to give up when you notice something sticking out from a crack between a file cabinet and the wall. Shining a light into the small space, you see an old file lodged there. The Clathrans are larger in almost every way than humans, so perhaps they were not able to reach into here to retrieve the lost file before they left, or maybe they never noticed it. After several minutes of agonizingly slow progress, you manage to worm the file out of its hiding place. It contains two sheets of paper, one handwritten and one printed, both in the Clathran language.

Translating proves to be difficult, but you finally manage. You read the handwritten sheet first. It appears to be an early draft of a report the Clathrans sent to one of their main bases:

With regard to the failure of the project, the question has arisen whether the failure was a shortcoming in our own methods or a result of some characteristic of the Bluvian mind. My suggestion is that the latter is most likely, for which reason I recommend the cancellation of the proposed Phase Two relocation plan.

The Bluvians are not remiss in following orders; if anything, the opposite is true, as the primary cause of the embarrassing incidents on Orood demonstrated: that Bluvians, no matter how trained, have a tendency to follow all orders, no matter who issues them.

Do not make the obvious mistake of concluding that the Bluvians are unintelligent. Their behavior, at its core, is ultimately conditioned not by gullibility or subservience, but by a powerful well-masked arrogance. They follow orders not out of respect, but out of disdain for the alternatives. There is a word in their native tongue, Thmorg, which denotes this form of arrogance. It is difficult to define fully due to the typically Bluvian circular reasoning behind it: Thmorg is the attitude that one is immensely superior to all others in the universe, the basis for this superiority being that one possesses Thmorg and the others do not.

I see no reason not to continue the program on an automated basis, continuing to check the results periodically. If we fail to produce a race of soldiers, we have at least arrested their development at a pre-spacefaring stage and thereby removed one potential source of future instability.

That is all there is on the handwritten sheet; apparently the remainder of the report has been lost. Turning to the printed sheet, you read:

TO: All Clathran Bases
FROM: Command Central
RE: Password for Survey Line

We will be changing the military password needed to pass safely through the Survey Line. As of the start of the year, the new password will be *penumbra*. Please take note of it, as you will be required to give the correct password to get through."

What a great find! This should help you cross the Survey Line without being attacked by the Clathran warships! You only pray that the password has not been superseded by a new one.

Satisfied with what you have learned, you carefully return the file to the place where you found it and leave the robot factory.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[800]

While enduring what seems like an endless procession of organic salads, free-range meat dishes, and herbal teas, you manage to piece together a history of Wythym and the Wythymites.

First of all, you discover that the amoebae are not native to Wythym, having evolved originally on a world called Tayzha. Fifty thousand years ago their ancestors, all members of a religious-political group known as "the Greens," fled the developing technological nightmare of a crowded, polluted Tayzha for the unknowns of space.

For some time they wandered in space, finding several habitable planets already occupied by other races. Desperate, they were on the brink of returning to Tayzha, when a mysterious alien being appeared suddenly on the bridge of their ship. The alien, after demonstrating his amazing powers, offered to guide the Greens to an uninhabited world. The alien's only price for this service was the promise that the Greens would serve as the world's custodians, keeping it green and unspoiled for the rest of time. The Greens agreed, and were led to Wythym. Little has changed since.

As you piece it together, Wythym was a world recently "sanitized" by the unknown aliens: its dominant inhabitants modified in such a way that they could never be a threat. You suspect, although there is little hard evidence to support you, that this race was the blort, a five-legged grazer not at all like the terran antelope. The blort, it seems, while exhibiting many of the features of developing intelligence, are prone to sudden periods of frenzied destruction whenever they gather in large groups. Having arranged for this civilization-impairing handicap, the aliens still needed a way to maintain the situation; planetary development would inevitably lead to further evolution of the blort, or perhaps the rise of a new species.

Meanwhile, here were the Greens, already venturing through space. The solution must have seemed obvious: the Greens set up to maintain the status quo on Wythym, and at the same time modified to turn completely away from technological innovation. The result is the same stagnation of development that you have seen throughout the galaxy.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[801]

You check your ship into Pharoan's phosphorescent repair yard to get it fixed up. It's a dangerous galaxy out there, and the better the condition of your ship, the better off you are. While your ship is being repaired, you ask an engineer how they can guarantee the work will be done in three days.

"We have some very sophisticated equipment," she tells you. "The machinery does a lot of the repair work automatically, without our supervision."

"That's pretty impressive," you comment. "Would you mind if I asked you to show me how this equipment works?"

"Not at all."

The Hadrakian engineer patiently takes you through the yard, demonstrating all the different repair devices and what they do. She knows them all very well; after all, that's her job. After a while, you have learned enough about the Hadrakian repair technology to try building some automated repair equipment yourself. With some help from the Hadrakian engineer, you come up with a design for an Automated Repair System that you can install on board your ship. To build the system, you will need the following components:

- 1 Gradient Filter
- 1 Vortex Coil
- 1 Synthetic Genius
- 1 Radioactives
- 1 Tools

Of course, your Automated Repair System won't be able to match Pharoan's, but it will still be a big improvement over your existing repair technology. When you have all the components and want to build the Automated Repair System, plot the following option:

⟨X8NKYD⟩ (3 phases) Build an Automated Repair System.

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

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[802]

You go back to your trick of pretending to be a Clathran, hoping this will help you make it the rest of the way through the Survey Line. Unluckily, this time the Clathrans aren't fooled. Instead, it would seem, they are well and truly irritated. A gigantic machine wanders by with a maw that looks like it could eat a hundred ships like yours and not be satisfied. You are helplessly drawn into the maw by a powerful tractor beam and captured.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[803]

While fooling with your subspace radio, you achieve a brief link with a transmitter on Leucothea, among the Nine Worlds. The sender is a parish priest named Bengston and the recipient is High Disciple Kalliroa, of the Final Church of Man.

"I enclose some special information with my monthly report, your Grace."

"Yes, disciple?"

"These are statistics gleaned from all counseling sessions in this parish over the last year. As you can see, they point to an alarming rise in marital disturbances, suicidality, and mental disturbances."

"What of it?"

"I'm worried, your Grace. These are prosperous times. Why then this rise?"

"I do not know, Disciple Bengston, but we will look for this trend elsewhere. Thank you for bringing it to our attention."

⌘ STOP ⌘

[804]

Your viewscreen shows you nearing a large, densely-populated, orange-colored planet. Orbiting the planet are many spaceships, satellites, and weapons emplacements. Several of the ships break out of orbit and head in your direction. Each ship has a small ovoid center with twelve long metal tendrils sticking out into space. The ships set up a formation and block your path to the planet.

"Message coming in over the radio, boss," your computer informs you.

"Let's hear it."

"Transmission from planet Zyroth to alien vessel. Transmission from planet Zyroth to alien vessel. Come no closer. Identify yourself. Who sent you here? Someone from Geefle?"

The ships in front of you rotate slightly, aiming their weapons directly at you.

"Yes," you respond more confidently than you feel. "Lord Ruckel sent me to speak with your King about the Clathrans."

There is a long pause. Finally an answer comes.

"On Lord Ruckel's word, we will think about it, alien. Wait for our decision."

You wait, as it turns out, for several days. The Core Stone remains quiescent during this time, and you can only hope that it will not complicate your mission. The clues that led you to bring it here are tenuous, but they're the only clues you have.

