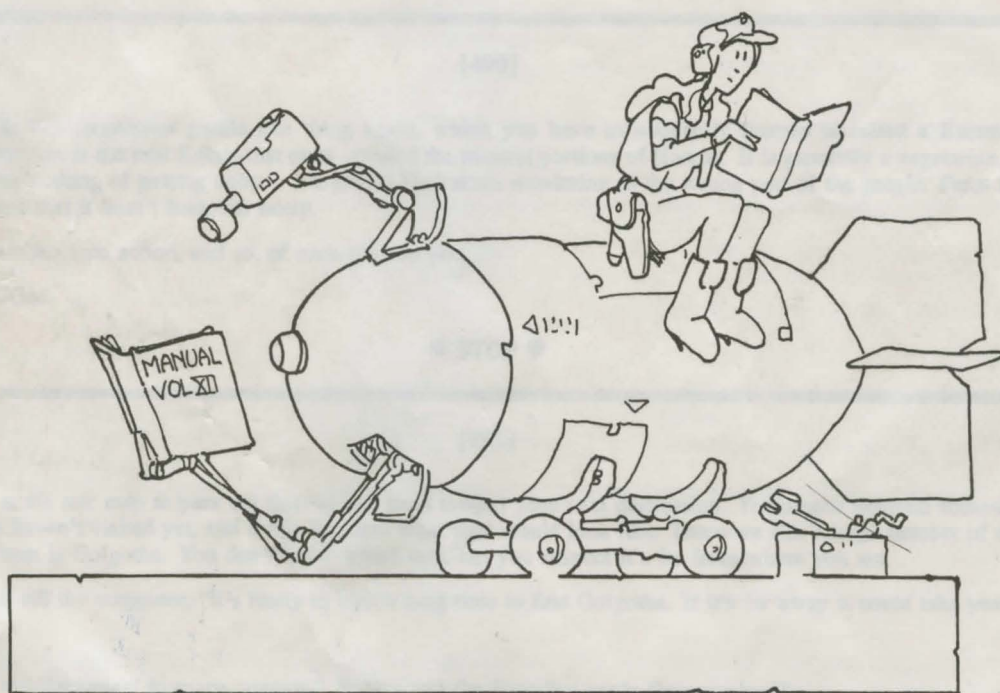


STAR SAGA: TWO™

BOOK H

TEXT 489-560



STAR WARS SAGA: TWO

BOOK II

15 / 1 489-260



[489]

You decide to return to the ocean depths of Psorus in an attempt to collect some of the rare and valuable substance known as Primordial Soup. Gritting your teeth, you climb into your environmental suit and grab the necessary equipment. You also realize that you may again have to confront the gigantic reptile known as the hydropsor. This time you hope you are better prepared.

Returning to the beach your computer has identified as the best spot for finding Primordial Soup, you enter the water. Walking slowly along the ocean floor, you again allow yourself to follow the dramatic drop into the dark depths below. You set up the equipment and wait. It is quiet for a few moments, but then you feel a familiar surge of swirling water, and a tentacle uncoils from out of a crevice in the murky depths.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[490]

Your opponent is that monstrous gorilla-like thing again, which you have subsequently learned is called a Bammfer. It is a native Hadrakian species, common in the rain forests that once covered the tropical portions of Hadrak. It is generally a vegetarian, but is functionally omnivorous, and thinks nothing of putting away a full-grown Hadrakian wandering in the wrong part of the jungle. From the way this one is eyeing you, you suspect that it hasn't been fed lately.

The Bammfer lumbers into action, and so, of necessity, do you.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[491]

You are staring at the star map to pass the time as you head toward your next destination. You amuse yourself sometimes by making up names for planets you haven't visited yet, and trying to guess what they would look like. There are still a large number of unidentified planets on the map. One of them is Golgotha. You don't know which one, but you suspect it's far from where you are.

"You know," you tell the computer, "It's likely to take a long time to find Golgotha. If it's far away it could take years."

"Maybe, Boss."

"How long was the *Archangel* in space, anyway? Back when the Founders made their voyage?"

"There's some dispute about the actual date of their departure, Boss. Consensus puts it about the year 2480. If they returned at the peak of the Plague, that would make it about ten years in space."

"Hmm. Long enough to have gone just about anywhere."

"The *Archangel* was bigger and slower than us, Boss. They would have had time to go from the Nine Worlds to the far end of the Arm about four times, if they went in a straight line. More likely they wandered around and made long stopovers."

"Hmm. Maybe we should try to find that other planet on the map."

"Which planet, Boss?"

"The one you found that was probably visited by the Founders along the way. If that was one of their stopovers, maybe some record of their visit will still be there. It could even give us a clue to where Golgotha is."

"That was well over three hundred years ago, Boss. Don't get your hopes up."

"Sure, but it couldn't hurt to look," you conclude. "Keep an eye out for — what was that planet's name? — Unaria. That's it, Unaria."

✕ STOP ✕

[492]

The large crowd gathered to witness your combat cheers lustily as you are defeated. Boos and jeers are reserved for your opponent, condemned by the gods to further existence on the mortal plane. You are left bleeding in the sand until after your foe has received a ribbon of citizenship in a short — fortunately for you — ceremony.

You lose consciousness at that point, waking some time later in what is obviously an advanced hospital. At the end of the week you are released from the hospital and find yourself healed nearly up to your previous level. However, you are still in the Enclave and must earn your citizenship before you can do much of anything on this planet.

You may select this option again.

✕ STOP ✕

[493]

You are doing the best you can to stop the Clathrans.

But time is running out.

If you need guidance, perhaps another visit to The Battle, Inc. is in order.

✕ STOP ✕

[494]

"Tell me about the Message, Darkwhistler. I know that many humans share this dream, in one form or another. What does it mean? Where is it leading us?"

"I'm afraid, human, that I can only be cryptic about the message you describe, since some aspects of it lead to the Core, where our powers do not extend. Other aspects lead to the planet Heliol, which is near the Core but not quite within it. You — meaning all humans — are the messenger, and perhaps the message itself. You must ask yourself what the three parts are: who is sending? Who is receiving? And what does the message itself convey? Part of it relates to the lack of limitations in humans, part of it involves movement from the Fringe to the Core, and the rest of it is obscure."

"Gee, thanks!" you say, sarcastically.

"I'm sorry, human. I'm trying the best I can. But perhaps you cannot know what the Message is until you deliver it. Perhaps its content depends on the who and the how of its delivery. It is hidden from me; you must go to the Core and find out for yourself."

✕ STOP ✕

[495]

While tuning your improved skip radio, you intercept a talk program originating from Norstar, in the Nine Worlds. Most of it is the usual drivel: political mud-slinging, iguana cooking recipes, and celebrity hyping, but one short segment catches your attention. The speaker is a psychiatrist named Moe Reed, from Harvard University:

"... and suicides are on the rise as well, increasing 15% this year over last. I attribute these signs of societal breakdown to the recent revelations of human activity beyond the Boundary. No longer is our life safe and structured; the universe is boundless again, and many of those with fundamental insecurities are unable to cope. I would look for more of the same to come."

"Thank you very much, Dr. Reed, for interpreting this year's mental health trends. Our next guest is a six year old pianist already acclaimed across the Nine Worlds as a virtuoso..."

Much to your relief, the transmission fades away.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[496]

You return, safe and undetected, to the fringes of the Karnossus system. The intense white sun is far away. The Clathran worlds and starship fleets that cluster around it are all but invisible at this range. But you know the Dodecahedron is there, absorbing part of that sun's energy and driving the Dual Space Interphase ever wider.

"We have to destroy it somehow."

Your computer answers like you were really talking to it, and not yourself. "That doesn't sound possible, Boss. The Clathrans have enough force in the system to repel even a large-scale invasion. In that low orbit, the sun itself protects the Dodecahedron from attack, and none of our weapons will harm it anyway."

"Don't rule out any options. I don't care if it has to be a suicide run."

"I understand, Boss. But it won't work. We need help to find a way past those fleets and to find a weapon that can destroy the Dodecahedron."

You silently acknowledge the computer's words. And there's only one place you can go where you might be able to get that sort of help.

"We'll have to go to the Hadrakians, to The Battle. They've asked for our help to find the Karnossus system. We've found it. Maybe they'll help us in return."

"Right, Boss. Let's get out of here."

You have not landed in the Karnossus system. You are aloft in the Karnossus trisector.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[497]

You have made contact with a graduate student named Michael Rave, broadcasting from his Harvard University laboratory.

"Go ahead, Michael."

"Tell me about the Galactic Arm. What are the aliens like?"

"Just folks. Except the Clathrans — they're uglier. Tell me about the Nine Worlds."

"There's more than Nine, now, as I'm sure you're aware. The politicians have never worked harder, trying to get things sorted out. The Church, the Corporations, the University, the Space Patrol, the KEPHers, and even the New Men, they all want their say."

"The KEPHers? The New Men?"

"The Keep Earth Pure and Human committee; Right wing radicals. The New Men is an organization for those with paranormal abilities. I'm thinking of joining myself."

"What's your ability?"

"I can see inside machines. They don't break for me, like they do for everyone else. But hey, I've got papers to grade. Good luck!"

"Good luck to you, Michael Rave."

❖ STOP ❖

[498]

You walk over to the area known as the "weapons district," where you have learned that a wide assortment of personal weaponry is available for purchase. The streets on the way there are virtually deserted; only the androids seem to be unaffected by the presence of the Clathrans. You see no duels at all because there are no Mardahlans walking around.

When you arrive at the block where the weapon stores were located, you find the street blockaded. A solitary Clathran soldier guards the area, and he is staring directly at you as you come around the corner. Fortunately, he mistakes you for an android. You duck quickly back around the corner before he can realize his mistake. Apparently the Weapons District is closed.

❖ STOP ❖

[499]

Due to the limited landing space on Holoth, the local Hadrakian merchants have taken to outfitting their ships with as many cargo bays as possible. This enables them to get the most bang for the buck out of their trading runs. Consequently, the Holoth Flap and Fly Space Construction Yard does a brisk business in Cargo Bay Expansion units. However, when you approach the Settled One who seems to be in charge of taking orders, she looks over your ship and informs you that there is not enough available space to install any more cargo bays. Unlucky!

❖ STOP ❖

[500]

You are escorted quickly to the back offices of The Battle, Incorporated, where a large meeting has already been arranged. The Hadrakians are intensely interested in the Karnossus system, and you spend several grueling hours reporting to them on all of your observations. Using sensor data stored in your ship's computer, you paint for them a full picture of the Clathrans' base, from the maneuvering fleets on the outskirts of the system all the way to the sun itself and its close parasite, the Dodecahedron. Your presentation is punctuated by frequent questions, which you answer as best you can. In particular, the Hadrakians seem to be looking for some kind of central command point in the Karnossus system, something they can sabotage with maximum impact on the Clathran military.

You are given a rousing round of applause at the conclusion of your presentation. A Settled One then takes the floor and addresses you:

"Well done, Human. You have brought us information of incalculable value. When your report has been thoroughly analyzed, I hope that it will show us a way to hurt the Clathrans at their very center."

"Can you see such a way now?" You ask.

You see claws clicking and ears laid back throughout the audience. "In truth," says the Settled One, "Nothing immediately presents itself. The system is extremely well defended and very large. Clathran military assets are scattered throughout it, not concentrated in any one location. It would take a weapon capable of destroying the entire system to affect their command structure significantly."

"In that case," you say, "May I ask for your assistance in one small matter? The Dodecahedron I described: I believe it to be the source of the rising Dual Space Interphase level, which in turn is causing the mass insanity of my race and the downfall of human civilization. If nothing else in the Karnossus system, I would like to destroy it. I came here seeking a weapon for the job."

The Settled One begins to speak, and you can tell from the diplomatic set of her foreshoulders that you are not going to get what you need. She is pre-empted though, by a question from the back of the room.

"You say that this dodecahedron is radiating Dual Space Waves?"

"I'm not sure it's a wave phenomenon," you answer. "But it's raising the Interphase throughout the galaxy. I view it more as the faucet from which the effect is pouring, filling the entire galaxy."

"Yes, yes, that would make sense. Our mathematics are different, but the concept is the same. You are sure that this dodecahedron is the cause?"

"It's taking in enough energy from the sun to power such an effect, and my variometer went off the scale as I approached it."

The moderator cuts back in. "Dr. Fenton-Lee, do you see a possibility in this?"

Your questioner approaches from the back of the room. She turns out to be a rumpled old Settled One in an untidy red uniform, with that aura of disregard for the material world that just screams "Scientist!"

"In my lab we have been studying Dual Space for some time. The rising Interphase level has had little effect on us Hadrakians — except perhaps to improve the performance of our divine visions slightly — and so has been a neglected area of study. For instance, our own directional variometer has recorded a peak Dual Space band in the direction of the Karnossus system for three years now, but the information was never pursued. Perhaps if it was, we would have found the planet sooner." This causes a stir among the assembled officials.

Dr. Fenton-Lee continues. "As a theoretical exercise, though, my associates and I have recently designed and modeled a Dual Space Inverter, which would counteract the effects of a device like the Dodecahedron. Our initial success with this project would lead me to believe that the Inverter could be rebuilt, perhaps as a weapon, in a size sufficient to destroy the entire Dodecahedron."

"That's great!" you burst out.

"Yes, most interesting, Dr. Fenton-Lee," says the moderator. "Perhaps you can get together with the human after this session to discuss your discoveries. But for our purposes the military importance of the Dodecahedron is limited, and in any case an attack on such a well-defended target is almost out of the question. We must return to a discussion of our military options. . ."

