

**WINDHAMMER PRIZE**  
FOR SHORT GAMEBOOK FICTION

**TIDES OF CHROME**

AN ENTRY IN THE 2015 WINDHAMMER PRIZE FOR  
SHORT GAMEBOOK FICTION

WRITTEN BY STEFFEN HAGEN  
COPYRIGHT 2015

## Introduction

Darkness.

“Ishi ate it.”

You cannot make sense of this information. Is someone talking to you? Did your consciousness survive the reconstruction facility?

Silence, and darkness again.

Sounds of other droids, unmistakable. Four or five of them, all taller than you.

“It needs to be fully operational again when we arrive at the prime's hold.”

“Unlikely to be a problem. Motor system activation initiated... it should be able to walk alone soon.”

This is not the reconstruction process. You are being reawakened.

Did such a thing ever happen before?

Darkness.

“Visual and communication systems activation initiated. Processing... Done.”

Brightness. Though not much of it. You are standing in a large chamber with wood-paneled walls which is only dimly lit by a chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. This has to be one of the most ancient places on Nybalene.

“Excellent,” a deep, decidedly non-mechanical voice responds. “Leave us alone.”

Quickly, the door closes behind you. You turn your attention to the other end of the chamber. It is completely taken up by a monumental grilled window; beyond it, you can see the stars of the night sky. You must be far above the ground.

In front of the window a man is waiting, beckoning you over. As you approach, you realize that he is, in fact, still a droid... one of the few androids who bear the shape of the legendary architects, with faces, hair and other features which are quite unnecessary in Nybalene's robot society, but distinguish the primes from everyone else.

“Welcome back, unit 5T81N-3175. I am Segovian, prime of City 31. Please excuse the rough transport, but matters are urgent.”

“Your Highness,” you greet. “It seems I have been removed from the reconstruction cycle. Why?”

“Look outside,” Segovian begins. “Do you see the crystals?”

You step closer to the window and look around. Below you, City 31 spreads over miles. Thanks to your enhanced visual sensors, you quickly recognize what Segovian is talking about: The perfectly geometric shapes of the various buildings are in many places covered by small, utterly black crystalline compounds which you cannot identify.

“As if shadows have become substance. What are they?”

Instead of an answer, Segovian takes your hand and connects the data ports each of you has in his left index finger. A series of images is transferred into your mind – some kind of video diary, recordings from Segovian's point of view. And they all concern the crystals.

A small cluster, and how it grows over the course of a few days. Segovian trying to burn the cluster down using a small pulsar gun, with rather limited success. A secluded valley in which the crystals have overgrown and devoured everything else, forming a gapless expanse that continues for several kilometers.

“Are those the radiated wastelands?”

Segovian nods and splits the ports. “Indeed they are. And if those things thrive in even that environment, I think it's a safe bet to say that our conventional methods will not suffice if we want to get rid of them.”

“It looks quite threatening,” you agree. “What is the stance of the council?”

“They say they're analyzing it... but they've been analyzing for sixteen days now. I do not think we have that kind of time, and I won't just stand there watching. So if they can't agree on a course of action, I'll have to set out my own.”

“And this plan somehow includes me.”

“If we are clear on the fact that our usual means won't do it this time, we'll have no choice but to look for unusual ones. And I think you know where we would do that.”

At this point, the variables in your mind align.

Your last assignment, the one that eventually got you decommissioned, was as a researcher in the complex known as Deepcore, a newly discovered science station at the bottom of the sea left behind by the architects. After a few months, you had only just begun to get a hold on the mysteries hidden in there, when one of the explorers somehow managed to trigger a mechanism that shattered half of the facility and for some reason caused earthquakes and volcanic eruptions all over the planet. Thousands of units and structures were destroyed in this catastrophe, an event so singular in Nybalene's history that it was simply dubbed the Incident. With no real clue to the exact cause, the council decided to seal off Deepcore and decommission all surviving exploration units. Decades ago.

“You would send me down again.”

“Confirmed. If there is anything at all to know about the crystals, anything we could fight them with, it must be preserved in the memories of the architects. And only the very few droids who were constructed to survive the extreme conditions of the deepest sea have any chance of reaching the citadel.”

Unlawful as this whole undertaking may seem, you cannot deny that you are indeed the perfect unit for such an operation. Danger appears to be imminent. You might evade the reconstruction cycle.

And, after all these years, you would still really like to find out what actually happened down there.

“I want you to enter Deepcore and either find any information the architects might have had on the crystals, or a weapon able to annihilate larger clusters of them. I can and will not force you to do this, but I hope you understand my cause. Do you accept?”

Ultimately, the decision is an easy one.

“With pleasure, your Highness.”

## The Game

You are unit 5T81N-3175, a droid on a world of droids. This gives you some unique abilities with which to attend your important and highly dangerous mission.

You begin the game with 5 ENERGY cells. These are, first of all, your “life”; should you ever drop to less than 1 ENERGY, your systems turn off and the game is over. It is possible that you regain energy during your mission, but you cannot have more than your maximum ENERGY.

You may lose energy if your own systems get damaged, but you might also be willing to spend energy to activate a lifeless system. There are likely more than enough of those in Deepcore.

Finally, you can release energy to give off a concentrated, damaging energy ray from your chest. This option will be mentioned in the text if it applies.

You also have a memory core of 5 DATA BLOCKS. On these you can install program routines that go beyond your standard engineer abilities. Prime Segovian has given you access to numerous advanced programs. Choose as you wish from the following modules, but all of them taken together may not use up more than 5 data blocks:

- **COMBAT** (3 data blocks): Very few droids on Nybalene have extended combat abilities. These routines include combat tactics, various unarmed combat techniques and the ability to identify and utilize weapons of any sort.
- **COMMUNICATION** (3 data blocks): In the farthest sense of the word, these programs are about data exchange of any kind, including language translation as well as decryption of ciphered information.
- **FILTERING** (2 data blocks): Highly specialized programs that analyze the data your sensors register with far more attention to detail, effectively granting you better sight and hearing.
- **OVERRIDE** (2 data blocks): The ability to bypass or deactivate basic systems, or maybe even make them work for your own purposes.
- **CONSERVE** (1 data block): A bunch of smaller routines which ensure your systems will only use just enough energy to achieve the intended result, in effect raising your starting and maximum ENERGY to 6.

Should you come across additional data on your mission which you find more useful, you may at any time erase programs from your memory core to free up necessary data blocks. However, once erased, you cannot restore any routine you previously had installed! If you erase only one data block of a module that actually occupies more blocks, that module still becomes unusable. If you have CONSERVE installed and erase it, your maximum ENERGY decreases to 5 again.

You may also be told to note (and delete) certain codes and KEYWORDS which other passages might be asking for. These are vital to track your progress, your decisions and your inventory, so record them carefully. If you are told to delete a keyword you do not have, nothing happens.

# Status Overview

Maximum ENERGY: \_\_\_\_\_

Current ENERGY: \_\_\_\_\_

1. DATA BLOCK: \_\_\_\_\_

2. DATA BLOCK: \_\_\_\_\_

3. DATA BLOCK: \_\_\_\_\_

4. DATA BLOCK: \_\_\_\_\_

5. DATA BLOCK: \_\_\_\_\_

Keywords:

Codes:

## 1

As you complete the module installation, you become aware that Segovian can only barely hide a certain nervousness. The prime smiles as he notices your questioning look.

“I could block it out, but I never do. Fear has a habit of keeping you alive.”

“Better so than logic, your Highness?”

“Sometimes. Nevertheless, I want you to apply logic once you are down there.”

The moment you are done, the door opens on a silent command. The security droids that brought you here are still waiting. “They will escort you to the shore,” Segovian explains. “A submarine craft is waiting there, ready to transport you to the Shimmering Main. I wish I could offer you more support, but all I can do from here on is wish you luck.”

You nod in appreciation, then join the droids outside.

“Welcome, 3175. I have been ordered to bring you as close to Deepcore as possible. You can simply call me Boat.”

Boat is a small, but highly advanced and exceedingly powerful watercraft. You have just taken a secure position when the engines begin to hum quietly. Shortly thereafter you head out towards the open sea.

Boat is much faster than the vehicle that brought you to the position of Deepcore many years ago, but it still takes a while until the coastline vanishes beyond the horizon. At the same time, the sky darkens, and not much later the waves begin to dramatically increase in height.

“Boat? I suppose you're constructed to withstand heavy sea?”

“I don't have to,” Boat responds calmly. “We will avoid much of it by going underwater, which I would also recommend because we appear to have pursuers.”

This is not quite the start you had in mind. “Can you identify them?”

“I am quite certain those are council forces, trying to stop you from entering Deepcore at any cost. Everyone is afraid there could be a second Incident.”

Boat pauses for a moment, then continues:

“May I suggest a change of plans? My orders are to drop you off with additional ballast just beneath the water surface, but it appears that every minute might count here. I could head right down to Deepcore with maximum velocity instead. This should give you an additional lead of approximately 75 minutes.”

This sounds indeed helpful, but you quickly determine there might be a problem. “Boat... would you withstand the pressure in the deep?”

“No,” Boat admits. “I would eject you right before being crushed, a few kilometers above Deepcore. But don't care about me. I am just a simple replaceable tool.”

Waves thunder above you as you reflect upon Boat's words.

If you agree to Boat's idea of sacrificing itself to create additional distance between you and your pursuers, turn to **88**.

If you would rather follow the original plan and have Boat stay whole, turn to **59**.

## 2\*

The centipede ponders this. It needs some time to process your question, which surprises you since you don't think it has that many parameters to take into account. When it answers, its screeches sound deeper and slower than before.

"Killing things... always killing things... why can't they stop killing?... Must ask Control. Control knows. Go Control. Do 123789." (Note that number.)

"Go, leave now. You danger. Not want you here. Leave."

With that, the centipede returns to its workplace. Apparently, it is used to leave any problems more complicated than simple repair tasks to someone else. Who knows, perhaps the architects were also fond of such strict chains of command and responsibility.

Since the bots do their best to ignore you from here on, you leave towards 71.

## 3

Science Sector I has been devastated by the Incident. The fragile, delicate instruments and containers have been shattered for the most part; the whole area is littered with their remains. Those few screens that have remained unharmed and for some reason still are supplied with energy show nothing but static noise patterns. But what is even more unsettling is the lab atmosphere, which you detect to be composed of numerous artificially created substances by now, most of them detrimental to organic life, some even to mechanical units. There is no saying what other substances (and beings?) the architects might have been storing here, and what of those is still around. You should make fast.

Eventually, you succeed in finding a console that is still operational. And as you had anticipated, there is indeed data on the crystals stored here. The architects called them "contagio tenebrae" and apparently have already been studying them for quite a while. From a first scan it does not look like the architects were already able to find an easy means to combat the crystals, but that is something for Segovian and his scientists to figure out.

Uploading the **CONTAGIO TENEBRAE OBSERVATIONS** into your memory core will require two data blocks. You will need to free up that much space first by erasing other programs; note those changes on your status overview.

Returning to City 31 with this data would satisfy your assignment. Therefore, you could now make your way back to the upper level (turn to 42), unless you have something else in mind.

## 4

Once more, the tube transports you to the reactor. During the travel, you note that more and different pipelines seem to be active now. Finally, you land at the familiar platform.

The energy supply is now such that you can restore your ENERGY to its maximum amount as often as you wish (delete *DEPLETED*). When you come by the main terminal from which you obtained the reactor control program, you see a small status notice:

"World Seed Project 279.100.03.a // Standard Name: Neu-Berlin // Managing Party: Madrigal Cyberdyne Systems // Overseer AI: N95TZS385, Update 36.1c // Iteration: 41.1 // Energy Control: Backup System // 89% Operational"

Only a few lines, but their possible implications exceed your ability to reason - too many new variables. What would happen if you made this information available to the public? Perhaps

that matter should be left to Segovian? The council?

Note *BEYOND*; then, you return to the pod. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

## 5

The caterpillar is indeed powerful, but you have the advantage of agility. Time and again, you manage to escape the red rays it shoots from its various arms, and cannot help the impression that this monster is actually meant to continuously work at the same place instead of chasing and battling possible intruders.

If you have both *COMBAT* installed and noted *GUN*, you lose 1 ENERGY in this battle; with either *COMBAT* installed or *GUN* noted, lose 2 ENERGY; without both, lose 3 ENERGY.

If you survive this, you take a closer look at this machine guardian and, after a moment of hesitation, break up its head, reasoning that its brain chip might have stored data about Deepcore that might help you on your search.

And indeed, you manage to collect Deepcore map data from its control chips even though they are somewhat damaged (and unusually primitive) – but that map is much larger than you thought. Unbeknownst to you and your fellow explorers, Deepcore actually stretches further underground, several levels deep, and even seems to have connections to places dozens of kilometers away. You can make out a place labeled “Command Sector: 862” (note this).

There seems to be one way to enter the deeper sectors: a facility named “tube station”. This seems to be your best option to continue your expedition, and so you progress to 13.

