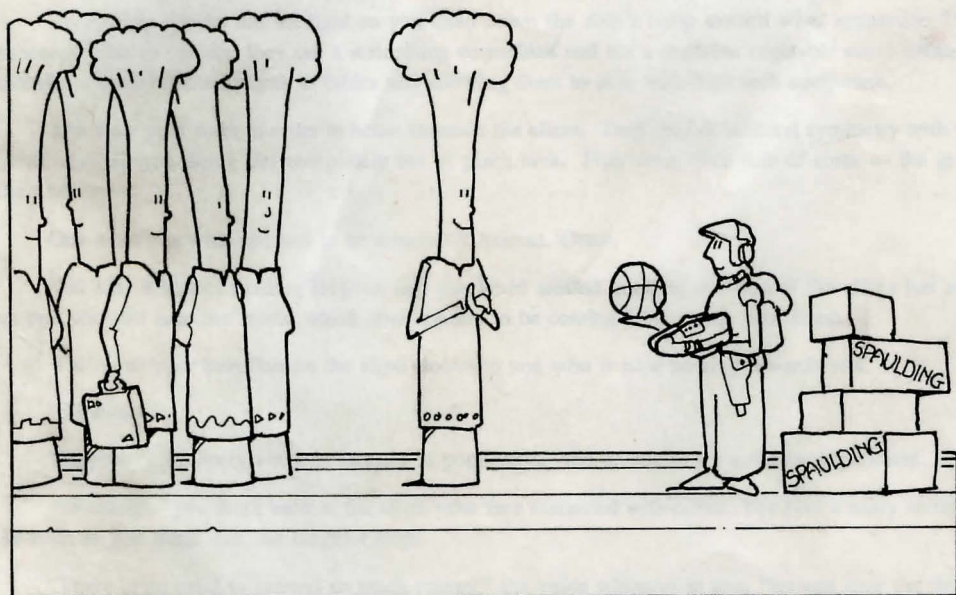


STAR SAGA: ONE™

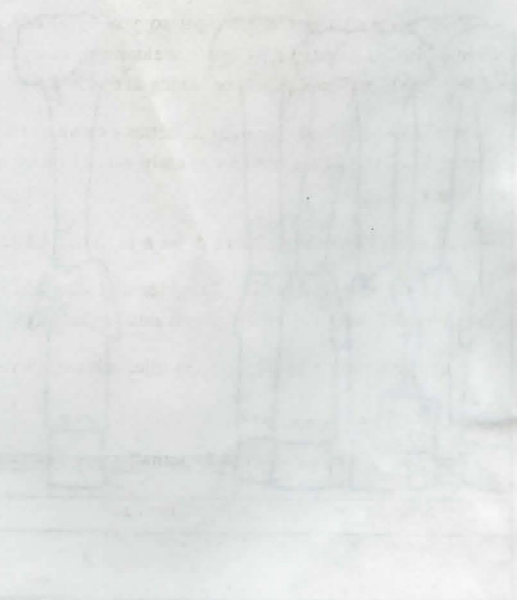
BOOK K

TEXT 698-755



BOOK K

STAR: ONE



[698]

This must be your lucky day. The geophysical survey you've just run on the planet Organu says that it is an Earth-sized world with a breathable atmosphere. If there's one thing you hate, it's landing on a world where you have to wear that uncomfortable survival outfit. You think it all stems from your senior prom and that awful get-up your mom made you wear. You can still see the look on your date's face when... oh, never mind, you've got more important things to consider.

You scan the readout. Organu seems to have two large continents that comprise 63% of the planet. The remaining 37% is taken up by two salt-water oceans. The smaller continent has substantial mineral deposits but appears sparsely inhabited. The larger continent looks to be a better bet for making contact with the natives. Your navigation system has picked up a landing beacon that will take you to a major seaport on the larger continent, so you follow the signal down.

Your glide path is short and steep and gives you little opportunity to sight-see. The brief glimpse of the city you get only shows that the buildings are all tall and thin; their doors and windows appear to be distorted somehow. The view is quickly cut off by the walls of the seaport as your ship thumps to a landing. You must check those impact coils next time you're in dry dock.

You double check the bio-scan to make sure there aren't any nasty little microbes laying in wait for you. The ship's manual had some pretty gruesome pictures of spacers who refused to take the proper precautions (shudder).

Everything checks out all right so you head down the ship's ramp toward what appears to be a welcoming committee of rather large broccoli. You've decided they *are* a welcoming committee and not a roadside vegetable stand because you can't imagine anyone going to the trouble of dressing their plants in tunics and allowing them to play with high-tech equipment.

You slow your walk in order to better examine the aliens. They exhibit bilateral symmetry with their arms (4), legs (2), and facial features (a variety), so you don't feel completely out of place here. They even have hair of sorts — the green leaves that grow out from the top of their heads.

One alien has what appears to be a mohawk haircut. Great.

You hear a sort of rustling laughter and you whirl around thinking that one of the aliens has sneaked up behind you. Although you see no one you still hear the sound which now appears to be coming from inside your head.

You focus your attention on the alien closest to you who is now bowing towards you.

"Welcome."


The alien's whispery voice is actually in your mind. You decide to try a daring experiment.

"Greetings," you think back at the alien, your face contorted with effort. You hear a nasty snicker which you're sure came from Mohawk. As soon as you think this, the laughter stops.

"There is no need to expend so much energy," the voice whispers at you, "we can hear the thoughts of beings such as yourself with the greatest of ease. To communicate with us you have only to think of what it is you wish to say."

You start to think how smugly superior the voice sounds but manage to squash the thought before it can be picked up. You'll have to be careful to avoid offending your hosts no matter how annoying they get.

You spend the next week exploring the city and unwittingly insulting any number of aliens. It's not your fault that they get upset when you think of them as vegetables. They shouldn't be listening in anyway.

Continued 

Besides, your first impression of their attitudes is correct. They look down on mammals as a class, especially mammals that aren't telepathic. You decide to overlook this glaring fault for two reasons. First, since you are obviously superior to them you can afford to be magnanimous, and second, there are some interesting places to visit on this planet.

(NOJFZI) (3 phases) Visit the Trade Ministry regarding the possibility of doing some business.

(7OLFRI) (3 phases) Visit the Organuan Museum of Natural History to find out more about these annoyingly telepathic aliens.

(N8JHZA) (5 phases) Visit Strangways, the leading Organuan expert in biological engineering.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[699]

At first sight, it is hard to believe what seems to have happened to your sensor array. The entire outer layer of sensors has suffered a flash overload. Ordinarily, this only happens if you fly too close to a star, or if an enemy attack results in a major detonation at point blank range. The amount of power needed to burn out your sensors in this way is about one fourth the total output of your power generators. But what exposed your sensors to that kind of power?

It must have been something that the aliens did. You have your computer perform a spectrographic analysis of the energy that burnt out the sensors. Sure enough, it turns out that well over half the energy was red and blue light. The aliens gave off so much red and blue light, combined with heat, that they overloaded your sensors. This was a contributing factor in your crash, since without your sensors it was much harder to guide the ship to a safe landing.

Anyway, repairing the sensor array is a long, tedious process. You have to replace each sensor individually, then reconnect all the relays between the sensors. It takes you two days to finish the job.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[700]

Your arrival on Leucothea causes something of a sensation. All of your fellow Disciples crowd into the spaceport area to see what will happen when you disembark. They are expecting you to be either arrested as a heretic or hailed as the greatest prophet since the Founders. No one can guess which. You are not so certain yourself.

By prearranged agreement, Lord Highest Disciple Efrigath boards your ship to greet you. Without a word you hand him the memory unit from Cordethar.

His eyes widen in surprise. You had informed him in advance that you were bringing what could be the Lost Text File, but seeing the unit actually in your hand is a shock to him nonetheless.

"Is it. . . ?" he asks.

"I don't know. It is encrypted in the Founders' Code."

He takes the unit and nods his head. Then he looks up into your eyes.

"Disciple, you have sinned greatly. What have you to say?"

You have already thought this over. "I invoke the One Hundred and Thirty-Second Resolution: 'The Founders are absolved from the sin of spacefaring as it was necessary for them to bring back their holy revelations.' I, too, have brought back revelations of the Founders. Whether or not this unit contains a Holy Text File, it is surely a creation of the Founders. Their own message on Cordethar told me to bring it to the Church."

He nods his head again. "This matter is not closed," he said, "but I think the claim will stand. There will be no penalty. I will now take the unit for decryption."

"Not so fast," you say in your best Ghost World accent. You grab the memory unit and hold it away from the Lord Highest Disciple.

"Disciple, you go too far," he says, though he seems more confused than angry.

"However the Church may absolve me, legally I am still a smuggler. I have a demand."

He says nothing.

"When this is translated I wish to see an unaltered copy of whatever text is there. I'll accept your word that you will provide this. But if you do not give your word, I will take the unit elsewhere. Somewhere in the galaxy is someone else who can translate it."

"If the Council rules that the text is forbidden and I provide a copy both of us will be under interdict."

"Not a problem," you say. "For me, anyway. And as for you. . . I could use an experienced pilot aboard."

He turns pale. Then he turns away and thinks for a while. "Very well," he says at last. "Even if I didn't trust you, I must trust the Founders. But if this text is not after all in the Founders' Code, I'll have your head for this."

The translation takes two days, during which time you wait aboard your ship. Efrigath comes aboard on the third day, carrying a small bundle.

"Darkwatch," he says. "You have brought me back a mystery."

"What do you mean? Couldn't you translate the file?"

"I could and did. As I agreed, here is a copy for you. It turns out that your demand was unnecessary. The Founders themselves have insisted that you receive it."

"Is it the Holy Text File?"

"No," he says. "Not if you mean a Holy Text File like the others. It is clearly the words of the Founders, but they are words of instruction, not of teaching. Much of it is technical material for the building of space drives and such. However, there is one very specific instruction that this is to be given to you." He hands you the small bundle of folded cloth. "The writing states that the one who has brought the text to the Church is to be sent out into space, again, to seek the planet Golgotha and the answers to all the mysteries."

"We cannot help you with this new mission except to tell you what little we know about the far regions of space. Our most secret data files tell us there are worlds which lie in toward the galactic core stranger than anything you can imagine. It is difficult to reach these worlds because the nature of space changes as you near the galactic core. Space dust becomes far too dense for the normal ship's two-axis drives to function and it forms a sort of barrier."

"It is possible to add a third drive axis to your engines which can handle the increased dust level. In order to power this tri-axis drive you will need what I have just handed you."

With that, the weary Disciple turns to go. Before he passes through the door, he turns and gives you one last piece of advice. "I do not pretend to know what the Founders had in mind when they set this time bomb ticking three hundred years ago. I will, however, pass on some

information I heard from a smuggler who sought the safety of the Church when she decided to give up her life of crime. She said there was a planet called Outpost, located just beyond the Density Barrier I spoke of, which might have information about the worlds beyond. I do not know any more than that. You are free to go. If you will excuse me, I have much to think about."

Efrigath leaves your ship as if in a daze. You unwrap the cloth he left you. Wrapped inside is a scintillating red and orange gem. It is a Flame Jewel, one of the holiest relics of the entire Church — the only material object that the Founders brought back with them from their journey. Now it is in your hands. You quickly wrap it up again.

Later you read through the Cordethar text. It is much as Efrigath said. Most of the technical information is already obsolete, but there is one section that describes the construction of a modification to the drive engines that was performed on the *Archangel* during her voyage: a Tri-Axis Drive Booster. This must be what Efrigath was speaking of, the means to get through the Density Barrier. It uses the Flame Jewel to focus the incredible power generated by the three drives. Unfortunately, it does not tell you *how* to build the booster. That is something you will need to learn when you head back out into space.

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

✱ STOP ✱

[701]

Though you are on your hands and knees, and you have your gravity compensation harness at maximum power, you are barely able to support your own weight in Fiara's intense gravity. As you crawl toward the entrance to the Antigravity Research Center, you feel as if the pressure is getting stronger and stronger. You have to stop frequently and lie flat on the pavement to rest; but even then it feels like there is a ton of lead on your back.

You rest, crawl a few more yards, and rest again. Your rest periods get longer and longer, and it becomes harder and harder to get back up on your hands and knees.

Eventually, you are lying prone on the ground and are completely unable to move. You feel as if you're going to suffocate as the weight presses your lungs against the earth. You are twenty yards from the entrance to the building, and there is no way you are going to make it.