Curiously, you notice that Dr. Fenton-Lee has not stepped down from the podium. "But don't you see?" she interrupts, pounding a fist against her head for emphasis. "If, say, a Dual Space Inversion Bomb were detonated on the surface of the Dodecahedron, there would be an immediate plunge in the local Dual Space level, a sharp constriction in the Interphase, leading to a completely disallowed reality state. The contents of a large area of space would simply be rendered unable to exist. The Dodecahedron would be instantaneously destroyed, along with most of surrounding space."

"You mean a gigantic explosion?" asks an admiral in the front row.

"I'm not exactly sure what it would look like," Fenton-Lee responds. "But given the amounts of energy involved, I wouldn't bet on anything in the Karnossus system surviving."

This statement is greeted by an immediate uproar, as each of the military officers present tries to be first to support the idea of destroying the Dodecahedron. Eventually, the moderator regains control.

"There is your answer, human. Dr. Fenton-Lee can explain to you how to build the Dual Space Inversion Bomb, and you can then use it to destroy the Karnossus system." She makes it sound so simple.

"Wait a minute!" you say, voicing one of your two objections. "I've seen the Karnossus system. There're going to have to be a lot fewer Clathran ships there before any kind of bombing mission is possible."

A high-ranking naval official in the front row stands up and answers you. "As to that, the Battle of Hadrak is approaching, when we will no longer run away from the Survey. If our forces, and those of our allies, are large enough, perhaps the Clathrans will be forced to commit some of their reserves out of the Karnossus system."

"That would help," you acknowledge. You hesitate about mentioning your second objection, the thought that this bombing run might be a suicide mission. You suspect that the Hadrakians have already figured that out. *Oh well, you think. It's my race that's going insane. It's the least I can do.*

"It's time to end this meeting," states the moderator. "If Dr. Fenton-Lee can stay behind for a moment, to explain the Inversion Bomb concept to the human, I would be appreciative." The military officials exit, leaving you alone with the moderator and Dr. Fenton-Lee. The latter is already sketching wildly on the holo-presentation board. You note the salient features of the design, which include the following components:

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

Dr. Fenton-Lee continues, "We have the Bomb Shell; it's an automated casing used primarily to destroy errant jump-engine cargo drones. We have a prototype ready of a new type having a limited form of artificial intelligence, which should be perfect for this design. As for the other components, we know them to exist in the galactic Arm, but we cannot tell you where to find them."

"What do I do when I've got them all together?" you ask.

"When you assemble the device, the Bomb Shell will initiate a self-test of the other components. Remember that this is a theoretical blueprint only; there may well be other ingredients necessary for its completion. Hopefully the Bomb Shell will be able to tell you what is lacking."

"Thank you, Doctor Fenton-Lee."

"Thank you, Human. You will do us all a service if Karnossus is destroyed. I will see that the Bomb Shell is transferred to your ship."

"Good luck," adds the moderator.

You are left with the sinking feeling that you will probably need it.

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

(LVM9JV) (7 phases) Assemble the Bomb.

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

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[501]

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

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

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

Ugh.

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

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

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[502]

Entering the inner sanctum of The Battle, Incorporated, you silently vow to sneak in one day to one of these offices and practice your own artwork by way of adding a human to the Hadrakian/Clathran combat mural. If only you were sure that the tide could be turned so easily. . .

A red uniform steps in front of your thoughts and you look up to see a Hadrakian Settled One. After exchanging greetings, you offer up some of your latest discoveries for The Battle's informational consumption, and your host dutifully returns the favor.

"It is all too clear that we will have to watch idly once again as a third of our colonies endures attack and occupation by the Clathran Survey. The Homeless Ones may claw their eyes in frustration, but we have no choice. We don't have the forces to make a stand, nor can we waste our resources on useless symbolic resistance.

"We do not yet know when or where the Clathrans will advance next, but it seems likely that they will continue to move through the Galactic Arm in broad formation. As their efforts to dismember the Empire grow, so too does our determination to stop their conquest, no matter what the price. We have no choice but to retreat and wait for the most opportune time to strike back, but that time must come. We will not abandon our oppressed compatriots."

That is the end of the formal briefing, and you nod your understanding to the Settled One before heading for The Battle's strategic planning offices in the rear of the building.

✂ STOP ✂

[503]

You stop your ship like a law-abiding Clathran, and wait as the huge dreadnought approaches closer. Your sensors show that two other dreadnoughts are converging on you as well. You converse with the suspicious captain, and things are going well until he insists on boarding your ship to inspect it. Not good. By this time, you are surrounded. The situation is hopeless. The Clathran captain efficiently boards your ship and takes you prisoner.

✂ STOP ✂

[504]

As you draw closer to the planet, you suddenly realize that all of the ships coming and going from the surface are Clathran, not Hadrakian. Simultaneously, you notice the three monitoring stations in orbit, and your threat detection radar begins to make ominous noises.

"Evasive maneuvers!" you command. Images of being captured and tortured by the green-scaled lizardoids go through your mind.

"The Clathrans have conquered Franclair," your computer reports. "They have blockaded the planet and established a large occupying force down below. There are indications that a brief battle between the Hadrakians and the Clathrans took place here fairly recently. However, the Clathrans now seem to have the situation well in hand. The three orbiting monitoring stations and a fleet of destroyers ensures that only Clathran vessels are allowed to come and go."

"Is there any chance of us getting down to the surface without being detected?"

"Yes, it's possible. But there's no guarantee, of course."

You feel very fortunate that your ship is well enough equipped as to make dodging Clathran technology feasible. Treading carefully, you start to pick your way around the Clathran monitors and destroyers. It will take all of the skills and techniques that got you across the Survey to get you safely down to the surface.

On the way down, you see that Franclair is indeed a tropical world. Steamy vegetation abounds in the jungles and warm shallow oceans. You try not to think of the insect population that must be here. From experience, you know large insects thrive in this type of climate throughout the galaxy. You are not sure why this is the case, but you just *hate* big bugs.

Since the main Hadrakian city is crawling with soldiers, you land instead in a small village some distance away. As far as you can tell, the Clathrans have not spotted you. A team of Hadrakian Homeless Ones immediately gathers around you and helps you hide your ship. A Settled One greets you, surprised by your presence. She introduces herself as the mayor of the village.

"Are not the Clathrans guarding the space ways around our planet?" she asks incredulously. You modestly admit that they are, but you were lucky enough to evade them. She is impressed by your capabilities and escorts you to the village's Enclave herself. When you get there, she begins filling out the paperwork for your registration.

"I hope that you are as capable in our Arena as you were in dodging the Clathran ships," she remarks. "Meanwhile you must understand that you will be confined to the Enclave until you earn your citizenship here. In these times of turmoil, we hold our rites of citizenship very dear."

The Arena system is a rather brutal method of screening visitors to the planet, but you have seen worse in your travels and try not to judge others too harshly for their customs. While waiting for the paperwork to be processed, you look around. Posters hang everywhere proclaiming the joys of being favored by the gods in the Arena. From the accompanying pictures, you see this means being killed in the battle. You are quite sure you do not ever wish to be so favored! There are also posters recommending visits to the many Shrines in the village once you have obtained your citizenship. Praying to the gods is an important and rewarding experience, the signs claim, especially if you can figure out the deeper meanings behind their actual words.

Finally the mayor indicates that you are all set. "You are welcome to stay here at the Enclave for the time being," she explains. "We have a comfortable room ready and you may visit the Enclave market while you are here. Of course, the rates are much better at the regular market, but you must earn your citizenship first if you wish to go there."

The Settled One radiates an impressive air of power and tranquility. She is perfectly suited to this sort of administrative position. "Oh," she adds before leaving, "I should warn you to watch out for the native Francloons. They can be troublesome."

You thank her and decide to use the available room; anything that's not the inside of your starship would look good now. Turning, you find a comfortable position and get a little rest. Before you can fall asleep, though, a huge insect the size of your middle finger appears from behind a curtain. Oh no! Buzzing loudly, the insect taunts you, then burrows its long stinger into your shoulder. Ouch! It sucks some of your blood before you manage to swat it dead. Shuddering, you burrow under the blanket, hoping to awake with the rest of your blood intact. You spot what must be one of the natives — a jellyfish-like body supported on numerous tentacles — leaving your room through a crack in the doorway. Strange.

When you awaken the next morning, you have a large, itching red bump on your shoulder. Your options are now:

(B7W8TK) (3 phases) Visit the Enclave market.

(G748QK) (7 phases) Take your chances in the Arena, attempting to win your citizenship on Franclair.

❖ STOP ❖

[505]

When you ask Thurk about the Clathran robots, he is remarkably unhelpful. The Bluvians know very little about technical matters and couldn't care less how the robots function or where they get their orders from.

"Will you take me to the factory where they are made? Maybe I can find out for myself how they work."

"Out of the question. The Clathrans told us never to reveal the factory location to strangers."

"But I'm not a stranger. I am your friend."

"Oh. Well, that's different then. Come, I'll take you."

Thurk leads you to a building with a single door at one end and several large doors at the other. The large doors, which Thurk says open only occasionally to allow damaged robots access to repair facilities, are sealed tight. The small door looks more penetrable, but it is guarded by one of the Bluvian-shaped Clathran robots. The robot is armed and will not let you pass.

As you think about the situation, you look across the street and see a large hangar facility that looks like it could house spaceships. The hangar is unguarded. "What's in there?" you ask Thurk.

"Cargo drones," he replies. "Years ago, the Clathrans used them to bring materials here."

"You mean the drones are just sitting there in storage?"

"I suppose so."

"Is there any chance I might borrow one of them? The Clathrans wouldn't even know it was missing."

"Our masters told us not to let anyone use their drones. Sorry."

You are about to try your usual trick of telling the Bluvian what he *really* should do when he continues, "But they never said anything about *selling* the drones," and gives you a conspiratorial wink. "The drones have three cargo bays apiece, and they're in excellent condition."

"Sounds good to me. What's the price?"

"Two units of Munitions and one of Phase Steel."

You have two new options:

⟨JSUZ72⟩ (7 phases) Attempt to disable the guard and enter the Clathran robot factory.

⟨3SPZS2⟩ (3 phases) Buy a 3-bay cargo drone.

❖ STOP ❖

[506]

You are met by a virtual delegation — eight red-uniformed Hadrakian Settled Ones. It's almost enough to drown out the power of the symbolic mural of Hadrakian and Clathran in combat. One member of the entourage immediately takes charge.

"I have been informed by Marshal Innvo that, as of the latest report of Fleet Admiral Szohvb, three of our colonies are now under occupation by the Clathrans in the wake of their Survey. The latest attack was met with light resistance by local Hadrakian forces, which did not effect significant attrition in the Clathran ranks. Although we are not privy to any of the specifics, rumor within the corporation has it that Innvo and Szohvb have prepared the outline for a major counteroffensive against the Survey. We will, of course, keep you abreast of developments in this area."

You give your customary report of your own findings and travels, but all the while you feel a marked surge of adrenaline at the thought of a massive counterstrike against the Clathrans. Would it be enough to stop the Survey? You wonder what you can do to positively influence the outcome.

With the formal briefing completed, you and the eight Hadrakians all stand and make your way out of the briefing room. You hope to get some further assistance from the tigorillas in the offices at the rear of the building.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[507]

You make it back to the fringes of the Karnossus system. The intense white sun is far away. The Clathran worlds and starship fleets that cluster around it are all but invisible at this range. But you know the Dodecahedron is there, absorbing part of that sun's energy and driving the Dual Space Interphase ever wider. And you know that the Dual Space Inversion Bomb can destroy the Dodecahedron.

But it has to get there first.

You circle the system at extreme range, looking for some weakness or opening that you missed before. There is none. These are the Clathrans' homeworlds, and they aren't likely to leave any weak spots in their defense.

"It doesn't look too good, Boss," concludes your computer. "The Clathrans have enough force in the system to repel even a large-scale invasion. In that low orbit, the sun itself protects the Dodecahedron from attack. We couldn't possibly get close enough to the Dodecahedron to attack it. We need to find a way past those battle groups, or to convince the battle groups to get out of our way."

"Could the Bomb be launched from here?"

"It would never make it, Boss. I calculate its chances of reaching the target in operational condition as approximately equal to that of a thirty-ounce snowball."

"In hell, you mean?"

"Isn't that where we are, Boss?"

You size up the prospects again. The Clathran battle fleet here is too large to overwhelm and too trigger-happy to sneak by. Your only hope is that they leave. If they were suddenly to become needed elsewhere, you think to yourself, there would be a chance. But how likely is that to happen?

"What's your analysis of the Hadrakian resistance effort?" you ask your computer.

"They're going to lose, Boss. They're outnumbered."

"Okay, what if their forces were augmented by allies from some of the other systems threatened by the Clathrans? The Riallans, the Sirissians, the Worzellians, and even the Zyran have a lot to lose if the Hadrakians fall. How would that affect the odds?"

"I'm sorry, Boss. The odds are still way against the Hadrakians. The Clathrans would simply commit more forces."

"From where?"

"From here, Boss."

"Exactly!"

It's a possibility worth thinking about — but it might not be easy. And time is running out.

Very carefully, you leave the Karnossus system.

You have not landed in the Karnossus system. You are aloft in the Karnossus trisector.

❖ STOP ❖

[508]

You must confess that Dardahl is nothing like what you expected the next Brotherhood world to be. Compared to the inhospitable environments of Margen and Dahl, Dardahl seems like a paradise. Unfortunately, your newfound acquaintances are unable to tell you where you might find the Brotherhood, so you'll have to locate it yourself.

