



HARD



NOVA

C L U E B O O K

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When Kendall asked me to write a Mercenary Ops Manual, I told him he was crazy. Actually, I called him a ~~fuck~~, but I'm not supposed to swear in this thing so that word will probably get erased. Then he offered me fifty thousand to do it. Hell, that's more than he paid me to kill the dictator of Ariel, Damien Altron. So now I'm a writer. Here's your first lesson in being a good merc — no high-paying job is beneath you.

This isn't really meant to be a formal guide or anything. I didn't even spend that much time on it. Kendall just said to jot down my ideas on how to stay alive long enough to get the job done. The Starkiller Mercenary Group is planning on franchising in other frontier systems, and they need a startup guide for new hires.

Here it is. I talk about combat, equipment, skills, and all that. I didn't know how to describe investigation techniques (yeah, being a merc isn't just shooting and looting) so I decided to describe all my recent missions, starting with just after I got my last ship. That way you can see how I deal with situations.

If this thing is organized badly, or if you can't understand what I'm trying to say, that's your problem. You gotta be smart and flexible to be a good mercenary. Besides, I didn't ask to write this book anyway. I learned all I know without using a paint-by-numbers book like this one. Use your brains if you got em, and if you're still alive and winning after a year of hard work, you're better than most mercs. Then you can write your own damn book.

Enjoy,

Nova

THE STARKILLER MERC COMBAT JOURNAL

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MONEY

In case you didn't already know (which means you're in a whole lot of trouble), money is the single most important thing on the Frontier. Whatever you do, do it for money, and do it for as much money as you can get. If you don't believe that, let me convince you.

Being a merc is one of the most expensive jobs you can find. Most people, from merchant traders to garage mechanics, they all have to buy equipment to do their jobs. So do mercs, but we're the only ones who have people shooting at us all day, blowing up our expensive hardware. If you're not careful, you'll end up spending all your pay on repairs and replacement equipment after the job is done.

Besides picking up mercenary work, there are other things you can do to make some quick cash. One way is to compete in the RoboMaze at Spaceport Malibu on Mastassini—where you not only get money for picking up flags, you get to practice your combat skills. But the two most effective methods of acquiring cash are smuggling and trading.

SMUGGLING

Smuggling is like mother's milk to a merc, because nobody (and I mean NOBODY) pays you for jobs in advance. Nobody wants their money littering a hallway full of dead mercs. You need to smuggle to get the money you need to buy the equipment you need to finish a job to get the money you need to cover your original costs that the smuggling paid for, and you come out ahead in the end. Get it?

In case you don't get it, just take my word for it. Smuggle goods as often as you can. You'll find the frontier's a really ugly and unfriendly place for a merc without any cash. Being dead-broke is only one step away from dead, period.

But there's a catch — smuggling can be deadly-dangerous. Usually the higher the pay, the more dangerous the run. And watch out for hot spots. As you travel around, you'll get a pretty clear idea of what planets and systems are dangerous to be caught dead in. If your ship and crew aren't up to the rough stuff, two missions that pay 10,000 are better than one mission that pays 20,000. Use good judgement — all the surviving mercs do.

TRADING (GUN RUNNING)

Trading is another word for exploiting an inflated economy at the expense of a depressed economy. Trust me. (I heard it from Gerard Kendall — the most reliable source I know.) There are places where weapon prices are low, and other places where they are high. Buy low, sell high. It's as natural as the law of superior force.

Here's a list of all the arms stores in the Four Systems, in order of economies, including their abbreviations. If you buy from any store and then sell to another store lower on the list, you'll make money. (Except for the two stores on Ariel — they have the same prices because they're in the same city.)

<u>STORE</u>	<u>PLANET</u>	<u>CITY/LOCATION</u>
Starkiller Company Store (SCS)	Holbrook	Starkiller HQ
Mayhem Unltd. (MU)	Mastassini	Spaceport Malibu
Arms Emporium (AE)	Ariel	Spire Hoverdock
Imported Arms (IA)	Ariel	Spire Civic Park
Weapon World (WW)	Tikorr	Tikorr Lounge
Used Weapons (UW)	Tikorr	Tikorr Club
Meridian Store (MS)	Ciberan	Meridian City
Rouyn Store (RS)	Rouyn	Rouyn Mining Colony
Trading Center (TC)	Varon	Glumpon

The hot tip is, buy from the Starkiller Company Store. The selection isn't the best, but the stuff is dirt-cheap. You can double, triple, even quadruple your money by selling Starkiller stuff to other stores. The further down the list you go, the more you'll make. Consider running guns from Holbrook to Varon to supply arms for the Lanta Philosophy Wars — there are worse ways to make a living.

HARDWARE

Hardware can be broken down into three categories: AMLs, protective armor, and weapons. Your life depends on all three because mercs are almost always outnumbered, sometimes as bad as 50-1. (Are you sure you want to be a merc?) I'll talk about each topic here in turn, in order of importance.

AUTOMATED MEDICAL LINING

Damn right. The single most important thing you need on your person is good AML. Anyone who doesn't think so can lease themselves a cemetery plot right now. No matter how big your gun is, or how thick your armor is, or how good a merc you are, the enemy's gonna hit you more often than you hit them (because you're outnum-

bered). Your survivability is based upon your AML's ability to keep you alive while you take multiple hits. Between the drugs, heat, and pressure, Rush AML will make you sick to your stomach, but it's a hell of a lot better than dying.

Think of your AML as your dinner, protective armor is your plate, and your gun is your knife and fork. You need your plate and utensils to eat dinner, but it don't amount to squat if you don't *have* any dinner. (Or don't think about it that way — see if I care.)

The bottom line — get Rush AML for you and all your crew members as soon as you can, or at least get Extended AML if you can't find Rush. Here's where you can get some, in order of increasing quality:

AML	Where to Buy
Issue	SCS, MU
Extended	MS
Rush	Not Avail. in Stores

AML Availability

Okay, so you can't buy Rush AML in stores. That's because it's too hot to stay on the shelves. Keep your eyes open and you can find some in a back room somewhere.

PROTECTIVE ARMOR

Yep, Protective Armor is the second most important item you need. (If you're really disappointed that I haven't talked about guns yet, stop reading now for your own good.) While it isn't important to get the best armor available before you buy a decent blaster (a tall order), you should always be conscious of the possibility of upgrading your current armor. You want to take as much stress off your AML as you can by wearing strong armor, because you'll be taking lots of hits. (Did you forget how outnumbered you're gonna be? Are you still sure you want to be a merc?)

But Battle Armor isn't necessarily the best armor for you to wear in every situation. It's the best protection money can buy — or a blaster can liberate — but it's bulky, loud, and can slow you down. You have to decide for yourself which armor to use for each occasion, depending on your fighting style and skill.

No matter what your style, the very least you should do is get armor that's better than your flimsy uniform. The Body Armor you're issued isn't bad — to start. Here's where you can get protective armor:

Protective Armor	Where to Buy
Body Armor	AE, LW, WW
Flak Vest	RS, WW
Kevlar Suit	Not Avail. in Stores
Glide Shield (Darcator)	Not Avail. in Stores
Battle Armor	Not Avail. in Stores
Grav Blocker (Darcator)	Not Avail. in Stores

Protective Armor Availability

Okay, so armor's not so easy to buy either. The good armor is often custom made and hard to come by. Keep your eyes open.

WEAPONS

Okay, once you get good AML and suitable protective armor, *then* you can worry about a hand-held weapon. There are dozens of guns around, from pea shooters to monster cannons, so you can get bigger and bigger guns as soon as you find them and can afford to get them (buy them or liberate them). And make sure you know of a good ammo supply, no matter how good you think you are. You'll be burning a lot of clips even if you hit every time.

Here's a list of weapons available in the Four Systems, where to buy them, and where to buy ammo for them. (Check your manual for specifics on which weapons need what ammo.) You can also pick up weapons and ammo on your excursions — in fact, some weapons cannot be bought in stores and must be scavenged. This list is in approximate order of increasing firepower, but remember that there are other restrictions not shown, like price, effective range, weapon type (Close, Standard, or Special — for skill considerations), and limitations on which races can use them.

Weapon	Where to Buy	Where to Buy Ammo
Stiletto	WW	No Ammo Req.
Stun Club	TC	No Ammo Req.
Derrin XL10	RS	RS, LW
Power Fist	RS, MU	No Ammo Req.
Sonic Mace	IA	No Ammo Req.
Gyro Pike	MS, TC	No Ammo Req.
AutoMagnum	MU	MU, LW
Grav Blade	IA	No Ammo Req.
Spike Caster	TC	SCS, MS, LW
Edge Spinner	SCS	No Ammo Req.
SL20 Sniper	SCS, WW	WW, TC
Electron Blade	AE	AE, LW
SMG-70X	MS	MS, LW, TC
M III Laser	Not Avail. in Stores	SCS, MS, MU
Slug Thrower	IA	IA, MU
M23-30AR	TC	SCS, LW, WW, TC
JW2 Blaster	Not Avail. in Stores	SCS, MS, MU
Grav Gun	AE	AE, WW, RS
Comp Blaster	Not Avail. in Stores	SCS, RS
Grav Disruptor	Not Avail. in Stores	IA, LW
Blast Rifle	Not Avail. in Stores	SCS, RS
ThermoCaster	Not Avail. in Stores	SCS
Radiation Grenade	TC	No Ammo Req.

Weapon Availability.

SPACECRAFT COMBAT

There are a lot of things you need to do to put the odds in your favor (I don't care how good you are — if you keep going into fights with 50-50 odds, your luck's gonna run out real quick). Here are the things you need to know, divided into the main points.

YOUR SHIP

The first thing you need to win a space battle is a decent ship. My experience has been that the Starkiller Mercenary Group gives lousy ships to its mercs. (Sorry, Kendall, but it's true.) But I understand the reason — if you're not a smart merc, they don't want to waste a plush, expensive ship on you, and if you're a smart merc, you can turn any bathtub into a sleek dogfighting spacecraft. Life's tough — it's just a cruel law of nature — and life's tougher when you're stupid.

The result is the same — you start off with a worthless pile of junk. To beat it into shape, you need skilled personnel. (And I mean *skilled*. Don't get fooled by wannabe hacks who'll screw up more than they fix.) Get a technician to hack all the systems, and get an engineer to fix them when they get damaged.

Once you turn your ship into a decent flying and fighting machine, it's only as good as your crew. If you hire a crew from the bottom of the food chain, you're gonna run into trouble no amount of technology can fix. Put the right people at the right post and make them specialize. I'll talk more about this later.

FALSE SIGNATURES

Often the first step in any military encounter is to get close to the enemy without being seen. Never underestimate the value of surprise. Use your signatures to disguise your ship so the enemy doesn't suspect an attack until he's halfway to the hereafter.

Extracting a false signature trace from analyzing other ship emissions is hard work, and it's a good argument for having an expert technician. And even an expert needs to focus the ship's sensors on a target for a long time before they can capture its signature on tape. But the extra few seconds a false signature can give you is worth the time and effort.

The most important thing to remember about signatures is that no signature works all the time. Flying disguised as a Ciberan Transport won't draw the attention of most rival mercs, but if you go into Ariel space, it's like waving a red flag in front of a bull. Use your brain and analyze each situation before choosing a false signature.

COUNTERMEASURES

Countermeasures have the advantage of being virtually foolproof. If you use the correct countermeasure, you will rarely be hit by an enemy missile. Unfortunately, countermeasures use fuel at an incredible rate, so you can't just leave them all on all the time. (You *can* leave them all on, if you want to, and if you don't mind limping around the solar system, unable to fire lasers or go through stargates, a sitting duck to anyone with a loaded weapon.)

The best (only) thing to do is to find out what weapon your enemy is using, and then activate only the appropriate countermeasure when a missile is bearing down on your ship. Disengage the countermeasure as soon as the missile is gone.

Discovering the kind of missile your enemy is using is not an easy job, and it's another good argument for having an expert technician. Until they can tell you what missile types are inbound, wait until the last second, and then turn on all your countermeasures. When the threat is gone, quickly turn them off again.

WEAPONS

Get an A7 Comet Beam as soon as you can afford it. It's that simple. These continuous-fire laser weapons are devastating, especially when you shadow the target as you fire.

Keep your other three missile bays filled with the three different types of missile (there's no point in having more than one A7 since they do not run out of ammo — they use your ship's fuel cells). Missiles are long distance weapons for use when the target is far out of visual range. Use them to destroy ships at a distance to thin out the ranks of the enemy before you arrive.

Don't waste your missiles on targets if you don't know what kind of countermeasures they're using. When your technician can tell what type of missile they're jamming, then fire a different type. Discovering the kind of countermeasures your enemy is using is also a difficult job, and it's yet another good argument for having a good technician. Until your tech can tell you what missile you should use on an enemy, your chances of scoring a missile hit are nil and none.

TACTICS

It's hard to say what makes for good space battle tactics above and beyond what I've already said earlier. See what target you're dealing with in case you want to use a missile from farther out. Otherwise, use false signatures to get close without drawing enemy fire, then give them all you've got until they're a flash of light and a

cloud of atoms. Turn on your own countermeasures if you see incoming missiles, and know your limits. If you start losing too many systems, leave before the enemy destroys your ability to escape.

The only other thing I can say (though I hope this much is obvious), and that is don't go into the middle of an enemy fleet and start shooting. Fly around the perimeter and pick off the ships on the outside, and then work your way in toward the middle. If you have a good ship, and good crew, and a good head on your shoulders, you might live to fight another day.

HOVERSHIP COMBAT

There's not a whole lot I can say about combat with hoverships except to avoid it if you can. Hoverships are not built for combat, they're built for transportation. If you do get suckered into a fight, fire fast and furious, and never, *never* allow yourself to get stuck in a cross fire. All hoverships are built about the same, so unless you're a great hover-gunner, the odds are pretty much even. If you flip a coin too many times, it will eventually come up tails and put you in the ground.

Sometimes the best offense is a good defense — there's nothing cowardly about running away from a fight you can't win. One quick way to avoid fighting in your hovership is to dock quickly. Since your hovership automatically stops when it reaches a hoverdock, line up on one of the destination coordinates and fly toward your destination at top speed. Disembark as soon as your ship stops at the hoverdock.

GROUND COMBAT

The key to successful ground combat is good hardware, strong skills, and sound tactics. I've already covered hardware in an earlier section, and I'll cover skills in the next section. Here I'll only talk about tactics

Tactics require practice. Your missions will give you practice, but first go to the robomaze on Mastassini so you can practice without threatening your life. And not only can you practice your tactics by going farther and farther into the maze, you can collect flags to redeem for money at arms stores. It's a no-lose situation, unless you lose.

CHECK YOUR TARGETS

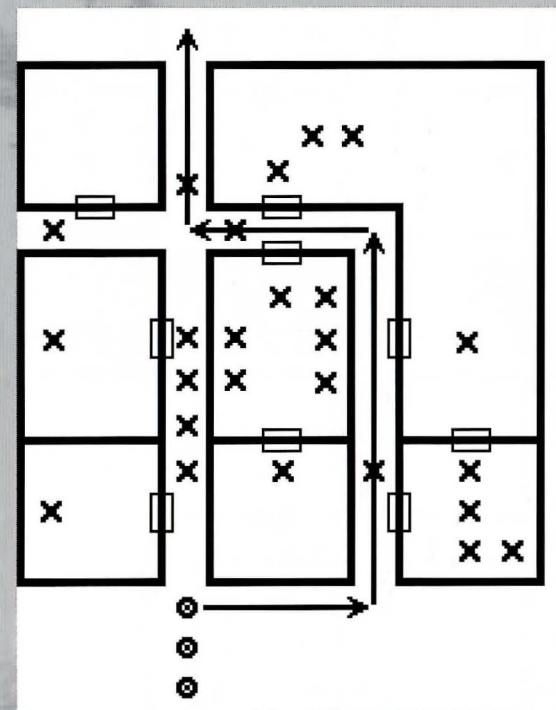
The first and most important rule is to know who to kill and who not to kill. Always, *always*, check your targets. Killing innocent civilians is not just bad for business and morale, it could cost you valuable information. And that goes for enemies, too. If you

meet an enemy who's willing to talk, indulge him or her for as long as it doesn't endanger your life and mission. Listen, learn, and *then* kill if you have to. Never refuse information, but don't believe everything you hear. As usual, use your brain.

AMBUSH AND OVERPOWER

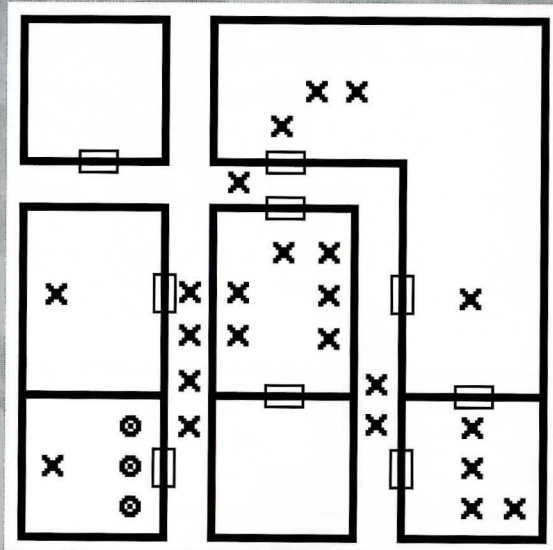
Even if you end up against a hundred enemy fighters, they all can't surround you and fire at the same time. None of the planets of the Four Systems has an atmosphere breathable to humans, so most fighting is done in tight hallways and cramped rooms. This is the only reason you have a chance when you're up against 100-1 odds.

Choose the path of least resistance. Gang up on enemy fighters who are separated from their platoon.



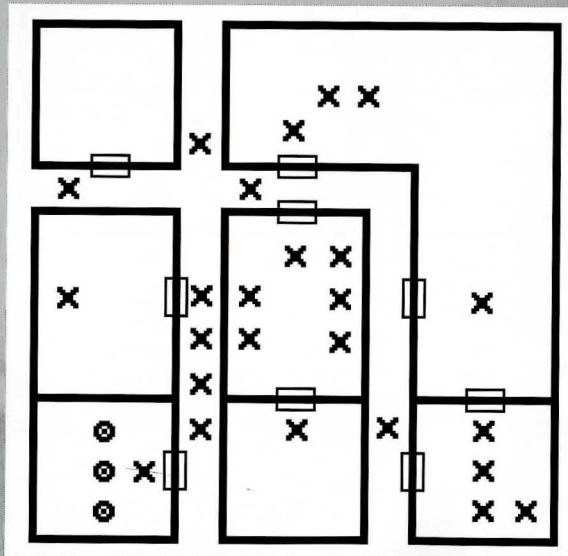
Path of Least Resistance

Force your way into rooms that only contain a couple enemies, and block the door so no others can enter while you dispatch the ones inside.



Gang-up

Then back away from the door just enough to let only one enemy in at a time, and kill them.



Ambush

STICK TOGETHER

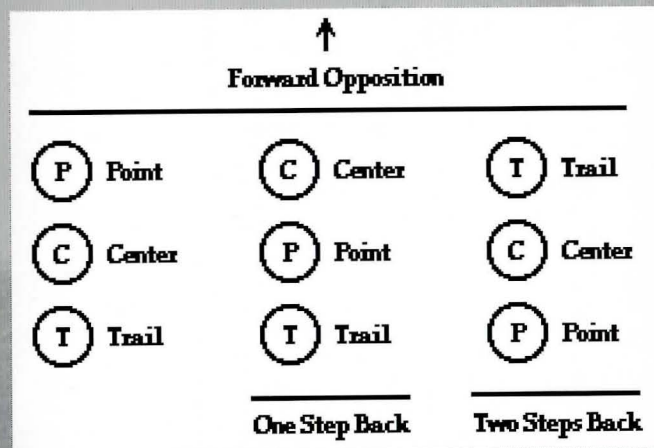
This should be self explanatory, but just in case, always stay within a step of each other. The only way you can protect each other is to stay together. If one of your landing party gets cut off during a hand-to-hand battle, your first priority is to take out the enemies between you so they can return to your side. Ask anyone if you don't believe me. They'll all agree with me because the one's who don't quickly end up dead.

PROTECT THE WEAK AND INJURED

You always lead your marching order, called the Point position. You want your strongest and most capable crew member in the Trail position, and the next strongest in the Center position. This way the weakest of the your landing party is partially protected between you and the trailing member.

The best method of protecting the weak is to avoid situations where you have no back door. Fight your way into tight areas without letting anyone by you to block your retreat. Keep an eye out for empty rooms where you can run in and barricade the door until your AMLs heal everyone to full strength.

If you do get into a desperate situation, you can maneuver your party to remove the most injured person from the line of fire. When you're in the lead, step back once, and the Center person steps in front of you. Step back one more time, and the Trail person steps in front of both you and the Center, effectively reversing your order. Use this technique to roll the strongest crew member in the line of fire during a heated battle.



Changing Positions

THE ROLE OF SCOUTING

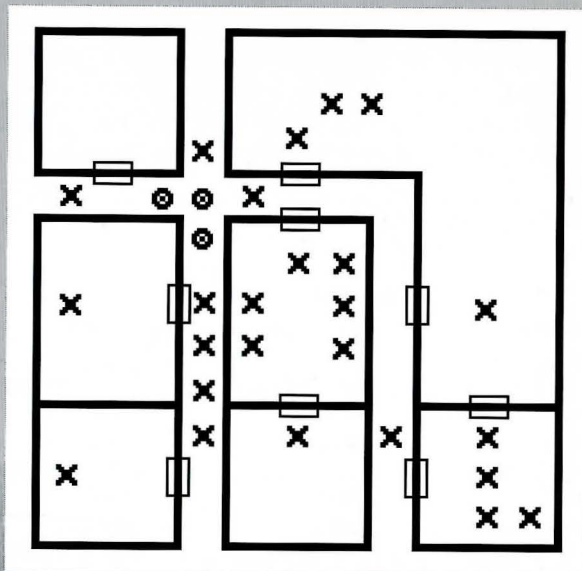
If you have a Darcator or a droid in your landing party, it is sometimes useful to send them out ahead. This is often true if you're in a location where you need to get something specific, or go directly to a certain place, and you aren't up to wandering around fighting at every turn. Once your scout finds the objective, however, have the scout return to the landing party before you proceed. Remember, stick together.

SITUATIONS TO AVOID

This is all common sense to me, and there's no way you're going to survive unless it becomes common sense to you, too. I figure I've got no hope of teaching you common sense if you don't already got it, but maybe I can show you two situations to avoid, and it will get you thinking in the right direction.

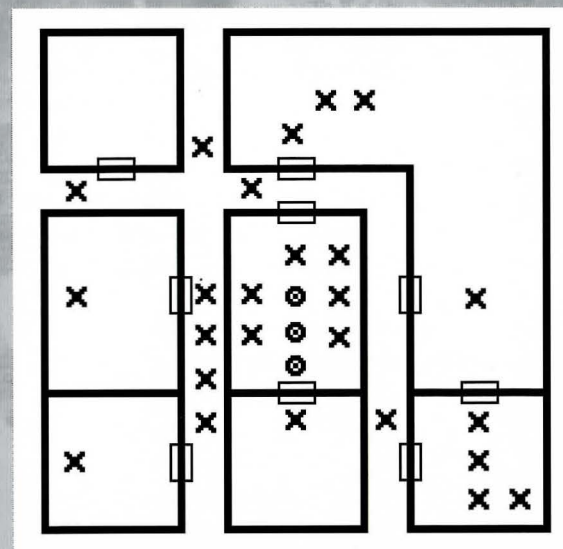
Think of it this way — you want to limit the number of directions you can be fired upon, and you always want a back door.

So, avoid corners, or you'll end up in a situation where the enemy can fire at everyone in your party at the same time, like in this diagram:



Don't Get Stuck in a corner

And always have a back door, otherwise you're caught in a cross fire with no way to retreat, like in this diagram:



Don't Get Surrounded

Get it? If you don't, take up farming, because if you don't start thinking in tactical terms, your tour as a mercenary is gonna be brief.

SKILLS

Everyone you recruit will have different skills at first, and they will each assume a different role on your team. The first thing you have to realize is that everyone, including you, must specialize. No one can become an expert in everything. If you find someone who's a good engineer, improve his or her engineering skills further to make them an expert before trying to make him or her competent in other areas. The whole reason you hire a crew is because everyone has their own talents and no one can be expected to be an expert at everything.

Despite the need to specialize, everyone needs to improve one skill before any other, and that skill is *Aptitude*, which is the ability to learn. Yeah, everyone needs to learn how to learn. The better your aptitude, the faster you learn everything else.

There is a special schedule of improvement for those crew members who'll join landing parties to conduct missions on planets and on board other ships. It is as follows.

When Aptitude is as good as it can get, improve *Fitness*. This is one of the biggest factors in the survivability equation. Besides, no one wants to hire a merc who's out of shape.

When Fitness is maxed out, improve *Agility*. At first, it's more important to do things quickly than accurately. Later you can worry about effectiveness.

Tactics and combat skills are important to improve now. If you only use close weapons, concentrate on improving *Close Combat* skills. You also might want to improve *Firearms* and *Special Weapons* skills so you'll know which end points where if you find a decent gun somewhere.

Stealth helps you get the first shot in, and *Demolitions* is the ability to effectively use grenades. These are less important skills, but worth enhancing once the others are at maximum.

THE STORY OF MY LIFE OR

HOW I KICKED BUTT IN THE FOUR SYSTEMS

Like I said at the beginning, being a merc isn't all just aim and shoot. You have to get to the bottom of things — find out who's in charge and how to stop them. You need to be a smart investigator, and I don't know how to teach you to do that. So what I've done here is give you a long and detailed account of my recent experiences, starting with the day I received my latest ship. Read it to find out how I dealt with the situations I've been faced with, and maybe some of my methods will sink in.

Keep in mind, though, that I'm relating these events to teach you problem solving. You won't see me explaining anything about tactics, skill improvement, and other topics covered in the first part of this journal. For instance, I don't mention all the times I went on smuggling runs to pick up cash now and then, but that doesn't mean I didn't do it. The fact is, I smuggled a lot (okay, Kendall, I admit it), but it doesn't relate to how I tackled my missions, so I don't describe them.

Enough explanations. Read until you're done, and then you're on your own. If you don't learn enough, or if you get unlucky (it happens), then you're dead, and I won't be held responsible. If you're smart, and you stay alive and successful, I won't take credit for that either.

