

Amber Zone: THE POLARIS PROCEDURE

By Michael Brown

The PCs are hired to help a children's toy manufacturer fend off enemies who want to steal his creations and turn them into weapons.

Players' Information

While the group is in the starport between flights, they are approached by a GNOME (Generally Networked Operative/Multipurpose Effector, a semi-autonomous manufacturing robot) controlled by an employee of Sancolin Fabrications, a well-known and beloved local manufacturer. Calling himself simply "Piet," he explains (through the GNOME) that his boss would never approve of bothering others with his problems; nevertheless, he asks for the PCs' help.

Sancolin Fabrications CEO Jules "Buck" Sancolin is a brilliant longtime fixture on the planet. Gifted with an abundance of mechanical, electronics, and manufacturing knowledge; he almost immediately found himself resisting offers from manufacturers all over the subsector -- mostly from weapons firms -- soon after setting up shop. Instead, he devoted his efforts to non-violence and expressed that conviction through his creations: children's toys and games. This naturally didn't sit well with several of the more ambitious firms. Apparently, Buck's designs would make dandy -- and profitable -- weapons with just minimal tweaking.

One of the more aggressive suitors is Birkenstange Arms. Recently, with the end of the Fifth Frontier War and the subsequent ending of military contracts, the company suffered a downturn. It's been forced to close manufacturing plants, lay off thousands of workers, and has even flirted with bankruptcy. The CEO of Birkenstange is desperate, and sees Buck's toys redesigned as weapons systems as just what his company needs to get back on track. He's sent many parties of representatives to Buck's factory, only to be turned away. Worse, the employees have caught many a Birkenstange spy trying to get an eyeful of Buck's designs and manufacturing processes.

Buck, unfortunately, is a kindly sort who only sees the good in people. He has refused to go to the authorities and has ordered his employees to do the same. Thus, the roundabout way Piet is using

to contact the PCs. As far as anyone can tell casually, it's merely one of Buck's robots running an errand. Plus, Buck said the employees couldn't contact the *authorities*...

Recently, while performing maintenance on the company mainframe, Piet happened upon a digital exchange between Buck and Birkenstange. The latter had seemingly grown tired of Buck's constant refusals to cater to him, and threatened to storm the plant and take whatever was needed. It looked to Piet that Buck ignored this threat as well.

Disobeying Buck's orders to intervene, Piet secretly hacked into one of Birkenstange's computers and found a draft of an attack plan. Most disturbing is the plan's mention of a mysterious mole that's been embedded into Buck's operation, awaiting orders. Piet doesn't know who the mole is, or what his/her plans are.

Piet is worried for Buck's safety, but worse, what'll happen if his creations are turned to death and destruction. Piet is willing to part with Cr100,000 -- a year's pay, plus his savings -- for the adventurers' help in stopping Birkenstange and protecting Buck. But they must decide quickly; the attack is to occur in 2D x 10 hours.

Referee's Information

If the party agrees to help, Piet transfers everything he has gathered on the enemy plans (good for a +1 on Tactics throws in planning) and a 10% advance on the agreed-upon pay to one of their personal computers and then leaves quickly, so as not to attract suspicion.

A quick check in the planetary datanet shows that Piet is telling the truth: Buck is a well-respected member of the manufacturing community with a reputation for quality and charitable giving. Birkenstange Arms has a reputation for mercilessness. The CEO has personally

weathered several indictments (but no convictions) stemming from his business practices. Buck also makes extensive use of GNOMEs, along with sentient workers like Piet.

The attack plan counts for the inside man having uploaded several secret software packages to Buck's mainframe; some to steal information, others to deactivate the plant's defenses when the attack happens. See below for a rundown of the computer's general capabilities. Meanwhile, a hired mercenary company assaults the plant from the outside, with the objective of grabbing as many hardcopy files and prototypes as they can. They've been given carte blanche to carry this out.

An orbital view of Sancolin Fabrications, suitable for the party's tacticians' planning, is available. The referee should prepare a sketch map for the players of the factory grounds. It's situated near the planetary North Pole and consists of the main manufacturing plant, quarters for Sancolin, his wife, and about 300 sentient workers; storage areas, including shipping warehouses; maintenance areas for the GNOMEs; vehicle garages; and several landing pads for cargo craft up to 1000 tons.

The mercenaries number 36, including the Commander (Platoon strength.) They are armed with ACRs, have Combat Armor (Book 1: Characters and Combat) and are otherwise equipped to Tech Level B (11). Their Broadsword-class Mercenary Cruiser remains in orbit at all times, but the two 50-ton Modular Cutters, each with a G-Carrier module, are berthed at the downport. Six mercs (including the commander) stay aboard the starship. The cutter pilots remain with their ships. All other mercs take part in the attack.

Beforehand, the fighters aren't idle; the commander has been sending patrols (equivalent to a fire team) with orders to gather intel and conduct whatever discreet acts of sabotage they can. If the PCs do the same, they'll encounter a scouting party on 9+, thrown once per hour. Mercenaries captured and interrogated break on 8+ (DMs: Interrogation skill; +1 per three points of pain the group inflicts.) Such intel gives the adventurers +2 to their Tactics skill, but throw 9+ (DM +1 per enemy casualty beyond the first) for the Commander to grow suspicious and move his timetable up by 7D hours. The referee should

determine the chances of gathering information using other means.

The corporate mainframe is equivalent to a starship's Model/6, running routine programs such as accounting software, manufacturing processes, and the like. It has a program equivalent to an Anti-Hijack program (Book 2: Starships) that triggers if intruders are detected, with the added capability of directing the GNOMEs to block, confuse, and distract opponents while the sentient employees make their escape. Authorized users can also take direct control of the fabrication machinery, the GNOMEs, and even some of the more complex toys, taking one combat round and a throw of 8+ (DM: Computer skill, obviously) to do so.

The attack commences with the landing of the G-carriers on opposite sides of the complex. The pilots and the gunners stay with the carriers (armed with turreted autocannon, 6D damage, fires 10-round burst, hit on 6+), leaving the remainder (24, minus any the adventurers have previously taken out; divided into squads of 8 soldiers each) to assault the factory. One squad fights its way to the main offices and computer room, while the others create a large diversion in the manufacturing areas. The mercs try to avoid killing noncombatants, but won't lose any sleep over accidental deaths.

Heroes looking for Sancolin (a portly older man with a jolly demeanor and full white beard) and his wife find them (10+, DM: Tactics skill) held prisoner in a storeroom by the mole, a low-level worker (such as a janitor or night watchman) with an outsized level of Computer skill. He is armed with a body pistol and happily uses his prisoners as shields. The old couple is appalled at the violence being done, both to them and in their name.

If the PCs drive the mercenaries off or otherwise halt the attack, Piet pays off as promised, although his role in the prior events comes out on an 8+ and he is subsequently let go from Sancolin Fabrications. Piet Cruz could become an invaluable aid to the party if they wish to take him along on further adventures.

The referee should determine the flow of subsequent events.