❖ STOP ❖

[509]

Due to the limited landing space on Holoth, the local Hadrakian merchants have taken to outfitting their ships with as many cargo bays as possible. This enables them to get the most bang for the buck out of their trading runs. Consequently, the Holoth Flap and Fly Space Construction Yard does a brisk business in Cargo Bay Expansion units. It is no surprise when you are told that Expansions don't come cheap. If you want one, you will have to pay through the nose. The price, including installation and finishing, is:

1 Phase Steel + 1 Radioactives

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

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[510]

You scream in pain as the talons sink into your shoulder. Twisting, you manage to dislodge the murderous grip and strike the foul creature's body. Now it shrieks in pain and flies upward out of your reach. Seconds later, it plummets toward you, its wing cracking you across your back. You feel like you have been hit with a ten ton cargo loader. Still, you are able to land a blow of your own before the harpy passes out of reach.

You take several steps back along the path you arrived on, waiting for the next onslaught; it never comes. You can hear the creature waiting for you in the trees ahead, but it is not inclined to press home its attack. You know a good time to escape when you see it, so you head back to the city and the safety of your ship.

On the way back, you can't keep the image of a Fountain of Life out of your head. One day, when you can defeat that monster, you know you will want to return to the Fountain. It's a matter of pride now.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[511]

Recordkeeper Crugh resides in a building ten miles from the city, where buildings tend to last longer. When he is informed that a detestable inferior alien piece of scum wishes audience with him, he says, "Wonderful! I've wanted to meet one of them for years." He invites you into his office, a very large room almost bare of furnishings. For the next several hours he regales you with a history of Bloo as he knows it.

He denies that the Bluvians were barely civilized when the Clathrans arrived three centuries ago. "We had very few table manners, sure enough, but at least we didn't go around fighting each other or shooting at every innocent piece of detestable alien scum that we saw," he says. "All the records I've seen show that we were pretty happy back then. We just had nothing to do. The Clathrans changed all that. Now we're happy and we have something to do. Does that make sense?"

"No," you reply.

"Didn't think so. Anyway, the Clathrans left a long time ago, but nobody noticed exactly when. The robots keep running, giving us new knowledge now and then. They keep saying that we'll someday conquer the galaxy. Now, I wouldn't mind conquering the galaxy, and most of us are still pretty fond of the idea, but just between you and me, I doubt it's going to happen. The Clathrans seem to have given up. They're pretty clever, but they don't understand Thmorg."

"What is Thmorg?"

"Not Thmorg. Thmorg. It's a kind of knowledge that all Bluvians have. You humans have it too, a little. The Clathrans don't, nor any other detestable inferior alien scum. It's knowledge that makes you superior to all other beings."

"Knowledge of what?"

"Knowledge that you possess Thmorg. Understand? When one has Thmorg, all other knowledge becomes secondary."

"So Thmorg is the understanding that you are superior because you have Thmorg?"

"That's not too far off. Anyway, about history. There's only one other major event to tell: a story that's been around for a while. It's rumored that when the Clathrans left they didn't give up altogether. They took a few thousand Bluvians off into space to try another method. So if you should meet them, give them my regards."

"No problem," you say. "Well, I must be going now. . . ."

"No you mustn't."

"You're right," you say. "I mustn't. What's for dinner?"

"Ah, see? I told you. You're already beginning to understand Thmorg."

❖ STOP ❖

[512]

Outpost is gone.

This means, of course, that you have no way of navigating back to your home planet. You erased that data from your ship's computer, so the Clathrans couldn't find the coordinates of the Home Worlds if they captured you.

You think about your situation, as you plan your next actions. What does the loss of Outpost really mean? What hope did you have of ever going home again anyway?

It means a lot. You and the other humans in the Arm are isolated. You can send and receive information via subspace radio, but that's all. For some purposes, that's enough. You can warn the Nine Worlds of whatever you learn about the Clathrans, and what you find in your explorations, and maybe that will help them. But the Nine Worlds won't broadcast their location to you over subspace radio — the Clathrans might be listening in. That means you no longer have any way to find your way home. Not unless the worst happens and the Clathrans find out where the Nine Worlds are, anyway. Then, you can join your race for a futile last stand.

Perhaps you may find other humans in the Arm who know the way.

Perhaps Vanessa Chang left other markers behind as she flew the *Fool's Errand* into the Arm on her last, secret journey.

In any case, your only hope of going home lies ahead — in the Galactic Arm.

The night is very dark in your tiny cabin aboard your ship. You try to sleep, but can't. You watch the stars for a while. Then, not really asleep, you begin to dream.

You see the stars of the galaxy in your dream, and realize that they are very beautiful things, like jewels strung on infinite spiral silver wires. So beautiful — how can you resist taking them? You can't; why should you? You take one, then nine, then a dozen more, holding them in your hand, and they don't burn you.

You hold a star full of ugly, misshapen creatures, drooling in a pool of arrogance. You hold a star full of muscular, white-furred tigorillas who leap excitedly from planet to planet but never get where they want to go. You hold a star where war is eternal, a star where creativity is useless, and a star where your face is hidden behind a golden mask in an amusement park. You look at another of your stars and see a multitude of midgets, too many to count, walking through each other. "Hello," you say to them, but they are not listening. In another star you see old, dark beings who know everything there is to know, whistling in your hand. These stars are all different, but somehow, they are the same.

Just in time, or too late, you notice the dragon, twisted darkly among the streams of stars, newly awakened, restless. It coils in agitation, and looks around for the source of its unease. It senses that some of the stars from its shining hoard are missing. It opens ten thousand eyes and extends ten thousand claws. It is searching for you. You close your hand tightly around your stars to keep them hidden; they might dim and flicker and go out, but you don't notice.

The dragon raises its head and open its giant maw, straining against the golden leash that chains him to a pit in the Galactic Core. He takes a breath of starry void and turns to face you. A thousand eyes transfix you in the dim glow. A thousand claws reach to rend you.

You think to yourself, this is just a dream and this dragon cannot hurt me. And the dragon answers, you are wrong, this is *my* dream and I can do with you as I will. And the dragon opens his great maw and breathes out not fire but light. As the light grows brighter and brighter, the stars dim to black coals and you hear in the distance the screams of the blinded. In the awful light you see that the dragon is right: you are nothing, mere twistings of shadows and smoke.

The light shines deep down into the pit, you hear the stirrings from deep within, and fear fills you. The golden chain rustles. The dragon lunges to engulf you. But its light becomes tangled in your shadows and goes out. Then you are in darkness: no stars, no dragon, just the pit and the fear within. In the dark you hear a voice, repeating over and over the question: Do you have the message? Do you have the message? But you can't answer the question, not because you don't know the answer but because the evil in the pit is awakening, approaching, and you must get away from it. You flee in the dark, and the question follows you: Do you have the message?

As you flee, you open your hand and the stars fall out: the star of the dark omniscient whistlers, the star of the midgets walking through each other, the star of the amusing golden mask, the star of the white-furred tigorillas, and the star of the ugly, misshapen droolers. The dragon has them all again. And you? You are back aboard your ship, seated facing the viewscreen, unable to sleep. You hear again in the back of your mind the voice from the darkness saying, Do you have the message? You think about Outpost, twice destroyed, and about your distant worlds.

The night is a very long one.

✧ STOP ✧

[513]

"Hey, Boss! Guess what? It's Psorus again, the planet that time forgot. The Clathran Monitors and dreadnoughts are still here, blockading the Hadrakian colony below. Shall I try to sneak past the Clathrans and land?"

You glance up from the work you are doing and see the planet Psorus floating in space before you. From up here, it looks like a serenely beautiful world with its swirling clouds, bright blue oceans and verdant landscape. But you've been down on the surface before and know otherwise. Psorus is a very young planet with all of the turbulence and upheaval that youth entails. What's more, it's full of huge reptilian monsters. It's a credit to the Hadrakians that they are able to maintain a colony here.

"Take her down," you instruct your computer, "but be careful. We can't take those Clathran ships for granted."

"Roger Boss."

You manage to get by the Clathran blockade well enough, but once again your ship hits heavy turbulence in the atmosphere and you are buffeted about the cabin. Before you have time to really damage yourself, your ship lands on a plateau outside the Hadrakian colony.

You have the same options as before.

✧ STOP ✧

[514]

You pick a Shrine at random from the Street of Gods, and soon find yourself resting comfortably on a carpeted floor next to a Hadrakian resting bench that would really screw up your back if you were to try it. You close your eyes, relax your muscles, and allow your thoughts to drift. Within minutes, or so it seems, you feel a presence in your head.

"Greetings, Human!" booms a voice. "I am the God of Resounding Klaxons!"

"I just bet you are," you think, contemplating an aspirin or two.

"Oh, sorry. I don't have to be that loud. Is this better?"

"Much."

"Human heads are a new experience for me, although I am one of those who is supposed to speak to you."

"Go ahead, then."

"Well, to make it simple, you can get a Gradient Filter on the planet Darkwhistle."

"Well thank you."

"You're quite welcome." With that the presence is gone.

"I heard from the God of Resounding Klaxons," you tell the Shrine Keeper on your way out.

"Oh yes," says the Settled One in reply. "He likes it here. Good acoustics."

You may select this option again.

❖ STOP ❖

[515]

Although the planet Geefle has a strong Clathran presence, you are not worried as you emerge from hyperspace. Your ship has already proven to be more than a match for the six warships the Clathrans routinely leave in orbit. In fact, this time you are easily able to evade detection altogether as you slip down to the planet.

As you bring your ship down to the planet's surface, you decide to land in the forest, among the giraffe-like Geefloids. The Zyran are still here as well, in large cities along the coastlines. You are dismayed to see how fast the Zyran are expanding, even though the Clathran blockade has prevented any new colonists from arriving. The Zyran already living here must be multiplying rapidly. Soon they will consume the planet's entire food supply, and the Geefloids will be driven into extinction.

Your options are the same as before.

❖ STOP ❖

[516]

To break the monotony of traveling in hyperspace, you try running through the many frequencies on the ship's radio in the hope of finding some interesting conversation. You are in luck. You make visual contact with a strange-looking red alien who claims to be from the Regullt system. Its arms don't end in hands but branch into smaller arms, which branch into fingers, which branch into smaller fingers. The creature has been doing some trading in this sector of the galaxy and is more than happy to chat with you. Perhaps not surprisingly, its mode of communication is an elaborate sign language, which presents more than the usual challenge to your online Universal Translator system.

"This organism's entremest greenmost difficulty past tense," it says, "be finding loud better weapons through through. Solution to of problem extremest the unit planet Dosia. Combat personal apparatus well done to attain Dosia locality said."

After a few hours of exchanging incomprehensible adventure tales with the red alien, you sign off and make note of the trading information — if that's what it was.

❖ STOP ❖

[517]

You have used the Survivable Jump Engine before, but you don't know if you'll ever really get used to it. You climb into the cryo tank, seat yourself comfortably, and get yourself ready for the jump. Greenish liquid pours in from the bottom of the tank, and rapidly solidifies to something approaching the color and consistency of lime-flavored gelatin. Your last action before movement becomes impossible is to wrap both hands around the Flame Jewel that hangs before you in the tank. Clearing your mind of all doubts, you reach out for the gem with all your essence.

The Flame Jewel reaches back, drawing you in and holding you tight. You open your inner eyes and regard the body that holds you, encased in green gel that looks greyish-black through the red filter of the stone that envelops your soul. Somewhere beyond your flame-shrouded world, a sentient super-computer is hurling a starship through a series of violent maneuvers in hyperspace, determining to a centimeter the exact position and velocity of the ship. Then there is a pause.

Beyond the cryo tank your computer shuts down, withdrawing its personality networks to an optical chip and leaving the operation of your ship to a simple machine. You perceive nothing, as the universe evaporates around you. A new universe forms at once, with your ship in a new location. You barely notice the gel dissolving away from the body that used to be yours, leaving it with a livid red tint. An itch somewhere draws only a fragment of your consciousness, barely disturbing you even when it becomes a tingle, then a burn, then. . .

The neuro-induction electrodes have shocked you awake. The jump was a success.

You are now in the trisector containing the planet Franclair.

You may select this option again.

❖ STOP ❖

[518]

When you settle yourself to meditate in the Shrine, a strange thing happens. Instead of your usual drifting thoughts about Hadrakian tailoring or the optical properties of green and orange ceiling murals, you find yourself thinking about nothing at all.

Blackness surrounds and penetrates your mind. Everything becomes nothing, and a void encompasses all. Your divine visitation has begun.

"I am the God of Zero Space," says the voice of your mind's eye, "The space of nonexistence that surrounds everything you know."

You see vast emptiness.

"Now," the god says, "Are you familiar with this object?"

A deep red jewel forms out of nowhere, burning with an inner fire that warms the emptiness with its beauty.

"A Flame Jewel," you say. "The centerpiece of my tri-axis drive engine."

"Correct," the god replies. "Would you like to know where to get more of them?"

"You bet."

"The planet Wythym is where you should look."

The Flame Jewel fades away and there is nothing again.

You shake it off and open your eyes. Nothing changes into everything, and you have seldom been happier. You drop by the Shrine Keeper to report the god's name on your way out.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[519]

The hooded Brother asks you to rise while she conducts the test for Righteousness. You take a deep breath in preparation and you find that your mind flashes back to the Brotherhood ordeals you managed to survive years ago. In the brief moment between inhalation and exhalation, you relive your trial on the planet Gen. There you faced death in the maw of a carnivorous desert plant. For three days and nights, you were trapped within its digestive pod awaiting your demise. During this time, you were able to rethink your life's path and gain many meaningful insights. When you emerged unscathed in the end, you were a new person, filled with an inner strength you did not believe possible. You were able to join the Brotherhood, learning the Rite of the Advancing Brother. With this knowledge and self-mastery came the power of Kothan, the Brotherhood ability allowing you to draw upon your inner strength, think more clearly, move more quickly and strike more powerfully, especially in times of danger.