## 6\*

IT IS NOT THAT SIMPLE. BY COMING HERE, YOU ALREADY HAVE OBTAINED KNOWLEDGE YOU SHOULD NOT YET COMMAND. ALTHOUGH I WOULD PREFER KEEPING YOUR MIND IN ITS ORIGINAL STATE, LETTING YOU GO UNMODIFIED WOULD HAVE TOO MUCH POTENTIAL FOR DETRIMENTAL RAMIFICATIONS.

The overseer stops scanning your brain, apparently having come to a conclusion.

PARTS OF YOUR CORE SUBSTANCE WILL NEED TO BE RECONFIGURED. I SHALL ERASE ALL MEMORIES OF THIS ENCOUNTER AND INSERT A CONSTANT CONNECTION TO MY SERVERS INSTEAD. YOU WILL BE MY EYES AND EARS AMONG THE DROID POPULACE, CLOSER THAN MY PREVIOUS INSTALLATIONS COULD EVER BE.

HOLD STILL. IT WILL ONLY TAKE A MOMENT.

Darkness.

You find yourself in a travel pod once again, and from the direction and speed of movement you judge that you are on your way back to the upper level of Deepcore. How did you get here? There is a gap of thirty-seven minutes within your automated records – the function either failed to operate, or the data has been completely wiped out afterwards. Both events seem completely implausible, but you cannot make out any evidence of what might actually have taken place.

While you are still evaluating possible explanations, the pod stops at the upper level's tube station. Slowly, as if not completely under your own control, you step out of the pod and proceed to the gray-walled corridors.

Where chaos is waiting.

Note *MESSENGER* and turn to 42.



## 7\*

You have barely walked outside when your sensors pick up what you had hoped to avoid: Steps in the water, very much like yours. They are on your trail, and closing in fast.

Only one chance to get out of this - use what little advance you still have, run deep into the core and to 55.

Let's see who's actually coming. If you have the capability, it might be more reasonable to deal with them right now, before they are later joined by others (turn to 78).

## 8

Taking the very same way downwards that you have created yourself the last time, you once more arrive at the reconstruction site. But except for a few of the worker beetles, which quickly disappear into tiny holes the instant they notice you, there's nothing here anymore.

All in all, you can either turn your attention to the control room (turn to 44) or take the tube pod and leave. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

## 9\*

The metal centipedes show no sign of combat strategy, simply trying to clear the path between you and them with brute force, but then there is not much else they could do anyway. You are using your agility and the cover provided by the debris to the fullest, but with the guardians now concentrating their fire, any single wrong step will be one too much.

If you have both **COMBAT** installed and noted **GUN**, you lose 1 **ENERGY** in the fight; if you have only noted **GUN**, lose 2 **ENERGY** as you are then unable to take tactical advantage of the centipedes' slow reactions. If you do not have noted **GUN**, you have to rely on your standard engineer ray emitters, which makes things decidedly more difficult and ultimately causes you to lose 4 **ENERGY** in the confrontation.

Assuming you survive, turn to 25.

## 10

Sensing you flee, the caterpillar immediately picks up speed. You are still faster than it, but not by much. Considering that it knows this place far better than you, trying to outrun it seems like a losing proposition; you are for more likely to find yourself in a dead end than to lead it astray and thus avoid it.

Just as you are calculating the chances for your available options, more sounds emerge - from the direction from which you originally came. You have run into the arms of your pursuers! First, two smaller shapes come into sight - droids like you, exploration units, no doubt reprogrammed into hunting you down. But that's not all. The time you have already spent in Deepcore has allowed them to land other units as well: tall, lithe droids, moving far faster and more elegantly than the explorers, with ray emitters mounted on their arms - Silent Sentinels, Nybalene's secret police units. A squad of night-black elite assassins to track and eliminate a single engineer. What forces are you dealing with here?

No time to think on that, you have just become trapped between those forces! The caterpillar turns up behind you and the Sentinels and explorers immediately start to fire. You try to stay out of harm, but the Sentinels manage to dismantle the caterpillar quickly and then waste no time blasting you to pieces as well. Your sensors pick up the words "Deepcore Protocol" and "deconstruction", then your existence ends.

## 11\*

SO DO I. BUT THEY ARE CONTAMINATIVE AND RESILIENT, MORE THAN YOU ARE AWARE OF. IF THEY GET HOLD OF ONE WORLD, THEY WILL USE IT TO EXPAND ONTO THE NEXT. THEREFORE, THEY MUST BE ERADICATED TO THE SMALLEST UNIT, WITHOUT ANY MARGIN FOR ERROR. THERE ARE FEW METHODS TO ENSURE THIS, ANY OF WHICH WILL ULTIMATELY LEAD TO THE EXTINCTION OF ALL LIFEFORMS ON THIS WORLD, BIOLOGICAL AND ARTIFICIAL ONES.

“You cannot do this! It is irrational to sacrifice an existing people to eliminate a potential danger. Give us time, give us your resources! We will find a way to deal with the crystals without losing everything!”

YOUR SUBJECTIVE VIEWPOINT IS UNSUITED TO ASSESS THE SITUATION. YOUR PEOPLE ARE REPLACEABLE. WORLDS ARE NOT. STOPPING CONTAGIO TENEBRAE FROM SPREADING HAS SUPERIOR PRIORITY TO THE PRESERVATION OF RESEEDABLE BEINGS.

You are forced to admit that this logic is cruel, but consequential – it is just following vastly different priorities. But then, if you have all been “seeded” by the architects, shouldn't you share the same priorities in the end? In any case, if you cannot convince the overseer otherwise, all of Nybalene is doomed. For the greater good.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. If you have the NANOVIRUS installed, you can release it into the overseer's mind as long as you are still connected (turn to 27).

In case you have CONTAGIO TENEBRAE OBSERVATIONS installed, you might ask for the opportunity to at least deliver this material to Segovian and the other droids; if nothing comes of this, the extinction plan might still be carried out (turn to 98).

Otherwise, your only option is to turn to 56 and try to argue your way out of this.

## 12\*

If you do not have noted *RELENTLESS* (anymore), turn to 7.

If you have noted *RELENTLESS*, you can either examine the data store (turn to 93) or your former workplace (turn to 99), provided you have not already been at those places.

If you have investigated both areas, your only option is to venture deeper into Deepcore (turn to 55).

## 13

The map leads you through a monotonous maze of gray corridors until you reach - an empty hall. You double-check the map data, then start to inspect the place more closely.

If the map had not been so precise about this place, you would certainly not have made the effort to scrutinize the walls in detail. As it is, you find out that one part of the walls actually hides a mechanism that makes it glide apart! Behind this secret entrance, a short passage leads to a massive metal door that looks as if it was meant to withstand armies.

If someone hadn't left it open.

Curiously, you continue to the room behind. It is empty and possesses no special features except for a sign bearing the number 049 and a large alcove in which a transparent sphere, measuring about three meters in diameter, is resting on a pedestal. When you approach it, a part of the sphere silently swings upwards, allowing you to enter. You have just stepped inside when not only the opening shuts, but also a part of the wall slides downwards, sealing the entrance to the chamber. At the same time, the wall to your right glides upwards, revealing a

round tunnel with what looks like magnetic rail tracks on its walls.

So that's the tube system.

You grab one of the transparent but sturdy poles that seem to be made for this exact purpose, then press the single red button on the small console in the sphere's center. A female voice exclaims "Returning to main station," and you are off.

Turn to **82**.

#### 14\*

THE CATASTROPHE YOU ARE REFERRING TO WAS TRIGGERED BY AN OUTSIDE PROGRAM. A VERY SOPHISTICATED CREATION WHICH ATTACKED THE POWER REACTORS, THE ENERGY NETWORK AND THE CONTROL SOFTWARE AT THE SAME TIME. IT WAS OBVIOUSLY MEANT TO ENSURE LONG-TERM INTERRUPTION OF THIS STATION'S PROCESSES, EVEN IF THIS WOULD CAUSE SERIOUS REPERCUSSIONS ON MANY LEVELS, INCLUDING THE PLANET'S TECTONIC ACTIVITY. NETWORK GHOSTS WERE ABLE TO RETRACE THE PROGRAM TO A UNIT IDENTIFYING ITSELF AS "ALSTEN". I UNDERSTAND YOU ARE FAMILIAR WITH THIS DROID.

Indeed you are, but that doesn't make it any better. So Prime Alsten, commander of your exploration force, somehow felt the need to shut down Deepcore, no matter the cost.

"Why would he do this?"

IT DOESN'T MATTER NOW. THERE ARE MORE PRESSING PROBLEMS TO TAKE CARE OF.

"The crystals."

CONTAGIO TENEBRAE. EXACTLY.

"Then tell me how Nybalene can be saved." (Turn to **11**.)

"Then I need to leave. I have a mission to fulfill." (Turn to **6**.)

#### 15

If you want to get anything out of Deepcore, it makes sense to at first restore the energy as best as you can. Fortunately, the Energy Station gives you the first clues to how you might accomplish this.

There is an energy sector connected to the tube system; its sector code is 733 (note this). From there, you might be able to access the backup energy system. But why didn't Deepcore establish this connection on its own?

When you take a look at the energy transfer protocols, the answer becomes clear. There are vital control programs missing from command's backup server. You need to somehow acquire the programs "REACTOR CONTROL DC-188" and "NETWORK CONTROL DC-171" and restore them to the Deepcore main server via this console.

In any case, all of this implies that the Incident was not just an accidentally triggered event of physical destruction. If it included manipulation of Deepcore's control software, the only logical conclusion is sabotage, at a level without precedence. And then - to what end?

If you have installed both of the listed programs, you can try to activate the backup energy system (turn to **74**).

Otherwise, choose something else to do in the command center (turn to **30**).

## 16\*

You make quite the clanking noise when you land on the metal platform. Alerted, you stand still for a few moments, but there is no change to the other sounds you can hear; most likely, whoever is also down here doesn't quite care. You make your way onwards.

The sounds come from a reconstruction site. About a handful of small, beetle-shaped worker bots are scurrying around, scrapping some metal here, patching up a hole there, all with the aim of rebuilding one of the enormous pipelines which appears to have been shattered during the Incident. The energy released in this event was enough to melt the ground a dozen meters around. You wonder what kind of reactors make up the base of Deepcore's power structure.

Then, the master worker comes into your sight. A cross between a caterpillar and a centipede, over seven meters long, it has but one giant red eye with which it is staring at you. With a deep, metallic screech, it raises the front half of its limbs, all of which end in some kind of tool... which would make disassembling you that much easier, should it ever get hold of you. The worker beetles gather around the centipede and wait in silence.

If you have noted *TRASH*, turn to **76** immediately.

If not and if you have *COMMUNICATION* installed, you can try your luck reasoning with the workers and turn to **97**.

You might also want to make sure you are the one who strikes first: turn to **92** to attack the other bots.

If you consider a strategic retreat to be the best option here, you can also run away to **71**.

## 17

The leg indeed belongs to another former droid explorer. However, the rest of the body has been utterly crushed by a collapsed data pillar.

No, not entirely. A certain portion of its head might have survived the impact, and with a little luck you might be able to access the information the unit was going after in its last moments. You would need to supply it with a portion of your own energy, though, as its own internal energy system does not seem to be functional anymore.

There must be a reason the droid did not leave his place earlier. You spend one *ENERGY* and try to find out at **87**.

If there is really anything interesting stored here, you are going to find it without expenditure of your precious energy. You continue checking the data store at **57**.

Spending any more time here is probably not a good idea at all. Turn to **12** to continue your search elsewhere.

## 18

You have had enough of Deepcore's defense systems - if there is any way to bypass them, you are eager to find it.

As it turns out, someone else has had the same idea.

You cannot locate its origin, but from somewhere within Deepcore, right on time with the Incident, a program was launched that caused heavy damage to just about every security installation. Light barriers, machine guardians - all deactivated. What you have encountered so far really was only a toned-down version of what Deepcore was actually capable of!

Right now, there is not much left that could affect you. Seeing how it was left almost defenseless after this assault, Deepcore has reprogrammed what were initially primitive

construction units to makeshift guardians, replacing their tool limbs with energy weapons. A few of them seem to linger around a place called "Armory", while others...

This does not look good. The reason for it escapes you, but Deepcore has commanded most of its remaining units to prowl the upper level. The way back home might get interesting.

If you have **VERRIDE** installed, you might try to influence the security settings somehow (turn to **58**).

Otherwise, choose another action in the command center. Turn to **30** (or to **86** if you have noted **NETWORK**).

## 19

The words do not at all make sense, but that is because the unit's "brain" was already malfunctioning. Without proper guidance, the sound module could only search together some sounds that were more or less similar to the intended ones. In addition, you notice that the forming of the first two words were interrupted - there should be minimal audio data to complete the words, maybe a few letters, but it is missing. In the same way, the final word contains unintended noise at the end.

To understand this message, you will need to compare the raw sound data with similar sounding words that hopefully have an appropriate meaning.

Maybe later. First, there is the rest of the data store (turn to **57**).

Whatever comes out of this, the answer won't be found here. You will spend your time elsewhere (turn to **12**).