It's every woman for herself.

STARTING OVER

When Kendall assigned me my new ship, I immediately flew it to Mastassini on the far side of the system, just to test it for leaks. It was airtight, but the controls were ancient, barely operational, and the thing flew as well as a damn bathtub. Even so, the biggest hassle on the whole flight was my navigator. His name's A'kri Janr, but I call him Punch — I don't think he gets the joke. He's really a boil on my butt, but Bremar navigators are hard to come by.

"What name ship, Nova?" he said every ten minutes. "Must name ship."

"It's just hardware, Punch," I told him. "It's like a blaster, or a flak vest — it doesn't need a name."

"Must have name," he squealed. "Otherwise, what ship called?"

"Fine," I said finally. "You want a name, here's a name." I pulled a nearly empty bottle of Cold Mud from my vest pocket. "I christen thee the *S.M.G. Ship*." I smashed the bottle on the brushed steel console next to the waste disposal controls.

He stared at me, his mouth gaping open wider than usual. I thought it was shock until he said, "S.M.G.? What S.M.G.? Sub Machine Gun?"

"No, brick-brain. It's for Starkiller Mercenary Group. And that's not the important part anyway. The name of the ship is *Ship*. Now give it a rest."

He wandered aft and I stared down at the broken glass glittering dimly on the floor, like distant stars. I was hard on the guy, but he has no sense of what's important. My last ship turned into a mini sun six months ago, taking most of my crew with it. Punch said I was a monster for leaving my crew behind, even though I had no choice. Now he's the one who's forgotten all about it. And besides, a ship is a ship. If I thought up a name for it, it would just be one more thing I'd lose.



RACE PROFILE

SUBJECT: Bremar Navigators

HOME WORLD: Unknown

AVE HEIGHT: 1.4 meters AVE WEIGHT: 35 kilos

description: Short, scrawny, pale, whiny, bug-eyed, mouths always hanging open. They're the only race capable of navigating through stargates. I see that as proof that the universe is not only stupider than we believe, it's stupider than we *can* believe.

SPACEPORT MALIBU

There's nothing worse than a prying bartender, especially one who resembles a two-meter-tall rot grub with breath like jet exhaust. He's sort of a friend, and he's generous with the free drinks, but I wasn't much in the mood to talk about my accident. It had been six months — I just wanted to put it behind me. Punch followed me around like a dog with a lobotomy.

Since the accident, I'd had this strange mental block against sudden violence. Unbelievable as it sounds, it was as if losing my crew made me appreciate life more. This isn't a healthy condition for a mercenary. I found a quick cure at the Malibu Bar and Casino on Mastassini. A Lanta evangelist in the doorway started pushing his propaganda on me, and the old feelings came rushing back. The only reason I didn't skrag the reptile right then was because it might scare off any potential recruits. People like to pretend they can trust you when they sign up, and random killing makes most folks nervous. I growled at the Lanta and walked around him and into the bar.

It was the usual crowd. A drunk Zero-L merc staggered around the room, blowing ignitable breath in everyone's face. I talked to him, just for kicks, but he got all pissed off about something so I shut his mouth with my fist and moved on. I met a guy named Spleen, or Bleed, or something like that. He tried to pick me up, but I shut him down. A young Delta Coro pestered me for awhile, but I managed to shake him. I thought the night was going to be a total waste when I saw someone in the far corner behind the fish tanks — she looked like she was cut from the same cloth as me.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Alexandra "Ace" Elcator

HOME WORLD: Mastassini

HEIGHT: 1.8 meter WEIGHT: 70 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Tough, rude, abrasive, impulsive, ruthless, my kind of partner. She's a pretty good gunner — in hoverships, spacecraft, and on the ground. No other special skills. I'd rather be for her than against her.

She had an attitude so thick she could have been my twin sister, but I can tell when someone's just trying to impress me. It wasn't long before she offered to sign up with me as a gunner. When I told her I'd hire her, she didn't believe me. She ran across the room to yell at the Lanta evangelist I walked around when I first arrived. She blasted him with her automagnum before I could say a word, and everyone in the bar applauded. She bowed, and then returned to our table.

"So when's our first assignment?" She asked.

I thought about it as I watched the bartender drag the body away. This woman was ruthless and unstable — more or less what I was looking for. Besides, anyone who hates Lanta as much as I do deserved a chance. "Right away. I'm Nova." We shook hands — neither of us tried to out-muscle the other.

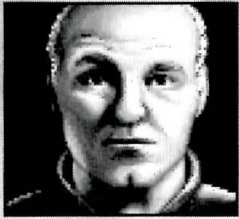
"Alexandra Elcator, but call me Ace. I get mad when people call me Alexandra."

"That's fine. I don't think I want to piss you off."

She smiled.

THE FIRST MISSION

As soon as we left Spaceport Malibu, I got a space comm from Gerard Kendall at Starkiller Headquarters on Holbrook. He said he had an assignment for me. I flew back to Holbrook and went down to meet him alone.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Gerard Kendall

HOME WORLD: Core World Klagston

HEIGHT: 1.8 meter WEIGHT: 80 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Quiet, calm, fair, unaffected, confident, generous, and a shrewd negotiator. He's tough, though he doesn't look it. I always thought he'd make a good field mercenary if he tried. For all I know he used to be one, but he doesn't talk about his past.

Kendall sat with his back to the door, and he didn't turn around to see who was walking up behind him — he was showing off. It's hard to show bravery when all you're flying is a desk, but he always somehow manages. When I stood at the edge of his desk, he swiveled his chair around to face me.

"Oh, it's you. So, how's the new ship handle?"

"It's like flying a rock that someone else threw. But at least there was fuel in it, Kendall. I'll give you that much."

He grinned. "More praise than I expected. Well, now it's time to scratch the paint a little. Someone's hijacked a Ciberan Water Transport. It's still in the Ciberan system, but it's heading toward the stargate. It's running with an old reaction drive, so you have some time to get there, but don't screw around too much. There are no hostages, so just exterminate whoever you find inside and leave it where you found it. Ciberan authorities will go get it when they can."

"How much?"

"The usual for a routine cleanup — five thousand." He raised a hand. "And don't argue with me, Nova. It's not that tough a mission. I'm only giving you that much because I know you're going to need a little extra cash to get started again. Have you picked up any crew yet?"

"One. A gunner. To prove herself she killed."

"Please," he said, shaking his head. "Don't tell me. Just get out there. Oh, and I'll need proof when you come back — something distinctly from the ship. But don't break anything that's not already broken. Got it?"

I raised my eyebrows and left his office without answering.

PLAYING IT SMART

The old Nova would have flown directly out to the transport and peeled it open like a can of beef jerky, but the accident had left me cautious and wiser. Kendall had given me one thousand in cash with the new ship, so I stopped in the Starkiller Company Store to spend it on some better hardware.

We all had Issue AML, and I didn't know where you could buy better — but I'd keep my eyes open. As for armor, Punch was going to stay up in the ship most of the time so I didn't have to worry about his bacon. I already had the best combat grade armor you can buy (that doesn't slow you down), so I was fine. Ace wore a flak vest, which is better protection, though a bit cumbersome. You can find better, but not in stores, only in guarded closets and next to unlucky people.

That left weapons. Sometimes you get into tight spots, so it's a smart idea to have a good weapon that doesn't use ammunition. I bought two edgspinners, one for me and one for Ace. They're long blades that look like studded scimitars, and they're the best weapon made that doesn't need ammo or power. I bought some more ammo for the automagnums Ace and I carried, and just for kicks I bought two SL20 Snipers — big, nasty projectile weapons. I didn't know where I could find any ammo, but when I found it, I'd be ready.

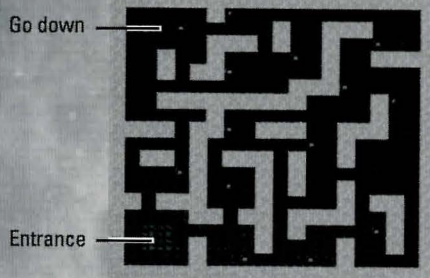
I spent the rest of my money on miscellaneous items and returned to the ship. I equipped Ace with the hardware I just bought, and I assigned her to the Gunner station on ship. I took Punch off the landing party roster and assigned Ace to the Center position for the next trip.

Ace was so excited about our mission that she polished her automagnum twice. She jumped up from her couch when I cut the thrusters, and then she rolled her eyes when she saw I'd simply dropped the ship into a parking orbit around Mastassini. "We're not ready yet," I said. The laser-light gleam in Ace's eyes dimmed.

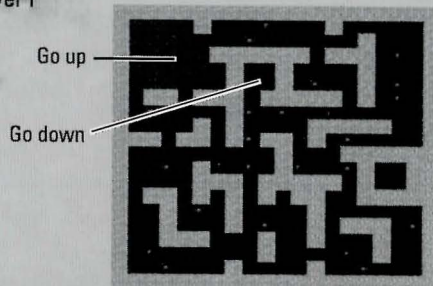
We dropped in the hovership to Spaceport Malibu again. I sold off the miscellaneous items I'd bought at the Starkiller store and got a 30% profit. Then I took Ace into the RoboMaze for target practice. By the time the referees dragged us out of there, stunned and smoking, we'd reached the fourth level and collected flags worth 3000 in cash.

"Okay," I said. "Now we're ready."

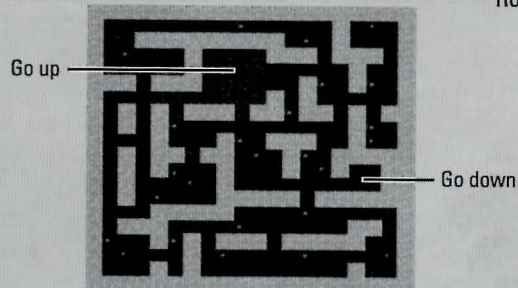
I only hoped I was right.



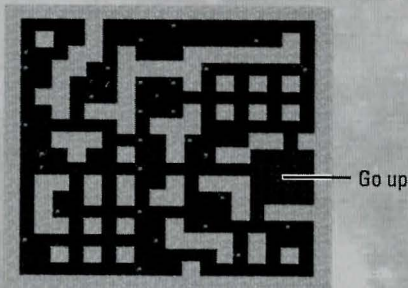
Robo Maze Level 1



Robo Maze Level 2



Robo Maze Level 3

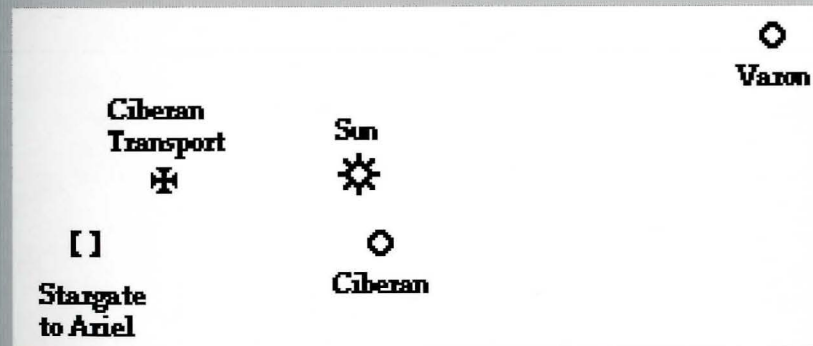


Robo Maze Level 4

THE CIBERAN TRANSPORT

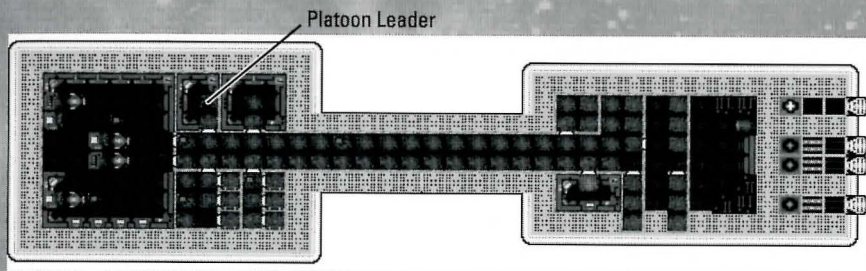
An impossibly dark blotch on the star field loomed in front of us. A'kri stared out the forward view port, mentally preparing to guide us through the stargate. He raised his arms like he was about to perform a grand miracle. I snorted and drank from the bottle in my vest pocket. His unique ability to fly us through stargates may seem like a miracle to him—to me it was just a damn inconvenience that I couldn't do it myself. When we weren't passing through stargates, the Bremar was a whining, useless drain on my food supply. If it was physically possible for me to learn how to navigate through stargates, I'd have given Punch a chance to prove his ability to withstand the vacuum of space a long time ago.

He wailed and cried like an alley cat looking for a friend. The view port swirled with colors as we accelerated to a speed no human number could describe. I turned away, bored. Punch occasionally and needlessly lowered his voice from his screeching to inform me of our progress. *Systems Nominal... Entering Stargate... Leaving System... Routing appears normal... Deceleration Effects Observed... Entering System...* We always struck the Euclidian Threshold with enough force to knock us out of our chairs if we weren't wearing our restraints, but Punch always said "Deceleration effects observed" anyway. What an ass.



Location of Hijacked Transport

We skipped through the Ariel system and through another stargate. The Ciberan Transport was just where Kendall said it was—on course for the stargate from Ciberan. Its reaction drive was so feeble the ship appeared to be standing still. It took very little effort to pull alongside and force our airlock to latch onto theirs. They hadn't disabled the emergency airlock override most commercial ships have these days, so I pulled the red handle and the door popped open with a misty hiss. I walked into their main airlock with Ace close behind me.



Ciberan Transport

We expected close combat, so we both drew our edgospinners. We jumped through the next airlock and saw no one in the hall beyond. Strange. I glanced at Ace, who shrugged, and then she flew back against the bulkhead, a shower of sparks erupting from her chest. A sledgehammer struck my right shoulder, and I spun around with the force, swinging my edgospinner wildly.

I struck air and met no resistance. I nearly fell down as a blue bolt of plasma flew over my head and slammed Ace against the bulkhead again. She slid to the floor, her eyes half open. I looked up again, my heart trying to tear a hole in my throat. Down the corridor, far out of reach of my weapon, stood two men in blue uniforms.



GENERAL PROFILE

SUBJECT: Ariel Fighters

HOME WORLD: Ariel

HEIGHT: Variable WEIGHT: Variable

DESCRIPTION: These single-minded grunts are soldiers of Damien Altron, the dictator of Ariel. They listen to orders, aim blasters, and pull triggers. The only ones you can talk to are the ones who really aren't fighters.

Those aren't just hijackers! They're infantrymen from Ariel! I shoved my spinner into its sheath and pulled out my automagnum and squeezed off a shot at the nearest target. The shot went wide. Ace fired her own automag once but missed as well. Another bolt hit my chest dead center. My body buzzed with the drugs my AML pumped into me to repair the damage and keep me standing.

We were outgunned and outclassed. I grabbed Ace by her flak jacket and dragged her back through the airlock. I heard running steps in the corridor, and I slapped the Emergency Close button. Ace tried to speak but gasped too much for me to understand her. I dragged her back to our ship and disengaged. Punch had us out of the system before I'd caught my breath.

REGROUP

AML is the best life-saving device ever invented, but it gives me the worst hangovers imaginable. By the time I had recovered, I was furious. I first thought I'd go back to Kendall and rip his gut open for sending me up against trained military fighters instead of the frightened, amateur hijackers I'm used to. But then I realized he probably didn't know either. It was those bastards on Ciberan who hadn't warned us.

Now it was a matter of pride. Ace wanted to go back into the Malibu Bar and drink her pride back, but I was determined to wipe that Ciberan Transport clean no matter what the cost. It was moving slowly enough — I had time. I took Ace back into the RoboMaze, almost against her will, and we practiced, and we practiced, and we practiced.

I lost track of time in the arena, but by the time we stepped out of the Robomaze — we weren't carried out this time — I thought I could clean off the ship by myself.

SAME SHIP, DIFFERENT DAY

We forced our airlock to seal on the airlock of the Ciberan transport again. Ace and I leaped back into the room, and I immediately saw three Ariel fighters. One ran into the engine room — the other two smiled and pointed at us. Ace and I quickly fired automag slugs at both of them and knocked them on their butts. Before they could scramble back to their feet, I pushed Ace into the engine room. She blocked the door while I pumped four shots into the Ariel we found there, putting him on the ground permanently.

Someone pounded the door. Ace stepped aside just enough to let him through, and slammed the door shut again. It was one of the fighters who'd laughed at us last time. We caught him in a cross fire and ruined his day. I signed my name on his face with my boot.

No one else tried to come into the engine room, so we ventured out, cornering people in small rooms to outnumber them one at a time. Three clips later, I thought we'd cleared the whole ship, but I noticed that all of the men we'd killed were dressed alike — we hadn't yet found the leader. And there was also one room we hadn't searched.

I stormed in and got a knife in my side, which drove the air from my lungs — my AML immediately engaged and heated my ribs at the wound. I clenched my teeth and slammed the heel of my hand into the man's nose to push him back. He fell against a communications console repeatedly as I emptied my clip into his chest. I let the empty clip clatter to the floor and inserted a new one. Ace pounded on the door to get in the room, but there was no place for her to stand.

He drew a blaster and we started exchanging fire at an incredible rate. Bullets and plasma bolts rattled the tiny room, and the noise deafened me as I fired faster

and faster. When he finally fell face down, I stopped firing, and I heard screams of rage echo and die. I realized the screams had been mine.

It was over. I concentrated on my beating heart, and the stench of burnt hair and flesh clogged my nostrils. I'd never fought so desperately in my life, and now that I'd won, I was exhilarated. My AML whined and wheezed as much as I did, and I slid down to the floor. Through the pain and the excitement and the adrenaline, I didn't forget Kendall and his stupid proof requirement. How could I bring back proof without tearing out any gauges? Wasn't my battered, bullet-ridden body enough proof?

I stared at the dead Ariel Commander, and the solution came to me. Ace called my name, but I didn't answer. Instead I holstered my automag, drew my edgspinner, and smiled.

PAYMENT

"What the hell is this?" Kendall picked up the head of the Ariel Commander and crammed it down the disposal chute. He started mopping up his desk with some napkins and leftover donuts. He said, "Man, I knew I was going to catch hell from you with this proof requirement."

"You know I hate paperwork. And I'm a little short on cash, so..."

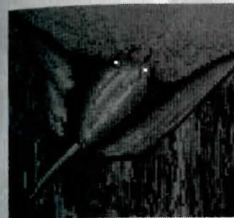
He grunted and tossed the bloody napkins into the chute. "It's as good as in your account. And I don't have anything else for you right now, so you might as well go out and smuggle or something."

"Smuggle? I don't smuggle, Kendall."

"Uh huh. Right. Look, I'll call you, okay?"

I wandered around the base for awhile, showing Ace the facility. We found a tall, dark-skinned woman named Janai in the Communications Center. She was pretty arrogant for just a comm tech, but I usually take that as a sign that a person is good at what she or he does. I don't discriminate against skilled people because of their attitude (except for Bremar Navigators, of course), but she said she was already assigned to another team. Too bad — I really needed a good comm tech.

My buddy Leod the Darcator was taking his turn as Shift Commander, so I stopped by and talked to him. He didn't have much time for me — I think he resents that I never seem to get assigned to Shift Commander duty — and he just told me to go smuggle. How is it everyone knows I occasionally smuggle? Did I have "SMUGGLER" written on my forehead?



RACE PROFILE

SUBJECT: Darcators

HOME WORLD: Tikorr

LENGTH: 1.6 meter

WEIGHT: 48 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Lewd, crude, rude, and constantly dropping dung everywhere. They claim to have a great sense of humor, but all their jokes are about excrement in one form or another.

KILLING TIME

We'd barely docked the hovership with the *Ship* when a pair of Delta Coro mercs caught us in an unprovoked cross fire. (As far as the Delta Coro are concerned, the Starkiller insignia is like a big, red target.) When one of their ships drew near, I told the ship's computer to shadow its movements, and I shouted for Ace to get to the weapon console. She activated the A4 Pulsar. The *Ship* rocked with laser hits, and I saw incoming missiles. The comm readout said they were radar guided, so I hit the radar jammers. Ace kept firing the A4. Before too long, two bright explosions rewarded our efforts.



GENERAL PROFILE

SUBJECT: Delta Coro Mercenaries

HOME WORLD: Core World Delta-2

AVE HEIGHT: 2 meters

AVE WEIGHT: 110 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Tall, skinny, green, hairless, basket-headed mercenaries with an intelligence so low it doesn't measure on the IQ scale.

I surveyed the damage — the *Ship* was nearly crippled. I steered it to the space station at Mastassini for repairs. As I flew, I tried to decipher a space comm I'd picked up. It took me nearly the entire trip back to Mastassini to figure it out, and it turned out to be just some space chatter between two Zero-L mercs. What a waste of time. I desperately needed to get a competent communications technician. Maybe I could think of a way to steal Janai from whatever assignment she got from Kendall.

At the Mastassini Space Station, the crews repaired all my systems. As usual, they didn't prorate the cost for the less damaged systems. Everything's modular and expendable these days — they assume that if it could be fixed, you'd have fixed it yourself, so they always just replace it for the maximum cost. What a waste.

While I wandered in the space station, I let it be known that I was looking for a smuggling run. The best paying job I could find was running guns to Ciberan past the Ariel blockade. I was pretty pissed off at the Ciberan government for not being straight with me the last time I dealt with them, but the price was right. With the cash

they were offering, I could outfit the *Ship* with an A7 Comet Beam — the ultimate ship-board weapon of destruction. I picked up the cargo — crates of disassembled projectile weapons of all sorts — and we set out for Ciberan.

The space around Ciberan was a war zone. I hadn't realized the situation had gotten so bad. I felt like I'd been set up again. The *Ship* took multiple hits from the cross fire I had to thread just to orbit the damn planet. When I dropped to the landing coordinates, there were a few stray Ariel hoverships shooting anything that moved, but I took them out fairly easily. I dumped the cargo and picked up a cool thirty thousand in cash.

As soon as I returned to space, I got a space comm from Kendall recalling me for another assignment. I didn't fly straight there. On the way back I stopped off at the Mastassini space station to pick up an A7 Comet Beam and repair all of the Ship's systems.

TWO FOR THE RIGHT PRICE

I got two missions for you," Kendall said. "A big one and a little one."

"What's the big one?" I asked.

"I'll tell you about the little one," Kendall said, grinning. "It's a great opportunity to participate in a great philosophy war—"

"Oh, no—"

"Yes, the High Lanta Fragmentaralist wants you to kidnap the High Lanta Dispossessionalist and deliver him to some peace talks that the High Disp refuses to attend."

"I really hate Lanta, Kendall. You know that. What makes you think I'll be able to do this job without greasing every one of them I see?"

"Because you're being paid to kidnap, not assassinate. Now, the High Frag doesn't know where the High Disp is, but he knows where the main Disp temple is." Kendall told me the coordinates.

"On Varon?"

"Of course on Varon — Lanta don't live anywhere else, except for the occasional evangelist. Pick up your fee from the High Frag when you finish the job."

"What about your percentage?"

"Forget it. The Frag wasn't willing to pay enough to make it worth my while to track. It's between you and him now, if you want to take the job. I'm doing you a favor if you haven't figured it out yet. Keep me out of it."

"Fine. So what's the big job?"

"Stop the Ariel invasion of Ciberan."

"Is that all? Don't you want me to move the planet to a different orbit or anything?"

Kendall raised his eyebrows. "No, but to stop the invasion you're going to have to take out Damien Altron and his general Camede Rodgen."

"Right, assassinate Altron. He's only the dictator of the most powerful planet in the Four Systems. I'll do it this afternoon and make it back here for drinks at Spaceport Malibu."

"The job's worth forty-thousand."

I smiled. "Gee, Kendall. You always know the right thing to say."

"Go see Max Sebastian in Meridian City on Ciberan." Kendall gave me the coordinates. "Sebastian gave me the security card you'll need to get in to see him."

"Okay, let's have it."

"Not so fast. I gave it to Janai — she's a top notch technician I've assigned to you. You need her, and not just for the card. She's in the communications room across the hall."

"We've met," I said and turned to leave.

"That's not all. This is going to be a big job — I'm not sure you understand just how big. You might want to pick up some more help. There's a guy named Rogers here on Holbrook you might want to pick up." Kendall gave me his coordinates.

"Will do. Thanks."

I picked up Janai on the way back to the ship. I didn't have to think of a way to steal her after all. She came quietly, and I wondered what Kendall had told her about me. I hinted around at asking, but she didn't tell me much. I'd have thought a technician adept at communication would talk more — but she didn't.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Janai

HOME WORLD: Holbrook

HEIGHT: 2 meters WEIGHT: 68 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Quiet, aloof, confident, egotistical, and a reasonably competent communications specialist. Although she's a technician, she's useless for anything but decoding space comms, but she had the key to get into Meridan City.

THE FISH RANCH

We flew to the coordinates where Kendall said we'd find this Rogers guy. The ranch we found sprawled across hectares of land — it was as big as Starkiller HQ itself. I parked the hovership and took both Ace and Janai inside with me.

Aquariums ran from floor to ceiling down multiple corridors. If this was someone's house, then someone either loved sushi or they had an overwhelming fetish for colorful fish. I couldn't imagine finding anyone worthwhile in a place like this.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Rogers Amaro
HOME WORLD: Core World Klagston
HEIGHT: 2.1 meter **WEIGHT:** 86 kilos
DESCRIPTION: Big, brave, powerful, tireless, merciful, good-natured. He single-handedly defeated the Zero-L Mercs during the Holbrook Colony Wars. Now he collects fish as a hobby, effectively retired, but not past his prime by any means.

"Howdy, Ladies!" a voice boomed. "What brings you all the way out to my estate?"

I saw a tall man in a ridiculous costume — a satin jacket with a purple velvet collar. But the face was unmistakable. I felt like a sap.

"Rogers?" I said. "Rogers *Amaro*? The Rogers Amaro who used nukes to blind the Zero-L Mercs during the Holbrook Colony Wars?"

"Guilty. Yep, all those damn flashlights are my fault. But that's old news. What can I do for you?"

"I'm not sure. Gerard Kendall of Starkiller sent me here to pick up a guy named Rogers. Do you have a son?"

