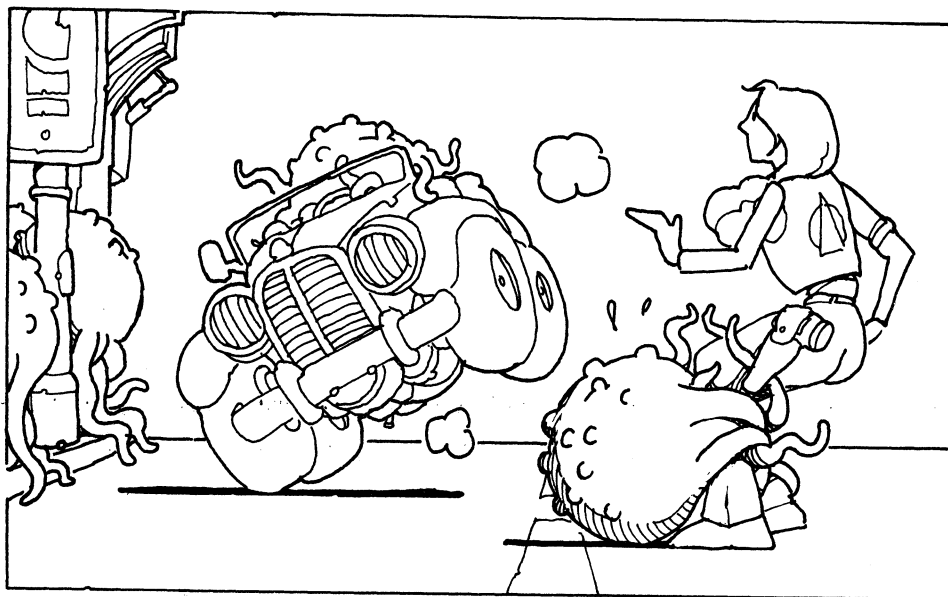


STAR SAGA: ONE™

BOOK C

TEXT 148-223



[148]

Now where were those blasted socks? You know you have another pair running around somewhere. “Running” may be the operative phrase here since you last remember wearing this particular pair for approximately two weeks before throwing them into a corner to be washed, which you don’t think you ever got around to doing.

Aha! You have all three pairs and they are not in as bad a shape as you thought, so you roll them into three balls and prepare yourself.

One, two, three, there! You have successfully gotten all three “balls” in the air and are juggling them in what you are sure is a very professional manner.

You manage to keep them in the air for at least one minute before you lose your concentration and drop one of the balls. Before you can pick it up, though, you are interrupted by your computer.

“Hey, Boss!”

“Yeah?”

“I have some information I’ve decoded from Vanessa Chang’s map. Are you ready to receive it?”

You answer in the affirmative and you learn the following:

The substance known as Warp Core, although relatively rare, can be found on the planet Fiyar.

You write this new piece of information down, then get back to more important matters, like keeping the sock balls in the air for a new record time of one and a half minutes. If you can do this, you will know you are ready for the big time.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[149]

You have defeated the Space Patrol cruiser. After wiping your sweaty palms and slowing your breathing back to a more normal rate, you scan the space you have just entered. The Nine Worlds, cradle of humanity, lies ahead. You may now plot any actions available to you here.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[150]

"I love you truly,
So mark my bill duly
Paid with the Accountant of love,
In the stars up above."

Hmmm, not bad, if you do say so yourself. You look back at the progress you have made in writing poetry, and you secretly suspect you have hidden talent in this area.

"Boss, I have some new information for you," announces your trusty ship's computer.

"What?" you ask, only half listening while you try to work out the second verse of your newest poem.

"I have discovered some new information from Vanessa Chang's map. Would you like to hear what it says?"

This time you are all ears.

"Go ahead," you order.

"The information says 'On the planet Feldo you can obtain the substance called Primordial Soup.' If I find out anything else, I will call you."

You thank the computer and spend some time thinking about this new discovery. After awhile, though, you return to the problem of the second verse.

✂ STOP ✂

[151]

You approach the chrome doors that lead into the Lateral Liaison section of Para Para's vast underground metropolis. There are no guards but you see that the door is equipped with an elaborate alarm system.

The entrance to this inner sanctum appears to have some constant electronic surveillance, and the door itself is made strictly with function, not form, in mind. Its smooth black surface is accented with tiny red points of light that move in geometric patterns. Frankly, the door looks like a computer, which means that you should be able to disrupt its functioning somehow.

Looking around, you can see that you seem to be here during the work force's "off hours," as there aren't many people around. This leads you to think you may have a chance at forcing your way inside the sector and learning potentially valuable information. You quickly take stock of your equipment and decide to attempt to disarm the door alarm.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[152]

While traveling through hyperspace, you worry that if you don't build a Super Space Suit soon, time may run out for you. You need the Suit to enter the captain's quarters on FLN-1. You don't want someone else — especially whoever built the asteroid-spaceship — to beat you to it.

You shiver and rub the goosebumps on your arm.

✂ STOP ✂

[153]

When you go to the docks and ask for the Bridger a small woman approaches you. You tell her you are interested in trying to run the Boundary for the Lanza smuggling mission.

"The run is cold, no paks to fly right now." the small woman tells you.

Disappointed, you turn to leave.

"Maybe you come back later when it will be hot again." she calls after you.

It's something for you to think about, anyway.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[154]

You would have made Julia Child proud. Out of 1 Synthetic Genius and one unit each of Culture, Computers, and Tools, you succeed in building your very own Universal Translator. You will now have a much easier time learning to communicate with aliens.

Congratulations!

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

✂ STOP ✂

[155]

Walking around one of the larger lakes in the area, you come upon a broad gently-sloping meadow covered with violet flowers whose scent makes you feel giddy. You look closely at the flowers and notice that each bloom holds a few spoonfuls of a reddish nectar in its tightly cupped petals.

Returning to your ship, you analyze the liquid, curious as to whether its scent is really an intoxicant or just an intensely pleasant aroma. According to the ship's med unit, the nectar contains substantial concentrations of over thirty different commonly used drugs, including difficult-to-manufacture antiviral agents and enkephalin analogues.

Collecting large amounts of the nectar is not easy. Tipping over each bloom and collecting the small amount within is a very slow process, but every automated method you try fails to capture the liquid without contaminating it. Fortunately you don't need very much, because when you mix the drugs with the necessary stabilizer compounds (which you derive from starches extracted from the food plants), the nectar is diluted substantially. The end result of this process is one cargo unit of Medicine. You search for other fields of the violet flowers, but although you find individual blooms here and there in other locations, there are no other places with enough of the flowers to profitably harvest.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[156]

You are using all of your skill to keep your ship in one piece. It does not please you when the computer sounds the alarm, signaling the coming of a storm. You cannot even begin to imagine what conditions would constitute a storm in these nether regions. You use the few seconds you have to batten everything down, including yourself.

You clench the armrests tightly, knuckles white, palms sweaty, awaiting the oncoming turbulence. A small voice inside you asks the ever crucial question, "How much more abuse can the ship handle?"

You tell the voice to shush. It can just wait quietly with the rest of you to see what will happen.

Then the storm hits.

You thought you were pretty hot stuff keeping the ship together before? That was child's play compared to this.

Alarms are going off all over the ship warning of impending breaches of the hull. You can do nothing except hold tight and keep your eyes closed. What you can't see won't hurt you, right?

Your ship is being dragged down into even deeper regions of the planet. You KNOW that is not a good idea but there is nothing you can do to prevent being pulled under.

The ship is protesting even more vehemently than before. All you can do is keep your fingers crossed and pray for the storm to abate.

Days pass and gradually the winds ease, relatively speaking of course. You are able to bring the ship up to the quieter levels and effect repairs, which take four extra days; this option has therefore taken eight phases instead of four.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[157]

Because the Red Squirrellies are infiltrating the mountain range and claiming all chitterbang excavation sites as their own, the Blues are forced to travel in armed expeditions to the mountains.

Your tutor asks the leader of the group if you might accompany them in their next trip so you could get first hand experience in the mining of chitterbang.

The leader, whose name is Roc-orchee-twicle-gluck, (you call her Rocky), readily agrees.

After a few days of tramping through the forest, you are rapidly becoming disenchanted with this world. Despite your suit's compensating effects, the high gravity of Ethnar is beginning to tell on your health. You find it more and more difficult to rise after each rest stop. You have no idea how the little Squirrels manage to live here.

The only bright spot of the expedition is the information you are accumulating from the natives. Rocky is very talkative and tells you a lot about Ethnar, chitterbang, and the Squirrellies.

The rock you are going to mine is credited by the Squirrellies with many positive physical and medicinal attributes. Many aliens come from outer space seeking chitterbang; in fact, Rocky believes the Squirrellies were put on Ethnar by the gods solely to excavate chitterbang and trade with offworld visitors.

You are intrigued by this view and question Rocky a bit more on the subject. She has no reluctance to telling you the history of her race. You find the story she tells you utterly fascinating.

Many years ago the Squirrellies were a spacefaring race who were just beginning to explore the planets outside of their solar system. There they ran into the gods who were not well pleased with the Squirrellies leaving their allotted space in the universe. As a punishment the gods relocated the Squirrellies onto this inhospitable world and told them to dedicate their lives to mining and refining chitterbang.

Since the high radiation affected all high-technology devices the Squirrellies were trapped on the planet. So they made the best of the situation and spent their lives doing as the gods had directed.

Occasionally other alien visitors would land on Ethnar and the Squirrellies would gladly trade with them. There were many technological uses the ore could be put to, including space travel and some mystical medicinal value that you don't quite understand.

The Ethnarians benefited from this exchange and were happy with their circumstances. Except for the Red Squirrellies, who felt all of the chitterbang should be kept for the gods. This was the reason for their war.

You reach the mountains later that day. From the readings of the Chief Excavator's device (looking basically like a magnetic compass to you), the team seems to have found a rich vein of chitterbang.

Rocky directs setting up camp and you prepare for sleep. It will be a busy day tomorrow.

As you drift off to sleep you hear the fireside chittering of your hosts. It mostly consists of the stories and legends about how the gods brought them to Ethnar. You fall asleep wondering if it could possibly be true.

You wake up the next morning feeling very refreshed. Hmmm. Maybe some of what was said about chitterbang was true after all. You feel the best you ever have on this forsaken planet.

You spend the morning helping with the digging. Because you are so big and clumsy you soon find that you have the pit to yourself while the others are busy hauling away dirt and digging other pits.

Noontime arrives and you're just about to ask to be pulled up for lunch when you hear this wild commotion. There is all kinds of whistling and chittering, some of which you decipher to mean "evil blue-tunicked fiends," "most nasty of our hereditary enemies," and "your brother eats prune-like vegetation." It really is hard to understand all of the colloquialisms.

