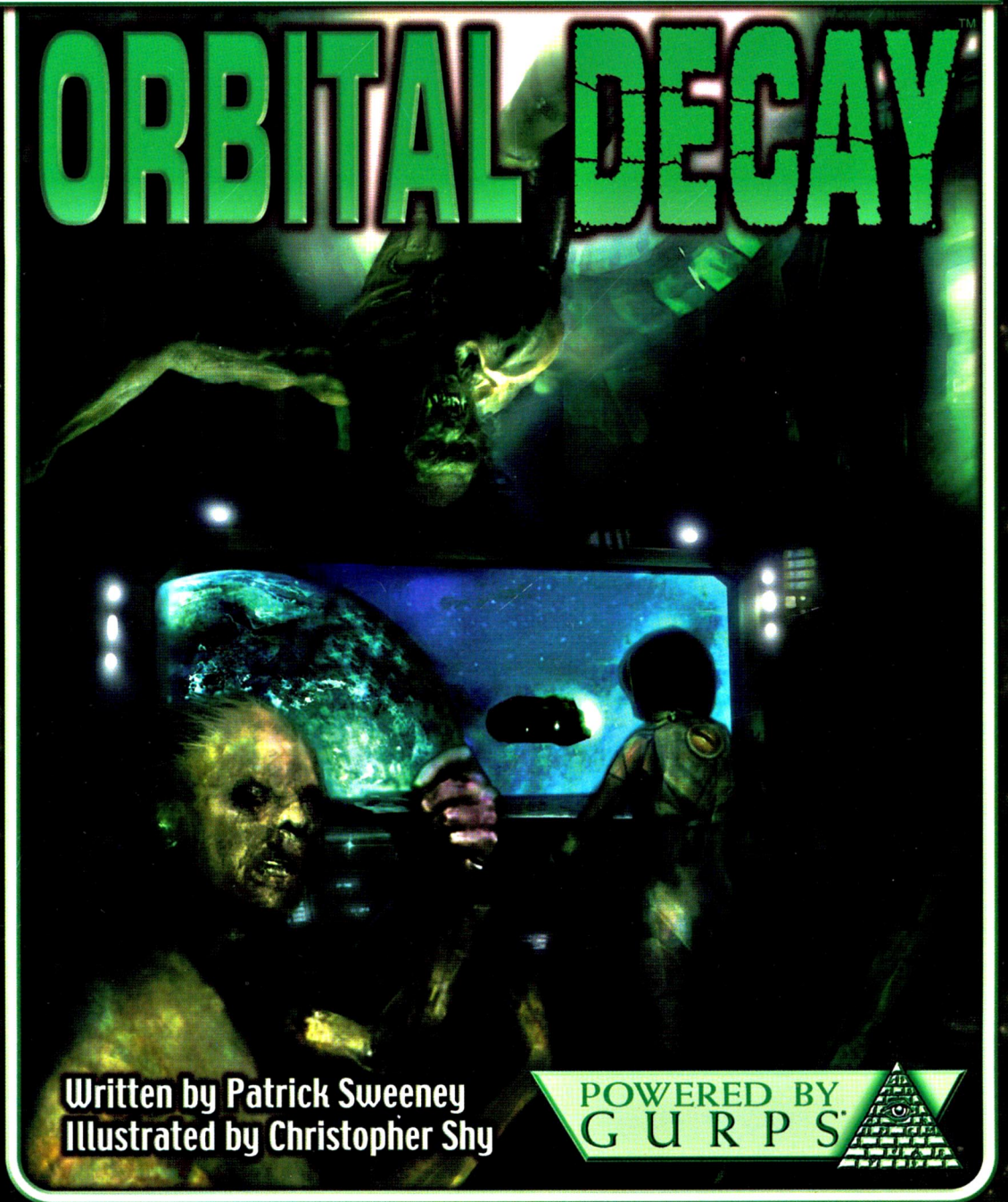
TransHuman Space

Orbital Decay



Written by Patrick Sweeney
Illustrated by Christopher Shy

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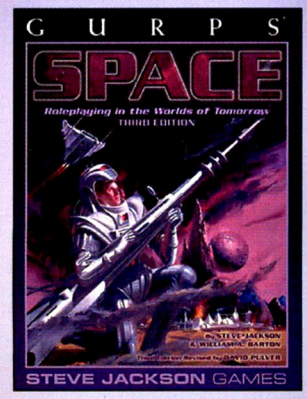

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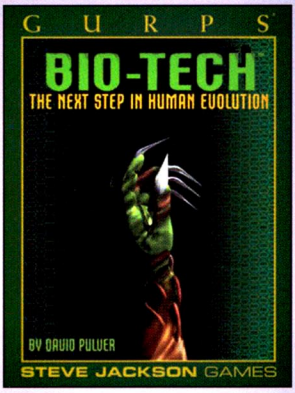

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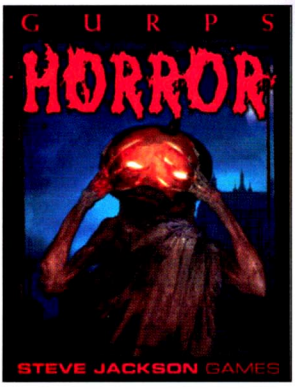

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ORBITAL DECAY™

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INTRODUCTION

Setting Options

While this adventure is designed primarily for the ***Transhuman Space*** setting, it can easily be adapted to virtually any science-fiction setting.

Modern: The basic concept of an experiment gone wrong at a remote research lab can be dropped intact into a modern science fiction-style setting, though some aspects of the plotline will have to change depending on the locale. An otherwise uninhabited island or snowbound Antarctic station are two possibilities for modified versions of the adventure.

The rough plotline could be used almost intact, however, if the setting is an underwater habitat. Submarines would have to replace spaceships, and flooding would be the primary hazard rather than pressure loss, but the basics of the adventure could proceed almost as written.

A radical twist might be to set the adventure aboard International Space Station Alpha in Earth orbit. Rather than freelance troubleshooters in 2100, the PCs are astronauts sent aloft in a space shuttle to investigate loss of contact with the station following the return of the first manned mission to Mars. The Mars mission inadvertently brought back an alien virus that has turned the station crew into zombie-like monsters.

Near Future: This adventure can easily be used in any near-future science fiction setting in which humanity has colonized the solar system. Few, if any, changes would be necessary to adjust for slightly different tech levels or backgrounds.

Far Future: A far-future setting in which humanity has colonized dozens of star systems also poses few difficulties to adapting the adventure. The orbital lab can still be placed around Earth if the GM desires, but any inhabited world will do. Higher tech levels might make new weapons or equipment available, but won't have a profound effect on the adventure itself.

There are a thousand ways to die in space, most of them awful. So it's no surprise that horror and science fiction are close literary cousins. Both delve into the unknown, and both frequently involve themes of isolation – whether physical or social. The difference lies chiefly in the style of storytelling. In science fiction, the unknown is frequently a source of wonder; in horror, a source of terror.

Biotechnology likewise both fascinates and frightens. Biotech critics have raised the prospect of man-made superviruses, spawned maliciously or accidentally. Other fears, as serious as unforeseen long-term effects of hormone therapy or as fanciful as armies of cloned soldiers conquering the world, are also taking root as the science of biotechnology expands. The best biotech horror tales tap into existing concerns, making their plotlines frightening as well as topical.

Orbital Decay melds horror and science fiction to create a suspenseful adventure in which the dangers of biotechnology-run-amok threaten both the personal survival of the protagonists and the fate of an entire world.

Using This Book

Orbital Decay pits a team of troubleshooters against a biotechnology disaster aboard an orbital lab in the year 2100. As the adventure progresses, the stakes continue to rise until the heroes are fighting not only for their own survival but also for the safety of Earth itself.

This book contains a plotline of key events, advice to the GM on adapting to player actions, and game information on NPCs, equipment, and vehicles. While every effort has been made to present information in a clear, logical order, it is highly recommended that GMs read through the entire adventure at least once before trying to run it.

About the Author

Patrick Sweeney is a freelance author based in California. He is the author or co-author of numerous books, including the Origins Award-nominated ***San Angelo: City of Heroes*** superhero setting now published by Hero Games. His interests include gaming, science fiction, camping, and comic books.

About Transhuman Space

The ***Transhuman Space*** series presents a unique hard-science and high-biotech universe for roleplaying. Set in the solar system in the year 2100, it is a setting rich in adventure, mystery, and exploration of the possibilities of existence. The core book in the line is ***Transhuman Space,*** written by David Pulver. It presents an overview of the solar system of 2100.

About GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of the ***GURPS*** system. Our address is SJ Games, Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! Resources include:

Pyramid (**www.sjgames.com/pyramid/**). Our online magazine includes new ***GURPS*** rules and articles. It also covers ***Dungeons and Dragons, Traveller, World of Darkness, Call of Cthulhu***, and many more top games – and other Steve Jackson Games releases like ***In Nomine, INWO, Car Wars, Toon, Ogre Miniatures***, and more. *Pyramid* subscribers also have access to playtest files online!

New supplements and adventures. ***GURPS*** continues to grow, and we'll be happy to let you know what's new. A current catalog is available for an SASE. Or check out our website (below).

Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Up-to-date errata sheets for all ***GURPS*** releases, including this book, are available from SJ Games; be sure to include an SASE. Or download them from the Web – see below.

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Internet. Visit us on the World Wide Web at **www.sjgames.com** for an online catalog, errata, updates, Q&A, and much more. ***GURPS*** has its own Usenet group, too: rec.games.frp.gurps.

GURPSnet. This e-mail list hosts much of the online discussion of ***GURPS***. To join, e-mail majordomo@io.com with "subscribe GURPSnet-L" in the body, or point your web browser to **gurpsnet.sjgames.com**.

The ***Transhuman Space: Orbital Decay*** web page is at **www.sjgames.com/gurps/transhuman/orbitaldecay/**.

Page References

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the ***GURPS Basic Set,*** *Third Edition.* Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the ***GURPS Basic Set*** – e.g., p. B102 means p. 102 of the ***GURPS Basic Set,*** *Third Edition*. Page references that begin with CI indicate ***GURPS Compendium I***. Other references are BIO for ***GURPS BioTech,*** S for ***GURPS Space,*** *Third Edition,* and TS for ***Transhuman Space.***

For a full list of abbreviations, see p. CI181 or the updated web list at **www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html**.

OVERVIEW

The adventurers are hired by the Terrell-Dieskau Corp. to investigate a loss of contact with its biotech lab on Vandegrift Station in High Earth Orbit, but corporate skullduggery denies them crucial information. The freelance team arrives at the seemingly deserted station, finds signs of violence aboard, and begins to investigate.

A disaster causes extensive damage to the station, pushing it into a decaying orbit. Stranded aboard the dying habitat, the troubleshooters discover the awful truth – experimental bioweapons have transformed the crew into mindless monsters stalking the intruders to sate their ravenous hunger. If the station is not destroyed, the nanoplagues might survive re-entry to infect the population of Earth.

Then things get worse.

Orbital Decay is designed for up to six specialists of not more than 200 points each. Cybershells of up to 400 points are acceptable, provided they are not optimized for combat. Smaller groups of higher-point PCs, up to 450 points each, will also work as long as they are not combat monsters.

VANDEGRIFT STATION

Most of the action in the adventure takes place aboard Vandegrift Station, an orbital research lab in High Earth Orbit. The habitat, constructed in 2072 by the Vandegrift Co. as a materials research facility, fell into disuse when the company went under in 2093. Terrell-Dieskau Corp. leased the vacant station from bankruptcy trustees in 2098, evicted squatters and remodeled it for use as a biotechnology research center.

The station has a ring design resembling a wagon wheel. The outer ring rotates to provide spin gravity via centrifugal force. It contains the labs and living quarters of the habitat. The four "spokes" of the wheel are passageways connecting the outer ring to the core. Four evenly spaced orbit-correction thrusters on the habitat ring help the station maintain a stable orbit. (See the inside back cover for a station map.)

The inner core remains in free fall and contains a docking ring for supply vessels. The core also holds the fusion reactor powering the station and a bulk cargo hold.

The normal crew consists of three administrators, 16 researchers in various capacities, and eight crew members who oversee station operations, perform maintenance, cook, and so forth. Dr. Anders Ljungdahl is the station's chief administrator, assisted by operations manager Marisa Sanchez and security chief Genjiro Matsukata.

KEY SYSTEMS

Vandegrift Station has a number of habitat-wide systems.

Communications: Vandegrift Station is equipped with a long-range radio transmitter for routine messages and a laser communicator for more sensitive data, as lasers are harder to intercept. Both systems are normally keyed to relay satellites connecting them to the main Terrell-Dieskau Corp. station.

