

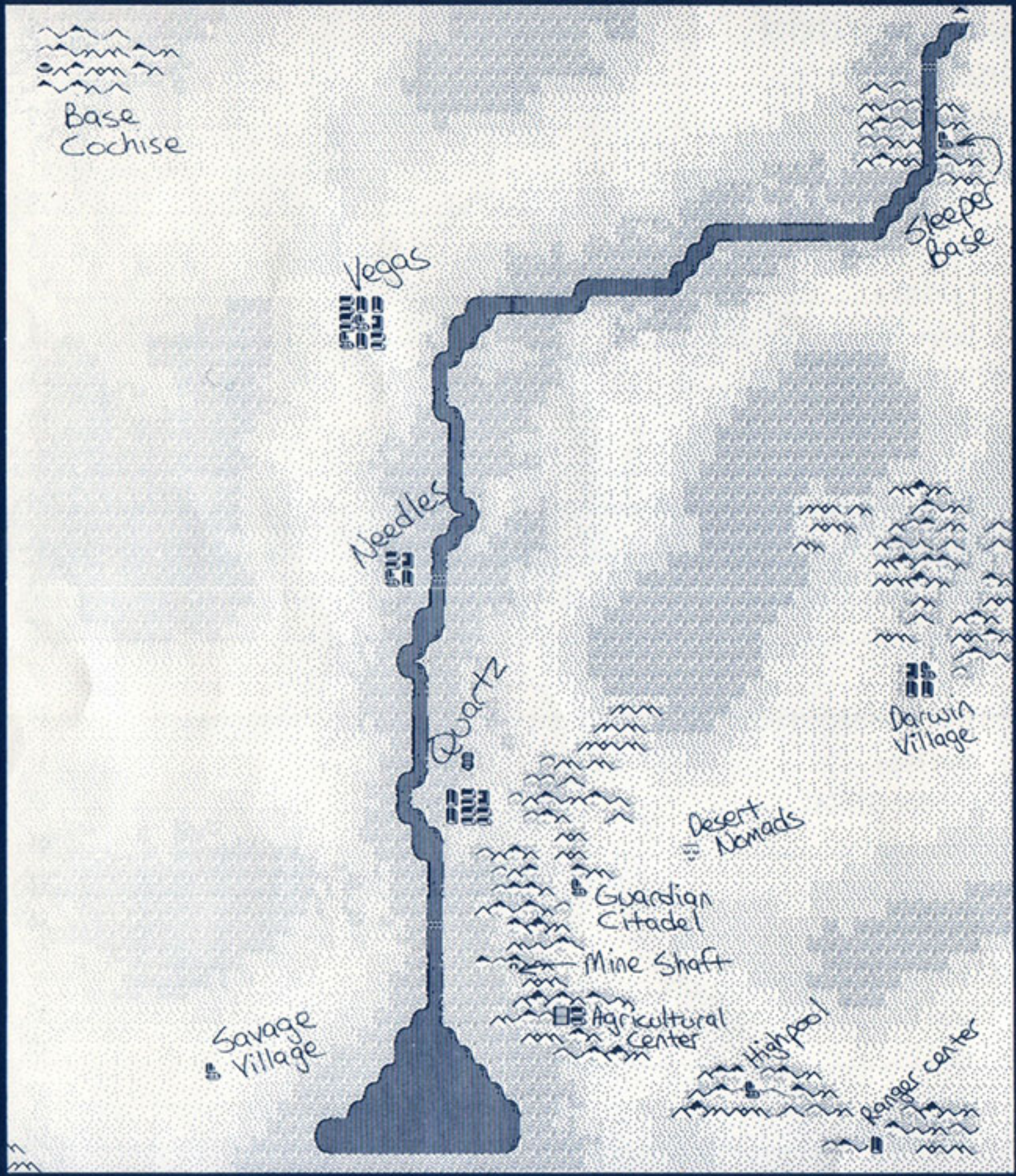
WASTELAND™

SURVIVAL GUIDE



TABLE OF CONTENTS

HIGHPPOOL	3
AGRICULTURAL CENTER	5
DESERT NOMADS	7
MINE SHAFT	9
QUARTZ	11
Scott's Bar	13
Stagecoach Inn	15
Courthouse	17
Outlaw Hideout	19
NEEDLES	21
DARWIN VILLAGE	25
VEGAS	27
Temple of the Servants of the Mushroom Cloud	29
Sewers	31
SLEEPER BASE, Level 1	33
Level 2	35
Level 3	37
FINSTER'S CHAMBERS	39
Mind Maze	41
GUARDIAN CITADEL	43
Outer Sanctum	45
Inner Sanctum	47
SAVAGE VILLAGE	49
BASE COCHISE	51
Level 1	53
Level 2	55
Level 3	57
Final Level	59
EPILOGUE	61

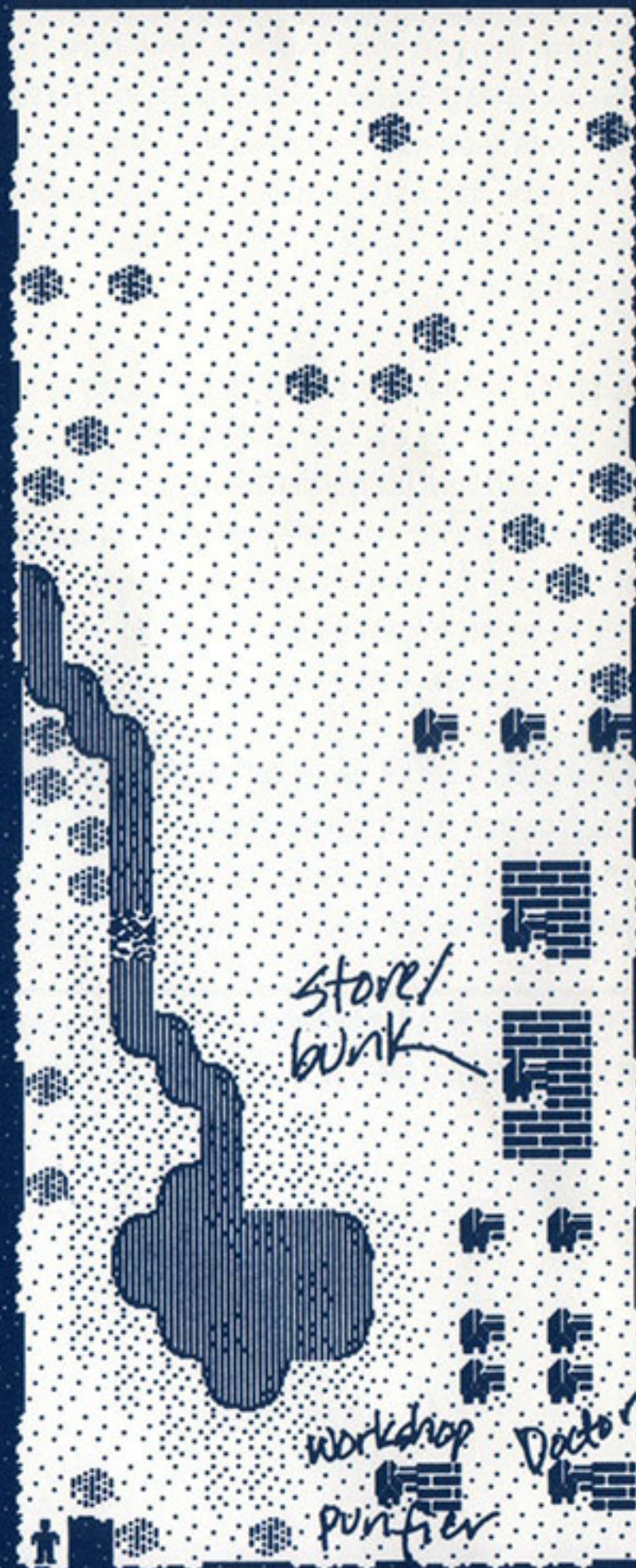


I got stuck working with these Rangers because I was the only one who could figure out any map, even if it was just a fly speck on a grid. These tumbleweed-for-brains couldn't figure out a map if it showed only one street in one town. So I got to guide them all around the southwestern deserts of the United States on some mission. Hell, they didn't even know what the mission was when we started. Stew said that somebody was aimin' to "run this dang desert show" and that he wouldn't rock on his bootheels until it happened. So, our great ambiguous mission was to locate the source of some disturbance in the desert. The only disturbance, it seemed, was occurring between some unwashed ears.

We were tossed together, the four of us. I guess it was because we had such a wide variety of skills when you added us up. Our leader was Stew. If they hadn't told me that he was the son of the legendary Desert Ranger Hell Razor, I would have thought that he was another sun-dried old desert coot. He learned how to shoot "before seeing the whites of their eyes" so he got to be our leader. Kate was a carbon copy of Stew, only she was years younger and used the women's restroom. Eugene was a mild-mannered guy with pasty white skin. He had absolutely no desire to leave his air-conditioned lab to muck about the desert, but we needed someone with technological expertise. I was recruited to keep them from ending up in Maine.

This survival guide is just my account of the places we went and things that happened to us during our year-long tour through a sandy hell. If you travel through these areas, this tells you about some of the things you can look for — or avoid. You're probably not going to do everything exactly the way we did, so don't freak out if things don't come out exactly the same. Just find your bearing and keep going.

One thing about the desert: anything goes. It's just one big lawless sandbox. Do anything you want, but just don't get yourself killed. That tends to shorten your life span incredibly. Good luck and may your Uzi never jam.



HIGHPOOL

HIGHPOOL

When we were standing outside of the Ranger Center yesterday, Stew said that we could make it to Highpool before the day was out. Well, *two* days went out and we weren't there. Never let a guy who picks his teeth with shell casings tell you how long it takes to get anywhere.

Store — We didn't have any money to buy anything, so we checked our inventory and browsed for things that we knew we would need. A canteen was a must in the desert; there'd be sure heat exhaustion without it. A rope would come in handy; never know when you'd have to lower yourself from strange places or sling across a chasm. And additional ammo never hurt a good Ranger. The jewelry caught our eye, but we knew that there'd be no use for glittery hunks of rocks in the desert.

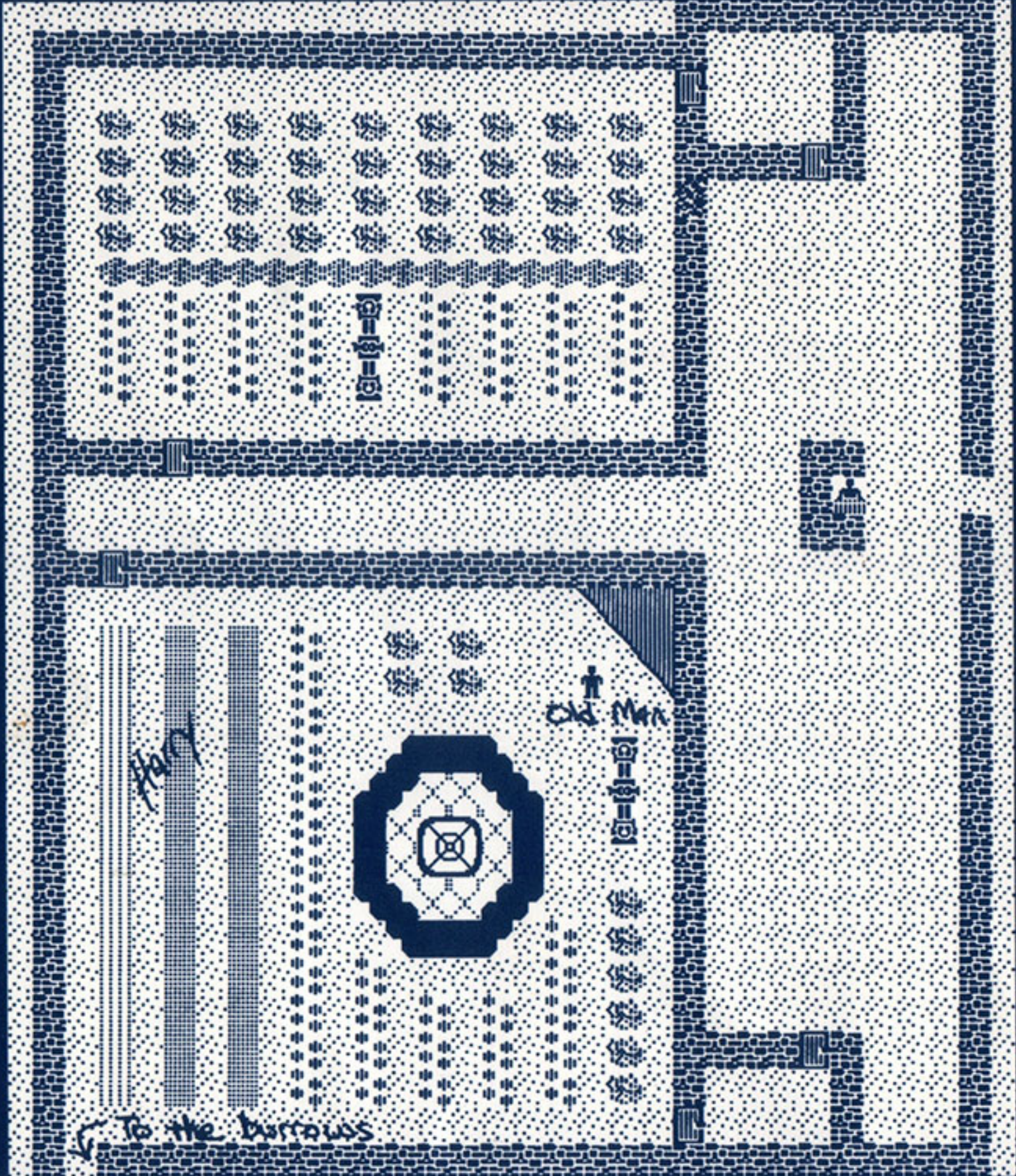
Workshop — There was a funky old workshop at the southern end. Eugene checked out all the machine parts and figured that the pump must have had something to do with the water purifier. If we had an engine, we could've gotten the purifier going again. I forgot to pack an engine when I put on my socks that morning, so we couldn't do anything at that time.

Hospital — There was a hospital here with a doctor who was dying to treat someone. He insisted that I could use an exam, but I declined. I couldn't stand the thought of being prodded by a guy who had graduated from some one-room university that operated in the shade of a cactus. Eugene was tired enough to buy a little healing. We should've left him there for a complete personality implant.

Bobby — We found this kid cowering in the corner. He wouldn't tell us anything until Stew put his face two inches from the boy's and asked all these questions about the cave and about Jackie and about the dog. Here the kid lost it (maybe out of fear, maybe because Stew's breath was so bad). He started babbling about how his dog Rex was sick and how he told Jackie not to go down the cave.

The Cave — It wasn't easy to find at first, but we finally did, thanks to my great perception. (Before we left Ranger Center, Stew slung his arm around my shoulder and told me "You bein' the most schooled and all, I was thinkin' that you'd be best at findin' stuff. Can I count on ya?" He slapped me hard on the back, which meant my answer ought to be yes. So in addition to getting them around, I was in charge of using my perception skill everywhere possible.)

We used our climb skill to get over the piles of rocks and encountered Rex, Bobby's sick dog (Rex was rabid, if you want to know the plain truth). Rather than let the dog go on in its sick, frothy misery, I did the humane thing and sent it to the big kennel in the sky with a single bullet. We found Jackie crouching behind the rocks in the very back of the cave and escorted her out.



AGRICULTURAL CENTER

AGRICULTURAL CENTER

The vegetables here were freakish. I could've used a string bean for a baseball bat. I could've hollowed out a carrot and made a canoe out of it. I guess that was why the animals in the fields were going nuts. They must've thought they had died and gone to veggie heaven. According to Miguel, one of the farmers, they were completely out of control. He enlisted our help to beat those bunnies back.

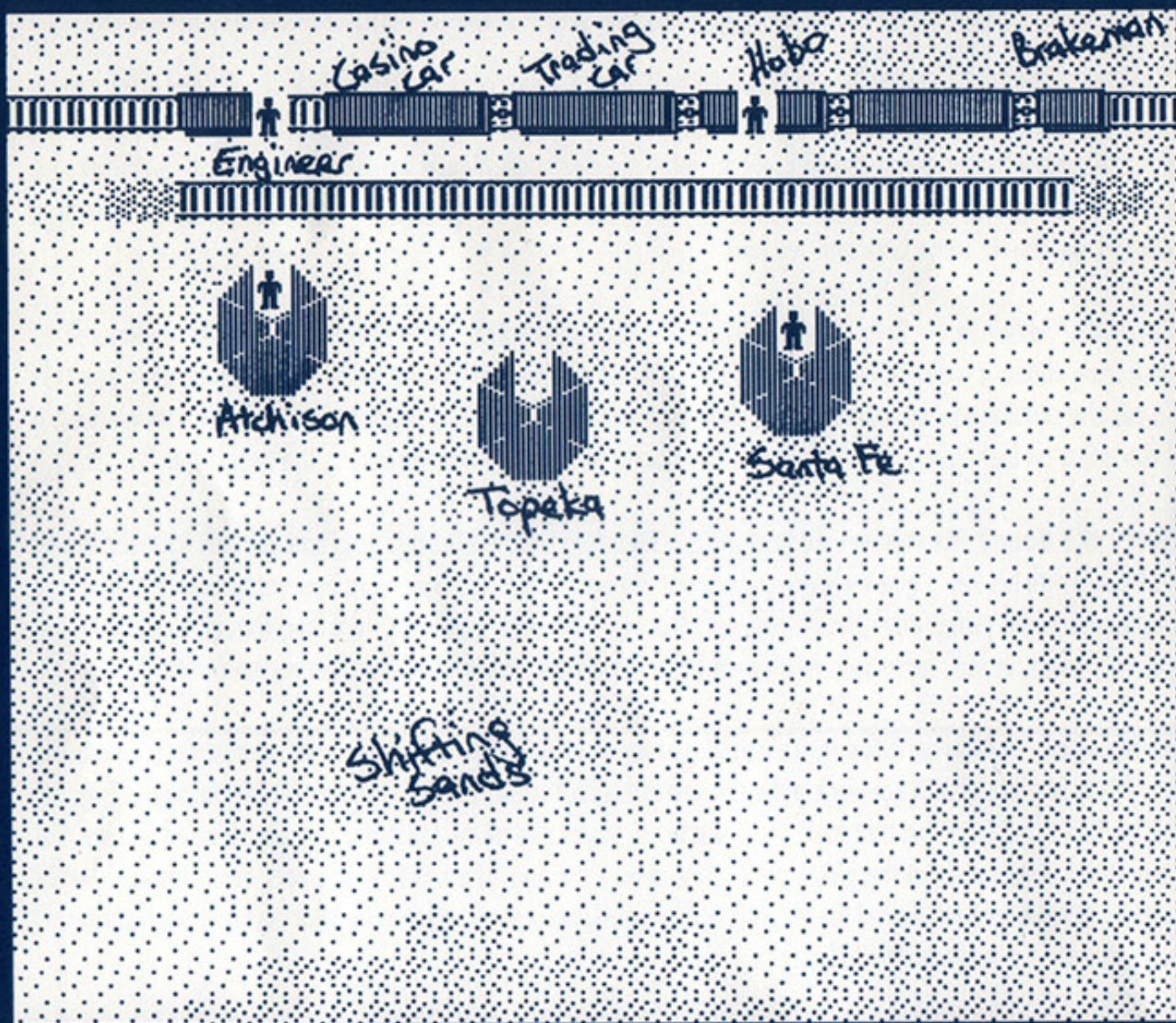
"Strangers," he said, "you appear to be brave veterans of many wars. You must help us. We can offer you no more than the fruits we harvest and our gratitude. This battle is too much for us but surely nothing for you." Stew was adequately flattered and immediately accepted the challenge. Miguel led us to the vegetable field where we meet an old man who looked at us like we were babies in diapers. He told us that if we were lucky enough to succeed, we should come back and see him.

Catapult/Satellite — Before we headed into the vegetable patch, Eugene studied the catapult and mumbled something about "a rudimentary defense system." As we walked past the north side of the satellite dish, he made an equally unfocused comment about "a pointless relic." Rather than pursuing his observation and risking a dissertation on technology I could've cared less about, we quietly headed towards the veggie patch.

Harry the Bunny Master — The old farmer told us to look out for this guy, and boy was he right. Harry had a way with his axe. I guess when you live your life out in the fields, you learn how not to let silly little things like Rangers with pistols and rifles bother you. But we eventually "bothered" him long enough to leave him in a bloody heap. In fact, he took so much lead from our pistols that we all raised our weapon skills.

Root Cellar — After we killed Harry and picked up what little loot he had, we went back to the old man. He was pretty impressed with our work so he showed us his root cellar. The computer graveyard intrigued Eugene, but he didn't find anything that could be of use to us. Under one of the computer consoles, I found a diary that gave a little history about the place; good after dinner reading. The boxes in the back room brought better fortune. We dug through each of the boxes (I had to use my perception to detect some of the harder-to-find items) and left with our packs a little fuller.

Animal Burrow — A hole in the southwest wall lead to the animal burrow. It was like a shooting gallery down here; hit one of those crazy bunnies and another would pop up in its place. Although we used up a lot of ammo, we got in plenty of target practice that helped us improve our shooting skills.



