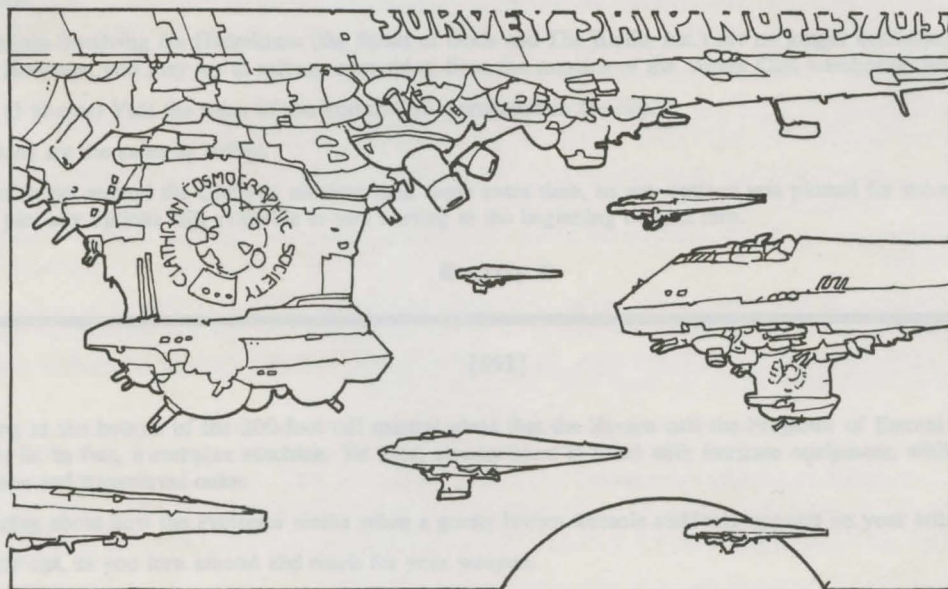


STAR SAGA: TWO™

BOOK K

TEXT 690-760



STAR SAGA: TWO™

BOOK K

TEXT 690-700



[690]

“Whoa Boss! Clathran monitor ship dead ahead!”

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

Breathing a sigh of relief, you head for the Hadrakian colony, but are stopped short by the sight of Adafa on your viewscreen. The odd flat disk is still there, with numerous alien machines spotting the landscape. However, the Hadrakians’ domed city has been destroyed, its ruins scattered across the hard surface of the disk.

“What happened?” you ask your computer softly. You can see that there are no signs of life left and you need a moment to recover. You only hope the Hadrakians were able to flee before their city was destroyed.

“I assume your question is rhetorical, Boss. Obviously the Clathrans destroyed the Hadrakian colony on Adafa. I’m not detecting any bodies, so the colonists may have been able to get out in time. Do you still want to land?”

You reply in the affirmative and are soon in the ruined city. Since the dome is no longer intact, you are forced to wear your environmental suit in order to explore.

Some of the options involving the Hadrakians (the Street of Gods and The Battle, Inc.) are no longer available, since the Hadrakian city has been destroyed. However, you may try to salvage something from the remains of the Vortex Coil warehouse; the option for this is:

⟨GB4WQT⟩ (3 phases) Visit the ruins of the Vortex Coil warehouse in the city.

Your other options are the same as before.

Your maneuvers to get around the Clathran monitor took some extra time, so any options you plotted for the remainder of this turn are cancelled. You may plot any options still available to you starting at the beginning of next turn.

❖ STOP ❖

[691]

You are standing at the bottom of the 200-foot tall martini glass that the Zyran call the Projector of Eternal Peace. Looking up, you see that the Projector is, in fact, a complex machine. Its long, slender stem is filled with intricate equipment, while its open top part has a strikingly perfect shape and transparent color.

You are wondering about how the Projector works when a gooey brown tentacle suddenly appears on your left shoulder.

“Woah!” you cry out, as you turn around and reach for your weapon.

A four-foot high pile of tentacles is standing there, with one tentacle reaching onto your shoulder. “I do not wish to hurt you,” the thing says, making you wonder where its vocal apparatus is.

“What do you want?” you ask.

“Food,” it answers. “Are you interested in the Projector? I will tell you about it in exchange for a meal.”

This seems a fair bargain, so you take the lunch you happen to have with you and set it out on the ground. The Zyran bundle of tentacles squishes back and forth like a mop over the food, and soon your lunch is gone.

“Thank you, Lunch-bringer.” The little Zyran burps, then introduces itself, “My name is Bisoppa. Now I will tell you about the Projector. Sixty-five thousand years ago, a group of powerful beings came to our planet and built the Projector. The powerful beings told us that the

Projector would give us eternal peace. Since we are normally an aggressive, violent race, we wondered how it would do that. We soon found out that, miraculously, the Projector made all Zyran immortal. For as long as the Projector worked, no Zyran aged or died. Unfortunately, this was not so good for us, for we only reproduce when we die; the death of the parent causes the birth of the children. Suddenly, there were no more deaths, and no more children. We discovered that our aggressive, warlike nature was an effect of our growing population. When the Projector stopped our population from growing, we became quiescent and peaceful. We had eternal peace, as the powerful beings had promised. But at what price? The Projector had taken away our vitality. Fortunately, the device no longer functions, and we are free from it now."

You can see that. The Zyran are no longer immortal, nor are they peaceful. But while the Projector worked, the Zyran must have been like many other races you have come across in the galaxy. They had been left content but stagnant, their natural evolution halted by a race of mysterious "powerful beings."

Be that as it may, you are awed by the power of the Projector: immortality for an entire race! The Core Stone has the power of immortality, but it affects only you. Could the Projector and the Core Stone be related?

"What happened?" you ask. "Why did the Projector stop working?"

"Three centuries ago an alien — we don't know who — stole the Stone of Immortality from the core of the Projector. At the time, our race was weak and complacent, and we did nothing to stop the thief. The Stone of Immortality was the true power within the Projector. With the Stone removed, the Projector no longer functioned. We were free. We started to age and to die and to grow again. We regained our vitality, our aggression. Three centuries have passed since then. We have made many technological advances and even colonized space. The thief did us a great favor. Now all that is left of our sixty thousand years of immortality are the powerless Projector and the jewelry we wear. See?"

Bisoppa shows you a small stone on a chain around one tentacle. It's a semi-transparent white sphere with a black center. "A miniature replica of the Stone of Immortality," the Zyran says, "To remind us of our past. To remind us that we should not fear death."

Wow. The explanation leaves no doubt: the Zyran Stone of Immortality and the Core Stone are one and the same. Who was the thief that took the Stone from the Projector? You can't know for sure but you have a good guess: Soulsinger.

You piece together the history of the Core Stone for the past sixty-five thousand years. To start, it was installed in the Projector of Eternal Peace by "powerful beings." The idea was to keep the Zyran peaceful by making them immortal. This worked until just three hundred years ago. At that time, Soulsinger came to Zyroth and took the Stone. This set the Zyran free, allowing them to develop into the aggressive spacefaring race you see today.

Soulsinger's story continued as you already know. After the meeting with Vanessa Chang on Outpost to decide what to do about the Clathrans, most of the explorers headed back to the Nine Worlds to set up the Boundary. Soulsinger was different. He stayed out in space on a quest involving the Core Stone. He never completed the quest. He was killed by a Clathran who took the Stone, went insane, and disappeared. Twenty generations of Stoneseekers searched for the Stone until you found it again.

Now you have the Stone. It makes you immortal, but it also leaves you with a great responsibility: to complete Soulsinger's quest. Unfortunately, you don't know what that quest is. You must learn more. You ask Bisoppa, "Who were the powerful beings that brought the Stone of Immortality to Zyroth? Where did they come from?"

"Our recollections of them are dim. They were not Clathrans. They were more alien, more powerful; they seemed masters of everything they touched. We think they came from the Galactic Core. Once they built the Projector they never visited us again."

"So you know nothing more about where the Stone of Immortality came from?"

"Perhaps what is written on the projector can help you. We have never been able to interpret it." Bisoppa leads you forward, to the stem of the martini-glass, and points out an engraved inscription. The text is short, and in a language you have never seen before. As you gaze at it, though, sudden understanding comes to you.

Here lie forever the entrapped remains of Grystalka-grysmaya, last surviving member of the race of Order Stones of the planet Stonehome. Doomed in entombment to eternal suppression of another sentient race, Grystalka-grysmaya serves the Masters now as his race refused to do in life. Let all sentient species take note: the Masters rule all space and will tolerate no competition.

"Can you read it?" asks Bisoppa, perhaps interpreting the expressions that play across your face.

"Yes," you say. "It's written in the language of the thing that was the Stone of Immortality, perhaps as a joke by the beings who put it here." You translate the brutal message. Bisoppa seems unsurprised.

"Since the thief rescued us from this thing, we have known that those who placed it here were not our friends. You have travelled the stars, Lunch-bringer, do you know if they still exist?"

"No, Bisoppa, I just don't know. Perhaps the planet Stonehome holds a clue. Have you ever heard of it?"

"No, never."

You thank the alien for its help. You have learned what you came to Zyroth for, but on your return to the spaceport, there are no fewer questions confronting you. Soulsinger must have read the message as well, after freeing the Stone from the projector — you have no doubt that it was the power of the Stone which allowed you to translate the epitaph. If Soulsinger felt as you do now, then his final quest must have been towards Stonehome, to return Grystalka-grysmaya to its own planet. But where is Stonehome? It's not listed on any of your maps. And what of the Masters? Do they still exist? How did they defeat the powers of the Stone? What other powers might they hold? And where are they now?

Gazing at the map, and thinking these things, your eyes are drawn inevitably to one section. Perhaps the Stone still influences you; perhaps you have known all along where your quest will lead. Caught in the hand of destiny, you contemplate the Galactic Core.

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

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

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

The survival of humanity is at stake.

✱ STOP ✱

[692]

The natives here are extremely interesting. They are constantly thinking, creating new inventions, improving on old concepts and ideas. Unfortunately they never apply their new breakthroughs to practical purposes. Once the Sallies have come up with something new and proved it will work, they get bored with it and move on to something else. You wonder how many fabulous scientific breakthroughs have been lost because of this mentality.

You wander around inside the Hadrakian business section, hoping to get a chance to speak with one of the Sallie natives. You do not have to wait long before one of the Sallies approaches you and literally runs into you as you are seated on a city bench.

"Forgive me!" he cries, putting the papers he was reading into his backpack. "Are you hurt? I know I shouldn't read and walk at the same time, but I was so interested in rereading my old notes on... but never mind that. Are you sure you're all right?"

You are touched by his concern, and reassure him that you are undamaged. You introduce yourself and learn his name is Lonner. You explain that you are not that familiar with his culture and would like to learn more about the Sallie people. He is thrilled, and offers to show you around.

"We will stay close to the Hadrakian sector," he says, "since you could easily become lost if you tried to find your way around the rest of the city by yourself. The mazes there are much more difficult and tend to change from time to time."

True to his word, Lonner takes you around, telling you stories and discussing scientific ideas all the while. By the time Lonner's tour is over, you have several new options to choose from:

⟨JGU47Q⟩ (4 phases) Go to the Sallion Gradient Filter Factory.

⟨3GP4SQ⟩ (5 phases) Visit a huge warehouse called "Accessory City" where Sallie merchandise can be purchased.

⟨SCZF2L⟩ (14 phases) Accept a standing invitation from Lonner to visit his home.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[693]

Whistling cheerfully, you finish cutting out the rounded section of thin partition sheeting with its handle on the bottom. As a finishing touch to your new invention, you attach a small rubber ball on a long elastic string to the paddle you have just made. You look at your handiwork and smile with satisfaction.

"So, what do you think of it?" you ask your trusty computer.

"What is it, Boss?"

A little peeved, you explain that it is a new way to pass the long boring hours of travel in hyperspace.

"See, you grab the handle and start hitting the ball with the paddle. The elastic string pulls it back. With the right rhythm, you can keep it going all day."

"Un hunh. That's very nice, Boss. Say, would you be interested in hearing what I recently found encoded on Vanessa Chang's map?"

Whap, whap, whap goes the ball. Nice to see you haven't lost your touch since primary school. "Yeah, sure," you reply while concentrating on keeping the ball in motion. You do not notice that your tongue is sticking out of the corner of your mouth in a rather comical fashion.

"Er, well, it seems that automated cargo drones are for sale on the planet Rothane. "

"Great," you answer, not really paying too much attention.

"Drones, as you know, are useful for returning to planet markets we have already visited. Once we know what is for sale and the cost, we can send the drone back to the planet while we continue with our own travels. They are really very useful. As good as I am, though, I can only keep track of one drone at a time. I would like to point out that this is my only shortcoming!" your computer tells you in a rather defensive tone of voice.

"One hundred four, one hundred five, one hundred six. . . "

You may read the *Host Guide and Player Reference Manual* for a more detailed explanation.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[694]

No matter how many times you visit these places, you have a severe reaction. As soon as you see the “Hospital” sign above the doorway you begin to sweat profusely. If you keep this up, the doctors will think you are coming down with a case of the boughie-woughie flu and put you in the isolation ward.

“Needles are nothing to be afraid of,” you mumble to yourself as you enter the hospital’s main lobby. It does little to calm you, though. You have been in many fine hospitals, but you are a nervous wreck every time. To calm yourself a bit, you stop to read the large chart on the wall explaining the services and procedures offered here. You hope that they won’t want to do *all* of those things to you, but steel yourself for whatever is necessary to render you in perfect health.

