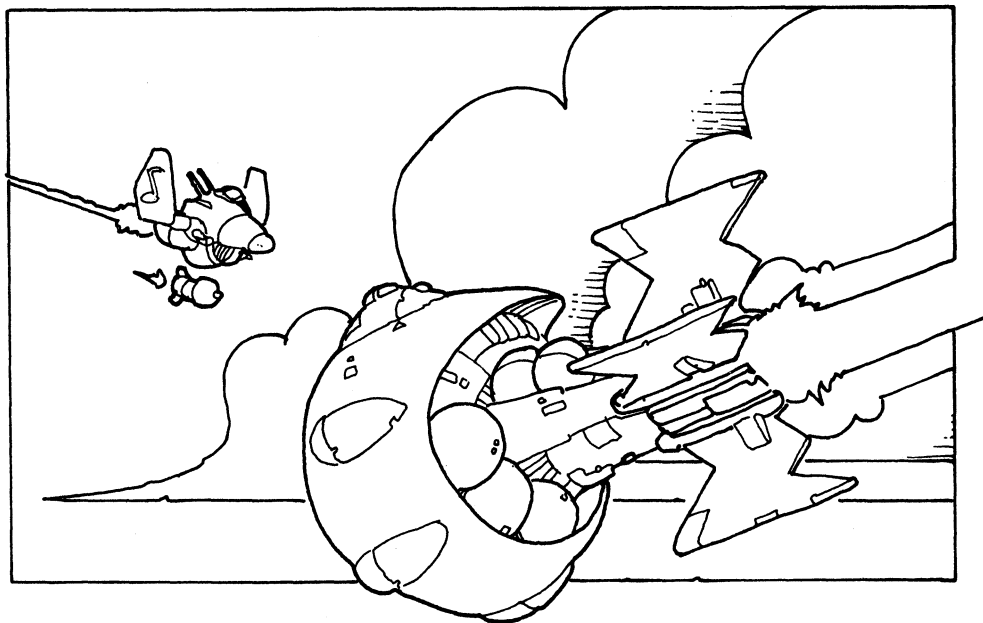


STAR SAGA: ONE™

BOOK G

TEXT 433-508



[433]

Learning the history of Wellmet is more difficult than you thought it would be. One reason is that the Public Archives isn't really a library, but a collection of old files, on paper and computer media, left behind by a long succession of governments. (Wellmet is currently between governments, but the old-timers say that this condition is too good to last.) The Archivist who maintained the facility was, until recently, a grizzled old man named Double John Rosenthal, who was rumored to know half of the Archives by heart. Unfortunately, he died three years ago, and the job is now held by his fourteen-year-old granddaughter Maxine. She's friendly enough, but is less interested in history than in the air-car she's currently building out of spare parts in the Western Tape Stacks. For the price of a much-needed levator flux valve from a local parts shop, she tells you what she remembers and shows you around the reference materials.

The other reason it's difficult to get a handle on Wellmet's history is that you keep underestimating how much of it there is. Wellmet seems so much the frontier town that you tend to forget that it's over five hundred years old — older than many of the cities in the Nine Worlds.

Wellmet, the records show, was the seventh planet to be officially colonized following the invention of the Wamirian Hyperdrive. This makes it older than the original colonies on the Nine Worlds planets Frontier, Atlantis, and Leucothea. In the time of the great space liners, the colony grew, but not as quickly as the other Nine Worlds. By the standards of the slow single-axis ships of that era, Wellmet was at the remote edge of explored space.

Forty years after its founding, the first colony was nearly bankrupt. It had failed to become industrially self-sufficient, and had few resources to offer that couldn't be found on less remote planets. The government of Earth, then undergoing a period of upheaval and dissension over colonial policies, began using Wellmet as an exile world where they "transported" convicted criminals and political prisoners. Although only a fraction of Wellmet's colonists arrived in this manner, today many natives proudly trace their lineage back to these transportees; naturally, the more serious the exile's crimes are said to have been, the more prestige is attached to the descendants.

With the advent of the two-axis hyperdrive and the resulting hundredfold increase in spaceship speed, Wellmet's situation changed dramatically. The planet went from being a remote outpost to being the innermost of a whole new series of colonies. Wellmet became a stepping stone to the outer worlds, and by the time of the famous explorers it was the nucleus of space shipping and trade between the old colonies (now the Nine Worlds) and the new. So central was its role that most people believe the Plague that brought this era to a close reached Earth and the Nine Worlds by way of Wellmet.

The single most crucial event in Wellmet's history, more crucial than even the Plague itself, was the decision that came with the establishment of the Boundary. If the decision had come out differently, Wellmet would now be one of the Ten Worlds, inside the Boundary with the others. The debate over the issue at the time was so intense that it briefly erupted into civil war. Even today, many a tavern conversation on Wellmet is devoted to the subject of why the planet ended up outside the Boundary. Some claim that the majority chose to retain Wellmet's independence and its ties to space instead of being closed in. Some claim that it was the powerful trade cartels — the precursors of today's Families — that decided the issue, choosing to hold on to their trade empires despite the hardships it would cause the population. Others claim that no one on Wellmet made the decision at all, and that the Space Patrol simply left Wellmet outside.

As a result of the decision, Wellmet became a "Ghost World" — a world that, although still populated by humans, was left outside the Boundary to fend for itself. While memory of the Ghost Worlds faded inside the Boundary, the merchants struggled to maintain trade between Wellmet and the other, less populous, more precarious far-flung colonies left outside. There were difficult times. Too often the survival or death of a colony hinged upon the cruel laws of supply and demand, profit and loss.

For its first hundred years, the Boundary was a truly impenetrable barrier. Although some pilots claimed to have gotten through, none of them could prove it. Getting out was easier; many spacefaring citizens of the Nine Worlds, dissatisfied with the restrictions of the Boundary, brought their ships to Wellmet and started new lives in space.

Over the years, space technology has improved in the Ghost Worlds, while the Space Patrol has changed very little. Thus the Boundary has become less and less a barrier to determined smugglers, and illicit trade with the Nine Worlds has become a major part of Wellmet's economy. Breaking the Boundary is a very expensive, dangerous, difficult, and profitable business, which is conducted mostly by the Families.

Today there are two kinds of ships on Wellmet: "connected," which are owned by the Families and operated by Family-hired crews, and "independent," which are owned by the crews, though they usually end up contracting with the Families most of the time anyway. You, of course, are an independent, and you intend to stay that way.

✂ STOP ✂

[434]

The computer readings indicate the area available for mining is huge. You will be able to collect one cargo bay's worth of Fuel in only two days.

The theme song to an old Earth TV show runs through your mind. You don't remember the whole thing, but all you can think about is "black gold, Texas tea." You also have the urge for chitlins, whatever they are.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[435]

After a vicious tussle, you manage to knock the would-be attacker out cold. While you are not in such great shape yourself, you decide to take advantage of the opportunity to perhaps gain some booty and frisk the slumped over body. Opening the former mugger's jacket you are almost knocked out by the personal body odor of the unconscious man. You are thankful he didn't realize what a powerful weapon just flapping his underarms at you would have been.

It seems to be your lucky day (in a manner of speaking), because you find the mugger had a blaster, which you pocket at once. This makes you feel a little better about your own wounds and consoles you on the long, slow, painful return to your ship.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[436]

The Automaton Market sells all sorts of robots, ranging from the simple household drink-serving variety to large industrial models. As you were no doubt hoping, they also sell automated drone ships, complete with jump engines which can power the ships across the galaxy in the blink of an eye.

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

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

One 4-cargo bay drone ship may be purchased here for the following:

2 Computers + 1 Fiber + 1 Medicine.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[437]

Exploring your surroundings is a difficult chore in these conditions. You have to put on your environmental suit after all, if only as protection from the bitter cold and heavy rain. The wet rock is slick, and every misstep seems to result in another bruise in the most uncomfortable location possible. The wind drives the rain into your face, leaving you with the choice of either getting wet or closing the faceplate of your suit and breathing stale bottled air.

You are hoping to find clues to why the planet has changed so abruptly, but the possibilities are limited. There is no animal life here, let alone intelligent life with the capability to alter a whole planet. The planet's orbit around the red giant sun is very close to circular and shows no sign of having been perturbed, even if there were any other bodies around that might have perturbed it. A meteor impact large enough to cause the climatic change would have split the planet, or at least left a noticeable crater, and even that couldn't explain the change in gravity. So far your first explanation still seems most sensible: it is a different planet entirely. But in that case, where did it come from, and where did the other one go? There is no doubt it is the same sun, curvature or no curvature, as it was the first time you landed; you've checked the position a dozen different ways.

After a day or two of exploring, it is clear that the planet's surface won't shed any light on the mystery either. Miserable as the planet looks, it looks like it evolved this way. It doesn't look like the aftermath of a disaster. The rocks, plants, water, and winds battle each other like old enemies.

You give up on this problem temporarily to devote your attention to searching for useful natural resources. You've found very little beyond the bad-tasting food plants you've already discovered, but you're hoping that a wider search will turn something up.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[438]

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

You get out of your ship to reexamine the crater. The large metal hatch you discovered last time is still there, guarding a tunnel leading into the asteroid's interior. You decide to make another attempt to blast open the hatch.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[439]

The Moiran Metal Works continues to be the bustling industrial compound you remember from your first visit. You skip the tour this time, and proceed directly to a conference with the Director of Sales.

"Why yes, I believe we do still have some spare units in stock. Are you interested in buying?" The Director goes on to tell you that the price per unit of Phase Steel is:

2 Computers + 2 Food + 1 Fiber + 1 Tools

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

✂ STOP ✂

[440]

You have decided that the only way you're going to learn anything useful about Riallan physiology is to examine it yourself. Since no Riallan seems willing to be examined, you'll have to force the issue. You don't intend any serious harm to your subject, and the potential benefits of what you might learn — including the secret of anti-gravity — outweigh the potential consequences. In fact, you plan to avoid any consequences by holding the alien until just before you take off.

The first problem is to capture a Riallan without damaging it. Weapons are much too risky. Luring one into a trap might work, if you could find anything that might lure a Riallan. Chasing one down would be impossible, since they can easily go places where you cannot follow. The simplest solution you can think of is to snare one in a net, and after rejecting some other more complicated possibilities you decide to try it. In preparation, you hang an inflated plastic bag from the ceiling of your compartment, then spend hours practicing sneaking up and netting it, ignoring your computer's unjustified comments about your sanity.