DESERT NOMADS

DESERT NOMADS

The camp was pretty quiet when we were there. About the most exciting thing was the dust devils that blew through and kicked everything around that wasn't tied down. Railroad tracks ran through the camp, but it was obvious that neither the engine, boxcars or caboose had moved in years.

Engineer — Seeing how his face lit up when his eyes found us, we decided to talk with him. He coughed up plenty of information about the Atchison, Topeka and the Sante Fe clans, not to mention a disparaging remark or two about the Brakeman at the other end of the train line.

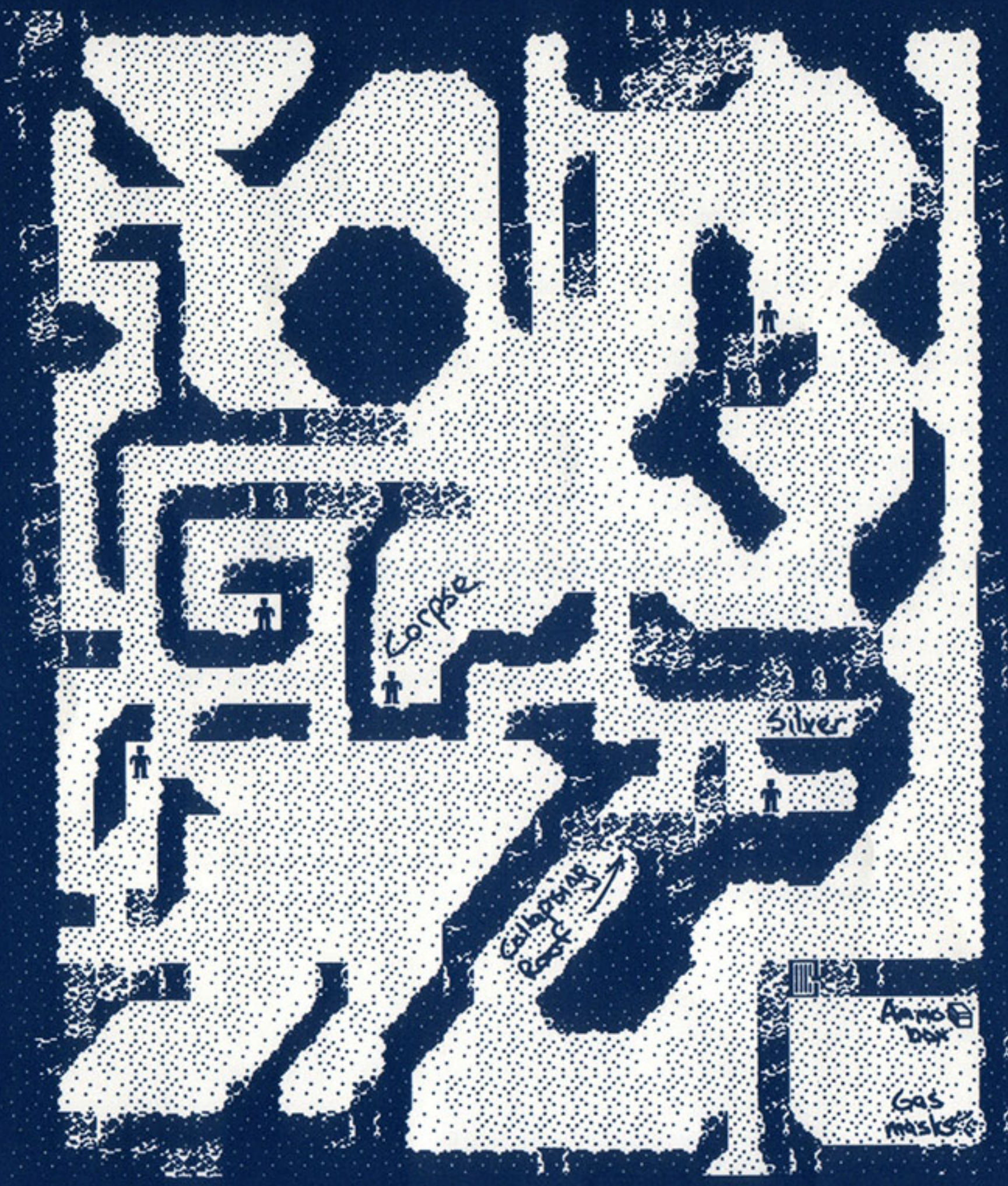
Hobo — Since he needed great liquid encouragement to orate, we fed him bottle after bottle of snake squeezins. Finally, after about his tenth bottle, he passed out from the stress of his visions. They all seemed like nonsensical ramblings, but at the last minute I gave him credit for being pretty deep and jotted them down just in case.

Brakeman — He wasn't as delighted to see us as the Engineer was, but he did take me into his confidence for some strange reason. He handed me a Visa card and in a hushed voice told me to take it to Head Crusher in Quartz. Without further explanation, he disappeared back into the darkness of the caboose.

Trading Car — Eugene and I were in the trading car when he suddenly shouted "The engine! Give me 500 bucks!" Turned out that the engine was exactly what the Highpool purifier needed. I wasn't too interested in handing over the wad of cash — especially for a cause as lost as Highpool — but Eugene convinced me that this sort of boy scout business would be good for our careers. (When we eventually took it back and installed it in the purifier, the guy in the store gave us a Mangler rocket. He also gave us jackets that he said would offer some protection.)

Gambling Car — I never imagined that gambling would require much skill until I lost \$100 in under a minute. Much to our amazement, Eugene proved to be quite the high-rolling stud. He had enough gambling skills to get on a winning spree that helped us stockpile extra cash.

The Tents — Before leaving the camp, we decided to check out the tents. We weren't much into invading people's privacy (Stew always told us "The cleaner you keep your nose, the less it'll get broke") but our curiosity overwhelmed us. We tried to chat with the guard at the west tent, but were gruffly rebuked by the Atchison man. At the second tent, the guard smiled wide and invited us to come in, but as Kate took a step forward, Stew grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back. Stew knew a Topekan (who were always poised for a fight) when he saw one, and didn't want to get sucked into a skirmish at this time. We stopped by the last camp, but that guard took absolutely no interest in us. We know when it's time to leave town.



MINE SHAFT

MINE SHAFT

Fresh footprints on the floor told us that we weren't the only ones here, so we took our weapons in hand and crept along as if we were going to get a big, nasty surprise.

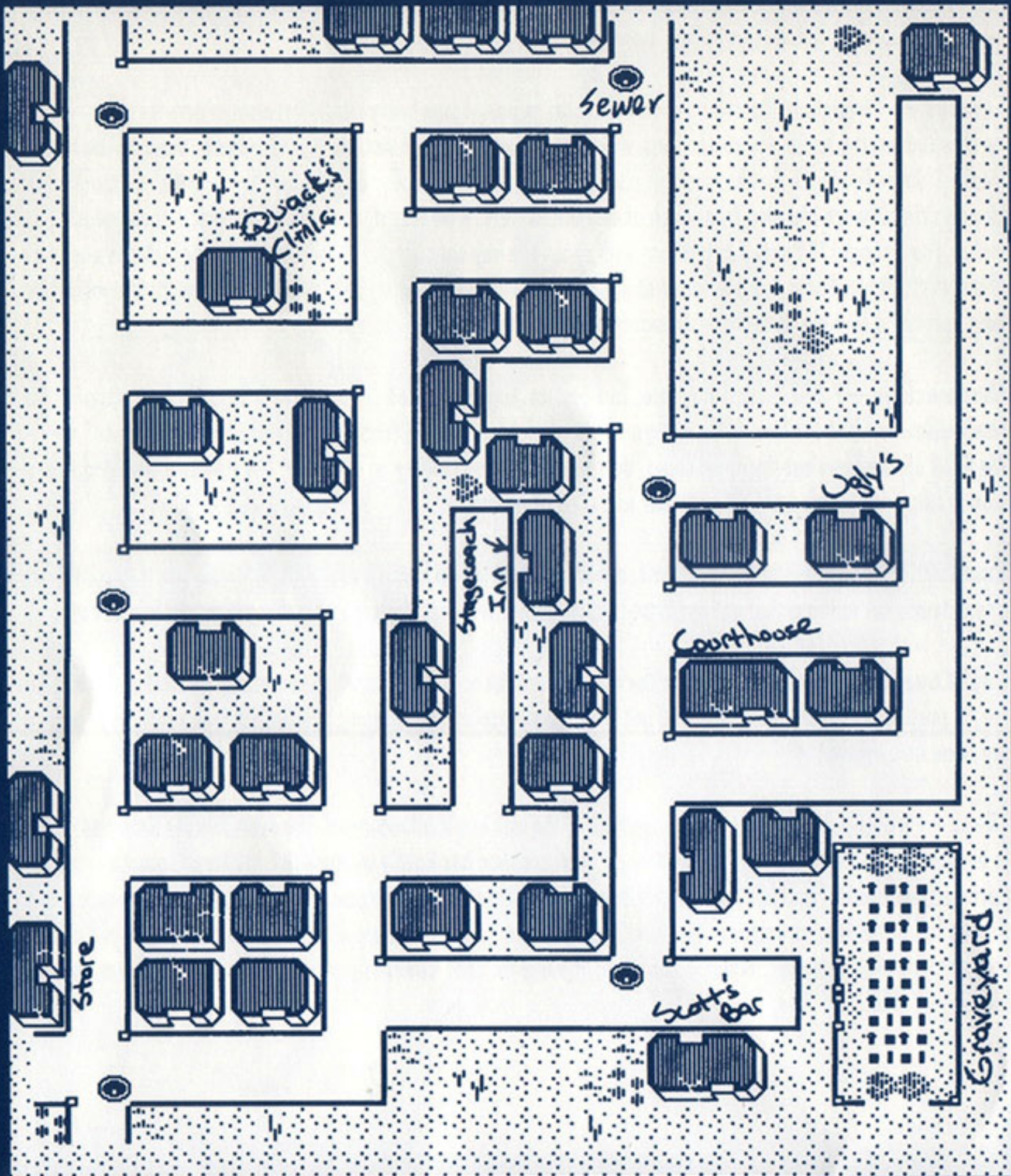
Corpses — Throughout the mine, we stumbled on corpses, some fairly fresh. Not ones to pass up an easy loot, we checked out the bodies for possessions, with some success. Eugene wouldn't touch a thing, though. The bodies freaked him out so much that he stuck his pistol straight ahead. Actually, Eugene was becoming a fair marksman by now. We all were learning from each of our encounters. Who was it who said "That which does not kill you makes you stronger"? Beats me, but that was about the key concept out in the desert. Every time we used one of our skills or attributes, we got better at it. I just knew that I had used my perception so much, it wouldn't be long before I'd be able to find the strangest things in the strangest places.

Shadowclaw — Call it tempting fate, but just as Eugene turned a corner with his pistol at attention, a Shadowclaw lurched for him. Eugene burned his whole clip, but the creature just gave him a "my turn" smile. We fired up the heaviest storm we could, and in a surprising display of courtesy, the creature slumped into a bloody heap just as we were down to our last clips of ammo.

Ammunition Room — In the southeast corner of the mines we found a room with a strong box that contained a few items, but nothing that got our little hearts racing. We took the rope and the gas masks just in case.

Roof Cave In — There was a place in the mine where the roof caved in when somebody walked under it. Like me, in particular. I walked under it and got a complete cranial rock massage. I think it took three days before my head quit throbbing.

Silver — We found some silver ore sticking out of the wall in a shallow tunnel. The ever-delicate Kate was ready to blow a hole in the wall with a grenade when Stew grabbed her tightly by the wrist, muttered something about "pyrotechnic junkie," and told her to put it away. He pulled out his pick ax and gently chipped out the ore. A few chunks fell at his feet, prompting him to explain to Kate, "That's how we do it in a cave that'll collapse at any minute, you chucklehead." When it comes to mining for that sweet silver, never argue with the man with metallurgy skills.



QUARTZ

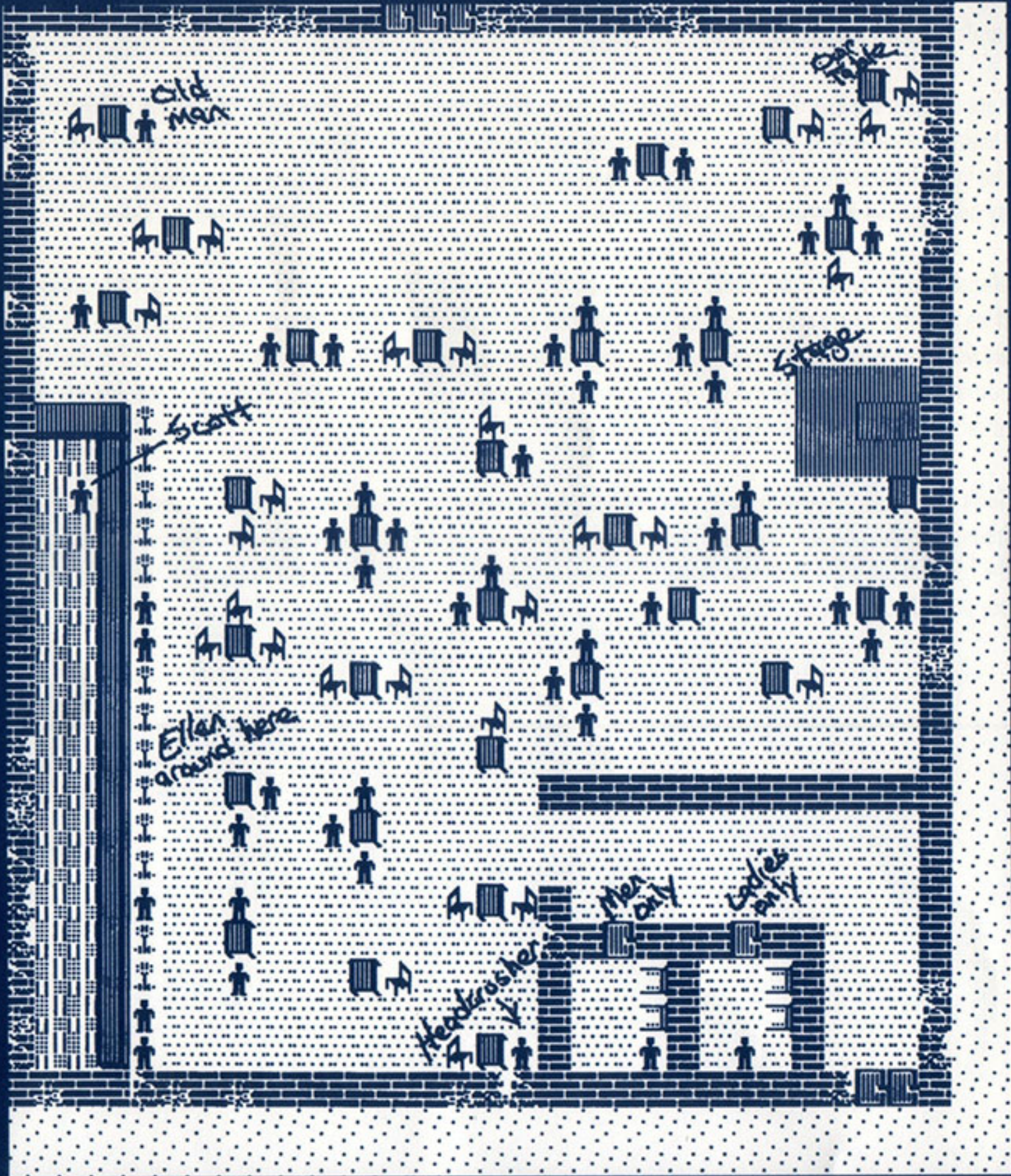
QUARTZ

I unfolded the map of Quartz onto the ground and Stew came over. As I was asking him where he wanted to go first, he yelled for Kate. "She spent a few years here after her parole. She was young. It was really just a misdemeanor," he confided to me.

Kate dropped the lizard she was torturing and came over without a word. Stew asked her for the highlights of Quartz and she told us that lowlights was all we were going to get. After taking a long, sweeping glance across the town, Kate explained that most of the buildings were just homes and that they were probably abandoned by now. She did point out on my map a couple of places that were "must sees," so I jotted them down.

We had two choices of travel routes in Quartz: above ground or under ground. Both had their pluses and minuses. If we travelled above ground, we wouldn't have had to breathe in the distinct sewer stink of rats and slime. But we would have had to face more of the pot shots from locals who didn't like outsiders (we preferred to think of ourselves as tourists, but that didn't strike a single hospitable bone in their bodies). In the commendable interest of self-preservation, Stew chose to use the sewers.

Before we made our visit to Scott's Bar, we stopped by a hospital to make sure we hadn't picked up anything from the corpses back in the mine shaft. Quack's Clinic was the only medical establishment around so, despite the fact that the place cost more than in Highpool *and* despite its name, we all got exams. You can pay now or pay later, I guess.



QUARTZ, Scott's Bar

QUARTZ

Scott's Bar

This turned out to be an average desert dive. We found a graffiti-covered table in the northeast corner of the bar and settled in.

Dancers — When Eugene followed the dancers up onto the stage (at their insistence, he claimed) he suddenly became the entertainment for a crowd of hooting drunks. He tried to leave the stage, but was "assisted" back on and then pelted with rotten fruit. Convinced that he should do something, he used his acrobatic skills and flipped about the narrow stage. He received some tepid applause, and responded to that by using his dexterity in a little trick and then his knife throwing skills. Finally, he tried his charisma by telling a few jokes and they let him off with hearty applause.

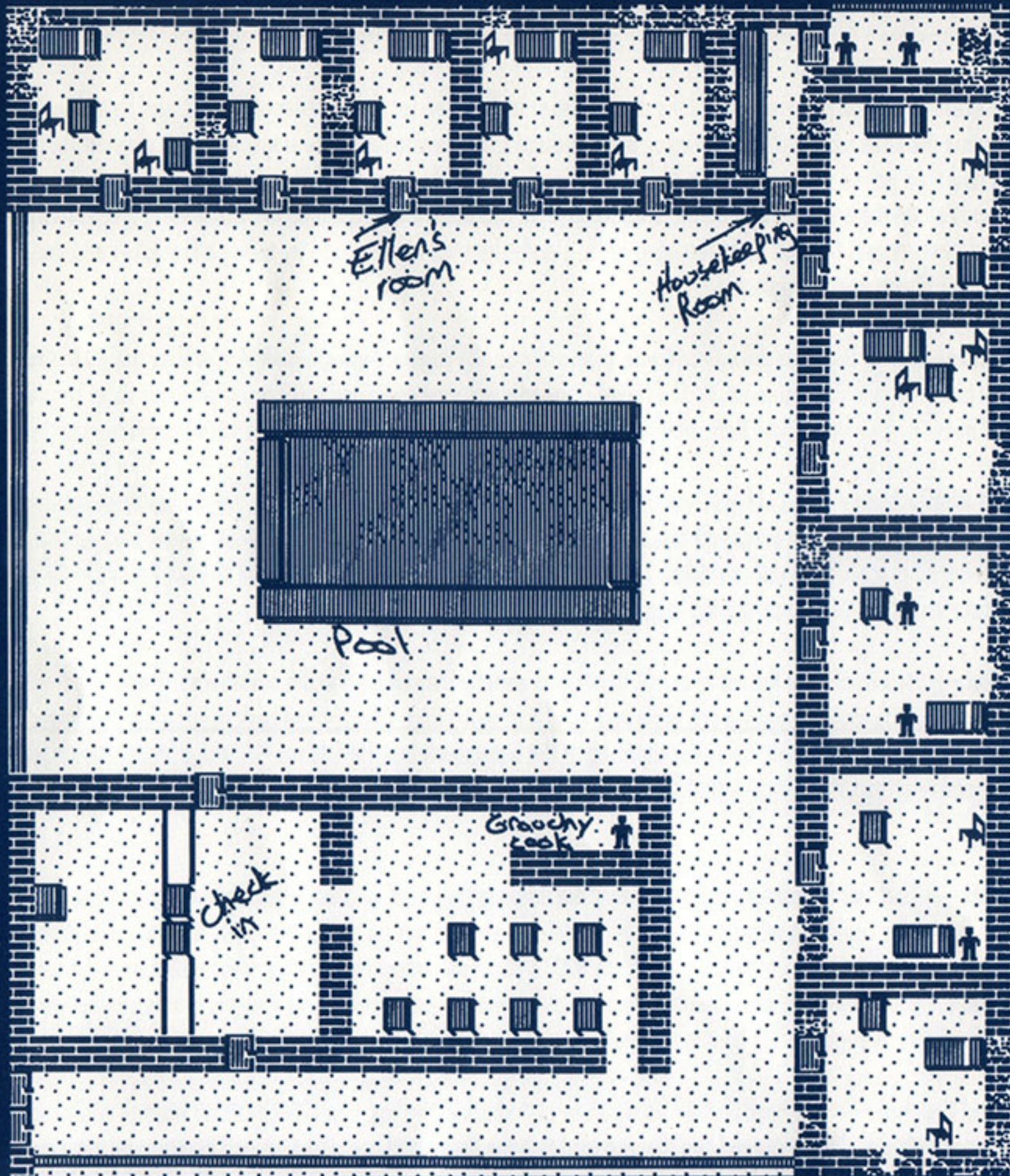
Bathrooms — Now that the performance pressure was off, Eugene remembered why he ever got up in the first place: to go to the bathroom. In it he found a boy who was shaken up and carrying on about his sister Laurie and about a guy named Ugly. Kate, who was in the women's bathroom, also overheard some interesting gossip.