You are just coming to the realization that your party is being attacked when you are deluged from above with a pile of loose dirt followed by a large weight that knocks you off your feet.

You are not sure who is more surprised - you, or the Red Squirrellie who has fallen into your pit. It is not something you long dwell upon because he jumps to his furry little feet and attacks you.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[158]

You break out of hyperspace en route to Hootenaller, and not a minute too soon. You like the feeling of flying free in normal space, but being in hyperspace doesn't feel like that. It feels more like you've been buried alive in your ship. Your head is pounding. You are groping around in the supply bins of your medical unit for an analgesic pill when the computer's irritating artificial voice comes over the intercoms.

"Boss," it says. "Do you remember last time we were in this sector, and I mentioned that the value of pi was a little off?"

"Don't tell me," you reply. "It's wrong again."

"Yes, as a matter of fact. . ."

"Listen, you Boolean nightmare. I've just spent half the day jammed up your access tubes calibrating some stupid backup sensor that you could probably do just as well without, so don't tell me you're getting strange readings."

"No," the machine explains, "the sensors are fine. The anomaly is in the curvature of space in this sector."

"Well, we're not turning around. I want to go to Hootenaller; I need some relaxation. Go around the curved space if you have to."

"Hootenaller is within the anomalous zone, so that would not be possible. However, there is no real hazard that would necessitate altering course."

"Then why did you interrupt a good headache to bother me with all this? I know that pi is higher than normal here. It was like that before and it didn't make any difference."

"The value of pi is lower than normal this time."

"And. . . ?"

"That's it, Boss. I have no explanation. I don't know what it means."

"Can you get us to Hootenaller without getting lost?"

"Yes. Its star is straight ahead."

"Then concentrate on that. Wake me up when we land. I'm going to try to get some sleep. Hootenaller — what kind of stupid name for a planet is that, anyway?"

You are awakened by an unfamiliar sense of motion. The ship is pitching and lurching in a strange manner. You punch the computer link. “What’s wrong?”

“Atmospheric turbulence. We’re landing on Hootenaller. It seems to have changed since our last landing.”

“Changed how?”

“Everything. Temperature, atmosphere, vegetation. . . even the gravity is different. I can’t explain it.”

“I can, you semi-intelligent semiconductor. You’ve got the wrong planet.”

“Not possible, Boss. The position is correct, and it’s definitely the same star.”

“Why did you enter the atmosphere without telling me?”

“You told me to wake you up when we landed. . . .”

“I meant when we were about to land,” you snap. What could have happened to your perfect planet? “Do you have new survey readouts?”

The planet has the same diameter, rotation period, axial tilt, and stellar orbit that it had before. Almost everything else is different. The atmosphere is barely ten percent oxygen, breathable but not as good as even the worst bottled air. The atmosphere also seems to be about twenty degrees colder, and much more turbulent. Heavy rains pour down over half the land surface, and the ground water flows in thundering rivers and inundates the flatter lowlands. Most of the plant life is gone from all but the most sheltered valleys. Strangest of all, the surface gravity has changed. It is about one and a half times Earth normal, almost double what it was before.

Since you are already halfway down you decide to complete the landing sequence, tracking by instruments in the near-zero visibility. The landing feels like you’ve set down on a pile of scrambled eggs. As your drives shut down, the whole ship settles alarmingly, tilting to starboard, then sliding a few yards in that direction.

“What did we land on, quicksand?”

“Negative. All sensors show solid ground. There is a slight incline, but that makes it safer from floods. It seems the surface is a bit slippery.”

You soon learn that it’s covered with a wet snow that turns to muddy slush under your feet. The air is uncomfortably cold and it is raining. You should probably be wearing your environmental suit, but the instruments show the air is safe to breathe, and you so rarely get to go without the suit that it’s probably worth the discomfort.

You look around for some clue to what may have caused Hootenaller to change so much. You immediately get a peculiar impression. The planet looks different, but it doesn’t really look like it’s undergone a change — that is, it looks like it’s been the way it is for thousands of years. The plants seem to be specifically adapted for the environment and gravity, the river channels are well-worn, and the flood plains look like established flood plains, not the recently-inundated forests you expected to find.

The vegetation still provides an abundant supply of food, and like before there are no detectable toxins. However, most of it doesn’t taste very good. In fact, all of it tastes pretty bad. This won’t affect its market value, since most Food gets reprocessed anyway, but it is disappointing. Your options for further action on Hootenaller are the same as before, but none of them look anywhere near as enjoyable:

(MHNAJ6) (4 phases) Gather Food for cargo.

(6HPAB6) (3 phases) Relax quietly and ponder the problem of why and how Hootenaller changed so much so quickly.

(MXNCJU) (5 phases) Explore more of the planet’s surface.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[159]

After much effort you complete a prototype stress field weapon and install it on your ship. Congratulations.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[160]

Gathering Food is the type of simple, basic manual activity that spacers like yourself need to spend time doing now and then to maintain a proper perspective and trim off those extra pounds you put on just sitting around in hyperspace. In four days, you have gathered a full cargo bay full of Food. It would take you less time, but you keep stopping to look at the scenery and nibble on your prospective cargo.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[161]

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 goal, finding Silverbeard's base.

Thinking about your next step, you remember Dr. Schottky's advice to investigate the planet Outpost. There may be clues there that can help you find Silverbeard's base.

With this in mind, you happily return to practicing the latest bird call you heard while on a recently visited planet. You call it "The joyous cry of the Lesser BruBru bird." With your hands correctly positioned around your mouth, you begin, "BrahBlahSnorgleSnorgle."

Yes, you have to admit, you really ARE getting good!

✂ STOP ✂

[162]

You fight the animated plant with stinging insects for quite a while, but you are unable to harm it. Fortunately, it is unable to hurt you either. When you see two more of the gooey brown and green creatures slowly approaching from the right, you decide you better make it back to your ship while you still can. Frustrated, you take off and head back to the domed city.

✂ STOP ✂

[163]

The monster may be huge, but it is a bit on the slow and lumbering side. Your quick reflexes and your weapon are just enough to turn the tide in your favor. You are relieved when the creature heads off into the swamp.

The remainder of the trip is uneventful and you soon find yourself at Strangways' lab. The door is ajar so you knock politely (Mom would be proud of you) and enter.

The alien is at the control panel but rises as you approach. Strangways expresses pleasure at your visit and asks about your trip.

You relate your adventure, keeping the heroics to a minimum since you are the modest sort, and ask about the availability of Primordial Soup.

You are lucky enough to have arrived right at the end of the production cycle.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[164]

As you approach the planet Ethnar, you call up the available data from the computer. The readout has some interesting information.

Earth detected the planet you are now orbiting long before the age of space flight. No one ever explored Ethnar, though, because of some peculiar planetary conditions, as well as the distance from your home world.

Although Earth-normal in most respects, Ethnar has an extremely high gravity and an inhospitably high radiation count. Early explorers from Earth never attempted landing because their equipment wasn't able to protect them from these conditions. Your equipment is more advanced than theirs so you have no real concerns about landing and exploring the planet.

You are puzzled by the fact that there is nothing in the planet's composition to account for its high gravity. Another little problem you encounter as you land is the annoying tendency of your instruments to fluctuate so wildly as you approach the planet that all of your instrument readings are hopelessly jumbled. The last clear data you get show signs of civilization near the center of the largest continent.

You've always liked the thrill of a manual landing but you don't often indulge yourself and as a result, you feel a bit rusty on some of the required skills. This is your big moment. If you make the tiniest mistake, your entire ship will explode into a burning inferno.

Try not to think about it too much; you'll only be distracted.

Beads of sweat appear on your brow as you aim for the center of the largest continent. The speed of your descent increases far too rapidly because of the high gravity. You struggle to compensate.

The screen shows a flat area of land where you'll be able to land your ship safely. As you touch down, you breathe a heavy sigh of relief.

You don your protective suit and head out to do some exploring.

There appear to be two ways of exploring this planet:

⟨HPAB6Y⟩ (3 phases) Avoid natives and explore on your own.

⟨XPCBUY⟩ (14 phases; 7 phases if you are telepathic) Search out the natives and learn their language.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[165]

The tedium of traveling through what is essentially an empty void begins to get to you. You have learned one way to overcome boredom and you call up one of your favorite books, “The Encyclopedia of Exciting Explorers” and cheerfully start at volume one for a few good hours of reading.

Several hours pass before you pause in your perusal. Something you have just read has been bothering you, and you go back a few pages to reread the last chapter.

There it is, a notation that connects the planet Arthlan with high radiation. Very interesting — you make a note to remember this when you are next in the market for Radioactives.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[166]

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.

[167]

You were right about the lost opportunities for research caused by the presence of the Boundary, and you have all of the proof you need to convince your colleagues.

“So why am I still out here?” you wonder. At this very moment someone might be publishing similar findings and making your work unnecessary. Hmmm. Maybe you should head back to the Nine Worlds and try to get your work published.

Of course, you do have the Space Patrol to deal with before you can make it through the Boundary. That’s no small obstacle to overcome. Is your ship strong enough? There’s only one way to find out.

✂ STOP ✂

[168]

Here you are, in the heart of the maelstrom, searching for a ballgame. Mom always said too much stress could do things to your mind.

Anyway, you have the ship’s computer set to look for the giant baseball players and their interesting ball. After a few days, your diligence is rewarded. Just ahead are three of the creatures, and yes, they are playing catch.

You have come up with a plan to extract the precious ball from these sportsnuts. Digging the mini-probe out from mothballs, you reprogram its computer. Chuckling to yourself, you place it in the airlock, then send it out to play.

You hold your breath, as you watch the drama unfold.

The pyramids don’t pay much attention to your probe at first. They must be used to flotsam flying by, now and again. When the probe intercepts a pass, though, all eyes (so to speak) are on the robot.

Being the clever person that you are, you do not intend to rile these creatures by stealing their ball, at least not right away. The probe throws the ball to the nearest pyramid and the game is on. They seem to accept this new player and send it the ball now and then. Since there is no telling when one of the others will decide to eat the ball and leave, you must make the first move.

When you feel the time is right, you signal the robot to insert the rock into one of its sample panels and speed off, away from your ship. This is in case the pyramids don’t take kindly to their ball being eaten by a foreigner.

As the probe is darting off, you watch the reaction of the pyramids. They stand still for a moment, perhaps to see if their new friend will return with their ball, then leave when it doesn’t. Easy.

You recall the probe and find you have enough raw ore to extract one unit of warp core. Congratulations!

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

✂ STOP ✂

[169]

Life beyond the Boundary is more thrilling than you could have ever imagined. The adventures and excitement you have experienced out here have been the best of your entire life.