The next step is to scout the spaceport and city to learn the movement patterns of Riallans. Pretending to study construction techniques, you record the movements of Riallans at different places and times. You need to catch a single Riallan with no witnesses present, and you need a route back to your ship once the Riallan is in your net. You also watch closely for any sign of Riallans using unusual communication methods, such as telepathy or implanted transceivers. A telepathic plea for help could bring your plans — and possibly your career — to a quick halt. Fortunately the Riallans seem to communicate only by their audible chirping, unless assisted by public intercoms or computer ports.

You learn that it is nearly impossible to find Riallans alone in the spaceport, where they work mostly in crews and keep tight schedules. In the city you can find isolated individuals, but it's a long way back to your ship. In the end you settle on a spot in the lower levels of the city. Nearby is a little-used passageway that leads most of the way to the spaceport area. At the prefigured time, you take your net to the city, settle into your hiding place, and wait.

You hear a quiet chirping from down the corridor. A large green Riallan hovers into view. It could turn in any of three directions. It chooses the corridor where you are waiting. It draws closer to you, still chirping. You tense yourself to strike.

Your nerve fails you, and you stay hidden. The alienness of the creature is disturbing. What if it explodes, or poisons you by contact, or pyrokinetically cooks your brain? And something else is wrong, something that takes crucial instants for you to put your finger on. Riallans never talk to themselves, but this one is chirping away, with an unusual repetitive pattern that you cannot interpret. As you let it pass by, it shows no sign of having seen you.

Moments later, there is a loud piercing squawk, like a Riallan chirp amplified a hundredfold. It comes from beyond the curve in the corridor where the green Riallan disappeared. A popping sound follows, then a peculiar fluid noise like eggs being scrambled. You cannot contain your curiosity. You follow the sound down the passageway.

The noise has stopped by the time you reach the bend. There is no sign of the green Riallan. You catch a glimpse of a yellow Riallan just as it disappears up a vertical opening, and a blue Riallan is hovering just in front of you, shaking and vibrating as if highly agitated.

What happened? Will the noise bring other Riallans? If they see you with your nets and weapons, will they blame you for whatever transpired here? The blue one has already seen you. With practiced skill you scoop it into your net, stuff it into a muffled radiation-shielded sack, and duck down the passageway toward the spaceport. The Riallan is heavier than you thought it would be — much too heavy to float in the air by natural buoyancy — but it puts up no resistance as you take it to your ship. No one sees you. You shove the sack into the nearest cargo bay and slam the doors closed.

Read immediately the next text entry the CGM has given you.

✂ STOP ✂

[441]

You fend the monster off and it writhes in rage. From up close you can see even better how its tail segments move together despite the five-meter gaps between them. The pieces aren't entirely fixed: tail can flow into empty space, and empty space can generate tail, as the monster moves and stretches.

At length the creature turns away, either hurt by the wounds you've dealt it or frustrated at being unable to swallow you. You see it dip its snout into the same nothingness that links the tail sections. It surges forward, the whole body following the head into nowhere, until the last thin segment of tail disappears. It is gone.

You feel a strong sense of accomplishment at banishing such a formidable enemy. In fact, you strongly believe some reward is in order.

Chuckling to yourself at your own self indulgence you turn to leave the battle ground. Reward indeed! You consider yourself lucky to have survived the encounter.

Still, you wistfully think about what you would ask for if this had been in the days of kings and queens and damsels in distress. If this had been an old Earth dragon and you had just saved the only child of a wealthy monarch you would now be granted a boon.

Hmmm, what in the galaxy would you ask for?

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[442]

You engage in ship-to-ship combat, throwing everything you have at the enemy, and are doing rather well — until the reinforcements arrive. Before you know what's happening, you find yourself surrounded and the order to surrender is blasting at you from your ship's intercom. You have no choice but to comply.

"Well, Spacer! We didn't expect to see you here again. Obviously you didn't believe me when I warned you not to return," gloats the same captain you encountered the last time you were caught. You groan inwardly while you wait for him to pass sentence. In space, there is neither the time nor the inclination for the niceties of a real trial.

"Since you are a known criminal we will have to deal with you a bit more harshly this time," he announces. "Take half the cargo you find below," he instructs his lieutenant. Turning back to you he glares at you fiercely, "If you have any sort of mind loss and decide to try again, I warn you that you will lose everything. Think about it, smuggler."

He does a quick about face and leaves with his crew and half of your cargo. You stand there speechless.

The intercom squeaks harshly at you, jolting you from your trance. "You will return the same way you came, smuggler. We will follow until you are outside the Boundary where you belong."

True to his word, he escorts you back to the Boundary and waits with weapons poised until you are safely through. This leaves you in the trisector containing the Nine Worlds, but outside the Boundary. Further attempts to run the Boundary now would be useless. However, if you can improve your ship's combat abilities, you may wish to try again in the future.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[443]

Your actions have a disruptive effect on the grey substance, while you are able to avoid coming into contact with it. With some difficulty you find your way off the lower decks of the wreck and back into daylight.

Along the way, you find a small puddle of a different liquid, a reddish substance with an oily smell. You test it cautiously, and discover that it is anti-inertial lubricant, or "Super Slip." You look for the source of the fluid and discover a cracked-open tank in the wreckage that still retains half its contents. With equipment from your ship, you have no trouble drawing this valuable compound, one unit's worth, into a cargo bay.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[444]

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 searched other planets 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."

"Why?" you had asked, totally perplexed.

"Because the Directives demand that they do so," was the infuriating reply.

"Couldn't you 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 line of defensive buoys the same question. People who live in glass houses. . . .

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?" the Core retorts. "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 ✂

[445]

You are directed to an underground walkway that leads from the spaceport to the colony's central dome.

The underground walkway ends just inside the dome. The entrance is unguarded, so you walk in. The city is an impressive sight. The buildings are all spherical, and of different sizes and colors. The largest buildings are in the center of the dome, surrounded by smaller ones near the edges.

You notice that a Darscian is motioning for you to come to a red spherical building over to your right. You enter the building and talk to the four-armed golden-furred creature.

"Hello," you say.

"Hello," he answers. "Welcome to Ioreth Colony. My name is Erdis."

"I am terribly sorry for my violent actions when I landed here," you explain, "I was poisoned by a flower. . ."

"Try to put the acts of aggression out of your mind," Erdis suggests, "You must be calm."

"You mean you're not angry?"

"Angry? We are sorry that you were sick. You will be safe inside the dome."

"Uh. . . thank you." Of course, the Darscians aren't upset, since it is not in their nature to feel hostile emotions. Nevertheless, Erdis's total lack of fear and anger is a little unsettling. It makes you feel even more guilty. There is a long pause as neither of you is quite sure what to say next. Erdis takes out a brush and starts grooming the fur on his arms.

"Why didn't you answer my radio signal?" you ask. "I tried to contact the spaceport before I landed, but no one answered."

"Oh." Erdis seems a little embarrassed. "We couldn't hear you. Our radio equipment is broken."

"Broken?"

"Yes. A recent alien visitor got sick the same as you and destroyed our radio station."

You talk with Erdis for a while longer, and learn that the building you are in is the alien receiving center, where alien visitors are welcomed to Ioreth Colony. You ask some questions about the colony, and come up with three possible activities to pursue:

(7DLQR8) (3 phases) Trade commodities with Ioreth's colonists.

⟨7TLSRW⟩ (5 phases) Learn how Ioreth Colony was constructed.

⟨JDZQ58⟩ (7 phases) Travel to an outpost deep in Ioreth's wilderness, where the Darscians are studying the native animal life.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[446]

"Computer," you call out as your ship emerges from hyperspace. "Give me a readout on the planet dead ahead."

A moment passes before you receive the information.

"Dead seems to be the word, Boss. Readings indicate the surface is primarily ice and the atmosphere has no oxygen at all. The temperature is subzero across the entire planet. There's no sign of life anywhere."

The computer's report is not at all encouraging. You are puzzled as to why Vanessa Chang would put such a planet on her map. But, try as you might, you can find nothing of value here. Perhaps if you knew what to look for. . . You decide to abort the landing procedure for now and go on to another planet.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[447]

Lateral Liaison hasn't changed a bit. It's still the same: shiny, pristine, and visually confusing. You tell the receptionist that you're here to see Dr. Schottky.

When the good doctor appears he heartily embraces you, congratulating you on the successful completion of your mission.

"So where is the ship?" he asks, smiling broadly.

"Er, I haven't exactly got it yet," is your uncomfortable reply.

His smile fades just a bit but he brightens again as he says, "Uh, so you were only able to bring in Silverbeard? Not to worry, without his leadership, we will soon be able to capture the ship."

"Well, um, I don't have him yet, either."

Doctor Schottky looks decidedly unhappy.

"Why have you returned here? Don't you know you may be compromising your mission?" he asks sternly.

You agree that it wasn't the wisest course of action for you to take, and you turn to go.

"Captain," the doctor calls to you before you leave.

"Yes?" you answer.

"Remember what we told you before about how to attract the pirate? Just keep a full cargo hold and constantly try to improve your ship's capabilities. You have the distinct advantage of being able to land on many planets and utilize their technologies while Silverbeard's ship stays the same. Don't give up — if anyone can beat the wily villain, you can."

Smiling, you feel much more confident than before, and you leave the office with a spring in your step and a song on your lips. Needless to say, you get several odd looks as you pass by people in the hallway.

You may select this option again.

❖ STOP ❖

[448]

The planet Cathedral is not easy to find. Its primary star system, a distinctive binary of yellow-white dwarfs, does not appear at the coordinates listed on your star map. Cathedral's stars, like all stars, drift slowly relative to the average galactic motion, but in Cathedral's case the drift is abnormally large. It takes five days of searching and scanning under conventional thrust to relocate the system.

Cathedral is a world of beauty. The light of its twin white suns, scattering through ice clouds high in the atmosphere, creates vivid rosettes of color when viewed from the warm surface. Fragile reddish ferns and trees are the dominant plants, sharing the dryer continents with grasses that grow in fields of blue and yellow.

But Cathedral is also a world of ruin. Of the Ghost Worlds, it is said, none has more ghosts than Cathedral. The humans that still live there call it the World the Gods Abandoned. All this you have heard from the spacefarers of Wellmet, who avoid the place.

There is only one landing port on Cathedral, though it looks from orbit as though there were once many more. Homing in on the only radio signals you can find, you land on the one serviceable artificial surface in the vicinity, near a small complex of crumbling concrete buildings. Nearby are large warehouses, some of them partly fallen but others intact. It is midday here, not oppressively warm, and nine or ten people are about. Your landing has attracted some attention among them; they stand and watch from among the warehouses.

