

10 PULSE LASERS
1000 DRAG ENGINES

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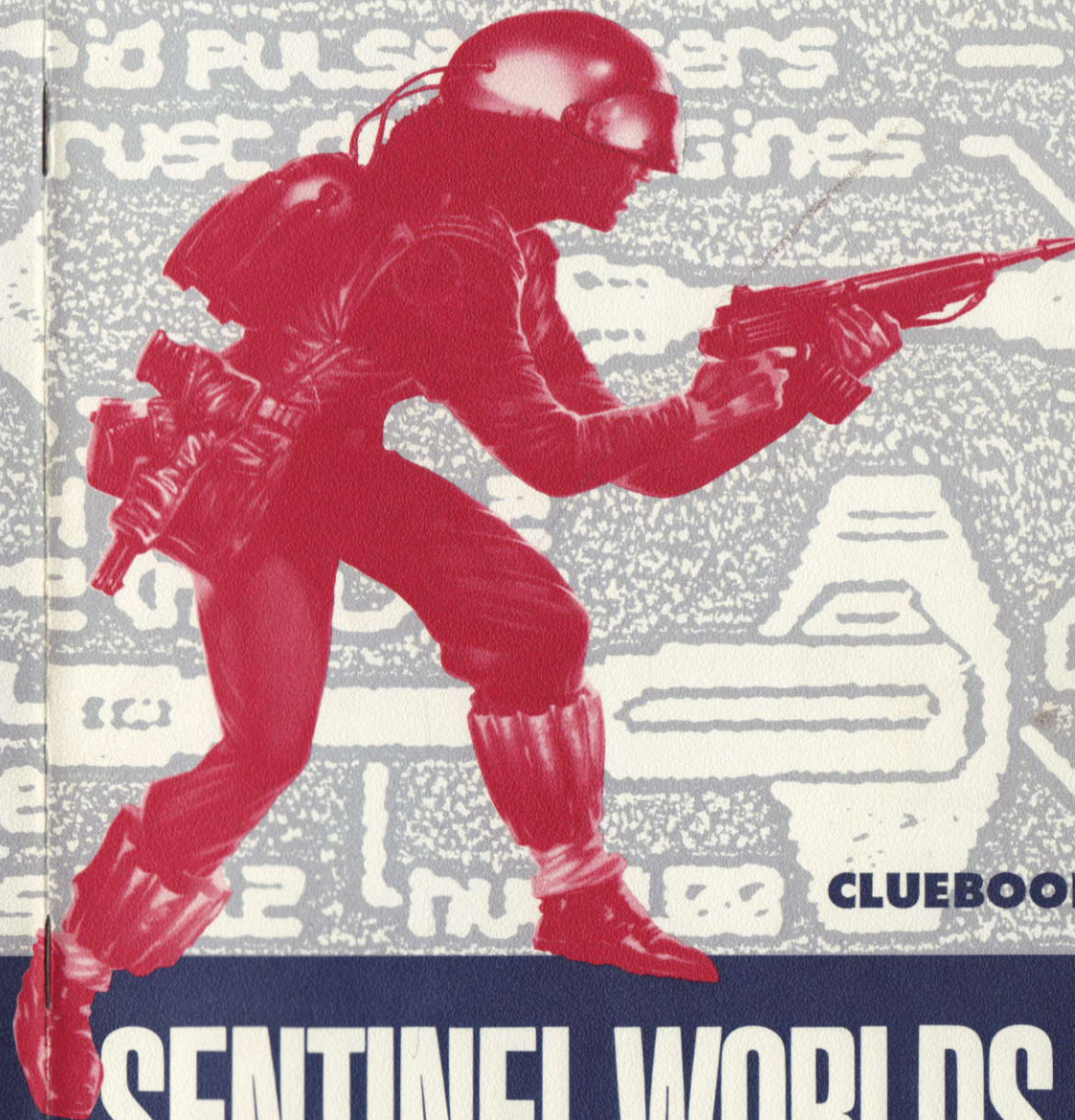


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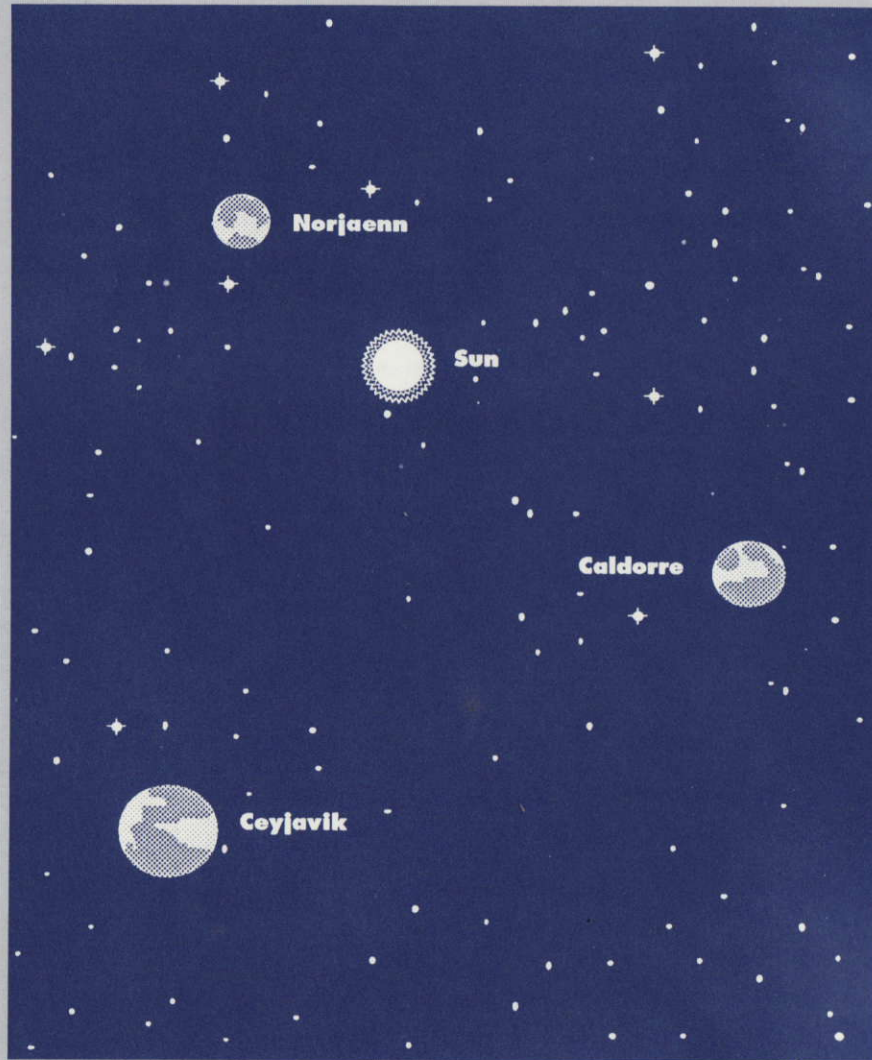
SENTINEL WORLDS

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CALDORRE SYSTEM



I never wanted much when I was a kid. A baseball glove, a menacing dog, all the soda I could drink, and an interceptor-class starship. Same dream as all the other neighborhood punks. The first three I got before I hit four feet; the last one took a little longer to come by.

I joined the Federation a few years ago. The economy was bad and military was about the only way to go if you didn't want to live at home. Luckily, navigating came as easy to me as picking lint from my navel, so the Fed put me in charge of a whole ship. It didn't take long to prove I was better than the other paint-by-number commanders. I got things done in half the time without killing crews and destroying ships. I was so cool under fire they thought I didn't have pores. (Living with a menacing dog for ten years takes most of the fear out of you. And closes your pores.)

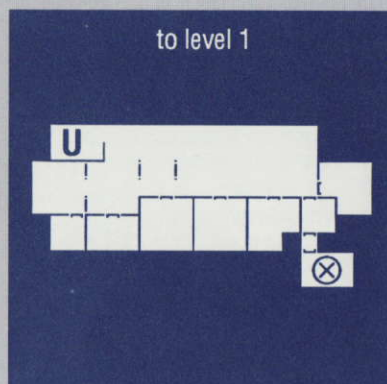
Federation superiors (overweight, red-faced guys stuffed into military green suits — "pimentos," we called them) briefed me on the troubles in the Caldorre system. Federation convoys were getting trashed by raiders before they could make it with their loads to the planets of Norjaenn, Ceyjavik and Caldorre. My crew and I would have to go there to stop it. Simple enough.

The Federation computer chose a crew for me based on compatibility of skills and temperaments. I threw the computer's choices away. I didn't want a crew that could get along at a tea party. I wanted people who were smart and wouldn't get themselves — or me — killed. I looked over the available cadet profiles and assembled a crew that I thought had potential for action. I wanted fighters and technicians. Forget the pretty faces.

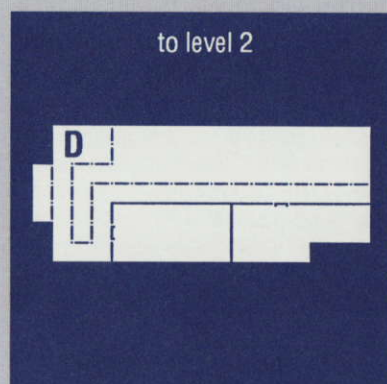
Rip Bradley was my first choice as pilot because he had skills as a gunner, something mighty useful in hostile space. Rip also performed well on the physical tests and had high dexterity and strength ratings. My communications officer, Sandy Li, was a genius cadet. I knew she could hack her way through any Federation ship computer before I could say "piece of junk." Karen Young was an avid racquetball player and an excellent engineer, a combination which made her the fastest repairwoman this side of any horizon. Our medic, Jon Wesley, was equally athletic and adept. His quick emergency treatments saved countless crew lives.