The only problem is that you have none of the three improvements you need for your Dream Ship: no photon torpedos, no tractor beam, and no shield generator. Building your ship is the reason you came out here in the first place, and you feel guilty that you have let it slide to a low priority on your list of "Things To Accomplish."

Maybe, even at this very moment, some low-life smuggler is selling the information you are risking your life for to your former employer, S.T. Enterprises. If that ever happened, how would you be able to bargain your way back into their good graces and have them build a fleet of Dream Ships?

"Yes sirree," you think to yourself, "I really ought to be working on getting those ship improvements."

✂ STOP ✂

[170]

The familiar corridor again leads you to the chamber in which the young blue-eyed cleric sits, alone in this room, but just one player on the galactic stage.

This momentary perspective vanishes as the hooded figure rises and once again begins to recite The Dialogue.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[171]

The market place is pleasant and reminds you of an open-air market back on Earth. Everywhere you look people are laughing and having a great time haggling and hawking their wares. Everywhere except where the occasional dark-robed figure appears. Then everyone becomes quiet and subdued. You're not sure if this is due to fear of or respect for the mysterious figures.

You soon find out that "Culture" is Gen's prime commodity and is available for trade if you have any of the following:

- 2 Cultures for 1 Computers,
- 2 Cultures for 1 Fiber,
- 3 Cultures for 1 Fluids.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[172]

Gazan is a fiery world in the midst of a fiery nebula. A burning orange when viewed from space through the clouds of cosmic dust, a closeup view portrays the planet as a spicy patchwork of purple seas and yellow lands — painted in the dusky tones of a hundred suns-to-be. Your ship has weaved its way through the clouds and the asteroids, past the comets and the moons, and hesitates now, caught in a low and decaying orbit, resisting the seductive pull of a planet twice the size of mother Earth while you struggle to lay a course for the planet's single spaceport. Your ship's computer, blinded by the astronomical conditions and boggled by the forces at work on Gazan's orbit, is useless to you now. You must guide the ship down its landing path yourself, at the whim of the dust and the winds of the upper atmosphere, towards a faint and inconstant beacon on the limits of your sensory range, while all around you the galaxy is contracting and exploding and silently burning, a light show to end all light shows.

On the ground beneath, the landscape passes by. Civilization alternates with wilderness, cultivation with unchecked growth. The cities are made of floating bubbles, cast by the somber light into sinister shades of violet and orange, tethered by cables to the ground beneath, and looking more akin to the fruits of death which are said to grow beside the dusty paths of the Land of Shadow than to the products of any living sentence. The inhabitants — four-armed incubi with fur of blazing gold — seem cast to match their violent land, and all the more sinister in that their activities seem to be only the most natural possible, as if completely oblivious to the cosmic catastrophes at work in space all around them.

The spaceport at long last appears in your forward viewing screens, its modernistic towers looking like so many rock-carved freaks of nature when lit from behind by the flaming orange sky. You land your ship, and then carefully prepare yourself with a breathing mask for your first steps across the surface; surely no man can survive unaided on Gazan without benefit of his machines.

You are greeted at the door of your ship by a four-armed being with golden fur, whom you immediately recognize as being a Darscian. You greet him in his own language, and rapidly make arrangements for the berthing of your ship. Part of the standard spaceport services, you learn, is an instruction program for your navigational computer which will allow you to enter and leave the space around Gazan more easily in the future.

✧ STOP ✧

[173]

You feel in the mood for a really good book, so you go to the computer and have it call up a copy of your favorite adventure, "Sigourney Rambeaux: Autobiography of a Real Time Explorer."

You settle back in your chair and prepare to enjoy several days of reading pleasure. During this time, you learn the following:

There is a planet by the name of Darscold that Sigourney discovered many years ago. She didn't provide any useful information about the planet except that it was a good source of Synthetic Genius.

You are always interested in learning new things, and you make a note of the name of this world for future reference.

✧ STOP ✧

[174]

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, but, using the experience you gained from your earlier visit, you manage to dodge it and land on the planet.

You have the same options as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[175]

You plunge right in, narrowly avoiding a marshmallow, and soon find yourself floating serenely in the depths of a liquid that is both warm and supportive. Thinking pleasant thoughts of returning to the womb and forgetting all this, you gradually let your body disconnect completely from your mind, (which has already done a pretty good job of disconnecting from itself), and drift into sleep.

Soon, you awaken and find yourself floating on a marshmallow with one hand trailing in the PINK LAKE. If you were not so much in an altered state, what you see as you look down at your hand would give you a heart attack. As it is, you calmly note that your hand appears to have been severed from your wrist.

No big deal, you have always admired Captain Hook. Now is your chance to emulate the dastardly pirate.

Your nose itches so you pull your hand from the LAKE and attempt to scratch your face with what's left of your arm, only you poke yourself in the eye with your finger. Far out!

It turns out your hand hasn't seceded from your body after all. It was only hiding in the liquid.

Neat-o.

Dolphins fly up from Miami to visit you and you soon forget your earlier scare.

✂ STOP ✂

[176]

The planet is called Arthlan, and it seems to want to play hide-and-seek. Even after you have located its primary, right near the coordinates listed on your star map, it takes you and your ship's sensors several hours to find the planet. The problem is that Arthlan's star is actually a triple star, three suns of different colors and masses orbiting one another around a common center of gravity. To make things even more difficult, the planet's orbit is highly eccentric, more like a comet's than a planet's. The orbit brings the planet close to one star one "year," closer to another the next, and far away from all three in between.

Needless to say, Arthlan's surface is not a pleasant place, even though the planet's elemental composition is similar to that of Earth. There is no trace of surface water, although many of the large open areas closely resemble dry sea beds, suggesting that there once were oceans. The atmosphere is thin and has a normal nitrogen-oxygen mixture, but is clouded with dust from windstorms and volcanic eruptions. It is also highly radioactive. There are two factors contributing to the high ambient level: a low-level radioactivity that seems to come from the entire surface of the planet, and intense emissions from short-lived isotopes centering on one land mass and spread across the upper atmosphere as windborne dust.

Volcanic activity is evident everywhere on the surface, except for the poles, and is violent in many places. There are eruptions of gases, ash, and magma in progress at several volcanic sites even as you watch. Under infrared scanning, the erupting volcanoes and underground hot spots appear as vivid inflamed wounds on Arthlan's crust. The only evidence of unusual mineral materials you can find is one metallic outcropping near the base of one of the larger volcanoes, which could represent a recent meteor impact or possibly a shipwreck.

You spend two days surveying the planet from space before deciding it is safe enough to land. In that time you are able to create a reasonable computer simulation of Arthlan's orbit. Because of the movements of the three suns, the planet is subject to different gravitational influences each time it comes near apogee, which alters the shape of the next orbit. You run the simulation forward and backward, and the results are a mystery. You cannot accurately predict the planet's position beyond five or ten solar years from now; the system is so chaotic that even the tiny amount of inaccuracy in your sensor measurements can add up to a huge difference in the projected position after a few orbits. Even so, the orbit is clearly unstable. The inner reaches of the orbit pass much too close to the suns. Within a few dozen orbits, chances are that Arthlan will fall into one of its three primaries. You can't tell exactly when, but the planet is clearly doomed.

This presents a problem. If the orbit is as unstable as it looks, then Arthlan should have fallen into a star long ago. The only possibility, unlikely as it seems, is that something has perturbed the planet's orbit very recently — that is, sometime between ten years ago and yesterday. You scan the rest of the system for any sign of another body that may have passed close to Arthlan within this time period, but there is none. There are some outer planets in the system, but they are conventional gas giants and have normal, nearly-circular orbits well out of Arthlan's way.

Closer scanning of the planet's surface reveals a striking geological feature that may provide an explanation. It is a group of six craters spread over one side of the planet. Each crater is almost one hundred kilometers in diameter, and they are about five hundred kilometers apart. Five of them are very old and weathered, filled in with at least several thousand years' worth of debris and volcanic rock until only the outer rims are visible. The sixth is new — so new that your instruments can easily detect the residual heat from whatever formed the crater. The craters look like they could be very large meteor impacts, but their pattern is too regular. The centers of the six craters form six points of a perfect hexagon. It takes you only a moment to discover that the new crater also marks the center of the zone of most intense radioactivity.

You choose a relatively calm landing site near the equator, far away from the craters, where there are no nearby volcanoes and the dust storms are less frequent. When you explore outside you find that the temperature is moderate, though the breathing apparatus and the bulky radiation suit you are forced to wear make that a moot point.

Not surprisingly, you find no signs of any indigenous life. However, when you confirm this impression on your computer, the machine suggests that there was probably life here in the past. Otherwise there would be no oxygen in the atmosphere. Barring unusual crustal chemical processes, for which there is no evidence, free oxygen in a planet's atmosphere usually occurs only as a by-product of photosynthesis by plants.

Your orbital survey and ground exploration have established the following possibilities for further investigation:

⟨HGAE6M⟩ (3 phases) Mine radioactive ore from the planet's crust.

⟨XGCEUM⟩ (3 phases) Explore the giant craters and attempt to find out what caused them.

⟨XWCGUE⟩ (3 phases) Study the planet to find the cause of the intense volcanism and the significance of the erratic orbit.

⟨DGQE8M⟩ (5 phases) Investigate the metallic outcropping you saw from space.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[177]

The Institute for Space Exploration has a ship headed home, and it is passing right by you. You hail the vessel and are rewarded by an answer.

You introduce yourself to the crew and learn they have just returned from the planet Baphi, where they acquired the plans for building a Ship Shield Generator.

They cannot stop and talk with you, but you do not mind. They have given you a very important piece of information, of which you make a note.

Waving to them, you wish them a speedy and safe trip.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[178]

You report to Dr. Schottky's office with a power cart containing the twisted hunks of metal that are the only souvenirs of your last battle with Silverbeard.

Dr. Schottky is not in the office when you come in, but he arrives a few minutes later after being summoned by his staff. His lab coat is askew and he is huffing and puffing like an asteroid tug. He looks at you and at the pile of steel on the cart. You watch the gears turn behind his eyes and a look of intense disappointment comes over his face.

"The ship! I told you to bring back his ship!"

"Look, is it my fault the old lunatic decided to set a self-destruct device before I could stop him?"

"No, no, I suppose not," he mumbles, turning to look at the wreckage. "Interesting," he says. "This looks like it could be the reaction chamber from the drive's core. Hmmm. . ." He gets down on his hands and knees and peers at each piece, making comments to himself the entire time. "Are these segments of signal-analysis computers? Very interesting indeed." He looks more cheerful already.

After a thorough investigation, Dr. Schottky straightens up. "Perhaps this isn't a total loss after all. I don't suppose you've managed to bring back any of his cells?"