Since the people do not seem inclined to approach your ship, you walk toward them to meet halfway. This excites them a bit, and they jabber to each other in a tongue that isn't quite Earth Standard. One of the younger ones strides out to greet you. You notice he is dressed in rough-textured homespun garments and carries both a hand laser and a homemade knife.

"Welcome, Astronaut. We are the spaceport folks and I am the speaker of your language that I know," says the youth. "My name is named Josuel. If trade is your journey, I'm the wheel and deal. It's good, traders are often showing up rarely." He grins as you struggle to sort out his words.

"Perhaps I can trade, if not now then on a later trip," you say carefully. "Tell me about this world." Josuel has to take a few moments to sort through your words as well. He seems quite proud to be able to speak with you at all. You gather that the other people here no longer communicate in Earth Standard.

"World? This world? This is no world, for why no one lives here. We are the no one. Long ago lived the ones that pray except for all the rest, they cried and there no more ships. Thataway the cities were, fell over" — he points in the direction of the major ruins in the area — "but no no-one anymore. People are trees men" — he points toward the densest forests — "we wheel and deal. Or is your visit for the Prophet?" Josuel pauses, a bit winded.

Further conversation reveals the following possible courses of action on Cathedral:

⟨PGBEYM⟩ (3 phases) Trade with the spaceport people.

⟨9GDEQM⟩ (4 phases) Explore the ruins, which Josuel claims are uninhabited.

⟨PWBGYE⟩ (4 phases) Go into the jungles where most of the people live and talk with them, hiring Josuel as interpreter.

⟨9WDGQE⟩ (3 phases) Examine one ruin of particular interest: the remains of a spaceship that Josuel says once carried the gods away and brought them back.

⟨LGRE4M⟩ (3 phases) Speak with the Disciple who lives near the spaceport to learn more of the history of Cathedral.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[449]

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

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

Of course! You are supposed to be building a tri-axis drive. You need the drive to go looking for Silverbeard's base on the other side of the Density Barrier.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[450]

The Moiran Metal Works continues to be the bustling industrial compound you remember from your first visit. You skip the tour this time, and proceed directly to a conference with the Director of Sales.

"I'm sorry to report that we are presently sold out, sir. A new production run is beginning, however, and more Phase Steel should be available for sale within a couple of months. In order not to waste your time while you're here, why not come with me and look over the newest artificial aquarium watering systems, just perfected by our hydroponics division. . ."

You gracefully decline the offer. You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[451]

You are picking up a transmission from some ship but cannot get a clear voice. Repeatedly you try to establish contact, but all you hear is a lot of static and a few sentence fragments.

Then you hear something new. Someone else is transmitting, apparently to the first ship. Why, they don't even know you exist and can hear what they are saying!

From what you can make out, you seem to be listening to a rendezvous between smugglers. Through the static, you piece together what you hear and come up with the following information:

One of the ships has just returned from a Human colony planet named Cathedral and has brought a huge shipment of Fiber from there. The colony planet is located just outside the Boundary, but there was no trouble with the Space Patrol.

The static becomes too much and you switch the radio off. You think about what you have learned.

✂ STOP ✂

[452]

You approach the chrome doors that lead into the Lateral Liaison section and see that the elaborate alarm system is, despite wishful thinking on your part, intact.

The smooth black surface is accented with tiny red points of light that move in geometric patterns resembling a computer grid. You hope this means you can disrupt its functioning somehow.

Since you made it a point to return when there aren't many people around, you have a chance at forcing your way inside the sector and learning potentially valuable information without being detected. You quickly take stock of your equipment and decide to attempt to disarm the door alarm.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[453]

You fly your ship to the Firthians' transportation platform, on the other side of the planet from where you originally landed. There the Firthians show you the particle catalyst, ready to be loaded onto your ship. It is a large complex-looking machine which will barely fit into one of your cargo bays. They are prepared to trade it to you for 2 Computers, 2 Fiber, 1 Crystals and 1 Tools.

Since you were expecting to see a chemical substance, you ask about the mechanics of the device and are told that the catalyst itself is stored deep inside the machine where you can't see it. The outer part of the machine is needed to generate a special energy field that holds the particle catalyst in a protective cocoon, where it is protected from outside forces. You can't just carry the particle catalyst in a vial since the catalyst would cause a violent reaction and the vial would explode. The machine allows you to get the particle catalyst when you need it by dispensing the catalyst through a shielded opening in the side of the machine. They warn you to be very careful when you use the device or else the resulting reactions could be violent and unpredictable.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[454]

The turbulence in the lower levels is incredible. You are using all of your skill to keep the ship intact.

The ship's alarms signal an oncoming storm even worse than the one you managed to survive earlier. You shudder to even think about what constitutes inclement weather when you are already in the midst of a tornado. From the computer scan, you really don't want to find out.

By using every trick in the book, plus a few no one else has thought of yet, you barely manage to skirt the storm.

Hey, you are actually getting the hang of things down under!

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[455]

After wandering around for some time through the completely deserted rooms and corridors of what was obviously once an occupied space station, you learn several things. First of all, the station is extremely old — your ship's computer sets its age at 50-75,000 years — and therefore not the product of any spacefaring race which you've met before.

Secondly, the interior seems to have been built for a race which had no need to sit or lie down, or else spent all of its time in zero gravity. The navigation and engine facilities have controls on all six walls, access being provided by bars and ladders arranged in all directions around the room's center.

Most of the satellite's interior, the control and defense facilities aside, is taken up by empty storage rooms, of similar capacity to your ship's cargo bays. In addition, there is loading machinery suitable for making transfers from the station to a ship (like yours) and vice versa; that will certainly help to save on the manual labor.

At this point, you can perform the following operations: you may load any cargo presently stored in the station's storage rooms into any empty cargo bay on your ship, you may unload any tradable cargo presently on your ship into an empty storage room, and you may, if you so choose, eject the contents of any of the station's storage rooms into space. The CGM will provide you with a list of the station's current contents.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[456]

Wellmet has no central commodities trading concern. Instead, there are a handful of independent commodities exchanges. Following suggestions from residents, customs officers, and handbills posted on the walls, you track down a few of the trade houses to see where the best deals are. The first, a huge storage facility on the outskirts of the city, seems promising: it is currently offering three units of Munitions in exchange for each unit of Fuel. Another, smaller but located right near the spaceport, offers one Munitions per unit of Iron. Continuing your search, you find deals of one Munitions per one Medicine, three Munitions per one Radioactives, and one Munitions per one Culture. You begin to see a pattern. You return to the first trade center and inquire, "Why is everyone offering Munitions and nothing else?"

"Current surplus," is the answer. "We're overstocked with the stuff."

"Why?" you ask. "Is it manufactured locally?"

"No, it's brought in by the shipload by old 'Slow Eddie' Falstaff. Every two weeks he hauls in with a shipload of Munitions. He found some secret source out in the Pleiades or thereabouts, about twenty years ago, and he's been like clockwork since."

"Why doesn't he shift to a more profitable commodity?"

"Slow Eddie? Why? He's got it made. An explorer could search a lifetime and not find a rich vein like that. Probably knows the coordinates of some world where it grows on trees, or the natives trade it for air. Can't get more profitable than that."

You concede the point, although Slow Eddie's career doesn't sound like what you expected the life of a successful interstellar trader to be like. However, the whole economy can't be based on trading Munitions around, no matter how much Eddie hauls in. "Where," you ask, "can I deal for commodities and goods other than Munitions?"

"Not here," is the invariable answer. "Maybe in the Family markets, if you can get a foot in the door." However, one trader you meet tells you, "I hear the Torrence Family is selling commodities on the open market now. You might want to try their spread." If you do so, plot option:

⟨4FXIC7⟩ (3 phases) Trade cargo in the Family market.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[457]

Unfortunately, your weapons aren't powerful enough to blast open the hatch. It must be made out of pretty strong stuff.

Your visit need not be a total loss, though. There is some pretty good radioactive ore in the crater which you can carry away in your cargo bays. You therefore have the following option:

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

✂ STOP ✂

[458]

Welcome back to Corbis, the planet with the cities but without the builders! The lack of intelligent life is belied by the eerie presence of empty cities filled with advanced technology. Only the semi-intelligent cats are present to appreciate this apparent contradiction.

Your options are the same as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[459]

Not only is the red garbed squirrel a fierce opponent but he also has the decided advantage of being able to do battle standing up.

You, however, find the tunnel to be very low and are forced to defend yourself in a rather bent-over fashion. It is not at all dignified.

You realize this cannot go on much longer. After making a succession of offensive feints you drive the vermin back far enough to give yourself some running space and scramble up the caved-in shaft wall.

Breathing heavily from the exertion, you find yourself back on the surface, safe, if not completely sound, from your adventure. You will need four days' rest before resuming your travels; therefore, this option has taken seven phases instead of three.

✂ STOP ✂

[460]

Your arrival on Leucothea is rather an anti-climax compared to your earlier visit. Your fellow Disciples watch you from the corners of their eyes but make no move toward you. They know you left here before without either being arrested as a heretic or hailed as the greatest prophet since the Founders, and they do not know what to make of you.

When you try to arrange a meeting with Lord Highest Disciple Efrigath you are told he is in meetings for the next week and is not able to see anyone. You can see you will get no more help here so you leave.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[461]

You are every bit as impressed by the night skies of Gazan on your return there as you originally were on your first visit. It may not make much difference to the phlegmatic Darscians, but the perpetually burning skies fill you with an incredible sense of wonder.

Your options are the same as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[462]

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

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

- Corin Stoneseecker, seated to your right, would be under the drinking age back in the Nine Worlds, and knows it. The kid reeks so much of curiosity, fear, and inexperience that you wonder if it might be an act. You suspect that Corin has more talent and training kept hidden than the others have showing. Valentine asks Corin, “Is Stoneseecker a surname or a title?” Corin replies that it’s both.

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

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

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

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

When your turn comes up, you introduce yourself as Professor Dambroke and hope no one has noticed the notebook you’ve brought with you.

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

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

Clerc smiles and says, “So, what do you think it’s like out there?”

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

At this point, all of the other players’ characters are with yours in the Slippery Silver Tavern. You should now introduce yourself in character, ask any questions you wish of the other characters, and discuss any points you wish about your experiences so far or

your expectations for the future. Remember that you're not required to tell anybody anything, and that you may lie if you feel that you should.

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

✧ STOP ✧

[463]

Cathedral was an interesting planet to visit but you have the sensation that you forgot something. Hmm, now what could it be? You are usually so good at remembering this sort of thing, too.