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

⊗ STOP ⊗

[695]

“Hey Boss, what’s our big plan here?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. The big plan, our master strategy, the concept that guides our actions. What determines where we go and what we do?”

“I do!”

“Well yes, but if you told me what you had in mind, maybe I could help you.”

“Good point. Our plan is based on information I received on Margen, from a scientist named Brother Dikestra. We’re going to investigate some dual space anomalies for him.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. The Interphase Variometer is supposed to tell us if we land on a planet that contains one of the anomalies. When that happens, we’ll do some research.”

“Could these anomalies be anywhere?”

“Anywhere in the Galactic Arm, according to Dikestra. Some might be on planets we visited already, or some might even be in Clathran territory. We’re going to have to visit a lot of planets to find them.”

“Are these anomalies going to be dangerous?”

“No more so than taking a vacuum bath without a tether.”

“That’s very reassuring, Boss.”

⊗ STOP ⊗

[696]

You pass through the artificial airlock and begin your descent into the heart of the volcano. Already you can feel the increasing heat pounding against the ship's outer skin. Instinctively, your eyes swing over to the temperature gauge and watch as the reading inches its way up toward the danger zone. You barely notice as the airlock closes silently above you, perhaps cutting you off from the outside world forever. You knew the risk when you made your decision.

Beads of sweat accumulate on your forehead. Though you are tempted to order the air conditioning brought up to full blast, you wisely refrain. From now on, you will have to carefully balance your own temperature needs against those of your ship. If the engines die while you're down here, you know you're not ever making it out alive. Cautiously pressing your hand against an outer bulkhead wall, you immediately pull it away before your flesh is burned. You silently pray you have not made the biggest mistake of your life.

Thrusters burning, you slowly continue your descent. The rear viewscreen only shows that you have not yet reached the end of the shaft. Glancing at the temperature gauge, you see that you will not be able to continue much longer. Soon, you will have to order a hard burn and begin your trip back to the surface. As for the airlock blocking the shaft, you will deal with it when the time comes.

Eyes darting from gauge to viewscreen and back again, you decide to wait until the temperature reading is actually in the red zone before ordering the computer to bring the ship back to the planet's surface. It is actually a few degrees shy of the zone when the computer calls to you to look at the rear viewscreen. Glancing up, you see something remarkable.

The shaft through which you have been traveling is splitting into two passages. Since your scanners will not work below the planet's surface, you must decide which route to take using visual clues only.

"Computer, recommendations?"

"Without my sensors, Boss, I can't say for sure. Both passages have heated air rising from them. We cannot see far enough down either of them to tell where they lead, but one does appear to have the smooth glass-like surface of the shaft we are now in, while the other looks like a natural rock vent, probably the one that leads to the fire and lava one usually associates with a volcano. I strongly recommend taking the glassy shaft, Boss."

You heartily agree. Within minutes, your ship is traveling down the artificial shaft and you soon find yourself in a large cavern. There must be some sort of insulation here as well, because you notice the temperature dropping as you approach the floor of the artificial cave. It is still hot enough out to warrant wearing your environmental suit, but you are no longer worried about the safety of your ship. At least not for the moment.

After struggling into the suit, you cycle through the ship's airlock and trudge over to the only item you can see in the cave. It is a large multicolored cube measuring about ten feet in each dimension. The cube hovers ethereally in midair, up near the ceiling of the cave, as colored lights flash across its six faces. As you approach this strange object, it floats down towards you.

"Computer, are we still in contact?" you anxiously inquire.

"Affirmative, Boss. Let me know if you need any help."

The cube halts its descent about ten feet above the floor. You can now see that it isn't really made of solid matter at all. It is all energy, colored lights that fill the air in an approximately cubic pattern. Next a voice comes from the cube.

"Welcome Master. I have awaited your return," the voice announces. You fight the urge to turn and see if there is someone else behind you whom the cube might be addressing. The voice continues on, heedless of your confusion.

"In the fifty thousand years since your last visit, I have sustained some system failures and am in need of repairs. I have, however been able to continue with my prime directive."

You are curious, so you take a chance and ask the question, "What is your prime directive?"

The cube unhesitatingly replies, "To keep the Kerosian race at a minimal intelligence level, Master."

"How is this accomplished?" you inquire. You realize that you are risking rousing the cube's suspicions, but you just have to know what is going on here.

"My primary system is attuned to the Kerosian psyche. Should any of their race be born with too high an Intelligence Quotient, they are brought here for genetic revision. They are then returned to their people with an intelligence level comparable to their peers. This ensures continued happiness and contentment among their race, Master."

"How do you bring them safely down here?" you ask.

"The transportation system was one of the first to become inactive," is the ominous reply.

"You mean they have been jumping into the volcano to their deaths?" you ask incredulously.

"Yes, Master," is the toneless reply.

"You are to cease the primary objective at once," you blurt out, unthinking of the consequences. There is a pause of several seconds before the cube replies.

"Access code?" it demands before it will continue along this line. You quickly call your own computer to see if you stand a chance of altering the alien system's prime directive.

"Sorry, Boss. My scanners don't work down here so I can't even try to break into the cube's programming." You curse under your breath.

"What is required to get your transport system working again?" you ask the cube. The answer fills you with a deep sadness for the Kerosians unlucky enough to be born intelligent.

"The entire organo-thermophasion unit will need to be replaced before proper functioning can once again commence," it responds.

You ask a few questions about just what an organo-thermophasion unit IS before you are ready to admit that nothing like that exists in the present technology of any race in this sector of the galaxy. The Kerosians' only hope is to remain stupid.

"However," the cube continues, "one Vortex Coil is all that is required to temporarily reactivate the instruction retrieval system, if you wish to access the data there."

"Well?"

"I am unable to access the instructions until I have installed the Vortex Coil in the system," is the firm reply. The cube floats back up to the ceiling.

If you have a Vortex Coil and wish to supply it to the cube, plot the following option:

(QSXZN2) (4 phases) Give the alien cube a Vortex Coil so it can reactivate its instruction retrieval system.

Until then, there is nothing more for you to do here, so you return to your ship and navigate your way back up the volcano shaft. You are relieved when the airlock that blocks the shaft opens and lets you pass. Soon your ship is flying free in Keros's turbulent atmosphere.

"Take us back to the village," you tell your computer. "I'm going to take a nice, cool shower."

"Will do, Boss."

❖ STOP ❖

[697]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 2

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

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

Choosing from the available actions, you decide that first priority is to investigate Silverbeard's cache of stolen commodities; perhaps there will be enough material to fill your ship's cargo bays. You are also interested in examining Vanessa Chang's old ship. That will use the remaining phases in 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: XZN2YH	—	—	A: XUN7Y8	—	—

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 2

Go to the computer and log on. Press A for Action, and select the 6-character code for visiting the commodity storage buildings; in this case it is XZN2YH, which can be selected by pressing B.

Note that as soon as you type the first A, the display changes to show the action codes available to you on Outpost. When you are done selecting the action code, the display will revert to the plot editor. This enables you to continue with the rest of your plots. In this case, you will press A for Action and then D, to select the option to go to the hangar where Chang's ship is located, the code for which is XUN7Y8.

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

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 2

When the computer has evaluated your move, it will send you to the appropriate text. Write down the text number(s) it gives you, in this case 179, then press Return or F to release the computer for the next player. You may notice that after you do this, 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 storage building 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.

You will be assigned two additional pieces of text to read after you are through loading commodities onto your ship. The first piece, number 175, describes your visit to Chang's ship. You will notice at the end of this text that you are given a new option. You should add the new option to your planet log for Outpost, which should now look something like this:

Planet Log			
Planet Name:		Outpost	
Actions Available:			
Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
7Z82KH	2	spaceport	
XZN2YH	3	commodities	yes
7U87K8	4	ship repairs	
XUN7Y8	3	Chang's ship	no
9ZV29H	6	survey planet	
LZM2JH	1	meet pilots	
9UV798	7	Chang's log	

The second piece of text you are given, number 177, will guide you through your next turn's adventure.

❖ STOP ❖

[698]

The bird-like creature continues to dive bomb you, missing as you manage to dodge its vicious talons and bone-crushing wings. You try to land a few blows yourself as the harpy flashes by you. Each time you miss as well. You tentatively retreat a few steps along the path that brought you here and find that the harpy does not follow.

You hate to give up now, but you realize you will not get past the creature this time around. You do not intend to let it get the best of you, though. Later, when you have acquired another weapon or ability, you might just return here and fight that bird. See once and for all who is superior.

You return to the city and your ship. That night you dream about the fountain.

You may select this option again.

❖ STOP ❖

[699]

You try to work your way casually past the automated drones and scout ships as if you were a friendly Clathran ship. However, there are many small craft checking you out, and they have ample time to analyze their data as you make your way through them. One of the scouts figures out that you're no Clathran and calls for a whole fleet of destroyers to intercept you. You are forced to turn around and flee with your tail between your legs. Fortunately the destroyers are slower than you are, so you are able to make good your retreat. In the process, you take a fair amount of damage from enemy fire.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[700]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

❖ STOP ❖

[701]

Considering the Clathran Menace, deteriorating conditions on Earth, the rising Dual Space level, and the legions of starving algae farmers on Atlantis, you have no justification whatsoever for wasting your time in an amusement park. Guilty thoughts torture you for a time — just under eight seconds — and then you abandon yourself to the fun of the moment. After all, Mardahland is an alien amusement park, so you can record this in your ship's log as "xeno-sociological research."

Although Mardahland is huge, the management has a policy of not allowing the park to become overcrowded and thereby ruin everyone's fun. You are therefore forced to wait in line for a time before entering.

SWISH, you feel the tail feathers of the ostrich in front of you brush your face. The tickling sensation almost makes you sneeze.

"How dare you..." the Mardahlian sputters, whirling to face you. "Oh, forgive me," he coos at you when he sees that you are not another of his kind. Batting his large luxurious eyelashes at you, he continues, "Aren't you new here?"

You know enough about the natives to realize that the alien is not trying to flirt with you. His peering at you and the fluttering lashes are only an attempt to see you properly; Mardahlians have notoriously poor eyesight. You smile and introduce yourself, explaining that you are visiting the amusement park for the first time.

"In that case, you must allow me to show you around!" he exclaims, bouncing up and down on his large and taloned feet. You tactfully step aside to avoid being skewered. "My name is Struth and this," he says, pointing to his android, "is Phrnk, my faithful companion." The bronze android pays little attention to you, since you do not appear to be a threat to its master.

The line moves forward and you find yourself passing through the gateway along with your new acquaintance. For the next several hours you happily wander around the park, playing games of skill and chance, listening to music that sounds astonishingly similar to that from a callopie, and eating something called Banff, which is green, fluffy, and fortunately non-toxic. All in all, you are having a great time.

You are especially interested in a game called "Boffia" to which you can only be a spectator. Genetics have provided the ostrich-people with removable clumps of feathers grown under their wings. To play Boffia, a person enters a large hedge maze, feather pillows at the ready. When another player is spotted, the two run at each other and attempt to be the first one to whomp the other with a pillow while screaming, "Boffia!" Spectators are in a gallery above the maze looking down and watching all of the fun. Since the ostriches have a great deal of strength, you would probably have your neck broken on the first boff, so you wisely watch Struth play the game. He soon emerges from the maze, victorious.

"Did you see that last one?" he asks you breathlessly as he replaces the feather pillows back under his wings. "She was so busy looking for me around the corner that she never heard me sneaking up from behind. Wham! I let her have it!"

He chatters on about the game until his android whispers something in his ear.

"Oh, I almost forgot! I have an important appointment in less than an hour. Will you be all right by yourself?"

"Thanks to your help, I will."

"Very good, then. Do try the rides, if you feel up to it. I particularly recommend the Omelet Maker, the Wringer, and the Haunted House. Come, Phrnk!" The Mardahlian takes his leave, followed by the bronze android.

You have some new options:

(VP9SVZ) (4 phases) Ride in the egg-shaped enclosed cars of the Omelet Maker.

(WSTZG2) (6 phases) Combine skill and intestinal fortitude in the Wringer.

(FSLZM2) (5 phases) Visit the terrorizing Haunted House.

❖ STOP ❖

[702]

"This is Professor Steven Strassmann of the Applied Astrophysics Laboratory at Harvard University, on the planet Harvard, broadcasting to anyone with the capability to receive it.

"The students are sacking the physics campus, and I feel that my equipment might soon be destroyed. I make this transmission now, while the automated laser defenses hold, to tell the human worlds what I have learned.

"I believe that I have discovered the true cause of human paranormal abilities and sudden insanity.

"My area of expertise is the study of higher physical laws and universal constants. I have devoted my life to the construction and maintenance of sophisticated equipment for monitoring certain mathematical functions across the galaxy. Over the last three years one such function, long considered a constant, has been steadily changing. We term this the dual space interphase constant, and I believe its steady rise exactly parallels the development of mass insanity on the Nine Worlds.

"The rising dual space interphase constant appears to unlock certain areas of the human mind heretofore considered inactive, and in those unprepared for the consequences, this has been disastrous. Perhaps my own discovery of this phenomenon is caused by an unlocking in my own brain. Who knows?

"My own time is drawing now to a close; I see that the students have brought a set of mirror shields and a ram for the door. I will fight to save my life's work. . ."

❖ STOP ❖

[703]

You approach the Bluvian soldier guarding the entrance to the Probability Membrane factory. Brazenly, you try to pass her.