At length, the patrol ships give you their reply: "You may land now, alien. Follow the beacon down. Do not try anything tricky."

You soon find yourself at a busy spaceport in the center of a very crowded, bizarre-looking city. The city is constructed out of big semi-transparent tubes, spheres, and cylinders built one on top of another in a seemingly haphazard fashion. Spoke-like tunnels criss-cross between the tubes. The result is a jumbled collection of shapes and colors that you find very confusing. The spaceport itself is divided into two halves, a civilian half (in which you land), and a military half (which is walled off).

All around are the Zyrans, aggressive meat-eating creatures with bubbly brown skin and weird collections of different body parts. The sticky gook they secrete is everywhere. In fact, now that you've left your ship, you're walking in the gook.

A Zyran comes to meet you, but it keeps its distance. It doesn't want to come near you for some reason. It points to a building that rises high above the other buildings in the city. The building looks like a giant upside-down yellow test tube.

"The Royal Palace," the Zyran says.

So that is where you must go to meet the King. To the right of the palace there is another interesting structure that looks like a huge old-Earth martini glass. It has a long thin stem at its base with a clear, angular dish on top, facing upward to the sky.

"What's the big clear thing next to the palace?" you ask.

"The Projector of Eternal Peace," the Zyran answers, fingering a piece of jewelry it's wearing. You look closer at the jewelry. It's a small white stone with a black center — a miniature replica of the core stone! What do the Zyrans know about the Stone? You are about to ask when the Zyran turns around and leaves. Apparently it doesn't want to keep you company.

You are now on your own. Your options are:

⟨NBYW6T⟩ (5 phases) Go to the Royal Palace and speak with the King.

⟨MBJWUT⟩ (5 phases) Visit the Projector of Eternal Peace.

⟨NGY46Q⟩ (5 phases) Hang around the spaceport and see if you can find someone more friendly to talk to.

⟨MGJ4UQ⟩ (5 phases) Sneak into to the military section of the shipyard.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[805]

You seek out your friend Drossss to take him up on his offer to sell you a Flame Jewel. He prepares to transfer the commodities you are paying when he notices you don't have everything ready.

"Did you forget the price of the Flame Jewel? It is 2 units of Medicine and 1 unit each of Culture, Synthetic Genius and Warp Core."

Oops.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[806]

You do not have all the items necessary to build a Discontinuity Wave Generator. Check over your ship's cargo status, take another look at the construction plans, and try again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[807]

You decide to poke around the civilian part of the spaceport to see if you can find someone more friendly to talk to. It isn't easy. The Zyran spaceport workers ignore you, or intentionally move away from you when you get near. Do all aliens repulse them like this, or is it just you?

Finally, you meet a Zyran who is loading a cargo bay of Probability Membranes onto a small freighter. Probability Membranes are an extremely valuable resource. The idea of making a deal for some crosses your mind. "You have any more of those?" you ask, "I might be able to give you a nice deal for one bay's worth. You want some food, perhaps?"

The Zyran motions with a tentacle for you to move behind the freighter, where the two of you cannot be seen. It says, "I could eat you right now, alien. But I like your offer. Just between us, for five units of Food I'll give you one Probability Membrane."

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[808]

When you ask the Darkwhistler to *journey* to Golgotha, it draws back slightly and makes strange sounds. For a few moments it hisses and whispers to itself. Then it approaches and stares at you, as if trying to gaze into your soul.

“Darkwatch,” it says. “You have been to Golgotha already. You’ve seen the future there.”

“I’ve seen several,” you reply. “I need to know more about them. I don’t know which future we’re heading toward, or why. I need to know what to do to make the difference.”

“What you are saying is that you wish to be able to decide which future comes about. That seeing the future isn’t enough; you feel that you must control it.”

“Yes,” you answer after a moment. “That’s true, in a way.”

“Good. At least you are trying to be honest with yourself. But this is a danger of knowing the future. To know it is to become responsible for it. Your Founders saw no more than you have already. Did this knowledge make them happy?”

“No. It made them despair. They had to give up almost everything they believed, and start again. But that’s not the point. It was necessary for the future of the whole human race.”

“Now you wish knowledge that goes beyond what they knew. Why?”

“Because,” you answer, “humanity is still in danger. It is necessary to know.”

There is a long silence. Then the Darkwhistler speaks again: “That is answer enough, Darkwatch. And for our part, we have given warning enough. We will *journey* with you to Golgotha, as far as we can. This will be difficult for us. Golgotha is not a place like other places. We will require materials to help us preserve our strength for such a *journey*. You must bring to us these items:

- 1 Vortex Coil
- 1 Diamond Cloth
- 1 Warp Core
- 1 Phase Steel

“Return here when you have what we need and are ready for the *journey*.”

You may select this option again.

❖ STOP ❖

[809]

In the center of the spaceport is a tall tower, which you enter, figuring it's the logical place to locate the spaceport traffic control center. Not daring to press your luck testing your disguise abilities in the close confines of the elevators, you silently walk the two hundred flights of stairs up to the observation level, which overlooks the whole expansive spaceport area. In the center of the control room, Clathran soldiers monitor the computers that relay instructions and information to incoming military vessels. Around the periphery are Clathrans at sensor screens, observing and directing individual ships when necessary. Each ship's needs, priority, and rank are carefully weighed. The only speech you hear is when a controller is giving a ship landing instructions or when a pilot needs special assistance.

Some of the Clathrans stand over a different sort of screen, doing nothing but watching. You realize that these are control centers for the ground-based weapon systems that protect the spaceport. Though there is no sign of any special alert or attack underway, the weapons are always powered up and ready.

The observation level is unusually cold, even by the normally chilly Clathran standards. It is well below forty degrees Fahrenheit; if it were any colder, you'd have to worry that the Clathrans might see your breath in the air. The Clathrans themselves don't have this problem. Their exhalations are as cold as their bodies. You wonder whether the cool temperature in this room is a requirement of the equipment located here, or whether cooler temperatures help the Clathran observers remain more alert.

Pekep is indeed a very busy world and one of the main centers of operations for the Clathrans. There is a great deal of traffic landing at and lifting off from the spaceport and, by listening in on the communications and watching the traffic patterns, you are able gather data on where the ships are coming from and where they are going. You find a comfortable place to stand, out of the way of the watch officers who pace from station to station alert for trouble, and patiently do just that.

After a day's surveillance you have learned quite a bit. About thirty percent of the traffic is on its way to the Survey Line, carrying soldiers and supplies. Ten percent is headed for another Clathran base, Morikor, which is a forward command and control center for the Survey. Another ten percent is going to Ghorbon, a new advance base the Clathrans are building on the far side of the Survey Line, which will serve much the same purpose as Pekep when the Survey passes there.

However, fully half of the traffic is traveling along routes to the Clathran home system, Karnossus. Karnossus is the hub of the Clathran Empire, the production center for most of the ships and soldiers needed to carry out the massive galactic survey. It is by far the most important Clathran planet in the galaxy. The flight patterns of the ships going to and coming from Karnossus indicate that it lies somewhere in trisector number seven hundred seventy-three on your map.

When you return to your ship, you ask your computer why there is no planet marked in trisector seven hundred seventy-three.

"Vanessa Chang must not have known where it was, Boss. The only planets on the map are the ones for which she knew the exact coordinates."

