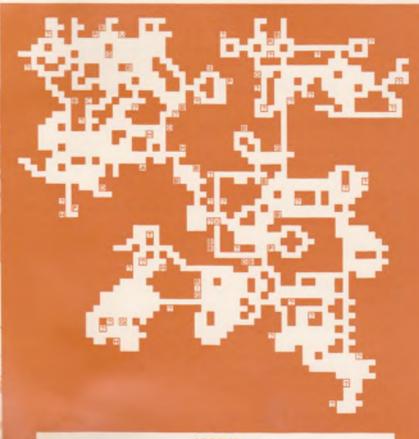


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City of Primus



LEGEND

- Computer Terminal Munitions Shop
- A Armory

make.

- B Bors, Lounges, Etc.
- C Computer Center
- D Personal Development
- G Gambling Establishment
- H Hospital
- M Mine Shaft O Controller's Office
- P Police Station
- R Repair Shop
- S Speeder Transport
- T Combat Training U University
- W War Games Room X Exit to Surface

A PRIMUS MEETING

Tom Jetland and an armor-clad marine squinted through the gloom of the bar and spotted me. The brute marine waded through the dance floor and Jetland followed in his wake, smiling and apologizing to the angry dancers. They both sat in my booth, the marine with a brooding pout.

A mutual friend, Greg Ericson, had suggested that we meet. He had told me that Tom Jetland needed a programmer, needed one so badly that he would pay credits up front. Jetland was helping Cybil Graves retrieve some stolen

property. Why he wanted a programmer, I didn't know.

The red dust of the planet's surface covered the two men. I could see bandages on Jetland, some of them crimson from the mix of dust and blood. Jetland extended his hand and said, "Good afternoon. My friend's name is Titus." The brute marine nodded, knit his blunt fingers together, and cracked them with a sharp pop.

I smiled, perhaps a bit wanly, and said, "Charmed."

Jetland grinned and said, "It helps him relax. Now, I am interested in hiring a programmer. Greg said you might be able to help us."

I nodded and replied, "I've coded for seven years on the Cybersynaptic V with some time on the hyperCarbonex systems off Pluto. Anything from race element analysis to neuron mapping."

Jetland frowned and said, "What the hell does that mean?"

"I can add and subtract," I smiled.

"And divide?" returned Jetland with a raised brow.

"You flatter me."

Jetland rubbed his hands together and said, "Well as one as one break into the system, I'll be satisfied. We might need you or an entire to see for now I can offer you two hundred credits up front, eight hundred were you hack the system."

"Hack the system? That's damn near a felony."

Jetland waved his hand as if he were fanning gnats away. Yeah, whatever. In the course of our journeys, we have accidently," he shot a glance at Titus, "injured some civilians and officers. We need to have our police records expunged of those misdeeds."

"That's it?" I asked cautiously.

"For now, yes."

I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to work out the irritating sensation I

had acquired in my short meeting with Jetland. After a spell of contemplative silence, I spoke up. "You didn't get those injuries trying to hack the system. And I recognize that red dust. There's no way I'm going out on the surface. I know Cybil wants you to retrieve something from the Nomads Outside and I want no part of it."

"You may have to travel to other cities, but not onto the surface," said Jetland. "Trust me."

Yeah, right.

We walked the grey corridors of Primus. Titus and Jetland followed a few steps behind. If I saw an officer approaching, I would signal and they would duck into a shop until he passed.

At a terminal I logged in and accessed the civil records. It wasn't good. "Jetland," I hissed, "it says here that you killed some civilians, not just injured them. And you're a controller agent?"

He scratched an eyebrow and gave a sheepish shrug.

Damn. This was going to be tough. I'd have to hack much deeper into the system than I previously thought. Federal Planet records were normally filed deep within the core. I pulled every trick I knew, and still couldn't do it. As I sat there thinking, a flurry of low level system activity caught my eye. It was trying to identify me! I quickly logged off, but I was sure that I left too late. Now we were all in the same fix.

"How much money do you two clowns have?" I asked.

Titus carefully withdrew from his vest a pouch full of credit vouchers and began to count, "One... two... three..."

Jetland rolled his eyes and said, "Maybe seventy credits."

All the spit in my mouth dried up. "Seventy? Hell, we've got to get out of here! I wasn't able to cleanup your record, and to make it worse, I think it identified me as an intruder. We've got to leave quickly."

"Four... five... six...," continued Titus.

An irritated Jetland slapped Titus across the hands, sending the vouchers to the floor like a rain of confetti. "I know we have to leave," Jetland said, "but a speeder ticket costs five thousand." He shrugged and said, "You were our last hope."

Underhanded cretins! They had no intentions of paying me the remaining

eight hundred credits. I began to wave my hands in disgust. "Great! Just great! The next officer that sees us will attack. No 'How are you doing today Mr. Jetland and idiot sidekick, Titus. Did you know that you have been traveling a little askew of our fine laws?' No! He's going to let you know you've been bad boys with a hot lead spanking!" I heard myself yelling wildly and stopped short. In a subdued tone, I resumed. "I suggest we get enough money to get a speeder ticket out of here. Are either of you good at gambling?"

Titus, who had been on his knees picking up vouchers, stood up. "Yup. A little bit."

"Okay, let's go." I didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the thought of Titus matching his wits with the sharks at the casino.

Titus entered a casino and through a window we watched him walk up to a laser slot. He placed a small bet, crossed his huge fingers, and pulled the handle. He didn't win the first time, or the second. Or even the third. But on the fourth pull he got lucky, recouping his losses and then some. With a big grinhe rushed to our window to show us his winnings. Jetland nodded approving and waved him back to the slots.

Titus strolled confidently back to the slots and placed another small wager. Success came quicker this time and again he left the game richer by a few creater. The lunkhead looked so happy. He showed us a handful of credits and nearly grinned his head off. Each time Titus was up by a few credits, we made sure man he left the Laser slot or Keno pit to keep the pit boss from rigging in a same and each time Titus stepped away, I checked his profile on the computer to contain that his gambling skills were progressing.