Of course, now you recall. You should have spoken with the disciple on Cathedral to get a lead on the course the Founders took in their ship, *Archangel*.

"Well, I guess I'll just have to head back there before I can accomplish my mission," you think sheepishly to yourself.

✧ STOP ✧

[464]

Although you're not quite sure how you got there, Feldo's internal storeroom is an impressive sight. Organic clones are coming and going in a steady stream, traveling to and from a dozen different places carrying all manner of equipment.

You swallow uneasily when you realize your ship and equipment would have ended up here if you had not answered Feldo's riddle correctly.

You ask Feldo how he is able to take care of so many items.

"Oh, pretty much the same way anyone maintains a lot of stuff, some of it rusts, some of it loses power and some of it is still usable. Would you be interested in looking around and taking some of this stuff off my hands, so to speak?"

Feldo has the equipment available for trade at the following prices:

Pressor beam — 1 Fiber, 1 Iron

Black cloud — 1 Tools, 1 Fluids

Anti-energy field — 1 Computers, 1 Food

Curvature inductor — 1 Fiber, 1 Fluids, 1 Crystals, 1 Culture

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

✧ STOP ✧

[465]

You cannot prevent the fluid from flowing closer to you, and your weapons don't seem to have much effect on it. You can repel parts of it, but the rest simply flows around another way. By the time you make it to the daylight, which causes the fluid to shrink back, it has scalded you several times.

You realize that it wasn't you that attracted the grey slime, it was the metal content of the radiation shielding of your environmental suit. By the time you are back on your ship, the suit is heavily damaged and you are in danger of radiation exposure. You also have a few burns on your skin, wherever the corrosive substance touched, but these are minor. You do greater injury to yourself scrubbing away the residue; in some places you scrub until you bleed.

Before you can go outside again on Arthlan, you must repair your radiation shielding; this will take you three days. Due to these repairs, this option has taken eight phases instead of five.

✂ STOP ✂

[466]

Walking along a range of hills halfway between their base and summit, you find a small lake cupped in the reaching arms of the highest of the hills, fed by a gushing mountain stream. You walk around it and continue on, but as you turn for one last look you see a strange rainbow pattern, a glinting of the sunlight refracted under the water. You return to the lake and kneel by its edge. At first you see only clear water, but as you focus your eyes on the depths you can barely perceive edges and surfaces suspended within. You plunge your arm into the water and your hand closes around a small stone. It's a raw Crystal, the most flawless you have ever seen. Within a few minutes you confirm that the entire lake is filled with Crystals of the highest quality, almost to the surface of the water. You mark the site, return to your ship, and fly back to the shore of the lake. Soon you have collected all the Crystals, a whole unit's worth, while the lake, replenished constantly by the stream, is as beautiful as ever. You search for other lakes similarly endowed with Crystals, but you find no others.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[467]

The gun and robot are too much for you. You are severely injured while the enemy remains unharmed. You retreat back to your ship to treat your wounds.

If you want to get closer to the alien vessel, you will need to improve your attack capabilities enough to damage the gun and robot, and you will need to improve your defense capabilities enough to avoid getting hurt yourself.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[468]

You are not entirely sure who the monarch-like person is on the front of the box, but you have decided your next velvet painting will be from this kit you brought with you.

The picture will show a male human in a sequined outfit, standing on a stage and lit by a spotlight. His hair appears to be slicked back except for one lock that curls down over his forehead. The title of the picture reads, "The King."

It will make a nice addition to your collection that includes a child with huge eyes, perhaps a genetic defect, and some equally pathetic-looking puppies and kittens. You don't care what anyone says — you like them.

As you open the little plastic jar of electric blue, you hear the computer speaking.

"Boss, 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 Ethnar.

You write this new piece of information down, then get back to more important matters, like finishing painting the eyes of your latest (soon-to-be) masterpiece.

✂ STOP ✂

[469]

You have always enjoyed the thrill of anticipation as you approach a new planet and Ascension is no exception. You sense the challenge of the unknown awaiting.

Boy, you really admire the early pioneers and envy their way of life. Having to chart unknown planets completely on their own with none of the sophisticated equipment that you now have, and actually discovering for the first time new continents, new oceans, new plants and animals — especially large, hairy, protein-ingesting animals with big teeth. . .

Er. . . maybe it's just as well you can run a geophysical scan safely from space. You instruct the computer to do just that.

The scan reveals a planet Earth-like in its land/water ratio as well as its breathable atmosphere. At present you are the planet's only moon. There is a great deal of mineral wealth to be found in the crust of the planet and its surface is teeming with life on both land and sea.

There is no high-tech civilization to be found, and you land your ship in the temperate zone of the northern hemisphere purely on a whim. It doesn't hurt that your instruments indicate a breathable atmosphere, comfortable temperature, and no dangerous microbes present in the air. You decide to take advantage of these conditions and stretch your legs outside the ship while there is some sunlight left in the day.

The field in which you've landed seems to be quiet enough, although you are a bit startled by the large insectoid creatures that are grazing at the far end. There's something unnerving about the way they keep bobbing their heads down for a bite of grass and then munch away while staring at you, especially the short one with the torn wing casing. In fact, this hypnotic effect leads you to decide that the best course of action is to get a good night's sleep and do some real exploring in the morning.

Continued 

You wake with the sunrise and while you eat your favorite breakfast of Yummy cereal and bananas (inexplicably, the fruit has been a rather unappetizing shade of lavender lately), you glance at the outside monitor. You are surprised to see one of the creatures you spotted last night just a short distance from the ship. It is the small guy with the torn wing and it seems to be looking for you. Not being the sort to keep anyone waiting, you get your survey equipment and head outside.

Since the preliminary report on the planet suggests that the large creatures are intelligent and have a low-technology civilization, you approach carefully, with your empty hands held out in the universal gesture of peace.

Taking this opportunity to study the alien, you note that it resembles a praying mantis. It walks on four legs while carrying another set elevated in front of it; the head, topped by long antennae, features transversely mounted jaws and protruding compound eyes. Overall it stands about eight feet high, although its natural posture seems to have the legs in a somewhat crouched position. It is golden-green in color, darker on the dorsal surfaces and lighter on the ventral.

The creature prattles softly, tilting its head first to one side then to the other as if it is examining you in turn. You carefully step closer to it but are brought up short as if you had walked into a stone wall. It is projecting some kind of protective field! Suddenly the creature bounds away. Apparently it has had enough of the first contact.

You spend the rest of the day examining the surrounding area, taking samples and studying the varied life forms. You note that it is getting late and turn back towards the ship when you see something that stops you dead in your tracks.

Following behind you is the little alien you've dubbed "Monty" (after a diminutive uncle you were fond of as a child). That in itself is not so strange, it's that the little guy seems to have trailed after you like an overprotective mother tidying up behind you. As you retrace your steps (so to speak), you can find nothing to show that you had passed this way before. Everything has been neatly straightened, smoothed, and put back into place.

Monty is now following a bit more closely and you glance back now and again to see the remarkable work he is doing to restore the path to the way it was before you and he traveled on it. You try to approach him but he retreats each time and finally you give up and return to the ship for the evening.

You spend the rest of the week exploring the nearby terrain.

You now have the following options to choose from:

⟨GHEAM6⟩ (3 phases) Assay and attempt to exploit Ascension's mineral resources.

⟨WHGAE6⟩ (14 phases, or 7 with Universal Translator or Telepathy) Attempt to relocate and establish communications with Monty, who you are convinced is intelligent.

✂ STOP ✂

[470]

Your third improvement, at long last! You have waited a long time for this moment and you relish every second. You lovingly go over every square inch of your beautiful ship. You can hardly wait to take this beauty back to Norstar and show it off to Marc and your Tekkie friends. You give yourself a well-deserved pat on the back.

Now all you have to do is get past the Boundary. Is your ship good enough to outfight and outrun the Space Patrol? There's only one way to find out.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[471]

You have no trouble at all bringing your ship through a maximum-efficiency approach and right down to the center of the landing pad. Automatic machinery takes over from there, moving your ship into a nearby hangar and beginning the process of refueling it and cleaning the drive units. You step outside, having been informed that the atmosphere and climate are within your tolerances, and are immediately greeted by two good-looking humanoid men, who step forward and shake you hand.

"Well done! We wish to extend our greetings and congratulations," says one of them, in Earth Standard. "Welcome to Ouabain. I am called Rikan."

"Uh, hello." you say. "How — "

"You've got lots of questions for us, we know," says the other one. "So why don't we all just step into the lounge and talk for a few minutes, before you move into the hotel. You may call me Rissell."

You talk for several hours, in fact, and in that time you learn a thing or two about Ouabain and the Ouabainese.

The first thing you ask is how they can speak your language so well. It turns out that Earth Standard was originally taught to them several hundred years ago by a human trader named Vanessa Chang, who stopped there on her way to explore the inner reaches of the galaxy. The Ouabainese thought the language to be so challenging and convoluted that they began speaking it themselves. Soon it became a common second language on the planet.

Next you ask about this interesting game and puzzle interest of theirs.

"It is more than a simple interest," Rikan corrects you. "It is a way of life we have chosen."

When you ask if he can explain why, he tells you a very interesting story.

"Over fifty thousand years ago, the Ouabainese people were fixated on an unhealthy philosophy. We were only interested in working and slaving away at our jobs, never in stimulating our minds and improving our ability to meet challenging situations. We were a very dull people.

"Then one day, we were visited by a wonderful race of alien beings who showed us the error of our ways. They brought into our lives the First Game. We became absorbed in the play and strategy and began to change our outlook on what we should be accomplishing as a race. Soon, we began devising our own games and puzzles and learned the thrill of game design. It changed our entire way of life, obviously for the better."

"Obviously," you quickly agree.

"So now we incorporate games and puzzles into every aspect of our lives, from collecting garbage (some people come up with such challenging puzzles for opening their receptacles that they don't get their trash picked up for weeks!) to running our school system. It is the only way we know."

You find all of this to be utterly fascinating but the last thing you learn is the most bizarre of all.

When you ask them if they ever get tired of playing, the answer surprises you.

"Yes, from time to time. We all realize there will be periods when we will find that nothing interests us. It is then that we dream of the coming of the One True Game Player, who will bring the Ultimate Game. When we receive this game, we will be able to play it for all time and not grow tired of it. The Visitors from long ago promised us they would send this Player to us when we were ready to appreciate the gift. We have been preparing ever since for the arrival of the Gamer.

Your two new friends excuse themselves, explaining they are late for a game session. They give you a rundown on the options available to you in the city, which are the following:

⟨MPNBJY⟩ (3 phases) Go to the market and see what the Ouabainese are willing to trade with you.