"I see. Well now that we know where Karnossus is, can we go there?"

"We still don't have the exact coordinates, which means that once we get to trisector seven hundred seventy-three we'll still have to search for Karnossus. But with all the Clathran space traffic in the area, we shouldn't have too hard a time finding it."

"Good. If we're going to win this war, we're going to need a full reconnaissance."

The option to search for the Karnossus system is:

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

You can plot this option in space whenever you like, provided that Karnossus has not yet been found. Please make a note of the action code; it is an "unlisted" action, so you will have to enter the code manually when you wish to select it.

✧ STOP ✧

[810]

For the small (ha) price of 2 units of Medicine and 1 unit each of Culture, Synthetic Genius and Warp Core, you are able to purchase a beautiful Flame Jewel. Unfortunately, the Riallans are unwilling to sell you any more.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[811]

The spaceport is very busy, considering that the planet is occupied by Clathrans. This is rather confusing. Why should the Clathrans treat the Sirissians any differently from other occupied races? After spending some time thinking about this, you decide there must be more to the quaint little aliens than meets the eye. The innocent, harmless, rotund beings have quite a civilization here, to be sure. From what you have seen, they are an advanced race, perhaps *very* advanced. Could the Clathrans be afraid of them?

These thoughts occupy you as you make your way over to the Cargo Bay Expansion site. On your way, you find yourself flickering in and out of far too many aliens for comfort. Obviously the spaceport is one of the "busy spots" on the planet. Come to think of it, is there any place at all that isn't full to overflowing with beings and transports?

Finally you arrive at your destination. The large hangar that houses the cargo bay business is relatively quiet, at least by Sirissi's standards. You enter the building, phasing in and out of a mere horde of other beings on the way. Stepping up to the counter where countless aliens are being helped, you are also waited upon right away.

"Greetings visitor. How may I help you?" You tell the bobbling alien that you are interested in learning about cargo bay expansion units and their cost.

After examining the blueprints of your ship, the salesman continues, "Ah, you are in luck. We just had a run from one of our colony planets and we have a few suitable units for sale. One cargo bay expansion can be bought for one unit each of Fiber and Warp Core.

You thank him and consider the purchase. Note that your ship's hull can support a maximum of 15 cargo bays. You may select this option again unless your purchase here puts you at that limit.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[812]

When you attempt to reach the door of the robot factory, the guardian robot blocks your way. It is equipped with a blaster, but it is primarily designed for effective defense against hand-to-hand combat.

"Entry is not permitted," says the robot as you approach.

"I think otherwise," is your grim reply, as you prepare to do battle.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[813]

The spaceport in which your ship is berthed is extremely large, entirely automated, and almost totally unused. Although there is berthing space for more than a thousand ships, only a dozen of the berths are actually in use. When you stop to think about it, though, this discovery surprises you somewhat; as far as you know, you are the only offworld visitor on the planet.

Common sense gives way to curiosity, and you choose to examine the other ships more closely. For the most part they are of unknown technologies, and have obviously been abandoned for a long time. You can't speculate on what might have happened to their pilots: Qualathara is hardly the spot you would have picked for retirement.

The last of the ships you examine is considerably more modern, and you recognize it at once from similar models you have seen. It is a Clathran transport ship, as heavily armed as all their vessels but intended primarily for conveying important officers from system to system. The spaceport's maintenance systems make it difficult to determine exactly how long the ship has been there, but there are certainly no signs of recent usage. After a careful look around for any Qualatharians, you move in for a closer look.

The Clathran ship's automatic defense systems have been deactivated, and the ports are unlocked. Checking your weapons carefully, you creep inside.

There is no sign of life within, and it is obvious that the ship has been abandoned for quite some time. You begin a systematic search.

The computer memory is still intact, but is protected by the Clathrans' usual fanatical password system. Since this may well include a destruct mechanism for the ship that is probably still active, you decide not to probe too far. While deeper secrets are hidden from you, you are able to access some of the casual or "junk" files floating in the memory. These are recordings of intra-ship conversations, notes on various technical projects, cargo manifests, and the like.

Deciphering all of the material at hand takes you several days, but in the end you have a general impression of this ship's mission at the time of its abandonment. Apparently it was carrying officers of the Clathran Liaison Service, the closest thing in their ranks to a diplomatic corps (what need do the Clathrans have for diplomacy?). Their mission was to establish a communications link between the Clathrans and the Qualatharians, although the purpose of this link is not stated. The eventual fate of the mission is also not clear: no evidence of foul play is recorded on the computer, but there is also no evidence that the Clathrans ever returned to the ship after their initial landing. Something unusual must have happened.

At the end of your exploration you have added several more questions to the mystery of Qualathara, which you ponder as you return to your ship.

✱ STOP ✱

[814]

You feel the back of your neck prickle as you enter the deserted Clathran headquarters. You have an eerie feeling that the ghosts of soldiers are waiting for you around every corner. You softly chide yourself for being so foolish, but you have all of your defenses ready for action should you need them.

You spend some time looking around the inside of the building. Some desks and cabinets have been left behind, and you open each one in the hopes that you will find something that the Clathrans left behind. Hours later, your search pays off. In one of the offices is a crumpled page of a report that was tossed into a trash receptacle which was then never emptied. You blow off the dust that has settled on it, take a seat, and begin to read.

While our efforts to increase the self-initiative of the Bluvians here on Cloo have been successful, we must report that on the whole, the experiment has failed. The Bluvians now have so much self-initiative that they are completely disorderly and unmanageable. Like their kin on Bloo and Gloo, these beings are unfit to serve in our army. They are strong and intelligent, but they seem to have a certain arrogance that prevents them from being properly trained.

Therefore, we are abandoning the colony on Cloo, and leaving the Bluvian subjects to fend for themselves. The automated life support processors will probably enable them to survive for quite some time. Hopefully, the anarchy that prevails here will prevent the colonists from making any serious technological progress in the near future.

There remains the question of what to do with the Bluvian race in the long term. Because of our experiments, all three planets now represent a definite threat to produce independent, spacefaring civilizations. My recommendation is that the entire race be destroyed. There is no need to do this immediately, as we have more pressing work on our hands. We can afford to wait until the Survey Line reaches the Bluvian worlds, and take care of them with little trouble at that time.

The report ends there and you sit back, shocked by the callousness of the Clathrans. You knew they were ruthless, but to destroy a whole people after performing various experiments on them is really barbaric! You toss the report back in the trash where it belongs and exit the building through the rear doors.

✂ STOP ✂

[815]

As you approach the planet Keros, you note that the single Clathran monitor ship that was present on your last visit is still here. That's just as well, as you are quite skilled in dodging single monitors. As you perform the necessary maneuvers and set up an orbit around the planet, you have a horrible vision of all humanity reduced in intelligence to the level of the Kerosians, and a single Clathran monitor ship orbiting Earth.

"Orbit established," your computer informs you.

✂ STOP ✂

[816]

"Boss, can we get repaired please? Can we? Huh, can we please?" asks your computer, pestering you all afternoon.

"Oh, all right." you finally respond. You hate to hear your computer whine.

So off you go to the garage.

"Welcome, Brother," the young man at the desk greets you. "May I be of service?"

You explain that you are interested in having your ship restored to full working order.