My crew assembled aboard the FSS ORION, an interceptor-class starship, with our assignment. I didn't know a thing about the Caldorre System or about its political problems. And I wasn't going to get the chance to do my homework on the way there. We were put in cryogenic sleep for the duration of the the six month journey to the troubled territory.

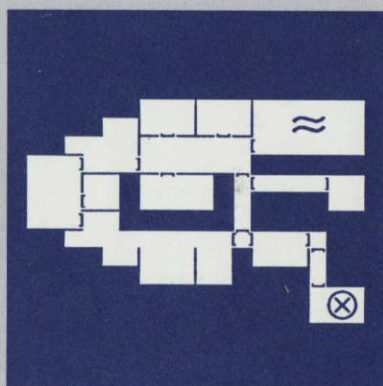
GRAGER'S SHIP, LEVEL 1



GRAGER'S SHIP, LEVEL 2



RAIDER SHIP



Legend

- ⊗ = Entrance
- U = Elevator, Stair or Access Up
- D = Elevator, Stair or Access Down
- ▽ = Tubeway to Ship
- ≈ = Item(s)



RAIDERS!

We awoke from our cold sleep just a few hours before our transport reached the Caldorre System. We had just started a pre-launch systems check of the ORION when our transport was attacked by raiders. Welcome to the neighborhood! We quickly found out that our Interceptor — woefully outfitted with stock Federation lasers, hull, engines and computer — was no match for the lightning-fast raiders. The ORION was raked over in the exchange. We were lucky to escape with our hides, no thanks to the antiquated Federation scrapheap.

We limped to Caldorre and put the ship into dry dock. Repair after repair after repair drained credit after credit after credit. New Federation policy — one all the commanders hated — demanded that we pay for our own expenses by performing services. At least we didn't have to job hunt; the Science Foundation had a number of missions so we signed up. Most of the missions consisted of dropping weather systems and monitor units on Ceyjavik, the Ice Planet. The only thing that bugged me about our missions was the fuel consumption. Each hyperspace between Caldorre and Ceyjavik cost us five hundred fuel units. It took plenty of adjusting to the ship before I could figure out ways to cut down on the fuel guzzling.

Ceyjavik had some curious inhabitants, especially the ice tigers. They were beautiful cats, but I was glad we weren't there to do research on them. Even though we were safe in our ATV, I insisted that the crew stay very, very clear of them. Karen thought it would've been fun to have to tag them or give them medical assistance. I asked her how fun it would be to feed them, say, with her body. She said she preferred to work with birds.

It was great earning easy credits, but we didn't want to run these pantywaist missions forever. The crew was growing restless for action. Jon kept asking if anybody had a severe laceration he could bandage. Sandy had programmed the ship computer to play liar's dice against itself. Rip was hunting ship rats with a pea gun. Fortunately we were saved from ourselves when we learned through Federation Communications that a convoy was under attack just off of Norjaenn.

As we approached the battle scene, we targeted what we thought was a merchant ship but was actually an expensive space yacht. Any rich playboy stupid enough to wander through a war zone deserved a couple of laser shots up his thruster, but I decided to give him a warning instead. We hailed the vessel and were granted permission to board. Mr. William Grager, a haughty, urbane, and filthy rich businessman, was in the second level of his yacht. Grager had a monopoly on all the trading within the Caldorre System; it was his cargoliners that were the victims of the raids. Grager thought that his competitors in the neighboring systems were responsible for the raids, but didn't have any idea where the raider bases were located.

Grager refused to lose his grip on Caldorre. He knew all Federation crews had explicit orders to destroy raiders in the system, so he offered to have the ORION outfitted with more sophisticated weapons and computer systems. Rip's eyes bulged at the offer, a definite indicator of its importance. Despite my dislike of the guy, I nodded to Grager, who immediately dispatched his technicians to the ORION.

Once they were done, we returned to the ORION and entered the raging battle. Our upgraded weapons and computers made us the predator this time, as we gutted several raider ships. I was on a commander's high, so I ordered Sandy to program the ship's computers to take out a raider's engines. When Rip blasted the engines, we destroyed her lasers. I considered leaving the scum to float helpless in space, but I didn't want to risk their getting rescued by other scum. I ordered the crew to board the ship.

I stood at the head of the party, armed with a cryo cutlass. Behind me stood Karen with a power fist. Jon, the medic, was next. He carried a cutlass, but his priority was to help anyone who got wounded. Next came Sandy. Rip brought up the rear, a fresh fifty-round clip in his automatic pistol. As we forced open the portal of the stricken raider ship, my combat helmet told me raiders were approaching. I saw that if I stepped into the narrow corridor of the enemy ship, I would have to face the raiders alone. I decided to remain in the entryway so that Karen could swing on an opponent, too. Rip would also have a clearer shot with his automatic pistol.

Several raiders rounded the corner. I could see their steel mesh armor and cryo cutlasses flashing in the artificial light. They were nasty opponents; Karen reported a few good hits with her power fist, but it took Rip's automatic pistol to effectively penetrate their armor. Better weapons were definitely our next priority.

Damn! The second we stepped into the corridor, the raiders set the ship's self-destruct mechanism. The whole bucket would blow in a few minutes. We leaped over dead raiders and made a fast tour of their ship. On the bridge more raiders attacked with sheer fanaticism. They weren't fighting to save themselves — they just wanted to have us done up crisp along with them. When the last of the bastards lay sprawled on the floor we moved on to the armory and collected as many of the weapons as time allowed. Rip discovered a tessellator, which he knew would fetch a good price on the market. We scrambled back onto the ORION with enough spare time to clear the raider ship before it turned into a scrap metal flambe.

KOSAKA'S GUNS R US, CEYJAVIK (2112, 480)

Weapons were a priority, but they don't come cheap. We needed money. We'd tried mining on Norjaenn and Caldorre; it was easy, but the money didn't cut it. Since we knew the Science Foundation was a dependable employer, we undertook many more missions, delivering the same old monitor units to Ceyjavik. For the most part, the planet appeared uninhabited by humans except for the egghead researchers who worked in the remote Bio-research Center. So

I was a little shocked to discover a small building just yards away from where we were going to install a weather monitor. A huge sign with the happy letters KOSAKA'S GUNS R US hung over the doorway.

Sandy and Karen could only give each other a goofy look of disbelief. Inside the building we found glass cases filled with handguns, bladed weapons, and ammunition. Rifles, sonic maces, gyro-pikes and other weapons hung neatly on the walls. We all considered picking up a shotgun, but Kosaka advised against it. He informed me that smart crews carried a variety of weapons so they'd be ready for any opponent, no matter how big, small, or ugly. His weapons recipe: Every crewmember should eventually be able to wield three different weapon types with equal prowess. We decided to buy weapons based on where each member of the crew stood in marching order. Sandy and Rip bought shotguns since they stood in back. Karen and I picked gyro-pikes since we were up front. Jon's main role was to heal, not to fight, so he took Rip's automatic pistol to use in those special moments. All he had to do was pick up some extra clips.

We also needed better armor than our flight jackets, but at best we could only afford a few flak jackets. Kosaka told us that flak jackets were the best all-around protection except for combat armor, which he didn't sell and we probably couldn't afford anyway. According to Kosaka, flak jackets provided good protection against all weapons, not just excellent protection against one or two types. For now, only Karen and I would have flak jackets. When we told him we'd be back, Kosaka smiled knowingly and handed us an Armor Protection Values sales piece.

Armor Protection Values

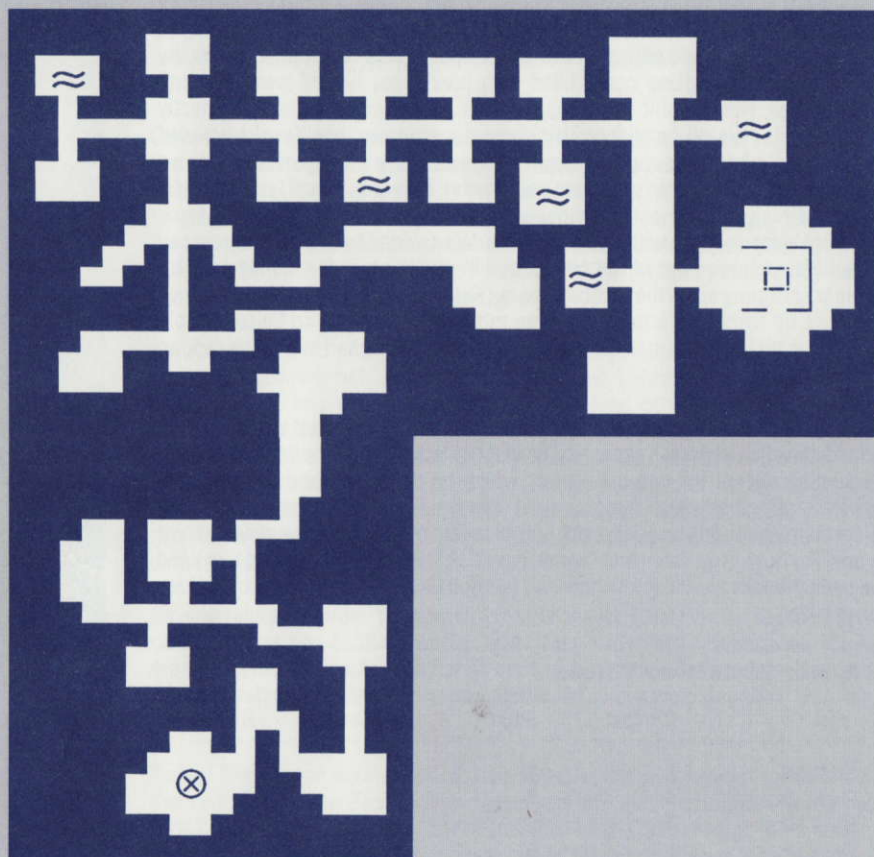
	Contact	Edge	Projectile	Blaster
Uniform	2	1	-	-
Flight Jacket	4	3	1	2
Steel Mesh	7	9	3	3
Flak Jacket	5	5	8	6
Kevlar Suit	3	5	10	2
Laser Reflect	3	2	1	10
Combat Armor	8	9	10	10

10 = most effective 0 = least effective

THE WARHAKA, CALDORRE (1151, 769)

Back on the ORION we received message of a dispute on Caldorre that required Federation assistance. We hyperspaced to Caldorre and set down at the beacon. We drove for a while before we discovered the Warhakan village. In the center hut we found the Warhakan leader who carried on and on about this strange race of fearsome creatures digging tunnels in Warhakan territory. He said the creatures were reportedly of immense strength, but he never came out and said they attacked any of his people. Still, they had appeared rather

KOSHOL CAVE



suddenly and were annoyingly digging around. Maybe these creatures with a mole complex were in some way connected to the raids.