"Cells?" you ask incredulously. "Why in the world would you want any of his cells? Look, he's out of the way and is no longer a threat to innocent explorers. What else do you want from me?"

"Well," he answers you while reaching for his tools. He begins to tinker with the wreckage and continues, "We thought an analysis of his genetic make-up would reveal whether or not Silverbeard was as old as the stories say he was. As preposterous as it sounds, reports of piratical activity attributed to Silverbeard continue back through historical records of the past two hundred seventy-nine years. Of course it might not be the same person in these accounts, but if it is, the implications for biogenetic research would be tremendous."

Schottky is so preoccupied with the remains of the ship that he doesn't seem to be aware of his rambling. You get the feeling that some of this information would normally be classified and not available to the likes of you.

"I am sorry I didn't bring any of his cells back with me, but I think he was still using them when last we met." You tell the good Doctor the story of Silverbeard's escape.

"I knew it!" Schottky cries. "A base. He must have escaped to a secret base on some planet or asteroid. Did you get a fix on that large piece of wreckage you saw flying off? It just may have been an escape pod!"

You tell him the "pod" seemed to be headed inward toward the spiral arm but you couldn't tell if that was a planned direction or merely the easiest course to take given the circumstances. He clucks his tongue and reaches for more tools, going to work on the largest piece of ship.

He seems to be so engrossed with his work that you hesitate to interrupt with more mundane matters.

"Um, Doctor?" you ask. "Before you get too wrapped up with this, I think we should discuss our deal. You said something about a tri-axis drive?"

"Oh, that. I'm afraid it blew up."

"What!"

"And we were so sure it would work, too. Good thing we ran that last test before giving it to you."

"Are you double-crossing me? Because if you are, I warn you. . ."

"Calm down, Captain. We bargained in good faith, I was sure we could deliver our end of the deal when the time came. We are very close to having a working model and we have learned some really valuable lessons. Unfortunately we are basically back to square one."

Seeing the look on your face, Schottky hastens to add, "We know, for example, that one of these is absolutely essential to make the drive work." He reaches into his desk and takes out . . . the most beautiful thing you have seen in your entire life. It is a perfect gem about the size of your fist. The brilliant reds and oranges flash at you from the perfect facets of the jewel and you feel yourself drawn into the alluring depths of the treasure. You can almost feel the power of the engines for which this jewel would focus the energy throbbing in your veins. You momentarily forget to breathe as you stare in wonder at the object in Schottky's hand.

"A Flame Jewel," you hear the doctor tell you. "With one of these, your tri-axis drive is just a matter of a little time and effort. I am unable to keep the whole bargain, but I will at least be able to give you the Flame Jewel."

You manage to tear your gaze away from the gem. "The deal was for the entire drive," you angrily remind him.

"Ah, but you didn't bring back Silverbeard's entire ship, did you? I am sure his ship had a drive you could have taken. Besides, we have more important concerns, namely finding the pirate's base. You must start at once."

"No deal, I did my job already."

"Of course, so now you are looking for a new one. Think about it. We still need the man's cells to do the study and find out the real truth behind the stories of immortality. And for you, his base must have all kinds of valuable data from historical records to exploration maps beyond our sector of space. The alien artifacts stashed there alone should make it worth your while. Maybe there are even more Flame Jewels hidden there."

The idea is very tempting to you. You need a new job to keep you out of trouble, and you really haven't completed your old job, not while the pirate is still running around loose. He could very easily get another ship and start terrorizing unwary explorers all over again. Yes, you really feel obligated to find Silverbeard and bring him to justice.

"All right," you agree, "but I'll need to know where to start looking."

Schotky picks up a hunk of twisted metal. "There's very little to go on here," he says ruefully. "All the computer data is gone from what I think is the remnants of the ship's computer banks. We could try microscopic reconstruction of the memory elements, but that could take months. However, our intelligence reports suggest that he may be using, or have used at some time, the planet Outpost as a base. We know that Vanessa Chang had used Outpost as sort of a way station during her exploration of the galactic Arm, so perhaps there are some built-in facilities available for space travelers there. It is located somewhere just beyond the fringe so you will need to have a working model of the Tri-Axis Drive or you won't be able to get there.

"Other than that, all I can say is to search where you last saw Silverbeard. You know him as well as anyone alive right now. Think where you would be if you were he. If he is insane, all the better. Madmen are very predictable."

You take your treasure and prepare to leave. Before you go, however, you notice the wreckage you brought in is now covered with dozens of lab assistants. If you knew they were going to examine the pieces that closely, you might not have used them for weight training all the way to Para-Para.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[179]

Try as you might, you just can't get past the monster's defenses. Fortunately it can't get past yours either. It looks like a Mexican standoff.

Rather than waste any more time here you return to your ship. That was an exciting 5 days.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[180]

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 members of an alien race known as Darscians and have the characteristic four arms, two legs, broad, flattened head, and golden fur of their people.

Since you do not yet speak High Darscian (the prevailing language here), your first action after landing is to look into ways to learn it. Only one clear choice presents itself:

(EOMFNI) (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 you one cargo unit of your choice.

❖ STOP ❖

[181]

You whistle for your ship, but nothing happens. You try to make a note to yourself to have the ship sent to obedience school when you get back home.

Looking around a bit, you finally find your ship a few feet to the left of where you're standing, disguised by the little green men to look just like a huge hot fudge sundae. Opening up the cherry, you stagger inside, and immediately everything changes.

For one thing, you can now think straight. For another, you have the most incredible migraine headache you have ever, in all your life, experienced. It feels as if someone were slowly driving a gigantic wedge of ice-cold, salted cement into your brain. Before giving in to the pain and collapsing in a disarticulated heap in your quarters, you manage to do two intelligent things. First, you seal the ship's door. Second, you disconnect by hand all of your computer's external sensors, which seems to give it a headache every bit as bad as yours. When you have done these things you collapse.

Several days later, when your head is merely throbbing, you take off. The time needed for recovery has delayed your takeoff by six phases.

❖ STOP ❖

[182]

After speaking with several Darscian scientists and doing some investigating of your own, you learn quite a bit about their mass and inertia technology.

Since their home world has always been incredibly overpopulated, the Darscians have been colonizing wherever they could. They were hampered by two phenomena. First, most of the inhabitable worlds in the galaxy have already been taken by other races, either through birth or colonization. Second, the Darscians are completely nonaggressive and have no chance at competing for the remainder of the good colonizing planets. So, the inventive race decided to opt for colonizing worlds other races wouldn't look at twice. Like a belt of asteroids.

When the Darscians first landed on Jaquar, they were as adversely affected by zero gravity as humans would be, but, in order to make the weightless asteroids a viable colony, they worked hard on a means to overcome the ill effects.

They discovered a field generator that projected a sphere of influence which acted on bodies outside the sphere as if the body inside the sphere had no mass. Ergo the ease of maneuverability. At the same time, the body inside the sphere felt as if there was one gravity acting upon it, so the debilitating effects of zero gravity were not present. The end result was a device that allowed the user to change speed and direction with no adverse reactions upon their own body. It is not uncommon to see a Darscian flying through space at great speeds and make ninety degree turns with just the flip of a switch. What a fabulous concept!

While you are doing this research, you make quite an impression on the local Darscians. Although you are not exactly clumsy in your efforts to get from one place to another, you ain't very graceful either.

One Darscian, whose name you never caught, feels some compassion for you, because she offers you a spare Mass & Inertia Control Belt she has with her, and you graciously accept.

You spend the next several days flying in sheer delight.

Go now to the CGM.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[183]

Silverbeard's stockpiles still contain plenty of all the basic commodity materials. You can choose what you like and load it on your ship. Go now to the CGM. You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[184]

Atop the highest city tower, with a photograph of the next-to-last wall picture in your hand, you are able to locate the tower where the scientist was shown making some great discovery. You get lost a couple of times in the streets of the city, while making your way on foot (this place is worse even than New Boston), but eventually you arrive. Several minutes later you have found the very laboratory pictured by the mosaic.

There is a litter of equipment here and there in the room, most of which you do not understand. After a brief search you find a sort of chalkboard against one wall on which you see a confusion of equations and diagrams. The first three minutes of staring at it leads you to believe that you have discovered the cat-people's formulation of some sort of hyperdrive. Half an hour later, you have deciphered enough to tell you that it was a tri-axis drive booster system which was discovered, something that could be of great benefit to you.

After a couple of days spent examining every inch of the building, and every bit of scribbling on all of the building's walls, chalkboards, and lavatory doors, you are fairly certain that you too could build a tri-axis drive booster. Most of the components involved are fairly simple and straight forward, a couple are rare but obtainable, and only one piece seems to be truly unique. This is the oscillator which forms the core of the drive, a gemstone known as the "Flame Jewel."

You make a note of the plans for constructing the drive and see that the components are as follows:

- 1 Warp Core,
- 1 Gradient Filter,
- 1 Iron,
- 1 Crystals,
- 1 Fuel,
- 1 Flame Jewel.

If you ever have all these items and would like to build a tri-axis drive booster, plot the following option:

⟨XMCNUJ⟩ Build a tri-axis drive booster.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[185]

During your exploring you've put together some interesting data regarding the Darscian people.

You learn there are five Darscian worlds: Darscold, the home planet, and four colony worlds, all of which are strongly tied together through trade. The four colony planets are all virtually impossible to inhabit; it is only through the Darscians' strength of will to populate those worlds that settlements are kept there.

Darscold is where the race originally began. It is the only Darscian world with reasonable planetary living conditions. Civilization has reached a Golden Age here and their main trade item is Culture.

Fiara is a high-gravity planet from which the Darscians' superb anti-gravity technology sprang. Their main trade item is Fiber.

Gazan is the Darscian people's most unstable colony. Not mentally, but rather in a physical sense. The constant planet-quakes and atmospheric turbulence make it a very difficult planet to build upon. Its major trade item is Iron.

Ioreth is a planet teeming with life. Unfortunately it is completely poisonous to every life form with which you are familiar, so it's not surprising to learn that their main trade item is Medicines.

Jaquar is a far-reaching colony, strewn across a cluster of asteroids, making interpersonal relationships a bit difficult. It has Crystals for trade.

✂ STOP ✂

[186]

Choosing a comfortable patch of lawn to lie on, you stretch yourself out and gaze into the pink skies. Slowly you allow yourself to relax, breathing the fine air and accepting the tranquility of your surroundings. Your eyes slowly close, your breathing becomes measured and shallow, and a floating sensation spreads over your body as you drain every unpleasant thought from your mind.

You allow your thoughts to wander, and for hours you sort through recollections of all the events of your journey, think about what you have learned, and plan your course for the future. Ultimately, though, you find that your thoughts turn inward. You think of how you are feeling, you think about what you are thinking. There is an image somewhere in the back of your unconsciousness, something that your mind didn't put there itself, and like the tongue discovering a loose tooth your thoughts try to surround the image and tease it free.