Old Riddle Man — This old man was sitting at the table in the corner across from us. He wouldn't stop staring at Stew and me so we went over to ask him if we were that good looking or that ugly. He didn't answer my question. Instead, he proceeded to ask *us* riddles. I figured out the first two answers: TOAST and R. Stew knew the third answer was URABUTLN from staring long enough at the table we were at.

Ellen — Stew finally got the nerve to talk to her and went by himself over to the bar where she was standing. From across the room I could see her smile and hand him something. When he got back to our table he showed me what she had given him; a key for room 18 at the Stagecoach Inn. He told me — with a smile as wide as his head could accommodate — that he paid her the appropriate compliment of URABUTLN: You are a beauty, Ellen.

Scott — Scott was the owner and bartender of the fine establishment, and was about as friendly and talkative as a bartender could get without making the customers want to get up and leave. Scott was liberal with the information — after he was tipped, that is. He told us about an outlaw named Ugly who had taken the Mayor hostage. He also doled out news about a guy named Ace who had been looking for Rangers to help him out with some trouble in Vegas before he disappeared.

Head Crusher — I saw Head Crusher sitting alone at the back of the bar. I could tell he didn't want an audience, so I met with him alone. I showed him the visa card that the Brakeman had given me and in return he gave me a password to give to the Atchison guard back at the Nomad's Camp. (When we later returned to the Atchison tent, we got started on a treasure hunt that nearly got Stew killed.)



QUARTZ, Stagecoach Inn

QUARTZ

Stagecoach Inn

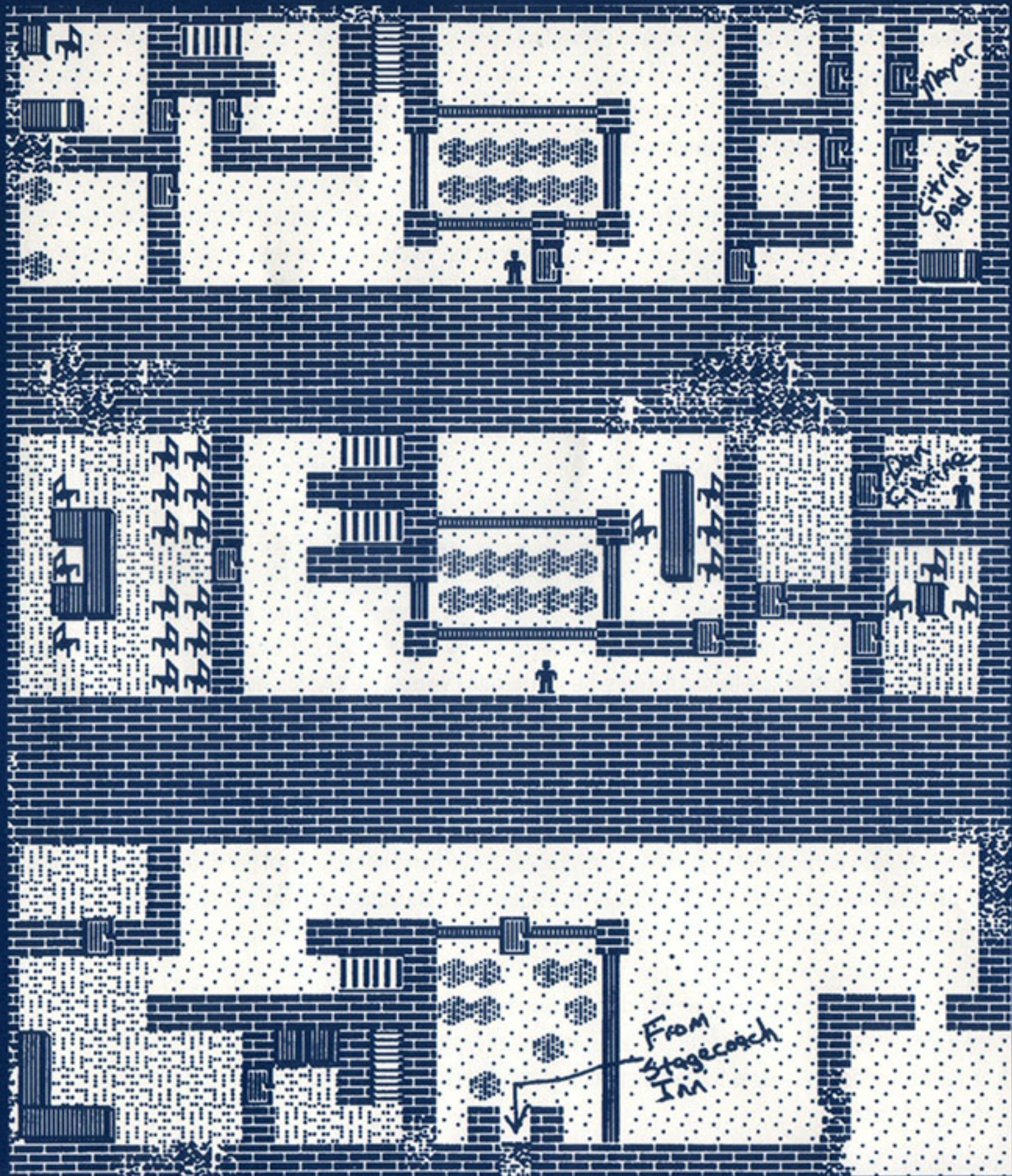
After we left Scott's Bar, we headed straight for the Stagecoach Inn to quell Stew's burning curiosity about the key Ellen gave him. Once inside, we entered through the doors on our left and found the desk clerk tilted back in his chair, snoozing away. Kate kicked the counter with her boots, which shocked the clerk into a backward tumble that effectively roused him from his sleep. We hadn't intended on renting a room, but at the insistence of Eugene — whose head was pounding from the anxiety of his stage debut — we did.

The Rooms — We went to room 10 and set our packs down. After smoothing out the lumps in the bed and stretching out flat on his back, Eugene was snoring away at top volume. Rather than listen to him snort like a congested rhino, the rest of us decided to check out the other rooms. Kate, our resident lockpicker, moved door to door, one second gently working the lock and the next second slowly pushing the door back. Despite all our work, we didn't find anything salient; just a thug or two and a little loot. The only room we didn't go to was room 18. We decided to wait until Eugene got his beauty rest before going here.

Laurie — After a few hours had passed, we woke Eugene up and headed over to room 18. Before Stew could whip out the key, Kate had picked the lock just for fun. When the door swung full open, the sole occupant turned towards us, startled and angry. Stew used his charisma and confidence to calm her down. She relaxed a bit and asked us for a servomotor. We gladly gave her the one we had found in the housekeeping storage room. Laurie took a deep breath of relief and smiled. Like we had heard so many times before, she told us about Quartz's state of siege. She gave us some ammunition and several leads on how to get to the Courthouse and bade us good luck. (After we left, Stew cuffed Kate behind the ears. He said he could've used the key, told her what he told her mother — URABUTLN — and saved the poor girl the shock of having her door picked open by some stranger.)

The Pool — Without a word, Kate dove in and stroked out a few laps. When she got out, we asked her why she plunged in fully clothed. All she could say was that you never knew when you'd have to swim fully clothed and she wanted to work on that skill. At this point, Eugene asked her if he could shoot her since he'd never know when she'd be shot and he'd like to get better at his medic skills. Kate slammed the butt of her rifle into Eugene's stomach and I got to practice *my* medic skills on Eugene, who was doubled over in substantial pain.

Housekeeping Storage Room — We decided to use the secret way to get to the Courthouse through this room. (This, by the way, bummed Eugene out, who was all ready to present the password MUERTE at the front door.) Once we snake squeezed the two bums and got past them, we found the trap door and were on our way to the Courthouse.



QUARTZ, Courthouse

QUARTZ

Courthouse

Second Floor — Through the trap door we ended up behind a tree in the atrium of the Courthouse. We found a flight of stairs just outside the atrium and climbed quietly to the second floor. A guard stationed at the top of the second floor asked us for the password. Eugene ribbed me out of delight and then said MUERTE.

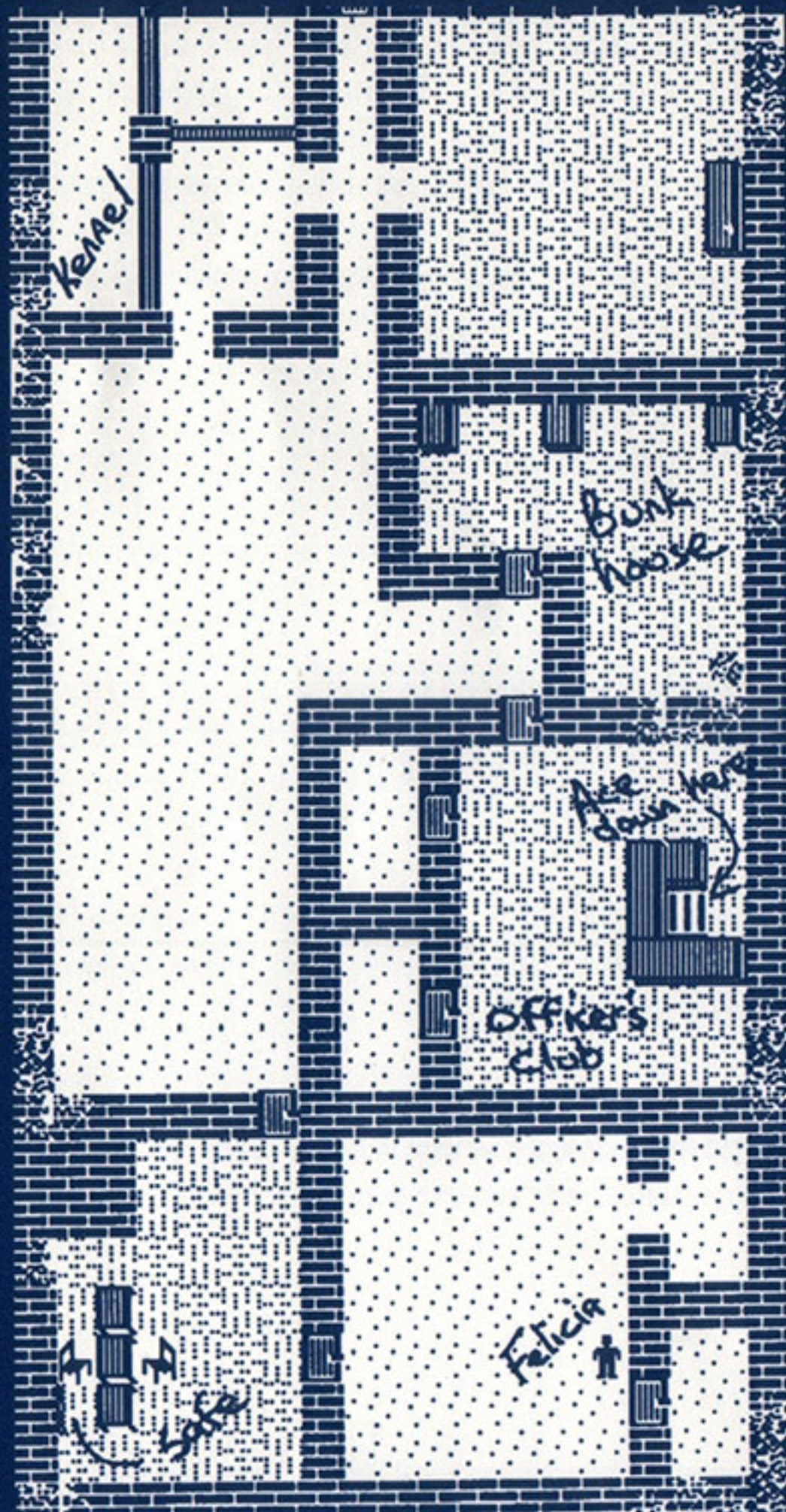
Louie — Heading along the south wall, we ran into a group of thugs who stopped us and eyed us carefully before waving us by. Stew heard loud snoring in one of the rooms and beckoned Kate over to pick the lock. As she pushed the door open, we could see in the entrance the author of the nasal rumblings. Before he could awaken to his fate, Kate strangled him and tossed him to the floor. Searching his body, she found a bracelet on his wrist that had no design, just the number 27 engraved on its underside.

Hewey and Dewey — We headed over to the other door and pushed it open, surprising Hewey and Dewey. When the last of the bullets found a place to rest, the men lay dead on the floor and Eugene sat slumped against the wall with a bullet lodged in his shoulder. Kate brought us two bracelets identical to the one we found on Louie, except these had the numbers 11 and 16 on them.

Dan Citrine — I patched Eugene up while Stew cut the bonds of a man strapped tightly to a chair. After Stew gave him a sip of snake squeezins, Dan Citrine wiped the blood from his shirtless chest and rose weakly to his feet to thank us. In return for our help, he offered to come along with us and show us where the Mayor was being held.

Quartz City Jail — The guard on the third floor looked at us and assumed we belonged to his fraternity of ruffians so he let us by without a blink. We picked the lock to the first cell on the right and found Dan's father. After their reuniting embrace, Dan's father gave us a nice reward.

Mayor Pedros — Checking the rest of the cells, we found Mayor Pedros. Although he was at first suspicious of our good intentions, we convinced him that if we were really the enemy, we would have been happy to leave him there to rot. Mayor Pedros liked our sense of humor and joined up with us (he didn't realize we were serious about letting him rot).



QUARTZ, Outlaw Hideout



QUARTZ

Outlaw Hideout

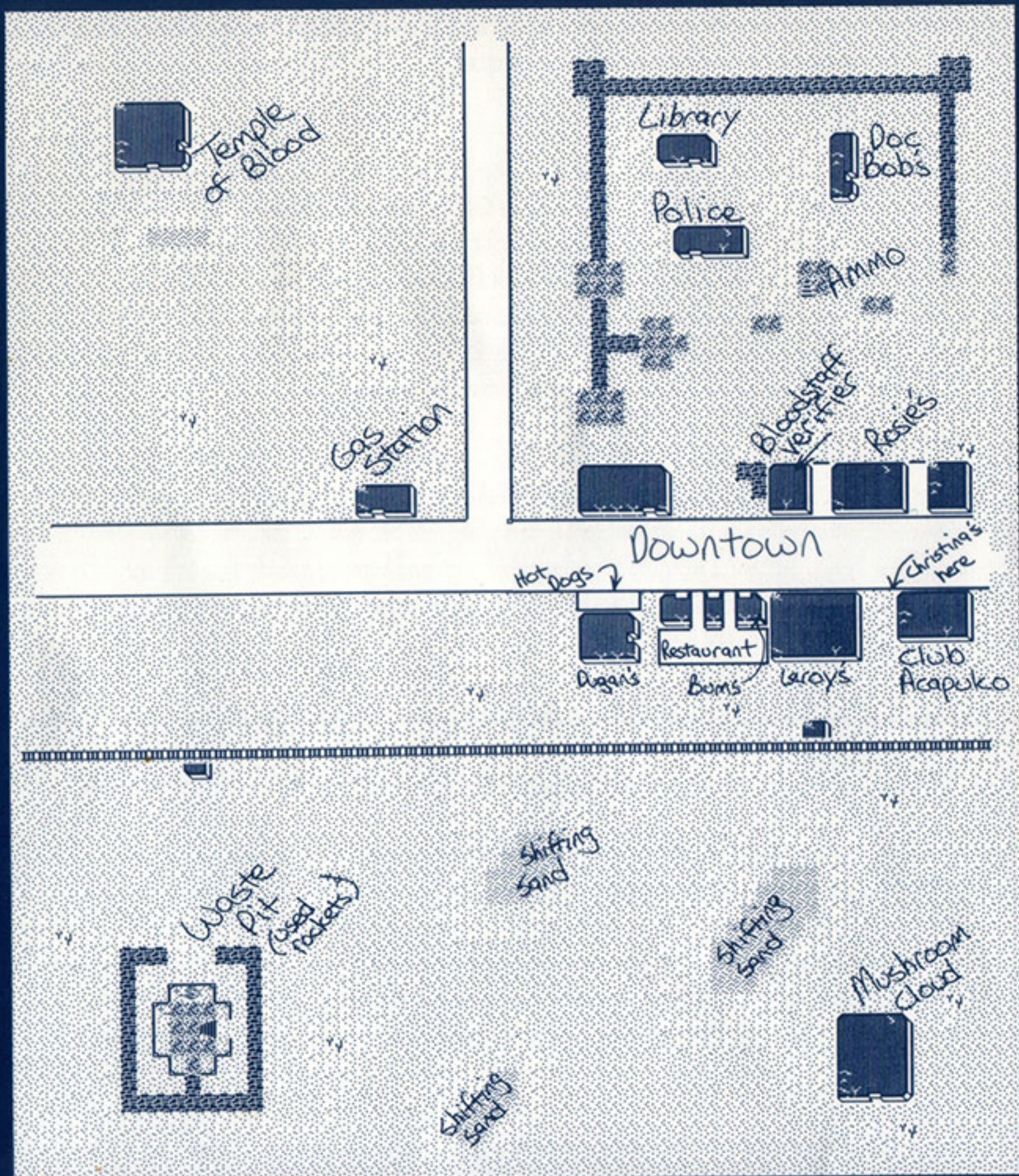
Under the guidance of Mayor Pedros, we found Ugly's hideout diagonal from the Courthouse. When the guard asked us for the password, Eugene smiled broadly, pulled out a sheet of paper he had found in the Courthouse, and then announced KAPUT with all the subtlety of a linebacker in a ballet. It, however, was enough to convince the guard, who waved us by.

Safe — We nosed around the lounge area and the officer's club, but found nothing interesting so we headed to the southernmost room. The guard wouldn't let us by so Kate introduced him to her Uzi, leaving him to ponder his poor judgment in a pool of blood. Behind the desk in the far corner of the room was a map with some scribbles on it and behind that was a safe. Kate smiled like a kid at Christmas and pulled out her plastic explosives, but Eugene stopped her as she was molding it in her hands. He moved up to the safe and turned the tumblers around — all the while muttering "Hewey, Dewey, Louie, 11, 16, 27" — and it clicked open. Goodies tumbled out of the safe as Kate smiled approvingly at Eugene and gathered up the loot.

Ugly — In the room across the way we found Ugly, a man whose nickname scarcely began to tell the full story. He commanded us not to come closer unless we wanted Felicia to die and quickly threw out an ultimatum: Let him go and he'd let Felicia live or kill him and seal Felicia's fate with his. Without consultation, Stew told him he had to die since he was the source of friction for the whole town and because nobody that ugly should remain on the face of the earth. Felicia angrily eyed her husband at our choice, but Mayor Pedros could only give a weak shrug.

As Ugly peeled off a round, he hit Mayor Pedros in the leg. The rest of us fired on him and reduced him to a red paste. Eugene ran over to Felicia and quickly used his skills to disarm the bomb. Once free, she told us not to worry about her and to go find Ace. As she wrapped Mayor Pedro's leg, we left with her instructions.

Ace — We returned to the officer's club. A man behind the counter followed us intently with his eyes. Sensing trouble, the pistolero unholstered his gun but before he could fire, Kate put him down with a squeeze of the trigger. We moved behind the counter where the body had dropped and there we found a secret stairway leading down to a cellar. Down in the cellar there were two cells, one from which we heard rustling. Kate picked the lock and out came Ace, casually stretching his arms as if he had been expecting us. He told us he knew his way around and asked if we would join him. Since all of us were interested in getting more miles per bullet, we agreed.



NEEDLES

NEEDLES

On our way out of Quartz, we found the same jeep we saw on our way in. Ace told us that he had worked on enough of these as he yanked open the hood. After a few minutes of tinkering, we were all packed into the jeep and on our merry way to Needles. Just as we had pulled into Needles, the jeep bucked and rattled before dying in front of a garage. What dumb luck.

Police Station — I couldn't imagine how the desert was any safer with these deputized clowns. While here, we decided to visit with detective Spam Shade, who filled us in on the peculiar Bloodstaff murders.