The Warhakan told us we could find the alien race beyond the Towers of Caldorre. The Towers, I knew, were both home to the technologically advanced Caldorrean's and a way-station on the Federation trade-route with the neighboring systems. The Towers were several kilometers in height and reportedly very ancient. With the Towers as a reference point, I used the Warhakan chief's crude map to estimate the coordinates of the tunnels.

THE KOSHOL, CALDORRE (1012:6, 622:8)

The tunnels were located near a forest of huge pines. The ATV wheezed over the rough, mountainous terrain. We had to search a while before we came across a well-hidden cave entrance. The minute we piled out of the ATV and into the cave, these mad cave bears made a beeline for us. Luckily, the scanner could sense beings approaching from quite a distance, so we were never taken by surprise, even when the attacks came from behind.

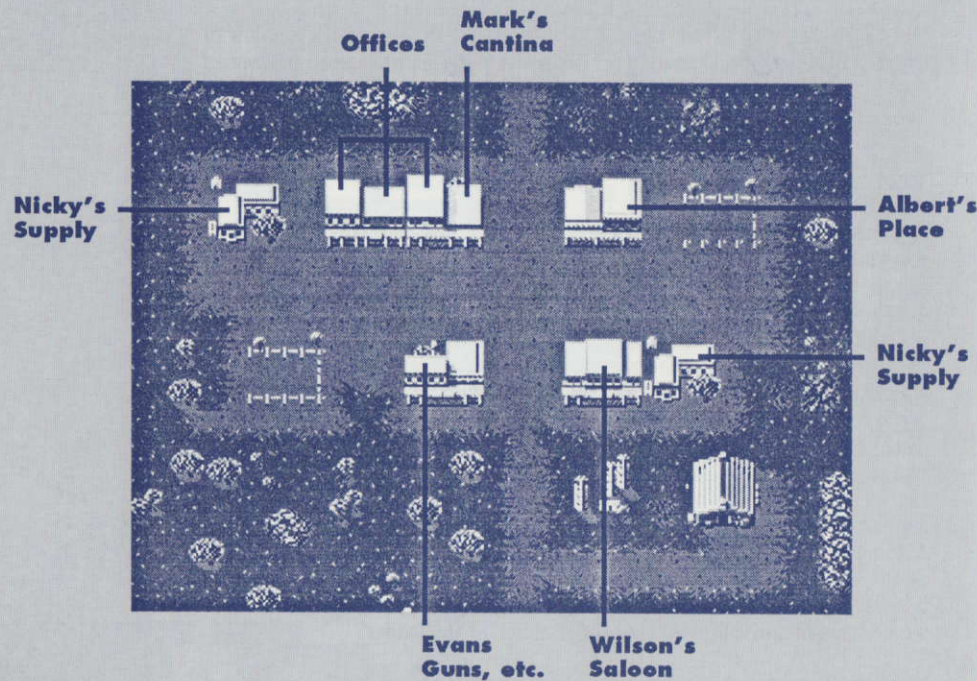
Deep inside the cave the bear attacks became less frequent. It grew suspiciously still. A blip on the screen alerted me to a being nearby, but it didn't register as hostile. I targeted the creature and as it formed on my scanner, I warned the others to prepare for an attack. The approaching monster was like nothing I'd seen before, except maybe in a bad horror film. The creature didn't attack so I attempted to communicate with it. Much to my surprise, it understood what I was saying. In an alien voice the creature responded that we would have to speak to the "one who dreams". Their leader?

We wandered through the tunnels until my scanner picked up a weird-shaped room to the northeast. Nothing blocked our way so we invited ourselves in to the massive chamber. A large, raised dais towered over us, spewing out tall flames that bathed the room in a hellish light. I slowly walked up to the leader in his inner sanctuary. I couldn't tell if the "dreaming one" was dreaming or not. I smiled my diplomatic smile and asked him why they were digging here. He said that the Koshol — his race — were digging because of a vision of evil, adding that they were only digging in these caves and nowhere else. I believed him. The Koshol didn't look like they cared a worm's butt about conquering Caldorre or picking on the Warhakan or even of living on the surface.

We seemed halfway to a resolution. After returning to the ship and resting a while, we went back to the Warhakan. I explained the seemingly-harmless intentions of the Koshol, and the Warhakan agreed to let them stay. Easy as that. The crew razzed me for my "mediating prowess," dubbing me "Sam the Used Interceptor Salesman." I had a feeling I'd be doing a lot more and a lot tougher negotiating than that. The Fed gave us a five thousand credit reward for our work. Bless their little hearts.

Even with all that behind us, I kept thinking about what the Koshol were after. They weren't mindless creatures — they had to be digging for some reason other than just because. I was sure they weren't working for the raiders. They

WESTERN TOWN



just had this vision of some evil force they had to destroy. The Koshols were a small piece in a huge puzzle of The Crisis of Caldorre. I just rubbed my tired eyes and hoped their piece would eventually fit in.

WESTERN TOWN, NORJAENN (1728:8, 992:6)

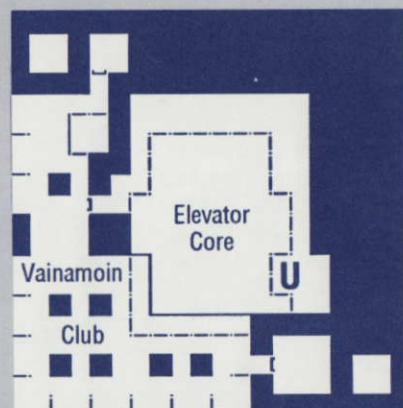
Flush with capital, we returned to Kosaka's for more flak jackets and ammo. Rip was jacked up from our success and aching to take on another raider ship. He wouldn't have to wait long. Another raider attack on another hapless convoy. We flew into a swarm of raiders and immediately disabled one of their ships. With even more tactical finesse, we boarded the ship and blasted away. In a strange twist, one raider surrendered himself. A raider who was unwilling to die for his master? I slammed the dog up against the wall and asked him whose boots he was licking. Right then he had second thoughts about letting himself get captured. Before I could get a word out of him, he choked down some cyanide. Sandy shook her head and predicted that interrogating these zealous raiders was going to be impossible. Out of frustration, we sacked the ship of whatever we thought had value and returned to the ORION.

The next dispute we'd have to settle was in a town called Tolve on the planet Norjaenn. We talked to the locals and quickly found out that there were only two factions in Tolve — make that on all of Norjaenn. Farmers were competing with ranchers for the available land on the planet. About the only thing both sides could agree on was that the Federation should have ended the raids a long time ago. The raids were crippling Norjaenn's economy and each group fingered the other as being secretly behind the raids. Peace was dangling by a fine thread on Norjaenn.

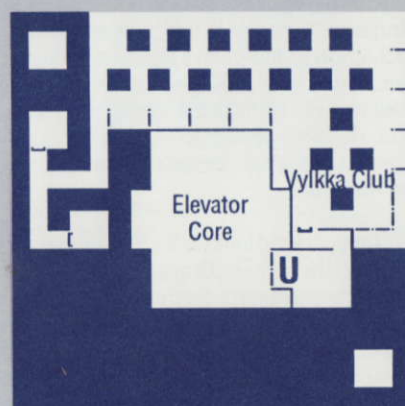
We thought we'd look for the town leaders and get their stories. The undeclared leader of the farmers, Grayper, was killing time in Wilson's Saloon. Grayper told us the ranchers were destroying the cargo ships. Karen pointed out to him that the ranchers had lost just as much as the farmers in the raids, but he shrugged her off. A woman named Taylor overheard our conversation. She thought that somebody off-world was responsible for the raids, but didn't think the bases could be in this system. Theory aside — and hers was the best so far — she appeared trustworthy. We left the farmers and went over to Albert's Place. There we found Robert Kann, the leader of the Kann clan, Norjaenn's leading ranching family. Kann was only a little more level-headed than Grayper. He thought the raids were a secret trade war, but he didn't have any idea who would stand to gain from a trade war or where the raiders were based.

Jason Depard was the owner of Mark's Cantina. He recognized that both sides were responsible for the dispute over land. When Jon asked him about the raids he looked him dead in the eye and told us he didn't know who was behind the raids, but he knew what: a Great Evil, greater than any we'd faced before. He grew quiet after that. The last thing he muttered was that he didn't think the raider bases were on Norjaenn. This dispute was going to be tough for even "Sam the Used Interceptor Salesman" to resolve. They were up to their hipboots in mistrust for each other. The only solution was to prove to both the ranchers and the farmers that their enemy — and the Federation's — was an

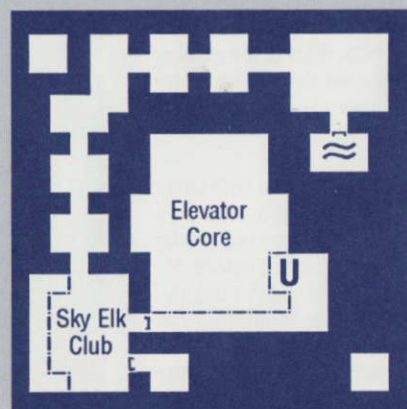
CALDORRE TOWER ONE, LEVEL 793



CALDORRE TOWER TWO, LEVEL 793



CALDORRE TOWER THREE, LEVEL 793



outside force. But we were a long way from knowing who or what that was. We'd have to knock around the system for leads. Caldorre would be our next stop.