"Just a minute there, you," she snarls, grabbing your arm as you go by. "I have no orders to allow you into this building. You will have to turn around and leave."

You explain that you only wish to look around and possibly buy a Probability Membrane, but she is not impressed. "Then go through the proper channels like everyone else."

"But they said it would take months just to process the paperwork!"

"So, you got something better to do?"

You have no choice but to leave. Combat in the middle of a busy street filled with armed Bluvian soldiers is very low on your list of things to do today. Frustrated, you cross the street and watch the Probability Membrane factory from the corner. You note that you are not the only one who is refused entry. Other Bluvians who do not outrank her, or who do not have the proper orders, are not allowed to enter either.

You look at the insignia she is wearing on her shoulder and see that it is a circle with a single stripe bisecting it. If you only had an insignia that outranked hers, you might be able to get in.

You may select this option again.

❖ STOP ❖

[704]

You are especially pleased to have landed on Mardahl, since it is the fourth Brotherhood planet and the place where you will have the opportunity to complete your training. If all goes well, you will finally reach the end of the Path of Intuition. However, there is a decided lack of any mention of the Brotherhood in anything you've seen. Searching for an answer, you consult your trusty computer.

"Have you seen any evidence of humans?"

"Humans?" the computer replies incredulously.

"The Brotherhood is supposed to be here somewhere."

"I see no evidence of them, Boss. You'll just have to look around for yourself."

"Gee, thanks!"

❖ STOP ❖

[705]

While the long tentacles are reaching out to grab you, you are firing your ship's weapons at the beast. You both miss, but the gelatinous blob pulls back from the heat of the energy weapons. Good, at least the thing has a survival instinct. You continue with your attack, only to be driven back by a tentacle uncoiling from a side tunnel. It almost caught you in a tight grip before you became aware of its presence. All thoughts of defeating this monster leave you. You will be more than happy just to leave this place alive.

Another tentacle grabs at you, but you fire all rockets and blast out of its reach before it has time to grab you. Seeing a clear tunnel up ahead, you make a bee line for it and safety. You do not even see the last tentacle trying to reach you before you can make good your escape. It misses you by inches, and the beast bellows in frustration.

You wisely decide not to repeat this little excursion and you head back the way you came. After running a quick check on your ship, you are pleased to see that you have sustained no damage from this little encounter.

❖ STOP ❖

[706]

One day in tri-space, you intercept the following:

"This is Varek, at the gate of the compound, calling Varna, aboard The Ark."

"This is Varna. Senior, why do you use the subspace transmitter? The distance is short between the gate and the launch pad."

"Only the subspace is working, Varna, and my need is acute. The mobs are back, and I fear that this time the lasers will not hold them. Even now they surge towards the gate! Sound the launch alarms and prepare to leave at once. We will hold the gate as long as we can."

"But Senior! The Wamirian drive is still not working; We cannot possibly go yet. And what of you, and the others at the gate?"

"Finish the drive in space, Varna. And go now, the mobs are inside the compound. All the other seniors are dead, and I soon will be. Go, while you have the chance. Leave Atlantis and save mankind! Go! Go! Go..."

The sound of an explosion abruptly ends the transmission.

❖ STOP ❖

[707]

Insulicon is a manufactured substance, refined from an unusual native crystal formation; the Tayzhans use it in small quantities to insulate circuit boards and wave emitters. Your ship's computer directs your attention to it, after analyzing samples of the natives' manufactured products. The material appears to be a perfect insulator, even better than the nearly inert ceramics used in your ship. Your computer points out that in large quantities, it might make a good shielding material for your ship, especially against high energy weapons.

You trace back Insulicon through a number of manufacturers and distributors until you find the ultimate source of supply: a single state-run factory in the southern hemisphere. You go there to negotiate.

The Tayzhans will sell you Insulicon. But a unit-sized chunk of the stuff is close to the monthly surplus output of the entire factory, so it's going to cost you the following:

2 Crystals + 2 Food + 2 Phase Steel + 1 Munitions

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

❖ STOP ❖

[708]

Your computer fixes onto the Hadrakian landing beacon emanating from the spaceport below. As your ship descends, 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.

Soon your ship is safely berthed at the spaceport and you are given instructions to check in at the visitors' Enclave. Following the directions, you soon arrive at the proper place and register. You will be confined to the Enclave until you prove your worthiness by defeating a foe in the Hadrakian Arena. This is a rather brutal method of screening visitors to the colony, 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 city 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, a Settled One, a female Hadrakian in charge of visitor registration, 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 awaken 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 ✂

[709]

From the Nine Worlds:

Join the Citizens to Free Bobby Woodfoot! He is not a murderer, but a prophet, charged with a great message and sent to free us all from the artificial bonds of civilization! Why should others stand in your way? You have the power to realize everything you want in life; join us for visualization instruction every Monday evening, and soon you will see that ours is the Way. Call CFBW today, and learn the potentials of the human mind!

Woodfoot, you know from previous listenings, is the deranged mass murderer recently jailed in New New York after being caught in an iron bear trap while fleeing his last crime. The story perfectly illustrates the more bizarre elements of human life; it surprises you not at all to learn that a cult has sprung up around Woodfoot.

✂ STOP ✂

[710]

The Dardahlans, as a rule, are not really interested in business. They have a very loose system of people working when the mood strikes them. As a consequence, their only two marketable commodities are the togas which they make only because they themselves need clothes to wear, and fiber gathered from fallen trees. They have a tradable surplus of both, but you have no interest in the togas.

You spend several fun-filled hours wandering around the marketplace, enjoying the magical sight of mythological beings brought to life on the beautiful planet. The satyrs and nymphs that inhabit Dardahl make the planet truly idyllic. There are many games to play and dances to dance; you stop only when you are thoroughly exhausted. Finally, you stagger over to the Fiber Trade booth and find that the rates are:

3 Fiber for 1 Food
2 Fiber for 1 Crystals
1 Fiber for 1 Culture

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

✂ STOP ✂

[711]

Wythym, it says on your map: an inhabited planet. You check Vanessa Chang's notations as your ship's computer guides you through the outer system.

"A pleasant planet, green and growing, with natives that are easy on the eyes. A surprisingly difficult place to leave, but we managed it at last. Our guess that Wythym is the source of the Flame Jewels is confirmed. . ."

The map notations go on with a string of technical details, but it was the line about Flame Jewels that really brought you here. You can use Flame Jewels.

Once through the outer system, Wythym itself is easy to spot. It's the planet with the Clathran Monitor in orbit around it. This startles you for only a second, of course, so the Clathrans manage just one full broadside before you scramble off the ecliptic and out of their line of fire. Your ship's excellent defensive systems stop all of the missiles at a good, safe distance, so you are personally unharmed. Entering the planet's atmosphere should scrub away the worst of the hard radiation.

Sneaking around a ship the size of a Clathran Monitor is never easy, especially when it's already on the alert. But fighting your way past is even harder, and you didn't come all this way to be run off by a bunch of green-scaled lizardoids. Accordingly, you activate your passive camouflage systems, aim for the side of Wythym opposite the Monitor, and drop back into the system.

The Clathrans have deployed killer satellites, of course, as well as a few manned fighters, but your electronic counter measures prove stronger than their counter-counter measures, and you leave them behind. Forever strangers, they should have gotten only a fleeting impression of a harmless meteorite. At least that's how your ECM was advertised back at the factory. In any case, you get by them without acquiring any further ionizing radiation.

Once into the atmosphere, you are faced with an unusual problem: where to land. Although you see signs of habitation below, there is no evidence of a spaceport anywhere. Your radio is strangely silent (except, of course, for some Clathran rant about violating protected planets, which your computer is wisely filtering out); there is no air-traffic signal at all, and not even any commercial radio activity. You look in vain for heli-pads, parking lots, or even a good-sized driveway to set down in, but nothing presents itself. Laser bolts are beginning to penetrate the atmosphere from above, so it is certainly time to get down and get covered, but where?

You finally settle for a relatively flat rock ledge, located near a large village. Although your ship can land on the proverbial dime, it doesn't do the dime much good; a small part of the rock formation crumbles under you as you come down. Your stabilizers are able to compensate, though, and when you emerge from the ship some moments later it is with the decided sense of a job well done.

Natives are already rushing toward you through the pleasant summery air, giant amoebae in a variety of eye-pleasing pastel shades. But much to your surprise, they pay no attention to you or your ship, heading instead for the rock slide triggered by your landing.

"Come help!" calls a puce alien. "Can't you see that this will lead to erosion if it's not fixed?"

"Here!" says a sky-blue specimen. "Help me rescue these lichen from under the rocks!"

A third alien finally does approach you, bearing a bouquet of wildflowers. It extrudes a wave emitter from its undulating mauve surface and addresses you directly, while simultaneously pinning a flower to the front of your armor. "Take this flower as a remembrance of those that died in the tragic rockslide."

"That won't be hard to remember," you respond. "This flower seems to have been crushed flat."

"Yes," the alien says. "And I have composed a poem to commemorate it. It begins 'When summer lit the Wythym fields. . .'"

"Very good," you mumble, edging away. You can't understand why Vanessa Chang had trouble leaving; you're almost sick of the planet already. And the next week doesn't make things any easier. The Wythymites are ecologically conscious to a fault, refusing to allow you to do anything which might upset the planet's "delicate natural balance."

In the end you arrive at the following options for further action:

{SZZ22H} (3 phases) Collect a unit of food.

⟨PZS2ZH⟩ (5 phases) Capture one of the amoeba-like natives for closer study.

⟨SUZ728⟩ (7 phases) Travel to the cave of the Flame Jewels.

⟨PUS7Z8⟩ (5 phases) Study the local flora and discuss natural remedies with the natives.

⟨JZU27H⟩ (4 phases) Gather with the natives in the village center, enjoy pleasing macrobiotic meals, and see what you can learn about their history (assuming, of course, that they remember any of it themselves).

✱ STOP ✱

[712]

You are joined in the inner office by five identically-clad Hadrakians; apparently their red uniforms are fixtures at The Battle, Incorporated. You all take seats at a large, round table. After you finish relating your own exploits to date, one member of your audience sits up as if to take charge of the meeting. Against the backdrop of the dueling aliens, Hadrakian and Clathran, you sense that what you are about to hear is grave indeed.

“At Marshal Innvo’s direction, we are authorized to brief you on the recently-completed occupation by the Clathrans of our colony on the planet Innermost. Due to lack of adequate preparation on our part, we elected to meet the Survey with only token resistance, while retreating most of our available strategic forces to other colonies, chiefly Adafa, Psorus and Franclair. This decision permitted the Clathrans to overwhelm Innermost quickly.

“After establishing military control of the planet, the Clathrans proceeded to thoroughly catalogue its resources, population, and technology in great detail. They have blockaded the colony against all ship traffic, even unmanned drones, and it appears that they intend to maintain this blockade indefinitely. Under these conditions, the economic consequences for the citizens of Innermost are most dire. Little if any trading with outside entities will be possible. We are, however, attempting to set up a smuggling operation to ensure that some of the most critically needed commodities get through. Although the risks are great to those involved, they simply must be taken on behalf of our fellow Hadrakians.

“The consequences to the remaining colonies of the Empire, while indirect, are significant nonetheless. We will sorely miss Innermost’s economic and military contribution to the common defense. In addition, we no longer have the intelligence capabilities that used to be provided by Innermost’s strategic location. Most disturbing is the knowledge that the Clathran Survey continues to advance. Adafa, Psorus, and Franclair are next in line, followed by our very home world, Hadrak. Time, my friends, is running out.”

The speaker stands, indicating the end of the formal briefing. As the five red-uniformed Hadrakians file out of the room, you follow them into the rear corridors and offices where The Battle, Inc. does its strategic planning.

✱ STOP ✱

[713]

In the early morning hours, long before the sun or any sane being is up, you are slipping between shadows on your way to the Clathran military base. Deserted alleys, all perfectly clean and free of litter, present no difficulty to your passing through in the dim light. You are not really surprised to see the military neatness of the Clathran people carried over into their civilian life, but you were at least hoping for a rat or two scurrying in the empty streets. How can you win against aliens who can keep their streets free of pests? Shaking this thought is hard to do, but finally you manage. You will need all of your concentration to successfully break into the base.

You circle the main building once to get the layout before trying to enter. The outer structure is hexagonal in shape and its circumference measures about a mile. There are over twenty doors along the perimeter, and at this time of night, no one is using them. However, they are guarded; in fact, most of the doors have two soldiers posted in front. You select a small door in the rear with only a single guard to try to gain entry through. You take a moment to collect your thoughts and wits about you, check your weapons, and stealthily creep up to your intended victim.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[714]

The planet Outpost is gone. There is nothing here to land on.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[715]

Using your work chit, you approach the god and place the wooden disk into the prayer box. The statue immediately comes to life. Why, it is an automaton!

It speaks to you, "Welcome, my child. What do you wish?"

You feel a little foolish, but you whisper your fondest desire. Who knows — maybe there is something to all of this.

"You must focus on your goal in order to achieve it and you must also treat others as you wish to be treated." With that, the statue stops moving and resumes its silence. Perhaps you chose a god who was too busy to be of real help.

You may select this option again.

✧ STOP ✧

[716]

Sometimes you have to pat yourself on the back for your brilliant ideas. Your latest one is simply a stroke of genius. Since you know the Roquies are able to infiltrate the Clathran base in the north, why not use them to run a spy mission for you? Who knows what useful information they can come up with?