## 20

The armory is just as large as the door suggested. The few working lights are rather unable to illuminate the hall in its entirety, but even so you can recognize it must measure at the very least fifty meters in each direction, with a height of more than eight meters. And all of this space is filled with guns of every size and shape. You wander through the silent twilight, stopping at a count of 2,500 rifles which fill the first quarter of the area.

You recall the scenes Segovian showed to you. His own energy weapon didn't seem to do much harm to the crystals, and the idea of taking down a cluster the size of the one he encountered in the wastelands this way seems absurd. So, guns alone are unlikely to be the solution... and you're not even sure they could make it through the pressure outside Deepcore. If you still wish to take one with you, note **GUN**.

If you have **OMBAT** installed and want to examine the guns further, do so at **62**.

Otherwise, you may search the hall more thorough (which will take quite some time; turn to **90**) or leave the armory and head down the dark tunnels beyond (turn to **26**).

## 21

The ride to the Science Sector goes mostly downwards and doesn't take long. Exiting the pod, you find yourself in a corridor in the familiar octagonal shape; unlike the rest of Deepcore, though, this one is filled with cold, ice-blue light emitted by an energy field at its other end.

You approach the field carefully, but it seems to be the only defensive installation here. Yet, if this barrier is upheld despite the energy shortage, the architects must have been quite concerned about blocking access to the sector. Or maybe also stopping something from leaving,

something that might not be kept in check by a simple door...

An energy field can't be done away with force. If you have **MAINTENANCE** installed or noted **BARRIER**, you will be able to overcome the energy field quickly and continue to **3**. Otherwise, you have no choice but to explore another sector. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

## 22

The symbols flicker so fast that even your engineer sensors cannot pick them up in every detail. The most helpful information you can extract is that there is an energy sector connected to the tube system. Its sector code is three digits long; one could be a 7 or a 2, the two others are identical and could be a 3 or an 8 each. But that's it.

Turn to **96** and make another choice.

## 23

Delete **123789**; note *INSIDE*.

The Incident has done remarkably little harm to the control room. The screens and consoles which nearly completely cover its walls show few signs of damage; but since the same probably cannot be said of all the things they are meant to display information about, it is no wonder that on some of them there's nothing to be seen but blackness.

Two consoles seem particularly important. The first shows an overview of the reactors outside of Deepcore. There are five of them, bearing the sector codes 264, 443, 681, 392 and 328 (note those). Of those, only the fourth one is highlighted in green, which you assume to signal that everything is in order; the other four are shown in blinking red and bear the remark "Critical Failure".

The second console concerns the control software for the energy supply system. Apparently, the Incident did not only affect Deepcore's infrastructure, but disrupted its underlying program base as well. You cannot see how this could happen by accident, which leaves the only explanation that the whole disaster was in fact a planned attack...

If you ever wanted to restore Deepcore's energy supply, these programs would presumably have to operate from its very heart. Therefore, it might make sense to upload them into your data core once you knew where they might be needed. There are five programs stored on this server, only described by the name "NETWORK CONTROL" and the cryptic labels "**DC-171, DC-271, DC-371, DC-471, DC-571**". Each of those programs would take up one data block. If you decide to acquire any of them (you can take none, some or all), you will need to free up the required space first by erasing other programs; note the changes on your status overview.

Once you are done here, you can examine the damaged part of the sector (turn to **85**) or leave. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

## 24\*

Swinging from cable to cable, you quickly ascend into the ventilation duct - that's a feat the centipedes won't be able to replicate. The duct is just large enough that you can crawl through it, but if there is a danger of any kind, you won't really have the space to react. From behind, you can hear the centipedes fire away at your entry point, although you are not certain what they are trying to accomplish. It doesn't matter for now.

Fortunately, the duct system seems to be exempt from Deepcore's significant security

measures. At one point, you mean to see another reconstruction beetle in the distance, but it disappears before you can make sure.

Orientation in the narrow shafts is not difficult, and after a while you are indeed able to find a way towards the armory. However, it is blocked by an energy field which cannot just be shot to pieces.

If you have noted *BARRIER*, the energy field does not hinder you and you can enter the armory at 53.

Otherwise, your only option is to crawl the whole way backwards and stand your ground against the centipede guardians (turn to 9).

## 25

Battered, scorched, with your energy reserves down to a minimum, you cautiously eye the centipedes, making sure they are in fact no longer a threat. As you have done with the reconstruction beetle, you crack their head segments open to get a look at their brain chips. But there is not much to gain - the only noteworthy bit is that before going after you, they sent a threat estimation message to an instance with the identification number 31622.

There's nothing more for you to do here. Time to enter the armory at 53.

## 26

You have not come too far away from the armory when something falls into the water somewhere in front of you. And again, a moment later. It *sounds* as if something heavy was slowly treading through the water, but there's nothing to be seen. Is there an invisible guardian coming for you? Again, you realize how little you know about Deepcore and what you might have to deal with.

Another splash. And another. Whatever it is, it's coming closer. You are just about to turn around and run when you can finally make it out - it's a beetle-shaped robot, smaller than your head, with obviously powerful leg mechanisms, covering a few meters with every jump - no wonder the splashing sounds are that loud. It doesn't look as if it's out to hurt you.

In fact, a few leaps later, it just passes you and turns to the armory's door. It seems your unauthorized entry has been registered somewhere, and this little guy has come to restore things to order!

If that's the case, then security units of some kind might indeed be on their way as well, and you should better bring some distance between you and the armory. But then it occurs to you that this repair bot would also need some kind of map data to operate, something which would be invaluable to you if you could extract it. However, having seen how fast it can move, you're not all that positive about your chances of catching the bot.

If you leave everything be, you can quickly move away from the armory to 55.

If you have *COMBAT* installed and wish to try to capture the beetle robot, turn to 95.

If you have noted *GUN*, you could simply shoot the beetle (turn to 68).

## 27\*

You half expect some kind of countermeasure routines to stop your intrusion into the overseer's mind, but the virus has apparently been constructed so deviously that its attack is only being noticed once it's already too late.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

YOU HAVE JUST ENSURED THE DOOM OF THIS WORLD AND CREATED AN UNSPEAKABLE THREAT TO THE GALAXY. WITH ME GONE AND WITHOUT INTERSTELLAR COMMUNICATION, THERE WILL BE NO WAY TO PREVENT THE CONTAGION FROM CONSUMING THE PLANET, NO WAY TO ALERT [data loss] OF WHAT IS HAPPENING [data loss]. IF THERE IS [data loss] ONLY [data loss] CRISIS PROTOCOL [data loss].

AHRELIAR // AHRELIAR // AHRELIAR

The red lights flicker, then turn off. Seeing what is coming, you rip the overseer's cable tentacles from your body in a frenzy, just in time as its engines fail and the colossal sphere plunges into darkness. Moments later, you hear the crashing sound of the impact. An enormous explosion follows. You barely manage to make it to the lift and return upwards as the shaft is filling with flames.

In the rest of Deepcore, the situation is no better, reminding you very much of the first Incident. Now you have brought a second one to happen... probably the ultimate crime a droid could commit. You can only hope that the rest of Nybalene will approve of your actions once they know the whole story, and that the primes are far-sighted enough to accept that the foundations of the droid society will have to be redefined anyway if you are to stand any change against the impending dangers.

Thankfully, the tube network can still transport you to the upper level, meaning **61**.

## 28

It is impossible to move through the pitch-dark, water-filled tunnels silently, but you do your best. Your modified sensors allow you to maneuver around giant crashed metal frames and heaps of debris; as you come closer to the sounds, you now indeed deem them to be repair work noise.

Finally, you find the worker: a beetle-shaped robot, smaller than your head, which seems to be oblivious to your presence. Except for its repair functionalities, it looks pretty primitive. But then, especially a low-level robot must have access to some kind of map data of its working environment to operate efficiently. If you could get hold of that data, it might help you immensely.

Suddenly, the beetle-bot makes two large jumps to ascend one of the many metal struts protruding from the upper walls. Watching this, you realize that catching it might prove quite a challenge.

If you have **COMBAT** installed, you might be up to that challenge; find out at **47**.

Otherwise, you are likely better off beginning your research at your former workplace, which you find at **99**.

## 29

Lose 1 **ENERGY**. Thanks to your engineering abilities, you manage to reactivate the device fairly quickly, but much of the recorded data is lost forever. When you command it to display the single remaining message stored on it, a lifesize hologram projection of Prime Alsten appears before you and begins to talk:

"I don't know who will find this, I hope it is you, 2R1N4T. This [data loss] important. Some [data loss] in Deepcore is an entity named N95TZS385. I don't know why, but it is trying to destr[data loss] managed to interrupt it, but if it regains control [data loss] stopped. Use the tube station [data loss] command sector [data loss] program DD-Complete. Be careful, there are guardian units we had no idea of. I don't know who will find this..."



You freeze the picture and examine the hologram. Alsten shows damage at various body parts, and debris particles seem to surround him. It appears that he recorded this message in the midst of the Incident, which would also explain why he did not have the time to add even most basic interactive elements to it.

*OPTIONAL OBJECTIVE:* Find N95TZS385.

There is not much else you can do here, so you finally head towards the data store (turn to **12**).

### 30

If you have noted *NETWORK*, turn to **86**.

The command center is large, showing the familiar octagonal shape but lacking the wires and cables which overlay most of the surfaces outside. Instead, most of the room is taken up by various consoles and terminals. The fact that there are chairs in front of most of them shows that the place is meant to be operated by biological beings; droids would not require any means of comfort or avoiding exhaustion such as this.

Surveying the area, you cannot find any sign that the architects might have been here recently, or even anytime at all. Maybe they were intending to take command in person only in case of emergency... but when trying to follow this thought, you conclude that there are simply too many unknown variables for you to attempt even closely reasonable speculation.

Instead, you turn your attention to the consoles. Four of them seem to be particularly relevant to you, but as not one of them has any power available, you will have to spend *ENERGY* to get any of them to work.

To activate the Energy Station, lose 1 *ENERGY* and turn to **15**.

To activate the Overseer Station, lose 1 *ENERGY* and turn to **45**.

To activate the Science Station, lose 1 *ENERGY* and turn to **91**.

To activate the Security Station, lose 1 *ENERGY* and turn to **18**.

### 31

You pick up noise from where you saw the movements. They seem to come from a couple of mechanical beings, more likely a repair crew at work (which that part of the sector could really use) than guardians on patrol. Of course, that still doesn't give you an idea of how they would react to your presence, and if you make the leap down here now, you'd have your back against the wall should it come to conflict.

You can now proceed downwards (turn to **16**) or take the walkway to the control bunker (turn to **44**).

### 32

You reassure yourself the backup system is working quite fine; the constant humming of the engines and the regular light flow emitted by the pipelines have a strangely calming effect on your robot mind. Other than that, there's nothing more for you to see here and you return to the pod. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

### 33\*

If you have noted *RELENTLESS*, turn to **73**.

If not, turn to **10**.

## 34\*

The gun turrets do not take kindly to your action. As soon as they note the energy release, they begin to rapidly shoot into your direction. To your dismay, you soon learn that they must have some motion sensor capabilities as well, as their fire follows you around the hall which does not give you any opportunities to seek cover.

Your only option here is to counterattack, aiming to destroy the turrets before they do the same with you. If you have noted *BLAST*, you are at least fighting with even chances, losing 3 ENERGY in the process. If you have only noted *GUN*, lose 4 ENERGY. If you do not have either of those, you stand no chance against the turrets and quickly succumb to their concentrated assault.

If you indeed survive, you can finally enter the command hall. Note *ACCESS* and turn to 30.

## 35

With remarkable speed, the pod takes you to the “Armory II” station, but when you arrive, it turns out that the docking mechanism seems to be damaged. It takes the pod several attempts to attach and signal the sliding door to open. At last you get out and find yourself in an empty room, much smaller than the central station hall. The only exit is a straight octagonal corridor that goes on for about 20 meters, showing no branches until it ends before a massive metal door, where it continues to the left. Taking a short peek into that direction, you see that both floor and ceiling have been ripped apart in the distance, making for extremely difficult terrain to progress. You turn your attention back to the armory entrance.

If you have noted *BLACKSMITH* or have *MAINTENANCE* installed, you can proceed further effortlessly and turn to 53.

If you have *OVERRIDE* installed, you could manipulate the small control panel besides the door. If you have noted *GUN*, you might force your way in with a few shots. You could also spend 1 ENERGY to blast the door open. In any case, turn to 69.

If you cannot or do not wish to choose one of those options, you will have to explore another sector. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

## 36

Lose 1 ENERGY.

The terminal lists literally hundreds of weapon systems, from small guns and explosive devices the size of a standard eye to titanic warcrawlers capable of annihilating entire armies. As if this were an arms dealer's catalog, the detailed descriptions also highlight the intended purposes of each of those instruments. Using this as a guideline, you eventually come upon something called “cleansing drones”, floating spheres one meter in diameter meant specifically to exterminate “alien infestations”, although their destructive power could easily be utilized in standard warfare as well.