On our way out of Tolte, we stopped by a supply store that was willing to buy some of the junk we'd seized from the raiders — a load off our backs and a little extra cash in our pockets.

CALDORRE TOWERS

We docked the ORION on the highest level of Tower One, the 801st story. The level was entirely devoted to docking ports, so I told Rip that if he didn't remember anything else, he'd better remember where the ORION was.

The towers were an awesome feat of engineering. In the center of the tower was a hollow core along which elevators ran up and down, delivering people to different levels. As non-locals, we were only allowed to enter the top nine levels. We squeezed onto a glider and swooped down to the next level.

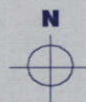
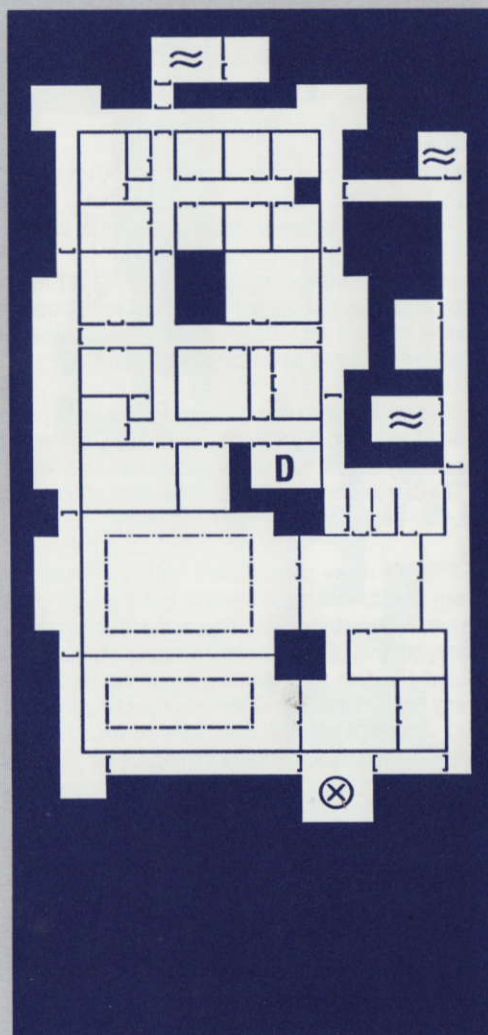
The locals were reluctant to speak to Federation marines. For the most part, our questions were met with short answers. We weren't too hurt by it. We were just glad to be in port and were ready to turn this investigation into shore leave. A neon light winked at us: "The Barracuda Bar." We smiled at each other and filed in without a word. Inside, star-pilots looked perfectly at home.

We ordered drinks and tried to make conversation with the locals. Most answered as any Caldorrean would, which was close to not at all, but one was actually willing to give his name: Ruawl. Ruawl said he had once been on a ship that was attacked by raiders, but that the raiders had given up their attack and vanished. He assumed that the raiders were warping in and out from another system, but didn't have any idea which one. Gunshots cut the conversation short. Bullets whizzed past. Jon brilliantly deduced that we were in the middle of a barroom brawl. Sandy deduced that they were aiming for us! Rip, Sandy and Jon ducked and opened fire. I turned on one of the rowdies behind me and chopped him to the floor. When the smoke cleared, four star-pilots lay dead and all of us were intact. We inspected the rest of the bar for more brawlers. In the back room Rip found a Mark V Teng. That seemed like nice compensation for our troubles! I threw it in my pack. On our way out I warned the bartender about allowing the wrong clientele into his establishment.

In the other levels, we found the usual offices and stores along with sport clubs, libraries and gyms designed to improve the body and mind — for the price of one thousand in cash. Valuables turned up in a few offices; I appropriated them in the name of the Fed. We checked out the weapons for sale in an armory; nothing we needed, but Karen pointed out that we could go here if Kosaka's didn't have something. In the last level we happened upon a bar that admitted only the charming. We Fed marines were too ugly to meet the club's standards, so we returned to the ship.

Towers Three and Two were like Tower One in their design and the kinds of establishments found there. In Tower Two there was a club only for the strong.

LAND LIFE LAB



In Tower Three was another club just for the swift. None of us met these clubs' standards either. I figured at some point, raising our strength, charisma and dexterity might be a good investment. It could only help us, and maybe we'd get to see what was inside these places.

BIO-RESEARCH STATION, CEYJAVIK (729, 426)

Hanging around the Towers was like being on vacation, so we weren't thrilled to get a distress call from Ceyjavik. Distress calls always meant possible danger and certain misery. The mood aboard the ORION quickly became tense.

We touched down near the bio-research center. Ice tigers roamed anxiously around the compound. Did some huge catastrophe occur? Were the tigers scavenging for food? We decided to stay in the ATV and see what we could determine from outside. All of the buildings looked intact. There were no signs of battle. Karen thought it was unusual to have so many tigers wander so near to a human settlement. Rip parked the ATV outside a building marked "Life Center," which was the living quarters for Science Foundation personnel. We climbed out of the vehicle into the bitter cold and ran straight for the building — into the hot breaths of four ice tigers.

After some work we managed to kill the animals. Our contact and edged weapons worked best on the tiger hides. We searched the rest of the building. Dead scientists lay mauled in the corridors and in their bedrooms. No survivors. Not good.

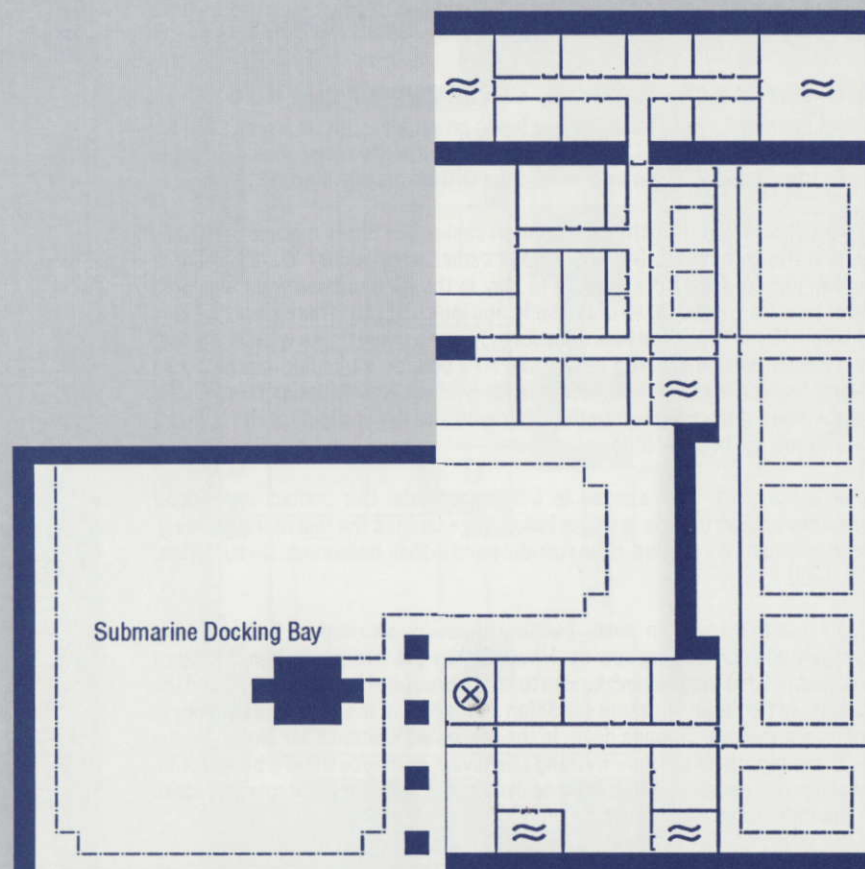
Tigers roamed freely in every building, feasting on corpses but attacking savagely as soon as they saw us. How did they get into the buildings? Karen commented that they weren't known to attack groups of humans. We found the Command Center in the same condition as the rest of the station: doors open, tigers everywhere, humans dead. In the offices we searched for clues: maybe we'd find reports of the tiger's strange behavior, or maybe there'd be scientific evidence of a decrease in the seal population, the tiger's main staple. We came to the radio room. Jon noticed a monitor flashing a message.

"We've got a survivor!" he cried, "Look. It says, 'This is Virginia K. In laboratory...attacked...Up the canyon — a hatch in the snow. Barricaded. Ice tigers went berserk.'"

LAND LIFE LAB, CEYJAVIK

We sprinted back to the ATV. Rip punched the controls and the huge machine roared in response. We headed northeast from the command center, and followed a snow-filled canyon for miles. Luckily, we had enough fuel. Inside the lab we found Virginia Karamatu. She recalled receiving a message from the Sea Life Lab reporting an incident in the mini-sub area where researchers had been exploring some underground volcanoes. Soon after that, the cats broke in and attacked. Virginia barricaded herself inside the radio room, knowing it was the most secure place in the lab. She tried to warn the base camp, but knew it was too late when no one responded. She said the attack was completely unprecedented, that the tigers were just overgrown pussycats — until now.