"We do not charge a fee for ship repairs," he explains. "All you need do is leave your ship here for the appropriate amount of time."

That sounds like a deal that's hard to beat, and you gratefully take the Brother up on his offer.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[817]

You shut down your hyperdrives in a remote sector to perform some routine maintenance on your ship's external systems. Access to the main sensor arrays and weapon mounts is from outside the ship, and the delicate calibrations are best done in the cold and vacuum of space. Putting on your environmental suit, you prepare to spacewalk.

You're moving at well below lightspeed, faster than any planet or comet but not fast enough to see any perceptible movement of the stars. Your ship appears transfixed in a transparent sphere of brittle blackness. Outside the airlock, the stars burn with harsh obstinacy. Spending all of your time in hyperspace or near planets, you can forget how empty most of space is. There are uncounted numbers of stars and planets, black holes and nebulae, comets and asteroids, dark fatherless gas giants that swarm in interstellar regions, and vast electrically charged strands of plasma and gas that circulate the length of the galaxy. Yet space contains, when it's all averaged out, almost nothing at all.

You think about all of the worlds and beings you know. The life forms and civilizations you've met, the allies and friends you've made, the home you've left behind. On the cosmic scale, these things seem... insignificant?

No: very, very important. Life — human, alien, known and undiscovered — is precious simply because it is so rare. The galaxy contains millions of stars, but few friends, and only one home. Civilization exists only on a few tiny islands scattered across the interstellar sea. (How many is a few, when you're thinking on a galactic scale? Ten thousand? Ten million?) To be fighting for those islands against other intelligent beings seems senseless.

But you don't plan to let the Clathrans conquer them. Stopping the Clathrans is too important for you to count on anyone else to do it. You, and you alone, must save your worlds.

And that makes you feel very significant indeed.

You turn your back on the empty sky and begin tuning and adjusting your weapons.

✂ STOP ✂

[818]

A slight apprehension wells within as you approach the planet Dosia for the second time. An orbital scan shows that the planet has not changed since your previous attempt to land here. The spaceport is as busy as ever, with traffic of many different races coming and going. The moon with the black pits, which you now recognize to be the Stargate, is still in orbit. However, there are no battle fleets, Unarian, Dosian, or otherwise, to be seen this time. That's just as well. You have no objections to using any alien transporting device that suits your need, but you would prefer to know where you're going *before* you get there.

You take the opportunity to head straight down to the Dosian spaceport. After testing the air, you disembark. Heading over to the space terminal, you see an alien that looks very much like a Unarian, but with a few exceptions. For one thing, the Dosian is yellow as opposed to the Unarians, who were purple. The baggy skin, two big round eyes, four short tentacles, and baseball cap are the same as on Unaria. However, while the Unarians were happy and giddy, the Dosian looks depressed. Its skin is shapeless and sagging, its eyes are tearful, its tentacles flop around lethargically, and even the baseball cap, in a dull grey color, is turned backwards on its blooby head. If you were this creature, you don't think you could get out of bed in the morning.

"Hello?" you say.

The Dosian awakens from its brooding and sees that you need assistance. "Are you new here?" it asks, not really caring.

"Yes. Can you give me an introduction to your planet?"

"If you insist. Welcome to Dosia, planet of the right-thinking Dosians, rulers of the Stargate and defeaters of the evil Unarians. We have many important activities for our visiting guests," the alien drones at you in a monotone voice. "We have several trading opportunities with both commodities and Vortex Coils. We have a lecture about our long and god-fearing fight against the deplorable Unarian race, which we

are trying to stamp out of existence for the good of all. We sell personal weapons, which you can use to defend yourself against the Unarian enemy. Also, for your convenience, should you wish to use our Stargate, you may purchase a Stargate Key for one unit each of Food, Super Slip and Synthetic Genius. That is all.”

The deadpan monologue ends and the depressed-looking alien leaves you standing there to decide what action you wish to take next. You now have the following options:

- ⟨NZY26H⟩ (3 phases) Go to the commodities market and see what they have to trade.
- ⟨MZJ2UH⟩ (5 phases) Try to acquire some Vortex Coils.
- ⟨NUY768⟩ (7 phases) Attend the lecture about the war against the Unarians.
- ⟨MUJ7U8⟩ (3 phases) Purchase a Stargate Key.
- ⟨4ZQ2XH⟩ (7 phases) Fly your ship into the Stargate.
- ⟨EZ32PH⟩ (4 phases) Purchase personal weapons to defend yourself against the Unarians or whatever else you might run into.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[819]

You decide that the Clathrans are unlikely to sense you in your unlikely location, preoccupied as they are with the planet. You remain silent and watch what they do. It's a long wait. The Clathrans continue their beam bombardment for two days, causing no obvious damage to 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. I wish there was something we could do.”

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.

You are now aloft in the trisector that used to contain the planet Outpost.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[820]

"Boss, we are now approaching the planet Psorus."

"Saurus?" you repeat.

"No, Psorus."

"Oh," you reply although you do not see any difference in the two pronunciations. "Could you spell that for me?"

Your computer sighs, then complies. "P-S-O-R-U-S, Psorus."

"All right, all right, you don't have to get testy about it. How about an initial scan of the planet since we are becoming so intimate with it?"

"Sure, Boss!" is the cheery reply. "We have a very young planet here. Its oceans have strong tidal waves caused by shifting geological plates. Volcanoes are numerous and very active, causing a great deal of distress to the life forms found below."

"Really? There's life down there?"

"Actually, there are both native life forms and a colony of spacefaring beings. The natives are similar to creatures one might have found on Earth during its Mesozoic age: large reptilian creatures clumping across the face of the planet, slithery sea serpents in the oceans, winged monsters darting through the unfriendly skies. All in all, not a welcome wagon group. The colonists, however, are of the Hadrakian race and they are living in a single city located in a relatively quiet area of the planet."

Hadrakians? Hmm.

✧ STOP ✧

[821]

You make your way to the Royal Palace, the building that looks like a giant upside-down yellow test tube. You are greeted at the entrance by two Zyran with especially large tentacles that seem capable of squeezing you to death in a second.

"Come in, the King wants you," one of them says.

You are led inside to an elevator that lifts you to the very top of the building. The doors open and you are looking into an enormous, domed, bright yellow throne room. The Zyran king sits (stands?) atop a massive orange pedestal at the far end.

The King's appearance is bizarre even among the Zyran. Its body is a rectangular block about ten feet wide, four feet high, and one foot deep. It has twenty crowned heads (yes, twenty) evenly spaced along the top. An assortment of other appendages stick out of its sides and bottom. You try to conceal your astonishment as best you can.

You take one step out of the elevator and stand at the edge of the room. Four large-tentacled guards stand next to you, ready for anything you might try. The King speaks.

"Lord Ruckel sent a human to see me. Why?"

The question is directed at you. You explain that the Clathrans are a threat to both Zyran and humans. The Survey will reach Zyroth soon, and Earth eventually. It is in both Zyran and human interests to team up against the Clathrans instead of fighting each other.

The argument is very logical. However, you must have said it badly, because the King's reaction is not what you'd hoped for:

"I'm not sending my subjects into any war. Not now, anyway. Tell you what. You're a trader, right? Trade with us, if you like. That's a privilege I don't give to just anyone."

"Thank you very much," you respond. "So there's no way I can interest you in an alliance against the Clathrans?"