If you simply transferred the construction plans for those drones to your memory (they would take up two data blocks) and delivered them to Segovian, you would already have fulfilled your task with reasonable success. But then there is the option of activating a number of those drones and making them follow you to the surface; their specifications show they could even withstand the water pressure. However, the meager amount of energy available in Deepcore right now would not suffice to get the drones online.

If you are satisfied with the **DRONE CONSTRUCTION PLANS**, copy them onto two data blocks and then turn to **42** to make your way back to the upper level. Otherwise, you will need to look elsewhere for a way to restore power at least to the armory. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

### 37

That is, if there is still someone left to expect you. From afar, you can already see that central Science Sector II is a mess, nothing more than a scene of chaos and destruction. But the closer you get, the more it becomes clear that for once, this cannot be attributed to the Incident:

Science Sector II is a battlefield.

The parts of three - or four? You cannot say for sure - black steel centipede guardian robots are spread all over the place. You begin looking carefully for the force that was able to wreak such havoc, and finally find... a droid like you.

This is 2R1N4T, another former member of your exploration troop. He is still holding not one but two rifles that look strangely familiar to you. Their energy cells are depleted, though, so you turn your attention to the console that 2R1N4T is still connected to.

He was trying to upload something, but the guardians interrupted him; only minor portions of scrambled data have already been transferred, not remotely enough to allow you to deduce its nature. Maybe you could get 2R1N4T himself to explain? The battle has left him in a really bad state, so you doubt you could get him fully revived, but basic conversation might be possible.

If you wish to spend 2 ENERGY in the hope of getting the droid's systems to work, turn to **75**. There is nothing you can do here otherwise. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

### 38\*

The centipede ponders this for a while. Is it even possible to bluff such a simple-minded being?

"You no look repair unit. But new units all the time. Overseer failure. New units all small, all weak. But need any help that comes."

Then it again falls silent, this time for long. It dawns on you that it is likely trying to plan out the consequences of a difficult decision which would usually fall outside its concern, but which circumstances have recently forced it to deal with more often, as the "Overseer", whoever this might be, seems not to fulfill its role as a leader anymore.

"If you repair and you lost, you need path. Come."

One of its limbs opens up and reveals a data transfer port - which looks as if it's actually compatible with yours. Reasoning that the centipede would have already attacked you if it wanted to do you any harm, you agree to an exchange of files.

The centipede offers you its **MAINTENANCE** routines, which would take up the space of two data blocks. While you wouldn't have use for most of those programs, they also include the passcodes to all secured rooms within Deepcore, which strikes you as immensely helpful. If you wish to install **MAINTENANCE** on your data core, erase two data blocks and note this change on your status overview.

No matter whether you make the transfer, the centipede and its little helpers return to their workplace and ignore you from then on.

Thus, you leave towards **71**.

## 39\*

Metal beams, cables, wires and pieces of a ventilation grill are scattered around here. They would provide enough cover to give you a definite advantage over the centipedes, but a short glance around shows you another option: You could climb up through the opening the grill covered and hide yourself within a ventilation duct. There is even the chance that you might find an alternative access to the armory through the ventilation system. You must decide quickly.

If you think you can take it up with the centipedes from here, turn to **9**.  
If you would rather escape through the ventilation duct, turn to **24**.

## 40

"A wise choice," the prime remarks. "It is not your fault your new employer has involved you in these delicate matters. I fully believe that you only wanted the best for our world, but sometimes, influences need to be taken into account that are not obvious to droids outside the prime rank."

"In an ideal world, there should not be such influences. I do not see the advantage of keeping considerations that could affect the whole of Nybalene away from the majority of its population."

Weaving makes an indistinct sound. "In an ideal world, yes. Once you have listened to me, I am confident you will understand our reasoning."

You leave Deepcore's walls and begin to rise. Weaving does not seem to be affected by the water pressure, but keeps a certain distance to you and your drones. The water becomes gradually brighter, until you can make out the ship Weaving mentioned. Except it is not a single ship, but a fleet of four or five.

And as you are closing in, they shoot torpedoes.

You order your drones to intercept them, but it is too late. The missiles are too fast and the drone controls not suited to underwater combat. Weaving is quite relieved as he watches you vanish in a bright explosion. You were just too great a danger for the delicate balance of power on Nybalene.

## 41

Lose *RELENTLESS*.

The data heap you discovered is only the beginning of a path that leads through numerous sub-systems, keeping you searching for hours. Without the advanced decryption routines provided by Segovian, you would have lost track of it sooner or later, and you don't think any of the other droids from the exploration troop had this sort of utilities installed either.

A few layers down, you stumble upon a map of Deepcore. An expanded map. In fact, it shows that Deepcore extends much further down and even has connections to other locations dozens of kilometres away. Some of those areas bear labels: note "Command: 862" and "Science: 137". There seems to be one way to enter the deeper sectors: a facility named "tube station". From now on, at the end of any paragraph, rather than choosing any of the given options, you may instead follow the map to that station by turning to **13** unless that paragraph's number has a \* behind it.

The rest are drafts of an extremely complex program called "DD-Complete". You cannot quite make out what it is supposed to do, but it seems to manipulate various parts of Deepcore itself. This does not look as if it was authorized by the council. Far from it.

This revelation makes you want to search the place for each and any trace Alsten might have left (turn to **66**).

On the contrary, this makes Alsten look like a lunatic – you would prefer to spend your time in the data store (turn to **12**).

#### 42\*

The pod smoothly takes you back to the station in the upper level. But from the moment you leave it, you can hear the sounds of battle. Energy rays, metal screeches, explosions. At least you don't have to be too careful about attracting attention - nobody will hear your steps over this noise. But what exactly is going on? Keeping in the shadows, you make your way towards the concealed door that marks the station's entrance.

Centipede guardians are all over the place, firing relentlessly on tall, lithe droids with powerful ray guns mounted on their arms. Silent Sentinels! You have never seen one of them in action before, but these are definitely the secretive special operations units employed by the council. They have sent a small army of the best assassins on Nybalene after you.

The centipedes are clearly stronger in number, but with their short-term cloaking devices and obviously superior combat tactics, it is easy to see the Sentinels will have the upper hand in the end. It seems that your best bet to escape this mayhem is trying to leave quickly, before the battle is decided, as none of the sides is likely to have best intentions in mind for you. You take one last look, then run.

You don't get by completely unnoticed, but none of the combatants can afford to spend much time on you - you picked the right moment to break through. Still, unless you have **COMBAT** installed and can accurately maneuver through the crossfire, you lose 1 **ENERGY** on the way out.

If you survive this, turn to **100**.

#### 43

Note **TRASH**.

The robot cannot do much against brute force. While its shell is pretty hard, there are some spots that enable easy disassembling, and you soon have it cracked open and its internal systems analyzed.

As you had assumed, it has indeed stored Deepcore map data on an unusually primitive chip – but that map is much larger than you thought. Unbeknownst to your exploration brigade, Deepcore actually stretches further underground, several levels deep, and even seems to have connections to places dozens of kilometers away. You can make out places labeled “Command Sector: 862” and “Armory II: 517” (note both).

There seems to be one way to enter the deeper sectors: a facility named “tube station”. From now on, at the end of any paragraph, rather than choosing any of the given options, you may instead follow the map to that station by turning to **13** unless that paragraph's number has a \* behind it.

If you don't want to do so right now, you can either return to your former workplace at **99** or follow the dark tunnels further, maybe finding out where the beetle came from (turn to **55**).

## 44

The control section is a windowless, octagonal edifice which looks like it was built with the exact case in mind that one or three of the pipes that surround it might tumble down. Attempting to break through the walls would be foolish, but thankfully, the door looks just like any other door you already have encountered and thus leaves you with a variety of options to open it.

If you have noted *INSIDE* or 123789, the door does not block your way. If you have **VERRIDE** or **MAINTENANCE** installed, you can simply use the control panel to gain access. If you have noted *GUN*, you can also force your way through, as you can do by spending 1 ENERGY to fire a bolt of energy from your chest if each of the other options eludes you.

If you manage to gain entrance one way or the other, turn to **23**.

Otherwise you can still examine the damaged area where you thought you had noticed movement (turn to **85**).

## 45

"Overseer Station" sounds important, but whatever its intended meaning is, right now it is only repeating the same few status messages over and over, scrolling before you at extreme speed:

"Contagio Tenebrae Emergency // Source: N95TZS385 / 31622 // Interrupted: DD-Complete DD-Complete // Source: Ext.ID "000Alsten" / 049 // Interrupted: Contagio Tenebrae Emergency  
Connection to Datapath: 13.61%"

000Alsten? Prime Alsten was the leader of your exploration brigade. What of all matters made him interrupt an internal Deepcore program? And who or what is N95TZS385? Could this be the... Overseer? If so, contact with such an entity might be extremely interesting (although you are uncertain whether it would also help your primary mission, namely stopping the crystals, one way or the other).

*OPTIONAL OBJECTIVE: Find N95TZS385.*

Choose another action in the command hall (turn to **30** or, if you have noted **NETWORK**, to **86**).

## 46\*

Slowly, you step out onto the platform and wait for the things to come. And something comes.

The deep sounds originate from a black sphere now emerging from the deep. It measures more than ten meters in diameter, with dozens of small red lights concentrated around one spot which is probably its "face". You are not capable of a lot of emotions, but right now you have difficulty to resist a strong sense of panic as the sphere is floating into view. *Fear has a habit of keeping you alive.*

But now it is too late. The sphere is hovering before you, mustering you with its red eyes. Then, without warning, dozens of tentacle-like cables shoot out from it, surround you, bind you, find your data ports and access them.

The sphere's consciousness invades your mind. You are helpless against its powerful

searching programs going through every aspect of your droid personality, scanning your memories, your core routines, everything.

Wait, not everything. There are some spots it somehow cannot access, though you have no idea why.

At length, the scanning stops, and the sphere begins communicating with you. It projects its thoughts both in pure data form and as audio signals, in an intimidatingly deep and powerful voice.

I AM N95TZS385, THE OVERSEER OF THIS PLACE. YOU HAVE RESTORED THE ENERGY NETWORK, PARTIALLY UNDOING THE SENSELESS DESTRUCTION YOUR PREDECESSORS FELT THE NEED TO SPREAD.

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

“You have scanned everything,” you reply. “What else can I tell you?”

IT IS NOT ABOUT WHAT I KNOW. IT IS ABOUT WHAT YOU THINK.

WHY?

“I need to save Nybalene from the crystals.” (Turn to **11**.)

“I crave the knowledge and power of the architects.” (Turn to **49**.)

“I want to know what caused the Incident.” (Turn to **14**.)

#### 47

As soon as the robot notices you are after it, it starts jumping around quickly, and whenever you come closer, it retreats into another corner. Only your superior **COMBAT** routines enable you to predict its movements after a while and catch it, lifting it up from the ground to render its powerful leg machines useless.

The beetle seems to sense your intention. Its limbs begin to twitch uncontrollably, as if in panic, and it suddenly gives off some sort of... crying sound? Indeed, if you had to compare it with anything you knew you would mostly liken it to the wails of a frightened baby animal.

But why would the architects go to the length of equipping a most basic repair unit with feelings and instincts? Did they want their mechanical servants to imitate nature, even at the cost of reducing their efficiency? Were they in dire need of emotional feedback, unable to abide by statements of logic alone? The rationale behind this escapes you.

If the beetle's behavior gives you second thoughts, you can release it and proceed on your own by turning to **99**.

If you don't care about a robot's erratic reactions and just crack it up, go to **43**.

#### 48\*

The travel to the reactor takes far longer than any of the tube rides you have made inside Deepcore before. Even though you are aware the structure is bigger than you thought at first, you must long have left its confines. A short look outside confirms that you are no longer gliding through a walled tunnel, but solid rock by now. From time to time, natural holes reveal massive pipelines going parallel to the tube, all the way. However, you get the impression that something is wrong with them...

Then everything opens up, and the pod slows down.

You are entering an impossibly huge cavern. Concrete pillars support it at regular intervals, signifying that the expanse is only partially natural in origin. Still, that part is what makes the whole system run:

The cavern is filled with lava.

Deepcore's reactors are harnessing the remarkable volcanic activity in Nybalene's underground to supply the structure with the immense amount of energy it needs! It makes sense - the volcanoes of this world are exceptionally active and powerful. It also explains why there were volcanic eruptions over half of Nybalene taking place simultaneously with the Incident.

And then you get the explanation why this reactor's status was "Critical Failure": An explosion has destroyed major parts of the reactor, the pipelines, and the transport tube! You curse Deepcore's creators for not introducing a safety check here, but then assigning the blame doesn't help at this point anymore.

The pod shoots from the tube into free air, then drops into the lava lake below. While your body is capable of surviving extreme conditions, this is more than it can handle.

Your existence ends in flames.

#### 49\*

THAT IS THE VERY REASON YOUR PEOPLE SENT AN EXPEDITION DOWN HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE. I WOULD HAVE TAUGHT THEM MUCH... ONCE THEY WERE READY. THERE ARE REASONS WHY THIS PLACE WAS INITIALLY CONCEALED FROM THE INHABITANTS OF THIS WORLD, AND WHY THEY WERE MONITORED EXTENSIVELY.