SEA LIFE LAB



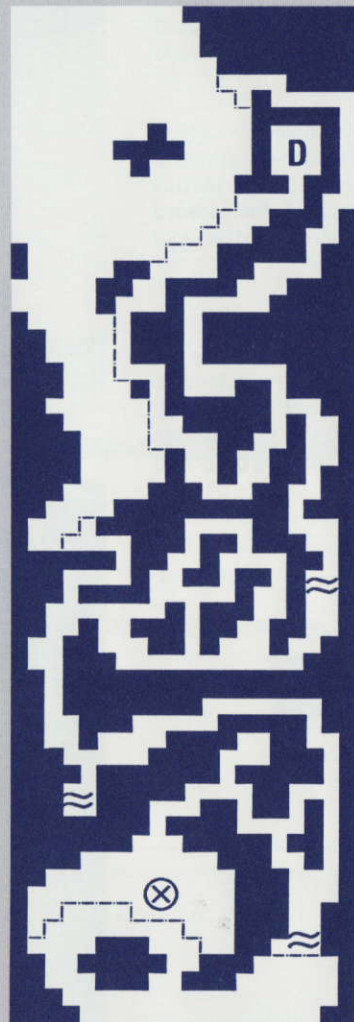
We offered to take Virginia to Norjaenn, but she was content with staying as long as the lab was secure. I told her that before we set off to investigate the aquarium we'd make sure the building was safe. In the lab's armory we found two AK assault rifles and a hyper-uzi. Since these weapons weren't supposed to be bought or sold, Rip said it was his duty as a marine to confiscate them and put them to good use.

We explored every inch of the Land Life Lab, occasionally tripping over boxes of ammo. We also found a long tunnel heading north from a hatchway in a small chamber near Virginia. After miles of walking we ran across the entry to the Sea Life Lab. Walking further to the east, we found an "EA Fun Lab". Rip scowled and said he was sure it was a trick, so we returned to the more important work at hand.

SEA LIFE LAB, CEYJAVIK

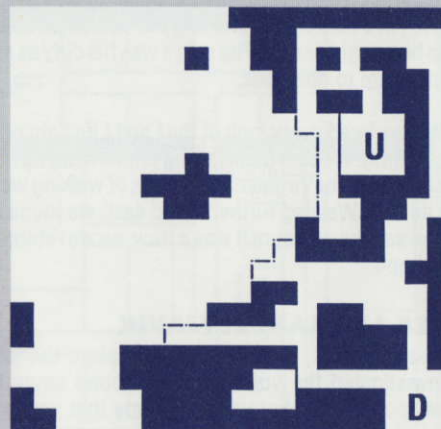
Heading west, I decided we'd explore the entire Sea Life Lab before we investigated the volcanoes. We found ammunition for our new automatic weapons and other valuable items that we were sure nobody would notice missing. We also found shattered aquarium tanks. Fish and other sea creatures lay in pools of water and glass along the corridors. What could have destroyed these tanks and have sent the tigers into a berserk rage?

VOLCANO, LEVEL 1



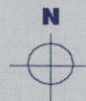
to
level 2

VOLCANO, LEVEL 2



to
level 1

to
level 3



VOLCANO, LEVEL 1, CEYJAVIK

We found a mini-sub and climbed in. Rip briefly stared at the controls before pressing two buttons and flipping a lever. The sub hummed with the sound of electrical equipment. He leaned back against the wall as the sub ferried us across the bay. Rip told me that we'd make it to the volcano if we didn't get horribly and irretrievably lost under the ice cap. Great sense of humor, that Rip.

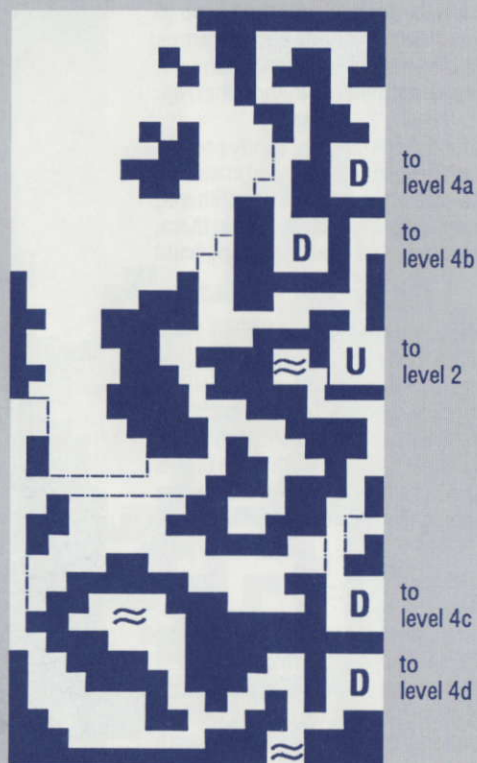
The sub surfaced and we stepped onto the natural stone landing. Sandy pointed at the only tunnel available. After a few minutes our scanners reported creatures advancing. Red lizards — known to have a palate for humans — slithered through the dirt toward us. Our rifles weren't particularly effective against them, but they were the best among our available weapons. And it beat wrestling hand to hand.

Call it a lapse in concentration or call it stupidity, but we had ignored our long-range scan for a moment; it was enough to have the twisted tunnels lead us in circles. The researchers probably got lost here the same way. In one tunnel Jon nearly broke his neck stumbling over a lost supply chest. At least his pain was paid off with some sellable items. A little beyond, we came to a fork in the tunnel. Sandy pointed confidently to the left. After a couple hundred meters the tunnel opened into a cavern. Another tunnel dropped gradually through the cavern floor, leading to still more caverns below. I could feel a distinct case of tunnel and cavern fever coming on.

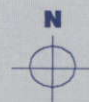
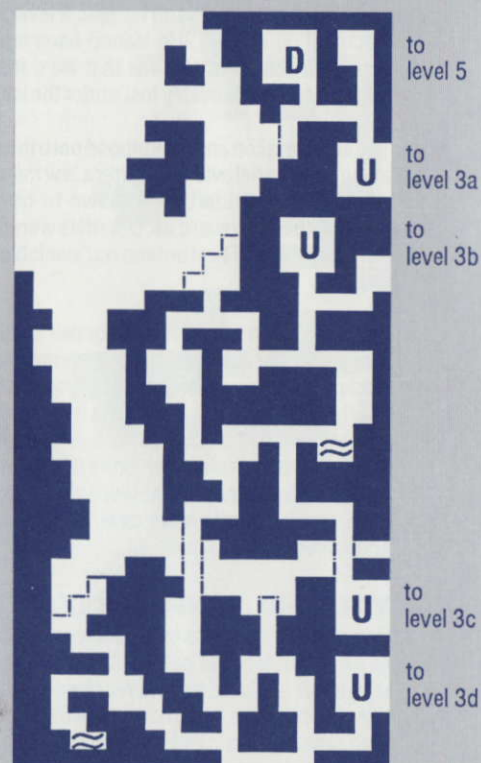
VOLCANO, LEVEL 2, CEYJAVIK

One good thing could be said about red lizards: the more we fought them the more experience we gained. I periodically contacted Federation command to report our exploits, and we received promotions even as we explored. I guess they figured if we had to die in hostile lands far from home, we may as well die high ranking. In a cavern in the southeast corner of the level, we found a path that went down to the third level.

VOLCANO, LEVEL 3



VOLCANO, LEVEL 4



VOLCANO, LEVEL 3 & 4, CEYJAVIK

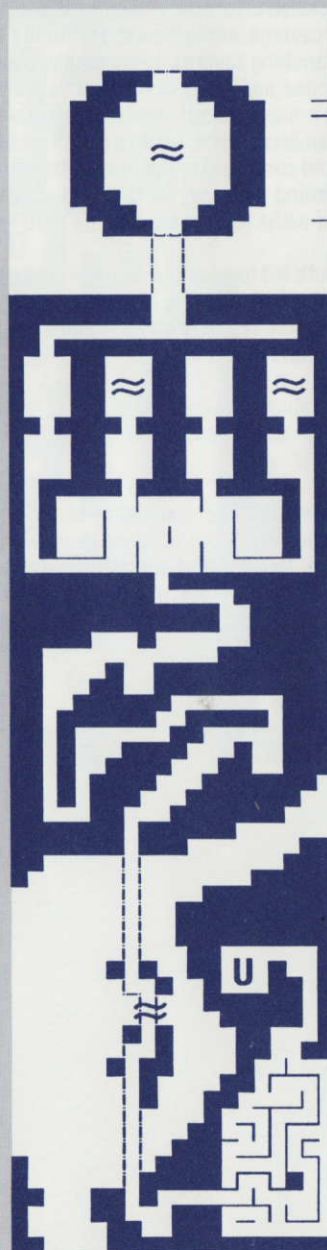
As we descended, the air grew sticky and close. Snakes attacked us with the same rabidity as all the other crazed creatures on Ceyjavik. We made our way south through the labyrinthine caverns. Along the way we found a shotgun pack and an AK mag in two of the branching caverns. In the southwest corner a path sloped downward. We descended and came out near a vaguely key-shaped tunnel. The path branched, one tunnel leading to the west, the other to the north. Wandering west, Karen found an Arisian lens, worth a chunk of change in some parts. We retraced our steps and continued to the north. The path branched in several directions, but with waning patience, we explored all of them. In two separate rooms we discovered paths leading back to the third level.

The path in the room to the south led to a small section of caves. In one of the caves we discovered a weird blue ball hovering in the air. Sandy was the first to see it for what it was — an illusion. We were clueless about why it was there, and despite our efforts, we couldn't dispel it.

The path in the northern room returned to a different part of level three. Here, a small tunnel formed a "hook," at the end of which was another path that wound its way down to level four.

Sandy kept good maps. I knew we could get lost just by blinking too long, and once lost, it would be short time before our machine guns were clicking on empty. The last section of level four formed something like an "H". In the northwest part of the letter, we found a small, unobtrusive opening.

VOLCANO, LEVEL 5



VOLCANO, LEVEL 5, CEYJAVIK

The heat became oppressive under our armor and combat helmets. We marched along, weary and tense from watching our scanners. At a split in the tunnel, I switched to long-range scan and realized that we stood before a maze. I picked the left-hand path because it looked the straightest. Something about very, very, very straight things appealed to me right now.