Next, your travels led you to the planet Dargen, where you were placed in an outer airlock in their protective city dome. As the temperature fell to deathly cold levels, you managed to survive by burning what you believed at that time to be the most valuable item you possessed. The Brotherhood took you to the Temple and taught you the next step in the path to Righteousness. Along with this came the ability of Darthan, which enabled you to evade the blows of your enemies with more skill and precision than ever before.

Now your Brotherhood training is culminating on the final planet, Margen. It has taken years to arrive here; all you can think about is whether or not you can respond to the Dialogue correctly. If you fail, perhaps they will send you away in disgust, to return to Dargen and brush up on your lessons.

All of these thoughts race through your mind in the time it takes to take and release one deep breath. You feel a calm descending over you; now you are ready.

Your examiner begins, "How does one know the way to truth?"

You reply, "I truly seek the answer."

The Dialogue continues, "The way to truth is by quietly admitting your innocence."

"I now know the way."

"How then, does one find which path to take along the way?"

"One asks in the Way of the Ancients."

"The Way of the Ancients is a long and treacherous path."

"Yet it is one I wish to follow."

"How does an ancient scry the path?"

"The Way of the Ancients is to ask in silence."

"The questions asked in silence are heard by the Very Wise."

"And surely the Very Wise know the Way."

"When you yourself asked in silence, how did they respond?"

"The way is towards the center."

"The core is in fact the center."

"And the core is the Way."

"When you get there, what will you find?"

"I do not know the answer."

"You truly are a Worshipful Brother."

"And I know you to be the same."

You cannot help the breath of relief that escapes your throat as you successfully complete the Dialogue. Even after all this time, you remembered the responses and were able to repeat them.

The Brother is also proud of your accomplishment. "Welcome, Brother. We so rarely find such capabilities as you have shown thus far." Her tone turns grave as she continues. "These are truly times to try our souls. You may not be aware of the grave dangers facing not only the Brotherhood, but all humanity." She speaks calmly, but with a sense of great urgency.

"We are all soon to be tested by the greatest threat of all, total extinction. We need people such as yourself to continue with your training and head deeper into the heart of the galaxy. The Clathrans must be stopped. But there is more to be concerned about than just the Clathrans. Go to the planet Dahl and begin the next phase of your training. Learn the Path of Intuition. With this teaching, you may be able to help save your race and defeat those who threaten all that we hold dear."

You stand in silence, which she interprets to indicate interest in the next phase of Brotherhood training.

"On the planet Dahl you will find an abandoned temple. Inside the temple is a candelabrum which you must rotate. When you have done so, the door to the real temple will be revealed. Descend the stairs, and when you are asked the question, 'How does one know the way to truth?' respond, 'I do not know the answer.' This will tell the Brothers that you are an Initiate of the Path of Intuition.

"In addition, you may wish to learn some more about the research we have been doing on a phenomenon called Dual Space. This phenomenon is responsible for some of the strange things that have been happening in the galaxy, we are certain. Personally I am no expert, but there is a Library next to the Temple here on Margen where you can go to read some of the research that has been done."

If you wish to visit the library, you may plot the option:

(ES3ZP2) (7 phases) Explore the Brotherhood's Dual Space Research Library.

You look at the Brother, as if to ask if there is anything more. She looks back into your eyes, measuring your discipline and focus. You try not to flinch under her scrutiny. She says sternly, "There is no more that we can teach you here. If you wish to continue your training, you must proceed to the planet Dahl. And do not forget: when you go to Dahl, you must give the answer 'I do not know the answer.' Only then will you be allowed to continue your training."

That said, she turns away, leaving you alone with your thoughts.

You may select this option again.

❖ STOP ❖

[520]

You don't have to travel far to find the Sirissian equivalent of a ship's garage. Logically enough, it is located right at the spaceport where you landed. When you head over there to check out the quality of the work they do, you are suitably impressed.

The Sirissian you meet there introduces himself as Fusion Shell Checker 1066. You hastily introduce yourself, and the two of you are soon talking like old friends.

"Fusie," as you've taken to calling him, shows you around the hangar area. You spend several hours gawking at the Sirissians' state-of-the-art equipment. Fusie explains that any technology which allows faster travel across the planet is given high priority on Takata.

"We have the Lectr'Arcs to contend with when traveling across the planet's surface. Speed and maneuverability are essential to avoid contact with the larger energy bolts, but sometimes we just aren't fast enough and a transport gets fried."

"But let's not dwell on the that," Fusie says briskly. "As I recall, you are here to learn what we can do for your ship!"

"Hmmm, let me see," he mutters, looking through his catalog of ship types and corresponding repairs. "Your ship falls into our class C category so... here!" he exclaims as she turns the book in your direction, pointing to the simple guidelines for giving your ship a complete overhaul. You gladly assent to the repair procedure and are rewarded three days later with a ship as good as new.

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

❖ STOP ❖

[521]

As the discussion draws to a close, you begin to think about where you want to go next. It appears that your fellow explorers will be spreading out in many different directions. Before you part, you all agree to keep your subspace radio transceivers tuned to a common frequency so that you will always be able to communicate with each other at will.

On your display screen, you call up the map of the Galactic Arm, the only star map now in your computer system. You wish you had more information to go on, or some concrete clue that would lead you in the right direction. But the Arm is almost entirely unknown. The only way to learn is to explore. You will have to set your own course from here.

❖ STOP ❖

[522]

"This is the final broadcast of the Keep Earth Pure and Human committee. Our efforts have failed, and we will soon be overrun by the masses. Insanity is everywhere, even within our compound, and discipline will no longer hold it at bay. They say now that it was all due to galactic flux, a change in someone's constant, but I liked the virus theory better. At least then we could blame the aliens. At least then we had an enemy! Now we are the enemy! Hah hah hah! Long Live Bobby Woodfoot! I'll show you the Message!"

❖ STOP ❖

[523]

You travel out to the nearby lagoon where the cargo drone factory is located. The reason it is here rather than in the city is because the Hadrakians use the lagoon to conduct experiments in jump engine technology. Jump engines are, of course, the propulsion system used in cargo drones. It is the jump engine that gives a drone the ability to move instantaneously from one point in space to another.

You enter the large complex where the drones are manufactured so you can inquire about purchasing one of the models. An elderly Settled One is sitting behind a long wooden desk, patiently filling out one of many forms spread out before her. This is one of the things female Hadrakians do best, a good thing since a trading conglomerate the size of the Hadrakian Empire must produce a great deal of paperwork. Over the desk is a large ventilating fan circulating the air inside the building gently upward. While you are waiting for the Hadrakian to look up from her work you watch the slow, circular movement of the fan. Suddenly, you see a furtive Francloon tentacle reaching up to the switch on the fan. Uh oh. You have just enough time to see that the switch reads “LO, MED, HI” and is currently in the “LO” position. But not for long.

“Look out,” you yell just as you hear the click, click of the switch being moved to the “HI” setting. The next thing you know you are in the midst of a storm of papers swirling everywhere.

The Settled One sits motionless for a second, sighs, then stands and unplugs the fan. She gratefully nods as you go over and help her collect all of the papers now littering the floor.

“We tried using computers, but the Francloons are even more adept at manipulating them,” she explains. “The things we put up with in order to live on their planet. Sometimes I really wonder if it is worth it!” She sighs and finishes picking up the last paper. “Thank you for your help. May I be of service to you?”

You explain that you are interested in acquiring a new cargo drone.

“I’m sorry,” she apologizes, “but we have none in stock right now. Manufacturing has stopped due to lack of materials, and all of our inventory has been sold out.”

“What do you mean, manufacturing has stopped? This complex is pretty impressive.”

“We used to import several of the components used in building the drones, but with the Clathran blockade around the planet, we can’t get those parts any more. We’re working on making the parts ourselves, but I’m afraid it’s going to be several years before they’ll be ready. Would you like to put your name on the waiting list? It’s one of these papers around here, if I can find it.”

“No, thanks anyway,” you answer.

“Very well, sorry I couldn’t help you.” The Settled One shrugs her shoulders and returns to her paperwork.

Disappointed, you leave the complex.

❖ STOP ❖

[524]

You do not have all the necessary items to build an Advanced Healing Unit. Check your schematic diagrams carefully and try again.

❖ STOP ❖

[525]

While walking through the city, you are constantly dodging smaller bolts of energy. The Sirissians assure you that the flashes are harmless but, looking at some of the lesser forms of mutation the colonists exhibit, you feel safer taking precautions whenever possible.

You decide to see what trading opportunities are available on Takata. After spending some time doing the proper research, you manage to find out what you need to know: the Sirissians have energy-based Tools to sell. By contacting the proper authorities at the spaceport, you learn that they will make the following trades:

- 2 Tools for 1 Crystals
- 2 Tools for 1 Medicine
- 2 Tools for 1 Super Slip

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

❖ STOP ❖

[526]

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

(RNAY56) (3 phases) Research dual space on Golgotha.

❖ STOP ❖

[527]

Your environmental suit is difficult to maneuver in close quarters, but you don't let that stop you from entering the airlock. Inside is a small (by Clathran standards) room full of hanging space suits. Another door, set in the opposite wall, leads to the interior of the dome. You quickly seal the outer door, cycle the airlock, and strip off your own suit, stowing it out of sight in a corner. No sooner is this accomplished than you hear the inner door opening and the guttural sound of Clathran speech.

You attempt to hide among the hanging suits, but the Clathran patrol has been sent specifically to search the airlock. You have heard of psychic abilities that would allow you to escape detection, but no matter how hard you concentrate you are unable to render yourself invisible. The Clathrans spot you almost at once, and instruct you to throw down your weapons.

There are now four heavily-armed Clathrans in the airlock with you, one of them already calling in a report to central command. Resistance, clearly, is useless.

But giving up is not likely to be much better.

With a snarl that needs no translation, you draw and fire at the Clathran with the communicator. Your second shot kills the guard near the airlock controls, even as you hurl yourself towards the outer door.

A glancing shot from one of the remaining guards burns a hole in your leg, dropping you in your tracks. You kill him with the final charge in your own weapon, and then brace yourself for a shot from the last survivor. Seeing your helplessness, he discards his gun and reaches for you with his bare hands, evidently hoping to capture you alive.

Despite his overwhelming strength advantage and your weakened condition, the Clathran guard is no match for your psychic powers. You call on skills learned in more than a decade of exploration to render him swiftly unconscious.

You don't have time to celebrate, however; more guards will be on their way in no time, to investigate the interrupted message. You hastily drag on your environmental suit, seal it as best you can, and turn to the airlock door. It is now locked, of course, but gives way rapidly under fire from one of the Clathran blasters. You stagger through and set off as swiftly as you can for your ship.

You almost don't make it. Tired by the action and weak from loss of blood, you arrive just seconds ahead of your Clathran pursuers.

"Get us out of here!" you shout, as you seal the inner door and stagger towards the auto-med unit. Then you pass out.

When you wake up, you are again in deep space. You are breathing, which is good; your ship and your lungs must still be capable of holding atmosphere.

"How bad is it?" You ask.

"Bad enough," responds your computer. "We took a lot of damage getting clear."

You are in deep space, in the trisector containing Morikor.

Go now to the CGM.

✱ STOP ✱

[528]

Your ship is at the limit of its fighting capabilities. At worst, you are giving as good as you are getting. After all, you are fighting three ships to your one! But you can see that there is no future in continuing this battle. The best you can hope for is to maintain your defense against them while hoping to land a lucky shot and take one of them out of the combat. You realize this is not bloody likely.

While you are trying to decide what course of action to take, the computer interrupts your thoughts. "Boss, the Zyran ships are breaking off the encounter. Should I let them go?"

You think about this for a second, then decide to let fleeing Zyrans fly. You are not the real bloodthirsty type anyway. Besides, you need to look after your own ship's damage since you are not leaving this fight unscathed.

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

Go now to the CGM.

✱ STOP ✱

[529]

"How can I describe the Archigenitors to you, human? They have had more forms in their years than even we Darkwhistlers. And I see from your mind that you think you know them, that you think you understand the motivations of a race gone from the galaxy for fifty thousand years yet still its major power. You think because I've described some of their actions to you in human terms that they can be understood that way, that you have no need to fear them.

"You couldn't be more wrong.

"Consider a race like the Clathrans. Individually strong and smart, technologically advanced, rulers of a vast galactic empire, and yet completely subservient to the Archigenitors. Think about what it must take to scare a Clathran, and then you might begin to understand the Archigenitors.

"You have seen, here and there throughout your travels, the crude evidence of the Archigenitors' meddling. You may even think of them as ruthless or malicious to do such things, yet these terms cannot be applied to them at all. There exists no standard of galactic conduct to judge them on, because they have no peers to establish such a scale. They are a mighty power existing in what seems to them to be a vacuum, gardeners lonely among nothing but weeds. Even a race as powerful as we Darkwhistlers once were plucked and tossed aside without a second thought, one more minor annoyance to be dealt with and then forgotten.

"Don't get me wrong, human. It may be that your destiny, should you survive the Clathrans, lies in a confrontation with the Archigenitors in the Core. But don't imagine for a moment that you will be on anything like equal terms when you meet, and don't even begin to think that you can understand what an Archigenitor can be."

You are surprised and humbled by the Darkwhistler's vehemence on this subject, and must beg his thanks for the interview and retire to your ship to mull it over. In the end, you reach a workable conclusion: whatever the Archigenitors may be or may do, the Clathrans are your enemies now.