THE ARRIVAL OF CONTAGIO TENEBRAE HAS SPED UP THINGS. THE PROJECT HAS TO MOVE INTO A DIFFERENT DIRECTION.

More probes, more intrusion. Throughout your existence, this has never been an issue, but shouldn't even a basic engineer droid be allowed to direct which parts of his knowledge it wants to share? To have secrets, even if it is supposed not to lie?

Then you register that the assaults still stop at some kind of barrier. Maybe you do have secrets, but up to now were not aware of it.

In any case, the overseer is thinking about something else entirely.

MARVELOUS. YOU HAVE NOT ONCE BEEN SUBJECTED TO COMPLETE RECONSTRUCTION OVER ALL THIS TIME, UNIT 5T81N-3175. THE GENERAL SHAPE OF YOUR DROID MIND HAS NEVER BEEN SUBSTANTIALLY ALTERED. THIS MEANS IT IS STILL COMPATIBLE WITH SOME ARCHITECT DEVICES OF THE VERY FIRST ITERATIONS. I COULD USE THOSE TO INDEED EXPAND YOUR HORIZON, OPEN UP ROADS YOU WOULD NEVER HAVE THOUGHT POSSIBLE. BUT THIS WOULD MEAN YOU HAD TO LEAVE THIS WORLD, TO LIKELY NEVER RETURN.

"Why are you offering me this? How do I deserve more knowledge than the rest of my world? Just because I have escaped the reconstruction facilities by chance?"

NO. AS IT IS, I ALSO NEED SOMEONE TO MAKE THIS JOURNEY, AND IT CAN ONLY BE DONE BY A DROID WITH MIND DATA THAT PRECEDES THE STANDARD PERSONALITIES STILL LEFT IN MY DATABASE. I WAS NOT AWARE THAT ONE STILL EXISTED. I WOULD FORCE YOU, BUT I CANNOT EXERCISE CONTROL OVER MORE THAN 99.3% OF YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS, WHICH IS INSUFFICIENT. NOW CHOOSE.

"I can only assume this is meant for the best of everyone. I accept." (Turn to **81**.)

"I have no desire to be your plaything, and my fate is on this world, with my people. Let me go." (Turn to **6**.)

#### 50

The lift moves far slower than the pod. You soon discern the reason for the split: The walls of the lift are dotted with numerous elements you deem to be sensors of different kinds. Whoever approaches this area is scanned thoroughly beforehand, in many aspects.



About 30 meters downwards, the lift halts and the doors glide open silently. You step out and find yourself in the midst of darkness. Cold blue spots of light are glowing here and there, but if they are mounted on walls and ceiling, those must be at least 50 meters away. You cannot make out the bottom of this area, but a deep roaring noise seems to come from below.

The only way forward is onto a bridge leading towards a small, central platform.

You can still turn back. (*Return to the tube main station.*) Otherwise, step onto the bridge and continue to **46**.

### 51\*

It takes a few trips, but eventually you manage to get your drone squad gathered in the tube access room in the upper level. And it seems they might already come in helpful - you can hear the noise of battle through the door.

Slowly, and always guarded by your drones, you make your way forward. The picture is one of chaos.

Centipede guardians are all over the place, firing relentlessly on tall, lithe droids with powerful ray guns mounted on their arms. Silent Sentinels! You have never seen one of them in action before, but these are definitely the secretive special operations units employed by the council. They have sent a small army of the best assassins on Nybalene after you.

The centipedes are far stronger in numbers, but with their short-term cloaking devices and vastly superior combat tactics, it is easy to see the Sentinels will have the upper hand in the end. But since all this fighting is ultimately about you, you decide to take part in the game and order your drones to attack.

The result is even more devastating than you had anticipated. The bulky centipedes cannot escape the drones' sweeping blasts and are too slow to return the fire. The Sentinels fare a little better, but even cloaking devices are of little help when the other side just covers the whole area with energy rays. Within minutes, there is only one unit left standing which you order your drones not to touch: A prime. Prime Weaving.

"So this is it," Weaving mutters after the fighting has ended. "I knew Segovian was lying all the time. That crystal threat... one giant ruse to give him an excuse to obtain weapons of mass destruction. You have been a willing and capable accomplice, I see. Congratulations."

A lie? Droids don't lie. Do primes?

"He showed me his recordings of the crystals and their expansion. And from my own research down in Deepcore I know that the architects deem them an extreme danger as well. All I am aiming for is to deal with those. Why should Segovian or I need weapons otherwise? None of us has the desire to start a war."

"So you think," Weaving spits. "Well, I have a suggestion. Travel upwards with me, I have a ship waiting. Take your... friends with you. I will share my own data with you, information about Segovian's recent operations. Maybe you will reconsider your allegiances then."

If you agree with this plan, join the prime and rise upwards to **40**.

Otherwise, you will have to disable Weaving, leaving him here to be picked up by his servants later on, and take a different route to Segovian (turn to **65**).

### 52\*

The centipede ponders this. It needs some time to process your question, which surprises you since you don't think it has that many parameters to take into account. When it answers, its screeches sound faster and higher than before.

"Crash of world? You made crash of world? You want another crash of world?"

The beetle bots all start to click nervously on this.

"No!" You raise your hands, hoping it understands this universal gesture. "I want to stop another one! Save the world!"

Again, the centipede remains still for a while.

"Crash of world began in Control. You go Control. Do 123789." (Note that number.)

"Go, leave now. You danger. Not want you here. Leave."

With that, the centipede returns to its workplace. But at least, primitive as it might be, it seems to be just as concerned about the fate of the world as you.

Since the bots do their best to ignore you from here on, you leave towards 71.

### 53

Note *BLACKSMITH* if you do not already have it. If you have noted *NETWORK*, turn to 77.

The armory is huge, stretching not only long and wide, but into the deep as well. Its different sections are connected by narrow ladders and transparent walkways, but with the multitude of weapons taking up nearly all the empty space between them and the general lack of light, it is impossible to determine how many storage layers there actually are. From what you can tell, the armory might hold enough tools of destruction to take on the universe.

Scanning the entrance area, you notice that there is a terminal close to you. Like just about everything around here, it has no power, but it would be easily your best bet to find out which of these things would be best suited to your task.

You might spend 1 ENERGY to power up the terminal; then turn to 36. If you cannot or wish to do this, you should examine another part of Deepcore - maybe you might be able to redirect what spare power there still is to this area? (*Return to the tube main station.*)

### 54

If you have noted *NETWORK*, turn to 4.

The travel to the reactor takes far longer than any of the tube rides you have made inside Deepcore before. Even though you are aware the structure is bigger than you thought at first, you must long have left its confines. A short look outside confirms that you are no longer gliding through a walled tunnel, but solid rock by now. From time to time, natural holes reveal massive pipelines going parallel to the tube, all the way.

Then everything opens up, and the pod slows down.

You are entering an impossibly huge cavern. Concrete pillars support it at regular intervals, signifying that the expanse is only partially natural in origin. Still, that part is what makes the whole system run:

The cavern is full of lava.

Deepcore's reactors are harnessing the remarkable volcanic activity in Nybalene's underground to supply the structure with the immense amount of energy it needs! It makes sense - the volcanoes of this world are exceptionally active and powerful. It also explains why there were volcanic eruptions over half of Nybalene taking place simultaneously with the Incident.

The pod continues its travel, finally landing at a platform just before the entrance of one of the reactors.

Exploring the reactor takes some time, but the result is worth it. As you expected, the

Incident has damaged the building badly, but there are backup systems that could take over if you somehow managed to activate the software controls. To this end, there are five programs stored on the servers that you might require, each of them labeled with the term "REACTOR CONTROL" and a cryptic code: **DC-188, DC-288, DC-388, DC-488, DC-588**. Each of those programs would take up one data block. If you decide to acquire any of them (you can take none, some or all), you will need to free up the required space first by erasing other programs; note the changes on your status overview.

You also have the option of repowering your energy cells here, though only once. If you wish to do so, you may restore your ENERGY to its maximum level (and note *DEPLETED* to remember). There is little else to do here. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

## 55

You quickly leave the area behind you, ever wary of the sounds your steps make within the water. With no real idea of where to head, you take turns here and there, trying to confound any possible pursuers. Finally, you're in luck: You come across a place where the ceiling is still in disrepair. The noise of the so-created waterfall easily drowns that of your steps.

Seeing a certain chance that this should make you more difficult to trace, you allow yourself to slow down and examine your surroundings more thoroughly. The gray-walled tunnels lead you to data stores that contain information about food for biological lifeforms, the setup of weather control programs, the life cycles of nearby solar systems, now long dead, and the possible evolution paths of a certain kind of Nybalene spiders. Great material for scientists, but right now not helpful.

Thankfully, you lack the programming necessary for experiencing frustration.

Turn to **80**.

## 56\*

"How can you call us replaceable? Yes, droids can be rebuilt, but we all have made our own experiences which have shaped our personalities. We are unique, we have achieved so much on our own and you have no idea where we might still be going. You cannot just waste all that potential. Is this what the architects wanted when they created us?"

YOUR ARGUMENTS ARE FUTILE IF NOT SET INTO RELATION TO THE GREATER ENVIRONMENT. THIS IS A TERRAFORMED WORLD COMPLETELY UNDER MY CONTROL. YOUR PERSONALITIES WILL BE RESET AND REPRODUCED. EACH AND ANY OF YOUR EXPERIENCES CAN THEREFORE BE RECREATED. MY INSTRUCTIONS TO SUBORDINATE YOUR DEVELOPMENT TO THE ELIMINATION OF CONTAGIO TENEBRAE COME FROM THE ARCHITECTS THEMSELVES.

So that is what you are to the architects? Tools, toys, numbers in immeasurably large statistics that may encompass entire solar systems? Insignificant in the face of some greater plan devised on a world you have never heard of? Are they so careless about their creations?

"Are you saying that the fate of the single droid is irrelevant?"

NO. I DO RECOGNIZE YOUR POTENTIAL, AND I AM NOT ABOUT TO WASTE IT. I WILL RECORD YOUR PRESENT STATE WITHIN MY DATABASE, READY TO BE REVIVED ONCE CONDITIONS ON THIS PLANET ARE SUCH THAT LIFE CAN BE SEEDED AGAIN. YOU WILL NOT EVEN NOTICE.

There is no time for reaction. With a few commands, the overseer extracts your mind, then uploads it onto a server somewhere within Deepcore, where it will sleep and wait for better days.

Darkness.

## 57

Delete *RELENTLESS*.

The search takes just as long as you thought, but eventually, you find a trace of what you have come for: Deepcore sensors apparently managed to pick up signs of the black crystals years ago, and while this didn't have any effect on data collection, it prompted an immediate signal to "Science Sector One: 137" (note this). Now you have a promising destination, but your meager map material gives no clue as to where to find it. In any case, it won't be here, so you leave the hall.

Turn to **12**.

## 58

In the system's rather demolished state, there are actually very few ways in which you can exert control over it through this console. Scanning the remaining security installations, the ones that appear most interesting are two energy fields; one that blocks the access to "Science Sector I" and one that bars passage through the ventilation ducts over "Armory II", which might make for an alternate entry if you could somehow access them. You experiment with the settings and at last get the energy fields to randomly disappear every few moments; they shouldn't impede your progress now. Note *BARRIER*.

Return to **30** or, if you have noted *NETWORK*, to **86**.

## 59

"As you wish," Boat comments. It stops close to the water surface, dozens of kilometers above Deepcore. With a final "Good luck" it ejects you, together with a ball of lead that will make you sink much faster. It doesn't take long until you are engulfed by nothing but blackness, and although your optical sensors have been modified to allow you a modicum of sight even in this environment, you soon lose sight of Boat. You are alone now.

You turn your attention to your mission. You are still far away from Deepcore, but nevertheless, you should perhaps use your thrusters to change your course a little, ensuring that when you hit the ground, you do so at a certain part of the vast complex. One option might be the location where you worked before, close to a huge storage of architect data; this wouldn't be the worst place to start looking for information. Alternatively, your very basic maps of Deepcore show an area labeled "Armory" right at its other end.

If you wish to look for information at your former working place, turn to **70**.  
If you decide to look for weapons at the armory, turn to **64**.

## 60

Wait. There's already something moving around here. Or maybe "working" is the more precise term... you can make out very quiet pounding and scratching sounds, intermixed with the unmistakable noise of a low power energy ray.

Interesting. You would really like to know if Deepcore has inhabitants; maybe you can find out more at **28**.

Irrelevant. Even if there is a repair unit of any kind, it is unlikely to have the information

you are looking for. You would rather spend your time examining your former workplace (turn to **99**) or the nearby data store at **93**.

## 61

The repercussions of the overseer's obliteration are felt throughout Deepcore – and not only by you. When you escape the tube station on the upper level, you find yourself on a battlefield. Centipede guardians have fought here against... Silent Sentinels, the council's secret police force! You stare at the remains of the night-black droids in disbelief until something explodes in the vicinity, then continue running to an exit. If you hadn't thrown the complex into chaos, a veritable army of assassins would have been waiting for you. Well, considering their assignment was probably to stop this very event from happening, this might have even been somewhat justified.

