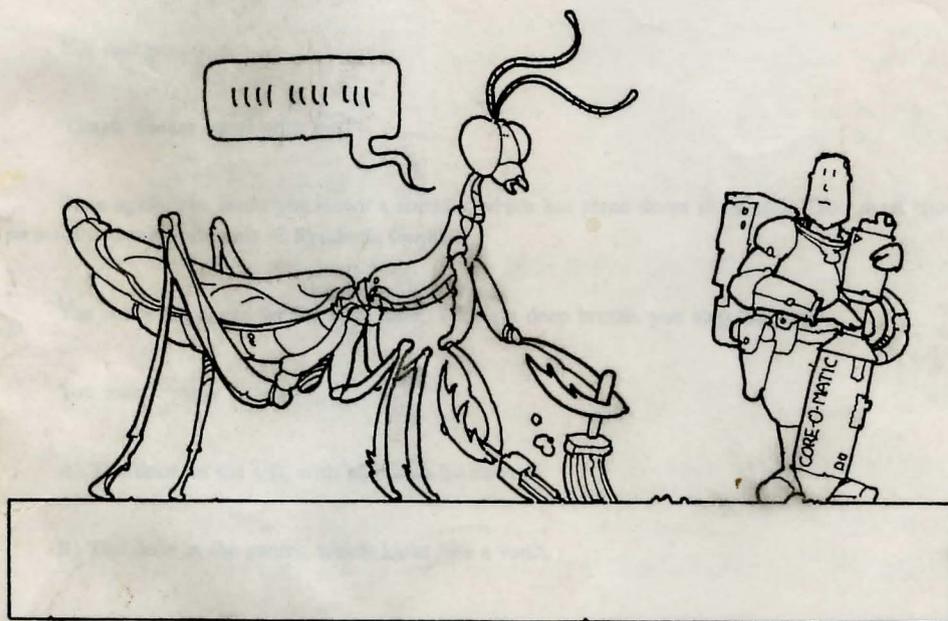


STAR SAGA: ONE™

BOOK J

TEXT 640-697



BOOK 1

ONE

TEXT



[640]

When you return to Gaykrell's office, you are told to have a seat and a game; the Director will be out as soon as she finishes a therapy session with a group of frustrated gamers. This seems to be a hazard of the lifestyle the Ouabainese have chosen for themselves. Good games and puzzles are sometimes hard to find, so people are forced to settle for mediocre games from time to time, and really bad games once in a while. The frustration level these games and puzzles can cause requires massive amounts of therapy to keep people from becoming too frustrated to be willing to play new games.

You remember how few really good games were available back home and can empathize with this group.

Soon the Director returns and greets you.

"Are you ready to attempt to solve the door puzzle?" she asks you.

You nod yes.

"Good. Please come with me."

Once again, she leads you down a corridor which has three doors at its end. "You must choose the correct door. If you do so, you will be rewarded with one unit of Synthetic Genius."

You study the doors for the final time. Taking a deep breath, you step forward.

You must choose among:

- A) The door on the left, with elaborate framework,
- B) The door in the center, which looks like a vault,
- C) The door on the right, which looks quiet and unassuming.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[641]

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

You open your mouth to say "no thanks," but Corin has already taken the bait. "Sure. What?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course."

"And expect us to buy them from you?"

"Not at all. They are yours."

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

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

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

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

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

“Good idea,” you point out, “but I believe that the equipment on my ship is more suitable to the task.” This proposition isn’t met with a lot of enthusiasm.

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

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

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

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

“You mean, without all six chips you couldn’t read any of them?”

“I believe I just said that.”

“Okay, so what’s on it? A message reading ‘Fooled you, Sucker?’”

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

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

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

“When was that?”

“Three hundred seven years ago.”

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

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

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[642]

To the Riallans, nothing will have happened except that the ship will have moved. The ship itself, and even your own body, will be perfectly repositioned without any disturbance. But your mind was held by the jump field. You saw space negated, only to be rebuilt around you. Your consciousness, while observing the rebuilding, was not part of that rebuilding. Your mind, the awareness that is now all you have, is a remnant of the old universe. It will not exist in the new. Your reality is gone forever, and you will go with it. You are already fading away.

Read immediately text entry 288.

✂ STOP ✂

[643]

You are really feeling like an adventurer. This must be how the early explorers felt, and you want to share the sensation with someone. Since you cannot actually get in touch with anybody you would feel comfortable relating these feelings to, you do the next best thing.

You ask the computer to bring up one of the old ship logs you have on file from the times of the expansion, so you can “share” your feelings by reliving their adventures.

Several hours later, you come across an interesting piece of information. You believe one of the early explorers found a planet that would be a good source of Synthetic Genius. If you are correct, the planet’s name is “Ouabain.”

You spend the remainder of your leisure time reading this file and enjoy yourself immensely, but you do not learn anything else of interest.

✂ STOP ✂

[644]

“What has four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon and three legs in the evening?” asks your ship’s computer as you approach the planet labeled “Feldo” on your map.

“What?” you ask, distracted from reading your favorite edition of “Games of the Decade: 1,000,001 Things to Do for Fun and Excitement.”

“That wasn’t me, boss. That was the planet talking. It wants us to answer the question or it says the consequences will be dire.”

“Huh?”

“What has four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon and three legs in the evening?” the voice coming from your ship’s speaker system repeats.

“I think we’d better answer, Boss. My sensors detect an advanced weapon system aimed at us,” your computer nervously informs you.

“Oh,” you say. “Wait a minute, let me think. I used to be pretty good at these when I was younger.”

You desperately put all of your grey matter to the task of figuring out the puzzle. From the depths of your memory you seem to recall a riddle much like this one.

Suddenly you remember the Riddle of the Sphinx and blurt out the answer, "Humans have four legs when we're crawling infants, two legs when we're adults and three legs when we're old and need a cane!"

"Good going Pardner! Why don't you just aim your ship down my throat and we can visit for a spell."

"Feldo appears to be a sentient planet, Boss," your computer explains as you prepare for entry. "Somehow it has taken the form of a gigantic human being and my sensors indicate the spaceport is located internally. To get there we literally have to fly 'down its throat.' Are you sure we want to do this?"

You are intrigued by this new form of life and decide to take the risk. "Go ahead," you instruct the computer, "We only live once."

"Or five million times, depending on your philosophy," your computer quips.

Feldo's Ground Control (or equivalent) directs you to a safe landing.

"Where are we?" you wonder aloud, peering out through the viewport.

"In my appendix," the planet answers. "That's where the spaceport happened to wind up when I shifted around internally to match your physiology, human. I wanted things to look a little familiar, so you wouldn't get lost.

"My name is Feldo. I'm a planetary-sized non-motile sentience. I speak Earth Standard because I've encountered humans before and learned it from them. You don't speak Feldo — no one does, anymore — so Earth Standard is what we're stuck with. When you began your landing approach I shifted my form somewhat to match your own internal arrangements, which you should be at least somewhat familiar with. Think of me as a planet-sized human, curled up in a ball, and you'll understand a little better what's going on. Okay?"

"I think so," you say, watching out the viewscreen as the wrinkly rugae of the stomach zip past on all sides. The pyloric sphincter is up ahead, and you wince involuntarily as your ship rushes toward it, but it dilates sufficiently to allow you through before you get there. The ride through the duodenum is a little rough, but the turns come just where they should, so you figure Feldo is telling you the truth about his internal arrangements. As you begin the long and tortuous passage through the small intestine, you turn your attention back to conversing with Feldo.

By the time your ship touches down in a huge and very modern spaceport in the center of a gargantuan pink cavern, you have gotten pretty well acquainted with the planet — at least enough so that you can figure on some cooperation in your mission here. You just have to remember when talking with him to give as good as you get; the first human Feldo met was a smart-mouthed explorer by the name of Vanessa Chang, and he has patterned his human personality after hers.

After a certain amount of acclimation to the unusual internal environment of a living planet, you are ready to begin pursuing various possibilities:

<OOFII> (3 phases) Travel to the Celiac Nerve Plexus, just behind the stomach, where Feldo has established his trading center for galactic resources.

<SOHFAI> (3 phases) Visit the Germinal Center, which is an organic factory for the production of Primordial Soup. Stop in there if you'd like to purchase some.

<O8FHIA> (7 phases) Travel to the region of Feldo's brain which is currently housing his automatic internal reorganization equipment. There you may take Feldo up on his offer to teach you how to shift your own innards around.

<88HHAA> (4 phases) Feldo has collected all sorts of equipment through the ages. If you'd like to go to the storeroom and see what Feldo has acquired just say the word, and he'll take you there.

<KOVFKI> (3 phases) Chat awhile and learn more about Feldo.

{40XFCI} (3 phases) See if the cargo bay expansion units Feldo has collected are suitable for increasing the capacity of your ship.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[645]

The empty expanse of space is sometimes more than you can bear. You feel the icy cold reaching out for you, calling you to leave your ship and join eternity.

You have found that a countermeasure for this siren's song is to make some sort of contact with humanity. One way is to immerse yourself in books and forget where you are, at least for a short while.

Your favorite series of books is "The Encyclopedia of Exciting Explorers." You tell the computer to bring up volume seven and you begin reading.

You read almost constantly for the next several days and the hours slowly pass.

One day you are reading a chapter that happens to mention a planet called Ouabain. The only thing you can learn from the text is that Computers are available on this planet.

Soon it is time to prepare to leave hyperspace.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[646]

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 ⊠

[647]

You are surprised to hear the high-pitched, reedy voice call to you from your ship's radio. More because you didn't think you could *hear* anything that high than because you thought you were alone out here.

You respond and introduce yourself.

The alien chirps and twitters awhile, something about getting Fuel on Fiyar, then is gone as quickly as it first appeared.

"People come and go so quickly out here," you mumble to yourself as you make note of this new information.

"What, Boss?" your computer asks.

Continued 

“Oh, nothing really. I was just thinking about how strange the universe is.”

“Ain’t it the truth.”

⊠ STOP ⊠

[648]

You feel a sense of accomplishment as you approach the planet Cathedral. Now you really feel like you are on your way to attaining your goal, that of finding the missing Text File. This is the first step in your mission. With luck, it will also be the last. It is conceivable that the File is actually here, waiting for the first explorer interested enough to come and find it. You are confident that you will be that explorer.

The planet itself 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. This would indeed be a fitting resting place for the Holy Text File.