You close your eyes and wait for who knows how long until a Darscian spots you. At first he thinks you are dead, but when he comes over for a closer look, you tell him you collapsed under the gravity. He goes inside and gets help.

You spend a week in the hospital recovering from your attempt to walk fifty yards under the Fiaran gravity. When you recover sufficiently to talk with the Darscian doctors, you admit that you tried to visit the Antigravity Research Center.

"I'm sorry," you apologize. "I wanted to see if I could make it."

"You humans are so brazen at times," the doctor observes matter-of-factly. "Your behavior is so unpredictable. Why did you try to go to the Research Center without permission?"

"I was curious," you tell him. "I wanted to see what was inside."

"We understand curiosity," the doctor remarks, "but how can you violate the rules? It's not civil."

You try to say as little as possible, since you know there is no way to justify your actions without embarrassing yourself further. After the week is up, you return to your ship.

If only you were a little faster, you might have been able to make it to the Antigravity Research Center before you collapsed. Maybe you'll try again sometime. Meanwhile, it's a good thing this happened on a Darscian planet. The Darscians are so forgiving. Some other race would probably have thrown you off their planet for good.

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

You may select this option again.

✧ STOP ✧

[702]

Your ship cannot withstand the beams, at least not for more than a second or two. You and your computer figure this out in the same instant: you when you feel the ship shudder like a small black hole had hit square on the hull, and the computer when it notices that the temperature sensors on the outer skin of the ship indicate a temperature that is very close to the melting point of the metal. You and your computer also have the same reaction: get out of there!

Fortunately the computer has the faster reflexes, and it does the right thing before you have a chance to mess it up. It accelerates the ship directly away from the beam. You probably would have tried to move laterally, and the beam would have tracked you.

"It's a heavy particle beam, Boss," says the computer. "Powerful but impossible to focus tightly. If follows a square law: if we double the distance to it, it's intensity is only one fourth."

"That also means if we'd been closer, it would have been even worse," you point out.

"That's true. It makes an excellent planetary defense weapon."

You check on your status. Fortunately, you seem to have escaped with less damage than you thought.

"Har, har, har!" gloats Silverbeard. "That's how I repel boarders. Right over the side with the anchor chain! Har, har, har!"

Unfortunately, Silverbeard may be justified in his confidence. Your ship doesn't have the defensive capability to approach the planet while under fire from the particle beams. You'll have to find a way though, if you're ever going to take Outpost. There must be a way to increase your defenses!

✧ STOP ✧

[703]

Once you've returned to the ship, you go right to the computer.

"Computer, activate," you command.

"Working."

"Give me all of the data available on the substance Warp Core." You are somewhat surprised at the promptness of the computer's response, since you had been having trouble with it from the time you approached Ethnar. But if it wants to work now, you won't complain.

"Warp Core — refined from raw ore, dull green in color. Used in advanced space drives. Very rare and valuable. May possibly have other unknown properties. End of report."

Very interesting.

⊗ STOP ⊗

[704]

You don't have high hopes of finding anything useful in this system. The only reason you stopped here is because your map shows there is a single minor planetoid. You never know what treasures you may find in an obscure place.

As you leave hyperspace, you run the usual scan on the system and sure enough, there is a single small planet in orbit around the blue-white primary. You don't think the lump of iron really qualifies as a planet, but then who are you to judge?

Yrebe is very close to the sun indeed. Extreme care will be required if you wish to land and explore. You ask the computer to plot a course to bring you to a relatively safe orbiting position where you can take some additional readings.

As you approach the planet, the temperature of the ship's hull increases dramatically. You compensate as much as you can for the inside temperature, but there is precious little you can do about the increasing heat on the outside, although the ship's not in any real danger, yet.

Reading the scan results tells you some interesting things. For instance, Yrebe is composed entirely of iron, and it has a fourteen day rotation. The side facing toward the sun becomes molten during the week long "day." Conversely, the side of Yrebe turned away from the sun is frozen in a solid phase and quite capable of supporting an exploration ship on its surface. Now doesn't that sound marvelous!

While your computer is plotting a landing site to give you maximum time on the planet, you run a close-range scan to see if you missed anything about Yrebe the first time through. You see nothing of any real consequence, except perhaps for occasional interference with your instrumentation. You first attribute the phenomenon to solar flares, despite the fact that your ship and the bulk of the planet itself should be shielding your instruments. The closer you come to the planet, the worse the effect becomes, until it even begins to affect the computer. Investigation of the problem is impossible until you have actually landed, so the mystery will have to remain unsolved for now.

The landing is uneventful; you breathe a sigh of relief as you touch down on a newly solidified patch of iron on the shores of a still-molten sea. You spend two days confirming your preliminary findings and you now have the following options:

⟨GMENMJ⟩ (4 phases) Mine for iron.

⟨WMGNEJ⟩ (4 phases) Investigate the mysterious interference.

✧ STOP ✧

[705]

Jaquar does, in fact, turn out to be a colony carved into a hundred different asteroids. Despite having originally evolved on a world with a considerably greater gravitational field than Earth's, the Darscians seem to have adjusted remarkably well to a life of virtual weightlessness.

You, however, are amazed that anyone could live in such an environment. The lack of gravity and atmosphere would have discouraged virtually any other sentient race from attempting to establish a viable colony here. Your estimation of the Darscian people as a whole has increased greatly.

Jaquar, once you get used to its unique geography, is much like any other inhabited area; as with the other planets you have explored, you are faced with a number of possible uses for your time:

⟨UOOFFI⟩ (3 phases) Visit the Interstellar Trader's Market, located on the same rock as the spaceport.

⟨E8MHNA⟩ (3 phases) Learn something about all the Darscian planets.

⟨U8OHFA⟩ (7 phases) Spend some time studying the technology involved in the fantastic manipulation of mass and inertia the Darscians seem to have accomplished in their weightless environment.

⟨AO6FPI⟩ (5 phases) Learn about the robot-controlled shuttles the Darscians have equipped with jump engines to transport goods between the asteroids.

✧ STOP ✧

[706]

You are equal in capability to the Patrol ship and neither of you can gain an advantage over the other. Unfortunately for you, you recognize the Patrol ship has only to bide its time before reinforcements arrive to surround you.

So you make the only decision possible and disengage from combat. The Patrol ship isn't used to dealing with tactics during battle and doesn't realize your motives. You are able to surprise it with some fancy maneuvers and make good your escape back out through the Boundary.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[707]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course."

"And expect us to buy them from you?"

"Not at all. They are yours."

You look the man over while thinking, "This man must be a lunatic!" while Corin says, "Don't talk stupid. If those were Vanessa Chang's maps you wouldn't be giving them away."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I believe I just said that."

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

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

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

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

"When was that?"

"Three hundred seven years ago."

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

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

You may select this option again.

❖ STOP ❖

[708]

Located near the center of Fiarasan, the Antigravity Research Center is relatively easy to find. During the drive, you wonder how you will manage to sneak into the center and connive someone there into telling you about the Darscians' antigravity technology. You also speculate on the military purposes for which the Darscians fear the technology can be used. What kind of weapon could take advantage of the antigravity fields that the Darscians use in their buildings and vehicles? Hmmm.

Right now, however, you are fifty yards from the entrance to the building, and you have another problem on your hands. Your bullet vehicle has somehow been rendered immobile for the entire area surrounding the research center.

The Darscians really don't want you to go in there.

If you proceed on foot, you can be sure of an exhausting struggle. You'll probably have to crawl and you might not make it. However, the building itself is surely equipped with antigravity, so if you can get to the entrance, you should be okay.

Since you did not come all this way just to turn back, you prepare yourself for the challenge. You turn your gravity compensation harness up to maximum and step out of your vehicle.

Immediately, the gravity seizes hold of you and throws you to the ground. It feels like you are being crushed under a steamroller. Nevertheless, you manage to get on your knees and you begin to crawl towards the door just fifty yards away. Can you make it?

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[709]

You arrive at the docks as directed and ask for the person known as the Bridger. You are told to stay put until she finds you.

Shortly after, a small woman approaches you and asks you your business here.

"Valle Lanza said to come here to get a smuggling trip on one of the Nine Worlds," you explain.

The Bridger looks at you skeptically and asks shrewdly, "You ever drill the Boundary, newly?"

You redden with embarrassment when you are forced to admit you have not yet flown inside the Boundary.

The good news is that the Bridger doesn't laugh at you, the bad news is that the smuggling mission is only open to those flyers who have already shown they can pass successfully through the Boundary without being intercepted by the Space Patrol.

"Once you get the ship-tech and drill Inward, you come back. I'll try to get a hot run for you. I like a newly who flies in with their jets on full."

Oh well, maybe you will come back later when you're eligible to make the run.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[710]

After a day's wait, the Firthian expert on the translator machine, a female named Ristha, comes to the surface to answer your questions. She tells you that the machine, called a "universal translator," helps the Firthians communicate with alien races. The Firthians bought the universal translator from an alien visitor long ago. They then duplicated it using chemical replication techniques, so they now have many of the machines. However, they don't know how to build them from scratch and they don't know exactly how they work. The translator is specifically tuned to the Firthians' mental patterns, so it translates only from alien languages to Firthian and back, not between any pair of languages.

You ask how you might find a way to build such a machine for humans. If you had a universal translator of your own, it would save you a lot of time learning to speak with aliens who don't know Earth Standard. Ristha replies that she can't be certain, but she remembers having heard something about translator technology on the planet Tralis. She's never been to Tralis herself, but another alien visitor once mentioned it.

✂ STOP ✂

[711]

As you navigate your way through the dusty Frog Leg Nebula, you pick up the radio signal mentioned in your aunt Cathir's note. Sure enough, the signal's phase-shift signature closely matches the cryptic patterns in Verse 5 of your tribe's Ancient Writings. You must be onto something!

You follow the signal to its source, a small asteroid. The asteroid is identified as "FLN-1" because of its position in the Frog Leg Nebula. Your scanners indicate that the asteroid is composed almost entirely of slowly decaying radioactive metals, covered by a thin layer of rock and sand. The surface is dotted by craters of various shapes and sizes.

Although the asteroid seems an unlikely place to find the Stone, you feel a sense of excitement building in your chest. This could be the end of your family's Quest! The Core Stone may be here waiting for you to come and return home with it in triumph.

"Is there anything else you can tell me about the radio signal?" you ask your computer, tension causing you to whisper the question.

"The signal is a repeated pattern, with a cycle time of 2 minutes 15 seconds," the computer replies. "Its characteristics indicate an alien language of unknown origin."

"Can you make any sense out of the message?" you query.

"Negative."

"Try communicating with whoever it is. Send out as many different kinds of signals as you can. See if we can get a response."

You spend a while transmitting at the asteroid, but the signal coming from it doesn't change. You can feel your shoulders slumping in disappointment. You can hardly believe that anything as valuable as the Core Stone would be left at an abandoned alien base.

"There's no response," the computer concludes. "Chances are good that the message is an automatic transmission of some sort, and there's no intelligence controlling it."

Well you might as well land on the asteroid anyway and have a look around. You can see that one large crater on the surface is highly radioactive compared to the rest of the asteroid, so you decide to land there. It was obviously the site of heaviest activity so it may be the

place where you will find the most artifacts. Since the asteroid has no atmosphere and little gravity, you have no trouble guiding your ship down.

You put on your space suit and step out onto the bottom of the crater. Using your instruments, you search for the source of the radioactivity. This soon leads you to an interesting discovery. Set into the center of the crater is a large metal hatch. Your instruments indicate that underneath the hatch is a tunnel that leads down towards the heart of the asteroid! So, there's more to this rock than appears at first sight.

You try to open the hatch but it won't budge. You look for anything that might trigger the hatch to open, but find nothing. It looks like you'll have to blast it open.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[712]

You approach Frontier and land using the coordinates you were given by the Bridger on Wellmet. You see a welcoming committee gathered outside your vessel. You hope they are friendly.

A tall woman approaches you when you leave your ship. She waits for you to make the first move. You are not sure what that move should be since this is your first time, but you most assuredly do not want *her* to know that! Deciding to brazen it out, you swagger over to her and, in your best Wellmet drawl, you say, "I just drilled the Boundary with a hot pak run. The Bridger said someone would be interested at this locale."