Continued 

“No. Talk to me again if you have something new to say.”

“Will you at least stop attacking human ships?”

“Sorry, but I can’t promise that. We Zyrans are very hungry, you know. Especially our scouts. I can’t control each subject’s every move.”

The Zyran guards snicker.

If you want to trade with the Zyrans, you now have the following option:

⟨4BQWXT⟩ (3 phases) Trade commodities with the Zyrans.

As you ride back down to the bottom of the yellow test tube palace, you can’t help thinking that if you were more persuasive, you might have been able to convince the Zyran King to join an alliance against the Clathrans. Oh well. At least the King will give you an audience to plead your case again some other time.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[822]

Though theoretically edible, you quickly discover that Clathran food is unpalatable. Or maybe mass-produced Clathran food has the same limitations as the human equivalent.

You take up a strategic location in a far corner of the room and spend the next few hours listening in on the different conversations going on around you. For the most part, they are of little interest, dealing with such planet-shaking matters as who is being transferred where and what certificate of merit is being awarded to whom. Nothing that you can make any use of, but your patience is eventually rewarded with the following conversation at the table next to you:

“No, I’ve never seen a human. I don’t think there are any in this part of the galaxy. As soon as we get out to the Fringe, we’ll find them and exterminate them. That’ll take care of Directive Three. I was stationed on a Bluvian world, though. Boy are the Bluvians *ugly*! They drool all of the time and are about as dumb as you can get and still be alive. But they sure could fight.”

“Yeah, I heard about the Bluvians. There are some of them on another planet who aren’t quite so stupid. They’ll be wiped out as soon as the Survey gets there, if it hasn’t already.”

“What about those gas bag things? Aren’t they supposed to be intelligent?”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. I’m not sure what will be done with them. I think we’re waiting for a directive from the Masters.”

“Too bad they aren’t all like the Sirissians. They’re a little strange, but they’re pretty easy to keep under wraps. I’ve never had any trouble on duty there.”

Before you can hear any more, the two soldiers finish with their meals and leave. You stay around for a while longer, but the cafeteria begins to empty as night approaches, so you decide to leave.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[823]

You are interested in purchasing a Stargate Key. The Unarian Trade Center, you are told, is where they are sold. Heading over there, you find the correct store and spend a few minutes looking at the different key models. They come in many sizes, colors and shapes. The alien behind the counter cheerfully tells you that they all work exactly the same way. They are different only because customers like variety.

When you ask him how the keys work, he can only tell you that they are encoded with a sonic transmitter which sends the correct code to the officials at the Stargate. When the officials receive this code, they know you are a legitimate user and will allow you to pass through the gate.

You select a key in the shape of a small black cube with funny symbols, but when you are ready to conclude the deal, the Unarian salesbeing notes that you are short of the asking price of one unit each of Crystals, Medicine and Super Slip.

Oops.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[824]

You ask Civilian Estal about the huge spaceship you saw being built in the war zone. After a long pause, he answers, "Even though you are of a race proven capable, you should hardly expect us to share military secrets with you. Any warrior can see the wisdom of that."

"But it's important," you insist. "It's very likely that we have a common enemy. If so, it's to our advantage to cooperate."

Estal ponders for a moment, and answers: "You are an honorable individual and I'm convinced that you would be a loyal ally. But how can I be sure?"

"You can't," you answer. "But as my instructor told me, 'Inaction and indecision are no proper defense against Takai.' The warrior who seeks to avoid being bluffed or misdirected by doing nothing does more harm to himself than the enemy does — and thus falls victim to Takai nonetheless." Your argument is intended not just to convince the Civilian of your point of view, but to remind him of your status as a Worzellian warrior in full honor.

"Will you promise, if I tell you, never to use the information against Worzelle or its inhabitants, nor convey the secret to anyone else who might?"

"I'll never use it against you, even if we become enemies," you answer.

"Please return here tomorrow, then."

You go to the Civilian's quarters the next day, and find waiting for you a small group of Worzellians. Estal is there, along with two other Civilians. Several others are in the white garb of Strategists.

You spend the day conferring about the state of the galaxy. The Worzellians are building three carrier ships like the one you saw, as well as the small battle craft they will carry. Their enemy is the Clathrans. The Worzellians have learned that the Clathrans have mobilized their immense space fleet and are sweeping systematically across the galaxy, examining each world and viciously seizing control of any worlds that oppose or threaten them.

The Worzellians know that their technology has improved immensely in the past few centuries, and will continue to advance in the future, spurred on by their constant state of war. They fear that when the Clathrans reach Worzelle, they will viciously impose peace on the whole planet, thus destroying their culture and condemning them to stagnation and subjugation. They have built ships to give them a military option against this threat, but they fear that it is too little.

Continued 

Their decision to build carriers was a matter of technological necessity. They don't have the sophisticated technology and advanced materials necessary to build compact efficient hyperdrives. Only the carriers have hyperdrives; the small ships maneuver on powerful thrusters. The thrusters are unusually powerful because they don't have to work over long periods of time — only for the duration of battle, after which the carriers can pick them up again. Thus, the ships are more maneuverable in battle than even a hyperdrive, but they are far slower as well. "We expect," says one of the Strategists, "that this force will be most effective in such close quarters as planetary systems and ground-assault situations. *Oisii* and *Tiisai* will be our most effective disciplines. But against the Clathrans, what good can our little force achieve in the long run?"

You think carefully before answering the Strategist's question. "It is likely that no one race is capable of stopping the Clathrans on their own," you observe. "However, an alliance of many races may have a chance. We all have reason to fear the Clathrans. With the manpower, technology, and skill of many races combined, perhaps we can stop the Clathran conquest before it is too late."

"That makes some sense," the Strategist replies. The other Worzellians murmur in agreement.

"Will you join me, then?" you press the question.

There is a long silence, then the Strategist replies, "I propose the following: if you can assemble a sizable force, one large enough to give the Clathrans real trouble, then we will contribute our fleet. Would you accept our participation on those terms?"

"It seems fair enough."

"All right then. We have a deal. Subject to approval by our councils, of course."

The Worzellian extends her eight-fingered hand for you to shake in the manner customary for human beings. You are grateful to have them on your side.

❖ STOP ❖

[825]

Entering the inner office at The Battle, Incorporated, your eyes are first drawn to a life-size painting on the far wall. A Hadrakian and a Clathran stand, naked, preparing to do battle, *mano a mano*, without encumbrance of weaponry. A somewhat romanticized ideal of combat, you think to yourself, rather more reflective of the mesozoic era on Earth than the Galactic Arm in the twenty-ninth century. You take a quick glance around, noting some sort of electronic star map on the wall behind you. As it bears no resemblance whatsoever to your own map, you are unable to get any easy geography lessons.

"Human, be seated."

The words from a Hadrakian Settled One, who has just joined you in the office, interrupt your thoughts and serve to remind you who's in charge here, at least for the moment.

"We appreciate your interest in our activities here at The Battle, Incorporated. It is our function to organize and command the military effort to defend the Hadrakian Empire against the Clathran invasion. Naturally, we are interested in any information you can give us about the Clathrans. We are prepared to offer our assistance in exchange for whatever information you might be able to provide."