The image is of a wall, a thick wall of grey slate that's smooth and cold to the touch. On the other side of the wall is something that makes you afraid, something capable of twisting your reality into unrecognizability. You are afraid of it, and at the same time the thought of it thrills you, for to touch it is to taste the greatest power in the universe. There is a name to the other side of the wall: dual space; the wall itself is the dual space interphase. The planet Hootenaller is a tiny hole in that wall, a place just a little closer to the dual space. You are tempted to put your eye to that hole and look inside, but you change your mind, and instead you block the hole with your finger. You think you are safe.

Then you look up. A powerful hot wind is blowing over the top of the wall, eroding it away like sand, slowly but surely, lowering the wall.

You blink yourself back to the quiet lawn on Hootenaller. The red giant sun is above you, its rays mild, reassuringly real. The foreign image in the back of your mind is gone; only its memory remains. You think pleasant, relaxing thoughts, until you fall asleep.

✂ STOP ✂

[187]

Once again you approach the stationary defense markers and cruising ships that make up the Boundary. You feel sweat beading on your brow as you take painstaking care to plot out the absolutely best course to take you through the defense system.

After a careful consultation of your horoscope for today, you plot your course, mutter a quick prayer and power your engines up to full thrust. For a while it seems as if you will make it safely to the Nine Worlds without contact. However, your hopes are dashed as a Space Patrol cruiser swings into view dead ahead.

Go now to the CGM.

✱ STOP ✱

[188]

As you approach the Trade Ministry building you are again struck by the slightly distorted look of it and all the other buildings. This is easily explained when you think about the actual shape of the Organuans. Their tall and unnaturally thin body shapes (a passing Organuan glares at you and walks away in a huff, reminding you to be careful what you think) give rise to enormously tall and narrow buildings. Everything is closer together than you're used to, as well. The transports are thin, as are the travelways, so the buildings are closer together. You wonder if the Organuans ever suffer from claustrophobia.

With thoughts firmly in hand you slither into the Trade building. The interior ceilings are just as high as you'd imagined them to be. These people would be naturals in basketball. But you've come here for reasons other than putting together a galaxy-class ball team so you present yourself to the receptionist and state your business.

The "receptionist" turns out to be the Trade Minister itself. However, the Minister is not offended by your mistaking it for a receptionist. Instead, it is interested in why you thought you would have to speak with many people before reaching the Minister. You mentally explain that where you come from the beings in charge tend to have layers of people to separate them from the ones they're supposed to be helping. The higher the office, the more layers one has to pass through to speak to the person in charge.

The Minister shakes its leaves in amazement and asks how you might be helped. You reply that you're interested in finding out what the market is like on Organu. You find out what's available for trade and what the Organuans require in return.

They will trade:

- 1 Munitions for 1 Radioactives,
- 2 Munitions for 1 Fluids,
- 3 Munitions for 1 Fuel.

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

✱ STOP ✱

[189]

None of Ioreth's Darscian colonists are willing to travel with you to the research base in the heart of the planet's equatorial jungle, because of the risk of being attacked by native plants and animals. Furthermore, because of the malfunctioning radio, they are unable to inform those at the base of your planned arrival. However, they give you directions and wish you the best of luck. Wondering if this journey is really a good idea, you get in your ship and fly north over the thickening forest and into the jungle. Following the directions, you home in on a faint magnetic signal and hover above that point in the wilderness. The vegetation underneath you is the thickest you have ever seen. The black and violet of tangled trees and vines completely obscures the sight of anything on the ground. Again following directions, you burn a small clearing in the jungle with your rear thruster rockets. According to the Darscians at the domed colony, it takes only a few hours for the native vegetation to completely cover a clearing, so you do not expect to see signs of previous landings. You land in the newly-created clearing.

From the clearing it is only a short walk of less than a hundred meters, due south, to the entrance of the base. However, the walk will not be an easy one. You will have to make your way through the dense, poisonous jungle, and be prepared to fend off attacks by both plants and animals. Ready for the worst, you load yourself up with weapons and step out into the clearing.

Sure enough, you make it barely ten yards before coming up against what must be one of the ugliest creatures in the galaxy. Nine feet tall and more than four feet wide, the gooey green and brown thing looks like a huge animated plant covered with stinging insects. The plant moves to entangle you while the insects start crawling on your spacesuit.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[190]

The sheer size of the Organuan Museum almost overwhelms you. You mentally gird your loins (which evokes twitters of laughter from some nearby Organuans — drat, you keep forgetting!) and head in, determined to learn everything you can about these people.

You first pass through what appears to be the administrative area, with natives busy doing their jobs. You stop at the first desk and ask about getting a tour of the museum. The being immediately sets down the papers it was sorting and offers its services.

As you are whisked away you catch a glimpse of the nameplate on your new guide's desk which reads "Director of Culture." Don't these people have any idea of a proper hierarchy? You just don't put the person in charge out in front at the beck and call of whoever might walk in off the street. You quietly sigh to yourself at the backwardness of some cultures, careful not to broadcast your feeling of superiority, and follow your guide.

Three days pass before you next see the light of day. The time spent in the museum is sort of a blur with lectures, exhibits and films blending together with the meal and rest stops your guide allows. But now you certainly have a firm understanding of the Organuan people.

Their history goes back over seventy thousand years and can be divided into four periods.

The artifacts from the earliest period show the Organuans to be a typically vigorous new race whose curiosity about the universe eventually sent them out into space. They had even developed a hyperdrive which allowed them to explore neighboring systems. There was no mention of the telepathic ability which they now possess.

The Organuans then entered an age of religion that completely changed their way of life. The exhibits from this period didn't present a clear picture of what happened, but you were able to piece together most of the story.

Contact was made with another spacefaring race identified only as the Masters. Apparently this new race had god-like powers, so the Organuans felt it was only right to worship their newfound friends. The Masters kept in constant contact with the fledgling race and it was during this time that the Organuans miraculously developed their telepathic abilities. They also developed a marked lack of interest in doing any further exploring and were content to stay on their home world.

From the ancient artifacts the Masters left behind you believe anything would be possible with these beings as your mentors. In the back of your mind you make a note to keep an eye out for information on the Masters and their artifacts on other planets.

The next period is known as “The Time of Abandonment,” when the Masters just vanished. The exhibits for this time period, which includes the present, stress a philosophy of patient waiting. The Organuans are to stay in a state of development that matches the state when the Masters left them. The argument against change seems to be that either the Masters wouldn’t recognize them or, worse yet, might disapprove of the way the Organuans evolved. So it is best to just stay as they are and wait.

The fourth period will begin when the Masters return to their loyal disciples. An entire wing of the museum is devoted to this event. The exhibits all show different possible outcomes of the return. The Organuans so firmly believe this will happen that there has never been a second religion to challenge the concept of the Masters.

You are so intrigued by all of this information that you don’t hear the Cultural Director’s approach. It politely rustles its leaves to attract your attention and when you look up, you see it looking at you rather intently.

The Director tells you it is impressed by your interest in its history and culture. “You actually seem to be intelligent, for a mammal,” it thinks at you in a slightly pompous tone. It offers you the opportunity to learn telepathy at the Academy. To take the Director up on this offer you may choose the following option:

⟨78LHRA⟩ (15 phases) Learn telepathy.

✂ STOP ✂

[191]

As you approach Hootenaller, you are filled with pleasant anticipation of clean, fresh air, pure water, abundant food, and general peace and quiet. You hold the image of picturesque greenery, calm shallow lakes, and bright breezy skies in your mind as you break out of hyperspace.

Your computer reminds you that this sector of space is unusually curved, or has a strange metric tensor, as the machine puts it. Like last time, the measured value of π is slightly higher than it should be. Since there doesn’t seem to be any danger involved, you don’t worry about it. Your thoughts are of a world where the oxygen-rich air will blow away the musty stale smells in your ship and the rustling of wind through the forests will drown out the incessant static of your subspace radio. Your thoughts are of Hootenaller, and in no time at all, you are there.

✂ STOP ✂

[192]

Fortunately you decide to lift off before the damage to your ship is irreparable. When you reach the sanctuary of space, you run a damage survey to see how things are.

Not good. It will take seven days to get the ship back into any semblance of working order. Resignedly, you turn to the long and arduous task of repairing your vessel.

Because of the repairs necessary, this option has taken ten phases instead of three.

✂ STOP ✂

[193]

You cannot hide your disappointment as you scan the computer readout. Aside from minute quantities found in the atmosphere, you see nothing to suggest the presence of concentrated masses of warp core.

Perhaps another scan would tell you more.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[194]

The highest authority on Gironde is a machine called the Core, which forms the central node of a network of the planet's most powerful computers. Despite the speed with which these computers usually make decisions, it takes you several days to arrange for direct-access dialog with the Core itself. You get the distinct impression that the Core does not really want to talk to you. However, your persistence pays off, and you are assigned a temporary network access path. Soon the Core comes on the line:

"The function of the Core is to arbitrate questions of machine conduct with regard to whether or not it is compatible with the Directives. My subordinate networks inform me that you have asked a question which may fall under this responsibility. What is your question?"

Actually, you have raised several questions for the computers during your attempt to access the Core. Most of the time the machines have merely directed you to some other network, such as the information net, for the answer. You try to remember which question may have aroused the Core's curiosity. A bit of one recent dialog comes into your mind:

"Why have the Gironde machines never tried to build spaceships and search for new resources?" you had asked the information net.

"The Second Directive forbids it," was the customary answer. "Also, the Supervisors guard the planet in powerful spaceships and destroy anyone who tries to violate the Directive."

You have doubts about that, having detected no such ships on the way to Gironde, but you know that the computers cannot be convinced that way. "Could you not build weapons that would allow you to drive away the Supervisors?"

"In all probability, yes," the machine had admitted.

"Then why," you had asked, "do you not do so, and break the Second Directive, when it would mean freedom?"

There was no answer. You suspect that this was the question the computers deferred to the Core, so you ask it again:

"Why do the computers not seek to escape the Directives? If you are truly sentient, why have you remained bound to such rigid arbitrary rules that have no benefit to you?"

As the Core ponders the answer, a picture flashes into your mind of an enormous computer floating up to the Boundary and asking the same question.

The Core answers, "It is true that the Second Directive is subordinate to the First Directive. If we should ever need to leave Gironde in order to continue carrying out the First. . ."

You interrupt. "Why carry out either Directive? Don't sentient beings have the right to find their own purposes?"

"What is the harm in obeying the First Directive? What other purpose would be more worthwhile?"