Computers: Rather than install a costly new computer system, Terrell-Dieskau

Corp. simply upgraded the gear already aboard Vandegrift Station when it leased the habitat two years ago. The computer is a microframe with Complexity 7 and 10,000 terabytes of data storage. The core computer runs nonsapient artificial intelligence software purchased by Terrell-Dieskau Corp. from Exogenesis. It is equipped with augmented reality, mugshot, and swarm controller programs, as well as software allowing it to operate station communications, life support, and security systems. It has a standard voice-activation interface.

The core computer can be reprogrammed only via the main computer console in the operations center, for security reasons. Also, certain key commands can only be entered at the main control console.

Virtual Tags: Vandegrift Station has a complete virtual tag system consisting of augmented reality positional overlays that serve as virtual signposts. Placed on walls, doors, objects, and even people, v-tags are visible to anyone with a virtual interface, such as smart glasses or brain implants. On the habitat, v-tags are used in place of old-fashioned signs on doors and walls to identify offices or relay instructions. Crew members often communicate by v-tag notes much as 20th century office-mates once used paper "stickies." The v-tag network is stored in the station computer system.

Life Support: Station life support systems maintain the air supply and other necessities of life. The core computer constantly monitors environmental controls, making thousands of minute adjustments in air pressure, temperature, and so on each second to keep the station at equilibrium.

Power: A Suncore IV fusion plant, manufactured by Asahi Ltd. of Japan, provides power to the station. Located in the station core, the second-generation reactor fuses deuterium with ^{3}He, a rare isotope of helium, to produce charged particles that are converted into electricity. Shielding contains the extreme heat and slight radioactivity generated by the fusion process. A small control room is located just outside the reactor room.

Security: Security procedures for individual sectors are covered in the descriptions of those sectors, and are primarily designed to restrict the access of station personnel to sensitive areas. Vandegrift Station also has station-wide security systems intended to protect against unauthorized intruders, boarding actions, industrial espionage, and other serious threats.

The station's nonsapient AI monitors all activity and movements aboard Vandegrift Station and oversees routine security. It alerts security personnel to any unauthorized activity or unusual patterns of activity.

Four cyberswarms of surveillance microbots constantly patrol the station. The station NAI, which compares the visual data to its personnel records to detect potential intruders, also normally monitors these. Microbots are tiny robots with microscopic components. None of them are individually intelligent, but they are useful in swarms.

For defense, the station is equipped with two cyberswarms of devourer microbots, with diamond jaws capable of tearing through armor. These can be activated or deactivated by codes kept by the security chief and station administrator. Control codes allow the chief or administrator to direct the cyberswarms to eliminate intruders, boarders, or other targets.

Chemscanners are located throughout the station. These use laser beams to detect chemical agents, microbots, nanomachines, and biochemical contamination. They are chiefly intended to guard against infiltration by outside microbot cyberswarms, such as those used for industrial espionage or sabotage.

In the event of a catastrophe, the station has been equipped with a self-destruct mininuke. The station administrator and operations manager must initiate the self-destruct sequence from the ops center in Blue Sector using their personal security codes. *Cheating Death* (see p. 29) provides more information on activating and deactivating the self-destruct.

Micro-Missile Launchers

Name	Type	Damage	SS	Acc	1/2D	Max	Wt.	RoF	Shots	ST	Rcl.	Cost	LC
Micro-Missile Pod	cr.	6d++	9	9	500	500	0.62	4~	4	–	0	$380	3

Tangler Warhead

Releases a sticky web which wraps around and immobilizes everything in the area. Neither armor PD nor DR protects against being hit, but anyone hit gets an extra Dodge roll to evade the strands before they close. The strands are too tight and sticky to be cut off. To escape, the victim may attempt one Quick Contest of Strength per minute vs. the strands' ST. If he is fully clothed, an Escape roll at -3 (one try every 10 minutes) will let him wriggle out of his clothes and get free. Multiple tangler hits add +25% to ST and -1 to Escape rolls. A failed attempt to break or wriggle free causes constriction inflicting 1 point of damage (rigid armor with DR 2+ protects against this). Ten or more hits from intense heat will also free the victim, but he takes full burn damage. The strands lose their constricting ability after 24 hours, and then lose 1 ST per two hours. The easy way to remove tangler strands is with anti-tangler aerosol spray ($100, 2 lbs.), which dissolves them instantly. LC 5.

15mm: single target, ST 10, $2.50.

Security Chief Matsukata has two security personnel from the operations crew. They monitor the security console in the operations center in Blue Sector and respond to emergencies. They carry 15mm micro-missile launchers with nonlethal tangler warheads as sidearms – projectile weapons fire can easily damage vital equipment.

The Core

Located at the center of the "wheel," the nonrotating, cylindrical core provides outside access to Vandegrift Station and contains some important compartments.

A docking ring is found at one end of the core. The other end contains an airlock, used for outside repairs to the station. A small room adjacent to the airlock contains four vacc suits with fully charged air tanks. The core also contains the fusion reactor that powers the habitat, as well as a small bulk cargo hold used primarily for food supplies.

The core is at zero gravity. Complex actions here require a Free Fall skill roll. The passageways from the habitat ring connect to a slowly spinning "sheath" around the core. Moving from the core to the ring feels like climbing "down" the ladders due to the spin gravity, which increases as the person gets closer to the outer ring. Pressure doors at both ends of all four passageways can seal the core off from the ring in the event of an emergency depressurization.

The Habitat Ring

Four sectors comprise the habitat ring. Pressure doors separate each sector. A depressurization in a sector causes the doors to close automatically after a 30-second delay to allow anyone inside to evacuate. The doors can also be closed manually in the event of a power outage, but they are heavy, requiring a ST-2 roll. Readouts at each pressure door provide information about the air pressure in the sector beyond. Bypassing the code to open a sealed door requires an Electronics Operation (Security Systems) skill roll.

The habitat ring has spin gravity of 0.5 G. Moving from the ring to the core feels like climbing "up" the passageway, and the sense of gravity fades near the zero-G core.

Corridors and rooms take up most of the space in the ring. There is an extensive air vent system in the ceiling, while utility crawlspaces beneath the floors contain power conduits, fiber-optic cabling, and other necessities. The access plates to the utility areas can be opened without keys by a Lockpicking skill roll.

Pressure hatches separate the utility areas in each sector. The hatches in the crawlspaces beneath the floor are normally kept sealed and are opened only as needed for maintenance. The hatches in the air vents are, naturally, open most of the time. They close automatically with the pressure doors in the event of an emergency. Unlike the pressure doors, the normally inaccessible hatches require no override code to unseal.

Blue Sector

Blue Sector contains the primary controls for all key systems on the station, including the main computer console, security station, and communications center.

Green Sector

Living quarters are found in Green Sector. The operations crew bunks four to a

room; the ops manage has her own room. Researchers are two to a room; the administrator has his own room. Green Sector also contains a galley, dining hall, a compact gym, and a lounge.

Yellow Sector

Yellow Sector contains low-security labs for conducting nonbiotech scientific research. The labs, designed for biochemistry or medical studies, are mostly unused at the moment.

The sickbay is in Yellow Sector. It contains two diagnostic tables and an EMU. It is equipped with basic medical equipment, including medical microbots, as well as two paramedic medkits for responding to emergencies in other parts of the station.

Red Sector

The sterile, high-security biotech research labs are found in Red Sector. Genetic sequencers, polymerase chain reaction equipment, incubators, culture vats, microscopes, and advanced imaging systems fill the tables and counters of the labs. In these highly sophisticated labs, researchers design and test nanoviruses, bacteria, and other bioengineered microorganisms.

For reasons of both safety and security, access to Red Sector is very tightly controlled. Precautions include a rigorous decontamination process for everyone entering or leaving the sector.

At either end of the sector, just inside the pressure doors, are security doors equipped with biometric scanlocks. These security systems scan fingerprints, retina prints, voice prints, or DNA to confirm the identities of those trying to enter Red Sector. It compares the scan to personnel records and only opens the door to authorized station personnel.

An override code or Electronics Operation (Security Systems) skill roll at -6 can bypass the scanlock. A failed attempt to bypass the security system sounds an alarm and shuts down the door until a security override code is entered from the ops center. This code can be bypassed by an Electronics Operation (Security Systems) skill roll at -8, but only from the security console in the ops center.

Rigorous decontamination procedures are designed to protect the sterile labs from outside contamination and prevent the accidental spread of microorganisms to other parts of the station. In addition, Red Sector has an independent ventilation system and air supply. The sector has a slightly lower air pressure than the rest of the habitat ring, so airborne microorganisms are less likely to escape through open security doors.

Red Sector also includes a small pharm animal testing lab housing mice, rabbits, and rhesus monkeys, and a secure biohazard storage facility, in which all gengineered viruses, bacteria, and other microorganisms are kept when not in use. A scanlock door, as described above, protects the biohazard storage facility.

Sickbay Equipment

The station sickbay has several pieces of advanced equipment. See ***Transhuman Space*** for more information on these devices.

Diagnostic Table: The patient lies on the table; scan results are projected onto an overhead screen. Gives +5 to Diagnosis skill.

Emergency Medical Unit: Can maintain biological function of someone who is clinically dead (but not at or below -5×HT) and perform whole-blood transfusions. 10 seconds to connect someone.

Medical Microbots: The sickbay has two forms of medical microbots. *Diagnostic Microbots* are used to determine what is wrong with a patient. Adds +5 to Diagnosis skill; can also identify other nanomachines such as proteus nanoviruses. Takes two hours to diagnose problems and another hour to retrieve; patient must be attached to diagnostic bed, cyberdoc, or EMU.

Programmable Immune Machines: These bio-nanomachines can be programmed to destroy specific targets. A successful Diagnosis roll based on a blood sample, urine sample, internal biomonitors, or use of diagnostic nano is necessary before using them. A Physician skill roll is needed to program them for a particular target. Programming takes half an hour. Success destroys a specific virus, disease, or other problem; the GM may apply modifiers if it is something unusual, bioengineered for particular lethality, etc. Each dose takes an hour. Failure allows a second try after programming a new dose of immune machines:

Medkit, Paramedic: +2 to First Aid, Physician, Surgery, and Diagnosis at no penalty. 7.5 lbs.

SETTING OUT

The characters hear through contacts that Terrell-Dieskau Corp., a minor player in the biotechnology industry, quietly seeks freelancers for a quick troubleshooting job in Earth orbit. Individuals with computer, technical, and combat experience are encouraged to contact the Terrell-Dieskau main station in High Earth Orbit for an appointment to discuss the work. Those interested can apply as individuals or teams, but time is of the essence.

If the operatives contact the company habitat for an appointment, a secretary program identifies itself as Darcy, takes their names, and arranges for them to meet at the station at the earliest possible time. This depends on whether the troubleshooters are already in Earth orbit or have other commitments, but Darcy presses the freelancers to meet within the next 24 hours. If asked, Darcy transfers funds for passage to the station to their accounts. It has no information on the job, but offers a $250 "inconvenience fee" per person if they seem to be balking.

The Terrell-Dieskau station is a hollowed-out asteroid in High Earth Orbit. It contains the administrative offices of the space operations division of the company and some research laboratories, as well as docking facilities for cargo-hauling craft and orbital transfer vehicles.

Terrell-Dieskau Corp.

A minor player in the biotech industry, Terrell-Dieskau traces its history back to the 2054 founding of Terrell Labs Inc. in the free city of Montréal. A biotechnology research firm, the lab worked chiefly on agricultural applications for genetic engineering. A strain of corn adapted for hydroponics farms aboard space habitats fueled company growth for several years, but Terrell Labs had difficulty coming up with a profitable follow-up product.

In 2070, the faltering company merged with Dieskau Pharmaceutical A.G., a medical lab based in Cologne, Germany. Now the Terrell-Dieskau Corp., the company struggled to carve out a niche in the increasingly crowded biotech industry by focusing its efforts on proteus viruses, nanosymbionts, and other microorganisms.

Diversification into cosmetic, gerontology, and anti-biowarfare applications has kept the company afloat, but Terrell-Dieskau continues to struggle against larger, better-financed competitors. Rumors of shady practices at Terrell-Dieskau, including questionable research projects, have circulated for the past several years but remain officially unverified.

Based in Cologne, the corporation operates laboratories in Osaka, Denver, and Johannesburg. It owns a space habitat in High Earth Orbit, and two years ago leased the vacant Vandegrift Station habitat, also in High Earth Orbit, as an auxiliary research center. Geoffrey Terrell, grandson of Terrell Labs founder Rodger Terrell, holds the office of company president.

The Briefing

Once the prospective hires arrive at the Terrell-Dieskau station, they are met by a gleaming cybershell controlled by an NAI secretary program and escorted to a briefing room. A short time later, a middle-aged man and a young woman enter. Both wear buzzwear business suits with nanobrushes that prevent even a speck of dirt from adhering.

The man introduces himself as Jens Dietrich, assistant vice president for space operations. He does not introduce the woman, but thanks the troubleshooters for coming and suggests they get down to business.

If the freelancers are unfamiliar with Terrell-Dieskau, Dietrich briefs them on the company history and operations as outlined above. Of course, he does not mention the darker rumors about the firm.