⟨6PPBBY⟩ (6 phases) The Ouabainese make the finest Synthetic Genius in the galaxy at the Special Institute for Learning. You may visit the S.I.L. and see what you can find out.

✂ STOP ✂

[472]

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. Unfortunately, just as you are about to implement the plan, a huge storm appears out of nowhere.

You still don't have the experience to handle one of these monsters and you run for the safety of the upper levels.

Better luck next time.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[473]

Digging at the site of Vanessa Chang's crash, you uncover the skeleton of the crew member mentioned in the shuttlecraft's log on Fiara. The skeleton is buried with a few sentimental items: a silver charm, a holographic ID tag, a miniature tombplate, and a journal. The tag identifies the crew member as Walter Friday, the ship's navigator. The picture depicts a handsome man in his mid-twenties with light brown hair and blue eyes. The charm is an intricately carved seven-pointed star. The tombplate reads "Here lies Walt Friday, our navigator and dear friend. He guided us to the depths of the galaxy, never ceasing in his search for new realms. His search is ended now; he has found the final realm."

The journal contains a precise mathematical record of the shuttle's travels, along with many hand-written calculations and scribbled notes. According to the notes, the shuttle's journey began on a planet called Gazan. It was on Gazan that the crew was forced to abandon their main ship (the journal doesn't say why), and take off in the lifeboat, a slow, minimally-equipped shuttlecraft. Captain Chang decided to head for the Darscian colony on Fiara, a three year journey.

Since the shuttlecraft's computers were not designed to plot courses for interstellar travel, Navigator Friday had to do all the course calculations manually. You find it hard to believe that he could do this, given the complexity of the task. The amount of information needed to plot an interstellar course is so great, and the mathematics so difficult, that you have never even heard of anyone doing it without a computer. However, the journal is proof that it can be done. Right in the middle of the book are pages and pages of complex computations you could not even begin to follow. Friday finished the math and set the shuttlecraft on the proper course for Fiara.

With the craft headed in the right direction, the entire crew went into suspended animation, a deep sleep that would enable them to survive the three year voyage to Fiara. Unfortunately, when they woke up they did not find themselves near Fiara. An unexpected change in the interstellar drift had caused the shuttlecraft to veer off-course. The three-year journey had taken them, not to Fiara, but to Koursh. Undaunted, Friday repeated his calculations, recomputing everything from the craft's new location. He estimated that it would take another two years to get from Koursh to Fiara. Alas, the crew could not just change the ship's course and go back into hibernation. Nearly all the ship's supplies had been used up getting to Koursh. Chang and her shipmates needed food, fuel, and other resources in order to continue their flight.

With little choice, they had to try to land on Koursh to scavenge the needed supplies. At that point in the journal there is yet another set of mind-boggling calculations. Friday knew the landing would not be easy. Koursh's wobbly rotation and shifting magnetic fields present quite a challenge. However, Friday was able to solve those equations too. He figured out the exact angles at which to penetrate Koursh's atmosphere and descend towards the surface.

Unluckily, those angles were the last thing Friday wrote in his journal. The crew was totally unprepared for the energy-consuming aliens. The shuttlecraft crashed, just as you did, on this rather inhospitable radioactive world. Friday was killed in the crash.

Since the journal represents a unique record of this portion of Vanessa Chang's journey back from the galactic arm, you make a copy of it for your records. You won't take the original; you intend to return it, along with all the rest of Friday's personal effects, to his grave. You realize you have already been disrespectful in disturbing the ill-fated navigator's remains. However, you don't think Friday would have been deeply offended by your brief intrusion. In fact, you feel certain that had you and he known each other, you would have been friends.

Because of the precision of the data in the journal, you now know the exact position of Gazan, where the shuttlecraft's journey began. Gazan's coordinates place it in trisector 369 on your map. In addition, you know the exact place on Gazan where Vanessa Chang and her crew abandoned their main ship. To visit that place, you can choose the following option when you are on the planet Gazan.

(BGYE9M) (6 phases) Go to the place where Vanessa Chang abandoned her ship.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[474]

You move your ship adjacent to the standing metal cylinder. You don't know how dangerous the artifact might be after thousands of years, but you want to have as fast an escape route as possible.

You start out very slowly and carefully, examining the outside. It appears that your initial hypothesis was correct: the top of the cylinder was once at ground level, and has been exposed as the ground around it eroded away, just like the nearby lava pillars. You shudder involuntarily the first time you touch the metal, but rationally you know your fears are exaggerated. If volcanoes, earthquakes, intense heat and absolute cold haven't disturbed it during five hundred centuries of Arthlan's erratic orbit, what is the touch of your hand going to do? Still, you sweat a little as you scratch off a tiny sample of the metal with a stylus, and are glad to use your desire to analyze it as an excuse to return to your ship.

A simple mass-spectrographic analysis settles one point right away. The alloy of the tube is composed partly of rare metals that don't appear naturally on Arthlan or anywhere in this system. Therefore, even if Arthlan was once inhabited by intelligent beings, they couldn't have built this artifact without at least some small help from extrastellar aliens.

The next day, you climb to the top of the cylinder, rigging your ropes so that you can get back down to your ship as quickly as possible if it becomes necessary. You instruct your computer to monitor every sensing device on the ship, even ones that are normally used only in deep space, and alert you to the slightest anomaly. Then you turn your attention to the flat plate atop the standing tube. Wiping the dust away, you see that it's made of the same durable alloy, but it is not as smooth as the cylinder. A hairline crack makes a square about a meter on a side, and in the center of the square is a recessed handle made to be gripped and pulled upward. Its contoured grip might have been designed for your own hand, except that it's a little larger.

You grasp the handle and pull. You feel the release of a mechanism somewhere below and slowly the hatch opens.

You look down the dark hole beneath the hatch, a meter in diameter, as deep as infinity. Resolutely you anchor ropes and begin to descend.

You reach an opening into a larger chamber and take stock of your surroundings. The shaft you descended is on one corner of the ceiling; on the opposite corner, on the floor, another shaft descends. The second descending shaft is not empty, however; a cluster of cables runs along its side and divides at the top to connect to a mechanism above. The mechanism is a transparent octahedron suspended in the very center of the cubic chamber by wires.

Read immediately the next piece of text the CGM gave you.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[475]

Upon your return, you find that little has changed on the lush and green planet called Supa, other than a somewhat increased level of business among those firms dealing with the space trade. It seems that more and more people are leaving the Boundary and finding their way into space, and many of them are winding up on Supa.

Your options are the same as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[476]

You cannot help yourself. You are too wrapped up in the lure of the other world, and so you place the helmet on your head. The jolt of energy is much stronger than anything you have ever felt before and your mind is incapable of handling the input. You fall, unconscious, to the floor, and experience massive convulsions. The thrashing is what saves your life, however, because you dislodge the helmet from your head during a series of agonizing contortions. You also manage to bruise most of your muscles and break two large bones.

Lucky you.

You lay unconscious for three days before you come to and drag yourself back to the ship where you get immediate, and life-saving, medical attention from sick-bay. Another four days pass before you are healthy enough to resume your explorations.

Maybe now you will think twice about playing with alien artifacts.

Due to the time you need to heal, this option has taken twelve phases instead of five.

✂ STOP ✂

[477]

After a brief but violent battle, you send the dog away yelping and licking its wounds. You feel a rush of relief and look yourself over to make sure you haven't sustained any serious injuries.

Unfortunately, you have sustained serious injuries. There is blood all over you, and it's not the dog's. For the first time you realize how close the animal came to getting hold of your throat, and you feel nauseous and dizzy. After lying still for a few minutes, you worry that the animal may come back. You manage to stand up and limp back to the spaceport. The natives, unable to render any medical assistance, watch as you climb into your ship to recuperate. It takes you two days to recover from your injuries.

When you first contemplated spacefaring and the dangers it would present, you certainly considered the possibility of encountering dangerous creatures. Somehow, though, you didn't imagine being mauled by the descendants of abandoned pets on a human colony world. You resolve to improve your capabilities for personal defense. You can't be safe in space, but you can at least make sure you don't die in a manner that will cause the patrons of the Slippery Silver Tavern back on Wellmet to laugh themselves silly.

Because of the time needed to recuperate, this option has taken six phases instead of four.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[478]

The first thing you learn about the spacers and smugglers of Wellmet is that the more experienced they are, the less they talk.

The best of the pilots are the true smugglers: the ones who run cargo in and out of the Boundary. The run demands top-notch equipment and a crew that doesn't make mistakes. A proven smuggler is a valuable person on Wellmet. Most smugglers end up joining one of the Families — not working for them as agents, but becoming full-fledged Family members. Thus you rarely see them outside the Family enclaves, except when they're out to negotiate for cargo or gear for their ships, and then they don't like to be interrupted.

Pilots without the hardware or constitution for the high-stress Boundary routes make runs between Wellmet and the Ghost Worlds. Unlike the Boundary run, where there are never enough ships to fill all the orders, fringe hauling is a very competitive business. Many of the routes are secret, known to only one spacer or Family. A fringe runner never reveals the coordinates of a market world. When a spacer retires, the secrets get passed down, or sold to the highest bidder.

Fringe haulers are the most common operators on Wellmet. Some of them are self-employed and some of them work Family routes for Family pay. All of them share the characteristic of being instinctively secretive. Some of them will gladly converse with you about technical matters but none will say anything about business.

The third type of spacer is the Prospector. Prospectors are often pilots of small or obsolete ships that can't support themselves in cargo runs. Instead, they explore new star systems trying for the chance to strike it rich. All it takes is one good find — an alien race, a new product, a new trade market, even an isolated Ghost World colony waiting to be rediscovered — to make a prospector rich. One such prospector, you learn, is Slow Eddie Falstaff. Twenty years ago he found a source of Munitions — he isn't saying where — and he's been hauling in steady profits ever since.

You happen to spot old Slow Eddie at a commodities exchange house, trying to negotiate a better price for a load of Munitions. When he gives up and stomps out the door, you try to start up a conversation with him. He ignores you and heads back toward his ship. You follow, and he ignores you even harder. You realize that he is nearly falling-down drunk. Finally he staggers into his ship and looks like he's about to slam the hatch. On impulse, you follow him right inside the ship, and when he slams the hatch you sit down in the dusty co-pilot's seat.

"Huh? What're you doin' here?" he grumbles. "Thought I told you to check those fuel levels. Do I hafta do everything myself?"

"Mr Falstaff," you begin, "I want your advice."