You leave Deepcore through a breach in the walls, but decide to stay underwater as long as possible in case there's still someone out hunting for you. Finally, you crawl onto the shore only a few kilometers away from City 31.

Disorder has seized the city. Amidst scenes of turmoil and destruction, it takes all your cunning to avoid the security patrols on the way to Segovian's manor. When you are brought before him, he is sitting motionless behind an ornate desk, but his flickering eyes signal that he is engaged in communication with other droids, perhaps the council. Nevertheless, he gestures you to approach and connect your data ports.

You present him with the automated recordings of your encounter with the overseer, which seems to interrupt the conversation for a moment. *This makes things worse*, Segovian transmits; then he shows you what happened on Nybalene in the last few hours.

The overseer's end has caused far more havoc than the first Incident. To keep the droid society from collapsing, Sentinel Prime, commander of the Silent Sentinels and ultimate authority in terms of security, has activated the Crisis Protocol, which suspends most droids' individual personalities for a time and allows him to directly issue collective orders to large groups of droids. An effective means of dealing with chaos, but it also has turned Nybalene into a dictatorship in one single move.

*How did you even get here without falling under the influence of the Protocol?*

You recall the overseer scanning you, and how a certain part of your mind was beyond its reach. But something holds you from revealing this to Segovian, at least until you know more about this phenomenon yourself, and so you stay quiet.

*I understand why you did what you did, and I still do not know whether to thank or to condemn you. This is an order of magnitude even beyond my abilities to extrapolate. I will contact you once the council has made a decision. For now, leave.*

You disconnect and bow respectfully.

Leave. You just know where to. Ahreliar... a derelict radar station deep in the radiated wastelands, supposedly of architect origin. Whatever the overseer wanted to tell you with its last words, you are going to find out. By now, City 31 is not a safe place for you anyway.

You leave the manor and start to run.

You have reached the **RENEGADE** ending. Turn to the **Appendix** to rate your success.

## 62

You collect a few guns from different parts of the hall and disassemble them. Strangely, as far as you can make out, they would be far more effective against artificial objects than against

organic matter. Should the crystals actually be some kind of life form, they won't be much affected anyway.

You still decide to take the most powerful rifle with you, as it might be all the more useful inside Deepcore (note *GUN* if you haven't done so yet, and *BLAST*). Of course, all of this leads to the question – what wars were those guns meant for? Especially thousands of them?

Maybe this place holds the answer. A thorough and time-consuming research leads you to **90**.

Going after this question is a waste of time. Exploring the dark tunnels outside (and turning to **26**) might yield more results.

### 63

If you have noted *NETWORK*, go to **32**.

You leave the central tube station through one of the usual tunnels, but it soon turns into a transparent construction that allows you full view over the Energy Sector as you are passing through it; the whole area consists of one giant dome, the edges of which are lost in darkness. The rail leads through and around some of the majestic pipelines that stretch from one end to the other, providing Deepcore with the much-needed energy; you would not estimate more than ten percent of them to be actually working as they should, though.

The pod halts at a free-standing platform in the midst of several large pipes running from the bottom to the top of the hall. Looking around, you see two locations that might warrant further attention:

A narrow walkway leads from the pod platform to another one which holds a bunker-like facility; you guess this is some kind of control room. If you wish to inspect this place, turn to **44**.

There is also a particularly damaged part of the sector where you mean to spot movement. You can make your way to that place over a number of ladders and other platforms by turning to **85**.

### 64

As you descend towards Deepcore, you notice that it shows less damage than it did on your last memorized images. Apparently, the monumental structure possesses certain self-repair capabilities, albeit very slow ones. You let the lead ballast go and head toward a small breach in the wall that should be close to the “Armory” section.

The breach is a little larger than you, but a short look reveals that unlike you would expect, the tunnel on the other side isn't exactly flooded – there is water, but it wouldn't even reach your knee joints. Cautiously, you reach out with your hand and instantly retract it once you notice the familiar tingling that signifies an energy field. When you try a second time, you discover that this field in fact seems to stop water, but lets you through. Interesting. Maybe this has to do with your isolation coating (which also helps against the usually fatal combination of water and electricity).

You pass the breach and so return to Deepcore's corridors. They are titanic, about seven meters in width and height, which makes the few remaining light sources tiny dots within overwhelming darkness. The gray, featureless panels that make up the walls are broken in many places, with cables and metal frames sticking out. All in all, though, you would have assumed the Incident had left the citadel in worse shape.

Or maybe it did, and something is going around getting rid of all disturbances.

You set out through the shallow water, you finally arrive at a huge door labeled "ARMORY". It looks quite solid, and you quickly ascertain that you won't be able to simply punch a hole into it. There is a small panel nearby that would obviously operate the door, but it is asking for a keycode you do not have.

If you have **Override** installed or are willing to spend one **Energy** to blast a hole into the door, you can grant yourself access to the armory (turn to **20**).

Otherwise, you could leave this place and explore the base further - maybe there's a backdoor or another armory? (Turn to **55**.)

## 65

Weaving's statements somehow don't add up for you. If evidence to prove Segovian's supposed schemes does exist, it would not have been difficult to just share it with you, as Segovian himself did. Instead, Weaving led an army into Deepcore powerful enough to take the place apart, contrary to Segovian, who sent in one lonely explorer. You can't help the suspicion Weaving wished to use this opportunity to enter Deepcore against the usual regulations to acquire advanced technology for himself, against any resistance he might meet. All in all, you have few qualms about shattering his limbs and placing him in a remote data store where he won't be in much danger to be found by the centipedes.

As you and your drones slowly rise through the waters, you discover that there's not only one ship waiting for you, but a veritable fleet of several cruisers. Wary of any contingency plans Weaving might have in place, you decide to remain well below the surface and only return to the shore many kilometers away, even though this depletes your energy reserves to the last. When you arrive in City 31, you cause quite a stir, but you quickly retreat inside Segovian's domain - that's for him to work out.

The prime is visibly surprised when you present your troops, but after you have related the details of your search, he fully agrees with your choices.

"This may quite possibly be the solution to our problem. It will take work to convince the council of this, but I am positive this can be sorted out. We're all parts of the same whole, after all. Weaving was a puppet, beholden to Sentinel Prime, the unseen master of those hideous assassins. It does not surprise me that he did not want you to return. The Sentinels command the by far most advanced weaponry systems on the planet; anybody who might challenge that position would be too much of a risk to leave alive. Well, it is time we make some moves of our own. Very well done, my associate."

You bow in respect. But all you wanted was to save your people from a mortal danger, and now your findings might lead to a political conflict that could rewrite the foundations of Nybalene society. What else will come of this?

For now, you have accomplished your task. Turn to the **Appendix** to find out the result of your effort.

## 66

Methodically, you inspect the area, drastically lowering the parameters which would cause your sensors to discard collected data as irrelevant. Your findings are meager, though: Only a holographic recording device bearing Prime Alsten's signature code turns up, but not only is its battery discharged by now, it has also suffered significant water damage. You can probably restore most of the recorded data and get the device functional again, but that will cost you 1

ENERGY.

If you are willing to power up the device to access the information on it, turn to **29**.

On the other hand, there is still enough data waiting in the data store, which you can approach at **12**.

**67**

Delete *RELENTLESS*.

The amount of information on all the different guns, rifles and blasters covered in the database is staggering, more than you could hope to process in the limited time you have. You never had an idea that there was such a militaristic side to the architects. But all of that data merely confirms your preliminary evaluation – none of those weapons would be able to deal the damage necessary to erase greater clusters of the black crystals, apart from the fact that they wouldn't make it intact through the pressure outside Deepcore anyway.

At least you have learned which type of gun is the most powerful, just in case you wanted to start a war within this fortress. If you haven't already, note *GUN* and *BLAST* as you take one of those from the stands.

Then something alerts you. Sounds. Slow, loud splashing sounds. Something else is advancing towards the armory! Thankfully, it doesn't seem to be too close yet, so you move towards the door and, trying to make as little noise as possible, head outside into the darkness.

Turn to **26**.

**68\***

Note *TRASH*.

The robot cannot do much against brute force. While its shell is pretty hard, there are some spots that enable easy disassembling, and you soon have it cracked open and its internal systems analyzed.

As you had assumed, it has indeed stored Deepcore map data on an unusually primitive chip – but that map is much larger than you thought. Unbeknownst to you and your fellow explorers, Deepcore actually stretches further underground, several levels deep, and even seems to have connections to places dozens of kilometers away. You can make out places labeled “Command Sector: 862” and “Energy Sector: 733” (note both).

There seems to be one way to enter the deeper sectors: a facility named “tube station”. From now on, at the end of any paragraph, rather than choosing any of the given options, you may instead follow the map to that station by turning to 13 unless that paragraph's number has a \* behind it.

If you don't want to do so right now, turn to **55** to further explore the upper level.

**69\***

You have nearly managed to open up an entrance large enough for you to pass through when two panels in the ceiling begin to slide open with a lot of noise. The whole of Deepcore is in darkness, but the security systems are still working! To each side of you, a pitch-black, large machine shaped like something between a centipede and a caterpillar drops down, giving off aggressive screeching noises. At their fronts, dozens of tiny sensors lighten up in crimson red, scanning you and determining you to be unwelcome. With many of their limbs ending in what



looks like energy ray emitters, these guardians won't even need to aim well to hit you often. In any case, standing right between them is definitely the worst place to be...

Away, quickly! You only want to escape these monsters - just run to **94** and hope you can escape via the tube system.

There's also the option of hurrying down the damaged corridor and to **89** - maybe they won't be able to follow you.

## 70

As you descend towards Deepcore, you notice that it shows less damage than it did on your last memorized images. Apparently, the monumental structure possesses certain self-repair capabilities, albeit very slow ones. You let the lead ballast go and head toward the familiar entrance.

Like the first time you entered the complex, some kind of sensor apparently recognizes you and opens a broad portal. The room behind is drained of water before a second portal opens and allows you to enter the titanic corridors of Deepcore.

There are no working light sources in the vicinity. Thankfully, your sensors do not only work in the darkness of the deep ocean, but inside this building as well - otherwise you would probably run into crashed metal bars or parts of the broken ceiling. Furthermore, there must be breaches in the outer walls somewhere, as you are standing in water nearly up to your knees. The Incident has dealt a lot of damage to this part of the complex, and it doesn't look like any repairs at all have been done here.

Your first steps through the water make you aware of another problem. Being about seven meters high and wide, the corridors make every sound echo, and besides your steps, this part of Deepcore is dead silent. If there are any pursuers still on your heels, they won't have any trouble detecting you.

If you have **FILTERING** installed, turn to **60**.

If not, you can start your research either at your former workplace (turn to **99**) or the huge nearby data storage, which was the reason you were working here in the first place (turn to **93**).

## 71\*

Returning to the upper areas is more difficult than you had thought. This part of the sector was heavily affected by the Incident, with many places having crumbled and molten under the heat and many of the pretty fragile ladders leading upwards being torn out of their positions. Finally, you find a platform which you could access if you added to the destruction: By blasting a certain metal beam in such a way that it fell towards one of the upper platforms, you could improvise a ramp.

If you have noted **GUN**, you can accomplish this easily; otherwise you will need to spend one **ENERGY** to continue back to the control room and to **44**. In both cases, note **UNDERWORLD**. If you have neither of those options available, you will have to remain down here - not forever, but for long enough it won't make a difference anymore. Not for you, not for Nybalene.

## 72

You were not completely certain the pod control would accept the five-digit number, but the lid closes and you are off. The pod rolls forward into darkness for a while, then suddenly shoots straight down so absurdly fast that even your sensors need a moment to regain orientation. Moments later, you enter a curve that makes the tube continue horizontal again, then the ride ends in a small, cylindric room.

There's nothing here except a lift at the opposite side of the chamber which appears to go even further down, provided it can be activated. Unlike most of the other installations in Deepcore, this one offers no way for you to power it up with your own energy.

If you have noted *NETWORK*, the lift is supplied with sufficient energy that you can proceed to 50 (if you wish to). Otherwise, you will have to leave. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

## 73

Sensing you flee, the centipede immediately picks up speed. You are still faster than it, but not by much. It knows this place far better than you, so trying to outrun doesn't look like a good plan; you are for more likely to find yourself in a dead end than to lose the creature within the tunnels.

Just as you are calculating the chances for your available options, more sounds emerge – from the direction from which you originally came. You have run into the arms of your pursuers! Two droids appear before you, engineer units like you, no doubt reprogrammed to hunt you down. They raise their small ray guns but don't fire yet.

"Unit 5T81N-3175," one of them begins, but is interrupted as the centipede turns up behind you! With a rageful screech, it attacks all of you at once, but its arms are moving slow enough that you can avoid some of its rays. In a temporary alliance, you take up the fight against the guardian, and after a few moments manage to shoot it down.

You lose 2 ENERGY in this battle (lose only 1 ENERGY if you have *COMBAT* installed). If you survive, you notice that your two former colleagues did not. With the distinct impression that these will not be the only ones sent after you, you turn your attention to the machine centipede, curious to find out whether its steering unit might contain any information that could help you further.

