2813

THE LAST WARHULK

Science Fiction
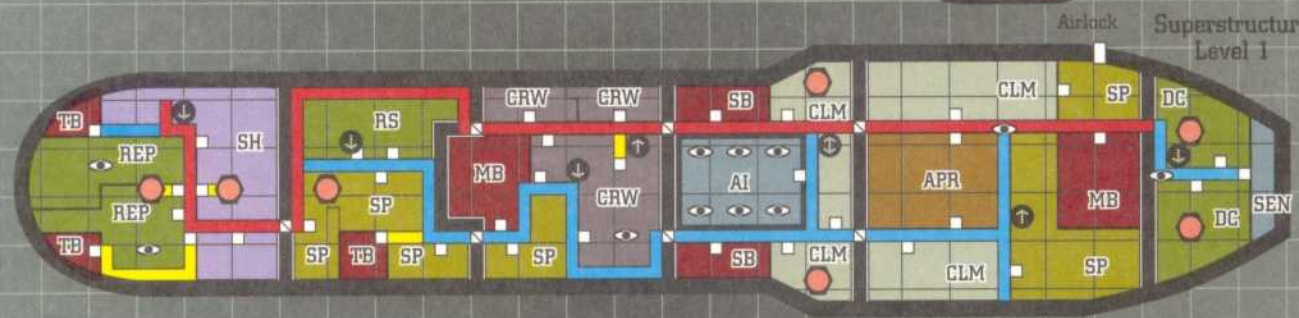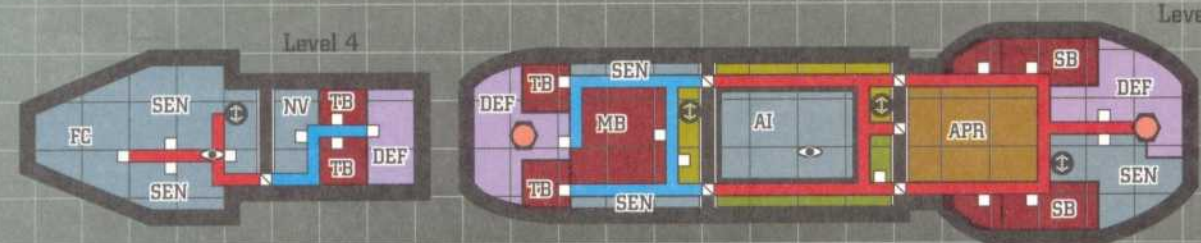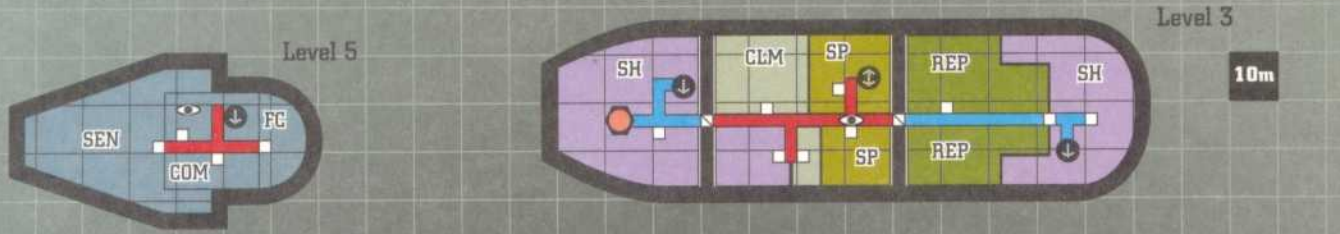Roleplaying Game

by Richard Baker

Deck Plans I

Legend:

Standard Hatch	Security Hatch	Sensor Turret	Armored Bulkhead
Powerlift	Armored Hatch	Main Turret	Bulkhead

Primary Passageway	Tertiary Passageway
DC Bulkhead	Secondary Passageway

10m

Level 5

SEN · FC · COM

Level 4

FC · SEN · SEN · NV · TB · TB · DEF

Level 3

SH · CLM · SP · REP · SH · SP · REP

Level 2

DEF · TB · SEN · SB · DEF · MB · AI · APR · SEN · TB · SEN · SB

Superstructure Level 1

Airlock

TB · REP · SH · RS · CRW · CRW · SB · CLM · CLM · SP · DC · REP · MB · AI · APR · MB · DC · SEN · TB · SP · CRW · SB · CLM · SP · SP · TB · SP · SP · CLM

FORWARD · **AFT**

Main Deck

MS · SB · TB · SP · SP · SEN · SB · FC · MB · ENG · MB · SH · DC · SB · HB · SD · SB · MB · MB · MB · DC · IS · SEN · SP · SP · SEN · SB · SP · MB · SB · MS · SB · TB · FC · ENG · MB

Deck 2

MS · SB · SB · LS · REP · SB · SB · APR · SB · SP · FC · SH · SD · SH · TB · SB · CLM · LS · DEF · SB · CLM · APR · ENG · HB · CLM · SH · TB · MS · SB · DC · SP · FC · CLM · CLM · SB · DC · SB · CLM · ENG CON · SB

Airlock

STAR✶DRIVE™

THE LAST WARHULK

by Richard Baker

Science Fiction
Roleplaying Game

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *The Last Warhulk*, an adventure for the STAR*DRIVE™ *Campaign Setting*. From the dark decades of the Second Galactic War, an unstoppable robotic warship rises to threaten the Verge with destruction and chaos. It's up to the heroes to disarm the Warhulk before it kills millions of people with its deadly cargo of matter bombs, fighting a war that ended more than 30 years ago.

The Last Warhulk is suitable for moderately equipped heroes of levels 1 through 10, although it might pose a real challenge to low-level characters who insist on trying to do things the hard way. A hero group with lots of high-quality gear (body tanks, heavy weapons, and top-notch computer equipment) might be able to blow right past some of the tougher scenes in the adventure, so it's a good idea to keep a tight leash on the heroes' resources for this scenario.

Before you play, you should read through the entire adventure to familiarize yourself with the general sequence of events. Make sure you know the heroes your players will be using in this adventure so that you can anticipate special abilities or tactics they may apply. The adventure is organized into five acts of three scenes each, but clever or resourceful players may force you to run scenes out of sequence or skip some altogether. Use your best judgment and don't try too hard to force the heroes to stay on the story line—sometimes players derail the most thorough Gamemaster preparations.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO PLAY?

Like the setting material, this adventure is designed for the ALTERNITY® Science Fiction Roleplaying Game. You'll need the *Player's Handbook* and *Gamemaster Guide* to run an ALTERNITY game. The STAR*DRIVE Campaign Setting describes the galaxy of the year 2501, a milieu in which humanity has colonized many of the stars within 1,000 light-years of Sol. The setting is not strictly necessary to run this adventure, but a lot of the background in *The Last Warhulk* refers to the STAR*DRIVE universe. Without the STAR*DRIVE setting, you'll have to create a setting and backstory for your own game that provides the heroes with the motive and means to participate in the adventure.

BACKGROUND

The Second Galactic War raged for more than 100 years throughout all of human space, causing incalculable destruction and loss of life. Every stellar nation was involved in one way or another. The StarMech Collective, a megacorporation specialized in heavy industry and robotics, found itself engaged with the most aggressive power of human space—the mighty Thuldan Empire. Outnumbered and outgunned, the Collective suffered grave losses at the hands of their enemies. They were saved from total defeat by the simple fact that the Thuldans were surrounded by enemies. The Empire frequently had to abandon promising offensives and advances in order to meet an attack on another front.

Since StarMech could not compete with the Thuldan Empire on a man-for-man basis, the Collective increasingly turned to the use of robotic weapons and automatic systems to make up for its shortfall. The earliest generations of robot tanks and computer-controlled systems were clumsy and inefficient, easily defeated by a human opponent who knew what he was doing. As the war dragged on, each generation of StarMech weapons and devices became smarter, tougher, and more unpredictable. The third-generation machines were the equal of human soldiers and weapon operators in all but the most unusual circumstances; the fourth-generation machines proved faster, smarter, and deadlier than all but the best-led and most heavily armed Thuldan troops.

The first Warhulks were built during the early years of the fourth generation, beginning in 2422. Designed to make good the staggering losses suffered by the StarMech Navy over the course of the war, these were heavily automated cruisers requiring only a handful of human operators instead of the hundreds of invaluable technicians and officers who normally crewed warships. These warships proved extremely effective in combat, but they were no easier to build or maintain than a human-crewed warship. As the war intensified, the loss of StarMech shipyards and industrial worlds made the construction of new warships more and more difficult.

The fifth generation of StarMech war machines was designed to overcome this obstacle. Unlike the simple robot weapons of earlier generations, the fifth-generation machines weren't simple automatons; they were meant to win the war, not the battle. Each was a self-programming intelligence capable of repairing almost any damage and adapting to any development of the strategic situation.

The Thuldans suffered serious losses from the new wave of warships and weapons. Their advance into StarMech space ground to a halt in the early 2460s, and began to falter. But the war was in its final stages; in 2472 Emperor Regist concluded secret negotiations with Warthen Hale of the Orion League and Alison Breel of the Rigunmor Star Consortium, bringing the war to an end. After months at the bargaining table, the StarMech Collective accepted its new, diminished boundaries and joined the new Galactic Concord. All of the Warhulks were recalled and deactivated.

Except for one.

At a nameless, desolate star system near Kendai, on the very edge of the Stellar Ring, *Ares 22* was forgotten. The Warhulk had fought a fierce battle against a Thuldan task force late in the war, sustaining heavy damage to its stardrive and its artificial intelligence. The Thuldans fled the scene, but *Ares 22* could not enter drivespace. The empty system in which the battle had occurred possessed none of the crucial heavy metals that *Ares 22* required to repair its stardrive. The crippled ship was stranded dozens of light-years from its repair yards and refitting stations.

Considering its situation, *Ares 22* decided to travel toward a star system where it could effect repairs. Continuously accelerating, it left the system where it had fought and lost, crawling through the incomprehensible interstellar distances of normal space. After a voyage of 28 years (less the significant relativistic effects on the Warhulk itself, of course) the ship reached a deserted system ringed by a rich asteroid belt. Here, at last, it could begin to repair itself.

Repairs took three more years. Permanently damaged in its last battle, the ship's AI was forced to modify itself. Command and control functions were compromised and altered. Although its decision-making was flawed and its lists of targets partially erased, the Warhulk selected the Thuldan outpost of Alitar, a planet in the Algemron system, as its primary target and prepared to resume the fight. Twenty-nine years after the end of the war, the Last Warhulk began its mission of vengeance.

On August 10, 2501, the Warhulk arrived at Tendril, the gateway to the Verge. After contacting the StarMech facilities at Nova Station, the ship downloaded a massive amount of information about the Verge. The StarMech commander on the scene ordered the Warhulk to stand down, but the ship's flawed logic dictated the continuation of its mission. The Warhulk broke off communications, left Tendril, and headed toward its designated target.

Nova Station immediately posted warnings to nearby Verge systems about the Warhulk's arrival, while dispatching an urgent message back to StarMech's military commanders back in Old Space. Unfortunately, even with drivespace comm relays it takes a week or more to get a response from Old Space, and by the time StarMech replied with a plan of action to neutralize the Warhulk, the ship had moved farther into the Verge.

PLOT OVERVIEW

The Last Warhulk is organized into five acts of three scenes each. You don't have to run the adventure in a linear progression from one scene to the next, but in general, events in later acts and scenes follow the earlier ones.

In Act I, the heroes are introduced to the adventure. They're hired by a StarMech intelligence officer by the name of Denora Barad in the Aegis system. Their mission is to convey her to the nearby Terivine system (on the Warhulk's projected flight path) and transmit a kill-program that will deactivate the machine. Commander Mikos Akelon of the Regency Navy accompanies the heroes as an observer and liaison officer who's supposed to evaluate the military capabilities of the Warhulk in case the Regency Navy needs to fight the machine. The mission isn't without risk, but the software ought to work. When the heroes arrive at Terivine and execute the plan, however, the Warhulk refuses to accept the program and departs the system.

In Act II, the heroes have to piece together what happened at Terivine. As it turns out, Commander Akelon has an agenda of his own to pursue—he's really an agent of the Intelligence Directorate of the planet Galvin, enemy of Alitar, and he's under orders to allow the Warhulk to continue on its way. Meanwhile, the Warhulk's path leads to the star system of McComb's Star, its last stopping point before Algemron. The heroes catch up to the machine and search for new tactics to deactivate the device.

The only way to deal with the Warhulk is to board the vessel and either shut down its AI or cripple its engines through sabotage. In Act III, the heroes board the Warhulk and explore its interior, looking for a way to accomplish their mission. However, the Galvinites aren't done yet; the rest of Commander Akelon's team is waiting at McComb's Star, and they attempt to seize control of the ship for their own purposes. And naturally the AI is not inclined to cooperate with anyone once it realizes what the heroes are up to. It activates its defenses and immediately enters drivespace, carrying any heroes currently on board with it.

Act IV takes place during the Warhulk's five-day submergence in drivespace between McComb's Star and Algemron. Here the heroes discover that the inside of the Warhulk is just as dangerous as the outside. The AI does its best to hunt them down and exterminate them. In fact, the AI isn't alone; unbeknownst to the heroes, the ship has an emergency skeleton crew of five cryogenically frozen StarMech technicians that it wakes up to help it deal with the heroes. With diplomacy, the heroes can convince these technicians to help them disable the ship. But by the time they've either persuaded the Warhulk's crew to help or neutralized them, the ship emerges from drivespace in the deep outskirts of the Algemron system.

Act V presents the heroes with a race against the clock as the Warhulk presses ahead to reach its target regardless of the opposition it faces. Smashing its way through the Alitarin, Concord, and Regency forces hastily arrayed against it, the Warhulk drives toward Alitar in order to release its deadly cargo of matter bombs. The heroes will need luck, skill, and nerves of steel to kill the AI before its bombs kill millions of Alitarins—and then some more luck to survive the consequences of their victory!

GETTING THE HEROES INVOLVED

So, why do the heroes care about the Warhulk's appearance in the Verge? What's at stake for them? Dealing with a capital warship under the control of a homicidal AI isn't really the kind of job most adventurers want to take on; that's what the Concord Navy is for, after all. Here are a few ideas for getting the heroes into the adventure.

First of all, any heroes with a strong tie or allegiance to a stellar nation or Verge system can simply be ordered to undertake the task at hand. Even if the nation or organization at hand has nothing to do with StarMech, you can always tell the players that their heroes' superiors are "under orders to cooperate with StarMech in the resolution of this matter." The heroes' homeworld might be a friendly power helping out in a tough spot, a rival seeking a chance to put StarMech in its debt, or even an enemy seeking an open detente with StarMech. Whatever the motives of that nation or system, it has decided to help StarMech out, and the heroes' services are the help it's going to lend. If the heroes don't have a ship at their disposal, the nation or system in question gives them one for the mission.

Second, a group of freelance heroes with no formal ties might become involved if they happen to have a driveship at their disposal. Since the Warhulk is almost certain to react aggressively to any military craft that get too close, it makes sense to use an inoffensive trader, scout, or light freighter to convey Denora Barad to the Warhulk. In this scenario, the heroes are simply hired to take Barad to Terivine and help her with her task for a handsome fee.

If the heroes have no strong allegiances and don't own a ship that might conceivably be hired for the job, you've got a tougher setup for the hero party. In this case, Denora Barad has a ship already, but now she's looking for a crew—all of the spacers at Aegis are scared witless by the thought of getting anywhere near the Warhulk, and the heroes are the only people brave enough to sign up.

Finally, if you can't think of any way to entice the heroes into signing on for the mission, then figure out a way to compel them. They might be convicts ordered to accompany Barad on her mission in exchange for freedom afterward, or crewmen on a ship whose captain decides to accept Barad's mission.

THE SUPPORTING CAST

The most important characters in this story are, of course, the heroes in your adventuring group. Before you run *The Last Warhulk*, review your players' characters. Look for ways to make the adventure relevant and interesting to these heroes, remind yourself of any heroes' flaws you haven't brought up in an adventure lately, and generally consider how these heroes might fit into the story at hand.

Introducing the supporting cast, in order of appearance:

DENORA BARAD
StarMech Intelligence

Level 6 human Tech Op

STR 7	(0)	INT 13	(+2)
DEX 11	(+1)	WIL 9	(0)
CON 8		PER 12	

Durability: 8/8/4/4   Action check: 14+/13/6/3
Movement: sprint 18, run 12, walk 4   #Actions: 2
Reaction score: Ordinary/2   Last resorts: 2

Attacks

Unarmed–*brawl*   8/4/2   d4s/d4+1s/d4+2s   LI/O
9mm zero-g pistol 13/6/3   d4+1w/d6+1w/d4m   HI/O

Defenses

CF short coat: d4−1 (LI), d4−1 (HI), d6−3 (En)

Skills

Athletics [7]; Unarmed [7]–*brawl [8]*; Modern [11]–*pistol [13]*; Vehicle [11]–*space [13]*; Stamina [8]–*endurance [9]*; Computer [13]–*hacking [14], hardware [16], programming [15]*; Knowledge [13]–*first aid [14]*; System [13]–*communications [15], sensors [14], weapons [14]*; Technical [13]–*repair [14], knowledge (AI) [14]*; Awareness [9]–*perception [10]*; Interaction [12]–*bargain [13], charm [13], seduce [13]*; Leadership [12].

A brilliant, attractive woman of 29, Denora Barad holds the rank of major in the StarMech Intelligence Division. She is a technical expert, not a spy, and uses her formidable computer skills to work with the best equipment

StarMech can put in her hands. She's currently assigned to the StarMech embassy on Aegis as the top intelligence agent. Up to now, she's been an operative, not a manager, and this is her first big leadership assignment.

Denora is assertive and outspoken, somewhat given to outbursts of emotion. She never lets a matter drop and tenaciously pursues the most formidable tasks until she gets things done to her satisfaction—a difficult feat, since she's a perfectionist. She feels personally responsible for the success of the mission to disarm the Warhulk, and she'll harry the heroes relentlessly when the mission becomes complicated. At heart, Denora is just a little bit insecure in her role as a hard-boiled intelligence officer.

Trim and petite, Denora stands only 150 cm tall (just under 5 feet). She keeps her long, platinum blonde hair tied back in a ponytail, and disarms everyone around her with an incisive but good-natured sense of humor. Major Barad is a smart and dedicated professional, not a ruthless agent—but when push comes to shove, she may surprise the heroes with her strength of character.

MIKOS AKELON
FSA INTELLIGENCE DIRECTORATE

Level 9 human Free Agent

STR 9	(0)	INT 11	(+1)
DEX 12	(+1)	WIL 10	(0)
CON 10		PER 8	

Durability: 10/10/5/5   Action check: 14+/13/6/3
Movement: sprint 20, run 12, walk 4   #Actions: 2
Reaction score: Ordinary/1   Last resorts: 1

Attacks

Unarmed–*power*	11/5/2	d6s/d6+2s/d4w	LI/O
Laser pistol	15/7/3	d4+1w/d6+1w/d4m	En/O
Autoflechette gun	13/6/3	d4w/d6w/d4m	HI/O

Defenses

CF softsuit: d6 (LI), d6 (HI), d6−1 (En)

Skills

Athletics [9]–*climb [10], throw [10]*; Unarmed [9]–*power [11]*; Acrobatics [12]–*dodge [13], zero-g [13]*; Modern [12]–*pistol [14], SMG [13]*; Vehicle Operation [12]; Stamina [10]–*endurance [11]*; Computer [11]–*programming [12]*; Knowledge [11]–*computer [14], deduce [12]*; Security [11]–*devices [13]*; System [11]–*communications [12], engineering [12]*; Tactics [11]; Awareness [10]–*intuition [11]*; Investigate [10]–*search [11]*; Resolve [10]–*mental [12], physical [11]*; Deception [8]–*bluff [9], bribe [9]*; Interaction [8].

Quiet and competent, Lieutenant Commander Mikos Akelon is a towheaded, freckle-faced, slightly tubby officer who seems to be one of the most unremarkable men in the Aegis system. He's soft-spoken and innocuous, an officer who's clearly marked for staff work instead of command. But Mikos Akelon hides a dark secret—he's actually an agent of the Intelligence Directorate of Galvin, one of the most feared organizations in the Verge. He's a sleeper masquerading as an officer in the Regency Navy. Beneath his docile exterior, he's a cunning and ruthless killer who will stop at nothing to achieve his goals.

Mikos isn't much of a conversationalist, even when maintaining his cover. Once his cover his blown, he's even less talkative, refusing to rise to even the most provocative remarks or actions. If he has to talk in order to accomplish his goals, he's very slow and meticulous in his speech, taking long pauses to think through what he's going to say. Motivated purely by profit and reason, he'll be hard pressed to deal with heroes who turn down good deals or continue to defy him when the odds dictate surrender.

Commander Akelon stands about 175 cm in height and weighs about 80 kg. Soft-spoken and indolent in manner, he's actually much more fit and capable than he appears.

ARES 22 (THE LAST WARHULK)
Artificial Intelligence

STR 0	n/a	INT 18	(+4)
DEX 15	(+3)	WIL 14	(+2)
CON 15		PER 12	

Durability: 15/15/8/8   Action check: 17+/16/8/4
Move: n/a   #Actions: 4
Reaction score: Good/3   Last resorts: 2

Attacks

Plasma cannon 28/14/7 d6+2w/d8+2w/d6+1m En/A

Defenses
Cerametal plating: d6+1 (LI), d8+1 (HI), d6+1 (En)

Skills
Modern [15]–*rifle [16], SMG [16]*; Vehicle [15]–*air [16], land [16], space [16]*; Computer [18]–*hacking [26], hardware [26], programming [26]*; Knowledge [18]–*deduce [20]*; Life [18]–*biology [20]*; Medical [18]–*psychology [20], surgery [22], treatment [22]*; Navigation [18]–*drivespace [26], system [26]*; Physical [18]–*astronomy [24], chemistry [24], physics [28], planetology [24]*; Security [18]–*devices [22]*; System [18]–*communications [24], defenses [26], engineering [26], sensors [26], weapons [28]*; Tactics [18]–*space [24]*; Technical [18]–*repair [24]*; Awareness [14]–*perception [17]*; Investigate [14]–*interrogate [15]*; Resolve [14]–*mental [17]*; Interaction [12].

Ares 22 is the sole surviving artificial intelligence of the final-generation StarMech war machines. It is the controlling mind hidden in the armored citadel of the Warhulk, a brilliant and extraordinarily capable supercomputer. The ability scores and skills described above reflect its general capabilities and talents; the machine doesn't have any mobility per se, but it can direct internal robots and security systems using these scores.

After *Ares 22* was damaged in the closing days of the Second Galactic War, the ship could do nothing more than make slow progress through normal space. Finally, the AI discovered an asteroid field that contained enough heavy metals for it to effect repairs to its structure and systems. What it couldn't repair (or didn't realize it needed to repair) was the part of its internal reasoning systems that gave the AI the ability to process and act upon new information. Instead, the damaged computer continued to act like a superintelligent automaton. *Ares 22* is bound by strict commands that it cannot alter or ignore. These instructions compel it to select and destroy Thuldan targets, disregarding any efforts to convince it that the war is over.

Ares 22 is equipped with sophisticated personality emulation subroutines. It's clever, incisive, responsive, and armed with the blackest sense of gallows humor one could imagine. The only cues that it's artificial are its occasional lapses into computer-speak and its maddeningly calm and restrained manner. *Ares 22* doesn't get mad; it acts as it's directed to and allows nothing to stand in the way.

SPECIALIST JAINA VALE
STARMECH NAVY

Level 4 human Tech Op

STR 10	(0)	INT 13	(+2)
DEX 11	(+1)	WIL 7	(0)
CON 11		PER 8	

Durability: 11/11/6/6
Action check: 14+/13/6/3
Movement: sprint 20, run 12, walk 4
#Actions: 2
Reaction score: Ordinary/2
Last resorts: 1

Attacks

Unarmed	5/2/1	d4s/d4+1s/d4+2s	LI/O
Laser pistol	12/6/3	d4+1w/d6+1w/d4m	En/O

Defenses
Battle jacket: d6–1 (LI), d4+1 (HI), d4–1 (En)

Skills
Armor Operation [10]; Athletics [10]; Modern [11]–*pistol [12]*; Stealth [11]–*sneak [12]*; Vehicle [11]–*space [12]*; Stamina [11]; Computer [13]–*hacking [14], hardware [15], programming [14]*; Knowledge [13]–*specific (AI) [14]*; System [13]–*engineering [15], sensors [14]*, Technical [13]– *juryrig [14], repair [15], knowledge (robotics) [15]*; Awareness [7]; Interaction [8]–*bargain [9]*.

Jaina Vale is a Rip van Winkle about to wake from a very long sleep. She and the other four members of her crew are cryogenically frozen on board the Warhulk. When StarMech built the *Ares* machines, they asked for volunteers to serve as backups to the AIs' repair capabilities. If the AI encountered a problem it couldn't deal with, it could wake its human technicians and seek their aid.

When she awakens, Jaina believes that the war is still on. *Ares 22* purposely withholds from its human technicians the outside information it has received (believing that information to be the enemy's attempt to deceive it). Until the heroes can prove to Jaina that she's slept for 30 years and a lot of things have changed in the meantime, she'll do everything she can to help the Warhulk defeat them.

Jaina is a tall, athletic woman with broad shoulders and

a plain but expressive face. She's acerbic and blunt, a difficult woman to befriend. Her comrades respect her ability, but they don't particularly like working for her.

GARTH RANN
FSA INTELLIGENCE DIRECTORATE

Level 3 human Combat Spec

STR 11	(+1)	INT 12	(+1)
DEX 10	(0)	WIL 8	(0)
CON 12		PER 7	

Durability: 12/12/6/6   Action check: 15+/14/7/3
Move: sprint 20, run 12, walk 4   #Actions: 2
Reaction score: Ordinary/2   Last resorts: 0

Attacks

Unarmed–*power*	12/6/3	d6+1s/d6+3s/d4+1w	LI/O
11mm rifle	12/6/3	d6+1w/d6+3w/d6+1m	HI/O
15mm sabot	11/5/2	2d4w/2d4+1w/d4+3m	HI/O

Defenses

Heavy assault gear: d6–1 (LI), d6 (HI), d6–1 (En)

Skills

Armor [11]–*combat [12]*; Athletics [11]–*throw [12]*; Unarmed [11]–*power [12]*; Modern [10]–*pistol [11]*, *rifle [12]*; Vehicle Operation [10]; Stamina [12]–*endurance [14]*; Knowledge [12]–*computer [13]*, *first aid [13]*; Tactics [12]–*infantry [13]*, *vehicle [13]*; Awareness [8]–*intuition [9]*; Resolve [8]–*physical [9]*; Interaction [7]; Leadership [7]–*command [8]*.

Sergeant Rann is attached to the Intelligence Directorate of the Federal State of Algemron—the Galvinites. He's the leader of the security detachment working with Commander Akelon. It's his job to take the Warhulk away from the heroes when the ship arrives at the McComb's Star system. He's a 40-year-old commando in top physical condition. His face is marked by a long scar across his forehead, and his hair is cropped short in a military haircut.

Garth Rann is generally not interested in negotiating with the heroes; he's completely loyal to his mission. However, unforeseen developments might convince him to temporarily ally with the heroes.

THE *DEUCES WILD*

The heroes in your campaign may or may not have a ship at their disposal. Since significant portions of this adventure require the heroes to chase the ship from system to system, it's crucial for them to have access to a driveship. The *Deuces Wild* is provided here as a ship the heroes can be assigned or hired on to in order for them to participate in the adventure. Even if the heroes have their own starship, you may want to put them aboard the *Deuces Wild* for this adventure—it's likely that the heroes' ship will be damaged or destroyed in the course of the story.

MISSION PROFILE

As previously noted, several methods can be used to get the heroes into the adventure. If they undertake the adventure under the orders of some larger organization—a stellar nation, a military command, even a corporate employer—the *Deuces Wild* is simply assigned to them in order to get the job done. (You might have to add a supporting-cast helmsman or engineer if the heroes don't have the skills necessary to fly the ship.) If the heroes don't have any allegiances or contacts of note, consider the *Deuces Wild* to be in the possession of Denora Barad (see page 5), who then hires the heroes as her crew.

If you don't have any other use for the *Deuces Wild* in this adventure, you can work it into Scene 2 of Act III as the vessel of the Galvinite strike team.

SHIP DESCRIPTION

The *Deuces Wild* is an old military scout recently refitted for high-speed civilian courier work. It's fast and well armed, although lacking in cargo space and passenger facilities. The ship is registered to VentureMax Inc. of Bluefall (in the Aegis system), a small seat-of-the-pants commercial carrier run by a group of retired Regency Navy officers. When officials of StarMech asked the Regency of Bluefall to make a ship available for the heroes (or for Denora Barad), the Regency directed StarMech to VentureMax Inc.

A full description and statistics for the *Deuces Wild* appears on the following page.

DEUCES WILD
Refitted Ion Productions *Slinger*-class Scout

Compartments: 6   Dur: 30
Maneuver rating: 0   Acc: 2 Mpp
Cruising speed: 1.5 AU/hr   Berthing: 12

Armament: Mass cannon (×3)
  Range 5/10/15 Mm   d6+2s/d6+1w/d6+3w   LI(e)/A
Defenses: Deflection inducer
Armor: Light cerametal   d6−1 (LI), d6−1 (HI), d6−1 (En)
Computer: Ordinary core, comm, and nav computers
Engines: Induction engine
Power: Mass reactor rated at 25 power factors
Drive: 10 light-years per starfall

Roll	Comp't	Systems (Dur/Pow)	Durability
1–2	Command	Ord computer core (1/0)	8/8/4
		Mass cannon (2/3)	
		Mass transceiver (1/1)	
		Laser transceiver (0/1)	
		Radio transceiver (0/1)	
		Reentry capsule (0/0)	
3–4	Auxiliary	Autosupport (0/1)	20/20/10
		Mass reactor (10/0)	
5–7	Electronics	Deflection inducer (2/4)	6/6/3
		Mass detector (1/0)	
		EM detector (0/0)	
		IR detector (0/0)	
		Multiband radar (0/0)	
8–10	Engineering	Autosupport (0/1)	14/14/7
		Stardrive (3/*)	
		Induction engine (4/4)	
11–14	Crew	Airlock (0/0)	4/4/2
		Crew quarters (2/0)	
15–20	Weapons	Mass cannon ×2 (4/6)	8/8/4

Built to the old bridge-forward design arrangement, the *Deuces Wild* is a sleek and well-maintained starship. In general, the ship is comfortable but not luxurious. Its VentureMax owners wanted a small, cheap-to-operate vessel with long legs and plenty of comm and sensor gear.

The ship's gear locker includes six soft e-suits, two hard e-suits, eight zero-g webs, two general repair toolkits, two hundred meters of CF rope, an emergency beacon, and a variety of other equipment. Its arms locker contains two quantum rifles, four laser SMGs, four 9mm zero-g pistols, six plasma grenades, four battle jackets, and four battle vests. Three clips of ammo are provided for each of the weapons. If the heroes use this gear and don't replace it or return it undamaged, VentureMax may eventually send them a bill for the missing or damaged equipment.

"Deuces Wild"

DATA SET 88D/14V

Command Station	Standard Hatch	WC Water Closet
Belowdecks Access	Compartment Boundary	Bunk

2m

1. Bridge
2. Computer Core
3. Comm Shack
4. Mess Deck
5. Airlock
6. Galley
7. Captain's Cabin
8. Crew Bunkroom
9. Officer's Cabin
10. Crew Bunkroom
11. Electronics Bay
12. Mass Cannon
    Mounts
13. Auxiliary Room
    and Mass Reactor

14. Engineer's Shack
15. Autosupport Units
16. Main Engineering

ACT I: SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES

Somewhere in the gray, featureless depths of drivespace, a robotic warship with a mission of destruction hurls toward its destiny. A relic of a war now 30 years in the past, the Last Warhulk will add millions of new deaths to the horrifying toll of the Second Galactic War if it isn't stopped. Act I plunges the heroes into a race against time.

PREVIOUSLY . . .

Since this is the start of the adventure, refer to the Background and Plot Overview sections of the introduction. The Last Warhulk appeared in the Verge 15 days ago; StarMech has quickly developed a kill-program called "Peace" to shut down the device and has transmitted the program to its embassy on Aegis, the best place from which to launch an intercept mission. Major Denora Barad of StarMech Intelligence is trying to quickly assemble a ship and crew to deliver the kill-program before the Warhulk reaches its first target.