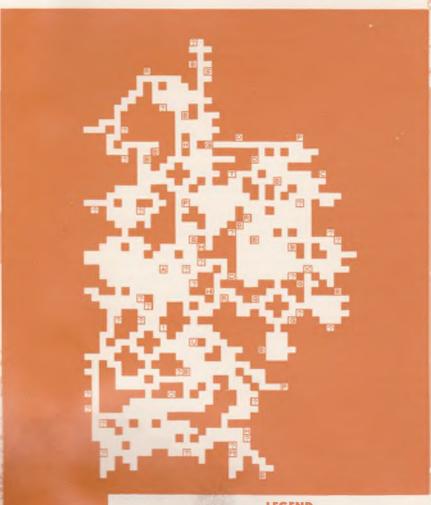
At one point in the gambling binge, Titus lost half our earnings in a spree at the Keno table. He slouched over to us, depressed a spree in luck. I tried to coax him back to the Keno pit, but Titus wouldn't return until Jerond asked, "Would you prefer to mine radioactive ore in a stinking hot roc suit?" Titus frowned and returned to the table.

After a few more hard losses, Titus's luck was on the upswing again. I kept checking his profile on the computer; his gambling skill showed no increase even though he was on a win streak. It wasn't until he had recouped his losses would his skills rise again. High on a positive roll, he spent the rest of the night gambling. By morning, the silly marine had won over thirty thousand credits.

We left Primus on the next speeder.

City of Progeny

man!



LEGEND

- ? Computer Terminal
- Munitions Shop
- A Armory B Bars, Lounges, Etc.
- C Computer Center
- D Personal Development
- G Gambling Establishment
- H Hospital
- M Mine Shaft
- O Controller's Office
- P Police Station
- R Repair Shop
- S Speeder Transport
- T Combat Training
- U University
- W War Games Room
- X Exit to Surface

2 HACKING AND TRAINING ON PROGENY

We arrived in Progeny and rested at a lounge. Titus seemed so book in seemed so book

We headed for a repair shop to pawn some spare items and make room in our packs. On the way over, a gang of thieves ambushed us. They sprang from the shadows of a broken terminal booth and knocked me down. It might have gone badly, but Titus whipped out an ancient Uzi from beneath his ear and flattened our attackers with a few bursts. He grinned and wiped down his gun with a small cloth while Jetland and I gathered the cutthroats' belong ras

We battled through several more ambushes before reaching a read shop. Once inside, Jetland sidled up to the mechanic and slipped him some credits. I heard the man whisper, "I saw Phelos with pink dust on him of us had heard of anyone named Phelos and Titus looked a trifle him of Jetland would so foolishly waste some of his hard-earned credits for words he could've easily extracted with his no-cost fist method.

We sold some items and left. We were just a few feet from the door-awhen a gentleman in an old vac suit took a shot from across the street a sniper rifle. Phzzzt! A slug embedded itself into the side of the Repair Shace Jetland let out a curse and we all fled, too surprised to engage the lone guman Only a hitman would carry such a weapon. I feared that we had a pour our heads. When I asked Jetland about the number of people he are "accidently" killed, he refused to answer.

I regretted taking this job.

Since we had credits to burn, Jetland decided to stop at a Training Cener With his controller agent status, he was allowed to engage in an scenario Jetland chose to practice with his pistol. He said that if we wanted arrange a scenario for us as well. Titus just patted his Uzi and shows a read I was interested in furthering my tactical skills, but Jetland said.

Stuff is worthless here on Mars! It all boils down to programming medic and battle armor skills, and skills for weapo. Tike the Uzi and grenades. Don't spend your time studying much else, my frie.

We stopped by several more repair shops and received several cryptic tidbits. One mechanic claimed that things other than gambling occurred in Parallax and to ask for Derahand. Another man, named Gecko, told us if we were looking for an edge to try the Parallax Training Center.

I tried hacking the system again. Fortune smiled and this time I succeeded.

From the records, I gleaned the code that would open the sealed mine shafts. Not what I wanted, but it might prove valuable so I copied it down. I also entered our names in the roster of the War Room. This would definitely be valuable, since we could train in the more deadly arts of war there. When I told Titus he could improve his automatic weapon skills — among other things — there, he displayed his wretchedly crooked teeth in a broad smile. I, myself, was more interested in the special battle armor skill. I tried to hack some more, but the system kicked me out.

"What about the police records?" inquired Jetland.

"Nope. It's going to take some time."

He shook his head and said, "Time we ain't got. Credits we got. I think we can afford a tutor. Let's go."

He insisted that I visit the local computer center and enroll in a quick training course. I resisted initially (what would some simple-minded hacker have to offer me?), but soon gave in to Jetland's persuading (particularly to the vise grip on my shoulder). I did learn some system quirks and new cryoflux frequencies which made the course worth the credits we shelled out. I also talked at length with the sysop. He mentioned that he would give me an experimental hacking terminal if I could retrieve an interface card from the sysop in Primus. I accepted his offer with a handshake. If I wanted to hack the system, the terminal would help tremendously.

While my comrades displayed their training papers at the armory and purchased battle armor, I tried once more to hack the terminal. Ha! Even without the terminal, my new skills enabled me to find the police files and clean our records, plus the hidden backup files. Right before I logged off, I discovered a reference to "Golum armor," the suits the special agents sometimes wore. Even tougher than battle armor, Golum armor was tuned to the individual, making it nearly impossible to steal and use. But, what could be tuned could be untuned. Hmmm. I would think on this more. In any event, our records were now cleaner than a baby's fresh-washed bottom.

With our newly-acquired law abiding status, Jetland couldn't resist walking right into the police station and inquiring if there were any current

bounties. There was only one. Jetland laughed out loud when he saw the wanted poster for Phelos Fletcher.

"Gentlemen, where would poor old Phelos get covered with pink dust?"
"The surface?" ventured Titus.

"Close, my friend, but no. Follow me."

PROGENY MINES AND THE NURSE

We trooped after him, eventually winding up at the entrance to the dosed Progeny mine. As I went ahead to unseal the shaft, I felt the hair on the book of my neck rise. Over the din of a struggling air purifier, I heard Jetland show "Watch out!" It was too late.

The flash of an energy blade blinded me as it swept downwards to my unprotected skull. I dodged the attack by diving away, but wound smashing my head on a nearby locker. As my assailant turned to drive as energy blade into my sprawled body, Titus tackled him from the side

They struggled briefly. A wild cry and then silence. Titus stood up Our attacker slumped unconscious, a rivulet of blood trailing down his creek attempted to get to my feet, but blackness struck me to my knees. Before I passed out, I heard Jetland calling for a medic and the police over the committee.