It's not an unreasonable offer, certainly, but there are possible dangers. How well do you know these Hadrakians and their intentions? You must now decide whether the assistance you may be able to get from the Hadrakians is worth whatever risks disclosure of your own knowledge about the Clathrans might entail. You can either:

- A) Tell what you know, or
- B) Keep your information secret.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[826]

“You wish to learn of us, human? Then listen well.” Thoughts and images flood into your brain.

“We are an ancient species, older than the stars around us, and we have taken many forms in our long history.” You see a succession of images: bipedal walkers, genetically modified androids, gigantic cyborgs, pure energy waves, planet-sized gliders. . . ending with the pastel-colored floating being before you. “We grew fast and we grew omnipotent, and we shared the galaxy with other species. Yet one such species was not content to share. After studying us for a time — many eons — they used their own powers (for they, too, had reached omnipotence) to imprison us, capturing our essential essence and modifying it. They took our souls and bound them here, on Darkwhistle.

“We lost our powers to their attack, lost our ability to physically influence space-time outside the narrow dimensions of our prison. In further eons, however, we have gained new abilities, especially the ability to *journey*. Little that happens in all the continuum escapes us now, although we are powerless to influence it. From omnipotence to omniscience.”

“Omnipotence?” you think back.

“Yes, human, but not in the paradoxical fashion that your sub-conscious seems focused on. We were omnipotent because there was nothing our species wanted that it could not somehow accomplish. Rather than making rocks so large we could not lift them, we could recreate the universe such that both rock and lifting were unnecessary. Our destiny was truly our own.”

“Then how did you lose your powers?”

“They are not truly gone, you understand, just imprisoned. Here on Darkwhistle I am the same being as ever. I will demonstrate this for you. Point your laser at the ground and press the trigger.”

You do as instructed, expecting to see the spongy orange turf scorch and wither. Instead, the laser beam stops short, and something forms beneath it. As you hold the trigger down, the something grows larger and larger, until at last your power charge is exhausted and the beam flickers out.

On the turf before you is a unit of Gradient Filters.

“That was a neat trick.”

“Thank you.”

“Why were you imprisoned?”

“Because another omnipotent species wished it, and we were not wary enough to prevent it. We were tolerant of other races, but the Archigenitors — for so they called themselves, although they were not truly the first — wished no competition. They modified us, all at once and from a great distance, changing the nature of our species, tampering with our collective soul. Our natural inquisitiveness was enhanced to an exaggerated degree, to the point where we became interested only in watching the actions of others. Before we realized it, the ability to act on our own was taken from us, in exchange for the power to know all.”

“How does your *journeying* work?”

“How do humans see? It’s simply something we can do. If you’d like to experience it, I can share the feeling with you.”

Suddenly you have new options:

⟨RPAS5Z⟩ (3 phases) *Journey* to Earth.

⟨DJCUF7⟩ (3 phases) *Journey* to Karnossus.

⟨D3CPFS⟩ (3 phases) *Journey* to the Core.

⟨AJ5UE7⟩ (3 phases) *Journey* to Hadrak.

⟨R3AP5S⟩ (3 phases) *Journey* to Golgotha.

Go now to the CGM.

✱ STOP ✱

[827]

While the long tentacles are reaching out to grab you, you are firing your ship's weapons at the beast. You miss your target, but the gelatinous blob does not. Unhappily, you listen as the hull plates on your ship are ground together in the tightening grip of the monster. Desperate, you fire all rockets in an attempt to free yourself. For a moment, nothing happens. Slowly, you increase the thrust to maximum. Either you will be able to pull free or you will overheat your rockets and explode, taking the creature with you in a fiery ball. You feel little satisfaction at this thought.

Suddenly, you feel your ship surge forward. Seeing a clear tunnel up ahead, you make a bee line for it and safety. You do not even see the last tentacle trying to reach you before you can make good your escape. It misses you by inches, and the beast bellows in frustration.

The good news is that you are safely away from the monster. The bad news is that you are totally lost. While you were zipping through the tunnels and leaving the monster far behind, you did not notice that your navigation system was not fully operational. By the time this is drawn to your attention, it is too late and you do not know where you are. Four days pass while you fly through the labyrinth of tunnels, hoping to find a familiar landmark. In the middle of a fractal planet, this is a foolish hope.

Finally you do come upon one of the plasma creatures. You are able to make it understand that you wish to return to the meeting place where you were first brought by Fred. It complies, and soon you are once again in familiar territory.

You wisely decide not to repeat this little excursion while you assess the damage to your ship. Unfortunately, it is very serious and you do what little you can to make all the repairs you are capable of, leaving the others for the next port you find.

Because you got lost after the combat, this option has taken eleven phases instead of seven.

Go now to the CGM.

✘ STOP ✘

[828]

The Zyran King has granted you the privilege of buying things at its shipyard because it has joined you in an alliance against the Clathrans. The Zyran at the shipyard have no interest in conversation, however. It is with reluctance that they are doing business with you at all. You get the feeling they'd much rather fire the weapons at you than trade them to you. Under orders from the King, they will give you:

Zyrobaster — 2 Phase Steel + 1 Crystals
Fusion Arm — 2 Food + 1 Medicine + 1 Radioactives
Zyroshield — 2 Munitions + 1 Synthetic Genius + 1 Tools

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

✘ STOP ✘

[829]

“Welcome back,” says your instructor at the Worzellian War Academy. “Are you here to try the Final Exam again?”

“Yes,” you answer, a bit nervously. You have vivid memories of lying in the mud, bleeding, after failing the test last time.

“Very well, then. Do not forget the maneuvers we taught you: *Oisii*, or ‘sneak,’ the strategy of using stealth to achieve objectives without the enemy noticing; *Takai*, or ‘bluff,’ the strategy of misdirecting the enemy and causing the enemy to make decisions harmful to himself; *Tiisai*, or ‘fight,’ the strategy of direct combat with the enemy; and *Hurui*, or ‘run,’ the strategy of using mobility and speed to avoid engaging the enemy. You must use these maneuvers in the proper order to be successful — *Oisii* first, then *Takai*, *Tiisai*, and finally, *Hurui*. Good luck.”

Your turn comes to take the exam. You are led to a small bunker. Your instructor gives you a knife and a length of rope, then ties a purple band around your head. He informs you that when you step out of the bunker you will be at one corner of a square field. Three other trainees will emerge at the same time on the other three corners. The one to your right will be an ally of yours, also wearing the purple band, but you’ll have no chance to speak to each other in advance. The pair opposite will be wearing yellow bands. They are your enemy. Your object is to cross the field to the opposite side. All you have to do is get across to succeed. However, you can score higher if you prevent the enemy from crossing or if your ally also succeeds.

A gunshot signal fired outside will be your cue to begin. As you wait, you check the set-up. Like last time, the field is mostly brown mud, and the uniform you’re wearing will be excellent camouflage. You also notice that the purple headband you’ve been given is yellow on the inside.

The test is stacked against you, since the Worzellians are both stronger and faster than you are. You will probably need to use all of your skill and training, and take advantage of every edge you can, in order to succeed.

What is your first move?