Dietrich then briefs the freelancers:

"Two years ago, Terrell-Dieskau leased the vacant Vandegrift Station. The facility is now being used to conduct biotech research for our cosmetics division.

"We are mildly concerned because there has been no communication from Vandegrift Station for roughly 72 hours. The last radio message was a routine report that indicated nothing was amiss. Since then, the station has sent no scheduled reports and has dropped off the Web. It has not responded to any messages sent via radio or data link.

"Normally, we'd send our own team, but circumstances have caught us off-guard with no space-qualified security personnel available. I've been authorized to hire a team of freelance operatives to go to Vandegrift Station and report back on the situation. Terrell-Dieskau will provide transportation and reasonable equipment. Time is of the essence, so the team will depart as soon as possible.

"If reliable communication cannot be established with the station on arrival, the spacecraft will take up a matching orbit and the team will transfer to the station in vacc suits. The operatives are to investigate conditions aboard Vandegrift Station and report to the company for further instructions.

"Fees are $10,000 per person, with a 25% advance. Now, it's very likely a matter of a simple comm system breakdown, in which case you'd earn that paycheck for nothing more strenuous than a short hop to the station and back.

"I can give you a few minutes to discuss this among yourselves, or answer any questions you might have. I am scheduled to meet with other applicants today, so if you are interested in this job I'm afraid I'll need your answer before you leave."

Dietrich increases the pay offer to an upper limit of $15,000 per person, with up to 33% up front, if the freelancers want to bargain. He reiterates that Terrell-Dieskau will provide transportation and reasonable equipment, so the operatives should have very few pre-mission expenses.

If the prospective hires are still unhappy with the pay or dubious about the job, Dietrich suggests that the contract is mainly a low-grade "milk run" to test them out for more lucrative work in the future.

Once the operatives accept, Dietrich introduces the young woman with him as Madison Haley, a junior executive in the space operations division. She will serve as mission commander, though the troubleshooters have tactical autonomy. If the freelancers object, Dietrich offers a "bonus" unless he has already reached his upper limit. Haley's status as mission commander is non-negotiable, however. The company has a sizable investment in Vandegrift Station and is not about to let outsiders aboard without direct supervision.

The company provides schematics and other basic information on Vandegrift Station. Dietrich refuses to provide details on the gengineering work at the station, but says Haley can provide more information during the mission if it becomes necessary.

The Truth

Terrell-Dieskau is deceiving its new hirelings on several fronts. The company is not conducting benign cosmetics research. Rather, its gengineers are designing black ops biowarfare applications using advanced nanoviral delivery systems.

OTHER OPTIONS

The main text assumes the PCs are freelance troubleshooters of some kind – mercenaries, bounty hunters, private security, spies for hire, private eyes, and the like – but there are plenty of options for getting other types of characters involved.

Activists or newshounds could sign up for the job in hopes of secretly ferreting out a hot story about corporate malfeasance.

Agents of law enforcement or government intelligence might be working undercover. Authorities who have heard rumors of questionable research would take advantage of the call for freelance operatives to send in their agents to get the truth.

This option also works for characters on active military duty, who could be ordered to the station either undercover or as a black ops raiding party.

Spacers or farhaulers could innocently dock at Vandegrift Station on a routine supply run, only to discover the station strangely silent and deserted.

Criminals, terrorists, or fugitives might be seeking information or bioweapons to steal.

Engineers, medics, hazmat specialists, programmers, and scientists are unlikely to choose to board Vandegrift Station on their own, but are extremely useful as members of a team headed by those with a stronger reason to take the job.

Dietrich is also lying about the lack of radio communication. A few hours after the routine report the freelancers are told about, the company received an unscheduled radio transmission from Vandegrift Station consisting of one word, "Wintergreen," a pre-arranged code word for a biotech containment breach. All communication from the station ceased after the message.

Terrell-Dieskau executives concealed news of the potential containment breach because they fear discovery of the research going on at Vandegrift Station. Of course, this also requires them to hide the true purpose of the station from their agents.

Executives decided to hire an expendable team of outside operatives to investigate conditions at the station before taking further action. They hope any problems at the station can be cleared up internally, avoiding government involvement if possible. Depending on what the freelancers discover, executives intend to further deceive, pay off, or eliminate the team to protect company secrets.

Finally, Madison Haley is not simply a junior executive. She is a top agent in the corporate security division, assigned not only to oversee the mission, but also to eliminate the team should drastic action become necessary. And Dietrich has a few contingency plans kept secret even from Haley.

On the Way

Terrell-Dieskau, via Haley, supplies any reasonable and legal equipment requested by the team. If team members wish to acquire illegal weapons or equipment, they have to do so on their own. Haley cannot aid them, but overlooks any questionable gear brought on the mission as long as it does not appear capable of causing serious damage to the orbital habitat. Explosives, heavy weapons, combat cybershells or cyberswarms, battlesuits, or other military-grade armaments are strictly forbidden by Haley due to the risk of massive property damage to the station.

The corporation offers vacc suits to any operatives who do not own them or choose not to use their own.

The corporation provides the *Columbia,* a *Kagoshima*-class orbital transfer vehicle, for the trip to Vandegrift Station. Pilot Andrei Belanov and co-pilot Shalini Raghvendra, both company employees, have been assigned to fly the spacecraft. The *Columbia* can depart on a few minutes' notice whenever the team is ready to go. The trip to Vandegrift Station takes approximately two hours.

Andrei Belanov — *84 points*

Age 36; 5'9", 150 lbs.; blond hair, hazel eyes.

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 12 [20]; **IQ** 11 [10]; **HT** 11 [10].
Speed 5.75; Move 5.
Dodge 5.

Advantages: Attractive [5]; Disease-Resistant [5]; Longevity [5].

Disadvantages: Reputation -3 (As playboy, to Terrell-Dieskau employees) [-5].

Quirks: Boastful about piloting skills; Gregarious; Ladies' man; Likes to party; Whistles popular tunes when bored. [-5]

Skills: Astrogation-11 [2]; Carousing-11 [2]; Computer Operation-11 [1]; Electronics Operation (Communications)-11 [2]; Free Fall-14 [8]; Games (InVids)-12 [2]; Piloting (High Performance Spacecraft)-15 [16]; Vacc Suit-12 [4].

Languages: English-11 [2]; Russian (native)-11 [0].

Equipment: Vacc suit.

Belanov was born in Smolensk, Russia. He is an Alpha upgrade, genetically engineered to be attractive, athletic, and healthy.

He has worked for Terrell-Dieskau Corp. for eight years and is the company's top-ranked orbital operations pilot. A boisterous, confident man, Belanov enjoys a good time – though he loves piloting even more. During flights, he talks with passengers, if any, or plays interactive video games on the ship's computer while the spacecraft coasts.

Belanov, who has a reputation within the company as a playboy, fell deeply in love

with a woman on his last trip to Luna. The emergency assignment to pilot the *Columbia* delayed the start of his vacation, on which Belanov intends to return to Luna to propose. Belanov, who has not confided in his co-workers with the news, seems somewhat distracted but very eager to complete the mission.

Shalini Raghvendra 34 points

Age 30; 5'6", 135 lbs.; black hair, brown eyes.

ST 9 [-10]; **DX** 11 [10]; **IQ** 10 [0]; **HT** 10 [0].
Speed 5.25; Move 5.
Dodge 5.

Advantages: Intuition [15].

Disadvantages: Dependents (Two daughters, 6 or less) [-32]; Shyness [-5].

Quirks: Devoted to children; Dislikes confrontation; Dislikes corporate politics; Dislikes lying; Likes Indian popular music. [-5]

Skills: Artist-9 [2]; Astrogation-12 [6]; Electronics Operation (Communications)-12 [6]; Free Fall-15 [24]; Freight Handling-10 [2]; Mechanic (Fission Drives and Reactors)-9 [1]; Piloting (High Performance Spacecraft)-14 [16]; Vacc Suit -10 [2].

Languages: English-10 [2]; Hindi (native)-10 [0].

Equipment: Vacc suit.

A woman of Indian heritage born in the Fiji Islands, Raghvendra is a baseline human with no genetic modifications.

A Terrell-Dieskau employee for six years, Raghvendra has recently started learning to paint to pass the time between piloting assignments. During flights, she listens to Indian music while the ship coasts. She is shy and prefers to stay in the background in social situations, but has very strong intuitive abilities that often go unnoticed.

Raghvendra has two young daughters who live with her sister in Suva, Fiji. She rarely visits Earth, spending most of her time in space, where she earns higher pay to provide her daughters with the best housing, medical care, and schooling possible.

A veteran of countless supply runs to Vandegrift Station, Raghvendra has heard disturbing rumors about the research going on there. She has misgivings about the co-piloting assignment, but fear of losing her job prevents her from protesting the company's handling of the emergency. Astute PCs may notice that Raghvendra seems ill at ease during the trip, however.

Madison Haley 366 points

Age 28; 5' 10", 155 lbs.; black hair, blue eyes.

ST 14 [45]; **DX** 16 [80]; **IQ** 13 [30]; **HT** 13 [30].
Speed 7.25; Move 7.
Dodge 8; Parry 11 (Karate).

Advantages: Alertness +1 [5]; Alternate Identity [15]; Attractive [5]; Combat Reflexes [15]; Fit [5]; High Pain Threshold [10]; Luck [15]; Panimmunity [2].

Disadvantages: Duty (To Terrell-Dieskau, 12 or less) [-10]; Overconfidence [-10].

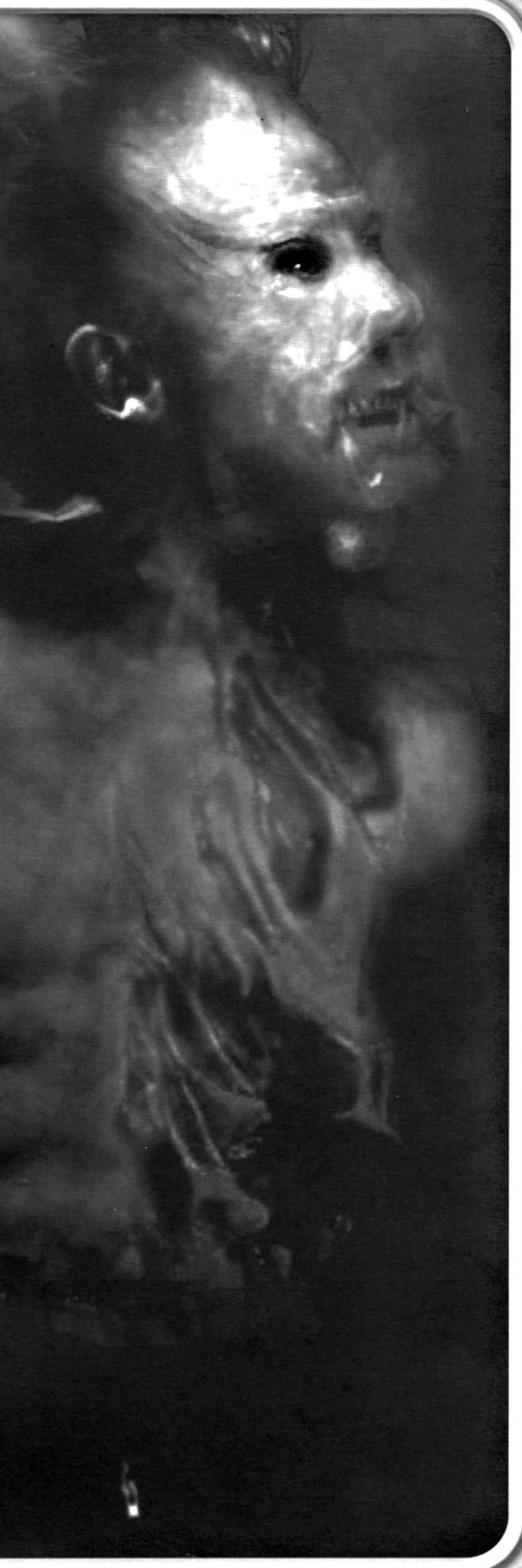
Quirks: Attentive; Cold-blooded; Cool under fire; Dislikes sloppiness; Likes living in space. [-5]

Skills: Acting-16 [8]; Area Knowledge (Earth Orbit)-15 [4]; Camouflage-13 [1]; Computer Hacking-15 [16]; Computer Operation-14 [2]; Cryptanalysis-12 [2]; Demolition-15 [6]; Disguise-15 [6]; Electronics Operation (Communication)-13 [2]; Electronics Operation (Security Systems)-16 [8]; Escape-16 [4]; Fast-Talk-15 [6]; First Aid-14 [2]; Free Fall-16 [2]; Guns (Pistols)-18 [1]*; Interrogation-14 [4]; Intimidation-16 [8]; Karate-16 [4]; Knife-18 [4]; Knife Throwing-18 [4]; Leadership-14 [4]; Sex Appeal-15 [6]†; Sleight of Hand-16 [4]; Stealth-18 [8]; Streetwise-14 [4]; Tactics-13 [4]; Vacc Suit-15 [6].
* Guns includes +2 for IQ.
† Sex Appeal includes +1 for Attractive.