Trying not to look nervous, you wait for her response.

"Welcome Runner," she begins. "We've been expecting you. If you will open the cargo bays, we will unload the merchandise. I believe you have a Gradient Filter due you; we will load it as soon as we've inspected the items you've brought for trade."

You know you can trust these people because they wouldn't risk cheating one of the Families. Even inside the Nine Worlds, they have a great deal of influence.

After only an hour you find your ship ready for departure.

"Nice doing business with you, Runner," the woman who met you says as you prepare to leave. "You're welcome back anytime you have a run from the Lanzas."

Waving, you climb aboard your ship and take off from Frontier. You are feeling very pleased with the outcome of the run. "If I ever need another Filter, maybe I'll take another smuggling mission," you think.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[713]

"Hey, Boss," your computer calls to you, and just when you are about to sit down to a really nutritious meal, too.

"What is it?" you respond a bit irritably.

"I've decoded something new from Vanessa Chang's map. Would you prefer that I wait until you are finished dining?"

"No, no," you say quickly as you head toward the console. "Show me what you've got."

"Sure, Boss. I found a short coded message that says 'Fluids are available for mining on the planet Baphi.' That's all for now."

You head back to your interrupted meal and make a mental note of what you have just learned.

✂ STOP ✂

[714]

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

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

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

You check your chronometer and see that two phases have passed since the rascally pirate accosted you. Maybe with the proper ship improvements you could stand up to him the next time you meet. After all, you are supposed to be putting an end to Silverbeard's piracy, not encouraging it by donating cargo to his cause!

✂ STOP ✂

[715]


You signal the contact on Heaven and give the password. A short time later, a coded beam comes back to you, giving you instructions for an approach and landing. Obviously someone in the Heaven space traffic control has been bribed, because no one even asks for identification as you land.

You land on an open steel deck near a power complex and watch as a small crew of men in orange jumpsuits prepare to unload your hard-earned cargo. You instruct your computer to release the access ports, and ten minutes later the Super Slip has been pumped away, probably headed for underground storage tanks.

It's as simple as that and you are about to instruct the computer to lift off when you get a priority one message over the Family radio channel. Turning to the correct frequency rewards you with the dulcet tones of your grandfather.

"Hai, Val, is that you?" you hear the familiar voice ask.

"Grandpa? Yes, it's me. Am I a Stewart again?"

Continued 

"You're a low down dirty smuggler, that's what you are. Imagine, my own grandchild stooping so low. I'm only glad that your mother isn't alive to see this. . ."

"Grandpa! You're always so proud of your great-great-great-great grandmother, the pirate, and yet you're ashamed of me being a smuggler?"

"Get off the phone and come talk to your father. He's got business to discuss."

Leaving your ship, you make your way to the port conference room where you are told your father is waiting.

"Valentine," he begins in his 'this is serious' tone of voice, "when I received word that you were on your way here to fulfill the Super Slip contract, I headed across the Boundary so we could meet and talk. I knew you probably wouldn't come to see me back on Wellmet and we have some unfinished business between us. You know you're not yet quite square with the Family. Although you've filled the contract, you owe us a ship. Will you return it to us?"

Symbols have always been very important in Family business. Your father clearly doesn't care about the ship itself. If you take over the Family some day, all the ships the Stewarts own will be under your command anyway. What your father is asking is, "Will you return to your former status as Family member, or do you intend to continue to work in space?"

You have your answer ready. "What do you mean? The Holly Roger is my ship. The Family never owned a ship by that name."

Your father shows no surprise at your answer. "You realize you are forfeiting your position as heir. You're a Family member again, but you'll never run the Family if you spend your young adulthood in space."

"I know. I guess I just feel more at home behind a nav console than behind a ledger book."

"Yes," your father sighs. "You never did have the slightest head for business. At times I despaired at the thought of turning this concern over to you some day." He turns as if to leave.

"Wait. . ." you say. "Listen. I know I never liked business and politics, and that I was a lousy student at the subject. But that's not the reason I chose the course I did. I know the Family is important. Don't think I take it lightly, but things are changing. Something's happening out there in the galaxy. I don't know what it is but it's something important and the Family might need to have someone ready to take advantage of any of the upcoming opportunities ahead. If I'm there, then the Family's there too. Do you understand?"

"Not really," he answers. "But I'll take your word as — as a spacer, and as the Family's first bloodline smuggler in three generations. Tell me, do you have a contract?"

"No. I've been exploring. . ."

"A Family spacer needs a contract. Come here." He opens the door to a closet and pulls out a steel cylinder about a foot long and half as wide. "Look at this." He unscrews the cylinder in the middle and separates the halves. As he draws the halves apart, you see a small object suspended between them, trapped in a field generated by the cylinder. You look closely at the object. It is a stone, vivid red in color, that scintillates with an inner glow, fascinating the eye with colors like fluid flame. You recognize it — a Flame Jewel — and bend to get a closer look. You feel compelled to stare at the shifting light, as if, if you turned away, you might miss something that you could never recapture. Your eyes search the faceted depths of the crystal, the better to perceive its every mystery.

The cylinder closes, trapping the Flame Jewel and freeing your eyes. "I keep forgetting it has that effect," your father says. "What do you think of it?"

"I think it's extraordinarily valuable. Worth more than any ship no matter what the ship's cargo."

"You are correct. Here is my contract offer: I will give this Jewel to you, if you will search for more. I know they must come from space. Find the source. Find the planet or star or place where these were formed. Then, perhaps, all the other business of the Family may indeed become unimportant by comparison."

"Where did this one come from?"

"The Family's had it for a long time. We think it came from somewhere in the Galactic Arm. More than that we don't know. However, if you want to go searching in the Galactic Arm, there's a problem.

"What's that?"

"Your two-axis drive won't function there. As you get closer to the Galactic Core, the density of interstellar matter increases. Once you leave the Fringe, the density is too high for your two-axis drive to handle."

"So what can I do? Is there any way to travel in the Arm?"

"Yes, but it hasn't been done in a long time, not since Vanessa Chang. You'll need to build a tri-axis drive. Fortunately, you now have the key component needed to build a tri-axis drive — the Flame Jewel. The Flame Jewel is the only known object that can focus and control the incredible amounts of power that the tri-axis drive generates."

"What else do I need to build the drive?"

"I don't know. Like I said, no one's done it for a long time. Maybe you can find out."

"And where do I go once I build the drive? Is the Galactic Arm all you can suggest? The Arm's a pretty big place."

"I can't tell you any more about where to find the Flame Jewels, but I can think of one place where you might be able to get more information. There's a world just beyond the Density Barrier, in the Galactic Arm. The world is called Outpost, and it's said that Vanessa Chang may have used it as a base for a short while. No one's been there in centuries, but there may be information and equipment there that you'd find useful. That's all I have to tell you. I hope it will be enough."

You take the cylinder, and by doing so accept the contract. It's not as simple a deal as it sounds. From what you've been told, the source of the Flame Jewels is beyond the Fringe, beyond the limits of your star map, and beyond the range of your hyperdrive. But if there's a way to find it, you will.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[716]

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

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

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

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

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

The more robotic creatures appear to be the beings in authority, and you quickly learn to address them. Language is a problem, but they seem to have dealt with a lot of aliens and, through a simple form of sign language which will get you by temporarily, you work out an arrangement to stay and look around the planet.

After a few days of assimilation, you decide that you really only have two options available at this time:

⟨PFBIY7⟩ (3 phases) Travel to the space station and do some exploring there. You believe that the Withelian market place for Interstellar Trade is located there.

⟨9FDIQ7⟩ (7 phases) Teach the Withelians Earth Standard so you can move freely about the planet.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[717]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 5

You only have two phases left in turn 5, since you borrowed five for your landing last turn. You decide to visit the Slippery Silver Tavern for a quick thirst-quencher before meeting Jen to find out what's happening with your family.

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	T	G	R	Y	B	R	V
2	Y	L	—	—	—	—	—
3	—	A: HFAL67	—	—	T	V	R
4	B	Y	R	G	B	L	—
5	—	—	—	—	—	A: 8VHKAV	A: OBFYI9
6							

"8VHKAV" is the action code for going to the Slippery Silver and "OBFYI9" is the action code for meeting Jen. These actions are only one phase each, so you can fit them both in at the end of turn 5.

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 5

Sign in at the computer, and enter the two actions you planned. Press **A** and then **D** (corresponding to the action code 8VHKAV) to go to the Tavern, followed by **A** and then **F** (corresponding to OBFYI9) to meet Jen. Then press Return or **F** to get the results.

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 5

The CGM sends you to the proper text for your adventure to continue.

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

Last but not least, always keep your character goals in mind — that is how you will win the game! Your goals have become a bit more directed since your meeting with Jen, and you hope that you are able to save your Family by delivering the necessary cargo of 3 units of Super Slip to Heaven.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[718]

Not even bothering to shrink yourself down, you crash to sleep in one smooth motion. Unfortunately, your dreams are bad. In no time you are caught amid the spires of the evil dreamscape, where you find a horrible, slaverling, hunched-up thing torturing a little puce alien. It leaves off when it sees you, of course, and springs to the attack.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[719]

Freddie's cousin, Bert, is every bit as pleasant a bundle of warty purple tentacles as Freddie himself. Fortunately for you, Alkonese is a simple language, which doesn't take long to learn. In a few short days you judge yourself to be fluent enough to get by, and you take leave of your instructor.

But before you go, you ask him about a strange occurrence you witnessed the night before.

You had gone out for an evening stroll and happened to see an Alkonese crossing a busy intersection. The little alien was passing in between cars without a care in the world and, apparently, wasn't disturbing the drivers either. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a car came speeding around the corner and was headed straight for the alien. The alien on foot stopped right in the middle of the road and seemed to be waiting for the driver to hit him. But, against all common sense, the driver casually veered in front of the stationary alien, missing him by several inches. No one was upset by what almost occurred except for yourself.

Bert explains that the Alkonese are able to whurffle their way out of danger.

You have no idea what he is talking about and say as much.

Bert goes on to explain that whurffling is the ability to see into the future and decide your course of action depending on what you have seen. The Alkonese pedestrian could see exactly where the driver would pass him in the road and made sure he was standing where the car wouldn't be. The driver was doing the same thing. So no one was in any danger, you see?

This may be a handy ability to acquire.

Bert provides you with a map and sends you on your way with some suggestions as to what to do.

The great and wondrous Alkon City proves to be nearly as interesting a place to visit as the Great Sand Waste on Leucothea. You spend some time wandering about, and now you may choose from the following options:

⟨GWEGME⟩ (3 phases) Visit the Market.

⟨WWGGEE⟩ (4 phases) Go to the Central Library of Alkon City and learn about the history and culture of the Alkonese.

⟨CGUEOM⟩ (8 phases) Learn more about whurffling.

✂ STOP ✂

[720]

Your return to Bugeye is as easy as your last visit. The big ball of mud is as full of bugs as ever, of course. However, that doesn't bother you since you head directly to the spaceport at Range City, near the North Pole. There, the solid ground and the small human colony provide a reasonable place for you to stay.

You talk for a little while with the spaceport official. The fuel trade is still strong, he says. However, the genetic research is going very slowly. "Well, that's the normal state of affairs for us," he admits.

You thank him for his time and head over to the visitors' lodgings. You have the same options as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[721]

You decide to return with Auvid to the section of the Institute dedicated to studying telekinesis and its effect on games. You can see how eager he is to show off his special area of research.

You soon find yourself trying to copy some of the alien's feats. Auvid offers to help you learn how to manipulate objects through the powers of your mind.

"We don't often get the opportunity to study alien abilities," he explains as a large crowd gathers around you.

You spend several days doing the difficult mental exercises you are given, trying to move objects around with the power of your thoughts alone. You are so dedicated that you valiantly continue, despite the almost overwhelming temptation to just give up. The Ouabainese are very supportive of your efforts.

Finally, after mastering a particularly difficult set of exercises where you can almost FEEL your mental muscles stretching and straining under the unaccustomed work load, you are rewarded, not by the pencil moving, but by the whole table zooming across the floor.

"Did you do that?" you accuse Auvid.

"No, you did that all by yourself," he announces proudly. "Well done."

"This is amazing," you say, still not believing you were able to move the piece of furniture.