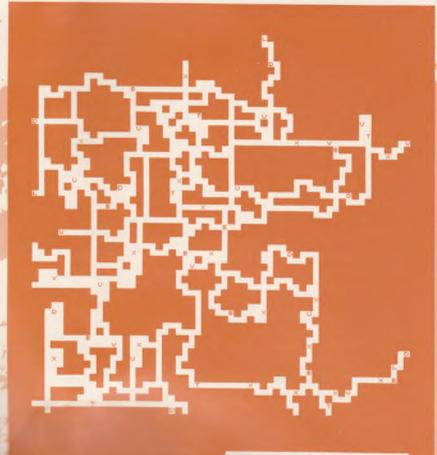
I awoke in a hospital, my head cradled in the hands of a pretty mean constraint of the state of the badge on her blouse: Suzanne Bonne She administered a small sedative and local anesthetic before neatly closing the deep gash on my forehead. Titus called her "Stitch" from then on. He was singled words. What a simpleton. But a simpleton who saved my the of teaching Titus monosyllabic words drifted through my head as several veils of darkness and into sleep.

To my surprise, I awoke in Primus. Jetland said I slept for near a accordance a half, time enough for him to take Stitch to a local restaurant and control to join our crew. Why she gave in and joined, I have no idea. The page Jetland could convince a mouse to walk into a cat's mouth.

Jetland also took my down time to explore the Progent of the police left, he and Titus ventured into the mine and the police left, he and Titus ventured into the mine and a mining laser of things, including four cases of dynamite and a mining laser of the police at not finding something to add to his arsenal, said he wanted something to add and dangerous" to wield. Stitch scowled at this talk of battle.

Since we were in Primus, we decided to find the sysop at the Computer Center. When I asked the sysop for the interface card, he grew abusive. I tried reasoning with him, and then finally offered to buy it outright, but he refused to discuss it and ordered me to leave.

Progeny Mine



LEGEND

- E Elevator Shaft T Tools
 X Cave In L Laser
 D Box of Dynamite B Bandages
 U Useless Items V Voc Suit

want.

I related this to Jetland and he said, "Wait here. I'll try talking to he a few minutes he returned with the card and said, "No problem. It's all a mater of creating the proper attitude." For some reason Titus thought this very and chortled all the way back to Progeny.

We landed in Progeny and hurried to the computer center. The sysoc delighted with the interface card, presented to me the promised termina a little more training, I was sure it would be a huge asset.

We ambled out into the city corridors and were immediately stopped a band of officers. Titus and Jetland seemed unsurprised and started was a way before the officers could draw their pistols. Stitch and I ran for cover watched from behind a nearby wall.

Titus rolled and ducked, firing continuously with his Uzi. He was so agree he could aim and fire three times as fast as Jetland. Jetland, less accesseveral hits. His reflecto armor mitigated some of the damage, but not a tried to flee, but another laser bolt sent him sprawling. He cried out for She sprinted towards him just as Titus threw several sticks of dyname are crowd of officers. They detonated with a tremendous blast, blowing an officers, two terminals and a statue of Cornellius Wrak. The huge expression nearly swallowed Titus. We limped away, carrying a badly injured server us. Stitch brushed her tears away with the back of her hand as several heal salves to Jetland's wounds.

We took Jetland to the L. E. Apathetic Hospital and services as a corpsman worked on our wounded comrade. They were experienced asked no questions. Before long, we left with a subdued our reason tow.

"Tom," I said, "how did you get that interface card?"

He smiled the mischievous smile I had seen before. All I did a see a guy if he had ever been hospitalized for head trauma. He shook his read and handed me the card. I didn't have to touch the guy — imagine that.

Of course, I thought. Imagine that. I shook my head and prepared myself for another hack into the police records.

Primus Mine



- E Elevator Shaft
- C Cave in
- D Box of Dynamite U Useless Items
- T Tools
- L Laser B Bandages V Vac Suit

year.

CYBIL'S TASK AND STRANGE HALLUCINATIONS

"Jetland wanted to discuss his deal with Cybil Graves so we returned to Primus and hustled over to the munitions shop.

"Have you retrieved my property?" she asked, glancing cooly at Stitch and me.

"No," replied Jetland. "It's too damn dangerous Out there. I want to terminate our agreement. Here take, your money back," he said, holding one thousand credits in his palm.

Cybil shook her head. "A deal is a deal. You accepted my offer and I expect you to uphold your part of the bargain. You have my microdisk and my mone. Now retrieve my package. I have nothing more to discuss with you. Good day. She left the counter and disappeared into a back room.

"That's one cold fish," said Titus.

"And one mean fish," added Jetland. "If we don't perform the task to her satisfaction, she'll send hunters after us. And I'm not spending the rest of my slinking through shadows to escape them."

We argued for well over an hour. He wanted me to accompany them on the surface. I would have preferred to fly into the sun. Have my nails peeced back one by one. Drink a vat of hot animal fat. Anything but go to the surface

"How would I know if they gave me the correct disk? You re the experious would know if they pulled a fast one," he said.

"You don't even know what the Nomads are supposed to see you anything to do with computers."

"I could just turn you in to the authorities, you know. That experimental terminal of yours doesn't look all that legal.

I snorted. "Oh? and you think dealing with Nomads will be apprec ated by the local constable?"

"Okay, okay. Fine. I wouldn't turn you in. But I really need you, Mac. We'll take care of you Out there, Titus and I. What do you say?"

Just then Titus grunted, "He's scared, Tommy. He's nothin' but plain scared."

Stitch looked over at me, and then away. Damn. I had spent the last several days learning about her and I liked her. She was tender and intelligent, a true

healer. The first time I saw her wield those heal salves, I knew she was different. It disturbed me for her to see my fear.

And truthfully, I was scared. I wasn't afraid of big dogs, or high places, or even of speaking in front of huge crowds. But leaving my comfortable underground city to go Outside made me nervous and sick. After several minutes, I would be racked with fear. In less than an hour, I would kill my own brother to get back Inside. I felt like I would detach from the surface at any moment and float into the empty, black sky. I wouldn't have the good fortune of dying. I would forever drift in the cold void, forgotten. Forgotten by Jetland, by Titus — and by Stitch.

"I seen you run from those scum back in Progeny," continued Titus. "And from the hitman, too." He put his arm around Stitch and said, "She saved Tommy's life while you were busy being scared." Stitch shrugged away from him, but still didn't look at me.

Damn.

We crept out of the dome on foot, heading north. I walked with my eyes closed. We were all on one long tether and I let it guide my way. I imagined I was walking in the terrapod back in Primus. No big deal. The soil beneath my booted feet could just as well have been brown earth. I walked this way for hours, stumbling occasionally. When we reached the hills, I concentrated on looking straight down, far away from the gigantic heavens above us. This worked fine until we were attacked by a Mutant and a Sand lion.