On the scanner, blips appeared at both ends of the tunnel. I cursed and targeted my opponent. A large, green lizard — a damn dragon — was approaching. I stepped forward and attacked with my gyro-pike, but the dragon's armor was too tough for the contact weapon. Throwing the pike aside, I readied my assault rifle and opened fire. I sunk a lot of lead into the thing before it dropped dead. More slithered toward me. The projectile weapons were the most effective, but even with high firepower, the dragons were tough adversaries. They had a nasty spit of corrosive acid that ate away at our weapons and armor.

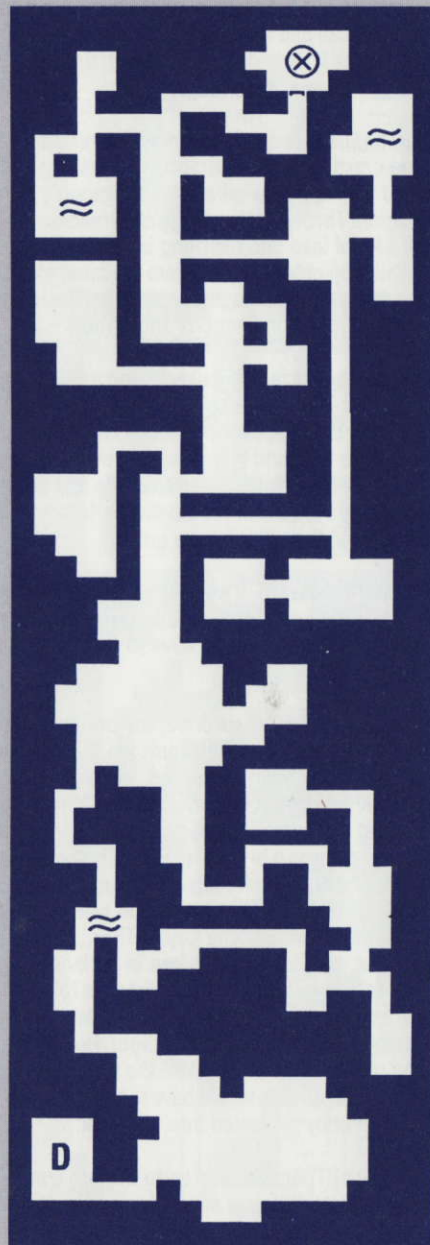
We came out on the other side of the maze and walked along a twisting, narrow path for what seemed miles. Bat-like creatures — Jon called them "bright flyers" — flew alongside us. They didn't appear hostile so I told everybody not to waste their ammo on them. On a thin land bridge we discovered a chest with more ammunition and a suit of Kevlar armor. Karen said she had a feeling the ammo was going to come in handy very soon. We left the Kevlar armor behind; dragons may be tough, but at least they didn't have guns.

Soon we stumbled on a symmetrical cavern. It wasn't the work of nature; some intelligent being shaped it. Inside the huge rooms roamed a bunch of dragons, big and small. Their breeding grounds! We didn't have to introduce ourselves to have the slaving reptiles crawl our way.

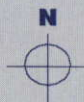
We entered with guns roaring. Much to our surprise, the bright flyers flew in to help us! Karen warned everybody not to hit them; we didn't need extra enemies. When all of the dragons had been destroyed, we explored the nest. In one chamber we found an AK 47; probably some unfortunate's weapon. In the chamber furthest to the west we found a passage with double doors at the end. On the other side of the portals was a brightly lit room. In the center of the massive hall was another blue sphere. This one wasn't an illusion; the scanners read it as a friendly being. I gave a wave to the being and was surprised that it was sentient. The being told me that it was the Key of Thor, a being of light. The Key told us about the Light, the light that shines in all living creatures. Sounded suspiciously hokey to me, but I listened politely. He told us that the Light could shine brightly in some and darkly in others. He also told us about the Sentinels, the folks who nurtured and followed the Light. He also briefed us on Malcolm Trandle, a being of darkness who locked the Key away hundreds of years ago. If we were to fight Malcolm, we would have to bring the Key of Thor to the Sentinels. With no further ado, he floated into my pack.

As if we were dreaming, the Key of Thor returned us to the lab. Our next step was to find the Sentinels. Fortunately, this was all happening too fast for us to stop and really think about it.

STRIKER RIFT, LEVEL 1



to level 2



STRIKER RIFT, NORJAENN (1 169, 677)

Jason Depard had said a Great Evil was behind the raids. Maybe this Malcolm Trandle guy was the very same Great Evil. Maybe Depard even knew who the Sentinels were.

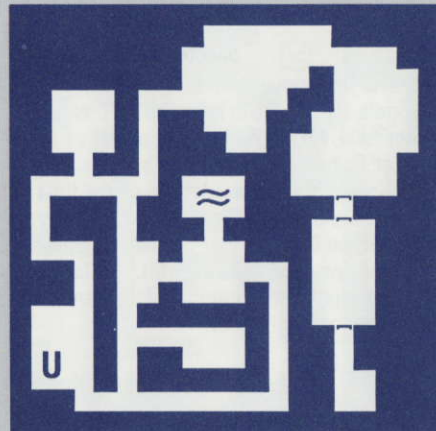
We arrived in Tolte to find most of the town deserted. We found Depard and sure enough, he knew of the Sentinels. He offered to tell us about them, but not until we settled the farmer/rancher feud. Might as well have asked us to spontaneously combust. We looked for Robert Kann in Albert's Place, but he wasn't there. None of the ranchers hanging around would give us the time of day, so we headed over to Wilson's Saloon to talk to Grayper. Oddly, Grayper wasn't parked on his favorite stool. Some farmers told us that Grayper's son was kidnapped and he was forming a posse up in Striker Rift. The farmers gave us the coordinates of the canyon. We had to move quickly if we wanted to keep the farmers and ranchers from killing each other.

There were no farmers to be seen in the canyon. Up the ridge, the cliff wall parted so we could spot a cave opening at 1168:2, 680:13. The farmers were probably searching for the kidnappers here. We moved slowly. It would only take one whacked out farmer to mistake us for ranchers and someone would be marinating in blood. We had to be just as careful not to mistake the farmers for firecats, dark gorillas, or acid-breathing spooks. These monsters roamed in packs and they would've been picking their teeth with our bones if it weren't for our rifles.

What a surprise it was when we entered a huge cavern and found Robert Kann, leader of the ranchers, giving instructions to a group of armed men! He told us that his son had been kidnapped. I asked him to give us a chance to get his son back. He granted us a day before he'd head in after us.

We raced ahead. Further on we ran into Grayper and his group of farmers. I told Grayper that Kann's son was missing, too, but he wouldn't believe me. Karen put a hand on his shoulder and managed to convince him to let us look for his son. Just ahead was a tunnel that led to another cave complex below.

STRIKER RIFT, LEVEL 2



to level 1



STRIKER RIFT, LEVEL 2

Walking northeast, we entered a bizarre temple. I didn't want to think about what kind of disgusting rites had to be hidden from the light of day. In an adjoining room were weapons. Good weapons. A gauss rifle, including ammo, two long range lasers and a crysprism. We collected the weapons and moved on.

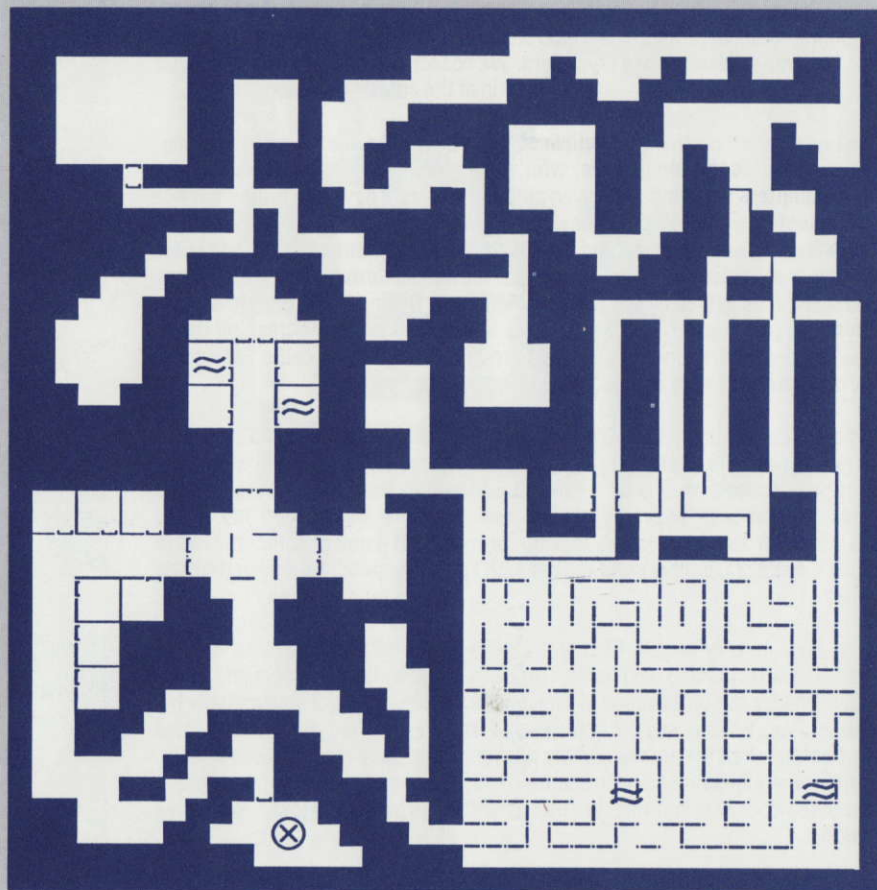
In a huge cavern north of the temple we got a chance to use the new weapons. We burst in on the kidnappers, who were nothing more than dumb thugs dressed up in flak jackets and given automatic rifles. They were tough, but not tough enough for five heavily armed, battle-hardened leathernecks like us. The battle lasted a short lifetime and burned up a lot of our ammunition. We knew the boys were close by, so we went ahead. We walked through a couple of doors and stood face to face with a young-looking guy. Behind him we could see the boys. The young guy said his name was Shadar and proudly screamed that it was he who was responsible for the burned fields and dead cattle. He smiled triumphantly, his eyes burning with an intense hatred.