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. You have decided already to be cautious about whom you will ask about the File. No need to alert everyone as to your mission.

“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.

You feel your excitement rise. This could be the lead you are looking for!

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 ⊠

[649]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 3

You realize the shipyard on this world may have one of the improvements you are looking for, so you decide to visit it next. Also, before the Boundary was built, you understand the planet Wellmet was the main center of all exploring activity. You wonder if this is still true. Since you need to get as much information as possible about the galaxy, you decide to make Wellmet your next stop, after you have finished with the shipyard. Look at the map and plan your best route to Wellmet. This is how your plotting sheet should look:

Plotting Sheet							
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
TURN							
1	T	O	V	G	Y	R	L
2	—	—	—	—	—	—	A: GOEFMI
3	—	—	A: W8GHEA	—	—	—	T
4							

Plot "W8GHEA," which will take 4 of the remaining 5 phases for this turn. Use the last phase to plot "T" for takeoff, which uses exactly 1 phase.

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 3

Go to the computer and log on as usual. Enter the plots you have chosen by typing A and then D (the D corresponds to the action code W8GHEA). After selecting the action code, continue with the rest of your plots, namely T to signify that you wish to take off at the end of this turn. Did you remember to press Return or F at the end?

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 3

The computer sends you to the shipyard text, number 137. Now, you may go and "see" what is happening to you by reading the selection.

Please note that you will be directed to return to the computer at the end of the shipyard text in order to see if you wish to make any improvements. This is what always happens when you are in a market place or shipyard. You should decide if you wish to take advantage of the improvements *before* you return to the computer so you will be ready to type in your instructions. Once again, it is important to note the items available, and their prices, on your Planet Log for future reference.

Continued 

Planet Log

Planet Name:	Crater		
Actions Available:			
Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
GOEFMI	3	market	yes
WOGFEI	7	drone market	
G8EHMA	3	weapons	
W8GHEA	4	shipyard	yes
COUFOI	5	seminar	

Trades Offered:

They Sell	For
2 tools	1 culture
2 tools	1 food
1 tools	1 fuel
1 tools	1 iron
1 tools	1 medicine
entanglement mines	1 food + 1 iron
warp winder	1 culture + 1 medicine
pulse inverter	1 food + 1 fuel
boarding robots	1 iron + 1 culture + 1 medicine

You will be given a second piece of text, 132, to read by the end of this turn. When you are ready, get the text, and your adventure can continue.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[650]

The four foot tall squirrel is surprisingly your equal in battle. But from the sounds you hear from above, you know your friends are winning the battle. The little alien, knowing that escape is the better part of valor, scampers up the pit wall, easily outdistancing you.

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

When you climb out of the pit you see that the Red Horde has been defeated. Rocky comes over to see if you are all right and you show her your new treasure.

She is impressed at the outcome of your battle with the Red Squirrellie.

“They are very fierce warriors,” she tells you.

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

She also tells you something interesting about chitterbang. She says you may know it better as Warp Core. She says it is possible to purchase refined Warp Core in the city. The lump of chitterbang you recovered from the Red Squirrellie is unrefined, but the Blue Squirrellies will refine it for you if you so ask.

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

You now have the following options:

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

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

⟨D9QD8Q⟩ (2 phases) Refine your chitterbang.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[651]

You enter the tunnel and slowly make your way down. With each step you take, you feel the weight of past generations of Questors on your shoulders. You are comforted by the weight rather than burdened by it.

You are glad to have the light from your space suit; without it, the tunnel would be pitch black. Even with your light, the passageway seems dim. You get the feeling that it is endless. After a mile or so, you begin to hear a low, vibrant hum. You continue downward.

After a full day's climbing, you are finally rewarded by a sharp change in the surroundings. The tunnel drops into a level hallway. Along the hallway are openings into a variety of rooms. The humming sound has gotten a little louder. You think about finding the Core Stone while hideous alien monsters pursue you, slaving after the Stone.

You spend the next few days exploring the interior of a highly advanced and apparently abandoned alien spaceship. The creatures that once occupied the ship must have been huge, for all the rooms, halls, and doorways are gigantic. The inhabitants also seem to have been warriors, for there are pictures of fighting creatures and weaponry everywhere. Indeed, most of the ship seems to be devoted to its weapons systems. If this was the ship of the alien that killed Soulsinger and took the Core Stone, you can see why Soulsinger lost the battle.

Right now, however, the ship is not very dangerous. Most of the technology is no longer serviceable. The engines collapsed into themselves, leaving a large dimensional hole. The drives are a badly damaged jumble of flawed crystals and decayed warp core. The weaponry is hopelessly blasted into pieces.

The only component even partially salvageable is the computer. Searching around in the deactivated magnetic chambers, you find some of the original processing banks in pretty good condition. You perform a few tests on a processing bank, and it becomes clear you are looking at no ordinary computer. The processing bank alone is powerful enough to serve as a Synthetic Genius.

Finally, you explore every possible room and come up empty handed. The disappointment you feel almost crushes you, but you manage to pull yourself together. The alien ship is empty and abandoned.

Continued 

Except, yes of course, how could you have forgotten? You still haven't found the source of the radio signal and that infernal humming that vibrates your very bones!

Aided by your instruments, you eventually locate an obscure door which seems to lead to the room where the radio signal and humming sound are coming from. Immediately you see that you have found an important place in the ship. The doorway is intricately carved with strange alien symbols and flanked on either side by sculptures of vicious-looking alien birds. It would seem that you have found the captain's quarters.

You are about to open the door and walk inside the room when you notice a dangerous reading on one of your instruments. The instrument indicates that the radioactivity inside the room is extremely high, far above the level that an ordinary space suit can withstand. Walking inside the room would kill you instantly.

To go inside, you will need a space suit that can withstand much higher levels of radiation — namely, a Super Space Suit. If you have one already, then you have nothing to fear.

You have two new options:

(EWMGNE) (3 phases) Take the computer processing bank you tested up to your ship. It will serve as a unit of Synthetic Genius.

(UWOGFE) (4 phases) Enter the captain's quarters. (You must have a Super Space Suit to plot this option; if you do not have one but would like to investigate the captain's quarters when you do, plot **(UWOGFE)** after landing on FLN-1. Options **(UGOEFM)** and **(EWMGNE)** cannot be repeated.)

✱ STOP ✱

[652]

You mentally prepare yourself for the battle with Silverbeard. The wily old pirate has a ship well equipped for the fight, but you are not daunted. You have made a few improvements to your own vessel, and feel more than able to handle the villain.

The battle that ensues is short but fierce. When the smoke clears (figuratively speaking, that is), you are amazed that either of you survived. From the computer readouts, you can see that both of you are badly damaged.

Unfortunately, Silverbeard's ship is in better shape than yours, and he is able to force his way onto your vessel.

"And now I will get my tribute from you!" he cries in triumph.

You watch helplessly as he transfers all of your hard-earned cargo to his ship, holding you at bay with an enormous blaster. When he is finished, he thanks you for your hospitality. Then with his usual "Har, har, har" he zooms away in his wounded spaceship.

You watch him go and shake your fist. "I'll get you next time," you vow. Perhaps with another ship improvement you will be able to succeed in your mission.

Ruefully, you turn and survey the damage to your own vessel; four phases of repairs will be required before you can consider the ship usable in hyperspace. Sighing, you begin the task ahead of you.

Go now to the CGM.

✱ STOP ✱

[653]

Your trusty "The Encyclopedia of Exciting Explorers" entertains you exceptionally well during the quiet days between planets. Volume four has some very bizarre chapters. One in particular mentions a world named Feldo, discovered by some nameless explorer long ago who told people, "The planet is really a nice sort who is willing to trade Medicine for various items."

You spend the rest of the trip reflecting on how peculiar people can be. Isn't it wonderful?

⊗ STOP ⊗

[654]

HOW TO PLAN TURN 2

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

Planet Log			
Planet Name:	Crater		
Actions Available:			
Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
GOEFMI	3	market	
WOGFEI	7	drone market	
G8EHMA	3	weapons	
W8GHEA	4	shipyard	
COUFOI	5	seminar	

Now you need to judge which of these options, if any, you wish to do. Since this is your introduction, we have taken the liberty of deciding for you. Don't worry — you'll be on your own soon enough!

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

You decide you would like to visit the Market place on Crater as your first activity. Plot the six character code "GOEFMI" on your plotting sheet. This will use the last phase of this turn and borrow 2 phases from your next turn. Borrowing phases from your next turn will happen often and is perfectly all right!

Continued 

HOW TO ENTER PLOTS FOR TURN 2

Go to the computer and log on. Press A for Action, and select the 6-character code for visiting the market place; in this case it is GOEFMI, which can be selected by pressing A again.

Note that as soon as you type the first A, the display changes to show the action codes available to you on Crater. When you are done selecting the action code, the display will revert to the plot editor. This enables you to continue with the rest of your plots. In this case, you have nothing else to enter for this turn.

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

HOW TO GET RESULTS FOR TURN 2

When the computer has evaluated your move, it will send you to the appropriate text. Write down the text number(s) it gives you, in this case 619, then press Return or F to release the computer for the next player. You may notice that after you do this, the CGM still lists your character as needing to "GET RESULTS." When this happens, you should not attempt to get the new results until following the computer's first instructions. In this case, you should read the market place text and decide whether or not you wish to trade any of your cargo for what is available here (you should note the trades available on your Planet Log for later reference).

Planet Log			
Planet Name:	Crater		
Actions Available:			
Code	Phases	Description	Repeat?
GOEFMI	3	market	yes
WOGFEI	7	drone market	
G8EHMA	3	weapons	
W8GHEA	4	shipyard	
COUFOI	5	seminar	
Trades Offered:			
They Sell		For	
2 tools		1 culture	
2 tools		1 food	
1 tools		1 fuel	
1 tools		1 iron	
1 tools		1 medicine	

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

You will be assigned a second piece of text which you should read after you are through at the market place. This text, number 649, will guide you through your next turn's adventure.

✱ STOP ✱

[655]

You really enjoy hearing the sound of your own voice being fed back into the control room through the ship's radio. You feel it enhances your natural tonal qualities, especially when you are singing. What an effect!

You are in the midst of a really moving verse of one of your favorite operas when the computer interrupts.

"Excuse me, Boss." You're not sure but it sounds like the computer is embarrassed about something.