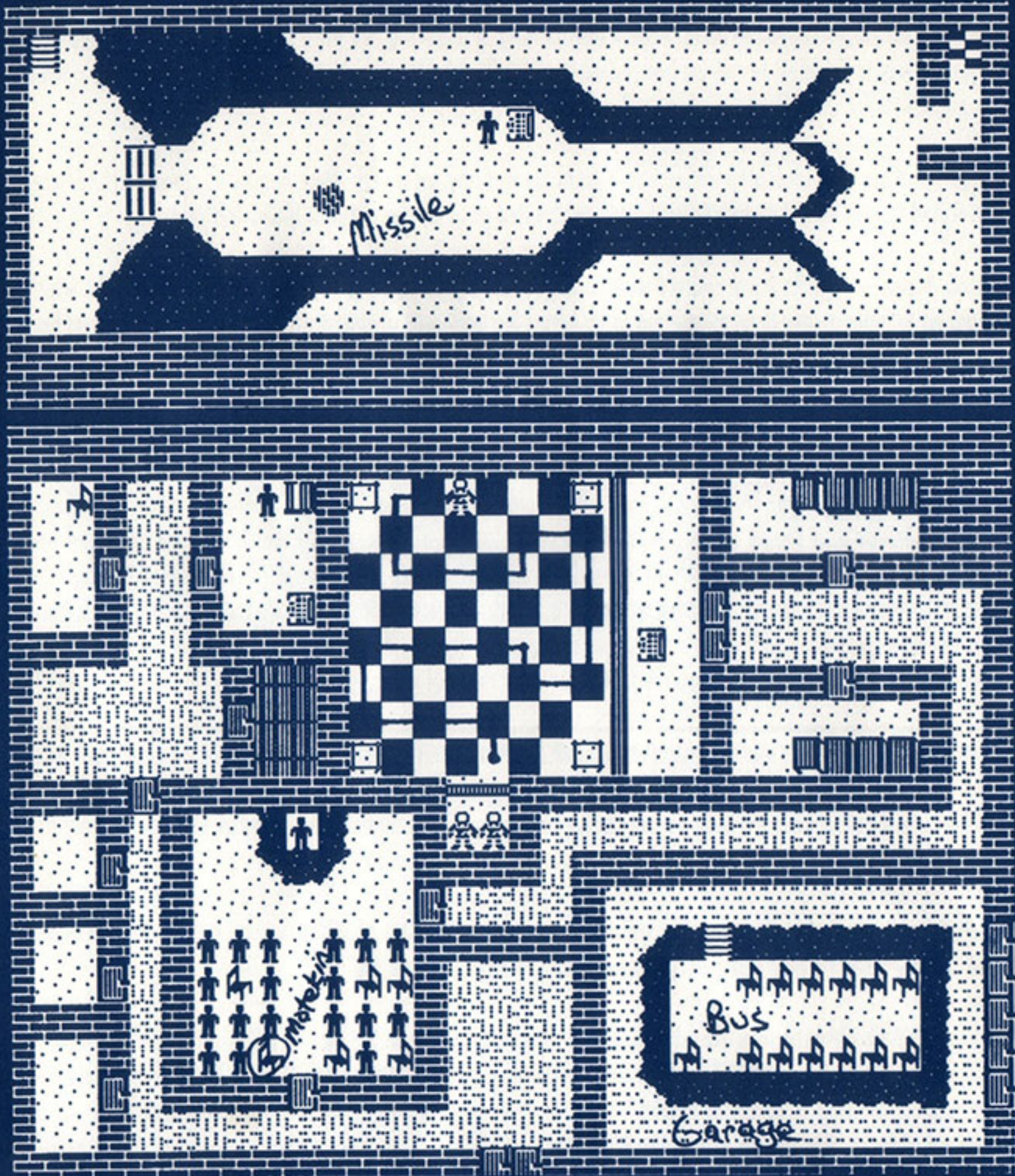
Ammo dump — The floor was spotted with puddles of blood, which we followed to a very large puddle, which happened to have a very dead man lying in it. Across his neck was a wide gash from which all his blood had drained. On the dead man's finger was a ruby ring with strange markings. Kate twisted it off the gnarled finger and slipped it onto hers for safe keeping. In the other hand, he was clutching a strange staff which Stew pried from his stiffened fingers. We also found ammo and something called a power pack, which we happily took.

Downtown Needles — We headed into the west side of Downtown Needles looking for leads. Outside an unmarked building, a couple of ugly humanoids stood fast in the doorway. Even though we prepared our weapons, they stood unflinching. Without so much as a salutation, Ace shot them dead. We walked through the room and headed down the stairs where we found a Bloodstaff verification table. We fed it the one we had just found on the dead man and it got crunched into a pile of toothpicks. When we fed it the one we took from the dead humanoid, the same thing happened. Neither were the real thing.

We headed over to the east side of Downtown Needles and found more gossip about the Servants of the Mushroom Cloud. Everything was pretty easy for us to get into except for this bar with a guy peering out of a peephole. Eugene remembered what the bum he fed snake squeezins to said about Club Acapulco, so Eugene gave the password ACAPULCO. We were in, but after losing a bundle, we were out again.

In an alleyway, we found Christina. She wanted us to hire her, but Ace said that we had enough people in our party (and besides, he didn't like women who spit) so we left her behind.

Servants of the Mushroom Cloud Church — The Bishop informed us that he had his second-in-command looking into the murders. I noticed that the Bishop had the same ring that we found from the dead man, so I told Kate to show the ring to him. The Bishop, realizing that his second-in-command was now completely out of command, offered us a reward to find the Bloodstaff.



NEEDLES

NEEDLES

(Continued)

Temple of Blood — We entered the Temple of Blood and were immediately beset upon by guards who knew we didn't belong there. In the blur of an arm, Ace drew his weapon and fired a burst that mowed them flat. Near the front entrance, we found a room full of meditating worshippers. Stew sat down on one of the chairs and started chanting "Oooooommm" at the top of his lungs. Once he thoroughly expelled the mantra from his system, he stood up from his chair and stretched. As he was turning to leave, something on the chair caught his eye: a launch code. "Good karma!" he praised himself on the find.

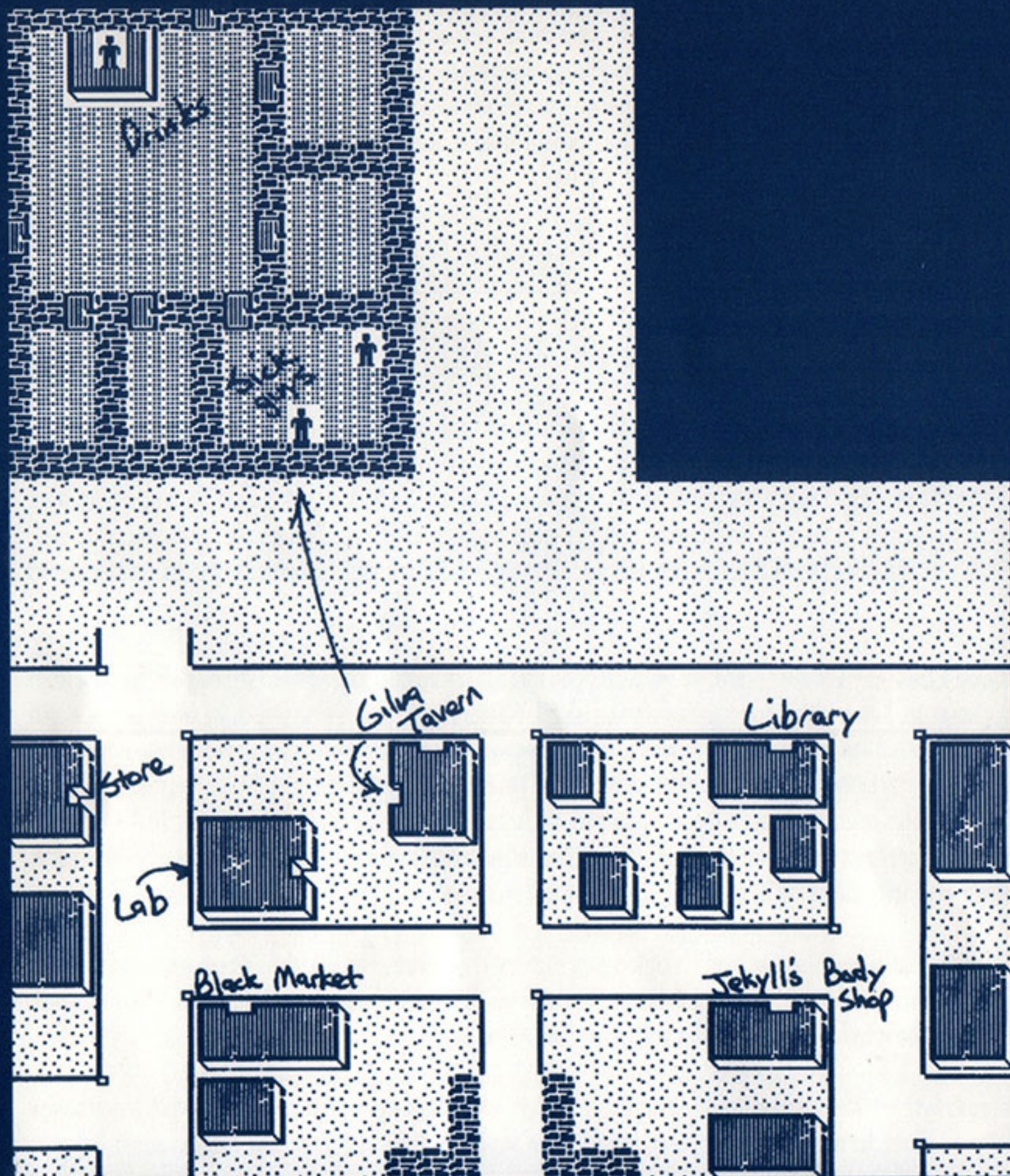
Checkerboard — After some exploring, we moved northeast through the Temple and found ourselves before a control panel which two Blood Guardians flanked. They asked if we were willing to meet their challenge and as Eugene shouted NO WAY! Stew shouted HELL YES! Suddenly, we were transported to the checkerboard, where our moves were awaited by the jeering crowd.

Stew took one step east on the board and was knocked down. Without thinking, he scampered back to the square that we were on to exhale away his dizziness. Ace muttered to himself about getting stuck on one of these in a military exercise and took a step north while we watched. Nothing. He took one step west. Nothing again. West three more times to the wall. North twice. East five steps. South one. East two to the wall. North four. West two. South one. West four. North two. East two. We made it to the end of the board, recounted our steps, and answered 30.

Blood Priest — For our reward, we were dropped through a trap door. As we were shaking off the pain from our landings, Kate pointed across the river to an island. We were fairly good swimmers so we swam across, much to the delight of the hungry fish. Once across, snipers began to fire at us, fire which we were happy to return once we moved into better positions. Undaunted, we circled the island to a set of doors at the northern end. After we blew the doors open, we found a room within a room, from which thugs poured out to greet us. In this place we had one of our most vicious battles with the Blood Priest's henchmen, and eventually with the Blood Priest himself. When we finally killed the Blood Priest, the Bloodstaff was ours.

Missile Room — When we made it back across the water, we headed up the stairs where we found the shell of a huge missile. A man asked us for the launch code, to which Eugene kindly offered MOTEKIM. With that word, the tip of the missile fell open, letting sunlight in and us out.

Bloodstaff — We returned the Bloodstaff to the priest, who smiled warmly at our authentic gift. In exchange for our efforts, he gave us plenty of loot, including an engine that would get the jeep running again.



DARWIN VILLAGE

DARWIN VILLAGE

We decided to head over to Darwin Village before we overwhelmed ourselves with Vegas. We had heard from some of the townsfolk in Needles that the southern entrance was laced with radioactive waste. If we had radiation suits, we could've taken the more direct southern route, but we didn't so we had to leg it north and enter through the mountains.

About half way into our trip, Eugene started getting delirious from the heat. It seemed that he had dropped his canteen somewhere along the way and wouldn't admit it to anybody, so he had been steadily dehydrating in silence. "What's the use of all this walking around?" he blurted with his fists clenched at his side.

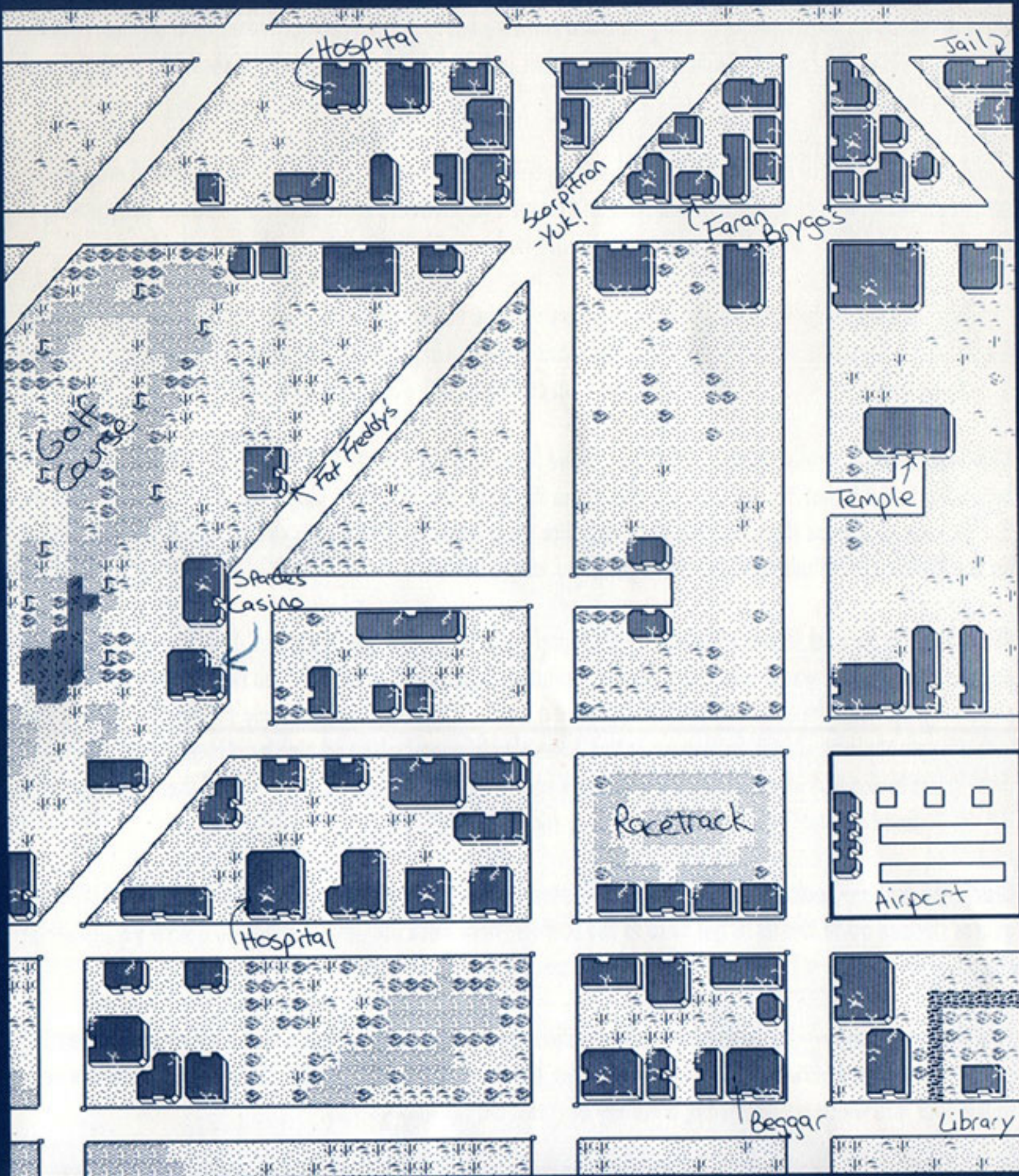
"Eugene, quit your whinin'!" Stew hollered so hard that the veins in his neck tripled in size. Stew didn't know Eugene was going delirious until he saw the imminent sunstroke in Eugene's face. Stew shook his head and gave Eugene a chug of water from his canteen. We then continued our walk into the bleary desert.

One hour. That's how much longer it took before we found Darwin Village. Good thing too, because we were all beginning to think that life was going to end in the Big Beige Bed. Darwin Village was tiny, insignificant even. But we were glad to be there. The tough town police came to greet us with guns drawn, so we hurriedly threw on our Kevlar suits to minimize the damage of our confrontation.

Mad Dog Fargo and Metal Maniac — We found these two guys sicker than dogs. They had somehow been poisoned and all that would save them was an antitoxin. Eugene ran over to the lab next door to see what he could whip up. With the chemicals that we found in a locker in the bunkhouse at Ugly's Hideout in Quartz and with a couple of pieces of fruit, Eugene made two doses of antitoxin which he administered to the men. In minutes, their fevers broke and within hours, the men were nearly back to full health. They offered their services to us, but we declined and told them to just take it easy for a while.

Black Market — Looking through his list of coveted passwords, Eugene gave the two guards CRETIN. The two guards stepped aside and let us get close to the counter. Here were the best weapons we'd seen yet. Although the prices were fairly stiff, Kate picked up a nice assortment of explosives.

The Underground — We entered something called The Underground, but didn't get very far into it. We tried picking the lock and blowing it open with explosives, but the door wouldn't budge. There was a narrow slot next to the door into which we jammed in a variety of cards, but nothing worked.



VEGAS



VEGAS

The trip to Vegas was quick. I guess it was because Eugene bought a new canteen, and was no longer dragging his butt along like a dying man. So there we were. Nuclear jewel of the desert. Neon capital of the world. Fifty-two cards for every man, woman, and child. It was a big place and we didn't quite know where to begin in our search for whatever we thought we were searching for. Ace told me that a lot of the places were abandoned and weren't worth checking out.

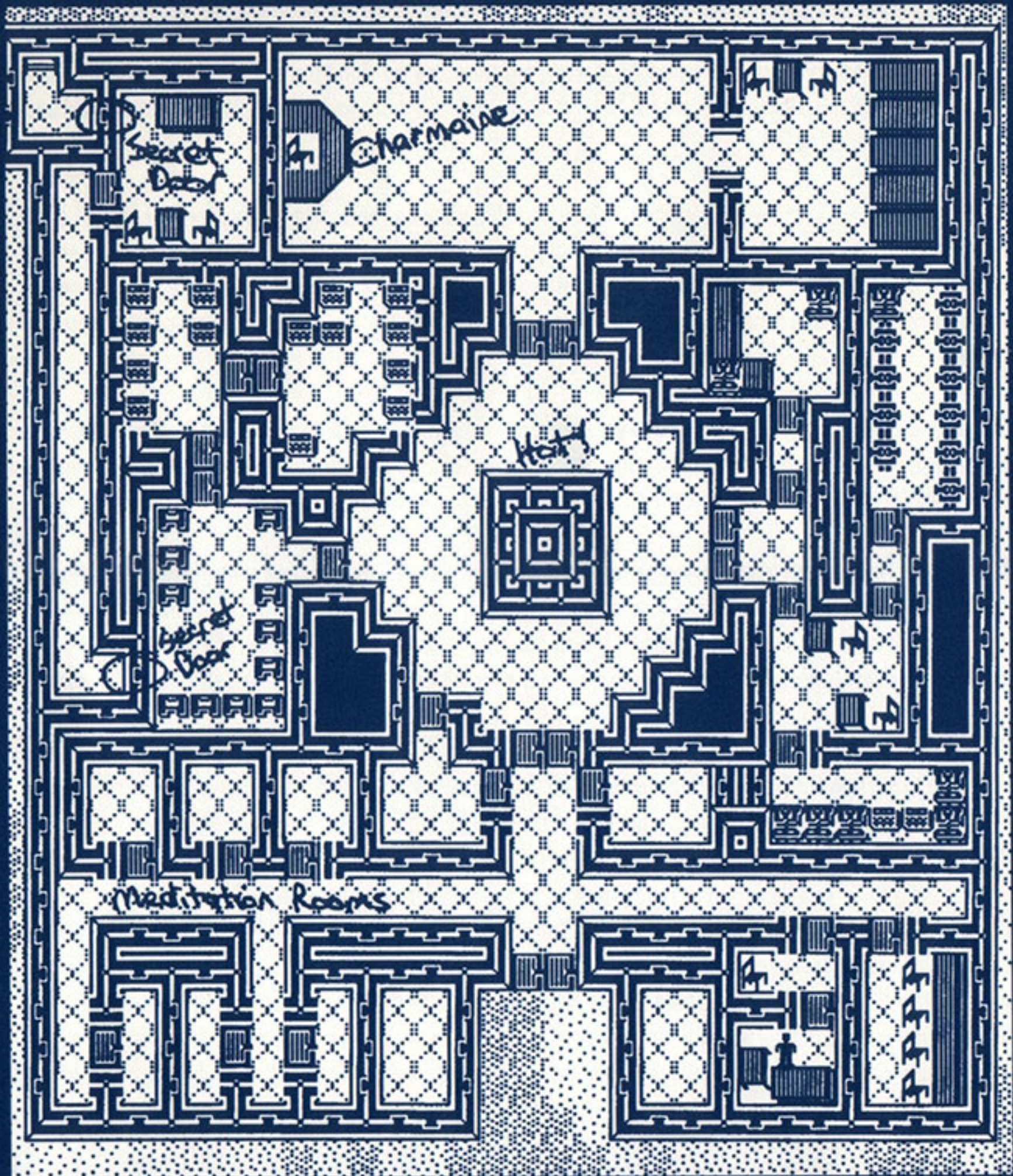
Police Station — There weren't any boys in blue here. The place had become a hangout for Fat Freddy's men. Aside from meeting a number of the many gun-happy inhabitants after we tripped the alarm in the upper left corner of the room while trying to get at some loot, we found a very revealing diary about the battle of power between Fat Freddy and Faran Brygo. We also released Covenant, who was being held prisoner by the motley bunch.

Spade's Casino — We all had our different gambling passions so we split up to seek our fortunes. When we regrouped, Stew told us about the pit boss he ran into by the bar who told him to see his boss Crumb. Crumb, in turn, told him to see his boss, Faran Brygo, and gave him a password to use.

Library — The librarian liked the way we looked and offered to teach us a few new skills. Eugene had enough skill points to learn about energy weapons. When he acquired his knowledge, he burst out, "Now I know what a power pack is for — energy weapons. All I need is a laser rifle and I can blow away the Mark III's with one pinky!" Our mild-mannered engineer was rapidly losing his lab coat demeanor.

Fat Freddy — Thanks to some nameless beggar in the building at Maryland and Tropicana streets, we got the password to get into Fat Freddy's. Our meeting with Fat Freddy was short and sweet. He asked us to kill Faran Brygo and bring back the onyx ring he wore in exchange for \$25,000. None of us really liked the sound of the deal, but we graciously accepted so we could get out with our arms and legs still attached to our bodies.