"Advice? I've got some advice. Change that outfit you're wearing. Attracts Betelgeusian Burglar Beetles with those colors. Can't have them around. Get in all the wiring." Slow Eddie drops himself like a sack of gravel into the pilot's seat. "You got that course logged yet?" he mutters as he begins to doze off.

"I need to know about space," you continue. "What the dangers are. What I should plan to do, where I should search."

"You fixin' to go off on your own, after all this time? Bad move, kid. Prospector? You want to go on the long hunt?"

"Uh. . . Yes. I know you've got to keep your secrets, but can you give me a lead? A direction?"

"Let me tell you a secret. Know how many stars are out there?"

“Yes, there are about ten thousand thou. . .”

“Neither do I, kid. Much too many. A handful of 'em like pearls in oysters, just to tempt us to dive too deep, and the rest just pretty lights. Damn useless things. Always hated 'em. Anyway, can't be a prospector. Too dangerous.”

“Why?”

“Pirates, aliens, space walls. . . gotta be crazy. Idea like that, what's your mother gonna say?”

“Tell me about the pirates. And what are space walls?”

“Oh, they're mean all right. Shoot you into atoms as soon as look at you. That's the pirates. Took my cargo just last year, and just said Har, Har, Har, and off he went. Space walls are where space gets in your way. There may be two stars, right next to each other, a light year apart in normal space, but you can't go in normal space because it's too slow. So you go hyperspace, but there's a wall there, can't get through. The hyperspace twists you around all the wrong way and you end up back where you started.”

“So what do you do?”

“Listen, you don't need to know about space. I'll show you the important stuff. You gotta know how money works. Space is all just part of money, anyway. I'll draw you a picture.”

He traces a pattern in the air with his forefinger: a triangle. “This here's space,” he says, pointing out one corner. “This is the Boundary, and these are the Ghost Worlds. Here, here, and here. Wellmet's in the middle. Now, you paying attention? Over here are the haulers. Take bulk stuff to the Ghost Worlds, food and chemicals, cause they need it. Bring back rare stuff, good stuff: wine, clothes, meat, glass, chips, ship parts. Got that? Now, this corner's Space, and you've got your prospectors. Go into space, bring back space stuff: alien stuff, materials, phase steel, anti'nertial. Bring it back, sell it to the Smugglers. For Reals, that's the money, to buy the good stuff with from over that corner. OK? Now, last piece: your smugglers, over in this Boundary corner. Thay jes' take the alien stuff from space over here, swap it for bulk stuff on the Nine Worlds where it's cheap; bring back the bulk stuff to sell over there. And 'round she goes.”

“How about you?” you ask. “Where do you fit in?”

“Ha! Look over here, triangle's got a extra point sticking out!” Slow Eddie jabs his finger at a point in mid-air, then laughs as if he'd just seen you slip on a banana peel. He laughs for a full minute, and when his laughter fades, so does Eddie. He begins to snore in his seat, and you open the hatch and climb out.

✂ STOP ✂

[479]

You may not really have appreciated it when someone disabled your instruments, but a Technology Nullifier sure seemed like something to have on your own side. Now that you have succeeded in collecting its component parts — one Particle Catalyst, one Synthetic Genius, one unit each of Fuel, Tools, Iron, and Medicine — you are only too happy to build your own Nullifier. You expect that this baby will be a potent addition to your ship's defenses.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[480]

You have mastered the art of running the Boundary. Using all the resources at your disposal, you manage to slide neatly through the Boundary markers without being detected. You make it to the Nine Worlds without encountering a Patrol ship. You may now plot any actions available to you here.

✂ STOP ✂

[481]

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

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

“Get ready to take off in a hurry.”

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

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

You tell your computer to close the loading door. Then you look forlornly at the pile of debris. Will its presence look suspicious to the Riallans? You suspect not. It’s not uncommon for ships in dock to have dry waste material to unload. It’s probably a severe breach of etiquette to eject it onto the platform, but it’s not a serious offense. Sure enough, after a few hours an automatic robotic loader notices the material and hauls it away without any fuss.

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

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

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

It looks like you’re going to have to, because the Riallan isn’t leaving. You don’t know why, but there’s nothing you can do about it.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[482]

You try to take off but go nowhere. Your generator isn't producing any power, so your drives have no energy to run on.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[483]

Two hundred paces beyond where you met the serpent there is a pile of green rock your computer tells you is Warp Core, a very valuable mineral. You find one cargo unit's worth but, even after searching the entire area, you do not find any more.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[484]

Your fighting ability is clearly comparable to theirs, and they soon decide nothing can be gained by continuing the battle. They break off contact and flee.

You decide not to let this encounter ruin your trip, so off you go, exploring the desolate city, weapon at hand in case you meet any more natives.

The city seems to be deserted. The mob you encountered earlier is nowhere to be seen. The only sound you hear is your own footsteps, echoing down the empty streets. You continue exploring.

As you turn a corner you almost run into a Tralisian! You are both startled for a moment and each take the time to quickly study the other before reacting.

The alien speaks first.

"Greetings, welcome to the planet Tralis."

You have heard this before, and make no reply other than to keep your weapon at the ready. You notice the native is also wearing a translating device, slightly different from the other Tralisian's unit.

"I gather you have met the left-spinners already," the creature continues, pointedly ignoring your not-so-friendly manner.

That's it! You noticed something was different about this alien compared to the first group you encountered. This one spins to the right, while the others all spun to the left. You are not sure what this means, but it is probably important.

"I am Shearsy and I wish to apologize for the uneducated left-spinners. If you will be so kind as to follow me, I think I can show you some real hospitality."

The alien appears to be a reasonable sort, so you decide to follow. As you are traveling, Shearsy asks if you have any questions or if you would like to be shown anything.

You decide to utilize the creature's offer of instruction first and ask about the history of Tralis.

Shearsy is more than happy to comply, and this is what you learn:

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, when Tralis was a highly advanced culture, many wonderful discoveries were made by their scientists. But, alas, the Tralisians were not happy. They were planet-bound due to their physiological structure. For all of their science, they couldn't work past the problem of acceleration and the need for their bodies to be constantly spinning.

The Tralisians had another problem as well. They were split into two races, the right-spinners and the left-spinners. No one knew why, but the right-spinners were the scientifically adept segment of the population while the left-spinners had no mechanical aptitude whatsoever. Over the years, the lefties slipped to the bottom of the social ladder and eventually ended up with the menial and custodial jobs.

About seventy-five thousand years ago, the righties discovered an early form of hyperdrive. This technology would have allowed them to overcome the acceleration barrier and explore space. At the same time, however, beings from a more advanced culture landed on Tralis. These aliens were greeted as gods by the lefties, while the righties were more wary and adopted a wait-and-see attitude.

Unfortunately, the aliens encouraged the idea that they were gods, and for some unfathomable reason spurred the lefties into revolting against the righties. The aliens kept any scientifically-based device from operating while the revolt was taking place. By the time it was over, the lefties had destroyed virtually all technology and killed many of the righties. Villages were set up outside the ruined cities and occasional forays were made to seek out and destroy any righties caught in the open.

The alien-gods then left, with a few gifts and commands to their new worshippers. One of the gifts was a large supply of translators and "rituals" to activate and repair them. Another gift was more subtle.

Through means the righties still haven't worked out, the gods genetically altered the Tralisians.

Before the coming of the gods, the birth ratio of right-spinners to left-spinners was 50/50. Two righties or two lefties had an equal chance of giving birth to either a rightie or a leftie; a rightie and a leftie were not able to give birth to anything.

After the gods' interference, however, lefties and righties both gave birth in the ratio of 75% lefties to 25% righties. Upon the birth of a leftie in the city, the child would be left, so to speak, on the outskirts of the village, where the lefties would take the child in and raise it.

At some point, over the years, the righties regrouped and set up a small, hidden, high-tech society in the heart of the abandoned cities. Through forays of their own into leftie territory, they established a spy network as well as a means of collecting supplies and other things. One of the first acquisitions was a working translator. Through study and experimentation, the righties built a working prototype of the device. At length, they even made some improvements and could adapt the translator to different races.

The right-spinner even drops a hint that they may be close to discovering how the gods made the genetic changes and reversing the effects. Then those left-spinning degenerates had better watch out!

You thank Shearsy for the information and ask if there is anything else of interest about Tralis. The Tralisian says the natural radiation of the planet, while not extractable itself, has produced some extraordinary mutations in the flora. Some of the visiting races have found the sap from the large trees to be a terrific medicine.

The alien's reply interests you. You already know that medicine is a valuable commodity in the galaxy.

Your options are:

(8UHOAF) (4 phases) Learn more about the right-spinners' translator.

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

⟨4EXMCN⟩ (7 phases) Go to the left-spinner village.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[485]

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

“Boss,” interrupts your computer over your audio link, “I’m picking up. . .”

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

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

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

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

As you reach the hatch your computer has more good news. “The energy is rising, and the field is unstable. There will be an explosion in. . .”

“Shut up and listen. I want you to take off and use the anti-energy field on the mechanism in the shaft.”

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

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

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

“Good. Keep the anti-energy field on it for a while, then ease off and see what happens.”

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

“Can you tell what activated it?” you ask the computer.

“You were there. What was down there?”

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

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

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

“Why didn’t it go off with the others, then?”

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

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[486]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 4

You need to finish plotting your move to Wellmet — your plotting sheet should look like this:

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

“B,R,O,B,” will get you to trisector #110, where Wellmet is located. The “L” tells the computer you wish to land here. Note you are using 4 of your next turn’s phases during the landing. We told you this would happen a lot!

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 4

Log on to the computer as usual and enter your moves, namely B, R, O, B, L.

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 4

Read the landing text the computer gives you. This is a new planet, so you should start a separate Planet Log for Wellmet. It will look like this when you are finished:

Planet Log			
Planet Name:		Wellmet	
Actions Available:			
Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
OFFII7	2	market	
8FHIA7	4	weapons	
8VHKAV	1	tavern	
OVFKIV	3	history	
KFVIK7	4	information	

You will also get your final directed walk-through text. Soon you will be on your own!

⌘ STOP ⌘

[487]

The Commodities Market is located in a sleazy part of town, but then, on Moiran, what isn't?

The warehouse to which you are directed is old; rodents and dirt mingle in every corner. You try not to look too closely at the darker areas behind shelves and under counters, where bigger things may be lurking.

The old woman standing behind the counter doesn't seem pleased to see you, but you don't take it personally; she probably isn't pleased to see anybody.