Concerned, you ask, "Yes, what is it?"

"Um, I have received a radio transmission and. . ."

Now you understand. The computer has been talking to someone who has heard your magnificent singing and wants to express their appreciation. The computer probably wasn't sure if it should interrupt you for such a thing. No wonder it felt awkward. You are just about to reassure it when it continues, "The speaker is an alien who is concerned about your welfare and wants to make sure you are O.K."

You sit for a moment digesting this information.

"Would you like me to connect you?"

"Sure, we don't want to seem rude."

You hear the static of the open channel, then an alien-sounding voice comes on. "Hello? Hello? Is all hokey there? We hear the sound and grow concerned."

"Yes, everything is O.K. here; thanks for checking up. Actually I was practicing a human form of entertaining."

"Oh, sorry I misunderstand intent. This means fun and enjoyment? Can you tell me more?"

You spend the next several hours explaining the concept of singing to the alien, even listening to its attempts at the art.

The alien is thrilled, and in return shares some information with you. It seems apologetic that it has nothing comparable to give you, but it does tell you that there is a planet by the name of Arthlan where you can find a really great substance called Super Slip. If you cover any surface with this stuff it will make the surface completely frictionless. What a great concept.

You are sure you got the better of this exchange.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[656]

Being swallowed by a planet-sized human being is much less disconcerting the second time around. You even enjoy the roller coaster ride through Feldo's intestinal tract this time, now that you know it simply leads to a spaceport.

You have the same options as before.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[657]

The ship's alarms scream out their warning.

"What now?" you think. "Why can't a person have a few minutes of peace and quiet?"

Turning to the screen, you spend an anxious moment before being able to identify the source of the alert. You're still not sure what you are looking at but if you don't take evasive action you are going to run into a giant pyramid. Which appears to be playing ball with another giant pyramid. Great.

You are quickly picking up the little tricks needed to survive the fantastic turbulence of the lower strata, and by calling on this skill, you are able to maneuver around the gargantuan ball players.

From a distance, you are able to watch the spectacle in relative safety. If questioned about this later, you will probably say you couldn't make out what was happening but right now, you would swear there are two giant pyramids playing catch in the middle of a tornado.

The creature farthest from you is winding up for the pitch. It releases a large rock, hurling it at the pyramid in front of you. As the rock approaches, your ship's sensors sound off. You are about to switch the alarm off without looking at it, when you notice a strange reading. The computer is telling you the rock these creatures are using for their sport is actually raw warp core!

You watch the game intently until one of the pyramids, for no apparent reason, decides to eat the rock. It then flies off in a nearby air current. The creature left behind seems to wait for a few minutes to make sure the other isn't coming back, then leaves.

Fascinating.

You may select this option again.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[658]

Following the Firthians' directions, you take your ship to the other side of the planet, where you find another ocean platform. When you arrive, the Firthians have already cleared a place for you to land. This platform is considerably larger than the one at which you originally arrived, measuring over a full square kilometer. The platform is filled with many different kinds of machines and plenty of Firthians, so despite its size it is pretty crowded.

Here the Firthians process raw materials efficiently under the low pressure of their atmosphere. They send materials up from the ocean floor, process them into more useful products, and send them back down. They also trade with the occasional alien visitor here.

The Firthians are willing to sell you medicines, which they can produce cheaply and in great quantities because of their biological and chemical skills, for the following items:

- 1 Medicines for 1 Computers,
- 2 Medicines for 1 Crystals,
- 3 Medicines for 1 Fiber.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[659]

Despite the handicap of not being able to breathe, you find you are more than a match for the would-be attacker. Deciding not to let a chance for some loot of your own pass you by, you frisk the unconscious body and discover the mugger had a blaster. You pocket the weapon at once, mentally thanking him, and whatever god kept you safe during the fight.

Eventually you make your way back to the ship where you immediately strip down and shower for over an hour to cleanse the stench of the planet from your body. There's no way you would have been able to sleep otherwise.

Go now to the CGM.

✕ STOP ✕

[660]

After collecting all of your components in one place like any good gourmet chef, you begin work on your Super Space Suit. Unfortunately, after some tinkering, you are unable to complete its assembly. You do not have all of the required parts; some more scavenging or shopping is clearly in order.

You may select this option again.

✕ STOP ✕

[661]

You have been sent to an old and venerable Squirrellie by the name of Achu.

You take an immediate liking to him and he seems to be pleased with your interest in the Martial Arts.

"Come, Grasselhop (the translation is equivalent to being called a certain type of insect found on the planet, and you assume it is a term of affection). We have a lot to learn," the old Squirrellie says to you.

The first day he has you wash the dishes, the floors, and a huge pile of dirty laundry, all the while breathing in a peculiar rhythmic method.

The second day you paint the interior and exterior of his home, wax the floors and the sidewalk, then do his food shopping for the week. This time you are instructed to chant a certain word under your breath. You get some very odd looks when you are at the grocery store.

The third day you spend from sunrise to sunset seated on the floor staring at a spot on the wall — a spot you missed when you did the cleaning earlier.

On the fourth day, you and Achu sit back and inhale some great-smelling incense. This day goes by very quickly, indeed.

The fifth day arrives and Achu starts to bid you farewell.

"Wait a minute oh venerable one," you say in perplexity, "What about learning how to use my new weapon?"

Continued 

Achu slaps his furry little hand to his forehead. "I almost forgot, Grasselhop. Thank-you for reminding me. It would have been a great embarrassment to me if you had left without this." and he hands you a pamphlet entitled, "Your Ninchuckle and how to use it."

You leave the home of your new friend while reading the five page booklet. It looks pretty easy. You will have no trouble learning to use your new twychee weapon.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[662]

"Well," you ask the computer as you approach Hootenaller, "how's the weather this time?"

"Same as before, Boss. High gravity and lots of rain. And the value of pi is still low in this sector."

"You seem to be obsessed with that number."

"Do you think I'm being irrational about it?"

"Don't get smart with me. I'm just not interested in hearing the reasons why you can't tell me why the nicest planet I ever discovered turned Jekyll-and-Hyde on me."

You perform a tricky landing in the buffeting winds and low visibility, setting down near one of the sheltered valleys where the food plants aren't too hard to find. When you open the hatch you discover that you've landed in a large deep puddle.

"Oh, hell," you grumble to yourself, and you go put on your environmental suit.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[663]

Remember how you felt a sense of accomplishment when you completed your first mission after you began your journeys? That was special, but you are at least equally as proud now. Using what at one time would have seemed a haphazard collection of raw materials — one Flame Jewel, one Gradient Filter, and one unit each of Warp Core, Crystals, Iron, and Fuel — you have succeeded in assembling a Tri-Axis Drive Booster. You now have the ability to fly anywhere in the known galaxy; specifically, you will be able to navigate in the Galactic Arm, where the density of space dust does not permit the use of a dual-axis hyperdrive. You are one of the few human beings ever to accomplish this feat.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[664]

Your ship cannot withstand the beams, at least not for more than a second or two. You and your computer figure this out in the same instant: you when you feel the ship shudder like a small black hole had hit it square on the hull, and the computer when it notices that the temperature sensors on the outer skin of the ship are reading a temperature that is very close to the melting point of the metal. You and your computer also have the same reaction: get out of there!

Fortunately the computer has the faster reflexes, and it does the right thing before you have a chance to mess it up. It accelerates the ship directly away from the beam. You probably would have tried to move laterally, and the beam would have tracked you.

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

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

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

"Is everyone safe?"

"Yes, Boss. Interestingly, it appears that at least one ship was able to resist the initial beam concentration. When we were forced out of range, the beams on us converged on whoever was left behind, and the increased load was too much. They had to flee too. But in all that energy, I couldn't gather enough data to reconstruct accurately the sequence of events."

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

You have no intention of doing that, but at the moment it seems that you also have no way to approach the planet in the face of the particle beams. You'll have to find some way of resisting them before you can hope to land on Outpost.

✂ STOP ✂

[665]

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:

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

Continued 

- Corin Stoneseeker 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. You ask Corin, "Is Stoneseeker 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.

When your turn comes up, you introduce yourself as Valentine S., no need to go into great detail with your new found "friends," some of whom may be spies for the Families.

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.

Stoneseeker stands 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 ✘

[666]

The emptiness of space is beginning to affect you, and you take steps to counteract the negative aspects of the yawning void.

First you turn on your favorite music cartridge, then you call up one of your favorite books, "The Encyclopedia of Exciting Explorers," and cheerfully turn to volume five for a few hours of pleasant reading.

You repeat this procedure over the next several days and while away the hours.

One day you are reading a chapter that happens to mention a planet called Gazan. The only thing you can learn from the text is that Iron is a common commodity on this planet. Something for you to keep in mind if you are in need of that particular metal.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[667]

As you approach the planet Firthe, you notice that the surface of the planet is completely hidden from view by a thick layer of white clouds. Moreover, your scanners report that the entire surface under the clouds is covered with water. The planet is one large ocean.

You wouldn't explore this planet any further except for the occasional protrusions that show on your scanner map of the ocean. There seem to be about a hundred or so such oddities scattered along the planet's equator. You can't tell what they are, so you head in for a closer look.

As you descend through the atmosphere, the cloud cover envelops your ship. The fog becomes denser as you approach your goal. Finally, barely a hundred meters above the surface of the protrusion, the fog clears, yielding to a steady rain.

You run a visual scan on the object below you and see it's a metal platform covering nearly half a square kilometer and elevated about twenty meters above the ocean. On the platform's surface, hundreds of funny-looking creatures scurry about.

Your arrival has been noticed and a place is cleared for your ship to land. You touch down on the platform and prepare to step outside. Since the atmosphere is not breathable and the air pressure is very low, you have to wear your environmental suit.

The aliens you meet when you leave your ship are among the strangest you have yet encountered. They are about your size, but their physiology is far more complex, with an astounding variety of appendages that flail about in different directions. Some of the appendages seem to be locomotive in nature, some sensory and some manipulative; others are completely mysterious.

When you try to talk to the Firthians, they motion for you to speak into a machine which translates the popping and clicking of the Firthian language into a reasonable imitation of Earth Standard. Using this machine, you are able to communicate with the aliens and they with you.

After conversing with the Firthians for a while, you learn that though the planet doesn't look too interesting from space, it is actually full of life. All life on Firthe is underwater. There are two basic kinds of creatures, those that swim toward the surface of the ocean, and those that dwell on the bottom. The creatures to whom you are speaking are unique in that they do both.