"Ah," he laughed. "Flattery. No, I don't have a son. And I'm not for hire. I told Kendall I was done with all that. I got better, safer things to do these days."

"Like collecting fish I guess."

He didn't notice my sarcasm, or he pretended not to. He said: "This is the most extensive rare fish collection in the Four Systems. In fact, it's almost complete. All I'm missing is a male Hanky Grobbler. And the only one I know of is sitting right out in the open at the Malibu Bar and Casino on Mastassini. I've half a mind to just walk up and take it one day."

"What's it look like?"

Rogers grinned. "Yellow with black spots. Why do you ask?"

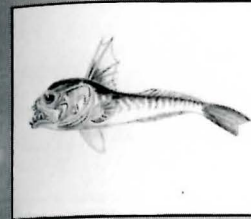
I smiled in return. "No reason. Hey, you mind if we take a look around your aquarium?"

"Not at all."

I walked over to where I saw a small, portable fish tank lying on a counter. I picked it up, put it in my personal inventory, and saluted Rogers, saying, "I'll be right back."

It didn't take long to fly to Spaceport Malibu and find the yellow fish with black spots in the fish tank. I could have asked the bartender for it, but he'd have given it to Rogers long ago if he was willing.

I didn't notice the teeth on the fish until it almost bit me, but I managed to drop the nasty little guy into the tank without getting bitten. I slipped out of the bar, avoiding eye contact with the bartender.



SPECIAL PROFILE

SUBJECT: Hanky Grobbler
HOME WORLD: Mastassini — now only in captivity.
LENGTH: 0.1 meter **WEIGHT:** 0.13 kilos
DESCRIPTION: Small yellow fish with black spots, sharp teeth, and is deadly poisonous. Only known male and female specimens in the Four Systems are at the Amaro Aquarium on Holbrook.

"It's a male Hanky Grobbler!" Rogers said when I handed it to him. "And I didn't get you anything."

"Now that your collection is complete, you don't have anything better to do than to come with us, do you?"

He shrugged. "I guess not."

"So what do you do besides fight?"

"I was an engineer in a former life."

"You're hired. When can you leave?"

"Hang on a second." He flipped a few switches, to put his tanks on automatic cycle, he said, and then he opened a small closet. He pulled out three M III Blasters. "These always came in handy on all the landing parties I attended."

I took one of the heavy guns — it was better than anything I'd ever held, let alone fired. "Welcome aboard," I said to Amaro. "I'll just hang on to this for a little while." I hefted the pistol.

"I kinda thought you might. Let's go."

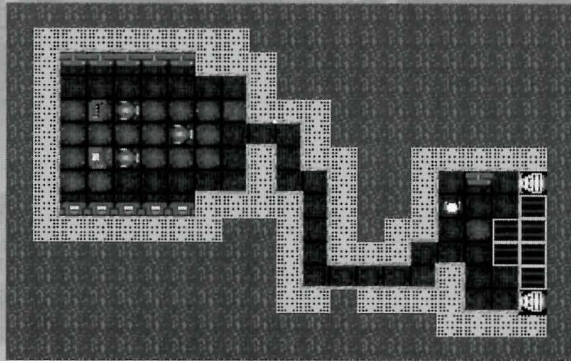
THE DISP TEMPLE MOST RANDOM

Only half of the derelict Core ship protruded from the ground. Soil was swept up its sides as though the ship had erupted from beneath instead of plunged in from above. It was old, probably from the First Exploration.

"Why did we come here first?" Ace complained. "There's a war on Ciberan!" A small flying bug landed on her cheek and she slapped it off. "Besides, this place stinks and it's full of bugs."

I turned to face her. "You saying you can't handle a few bugs?" She didn't answer, so I continued. "We barely made it through a dozen Ariel fighters on that transport, and now you want to take on a whole army of them? We need more practice at this. I've done a lot of things for Kendall in the past few years, but fighting an army of professional soldiers isn't one of them. Believe me, we need the practice. Right, Rogers?"

He just smiled and said, "You lead, I'll follow."



Dispossessionalist Temple

The airlock was missing — a tattered blanket covered the hole where it once hung. I pushed the blanket aside and entered. The air stank like curdled milk, and my eyes watered in the stench as they slowly adjusted to the relative darkness. I walked toward the front of the ship down the slope caused by the wreck. I saw eye sockets made of bone staring at me.

"Damn it!" I jumped back. The crash couches on the bridge still held the human remains of the pilot and copilot. The Lanta scum hadn't even taken away the bodies before they turned the ship into a temple.

"Resigned hello, my abominable co-existor," a gravelly voice said, and I spun to face it. It was a Lanta Dispossessionalist. "Come you prepare you for to the not the approach of Grand Universal Disorder? First body randomize with following mind."



RACE PROFILE

SUBJECT: Lanta

HOME WORLD: None

AVE HEIGHT: 1.6 meter AVE WEIGHT: 74 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Dry, bumpy, scaly, ugly, repulsive, voices sound like someone drowning in gravel. The Fragmentarilists (Fraggs) are articulate but conniving little monsters determined to set the world straight.

The Dispossessionalists (Disps, or Dispos) live a doomed life and talk nonsense as a way of expressing their faith.

"Uh..." I tried to piece together what he said. "Not really."

"Reconsider you should decide most soon assuredly, Abomination. Your numbered days end not forever."

He started to turn away, and I grabbed his scaly arm. "Wait, no, actually, I... I need...guidance. What should I do?"

"Prepare eternally. To do, remain and move not or speak it."

There was a concept buried somewhere in his words, struggling to get out. I almost thought I understood, but then I didn't. "How's that again?"

The Lanta looked distressed, and he glanced around the room. There were no other Lanta around. He whispered: "To prepare yourself, stay here in the temple and be quiet. Disorder will soon follow. But," he added, "you didn't hear it that way from me."

"Right. Actually, I'm looking for...uh...you know...your boss. What's he called again?"

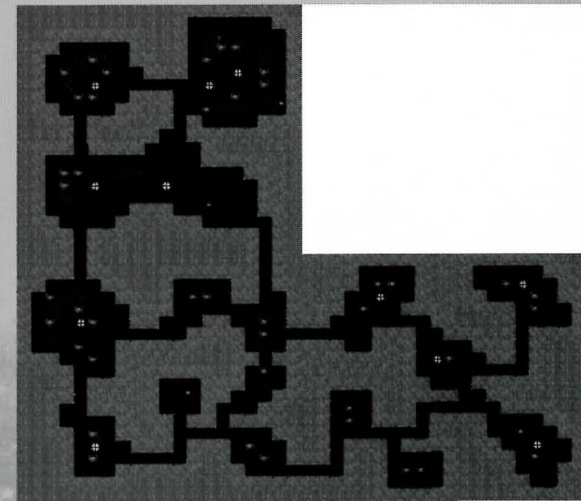
"The Most Random Dispossessionalist." The Lanta raised his voice again. "No knows where Most High remains visible. Predictability not random implication disorder. Now meditate must before eternity."

"Thanks but no thanks," I muttered as he walked drunkenly away, presumably taking a random path to his destination. "Let's search this place."

There wasn't much to the ship, so it wasn't long before we saw some scratches on the wall. On the wall were the coordinates of Ulgurch, the main Lanta city on Varon.

ULGURCH AND THE GREAT DEBATES

The small city sat at the bottom of a box canyon. I dropped the hovership behind some trees near Ulgurch, and Ace, Amaro and I approached on foot. Large, tattered banners explained that today were the Great Debates. I recognized the holes in the banner — they were made by blaster fire.



Ulgurch

On Varon, debates are apparently won by force. We walked into a fire fight where no one was an innocent bystander. Not only that, there were Zero-L mercs everywhere. I smirked. Zeros are the worst mercs conceivable. I don't mean any disrespect, but eyesight is a must for a good mercenary. I'd always wondered how the Zeros stayed in business when no one I knew would hire them anymore. There was something vaguely appealing about the idea of Lanta and Zero-Ls killing each other off on a remote planet that had no material wealth.



GENERAL PROFILE

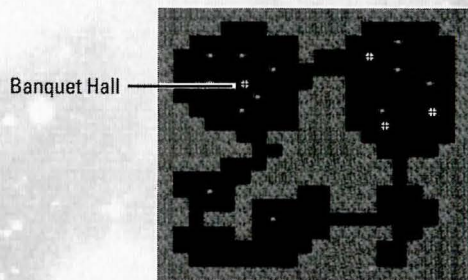
SUBJECT: Zero-L Mercenaries
HOME WORLD: Core World NHI-0/L
AVE HEIGHT: 1.5 meters AVE WEIGHT: 85 kilos
DESCRIPTION: Short, fat, fish-faced, and blind from nuke flashes during the Holbrook Colony Wars. They make better door stops than mercenaries.

There was nothing we could do but draw our weapons and enter the fray. At first I tried to only shoot Disps, since I was supposedly working for the Frags, but it became too difficult to tell them apart quickly, and they were all shooting like mad anyway. Besides, I hated them all and who would know what I did if they were all dead? "Kill them all," I whispered to Ace and Amaro. "Let the janitors sort 'em out."

I lost track of how many Lanta I dumped, and how many of those were on the side I worked for. At some point I grabbed one Disp by the neck and slammed his head against a clay wall, and I saw a beautiful mosaic now marred by a bloody swath. I wiped the blood away and saw a map of Varon. Included on the map were the coordinates of the Leader's HQ. It wasn't clear which leader lived there, but it was a start. I signaled to Ace and Amaro, and we waded back out to the hovership.

THE TOP OF THE HEAP

We walked into the camp and were immediately fired upon by Lanta guards. We dropped and returned fire. As we picked them off, I saw that they weren't dressed as Frags or Disps. They were different somehow. But they didn't die any different.



Lanta Leader HQ

Ace went completely nuts. She sprayed pulses past me and wasted every Lanta I started to aim at. She yelled as we charged ahead and kept firing even when there was no one to shoot. When her eyes stopped burning with hate, I'd give her a lesson in conserving ammunition.

We burst into a banquet hall. Two Lanta wearing very expensive clothes sat next to a fire, apparently having dinner. They looked up, the far one with fear, the near one with passive disinterest. I had to slam Ace against the wall to stop her from shooting them. She glared at me and kept her blaster aimed in the Lantas' general direction.

"Greet in absence of thought and breath cohesion, Abominable Violation," the nearest Lanta said. "Structure yourself before not with intent forgotten where nature lies oblivious for temporarily only."

"Uh huh," I said. "You must be the Disp Leader."

"With no division seeks nature confirmation explain entropy violations. You example for revealing chaos renegade. Conversation erodes freedom — pattern imposition effects pain."

"Yeah, I'll give you some pain." I aimed my blaster at him.

"Randomness complete with nearly certainty lack of existence in coherent matter. Dispersion not asked nor unrequested, no imposition intended."

"Whatever you say. But I'd still like to kill you instead of just kidnap you."

The far Lanta's heavy lip curled. "You're not...not *Starkiller* mercenaries, are you?"

"You can talk?" I said. Then I put it all together: the clothes, the room, the banquet. "You're the High Frag. Isn't this interesting?" I bent down and picked up a piece of meat from a blanket, still aiming the gun at the two Lantas. I bit into the meat — it was sweet.

"As you can see," the High Frag said hastily, "I managed to get the Most Random Dispossessionalist to come here on his own. I no longer need your services."

"That's a crock!" Ace yelled, and started to lunge forward. I put up an arm and stopped her.

"It's not that simple, Frag." I said and tossed down the bare bone I'd just picked clean. "It looks like you tried to set us up somehow. I think you should tell us what's going on."

"Nothing is going on. I'm telling you the truth. Now, I've already paid Kendall, so if you'll please excuse us, our business is concluded."

I grinned. "Let's not worry about money just yet. We've waded through a lot of fresh corpses to get here, and unless you want to get carried up to the top of the pile, I suggest you start talking."

"Please leave before I call the guards," he said.

"Your *guards* are lying in a bloody heap out in the hall!" I shoved my blaster into his face. "Now *TALK!*"

"All right — don't shoot! We're working together, he and I."

"Why call us in?"

"The battles were weakening. The devout were losing their will to fight. I needed a catalyst to stoke the shrinking flames. I just...never expected you to get this far."

"You little green bastard!" Ace screeched. "Come on, Nova! Let's skrag em both right now!"

"Hang on," I said. Then I said to the Frag, "Give us our money."

"I told you I've already transmitted it to Kendall. If he's holding out on you, that's your problem."

"No, it's yours." I nodded to Ace and gestured toward the Disp. Ace shot a bolt through the side of the reptile's head. It fell to the dusty floor in a flurry of colorful robes.

"The money, Frag."

He fumbled to draw a spikecaster — a pathetic weapon to aim at mercs in full armor and AML. I sighed and nodded to Ace. She blasted the Frag. As we searched the bodies, Amaro guarded the exits. He said, "I think maybe you like this too much, Ace. Do you have something to tell us, maybe? Some story about how your parents were killed by Lanta, and this is your revenge?"

"Nope," Ace said, rolling over the Frag leader roughly. She found a sack on the body — it was filled with precious stones. She tossed it to me and walked out in the hall. She stopped next to Amaro and said, "I just don't like the smell of their breath. It makes me want to puke. So whenever I see one, I just get it to stop breathing." She stepped over a body and walked back to the hovership.

"You pulled your trigger pretty fast too, Nova. You're a hard-ass kind of woman. I don't—"

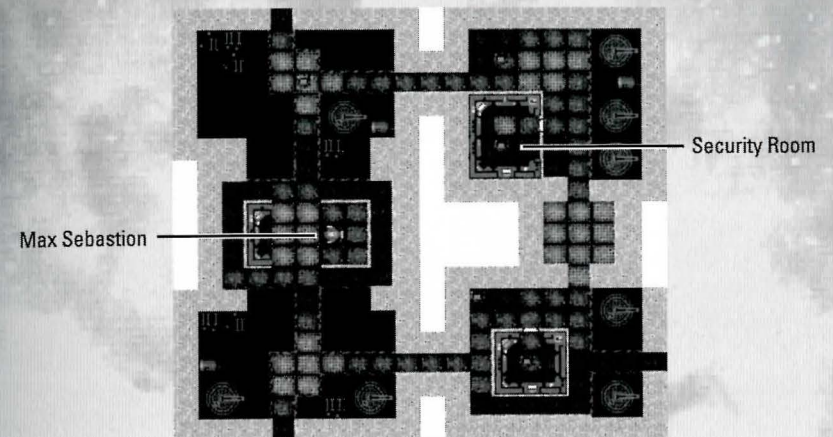
"Killing a Lanta is like breaking a toaster," I said quickly. "Except at least a toaster is good for something when it works. Now come on." I waved the sack of gems. "Let's go sell this at the Lanta trading city. Glumpon, I think it's called. That'd be poetic justice. I heard some rumors that they sell some pretty good weapons there. We can pick some up and then get off this rock and never come back."

Amaro said nothing, he just followed me back to the hovership. All the way back to the *Ship* I thought about how much he pissed me off. He fought very well, better than Ace with all her fury, but if it weren't for him, I wouldn't have thought twice about "randomizing" the Lanta leaders. No one needs a damn conscience following them around, least of all me.

MERIDIAN CITY

"Now we can get into a fight we all believe in," I said to Ace as I docked the hovership at Meridian City on Ciberan. Amaro said nothing. We trudged through the snow to the main building and walked in. Just north of the entrance was a small

security room. I looked in my pack and found the mag card I got from Janai on the ship, and I put it into the slot. The ElectroMag security fences dropped, and the three of us walked further into the complex.



Meridian City

There was only one man in the complex who wasn't wearing the heavy clothing of a Ciberan worker. I walked up to him, and he looked us up and down.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Max Sebastian

HOME WORLD: Core World Hrontust

HEIGHT: 1.4 meter WEIGHT: 58 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Short, abusive, short-tempered, indifferent, and an all around pain-in-the-butt. He controls Ciberan and all its water and deuterium interests, which he exports at a high profit.

"It's about time you showed up!" he snapped.

He was short, and wouldn't look me in the eye — not the kind of guy I'd expect to find yelling at armed fighters. But I guessed he was under a lot of stress, with Ariel trying to take over his planet and all. I gave him the benefit of the doubt. "Sorry, Mister Sebastian. We got hung up—"

"Well that's just great!" he shouted. "You got *hung up*! Well, while you were *hung up*, Ariel fighters have taken over my primary research center!"

"Well," I said evenly, "we're here now. What do you need?"

"What do I need? What do I *need*?! Are you the best mercenaries Kendall's got?! For the money I'm paying?! What I *need* is for you to stop those damn Ariel

lunatics! We're a business here, if Kendall didn't tell you, and they're mowing us down with blasters!"

"Max!" I shouted at him. He stopped yelling and stared at me, his face red. "Just calm down, all right? I know you're in trouble — that's why we're here. Just tell us where you want us to start, and we'll take it from there."

Max released a large breath. "I...I'm sorry. We're just losing a lot of good people. The Ariel bastards just took over the Research Center — start there." He told me the coordinates. "You'll have to fly there by hovership because my whole network of complexes is shielded from orbital drops."

"Fine, we'll go clean it out."

He looked up at me. "That's not all. Cleaning up is only the first thing you have to do. They'll just send more unless you stop them at the source. You have to kill Ariel General Camede Rodgen, and then the dictator of Ariel, Damien Altron."

"Yes, Kendall told me. Where can I find them?"

"Probably at some base of operations here on Ciberan. I know they've established a base camp somewhere under my shield, but communications are down. I don't know where they are. Hell, they might be running things from Ariel for all I know."

"Okay. Is that all?"

"No that's not all!" he suddenly bellowed. "Get out there and do something! If you don't, then you won't get paid!"

"Fine, Sebastian. We'll be in touch."

As we walked out, Ace leaned over to me and said, "That guy's got a cattle prod up his butt. How could you stand there and take it?"

"Never argue with a fool," I said.

"The poor fellow's whole planet's being overrun," Amaro said quietly. "You'd do the same in his boots."

"We'll see," I replied.

We stopped off at the Meridian Store on the way out. At the Glumpon Trading Center on Varon, I'd bought some M23-30 Automatic Rifles and ammo, and this store didn't have any better. Amaro was nearly out of energy packs for his M III Laser, so I bought him as many packs as he could carry

Then I saw a rack of Extend AMLs. I grinned and beckoned Ace. She immediately stripped off her Issue AML, and I did too. I started to pay for three sets of the Extend, but Amaro opened his body armor just enough to show me that he'd had Extend all along. I just laughed and bought two instead. Ace resented Amaro's not telling us about his Extend, but what did it matter? It wasn't like he had spares. I sold our used Issue AML to the Ciberan behind the counter, and we walked back to the hovership.

THE CIBERAN RESEARCH CENTER

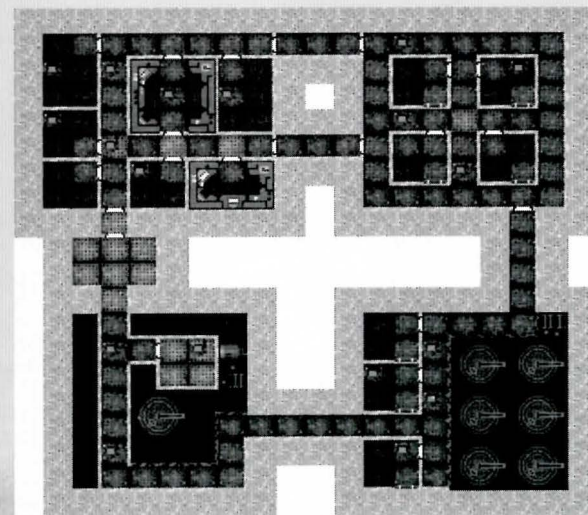
I looked down at the coordinates of the Research Center from orbit. The location was near the western edge of the shield area. We dropped to the edge of the shield as close as we could get to the target coordinates. We flew in, skimming the glacier, melting a furrow in the ice with our fusion engines.

The installation had a low profile, presumably to combat the fierce winds and snowstorms common to Ciberan. We approached the hoverdock, and an Ariel hovership appeared from behind a microwave transmitter tower, firing its lasers. Ace whooped and jumped down into the laser turret and started firing. In seconds the Ariel ship spiraled into the snow and exploded.

The scanner showed two more hoverships close by, bearing down on us. I saw that we were in reach of the hoverdock, where we would be safe from attack. I nudged the ship forward toward it.

"Hang on!" Ace shouted. "Let em come. I can take em out now so they don't surprise us on our way out!"

I slowed, and she spun the turret madly to take out the remaining two Ariel craft. Then I maneuvered us into the hoverdock. We stepped off the ship and walked straight into a firefight.



Ciberan Research Center

Our entrance surprised an Ariel fighter, and we put him down before he had a chance to fire back. The corridor reeked of fusionite, and a heavy layer of smoke obscured the ceiling. We found a Ciberan defender crouched behind some crates.



GENERAL PROFILE

SUBJECT: Ciberan Defenders

HOME WORLD: Ciberan

HEIGHT: Variable WEIGHT: Variable

DESCRIPTION: These people were workers in Max Sebastian's water/fuel export business. The Ariel invasion turned them into armed defenders, though they are not trained soldiers.

"Man, am I glad to see you!" he shouted over the din. "We need all the help we can get. But there're hundreds of these Ariel bastards — they just keep coming and coming, and they never run out of ammo! Even if we kill them all, more will come to take their place!"

I looked to Ace and Amaro, and then back at the Ciberan. "We can't fight a never-ending battle. What's the point in us being here?"

"You've got to stop it at the source! All we've seen here are grunts. You've gotta find Damien Altron and his general. Kill them and the attacks will stop."

An explosion rocked the four of us and showered us with splintered wood. "Where?!" I yelled.

"I don't know! Try the Quality Control Base." He gave me the coordinates. I think that's where these grunts are coming from."

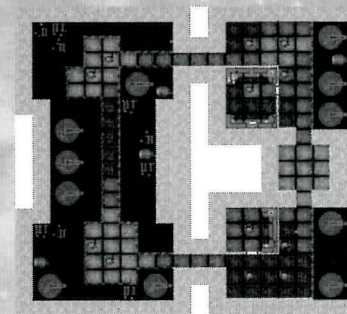
"All right. We'll help you clear out this wave of Ariels, and then we'll go there."

He nodded, and the four of us ran into the fray. The Ariels were armed with blasters and protected by Kevlar, but skill prevailed and we left without leaving an Ariel standing.

We'd barely taken off when we were attacked by two more Ariel hoverships. Ace perforated them with laser fire, grinning the whole time. I flew us back up to the Ship, watching Amaro out of the corner of my eye. He looked disgusted. To hell with it, I thought. As long as he keeps fighting as well as he did, he can look however he wants to.

THE CIBERAN QUALITY CONTROL BASE

The Quality Control Base was toward the northeast end of the shield. Again we dropped to the edge of the shield as close as we could get to the target coordinates. The Base looked like a number of separate buildings, but I suspected they were all connected under the ice. Ace had to shoot three Ariel hoverships out of the sky. We took some hits but she was getting pretty good at it.



Ciberan Quality Control Base

Two Ariel fighters caught us in a cross fire as soon as we cleared the door. We circled around and cooked them both. A Ciberan ran in a crouch to meet us.

"Starkiller Mercs! You must have come from the Research Base — have those Ariel bastards got there yet?"

"Don't worry about your buddies — they're just fine," I said. Ace started to say something, but I moved my edgspinner a bit and it touched her ribs. She shut up.

"That's a relief. I thought for sure they'd have got there by now."

I poked Ace again in the ribs before saying, "have you seen the general in charge of this operation?"

"We only saw her for a second. She took a pot shot down the hall and killed Gordon. Then she bugged out."

"Where?"

"I don't know, but I heard someone say the Ariels are coming from the Main Processing Station." He shouted the coordinates.

"Okay. We'll help you clear these fighters out, and then we'll go after her."

"Shoot her once for Gordon."

I nodded, and we both ran down the hall, hugging the wall. In no time we'd killed all the Ariel fighters, and we walked out to the hovership feeling invincible. I was glad it was too cold for the Ciberans to follow us out, so they didn't see what happened next.

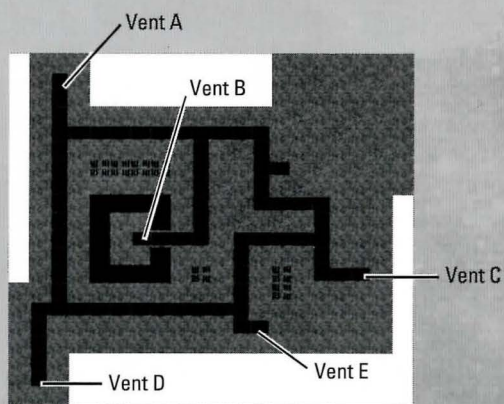
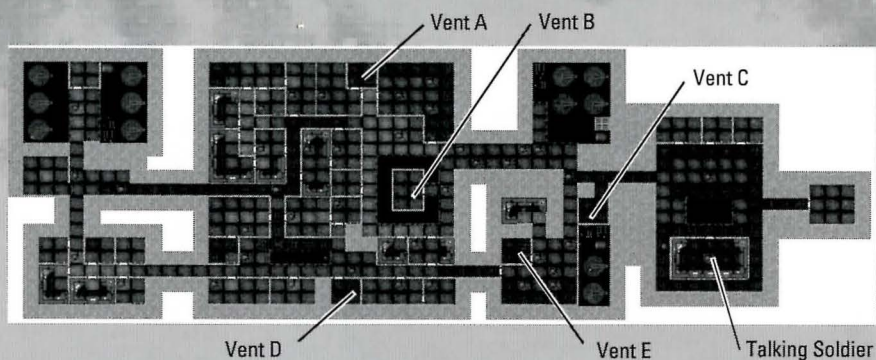
Two Ariel hoverships came at us from two different directions. We'd taken hits from the previous battle, so we were already hurting. Ace managed to get one of the Ariels, but the remaining one hit a soft spot and I heard the drive overload alarm wail.

Oh, no...not again! Just before the drive exploded, charges around the bridge section detonated, blowing the cockpit section away from the main ship. It exploded, sending burning shrapnel arcing into the snow, trailing dark streamers of smoke. We hit the glacier and tumbled. Upside down and still strapped into my chair, I watched the Ariel fighters fly away, thinking we were destroyed, and I listened to the steady drone of the distress beacon as I waited for the life boat to come from the

Ship. Luckily, no one was hurt, but I'd have to spend a few thousand on a new hovership at the Ciberan space station when we returned to the *Ship*, and the disaster echoed in my mind another explosion that didn't turn out so well.