As soon as you can, you ask the Roquies to meet you in their village for a meeting. Although they are not too sure what a meeting is, they agree to have a gathering. You wisely bring food to hold their attention.

When everyone is present, you hand out all sorts of fruit, nuts and bread, which your computer assures you will be tasty for the natives. While they are chewing happily, you talk to them for quite a while about the Clathrans, how bad they are, how much they hurt people and what a good idea it would be to sneak into their base and steal important papers so you can read them. The Roquies all nod in agreement. Good, this just might work!

You spend more time outlining a very simple plan for the furry creatures to cross the desert, break into the Clathran base, as they have done many times before to get their blasters, and bring back any papers they can see laying around in offices. You have even brought along some sheets of paper to show them what to look for. They all pass the sheets around among themselves. You do not see when one of the Roquies eats the paper.

Confident of success, you give a few rousing words about freedom and happiness, to which the natives respond by standing and cheering.

"Then let's do it, let's go and beat those soldiers. Let's show them they can't come to our world and put up a base without permission!" you cry, taking a few liberties in the heat of the moment.

“Yeah!” the Roquies yell, waving their arms over their heads.

“I’ve brought enough food for the journey, let’s go now!”

The natives each take one of the food parcels and follow you into the jungle. You feel jubilant that this has worked out so well, better than you had ever dreamed it would. You are so exuberant that you hardly notice when your companions lose interest and, one by one, drift off into the jungle. You reach the edge of the desert and discover that you are alone. Retracing your steps, you find the entire village having a picnic with the supplies you brought for the mission. You resign yourself to the fact that this will never work and return to your ship for a nice hot relaxing bath to soothe your nerves.

❖ STOP ❖

[717]

Finding the Cave of the Flame Jewels is no great trick: the Wythymites are only too happy to show you where it is. They think the Flame Jewels will change you, make you more like them, more conscious of the environment and other living things. You’re willing to risk it.

The Cave of the Flame Jewels is initially no different from any other cave you have ever seen: dark, damp, and clammy. But then it opens out into a lighted gallery, and suddenly everything changes.

First you are stunned by the beauty of it all: a room the size of a large theater, framed by walls of fiery stone. It’s like seeing a Flame Jewel from the inside out, surrounded by faceted walls that burn with their own inner radiance. Jewels litter the floor, from pea-size to those too big to lift, all perfectly faceted, and all with the same inner fire. Radiance lights your face, and burns into your soul. Bedazzled, you bend to pick up a Jewel, and find yourself lying on the floor, gazing upwards into the kaleidoscopic ceiling.

And then the revelations begin:

Flame Jewels form the core of Wythym. Flame Jewels have made Wythym a paradise for all life. Flame Jewels are living things, older than the galaxy itself. Flame Jewels are the tools of the Meddlers, set here to ensnare the unwary. Flame Jewels are a key to the human soul. Flame Jewels can swallow you up, burn you with an inner fire, and set you free again, changed. Flame Jewels are beautiful. Flame Jewels are more precious than habitable worlds. Flame Jewels unlock the doors of Dual Space. Flame Jewels link the sundered worlds. Flame Jewels are here to help you. Flame Jewels are here to never let you go. Flame Jewels. . . Flame Jewels. . . Flame Jewels. . .

A timeless time later, the Wythymites pull you from the cave. Your hair is longer, and unkempt. Your clothes are soiled. You have lost weight. Clutched in your right hand is a Flame Jewel.

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

❖ STOP ❖

[718]

You have worked long and hard to get your ship to its present level of excellence and it pays off for you now. Using all of the weaponry and training at your command, you dodge the laser blasts of the satellite and bring your own guns to bear on the space menace.

"Ready to fire, Boss."

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

"Roger, Boss."

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

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

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

"Ghorbon is a Clathran planet."

"Is that the good news or the bad?"

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

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

✂ STOP ✂

[719]

Walking through the ruins of the colony is like walking through a ghost town. Distorted wreckage of the Hardakian city that used to be here are everywhere. You dread that you might find corpses of the former inhabitants, dead of suffocation and/or hypothermia, but you see none. You hope your theory is correct, that the Hadrakians must have fled *en masse* when the Clathran Survey approached their world.

You shiver a little and check the temperature reading of your environmental suit: normal. Stalking the rubble-cluttered streets, you examine the ruined buildings all about you. Nowhere is a structure left completely intact. Finally, near the dome's edge where machinery for handling spaceship cargos used to operate, you arrive at a building that still has three walls and most of a roof. You enter through a gaping hole in one of the walls and look around.

The structure used to be a storage facility for cargo ready to be loaded onto spaceships. Most of the former inventory is gone, and what little is left is in ruins. You are disappointed, but patiently look through the rubble and trash littering the floor. In one of the piles of crumbled roofing, you locate a Vortex Coil that is still in good condition. You are fortunate; the Hadrakians must have had to evacuate very quickly to have left such a valuable item behind. You thoroughly search the rest of the warehouse but find nothing else of value. Returning to your ship, you store the Vortex Coil safely in a cargo bay.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[720]

You approach the place where you know the Karnossus system should be located, but you see nothing. There are no planets, no debris, not even wisps of hydrogen gas to prove that a mighty star system once existed here. You've never seen a region of space quite so empty. The Dual Space Inversion Bomb has done its dirty, but necessary, work.

You were not able to land, so you are still aloft in the trisector which formerly contained Karnossus.

❖ STOP ❖

[721]

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

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

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

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

Clearly, you think, this is an important place. With that thought comes another one: sabotage.

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

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

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

Then you set the timer, giving yourself two hours to clear the area. You hesitate for a second before throwing the switch. You have no illusion that your action will cause more than a momentary delay in the Clathrans' march to galactic domination, but every moment counts. Then another thought occurs to you; perhaps you can find some way to tap into the data here, and transmit it to your ship. With the aid of your computer, you might be able to decipher the Clathran orders, and learn something of their ultimate plans. That would certainly give Schottky and friends something to chew on.

You quickly rework your device, this time rigging it to send duplicates of all transmissions on a frequency you know your ship can receive. After a moment's thought, you change that frequency to the one used by the Institute for Space Exploration. Once you're safely clear of the planet, you'll call and talk to them about what they're getting.

You finish up your handiwork, and inspect the results. Using the Clathrans' own transmitters to send their battle plans to the Human Worlds seems somehow fitting. Eventually, of course, someone will tumble onto what you have done. By then, though, you'll be long gone. And in the meantime... humans can only benefit.

Two hours later you are safely clear of the War Room, going about your business in the starlit city just like any other invisible espionage agent.

✧ STOP ✧

[722]

You are very impressed by all the ships the Brotherhood is building here on the planet Dahl. Understandably, the Brethren want to be able to evacuate their colonies in case the Clathran Survey uncovers them. However, there is also the possibility that the ships could be used as an offensive fighting force. They are certainly well-equipped with weapons.

You ask a Brother if there is anything available you could use to improve your own ship. After all, you travel around quite a lot; you could use every bit of help you can get. The Brother answers that he would be willing to sell you some things for a price:

Boarding Robots — 1 Medicine + 1 Munitions
 Inertial Stabilizer — 1 Crystals + 1 Fiber
 Causality Shielding — 1 Phase Steel + 1 Synthetic Genius + 1 Tools
 Entropy Loop — 2 Food + 2 Super Slip + 1 Warp Core

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

✧ STOP ✧

[723]

You go back to see the First Merchant again, hoping that the deal she had offered during your previous visit is still available.

Upon your arrival, you are told that the First Merchant is unable to speak with you personally, but that the same special trades may still be made.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[724]

You wander and wander through the night but you are thoroughly lost. When will you get out of the maze? You could be stuck in here forever the way things are going. There is another fork in the road ahead. . . and another. . . and another. It is too much; it is going to drive you crazy!

Tired, dirty, and hungry, you collapse on a sidewalk inside the Sallie section of the city. You are never sure what really happened, but you think you remember several of the tall natives picking you up and carrying you back to your ship. You dream of being lost in the maze for all eternity, searching desperately for a way out. Not another fork in the road. . . dead end up ahead. . . one way the wrong way. . . NO!

It is an extra 7 phases before you are in any condition to leave your ship again, and your health has been somewhat impaired. Working with your computer's psychotherapy module, you manage to get the courage to go back into the Hadrakian district of the city again. However, you firmly resolve never again to return to the Sallie part of the city on your own. Ever.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[725]

You are greeted by an unusually harried-looking Settled One who enters from the other end of the conference area shortly after your arrival.

"I apologize for any abruptness you may feel, but we have been holding strategy sessions all day, every day, for some time now. Our plans for meeting the Clathrans at Hadrak are crystallizing slowly but surely. Any information you can provide from here on in will be absolutely vital."

You report on what you have learned in your recent travels — just another small piece of what must be a staggeringly large puzzle. When the briefing is over, you bid the Settled One good day and head towards the offices in the rear of the building to confer on strategy.

✧ STOP ✧

[726]

You are ready to leave this world, at least for the time being. Giving your computer the necessary orders for liftoff, you sit back in the command chair and watch as the planet begins to recede on your viewscreen.

"Boss?" your computer asks, snapping you out of your reverie. "What should we do about the energy beam? From the earlier evidence, I suspect it will home in on us and strike without warning in less than twenty seconds."

Oh no, the energy beam! "Prepare for evasive maneuvers, but first, use weapons to try to disable the beam closest to us."

"Roger, Boss. I would like to mention, though, that such action" (as your ship's weapons lock onto the beam as ordered, and fire), "will probably cause the beam to strike us earlier than. . ." The statement goes unfinished as your ship rocks with the force of the alien weapon engulfing you in its beam of energy.

You would like to masterfully take command and give just the right orders to pull both you and your ship out of the deadly beam, but you cannot do so while sprawled across the floor, unconscious. With no protection to either you or your ship, you both take a beating. The only good thing is that your ship's thrusters, far faster than the native plasma creatures in projecting you into orbit, are able to get you out of the beam's path before you are killed. Hours later, when you wake up, you are not sure the ship did you such a big favor.

"Unnngh," you groan through clenched teeth. You want to ask about the ship's condition, but pass out again.

"Glllurgh," you moan, hours later. This time you manage to stay conscious for the short time needed to assess the damage to your ship. It isn't pretty. You fall back into a deep sleep. When you awaken, you feel at least remotely human.

As you plot the instructions for the next leg of your trip, you think to yourself that it might be a good idea, the next time you return to this planet, to find some way of protecting yourself from the alien energy beam.

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[727]

Aargh — wrong combination again! At this rate, it'll be several decades before you figure out how to get at these doggone storage compartments. Good grief!

You may select this option again.

✧ STOP ✧

[728]

Safely past the Survey Line, you scan the subspace radio frequencies, hoping to find an open channel that will put you in contact with the Church, back home. Instead, you make contact with Admiral Roland Wilkins of the Nine Worlds Space Patrol.

"So you are Disciple Laran Darkwatch, of the Final Church of Man?" the Admiral asks.

"Yes, sir."

"I have been trying to get in touch with you for quite some time, you know."

"No, I wasn't aware of that. I'm a long, long way from the Home Worlds, so I can pick up only occasional random transmissions over my radio. How can I help you?"

"I need all the information you can give me about the Clathrans. We've decided to build a space navy, to try and protect the Home Worlds from the alien threat. What kind of ships do they have? How fast are they moving? Are they as serious a threat as Vanessa Chang predicted?"

You tell the Admiral about your various experiences with the Clathrans, and describe the size and composition of their survey fleet in great detail. The Admiral is quite dismayed.

"The situation is worse than we thought," he concludes.

"Yes," you agree. "It's a miracle that I was able to cross their Survey Line. There were some close calls. . ."

"Not only is the military threat more serious than we had expected," the Admiral continues, "but we've been having other problems here in the Home Worlds as well."

"You mean Sudden Adjustment Psychosis Syndrome?"

"So you've heard about it? It's getting worse. People are going mad. Strange mental powers, visions of dragons swallowing the galaxy, whatever. The scientific people say it's being caused by something called Dual Space. What do you know about that?"

You update Wilkins on what you've learned in your explorations so far.

“Very interesting,” he comments. “I was talking to Disciple Efrigath of the Church just the other day. . . .”

“Lord Highest Disciple Efrigath?”

“Yes, and he said you were looking for a place called Golgotha, where the Founders of the Church had found something of great importance.”

“I believe so.”

“Whatever it is they found, do you think it might lead to a way to stop the Clathrans, or to deal with this Dual Space thing, or both?”

“It’s possible. I don’t know. It might be more important than either of those things.”

“You’re talking in riddles. What could be more important than saving the whole human race? I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I, sir. But I sure wish I did. Keep working on that space fleet. You might need it.”

“We will, Darkwatch. Meanwhile, do whatever you can out there to help out, OK?”

“You can count on it. Say hello to Efrigath for me.”

“Over and out.”

✧ STOP ✧

[729]

The place to buy Cargo Bay Expansions is not far from where your ship is “parked” amid the mounds of decaying matter. To get there, you have to work your way carefully through and around rotting trash, avoiding the vermin that have adapted their lifestyles to this environment. And THEN you have to keep a wary eye out for the numerous Clathran patrols that make the rounds of the city on a regular basis.

The directions to the sales office indicate that it is buried under a particularly large heap of refuse topped by a discarded billboard touting the taste qualities of a tobacco-like product guaranteed to cause severe lung distress for the entire day not only to the smoker, but to anyone within breathing room, a quality the Wesmlots valued in a product. Following an almost invisible path, you soon find yourself at the entrance to the hidden office.