The Firthians are a very old and advanced race with a fully developed civilization. They are accomplished chemists, biologists, and geneticists, and even have some experience with space travel. Their culture is concentrated primarily in cities that lie on the bottom of the sea.

You now find yourself with the following options:

Continued 

⟨OPFBIY⟩ (3 phases) Trade commodities with the Firthians.

⟨8PHBAY⟩ (4 phases) Visit an underwater chemistry laboratory.

⟨89HDAQ⟩ (5 phases) Learn more about Firthian biology.

⟨KPVBKY⟩ (5 phases) Travel to Thiros, the Firthians' largest and most advanced underwater city. Because of the extremely high pressure of the sea in that part of the ocean floor, you cannot go there without a Super Space Suit. Consequently, you need a Super Space Suit to select this option.

⟨4PXBCY⟩ (2 phases) Investigate the translation machine.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[668]

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

After checking through your possessions you think to yourself, "Hmmm. Maybe I could use something more in the way of weaponry."

In order to see what you are missing,

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[669]

The city of Wellmet, on the planet Wellmet, sprawls across the land below you. The city is a tiny mark on the vast surface of a planet that could be Earth's twin, but from closer up it seems large enough to hold every facet of humanity within its jumbled streets, tangled rivers, and haphazard clusters of buildings large and small. From the many spaceports that share the city among them, ships of every description come and go, bearing cargo to and from the surviving colonies of the Ghost Worlds or making the perilous run across the Boundary.

Amid all this traffic, you face the problem of deciding where to land. Some of the spaceports are reserved for use by the Families, and these are off-limits to you. You could land at one of several private pay ports, which charge high fees for berthing (most of which, you suspect, goes to pay bribes to Customs inspectors), but you decide on the free public spaceport instead. You don't, as far as you know, have any forbidden cargo to hide from Customs, and you are a good enough pilot that the awkward high-traffic approach lane to the public port doesn't bother you.

The landing, it turns out, is not easy. You have to wait several hours just to find a suitable approach window. Once down, you have to wait for a full inspection by Customs officials, who squint and scowl at some of your cargo and equipment but in the end don't give you any trouble. It is night on Wellmet by the time you finish the landing shutdown, so your business will have to wait until the next day.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[670]

You leave the heat of the afternoon sun behind you as you step into the tavern. The cool dimly lit interior is a pleasant change from the humidity of the outside world; you seat yourself at the nearest table with a contented sigh.

Looking around, you can see no more than a dozen patrons like yourself taking advantage of a lull in their afternoon's work to stop by the bar for a cold one. You nod pleasantly to the nearest person who snorts in disgust and turns away. Now what was that all about?

The bartender approaches your table — apparently they don't have waiters here. He asks for your order.

"A tall frosty iced tea, my good man," is your reply. He stands there for a moment as if to give you time to place your *real* order, then heads back to the bar shaking his head. He returns a short time later with your drink and you pay him.

You give the room another scan to see if there is anybody who looks like they would be interested in exchanging information with you. The table in the far corner has five people who are intently playing a rather complex-looking card game, and you wisely decide not to bother them. Three people are seated at various tables with whom you might be able to strike up a conversation. First you would have to wake them from their drunken stupors, though. This doesn't seem to be too promising a proposition, so you continue to scan the room.

Two women in miner's clothes are sitting with a young man wearing the frilliest outfit you have seen in a good long time. They seem to be making some sort of deal, because you see them shake hands before going to the back room together. Now what could that have been all about?

That leaves the less-than-friendly man who turned his back on you when you first entered. Not being the type to hold a grudge, you take your tea and join him at his table.

"Hot, isn't it?" you begin. "But it's not so much the heat as the humidity, don't you think?" With this innocuous start, you proceed to introduce yourself and ask if you can sit down.

The man turns toward you with a fierce glare. "I hate outworlders, I despise space jockeys and I can't find the words to say what I think of YOU!" he bellows, rising from his chair. He is about seven feet tall and you estimate he weighs at least 400 pounds.

You try to smile and back away; you are not looking for a fight. You don't get more than two steps towards the door before he grabs you and starts to take a swing at you.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[671]

Silverbeard's ship is definitely a candidate for the perfect fighting machine if ever there was one. It fires no projectile weapons — its long thin hull isn't even thick enough to contain torpedo tubes — but its other capabilities more than make up the slack. The hull is so slender that it is difficult for your sensors to "see" even from the side, and when it turns to aim directly at you it is invisible — until it fires. A single hit from that deadly beam, lancing from the point of the needle in an infinitely thin, infinitely bright line of liquid silver, burns out all of your defensive shields. You know you cannot survive another.

Fortunately, the silver beam weapon can only fire once every few seconds, and the whole needle ship must aim to bring it to bear. This is not true of the stress fields — Silverbeard seems to be able to throw these casually and continuously in any direction. The stress fields are somehow related to tractor and pressor beams, but more powerful, and with the ability to pull in many directions at once. They emanate in pale folds from the center third of the needle hull, sweeping through vast areas of space, impossible to avoid. Each time your ship passes through a field, your entire hull twists and creaks, your drive tubes falter as the reaction mass shifts in the warp core, and even your own body feels the effect as a pulling in your gut and a pressure behind your eyes that makes you feel sick.

Several minutes into the battle you discover the pirate's third weapon, though he has been using it all along. You don't know what it is, but it causes tiny holes to appear, as if by magic, in your ship. There is no detectable energy beam, nor any material projectile, to cause the holes. When they appear in your hull, the effect is negligible, because the holes are too small to cause any serious loss of air. But they also seem to be appearing inside the ship, in random places — the floor, the empty co-pilot's seat, the instrument panel. . . A small peripheral display screen to your right suddenly flashes and burns out, pierced by a hole, and you realize how many vital places there are within your ship — the drives, the controls, the computer — in which one of these tiny holes could well prove fatal.

Having no choice, you continue to press your attack on Silverbeard. One way or another, this fight will decide the issue, for all of the attackers have taken heavy damage and many, including yours, might no longer be spaceworthy. There are no alternatives: either you will land on Outpost, or you will die in space. You press the pirate with every weapon you have. You increase your power level to the point of overload. Finally, in desperation, you vent all your cargo bays to space, emptying your ship to gain speed and maneuverability.

There comes a moment when you don't think you can continue. Your weapon systems are failing, your ship is barely responding to your flight controls, and your computer has frozen like a shell-shocked soldier. You realize you have a choice: you can try to make it to the planet's surface alive, or you can make one last suicidal attack run on the needle ship. Your ship screams from every weld as you grimly turn to face the enemy. . .

. . . and at that moment Silverbeard's ship begins to disintegrate. There is a series of small flashes like firecrackers exploding up and down the length of the needle. Crackling green and yellow sparks play over the hull, starting at the needle's tip and moving toward the swelling of the cockpit. Silver particles spray from the central section, and the whole ship makes a ponderous turn that brings it into contact with the last of its own collapsing stress fields. With a sudden lurch, the fighter breaks in two; the short section behind the cockpit breaks off and pinwheels into space while the needle point, with the cockpit still attached, drives directly toward the planet.

You watch as the impact approaches. An ordinary ship might burn up in the atmosphere, but the slim needle of Silverbeard's fighter pierces it effortlessly and continues downward. It seems to hit the ground in slow motion. There is no explosion, no crater, just the slow crumpling of the hull as its momentum drives it flat against the rock.

You spend the next few minutes trying to avoid the same fate as you work the bypass controls, trying to find enough backup systems still working to make a controlled landing. Your ship-to-ship links are dead, so you decide to land at the most obvious place, near Silverbeard's crash site. With the stress fields gone, things aren't as bad as they seemed during the battle. You control your ship well, and make what might be the best landing of your life — so good, in fact, that you even survive. Everyone manages to make it down safely.

Silverbeard didn't do as well. The metal of his hull is splashed across a small ravine, looking like it had been melted and poured there. The cockpit capsule alone still holds its original shape, and it is crushed and half-buried in the rock, split open along one side.

You put on your environmental suit — the instruments that would test the air for you are damaged — and leave your ship. Everyone climbs down to the place where Silverbeard's capsule landed. Carefully, you examine the wreckage.

Silverbeard is inside the capsule. He is alive, but not for long. There is not much left of him. His eyes are open, staring wildly and darting from place to place, never focusing on any of your faces. Behind the blood, his face looks young, no more than forty years old. His hair is white, but he is clean-shaven.

"You dirty bilge-drinking Clathrans," he spits, and you can't tell if he's addressing you or the phantasms of his memory. "Ye done for me good, you have." A laugh shakes what's left of his frame, and you hear bones grate. "But I fooled ye all along, I did. This ain't Earth. Hear that, you suckers, you'll never get the coordinates. All these years ye dog me, and this ain't Earth. I led ye on a sea snark chase, I did, and now if you want to find the homeworlds ye can fish for them."

The pirate shudders once more, and his eyes roll back in his head. He is dead.

You turn away from the smashed capsule. The suggestion is made to bury Silverbeard, and you agree to help, mostly to get your mind off the much greater problem of repairing your ship. There is no soil on Outpost as yet, so you wrap Silverbeard's body and carry it, in the least damaged of your ships, out over the sea. You drop him into the water, where the planet's newly-evolved microorganisms will slowly consume him.

You then turn your attention to your own ship. A thorough inspection lasting two or three days tells you all you need to know. The good news is that enough of your thrusters are left that you can move from place to place on Outpost. The bad news is that almost nothing else is operational. The computer doesn't respond to even the most rudimentary signals, your hull and internal wiring are riddled with damage from holes and stressing, and even the internal superstructure is weakened. Your cargo bays are empty. Worst of all, the Warp Core in your main drives is ruined beyond repair.

All might not be lost, however. You conclude that you can repair your ship adequately if you have four things: a new Warp Core, a large supply of basic raw materials such as Iron, Crystals, and Radioactives, sophisticated tools and test instruments, and a working computer to supply basic knowledge and help re-activate your ship's computer. Silverbeard's base on this planet might have all of these things, if you are lucky.