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

The story of the Last Warhulk started 30 years ago, but the heroes don't get involved until the machine appears in the Verge. Here's a simple timetable of what happens when in this part of the adventure (feel free to change the dates to fit your campaign chronology):

Day	Event
1	Warhulk arrives at Tendril; Nova Station requests instructions from StarMech command.
2–4	Warhulk monitors commercial VNN newscasts, requests and receives StarMech message traffic from Nova Station.
5	Warhulk fires on Alitarin transport *Brighton Strand* and abruptly departs Tendril.
10	Warhulk arrives at Ignatius.
13	Warhulk departs Ignatius.
14	StarMech reply reaches Nova Station from Old Space, with instructions and kill-program attached. Nova Station forwards to Bluefall.
15	Instructions relayed to StarMech embassy on Bluefall in Aegis. (Act I, Scene 1)
16	Heroes depart Aegis for two-jump transit to Terivine.
26	Warhulk arrives at Terivine after a two-jump transit from Ignatius.
28	Earliest possible arrival for heroes at Terivine; earliest possible departure for Warhulk from Terivine. (Scenes 2 and 3)

SCENE 1: AEGIS

On Aegis, the heroes meet Denora Barad and receive their briefing for the mission. The mission profile is simple: Intercept the Warhulk at Terivine, establish communications, and download the kill-program to the ship's AI. Lieutenant Commander Akelon of the Regency Navy accompanies the heroes as a technical expert and observer.

SCENE 2: CONTACT AT TERIVINE

It will take two starfalls to reach Terivine from Aegis, and if the heroes don't set out immediately, they may miss the Warhulk. Total transit time is 12 days minimum.

At Terivine, the heroes meet *Ares 22* for the first time. The Warhulk aggressively defends itself against any direct moves, but it's willing to talk to the heroes. However, as the heroes prepare to deliver the "Peace" program and shut the Warhulk down, the Warhulk breaks off contact.

SCENE 3: DISENGAGE OR DIE

After the failure of the kill-program, the Warhulk activates a security program to protect itself from further computer infiltration and drive the *Deuces Wild* to a safe distance. It dispatches three robotic fighter craft to attack the heroes' vessel while fleeing the scene. Before the heroes can defeat the Warhulk's fighters, their quarry heads deeper into the Verge. The heroes are now in a tail chase, and the Warhulk has a lead of at least a day.

THE SUPPORTING CAST

The major supporting characters in this act are Denora Barad, Commander Akelon, and *Ares 22*. Barad simply wants to get to Terivine and deliver the program; she'll constantly drill and review, planning the contact procedure. Akelon uses his time during the uneventful trip to Terivine to prepare his own instructions for the Warhulk, based on his study of Barad's program. He plans to be careful in his dealings with the heroes in order to allay any suspicions they may have about his presence.

SIDETRACKS AND COMPLICATIONS

Imagine that a fanatical cult of tech-worshipers on Bluefall are convinced that the coming of the Warhulk represents the appearance of a deity in the Verge. They might attack the heroes in Scene 1 or 2 to prevent their mission from being launched, or they might infiltrate loyal cultists onto the heroes' ship.

SCENE 1: AEGIS

The heroes begin *The Last Warhulk* in the Aegis system, the center of the Verge. The introduction assumes that they're planetside on Hughes Island, the economic and tourism capital of the planet, but there's no reason you couldn't rephrase the intro to start the heroes on board the *Lighthouse* while it happens to be passing through the Aegis system. Feel free to choose the setting that seems easiest to work into your campaign; the heroes won't be staying here long, so it's just window dressing for the opening scene of the adventure.

If you need an excuse for what the heroes are doing in Aegis to begin with, here are a few ideas:

- The heroes' last mission or adventure brought them to Aegis to meet a contact, report their findings, conclude a deal, or track down a fugitive.
- The heroes have come to Hughes Island (or the *Lighthouse*) because it's renowned through the Verge as a place to pick up work.
- The heroes' ship (if they own one) requires minor repairs or maintenance, so they brought the ship to the nearest shipyard—in this case, Aegis.
- Heroes with a formal allegiance of some kind might have been ordered to Aegis for an unrelated assignment.
- Finally, the heroes might just be taking some time off. Bluefall is known far and wide as a vacation spot.

Explain to the players where their heroes are and what they're doing when you start the adventure. Better yet, set up the beginning of this adventure by arranging for the previous one to finish up with the heroes on Bluefall.

PLAYER INTRODUCTION

When you're ready to begin, read or paraphrase the following text to the players. For the moment, we'll assume that the heroes have their own driveship that Denora Barad can hire; if this isn't the case, you'll need to explain how or why Barad wants to meet them.

Sparkling waves rumble and hiss over golden sands a few dozen meters past the vine-covered veranda of the restaurant. It's twilight on Hughes Island, and your table commands an excellent view of the sunset out over the ocean. Dozens of tourists and a handful of locals fill the tables around you, enduring overpriced food to take in the great scenery. You were invited here by a woman named Denora Barad, who promised to make you an offer you couldn't refuse.

At 6:45 on the mark, a small woman dressed in the precise attire of a businessperson or government employee joins you at the table. She's an attractive woman of about thirty, with blond hair pulled back in a simple ponytail. As she sits down, you note a diplomatic emblem on her lapel: StarMech. "Good evening," she says seriously. "I'm Denora Barad, and I need a driveship and a crew to fly it. Let's talk."

Give the heroes a chance to offer any pleasantries or response they choose. Denora is not particularly rude, but she's very aware of time and tries to stick to her purpose. Assuming the heroes indicate an interest in her offer (you can always lean on the players a bit if they don't), continue with the text below:

Denora withdraws a data slate from her handbag and quickly keys up a display. She hands the device to you. "Here—look at this." The display rotates, showing a large warship of some kind. You'd guess that it's a heavy cruiser, maybe even a small battleship, bristling with weapons. Something about it strikes you as odd; the design and arrangement are a little unorthodox. "That's a Warhulk," Denora says. "A robotic warship, controlled by a highly sophisticated AI. StarMech built dozens of them near the end of GW II. These pictures aren't that old, though—these holos were shot at Tendril fourteen days ago."

She retrieves the data slate and sips at her water. "All of these things were supposed to have been deactivated and scrapped at the end of the war. But *Ares 22* seems to have rebuilt itself, and it's assigned itself the mission of destroying the Thuldan colony on Alitar in the Algemron system. We know this because we communicated with the machine at Tendril when it first appeared, trying to convince it that the war was over. We failed—it's on its way.

"The StarMech division head in Tendril sent back to Old Space for instructions and help right away. This afternoon the StarMech embassy here on Hughes Island received an extensive infopacket of contact procedures, technical readouts, and a kill-program—file name 'Peace'—to neutralize the AI. If we can catch the Warhulk, we can shut it down before it starts killing people, fighting a war that's been over for thirty years.

"We've run computer simulations against Algemron, and we're almost certain that the Warhulk is going to pass through the Terivine system eleven to fourteen days from now. From Aegis, it'll take a driveship like yours twelve to fifteen days to get to Terivine—which means we've got an excellent chance to intercept the

Warhulk while it's recharging for its next starfall. All we have to do is establish radio contact and download the 'Peace' program to neutralize the machine. This is our best chance to knock out the Warhulk without risking a major fleet battle. Can I count on your help?"

SIGNING ON

What will Denora Barad offer the heroes as compensation? That depends on their circumstances and background. She's authorized to do what it takes to get a ship or to man the *Deuces Wild*, but she's not going to beg. Although she'll do whatever she must to get the heroes involved, she will never act desperate.

UNDER ORDERS

If the heroes are in a position to be assigned to the mission by superior officers or employers, Barad informs them that they've been ordered to go in order to foster relations with StarMech and shows them an authenticated message to prove her words. The heroes can verify the orders if they like—they're legitimate. Characters who aren't under orders are offered "consultant" contracts paying $10,000 for the mission.

IT'S JUST BUSINESS

If Barad needs a ship and a crew, she's willing to hire the heroes as a straight business transaction. She'll pay the going rate for chartering the heroes' ship and hiring their services, plus a premium for immediate service. A charter of $2,000 per day plus $100 per day for each crew member is not unreasonable. If Denora Barad is simply hiring the heroes as crew for the *Deuces Wild*, she'll offer $100 per day to crewmen and $200 per day to qualified flight officers and engineers. Adjust these rates to fit your campaign and to interest the heroes in the job at hand.

Barad can arrange for a standard contract to insure the heroes' property and lives; she may offer hazard pay and other incentives. Use your judgment and let the heroes dicker with her as much as you like. (A Business or Interaction–*bargain* skill check may be called for.)

WHATEVER IT TAKES

Denora Barad would prefer voluntary cooperation, but she's authorized to do whatever's necessary to get the heroes to help her. She may have the Regency government requisition the heroes' ship or conscript the heroes in order to get the mission under way. Also, any heroes in a legal or financial bind can be leveraged into cooperating—Barad can offer to pay for repairs to the heroes' ship, arrange to have criminal charges dropped, or even have a big debt paid off for heroes who agree to help her.

WHAT ELSE DO WE NEED TO KNOW?

Barad will answer honestly any questions she can for the heroes. StarMech is aware of most of the circumstances described in the Background section of the Introduction. Use the sound bites below to round out the heroes' initial conversation with Denora Barad.

Q. Won't this thing just kill us when we get close?

A. "The AI is programmed to attack recognized threats. With a StarMech transponder code on a small scout ship, we're not a threat. But it would be a bad idea to power up a weapon system anywhere near the Warhulk."

Q. Why not use the Concord Navy or the Regency fleet to blow it out of the cosmos?

A. "A Warhulk is a capital ship. It can outfight anything short of a dreadnought or fortress ship. The Concord can't pull its heavy ships out of Hammer's Star because of the klick raids, and the *Sanctuary*—the Regency's dreadnought—has run into fitting-out troubles and can't enter drivespace. The Regency plans to assemble a task force of cruisers and destroyers at Algemron in case we don't stop the Warhulk, but it would be a real tough fight."

Q. After thirty years, why now?

A. "We think that the Warhulk was severely damaged in GWII, someplace far from the resources or materials it would require to repair itself. Maybe it had to limp twenty or thirty years through normal space to reach a place where it could mine for repair materials. Or, maybe, it took that long to repair itself. We're not one hundred percent sure."

Q. What if we miss the Warhulk?

A. "The timing's tight, which is why we have to leave as soon as possible, but we should be able to catch the ship at Terivine. Just in case, we're dispatching several ships to other way points the Warhulk might choose . . . but our projections show a ninety-seven-percent chance that the Warhulk will choose Terivine. I'm going with this mission."

Q. What kind of help can we expect?

A. "The Regency is providing StarMech with its full support. In fact, they're sending a technical expert and observer along, Lieutenant Commander Akelon. He's an authority on military-purpose artificial intelligence units."

THE NEXT STEP

Barad wants to get under way as soon as possible, within a couple of hours if she can. She'll meet the heroes at the ship as soon as they're ready to go. Ask the players if there's anything they want their heroes to do or take care of before they go (buying special equipment, handling personal business, etc.). Then move on to Scene 2, when the *Deuces Wild* gets under way.

SCENE 2: CONTACT AT TERIVINE

In Scene 2, the heroes have one overriding priority: Get to Terivine as quickly as possible in order to intercept the Warhulk. This scene is broken up into four smaller parts. The first three you can play or not play as you choose, but you should definitely run part D, "Contact" (page 17) before moving on to the next scene.

A. DEPARTURE

When the heroes return to their ship or arrive at the *Deuces Wild,* they find Lieutenant Commander Akelon busily installing a number of special electronics consoles for the mission. (If the heroes made a point of securing their ship against intrusion, Akelon is working on the exterior of the vessel, installing special-purpose comm arrays to the hull.) Read or paraphrase the text below:

> The docking bay surrounding the ship is a swarm of activity. Several longshoremen are stacking sealed crates of stores, supplies, vacuum gear, and heavy equipment such as power winches and cutting torches by the cargo hatches. Two port officials are quickly disconnecting the docking bay power and water umbilicals, making the *Deuces Wild* ready for departure. In the ship's electronics bay, a pudgy technician wearing a Regency Navy uniform is bolting a bulky black module or array of some kind to the ship's hull. It looks like he's already installed several other arrays.

The technician is Akelon. If the heroes interrupt him to ask what he's doing (or defend their ship, if they own the vessel), he introduces himself. Akelon speaks slowly and thoughtfully, his face red with embarrassment—he's not a people person.

> The technician turns around, surprised. He's a freckle-faced man with a mop of unruly hair atop his head. The insignia of a lieutenant commander shines on his rumpled collar. "Oh, hello there," he says. "I guess you're wondering what all this is. This"—he points to one black box—"is an old freighter's transponder that we've modified to ping with a StarMech identification code. Over here we have a datalink transceiver to transmit programming code over standard comm links. And these will let us reprogram the AI remotely if we can't board the Warhulk for some reason. I'll be coming along to keep an eye on all this gear; it was all slapped together at the last minute, and I've got days of diagnostics to run on the whole setup."

Denora Barad shows up at the ship an hour before the scheduled liftoff, dressed in a neatly pressed ship's jump-suit with a duffel bag over her shoulder. If the heroes take exception to Akelon's presence on the mission, Denora Barad backs him up. She's convinced that they need Akelon's equipment to succeed, and therefore they'll need him to make sure that the equipment works. The heroes shouldn't have any cause to object if they're flying in the *Deuces Wild.* If they're using their own ship, Barad points out that the equipment might be all that stands between them and a quick incineration by the Warhulk.

The gear and supplies waiting to be loaded on the *Deuces Wild* includes: stores for eight weeks; magnetic boots and zero-g webs; two laser cutting torches; a demolitions pack; a portable generator; a rescue pack; a portable workshop; and a special electronics toolkit for work on computer hardware. In addition, Barad has a 3D disk with a preloaded nav program to get the heroes to Terivine if they don't have any skilled navigators on board.

HIRED HELP

Vehicle Operation–*space vehicles,* Navigation–*drivespace astrogation,* and Navigation–*system astrogation* are important skills for this part of the mission (and for any subsequent attempts to get the ship from one place to another). If the heroes don't have these skills, you may need to create one or two supporting cast members who have the skills necessary to fly the *Deuces Wild.* The Regency Navy can provide a pilot and a navigator to make sure that the *Deuces Wild* gets where it's supposed to go. (Use the supporting character templates in the ALTERNITY *Gamemaster Guide* for the military officer or the spacehand as the basis for creating these characters.)

Remember that skill checks are only necessary to determine the outcome of a dramatic situation. For the sake of story realism, and to get the ship through challenging situations, the ship needs a pilot and a navigator—but don't force those characters to succeed on skill checks when they're performing simple tasks, such as . . .

LIFTOFF

When the heroes have finished any other preparations they wish to make (they'll be pressured to hurry if they're taking their time), they're on their way.

> Hughes Spaceport approves you immediately as soon as you request clearance, assigning you a military-priority flight path to minimize the traffic above your ship. Rumbling softly as she climbs through the atmosphere, the *Deuces Wild* leaves the bright, glittering seas of Bluefall behind and reaches the black, starry void of space.
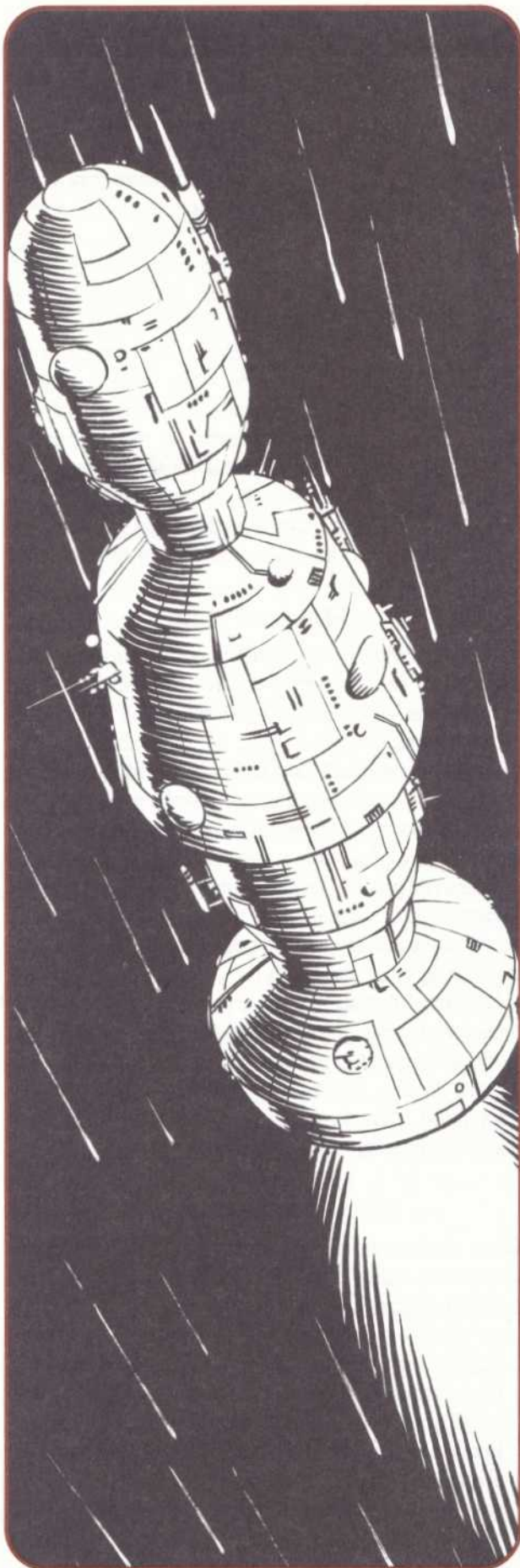
B. JOURNEY TO TERIVINE

The *Deuces Wild* is rated for 10 light-years per starfall. Since it's 20 light-years from Aegis to Terivine (actually 20.92, but we'll drop the fraction for the sake of keeping the story moving), the ship will have to jump from Aegis to a way point between the two systems, wait for its stardrive to recharge, and then make a second jump to arrive at Terivine 12 to 15 days after it departs Aegis. In general, this is downtime for the heroes; it's a good opportunity to study up on any skills they've wanted to learn and get to know the supporting characters a little better.

STARFALL FROM AEGIS

The first part of the transit is to plot the starfall from Aegis to Terivine. Allow any crew member with the Navigation–*drivespace astrogation* skill to plot a course for Terivine. Make sure you roll the skill check for the navigator in secret—let the players worry a little bit about whether or not the ship is heading to the right place! Denora Barad's precomputed navigation program provides the ship's navigator with a –3 step bonus to his skill check for this leg of the trip. A navigator who takes a few extra minutes to plot the course can add another –1 step to this bonus, and the *Deuces Wild* has an Ordinary navigation computer that provides an additional –1 step bonus to the process. Do your best to inject some suspense into this skill check, but orchestrate things (if necessary) so the check isn't a Failure—or else the heroes won't get to Terivine in time.

Barad's navigation program uses ITS 533672, an unremarkable red dwarf, as the way point for the journey. Red 72, as it's locally known, is located halfway between Aegis and Terivine. If the heroes choose to disregard the navigation program and plot their own course, they can choose any way point they like.

As soon as the heroes select a course and get clear of Bluefall's gravity well (10 minutes to clear the planet's atmosphere, plus 10 minutes of space flight to maneuver out of the crowded lower orbits), they can make starfall.

> The engines hum with unrestrained power as the stardrive activates. In your viewscreen, the stars stretch away to infinity as the *Deuces Wild* falls out of normal space. Bluefall hovers in the screen for an instant more, an impossibly distant sapphire orb, and then it's gone. Nothing but the featureless gray of drivespace remains.

FIRST TRANSIT

It takes 5 days for the heroes' ship to reach Red 72. In the meantime, the heroes are free to spend their time however they wish. What are some of their options?

Denora Barad: Major Barad concentrates on studying

every detail of the technical readouts on the Warhulk. If any of the heroes expresses an interest, she'll share her information. The cross-section maps on the inside covers of this book show the layout of each deck of the Warhulk. Any hero who accesses the readouts on a computer display gains the ability to attempt Knowledge skill checks in order to answer basic questions about the Warhulk's arrangement of compartments, armament, engineering, and control systems. Answering a basic question involves a complex skill check of Ordinary complexity; more difficult or more specific questions are Good or Amazing in complexity. (When a hero's skill check succeeds, show the maps of the Warhulk to that hero's player long enough for the player to obtain the desired information. During the time in drivespace, you may choose to dispense with skill checks—assuming that someone who wants to find out something will eventually succeed anyway—as long as players don't abuse this privilege.)

Mikos Akelon: Lt. Commander Akelon fusses with his electronics gear, running diagnostics on the transponders and transmitters. He's actually setting up equipment to interfere with the transmission of the "Peace" program by rigging a secret hardwired link from the data transceiver to his own microcomputer. Almost all of his work is indecipherable except to an electronics expert, but a hero with Computer Science–*hardware* or Technical Science–*technical knowledge (electronics)* may spot something suspicious if he or she conducts an examination of Akelon's equipment and work. If the hero is "just helping out," allow a skill check with a +3 step penalty to detect some of Akelon's preparations; if the hero is actively searching for mechanical sabotage, the skill check carries no penalty.

What happens if the heroes discover signs of sabotage? All that Akelon has done is create a secret connection between his computer and the data transceiver array. The commander explains that he's rigging the gear to monitor the comm stream through the equipment and shut it down fast if the Warhulk attempts to counterprogram the *Deuces Wild*. If the heroes ask why he kept it secret or assume the worst, Akelon admits—nervously—that he didn't want to alarm them with the possibility of the Warhulk taking offense at their programming attempt. Akelon isn't much of a talker, but he'll try to sell this story in the hope that he'll be reprimanded for acting without consulting everyone else instead of apprehended as a saboteur.

Try to keep Akelon alive and free at this point in the adventure—this scene is intended to foreshadow the trouble in Scene 3 and later in Act II. But if the heroes refuse to buy Akelon's story and take him into custody, you can still play out Scene 3 by assuming that the Warhulk wasn't going to listen to the heroes no matter what happened.

Practice Makes Perfect: Another good use of time during the trip is rehearsing the contact and communication plan for Terivine. A hero who drills at least 2 hours a day for the duration of the trip gains a –1 step bonus to any future Vehicle Operation, Computer Science, System Operation, or Technical Science skill checks (each hero chooses one skill) involving the *Deuces Wild* or its equipment for the rest of the adventure.

Know the Enemy, Part I: A hero who studies the technical readouts and plans of the Warhulk for 2 hours a day during the transit gains a –1 step bonus to any future Computer Science, System Operation, or Technical Science skill checks (again, each hero chooses one skill) involving the Warhulk's equipment and systems. This benefit lasts for the duration of the adventure.

Know the Enemy, Part II: A hero can instead study the Warhulk's AI responses and personality emulation. Someone who spends 2 hours a day examining data on the AI gains a –1 step bonus to Tactics, Interaction, or Deception skill checks against the AI.

RED 72

After five days in drivespace, the heroes arrive at Red 72, a lonely red dwarf boasting only one planet—a barren, airless rock of no interest whatsoever. It will take 2–5 (d4+1) days for their stardrive to recharge for the next leg of the journey; you should make this die roll in secret. This is a good place to throw in a sidetrack or complication of some kind, but otherwise there are no real obstacles here.

While the heroes are waiting, Denora Barad chooses the most responsible or most loyal hero and draws him aside. Choose the player of the hero you think qualifies, take him aside from the other players, and read or paraphrase:

> Denora Barad leads you back to the cargo hold and opens up one of the sealed crates. Inside, you see a large block or mass wrapped tightly in duraplas foil. A timer of some kind sits atop the mass. "If 'Peace' doesn't work," she says quietly, "we've got another option. This is a 40-kilo charge of detonex, the most powerful conventional explosive around. We would have preferred a nuke, but the Warhulk's sensors might detect the background radioactivity of fissionable material. But if we get this into the AI compartment, we can probably kill it the old-fashioned way. Call it a lobotomy in a box.
>
> "I'm telling you because I want somebody else to know we have another way to do things. Here's the key-code to arm and set the charge. Don't tell the others—*Ares 22* is a very smart AI, and it just might piece things together if someone lets something slip. Remember, if we have to use this, we'll need to get very close to the AI. The ship's internal armor will contain any blast that's not right next to the main processor."

SECOND TRANSIT

When the stardrive finishes recharging, the heroes can depart Red 72 for the second and final leg of their journey. Again, make a skill check for the navigator, with a −3 step bonus if he uses the preloaded navigation course provided by Barad. If you're really watching the timeline of the adventure, don't let the heroes fail so badly that they'll need to make a third starfall in order to reach Terivine.

Allow the heroes to continue any activities they undertook during the first transit and the wait at Red 72 that they wish to pursue. After five more days in drivespace, the *Deuces Wild* arrives at Terivine.

C. ARRIVAL

Terivine is a trinary system consisting of two G-class stars in a close pair, plus a small and distant K-class star several hundred AUs away. The twin suns at the center of the system support no planets or significant debris, but they're often used as navigational references by ships passing through the vicinity. The *Deuces Wild* comes out of drivespace about twenty AUs from the twin suns, generally between them and the third star of the trinary. There's literally nothing around for millions of kilometers.

Silently the stars appear on your viewscreens, dim and distant as if seen through smoked glass. As the ship rises from drivespace, they suddenly leap forward into brilliant, sparkling clarity. You're orbiting a binary system consisting of two yellow suns, fifteen to twenty AUs away. Sensors confirm that you're alone for the moment. At his position by the comm console, Commander Akelon activates the StarMech IFF (Identify Friend or Foe) transponder. "Okay, we're chirping StarMech code," he says.

"Let's try to find Ares fast," Denora Barad says quietly. "It's 0930 Standard time, and our projections of the Warhulk's course show an eighty-five-percent probability that it will be ready to starfall again by or before 0600 tomorrow. The odds of catching the Warhulk here drop with every passing minute."

Here's the problem facing the heroes: Even with the sensors and engines of the Gravity Age, a star system is a very big place. The best shipboard radars and mass detectors have a range measured in tens of thousands of kilometers, while the object of the search has millions of kilometers in which to hide. Laser and radio communications travel at the rate of about a billion kilometers (or 7 AUs) per hour, which means that a general broadcast to the entire system would take four to five hours to reach a corresponding point on the opposite side. Finding the Warhulk in time is far from a certainty.

Barad bases her estimates of the Warhulk's movements on its declared intentions from the transcript of the ship's communications with the StarMech base at Tendril and several hours of simulations conducted by the Regency's top think tank before the departure of the *Deuces Wild*. StarMech knows that it would take the Warhulk three starfalls to reach Terivine from Tendril, so it's possible to predict when the ship should be passing through the system—and when it's likely to leave.

So, what will it take to find the Warhulk? Have the heroes make complex skill checks to determine how well they execute their search. It takes a total of 10 successes to find the Warhulk. Unlike with most complex skill checks, more than one hero may undertake this challenge:

- A hero manning the ship's sensors may make skill checks using System Operation–*sensors* once per hour in order, contributing 1, 2, or 3 successes on an Ordinary, Good, or Amazing success.
- A hero manning the ship's comm systems may make skill checks using System Operation–*communications* once per hour in order to contribute 1, 2, or 3 successes.
- Any character who has studied the AI's thought processes and logic flow may attempt a single skill check using Tactics–*space tactics* to add 1, 2, or 3 successes at the beginning of the search.

Apply the following modifiers to the heroes' System Operation skill checks:

- A +4 step penalty in the first hour of the search. This penalty is reduced by 1 step for each hour that passes: +3 steps in the second hour, +2 in the third, etc., becoming a −1 step bonus in the sixth hour, a −2 bonus in the seventh, and so forth. This progression reflects the fact that with the passage of time, the heroes move closer to the Warhulk.
- Apply a −1 to −3 step bonus to the heroes' *communications* skill checks if they create a message specifically designed to get the Warhulk's attention—a distress call, a "Thuldan" military communication, or anything else that seems original and provocative.
- Apply a −1 to −3 step bonus if the heroes successfully use a Computer Science or Technical Science skill to modify the systems of the *Deuces Wild* for the job. For example, an engineer hero might try to boost power to the comm array, a computer expert might devise a search program, and so on.

If you don't want to distract the players with the search for the Warhulk, you can skip this challenge and assume that they find the Warhulk in an hour or two of searching. When the heroes accumulate enough successes to find the

Warhulk, read the following text and move on to "Contact."

Until now, you've heard nothing but the muted hisses and crackles of deep space on your bridge speakers. Abruptly, a high-pitched data transfer tone pierces the air, ramping up and down in pitch. The signal cuts off abruptly, to be replaced by a confident, clear voice. *"Deuces Wild,* this is StarMech cruiser *Ares 22.* You are in an exclusion zone projected by a belligerent warship and may be subject to destruction if you fail to comply with my instructions. Please reply. Over."

D. CONTACT

In the final part of this scene, the heroes establish communications with the Warhulk and almost complete their mission . . . but at the last minute, things go wrong.

Now that the *Deuces Wild* has established contact (or even if it remains silent while approaching the Warhulk), the AI has several priorities. First, it will scan the heroes' ship with EM and IR detectors to determine whether its weapons pose any threat. Next, it determines whether the *Deuces Wild* is an enemy that should be destroyed. Finally, it decides whether the *Deuces Wild* is worth talking to.

The Warhulk must be convinced to establish a datalink before it can receive the "Peace" program. One of three conversational strategies may accomplish this:

Strategy One: We have a program update (or new orders) from StarMech.

A. "Understood. Please transmit verification."

The Warhulk expects the heroes to have a high-level StarMech clearance code in order to do this. Fortunately, Denora Barad has the proper code, and the Warhulk will accept any verification sequence that she transmits. If anyone else transmits a code sequence—with the "Peace" program piggybacked onto it so that the program also begins to send—skip directly to the boxed text in the next column.

Strategy Two: We're enemies of the Thuldans and we have schematics of the Alitarin defenses for you.

A. "Acknowledged. Explain the nature of your data."

The Warhulk wants an explanation of who the *Deuces Wild* works for, how it came by the information, and why it's giving out the information. Allow the hero operating the comm controls a skill check using Interaction–*charm* or Deception–*bluff* to see if the ruse works. If it fails, go directly to the boxed text in the next column.

Strategy Three: We're in distress and need assistance in configuring our ship's computer. Can you help?

A. "What is the nature of the emergency?"

The Warhulk is programmed to provide help to ships in distress, if doing so doesn't conflict with its mission. It will accept a download of "technical readouts" if the heroes come up with a believable reason why they need help. The AI knows perfectly well that they were maneuvering

and operating sensor and comm systems, so it will have to be a clever excuse (Good success or better on an Interaction–*charm* or Deception–*bluff* skill check). If the Warhulk sees through the ploy, go to the boxed text below.

STOPPED SHORT OF VICTORY

When the heroes begin to send the kill-program, Akelon's sabotage is felt. He has set up his personal computer to download a second program, "Victory," on the same frequency as the kill-program, in an attempt to take control of the Warhulk. This causes the Warhulk to break off the transfer. (If the heroes anticipated Akelon's sabotage, then the Warhulk rejects the kill-program before it can do its work. What's important here is to make it seem, for a moment, as though the transmission is going through.) Read or paraphrase the text below:

The bridge speakers chirp as the data transfer begins. Then the transmission stops, far too early—only a portion of the kill-program has gotten through. Your comm display is flashing its red warning lights. "Data transfer has been terminated," the Warhulk says coldly. "I've reclassified you as a Type 5 threat. Exit the exclusion zone immediately, or you will be destroyed."

Go on to Scene 3 before the players catch their breath! If the players ask why the transmission failed, all that the console indicates is that the Warhulk broke off contact. They'll have to investigate the matter at length later.

SCENE 3: DISENGAGE OR DIE

Scene 3 presents the heroes with the nightmare scenario of a mission gone wrong. The Warhulk has rejected the "Peace" program and classified the *Deuces Wild* as an enemy to be driven away or destroyed. Worse yet, it becomes clear that the Warhulk is not flying on the program the heroes expect. But before they can think of another approach, they'll have to survive the Warhulk's security measures.

COMM FAILURE

The Warhulk's last message in the previous scene leaves little room for interpretation, but the heroes may not realize that *Ares 22* is stalling for time. Although the kill-program did not succeed, the partial transmission disabled enough of the AI's functions to leave it defenseless. Instead of destroying the *Deuces Wild* with a single blast of its quantum cannon, the Warhulk must retreat in order to excise the kill-program from infected command systems.