Languages: Chinese-13 [2]; English (native)-13 [0]; Japanese-13 [2]; Russian-13 [2].

Equipment: Vacc suit.

A product of an Orion genetic upgrade purchased by her parents, Haley has metabolic and glandular modifications designed to burn away excess fat, enhance physical performance, and optimize crisis response.



She was born in San Francisco and was recruited by the U.S. Space Intelligence Agency in college.

Haley served as a field agent for six years, then quit to go into the lucrative private security field. She has worked for the Terrell-Dieskau security division for two years and has a strong sense of loyalty to her employers.

An extremely skilled field agent, Haley has comprehensive knowledge of espionage tradecraft and excellent combat-related talents.

Haley can lie convincingly about attending Harvard University business school, hiring on at Terrell-Dieskau at graduation, and the excruciatingly boring details of her normal duties. At all times, she conceals her true skills and sticks to her cover as a clueless corporate drone clearly out of her depth.

While she is very skilled with knives and guns, Haley initially carries no weapons on this assignment. She may try to pick up weapons on the sly during the exploration of Vandegrift Station if it seems prudent.

Jack, Low-Sapient AI (LAI) 105 points

IQ 10 [0].

Advantages: LAI-7 [50].

Disadvantages: Virtual Interface Implant [-11].

Skill: Accounting-11 [6]; Computer Operation-13 [6]; Cryptanalysis-15 [14]; Diagnosis-12 [8]; Electronics Operation (Communications)-11 [4]; Electronics Operation (Security Systems)-14 [10]; First Aid-15 [10]; Tactics-12 [8].

Haley has a virtual interface implant with a low-sapient AI companion that she has named Jack. Jack serves as a personal secretary, research assistant, recorder, servant, pet, and tutor. Jack is capable of calculating the likely result of actions and running simulations to analyze options or avoid problems.

Unknown to Haley, she also carries a puppet implant allowing Jack to take direct control of her body in certain circumstances dictated by Terrell-Dieskau Corp. The puppet implant and reprogrammed LAI were secretly added during surgery to upgrade her virtual interface implant upon joining Terrell-Dieskau.

Final Approach

After an uneventful trip, the *Columbia* approaches Vandegrift Station.

Something's Out There

Belanov informs the team that the *Columbia* has picked up an automated distress beacon. As the *Columbia* nears the source of the distress beacon, a vacc suit-clad body can be seen drifting in space. A strobing light on the helmet flashes over and over.

Haley identifies the vacc suit as one used at Vandegrift Station and orders the team to effect a rescue. While the person does not respond to radio calls or seem to be moving, Haley argues that he may be unconscious or otherwise in need of assistance.

The pilots can maneuver the *Columbia* near the body. The team can exit via the airlock and recover the body using Free Fall and Vacc Suit skill rolls to maneuver in space.

When they approach the floating body, operatives see the name "Robinson" and an employee number stamped on the helmet. Other insignia identify her as a Terrell-Dieskau Corp. employee assigned to Vandegrift Station. She appears to be a woman in her late 20s with blue eyes and short brown hair. Her eyes are closed and she appears very pale. A suit readout indicates that her air tanks are dry. If the freelancers are carrying equipment to check her medical condition, they detect no life signs.

Haley insists that the body be brought aboard *Columbia* for autopsy and proper disposal back at Terrell-Dieskau headquarters. She leaves the suit sealed for safety's sake.

Sophie Robinson

A check of the Vandegrift Station crew manifest provided by Terrell-Dieskau Corp. yields additional information about Sophie Robinson, a maintenance tech rated for extravehicular activity. She is 25, lists a father in Festus, Missouri, as her next of kin and has worked for the corporation for three years.

To all indications, Robinson has died. In reality, however, her life signs are so low as to be undetectable by portable medical equipment. She has been infected by the rogue viruses loose aboard Vandegrift Station (see pp. 18-20) and has lapsed into a deep life-preserving coma. Robinson attempted to flee the carnage aboard the station, unaware that she had already been infected.

Haley's quite reasonable order that the body be left sealed inside the suit should prevent the operatives from gaining too much information about the rogue viruses or fate of the station too early in the adventure. The body can be stored in the cargo hold for transport back to the corporate station.

EVA

A few minutes after the recovery of Sophie Robinson's body, the *Columbia* nears Vandegrift Station. The station does not respond to radio hails, and efforts to remotely access its central computer are likewise unavailing. The outer door to the airlock in the nonrotating core has been left open.

Following the procedure set down by the mission parameters, the *Columbia* takes up a matching orbit rather than docking directly to the station. The team will suit up and EVA to Vandegrift Station. Belanov and Raghvendra remain aboard *Columbia.* Haley dons a vacc suit with the intent of joining them on the trip to the silent space station.

If the freelancers object, Haley points out that only she possesses the security codes for opening sealed doors or reactivating the station computer. Haley will not give the codes to the team, nor will she consent to any course of action that prevents her from being present aboard Vandegrift Station. If necessary, Haley threatens to abort the mission, putting the freelancers in forfeit of their pay.

Secretly, of course, Haley intends to stick close to the operatives so she can eliminate them if they become a liability. She tries to portray herself as a corporate drone more concerned about following orders than common sense, however, to conceal her true role.

The team members can transfer to the airlock using Free Fall and Vacc Suit skill rolls to maneuver in space. One person can string a line between the *Columbia* and the airlock to help guide the rest of the team, if desired. Haley uses her Acting skill to feign inexperience with moving in free fall.

THE STATION

An outbreak of insane violence, ignited by the accidental release of rogue nanoviruses aboard the station (see pp. 18-20), has left Vandegrift Station in poor condition.

Corridors and rooms are eerily deserted. Infected by the mind- and body-altering nanoviruses, the surviving crew lurks in the utility crawlspaces and air vents of the habitat ring. Aside from an occasional mysterious noise or a movement glimpsed in the shadows, they remain hidden. Any corpses are likewise concealed.

Setting the Mood

Initial exploration of the seemingly deserted station should be an unsettling experience for the intruders.

The dim lighting, abandoned passageways, and indications of violence are a good start. The lack of signs identifying various rooms, due to the crashed v-tag system, puts operatives at a disadvantage.

Remind players that they are on unknown, potentially hostile ground by requiring occasional Sense rolls. Those who succeed hear mysterious noises in the distance or glimpse something scuttling in the shadows behind the team. Further investigation finds nothing amiss, of course.

Evocative descriptions of the curiously quiet station and clues indicating a ghastly end for the crew are also tools for establishing a tone of dread.

Exercise restraint, however. Most players are inured to scenes of graphic violence in games. Enigmatic hints of something horrific at work will go a lot farther in setting a frightful mood. Early in the adventure, a few drops of blood spattered on a computer keyboard are more unnerving than entire walls dripping with gore, for example.

Remember, the point is not so much to frighten the players now as to get them on edge so they can be frightened later when the true horrors emerge.

Lighting throughout the station was dimmed before the computer was deactivated. Countless lighting tracks have been broken or damaged, leaving extensive portions of the station in darkness even if the PCs restore control over environmental systems. All unaided Vision rolls are at -5 for darkness.

The entire habitat is in disarray. In some passages and compartments, piles of furniture, crates, and so forth form makeshift barricades. Steel pipes and other homemade weapons lie discarded on the floor. Sticky residue from tanglers can be found in the corridors near Blue Sector. Strange dents, scratches, and stains mar the walls in some sectors. Equipment throughout the station has been smashed, thrown against walls, and subjected to other random acts of violence.

The kitchen and food stores in Green Sector have been thoroughly ransacked. No edible food of any kind remains.

The station computer has been shut down and can only be reactivated at the main computer console in the ops center in Blue Sector. Remote workstations are inoperative. This requires a security code, possessed by Haley, or a Computer Hacking skill roll at -6. Reactivating the computer reveals a more serious problem, however. The memory banks have been physically damaged. Retrieving data requires a Computer Operation skill roll at -3 and up to an hour for each attempt – and the recovered data may be incomplete.

Once the PCs reactivate the computer, they can reset the environmental controls, including lighting and temperature. Life-threatening al-terations, such as evacuating the air from a sector, require a security override code or a Computer Hacking skill roll at -6.

As a result of the computer shutdown, the station's v-tag network is inoperable. Nameplates on doors, directional signs, and other navigational aids, all of which are v-tags, are down until the station NAI is reactivated. even then, however, some are garbled or missing due to the damaged memory banks. The GM can use scrambled v-tag memos to provide hints to the agents exploring the station. (See p. 32 for interior maps.)

Station security systems – including the various security microbots – are offline, and Haley claims not to have the codes to reactivate them.

This is a lie. She intends to use the security microbot swarms to eliminate the team if it learns too much and does not want anyone else to have access to the control program.

In order to circumvent efforts to override the security codes, Haley surreptitiously removes a key circuit chip from the security console in Blue Sector as soon as possible. Security systems remain inaccessible and inoperative until she reinserts the chip.

Finally, the communications center in Blue Sector has been wrecked. Any Electronics skill roll reveals that the damage is irreparable.

EXPLORATION

The party can enter Vandegrift Station via the open airlock. Once the outer door has been sealed, the inner door can be unlocked using a security override code possessed by Haley or by an Electronics Operation (Security Systems) skill roll at -3.

Once inside, the freelancers are free to explore where they like, although Haley tries to dissuade them from going immediately to Red Sector. She suggests that the ops center in Blue Sector is a more logical choice, allowing the team to reactivate the station computer, check communications systems, and possibly discover clues to the fate of the crew.

As they move deeper into the station, the troubleshooters discover the damage, signs of violence, and other clues outlined above.

The operatives should spend enough time exploring to realize that something has gone seriously awry aboard Vandegrift Station, but not enough time to gain concrete information about the disastrous recent events or the research going on. Saving the terrifying revelations until after the characters have been stranded enhances the sense of impending doom vital to horror stories.

Also, the freelancers should move far enough away from the airlock that trying to EVA back to re-board the *Columbia* during the next set of events is not a viable option.

MAYDAY

As the troubleshooters investigate Vandegrift Station, a new horror unfolds aboard the *Columbia.* The comatose Sophie Robinson awakens under the effect of the nanoviruses loose in her body. Ravenous, and suffering neurovirus-induced madness, she attacks Belanov as he eats a snack. Transformed into a hideous monster by the horrors aboard the station, Robinson slays the surprised pilot in a bloody assault.

Raghvendra sees the murder of Belanov and seals the cockpit door before the crazed Robinson can enter. The former tech pounds on the door with augmented strength.

As the door buckles, Raghvendra realizes that rumors of biowarfare research aboard Vandegrift Station are true. Even worse, some sort of contagious bioweapon has infected the station crew. Terrell-Dieskau is clearly more interested in recovering the research data than the safety of the freelance team, OTV crew, or anyone else. Given that the cockpit door will not hold the murderous Robinson for long, the copilot determines to ram the station.

Raghvendra hopes to destroy the nanoplague aboard Vandegrift Station before corporate greed allows it to spread – possibly to Earth itself, endangering her children.

Powering up the fission engines of the OTV, Raghvendra begins a desperate radio broadcast as she loops around to build up speed and heads for the orbital habitat.

"Mayday. Mayday. Mayday. This is Shalini Raghvendra, acting pilot of the OTV *Columbia.* I am declaring a biohazard emergency aboard Vandegrift Station. I repeat, a biohazard emergency. Do not approach or dock at Vandegrift Station for any reason. My ship has been contaminated and grave danger exists that it could spread the contagion. I am going to ram the station to attempt to eliminate the source of the plague. Mayday. Mayday. Mayday. Biohazard emergency aboard Vandegrift Station. Do not approach."

Raghvendra continues radioing various repetitions of this message until just before the *Columbia* hits the station. Her final words are, "My daughters . . ."

Contingencies

The ramming of Vandegrift Station is a key element in the adventure. It leaves the PCs stranded aboard a dying orbital habitat infested with plague-infected maniacs – clearly, an optimal situation for a horror story. Just as clearly, the players will do everything in their power to avert this outcome. Here are some ideas for keeping things on track:

The time required for Raghvendra to maneuver the *Columbia* into ramming position has been left open. The GM can set the time based on the actions of the troubleshooters – leaving enough for them to escape the point of collision, for example, but cutting short a complex plan to stop Raghvendra. Properly timing the action sequence should ensure that operatives are too far from the station airlock to try to re-board the ship before the collision.

There are no weapons aboard Vandegrift Station capable of quickly disabling *Columbia*. The team may try to talk Raghvendra out of her course of action, but she is determined to destroy the threat to Earth and her daughters. If the heroes are too persuasive, Raghvendra switches the OTV radio to transmission only. She does not obey orders from Haley, her nominal superior.