Faran Brygo — Stew used the password KESTREL that Crumb, the manager of Spade's Casino, had given him. He then told the next set of guards that CRUMB had sent him. When we met Brygo, we didn't want to make him mad, so we asked him how we could help *him*. Brygo turned out to be a rather pleasant man who seemed sincere in his request for help. Rather than kill him, we accepted his request to find Max. According to Brygo, Max sounded like the guy with the real scoop. At this point in our journey, we were ready to talk to anybody who could tell us more than "something funny's going on in the desert." Stew couldn't help but wonder what would've happened if we had shot our way into Brygo's hideout; for now, he left the attack to his imagination.



VEGAS, Temple of the Servants of the Mushroom Cloud

Temple of the Servants of the Mushroom Cloud

As Brygo had recommended, we came here to find Charmaine. From the outside, the Temple looked like a movie theater. The lobby area was filled with big glossy posters of Oppenheimer and Einstein, featuring them as if they were stars in some movie. We stepped up to the door and a woman asked us for the name of the Holy One. Although Eugene insisted that I tell them OPPENHEIMER, I gave them EINSTEIN instead. Something about Einstein sounded more authoritative. Anyway, the woman swung the door back and let us pass.

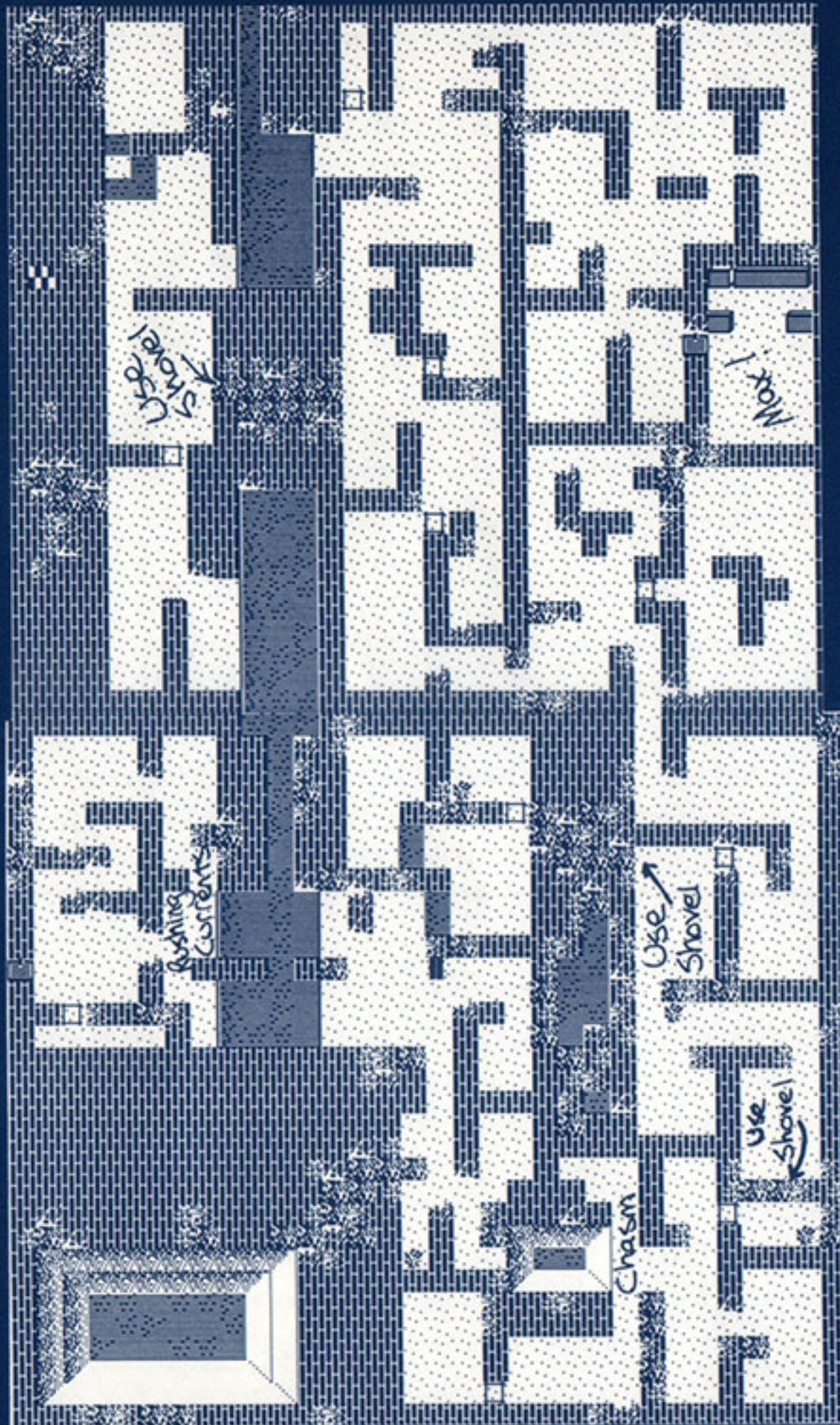
Since the Temple seemed relatively safe, we broke up and milled around. Before we knew it, we heard an explosion and somebody yelling "Take that!" It seemed that our zealous Kate wanted very badly to get through the northern doors. She couldn't pick them open so — as always — she used the explosives approach to solving her problems.

A strange glow illuminated the room that Kate had won her way into. At first we thought it was neon, but Eugene yelled "Radiation!" His geiger counter clicked like mad near the glowing areas. As a exercise in smart living, we avoided these spots.

Charmaine — The Temple was quiet except for the chanting that came from the back room. Careful to not rouse the ire of the worshippers, we weaved quietly through the crowd and approached Charmaine, careful not to get too close. Brygo warned us that she went nuts when people got too near to her, so we moved in close enough just to get her attention. Maybe she was worried about catching Igglerot, one of those new airborne diseases that was going around. When she saw us, she asked if we sought the great glow. I didn't know what the hell it was but it sounded good to me so I said YES. I also told her that FARAN BRYGO sent us so she wouldn't think we were just a bunch of creeps who blew in from the desert looking for free food and lodgings.

Charmaine instructed us to fetch the real Bloodstaff from the Bishop at the Temple of Blood and bring it back to her. We all balked at the idea of making the long, hot run back to Needles, but Stew had been smitten by Charmaine and was eager to do her bidding. With the password DIPSTICK in memory, Stew made the journey back — solo — and returned the next day with the Bloodstaff.

Charmaine told us that she had last seen Max heading for the sewers and that if we wanted to find him, we'd have to get a hold of a Sonic Key. (She told us Max hid one out in the old golf course, but it just so happened that we had already pocketed one from a fight.) Charmaine handed us a map of the Temple and showed us how to get to the northwest room, where we'd find the entrance into the sewers.



VEGAS, Sewers

VEGAS

Sewers

The sewers were loaded with androids who were not pleased at our intrusion into their slimy underworld. The cyborgs were brutal, heartless killers, but the hexborgs were worse; they were almost as bad as the Scorpion in downtown Vegas. Some Frankenstein was cranking out an army of metal monsters!

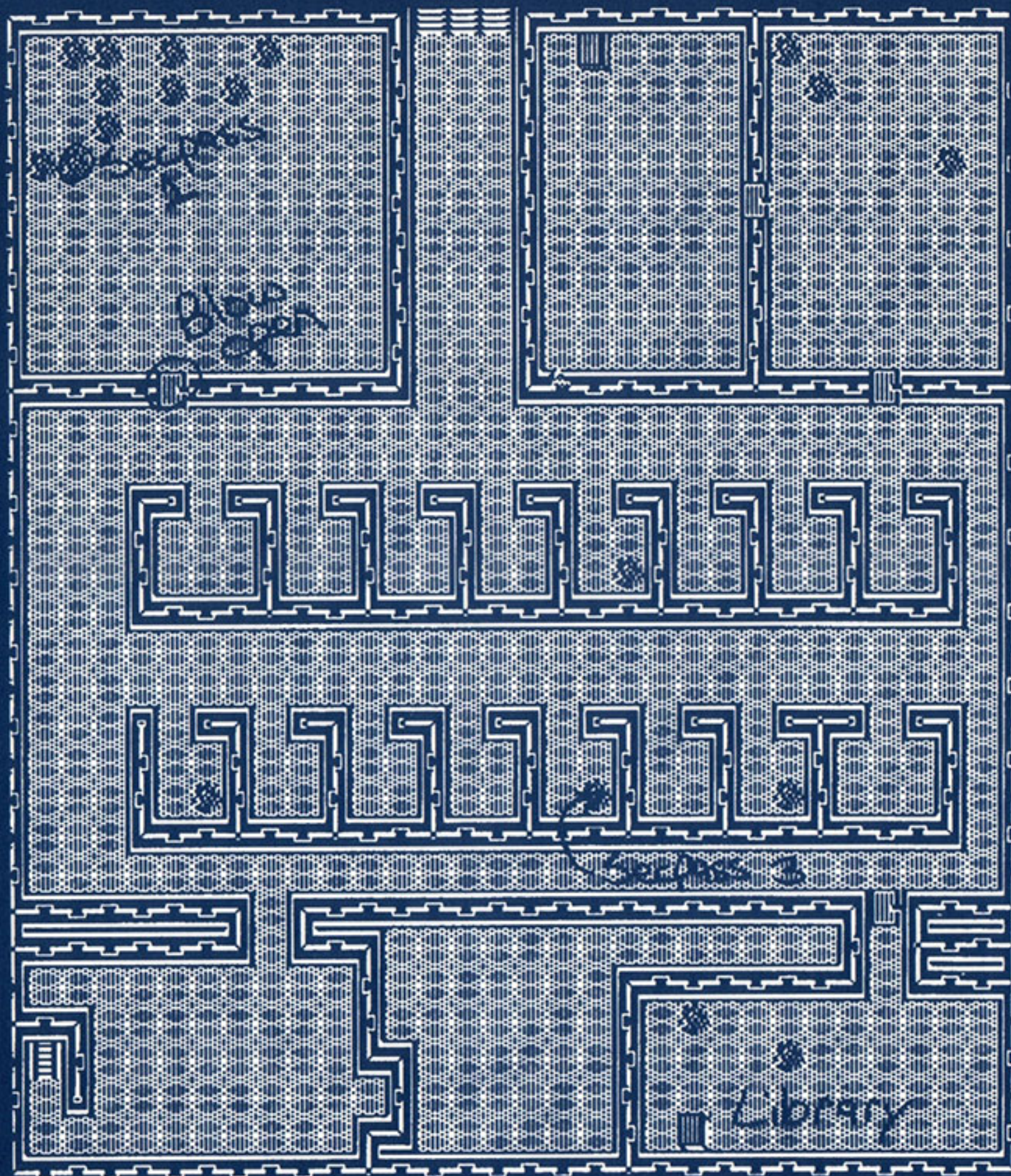
The murky sewer water rushed quickly through the open underground channels. Rather than trying to cross it on foot only to fall and get washed through the whole sewer system with the brown mystery stuff (actually, we had an idea of what it was), we strung a rope over the rushing water and shimmied our way across. Maybe our swim skills were strong enough to resist being washed away, but better to say "We should have" than "We shouldn't have."

Electronic Parts — We covered every inch of the sewers, getting into battle after battle after battle. We collected a variety of strange parts: rom boards, servomotors, power convertors, fusion cells. We weren't quite sure what to do with them, but we figured that these creatures couldn't possibly feel so strongly about hanging on to them if they weren't of some value. So like robots ourselves, we mechanically killed and collected everything in sight, in search of the inscrutable Max.

The Chasm — A huge rectangular chasm blocked our progress. Rather than trying to cross it, we found an area of the wall where the bricks were so weak that we could shovel our way through. Kate was complaining about all the digging; she wanted to blow through with Law rockets, but Stew wouldn't let her waste the ammo. When we broke through, it was back to more fighting and collecting.

Max — Our seek and destroy mission eventually brought us to a lab that the sonic key helped us get into. In the lab was a long table with sections of a machine in need of repair. Eugene, who had been collecting the spoils of our sewer battle, ran the diagnostic function and began dropping parts into the machine and initiating repairs. There seemed to be no logic to how Max would work. Eugene just stuck in piece after peice, trying to find the right combination of parts. Finally, after nearly an hour of plugging in and pulling out, all parts were successfully in place. Eugene prepped for assembly. With a whirl of sound, Max came to life. Excitedly, he told us about Sleeper Base and about Base Cochise.

head - android head and Rom Board
neck - power convertor, Rom, Fusion



SLEEPER BASE, Level 1

SLEEPER BASE

Level 1

This place was like a morgue, which, despite its eeriness, was a welcomed break from the shooting and looting that had been going on. We were all pretty tired so we pulled up a cold, hard floor and got some sleep.

About ten hours later, I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling, wondering where I was. Home, no. Sleeper Base, yes. I wiped the drool from my cheek and sat up. Kate, Ace, and Stew had already been up and about. Eugene, who could outsleep a hibernating bear, was submerged deep in a dream. I shook his shoulder until his eyes cracked open.

"Listen, no more sleeping at Sleeper Base," I told him. "There's not much left to do before we're done with this job. The more you sleep, the more you delay. What do you say we finish this and go back to our homes where beds are beds and floors are floors?"

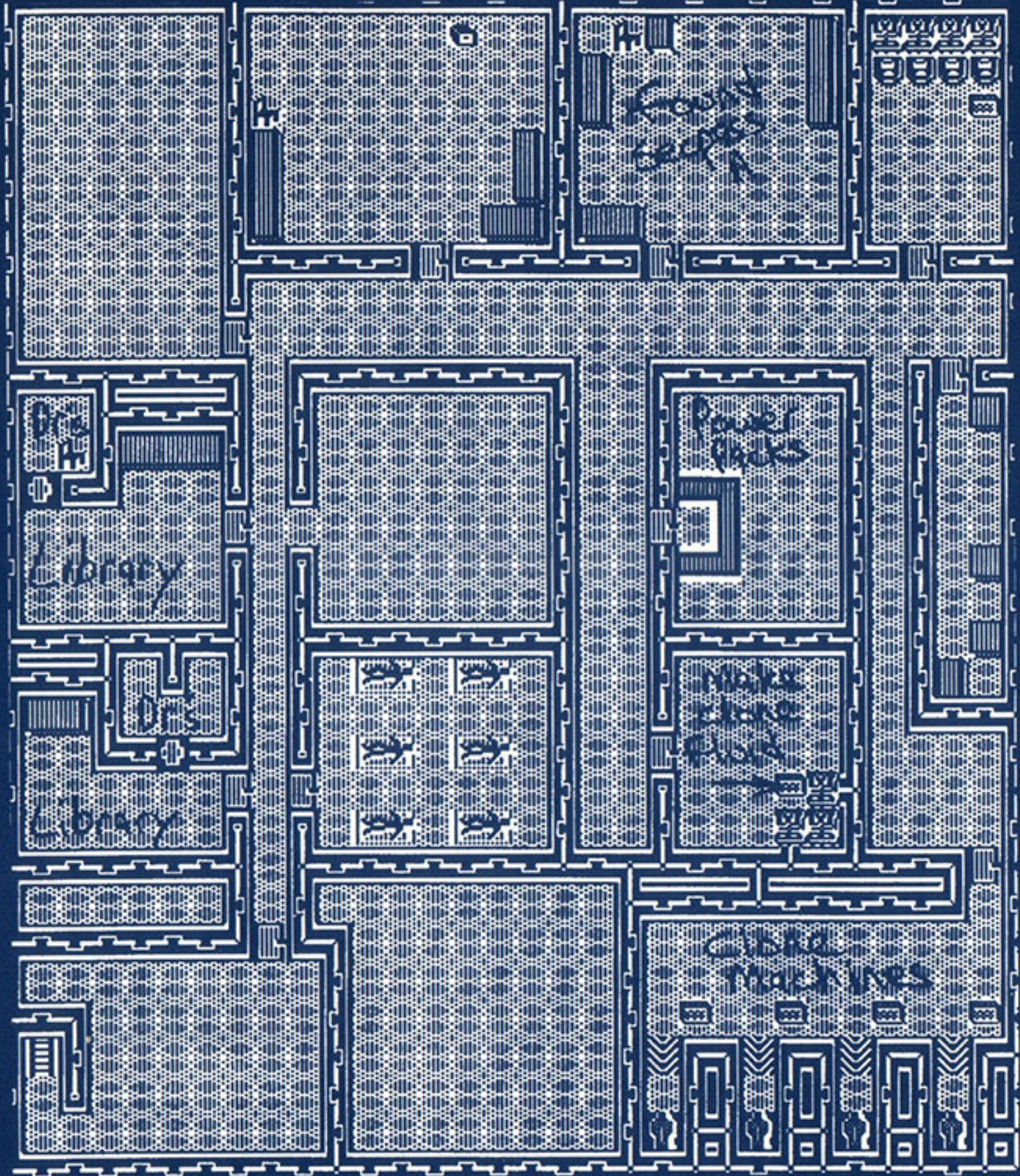
"Yu bea wagk log?" was all that dribbled out of his mouth.

"Yeah. I've been awake long. I only slept two hours." It was a lie, but somehow Eugene was the kind of guy whose head you really wanted to mess with. "We've already checked out the whole place. We found this really incredible faucet. When you turn on 'cold', liquid silver comes out. When you turn on 'hot', liquid gold comes pouring out. And the toilet bowls are filled with platinum."

Eugene caught this lie. A good thing, too. If he believed this, I would have kicked him out of our party on the grounds of "reckless, party-endangering gullibility." Anyway, we were all up and ready to move on.

Level 1 — We moved through the place slowly and methodically, checking out every inch of every room and cubicle. Our search yielded two thin cards, one labeled secpass 1, the other secpass 3. The passes let us gain access to several of the rooms on this level. My favorite was the one that had the loot on the floor. All rooms should always have loot lying around on the floor.

Library — In the far room, we found a set of books entitled "Everything you always wanted to know about Clone Preparation Chemicals" and a library that offered cloning skills. Eugene was hot to learn something new and Stew was hot to get cloned so Eugene studied up on the technique.



SLEEPER BASE, Level 2

SLEEPER BASE

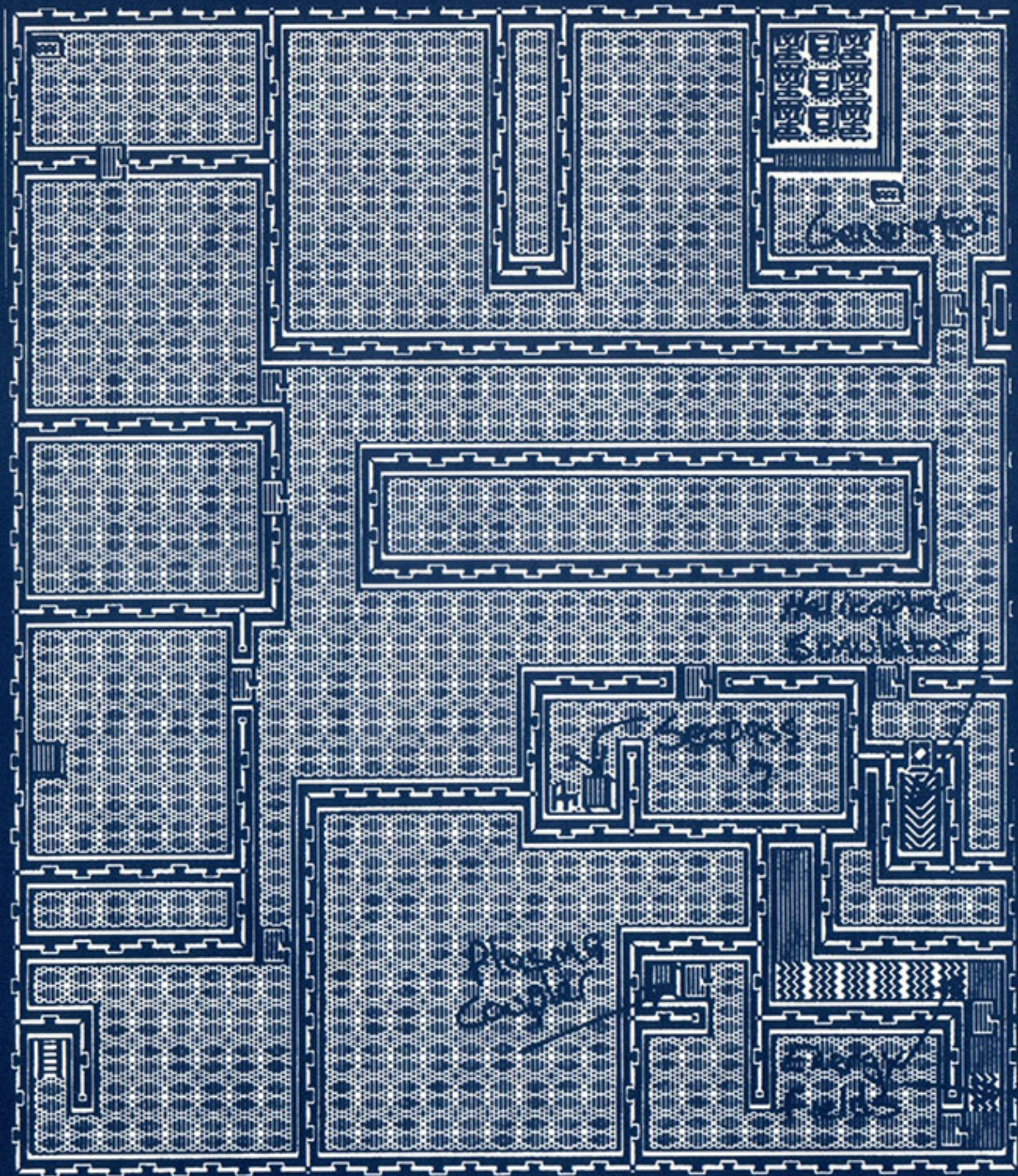
Level 2

With secpasses in hand, we moved to the second floor and used them to get into a number of the rooms. Several we couldn't get into. We resigned ourselves to getting into them later on if we could find more secpasses. After rooting through one of the northern rooms, we added a secpass A to our collection of cards.