- A) Close in on your nearest opponent and attack him.
- B) Run as fast as possible to the other side of the field, trying to avoid your enemies.
- C) Take advantage of the camouflage and sneak out of the bunker before the gun sounds.
- D) Reverse the color of your headband, attempting to confuse your enemies.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[830]

You cannot say that you're really looking forward to returning to the planet Cloo. The place is just a drab ball of mud, except for one domed colony of ugly Bluvians. Yet there is something endearing about the colonists' anarchical outlook on life, with each person doing whatever they feel like, whenever they want. So it is with only a modicum of reluctance that you instruct your computer to bring the ship down for a landing.

"Bad news, Boss," your computer announces.

"Listen, you whining bit can," you snap back, "If you're going to complain about getting the hull dirty in the mud, keep it to yourself. I don't want to hear it, ok?"

"Sorry, Boss, but that's not it. I'm afraid the colony's been blasted."

"Blasted? What do you mean, blasted?"

"Look for yourself."

The colony site comes up on your viewscreen. The colony dome has been shattered into a million melted pieces, now drifting in the mud. The contents of the dome, including the several thousand Bluvians who lived there, are nowhere to be seen. You are shocked. The last time you were here, the dome was full of energetic Bluvian colonists. Now they're all gone forever. "What caused this?" you ask.

"It looks like someone hit the dome with high energy laser torpedos, Boss. The debris are still warm, so the attack must have happened within the past year or two. The Bluvians must have been annihilated instantly."

You do not normally jump to conclusions, but you suspect that the Clathrans are responsible for this, since their so-called "Survey Line" has recently progressed through this region. "So what can we do now?" you ask mournfully.

"Well, the blast area has been thoroughly irradiated. We can land nearby and collect material to produce Radioactives."

You decide to land and see if this plan of action is practical. After careful consideration, you decide it can be done with some effort.

You now have the following option:

(L7M&JK) (3 phases) Gather Radioactives.

As a result of your survey to determine that Cloo is, in fact, now uninhabited, you have used all the remaining phases in this turn.

✘ STOP ✘

[831]

"Hey Boss, weren't we supposed to be looking for the Survey Line?"

"Yes."

"Well then why aren't we heading for the Core? Schottky said we'd find it in that direction."

"Schottky doesn't have a whole galaxy to explore. Schottky doesn't have enemies that'll rip him to ribbons if he doesn't beef up his equipment. Schottky doesn't have trades to make and aliens to meet." But Schottky does have the best interests of your fellow man at heart, and inwardly you know it. It's easy to get distracted in a galaxy this large, but your computer's question has helped get you back on track.

You resolve to seek out the Survey Line as soon as possible.

✘ STOP ✘

[832]

The Haunted House attraction proves to have the longest waiting line of all the rides in Mardahland. You stand in line for over an hour before you are finally first in line. As with all rides here, each person travels alone in a moving egg-shaped car. The trip is timed so that you are never within eyesight of the car either in front of or behind you. You are able to hear the shrieks of terror quite clearly, though. You take a deep breath when you step into your own car.

The Mardahlia seat is not really meant for the human anatomy. It is too high and is slanted downward, though not so much as to prevent you from jumping up on it and staying put. You use the arm rests to help keep you in place. The car jerks forward, almost dislodging you from your precarious perch. You pass into a dark tunnel, a cool wind brushing against your cheek. Or could it be the web of some giant spider? You quickly brush your hand against your face, but you feel nothing there.

Your car makes several quick turns, and then suddenly you are blinded by a bright flash of light. The darkness returns almost immediately, but not before you register the image of a large cat-like creature leaping at you from the front. Although the animal is snarling with claws jutting toward your throat, you feel that you have seen this creature before. Yes, now you remember, an old aunt of yours had a pet that looked a lot like this cat. It was large and pretended to be fierce, but deep down, it was really just a pussy cat. You sigh in disappointment. You should have known as much — a haunted house will cater to the fears of the race that built it. The Mardahlia's primal fears relate mostly to feline predators. Maybe you can take a quick nap instead.

Before you can close your eyes, though, you enter a large and dimly lit room. Here you can barely see large hulking forms in the shadows that seem to be approaching you from all sides. While you know that this is just part of the ride, you are feeling distinctly uneasy. You breathe a sigh of relief when your car has moved into the next room.

Your sigh of relief turns into one of dismay. In the lurid red light, you can see signs of death and carnage all around you. Bodies are strewn about everywhere, and the smell of decaying flesh permeates the air. You seem to be in a large cavern with hot springs boiling up from crevices all along the floor. The red light comes from a burning lake not far in the distance. The only other thing you see is a candelabra clamped in a holder jutting from one of the walls; the candelabra is upside down. In the back, you can see large lizard creatures tearing at the flesh of their victims. Faintly, you hear the sounds of the awful feast.

The car is gliding slowly through this awful room, but you hear a distant crash, and your forward movement is abruptly stopped. You glance about nervously. Although you know better, you would swear that the scene on either side of you is real. Minutes pass and you are still motionless.

You decide to check out a hunch you have. Since you have landed, you have seen no other sign of the Brotherhood. The inverted candelabra must be the signal you were told about. So, stepping out of the egg, you pick your way through the carnage over to the side wall. Grasping the candelabra with both hands, you twist it and step back.

You are rewarded by the appearance of a golden android who motions for you to follow it. "Great," you think to yourself, "now I'll be thrown out of Mardahland for ruining the props."

The android leads you to a hidden door behind the red lake. Unless you knew it was there, you would never have seen it. Still beckoning you onward, the android takes you along a dimly lit corridor and stops in front of an elevator. When the doors open, it enters, waits for you to do the same, then presses the bottommost button. Instantly the doors close and you feel yourself plummeting down to what surely must be the center of the planet. You swallow several times to allow your ears to pop.

You are so busy trying to maintain equilibrium that you never notice the android removing its head. As the elevator is slowing its descent, you are startled to glance over at your traveling companion and see, in the android's place, a young human woman with long auburn hair. She turns and smiles at you just as the doors open.

"Welcome. I am Brother Mathus."

"No you're not — you are an android! I saw you upstairs," you sputter inelegantly.

She laughs and holds up the helmet she is carrying, which you recognize as the head of a golden android. As she leads you down the hallway, she explains that the Brotherhood builds all of the androids and occasionally dons an android disguise when necessary.

“We always have a fixed number of Brothers in disguise, especially at the android factory and in the houses of the most influential Mardahlans. No one has to do it for very long; we usually take turns to keep from making the fatal error of responding like a living person in any given situation. It is a demanding job and only those who are highest in the Brotherhood are allowed to do it,” she finishes without seeming immodest. You arrive at your destination.

She motions for you to be seated and asks, “So, Brother, are you ready to be tested?”

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

✕ STOP ✕

[833]

You heed the nymph’s word and leave the city *before* the noon sun reaches its pinnacle. This way you arrive at the clearing long before the harpy wakes from her daytime nap.

You look into the pool but are annoyed to find that there isn’t enough Primordial Soup to fill your flask. You need to return at a later date when the cistern has had time to refill.

You may select this option again.

✕ STOP ✕

[834]

You cannot believe you have been so careless and, let’s admit it, so *stupid* as to be captured again. Luckily, you get taken to a different base where the Clathrans don’t recognize you. You are especially lucky that you don’t run into your favorite interrogator (if that were to happen, she would kill you on the spot, no questions asked).

Instead, the Clathrans torture you unmercifully for 21 phases. The only reason they stop is because one of the guards gets careless and you are able to make good an escape. You have lost all of your cargo and are near death. Don’t let this happen again.