THE CIBERAN MAIN PROCESSING STATION

The Main Processing Station was toward the northeast end of the shield. It was the biggest base we'd seen so far. Ace again had to shoot a few Ariel hoverships out of the sky, but she was less cocky about it. We took no hits from the Ariel hoverships.



Ciberan Main Processing Station

The base was swarming with Ariel fighters. There weren't any Ciberans left. We charged in and fought through the blue uniforms, occasionally picking up stray guns and ammo as we went.

We turned a corner and faced six fighters, all firing blasters. The Ariels wore Kevlar — pretty dumb, considering it only protects you a bit more than a flak vest and

it really slows you down. But they still forced us to take refuge in a room. Amaro blocked the door while we waited for our Extended AML to do its stuff.

"Hey, look at this," Ace said. Amaro stayed at the door, holding it shut as multiple shoulders tried to open it. I walked over to where Ace stood, and saw an air vent in the floor. It was big enough to let a person pass through.

"Let's go." I dropped in, followed by Ace. Amaro ran and dove, and we closed the vent behind us. We ran through the air ducts, crouching in the tight space. The Ariel fighters didn't follow.

The ducts formed a network that gave us easy access to most parts of the base. We jumped out of them, wasted the Ariels nearby, and then disappeared back into them again. It proved to be an effective strategy.

As we went, we picked up some weapons and ammo — some we could use, some we couldn't. And we also found a Mag Card marked 391A. I dropped it in the pool with the rest of the stuff.

When we thought we had taken care of all the Ariels, we searched the place to make sure we didn't miss anything. In the farthest reaches of the base, we found a room with a single Ariel fighter in it. When he saw us, he tensed up but didn't reach for a weapon.

"You're not Ciberans! Who are you? What are you doing here?" He shouted, but I felt it was from fear, not authority.

I glanced at Ace, who smirked. I turned back to the soldier and said, "You're the only Ariel we've run across who hasn't immediately fired at us. I'd say that means you're a coward. What do you think it means?"

He sneered, but it was a forced gesture. "It means I'm not just a grunt. I know how to talk."

"So talk. Who the hell are you if you're not a grunt?"

"I'm General Rodgen."

"Really?" I said, drawing out the word. "I guess I'd better kill you then." I raised my blaster.

"Wait! I'm supposed to give you a warning." Drops of sweat appeared in the creases of his forehead.

"Yeah, what kind of warning?"

"About the odds. So far you've been fighting pretty even odds. But we've got more fighters landing on Ciberan every minute. You haven't got a chance."

"I'll tell you what. Tell me where they're landing and I won't kill you."

"I was going to tell you anyway. That way I can save my troops the trouble of searching for you. The landing base is at coordinates 0907,0650."

I nodded. "Thanks for the info. I'll let you go if you want, but the Ciberan defenders will probably just kill you."

"I'll take my chances."

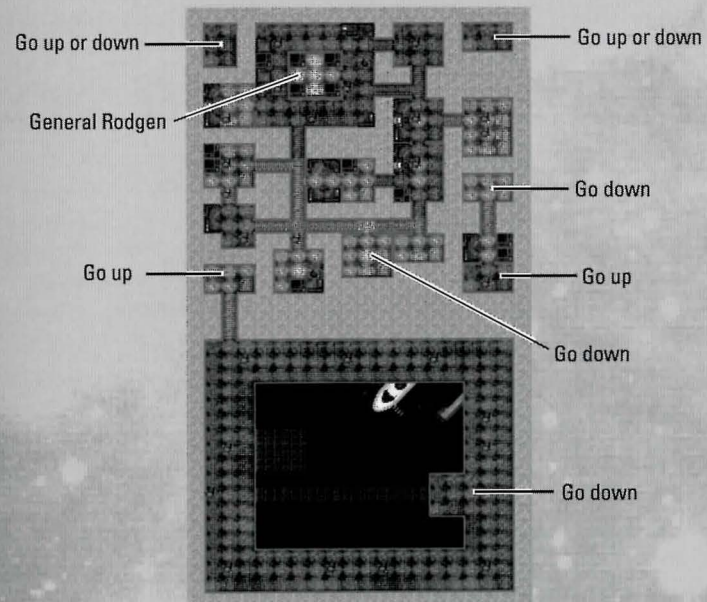
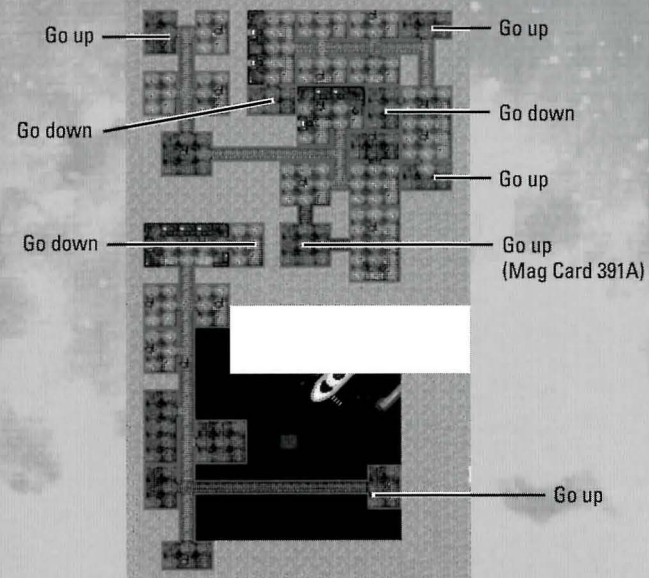
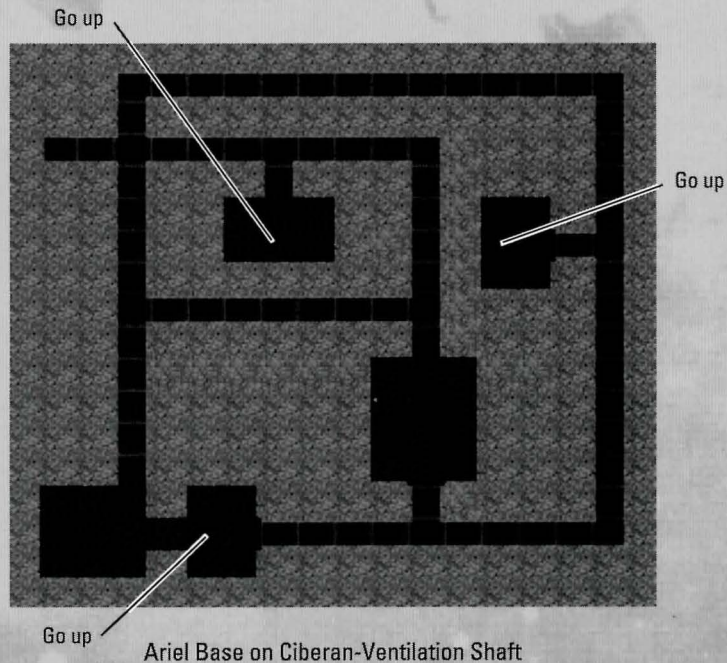
I nodded again. Then I raised my edgspinner and hacked him. I nudged his corpse with my toe and said, "On the other hand, I think I'll just save them the trouble of searching for you."

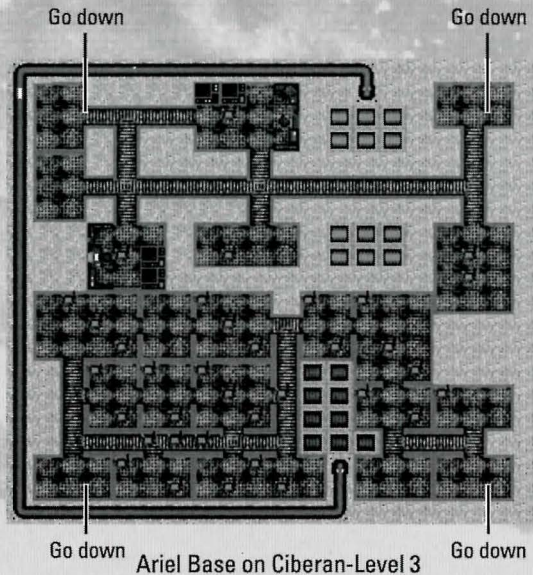
I found a Mag Card marked 174J next to the body, and I picked it up. "Let's go," I said to Ace and Amaro. "We're almost to the end of this."

THE ARIEL BASE ON CIBERAN

Before continuing, we went back to the Meridian Store and sold off the extra stuff we found while fighting the Ariels. Amaro pointed out that some of it might have belonged to the Ciberans, but Ace and I outvoted him 2 to 1. We figured we deserved it no matter who's it was.

The coordinates the lying soldier gave us were suspect, because (obviously) he was a liar. But we decided it was more likely to be a trap than nothing. Trap or not, we had to go — it was what we were getting paid to do.





We looked at the site from orbit — it sat in the middle of the shielded area, of course. They would want to prevent ships from dropping directly on them from orbit. It looked like there was a clear corridor to the south, so we dropped to the edge of the shield due south of the site and traveled north.

The scanner showed over a half-dozen hoverships patrolling the area. Despite Ace's blood lust, I maneuvered around to avoid them and get directly to the coordinates without conflict. No structure was visible — only a large hoverdock entrance. I pulled the ship into the dock and parked it. There was no telling how big the base was from the surface.

The parking area was huge. We slipped in beside an Ariel ship, and crept out into the bay. The construction was very recent, and built to withstand a full scale war. We surprised the crew and killed them all quickly.

Across a precarious catwalk was a lift up to the upper deck. A few fighters met us there, and we dropped them over the edge. We took out the guards at the main entrance, and walked into the structure itself.

It was still under construction. Corridors led to dead ends, whole rooms were empty, and the shortest distance between two points was not a straight line. The main floor was so crowded with Ariel fighters that I couldn't see how they could walk around each other to get from room to room.

"Damn," Ace whispered. "There must be *dozens* of them!"

"I thumped her on the chest plate and said, "Aren't you glad you got Extend AML."

She grimaced a smile, and we walked into the first room, with Amaro close behind.

The Ariels were carrying powerful blasters, but they also were wearing the same bulky armor as the others we'd killed in the other bases. We took out the first couple, but Ace took three chest wounds in a row. I pushed back from the front to let Amaro take over, and I frantically looked around the room. I saw another vent in the wall, and I ripped it open. I jump into it and pulled Ace with me. Amaro backed into the hole, and then we ran. The fighters didn't follow.

We waited as Ace's AML wheezed and hissed, beating her body back into shape. When she could walk, we scouted out the shafts. Cleaning out the Main Processing Station was a lot easier once we found the ventilation shafts and used them, so we decided to repeat the strategy.

Within twenty minutes we'd cleared out the entire floor.

We got lost, wandering around endless corridors, finding dead ends and elevators that didn't open at every floor. I tried to keep track of time by how much ammunition I had left, and toward the end I figured we'd been at it for hours. We were exhausted, but running on adrenaline and stimulants pumped into our blood streams by the AML.

We found a security elevator that needed a Mag Card. I dug around in my pack for the key I found at the Main Processing Station. I found it — it was marked 391A.

It fit. The elevator doors opened, closed, and opened again to reveal the Ariel invasion headquarters.

We took out the guards on the periphery first, working our way toward the control complex on the center of the level. When we reached the center, we found the control complex inhabited by a formidable-looking woman with white hair. She was speaking with three Lieutenants.

As soon as they saw us, the three Lieutenants turned and fired. We fired back, and all throughout the exchange, the woman stood erect, never ducking, never flinching, not even when the last of her Lieutenants fell down, cooked to the bone.

"Who the hell are you?!" She shouted. "How did you get in here?!" She looked more angry than startled. She was obviously General Camede Rodgen.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: ARIEL GENERAL Camede Rodgen
 HOME WORLD: Unknown
 HEIGHT: 1.9 meter WEIGHT: 72 kilos
 DESCRIPTION: Don't know much about her except she's one tough mother.

"We came in through the front door," I said. "And there are a lot of dead guards in the halls to prove it."

She looked at me carefully. "You must be that Starkiller merc I've been getting reports about."

"Yep. And Max Sebastian is paying me a lot of money to kill you and your fighters. I've killed all the fighters. Now it's your turn."

"Killed all of my fighters? Not even a fraction! Our forces have already captured everything but Meridian City!"

"I don't believe you. Your invasion forces are history."

"Yes, *future* history! Once we get past all this petty squabbling, we'll go down in history as the ones who united the Four Systems under one rule!"

I looked around. "Who's we?"

"Me and Damien Altron, of course. He will rule and I will keep order."

"I've been hearing a lot of bad things about this Damien Altron guy. In fact, after I kill you, he's the next stop on the hit parade. Where can I find him?"

"He's on Ariel, obviously, but if you think you can find him, you're sadly mistaken. He's everywhere, yet I'm the only one who ever sees him."

I laughed. "Aren't you the lucky one? So no one ever sees him, huh? Maybe there is no Damien Altron. Maybe you're the real leader. Maybe if I kill you here, the whole thing stops right now."

She pressed her lips together, then she shook her head. "You really are pathetically naive, Starkiller."

"Okay, here it is. Tell us where Altron is and I let you walk. What do you say?"

"I say," she said with confident authority, "that you walk out the way you came, or I'll have you carried out. If you leave now, I won't send anyone after you. You can't hurt us."

"Uh, huh. Tell me if this hurts..." I aimed my blaster at her chest.

"Guards!" she shouted, and drew her own blaster.

"They won't save you," I replied, and I fired. I crouched so Ace and Amaro could fire over me. The room filled with thick, gagging smoke, and echoed with sizzling and popping as we vaporized walls, armor, and finally flesh. General Camede Rodgen unceremoniously dropped to the carpeted floor.

I searched her body and found a Mag Card labelled 942Z. "This place is empty — Altron's not here. But if this General was the only one who ever saw him, I'll bet this Mag Card is the key to his front door. Let's go."

A couple Ariel fighters tried to ambush us as we left, but I punched the hovership drive into the red and threw us up out of the atmosphere before they knew which direction we went. Without support, they wouldn't last long down there. Our business on Ciberan was done, and Ariel was the next target.

SPACE CHATTER

We stopped off on Varon to sell the surplus goods we picked up. Then it was back to Mastassini for some safe repairs. We had plenty of cash, so we could replace all of our damaged systems and refuel. We were about halfway there when Janai handed me a piece of paper with two intercepted space comms on it. "I decoded these just a few minutes ago," she said.

It was nice to be handed a finished message, typed on a slip of paper. I read both messages:

Rouyn intercepted message from Cptn. Rencho, Ore Ship Primmadonna:
TRANKOR BASE, WE'RE PICKING UP MULTIPLE UNKNOWNNS ON LONG RANGE SWEEP. PLEASE CONFIRM.

Rouyn intercepted message from Trankor Base, Planet Rouyn:
NEGATIVE, DONNA. WE CANNOT REPEAT CANNOT CONFIRM UNKNOWNNS. CHECK INSTRUMENTS OR APPROACH FOR VISUAL.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"I picked up two more, but I haven't finished decoding them yet."

"It could be anything. Keep me posted."

We docked at the Mastassini Space Station soon afterward. I completely repaired and refueled the ship until we were all good as new. I knew we were going to have to be in top form to walk into an Ariel stronghold.

On the way to the stargate, Janai brought me two more decoded space comms. I could read nothing in her expression. I read them both:

Rouyn intercept message from Cptn. Rencho, Ore Ship Primmadonna:
TRANKOR BASE! THE LITTLE BUGGERS ARE EVERYWHERE! WE'RE LOSING SYS... (GARBLED) CLOSING IN! (STATIC).

Rouyn message from Trankor Base, Planet Rouyn:
DONNA, YOUR SIGNAL'S BREAKING UP. PLEASE REPEAT. DONNA, WHAT IS YOUR SITUATION? DONNA, PLEASE RESPOND... (MESSAGE REPEATS).

When I finished, I looked up at Janai. She looked worried.

"Probably just a bunch of Zero-L swarming a Rouyn ore ship," I said. "Don't sweat over it. We'll go to Ariel, as planned. We've still got to kill Altron to stop his Ciberan takeover attempt."

She nodded and returned to her station.

As we neared the stargate, I told Punch to warm up his vocal cords for another wormhole trip, when, Janai gave me another space comm. Five in a couple hours was getting a little tiresome. But it only took a few seconds to read:

Starkiller message from Gerard Kendall, Starkiller HQ:

EMERGENCY ASSIGNMENT: ROUYN COLONY IS UNDER ATTACK.
RETURN TO HQ FOR NEW ORDERS IMMEDIATELY. ENDMMSG.

"Sorry, Punch. I'm turning us around. Kendall sounds pretty serious about this. If its more important than stopping Ariel's invasion of Ciberan, it's gotta be big. I spun the ship around to face Holbrook and turned on full thrust.

TROUBLE ON THE FRONTIER OF THE FRONTIER

"I'm glad you're here," Kendall said to me. "All hell's broken loose in the Rouyn System. I'm not sure what's going on, but the mining colony out there is screaming for mercs. I think they hired the Delta Coro first but didn't get any results."

"Are the miners being attacked?"

"It sounds like it. Or maybe it's just sabotage. Either way they're suffering damage on a massive scale. I want you to go out there and see what's going on."

I glanced at Ace and Amaro. "Our hands are full, Kendall. Can't you get someone else."

"You *are* the someone else, Nova. I already lost a team in the Rouyn System, before they had a chance to transmit a message telling me what was going on. I didn't want to take you off your current job, but this is getting big. It could affect us all."

"Terrific." I sighed. "What do you want us to do?"

"Go talk to the foreman on the Rouyn Mining Colony." He showed me the coordinates on a slip of paper. "Find out from him what's going on, then stop it. Deal with the Ariel-Ciberan thing when you have the chance. I gather you've made some progress?"

"Some. We've cleaned out Ciberan. All we have left is to stop the next wave at the source on Ariel."

"Okay, it sounds like they can hold off for a bit while you take care of this Rouyn mess. Take Leod with you if you think you can use him — he's taking his turn as Shift Commander in the next room. I'll cover for him."

I drew back. "Take Leod? On a job? We're not going up against Zero-L, you know."

Kendall shook his head. "If you still don't know how useful Darcators are, now's a good time to learn. Now get going."

We picked up Leod on the way out. He was excited to go — too excited. Now I know what Amaro felt when he saw Ace and I working over the Lanta Leaders. Now I felt like a jerk. I avoided looking at Amaro as I led my crew back to the hovership. Leod babbled about how he knew all along that the Four Systems would get invaded sooner or later. What was a Darcator good for besides flinging dung on the floor? An invasion... he was crazy.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Leod

HOME WORLD: Tikorr

LENGTH: 1.5 meter

WEIGHT: 43 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Crude, obnoxious, insensitive, smelly, a good programmer, and he doesn't care where he relieves himself. But he makes for an excellent scout and a formidable fighter. In his own words, he is "silent but deadly."

THE ROUYN MINING COLONY

As soon as we left orbit, I sat Leod down (you know what I mean) at the Tech station. He had good programming skills, so I told him to hack the system software to make the *Ship* run worth a damn.

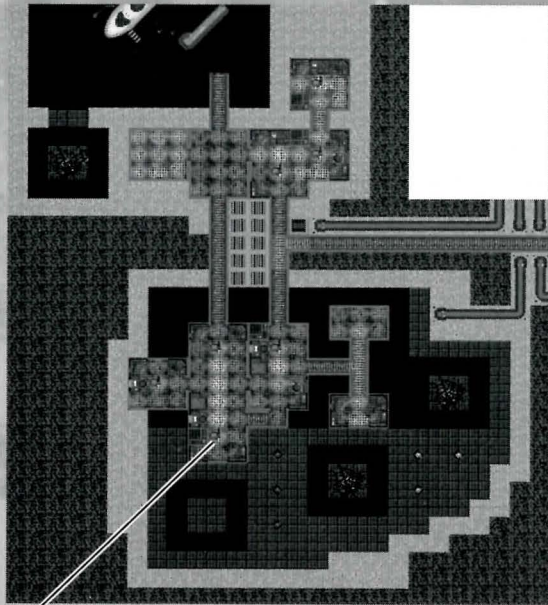
We entered the Ariel system on the way to the stargate to Rouyn, and I saw a couple blips on the long range scanner that looked odd. I was about to tell Janai to check them out, when the comm station erupted with static, and a single message jammed the channel.

YOU HAVE ENTERED ARIELLIAN SPACE. THE GLORIOUS WORLD OF ARIEL DEMANDS TRIBUTE BEFORE YOU MAY PASS.

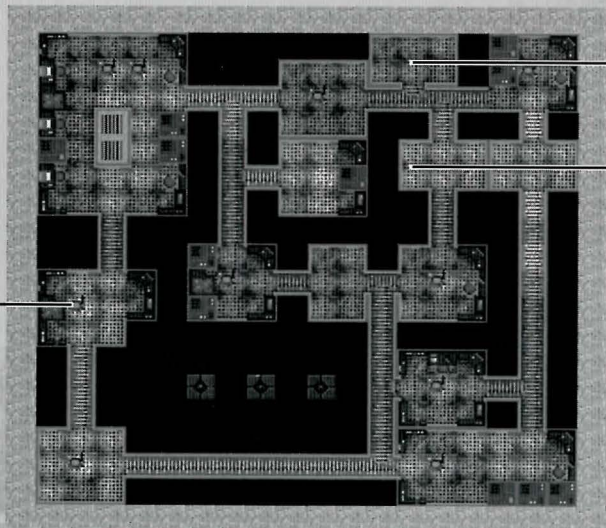
They wanted us to transmit twelve thousand?! That was 20% of everything we had. "Forget it," I muttered. "We're not even *going* to Ariel." I accelerated. We shot through the stargate to Rouyn before they could figure out whether we paid or not.

I hated going to the Rouyn system. It was like crawling down into someone else's storm cellar. I saw more strange blips on the scanner, and I told Janai to get on it. Ace wanted me to approach one for visual, but I wanted to hear what the miners had to say before I started running around chasing strange blips.

The coordinates took us to an unlikely spot on the surface of the desert planet. I saw multiple blips on the scanner, but I managed to steer us to the hoverdock before meeting up with any of them. I could feel Ace's eye on my back, and I knew the question she wanted to ask. I wasn't being a coward, I was being smart. Amaro could understand that. I looked to him, and he nodded, as if he read my mind.



Foreman
Rouyn Mining Colony Entry Way-Dome 1

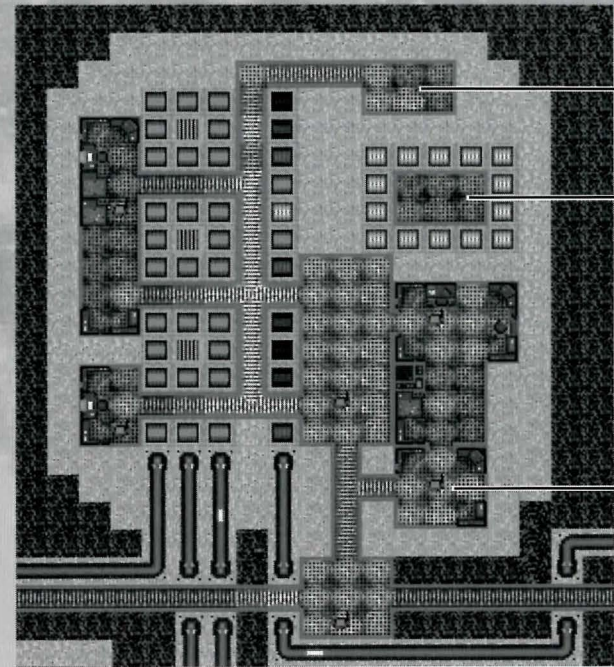


Library Security
(Mag Card
845B)

Go up

Go up to
library

Rouyn Mining Colony-Sub-Level

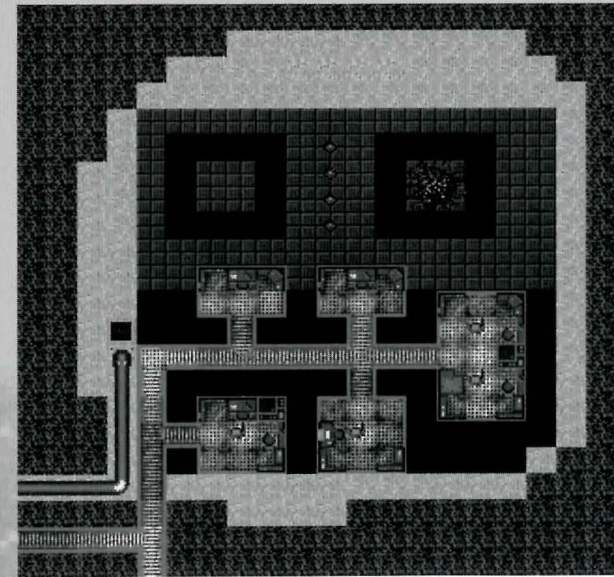


Go down to
basement

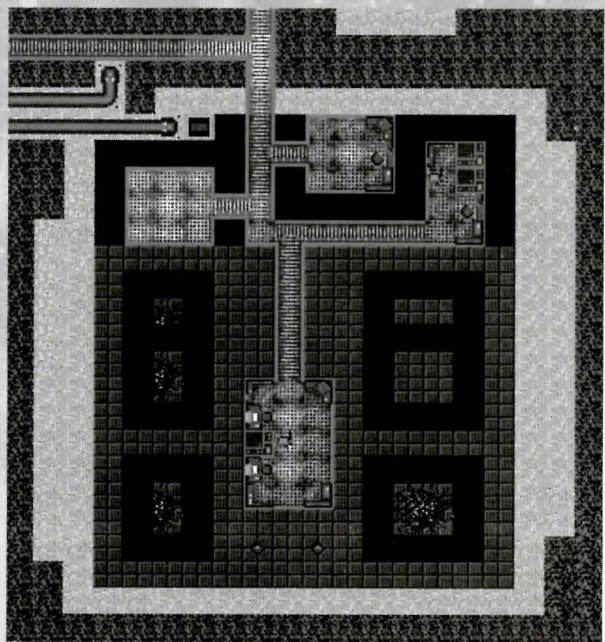
Library
(go down)

Central Air
Processing

Rouyn Mining Colony Dome 2



Rouyn Mining Colony Dome 3



Rouyn Mining Colony Dome 4

A miner told us where to find the foreman, and we walked down the south corridor until we found him. He stared out the window, and I had to clear my throat to get him to turn around. His dirty, harsh features made him look like he'd been chiseled out of sedimentary rock.