Power controller — The power controller in the northeast most room was missing a convertor, so Eugene installed the one we had found. Eugene suspected that it was running some unit somewhere in the building so he thought that while we were here, he'd get it running.

Clone Machine — Stew was licking his lips when we found this. The thought of himself in multiples was almost too great for him to stand. Without wasting a precious second, he put Eugene and his newfound skills to work. The first thing Eugene did was run the system diagnostic, which told him that there was a problem with the outflow system. Kate ran out of the room and came back with several jugs from another room to use. Once these makeshift outflow devices were set in place, the system was ready to go.

Clone Pod — These were long sleek tubes of steel, just large enough to encase one human. Stew was the first to show his absolute faith in science and merrily jumped into one of the pods. Eugene poured in the solution and the cloning process began. It only took a second for the machine to read Stew's genetic pattern, but like a fine wine, the entire development process would take a while so — as much as Stew wanted to — we didn't hang around. He was comforted enough to know that if he were to die, he would still be alive.



SLEEPER BASE, Level 3

SLEEPER BASE

Level 3

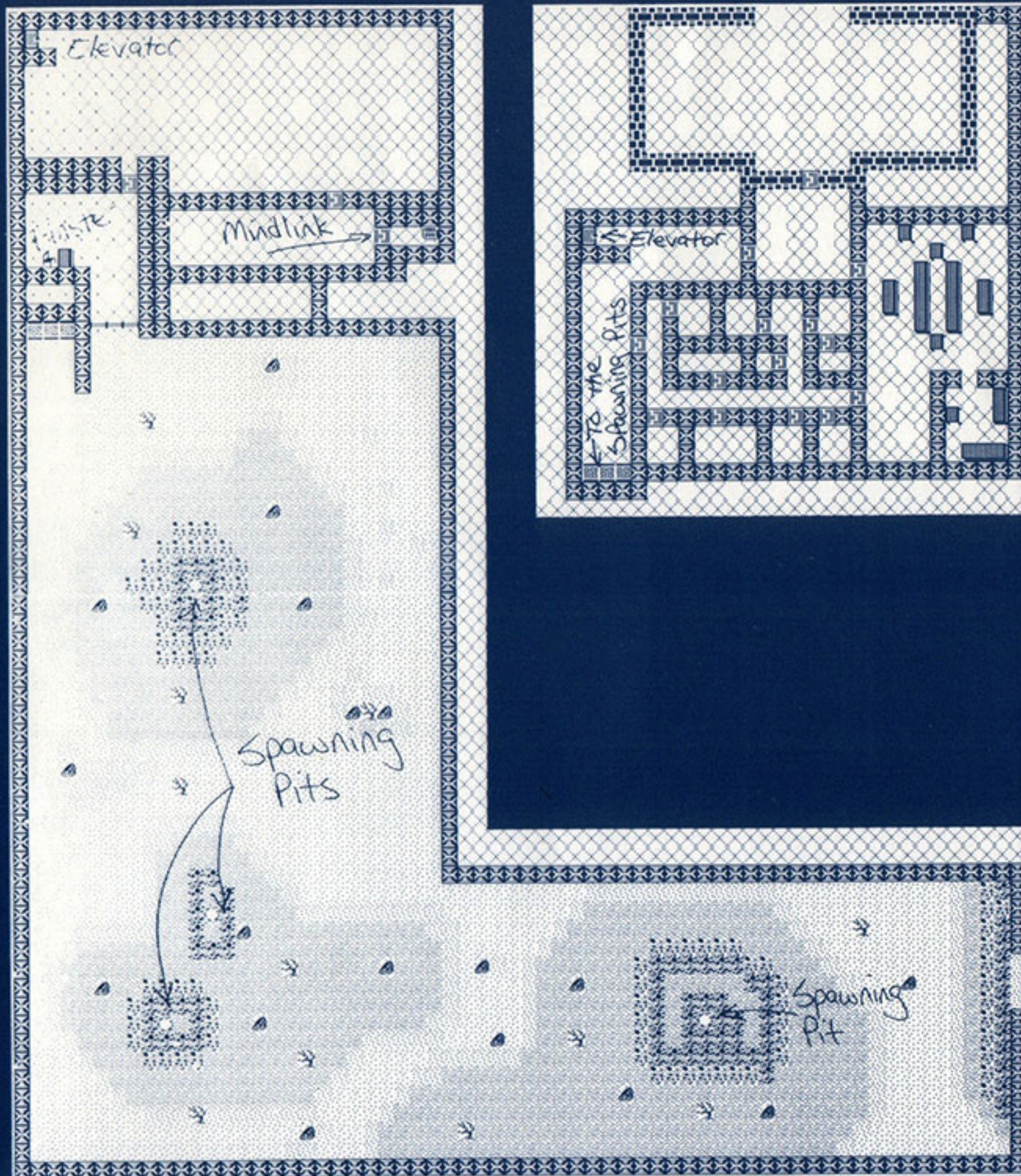
Level 3 brought little more surprise than level 1 or 2. In one of the center rooms, Kate picked open a lock on a desk to find secpass 7. This brought our total card count to four.

Power Generator — In the southeast corner, there was a narrow hall with a high energy field that zapped us when we tried to walk through (Ace couldn't get his hair to lay back down for days). Instead of forcing our way through the forcefield at the expense of our lives, we backed out of the hallway. Once safe, Eugene clapped his hands together in a sudden flash of inspiration. He told us that he was going to the room with the power controller and would cut the power long enough for us to get through the force fields.

A half minute after Eugene split from the group, the buzzing of energy ceased. We hustled down the hall to the next door when the power came back on, allowing us to use our secpass on the door. Once through, Eugene cut the power as we moved on and turned it back on when we got to the next door. We popped open the last door and inside the room found a plasma coupler and fusion cell which Kate slipped into her bag. We made our way out the same way we got in, turning the power on and off.

Helicopter Trainer — The helicopter trainer was one of the most advanced any of us had ever seen. After adding a part to repair the simulator door, Stew stepped into it, but much to his disbelief, he was rejected due to poor cochlear neural development. Kate stepped into it but was likewise rejected. When I jumped in, I was accepted. My high IQ, high dexterity, and good ears seemed just enough to get me by. So — in a snap of a finger — I had learned how to fly a helicopter. Kate was jealous that I got to learn, but Stew didn't mind. He was still high from having been cloned.

At this point, we had seen all the splendors of Sleeper Base that our handful of secpasses would let us. We remembered what Max said about going to Project Darwin before we'd be able to find out everything about Sleeper Base. Off to Project Darwin it was.



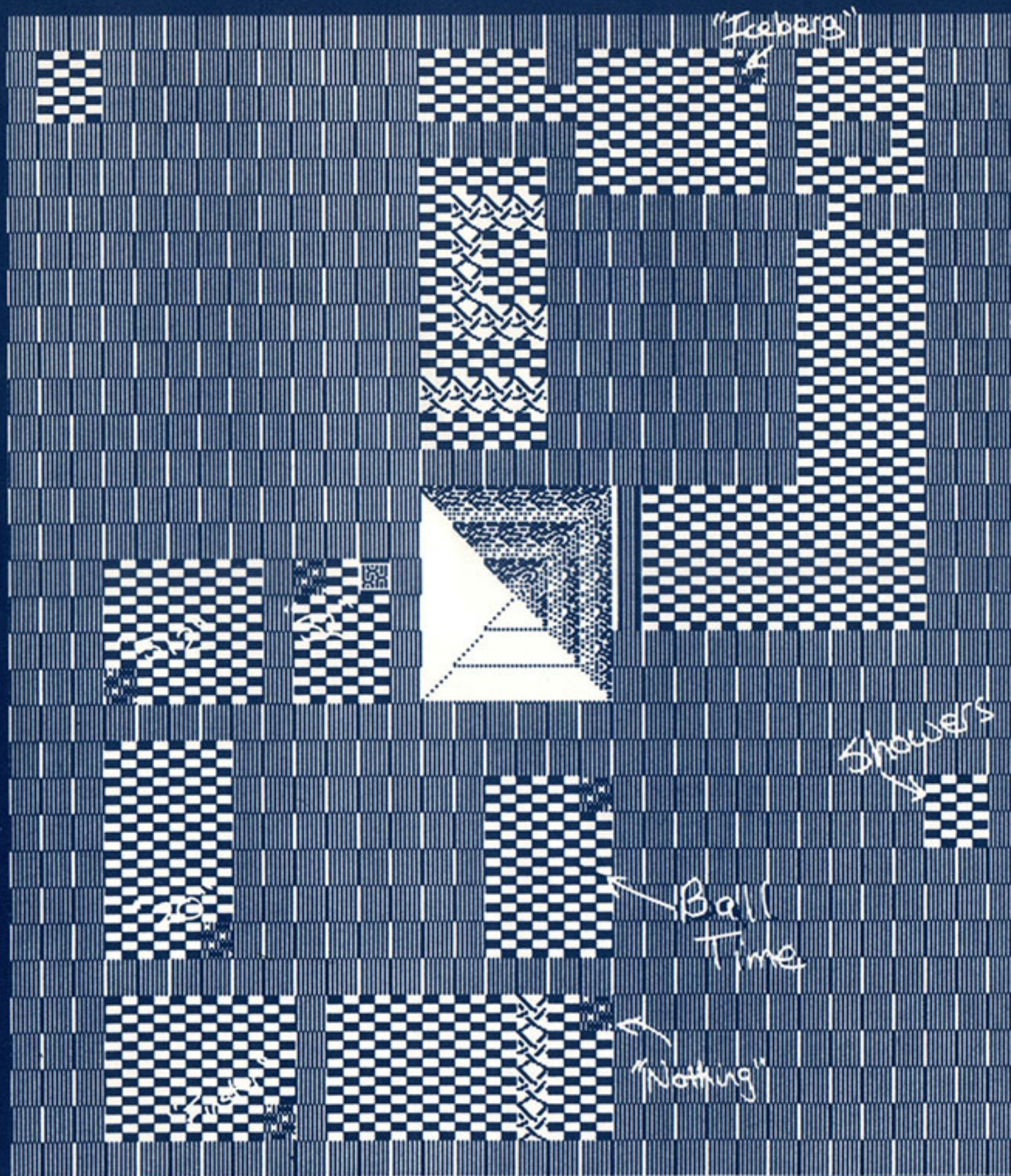
FINSTER'S CHAMBERS

FINSTER'S CHAMBERS

During our previous visit here, we couldn't get into The Underground. Now with secpass 7 in hand, we were able to open many of the doors. From the ground floor we took an elevator that led to the upper level. There we found Irwin John Finster, who didn't seem phased by our unannounced visit. Like a proud father, he showed us his pet project, a model of how the world was going to be when all men were gone. Then he abruptly asked us to leave and disappeared. We searched the rest of the upper floor, but didn't find anything of interest except for the Mindlink, which we had no idea what to do with.

Lower Level — We went back to the elevator and decided to go to the lower level. It asked for a password and Eugene, who remembered seeing "Proteus=Darwin" in the Quartz Courthouse jail cell, entered PROTEUS. When we got down there, we found a cell door which Kate broke open using her strength. (I suppose if I had to marry a woman, I'd want one just like her: one who could jack up a car with her pinky; one who could tie bows with cast iron rods; one who could separate a house from its foundation. You really never know when she'll come in handy.) Just as the cell door swung fully open, a group of prisoners rushed past us without so much as a thanks. We didn't want to hang around to take the blame for this unauthorized emancipation, so we took the elevator back up to the upper level. Finster had returned and somehow knew that we cut the prisoners loose so he lunged at us in blind anger. But before he could lay a finger on us, Stew shot him dead in his tracks.

Mindlink — Much to our surprise, his head rolled off of his body, exposing wires from every color of the rainbow — Finster was a cyborg! Eugene, who had excellent cyborg skills, scooped up the head and ran off with it over to the Mindlink in the next room. Before we could ask him what he was doing, he had connected the android's head to the Mindlink and had slipped a cyber helmet over his head. He could no longer hear us.



FINSTER'S CHAMBERS, Mind Maze

FINSTER'S CHAMBERS

Mind Maze

Finster's Mind Maze — Although he claimed it was just minutes, hours had passed before Eugene regained his consciousness. He told us of the strange mind maze that he thought he would never return from. His explanation goes as follows:

"In each room I was asked a question that I had to answer before I could proceed. The answer to get out of the first arena was 32, and the second was 512. In the third arena I ran into the Night Terror, a monster from my psyche that I knew I would never be able to kill so I left it alone. The answer to move on was 20.

"Things got trickier in the fourth arena. This is where I was buffeted around by a teleporter. I was tired of running around so I just stopped in the northwest corner. That's where I started using my IQ to think it out. All of a sudden, I hear Finster's voice and I get bumped to a new square. I just kept using my IQ until I wound up in the southwest corner. From there I ran straight for the door to the east. For the next riddle I answered FINSTER.

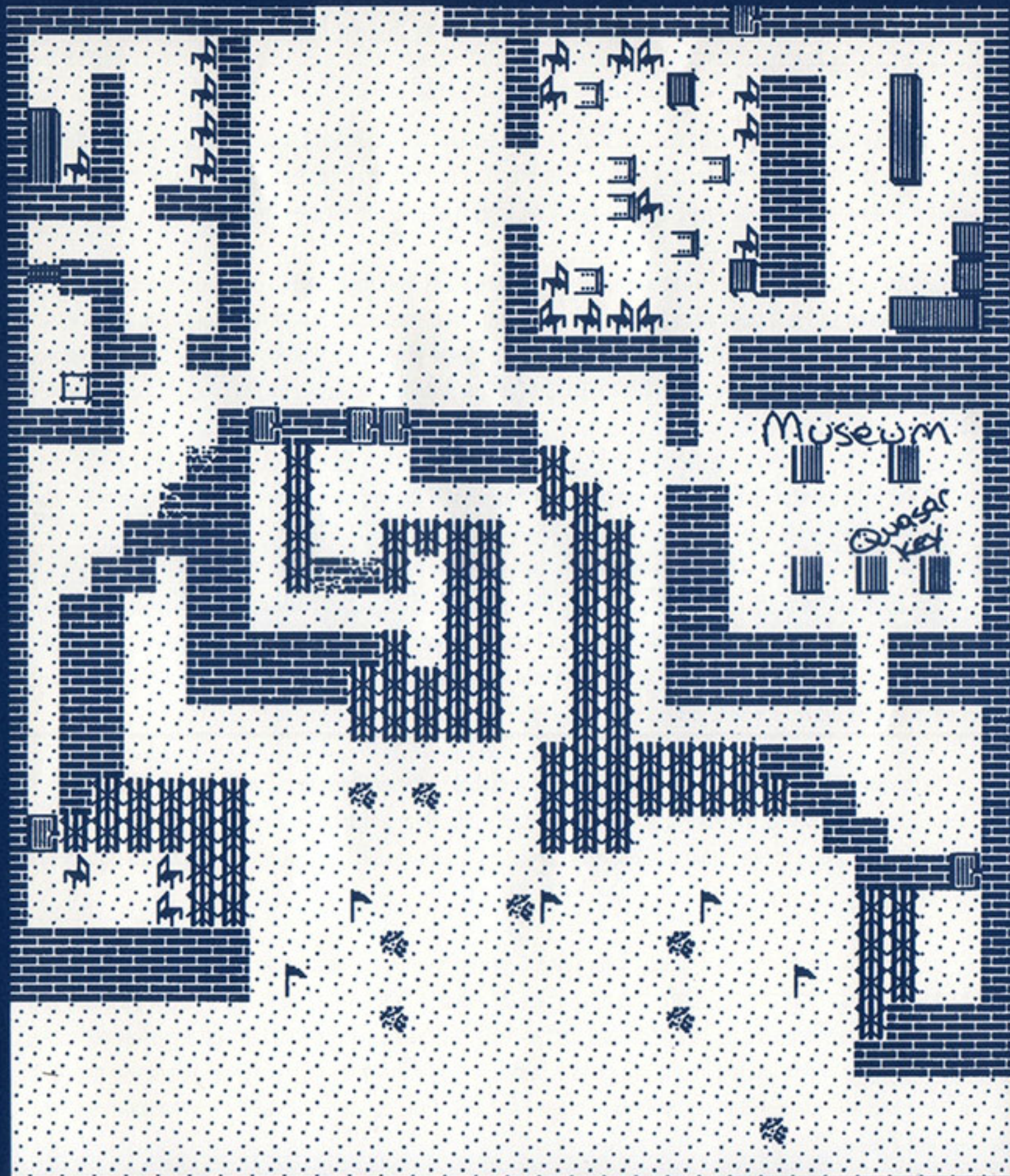
"In the fifth arena I ran into a Lie spider. After I killed it, I moved over to the web and repeatedly used my strength to break through. To get out of that arena, I answered NOTHING.

"The sixth arena scared me the most. I only played baseball once and I wound up with a black eye and two missing front teeth. I didn't know what to do so I shut my eyes, swung at the ball, and barely eeked out a single. I guess my poor performance got me thrown into the showers. After trying every skill and weapon I had, it turned out to be plain luck that got me out of there.

"In the seventh arena, I broke through a silicon wall that ran from floor to ceiling using my strength. Just as I crossed through the hole, a Finster-looking android confronted me, which I killed. I put my shoulder up against the other silicon wall and broke through again with my strength. I had to kill another one of those androids before I was let out.

"Next arena, more androids. After I killed one, I picked up its head and answered ICEBERG to its riddle, which let me into the next arena. Here a booming voice threatened that I would be killed if I went west and you guys would be killed if I went east, so I went west, but nothing happened. As I passed through a narrow doorway, I was thrown into a room where I heard you guys talk about my EEG. I was just strong enough to use my IQ to signal that I was still alive. When I was strong again, I got out of the room. From here I moved south and ran into the last Finster.

"I killed Finster with my last few clips of ammo. I found in his pocket a secpass B which I think opens one of the rooms at Sleeper Base."



GUARDIAN CITADEL

GUARDIAN CITADEL

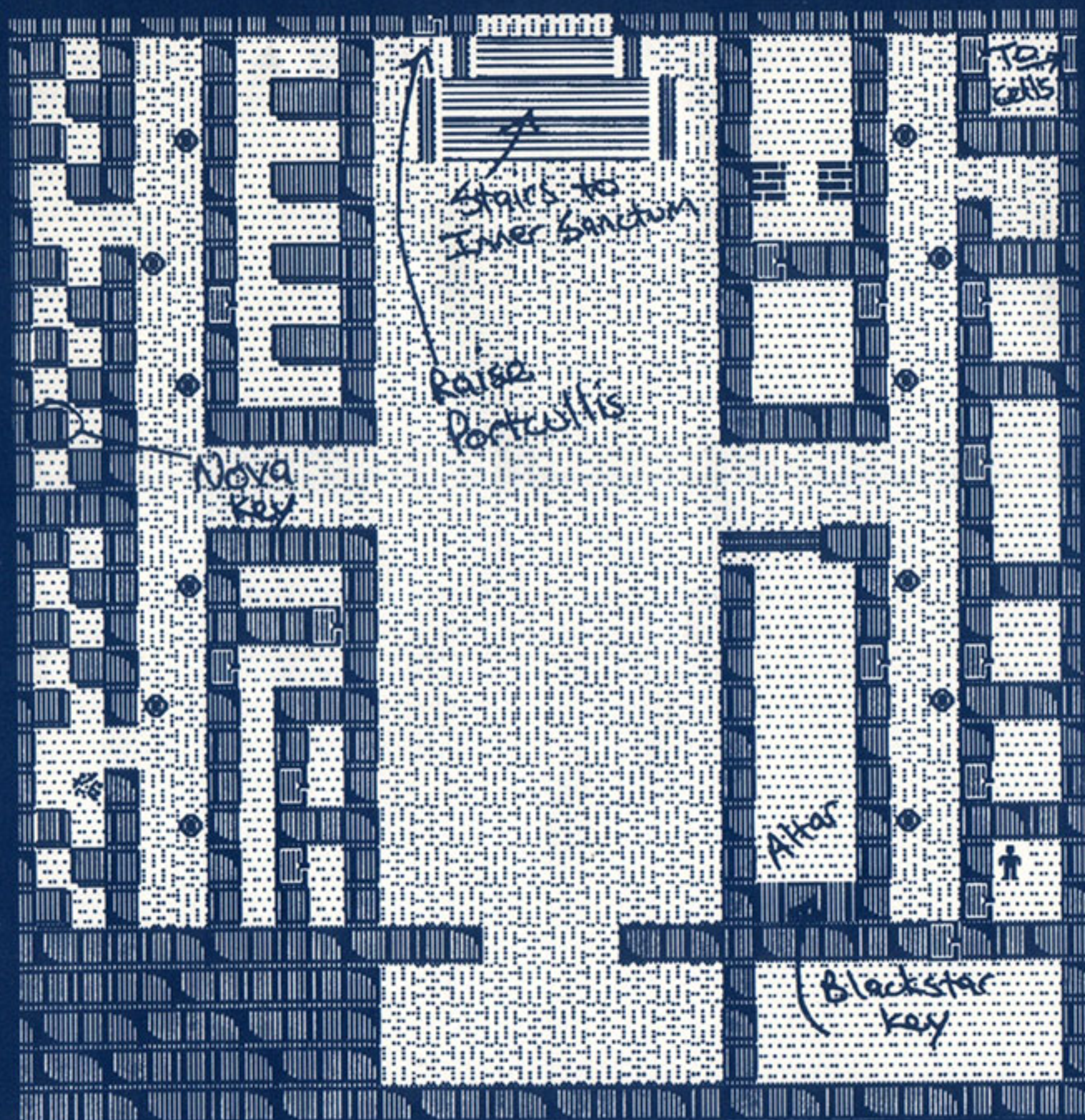
Before we went to the Guardian Citadel, we went back to Sleeper Base and used secpass B on one of the rooms we couldn't previously get in to on level 2. There we found a cache of weapons and pseudo-chitin armor, which readied us for the ills of the Guardian Citadel.