Shadar paused for a moment. Turning slightly, he shut his eyes and stretched an arm toward me. I felt a tingling at the base of my skull. My mind was being engaged, focused on Shadar's evil will. I fought to keep from falling into the black pit that was widening around me. Shadar's will probed my mind, searching for a way in. He was looking for the bright flame of light. I moved to block his attacks, but his mind moved with lightning speed. He was getting the better of me.

As quickly as they began, Shadar's attacks broke off. I blinked and noticed Jason Depard standing next to me. I grabbed Jason by the shoulders and asked him if Shadar ran off because of him. He told me that Shadar was actually his brother Paul. Shadar was the name Paul's "evil master" had given him. He said the Sentinels had the answers to my questions and gave me their coordinates. Behind where Shadar had been standing I noted an empty room. Rip tried to get in, but the door was jammed. We had better things to do, so I told him to leave it alone.

With the boys safe and the dispute resolved, we could rest. The crisis had given us a cargo load of experience. Our confidence in handling matters (and our weapons!) was quickly increasing.

SENTINEL'S CAVE



SENTINEL'S CAVE, NORJAENN, (992:5, 1121:12)

We wanted to get more ammo at Kosaka's before we landed anywhere else. A burbulator that Jon picked up fetched ten thousand! We wouldn't have to worry about scraping up cash for a while.

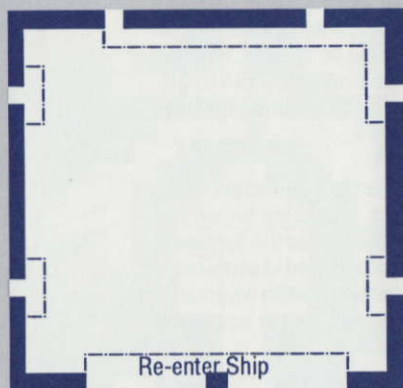
The next day we touched down on Norjaenn at the coordinates Jason gave us. Karen spotted a nearby cave entrance hidden by brush. We pushed through the bushes and went in. In the southwest we ran across some of the colossal Koshol. They recognized us as friends (fortunately!) and let us pass. Past the Koshol quarters we wandered into a serene hall which was a Koshol Temple. Throughout the Sentinel caves we had to waste a lot of ammunition on the huge gray bats that pestered us.

To the southeast we blundered into a maze. Mazes, Sandy commented dryly, were excellent forms of protection. It certainly kept us wandering for several hours. North of the maze were several passages; only one led to the Sentinels. After trying several that ended in dead ends, we found one that led to some more natural caves. I knew we were drawing nearer to the Sentinels when we entered a room that radiated energy. A little further on, in a room in the northwest corner, the Sentinels waited for us.

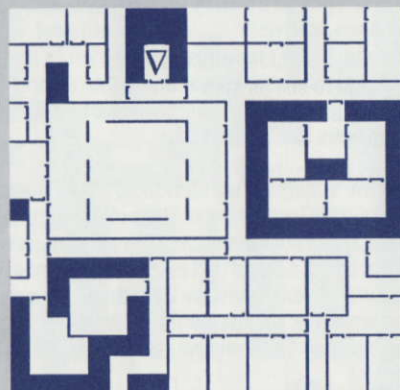
We spoke with Kedro. He told us he could only give us the power to defeat Malcolm if we retrieved the Book of Spells from Malcolm's "battlestation." Malcolm had stolen the Book when he stole the Key of Thor, robbing the Sentinels of their youth and much of their power. Kedro could teach us the powers we needed to get the Book. The most important ability he gave us was the power to read another person's thoughts. With this power, we'd be able to capture a scum raider and learn how to get into Malcolm's battlestation before they did the self-applying cyanide routine. We left the Sentinels and returned to the ORION. We were itching to get our hands on another raider so we could get to know him, but first we went to Kosaka's to stock up on ammunition. He wasn't surprised to see us.

BATTLESTATION QUADRANTS, LEVEL 1

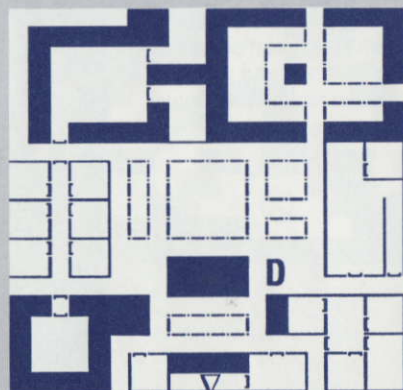
A. Docking Bay



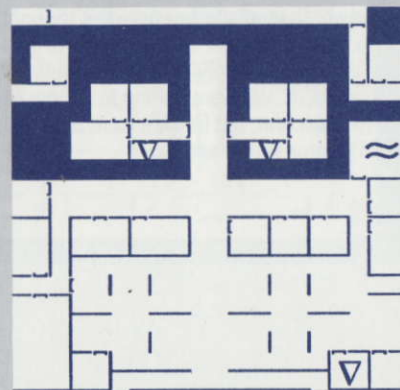
B. Bunk Room Quadrant



C. Elevator Quadrant



D. Armory Quadrant



BATTLESTATION, LEVEL 1, CALDORRE

The raider's feeble mind opened like a book! To get into Malcolm's battlestation, we had to go to space coordinates 2220, 1321. From there, we hyperspaced to 3884, 3305. We seemed to freeze at light speed, and suddenly our ship was in the main docking bay of Malcolm's battlestation. I told Sandy to record our coordinates in the battlestation: 1792, 955. From the number of raider ships Malcolm was fielding everyday, I knew his battlestation was huge.

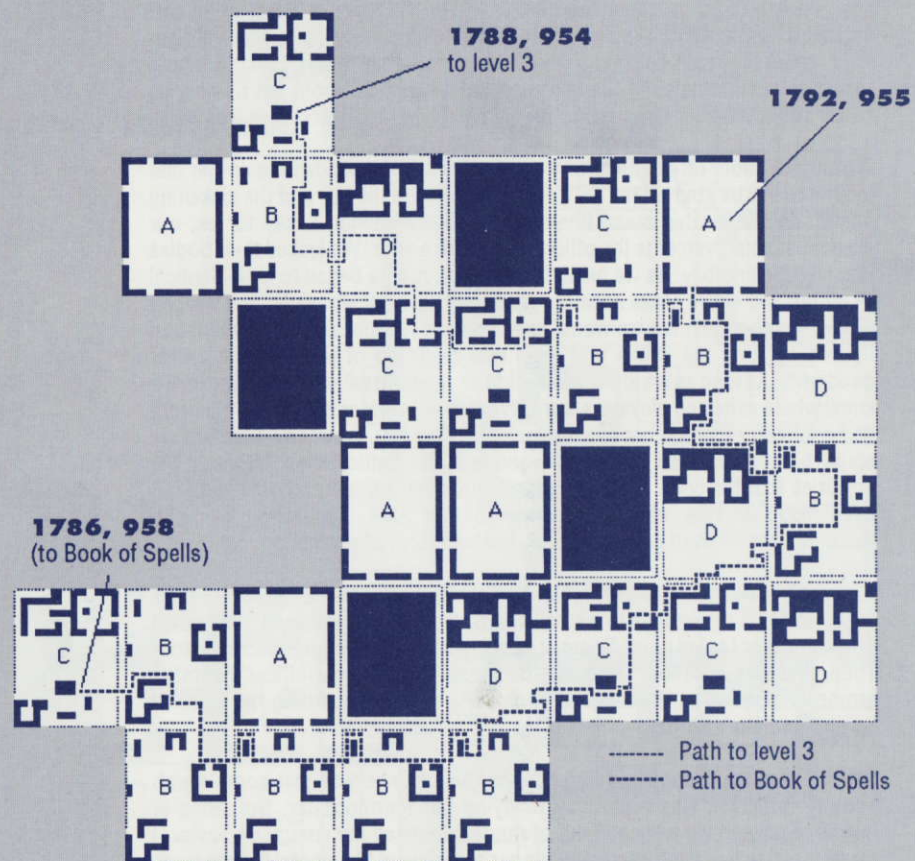
A group of raider officers in gleaming combat armor rounded the corner just in time to see us step off the ORION. Laserfire lit up the bay and the sickening smell of super-heated metal filtered through my helmet. Lucky for us, our marksmanship overcame the officers' superior armor. We kicked their bodies into the docking bay. As we headed southeast, rooms began to look identical to others and entire areas began to randomly repeat themselves. If it weren't for our combat helmets we would have become hopelessly lost. Sandy soon figured out that the whole first level was made up of just a few types of quadrants. As long as we knew which kind of quadrant we were standing in, we knew where exits and elevators were. We also discovered that every quadrant had a tubeway that led back to the main docking bay. From any quadrant we could hightail back to the ORION and exit the battlestation. Without the armories that Malcolm had conveniently provided us, we probably wouldn't have made it. They contained ammo for our AK's, long-range lasers, a thermocaster — even combat armor, the best form of protection.

After days of searching, we discovered an elevator at battlestation coordinates 1786, 958 that brought us to a small complex on the second level. Way down a long corridor I spied a lone figure. It was Taylor, the agriculture specialist from Tolve. She was a traitor! She just stood there in her raider officer's combat armor waiting for us. Perfect, I thought, she must be guarding the Book of Spells. And she's alone.