Upon entering, you see four Settled Ones sitting in a circle, grooming each other. The heavy smog content of the air, as well as the basic dirt and grime in the city, wreak havoc with their usually meticulously clean fur. Their solution, aside from setting up a domed living area in the main part of the city, is to hold grooming meetings where they spend several hours a day getting the filth from the planet out of their hair. You have even seen the impatient Homeless Ones take the time for this activity!

Walking over to this group, you greet them politely and explain you are interested in learning the selling prices of their Cargo Bay expansion units. One of the Settled Ones, without stopping her activity, shows her fangs in what passes for a Hadrakian smile and informs you they have a great sale going on during the Clathran occupation. She quotes you the following price:

1 Synthetic Genius + 1 Tools

Before you make a decision, you have a question which has been bothering you — how do the Hadrakians get the expansion units ONTO your ship while it is buried under tons of trash? When you bring up this minor detail, the Settled One laughs out loud and explains how they are able to get around the inconvenience of not being able to work out in the open.

“We have a well hidden and very well developed underground network, both in the metaphorical and physical sense. Using the passages below ground which traverse the garbage dump, we are able to reach the different underground landing pads like the one where your ship is, and come up from below to install the item you purchase. Easy!”

Go now to the CGM. You may select this option again unless your purchase here puts you at the 15 cargo bay limit of your ship’s hull.

✧ STOP ✧

[730]

You noticed from the start how spry and agile the Kerosians are, and you are curious to see what they consider to be a challenging sport. So you go with Smam to his daily practice session, which takes place on the side of the volcano which looms ominously over the village. While the volcano has never been known to erupt, you can tell from its rumblings that it is far from dormant. Smam is unconcerned, though, so you follow him to the practice site.

Jump'r'crunch is a sport which evolved from the necessity to learn to dodge the many boulders and rocks that landslide down the slopes of the volcano. It is a necessary skill since the Kerosians' church of worship is located at the lip of the volcano's mouth. The faithful have to be especially fleet of foot to survive the daily climb up the mountain, since it is impossible to predict when the hike will be rudely interrupted by a deluge of falling rocks. While most Kerosians are satisfied with being able to elude the occasional rockslide, some have become so adept at it that they have their friends carry rocks up the volcano and loosen them on purpose just so they can have the fun of dodging them. And so Jump'r'crunch was born.

You are fascinated by the whole process of the sport. At the start of the practice session, many of the smaller-sized boulders are carried about halfway up the volcanic slope and held there behind a large sturdy gate. When the signal is given, the gate is dropped and the rocks set loose. The slope is steep, so they gather a fair amount of speed as they approach the bottom. It is here that the athletes are waiting. Using techniques perfected over the centuries by their ancestors, the Kerosians weave and dodge the deadly assault. Smam is by far the best dodger of all.

When the practice session is over, you ask Smam to show you how it is done. For several hours, you practice the moves and dodges basic to jump'r'crunching. Soon you feel you are ready for a few rocks, so you and Smam carry a small number a short way up the slope. You trot back down to the foot of the volcano and signal Smam that you are ready. Just then, you hear a sound that chills your blood: the rumble of a ground tremor. It is immediately followed by the groaning of a rockslide. Looking up, you see that the whole side of the volcano is alive with rocks and boulders. There is nowhere to run or hide; you will have to try to survive using what you have just learned from Smam. He has run the short distance to where you are and grins at you.

"Ready for the real thing?" he asks.

You take a moment to swallow the flood of saliva in your mouth caused by the adrenaline now coursing through your veins, then nod yes. Muscles taut with expectation, you stare at the mountain of rocks about to fall on you, and prepare to jump.

The next few minutes last an eternity — dodging and twisting, rocks the size of mountains narrowly missing you. Sweat blinds you, but you are moving on instinct now. There is no need to see, for you are working on the feel of air currents, the trembling of the ground, the smell of stones roaring by you. Then it is over. The silence is deafening.

Smam startles you by grabbing your arm. "Well done, well done!" he exclaims proudly. "You have the makings of a first class jump'r'cruncher." High praise indeed from one of the best.

Congratulations! You have learned the ability of *jump'r*. It will come in handy during combat, when actions speak louder than words.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[731]

One good thing about the small size of the Hadrakian colony here is that you can easily get to where you are going. Within minutes of leaving your ship, you find yourself at the front door of The Battle, Inc., the government-sponsored resistance to the Clathran onslaught. You enter the small building with no difficulty and return the Settled One's greeting. She is seated comfortably behind a small platform, working on some project involving stacks of books, laminated star maps, and small glass markers. You hate to disturb her, but she asks what she may do to be of assistance.

You tell her why you are here and that you are interested in speaking with someone in The Battle to get information on the war.

"Of course," she replies, pointing to a door behind her work area. "Right in here," she tells you and leaves you to your own devices. You step into the back room and the door closes behind you.

❖ STOP ❖

[732]

The *Quest's End* is perhaps the most powerful single-occupant vessel in the galaxy. After all, who else has managed to fight a Clathran dreadnought and win, the way you did when you crossed the Survey? You are fast on the move, strong on the attack, and well-defended.

And there are lots of Clathrans to kill.

You begin by jumping from duel to duel, warping into the middle of things, taking a few well-placed shots at the Clathran ships, and then speeding out again. The Zyran forces especially seem to benefit from your help. With you providing occasional extra firepower, and an even more important element of distraction, the Zyran forces nearly always go on to win.

Eventually, however, the Clathrans catch on to your tactics. They break off their individual attacks and head for the *Quest's End* in a mass. This leaves an opening for the Zyran fleet, of course, and they are quick to close in behind the Clathrans and do what damage they can. For yourself, you have little option but to retreat, again and again. You are as fast as any of the ships in the Clathran battle group, but there are many more of them, and you are soon surrounded. You fight like a demon as the Clathrans close in on you, hoping to give the Zyrans enough time to bail you out. Things are not looking very good, though. Your weapons are powerful enough to make a difference, but your defenses can't withstand much more punishment. Your active countermeasures work better, but in the electromagnetic soup of this battle, no one's being fooled by fake sensor images or decoy torpedoes. It's a matter of beams against shields, power against power.

You have to fight to keep both hands on the control. One hand seems to want to reach over to your right.

This is no time to panic, you think to yourself. You have to escape from the Clathran formations. There seems to be an opening above you and to port. You loop into the new course, but a Clathran ship seems to come out of nowhere and block your route. You reverse trajectory, only to discover that three dreadnoughts have hemmed you in, blocking any possible escape, and their combined firepower is starting to push your shields to the limit. Worse news is on the way, in the form of the Clathran Monitor commanding this battle group, even now maneuvering in close to you. Held helpless, you are almost in range of the behemoth's weapons.

If only your hand didn't keep reaching to the right, you'd be able to fight better. You need to defend yourself.

Defend yourself! Suddenly you realize what you've been reaching for. It's just within reach. You reach for it as your ship shudders under the coercive force of a powerful pressor beam.

Closing your eyes, you reverse the flexion glove over your hand, exposing the Core Stone to the open air. Blinking suspiciously, you open your eyes again to see that it is cold and dark, almost seeming to suck light into itself. This surprises you for a second, since you remember the last time you unveiled it on the bridge, when you were nearly blinded by its radiance.

You haven't any longer to ponder the phenomenon, though, as the Clathran Monitor draws into range of your ship and unleashes its beam weapons in a broadside you know you cannot possibly withstand. This, indeed, is the *Quest's end*.

There is a bright flash of light from the viewscreens, as the energy weapons encounter the remnants of your shields. You close your eyes again, but when you open them a moment later you see. . .

Your viewscreen. Your control panel. The undamaged interior of your ship's bridge. Your shield controls, reading close to the maximum, but no further. Dazed, you watch as your computer automatically fires your powerful weaponry. A dreadnought is destroyed, and you score a hit on the Monitor, as other Clathran ships move in.

The Monitor fires again, and again nothing changes. You hit the Monitor, and see that your sensors now show its propulsion systems destroyed. Other ships are firing, as well, and they can't possibly be missing you; the tactical display shows you hanging immobile in the middle of a globe of Clathran ships. But none of the damage is getting through. The Clathran weapons might be nothing more than flashlight beams for all the harm they are doing you.

And your weapons are slowly tearing them apart.

The Monitor explodes with your seventh hit on it, a total loss. Three more dreadnoughts have succumbed, and the fire directed at you is thinning markedly. Clathrans are turning to run, to escape your indestructible ship, but the Zyrans are behind them, and the Battle Group is soon completely exterminated.

You look at your instruments. You are in exactly the same spot in space you were when the Clathrans closed in on you, and your shield status has not changed a whit since you unwrapped the stone. Even now, when they should be cooling off and recycling automatically, they are suspended in a state of near-maximal load.

You reverse the glove over the Core Stone, and twist the top of it closed. The shields begin their refresh cycle, the *Quest's End* drifts across space, and motion returns to the galaxy. The Core Stone must have protected you and your ship in a dynamic stasis field, the way it did the nearly-dead Clathran who held it when you found it, the way it did the spinning top in your experiment on Atlantis before you left the Nine Worlds. Somehow it sensed the pattern of your ship, and acted to preserve it from any outside perturbation. Ever since Zyroth, of course, you have known it was a sentient entity, but now you perceive just how powerful an entity it really is.

"We've got a message coming in from the Zyrans," says your computer.

"Go ahead with it."

"Captain Stoneseeker, this is Commodore Zug." The transmission is fortunately voice only; you have no desire to see what Zug looks like. "Congratulations on your dispatch of the Clathran forces. Will you join us now as we return to battle? There are many more enemies to eat!"

"Indeed, Commodore. I will follow where you lead."

And follow you do, through hours more of combat. The Allied forces, initially overwhelmed by the Clathrans, rally behind you. Three times more, the *Quest's End* is caught by superior Clathran forces, and three times more it is the Clathrans who are destroyed. By the end of a long day of fighting, the Hadrakians and their allies are victorious. The Clathrans flee — those ships that are able — perhaps to rebuild and relaunch their Survey.

For the most part, the Allies let them go. Only one ship is detained, the last surviving Monitor in the Hadrak system. This ship is carefully neutralized, then ringed by an entire task force. The Hadrakians hope to board it and capture its computer systems intact, for the information it will give them about Clathran tactics and strategies.

With their permission, you join the boarding party.

✱ STOP ✱

[733]

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah, a human. I knew I'd be seeing more of you since I agreed to this alliance against the Clathrans. So Lord Ruckel sent you here. What information do you have for me?"

You tell the King what you know about the latest movements of the Clathran Survey Line, the status of the Hadrakian War, and the progress being made bringing more races into the alliance.

In return, the King offers you the opportunity to trade commodities on Zyroth, and also to visit one of their shipyards. You are delighted to accept, of course. The options are:

(4BQWXT) (3 phases) Trade commodities with the Zyran.

(EB3WPT) (5 phases) Visit a Zyran shipyard.

As you ride back down to the bottom of the yellow test tube palace, you mentally congratulate the person who was able to convince the Zyran to join an alliance against the Clathrans. Who would have thought the Zyran could become such an important military ally? With them on the same side as the Hadrakians, yourself, and whomever else you manage to round up, maybe you can actually stop the Clathran Survey!

Then again, you'd better not get your hopes up. The Clathrans will be no pushover.

❖ STOP ❖

[734]

You sneak out of the bunker before the gun goes off, and use the camouflage provided by the mud to crawl to the center of the field. Meanwhile, your ally is guarding your side of the field. One of your opponents is searching for you; the other is nowhere to be seen.

You must now decide how best to continue your effort. Your choices are:

A) Continue to crawl in the mud, trying to get to the other side of the field unnoticed.

B) Fight the enemy who is looking for you, hoping to defeat him.

C) Run as fast as you can the rest of the way, dodging your enemies as necessary.

D) Reverse the color of your headband, making yourself look like one of your enemies.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[735]

For two days you make your way inward toward Knapt's core. The plasma creatures stay with you for a while but eventually trail off. Your instruments begin to pick up traces of the atmospheric bubble reportedly at the planet's center. As you get closer, the tunnels become narrower until you are afraid to continue. Just then, you emerge into a roomier tunnel that seems to head straight to the heart of the planet. You continue on your course.

It is very dark and quiet. The gravity has dropped to almost nothing but, even so, you would swear you can feel the weight of the planet all around you. Your computer informs you that the ship has entered the area where the atmosphere is present.

You keep traveling along the corridor for another hour when the computer interrupts your thoughts with the message that there are rhythmic fluctuations in the carbon dioxide readings.

"Boss, it could be caused by something living down here."

"Like what?" you start to ask, but it becomes unnecessary as a large tentacle curls out of a nearby corridor. The creature to which it is attached emerges next, and you gulp as you see that it is ten times the size of your ship. The main body is roughly spherical and has a translucent gelatinous appearance, except for the ridged area around what you assume is the creature's mouth. You are not happy to see it gaping at you hungrily.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[736]

"Time to shake the dust of this primitive planet from our boots," you tell your faithful computer.

"Huh?" it asks, confused.

"Prepare for liftoff," you reply.

"Oh, why didn't you say so?"

You wisely choose to ignore this remark and settle back in the command chair and watch the front viewscreen as the ground pulls away. Within seconds, you are aloft and soaring through the brilliant blue skies of Psorus on your way to the vast emptiness of space. You jump back in surprise as something black and scaly momentarily blocks your view.