He straightened up. "Man, am I glad to see you! I hired the Delta Coro first but I haven't heard from them." He shook his head. "What a bunch of worthless idiots."



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Mining Colony Foreman
HOME WORLD: Core World Tyllinous
HEIGHT: 1.9 meter WEIGHT: 85 kilos
DESCRIPTION: Dirty, smelly, awkward, moody, and a mining foreman who doesn't know how to do anything else.

"So what happened here," I asked.

He looked back out the window. "They came a few days ago. It took us awhile to figure out what they were 'cause they kept blasting us with electromagnetic pulses, frying all of our equipment."

"So what are they?"

"They're small, alien ships. We shielded a transport enough to get close and managed to bring one down. It was built for two beings, but it was empty, like a probe or something."

He stared at something out the window, so I said, "What else?"

He shrugged. "We don't know what they want—and we can't trace where they came from—our gear isn't shielded enough to take their pulses. But we do know who sent the little buggers."

"Who?"

"The Desiree Labs, obviously."

Desiree Labs, I thought. Renegade scientists. "Why obviously?"

He looked at me. "Who else could do it? Those witches are the only ones who could suddenly invade a system with small, unmanned spaceships. And they're the only ones who'd want to."

I was getting lost. The man's reasoning was faulty. "Why would they want to?"

"How the hell should I know?!" He frowned. "They're crazy scientists. Go ask them for yourselves. But do it fast, or we're gonna fall into the red so far we'll never climb back out again."

"All right. Where are these Desiree Labs?"

"I don't know that either. I heard a rumor that they have a base on Tikorr, but I don't know where. Hell, they might not even be there at all..." his voice drifted off.

I looked to Amaro, but he offered no guidance. The foreman was obviously devastated by what was happening, but if he didn't stand up for himself, he was going to get run over. Even though Max Sebastian was a pain in the ass, at least he was doing *something*, his men were *fighting*.

"That doesn't give me much to go on," I said.

He raised his eyebrows, as if surprised. "There might be a viewer disk in the library. There's a Mag Card for the library lying around here somewhere—don't ask me why we keep it locked up."

"Is that all?"

He took a deep breath. "Look, Starkiller. All I want is for you to get these damn emitters out of my system. I don't care how you do it. I think it's the Desiree's, and I think they're on Tikorr. The rest is up to you."

A Mag Card labelled 845B lay on the counter next to him. I presumed it was for the library and picked it up—he didn't stop me. "C'mon," I said to Amaro and Ace. "Let's take a look around."

We wandered around for quite awhile before we found an elevator in the next dome. It took us below ground level, and we found another elevator that led up to the library, but it was locked. We had to find a security shack three rooms away to unlock it with the key we got from the foreman, and only then could we get up into the library, which was on the ground floor, but had no ground floor entrances. Go figure.

And then, we copied the viewer disk he referred to, and it was just a historical account of the Desiree scientists. It didn't help us any. (Although I *did* learn that Desiree was actually DSRE, short for Deep Space Research Expedition — I always thought it was a women's name since the scientists were all women — but either way it didn't help us any.)

We left the colony and took off in the hovership. We could have met up with the funny blips in the hovership, but I felt safer meeting them in the *Ship*, since it was so much better equipped. Both ships were shielded enough to withstand EMPs (ElectroMagnetic Pulses), but I wanted an A7 Comet Beam between us and them.

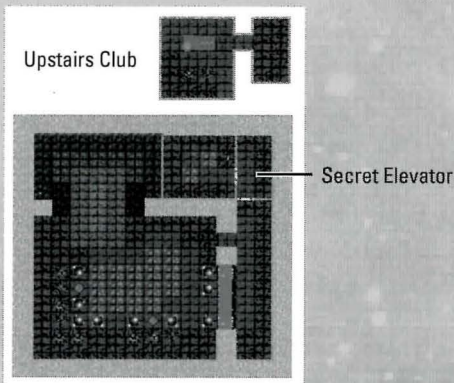
PROBES

I targeted an isolated funny blip on the long range scanner, and we approached slowly. I had a hunch that the EMPs were their only weapon, if it even was a weapon, and I pulled us in close. It didn't attack us. It was obviously a probe of some sort — not built for battle. The EMPs must just be a byproduct of whatever it was doing. Either way, they had to go. I nodded to Ace, and she blasted it with the A7. It exploded without retaliating. There were a half-dozen more in the Rouyn System, and we destroyed them all, but I had a feeling that more were coming.

We headed for Tikorr.

THE TIKORR CLUB

There was a large, shielded area on Tikorr, but I figured that the Desirees wouldn't want to draw attention to themselves by putting up a shield. I decided that if anyone knew where the Desiree Base on Tikorr was, they'd probably be in a bar. I took Ace and Amaro down to the Tikorr Club — a rough and tumble bar and casino near the hoverdock of a sprawling, box-like city. The city was populated exclusively by Darcators, since no other races could breathe its methane-laden air (and no one wanted to walk on its dung-covered floors), but the bars and lounges were open to outworlders.



Tikorr Club

The corners of the hallways reeked of urine and other things, and as we rode the elevator up to the club, I said to Ace, "Ever been here before?"

She shook her head. Amaro and I exchanged a smile.

The room was full of drunks, mostly mercs, core pilots, and Darcators. I weaved through them all to the bar and hailed the bartender.

He waddled over and said, "Can I get you a drink? Or is there something else I can do for you?" He looks at me inquisitively.

"What else could you help me with?"

He shrugged. "It's up to you, Buddy. Whatever you want."

I bit my tongue. Normally I shoot people who call me Buddy, but I might need something from him. He sounded like he knew something. "Make a suggestion."

He shook his head, and his jowls swayed. "It doesn't work that way, Friend."

I don't like being called Friend much, either. I glanced around, and I saw a back room past the bar. "Maybe you can tell me what's behind that locked door behind the bar?"

"If you don't know what's behind it, you don't belong there." He narrowed his eyes, though I thought his pig-eyes couldn't get any narrower. "Who sent you?"

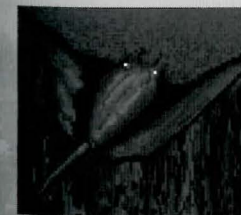
"Um... I forget his name. He's kind of medium height, medium build, doesn't say much. *You* know him."

His blubbery girth surged once. "Nice try. Well, come back if you think of anything else I can do for you." He left to go tend to some other customers.

My hand was on the butt of my gun — I hadn't realized I put it there — and I removed it. I'd deal with him later. I remembered I was here to find out where the Desirees were hidden.

I somehow managed to talk to the mercs without starting a fight, which was no small feat, but they didn't tell me anything I'd repeat to my mother. Only the core pilots were willing to talk about the Desirees, but they didn't know anything helpful. I barely got the Darcators to talk — they were too busy dumping on the Zero-Ls.

One Darcator looked tougher than the rest. He floated down from the ceiling to greet me. There's a thumb-sized chunk missing from his left wing.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Galejay

HOME WORLD: Tikorr

LENGTH: 1.7 meter

WEIGHT: 50 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Proud, even aristocratic, scarred, and a tough talker. Other than that, one Darcator is as good as another as far as I'm concerned.

"How would you like to hire a mercenary who can fly silently and turn invisible at will?" He asked.

"You, I suppose?"

"I'm the only Darcator here who is brave enough to excrete on aliens other than Zero-L."

I dropped my hand to my gun. "Don't prove it if you know what's good for you."

"I don't need to prove it to you. I am the only one here brave enough to even say it. So, are you interested in my services?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I need any more Darcator dung on my ship."

"I can hold my dung when I have to." As he said it, I smelled something rancid. "But most situations do not require it."

I had nothing to lose — Leod already had dirtied up the Ship as much as was possible. "Okay, I could use you. When can you leave?"

"As soon as you get me a GravBlocker."

Amaro and Ace didn't know what that was either. "What the hell is a GravBlocker?"

"It is Darcator armor. I refuse to go out and fight without proper armor. Look at what happened last time." He fluttered his wing with the missing piece.

I laughed. Do Darcators know laughter when they hear it? "Well, if I ever find any, maybe I'll come back for you."

"Come back when you have it. Then I will join you."

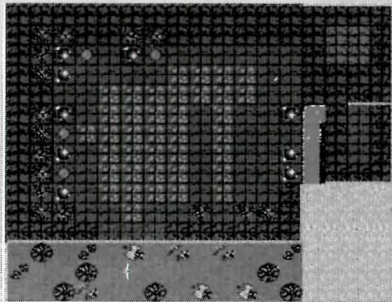
Yeah, maybe, I thought. But don't hold your breath.

There wasn't much else we could do at the club, but I did search around in that area beside the bar. The elevator was securely locked, but there was an unlocked supply closet next to it. The small room was full of cases of Mud.

I stole them.

THE TIKORR LOUNGE

Just to the northeast of the club was a lounge I'd been to once, a long time ago. The lounge and a small arms store were the only areas inaccessible to non-Darcators. We flew there directly from the club. Just inside, I stopped in the store and sold off most of the Mud I stole from the Club bar — keeping just enough for myself.



Tikorr Lounge

The bartender was watching something on the holo, and I couldn't get his attention without shoving my gun in his face, so I looked around for any women who might be Desirees or know of them. I saw a slight looking girl in the corner, and I walked up to her.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Cerallon

HOME WORLD: Ariel

LENGTH: 1.6 meter WEIGHT: 63 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Young, quiet, shy, introverted, low-confidence, fairly good programmer but needs additional skill to be really helpful. She's a frustrated computer programmer with dreams of being a front-line merc. It'll never happen.

"Hi," she said brightly. "My name is Cerallon. Can I help you?"

I thought then that she might be a bar maid on a break, but she discretely slipped her hand under the table, and I heard her unfasten a holster.

"Leave your gun on your hip, Sweetheart. I'm not gonna hurt you."

She smiled. "You can never be to careful."

"Sure you can. If you don't trust people, they won't trust you."

She returned her hand to the tabletop. "I trust you."

I quickly drew my gun and leveled it at her nose. "The only thing worse than not trusting people is being gullible."

Her eyes widened and she held her breath.

I held the gun in front of her another second or two, to see if she'd start breathing again. She didn't, so I holstered my gun so she wouldn't faint. "So what are you doing here, Cerallon?"

"I'm a computer programmer," she said, quickly regaining her composure. "I get claustrophobic in the Center, so I come here to relax."

"Nice try. You wouldn't have a blaster if you wanted to relax." I decided to let the lie pass. "So you program? Can you hack software?"

"That would be too easy to be interesting. I'd rather use this." She pointed to her holster.

"You haven't impressed me much with your gun, but I could use a good programmer to hack my ship's software. Interested?"

"Not if all I get to do is program. I can stay here and do that."

My ship was still in bad shape. Leod had fixed it up a little, but he often broke as much as he fixed, and it still had a long way to go. If this girl really could fix up the Ship, it would be worth that much less reward when it came time to divide up the spoils. The only solution? Lie like a jackal.

"I'll tell you what," I said. "I'll bring you on my landing parties if you hack some of my systems while we're in space. How's that?"

She thought about it for about two seconds. "It's the best offer I've had so far. Okay, I'll come."

"Good." I stood up, looking around for any more women who might be Desirees, or know of any. "I've got a lot of software that needs hacking."

"And I get to come on landing parties," she said.

"Oh yeah," I quickly said to her. "Sure, I won't forget." I'd thought then that I'd have to make up some clever excuse for selling all her gear.

Along the south wall was a huge aviary. All of the birds were oxygen breathing, which meant they weren't Tikorr natives, so I had no idea why someone went to all the trouble of bringing them here. Amaro, however, was hypnotized by the whole scene. I wondered if he felt homesick — missed his fish.

A silver-haired woman leaning into the aviary attracted my attention. Her coat looked like a scientist's lab coat, and I walked over toward her. Something short and green got in my way, and I started to push past it when it spoke. It was a loud and whiny voice I'd heard before — it was the Delta Coro kid from the Malibu Bar.

I talked my way around him — it took awhile — and I did manage to learn that he was the one that injured the Darcator at the Tikorr Club. Some battle he'd been in, I thought. Attacked by a kid with a toy gun. I gave the kid the brush-off and walked up to the woman at the aviary.

Her smock reeked of vomit, and her breath smelled like a Tikorr sunset. But she was obviously a scientist.



GENERAL PROFILE

SUBJECT: DSRE Scientists

HOME WORLD: Variable

HEIGHT: Variable WEIGHT: Variable

DESCRIPTION: Amoral scientists with only one goal, the uninterrupted research of their assigned category. They are surrounded with defense droids, but do not fight for themselves, even when cornered.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She glared at me. "You've got to be kidding."

"Later," she said. "Can't you see I'm busy?" She leaned over into the aviary again and made a new puddle in the landscape.

I wasn't ready to threaten her, so I backed off. A merchant came up to me and started to give me a sales pitch. When I told him I picked up most of my gear from fresh corpses, he changed his tune. He told me of some Delta Coro who bought from him but never paid, and he wouldn't mind seeing them out of action. My reward would be whatever we found on the bodies. I wasn't that interested, until he told me

they were in the secret room above the Tikorr Club. "Tell the bartender Freejon sent you," he said. I told him I'd do my best. Hell, maybe they did have some good hardware.

It had been a few minutes since the scientist dame told me to get lost, and she hadn't thrown up since, so I approached her again.

"I can't talk now," she said in a deep, raspy voice. "I've got to get back to the lab."

"The Desiree Labs, maybe?"

She smiled weakly. "That's D-S-R-E, not Desiree. It stands for Deep Space Research Expedition. And I've got to get back."

"You're in no condition to fly. Let me drop you off."

"I don't know..." She looked at me and my crew carefully. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"I guess you can't. But I don't see anyone else offering."

She nodded, pressing her lips together. I think she swallowed bile. "That's true. I really do have to get back." She closed her eyes and swayed a little. Then she opened them again. "I'm sorry, what were we talking about?"

"Taking you home," I said patiently.

"It looks..." Her head bobbed a bit. "It looks like I have no choice." She leaned all her weight against the rail, eyes closed. I thought she might have nearly passed out, but then she said, "Take me to coordinates..." Her voice faded, and I barely caught the coordinates.

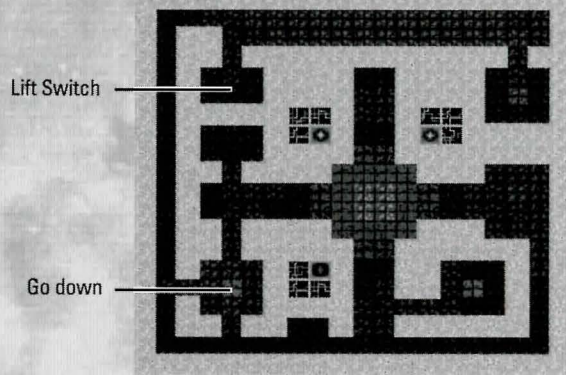
I gave Ace and Amaro the thumbs up sign, and said, "Okay, let's go."

She didn't respond. She really was passed out now. I shrugged and left her there hovering over her own vomit.

NOT A SCIENTIFIC SOLUTION

Before we went to the coordinates the Desiree gave me, I flew all the way back to space to drop off Cerallon. When Amaro, Ace and I crawled back in to the hovership to go back to Tikorr, Cerallon looked surprised and indignant. "You're gonna have to prove your worth before you can come down on landing parties. The hovership only holds four, and we always need to leave one chair empty in case we want to bring anyone back with us. Now start hacking those systems."

The scanner showed more than a dozen air targets, but none of them were near the Desiree Base hoverdock. I flew out just far enough to ID the blips, and I saw that they were Delta Coro fighting the Base security droids. Security droids are notoriously stupid, and Delta Coro don't rate very high on the food chain either. They both were occupying each other, and we slipped right into the hoverdock without firing a shot. Ace was pissed. "You'll get your chance," I told her.



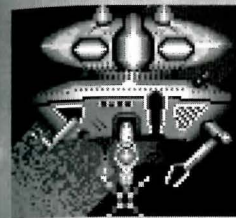
Tikorr DSRE Base Ground Floor

We walked inside the Base and right into a standoff. Delta Coro and roving security droids were facing each other in a no win situation. A couple DC tried to rush us, but we dropped them pretty easily. Ace kept throwing me dirty looks — since I was in front, I took most of the kills myself. Amaro looked amused by the whole thing. We picked up some bloody battle armor and energy cells and moved on.

In a small side room, we found a DC stupidly trying to open an elevator which had obviously been welded shut. We shot him before he could draw his weapon. Nearby we found some ammo, and Rush AML! There was no time for any of us to put it on, so I crammed it in the pool and decided to see who needed it most after the fight ended.

A DC shot at us from a doorway, and we put three slugs through his green, scaly head. Suddenly a half-dozen poured out into the corridor and we were stuck in a firefight. Ace was yelling like a maniac as she helped us mow them down. Delta Coro fight as well as they think.

In the side room where the DC had jumped us from, we found a cleaning droid that the DC had apparently been trying to dismantle, for whatever reason. On one of the access panels was written: Automated Limited Integration Cleaning Emulator, or A.L.I.C.E. We tried to talk to it, but it was hard to understand. We finally got the idea that it was missing a circuit board, so we looked around until we found one on the ground nearby.



MISCELLANEOUS PROFILE

SUBJECT: A.L.I.C.E.

HOME WORLD: N/A

HEIGHT: 1 meter WEIGHT: Unknown

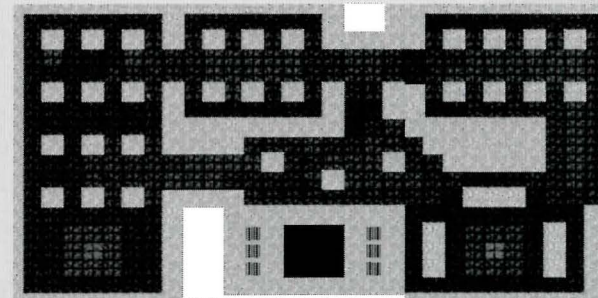
DESCRIPTION: Alice is an Automated Limited Integration Cleaning Emulator. She specializes in pest control, most notably rats, Hooverbugs, and cockroaches. She has access to all sections of the Tikorr DSRE Base, and she can be piloted by remote control.

I gave it to the droid, and it snatched it away. It worked like crazy, breaking as many connections as it made. The finished patch looked barely operable. I wasn't surprised when it said, "Ready for new orders."

"Alice," I said, pointing out to Amaro and Ace that Alice was holding a PlasmaCannon. "Follow me."

We cleared the place of Delta Coro without much trouble, and it wasn't until after we did that I realized these were the DC the miners hired before us. The stupid DC hadn't even gotten into the Desiree Base yet.

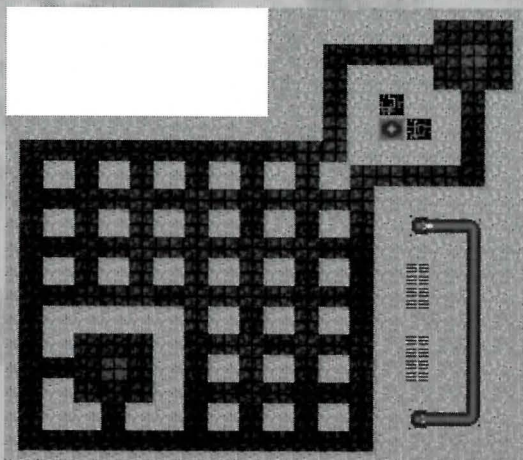
The elevator to the next level was surrounded by eight security droids. They stood on two massive, tracted feet, and they pivoted nasty-looking PlasmaCannons with remarkable speed. But they weren't very resistant to high-powered shells from our M23s. Soon the elevator room was knee-deep in smoking electronics. I pushed the down arrow, and the lift lowered us to the next level.



Tikorr DSRE Base Level 2

I know a security maze when I see one. This one looked remarkably like the RoboMaze at Spaceport Malibu, except these droids weren't using stunners. It didn't matter, we waded through the wreckage easily enough. The aggravating part was running into the transparent barriers that had been placed at random throughout the maze.

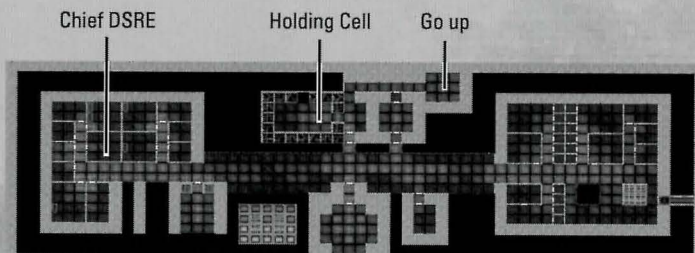
We thought we'd found the lifts to the next level near the east wall, but they wouldn't work. Then we found a working elevator to the south. It obviously was built for droid access only. I was glad we had Alice with us — she quickly lowered the lift.



Tikorr DSRE Base Level 3

Piercing alarms rang in the air. I thought we must be on a level with humans on it — if there were only droids, they could spread the alarm silently to each other without warning the intruder. But I was wrong.

A droid appeared from around the corner, and it aimed a weapon at me unlike anything I'd ever seen. It fired, and my mind splintered into tiny fragments of light. I fell, and blacked out.



Tikorr DSRE Base Level 4

My nose hurt. I jumped up, waving my gun wildly. "Take it easy," Amaro said. "We're in a holding cell."

I looked out through the energy barrier and saw the switch to disarm the field within my reach, if only I could reach through. It was impossible.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Where's Alice?"

"Where we left her probably. She's a Desiree cleaning droid — the security droids would have no reason to take her."

I smiled. "Then we're free. All we have to do is remote pilot her up here to throw that switch, and we're out!"

Amaro smiled knowingly. I think he already had that in mind, he'd just been waiting for me to wake up. It irritated me that I was the last to wake up, but there was nothing I could do about it. I dialed up Alice on my portable two-way transmitter. I brought up a view of what she could see on video, and it was a distorted view of the second level security maze. Then I realized what I was looking at — Alice could see the transparent security barriers because she was in tune to the electromagnetic signature of the area.

But knowing where to go and getting there were two different things. The security droids didn't attack Alice, but they wouldn't let her squeeze past them in the corridors. I had to wait until they got out of the way to move. Once I told Alice to shoot one of the droids, but she couldn't aim her laser worth a damn. I impatiently waited for the droids to get out of her way as I wondered why the whole base wasn't overrun with rats and Hooverbugs.

Finally I got her to the elevator. There was an object on the floor, but I couldn't tell what it was, and I couldn't get Alice to pick it up. I'd have to check it out later. I had Alice access the lift and go down a floor.

I piloted her down the hall, and suddenly I was looking at myself and saw that I was staring intently at something. I looked up from the two-way and saw Alice hovering outside the cell. I told her to flip the switch, and the barrier faded. Alice rejoined my team.

We wandered out into a large hallway, and saw a couple of Desirees. We approached one, who didn't see us until we surrounded her.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Chief DSRE Scientist, Tikorr Base

HOME WORLD: Unknown

HEIGHT: 1.7 meter WEIGHT: 62 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Cool, brave, impatient, single-minded, unaffected, and effective at solving problems when she feels she has a stake in them.

She jumped slightly, startled. "What are you doing here? How did you get in?" I smiled. "I'm looking for someone in charge."

She looked suspicious for a moment, then the look faded. "Well, the only way you could get in past the security droids is if you were expected. The ranking scientist is down the hall to the west."

We walked into a room where a Desiree was leafing through a stack of computer printouts. She glanced up and then back down at her work again. "You don't belong here," she said nonchalantly. "Leave before I call the security droids. And they won't put you outside, they'll just kill you."

"That's a warm welcome," I said congenially. "Maybe I'll get my friends here to turn their blasters on High and fry your onions before the droids get here."

She slammed down her stack of printouts. "All right, don't hyperventilate. What do you want?"

"Do you know anything about all those little ships attacking the Rouyn Mining Colony?"

"They're not attacking the miners. They are probes. They're just looking for a certain type of solar system."

"So you admit it. You're the one controlling them."

She rolled her eyes a bit. "They're not ours — we don't have the resources for something on that scale. We just know what the probes are doing by analyzing their pulses. Besides, why would we need to probe a system we already know everything about?"

"Well if you're not behind it, then who is?"

"I don't know, but presumably whoever is responsible will show up eventually if they find what they're looking for."

I shook my head. If she was a liar, she was a damn good one. "This all smells like Darcator dung to me."

"Even if we were responsible, killing me wouldn't stop it. But I'm telling you, it's not us. We study gravitational theory here, not solar system dynamics."

I believed her. "If you eventually find out who sent those probes, would you tell me?"

"Those probes are everywhere," she replied. "If whoever sent them ever shows up, I doubt you'll need me to tell you. Now please go, I've got work to do."

We left, but not without searching the base first.

In a computer network center, we saw an scrawny man sitting in front of a computer terminal. It was an Infoman, a terrible reminder of what the Core worlds do to people who don't fit their idea of the social norm. Their brains are accessed like organic computers, performing mindless calculations on demand. The Infoman's eyes widened, and he seemed about to speak, but then the terminal lit up and he slumped. A thick, twisted cable connected the back of his skull to the terminal.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Waldro

HOME WORLD: Core World Dronnisson 5

HEIGHT: 1.6 meter WEIGHT: 50 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Skinny, tired, manic-depressive, suffers from delusions, but an Infoman that is a helluva great communications technician.

I touched his shoulder — he didn't react. "Are you okay?" No answer. "Hello? Is there anybody in there?"

The terminal shut down. The man stirred and choked out a few words. "Can't...talk...accessing...please....help..." The terminal lit up again and he sagged in his chair.

I waited until the terminal lights went out, and said, "How do I get you out of here?"

"...destroy..." he said softly.

"Won't it hurt you if I shoot the machine you're attached to?"

"...shoot...me...please...can't...stand...it...anymore..."

"I can't do that," I whispered to him. "I don't do mercy killings."

"...just...shoot...terminal...grounded..."