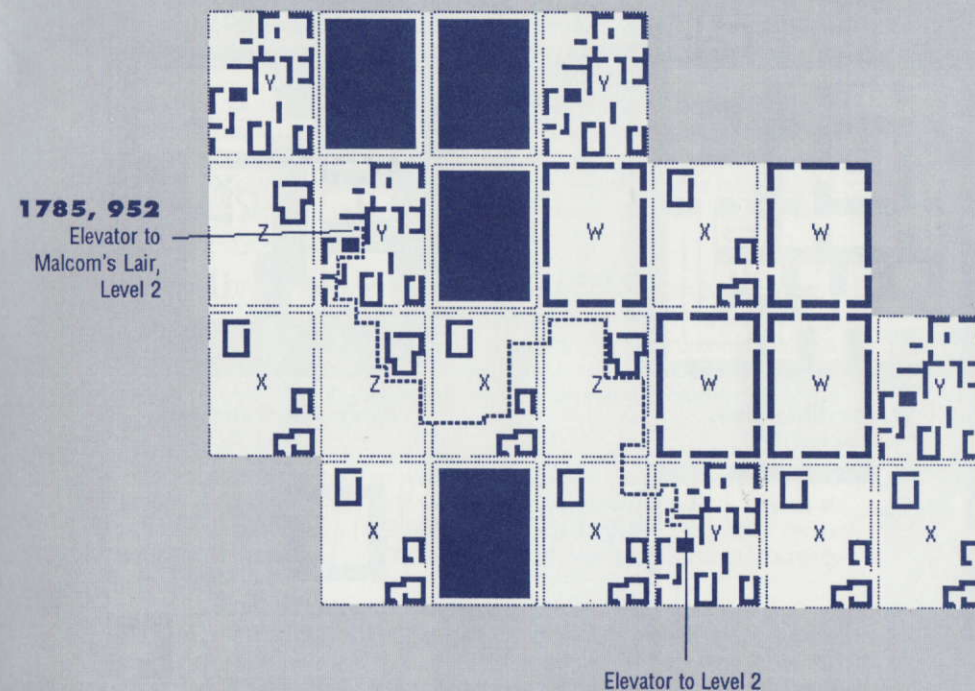
Rip called out her name, adding that he thought she was just some dumb country bumpkin. She replied by readying her thermocaster. No sense of humor. Knowing we were still out of range, I focused my energy on Taylor. I raced through her mind searching for her experience. My mental fingers soon clutched it and with a subtle wave of the hand I blotted it out. We advanced toward her. A look of fear spread over her as she realized she'd "forgotten" some tricks with her weapon. She knew she was out-matched but fought until the very end. The evil master must've been one charming guy to get his legions to be so slobberingly servile.

The Book of Spells was hidden inside a vault room inside a larger room. It told us it could provide some protection, but we had to quickly bring it to the Sentinels. We took the closest tubeway back to the ship.

BATTLESTATION, LEVEL 1

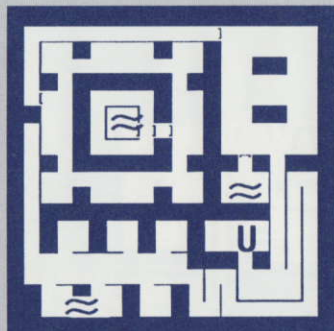


BATTLESTATION, LEVEL 3



BATTLESTATION QUADRANTS, LEVELS 2 & 3

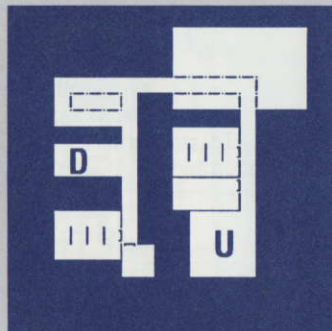
**Book of Spells,
Level 2**



to level 1

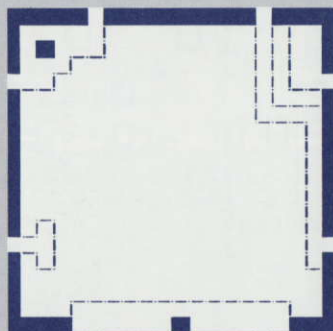
to level 3

**Elevator Passage,
Level 2**

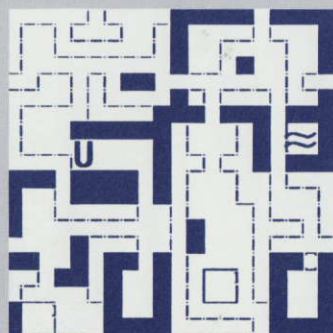


to level 1
(1788,
954)

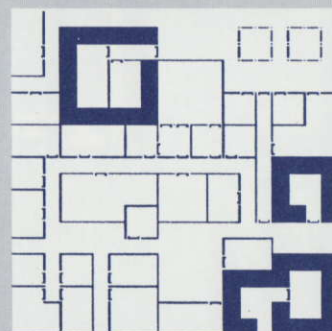
**W. Docking Bay,
Level 3**



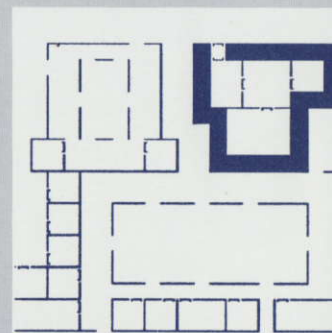
**Y. Armory Quadrant,
Level 3**



**X. Empty Quadrant,
Level 3**



**Z. Bunk Quadrant,
Level 3**



BATTLESTATION, LEVELS 2 & 3, CALDORRE

Kedro nodded with approval as we entered the Sentinel's inner sanctuary. I took the Book of Spells out from under my arm. The Master wasted no time. As he read I could feel the Sentinel's power growing, and my own, too. I started feeling very strong. I knew that the Light I was standing in would flood any darkness.

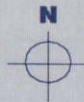
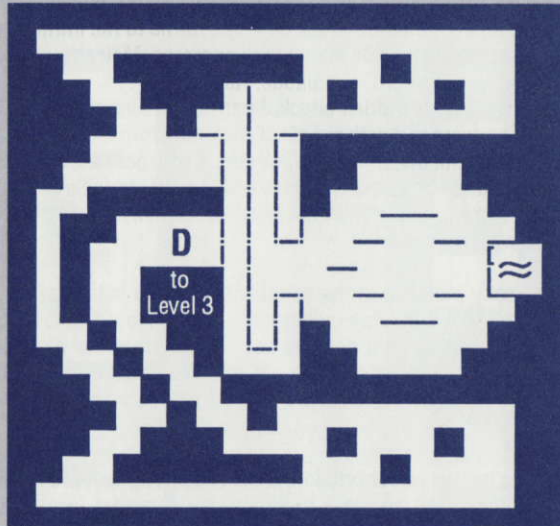
Kedro took me aside. He told me I would find Malcolm in his lair and that I was going to battle him to the death using the powers I'd learned from the Sentinels. Somehow, I knew I would be saddled with the final task. Kedro gave me one final warning: if I destroyed Malcolm, his evil creations would crumble, including the battle station and the Towers. Not only would I have to kill him, but we'd have to get out before we were squashed.

Aboard the ORION Sandy punched in the coordinates for the battlestation. I hoped it was for the last time. The ship quietly responded. A few moments of light speed returned us to the main docking bay. Malcolm, in his glorious paranoia, had laid a pretty complex path to his lair. We couldn't get there directly. It took a week's exploring until we figured out how to reach the coward's nest.

From the main docking bay we went north into another docking bay, then west through a series of bunks until we came to an elevator quadrant located at battlestation coordinates 1788, 954. The elevator dropped us to another series of rooms on the second level. Around the corner was another elevator leading to the third.

The third level was like the first: it was made up of only a few different quadrant designs repeated over and over. Not terribly original architecture. From the elevator shaft we walked north to a docking bay, then headed west through more bunk quadrants. We found an elevator at 1785, 952 which delivered us straight to Malcolm's personal quarters on the second level.

MALCOM'S LAIR, BATTLESTATION, LEVEL 2



MALCOLM'S LAIR, BATTLESTATION, LEVEL 2, CALDORRE

Once in his lair, there was only one long, twisted way to Malcolm himself. Our footsteps echoed down the deserted corridors until we came to the immense hall that was Malcolm's quarters. Like some dark sorcerer, Malcolm stood cloaked in scarlet robes, waiting for us in solitude. He struck with the speed of a viper, but I was prepared for a sudden attack. I parried every mental thrust easily. At first my ripostes were met with supple defense, but slowly I managed a nick here, a touch there, until my attacks came with such speed and from all sides that Malcolm began to slip. He'd spent too many years holed up in his sanctuary, fixated on the fall of the Federation, that he'd grown weak as a warrior. Now fear was making him lose his ability to focus. Out of panic he responded to my feints. I could see the shaded glow of his dark being. I reached for it, grasped it...Malcolm fell to the floor in a heap. The evil Trandle, scourge of Caldorre, was dead.

I remembered the Sentinels had told me all of Malcolm's creations would fade with his death. We had to escape before the battlestation ceased to exist — with us in it. I should've been feeling half-dead from the battle, but the Light kept pulsing in me as I led the crew out. A tubeway back brought us to the main docking bay where the ORION waited. We cut out of Caldorre before our butts were melted to the launch pad.

We orbited around Caldorre so we could gloat over a job well done. It was satisfyingly pyrotechnic. Fat orange fireballs shot hundreds of miles into black space. Huge chunks of burning Caldorre towers hurled across our main screen before whimpering out. Fire, smoke and spark stewed on the planet surface. All very impressive for what was just an illusion.

Messages of congratulations and thanks poured in. Rip broke open a bottle of Norjaenn Brut and we toasted our fantastic success. Karen elaborated on her vacation plans on the sunlit shores of Rouyn. Rip laid out his plans for an intergalactic road trip. An intoxicated Sandy repeatedly told Jon how she really admired his bandaging abilities and how she looked so forward to working with him again. Jon tried changing the subject to movies, travel, music, raiders — anything.

I stared out into the vast galaxy outside our ship and thought of my own plans. I could stay with the Feds. Or maybe become a gazillionaire by bottling the Light and marketing it in six-packs.

Or open a Used Interceptor Lot...just call me Sam.

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NOTES