"What was that?" you ask just as your computer is triggering the red alert siren. The piercing sound of "WHHHHHOOOOOOAAAAAH-HHHHHH!!!!" nearly shatters your eardrums. With hands pressed tightly over your ears you scream at the computer to shut the siren off and tell you what is happening.

"We're under attack, Boss. Some kind of gigantic flying reptilian monster — an aeropsor, I think. It's at twelve o'clock and coming right at us!"

The winged reptile is as large as your ship, can maneuver with incredible speed and agility, and has claws and a beak that can rend metal into so much ribbon. Things do not look really good for the guys in white hats.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[737]

"We're now leaving the planet Golgotha, Boss," says your computer.

Golgotha! After all these months, you have finally reached the world where, hundreds of years ago, the Founders of the Final Church of Man received their revelations. At last you have tracked the mysteries of the Church to their source. What did the Founders find? What understanding was strong enough to cause them to give up their old creeds and create the six Holy Text Files? Where is the Seventh Text File?

But wait — did the computer say "leaving?"

You quickly glance at the viewscreen, then key in for a rear view. A reddish planet is receding behind you.

"Why are we leaving?" you demand. "Turn the ship around. When did we reach Golgotha?"

The computer is silent for a moment. "Two days ago, Boss. We scanned the planet, found nothing of interest, and finally you ordered me to take off."

"This time you've blown your chips for sure. Why would I tell you to take off when we just got here?"

"I don't know, Boss. Don't you remember?"

"I don't remember anything! Are you saying I've been asleep for two days?"

"No, Boss. You were acting quite normally. Is something wrong? You're not making any sense."

"Well, let me put it this way. One of us is rather out of touch with reality. Whichever of us it is, it's not good news for me. Can you show me your records of the last two days?"

"Of course, Boss. Just a moment. . . I'm sorry. I seem to have made an error. The records aren't in storage."

"Perform a systems check," you order the computer. As the machine complies, you guide the ship manually into a reasonable orbit around the dim greenish planet.

"All my circuitry and logic kernel segments check your okay, Boss. Boss! What are you doing? We're on collision course! Release the manual controls!"

You look up and see Golgotha's yellow-white surface rushing toward you at frightening speed. You quickly pull out of the dive, then return the flight controls to computer mode. What could you have been doing? How could you have made such a clumsy flying error?

"Now approaching the planet Golgotha, Boss," says the computer as if nothing were wrong. Your head reels. Approaching? Sure enough, the dull grey orb is centered in your forward viewscreen.

"How can it be in front of us? We were just flying away from it!" you ask out loud.

"What do you mean, Boss? We're just arriving at the coordinates on the map. Do you want to leave without even scanning it?"

"Check every instrument reading," you instruct the computer. "There's some sort of anomaly here, either in the ship's systems or with the planet."

"Boss, there's nothing wrong with the ship, except that I can't get a sensible reading from the Interphase Variometer. I suspect it has broken down. Its reading is pegged at the upper extreme of its scale."

You look around and notice that the planet is nowhere in sight. "Turn us around," you command. "We've passed Golgotha. . . the coordinates must be a little bit off." But you have a very uncomfortable feeling that something else is wrong. You feel a sensation of dreamlike anxiety, a swarming of contradictory thoughts. The ship changes course, and the tiny planet of brown and white comes back into view.

"Suppose the Variometer reading is true," you ask. "What would it mean?"

"Well, according to theory it would mean that a wide variety of alternate realities exists at this point, and that shifting between them is easier. If we're at some sort of special nexus in Dual Space, then the Interphase could appear to be vastly wider. Local reality would be highly unstable."

"Why only local reality? What's the difference?"

"This is all theoretical, Boss, but from what we know so far about Dual Space, the Interphase should be close to the same width throughout the galaxy. Golgotha violates that law somehow. At the same time, the effect is confined within a small volume of space. If it weren't, and the Interphase had really widened to this point, we would see the stars shifting around, not just the planet."

"So how can I get there? How did the Founders manage to land there?"

"It's difficult, Boss. The zone of instability around Golgotha makes all events and facts highly subjective. My sensors and logic systems simply don't function there. Because your sense of subjective sentience is better developed, you might be able to control the instability."

"Really? And how do I do that?"

"Beats me, Boss. Reality in the Dual Space Interphase is subject to alteration by preconception. It conforms itself to your conclusions. If your mind wanders, so will you. It appears that you would have to concentrate on passive perception, and let go of your sense of logical inference, in order to force the nexus to show you its real shape."

"Let go of my sense of logic? You've got to be kidding."

"Not at all. Knowing you, it should be second nature."

"Okay, set a course back to the planet. How close to a landing can you get without using sensors, just going by the map?"

"I can reach orbit, Boss, but not land. You'll have to do that manually."

"Fine. Put a direct visible-light feed on the viewscreen and take yourself out of the image processing sequence. That'll keep things simpler. I'll try to concentrate on keeping us and the planet where we should be."

You once again draw close to the planet, a brilliant blue sphere streaked with dark grey clouds. The image wavers and trembles slightly, but you watch it closely as you approach. Again you feel the strange sensation of contradiction, of numerous possibilities striving to be realized. Why should you be here and not there, and why should it be now and not then? Why do you insist on knowing where you are, when you could be anywhere? Why merely look, when you could draw whatever shape you want to see out of the layers of possibility? You keep your thoughts and expectations neutral as you enter orbit. You concentrate on the unchanging stars and ignore the planet's shifting patterns and colors. As you descend, you watch the horizon and the ground beneath, and pay only scant attention to the ships' instruments. You try not to think about all the other places on the planet where you could be landing, where in some other reality not far away in the Interphase you are landing at this very moment. There are infinite possibilities, you remind yourself, but there is only one reality, or at least only one at a time.

You don't feel any jolt when you finally touch Golgotha's surface. The rock seems to be shaped as though specially carved to cradle your ship. The atmosphere is breatheable, or at least you think it is. You prepare to explore the planet, but at the same time you wonder just what it is you've landed on. Is there really a planet here at all? Or just the idea of a planet, pulled from the Interphase to fulfill your expectations? You decide that Golgotha must possess some degree of autonomous reality, for otherwise it couldn't have been discovered. Perhaps there was a normal planet here once. Whatever happened here to create the discontinuity in Dual Space left at least the memory of a planet orbiting in its place. You wonder what — or whom — they found here, and whether any sort of intelligence might still live on Golgotha. You wonder how the Dual Space anomaly and the strange nature of Golgotha might have influenced or inspired the Founders.

Your options are:

(HNRYA6) (7 phases) Search for any sign of intelligent life on the planet.

(DNCYF6) (7 phases) Examine the planet for evidence left behind by the Founders.

(HMRJAU) (7 phases) Investigate the cause of the Dual Space anomaly.

❖ STOP ❖

[738]

A crowd of Wythymites gathers around you.

"Okay," you say. "I've brought the goods."

An ochre Wythymite pushes to the fore. "We have the Flame Jewels." He gives you instructions about where to send the drone, then urges his fellows forward to empty your cargo bays.

You transmit the drone instructions to Para-Para. It'll take the ISE a few minutes to set up their end of the deal the way you worked out, so you have some time to think things over.

Perhaps your proximity to a whole planet of Flame Jewels stimulates your brain somehow, or perhaps you are just relaxing at the conclusion of a difficult quest, when suddenly you figure out what it's all about. The Wythymites were awfully eager to help you get some Flame Jewels, surprisingly so when you consider how vehement they became against your taking any other resources. Why? It must be because they want you to take them. The negotiations were only a sham, to lull your suspicions. For some reason the Wythymites want Flame Jewels spread throughout the galaxy. Or the Flame Jewels themselves wish to spread, and are merely using the amoebae. You think back on your revelations, trying to recall a particular vision. Flame Jewels are living things. Flame Jewels are living things!

Bolting from the bridge, you descend to the *Holly Roger's* engine room. "Show me how to get to the tri-axis drive assembly!" you command your computer.

"Right away, Boss. Would you also like to take apart the shields, the navigator, and the life support systems?"

Your reply is a muttered curse, hurled back over your shoulder as you plunge into the maze of electronic machinery which powers your ship. At last you find the tri-axis drive unit, and the Flame Jewel nestled in its core, the one given to you by the Family, years ago. Unceremoniously hauling it out, you rush it to the science cubicle and drop it on the platter of the scan-all.

"Well?" you demand.

"You're right, boss, although I'll never understand how you flesh and bloods figure these things out. It's half a millimeter larger than it used to be, and two grams heavier."

"Hah!"

"If you wouldn't mind filling in a poor dumb computer. . . ?"

"It's alive, you ninny. A Flame Jewel is a living, growing thing. They want to leave the planet so they can spread across the galaxy. A living, sentient thing, untouched by the Masters. No wonder they feel so akin to our human minds."

"Does this change the deal?"

That requires a moment's thought. "I think not. The Flame Jewels may be dangerous, but right now we need all the help we can get against the Clathrans, and they want us to use them. Mark this one down for future study, when things are a little more settled."

"Aye aye, skipper. I sure hope you know what you're doing."

"Me too, computer. But we'll let the ISE know, just in case." Getting back on the subspace hook-up, you relay your thoughts. As expected, the ISE still wants you to send the Flame Jewels.

Reassembling your tri-axis drive keeps you sufficiently busy for the next two hours that you have no more clever thoughts. And after that, the drone arrives.

It appears instantaneously on the designated landing spot. You circle overhead, alert for any sign of a double-cross. The Clathrans, you know, would destroy worlds in exchange for a drone programmed to return to human space.

The Wythymites are on your side, however. You see the ochre one produce a black canvas sack and deposit it gently into the drone's number one cargo bay, then ooze back and wave to you. You send a remote signal, and watch as the drone vanishes. Your subspace radio, still tuned to Para-Para, soon comes to life:

"It's back, it's back."

"Call Doctor Schottky."

"Stars! Look at those meter readings, they're off the scale!"

"Blow the drone! Blow the drone!"

"This is Margaret Ellison, calling Valentine Stewart."

"Stewart here."

"The cargo has arrived safely. We triggered the drone's self-destruct right away, as planned, and there are now Flame Jewels scattered over most of this cubic parsec. Dual space sensors are recording unusually high values, but I think we can contain it at this dilution."

"Roger. Just be careful picking them up. Don't get too many together at once."

"Understood, Stewart. Thank you for your services."

"Thank the family, Ellison. Thank them the way that you and Dad agreed on."

"Your family will be well paid for your work, never fear."

"And get the Fleet ready ASAP. There's about to be a hell of a battle here in the Arm."

"The Clathrans?"

"Damn right. The Hadrakians are about to take a stand, and the other free races with them. This may be our best chance to stop the Survey."

"Roger, Stewart, we'll be in touch. Over and out."

The Clathrans, indeed. Their Survey marches ruthlessly onward, conquering every planet with intelligent life. Despite all the work you've done, right now the only obstacle between the Clathrans and the Human Home Worlds is the Hadrakian fleet. Desperate to save themselves, the Hadrakians will be putting up a last stand on their home planet against tremendous odds.

Whatever the odds, the Hadrakians had better win. You have already sent the Home Worlds the flame jewels they needed. Now you must do whatever else you can to help the Hadrakians win their war. But what exactly is necessary? How will you be able to make a difference? You know where to find out: at the offices of The Battle, Incorporated. If you go there, the Hadrakians will not be shy about telling you what to do.

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

The survival of humanity is at stake.

❖ STOP ❖

[739]

Having explored the planet's entire surface, you know that there is nothing here that accounts for the strange Dual Space anomaly that enshrouds it. There is no sign of any natural feature or any sort of artificial device that would explain why reality is unstable at this one place.

Perhaps something happened here long in the past that caused Golgotha to become what it is. If so, perhaps you can learn what it was. You know that Golgotha can play tricks with time. Perhaps it can show you its own creation.

❖ STOP ❖

[740]

You set the dials, stand back, and are rewarded by the sound of the collected doors beginning to protrude from the plane of the station walls. As this happens, a handle pops out of the left side of each compartment. Voila!

You now have a new option:

(XBNWYT) (3 phases) Access the contents of the compartments.

⊗ STOP ⊗

[741]

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

- 1 Medicine for 1 Culture
- 1 Medicine for 1 Warp Core

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

⊗ STOP ⊗

[742]

It is the Goddess of Quiet Endings who visits you as you lay meditating in the bowels of a Hadrakian Shrine on the Street of Gods, and you sleep peacefully for many hours after her visitation.

But you remember her name, which is supposed to be important somehow, and you remember her message, which was "You can collect Culture on Bloo if you want, but don't make me look at that stuff."

You may select this option again.

⊗ STOP ⊗

[743]

As sparsely populated as Adafa is, you are surprised by the resounding set of boos you receive when you win the combat (thereby indicating disfavor with the gods). A Settled One steps forward and presents you with the orange sash of Adafan citizenship. The Homeless One carrying the box of sashes at her side merely snarls at you. The female ignores him, smiles at you, and offers to show you around the domed area. The male snarls again and starts picking his claws. Although you know the short-tempered manners of the Homeless Ones are the opposite of the polite patient ways of the Settled Ones, it is still hard to accept the vast contrast between the two.

You accept the kind offer and are soon touring the small city. Your guide introduces herself as Ghengee and proves to be an excellent host. She spends most of the day with you explaining what little the Hadrakians have been able to learn about this strange world they have discovered.

"We have been here for only a short time and have been hard pressed to keep the colony going," she tells you. "We have to import everything needed to support life; except for solar power, Adafa has no natural resources. It has made life difficult for us, but the males thrive on the challenge."