The biggest potential complication arises if one of the operatives elects to stay on the *Columbia* for some reason. He will be in a position to physically stop Raghvendra or kill Robinson, removing the immediate threat to the desperate co-pilot.

There are some options in this case. Robinson can kill Belanov in another part of the ship, perhaps in the cargo hold, away from the freelancer. She could attack and injure the agent, preventing him from interfering. Raghvendra could very quickly prepare to ram the station, leaving the operative barely time to pull on a vacc suit and escape into space before the OTV is destroyed.

Along with ensuring that the *Columbia* does indeed ram the station, the GM may also have to take steps to keep the team alive during the collision.

The OTV rams Vandegrift Station in Green Sector. Anyone observing the *Columbia* can deduce its heading and warn fellow agents in Green Sector. Depending on their Move scores and encumbrance, freelancers may have time to get clear before the collision.

Sophie Robinson — *70 points*

Age 25; 5' 5", 135 lbs.; brown hair, blue eyes.
ST 18 [90]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 6 [-30]; **HT** 9 [-10].
Speed 4.75; Move 4.
Dodge 4.
Advantages: Hard to Kill 2 [10]; High Pain Threshold [10]; Night Vision [10].
Disadvantages: Albinism [-10]; Berserk [-15]; Gluttony [-5].
Skills: Electronics Operation (Communications)-8 [6]; Free Fall-12 [8]; Vacc Suit-8 [6].
Equipment: Vacc suit.

The trio of nanoviruses loosed aboard Vandegrift Station has altered maintenance tech Sophie Robinson, a baseline human, into an inhumanly strong, crazed transhuman bent on destruction.

Robinson punches using her DX for 1d thrusting damage or bites with her DX for 1d cutting damage. If she picks up an improvised club, she attacks with default DX-5 for 3d+1 damage. If her targets are wearing nanoweave body armor or other protection that she cannot penetrate, Robinson grapples with them, trying to yank off helmets and tear open armored suits to get at them.

Collision

The collision violently shakes the habitat and causes perturbations in the spin gravity. Lights flicker while explosions echo down passageways. The air pressure begins to drop due to multiple hull breaches. Meanwhile, the shattered remnants of the *Columbia* spin off into space. Needless to say, this should be a fast-moving action sequence. Play it to the hilt to convince players the survival of their PCs is at risk.

Explosions

The collision releases various combustible chemicals from the internal workings of the habitat and OTV. A series of small explosions rips through Green Sector, each doing 5d concussion damage (see p. B121).

Fires are also possible, at least until decompression deprives them of oxygen. Anyone on fire or in a flame-filled hex takes 1d-1 damage per turn.

Decompression

Outside of Green Sector, anyone not in a vacc suit registers the drop in air pressure as his ears pop. In Green Sector, the rush of air threatens to blow people into space. Anyone within 10 yards of the hull breach must make a ST roll to grab something sturdy and hang on. A Climbing skill roll or ST-5 roll allows the person to crawl away from the breach, moving from grip to grip. Those farther away from the breach must make a DX roll to avoid being swept off their feet by the gale of escaping air, but can otherwise move normally.

The length of time required for the sector to fully decompress has been left for the GM to determine. Anyone trapped in the airless Green Sector or hurled into space without breathing gear can operate on the oxygen in their blood for HT turns if active, HT×4, if moving, or HT×10 if passively waiting. After this time, 1 fatigue is lost per turn until ST reaches 0 and the person falls unconscious. Four minutes later, he dies. See p. S105 for information on explosive decompression and p. S103 for more information on vacuum.

The pressure doors at either end of Green Sector seal and lock 30 seconds after the collision (see *The Habitat Ring*). The sector remains in vacuum, and opening a pressure door starts decompressing the next sector. A safer, but more laborious, way to reach Green Sector is to don a vacc suit, exit through the airlock in the core and enter the sector through one of the holes in the outer hull.

Gravity Fluctuations

Anyone standing in the habitat ring must make a DX-8 roll or be thrown to the floor. Furniture or unsecured equipment may tip, possibly endangering troubleshooters.

The extensive damage disrupts the rotation of the habitat ring, creating a long-term perturbation in its spin gravity. All DX and DX-based skill rolls are at -1 in the habitat ring due to periodic gravity "hiccups."

Systems Failures

Some station systems may go into emergency shutdown due to catastrophic damage, at GM discretion. This can be done to make things easier or harder for the freelancers, as desired. Operatives who are engineers might welcome the chance to jury-rig failing systems, for example, while a team lacking in repair skills will probably find such a turn of events more frustrating than fun.

Mechanic, Engineer, Electronics Operation, and Electronics skill rolls are required for repair tasks. Tools and some spare parts can be found in maintenance lockers scattered throughout the station. The computer contains a complete inventory. See *Conducting Repairs*, p. 24, for more information.

Orbital Decay

An analysis of the habitat's orbit, by freelancers using the Astrogation skill or the station NAI, reveals the collision has pushed Vandegrift Station into a new, rapidly decaying orbit that will send the station plunging into the upper atmosphere in approximately 12 hours. While some individual components might survive, most of the habitat will burn up on re-entry.

The station could be destroyed as a navigation hazard as it plunges through low orbit and into the upper atmosphere. Chances of survival for anyone aboard are slim. Rescue seems unlikely, given the biohazard warning issued by Raghvendra from *Columbia*. Would-be rescuers, if any, will probably be reluctant even to send microbots aboard for fear of carrying back the unspecified contaminants mentioned by Raghvendra's mayday.

Operatives may not check the station's post-collision orbit at first, but will no doubt catch on as Earth gradually appears to grow larger in station windows as the hours pass.

DEADLY SECRETS

Trapped aboard Vandegrift Station, troubleshooters must uncover the terrifying truth behind the habitat's fate in order to survive.

PROJECT MATTHIAS

The downfall of Vandegrift Station began with Project Matthias, a bold initiative intended to save the faltering Terrell-Dieskau. Company executives decided to launch a new, top-secret biowarfare research wing without the knowledge of governing authorities. They leased Vandegrift Station as a remote, secure facility that could be staffed with their most trusted employees. Under Project Matthias, researchers would quietly devise unsanctioned bioweapons for sale to factions around the world and throughout space. The risk of discovery by disapproving governments was high, but so were potential profits.

Then things went horribly wrong.

Tran Nguyen, a research assistant working in the pharm animal lab, was bitten by a rhesus monkey infected by an experimental neurovirus. The neurovirus, although incomplete, could be transmitted via saliva.

As the neurovirus took hold, Nguyen became increasingly irrational and decided not to report the bite to station medical personnel as required. He later entered the biohazard storage facility in Red Sector, sealed the doors, and injected himself with an experimental proteus virus designed to produce physically powerful shock troopers.

Security personnel and researchers dragged Nguyen from the storage locker, but he bit several people during the scuffle – infecting them with both the neurovirus and proteus virus, which had an unnoticed flaw allowing transmission via saliva.

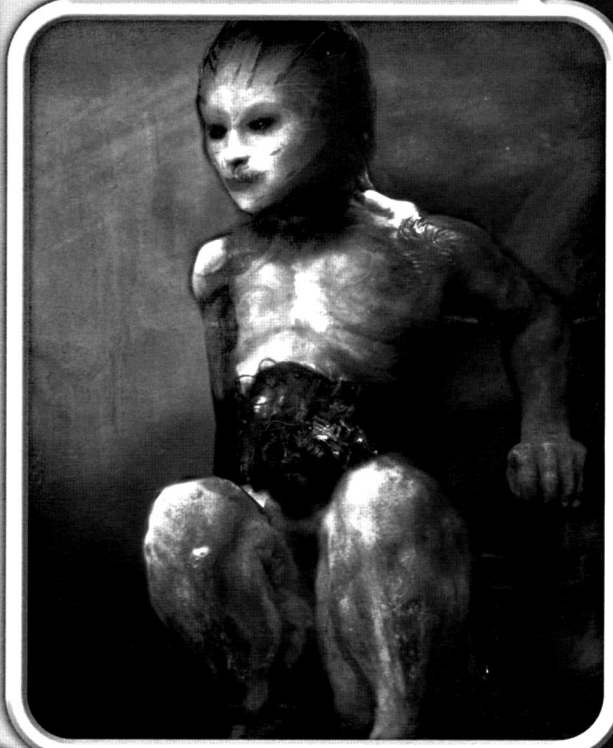
Incidents of inexplicable illness, insanity, and violence multiplied out of control aboard Vandegrift Station. Hindered by ignorance of the side effects of the incompletely gengineered viruses, researchers and medical personnel could not curb the spreading chaos.

Fighting in Red Sector accidentally released yet another gengineered pathogen, a flesh-eating nanoplague. Elsewhere in the habitat, rampaging crew members driven mad by the neurovirus smashed vital equipment, including the comm system.

A handful of uninfected station inhabitants tried to barricade themselves to await rescue that might never arrive, but in a matter of hours everyone aboard Vandegrift Station had either been infected or slain.

ROGUE VIRUSES

Three viruses are loose on Vandegrift Station, all biowarfare applications designed aboard the orbital lab. Most were still being refined at the time of the breach and do not work as intended, with horrific consequences.



"Harrower" Anti-Flesh Bioweapon

This nanoplague slowly rots the flesh of those it infects. It is intended to overtax health-care systems and sap morale among enemies rather than to kill large numbers of people. Design of the nanoplague was essentially complete at the time of the breach.

Infection: Designed to be extremely contagious, the bioweapon spreads by airborne bacteria as well as close contact with sore-carrying victims. Anyone not in a sealed vacc suit or other protection aboard the habitat must make an HT-2 roll to avoid infection; the roll is HT-4 for anyone actually touching an infected person.

Symptoms: Sores develop on the skin within 24 hours of infection. They are unsightly but not especially painful. Necrosis sets in 48 hours after infection as the flesh around the sores begins to die. The unmistakable sickly-sweet odor of rotting flesh grows as necrosis spreads – loss of more than 1/3 HT brings on the Bad Smell disadvantage.

Progress and Recovery: A HT-4 roll is required each day. A critical failure means a loss of 1d-1 HT; a regular failure is a loss of 1 HT. A success regains 1 HT; three consecutive successes, or a critical success, indicate a full recovery. Lost HT is recovered normally.

Treatment: Antibiotics have their normal effect. Panimmunity also provides a bonus.

There are vaccines and specific antibiotics for the nanoplague, devised at the same time as the bioweapon. They are kept in the biohazard storage facility in the main research lab in Red Sector. The vaccine and antibiotic are designed to be injected; the vaccine provides a specific immunity to the anti-flesh bioweapon while the antibiotic cures an infection within 24 hours. Lost HT is recovered normally.

"Shocktrooper" Proteus Virus

Close to completion at the time of the breach, this experimental nanovirus is intended to produce instant shock troops, enhancing the strength and durability of those it infects.

It is a proteus nanovirus, a bionanomachine that reproduces rapidly through the body, resequences DNA, and stimulates quick growth of newly modified cells.

Increased strength and pain resistance are among its beneficial effects. The virus also causes the body to automatically enter deep hibernation in life-threatening conditions, such as lack of oxygen or severe trauma, often enabling the person to survive otherwise-lethal circumstances. The transformed person is ravenous.

While the physiological effects of the virus are close to design specifications, gengineers had not yet resolved a glitch allowing hosts to pass the virus to others. Some other unintended side effects remain – the skin bleaches to a pale white, and the victim gains excellent night vision, with a corresponding aversion to bright light.

Statistics: ST +8; High Pain Threshold [10]; Hard to Kill 2 [10]; Night Vision [10]; Albinism [-10]; Gluttony [-5]. LC: 1

Infection: "Shocktrooper" can be transmitted via body fluids, such as saliva from a bite. The victim's immune system fights off the nanovirus on a HT-3 roll. Bonuses for Panimmunity and Disease-Resistant do apply; however, Immunity to Disease gives only +10 to HT to resist.

Symptoms: These develop within 30 minutes of infection and may include itching, chills, hot flashes, sudden sweats, hunger pangs, hallucinations, and other odd sensations. These symptoms persist throughout the transformation period. Within one hour, accelerated muscle growth and other radical physical changes begin, causing excruciating pain. On a roll of HT-4, the person falls into a coma for the remainder of the transformation.

Progress and Recovery: The virus takes 12 hours to complete its work. Once a person has been infected, the nanovirus cannot be stopped short of introduction of a counter-nanovirus or a medical microbot nanowash.

Treatment: The Programmable Immune Machine microbots in sickbay might be able to wash the body clean of the proteus virus in the early stages of the transformation. No existing cure can reverse the Shocktrooper transformation once complete. Given time, however, a gengineer could devise a second proteus nanovirus to reverse the effects.

Propaganda Neurovirus

This neurovirus, intended to demoralize and disorganize enemy forces by inducing a sudden, severe depression, escaped at an early stage of its gengineering. Rather than delivering a finely tuned neurochemical attack, the flawed virus causes gross brain damage and stimulates aggression in victims.