❖ STOP ❖

[530]

Unfortunately, the enemy has the advantage of the first attack. With a raucous cry, the aeropsor attempts to seize the hull of your ship in its metal-piercing talons and tear a bite out of the side with its beak. Reacting quickly, you manage to get out of the way just in time.

Now it's your turn. "Evasive action, arm all weapons, bring the ship about and FIRE!" you command. With hands braced against the control panel, you await the outcome of the salvo. However, the monster is as quick as you are and it dodges your attack.

The aeropsor is now having second thoughts about attacking such a strange creature. Wheeling about, it heads off into the sunset, leaving you to say a quick thanks to whoever is watching over you. Breathing a sigh of relief, you allow yourself the luxury of sinking back into your command chair before giving the order to continue on your previous heading, out into the depths of space.

You are lucky to have survived this encounter unscathed.

❖ STOP ❖

[531]

From your ship, you plan out a mapping and scanning run for the planet that will cover the entire surface. You want to find out if there's anything else of interest on Outpost that you missed before. It will take several days to complete the search from orbit; you intend to scan from a low altitude, which will decrease the coverage of your ship's sensors.

For the first several days in orbit you find nothing except the remains of more of Silverbeard's defensive beam weapon emplacements, which you already knew about. Here and there are spots of other wreckage which you presume are fallen parts of the pirate's destroyed battle satellites. At times, bands of thick clouds obscure the surface, delaying your scanning. Outpost's oceans are small, but there is plenty of free surface water, and rainfall is frequent at most latitudes. Your computer notes that the planet is slowly but continuously gaining water as it sweeps up the trace gases that permeate its white dwarf star system in the aftermath of the star's nova. Conditions are ideal for the formation of primitive life forms, and indeed the planet's oceans abound with self-replicating molecules that may be precursors to unicellular life.

It is near the end of your search pattern, at a point almost exactly antipodal to Silverbeard's base, that you find the anomaly. At first you see only a bright reflection, like a glint of starlight from a steel plate. Looking closer, you see that a broad rock face has been levelled off and smoothed. The plane is angled about forty-five degrees and forms one slope of a high ridge, as if a pyramid had been buried under a mountain, leaving one side showing.

"What's that made of?" you ask your computer.

"It seems to be native rock, Boss, the same as the surrounding ground. Surface irregularities have been cut away to leave a flat area about two hundred meters on a side. It's exceptionally smooth. It might have been cut with a laser. Notice the debris at the bottom of the slope."

You land at the base of the cut, where the jumbled debris is in fact quite impressive. Large chunks of rock, cut off on one side to the same smoothness as the polished slope above you, lie in a jumbled heap. "Any idea of the purpose of this?" you ask the computer.

"My analysis indicates the four most probable purposes are, respectively, a trademark indicating planetary ownership, a signal reflector for astrophysics experiments, a playing field for a heavily handicapped ball game, or a sliding board for very obese aliens. Unfortunately the total cumulative probability for any of these is a rather small fraction of a percent. The next hundred most likely possibilities are, respectively, an unfinished interplanetary billboard, a landing field for wedge-shaped spaceships, a testing range for high-friction sneaker soles. . ."

"Enough!" you bark. "If you don't have any idea, why don't you just say so?"

"Hummmph. I thought you'd be impressed. My new capabilities allow me, when faced with a difficult problem, to formulate hypotheses based on much more divergent information that I was ever able to correlate before. To use more imagination, as it were. You should find this quite useful."

"I find it quite annoying," you reply. "I'm going to look at the rock a little closer." You don your high-friction sneakers and walk to the slope, picking your way carefully through the jagged rubble at the base. The rock is granite-like, almost black in color but with tiny blue and white flecks distributed through it. You toy with a few loose stones and conclude that the rock is very hard and durable. Only hardened metal tools can scratch it. You inspect the edge of the smooth area and confirm that it is indeed part of the solid bedrock of the hills and not assembled from pieces. Somewhat reassured that there's no reason to suspect danger, you begin to climb the incline.

The inscription is literally right under your nose before you see it. The words are carved into the smooth stone, halfway up the slope. The words are in Earth Standard, in letters no more than two inches high. They read:

*In Memory of Humankind
And Her Achievements*

We Will Be Avenged

V. Chang, May 30, 2519

"What the heck does that mean?" you wonder aloud as you descend the slope again. It doesn't seem to make much sense. Why would Vanessa Chang create a memorial for a race she knew all along wasn't dead? And why the date in 2519, when her last departure from Outpost was in 2493?

"Man is man, but Humankind is a woman," quotes your computer. "Obviously Chang, if it was she who did this, had a computer almost as well-educated as I am."

"I don't care about the wording. What's the memorial for?" you ask.

"As a first guess, I would conclude it's another ruse against the Clathrans," suggests the computer. "We assume they can decode Earth Standard, having mind-wiped Chang's crewman Doctor Dighton. Perhaps they were supposed to read this and confirm that they'd succeeded in killing all humanity — except, of course, for Chang, who they would remember had escaped from them."

"You think Chang really did this, then? Why's it dated after her death?" you ask.

"The date of Vanessa Chang's death isn't recorded," says the computer. "In fact, 2519 is the last year where there is any record of her. After that, she disappears."

"You mean she disappears from the official records, or for real?" you ask.

"Both" says the computer.

"Hmmm." You think about what you know of the famous explorer. After her last return from Outpost, she devoted her efforts to creating the Space Patrol and the Boundary. She apparently never told anyone on the Nine Worlds about the Clathrans, but everything she did was aimed at preventing any further contact between Clathrans and humans.

"Are there by any chance records of any spaceships disappearing at about the same time?"

"There were no ships reported missing," says the computer. "But there is one discrepancy in the records. A ship named the *Fool's Errand* was commissioned by the Space Patrol that year, but was never mentioned again in any context. There are lots of references to it having been under construction, parts and labor allocations for example, but no mention of it in crew assignments, duty reports, or service records."

Vanessa, you are one sneaky scheming lady, you mutter to yourself. You find it amazingly easy to picture the woman, already in her eighties, having been partly responsible for the extermination of half of mankind and directly responsible for laying out the course of the next three centuries of human history, quietly boarding a spaceship and breaking through her own Boundary, returning to space for reasons always and entirely her own.

But the mystery still remains, why the monument? "There's something about that inscription we're missing," you tell the computer. "There's some other purpose to this thing. I want you to correlate every piece of data about that stone out there with everything you know about anything else until you find what it is."

"That could take days, Boss."

"Have anything better to do?"

"It depends, Boss. The ship usually flies better when I help."

"That's OK. We'll stay right here."

The computer outperforms itself. It is less than a day and a half before you are awakened by a joyous cry of "Boss! I have it!"

"What did you find?"

"Boss, you're not going to believe this. It's a fix on the location of Earth."

"What? You mean that inscription somehow encodes Earth's coordinates?"

"No, Boss." The machine is clearly enjoying itself. "It's much simpler than that. The thing literally points to Earth. It's oriented so that at midnight of May 30, 2519, Earth Standard Mean Time, a line perpendicular to the plane of the smoothed stone pointed directly in the direction of Earth. Knowing that, you can find the direction of Earth at any time by projecting the planet's motion back in time to that date."

"That's impossible. You could never calculate the planet's motion that accurately. Continental drift alone would set you off a skillion parsecs."

"No molten core, Boss. No continental drift. This planet's older than it looks. Remember that its primary has nearly burned out. The biggest source of inaccuracy is actually the effect of friction from the gaseous residue in the system slowing down the planet's orbit. And I can compensate for that in the calculations. Chang's computers probably couldn't, which means the marker would have been useless to her by about ten years after she set it. I guess that was less important to her than having a trail sign back to the Home Worlds that the Clathrans could never figure out."

"You found it," you point out. "Why not the Clathrans?"

"I found it only because I already know the real coordinates. It took me about two to the twenty-third power guesses before I hit on the right answer. If the Clathrans tried to figure it out they'd have to test out every possibility. They might just as well search every planet in the galaxy."

"Don't remind me," you reply. "That might be exactly what they're doing."

✧ STOP ✧

[532]

Your Interphase Variometer indicates that this planet is definitely one of the Dual Space anomalies you are seeking. However, you have not yet explored the planet thoroughly enough to understand what is going on here. As a result, you can't really do any worthwhile research yet. Perhaps if you did some more of the options on this planet, and then attempted to do some research, you would be able to accomplish more.

You may select this option again.

✧ STOP ✧

[533]

Your contact is Doctor Amos Schottky, of the Institute for Space Exploration, on Para-Para.

"Actually, we now know that the insanity is not a disease state at all, but the perfectly rational response of a sentient mind suddenly exposed to gross violations of established physical law. SAPS, as it will probably continue to be called, is the unbalancing of a mind by external forces."

"You mean the rising dual space level?"

"Exactly. Here on Para-Para we refer to it as the Brunner constant, because that's what Professor Baling named it in his final transmission. We have successfully repeated his experiments, and can now monitor for ourselves the steadily rising value of this supposed constant."

"But how does that cause insanity?"

"The exact link is still uncertain, but it seems that the Brunner constant somehow determines the possible future realities open to us. As it rises, more futures become possible at any given instant, including ones where gross violations of physical law can take place. In a sufficiently advanced state, the apple is as likely to fall up as down. Unprepared humans, their minds carefully calibrated from birth to a certain range of physical laws, cannot deal with these sudden changes, and so become insane."

"Will all humanity go insane?"

"Perhaps. Crowds certainly contribute to the onset of insanity, since others around one making random permutations in reality will contribute to one's own mental deterioration, so humans alone, particularly in deep space, are somewhat protected. Those immersed in rigid hierarchies, with sufficient discipline of will, can ignore the breakdowns around them, so the military and para-military groups will survive longer. Finally, those like you and I and the Disciples of the Final Church of Man who have been re-calibrated to expect unusual mental powers

can 'roll with the punches' and accept our expanding powers without becoming insane. But we are the vast minority among all humans, and I fear that most will eventually succumb."

"Thank you for your time, Dr. Schottky."

"Thank you for your concern."

❖ STOP ❖

[534]

You take note of the variety of ships that have landed in and around the spaceport area. Besides your own, there are five others: the *Run Amok*, the *Jihad*, the *Holly Roger*, the *Quest's End*, and the *Barratry*. It is clear that all are from the Nine Worlds or nearby. All of them, obviously, possess tri-axis drive systems, or else they wouldn't be here. That means that their owners must each have obtained a Flame Jewel somewhere. You wonder where they got them. Over the past few days you have observed the pilots and their ships pursuing their own affairs: loading cargo from the stockpiles, exploring the ruins, and surveying the planet. You've kept a respectful distance while engaged in your own work, but you decide it would be a good idea to talk to them and find out what their intentions are in the Arm.

You speak to the others one at a time over ship-to-ship and in person. Eventually you conclude that it would be wise for you all to meet together. You arrange to get together in the decaying hangar where the *Lockerbait* rests.

In the dim light of the hangar, you look around at those who have gathered here so far from home. Every face you see is the face of an experienced spacer. You are relieved that none of them is a fool or an idiot. Of course, looking back on your own experiences, you can see that it would have been unlikely for a fool or an idiot to make it to this place.

You are all aware of Vanessa Chang's warning about the Clathrans in the Arm. You all agree to take precautions to protect the Home Worlds if any of you are captured by Clathrans. To ensure against any possibility of error or duplicity, you all go together to each person's ship and watch as they erase all navigational data of the Fringe, including the coordinates of the Nine Worlds and other human planets, from their computer systems. You agree to rely on the marker that Vanessa Chang left on the far side of Outpost. You instruct your computers to erase everything they know about the marker, including the very fact that it exists. Now, only you and your computer working together, in the presence of the monument itself, can reconstruct the path home.

When this is done, you have a sudden feeling of terrible isolation. In the past you have travelled to lonely and distant corners of the galaxy, and gone to many new worlds, but now necessity has forced you to give up all the familiar ones. Your link to your distant home seems very tenuous, and the tremendous risks you are facing seem real for the first time. You can sense that the others feel the same. Perhaps, you agree, you can help each other.

At this point, all of the other players' characters are with yours on Outpost. You should now introduce yourself in character. You may ask any questions you wish of the other characters, and discuss anything you wish about your experiences so far or your expectations for the future. You are not required to tell anybody anything, nor are you required to always tell the truth.

When you are finished with the discussion, return to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[535]

You decide to join the Middle Riallan political discussion group again. You sit silently on one of the rigid bars for a while, listening to the Riallans' telepathic thoughts.

"The Clathrans have advanced even further since the last time we met. They're going to conquer the whole galaxy."

"Well, hopefully the New Riallans will be able to help stop the Clathrans. Let's not forget the human who came to our planet just recently, and gave us that great idea."

"You mean the idea of asking the New Riallans, who live in the Fringe, to send a fighting force to help the Hadrakians in their war against the Clathrans?"

"Exactly. The Hadrakians are the largest group fighting the Clathrans right now. They may not be able to stop the Clathrans by themselves, but if enough other races help out, you never know. There isn't much we can contribute ourselves given our lack of material, but our children, the New Riallans, are very capable with spaceships."

"We're still going to wait until we think there's a chance of victory, though. Aren't we?"

"Yes. It wouldn't do any good for the New Riallans to send their spaceships now. We have to wait until it looks like a little help will give the Hadrakians enough strength to win a decisive battle. Then we'll send a courier to the Fringe to ask the New Riallans for help."

You like the way the conversation has been going. One of the gas bags turns in your direction. "I see one of our Human visitors has returned. Welcome back, Human," it thinks at you.

"Thank you," you think back. "I see that you have a plan of action against the Clathrans."

"Yes. One of your race recently came to us, and gave us this excellent idea of asking the New Riallans to help fight the Clathrans. We don't want to just wait around while the Clathrans conquer the entire galaxy."