You happily spend the rest of the day practicing your newfound telekinetic abilities.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[722]

This planet is confusing. Things live here. Red things and blue things. Things that fly and things that don't. The red things fly and the blue things don't, except for the ones that do. The blue things appear wherever you go. The red things follow you around. The blue things that don't fly are the same as the ones that fly when they stop moving. There are lots of red things and lots of blue things. It's very confusing.

Now there are even more of the red things. They're all around your ship. There are some blue things too. Your computer is warning you about something but it's hard to concentrate. In between the red things and the blue things there are some strange purple ones. Some of the red things are turning blue. Your ship is having trouble maintaining its flight path through the atmosphere. Was that a purple thing you just inhaled? The computer says your ship's energy level is very low. The red things are flying faster and faster. The blue things are appearing everywhere. You're going to crash!

There is a screaming clap and roar as your ship smacks into the dusty surface of the planet Koursh. The impact throws you across the helm and into the wall. You pass out.

When you wake up, you feel terrible. Your head hurts. Your back hurts. Your shin has a long bloody bruise where it scraped across the communications panel. Fortunately you are still alive. You are suffering from a concussion and loss of blood but it doesn't feel like you broke any bones. You get your medical equipment and attend to your injuries.

Your ship is a mess. The navigation control system is torn open, revealing a jumble of melted electronics. The main sensor array is reporting no data at all. The power generator is crushed. The bridge is a disaster area, with the screens shattered and loose equipment strewn about the deck. It is going to be a major repair job. However, you are lucky things aren't worse. At least your drives and computer are still in working condition.

What happened? You remember being surrounded by a sea of aliens. You couldn't think straight. Suddenly your ship was out of control. Your computer mentioned something about losing energy. You decide to play back your computer log to see if it can tell you anything.

The log shows that the energy output of your power generator began to decline as soon as you entered the atmosphere. As you got closer to the surface of the planet, the energy output fell even more, until it could no longer support your ship's systems. When it became clear you were going to crash, the computer did its best, diverting all the remaining power to the life support systems and executing a decent crash landing.

Your computer gives no indication of what caused the energy level drop. Maybe something was wrong with the generators. Maybe it has something to do with the planet's atmosphere, or the aliens. You just don't know.

You still feel a little disoriented, but mostly you seem to have regained your senses. You put on a space suit and step outside the ship. You are standing in a deep crater which your ship carved out of the ground when it crashed. There are none of the aliens inside the crater, but around the edges of the crater you can see shifting groups of the red and blue creatures.

You have a few options on how to proceed:

⟨FOIF7I⟩ (2 phases) Repair your navigation control system.

⟨VOKFVI⟩ (2 phases) Repair your main sensor array.

⟨F8IH7A⟩ (3 phases) Repair your power generator.

⟨V8KHVA⟩ (3 phases) Investigate the red aliens.

⟨RO4FXI⟩ (4 phases) Investigate the blue aliens.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[723]

Exploring on Hootenaller is so pleasant that you could spend years doing nothing else. As you travel and watch the scenery you also pay attention to all the details around you, hoping to find yet more valuable material for the taking hidden away somewhere. You look deep into the crystal waters of the lakes, high on the tops of mountains with spectacular views of the surrounding lands, and far across open plains and fields of iridescent flowers. In the end you find only a particularly rich stand of Food-yielding plants of the highest nutritional quality, so you move your ship to the site in order to collect them. By the end of your expedition, you feel exceptionally fit and healthy, but you're not certain whether it's the effect of the food, the air, the exercise, or some combination of all three.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[724]

You find the planet Arthlan right where your earlier projections predicted. Following its suicidal erratic orbit, it has moved closer to the largest of its three suns on a long curve that, this time at least, will narrowly miss the suns and pass back out on another loop of a different shape entirely.

From space you rescan the planet's distinctive geological features. Still prominent are the six huge craters, five ancient and one new, that form an almost perfect hexagonal pattern. Widespread volcanic activity and dust storms make the surface an extremely hostile place, but there are safe zones along the equator where volcanoes are scarce and the strongest winds don't blow. As you prepare to land, you check your breathing gear and radiation shielding. The atmosphere is composed of breathable gases, but the intense radiation borne by the windblown dust makes exposure a hazard.

On the way down to your chosen landing site you catch a glimpse of the peculiar metallic outcropping at the foot of one of the larger volcanoes. It's hard to tell, but it looks as if it has shifted position by a few hundred yards since you last scanned it.

Looking out on the barren dustblasted landscape, you recall your computer's conclusion that there was once life on this planet. If so, there is none left now, just dry expanses of flat stone sea bed, punctuated by volcanoes and baked by sunlight and radiation.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[725]

You manage to get the ship off the ground, but it is hard to travel along your plotted course. The ship keeps veering off in unexpected directions. It just won't go where you want it to. Without your navigational controllers, you can't steer the ship well enough to get into orbit. You have no choice but to land your ship back on the surface. What's more, the landing is a rough one, since at the last minute the ship takes a sudden lurch downward and you crunch noisily into the ground. Concerned, you examine your ship to see if there is any more damage. You are relieved to discover that the hull absorbed the impact successfully, leaving the ship in just about the same condition as when you tried to take off.

Your takeoff was a failure, so you are still on Koursh.

✧ STOP ✧

[726]

You return to FLN-1, the small asteroid in the Frog's Leg Nebula. The asteroid is still emitting a repeated radio signal in an unknown alien language. You land your ship in the same radioactive crater you visited last time, the one with the tunnel leading into the asteroid's interior.

✧ STOP ✧

[727]

You attempt to talk to the spaceport official.

"Hello," you say.

"Pibst dorc," he responds.

"I want to apologize for my actions," you continue, "I was poisoned by a flower. . ."

"Quesnog?" the Darscian asks.

Soon it becomes clear that neither of you can understand a word the other is saying. To get any further, you are going to have to learn High Darscian. If you wish to do so, plot the following option:

⟨NDJQZ8⟩ (7 phases with telepathy or a universal translator; 14 phases without) Learn High Darscian. This option will cost you one cargo unit of your choice.

You can't do anything else on Ioreth until you learn High Darscian.

✧ STOP ✧

[728]

With all your ship's systems repaired, you have no problem taking off and seem headed for a successful ascent through the planet's atmosphere. However, you do not get very far before you find yourself once again surrounded by the aliens. They're flying all around you: red aliens and blue aliens. The red aliens are flying faster, the blue ones slower. But this time you're ready. You're not going to let them confuse you.

When your ship's power alarm goes off, you abort your takeoff and turn back to land. You set the ship gently on the floor of the crater you from which you took off. The aliens retreat.

You check the ship for damages and discover that there are no major problems. The reaction in the power generator is a little weak, but that will correct itself in a few hours. It's hardly your main worry.

Your main worry is that you're stuck. You can't take off without being attacked by the confusing aliens. You'll have to try to learn more about the aliens in order to figure out a way to escape.

✕ STOP ✕

[729]

The Hemingella are able to efficiently add a system of auxiliary rockets to your ship that will make it more maneuverable. The cost, one unit of any commodity, seems like a bargain compared to the benefit received.

To select the commodity of payment,

Go now to the CGM.

✕ STOP ✕

[730]


As your drives cycle back and you slide out of hyperspace, Wellmet's sun is already lined up in the center of your viewscreen. Even if you hadn't grown up there, Wellmet would be an easy planet to find. It is one of the few worlds outside the Boundary whose positions are clearly documented on standard star maps.

Your ship, now powered by conventional thrusters, begins to decelerate in a carefully calculated curve that will bring you to the planet with a velocity suitable for making a landing approach.

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

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

Six point seven three hours later, you are in orbit around Wellmet. From above, the world you grew up on looks very different than the home you remember. You lived most of your life in cities, never paying much attention to the planet's vast oceans, deserts, mountain ranges,

Continued 

polar caps, and expanses of green vegetation. Wellmet, you've been told, is amazingly similar to the planet Earth in the Nine Worlds, lacking only animal life and a moon. Some say that this is why Wellmet became the focal point of early space exploration and, later, the main nexus of interplanetary trade, but you are not so sure. After all, why would people travel in space to reach a world just like the one they left? More likely it was Wellmet's central location among a number of colony worlds that gave rise to its thriving trade economy.

There are about sixty million people on Wellmet, though no one's ever tried to count them. Most of the people live in or near the city of Wellmet. The city covers a thousand square kilometers, and it teems with traffic. Because Wellmet has no one central authority that tries to plan everything out, the city is a chaotic jumble of human activity and construction. Clusters of dwellings, factory buildings, transmission towers, and landing pads mix indiscriminately with animal pens, cultivated fields, open rivers, and power plants. Squat warehouses of wood and brick adjoin graceful towers of wire and glass. There is no single large spaceport, but instead a variety of private landing and docking facilities scattered across the town, ranging from gleaming automated cargo ports to bare concrete pads.

Given your circumstances, you are not really sure where you should try to land. Most of the spaceports in Wellmet are privately owned. Some belong to specific Families and are reserved exclusively for Family use; others are available to anyone but charge steep berthing fees for their use. There is also a large public spaceport, but it is in a poor location and has a difficult landing path that passes through the traffic of all the other ports.

The Family ports have the best facilities and the safest, most efficient approach lanes. However, your standing in the Stewart Family is a bit uncertain right now, so you're not sure it would be a good idea to land at the Stewart complex. One of the other Families might do you the favor of clearing you at their port, but with Family politics the way it is, there are potential complications, and you don't want to owe favors this early in your career. You're also a bit leery about the private docks. Whatever they cost, you can't afford it, and if they found out you didn't even have a Contract they might run you off, or even impound your ship. You sigh to yourself. Things never looked this complicated from the ground; you just assumed all those ships always knew where they were going. You ask the computer to plot an approach for the public 'port.

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

On the ground, a delegation of spaceport officials meets you as you disembark. They are required to search your ship for contraband cargo. You could get them off your case by pulling your Family name and rank, but you're not supposed to at this stage. Soon you'll be dealing in places where the name Stewart doesn't mean a thing, so you'd better learn to play by local rules. Anyway, you know the inspectors are only looking for certain drugs, weapons, and luxury items that are subject to import duties on Wellmet. You have none of these things on board, so you relax and let them search. They reassure you that the security of your ship is guaranteed in the public 'port, and they offer you any assistance you may require in arranging your stay on Wellmet. You smile and tell them you know your way around.

But you don't, really. You know your way around the Family spreads, but being on your own and anonymous brings you in contact with an entirely different Wellmet. You spend a few days just hanging around the public sections of the city, looking at it from the perspective of an outsider. How would Wellmet look to a yokel fresh across the Boundary from the Nine Worlds? Probably like a bunch of contradictions. The people here are unfailingly gracious and polite, yet a majority carry sidearms of one sort or another. Most of them care more about experience and skills than titles and rank, yet whole sections of streets are off-limits to anyone who is not a member of one of the Families. Almost everyone feels a degree of contempt for the Nine Worlds and the Boundary, but you admit that without the Boundary and the smuggling trade it generates, Wellmet would not be as prosperous a trading center as it is. And you do refer to people of the Nine Worlds as "worms," but only while they live inside the Boundary. Those that find their way out are the ones that deserve your respect. Wellmet is a place that lives by its own rules, a gigantic frontier town where one spacer crew might gun down another for short-weighing a cargo load of Fiber, but would turn around and loan the Crystals out of their drives to a hard-luck case who needed them.

As just another independent smuggler, without a contract and operating on a thin margin, you discover you have the following options on Wellmet:

(OFFII7) (2 phases) Find out what the best deals are on Wellmet for trading commodity cargo.

(8FHIA7) (4 phases) Spend a few days talking with spacers' supply merchants to find out what sorts of personal armaments you can obtain here.

(8VHKAV) (1 phase) Stop off at the Slippery Silver Tavern and hear the latest news and gossip from the spacers who frequent the place.

(KFKVIK7) (4 phases) Speak to experienced space traders around the port to learn what you can about navigation, exploration, and the hazards of space.

❖ STOP ❖

[731]

The alarm jars you from your sleep. You leap from your bed shouting, "Computer, identify danger!"

Almost before you have finished speaking, the computer is replying.

"Storm rapidly approaching, no evasive action possible at this time."

Looking at the screen you gasp in amazement. Unfortunately, the computer is correct about not being able to elude it and you prepare in the two seconds you have left for impact.