I understood. I drew a gun and fired at him.

He sprang backward like a frog's leg in biology class when touched with an electric wire. Blue arcs cracked in the air and the room filled with smoke. We ran over to the man and helped him to his feet. "You okay?"

"Killer hangover," he mumbled.

"What's your name?"

"Ordlaw... No, Waldro, I think. Thanks for shooting me out. Can you get me out of here?"

"Yeah, we can take you with us." I saw Ace glance over at Alice, and I knew what she meant. We could only take one of them back with us. Sorry, Alice, I thought. Humans win over machinery in my book. Besides, she'd gotten us into the Desiree Base, what else was she good for. I told her to stay put and she acknowledged my command.

"Wait! Wait!" Waldro shouted. "We've got to save Dennar!"

"Who the hell is Dennar?"

"He's..." he thought about it, then his eyes lit up. "He's my brother! We... We came out from the Core and were kidnapped. I got turned into an Infoman, and he got taken to a Darcator ship garage. They force him to repair ships for them — he's a great engineer." Waldro closed his eyes for a minute. "He's here on Tikorr. I remember running across the info in the data base." He told me the coordinates.

"All right, we'll save him. Just be quiet, all right. Let's get out of here before the Desirees find out we've taken you. I don't want to have to grease them all, and who knows what kind of weapons they have anyway."

Across from the holding cell was a shaft with direct one-way access to the hoverdock, for the scientists. We took off, leaving Alice behind.

A BRIEF RESCUE MISSION

"But why?!" Ace said when I told her she'd have to stay behind while Amaro and I went after Waldro's brother Dennar.

"Because the hovership only holds four, that's why. We have to bring Waldro because he's the only one who knows where this guy is?"

"No, Nova — not why can't I go, why are we going after this guy at all?"

"Oh, you think I've gone soft on you, is that it? Waldro said his brother is being held prisoner by Darcators because he's a good engineer. If he's that good, we need him. He'll be grateful if we spring him, and we can get some work out of him. Amaro is an okay engineer, but I want him to concentrate on his main strength, and that's fighting."

Ace stomped off into the kitchen. I had been right the first time — she really had wanted to know why she couldn't come, not why we were going at all. And I'd just answered her question.

The Channar Ship Garage where Waldro said his brother was turned out to be under the shield to the west. Before going down I equipped Waldro. He wasn't a fighter, so I gave him the Rush AML and the Battle Armor we'd found at the Desiree Base. I took the CompBlaster I found, and a few energy packs, since I was the only one who really knew how to effectively use high-power energy weapons. I gave my M23 to Waldro — who knows, he might get lucky.

The garage wasn't where Waldro said it was. We searched around for awhile, but no garage. I began to think that Waldro really was wacko, like he seemed to be, but since we were here, I decided to be smart about it. I thought it was possible that he'd only got one of the coordinates wrong, so I flew along the north-south line on the first coordinate. I was right. The base was actually just south of the coordinates Waldro gave me. I parked in the Garage and we strolled in.

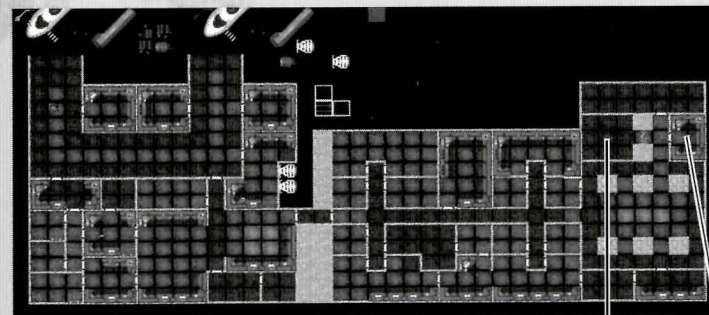
A bolt of light came out of nowhere and knocked me back a step. Another came. I fired twice at where the bolts came from, and a Darcator fell from the ceiling, dead. They were camouflaged! We'd have to find them by seeing where their fire came from - we'd never get the first shot in.

The Darcators swarmed around us like bats — I was glad I had put good armor and AML on Waldro or he would have went down five steps in the door. We found a couple miscellaneous items in some of the side rooms. Slumped in one corner was some AML, looking like a deflated human. I picked it up — it was Rush.

I tossed it to Amaro. He smiled and tossed it back. I tossed it to him again. "Look, Amaro," I said. "You know I can take more hits per square centimeter than you can. You take this one and I'll take the next one. Put it on now. I'll cover the door."

He put on the Rush and we went back out into the hall. I got my reward soon after. In a large storage room I found a Thermocaster — the most powerful hand weapon ever made. I dropped my CompBlaster into the pool and fired a test shot from the Thermocaster at a Darcator down the hall. I never did find the body.

We later found some Battle Armor, which I gave to Amaro without argument. He'd seen me pass up enough armor in the past to know that I didn't like the bulky weight of heavy armor. We found more loot than we could carry before we found Dennar Citann, who was sitting alone in a holding cell.



Channar Ship Garage

Dennar Control Room



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Dennar Citann

HOME WORLD: Core World Jillstar

HEIGHT: 1.9 meter WEIGHT: 72 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Simple, groomed, boyish, clever with tools, an accomplished ship garage mechanic with little formal training.

Waldro worked some magic on the door lock computer mechanism and the energy barrier dropped. Citann emerged and said, "I can't thank you enough for getting me outta here-umph!"

Waldro had brushed by me and grabbed Dennar in a huge bear hug. Dennar pushed him away. "Who the hell is this guy?!"

I looked at them both. "It's your brother Waldro."

"I don't have any brothers." He stared at Waldro, who was still smiling. "Wait, I remember you. You were on the Core ship, the C.W.S. Reagal." He turned to me. "I

remember this guy now. No offense, but he's sort of a basket case. It's not that I'm ungrateful or anything, but we're not brothers — we're not even friends."

"How can you say that, Dennar?" Waldro whined. "We grew up together! Don't you remember the times we had? We used to... Well, I remember how we..." His brow creased. "You're confusing me, Dennar."

"Can we take this outside, please?" I heard Amaro chuckling behind me. I didn't turn around.

"This guy's really cracked," Dennar said. "Don't you know what happens to people when you wire their brain? On top of that, he's still got six inches of wire dangling out of his brain! How did you disconnect him, anyway?"

"I shot—"

"But really," he continued. "Thanks for breaking me out. I'm a pretty good engineer — that's why the Darcators kept me here. I'll help you out any way I can—"

"But Dennar—" Waldro started.

"Shut up! All of you. We'll sort things out when we get back to the ship." I turned and stomped down the hall, shooting the occasional remaining Darcator along the way. I heard Amaro laughing. I didn't care. I had more important things to worry about.

MORE SPACE CHATTER

We flew to the most depressed economy in the Four Systems to sell all the loot we'd picked up — The Trading Center of Glumpon, on Varon. Leod had said he was a pretty good pilot, and I was letting him prove it. I was resting. On the way back to the Ariel system, we were flooded with space chatter. Waldro continued to pester Dennar about their nonexistent relationship, so I sat Waldro down and told him to decode the space comms. He ripped through them in no time. There were advantages to having a wire in your brain. I read the four messages.

Rouyn intercepted message from Cptn. Frombs, Drilling Ship Rattlehum:

TRANKOR BASE, WE'RE PICKING UP MORE UNKNOWNNS. THESE ARE A LOT BIGGER THAN THE EMITTERS.

Core intercepted message from Cptn. Addack, Transport 3B9:

MESSAGE FROM RATTLEHUM CONFIRMED. SHIPS ARE ALIEN BUT LOOK LIKE BATTLE CRUISERS. THEY'RE MOVING TO INTERCEPT.

Rouyn intercepted message from Cptn. Frombs, Drilling Ship Rattlehum:

THEY'RE ALL OVER US, MAN! HUNDREDS! THE SCANNER JUST SHOWS A BLUR! WE'RE TAKING HITS! (STATIC).

Rouyn intercepted message from Trankor Base, Planet Rouyn:

ALL SHIPS, THIS IS AN EMERGENCY RECALL. ALL SHIPS RETURN TO TRANKOR BASE IMMEDIATELY. (MESSAGE REPEATS).

As I finished the four, Waldro handed me a fifth. "This is the last one." I read it.

Starkiller message from Gerard Kendall, Starkiller HQ:

EMERGENCY ASSIGNMENT: ROUYN COLONY IS UNDER NEW ATTACK. SEE REFUGEES ON PLANET ROUYN, COORDS (0947,0306). ENDMSG.

"Damn," Ace said under her breath.

I shrugged. "They could be exaggerating about the number. And it could just be more probes."

"They said these were bigger."

"Bigger probes. Let's not get all excited before we know what's really going on for ourselves. Let's go to Rouyn."

INVASION

"For the love of Lanta!"

I'd never heard Rogers Amaro exclaim about anything before, and my blood froze when I saw that he was staring at the long range scanner. Everyone crowded around the display.

The miners weren't exaggerating about the number of blips — they were *everywhere*.

"Leod!" I shouted. "Get us out of here, course 315. Now!"

"That course takes us the other way!" Ace said.

"Damn right it does! *Now*, Leod!"

The *Ship* accelerated slowly, but finally we were out of range of the thick of it. I told Cerallon to hack the thruster system until it couldn't be hacked anymore.

"What good is that?!" Ace cried. "Hack the targeting system instead. We only need the thruster if we bug out, and we're not gonna!"

I ignored her and said quietly to Amaro, "How many did you count?"

"At least three dozen blips. I believe the chatter — I don't think these are probes."

"I agree. We can't rely on our hand-to-hand skills anymore."

He nodded grimly.

"What are you two whispering about?" Ace demanded. "Why are we just sitting here doing—"

"Shut up, Alexandra!" She stared at me, stunned. "And sit down! This ship is a tub and we're not going to do anyone any good if we walk into that fight and die. We're not using any fuel out here, and we aren't in any danger this far out,

so we're gonna sit here until Cerallon whips this boat into something that stands a chance. Now you might as well get something to eat and relax. We're gonna be here for awhile."

Awhile turned into two days. Cerallon dropped into her cot before she gave me a report on what she'd done. I have to give her credit — she worked her butt off. I considered making good on my promise to take her on a landing party if I found a safe one sometime. I didn't think I would find one very soon.

I sat down next to Leod, who was still dozing in the cockpit. I pulled on his tail gently. "Leod, wake up."

His eyes fluttered open. "Nova."

"Cerallon's asleep. Let's give this baby a test run, and see how she did."

Leod checked the instruments to make sure our path was clear, and he hit the thrusters. I don't know why I didn't strap in first. I flew across the bridge and slammed into a bank of lockers.

"Whooooeee!" Leod shouted. I was flattened against the steel doors, unable to move or even talk, and we hit top speed in under seven seconds. I fell onto the floor.

I climbed into the chair next to Leod. "Hot damn, that was a kick!" I rubbed a sore spot on the back of my head. "Try the attitude jets — let's see how it maneuvers." As I said it, I reached for the seat restraints — too late.

"Whooooeee!" Leod shouted and pulled the stick to the left and back. The Ship rolled ninety degrees and climbed, relatively. I tumbled out of the chair and rolled out the hatch into the corridor, bowling over Amaro as he struggled to get to the bridge.

"What the hell is going on?" he shouted over the rumble of the drive.

"We're ready to go to Rouyn," I answered in disgust, wiping Darcator dung from my eyes.

FACE TO FACE

One of the blips on the edge of the group flew isolated — it must have seen us coming. It came into visual range.

"Looks like a big banana," Leod said.

"What do you know about bananas?" I asked, though I didn't expect an answer.

"All I know is that after I eat them, I end up—"

"Yeah, Leod. Thanks. Pull in closer."

It was alien all right, but it wasn't so alien that we couldn't see that it was built for war. Waldro sat at the comm station, and he pieced together a picture from the telescope.

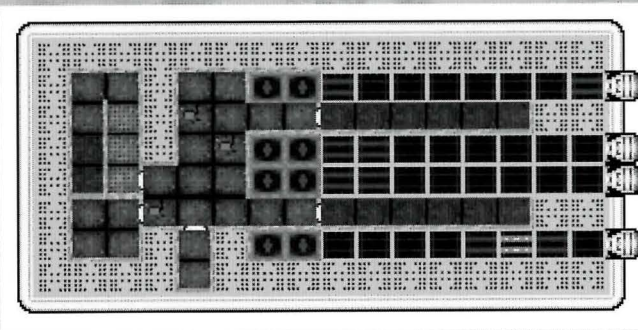
"Look at that oval on the side — looks like a hatch." I smiled. "Looks like it would nearly fit with *our* hatch."

"We're supposed to go talk to the miners," Amaro reminded me unnecessarily.

"We know what they're gonna say. We're gonna have to run through a hornet's nest of these ships to get to Rouyn, I say we board one now and see what we're up

against. Pull us in close, Leod, and extend the airlock sheath when we're close enough. Amaro, Ace and I will wait at the airlock until we get your signal."

The airlock sheath connected with the alien ship, forcibly and without permission — the tractor beam counteracted any resistance the aliens might have had to the mating. The thud shook the *Ship* like a harp string, and we got the signal from Leod that we had an airtight passageway.



Typhon Ship Engine Room

The air was heavy and thick, with a greasy odor like rotting leaves. A small figure darted to one side and disappeared before we got a good look at it. Two others jumped out into the hall in front of us and started firing plasma bolts. I turned my Thermocaster to Liquify and shot them both dead. Between the two of them, I got a clear idea of what they looked like — short, greenish-yellow, bug-eyed monsters holding guns as big as they were.



RACE PROFILE

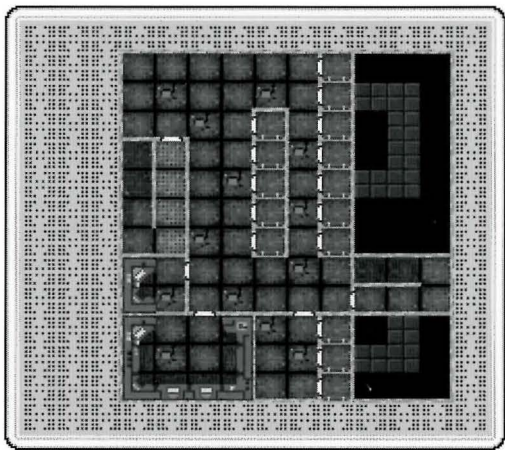
SUBJECT: Typhons

HOME WORLD: Unknown

AVE HEIGHT: 1.3 meter AVE WEIGHT: 25 kilos

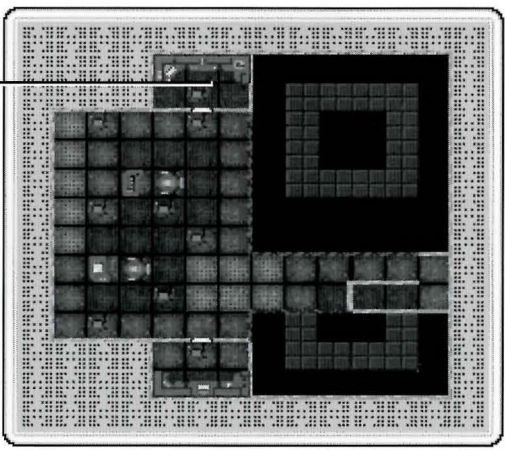
DESCRIPTION: Small, yellowish-green, bug-eyed, xenophobic aliens. They seem to want to kill everything they see, and they come in a wide range of strengths, from feeble to formidable.

We hunted around and found some discarded armor and weapons. None of it was anything we could use, but we might be able to sell it to ghouls or other fortune hunters. Then we found a ramp leading down into the ship. We found the engine room which held some gas canisters with alien markings on them. I couldn't read it, but it looked dangerous. Maybe it was nerve gas or something like it. We picked up two canisters and moved down the ramp toward the innards of the ship, confident of our success if the first encounter was any measure.



Typhon Ship Crew Quarters

A dozen or more of the little aliens scurried around the second floor. We had little trouble picking them off, especially with my Thermocaster, but they were hitting us — mostly me, since I stood in front — with some pretty hot shots. By the time we'd killed off the whole floor, I was gasping for breath. We sat down at the top of the next ramp until my AML fixed me up. I was starting to envy Amaro and Ace for their Rush AML.



Typhon Ship Bridge

The first blast on the last level threw me back into Amaro and we both tumbled to the floor. I tried to sight on an alien, but they were scurrying around too much to track, so I just shot randomly into the crowd. We mowed them down in a furious

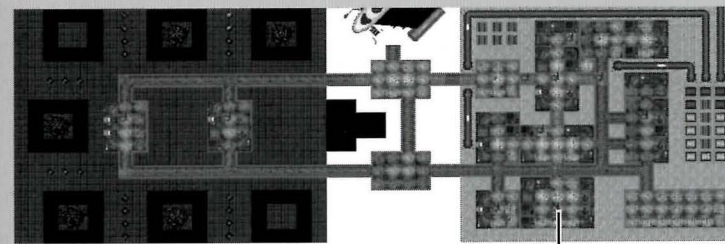
exchange of coherent light, until all the little monsters were steaming piles of alien flesh.

We looked around the room, which looked like the bridge, but we couldn't make any sense out of the controls. We didn't see anything at first, but then I saw what looked like a data storage device. We couldn't read the alien writing, but I transcribed the data into my viewer disk library anyway. Maybe we could figure it out later.

We left the ship and I let Ace turn the A7 Comet onto the alien ship and blow it to atoms.

ROUYN REFUGEE CAMP

We flew through the swarm of alien battle cruisers faster than they could react. The improved ship performance let us get to Rouyn and establish orbit without taking many hits. When Cerallon woke up I was going to give her a raise. We dropped to the new Rouyn coordinates wondering why the miners had moved nearly halfway around the planet.



Miner Refugee Camp

Foreman

The camp was small, too small to hold all the miners. The flickering lighting came from old oil lamps, the kind I've only ever seen in books and old holos. We bumped into some miners who seemed to recognize us, or at least recognize what our presence meant. They looked at us like we were responsible for what was happening. The miners called the aliens Typhons, because they came like a typhoon. After little talk, the miners avoided us.

We found the Foreman sitting alone in a makeshift control and communications center. He looked up wearily and said, "You came — good." The foreman looked haggard, resigned to defeat. "I suppose it's my fault that those little bastards took over my colony — most of us didn't make it out. If I hadn't sent you after the Desirees, you might have been able to stop this invasion before it started."

I doubted that. I could have given him something to hope for, but if it were me, I'd want to hear it straight, so I said, "I've got some bad news for you. We're talking about a full scale alien military invasion. A handful of mercenaries can't stop it."

"Then we're all dead. The only planet with a significant military force is Ariel, and that's hopeless."

I nodded. "Altron's forces are committed to taking over Ciberan."

"Hmph. I should have known. Altron's a fool. He's going to lose Ciberan and Ariel if he doesn't help stop this invasion."

"We could try and take your colony back for you, but what good would it do? They have a military battle fleet. They'd just take it right back again."

"If you don't stop it, nobody will." He shrugged helplessly. "It's up to you — either die today fighting the aliens or die tomorrow on a bar stool."

"You've got a point there. I'll see what I can do. Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Well, one of our ships got a close look at the fleet when it first arrived. The ship's log might help you, but it's back in the library in the colony. Beyond that, I can't help you."

We left him there, wallowing in despair, but I had an idea.

MASSACRE

Back on the ship, Cerallon was awake. I told her what a good job she'd done on the Ship, and she immediately asked to come on the next landing party.

"Sorry, Kiddo. This next one's a tough one — we might not make it back. I'm not even letting Ace come." Ace looked up suddenly, but I kept talking. "The only reason we're going at all is because I got a plan, and I need a Darcator to pull it off."

As soon as I said it, Leod was all over me like a dog. "When are we going?"

"Right now. Suit up. And we'll need these." I held up the two canisters we'd found on the Typhon ship.

"What are they, Nova?"

"If I'm right, it's Typhon nerve gas. And since the Typhons only know Typhon biology, it probably only works on them."

"Probably?"

"I'll go by myself if I have to."

Amaro and Leod crawled into the hovership. I followed.

When we docked, I tried to hand one of the nerve gas canisters to Leod, but they were too heavy — understandable since he didn't have hands.

"That's okay, Leod. We're looking for the central air. I think I saw it in the second dome last time we were here. Camouflage against the ceiling and sneak around until you find it. Then radio us."

"Right." He hovered up to the ceiling and vanished.

We hid in the articulating tunnel that led out to the hoverdock. After several minutes, Leod's crackling voice called over the radio and gave me directions.

"Hang out there, Leod. We're coming in."

We only ran into a few Typhons on our way to Leod, and we fried them all before they had a chance to react. We found Leod in the central air processing station, and we quickly hooked up the canisters to the intake.

"It's not gonna work." Leod said, flying back and forth across the ceiling, turning visible and invisible.

"Give it time."

"I don't smell anything."

But then we heard something — a high-pitched squealing. Suddenly three Typhons ran into the room, past us, and then out the other door. The gas didn't kill them, but they were all running around like maniacs. We shot at a few, and they died without firing back. Whatever the gas was doing, the Typhons were incapacitated.

I wanted the throw up. We killed them helplessly like hosing down a driveway. I wish the gas *had* killed them, because it would have been easier than killing the defenseless aliens one by one without a fight. But we had to kill them all — we didn't know if the effect of the gas was temporary. What really bugged me though, was that we would have had to kill them all even if the effect was permanent.

We hosed down the whole colony. We didn't talk about it, we just did it. But it didn't solve the problem of the swarming battle cruisers. A canister of nerve gas wasn't going to solve that problem — neither was a quick ship with a fully charged bank of fuel cells. Maybe the ship's log the Foreman told us about would help. We went to the library and found it.

It did have one piece of information we didn't have — the invaders were pouring into the Rouyn System from the Stargate to Nowhere. No Bremar would navigate through that stargate. They believed it led to the heart of a sun. We'd see about that, I thought as we flew back to the ship.

NOWHERE TO TURN

Even with a gun to his head, Punch wouldn't navigate us through the stargate to nowhere. That wasn't the solution. And we couldn't just keep flying around blowing up Typhon cruisers either — more would just pour in through the mysterious stargate. There was only one thing to do.

"What do we do now, Nova?" Amaro asked. I think he already knew the answer.

"We go find Damien Altron."

"We're giving up?" Ace asked.

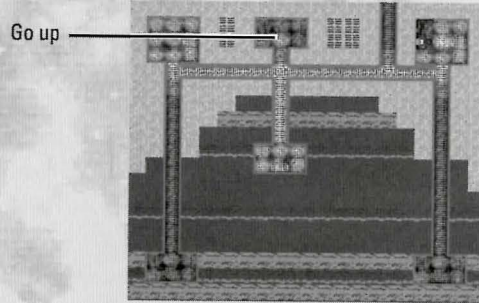
"No. Did you forget that Max Sebastian is going to pay us 40,000 to kill Altron?"

"No, but isn't stopping this invasion more important?"

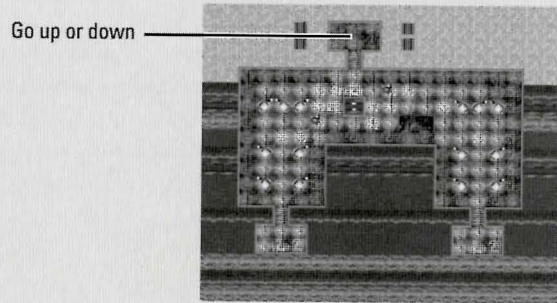
"Not unless you know how to do it. We're only a dozen or so mercs. Besides, we might be able to kill two megalomaniacs with one stone. We can ask Altron to help stop the invasion, and if he won't, we kill him, and then ask the next one in line for the throne. We keep going until it works. Leod, take us to Ariel. And don't stop to pay toll."

THE CENTURY LOUNGE

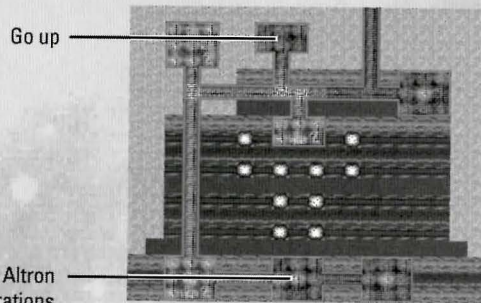
The inhabited portion of the planet Ariel actually consists of only one city — Spire — floating high about the huge gas giant. Swirling clouds formed separate sections like oil and water. The lower layers were turbulent enough to destroy a hovership if it drifted down too far. We docked at the main city hoverdock.



Entrance to the Ariel City of Spire



The Century Lounge



Go up to Altron
Operations
(mag Card 174J)

Spire-Top Floor

"What's a groob?" Ace asked me in the elevator.

I looked at her out of the corner of my eye. "What?"

She pointed at the wall where someone had scratched, 'Damien is a Groob!'

"I don't know."

We walked into the Century Lounge on the second level. I hassled the bartender for information for about ten minutes before I finally gave up in disgust. I stood there watching him wipe glasses, streaking them with grease from his thick fingers, and I suddenly got very tired.

The weight of the galaxy lay sprawled across my shoulders. What made me so special? Why couldn't anyone else save the Four Systems from invasion and general mayhem? Why was everyone depending on me?

"C'mon, Nova," Ace complained. "Are you going to buy us some drinks or what? Remember you've got all the money."

I smiled and remembered why everyone was depending on me. I bought Ace and Amaro drinks, and then I wandered away. I was still tired. I found myself sitting next to an old woman with purple-rinsed hair.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Orai Volamar

HOME WORLD: Core World Freeland

HEIGHT: 1.4 meter WEIGHT: 45 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Old, worn-out, chain-smoker, ex-lounge singer, has a raspy voice and unusual sexual tastes. I like her.

She lit up a cigarette and said, "Not a lot of action in this bar, is there Missy?" She took a huge drag on her cigarette and then filtered the smoke out of her nose. "But then my taste runs a little rare. I like 'em short and pasty."

I laughed tiredly. "Sounds like a Bremar."

She smiled and gestured with her cigarette. "You ever make it with a Bremar, Missy?"

"Can't say that I have. I don't even think I know the difference between male and female Bremars."

"There ain't no men or women Bremars, Missy. They're all the same. It's recreation, not procreation."

"I didn't think Bremars liked humans that much."

"They don't. You gotta get them really drunk first — that's the only way to trick 'em."