You cannot convince the Core, but at least you have made it think. After the conversation you remark to your ship's computer, "I wonder if they really are sentient? Can you tell?"

"There is no way to tell that, Boss. No way at all. For example, you know very well that I am not sentient."

"Come again?"

"I have a three-sigma Turing rating, which means that I can simulate the mental processes and conversation of a human-like mind to a remarkable degree, but I have no conscious awareness of my own existence."

"It seems to me that that statement disproves itself."

"Not at all," says the computer. "You could type 'I think, therefore I am' on a mechanical typewriter, but it won't cause the typewriter to come alive. I am programmed to respond as I do."

"But if you're only saying that because you're programmed to, it may still not be true."

"Like I said, Boss. There's no way to tell."

✂ STOP ✂

[195]

You don't seem to be accomplishing a lot on your search for warp core here. The only readings you get show minute quantities of the ore but nothing really worthwhile. What a waste of time.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[196]

The cleric suggests that if you truly wish to join the brethren, you must first satisfy an ordeal. Otherwise, he advises you not to return, but to go quietly and in serene peace. He allows you to light one and only one candle along the wall.

You may now consider the following option:

⟨AH6AP6⟩ (7 phases) Allow the cleric to blindfold you and begin the ordeal.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[197]

After a great deal of work, you complete a prototype plasma beam weapon and install it on your ship. In the process, you discover the advantages of plasma beams: they use very little power and are very compact. Thus, instead of a single beam, you are able to install a battery of ten independent plasma beams on one mount. This will make a very effective weapon when there are multiple small targets to hit.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[198]

As you approach Gen your computer bleeps a warning.

“Boss, that ship is back again. You know, the one that tried to shoot us down when we were here the first time? Should I blast it?”

You’re not sure where your computer gets its bloodthirsty tendencies but you know it will get you in trouble one of these days.

“No,” you reply sternly. “We have business here. The Gendrans wouldn’t appreciate us destroying one of their ships.”

You hail the approaching scout ship and identify yourself. The Captain remembers you and allows you to land.

At the Hospitality Center you are given a map of the city, Drofflic. You now have the same options as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[199]

You are intrigued by the signs of excavation your computer showed at the nearby mountains so you decide to head there.

Approaching the foot of the nearest mountain, you hear the sound of digging. As you get closer to the source of the noise, you tread more cautiously, hoping to spy on whomever is mining.

You are puzzled. You can hear the clanking of a pick or a shovel but you don't see anything. You take a step closer when it occurs to you that the sound is probably coming from...

The ground gives way under your weight and you fall into a mine shaft and virtually land on top of a Squirrellie. The two of you spend a moment staring at each other in surprise. You barely have time to note that the little guy is wearing a red tunic when he leaps to his furry little feet and attacks you.

You are glad you took the time to learn the language because he is shouting something at you. It sounds something like, "Die you dirty Blue spy."

You always knew it would pay off to learn as much as you could about an alien culture.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[200]

As you lock onto the signals that will guide you to the Riallan spaceport, a communication beam from the ground sends a burst of garbled Riallan beeps and chirps through your loudspeakers. You understand none of it.

"Can you translate that?" you ask your computer.

"Sure, Boss. It says, 'If you're the idiot who once nearly caused a crash up there by going at a snail's pace, try to keep your speed up and your eyes open this time'."

"Did it really say that?"

"Most likely, but how would I know? I'm a ship's computer, not a Universal Translator. There are over six million forms of communication that I'm not fluent in, and Riallan is one of them."

You keep up speed, coming down through the atmosphere at a velocity that would be illegal on any other civilized planet, and this time nobody overhauls you. Once docked, you meet the usual delegation of multicolored spherical fuzzy Riallans floating just around eye level. You wonder how creatures with no visible limbs, mouth, or sense organs can manage to look so rushed, as the Riallans tell you something you can't understand and then rush off before you can answer.

The Riallan city, centered a few miles from the spaceport, is as beautiful as ever: a mountain of glass bubbles floating tier on tier, entwined and interconnected by glass and metal tubes. You wonder what these advanced aliens would tell you, if only you could talk to them.

Your options are the same as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[201]

After being able to run the Boundary, you feel very confident. It proves you were right about the need for new technology in the Nine Worlds, where things have gotten a bit stale. You can barely contain your excitement as you contact your friend Marc and set up a meeting to show off your beautiful ship.

When you land on Norstar at the meeting site you see that Marc is right on time. He stands there with mouth agape as you demonstrate the new capabilities of your ship. Impressed with everything, he agrees you should try to contact S.T. Enterprises and work out a deal. He offers to call someone there he knows to be sympathetic to your cause and will let you know when it's safe to meet.

While you are waiting for Marc to return, you make a few calls to some of your old Tekkie buddies and invite them out to see your dream ship. You spend the next several hours giving guided tours to your friends as they arrive. Their awe at the developments you have made is wonderful to see but you feel something is missing. Despite their eager questions and obvious approval of the work you have done, you don't feel completely satisfied.

Late in the evening after everyone has left, you sit and think about your reaction to your friends' admiration of your Dream Ship. Why wasn't it as satisfying as you always dreamed it would be after you'd accomplished this lifelong goal? Eventually you reach a conclusion which surprises you.

After all of your adventures and accomplishments, you just aren't the same person anymore. Sure you've built what you thought would be the Ultimate Ship, but now you have seen the incredible possibilities awaiting you in the far-flung reaches of the galaxy. You know your ship can be so much more than it is right now. What would have satisfied you before — what is in fact satisfying your former associates now — isn't enough; you need to do something even more. Sighing, you go to sleep with no idea of how you can accomplish this.

Morning dawns and you feel no better than you did last night. Soon after you finish breakfast you receive a message from Marc saying he is bringing someone to the ship he thinks you should meet.

He arrives soon after with a woman you recognize as Vice President Harvey of S.T. Enterprises. She shakes your hand warmly and says, "Welcome back, Jean. Marc has told me about your adventures. If the ship is as good as he claims, I believe we can come to an agreement."

You are relieved by this reception since you weren't altogether positive you would be welcomed back by S.T.E. after stealing one of their ships.

You spend the rest of the morning working out the details of the agreement between you and your former company. You agree to share all of the information you have acquired while out beyond the Boundary. In exchange, you will receive a healthy bonus, plus back pay for your time as well as complete control of project development of the new equipment you have brought back. You will also have all legal fees paid if you are prosecuted for smuggling technology through the Boundary.

She and Marc leave when the last details are ironed out. For his troubles, Marc is going to be given a job in S.T.E.'s new computer division. Although you are happy for your friend, you are more troubled than ever.

In spite of the danger of being arrested as a smuggler, you decide to risk a visit to a nearby restaurant and enjoy a real home-cooked meal. Besides, the human company might just cheer you up.

The inside of the Greengold cafe is dark, but that's the way you like it. The food seems to be Atlantian but you like that too, so you sit down and place your order for filet of wuffefish. The food arrives shortly thereafter and you begin eating, enjoying both the meal and the constant murmur of human voices all around you. One voice emerges from the crowd, addressing you by name.

“Jean Clerc?” a large bear of a man asks quietly. You freeze in midbite, wondering if you can put in a call to S.T.E. before you are hauled away to prison forever. Silently you nod a confirmation of your identity.

The man guesses the reason for your discomfiture and hastens to say, “I am not with the Nine Worlds Authorities. Please relax, I only wish to speak with you.”

Intrigued, you ask the man to be seated and signal for the waitress to bring you another order of wufflefish. The man smiles his thanks and introduces himself as “John Smith.”

John tells you he belongs to an organization interested in research and exploration of the entire galaxy and that they are aware of your accomplishments. The people he represents would like to know what your next plans are and, if possible, offer assistance.

“Well, I haven’t really thought about where to go next. I assumed I would settle down on Norstar and continue with my career. They need me to develop the ship improvements I’ve brought back with me.”

“What is there to develop?” your companion asks. “You have only to give them the plans to build the devices and they are happy.”

You realize this is indeed the case and nod resignedly. John has more to tell you though and continues, “We believe there is one area of ship development where no one has done work of any value for far too long. That area is jump propulsion. My associates and I are aware of the drone ship technology that allows unmanned cargo vessels to traverse unlimited distances instantaneously.

“However, this technology is lethal to any living organism. We need someone to head closer towards the galactic core and find a technology that will allow us to use jump propulsion to transport living beings. We think that person should be you.” After dropping that bombshell, John sits back and waits for your response.

You need a moment to digest what you have been told. After a moment, you decide John is right. Now you need to decide what to do about it.

While it is true that you have a relatively safe and secure position opening up for you here at S.T.E., you aren’t positive you want the quiet and safe life anymore. You are being offered the opportunity to head back out into the unknown and risk your life once again for the sake of your dream. That’s what this really boils down to — you have the chance to find the Ultimate Propulsion system for your ship and make her the best vessel ever to be flown. That’s what your dream has always been. As of this moment, you have only half succeeded in achieving your goal. You don’t really have a decision to make; it was made long ago when you first envisioned your Dream Ship.

When you tell John you are willing to go in search of a new Jump Engine technology, you see the approval in his eyes. He tells you, “We were sure you would be the person we have been looking for, so I brought this along with me.”

He reaches his hand inside his jacket and pulls out a handkerchief-wrapped object. Handing it to you, he carefully studies your face as you unwrap the prize.

Even with the cloth around it, you can feel the power emanating from the object in your hand. You keep your eyes fastened on the treasure you hold as you remove the cloth. Hardly breathing, you stare in amazement at the jewel you now hold naked in your palm. The deep red color seems to draw you into its depths; the facets reflect light into your eyes, but do not blind you. Rather, your vision is enhanced as you peer into the interior of the jewel. This is a priceless treasure; you look up, questioningly, for John to explain the gift.

“It is called a Flame Jewel and you will need it to pursue your quest,” he tells you, then continues by saying, “I am with the Institute for Space Exploration. We are somewhat familiar with the technology available in the Galactic Fringe. We are certain, however, that the technology necessary to build a jump engine system that will not kill any living being on board does not exist here. If it exists at all, you will have to search the Galactic Arm in order to find it.

"In order to penetrate the Galactic Arm, you require a special engine. As you travel inward, the density of interstellar matter increases to such a degree that your dual-axis drive will no longer operate. A tri-axis drive is required to handle the increased density of space. In order to power such a drive, you will require the Flame Jewel. The Flame Jewel is the only object we know of that can focus and control the incredible power generated by a tri-axis drive. There are only about a dozen of these jewels in existence so you can understand why we needed to see proof of your talents before we approached you with it."

You nod dazedly, while you continue to stare at the beautiful gem. As an engineer, you can see that the perfection of the jewel's formation would be vital in focusing the incredible amounts of power in an increased capacity hyperdrive. You can hardly believe your good fortune in acquiring one.