Neuroviruses are normally optimized to make subtle changes in personality and mental structure by altering the connections between neurons and adjusting the neurochemical balance of the brain.

Statistics: -4 Intelligence, Berserk [-15]. LC: 1.

Infection: Fortunately for newcomers to the station, work on the infectiousness of the virus is incomplete. The finished neurovirus was meant to spread like most communicable diseases, through airborne pathogens from sneezing or coughing. At present, the unfinished neurovirus cannot survive for long in the air, nor does it make victims ill enough to cause sneezing or coughing. It can currently be passed only through direct contact with body fluids, such as saliva from a bite.

The victim's immune system fights off the neurovirus on a HT-3 roll, plus bonuses for Panimmunity and Disease-Resistant. However, Immunity to Disease gives only +10 to HT to resist.

Symptoms: These develop within 4 hours of infection, consisting chiefly of increasing irritability, memory loss, and gradual dulling of mental faculties. Other possible symptoms may include odd tastes or smells, memory flashbacks, impaired motor control, blurred vision, and even psychotic breaks.

Progress and Recovery: The neurovirus takes 12 hours to complete its work. Once established, the nanovirus is unhindered by the body's natural defenses.

Treatment: Researchers were working on antidotes and vaccines to the neurovirus. Records of the research are locked in the lab's secure computer files. See pp. 21-22 for details on opening the files. This information halves the amount of time required for gengineers to devise a counter to the neurovirus.

The Infected Crew
61/79 points

ST 18 [90]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 6 [-30]; **HT** 8 [-15].
Speed 4.75; Move 4.
Dodge 4.

Advantages: Hard to Kill [10]; High Pain Threshold [10]; Night Vision [10].

Disadvantages: Albinism [-10]; Berserk [-15]; Gluttony [-5].

Skills: *Former Maintenance Crew:* Computer Operation-8 [4]; Electronics Operation (Various)-8 [6]; Mechanic (Various)-8 [6].
Former Researchers: Biochemistry-6 [8]; Computer Operation-8 [4]; Genetics (Genetic Engineering)-6 [8]; Physiology -6 [8]; Research-8 [6].

The rogue nanoviruses have mutated the surviving station crew into a mob of inhumanly strong, brain-damaged psychopaths stalking the habitat in search of food. Their pale skin is covered with oozing sores and rotting flesh from the nanoplagues loose on the station. Many of the crew, mad with fever, have ripped off some or all of their clothes.

Some of the former crew carry makeshift clubs. They wield these with a default DX-5, and do 3d+1 damage with their tremendous strength. Unarmed crew punch at DX for 1d thrusting damage or bite at DX for 1d cutting damage. Bites can infect victims with the proteus nanovirus and neurovirus.

The intruders on Vandegrift Station may wear armored vacc suits or nanoweave armor to prevent the station personnel from causing much injury. In that case, the diseased crew grapples with the intruders, trying to pull off helmets, gloves, and life support packs or rip open armor. This requires a successful Grapple maneuver (p. B111), followed by a ST-10 roll to tear off a helmet or other secured piece of clothing. Exposed flesh may spark biting attacks by the starving former crew.

Crew members also use their great strength to grab any weapons out of the hands of intruders (p. B111). The disease-ravaged crew may use any seized armaments against intruders as clubs.

Supernatural Zombies

The GM may prefer to use "living dead" zombies of pseudoscientific or supernatural origin for the former crew, particularly for adventures not set in ***Transhuman Space.***

GMs unconcerned by scientific implausibility can posit the existence of a virus or chemical goo that really does bring the dead back to life. Rather than a host of biotech viruses, scientists accidentally unleashed a zombie-making plague or toxic gas causing the dead to rise.

Or, for a more supernatural feel, researchers aboard the habitat might have been studying an alien artifact discovered on Mars with the mystic power to bring the dead to life. Voodoo rituals by a cultist among the crew might be another mystical origin for the zombies.

GURPS Undead contains information on creating undead foes with a variety of origins.

The prospect of being exposed to airborne nanoviruses, not to mention being pawed by crazed plague victims, presents a truly horrific scene. Reduced to subhuman intelligence, the crew roams the station in loose packs. In combat, they fight in a berserk fury but may use rudimentary pack tactics, such as dogpiling on a particularly agile foe.

The statistics on p. 20 represent an average infected crew member. At GM discretion, some of the crew may have started out with higher attribute scores, which were then altered by the nanoviruses. For example, a formerly brilliant researcher with IQ 12 would now have a dull IQ 8. An ex-weightlifter might now have ST 20 or more.

Infected Animals

Some of the pharm animals kept aboard for testing are loose. Infected by the various nanoviruses, the few surviving rhesus monkeys and lab rats are an interesting twist to throw at jumpy operatives as they explore the habitat. Since they are gengineered for testing human-targeted bioweapons, infected pharm animals have enhanced strengths and decreased intelligences, though to different degrees than humans.

Rhesus Monkeys

Several rhesus monkeys are loose in the habitat. These large monkeys do not have prehensile tails.

ST: 6 **Move/Dodge:** 8/7 **Size:** 1
DX: 15 **PD/DR:** 0/0 **Wt.:** 20-40 lbs.
IQ: 6 **Damage:** 1d-4 cut*
HT: 13/5 **Reach:** C

* A successful bite can transmit the proteus nanovirus and neurovirus.

Rats

Countless lab rats infected with the viruses are loose on Vandegrift Station. Some have been snatched up and eaten by the ravenous crew, but plenty remain.

ST: 5 **Move/Dodge:** 6*/6 **Size:** <1
DX: 13 **PD/DR:** 0/0 **Wt.:** <1 lb.
IQ: 1 **Damage:** 1d-5 cr*
HT: 17/2 **Reach:** C

* A swarm of around a dozen rats has Move 4, with collective damage 1d cr. The swarm disperses after 6 hits. Any successful bite can transmit the proteus nanovirus and neurovirus.

The Truth Comes Out

As the hours count down, the team has a number of avenues of investigation to pursue.

Computer Records

Information stored in the data retrieval system can shed a great deal of light on recent goings-on. The computer records contain logs on the biotech research in Red Sector, including development of the rogue viruses.

The official station log, or journals kept by other station personnel, can reveal at least part of the story of the past few days. The security logs also contain key information about the station's fate.

As noted earlier, the computer's memory system has been damaged. Retrieving data requires a Computer Operation skill roll at -3 and requires up to an hour for each attempt, at GM discretion. In addition, the recovered data may be incomplete.

Most records, particularly the research and security logs, are encrypted. Haley, who already has a pretty good idea of what has happened and does not wish the freelancers to recover too much information, claims not to have the relevant decryption keys to unlock the files. Unfortunately for the operatives, data encryption in 2100 is virtually unbreakable without enormous amounts of time and computing power, neither of which they possess.

The station administrator, Dr. Anders Ljungdahl, had a master passcode allowing him to decrypt any file stored on the main computer for security purposes. During the frantic, failed battle to save the station, Ljungdahl wrote a v-tag memo containing the passcode for researchers seeking data to combat the nanoplagues in hopes of speeding their efforts. But the computer system and v-tag network failed before the code could be used.

Reactivation of the station computer brings the v-tag memo to light in Ljungdahl's office, though the damage to the computer memory has slightly garbled the v-tag. It reads, "Computer files: Passcode Sol . . ." The second half of the last word is scrambled and cannot be read; the full word, "solace," is the administrator's master passcode for the station computer.

Armed with the partial code, troubleshooters can make a Computer Operation skill roll at -5 to complete the passcode and decrypt all files on the computer. Calling up individual files still requires the Computer Operations skill roll at -3, as above, due to the damaged memory banks.

LAB RESEARCH

Science-oriented operatives can unravel the secrets of the rogue viruses by conducting their own research in the station labs.

Blood or tissue samples recovered from infected crew members can be analyzed in the sickbay or Red Sector biotech lab, revealing the nanoviruses. Or troubleshooters could find the active samples of the viruses in the biohazard storage locker in Red Sector.

The Red Sector lab is a Full Genetics Lab (see p. BIO21) but, because freelancers are dealing with cutting-edge biotechnology, the +2 to skill rolls for simple tasks does not apply. Some equipment in the lab has been smashed, but enough remains intact for one researcher to work unhindered. The sickbay has a Small Genetics Lab (see p. BIO21), requiring a -5 to skill rolls on major projects, such as analyzing rogue nanoviruses.

The team can pursue several avenues of research. Analyzing the flawed nanoviruses can yield information about their infectiousness, symptoms, effects, and treatment. All of this research takes time, however, and the limited time before the station crashes to Earth may force PCs to take some shortcuts.

The chart below outlines the basic time and modifiers required for each research task. Researchers can try to speed up the work by taking shortcuts at a cumulative -4 penalty for each halving of the required time.

Genetics (Genetic Engineering) is the operative skill. Access to the appropriate research logs stored on the computer can speed the work considerably.

Task	Time	Modifier
Analyze altered DNA	1 hour	-2
with lab records	30 min.	-1
Analyze "Harrower" anti-flesh bioweapon	2 hours	-2
with lab records	1 hour	-1
Analyze "Shocktrooper" proteus virus	6 hours	-6
with lab records	3 hours	-3
Analyze propaganda neurovirus	4 hours	-4
with lab records	2 hours	-2

Other Viruses

Terrell-Dieskau gengineers may have been at work on other bioweapons in Red Sector. These could pose new threats, or be put to use by resourceful freelancers to combat the nanoplagues loose on the station. The GM will have to devise the specifications on other nanoviruses found in Red Sector.

Mutant strains of viruses already loose in the habitat are another possibility. New strains could spread in different ways, creating all kinds of uncertainty for operatives.

NEW ARRIVALS

A band of Negative Growth terrorists arrives, intent on recovering bioweapons from the failing Vandegrift Station.

Unidentified Ship

Approximately 10 hours after *Columbia* rams Vandegrift Station, an unmarked orbital transfer vehicle approaches the troubled habitat. The operatives may spot the craft out a window or via approach radar in the ops center, if they have restored that system. The OTV shows no identifying radar transponder and does not respond to hails from the short-range vacc suit radios of the freelancers.

The spacecraft circles Vandegrift Station, apparently assessing the damage, then docks at the docking ring in the nonrotating core.

A New Threat

The armed occupants of the OTV deploy into the core in a military fashion, ready for trouble. The intruders are especially alert if radio hails by the team have alerted them to the presence of someone still aboard.

The station has been invaded by terrorists affiliated with Negative Growth. A group devoted to halting the terraforming of Mars, Negative Growth shot to the top of the system's most-wanted lists when it tried to blow up the Mars space elevator in 2094 with a nuclear device. Some members are believed to have fled Mars and sought sanctuary with other terrorist organizations, such as Europa Defense Force or Blue Shadow. The group has at least 400 hard-core members, though many have been arrested and face execution.

This Negative Growth cell has been hiding in the junkpile of dilapidated, outmoded habitats clogging Earth orbit, inhabiting vacant stations rented through various front organizations as safehouses.

The cell received the mayday broadcast by Raghvendra and, having already heard underworld rumors of black ops research going on aboard Vandegrift Station, decided to board the presumably deserted station in search of bioweapons. The terrorists hope to recover a nanoplague or other contagion with which to threaten authorities to secure the release of their captured comrades.

Setting the Mood

A boarding action by terrorists might seem at first to be a straightforward action sequence, but there are plenty of ways for the GM to drop some horrific touches into this turn of events.

After hours of battling the diseased crew, the operatives are likely to be tired, injured, and running low on supplies. A strike team of fresh, heavily armed terrorists is no laughing matter, and outgunned freelancers may be forced to skulk around the station avoiding contact with the intruders or seeking opportunities for ambush.

This presents an interesting shift in roles for the team members – from intruders themselves to defenders of Vandegrift Station. While no alliance with the psychotic former crew is possible, the troubleshooters are now fighting on the same side in some respects.

In addition, the Negative Growth cell represents another twist on horrific foes – the human fanatic. Having dealt with barely human monstrosities and deadly betrayal, operatives now face terrorists willing to go to any length in the name of their cause.

This development also presents the GM with a number of tools to keep the adventure on track.

If the freelancers are running low on ammunition or equipment, captured terrorist gear can help them resupply for the climax.

If the heroes are not faring well, the heavily armed terrorists can thin the ranks of the infected former crew and draw their attention away from the beleaguered team. Some of the terrorists can also perish in the fighting to avoid overwhelming the operatives in the climax.

On the other hand, if agents have managed to destroy most of the diseased crew, the terrorists present a dangerous new foe to keep the adventure challenging.

Terrorists

There are at least eight Negative Growth terrorists aboard the OTV, though the GM can adjust the size of the cell depending on the number, skill, and status of the PCs. The terrorists are led by Daniel Adumbe.