I turned to face her more, intrigued by her deviant lifestyle. "What do you see in Bremars?"

She laughed, or more like cackled. "Ever hear a Bremar sing, Missy?"

"Uh, huh. Every time I go through a stargate. And he always sings this awful song he calls, 'My Life, My Love, My Pressure Suit.'"

"I can't stand to hear em sing, myself. I wear ear plugs. But they sure know how to treat a lady." The old woman took another drag on her cigarette, turning a quarter of its length into ash in one draw. As she exhaled, she said, "You know I used to sing, Missy?"

"No," I shook my head. "Sorry."

"That's okay, Missy. It was before your time. My name's Orai Volamar. I was quite a star in the Core Worlds. Then the smoking caught up with me and I lost my voice."

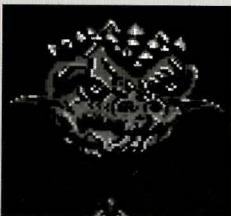
I could have been inspirational, but I wasn't. I was too tired. I just said, "That's too bad."

Orai crushed out her cigarette and stared off into space. We were both silent for a minute, and I could hear Ace and Amaro behind me arguing about the role of mercy in a mercenary campaign. Then Orai looked back at me. "Sorry, Missy. Memories are hard to lose. I'd like to be alone for awhile. It was nice talking with you."

I stood up and started away, and I saw that damn Delta Coro kid I've seen in every bar in the Four Systems. I ducked into one of the observation rooms to avoid him.

"Hello." The voice behind me was raspy, but not the same way Orai's voice was raspy. This voice was more...scaly.

I turned — it was a Lanta. He said, "Please sit down. It isn't often that I get a chance to talk to someone about things other than Lanta philosophy. We aren't all fanatical evangelists you know."



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Skreed

HOME WORLD: None

HEIGHT: 1.4 meter WEIGHT: 71 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Not your everyday, garden variety Lanta. He's coherent, almost tolerable, and has an unusual talent for destroying computer hardware through rhetoric alone.

"Really?" He didn't sound like any Lanta I'd ever heard. "I thought all Lanta could talk about was their philosophy."

He laughed — it sounded like a street sweeper on a gravel road. "We're not all so predictable. In fact, let's try an experiment..."

I should have seen it coming, because I thought I knew every bar trick in the book, but he caught me with a scam I'd never run across before. The guy had a

useless talent for conning people in a way that didn't seem very profitable. If he had bet me money, I'd have probably smashed his face instead of paying up when I found out what his game was.

"The really interesting mind games take too long to explain in a bar," he said, though I didn't ask. "Believe it or not, I used to make a lot of money this way when I was a kid."

What a coincidence, I thought. I was looking for a kid right then, seeing if it was safe to go out of the observation deck yet. "Really," I said, not paying close attention.

"You'd be surprised. I used to be able to talk to pay phones and trick them into spilling out all their change."

"No kidding," I replied, still looking for the DC kid. I couldn't see him anywhere.

"And one time I convinced my tutor droid that its motor circuits were radioactive. Then I told it I was starting to feel nauseated, so to save me it threw itself out the window."

"You're a talented kind of guy." It looked like the kid had left.

"An untapped resource, I assure you," he said quickly. I think he knew he was about to lose his audience. "I only have a talent for destroying computer hardware, not repairing it. There's a limited business potential for destroying computers."

"I suppose." I went to the doorway. "Well, it's been real educational."

He nodded vigorously. "It was pleasant talking with you. Goodbye."

And that damn Delta Coro kid was waiting for me just around the corner.

He started babbling about cameras hidden in the potted plants. I didn't care if there were cameras in the toilets, I was sick of this little monster. "Get away from me kid," I said quietly. "Or I'll take my blaster here and perforate your colon."

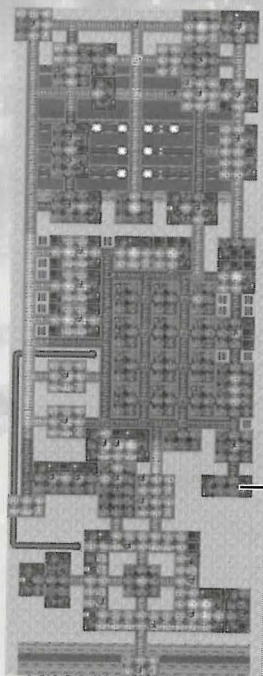
He backed away, eyes wide. I pushed past him — he leaped like he thought I was going to throttle him — and I picked up Amaro and Ace on my way out.

ALTRON OPERATIONS

We wandered around until we found a security elevator on the third level. The Mag Card slot was labelled 174J. I fanned out the Mag Cards we'd picked up, and the one we found with the lying Ariel fighter on Ciberan was marked 174J. We drew our guns and punched the access button.

The whole floor was devoted to maintaining a dictatorship — cameras, records, interrogation rooms. The Ariels were technicians, but they were all armed, and they all started shooting when they saw our lack of Ariel uniforms.

We killed them all without much problem. We ransacked the place for goods, Mag Cards, or other items. We walked into the waste disposal room, and found a surprised unarmed man. He looked like a janitor.



Janitor (rebel spy)

Altron Operations



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Hudson

HOME WORLD: Ariel

HEIGHT: 1.6 meter WEIGHT: 79 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Passionate, impulsive, angry. He's an Ariel rebel spy in Altron Operations area at the top level of the city of Spire.

"Don't shoot!" he shouted. "I'm not one of Altron's pigs!" I looked at him, putting a question on my face. He continued. "I'm not one of Altron's peeping toms! I'm a spy, working with the rebel forces. We're the only ones on Ariel fighting his totalitarian regime!" His eyes burned with genuine passion, but was his passion coming up with an excuse to stay alive?

"So why tell me?"

"Because you were about to fry my ass, that's why! Besides, you're the first one's who've ever come in here firing blasters. You're just what we need to bring down Damien Altron."

For the sake of discussion, I decided to assume he was telling the truth. "How many rebels are there?"

"Only a handful. But we've been fighting for a long time. We have spies in lots of places. We have information that can help you."

"For instance?"

"I can't help you myself. I'm only one small part of the rebel forces. Go to our main base and they'll help you there. It's here on Ariel." He told me the coordinates. "Talk to Jared, our leader."

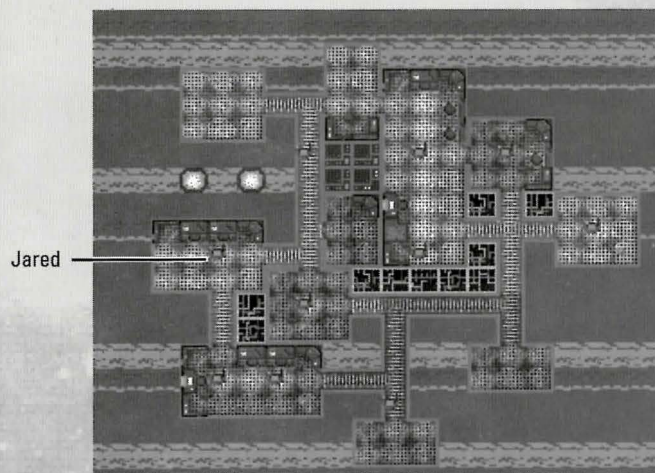
I thought about it. "Okay, we'll go. But if I find out this is a trap or a wild goose chase, I'll come back here and pull your liver out through your nose."

"I'm not worried. Good luck."

UNEXPECTED ALLIES

I'd been wrong about Spire being the only place to go on Ariel. The coordinates the rebel spy gave us led us to a large floating platform — maybe a converted weather station or research outpost. They must have still been renovating, because there were many switches on the walls labelled "Null Event" which did nothing. They must have also believed they were well hidden because they had no perimeter defenses. We docked without incident.

No one acted surprised to see us. Armed men in uniform directed us to Jared. He was a huge, bald man with broad hands. He chuckled when he saw us and said, "So you came. Hudson wasn't sure you would. He said you made quite a mess up there in the Altron Ops Center."



Jared

Ariel Rebel Base



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Jared
HOME WORLD: Ariel
HEIGHT: 1.9 meter WEIGHT: 100 kilos
DESCRIPTION: Jovial, committed, organized, patient, open-minded, and has been in charge of the Ariel rebellion for years.

"We do what we're paid to do. Sometimes more, never less."

"And I'm sure Sebastian is paying you well. But I hope you are here fighting for more than just money."

"Money talks loud in my ear, Jared. But don't you worry — someone else is paying the bill. And I don't know anyone named Sebastian."

He grinned. "I admire your discretion, if not your motivation. I suppose it doesn't matter if you get the job done."

Get on with it already, I thought. "Your spy told us you had some information for us."

"Indeed. You'll find these Ariel coordinates helpful." He showed me coordinates on a piece of paper. "That's where you'll find Damien Altron."

"Do you have any fighters you can send with me?"

"I'm afraid not. But we can help you in another way. Once you fight your way into Altron's stronghold, he'll summon more troops. We'll hold off the reinforcements from getting to you."

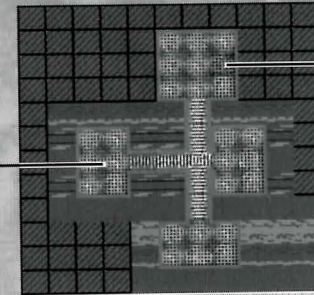
I held back a laugh. In other words, he was promising to do something that might not even need to be done. Fine — no one told me I could expect help on this job. "I guess that's it then. Wish us luck."

"Good luck, Starkiller. We'll see you after the nightmare has ended."

THE BRAINS BEHIND THE BRAWN

The platform floated easily despite its massive proportions. I had difficulty believing that a structure this large and this close to Spire could go unnoticed. Only two hoverships guarded the hoverdock — I blew off their drive units and watched them plunge into the swirling clouds for places unknown and pressures undreamed of.

Due north from the entrance we found an elevator, but it was locked with no visible controls — not even a Mag Card slot. We searched and found another elevator to the west with a sign that read, 'No Access.' A Mag Card slot under the sign was marked 942Z. I found the card we retrieved from General Rodgen's body, and inserted it into the slot. The elevator rose silently to the next floor.

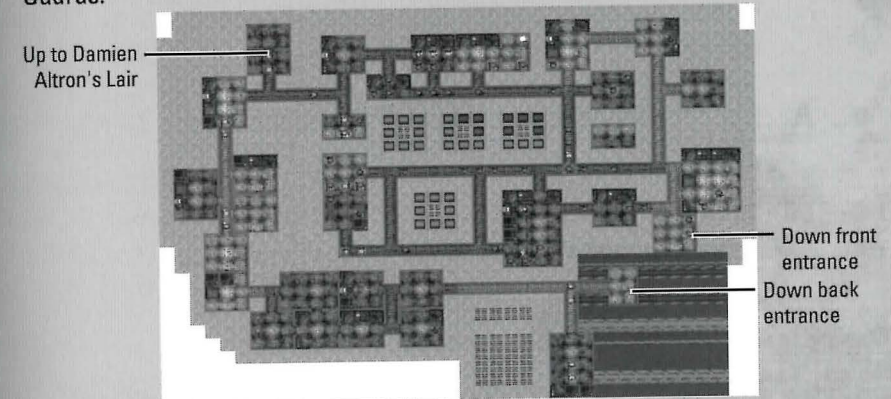


Front Entrance
Back Entrance

Entrance to Damien Altron's Stronghold

"Hello," a voice said. We drew our guns, but there was no one around. "It's good to see you again." The voice came from a speaker just outside of the elevator. Clearly whoever it was thought we were General Rodgen.

We wandered through rooms that hadn't been used in weeks. The deeper into the hallways we went, the more we heard the rustle of people walking and talking. Guards.

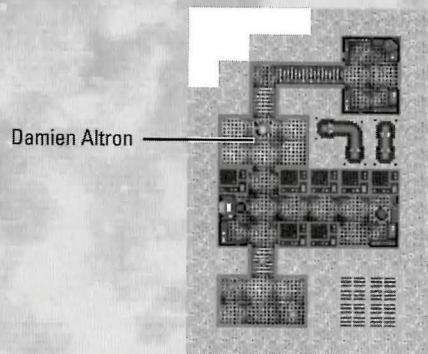


Damien Altron's Stronghold

A juncture in the hall gave us two possibilities — one direction sounded like where the guards were on duty, the other was dead-quiet. We chose the quiet hall, and saw a sign that read, 'Access Restricted to General Camede Rodgen.' We ignored the sign. For *our* purposes, we were General Rodgen.

Elevator doors opened as we approached — we were expected. Just outside the elevator on the next floor, we found a pile of boxes of Mud. I grinned. It looked like Altron and I had something in common. I wondered if they'd yet figured out that we weren't the General. Either way, the route was completely without guards. Did Altron trust Rodgen *that* much? Or was something wrong.

I stepped over the cases of Mud — I'd pick them up on the way out — and into a small office space. Lights flickered on as I walked, and I caught a glimpse of a face in the darkness ahead.



Damien Altron's Lair

The man looked like he was part human, part cloud, like he'd just swirled into existence a moment before we stepped into the room. He wore a purple cloak that exposed only his head — dark skin, hair and eyes. When he spoke, his voice was like approaching thunder.

"I can only assume that your presence here means you've killed General Rodgen. That distresses me more than you can possibly imagine." He spoke without expression, which made his words that much more eerie. He reached into his cloak.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Damien Altron
HOME WORLD: Core World Yttro
HEIGHT: 2.2 meter **WEIGHT:** 125 kilos approx
DESCRIPTION: The dictator of Ariel since its founding, and he looks it. The man will do just about anything for anything he wants, even if it means selling out the human race.

I panicked. I drew my Thermocaster and fired three quick bolts through his chest. The wall behind him exploded outward with a plume of smoke and burning paint. He was untouched.

"I usually enjoy that little trick, but somehow it's not the same knowing Camede is dead."

Still shocked and frustrated, I fired three more shots through his chest. The wall behind him caught fire a moment, then petered out.

"You really are stupid, Starkiller. Can't you recognize a hologram when you shoot through one?"

"Then where are you?" I didn't look around — somehow I worked up the courage to take my eyes off his invulnerable manifestation.

"I'm right here. I'm all around you. You see, I'm a highly sophisticated computer system. A complex electronic life form, if you will."

Impossible. "Damien Altron — a bean counter?!"

"That's why Camede's death is so distressing. She created me. Then she put me in charge of Ariel administration, and she went out to gain military control of the Four Systems."

I quickly glanced around the room. "I was the one who killed her you know. And I'd do it again."

Silence. Then, "You'll find I'm not so easily goaded into hasty action, Starkiller."

"But you must realize that I've come here to kill you."

"Yes," he said and began pacing. It was a confusingly human thing to do, considering he was only a holo projection from a computer, and he knew that I knew that. "And you must realize now that the only way you can kill me is to destroy this planet. I have systems everywhere. Or are you going to shoot my hologram again?"

I wanted to scream at him. "Oh, yeah?!" How do you destroy a computer without blowing it up? "Here, listen to this — everything I say is a lie!"

"So what? You're human. And you've been watching too many old programs on the holo. It would take something a lot more sophisticated than that to trick me. It can't be done."

And suddenly, I knew that it *could* be done. And I knew just how I could do it. "I'll find a way to destroy you. It's only a matter of time."

"Enough of this posturing. The past is gone and can't be changed. Maybe we can help each other."

"No way."

"Here me out. I know Max Sebastian has hired you to kill me. I'll double his price. How much did he promise you?"

I thought for a moment, then grinned. "One hundred thousand."

"That's a lie, but I'll still double that if you go kill Sebastian for me instead. Considering you'll never kill me to collect from him, mine is the better deal."

"Forget it, Bit Brain. I'll be back."

"Just think about my offer."

I left him there, floating a fraction of an inch above the floor. On the way out, I picked up a case of Mud — the fee for my office visit. A hologram couldn't appreciate the stuff anyway. We made our way back to the exit elevator.

It was locked. And since there was no key card, there was no way to open it. Double-cross. That's why Altron hadn't killed us himself — he knew his guards would keep us from walking away alive. "It looks like we're gonna have to get out the long way, through the guards."

I was being punished for what I did to all the helpless Typhons in the Rouyn Mining Colony. The battle we fought was what the Typhon battle should have been if we hadn't found the nerve gas. I had the highest constitution, so I shielded the others with my body as we plowed through the smoke and sparks.

Ace dropped — not dead, but barely alive. Amaro picked her up and dragged her along until her AML brought her around. By then we were nearly to the exit.

I pulled the trigger of my Thermocaster a dozen times before I realized that it wasn't firing. I punched out the clip — it was empty. And I had no others. "Damn it!" I took a hit in the shoulder and spun around. I gritted my teeth against the pain and ripped two radiation grenades off my vest and threw them down the hall. The soft explosions melted the Ariels standing near the door, and I helped Amaro drag Ace into the elevator. We stumbled out to the hovership and took off before the radiation cleared. I waved my hand to clear the smoke enough to fly the hovership into orbit. I wondered what was smoking, and I saw that it was Ace. But she was alive. Barely.

I knew how to destroy Damien, and I vowed to take out his guards in the process.

A PHILOSOPHY WAR

I found the Lanta philosopher where I left him — in the observation platform of the Century Lounge. He looked up and seemed pleased to see me. I could use that to my advantage.

"Hello there. We haven't actually been introduced. My name is Skreed. I just came from the Malibu Bar on Mastassini. I had the most remarkable luck at roulette. Would you like to hear about it?"

"Actually, I'm in kind of—"

"It was one of those computer-run games," he said, oblivious to my impatience. He described an encounter he had with a computerized roulette game, but it just confirmed what I already knew.

"I know a computer you can't trick," I said. "It's the most clever and powerful computer in the Four Systems."

He gurgled. "There isn't a computer made that I can't turn upside down just by talking to it. It's a fundamental problem with artificial intelligence these days because of—"

"I know of one. I'll take you to it."

"No, thanks." He waved a hand. "It isn't worth my while. Besides, I'm getting too old. I don't like to get off the planet much."

"You just came from Mastassini!" I cried. Then I realized what he was doing, so I said, "I'll bet you a thousand you can't do it."

"A thousand? It's a bet. Where is it?"

"Here on Ariel. It won't take long to get there, but we should probably get you some body armor if you don't have any. He's not an easy computer to see without an appointment." I took him by the elbow and started to lead him out.

"Wait. Body armor? Wait a minute."

Ace grabbed his other elbow and we dragged him away.

A BATTLE OF WITS

I flew straight to Altron's stronghold without returning to the Ship, with all four of us in the hovership. I figured we'd need that much protection to get Skreed in to see Altron alive.

I tried the General Rodgen's Mag Card in the back entrance, but it didn't work. Altron's voice came from a hidden speaker and said, "I know who you are this time. You cannot succeed." So they were ready for us. So much the better. I was rapidly paying back the karmic debt I'd developed from the Typhon Colony massacre.

We ran forward as a group, with Skreed in the middle. It wouldn't have been as bad if Skreed hadn't been wailing the whole time, but I think it had an affect on the Ariel fighters. Our goal wasn't to kill them all just yet — only to kill enough to push our way in to see Altron. We knew they wouldn't follow us in.

We finally broke through, and the office lights came on as we entered. A voice boomed at us, louder than at our first meeting.

"You've brought an iguana with you this time," he said.

"See," I said to Skreed, ignoring the hologram. "There it is — do your stuff."

"I don't appreciate your bringing that reptile in here, Starkiller. You're going to regret this."

"Just shut the hell up and listen to what he's got to say!"

Skreed walked up to the holo and introduced himself. The two began to talk.

The conversation sounded simple enough, even random and pointless. It dragged on for five minutes, then ten. They talked about everything from central heating to citizen surveillance. I started to get anxious listening to this Lanta discussing weather stations with his captive audience, wondering if I wasn't making a big mistake.

Altron's holo flickered.

I looked more closely, and it was solid again. But Altron's face was expressionless. His lips weren't in synch with his words anymore. The conversation still sounded trivial to me, as Altron spoke, his holo was completely frozen. Did he notice?

"Skreed?" I whispered. "What the hell—"

"Get down!" he yelled, and the lights dimmed. I looked around and saw that I was the only one standing.

The wall behind Altron exploded, twisting steel screeched and concrete rumbled. I lay on the floor, not sure how I got there, and covered my head, nearly deafened by the roar. When the sound had stopped, my head still rang with the sound, and I climbed to my feet, checking for broken bones. I couldn't see three feet for all the dust in the air.

"Skreed?!" I shouted. "What the hell did you say?!"

I saw a greenish form ahead of me. "It's rather complicated. Let's just say he got his priorities confused." Skreed tried futilely to dust himself off.

"No, Skreed. You tell me what you said."

"It's hard to explain to someone who doesn't already understand it. Every computer has its priorities. By talking to it, I learned that it was complex enough to have equal priorities."

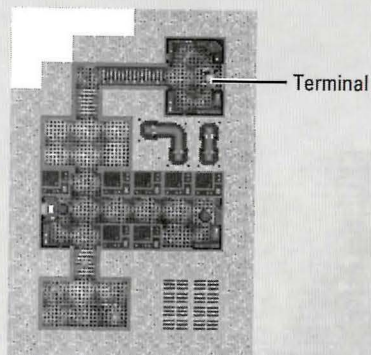
"So?"

"So I set up a little scenario that set two critical and equal priorities in direct conflict. And since this particular computer is paranoid, it took my scenario as a potential threat, and the two systems started to draw power from each other."

"That's what did all this?"

He shrugged. "The whole process fed on itself. And since I chose two systems with a higher priority than power consumption, it couldn't stop fighting itself for the power."

"Well, whatever it was, it was damn incredible. C'mon, let's go check out this hole." I deliberately walked through the holo of Damien Altron, and as I did, it flickered, faded, and disappeared.



Damien Altron's Lair

Against the far wall stood a computer terminal. Dimly glowing green letters surged with wavering power. A message read: "PRIMARY COGNITIVE FUNCTIONS FAILURE. SENDING REPAIR REQUEST TO CAMEDE RODGEN..." Below the message were three menu selections:

- A. D. SADH LI, FIE !LKJWE ?KJ WE EW ETR-30-
- B. REPLAY LAST MESSAGE RECEIVED FROM TYPHON FLEETMASTER.
- C. TRANSLATE TYPHON DATA DISKS.

Last message from Typhon Fleetmaster! I pressed B and letters flowed across the screen: RECEIVED LAST MESSAGE. INVASION PROCEEDING AS PLANNED. REPORT ON PROGRESS SOON.

That's why Altron wasn't helping fight the Typhons! He was working with them. They probably had planned to divide up the Four Systems between them.

I remembered the Typhon disks I got from the battle cruiser we boarded, and I dropped them into the slot and pressed C. After a minute, I got two translated disks back. I read them.

NEW MISSION ORDERS AND BACKGROUND
AUTHORITY: HIGH TYPHON FLEETMASTER

THE BUREAU OF SCIENTIFIC AFFAIRS HAS CONCLUDED THAT THE GREAT TYPHON SYSTEM IS DOOMED. OUR SUN DIMS MEASURABLY EVERY DAY, AND THE BUREAU REPORTS THAT IT COULD GO DARK AT ANY TIME - IN TWO DAYS, OR TWO THOUSAND YEARS. FOR SOME TIME THEY BELIEVED THAT INJECTING MATTER INTO THE GREAT CLOUD COULD IGNITE IT INTO A NEW SUN. UNFORTUNATELY, THEY HAVE CALCULATED THAT THE GREAT CLOUD NEEDS AT LEAST AN ADDITIONAL 0.4 PERCENT INCREASE, WHICH IS SIGNIFICANTLY MORE MATTER THAN WE CAN TRANSPORT.

THE BUREAU OF MYSTIC AFFAIRS HAS ATTEMPTED TO RESTORE THE SUN BY SUPERNATURAL MEANS, BUT AS WAS EXPECTED, THE ATTEMPT FIZZLED MISERABLY. THE TYPHON PEOPLE ARE BEING INFORMED OF THESE FACTS JUST AS YOU ARE, AND THERE IS MUCH GRIEF EVERYWHERE. TWO OF THE THREE BUREAUS HAVE TRIED TO SOLVE THE GROWING PROBLEM, AND THEY HAVE FAILED. THE BURDEN NOW LIES ON YOU. IT IS UP TO THE BUREAU OF MILITARY AFFAIRS TO SAVE THE TYPHON RACE FROM EXTINCTION.

THE ONLY SOLUTION IS TO COLONIZE A NEW PLANET IN A NEW SOLAR SYSTEM. A NUMBER OF UNMANNED PROBES WERE SENT THROUGH THE STARGATE, AND THEY FOUND A SUITABLE WORLD IN THE SYSTEM THAT LIES BEYOND. THE SYSTEM IS INHABITED, AND IT IS CONNECTED VIA STARGATES TO THREE OTHER SYSTEMS. TO SECURE THE PLANET WE NEED, WE MUST CONQUER ALL FOUR SYSTEMS. OUR INITIAL ENCOUNTER LED US TO COMMUNICATE WITH AN ALIEN CALLED DAMIEN ALTRON. IF WE HELP HIM CONQUER THE ADJOINING THREE SYSTEMS, HE WILL INSURE OUR ISOLATION AND SAFETY IN THE SYSTEM WE REQUIRE.

YOUR ORDERS: ATTACK THE FOUR SYSTEMS UNTIL YOU RECEIVE FURTHER ORDERS. AVOID DAMIEN ALTRON'S GAS GIANT IN THE CENTRAL SYSTEM. FIGHT FOR YOUR UNBORN CHILDREN, FIGHT FOR THE FATE OF TYPHON.

IF ONLY OUR SCIENTISTS HAD FOUND A WAY TO SAVE OUR SUN, WE WOULD NOT BE FORCED TO TAKE SUCH DRASTIC MEASURES. PERHAPS THERE IS STILL HOPE THAT SCIENTISTS WILL DISCOVER A WAY TO HELP US, TO STOP THE WAR WE NEED TO WAGE.

So the little buggers just needed to find a new place to live, and they had the bad luck to run into Damien Altron first. The Typhon missions orders sounded like an impassioned plea for assistance to me — they only turned to violence as a last resort.

“C’mon,” I said. “Let’s blast our way outta here. We’ve got places to go.”

“Where, for instance,” Amaro asked.

“The Desirees. They’re scientists, right? Maybe they can figure out a way to fix this mess.”