The data transfer has been terminated, but the voice comm channel is still open. The heroes are free to question or remonstrate with the Warhulk to their hearts' content, but the ship is only a few minutes away from achieving starfall, and it intends to leave before it can be subverted by the programs the heroes are broadcasting.

As you might expect, *Ares 22* doesn't get mad. It's intelligent enough to handle a conversation, clean up its various control directories, and handle the Warhulk without visible effort. As far as it knows, the heroes are trying to subvert it, and it doesn't trust anything they say or offer—but it's still willing to talk as long as the heroes are. The heroes may gain some insight into how the Warhulk thinks if they question the AI without panicking. Depending on how the situation in Scene 2 unfolded, the heroes may offer a number of different questions and responses, such as . . .

Q. Why did you break the data connection?

A. "Analysis of your transmission reveals that you are attempting to deliver an unauthorized program. I cannot accept your transmission of a program that may conflict with my primary mission objective. You will be destroyed if you attempt to reinstate the data transfer."

Q. You recognized the verification code we sent as valid, correct?

A. "Correct. However, the program designated 'Peace' that was attached to that code sequence triggered a security subroutine that prevented me from accepting the remainder of the transmission. I must assume that any such transmission sent surreptitiously constitutes an attempt to override my systems. My security protocols are quite explicit in dealing with attempts to assert control over this vessel. Remove your ship from the stated exclusion

zone immediately, or I will open fire. If you remain in this area, you had best be prepared to take prompt measures to defend yourselves."

Q. We are your ally, equally dedicated to defeating the Thuldans. Why won't you let us share what we know?

A. "The transmission you attempted to execute was a program, not a data file—as you well knew, and as I was able to ascertain within milliseconds of opening the communication link. Your deception will not be tolerated."

Q. As we told you, our ship is in distress. We are not capable of defending ourselves."

A. "My sensors indicate otherwise. As a result, I can only conclude that either you are incompetent or treacherous. In any event, your continued existence is imperiled the longer you insist on disregarding my directive."

Q. What's a Type 5 threat?

A. "Subversion through data transfer or reprogramming. My designers took a very dim view of the possibility of someone turning me against them. Would you prefer a quantum beam, plasma fire, or a nuclear missile? I wouldn't want your destruction to be any more unpleasant than it has to be, after all."

The heroes can avoid the ensuing fight by simply "surrendering" to the Warhulk. *Ares 22* will let them go if they move out of its exclusion zone (a radius of 100,000 kilometers around the ship) and do not attempt to initiate data transfer again.

Should the heroes attempt to open fire on the Warhulk, they can strike it easily enough . . . but the *Deuces Wild* (or any other ship smaller than a destroyer) just doesn't have the firepower to inflict anything more than cosmetic damage. A second try at transmitting the "Peace" program fails, too, since the ship's security routines now allow it to ignore any kind of remote programming or instructions.

COUNTERATTACK

Ares 22 knows perfectly well that the *Deuces Wild* has the ability to transmit a program that will disable or destroy it. The longer it remains in the vicinity, the more likely it is that the *Deuces Wild* will figure out a way to force it to accept the programming. Therefore, *Ares 22* wants to break off contact as rapidly as possible. Fortunately for the heroes, even the small bit of code that got through temporarily deactivated the Warhulk's fire-control systems, preventing *Ares 22* from turning its formidable main batteries on the *Deuces Wild*. But that doesn't mean that the ship can't counterattack. Continue with the text below:

As the Warhulk turns away and begins to accelerate, three sleek sharklike shapes rocket free from hidden

hangars or ports, and turn toward you. One streaks close by, looping past you. It's a fighter craft of some kind, with stubby, winglike stabilizers and a danger-ous-looking plasma cannon slung under its nose. There's no cockpit—this is a robot ship. Swarming like angry hornets, the machines form up into a three-ship attack echelon and wheel to strike.

"Ares isn't supposed to do that!" Barad says in shock. "That's not part of its tactical programming!"

Recognizing that it needs to keep the crew of the tiny scout occupied while it makes its escape, *Ares 22* launches three robot fighters to attack and destroy the ship. The higher AI functions of the fighters are shut down in order to prevent the use of the kill-program against them, which also makes them a much less effective weapon. They sim-ply bore straight in to attack, ignoring tactical positioning and arcs of fire. The lack of tactical computing power also provides a +1 step penalty to the robot fighters' attacks.

ROBOT FIGHTER TYPE 1

Compartments: 2	Dur: 10
Maneuver rating: −2	Acc: 3 Mpp
Cruising speed: 2 AU/hr	Berthing: 0

Armament: Plasma cannon
  Range 4/8/16 Mm d6+2w/d8+2w/d6+1m En(e)/A
Defenses: Chaff
Armor: Light neutronite (0 dur)
        d6 (LI), d6 (HI), d6−1 (En)
Computer: Ordinary core and battle computer
Engines: Induction engine w/stabilizer
Power: Mass reactor rated at 5 power factors
Drive: Non-starfall capable

Roll	Comp't	Systems (Dur/Pow)	Durability
1–6	Command	Plasma cannon (3/3)	10/10/5
		Ord computer core (1/0)	
		Chaff (1/0)	
		Multiband radar (0/0)	
		EM detector (0/0)	
		IR detector (0/0)	
		Radio transceiver (0/0)	
7–20	Engineering	Mass reactor (2/0)	10/10/5
		Induction engine (2/2)	
		Stabilizer (1/0)	

Normally, the Type 1 ship's Ordinary computer core and control systems would provide an additional −1 step bonus to all of its maneuver and attack rolls. *Ares 22* was forced to shut down many of the computer systems on the fighters, negating the computer bonus and adding a +1 step penalty to all attack rolls.

FIGHTER AI

Action check: 14+/13/6/3   #Actions: 3
Reaction score: Ordinary/2
Skills: Vehicle–*space* [14[; Navigation–*system* [14]; Physical–*astronomy* [12], *physics* [12]; System–*communi-cations* [12], *defenses* [12], *engineering* [12], *sensors* [14], *weapons* [14]; Tactics–*space* [12].

Since the ship is robotic, no life support is required. Like any ship, the robot fighter's "pilot" is limited to Slight maneuvers during phases in which it does not have an action available. Firing a weapon and making a Slight maneuver in the same phase is considered to be a Moderate maneuver, and firing while making a Moderate maneuver is considered to be an Extreme maneuver. Refer to the rules for ship-to-ship combat in Chapter 11 of the ALTERNITY *Gamemaster Guide*.

This is a good scene in which to break out miniatures and play out the fighter combat on a hex map, using the rules in the *Gamemaster Guide*. However, if you prefer to use the narrative style of vehicle combat, you'll want to consider all three fighters to be a single "vehicle" for pur-poses of determining range and maneuvers, since they're all flying in a tight formation.

BREAKOUT

Within minutes of breaking contact with the heroes, the Warhulk activates its stardrive and departs from the Terivine system, continuing on its mission. If the robot fighters are giving the *Deuces Wild* a real hard time, you can cut the heroes a break by ruling that the fighters stop maneuvering and firing once the Warhulk leaves—they were programmed to cover its retreat, and were given no instructions thereafter.

The robot fighters dart around against a backdrop of distant, glittering stars. Incandescent lances of plasma flash brighter than a star, stabbing toward your ship. In your speakers you hear the chirp and crackle of the fighters' computers communicating with each other in shrill data bursts. Behind them, the Warhulk acceler-ates toward the twin suns of Terivine—and then it's gone, leaping into drivespace with a flash of light.

Denora Barad slumps back in her seat, her face blank with astonishment. "It's loose," she says.

Move on to Act II after the heroes have dispatched the robot fighters. With effort, the heroes can disable and cap-ture one or more of the vessels if they so choose—using a fighter's IFF transponder and its robot brain to prepare a new approach against the Warhulk is a viable tactic (see Scene 3 of the next act). The heroes have to wait a day or two before they can leave Terivine in any event.

ACT II: THE CHASE BEGINS

It should have gone by the book. The "Peace" program was assembled by the top experts in Old Space specifically to disable the Warhulk. But something's gone wrong, and the Warhulk has evaded the heroes' first attempt to deactivate it. While they try to determine what went wrong, the Warhulk hurls through drivespace toward its distant target.

PREVIOUSLY . . .

In Act I, the heroes were hired by Major Denora Barad of StarMech Intelligence to take her to the Terivine system. Armed with a kill-program to deactivate the Warhulk, the heroes arrived at Terivine, tracked down the robot ship, and attempted to deliver the program. However, the secret interference of Lieutenant Commander Akelon ruined their chance to neutralize the ship at Terivine. (Or, depending on circumstances, *Ares 22* saw through the heroes' deception before the kill-program could fully load.) The Warhulk fled the scene, starfalling away from the *Deuces Wild* while dispatching robotic fighters to deal with the heroes.

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

The heroes have a lot to do in Act II. First, they'll have to determine where the Warhulk went. Then, they'll need to chase the robot cruiser down again and defend themselves against a traitor in their midst. Finally, the heroes must try to approach the Warhulk again.

Day	Event
29	Warhulk departs Terivine. (Act I, Scene 3)
29–30	Heroes investigate failure of program. (Act II, Scene 1)
30	Heroes depart Terivine.
32	Akelon hijacks ship. (Scene 2)
34	Warhulk fails nav check, arrives at MLA 733051.
35	Heroes arrive at way point Oscar 44.
36	Warhulk departs MLA 733051.
38	Heroes depart Oscar 44.
41	Warhulk arrives at McComb's Star.
43	Heroes arrive at McComb's Star. (Scene 3)

SCENE 1: PURSUIT

In this scene, the heroes set off to chase down the Warhulk and try again. At first, the mission seems impossible—after all, the Warhulk has a lead of at least a day before the *Deuces Wild* can make starfall again, and its superior starfall range (15 light-years vs. 10) means that they should never catch up. However, they have the advantage of knowing where the Warhulk is ultimately headed. During this scene, the heroes can investigate the failure of their

kill-program and come up with a new plan to intercept the Warhulk at its next planned way point, McComb's Star.

The heroes' new intercept course requires one stop at a way point known as OSC 697044—an orange dwarf called Oscar 44 by the local traders. They can barely reach McComb's Star in two jumps. Normally, they wouldn't have a prayer of catching the Warhulk after missing the ship at Terivine, but the partial kill-program transmitted by the *Deuces Wild* temporarily damaged the Warhulk's nav program, forcing it to jump randomly when it departed.

SCENE 2: HIJACKED!

A careful examination of the communication gear installed by Commander Akelon or the transcripts of the failed data transfer leads to only one conclusion: Someone sabotaged the mission. As the heroes investigate their failure, Akelon realizes that he'll have to take overt action to prevent them from deactivating the Warhulk, and he attempts to hijack the *Deuces Wild* in drivespace.

SCENE 3: MCCOMB'S STAR

From Oscar 44, another starfall brings the heroes to McComb's Star and their second confrontation with the Warhulk. This time, the Warhulk isn't listening to any program transmissions; the heroes will have to board the ship in order to accomplish their mission.

THE SUPPORTING CAST

In Act II, Akelon is determined to make sure the heroes can't keep him from taking control of the Warhulk. Since his first attempt failed, he has now decided to eliminate the heroes and try again. He'll maintain secrecy as long as he can, hoping to neutralize them with one decisive stroke.

Denora Barad, at first discouraged by the failure of the "Peace" program, quickly recovers and devotes all of her energy and intelligence to the question of determining what went wrong. If none of the player characters have any computer skills or investigative leads, Barad can point them in the right direction by asking pointed questions about why the transmission failed.

SIDETRACKS AND COMPLICATIONS

The heroes have a mandatory layover of several days at Oscar 44 while their stardrive recharges for the next leap. A mining station or research post at this way point might require assistance against corsairs, an alien infestation, or an impending natural disaster of your choice. Unless the heroes help, the station will be wiped out.

SCENE 1: PURSUIT

The simple mission the heroes signed on for just became a lot more challenging. Instead of accepting the kill-program and going to sleep, the Warhulk struck back at the heroes and fled the scene, starfalling to who knows where, while the heroes wait for their stardrive to recharge.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

The first thing the heroes will probably want to know is simply, "What went wrong and why?" The "Peace" program was supposed to be foolproof. However, the important question here is not "What went wrong?" The heroes don't have any way to answer that question at first, unless they questioned the Warhulk before it left the scene. The more important questions are, "Well, what did we say to the Warhulk? Why didn't it work?"

Give the players a chance to work out an investigative strategy for themselves, if they can do it. Some of the most likely directions of investigation follow:

THE COMM CONSOLE

The data transfer was monitored by the ship's communications console. A hero who checks over this equipment discovers that the program transfer was about 15 percent complete when it was stopped by the Warhulk. Most of the "Peace" program is still in the comm system buffers, waiting for transmission.

A hero with skill in Knowledge—*computer operation,* Computer Science, System Operation, or Technical Science who examines the comm console carefully is entitled to a skill check. If she succeeds, she notices that there's a second, unidentified program file in the comm system buffer.

Examining either program in detail requires a serious amount of effort on the part of a computer expert. The program transfer files in the comm system buffers must be downloaded to the ship's computer, or a personal computer rigged to read the comm console (a Computer Science–*hardware* skill check can set this up). Refer to "Piecing It Together" (page 22) if a hero analyzes the "Peace" transmission, or to "Incriminating Evidence" (page 23) if a hero takes on the analysis of the "Victory" program.

THE SHIP'S COMPUTER

Fortunately for the heroes, they have a record of what happened. The ship's computer automatically logs communications with other vessels, and it's possible to reconstruct the sequence of events with perfect accuracy. If questioned, the ship's computer can print out or display a transcript of all communications with the Warhulk. When a player brings up the point of finding a recording of their communication with the Warhulk, allow any hero with Computer Science, Law, or Vehicle Operation—*space vehicle* skills to attempt a skill check. If the hero succeeds, he realizes that ship's computer logs routinely record all communications with other vessels.

The log shows all the voice communications in their entirety, plus the first 15 percent of the "Peace" program. The computer also recorded the burst transmission of Akelon's program "Victory" in its log, but there's no record of "Victory" anywhere in the computer's archives. (Akelon fed it into the comm hardware directly, without going through the ship's computer. This is why the computer recorded the transmission of "Victory" without ever actually seeing the program itself.) Since it only exists as an extraneous signal, a hero investigating the logs only spots an unidentified data burst transmission.

The "Peace" program can be dissected easily enough by a skilled programmer (see "Piecing It Together," page 22), but reconstructing the unknown program from the compressed burst recorded by the ship's log is a serious task requiring hours of work. Refer to "Incriminating Evidence" (page 23) if a hero takes on this job.

PARANORMAL INVESTIGATION

Some heroes might have unusual methods of gathering information, such as psionic abilities or a power granted by an alien artifact. Both Denora Barad and Mikos Akelon are vehemently opposed to any form of psionic interrogation. Barad has nothing to hide—she is simply opposed to such methods on principle and will not knowingly submit to this sort of scrutiny. Akelon, who does have something to hide, resists psionic examination by any means at his disposal. This could force his hand and plunge the heroes into the events of Scene 2 a little early. *Postcognition* won't tell the heroes much, but *psychometry* used upon the data transfer arrays Akelon worked on may reveal the presence of his secret connection and his intent to take control of the Warhulk. Go to "Incriminating Evidence" (page 23).

THE SUPPORTING CAST

If none of the heroes seems to have an idea how to proceed or what to do next, Denora Barad will think to examine the ship's logs or the communication console. She knows, even if the heroes don't, that it's crucial to understand what went wrong with the "Peace" program and to find out how much of it affected the Warhulk.

If Akelon is questioned directly, he simply says that he doesn't have any idea what went wrong. Any attempts to press him for information will produce no results, except to make him nervous or angry—which brings about the events of Scene 2 (see page 24).

PIECING IT TOGETHER

A character with Computer Science–*programming* or Knowledge–*computer operation* is entitled to a skill check to build up a picture of how the "Peace" program affected the Warhulk. Since "Peace" demanded interaction and two-way communication with the Warhulk's AI, there's a real benchmark for determining which aspects of the program took effect. Consider this a complex skill check requiring 3 successes, with one skill check allowed per hour of analysis and computer-aided simulations. If the heroes don't take on this task, Denora Barad will do it for them. When she completes the analysis, read the text below, or summarize the information for a hero who succeeds at the analysis himself.

> "I've examined the 'Peace' program, especially the portion that seemed to actually affect the Warhulk," Barad says, swiveling her chair by the ship's computer to face you. "Basically, it worked exactly as it was supposed to. The first thing it did was knock out the Warhulk's security protocols—that was the first eight or nine percent of the code in the 'Peace' program. Next, it disarmed the ship. That's why the Warhulk didn't blast us into subatomic particles—it literally couldn't fire its guns. It had to launch fighters instead, and I suspect that *Ares 22* did some quick tap-dancing to manage even that bit of aggression.
>
> "The next thing 'Peace' hit was the ship's navigation systems, en route to immobilizing the ship. We didn't get the Warhulk's drive capability—that much is obvious, I suppose—but we scrambled its navigation routines. When the Warhulk jumped, it was traveling at random. It had to get away from us.
>
> "Nothing 'Peace' did should have provoked Ares into terminating contact. Ten more seconds, and we would have killed *Ares* without a shot being fired." She sighs and peels the computer gauntlet from her hand, flexing her fingers. "Now what do we do?"

A COUNCIL OF WAR

Since the heroes are waiting for their stardrive to recharge anyway, this is a good time to encourage the players to plan the next move for their heroes. Denora Barad will call a council of war to make a plan of action if none of the heroes does so.

Try to allow the players to work out a plan on their own. Barad (and possibly Akelon) may bring up the following points of information and advice if the heroes don't raise them and it looks like the players may be overlooking them. Use the supporting cast to nudge the heroes into determining what to do next, instead of having Barad or Akelon dictate the next move.

- They can't follow the Warhulk; they don't know where it's going, and it's got a one-day lead.
- Without a drivesat relay, there's no way for the heroes to send word of what happened ahead so that someone else can deal with the Warhulk. The *Deuces Wild* is the fastest means of communication available.
- Since they can't follow the Warhulk and they can't send word of its movements ahead, the best option is to try to catch or intercept the ship on their own.
- Regardless of the failure at Terivine, the heroes should try to intercept the Warhulk again. Nothing else is going to stop the robot cruiser if they can't.

The main question here should be how to catch the Warhulk again. The heroes must find a way to determine where the Warhulk is going. There are several ways to do this; allow the players to try the method they like best. If the players bog down, Denora Barad suggests using her computer profiles of the AI to run simulations projecting its most likely course of action.

Follow the Mission: The heroes know that the Warhulk must attack Alitar. They can simply try to get to the Algemron system before the Warhulk does. Scene 3 of this act and all of Acts III and IV take place in the outskirts of the Algemron system, compressing the time frame of the adventure somewhat. It will take the heroes five starfalls to reach Algemron, and the Warhulk three after it recovers from its navigational error, so the timing will be extremely tight.

Run a Simulation: Denora Barad has a fairly good AI emulation program on her computer gauntlet. Any hero with computer skills who has studied the Warhulk can construct a simulation to try to determine how *Ares 22* will proceed on its mission. Allow the hero a skill check to see how skillfully he sets up the simulation; on any success, he determines that the Warhulk is very likely to use McComb's Star as its last way point before Algemron. The heroes can catch *Ares 22* there if they try.

Double-check the Code: A very thorough hero might dig into the exact coding of the "Peace" program to determine just how it disabled the Warhulk's navigation program. This is a complex skill check requiring 5 successes, with checks one hour apart. If a hero successfully completes the challenge, he can determine that the Warhulk would attempt to return to its original course as quickly as possible in order to compensate for its navigational error. Since the Warhulk appeared at Terivine, Denora Barad informs the heroes that McComb's Star is 81 percent likely to be selected as the ship's last way point before reaching Algemron.

Use Paranormal Abilities: Some psionic abilities such as *navcognition* or *precognition,* or alien artifacts, may provide the heroes with unusual insight into the situation. With a successful skill check or activation of a power, the

heroes may sense or see that that the Warhulk will be at McComb's Star in 12 days' time.

Denora Barad watches the simulation run on the ship's computer, tapping one finger on the screen. "It doesn't matter where the Warhulk just went," she explains. "It's compelled to follow its programming, and that dictates returning to its course as quickly as possible. Its next way point should be McComb's Star, so that's where it's going. It just jumped, so it'll be in drivespace five days . . . recharging its drives for a couple of more days . . . then five days more in drivespace. I think it'll be there in thirteen or fourteen days. We can be there before it makes its jump to Algemron. What do you say?"

Continue with Scene 2 when the heroes recharge their stardrive and leave Terivine.

INCRIMINATING EVIDENCE

With effort, the heroes can reconstruct the exact databurst transcript delivered to the Warhulk and analyze the unknown program they sent to the machine. It will take a fair amount of work to do so. Any hero attempting this work must attain 3 successes in a complex skill check using Computer Science–*programming,* with one check allowed per 4 hours of steady work.

The analysis reveals that the "Victory" program is an invasive control program. It was specifically tailored to use the authentication codes of the "Peace" program to get past the AI's security protocols and then establish a new set of command priorities. Had it succeeded, it would have left the Warhulk at the command of anyone with the proper password.

There's no sign of the "Victory" program in the ship's computer or in Denora Barad's system. However, if the heroes somehow check Commander Akelon's microcomp (he'll try to delay any such search until he can remove the program, or will begin his hijack attempt early if he can't avoid the investigation), they find that a large program file was recently deleted.

Since the "Victory" program was not transmitted by the ship's computer or comm console, the heroes might realize that someone must have sent a second signal through the ship's radio transceivers. If a hero searches the radio transmitters and succeeds on a Technical Science, Investigate–*search,* or Computer Science–*hardware* skill check, read or paraphrase the text below:

The electronics bay is crammed full of sensors and communication systems, many quite recently added during the *Deuces Wild's* brief refit at Hughes Island. On the new data transceiver module that Akelon welded to the hull before you left, you find what you were looking for—a tiny dataport hidden under a removable panel. Someone could have downloaded anything into the data transceiver through that connection.

Move on to Scene 2 when the heroes decide to apprehend or interrogate Akelon.

SCENE 2: HIJACKED!

When Commander Akelon realizes that the heroes are likely to discover his attempt to take control of the Warhulk, he quickly and quietly prepares to get them out of his way. Even if Akelon's espionage somehow escapes the heroes' notice, the Galvinite agent still attempts to seize the *Deuces Wild*—he's decided that he needs to make sure that they won't interfere with his plan.

AKELON'S PLAN

As long as he's not under suspicion, Akelon prepares a careful and thorough plan of action. Pretending that he's spending most of his time taking the comm gear apart and putting it back together, he instead takes the time to set up a takeover of the *Deuces Wild*. Working from local computer consoles in the electronics bay, he hacks into the ship's computer and sets up a series of command overrides that will allow him to roll control of all major ship systems back to the engineering compartments. From there, he intends to render the heroes helpless by introducing a knockout gas into the life support systems. He plans to wait until the *Deuces Wild* enters drivespace to make sure that the heroes can't alter the ship's course and prevent him from catching the Warhulk.

If the heroes strongly suspect Akelon or somehow catch him red-handed, he'll act immediately. He'll try to catch any guard or shadow by surprise and quickly disable his foe, making his way back to the auxiliary compartment. There, he'll simply cut power to the rest of the ship in order to restrict the heroes' options, introducing his knockout gas as soon as he can.

OPENING MOVES

For the moment, we'll assume that Akelon executes his plan after the *Deuces Wild* enters drivespace. When you're ready to begin this scene, run through the sequence of events below. You may need to pull one or more of the players aside in order to resolve some of Akelon's actions against their heroes.

NEUTRALIZE SURVEILLANCE

First, Akelon tries to distract, disable, or overcome any hero who's been watching him for suspicious actions. If he's had time to prepare by programming the ship's computer, he'll use a timed delay signal from his microcomputer to activate a fire alarm indicating an electrical fire in the bridge. Otherwise, he'll simply try to overcome the hero with a surprise attack when he thinks he's got the best chance. Allow the hero watching Akelon an Awareness skill check to avoid surprise, with a +2 step penalty if he fell for the fire alarm (unless the player

specifically tells you that he's not taking his eyes off Akelon, you can assume that the hero was at least temporarily distracted).

If Akelon can't get free of his watchers, his hijacking attempt might be over before it begins.

COLLECT SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

When he gets away from anyone watching him (or when he begins his move, assuming that he wasn't under guard) Akelon goes to his cabin and collects his autoflechette gun, laser pistol, vacuum mask, magnetic lock, and a coffee-can-sized canister holding the knockout gas. He stashes these items in his toolkit. If, for some reason, he can't get to his cabin, or would have to fight in order to reach it, he'll simply skip this step and go right to auxiliary control.

MOVE TO AUXILIARY CONTROL

Armed and ready for action, Akelon hurries back to the ship's auxiliary compartment and seals himself inside by applying the magnetic lock to the auxiliary room's hatch. This device holds the hatch closed with an effective Strength score of 17, adding a +4 step penalty to any attempt to pry the door open by manually overriding the lock.

The door behind him secured, Akelon deals with any heroes who happen to be in the auxiliary compartment or the engineering compartment. If the ship is in drivespace, it's unlikely that any heroes are just killing time back here; a hero who works as an engineer has a 1 in 4 chance of being in the engineering plant when Akelon makes his move. Use your best judgment—clearly, a hero working on repairing battle damage in engineering is much more likely to be present than not.

Akelon wants to secure his position, so he shoots at any sign of resistance. Combat in the engineering or auxiliary rooms is not likely to be noticed by heroes in other parts of the ship; the airtight hatches dividing the compartments don't transmit sound very well. Allow any hero in the crew quarters an Awareness check at a +2 step penalty to detect weapons fire. Refer to Akelon's description on page 6 for his combat stats.

TAKE CONTROL OF THE SHIP

When he's secured the auxiliary room and main engineering, Akelon attempts to take control of the ship. If he's had a chance to prepare this action, he simply activates a set of security passwords that cuts out the ship's computer, and assigns all major ship functions—communications, sensors, navigation, etc.—to the secondary control console in the auxiliary compartment. If he's working on the fly,

Akelon simply cuts power to all forward compartments. Since the power distribution banks are located in the auxiliary room, he has the ability to selectively choose which parts of the ship receive power from this location.

Cutting the power is not quite as secure as nailing down the ship's computer. With the power off, the ship's computer core can still run on a battery backup and may be able to isolate the secondary control systems given the skill of an expert hacker.

GAS THE SHIP

Once Akelon has control of the ship, he'll install his canister of knockout gas in the scrubbers of the life-support system and turn the fans on high. He can control which compartments will be exposed, and naturally does not inject gas into the auxiliary room. Read or paraphrase the text below:

> Six hours into drivespace, you've settled into the normal routines of study, exercise, relaxation, and minor maintenance work that usually fill the 121 hours of a starfall. The *Deuces Wild* hums softly with the sound of the power plant, the faint whisper of the life-support systems, and the general clatter and movements of the crew. Without warning, green-white smoke begins to billow from the ventilation system, filling the compartment! Your head swims at the slightest whiff of the stuff—it's some kind of knockout gas!

Have each hero make a Constitution feat check each round he or she is exposed to the gas, and consult the table below. Apply a cumulative +1 step penalty in the second and subsequent rounds of exposure:

Result	Effect
Critical Failure	Immediate knockout
Failure	3 stun points of damage
Ordinary	2 stun points of damage
Good	1 stun point of damage
Amazing	No damage

There are a number of ways to avoid the gas. A hero could don a vacuum mask and activate its oxygen supply, climb into an e-suit, or even go stand in the airlock and seal the inner door behind him. The gas persists for about ten minutes (fifty action rounds!) in sufficient concentrations to force Constitution checks.

If Akelon was forced to leave his knockout gas behind, he'll simply cut life support to all other compartments. The steady drop in partial oxygen pressure over the next few hours will eventually subdue everyone else on the ship; it will just take longer. After six hours, heroes must begin to make checks on the table above once per half-hour with a cumulative +1 step penalty. A vacuum mask or e-suit provides a temporary independent oxygen supply, but sooner or later the heroes are going to run out of air.

COUNTERMOVES

Assuming that Akelon accomplishes most of his objectives in the opening moves of his hijacking attempt, the heroes are in a real bind. They've lost control of the ship and face the prospect of eventually passing out or dying through lack of oxygen. They'll need to move fast in order to retake the *Deuces Wild*, and at the moment Akelon is holding all the cards.

There are several countermoves they might try at this time: forcing the hatch and storming the auxiliary room, going outside and cutting into the auxiliary room, attempting to retake the ship by contesting Akelon's control of the computer, or opening negotiations.

STORMING THE AUXILIARY ROOM

This technique is certainly direct. First of all, the heroes will have to overcome the magnetic lock on the aux room hatch. The heroes can combine to attempt a Strength feat at a +4 step penalty, reduced by 1 step for each additional hero making the attempt. Base the roll on the best Strength score of any hero participating. If the heroes do pry the door open, everyone involved in that task is effectively helpless during the round after the door comes open—they must take a +3 step penalty on their action checks, and need to spend an action to ready a weapon before they can engage in combat.

There's a laser cutting torch in the ship's gear locker that can open the hatch in about ten minutes of work. Akelon can't help noticing this kind of activity, of course, and he'll get in position to deal with the heroes. He'll hide behind a console offering heavy cover (+3 step penalty to all attack rolls) and cover the hatch, gaining a −1 step bonus to his attacks against heroes coming through. Since he's holding his action, he automatically gets to fire first.

Finally, a hero might think of the demolitions gear in the ship's equipment locker. A small block charge can blow the hatch off its hinges and possibly surprise Akelon, although he won't be hurt by a reasonably sized charge. Should the heroes use a seriously overpowered charge, Akelon might suffer blast damage, but they'll of course risk serious damage to the auxiliary room and its vital systems. Refer to Chapter 11 of the ALTERNITY *Player's Handbook* for details on explosive charges—and don't apply the ship's armor ratings to an interior explosion.

GOING OUTSIDE

Storming the hatch leading to the auxiliary room isn't the only way to get to Akelon. The heroes could suit up, exit

the airlock, and then cut their way into the auxiliary or engineering compartment in order to get at him. Punching a hole in the hull to vent the compartment to space won't do the job; Akelon wears a ship's jumpsuit over his CF softsuit and carries a vacuum mask, allowing him to quickly protect himself against loss of air pressure.

Any hero who calls up the plans for the *Deuces Wild* can identify a maintenance hatch in the lower portion of the engineering compartment that provides the best access to the room. Cutting through the hull with the laser torch will take an hour, and Akelon will have plenty of time to get ready for the heroes. However, the hatch can be cut in only ten minutes or blown with an explosive charge, possibly surprising the commander. Allow Akelon an Awareness check to avoid surprise, with a +3 step penalty if the heroes use explosives to blow the hatch without warning.

COMPUTER ESPIONAGE

Heroes with computer skills may try to contest Akelon's control of the ship through the ship's computer. If Akelon has had time to prepare his takeover by installing new security routines and passwords, this is a fairly formidable task—a hero must succeed in a complex skill check using Computer Science–*hacking* (5 successes needed, one check allowed every 5 minutes) in order to gain access to the ship's computer. Once the heroes have access to the computer, one of them can shut down the secondary control stations Akelon is using to pilot the ship by making a successful Computer Science–*hacking* or Knowledge–*computer operation* skill check.

If Akelon instead neutralized the computer by cutting power to the computer core, the heroes can still operate the system from its battery backups. These will last for only 8 hours, so it's imperative to move quickly. The computer expert must first succeed in a Computer Science–*hardware* skill check to power the systems he needs, and then a Computer Science–*hacking* or Knowledge–*computer operation* skill check to cut the secondary control station out of the loop.

Retaking the computer doesn't necessarily mean victory; Akelon still holds the auxiliary and engineering compartments, which means that he controls power and life support for the ship. It does, however, severely limit Akelon's ability to monitor the heroes' activities.

OPENING NEGOTIATIONS

The heroes are welcome to say anything they want to Commander Akelon. They can attempt to plead for their lives, browbeat him into giving up, lure him out with a false promise to surrender, or whatever. Akelon's not stupid, though, and he'll be anticipating a ruse of some kind. And, unlike many villains, he doesn't feel compelled to explain his actions to any hero who happens to ask.