An aerial survey of the planet leads you to what must have been Silverbeard's base, not too far from the power generator you destroyed in the assault on Outpost. There is what looks like a miniature spaceport, with a small landing pad and several large buildings that resemble hangars. A short distance away is a series of long, wide, low buildings that are almost featureless except for the stains and weathering of age. A few miles south of this cluster is one more building, also hangarlike, that appears just as old. To the west, between the power generator and the spaceport, is one of the ground-based heavy-particle beam weapons that attacked you on the way down, and it adjoins a small metal building. You land your ship near the main complex and consider your options:

(NPJBZY) (7 phases) Search the newer hangars adjoining the "spaceport."

(7PLBRY) (7 phases) Search the long, low, old buildings nearby.

(N9JDZQ) (7 phases) Search the beam weapon emplacement.

(79LDRQ) (7 phases) Search the old hangar to the north.

✱ STOP ✱

[672]

You take the Stone out every now and then to admire its beauty. You are very proud of yourself for accomplishing what no one in twenty generations was capable of — finding the Stone. Yes, you are proud and rightly so.

Except you feel as if something is missing. You think back over your feats and the treasure you have obtained for your people. No, everything is all right there. So what could be troubling you?

You wish that your mother and father were here. Perhaps they could help you figure out what is wrong. They have been a source of strength and support to you throughout your young life.

Of course, that's it! You need to bring the Stone back to the Nine Worlds and tell your family and people you have succeeded in your mission. They will receive the Stone with gratitude and a knowledge of how it can be used to save Humanity.

But is your ship strong enough to run the Boundary? There's only one way to find out.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[673]

You are intrigued by the presence of an entire continent devoted to a clean and healthy environment amidst the polluted conditions on Withel. You decide to go there after you are unable to get any Withelian in the industrialized part of the world to answer any questions about it. Their only comments are along the lines of: "We wouldn't have any idea what goes on in such a barbaric place," and "Of course I don't have any information on the degenerates who inhabit that place."

You plot the short hop on your ship's computer, then sit back while you are flown across the ocean.

While you wait for the landing cycle to be completed, you read the reports on the outside environment. All of the numbers indicate an environment at least twice as pure as that of the other continent. Some of the differences amaze you.

The only explanation you can conceive of is that some of the people simply refuse to allow their air, water, and land to become polluted.

As you head outside, you are surprised by the number of Withelians who have come to greet you. They all are thronging around the ship and reverently touching the metal hull. One alien has a Translator around her neck. You notice that none of the other aliens have any translating devices and only an occasional alien has a cyborg implant. The bits of conversation you pick up through the lone translator all sound the same, "A metal ship, how wondrous." "Do you think it will stay?" "Do you think it will take anyone back with it?"

You are totally baffled.

"Greetings, I am called Grotok. Allow me to be your guide while you are here."

Since you haven't received a better offer, you accept.

Grotok takes you to her home and serves you a simple meal cooked over an open fire. She seems to be embarrassed by something, but you wisely decide not to ask about it.

After the meal, you sit around the fire and tell your hostess about yourself and your travels. You embellish some of the details, but only to create a better story. Grotok seems to feel more comfortable around you, and loosens up a bit. After a short time, she is telling you about her life and adventures. You learn the following:

The Withelian people had always been fascinated by machinery, robotics and bionics. It was only natural that, when a superior race made contact with them, eons ago, the first thing the Withelians asked about was information which might improve their technology. The visiting race was only too happy to comply with the request for information and even went so far as to build a huge machine capable of transforming parts of the Withelian anatomy into bionics.

This machine, called the "Constructor," was such a masterpiece in bio-technology that, to this day, the Withelians have not been able to produce another.

The impact the Constructor had on the Withelian way of life was tremendous. A whole new social order was developed through the years, one in which the rich and powerful were able to purchase mechanical improvements while the poor and unimportant went through life as total organic beings. The most shameful thing to a Withelian was to die without any mechanical body parts.

Not only did a Withelian strive to schedule an appointment with the Constructor for the installation of new parts, but he had to stay rich or powerful enough to warrant a yearly maintenance check-up. If he couldn't return to the Constructor every year, his body part(s) would almost instantaneously develop a mechanical problem. So great was the social stigma that anyone who had a failed body part would likely lose his job after a few weeks, and all of his friends would pretend not to know him. Soon he would end up at the bottom of the social hierarchy, sweeping the streets.

The real outcasts, though, were sent here to the undeveloped continent where the other Withelians wouldn't have to see them and be reminded of their existence. Only one in a million on this continent would be able to earn enough money to pay the huge immigration fee to travel to the industrial area.

Here, Grotok sighs and says, "Only one in a million, and yet it is what we all live for, to be that lucky one."

You excuse yourself and head back to your ship. The throng of Withelians is still there. You can understand their fascination for the ship a little better now and are tolerant.

As you get ready for sleep, you can't help but think about what you have learned today. It does explain something that bothered you about the Withelians. From the moment you saw how technologically advanced they were, you wondered why they never went into space. Now the answer is obvious. To go into space would take them away from the Constructor and would strip them of their social status. Not to mention the necessity of returning at least once a year to prevent mechanical failure of their body parts. You could survive with a faulty mechanical eye, but not with a faulty mechanical heart or liver.

"Quite a corner they've painted themselves into," you think to yourself as you drift off to sleep.

You spend a few more days exploring the continent but you learn nothing new.

✘ STOP ✘

[674]

"Computer, where did I put down those notes I was writing?"

"Sorry, Boss. If I had as many sensors inside the ship as outside, I might be able to help you."

"Not your fault," you tell the machine. It's been one of those days where you can't even be sure your head's going to be where you put it last. You've been trying to organize your exploration notes and look for patterns in what you've found, but the planets all seem to run together in your mind. It's suddenly all very bewildering, as if the true size of the galaxy you're exploring has finally caught up with you.

And now you're headed back toward Hootenaller. Maybe that's what's really bothering you. Planets just don't change their gravitational fields because they feel like it, or alter a million years' worth of natural history on a whim. Somehow Hootenaller became a different planet. The unusual metric tensor in this sector of space may — no, must — have something to do with it. You check in your computer files and find some barely-intelligible reference sources on cosmology. They succeed only in getting you more confused. Theories on curved spaces have been pretty well developed, and quite a lot — though not everything — is known about how multiple-axis hyperdrives and instantaneous jump engines work. You also look up "dual space," and find that the term doesn't appear except as a purely mathematical concept. In mathematics, a dual space isn't a physical space at all; it's the set of all possible ways of transforming or altering some other space. When you try to read any further about the subject, the texts dissolve into little cryptic symbols.

"Computer," you ask, "what kind of readings are you getting on the Hootenaller sector this time?"

"Fluctuating. The pi reading has just started to exhibit Brownian flux to a maximum fluctuation of ten to the minus five."

"Is this going to affect us or the ship?"

"Not at those levels. The fluctuations are smaller than the variation was last time." But you still don't like the implications. It sounds as if something is now actively disturbing the structure of space in the area. You stay alert as you draw closer to Hootenaller.

"How's the planet look?"

"Better see for yourself, Boss." A screenful of statistics appears on the computer port, but you don't look at it. You are too busy staring at the image in the main viewscreen. Hootenaller has changed shape. It's been squashed at the poles like a deflated beach ball while the equator bulges out in a wide ellipse. Theoretically a planet with a very high gravity and a very fast rotation could assume a shape like that, but Hootenaller has neither excuse. To make it worse, the planet isn't even round at the equator: the equator bulges out further in some places than in others, so that if you looked down from the pole the planet would still have an oval-shaped outline.

That's not the only change. The color of the surface, instead of the green of peaceful forests or the grey of storm clouds, is a shameless flaming orange, streaked with clashing blue and green.

"Can we land on that. . . thing?"

"I don't see why not, Boss, except for reasons of taste. The surface gravity is Earth normal to a few decimal places, the air looks good, and the temperature is survivable without gear, though warm. There's plenty of plant life down there, and surface water in places, although there are no clouds."

"Can we do a reasonable landing approach on a planet that shape?"

"Sure. All planets have some equatorial bulge; it's just a matter of compensating. Do you want a high spot or a low spot?"

You select a landing site in the moderate latitudes and perform the approach yourself. You find that the ground appears flat, not sloped downhill toward the pole as you expected. That means that the gravitational potential is equal all over the surface, and that gravity always pulls straight downward. This is normal, of course, for spherical planets, but here it's a peculiar phenomenon.

Far more peculiar is the vegetation you find on the surface. The trees are all bright orange, even the branches and trunks, and they grow in a variety of unlikely forms. Some look like bare trunks with one huge leaf apiece, and others have branches that subdivide so many times into such tiny twigs and leaves that they look like orange clouds. There are orange bushes, orange grasses, and thick pulpy orange cacti, with no spines, that grow from the ground like stacks of barrels. Many species produce edible fruits or pods, though these are as orange as the rest of the plants and it takes some willpower to eat them. Their taste is not unpleasant, and there are no poisonous varieties anywhere, but some have sharp seeds inside and others look so unappetizing that you have to close your eyes and force yourself to taste them. Still, they would make a good source of marketable food.

While you study the plants, you notice some other strange things about the landscape. A refraction effect in the upper atmosphere makes Hootenaller's red giant sun appear a deep blue from the surface. Distances are very hard to judge. You are fooled many times, occasionally tripping over a small bush that you thought was a large tree farther away, or walking toward two identical-looking specimens only to discover that one of the two is ten times as big and ten times as distant.

You are starting to feel some small sympathy for whatever explorer named this planet "Hootenaller" as you consider your options. They are essentially the same as before:

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

⟨6HPAB6⟩ (3 phases) Relax quietly and ponder the problem of why and how Hootenaller keeps changing its appearance.

⟨MXNCJU⟩ (5 phases) Explore more of the planet's surface.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[675]

You experience a rather painful eternity of the most extreme torment, as the monster slowly dismembers you and eats the pieces. Fortunately enough, this being a dream, you do eventually wake up.

Unfortunately, you are still on Tretiak.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[676]

The import/export exchange is a small office in the city. You talk with the young woman at the front desk. She tells you that the Bugeye colony does most of their commerce through regular shipping contracts with the other Ghostworlds, primarily Wellmet and Supa. This business is carried out by freighters that arrive at the spaceport a couple of times a month to drop off various commodities and pick up fuel. Individual visitors such as yourself come to the planet only occasionally.