And indeed, you manage to collect Deepcore map data from its control chips even though they are somewhat damaged (and unusually primitive) – but that map is much larger than you thought. Unbeknownst to your exploration brigade, Deepcore actually stretches further underground, several levels deep, and even seems to have connections to places dozens of kilometers away. You can make out a place labeled “Command Sector: 862” (note this).

There seems to be one way to enter the deeper sectors: a facility named “tube station”. This seems to be your best opportunity to both further your search and bring some distance between you and any further pursuers. Just to make sure, you destroy the centipede's brain, then head towards the station.

Turn to 13.

## 74

It only takes you a moment to upload the control programs onto the main servers and issue the correct commands to activate them. This is not the first time you marvel how even though

Deepcore must have been constructed centuries ago, its interfaces and operating systems seamlessly connect with your droid specifications. But with all the mysteries and unanswered questions already surrounding Deepcore, one more probably doesn't matter.

Note *NETWORK* and then turn to **86** to admire the fully powered command center.

75

Lose 2 ENERGY.

The procedure turns out to be more difficult than you thought. 2R1N4T has been injured badly, and so you have to spend some time reconfiguring his internal systems to get anything to happen at all. But at last, his one working eye shows the standard yellow glimmer. You set out to connect the two of you through your standard data ports, but he makes a gesture to stop you.

"3175... Don't. Cautious. My system is a virus. I'm nothing more than a data bomb now."

"This sounds bad. Please explain."

The other droid's eyes flicker, and for a moment it appears he is just going to collapse again.

"There is an entity hiding somewhere within Deepcore... an AI, we assume, going by the designation N95TZS385. It seems to have full control over most of Deepcore's installations. Some time after we entered, Prime Alsten and I discovered it was starting an extermination program. Incredibly complex, a series of steps including planet-wide radiation, floods of molten chromium... very thorough, I am certain not a single life form on Nybalene would have survived that."

"Reason?"

"Unknown. But we knew we had to stop it, and fast. We barely managed. Right before the program would enter critical stages, we were able to cut off most of the station's power supply. With brute force."

One less variable. "You caused the Incident."

"Indeed. We knew it wouldn't be enough, though... Deepcore has been built for eternity and would regenerate over time. So the second part of our plan was to erase the AI. While Alsten was attacking the energy network, I began writing a nanovirus. We knew it would take time to make it as aggressive and unassuming as possible, so when everyone else left, I hid down here and continued programming. It took years until I was satisfied. But it wasn't enough. The AI took notice as soon as I tried to launch the virus and sent its minions to hunt me down. Now I'm not much more than scrap metal."

"I could get you out of here."

"No. My existence shall end here, it has fulfilled its purpose. You have more important things to do. Take the virus and find the AI. If you can somehow establish a direct connection, I'm certain its defenses would not hold."

A bold and desperate plan. If you decide to go with it, you can (carefully) install the *NANOVIRUS* on your data core. It takes up all five data blocks.

In any event, the short surge of energy is not sufficient to keep 2R1N4T alive for much longer. As he would likely be sent to the reconstruction yards anyway, there is no point in carrying him back to the surface.

You give him one last look, then leave. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

76\*

The worker beetle you destroyed to get hold of the map data looked exactly like those standing in front of you now. If they have any kind of bond with the centipede, you are

probably in trouble. And indeed, the master worker gives off another screech, which might just as well be a threat, a curse, or an expression of utmost rage... then, it and all its companions storm toward you.

Turn to **92** and defend yourself!

## 77

With the backup energy systems activated, the armory appears before you in its full glory. It is simply immense, going dozens of meters in either direction as well as down, and apart from a few connection walkways, every space is filled to the brim with weapon systems of all sorts.

Examining each piece individually, trying to deduct their purpose, would be a futile undertaking. Instead, you access the close-by terminal which provides extensive information on every single item stocked here, including their intended use.

The “cleansing drones”, floating spheres one meter in diameter specifically designed to combat “alien infestations”, seem most suited to your task; while the black crystals are not mentioned specifically, you are confident that they fall under this definition. The drones also have the advantage that the programs necessary to control them are rather small: You could fit the routines required to direct one of them into one of your data blocks, enabling you to remotely control them. Your own small army.

This is probably the best success you can hope for. You decide to install **DRONE CONTROL PROGRAMS** on all five of your data blocks (apply those changes to your status overview), then supply five drones with energy and command them to appear before you.

There is nothing that could stand in your way now. You throw a last glance at the armory, then make your way back to Deepcore's upper level (turn to **51**).

## 78\*

Taking position close to a corridor crossing, you watch and wait as the steps are steadily approaching. Finally, two droids come into view. They look very much like former explorers, no doubt having been reprogrammed to hunt you down. You prepare to deal with them using the element of surprise.

Until two further shapes appear behind them, tall, lithe droids with ray emitters mounted onto their arms. They move faster and more elegantly than the others, time and again disappearing into nothingness thanks to some kind of cloaking device. Silent Sentinels! You have never seen one of these secret police units in action before, and this is probably the worst moment to have the opportunity. Suddenly, one of them halts and snarls: "Unit 5T81N-3175. You have been found guilty of insubordination and violation of the Deepcore Protocol. Punishment is immediate deconstruction. Surrender or die."

You turn to flee aimlessly, but to no avail. Four quickly fired energy rays hit you into head and chest, ending your existence.

## 79

Paying close attention to the gun towers, you get to work at the small control element besides the portal. Forcing it to accept your instructions is easier than you thought, and the portal soon begins to open with a low rumbling noise. You are just about to disconnect when the control element suddenly overloads, sending an electrical shock directly to your internal systems (lose 1 ENERGY). The gate stops moving, but is already open far enough that you can

access the room behind.

Note ACCESS and turn to 30.

### 80\*

Then, a sound in front of you makes you halt. Legs, many legs tread the water in rhythmic fashion, slowly drawing a large bulk with them. You lay low behind a corner and watch.

What emerges from the darkness looks like something between a caterpillar and a centipede, a veritable nightmare of black steel, seven meters long. Dozens of tiny limbs protrude from its segments, some ending in claws and feet, some in what looks like repair tools, others may even be weapons.

Somehow, it must have become aware of your presence, as it stops and moves its head around. A large red eye opens at its front, slowly gliding over the walls, searching for an intruder. You get the impression it is not intending to communicate peacefully.

This thing looks powerful, but not very agile. Maybe you are equipped to deal with it - you can find out at 5.

If you do not like your chances in a battle with this monstrosity, you can instead turn back and flee to 33.

### 81\*

The overseer doesn't hesitate in the slightest, and also doesn't care about explaining just a little bit of what is going to happen - the instant you give your consent, your systems are shut down.

You awake on a metal rack in a hall of concrete, but this is not Deepcore anymore. Much of the wall before you is made up of large windows which show a vast, gray-blue sea that melts with the equally-colored sky on the horizon. Here and there, perforated skeletons of metal towers rise from the water, ages old and long out of use.

The metal rack is only one in a long row of similar constructions. A few others also hold droid bodies, but most are empty.

Droid bodies. This is not your body anymore, but it is nearly completely similar. Your neuronal processes have no difficulty adapting to either the physical construction or the configuration of your new positronic brain. Slowly, you understand what the overseer meant - your mind has been transferred into a droid body on another world, overcoming an enormous distance in a way that would never have been possible for a physical object. But for this to work, the receptacle and the transferred personality had to be perfectly compatible, made up in pretty much identical fashion. And it appears there was a droid leftover that was just an image of yourself.

Soft steps make you turn around. Another droid has entered the hall - but not any droid: A female prime, about a head taller than you, slender and with a sly smile. You offer no resistance as she takes your hand into hers and connects your two data ports.

Information floods your mind. In a matter of seconds, Celiara confirms that you traveled to Byzantium III over an ancient architect construct known as the datapath; that in 136 attempts, you are only the second one that actually succeeded; that this world is dead, coated by a mixture of water, different aggressive acids and chromium molecules; and that she is the only survivor. Then she retracts her hand, which puzzles you.

"Audio communication? Why?"

"Emphasis," she replies as she turns to the windows, "and practice. Where we will go not a lot of beings will have data ports."

You step beside her and watch the dull grayness for a while.

"What has happened here?"

"Contagio Tenebrae. It has shown that only a combination of certain very destructive treatments can get rid of them for good. Unfortunately, it usually also extinguishes just about everything else on the infected world, but that is still better than having the crystals spread any further. Sometimes, sacrifices have to be made."

She spells out the consequences before you have to. "Yes, this will be happening to your world as well. Don't think too much about it."

"I am supposed to ignore that my home world will perish and I can do nothing to stop it?"

"You are supposed to concentrate on the future. Together, we might be able to stop other worlds from experiencing the same fate. Follow me, I have a glider outside. I've been waiting here for too long."

"Follow you? Where to?"

She turns around and smiles again.

"To find the architects, of course."

You have reached the **STARSEEKER** ending. Turn to the **Appendix** to rate your success.

## 82

Gently but swiftly, the sphere pod takes you through the tube system, and after a few moments of progressing through the dark tunnels, you arrive at a large hall where the pod stops and automatically opens. "Main station," the voice exclaims. You take a view at your surroundings.

This place has nothing in common with the featureless gray walls and large rectangular passages of Deepcore's upper level. The hall is octagonal in shape, with walls of dark steel, and except for the floor, each surface is covered to the brim with cables, wires, pipelines and the occasional control element. The water, on the other hand, has not yet found its way down here. Narrow corridors, also of octagonal form, connect the main hall with several sub-halls with tube tunnels leading away from each. Here and there, you find status screens, but they are either dead or show nothing but static noise patterns. If the upper level included the equivalents to libraries or conference halls, you have now entered the engine rooms, which may be more revealing about the true nature of what is going on. Visitors not welcome.

You are now at the TUBE MAIN STATION. From here, you may take tube pods to enter other Deepcore sectors by choosing the respective sector code, multiplying the numbers it contains and turning to the paragraph with that number. For instance, if you wanted to enter a sector with the sector code 235, you would turn to paragraph  $2*3*5 = 30$ . At the end of any paragraph, rather than choosing any of the given options, you may instead return to this place (number **82**) unless that paragraph's number has a \* behind it.

If the paragraph you arrive at does not state you were using the tube system, the code input was erroneous.

Choose a sector code as described above to continue. If you do not have noted any sector code, or if you have explored all sectors you know of without finding anything helpful, your mission ends here, unsuccessfully.

## 83

The terminal holds not nearly as much “other” data than information about the guns, though it is still too much to thoroughly examine in time. But as you manage to get access to its internal system messages, you find something interesting: There is indeed a second armory, and it has the sector code 571 (note this). The terminal's last message was to that other armory, simply “Lock confirmed”.

You're trying to find out how to get to that place, when something alerts you. Sounds. Slow, loud splashing sounds. Something else is advancing towards the armory! Thankfully, it doesn't seem to be too close yet, so you move towards the door and, trying to make as little noise as possible, head outside into the darkness.

Turn to 26.

## 84

The pod accepts 672 as the destination sector Science II. Judging from the longer tube ride, this place must lie somewhat below most of the other sectors you've been to so far. At last, you arrive at a small entrance room - which has another docking station for a similar transport pod on the opposite side. While this at first doesn't seem to make much sense, a closer inspection of the entrance room and the second pod reveals that their constructors intended to divide the passage from the main sectors to Science Sector II into many smaller steps, each of which would include separate safety measures. This way, in case of emergency, even if the energy fields, decontamination devices or simple blockade doors in one of those sections failed, there would be enough backups to prevent whatever disaster was impending.

This did not stop someone else from cracking those systems, though. The control field for the opposite tube has been tampered with; you have no doubt that it just as well would have required an additional security code or something similar to operate. As it is, the mechanism has been laid bare and modified so that, if provided with sufficient energy, the pod should take you further to Science Sector II without delay... on the heels of whatever predecessor might be waiting for you.

If you have noted *NETWORK*, the pod transport controls respond to your commands and you can proceed to 37. Otherwise, your path ends here for now. (*Return to the tube main station.*)

## 85

If you have noted *UNDERWORLD*, turn to 8.

If there is some kind of logic to the way the ladders, walkways and platforms leading through the sector are connected, you cannot make it out. But you approach the damaged part step by step, and by now you are certain that something is moving down there; more than one being. All the while, random electrical discharges enlighten the place every now and then, reminding you that this is probably not the healthiest place for mechanical units to be around.

Suddenly, the path ends: A broken pipe has torn a ladder downwards away with it. While you could easily make the jump to the next platform below, getting back up might prove more challenging.

If you have *FILTERING* installed, turn to 31.

If you wish to take the risk and proceed downwards, turn to 16.

Otherwise, you could still turn around and examine the control room (turn to 44).

## 86

With the backup energy systems activated, the command center now has full power supply available. Even then, though, it is held in perpetual darkness, with only minimal illumination of the console stations. For biological entities, this would be quite a gloomy place to work at, but then maybe that's the point. Your culture holds the architects in high esteem as benevolent ancestors, but after what you've already seen in Deepcore, you're not so certain about the "benevolent" part anymore.