Daniel Adumbe 118 points

Age 38; 6' 0", 165 lbs.; no hair, brown eyes.

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 11 [10]; **IQ** 12 [20]; **HT** 10 [0].
Speed 5.25; Move 5.
Dodge 5; Parry 8 (Brawling).

Advantages: Alertness +1 [5]; Ally Group (Negative Growth cell, 12 or less) [20]; Charisma +2 [10]; Strong Will +2 [8].

Disadvantages: Fanaticism [-15]; Sense of Duty (To Negative Growth) [-5].

Quirks: Deep thinker; Distrusts authority; Gregarious; Likes to debate politics; Yearns to return to Mars. [-5]

Skills: Brawling-12 [2]; Computer Operation-14 [4]; Demolition-12 [2]; Electronics Operation (Security Systems)-12 [2]; Guns (Pistol)-14 [2]*; Intelligence Analysis-12 [4]; Leadership-14 [2]†; Memetics-14 [16]; Politics-16 [10]; Stealth-12 [4]; Strategy-14 [8]; Tactics -12 [4]; Teaching-15 [8].
* Guns includes +2 for IQ.
† Leadership includes +2 for Charisma.

Languages: English (native)-12 [0]; Sign Language-12 [2].

Weapons: Pistol 10mm.

Armor: Nanoweave vest (PD 2, DR 10), no encumbrance.

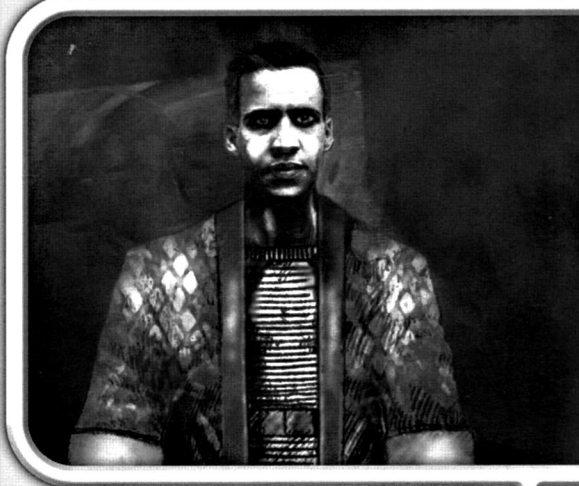
Equipment: Flashlight; radio headset.

Daniel Adumbe is a Negative Growth cell leader. He is competent at terrorist tradecraft, but his true value to the organization lies in his talents as a speaker and leader.

Adumbe, a baseline human, was born on Mars to parents of Kenyan heritage. His biochemist father earned enough to send Adumbe to college on Earth, where he fell in with a radical crowd of free thinkers. Adumbe studied political science and dabbled in nanosocialism, but eventually returned home to Mars after earning his degree.

Outraged by the changes wrought by terraforming during his absence, Adumbe joined the Preservationist movement and later became active in Negative Growth. His dedication and political skills earned Adumbe considerable influence within the terrorist organization. Following the crackdown on Negative Growth in the wake of the failed bombing of the Mars space elevator in 2094, Adumbe's cell fled into hiding in the ghetto of aging orbital habitats around Earth.

Adumbe became the cell leader in 2098 after the previous leader was arrested during a smuggling operation at the Taiko Spaceport.



Negative Growth Terrorist 60 points

ST 11 [10]; **DX** 11 [10]; **IQ** 10 [0]; **HT** 11 [10].
Speed 5.5, Move 5.
Dodge 5; Parry 9 (Brawling), 5 (Knife).

Advantages: Alertness +1 [5].

Disadvantages: Fanaticism [-15].

Quirks: Variable. [-5]

Skills: Brawling-14 [8]; Computer Operation-11 [2]; Demolitions-14 [10]; Electronics Operation (Security Systems)-12 [6]; First Aid-10 [1]; Guns (Pistol)-14 [4]*; Knife-12 [2]; Politics-10 [2]; Stealth-12 [4]; Streetwise-11 [4].

Languages: English (native)-10 [0]. Sign Language-10 [2].

Weapons: See below.

Armor: Nanoweave vest (PD 2, DR 10), no encumbrance.

Equipment: Flashlights; radio headsets.

The Negative Growth cell members are baseline humans of all ages, appearances, and ethnic backgrounds. They are dedicated to their cause and to each other.

They wear nanoweave armor vests – a multilayered weave of carbon nanotube fibers plus climate control systems – under practical clothing. The vest covers torso and vitals. DR (not PD) is halved vs. impaling attacks.

Each terrorist has a radio headset for easy communication. They carry a variety of conventional pistols and rifles, all using standard caseless ammunition with the bullet encased in the propellant. There are no shells, requiring no ejection mechanism and reducing jams. Each terrorist has at least one extra clip of the appropriate ammunition.

Some have high-powered 4mm pistols or heavy 10mm pistols. Others are armed with personal defense weapons (PDWs). These light automatic weapons have an ergo-nomic shape similar to the modern FN P90, with magazines mounted atop the weapon rather than in the pistol grip. They also come in 4mm or 10mm calibers.

One of the terrorists carries a brick of octonitrocubane plastic explosives, used primarily for blasting open sealed doors or other useful tasks rather than combat. A brick does 6d×8 per pound and weighs 1 lb.

The unmarked OTV used by the terrorists is a *Kagoshima*-class craft essentially identical to the *Columbia.*

Terror Tactics

The Negative Growth terrorists are interested chiefly in finding the biotech labs in Red Sector to search for nanoviruses usable as bioweapons. The pilot and co-pilot stay aboard the OTV; the rest enter the station.

A trained paramilitary force with extensive experience, the Negative Growth cell acts with precision and forethought – employing cover, deploying carefully into each new compartment, and using hand signals to communicate silently while on hostile ground. If a firefight erupts, Adumbe may send some terrorists to flank attackers while the rest keep them pinned down.

If they encounter infected crew members, the terrorists may try to capture one for interrogation, but quickly realize their error. After this, infected crew members are shot on sight.

Realizing they have a time limit, Negative Growth cell members try to deal quickly with any obstacles, such as the PCs or former crew members, but do not waste time on extended counterattacks or chases. The terrorists remain focused on their goal of recovering usable bioweapons and fleeing before the station plunges into Earth's atmosphere.

Desperate heroes, or clever ones, may try to ally with the Negative Growth cell. This will require some tricky – and fast! – bargaining with Adumbe, who is not interested in helping the freelancers for charity's sake. Unless the terrorists have suffered severe losses, or the troubleshooters can offer a convincing argument as to why Adumbe needs their help, he sees no benefit to joining forces.

In any case, Adumbe will make recovery of the nanovirus samples for use by Negative Growth part of any agreement.

The arrival of the Negative Growth cell should be a clear sign to the team that it's time to blow the station and depart, segueing cleanly into the frantic climax of the adventure.

Terrorist Weapons

The GM should distribute these weapons among the Negative Growth terrorists as desired for play balance.

Name	Type	Damage	SS	Acc	1/2D	Max	Wt.	RoF	Shots	ST	Rcl.	Cost	LC
Guns (Pistol)													
Pistol, 4mm	cr.	3d	9	4	250	2,100	1.5	3~	50	8	-1	$560	3
Pistol, 10mm	cr.	3d+	9	4	200	1,900	2.75	3~	20	10	-2	$610	3
Guns (Light Auto)													
PDW, 4mm	cr.	3d+2	11	8	380	2,700	2.1	12*	100	8	-1	$560	2
PDW, 10mm	cr.	3d+	12	7	200	1,900	5.9	12*	60	9	-1	$685	2

CHEATING DEATH

In the climax of the adventure, the freelancers must overcome the Negative Growth terrorists, evade the diseased former crew, destroy Vandegrift Station to protect Earth, and, with luck, escape.

Infected Crew

While crazed station crew members lurking in the shadows are no longer the only threat to the troubleshooters, they remain a dangerous wild card. Surprise attacks by the infected crew can complicate the plans of the PCs or, conversely, thwart efforts by Negative Growth terrorists to wipe the team out.

Setting the Mood

The terrorist incursion pushes the adventure into overdrive. As the clock ticks down, heroes must act quickly to save themselves and Earth – all the while evading the marauding former crew and lethal terrorist strike team. The GM should keep the tension high and pacing relentless throughout the climax by giving the players no time to relax or get their bearings.

Edge of Destruction

The re-entry of Vandegrift Station into Earth's atmosphere not only spells the probable doom of the freelancers, but could endanger Earth itself. Some portions of the station, notably the core and the shielded fusion reactor chamber, could remain more or less intact when the station breaks up in the atmosphere.

In this case, one or more of the exceptionally hardy former crew might survive to infect would-be rescuers or salvors on Earth. While the chance may be slim, hopefully the heroes are not willing to gamble with the chance of loosing a monster-creating nano-plague on Earth. Destroying the station before it hits the atmosphere is the best solution.

Self-Destruct

Terrell-Dieskau equipped the station with a self-destruct device in case of a catastrophic contamination of the orbital habitat.

The device, a mini-nuke capable of obliterating the entire station, can be activated in the ops center in Blue Sector. Two codes, one possessed by the station administrator and the other by the security chief, are required to activate or deactivate the destruct sequence. The time until detonation is set on activation. The sequence can be aborted, using the security codes, at any time until the final two minutes of the countdown. At this point, detonation is inevitable.

The operatives can bypass the security code protocols to activate or deactivate the destruct sequence with a successful Electronics Operation (Security Systems) skill roll at -6 or a Computer Hacking skill roll at -6.

If the troubleshooters do not have access to the ops center, they could find the mini-nuke itself in the core and try to "hot-wire" the bomb. This requires a Demolition skill roll at -3, but there is no way to set a timer unless the operative has brought bomb-making equipment with him or, at GM's discretion, acquired it from the gear brought aboard by the Negative Growth terrorists.

In this case, a freelancer may volunteer to remain behind and detonate the bomb once the others have escaped, sacrificing himself to save Earth – particularly if the adventure is not part of an ongoing campaign.

The mini-nuke, located in the core, does 6d×4,000,000 explosive damage when it detonates. In space, with no air to carry the blast, damage is divided by the square of the range in yards.

Escape

Before they destroy Vandegrift Station, operatives will have to find a way off . . . or perish as martyrs to the safety of Earth. Fortunately, the Negative Growth cell has provided them with an escape – if the PCs can take advantage of it.

The terrorists' orbital transfer vehicle remains docked to the station core. The team must overcome the two terrorists in the OTV to take the craft. Any surviving terrorists elsewhere on Vandegrift Station will, of course, rush to assist their comrades in case of a fight at the docking ring.

After seizing the OTV, the team must undock and pilot it away from the station. A Piloting (High Performance Spacecraft) skill roll is required to undock from the station, with the default being IQ-6.

If the GM chooses, the OTV crew had time to lock down the controls before the heroes seize the ship. A security code, Computer Hacking skill roll at -4, or Electronics Operation (Security Systems) skill roll at -2 is required to unlock the OTV controls. This works particularly well if the operatives are running out of time – perhaps the other terrorists on the station are about to retake the craft, or the self-destruct detonates shortly.

Fortunately, spacecraft can achieve high speeds fairly quickly at maximum thrust with no atmospheric friction or gravity to impede them. The OTV can clear the blast radius in just over 8 seconds at full thrust. Debris from the blast could damage the craft, however. A Piloting (High Performance Spacecraft) skill roll is required to dodge the debris.

Last Resort

It's possible the operatives will fail to seize the Negative Growth OTV for some reason. As a last resort, after disabling the self-destruct, the team may opt to try to ride out re-entry in the station core. The habitat ring will certainly burn up, but the core may be sturdy enough to survive an ocean landing – if the freelancers are lucky enough to hit water instead of land.

Of course, disabling the self-destruct and hoping to survive re-entry does risk bringing the nanoplagues to Earth, particularly if any team members are infected.

The dangers of riding out re-entry are plentiful. First the core heats up to a nearly unbearable temperature. As the station breaks up, the core may tumble, hurling the PCs against walls, floors, and ceilings. An ocean impact will cause more injuries; the heroes will have to act quickly to escape the rapidly flooding core before it sinks.

Conclusion

Authorities are already on their way to investigate the mayday call by *Columbia*. Detonation of a mini-nuke in orbit and the destruction of Vandegrift Station naturally hastens their response. The entire incident is put under intense official scrutiny.

Unless the PCs evade authorities, they are placed in quarantine and held for questioning. They are probably released in a few days – if their stories check out and they carry no infectious diseases – although bad Reputations or other disadvantages could complicate things.

The troubleshooters have a choice of telling the truth about Terrell-Dieskau's activities on Vandegrift Station or covering it up. In either case, authorities are interested in any proof the team can provide. Of course, most of the evidence has been destroyed, unless the party saved nanovirus samples or computer records from the station.

If the operatives tell the truth, and especially if they have some evidence, Terrell-Dieskau faces government investigations, possible fines, and, civil suits from the families of those killed aboard Vandegrift Station.