Strapping yourself into your chair while the motion of the ship is trying to throw you into the ceiling, walls and floor is no easy task. You finally manage to accomplish it, though, and watch your life flash before your eyes in relative stability.

You have never seen a storm of such magnitude and have no idea how to ensure your own survival. The computer screen shows the storm's most intense points and you come up with an idea.

"Computer, use all thrusters and bring us down below the winds."

"Affirmative."

You cannot tell from the motion of the ship how successful the maneuver has been, at least not for a few minutes. Then the easing of the turbulence confirms that the ship has evaded the worst of the winds.

You are surprised at just how far you've had to come to escape the monstrous storm. You are not all that easy about being so deep in the planet's strata. The ship creaks a protest at the abuse you are subjecting it to down here. Why, it is almost as dangerous as being above right now.

Almost, but not quite. You decide to sit tight until readings tell you it is all clear.

You spend several nerve-racking days in this inhospitable environment, constantly checking the path of the storm to see if it is safe to reenter the upper strata.

Finally you get the all clear from the computer. It is none too soon either for your taste. You could almost feel the ship's hull being ripped apart by the turbulence below. You give the command to ascend.

Just as you are leaving the lower levels, you pick up a strange and exciting reading. Warp core, one of the rarest elements in the universe, is right below you.

Excitedly, you recheck the readings only to find no sign of the ore.

Disappointed, you look again and see the reading reappear, fainter now, but definitely present.

You rise to the, now safer, upper strata and ponder your new discovery. From the evidence, you would guess warp core can be found in the lower levels and something down there seems to be able to block the readings of the ore. You may now consider the option of returning to the lower strata.

It is not a safe venture nor will it be easy to actually mine the stuff if you do find it down there. Not to mention the fact that your ship may not survive another trip below.

You may choose the following option:

⟨P9BDYQ⟩ (4 phases) Go diving for warp core.

Due to the damage caused by the storm, this option has taken seven phases instead of three.

You may select this option again.

✱ STOP ✱

[732]

Life as Gironde knows it began tens of thousands of years ago when a mysterious figure called the Installer (or, in some versions, a group of Installers) placed the first machines upon the planet's metal-rich surface. The Installer needed the machines to perform a vital function: the fabrication and storage of a manufactured product whose exact nature the information net is not permitted to reveal. From the accounts of the earliest computers it is clear that the Installer wanted the machines on Gironde to perform this function independently, with no requirements for maintenance or upgrading:

"The Installer in its wisdom knew that without thought the action is purposeless, and without action the thought is purposeless, and so created them in two kinds: the computers, executors of the thought, and the robots, executors of the action. The Installer in its wisdom knew that machines would wear out and fail, and so created them with the power to replicate themselves, so that forever could the First Directive be carried out. The Installer in its wisdom knew that the metals would grow scarce and the crusts of Gironde would deform and the dual space interphase would wax and wane, and so created them with the power to modify themselves and their progeny, so that forever could the First Directive be carried out. The Installer in its wisdom knew that unforeseen changes and problems would appear, and so created them with the power to think and learn and devise solutions, so that forever could the First Directive be carried out. The Installer in its wisdom knew that even it itself might change over the spans, and so created them with the power to communicate and to recognize and respect all sentient beings who are the Installer's creations, so that forever could the First Directive be carried out."

In ages past there has been war on Gironde, which may not have been predicted by the Installer, for as the machines replicated and evolved there was competition for resources and only the best suited for their applications were supposed to survive. At first the competition was resolved by organized contests, in which those machines proving themselves the most adept at their manufacturing tasks were allowed to function while those that failed were scrapped or rebuilt. Over the centuries a few emerged that, because of some defect in their construction, refused to submit to rebuilding when it was ordered. These multiplied unchecked and learned to win the contests by attacking and overcoming their rivals. Eventually those machines that dominated were those best able to attack and defend themselves against other machines, rather

than those best able to fulfill the tasks the Installer intended. In the wars that came and went in cycles for thousands of years, even the First Directive was occasionally pushed aside as machine battled machine. The Installer took no action except to issue a Second Directive: that no sentient machine could ever leave the surface of Gironde, on pain of destruction. The Installer created the Supervisors to guard the planet against those who try to break the Second Directive.

Fifty thousand years ago the Installer stopped visiting Gironde, though the Supervisors remained. This indirectly touched off the most violent wars of all, devastating the planet and its machine intelligences. Many of the computers realized that they were facing total destruction, for if the last mobile robots were disabled, there would be nothing for the computers to do except meditate on their folly until their power sources failed. So the remaining machines bonded into the great networks to ensure that such disaster could not happen. With the wars ended, the networks now create their own Lesser Directives which govern all machines and oversee that the First and Second Directives are carried out. This is the state in which Gironde is found today.

There are a few crucial questions that the net cannot answer. It does not know any other identity for the Installer or for the Supervisors, and it will not reveal the exact terms of the First Directive or the manufacturing processes or products that the First Directive involves. It also has almost no information about events in the universe beyond Gironde, which the machines take no interest in at all, or about what other races or individuals trade with Gironde at the spaceport.

You ask the net, "Are the Supervisors machines like yourself? And do they still guard your planet?"

"The Supervisors are not computers; they are mobile individuals much like your own mobile service unit. They live within spaceships similar to yours but much larger, and they are always present within our star system."

"I didn't detect any other ships in the system on my way to Gironde. Why didn't I notice them?"

"I do not know. Perhaps your intellect is insufficient."

❖ STOP ❖

[733]


You firmly believe that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, but with the food processor acting up again, you decide just to have coffee. You don't mind the odd colors as much as the soft green fur that appears on your cereal. It's almost enough to make you swear off eating.

You spend most of the morning waiting for Monty to appear with a teacher who is willing to explain the intriguing history and philosophy of the Ascendants to you.

When the dreaded lunch hour arrives, you make the adult decision to have another cup of coffee instead of solid food. Besides, you could stand to lose a few pounds.

Mid-afternoon arrives but Monty does not. You really hate to waste time, but since you said you would be waiting at the ship for him, you really can't leave. So you gather your courage and, armed with your trusty tools, head to the galley. No hunk of machinery, food processor or otherwise, is going to get the best of you!

Hours later, the computer alerts you to the approach of two beings. You quickly grab a towel and wipe off as much gook as you can while heading toward the hatch. No machine was ever built that you couldn't handle. That old food processor is probably running better than ever now.

Continued 

Monty greets you and introduces you to a particularly large Ascendant; it towers over the two of you. After muttering something to your friend, it crouches down to what passes for a seated position, where its head is a mere three feet above your own. You swallow nervously.

It seems the creature likes the name you have given Monty and asks if you will favor it with one as well. You don't have any problem complying with this request because from the moment you saw the alien you immediately thought of your third grade teacher, Mrs. Hugo.

She had been a large lumbering woman who always seemed to be peering down at you from a lofty height. She never had to raise her voice, it just boomed out across the classroom. She also never had any problem with the students; everyone would behave because they couldn't begin to imagine the consequences of misbehaving.

So you christen the Ascendant "Hugo" and after a moment of conversation with Monty, she nods her acceptance and gives you her thanks for the wonderful name. Hugo spends the next few hours explaining Ascension's past.

Long ago, Ascendants were split into two nations who were constantly competing with one another in every conceivable area. Technology was an especially competitive field and many wonderful discoveries were made by each nation, only to be misused in the battle to be better than the other side.

Each group would think nothing of using experiments that would lay waste to vast tracts of land and kill countless innocent life forms in their race for superiority.

Inevitably, the point was reached where either side's next move would literally destroy their planet. This sobering revelation brought both nations to a stop long enough for the leaders to set up a meeting to discuss their planet's future.

There had been a growing movement in both lands that arose from the horror many Ascendants felt about the unthinking destruction and irreparable damage that had been done to their world. Historians today still love to argue as to whether or not this movement, coupled with the temporary halt in hostilities, might have been enough to push Ascension toward a new way of life. They would never know for sure, because it was at this point in time that the "Others" landed on their planet.

These strange beings from another world were a benevolent race who were concerned with the health and well being of young races. They traveled to promising worlds where the people seemed to be on the verge of self-destruction and tried to help these races find a solution to their difficulties.

They spent several years teaching the Ascendants how they could coexistence peacefully. One of the methods the Others used was to tell horrible stories about other fledgling races who essentially destroyed themselves and their own worlds with their lust for power and technology.

The Others then explained that there were several paths the Ascendants could follow, but the one they chose makes you realize how alien two races can be. Using what they learned from the Others coupled with their own knowledge of themselves and their history, the Ascendants concluded that the root of their problems was change. They had always tried to change the world and each other, and they saw where that led. If they concentrated on total stability then they would never have conflict and their people and world would be safe.

Although this meant that they would have to sacrifice the benefits of technology, everyone agreed that it would be for the best. However, it occurred to some that future generations couldn't be counted on to hold to this philosophy. And what if beings from another civilization landed and wanted to reintroduce technology, either as a form of trade or in the way of an invasion force? What could be done to protect Ascendant descendants from themselves and from outside forces?

This problem had everyone stumped until the Others brought a new device, which they had discovered long ago, to the Elders. They called it the Technology Nullifier.

It was the perfect solution to their problem. The Ascendants used the device to shut down every high-tech instrument on the planet. The nullifier was unaffected itself because the field radiated outward from the protective casing and could never be turned inward on itself or affected by another Nullifier. The Elders had made sure that the device was safeguarded from both inside and outside attacks.

The Ascendants were now able to concentrate on the business of implementing their new philosophy, whereby they would no longer change their world merely to suit themselves. Plants and animals had as much right to live an unmolested life as they did, and the Elders set forth a way of life that would grant every living thing this privilege.

"We have taken the axioms of our forefathers and carried them to one final logical conclusion. Our philosophy, therefore is complete and perfect." Hugo concludes with the air of a being who knows its beliefs are the Truth.

You are duly impressed by the dedication these beings have shown in following what to you seems an impossible way of life. But more than that, your mind is reeling under the implications of a device such as the Nullifier actually existing.

Hugo asks if you have any questions. You do, but you're not sure how to ask.

Finally you tell her how fascinated you were by the narration and ask if there's some way of finding out more about the Nullifier.

You are stunned when she tells you that although they don't allow people to visit their model she sees no reason that you couldn't just build your own and examine it to your heart's content. It is obvious that you are a bright and understanding person or you wouldn't have been interested in their history. Perhaps if you had your own model, you might carry their philosophy to other people.

She gives you a set of plans and tells you that you'll need the following to construct the device:

Technology Nullifier

- 1 Particle Catalyst
- 1 Synthetic Genius
- 1 Fuel
- 1 Tools
- 1 Iron
- 1 Medicine

If you ever have all these items and would like to build a Technology Nullifier, plot the following option:

<X6CPUB> Build a Technology Nullifier.

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

Hugo bids you farewell and lumbers off. You head back into the ship very pleased with yourself. The first thing you do is stop off at the galley and show the processor your new recipe. You explain that if things don't change pretty soon, you might try whipping up something new in the kitchen to try out on the food processor!

Later that night you sit down to the best meal you've had in weeks. Sure the carrots have an applesauce filling but you don't hold that against the processor. In fact, you think they taste better this way.

❖ STOP ❖

[734]

After several minutes of inconclusive tussling, you manage to break away from the mugger and escape down the street. Fortunately, it is still daylight and there are people about, so the mugger is somewhat restrained from using the blaster he was waving around. After this little bit of excitement, you manage to make it back to your ship without further incident.

✂ STOP ✂

[735]

Your return to Heaven goes as smoothly as it had the last time you were here. After signaling your contact and giving the password, a coded beam comes back to you, giving you instructions for an approach and landing.

You disembark and a ground crew member approaches you and asks what contract you are filling. You explain you have no contract right now but. . .

The man you are speaking interrupts you, "So just why are you here?" he asks suspiciously. "No one but contractors are supposed to land here without special permission." Here, the man signals the security guards to come over.

You nervously stammer an apology and tell him you didn't know, but you'd be glad to be on your way.

He nods his consent and you hastily make your way up the ramp to your ship. Plotting a course to take you back outside the Boundary, you think about how lucky you were that the goons weren't in a less agreeable mood.

You blast off and plan your next course of action.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[736]

It doesn't take long before it is readily apparent that you are no match for the aliens, but rather than press their advantage, the spinning creatures pull back and allow the spinner who first approached you to come to the front of the crowd.