However, they are happy to have you visit Bugeye any time. They will offer you the same terms of trade they have with their regular customers. Namely, they will give you:

- 3 Fuel for 1 Culture,
- 3 Fuel for 1 Munitions,
- 2 Fuel for 1 Tools,
- 1 Fuel for 1 Food.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[677]

You return to the rain forest and survey the innocuous-looking “guardian” plants that surround the Medicine plant grove. From your earlier visit you know this ring of outer plants is in reality a danger to the unwary visitor. They have the rude inclination to try to eat you when you’re not looking.

You, however, are prepared for them. You make a foray into the grove and safely collect enough tree sap to distill one unit of Medicine. You even have the audacity to reach out and give one of the monstrous plants an affectionate pat on its pod when it isn’t looking.

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

⌘ STOP ⌘

[678]

It really is a simple matter of using the brains you were born with and the hardware you’ve acquired to defeat the slimy thing. You are able to wound it enough that it slinks off into the mire.

So much for fierce monsters.

You continue on down the trail whistling the same cheery tune, but a bit quieter this time.

You finally reach the end. You know it is the end because, except for a fantastically shaped building, there is nothing ahead but impenetrable swamp. And boy does it smell *bad*.

You quickly forget about the foul odor, though, as you concentrate on what must be Strangways’ lab.

The structure is amazing, even compared with other Organuan architecture. The walls are both curved and straight, with peculiar bulges and projections at seemingly random intervals. Multi-colored smoke billows from various portals along the sides and roof, looking for all the world like a rainbow machine. Far from being merely bizarre, it's quite beautiful.

As you stand there with mouth agape, you suddenly feel the presence of another being. You whirl in surprise, reaching for your weapon in case it is another swamp monster.

Instead of a green slimy thing, you see an Organuan who is freakishly tall even among its own kind. The alien calmly nods at you, completely ignoring the weapon you have aimed in its direction, and proceeds down the path toward the marvelous building. Congratulations, you've just met and almost killed Strangways. Good going, ace.

You have no choice but to follow the path down to the doorway. Amazingly enough, the alien is waiting for you and motions for you to enter the lab. You hope there will be no hard feelings about the little misunderstanding outside.

The inside is breathtaking. A large apparatus takes up most of the interior and rises thirty feet into the air, nearly touching the ceiling. Colored tubes connect an arrestingly intricate collection of equipment. The heart of the apparatus has bright lights of every color imaginable flashing in almost a pulse-like beat. As you feel your own heart take on the tempo, you feel in tune with everything in the room, even Strangways.

This last thought brings you out of the hypnotic state into which you were slipping. Where did the alien go?

You wander around for a few minutes before you find the Organuan. At your approach, Strangways looks up from the control panel where it is working and waits for you to say something intelligent.

Not wanting to disappoint your host you introduce yourself and tell the alien you have never seen anything quite as wonderful as this lab. You ask the alien if it would mind explaining, and perhaps demonstrating, the machine's function.

From the telepathic link you can feel Strangways' pleasure at your interest in its work.

"Certainly, human," the alien replies. "It is not often I get visitors. The denizens of the swamp are helpful in insuring my privacy but I sometimes think they are *too* good at their job. I get lonely from time to time.

"My work here is primarily concerned with the origin of life. I have been successful in producing the mixture from which early life arose. I call it 'Quick Life'."

Strangways shows you a large vat into which the end product of the machine is dripping.

You are quick to recognize the mixture as Primordial Soup, a valuable commodity to possess. You tell the alien you are interested in making a trade and offer some trinkets and beads you have in your pocket.

The Organuan is not the kindly but naive scientist you took it for, as he makes it very clear to you that nothing less than the going price for the concoction will be acceptable. Strangways explains to you that several weeks are needed to produce one unit of Primordial Soup and you unfortunately have arrived before the next batch is ready. You will have to return at a later date.

He does tell you the current price for Primordial Soup, though:

1 unit of Primordial Soup for 1 Crystals, 1 Fuel, 1 Computers, and 2 Tools.

As you return to the ship you note that 5 days have passed. Oh well, better luck next time.

You may select this option again.

✧ STOP ✧

[679]

As you make your way back to the Antigravity Research Center several thoughts run through your mind, but the main question you have is how can you sneak into the center and learn about the antigravity technology?

Fifty yards from the entrance to the building your vehicle has once again been rendered immobile for the entire area surrounding the research center.

Once again you prepare yourself for the grueling ordeal. Turning your gravity compensation harness up to maximum, you step out of your vehicle.

Immediately, the gravity seizes hold of you and throws you to the ground. You feel like you are being pushed into the ground by a large creature. Nevertheless, you manage to get on your knees and you begin to crawl towards the door just fifty yards away.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[680]

He is armed with a bizarre weapon that seems to be a cross between a boomerang and an eggbeater. He handles it well enough to keep you on your toes.

You are both wounded and weak from the exertion of the battle. You are beginning to wonder if the green rocks are worth all this and you are actually thinking of making an honorable retreat.

That is, until he slips on some loose dirt. As he falls he throws the weapon at you chattering, "Your uncle swims like a troopship!" Obviously something has been lost in the translation, but you get the drift.

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

You now have a handy new weapon. Now if you only knew how to use the thing. . .

You find Rocky on the surface and note the Blue Squirrellies have handily defeated the Red Horde. You show her your new acquisition and relate your latest adventure. She is very impressed that you were able to survive such an encounter and says you may have some fighting aptitude.

"Perhaps you would like to train in the Martial Art of Twychee of which this weapon is a part?" she chitters at you.

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

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

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

You now have the following options:

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

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

(TPSBWY) (5 phases) Train in Twychee.

Because of the physical damage you suffered in combat, this option has taken nine phases instead of seven.

Go now to the CGM.

✠ STOP ✠

[681]

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.

Fortunately, you do have the skill of telepathy, which allows you to pick up mental impressions of what the Riallans are conveying, even when you can't understand their speech. The Riallans show no sign of being able to gather such impressions from you, so you will have to supplement your ability with some technical effort. 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 compares the Riallans' responses with your own impressions of the speaker's mental concepts. The process goes very quickly. After only a few days more, you and your computer have decoded most of the vocabulary and many of the grammatical structures of the language.

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 class 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 Riellan 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 Riellans make fast robot cargo haulers, and see what it would cost you to acquire one.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[682]

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

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

Once out of the satellites' range, you look over the situation. It's clear that you must find a way to attack the stations more effectively. Your defenses seem adequate, but you don't have the means to disable so many all at once. Your best disabling weapon systems have limited range, and you are only one ship, while each of them maneuvers and attacks independently. To win you would need more firepower than you can imagine putting into one ship.

There is, however, another way to increase your attacks' effectiveness, and that is to increase your own numbers. Attacking with more than one ship simultaneously would divide the satellites' attention, so that they couldn't swarm in such great numbers.

If you and one or more other players wish to try to attack Outpost together, each of you must plot the LAND option, with your ships in the Outpost sector, during the same turn.

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

⊠ STOP ⊠

[683]

You return to Atlantis and are greeted with surprise and excitement.

"You have fulfilled your mission so soon?" you are asked by the villagers. "We hadn't dared hope it would be this easy!"

Embarrassed, you are forced to explain you have not finished your final task, but only returned to see how everyone was.

You see the disappointment in their eyes. Your premature arrival raised their hopes and then cruelly dashed them to the ground. You do the best thing possible and bid them farewell. You think it is best if you do not return until you have found the answers to the mystery of the stone.

As you plot your next course, you silently wish your home planet good-bye. It may be a long time before you see it again.

You may select this option again.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[684]

The beam weapon emplacement is an impressive device, impressive more for its size than for its sophistication. Heavy neutral particle beams are not difficult to generate, but the weapons are big and clumsy and require enormous amounts of power, so they've never been used to arm spaceships.

The head of the beam generator, including the machinery that directs the beam at its target, has been completely destroyed in the battle. The rest is in good condition, giving you a chance to see how it was constructed. Silverbeard must have built it with the aid of robotic machinery, and even then it must have taken a long time.

Next to the weapon itself is a moderately-sized building where much of the work was probably done. Sophisticated precision machine tools are set up around the perimeter of a large open workshop floor. With such tools Silverbeard could have built almost anything. The only things he couldn't have built are the machines themselves. Most likely he stole them from a shipment smuggled out of the Boundary and intended for a Ghost World colony somewhere.

The equipment here will be of immeasurable value in repairing your ship. You can use it to rebuild the most delicate of your damaged systems, including sensors, flight controls, and life support systems.

You suspect that Silverbeard created much of his most sophisticated weapons here, including the battle satellites and the unusual weapons of his fighter. You examine everything very closely, looking for some clue as to how these were built. From haphazard scribbled notes, the settings of the machines, and half-assembled modules scattered around, you can deduce the operating principles of two of them: the plasma beams that the battle satellites fired, and the stress field. Of the two, the stress field seems much the superior weapon; the plasma beams were not very effective except in great numbers.

You cannot discover anything at all about the other weapons Silverbeard used, except for one brief mention of a part used to mount a "singularity generator." Could Silverbeard have obtained these somewhere else? Did he pirate from alien ships as well as humans?

If you can repair your ship and computer fully, you may be able to construct and install a stress field weapon or a plasma beam on your ship. To attempt this, plot option(s):

(ZP5BTY) (10 phases) Build and install a stress field weapon on your ship.

(J9ZD5Q) (10 phases) Build and install a plasma beam weapon on your ship.

You can only select these options after your ship is completely repaired.

You move your ship closer to the workshop and spend several days making partial repairs to many of your ship's more delicate systems.

✂ STOP ✂

[685]

You charge up your weapons and prepare to meet the fleet head-on. It may be your only hope. At the very least it will take the black ships by surprise, and it will allow you to use their own numbers against them. You charge the fleet at full speed, figuring that if you can get inside their formations they will have great difficulty firing at you without hitting each other. As you close you concentrate your own fire on the ships dead ahead, nearest your own trajectory, hoping to win yourself a gap.

The black giants return your fire with blue-green bolts that look lethal.

You swerve to avoid their flak and hope that your own counterweapons can confuse their sensors enough to keep you alive.

But something is wrong. The enemy ships hold their position, hardly bothering to evade you at all, and absorb your fire with no sign of damage. As you draw closer, your weapons should become more lethal, but there is no effect. There is not even the expected violet bloom of energy being absorbed by shields. Your bolts simply hit the dark hulls and disappear without a trace.

Their weapons seem unable to connect with your ship either, so you continue the charge. Perhaps your tactics are confusing them after all. Then you see the ships converge on the space ahead of you, blocking your way. They are trying to ram!