We ran across the plains of Mars, pursued by these creatures. Our pace forced my eyes open. I began to sweat with both exertion and fear. Despite my stumbling over every rock on the landscape, we finally outstripped our predators.

After several more encounters with Martian Urchins and Crushers, we were relieved to see a band of approaching Nomads. They split and surrounded us their loose fitting robes blending into the rusted hills. Their leader carned a rasy looking rifle, better than Titus's Uzi. He greeted Jetland and a sked for the disk.

its red eye acrong stowly like a sluggish heartbeat. Before we could react, he and his wratter account of the tortured hills of Mars and

vanished.

Through the comlink I heard Jetland exclaim, "A finder! This deal just keeps getting worse. Okay, let's follow the beacon."

I groaned and followed.

The signal led southward, towards an enormous pile of rubble. As we neared the rubble, we were attacked by several Urchins hiding in the shadows. Although the Urchins managed to toss several spines at us, they were hardly a combative challenge. Jetland lobbed several sticks of dynamite and Titus finished them off with his Uzi.

My fear, irrational as it already was, began to worsen. The sky loomed over me, prying at my feet, trying to cast me adrift, off the tiny planet into space. I closed my eyes again and listened as Jetland muttered and walked around the pile of stones and cracked fragments of ancient lava. I heard him examine the area, lifting stones and moving rubble.

"Well," he announced, "the finder claims that what we seek lies beneath

this mess. Are you listening, Mac?"

I nodded weakly.

I heard him snort. "Whatever. Titus, do you still have that mining laser? Can you use it?"

Titus shook his head. "I got it, Tommy, but I don't know how to use it."

We stood there for a moment, silent. Then Stitch spoke up. "I have some mining skill. I know how to use that laz'."

I opened my eyes.

She calmly removed the laser from Titus, slung it around her slim waist and began slicing up the rock into slabs of heated glass. Jetland graned you up, eh?"

I mutely nodded.

Stitch quickly uncovered a vent in the surface and found a growing corpse holding a black box that blinked in step with our finder. The covern entrance, probably an old volcanic vent, beckoned me. Anything to get out from beneath this huge sky! "We should check this out. I've never heard of a covern this close to Primus," I quickly said.

Jetland looked at me quizzically and replied, "A medic with a laz' and a Marco Polo programmer. Okay we'll take a look." He knelt and pried the box from the corpse's grisly hands and placed it in his pack.

We descended and began to explore a series of natural tunnels. After the first cave in, I wished Stitch had more mining skill. After the first steam vent, I

Cave 1



- L- Lava

lash! .

wished she had more medic skill. Before long, I didn't know what was worse, the surface or its interior.

Strangely enough, the cavern had more to offer than steam vents and lava pools. Jetland discovered several odd, reddish-brown balloons that transmitted very strange hallucinations: visions of aliens, laboratory doors opening into a bizarre zoo, and other weird dream thoughts. Jetland shook his head and muttered for some time after the encounter. We marked the locations on our map and pressed on.

In addition to giving us strange hallucinations, the balloons gave us psionic abilities; abilities which we could only control with our minds. I absorbed into my mind a strange looking bat which I wielded as if it were in my hands. In a far corner, Titus absorbed something called a synapse beam. Titus scratched his head, knotted his brow, and accidently fired the synapse beam. "Not very loud, but very dangerous," he said. The lower level furnished some odd but extremely durable and protective armor — and more hallucinations.

Satisfied, we left the caverns and ascended to the surface. We hustled back to the Primus dome, this time with me leading. I hurriedly entered the security code and we entered the sweet confines of Primus.

5 THE SECRET OF PROSCENIUM

Our mission accomplished, we visited the munitions shop. Cyb lever the hostess, merely grabbed the box, threw a wad of credit vouchers at us and excackling. Good riddance, I thought.

Our job concluded, I bid my goodbyes to Jetland who said. Who a how about cleaning our records one more time? Just to make sure. I didn't eel ke I owed him the favor, but I agreed to breach the system once more just to be rid of him. After taking several courses in computer, I had grown fairly skilled breezed through the simple security measures and cleaned our records. For curiosity's sake, I hacked as deep into the system core as I could.

What I discovered astounded and shocked me. I found a series of transmissions from Proscenium, the mysteriously silent city. Evidently, one of the mine shafts had broken into a series of ancient tunnels that didn't appear to be natural! In those tunnels, they found evidence of an ancient civilization. I hacked even further and discovered that they had even encountered a new form of sentient life.



LEGEND

- V Vent Up R Race Cell
- D Door Cell
- L Lava
- S Steam
- 1 Synapse Beam 2 Reaver Rifle
- 4 Render
 - 5 Marrow Bat
 - 8 Armor?

man!

"Jetland," I said. "Do you remember those balloons you encountered beneath the volcanic vent? Those were fragments of martian memories, cells containing thoughts and ideas. This is incredible! We've got to scour the mines for as much information as possible. Parallax is closest to Proscenium, isn't it? I think we should start there."

Jetland said, "Who knows about this?"

"Well, the Controllers, naturally. It's their message, after all."

Jetland swore. "He knew! Wrak knew all along! Damn him. Okay, before we go to Parallax, I want to visit the honorable controller and throttle him.

We entered the controller's office. The entire complex was panelled in rea mahogany, imported from Terra. We politely asked the secretary for an appointment but she snottily refused, claiming Wrak was out.

Jetland smiled and said, "My friend Titus desires discourse with Corny and I fear he may get violent if he is forced to wait more than, say, twenty seconds."

The secretary hissed, "Get out! Don't make me call the security 'droids! Much to the horror of the secretary — and to the rest of us — Jetland toolout a stick of dynamite and said, "Couldn't make me happier, ma'am."

Everyone scrambled. Titus grunted and kicked open the Controller's door as the secretary pushed the security button. The panels slid open to reveal six Class-A security robots. Stitch and I dove for the office. Jetland, in one smoor action, grabbed the secretary, tossed the dynamite at the lead 'droid, and rolled into the office. The stick exploded. Robot parts flew everywhere as my ears rangin protest.

I shouted at him, "Are you crazy?! Don't you think it a bit extreme to be the controller's office to bits? You could have killed us.

Jetland gave me a crazed grin and said, "And Wrak isn't ever nere now rude. If you blow up a man's office, you expect him to be there "He coxec at me and said, "Don't worry, Mac. Hey, you can always clean our records, right?"