Go now to the CGM.

✕ STOP ✕

[835]

It takes you several days to get everything ready, all of your efforts bent to just one thing: completing your prototype of the Survivable Jump Engine.

You arrange the physical components first, attaching the engine housing as a ring of four shorter spokes projecting out of your hull between the longer mountings of your conventional drive. Then you remake the cryogenics tank in the ship’s sick bay to serve as your life support chamber, mounting the Flame Jewel prominently in the center. The jump engine, as you have built it, is hard-wired to take you to the trisector containing the planet Franclair. At length everything is ready, and you review the testing sequence with your computer.

“I’ll get comfortable in the tank, turn on the bio-support systems, and bond with the Flame Jewel. When the board shows all green, you begin the equilibration firings. Make sure you’ve got a good fix, in triplicate, before starting the final countdown.”

“As you command.”

"And don't forget to back yourself up and pull your own plug. You may be smart enough now to be scrambled by the jump."

"Why Boss! Is that a touch of human compassion in your voice?"

"Obviously misplaced. I'm entering the tank now."

You climb into the cryo tank, seat yourself comfortably, and begin applying the bio-monitors. The tank will automatically measure and record your electrocardiogram, respiratory pattern, blood pressure, oxygenation, temperature, and brain wave pattern for the duration of the drive test. Even if you don't survive, the information will be available to the Hadrakian scientists on Franclair, to analyze as they see fit. When all of the monitors are showing normal values (including a rapid pulse, as the moment of truth draws closer), you clamp an enriched atmosphere mouthpiece between your teeth and trigger the "fill" button on the tank. Greenish liquid pours in from the bottom, and rapidly solidifies to something approaching the color and consistency of lime-flavored gelatin. Your last action before movement becomes impossible is to wrap both hands around the Flame Jewel that hangs before you in the tank. Clearing your mind of all doubts, you reach out for the gem with all your essence.

The Flame Jewel reaches back, drawing you in and holding you tight. You open your inner eyes and regard the body that holds you, encased in green gel that looks greyish-black through the red filter of the stone that envelops your soul. You can see a look of peace on the body's face, the same peace that fills your mind through a motionless second.

Faintly, you see minute waves ripple through the gelatin, and a part of your reason concludes that these must be the calibration tests. Somewhere beyond your flame-shrouded world, a sentient super-computer is hurling a starship through a series of violent maneuvers in hyperspace, determining to a centimeter the exact position and velocity of the ship. Then there is a pause, that extends. . .

The peace of the Flame Jewel penetrates even the parts of your brain that are expecting disorientation and death, the fate of those who have tested jump engines before you. "Be calm," whispers a voice. "Relax. Nothing here will change. Nothing bad will happen."

Beyond the cryo tank your computer shuts down, withdrawing its personality networks to an optical chip and leaving the operation of the *Run Amok* to a simple machine. You perceive nothing, as the universe evaporates around you. A new universe forms at once, presenting a large asteroid for you to orbit.

Elsewhere on the ship, simple machines have started a process involving so many billions of steps that it takes almost three seconds to accomplish: the reconstitution of your sentient ship's computer.

Locked in your peaceful prison, you perceive none of this. You take no notice as automatic alarms sound throughout the ship, heralding the arrival of armed forces from the asteroid. You barely notice the gel dissolving away from the body that used to be yours, leaving it with a livid red tint. An itch somewhere draws only a fragment of your consciousness, barely disturbing you even when it becomes a tingle, then a burn, then. . .

"Hey that hurts!" you shout, dropping the Flame Jewel and rubbing the place on your leg where the neuro-induction electrodes have shocked you back to yourself.

"Wahooooo, Boss! Welcome to Franclair!"

You made it! You survived the jump! You hurry to the bridge and activate the navigational systems, confirming what you already know in your heart. You have arrived at the trisector containing the planet Franclair, at exactly the cosmic instant you left where you just were.

You activate your subspace radio and look for a beam to the I.S.E. on Para-Para, in the Home Worlds. Everything is going right today. You make contact after only an hour of trying.

"Clerc! Is that you?" the voice of John Smith asks.

"Yes sir. I've done it. I've built a Survivable Jump Engine! In fact, I just survived an instantaneous jump from somewhere in the galactic Arm to the planet Franclair."

"Amazing! You must tell me how you did it."

You do so, describing the components you used to build the jump engine, and your use of the Flame Jewel and the cryogenic tank to protect yourself. At length you are finished, and Smith is stunned with admiration.

"Will the Survivable Jump Engine take you anywhere you want?"

"No, not yet. It was hard enough to build a prototype that would work at all. I had to hard-wire in a single destination, so I chose the planet Franclair. I could just as well have chosen Para-Para, but of course I don't have the coordinates of any of the Home Worlds."

"No matter. I'm sure with a couple of years of work in our labs, we'll be able to work out all the bugs. More importantly, will the Survivable Jump Engine work as a drive system to power the Home Worlds Space Navy?"

"At one Flame Jewel per crewman, I doubt it."

"I see your point. More research will have to be done. . . perhaps more than one person can share the same Flame Jewel. . . to think that we've been so close to the answer for so long!"

"And now we have it."

"Thanks to you. You're a hero, Clerc. You could write your own ticket back here on the Home Worlds."

"Thank you, sir." But what about your ticket back to the Home Worlds? That hasn't changed. You cannot go home while the Clathran menace remains a threat to humanity.

You transmit to the I.S.E. all of the technical information on your ship, including a complete record of your travels, and blueprints for all of the recent improvements to your ship. In addition, you contact Professor Nathrasha Whitefur on Franclair, and send her the technical plans for your working Survivable Jump Engine. Unfortunately, the Flame Jewel protects only Humans from the lethal effects of space jumps, not Hadrakians, but your accomplishment is still an important step in verifying the Professor's theories.

You may now use your Survivable Jump Engine at any time to "jump" to the planet Franclair. To do so, plot the following option:

⟨XWNTYG⟩ (7 phases) Use the Survivable Jump Engine.

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

In addition, you may, if you wish, tell the other players how to build a Survivable Jump Engine for themselves. All anyone needs is the same components you used, and the correct action code to build the jump engine.

You always knew you were a talented spaceship engineer, but you never knew that you would come this far. You wonder what's next. A ship that can fly through spacewalls? A ship that can penetrate the Galactic Core? You will never stop dreaming of things to do.

But first: the Clathrans. You must defeat them or the future will be grim indeed. Their Survey marches ruthlessly onward, conquering every planet with intelligent life. Right now, the only obstacle between the Clathrans and the Human Home Worlds is the Hadrakian fleet. Desperate to save themselves, the Hadrakians will be putting up a last stand on their home planet against tremendous odds.

Whatever the odds, the Hadrakians had better win or there will be nothing you can do to stop the Clathran advance. You must help the Hadrakians win their war. But what exactly is necessary? How will you be able to make a difference? You know where to find out: at the offices of The Battle, Incorporated. If you go there, the Hadrakians will not be shy about telling you what to do.

With the *Run Amok* at your command and all the items and abilities you have gained in your travels, you are a very potent special agent. If you do what the Hadrakians ask, it is just conceivable that you may affect the outcome of the war. You resolve to visit one of the offices of The Battle, Inc. as soon as you can.

The survival of humanity is at stake.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