For a split second you freeze at the controls, and a blue-green bolt hits you. You black out for far too short a time and when you return to your senses you are spiraling under full power toward Gironde. There is blood in your mouth and on your console, and the G-forces are tearing you apart.

"Computer! Damage!" you cry. You grab at the manual flight controls like a drowning man for a scrap of wood.

"Lost velocity, directional, and attitude control. Cannot determine hit location. Drives undamaged. Systems undamaged. Hull undamaged. Manual controls may function."

If you were not so busy trying to get the ship under control you would wonder how a hit could damage your internal directional controls without destroying your drives or penetrating your hull, but the shining steel surface of Gironde growing in your viewscreens makes it tough to concentrate on such things. By the time you slow yourself down to avoid becoming a meteor shower and have the ship pointed in the same direction you're moving, the planet has you firmly in its gravitational hold and you decide your best chance is to try to land. Moments later you skim off a broad grey plane of solar power collectors, leaving a wake of twisted metal behind you, and a few seconds after that you are flying in the atmosphere, back under full control, and headed for the spaceport's landing pads.

On the ground you assess the damage. Most of it is superficial, sustained when you skimmed off the ground the first time. There is no sign that you were hit by any sort of energy weapon. You pull apart the wiring conduits inside your hull looking for the damage to your control systems, but you find no damage there either. Your computer reports that its full capabilities have returned.

"What hit us, then? Why did we lose control?"

"I don't know, Boss," says your computer. "Perhaps it was some sort of jamming weapon."

"Perhaps," you agree.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[686]

You were made aware, when you first learned the language, that the Darscians are a quiet and contemplative race. They are completely herbivorous, non-violent, and seldom display extremes of any emotion. You have accepted the hospitality of Clivus, a noted Darscian philosopher, in an effort to learn how and why the Darscian people have remained a viable colonizing force in the galaxy.

"Genetically we are built to maintain calm and non-aggression," Clivus begins, his voice a steady monotone.

"However, emotionally, this is sometimes a problem, especially when we find ourselves in a very stressful situation. So, in order to augment our physical capacity for peace, we have developed a technique we call 'Serene Contemplation'."

Clivus' voice drones on, describing how, at birth, the Darscian children are exposed to a soothing voice teaching the merits of being in control of one's emotions.

"It is not the actual words themselves that change the attitude of the person, but rather the sound of the words, the modulation of the voice, very much like what I am doing for you now."

You can feel that you are in some sort of trance induced by Clivus' speaking to you. You experience a clarity of thought you've never felt before and your mind expands with each syllable you hear. You can actually see the unity of Matter and sense its marriage to Energy. The universe is a very peaceful place to be.

You slip deeper still into the trance and begin to feel less tranquil sensations. You know with certainty that the Darscians have never experienced the trance at this deep a level. Here you can see with your mind's eye the firestorm that rages below the apparent serenity of the universe. You do not go any further, since to do so would be death as you know it, but you watch this display of the raw power of the universe in wonderment.

You understand now that the serenity the Darscians have found is a purely superficial one. Their genetically-induced love of peace and order is only standing in the way of their discovering the real Truth, whatever that may turn out to be.

Despite all appearances, the Darscians' way of life is a wrong turn. However, the ability to achieve what they term "Serene Contemplation" may actually be useful to you. In this state, which you are now able to reach on your own, you can think more clearly and react to life-threatening situations faster.

You have probably tripled your chance of survival in very dangerous situations.

Go now to the CGM.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[687]

Wellmet turns below you, a smooth sphere whose surface dwarfs the human settlements that ride upon it. Even the city of Wellmet, home to sixty million people and the place where you grew up, is no more than a spot on the coast of one of the smaller continents. Looking at the city on the scale of the whole planet, you might think it small, but you would be wrong. There are cities on the Nine Worlds that house more people, but they stack them up in neat towers, while Wellmet spreads horizontally without plan or pattern.

The airspace and orbital paths above the city seem almost as crowded and chaotic as the streets below. From the many spaceports that share the city among them, ships of every description come and go, bearing cargo to and from the surviving colonies of the Ghost Worlds or making the perilous run across the Boundary. You briefly consider landing back at the public spaceport, but you decide that it's time you started thinking of yourself as a Stewart again. You hail the Family landing pads at the Stewart complex and are soon cleared to land. The approach path brings you down in advance of the bulk of the traffic, and the automatic signals provided by the Family facilities make the landing a breeze.

⌘ STOP ⌘

[688]

"THE DAILY SUPA-MAN" reads the sign over the door of the colony's only newspaper. As you open the door, you hear a tinkling sound overhead. Surprised, you look up and see a small brass bell set to ring whenever the door is opened. "What a great idea," you think to yourself — so much more pleasant than the sound of an electronic buzzer to signal the arrival of a customer.

Inside, you meet a small, thin man by the name of Barney who is in charge of the back files. He is more than happy to show you where you can read through back issues of the newspaper.

It takes only a few moments to arrange some time with the paper's data bank, still affectionately called a morgue even in these days of electronic memory.

For a while you are content to simply browse through the contents of past issues, reading odd items here and there as they catch your eye. Eventually, however, you find what you are really looking for: an historical perspective piece published as part of the colony's 100th anniversary celebration. You settle down to learn what you can about Supa's history.

The colony was originally founded by Intergalactic Alchemy Incorporated (IntAlk), a huge industrial combine with headquarters on Earth and Heaven. Supa was intended as a forward base for agriculture in this quadrant of the galaxy. In the aftermath of the Space Plague, IntAlk ordered Supa abandoned and all residents returned to planets inside the proposed Boundary. The Supans, however, resisted. IntAlk did not debate the matter with them, but simply cut the colony off completely, imagining, you are sure, that it would soon wither and die without the support of the Nine Worlds.

Although Supa was a long way from Earth, it proved rather quickly that it could be self-sufficient at providing food for not only itself, but also neighboring worlds who were cut off from the parent planets. They were able to trade for many essential commodities with the nearby alien civilizations as well. Supa survived the change and actually began to thrive.

You learn more about another Ghost World, Wellmet, which is easily the most important of the abandoned colonies. It is located closer to the Boundary than any of the other colonies, and could have been included with the Nine Worlds had the citizenry desired it.

Wellmet is now the center both for human trade with alien races (perhaps the reason they did not wish to be included in the Boundary), and for smuggling into the Nine Worlds. Information is said to be available on Wellmet that will allow even the slowest of spaceships to penetrate the Boundary. *The Daily Supa-Man* lists the Slippery Silver Tavern on Wellmet as the traditional meeting place for both inbound and outbound adventurers, as well as a principal contact point for the “Families,” Wellmet’s semi-feudal merchant lords.

Supa carries on trade with Wellmet, and has even gone so far as to contribute ships and people to the Ghost Worlds Defense Force, organized on Wellmet in the days when the Space Patrol tried to suppress smuggling at its source.

One last article you read gives you some insight into the hardy nature of the colonists on this planet. It seems that IntAlk pulled all of the heavy farming equipment out when they left, even though the machines legally belonged to the colonists. The parting words of the company were, “So sue us!”

The colonists had been forced to return to the methods used by early pioneers for about one hundred years until they could afford to smuggle large equipment back out through the Boundary. Today, although they are as modern as any agricultural area back in the Nine Worlds, the Supans like to have the appearance of rural simplicity to remind them of the difficult times back in the early years. Hence the quaint stores, saloons and newspaper.

Intrigued by what you have read, you return to your ship.

✠ STOP ✠

[689]

You meet Jen in the Bottomless Pit Lounge, well known to be the worst, cheapest, and dirtiest watering hole on Wellmet. There, you find out what the deal is with you and the Family.

It turns out that your stealing a ship was not what set them off. That they might have overlooked. But in stealing the ship you caused the Family to break a contract, and that is not so easily forgiven.

The contract was to deliver three units of a rare anti-inertial compound — stuff that smugglers call “Super Slip” — to the planet Heaven in the Nine Worlds. The ship you stole had the Super Slip loaded aboard, and they were the only three units anywhere on Wellmet. In fact, no one even knows where the stuff comes from. The previous supply was brought to Wellmet from somewhere in deep space by a prospector who hasn’t been heard from since.

There is only one way you can get back into good graces with the Family: deliver the Contract yourself. If you do that, you nullify the offense of having ruined the contract, and the Family will take you back. However, because you’ve been disowned, you must do it with no help from the Family. Jen gives you the contact name and password for making the delivery.

“So it’s a snap,” says Jen. “Just uncache the stuff from wherever you dumped it and take it to Heaven.”

“I dumped it in the sun.”

“Oh. What a downer.”

“And anyway,” you go on, “even if I had it, I couldn’t get it through the Boundary to the Nine Worlds. That’s a trick for serious spacers. If the Space Patrol were to grab it, that’s not going to satisfy anybody’s contract.”

“Well, it doesn’t have to be those three units,” says Jen. “Any three units will do it. All you have to do is find some more.”

Continued 

When you acquire three units of Super Slip, and want to fulfill the contract on Heaven, go to the Nine Worlds and plot option:

(IO7FLI) (7 phases) Deliver three units of Super Slip to Heaven.

✂ STOP ✂

[690]

Your long-range scanners indicate that the planet Crater is hardly the size of a large asteroid, yet it bears the most enormous chasm you have ever witnessed in all your travels, a colossal smouldering crater which deforms approximately a third of the planet's surface. From space, much of Crater appears to be covered by mines and vast structures whose austerity leads you to suspect they are factories. However, it is difficult to be certain of this from afar. Closing in, you scan the planet's industrial surface for any sign of inhabitants, and find none. You decide to defer any attempts to contact possible Craterians until you do a bit more exploring.

Aiming your x-ray scanner at a group of buildings, you see that the buildings are filled with impressively sophisticated missiles which appear ready to be launched. On panorama, your scanner's screen indicates that every building on the surface either houses defenses or manufactures them. But where are the beings who built all of this?

Suddenly you realize your ship is losing altitude, and you are headed in a completely different direction than you had intended. Your controls are unanimously inoperative. However, you are decelerating at a pace which is too gradual, too controlled to feel as if you are about to crash. In fact, if you had complete control of your ship, you would not be capable of executing as precise a landing as you observe your ship doing on its own. Just now, the thought occurs to you that it might be a good time to radio the Craterians and identify yourself.