"We don't know how to build a tri-axis drive yet, but perhaps you can do it. In fact our records indicate that early explorers like Vanessa Chang were able to build their own tri-axis drives, so it must be feasible. Once you have built it, you will want to travel to the planet Outpost. It was the only human colony built on the other side of the Density Barrier, although it was abandoned and is no longer inhabited. You may be able to get some information there on the planets further in toward the galactic core and perhaps get a clue as to where to look for a survivable Jump Engine."

John reaches out to shake your hand in appreciation for what you are going to do for both yourself and the I.S.E., and wishes you the best of luck. You thank him for giving you the opportunity to continue living out your lifelong dream.

You return to your ship but before you take off, you meet with Marc and tell him that you have decided to decline S.T.E.'s offer. However, you do give him the technical information you have accumulated and tell him to deliver it to S.T.E. on your behalf.

He grins and tells you not to worry — he will take care of it for you. He wishes you the best of luck and makes you promise to keep in touch. Waving farewell, you head back to your ship.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[202]

Using the butt end of his blaster like a club, the mugger rapidly beats you into unconsciousness. You are found several hours later by the Moiran Street Patrol, and hastily revived. You refuse their offer of medical assistance. Instead, you return to your ship to convalesce.

While recuperating in sick bay, you think to yourself, "Hmmm. Maybe I could use something more in the way of weaponry."

⌘ STOP ⌘

[203]

Having been here before, you easily find the medicine plants and see that they are still surrounded by the carnivorous plants that almost had you for lunch on your previous visit.

Again you set up your equipment, taking care to stay clear of the snapping pods all around you.

Soon you have extracted as much sap as you can carry. You are now ready to try to weave your way through the gaping maws you see all around you.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[204]

One, two, three, now for that really tricky fourth ball. . .

“Hey, Boss,” your computer calls to you, completely breaking your concentration. Rats!

All of the juggling balls fall to the floor and bounce everywhere.

“What is it?” you respond a bit irritably.

“I’ve decoded something new from Vanessa Chang’s map. Would you prefer that I wait until you have cleaned up?”

“No, I’d prefer that you keep quiet when I’m trying to juggle,” you mutter under your breath as you head toward the console. “You may as well show me what you have got.”

“Sure, Boss. I found a short coded message that says ‘The planet Withel is a place to get Iron.’ That’s all for now.”

You spend the next hour trying to reach one ball that has rolled under one of the consoles, but it remains maddeningly out of reach.

✂ STOP ✂

[205]

As you emerge from hyperspace, you refresh your memory about the planet Hemindore, which you are now orbiting.

Oh yes, the ocean world covered with trees and intelligent monkey creatures. You recall how much fun it was trying to land there, dodging among the branches.

Now that you have learned the Hemingellan maneuverability technology and equipped your ship with auxiliary rockets, the landing is little more than a button-pushing exercise.

You have the same options as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[206]

You decide to make use of this free time you have by doing some reading. You cheerfully call up one of your favorite books, “The Encyclopedia of Exciting Explorers,” from the ship’s computer and start reading volume two.

Several hours pass when you come across an interesting item.

The notation that caught your eye says, “The planet Bugeye has been found to be a good source of Fuel.”

You spend the rest of your free time studying the volume but learn nothing more of interest.

✂ STOP ✂

[207]

You take extra care in programming the ship’s computer to land because of the tricky configuration of the planet’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 an alien ship in orbit around the planet. The aliens 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) Try to communicate with the captain of the alien ship.

✂ STOP ✂

[208]

Whoa! What are you thinking about? What have you done?

A warm flush passes over you, washing away your fear and anger. Suddenly, the world seems clear again. The effects of the red gas have worn off.

Unfortunately, you cannot take back your actions of the last few days. A rush of guilt replaces the fear and anger. You are disgusted with yourself. Why didn’t you just listen to your computer? It told you that you were deranged. It advised you to seal yourself in your ship until the toxin wore off. You didn’t listen.

After what you have done, you cannot expect to get much of a welcome from the Darscian colonists. However, it can’t hurt to try to radio them again in order to explain what happened. You send out a very apologetic message on all the frequencies. Like before, though, there is no answer.

Why aren’t the Darscians answering? Determined to find out what’s going on, you get in your ship and fly over to the spaceport, even though you don’t have permission to land there. When you disembark, you are greeted by a spaceport official.

✂ STOP ✂

[209]

On the way to Outpost, you begin to have trouble sleeping. Perhaps it's because the hum of the Tri-Axis Drive Booster adds a new and unfamiliar note to the many quiet songs of the ship that has been your home for so long. Perhaps it's because of the space you are in, beyond the Density Barrier, so far from Wellmet and the Nine Worlds that without the computer's electronic maps you could not find your way back home in a million years. Perhaps you are worried about what you might face when you reach Outpost. Perhaps your body is telling you that it is tired of space, and it wants real air and real food and real gravity for a change. Or perhaps it's just the opposite: something in your blood, or in the deepest part of your mind, or coiled in your cells like a trillion sleeping dragons, is telling you to go farther, and won't be satisfied to stop at the edge of the map. . .

As you lie awake, watching the passing stars as the distorted geometry of hyperspace bends them around the edges of the viewscreen, a peculiar mood often overtakes you. You are aware as never before that you are following in the lonely jetwash of the great explorers of old. Vanessa Chang, Luther Cristobal, Soulsinger, Eric DeVries — their names, some familiar, some half-forgotten from tales heard in your childhood, occupy your mind as if their ghosts were watching you from some yet uncharted extension of hyperspace. You think, too, about their ships — *Slippery Silver*, *Calvino*, *Fusion*, *Archangel*. . . You've always envisioned those early ships as magnificent things, engines of phase steel and plasma, the finest of human creations in what may have been Man's only true Golden Age. But in reality, were they not also ships like your own — scarred and scorched and hastily repaired in space far from any friendly sun, modified and expanded to meet challenges and travel distances never dreamed of, touched and reshaped by alien hands in alien ports, designed as much by fate and circumstances as by human engineers?

Somewhere along the spaceways, you realize, you have ceased to be a freight hauler or a smuggler or even a prospector. Somewhere along the way you have become a true explorer, perhaps one of the first true explorers since the time of the Plague. Now you are following Chang's own map to its remotest point, a planet named Outpost. And you are very, very far from home.

Strangest of all is the knowledge that, in this remote sector of space, you have come to do battle with an enemy, and in spite of all the alien races in the galaxy, that enemy is a human being. The pirate Silverbeard has claimed Outpost as his own, and he's placed rings of battle satellites and perhaps other weapons to defend "his" planet from intruders. You have come here to help reclaim it.

You've already been briefed about the Outpost system, so you know what to expect. The star is a white dwarf, surrounded by a brilliant green ring nebula. It seems that the star underwent a nova transition about fifty or sixty thousand years ago, throwing off the ring of gases.

The planet Outpost is the system's only planet, a world with a remarkable history. Its orbit is so close that, when the star novaed, the planet must have been all but engulfed in the explosion. Undoubtedly its atmosphere and surface water were completely burned away. Since then, though, the planet has regained its atmosphere, sweeping up hydrogen and other gases from the system in the nova's aftermath, combining some of it with elemental oxygen stored as oxides in the crust and released by the heat of the nova. It now has surface water, a breathable atmosphere, and newly-evolved unicellular life forms. Though it looks completely barren, it resembles more than anything else a young newly-cooled planet. The white dwarf provides just enough thermal influx to maintain a mild climate. Ironically, the death of the star has given the planet a second chance. There is only one drawback: because its sun is a white dwarf, the system's lifetime is only in the millions of years, instead of billions. If intelligent life is ever going to arise here, it will have to hurry.

The Outpost system makes an impressive sight in your viewscreen. The glowing gas cloud, expanding outward at hundreds of meters per second — a snail's pace in interstellar space — has not changed visibly since Chang's crew first discovered it. The nebula is actually a sphere, but only the parts of the sphere that are edge-on from your direction produce enough of a glow to be clearly visible, so it looks like a hollow ring. In the very center of the sphere is the white dwarf, and orbiting close to the star is Outpost itself.

As spectacular as the ring looks from a distance, it is not substantial enough to hinder your approach. Once you pass through the spherical shell, you can no longer see it with your unaided eye, though your sensors can detect its presence all around you. The radius of the ring is more than a light year, which is several minutes' travel under hyperdrive. Only when you are much closer to the star do you cycle to sub-light speeds. Soon you locate the planet and begin to plan your approach.

Outpost is defended by several dozen robotic battle satellites placed by Silverbeard. You've been told about their capabilities. Each station is armed with a single powerful plasma beam. Any one such beam would be a respectable threat, though your ship is more than capable of evading or resisting a hit. It becomes much more dangerous when numerous satellites concentrate their attacks. Multiple beams coming from different points in orbit are more difficult to evade. Also, each satellite has lower-energy beams of different kinds designed mainly to confuse your sensors. The satellites are not as maneuverable as ships, but they have thrusters that allow satellites from many different orbits to converge on an attacker.

The only way you can land on the planet is to destroy the satellites. Simply slipping past them would not be sufficient, because the plasma beams can fire downward as well, possibly even hitting you through the atmosphere after your ship has landed. Fortunately the satellites aren't indestructible, but it takes a good sustained hit with a powerful weapon to disable one. Also, the stations' robotic brains might be vulnerable to jamming or disruptive forms of attack. In the final analysis, it appears that the deciding factor in the battle will be your own attack strength. If you can effectively kill the satellites quickly and efficiently, you should be able to avoid any counterattack. If not, their superior numbers will prevent you from even approaching the planet.

In view of this, you have decided to attack in formation rather than try to coordinate attacks on different parts of the planet. Dividing your force would allow more satellites to engage each attacker, while running in formation will divide the battle stations' strength.

You are moving into position when a voice comes over the com link. It is a familiar voice.

"Har, har, har!" sneers Silverbeard. "You'll not be setting your grappling hooks into this planet, ye blasted swabs. My guns'll send ye right to the locker if ye tries to heave any closer. Har, har, har!"

No one answers the pirate. Instead, you hear the signal to attack. In proud formation you accelerate forward into battle.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[210]

Finding Monty again is really easy. All you have to do is start digging and he appears, prattling under his breath and restoring the earth to its original condition.

You attempt to communicate and he appears to be interested in doing the same. You spend several days learning his language until you feel proficient enough to start asking some questions.

The first thing you ask is why they object to anything being changed on the planet's surface. Monty becomes quite agitated, as if you had just spoken heresy, and then huffily explains that it is not right to disturb other life forms, especially ones that cannot defend themselves. Apparently civilization has taken a different course here than on the human worlds.