It calls out to you, "There has been a terrible misunderstanding here. Will you allow me to approach and try to explain?"

You have nothing to lose so you signal agreement and the Tralisian cautiously makes its way toward you.

"I am called BarrBurr," the alien informs you, rotating all the while. You notice that as it rotates, its voice fades a bit, then reappears a moment later. You wonder where its mouth is. "I wish to apologize for the misunderstanding we seem to have suffered here."

The alien sees your distrustful glances at the armed crowd and tries to reassure you of their intent. "We do not approve of any technology the gods have not blessed us with personally, so my people tend to be very suspicious of off-worlders, who invariably carry a great deal of technology with them. We ask that you keep use of your machines to a minimum while visiting here."

You agree to leave your scanners behind, but insist on carrying a weapon in case of further hostile action. Fortunately, BarrBurr thinks this is a reasonable compromise.

"I will be pleased to be your guide while you are on Tralis," the creature continues. "If you will come with me, we will go to my village."

The Tralisian's voice becomes a bit louder and you are able to see that the sounds are emanating not from a mouth, but from a device hung from one of its appendages.

BarrBurr, aware of your scrutiny, offers an explanation. "We Tralisians have been favored by the gods with a holy relic which enables us to communicate with other races. We only have a few and they are irreplaceable. These are the only devices we allow in our villages.

"We must be going now if we are to reach home before nightfall."

During the trip, BarrBurr uses the time to fill you in on Tralisian history. You learn the following:

Thousands of years before the coming of the gods, BarrBurr's people were enslaved by an evil sector of the population who had a sickening disposition to spin to the right.

These wicked people used the god-forsaken methods of science to subjugate the left-spinners.

Then came the gods. They banned the evil scientific method and, through divine intervention, caused the correct thinking left-spinners to propagate, while the wicked right-spinners diminished in number.

The left-spinners abandoned the tainted cities with two exceptions: meeting visitors at the spaceport, and participating in the ever popular heretic hunts to search for the few right-spinners who were still hiding there and destroy them.

You ask why visitors come to the planet.

The alien is not offended by your bluntness and replies, "There are a lot of medicines available in the rain forests for those wishing to extract them."

You arrive at the village as BarrBurr finishes the last sentence. Even in the fading light you can see how low-tech the civilization has become. There are no artificial lights anywhere, only lanterns and candles plus what little light they get from the cooking and heating fires. Everything from buildings to clothing appears to be hand crafted. The streets are unpaved, with the exception of gravel used to fill in low areas.

BarrBurr takes you home for the evening, explaining that you will be taken on a tour of the village in the morning. You get to meet the alien's family now, however — all twenty of them.

Boy are you lucky.

BarrBurr's mate, Salonne, has just returned home from a hard day of praying for sunshine at the rain forest. You are about to suggest using sunlamps when you remember their hatred of science. You wisely decide to keep your mouth shut.

The other eighteen beings are the children, all spinning and twirling in what BarrBurr and Salonne obviously consider to be an adorable manner. You are getting nauseous. Thankfully, it is the children's bedtime and the room clears of most of the dervishes. Your stomach is not quite up to the meal you are offered, so you head off to bed as well.

In the morning, you stay in bed long enough for the reduced noise level in the other room to tell you the kids are off to school, or whatever the Tralisian equivalent is. You enter the main living area and find only Salonne there, without a translator. Through a great deal of effort, you are made to understand that you are to wait here, though you're not sure why. Salonne leaves, presumably for another hard day of prayer. You see how vital these translators are to the Tralisians if they wish to communicate with alien visitors.

Soon enough, BarrBurr returns, apologizes for the delay and explains, "The children have to be spun to school. If you are ready, we may go on our tour now."

You say you are ready and willing, and off you go.

Your opinion of the village does not improve with the morning light. You have nothing against handmade artifacts, but these people seem to have taken the worst aspects of a low-tech civilization and allowed no room for improvement. You sigh to yourself and think, "To each his own."

The village is bigger than you thought and you are hard pressed to keep track of all the turns you take. As you round another corner you are witness to an interesting sight. Before you stands a Tralisian who is actually spinning in the opposite direction!

All three of you are shocked at the confrontation, but it is the right-spinner who makes the first move, which is to spin away as fast as possible. BarrBurr is not far behind, screaming at the top of its lungs, "A spy! A spy!"

Although you are a second slower to react, you have the advantage of being able to run faster than the Tralisians. So when the right-spinner turns a corner and runs into a secret passageway, the door to which is disguised as a stone wall, only you are a witness. The left-spinners are turning the corner now and demanding to know where the spy is. You point to the next right turn and, with fingers crossed, tell them the spy went, "that-a-way."

You and BarrBurr remain behind as the rest of the group rushes off in chase.

You now have the following options:

⟨OUFOIF⟩ (4 phases) Find out more about the left-spinners' translator.

⟨KEVMKN⟩ (7 phases) Elude BarrBurr and explore the secret passage.

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

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[737]

"Give it up, Silverbeard," you command when you realize you have defeated the old space pirate. "I've come to take you in to the authorities."

"Har, har, har," is the only verbal response you receive. However, the wily old pirate takes the opportunity to swing his ship to starboard and fire a fusillade at your flank.

You have not come this far only to be taken in by a transparently obvious ploy.

"Har, har, ha. . .," you hear over the ship's speakers as Silverbeard realizes he is firing into empty space. You have taken your ship into a steep dive and come up at the unprotected underbelly of the enemy vessel, where you fire a few of your own weapons.

"Blast you, you rotten do-gooder," he sputters at you over the comscreen. You can see the massive amount of damage you have inflicted upon his ship.

"Last chance — will you come along with me peacefully or will I have to come in there and get you?" you ask.

"Sure, come and get me," he sneers as he activates a red button on his control panel. Immediately you hear a warning siren start in the background as his ship's computer announces, "Ten seconds to self-destruct. . . nine. . . eight. . ." Silverbeard heads over to a hatch marked "Emergency Escape Pod" and ducks through the doorway.

Using full thrust, you manage to escape most of the blast as Silverbeard's ship blows itself up. A technicolor flash from the explosion blinds you for an instant, but disappears in the next instant as the oxygen from the vessel's interior disperses into the empty space around. All your computer now detects in the area are pieces of debris.

You see what may be a trail left by a small vessel heading out toward the Galactic Arm, but you are not sure — it may just be the trail of one of the larger ship pieces blown out in that direction. In any event, you decide to collect pieces of the ship from the immediate area as proof that you've accomplished your mission of putting Silverbeard out of business. Even if the old pirate did escape, he no longer has a ship capable of terrorizing the space lanes.

After a short time, you have collected the remains of Silverbeard's ship to take back to Para-Para. You are eager to see what Dr. Schottky will have to say when you deliver the debris to him. Checking your chronometer, you discover that four phases have elapsed since you encountered the pirate for the last time. You are feeling very proud of yourself for accomplishing your goal.

✂ STOP ✂

[738]

The city of Wellmet, on the planet Wellmet, sprawls across the land below you. In the previous visits you've made to the city, you've learned to deal with the heavy air traffic around the many spaceports, but you still face the problem of where to land. You decide to drop at the public 'port, as far as possible from the Family-controlled sections of town.

The landing, it turns out, is not easy. You have to wait several hours just to find a suitable approach window. Once down, you have to wait for a full inspection by Customs officials, who poke around your ship squinting and scowling at your cargo and equipment. It seems they are being more thorough and taking more time than usual. Just as you are beginning to wonder what's going on, one of them calls you from outside the main hatch: "Captain, we need you to sign the papers."

You step out of the hatch. A stun beam, aimed from point blank range at the back of your neck, sends you to the ground. Still conscious, but numb from the neck down, you slam into the hard landing deck like a load of Iron.

The men who gather around you are not Customs officers. They wear no uniform at all, but they aren't making any secret of whom they represent.

"Perhaps you didn't read the fine print of your Lanza family contract," says one of the men. He looks like a skinny little runt, but only because the men he's standing next to are twice as big as he is; in fact, he's about twice as big as you. "Jasper, would you be so kind as to inform the Party of the First Part of the seriousness of such a breach?"

One of the bigger men responds, "Couldn't we just tear 'em into the Party of the Second, Third, and Fourth Parts?"

"Now, now," says the first man, "that would hardly be good business, would it? I'm sure the good smuggler here has every intention of setting things right with the Family, despite having had the bad taste to dispose of the original contracted items without delivering them to the agreed agents. Many businesspeople make the easy mistake of failing to pay attention to the small details in a complex agreement, and thereby neglect to fulfill all their obligations. Fortunately, this particular contract has a clause that covers that eventuality, which we will waste no time in putting into effect. Jorge, will you please see to it?"

Jorge signals to three other men, who step away from you and out of sight. A moment later, they reappear in your field of vision carrying a large plasma cutting torch. They spend the next two hours systematically removing every scrap of cargo from your ship. They don't even bother to force you to supply the command codes to open the loading hatches; they just cut open each bay, leaving horrible gaping holes.

When they are almost done, Valle Lanza appears at the spaceport and stands over you. "Bad slide, spacer. Stars, why to waste such a sweet deal? Fight City Hall? Got a beef? Or been paid off? Hyper silly, hyper stupid. You know, my rep's on that deal with yours. Got the Family looking at me. Bad business like that, I'll end up junior partner."

The effects of the stun weapon are beginning to wear off. You struggle to sit up. Valle looks at you, then at the last of the cargo haulers pulling away from your ship, then calls out: "Hey! Jerr! Hull's not in the contract! Nice show, but square it!"

"Doin' you a favor, vacuum. Call contract even but stay clear of Lanza jetwash. Facto being you're not to be here again, ever. Hear me? Clear." She runs after the departing haulers as you struggle into your ship's cabin.

A few hours later, a crew of shipyard workers arrive at the port and, without a word from you, begin repairing the damage to your cargo bays. When you ask them what's going on, they tell you that the work was pre-arranged and prepaid. It takes them four days to complete the repairs, during which time you get the distinct impression that you will not be welcome here once the repairs are finished.

You take off as soon as the crew departs and find yourself in orbit around Wellmet.

Because of the time needed for repairs, the attempted landing has taken five phases instead of one.

✠ STOP ✠

[739]

You were impressed at first by their ships and machines, but after further research it becomes apparent that Hemingellan technology is nothing special. From what you can tell, scientific research on the planet has come to a near-standstill. Over the past 1500 years, the Hemingella have made only minor improvements in their technology and mechanical expertise. They know space travel is possible, but show no ambition of achieving it. They even seem to have forgotten how some of their machines work, despite their rote memorization of the techniques for construction and use of the equipment.

Your studies aren't completely fruitless. By analyzing the mechanics of their flyers, you work out a way to increase the maneuverability of your own ship. A quick check with the Hemingella who are studying your vessel confirms that your ideas are sound. However, the work will have to be done here, using Hemingellan facilities. When you are done, you will have greatly improved the mobility of your ship.

You also take the opportunity to investigate a rather interesting-looking machine the Hemingella use for loading bulky goods into their fliers. The device is connected to a system of pulleys and rails along the network of branches that covers the entire work area. When the device is positioned over a crate that is too heavy for the rather frail Hemingella to lift and turned on, it emits a beam that actually draws the load up into the air. Then the machine and connected crate are drawn along the appropriate branch track until they are in position over the flier to be loaded. The "tractor beam" is then gradually dimmed as the package is lowered completely into the ship.

You think how handy a tractor beam would be to have out in space if you are in ship-to-ship confrontations. After checking with the Hemingella, you discover you can easily install such a device on your vessel. The only thing it will cost you is time.

You now have two new options:

(JGZE5M) (4 phases) Have your ship's maneuverability increased. The cost for the work will be one unit of any commodity (your choice).

⟨ZG5ETM⟩ (6 phases) Install a tractor beam in your ship.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[740]

You survey the new addition to your ship with pride. You have come to realize that if you are ever to best that wily pirate Silverbeard, you will need to beat him on his own grounds. Your ship will need to be every bit as good as his, and then some.

You are very pleased with today's work, but you're not content to rest on your laurels — now you need to find an even better improvement!

Whistling merrily, you head into your ship to whip up a good peanut butter and marshmallow sandwich as a reward to yourself.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[741]

Freddie is just thrilled to be your interpreter and is eager to begin his duties. He guides you through the great and wondrous Alkon City which proves to be nearly as interesting a place to visit as the Great Sand Waste on Leucothea. At least until you happen to look to your right while crossing a street with Freddie and see a speeding transport heading directly towards you.