At the gate we were stopped by two brothers, David and Goliath. We knew they weren't tilting flowers, but we also didn't expect them to be so hard to kill. When we finally did bring these giants down, we found a Pulsar key which had been etched with "Do not duplicate." We knew it must've been an important key. Stew looked at it this way and that and clucked his tongue as if he knew something.

We blew through the front door and at that point, everybody with a weapon and a pulse came to greet us. Our anti-tank weaponry skills were turning out to be tremendous assets. Without it, our RPG-7s, Sabot rockets, and Law rockets probably would have shot in willy-nilly directions. As it was, we were doing a great job of nailing our targets.

We made our way through every room on the floor, ducking and blasting with every turn. When the firefighting was over, we found some power weapons, the likes of which we had never seen. Although we were all attached to our weapons, we knew that these were far more powerful and worth forsaking our beloved conventional weapons for.

Quasar Key — To the right of the entrance was a museum. In it were five pedestals, each proudly displaying a piece of art. None of us liked to defile works of art, but we could hardly find the value in what we were looking at so we tried opening the cases with our strength with some success. The ones we couldn't budge we smashed in. I picked up the twisted porcelain chunk of something-or-another from my case and looked at it. As I went to set it back down, I saw the key that had been sitting underneath it. When I showed it to Stew, his pupils constricted to black pinpoints. "The Quasar key," he said in his flattest voice.



GUARDIAN CITADEL, Outer Sanctum

GUARDIAN CITADEL

Outer Sanctum

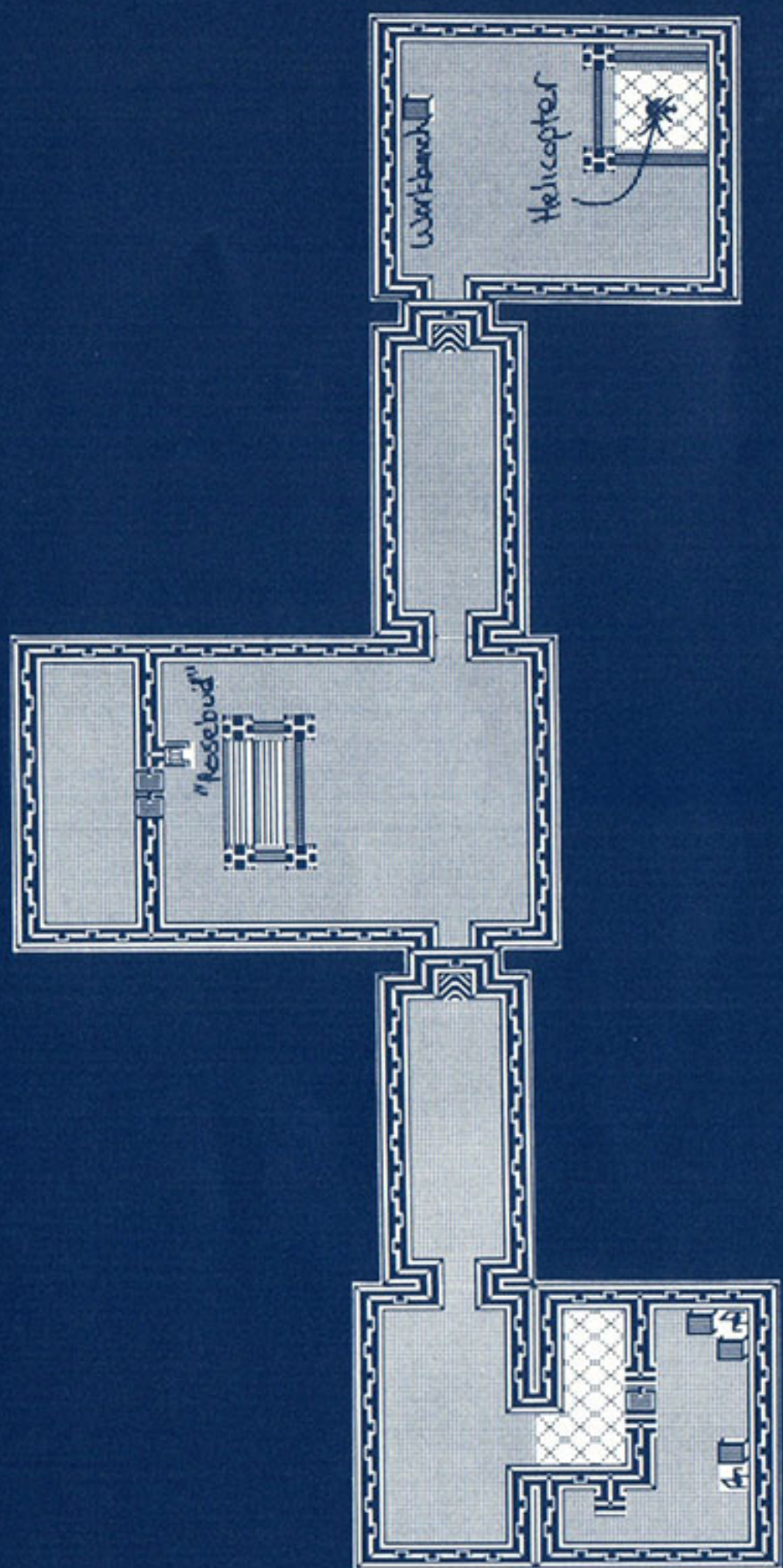
Through the door in the mess hall we found a new series of rooms in what was called the Outer Sanctum. Stew must've felt the time was ripe for an explanation because he huddled us together and told us in his most sober voice that we *had* to find two more keys. "The alternative," he said, "is to *not* find them, go on home with our tails tucked between our legs, and wait for the world to get overrun by cyborgs and 'droids. Would you like that?" I had no idea when he suddenly figured all this out, but none of us wanted to challenge his new goal.

Nova Key — We split up and began our key-finding task. I was in a room sifting through the power packs I had found when, from the next room, I heard Kate banging against the wall as if she were struggling arm-in-arm with somebody. Before I could run over to help, I heard her hooting at the top of her lungs, "Nova key! Nova key! And I found it!" Three down, one to go.

Blackstar Key — In one of the rooms there was an altar. On it stood a statue of a madonna-like woman and a few dried flowers at the base. I searched around it and under it, but didn't find anything out of the ordinary. I couldn't seem to walk away from it, so I looked it up and down using my perception. There, imbedded in the wall between the stones was the Blackstar key. I immediately took it to Stew, who slapped me so hard on the back that I staggered three steps forward.

Cell — In one of the cells through the door in the northeast, we found Redhawk. He asked us to take him back to his father, the Junkmaster of Savage Village. We told him that we had plenty enough to do without playing personal escort to some coppery-skinned punk. He countered by telling us that his father knew where our true enemy was. Stew believed him, so we all had to believe him. We would take him home after we completed our task at hand.

Portcullis — The stairs to the north were blocked by a huge portcullis. To raise it, Kate went through the door to the left of the stairs into a small room. With her soon-to-be-legendary amazonian strength, she turned the crank and raised the portcullis.



GUARDIAN CITADEL, Inner Sanctum

GUARDIAN CITADEL

Inner Sanctum

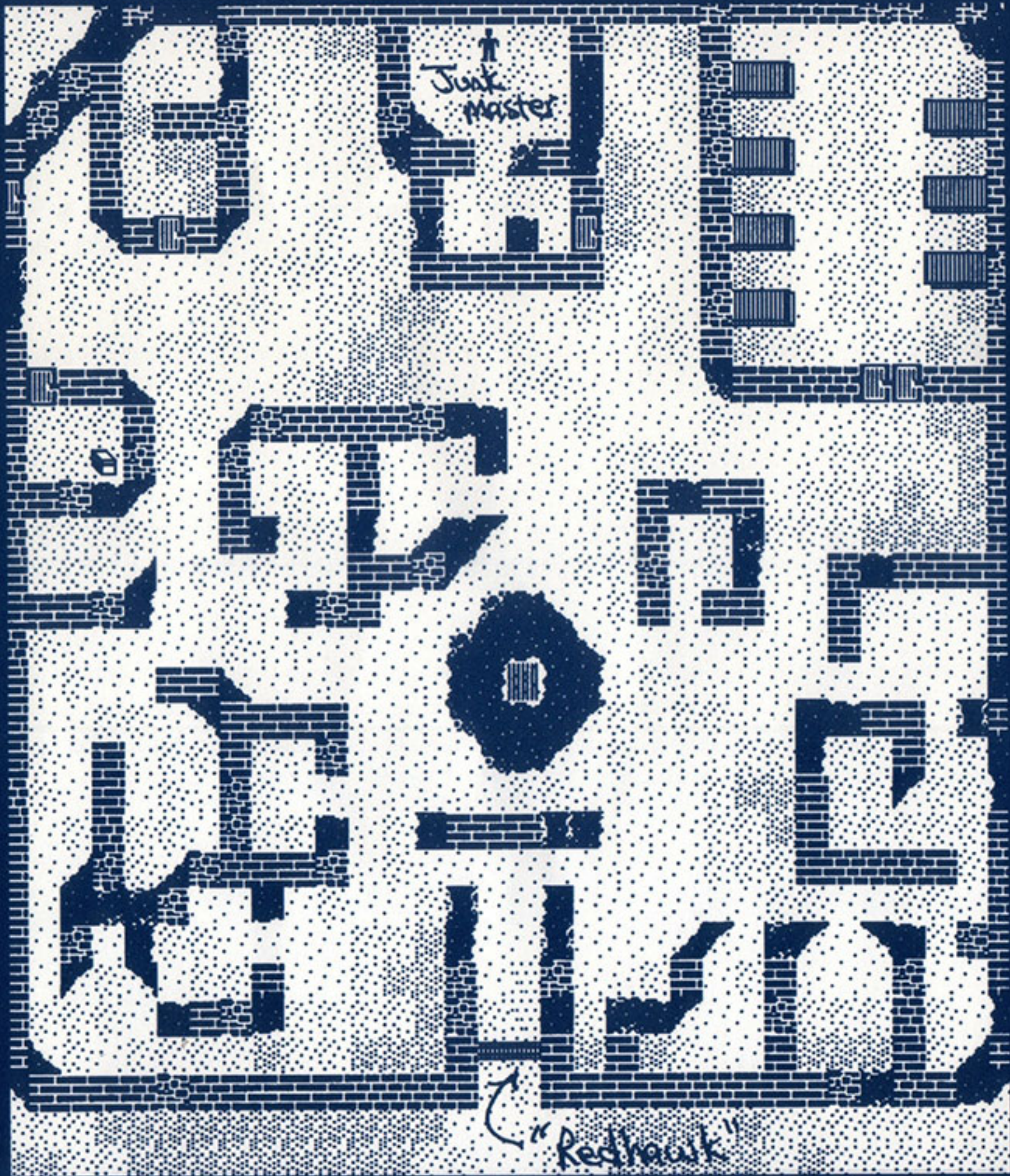
We had no idea why this was called the Inner Sanctum. There was no feeling of warmth, karma, philosophy, or anything else that we thought places called "Inner Sanctums" should have.

Power Armor and Power Packs — The two gold doors were shut tight against intrusion, but, ironically, it turned out to be one of the easiest for us to break into. No key, card, or explosive would work; only the correct code entered on the alphanumeric keyboard would allow entry. Thanks to the sloppy security around this place, we had seen ROSEBUD scribbled in a number of places. The doors parted to reveal a room full of power packs and power armor. Always happy to update our technology, we immediately stripped the pseudo-chitin armor and threw on the power armor.

Secpass B — We walked west through a series of three rooms, opened another one of those "security doors," and found a couple of desks. I turned the place upside down, but all I found was another secpass B and an old sled.

Toaster — Eugene never ceased to amaze me. He even knew how to fix a toaster. We found a workbench for him to set the toaster on and let him go to work. Even more amazing than his sweeping skills was the fact that he managed to pull a plasma coupler out of the ailing toaster, a strange place for a strange item, if ever there was.

Helicopter — In a far corner of the building, a helicopter sat behind a chain link fence. I was tempted to blast through the fence and take off with it since I had learned how to fly one at Sleeper Base, but nobody had a desire to be airborne with a man whose training came from the equivalent of a match book cover. Perhaps another day I would come back for my little joy ride.



SAVAGE VILLAGE

SAVAGE VILLAGE

Stew was all hot to head for the final confrontation, but Redhawk wanted no part of it. "Take me to Savage Village," he begged, "and my dad, who's a powerful chieftain, will reward you."

As we approached Savage Village, we saw the heavily barbed gate in the front. Redhawk kept mumbling a series of words in an attempt to recall the password. "Carburetor? No. Scrap metal. Sheet metal? Linoleum. Mmmmm. Rust..."

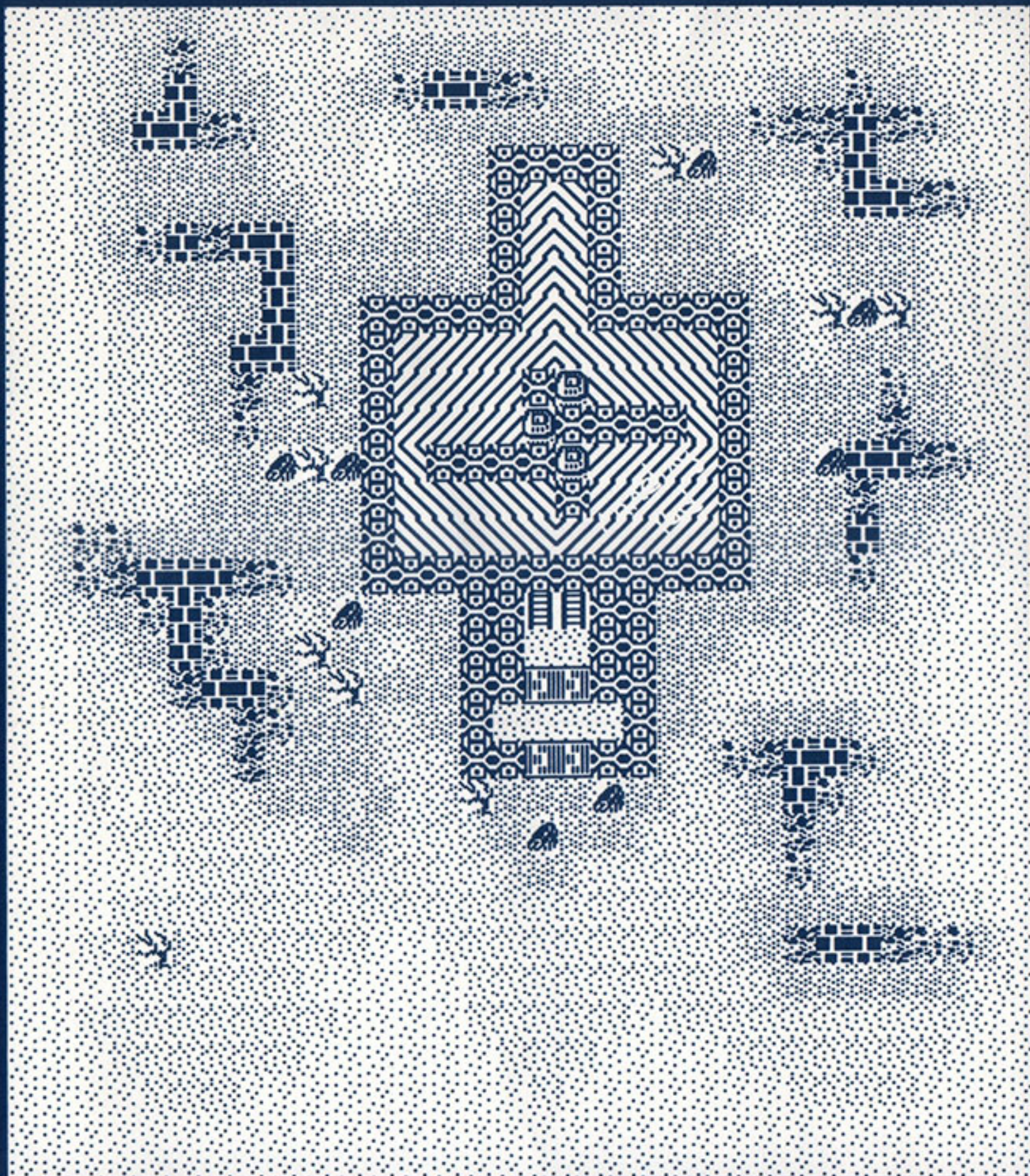
"REDHAWK," said Stew.

"What?" answered Redhawk.

"No, not you. The password. The password is REDHAWK. I got it after climbing alone to the top of one of the sand hills in Needles. Don't ask me why it was there."

A segment of almost every item made between the first world war and yesterday could have been found inside Savage Village. One man's garbage was another man's treasure, I figured. If this was their village, the place where they *lived*, I would've hate to have seen what their real junkyard looked like.

Junkmaster — We found him spaced out in his corner, wasted away from eternal days and nights of pining. When we brought him Redhawk, the Junkmaster jumped to his feet as ten years of life rushed back into his body. In exchange for his son, he gave us a load of weapons.



BASE COCHISE

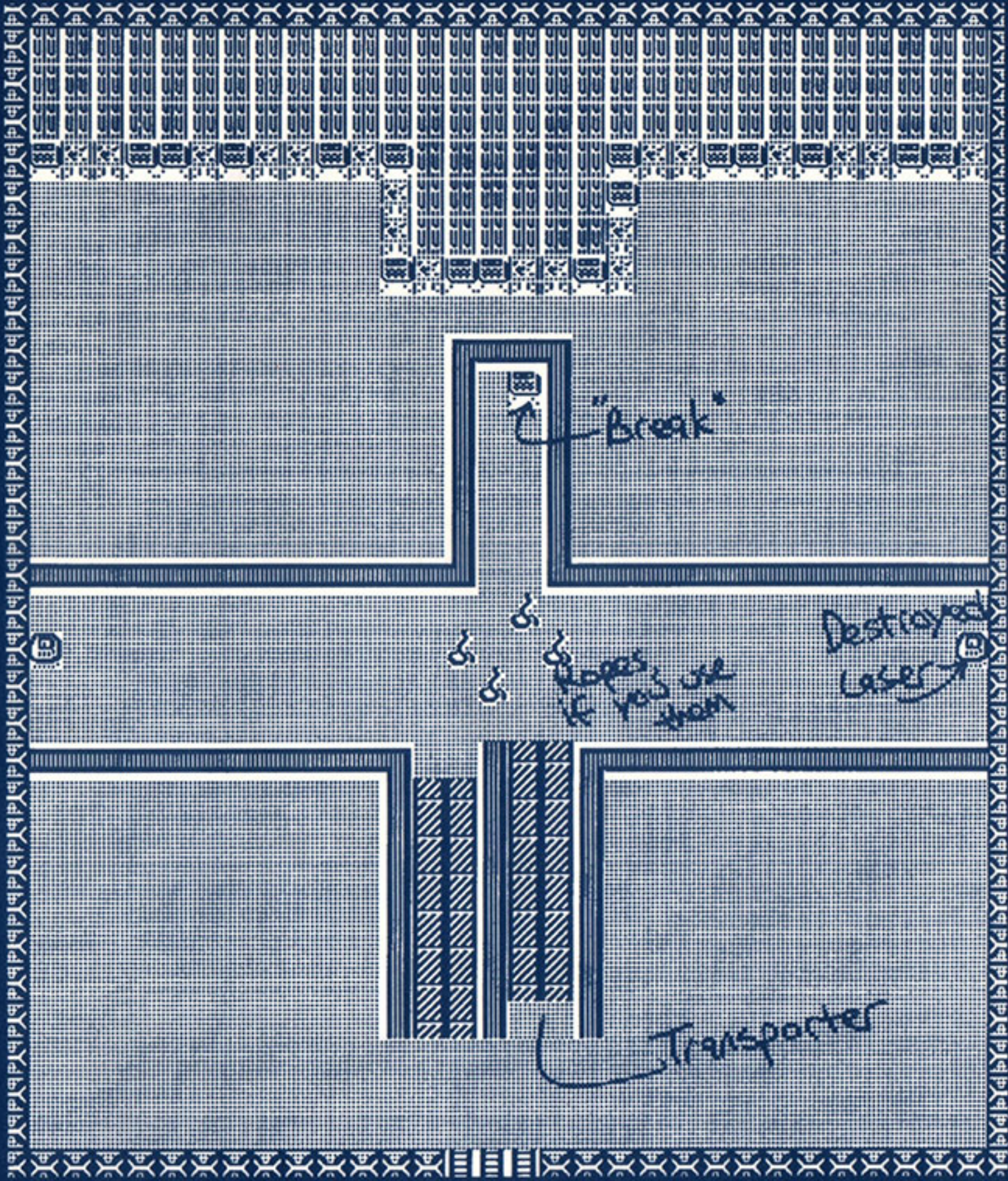
BASE COCHISE

The Junkmaster's warning about the perils of Base Cochise rang through our heads. We didn't want to die in a place where steely-eyed cyborgs would be the only ones attending our funeral. Paranoia was on our side.