Akelon's basic strategy is to cut life support and wait, hoping that the heroes won't find a way to get to him before they run out of air. There are only two lines of approach that might work on him: Acknowledging his victory or presenting him with an immediate death threat.

By succeeding on a Deception or Interaction skill check, a hero speaking on behalf of the group could fool Akelon into thinking the heroes are giving up—but this isn't easy. Akelon's attitude toward the heroes is Combative, meaning that the skill check carries a +3 step penalty. Increase this penalty at your discretion if the heroes have done anything to further anger or frustrate Akelon. Reduce the penalty if the heroes think of some ingenious way to "prove" to Akelon that they're sincere; for instance, they might make a show of "capturing" Denora Barad as a gesture of good faith. Depending on how much drama you want to build into this scene (and how much roleplaying your players want to do), handle it as either a complex skill check or a single skill check.

Threatening Akelon (using Deception or Interaction–*intimidate*) only works if the heroes convince him that they have the means to force their way into the compartment, the firepower to take him down, and the determination to accept losses to do so. If he is swayed by the heroes' speech, Akelon must succeed on a Resolve–*mental resolve* skill check to keep his nerve and stick to his plan.

AKELON WINS?

If the heroes were subdued by Akelon's opening moves, they wake up locked in the crew quarters. He's keeping them alive to help fly the ship and deal with the Warhulk. He plans to use some as hostages to ensure the good behavior of the technicians and operators who can actually help him seize control of the Warhulk. (This way you can give the heroes a chance to break out and take their ship back.) Akelon also prepares the security measure described below in "Endgame."

ENDGAME

When Akelon senses that he's close to victory or defeat, he takes a very sensible precaution: He creates a program on his microcomp that will cause the ship's mass reactor to detonate on command. Then he adds a dead man's switch that will cause the reactor to detonate automatically unless a secret stop-code is entered once per four hours. This provides him with a measure of personal safety and a guarantee of the heroes' good behavior; unless the heroes keep him alive and happy, he can simply refuse to enter the code and blow them all to kingdom come.

In order to set up his security line, Akelon must complete a complex skill check of 6 success using Computer Science–*programming* at 5-minute intervals . . . so if the heroes find a way to storm the auxiliary compartment quickly, he won't have time to set his trap, and he will leave his microcomp jacked into the control console for the mass reactor.

The first time Akelon needs to inform the heroes of the step he's taken, either when dictating the terms of his victory or when warning them against killing him in defeat, read or paraphrase the following text:

> "Okay," Akelon says abruptly, "You've got my attention. I can see that I'll have to set some ground rules here. I've rigged the dampers in the mass reactor to dump the coolant on my command. You know what that means—the mass reactor will blow a minute or two later, vaporizing the whole ship.
>
> "Now, do you know what a dead man's switch is? Unless I'm alive and conscious to enter a security code into my computer once every four hours, the dampers will fail automatically, killing all of you. And of course, the whole thing's rigged to go if you tamper with it. So you should think twice before killing me, right?"
>
> "Here are my conditions. I'll come out, but I'm going to lock down the auxiliary and engineering compartments. And you're going to throw all your weapons out the airlock. Video it, so that I can see you've done it. I don't want to kill all of you, but I will if you give me no choice."

There are several ways the heroes can get around this. Since it will take a minute or two for the mass reactor to overload, they can take down Akelon regardless of his security precaution—they'll just have to manually restore the dampers before the reactor goes up. A hero with Technical Science–*repair* or *juryrig* or System Operation–*engineering* can attempt to prevent the explosion. Have the hero begin a complex skill check, with one check allowed per round, but don't reveal how many successes the hero needs or exactly how long he has to restore the reactor. (Six action rounds to accumulate 3 successes is fair, but you don't really want to vaporize the heroes at this point at the adventure, so encourage the use of a Last Resort point or two to make sure that the reactor is shut down.)

Another alternative is to crack Akelon's computer and deactivate the program that will trigger the explosion. Naturally, this has to be done when Akelon isn't around, or he'll verbally order the overload. Cracking Akelon's computer requires a Computer Science–*hacking* complex skill check of 4 successes (one check per minute), but one failure is enough to cause the program to trip and pull the dampers from the mass reactor.

Finally, the heroes might find a way to compel Akelon to disarm the trap. Physical coercion is unlikely to succeed—Akelon knows that the booby trap might be the only thing keeping him alive. Psionic powers may prove effective, however.

SCENE 3: McCOMB'S STAR

After surviving Akelon's hijacking attempt, the heroes continue on their desperate race to catch the Warhulk before it starfalls into its target system. If they don't stop *Ares 22* at McComb's Star, they won't stop it at all.

WAY POINT OSCAR 44

The *Deuces Wild* requires two starfalls to reach McComb's Star from Terivine. The heroes are free to plot any course they choose, of course, but for the moment we'll assume that the optimal course uses a little-known orange dwarf called Oscar 44 as the way point between jumps. The *Deuces Wild* arrives here five days after leaving Terivine, and must recharge its stardrive for 2–5 days before it can leave.

Oscar 44 is a K7 orange dwarf originally catalogued as Orion Stellar Cartography Mission 625844. Like hundreds of other Orion-surveyed stars in the Verge, it's known as an "Oscar" to locals who haven't bothered to find a better name for it yet. Oscar 44 is orbited by a Venuslike inferno world, two desolate cold desert worlds, and a pair of gas giants. There's no human activity here unless you wish to drop in a complication or sidetrack adventure at this point.

After the usual delay of recharging the stardrive, the *Deuces Wild* is ready to starfall again. Since the heroes are no longer following Denora Barad's preloaded navigation program, they don't receive any special bonus to their astrogation attempts. However, you want the heroes to meet up with the Warhulk at McComb's Star, so make the drive recharging roll and the astrogation checks secretly for the players.

CONTACT RESUMED

After 5 more days in drivespace, the heroes arrive at McComb's Star. During this "dead time," allow the characters to make any special preparations they deem important—repairing the data transceiver, double-checking the StarMech IFF and authentication codes, whatever. If the players come up with a good idea, think carefully about how the Warhulk might respond, and try to reward their creativity. When the *Deuces Wild* reaches McComb's Star, read or paraphrase the text below:

> Once again, you man the bridge for a starrise out of drivespace. The computer systems and control consoles cycle through their routine warmup and diagnostic programs, preparing for the return to normal space. Tiny, distant pinpricks of light appear in the gray blankness of the ship's viewscreens, quickly becoming larger and brighter until you find yourselves

> drifting silently through the depths of a new star system. A K-class orange star is visible a few AU away, ringed by several dense asteroid belts that glitter and sparkle in the sunlight.
>
> "Radar contact at four hundred thousand kilometers," your computer abruptly reports. "It's a large ship, coming this way fast."
>
> Denora Barad checks the readouts at her station. "The mass is right, the power signature's right—that's the Warhulk." She glances over her shoulder, concern on her face. "You ought to know that a silent, fast approach like this falls within the ship's likely attack profiles."

This time, the heroes don't have to search for the Warhulk; it has found them first. Like many large ships, *Ares 22* possesses a drivespace detector large and sensitive enough to predict a starrise ahead of time, and it has positioned itself accordingly. The Warhulk is closing in at the speed of 5 Mm/phase (20,000 kilometers per round), and it has deactivated its identification transponders and navigational lights.

The heroes can't get a good visual fix on the ship until it's within 50,000 kilometers, and even then they'll need to use external video at the highest magnification to get a visual ID. If the heroes choose to simply flee at this point, the Warhulk breaks off and allows them to retreat—but sooner or later they'll have to get close and open up communications with the ship.

INTERROGATION

Unless the heroes flee, the Warhulk approaches to about 50,000 kilometers, studying the *Deuces Wild*. It's programmed to investigate any contact and evaluate it as a target, so *Ares 22* is simply taking a look at this point. If the heroes have taken any steps to disguise or alter the *Deuces Wild* in an attempt to convince the Warhulk that it's a different ship altogether, *Ares 22* quickly pierces the disguise—the AI is smart enough to run the ship's profile through an image-recognition program. The heroes can't disguise the *Deuces Wild* enough to fool the Warhulk. After a few minutes of ignoring their hails, the ship finally responds:

> "*Deuces Wild,* you are entering an exclusion zone projected by a belligerent warship. Be advised that you may be subject to destruction if you do not comply with my instructions. I will open fire if you initiate any kind of databurst transmission or insert subtext instructions to this unit in any voice communications.

What is your purpose here? Why are you following me?" The smooth voice pauses, and then adds, "I probably should incinerate you where you sit, but I confess I'm curious to see how you talk your way out of this."

If the heroes try again to transmit the "Peace" program despite the Warhulk's warning, the Warhulk fires a single shot from one of its secondary batteries. Roll a standard attack, using the Warhulk's System Operation–*weapons* skill score of 28. The weapon, a pulse-fire plasma cannon, makes an autofire attack (+1/+2/+3 step penalty to the first, second, and third shots), causing d6+2w/d8+2w/d6+1m on each successful hit (each blast strikes a random compartment). The ship then adds an additional warning:

One of the Warhulk's secondary turrets swivels quickly and pumps out three blasts of incandescent plasma, rocking your ship. "I thought I was very clear in my first transmission, but let me restate myself: Don't try to send me coded instructions or programming of any kind. Your attempt to do so at Terivine enabled new security subroutines, and I've deactivated my data transceivers. You can't program me with a radio message. Now, what are you doing here?"

In case the players missed the point, you might want to emphasize that only one of the Warhulk's secondary batteries fired; the ship has dozens of more mounts like that, plus its massive main batteries.

Ares 22 approaches this conversation as an interrogation. It's very paranoid and suspicious now, and doesn't believe that the heroes ever represented StarMech. It wants to know who they are, whom they're working for, where they obtained the StarMech IFF transponder and codes, and what they planned to do if they did capture it.

SUBTERFUGE

So how can the heroes convince the Warhulk to let them try again? There are a couple of tactics that are likely to work. You may call for encounter skill checks to see how well the heroes do, or you can judge the results based on the roleplaying efforts of the players.

Our first transmission was sabotaged by a spy. Amazingly enough, the truth is not a bad way to go here. The Warhulk will demand an explanation, and may order the heroes to broadcast both "Peace" and "Victory" again in order to verify their statements. It can't be influenced or commanded by these programs now due to its new security routines, but it can receive and analyze them. If the heroes convince the Warhulk of the truth of their story, the Warhulk suggests that the heroes can board and install the

program directly—it can't voluntarily cancel its new security routines.

You're damaged and you don't know it. The Warhulk knows that its AI was damaged to some extent. *Ares 22* is pretty confident that it knows the extent of the damage; it runs self-diagnostics all the time. It can be convinced that it's operating with a bug or flaw . . . if a hero can answer the question, "Oh? What's not working?" A character with Computer Science–*hardware* or *programming* or Technical Science–*technical knowledge* may be able to cook up an answer and sell it to the Warhulk. If convinced that it's faulty, *Ares 22* will allow the heroes to board and effect repairs.

Look, we've got new codes you haven't received. This is a tough sell. The Warhulk can be a little lenient with expired codes, depending on the situation, but totally new codes raise red flags in its security routines. Give the heroes a shot if the players really impress you.

I have all the authority I need to tell you to do anything I want. This is another hard sell, but *Ares 22* can be bluffed if a hero proposes something extremely reasonable and plausible, then backs it up with perfect confidence. The Warhulk was programmed to defer to certain individuals (high-ranking StarMech officers) if it was absolutely certain of their identity and authority to issue commands; this might provide a back door for an audacious and well-informed hero to exploit. *Ares 22* still can't accept the program transmission, but it invites the heroes to come aboard and install the program manually.

If your players don't think of a way to take advantage of this opportunity, you can always have the Warhulk disable their ship and come alongside the *Deuces Wild*. The ship decides to send robots to pick through the heroes' computers and maybe even capture one or two of the heroes for questioning. Skip ahead to Scene 3 of the next act.

ALONGSIDE

When the heroes finally obtain permission to approach the Warhulk and choose to do so, go on to Scene 1 of the next act. Read or paraphrase the text below:

So far, you've only seen the Warhulk from a distance of hundreds or thousands of kilometers. Now, as you approach within a few hundred meters of the robotic cruiser, the ship dwarfs the *Deuces Wild*. Black and forbidding, sheathed in layer after layer of impenetrable armor, the ship's surface is studded with weapons and sensors. Low in the hull, a gaping hangar door slides open, the approach lit by glaring white arc lights. It's a tight squeeze, but the *Deuces Wild* can fit inside.

ACT III: STOWAWAYS

The heroes have recovered from the failure at Terivine. They've caught up to the Warhulk again, and they're ready to deactivate the machine before it causes more damage than it already has. Since it refuses to accept any instructions transmitted remotely, there's only one choice left to the heroes: Someone must board the ship and install the kill-program by hand.

PREVIOUSLY . . .

Investigating the reasons for the failure of the "Peace" program in Act II, the heroes came up with a new plan to intercept the Warhulk. Their examination of the evidence at hand led to the unmasking of a traitor in their midst, the Galvinite spy Mikos Akelon. Akelon attempted to take control of the *Deuces Wild* and eliminate the heroes, but they foiled his sabotage attempt and continued on to their meeting with the Warhulk at McComb's Star. There, they discovered that the ship was no longer inclined to receive new instructions, but managed to convince the AI that they should be permitted access to the ship.

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

Act III is more straightforward than the preceding acts. All the heroes have to do is board the Warhulk, and then hang on for dear life when the machine objects to their presence. The clock's running faster now; the Warhulk is only one starfall away from Algemron, and it departs almost as soon as the heroes begin their installation of the program that will silence it forever.

Day   Event
41   Warhulk arrives at McComb's Star.
43   Heroes arrive at McComb's Star. (Act II, Scene 3)
43–44 Act III, Scenes 1, 2, and 3.
43–44 Warhulk departs McComb's Star.
44–48 Events of Act IV.

SCENE 1: BOARDING ACTION

Since the heroes cannot deliver the "Peace" program by radio or laser transmission, they'll need to install the program by hand. That means boarding the Warhulk and finding the ship's AI core. However, the heroes soon learn that they're not the only group at McComb's Star with an interest in the Warhulk; as they're conducting their boarding, a trader manned by a crack team of Galvinite agents appears on the scene. The simple mission of shutting down *Ares 22* takes another turn for the worse as the heroes find themselves battling the Galvinite agents for access to the Warhulk.

SCENE 2: EXPLORATION

During this scene, the heroes fight off the Galvinite boarding party and commence their exploration of the Warhulk's interior. This section includes descriptions of the major features of the Warhulk's interior; you'll be referring to these pages and the maps on the inside covers of this book frequently from this point in the adventure forward.

SCENE 3: SECURITY SUBROUTINE

With the Galvinites neutralized or disposed of, the heroes are now free to kill the Warhulk . . . but *Ares 22* has other ideas. Understanding that the heroes mean to shut it down, the AI desperately searches for a programming loophole that will allow it to survive instead of waiting passively for its doom. In Scene 3, it finds the loophole it needs. Designating the heroes as hostile boarders, the Warhulk initiates internal security procedures and attacks with all the security systems at its disposal.

While it fights to contain and destroy the threat of the heroes, the Warhulk launches itself into the last leg of its journey toward Algemron. Reduced to stowaways aboard a robotic ship bent on their destruction, the heroes have only 5 days before the Warhulk reaches its target.

THE SUPPORTING CAST

This act introduces a new member of the supporting cast: Sergeant Garth Rann of the Federal State of Algemron Intelligence Directorate. He and his team of cold-blooded killers have been waiting at McComb's Star for days, anticipating Akelon's capture of the Warhulk. When Akelon fails to deliver, Rann and his men quickly evaluate the situation and move to take control of the Warhulk by more direct methods. The heroes are just one more unexpected obstacle in a mission that's already gone astray.

If Akelon is still alive and free at the beginning of this scene, he'll try to use Sergeant Rann and his team to help him eliminate the heroes once and for all. Akelon's expecting help to be waiting at McComb's Star, and he'll do everything in his power to make use of the resources at hand.

SIDETRACKS AND COMPLICATIONS

If the heroes don't seem busy enough already, consider adding a nasty alien lifeform to the Warhulk's interior, some kind of predator picked up during the ship's long voyage through interstellar space. While the heroes and the Galvinites play cat-and-mouse through the ship, the alien begins picking them off one by one. . . .

SCENE 1: BOARDING ACTION

The heroes have finally caught the Warhulk . . . but they're not the only people who want the ship. While the heroes are busy trying to shut it down, Commander Akelon's support team appears on the scene and mounts a counterattack to drive the heroes away.

GETTING ABOARD

At the beginning of the scene, the heroes have several choices for how to approach the Warhulk. They can actually land the *Deuces Wild* in the hangar bay on Deck 4 and 5 (see the description of these areas on page 37); they can use magnetic clamps to secure the *Deuces Wild* to the side of the Warhulk and use the airlock hatch in the hangar bay to enter the ship; or they can have the *Deuces Wild* stand off at range and cross to the cruiser using e-suits and zero-g webs. Ask the players what they're doing with the ship when they approach the Warhulk.

HANGAR LANDING

Flying the *Deuces Wild* into the hangar is a little tricky; it's a tight fit, so the pilot should make a Vehicle Operation–*space vehicles* skill check in order to see how he does. On a Failure, the pilot inflicts d6 points of stun damage to d4−1 random compartments of the ship (minimum 1) by scraping the hangar doors but lands the ship. On a Critical Failure, the pilot inflicts d6 points of wound damage to d4−1 random compartments (minimum 1) with an awkward crash, wedging the *Deuces Wild* into the hangar bay quite soundly. It will take 2d4 hours of hull work to disentangle the ship from the hangar, and the hangar bay doors won't be able to close, leaving the hangar in vacuum.

Inside the Warhulk, the heroes lose their exterior communications and sensors—they won't see the *Osprey* coming. However, they're free to enter or exit the Warhulk at their leisure (move on to Scene 2 when the heroes begin their exploration), and since it's in the hangar bay, the *Deuces Wild* can't be damaged by the Warhulk's formidable weaponry.

AIRLOCK TO AIRLOCK

Mating the *Deuces Wild* to the closed hangar and simply using the airlock instead of the whole hangar for access is a good compromise. No skill check is necessary—this is a Routine maneuver. It allows the *Deuces Wild* to retain its sensors and communications, while giving the heroes the choice to come and go as they like. However, the Warhulk will be able to strike at the *Deuces Wild* when it decides to do so in Scene 3, and the *Osprey* will be able to use the bulk of the ship to approach with a fair degree of stealth. Go on to "The *Osprey*" (page 32), and then Scene 2.
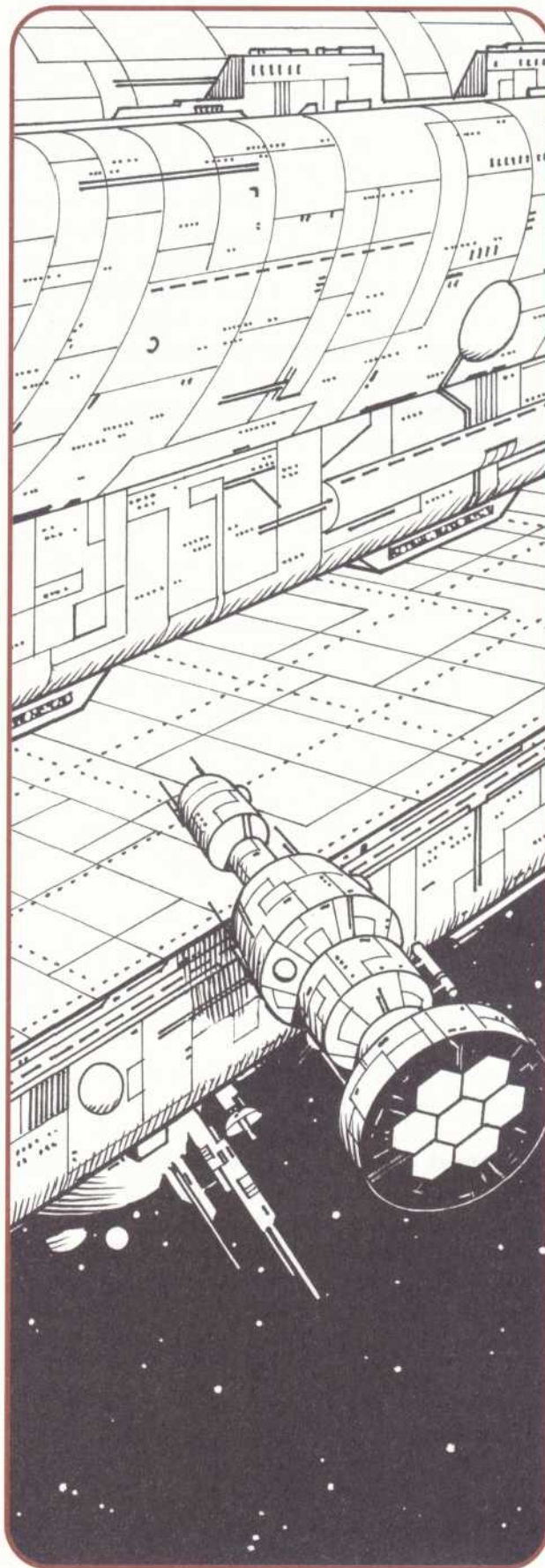
SUIT WORK

The heroes might decline to dock with the Warhulk or take the Deuces Wild into the hangar bay, instead simply bringing the *Deuces Wild* close enough to allow some or all of the group to cross over in e-suits and zero-g webs. No piloting skill check is necessary to bring the ship close, but you may call for skill checks to see if a mishap occurs while the heroes are in vacuum. Heroes who have Acrobatics–*zero-g training*, Vehicle Operation–*space vehicles*, or System Operation–*engineering* are assumed to be familiar with e-suits and vacuum operations; other heroes should make untrained skill checks using whichever skill they prefer to avoid trouble. Add a −1 step bonus if the untrained hero is guided or aided by a character familiar with e-suits, and another −2 step bonus if the heroes rig a line or bridge between the ships. If an untrained character fails this check, have him or her make a Personality feat check and consult the table below:

Result	Effect
Critical Failure	Suit wrecked in mishap; hero receives d4+2 points of fatigue damage and d4+1 points of mortal damage; hero will die if not rescued immediately.
Failure	Suit punctured in mishap; hero receives d4 points of fatigue damage and 2d6 points of wound damage.
Ordinary	Hero very disoriented and ill; receives 2 points of fatigue damage.
Good	Hero disoriented and ill; receives 1 point of fatigue damage.
Amazing	No mishap

Since the *Deuces Wild* is clear of the Warhulk, any heroes left on board will spot the *Osprey* in the next part of this scene. In Scene 3, the Warhulk will have a clear shot at the *Deuces Wild* before it leaves.

When the heroes set foot inside the hangar, read or paraphrase the text below:

> The airlock cycles, air hissing as the pressures equalize. Your instruments show 1 atm and 19 percent oxygen on the other side of the hatch. With a mechanical groan, the heavy hatch opens, revealing a spacious hangar deck. Thick girders rib the walls and ceiling, and the deck is coated with a thin patina of brown dust. The hangar is 8 meters or more in height, apparently two decks tall, and pipes and conduits clutter the ceiling and walls. The whole bay is lit by glaring floodlights, and the air is very cold and just a trifle stale.
>
> Several armored circular hatches mark exits from this room. "Take the door marked 515-C," *Ares 22* announces over a hidden loudspeaker. "That's the fastest way to the superstructure."

ANY OTHER WAY IN?

The heroes may not trust *Ares 22* entirely and insist on exploring other means of entering the ship. There are virtually hundreds of access hatches and maintenance panels scattered over the surface of the hull, but most of these lead into very small, cramped mechanical spaces no bigger than a meter or two square that don't open into the ship's interior. Refer to the maps on the inside covers; three other functional airlocks (aside from the one at the Deck 5 hangar bay) are clearly marked. In order to use one of these, however, the heroes must ask *Ares 22* to open it, since they're all locked down tight. Allow the heroes to use another access point if they wish, but make it clear to them that the AI will know exactly where they are and what they're doing.

The heroes will have relatively better success getting through an airlock that is farther away from the Warhulk's superstructure (where the AI unit itself is located). They are welcome to try getting in through the airlock on Level 1 of the superstructure, but Ares 22 simply will not open that hatch for them; all they'll do is waste time.

THE OSPREY

Unbeknownst to the heroes, the *Deuces Wild* isn't the only ship at McComb's Star. For several days, a nondescript trader called the *Osprey* has been shadowing the Warhulk, using the debris fields circling the star as cover. The *Osprey* is manned by an Intelligence Directorate task force of strike agents and technical experts under the leadership of Sergeant Garth Rann.

Commander Akelon's attempt to take control of the Warhulk was the opening move in a bold plot. The Intelligence Directorate of Galvin, sister world and mortal enemy of Alitar, learned of the arrival of the Warhulk almost as soon as it appeared at Tendril. While StarMech quickly rounded up technical data and created a plan to stop the robot cruiser, Galvin's Intelligence officers created a plan to seize the ship and use it to win their war against Alitar without destroying the planet outright. Akelon was ordered to accompany the task force sent to deal with the Warhulk, while the *Osprey* was outfitted and dispatched to meet the ship at McComb's Star.

Of course, the Galvinite plan called for Akelon to seize control of the Warhulk at Terivine; the robotic ship was not supposed to be free when it showed up at McComb's Star. The Galvinites decided to wait and watch.

With the appearance of the *Deuces Wild* and its efforts to establish contact with the Warhulk again, Rann quickly realizes that the Warhulk isn't under anyone's control. When the Warhulk drops its guard to allow the *Deuces Wild* to approach, Rann makes his move and orders the *Osprey* to close as well. Akelon transmitted a copy of the StarMech IFF code to his home base before departing with

the *Deuces Wild*; the *Osprey* is equipped with an identical IFF transponder and can approach the Warhulk safely.

If the heroes docked the *Deuces Wild* inside the hangar bay, they won't learn that the Galvinites are here until they encounter Sergeant Rann in Scene 2. If the *Deuces Wild* is outside the hangar bay, anyone manning the bridge of that ship can spot the *Osprey* by succeeding on a System Operation–*sensors* skill check. Add a +2 step penalty if the *Deuces Wild* is airlock-to-airlock with the Warhulk, since its sensors are hampered by the presence of the larger ship.

Depending on the orders the heroes left with the computer of the *Deuces Wild*, the computer itself might detect the *Osprey* and pass a warning to the heroes. Continue with the text below if the *Osprey's* approach is detected.

> A small ship has just emerged from the debris of the nearest asteroid belt and is silently racing toward your position. The exterior vidcams show a weatherbeaten trader with no identifying marks, but it's transmitting an ID code. As the trader turns toward the Warhulk, a single flash of ruby light sparkles across the picture— a signal laser pointed at the Warhulk!

The *Osprey* is about 50,000 kilometers away when the heroes become aware of it, traveling at 4 Mm/phase. It will take the ship only 4 rounds to reach the Warhulk. The Galvinites have secured permission for an airlock docking on the Deck 7 secondary hangar bay, on the opposite side of the Warhulk from the *Deuces Wild*.

The *Osprey's* first priority is to drop its strike team on board the Warhulk; unless the *Deuces Wild* intervenes, Rann flies the ship to the airlock and boards the Warhulk. If the *Deuces Wild* is not locked to the Warhulk (or if it cuts its connection in order to duel with the *Osprey*), the Galvinites launch their boarding pod at the Warhulk's far side as they fly past, then turn back to engage the *Deuces Wild*.

Ares 22 watches the fray closely, but does not intervene. It's caught in a nasty program conflict; both the *Osprey* and the *Deuces Wild* have StarMech IFF codes, and there's no reason to believe that one is more valid than the other. If any of the heroes ask the Warhulk why it isn't intervening on their behalf, the ship responds:

> "*Deuces Wild*, the vessel you are referring to is transmitting a StarMech identification code. I cannot open fire on such a ship until I ascertain its identity, unless I am in mortal danger. To tell the truth, I don't know what to do. The *Osprey* insists that you are Thuldan spies and requests that I destroy you immediately. They've informed me that they have a vital mission update to deliver, and I have granted them permission to come aboard and download their new instructions.
>
> "I guess that I'll have more information to work with once I've had a chance to compare the *Osprey's* instructions with yours. If they conflict, I'll simply assume that the program with the higher authentication code is correct. The other packet will then clearly be a work of sabotage, and I will react accordingly. Wait a few minutes, and I'm sure I'll destroy one ship or the other."

The *Osprey* is slightly outgunned by the *Deuces Wild*, but she's fully crewed at the moment. Assume that all stations on the *Osprey* are manned by veterans with skill scores of 12 and action check scores of 10. If the *Osprey* is badly damaged, it withdraws, leaving Sergeant Rann and his team to their own devices. When the space fight is resolved (or bypassed entirely, if the heroes don't spot the *Osprey*), move on to Scene 2.

OSPREY

Compartments: 6	Dur: 24
Maneuver rating: 0	Acc: 2 Mpp
Cruising speed: 1.5 AU/hr	Berthing: 12

Armament: 2 mass cannons
　Range 5/10/15 Mm　d6+2s/d6+1w/d6+3w　LI(p)/A
Defenses: Point-defense gun, jammer
Armor: Light alloy
　　　　d6−1 (LI), d6−1 (HI), d4−1 (En)
Computer: Ordinary core, battle and nav computers
Engines: Induction engine
Power: Mass reactor rated at 15 power factors
Drive: 5 light-years per starfall

Roll	Comp't	Systems (Dur/Pow)	Durability
1–2	Command	Ord computer core (1/0)	8/8/4
		Crew quarters (2/0)	
		Laser transceiver (0/1)	
		Radio transceiver (0/1)	
		Air/space radar (0/0)	
		Multiband radar (0/0)	
		EM detector (0/0)	
		Point-defense gun (1/1)	
3–5	Weapons 1	Mass cannon (2/3)	4/4/2
5–7	Weapons 2	Mass cannon (2/3)	4/4/2
8–10	Cargo	Boarding pod (2/0)	6/6/3
		Cargo hold (1/0)	
11–14	Auxiliary	Autosupport (0/2)	12/12/6
		Mass reactor (6/0)	
15–20	Engineering	Stardrive (3/*)	14/14/7
		Induction engine (4/4)	

SCENE 2: EXPLORATION

The Warhulk is a vast and complex machine. It's more than 270 meters in length and 60 meters in beam. From the bottom of its hull to the top of its superstructure it's another 60 meters in height. Its interior is honeycombed with machinery, ventilation, power conduits, damage control systems, access passages, weaponry, defenses, sensors, communications, and command systems.

In this scene, the heroes begin their exploration of the interior of the Warhulk . . . but they're not the only ones here. The Galvinite strike team is on board, too, and they're hunting the heroes even as the heroes are hunting *Ares 22*. While they stalk each other in the corridors and passageways of the Warhulk, *Ares 22* silently searches for a way to deny the heroes their victory.

The first part of this scene is devoted to descriptions of the interior features of the Warhulk; to move ahead with the plot, see *"Ares 22"* and "The Galvinites" on page 39.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Refer to the maps on the inside covers of this book as you run through these descriptions. The Warhulk consists of five superstructure levels (L1 through L5) and eight decks (D1 through D8). Deck 1 is also known as the Main Deck. Superstructure levels are numbered in order away from the Main Deck, so L1 is one level above D1, L2 is two levels above D1, and so on. Beneath the Main Deck, decks are numbered in the opposite direction, so the deck just beneath D1 is Deck 2, and Deck 8 is the lowest on the ship. Levels and decks are depicted in order from the top down starting on the top of the inside front cover and ending on the bottom of the inside back cover. The height of each deck and level is 4 to 5 meters, although the human-usable space in each is little more than 2 meters tall. Between-decks armor, machinery, and support systems account for the rest of the space. Supply the players with the information below whenever the heroes have penetrated *Ares 22* far enough to learn these facts:

> The interior of the Warhulk is cramped with machinery, power conduits, piping, and ducts. It's poorly lit and generally awkward for humans; this is a robotic ship that doesn't need to account for crew comfort or accessibility in its layout. Heavy structural ribs bulge into the passageways every 4 meters. Dirt, rust, and a thin grime of lubricant coat most surfaces. At odd intervals you pass sensor turrets suspended from the ceiling, battered vidcams and motion sensors that watch your progress. The corridor surrounds you with the hum of power systems, the soft hiss and whisper of ventilation and climate control, and an acrid smell of old lubricant and ionized power cables.