I shook my head and watched Jetland rifle through the career of Cornellius Wrak's desk. He looked up, holding a sub-space transporter voucher. "Well, not only is Wrak gone, but all the controllers, too! He leafed through another stack of papers and said soberly, "It says here that Proscenium is destroyed. Evidently, some type of mutant invaded the city through those tunnels you told us about and killed everybody. The controllers knew, but they just saved themselves and left. The pigs! They played me for a sucke." His voice hardened. "An entire city... Damn. Okay, well, there will be time or getting

City of Parallax



- 7 Computer Terminal Munitions Shop
- A Armory
- B Bars, Lounger, Etc.
- C Computer Center
- B Personal Development
- G Gambling Establishment
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- O Controller's Office
- P Police Station
- R Repair Shop
- 5 Speeder Transport T Combat Training
- U University
- W War Games Room
- X Exit to Surface

even soon." He waved his hand and looked around the room. "Jeez, what a mess. Let's get out of here. I think it's time we pay the Parallax casino a visit and ask for Derahand. Back at the Repair Shop, one of those mechs said that Derahand could help us." He scratched his head and said, "Or was that Gecko? Oh, well, the casino will do for starters."

Stitch gave the secretary a sedative. The poor lady had been sobbing and rocking back and forth. I didn't blame her. People don't normally come in and blow up your office.

We boarded a speeder bound for Parallax. During my last hacking session, I had entered our names in the speeder executive list, which gave us a free access to the speeders. Titus, inordinately pleased, whistled and cleaned his gun in the first class dining room. We arrived in Parallax rested and fit, ready for anything.

A LAWLESS PARALLAX AND GOLUM ARMOR

Parallax. Never before had I seen a city with as much blatant disregard for Martian law, as lax as the laws already were. Rogues and thieves walked the streets alongside Nomads and hitmen.

With all the guntoters around, Jetland thought it prudent to stop by the War Room and train in some weaponry. Even Titus — who always said that training was okay for people who couldn't find their triggers — agreed. Stitch stopped by the hospital to train in some new medical skills and came back with a medpac B.

The War Room contained simulations which were so real, the user could barely tell the difference between reality and fantasy while wearing a simple m Jetland gained enough skill to use a grenade launcher. Titus, content with his Beamer, elected to improve his agility at a nearby Development Center.

At a casino we asked for Derahand. He offered us a set of Golum armor for the "bargain basement" price of 10,000 credits a suit. Titus and Jetland moved into a corner to discuss the offer in low whispers. I could tell by the way. Titus shook his head, he didn't want to pay 10,000 for anything, let alone one suit of Golum armor. Jetland surveyed the room, marking the exits with his eyes—they were planning to steal the suits! I ran over to the two and reminded them of the repercussions of their last theft. And, besides, I added, the Underg—addid not have records I could easily clean, if I could clean them at all.

Parallax Mine



LEGEND

- E Elevator Shaft T Tools
 X + Cove In
 D Box of Dynamite B Bondages

MAK!

Titus twice dropped the bundle of credits from his shaking hands. It was breaking his heart to part with his gambling gains, so Jetland asked "Name just one thing a dead man can do with 40,000 credits." Titus thought for a moment, shrugged, and then parted with the credits. When the handoff was complete, we became the owners of four suits. They were useless, however, until we individually tuned them. We hoped that somebody at the Training Center could help.

Not knowing the location of the Training Center, we wandered for a bit. We soon found out that wandering was a luxury reserved only for the strong and stupid. A band of hitmen, unprovoked, held us up with Particle Beams. Stitch talked them out of it, explaining that there must have been some mistake. She flirted a bit with the hitmen who soon changed their minds about cleaning us out. Amazing what a little street smarts and diplomacy could do. Pretty brown eyes didn't hurt either.

At the Training Center, we told them that Gecko sent us. The clerk uttered a surprise "Oh!" and called for somebody in the back. The man who came out offered to tune our newly purchased Golum armor, but at that moment I pulled Jetland aside with an idea. "Before you accept, let me look in the system one more time. I'm sure the code exists somewhere that will let us tune our own Golum armor."

Jetland shrugged and said, "Whatever you say, Ace."

With that glowing endorsement, I attempted my final hack, do or die. I burrowed in the system for nearly twenty minutes, following false leads and accessing useless data banks. Finally, I found what I was looking for: a file describing the neuromechanisms that controlled the Golum identification process. Switching the synaptic polarity and decreasing the immunity check would enable me to use another person's suit. Simple, really. The only catch was that only I, as a programmer, could use this formula to tune the armor and I could only tune my own, not anybody else's. I returned to the group and smiled sheepishly at Jetland.

"You're going to need three tune ups," I told him.

We left the Training Center feeling cocky in our Golum armor. When another band of hitmen challenged us, Jetland just smiled and said "catch" as he lobbed a grenade in their midst. They scrambled away from the impending explosions and opened fire. Both Jetland and Titus went berserk The refine roared and charged, tossing sticks of dynamite ahead of him an deaping to the explosion itself! A line of holes appeared above my head and alized my

peril. I ducked around a corner, avoiding the savage battle. I peered through the smoke and saw Stitch lying motionless. In one outstretched hand she held her medpac. Another explosion. Smoke billowed around her. I inched out, keeping my head low. No use. Several bolts ripped into the wall above my ear and chased me back. Damn! Damn! Damn! Stitch, still motionless, now had dark blood pooling under her head. Another explosion. Molten metal fragments and someone's leg struck the wall. I realized I was crying. Just then, a bolt hit Stitch. And another. I hated those bastards.

The smoke from the last explosion drifted over her. I gritted my teeth and ran to her. My medic skill, barely adequate, allowed me to administer several injections into her more serious wounds. I dragged her away, towards my hiding spot. She groaned. A laz' bolt clipped me and I stumbled. We both groaned. I jabbed an injection into my butt and hurried on. How stupid we were to have provoked the hitmen of Parallax as if they were silver-haired old ladies! Crouched behind a toppled terminal booth, I tried to use Stitch's medpac. Far too complex. Damn.

After a series of explosions, each concussion more deafening than the previous, there was a lull. I heard footsteps approaching, I cradled Stitch in my arms and fumbled for my knife. Pointless. I would be cut into cubes or patterned with laser holes before I even showed my stupid knife. Just then Titus peeked his huge blunt face around the corner and said, "Cozy?"