Ace was looking over an aerial snapshot of Base Cochise. He pointed out the helicopter landing pad on top and said, "Let's fly in and avoid the front door defenses." This suggestion rang every one of my bells. If they wanted to put their lives in my little hands, I would be happy to fly them.

So we returned to the Guardian Citadel and hopped into the chopper. It took a while to engage the pilot's controls and seat. Finally, it dawned on me to use my chopper skills. After that brilliant deduction, we took off without a hitch, flew over the mountains, and then crash landed on the roof of Cochise. Ace was about to comment on my first solo, but a 7mm Vulcan cannon distracted him.

We ducked out of the helicopter, careful not to get hit. After mopping up a few androids and antipersonnel artillery, we climbed down from the roof, picklocked the front gate, opened the second, and clambered to the tomb below. We could've dropped through the roof with rope, but that was no way to behave as guests.



BASE COCHISE, Level 1

BASE COCHISE

Level 1

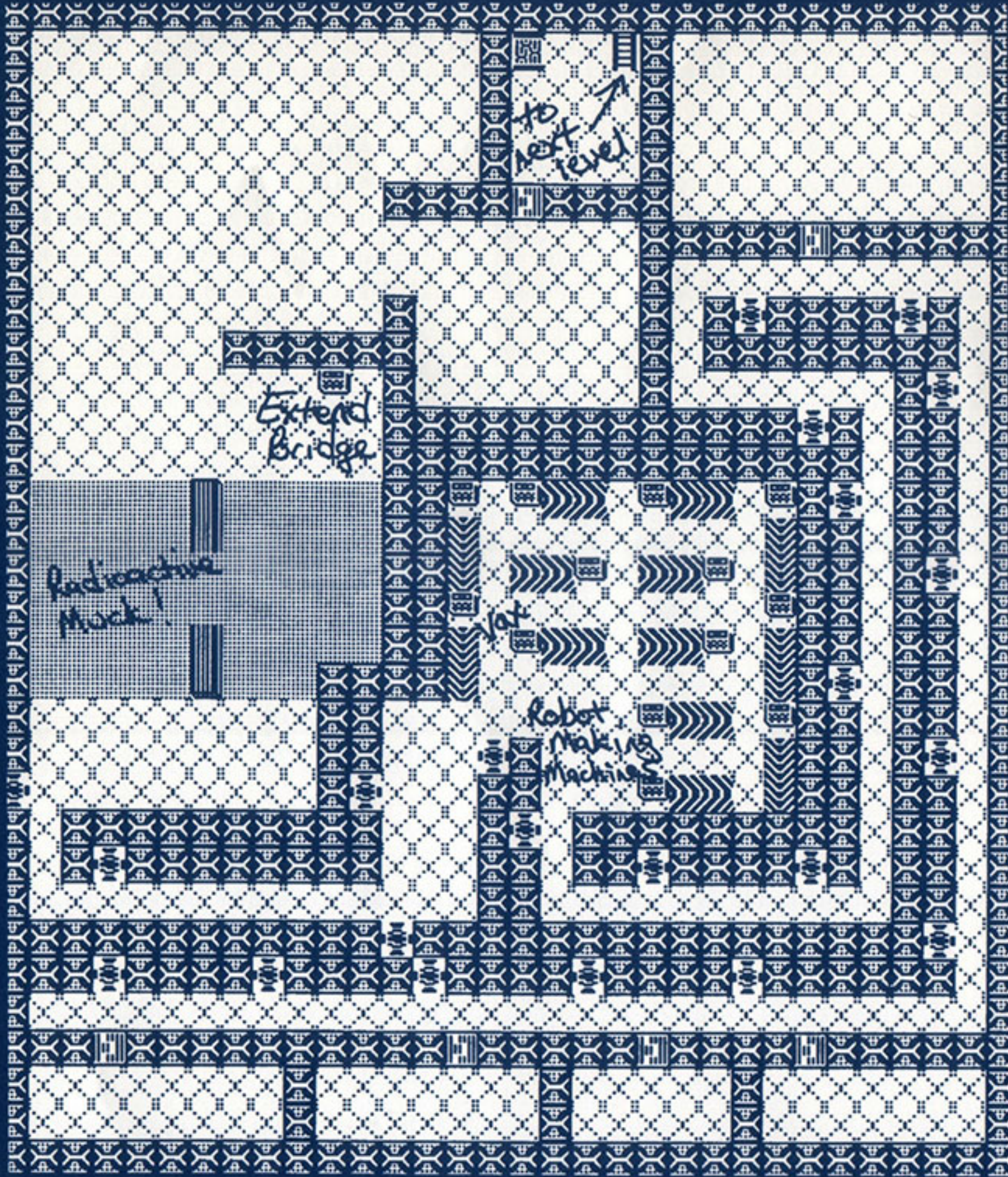
"Uuuuuuuuu" I could hear Eugene mutter to himself. Eugene had come the longest way and he had the most to lose. Months ago he was a nose-picking laboratory geek. Today, he was ten times the technician and one hundred times the fighter. And he had a killer tan on top of it. I knew he was torn between finishing what we had started and taking everything and running.

Actually, we had all learned a lot and could've taken it and ran. Any one of us could've fetched a high price as mercenaries. There was always a world market for gun-toting people who could follow a direction or two. But adding the destruction of Base Cochise on our resumes was something that we just couldn't resist, something that would up our asking price substantially. We were arguing over whether or not we wanted to go through with this when Stew raised his hands.

"We started out on a mission to save the world. Now it may actually be carried out in the name of greed. Well, if it gets the job done, who cares? I'm just telling you we're all finishing what we started. And I don't care about your reasons. You could do it for the handshakes. You could do it for the honor of your pooch. You could do it cause it just plain *feels* good. I don't care. I'm still king of this dung heap and everybody is coming with me." End of discussion. We went up to the door, blew it open, and began the end.

We stepped onto a floor conveyor belt, sort of like the ones that used to be in airports. At the end of our little ride, we were faced with three short corridors. Directly in front of us was a computer. Eugene had been working on a similar one back at Ranger Center and was about to enter BREAK when Stew stopped him mid-word. Stew was worried about making our presence known to some ill-tempered computer at this point, so we chose not to mess with it.

We went down the right corridor and felt along the wall for buttons, switches, or panels. Stew rapped his fist against it and said it sounded hollow enough to penetrate. Without having to ask, Kate had a Law rocket in hand and blew a hole clean through. After the dust cleared, we could see a chute leading down to the floor below. Like kids on a slide, we jumped in and slid down to the next level.



BASE COCHISE, Level 2

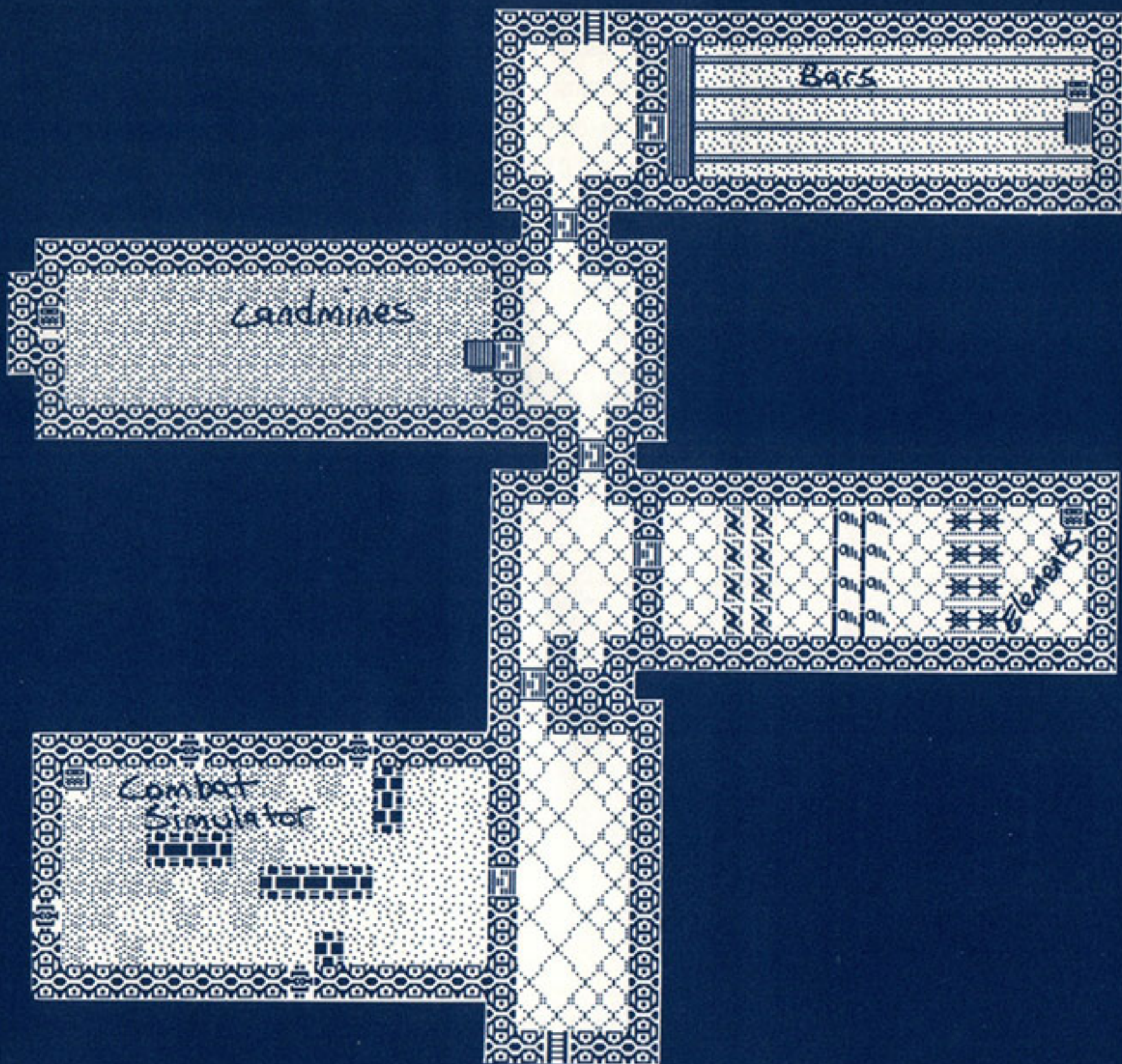
BASE COCHISE

Level 2

Robot Making Machines — Around the corner from where we landed we found a computer whose sole purpose in life was to extend the bridge that traversed the radioactive muck. (If it weren't for the bridge, we would have had to put on radiation suits, something which we had neglected to carry. We'll have to remember to plan better next time.)

We safely crossed and made our way to the center of the building where we found the robot-making machines. Eugene typed RUN at one of the terminals, and the screen displayed three choices: admin, hunter, or killer. We weren't interested in creating more enemies to battle, so we didn't choose either of the latter two. We did, however, select admin since it sounded relatively harmless. In a minute, a robot named Vax was spit out of the unit. For an administrative robot, he had an awesome constitution so we asked him to join our party. With Vax's help, we destroyed the machines from whence he came. It was a small, but satisfying step towards stopping the android invasion.

In the northeast room, we found power armor, LAW rockets, RPG-7s and power packs; all those good things in life. Stew was sorting out the weapons when the seriousness of our task seemed to strike him. "It seems pretty quiet here," he said. "Let's rest here before we wrap it up."



BASE COCHISE, Level 3

BASE COCHISE

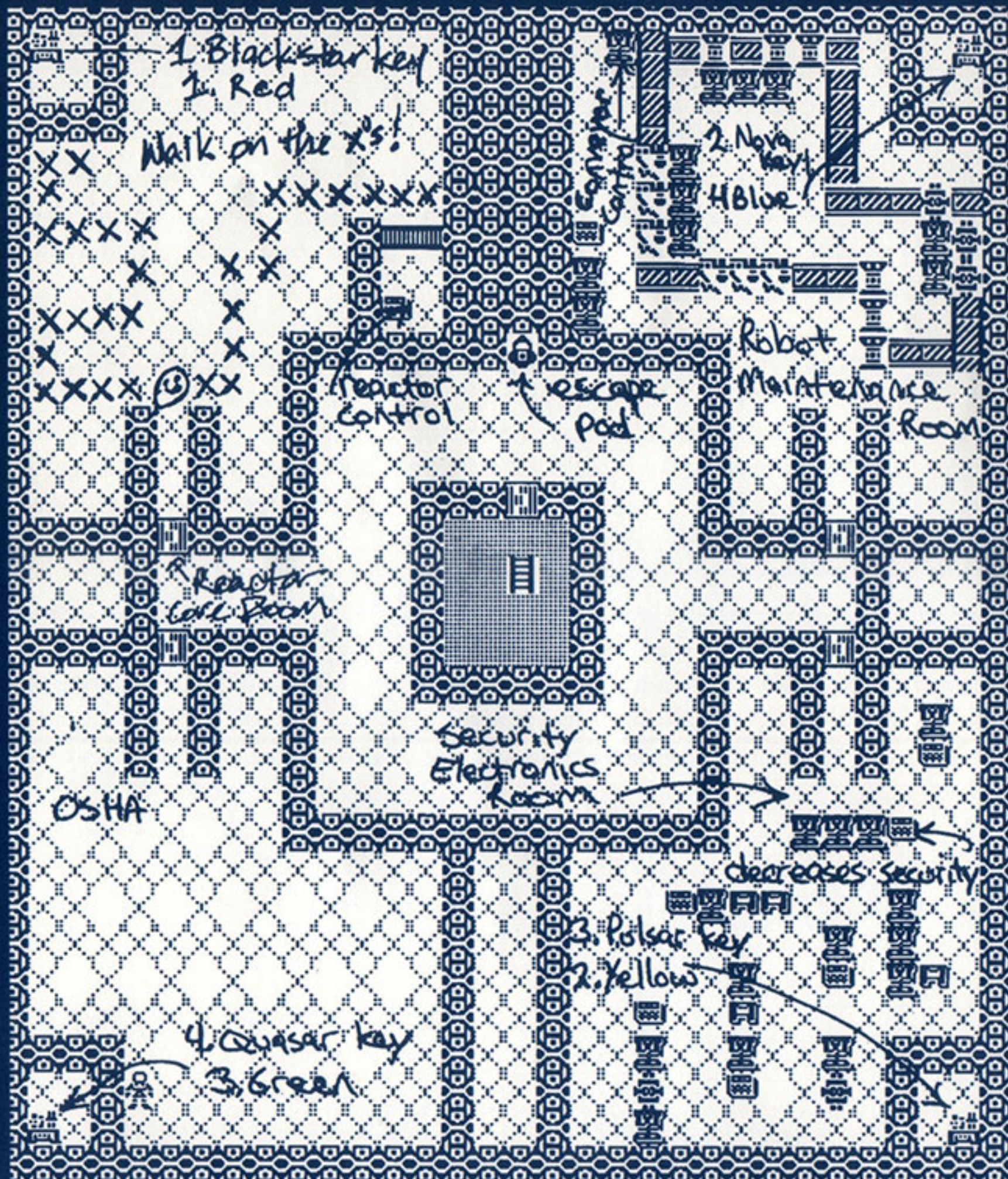
Level 3

The Four Funny Rooms — We tried to pass through the south door but keys, rockets, and threats didn't work. Eugene looked into a side room and saw a computer at the other end. Shimming with agility over one of the slippery bars and rocking perilously from side to side, Eugene made it to the other end without getting deep fried. Once he switched on the computer — which opened the vault door — he made a cautious return.

The next room was too serene to be true. I used my perception and, not surprisingly, found the place riddled with land mines. Moving cautiously along with the fear of having my feet blown into a size 30 triple Z, I made it safely across to the computer. I threw the switch to open the second vault door, and made my way back effortlessly, now that I knew where those pesky landmines were.

The third room housed some strange meteorological experiment. Three different elements blocked the path to the computer. The first, electric, was a dancing shield of tiny lightning bolts. The second element was hurricane-speed winds made visible only by the dust it kicked up in the room. The third layer, cold, was a shifting shield of ice and snow. With her power armor and a lot of luck and strength, Kate cut through each layer, making it to the third vault door switch and back. Although her hair was tangled into a rat's nest and her skin mottled in ten shades of red and white, she recovered after a few minutes of rest.

Stew wanted to handle the last room himself. Two steps into the combat simulator room, a Laser Cannon materialized from the stone walls, firing at Stew who immediately dove face-down behind a rock. Setting up in a crouched position and taking careful aim, Stew exploded it into junkyard parts with his meson canon. He took a few steps forward before he was again attacked and again had to return fire. After several more of these duck-and-fire exercises, he made it to the computer. Mission accomplished, Stew flipped it on and easily fought his way back out.



BASE COCHISE, Final Level

BASE COCHISE

Final Level

The final level of Base Cochise contained four rooms. Ace rolled out a map we had never seen before and asked us to gather around for the lowdown. He explained to us what we had to do and heartily suggested that we not screw up this late in the game.

Security Electronics Room — Here we found a machine that allowed us to reduce the frequency of security units being released. Eugene didn't need any convincing on our part to use his electronic skills to make it work.

Robot Maintenance Room — This is where the robots went to get the most out of their metallic lives. Kate blew up the computer that controlled the conveyor belts, which completely shut down the system.

OSHA — There was nothing here. Nothing, except for the Silver Strangler, one of the worst killing machines we had ever seen. We destroyed it, but not without a high price. Kate lay bleeding on the floor, her side cut clean open. There was nothing we could do to save her so we left her behind.

Reactor Core Room — We didn't have radiation suits, thanks again to our lack of proper planning. Stew, who was becoming more and more curious to us, told us to follow his exact footsteps unless we wanted to become radioactive Rangers. He led us over to the glass wall behind which a large computer was enshrined. After blowing it open, he told Eugene to install the plasma coupler we had found at Sleeper Base.

After we backtracked out of the room, Stew surprised us all by pulling out a highly confidential military document. "This is the destruction sequence," he said. "We have to split up to do this. I'm going to explain to you what sequence we have to turn the keys in and what order the colors have to be executed. We're almost there, guys. This is the last thing I'm ever going to ask you to do. Be a pal and don't mess it up." I looked with surprise at the others who could only stand with their mouths ajar.

To complete our task, we had to split up. Stew and Vax remained in the Reactor Core Room with the Blackstar key. Eugene took the Nova key and ran over to the Robot Maintenance Room. Ace took the Pulsar key and went to the Security Electronics. I took the Quasar key and went to the OSHA Room. As Stew had instructed us, we turned the keys in the following sequence: Blackstar, Nova, Pulsar, and Quasar. To complete the destruction process, we ran the color sequence: Nuclear Reactor Room — red, Security Electronics Room — yellow, OSHA Room — green, and Robot Maintenance Room — blue.

The countdown began. The greater task was done and all that was left was the lesser task of escaping with our lives. Much to our surprise and relief, we found an escape pod in the north wall of the courtyard and blasted out of there. We sat in stunned silence as Base Cochise grew smaller and smaller through the port window. Part of the shock came from having completed our mission, part from losing Kate, and part from Stew's sudden weirdness.

The pod took us up to the first level and from there we ran like rabbits out into the desert. We had spent months in the desert unravelling a bloody, sandy mess and it all came down to this final moment, where a small city would light up the desert sky like the first bomb that dropped a hundred years ago in World War III. After our amazement passed, we turned to Stew and asked why he had never revealed the fact that he knew Base Cochise existed. Stew removed his head, shook out a little sand out and reattached it to his neck. "Be-cuz," he began in an electronically clipped voice, "I wuz not pro-grammed to."

EPILOGUE

So Stew turned out to be a 'droid. Pretty weird to think that the very thing we needed to exterminate helped us do the exterminating. Stew was okay though; he was a "friendly." Turns out he was one of the first androids developed at the Ranger Center, under the guidance of Einstein's great-great-great-great grandchildren. Stew now lives in a little Quonset hut outside of Vegas and shoots at desert rats all day. Big news is that he just married a pretty prototype domestic 'droid named Stepford.

Eugene is back in his air-conditioned lab at the Ranger Center. He swears that he'll never get stuck out in the desert again and only goes outside to take an occasional soil sample. But if you feed him enough snake squeezins, he does admit that he had a good time on his trip, and wouldn't trade in the experience for 30,000 crisp white lab coats.

Kate. Well, she was barbecued in the big blast. If you have to go, a free cremation never hurts. May she rest in desert peace.

I have a small atlas business on the side that keeps the money trickling in so I can travel and map. I'll have a new map series coming out on the Australian outbacks soon. If you get sent there to squash an android uprising, be sure to pick it up.

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