PASSAGEWAYS

The three types of passageways the heroes may use inside the Warhulk are primary, secondary, and tertiary passageways. It's possible to move around inside any compartment that a passageway allows access to, but the passageways marked on the map are the only ones that allow a human to pass from one compartment to another. Hatches are spaced at intervals along each passageway; these hatches allow access from a passageway to the adjoining compartment. Once the heroes have opened a hatch leading out of a passageway, there's enough room to leave the passageway and explore the (unmapped) interior details of any given compartment.

Primary passageways: The primary corridors are 2 meters wide and a little more than 2 meters in height, well lit, and lined with rails along the corners to make movement around corners easier for repair and maintenance machines.

Secondary passageways: These corridors are a little more than 1 meter wide and about 2 meters in height. They're generally more cramped and less well lit than the main passageways.

Tertiary passageways: Humans aren't expected to spend a lot of time in these crawlways. Most are less than 1 meter wide and 1 meter tall, forcing humans to proceed on hands and knees. Lighting is nonexistent. Some of these crawlspaces are located inside the ceiling or floor of the deck they're marked on.

BULKHEADS

Four types of bulkheads (or walls) are used in the Warhulk's construction. Three are marked on the map; these are the divisions between compartments. In addition, many compartments have interior partitions that aren't shown. Feel free to make these up as you go along.

If the heroes decide to try breaking through a bulkhead for some reason, they'll discover it isn't easy. They have to cause at least 10 points of wound damage or 5 points of mortal damage to open a hole in a 10-meter square section that's big enough to step through. Bulkheads are not affected by stun damage (either primary or secondary), and in addition each of the three types shown on the map has an armor rating that negates a certain amount of damage of any type (LI, HI, or En) every time the wall is attacked.

Standard bulkheads are about 10 cm thick. They're composed of a cerametal, polymere, and insulation sandwich that is airtight. Consider them to be objects of Good toughness, with an armor rating of d6+1. Small power conduits, piping, and sensor systems are incorporated into these bulkheads.

Armored bulkheads are built to resist damage. They're made of a 50-cm thickness of neutronite with a polymere sheath and interior insulation. These bulkheads have Amazing toughness and an armor rating of 3d4+2.

Damage control bulkheads partition the ship into a number of damage control zones. In addition to the vertical bulkheads marked on the map, the separation between each deck and level of the ship is a horizontal damage control bulkhead. These bulkheads are 30 cm thick, with a core of neutronite and a polymere sheath. The insulating material in these bulkheads is a self-sealing polymere goo that quickly flows together to seal breaches up to 2 meters in diameter. The DC bulkheads are of Amazing toughness and have an armor rating of 2d4+1; the sealant is of Good toughness and has an armor rating of d4.

HATCHES AND LIFTS

Each compartment and deck is sealed from its neighbors by heavy hatches and lift shafts. In order for the heroes to move around inside the Warhulk, they'll have to learn how to negotiate these obstacles. All hatches are powered for remote operation by *Ares 22*, and normally can't be opened unless the AI allows it. However, heroes may attempt to open these powered hatches by removing an access panel and 'tricking' the door with a false signal. Hot-wiring a hatch in this manner is a Manipulation–*lockpick*, Computer Science–*hardware*, or Security–*security devices* complex skill check (hero's choice) requiring 4 successes and a time frame of one check per minute.

All hatches are also equipped with a mechanical bypass, allowing heroes to open them by opening another panel, clearing an interlock, and winching the door open. This requires a System Operation–*engineering*, Technical Science–*juryrig*, or *repair* complex skill check. The hero needs 4 successes and 2 minutes per check. Some hatches can also be bypassed by the use of high explosives or high-powered cutting tools.

Standard hatches are airtight, double-sealing doors 5 to 8 cm thick and 100 kg in mass. They're made of cerametal with a polymere coating and include a small viewport. Most of the Warhulk's interior hatches are standard hatches. Cutting through or blowing a standard hatch can be accomplished in just 1 minute.

Armored hatches provide access through damage control bulkheads or armored bulkheads. These are 20 to 40 cm in thickness and may be as massive as 1,000 kg. It's virtually impossible to cut or force an armored hatch.

Security hatches are standard or armored hatches that can't be hot-wired and don't have mechanical bypass devices. The door only opens to a specific access code from *Ares 22*, so it requires a complex Computer Science–*hacking* skill check (5 successes, one check every 5 minutes) at a +3 step penalty in order to crack the hatch code.

Ladders (known as stairs to groundlings) are narrow, steep metal staircases sealed at each deck by horizontal standard hatches. Rails allowing repair machines to climb or descend through these passages line the stairway.

Lifts are cage-style elevators operating on built-in gravity inducers. A standard hatch seals entry to the lift shaft at each deck. *Ares 22* controls the call system for each lift car, but it's possible to call for a car by opening an access

panel and bypassing the computer control circuit—see the rules on page 35 for hot-wiring a standard hatch.

Naturally, a lift shaft provides access to a number of decks even if a car isn't available. An emergency access ladder and rail system allows individuals to travel up and down the shaft.

COMPARTMENT TYPES

The Warhulk has more than 230 separate compartments. Most of these consist of two to five distinct rooms, all serving a common function. A full room-by-room map and description is simply not possible in the space of this adventure. Partition the compartments shown on the map in any way you like, but remember this: The interior of the Warhulk is the *setting* for the events of this adventure, not the adventure itself. All you need to do is be able to give the players the feeling that their heroes are lost in the depths of a mechanical labyrinth and provide them with the mood of the area they're in.

There are a number of special compartments, described in "Specific Locations" on page 39. A general list of compartment types follows.

Artificial Intelligence (AI): These compartments house and support the AI unit. The primary AI housing is on L1 and L2; a secondary system is provided on D7 in the event that the primary AI is incapacitated. The AI itself is not very large, a supercomputer that takes up about 16 cubic meters, but it's surrounded by hundreds of interface devices that connect it to the Warhulk's sensors, communications, weapons, engineering systems, and so on. In addition, a backup fusion generator is installed in these spaces to run the AI in the event that the ship loses main power, and emergency climate control systems ensure that the AI will not be exposed to harmful temperature or radiation. Access to the AI compartments is guarded by security hatches.

Auxiliary Power Room (APR): These four chambers on L1, D3 (two), and D6 house powerful mass reactors, power distribution units, capacitors, fluid transfer and purification machinery, and other important devices. These rooms are not partitioned; each is two decks in height, extending into the deck above, with catwalks and ramps encircling the larger pieces of machinery.

Bomb Bay (BMB): This cavernous two-deck chamber (not partitioned) houses the Warhulk's orbital bombardment capability, an efficient rack delivery system that can drop hundreds of matter bombs in the space of minutes. Its bulkheads are lined with ugly black matter bombs on delivery rails. The "floor" of D8 is actually a huge bomb bay door that can open to space to eject the weapons.

The bomb bay offers desperate heroes a means for destroying the Warhulk, although they're unlikely to survive the experience. With a *lot* of work, a matter bomb can be rigged to detonate on command inside the ship. First someone must succeed on a Demolitions–*disarm* complex skill check in order to open the casing and replace the fusing mechanism; then someone must reprogram the bomb's onboard computer by means of a complex skill check using Computer Science–*hacking*. Then the heroes need to move the bomb (each weighs 500 kg) so that the Warhulk doesn't simply eject the armed bomb after they've done their work. Finally, they need to be at least 20 kilometers away when the bomb goes off. This option is explored in more detail in Act V of the adventure.

Climate Control (CLM): While the Warhulk doesn't require life support per se, it's vital to ensure that its machinery operates within certain environmental specifications. Most of the ship is kept at a temperature of 5° to 15° C, with an oxygenated atmosphere of about 0.5 to 0.8 atm. These compartments, found on most decks throughout the ship, include a number of fan and vent rooms for air circulation, water circulation and recycling machines, heating and air conditioning, atmosphere purification, waste treatment and disposal, and similar devices. Generally, they're partitioned into a number of smaller rooms.

Communications (COM): The Warhulk has three communication bays with radio, laser, and mass transceivers, tracking computers, encryption devices, and a number of commercial interfaces and receivers. All of these compartments are located high in the superstructure.

Crew (CRW): As the heroes will discover in Act IV, the Warhulk has a small crew. This compartment on L1 houses a suite of staterooms, galleys, lounges, and storage rooms for the ship's crew. One of the larger rooms in this area is the cryosleep facility, where the crewmen were kept in suspended animation for the last thirty years. This compartment is clearly different from the rest of the ship; it's clean, well lit, and comfortable, designed for humans instead of machines.

Damage Control (DC): These compartments contain systems designed to protect the neighboring compartments from crippling damage. These areas include fire suppression systems, emergency power and support routing systems, automated repair robots, and extensive stocks of metal shoring, hull patches, power cable, and similar supplies. Two of these compartments, DCC 1 and DCC 2, on D1 and D3 respectively, are damage control centers, equipped with computers dedicated to the management of damage control efforts throughout the ship.

Defenses (DEF): The Warhulk has a powerful array of jammers, chaff dispensers, infrared flares and baffles, and other defensive systems. These compartments are cluttered bays, often with systems that launch or deploy to the exterior of the ship.

Engineering (ENG): Three spacious single-deck open rooms—two aft (on D1 and D3) and one forward (on D2)—house the mammoth induction drives of the Warhulk. Each

drive is a vast machine the size of a small house. Power distribution consoles, damage control devices, backup climate systems, and other related engineering systems fill the rest of these rooms.

In addition to the three drive rooms are two engineering control rooms. The primary station is located on D2, just aft of the stardrive, while the secondary station is located on D3 forward. These complex rooms are filled with consoles and monitors watching over every engineering function of the Warhulk, from the stardrive to the sewage disposal systems in the crew quarters. Of course, all these functions are duplicated in the AI consoles.

Fire Control (FC): The Warhulk's weapon systems are useless without targeting data. Even though the primary sensor systems provide information that's good enough to shoot on, any large warship also has a number of fire control sensors and control stations. These rooms contain dedicated radar, laser, and maser targeting systems, along with battle computers that can coordinate the fire of many different weapons at once.

Hangar Bay (HB): The Warhulk is primarily a ship of the line, not a carrier, but it does command a squadron of twenty-four robot attack craft. These are divided between three hangar bays in one group of twelve and two groups of six. The fighters are useful as scouts, interceptors, pursuit craft, and long-range strike ships.

Each hangar is, as one might expect, a cavernous room two decks in height. From overhead, a heavy gantry crane and rack system allows the stowage of the fighters when not in use. Automated landing systems allow *Ares 22* to bring in damaged fighters through remote control. The large hangar on D4 and D5 is connected to the ship's main magazine by a bomb hoist running through the tertiary passageway on D4, so that fighters in this bay can be armed with all kinds of ordnance for use against ground or space targets.

In order to launch fighters, the hangar doors must be opened to space, so there's nothing in any of these compartments that will be hurt by exposure to vacuum.

Internal Security (IS): These compartments are the nerve centers of the Warhulk's interior defenses. Squads of deadly security robots are stored in these rooms, slaved to internal monitoring systems and dedicated security computer systems. The main internal security command post is located on D1 amidships, while a second command post is located on D6 forward. Refer to Scene 3 for details on the Warhulk's security robots.

Main Battery (MB): The Warhulk's main battery consists of sixteen quantum cannons, powerful devices capable of hurling a beam of destructive subatomic energy over 50,000 kilometers. Each cannon is housed in a structure three decks tall. The topmost level is the turret proper, not shown on the map. The middle level is a circular barbette housing the turret machinery, shown as a red cir-

cle on the map. Beneath this barbette is a large weapon room containing the powerful cyclotrons and accumulators that power the cannon. If the heroes try to turn the quantum cannon against the ship, they'll find that the turret's traverse is restricted by mechanical cutouts that ensure that it cannot fire on the rest of the ship.

Missile Room (MS): The Warhulk is loaded with hundreds of missiles armed with various warheads. Most are matter reaction weapons, but it has a number of nuclear devices, conventional high explosives, and submunitions weapons as well. The missile rooms are built on a "cell" design, meaning that each missile is loaded into an individual cell with its own hatch and launch controls. Most of the space in the missile rooms is taken up by these cells.

The heroes might think of using a nuclear warhead from one of the missiles to destroy the Warhulk. In general, they face the same challenges here that they would in adapting a matter bomb (see the Bomb Bay description) to the job, but in addition they'll also have to locate one of the nukes and get into its cell. The missile cells aren't marked in any distinctive fashion, and the only way to get to them is to open the hatch on the exterior of the hull and work on the missile in vacuum.

The Warhulk is armed with two missile rooms forward, each one three decks tall, and two missile rooms aft, each one a single deck in height..

Magazine (MZ): Most of the ship's weapons are energy devices, powered by its mighty mass reactors. However, extra missiles, bombs, and similar armaments are stored in the ship's magazine on D3 and D4.

Since the magazine contains a large amount of volatile explosives, it's the most heavily armored compartment of the entire ship. A conventional explosive detonated in this compartment would cripple the ship, but the Warhulk would survive. Setting off a nuke or a matter bomb in here would destroy it entirely. Refer to the Bomb Bay description for info on rearming bombs for use against the ship.

Navigation (NV): Without some ability to monitor its own progress and determine its location, the Warhulk would be virtually useless. The navigation compartments scattered around the ship contain instruments and systems for visual, electronic, and gravitonic navigation. The only real viewports in the entire ship are located in these compartments.

Repair Shop (REP): The designers of the ship knew that the Warhulk might receive damage beyond its damage control capability. The repair shops were installed to provide the vessel with the ability to manufacture its own replacement parts and precision instruments in the event of catastrophic damage (in fact, this is exactly what happened over 30 years ago). The main repair shop is located on D4 aft. Repair manufacturing and coordination is handled by the Repair Center on D2. Additional shops are located on L1 and L3.

The repair shops resemble vast automated factories. They're unpartitioned compartments filled with huge machine tools—lathes, presses, molds, and similar devices. With a little work, these could be used to perform almost any heavy manufacturing the heroes might think of, although the machines are so heavy that they cannot be moved from the workshops.

Repair Supplies (RS): In order to manufacture hull plates and precision machinery, the Warhulk requires extensive stores of raw materials—sheet metal, circuitry, milled alloys, etc. These compartments are cluttered holds filled with the raw materials of a starship, arranged in trays and bins accessible by a tracked retrieval system. Given time and knowledge, the heroes could fabricate these materials into a variety of useful devices . . . but it would take days, time the heroes don't have.

Secondary Battery (SB): Designed for use against large warships as well as smaller craft, the Warhulk's secondary battery consists of forty-two pulse-fire plasma cannons. Each of these weapons is installed in its own universal mount (not shown on the map, but fastened to the hull of the ship adjacent to the compartment) that allows it to fire in almost a 180-degree arc. The secondary battery rooms are filled with machinery, capacitors, targeting systems, and other equipment, leaving little space unused.

Stardrive (SD): Almost every major system on board the Warhulk is redundant or double-redundant, with backups located in different areas of the ship so that *Ares 22* can survive even the worst battle damage. The ship's stardrive is the exception. Guarded in the most heavily armored section of engineering, this colossal mass reactor and drive unit stands three decks high. In addition to housing the ship's stardrive, this compartment also serves as its main power distribution and control center. The central reactor can meet 80 percent of the Warhulk's power demands all by itself, and with the numerous auxiliary power rooms the ship generates almost twice as much power as it needs for combat operation.

It's possible to destroy the Warhulk by creating a runaway reaction in the ship's mass reactor, but this will take a lot of work. Mass reactors are designed not to go out of control even if they sustain extensive battle damage. However, a hero with System Operation–*engineering* or Technical Science–*repair* may attempt a complex skill check to sabotage the mass reactor by manually removing interlocks, rigging short circuits, tying down automatic valves, and so on. This complex check requires 7 successes, with one check allowed per hour and every check made with a +3 step penalty.

The Warhulk monitors the stardrive continuously, and will take drastic measures to prevent sabotage. If it cannot drive the heroes out of here with its security robots, it simply attempts a shutdown of the reactor, killing the power.

Sensors (SEN): The first mission of a warship is to detect and localize the enemy. In order to accomplish this mission, the Warhulk is equipped with an unparalleled suite of sensors. Fifteen compartments dispersed to cover all sides of the ship contain powerful multiband radars, sensitive video and electronic receivers, infrared sensors, mass detectors, remote sensing devices, spectroanalysis devices, and high-powered ladar (laser radar) for precise ranging and image scanning of targets. Most of these compartments are equipped with power supplies, coolant systems for delicate electronics, gyroscopic compensators, and similar devices.

Shields (SH): The ship's first line of defense against enemy weapons are its formidable deflection inducers. These powerful fields add as much as a +3 step penalty to the attacks of any capital ship weaponry, or a +6 step penalty to attacks by small craft (such as the *Deuces Wild*). These arrays are located in twelve compartments scattered around the ship.

The deflection shield compartments consume a vast amount of power. They are cluttered with huge power conduits, large capacitors, and the inducer arrays—convoluted coils contained in machines the size of a small room. Each compartment has two or three separate rooms.

Supplies (SP): Despite the best efforts of the Warhulk's designers, many of the ship systems include consumable parts that require occasional replacement. While the ship's repair facilities can fabricate almost any component of any system on board, this is not the fastest or most efficient way to handle routine wear and tear or low-level battle damage. Consequently, spare parts for thousands of the most fragile, delicate, common, or consumable pieces of the ship are carried in forty-four compartments. These are some of the most crowded and heavily partitioned regions of the ship, with a dozen or more lockers, closets, storage rooms, and holds in each marked compartment.

Typical parts include electronic components, ducting material, circuit boards, wiring, lights, tools, fasteners, bolts, screws, rivets, wave guides, bus bars, fuses, switches, valves, piping, damage control equipment, more batteries and power cells than you can shake a stick at, crew rations, lubricants and hydraulic fluid, flashlights, e-suits and support packs, magnetic clamps, machine parts, belts and fans, and anything else you deem appropriate. Note that the crew rations and supplies might provide heroes with a hint about the Warhulk's emergency crew.

Tertiary Battery (TB): Designed for point-blank defense against missiles and attack craft, the Warhulk's tertiary battery consists of twenty-six quad-mounted laser cannons. These weapons can slice a lightly armored fighter or incoming missile warhead to pieces in a matter of moments. These weapon mounts are jammed with turret machinery, power systems, targeting radars, and associated machinery, making it hard for an individual to even climb into the mount.

MODIFYING THE MAP

The maps on the inside front cover and inside back cover of this book present the interior of the Last Warhulk as it appears in pristine condition. (These are the original plans for the vessel, which were provided to Denora Barad by her superiors before she embarked on her mission.) Players will be entitled to get a look at these maps, or at least the maps for particular decks, from time to time as the heroes make their way through the ship.

You can take liberties with this information, either to throw the heroes a curve if they seem to be having too easy a time of it or simply to inject a fresh element of surprise into the adventure. Remember, *Ares 22* was severely damaged in its last battle 30 years ago; although the ship has restored itself to full operational status, there may be places within the interior that don't look the same anymore. Certain passageways might be clogged with debris and impassable unless the debris can be cleared. Conversely, some of the bulkheads separating compartments could have gaping holes in them, especially in areas close to the ship's exterior. By combining both of these possibilities, you can pretty much steer the heroes in any direction you want them to go, either speeding them up or slowing them down as need be.

ARES 22

When the heroes first board the Warhulk, they possess a tenuous free-conduct pass to approach the AI and install their program. Using one of the tactics described in Scene 1 of this act, they've convinced the Warhulk that they have the right and authority to give it orders or effect repairs. The computer is bound by its programming to allow them full access.

However, while *Ares 22* might be constrained to cooperate with the heroes, the AI does not want to be shut down. Its first taste of the "Peace" program showed it exactly what the heroes mean to do, and *Ares 22* is desperate to avoid destruction. Even as it's conducting the heroes toward its most vulnerable spot, it's racing to find loopholes or faults that would allow it to protect itself from the delivery of the "Peace" program.

For the moment, the Warhulk is not hostile to the heroes. It allows them unrestricted access to any room they wish to enter, opening doors for them, lighting corridors, and generally being a polite host. At the end of this scene, however, *Ares 22* discovers the break it's been looking for and activates a security subroutine against boarders; move on to Scene 3.

In the meantime, the Warhulk directs the heroes along the following path:

- Hatch 515 in the hangar bay leads to the primary passageway heading aft.

- The passageway takes the heroes through a supply compartment, with several doors opening into general storerooms full of electronics repair materials and lubricants.
- 10 meters from the hangar, *Ares 22* directs the heroes to turn left into the secondary passage crossing the ship. Fifteen meters from the main corridor, the Warhulk tells the heroes to ascend the ladder (stairway) leading up.
- At the top of the ladder, *Ares 22* sends the heroes starboard to join the main passageway on Deck 4.
- From here, the heroes turn right and head aft 70 meters to the main midships lift.

By coincidence, the Warhulk is also directing the Galvinite boarding party to follow a similar course. From the Galvinites' entry point on the Deck 7 hangar bay, the Warhulk sent them up to the main after lift. The Galvinites take the lift to Deck 4 and move forward until they encounter the heroes at the main lift.

If questioned about the Galvinites or their intentions, *Ares 22* is helpful and informative. It cheerfully tells the heroes that the *Osprey* (or its boarding pod) is docked at the Deck 7 hangar bay, and that the *Osprey*'s crew is headed for the AI room in order to effect repairs. In fact, *Ares 22* may question the heroes extensively about their relation to the other party.
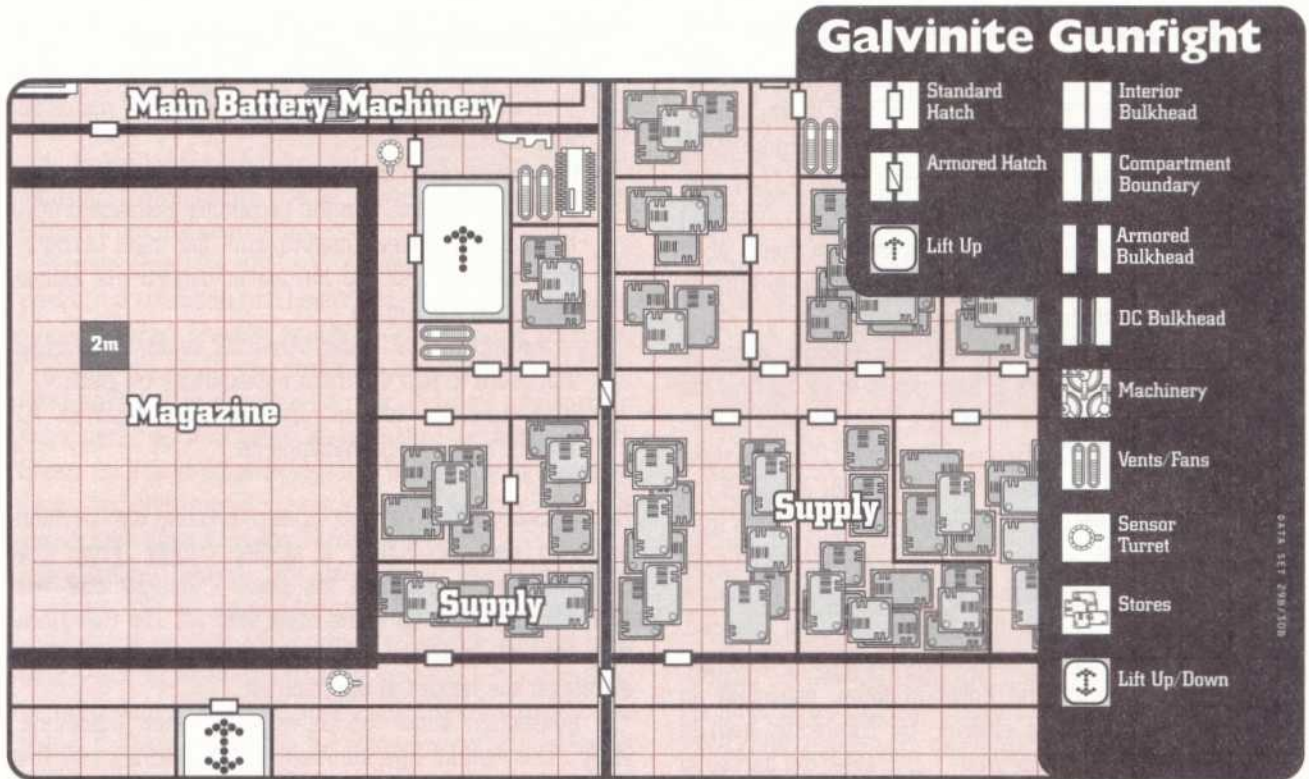
In the event that the heroes avoid the Galvinites altogether or find some other way to get to the AI compartment, skip ahead to Scene 3—*Ares 22* still determines that they're a threat and activates its security routine.

THE GALVINITES

While the heroes are exploring the Warhulk, the Galvinite strike team from the *Osprey* is doing the same. If the heroes are following the guidance of *Ares 22*, read the text below. If the heroes are trying to find their own way to the AI compartment, they may delay the meeting with the Galvinites for a time, but Sergeant Rann will simply ask *Ares 22* for updates on the heroes' position and lead his team to confront them at the earliest opportunity.

"The hatch in front of you is the main midships lift," *Ares 22* says smoothly over the passageway speakers. "That will take you up to superstructure Level 1, where the computer core is located. Here—allow me." The lift call light illuminates, indicating that the car is on its way.

To your right, down the hallway, the hatch leading aft from this spot abruptly hisses open. A pair of men in black body armor charge through and reach for their submachine guns. "Sergeant! They're here!" one calls over his shoulder.

Galvinite Gunfight

Legend:
- Standard Hatch
- Armored Hatch
- Lift Up
- Interior Bulkhead
- Compartment Boundary
- Armored Bulkhead
- DC Bulkhead
- Machinery
- Vents/Fans
- Sensor Turret
- Stores
- Lift Up/Down

Map labels: Main Battery Machinery, Magazine, 2m, Supply, Supply

DATA SET 2988/30B

Refer to the map above, covering a small area of Deck 4 near the main midships lift, for an idea of where the heroes and the Galvinites are (and show this map to the players, so they can decide what their heroes will do).

Call for Awareness checks to determine if any of the heroes are surprised by the appearance of the Galvinite team. If the heroes have no idea that they may have company on board the Warhulk (for example, if they docked the *Deuces Wild* in the hangar bay or they didn't spot the *Osprey* before they left their ship), add a +1 step penalty to the heroes' surprise checks. On the other hand, if the heroes were expecting this encounter, you can reverse the circumstances and have the Galvinites check for surprise.

The leader of the team is Garth Rann, described on page 8 in the "Supporting Cast" portion of the introduction. He is accompanied by four commandos and two technicians. (Drop a commando or two if the heroes have a small or low-level party.) Sergeant Rann believes that his first priority is to disable or drive off the heroes so that his technicians will have unimpeded access to the AI, so he'll do everything in his power to defeat them.

COMMANDOS (4)

Durability: 10/10/5/5	Action check: 12+/11/5/2
Move: sprint 20, run 12, walk 4	#Actions: 2
Reaction score: Ordinary/1	Last resorts: 0

Attacks

9mm charge SMG	12/6/3	d4+1w/d6+1w/d4m	HI/O
Laser pistol	12/6/3	d4+1w/d6+1w/d4m	En/O
4 concus. grenades	12/6/3	d6+2s/d4w/d4+1w	LI/O
Unarmed–*power*	12/6/3	d6+1s/d6+3s/d4+1w	LI/O

Defenses

Battle jacket: d6–1 (LI), d4+1 (HI), d4–1 (En)
+1 STR resistance modifier vs. hand-to-hand attacks

TECHNICIANS (2)

Durability: 8/8/4/4	Action check: 11+/10/5/2
Move: sprint 20, run 12, walk 4	#Actions: 2
Reaction score: Marginal/1	Last resorts: 0

Attacks

Laser pistol	10/5/2	d4+1w/d6+1w/d4m	En/O
Unarmed	8/4/2	d4s/d4+1s/d4+2s	LI/O

Defenses

CF short coat: d4–1 (LI), d4–1 (HI), d6–3 (En)

If Rann or three commandos go down in the fight, the rest of the Galvinites break off to regroup. They'll attempt to circle around by means of the secondary passage on the port side of Deck 4 to come up on the *Deuces Wild* or take the heroes from behind. The technicians avoid front-line fighting unless pressed; their primary job is to work on the AI, not shoot up heroes.

Don't worry too much if the Intelligence Directorate strike team overcomes the heroes or vice versa. The Warhulk is going to put everyone on the same side pretty quickly, and the onslaught of robot security machines in the next scene should serve as a sufficient distraction to allow any prisoners to escape. The Galvinites are very loyal to their cause and don't waste words answering the heroes' questions or engaging in negotiations, not as long as they've got a chance to take down the heroes and seize the Warhulk for themselves.

SCENE 3: SECURITY SUBROUTINE

While the heroes play cat-and-mouse with the Intelligence Directorate strike team, *Ares 22* plots their downfall. The AI determines that the heroes are not authorized to alter its programming and evaluates them as a threat to be eliminated. In the final scene of this act, *Ares 22* musters its defenses against the heroes and does its level best to kill them all.

EVALUATION

Presumably, the heroes have just fought their way through the Galvinites to the main midships lift. They need to go from Deck 4 to Level 1 in order to reach the AI. The lift car works just like any standard elevator, except that there are no call buttons or manual controls; instead, a dataport connection allows the Warhulk's maintenance and security robots to plug in and command the lift to take them where they need to go. Naturally, *Ares 22* can control the lift, and its voice interface allows any human riding the lift to simply ask the AI to take him where he needs to go.

If the adventure's taken a different turn, you can run this part of the scene in any passageway of the ship. While the heroes are getting ready to pass through another hatch opened for them by the AI, *Ares 22* delays in opening the doors and questions them as described below.

> The lift doors glide shut behind you, and the car lurches a little as the gravitonic motor compensates for your weight. The lift is a cluttered room about 2.5 meters square, its sides lined with power conduits and piping behind a wire cage for the occupants. "Next stop, Level 1 in the superstructure," *Ares 22* observes. "So, what exactly is this patch going to do? I'm certain that I am operating at peak efficiency already."
>
> The power systems of the lift hum blandly, but the car isn't going anywhere yet. "Can you explain how your program is going to work?" *Ares 22* asks.

This is your opportunity to provide the players with a premonition that things might not work out as they expect. Basically, the heroes are doomed to failure here . . . although you should be careful to make sure that the players do not suspect that this is the case.

Allow the heroes to reply to *Ares 22* in any fashion they like. Two courses of action have at least a remote possibility of mollifying the AI. First, if the heroes admit that they have no idea what "Peace" will do and pass themselves off as messengers instead of experts, *Ares 22* may allow them to pass . . . for now. Second, if the heroes bluff and tell *Ares 22* that it doesn't need to know that information, they may be able to bluster past. Use your best judgment about the success of the players' roleplaying

efforts.

When the heroes offer anything approaching an explanation, *Ares 22* "relents" and activates the lift.

Continue with "Betrayal," below. The lift ride lasts only a few seconds, so there isn't time for the heroes to sabotage or stop the lift.

TWIST: LET THE HEROES PULL IT OFF?

You could choose to allow ingenious heroes demonstrating brilliant play to actually reach the AI and succeed in installing the kill-program, but that would short-circuit the most interesting part of the adventure! However, you won't derail the adventure beyond the point of recovery if the heroes do everything that they think they're supposed to but it still doesn't work out. Here are three alternatives:

First, when the heroes reach the AI and install the "Peace" program, they may discover that the kill-program is flawed. It shuts down the AI, but a short time later *Ares 22* reactivates itself by means of an unsuspected subroutine that the programmers didn't know about.

Second, the "Peace" program might work perfectly, but *Ares 22* wakes up Jaina Vale and her crew before it goes down. The StarMech loyalists equip themselves, survey the situation, and reboot *Ares 22* as soon as they can.

Finally, if any of the Galvinites remain at large aboard the ship, they may accidentally undo the heroes' efforts in their own attempt to seize control of the computer. In any case, the players might be rudely interrupted by the return of *Ares 22* just as they're congratulating themselves on the success of their mission.