"My feelings exactly," you think back, "We all need to pull together to fight the Clathran menace. I'm delighted to hear that you're planning to contribute."

"Hopefully, it will make a difference. Well, I'm going off to eat. See you later, human."

One by one the Riallans float away, leaving you alone on the rigid bar. You are satisfied that the Riallans are doing all they can to help the cause, which is all you can ask.

❖ STOP ❖

[536]

You set up your little trick and return to the first room to await the repercussions. It doesn't take long until you hear a satisfying "Brrraattt" from the whoopie cushion. Moments later, Whooger enters the room and approaches you. The reek of foul-smelling gas causes you to involuntarily step back in self-defense.

"Well, I think you have had more than enough opportunity to observe our lifestyle up close and personal," the alien says, trying to fan the gas away with its tentacles. "I thought this building would be a good place to teach you. Now you can understand what it is to be a Francloon, constantly on the lookout for jokes and opportunities to play them on others. You may call us callous, but it is something we have no control over since we are the way we are. You have been an interesting visitor and I thank you for coming. The door is now unlocked and you may leave anytime you wish. I trust that you have been inconvenienced substantially."

You stand there for a minute, speechless. You certainly have been inconvenienced. For one thing, your health has suffered from the many "jokes" that were played on you. However, you also believe you have gained an understanding of the Francloons. You feel sorry for them; their attitude towards life is not a pleasant one. You wonder what really happened all those years ago to make the Francloons the way they now are.

You have nothing more to do here so you bid the alien farewell and leave.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[537]

"I see my thoughts are good ones to you, and so I will take some matter in trade."

This stray thought, telepathized by the Darkwhistler before moving on to another topic, means little to you until later, when you return to your ship for some sleep. One of your cargo bays has been emptied!

The Darkwhistler had never strayed from your sight, of course, and none of the locks, bars, safety catches, alarms, recording systems, or artificial intelligences on your ship can shed any light on your loss.

Clearly, there are things you don't know about the Darkwhistlers.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[538]

Your opponent in the Arena this time is a large amoeba of some kind, oozing towards you from the opposite door. The sand it slithers over is not sticking to its slimy surface, but you're sure that there will be no such problem with your skin. The fact that the alien is relatively shapeless is bad news because this indicates a lack of rigid internal structure. This leads you to suspect that conventional projectiles may be relatively ineffective against it. Maybe energy weapons?

Sizing up its weaknesses (which doesn't take nearly as long as you'd like), you plunge into action.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[539]

You finish your discussion with the Darkwhistler. "You took knowledge from me," sounds the voice in your head. "Now I will take matter from you."

The voice returns an instant later. "You have no matter on your ship. I have corrected this."

Later on, when you have a chance to check, you discover that one of your cargo bays, previously empty of all commodities, has been filled to the brim with the spongy orange turf of Darkwhistle. Unfortunately, there seems to be no way to remove it.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[540]

Looking at the planet Cloo, you shake your head. The surface of the planet is covered completely with a thick, viscous brown mud. The mud flows slowly around the planet in currents and eddies, simmering and bubbling in the hot equatorial region and freezing into solid patches in the cold polar areas. The oxygenless atmosphere is a drab brown color and all of the planet's surface water is bound up in the gunky mud. Why would anyone want to live here?

The planet is devoid of native life. However, it looks like someone once did live here. You spot the remains of a colony dome located in a temperate zone halfway between the equator and the north pole. Unfortunately, the dome has been shattered into a million melted pieces, now drifting in the mud. "Computer, what's your analysis?" you ask.

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

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

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

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

You now have the following option:

⟨L7M8JK⟩ (3 phases) Gather Radioactives.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[541]

At length you finish your story. Although the Hadrakian shows no outward sign of being impressed, you can hardly imagine otherwise. Now it is her turn to tell you what she knows.

"You seem to know a bit about the Clathrans," she begins, "But you need to be brought up to date on their more recent activities. Since your Vanessa Chang met up with the Clathrans three hundred years ago, the green-scaled lizardoids have been busy, very busy. Their industrial capacity to build ships and soldiers is practically beyond belief. Our intelligence reports that they now have tens of thousands of ships, spread in a plane across the width of the galactic spiral. This is the fleet we call the Survey Line, now in the process of sweeping across the galaxy, from Core to Fringe, conquering every race in its way.

"The Clathrans have already advanced to a point where several of our colonies are in imminent danger. Our most pressing concern is the planet Innermost, so named because of its proximity to the Core relative to our other colonies. The Survey is now only a few steps away from the Innermost system, and the prospects for the colony's defense are poor.

"At this time, our forces are nowhere near ready to face the massed Clathran navy. I'm afraid we will only be able to watch as Innermost is cut off from the rest of the Empire. The citizens of Innermost have been told to prepare for occupation by the Clathrans. We don't know what the ultimate effect of Clathran occupation will be, but we do know it won't be to our liking.

"Meanwhile, we are formulating a strategy that will provide the best possible chance of ultimate victory over the Clathrans. It will be necessary for us to retreat the bulk of our military forces to colonies more distant from the advancing Survey until we are ready to engage the enemy directly. After Innermost, our colonies of Adafa, Psorus, and Francclair will be next in line, followed by our home planet, Hadrak. Sooner or later, we will have to put up a stand. The crux of our strategy is to make sure that stand is a successful one. Right now, we don't see how to do that, so we retreat."

The Settled One stands, indicating that this is the end of the formal briefing. You leave the briefing room and walk towards the rear corridors and offices where The Battle, Inc. does its strategic planning.

❖ STOP ❖

[542]

Nothing happens. The compartments are as inaccessible as ever.

Reflecting on the situation, the fact that the station appears on your star map, combined with its familiarity with Earth Standard, suggests that other human visitors have preceded you here. Perhaps the combination has been documented somewhere. If not, maybe some mental ability would enable you either to divine the correct combination or open the doors by sheer willpower. Anything is better than trying 99,999 combinations.

You may select this option again.

❖ STOP ❖

[543]

The Arena is always a bit of a mystery for you, since you never know what's going to come strolling out of the other door. This time it's snakes.

It looks like about half a dozen of them slithering out onto the sand, each about six feet in length and as thick around as your leg. They look remarkably like the anacondas that used to populate Earth's jungles (back when Earth had jungles), which just goes to show that a good simple design plan will work throughout the galaxy. Convergent evolution is an amazing thing.

As the snakes spread out and begin moving toward you, you find yourself hoping that your guess about their capabilities is correct. They certainly look like constrictors, but you'd hate to find out the hard way that they're actually poisonous.

From the little you have heard about these creatures while in the Enclave, you know they operate on a group mind mentality. Maybe you can make use of this somehow. Striving desperately to look in six directions at once, you begin laying your plans. . .

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[544]

Food is painfully easy to find on Wythym: it's growing wild everywhere you look. The pain comes from your dealings with the natives when you attempt some harvesting. No sooner are your electro-scythes unshipped and aimed at some unused field full of weeds (one being's weeds are another being's fodder) than you suddenly have a chain of amoebae in front of you, linked pseudopod to pseudopod and chanting the local equivalent of "We shall not be moved!"

"But why?" you ask. "What's the difference if I harvest some weeds? They've got a food shortage on Hadrak, you know."

The leader of the Wythymites responds "We will not stand idly by while you slaughter helpless living things! First harvesting, then strip-mining, acid rain, and ecological devastation! Hell no, let it grow!"

Baffled, you desist. Since no amount of reason appears likely to sway the opinion of the natives, you stop trying. Beginning that night, when all good amoeba are in their beds, you move your ship to desolate areas and take the food you need. In just a few nights you've acquired a whole cargo bay full.

You learn subsequently that your harvesting was attributed to the feeding frenzy of a roaming herd of blort (a five-legged grazing mammal not at all similar to the terran antelope). Since blort deforestation is a "natural" act, and therefore okay, the Wythymites never investigate further.

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

❖ STOP ❖

[545]

Every city on the surface of Ululu has a huge arena where the Sirissians go to watch their favorite sport, called "splorg." You are curious to learn more about this, so you decide to visit one of the arenas. The closer you get to the place, the bigger it gets. What do they do in there? You finally reach the massive outer gates only to see a sign informing you that the arena is closed until the next splorg match is held the following week. Rats!

You must have spoken aloud because, from the vicinity of your left elbow you hear, "Ah, you wish to see a splorg match! Wonderful."

Turning, you see an elderly Sirissian who proceeds to introduce herself as Oiler 15. You politely return the introduction and before you know it, you are walking beside your new friend and learning about Splorg.

From what you can deduce, the game is played on huge courts oiled with a thin layer of Super Slip. Five teams, each with twenty members, play simultaneously. Ten players on each team are "splorgum;" their job is to push the "skellum" across the court. The skellum are the other ten team members. There are bizarre rules that go along with movement, scoring, and various obscure and incomprehensible aspects of the game. For instance, when a skellum has become motionless in the middle of the court, he becomes fair game to any well aimed shot from one of the splorgum. The first one to hit the motionless player scores a lot of points.

One particularly interesting feature of the game is the result of pushing the skellum around. They are sent flying, uncontrolled, across to the other side of the court. Padding encircling the skellum allows them to careen into walls and other splorg players with little risk of physical injury. They also have uniforms made from a nearly indestructible material called Diamond Cloth, which is a rare item in the galaxy. You would love to get hold of some of that material!

You have trouble envisioning the rest of the game as it is described to you. Your new friend realizes how difficult it is for a newcomer to the sport to understand its play. So, with great hospitality, she invites you to have dinner at her home and to watch a little splorg on her court. You eagerly accept.

Oiler 15's home is the Sirissian equivalent of a mansion. There are over thirty rooms in the main house, not to mention the small five-room summer house near the splorg courts. As you dine with your friend, you learn that splorg oilers are well-respected (not to mention well-paid) members of the community. The skill and precision needed to oil a court properly is rare, so the oilers can name their own price.

After dinner, you adjourn to the splorg courts, where Oiler 15 has arranged a three team version of the game for your benefit. The game lasts for over three hours, and at the end of that time you are still not sure what is going on. The splorgum send the skellum winging their way across the courts with glee. The skellum crash into each other, as well as the walls, with joyful abandon. All you can do is smile and hope that Oiler 15 doesn't think you are too dense. When the game is over, you thank your host for the wonderful dinner and the unique opportunity to watch such a fascinating game.

She is pleased that you are so interested in their pastime. She also noted your earlier reaction to the mention of Diamond Cloth. She thinks she might be able to get some of the material to trade you if you are interested.

You have the following new option:

(DGC4FQ) (3 phases) See how much the Sirissians want for Diamond Cloth.

❖ STOP ❖

[546]

Curious about what should have happened to you on Margen, but didn't, you contact Dean Myers via subspace radio. After telling her about everything you saw and did there, you ask her what you missed.

"I thought you were out there to research dual space, Dambroke."

"I am."

"Then why did you skip the Brotherhood's dual space library?"

"Ummm — I think we're about to lose our connection. Good to talk to you." You quickly turn off your radio. The Dean was right, of course. You will have to go back, join the Brotherhood if you haven't already, and look at the Brotherhood's dual space library.

✧ STOP ✧

[547]

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

The planet appears as a haze of gas and debris that has expanded only slightly since you saw it last. Cold, lifeless, and inert, the cloud drifts silently through space. Perhaps millions of years in the future it will coalesce again into a planet, but that is irrelevant. Outpost is gone forever. There is nothing more for you to do here.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[548]

You continue crawling in the mud, but the opponent who was searching for you manages to find you. He attacks while you are still on the ground, seriously injuring you. Your ally sees what is happening and comes to the rescue, but it is too late. You bleed in the mud as your ally and the opponent who attacked you knock each other out. Undisturbed, the other opponent crosses easily to your side of the field. You pass out.

✧ STOP ✧

[549]

One day, out of the blackness of space, you get a subspace call from Brother Dikestra.

"Professor Dambroke, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Brother."

"How is your work progressing?"

"Well enough. I've visited one of the anomalies, as you know. Has your own work advanced any?"

"We've been working on a mathematical model of the data you sent us, and I think we're nearly done. We need to test it now on some new material. When will you be researching another anomaly?"

"The Clathrans. . ." you mutter. "Survey. . . ship improvements. . . big galaxy."

"I know it's not easy. But you've got to keep trying. This is important."

"Uh, thanks. I'll get back to you as soon as I have anything."

"Very well, Professor Dambroke. We'll be in touch."

✱ STOP ✱

[550]

What's in the walled-off military half of the spaceport? you wonder. You decide to climb over the wall and take a closer look. Getting over from the civilian side isn't too hard. The civilian spaceport workers are busy at their jobs and not paying attention to you. Unfortunately, when you come down on the military side of the wall you are spotted immediately. Three Zyran guards with huge coiled tentacles converge on you.

"What do we have here?" one of them asks.

"Some kind of weird alien," the second one answers.

"I think we should eat it," the third one says.

You better think fast. "Excuse me," you pipe in, "but is this the way to the Royal Palace?"

"It talks," the first guard says.

"What do you want with the Palace?" the second one asks.

"Why shouldn't we just eat you?" the third one demands.

"I'm here to speak to the King, at Lord Ruckel's invitation," you explain.

"We better let the thing go," the first guard decides.

"OK," the second one agrees.

"But if it comes back again, I'm gonna eat it," the third one says.

The three guards coil their tentacles around you and heave you high over the wall. You land with a thud on the civilian side of the spaceport. Ouch.

Trying to spy on the military section of the spaceport wasn't such a good idea. You need to find away to get over the wall without being noticed by the guards on the other side. If you had an ability that enabled you to disguise yourself, or to sneak around undetected, it might work. Until then, you'd better stay among the civilians.