You tell her you are interested in trading and she tells you in a bored tone of voice that crystals are all she has for trade. You may trade for them in the following deals:

- 1 Crystals for 1 Fiber,
- 1 Crystals for 1 Tools,
- 2 Crystals for 1 Food,
- 3 Crystals for 1 Computers.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[488]

The tri-axis drive is every bit as powerful and beautiful as you had hoped it would be. You can feel the thrum of your engine pulsing through your body, like a heart beating all around you. Nothing could be more thrilling for you.

With this new ship improvement, nothing can keep you from accomplishing your new goal, building the non-lethal Jump Engine — the ultimate engine for the ultimate ship.

After thinking about your next step, you remember the ISE's advice to investigate the planet Outpost. There you hope to find clues as to where to go on the other side of the Density Barrier.

With this in mind, you happily return to the engine room and study the intricate workings of your new drive.

✂ STOP ✂

[489]

"We're looking for a Boundary driller to fly Inside and swap three paks of Culture with the worms," Valle Lanza tells you. Apparently the Lanza Family has a lucrative smuggling run to be made from Wellmet to the Nine Worlds.

You are intelligent enough to ask what's in it for you if you decide to make the run, and you see her estimation of you go up appreciably.

"Smart to ask, the pak here will be sharp, a screener for your troubles."

You silently translate what you just heard — the reward for a successful run across the Boundary will be a Gradient Filter.

"You want, then you ask the Bridger at the dock, see if the run is hot. Sometimes it's cold with no paks to fly, so go ask when you're prepped to drill the run. One item, you sign on for serious. You don't return here till the paks are changed Inside."

With that bit of advice, Valle leaves you at the dock. If you wish to take on the smuggling run across the Boundary, choose the following option:

⟨4VXKCV⟩ (3 phases) Sign up for the smuggling run.

✂ STOP ✂

[490]

With your weapons you are able to fend off the grey liquid. As soon as you force it back in one place, it tries to flow back toward you from other directions, but you can keep ahead of it. However, you don't want to give it too many opportunities. You fight your way out from the wreck and into daylight, leaving the strange animated grey slime behind.

✂ STOP ✂

[491]

There is a single company responsible for building all of the inter-asteroid shuttles — Darscians don't believe in competition! It's called the Ship Works. They specialize in jump engine drones the Darscians find useful in transporting ore from inside their system to the various Darscian worlds throughout the galaxy.

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

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

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

2 Iron + 1 Fuel.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[492]

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

After a short distraction caused by a crewman in an adjacent booth somehow managing, despite the generally relaxed atmosphere of the place, to heave another man clear over one of the partitions, you find yourself joined at your table by a tall slim man who looks like he grew up in low gravity. He declines to identify himself, even after you have given your name. This puts a bit of a damper on the conversation, but after a few more drinks the talk becomes freer and you decide that your companion is all right.

During the course of the conversation the tall man asks you an interesting question.

"Do you really want to know what's out here beyond the Boundary?"

Your reply is, "Sure. What?"

"Empty space," he answers. "More empty space than you can imagine. And here and there, just often enough to keep it from being totally empty, a star. Now, some of these stars have planets. Maybe one in eighty. More, if you count worthless silica asteroids. Less, if you leave out worthless gas giants. Of course, the stars with planets look the same through a scanner as the ones without. You can only tell by going there, unless you want to observe the same star from a stationary point for a year or so. It's faster to go there: takes maybe two weeks there and back on a careful course. That means a good explorer finds a planet about every three years. Of course, only about one planet in twenty has anything interesting on it, unless you're a geologist or a weatherman. The odds are worse if you're looking for anything that can

make a profit in trade. That's why there aren't many explorers these days. Work it out: with a billion stars in the galaxy, there may be millions of good planets — but how are you going to find them?"

"So what's the point?" you inquire. "Are you going to tell me I should work for you instead, hauling Iron through the Boundary?"

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

You look at the sparkling chips and ask, "Computer software?"

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

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

"Of course."

"And expect me to buy them from you?"

"Not at all. They are yours."

You look the man over to see if he is joking with you, then respond angrily, "Don't talk stupid. If those were Vanessa Chang's maps, you wouldn't be giving them away."

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

You remain seated for a heartbeat, then quickly head for your ship with your set of shiny wafers. You load them into your computer and request a decryption analysis.

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

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

"I believe I just said that."

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

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

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

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

"When was that?"

"Three hundred seven years ago."

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

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[493]

You are interrupted by your computer's voice over the com link. "Boss, get back here. There's something going on on around the side of the planet."

You rush to your ship's control console. "What is it?"

"There's a spatial anomaly of some sort being generated under the planet's surface. It's similar to a ship's warp field but there's a lot of energy in it. It's coming from the zone of the craters."

"Do you know what's causing it?"

"No, but it's building up exponentially. It's going to cause an explosion."

"Are we in any danger? Wait a minute. . . are you talking about the same kind of explosion that formed those craters?"

You take off, setting a course that keeps the planet between you and the crater site while getting you clear of the atmosphere. You are only a few kilometers up when the explosion shakes Arthlan.

You don't get to see the fireball, which is a good thing, because the only thing that can block all that radiation is the planet itself. Around the far side, you watch shock waves wreak havoc on the crust and surface. From space the waves of destruction move as if in slow motion, but on the planet it is a storm of chaos, opening cracks in the stone beds, shaking mountains into piles of jagged shards, turning the winds into shock waves that scour everything in their path. Rounding the planet, you see the residual glow of the explosion, blooming from beyond the horizon like a sunrise, alive with radioactivity and seething with unimaginable heat. The planet's surface is invisible beneath the glowing clouds of red-hot dust, but you can locate the center of the explosion in the area of what once was the gap in the ring of craters.

For several days, conditions on Arthlan make it impossible to land again. Waiting in orbit, you watch as the dust settles and the planet finds a new equilibrium. Near the equator, where there used to be five identical craters arrayed with geometric precision, there are now six. The new crater is the same diameter as the others, but being new, it appears much deeper. Its center still glows a visible red, radiating the last of its heat into space. At the new crater's rim, Arthlan's crust is twisted and piled into mountains of debris that reach higher than any mountains on Earth. Nor is the rest of the planet unscathed. There are dozens of new volcanoes, jagged cracks have riddled seabeds that were once smooth, and the dust concentration in the atmosphere has tripled. The ambient radioactivity that you measured before is insignificant compared with the levels now. Before, the radioactivity spread evenly over the surface, and was emitted by long-lived elements that gave off radiation at a slow steady rate. Now, the radioactivity is of a type given off by hot, short-lived isotopes and it is most intense in the area around the new crater. In fact, you are able to determine that less time will be needed to mine radioactives in the future; that option will henceforth take only three phases. Already, the fierce winds of the upper atmosphere are carrying the radioactive dust across Arthlan's face.

Also, something else has changed. Arthlan's new 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.

At length, you decide that you can once again land on the planet, as long as you stay on the side away from the craters and wear protective radiation shielding and use breathing apparatus at all times. You locate a region near the equator, relatively free of volcanic activity and where the winds are less dangerous, but for the moment you elect to remain in orbit, pondering the cause and effect of what you have seen.

Due to the explosion, your plots for this turn could not be executed. The process of evacuating Arthlan's surface and observing the aftermath of the explosion has taken seven phases.

✂ STOP ✂

[494]

Floating disembodied in a place empty even of blackness, you understand for the first time the paradox of the Jump Engine. To those watching from real space, a jump ship seems to disappear from one location and reappear in another. But from your perspective on the jump ship, you have seen it in a different way. You have seen one universe destroyed and another rebuilt in its place. The new is identical with the old, but for one detail: the five hundred kilometers of space. In the new reality your jump ship will exist in a different location, five hundred thousand meters separated from where it used to be.

Once you understand this, you also realize why intelligent beings have never survived the trip, and why you will not survive it yourself.

Read immediately text entry 97.

✂ STOP ✂

[495]

Though you are on your hands and knees, and you have your gravity compensation harness at maximum power, you are barely able to support your own weight in Fiara's intense gravity. You have to stop crawling more than once on your way to the entrance to the Antigravity Research Center, and lie flat on the pavement in order to rest. Finally, you make it to the door which opens automatically. You crawl inside the building, where there is full gravity compensation. Suddenly, the weight is gone and you feel so light you could almost fly.

You stand up quickly, before anyone notices you lying on the ground. You brazenly walk past the receptionist and pass through the door marked *Research Lab*.

The room is a large one, containing many different pieces of equipment. You see you are the only person in here, at least for the moment, so you decide to take a quick check around to see what you may find.

A large machine of mysterious purpose fills one wall of the lab and is making the most annoying noise you've ever heard. You spend a precious few minutes examining it but have no clue what its purpose is.

Next you examine various work stations and find one where a cylindrical shaped device is being used as a sort of pencil holder. What you find to be of great interest is that the pencils are being held in a field about five inches above the top of the device!

You have found a working anti-gravity generator. Ignoring your conscience, you slip the device inside your shirt and casually make your way out of the lab.

Your heart beats loudly as you pass the receptionist, not even looking at him. The outer door opens automatically and you step outside.

Fiara's gravity is upon you in an instant, slamming you into the ground. The antigravity device falls out and rolls just beyond your reach. You crawl forward, arm outstretched, fingers aching to make contact with the smooth metal of the device.

Finally, after what seems to be an eternity, you manage to grasp the unit and turn it on. Instantly you feel a great relief as the crushing weight of the massive planet is removed from your frail body. In a matter of minutes, you arrive at your ship and sink gratefully into the control chair.

Congratulations! You are now the proud owner of an anti-gravity device. Of course, you will not be able to use it while on Fiara. The authorities would only take it away from you.

However, by installing the antigravity ray on your ship you expect to make use of it in a variety of ways. For example, the ray could cause a solid object coming at your ship to change course and head off in another direction. Imagine what you could do if you had access to their technical knowledge, rather than just a stolen piece of equipment.

Go now to the CGM.

✂ STOP ✂

[496]

You refuse to dignify the outrageous demand with a verbal reply. Instead, you swing your ship about and make your intent obvious; you will do battle with the villainous pirate.

You feel confident of your ability to at least defend yourself, even if you do not have the necessary ship improvements to actually defeat Silverbeard. You grimly begin firing your weapons.

After a few minutes, you can see that you will not be able to overcome Silverbeard's defenses. Apparently the pirate has reached the same conclusion about you, because he fires an intense fusillade at your vessel which turns out to be merely a diversionary tactic. As you are defending yourself against this new onslaught, your enemy takes the opportunity to swing into full retreat.