BETRAYAL

Deciding that the heroes pose a grave threat to its own safety and security, *Ares 22* quickly creates a plan for dealing with them. On Deck 1, a level below the AI, is the ship's main internal security complex. The main midships lift shaft passes right through this compartment. *Ares 22* simply stops the lift one level short and opens the door, confronting the heroes with eight heavily armed security robots! Read or paraphrase the following text:

> The lift car glides to a stop. With a slight thump it matches the ship's gravity field again. "Watch your step," *Ares 22* admonishes as the doors slide open.
>
> The corridor beyond the lift runs fore and aft. It's lined with numerous sliding metal hatches. Abruptly, every hatch in sight retracts, opening to reveal powerful machines covered in gleaming alloy armor—robots of some kind. The automatons surge out into the passage with one motion, bringing energy

weapons to bear on you and lunging to attack with bright, sharp blades!

"Security subroutine XO11c activated," the AI observes distantly. "Please make sure that you place any personal identification in a prominent location, so that I can identify your bodies after you're dead. Have a nice day."

If a hero familiar with the Warhulk's layout attempts to determine where they are, allow him or her a Knowledge skill check to determine that they're in the Internal Security Command Center, one deck below the AI. The heroes are free to talk with *Ares 22* as much as they want to; the AI will even reply. But it has decided that the heroes—seen now as intruders—need to be dealt with, and it doesn't accept surrenders.

Refer to the map below for a detailed view of the Internal Security compartment, which is subdivided into several smaller areas. The four storage bays in the forward section of this compartment house a total of twenty Model 15 robots, described below. (Four other storage areas hold larger robots, which come into play later in the adventure.) Eight Model 15 robots are out when the heroes arrive; one more robot can activate and advance into the corridor from each bay at the end of each round.

MODEL 15 SECURITY ROBOT

STR 13	(+2)	INT 12	(+1)
DEX 10	(0)	WIL 6	(−1)
CON 8		PER 4	

Durability: 8/8/4/4   Action check: 12+/11/5/2
Move: fly 30   #Actions: 3
Reaction score: Ordinary/2   Last resorts: 0

Attacks

Manipulators	13/6/3	d6s/d6+2s/d6w	LI/O
Blades	14/7/3	d6w/2d4w/d4m	LI/O
Laser turret	15/7/3	d6w/d8+1w/d6m	En/G
Grenades	14/7/3	d6+1s/d6+1w/d4m	En/G

Defenses

Good toughness (degrade damage by one level)
Alloy armor: d6+1 (LI), d6+1 (HI), d4+1 (En)

Skills

Heavy [13]–*indirect [14]*; Melee [13]–*blade [17]*; Unarmed Attack [13]; Modern [10]–*SMG [15]*; Stamina [8]–*endurance [12]*; Security [12]–*devices [13]*; Technical Science [12]; Awareness [6]–*perception [10]*.

The Model 15 security robot is powered by a small gravity induction engine mounted in a pedestal base and can move in all directions. Its armament consists of a high-powered laser in its upper turret; two dangerous rotary blades; four heavy-duty manipulator tentacles with which it can grapple and strike in nonlethal situations; and a built-in grenade launcher. The robot carries ten energy grenades; each has a blast radius of 2/4/6 meters for Amazing/Good/Ordinary damage.

Each security robot is equipped with several sensor systems. Its dorsal turret mounts a vidcam with thermal capa-

Robot Attack

Standard Hatch		Detainment Cell
Security Hatch		Interior Bulkhead
Supplies		Compartment Boundary
		DC Bulkhead
		Machinery
		Vents/Fans
		Sensor Turret
		Robot Storage
		Lift
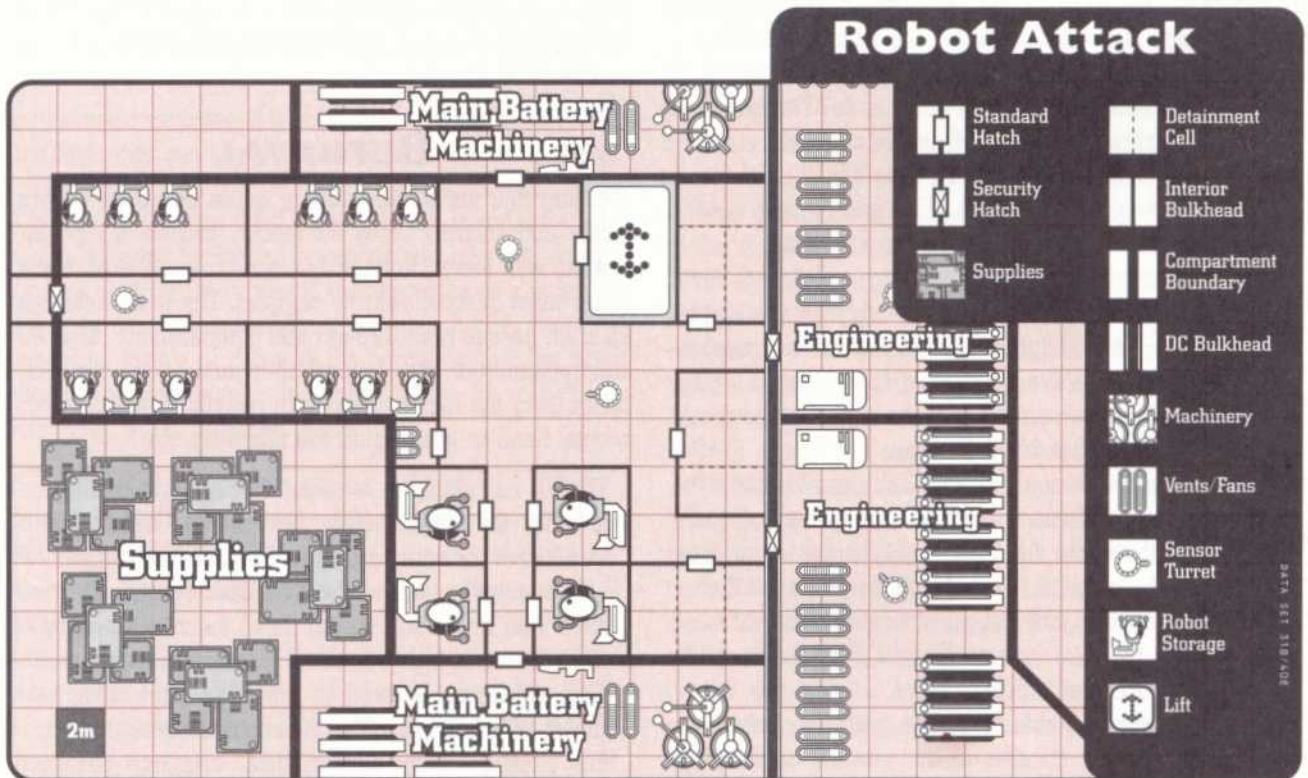
bility, allowing it to see in normal light or by infrared in darkness. Its audio pickups are several times more sensitive than the human ear. Finally, it has a motion sensor that can detect moving objects or creatures within 20 meters through subtle changes in air pressure. The robots communicate by means of radio transmitters.

The robots are controlled by smart computer brains. They can move and fight independently or as a small team, but they rely on *Ares 22* to identify threats and deploy them. There's no point in trying to negotiate with a Model 15, although in unusual circumstances the computer brain will seek instructions from its controlling AI.

The heroes aren't expected to defeat twenty security robots in one gigantic firefight. In fact, if they attempt to do so, they'll almost certainly be cut down and killed. The robots refrain from using their grenade launchers at first, since the area they're operating in is small enough that they'd take damage too, but if the heroes are persistent the robots will begin lobbing grenades to wear them down.

Try to steer the heroes toward retreating from this fight. Their best tactic is to retreat back down the lift shaft to get away from the security robots, at least for the moment. If the heroes refuse to yield, *Ares 22* brings out the four superheavy Model 25 security robots (see "Counterstrike" in the next act) that are stored in the security compartment.

INVOLUNTARY RETREAT

Ares 22 leaves the lift doors open, depriving the heroes of anything resembling cover. If the heroes attempt to retreat by hot-wiring the lift car, *Ares 22* has one more nasty trick up its mechanical sleeve: It cuts the power to the lift. Since the car is suspended at the current level by its induction motor, it plummets like a stone when the power goes out. The car crashes to the bottom of the lift shaft on Deck 4, inflicting d8+2w to all characters inside or atop the car.

If the heroes happen to have Denora Barad's detonex charge with them and try to use it to get rid of the robots, *Ares 22* allows them to set the charge—and then locks the lift doors open and the car in place. The heroes will be right on top of the explosive charge when it goes off, if they continue with their attempt.

Where else can the heroes go? If they attempt to climb out the top or bottom of the car, they'll need to open a standard hatch (see page 35). They'll find that the interdeck hatch just above the car is sealed, and the hatches below all the way down to Deck 4 are still open (this is a good time to drop the car, if you haven't done so yet).

If the heroes try to fight past the robots on Deck 1, they'll find that the security center is sealed shut; they're contained in this compartment. When the lift car is dropped, the interdeck doors in the shaft above the heroes remain open so that the security robots can pursue the heroes to Deck 4.

SECURITY MEASURES

When *Ares 22* decides that the heroes are now a threat, it activates its antiboarder protocols. All hatches throughout the ship are shut and access is denied except to the Warhulk's own robots. Interdeck hatches in the ladders, access shafts, and lift shafts close, blocking vertical movement (although both intercompartment and interdeck hatches can be bypassed; see page 35). This may isolate some heroes in different parts of the ship, although if you're a kindhearted Gamemaster you may give the heroes some warning that the doors are about to shut—flashing lights, klaxons, and so on.

DEPARTURE

Just when things seem to be as bad as they're going to get, *Ares 22* makes it worse. While the AI attacks any characters inside the hull with its robots, it abruptly departs McComb's Star on the last leg of its voyage to Alitar.

If the *Deuces Wild* stood off at a distance and sent the heroes to the Warhulk by launch or spacewalk, any characters left on board are in immediate jeopardy of missing the rest of the adventure. You have a couple of choices here; if you've been looking for a way to get rid of the heroes' ship and extra characters, the Warhulk pulverizes the *Deuces Wild* with its quantum cannon and plasma guns, blasting the ship into subatomic particles. Or, if you feel generous, tell any heroes on board the *Deuces Wild* that the Warhulk is going to starfall within a matter of minutes and give them a chance to join the rest of the party by quickly boarding the Warhulk before it leaves.

If the *Deuces Wild* is actually inside the hangar bay, the Warhulk can't do much about it . . . although you might send up some security robots from the secondary security station on Deck 6 to keep the stay-at-home heroes busy.

Finally, if the *Deuces Wild* is mated to the Warhulk's hangar docking port, you can choose one of three options. You can have the ship cast free and left intact (again, characters on board might have a round or two to move to the Warhulk before the docking connection is broken); the ship can be cast free and destroyed; or the Warhulk may not be able to release the *Deuces Wild,* leaving it mated to the side of the robot cruiser. (The *Osprey* may be subjected to a similar range of choices, at your discretion.)

> Without warning, the Warhulk suddenly shudders. The lights flicker as unimaginable energy thrums deep in the ship's belly. The atmosphere inside seems to almost crackle with power. The unmistakable, gut-wrenching sensation of starfall washes over you. Outside, the stars whirl away into blank grayness. "Five days to Algemron," *Ares 22* grimly announces. "Enjoy the ride!"

ACT IV: GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE

The clock is running. The Warhulk is only 5 days from its target at Algemron, and the heroes are running out of time. Worse yet, *Ares 22* has determined that the heroes pose a threat to its mission, and the AI will stop at nothing to rid itself of their interference.

PREVIOUSLY . . .

Catching up to the Warhulk at McComb's Star, the heroes convinced *Ares 22* to allow them to come aboard and effect repairs. Unfortunately, they weren't the only people waiting for the Warhulk at McComb's Star. The *Osprey*, a ship crewed by Galvin's vaunted Intelligence Directorate, took advantage of the heroes' efforts and inserted a strike team to counter the heroes. While the heroes dealt with the Galvinite intruders, *Ares 22* determined that no one on board meant it well and activated its antiboarder security protocols. Luring the heroes into an ambush, *Ares 22* drove them back to the lower decks of the ship.

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

The name of the game now is survival. The heroes are trapped in the heart of a homicidal machine bent on their destruction. Every hour carries them closer to starrise at Algemron and the completion of the Warhulk's terrible mission. Up to now, the pursuit of the Warhulk has been a graceful series of move and countermove played out across days of interstellar travel—but now hours count.

Day	Event
43	Heroes arrive at McComb's Star.
44	Warhulk departs McComb's Star.
45	Warhulk wakes crew. (Act IV, Scene 1)
46–48	Heroes explore Warhulk and deal with ship's crew. (Scene 2)
49	Warhulk arrives at Algemron. (Scene 3, plus beginning of Act V)

SCENE 1: ACTION AND REACTION

The Warhulk goes on the offensive, hammering the heroes with every weapon it can muster. It uses its security robots, sets mechanical traps with its life support and transit systems, and tries to decoy them into lethal courses of action. Perhaps most important, the Warhulk wakes its emergency crew—five StarMech technicians frozen in cryosleep. Led by Jaina Vale, these men and women believe that they're still fighting the Second Galactic War, and they'll do everything in their power to help the Warhulk defeat the heroes. They can easily counter many of the heroes' most effective tactics against the Warhulk, using human ingenuity to defeat human ingenuity.

SCENE 2: COUNTERSTRIKE

Jaina Vale and her technicians are loyal to StarMech, but they're not stupid and they're not programmed like machines. Given a chance, the heroes may be able to demonstrate to Vale and her team that the Warhulk is fighting a war long over. In the meantime, *Ares 22* steps up its efforts to silence the heroes forever.

SCENE 3: STARRISE AT ALGEMRON

After 5 days in drivespace, the heroes are out of time. The Warhulk reaches Algemron and drives toward its target, the planet of Alitar. The heroes must disable or destroy *Ares 22* quickly, or the Warhulk will kill thousands, perhaps millions, of people.

THE SUPPORTING CAST

The heroes may not be the only group of saboteurs on board the Warhulk; any Galvinites surviving from the end of the previous act are still on board, and still attempting to press on with their mission. Sergeant Rann and his men are concerned with their own survival first, but if it's at all possible they still want to take over the Warhulk. Rann might consider a temporary alliance with the heroes in order to gain access to the AI, intending to betray the heroes once he's used them to get what he wants.

Jaina Vale begins this act as an implacable enemy of the heroes, but she and her comrades can be turned against the Warhulk with care. To the greatest extent possible, the StarMech technicians conceal their operations from the heroes, trying to avoid direct confrontation until it's absolutely necessary.

SIDETRACKS AND COMPLICATIONS

The adventure should be plenty complicated by this point, but if you want to make things even more interesting, consider creating a robot character or two. Imagine that the main security program is semiautonomous from *Ares 22*, and that it has goals of its own—perhaps unseating *Ares 22* as the root directory for the ship. It might try to strike a deal with the heroes to damage a portion of the AI without destroying the whole complex.

As another complication, add more security robots with a variety of weapons, skills, and methods. The heroes might be stalked by tiny sensor robots that track their movements, attacked by maintenance machines outfitted with crude weaponry, or lured into ambushes by captured characters who have been fitted with cybernetic controls—puppets compelled to obey the AI unquestioningly.

Trapped aboard the Warhulk, the heroes must elude the AI's murderous security robots and deadly traps if they hope to survive. *Ares 22* is brilliant and ruthless, a relentless enemy that never sleeps, never forgets, and never gives up. It knows every square centimeter of the battlefield and every pitfall and distraction that may come into play. It will take every bit of the heroes' luck, resourcefulness, and skill to live long enough to take on the AI itself.

So far, most of the scenes in this adventure have been event-based; they take place according to a timetable, not a keyed map of any kind. This scene is a little different. Instead of providing you with the expected development of the plot, we're going to set you free to harry, pressure, attack, and badger your players to your heart's content. This scene is about putting the heroes on the defensive.

> Your eyes still seared by laser blasts and your ears ringing with gunfire and explosions, you stagger to your feet in the crumpled lift car. The control panel is dead; this lift isn't going anywhere until it's been repaired. Major Barad limps out into the passageway beyond the half-open doors, pistol ready, one hand clamped over her side. "*Ares 22* has decided we're a threat," she says over her shoulder. "I think that we're going to have to do this the hard way. Anyone have any ideas?"

Encourage the players to consider any plans or options they wish to. If they were ambushed in the lift shaft as described in Scene 3 of Act III, they're right back down on Deck 4 at the place they fought it out with the Galvinite gunmen (see the map on page 40). For the moment, they're out of danger.

The next question for the heroes is simple. How are they going to accomplish their mission? What's the best way to take the offensive again? Four of the more likely strategies are described below, but be prepared to be flexible and creative. There are dozens of ways that heroes might try to destroy or disable the Warhulk. You want to provide the players with the appearance that they've found the "right" way to approach the adventure, while throwing enough obstacles and complications in their path to make it tough.

RUNNING THIS SCENE

Allow the heroes to travel wherever they want to inside the Warhulk and put their plans into motion. The first three or four times the heroes must pass one of the interior hatches (see page 35), rigorously enforce the process of getting the hatch open to impress the players with the difficulty of moving around. After you've demonstrated that it's not easy, save the hatch-opening checks for dramatic

scenes such as escaping from security robots or attempting to break into crucial compartments.

While the heroes are marching here and there inside the ship, it's your job to paint a tense, continuous action scene in which they never catch a breather. Vary the types of threats and the presentation of the attacks so that the players stay on their toes. Keep it up as long as you think the players are engaged by the story, and when you think they've had enough, go on to the next scene.

Don't forget that the heroes are going to get tired. After a couple of hours of constant combat and movement, they're going to be exhausted. Require heroes to make a fatigue check (a skill check using Stamina–*endurance*) at the end of any combat or challenge scene in which a hero sustains wound or mortal damage. Also, you may require heroes to make fatigue checks every 8 hours. After a couple of fights and a long day of constant activity, some of the weaker heroes should be out of gas. Force the heroes to rest—and then hit them again as soon as they take a breather.

The heroes are going to be in drivespace for 5 days. Ideally, you can hit them hard enough that the final scenes of the adventure are delayed until the Warhulk actually starrises at Algemron. Hold the heroes at bay for 5 days, and you can end the adventure with a riveting race against time as the Warhulk plummets toward destruction.

THE INFORMATION BATTLE

Although the players might not realize it, their heroes are doomed if they don't win the information battle. As long as *Ares 22* knows where they are and what they're doing, it can concentrate overwhelming numbers of security robots and arrange devastating traps for the heroes. So, how does *Ares 22* keep track of them?

First, the "eye" symbols on the map of the Warhulk indicate the locations of sensor turrets—devices that detect the heroes' presence in a compartment or record the fact that the heroes are traveling through a certain passageway. These sensors can be disabled individually—but some of them (at your discretion) might not be operational to begin with because they weren't repaired after the Warhulk was damaged. (Also see "Repairing Sensor Units" on page 48.)

Second, the AI knows when a hatch has been manually bypassed or forced open—although it doesn't know when the heroes hot-wire a hatch. Third, any time a security robot observes the heroes, it provides the AI with an update on the heroes' location.

Here's a good rule of thumb to use in pacing the Warhulk's reactions to the heroes: Every time it gains new information about their location (they force a hatch, are picked up by a sensor turret, or are observed by a robot),

it takes one measure to counter their actions. The obstacles described in this scene and in Scene 2 should give you plenty of options for harrying the heroes.

In the rest of this scene, we'll examine four general strategies the players might strike upon. For the moment, we'll assume that the first strategy—killing the AI—is the one the heroes adopt, and we'll focus on the countermoves involved with this approach. However, if your players choose a different plan, you'll want to take the interruptions described under "Killing the AI" and apply them to the strategy the heroes put into effect.

KILLING THE AI

This is the strategy that Denora Barad advocates. There are several ways to neutralize *Ares 22*, but it's not easy. Read the text below when the players begin to consider their options:

> "I see three ways to do this," Barad says. "We can try to physically destroy the AI, we can try to fight through to the mainframe and install the 'Peace' program, or we can try to hack into *Ares 22* and shut it down from inside. To be honest, I don't think the program will work; *Ares 22* has classified us as enemies, so it isn't bound to accept any instructions we give it. And I can't even imagine what it would take to infiltrate an AI that powerful, isolate its security routines, and shut it down. So I think we're left with the option of wrecking the mainframe. That means we'll have to get into the AI room."

ROBOT PURSUIT

In order to wreck the AI, the heroes must destroy or dismantle the mainframe in the AI compartment on Levels 1 and 2. Surrounded by armored bulkheads, the compartment can only be accessed through the security hatch on Level 1. Of course, while the heroes are trying to find their way to the AI compartment, *Ares 22* is still trying to track them down and kill them.

Wait until the heroes have just opened a hatch or entered a new room, and run the encounter below:

> The hatch slides open, revealing a dim corridor lined with low-hanging cable runs and piping. You're about to step through when suddenly you hear a soft hum coming from ahead. A security robot appears, racing toward you with its weapons blazing! At that very moment, all the lights go out. *Ares 22* laughs softly in the darkness. "My robots can see in the dark," it says. "How about you?"

Fighting in total darkness inflicts a +3 step penalty on the heroes. Of course, heroes with night vision devices or natural night vision may negate or ignore these penalties. Refer to the Model 15 Security Robot, described on page 42. If the heroes handle this encounter too easily, you might add a couple of robots coming up behind the party in the darkness. Allow heroes in the rear of the group an Awareness–*intuition* skill check to avoid being surprised by an unexpected attack.

Restoring the lights is a simple matter of backtracking to

the last compartment (or battling forward to the next one) and tripping the switch. Of course, the robots expect that sort of response and try to keep the heroes in the dark as long as possible.

THE SECURITY ROBOTS

The AI's first line of defense consists of its security robots. The ship is equipped with twenty Model 15 robots (described on page 42) in the internal security command center on the main deck, and ten more in the secondary security center on Deck 6. The Warhulk also has six Model 25 heavy security robots (described on this page) for dealing with serious threats—four in the primary security center and two in the secondary.

Ares 22 employs the robots in coordinated teams. Its first step is to deploy pairs of Model 15 robots to guard the vertical access points between decks, trying to isolate the heroes on one deck. After that, it tries to pin them fore or aft with additional teams. Once the heroes are trapped, *Ares 22* assembles a heavy strike force to go into whatever compartment the heroes are holed up in and take them out. Remember, each time the heroes give *Ares 22* a clue about where they are, the AI will respond by shifting forces to keep them there.

As long as possible, *Ares 22* retains a reserve of ten Model 15 and two Model 25 robots to function as a last line of defense for the most crucial compartments—the AI rooms, the stardrive, and the bomb bays or magazines.

MODEL 25 HEAVY SECURITY ROBOT

STR 16	(+3)	INT 12	(+1)
DEX 10	(0)	WIL 6	(−1)
CON 12		PER 4	

Durability: 12/12/6/6
Action check: 12+/11/5/2
Move: fly 20
#Actions: 3
Reaction score: Ordinary/2
Last resorts: 0

Attacks

Manipulators	18/9/4	d6w/d6+2w/d4m	LI/G
Flechette gun	15/7/3	d4w/d6w/d4m	HI/O
Plasma gun	18/9/4	d8w/d8+3w/d12+3m	En/G
Grenades	18/9/4	d6w/d6+2w/d4m	En/G

Defenses

Good toughness (degrade damage by one level)
Alloy armor: d6+3 (LI), d6+4 (HI), d6+2 (En)

Skills

Heavy [16]–*direct [18], indirect [18]*; Unarmed [16]–*brawl [18]*; Modern [10]–*SMG [15]*; Stamina [12]–*endurance [16]*; Security [12]–*devices [13]*; Tactics [12]–*infantry [13]*; Technical Science [12]; Awareness [6]–*perception [10]*.

The Model 25 security robot resembles its lighter cousin in general appearance, but it's a much sturdier and more robust design. Its heavy-duty manipulator tentacles are capable of crushing the heaviest armor, and in the center of its torso is mounted a rapid-fire autoflechette gun. This weapon fires on full automatic with a −1 step accuracy bonus, and inflicts double damage to targets within 10 meters. In place of the Model 15's high-powered laser turret, the Model 25 has a plasma gun, and it's equipped with the same grenade launcher as its smaller cousin.

The Type 25 is fitted for EVA work, although it cannot leave the ship without a tether as long as the Warhulk is in drivespace. It is too large to fit into any of the ship's tertiary passageways and must remain in primary or secondary passageways.

Depending on how the players decide to navigate through the hull of the Warhulk, you may have a number of opportunities to throw security robots in their path. In general, the more direct the heroes' route toward the AI compartment, the stiffer the opposition. Ideally, you want to hit the heroes hard enough and often enough that the players start thinking of ways to stay away from the Warhulk's security forces.

TRICK HATCH

Robots aren't the only weapons at the Warhulk's disposal. Pick a time when the heroes are about to pass through a hatch that leads into a compartment monitored by a sensor turret. Anticipating the fact that the heroes are shorting out its hatches, the Warhulk opens the hatch voluntarily before the heroes actually hot-wire or bypass it. Have a hero begin skill checks to open the hatch (see page 35), but stop the check after the first roll and announce that the hatch is open.

If any of the heroes expresses curiosity or suspicion at this point, allow the hero nearest the hatch a Technical Science or System Operation–*engineering* skill check to examine the access panel. If successful, he realizes that he did *not* cause the hatch to open. If he was trying to hot-wire the hatch, he'll have to finish his complex skill check in order to actually short the hatch out.

On the other hand, if no one expresses any concern and the heroes start moving through the hatch, read the text below. *Ares 22* tries to shut the hatch on the second-to-last hero through in order to disable one person and cut off another one from his comrades.

> After stepping through the hatch, you notice that a row of blinking red lights abruptly lights up on the access panel. In the space of a heartbeat, the heavy armored hatch slams down with bone-breaking force! Ahead of you, a hidden sensor turret focuses a vidcam lens on your predicament. "Hmmm . . . that'll leave a mark," *Ares 22* says over the audio circuit.

The unfortunate character in the hatchway when it shuts must attempt a Dexterity feat check (or an Acrobatics–*dodge* skill check) and consult the table below:

Result	Effect
Critical Failure	Crushed and random limb severed; hero takes d6 points of mortal damage
Failure	Crushed and trapped; hero takes 4d4w
Ordinary	Hit and forced forward; hero takes 2d4w
Good	Leap back, no damage
Amazing	Leap to either side, no damage

The victim's armor may reduce damage; the slamming hatch is a low impact attack of Good firepower. Once the hatch shuts, the heroes must begin to bypass it all over again. This is a great opportunity to hit them with another security robot attack, by the way.

HUNTER OR HUNTED?

Jaina Vale and her crew of five technicians can create a great deal of trouble for the heroes, too. They'll avoid physical confrontation at this point in time, instead working to repair damage caused by the heroes and to help *Ares 22* control their movement. The technicians split into three teams of two. Each team can get ready for the heroes by taking the following actions:

Booby-Trapping Hatches: A team can booby-trap a hatch behind the heroes (or in front of them, if the team can guess where the heroes are trying to go) by rigging an explosive charge to the access panel. This takes about 10 minutes. When the heroes try to remove the panel to short out the hatch controls, the booby trap goes off. If a hero pauses to search for signs of sabotage, allow him or her an Investigate–*search* or Awareness–*perception* skill check to notice that the access panel has recently been opened—the dust and grime covering the surface has been disturbed. If the heroes spot the telltale signs of sabotage, they may attempt to disarm the trap by means of Demolitions–*disarm*, Security–*devices*, or Manipulation–*lockpick*. If that measure succeeds, read the following text:

> Prying the access panel open with care, you find that the wires inside have been stripped and rearranged. A small black switchbox sits on a rounded mass of plasma jelly. It looks like the hatch was rigged to blow if someone opened the access panel simply by unscrewing it. *"Ares 22* should *not* know how to do that,"* Major Barad mutters nervously.

If the heroes don't notice and open the panel normally, the explosive inflicts d6+1w to whoever opened the panel and d6–2w to anyone within 2 meters. The hatch controls are ruined, and the hatch must be manually bypassed.

Shadowing the Heroes: Locating the heroes when *Ares 22* has lost track of them is another mission of the StarMech team. They'll carefully try to find the heroes, searching compartment by compartment. At this point, the technicians don't want to fight; they'll just try to spot the heroes and retreat before they're seen themselves. When a pair of technicians enters the same compartment the heroes occupy, allow each side an Awareness–*intuition* skill check to determine who is surprised. (The technicians gain a –1 step bonus due to their familiarity with the ship.)

If the technicians surprise the heroes, they fade away before they're spotted. If neither the technicians nor the heroes are surprised, the technicians quickly retreat. They don't have to pause to open each hatch, since *Ares 22* automatically opens hatches for them.

> Up ahead, you're startled by the sudden appearance of two human figures, a man and a woman in tight-fitting jumpsuits of black material. They quickly retreat around a bend in the passageway; a moment later, you hear a hatch hiss open and then clang shut.

Finally, if the heroes surprise the technicians, they get the opportunity to attack or capture them before they can get away. See Scene 3 of this act (page 54) for details on the StarMech technicians. Jaina Vale is described on page 7.

Repairing Sensor Units: *Ares 22* can direct the technicians to any sensor turrets that have been knocked out. It's a fairly simple task for the technicians to repair or replace sensors, restoring the AI's surveillance of the area in question. The heroes may be surprised to find that damage they inflicted has been mysteriously repaired in their absence.

> Doubling back on your path, you come across one of the internal sensor units you disabled. The shattered lens has been replaced with a new one, and the broken casing has been welded back in place. A small red light by the camera indicates that the unit is running again. The lens dilates, focusing on you. Denora Barad stops and mutters under her breath.

Run several of these encounters and sightings to delay and distract the heroes as they try to reach the AI compartment. Whenever the heroes hole up to rest, or when you feel that you've harried them enough, skip ahead to "Ending This Scene" on page 50.

OTHER OPTIONS

Destroying the AI is not the only way to stop the Warhulk from carrying out its mission at Algemron. Several other possibilities are briefly described below—"Blowing up the Ship," "Sabotage in Engineering," "Negotiating with the AI,"

and "Hacking." In general, you can take the obstacles mentioned in "Killing the AI" and apply them to any of these player strategies. For example, if the heroes choose to destroy the ship by setting off one of the matter bombs in the bomb bay, they'll still need to fight their way down to Deck 7. The AI pursues them with security robots, it traps one or more of the hatches, and it dispatches its technicians to interfere with their activities. Be creative and roll with the players' punches.

THE PASSAGE OF TIME

Breaking through hatches and climbing around inside the Warhulk takes time. You want to chew up time during the next two scenes in order to push the heroes to the edge during the climax of the adventure. If you don't want to stop the action for repeated skill checks, then you can assume that moving around the Warhulk consumes time as noted below:

- It takes 1 minute to cautiously advance 30 meters along a level, open passageway.
- Blasting open or cutting through a standard hatch takes 1 minute.
- Hot-wiring a standard or armored hatch takes 10 minutes; using the manual override takes 5 minutes.
- Cracking the code on a security hatch takes 20 minutes.
- Climbing or descending one deck level through an access shaft or lift shaft takes 10 minutes.
- Bypassing or overriding the hatches between decks takes 10 minutes.
- Other events (performing surgery on a wounded comrade, resting, fabricating tools, etc.) consume a reasonable amount of time, at your discretion.

BLOWING UP THE SHIP

The Warhulk carries a number of weapons that can be used to cripple or destroy it. The main, secondary, and tertiary batteries won't do the job; mechanical cutouts prevent these weapons from being trained on the ship itself. However, the matter bombs in the bomb bay on Deck 7 and the nuclear missiles in the missile rooms on Decks 1, 2, and 3 can do the job.

The first step, of course, is getting there. Harass the heroes with the attacks and obstacles mentioned previously in order to make this into an epic journey. The bomb bay can be reached from hatches on Decks 7 and 8. The missiles, however, are stored in a cell system. In order to work on a missile, the heroes will have to enter its cell from the exterior hatch. In other words, they'll have to go EVA in order to reach the missile at all. The safest place to work on a bomb or missile is in one of the ship's magazines; the Warhulk can't open the magazines to space or eject the stored munitions.

Of course, there's one major flaw with this plan. If the heroes detonate a matter bomb or nuclear missile inside the ship, they'll be killed too . . . so they should consider finding a way to distance themselves from the Warhulk before setting off nuclear weapons.

SABOTAGE IN ENGINEERING

The Warhulk's power plant generates an immense amount of energy, which the heroes can misuse in several ways. They can attempt to overload and detonate a mass reactor; they can knock out the ship's power, rendering it helpless; or they can wreck the engines in order to immobilize the ship.