We brought Stitch to the hospital. Amazingly enough, both Jetland and Titus sustained few injuries — the two who deserved the most. As we waited, a terribly burned man on a gurney was wheeled into the room. I looked away, sickened. The medics argued with the head nurse, trying to avoid the admittance forms. I looked away from the scene, but the injured man croaked at me, his voice clogged with the gravel of his injuries. "You know, don't you? The martians..." He shuddered. "The Nomads made peace with them, so can we." His voice faded, and then a whisper, "See Cain at the Uni..." The medics returned just then, shoving the gurney through the surgery doors and cursing the nurse.

Jetland raised his eyebrows and said, "Did you recognize him? He may have been one or toose agents we saw in the mines. Hmmmm, perhaps we stow a specific section."

They recome from the pospital fit and whole. Her visible wounds so ther process our she walked with us as if nothing had ever happened.

As a meanaged the corridors of Parallax, an indignant Tom Jetland

blurted out, "Can you believe those hitmen? Do they think they can just attack innocent citizens? They nearly killed Stitch! Someone's got to do something." He ranted on for several minutes before deciding to complain to the police. He stormed into the Police Station, righteously claiming his right to unmolested travel in the byways of Mars.

They promptly arrested us. "What?!" sputtered Jetland.

"Unauthorized data access, assault and battery in Progeny, destruction of public property, trespassing and — " the sergeant paused briefly in his recitation to look harshly at Jetland, "breaking and entering a Controller's office."

"Oh," said Jetland in a small voice.

We stood as accused. Fortunately, we had the credits to pay our bail and fines. Without sufficient funds, they might have kept us there indefinitely — and time undoubtedly passed slower than normal in a Parallax jail. As we were leaving the station, Jetland whispered, "I failed to mention to the sergeant that we had run packages for Cybil. Aiding and abetting is such a nasty phrase around —" Just then Stitch cut him off.

"Look! That's Cybil Graves!" She waved her finger wildly at a wanted poster.

Jetland gaped. "Her? Dead or alive?" He laughed and rubbed his hands together. "I lead a charmed life. I thought my revenge would come hard."

Indeed, the poster claimed our former employer had attempted to kill all the citizens of Parallax with poisonous gas. That fit her style. The reward was fairly substantial, but I think Jetland's motivation extended far beyond the financial aspect.

PROFESSOR CAIN OF PROGENY UNIVERSITY

Jetland, curious about what the burned man had said about Cain, herded us onto a speeder to Progeny. Once there, he marched us straight to the Progeny University. Still a little battle weary from our previous encounter, we fled all hitmen. Once at the university, we asked for Cain.

He appeared, and smiled. He treated us as if we had met before, but I couldn't remember ever meeting him. After a few minutes of friendly convertion, he led us into another room. I was beginning to think the professor had een

snorting book-binding glue for too long when he apologized for his overlyfriendly behavior. He feared that people were observing us so he wanted to appear as if we were long-time friends.

Jetland and Cain talked about recent events, Cain about the new sentient life and Jetland about the controllers' knowledge and the part Cybil Graves

played in it all.

"I doubt that poor Graves knew a thing about it," speculated Cain. "Her schemes seem to revolve around the Nomads and their hopes of reclaiming a city for their own. If your society condemns you to a life on the surface of Mars, your natural inclination is not charitable. I suspect they cared little for the innocents of Parallax, if such a creature exists in that perilous city.

"I fear that she may attempt a second slaughter, perhaps in another city, perhaps this one," continued Cain. "All this pales in comparison, though, when the martians are considered. I encountered one of them while collecting specimens on the surface. One of them touched me, communicating his thoughts and feelings. One of his kind had died and somehow they equate that death with the city dwellers. The creatures that destroyed Proscenium originate from a martian device that generates new life. This machine was accidently activated by a miner when she and her co-workers broke into the martian laboratory below Proscenium.

"The martians seem to care little for the colonies — for now — and show no signs that they intend deactivate this mutant generator. If I am correct, these mutants will travel to the other cities, killing more citizens than Cybil. You must stop this threat."

"How?" asked Jetland. "From where do these mutants originate?"

"I can restore your finder to locate the place where I believe the martian device exists. Follow this beacon and you will discover the source of the creatures. I recommend starting outside Parallax."

I nearly fainted at the thought of another foray onto the surface. Jetland shook Cain's hand and thanked him for the information. I extended my own sweating paw for the professor to shake. Titus, cracking his knuckles, simply nodded his head. Stitch smiled and checked her medical bag. Cain gave us a last look before alsoppearing between two ceiling-high book shelves.

Lettand snapped his fingers outside the University of Progeny and said, "I can't stand it. It seems grossly unfair that I should be denied the pleasure of king Chail Graves. It's sanctioned by the police," he smiled, "and I get paid for it! What else could you ask for?"

"Forget her, Tom," protested Stitch. "We've got bigger problems."

Jetland stared blankly ahead. "Yeah. I know. Well, perhaps chance will bring us together." A smile grew wide on his face. I knew he was mentally mowing down Cybil at that very moment.

8 A CYBIL SURPRISE

After traveling to Parallax, we stopped at the Armory. We entered the shop and Jetland approached the counter as Titus cleaned his gun. I rummaged through my pack, thinking of replacing my switch blade with something more powerful.

I heard Jetland mutter something, and then louder, "Hey!" and then even louder, the staccato pulse of laser fire. We dove for cover. The purple bolts of a powerful assault rifle peppered the wall. The bright light imprinted my retinas like the splash of a distant nova, blinding me for a moment.

Amazingly enough, I heard Jetland laughing! Deep guffaws escaped him and echoed in the room. He cried out, "Nice to see you, too, Cybil! I see you've retained your sense of decorum. I guess you are aware of the bounty?"

A female voice I recognized as Cybil's said flatly, "There are 4,000 credits on the counter. That's more than the police are offering. Just walk to the counter and I'll head for the door. I know your kind. All you want is the money."

Stitch grabbed my arm as Jetland stood motionless. His eyes were locked on Cybil. She slid towards the door, her eyes on Jetland's pistol.

Jetland glanced at the money, the shop's neon sign glittering in his greedy eyes. Cybil ducked behind a high shelf of vests. Jetland swiveled away from the counter, a terrible, slack expression on his face. He said hollowly, "You know how I am about holding up my part of the bargain, Cybil." Cybil appeared from behind the shelf and ran for the elevator. Just as she entered the metal box, Jetland cooly raised his pistol and squeezed off several shots. The slugs struck Cybil high in the back. As she turned to face us, the elevator doors closed with a sharp hiss.

"Damn! Titus, give it a kick!"