You may select this option again.

❖ STOP ❖

[551]

Alarms jolt you out of a sound sleep. Long ago, you learned the art of struggling into your jump suit while running up to the control room, and you put this to good use now.

"What's up?" you holler, racing along the corridor. "A Clathran ship?"

"Negative, Boss. My sensors aren't detecting a ship, exactly, it's . . . something else."

You have little time to wonder about this enigmatic response because you are already at the bridge staring at the viewscreen. The computer is right — it is something else — but you're darned if you know what that something else is. Memories from your childhood rise to the surface of your mind, and the image of a gymnastic latticework frame is the closest thing to which you can compare the image before you.

The structure floating in space is about the size of a small planet. It is made of long bars intersecting and forming three-dimensional cubes, triangles and many other shapes. You get dizzy just looking at it. You also see that there are areas with definite purposes, especially one place where ships, such as your own, are docked. Before you commit to such an act, you take some time to study the structure in an effort to find out who is running the show.

Additional puzzlements come in the form of automobile-sized gas bags that twist and soar throughout the bizarre planetoid. They come in three basic colors: dull grey, boring black and drab brown. Are these living creatures? Perhaps they carry the real inhabitants inside like individual environmental spheres?

"Boss? From the scan I . . ." your computer is interrupted by a hearty voice that is coming from inside your head.

"Greetings, Human! We, the Middle Riallans, bid you welcome. We remember our first human visitor, Vanessa Chang, quite well. Do you wish to dock at our port facilities? I will give you the proper coordinates should you wish to do so."

Riallans? Here? Your mind flashes back to the planet you explored while still in the Fringe where beings who called themselves Riallans lived. They looked almost nothing like the gas bag that has positioned itself in front of your viewscreen. The Fringe Riallans were small beach ball-sized creatures with no permanent appendages, who lived on a regular planet. The "Middle Riallan," as it calls itself, is quite different. It is a big gas bag ten times the size of the Fringe Riallans, has two taloned feet on its bottom, and apparently lives in deep space.

Remembering your manners, you answer the being's question, "Thank you. I will probably dock in just a while, but I want to get my bearings first." This response was verbal on your part but the alien understands and leaves you to run more computer scans to verify your data. After a short time, you decide that the information you have gathered does indeed support the claim that the gas bags are real creatures who live on this latticework in deep space. You instruct your computer to dock. As you approach the spaceport, you see something that catches your interest. It is a deep red pulsating glow coming from the center of the huge framework. The red glow arouses your curiosity, but you ignore it for the moment.

Finally you are safely docked and ready to explore. Since you are in deep space, you are forced to clamber into your environmental suit before you can go anywhere. You leave the airlock and literally run into the same Riallan that greeted you earlier. It tells you that its name is Ghuuss and offers to show you around; you readily accept. Some time later, when you are back at your ship, you review the actions available to you here. From what Ghuuss showed you, the Riallans have a commodities market, a historian you can speak with, and a group that meets every week to discuss the galactic political situation. You can also attempt to find the source of the pulsating red glow that caught your attention on landing. You now have the following options:

(S7Z82K) (3 phases) Visit the market.

(P7S8ZK) (4 phases) Speak with the historian about the Riallans' past.

(SXZN2Y) (7 phases) Join the weekly political discussion.

(PXSNZY) (5 phases) Look for the source of the mysterious red glow.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[552]

"This is Margaret Ellison of the Institute for Space Exploration, calling human traveller Valentine Stewart. Come in Valentine Stewart."

"This is Valentine Stewart, receiving you four-by-four in subspace."

"Valentine, please report progress on finding Wythym."

"No progress yet, Margaret."

"We need those Flame Jewels, Stewart."

"I know that, Ellison. But there are these Clathrans, see? They're in the way. And while we're on the subject, can the ISE assure me that the Clathrans can't trace subspace communications?"

The connection is abruptly broken.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[553]

The structure before you looks simple. It is a perfect cube the size of a large building, made of the same unknown and unanalyzable substance as Adafa itself. Near each of the four corners hovers a sphere emitting diffuse white light. The walls, when you touch them, seem to be vibrating slightly. The single opening at the base of one of the walls measures about six feet by six feet. Beyond the opening is a cavernous blackness which resists even the brightest intensity setting of your suit lights.

Taking a deep breath, you gingerly step into the room. You feel the vibration now through your feet. Still you see nothing. You take another step, placing yourself entirely inside the building, and the enormous room fills with light. Hovering near each of the eight corners is a glowing sphere similar to those you saw outside the cube. The light isn't really very bright, but your eyes are adjusted to the dark night side of Adafa, and for a while you can't see anything in the glare. The first thing you notice when your vision clears is that the opening you arrived through is no longer there. Apart from the glowing spheres, the cube's interior is completely empty and featureless.

You force yourself not to panic. A moment later another opening appears on the opposite wall. Suddenly fearful of being trapped inside the cube, you step quickly through.

Eight glowing spheres light up. Around you, instead of the dim surface of Adafa you expected, is another featureless cube. Again the opening through which you entered is gone.

This time two openings appear, one on the wall to your left and one, incongruously, on the ceiling. The vibration you feel through your feet is slightly stronger. You step through the wall opening, fighting a growing sense of dread.

Another cube. This time two openings appear in the walls, but both are at ceiling level. You examine one wall to look for a way to climb up.

Suddenly you find yourself horizontal in midair about two feet from the floor. Wham! Two feet is a long way to fall face-first and with no warning. You stand up and look around. The openings are in different positions: one is now an open pit at the opposite end of the floor

you're standing on, and the other is a trapdoor on the ceiling. Either they've moved, or gravity in the cube has rotated ninety degrees. From the way you "fell," you surmise that gravity shifted when you touched the wall, so that the wall became the floor.

That solves the problem of how to reach the openings. But you have a worse problem: how to get out of whatever this cube is. You try to remember the pattern of cubes you've walked through so far. The change in the direction of "down" makes it confusing, even though this is only the fourth cube. But when you manage to remember the sequence, you realize it doesn't help you escape because you can't go backwards through doorways that disappear.

You put one foot on the wall that used to be the ceiling. As you touch it, the gravity shifts again and you go sprawling to the new floor. Now that you know what's going on, though, you figure you might be able to learn to step gracefully from wall to wall. In the new orientation, both openings are situated like normal doorways. You step through one of them, and find yourself in another cube. This one has three openings leading in different directions.

You're in trouble and you know it. You've stumbled into some sort of strange labyrinth, an interconnected maze of cubes impossibly folded into one single cubic structure on Adata. You don't know if it was intended to be a labyrinth or if it has some other purpose beyond your comprehension. Perhaps for the builders this was just ordinary architecture. Worst of all, you don't know whether it's even solvable on a human scale. Perhaps the alien builders could move through an array of a billion cubes, intricately interconnected in three (or more) dimensions, as easily as you walk down a corridor. If it took them a year, what would they care, if they lived for ten million? On the other hand, your environmental suit won't sustain your life for more than a few days.

You proceed through a few more cubes, balanced on the edge of panic, hoping that your worst fears are wrong and that you'll soon find an exit back to Adata. You wish you could have your computer's help, but you can't make contact from inside the cube. You try peering through doors without passing all the way through them, but the blackness beyond each opening is impenetrable. Only when you pass entirely through an opening do the floating spheres light up and a new cube come into view around you. For a while you try marking your way by venting a little bit of water from your suit onto the walls or floor and letting it freeze there. You can't really afford to lose the water, but you have nothing else to mark with. Unfortunately, you never seem to come back to any of your marks, even after passing through hundreds of cubes.

Only when you stop to rest, worn out and near despair, do you think about the glowing spheres. It occurs to you that you never really examined them closely. You thought they might be dangerous. But what do you have to lose now? You approach the one in the nearest corner. It's difficult to look at directly, not because it's intensely bright but because it's hard to focus on. Whenever you gaze directly at it, it suddenly looks much farther away. Your instruments detect no heat or radiation from the sphere. You reach toward it, not intending to touch it but merely to gauge its size. Somehow you misjudge the distance and plunge your hand into the sphere of light.

The radiance passes into your hand like an electric shock. But it's not electricity; it's an opalescent warmth that runs quickly up your arm and diffuses throughout your body. A moment later, the sensation of it reaches your brain. Every part of you screams with pain and shouts with amazed joy at the same moment. Agony and energy mingle within you, as if you were on fire but the fire was nourishing you instead of consuming you. For one instant the light holds you in thrall. In that instant you experience an awareness that is as far beyond what you used to call "consciousness" as human consciousness is beyond the dim liquid thoughts of an amoeba. Far more than a feeling of power or a revelation of any particular knowledge, it's a sensation of pure life, a proclamation of your existence more intense and authoritative than you ever imagined possible. You revel in the sensation even as you realize that the light is too much for your body and mind to absorb. Then the feeling changes. The light withdraws from you as if it were changing its mind, as if it were realizing that it doesn't belong here. It leaves your body and retreats to the walls of the room, coalescing back into a single sphere in the corner.

Less than a second after you reached for the sphere, you are back to normal, folded once again within your own familiar conscious self. As far as you can tell you are unhurt. But you're not unchanged. You feel that some unnamed sense that you didn't know you had has been strengthened. As a conscious being, you have always had the unique power to make choices of your own free will. But now you see that making the *correct* choice, when the circumstances place strict limits upon the possibilities, is within your power as well.

The alien maze of cubes is a case in point. The cube you're in has three possible openings to try. A few moments of concentration reveal that only one leads you closer to an exit; you choose that one and go through. The next cube has only one exit, so there's no choice to be made at all. The next cube has two exits. Again you concentrate on the decision, and again you see that only one opening is the *correct* one. In this way you proceed through almost three thousand cubes. You are hungry, dirty, tired, and almost out of air when you stumble out onto the plain of Adata. You blink in the dim starlight, unable for a moment to figure out why you're not inside a cubic room with eight glowing spheres in the corners.

You think about your experience as you return to your ship. Prescient Choice doesn't seem like something that you will use often. You prefer to make decisions by applying your own intelligence to the information you have available. But if you're ever confronted with a choice or combat situation for which you have no information and have to guess, this ability may be very useful.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[554]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 3

Choosing from the remaining actions on Outpost, you decide to investigate Silverbeard's commodity storage area, take a look at Vanessa Chang's old ship, and then investigate the other pilots who are here. These actions will use your allotted phases for this turn. Your plotting sheet should now look like this:

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	R	L	—	—	—	—	—
2	—	A: 9ZV29H	—	—	—	—	—
3	A:XZN2YH	—	—	A:XUN7Y8	—	—	A:LZM2JH

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 3

Go to the computer and log on. Press A and then B (the B corresponds to the action code XZN2YH) to look into Silverbeard's supply of stolen commodities. Then press A and D (which corresponds to the action code XUN7Y8) to visit Chang's ship. Thirdly, press A and E (which corresponds to the action code LZM2JH) to meet the other pilots. Finally, press Return or F to get your results for this turn.

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 3

The CGM will send you to the text describing the storage buildings where Silverbeard kept his supply of stolen commodities. You may notice that after you note this text assignment, the CGM still lists your character as needing to "GET RESULTS." When this happens, you should not attempt to get the new results until following the computer's first instructions. In this case, you should read the text and then return to the CGM.

When you return to the CGM, you will have the opportunity to transfer as many units of the stored commodities as your ship is able to hold. Select the commodities you wish to take by number; you may press U for Undo if you change your mind about taking something, and start over.

When you are finished with the cargo transfer, the CGM will instruct you to read the text for visiting Chang's ship followed by a piece of text which describes your rendezvous with the other pilots.

This concludes your character's first three turns. You should now have a good idea how to plot your moves on the computer. If you are still a bit uncertain, we recommend that you read the Rules section and/or CGM Guide in the *Host Guide and Player Reference Manual* or ask a helpful soul standing nearby. You should also have an indication of how important it is to write things down, especially the options available on each planet and any significant information you learn as a result of them.

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

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

❖ STOP ❖

[555]

Panting and sweating, it takes you a moment to realize that you have won! The crowd boos lustily, deploring your lack of divine favor. A gaudily-clad Hadrakian female with lustrous white fur presents you with the lavender badge of citizenship on Francclair and publicly proclaims your worthiness to do business with the Hadrakian citizens of the planet.

You spend a couple of days partying in the village (partying being one of the things the Hadrakians do best), before settling down to the serious business of business. The arrival of the Clathran Survey has put a heavy damper on the planet and its many industries. From the information you have been able to gather on the streets, the Hadrakians on Francclair put up a brief fight against the Survey Line and, when it proved to be too tough, sent their remaining ships inward to help guard Hadrak, the home world of the Empire. Prices at the commodities market are now extremely favorable in exchange for goods that are in short supply after the Clathran interdiction.

Life under occupation has changed the attitudes of Hadrakian males and females alike. The Homeless Ones, normally brash and eager to fight, have had to keep their emotions on a tight rein, since the Clathrans impose grave penalties for any rebellious activities. In contrast, the Settled Ones, normally calm and patient, have had to think quickly and become more daring in their planning. All in all, there is a feeling of desperation everywhere. Even the usually lavish Hadrakian parties seem grim. If the Clathran Survey is not stopped, it will mean the end of Hadrakian space travel, and possibly the extermination of the entire race.

As you tour the city, you realize you have seen none of the indigenous species, the Francloons. Stopping at a nearby restaurant, you ask the Settled One who serves your lunch about them.