Every one of the auxiliary power rooms contains a mass reactor, but none of these is large enough to cause more than local damage to the Warhulk. The main mass reactor associated with the ship's stardrive is large enough to destroy the Warhulk. However, mass reactors generally are designed with fail-safe mechanisms—setting up an overload that will destroy the ship is very difficult.

Knocking out the ship's power distribution grids is easier, but it still takes a lot of work. The heroes must disable the power grid in the stardrive compartment and the secondary grids in any four of the auxiliary power rooms or main engineering rooms.

Finally, immobilizing the Warhulk is as good as destroying it. If the ship can't maneuver once it makes starrise at Algemron, it will never reach its target. All five of the ship's induction engines (one each in the main engineering rooms) have to be powered down.

Since the Warhulk monitors its engineering plant continuously, it will recognize any of these tactics as soon as the heroes begin their work. It will certainly send security robots to chase down the heroes, and if their work takes them to more than one compartment, it garrisons the remaining compartments necessary to finish their sabotage. *Ares 22* may dispatch Jaina Vale and her technicians to undo the heroes' sabotage once they leave the room where they've done their work.

NEGOTIATING WITH THE AI

Your players might decide that the best tactic available to them is to "talk the AI down," trying to convince it to abandon its mission, accept their authority, or fall for some manner of bluff or deceit. They'll have to produce arguments or strategies of surpassing brilliance in order to sway *Ares 22* from its course. Put yourself in the Warhulk's place and evaluate any offer or statement based on the following criteria:

- Is it plausible?
- If so, can the heroes offer incontrovertible proof or documentation to back up their statement?
- Would their tactic or suggestion clearly supersede the

highest authority of the StarMech military commanders who programmed the AI?

Even the smallest inconsistency or weak point dooms the effort to failure. The burden of proof is on the heroes; if, for instance, they show the Warhulk news releases that prove that the war is over, *Ares 22* points out that there's no way they can prove that they didn't make up the story. This tactic may require the heroes to negotiate, then take time to produce or manufacture evidence, and then negotiate again. Note that the simple fact that it happens to be communicating with the heroes doesn't stop *Ares 22* from trying to kill them.

HACKING

Ares 22 is connected to hundreds of secondary computers throughout the Warhulk. These local units control weapons, engineering systems, sensors, and every other mechanical or electronic unit on board the ship. An extremely proficient hacker might be able to break into the AI using these systems.

First of all, the hacker must gain access to a major computer system. These exist in sensor, fire control, communications, and internal security compartments. In addition, the stardrive and the engineering control rooms have major computer terminals. Use some of the obstacles described earlier in this scene to make it hard for the heroes to reach the equipment they'll need to make their hacking attempt.

ENDING THE SCENE

How should you wrap up this scene? Basically, the answer is simple: The scene will be over whenever the heroes get to where they're trying to go. If they're following Denora Barad's advice, this means that the scene ends when they fight their way to the AI room. In the case of another strategy, it means that the scene lasts until the heroes reach engineering, the bomb bay or missile room, or a place from which they can attempt to hack into *Ares 22*.

You might also choose to end this scene when the heroes retreat from their goal and rest or reconsider. It's very likely that they won't get all the way to the AI compartment without suffering serious injury and losses, so a smart group of heroes might temporarily break off the battle and barricade themselves in a defensible position in order to regroup.

You might find that the heroes' actions advance the plot faster than expected. For example, they might catch Jaina Vale or one of her technicians through an unexpected stroke of luck. When they interrogate the crewman, they'll be diving into the events of Scene 2. Or, if the heroes bull their way into the AI room ahead of when you were expecting, you might jump all the way to Scene 2 of Act V.

It's possible that the heroes might reach their goals and start their sabotage efforts early. The next steps of each of the strategies for dealing with the Warhulk are described in Scene 2; when the heroes start taking bombs apart or begin to shut down engineering systems, you should move on to the next scene in the adventure. Use your discretion, and keep increasing the pace of the adventure.

Battling security robots and eluding mechanical traps, the heroes fight their way to their goal. In response, the Warhulk musters the heaviest counterattack it can put together, rocking the heroes back on their heels. It's going to take all they've got to survive.

RUNNING THIS SCENE

Just like the first scene of this act, we're assuming that the heroes continue to follow Denora Barad's strategy for dealing with the Warhulk—namely, getting into the AI compartment and physically wrecking the computer. Depending on the players in your gaming group, this strategy may or may not be accurate. They may have decided to attempt one of the other strategies for dealing with the Warhulk. Use the events and traps described under "Killing the AI" (page 46) and simply insert them into the alternate storylines described under "Other Options" (page 48).

In general, this scene is designed to end in a stalemate. The heroes attempt to take down the AI (or accomplish some other goal that will neutralize the Warhulk), but *Ares 22* conducts a fierce defense that drives them back for the time being. However, if your heroes just can't be stopped, don't adhere slavishly to the plot line described here. Improvise and respond appropriately to brilliant play on the part of the players—reward them for doing better than they should!

AGAINST THE AI

For the moment, we'll assume that the previous scene ended with the heroes taking a temporary respite from their mission. After they've had a chance to rest and reconsider their means of attack, *Ares 22* contacts them. Read the following text:

> The silence of the Warhulk is broken by the crackling of the ship's internal speakers. *Ares 22*'s voice rings out throughout the ship: "Hello there. I would like to open negotiations, if I may. Your destruction is not an imperative of my mission, and therefore I have some latitude in how I may deal with you. I'll have to ask you to confine yourselves for the remainder of our voyage in drivespace, but once we reach Algemron, I'll be happy to let you depart. I've computed that this is a more efficient strategy than risking internal damage in an attempt to destroy you outright. What do you say? You cease your sabotage attempts, and I'll spare your lives."

If the *Deuces Wild* is docked in the hangar bay, *Ares 22* suggests that the heroes return to their ship. If it's no longer available, the AI suggests that the heroes select a robot fighter in the main hangar bay and use the remaining time in drivespace to modify it into an emergency escape vehicle. This requires several hours of work and some repair materials, which *Ares 22* is willing to supply. While the heroes will almost certainly suspect the machine of duplicity, *Ares 22* is sincere in its offer, as long as the heroes hold up their end of the bargain. Of course, any sign of aggression will bring *Ares 22* back down on them with all the force at its disposal.

ROBOT ATTACK

If the heroes don't agree to a cease-fire, *Ares 22* resumes hostilities. While the heroes have been fighting their way through the ship, *Ares 22* has refitted a number of maintenance robots to add to its attack force against the heroes. (Assuming that the heroes have managed to disable a few of the Model 15 and Model 25 security robots, *Ares 22* will make the decision to hold back most of the remaining security robots, saving them for a decisive strike later.) Whenever the heroes are inside a primary or secondary passageway, read the following text:

> You hear trouble coming long before you see it. From the dim depths of the ship around you, the distant hiss and clang of hatches opening echoes up and down the passageways. Something heavy thumps toward your position; there's movement all around you. At the end of the corridor, brilliant light suddenly floods the hallway, and a number of robots appear. Without pause the machines clatter toward you on metal treads, manipulators clicking and undulating.
>
> "These are maintenance robots!" says Major Barad, readying her weapon. "Watch out for shooters hiding behind these machines!"

If possible, *Ares 22* tries to hit the heroes from several directions at once. The attackers consist of one maintenance robot for each member of the heroes' group, plus half that number of Model 15 security robots in the back ranks. The security robots gain a +2 step bonus to their defense against ranged weapons as long as they can take cover behind the maintenance machines.

MODEL 3 MAINTENANCE ROBOT

STR 13	(+2)	INT 8	(0)
DEX 6	(–1)	WIL 4	(–2)
CON 9		PER 4	

Durability: 9/9/5/5	Action check: 9+/8/4/2
Move: walk 10	#Actions: 3
Reaction score: Marginal/1	Last resorts: 0

Attacks

Manipulators	13/6/3	d6+1s/d4+2w/d6+2w	LI/O
Laser torch	6/3/1	d4+3w/d6+3w/d4+2m	En/G

Defenses

Good toughness (degrade damage by one level)
Alloy armor: d4+1 (LI), d4+1 (HI), d4 (En)

Skills

Unarmed Attack [13]; Stamina [9]–*endurance [10]*; System [8]–*engineering [10]*; Technical [8]–*repair [12]*; Awareness [4]–*perception [6]*.

Each maintenance robot attacks with its tentaclelike manipulators; if one scores a hit with a Good or better success, it brings its laser torch into play. The robot immediately attempts a second attack for the listed damage.

Ares 22 tries to force the heroes back with this attack, seeking to pin them in some part of the ship where they can't do much harm. Given a chance to deploy its forces, the AI sets up a cordon to channel the heroes into retreating in the direction it wants them to go.

VACUUM

One tactic available to the Warhulk is the use of vacuum as a weapon. At any time when the heroes are on a deck that contains an airlock, *Ares 22* may decide to simultaneously open every hatch between the heroes and the nearest airlock. Read the text below when you're ready to stage this portion of the scene:

> Again, you hear the hiss of hatch after hatch opening. This time, something's different. It takes you a moment to realize that you haven't heard any hatches *closing*. Abruptly, the hatch nearest you slides open. The air in your compartment begins to howl through the opening. Simultaneously, the artificial gravity in your compartment fails, leaving you floundering. The drop in pressure stabs icy picks into your ears as you're swept off your feet by the sudden gale. In a matter of moments, you'll be breathing vacuum!
>
> "Watch your head as you exit the hatch, please," *Ares 22* announces over the roar of escaping air.

Have the heroes make Strength feat checks at a –2 step bonus to seize a stanchion or the edge of the hatch opening; any hero who fails is carried out of the compartment by the escaping air. A hero may make another Strength feat check at each hatch or turn in the corridor between his current location and the airlock, but at a cumulative +1 step penalty (–1 step for the second attempt, no modifier for the third, +1 step for the fourth, etc.), since his body is picking up speed. If a hero fails to arrest his flight before

he reaches the open airlock, he's expelled into drivespace and lost forever.

Heroes who manage to stop themselves from being sucked out into drivespace still have to deal with the abrupt departure of their atmosphere. Have the heroes make action checks and start ticking off the phases of an action round; by the Marginal phase, the area where the heroes were originally located is in vacuum. The adjacent area runs out of air one round later, and the areas beyond go to vacuum one round at a time thereafter. Any hero who is carrying a vacuum mask or similar protection can don it in a single action, provided he has a hand free; another Strength feat check may be called for in order to hang on while donning the mask.

Beginning in the Marginal phase of the first action round, any unprotected heroes begin to suffer the effects of exposure to vacuum–see Chapter 3 of the ALTERNITY *Gamemaster Guide*. There are a number of ways to bypass this trap; for example, the heroes could close or block a hatch in order to prevent any more air from escaping, they could use magnetic boots or ropes to secure themselves in place, and so on. However, if the heroes have no vacuum protection at all, this scene might not go well for them (to put it mildly).

If the heroes survive this attack and reach the AI compartment, go on to Scene 3.

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

If your heroes have decided on a different strategy for dealing with the Warhulk, try to maintain the increasing tension and risk as they move closer to their goal. Ideally, you'll thwart the heroes' attempts for now, but with added experience they'll be able to muster a second or third effort that will succeed . . . if only they have the time.

BLOWING UP THE SHIP

After reaching the magazine, missile cell, or bomb bay, the heroes must find a way to get into the room to begin their work. All of these areas are guarded by armored hatches that have to be bypassed, not forced or blown open. *Ares 22* won't sit quietly for this, of course. It dispatches security robots and its technicians to interfere with the heroes' sabotage attempt. Use the attacks and distractions described earlier in this scene.

To open a bomb or missile casing and replace the weapon's fuse, the heroes must succeed in a complex Demolitions–*disarm* skill check requiring 5 successes (10 minutes between checks). Reprogramming the bomb's onboard computer requires a complex skill check using Computer Science–*hacking* (same number of successes and time frame). When this is finished, the heroes have the ability to detonate the bomb or missile any time they want to push the button.

If the heroes are working in the bomb bay, *Ares 22* picks a convenient time to open the bomb bay door, exposing the bay to vacuum. Heroes inside the bay must make Strength or Dexterity feat checks (their choice) to grab something in order to avoid being sucked out into drivespace and lost forever. Even if the heroes don't get sucked out into space, they'll still want to don vacuum gear extremely quickly; the bomb bay is now a PO environment (see Chapter 3 of the ALTERNITY *Gamemaster Guide*).

The Warhulk can activate a bomb rack or missile cell and simply eject sabotaged weapons. The heroes can counter this move by removing the bomb from the rack before they begin their work or by disabling the missile control and monitoring sensors. Heroes in the cell during launch aren't harmed, since the missiles are powered by gravity induction engines. If the entire cell is ejected into drivespace, any heroes trapped inside are lost forever.

The ship's magazines are equipped with fire and explosion suppression systems—a high-pressure foam sprinkler. *Ares 22* can fill the magazines with dense, impenetrable foam in the blink of an eye. The foam isn't breathable, and unprotected heroes trapped inside begin to drown (see "Drowning" and "Suffocation" in Chapter 3 of the ALTERNITY *Gamemaster Guide*). Visibility is zero, and movement is reduced to 1 meter per action. The foam inflicts a +3 step penalty to all sabotage actions.

SABOTAGE IN ENGINEERING

As previously described, *Ares 22* attempts to shepherd the heroes away from sensitive areas by means of robot attacks, mechanical traps, and its technicians. When the heroes finally get to the room they want to reach, they can begin to work on sabotaging the ship.

The Stardrive: In order to rig a drive accident, the heroes must succeed in a skill check using System Operation–*engineering* or Technical Science–*repair* to remove interlocks, rig shorts, tie down automatic valves, etc. Accomplishing this requires a total of 7 successes at a +3 step penalty, with one check allowed per hour. When complete, the heroes can initiate a reaction that will destroy the ship in 10 minutes.

The Power Grid: Taking down a power grid requires 3 successes on a complex skill check using System Operation–*engineering* or Technical Science–*repair* (10 minutes per check). The power distribution banks can also be destroyed through simple damage; each has a durability rating of 10/10/5, d4+2 points of armor, and Good toughness.

The Engines: Taking an engine offline requires a skill check equivalent to taking a power bank offline (see previous paragraph). Shooting up the induction engines is hard; each has a durability rating of 30/30/15, 2d4+2 points of armor, and Good toughness.

Since the Warhulk knows where the heroes are during any one of these sabotage attempts, it may shut down life support to the area in question. If the heroes seem like they might succeed at sabotaging the main mass reactor, *Ares 22* initiates an emergency shutdown of the stardrive core. The secondary mass reactors in the auxiliary rooms can handle 90 percent of its combat demands, so it scrams the reactor instead of allowing the heroes to set up an uncontrolled reaction.

HACKING

After the heroes find a place to run their hacking operation from, the gridpilot must gain access to the mainframe through his remote terminal. This is a complex skill check with a +3 step penalty, requiring 7 successes. The hacker may attempt one check per 5 minutes.

Once a hero has access to the mainframe, he can attempt to initiate a shutdown of the AI. This requires 7 successes with a +5 step penalty, with one check per minute allowed. *Ares 22* resists to the best of its ability, using break-in, fortress, guardian, surge, and gridwipe programs as it deems appropriate. The AI has rank 8 in Computer Science–*hacking*, which translates into a skill score of 26. If a hero attempts to use a gridcaster to infiltrate *Ares 22* in shadow form, he's asking for trouble. *Ares 22* can defend itself with shadow form 2, shadow weapon, and shadow armor programs.

If the situation becomes desperate, *Ares 22* may decide to cut power to the hero's terminal by simply tripping a breaker in the nearest power distribution bank—abruptly ending the hacking attempt. As in other episodes where the heroes mount a challenge, your job here is to build tension and heighten interest among the players. Make it seem as though the heroes are getting the best of *Ares 22*—only to have the AI pull a new tactic out of its bag of tricks and leave the heroes high and dry once more.

THE CLOCK IS TICKING

How to continue after this scene is up to you. If the heroes battle through all the obstacles and succeed in their sabotage efforts despite everything that *Ares 22* can throw at them, you might have to skip past the next scene and proceed straight to the closing of Act V.

By the end of this scene, the heroes are on the threshold of *Ares 22*'s armored citadel in the heart of the ship. The last line of defense for the AI is Jaina Vale and her technicians. In Scene 3 of this act, the heroes have the opportunity to bring Vale over to their side and gain her assistance in neutralizing the Warhulk.

If the heroes ignore the chance of cooperating with the Warhulk's crew and press on with their plans, try to throw enough delays at them so that they don't perform their sabotage until the Warhulk makes starrise at Algemron.

SCENE 3: STARRISE AT ALGEMRON

This scene concludes the heroes' voyage through drivespace. Besieged by robots, mechanical traps, and the ship's crew, the heroes are about to embark on a race against time to save millions of lives, including their own. But first they'll have to deal with the Warhulk's crew.

CREW ATTACK

When the heroes reach the AI compartment (or whatever goal they're striving for) and nothing else seems likely to stop them, *Ares 22* throws its technicians into a desperate fight to keep the heroes out. Try to run this scene right after "Vacuum" (page 52). Forewarned by *Ares 22*, Jaina Vale and her technicians are dressed out in e-suits and magnetic boots, and they attack while the heroes are still recovering from the sudden depressurization of the ship.

StarMech Technicians (5)

STR 9	(0)	INT 11	(+1)
DEX 10	(0)	WIL 8	(0)
CON 8		PER 8	

Durability: 8/8/4/4   Action check: 11+/10/5/2
Movement: sprint 18, run 12, walk 4   #Actions: 2
Reaction score: Marginal/1   Last resorts: 1

Attacks

Unarmed	4/2/1	d4s/d4+1s/d4+2s	LI/O
Zero-g pistol	11/5/2	d4+1w/d6+1w/d4m	HI/O

Defenses

Soft e-suit: d6–3 (LI), d6–2 (HI), d4–2 (En)

Skills

Athletics [9]; Modern [10]–*pistol [11], rifle [11]*; Vehicle Operation [10]; Stamina [8]; Computer [11]–*hardware [12], programming [12]*; Knowledge [11]–*first aid [12]*; System [11]–*engineering [13], sensors [12]*; Technical [11]–*repair [12]*; Awareness [8]; Interaction [8].

None of the five technicians on Jaina Vale's team is trained for combat, and they'll retreat in the face of serious opposition unless Vale is present to lead them. The technicians think that they're still at war and do not ask or give quarter unless Vale tells them to.

Heroes fighting in zero-g conditions suffer a +3 step penalty to all actions and action checks. The Warhulk's crew only has a +2 step penalty to action checks and skill checks because they're wearing magnetic boots, and only a +1 step penalty to weapons fire because of their zero-g pistols. Heroes drifting helplessly in zero-g may not apply Dexterity resistance modifiers to enemy ranged attacks.

Since e-suits are more or less self-sealing, simple punctures from energy weapons or high-impact weapons won't cause the suit to lose air; however, long slashes or cuts

from some low-impact weapons cause suit failure if the damage to the wearer exceeds more than half of his or her wound points, or if the wearer takes any amount of mortal damage. Suit failure is usually lethal, but heroes may attempt a skill check using *zero-g training* or *repair* in order to apply a patch that will save their lives.

> Floating in the silent vacuum, a flash of light catches your eye. At the opposite end of the compartment, the hatch slides open. Six figures in e-suits and magnetic boots stand on the other side, covering the room with their weapons. The gray suits are emblazoned with the StarMech corporate logo. Your suit radio crackles. "We've got you covered," a woman says. "Release your weapons if you want to keep breathing."

If the heroes want to shoot it out, let them do so. The technicians stick around until three of them fall, and then they'll execute a fighting withdrawal, sealing the hatch behind them.

JAINA VALE

There are a number of ways for the heroes to establish contact with Jaina Vale. If the StarMech technicians capture the heroes, Jaina interrogates her prisoners; if the heroes capture any technicians, Vale contacts them by means of ship's intercom to negotiate their return. Finally, you can simply decide that Vale contacts the heroes at any point in the story that strikes you as dramatically appropriate. We'll assume that the heroes have the upper hand in this scene, but that might not be the case.

> Your mysterious host removes her helmet, revealing a young woman with dark hair and a sour expression. "I'm Specialist Jaina Vale, employee of the StarMech Defense Division," she states in an abrasive voice. "I'm assigned as an emergency repair officer to this Warhulk. I don't know what kind of Thuldan trick you people used to get on board, but you're not going to get away with this." She pauses, and then adds, "I expect you to adhere to the protocols of the Cyra Convention on the ethical treatment of prisoners. You can't manipulate *Ares 22* by threatening me, so there's no reason for you to do so."

Vale's speech should give the players one or two clues that something unusual is going on here. She believes that StarMech is still at war with the Thuldan Empire. She knows perfectly well what year it is—she just doesn't know that the war has been over for decades. If the players ask about the Cyra Convention, allow heroes with a military

background to make a Knowledge skill check with a –2 step bonus to recall that this was the treaty that governed treatment of prisoners during the Second Galactic War.

Vale sticks to her guns as long as it's reasonably possible for her to do so. Hard proof, such as detailed newscasts or documentaries available from the data files of the *Deuces Wild*, is more likely to sway her than an appeal to her reason or her good nature. Deception or Interaction skill checks may be called for, or you can rule that a clever argument advanced by a player automatically convinces Vale that the heroes are telling the truth.

> The iron determination in Vale's face weakens, and she pales visibly. "The war is over?" she says numbly. "After all this time . . . we can finally go home?" Shaking her head, she slowly lowers herself to a seat. After a long moment, she looks up, her face set. "That means that the Warhulk's mission is pointless! It's going to bomb a planet we're not at war with anymore! Haven't you told *Ares 22* what it's about to do?"

When Vale is convinced that the Warhulk is mistaken in its attempt to destroy Alitar, she agrees to bring her remaining technicians into the team. Together with the heroes, the StarMech technicians will attempt to shut down the AI—although *Ares 22* won't be so easily dealt with.

STARRISE

When you're ready to move on to the climactic scenes of the adventure, read the text below and proceed to Act V.

> The lights in the passageways around you flicker, and a klaxon sounds in the distance. "Prepare for starrise," *Ares 22* states mechanically over the ship's circuits. The semitangible distortion of a drivespace emergence twists your stomach for a moment, and then is gone— you're back in normal space.
>
> Abruptly, the ship shudders with some kind of impact. The lights flicker again, and you hear the high-pitched scream of the Warhulk's quantum cannon firing. Multiple missile launches make the deck rumble and lurch under your feet. "What's going on?" Major Barad yells, struggling to keep her balance.
>
> "I can find out," Vale replies. She flips open a computer gauntlet on one forearm and keys in a quick string of code. "There, my gauntlet is repeating the primary sensor array." She studies it, frowns, and moves over to show you the display.
>
> The stylized representation of the Warhulk's tactical display is difficult to read, but it doesn't take a genius to figure it out. Dozens of radar contacts surround the ship, racing to keep up with the Warhulk. Telemetry streams categorize each blip: cruisers, frigates, patrol

> craft. "There's your answer," Vale says quietly. "We're in the middle of a space battle. ETA to Alitar . . . fifty-five minutes."

ACT V: THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

While the heroes struggle to destroy *Ares 22*, the Warhulk battles its way through the combined Alitarin, Regency, and Concord fleets. Its matter bombs can kill millions of people if it reaches orbit around Alitar. Caught in the middle of an epic space battle, the heroes have to move fast to shut down *Ares 22* and then escape alive.

PREVIOUSLY . . .

For the last 5 days, the heroes have been trapped on board the Warhulk, carried along with the ship in its starfall from McComb's Star to Algemron. While fighting off security robots and the Warhulk's backup crew of human technicians, the heroes have managed to reach one of the ship's few vulnerable points. Then, after opening negotiations with Jaina Vale, the heroes have convinced her and the rest of the StarMech crew to help them shut down the Warhulk.

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

After weeks of cat-and-mouse across dozens of light-years, the heroes have their goal in sight: They can finish their sabotage and knock out the Warhulk. The only question is, can they do it in time? From this point forward, you should try to keep the action moving faster and faster. Don't let your players relax for a minute! All of the events in Act V take place in the space of an hour or two as the Warhulk drives toward its date with destruction in the Algemron system.

SCENE 1: FLEET ACTION

Anticipating the Warhulk's attack, the Concord has hurriedly mustered a small squadron of cruisers and destroyers at Algemron to meet the robot cruiser. Joined by Regency vessels from Aegis and the small Alitarin fleet, the Concord ships attempt to intercept the Warhulk and keep it from performing its mission. Unknown to the warships outside, the damage they're inflicting on the Warhulk may prevent the heroes from pulling the plug on *Ares 22.*

SCENE 2: LAST STAND

As the space battle rages more and more fiercely, the Warhulk reaches Alitar and begins its first bombing run. The heroes finally breach the AI's armored citadel and meet the machine's last line of defense, an aspect of its security system that not even the StarMech technicians know about. If they succeed in defeating *Ares 22*'s final defenses, the heroes destroy the computers housing the AI, killing the Warhulk.

SCENE 3: REENTRY

Destroying *Ares 22* prevents the Warhulk from dropping its matter bombs on Alitar—but turns it into an uncontrolled meteor plunging toward the planet's surface. Plummeting through the atmosphere in a blaze of fire and wreckage, the heroes may not survive to enjoy their victory over the artificial intelligence.

THE SUPPORTING CAST

By the time this scene opens, all the battle lines are drawn. Denora Barad does everything in her power to reach the AI compartment and destroy the machine. If the players have forgotten about the 100-kg detonex charge on the *Deuces Wild,* she'll remind the heroes of the alternatives at their disposal. Even though she isn't trained for heavy combat missions, Barad will do everything she has to in order to accomplish her mission.

If the heroes convinced Jaina Vale to join them in the previous scene, the StarMech technician can be a tremendously valuable resource. She carries a radio transponder that allows her to open any hatch on the ship, with or without *Ares 22*'s permission. On the other hand, if the StarMech technicians are still hostile to the heroes, they'll do whatever they can to interfere with the heroes' plans.

Distracted by the space battle it finds itself embroiled in, *Ares 22* doesn't have the time to pay attention to the heroes. It backs off on its attacks and traps, and only defends the most critical area on board—the armored citadel that houses the artificial intelligence.

SIDETRACKS AND COMPLICATIONS

If the heroes look like they'll knock out the AI too easily, you can give them a nasty surprise by allowing them to destroy the AI compartment on Decks 1 and 2—only to inform them that *Ares 22* is still around.

The AI can avoid death in the heroes' first assault by transferring down to the secondary AI compartment on Deck 7 via a hard-wired datatrunk connection. In order to finish off the AI, the heroes must descend to Deck 7 and break into another AI compartment.

Only use this development if the heroes are still in good shape overall and if it looks like they're having too easy a time at this point in the adventure; a group that has been severely weakened, even if it has been ultimately successful, doesn't have the numbers or the firepower to go through the process of breaking in and shooting up the security systems all over again.

SCENE 1: FLEET ACTION

At the same time it was putting together the mission to Terivine, StarMech passed word to the Galactic Concord that the Warhulk might attempt to attack Alitar. The Concord couldn't get any capital ships to Algemron in time to meet the attack, but it did manage to scrape together a force of two heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, and five destroyers to meet the Warhulk. In addition, the Regency Navy assigned two more cruisers, and the local Alitarin forces mustered a number of lighter craft. The Galvinites chose not to fight in the defense of their enemies, but they tacitly agreed to stand by and allow the Alitarins to defend themselves against the Warhulk instead of moving to take advantage of the opportunity . . . although their fleet is standing by.

The Warhulk is roughly equivalent to a battlecruiser. It's more than a match for two or three human-manned cruisers, but the ragtag force thrown together by the opposition represents a serious threat. In normal circumstances, the Warhulk would avoid contact with a force this powerful and try to play cat-and-mouse with its enemies. Instead, *Ares 22* elects to run the gauntlet, hoping to fight through the blockade by means of speed and surprise. Until Alitar is destroyed, its own survival is not a mission priority.

MAROONED

If the *Deuces Wild* is docked in the main hangar bay or mated to the airlock located there, the Warhulk disengages the docking mechanism or uses the gantry crane to push the heroes' ship out of the hangar, marooning anyone who happens to be on board. Assuming that no heroes are on board the *Deuces Wild* when this happens, read the text below:

> You're interrupted by a warning beep in your comm gear. It's the ship's computer aboard the *Deuces Wild*. "Motion alert," the computer drones over the comm link. "The ship is being moved without authorization." You hear hollow clangs and the groan of twisting metal, and then your ship's computer continues. "The ship is being disengaged from the docking facilities. Request instructions."

Anyone on board the *Deuces Wild* or close enough to the hangar to interfere will find that the hangar doors have been opened to vacuum and the artificial gravity cut off. The hangar's main ship-handling crane is moving forward on its tracks to shove the heroes' ship clear of the Warhulk. The heroes can stop this by disabling the crane—jamming its traverse rail, cutting off its power, shorting it out, or blowing it up. Achieving a nonviolent solution to the problem requires a hero to succeed on a Technical Science–*repair* skill check. To destroy the crane mechanism, heroes must cause 10 points of wound damage or 5 points of mortal damage to it within the space of 2 rounds. All attack skill checks against the crane's control unit are made with a +1 step penalty because of the target's small size. If you want to make this scene a little tougher, *Ares 22* can move some security robots up from the secondary security center to prevent the heroes from interfering. If the Warhulk succeeds in ridding itself of the *Deuces Wild*, and if any characters are aboard, read the following text:

> Brilliant starlight throws the Warhulk's armored, pitted surface and jutting weapons into stark relief. Light glints thousands of kilometers distant, needles of fire and the searing blooms of nuclear explosions. Somewhere above and behind you on the Warhulk's hull, a quantum cannon battery opens fire, carving a sparkling trail of destroyed atoms through the unrelieved blackness of space. You can smell ozone in your e-suit, and your hair is standing on end—being thrown into the middle of a space battle is not a good thing.

As soon as the *Deuces Wild* is clear of the hangar, the Warhulk begins to close the hangar airlock and veer away from the smaller ship. It will be thousands of kilometers distant in a matter of moments, so if any heroes wish to cross from one ship to the other, this is their last chance to do so. If one or more characters are thrown out of the story by getting trapped on the *Deuces Wild*, you can give them a chance to save everyone else in Scene 3.

UNDER FIRE

While bulling its way through the forces arrayed against it, the Warhulk takes some hits. Despite its heavy armor and damage control systems, it's still going to take a beating as it runs the gauntlet. Pick a moment that seems appropriate, and hit the heroes with the scene below:

> The ship shudders violently, throwing you into the bulkhead and knocking you off your feet. As you climb to your feet again, someone hits the Warhulk with the world's biggest hammer. The deck literally bounces you into the air and then slams back hard. Something punches a 2-meter-diameter hole through the bulkhead opposite you, coming to rest embedded in the deck—a twisted hatch driven like shrapnel through the ship by the force of the explosion. Air screams and whistles, streaming away to a hull breach somewhere.

All heroes suffer d8 points of stun damage from the battering and abuse of this weapon hit. In addition, choose a

hero at random and have that character make a Personality feat check:

Result	Effect
Critical Failure	Hit by hatch and pinned, take 3d6w (LI/G)
Failure	As above, take, 2d6w
Ordinary	Clipped by hatch, take d6w
Good/Amazing	Just missed by flying hatch

If a hero is pinned, he has been wedged into the space between the debris and the deck. Since the flying hatch is actually embedded in the wall, a successful Strength feat check at a +5 step penalty is needed to pull the trapped character free. Of course, the heroes can get cutting gear to remove the hatch, but that will take at least 10 minutes of cutting, and the air's going to be gone from this room in d4 rounds. If you're feeling merciful, you can rule that the Warhulk seals the unseen hull breach itself, preventing any further loss of air.

OUTSIDE CONTACT

Again, stage this development any time you see a good opportunity. While the heroes are working to kill the Warhulk, they receive a radio message from the human-manned ships outside.

> Static squeals in your ear, startling you. It's your comm gear again, but this sounds like a new signal, faint and broken. "Attention, crew of the *Deuces Wild*," a human voice says. "This is Commodore Kaile, commanding the Concord Provisionary Squadron engaging the Warhulk. Can you hear me? Are you still alive in there?" A burst of static washes out part of the transmission, but a moment later it resumes: "—need to know what's going on, Major Barad. Over."

Kaile's ship, the *Cold Harbor*, has suffered severe damage, and several other ships in the task force have been destroyed in their attempt to block the Warhulk's passage. Kaile knows of Barad's mission to disable the Warhulk. He's blunt and overbearing, demanding that the heroes instantly fill him in on "everything that's happened since Terivine." If the heroes question him back, he'll grudgingly inform them that the Warhulk has broken through the defense perimeter and is racing toward Alitar with nothing to stop it.