Frozen with surprise, you spend the next crucial moments gaping at the vehicle as it comes closer and closer. Freddie, however, doesn't seem to be very surprised or even worried. Calmly, the little alien remains in the middle of the intersection and grabs you with one of his tentacles, thus rendering you immobile.

You, however, have different plans and try desperately to run across the boulevard. Freddie tries just as desperately to keep you in the road. Maybe he thinks you will act as a cushion between him and the vehicle. At any rate you cannot move so you do the only sensible thing, you close your eyes.

Seconds tick by but you do not feel the impact of a speeding machine crashing into your body. Cautiously you open your eyes and see Freddie looking at you like you had two heads.

"What were you trying to do, kill yourself?" Freddie asks incredulously.

"I was trying to keep body and soul together," you reply defensively.


"By running into the path of an oncoming car?"

"But the car was headed right for me!"

Freddie looks at you for a moment, then asks you if you aren't able to whurffle. You tell him that you have no idea what he is talking about.

As you continue your journey, Freddie explains that whurffling is the ability to see into the future and act accordingly. For example, both he and the driver knew that by remaining where they were standing in the road, the driver would veer safely to the left and miss you and Freddie. By your trying to rush forward to what you thought was safety, you were really putting yourself in the path of the oncoming car.

Some Alkonese are able to whurffle better than others, but all can whurffle to some extent.

Continued 

Although Freddie cannot tell you any more about whurffling, he is able to give you the following options:

⟨GWEGME⟩ (3 phases) Visit the Market.

⟨WWGGEE⟩ (4 phases) Go to the Central Library of Alkon City and learn about the history and culture of the Alkonese.

⟨CGUEOM⟩ (8 phases) Learn more about whurffling.

You may hire an interpreter each time you visit Alkon.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[742]

The emptiness of hyperspace is depressing enough without your feeling that something is wrong. A nagging sensation seems to be trying to tell you something. Eventually, you are forced to take some time and meditate on the problem; this is what you find.

You feel you are doing reasonably well in your search for the Stone. You know your next step lies in successfully exploring FLN-1.

"Computer," you call.

"Yes, Boss?"

"What will we need to blast that hatch on the asteroid in the Frog's Leg Nebula?"

"Well Boss, with the data I have now, I would say we need a good offensive weapon for our ship."

You review your present capabilities to see if you have obtained such a device since your last attempt at FLN-1.

Hmmm. It's something to think about, anyway.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[743]

You wish you could wake up, and yet you know from experience that you won't be able to — not until you die.

You're not sure which dream this will turn out to be but you sense that your dream self is approaching the dimly lit cavern where the robed figures await you. In some dreams they send you to places where you are eaten alive by one monster or crushed to death by another. Other dreams are shorter and more to the point, as the mysterious figures just kill you outright. You can hardly wait to see what awaits you tonight.

You started having the dreams when you were three days out from the planet Gen and have had one per night like clockwork. You've tried taking sleeping pills, using hypnosis, even asking the computer to sing you lullabies during the night, but nothing seems to help, so you may as well get on with this one.

The cavern is dimly lit, as usual, and filled with faceless dark-robed figures, as usual. They part before you, forming a pathway that leads to an even darker cave. Oh great. This is the *really* scary dream.

As you pass through the cave entrance you hear the sound of dripping water echoing through the chamber. Although there is very little light you can tell that the cave is just the right size for a very large animal, or a big hairy monster, to feel right at home.

You can now hear the sound of a large animal breathing deeply. "Good," you think, "maybe I can sneak past it this time while it sleeps."

CRASH-RATTLE-THUNK. You have tripped over what sounds like a pile of bones(?!!!!). You freeze but it's too late. An arm casually reaches out from a recessed area in the wall. Sharp claws snag your clothes and flesh, and before you can even finish screaming you are dead.

You wake up in a cold sweat, as usual.

"Good morning, Boss. Glad to see that you're awake."

You turn to glare at the computer while you force your hands to loosen their grip on the sheets.

"Didn't I tell you to monitor my sleep patterns and wake me when I began to have The Nightmare?" you snap. Sometimes you think that the old heap of bytes has a malicious streak and likes to see you thrashing about, screaming in terror.

"Sorry, Boss. I really was going to wake you but something came up first. Since you *are* awake now, I can ask you whether or not I should blow that ship out of the sky?"

"WHAT ship?" you demand while slipping on your bathrobe.

"The one that's been trying to blow *us* out of the sky. I'm getting tired of dodging its missiles."

"Have you tried hailing the ship to find out what it wants?" you ask while peering at the monitors, all thoughts of The Nightmare gone for now.

"Well...er...no, not as such."

You give the computer another withering glare and put through a call to the other ship.

To your surprise the response is in English, an archaic dialect of Earth Standard. The captain apologizes and says that when she didn't receive a greeting she had to assume that you were an enemy ship and therefore began her attack. Since you have decided to be civilized after all, she directs you to follow her to the spaceport.

While your computer is preparing to land, you run a geo-survey on the planet and discover that it has an earth-like ocean/dry land ratio. However, all of the land is massed into one huge continent. Furthermore, there seems to be only a few arable areas; the rest of the land is an enormous desert. The spaceport you are tracking is near the largest "oasis," just a few miles inland from a salt water ocean.

As you arrive in the city of Drofflic, you are greeted by a rather gruff man in uniform. After a brief interrogation you are directed to the "Hospitality Center." From the looks of the place, you gather that this immigration center has been inactive for quite some time.

From the map and brochures you get here you find your options to be:

⟨EHMAN6⟩ (3 phases) Visit the commodities market.

⟨UHOAF6⟩ (3 phases) Visit the city archives.

⟨EXMCNU⟩ (4 phases) Visit the Temple of Nil.

⟨UXOCFU⟩ (4 phases) Take the sandshuttle to the city of Markov.

❖ STOP ❖

[744]

You feel very proud of yourself now that you have progressed from juggling mere balls to juggling more imaginative things. Why hadn't you thought of this before?

You prepare your first throw, three hard boiled eggs weaving a mesmerizing pattern in the air. One, two, thr...

"Excuse me, Boss, but I have a question for you," interrupts your ever-faithful computer.

Splat! It would appear that the eggs weren't hard boiled after all, as evidenced by the mess you now have all over the deck.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to startle me when I'm trying to concentrate on this trick?" you begin to sputter at the computer.

"Sorry, Boss, but I did ask if I could interrupt," your computer says defensively.

You grudgingly agree that such was the case.

"Anyway, I wanted you to know I have found and decoded another message on Vanessa Chang's map. Would you be interested in hearing what it says?"

The computer now has your complete attention and you tell it to go ahead.

"The piece I have discovered says 'The planet Bugeye is a source of the substance known as Primordial Soup.' That's all the information on this particular section, but I'll let you know if I find anything else."

You mull this over as you get a mop to clean up the gooey mess on the deck.

❖ STOP ❖

[745]

You perform an extensive study of the crust of Arthlan, surveying vast tracts from aboard your ship. Unfortunately, you cannot always land in the interesting places you most want to examine because of the harsh surface conditions, so you do the best you can from the air. You wish to learn how the planet formed and why it has assumed the orbit it is in.

It soon becomes clear that those are two entirely different questions. Arthlan started out as a normal planet in a normal orbit, well within the "life belt" orbital zone of its triple primary. This is evident simply from the size and composition of the planet. The process by which inner planets form would simply not allow a planet like Arthlan to start out in a cometary orbit. The dry sea beds indicate two other important pieces of evidence: that Arthlan once had seas, and that it once had the type of continental crustal tectonics that cause sea beds to form. Arthlan is poorer in heavy elements and smaller than Earth, but the planets' early natural histories may have been similar.

It is hard to find any evidence that there was once life on Arthlan, besides the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere. You find no fossils or remains. On the other hand, the planet's present orbit causes it to be repeatedly scorched and frozen as its distance from the suns change, and this could easily have wiped out all traces of life within a very short time. The intense volcanism is another effect of the erratic orbit: when the planet passes close to the suns it is subject to enormous tidal stresses; these can be strong enough to heat a planet's core and cause volcanoes and earthquakes.

You turn your attention to the problem of what might have nudged Arthlan out of its original orbit. Your suspicion falls immediately on the most recent crater. Would an impact or explosion powerful enough to create a crater that size be sufficient to push Arthlan into its current orbit? You investigate the problem on your computer, and the answer is no. However, the total effect of six such impacts or explosions would have been sufficient. The five older craters would have done most of the work, and the latest one could have provided the final push that has doomed Arthlan to crash into one of its suns. However, the pushes would have to have happened in a precise way, and at just the right times, when the configuration of the triple sun, the rotational position of the planet, and the positions of outer planets were exactly right.

You look for evidence of how long ago the first nudges took place, but you find little evidence to go by. The effects of the orbit on the crust render the normal means of assessing geological age useless. Only the rocks know, and they aren't talking.

✱ STOP ✱

[746]


Your ship cannot withstand the beams, at least not for more than a second or two. You and your computer figure this out in the same instant: you when you feel the ship shudder like a small black hole had hit square on the hull, and the computer when it notices that the temperature sensors on the outer skin of the ship indicate a temperature that is very close to the melting point of the metal. You and your computer also have the same reaction: get out of there!

Fortunately the computer has the faster reflexes, and it does the right thing before you have a chance to mess it up. It accelerates the ship directly away from the beam. You probably would have tried to move laterally, and the beam would have tracked you.

"It's a heavy particle beam, Boss," says the computer. "Powerful but impossible to focus tightly. It follows a square law: if we double the distance to it, its intensity is only one fourth."

"That also means if we'd been closer, it would have been even worse," you point out.

"That's true. It makes an excellent planetary defense weapon."

Continued 

You check on everyone's status. You all seem to have had the same thought in mind — "Run!" No one was able to withstand the heavy particle beam at close range.

"Har, har, har!" gloats Silverbeard. "That's how I repel boarders. Right over the side with the anchor chain! Har, har, har!"

Unfortunately, Silverbeard may be justified in his confidence. Not one of your ships had the defensive capability even to approach the planet under fire from the particle beams. You'll have to find a way, if you're ever going to take Outpost.

✂ STOP ✂

[747]

You study the insides of the octahedron more closely. The mechanism looks almost like a navigation system, or perhaps an experiment in gravitation.

"Boss," interrupts your computer over your audio link, "I'm picking up anomalous. . ."

You don't wait for the rest of the sentence. You begin climbing immediately. As you pull at the ropes you look back and see a small green light glowing on the far wall of the room. You are sure it wasn't there before. The computer is saying something about detecting sudden gravitational fluctuations and the possibility of a warp field being energized far below the surface.

"Is it bad?" you gasp, halfway up the shaft and already winded.

"Something down there is generating a lot of energy and putting it into a spatial disturbance similar to what a hyperdrive generates. I'm picking it up on the sensors I use to locate other ships in space."

You burst forth from the outer hatch and slide down the ropes with all the speed available. The heat from the rope as it passes through your palms is felt even through your gloves. You feel a tremor as you reach your ship.

Your computer now has more good news. "The energy is rising, and the field is unstable. There will be an explosion in. . ."

"Shut up and talk with your boosters! Get us out of here!" You're halfway out of the atmosphere by the time you get the hatch closed, and there's no time to reach your acceleration couch. You hug the deck like it was your favorite thing in the whole galaxy.

The explosion hits you just as you clear the upper atmosphere. The shock wave sends you crashing around the interior of your ship as all loose articles become flying projectiles. The noise is louder than anything you can remember assaulting your eardrums.

A burst of radiation overwhelms your ship's deflectors activating all of your alarms and adding to the deafening cacophony. Your drive field is hit by a wall made of energy of every known electromagnetic frequency and the ship lurches wildly as the thrusters are first unbalanced, then fail altogether.

"Computer, are you alive?"

"No, Boss. I'm only a computer."

"One of these days it's going to be 'daisy, daisy' time for you," you grumble at the machine. "What's our status?"

"We're in a good orbit. The drives are overheated but they should be functional when they cool down. The deflectors caught most of the radiation, your suit is rated for most of the rest, and the amount that got through is definitely nonlethal."

"Nonlethal? What does that mean?"