The marine took three steps and swung a booted foot against the closed door. It held. Titus bounced on one foot and yelped. He growled and rus.ied it again, butting it with his head. It held. He fell to the floor and rocked back and

Cavern 1



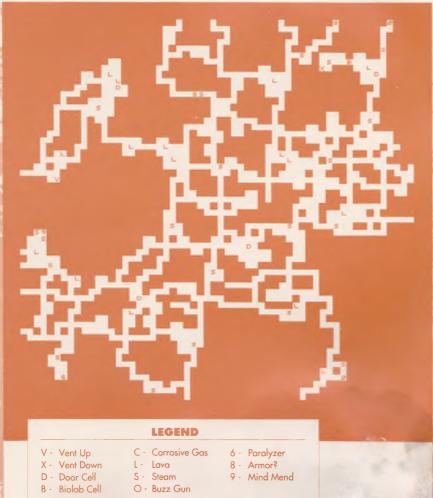
LEGEND

- V Vert Up

- 3 Vent Down D Door Cell B Biolab Cell
- C Corrosive Gas
- S Steam

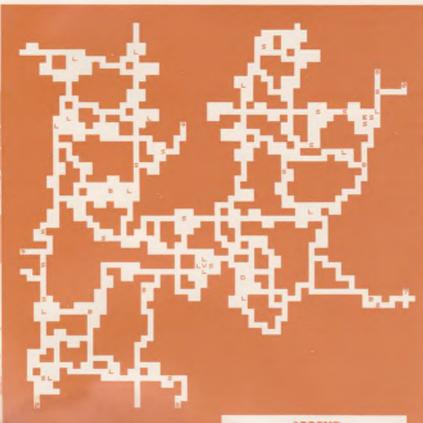
- O Buzz Gun
- 1 Synapse Beam
- 2 Reaver Rifle 3 Mind Melt 4 Render

Cavern 2



- O Buzz Gun

Cavern 3



LEGEND

- V Vent Up E - Elevator Lift
- D Door Cell
- B Biolob Cell
- L- Lava
- S Steam
- O Buzz Gun

forth with his coconut cradled in his hands. There was a small silence and then Stitch began to laugh, and then howl. Tears leaked from her eyes as she laughed and laughed and laughed.

As we were drying our tears, a bemused troop of officers came back down the elevator with weapons drawn. They had heard Jetland's shots and were ready for a firefight. When it was clear to them that we had no intentions of attacking, they lifted Cybil, who had been lying semi-conscious on the elevator floor, to her feet. Blood from her bullet wounds trailed down her shirt and onto her hands, which were cuffed tightly behind her back. Jetland's shots had put her in the hospital where she would await trial.

Jetland's idea of celebrating was to get more training. He suggested that we work on our agility and become more expert in our weapons. If this was the celebration we were going to get, then I insisted on increasing my Golum armor skill. "You just have to wear it, pal, not learn all its intricacies," Jetland said.

Once we were done with our training, we were all ready to exit the city. More precisely, I was as ready as I would ever be.



CASUALTY IN THE CAVE

Again the black sky and her glittering stars of white. The Golum armor bunched around my knees and creaked as I walked over the surface, following the blinking eye of the finder. I hoped that Cain's beacon wouldn't lead us astray.

A sole Crusher challenged us from a canal bed, its pincers rapidly clicking together. We left it alone and pushed farther north.

I attempted to focus my thoughts on the pleasant memories of my home, back on Terra; anything to create a diversion from the emptiness above me. We stayed close to the sides of the cavern walls, and traveled down, descending at every opportunity. Occasionally, we stumbled across the strange reddish balloons. The sensation of alien thoughts melding with human intellect was unnerving; in each encounter, my eyes would ache momentarily and I would grow dizzy. A small price to pay, however. The psionic abilities we gained were fabulous. The mental armor (or at least that's what Titus claimed to have discovered) was spectacular.

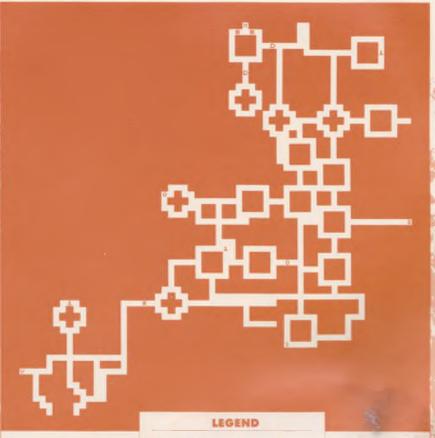
Ironically, we were attacked by martians. Red blobs, much like the balloons, scuttled down a corridor and assaulted our group. We had no desire

Mine 3



44.00

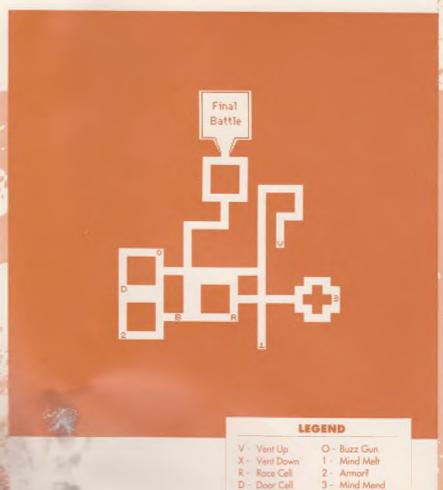
mak!



- V Vent Up
- X Vent Down
- R Race Cell

- D Door Cell
- O Buzz Gun 1 Mind Melt
- 2 Armor?
- 3 Mind Mend
- 8 Biolob Cell

Tunnel 2



- 3 Mind Mend

man to

to fight these odd creatures, yet they prevented us from fleeing. Finally, self-defense dictated that we use our new found abilities against the same people who gifted us their thoughts and memories. We sustained some damage in these fights, but Stitch had acquired a healing ability which could heal the entire party at long range and to full strength in a short time!

We descended three levels, discovering the strange balloon memories and abilities as we went. On the third level, I found a tunnel that led back to the surface.

We emerged from the tunnel, returning to that dreaded sky. We were on a hill, overlooking what remained of Proscenium.

A grotesque mutation, her egg sack bulging, squatted by a mound of human bodies. Her minions, purplish with dried blood and dust, continued to sift through the debris of the city and stack the bodies by their perilous queen. Jetland looked away and retched, fouling his suit. I didn't blame him; in fact, I was on the verge of joining him.