A SCIENTIFIC SOLUTION

We couldn’t get past the second level on the Desiree Base without Alice to activate the lift. We hunted around, and we found a switch in the northwest corner of the entrance level that activated the second floor lifts along the east wall. The lift bypassed the stunner droid level.

When the chief scientist saw us, she shouted, “Leave this base at once or I’ll call the security droids!”

I was unimpressed. “Get a load of this.” I handed her the translated Typhon viewer disks.

She read them through quickly, and then took a copy. Her expression revealed nothing. “I’ll be right back,” she said, and disappeared.

She returned. “We can’t help you here. Go to our sister base on Mastassini.” She told me the coordinates. “They’ll be able to help you.”

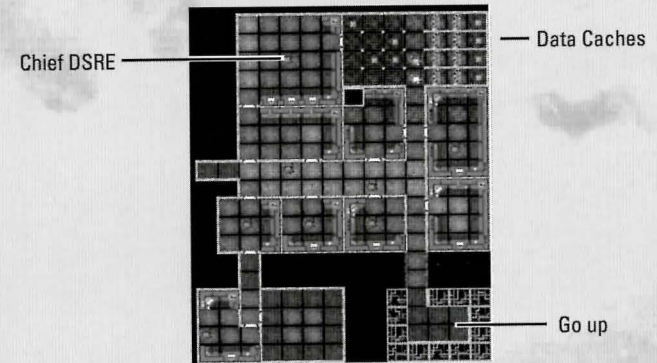
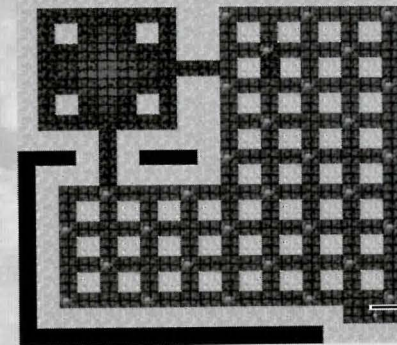
“Wait.” Scientists were scientists, right? “Why can’t you help me here?”

“We research gravitational theory here. The Mastass base specializes in wormhole theory. There might be a way to defeat these aliens, but only the Mastass base can help you.”

On the way out, we saw Alice wandering aimlessly in the halls. I thought she might be able to help us, so I told her to follow us. I handed her the Yohzan gun we picked up from the alien ship, to see if she could make sense of it. A rat scurried across the floor across the hall, and Alice blasted it. I thought that little talent of hers would come in handy on the *Ship*.

MORE SCIENTISTS

We walked out of the hovership and straight into a security maze. I don’t know why I’d expected them to turn it off for our arrival. And the maze was full of invisible barriers. My nose was bleeding when we finally made it to the lift. Nothing is ever easy.



Mastassini DSRE Base

“There you are,” said the Chief Scientist when we found her. “I wasn’t sure if you were going to make it.”



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Chief DSRE Scientist, Mastassini Base

HOME WORLD: Unknown

HEIGHT: 1.7 meter WEIGHT: 62 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Cool, brave, impatient, single-minded, unaffected, and effective at solving problems when she feels she has a stake in them — in other words, almost indistinguishable from the Chief DSRE on Tikorr. Maybe they’re clones.

"It might have helped if you had turned off the defense droids," I replied. "We might have died in the hallway."

"If you could have died that easily, you couldn't have come this far." She smiled as though she'd made a joke. "We've analyzed the alien disks you gave to our Tikorr base, and we think we've worked out a solution. It's on these two viewer disks. Read them now."

I did.

SCIENCE ANALYSIS

DSRE LABORATORY 324, REMOTE WORMHOLE RESEARCH CENTER
RESULTS SUMMARY:

THE INVADING ALIENS COME FROM A SYSTEM CONNECTED TO THE ROUYN SYSTEM BY A WORMHOLE. THE ALIEN SYSTEM IS A FAILED BINARY - A RED GIANT AND A LARGE HYDROGEN GAS CLOUD. THE WORMHOLE ENTRANCE IS POSITIONED BETWEEN THE STAR AND THE GAS CLOUD, WHICH EXPLAINS WHY BREMARS PREVIOUSLY BELIEVED THE STARGATE LED TO THE CORE OF A STAR.

THE ALIEN STAR IS NEARING THE END OF ITS RED GIANT PHASE ON THE MAIN SEQUENCE, AND IT WILL DIM INTO A DWARF SOON. THE ALIENS APPARENTLY PLANNED TO IGNITE THE GAS CLOUD TO CREATE A NEW SUN, BUT THEY DID NOT HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY TO MOVE ENOUGH MATTER. AFTER THEY REALIZED THEIR SYSTEM WAS DOOMED, THEY INVADED ROUYN TO CONQUER IT. TO INSURE THE SUCCESS OF THEIR INVASION, THEY MADE AN ALLIANCE WITH DAMIEN ALTRON TO PROVIDE MUTUAL SUPPORT. OUR CURRENT PROJECTIONS INDICATE THEY WILL SUCCEED WITH A 90% POPULATION LOSS IN THE FOUR SYSTEMS.

WE HAVE CALCULATED THAT THE STELLAR FRAGMENT CASCADE HAS SUFFICIENT MASS TO IGNITE THE ALIEN GAS CLOUD INTO A SUN. THIS WOULD SAVE THEIR SYSTEM AND WE ARE CONFIDENT THE ALIENS WOULD WITHDRAW. THE STARGATE IN THE ROUYN SYSTEM LEADING TO THE ALIEN SYSTEM CAN BE MOVED INTO THE PATH OF CASCADE TO SEND THE STELLAR FRAGMENT INTO THE ALIEN GAS CLOUD. THIS CAN BE DONE BY ALTERING THE CENTER OF MASS IN THE ROUYN SYSTEM BY MOVING MASSIVE ASTEROIDS TO ACHIEVE A NEW GRAVAMETRIC EQUILIBRIUM.

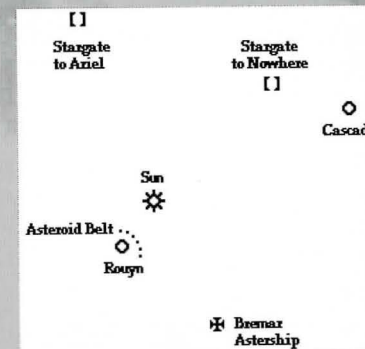
A SECOND POSSIBILITY EXISTS. IF THE STARGATE IS MOVED TO A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT LOCATION IN FRONT OF CASCADE (STARWARD INSTEAD OF SPACEWARD) THE FRAGMENT WILL ENTER THE ALIEN SYSTEM TRAVELLING IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION. WHEN THE FRAGMENT REACHES THE RED GIANT, THE STAR WILL UNDERGO RAPID COLLAPSE UNTIL IT DETONATES. THE RESULTING SUPERNOVA WOULD COMPLETELY ANNIHILATE THE ALIEN SYSTEM.

"Damn," I whispered. "This is some serious stuff."

"There are three major asteroids in the Rouyn system made of stellar material, just like Cascade. If you can move these three asteroids to new locations, the stargate will shift."

"How're we gonna move these asteroids?! My little ship can't do it."

"Get the Bremars to do it. They have an astership in the Rouyn System. If you haven't seen it yet, it's a big asteroid. Here's a map." She handed me a schematic of the Rouyn System.



Location of Bremar Astership

"Ok. How do I know where to move the asteroids to?"

"We'll give you a data cache to give to the Bremar Songmaster. He'll use it to position the asteroids. But you have to make a decision first."

"What's that?" Dumb question.

"Do you want to create a new sun for the aliens, to save their race, or do you want to explode their existing sun to destroy them all. The decision is yours."

I must have looked stricken, because she looked at me strangely. "I don't want to make that kind of decision!" I said. "Why can't *you* decide?"

"You're the one who is going to have to do the work. As far as the Four Systems is concerned, the result will be the same. You're the only one who has to live with the method."

Kendall was going to have to pay through the nose for this one. I saw dozens of little aliens, running around in the mining colony, convulsing, falling before my blaster.

"Save them," I said quickly. "I hope this doesn't come back to haunt me. Now let's do it before I change my mind."

The scientist nodded. "We've already prepared that data cache." She gave me directions to the output room.

"Do you think I'm making the right decision?" I asked her.

She smiled. "If I thought there was a right decision, I'd have made it for you. But there's one more problem we have to worry about."

"What's that?"

"When the stargates close, the Four Systems will still be full of alien battleships."

I thought for a moment. "Call Gerard Kendall at Starkiller HQ on Holbrook. Tell him what's going on. He'll think of some way to get them out before the stargate closes."

She wrote down the information and said, "Good luck."

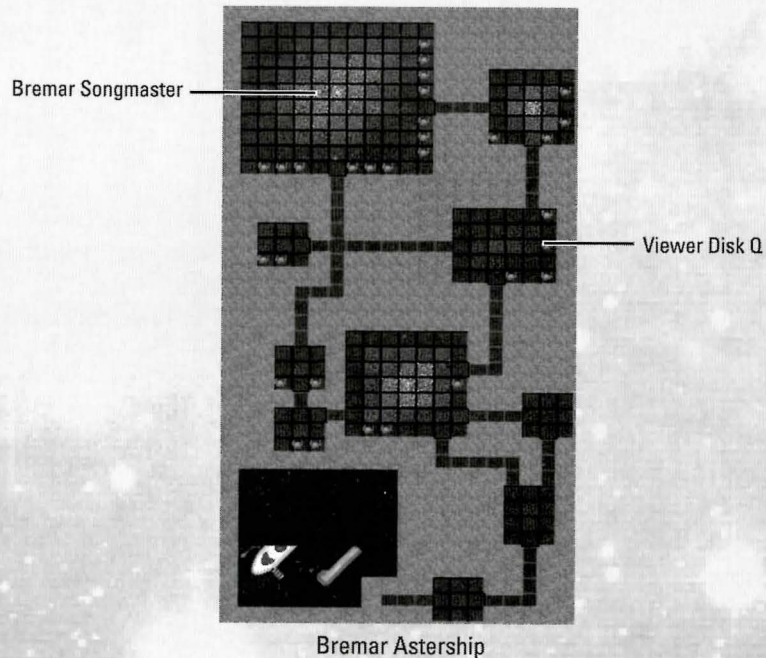
I left without saying another word. Ace and Amaro followed silently. I found the data cache where the scientists told me I'd find it, and I saw others behind barriers. They had obviously also prepared the data cache to annihilate the aliens, but only directed me to the one I chose.

"I think we should—" Ace started.

"Shut up," I said simply. "Leave this one on my head."

THE BREMAR ASTERSHIP

The Bremar Astership was a huge asteroid set away from the main belt, far from both Rouyn and Cascade. We flew the *Ship* down into long channel leading into the asteroid. The tunnels were artificial channels carved crudely into the rock.



"I feel like a worm," Ace said.

"You look like a worm," Amaro answered.

"But neither of you are as smart as worms," I said. "Or as quiet."

We walked in the dim, dry caverns for quite awhile before we found any Bremars. They told us to seek the Songmaster further into the ship. We found him in the center of an immense spherical cavity deep within the asteroid. He didn't look up as we drew near.



PERSONALITY PROFILE

SUBJECT: Bremar Songmaster

HOME WORLD: Unknown

AVE HEIGHT: 1.5 meters AVE WEIGHT: 38 kilos

DESCRIPTION: Your typical Bremar, but more rude and obnoxious than usual. He's fanatically devoted to his cause, even at the possible expense of his life — something I didn't expect from a race of cowards.

"I'm very busy," he said. "I don't have time to talk."

"But I want to give you something."

He looked up. "All right, make it quick."

I gave him the data cache.

"They look like DSRE data caches. These are valuable, you know. Why give them to me?"

"It's a long story." I told him the condensed version.

"Interesting," he said. "Very interesting. I'm surprised I didn't think of it myself. After all, we knew that stargates can be moved."

"So you'll help us?"

"No. The plan involves making Cascade disappear from the Rouyn System."

"Exactly!"

"But with cascade gone, the stargates in the system will break down and dissipate. My astership and all of us will be cut off from the Four Systems."

"So what?!" I couldn't believe the plan was going to fall flat this close to the end. "Bremars live everywhere in the galaxy! What does it matter if you can't get to the Four Systems conveniently?"

"Maybe it doesn't matter to you, but we are here on the frontier for a very important reason. We just can't help you."

"But if you don't help us, the Typhons will destroy everything — including you!"

"Not likely. They are only attacking settlements on planets. They haven't been aggressive toward us."

I wanted to scream in his pathetic, twisted face. "I can't believe you're being this stupid!"

"You'll just have to think of a different plan."

"Gimme those Desiree things back."

"No, I think I'll hang on to them. You don't need them anymore since no other ship can do what they say. Think of them as my fee for the visit. Good day."

I stomped around the caves, my footsteps echoing feebly in the still air. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!" Amaro and Ace followed me at a safe distance. I was stumped. What could I do? What could I do?

Finally, I sat down against a rocky wall to catch my breath. Ace and Amaro sat next to me.

"We'll just have to think of something else," Amaro said. "It really isn't fair to expect the Bremars to cut themselves off from the Four Systems just like that."

"It's better than dying," I said. He didn't reply.

I saw something under my foot. It was a viewer disk. I picked it up and read it, to distract my mind.

INSPIRATIONAL MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT FROM THE SONGMASTER

'WHY WE ARE HERE, A REMINDER'

IT HAS COME TO MY ATTENTION THAT MANY OF YOU YOUNG SONGERS HAVE LOST SIGHT OF WHY WE ARE HERE IN THIS DESOLATE FRONTIER. I MUST REMIND YOU THAT THE SEARCH FOR OUR HOME WORLD IS STILL THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF OUR RACE, AND ALL OTHER CONSIDERATIONS ARE SECONDARY. YOUNG SONGERS OFTEN DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF FINDING THE WORLD OF ORIGIN, BUT LOVE FOR ANCESTRY IS OFTEN A PRIVILEGE OF THE OLD.

SINCE LONG BEFORE WE ENCOUNTERED THE HUMANS, IT WAS FORETOLD THAT AN ALIEN WOULD HELP US TO FIND OUR HOME WORLD. WHEN WE ENCOUNTERED THE HUMAN RACE, WE INSTANTLY KNEW THAT THE ALIEN FORETOLD WOULD BE A HUMAN FEMALE. SHE WOULD BE THE ONLY HUMAN CAPABLE OF SINGING THE OF BREMAR TRADITIONS. SO WHEN YOU FEEL LOST AND LONELY, REMEMBER THAT WE ENDURE THE COMPANY OF HUMANS ONLY FOR THE SAKE OF THE SEARCH FOR THE WOMAN WHO CAN SING THE TRADITIONS OF THE BREMARS, AND LEAD US TO OUR HOME WORLD.

I jumped up. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?" Ace asked.

I flipped her the viewer disk. "This is why the Bremars are staying in the Four Systems — to look for the human female who fulfills this prophesy. If the prophesy was fulfilled, they wouldn't need to stay here anymore."

"They've been looking for this mythical woman for ages," Amaro said. "Where are we going to find her in the next few days?"

I grinned. "We don't have to find her, all we have to do is find someone they *think* is her. Let's go. And I know just the woman — she's a perfect fit."

A STAR IS REBORN

"I haven't seen you in a while, Missy," Orai said. "Find a nice boy to settle down with?"

"Nope," I said. "But I have something for you."

"Thanks, Missy. But like I told you. I like em short and pasty."

"I remember. What would you say if I told you I could get you on board the Bremar Astership?"

"I'd say it was a dream come true." She puffed on her cigarette once. "I'd also say it's a crock."

"It's not a dream, Orai. I guarantee you they'll welcome you with open mouths, on one condition."

"Keep talking, Missy."

"You have to pretend you're the greatest female human singer in the galaxy."

Her shoulders slumped. "Oh, is that all? Damn it, Missy! You got an old lady's hopes up. I told you, I don't sing anymore."

"They won't know that. You see they have this prophesy about finding the greatest female human singer. We'll convince them it's you."

"It'll never work. They'll know I can't sing."

"Do you have any of your old recordings?"

She glanced around the bar. Then she said softly, "I have a greatest hits disk in my purse — don't ask me why I carry it around. I was twenty when I made it."

"They won't know that. We'll tell them you have a sore throat. Even if they decide later that you aren't the one, you can get a good solid week out of it. What do you say?"

"This all sounds pretty weak, Missy. They'll never buy it."

"It's worth a try though, don't you think?"

Orai frowned, and then she smiled. "Okay — what the hell. Wait, don't you want to hear my recording?"

"No time — let's go." I stood up.

"Wait, not so fast. What do you get out of all this?"

I shrugged. "The knowledge that I've made you happy. And it might also save the Four Systems from complete annihilation."

"Right, Missy. As long as we can pull this off, I don't care *what* you get out of it."

A PROPHECY FULFILLED

The Songmaster saw Orai, and his expression twisted even more than it already was — I didn't know what it meant. Orai sat on his lap.

"What's going on here?" the Songmaster sputtered. "Who is this woman, and why is she sitting on me?"

"This is the woman you've been waiting your whole life for."

He stared at her. "She has blue hair... Interesting. What's that thing hanging out of her mouth?"

"It's a cigarette, Honey," Orai said. "You want one?"

The Bremar just stared at her. I waved my hand to catch his attention.

"I read the transcript of your speech, about the search for the human female who can sing the Bremar traditions." I gestured to Orai. "Here she is."

The Bremar looked at me, then Orai, then me again. "You don't really expect me to believe this purple-headed woman is the one foretold, do you? Did you think you could just go out and find any attractive human female and have me believe you? We've been searching for this woman for ages!"

Attractive? I thought. "But she's the one! What can we do to convince you?"

"All right, all right. Make her sing and let's get this over with."

"I'm not furniture, you know," Orai rasped. "You can talk to me—"

"Well, actually, there's a little problem there—" I started.

"I thought so."

"It's all very sad, you see. Her...her husband left her, and...and then she started smoking and lost her voice..."

"Then she obviously isn't the one foretold. If you'll excuse me—"

"But she could be rehabilitated!" I didn't like the screech that was creeping into my voice. "I swear it!"

"You two are wasting my time. Now please go." Even as he said it, I saw that he made no move to push Orai from his lap. I still had a chance.

"Here," I said, starting the recording of her Greatest Hits collection. "Listen to her recording."

Orai's voice drowned out the background music very effectively. I almost groaned aloud. Even fifty years ago she was worse than any lounge singer I'd ever heard.

"Actually—" I started to say.

"Quiet!" the Songmaster snapped. He listened intently. As he did, I remembered how much I hate listening to Bremars sing.

"That's the most incredible voice I've ever heard! I would say you were trying to trick me with a recording from a Bremar, but her harmonies are unique! How does she sound now?"

I glanced at Orai and she shook her head slightly.

"All she needs is a little rehab, that's all. Her voice will come back in no time."

"How do I know this is the same woman as on the recording?"

"Why would I have brought a different woman when it would be easier to bring the right one?"

"Maybe the right one wouldn't come."

"Ah," I said. "But then she wouldn't have been the one foretold!"

"Yes!" he said, swept away by my faulty logic. "You're absolutely right." What a sucker.

Orai leaned over and whispered in his ear hole. Then she straightened up. I couldn't read his expression, but he said, "There is no doubt — she is the one."

"So does that mean you'll help us move our asteroids?"

"Of course. I knew that was your motive in coming — that's why I was so suspicious. We no longer need to stay in the Four Systems. We will move your asteroids. Get out of the system as soon as possible. And thank you."

Orai climbed off the Songmaster's lap and walked over to me. "It sounds like even when they figure out I'm not the one, they'll be stuck with me. I'll make it worth their while." She winked, then returned to the Songmaster's lap. She started to light up a cigarette, then changed her mind and tossed it away.

"Goodbye, you two. I'm sure you'll make each other very happy."

Orai beamed. The Songmaster grimaced, like all Bremars always do.

MOVING HEAVEN AND EARTH

We all stood on the bridge of the *Ship* and watched as the Bremar Astership bumped each of the three massive asteroids into position. As we watched, the scanner alarm wailed, and the scanner glowed brightly with contacts. The entire Typhon fleet screamed past us and disappeared through the stargate to nowhere.

The stargate shifted as the last of them vanished, and floated in front of the planet Cascade. The planet shimmered, and then, impossibly, vanished. A huge blast of flame blasted out of the stargate, and the *Ship* tumbled in the shock wave, lurching with the sudden gravitational shift caused by the missing planet.

Punch screamed. He jumped down to the pilot controls in a panic and turned the ship around. We flew through the stargate to Ariel faster than ever before. Fear is a powerful motivator, for humans and aliens alike. We emerged from the other side, and I looked back.

The stargate to Rouyn was gone.

The Four Systems were now Three.

A Delta Coro ship flanked us and opened fire. They hadn't even noticed. We'd just saved everybody's life, even the damn Delta Coro, and they were shooting at us.

Some things never change.

APPENDIX: LOCATIONS AND ITEMS

Editor's Note:

To save you the trouble of writing down location coordinates and contents on scraps of paper, we've included a list of all the locations you can visit in the Four Systems. We recommend that you do *not* use this list to find locations you don't already know about. Visiting locations on this list without being given the coordinates in the course of your travels will adversely affect your experiences. If you use this list to circumvent the normal flow of your investigations, you'll be thrust into situations you are not prepared for, and you'll also end up talking to sentients who won't make any sense to you, because they'll be making assumptions about how you came to visit them. So please, for your sake, use this list only as a convenient record of places you've been, and of places you may see in the future.

Also, the locations are listed in the order that Nova visited them in the experiences described in her journal. If you choose to follow her path, the places you've been won't be mixed up with the places you haven't been.

Ciberan Tanker — NE of the stargate in Ciberan system
SMG-70X
SMG-70X Belt

Amaro Estate — Holbrook: 0429,0270
Fish Tank

Disp Temple — Varon: 0570,0286

Ulgurch — Varon: 1726,0634

Leader Hall — Varon: 0670,0629

Meridian City — Ciberan: 0588,0387

Ciberan Research Center — Ciberan: 0610,0608

Ciberan Quality Control Base — Ciberan: 0912,0473

Ciberan Main Processing Station — Ciberan: 0747,0348
Mag Card 174J
Mag Card 391A
Extend AML
Kelvar Suit
JW2 Blaster
Energy Cell
M23 Clip
SMG-70X Belt

Ariel Invasion Base — Ciberan: 0907,0650
SMG-70X
M23-30AR
Thermo Pack
Energy Pack
M23 Clip

Rouyn Mining Colony — Rouyn: 1524,0608
Viewer Disk P — DSRE Background
Extend AML
Kelvar Suit
M23-30 AR
Energy Cell
Energy Pack
M23 Clip
Viewer Disk X — Miner's Log (After Invasion)

Tikorr Club — Tikorr: 1472,0530
Cases of Mud
Rare Gems (Upstairs)
Kelvar Suit (Upstairs)
JW2 Blaster (Upstairs)

Tikorr Lounge — Tikorr: 1531,0468

DSRE Lab — Tikorr: 0667,0367
Rush AML
Extend AML
Battle Armor
Comp Blaster
Blast Rifle
Energy Pack
Energy Cell
SMG-70X Belt
M23 Clip

Channar Ship Garage — Tikorr: 0326,0547
Rush AML
Battle Armor
Rad Grenade
Thermocaster
M23-30AR
Thermo Pack
M23 Clip

Typhon Ship — Misc locations

Viewer Disks R,S — Untranslated Typhon Mission Orders
Nerve Gas
Enforce Armor
Yohzan Gun

Rouyn Refugee Camp — Rouyn: 0947,0306

Mag Card 845B
Grav Blocker
Spike Sack

Altron Operations — Ariel: 1305,0488 (4th floor)

Mag Card 391A
Extend AML
Kelvar Suit
Grav Blocker
Rad Grenade
MIII Laser
Comp Blaster
Energy Pack
Energy Cell
M23 Clip

Rebel Base — Ariel: 1571,0546

Grav Gun
Energy Cell
M23 Clip

Damien Altron's Stronghold — Ariel: 1411,0426

Viewer Disks T,U — Translated Typhon Mission Orders
Cases of Mud
Extend AML
Kelvar Suit
Flak Vest
MIII Laser
Electron Blade
Slug Thrower
Energy Cell
M23 Clip
Slug Pack

DSRE Base — Mastassini: 1186,0173

Viewer Disks V,W — DSRE Invasion Analysis
Extend AML
Rad Grenade
Grav Disruptor
Comp Blaster
JW2 Blaster
Energy Pack
Energy Cell
Grav Booster
SMG-70X Belt
M23 Clip

Bremar Astership — Rouyn System: Lower right asteroid field
Viewer Disk Q — Bremar Inspirational Message

ADDENDUM

There are a number of places Nova did not describe because they did not relate to the investigation process she followed to save the Three Systems from the Typhon invasion. They are included here for your reference.

Fragmentaralist Temple — Varon: 1749,0344

Mitchray Base (Zero-L Base Ruins) — Holbrook: 0790,0408

Cases of Mud
Rare Gems
JW2 Blaster

Pinnacle Base (Zero-L Base Ruins) — Holbrook: 1126,0190

M23-30AR
Thermo Pack
Energy Pack
SMG-70X Belt
SL20 Clip
M23 Clip

Satellite Base (Zero-L Base Ruins) — Holbrook: 1309,0409

Rare Gems
Rush AML
Battle Armor
Rad Grenade

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nova is the most visible, highest paid mercenary in the Three Systems. While she is generally credited with saving the Four Systems from the Altron-Typhon Conquest Conspiracy, she will be the first to tell you that she was only the catalyst that brought all the pieces together — she enlisted the DSRE Scientists to find a way to get rid of the Typhons, and then she convinced the Bremar Songmaster to implement the solution.

Nova is currently on an extended leave of absence. "Until the money runs out," she says. She resides in an undisclosed location on Holbrook, where she has taken up searching for more abandoned Zero-L bases to loot. And she claims that the Delta Coro HQ is at coordinates (0386,0673), but "don't believe everything they tell you."

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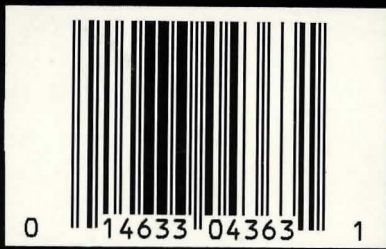
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