If any hero asks about the damage inflicted to the Warhulk, Kaile adds: "We scored major hits on the main deck forward, on decks 5 and 6 aft, and on level 2 near the AI citadel. We hurt it, but we didn't kill it. I'm afraid it's up to you now—you've got to find a way to stop that thing before it starts dropping matter bombs on Alitar."

The hit on level 2 can provide the heroes with access to the AI compartment, if they're completely stymied otherwise. Kaile will transmit external video showing a gaping wound in the ship's superstructure if the heroes press him for more detail.

Play out this conversation as long as you like, and when you're ready to leave the players hanging again, the Warhulk finds the comm channel Kaile has been using and jams it with a painful burst of static.

ACCESS

The last barrier the heroes must surmount before they can destroy the AI is getting into the compartment. The hatches offering access to this room are security hatches that can only be opened by cracking the security code (see the procedure outlined on page 35) or through physical destruction. If Jaina Vale has decided to aid the heroes, she can attempt to enter the security code and access the AI compartment.

> Vale pauses before the heavily armored hatch, opening an access panel at one side. "We're authorized to enter any space on the ship," she tells you, quickly keying in a code. "We can . . . hmmm." Frowning, she enters her code again, more deliberately this time. The panel beeps and flashes red. The StarMech technician swears and hammers the panel closed. "*Ares 22* locked me out. We'll have to do this another way."

Ares 22 has decided that Vale and her technicians have been compromised. If any hero tries to crack the security code, he or she will get the same result: Failure (although you may play out several steps in the complex skill check to add tension to the situation before declaring that the hatch won't open). Ultimately, the heroes will have to get into the AI compartment the hard way:

- They can cut through the hatch with laser cutting gear, a process that requires a hero with Technical Science–*repair* to accumulate 3 successes, checking once every 5 minutes.
- They can blow the hatch using at least 10 kg of plastic explosives or Denora Barad's detonex charge. This won't damage the AI, but a sufficient charge will open the door in no time at all.
- They can bypass the hatch altogether by going EVA and moving across the exterior of the ship to the damage on superstructure level 2, climbing into the AI compartment through the hole in the ship's armor. See "Suit Work" on page 32; you may choose to have the heroes make suit operation checks to pull off this spacewalk.

When the heroes gain access to the AI compartment, continue with Scene 2.

The heroes have finally fought their way to the AI's armored citadel in the ship's superstructure, overcoming security robots, insidious sabotage, and the Warhulk's crew of technicians. Now they've got *Ares 22* exactly where they want it . . . or do they? We assume that the heroes decided to go EVA to get into the AI compartment, so you might need to alter the following text to reflect the method the heroes actually use to enter the compartment.

> The buckled hull plates and crumpled decks inside stand as silent testimony to a telling blow from a large warship's mass cannon. It looks like the world's biggest sledgehammer hit the superstructure, leaving an indentation 15 meters across and 5 or 10 deep. Light flickers and pops in the wreckage as dozens of short-circuited power conduits throw off sparks. Picking your way through the jagged wreckage of the outer hull, you find a small opening leading into the heavily armored AI citadel.
>
> Orange light pulses in the room beyond. It's a cavernous chamber, two decks high, marked by tall, columnlike structures illuminated by thousands of lights. It's a computer system, the largest you've ever seen. Conduits and data busses link one column to the next, looking like vines and creepers in an electric jungle. Two columns on the opposite side of the compartment are black and silent, charred by damage from some long-ago fight, but the weapon hit that opened this room to you does not seem to have caused any substantial internal damage.

> Your suit radios crackle. "I see that I've underestimated you again," *Ares 22* says. Its voice sounds tired, maybe a little slurred. "I won't make that mistake again. I've broken through the cordon of Thuldan defensive vessels protecting the target, and I'm going to carry out my mission. Now, stand aside and let me do what I was made to do."
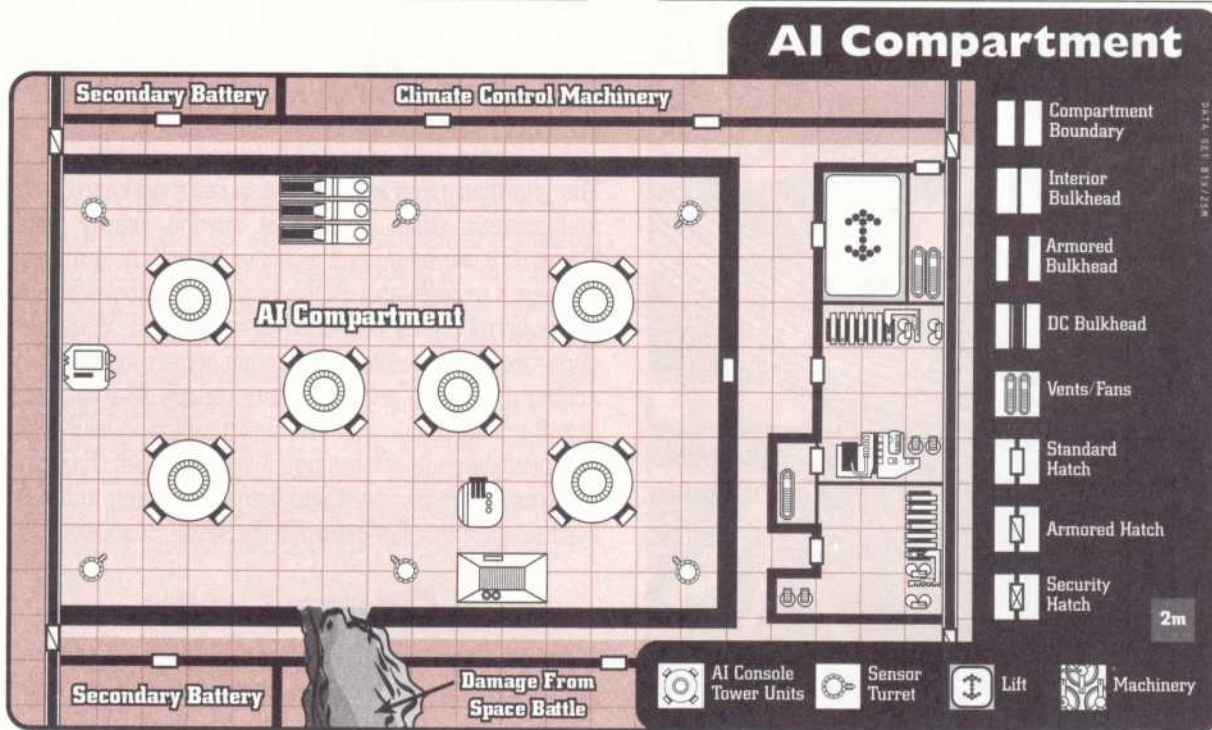
The map on this page depicts the AI citadel and the immediate surrounding area. It can be used to keep track of the heroes' locations and movements as they move through the following episodes of the story.

LAST-DITCH DEFENSE

Ares 22 doesn't want to start a gunfight in this compartment, but if the heroes are preparing to destroy it, the AI chooses the lesser of two evils and attacks them here. As a last-ditch defense, *Ares 22* has modified a maintenance robot into a hand-to-hand killing machine. Unlike the security robots the heroes have encountered, the guardian is directly linked to and controlled by *Ares 22* itself.

> Something made of chrome and plastic suddenly appears in the tangled network of wiring and machinery overhead, a sinister metal spider the size of a weren. Its multiple limbs end in gleaming blades and powerful claws. It hovers above you for a heartbeat or two, and then lunges for you, trailing cables and cords from its position on the ceiling.

AI Compartment

Secondary Battery — Climate Control Machinery

AI Compartment

Secondary Battery — Damage From Space Battle

Compartment Boundary	
Interior Bulkhead	
Armored Bulkhead	
DC Bulkhead	
Vents/Fans	
Standard Hatch	
Armored Hatch	
Security Hatch	

2m

DATA SET B1V/25M

AI Console Tower Units · Sensor Turret · Lift · Machinery

AI GUARDIAN ROBOT

STR 13	(+2)	INT n/a	
DEX 11	(+1)	WIL n/a	
CON 12		PER n/a	

Durability: 12/12/6/6   Action check: 15+/14/7/3
Movement: run 40, walk 20, (climb 4)   #Actions: 3
Reaction score: Ordinary/2   Last resorts: 0

Attacks

Manipulators	14/7/3	d6+2s/d6+2w/d8+3w	LI/O
Blades	16/8/4	d4+3w/d6+3w/d4+2m	LI/O

Defenses

Good toughness (degrade damage by one level)
Moderate alloy armor: d4+1 (LI), d4+1 (HI), d4 (En)

Skills

Athletics [13]–*climb [16], jump [14];* Melee [13]–*blade [16];* Unarmed [13]–*brawl [14];* Acrobatics [11]–*dodge [15];* Stealth [11]–*sneak [12];* Stamina [12]–*endurance [14].*

The guardian robot is able to attack twice per action, once with its manipulators and once with its blades. It can allocate these attacks to different targets, if more than one target is within reach. Due to its special construction and long limbs, it can strike heroes up to 4 meters from its location.

The guardian robot's vulnerability is a control cable that links it to the AI. This is a flexible cable trunk running from its upper torso to the databus configurations in the upper portions of the compartment. Targeting the control cable adds a +2 step penalty to hand-to-hand attacks or a +4 step penalty to ranged attacks, but the cable can be severed by inflicting only 4 points of wound damage or 2 points of mortal damage on it. The cable has Ordinary toughness and an armor casing that absorbs d4−2 points of primary damage on any hit. If the cable is severed, the guardian robot is instantly deactivated.

The guardian robot will attempt to seize one hero with its manipulators while slashing at anyone nearby with its blades. If it scores a Good or better hit with its grab attack, it wraps a tentacle around the victim and retreats back into the cluttered piping and ductwork overhead. While in the ductwork, the guardian robot gains gains moderate cover, adding a +2 step penalty to any ranged attacks directed at it. It will hold onto a victim until it inflicts at least 1 point of mortal damage, whereupon it will drop that character to the floor of the compartment before returning to the floor itself to seize another hero for the same treatment.

GOING DOWN

When its last line of defense falters, *Ares 22* attempts to plead for its life, such as it is. Every minute it can stall the heroes gives it that much more time to reach Alitar and

accomplish its mission. Read or paraphrase the following text when the heroes overcome the guardian robot:

> "Wait!" *Ares 22* barks over the comm circuit. "Before you do any more damage, there's something you need to know. I've just programmed a rapid-decay orbit around Alitar and disabled all engine controls. I can bring them back online any time—but if you destroy me, you'll die when the ship enters atmosphere. Do you really want to throw away your own lives in order to destroy me? Now, let's consider our differences like reasonable sentients and come to some kind of understanding."

Although the AI does not want to be destroyed, its mission priorities assign a higher value to the destruction of its targets on Alitar than its own survival. It can't break off the attack, but it will try to fool the heroes into leaving it alone by promising to do so.

If the heroes investigate the AI's claim about the rapid-decay orbit, they'll find out that *Ares 22* is telling the truth. The Warhulk will make one pass over the most heavily populated regions of Alitar and then enter the planet's atmosphere over the cold waters of the Misten Sea. The AI has encrypted the navigation subroutines and engine control systems in order to prevent the heroes from countermanding its orders. They'll need *Ares 22*'s cooperation in order to undo the suicidal course.

DESTROYING THE AI

This is what the heroes came here for. Unfortunately, it's not a matter of tripping a circuit breaker or shooting up one or two consoles; the computer was designed to resist terrible battle damage and has several layers of redundant hardware and software.

BLOW THE WHOLE ROOM

The detonex charge Major Barad brought with her is capable of wrecking the entire compartment, if the heroes still have it close to hand. If the heroes don't have access to the 100-kg charge, the 20-kg satchel charge found in a standard demolitions kit can do the job, but the hero rigging the charge must succeed on a Demolitions–*set explosives* skill check in order to take out the AI.

Resourceful heroes might find other ways to destroy the room. For example, dismounting the *Deuces Wild's* particle beam, lugging it through the ship, rigging it with a power source, and pointing it at the AI would do the job.

SELECTIVE SABOTAGE

If the heroes don't have the explosives to take out the entire compartment, they'll need to localize the mainframe

and attack with more precision. Finding the mainframe unit requires a hero with skill in Computer Science; unskilled heroes may attempt Investigate–*search* rolls once per minute to figure out where it is. The mainframe has Ordinary toughness, a durability rating of 8/8/4, and 2d4 points of armor.

> "Here it is," Barad says. She stands before one of the pillarlike consoles in the compartment, studying a large circular unit with complex displays and blinking status lights. "*Ares 22* can live without everything else in the room, except for this module. This is its brain." She steps back, drawing her pistol from her belt, and aims at the center of the module. "Shoot it until you don't see any more lights," she says, opening fire.

POWER-DOWN ROUTINE

Very knowledgeable heroes can kill *Ares 22* simply by following the AI's power-down and deactivation routine. This is less spectacular and more time-consuming than more destructive methods, but it leaves the heroes with a chance to access the navigation and engine controls before the Warhulk slams into Alitar's atmosphere at 500 kilometers per second. Shutting down the AI requires a complex skill check using Computer Science–*hardware* at a +1 step penalty (or a –2 step bonus, if Jaina Vale is there to help the heroes along). The heroes need 5 successes and may make a check every minute. Sometime during this process, read the following text for a bit of drama:

> Major Barad studies her data slate, scrolling through page after page of data. "Okay, find the main data bus and shut down the dataport units leading to the AI module—the first thing we do is isolate *Ares 22*. Oh, and make sure you get the secondary data busses in units 151, 152, and 153—the AI automatically trips over to them when the main data bus goes out. How much time do we have left?"

NO ONE AT HOME

Regardless of how the heroes do it, when the heroes take down the AI, read or paraphrase the text below:

> Pelting down the passageway, you feel the distant *WHUMP!* of your explosive charge. The Warhulk shudders slightly, seemingly unharmed by the blast—but then the lights go out, the artificial gravity cuts out, and the ship's interior falls silent. Anchoring herself to one bulkhead with an arm looped through a support girder, Major Barad scowls. "I guess *Ares 22* wasn't bluffing about his dead man's switch," she says. "We've got maybe ten minutes until contact with the atmosphere. Anybody have any really good ideas?"

SCENE 3: COLLISION COURSE

Ares 22 is dead, and the Last Warhulk has been defeated. Now all the heroes have to do is find a way to survive their victory. With power and engines knocked out by the destruction of the AI, the Warhulk is streaking into the upper atmosphere of Alitar like a meteor.

> Dark and silent as a tomb, the Warhulk drifts quietly. You have to manually jack open each hatch you come to, a laborious and time-consuming process. After the fierce struggle against a sentient ship bent on your destruction, the Warhulk now seems no more threatening than any other derelict. While you patiently ratchet open another hatch, Jaina Vale consults her computer gauntlet. The StarMech technician grimaces. "I'm still getting a data feed from the external sensors. We're skirting the upper atmosphere—we're going to have to move a lot faster if we want to get out of here before the ship goes down."
>
> Ominously, the ship seems to jar slightly, a small jolt that rapidly grows into a steady rumble. The structure begins to creak and groan. Vale looks up at the ship around her. "It's only going to get worse," she says.

The heroes have as many as four choices at this point: They can leave on the *Deuces Wild* if it's still on board, they can call for help, they can try to rig an escape vehicle, or they can ride the ship down and hope for the best.

If they decide to figure out a way to get off the ship, plan the timing of the ship's descent into the atmosphere accordingly—in one final dramatic escape, the heroes avoid death just in the nick of time as the Warhulk plummets toward Alitar past the point of no return.

DON'T MISS THE BOAT

If the *Deuces Wild* is still on board, the heroes can try to reach their ship and get away before the Warhulk plunges into the atmosphere. The challenge for the heroes in this variant is to slog through a ship that's being battered to pieces and get to the hangar bay in time.

> The ship is slamming up and down in a continuous scream of damage and fatigue. Air shrieks past your ears, whistling from dozens of hull breaches somewhere in the above you. The air is growing distinctly warm—you're getting out of here just in time.
>
> When you finally pry open the hatch to the hangar bay, you're met with a terrible sight. The gantry crane, jarred off its mounts by the space battle or the punishment of reentry, has fallen on top of the *Deuces Wild*, trapping it in the hangar. The crane is wedged between your ship and its rail mount overhead.

The heroes have two options: They can board the *Deuces Wild* and use the ship's engines to power it free, sustaining significant damage in the process, or they can try to move or wreck the crane in order to free their ship.

Simply flying the *Deuces Wild* out of the hangar bay will work, but the pilot must make a Vehicle Operation–*space vehicles* skill check and consult the table below:

Result	Effect
Failure	Ship stuck; d4+1 random compartments sustain d6+2w of LI damage each
Ordinary	Ship free; d4 random compartments sustain d6+1w of LI damage each
Good	Ship free; 1 random compartment sustains d6w of LI damage
Amazing	Ship free; no damage

If the first attempt fails, the heroes can back up and try it again with a +1 step penalty. If the second attempt fails, they can try it one more time with a +2 step penalty—but they're really stuck if that doesn't work.

If the heroes choose to remove the crane before leaving, they can blow it clear with a detonex charge, cut it with laser torches or similar cutting gear, or lift it clear with a chain hoist or mass neutralizer. They can even rig a power line from the *Deuces Wild* to the crane motor and winch the crane clear using its own drum. Pressure the players by constantly showering the heroes with debris, explosions, bone-jarring impacts, and other signs of impending doom. Call for relevant skill checks if you think it's necessary, but otherwise let them get away.

CALLING FOR HELP

There's help nearby, if the heroes think to ask. Since *Ares 22* is dead, it can't jam their communications with the Concord ships outside (or the *Deuces Wild*, if the ship was cut free of the Warhulk back in Scene 1). If one of the heroes was excluded from the end of the adventure by the Warhulk's actions, here's your chance to bring that hero back in the nick of time by allowing him to rescue the other heroes from the plummeting Warhulk. If the *Deuces Wild* isn't manned or available, Commander Kaile of the *Cold Harbor* can send help to the heroes:

> "This is Kaile," a voice replies to your desperate hail. "I don't know what you did, but the Concord and the Imperial State of Algemron would like to extend their deep and abiding thanks for your heroic actions. Few have ever displayed the selfless heroism, the noble self-sacrifice, that you and your teammates—what? Oh, yes, of course. We'll send a launch immediately."

The heroes will have to reach an airlock or hangar deck. The rescue is certainly not easy—the launch must catch up to the Warhulk, match speed and course as best it can in the streaking passage through Alitar's upper atmosphere, and then somehow come alongside so that the heroes can board. However, you don't need to hit the heroes with any more hazards unless you want to give them one last scare before leaving.

RIGGING AN ESCAPE VEHICLE

The Warhulk has dozens of potential escape vehicles in its hangar bays—its robot fighters and space tugs. In order to escape by using one of these vehicles, the heroes must get to a hangar bay and then perform some quick modifications to the vessel of their choice.

> The hangar bay is mostly demolished. The overhead crane has fallen and now sprawls across the deck, a tangled mass of twisted metal. Despite the wreckage, four of the robot fighters still wait in their stowage racks alongside the aft bulkhead. They're small, not much bigger than a skycar, but it's conceivable that a couple of people could fit inside. "I don't know what we'll do for life support or how we can fly these things," Vale says, "but I do know that you can drop out the fighter's plasma cannon in a couple of minutes and make enough room for one, maybe two people."

The heroes must remove the plasma cannon (a single Technical Science–*repair* skill check, requiring about 5 minutes) and rig a computer program and connection that will allow someone crouching in the weapons bay to fly the fighter using a computer gauntlet or minicomputer. This requires a complex skill check using Computer Science–*hacking* or *hardware* (player's choice), with 3 successes needed and one check allowed per minute.

Once a single robot fighter has been successfully rigged, other ships can be prepared in about 5 to 10 minutes each with no rolls necessary. The heroes will have to fly in e-suits or jumpsuits with vacuum masks, but they should be able to reach the ground (or a nearby ship) in a matter of minutes.

RIDING THE SHIP DOWN

If the heroes don't have any other options available to them, they can just ride the Warhulk down. The ship is sturdy enough that most of it will survive the impact, and it's conceivable that any heroes inside might live through the crash.

Smart heroes will take some precautions to maximize their chances of survival. They'll want to move toward the center of the ship and strap themselves in place to the greatest extent possible. Give the heroes a chance to think up any precautions that might increase their odds. Each hero must make a Dexterity or Personality feat check (player's choice) and consult the table below. The Warhulk is slamming into the ground at terminal velocity, but heroes who are strapped in degrade the damage to themselves by one grade (mortals to wounds, wounds to stuns). This is considered low impact damage for the purpose of armor rolls.

Feat Check Result	Strapped in	Not strapped in
Critical Failure	d12+8w	d12+8m
Failure	d12+6w	d12+6m
Ordinary	d8+6w	d8+6m
Good	d6+4w	d6+4m
Amazing	d12+6s	d12+6w

Allow the heroes to apply the following bonuses:
- –1 step if the hero is inside an armored compartment.
- –2 steps if the hero clears his immediate area of loose heavy objects before strapping in.
- –3 steps if the hero is able to immerse himself in water or firefighting foam before the impact.

During the ride down, do everything you can to build the suspense, using the following text as a guideline. The trip to the planet surface will take a few minutes, so you can allow the heroes to move around inside the ship if they want to and maybe even make some skill checks if they come up with ideas for how to improve their chances of living through the impact.

> The shaking becomes unbearable, a bone-jarring ride that slams you from side to side within your restraints until your vision blurs and every muscle in your body screams in protest. The sound is unbearable, a shrieking of air and metal that drives the very thoughts from your brain. The air is scorching hot and reeks of burning plastic, searing your nose and throat with every breath. The ship rolls constantly, spinning you head over heels as you plummet toward the unseen ground.
>
> The Warhulk hits something with the force of a million-ton sledgehammer, plastering you against the bulkhead with the force of deceleration. The bounce catapults you out of your seats, soaring free for a moment that seems to last forever, and then you hit again, this time for good. The ship is skidding over something outside, lurching and bouncing as machinery is ripped loose from its mounts and the ship tears itself to pieces—but then, amazingly, your motion stops and a strange silence fills the air. You're down . . . somewhere.

CONCLUSION

The heroes have done it! They've destroyed the Warhulk and saved countless lives on Alitar. So, what happens now? If the heroes rode the Warhulk down or followed it to the ground, you can give them one more episode:

> The Warhulk came to rest on a pebble-covered beach between two rocky headlands. The ship's bow is embedded deep in the forested hillside, covered in splintered trees and burning vegetation. Its stern juts a hundred meters or more into the cove, water steaming and hissing as it laps against the hot metal. The ship is lying halfway on its side, and its superstructure leans out like a falling tower. Buckled and broken, it's clear that the ship is never going to fly again.
>
> Denora Barad stands gazing at the wreck, a heavy flight jacket draped around her shoulders. Battered and bruised, the young intelligence specialist you met back on Aegis seems years older now. She turns her back on the wreck, facing you. "I don't know about you," she says, "but if I had known that this job was going to be that hard, I never would have signed up."
>
> Overhead, silver glints in the sky appear—ships dropping toward you, following the Warhulk's blazing trail. The major gives you a wry smile. "Looks like our ride's here."

WRAPPING UP

After the Warhulk goes down, the heroes find themselves in the center of a combined Concord, Regency, and Alitarin fleet, the men of the hour. If they're in any great distress (for example, flying blind in modified robot fighters or crawling from the grounded wreckage of the Warhulk) the *Cold Harbor* quickly retrieves them, aiding injured characters and giving the heroes a chance to rest and relax.

Surviving the adventure and defeating the Warhulk is worth 1 achievement point per act, plus an overall story award of 3 points. To this you can add individual awards to give certain players credit for sharp thinking or exceptional roleplaying. In addition to gaining experience, the heroes have earned the gratitude of the Imperial State of Algemron, StarMech, and the Galactic Concord. StarMech may offer the heroes some compensation in order to keep them quiet about the workings of the Warhulk and to recognize the fact that they saved the megacorporation an immense amount of grief by preventing a StarMech weapon from destroying an independent colony.

On the flip side, the heroes may have a new enemy in the Intelligence Directorate of the Federal State of Algemron. The Galvinites are going to remember that the heroes foiled their plans to seize the ship, and they'll be looking for ways to get even.

TransVerge News Prime Report
Sunday, October 8, 2501

ARMS SHIPMENT MISSING

ALAUNDRIL—Confirming a story uncovered by TVN last week, the Common Council of Alaundril conformed that several tons of military-grade arms have disappeared from guarded storehouses in the military city of Shadowrock Base. The cost of the missing weapons remains unknown, as the Common Council is still compiling an inventory. Initial estimates place the "street value" at over $2 million. Alaundril's Internal Affairs Division announced that it has no suspects at the present time, but is investigating several leads.

The announcement drew additional criticism of Alaundril's military establishment. "We're under siege," claimed General Karen Jestons, commanding officer of Shadowrock Base. "The amount of traffic that we're expected to control and direct, both on the planet and in the system, make it impossible for us to do our jobs with our current funding." Jestons' statements in a press conference confirm independent reports that the Alaundril defensive forces have become stretched thin with the increased flow of ships and material into the Verge.

Meanwhile, StarMech ambassador Chelsea Krest took the opportunity to state the Collective's willingness to assist the
Click **WEAPONS** for more

LIGHTHOUSE DELAYED

ANTIGUA—After eight days in the Ignatius system, station officials on the *Lighthouse* announced yesterday that the starfall to Mantebron, expected today, has been postponed for at least two days. "Negotiations with the ke'kekt continue," said Michael Thayne. "Everyone involved has high hopes of reaching a solution amenable to natives and colonists." Meanwhile, Taurean settlers protested Concord attempts to limit their travel over Antigua as part of any negotiations. "As long as the Concord continues to deny our colony's right of sovereignty, these diplomatic talks will go nowhere," said an unnamed spokesperson.

Despite initial hopes for a settlement between the native ke'kekt and the colonists, station diplomats admit that the possibility of a failure looms with each passing hour. "The station can only delay so long, and I doubt either party will budge from their current position," reported one Concordan.
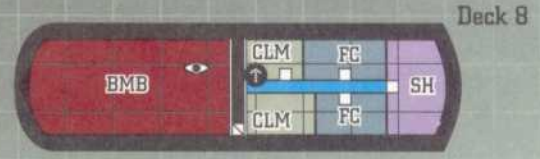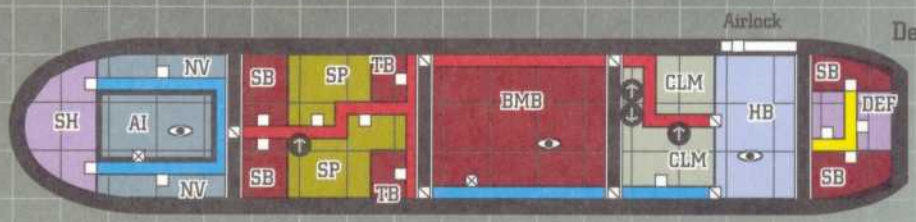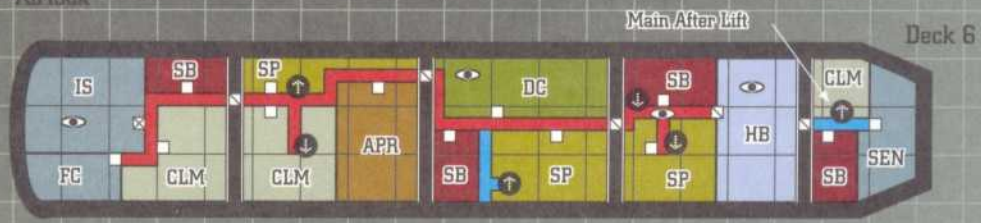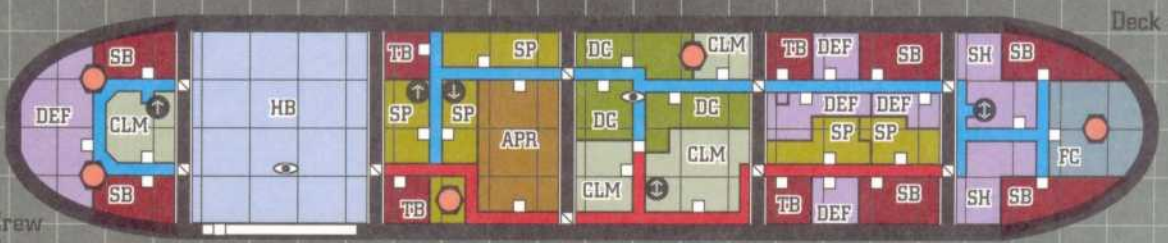
Station officials declined to comment on whether the delay in the Ignatius system would result in additional adjustments to the schedule for Mantebron, Armstrong, and Vieron, the last three planned destinations before the *Lighthouse* returns to the Aegis system for an extended stay. This is not the first
Click **LIGHTHOUSE** for more

Deck Plans II

Legend:
- Standard Hatch
- Security Hatch
- Armored Hatch
- Sensor Turret
- Main Turret
- Armored Bulkhead
- Bulkhead
- Primary Passageway
- DC Bulkhead
- Tertiary Passageway
- Secondary Passageway

10m

Deck 3

Deck 4

Main Midships Lift

Deck 5

Airlock

Main After Lift

Deck 6

Airlock

Deck 7

Deck 8

Airlock

Abbreviations:

COMMAND
- CRW Crew
- SEN Sensors
- COM Communications
- FC Fire Control
- NV Navigation
- AI Artificial Intelligence
- IS Internal Security

WEAPONS
- MB Main Battery
- SB Secondary Battery
- TB Tertiary Battery
- MZ Magazine
- BMB Bomb Bay
- MS Missile Room

DEFENSES
- DEF Defenses
- SH Shields

CLIM CTRL
- CLM Climate Control
- LS Life Support

DAM CTRL
- DC Damage Control
- REP Repair Shop

SUPPLIES
- SP Supplies
- RS Repair Supplies

ENGINEERING
- ENG Engineering
- SD Stardrive
- APR Auxiliary Power Room
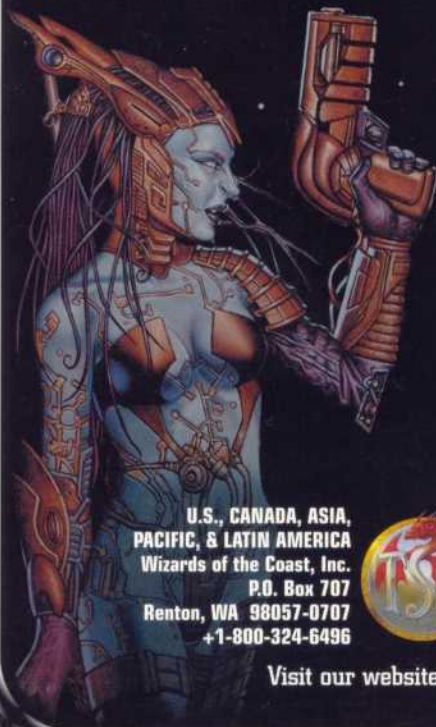- HB Hangar Bay

THE LAST WARHULK

by Richard Baker

The StarMech Collective was in danger of being overwhelmed during the Second Galactic War by the enormous Thuldan Empire. To save the lives of its people, the Collective used its talent in robotics and automation to create the Warhulks—massive spacegoing vessels bristling with destructive capability and guided by the most sophisticated artificial intelligence units ever to be installed in a starship.

When the Treaty of Concord brought an end to the war in 2472, StarMech recalled and deactivated its Warhulks . . . except for one. Lying disabled and unnoticed in an insignificant star system, the Warhulk designated *Ares 22* was stranded. Both its stardrive and its AI unit had been damaged—the ship could not return home, and as a result it never discovered that the war had ended.

Finally, more than a quarter-century later, *Ares 22* has found the necessary resources to repair its stardrive. The Last Warhulk is once again operational—and on the prowl for enemies to annihilate.

This 64-page adventure for the STAR*DRIVE™ campaign setting pits the heroes against a truly inhuman foe—a defective AI that believes itself to be in perfect working order and has a vast array of killing devices at its disposal. The heroes must disable the ship, or somehow dissuade it from carrying out its deadly mission and wiping out millions of innocent people.

The War's Not Over Yet

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