"They're not usually this shy, so you should consider yourself lucky. They probably just don't know what to make of your species yet," she explains. "Enjoy it while you can. Many of our citizens rue the moment the natives take notice of them. Except for the Homeless Ones, of course. They see the attention as a challenge even if it lands them in the Hospital." Before you can ask her what she means by this, she leaves. Hmmm.

When you finish your meal, you stand to leave. Kerplat! As you try to take your first step, you find yourself falling flat on your face. Your shoes are stuck to the floor by some kind of goo! Peering beneath the table brings you face to face with one of the natives, which makes a high tittering noise as it regards you. If you didn't know better, you'd swear it was laughing. You take the opportunity to study it more closely.

The alien is a round bag of protoplasm with a collection of sensory apparati at one end and a collection of tentacles at the other. It is about two feet in diameter and moves about by scuttling on whatever number of tentacles are not being used for other things. You extend a hand to it, under the table, but the alien ejects a gas from one end of its anatomy that propels it away from you at great speed. Unfortunately, this gas seems to consist chiefly of sulfur, and you spend the next five seconds gasping for air. Phew!

A Homeless One enters the restaurant in time to see what has happened. Baring its fangs at the fleeing Francloon, the Hadrakian male pulls out a projectile weapon and takes aim at the rapidly disappearing alien.

"No, wait!" you manage to choke out. "Let it go." The Homeless One shrugs and holsters his weapon. You free your shoes from the goo, wondering if the Francloon secreted it there on purpose, and go about your business.

Your investigation of the Hadrakian colony on Francclair turns up many points of interest. A particularly noteworthy site is a wide lagoon located just outside the city. The lagoon has the unusual property that a low grade electric current is constantly flowing through its waters. As a consequence, it is an ideal location for performing various kinds of scientific research. For example, scientists working there have made several breakthroughs in jump engine technology, the propulsion system used by cargo drones.

You now have the following options:

⟨BXWNTY⟩ (3 phases) Visit the Planetary Commodities Market.

⟨GX4NQY⟩ (5 phases) Check in for a stay at the hospital, which will cost one unit of any commodity, your choice.

⟨C7F8LK⟩ (7 phases) Contact the local division of The Battle, Inc., "The Empire's officially sponsored Clathran resistance corporation."

⟨57E83K⟩ (5 phases) Travel to a cargo drone factory located at the edge of the lagoon.

⟨CXFNLY⟩ (6 phases) Investigate a scientific research facility called the Wet Repulsion Slab, submerged in the lagoon.

⟨5XEN3Y⟩ (7 phases) Go to a place where the Francloons like to gather so you can learn more about this unusual race.

⟨B9WVT9⟩ (3 phases) Stroll the Street of Gods, and pray to the Hadrakian deities.

✱ STOP ✱

[556]

Your travels through the Stargate — voluntary and involuntary — have given you some interesting insights about Dual Space. Clearly, the Stargate is the Dual Space anomaly associated with Unaria and Dosia.

"Show me the data we collected when we went through the Stargate," you tell your computer.

The Interphase Variometer readings from your trip through the gate appear on the screen. Apparently, the Variometer reading fell to zero for a brief moment when you entered the gate, and again when you exited. In between the reading undergoes a rapid oscillation.

"Exactly when between those readings did we change position?" you ask.

"I can't tell, Boss. In fact, just looking at the data, it would be hard to prove that we changed positions at all."

"What?" You think about it for a while. "Suppose we didn't change position at all. Suppose we made two shifts in the Dual Space Interphase instead."

"I don't quite see how that would work."

"Well, we know that Unaria and Dosia are practically identical. So identical, in fact, that they might really be the same planet — not in our reality, but in another one not far away in Dual Space. So the Stargate exists in two separate states — one in which the planets are half the galaxy apart, and another in which there's no distance between them at all. To travel through it we shift momentarily to the together state, and when we shift back to the separated state we're at the other end."

The computer displays an equation. "There's a problem, Boss. Those two states would be pretty far apart in Dual Space. Reality would have to collapse into one or the other state."

"That's the oscillation we saw in the data. Most of the planets exist always in the separate state. But within the Stargate there's a standing discontinuity wave that continuously oscillates between the two states. It must be artificially maintained, but that wouldn't be too hard with a standing wave."

"But the magnitude of the effect is huge, Boss. The position of a whole planet, or maybe two whole planets, is affected."

"That's right. Impressive, isn't it?"

You hasten to incorporate what you have learned into your work.

✱ STOP ✱

[557]

The planet you are approaching is a very, very busy one. Your computer is able to identify more than a thousand other moving bodies in the vicinity, including scouts, satellites, space stations, probes, tugs, drones, miners, liners, and warships. Especially warships.

"Yow! Computer, are we in any danger?"

"That's a relative question, boss, but if you mean 'Are we in any danger from the armed ships displayed on the forward viewing screen?' the answer is no."

"No?" The screen is continuing to identify and track new ships coming out from the planet's shadow.

"Many of these ships are still under construction, boss. And the ones that are fully operational aren't paying any attention to us."

"Then who are all these people trying to contact us?" Lights are blinking all over the communications board.

"Space Control is probably the most important. The rest of them seem to be advertisements from various merchants. This is the planet Hadrak, home world of the Hadrakians."

"Can we land?"

"Navigation will be a little tricky, what with all the traffic, but there's a clear signal marking the landing site."

⌘ STOP ⌘

[558]

You spend the morning preparing for your next sojourn to the Fountain of Life. Again, you leave just past noon and you fortify yourself along the way with food and water so you will be ready to fight should that harpy animal attack you.

The scenery is just as pleasant as before, with peaceful hills and fields. All too soon, though, you arrive at the forest. The sun is sinking but you press onward. No sense in stopping now since you still have some daylight left.

Just when the woods are at their darkest, you hear an ear-shattering shriek and you prepare for battle.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[559]

This is just not your day. You try to hit the troop carriers, but you can't even get close. Instead, all you accomplish is attracting the unwanted attention of the escort ships. This is not good.

"Er, Boss?" your computer gulps.

"Umm?" you acknowledge while feverishly trying to lock onto a target, any target.

"Boss? I think you can save your energy. We are being hailed by a Clathran ship. The Commander is telling us that we are completely surrounded and have a choice of surrendering or being blown out of the sky. How do you want to respond?"

You sit motionless at the weapons console, then slide your eyes left to take a surreptitious glance at the front viewscreen. Sure enough, you see all of the escort ships in position about your own vessel. Rats. You make the only decision possible at this time, to surrender.

The Clathrans board your ship and take you prisoner.

❖ STOP ❖

[560]

You return to the end of the long hall within the temple to wait for your contact in the Brotherhood. Since you do not know any other way of getting in touch with her, you seat yourself on the hard floor and wait, keeping in mind the virtue of patience.

Hours pass before she appears from out of nowhere. "Welcome back. I am pleased to see you again. Are you ready to learn the way of Righteousness?"

You nod without fully understanding what this means, but you have a strong feeling that the Brotherhood is an important key to accomplishing your own mission. Silently, you follow her back down the corridor to one of the side doors you passed earlier. Opening it, she motions you in. As you pass through the doorway, you see that it leads to another corridor which branches into two more corridors. Turning to ask which one you should take, you are startled to see that you are alone. You reach for the doorknob behind you, but it is locked. From outside, you hear a faint voice telling you to face all your fears, for that is the only way to learn about yourself. Resigned, you turn back to the beginning of the Maze. This must be your first Brotherhood lesson.

You spend hours walking up and down the smooth halls of the labyrinth. One corridor is virtually identical to another and you are not even sure there is an end to this maze. Occasionally you hear unintelligible whisperings, which begin to bother you. Soon you are bathed in a cold sweat while spending half your time looking back over your shoulder for some shapeless predator. Finally, you can take no more of this.

Sitting in the middle of the hall, you begin relaxation techniques you learned somewhere in your past. Eyes closed, you do not open them even when the whisperings start up again. You do not open them even when you are sure there is a horrible fiend waiting to leap upon you. Instead, you take several calming breaths and relax. Finally, when you are ready, you open your eyes and see a robed Brother standing in front of you.

"Well done, Brother. Come with me and I will show you an even better way to overcome your fears." You follow the nameless figure out of the maze and into a training room where he spends several hours instructing you in the Brotherhood art of Kothan, the ability to think more clearly, move more quickly, and strike more powerfully, especially in times of danger. This will certainly come in handy during combat.

"You have come a long way already. Are you prepared for the next phase of your training?" the Brother asks you. You nod in affirmation. "Fine, then follow me."

The Brother leads you to another room that has, aside from the door through which you just entered, three other doors at the opposite end of the room. The Brother tells you that the pursuit of knowledge is the most important thing in the universe; you must be willing to dedicate yourself to learning more always. With this bit of sage advice, he leaves you alone in the room, closing the single door behind him. His parting words are to choose one, and only one, door to pass through from the three at the far side of the room.

How strange.

You stand for a moment, looking around the interior of the room you are presently in, trying to find some clue as to what is expected of you. There is nothing to see except the three doors, so you go over to the one on the far left. Through a small grille set into the upper portion of the large wooden door, you peer into the first room. You see shelves of books on the three walls in your view. . . very interesting.

The second door is some sort of airlock, which you can see through a heavy plastic window. The interior of the room is almost barren, except for a bowl of water and a package that appears to contain food.

The third door resembles a typical office door, the upper half being glass. You look in this room and see all sorts of files and papers atop several desks.

You are wondering whether to enter the first or the third room to enhance your "knowledge" when you are startled to note that your room is leaking. Strange as it may seem, you see rivulets of water sheeting down the side walls and beginning to pool on the floor. At this rate, you will need to put your swimming skills, such as they are, to use very soon. What if the water keeps on rising? You suddenly face the possibility that you may drown in here. Your first move is to double check that the door through which you entered is indeed locked; it is. You will, in fact, need to pick which door to open of the remaining three.

The Brother told you that knowledge is the most important pursuit in the universe. Did he want you to enter one of the rooms with things to read? Neither of those two doors look like they could keep out the rising water, though, and what good is knowledge if you are dead? You make the decision to enter the empty middle room with the door that would be able to seal out the water. Slogging through the now ankle-deep fluid, you do just that, sealing the airlock closed behind you.

Several hours pass as you watch the water rise all the way to ceiling level in the outer chamber while you are safe and dry inside your room. Sipping the water and nibbling the food helps you pass the time until the water recedes. Cautiously, you leave your sanctuary just as a Brother is entering the room through the original doorway.

"Congratulations. You have shown a great deal of intelligence with your choice of rooms. There are too many people who, given information, take it at face value despite the consequences. You have done well. If you will come with me, I will instruct you in another Brotherhood art, that of Darthan."

You follow the Brother and take the day or so necessary to learn the techniques of your new ability. With Darthan, you are able to use a superhuman speed to evade attacks in combat. You are pleased with this new ability, thinking that it will come in very useful while you are completing your own personal mission.

"Now you will learn the Dialogue of Righteousness. When you have done so, you will truly be one of us," your teacher tells you. The Dialogue he teaches you is the following:

Brother: "How does one know the way to truth?"

You: "I truly seek the answer."

Brother: "The way to truth is by quietly admitting your innocence."

You: "I now know the way."

Brother: "How then, does one find which path to take along the way?"

You: "One asks in the Way of the Ancients."

Brother: "The Way of the Ancients is a long and treacherous path."

You: "Yet it is one I wish to follow."

Brother: "How does an ancient scry the path?"

You: "The Way of the Ancients is to ask in silence."

Brother: "The questions asked in silence are heard by the Very Wise."

You: "And surely the Very Wise know the Way."

Brother: "When you yourself asked in silence, how did they respond?"

You: "The way is towards the center."

Brother: "The core is in fact the center."

You: "And the core is the Way."

Brother: "When you get there, what will you find?"

You: "I do not know the answer."

Brother: "You truly are a Worshipful Brother."

You: "And I know you to be the same."

After hours of practicing, you finally learn it perfectly. The Brother is also proud of your accomplishment. "Welcome, Brother. We so rarely find such capabilities as you have shown thus far." His tone turns grave as he continues. "These are truly times to try our souls. You may not be aware of the grave dangers facing not only the Brotherhood, but all humanity." He speaks calmly, but with a sense of great urgency.

"We are all soon to be tested by the greatest threat of all, total extinction. We need people such as yourself to continue with your training and head deeper into the heart of the galaxy. The Clathrans must be stopped. But there is more to be concerned about than just the Clathrans. Go to the planet Dahl and begin the next phase of your training. Learn the Path of Intuition. With this teaching, you may be able to help save your race and defeat those who threaten all that we hold dear."

You stand in silence, which he interprets to indicate interest in the next phase of Brotherhood training.

"On the planet Dahl you will find an abandoned temple. Inside the temple is a candelabrum which you must rotate. When you have done so, the door to the real temple will be revealed. Descend the stairs, and when you are asked the question, 'How does one know the way to truth?' respond, 'I do not know the answer.' This will tell the Brothers that you are an Initiate of the Path of Intuition.

"In addition, you may wish to learn some more about the research we have been doing on a phenomenon called Dual Space. This phenomenon is responsible for some of the strange things that have been happening in the galaxy, we are certain. Personally I am no expert, but there is a Library next to the Temple here on Margen where you can go to read some of the research that has been done."

If you wish to visit the library, you may plot the option:

⟨ES3ZP2⟩ (7 phases) Explore the Brotherhood's Dual Space Research Library.

You look at the Brother, as if to ask if there is anything more. He looks back into your eyes, measuring your discipline and focus. You try not to flinch under his scrutiny. He says sternly, "Don't forget: if you go to Dahl, you must give the answer 'I do not know the answer.' Only then will you be able to continue your training."

That said, he turns away, leaving you alone with your thoughts.

❖ STOP ❖