"Why are you trying to maintain a colony here?" you ask, knowing of the mercantile nature of the Hadrakians. No matter how interesting Adafa is scientifically, you can be sure the Hadrakians wouldn't be here unless there was some economic attraction to the place.

"Although we do not know who built this artificial world, we have been able to make sense of one or two of the machines and devices that were left behind. Those things that are not working anymore can be salvaged for their parts. One of our biggest export items is Vortex Coils. As you may know, they are rather rare in the galaxy and the amount we can recover from the inactive machines here make it more than worthwhile for us."

"There is one small problem," she continues, as visions of going off on your own to do your own scavenging flash through your mind. "I feel I must warn you of the dangers we have discovered during our stay on Adafa. The alien machines, even the inert harmless-looking ones, are very unpredictable. It takes us several years of testing to determine if we can even safely approach one without causing it to activate in some nasty and unexpected way. So far, we have lost several hundred Homeless Ones to the unexpected."

"What else have you learned about Adafa?" you ask your guide as you wander through the Hadrakian city.

"We believe it to be one of the oldest artifacts in the galaxy, easily over 100,000 years old by our calculations. We have no idea what race built it, though there are rumors on various planets of a race called the Masters who were capable of such technological miracles."

"Are you sure it wasn't the Clathrans?" you ask.

"Impossible. The science required for some of the machines we have seen far surpasses their abilities. No, this was built by a vastly superior race. It is really quite puzzling."

"Do you know what the devices do?"

"After years of careful study, I can tell you that we have no idea what most of them do. But we have discovered a few machines that make some sense to us. One of them is a high resolution telescope. It was one of the first things we were able to study safely. One odd property of the telescope is that, over the years, its ability to resolve objects farther and farther away from us has been improving. But how it works to begin with is just as much a mystery."

The rest of your time with Ghengee passes pleasantly and it is soon time for you to return to your ship for your evening rest. Thanking your congenial host, you part company. You now have the following options on Adafa:

(GB4WQT) (3 phases) Go to a warehouse where the Hadrakians keep Vortex Coils and inquire about purchasing one.

(BGW4TQ) (7 phases) Visit the offices of The Battle, Inc., the Hadrakians' officially sponsored Clathran resistance corporation.

(GG44QQ) (7 phases) Study the high resolution telescope.

(CBFWLT) (5 phases) Explore the night side of Adafa, covered with many ancient alien devices, on your own.

(BCWFTL) (3 phases) Stroll down the Hadrakian Street of Gods to seek inspiration and perhaps some useful information.

❖ STOP ❖

[744]

Unfortunately, the enemy has the advantage of the first attack and makes the most of it. With a raucous cry, the aeropsor seizes the hull of your ship in its metal-piercing talons and starts tearing a bite out of the side with its beak. Before it can get too far, you manage to fire a salvo of weapons that seek out the beast and distract it. Surprised, the reptile releases your ship and backpedals in the air to reassess the situation. You seize this opportunity to fire another round at the monster but miss.

"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 this third salvo. It too misses the intended target. However, the monster is 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. As it is, the aeropsor inflicted some serious damage to your ship's hull.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[745]

You are more than happy to spend some time chatting with the captain of a passing Hadrakian trading vessel. The Settled One is older than you would have expected her to be, as chasing across the galaxy isn't an occupation that normally leads to a ripe old age.

You both spend a good amount of time trying to top each other's stories of daring adventure. When you both stop, you decide that the undeclared contest is a tie. Your respect for the older alien has risen greatly.

As you are ready to depart, the Hadrakian trader says something that surprises you. "Human, I must admit I was skeptical of you when we first met. You are so young compared to my many years, yet you have shown that you are well capable of handling yourself, and I wish you well and good trading. One more thing — if you are ever in need of Vortex Coils, I have found the planet Dosia to be a good source. Farewell."

❖ STOP ❖

[746]

Everywhere you look you see happily bubbling purple-tentacled aliens, all wearing baseball caps. You feel as though you have stepped into a surreal painting, or maybe just through Alice's looking glass. In any case, you find it difficult to keep a straight face as you make your way to the market district in the city.

You reach the offworld trade center and look at the latest commodities available here. From what you can tell, the Unarians have Phase Steel they are willing to trade for the following items:

- 2 Phase Steel for 1 Crystals
- 1 Phase Steel for 1 Munitions
- 1 Phase Steel for 1 Super Slip

1 Phase Steel for 1 Tools

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

❖ STOP ❖

[747]

You let loose all your firepower on the defenseless monitoring station, and it breaks up into small pieces. Unfortunately, this alerts the rest of the Clathran Navy to your presence. Soon you are completely surrounded by a whole fleet of Clathran destroyers. Gulp. There is no way out.

You are captured.

❖ STOP ❖

[748]

You trade questions and answers for the next several hours and learn that the plasma creatures do not have a great deal of knowledge about the galaxy. They are not extremely long-lived, nor do they have any racial memory. They are not native to Knapt, but were driven here in the last few centuries by the Clathrans, who tried to exterminate them. When that failed, the soldiers placed the beam weapons on the planet's surface to keep the plasma creatures trapped here forever.

You are curious as to why the Clathrans would persecute these seemingly harmless creatures almost to the point of extinction. You learn something interesting. Fred tells you a story told by the plasma creatures of their life before Knapt. These interesting aliens were born to live in the cold depths of outer space, but they were attracted to an interesting planet or space object from time to time. They often traveled in small groups and met to form large packs when their mating cycle demanded it of them.

On one such occasion, the group came together in the vicinity of an artificial device that fascinated them. The machine, shaped like a large golden dodecahedron, was causing the physical laws of the universe to fluctuate in a manner that has not been seen for many millennia. The plasma creatures were not dependent upon these fluctuations, as were some beings, but they were drawn to the device itself, like moths to a flame. The effect was that the device became "clogged" by the plasma creatures, so that the fluctuations were drastically decreased. The undoers, or Clathrans, became outraged by this and began destroying the plasma cloud beings.

They fled for their lives, but the soldiers pursued them. Finally, they stumbled on this planet which, with its myriad of tunnels, was an ideal place to hide. The Clathrans tried to exterminate them but were defeated by the tunnels. Instead, they settled for placing the six generators that formed the deadly energy beams on the planet's surface to keep any life form from lifting off the planet. So now the creatures are trapped.

You are moved by this story. While there is nothing you can do to help at this time, you vow to return here once the Clathrans are destroyed and render the beams inoperable, thus freeing the cloud beings. You do not speak this resolve aloud, but you have the feeling Fred knows your intentions and he pulses warmly at you.

❖ STOP ❖

[749]

"Your perseverance is appreciated, Human. It is most gratifying to know others who stand in opposition to a common enemy." This greeting from the Hadrakian Settled One, dressed in the red uniform of The Battle, Incorporated, is not so much stiff as in tune with the solemnity of the galactic situation — the menace posed by the Clathrans and their Survey.

After bringing the Hadrakian up to date on your own travels and accomplishments, you get an update on the Survey.

"The Clathran Survey is once again advancing, following the occupation of Innermost. Due to the extreme breadth of the forces which actually comprise the Survey, it is not possible for us to determine which of our colonies might be threatened soonest. This uncertainty makes planning an effective counterstrategy difficult, to say the least. It may well be necessary, once again, to adopt a passive approach, regrouping our own forces to await a better opportunity for retaliation."

The Settled One rises, indicating the end of the formal briefing. You leave the briefing room and head back to the corridors and offices in the rear of the building.

❖ STOP ❖

[750]

"Anything interesting to read in your database?" you ask the computer. Why do you even bother asking, you wonder? There's never enough to read during those long trips between planets.

"Actually, Boss, there's an interesting book I uploaded a few planets back. I thought it was a native work but it turns out to be an import, originally written on the planet Worzelle. I've completed a translation if you're interested. It's all about strategy and tactics."

"Sounds right up our alley. What's it called?"

"*The Way of the Enemy*," recites the computer, displaying the first page.

The book isn't too bad, though it gets a little repetitious at times. It treats war like a fine art form and suggests rules for how to wage it with style. According to the computer, in its original language it's all in verse.

"The first rule of tactics is the same as the final rule of strategy, and that is to find the position of advantage," you quote. "It looks like these Worzellians have made war into a religion."

"I suppose that's no worse than the other way around," comments the computer.

"They seem to pride themselves on being such great warriors. I hope that they'll be able to help us in the war against the Clathrans."

"I hope that someone's asked them."

❖ STOP ❖

[751]

The real secret to avoiding the harpy is to leave the city earlier in the day. This way you arrive at the glade before the harpy comes out for the evening. The morning sun accompanies you on your journey and the noon day sun finds you already in the glade.

You examine the small pool where the Primordial Soup accumulates. You find that you are in luck — the pool is full! Taking your expandable liquid container from your backpack, you fill it with all of the cloudy liquid available, leaving the cistern dry. Not for long, though — you see a small trickle appear as the pool begins to refill. Should you wish to return later, there may be enough to fill your flask again.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[752]

You decide to make good use of the time you have to spend in hyperspace by recharting all of the data you have gathered on the commodities and various other trades available in this part of the galaxy. Before you are even halfway finished, you push back from the table, discouraged by the gaps of information in your chart.

"Hey, Boss? Remember we were told that the Hadrakian shrines are a great source of economic information? Maybe you should pray at them a couple of times and see if you can learn anything useful!"

"I don't know. It seems likely to be just superstitious nonsense, or some sort of fraud."

"So what, Boss? Even if the gods in the temples were just hidden Hadrakian priests putting on a show, if they're giving out useful and accurate information we can use it. And if they're real, maybe some sort of psychic manifestation unique to the Hadrakians, who knows what sort of hidden meanings their advice might hold?"

"Maybe you are right," you admit. It's something to consider, anyway.

✧ STOP ✧

[753]

You are extremely grateful for your environmental suit. Without its protection, you would be seriously endangered by the poisonous and corrosive atmosphere blowing all around you with gusts up to 100 miles per hour. As it is, you have to spend so much time on the planet's surface that you begin to feel rather sick. Fortunately, you manage to set up the mining rig before succumbing to nausea. You stagger back to the ship.

After spending a short time in your sick bay, you are feeling well again. Moreover, you have one unit of Radioactives to show for your trouble.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[754]

"This is taking a long time," you remark to the computer. "Are you sure we're on the shortest fastest course?"

"Given the route you selected, and the fact that we have to go around the domain walls — the space walls, that is — we're very close to optimum, Boss."

"Let's see it on the map." The computer displays your course on the main screen, superimposed on the star map.

"This course doesn't look anywhere close to optimal," you complain. "Why are we swinging so wide in this trisector? And couldn't we have cut off some distance along the last stretch?"

"We could have, Boss, but that would have lengthened the travel time, not shortened it."

"What do you mean? How could it be longer to go straight across these two trisectors instead of making a big semi-circle around them?"

"The semi-circle you perceive is really a straight line, Boss. It appears curved because of the distortion of the map display."

"What distortion? Can't you correct the distortion?"

"Complying, Boss."

On the screen, the familiar star map suddenly twists and changes, stars and trisectors sliding across one another, stretching and overlapping, crowding together in some regions and opening wide empty rifts in others. Your plotted course becomes a series of almost straight lines, bending only to avoid the space walls. But the rest of the map is now an incomprehensible tangle.

"The actual map data in my memory is a mathematically-represented three dimensional image," explains the computer. "Actually, it's five-dimensional, because it also includes time and hyperspace in the model. The spacial component is three-dimensional, like the galaxy itself. The map as I usually display it is a two-dimensional projection of the three-dimensional map onto the plane of the galactic disc. It's been sectioned and distorted using the Friday trisector transformation equations so that the two-dimensional image shows the relative positions of planets located in three-dimensional space in a useful way. Of course, some distortion takes place in the process. That means that although you see planets in their correct positions and distances from each other, and the overall shape of the Arm is correct, some of the information on the full mathematical map is obscured on the display. For example, the space walls shown as lines are actually curved and slanted planes, and when we go from planet to planet we're moving in three dimensions, not two."

"What are you displaying on the screen now?"

"This display is the same map projected differently, so as to remove the distortion from our current trajectory. Doing so introduces even greater distortion to the rest of the map, as each trisector shifts according to its third-dimensional component. This kind of display isn't really very useful. The standard map is the best possible two-dimensional compromise for showing as much information as possible."

"I see," you reply as the map resumes its original appearance. "But what does Friday have to do with it?"

"Friday's trisector transformation equations were named after Walter Friday, the navigator of Vanessa Chang's crew, who invented the equations and the trisector-based navigation system that goes with them. It was a major technical innovation at the time, and Vanessa Chang's maps were probably the first navigational database to use them."

❖ STOP ❖

[755]

Your computer interrupts what you are doing to give you an urgent message.

"Boss, I'm picking up strange readings from out near the Density Barrier. Something there just gave off a burst of high-frequency subspace interference. The only thing I know that would do that would be a whole lot of matter turning into a whole lot of energy all at once."

"Can you localize it any closer?"

"It's from back in the direction of Outpost, possibly from Outpost itself."

This doesn't sound like good news.

"How much energy was released?"

"A lot, Boss. You'd better hope it wasn't Outpost itself." But you have a strong feeling that it was.

❖ STOP ❖

[756]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The argument is not only logical, but your Diplomacy ability allows you to state it with great conviction and persuasiveness. The King is convinced.

"I am afraid you are right. We must work together. These Clathrans have to be stopped."