Titus pointed towards the mine shaft, the same shaft that began this nightmare. We nodded. A nearby trench might serve as a shield from the industrious eyes of the mutants, so we scurried down its length. Upon arriving at the mine shaft, I discovered that the elevator computer controls were mangled. Jetland cursed. I could barely see through his face mask. His suit's autocleaner was working hard, but it would take a while to remove his regurgitated meal.

I smiled and showed Jetland my remote terminal, the same one I had received from the sysop in Progeny. It plugged right in, enabling us to operate the elevator and descend down into the mines of Proscenium.

We explored the mines and discovered a breach in the wall which led to a series of inter-connected tunnels. Titus grew very agitated when Jetland told him our automapper wouldn't operate properly in the strange tunnels.

After winding through the gnarled passageways, we found ourselves outside a craggy grotto, where we discovered four pulsing mounds of mass. A monstrous biomechanical organism, emitting the masses from a vatic making plasma, stood behind its creations. One of the quivering masses leap of ward with surprising speed and attacked, enveloping a surprised Titus. I expected him to shrug it off and attack, but instead he screamed. Stunned, I watched him melt, his screams changing into wet mewls and then a suffocated gurgle.

I heard Jetland scream "No!" and then open fire. We all did, fighting for our lives. Stitch dove behind a large rock while Jetland rolled behind a high mound of dirt. I alone stood in the open, challenging the amorphic blob with a flame thrower. It responded with a loud gurgle and a contorted howl before sliding angrily towards its aggressor — me. Again, I fired, this time joined by Stitch and Jetland. In a fit of pain, the blob stopped its approach and shuddered violently. The noise of its slapping gelatinous flesh filled the cave. Much to our amazement, Titus's body slipped out from beneath the blob; rather than use its energy to digest the tough marine, it needed all its strength to heal itself.

I yelled at everybody to hold their fire and ran to Titus. I tried to drag Titus away by the boot, but the blob slopped forward and consumed him again. I cursed and stumbled, the creature's cold flesh brushing my hand as I tumbled backwards. I staggered back to Jetland, who had been firing on another blob with his chem gun. It seemed that the destructive force being laid out by his arc weapon was too much for the blob to overcome. I joined Jetland, and with our combined powers, we blasted the blob into thousands of blobettes.

"Jeeeettlaaaand!" suddenly pierced the air. We looked over at Stitch, a blob less than five feet away from her. Her weapon had malfunctioned and she

was feverishly yanking and pulling on it to bring it back to life.

"Get behind that rock and hold off these two!" Jetland yelled to me as he ran towards and fired on the blob that was descending on Stitch. I kept a steady stream of laser fire on my two blobs; it was enough to slow their approach. Sitting only a few feet from me, I could see the detail in their amorphic mass: thin pink veins traveling in a complicated networks across their surface; small dark spots shifting like eyes on their cloudy flesh; small lumps on their body appearing and disappearing as if hands were trying to push out from within. As they drew nearer and nearer to me, I became more entranced by their presence.

"Jeeetttlaaaand!" pierced the air again. I broke from my trance and looked over at Stitch. She and Jetland were looking at me, Stitch with her finger waving in my direction. In my fascination with the blob, I had quit firing, my gun hanging limply in my hand. One hard look from Jetland and one soft look from Stitch worke my stupor. I reseated my finger on the trigger and continued firing.

Splosion rocked the cave and more slime parts landed around me. In

a le carda, letand was back by my side, firing. "Titus is dead," he said.

spot the said. The probably never thought he'd get taken out by an

think you can be seen the naraest things to kill, but I don't think you can be seen to be seen the naraest things to kill, but I don't think you can be seen to be seen the naraest things to kill, but I don't think you can

look on his face.

I shrugged. "Jetland, the day you figure out how to clean up your own police files is the day I'll be your fighting goon." Jetland shrugged back and smiled. He seemed to appreciate my perspective. We fired together in silence, wearing the blobs down.

As we were preparing to make our final assault on the blobs, we heard the cry "This is for Titus!" followed by an explosion that rocked the cave and knocked us both to the floor. More slime hit the walls, this time accompanied by glass and metal. We slowly peered over our rock barrier and found Stitch lying on the floor, knocked flat by the blast of her own doing.

Jetland ran over to Stitch and placed her head in his lap. He brushed the tangle of hair away from her face as she looked up at him. She smiled and with a weak voice tried to talk. "Mind Melt. A little martian thing I think I picked up...did it work?"

Jetland surveyed the cave. The gnarled hull of the blob-making machine and tendrils of slime dangling from the walls were all that was left.

"Did it work?! Damn!" Jetland hooted with delight. He planted a kiss on Stitch's lips, just as she passed out. "Damn," he said again. "Women have done a lot of things, but they've never passed out on me." We picked up our wounded comrade and made our way out of the mines.

10 THE TRIO REVIVED

I was sitting at Stitch's bedside when she came out of the coma. She rubbed her eyes and smiled at me as if she had just awoke from an afternoon nap.

"How long have I been sleeping?" she asked.

"A couple of weeks," I told her.

"You're kidding!" She looked around the room searching for something that would counter my claim. But she would find nothing. She had been loying there as good as dead for fourteen days.

"Where's Jetland?" she asked as she shifted around the bed, fit is muscles again.

"I saw him the other day at a bar. He said his ship's almost fix ed by a controlled about storying not positive if he's leaving right away. He's not thrilled about storying didn't want to leave and have Titus's death be all for nothing. And started thinking about those controllers, he twisted his swiz-zle stick up his

knuckles were white."

Stitch shook her head. Then she looked at me and asked "What about you?"

"Jetland wants me to stick with him. I'm in no hurry to break in another employer, so I figured I'd just follow his lead for a while."

Stitch looked hurt.

"Oh," I continued, "and Jetland said 'If that Stitch doesn't stay a vegetable or come out a drooling idiot, we should ask her to stay with us.'"

She looked at me for a moment, trying to decide if Jetland's left-handed compliment should anger her or not. Apparently not. She smiled and said, "Tell Jetland I accept his offer." Then she closed her eyes and clasped her hands across her chest.

Before leaving, I warned, "If you have to sleep, keep it down to three days at a time, okay?" She sank back into her dreams before I left the room.

When I got to the bar, I found Jetland sitting at a corner table. I told him of Stitch's recovery as he nodded, pleased with the news.

"That which does not kill us makes us stronger," Jetland winked with his glass raised.

"Mars gets us all in the end — the difference is when," I winked back.

We drank to our trio revived and planned for a brand new day on Mars.

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