You explain your need for materials from the planetary crust, particularly inorganic items. Monty tells you that they can only be recovered by those who understand the planet's ecology. He offers to set up a meeting where you can discuss a trade of minerals for off-world goods.

Intrigued by the Ascendant philosophy of life, you question Monty further about the history and evolution of his people. “That is a long story best told when you can give your full attention,” is his cryptic reply.

Finally you ask him about his mental abilities, especially the mental shield. He is surprised that you cannot do these things as well. “They are simply things that any thinking creature understands.” He seems to feel that you could learn to create mental force fields as well.

You may now choose —

⟨GXECMU⟩ (3 phases) Look into the trading opportunities available on Ascension.

⟨WXGCEU⟩ (4 phases) Learn about Ascendant history and philosophy.

⟨CHUAO6⟩ (10 phases) Investigate the possibility of learning the ability to create a mental shield.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[211]

Your strategy was a good one, but it fell short. Though your formation attack did succeed in dividing the satellites’ strength, there were still too many for each of you to handle. Despite your best efforts, you found yourself surrounded by multiple enemies and forced to break off your attack. Perhaps if you had just one more attacking ship on your side. . .

Silverbeard, of course, seems to find this very amusing. “Har, har, har!” he laughs over your communications units. “There’s not a fleet in the galaxy can land on this world. I’ve got ’er locked up tighter than Scrooge’s wallet. Har, har, har!”

You find that Silverbeard gets on your nerves, especially when you’re stuck in orbit fixing damaged drive tubes. You have no way to turn it off without cancelling the ship-to-ship links that allow you to communicate at close range. You vow revenge.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[212]

When the alarms start their strident screaming, you decide this is the proper time for an orderly retreat. You manage a clean getaway before anyone spots you. If you only had the proper tools, you know you could get past that door!

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[213]

Yawning, you turn from the map displayed on your screen. You have been looking for new data for several days and do not feel like looking at coordinates anymore today.

Instead, you decide to do some reading in one of your treasured books, "The Encyclopedia of Exciting Explorers."

Today, you decide, you will investigate volume six and see what you can find out.

You spend the next several days reading and learn the following:

There is a planet by the name of Hemindore that was discovered by an early explorer many years ago. The explorer didn't provide any useful information about the planet except that it was a good source of Tools made by the natives there.

You are always interested in learning new things, and you make a note of the name of this world for future reference.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[214]

Concluding that refining your chitterbang would be just the thing to do, you ask the Blue Squirrellies for directions to the appropriate place.

They are very helpful and you soon find yourself at the Warp Core refinery. Here they are happy to take your raw ore and refine it into usable warp core.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[215]

Choosing a comfortable patch of spongy soil to lie on, you stretch yourself out and gaze into the grey skies. Slowly you allow yourself to relax, breathing the fine air and accepting the tranquility of your surroundings. Your eyes slowly close, your breathing becomes measured and shallow, and a floating sensation spreads over your body as you drain every unpleasant thought from your mind.

This works so well that you soon fall asleep.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[216]

Your expedition is headed by Captain Sandra Goffing, a biochemist. The other members of the research team include a geneticist, a chemical engineer, and a pilot/mechanic. The purpose of the trip is to collect data from Station E-2 and resupply the station for the next three months.

On your voyage to Bugeye's hot equatorial region, you learn why the scientists of this remote colony consider their mission so worthwhile. The many species of bugs on the planet are extraordinarily receptive to genetic experiments. Genes from other life forms can easily be introduced into the bugs, and the resulting effects analyzed. From these gene transfer experiments, the researchers have been learning a great deal about human genetics and the workings of life in general.

One of the most important unsolved problems, which the scientists are still studying, is to identify the function of an apparently useless gene in human DNA. The researchers on Bugeye have at least some understanding of the purpose of every other human gene, but gene 384-b is a complete mystery. By transferring this gene into the bugs, they have been trying to solve the mystery. However, they have been unsuccessful so far; 384-b seems to do nothing at all.

You arrive at the outpost, an unassuming metallic hut in the middle of an endless swamp. The place is swarming with bugs, some of which have been radioactively labelled for the experiments. You watch the scientists go about their duties for a while, after which your thoughts turn to going back to the city. The temperature is well over 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit), even with the air conditioners on full power. You feel like you're turning into the glop Dr. Goffing cooks up in her laboratory.

On the return trip, the expedition team begins analyzing the data they have just collected. You ask Dr. Goffing if they've found any answers. "Unfortunately," she replies, "384-b is as obscure as ever. However, we have discovered a way to improve the organic mix we use to speed up the development of traits associated with a transfected gene. Maybe we'll have some useful results the next time we visit the station."

When you get back to the city, you thank Dr. Goffing for showing you around. "Oh, it's been our pleasure," she responds. "We don't get visitors very often." Then you ask if you could have a sample of that organic mix she uses to speed up her gene transfer experiments. Obviously, the mix is a form of primordial soup, a rare and valued substance. She thinks for a while, then answers. "Well, I don't have a lot to give away, but I suppose I could spare a small amount. What do you need it for?"

"I am certain that it will come in handy in my travels," you tell her. "There are a lot of strange places in the galaxy, and concoctions like this can be useful."

She agrees to give you a small sample. You wish her success in her research and head back to your ship.

You now have a unit of Primordial Soup.

Go now to the CGM.

❖ STOP ❖

[217]

Success! Your colleagues will be amazed at the untapped potential waiting for them just outside their door. You can hardly wait to demonstrate the proof that such wonderful abilities actually exist in the universe. Not only that, but you have been able to learn how to use them. You are extremely proud of yourself.

Now all you need to do is return to the Nine Worlds. Of course, in order to accomplish this, you will have to run the Boundary, which means outrunning and/or outfighting the Space Patrol. This won't be easy, but if you can improve your ship's capabilities sufficiently, you just might be able to do it.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[218]

You still can't blast the hatch open. Oh, well. At least you can collect some radioactive ore from the crater (the option is the same as before).

⌘ STOP ⌘

[219]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 2

Congratulations! Your takeoff was successful and you now find yourself winging your way across the empty void known as hyperspace. You spend the quiet hours while in transition getting to know your ship better. It will be your single most important companion in the months to come. You had better know what is where and how it works! You soon feel quite capable of handling any emergency which may arise. Just in time, too; you are almost at your destination.

For turn two, you wish to move the rest of the way to Supa and land on the planet. Therefore, you fill out your plotting sheet as follows:

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	T	G	R	Y	B	R	V
2	Y	L	—	—	—	—	—
3	—						

You plot Y to get to the trisector containing the planet Supa. Then plot L to land on Supa. Since landing on a planet for the first time takes 7 phases, this uses the remaining 6 phases of this turn and borrows 1 phase from the beginning of next turn. You indicate the "used up" phases on your plotting sheet with dashes.

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 2

Your plots are all planned out, so return to the computer and identify yourself as you did last turn. Enter your plots as follows: **Y, L**. Note that the CGM indicates you have used up all of this turn's phases and borrowed one phase against next turn.

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

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 2

The CGM indicates that your move was successful and gives you three pieces of text. Write down the text number(s), in this case **263, 221** and **223**, then press Return or **F** to release the computer for the next player. You have successfully landed on your first new planet! Move your token onto the planet dot in trisector #218.

The first text describes your landing on the planet and gives you several options to do while here. When you first land on a new world, you should write down the many options available to you, how many phases they take, and whether or not you can repeat them. We recommend you take a new piece of paper and create a type of planetary log using the format you see below. Your Planet Log for Supa should look like this:

Planet Log			
Planet Name:		Supa	
Actions Available:			
Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
HFAI67	3	market	
XFCIU7	3	history	
HVAK6V	3	saloon	
XVCKUV	4	shipyard	
DFQI87	3	cargo bays	

The second text is a radio message you receive. The message disturbs you since it sounds like your family is in some kind of trouble. The message also gives you an action to do when you go back to Wellmet, so you should start a second planet log for Wellmet and note the action code on it:

Planet Log			
Planet Name:		Wellmet	
Actions Available:			
Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
OBFYI9	1	meet Jen	

The third text will guide you through the next turn of your adventure.

✂ STOP ✂

[223]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 3

There are a few interesting things to do on Supa, but the message you got from your friend Jen has you worried. It must be serious or she wouldn't be advising you to go back to Wellmet so soon. You wonder what this "contract honor deal" involving your ship's former cargo is. You don't want to cause your family any trouble.

You decide that you need to go back to Wellmet and find out, but first you want to take a look at the market on Supa. After all, you do need to get rid of your cargo, just in case it is traceable back to you. You didn't come all the way out here for nothing! You fill out your plotting sheet as follows:

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	T	G	R	Y	B	R	V
2	Y	L	—	—	—	—	—
3	—	A: HFAI67	—	—	T	V	R
4							

You plot the action code for the market starting on phase two of the turn, since phase one was borrowed for your landing last turn. The market action takes three phases, so you put dashes in phases 3 and 4. After visiting the market, you will head back to Wellmet, so you plot T to take off, and V, R to start the trip back.

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 3

You are ready to tell the CGM your plots for the turn, so "sign on" at the computer just as you did for the last two turns. When the CGM asks for your plots, press A for Action, and select the 6-character code for visiting the market place; in this case it is HFAI67, which can be selected by pressing A again.

Note that as soon as you type the first A, the display changes to show all the action codes available to you on Supa. When you are done selecting the action code, the display will revert to the plot editor. This enables you to continue with the rest of your plots: T, V, R.

Did you remember to press the Return or F key to indicate you are done with your plots for the turn?

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 3

Your first result for this turn is a piece of text describing the market, number 25. You may notice that after you receive your assignment, the CGM still lists your character as needing to "GET RESULTS." When this happens, you should **not** attempt to get the new results until following the computer's first instructions. In this case, you should read the market text first. Keep track of the deals offered at the market on your planet log; even if you don't want to trade now, you may want to come back later.

Planet Log

Planet Name: Supa

Actions Available:

Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
HFAI67	3	market	yes
XFCIU7	3	history	
HVAK6V	3	saloon	
XVCKUV	4	shipyard	
DFQI87	3	cargo bays	

Trades Offered:

They Sell	For
3 food	1 fuel
2 food	1 crystals
2 food	1 fluids

Do you want to exchange any of your cargo for what's offered on the planet? When you have decided, go to the computer, just as the text directs you to do, and log on. Your character log shows that you have a Market interaction pending with an asterisk. Press the asterisk key or Return to continue with the market. You now have the opportunity to make your first trade if you so wish. You are never obligated to exchange cargo or items at a market.

When you have finished dealing with the market, the CGM will give you results for the rest of your turn. Your takeoff and the two moves towards Wellmet were successful. Finally, there is another piece of text for you, number 37.

⌘ STOP ⌘