"Great. Then that's settled. So you'll send your fleet to help the free races of the galaxy fight the Clathrans? I'll let you know when you're needed."

"Yes, by my decree. Assuming the strategic situation looks okay to me, of course. You have my word, Human."

"Excellent," you respond. "You won't regret it. One more thing. Can you get your people to stop attacking human ships in deep space? We're on your side now."

"Sorry, but I can't promise that. We Zyran are very hungry, you know. Especially our scouts. I can't control each subject's every move."

The Zyran guards snicker.

You talk with the King a while longer, and it offers you the opportunity to trade commodities on Zyroth, and also to visit one of their shipyards. You are delighted to accept, of course. The options are:

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

⟨EB3WPT⟩ (5 phases) Visit a Zyran shipyard.

As you ride back down to the bottom of the yellow test tube palace, you congratulate yourself on a job well done. Who would have thought the Zyrans could become such an important military ally? With them on the same side as the Hadrakians, yourself, and whomever else you manage to round up, maybe you can actually stop the Clathran Survey!

Then again, you'd better not get your hopes up. The Clathrans will be no pushover.

✕ STOP ✕

[757]

From space, Qualathara seems isolated and lifeless. However, your sensors detect energy transmissions that could only be created by an advanced civilization. As you approach, you detect no other ships taking off or landing, and yet the energy transmissions indicate the existence of a highly sophisticated spaceport near Qualathara's only city. The surface of the planet presents a similar contrast; for the most part it is a barren expanse of sea and land, with no attempt at cultivation or development. Yet the single inhabited city shows evidence of highly sophisticated construction, and obviously boasts a large population. You begin your usual geophysical scan of the planet's resources, but never finish; your equipment overloads and shuts itself off automatically almost at once, blown out like a candle flame. A second try produces the same result. Clearly this wasn't an accident; some sort of active jamming system is interfering with your sensors. It occurs to you then that a third try might end up with something else overloading and shutting off, such as your hyperdrive or your life support unit. So you give up trying to spy on the planet and simply follow the landing beacon down.

You are met at the spaceport gate by a bipedal green-scaled alien who looks a little like a giant lizard walking erect; in fact, he looks very similar to a Clathran. But he is not a Clathran. He is smaller and less muscular, his limbs are shaped differently, and his scales are a different color green. Without attempting to communicate otherwise, he looks straight at you and says "Can you understand me?"

"Why yes, I can."

"Then your translator is adequate. Good." The alien turns and stalks away. Having no idea what else to do, you follow him.

The alien leads the way to a nearby building, and stops at the door. "You will stay here."

"Thank you," you say, but he is already striding back toward the city, and gives no sign of having heard you.

In the next several days you manage to make yourself quite comfortable in the completely deserted Visitors' Quarters. The robots and other automated devices which serve the place (and staff the nearby spaceport) readily obey your commands but, unlike your ship's computer, are not programmed to offer any advice or opinions.

You take several walks through the city, during which you learn two important things about Qualathara: first is that the Qualatharians, as the lizard-like aliens are known, are an extremely ascetic and traditional group. They do little work of any practical nature, preferring to leave that entirely in the hands of the city's automatons. Instead they content themselves with regular tours of the city's libraries and museums, attendance at the Shrine of Space, and private meditations. The Qualatharians take no notice whatsoever of your existence, but the robots and computers you encounter will serve you as perfectly as they serve their builders.

The second thing you learn about Qualathara and its inhabitants is the one thing that a Qualatharian will trouble himself to do: fight. On one of your walking trips through the city you observe a Qualatharian, apparently engrossed in the study of a building's facade, walk straight into the chest of another of the aliens. You are close enough for your translator to pick up a heated exchange between the two, followed by a sudden cooling, followed by ceremonial bows, followed by the initiation of a laser-sword and stunner-shield duel. Their movements, as they thrust and lunge at each other, are almost too fast for your eyes to follow. Every trick of sword and stunner play is employed and neatly parried, including many you could not have imitated if you tried; each combatant whirls and spins with a lightning speed completely beyond

the human species. A crowd gathers as the Qualatharians fight, watching the weapons-play in stony silence as if judging the value of every move and counter.

Each alien touches the other twice, and each is battered by the constant probing and blocking of the stunners. In the end they both go down together, seizing the same opportunity to recklessly attack. The crowd disperses without a word, leaving the bodies for a team of robots to remove. You are left stunned by the ferocity and grace of the normally slow-moving Qualatharians and make a resolution to watch where you are walking.

A further example of the skill in arms of the Qualatharians comes on the very next day, as you sit in one of the city's parks, trying to make up your mind what you want to do next. A grass-grooming robot you can see working on a field some two hundred yards away goes suddenly berserk, perhaps due to a malfunction somewhere in its innards, and attacks the raking robot working alongside it. You can hear the horrible screeching of metal on metal as the raking robot goes down to the grass-groomer's shears. The victor, still berserk, swings around and attacks the next nearest object, an ornamental tree. At this moment the Qualatharian sitting near you, who had been meditating quietly, leaps to his feet and in one smooth motion draws and fires a tight beam laser pistol, which scores a direct hit on the computer brain of the malfunctioning robot. The shot narrowly beats two other, equally accurate, beams from other Qualatharians in the vicinity. None of the Qualatharians was standing anywhere near the target. You'd have been lucky to hit the tree at that range.

Within a week after your landing you have arrived at the following possibilities for further action, assuming you wish to remain on Qualathara.

(8BKWDT) (4 phases) Visit some of the local libraries and museums.

(VB9WVT) (4 phases) Examine the automated technology in the spaceport.

(8GK4DQ) (4 phases) See if you can cut a deal to buy some of the Qualatharians' impressive personal weaponry.

(VG94VQ) (7 phases) Visit the Shrine of Space, which seems to be the center of Qualatharian life.

❖ STOP ❖

[758]

It's the red dragon again. You have no idea where the Hadrakians managed to dig up such a creature, and at the moment you don't have the time to think about it. It's hungry and you're tasty. Good luck.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[759]

As you approach the planet Worzelle, your sensors spot several new craters on the planet's surface. You also pick up some gravimagnetic pulses that indicate inertial annihilation weapons in use. It looks like business as usual on this warring world.

Fortunately the demilitarized city in the south still looks safe and intact. Following landing instructions, you touch down at the spaceport. There you are met by a rather impressive contingent of Worzellian officials, including Civilian Estal, General Hardhasz of the Academy, Field Marshal Digbog of the Green forces, and several white-uniformed dignitaries whom you recognize as Strategists. Apparently they hold you in very high esteem, for they have all assembled to welcome you formally back to Worzelle. They are also very interested in hearing your accounts of recent exploits, newsworthy events in the galaxy, and descriptions of the adventures of your fellow humans. Obviously they have ulterior motives for asking such questions, but their respect for you seems genuine, so you tell them your story, leaving out only the most sensitive information.

They are very impressed by your accounts. They tell you that as an honorary Worzellian warrior, and a member of the race of Vanessa Chang, you will always be welcome on Worzelle. In addition, because of your honored status, you may use the Worzellian medical facilities at no charge from now on.

You thank them for their kindness and they depart. You have the same options as before.

✱ STOP ✱

[760]

"Boss, there's something I don't understand."

Your head snaps up from the book you've been reading. To have your computer admit to not understanding something, well, let's just say it doesn't happen often. It happens so rarely, in fact, that you occasionally wonder whether it makes up some of its findings just to save face in front of you.

"What is it?" you ask.

"We've been orbiting the planet Keros for a while now, and I am having trouble completing the survey scan. I have the data on the atmosphere and the upper layer of the planetary crust, including all the life form readings. However, the data on the geology underneath the surface are garbled and unreliable. I don't seem to be able to get clear sensor readings, and I just don't like it."

"Well, I'm tired of waiting. That brown, red and white ball down there hasn't changed much in the past day and a half. Give me a readout on everything you have so far. It sounds like you're doing okay to me," you instruct. Within minutes, you have the information in front of you, and you spend the next hour studying.

Keros is small, perhaps 70% of the size of Earth. However, it is also quite heavy, with slightly higher gravity than normal. You look for an analysis of the core composition to see why the planet would be so dense, but you run into the garbled data your computer was complaining about.

Keros is also a planet in the midst of geological upheaval. There are tremendous earthquakes occurring on every continent and ocean floor. Chains of active volcanoes dot the landscape. In the southern hemisphere, the quakes are especially violent, making the area uninhabitable. However, high heat and pressure where the upheaval is at its worst have helped to create deposits of valuable Phase Steel.

The northern hemisphere is also riddled with quakes and tidal waves, but it isn't as bad as in the south. In one area there is a huge volcano, nearly twice the size of any other mountain on the planet. Ironically, this volcano seems very stable, as does the entire surrounding area. It is here where the intelligent Kerosian people live.

The Kerosians are short in stature, humanoid, and have very large hairy hands and feet. Their civilization is not technologically oriented and is confined to a handful of villages located near the big volcano. Your scan indicates that the villages are all quite old, which implies that the area near the volcano has remained stable for quite some time.

After completing your evaluation, you decide to bring your ship down outside the largest Kerosian city. Although your computer grumbles some more about the lack of complete geological data, it carries out your orders, and you soon find yourself stepping out onto a brown grassy hilltop and breathing the fresh air. Small furry animals frolic on the hillside while winged butterflies flutter overhead. You hear the sound of children's laughter coming from over the next rise and you head toward it.

As you top the ridge, you see a group of Kerosian children playing some sort of game. You put on your friendliest smile and start down toward them.

"Hello," you call out so as not to startle the little ones. "I am called. . ."

SPLAT! Something dark brown, foul-smelling, and extremely gooey is oozing down the front of your shirt. The little cherubs stare at you as they wait for your reaction. They do not have to wait long.

“Who threw this?” you demand in your sternest tone of voice. A tiny girl steps forward, her bottom lip trembling only slightly. “What’s the meaning of this?” you ask.

“The last person to join the game of Drek-pie throwing is fair game for a free hit. Everyone knows that!” she proudly announces. You ask a few questions about the rules of the game, then join in for a few rounds. The game is actually quite complicated because the target person changes frequently and if you hit the wrong person, you are immediately bombarded by everyone else. You make a few mistakes, but are good enough at ducking the missiles that you emerge relatively ungoosed.

Enough is enough, though, and soon you start making your way to the village. The sound of footsteps coming up from behind makes you turn. You see the little girl who first hit you approaching. You slow your steps to accommodate her pace. You introduce yourself and she tells you her name is Bassins. For the rest of the short walk to the village, you exchange small talk and learn a little more about each other.

She tells you that the village is very old, with most of the buildings still in their original state. The village’s government is a council of Elders who volunteer a year’s service to keep the public utilities running smoothly. There are very few problems for the council to contend with since the people are peaceful and have only two real interests, sports and religion. The most popular sport is called Jump’r’crunch and the natives’ religion involves worshipping a deity inside the volcano.

You ask her if it would be possible to meet someone from the council of Elders. She laughs and says you already have. She is the head of the council. You hide your surprise very well by pointing to a grazing herd of large animals. She tells you they are the Dreks from which Drek-pies are gotten.

You finally reach the house where Bassins lives. She invites you to stay with her family while you are in the village. You readily accept her kind offer and are introduced to her husband, Smam, reportedly the best Jump’r’crunch player in the village, and her two very small children, Sim and Del. You spend the evening entertaining your hosts with tales of bravery and adventure. They are a cheerful, fun-loving group, but a bit on the simple side. They are easily entertained by your adventure stories and believe even the most blatant exaggerations you add to your tales.

The next day, you travel through the village in order to see the people going about their day-to-day duties. From what Bassins told you last night, they all spend the morning cleaning their homes, inside and out. Then everyone goes to whatever job they have just in time to break for lunch. A few hours later, they return to their jobs, finish up what little work is left, and leave for the day. You find it hard to believe that this system really works.

Yet, as you travel through the streets of the village, you see everything just the way Bassins described it. Everyone does their housecleaning in the morning, then, when that task is done to their satisfaction, they head off to whatever sort of work they do for a living. If they need any shopping done, they can stop in a store at any time, take what they need, and leave their personal marker for each item taken. Apparently the Kerosians are simple enough that dishonesty doesn’t even occur to them.

You notice a decided lack of schools, libraries, book stores and such. When you stop by Bassins’ office for lunch, you ask her about educating the children. She laughs and says that few jobs require any reading and writing; those that do pay poorly and are not very popular with the young Kerosians. Most people would rather work outdoors or take jobs that required very little time inside. She herself barely spends an hour a day at her job. The rest of her time is spent worshipping the volcano or playing Jump’r’crunch.

This is the way the Kerosians have lived for eons. The system works because the Kerosians don’t ask for very much out of life. When lunch is over, Bassins excuses herself, explaining that she has a few more details to attend to before she can leave for the day. She attends a worship service every afternoon, though, and tells you that you would be welcome to stop by the church whenever you are free. Also, Smam attends Jump’r’crunch practice every day after service and you can join him if you feel like it.

You are left with the following options:

- ⟨ZS2ZH2⟩ (3 phases) Fly your ship to the unstable southern hemisphere and look for Phase Steel.
- ⟨US7Z82⟩ (3 phases) Try to find out more about the subterranean geology.
- ⟨ZP2SHZ⟩ (4 phases) Go with Smam in the late afternoon to his Jump’r’crunch practice.
- ⟨UP7S8Z⟩ (7 phases) Visit the church where the Kerosians worship, at the top of the big volcano.

❖ STOP ❖