Using evasive maneuvers that take your breath away, Silverbeard makes good his escape.

"Har, har, har," you hear over your intercom as the ship disappears beyond detector range.

You survey the damage done by the battle and estimate a good two phases will need to be spent before your ship is hyperspace-worthy again.

✂ STOP ✂

[497]

You have had absolutely no luck in defeating that rascal, Silverbeard. His ship is just too much for you to handle. If only there was a way to make your ship better than his.

Of course there is. You can get your own ship upgraded even more than it already is, and then you will be more than a match for the villainous pirate.

✂ STOP ✂

[498]

Your power generator is a gruesome sight. The titanium-alloy casing is buckled and cracked, as if it had been pelted by lead boulders. The pace rods are corroded all the way through. The reaction chamber, which normally has a temperature of twenty thousand degrees, is stone cold. The recycling blades are coated with a clear, gooey substance that fizzes when you touch it.

It is clear that the damage to the power generator was not caused by the crash. Rather, your power generator was damaged first, and that was the main reason why you lost control of your ship.

The only explanation for the damage inflicted is that the aliens actually attacked the generator. The buckles and cracks in the casing are places where the aliens physically rammed into it. The pace rods were corroded by contact with strong acid, perhaps a secretion given off by the aliens. The reaction chamber is cold because the aliens somehow sucked all the energy out of it. And the gooey substance on the recycling blades is probably the aliens' flesh.

How the aliens got inside the hull of your ship to get to the power generator, you don't know. In any case, you have a lot of repair work to do. You spend one day replacing the pace rods and cleaning the recycling blades. Another day is needed to mend all the cracks in the casing and to hammer the inner surface back into shape. On the third day, you repair several minor parts and reactivate the reaction at a very cautious 2500 degree level.

At 2500 degrees the reaction starts up OK, so it seems likely that the power generator is once again serviceable. However, you won't know for sure until you bring it up to full power and try to take off.

Unfortunately, bringing the generator up to full power might trigger another attack by the aliens. If you tried to take off, and the aliens attacked again, it would be a race to see if you could get out of the atmosphere before they destroyed your power generator again. You might make it, but you can't be sure.

✂ STOP ✂

[499]

You carefully make your way over to the stand of palm tree-like things and examine their trunks, leaves and nuts. Although the trunks and leaves are of little use to you, you discover that the coconuts are a great source of Fiber. You spend three days collecting the nuts and processing them to get one unit of Fiber.

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

✂ STOP ✂

[500]

You are feeling rather smug after running the Boundary successfully. You send Marc a radio message, set up a safe meeting place and time, then plot a course for Norstar. When you arrive you see Marc already waiting; he is obviously happy to see you. You tell him all about your exciting adventures.

Although he is impressed with your escapades, he seems troubled. When you ask him why, he tells you, "S.T.E. is not happy with what you have done. Until you have tangible proof of the great ship improvements available beyond the Boundary, they are going to treat you as they would any common Boundary runner. Let's face it, they will be willing to take you back if they can make enough of a profit but otherwise it's too dangerous for you to come here. You'll need the three improvements you promised to get — photon torpedos, a tractor beam, and a shield generator — before it will be worth their while."

You see his point and agree. You know there are many opportunities to acquire ship improvements beyond the Boundary, so you bid your friend farewell.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[501]

The intense feeling of satisfaction you experienced when you held the lost module of the Founders in your hands was wonderful indeed. Recently, though, you have been feeling that something is amiss.

Uncertain as to why you feel this way, you spend some time reviewing your actions since that great moment.

"Of course," you say, while hitting your forehead with the palm of your hand.

"What's wrong, Boss?" your computer asks, sounding concerned.

"Nothing we can't fix," you reply. "Since we now have the missing File, we ought to be heading back to Leucothea, in the Nine Worlds. Of course, that means getting past the Boundary, and the Space Patrol, but maybe we can do it."

"Whenever you say the word, Boss."

✂ STOP ✂

[502]

Learning to communicate with Riallans is going to be difficult. For one thing, their language is very odd, with no discernible patterns, and “spoken” so rapidly and at such a high pitch that you will need special equipment to help you make the sounds. Even worse, the beachball-shaped Riallans are so different from you physically that you cannot understand each other’s gestures. And these obstacles would be easier to overcome if you could find a Riallan willing to take some time and instruct you, but you cannot.

You are forced to try a technical approach. You start by recording random Riallan conversation from the spaceport area. After extensive computer analysis of the waveforms and frequencies involved, you are able to build a device that will correctly synthesize Riallan beeps and chirps. It takes you a few days to build the talker and interface it, along with the recorder, to your portable ship-computer terminal.

Your next step is to return to the Riallan city with your equipment and “interview” passing Riallans. Over and over you play back recorded sequences of beeps, chosen at random, while your computer records and analyzes the Riallans’ responses. Gradually you build up statistical tables of associations between basic concepts and specific phrases; these allow you to be more selective in what you “ask” the Riallans, which in turn allows you to learn more from their responses, until after a week you have mastered the grammar of their language and are working on vocabulary.

At the same time, you have a chance to explore the city more thoroughly, eventually learning the meanings of some of the auditory “street signs” built into the walls. Moving around the city is difficult, because it was designed for beings who float four feet or more above the floor. Vertical shafts open up without warning in corridor floors, access doors are set high atop walls with no means of ascent provided, and floors slope at steep angles or tilt wildly sideways. Even the level floors can be difficult, covered with obstacle courses of glass conduit, power cables, and ventilation ducts of the type that most gravity-bound beings would locate on the ceiling. You spend a lot of time searching for alternate routes. The Riallans, for their part, seem very impressed by your ability to climb. One pauses long enough to ask, “How do you coordinate and control so many multiple joint flexible appendages at once?” but doesn’t wait for an answer. You eventually learn enough about the environs to pursue the following possibilities further:

⟨HUAO6F⟩ (3 phases) Go to the Universal Iron Exchange and see what deals you can make.

⟨XUCOUF⟩ (3 phases) Look for a source of information about Riallan physiology — perhaps a doctor, or the Riallan equivalent, who can tell you how these fuzzy beachballs manage to move, see, eat, and manipulate appendages.

⟨HEAM6N⟩ (5 phases) Explore the undeveloped lands outside the city.

The Riallans maintain extensive shipyards in this city. From what you saw in orbit, you can tell that their knowledge of propulsion systems is pretty advanced. In this area you see several possibilities for further examination:

⟨DEQM8N⟩ (3 phases) Visit the labs run by the Riallan Space Authority and see if they will give you any information about their Tri-Axis Hyperdrive system or other advances in drive technology.

⟨TESMWN⟩ (3 phases) Visit the construction yards where ships’ hulls are built and see if you can arrange for your own ship’s cargo capacity to be increased.

⟨DUQO8F⟩ (3 phases) Visit the Jump Engine factories, where the Riallans make fast robot cargo haulers, and see what it would cost you to acquire one.

✱ STOP ✱

[505]

You pull away from the battle disheartened. The battle should have been a simple one for you to handle. After all, it's not your first time here.

"Why didn't we win this time?" you ask your computer. "We were successful the last time we engaged in this combat!"

"Sure, Boss. Except we had more ships with us then," is your computer's ever so logical response.

"That's right! So if we return with at least that number of people the next time, we'll probably be more successful."

"Gee, Boss. I wish I were as clever as you."

"Watch it or I won't let you win at chess anymore," you warn the impudent voice of steel.

"LET me win?!!!"

✂ STOP ✂

[506]

You are randomly browsing through your ship's bibliobank when you see an entry that attracts your attention. You see you have on file a copy of an old ship's log from the times of the expansion. Eagerly you order the volume to be shown on the screen, and you spend the next several days piecing the odd bits of data together.

After many hours of work, you are able to read a story of adventure and excitement, much like what you are living yourself! You even pull out a piece of information that may be of some use.

According to this log, in which neither the name of the captain nor the ship can be found, there is a planet called Ascension, where you are sure to find Crystals for sale by the natives.

You make a note of this fact and continue with your reading, but you learn nothing new.

✂ STOP ✂

[507]

Jaquar has not changed a whole lot since the last time you were here: the same sun, the same comets, and the same large asteroid belt. Your ever-helpful ship's computer plots a swift and efficient course to the rock which holds the spaceport, and within a few hours you have once again disembarked on the weightless surface of Jaquar. Your options are the same as before.

✂ STOP ✂

[508]

Upon closer examination of the last usable data provided by your computer during your approach to Ethnar, you identify a probable location of a city, so off you go. Before you have gone too far, however, you are surrounded by approximately one hundred squirrel-like creatures.

Your new acquaintances are undoubtedly intelligent because they are carrying projectile weapons, some of which are aimed at you.

Isn't exploring exciting?

You make a quick verbal entry into your log:

I've been captured by a pack of four-foot tall Squirrellies wearing blue tunics. They are pointing guns at me so I've decided to go with them.

I've noted that the leader has about a dozen of the Squirrellies staying with my ship. The rest of us are headed off into the jungle.

End of entry.

It takes a few days to reach the city. During the journey the leader chirps and whistles at five or ten Squirrellies at a time and sends them off into the jungle. When you finally arrive at your destination, your group consists of yourself, the leader, and a dozen or so followers.

The aliens no longer treat you like an enemy. Through sign language you've been able to communicate to a certain extent with the leader and have found out some interesting things.

The reason for the Blue Squirrellies' caution was that they are at war with the Red Squirrellie tribe over mining rights in the mountain range that passes between both city-states. The Blues weren't sure if you were an alien visitor or some sort of spy. They had to be careful, since the Reds are a sneaky lot.

Your physical appearance, coupled with your complete lack of knowledge about the planet, convinced the Blues you were an innocent visitor from another world.

The Squirrellies seem used to aliens dropping by. You gather it has something to do with whatever it is they mine. You make a note to find out about the ore at a later date. Right now you are more concerned with learning to communicate.

Fourteen days have passed since you left the ship but you have something to show for your effort. One of the squirrellies offered to help you learn their language so now when you chirp, tweet, and whistle at the aliens there is a good chance they will understand you.

You have also found out more about their mining operations. Your tutor was very informative during the course of your studies. The alien told you about a greenish mineral that is readily found in the mountain range bordering their city. The Squirrellies call the ore "chitterbang" and rely upon it as their sole export to visiting aliens.

It may be worth your while to find out more about this mineral. It seems to be quite valuable.

Your options are:

⟨H9AD6Q⟩ (3 phases) Visit the marketplace.

⟨X9CDUQ⟩ (7 phases) Go on the mining expedition.

✂ STOP ✂