The moment you turn on your radio, you are blasted by the voice of spaceport control who, luckily for you, speaks Earth Standard with a slight Leucothian accent. "Who are you and what do you think you're doing, entering our atmosphere and flying around our planet without permission?"

"I am from the Nine Worlds," you reply. "I come in peace."

"Peace? Do you really expect us to believe that? We are bringing you down for interrogation."

"I mean you no harm, honestly. I'm not your enemy."

"Don't try anything funny — we are armed!"

And they're not kidding. Their whole planet is a fortress.

As your ship lands in one of the few barren, undeveloped areas on the planet, your radio picks up a conversation between spaceport control and some authority deep in Crater's interior.

"We have landed the ship on the median ramp of the visitor's minefield. We request permission to detonate V611's in the event of a catastrophe."

"Permission granted for V611 detonation."

Frazzled, you radio spaceport control. "Excuse me... uh, spaceport control... I didn't mean to eavesdrop. Actually, my radio accidentally... did I hear you say I've landed in a minefield?"

"This is routine procedure here. When your hatch opens, exit unarmed. Step onto the grey platform directly beside your ship and ground transport will take you to the holding area for quarantine."

Following four days of quarantine, you are taken to Crater Security for interrogation.

“This won’t harm you, although it may sting a bit,” a security officer tells you as he draws forth some fluid into a syringe.

“What is that? What are you doing?”

“This is an ancient means of ensuring that you come in peace, as you claim. In fact, it was invented on the planet Earth. It’s called ‘truth serum’. You will have no recollection of the forthcoming investigation. If the magistrate concludes that you are safe, you will be permitted to continue your visit on our planet. If you are deemed a threat, you will be disposed of.”

When you regain consciousness, you learn that you have been granted permission to remain on Crater, and you are placed in the custody of Olarus, an armed guard. Olarus, like all Craterians, lives underground. Viewing the Nine Worlds Boundary as inadequate protection from alien invasion, Craterians spend their entire lives entrenched deep within the interior of their asteroid-sized world, while the planet’s exterior has been transformed into a battleground. As Olarus puts it, “Crater has been fortified to withstand repeated attacks. When the alien invaders destroy the rest of humanity, Crater will be Mankind’s last bastion of hope.”

You follow Olarus into a subterranean vehicle which descends several kilometers into the ground, taking you to the vast underground city where the planet’s inhabitants live. You hear the constant rumble of heavy machinery everywhere as you travel past brightly lit, crowded sections and across dark, open cavities deep within Crater’s interior. By the time you arrive at the terminal, marked “level 147, station E3,” Olarus has told you a bit more about the planet. You identify five possible options for further activity:

⟨GOEFMI⟩ (3 phases) Trade commodities at Crater’s commercial exchange port.

⟨WOGFEI⟩ (7 phases) Investigate Crater’s robot drone technology. Olarus says that the experimental robot drones are the only completely safe way to trade with aliens, and are supposed to be very efficient as well.

⟨G8EHMA⟩ (3 phases) Tour one of Crater’s personal weapons factories, and see if there’s anything you’d be interested in buying.

⟨W8GHEA⟩ (4 phases) Visit a Craterian shipyard, in the hope of acquiring something new to improve your ship.

⟨COUFOI⟩ (3 phases) Attend a seminar at Crater’s Institute for Scientific Research.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[691]

Your thoughts turn to strange subjects as you travel through the cold wasteland of hyperspace. Sometimes your mind turns to philosophical questions and you ponder the nature of space, time, and the endless universe.

Other times you think about yourself and what you are trying to accomplish out here. Sure, you know you are looking for Silverbeard the pirate, but you aren’t really sure how to track the villain down.

You remember what you have heard in your travels — “You won’t need to look for Silverbeard — he’ll find you when you least expect it.” The pirate especially likes to prey on ships that are far from any possible planetary assistance. Maybe the more time you spend in hyperspace, the more likely you will be to run into him.

Continued 

Who knows, maybe once he knows you are searching for him, he will be eager to find you as well. Of course you will have to defeat him in battle, but you plan on getting your ship upgraded with as many weapons as possible. Silverbeard is used to preying on minimally-armed smugglers, not expert pilots in crack ships.

✂ STOP ✂

[692]

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

You radio the colony's spaceport, but like last time, there is no answer. You decide to land at the spaceport anyway, in order to try to talk to the Darscian colonists in person. When you disembark, you are greeted by a spaceport official.

✂ STOP ✂

[693]

"You are truly an Advancing Brother."

The phrase reverberates in your head. All you can think of is that you gave this response earlier and that your dialogue should be on a higher level.

You feel a shiver of dread as you look up at the Brother who is giving you the test. You can see he is not at all happy.

You become very unhappy yourself when the Brother picks up a nearby wooden staff and begins pummeling you about your neck and shoulders.

"How do think you can advance in rank if you insist on being so CARELESS!!" he shouts.

"Ow, ooh, ouch," you reply while trying to leave the room. "I'll do better next time," you manage as you make it to the safety of the outer corridor.

"You'd better!" is his response as he slams the door after you.

Miserably, you make your way back to your ship where your trusty sickbay is waiting to patch your wounds.

You may select this option again.

✂ STOP ✂

[694]

Emerging from hyperspace, you instruct the computer to head for the only habitable planet in the system and to make a survey pass.

According to the charts, such as they are, you see that the planet's name is Tretiak. You have no other pertinent information available to you about this world, so it is up to you to make a planetary survey before landing.

The first orbit gives you the data about the gravity and physical characteristics of the planet. You see that it has a familiar ratio of water to land, roughly 3:1, with gravity a little lighter than Earth-normal. The readout on the atmosphere shows it to be breathable and harmless. Fine. You instruct the computer to land.

Tretiak offers no landing signal for you to home in on, and there is no evidence of industrialization on the surface amidst the seemingly ubiquitous jungle. You ask your computer to begin a slow descent, while you look for a likely landing spot.

Your eyes stray for a minute from the viewscreen in front of you to the manual data gauges arranged around your control cabin. Noticing an abnormal reading on one of the atmosphere analyzers, you ask your computer for an explanation.

"The atmosphere is perfectly breathable in the human-normal range, with no trace of contaminants or taints."

"Then what about this value?"

"The sky is enormous and we have yet to lay eyes on the naked face of God."

You have no idea what this means, but you are bright enough to realize you have a problem here, so you take action to remedy the situation.

You hastily cut to full manual controls, turn off the computer's external sensors, and don your Super Space Suit. Something's very wrong with whatever the computer's sampling out there, and you don't want it to get to you.

You land manually, near the shores of a big pink lake. You then carefully seal up all of your ship's external sensors, tell your computer to go to sleep, and slip outside for a look around.

You have never seen a planet with the color scheme of Tretiak and, with a little luck, you will never see another. Besides the pink lake, which is the color and consistency of a popular stomach medicine, nothing else seems to be a normal color, either. The sky is orange, most of the vegetation purple, and the natives are green. You are beginning to feel a bit nauseous.

"Hello," says a little green man standing a short distance away. Others of his kind have respectfully gathered about your ship. "Take off your suit and stay awhile."

"Uh, I think not," you say. "I don't think the atmosphere would agree with me."

"Suit yourself," says the little green man, with a giggle. The others giggle as well, and then slip away into the vegetation.

You return to your ship, to run several days of tests on your computer and experiments on the planet's atmosphere. The latter studies confirm that the atmosphere contains some very dangerous neurotoxins, and the former indicate that your computer has been affected. It looks like the damage will clear, however, once you can get away from the planet and clean the input leads.

Your options are as follows:

(SETMSN) (3 phases) Talk with the little green men, and see if you can figure out how they know Earth Standard.

(LURO4F) (4 phases) Wander down to the lake and try to determine why it's pink.

⟨5UTOSF⟩ (3 phases) Collect the fruit of the nearby 'palm' trees, which look like they might make a good source of Fiber.

⟨PAB6YP⟩ (7 phases) Take off the Super Space Suit. We dare you.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[695]

You are feeling very restless, but are not sure why. You are holding your own out here beyond the Boundary, and have even gotten one of the three alien abilities you need to find before you can return to Harvard.

Maybe that is the problem. You only have *one* of the abilities so far. You need to start seriously thinking about getting the other two abilities, or you may lose the golden opportunity you have to do anything about the intolerable research conditions back on Harvard.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[696]

Once again you are back at Wellmet, the center of human commerce outside the Boundary. You've become pretty good at making landing approaches around the busy spaceports of the city, and you lose no time in coming in. As far as you know you're still on the Lanza family's guest list, so you contact the spaceport to request a landing slot. They tell you that they have no room at present, but that as a favor they will arrange a berth free of charge at a private spaceport in a good section of town.

Once secure on the ground, you phone Valle Lanza and ask why the Lanza family is doing you favors.

"Because, thick hull, we want to buy you out."

"Why?"

"For one thing," says Valle, "buying out independents is how we build our ops. And word's been out that you've got something worth dealing. Info, coordinates, whatever, could mean good Family business."

"Sorry to disappoint. I'm just another crazy explorer."

"Ha. Just like I'm another slang-slinging city rat. Word to the wise, though: big family like Lanza or Stewart can afford to take 'no' for an answer. Watch out who else you deal with. DeCoeurs and Cristobals can still play mean, like in the old days. And remember the offer if things get too hot."

"Thanks. I think." You hang up the handset.

⊠ STOP ⊠

[697]

You are feeling rather smug about running the Boundary successfully. Happily, you contact Dr. Myers to schedule a meeting.

When you arrive you see she is already waiting, delighted to see you. You tell her about your adventures and that you have proof of one alien ability.

Although she is impressed with what you have done, you sense something is wrong. When you ask her, she tells you, "It is wonderful that you are able to give us proof that an alien ability exists, but only one ability isn't going to carry enough weight with the University. They'll just say that it is a fluke and isn't conclusive proof of anything. We'll need at least two more abilities to make it worth publishing."

You see her point and agree. You know there are a lot of alien races scattered throughout the galaxy, so things don't look all that bleak. You need proof of two more alien abilities. Then you can return to Harvard.

You bid your friend a cheerful farewell and head back out to the unknown reaches of space.

As you prepare your ship for take off, you are a lot less apprehensive about what awaits you. You survived the trip the first time, so you figure you can probably do it again.

You may select this option again.

✱ STOP ✱

[1971]