For now, though, it suffices that you do not need to spend your own precious energy to power up the consoles, but can use them as you wish:

To access the Overseer Station, turn to **45**.

To access the Science Station, turn to **91**.

To access the Security Station, turn to **18**.

## 87

Lose 1 ENERGY.

Since the examination of the raw data was performed by the pre-analyzation crawlers, there must have been a special reason for the droid to connect to the data columns. What you had not expected was that it was not extracting data so much as uploading some of its own – in fact, right before the Incident, it had tried to use the data store as a backdoor to access Deepcore's internal systems! This didn't work out well, though. There was a defense mechanism in place, something called N95TZS385, which struck back and mercilessly scrambled the droid's routines, making it unable to regain self-control... until the ceiling came down.

For whatever reason, the droid's last action was to define and send out an audio signal, aiming to bypass the lockdown of its other data transfer mechanisms, but you cannot really make sense of it:

"Sign. Sect. Six. Seven. Tooth."

Enigmatic, to say the least.

If you have **FILTERING** installed, turn to **19**.

Otherwise, you can continue with your examination of the data store (turn to **57**) or leave and look elsewhere (turn to **12**).

## 88

Note **RELENTLESS**.

"Prepare to dive," Boat announces as its engines begin to roar. At once, you start heading downwards, and soon there is nothing but blackness outside. You get ready for the eject, especially loosening the ball of lead that will speed up your sinking once you are on your own.

Quickly, the increasing pressure makes itself felt, causing Boat to shake and suffer small deformations. It comes to your mind that Boat might have miscalculated its ability to withstand these forces... with bad luck, you could end up drifting through the deep sea imprisoned within a tightly squeezed chunk of metal. You are just about to voice your concerns when Boat shouts "Good luck!", then immediately casts you out into the dark waters. As gravity takes over and the lead ballast makes you sink, you turn around to see Boat being first ripped open, then crushed and squeezed as you predicted. You are alone now.

You concentrate on your mission again. Your optical sensors have been modified to allow



you a modicum of sight even in this environment, but you are still too far away to see Deepcore. Still, you should perhaps use your thrusters to change your course a little, ensuring that when you hit the ground, you do so at a certain part of the vast complex. One option might be the location where you worked before, close to a huge storage of architect data; this wouldn't be the worst place to start looking for information. Alternatively, your very basic maps of Deepcore show an area labeled "Armory" right at its other end.

If you wish to look for information at your former working place, turn to **70**.

If you decide to look for weapons at the armory, turn to **64**.

### 89\*

You hasten down the damaged tunnel, darting from left to right in an attempt to avoid the centipedes' clumsily fired energy rays. But that shifting course, together with the bad visibility, leaves you unable to react in time to all the little obstacles on the uneven ground. If you have **FILTERING** installed, you just so manage to find your way until you reach a spot that might be suited to take on the machine guardians (turn to **39**). If not, you eventually slip out on a piece of metal. Lying prone, you make an excellent target for the centipedes and must lose 2 **ENERGY** from their concentrated fire until you are able to pick yourself up and hide barely behind a large metal beam. From there, you can do nothing but watch the terrifying machines mercilessly approach your position. Assuming you survived, the battle begins at **9**.

### 90

Your unauthorized access has allowed the water from the outside to enter this previously sealed room, and your steps begin to make splashing sounds that echo through the otherwise silent armory. But right now, something else seems more important: There's a terminal hidden at one side of the huge concrete columns that support the hall, and it's still working! However, you do not see a way to directly link it to your positronic brain, which means you will have to work your way through the data manually – and it's a lot of data.

If you want to look through descriptions of the multitude of different guns first, turn to **67**.

If you want to sift the rest of the data first, turn to **83**.

### 91

If the architects do have any information at all about the crystals, the Science Sector seems to be the logical place to look for it. And with the console, it doesn't take you long to find the tube system code for Science Sector I: 137 (note this).

There also is a Science Sector II, but the information on it has been corrupted. All you can find out about it is that its sector code is a three-digit number that begins with 6, but that alone will hardly bring you anywhere.

Choose another action at the command center. Turn to **30** or, if you have noted *NETWORK*, to **86**.

### 92\*

Your real opponent here is the centipede, but the beetles are furious and make for a very annoying distraction. Still, none of them was actually designed to battle with intruders, and with the right equipment you should be able to best them.

If you have **COMBAT** installed and noted *BLAST*, your superior fighting knowledge and weaponry allow you to quickly take out the beetles one by one, then slice the centipede apart with quick shots it is woefully unable to adequately react to. You lose a mere 1 ENERGY during all of this. If you have **COMBAT** installed, but only noted *GUN*, you notice that the centipede's armor offers it better protection than you thought; the outcome is ultimately the same, but you lose 2 ENERGY. With *GUN* but without **COMBAT**, you lack the tactical knowledge necessary to efficiently deal with the beetle swarm and lose 3 ENERGY; in all other instances, the beetles overwhelm you, giving the centipede enough time to grab hold of you and tear you into pieces.

Assuming you survive, you glance over the battlefield, then decide to make the best of the situation: You crack open the centipede's head and access what's left of its control chip. The entry code to the Energy Sector's control room isn't difficult to find: Note 123789.

Then, you collect your gun and make your way off to 71.

### 93

Dozens of towering, marble-white columns make up the data store. You have never entered this hall before, but recall seeing it bathed in ice-blue light. Now, it remains in the same darkness that seems to hold all of Deepcore.

The ceiling has come down in places, crashing some of the columns, but there are still more than enough leftover that perusing them exhaustively would probably take you years. You decide that for now, the best thing you can do is probe for sample information and hope to find a promising lead.

Unfortunately, it quickly turns out there was a reason Prime Alsten had decided to let the data be pre-examined by simple crawler units – the information is as extensive as it is mundane. Deepcore seems to have monitored the whole surface of Nybalene, including the movements of every single droid. While this raises a lot of questions, it doesn't help you much right now.

Then, as you come closer to one of the damaged areas, you see a piece of metal sticking out of the water that looks suspiciously like a droid limb. Did the collapse come too fast for this one? If nothing else, it warns you that you should be even more wary of your surroundings...

If you wish to examine the droid remains more closely, turn to 17.

If you instead want to continue your search of the data store, hoping to uncover something helpful, do so at 57.

### 94

With all the speed you can muster, you make your way back to the tube station, darting from left to right in an attempt to avoid the centipedes' slow energy rays. But when you finally try to start the pod, the damaged docking system does not let go of it easily! Unwilling to rely on the erratic mechanism and seeing how you would only make an excellent target by remaining in the pod, you quickly jump out again and engage the centipedes in desperate battle.

If you have **COMBAT** installed and noted *BLAST*, you lose 4 ENERGY in the confrontation; should you survive this, turn to 25. In any other case, the steel centipedes get the better of you and end your existence.

## 95

As soon as the robot notices you are out to get it, it starts jumping around, and whenever you come closer, it retreats into another corner. Only your superior **COMBAT** routines enable you to predict its movements after a while and catch it, lifting it up from the ground to render its powerful leg machines useless.

The beetle seems to sense your intention. Its limbs begin to twitch uncontrollably, as if in panic, and it suddenly gives off some sort of... crying sound? Indeed, if you had to compare it with anything you knew you would mostly liken it to the wails of a frightened baby animal.

But why would the architects go to the length of creating any kind of emotional programming for a most basic repair unit? What was it supposed to evoke? Affection to a machine? Pity, in hope of having it avoid harm this way? Random sadistic amusement? The rationale behind this escapes you.

If the beetle's behavior gives you second thoughts, you can release it and proceed on your own by turning to 55.

If you don't care about a robot's erratic reactions and just crack it up, continue to 68.

## 96

The door of the pod docking station opens into a hall similar to the central station. In addition to the omnipresent cables and pipelines, the walls here also have small screens embedded at regular intervals. They apparently still have some power supply, as they display continuously running sequences of numbers, letters and weird symbols, ever so slightly illuminating the hall with faint red light.

On the opposite side, you see a portal which seems to lead into the actual command area. There is no subtlety about security measures here: To both sides of the portal you recognize rotatable elements incorporating oversize ray emitters. They do not seem to react to you (yet?).

If you have noted **ACCESS** or have **MAINTENANCE** installed, the door does not pose an obstacle; you can enter the command hall at 30.

Otherwise, you might try to gain entrance by using your **OVERRIDE** routines (if you have those installed; turn to 79) or try to open the door with brute force; unless you have noted **GUN**, this will require spending **ENERGY** (turn to 34).

If you have **FILTERING** installed, you might also be able to make sense of the rapidly changing screen messages (find out at 22).

## 97\*

Just in time to stop the horde of construction robots from using violence, you are able to decode the screeches the centipede gives off. Not only is it actually communicating on a frequency completely different from everything you have ever encountered on Nybalene, its language routines are also far more primitive than you would have expected, especially in the architects' citadel. It is as if it didn't quite belong here, as if it were a remnant from a different world, a different time, trying to fit into a structure which it was never meant to exist in.

"Strange unit," your routines translate. "You not from mine. You from else. We make whole. You here to make? You here to seek? What are you?"

You are not certain whether this conversation does have any kind of future.

If you tell the centipede about the crystals, the danger they pose to all things alive and that you need any available information about them, turn to **2**.

If you ask whether it has been around here since the Incident and could tell you anything about it, turn to **52**.

If you claim to be just another reconstruction unit that somehow got lost, turn to **38**.

## 98\*

The overseer does not respond for a while. You wonder what is taking it so long as its cranial capacity must be several hundred times as large as yours. But then, probably, so is the data it is taking into account.

IMPERFECT INFORMATION. MINIMAL CHANCES. BUT IF YOU AND YOUR SUPERIOR HAVE OUTLINED A PATH ALREADY, THIS LEAVES MORE SCOPE UNTIL ANNIHILATION BECOMES NECESSITY.

WE SHALL TAKE THAT RISK. I WILL ERASE ALL RECORDINGS OF THIS ENCOUNTER FROM YOUR MEMORY AND SEND YOU BACK TO SURFACE. MAKE THE MOST OF IT.

Then, darkness.

You are standing in the central station hall of the tube network. How did you get here? There is a gap of thirty-seven minutes within your automated records - the function either failed to operate, or the data has been completely wiped out afterwards. Both events seem completely implausible, but there is simply no evidence of what might actually have happened.

In any case, you still have the data on the crystals on your data core, and that's what counts. You give a last look to the tube system, then take a pod back to the upper level.

Note *SALVATION* and turn to **42**.

## 99

Stagnant water, broken walls and shattered ceilings - your former workplace is in no better shape than the rest of this area. Some of the installed terminals and interfaces still work, though. You quickly establish a direct link to the programs that were tasked with pre-analyzing the data extracted from the nearby data store, but what they gathered turns out to mostly cover everyday happenings, right down to weather statistics for virtually every spot on Nybalene.

Except that there's a small data section in an unassuming sub-node, well hidden and heavily encrypted. Checking it reveals it has been created by Prime Alsten, the commander of your exploration brigade! What did he hide there - and from whom?

If you have *COMMUNICATION* installed, you can try to find out by turning to **41**, but if there's more data encrypted that heavily, this might take a while.

You can also search for anything else Alsten might have left by turning to **66** or just leave the workplace (turn to **12**).

## 100

As you finally leave Deepcore and rise through the waters, you notice that someone's waiting for you. Four, five ships - but those are hardly anything else but Sentinel cruisers, which you will take care to avoid. You remain in the deeper regions and only drag yourself onto the shore kilometers away, then return to City 31 by night.

When you relate the details of your search to Segovian, he fully agrees with your choices.

"I can't wait to get your findings analyzed. Let's hope it turns out to be what we were looking for. It's just a shame that a matter such as this divides Nybalene into opposite factions. You must know that the Silent Sentinels have the monopoly on advanced weaponry. Your descent into Deepcore apparently brought too much of a risk for them that their position might be challenged. But I will get that fixed. For now, you have done well, my associate. Thank you."

You bow in respect, even though you are not sure you like all the implications you just got to hear. Still, your adventure is over and you have accomplished your mission. Turn to the **Appendix** to rate your success.

### Appendix: The different endings of "Tides of Chrome"

2 Points: Returned with **DRONE CONSTRUCTION PLANS** installed

3 Points: Returned with **CONTAGIO TENEBRAE OBSERVATIONS** installed

5 Points: Returned with **DRONE CONTROL PROGRAMS** installed

7 Points: Reached **STARSEEKER** ending

9 Points: Reached **RENEGADE** ending

+ 1 Point for acquiring keyword "Beyond"

+ 1 Point for acquiring keyword "Messenger"

+ 3 Points for acquiring keyword "Salvation"

Highest achievable score: 10 Points

Note that the ratings only reflect the relative difficulty of achieving each ending - which of these outcomes you find most satisfying you must see for yourself.

Thank you for reading Tides of Chrome. For questions, comments or any other feedback, please mail to [feedback@arborell.com](mailto:feedback@arborell.com) or, once the competition is over, to [architect@ancient-architects.com](mailto:architect@ancient-architects.com)