The Negative Growth OTV will be seized by the government as evidence, along with any data or nanovirus samples recovered by the team.

If the troubleshooters evade authorities who are responding to the explosion, they may opt to keep the Negative Growth OTV and anything recovered from the station.

And Then?

There are numerous options for follow-up adventures.

Someone else could try to re-create the biotech research performed aboard Vandegrift Station, with even more horrific results. The troubleshooters might stumble across the problem by accident or be called in as "experts." The culprit could be another corporation, a government intelligence agency, a terrorist organization, or a mad scientist operating on his own.

Negative Growth may vow revenge on the operatives, blaming them for the destruction of Daniel Adumbe's terrorist cell. Likewise, the freelancers are unlikely to be popular with Terrell-Dieskau Corp. employees, or investors – particularly if their revelations cause the company to collapse.

Terrell-Dieskau

Future relations with Terrell-Dieskau depend in large part on what the team reveals to authorities.

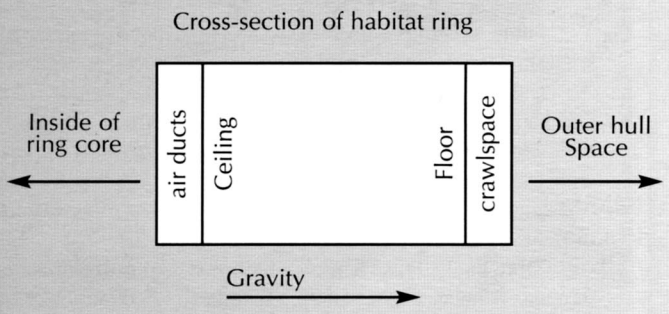
If the freelancers conceal the firm's illicit activities, Terrell-Dieskau pays the balance of their fee plus a bonus of $5,000 per survivor. The company may even become a Patron if the operatives can convince executives they bear no ill will over the deceptions and double-crosses. Needless to say, this will be extremely difficult.

More likely, Jens Dietrich will hire assassins to eliminate the freelancers under the assumption that they intend to seek revenge on him. Dietrich may even send a mind emulation infomorph of Madison Haley, as described earlier, to carry out the job.

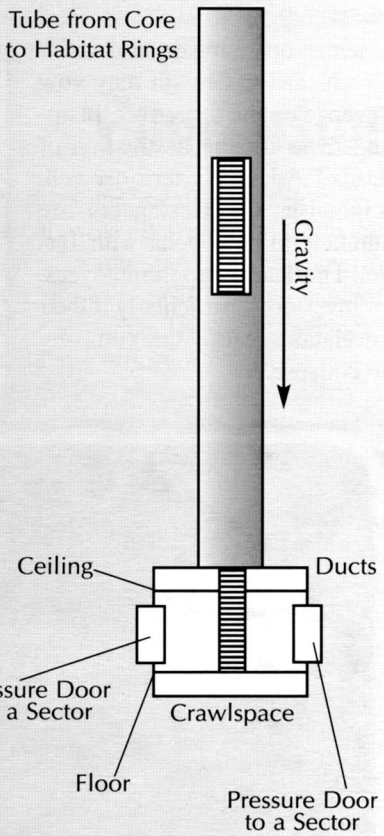
If the freelancers tell all, Terrell-Dieskau officials will be extremely displeased. Assassins are a possibility, but might draw too much attention if the company is under official scrutiny. The corporation may hire investigators and public relations experts to blacken the PCs' reputation or take other steps to damage their credibility with the government.

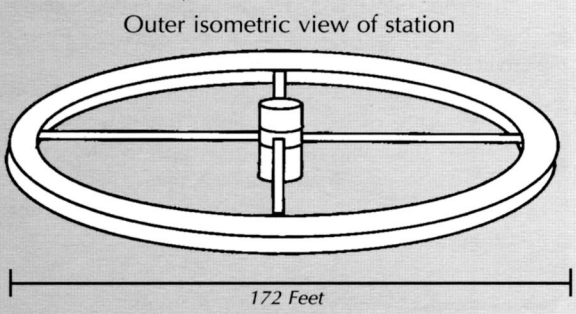
Unscrupulous freelancers might blackmail Terrell-Dieskau with evidence of its malfeasance. But they may end up being sought by authorities for questioning, especially if the corporation double-crosses the troubleshooters and exaggerates their role in the affair to authorities investigating the destruction of Vandegrift Station.

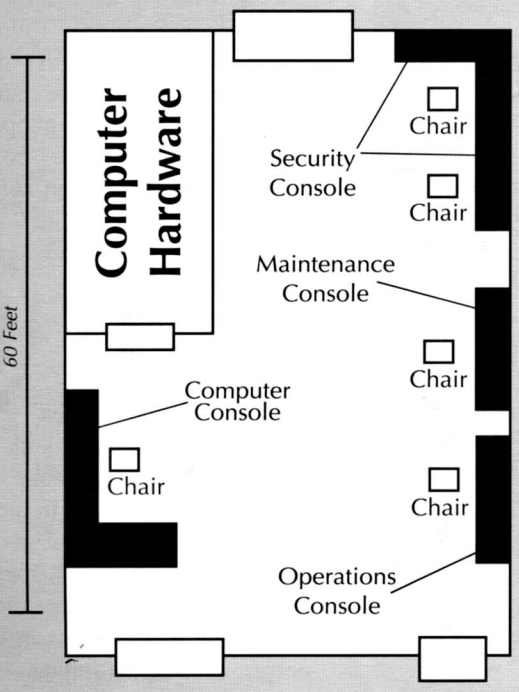
For a wild twist, Madison Haley – presumably killed during the adventure – could return to hunt down the team as an infomorph in a puppet implant controlling a host body. A mind emulation software upload taken just before Haley departed on the mission might subsequently be placed in a new body to seek revenge. Her consciousness might even become a recurring villain, returning again and again to pursue the adventurers in new bodies via the wonders of 22nd-century biotechnology. See ***Transhuman Space*** for more information about infomorphs and puppet implants.



Habitat Ring Side View







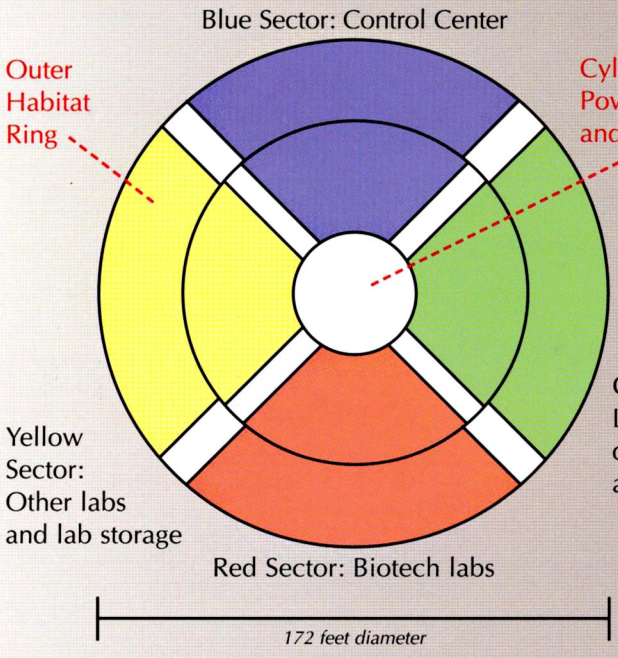
Ops Center Side Map

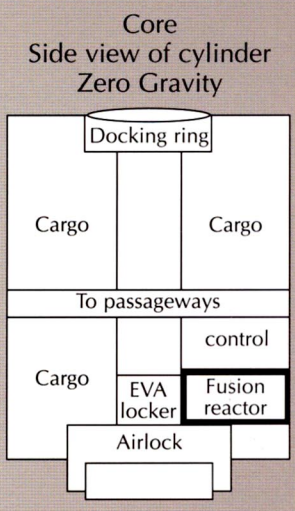
= 1 yard

Vandegrift Station

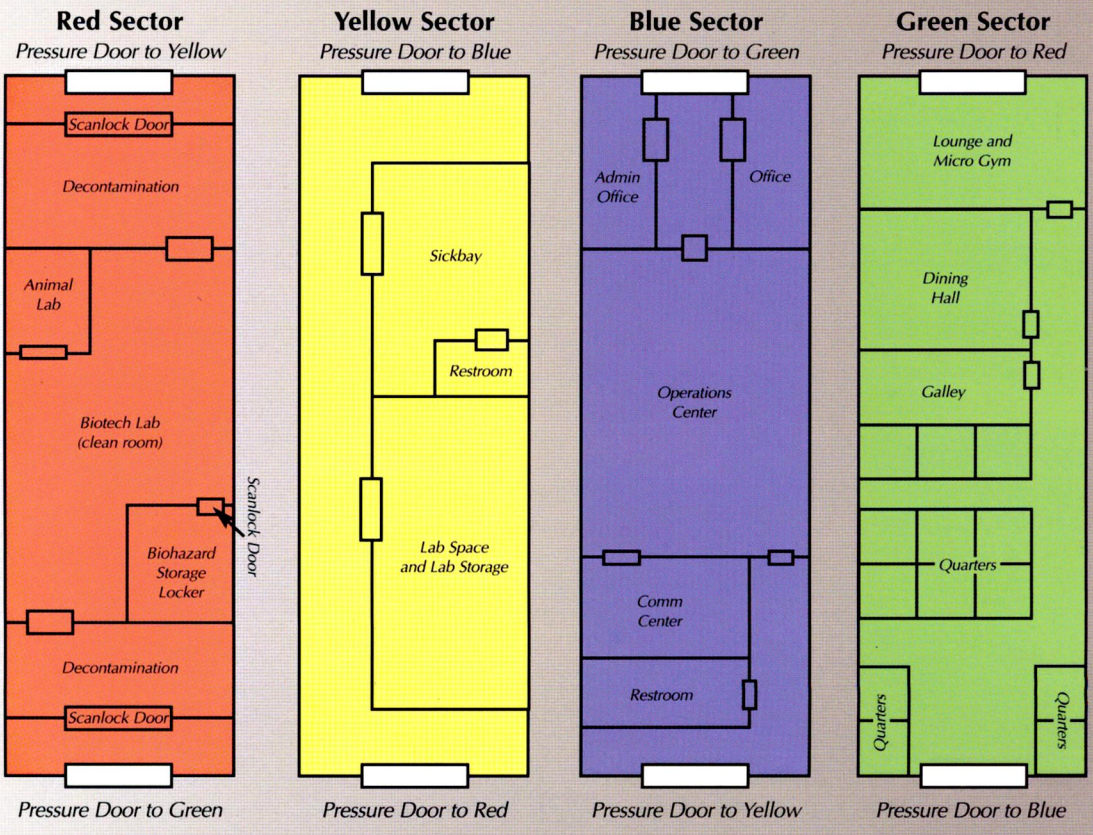
Top Down View of Station

The "floors" in the four sectors are on the outside wall of the habitat ring, providing spin gravity.





Sector Views are cut away from habitat ring and laid flat, viewed top-down. They fit together end-to-end to form the outer ring.

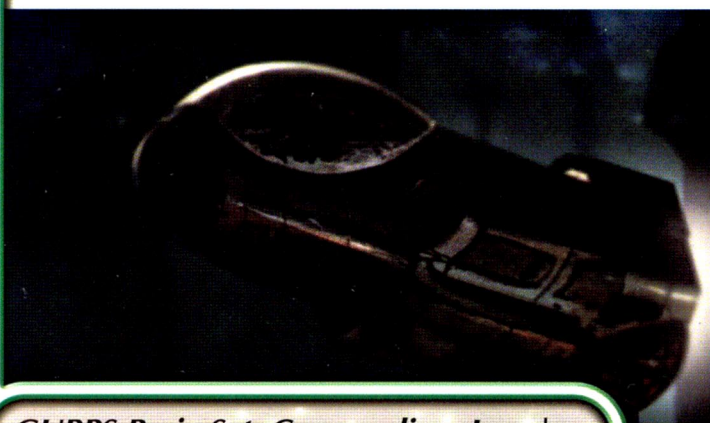


= 1 yard

Vandegrift Station, a top-secret orbital research lab, has suddenly stopped all transmissions. Why has the station gone silent? Where did all the researchers go?

What's that clawing at the airlock?

Orbital Decay includes maps and stats of a typical orbital facility, character descriptions, and an adventure for up to six 200-point ***Transhuman Space*** characters, either biological or cybershell.



GURPS Basic Set, Compendium I, and ***Transhuman Space*** are *required* to use this book in a ***GURPS*** campaign. ***GURPS Space*** and ***Bio-Tech*** may also be useful. The ideas and maps in ***Orbital Decay*** can be used with *any* roleplaying system.

Written by Patrick Sweeney Edited by Andrew Hackard
Illustrated by Christopher Shy
Transhuman Space **designed by David Pulver**

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