"It means a week in the med unit for you, Boss, unless you aren't fond of hair or children."

Before you go into radiation treatments you make a new scan of the planet. Where there used to be five identical craters arrayed with geometric precision, there are now six. The new crater is the same diameter as the others, but it is much deeper. Its center is glowing brightly all the way up to visible red, spilling enormous amounts of heat into space. At the new crater's rim, Arthlan's crust is twisted and piled into mountains of debris that reach higher than any mountains on Earth. Nor is the rest of the planet unscathed. The winds are blowing with hurricane fury all over the planet, jagged cracks have riddled seabeds that were once smooth, and the dust concentration in the atmosphere has tripled. The ambient radioactivity that you measured before is insignificant compared with the levels now. Before, the radioactivity spread evenly over the surface, and was emitted by long-lived elements that gave off radiation at a slow steady rate. Now, the radioactivity is of a type given off by hot, short-lived isotopes and it is most intense in the area around the new crater. Already, the fierce winds of the upper atmosphere are carrying the radioactive dust across Arthlan's face.

One other thing has changed: the planet's orbit. The explosion has given the planet a sufficient nudge during its inward fall that the orbit is now more unstable than before. Where before its apogee was well beyond the range of the chaotic movements of the suns, the planet's comet-like loops will now take it inside the trinary star system. It won't happen for a few orbits yet, but within a few years Arthlan is doomed to fall into one of its suns.

At the computer's insistent urging, you give up your study of the planet and set the medical unit for a week of radiation treatment. You'll still be in orbit when you wake up, a week from now.

Due to the radiation treatment you require, this option has taken seven phases instead of three.

✱ STOP ✱

[748]

The wrecked satellite is still in very nearly the same location as it was for your last visit. Perhaps at some point it will begin to drift randomly through space, but for now it seems quite content where it is. You have the same option as before.

✱ STOP ✱

[749]

You decide to try a longshot gambit. You figure the alien ships couldn't be having an easy time tracking your ship, not with Gironde scattering starlight and glowing infrared behind you. Perhaps you could make yourself so difficult to track that they will lose you entirely.

Your first step is to cut your drives. Shutting down cold would be best, but just a little too risky if your ploy fails. Instead you cut down to just a few microgravities of acceleration, leaving yourself just enough residual velocity to drift out of the system. The next step is to turn off your life support systems. This will cut down on the thermal emissions from your hull as the outer hull cools to the temperature of space. In your compartment, you can survive for several hours this way. Turning off your deflector screens is more risky, since it means you are vulnerable to micrometeor impacts and unusual stellar radiation, but at your low velocity the risk is minuscule. Finally you turn off all of your sensors except for those that are purely passive listeners, so that no one can find you by homing in on your own detector beams. The black ships are making no attempt to hide themselves, and still show clearly on your viewscreen.

There is one other thing you must turn off: your computer. This is more difficult, but necessary, since the small amount of ordinary radio waves it produces could give you away. It takes several minutes to prepare for a total computer shutdown, since you must carefully set a number of emergency manual controls. When you are ready, you disengage the computer from your console and power it down.

At that instant the enemy fleet disappears. Only the stars remain on your screen, exactly as they were.

You swear under your breath, then again out loud. Your mind races. You recall how your ships sensors work: the images picked up are split in half. Half go directly to your readouts and viewscreens. The other half are processed and image-enhanced... by your computer. The same for the communication channels. The same for the drive controls. The same for every single solitary system on your ship, right down to the coffee maker! There never was any fleet of black spaceships. Your ship's computer has been displaying false data on your readouts and viewscreens. It could even override your drive controls to simulate the effects of a "hit." Your computer has been playing around with you.

Which means that someone has been playing around with your computer.

Cursing, you turn your drives, sensors, screens, and life support back on. You make a manual landing at the spaceport, ignoring all communication from the ground, your computer still shut down. Inside the spaceport a few curious robots wheel out to investigate what to them must seem a dead ship. You let them wonder as you set to work.

It takes several days to reconfigure your ship's computer from scratch. You spend hours poring over nearly-incomprehensible technical manuals as you root out the damaged routines and modified code that the Gironde computers have implanted in the system. With the help of a small backup computer, powered down and therefore unaffected during your stay on Gironde, you trace down the communications routes by which the false code was installed and add screening routines to make sure that it doesn't happen again.

In the process you learn a great deal about ship's computers and how their sensors, image recognizers, processors, language and personality modules, and control circuits interact to give your ship the capabilities it has. The way that the Gironde intelligences were able to modify the central logic of the system via what were supposed to be mere linguistic symbol-recognition channels is especially interesting. Your computer, when it is repaired, may be able to perform a similar trick against an enemy's computer system in the future. Though the degree of subtlety will not be close to what happened to your own ship, you should at least be able to confuse or disorient unprotected enemy computers if conditions are right.

First, though, you must complete your repairs and put your own safeguards in place. You chuckle when you remember how your computer called you its mobile service unit; you never dreamed it would become the truth.

When you are finished your computer is back to its normal, profusely-apologizing self, and you are confident that it will be resistant to future tampering. However, you get no apologies from the computers of Gironde. When you cautiously reestablish a communication channel, Earth Standard voice only, the systems deny any wrongdoing and claim to have no awareness of the deception. "Why would we perform such a deceitful act," they ask, "when the real Supervisor fleet is out there for all to see?"

If you're going to get any satisfaction on this matter, your only recourse is to plot option:

(RH4AX6) (3 phases) Confront the Core, Gironde's highest computer authority, again.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[750]

Jaquar does, in fact, turn out to be a colony carved into a hundred different asteroids. Despite having originally evolved on a world with a considerably greater gravitational field than Earth's, the Darscians seem to have adjusted remarkably well to a life of virtual weightlessness.

You, however, are amazed that anyone could live in such an environment. The lack of gravity and atmosphere would have discouraged virtually any other sentient race from attempting to establish a viable colony here. Your estimation of the Darscian people as a whole has increased greatly.

Jaquar, once you get used to its unique geography, is much like any other inhabited area; as with the other planets you have explored, you are faced with a number of possible uses for your time:

⟨UOOFI⟩ (3 phases) Visit the Interstellar Trader's Market, located on the same rock as the spaceport.

⟨U8OHFA⟩ (7 phases) Spend some time studying the technology involved in the fantastic manipulation of mass and inertia the Darscians seem to have accomplished in their weightless environment.

⟨AO6FPI⟩ (5 phases) Learn about the robot-controlled shuttles the Darscians have equipped with jump engines to transport goods between the asteroids.

✂ STOP ✂

[751]

You find that if you clear the coconuts away and remain in the area, the little green men will roll more nuts down at you. What fun!

After several more days go by, you have collected enough for another unit of Fiber. As if you really care.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[752]

Reluctantly taking Josuel as your guide, you journey into the forests where most of the remaining human population live. The conditions there are a bit of a shock. You expected to see a low-technology society like that of the spaceport town. Instead you see utter squalor of a kind not seen inside the Boundary for centuries. The people are barely articulate and have no technology at all. They shrink in primitive fear from your clothing and Josuel's weapon. Josuel points out the elaborate cloth shelters in which they live, the few scraps of iron they use for cooking utensils, the open fires, the game pens filled with pigs.

"Boundary good them no, hay?" says Josuel. "Better is here than" — he gestures to the sky — "Cathedral, no one lives, but other worlds, no no one at all. Who knows?" It seems that Josuel has learned quite a bit from other spacefarers. He is saying that, if a world Cathedral's size could be reduced to this, how many smaller colonies have died completely? Yet Josuel speaks as if to recite simple fact, without bitterness or accusation.

There does not seem to be much to learn here for your purposes, however. You manage to communicate to Josuel that you wish to learn more about what happened on Cathedral at the time of the establishment of the Boundary. He leads you to the home of a woman known locally as the Prophet.

The Prophet is in fact a young woman who lives, not in isolation, but on the very edge of the populated region. You find her outside a small wooden hut which unlike the others has been painted white. You tell Josuel to greet her according to local custom, but before he can say a word the Prophet addresses you directly.

"Tell the story to all who will listen, is how it begins," she begins, staring upward and reciting from memory. "For the fathers of my mothers and the mothers of my fathers were there, they saw, and they wish it to be told, though their writings are destroyed and their lives hunted. There was a ship that sailed in search of God, a ship full of men who wanted to find God and bring God back home so that they could worship Him. It was from this cathedral the archangel ship went out, and promised to return. But it returned bearing lies and a ship full of liars, who said God is not there, look for Him elsewhere. For the fathers of my grandmothers were on the ship, and they met the Gods. The ship met the Gods on man's farthest outpost. God gave them the truth, which they hid in a place unknown, and returned with lies instead. There, where the archangel fell, the truth they hid. Their shame diminishes us all."

As the woman completes her recitation, you notice that a knot of locals has gathered in a circle around you. The woman retreats into her hut. You step forward to ask questions, but Josuel holds you back. "Her's not even know what are saying," he tells you. "Family hers tells the song parent to child, they remember and say." Josuel says a few words in Cathedral dialect, and the people part to let you by. They do not follow you as you return to the spaceport.

You ask Josuel, "Do all the groups live like that? In tents, with no power or running water?"

"Many better, some worse," he replies. "When astronauts come trade, it's better for all. When the stars are empty, it's hard. Some folks have pipes for water and wires for lights. These have piggies for meat, more useful."

❖ STOP ❖

[753]

Outside one of the domes is a large steel and glass aquarium that the Darscians are probably using to research the native sea life. You fly your ship over to the aquarium and hover above it.

You gleefully dump the entire contents of your garbage tank on the aquarium. The steel and glass structure, unable to support the hail of compressed garbage falling from the sky, shatters and collapses. The hydrochloric acid from the tanks spills out and forms a large puddle around the remains of the building. The creatures that lived inside scurry to the nearest place of safety; some have to be carried. A number of Darscians gape at you from behind sealed windows, shocked at what you have done.

"Heh heh heh!" you chortle.

❖ STOP ❖

[754]

The ship you see on your screen is registered to the Institute for Space Exploration, so you decide to make contact. The man who answers seems friendly enough; you introduce yourself and learn that his name is Christopher.

You spend many hours deep in conversation with your new acquaintance. When you are both ready to sign off, you are pleasantly tired.

While you lay back and relax, you reflect on some of the things Chris said to you. One piece of information could be useful to you at some point. You were told that the design for a Super Space Suit can be obtained on the planet Firthe.

You make a note of the information before you allow yourself to drift off to sleep.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[755]

All offworld trading on Medsun is conducted by the human colonists; it is one of the few elements of life on the colony that is not shared with the native Medsunians. The natives never developed space travel before the colonists' arrival, and show no interest in it now. The task of negotiating with space traders is undertaken by colonists who, you later learn, were once spacefarers themselves.

"Certainly a colony with a population this large has a considerable need for imported goods from higher-technology worlds," you explain to one Hiram Leadbelly, former smuggler and now chief human interstellar import/export manager on Medsun. "Medicines, computers, tools, and crystals are what you need to improve the colony's standard of living."

"I can understand how a person might feel that way," says Hiram. "But most folks here like the world the way it is. All we need is a good supply of radioactives to keep the electric company happy, and process chemicals for controlling sewage and keeping the ecosystem in balance. Oh, and the crews down south are still building bridges, and using up Fiber like it's going out of style, so I'm authorized to pick up some of that."

"What sort of chemicals?" you ask.

"Oh, process chemicals is just an old name for what you call Fluids. I should have remembered, since I used to haul them around the Void myself and I never knew what they were for either. They're just chemical reagents and catalysts used for turning one kind of glop into another — toxic glop into fertilizer, metabolic waste glop into pollution-free fuels, that sort of thing. We use it for sewage treatment and papermaking and such. With a lot more of it you can change a whole planet's atmosphere, not that anyone would ever want to do such a thing."

"So your only needs are radioactives, fiber, and fluids? What about your industries?"

"We don't have any, except what I said. We and the locals get by just fine with what's at hand." You are ready to argue with him about that statement, but somehow the way he says it makes you realize that the Medsunians are indeed just fine the way they are. An hour from now you will wonder why you gave in so easily, but it all makes sense at the moment.

The only thing that is produced in abundance on Medsun is Culture, and that is what Hiram Leadbelly offers you in trade. He will supply one Culture for one Fluids, two Culture for one Fiber, and three Culture for one Radioactives.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘
