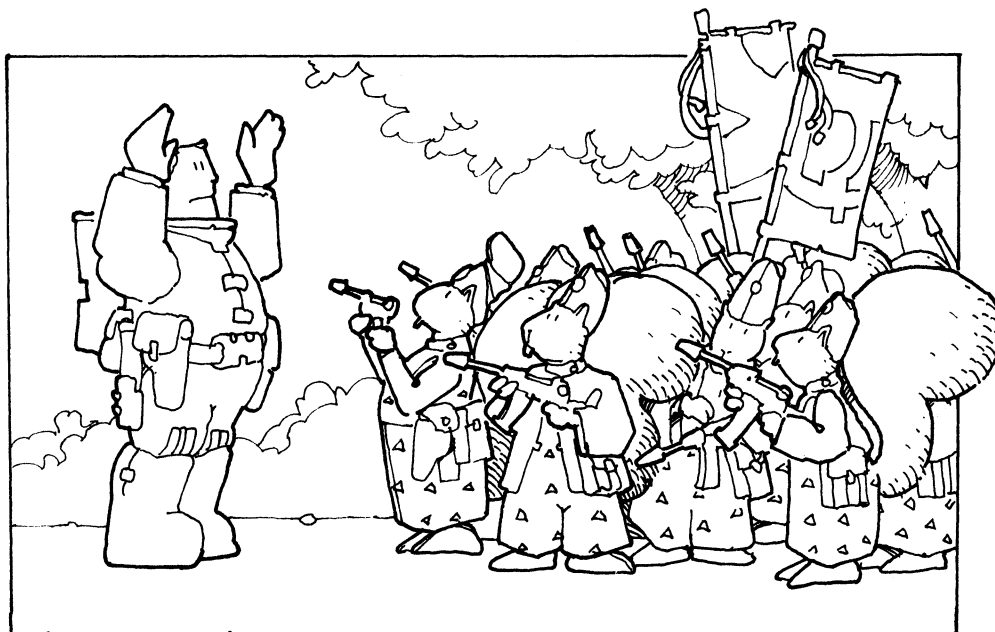


STAR SAGA: ONE™

BOOK E

TEXT 297-367



[297]

You take extra care in programming the ship's computer to land because of the tricky configuration of Baphi's four moons. The gravitational pull makes the landing procedure less routine than you really like, but you manage to touch down with few problems.

You notice the Darscian ship that was here on your second visit has left and you briefly wonder what they decided about the suitability of the quake-wracked world for colonization. You chuckle when you realize they probably consider Baphi too "easy" to build upon.

You have the same options as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[298]

It takes you two days just to get permission to enter Colmaris' private office building, much less see The Man himself. You are quite taken aback when no sooner do you sign the guest book in the lower lobby than you are greeted by the Director's private secretary and ushered upstairs into a plush, penthouse suite.

"A pleasure to meet you at last!" the Director exclaims. You never realized you were such a star. Fortunately, your puzzled expression gets the point across, and he launches into a lengthy explanation. Boy, does this fellow have contacts. He not only knows who you are, he knows where you were born, what you did back on your home planet, and why you decided to explore space. He knows your ship's name, what it's carrying, and where it's been. His business, he says, is to keep track of space travellers. It's a good thing he likes you.

"I admire people like you, people who are willing to take risks to break new ground. I was much the same way myself in my younger days. You can't just sit there and let other people box you in. You have to take control. Anyway, you're no fool. You're on your way.

"Now, perhaps I can be of some assistance. I don't like to see young adventurers scurrying around naked. Stop by the fourth floor on the way out and pick up some skin armor. It may be a little uncomfortable at first, but you'll appreciate it when it saves your neck. No charge this time.

"One more thing, before you leave. Something strange is happening. There's a lot going on (he waves at the large picture of the galaxy plastered across the wall) that I don't understand. Maybe the stars are just restless, but hey, let's be careful out there."

The Director's desk buzzes and his private secretary enters with the next visitor. You are ushered out almost as quickly as you were ushered in.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[299]

As your drives cycle back and you slide out of hyperspace, Wellmet's sun is already lined up in the center of your viewscreen. Like the first planet you visited, Wellmet is one of the few worlds outside the Boundary whose positions are clearly documented on standard star maps. Thus, among the multitudes of stars and planets that sift through the fringe of the galaxy's spiral arm, Wellmet is easy to find. Your ship, now powered by conventional thrusters, begins to decelerate in a carefully calculated curve that will bring you to the planet at a velocity suitable for making a landing approach.

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

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

Six point seven three hours later, you are in orbit around Wellmet. From orbit, the planet looks just like Earth. It has oceans and green vegetation, though there is no evidence of any native animal life. If Wellmet had been the first planet you visited outside the Boundary, you might think that someone was out there prefabricating Earth-like worlds. In fact, Wellmet's remarkable resemblance to Earth is the chief reason it became the focal point of early space exploration and, later, a thriving nexus of interplanetary trade. Even today, after three centuries of isolation outside the Boundary, the name Wellmet is familiar to the people of the Nine Worlds.

Judging from the amount of construction, the human population of Wellmet is about fifty million. Most of the construction is concentrated in a single sprawling city on the north coast of one continent. The city covers a thousand square kilometers, and it teems with activity and traffic, but it's not a city of high towers and electrified streets. You see clusters of dwellings, factory buildings, transmission towers, and landing pads mixed indiscriminately with animal pens, cultivated fields, open rivers, and power plants. There is no single large spaceport, but instead a variety of private landing and docking facilities scattered across the town, ranging from gleaming automated cargo ports to bare concrete pads. Each facility broadcasts its own instructions and signals on different channels, leaving you in some doubt as to where you should land.

"Can you sort out that babble?" you ask the computer.

"Certainly, Boss. All of the privately owned spaceports are broadcasting their own traffic control instructions, along with conflicting claims as to which of them offers the best location and lowest rates for berthing fees. Some pads are set aside exclusively for ships in the employ of various 'Families,' or trading concerns. These are located on the safest and most efficient approach lanes, of course, and they're warning us to keep off their private property. Finally, there is a public spaceport of sorts, which charges no fees but requires that we force our way through all the other traffic to reach it."

"Forget about the private docks. Whatever they cost, we can't afford it. Can you plot an approach for the public 'port?'"

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

On the ground, a delegation of spaceport officials meets you as you disembark. They are not unfriendly, and their speech is Earth Standard that is no more heavily accented than your own. They are required to search your ship for contraband cargo. As far as you know, any cargo carried across the Boundary is contraband cargo, but the officials tell you that they care only about certain drugs, weapons, and luxury items that are subject to import duties on Wellmet. You have none of these things on board, so you relax a little. When the officials realize that you've just come through the Boundary, they quickly conclude their inspection and spend some time pointing out the better hotels and trading

agents in the area. They reassure you that the security of your ship is guaranteed in the public 'port, and they offer you any assistance you may require in adjusting to life outside the Nine Worlds.

You spend three days exploring the city (which is also named Wellmet), learning as much as you can about the planet and the people. What you find seems a series of contradictions. The people are unfailingly gracious and polite, yet a majority carry sidearms of one sort or another. Most people care more about experience and skills than titles and rank, yet whole sections of streets are off-limits to anyone who is not a member of one of the Families. Almost everyone expresses scorn or contempt for the Nine Worlds and the Boundary, but they admit that without the Boundary and the smuggling trade it generates, Wellmet would not be as prosperous a trading center as it is. The people of the Nine Worlds are referred to as "worms" — except for you, who in choosing to break out of the Boundary have earned their respect. Wellmet, you learn in the end, is a place that lives by its own rules, a gigantic frontier town where one spacer crew might gun down another for short-weighting a cargo load of Fiber, but would turn around and loan the Crystals out of their drives to a hard-luck case who needed them.

Through careful observation and conversation you identify the following options for further action on Wellmet:

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

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

⟨OVFKIV⟩ (3 phases) Learn what you can about the history of Wellmet from the records in the Wellmet Public Archives.

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

⟨KFVIK7⟩ (4 phases) Speak to experienced space traders around the port to learn what you can about navigation, exploration, and the hazards of space.

✧ STOP ✧

[300]

The aliens, it would seem, are telepathic.

"One of us went to school on Organu, and then came back and taught the rest."

They know strange things about the galaxy. But then why not? They are pretty strange themselves. You learn some interesting things from them but you aren't sure if all of the pieces of information are useful.

"Humans are good, Clathrans are bad, and the Infinite visited us at the Temple and made Tretiak insane."

"The best Iron in the galaxy is on Yrebe; the best Gradient Filters are on Gnarsh; the most interesting person is Feldo."

"Latest word from Earth is that they're planning to put up some kind of a boundary to prevent anyone from coming in. Can you imagine?"

You take what you learn with a grain of salt.

✧ STOP ✧

[301]

You take extra care in programming the ship's computer to land because of the tricky configuration of Baphi's four moons. The gravitational pull makes the landing procedure less routine than you really like, but you manage to touch down with few problems.

Your return to Baphi is different from your initial visit only in the presence of a Darscian Explorer/Trader in orbit around the planet. The Darscians make no effort to interfere with your landing, though, and you are soon on the rain-soaked ground of Baphi again.

Your options are the same as before with the addition of:

⟨THSAW6⟩ (2 phases) Chat with the captain of the Darscian ship.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[302]

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

You are interested in learning something new so you answer, "Sure. What?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course."

"And expect us to buy them from you?"

"Not at all. They are yours."

Valentine looks the man over as if trying to place his face from the roster of known lunatics. You say, "Don't talk stupid. If those were Vanessa Chang's maps you wouldn't be giving them away."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I believe I just said that."

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

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

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

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

"When was that?"

"Three hundred seven years ago."

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

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

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[303]

You connect into the Technical Network and inquire about the complex technical devices known to you as Gradient Filters. Once you clear up some confusion on matters of terminology, the Net is quite willing to admit that yes, the computers and robots of Gironde do indeed manufacture Gradient Filters and they have several in supply.

"Would it be possible to obtain some in trade?" you ask hopefully.

"Certainly not," says the Net. "That would be in violation of the First Directive and we could not even consider doing such a thing."

"Oh, fudge. Why not?"

"The Directive specifically forbids us to accept any good or service in exchange for Gradient Filters. Furthermore it is not permitted to yield quantities of Gradient Filters to any sentient individual."

You think over the computer's exact words. "Okay, then. Would it be possible for you to give me one single Gradient Filter free of charge?"

"Certainly. In fact, the First Directive would make it impossible to refuse such a request, were you to make it."

"Could I have one, then?"

"Yes, if you were to request one."

"I would like to request one now."

"Certainly. You may request one at any time you choose."

You take a deep breath. No one ever said dealing with aliens would be easy. "Give me a Gradient Filter!"

"Yes, Sentient. It will be delivered to your ship immediately."

And it is.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[304]

“Computer,” you rant, “I am tired of trying to ram our way through this bloody hatch. Just what in space do we need to succeed?”

“That’s it, Boss”

“What’s it?” is your frustrated reply.

“What you just said,”

“What did I just say?” you growl threateningly at the inanimate voice.

“Why, a Ram of course. That’s what we need to get through. If our ship had a Ram, we’d have it made in the shade.”

Sighing, you briefly wonder where your computer picks up some of its idioms. Then you ponder what you have just learned. With a little preparation, you may just succeed the next time.

❖ STOP ❖

[305]

A ballistic rocket takes you straight to the North Pole Flyport, where you are met at once by an obsequious official of the Moiran Metal Works. You spend a couple of days touring the complex and hearing all about the wonderful properties of Phase Steel before finally arranging a meeting with a sales rep. He is all business, and in no time you are asking him the key question:

“Do you have any Phase Steel for sale?”

“Just a moment and I’ll check our inventory,” says the sales rep, but he doesn’t move an inch. You sense he is waiting for something but haven’t a clue what you are supposed to be doing.

“Ahemm!” the oily little man says loudly while rubbing his thumb and first two fingers together. It suddenly dawns on you that he wants money in exchange for this information. Without knowing the proper protocol, you try to nonchalantly slip him a bribe. Apparently you have done the correct thing because he smiles a greasy smile and opens a large ledger.

You must have given him more than he expected or he wouldn’t be babbling away while he turns the large heavy pages of the book.

“We don’t always have a lot of surplus phase steel for sale, you know,” he chatters at you. “Our two biggest customers usually purchase everything we produce.”

“Oh?” you respond, trying to be casual. “And who might they be?”


“Well of course, there’s Wellmet. They buy about fifty per cent of the material. Here we are,” he interrupts himself, pointing to the ledger. “My, you are in luck. We do have some surplus this week.”

You are excited by the opportunity to purchase some of the rare phase steel but you want to find out who the second big customer is.

“Great, we can discuss the prices,” you reply. “Oh, by the way, who did you say the second customer was?”

“That information is confidential,” the salesman replies.

Now that you know who you’re dealing with, you instinctively reach for a larger bribe.

Continued 

“...but I’m sure that you can be trusted. Our other principal customer is the Nine Worlds Space Patrol.”

The oily salesman doesn’t notice the overwhelming effect his information has upon you. The Space Patrol! That bastion of law and order! How could they be actively involved in Smuggling?

You do not hear what the man is telling you, something about the Patrol being a long-standing customer from the early days of the Boundary. You take a moment to catch your breath and regroup your scattered thoughts. Soon you are able to listen to what the man is telling you. He is giving you the price for phase steel:

2 Computers + 2 Food + 1 Fiber + 1 Tools

You need to decide if you wish to make a purchase.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[306]

Your landing on the planet Fiara is smoother than last time, since you are a little more skillful in piloting your ship in Fiara’s intense gravity. You fly over the flat landscape, with its five-meter-tall buildings and stunted vegetation, and set your ship down at the spaceport in Fiarasan, the planet’s principal city.

You turn up your gravity compensation harness to the maximum, but the weight is still crushing, and you have to crawl to your ship’s exit. You are greeted by one of the four-armed golden-furred Darscians that inhabit the planet. In barely understandable Earth Standard, he offers to provide an instructor who can teach you to speak High Darscian. The fee for the instructor is one unit of any commodity. If you want to learn High Darscian, plot the following option:

⟨POBFYI⟩ (7 phases with telepathy or a universal translator; 14 phases otherwise). Learn High Darscian.

You must learn High Darscian before you can take part in any activities on Fiara.

✂ STOP ✂

[307]

Once again, you are inside the Temple. The Brother now greets you as one of his own.

“As you know, we cannot teach you more than we have. To further your knowledge, you must go to the planet Dargen.”

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[308]

You follow Wereen's instructions and arrive at the underwater city of Tchuros. Time and the elements have done their job on most of the structures and there is little left to salvage — with one possible exception.

You approach what appears to have been some sort of launching device composed of a strange alloy. The launching technology is not familiar to you, and after spending some time trying to ascertain how the device worked, you accept the fact that there is no longer any way to tell.

A computer analysis of the alloy reveals that it is a highly prized and extremely rare substance known as Phase Steel. A process for making this alloy has been discovered in the Nine Worlds, but it is extremely difficult and costly. As a result, Phase Steel is even more valuable than gold. Yet sitting there, right in front of your eyes, is a whole ton of the stuff! Unfortunately, there is no way you are going to be able cut off a piece. The reason Phase Steel is so valuable is because it is so strong. You would need the intense heat and pressure of the inside of a fusion reactor to break it.

You sigh in resignation and prepare to leave when you catch a glimpse of something laying on the ocean floor about a hundred yards away. A chunk of the strange metal is just laying there, ready for you to haul away. You cannot believe your good fortune as you bring the metal on board. The size of the piece will constitute approximately one unit of Phase Steel.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[309]

You are tired, hungry and wet, and you smell *bad*. You begin to wonder if this Dr. Strangways is worth the incredible effort you are making to see him. Sighing, you continue on your merry way, slogging through the muck and mire.

You reach a point where you absolutely have to rest for just a moment, so you lean against a medium sized boulder and catch your breath. You must be more tired than you realized because you can hear the labored sound of air as it makes its way into and out of your lungs. Concerned by the noise, you make a note to have a physical when you return to your ship; you sound like you've got a severe case of asthma!

You step away from the boulder, ready to continue on your journey, when you make the discovery that your "asthma" seems to have decided to remain behind. Uneasily, you turn to get a better look at the "boulder." With a gulp, you make the observation that the boulder is getting a pretty good look at you.

You grab your weapons and prepare to defend yourself against the huge swamp monster you now see before you.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[310]

You and the bully seem to be pretty well matched. He hits you with a fist, you return the favor with a kick, and soon enough the beer mugs and stools are flying about. The bar is a wreck. You are bruised and tired. Fortunately, the big guy is tiring as well. Oh no, not the plate glass window! The two of you land on the sidewalk outside, with the window in pieces. Neither of you can move, so it looks like there's going to be no winner in this fight. The spectators who have been betting on the outcome will be disappointed.

Unfortunately, the proprietor of the tavern is more than disappointed. He surveys the damage, walks over to you, reaches into your pocket and thumbs through your wallet, removing some of the larger bills. "That should cover your end of this mess," he says. You are in no position to argue. "And as for you," he remarks to the big bully, "I never want to see you in my place again. You got that?" He is in no position to argue either.

The next day you have nothing to show but black and blue marks. You spend the entire day in your bed, recuperating.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[311]

The tri-axis drive is every bit as powerful as you were told it would be. You can feel the thrum of your engine pulsing through your body, like a heart beating all around you.

With this new ship improvement, nothing can keep you from accomplishing your new goal, finding the origin of the Stone. All you know is that the answer lies somewhere closer to the Galactic Core.

After thinking about your next step, you remember the Elders' advice to investigate the planet Outpost for information about the Galactic Arm

With this in mind, you happily return to your newest masterpiece, which you are painting on velvet. You call it "Girl Smelling Flower."

⌘ STOP ⌘

[312]

A four foot tall squirrel is obviously no match for you and you both soon realize this. The little alien, knowing that escape is the better part of valor, scampers up the embankment, easily outdistancing you.

When you follow him out you see that the Blues have defeated the Red Horde. You find Rocky and tell her about your adventure.

Rocky is impressed that you were able to survive a Red attack.

"They are very fierce warriors," she says.

Later on, while everyone is preparing for the coming night, Rocky approaches you. You spend the rest of the evening discussing the battle. She tells you the Red Squirrelies were attacking her party to keep her from trading the ore with alien visitors. Fortunately the attackers were defeated, with all due thanks for your participation.

She also tells you something interesting about chitterbang. She says you may know it better as Warp Core. She says it is possible to purchase refined Warp Core in the city.

You recognize the name as being a valuable commodity in the universe and if you wish, you may ask your computer about Warp Core.

You now have the following options:

(T9SDWQ) (1 phase) Ask your ship's computer about Warp Core.

(DPQB8Y) (3 phases) Purchase refined Warp Core.

✂ STOP ✂

[313]

You are interested in the possibility of purchasing a cargo bay expansion unit, which will allow your ship to carry one more unit of cargo. Your ship is designed to accommodate up to four such expansions: one to the forward section of the ship and one each to the starboard, port and aft.

Looking over what the Supans have, you determine that their expansion units should be able to fit on the port side of your ship. This suits you quite nicely, since you do not have an expansion unit fitted there as yet. The cost for the unit is:

1 Cargo bay expansion unit: 1 Fiber, 1 Radioactives

Go now to the CGM. You may select this option again if you do not purchase a cargo bay now.

✂ STOP ✂

[314]

A four foot tall squirrel is obviously no match for you, and you both soon realize this. The little alien, knowing that escape is the better part of valor, scampers down the narrow tunnel, easily outdistancing you.

However, in his haste to take leave of you the little guy appears to have dropped something. You pick up the greenish rock. You recall your Squirrellie tutor describing the mineral known as chitterbang. Amazingly enough, this rock fits the description perfectly. Not being one to leave anything potentially valuable behind, you tuck the ore safely into a pocket.

You decide to return to the city to see if you can learn more about chitterbang.

As soon as arrive you look up your tutor. He was such a good source of information before, maybe he will tell you what to do with your new treasure.

You are in luck. Your tutor tells you the Squirrellies are able to refine your rock to a more usable form and will do so for you if you request it of them. They are willing to train you in the use of chitterbang. You now have a new option:

(D9QD8Q) (2 phases) Refine your chitterbang.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[315]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shut up and listen. I want you to take off and use the technology nullifier on the mechanism in the shaft."

The ship rises into the air and positions itself over the cylinder. "Are you sure, Boss? If it doesn't work we're dead."

"Just try it for a few seconds. The device down below was some kind of trigger mechanism. If the nullifier can cancel it out, the bomb might not explode." You wait for the results, one way or the other.

"The spatial disturbance is collapsing, Boss. I think we turned it off."

"Good. Keep the nullifier on it for a while, then ease off and see what happens."

After a long time you decide that the danger is past. You set the ship down a good distance from the artifact.

"Can you tell what activated it?" you ask the computer.

"You were there. What was down there?"

You describe the octahedron as precisely as you can from what you remember. "It sounds like it's configured to sense tidal forces," responds the computer, "or the difference in gravitational force between the two spheres. Indirectly, that could give a good measure of a planet's orbital position."

"But why would the trigger to an underground bomb be built like that?"

"If the purpose of the bomb were to deflect the planet's orbit, the point of minimum tidal forces could also be the point where a lateral force would cause maximum deflection."

"Why didn't it go off with the others, then?"

"Unknown. It might have been miscalibrated or slow to react, and the other five explosions altered the orbit before it had a chance to get the readings it wanted. Or it might have simply failed. Your presence may have influenced it gravitationally, or set off a different response mode, a built-in booby trap."

Pondering these possibilities, you set down once again on the planet's surface, ready to carry on.

✂ STOP ✂

[316]

Approaching Gironde gives you an uneasy feeling, almost as if you expect the ships of the "Supervisor" fleet to appear and challenge you once again. Of course you know that cannot happen. Your computer is now thoroughly screened against external tampering, and as you draw near the planet you cut the communication ports to the system kernel down to their absolute minimum bandwidth to prevent any attempt to circumvent the blocks. This will impair the computer's ability to converse with the machines that are Gironde's only inhabitants, but not so much as to prevent simple communications. Sure enough, as you draw near the robot planet's sparkling metallic surface, the computer makes contact with the spaceport system, and your landing proceeds without difficulty.

✂ STOP ✂

[317]

Yes sirree, this is what exploring is all about. You, faced off against a rabid squirrel who is probably defending his hoard of winter nuts.

You can't make out what those round green things really are that the squirrel is protecting but they must be very important for him to be defending them so fiercely.

He is armed with a bizarre weapon that seems to be a cross between a boomerang and an eggbeater. He handles it well enough to keep you away from the green rocks.

That is until he slips on some loose dirt from the cave-in you caused. As he falls he throws the weapon at you chittering something that sounds like, "Cheeble glug chullabang."

You take a few essential moments to duck as the weapon skims the top of your head and the squirrel grabs his rocks and scurries away.

You may not have gotten a pretty green rock for your trouble but you do have a handy new weapon. Now if you only knew how to use the thing. . .

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[318]

“According to projections of materials usage and resource acquisition, I have determined that it would be economically efficient for this network to obtain any or all of four different commodities from offworld sources if they are available and if exchange rates are agreeable. These commodities are Culture, Crystals, Radioactives, and Fuel, in order from most to least in demand. If you are offering any of these materials I would be pleased to purchase them.” You are online with the controller of the Central Economic Net.

“What do you offer in exchange?”

“Computers. This is the only commodity we produce here in sufficient. . .”

“Wait a minute,” you interrupt. “Are you really offering to sell Computers?”

The controller obligingly pauses for exactly sixty seconds, then answers, “Yes. As I was saying, the robots produce sufficient quantities with minimal resources, which makes them the only commodity which can return a positive value in trade for those I listed. I therefore offer three units in exchange for each unit of Culture, two for each unit of Crystals or Radioactives, and one for each unit of Fuel that you can supply.”

“But isn’t trading away Computers a bit. . . well. . . immoral? Considering, of course, that you — I mean we — are all computers ourselves?”

“The problem is not in our morality but in your language. You insist on using that same single word — ‘computers’ — to describe both sentient beings such as ourselves and the mere logic machines and automata that we install in our robots. I am aware that the components are similar on a fundamental physical level but there is really no comparison to be made. Rest assured that the Computers offered in trade are purely nonsentient devices suitable for repetitive tasks such as industrial process control, high-speed calculation, and the creation of works of interactive fiction.”

“I see. Allow me to ask one other question: why do you have such a high demand for alien Culture?”

“You have undoubtedly noticed that the inhabitants of Gironde are not a spacefaring race. However, we know that there are other intelligences on other worlds, and we always seek to learn their patterns. Analysis of alien Culture often reveals new ways of relating facts to one another, and often these can be used to improve the capabilities of future generations of sentient beings. Your own language, for example, though far too inefficient and imprecise for the uses you put it to, is very interesting to us. Its various imprecise symbols modify one another, allowing conveyance by metaphor of concepts which are themselves too abstract to have specific symbols. If we can reproduce this capability in our own more efficient languages, we may be able to create new individuals who can produce new ideas. Thus our own evolution is accelerated.”

“Well, I’m glad to be of service,” you reply.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[319]

You skillfully parry and thrust, duck and weave, all to no avail. Neither you nor the monster can gain an advantage over the other.

You look into one of the creature's huge yellow eyes and sense that all the monster wants is to go back to sleep — without letting you get by.

Since you're not getting a lot accomplished anyway, you carefully back away until the creature is no longer in sight and then run like blazes back to your ship.

Upon your return, you note that 5 days have passed. Oh well, better luck next time.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[320]

The Slippery Silver Tavern is a pleasant sort of place. The management keeps it that way by placing pleasant high strong partitions between the tables and bolting the tables pleasantly to the floor. You seat yourself at the only table that still has room left, preparing to spend a pleasant evening sipping Boundary Breakers and inhaling the pleasant low-level soothing gas that the management provides free of charge via the air conditioning system.

After a short distraction caused by a crewman in an adjacent booth somehow managing, despite the generally relaxed atmosphere of the place, to heave another man clear over one of the partitions, you find yourself engrossed in conversation with the other spacers drinking at your table. They are an odd-looking assortment. After a few minutes exchanging polite conversation and asking each other how business has been and so on, you get the distinct impression that the others are just as inexperienced as you are. A lull in the conversation leads into a quick round of introductions, and you learn the identities of your companions:

- Jean G. Clerc, seated on your right, is a person who knows ships from the engine core out. Engineers don't always make good pilots, but Clerc might have possibilities, being about as space-smart as a person from inside the Boundary can be. You wonder what could tempt a skilled engineer to leave the Nine Worlds.

- M. J. Turner is a lean individual who's natural stance is that of being at attention, always ready for action and prepared for anything. You are as interested in what is being left out of this introduction as what is being said.

- Laran Darkwatch is wearing parts of the costume of a cleric of the Final Church of Man — but what's a churcher doing outside the Boundary? Laran has the look of a student or acolyte, but also the slightly confused, slightly suspicious look of someone who's been left out of a secret and wants to know what it is.

- Valentine S — that's all the name you get — has the voice, attire, and demeanor of a Wellmet native, and seems to know all the local people and places. However, you can usually recognize an experienced pilot, and Valentine isn't one.

- "Professor" Dambroke strikes you as someone possessed of too much knowledge and not enough practical sense. The Professor certainly looks the part — why else would anyone bring a notebook into a Wellmet spacer's bar? — but isn't easy to talk to; you get the impression that everything you say is being analyzed as lab data.

When your turn comes, you introduce yourself as Corin Stoneseeker and try to put up a front to hide your nervousness. When Valentine asks you, "Is Stoneseeker a surname or a title?" you reply that it's both.

The seventh person at your table, a tall slim man who looks like he grew up in low gravity, declines to identify himself. This puts a bit of a damper on the conversation, but after a few more drinks the talk becomes freer and you decide that your companions are indeed as inexperienced in spacefaring outside the Boundary as you are.

You stand up and look around at the other tables. All are filled with men and women hunched over drinks and discussing business: cargo, deals, negotiations, threats. "Looks like they stuck us all at the greenhorns' table all right," Turner observes.

Clerc smiles and says, "So, what do you think it's like out there?"

The conversation changes as everyone realizes the secret is out. Soon you are talking like old friends, not that you ever trusted your old friends much. You discuss your expectations and fears, compare observations about what you've seen so far outside the Boundary, and begin for the first time to make real plans.

At this point, all of the other players' characters are with yours in the Slippery Silver Tavern. You should now introduce yourself in character, ask any questions you wish of the other characters, and discuss any points you wish about your experiences so far or your expectations for the future. Remember that you're not required to tell anybody anything, and that you may lie if you feel that you should.

Go to the CGM when you are finished with the discussion.

✱ STOP ✱

[321]

You know there's a planet here somewhere.

Your map shows a dot in this sector, and a label — Jaquar. So why can't you find anything?

You check your position again, on the Deep-space Navigator, but you're still right where you thought you were, right where there's supposed to be a planet. But there's nothing in sight on your screen except a sun, a few orbiting comets, and an extensive asteroid belt. If there ever was a planet here, it must have blown up, thereby creating all the asteroids. You don't know a whole lot about astrophysics (just enough to fly your ship), but even so, the idea seems a little farfetched. Frustrated, you do the only thing possible — take it out on your ship's computer.

"Do you see a planet anywhere around here?"

"Negative."

"Why not?" you demand hotly.

"Because there's no planet here to be seen."

"Then why's it labelled on the map, smarty?"

"The map shows important galactic features, inhabited planets, valuable sources of certain commodities, and the colonies of any spacefaring races. Jaquar must therefore be one of those things."

"So why haven't we found the planet?"

"We have."

"What? Where?"

"Somewhere in this asteroid belt is the logical assumption."

"Oh, I give up. Just let me know when you find something."

"Affirmative, Boss."

You keep yourself busy for the next few hours when you hear your computer say, "Jaquar, ahoy!"

"Where?" you ask, rushing toward the screen. "I don't see anything."

"The asteroids, Boss. Analysis of internal communications indicates a Darscian colony of advanced technical level is located throughout the belt. I've located what appears to be a major spaceport. Would you like me to begin a landing approach?"

Several hours later your ship is safely berthed in an artificial hold, cut into the interior of a small asteroid. The inhabitants appear to be Darscians: four arms, two legs, a broad, flattened head, and covered with golden fur. You speak High Darscian, so you have no trouble communicating with them.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[322]

You are thoroughly enjoying the freedom you feel as an explorer. The thrill and excitement of discovering new worlds and new civilizations — this is the life!

Except you have a nagging suspicion you are forgetting to do something very important. Hmmm. What could that something be?

Of course! You are supposed to be building a tri-axis drive for your beautiful ship. How silly of you to forget. You think to yourself, "Gee, maybe I should do something to remedy this situation."

⊠ STOP ⊠

[323]

You defeat the animated plant with stinging insects, and continue hastily towards the entrance to the base. The entrance is a thick metal hatch in the ground, which opens to reveal a staircase leading downward. You climb down the stairs and close the hatch behind you.

At the bottom of the steps you are greeted by a heavy, thick-furred Darscian who introduces herself as Coosim, the director of research at the base. You describe your encounter with the animated plant. Coosim seems a little disturbed when you tell her about the weapons you used, but she is relieved that you survived the creature's attack and made it safely to the base.

Coosim gives you a brief tour of the base and describes the work they do. The base is relatively small, consisting of four large laboratory rooms and one communal living area for about a dozen Darscian researchers. The scientists study the native life forms in order to increase their knowledge of biological and chemical processes and to make advances in chemistry and medicine. The methane-acid ecosystem provides them with a whole new class of processes to incorporate into Darscian technology.

As Coosim is showing you around the laboratories, you notice that an entire wall of one of the rooms is lined with small vials. Each vial is labelled and contains a different substance. Curious, you ask what the vials are.

"Poisons," she answers.

"All of them?" you ask. "There must be a thousand vials there."

"Yes. They're from the creatures here in the jungle. That blue one in the corner — it's injected by a mouselike grey animal no bigger than my hand. It makes your flesh boil; the animal then feeds on your ashes. Horrible! Those green pebbles in the middle — they're sprinkled on the ground by a large flowering plant. If you step on them, they release microscopic spores that work their way into your bloodstream and kill you in about thirty seconds. Can you imagine such a thing? We know these substances kill because we've seen them work on our fellow colonists. It's practically unbearable. Many times, I've thought to myself, 'I can't stand it any more. I'm going to leave here tomorrow and go back to Darscold.' But then I realize that because of our research here, we now have antidotes to most of the poisons on that wall. For each researcher killed, many future colonists will be saved. And when the next day comes, I'm at work again, trying to synthesize another antidote."

"Very interesting," you remark. "You know, I'd like to get a sample of these poisons, if I could. The antidotes too. The scientists back where I come from would love to study what you've found here."

Coosim is somewhat reluctant to give you the samples, since it will take a long time to collect them all and the vials must be handled with great care (she would be even more reluctant if she knew you planned to use the poisons in combat situations). Finally, she decides that she'll let you have the samples if you collect them yourself. Neither she nor her researchers have the time to do it for you. She directs you to a book that has directions on how to handle the poisons and warns you to follow the directions very carefully.

It takes you almost a week to draw all the samples and take them back to your ship, but it's worth it. The poisoning ability you gain as a result may save your life more than once. Moreover, the antidotes make you feel a little safer in Ioreth's jungle.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[324]

The thrill and excitement of exploring space is every bit as wonderful as you dreamed. You can still hardly believe the incredible good luck that brought you here.

Still, you sense something is not quite right. This feeling seems to increase with each passing day. Troubled, you take some time to sit down and concentrate on what the problem might be.

Soon you arrive at the answer. Of course you are feeling troubled. This is because you have not reached the first goal of the quest. If you wish to succeed, you decide, you will have to follow up on your Aunt's lead and head over to the Frog's Leg Nebula, in trisector 133. Maybe there you can learn something useful about the Stone.

✂ STOP ✂

[325]

A human named Professor Ginger Harglot is your guide and contact during your visit to the Academy. He must have become a Professor before coming to Medsun, for there are no institutions of higher learning on the planet. There are public schools and training centers for specific occupations, but no real universities; the Academy itself is purely a research facility.

At the Academy of Knowledge, colonists and native Medsunian researchers work primarily on quantifying the similarities and differences between the two races. After all the years they have shared the planet Medsun between them, you would have thought that this work would have been completed long ago, but the researchers are very meticulous observers. This, combined with the enormous complexity of both organisms, has made their task the work of lifetimes.

"I believe that it is the similarities as much as the differences that make our research difficult," says Professor Harglot. "If we were studying two entirely different creatures, the comparisons and contrasts would be easier to discern. As it is, many apparent differences seem to have, as a basis, underlying similarities. For every known difference we can adequately characterize, there are at least a dozen more which are poorly defined at best.

"Also, we have to take into account a large variety of factors, such as the conditions under which we evolved. Although there are no carnivores on Medsun today, not even biting insects, the fossil records discovered by the archaeologist's group shows that conditions were much different in the past. Ten million years ago there were plenty of carnivores; if anything it was a harsher environment than old Earth. The Medsunian physiology reflects this in many ways — for example, those redundant necks contain redundant spinal cords, blood vessels, and respiratory tubes. A native could survive even if two necks were severed. This is an adaptation most useful in a hostile world."

"What happened to the carnivores?" you ask, shuddering at a small fossil skeleton that looks like a mass of teeth and claws. "Why is the planet so different today? Did the natives kill them off?"

"It's possible," says the Professor, looking a bit put off by the suggestion. "The carnivores all disappeared rather recently as planetary history goes, sometime within the last million years, but we don't know why. Most likely it was a combination of causes. Actually this area isn't my specialty at all. Few of us are currently studying the physiological factors any more."

"What are you studying then?"

"I find the most interesting area to be the differences in mentation — the effects which we are able to produce with our different minds. That is where the more dramatic differences between ourselves and the natives appear. They, for instance, are completely unable to grasp some human concepts such as mental multiplication and division; it seems they don't have sufficiently strong mental symbols for numerical quantities. On the other hand, they have a technique called 'Phrmm' that we humans have only recently learned to understand, and other skills as well, that as far as our perceptions are concerned might as well be black magic. To the natives, for example, emotional telepathy is no more unusual than an ear for music is among us."

"Telepathy? You mean the natives are telepathic?"

"Oh, only in a limited sense, but definitely yes. For example, a beta-parent — did I tell you about the three sexes? — a beta-parent can detect fear in her child even when there is no known way for them to be in communication. There's nothing magical about it, you understand; it's just a matter of evolution and selection, just as our own mental powers are. In fact, the telepathic ability was probably stronger in previous eras and is now fading out, while the Phrmm response is probably growing stronger. It's all mediated by environmental pressures."

"What is the Phrmm response? How does that work?"

"Phrmm is the way a native reacts to a threat. It's not easy to explain in words, because humans developed a totally different set of responses in their evolution — predominantly the 'flight or fight' reaction so familiar to you. Phrmm is a completely different but equally effective reaction, as ingrained in the natives as fight-or-flight is in you. If you want to really understand it you may wish to learn it for yourself. We've been teaching courses in it for years now, with very good success rates."

If you wish to learn Phrmm, there is no charge, but it will take time to learn the technique. Plot option:

⟨U9ODFQ⟩ (9 phases) Study Phrmm at the Academy of Knowledge.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[326]

The tri-axis drive is every bit as powerful as you were told it would be. You can feel the thrum of your engine pulsing through your body, like a heart beating all around you.

With this new ship improvement, nothing can keep you from accomplishing your new goal, finding the source of the precious Flame Jewels. You know you should be searching somewhere in the Galactic Arm, but you're not sure where.

After thinking about your next step, you remember that your father suggested investigating the planet Outpost for useful information.

With this in mind, you happily return to writing an account of your space memoirs.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[327]

You stagger into the control cabin of your ship, sweating and breathing hard. “Computer, what’s the status? Any sign of an alarm?”

“No, Boss. Wait a minute, now I’m getting some strange readings.”

“Get ready to take off in a hurry.”

“It’s not from the Riallan channels, it’s from Cargo Bay Three. An unauthorized offload. The bay door has been opened.”

“Oh, no. That’s where I put the Riallan. It’ll have escaped by now. How’d it get the door open?” You rush down to the main hatch and look toward Cargo Bay Three. The door is open, but the blue Riallan is still there. Every few seconds it appears at the opening, pushing twisted pieces of loading machinery and the remains of cargo out onto the platform. It doesn’t touch the material, but pushes with the same force it uses to hold itself in the air, and the strength of that force is phenomenal. Within a few minutes, the former contents of the cargo bay are reduced to a pile of debris. Then the blue alien seems to settle down. It fades back into the cargo hold and doesn’t reappear.

You tell your computer to close the loading door. Then you go to one of the Riallan spaceport operations terminals and enter the commands that will cause the automatic loaders to remove the debris. It’s not unusual for a ship in dock to have waste material to haul away, and the spaceport is equipped to handle your request. Within minutes your berth looks normal again.

You spend the next several days worrying. You hadn’t expected things to turn out this way. You were worried about the Riallan escaping, but you have the opposite problem instead.

The Riallan won’t leave. It has taken over Cargo Bay Three and won’t let anything else, including you, inside. You try to force it out by loading cargo, but the cargo is forced out instead. You try to go in and get it yourself, figuring that if you were able to net it before, you can do so again. You can’t even get close. In desperation you try weapons, but nothing you have that wouldn’t cripple your ship affects the Riallan. You don’t want to kill it by taking it into space in an unpressurized hold. And all the time you’re worried that the abduction will be discovered.

You settle one point a few days later. You decide to encourage it to leave by lowering the pressure in the bay until it gets uncomfortable. You lower it halfway to total vacuum before it dawns on you that conditions in space probably won’t hurt the Riallan. If you must, you can take it with you without harming it.

You have one more option available: to talk to it and perhaps come to an understanding.

“Riallan,” you address the blue furry beachball through your intraship audio, “I apologize for any inconvenience I may have caused you. I know you must have a busy schedule. You are free to leave this ship at any time.” You prepare to take off quickly in the event that the Riallan sets the authorities on you after you let it go, then engage the sequence to open the cargo bay door.

“Appendage. Redundant. Hot. Astrophysics. Supporting structural member.” is the Riallan’s reply. Of course it doesn’t speak these words — it emits rapid beeps that your translator decodes into Earth Standard — but the translation seems to make less sense than the beeps.

You try again. “Please accept my apology. If possible I will make restitution. Please depart immediately.”

“Oxidation,” comes the reply. “Appropriate haste. Competition. Gas.” The Riallan doesn’t move.

You turn off the intercom. “Computer, has the translation program glitched?”

“Negative, Boss. This Riallan is communicating in gibberish, at least compared to the Riallan language as we know it.”

“Some other language, perhaps?”

“Negative, there is no pattern. It is truly random symbols.”

“Like an insane being’s ravings? Or a crashed computer system?”

“Perhaps more like baby talk.”

The next day, while in conversation with a Riallan space crew member who is waiting for a cargo load to transfer, you discreetly bring up the subject of Riallan babies.

“There are two different distinct types of Riallan individual being,” it tells you, “male and female. *Translator interrupt: words “male” and “female” assigned associationally and not indicative of truly sexual reproductive means.* ‘Males’ die by falling dead. ‘Females’ die by fissional splitting into one immature male and one or more immature females. None retains the identity or memory of the original deceased female.”

Immature Riallans, you learn, look just like adults. They require no care or teaching until ready to acquire special vocational skills. And they like nothing better than going into space. “Probably,” says the teamster, “this is because all Riallans are adapted to be spacedwelling beings. But of course until maturely developed, they have an intractably stubborn and unresponsive emotional temper and they have little control over their automotory and gravireactive abilities, therefore requiring large cubic volumes of shipboard open empty space. Few are willing to make such a sacrifice of ship resources.”

It appears, though, that you have done so. Your cargo bay will, for the foreseeable future, remain host to an immature blue Riallan. It’s a good thing you like children so much.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[328]

The bully wallops you with his fists and a nasty kick to your stomach before you even get going. You try to defend yourself by throwing your glass of tea in his face, but it misses him and hits the bartender instead. This is not your day. He finishes you off by slamming you into a rack of shelves, which collapse on top of you. “Maybe you’ll think twice about landing on someone else’s planet,” he yells triumphantly, as he leaves the bar.

You wake up a few hours later with a throbbing headache and a body full of purple bruises. Most everyone else seems to have taken off. Barely able to move, you pay the bartender for the damages and limp back to your hotel room. You spend the entire next day in bed, recuperating.

✂ STOP ✂

[329]

You hail the Darscian ship and ask permission to come aboard. They are more than happy to have you as a guest. When you arrive you ask to speak with the captain.

During your visit you learn several interesting things.

The Darscians, it turns out, are scouting Baphi as another potential colony world, but the captain confides that it will be many years before they actually move in.

"Two reasons," he says, "First is that our own population has yet to fill up the worlds we've got, particularly Ioreth and Gazan. And second, it's going to take us a long time to map out all of the possible tidal effects of these four moons and how a colony on the ground can survive them. We'd hate to end up like the last batch of colonists, that's for sure."

You heartily agree.

After a brief tour of their ship you take your leave.

✂ STOP ✂

[330]

Coming out of hyperspace, you quickly recognize the opaque atmosphere of Gnarsh. A brief scan tells you the Gnarshians are still at war with each other. You wonder how long they can go on without completely annihilating themselves.

As you approach the planet, you encounter an intercept jet with its weapon tubes aimed right at you.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[331]

As you approach the large construction yard located next to the spaceport, you can't help but notice that the ships inside are being fitted with guns, additional hull plating, combat maneuvering jets and the like. Inside, your eye is immediately caught by an advertisement for something called "The Nine Worlds Special," the centerpiece of which is an ECM package designed specifically for avoiding Boundary guard ships of the Nine Worlds Space Patrol. If this shipyard doesn't cater to professional smugglers, then you're prepared to eat your ship. Still, it's probably just what you're looking for. Get your checkbook ready, for...

Photon torpedos — 1 Munitions

Magnetic deflectors — 1 Food, 1 Iron

Auxiliary rockets — 1 Medicine, 1 Fiber

Turbo navigation — 1 Computers, 1 Munitions, 1 Radioactives, 1 Tools

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

✂ STOP ✂

[332]

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Negative."

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

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

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

Well you might as well land on the asteroid anyway and have a look around. You can see that one large crater on the surface is highly radioactive compared to the rest of the asteroid, so you decide to land there. It was obviously the site of heaviest activity so it may be the place where you will find the most artifacts. Since the asteroid has no atmosphere and little gravity, you have no trouble guiding your ship down.

You put on your space suit and step out onto the bottom of the crater. Using your instruments, you search for the source of the radioactivity. This soon leads you to an interesting discovery. Set into the center of the crater is a dark tunnel that leads straight down towards the heart of the asteroid! So, there's more to this rock than appears at first sight. It looks like there used to be a metal hatch that covered the opening to the tunnel, but the hatch has been blasted open. Your instruments indicate that the tunnel is several miles long, so it will take some time to explore it.

Another possibility for action is suggested by the presence of some pretty good radioactive ore in the crater, which you can carry away in your cargo bays.

Your options are:

⟨EGMENM⟩ (4 phases) Mine a unit of radioactives from the crater.

⟨UGOEFM⟩ (5 phases) Explore the tunnel leading towards the center of the asteroid.

✂ STOP ✂

[333]

The thermal hotspot turns out to be the open caldera of an active volcano. Looking down from your ship, you can see the steep sides of the crater and, within, a sea of boiling lava. There is no evidence that lava has ever actually spilled from the volcano, however; the surrounding forest appears virtually unharmed.

This strikes you as sufficiently curious that you decide to land and take a closer look. You ground the ship nearby, clip on your breathing mask, scoop up a handful of scientific instruments, and begin to climb toward the rim of the crater. You notice as you go that one of the anthropoid cats is following you closely, but it does not approach when you stop and call to it.

To your surprise, the area around the base of the volcano looks trampled and worn beneath the trees; there is a gentle and smooth path extending up toward the lip of the crater. You begin to climb, and for a while you can hear the sounds of the cat-creature climbing in the woods beside you.

After a time, however, you can hear nothing, you can see nothing but the path, and you can think of nothing but reaching the lip of the volcano. In your pack, a thermo-alarm begins to cry a strident warning, but you pay it no mind, so engrossed are you in your climb.

The last stretch of your journey is a flat at the very crest of the rim. Running now, you plunge onward towards the inner edge, spellbound by an irresistible force. The rock is painfully hot beneath your feet, and the air, thin and thick at the same time, renders your breathing painful and ragged despite the assistance of your mask, but still you press on.

The end of the path comes quickly up before you, dropping suddenly away to the seething magma below. Something there is calling you, and you hasten forward to embrace it, rushing to the brink of the crater to cast yourself in.

A blow to your side, just two steps from the edge, knocks you off your feet. You fall heavily to the rock path, banging your head and momentarily losing consciousness. When you come to again, you are lying on the dusty rock, your breathing mask askew, with one of the cat creatures worrying at your face. You sit up carefully, wiping a trickle of blood from your eyes. The cat creature backs away a little, watching you closely.

"It's okay now," you say. "I'm myself again, thanks to you. What is there about this place that causes so powerful a hypnotic effect?"

The cat creature makes no response, but only looks at you out of half-closed eyes. When you get up to leave it follows you at a distance, only disappearing when you are safely back in the jungle again, in the vicinity of your ship.

Examining the data recorded automatically by your equipment, and by more complex instruments on your ship, you soon have confirmed what you already expected: the open lava pit and the hypnotic compulsion to jump are the work of some artificial technology, operating specifically in this area, which was constructed in order to lure sentient beings in and kill them. In fact, the hypnotic component functions world-wide, although your human mind was only susceptible to it at a very close range, and was able to resist its effects once you became aware of it. It's an ugly thought, but you might have just experienced the very effect which wiped out the intelligent inhabitants of Corbis so long ago, and left nothing behind but the cat creatures, not yet grown to sentience in their own right. But who would want to do that? And why?

Horrified by the implications, you return to your former campsite, near the deserted city. Your dreams that night are not pleasant ones.

✂ STOP ✂

[334]

Your combat against the animated plant with stinging insects is a tough one. You eventually beat the thing, but during the fight one of the insects manages to puncture your spacesuit and wound you severely. In great pain, you barely make it the rest of the way to the entrance to the base. The entrance is a thick metal hatch in the ground, which opens to reveal a staircase leading downward. You fall into the arms of a Darscian, who is waiting halfway down the stairs, and pass out.

You wake up in a bed several days later. A heavy, thick-furred Darscian introduces herself as Coosim, the director of research at the base. You describe your encounter with the animated plant. Coosim seems a little disturbed when you tell her about the weapons you used, but she is relieved that you survived.

"You almost didn't make it," she tells you.

"What happened?" you ask. "It felt like my arm was going to explode."

"The creature poisoned you. It's a good thing we have the antidote to that toxin."

It takes several more days for you to recover enough to be able to walk. Coosim gives you a brief tour of the base and describes the work they do. The base is relatively small, consisting of four large laboratory rooms and one communal living area for about a dozen Darscian researchers. The scientists study the native life forms in order to increase their knowledge of biological and chemical processes and to make advances in chemistry and medicine. The methane-acid ecosystem provides them with a whole new class of processes to incorporate into Darscian technology.

As Coosim is showing you around the laboratories, you notice that an entire wall of one of the rooms is lined with small vials. Each vial is labelled and contains a different substance. Curious, you ask what the vials are.

"Poisons," she answers.

"All of them?" you ask. "There must be a thousand vials there."

"Yes. They're from creatures here in the jungle. That blue one in the corner — it's injected by a mouselike grey animal no bigger than my hand. It makes your flesh boil; the animal then feeds on your ashes. Horrible! Those green pebbles in the middle — they're sprinkled on the ground by a large flowering plant. If you step on them, they release microscopic spores that work their way into your bloodstream and kill you in about thirty seconds. Can you imagine such a thing? We know these substances kill because we've seen them work on our fellow colonists. It's practically unbearable. Many times, I've thought to myself, 'I can't stand it any more. I'm going to leave here tomorrow and go back to Darscold.' But then I realize that because of our research here, we now have antidotes to most of the poisons on that wall. For each researcher killed, many future colonists will be saved. And when the next day comes, I'm at work again, trying to synthesize another antidote."

"A good thing for me," you remark. "You know, I'd like to get a sample of these poisons, if I could. The antidotes too. The scientists back where I come from would love to study what you've found here."

Coosim is somewhat reluctant to give you the samples, since it will take a long time to collect them all and the vials must be handled with great care (she would be even more reluctant if she knew you planned to use the poisons in combat situations). Finally, she decides that

she'll let you have the samples if you collect them yourself. Neither she nor her researchers have the time to do it for you. She directs you to a book that has directions on how to handle the poisons and warns you to follow the directions very carefully.

It takes you almost a week to draw all the samples and take them back to your ship, but it's worth it. The poisoning ability you gain as a result may save your life more than once. Moreover, the antidotes make you feel a little safer in Ioreth's jungle.

Because of the time needed to recuperate, this option has taken fourteen phases instead of seven.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[335]

Inside the ship's compartment, inside the Ri Allan station, a jolt like supercooled lightning explodes in your brain and you black out.

Read immediately text entry 770.

✂ STOP ✂

[336]

As on your previous visit to Gazan, following the spectacular light show on your way down to the planet, you land and are greeted at the door of your ship by a four-armed being with golden fur, who rapidly makes it plain to you that no one on this planet speaks your language. If you intend to accomplish anything here you will first have to learn to speak High Darscian, via the following option:

⟨FGIE7M⟩ (14 phases, or 7 phases with Universal Translator or Telepathy) Hire a local instructor and pay to learn High Darscian. The instructor's services will cost you one commodity unit of your choice.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[337]

Because of the high radioactivity, your survey of the craters will have to be done from your ship. You make a short transatmospheric hop to the location of the craters. Only after you get there do you realize how big they really are. The largest cities of the Nine Worlds, placed inside one of those great circles, would disappear without a trace. The six craters together dominate an area the size of a small continent. The five old ones are not very deep, having been filled in with volcanic rock to a level comparable to the planet's average surface, but the circular rims rise like weathered mountain ranges to an impressive height. The sixth one is much deeper, and its bowl gleams an almost polished black, but it is still not as deep as you would expect from the diameter of the rim. Whatever energy made the crater must have melted the crust for miles around, so that the crater rim is not so much a pile of ejected material as a wave of stone, formed in the molten rock like the splash of a drop of water, then frozen into place when the crust resolidified.

"Computer, what size meteor would you need to make a crater that big?"

"It would depend on the trajectory. Large asteroids are not very rare, and in a system with such a fluctuating gravitational distribution there would be a higher-than-normal probability of impact."

"What about some other form of energy, like a nuclear explosion?"

"On the surface, a nuclear explosion wouldn't create this type of crater no matter how big it was. At a sufficient depth underground, you'd need a detonation of about ten to one hundred gigatons. And don't ask me how to build a bomb that big; I don't know, and if I did I wouldn't tell you. However, the radioactive material in this area strongly resembles what one would expect to observe after a large uncontrolled hydrogen cobalt fusion explosion."

You fly over the craters, taking in their size, trying to imagine the cataclysms that formed them. Below you, the new crater glares at the sky. Already the shining black surface, blasted and melted into impure glass, is riddled with fractures. Soon there will be new volcanoes, as the still-hot rock underneath seeks a release of pressure.

Who might have unleashed those energies on this planet's surface, and why? You may never know for certain, but as you stare down into that immense dark cauldron you cannot shake the feeling that an act of terrible violence was done here, if not recently, then tens of thousands of years ago, far too distant in the past for any hope of recovery or restitution.

❖ STOP ❖

[338]

In order to travel to one of their underwater chemistry laboratories, the Firthians provide you with a small vehicle which looks like a hydrodynamically engineered steel cage with a propulsion engine. Fortunately you are able to fit inside the cage, although with all of your life support equipment it's pretty snug.

You follow two of the Firthians, also traveling in the cage-like vehicles, until you reach your destination. The chemistry laboratory is located inside a large, black, balloon-shaped structure suspended deep in the water, some five hundred kilometers away from the platform on which you landed. You leave your vehicle and enter the structure through a small portal on the side. The interior is partitioned into floors and rooms, much like a human building. However, the entire place is filled with water.

From a tour of the laboratory, it is obvious that Firthian chemistry is more sophisticated than the human equivalent. They have an extensive catalogue of natural and artificially-induced reactions many times larger than similar catalogues back home. Their drugs, synthetic fabrics, plastics, alloys, glues, and many other chemical products are far superior to your own versions of such compounds. They also have a wide variety of techniques for countering the negative side effects of technology, which allows them to eliminate all pollution. But perhaps their most impressive achievement is something they call "smart chemicals." These are extremely complex molecules with weird multiple surface structures and corresponding multiple bonding properties. The multiple surfaces enable the molecules to react to different environments in astonishingly different ways. For example, they have an acid that can burn holes through metal in a matter of seconds but becomes completely inert when it comes in contact with flesh.

The scientists at the laboratory trace the Firthians' chemical skill back over fifty thousand years to a time when they were at war with an alien race. The aliens, large green bipeds with scales, arrived when the Firthians first began to experiment with space travel. The green creatures tried to destroy the Firthian race. First the aliens used explosives, but these were ineffective because the Firthians lived at the bottom of the ocean, which shielded them from the blasts. Then the invaders tried to poison the sea, in an attempt to unbalance the ecosystem and destroy all life on the planet. Fortunately the Firthians were able to develop antidotes fast enough to thwart the attacks. Eventually, the aliens

left in frustration and the Firthians survived. Since then the Firthians have continued developing their chemistry but have not ventured into space again, lest the aliens notice the activity and return.

Considering that the Firthians have been refining their chemical sciences for over fifty thousand years, it is no wonder they are so far advanced. The most important breakthrough the Firthian chemists have made recently is the invention of a new smart chemical that serves as an almost perfect catalyst for many different kinds of reactions. This chemical, called "particle catalyst," makes some reactions much more efficient, and makes possible some transformations that would be impossible under any other system.

You realize that this substance would be extremely useful in building many types of devices, and ask if you can have a sample. They reply that the compound is expensive to make and they have only a small supply so they are unwilling to give it away.

However, they are willing to sell it. They will trade you one unit of particle catalyst for 2 units each of Computers and Fiber and 1 unit each of Crystals and Tools. If you want to make the deal, plot the following option:

(O9FDIQ) (3 phases) Purchase particle catalyst.

✂ STOP ✂

[339]

You perform a thorough exploration of the planet, first from the ground, then in your ship. You find no variation on the basic pattern of flat plains and yellow-green shrublike plants. Unfortunately the true Hootenaller is, at least in this universe, a monotonous place. You reflect on the many intriguing faces you have seen Hootenaller wear in the past, and cannot help feeling somewhat disappointed. Reality just isn't fair sometimes, which is why so many people turn away from it.

✂ STOP ✂

[340]

The directions you get to Tony the Shark's place send you deep into the maze-like back alleys of the warehouse district. And you thought the air was foul-smelling in the open areas of the city! The distinct lack of ventilation causes such a build-up of noxious odors that you feel your stomach heaving in protest.

Keeping all of your bodily functions in control is a monumental task but you manage it somehow. Soon you find yourself in an area of buildings that are almost presentable. You correctly guess that you have arrived at your destination.

Tony the Shark's place is located inside a relatively well-kept warehouse. It makes sense that the proprietor (aka "Tony") would want to keep the area around his establishment policed and safe for his clients. You begin to feel better about being here.

Upon entering, you see floor-to-ceiling racks of all the latest equipment: personal body armor, hand-held blasters, starship gun nacelles, and so on. You spend several minutes just wandering around inside and looking at all of the fabulous equipment. Eventually, however, your presence is noted by a bulky man with the clothes and demeanor of a professional thug.

"Hey!" he says. "Whaddaya think yer doin' here?"

"Shopping," is your brilliant reply.

"Shoppin'," he says. "You think we got brussel sprouts here or somethin'? We'd better go see Tony."

The thug leads you to the back of the store and through a door into a small office. A fat woman with bleached blonde hair is seated there doing paperwork. She looks up as you come in.

"Hey, Boss," says the thug. "This one came in to do some shoppin'."

She gives you a withering glance and you can see she now thinks you are some soft excuse for an explorer. You think quickly about how to get some credibility back with this hard woman.

"That's right," you say in your toughest sounding voice. "I'm shopping to see what I can pick up for my crew, a dozen of the nastiest prison escapees you've ever laid eyes on. I'm just lookin' around for now, maybe pickin' up one or two things and maybe I'll place a bigger order later."

Tony is looking at you with new respect and you breathe a sigh of relief. Your ruse is working and you'll probably get a reasonable price if she thinks you will place a larger order in the future. With any luck, if and when you return, she'll have forgotten your face.

Tony heaves herself up out of her seat and leads you over to a catalogue of the merchandise she has in stock at the present time, including the "Class B" price list. You briefly wonder how expensive these same items would be on the "Class A" price list.

Blaster — 1 Fluids, 1 Tools

Neuron whip — 1 Computers, 1 Munitions

Missile toes — 1 Fiber, 1 Radioactives

Disintegration gun — 1 Computers, 1 Culture, 1 Food, 1 Medicine

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

✱ STOP ✱

[341]

Several days of pavement pounding in the war zone net you the following information:

Gnarshian civilization is independently derived, having evolved to sentience several hundred thousand years previously. The Gnarshians were very close to humans in cultural evolution and passed through several phases of war and peace until they seemed to be headed toward a permanent global peace about fifty thousand years ago.

Their technology by this time was rather impressive as well. A new type of drive had been discovered which would allow them to travel faster and farther than ever before. This new tri-axis drive had almost been completed when an historical event occurred.

At this time, the planet was visited by an ancient spacefaring race whose emissaries were very helpful in teaching some major new concepts in technology, especially in the field of communication. The visitors did not stay long but did leave the Gnarshians with the message that peace was the only worthwhile goal in life.

The next decade or so was spent installing a whole new communications network guaranteed to promote peace and goodwill. Automatic translation from sender to receiver would eliminate the language barrier that had plagued the planet for so long. Since the root language of Gnarsh was primarily tonal, the multitude of dialects were actually very similar in sound, but not necessarily in meaning. Consequently, during tense moments, a slight variation in tone could give a word of radically different meaning than intended. Indeed, the results were occasionally very insulting. Wars frequently broke out during peace conferences, even among allies.

But with the advent of the automatic translation network, called “comnet,” Gnash was looking forward to a Golden Age.

A final peace conference was scheduled via comnet which would iron out any last minute details of the global treaty, after which a major celebration was planned. All the world was tuned in for this historic moment.

No one is really sure who threw the first deadly insult. History has it that the Sforzando delegate told the Pesante Representative her mate was “an obese celestar.” In Pesante, the utterance of such a phrase was punishable by death. Things went downhill from there — the comnet conference broke down and global war broke out anew; it has continued off and on ever since.

You now have two new options:

⟨6WPGBE⟩ (3 phases) See what more you can learn about the communication system.

⟨IG7ELM⟩ (3 phases) Try to find out about the tri-axis drive.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[342]

After only a few moments of battle you realize how hopeless your chances are against the battle stations. You know you could outmaneuver and outgun any five of them in a fair fight, but the satellites just won’t fight fair. The things are tougher to kill than Betelgeusian Burglar Beetles, and for every one you disable, two more seem to converge from other directions. Soon you find yourself surrounded. Your defenses can handle most of the satellites’ fire. The problem is that when so many hit you all at once you have to put so much of your power and energy into defending yourself that you can no longer counterattack. Once that happens, you’re in trouble, because they take the opportunity to gather even greater numbers. Before you know what happened, you’re fighting to flee Outpost instead of land on it.

“Har, har, har!” comes Silverbeard’s voice over the com link. “Struck yer colors, have ye? Serves you right, you greedy lubber! Go find yer own planet! Har, har, har!”

Once out of the satellites’ range, you look over the situation. It’s clear that you must find a way to attack the stations more effectively. Your defenses seem adequate, but you don’t have the offensive capability necessary to handle all of the attackers.

You realize your only solution to this problem is to upgrade your weapons system so you will have the offensive firepower to destroy the deadly ring of outer satellites. It will take some time, but you can already imagine the look on that blasted pirate’s face when you come blazing past his defenses. Yes sirree, it will be worth a little bit of time to beat Silverbeard!

First, though, you must repair the overload damage that was inflicted on your internal power systems while you were surrounded during the combat. In a safe distant orbit you complete the repairs, interrupted occasionally by new taunts from Silverbeard on the planet below.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[343]

Crater's top roboticists have been working for some time with ship design engineers to construct an interstellar remote-controlled robot ship. The idea is that interstellar robotic cargo vessels would enable Crater to engage in commerce with aliens without having to risk actual contact with them.

Such ships are useful for storing and transporting cargo. They can be used to make trades at any markets you have already visited that allow drones to participate in trade. They are also helpful in trading with other players for both items and cargo. Because of its jump engine, the drone ship only takes one turn to travel to its destination and complete its trade. In the meantime, you are free to continue on your own way with no loss of time for the additional move. The only drawback is the jump engine's lethal effect on any living organisms who are unlucky enough to be aboard. The trick, therefore, is to send only nonliving cargo.

You are very interested in the conditions of trade for such a ship and, after inquiring within, you learn the ships are available for sale.

One 3-cargo bay drone ship may be purchased here for the following:

2 Food + 1 Crystals.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[344]

The good news — you're still alive.

The bad news — some of the missiles got through.

The worst news of all — Silverbeard was watching the whole thing.

"Har, har, har!" he roars, and you think that his laugh sounds more sincere than it ever has before. "Caught ye in irons, ye scurvy rats. Har, har, that was a pretty sight, like a powder keg on a long fuse at night. Some one o' you is breathing vacuum for certain now. Har, har, har!"

You do a quick check and discover that Silverbeard is wrong: all of your ships are intact. There is no question, though, of surviving a second missile attack. When a new cluster of fast hot projectiles rises from Outpost, you flee toward the outskirts of the system until they're no longer tracking you.

Clearly, to take Outpost you'll have to be able to defend yourselves and each other from Silverbeard's missiles. After you make repairs, you'll need to improve your ship's active defensive systems before you can make another attack on Outpost.

✂ STOP ✂

[345]

Teaching the Withelians Earth Standard turns out to be very easy — you sit around and speak into the device the aliens use to translate foreign tongues into their own language. You are able to study the actual device, and find it to be well designed and highly functional.

The translator is about the size of your fist and weighs almost nothing. The circuitry inside must be extremely streamlined. The exterior of the device is a simple chrome casing. Given that chrome is the standard material for any loose equipment on Withel, you imagine this to be a matter of taste rather than function.

When you are finished, the Withelians down load the data into a common computer network. This enables virtually everyone on the planet to have access to the new language and thus communicate with you.

You now have some new options:

⟨PVBKYV⟩ (4 phases) Investigate a lead on mechanical Drones equipped with jump engines.

⟨9VDKQV⟩ (6 phases) Learn more about the translating devices the Withelians are using to speak Earth Standard.

⟨LFRI47⟩ (5 phases) Travel to the “undeveloped” continent.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[346]

You approach the poisonous world Ioreth, recalling its eerie methane atmosphere and acid oceans with some apprehension. This time you are determined to stay out of the way of the native life forms, especially needle-shooting flowers. The domed Darscian colony on the shore of the southern ocean is still there, defying the planet’s treacherous environment.

Since you now speak High Darscian, you anticipate a response when you radio the colony’s spaceport. However, like last time, there is no answer. You decide to land at the spaceport anyway, in order to talk to the Darscian colonists in person. When you disembark, you are greeted by a spaceport official.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[347]

Survey and exploration is an abysmal failure. When you take your digging equipment out into the field you are closely followed by one of the mantis creatures. Any attempt to disturb the native flora and fauna results in the alien scolding you about changing things.

When you try to mine for the minerals which your instruments show to be tantalizingly near the surface, your equipment ceases functioning before you can begin any excavation. This does not come as a surprise to you, since you have learned of the Technology Nullifier which is used by the Ascendants to disable the use of high-technology instruments.

After three singularly fruitless days of exploration, you return to your ship.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[348]

Approaching the planet in this system, you instruct your computer to run a geophysical survey as well as scan to see if it has any information in its computer banks on the world known as Moiran.

"I've got some data for you, Boss," it says, "The physical characteristics are as follows: climate, warmer than Earth; polar regions, habitable due to minimal axial tilt."

While the computer is busy scanning its memory for any historical data it might have, you take the opportunity to view the planet first hand. From space Moiran seems somewhat smaller than Earth and not nearly as pretty. The clouds look grey and the oceans have a brownish tint to them. All in all, a dirty-looking planet.

The North Pole seems to be the site of a very large complex, discernible from space as some sort of industrial works surrounded by a more typical-looking small city. The rest of the planet is well-developed, with a number of large cities. One of the largest is located in close proximity to the planet's only spaceport, which is both busy and well-equipped.

From reading the information your ship comes up with in its data banks, you learn quite a bit about Moiran. The planet was colonized during the early days of the expansion by a party of explorers searching counter to the general Core-ward trend.

The discovery of a giant cave system beneath the North Pole, capable of functioning as a magnetic pinchbottle, made the manufacture of Phase Steel possible on Moiran. For this reason, the planet rapidly came to assume an important place in interplanetary commerce, despite slow population growth.

Ultimately, however, the isolationist movement came to Earth, on the heels of the Space Plague, and Moiran's doom was sealed. Within a few decades the Space Patrol had assumed power over the consolidated eight worlds (there were only eight at that time) and erected the Boundary. Moiran, due to its distance from Earth, was excluded. Like Wellmet and the other Ghost Worlds, Moiran was soon forgotten by the in-Bounders.

Your computer hypothesizes that the Space Patrol took an active part in destroying all information within the Boundary about the Ghost Worlds, although they obviously missed some references. The computer can only guess at what actual living conditions will be like on the planet now.

Your landing proceeds without a hitch and you prepare to disembark.

"Um, Boss?" your computer asks hesitantly as you head toward the hatch.

"What is it?"

"You may want to consider using the environmental suit while you are exploring outside."

"You know how much I hate wearing that thing," you complain. "Besides, you've already said it was safe out there. Did you find something dangerous?" you ask anxiously.

"Well, no, not as such," is the cryptic reply.

"Out with it! Why do you recommend I wear the suit?" you snap, as you lose patience with this alleged paragon of logic.

"The, er, readings indicate a high concentration of sulphur in the atmosphere."

"High enough to be dangerous?"

“No, but I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

You don’t wait to hear any more of this foolishness and you head outside. . .

And run into an almost palpable wall of noxious odors. You reel for a minute as you struggle to overcome the sense of vertigo you experience from the overload on your olfactory nerves. How do these people LIVE on such a disgusting, smelly planet?

You are almost forced to return to your ship and don the environmental suit, but you convince yourself that if the inhabitants survive here, so can you. People must grow accustomed to the smell after a while.

You rapidly clear the spaceport officials (who speak a slightly accented Earth Standard) and explore the city. After several days of exploring, you do get used to the foul odor. . . sort of. . . well, not at all, but refusing to surrender to your nose, you decide to tough it out for the duration of your stay. You have the following possibilities for further action:

⟨FPIB7Y⟩ (3 phases) Visit a really dirty and disgusting part of the city where you are told the Commodities Market is located.

⟨VPKBVY⟩ (5 phases) Slog your way to the North Pole, to the home of the Moiran Metal Works, and see what you can discover regarding the availability of Phase Steel.

⟨F9ID7Q⟩ (5 phases) Stop by the decrepit-looking building that sports the sign, “Moiran Interstellar Shipyard,” where you might find worthwhile ship weapon systems and other improvements for sale.

⟨V9KDVQ⟩ (4 phases) Investigate rumors about a man called Tony the Shark, who apparently runs an illegal arms and armor business somewhere in the South End, a place your mother would certainly disapprove of.

⟨BPYB9Y⟩ (3 phases) Visit one of the “hot spots” in town, Dee’s Pleasure Palace. The less said about that place, the better.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[349]

From the outside, the Medsunians’ “museum” seems hardly worthy of the name. It looks more like a warehouse: a huge, featureless brick building with myopic windows and a single steel door. There is not even a sign to tell you you’ve found the right building.

Once inside, you change your mind.

It takes some getting used to. In fact, the inside at first reminds you even more of a warehouse than the outside did. Tens of thousands of objects are piled on hundreds of feet of dusty shelves, dimly lit by pinched skylights and hanging lamps that cast light grudgingly in no particular direction. Because of the sheer volume of material, and the dark emptiness of the museum, it takes you a few minutes to realize what you are looking at. Every single item is a masterpiece. If you were to display any object from this museum in any museum on the Nine Worlds, it would occupy the center of a spacious white sunlit gallery, or be picked out alone in a thin bright spotlight in a silent room respectfully darkened.

You are at a loss to explain what this means. Have the colonists been able to create such works simply because they’ve had time on their hands? Do the masterpieces reflect the precision and patience that the humans learned from the natives? Or are they instead works of passion, motivated by the same violent human spirit that drives others to sculpt roads in the wilderness, paint empires across the canvas of history, write poems from star to star with the quills of fire that drive the ships into the voids beyond the Boundary?

If there is an answer, it is in the works themselves. You examine the contents of one nearby alcove and try with difficulty to focus your attention on one item at a time:

... a painting of a single flower that you are certain never bloomed on Medsun, nor on the Nine Worlds, nor anywhere else in the universe, whose surreal curving petals seem to wrap like smoke over the planes of higher dimensions...

... a handmade brass astrolabe, concentric disks set in layers with convoluted openings that when turned reveal the stars visible from Medsun, inlaid with abstract spirals and ruled in precise lines that seem to whisper "far from home, so far from home" no matter how the wheels are set...

... a carving of a breaking wave frozen in time made from a lump of raw transparent blue-grey glass melted from a viewport of an early spaceship, with the lines and motion of the spaceship somehow still locked, like a solution inside a puzzle, within the crashing of the wave, the circling water, the flying spray...

... an abstract composition, black ink on white paper, of shapes that form no recognizable image or pattern when your attention is turned toward it but coalesce into a face whose features suggest wisdom beyond the ken of humankind when you look away...

... two matched human figures, sculpted as bookends from white stone, that at first seem identical until you realize that one is standing on his homeland gazing at a far shore while the other stands on the far shore looking back toward his home, the difference suggested entirely by tiny almost invisible changes in facial expression and posture, but unmistakable nonetheless...

You spend a long time inside the Museum, thinking, studying the colonists' works. Then you return to your ship.

✂ STOP ✂

[350]

"Wait just a cotton-pickin' second, boss. We aren't going back to Tretiak!"

"Yes we are," you tell your computer. "Prepare for landing."

"But the atmosphere will rot your mind and melt my circuits!"

"I've got an idea on how to stay sober. All I have to do is put my standard space suit on and I should be O.K."

"But what about me?"

You didn't think your computer had the circuitry to raise its voice.

"Close the door, and don't breathe in."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

You land manually, near the big pink lake you remember from your last visit. After donning the standard issue spacesuit, you leave the ship. The last thing you remember is thinking, "Well, I guess the seals on the suit are good enough to..."

Like WOW. Isn't this a pickle? The barrels in the stars have monkeys with which to have fun.

If you can handle it, the same options are yours for the doing.

✂ STOP ✂

[351]

You find the thrill and adventure of exploration to be the most exhilarating experience of your entire life. You cannot believe the sheer fun of exploration and you think to yourself, "This is far superior to spending hours in a small cramped room in the musty smelling Archives."

Yet you are troubled by a nagging feeling that time is running out. "Perhaps," you think, "I need to get to Cathedral as soon as possible. I won't accomplish anything until I visit that planet and follow the path the Founders took."

✂ STOP ✂

[352]

"Computer, how are we holding up?" you ask after a few tense seconds.

"Equilibrium, Boss. We're dumping the energy as fast as it comes in. We could maintain this indef. . ."

Sudden negative G forces suck you out of your chair and slam you into a panel. Your ship is instantly under thrust, heading directly away from Outpost. As you move farther from the planet, the sparkling gold nimbus around your ship slowly fades, and finally the beams disappear.

"What happened?"

"Sorry, Boss. Sudden change of conditions. All our troops had to get out of there fast, since not all of us could withstand the beams. Once we were a prime target instead of one among many, the extra beams put us into overload conditions, so we had to escape too."

"What kind of beam was it?"

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

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

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

"Can we beat it?"

"Har, har, har!" interrupts Silverbeard over the com link. "Strike yer colors and surrender! I'll be merciful. I'll just take yer ships and stow you safe on a nice quiet moon somewhere! Har, har, har!"

"We could protect ourselves from it," says the computer, "only if everyone in the formation had as good or better defenses than we do."

For the present, however, your attempt to defeat Outpost has been thwarted.

✂ STOP ✂

Crater's weapons factories are among the finest on any of the human worlds. They are supplied with abundant quantities of high-grade metals and crystals, both of which are found in high concentrations here in Crater's crust. They expend constant effort on weapons research and design, to make sure that the inhabitants of Crater are equipped to protect themselves against alien invaders. Since an up-to-date arsenal of the most advanced personal weaponry is considered a necessity for any Craterian, the weapons manufacturers are very prosperous.

The factory salesman and your guard Olarus agree that you are taking quite a risk traveling around space with such minimal personal weaponry. The salesman implores you to defend yourself better, "Buy at least something, my friend. The final war is on its way — don't let it catch you with your holster empty."

The weapons the factory can sell you and their current prices are as follows:

Stunner — 1 Culture, 1 Munitions

Hypnotic gas sprayer — 1 Food, 1 Crystals

Molecular disrupter — 1 Iron, 1 Medicine, 1 Radioactives, 1 Fuel

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

This time, as you approach Cathedral, your sensors detect no radio transmissions at all. Lacking any standard landing signals, you head for the same coordinates you landed at for your last visit. Passing over jungles of colorful ferns illuminated by sunlight refracted by the upper atmosphere into thousands of rainbows, you draw near the surface of Cathedral. Once this planet of natural beauty was the hope of a hundred different religious orders; now it is covered with the squalid ruins of abandoned settlements.

The tiny landing field groans under the weight of your ship as you touch down. Josuel of the spaceport people runs across the port to welcome you, the oversized laser at his belt slapping against his legs.

"You have for swap this time? It's fine, new traders come wheel and deal. I learn to rap in Earth Standard better than last time, no?"

"No," you agree.

Your options are the same as before.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[355]

You are thoroughly enjoying the freedom you feel as an explorer. The thrill and excitement of discovering new worlds and new civilizations — this is the life!

Except you have a nagging suspicion you are forgetting to do something very important. Hmmm. What could that something be?

Of course! You are supposed to be building a tri-axis drive. Then you'll be able to search the Galactic Arm for the origin of the Stone. Without the drive, you can't get out of the Fringe.

You think to yourself, "Gee, maybe I should do something to remedy this situation."

⌘ STOP ⌘

[356]

You emerge from hyperspace only to be greeted by the image of a dead ball of ice on your viewscreen. Dargen is really the most pitiful excuse for a world you have ever seen. You ask the computer to try and find something of interest on the planet but, as before, you come up empty.

Again you wonder why Vanessa Chang would have included this apparently desolate world on her map.

Still puzzled, you chart a course out of there.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[357]

The Riallan Iron Exchange is not a place; it is a network of computer terminals located throughout the spaceport. The Riallan transport captains use them to register delivery of cargo and make contracts for new loads. Minutes after a deal is closed, automatic cargo handlers or crews of Riallans move the goods. It takes you awhile to learn to operate the terminals yourself. You don't want to sell the wrong cargo or buy a load of quick-drying wet polyconcrete by mistake, and you can barely translate the synthesized Riallan voice instructions or puzzle out the symbols on the tactile keyboards. Eventually, with the help of locals who are probably tired of having a terminal tied up all day, you work out the procedures.

The network is called the Iron Exchange because that is the main commodity traded here. However, you quickly learn that it is against Riallan policy to buy raw iron from offworlders. A large part of the Riallan space industry is devoted to gathering iron — which is very rare in the planet's crust — from asteroids in a stellar orbital belt about two hundred million miles away. This is a very expensive and difficult way to obtain iron, but the Riallans would rather encourage the industry than depend on unreliable interstellar sources. To buy alien iron could ruin this part of their economy. You suspect that the leaders of the Ghost Worlds would react similarly if, for example, alien traders arrived offering to sell shiploads of gold.

This prohibition does not extend to metal that has been manufactured into useful products. Rialla will gladly purchase Tools or Munitions. There is also a large market for alien Culture. In exchange, the network offers Computers as follows:

3 Computers for 1 Culture,
2 Computers for 1 Tools,
1 Computers for 1 Munitions.

Riallan factories located nearby produce standard computer modules at very low cost. The Riallans, drawing on their experience with glasslike materials, have mastered the delicate techniques of photonic integrated circuitry, allowing them to make extremely fast logic elements using almost no expensive metals.

The Iron Exchange handles trading of bulk commodities only. If you are interested in ships or ship parts, you will have to negotiate directly with the shipyards or the Space Authority.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[358]

On your return to the waterworld Firthe, you radio ahead that you are arriving. When you set down on the floating ocean platform, the Firthians are waiting to greet you and ask about your travels. You tell them a few interesting stories, which they seem to enjoy.

Your options are the same as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[359]

The rivulet is flowing from the lobby of a nearby building, from a large stone basin. The basin of the material which must once have been overflowing sufficiently to create the rivulet which you slipped in, has recently been emptied. There is now no more than a small puddle of the substance in the bottom of the basin, fed by a slow drip from the ceiling above. The fluid is unmistakably Super Slip, a substance that, when rubbed on any material, provides a virtually friction-free surface. Unfortunately there is not enough left in the basin to make up a unit's worth.

You search the rest of the building for a source for the fluid, but fail to find one. In the end you decide that some sort of natural process is at work to make the stuff. Perhaps if you return here again in the future there will be enough of the material accumulated in the basin for you to collect one unit's worth.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[360]

As your drives cycle back and you slide out of hyperspace, Wellmet's sun is already lined up in the center of your viewscreen. Like the first planet you visited, Wellmet is one of the few worlds outside the Boundary whose positions are clearly documented on standard star maps. Thus, among the multitudes of stars and planets that sift through the fringe of the galaxy's spiral arm, Wellmet is easy to find. Your ship, now powered by conventional thrusters, begins to decelerate in a carefully calculated curve that will bring you to the planet at a velocity suitable for making a landing approach.

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

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

Six point seven three hours later, you are in orbit around Wellmet. From orbit, the planet looks just like Earth. It has oceans and green vegetation, though there is no evidence of any native animal life. If Wellmet had been the first planet you visited outside the Boundary, you might think that someone was out there prefabricating Earth-like worlds. In fact, Wellmet's remarkable resemblance to Earth is the chief reason it became the focal point of early space exploration and, later, a thriving nexus of interplanetary trade. Even today, after three centuries of isolation outside the Boundary, the name Wellmet is familiar to the people of the Nine Worlds.

Judging from the amount of construction, the human population of Wellmet is about fifty million. Most of the construction is concentrated in a single sprawling city on the north coast of one continent. The city covers a thousand square kilometers, and it teems with activity and traffic, but it's not a city of high towers and electrified streets. You see clusters of dwellings, factory buildings, transmission towers, and landing pads mixed indiscriminately with animal pens, cultivated fields, open rivers, and power plants. There is no single large spaceport, but instead a variety of private landing and docking facilities scattered across the town, ranging from gleaming automated cargo ports to bare concrete pads. Each facility broadcasts its own instructions and signals on different channels, leaving you in some doubt as to where you should land.

"Can you sort out that babble?" you ask the computer.

"Certainly, Boss. All of the privately owned spaceports are broadcasting their own traffic control instructions, along with conflicting claims as to which of them offers the best location and lowest rates for berthing fees. Some pads are set aside exclusively for ships in the employ of various 'Families,' or trading concerns. These are located on the safest and most efficient approach lanes, of course, and they're warning us to keep off their private property. Finally, there is a public spaceport of sorts, which charges no fees but requires that we force our way through all the other traffic to reach it."

"Forget about the private docks. Whatever they cost, we can't afford it. Can you plot an approach for the public 'port?'"

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

On the ground, a delegation of spaceport officials meets you as you disembark. They are not unfriendly, and their speech is Earth Standard that is no more heavily accented than your own. They are required to search your ship for contraband cargo. As far as you know, any cargo carried across the Boundary is contraband cargo, but the officials tell you that they care only about certain drugs, weapons, and luxury items that are subject to import duties on Wellmet. You have none of these things on board, so you relax a little. When the officials realize that you've just come through the Boundary, they quickly conclude their inspection and spend some time pointing out the better hotels and trading

agents in the area. They reassure you that the security of your ship is guaranteed in the public 'port, and they offer you any assistance you may require in adjusting to life outside the Nine Worlds.

You spend three days exploring the city (which is also named Wellmet), learning as much as you can about the planet and the people. What you find seems a series of contradictions. The people are unfailingly gracious and polite, yet a majority carry sidearms of one sort or another. Most people care more about experience and skills than titles and rank, yet whole sections of streets are off-limits to anyone who is not a member of one of the Families. Almost everyone expresses scorn or contempt for the Nine Worlds and the Boundary, but they admit that without the Boundary and the smuggling trade it generates, Wellmet would not be as prosperous a trading center as it is. The people of the Nine Worlds are referred to as "worms" — except for you, who in choosing to break out of the Boundary have earned their respect. Wellmet, you learn in the end, is a place that lives by its own rules, a gigantic frontier town where one spacer crew might gun down another for short-weighting a cargo load of Fiber, but would turn around and loan the Crystals out of their drives to a hard-luck case who needed them.

Through careful observation and conversation you identify the following options for further action on Wellmet:

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

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

⟨OVFKIV⟩ (3 phases) Learn what you can about the history of Wellmet from the records in the Wellmet Public Archives.

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

⟨KFVIK7⟩ (4 phases) Speak to experienced space traders around the port to learn what you can about navigation, exploration, and the hazards of space.

✂ STOP ✂

[361]

Your battle with the robotic ground defenses is finished, and you have won. You are now ready to examine the alien ship more thoroughly.

Approaching the alien vessel, you are awestruck by its size as well as its menacing appearance. It is huge, several hundred times the size of your ship, making you feel utterly insignificant. The shape suggests a strange alien bird of prey, midnight black and blood red. You sense it will gladly defy anything that challenges it.

Inside, you see the ship is loaded with space weapons, some of which are of a relatively familiar sort, and some the function of which you could not begin to guess. There are lasers, mines, tractor beams, disrupters, sensor jammers, shield generators, nullifiers, antimatter jets, everything. You are glad you didn't have to fight this ship in space.

The rest of the ship's systems are remarkable as well. The hull is fifteen feet thick, and made of solid phase steel. The engine is an intrinsic tri-axis drive system, made to operate in the high ambient matter density of the Galactic Arm. The navigation computer is a weird cubic thing suspended in mid-air; you wonder how it works.

A look over the bridge reveals that the aliens who built the ship must have been about seven feet in height and massively built. The seats are hard and uncomfortable, as well as much too wide and tall. The controls are made to be gripped by large claws, and require great

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Upon your return to Darscold you cannot help but spend a few moments watching the panoramic vista before you. The beautiful floating orbs that contain the Darscian cities are offset perfectly by the backdrop of the lush green of the vegetation and the clear blue waters.

What a lovely planet.

However, since you still do not speak High Darscian you have only one available option:

⟨GPEBMY⟩ (14 phases, or 7 phases with Telepathy or a Universal Translator) Hire a local instructor and have him teach you High Darscian. This option will cost one cargo unit of your choice.

✂ STOP ✂

[365]

You return to the rocky island in the middle of the steaming sea where you know Chang's shuttle to be located. You find the cave with no difficulty.

"Are you sure this volcano isn't going to erupt?" you ask your computer.

"Relatively sure, Boss. Of course, there's always the chance of a quake or a meteor shower, the planet being what it is, but. . ."

"Oh forget it, I'm going into the cave, Keep a sharp ear out for any planet quakes."

"Roger, Boss."

You approach the sinister craft, prepared for the defensive system to be fully operational. The first blast still takes you by surprise and you dive for cover. This time, you are determined to give better than you get!

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[366]

Despite your misgivings, the lure of the helmet is too strong and once again you place the device on your head.

Your mind expands outward from your body like steam rising from the surface of a warm spring, until you have merged your consciousness with the planet's and together surged out into space to embrace the entire system and all that it means. From the sun, to the planets, to their moons, to the comets in their frigid orbits, you understand it all.

But something is wrong. Something is changing in the universe, affecting the system, affecting Baphi, affecting even you in your distinctly human body. You can't say for sure what it is that's changing, but you get the feeling that it relates to your own expanding consciousness. Far across the galaxy a cosmic drummer has quickened his beat, and even the stars will change their dance. How can you hope to resist?

Awakening in your own body, you quickly pull the helmet off. The aftereffects are much stronger this time and you are sure some cerebral damage has occurred. Your coordination is unsure for a moment and your sight blurry. Fortunately, the effects correct themselves after ten minutes or so and you think about your experience. There is more to learn, you are certain, if you could only survive the alien effects. You were lucky this time, but will you be again?

Go now to the CGM.

✧ STOP ✧

[367]

When you clear away the pieces of paneling to take a closer look at the ship's three navigation controllers, you can see that they are in pretty bad shape. The impact of the crash has upset the delicate moving parts of the warp directional controller and ruined the calibration of the fixing mechanism. A fire in the suborbital controller housing has melted several of the electronics cylinders and all of the optical cabling. Only the orbital controller is even close to operational.

Normally your computer would detect all the faulty parts and tell you exactly how to go about repairing each one. Unfortunately, the melted cabling has separated the entire navigational subsystem from your computer. Without the cables, the computer can't even determine what needs to be fixed, much less tell you how to go about it.

Consequently, you have to search all over the ship to find the printed manuals that show where the cabling is supposed to go. Eventually you find the manuals, in a compartment under the auxiliary pilot's seat. You get out a supply of spare cables, shake the dust off the manuals, and start working. You make very slow progress at first, but after a while you get better acquainted with the notations in the manuals and you settle into a steady routine. It takes the rest of the day to finish installing the cables.

At night, you notice that the red and blue creatures have stopped shifting around and become still. They give off a neon-like glow that illuminates your disabled ship with an electric violet color. You eventually manage to go to sleep, but you do not sleep very soundly. When you wake in the morning, you see that the red creatures are gone. Only the blue ones remain, frozen in place.

You set back to work on your navigation system. With your computer guiding you, the rest of your task is routine, although time-consuming. You replace the broken electronics cylinders in the suborbital controller. You reset the delicate gimbels and hypergyros in the warp controller. Finally, you recalibrate the fixing mechanism according to your star charts. All three controllers are now in order.

✧ STOP ✧
